The second mission of the Enterprise brings some unexpected adventures for Franny and the crew, along with one big pain.
Chapter 1

Well Done II

Three days into our second mission and my jaw was aching. It wasn’t because I’d been hit, or had a cavity; no it came from clenching it tightly as I put up with Justine Zindal in my galley. By rights everything should be smooth sailing: I had a new and improved kitchen, I loved the work I was doing and I was now happily married to a complete stud slash teddy bear. All of that should be enough to put me over the moon.

Well we were well past the moon and unfortunately, I had to put up with a sous who second-guessed every decision I made and kept me on edge. From the first day Justine questioned everything I did and wasn’t happy with any of the answers. By the second day I decided to work around her as best I could which seemed to be what she wanted, unfortunately. So here I was twenty-four hours after that, preparing food for eight-nine people three times a day while she did the minimum to help me.

“Oh I can’t grate carrots; my arthritis won’t let me,” Justine informed me. “Don’t you have an electric grater?”

“I can run the sterilizer but you’ll have to stack the plates,” she told me a few hours later. “That sort of bending isn’t good for my back.”

And finally, “You’re spoiling this crew and not being efficient, Chef. Three entrée choices all by hand is ridiculous, and you’re not even using the protein re-sequencer! They don’t need that much variety!”

She conveniently disappeared after that, leaving me to handle all the prep for the next day. After I finished laying out the materials for breakfast and programed the dishwashers, I stalked off to the quarters I shared with Jon and began growling as I peeled off my clothes and roamed the living room. Porthos thought this was some new game got up and followed me around, giving every dropped item the sniff test.

“Damn it, who does she think she is? It’s one thing to criticize my work, but Christo! Doing only forty percent of her job and leaving me to pick up the other sixty on top of everything else? I’d like to . . .” I stopped my rant as Jon looked up from the desk, his expression caught between amusement and worry.

“Rage striptease is a new one,” he commented, eyeing me and grinning. “Don’t let me interrupt.”

“Grrrr,” I sighed, pulling the net off my chignon and letting my hair loose. “I’m going crazy right now. It’s Justine.”

He sighed. “Still slacking?”

“Big-time,” I nodded. “She’s claiming medical excuses for it and I need to check with Phlox to see if any of them are valid. How many would it take to deem her physically unfit for duty?”

“I’m not sure,” Jon admitted, rising up and coming over to me. “Because it’s still a new billet that sort of regulation is still being worked out. I really like this bra.”

“So I should keep it on?”
“No, I think you should take it off so we can keep it safe somewhere else,” he purred, taking me into his arms. I relaxed a bit, but my mind was still on the galley situation even as Jon deftly worked open the hooks in the back.

“Maybe there’s a psychological clause I can use.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “In the meantime, go take a hot shower and relax. We’ve got vids from the moms.”

I brightened and kissed him before slipping away to the little bathroom to wash Justine out of my thoughts for a while. When I was done I climbed into my pink nightie and climbed into bed, where Jon was already sitting against the headboard, working on some last minute computations that he set aside to pull the covers back for me.

“Better?”

“Much,” I agreed. “Play on.”

His mother came on first, looking a little startled; not everyone was comfortable filming themselves and Sally Archer was one of them. She blinked a little. “Hi you two. It’s me.”

Jon and I always chuckled at that. I mean we were looking at her and yes of course we knew who she was but it was also such a sweetly goofy Sally sort of thing that she always said—as if we might mistake her for someone else. He slid an arm around me.

“Anyway, I wanted to know what you two wanted for the holidays. I’m expressing things to Vulcan since Starfleet’s got a series of rendezvous supply freights there and a little bird told me which one will be meeting up with the Enterprise within a few months,” she cocked her head just the way Jon did once in a while so I knew where he’d learned the gesture. “Don’t be practical!” Sally urged. “Tell me what you’d really like or it’s going to be all underwear and socks!”

“I wouldn’t mind the socks,” I murmured.

“I’d definitely mind the underwear,” Jon replied. “The last boxers she sent me had little spaceships on them. NOT exactly what a Starship captain needs to be caught dead in.”

“Seriously?” I giggled. “Where are they now?” On the screen Sally was talking about her date with someone called Harry Reingart, who seemed to be a microbiologist she’d met at some gardening event. Jon was caught between listening to her rambles and my question.

“Back of the top drawer I think.”

“Can I have them?”

“Yes,” he shot me a sidelong glance. “Umm, any particular reason?”

“For . . . that time,” I replied softly. “I’m due in a few days and they’ll be more comfortable.”

He tightened his arm around me. “Franny—my underwear is your underwear. Jon paused and added, “Not something I ever thought I’d say in my life, but . . .”

“But thank you,” I told him. He was a good husband, very considerate when I had my period and I appreciated that. Most of the time they were mild to bearable, but every third one or so would be truly awful and Jon would do whatever I needed: curl up around me, bring me tea or just go away if I told him to. He wasn’t grossed out, either, which was a blessing as well.
“Anyway, love to both of you and I’ll expect a gift list soon!” Sally chirped from the video before it came to an end.

“Do you think she’s serious about this Reingart fellah?” Jon asked me.

“Maybe,” replied, “you could have him checked out you know.”

“I might,” he nodded and started the second vid. Mom and Nona popped up on the screen, both of them grinning.

“Hello there, Sweeties!” Mom waved. “And Porthos!”

From beside the bed I hear him stir at the mention of his name. Mom and Porthos were good friends, especially when she introduced him to the joys of pasta.

“We’re going to be making ravioli today and taking it to the Starfleet Parent’s Picnic! Not sure how much to make so we’ll keep going until the flour runs out!”

“Holy Guacamole—Mom, your canister holds fifteen pounds!” I told the screen. “You’re going to feed the entire fleet with that much!”

Jon chuckled.

Nona spoke up. “Start looking up semolina recipes, Francesca. You will be making it soon!”

“Nona!” I shook my head. Jon waited until my mother finished talking about missing us, wishing us a safe mission and signing off before shooting me a curious look.

I rolled my eyes. “Semolina is durum wheat that’s used for porridge. It’s um, a common Italian baby food.”

“Oh,” he replied. “I kind of figured. But not much chance of that. Speaking of which, I do need to see Phlox for the next injection.”

“I’ll remind you in the morning,” I promised him, and after turning out the lights, we kissed, and curled up to sleep.

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As it turned out, I saw Phlox myself during breakfast. I took a piece of toast and joined him at his table, sitting so I could keep an eye on the galley. Phlox being his usual observant self noted this with a nod.

“So, I need to ask you about my sous,” I began. “I realize some information is confidential and part of doctor/patient privilege, but . . .”

“But?” he prompted me before digging into his cheese and avocado omelet.

“But are there any legitimate reasons Commander Zindal cannot do certain jobs or physical activities in the galley?”

Phlox considered my question a moment, fork hovering. “I’d have to check my records, which are still being uploaded and updated before I could answer that,” he told me.

“All right,” I sighed. “Thanks.”
“Is everything all right?” he asked, putting on that ‘I’m listening even though I’m eating’ face.

“Well . . . I’m doing a lot of extra work,” I told him quietly. “Things that Maalik would have been doing if he was here. Right now it’s merely annoying but if we get into any sort of trouble or rush . . .” I trailed off, knowing Phlox would understand.

“I see,” he nodded. “Well, whatever I can share or do to rectify the situation, I shall. In the meantime, thank you for the omelet.”

“You’re welcome. Also, the captain needs a Null injection,” I added, feeling myself go a little pink in the face.

To his credit, Phlox merely nodded again. “An easy fix.”

I rose and headed back to the galley, where Justine was seated at the back desk, watching something on the holoscreen while the breakfast dishes piled up on the conveyor belt.

“Hey!” I called sharply. “We can’t let things sit!”

She looked over and slowly turned the monitor off. “You’re understaffed,” Justine groused. “There should be a crewman or two to do the drudge work like this.”

Privately I agreed, but to her face I merely shook my head. “Well there aren’t any, and we need to keep the galley as clean as possible. Let’s get busy.”

We gloved up and ran the dishes through the rinse and racked them for the sterilizer. I spoke above the sprays. “I think we ought to have recyclable dishes instead of reusing these polycarbonate ones.”

“Make them out of what?” Justine scoffed, “You’re just lazy.”

I thought that was the pot calling the kettle black and nearly snapped at her but it wasn’t worth it. I focused instead on my idea, wondering what we could use to create dishes and by the time we were done loading and unloading them I knew.

I waved her off and sat down, typing up my hypothetical idea and listing questions for Trip about the feasibility of filtering out the protein-heavy recyclable waste to create sterile blocks that could be synthesized into plates. If we could do that, I reasoned, we could reduce the size of the dishwasher/sterilizer we’d need on a ship by at least half, and if worst came to worst, even EAT the dishes themselves if we needed to.

Yes it was radical and a little bizarre, but in terms of saving space and time, it could be feasible. I wrote it up and sent it to Trip, feeling pleased about the idea. He might shoot the whole thing down of course, but if there was even the tiniest possibility it could work, he’d be the engineer to spot it.

I stretched and as I stood up, I felt the tiniest trickle along the inside of one thigh and sighed; my period was here. Hormones, especially in artificial and unknown environments were more susceptible to fluctuation, and while Null wasn’t perfect it was the best option for space travelers. I’d been on Null just to counter my period, but women could only be on that for two years before they needed to take a six-month break, and Jon had opted to take the male version so I could do so. I appreciated his support even though I wasn’t thrilled about re-establishing a cycle.

On the bright side, I had found the boxers, and was looking forward to wearing them.
Trip thought my idea was dandy and met with me to discuss it after breakfast a few mornings later. He was enthusiastic about everything except the possible taste of the dishes.

“They won’t be the best food experience,” he warned. “Mostly like some sorta big cracker I’d guess but if we were starving it would work as extra rations. You’d have to experiment and see what sorta seasonings would be stable enough and flavorful enough to make it palatable.”

I grinned. “Oh I can think of a few flavors that might help—taco tableware, dill dishes—"

“Paprika plates?” Trip grinned. “Pepper platters?”

“Possibly,” I nodded. “I’d be willing to start experimenting if you and your engineers can get me some of the protein blocks. I don’t know who’d be willing to help me with the synthesizer programming though.”

“Maybe T’Pol,” he offered off-handedly. “She’s got the skills and she might be willing if you presented it as a challenge.”

“A challenge?” I asked, noting how he blushed a little.

“Wellll,” Trip drawled, “She’s gotten better, but the best way to get her involved is to tell her why something can’t be done. She’d never admit it, but that woman loves to prove me wrong.”

“Is that a fact?” I grinned.

“I’m hardly ever wrong, actually. I just present the con side first,” Trip pointed out. “She jumps on that, and before you know it, problem solved. It’s kinda fun to watch.”

“All right then,” I rose up. “I’ll see what I can do about moping and griping in hopes she’ll take the bait. In the meantime I need to take a pup for a walk.”

Even before marrying Jon I loved his dog. Our dog now, actually. Porthos was our fur child and he seemed pretty pleased to have another person in his pack. I made time to take him for a walk in the mid-morning, usually going through the hydroponic station and cleaning up after him and telling him all about upcoming menus. To his credit Porthos was non-judgmental and wonderfully affectionate; beagles are lickers to the first degree and generally pleased about attention from anybody.

Except Justine.

The first time I walked him through the galley she had a fit, yelling at me that I was violating sanitation rules. Porthos, who’d never been yelled at in his life thought we were being attacked and barked at her, standing his ground at my ankles. When Justine found out it was the Captain’s dog she huffed and made a fuss about how the accommodation did not include the galley and I needed to keep him out of food prep and storage areas.

It took a lot of soothing to calm Porthos and me both down after that, and even though Justine had a point in terms of regulations, being a bitch about it didn’t make things any easier. Jon grudgingly agreed that the rules were correct, but ended up giving Porthos treats for a week straight just to make up for it. When I pointed out that I too, had been yelled at and needed treats, Jon created a naughty game involving mints and pillows that went a long way towards making me feel better.
I walked Porthos to Sickbay, where Phlox greeted us both warmly, casting a professional eye over my companion, stroking his head.

“You look healthy today,” he told the dog. Pleased, Porthos wagged his tail in agreement and I laughed.

“He knows he’s getting a shank bone tonight so life is looking good for him.”

“One of the few joys of a dog’s life,” Phlox agreed. “So, about your sous. She does have a listed issue for lifting anything heavier than nine kilos but other than that is fit for duty.”

“So that’s about twenty pounds,” I mused. “All right, that’s not really an excuse for getting out of the dishes then, or basic prep.”

“Not really, no,” Phlox agreed. “Although writing her up would be tricky since you are both the same rank.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “And Jon can’t mediate since he’d be accused of having a bias. I’m not sure what to do at this point.”

“Wait,” Phlox advised. “The time will come when your sous will have to either rise to the occasion or be hoist on her own petard.”

“At what cost?” I winced. “I’m all for letting her suffer the consequences of her own folly but not at the expense of the crew!”

“True,” he sighed. “Both of us will be watching though, so with any luck it won’t be anything too dangerous.”

Porthos and I left, and out of the two of us he was the cheerier one by far. I left him in the quarters with a rawhide strip and took myself to the galley, wondering if the open-face sandwiches had been laid out yet for lunch. When I got there Justine was back on the holo-screen watching something she turned off when I came in. There was nothing on the counters, nothing laid out or ready to go.

“Lunch?” I asked, trying not to sound annoyed.

“I was waiting for you,” Justine replied. “Are you through with the dog now?”

I went to wash my hands, trying not to curse under my breath—it was going to be a loonng mission.

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It turned out Nona was right about the semolina. But not quite in the way I would have suspected. About three days on, I got a page to the Situation Room. That was a first—I’d never even BEEN in the Situation Room, and given that chefs generally aren’t part of command missions I guess that’s no surprise. I brushed the powdered sugar off my apron as best I could and hustled up to the A deck, feeling a little excited and a lot nervous.

I’d be seeing Jon actually doing his job—kind of neat, even if I wasn’t sure what part I’d be playing in it yet. As the turbo lift went up I wondered if I was needed to plan a banquet, or arrange for food supply packages to somewhere . . . logical reasons for me to be up near the bridge and in the thick of things. I reached the bridge, got off on the wrong side, and had to have Hoshi direct me to the right room with a little grin.
So much for being a competent professional.

Jon was already in the room along with Trip, T’Pol and Phlox; when I joined them they gave a nod before looking back at my husband.

“Good you could make it, Chef.” Jon murmured. “Do you have any way of making baby food?” he asked me in complete seriousness.

I nodded. “Uh, yes, Captain. What . . . sort of baby are we talking about?”

“One Vulcan infant,” T’Pol told me. “There is also a Tellerite child, and three human children to be fed as well.”

I looked at the screen on the table monitor and saw a group of people there, looking back at me. Yes, definitely a Vulcan baby in the arms of an old Vulcan man, and what looked like a Tellerite toddler clinging to the man’s pant leg along with three other kids, all older, clustered around the man who I realized looked a bit gaunt.

“What’s going on?”

Jon looked at T’Pol, who spoke up. “These are the survivors of the Celestial Symphony of Phinda, Tellar Prime. Their ship responded to a distress call three weeks ago and the shuttles containing the majority of the symphony members going to provide aid did not return. This is Saroz, lyre-master, and the children of the Symphony.”

The man on the screen gave a nod and spoke, his voice deep and measured. “I seek support and relief for the children, and hope that your ship and crew can determine what has happened to our crew.”

“Well intend to do that,” Jon assured him. “First step is to bring you aboard and make sure you’re decontaminated. We’ll send a team to your ship as well to look at whatever can be salvaged or stored on the Enterprise.”

“Thank you Captain Archer,” Saroz intoned. “We deeply appreciate the assistance.”

I looked at Jon and gave a little nod. “Baby food,” I repeated. “Also, easily digestible nourishment for the other six—they look like they’ve been on short rations.”

“They have,” T’Pol murmured.

“All right, we have our mission,” Archer intoned and nodded a dismissal for everyone. He gave me a glance and I stayed behind, waiting until he spoke again.

“Franny, do you know of any on board who has experience with kids?” he asked me.

I thought for a moment, because Jon knew I had more personal interaction with the crew and a better sense of their personal lives.

“Phlox of course,” I murmured, “And I think Ensign Cholokwesi has a baby brother back home—those are the only first-hand folks I can think of aside from those of us who babysat a lot as teens.”

“Okay then,” he sighed. “I’ll get our guests back to the ship and you can go make something for them to eat. Saroz has been starving himself to make sure the kids had food; I’m sure you saw that.”
I nodded. “Plomeek for him then, with something richer if he can handle it. Where are we going to house them?”

“They’ll probably want to stay together; survivors usually do,” Jon murmured, looking pensive. “I may give them the game room and move air mattresses in there, depending.”

I nodded and gave him a quick hug, getting a little powder sugar on him before brushing it off and heading out, thinking about easy food.

Easy food really isn’t always that easy. I was going to have to figure out what would be best for three different species, check for allergies and try to make the meals appealing. While I had a good idea what the human kids would eat, I wasn’t sure about either the Vulcan baby or the Tellerite toddler, so that meant doing a computer search.

When I got to the galley, once again Justine was on it.

I cleared my throat loudly. “Sorry to interrupt you, but I need the database,” I told her.

Justine slowly got up and gave me the seat. “Why?”

“We’re expecting guests,” I replied, and dropped into the chair, starting my search. “Tell me; do we have any oatmeal, semolina or tapioca?”

“How should I know?” Justine replied, and I turned to glare at her.

“Go. Check. With. Sath.” I snapped. “While you’re at it, ask him for baby bottles or the equivalent from medical supplies, get the ingredients for Plomeek laid out and start working on the dinner shift vegetables.”

Justine blinked a little; it really was the first time I’d used my no-nonsense tone with her and I think it caught her by surprise. I kept glaring at her until she slunk out of the galley, then I took a breath and went back to my search.

I won’t lie; it felt good to assert a little authority.
Chapter 3

My searches brought up very little on baby food for any species other than human and I shifted to most nutritious foods with fewest ingredients. Once I had a list of stews, soft vegetables and steamed meats, I fed them into the programming and sent a message to Sath about extra dish towels for diapers, and some smaller clothing for the children. Justine returned as I was putting together sandwiches. “We have about fifteen pounds of oatmeal, two pounds of semolina but only a half-pound of tapioca powder. We’ve also got powdered milk, canned goat’s milk and something in that load of goods from Koraav station that might be pudding,” she reported. “Want to tell me what’s going on and how many babies are involved?”

“We’ve got some survivor-refugees and a pair of them under the age of two,” I told her as I moved to start stock. “Also an older man and three children.”

“That’s all?” Justine murmured, and I nodded.

“Yeah. I don’t think the ship was very big to begin with and they’re all that are left.”

“Okay then,” she responded and pulled out items for Plomeek. I was pleased to see her get to work and thought it was a good sign—maybe all we needed was a challenge.

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Three hours later I brought up the food on a cart, feeling anxious and hopeful by turns. I pressed the door panel for the game room and was admitted, rolling the cart in and getting my first good look at our guests.

They’d been decontaminated and showered; the kids were in the smallest clothes we could get them but even then they were baggy. In person I could see how gaunt Saroz truly was. I tried to hide my shock as I brought the cart to the table where he sat, the baby on his lap, the other children sitting at chairs near him.

“I greet you in the name of the symphony,” he intoned. “You are the chef?”

“I am, please call me Franny,” I murmured, hoping it would be less formal. Reed was with them, standing off to the side, along with his second-in-command, a little woman with long red hair. I looked at the children.

The baby Vulcan in the little shirt and diaper looked to be about eight months old, with a tuft of glossy black hair, delicately pointed ears and big eyes. Seeing my gaze, Saroz introduced her. “My granddaughter, T’Prith. She is just beginning more solid food but still takes bottles.”

I handed over one from the warmer, pleased to see her reach for it and pull it into her mouth, nursing quickly. Saroz didn’t smile but the look on his face gave the impression of one. He had long grey hair, neatly braided and the typical short bangs framing his face.

“This is Gorli Boral,” he indicated the Tellerite toddler, who had long curly blonde hair and a stocky body. She was chewing a fist and holding the hand of the Human girl next to her. Saroz introduced her as well. “Tilla who is six, and that his her brother Hux, ten, both of the TallTree family. And this,” he indicated a small boy on the floor at his feet, “Is Rof, eight, of the Madrid family.”

I could see the resemblance of the TallTree children, who both had freckles and green eyes while...
Rolf had an olive complexion and brown eyes so dark they looked black. All of them were looking not at me but the cart, so I quickly served up the dishes.

“Gorli, I have mashed potatoes and carrots for you; Tilla, Hux, Rof, here are some grilled cheese sandwiches, some vegetable soup and a few puddings. Saroz, Plomeek. If any of you want something different just ask me and I’ll try to get it for you.”

All of the children looked to Saroz, who murmured, “we are grateful and thank you for this bounty . . . Franny. Let us eat, children.”

They ate. Not ravenously, but with serious attention to the food and I stood back, feeling a wave of emotion somewhere in my stomach. How long had they been on low rations? How much had Saroz given up so they could eat?

“Good,” Tilla murmured timidly.

“Go-od,” Gorli echoed, grunting a little but clearly a fan of the mashed potatoes considering how much of them were all over her face now. I noticed Hux had put one of the sandwich halves into his pocket and that sent another pang through me. I squatted down at the table so I was eye-level with the children.

“There’s more,” I assured them. “I promise.”

Hux eyed me. “Yeah?”

I nodded. “Yep. Guests on the Enterprise can have food whenever they want it.”

He brightened a bit. “Like one of the big cruise liners out of Arc Station?”

“Something like that,” I grinned. “Although I can’t sing and dance like their chefs and waiters do.”

He laughed, as did Rof. “Okay,” Hux nodded. “No singing and dancing.”

With the ice broken, I asked them what they liked to eat. We were chatting about pie when T’Prith suddenly dropped her bottle and let out a prodigious belch. It was SO unexpectedly loud from such a delicate looking baby that we all laughed and even Reed smirked. T’Prith looked around at us, slightly bewildered.

“You have the lungs of your mother,” Sardoz told her solemnly, and I chuckled again, trying to hide it because I never thought I’d see one Vulcan tease another in my lifetime. T’Prith seemed to enjoy the attention and wriggled as a tiny bit of spit-up began to dribble down her chin.

“Prff spzzz,” Gorli pointed out, grinning wide enough to show little bottom tusks.

“Yeah, all the time,” Hux agreed. “She’s a baby, not a big girl like you, Gorli.”

“Ya,” Gorli agreed. I watched her get down from the table and trot over to Reed, looking up at him. Uncomfortable, Reed looked down at her and then at me, helplessly. I made an ‘introduce yourself’ gesture so he squatted down to look at the chubby Tellerite child.

Gorli grunted something and did a little dance that anyone who’d ever dealt with a two-year old understood. Clearly Reed hadn’t been around too many two-year olds because he kept looking confused until his second in command cleared her throat and bent down.
“Potty?” she murmured in a kind voice, and Gorli nodded vigorously. The second, whose name I belatedly remembered was Gordon-Ross took the toddler’s hand and led her to the bathroom doors while Reed blushed.

I handed out napkins and Sardoz wiped T’Prith’s face and chin while Hux helped clean his sister and Rof. Reed drifted over and began to stack the dishes, watching as I piled the leftovers onto one plate and put it back in the middle of the table. He looked at me and understood; I saw compassion in his gaze, which was nice.

“Thank you,” I murmured.

Reed tipped his head. “Thank you, Chef. Gordon-Ross and I are keeping an eye on our guests until Trip and Mayweather return with some of their personal belongings.” He lowered his voice and added, “They’re very quiet—is this normal?”

“They’re still in a bit of shock,” I guessed. “As they get used to things they may get rowdier, so enjoy the peace while you can.”

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I got dinner served up alongside Justine, who actually managed to do her fair share of work this time, and when I brought Jon his meal, he waved me to one of the seats at the captain’s table. “Just for a minute, I know you’re busy. How are the kids?”

“They ate,” I reported, “and seemed to enjoy it. How long were they out there and what did Trip find on the ship?”

“It’s complicated; I’ll tell you tonight,” he promised, working on the paella in front of him. “In the meantime I’m due to see Phlox for . . . important reasons.”

I snickered. “Very important reasons,” I agreed. “Quite grown-up of you to remember. Does this deserve a reward?”

“Yes,” Jon assured me. “It does. As a seasoned captain of the first Starfleet starship in fact, I feel well-qualified to choose the prize that best fits this particular errand, Chef. Just so you appreciate where we stand on this.”

“Somebody’s been working on his diplomatic language,” I murmured, trying not to grin. “So what could this magnificent bounty possibly be? Are you going to have me make you a chocolate sundae? Are you going to have me strip down to my black lace nightie and spoon-feed it to you while straddling your hips?”

Jon blinked and gave me a hot-eyed gaze, pointing his fork at me. “A good diplomat recognizes the magnificent ideas of others, and in the spirit of goodwill and cooperation promotes them enthusiastically. I choose to do so with THAT suggestion.”

“You want me to make it so?”

He thought about that. “Kinda has a ring to it. And yes, that’s exactly what I want at twenty-one hundred hours, please.”

I rose. “A pleasure working through diplomacy with you, Captain.”

“Oh it’s all about the pleasure,” Jon agreed with a smirk.
At the door I turned and looked at him. “Hey, you have a couple of things that might be good to share with the kids, by the way.”

When he looked puzzled, I smiled. “A ball, and a dog. I think those could work diplomatic wonders with our visitors, if presented the right way.”

Jon gave a quick nod. “Good thinking. Remind me to give you a promotion, Chef.”

I laughed and headed back to the galley.
When I was finally done in the galley I carried the little cooler containing dessert back to our quarters and stepped in, setting it down. Jon was already there lounging on the sofa, re-reading *Secrets of A Serbian Water Polo Coach*. I sighed. He could quote whole passages of the book already and much as I loved him, his devotion to this particular sport was beyond my understanding. Still it could be worse; I could have married someone into bug collecting or taxidermy.

“Hey,” he set the book down and motioned to the sofa. “So, about our guests . . .”

I kicked off my boots and set them by the door before padding over, kissing him, and stretching out along his side. “Yeah?”

Porthos came over and looked at us with that particularly mournful ‘I’m being left out’ look that all beagles have mastered. Jon gave a little grunt and the dog jumped up to settle against my legs, happy to be with his humans.

“Trip downloaded the ship’s log and last coordinates when he and Travis shuttled over,” Jon continued. “T’Pol has been analyzing them so we can figure out the particulars of their route. Sardoz was their company’s booking agent and not their pilot, so he doesn’t know much about the actual flight plan except that they were scheduled to rendezvous with a fleet of commercial freighters headed to the refueling station near Arc One.”

“Are they really a symphony?” I wanted to know.

“Yep. We found plenty of instruments,” Jon nodded. “Ship’s complement was twenty-two, not counting the children, the pilot and the medic. The shuttle and emergency eject pod are both gone. From what Sardoz has told us, they received a distress call from a crashed ship nearly two and a half weeks ago.”

I considered that. “But they’re musicians. What could compel them to leave?”

“Excellent question,” Jon agreed. “The logical response, as T’Pol would remind us all, would have been to relay the signal on to other ships and send a response to the distressed party indicating that. Maybe asking for coordinates as well. Apparently that’s not what happened. Within a few hours of hearing this call, the majority of the crew loaded up into the two shuttles and left. The other weird note is that Sardoz reports he got a serious headache hearing the call but it faded a few days later.”

“That’s creepy.”

“Yes,” Jon agreed. “Something in that message compelled them to go and leave behind not only their ship and instruments but their children as well. It’s more than creepy, it’s sinister. I may not be a parent, but anything that could sever a bond like that has to be tinged with evil.”

“Like a Siren’s song,” I mused, sighing. “So was there a recording of this distress call?”

“I’m sure there is, but we’re not going to listen to it without precautions,” Jon told me grimly. “Trip and T’Pol are running it through a voice to print program. We’ll READ what it says, sometime tomorrow.”

“Okay then,” I agreed “In the meantime, have you earned the dessert I brought?”
Porthos looked up; he’d learned several new words around me and ‘dessert’ was clearly one of them. I giggled.

Jon chuckled himself. “Yep. Let the rewarding begin.”

One of the more gratifying things I’d discovered in my marriage was how addictive intimacy was. For years I’d been a bit of a loner, self-reliant and a bit headstrong. To have a partner in my life who listened to me, appreciated and loved me was still new and amazing. Learning how to have fun in a relationship had me giddy, and certainly enjoying the give and take of both the sensual and the silly was part of that.

Like now.

Jon lay back on the bed trying to look dignified, which was ridiculous because he was down to his boxers and er, pleased to see me, if you get my drift. In the bathroom I changed into my nightie and emerged to fetch the cooler. Inside was a petite serving of chocolate sundae which I carried over to the bed along with a spoon.

“Permission to engage in dessert?” I murmured, snickering.

“Granted,” Jon replied, reaching for me and settling me across his hips. “Oooh nice,” he added, stroking my lower back as I tried to balance without hurting him.

“Tonight’s dessert is Ghirardelli dark chocolate gelato with fresh whipped cream, chopped pistachios and a cherry,” I told him, holding up the glass dish, “via the creative talents of your chef, Francesca.”

“Yum.”

I fed him a spoonful and as he swallowed, I wriggled. Clearly the combination of taste and touch was almost too much and Jon groaned a little. “Okay, this is dangerous,” he admitted.

“But fun!”

“That too.”

A spoonful for me, and I felt one of Jon’s hands slide up under my nightie to stroke my stomach. His fingers were cool and I twitched, which in turn made him flex.

“Hey!” I protested. “I could have spilled!”

“You knew this mission would be dangerous when you agreed to it,” Jon rumbled at me. “Show me you can handle it.”

The little taunt made me bristle a bit, although playfully, and I leaned down, resting my elbows on his chest and setting the cold dessert glass between them. He winced a little, but grinned at me.

“All right buster, we’ll see who can handle it!” I cheerfully challenged, and fed him another spoonful as I rocked my hips ever so slightly.

It . . . got messy. By about the fourth spoonful the sundae was done and the pair of us were far more interested in getting rid of our pajamas. I for one was delighted to be astride my husband since the view was wonderful and the sensations divine. Jon Archer was not a little man, so being able to take control of well . . . depth and speed and stroke for our lovemaking was a great exercise in teasing.
This was one of the few positions where I could make him curse and beg, right up until he slipped his hands around my upper thighs and let his thumbs begin rubbing against far more sensitive places between them. When Jon did that I’d lose my focus and start cursing a little myself, working us both into spectacular orgasms that generally ended with me collapsing on him like a beginner’s soufflé while he gave happy groans and passed out as well.

Sex coma, we called it. Both of us would slip into them afterwards, which meant things were sticky but I loved the warm cocoon we made when we were together. Listening to his heart beat was my lullaby on nights like that, and it made up for mornings of damp sheets, terrible bed head, and dishes licked clean by a slightly guilty Porthos.

--oo00oo--

Silver dollar pancakes went over well with the kids. When Sardoz gave one to T’Prith, she took on in her small hands and gummed the thing, concentrating on it. In that moment she looked so much like a tiny T’Pol I had to hide my laugh.

“Everybody sleep okay?” I wanted to know. Hux, Tilla, and Rof nodded. Gorli kept shoveling pancakes in so I assumed she was fine.

“We slept well,” Sardoz told us as he kept an eye on his granddaughter. Somehow Trip had rigged up a baby chair by mounting a plastic bucket with leg holes cut out of it on a stool. “I am concerned not only for our missing members but also our families; would it be possible to send a message to them?”

“I’m sure it will be,” I told Sardoz. “Not speaking officially here but I’m sure the captain will agree. In the meantime, what can we do to . . .”

“. . . Keep the children occupied?” Sardoz finished, looking thoughtful. “Generally we have lessons in the morning broken up with periods for physical recreation and rehearsal. If you have recovered our instruments and if there are any educational materials aboard, I believe we can keep to our regular schedule, Chef.”

I looked to Reed’s second, Pretoria Gordon-Ross, and she nodded. “We have the instruments and I’m pretty sure we can come up with books and PADDs for them,” she assured me.

“Back to lessons?” Hux gave a little groan. “I wanted to look around the ship!” Giving me a pleading look he added, “Can we do that sometime? Please?”

“I’ll check. No promises,” I told the boy. “I’ll be back in a little while and I might bring a friend, if I’m allowed.”

“A friend?” Hux echoed, and I nodded. Looking at Sardoz, I added, “Is there anything else you need right now?”

The elder Vulcan thought for a moment. “Paper and a pen,” he told me. “I have a piece I have been contemplating for a while that I would like to arrange.”

I nodded. “I’ll pass the request on.”

Justine was not in the galley but the dishes were, and I got to them. I’d already opened up a document in my private files and had a running list of her derelictions; this would be one more on it. Grumbling, I managed to get the last of the breakfast utensils done when she showed up, a basket of hydroponic vegetables in hand.
“So I was thinking of a ratatouille for lunch,” she began when I stalked over to her.

“Chef Zindal,” I began, working at keeping my voice steady. “On this ship you are MY sous, and as such do not get to pick and choose your duties. I realize you have one medical issue listed for lifting above a certain weight, but other than that you are expected to carry out your job diligently and consistently.”

Justine’s expression stayed bland. “Little girl, I have fifteen years more experience in kitchens than you do, and while the paperwork may say you’re in charge, I don’t think you’re particularly good at it. Dishes,” she announced, “are beneath me! If you had any real leadership skill you’d get a crewman assigned to handle them! We’re chefs, not dishwashers!”

“We are also personnel of this ship and do whatever comes with being in this galley!” I shouted at her. “For the moment that includes washing dishes!”

“I refuse!” Justine snapped. “I outrank you and don’t think that just because you’re married to the captain you can order me about! I’ll cook and create, but I will NOT do dishes!”

She stormed out, spilling the basket of vegetables and I blinked in shock, barely holding back my fury.

As far as I could see I had two choices: I could complain to Jon and have Justine removed from her duties, or send a complaint to Star Fleet and have them deal with her. Neither one would be quick nor fun, I realized. Justine had pretty much screwed me over and probably knew it at this point.

The other option would be to wash all the dishes myself, which wasn’t impossible but it would cut into the rest of my work . . . which is probably just what Justine wanted. With me stuck doing dishes, she’d take over creating the menu and doing the actual cooking.

I thought hard for a moment and went to the ‘com, calling up Trip. “Chief, how quickly can we get to the prototype dishes?”

“A week,” he offered up. “They won’t be pretty but they’ll do. Is there a rush on it?”

“Yeah,” I admitted slowly. “I think so. Let’s talk after dinner tonight.”
Chapter 5

Porthos was a hit. His tail never stopped wagging as he greeted the children and everyone’s hands were thoroughly washed as he rolled over, snuffled and permitted himself to be petted. Hux and Rof definitely loved him; Gorli wanted to pull his tail and ears, but I explained why that was a mean thing to do and she seemed to understand. Tilla was a little shyer but warmed up after a while.

But the most fun was to watch baby T’Prith. Her eyes got big and she put her whole focus on watching Porthos, her lips moving as she did so. I had him lie down, and he slowly inched over to where she was sitting on a blanket, looking at her hopefully.

T’Prith let out a delighted shriek. Porthos barked in agreement and before I could stop him he nuzzled her bare foot, making her giggle.

You don’t know cute if you haven’t seen a baby Vulcan giggle. Honestly, it was too much, and even Phlox was grinning at how excited T’Prith was.

“She’s fearless isn’t she?” he murmured to Saroz, who was at the table, writing.

“She is,” he agreed, looking at his granddaughter. “A wanderer and explorer.”

I’d learned more about our guests, and knew that Saroz and his family had come from the coastal city of Raal on Vulcan where he’d been a renowned lyre-master. Even T’Pol had heard of him and was personally involved in contacting his associates there. He’d been primarily in charge of the children’s education during their tours, and arranged the trips.

I liked him. He was far more . . . mellow than most Vulcans and I suspected it was due to his age. Saroz was serene but not above being firm and encouraging with the kids and they loved him that much was clear. They were lucky he’d stayed with them instead of disappearing like the rest of the orchestra.

I’d also gotten to hear a little of their rehearsal and realized that everyone actually played instruments. Hux was the most talented, playing a tri-level keyboard with amazing skill. Rof played disk and rod chimes while Tilla and Gorli played various drums. Gorli especially was good with rhythms and I found out her father Grund Boral was a renowned percussionist. The idea that a three year old could not only handle drums but actually play them was eye-opening to say the least.

I spoke with Phlox about it later and he agreed. “They’ve been exposed to music their entire lives so far, and the influence is evident. They’re fortunate that way.”

“I didn’t start cooking until I was a teenager,” I sighed. “Think of what I could have been if I’d been Gorli’s age in the kitchen!”

“Messy,” Phlox predicted. “Cooking is far different from basic percussion.”

“True,” I admitted. “So they’re all healthy?”

“As far as I can tell, yes. Sardoz is recovering from his deliberate fast and in very good health for a man of his decades,” Phlox murmured. “Another benefit of music I suspect.”

“So what do you think happened to entice their parents away?” I asked quietly.
Phlox sighed. “I don’t know, but working logically, it had to be something that targeted them. Sardoz and the children were not affected, so that’s a clue, but I’m not sure what it means at this point. The captain and Commander T’Pol are working on it now.”

I had to be content with that, and went about my duties, making it a point to call Justine for a talk in the galley because I was determined to handle her on my own first.

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She sat down stiffly, her body language full of passive aggressiveness but I decided to take a page from Jon’s playbook and had made coffee and biscotti, setting them on the prep table between us. “You don’t like doing dishes—nobody does,” I told her as we sat. “But the Enterprise doesn’t have a crewperson to spare, and for the meantime it IS part of our listed duties. We can work to get that changed by the next mission. But for now, we wash. BOTH of us.”

Justine sighed, looking slightly mulish but when she spoke, her voice was quiet. “I . . . had no idea about this part of the job. When I looked over the logs you and Maalik kept, you never mentioned the clean-up beyond a line or two. I . . . made an assumption that it was assigned elsewhere.”

I took that for the unspoken apology it was, and gave a wry grin as I sipped my coffee. ‘I’m honored you looked at the logs, and for the record, dishwashing is both time-consuming and an added chore. That’s why the idea of recycled dishes created from our organic waste has such potential. It would free up both time and space in the galley—time we could use for better work.”

Justine nodded. “You make a good point. I wonder if we can access information about the galleys of other ships, particularly Vulcan or Andorian ones. They’ve been out here longer than we have and may have a jump on something like this.”

I brightened. “Great idea! I hadn’t even thought of that!”

She looked at me, clearly surprised at my support. “Yes?”

I gave an encouraging shrug. “Yes. Do you want to look into it? I can cut a deal with you, Justine—I’ll do the dinner dishes for the next two weeks if you want to use that time to do the research. Fair enough?”

For the first time ever I saw her smile, and she gave me a nod in return. “I suppose can’t get out of them forever but it’s a good offer. Yes, I’m fairly sure O’Neil can get me the specs and logs from a few ships. And . . .” she added, “I let my frustrations get the better of me earlier. You are the chef.”

I felt a pang of compassion for her; the woman wasn’t bad, just a little difficult. I knew the type—my Aunt Gisella was the classic example. “Thank you,” I told Justine. “I do appreciate your saying that. I want this galley to run smoothly and I know it can’t without your enthusiasm and experience, Justine.”

She smiled again and took a biscotti.

--oo00oo—

When you’re in the galley you hear things but you don’t always get told things. We’d taken the orchestra’s ship into our shuttle bay and shifted course but I found out only when Sath said so well after lunch. He was helping me plan out the menus and mentioned it as we were deciding on how much chicken we needed for the week.
“Yeah apparently Commander T’Pol figured out the coordinates for the distress call so we’re heading there,” Sath told me. “The second shift navigator, Cindy, told me.”

“Cindy,” I teased. “Isn’t she the one with the big—”

“—Smile, yeah,” Sath corrected me, grinning. “Nice girl; I’m hoping she’ll go with me to movie night this Saturday.”

“What’s playing?” I wanted to know.

“Dunno, something about dancing cats. Anyway, Cindy says we’re on our way and should be there by dinner. Bet your hubby cancels his so he can lead the landing party to wherever we end up.”

“No bet,” I sighed, all too aware of Jon’s enthusiasm. “I wonder if this means we’ll be running a rescue.”

Sath gave a shrug. “If anyone’s there.” He shot me a sidelong glance. “I hate to be pragmatic but these kids and their guardian might not have anyone left. I want to be hopeful but . . .”

I knew where he was coming from. We’d had some hard missions as well as successful ones and all I could do was hope this ended well.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I really want this to be one of the good ones.”

After finishing with Sath, I took a look at the protein block that I wanted to shape into a dinner plate. Most of our recycled stuff looks like plastic but softer. I took one of the regular plates out, scanning it first in the re-sequencer.

MATERIAL NOT CONSUMABLE the program helpfully informed me. “No shit,” I muttered. “I just want the pattern.”

Nothing I did would let me scan the plate, and I was getting frustrated when Reed came into the dining room and strolled over.

“Chef, I was wondering . . . are you trying to scan a plate?” he asked.

“Yes!” I growled. “Sorry, I just need the pattern but the failsafe for the protein re-sequencer won’t allow it. Stupid thing.”

“Well it’s a failsafe for a reason,” he pointed out. “But, if you’re looking for the pattern, I do have a suggestion.”

Minutes later we were in the transporter room and I was laying one of the dishes on the pad.

“Here?”

“Just there,” Reed agreed. “We’ll beam it . . . let me think. Need an established location . . .” He hit the intercom. “Gordon-Ross, are you still in the shuttlebay?”

“Sir, yes I am,” came the reply.

“Good. Would you let me know if a dinner plate appears?”

There was a pause and I fought not to giggle. Even Reed’s thin mouth quirked, but finally Gordon-Ross replied.

“Very well, sir, yes I will.”
“Reed out.” To me he added, “Unflappable, that girl. I admire that.”

I myself thought he admired a bit more than just her attitude but now wasn’t the time to say so. Instead I stepped next to him as he began the transporter sequence. The dish shimmered, went opaque, transparent, and then vanished. I fought the impulse to applaud.

Behind us the ‘com crackled. “Gordon-Ross here; we have deck plating, sir.”

“What have I told you about using puns, Gordon-Ross?” Reed murmured and I swear his tone was almost affectionate.

“I’m limited to one a day, sir. But this one seemed part of the perfect setting.”

I snickered. Reed gave an audible sigh. “Annd just for that you may clear the deck. Please bring the plate back. Reed out.”

Collecting the pattern was simple, and I left the transporter room with the data in hand, ready to find out if the re-sequencer would accommodate my wishes and make me dishes.
So while I was messing around in the galley with reclaimed protein and dish patterns, up in the Situation Room, T’Pol knocked out my husband and a few other people, stole a shuttle, and took off.

Yeah, not her typical behavior there.

I heard the klaxon go off, and saw people dash out of the Mess Hall, knocking into each other as they bounced through the doors, but I knew better than to get in the way. I saw Justine looking at me from the galley and gave her a ‘your guess is as good as mine’ shrug as I started to clean up dishes. Emergencies happen on a ship and I was getting used to that even now. It was about twenty minutes later, though, that Sath dashed in, told me Jon had been hurt and to get to Sick Bay pronto.

I ran. Not ashamed to admit I was out of breath by the time I slid up to the doors and hit them, forgetting the button in my panic. The doors wooshed open and I looked around wildly, seeing Jon sitting up with a big bruise on his left cheek and a pissed expression.

“What the hell happened?” I demanded.

Phlox was waving something over Hoshi, who was lying on the other med bed, her nose kind of crunched looking and spattered with blood.

“T’Pol didn’t take my order to stay on the ship too well,” Jon grunted. He rubbed the left side of his jaw as I came over and took his free hand. “She’s got a swing like a hammer. Ow.”

“And she’s broken the ensign’s nose,” Phlox pointed out grimly. “At the moment Commander Reed and a few of his team are pursuing her.”

“Id was the message,” Hoshi muttered thickly. “She volunteered to listen to id trew headphones.”

“The recording?” I said, giving Jon’s fingers a squeeze. We were pretty good about no PDAs around the crew but I was still simmering with fury, feeling ready to kick a certain Vulcan’s butt. This protectiveness wasn’t really new, but the degree to which I was feeling at the moment had me growling.

Jon shot me a loving, slightly exasperated look and squeezed my fingers in return. “Yes. We’d read the print-out and it had not only a plea for help but also coordinates so we have an idea where she might be going.”

“So we’re all going after her?” I asked.

“Reed first but the ship was already headed that way,” Jon reminded me. “We’ll catch her—if not here, then on the planet.”

“When do we get there?” I wanted to know.

Jon slid off the table, rolling his head from shoulder to shoulder. “Within an hour if everything goes right. Hoshi, find a way—a safe way-- to analyze the frequency, timbre, hell whatever audio aspects of that message that you can once the doc lets you go.”

He turned to me and dropped his voice. “If we end up going down I may not be home for dinner tonight.” Jon meant it as a tease, but I gave a sigh.
“Understood. Make it back by midnight and we can have a picnic.”

That was our code for . . . well one of those personal bits of shorthand that couples develop. Jon gave me a quick, smutty smirk and then left Sickbay, that long stride of his carrying him off quickly.

I looked at Phlox, who was spraying Hoshi’s nose with something that glowed. “Anything I can do?”

“The ensign here might benefit from some tea,” Phlox told me. “It would help with the swelling.”

I knew which brand of green tea Hoshi liked so I went off to brew some, trying not to worry, which was harder than it sounds.

T’Pol wasn’t the sort I would have ever thought would launch into combat and the fact that she HAD left me wondering what the hell was in that distress call and how it could have turned her from a rational Vulcan into someone desperate to get to the planet. After I finished making and delivering the tea, I went to see Sardoz.

“Oh yes, they were all . . . agitated,” he agreed. “I found it distressing, particularly the behavior of Sootha and T’Paf, but they would not be swayed from joining the others and I was in no shape to challenge them physically, not that I would.”

“Is it possible there was something under the words—some subliminal sort of enticement?” I asked, figuring a musician might know something about that.

Sardoz considered it. “It would be logical,” he admitted, “since the message itself was fairly straightforward. In Earth legend, is there not a story of a Siren’s song?”

“Yes,” I agreed, lowering my voice. “Luring sailors to their deaths. Not something I think the kids ought to hear about.”

Sardoz nodded. “I concur. And I wonder . . . on our ship we have some specialized equipment that might help in your analysis of the message. Since I was preoccupied with the welfare of the children at the time I did not have a chance to use it on the message but now seems a good moment to try.”

I passed the suggestion along to Hoshi and returned to the galley, working hard on not worrying. Luckily I had plenty to do because I’d promised the children we’d make pizza together.

Coming as I did from the culture that had perfected the dish, I was a pretty good tosser, able to spin dough off my fingertips overhead with a flair. Yes I was showing off but to be fair it was fun to see Hux and Rof watching intently, as Tilla giggled and Gorli clapped.

“Can I try?” Hux begged, so I set him up with a section of dough which he tossed a little too enthusiastically. It flew up, wobbling, and landed on Gorli’s shoulder like a pale floppy cape. She clawed it off and bit into the dough, chewing happily while Rof got the giggles and Hux shook his head. “Gorli! It’s not even cooked!”

“It won’t poison her,” I assured the boy, “Although it’s not really tasty. Okay, let’s try again . . . .”

Hux caught on and did a fair job, but Rof, Tilla, and Gorli had to be content with rolling out the dough. I supervised the spread of the tomato sauce and showed them how to lay on the toppings, enjoying myself more than I thought I would. It wasn’t that they were well-mannered, although they were; it was simply fun to teach I guess.
Tilla and Gorli’s pizza was piled with too many vegetables, and Hux had made a bulls eye with pepperoni on the one he’d created with Rof, but everyone was pretty proud of what they’d done, and I took them to be baked, tickled at how much fun it had been.

True to his word Jon wasn’t back in time for dinner, which was baked ziti. I heard from Mayweather that both shuttlecraft were on the planet, and we were in orbit around it. “Chief Engineer’s manning the bridge but he’s not happy,” came the quiet confession. “I’m sure you know why.”

I did, and nodded. “She’s tough and they’ll bring her back; figure out what’s wrong.”

Mayweather nodded back at me. “If she doesn’t kill the rescue part first. You didn’t see T’Pol in action, Chef. Scary.”

I winced and collected his empty plate. “I saw the end results which were bad enough.”

It got well into night. I gave in and let Porthos sleep on the bed with me. It was our unspoken arrangement whenever Jon was gone, although I suspect he knew. Porthos was a comfort, albeit an occasionally flatulent one. I slept lightly, ready for the klaxon, or the door; any alert would wake me.

I felt sick. The ziti hadn’t sat well. Food never did when I was worried, and when I finally managed to dream it was about giant pizzas flying overhead with little baby Vulcans on them.

The intercom chirped around three in the morning and I staggered over, tapping it. “Yeah?”

“Thought you’d want to know both shuttles are coming back,” Trip told me. “Jon’s due in about twenty minutes.”

I splashed water on my face, climbed into a utility suit and headed out to the shuttlebay, trying to shake the sleep off.

Trip was there, as was Phlox along with Sardoz, who looked as sleepy as I did. The two shuttlecraft touched down and I watched Reed climb out of one, followed by Gordon-Ross from the other. Then people got out.

Strangers.

Very obese strangers. They staggered out, supporting each other and I realized with shock that two of them were Vulcan. Big, bloated, and looking scared despite trying to appear calm. Other heavy humans came out, and one absolutely rotund Tellerite who could have rolled his way to us if he wanted. I wanted to laugh at how outraged Gorli’s father was but knew I shouldn’t; it was fatigue and shock making me giddy.

I’d never seen an overweight Vulcan before and the two making their way towards us were on their last legs. Phlox directed the hoverbeds over and began to guide them onto them, calling for more as he did so.

By my count there were thirteen strangers, and I felt a pang of sorrow, remembering there had been twenty in the orchestra.

I looked for Jon. He finally emerged with T’Pol, who walked stiffly, her jaw clenched the entire time. When they reached us, Jon spoke, but not to me, to Trip. “Put her in the decontamination room and start piping in Hoshi’s counter-audio track.”
“Aye Cap’n,” Trip replied, directing T’Pol to come with him. As she passed me I could see sweat darkening her brows and realized she was fighting some inner demon. Jon slid an arm around me and sighed.

“Let me get us underway and I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

I gave him a nod and followed the last of the hoverbeds out of the shuttlebay, fighting yawns.

When Jon finally showed up I was already dozing but rolled over to greet him along with Porthos, who guiltily jumped off the bed and wagged his tail. Jon patted the dog, peeled himself out of his jumpsuit and slid into bed, pulling me into his arms despite my little protests: damn, he was cold.

“Hey a little warning there, icicle man!” I muttered, reluctantly letting him spoon around me.

“Duty of any wife in a warm bed is to share her heat with her husband. I’m sure there’s a law about it somewhere,” he replied. “Sleep. I’ll tell you everything in five hours. Deal?”

“Deal,” I agreed, trying to pull my feet away from his, which were frozen as far as I could feel. This he would not allow and slid a leg over mine, pinning me against him.

“All your warmth are ours,” Jon taunted against the back of my neck.

“You’re just lucky I like you,” I grumbled, quietly glad he was back and with me.
Chapter 7

Both of us were groggy, but not so much so we didn’t have a frisky wake-up call. Not every encounter was ship-shaking nor had to be; sometimes a slow ‘ooh glad you’re here, let me show you how much’ is as meaningful as all the other sorts. As we cuddled in the afterglow, Jon finally told me about the rescue.

“Dead ships,” he rumbled. “Big sort of tundra biome but shuttles everywhere Franny, and we couldn’t identify all of them. Most were like ours, meant for planet to ship transport but a few were whole ships. Abandoned, deserted; a few looked as if they’d crashed but most of them were just . . . empty. Spooky as hell, and when we caught up with Reed and his team they reported that T’Pol was making her way north on foot. Good thing we all had the earplugs in, even though it meant resorting to hand signals and PADDs. We got to tracking her and after two miles we started seeing bones.”

“Bones? Like whole skeletons?”

“No,” Jon shook his head against the pillow. “Bones. Nothing was articulated or laid out the way you see when something’s died naturally in one spot. These were piles and clutter. Franny, I recognized some of them. Femurs. Skulls. They were—”

“—garbage,” I finished, feeling sick. “Oh shit.”

“Yes,” he hugged me tighter. “We hadn’t seen another living thing on the planet beyond plants and some insects, so of course we were all wondering what sort of predator we were going up against here. Finally caught up with T’Pol and had to stun her. Not exactly sorry about that—mean of me to say so, but . . .”

“You did good,” I assured him. “So did you find whatever it was?”

He sighed. “We found three ogres. Big shambling humanoid beings that looked right out of that ancient Tolkien movie. We realized that they were in charge of the cages that were holding the orchestra—or what was left of them. Some sort of encampment with netting cages set up around a floating building. Reed and I decided he and his team would to free the orchestra and get to the shuttles while Hoshi and I looked for the transmitter that was broadcasting the distress call.”

“And?” I got up and made him do the same, leading him to the shower. We generally washed up together out of comfortable habit. I got the water the right temperature while Jon grabbed some towels and followed me under the stream.

“It was coming from the building, which was anchored by a ladder. The Ogres didn’t seem to notice us and I’m guessing it’s because they were probably deaf.”

“Or maybe nobody ever resisted the distress call,” I suggested. “What was in the building?”

“How do you know I went in the building?” Jon started rubbing shampoo into my hair. I snorted. “You’re Jon Archer; of course you went in. Come on, spill!”

“A table.” His voice lost some of the good humor and I tried to look up at him but the suds in my eyes made that hard. “A very stained table. Hoshi and I were quiet and found another room with a pretty sophisticated array of broadcast equipment, most of it cobbled together from all sorts of technology, but we figured out where the power source was and unplugged it.”
“Unplugged it?”

“With prejudice,” Jon switched places with me and I rinsed off. “Melted most if it into slag, but once we did I guess you could say the silence woke up. We popped our earplugs out just as this huge . . . jellyfish came floating out of a doorway.”

“A . . . jellyfish?”

“Blobby, tentacles, glowing and floating. Franny, up until now we have seen a lot of shit but this was unbelievable,” Jon looked a little haunted. “About seven meters tall and headed right for us. We tried talking to it, no luck, finally took a shot at it and seemed to stun it so I got us out of there pronto.”

My stomach roiled. “Shit, did it chase you?” That sounded like the worst possible nightmare—to have a giant jellyfish hunting you through some strange building.

“Yeah. We managed to outrun it and made it back outside but it didn’t follow us. By then the Ogre things were catching on and starting to grab weapons but they were physical ones—clubs, spears, that sort of thing. Reed blasted them into unconsciousness and we freed the orchestra but I’m sure you saw them . . . . Where are my socks?”

“Second drawer,” I reminded him. “Yeah, what happened to them?”

“They were being Hansel’ed,” my husband replied grimly. “Fattened up to be eaten.”

That’s when I dashed back to the toilet, gagging.

--oo00oo--

I’m not a vegetarian. I’ve prepared, cooked and eaten a lot of different cuisines, and even though there are dishes I won’t try, it’s not because I disrespect the culture. But eating beings of higher intelligence hits a chef in a particular way and I was no exception. Maybe it’s because we’re so intimately familiar with the way food is prepared but whatever it was, I literally could not stomach the thought of what had been happening on that planet.

Worse, both of Rof’s parents and Gorli’s mother had been among the . . . unreturned. The idea that these two kids had lost family in one of the most horrific ways possible upset me as well. I had to work at being supportive because Phlox wanted me to create meals for the survivors based on specific nutritional projections.

“They’ve been force-fed a calorically dense diet for the last six weeks and the physical and psychological toll is severe,” he rumbled to me as we looked at the readouts. “Particularly for the Vulcans; an overload of fats have put their metabolisms in crisis. I’ve analyzed a sample of the . . . food they were given and it seems to be primarily composed of the rendered body fat of previous captives mixed with exotic, quite possibly toxic compounds I have yet to identify.”

It was the first time I’d heard revulsion in Phlox’s voice and I empathized, feeling the same way about this situation. “What would help?” I asked.

“Basic broths and simple gruels for the time being. Some of the gentler Vulcan foods for Sooth and T’Paf. As for Grund Boral, he’s going to have to fast for a few days so his body can detox. Tellerites aren’t capable of processing animal fat at all, and he’s lucky to be alive at this point.”

“And the others?”
“Simple, easily digested food, lots of water and rest at this point.”

From what I heard, Jon set up several warning buoys and contacted not only Starfleet, but also the Vulcan High Counsel and the Tellurian Authorities, briefing them on what had happened and warning them about the planet.

“Starfleet will be back,” Trip told me, looking grim. “Prob’ly with a squad of MACOS and they’ll scour the planet, scavenge the tech. Far as T’Pol can figure, the Jellyfish creature ingested the brains and nervous systems and left the rest of the bodies for the Ogres. They may have been the first to land or crash on the planet and developed a symbiotic relationship to lure others down to the surface.”

“I want to feel sorry for them but . . . I can’t,” I admitted. “It’s too grotesque.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, handing me a newly molded dish. “The jellyfish creature musta made the recording using all the patchwork computer voices and with some powerful subsonic, subliminal technology it managed to create the ultimate lure.”

“Creepy AND dangerous,” I muttered, looking over the dish. I deliberately dropped it on the floor and it cracked in two, which was a big improvement over the previous ones that shattered, bounced, or in one entertaining instance, splatted, making a wet flatulent sound.

Let’s face it, nobody expects to drop a dish and have it fart.

“Single crack is probably the best we’ll get,” Trip told me, picking up the two pieces. “If we make ‘em any harder they won’t break down in the recycle sequence. Star Fleet can probably refine the pattern and strength once we send them the specs.”

“Justine’s already been talking to them about it,” I nodded. “So can we make enough for a trial meal?”

“I suppose so,” Trip agreed. “Got a particular color you’re shooting for? Because I don’t think we’re ever going to get them bone white—we jest don’t have that level of refinement.”

“Something in a pale blue or green, if we can. I’ve got some food-safe dye we can use.”

“All right,” Trip finally smiled for the first time. “Let’s try some out.”

--oo00oo—

Jon and I had dinner together in the Captain’s Mess and I served us Korean ssam with kimchi and noodles. I used the new plates and we both enjoyed the meal even though I knew it was spicier than our usual fare.

“So now we take the orchestra home?” I asked, twirling noodles on my fork.

“I’ve discussed it with Phlox and Starfleet; they’re suggesting we take them to the nearest medical facility, which in our case is on Sauria III. Their relatives have been notified and Starfleet is bringing them there as well. Wow, this is . . . kind of hot,” he finished, reaching for the water pitcher I’d thoughtfully brought along.

“Hey, hot is good for you; clears the sinuses,” I countered.

“They’re not just cleared, they’re charred, Franny,” Jon grunted, rubbing his nose.
My reply was cut short when Phlox appeared at the door to the Captain’s Mess, looking concerned. “Captain; Chef. I need to speak to you both in Sick Bay As soon as possible.”

He wasn’t smiling, and my heart lurched as I wondered if one of the orchestra members had died.
“The whole lot?” Jon demanded.

“The entire lot,” Phlox echoed quietly. “According to the information from the central pharmacy for the fleet, everything delivered to the Enterprise, the Columbia and several smaller ships was within that dosage batch.”

I was sort of frozen in place, my brain going at about zero, which was a first for me, but I’ve never been good with shock. And this was shock all right; I could tell by the wobble in my knees. I leaned over one of the exam beds, bracing my hands.

“We’ve got to alert the crew,” Jon looked grim, “and let them know. Let them each . . . choose what course of action to take.”

“Agreed,” Phlox was already at my side, looking at me. “Chef . . . .”

“Yes,” I whispered, “I think I am.”

Weird now your life can change in less than two minutes.

I don’t remember leaving Sickbay even though Jon had an arm around me the entire time. We headed back to our cabin, and didn’t even bother turning on the lights, just headed for the sofa, collapsing on each other in the darkness, holding each other tightly.

“Franny,” Jon kept murmuring, “Franny sweetheart . . .”

Porthos came over and whined softly so I patted the sofa and having him jump up was so familiar, so comforting that I smiled. I wiped my eyes and gave my husband a good solid kiss before taking a deep breath.

“Okay. So, let’s talk. Yes or no? We’re not the only people on this ship who are going to be making this decision but I want ours made the sooner the better, Jon. What do you want?”

“God Franny, please don’t put it like that. We’re in this together but it’s not my body we’re talking about, not my career in the balance here.”

“At the same time,” I sighed, “I need to know how you feel because we are married and this is kind of big. We’ve talked about the theoretical ‘in the future’ situation but this is right now. What’s going to happen for those of us affected?”

Jon stroked my back. “Well, Starfleet and the pharmaceutical supplier are at fault, so my guess is that they’ll probably offer ground assignments to anyone wanting to stay in the service, and honorable discharges to those wishing to leave, along with a settlement I assume. And since we’re heading to Sauria III, those wishing to terminate can do so, most likely with a settlement as well.”

I patted Porthos. “But I’m . . . civilian,” I reminded Jon. “So in theory, I could choose to stay on the job and . . . carry on.”

“For how long?” Jon asked, his voice light.”I can’t see you dishing up meals seven months from now—your mother and Nona would kill me for that alone.”

“I’ve got Justine and time to prepare at least two months of meals towards the end. And the new
dishes will cut clean-up time down so I won’t be as tired,” I argued, realizing belatedly that my decision was made. Jon seemed to realize it too, and stretched out, pulling me on top of him.

“So you want to do this?” he murmured, his voice shaky. “No pressure, no judgment, no guilt sweet Franchesca.”

I squeezed my eyes shut; feeling a rush of love so strong I thought it was going to overwhelm me. It was crazy and risky and went against all the advice I’d get from my family, I knew that already. “Yep.”

“As your captain I have to point out that it’s a dangerous choice. You’re in a support position but this ship and this mission will carry us into unknown and perilous situations every hour. There are no guarantees for your safety or life, and you need to be aware of the risk you’re choosing,” Jon intoned, kissing my temple. “But as your husband, I’m thrilled. Terrified too, but mostly thrilled.”

I giggled. “Oh goodie, we really ARE on the same wavelength.”

His hands slid down to my ass, cupping it. “So I’m guessing things happened for us on the night of the gelato.”

“Most likely,” I told him, tugging the zipper of his jumpsuit down. “I’m blaming it on your love of dessert and procrastination.”

“Procrastination had nothing to do with it,” Jon protested. “If the dosage was as its name implied—to wit, null indeed—then it wouldn’t have mattered if I’d gotten it on time or not.”

“So it’s all on the gelato,” I humored him. “Surrre.”

“You know this position suddenly seems really familiar . . . .”

We took advantage of it, and each other, much to Portho’s long-suffering embarrassment.

--oo00oo--

Once the news was delivered throughout the ship I found myself the confidante of several couples, some of whom I hadn’t realized were couples. I had to include antacids with the breakfast menu and spotted tense conversations here and there along with some suppressed excitement as well.

It’s a real study in ship dynamics when an entire lot of birth control fails and I wondered if Maalik was having as interesting a time on the Columbia as we were, so I contacted him to check.

He looked a little haggard, but pleased to see me over the link just the same. “Franny! So . . . I suppose you’ve heard the news too?”

“Yeah. In fact, I’m part of the affected population,” I reminded him, grinning. “Jon and I are going to make a go of it.”

Maalik beamed. “Congratulations! Oh that’s lovely, Franny, really!”

“Thanks! How’s the Columbia taking it?”

His expression shifted to embarrassment. “About a fourth of the crew have some soul-searching to do, including my sous, but I have faith in Captain Hernandez and I’m making a lot of easy meals at the moment. Sooo tell me about this dishes project of yours—”

We chatted a while and I brought him up to speed on that as we swapped recipe files, and I wished
him and his ship well when we signed off. Maalik was a treasure and I was glad he was doing so well, even as I missed him.

Breaking the news to Justine was interesting too. She heard me out, crossed her arms, nodded, and said, “Shoes.”

“Huh?”

“Get the best pair of supportive shoes you can, right now. Get them a half to a full size up and break them in pronto. Also, you’re going to need to re-work our schedule to give yourself naps.”

I stared at her and she gave a little sigh, a small smile on her face. “Chef, you’re not the first woman who’s had to work through her gestation.”

It dawned on me what she meant, and I kept looking at her. Justine gave a shrug. “I was working at Chez Andre until two days before my son Daniel was born. They wanted to let me go when they found out but I fought back, assured them I could do it. And I did.”

“I . . . didn’t know,” I admitted, surprised. I’d never even thought about Justine having a family; she’d always seemed so self-contained.

“Yes well he’s a miner for the Tavros Ore Company,” she told me. “Head of operations on the north side of Tavros II. Good man, most of the time.”

“Is he your only one?”

“No. My daughter Evelyn works as an accountant on Risa, and my youngest, Pickle—sorry, Pauline—runs a cheese making farm in Wisconsin. She’s the only one of the three in food service.”

I heard the pride in her voice, saw the little smile, and for the first time saw Justine as more than just my sous. Quietly I asked, “Do you have pictures?”

She did.

--oo00oo—

I made it a point to visit with the children every day and now studied them, realizing I was seeing them also on another level. Baby T’Prith let me hold her, comfortable with my care, and Tilla generally hung onto me as well. I was amused that Gorli clearly had a crush on Reed, making sure to plaster herself to him whenever he came to the Rec room.

And he was good with her. For a guy who didn’t know much about children Reed was quiet and kind, gravely playing patty-cake with the Tellerite toddler while she called him ‘Weed!’ in her gravelly voice.

“Is Gordon-Ross jealous yet?” I teased him after he and Gorli built a tower of blocks only to destroy it upon completion.

He shot me a dry look but I saw his thin mouth quirk. “I haven’t ever been in the position of having two females fight over me . . . yet. Gordon-Ross is taking the high road.”

“Not hard when her competition is less than two feet tall and under the age of three,” I countered, snickering. “Still, you’ve been good with her. Thanks for that.”

“It’s all right,” Reed replied, letting Gorli tug at his hand. “It’s refreshing to have someone so . . .
straightforward about everything.”

I agreed, and I knew it was going to be hard to see them go—I wasn’t the only one of the crew who’d gotten attached to our charges. Still, they all needed better care than we could give them, so by the time we reached Sauria III it was time to go.

They gave us a little farewell concert. Sath helped Sardoz set up the instruments in the Mess Hall and I made fancy canapés for it. It reminded me of a recital, but of course these kids were already pretty accomplished musicians. Most of the adults were recovered enough to attend, which was a great support, and even Grund, Gorli’s father was allowed to show up, albeit in a hoverchair. They looked haggard.

“Survivor’s guilt, along with acute shame,” he murmured. “They are having trouble dealing with the reality of their forced cannibalism.”

“Yes, that would be hard to accept,” I agreed from the back of the Mess Hall where we stood listening to one of the songs. “I’m glad we’re taking them to get help.”

“Yes,” Phlox nodded. “And this concert is the start. I will miss the children, though. It’s been a bright spot to have them.”

And I nodded.
The Fortitude was enormous. I thought the Enterprise was big, but then again I hadn’t seen many space ships, and certainly not freighters. The Fortitude stretched out on our port side, long and unpolished and well, big. It wasn’t built for much beyond travelling from one place to another along established routes so it had a sort of solid staunchness to it. I say that because I’d gotten a little better at seeing design and purpose now. Part of it was hanging around Trip and Jon; the other was simply seeing other ships on a more regular basis. Nobody would call the Fortitude beautiful but she got her job done and was still out here so that had to count for something.

Jon was going to have the captain of the Fortitude over for dinner, and like a good chef I asked who it was so I could personalize the menu. The master of the ship was a Denobulan named Tamzine Thalix, and I suspected she’d enjoy Denobulan sausage so arranged to make that for her. I sent my compliments to Chef McGee and offered to meet up if there was time, signing the transmission with my name. Got a response within ten minutes telling me anyone was welcome to come through the galley at any time so that sounded positive.

Justine and I set up for the interviews, choosing to stage them at one of the prep tables instead of out in the Mess Hall, and I flipped through the files, re-familiarizing myself with the candidates. Esra Vinch from the Phobos colony; Juliene Holtz from Minnesota, Earth, and someone named Fog Sassendo from the Green Mountain Ore company.

“First one and last one are space rats,” Justine told me confidently. “They’ll be acclimated to being on a ship so that’s an advantage right there. The middle one is most likely Starfleet’s applicant.”

“How do you want to do this?” I asked. I myself didn’t interview to get my job; all I’d done was successfully feed Jon for three weeks in a row so I’d bypassed any formalities.

“You ask for the background and I’ll ask the duty-related questions,” Justine suggested. “I think between us we’ll find our dishwasher pretty quickly.”

That’s how we set it up, in fact. As the first candidate arrived, Justine set her coffee cup off to the side before she set down a PADD and a notepad. I wondered what she was up to.

Esra was a lean young man with a nervous smile. He told me about his time working at various jobs on Phobos and while I liked him he seemed a little restless and shifted around a lot not quite focusing on anything. Justine asked questions but I could sense she’d already dismissed him as a good choice.

Juliene looked like she was twelve. She wasn’t; she was over twenty and her resume showed a variety of duties in kitchens on Earth, but I winced when she asked if there were any ‘un-human’ crew members on the Enterprise and seemed nervous about touching dishes that “they” used. We couldn’t tolerate xenophobia, not even in a dishwasher, so although her credentials were good, both Justine and I were in agreement that Juliene wasn’t our girl.

Then the Fog rolled in. He was tall and lean, with skin sort of a soft grey and bunned pale hair that had streaks of blue and white in it. Before I could ask him to sit down, he moved around the prep table, took Justine’s coffee cup, carried it to the open dishwasher and loaded it in, then came back to us and sat.

Justine gave me an approving look and I gave her the tiniest of nods before looking at the person in
front of us. “So, that showed initiative.”

“Or cheekiness,” the voice was deep but melodious too. I saw several studs in one ear and the glittery scroll of a Risan tattoo along the left temple. “I have been accused of both before.”

“Yes, well Mister Fog—”

“Not Mister. Not Miss,“ they corrected. “Ind for Individual as a formal address, but Fog is fine otherwise.”

Genderfluid. I felt a pang of homesickness; a lot of culinary folk in the Bay Area were in this spectrum.

“Fog,” Justine nodded. “All right. What experience do you have with a Mark V full spectrum sterilizer?”

Enough apparently to run and repair it without instructions. Their previous job at Green Mountain Ore involved both prep and clean-up, so I was already pleased at the idea of having a possible Entremetier working with us for the rest of the mission. Justine asked good questions and relaxed a little more with every answer, finally shaking Fog’s hand and thanking them for the interview. Once they’d left, we looked at each other and grinned.

“Fog?” I asked, just to confirm.

“Fog absolutely,” Justine nodded. “I’ll get the paperwork started and check on a berth for them before getting the evening meal started. Need help with the sausage?”

I shook my head. “No I’ve got it, thanks. Also, I think we’ve got some extra Moroccan caraway and pepper to trade with the Fortitude if they’re interested.”

“Maybe we can pick up some vanilla bean or roasted cinnamon in exchange,” Justine nodded, moving to the computer station. “I’d love to offer more baked goods, especially at breakfast.”

While it sounded good, my stomach gave a little lurch and I headed to the nearest head as mid-morning sickness officially began.

--oo00oo—

I liked Captain Thalix, who could have been a sister to our doctor, albeit one with a blonder shoulder-length ponytail. Apparently she was some sort of distant relation to Phlox, some fifteenth cousin or so, which meant Jon invited Phlox to dinner as well. The three of them talked about the personnel transfers, which would start the next day, and caught up on both Starfleet and general space scuttlebutt, most of which I heard later that night.

“Been some strong ion activity in this sector; lot of interference, particularly with the transporters and some of the navigation controls,” he told me over his shoulder as he finished up his log entry. “Also Thalix said two of the shuttles we found on that planet were from another freighter that was reported missing six years ago. And I’m getting an earful from the Admiral about you staying on the ship.”

“I bet,” I sighed, sprawling on the bed. “He does know it’s not our fault we’re expecting, right?”

“He does,” Jon sighed, “but he’s worried about you influencing me and my decisions.”

I made a rude noise. “Hey I was doing that long before we even got together!”
“Agreed,” Jon snickered. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way, frankly. You are speaking on behalf of everyone on board’s family in a way—the human representation so to speak.”

“I like that,” I told him. A thought occurred to me, sparked mostly by memories of the interview earlier. “Jon . . . when did you decide I’d be a good choice for chef anyway? Because I can’t believe it took three weeks for you to make that decision.”

He spun in his chair, cocking his head and looking at me, a little smile on his face. “Hang on; let me find the diary entries.” He turned back, tapped on the keyboard and hummed a few seconds before finding it.

“Oh, here’s the first one . . . took up Trip’s suggestion to check the State House tonight and looked over the menu. Pretty good selection but I have no idea how many people are working in the kitchen. Not sure how to set up an interview but on the plus side the pepper steak is amazing. Next entry is two days later . . . I think the blonde is the chef. At least I hope she is. She’s definitely ordering people around and seems to have it in hand. Great calamari.”

I giggled. “So you kept choosing that left table so you could watch me?”

“Yep. Ohh, I remember this one: Watched the blonde deal with a small fire. Very impressed; barely put her off her stride. Good sea bass. Wonder if she’s single.”

I laughed again. “Seriously?”

“And the next one . . . waiter knows me by now, put me at my usual table. I bet he thinks I’m a stalker. Excellent risotto. Will have to add more time on the treadmill. Blonde’s cooking worth it.”

I rolled off the bed and peered over his shoulder at the screen. “Chose something Vulcan off the menu—something grainy,” I read aloud. “Kind of bland but I expected it would be. Need to make my move or my ship won’t have a chef. Will ask for her name from the maître’d.”

When I tried to read the next one, Jon darkened the screen. “Nope, not that one, sorry.”

“Classified?” I teased.

“Erotic dream,” he told me, going pink in the face. “Damn you and your porterhouse steaks!”

I lost it, laughing until he pulled me into his lap, kissing my neck and laughing with me. “There you have it; I was falling for you before I even knew your name, Franny. What would Maxwell Forrest think about that?”

“He’d think you were going with your gut instinct. Or stomach one anyway,” I replied, feeling tingly. “Ohhh, that’s nice. Keep doing that.”

And Jon did.

--oo00oo--

I thought I was nervous about shuttling over to the Fortitude galley, but Justine was the one who couldn’t keep still. She shuffled her feet and kept rubbing her hands for the entire trip. I nearly snapped at her but in truth I was sort of fascinated. Whoever this chef was, he had to be pretty impressive to make a normally hard-edged Starfleet professional so . . . squirmy.

“You okay?” I asked.
Justine drew in a deep breath. “I’m fine,” she lied.

“Riiight,” I muttered back and left it at that.

We docked and let the freighter crew scan our dispatch bag of spices before having a young crewmember lead us down to the galley. The closer we got, the slower Justine walked. Right at the point where I was going to start pushing her ahead of me, we passed through a swinging glass door and stood in a circular prep room with beautiful wooden cabinets and marble countertops.

After nearly two years of seeing nothing but stainless steel on my own ship, the décor here had me sighing with pleasure. There was a huge spice rack on one wall along with hanging pots and pans of copper and brass, and in an offset shelf, fresh herbs were growing in small ceramic pots.

I turned to say something to Justine, but my attention was caught by the man standing off to one side. The one with the chef’s knife and thunderous expression. He was old and rangy, with white hair in two long braids coming over wide shoulders, shaggy grey eyebrows over two deep and mournful brown eyes, like a basset hound.

“Shit. Little Jus-tine,” he rumbled in a bass voice. “Fuck me.”
Chapter 10

Ever get caught between two people who are so intensely focused on each other that you feel invisible? Ever wish you were invisible in that moment? Because that’s exactly how I felt standing there. For all anyone knew I was part of the background.

Justine didn’t move, but she spoke, and her voice was a little shaky. “Blue. Been a long time.”

“Too long,” Chef McGee rumbled. “Not long enough.” I watched him shift his grip on the handle of the knife, and finally slam it down point first into the plastic cutting board on the prep table. It went in at least an inch and the knife stood upright, quivering.

Kind of the way I felt, actually. I’d been witness to more than my share of kitchen violence—you can’t become a chef without running into people with vicious tempers—but it had been a while.

Justine actually looked more relaxed after this display, still looking at the man intently. “Don’t ruin a good Misono on my account,” she murmured.

“Still tellin’ me what to do,” he growled. “What the Nausicaan slobber-fuck are you doing here? Last I heard you were sweet-talking your way up in the Fleet and teaching classes.”

I kept quiet, not sure how this was going to play out, but fascinated just the same.

“Been keeping track of me?” Justine looked pissed and pleased at the same time.

Chef McGee looked pained and didn’t answer. He wiped his hands on his apron as he straightened up, which made me realize he was probably taller than Jon by a few inches. “I’ve got nothin’ to say to you.”

“Good. Means you’re stuck doing all the listening . . . for once,” Justine snapped. “I don’t give a rat’s pretty pink scrotum what you think of me anymore, but DeMarelli-Archer here is the official chef for that ship out there and deserves your respect. Show her how you run things, listen to what she says and you’ll both get a hell of a lot out of it. That’s all that matters right now.”

Watching Justine lecture Chef McGee was like watching a chipmunk lecture a bear and I tried not to laugh. Geez the tension between them was so palpable I could practically pluck it, like a guitar string.

McGee turned to me, dramatically sweeping his gaze my way, completely ignoring Justine as he did so. “Chef DeMarelli-Archer. Welcome to the galley of the Fortitude. I’m Blueflower McGee.” He held out a hand and mine was sort of lost in his when he shook it. Lot of calluses, strong grip. Behind him I saw Justine’s face break for just a second; a lost painful look before she pulled herself together and slipped out, leaving us alone.

Chef McGee stiffened when he heard the door close behind her, and then sighed. “Let me show you around,” he offered quietly, and did.

Apparently he’d built the cabinets and counters with help from the more construction-talented crewmembers, trading favors for food over the last few decades. “Can’t abide too much stainless steel,” he admitted after urging me to call him by his first name. “Kinda dulls the soul and sucks out creativity.”

“I agree,” I nodded. “Getting to that point myself over on the Enterprise.”
“Industrials, they’ll crush your spirit every time. Try and get some tools with wood or bone handles too; contact with something non-metallic helps. Also, plants. I know it sounds touchy-feely, but functional greenery does more’n spice the food. Good for the soul. I can give you some rosemary and oregano cuttings before you go, if you’d like.”


Blue gave a laugh. “Yeah, got the way with them from my own mama. Anyway, I heard tell you’re interested in our dishes. Ours are reconstituted from pulp, mostly paper and wood, cycled through about seven times or so before it’s useless. We take multi-world timbers as part of our regular load so we always have pulp, and get the remnants from the mills. Get complaints now and then about splinters in the food but other than that it works. What’s your scheme?”

So I told him about the edible recycling, laying out the details even as I wondered about his relationship to my sous and why they were estranged. Part of it was natural nosiness of course, and the other part was just in seeing another side of Justine. I’d assumed she’d been with Starfleet all her life, and now I was getting bits and pieces of a genuine roving chef career that fascinated me.

“Damn that sounds bitchin’!” Blue enthused, flicking one of his white braids over his shoulder as he grinned. “What’s the texture like? Does it hold sauces and gravies without sogging up? Have you figured out a shelf life for ‘em yet?”

“Grainy but we’re working on smoothing them out at the moment. Texture’s like a heavy cracker mostly and we can keep them from sogging with a thin edible shellac but takes time to apply it,” I responded. “Haven’t cut the time on that part.”

Blue nodded and we turned our discussion to recipes and schedules, sharing details and stories. He was an invaluable resource and I made a note to add him to my list of priority contacts as we traded spices. Finally we stepped out of the galley for a tour of the Fortitude’s hydroponic garden; I looked for Justine but she wasn’t lingering in the corridor.

“She won’t hang around here,” Blue muttered, catching my glances. “Short Stack’s got more sense than that. Come ‘on.”

A nickname.

I mused on that as I followed him through a series of turns and ladders until we were in front of a laser beam laced door, which seemed overkill to me. Blue sighed. “We get a lotta folks tryin’ to sneak tomatoes and bingaz berries. Captain Thalix got tired of me bitchin’ so she set up security. Stings like a mofo and leaves a burn so we know who’s pilfering. Not many attempts now.”

He pulled out a remote and tapped in a code; the beams shut off and the doors rolled open to reveal a huge greenhouse with overhead tanks and raised tables full of greens. I took a deep breath of sweet leaves and humidity, loving it. Nothing makes you appreciate plants like being deprived of them for months at a time. Even Blue was inhaling and grinning.

“Sometimes I’m tempted to settle on a planet and enjoy this every day,” he admitted, taking a collection basket from a stand near the door. “But then it’d stop being special. Let’s get some fundamentals, Franny.”

I found myself liking Blue, and when we were done collecting vegetables, he gave me half of them, grinning when I shook my head over the offer of blue coriander.
"You too, huh?" he chuckled. "Had some a few years ago. Got naked and climbed into a Sehlat’s cage to cuddle with it. Damned lucky it was an old domesticated one who didn’t mind, although all the kids visiting the habitat that day got an eyeful."

I laughed, nodding. "And the hell of it is it really added flavor," I commiserated. "But it turned me into a . . . groupie for the captain."

"And how did that turn out, Missus DeMarelli-Archer?" Blue snorted.

I blushed but shrugged. "The, ah, start of a very good thing, even if I can’t have Pla-ku mor anymore. I should get going, I guess. Hey, would you want to do a mutual dinner?" I suggested, brightening up.

Blue gave a little half-smirk. "Could probably arrange something for the last night maybe; Captain Thalix is big on hospitality and I wouldn’t mind getting’ a peek at those dishes of yours. Let me run it by her and see what’s what."

"I’m sure Jon would be good with it and so would Just——" I stopped, feeling embarrassed, but Blue shot me a steady look.

"We do this, just keep her outta my way," he rumbled. "Far away. Bitty imp’s already messed up my peace of mind just walking into my kitchen—I’m gonna have to burn a Harmony bud just to get any sorta serenity back."

I nodded because I wasn’t sure what else to say. He didn’t seem as angry now; just heavily sad.

After saying goodbye, I shouldered my new spices and vegetables, heading out and back along the corridor towards the shuttle bay. About halfway back Justine rounded a corner I passed and fell in step with me.

Her eyes were puffy but I didn’t say anything.

--oo00oo—

"Sooo, Mom," Jon began speaking to the camera even as he slipped an arm around me. We were sitting side by side on the sofa, trying to look like responsible adults. At least my husband was; I was fighting a case of the giggles. "I’m sure you heard about the, ah, little problem with the . . . ah, medical supplies that were delivered to Starfleet," he began. I found it hilarious how red in the face he was, and fought really hard not to snicker but it was funny as hell to see the macho captain of the Enterprise stumbling over the topic of birth control to his mother.

"We’re part of the statistics, Sally," I offered up, smiling. "Jon and I had a one hundred percent failure rate!" I flashed a thumbs-up.

"Franny!" Jon muttered, but tried to put a brave face on it to the camera. "Yes, um, we’re expecting a baby." His arm around me tightened but I wasn’t sure if it was out of affection or warning.

"A grandchild," I prompted, and he brightened.

"Yeah, exactly! So while it’s sooner than any of us expected, there is that and we wanted to share the good news. Franny’s going to stay on the ship but we should be getting back right before the birth. Yes I will take extra special care of her and yes we’ll avoid all unnecessary risks and I’ll make sure she eats well. We just wanted you to know along with Franny’s folks. We’ll talk to you soon and we love you Mom."

As soon as the recording camera clicked off, Jon slumped, rubbing the back of his neck. "God, I
sounded like a complete idiot.”

“Yep,” I agreed cheerfully, kissing his chin. “I take it you never talked much to your mother about the birds and the bees?”

“No,” Jon admitted. “My dad gave me the biological talk when I was twelve and then the ‘How NOT to get a girl pregnant’ sermon at fourteen. Mom was not part of either lecture series.”

“Well if she had you then she’s got an inkling about the process and I’ll give you a hint Jon: your mom already knows we’re having sex.”

“I don’t mind her knowing,” Jon complained, “I just don’t want her thinking about it.”

“She won’t from this point on—she’ll be focused on the Blip,” I assured him. “Based on those boxers she sent, I can’t wait to see what the onesies are gonna be like.”
Chapter 11

Both Captain Thalix and Jon gave the go-ahead for the joint banquet, so we settled for having it on the Fortitude because their Mess Hall was bigger. By our estimation we’d be feeding two hundred folks in various shifts through the day, so I tried to keep the menu to match the meals. Blue was good with that, ready to do pancakes and waffles in the morning along with an omelet bar while I set up some of the lunch and dinners, working with Justine.

She still wasn’t talking but sure listened when I told her about my visit with him. Wildly curious as I was, I kept from asking questions, figuring she’d speak up when she felt like it. The fact that I didn’t pressure her seemed to help because she put in a lot of extra work without complaining, too.

I was pleased that Fog settled right in as well, bussing, washing and prepping alongside us easily. They’d gotten a berth with the general crew and I appreciated the extra help because I’d started feeling more fatigue, especially in the afternoons.

“You’ll have to cut down on the caffeine,” Fog told me. “Find a soothing tea for a substitute, Chef. Bingaz or mint.”

“No coffee?” I grumbled. “Nobody told me about this part. What else am I supposed to give up?”

“Sex; trampolines; sex on trampolines,” Sath told me as he sailed into the galley. “Hey Fog!” The two of them went through a complicated handshake while I tried to hide my blush.

“I’ve never had sex on a trampoline!” I protested, just for the look of the thing—given Jon’s libido it was probably on his bucket list, however.

“Too bad, so sad,” Sath sighed, “thrust is great, rebound’s a little tricky. Have you seen Justine?”

“No, I thought she was heading to the Fortitude to set things up,” I replied, suddenly having visions of a bloody slaughter. “Uh . . .”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Sath muttered, not looking convinced. I’d told him about the confrontation with Blue and knew he was probably thinking the same thing I was.

“Yes they will be fine,” Fog interjected, handing me a mug. “I worked with Blue and I know he wouldn’t harm anyone.”

“I think this situation might be different,” I replied, taking a sip from the mug. Sweet; citrusy. I liked it. “Oooh, what’s this?”

“Pomelo Hibiscus tea,” Fog replied. “Good for your immune system. Why is this different?”

“Thank you. Well because I think he and Justine have some emotional history that’s not . . . resolved,” I admitted. “Although neither one is talking about it.”

“I better check in and make sure everything’s . . . okay,” Sath sighed. “We’ve got two shuttles ready to bring over whatever you need to the Fortitude, and they’ve got a transporter too, so you can send things that way as well.” He scooted out and I hoped everything was going to be all right.

Some of my trepidation must have shown because Fog sighed. “Well if it IS an emotional situation perhaps it’s time they cleared the air. The qi of a kitchen can’t survive bad vibes.”
“True,” I agreed. “Hey, how do you feel about having a few . . . plants in here?”

--oo00oo—

I didn’t hear back from Sath, so I got on with the business of transporting food to the Fortitude, hoping I wasn’t going to be turned away or directed to someplace other than the galley. When we docked, I followed the hover carts, trying to keep my concerns tamped down.

Turned out I was worrying for nothing; Sath and Blue were talking and Justine was nowhere in sight. Blue spotted me and waved the carts towards the furthest prep table, nodding as the crew began unloading them. “Oooh, smelling great, Franny.”

“Good, it should,” I nodded. “So . . . where’s my sous?”

Immediately the congenial atmosphere faded.

Blue grunted. “She’s setting up the Mess Hall. Savorn here’s running interference so I don’t have to deal with the tiny terror.”

“Oh, okay . . .” I started to unpack one of the containers, hoping nothing shifted too much, and feeling relieved once I’d looked—at least the food was going to be all right.

“I’m . . . gonna go make sure the rest of it gets here,” Sath headed out, leaving me alone with Blue, which wasn’t the most comfortable situation.

I shot the chef a look; he made a face in return. “You’re dyin’ to ask about me and her, aren’t ya?” came his heavy comment.

“Yeah,” I admitted, pulling pans of lasagna out. “I know it’s none of my business but she’s not talking and I’m going to have to work with her for the next seven months or so. Right now that’s not looking like a lot of fun.”

Blue came over to help me, lifting three pans to my every one. “Down and dirty---she made me fall for her and then left. Not a damned word, no explanation. I didn’t take kindly to that.”

Pausing, I looked at his profile before I spoke. “How long ago was this?”

“Thirty-two years ago,” he muttered.

I blinked. “Uh . . .”

“Yeah yeah, lots of folks have told me to get over it. Problem is, I’ve got Haluite blood.”

I had no clue what that was; Blue shifted a little uncomfortably before uncovering one of the pans. “Haluites bond fer life. Chemistry thing, hormone thing. Can’t break it even if I wanted to—not without one of us dyin.”

Shit. I winced. “Like, forever?”

Blue turned those basset eyes to me and I saw just how deep his misery went before he drew in a breath. “Yeah. So I went back into space, hopin’ to get the hell away from . . . everything. Heard hints about where she was, what she was doin’ every once in a while. But it ain’t any use. She made that clear decades ago.”

“But . . .” I didn’t know where to start. “Uh, does she know about the bond thingie?”
“Hell if I know. Tried sending her a message once but since she never replied . . .” he shrugged and shifted the pans to line up evenly. “Yesterday was the first time I’d seen her in over three decades.”

“Damn,” that slipped out before I could stop it; Blue gave me a wry nod in return.

“Yep. Never thought she’d leave Earth, myself . . . she’s not the wandering type. But Justine’s still the same unforgiving, prickly, bossy éclair she always was.”

“Éclair?” I snorted.

“Puffed up, crusty on the outside . . . “ Blue mumbled, not willing to finish the analogy while I shook my head.

Thirty-two years and it was clear he still had it bad. I made a mental note to look up Haluites when I got back to the Enterprise; in the meantime we had food to serve up, and fast.

I loved the next few hours. Having a full kitchen in full swing was something I’d missed—shouted orders, specific stations, smoothly moving in synch with other talented people who knew their jobs . . . it felt wonderful to be in the thick of it again. Since it was Blue’s ship I acted as his sous, while his dishwasher Sam; Justine; Sath; and even Fog worked under us, moving meals and bringing back dishes with alacrity.

And mio Dio, could this crew EAT. I sent out fifty plates of lasagna in ten minutes, along with dishes of spaghetti al forno and bowls of minestrone soup. Justine was flying through salads and beautiful fruit plates, her knives flashing as she called for more ingredients and I’m not sure how Sath got roped into waitering but he took to it in a way that told me he’d done it before.

By the end of the second shift lunch, I stepped out to take a look at the Mess Hall, a little tired but ready for my second wind. There were at least seventy people there at tables, rowdier than I was used to, but then again the Enterprise rarely had all shifts eating at the same time.

Humans—Terrans, as I was learning to call them, along with Denobulans; Vulcans; a few Andorians and a cluster of Tellerites at one table, all drawing engineering schematics on the nearest wall while eating and arguing. I didn’t see Captain Thalix or Jon at first, but finally figured out that the little terrace over the main doorway was the Captain’s table and waved. My husband waved a forkful of lasagna at me, which cracked me up. I waved back at the doofus and was returning to the kitchen when I heard the crash.

Shit.

I ducked in, looking around and spotted Blue, who was wobbling a little, his big gnarled hand clutching . . . oh shit, the edge of the dry ice container we’d used to keep the seafood appetizers cold. His hand was turning white, and there were shrimp and oysters all over the floor now. I tried to reach over to help him peel his fingers free but Justine beat me to it.

She threw a towel on the dry ice container and picked it up. “Blue! Come on, over to the hot water,” she ordered, steering him, who was still stuck to it over to the sinks. “Fran, get any doc or first aid you can, treatment for burns, pronto. Sath, hold up on food until we get this cleared.”

I grabbed the kit off the wall and passed it to her, and then stepped out in the hall, grabbing the first crewmember and asking for help. I got it too; less than a minute later both Doctor Phlox and another medical person were in the doorway of the Galley to help.

I saw Justine had turned the hot water on and the entire sink area was fogged out as the dry ice melted. The entire time she was talking to Blue, her hands running over his, her words soft. “Gonna
be okay. You’ve got calluses so that will help. I know it hurts but you have to flex your fingers and get the circulation going.”

“Fuck,” Blue growled. “Fuckfuckfuckstupidfuckingaccident! That’s what I get for thinking I can handle being in the same fucking kitchen with you!”
Haluites are the minor population of Mindar V,” Phlox told me as we sat together over coffee and biscotti. “One of the first populations to work with the Andorians nearly two centuries ago. Humanoid for the most part, but with a particular biochemistry that evolved to keep the population stable. Most Haluites are careful about personal relationships and know when they’ve found a potential Bondmate through simple reactive chemistry.”

“Swooning? Heart flutters?” I joked, but Phlox gave a thoughtful shrug.

“Something like that; it’s not well-documented. Haluites rarely bond with beings outside their particular species but it does happen. Chef McGee’s own family tree bears that out.”

“But Justine’s human, so why’s she glued to him?” I asked, yawning. Sath and I had gotten together a quick team of cooks and while the meal issues were under control at the moment, I’d put in a lot of overtime to make it happen.

“Because thirty-two years ago her body chemistry changed when they bonded. His DNA—specifically the Haluite portion of it—merged with hers,” Phlox replied. “Fascinating really. The strength of that bond, created through exchange of various bodily fluids was powerful enough to keep them linked for all these decades.”

“Very romantic, yeah, but I repeat, why are they STUCK together?”

Phlox smiled. “Because they have a lot of lost time to make up for, as the saying goes. They will need to be on the same . . . wavelength and that will take contact and communication. I suggest we leave them to that in peace.”

I left Sick Bay and headed for quarters, but when I got there, I couldn’t sleep—not just yet. With Porthos in my lap, I turned on the computer and idly looked up someone.

More specifically Daniel Zindal of the Tavros Ore Company.

Tall, rangy and . . . thirty-one years old.

Shit.

I was still staring at his statistics when Jon came in; Porthos abandoned me for him and did the happy doggy thing while Jon petted him. They both wandered back to me, and Jon looked at the screen.

“Interested in mining now?”

“Miners. And not the underage kind although this one . . .” I trailed off. “Jon, I think he’s Blueflower McGee’s son.”

Jon shot me an interested glance. “And? So?”

“Well he’s Justine’s as well. The timeline’s right.”

That’s when Jon looked troubled. “So does Chef McGee know?”

“I dunno,” I admitted, “but up until now I don’t think so.”

Jon sighed. “Franny, we need to leave it alone. Leave them alone to work it out. I told Phlox we
can stay about six hours longer but after that we’ve got orders to move on and investigate an anomaly.”

“An anomaly?”

He sighed. “Something hush-hush but important. I’m under need-to-know restrictions on that, so don’t ask, okay?”

“Is it dangerous?” I returned, looking at him gravely.

“Anything and everything out here has the potential for danger, sweetheart. I’ll do my best not to go into anything blindly or stupidly—that’s as much as I can promise.”

“Okay,” I agreed with a sigh. “In the meantime, rub my shoulders?”

“Only if I get to rub other things later,” he countered with a smirk.

--oo00oo--

By the next morning I fixed breakfast for the crew, laid out the prep for lunch and took a shuttle to the Fortitude, steeling myself for the worst. In all the time I’d known Justine I’d dealt with her strong personality as best I could, and I didn’t see a whole lot of hope in her bending. Honestly, this was a woman who’d held out against a biological bond for three decades out of sheer spite, and at this point I had no idea what to expect.

I made my way to the galley and found it locked; curious, I knocked.

Heard some shuffling and finally the door opened, with Blue peeking out, long white braids dangling as he grinned at me. “Franny!”

“Blue . . .” I replied, startled at his good mood. “Ah, is everything . . .”

“Straightened out?” he rumbled. “I suppose so. Come on in.”

As I stepped in I realized two things VERY quickly.

Blue was naked. Since I was looking at the backside of him I had time to avert my gaze, but as I did so I spotted Justine leaning against one of the far prep tables, coffee mug in hand.

Yeah, she was naked too.

“Uh, I can come back at another time . . .” I yelped, not sure where to look at this point. It dawned on me that while Blue and Justine weren’t stuck together anymore, this mutual nudity wasn’t much better—at least from my perspective.

“Naw it’s cool.” Blue was donning an apron now, so at least I was spared any further awkwardness, but my face was still hot enough to fry an egg on.

Justine gave a sigh and a smile, completely unfazed by her state of undress—it was very hard to reconcile her in this moment with the hardnosed head of Starfleet Cuisine who’d grilled me at the end of my first mission, frankly.

“Morning, chef. Can I get you some coffee?” Justine asked sweetly.

“Yeah . . .” I weakly agreed, “Um . . . you two . . . okay?”
Blue’s hand was bandaged but he was pulling out ingredients that I recognized would eventually be bread: flour, eggs, yeast. “Better’n okay. We are Resolved, but I’m guessing you knew that. Just my love, can you bring over the salt and butter?”

She moved to do so. “Yep. So yes. We um, talked, and got a LOT of issues worked out between us.”

Within minutes I had steaming coffee and a warm blueberry muffin in front of me while Blue had his ingredients, all efficiently measured out. Watching the way he and Justine worked around each other was like watching perfectly geared cogs in smooth action, which for every kitchen is the goal.

“Yeah,” Blue sighed happily. “Cleared the air. Gonna get hitched once we talk to our kids and get a common date.”

“The kids,” I echoed, shooting Justine a look.

She glanced at Blue and then at me. “Yeah, he’s the father of my kids. I knew Daniel was his for sure, and then when I turned up pregnant twice more without any sex . . .”

I stared. “Say WHAT?”

“Not immaculate conception; that Hulite thing. Semen gets stored until conditions are right,” Blue rumbled, trying not to look smug and failing. “Tried to tell the tiny terror here about it but she was too worked up about me bein’ a married man back when we were at Estrella De Amor.”

“Married?” I was lost now, looking from one bare-assed chef to the other, my coffee getting cold.

“Yeah, I was the third in a poly-union with this Denobulan couple,” Blue rattled off. “A legacy from my brother, kinda complicated but pretty much in name only. Never Bonded with either of them, nice as they were. Butter?”

“Here. So yeah, I had Daniel, and then a year later, Evelyn. I was freaking out of course,” Justine sighed. “My obstetrician didn’t believe me when I told her I was celibate and I gave up the argument eventually because both kids were absolutely normal. I had Pauline a year after that.”

“You had three kids . . . without intercourse?” I don’t flabbergast easily but this was freaking me out. I couldn’t imagine turning up pregnant three times with no sexytime preceding it.

Justine pursed her mouth. “I did. I had . . . suspicions but no proof, and I was still so hurt and angry with Blue that I refused to try and find him. But I did get a job with Starfleet, and in the course of work and research there, that’s when I realized the love of my life might not actually be all human.”

I took a deep breath. “Ookay, so what—how-- are you going to tell the kids?”

“We did a vid,” Justine replied, flouring one of the marble counters and shifting part of the dough that Blue had mixed up. “Gave them all the facts and reassured them that all was well.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to not to picture Blue and Justine blithely filming away in the nude; trying not to picture the looks on their kids’ faces at receiving an incoming message like that.

The hell of it was that Justine was so calm now, so utterly relaxed and comfortable, even in the buff. She worked part of the dough, kneading it expertly with even pressure, her focus complete. Blue moved to lay out pans, humming quietly.
“Franny . . . I won’t be going back to the Enterprise,” Justine glanced up at me. “I can’t. I’ve already sent messages to the captain and to Starfleet. Captain Thalix is willing to take me on for the duration of this trip, and after that Blue and I will negotiate for another contract for the next trip. I’m sorry . . . I was really getting to enjoy the position but this . . . kinda takes precedence.”

I cocked my head. “Yeah,” I agreed. “I get it. I’m going to miss you though, believe it or not.”

She laughed at that; a genuine chuckle. “I’ll miss you too. For the record I was jealous of your success and experience in space, but having come out here I’m learning it’s a lot of work as well. You’re gonna do fine, Franny—just make sure the captain takes good care of you for the rest of your lives, okay?”

I was halfway through hugging her when I stiffened and pulled back. “Oh, yeah, and I meant to ask—"

“--The nudity?” Justine finished for me. “Big part of the Resolution. We’re going to be like this for the next couple of months. Another reason I can’t go back to Starfleet.”

“Yeah they’re big on uniform codes,” I agreed.

--oo00oo--

When I got back I went to take a nap, stretching out on the bed in my quarters, Porthos joining me. The fatigue was hitting hard at this point and I knew better than to ignore it. I was happy for Justine and I wished her and Blueflower well but I also knew I’d have to bring Fog up to speed in terms of prep as soon as I could.

“Space is weird,” I told Porthos, who thumped his tail at the sound of my voice before snuggling closer against my hip. “Here’s hoping we get some nice boring mission where all I have to worry about is feeding people, okay?”

The pup made a little ‘whuff’ of agreement and we both drifted off.
Chapter 13

The closer we got to wherever the anomaly was, the tenser Jon got. I did my best to be supportive but he had a lot on his mind as did T’Pol and Reed. I guessed it was something both scientific and dangerous, given the principal players involved. It took work to stay on an even keel emotionally though, especially when Jon was gone for longer hours than usual and I was feeling my body change with the pregnancy.

At four months I was experiencing a shift of tastes. Coffee was always bitter now even when I filled it with cream and sugar, whereas I couldn’t get enough of horseradish. Not in the coffee of course, but in nearly everything else. Every sandwich, every dinner entrée . . . I’d even discovered it was a wild kick on rhubarb pie. Fog didn’t even ask anymore and just set it out for me before I even came into the kitchen now.

Horseradish, yum.

Also, Phlox was checking on me regularly. “You’re reassuringly healthy which is good, and right on track,” he announced at my last checkup. “Any unusual symptoms?”

“Well you know about the horseradish thing. Also a few odd little dreams. Nothing I remember too clearly but they’re pleasant,” I reported.

“You are connecting with the new lifeform within you,” Phlox told me. “It’s a common phenomenon with new mothers in many species.”

“Getting to know the blip?” I grinned.

“Something like that. It’s a good thing,” he nodded. “Make sure the captain has some time for that as well.”

“I wish I could,” I admitted. “He’s pretty busy right now.”

Phlox nodded. “I know. Still, it’s important for him to a part of the process and I will speak to him about it. In the meantime, I want you to hold the course and check in with me in a few days for a preliminary scan. Are you sure you don’t want to know the gender?”

I shook my head. “I’m willing to wait.”

After I left Sickbay I took Porthos for a stroll in the hydroponic gardens, checking out what vegetables were nearly ready for harvest. I was gaining weight but it wasn’t showing yet, which mom assured me was a family trait.

“You’ll pop out around six months,” she’d videoed me, grinning. “One day slim the next day, BLOOP, instant little pot belly. I went through it as did your Nona. All very traditional. Enjoy the ability to stay out of maternity wear as long as possible—I can’t imagine Starfleet has anything that looks good.”

She was right about that; I was already talking to Sath about making a shipwide bargain with anyone who sewed. He was acting as broker, making the deals for his usual ten percent cut.

Part of ship culture, really. I was on the gossip network, and the trade chain and even the Sob Sister line where you met up with someone who needed to vent and got the favor returned later. I’d been on the receiving end of some diatribes about how feckless certain partners were, and how learning
to clean a bathroom sink or put a toilet seat down was now a make or break deal.

All part of being in the crew.

When we finally arrived at wherever we were, the ship went into orbit, and I noticed we were circling around a little planet that seemed to be mostly sort of grey and dusty. There was one ridge of mountains that stood out—just one, long and straight from the pole to about midway. Looked a little like the planet had a Mohawk, and I kept seeing it when I peeked out the window. It looked artificial to me but I couldn’t ask Jon about it; he was too caught up in planning some expedition down there. He was missing meals and coming in late to curl around me in the dark for most of the week.

I tried not to mope; at least he was there, but I did miss the coupling part of being a couple. To compensate I put out some pretty great meals and at least the crew seemed to appreciate my efforts. To be honest part of it was for the attention, and part of it was to test the new plates. Success on both fronts, thank goodness. Fog was delighted with the recycling part, shoveling and slinging in the dishes to the system, singing their lungs out while doing it.

Pretty hilarious.

So when I went back to see Phlox I was in a good mood. Not completely happy, but not depressed either—in short, doing fine. That’s why it was so damned unexpected to suddenly feel dizzy, queasy and light-headed.

I looked at Phlox, who was staring at me, and damned if I didn’t watch him dissolve in a column of twinkles, right before I did the same damned thing. I know it, because I caught my own bubbling out in the reflection off one of the columns.

****

No idea how long I was out, but when I blinked, I sure as hell wasn’t in Sickbay anymore. Phlox was leaning over me, running his hands lightly over my form looking worried. “Franny, how do you feel? Are you all right?”

I glanced around the dark room, realizing from the bare walls and single glass front that it was a cell. “I think I’m okay. What happened?”

Phlox slipped an arm around me, helping me sit up from the bench I was on. “We were . . . transported,” he replied tersely. “I’m furious. Aside from doing so against our knowledge and will, it’s risky for you in particular and I intend to have a serious discussion with the responsible party!”


“I don’t think so,” Phlox tried to reassure me. “I’ve been monitoring you and your vitals seem normal to me. Take a moment and concentrate; then tell me how you feel.”

I did as he asked and took a breath, tamping down my panic and concentrating. “I feel fine . . . for the moment. But who would do this and why? Just . . . snatch us away like this?”

“I have no idea,” Phlox admitted. “We’ve been here for about an hour, and from what I can tell we materialized here inside this . . . confinement. The air is re-circulated and the gravity is within planetary standard. It’s cooler than the Enterprise but not by much.”
I nodded, still concentrating on how I felt. “So we’re not on the ship, and it’s dark. How much time has passed?”

“Maybe an hour or so,” Phlox replied. “I haven’t explored where we are since I didn’t want to leave you, but now is a good time to do that.”

He rose up and reached a hand out to the glass; the minute he touched it a static crackle flared and Phlox yanked his hand back, hissing. “NOT glass; forcefield. Charged,” he muttered.

I backed away from it. “You okay?”

“Minor fingertip burns,” he assured me. “Enough to discourage further contact.”

I squinted, trying to look through the forcefield at the wall beyond it. “Some sort of panel there . . .” I shifted my head to peer further out, “Doors. It reminds me of the brig.”

“Our brig?” Phlox wanted to know.

“Sort of. I tried to look around every place I could on the ship but only got a peek at it once. Still, that’s what it reminds me of.”

“Perhaps if we try to draw attention we can find out more,” he suggested and before I could object, Phlox raised his voice. “Hello? Is anyone out there?”

We heard footsteps and the doors I’d spotted whooshed open as two people came through to stand just on the other side of the field and stare at us. It’s a damned good thing I was sitting because I’m pretty sure my legs would have given out. As it was I swayed a little, trying to deal with the shock. Mind you, I wasn’t the only one dealing with it either apparently.

“Captain?” Phlox asked in a very uncertain voice.

But the person who could have been my husband’s twin wasn’t paying any attention to him. He was staring at me with the wolfish hunger of a starving man at the edge of a loaded banquet table. “Chesca . . .” he growled. “Well fuck me with an agonizer! Chesca the Beast . . . sort of.”

His hair was cut in a bristly style and was darker than Jon’s. And while the man’s general features were pretty close, I hated the sly gleam of his eyes, the brazen set of his shoulders as he swaggered closer and hunkered down to stare at me as if I was an animal in a zoo.

“Looks like my trap picked up some honey as well as prey,” he tossed over his shoulder at the second person. I shot a peek and a second wave of shock hit at the sight of another Phlox. A reeeally creepy scowling one in black leather. My Phlox was staring at his counterpart and not looking any too happy about it either.

“Repulsive,” the other Phlox announced, which I thought was pretty ironic considering how he looked.

“Yes, you are,” mine replied, which made me smirk a tiny bit.

Evil Jon didn’t miss that and grinned at me. “So the theory of parallel universes is true . . . at least at this point in time and space. Looks like the Corridor is the real thing.”

“And?” the Evil Phlox had shifted his gaze to me. I shuddered.

“And now we set a little more bait for a bigger catch,” Evil Jon replied. “I want one more shot with
the transporter. We’ll send them a nice big clue.”

He hit some sort of remote and the field dropped. Before I could react, Evil Jon reached for me, hauling me to my feet. He took his time groping me, pulling off my lovebind wedding bracelet and one of my earrings while I tried to resist.

“Stop or I’ll take every stitch you have on,” he told me, flashing a ruthless grin. “Wouldn’t be the first time . . . I’ve missed you.”

I wanted to throw up but settled for showing my teeth. He laughed at that, pushing me away with a lingering touch, stepping back slowly. “Alive again . . . I knew the lure would be worth it.” Evil Jon tossed my bracelet up, caught it, and then deliberately squeezed the soft metal, mangling it.

“Figlio di puttana!” I hissed at him, lunging, but the field went up again and I bounced against it, getting a shock that shoved me back.

Phlox snagged me, bracing me. “Stop,” he murmured, squeezing my upper arms. “Franny, you need to calm yourself.”

I knew he was right, but glared at the two men on the other side of the force field.

Evil Jon licked his lips. “Feisty as ever . . . oh I’m looking forward to re-taming you, Chesca.”

They stepped out again, and I sagged against Phlox, who soothed me as best he could.
A long time passed. I slept, and eventually we were herded out by a pair of guards with sidearms; in the hallway another couple of guards separated us. I protested as did Phlox but it was useless.

“Be calm,” Phlox called to me as we headed in different directions. “We WILL be rescued, Franny.”

I nodded, working hard not to cry. I was exhausted and hungry and needed to pee but I wasn’t about to show any weakness if I could help it. The guards prodded me onward, down hallways and I tried to see if they were similar to the Enterprise, but I couldn’t tell much because they were fairly low-lit.

Eventually I was pushed forward through a pair of doors that turned out to be quarters. Spartan ones, but I hurried to the bathroom once the doors closed behind me. The facilities were equally stark but my bladder and I didn’t care; once I was done I washed my hands, noting that the mirror was unbreakable stainless steel.

I looked . . . not great. No surprise there of course. I patted my abdomen. “Okay blip, let’s just get through this and back to our ship. First chance we get, we kick Evil Jon right in the palle and run for it.”

I looked around for any sort of a weapon but didn’t see anything breakable, portable or usable—like a guest quarters with no preparation to it. I did see an emblem on a few things though—a planet with a dagger through it. NOT uplifting at all. Sitting on the bed I tried to think back and sort matters out.

Evil Jon had said something about parallel universes and a corridor. If Phlox and I were in some sort of a parallel universe that would kind of make sense, but I wasn’t sure about the corridor part. My strength was in food prep, not physics or any of the hard sciences. Still, I knew I wasn’t where I had been, and everything here seemed real enough.

I got up and looked for a computer terminal but of course there wasn’t one in the room, so I paced a bit. If this was some sort of weird evil version of our world then it made sense there was an Evil Jon and an Evil Phlox. But something Evil Jon said . . . ‘alive again’ . . . kind of hinted that the bad version of ME wasn’t in this world anymore. Ugh. So I had been here but now I wasn’t, and that didn’t bode well.

Especially given that Evil Jon seemed pleased to see me. Really pleased. And whatever relationship he’d had with my other self, I wasn’t going to be a replacement or a do-over or whatever he had in mind, oh hell no. Before I could muse further on any of this however, the door whooshed open and a really slutty-looking Hoshi came in.

A sort of ho-Hoshi as it were.

“Hi. You need to die again,” she announced, and lunged at me with a dagger.

Damn it! I spun out of her way and gave her a hard shove to the back, sending her towards the wall. Before she could turn and skewer me, I kicked her right knee and danced back, watching her topple to the floor. Then I stomped on her right forearm hard.

I heard a sort of crack.
Evil Hoshi yelped, and when she went to grab her arm, I kicked her face and stomped on her left forearm.

While she wriggled on the floor in pain, I picked up the dagger, feeling a little terrified of my own adrenaline-fueled reflexes. “Yeah no--don’t threaten a chef with knives. We know how they work.”

She let go a stream of profanity that would have blistered the walls if they’d been painted. I felt bad until she looked up at me with hate-filled eyes.

It hurt. The real Hoshi and I got along pretty well back in my universe. She’d been one of the first crewmembers I’d befriended and her Oden recipe was fantastic. Made it all the worse that she was the one who’d taught me some basic self-defense, really.

“You need to DIE,” she hissed at me, trying to sit up with two broken arms. “Watch your back from now on because . . . I WILL kill you!”

“Hey, I’m the one with the knife,” I pointed out, but the doors opened again and a tall menacing Evil Travis stood there with a really wicked sidearm pointed at me. He looked at Evil Hoshi.

She shook her head. “I want to kill her myself,” she told him coldly. “Just get me to sick bay.”

He waved at the knife in my hand.

Evil Hoshi shrugged.

Evil Travis kept the weapon on me as he scooped an arm around Evil Hoshi and lifted her to her feet; she cocked her head and stared at me hard for a moment.

“This little setback doesn’t matter,” she spat at me. “I’M the captain’s woman now and I intend to keep the position.”

I made a disgusted face; I couldn’t help myself. “You and Jon?” Somehow the idea seemed kind of ludicrous; like topping a steak with sprinkles.

Evil Hoshi made a disgusted face back at me. “Maximillian Forrest is the captain!” she snapped, and gave a nod to Evil Travis, who took her out of the doors. They wooshed shut and locked, which was no surprise, but I didn’t mind as much.

Now that I had a dagger.

--oo00oo—

For the record, being a prisoner is really boring.

I tried sleeping for a while, and figuring out where best to hide the dagger, hell I got to the point of using it to carve ‘Franny was here’ in the wall by the bunk when I heard footsteps. By my reckoning it was close to evening and I hoped it was someone bringing me something to eat.

It was and it wasn’t.

A surly-faced Evil Sath stood in the doorway, all skinny and oily. He dropped a plastic tray on the floor and shoved it over with his boot, making the contents slosh as he did so. “I heard you were back . . . ah well, I guess the good times had to end at some point.”

I looked down at the slop on the tray. “Is that . . . a chicken claw? Ewww!”
He shrugged. “We were out of heads and to be honest I’m not picky about what I serve prisoners.”

I deciphered the mess at a glance. “Water, stale flour, boiled chicken, dehydrated celery . . . Damn, Savorn, that’s not even trying!”

He looked up, his gaze sharp. “I never told you my first name!”

“You did in my world,” I assured him. “We put together some fantastic banquets.”

He looked at me as if I’d suddenly declared that I loved him. “B-banquets? Like, real food banquets?”

I sensed an opening.

“Stacks of grilled steaks; seared red peppers with fluffy rice,” I murmured enticingly. “Buttered baby peas and homemade garlic bread, and best of all, peanut sauce sautéed satay skewers.” I drawled, trying to put a sensual spin on the menu.

My words seemed to be pure porn to him; he squirmed and licked his lips.

“Shut up,” Evil Sath moaned. “I’m not listening to you!”

“Eclairs the size of bricks,” I told him sweetly as I moved closer. “Seven layer fluff cake with a chocolate ganache so shiny you could see yourself in it.”

“Shit,” he swallowed hard. “I haven’t had chocolate in two years!”

“Not to mention huge slabs of fudge, salty-sweet peanut brittle and whipped fondant . . .” I trailed, shifting. “Yeah you and me, we cooked a LOT, Savorn.”

He was lost in the fantasy, drooling a little—it seemed almost mean to knee him hard in the nuts but I did it anyway. Evil Sath gave a shrill squeak like a wounded hamster and dropped to the deck. It was sheer bad luck that it was face-first into the glop. He managed to roll so he didn’t choke, but passed out, dripping the sludge on my shoe.

I searched him and found what looked like a passkey in his pocket along with a metal chip thingie on his shirt that looked important, so I took them both before I shoved Evil Sath’s crumpled legs into the room, stepped out and looked around. Not going to have a lot of time, I knew, but at least I was out of the cell and doing something. I crept along, listening carefully for any sounds.

The hallway looked like every other hallway on the Enterprise and I groaned to myself because I was going to have to reach some intersection before I could figure out where I was. There was one up ahead so I tried to inch towards it for minimal exposure.

Nobody there, but there was a little signage that said this was Deck F, which meant one level up and I could get to the galley. I knew I could find a few more of my favorite weapons there and I also knew of a few hiding spots most folks wouldn’t think of---at least if the layout here was anything like my own Enterprise. And while I was thinking about all this and trying to make my way to one of the turbolifts, I got caught by the one person I really didn’t want to see.

Evil Jon grabbed me from behind, wrapping his arms around me and pinning me against him, one hand cupped over my mouth, fingers bent so I couldn’t bite them.

“I just saw Hoshi in Sick Bay,” he growled in my ear. “Nice work.”

I growled back a little, hoping it would stop the fear in my belly.
“The captain’s going to be pissed that his concubine’s out of commission but hey those are the breaks—both of them.”

I struggled again but the man was strong. I should have known better but I tried anyway. No luck.

“Now now,” Evil Jon chided, “Save the wiggling for when it will do us both some good. Come on—"

He half-dragged, half-led me to the turbolift and pinned me to a wall while grabbing the cone and twisting it. I glared at him but he didn’t even notice.

“Nope, you’re not going to stab me,” Evil Jon commented when I came up empty for the dagger. He held it up and jabbed it into the panel above my head. “I happen to know you’re smarter than you look. Now my ‘Chesca . . . she was a total bimbo,” he murmured fondly. “Bouncy, giggly, and surprisingly dangerous in bed, but with enough cunning to get by. Almost. You however, seem to have a lot more going on upstairs than she did.”

“Thanks?” I muttered with as much sarcasm as I dared.

He shrugged. “It wasn’t a high bar to clear. Okay, here we go . . .”

Evil Jon strong-armed me out and down another corridor but instead of heading to personal quarters, we turned and headed in a different direction. I began to figure out where we were going before we got there, and as we reached the side door of the galley, I gagged.

Something reeked.

“What the hell?”

“Since the Beast died we’ve lost our five star rating,” Evil Jon chuckled, and pulled me through the door into a realm of foul, inhuman chaos. Dishes were piled in crusty disgusting stacks; flies partied on nearly every surface and the luscious layers of mold, grime, congealed grease, maggoty meat and rotting fruit gave off a miasma that hung like a curtain of corpses throughout the work area.

I was so deeply, personally, professionally and infernally offended that I nearly forgot to vomit.

Nearly.
I couldn’t take it. Yes I was a prisoner in another dimension; pregnant and facing a dangerous and uncertain future, but damn, this GALLEY!

“I want buckets, sanitizer, mops, good God, a fire hose!” I shouted at Evil Jon as I wiped my mouth. “Give me two people and the right supplies and I can have this place cleaned up in a few hours. I’m begging you!”

He gave me that grin. “Better than torture. This reeeeally bothers you, doesn’t it?”

“You have no idea how much,” I growled, longing to roll up my sleeves and get to work. “How could she let this---”

“She didn’t,” Evil Jon broke in, and for a second his face looked haggard. “It just went downhill after we lost her. Sath’s been cooking . . . sort of. We . . . eat a lot of canned rations.”

I turned to face him. “Look, if you keep me locked up I’m pretty much useless, but I could actually DO something here. Something useful. At the very least put this place back in working order if only for professional pride. This is just sick.”

“I don’t make deals,” he told me, “but I’m a pragmatic man. You go into the manacles, you can do what you want to do here. No manacles, no work.”

“Manacles?”

I had to ask.

Evil Jon whipped out a pair of gleaming gold cuffs with an array of light bands around them. “Containment restraints that keep you in the galley. They also prevent you from stealing knives and or plunging them into yourself or others.”

“Wow, what a fantastic recruitment incentive,” I drawled. “Bet they were lining up for a chance to be in those!”

“Could be worse,” Evil Jon pointed out. “You could always be a test subject in our medical labs.”

I shut my mouth. Having seen Evil Phlox once, I didn’t want to see him twice, and certainly not in any test capacity.

Evil Jon gave a nod and held up the manacles again. “So, I take it you’re amenable? That means you agree,” he explained helpfully.

“I know what amenable means,” I snapped. “I consent on the sole understanding that I’ll have access to both the appropriate sanitation equipment and manpower to sterilize this entire galley.”

“Listen to you with your Vulcan-level vocabulary,” Evil Jon mused. “That’s one nice change from my ’Chesca. I can lend you a pair of grunts to help clean but that’s on the understanding you get this place in shape within four hours.”

I looked around again, weighing my chances and slowly nodded. “Okay. But if you want me to do
any cooking, I’m going to need to know what your supplies are like.”

Evil Jon shrugged. “I don’t know; you can talk to Sath about that. Wrists . . .”

The cuffs clicked around my wrists and I got a quick, painful jolt that left me breathless; Evil Jon had just become Dick Jon in my book.

“Just a taste of the lowest setting,” he told me. “So you understand. Try to pass through the doorways here and you’ll get a much higher stun.”

“What if I need to go to the bathroom?” I demanded, panicking a little. Since my pregnancy, I’d needed to visit the little chef’s room a lot more often than usual.

“This button,” he pointed to a small one on my left cuff. “Sends an alert to me and I’ll come down to escort you.”

I made a face. “Creepy.”

“Better than just telling you to use a corner,” he pointed out.

I looked around once more and then back at him. “Okay then. Supplies? Workers?”

He went to the wall ‘com and called for two crewmen I recognized, although the counterparts that came through the galley door a few minutes later looked a lot more menacing than the Sanchez and Rosenberg I knew from MY universe.

They both looked at Dick Jon with clear distaste before looking at me in surprise.

“I thought she was dead,” Rosenberg blurted.

“Yeah but it wasn’t fatal,” Dick Jon snickered. “This time. You’re going to do whatever SHE asks in terms of getting this place cleaned up,” he told them. “Four hours, and if it’s not done by then, there’s a special project involving a certain booth that Doctor Phlox is dying to try—dying being the operative word here. Get to work.”

He left, and we got to it.

Two hours later I was happier but not completely satisfied. A lot of the mess had been mostly surface, and because the dishwasher and sanitizers were working the drudgework of cleaning and re-shelving did a lot to clear out the clutter. I told Sanchez and Rosenberg what I wanted and made clear why it was a good idea, which seemed to help in getting their cooperation.

“So I guess you two worked things out?” I idly asked while scouring one of the prep table tops.

Sanchez gave me a strange look. “Worked things out?”

“Yeah, you and Reuben,” I nodded to Rosenberg, who looked confused.

“What are you talking about?” Sanchez glanced at Rosenberg and back at me, looking a bit pink in the face and I didn’t think it was from exertion.

Now it was my turn to look confused.

“About your relationship? About how you guys were worried about breaking the news to Reuben’s son and your grandmother?”
“What the *hell*?” Sanchez roared while Rosenberg went an even deeper red.

I’d put my foot in it, and tried to backpedal. “Sorry, sorry, my mistake. It’s just . . . back in my universe, uh, you two are a thing. Super cute . . . one of the nicest couples on the ship in fact.”

“You’re kidding,” Rosenberg dumped out a bucket of sludgy water and rinsed it out. “Just because I’m always paired up with him is no reason to think he does anything for me.”

“Hey, you told me Alberto has and I quote, “the cutest tuchas I’ve ever seen, unquote. Told me that over coffee right here in this kitchen in fact!”” I protested, irritated because it was true.

Not that Alberto had the cutest tuchas—in my opinion Jon’s was the superior rear—but that Reuben HAD told me so nearly a year ago.

Sanchez—Alberto—glared at Reuben. “Dude, have you been looking at my ASS?”

“Given how you show it off all the damned time it would be hard to miss,” Reuben shot back.

“I don’t show it off!” Came the retort.

“Oh yeah? Explain to me those gravity resistant shorts you wear in the weight room then. Paint would be thicker!”

“They’re . . . ergonomic!” Alberto protested, although he was red in the face too.

“No, they’re *slutty*, Al. I’m surprised Lieutenant Meecham hasn’t offered to spot your glutes, and I don’t mean in a weight-lifting way!”

“No my type!” Alberto was scrubbing the front of the sink hard enough to make it gleam. “And anyway it’s not like you’re any better with those one-size-too-small tee shirts of yours . . .”

I pulled open the walk-in freezer just to get away from the argument which was my first mistake. Someone had cranked the frost factor up by about a zillion, so it was painfully chilly just standing in the doorway.

The other mistake was finding the frozen corpse.

I bit back a scream, staring at the huddled lump cemented between the shelving units, hoping I didn’t vomit.

For a dizzy moment I wondered if it was my counterpart, but no, this was clearly a man. A man in his underwear who’d tried to stay warm and failed in the most spectacular way. I bent closer to look at his icy features.

Then I recognized him and quickly backed out of the freezer, slamming the door shut. “So, we’re doing good! I bet I can get some snickerdoodles started!”

Both men looked up at me from their argument, surprised. “But what about the floor?” Reuben wanted to know, looking down.

“A mopping and a sterile pressurizer ought to get it done in twenty minutes,” I gabbled. “And as for the snickerdoodles well . . . if we’ve got the ingredients I can have a batch ready in no time . . . tell you what: Reuben, you get one of those big mops from the shuttle deck supplies and Alberto, you go check out the pantry, okay?” I rattled off the ingredients to him.

The two men looked at each other and back at me. “We get first crack at the cookies, right?”
Alberto asked.

I nodded a little desperately. “Absolutely! Cross my heart!”

They hesitated a moment and I added, “As many as you want.”

That sold it; they took off and I waited until they were out of hearing before I jabbed the little button on my left cuff. “Hey! Are you there?”

I heard a click. “Yes I’m here, tiny bladder.”

“Shut up,” I hissed. “Got a MUCH bigger problem than that. Just get DOWN here please!”

“Please?” came the snort. “Damn, you must be hopping!”

I rolled my eyes and started pacing.

Without even thinking about it I pulled out a few cookie sheet pans and a few bowls, hoping we had the snickerdoodle ingredients in the pantry and listening for footsteps.

I heard them and saw Dick Jon come sauntering in, looking around at the newly cleaned galley.

“Not bad,” he admitted. I grabbed his sleeve and dragged him towards the freezer, but he resisted, grabbing me back and pulling me close. “You smell like disinfectant but . . .”

“There is a dead guy in the freezer!” I hissed. “And we BOTH know him!”

Dick Jon let go of me. He pushed me to the door and motioned for me to open it and go in before him. “I don’t plan on getting locked in myself so . . . oh fuck.”

Fuck was right. Maximillian “Frosty” Forrest didn’t look any nicer on a second viewing. Dick Jon studied him for a moment and then waved me out before closing the door and staring at me.

“Solid, so you couldn’t have done it. My money’s on Hoshi, which means she’s been pretending Forrest’s been ill. Damn, this changes a few dynamics.”

“It did for him,” I shuddered. “Shit, this means you’re captain here now, right?”

Oh the humorless cold grin I got back had me quaking a little.

“Yes I am,” Dick Jon smiled. “Which feels pretty good. Time to see if I can handle running two ships instead of just one.”

Chapter End Notes

is anyone still reading?
NOT what I wanted to hear, frankly. “Where’s Jon? What have you done!?” I shrieked.

Dick Jon grabbed something off his insignia and hit my shoulder with it: a flare of pain made me suck in a deep breath as I struggled to stay standing.

He pulled it back and stared at me. “I don’t know how it is in your universe, but in this one, I’m in charge. I suggest you get with the program.”

Man I wanted to bitchslap him into next month but I had a baby to protect so I fought my own temper and bit my lips to stop any obscenities from making the situation worse.

Dick Jon gave a nod, his teeth gleaming. “Let’s get something straight right now: you’re not going back. You’re going to spend your days in this galley and your nights in my bed, ‘Chesca—just like old times. The other Jon Archer’s going to crack pretty soon. A body can take only so much and he’s been in the booth for about six hours. Once he cooperates I’ll have what I need to take his ship.”

God. I felt like throwing up on him. Obviously Jon—MY Jon—had come to rescue Phlox and me and gotten caught. He was being tortured somewhere on this damned ship! I flexed my hands, willing myself to stay calm, but shit it was hard.

“Are we clear?” Dick Jon demanded, lifting my chin with his fingers. I looked at him and it was so painful. So much like the man I loved and yet not him at ALL.

I gave a sullen nod.

“Okay. Make food, stay quiet and maybe you’ll get by. You’re either with the Empire, or under it.”

I said nothing, which was hard but the better choice. Dick Jon squeezed my chin so hard I was sure I’d have a bruise, and grinned. “Still defiant. I’m looking forward to screwing that out of you.”

He let go and left just as Reuben and Alberto returned. I gave them a big fake smile and got to work making Snickerdoodles as quickly as I could—which was pretty fast, actually. They mopped around me and by the time I got four trays into the oven the floor gleamed.

“Damn, I think all that brown stuff by the freezer door was blood,” Alberto commented.

“Cuts of meat can drip,” I replied with a wince. “So . . .” I looked at his uniform, spotting a familiar little pin on the front. “You’ve got something smudged on your . . .”

“Oh, yeah. Not good to get anything on the agonizer,” Alberto muttered. “I’d probably get punished with it just for that.”

“Bad?” I asked, opening the oven door to distract a little. The scent of cookies drifted out.

“Bad enough,” Reuben shook his head. “Last time I got zapped for an infraction I’m sure I lost brain cells.”

“Ohhh. Hey can you get me that pot holder?” I asked, feeling glad I had Sath’s agonizer deep in my pocket. I didn’t want to use it on these guys but I would if it meant getting to Jon. I had my bearings now, and I knew the layout of this galley. I knew a few things that Dick Jon didn’t too—like the
fact that the rotating broom closet that opened both in the galley and the Mess Hall wasn’t officially a door, but could be used as one.

I was betting it didn’t have any if nasty barrier electronics hooked up to it, either.

The cookies turned out well even though I was fretting like mad, wanting Reuben and Alberto to leave. It took a while but eventually they were called by someone and headed out. It wasn’t my imagination either; they were definitely a lot chummier with each other, shooting each other shy looks. I guess my comments let the cat out of the bag, and at any other time I would be tickled, but I was too concerned about Jon right now.

Once I was sure I was alone, I went to the doorway and studied it. Sure enough I spotted a track of glowing metal that rimmed the frame and the color matched the manacles on my wrists. The closer I got, the more the metal hummed, and I felt them tighten in a sort of warning. Very annoying. Looked like this version of the Enterprise kept its chef as a prisoner for most of the day, which sucked. I felt some empathy for the other me, and wondered what exactly had happened to her.

Murdered, or suicide?

Shaking off those thoughts, and walked over to the little broom closet and opened it. A few old and mildewed mops were here but I was more interested in the back wall. I looked at it, and didn’t see any metal. I prodded it with one of the mops, and it took some pushing but the back popped open, revealing the Mess Hall beyond, dark and empty.

I took a breath.

Dio I was terrified. I didn’t want to zap myself and hurt the Blip; I didn’t want to get caught and dragged back—all I wanted was to find Jon.

But first . . . weapons.

I remembered so long ago, joking with Maalik about how we could defend ourselves with all the tools we had. If I couldn’t use knives, I’d have to rely on a few other things . . . like the meat tenderizer, which hefted nicely in my hand. I looked in all the drawers until I found the single handle mezzaluna and picked it up.

So I had these two and the agonizer and it was time to get going before I lost my courage or Dick Jon came back.

I stepped through the closet, closing it behind me and snuck to the door leading out to the halls, on the alert. I wasn’t sure what time it was, but nobody seemed to be out, which was good. According to the layout of the ship I knew, if I went left I could reach Sick Bay. Bad news would be Evil Phlox, but Good news would be that my Phlox might be there.

I went left. When I reached Sick Bay, I risked a peek through the glass doors and saw . . . too much chrome, glass and sharp things. This Sick Bay looked like something out of a hospital horror vid but I forced myself to keep looking until I spotted a booth with Phlox—MY Phlox—in it. He was leaning against the glass, looking tired and worried but not particularly beaten up. I tried to catch his attention.

He looked up, looked around, and nodded.

I came in, coming over to him quickly. “Are you okay? Where’s Jon?”

“For the moment I’m fine,” Phlox told me, his words muffled slightly from the booth. “Apparently my counterpart is . . . reluctant to torture a fellow Denobulan. Particularly one with his face.”
“Lucky you. How do I get you out?”

I found the door release high on the frame of the chamber and a minute later Phlox was out. He looked at me carefully, touching my chin. “You’re injured.”

“Minor,” I assured him. “So where’s Jon?”

Phlox looked at me sharply. “Our captain? He’s here?”

That’s what the other one said. That he was in a booth and had been for seven hours now,” I blurted, close to tears. “Tortured! God, I can’t take much more of this stupid universe!”

“I agree,” Phlox slipped an arm around me and looked around. “We’re not safe here, and I suspect the captain may be in Reed’s . . . custody. We should make our way there. Let me arm myself . . .” He pocketed several hyposprays.

“Hey, can you get these off?” I held up my wrist. Phlox considered it, led me to a cabinet and pulled out a huge pair of bladed pliers.

Two crunchy snips and they were off; I left them in the cabinet and followed Phlox out.

We had a few close calls, but managed to make our way towards Reed’s office. Some of the halls had speckles of blood on them and others had some marks I didn’t want to look at too closely. When we were just around the corner, I saw guards.

Phlox stepped up and pressed a hypospray, knocking one out. I hit the other with the tenderizing mallet, right at the temple. He went down too, as I winced.

We hit the door panel and it wooshed open. Evil Reed came forward, looking from Phlox to me in surprise and received a hypo before he got two words out. Phlox caught him and dragged him inside while I looked around.

Jon. In a booth, spasming in agony. I gave a yell and pressed myself against the glass, slapping frantically up on the top sill for the release button, hitting it more by chance than aim; it popped open and Jon pretty much fell onto me, almost taking me down but I managed to hold him up, clinging to him and saying things in Italian because I DO that when I’m upset. “Ho intenzione di uccidere quell figlio di puttana!!”

Jon looked up at me blearily, and grinned. “That’s my girl!” One of his hands slid to my stomach and patted it reassuringly. I felt the warmth of him, the solidity. I wanted to cry.

Phlox turned to us. “Captain.” He checked Jon over and from the set of his mouth I could tell he was angry. I was too, damn it. I has the meat tenderizer in my hand and was tempted to slam it against the glass of the booth but didn’t.

“You need rest and nutrients and fluids,” Phlox muttered. “As soon as possible. Captain, we need to get to safety; what do you suggest?”

“O-other Jon,” he mumbled, sagging against me a little.

“Yes, we want to avoid him,” Phlox replied, coming to help me support my husband.

“Not him,” Jon shook his head, blinking his bloodshot eyes. “Other Jon, over there.”

I looked where he was waving; a door on the other side of the room. Phlox motioned with his chin
for me to go open it because Jon was trying to walk in that direction but could barely stand. I moved over, poked the panel and it wooshed open.

Another booth.

Hair to his shoulders, bearded, bare-chested, wearing a sort of sarong with long scrolls of tattoos down his right shoulder.

Another Jon.
Chapter 17

“Dio mio, how many ARE there of you?!” I asked my husband, who gave a confused shrug.

“I’m going to free him,” Phlox announced, and moved to open the booth. I clung to Jon—my Jon and watched as this other person slumped and clung to the doorframe before stepping out on shaky legs.

Bare legs, sandals on his feet, I noticed.

“Healer . . . Phlox?” he rumbled uncertainly, and then turned to look at me and Jon. “Fran-nee?”

“Another Franny,” I called to him. “A good one. This is a good Jon.”

The other Jon—the Primitive Jon as my mind labeled him—nodded slowly, blinking in fatigue. “Yes, I saw him brought in by the Evil one. So this is his world? One of the several?”

“Apparently. He’s found a way to tap into parallel universes using a remote transporter in the Stella Praetorium,” Jon muttered. “We’ve got to get back and if need be, destroy it.”

“How?” I asked, eyeing the unconscious Reed on the floor. “From what I can tell we’re on the bad version of the Enterprise right now.”

“The Stella . . .?” Phlox asked.

Primitive Jon moved, bending to drag Evil Reed into the booth, shoving his limp form within it and closing it with a sense of satisfaction, I thought. “The Hall of the Stars,” he replied firmly. “Astromage T’Pol found the old knowledge and we came seeking it to better our understanding.”

“Hall of stars?” I looked from one Jon to another; mine spoke up.

“That long ridge on Chronos Minor. It’s a temporal convergence chamber with . . . for the simplest explanation, doorways into other universes,” Jon managed. “Like a long hallway in a hotel.”

Primitive Jon nodded. “It draws power from the core of the planet and the sun in a balance of gravity and molecular energy that is intriguing.”

We all stared at him.

He shrugged. “Science? You do this too?”

“Ah yeah,” Jon muttered, grinning weakly. “Sorry, I guess I assumed . . .” he waved at his counterpart’s outfit.

Primitive Jon however, had his head up and was listening intently. “The engines have slowed; we must leave before we are discovered. My tribe will be worried.”

Jon cocked an ear and nodded. “Yeah. Shuttlecraft’s our best bet at the moment.”

“Weapons,” Primitive Jon responded, and looked around the room. Reed had plenty on display—the sort of overly macho-sadistic décor that made me wince. My Jon grabbed a rifle thing and Primitive Jon took two pistols, both of them nodding to each other.

I held up my mallet and mezzaluna. “Good to go.”
They both grinned at me, and the stereo effect was sort of dazzling. Phlox moved to the door, waving for us to be quiet. “Directions, captains?”

“Up,” Jon murmured and his counterpart nodded. “The craft are one deck above us, but I think we should take the work tunnels.”

“Agreed,” my Jon nodded. “Service hatch should be just down the hall to our left.”

I found myself flanked by the Jons, which surprised me. Primitive Jon shot a look at my abdomen and I blushed; he gave a short nod. “Your first?”

I nodded. My Jon looked over as we stepped out into the corridor, his expression curious. “You?”

“We have three,” Primitive Jon murmured, “including the hound.”

I gawked a little. “Really?”

Phlox was deeply amused but quiet; my Jon was just as surprised.

“Yes,” Primitive Jon pointed with his chin to the maintenance hatch. “My Fran-nee is both strong of will, and irresistible.”

Jon snorted and I went red, but before I could say anything, Primitive Jon pressed his thumb against the scan pad. “If we are truly exacts . . .”

The panel under his thumb flared green and the hatch slid open.

My Jon nodded. “Inside.”

We crowded in, and not a moment too soon; I head the footsteps just as the panel slid shut. Heavy steps.

“Move,” both Jons whispered at the same time, and they herded Phlox and me forward in the darkness. I couldn’t see very far, but the Jons knew where we were going and kept us moving. We reached a service ladder and Primitive Jon went up first. My Jon sent me up next, which was interesting because the view up Primitive Jon’s sarong was, uh, familiar—not that I was trying to look. As it was I blushed when we all got to the next level though nobody could see it well in the dim light.

Primitive Jon led the way and we walked along the inside of a curving wall until we reached a panel faintly ringed with tiny lights. The Jons looked at each other.

“We return to the Hall of Stars,” Primitive Jon murmured. “Each to our own doorway.”

“We agree that we notify our leaders of the Evil One?” Primitive Jon offered. “It pains me, but the leaders will order us to destroy Chronos Minor, and if that happens, my doorway will go dark as many of the others in the Hall of Stars already are.”

“Yeah those are probably the orders we’ll get as well,” Jon admitted. “The loss of one of the greatest temporal portal engineering achievements balanced against invasion and war with . . . well, our darker versions. After all, the devil out there---” he waved a hand, “may not be the worst one of us.”

We all shuddered. I know every person has a dark side, but the idea of the dark side having an even
darker side was horrifying.

Phlox sighed. “Sometimes the greater good isn’t in going forward, it’s in changing direction.”

“Well said, Healer Phlox,” Primitive Jon nodded. “Much as my mages will argue, I know what must be done.”

Jon pushed the emergency release for the panel and it slid open, spilling light in. He cautiously peeked out. “Fuck.”

Dick Jon stood there, flanked on each side by two pistol-pointing baddies. He smiled at us, opening his arms in a welcoming gesture of a pleased tyrant.

“Great minds,” he murmured.

“Yours is just diseased,” I couldn’t help but snap back, feeling a surge of hateful fear inside me.

“Now, now,” he chided, swaggering closer. “I’m sure with a few attitude readjustments we’ll get along just fine.” He reached out to grab my arm but I swung the mezzaluna and sliced the back of his fingers in one sweep. Blood gouted up and everyone tensed.

Dick Jon’s face shifted, looking furious. “Gonna regret that, ‘Chesca,” he rumbled with menace. I sensed the two other Jons tensing, and knew I needed to keep this bastard’s focus on me, so I laughed.

It was forced and barely convincing but oh he took it personally. His right arm swung and he slapped me, flinging blood droplets everywhere.

 Didn’t get to finish it though—Primitive Jon on my right grabbed Dick Jon’s wrist and yanked him off-balance as MY Jon drove a fist deep into Dick Jon’s gut. The two crewmen tried to shoot but couldn’t get anything lined up. Phlox darted forward and jabbed one with a hypo, and then reached over and squeezed the other one’s shoulder; he stiffened and dropped, falling on his buddy in a heap.

“Nerve pinch,” he murmured. “I must remember to thank T’Pol for showing me that.”

And me? I was trying to keep my husband from killing Dick Jon, who was sprawled face up on the shuttledeck, pinned there by one booted foot and one sandaled foot on each shoulder.

“I say we kill him,” Jon growled. “Right now!”

“No!” I glared at my husband. “You’re not him and you’re not going to sink to his shitty level, Jon. He’s a vicious bastard and a killer but YOU AREN’T!”

“He kidnapped you.” Jon’s words, clipped and dry. “Teleported your mangled wedding ring onto the bridge at my feet, Franny! I was going out of my damned mind with worry, had to fight with T’Pol and Reed about going down alone, and when I finally found this son of a bitch he told me about his plans for you!”

The pain in his voice hit me hard and I fought tears, forcing myself to speak calmly. “Sooo he’s a motherfucker, yeah. But let his own world kill him.”

Jon gritted his teeth. I saw the struggle in him and understood it. Lord knows if our positions were reversed and I was the one facing off with a black-hearted bitch who had threatened HIM . . . yeah I’d be considering killing me too.
Primitive Jon spoke softly. “Jon, she is right. His day here is over; his own tribe will deal with him far more viciously than we could.”

I looked down at Dick Jon, who was giving that unrepentant glare up at us, but this time I saw fear in his eyes. He struggled, but Jon shook his head, putting more pressure on his foot. I hear the snap of Dick Jon’s collarbone and he gave a yelp of agony.

“Captain,” Phlox murmured warningly. “We need to leave.”

Reluctantly Jon nodded and let Phlox bend down to do that squeezy shoulder sleep thing again then waved us all to the closest shuttlescort just as an alarm went off and then things got sort of frantic and fast. I was pulled in, shoved into a seat and told to strap in. Jon and Primitive John tumbled in after Phlox and got the thing moving, doing some sort of complicated override for the doors.

We shot out at a stomach lurchingly fast speed out into space and I clung to the webbing belt, trying not to throw up.

“They will try to fire on us,” Primitive Jon pointed out. “Evasion?”

“Yep,” Jon replied, and our shuttle jerked down and to the right with all the speed of a rollercoaster. Our shuttles didn’t have this kind of maneuverability, or maybe they did and I’d just never experienced it before. Either way I was fighting my own responses as we zoomed and zagged, doing things I never wanted to do in the first place or ever again.

“Hold on,” Jon told us, and we did a barrel roll that made me whimper. I saw bolts of light shoot past us as we flew on, and within a minute or two we were down along the ridge of the planet, the one that looked like a Mohawk. Up close I saw that the spines were regulated and clearly artificial, like a row of antenna.

“Where?” Jon asked, and Primitive Jon pointed.

“The twenty-first one from the pole of the planet!”

“What? Which one?” Jon called, but Primitive Jon grabbed the closest handle of the control wheel and steered it, guiding us down towards one of the spines. As we got close I thought we would crash into it and tensed, but instead it sort of dissolved into a cloud around us and we ended up in a slow descent down into . . . a hangar? A cave? Some sort of very big room.

This is why I’m not a scientist. I’m sure that T’Pol or Trip would have a better way of describing it, but as a chef all I could say is it was a big room.
Chapter 18

I decided to throw up. Not that I wanted to, but my stomach made it clear that it needed to teach me a lesson about roller-coastering in space while pregnant. I turned away from everyone and tried to do it discreetly but I’m sure I wasn’t making a good impression.

Phlox ran a gentle hand over my back when I was done, and when I spit and straightened up, Jon took me in his arms. “Franny,” he murmured, not even fazed by it all. I hugged him, wanting a drink of water.

“Sorry about that,” I muttered, but he just laughed.

“Sorry about that ride. Okay, we’re in the Hall. Now we need to avoid the transporter and get back to our own universes.”

I looked around.

The Hall of Stars was a big hangar-shaped place carved out of rock that went on either direction for as far as I could see. Rounded doorways lined the walls, one about every thirty feet or so. I was reminded of some of the military hangars back on Earth, but much, much larger. The floor was stone, with thick coating of grit on it, and the clear light came from a long glowing ribbon overhead that ran the length of the place as far as I could tell.

The closest doorway to us was dark, and next to it on the wall was some odd notation. Primitive Jon saw me looking at it and nodded. “That is a dead world. We had begun marking and numbering the doors when we arrived, three days ago. Other Jon, look to the ground; he may have moved his travel ring.”

Jon nodded, and spoke to Phlox and me. “The best I can figure, the bastard me managed to create a portable transporter relay. He set it up to control the beaming into any doorway he chose, kidnapping people at random—that’s how he was able to nab you two and send the bracelet back.”

“Impressive technology,” Phlox admitted.

Jon nodded. “Most likely not his, either. A place like this, he could loot any given version of our universe and probably has.”

“So where’s home?” I wanted to know, looking around again.

“For you, the fifty-first doorway,” Primitive Jon replied.

“Starting from . . .?” I asked, confused.

Primitive Jon pointed overhead. “From the gold point, southward. Each point is a century; that much we have determined. The doors seem to have no pattern but a rough count of doors to years is close enough to find your home.”

“So we start walking,” Jon nodded, his arm still around me. “Can you do that, Franny?”

I nodded. “I’m good with not flying. So where’s the shuttle anyway?”

Primitive Jon grinned. “Back on whatever ship it came from as far as we know. One of the great mysteries that TechMage Trip has been studying and he says that it has something to do with
temporal navigation and technical barriers. Every time we sailed here, we floated down and our ship would tell us the small craft had re-appeared within its berth. Truly an impressive feat of defense.”

“Valet parking,” Jon snickered, and I laughed at that. We began to move, and on impulse I angled my steps so that I veered towards the doorways, making my way to the nearest one that seemed to glow.

Primitive Jon intercepted me, holding a long bare arm out. “Take care—you may view within and most often they cannot see us, but once in a while they do.”

Curious now, Jon and Phlox joined me in peering through the doorway.

We saw the bridge of the Enterprise . . . sort of. The walls and deck were polished wood, and the captain’s chair was some sort of wicker, with fancy toggles along the arms. And the man sitting in it . . . was Jon.

But in a fancy blue uniform trimmed with red fur, and he had both a ponytail and an eyepatch. Next to him was Trip, who had a fur-trimmed uniform too, along with a long blond ponytail and gold hoops in his lobes.

“Pirates?” I blurted, looking from the doorway back to my husband, who looked bemused.

“Something along those lines . . . I wonder what their technological timeline is,” he replied. “More organic, but maybe it’s just the aesthetic.”

“Fascinating,” Phlox offered, and looked at Primitive Jon. “So you’ve been studying your alternative selves?”

Primitive Jon shook his head. “From a distance, without interaction. The Star Tribe feel honor-bound to interfere as little as possible so each world may mature on its own.”

Jon nodded. “Non-intervention. Is there a point where you consider making contact?”

“Flight into the stars,” Primitive Jon replied. “If they reach out that far, then we may greet them, but no sooner unless necessary.”

“I like that,” Jon murmured.” Sort of what the Vulcans in our timeline did,” and I could almost see the cogs in his head turning. In the doorway, Pirate Trip must have said something to make Pirate Jon laugh because they both were chuckling. Briefly I spotted T’Pol, and realized she had long dreads, and wore in a knee-length dress with leather boots along with a thick collar of polished black and silver stones around her throat.

“Franny,” Jon murmured, “We have to move on.”

So we did the grit lightly crunching under our steps. I made it a point to look into as many doorways as I could though, and spotted ship decks of stone and jelly and one growing grass; saw crewmembers who were shadows or had fangs and one version of Jon where he was an anthropomorphic shaggy beast.

A Jon-bear.

Same eyes though.

I even saw variations of Porthos, including one where he was a glittering beagle colored python,
which made both Jon and me shudder a bit as we passed by.

And the dead doorways—some were outer space, with stars in them but others were black voids, while others . . . you got the feeling something might be there in the spaces between the atoms. Primitive Jon saw me shiver and nodded as we strode past one. “There are doorways that open to places that should not be,” he murmured, gaze haunted.


I stared at our doctor; he shrugged. “I’ve read a few of the tales.”

“Let’s keep moving,” Jon suggested, looking around again. I leaned against him, fighting fatigue and let him help me along. The sheer comfort of having him back gave me strength.

“I can’t believe you talked Trip and T’Pol into letting you come after me,” I murmured.

I felt him flinch. “Well we didn’t quite come to an agreement,” Jon admitted uncomfortably. “More of a ‘we’re looking the other way while you do this’ arrangement.”

Tiredly I laughed. “You’re seriously stubborn at times, Jon Archer.”

He kissed my temple. “Franny, you and the baby were on the line: there never was a choice. Trip and T’Pol knew that.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I’d do the same if you got nabbed by a psychotic version of me. Or any other version of me, frankly.”

“I know,” he chuckled. “Although seeing you battle it out with the furry bear version could have been fun.”

I swatted him lightly and was about to say something more when we heard a noise ahead of us and stopped. Up to this point the only noise in the Corridor had been our own footsteps but this was new and we peered ahead trying to see what had made it.

“How close are we?” I murmured to Primitive Jon, who was focused on the sound.

“Within fifteen paces or so. That humming . . . we are close to the travel ring.” He bent and scooped up some of the grit underfoot and threw it in front of us. It drifted down, but the furthest bits bounced back.

Jon grabbed grit as his other version grabbed another handful and together they threw it harder. This time nearly all the grit bounced.

“Okay, there it is. Question now is how big is it?” Jon asked. “Does it block the entire corridor?”

We all helped to throw grit, establishing that the transporter was about two meters in diameter, right in the middle of the corridor. There was barely room enough to pass around it on either side but it could be done—

A quick whine sounded.

The transporter activated, glowing as we all backed up from it and as the figure in it solidified I blanched because fuck it, Dick Jon was back, and this time he had Evil Phlox and a scarred-up Trip, all of them armed, all of them pissed as they stepped out of the ring of light.

Juuuust what we didn’t need. I glared at him and he gave me the ugliest smile yet.
“Kill them a---” he tried to say but apparently all of us had the same idea: we all threw our handfuls of grit straight into their faces.

Sometimes the most basic weapons are the best.

Primitive Jon yanked Scarred Trip’s rifle out of his grip and rammed the butt into the engineer’s face, knocking him off his feet. Phlox shoved his counterpart hard. Both Evil Phlox and Scarred Trip fell backwards.

Unfortunately, when they passed through the transporter’s ring, the parts of them that broke the perimeter teleported away.

[58x802]Annd the rest of their bodies did not.

I would have thrown up again if I’d had anything left to barf but all I managed was some dry-heaving as the bisected remains dropped on the ground, blood leaking everywhere. I shifted my gaze to Jon, who was grappling with Dick Jon in a sort of wrestling match. They slammed against the wall between doorways with Dick Jon trying to fire his pistol.

I wanted to jump in and help, but Primitive Jon held me back. “Stay put, I will do it!” he told me and moved forward.

But they were close to one of the dead doorways, and Jon just barely managed to twist away from his rotten doppelganger, falling out of the line of fire onto the ground. Dick Jon shifted his pistol back and forth from Jon to Primitive Jon, looking savagely pissed off, forcing them both to stay still.

“Kill or be killed. Only one Jon Archer is going to live and that’s me!” he bellowed. “Nothing’s going to stop me, you hear?”

He stood with his back to one of the dead doorways, face going red, tendons standing out along his neck. “I’ll conquer all the worlds! Every one of them will kneel before me!”

Behind him.

I saw her and clamped my lips shut HARD. I knew Phlox saw her too. Dead pale with empty eye sockets; a sweet smile full of sharp, dark-stained fangs.

“Jonnnnnnnn,” she hissed, drifting in the doorway. “Jonnnnnnn.”

Her glowing arms slid around Dick Jon’s torso and the minute she touched him, he froze, eyes glowing bright red. “F-f-franny?” he muttered in a thick dazed voice.

He tried to turn his head to look at her while we all watched, too stunned to move ourselves.

“Jonnnnn,” came her voice again. “Hungry.”

She yanked, and he disappeared into the dark doorway, pistol clattering onto the stone floor. A moment later a spray of blood followed, staining the stone floor.
Chapter 19

Primitive Jon took charge, dragging the remains of Scarred Trip and Evil Phlox towards another dark doorway and flinging them through it. I crawled over to Jon and helped him sit up, not sure I could take much more. He looked at Phlox and then at me, sighing.

“Thank you,” he told our doctor, who helped him to his feet.

“You’re welcome,” Phlox replied. “How are you feeling?”

“Very tired of fighting with myself,” Jon replied with a ghost of a grin. He looked to the doorway where Dick Jon had been dragged off and gave a little shudder.

I let him gently haul me to my feet and once I was standing, Primitive Jon came over, rubbing his hands on his sarong. “We must destroy the travel ring.”

So he, Phlox and Jon picked up all the weapons and fired at it together. The overload of energy gave a screechy whine as it built up, finally bursting in a flare of sound and light as the ring slagged into so much molten metal and plasma.

Primitive Jon gathered the weapons and threw them into the destroyed teleporter where the residual heat melted them as well, leaving a mess on the stone floor.

He sighed. “We damage and destroy as much as we admire and learn. All of us have a long way to travel yet.”

I knew he meant metaphorically, but looked down the long hallway anyway. “I know what you mean,” my Jon agreed, and we all made our way around the edge of the ruined teleporter to the other side, the fatigue setting in again now that the adrenaline was wearing off once again. I leaned on Jon, planning on sleeping for a week once we got back.

The third doorway down on the left, Primitive Jon stopped, running a finger over the notation next to it with a small smile. “This is where my journey ends,” he told us. “My home and hearth are here. Friends--"

I thought he was going to shake our hands but he formally hugged each of us before stepping back and pressing his hand to our right shoulders in a sort of salute I guess. Jon was last, and seeing them face each other was memorable—the same person in different circumstances, both noble, both flawed.

“Thrive,” Primitive Jon murmured. “Be safe in all your wanderings, wise in all your decisions, blessed in your family.”

“The same to you,” Jon replied, clearly touched. They grinned at each other and I watched as Primitive Jon turned and stepped through the archway. For a moment I saw his bridge: the carved stone walls in strong curves, the flicker of a hanging lamp and finally his Franny.

This one had a long braid over one bare shoulder and more freckles than I did. She too had tattoos down one arm and I recognized the bowl and fire designs easily as she hugged her Jon in a tight welcoming squeeze. Over his shoulder . . . she winked at me.

Then the portal shifted into a soft glow and I couldn’t see anything more beyond it.
“If we stepped through, we’d be in his world, right?” I asked.

“Yes, although I’d rather we didn’t,” Jon told me. “Come on, our own doorway has to be somewhere close by.”

It took about thirty yards more but we found it. Jon eyed the bridge carefully, and when Trip appeared, he grinned. “Yep right one. Trip’s got a black eye.”

“A black . . . you hit him?” I blurted.

“Had to,” Jon nodded. “So if Starfleet investigated he could tell them I’d fought my way down to the surface. It’s not like I enjoyed it. Much.”

“Yeah I’m sure he didn’t either,” I muttered. “Dio, did you punch T’Pol too?”

“Nah, I stunned her,” Jon admitted. “And I might have enjoyed that a little.”

Phlox was giving us both a sidelong look as he shook his head. “I’m chalking that up to fatigue and the mild concussion I’m sure you have, Captain.”

“Exactly,” Jon snickered. “Okay, let’s go home.”

--ooOOoo--

There was a lot of hugging and chatter after we all stepped onto the bridge and while I was glad to be back all I really REALLY wanted was sleep. Well, comfort and sleep. I’d been up a very long time; I’d been riding an emotional rollercoaster for a while and I was very close to breaking into tears when Phlox firmly prescribed rest for Jon and me.

We made it to our quarters, greeted a very happy Porthos, showered and got into bed. Once I was in Jon’s arms, I let myself cry, long and hard against his bare furry chest, just letting all the tension drain out. I was aware that he was crying too, and loved him all the more for it because it let me know he needed some comfort as well. So we were soggy and sleepy and minute by minute I relaxing.

“Now I know why Starfleet doesn’t send families out,” Jon finally sighed. “It’s one thing to talk hypothetically about the emotional toll and another to experience it. Are you okay Franny? I mean really, really okay?”

I knew what he was asking was ‘did that bastard touch you in any way?’ so I hugged Jon a little closer. “The dick version of you didn’t get a chance to ah, do anything to me besides bruise me like a grape and spout a lot of crap. I’m good.”

I wasn’t totally sure of course—the nightmare of having someone with your husband’s face being a sadistic captor isn’t something you can shrug off overnight, and I suspected I might have a few nightmares, but I loved Jon and wanted to reassure him.

But this was the man I’d married and he knew me damned well. He made me look into his eyes. “Do you want to go home?” Jon asked softly. “Be with your mom and have the baby on Earth?”

Hell of a tempting offer. I knew it would create all sorts of problems with Starfleet, and possibly derail Jon’s career, but here he was offering it without the slightest hesitation. Putting me and the Bulge first.

I took a breath. “It’s a wonderful offer but I don’t think I can make a rational decision right now,” I
hedged. “We’re both pretty shaky and not exactly in our right minds. Can we sleep on it?”

He nodded, and pulled me close again, wrapping around me until we both fell asleep.

A few hours later I woke up and used the bathroom, unspeakably grateful to be back within the comforts of our quarters. When I slipped back into bed I curled around Jon’s broad bare back, stealing his body warmth and getting only a little grumble of complaint about it. He wasn’t awake, and it brought out the impishness in me.

I began touching him. Just lightly here and there, little caresses that my husband would barely feel but when I slid a hand down his hip and across the front of his thigh I found part of him that certainly wasn’t sleeping. My fingers curled around as much of Jon as I could grasp, and I felt him give a happy rumble even as his erection throbbed against my fingers.

Between kisses along the back of his neck and my hand caressing him, Jon was waking up and purring as he did so, making it clear he liked what I was doing. He rolled over to face me and pulled my leg over his hip, sleepily stroking my flank and nuzzling my face. Oh the way he said my name was a prayer, whispered against my skin between kisses, licked across my cheek and nibbled down my jawline. Jon was in no hurry, taking his time in re-acquainting himself with my body in ways that make me blush even to remember them.

Of course I wanted to reciprocate and let him know how glad I was to have him in my arms again but this time my easy-going husband was taking the upper hand, rolling me onto my back and running his big palms along my ribs, hands gliding over the little roundness now rising under my navel. He followed his touch with kisses, nosing his way down through the tangle of fur until his hot tongue slid along the slick seam between my hips, settling in for a while.

I wriggled and yelped and sighed, gripping his hair and cursing him even as I opened my legs wider and rocked against his lips losing the battle against my growing lust for him. Jon had me spoiled; my body responded eagerly to his kisses and licks, the sweet tension building with every flick of his tongue for the next few minutes.

I must have whimpered, or tightened my grip or something because Jon shifted, lightly sucking on that stiff little button of my clitoris and I was gone, climaxing so damn hard I saw stars through my closed eyes, gasping as I rode out that glorious crescendo.

Orgasms. I **highly** recommend them as the ultimate endorphin boost, yeah.

When I recovered sufficiently I looked down the length of my body to see my husband wiping his mouth along the inside of my damp thigh, looking hella pleased with himself. Given that my knees were still over his shoulders I couldn’t do much more than smile weakly at him. “You are a **Sex God.**”

Jon laughed and I felt the rumble of it where his chest was pressed against my ass. “Not putting it on my CV, but it’s good to hear you admit it.”

I smirked. “That tongue is a treasure; don’t waste it **all** on diplomacy.”

He shifted, crawling forward as I moved my legs to wrap around his hips. “Franny . . .” Jon’s tone was a little desperate and I understood so I reached down to guide his heavy prick into me.

From the first thrust I clung to him, rocking with his body, savoring the sweet raw joy of our intimacy. Science and ingenuity might have us in space, but in this precious bond Jon and I were re-grounded in spirit and body. A whole lot of body in fact, and I savored the heat and power of
Jon’s climax, glad to feel his weight on me and in me again.

We slept in.

--oo00oo—

Of course I had a huge appetite when I finally got up, so I showered, dressed and headed to the Galley, where Fog already had oatmeal with blueberries set out along with the little jar of horseradish.

“Thank you,” I told them gratefully.

They shrugged. “Thank you for not dying and leaving us to manage all this alone. Dishes we can do, but actually cooking is a little more difficult. Not sure how you manage it so much of it. We would have been lost without Sath.”

“Both of you are terrific,” I told Fog. “I’m going to pull up a week’s worth of B level meals right now so you can put your feet up. Sound good?”

Fog nodded, their ponytail over one shoulder. “Shouldn’t you be the one putting up your feet?”

I shook my head. “Too much energy.”

So I used it to make waffles and served them up personally, greeting crewmembers and circling around tables to reassure folks I was back. Trip gave me a relieved smile.

“Glad to have you back, Chef,” he told me, patting my shoulder. “You and the slugabug doin’ okay?”

“So far so good. Sorry about the black eye,” I replied wryly, but he just laughed.

“Not like he put his full weight into it. Mostly for looks, we both know that.”

“And he stunned T’Pol?” I asked.

Trip smirked. “Yeah. She fell on me since I was already on the deck and between you an’ me I can’t thank Jon enough for that.”

I smirked back. “Is that so?”

“Lotta bounce to that woman,” Trip assured me with a saucy grin. “Anyway good to have you back. I was getting’ tired of cereal and milk.”

“Good to be back. Now about my recycled dishes . . .” I pulled up a chair.
So things were going pretty well and I was getting close to the end. Mom was right—I now had a low rounded belly like I was smuggling a basketball. Certainly I was waddling more now that I was in my eighth month, but still getting those meals out three times a day with Fog’s help. Jon wanted me to slow down but I pointed out that I’d have plenty of that once the baby was born and didn’t he have a ship to go run?

I guess my natural bossiness climbed a few notches, and that became apparent when we found out that the Enterprise was going to be escorting diplomats back to Vulcan. It was light duty, and secretly I suspected it was StarFleet’s way of polishing Jon’s skills as a mediator and host, but in any case it meant a full ship shakedown and clean-up right down to the welding and rivets. We’d have guests for three days and for me that meant going above and beyond culinarily. (Is that a word? If not I just made it one.) Anyway the food was going to be top-notch for the honor and glory of our ship.

“Franny I love you but please don’t go overboard,” Jon pleaded with me. He was rubbing my tummy as we lay spooned together, and from what I could feel, baby was responding well to the touch.

“I’m not! Three entrees per meal is the hotel standard anywhere in the galaxy and I could do that in my sleep,” I told him. “We both know that.”

“You’re going to be stubborn about this, aren’t you?” he accused me with a sigh.

“Not stubborn; pragmatic,” I corrected him, moving his hand to where I felt the baby kick. For a moment he said nothing, but grinned when he felt the hard poke against his palm.

“Soccer player,” Jon predicted.

“Venusian aikido champ,” I countered, “and I’ll have the internal bruises to show for it.”

“Mom says I was pretty active myself at this size,” he murmured. “I guess it’s an Archer thing.”

“No, the Archer thing was what got all this started,” I teased. “You and your libido.”

He smirked over my shoulder. “Takes two to tango, Franny, and you were leading at least half the time, so let’s not go making assumptions.”

“Fair,” I admitted. “So how many diplomats in all?”

“Six,” Jon told me absently because baby was kicking again. “Two Vulcans; a Tellerite; a Denobulan and two humans.”

“Okay, I know those cuisines pretty well,” I nodded, pleased, “that helps. When do we pick them up?”

“On the way now,” Jon told me. “Should be getting them within two days. I need to brush up on all those nitpicky protocols that seem to matter so much. I’ll be studying in the evenings, so that won’t be fun.”
“So do I play hostess or chef?” I wanted to know. It was something I’d been wondering about ever since I heard the new mission.

Jon made one of those thoughtful noises. “Huh. We’re hosting but I’m not an Ambassador so I guess we stay in our Starfleet roles. Let me check with Forrester and see if there’s any precedent on that. In the meantime, you need sleep.”

I snorted, rolling to face him, or trying to anyway. It took longer at the moment. “No, I need a little cheesecake first.”

“Is that a request?”

“It’s . . . a *strongly* emphasized suggestion,” I countered, giving him my best puppy eyes, “coming from the Deeeep One.”

He snorted but rose up. “I’m suspicious but damn your wily ways. Thought any further about names?”

Jamison for a son; Gaia for a girl. Maybe.”

Jon considered them, nodding thoughtfully. “Not bad. Better than Mom’s suggestions.”

I snickered. “Yes, I’m not naming our baby Myron or Enid, special as those were in your family.”

He made a face. “Be aware Mom might push them for middle names. I’ll be right back.”

I settled in to wait, feeling pretty pleased with myself. Too bad I fell asleep before Jon returned.

--oo00oo—

I wasn’t in the shuttle bay when the diplomats came aboard; Fog and I were finishing the final set of recyclable dishes and I was determined they’d be perfect, right down to the official Enterprise emblem in the center. They looked wonderful and they worked perfectly at both holding food and being broken down. That meant we were using thirty-five percent less energy for the galley and Trip was pleased to help me write up the reports for both the engineering and the waste management officials back in San Francisco.

Weirdly I was gaining a following too—now I was getting messages not only from my family and friends, but also from other ships both in StarFleet and outside of it. I swapped recipes, offered suggestions to questions and made some valuable contacts. Blueflower and Justine were a great source of interstellar gossip and Maalik and I kept each other up to date on galley updates.

I also corresponded with T’Pij, a young Vulcan cheesemaker who was distantly related to Saroz, the Vulcan Lyremaster who we’d rescued a while back. She’d even sent me some of her products, and let me tell you, Sehlat cheese is some kind of *strong*, like a good Parmesan. I put it in risotto and the crew raved about it, which is always the best sort of review. T’Pij was interested in the possibility of hollowing out the harder version as a container for long voyages—an idea I really liked as well.

Anyway Fog and I were finishing up the last of the banquet plates and feeling pleased at how pretty they turned out.

“We might even make our own edible storage containers,” Fog suggested. “Sort of an all-in-one meal?”
I laughed at that. “Anything’s possible I guess.”

Sath sailed in. “They’re heeeeeeere,” he told me. “And they don’t look happy.”

“They’re diplomats; they’re supposed to have poker faces,” I reminded him.

“Yeah well all I know is from the peek I got, they’re giving the captain some frosty shoulders,” Sath replied. “Just letting you know.”

“Hmmmm,” I wasn’t happy about that; I can be pretty protective of Jon and I’m not ashamed to say so. Still, he was the captain and a big boy at that, so I kept my concerns to myself as I began to prep some canapés and appetizers.

Nearly every culture has some sort of little nibbly dishes they make as icebreakers, I’d discovered. Denobulans favor grilled kidneys from lemur-like animals on their homeworld; Vulcans have all sorts of little vegetable packet snacks and Tellerites serve up complicated blends of juices and exotic greens. I did my best to re-create most of these with what I had on-board which meant grilled chicken livers on toasted sourdough slices, steamed vegetable dumplings drizzled with honey and fancy bingaz smoothies in little shot glasses. It was a nice spread, if I can brag a little.

I knew Jon was going to bring everyone into the dining hall so Fog and I stood ready to bring out the goodies. I heard folks arriving, and picked up a tray, stepping out from galley as gracefully as I could, which wasn’t a complete success. Part of it was being pregnant, sure—my sense of balance was a little off these days. The other part of it was seeing that there was someone ELSE with the diplomats.

Standing among the group was a very familiar, very unwelcome person: namely the Zorida Stalope of Beta Persei. And Miss Bitch Kitty—the same one who’d insulted me and ended up throwing a plate at me—wasn’t alone. Next to her was a thick-maned massive Perseian who towered over everyone, and had fangs longer than my Misono knives.

That’s when I realized why Jon had gotten the cold shoulder, and worse, what this entire trip was REALLY about.

Shit.

I took a deep breath and shifted back into catering mode, hoping to stay unobtrusive, which is hard to do when you look like you’re stuffed a medicine ball under your tunic.

Jon looked . . . I’m not sure I can describe it. Formal, stiff, and yet watchful. He invited everyone to enjoy the canapés and I knew he was keeping an eye on me as I offered up the tray to the Tellerite, a squat male with deep-set eyes.

“Probably poorly prepared but the price is right,” he rumbled at me, taking two of the shot glasses.

“I’m sure you’ll be sick, but it’s all we have,” I replied courteously. He gave an appreciative snort at my words. Fog was circling in the other direction, moving smoothly so I kept to the edge of the group, trying to stay unseen. Jon shifted and I reached him a moment later, watching him take one of the veggie dumplings.

“Damn,” I murmured under my breath, shooting a glance at the back of the giant Perseian.

“Part of the job,” Jon replied in an equally soft voice. “No regrets.”

“Who is he?” I asked. “Bodyguard?”
Jon gave me a grimace. “Worse. That’s the Zemulun Stalope. Ruler of Beta Persei and . . . the Zorida’s father.”

I glanced at him again, realizing he was scooping all of the chicken liver canapés off Fog’s tray. “Please tell me they ah, brought their own ‘dispatcher of carcasses.”

“Nope,” he sighed. “We’re expected to provide for them because they’re our guests. Last minute surprise guests, to help hammer out a new diplomatic . . . relationship.”

I caught my husband’s gaze. “Jon, don’t take this personally, but sometimes,” I sighed, “Starfleet sucks.”

For the first time all day, he grinned at me.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back! Sorry for the hiatus; I'm going to finish this story!
I thought it was a damned good thing I’d saved the program in the protein re-sequencer, but it turned out that the Zemulun Stalope had brought his own food supply as well . . . and it was more varied than his daughter’s choice.

Phlox and I toured the corner of the shuttlebay that had been penned off for the . . . supplies.

There were the rats of course. Those I could handle, but the others . . . Big, slow, very dangerous looking supplies nosing around in the hay.

“Dios! They’re dinosaurs,” I muttered weakly, wondering how I was going to prepare one because they looked like little armored tanks with spiked tails.

“Yes,” Phlox nodded. “Rather like a small Anklyosaurus. Or the Beta Perseian versions of the same, I suppose.”

“I’ve never prepped anything like that!” I pointed out miserably. “And if it’s done improperly, I could end up hurting myself or killing our guests!”

“True,” Phlox commiserated. “Although from what I saw of the Zemulun Stalope at the gathering he certainly wasn’t adverse to your earlier offerings. Let’s see what we can find out. I’ll talk to the aides and surely you have enough connections to get some help with preparing these . . .” he waved at the pen.

I nodded; what else could I do?

So I waddled back, glad that I’d already set most of the menu for the other guests, and thinking hard of who to ask. Blue was top of my list; out of all the chefs I knew, he had the most multi-world experience, so I got a priority channel to him as soon as I got back to the galley and sent images of the . . . food source.

“Oh man, now there’s a challenge,” he muttered. “But it looks a little like an armadillo. Got any connections to hunter chefs? Maybe backwoods types?”

“Possibly,” I sighed. “If you get anything, sent it through priority. How are you and Justine doing?”

Blueflower beamed. “Shakin’ and bakin’ every day! Itty Bitty’s got a sideline goin’ with cosmic crullers these days. Speakin’ of these days, ain’t you about to pop?”

“Close to it,” I grinned. “Tell Justine I really appreciate her advice about the shoes.”

“Will do; we’ll be in touch,” Blue promised before signing off.

***

Porthos knew we had guests that he didn’t like; I could tell by the way he snuffled me and made little gruff snorts. Normally he’s a mellow pup; sweet and friendly, but he’d already had a run in with the Zorida Stalope and somewhere in his doggy brain he’d decided this wasn’t a cat he liked. Consequently Jon and I were determined to keep him from the Zemulun Stalope before our pet ended up as another snack. The last thing any of us needed was to have an Incident, so I arranged for Phlox and Sath to run herd on our beagle as needed.
Oddly enough, one of the people who gave me some help in regards to the food was our chief engineer. I never would have guessed it in a million years but as I served up breakfast, he handed over a printout to me.

“Jon mentioned you were lookin’ for some prep advice,” Trip murmured, “so I pulled up my great granny’s diary, specifically her recipes for, ah, armadillo. Figured that’s pretty close to those things in the hold.”

I could have kissed him and said so.

“What’s stoppin’ you?” he teased, so I planted one on his cheek, clutching the papers gratefully.

“If this works out I’m going to make sure your grandmother gets the credit for it,” I told him.

“And this works out, you’d better,” Trip agreed. “She’d come back jest to haunt me if you didn’t.”

And so I got started. Fog was interested in helping so we both read over the recipes, and talked to one of the Zemulun Stalope’s assistants, Perimal, about the food.

“The armored ones are called Zoks and the furred ones are called Kikas. Handling them is . . . considered bad manners,” she told me, her tail flicking back and forth. “The work of the lowly.”

“Yes, I remember that,” I sighed. “But since I don’t want to offend or poison anyone, I’d appreciate a little help here.”

“But you are already well-informed,” Perimal looked confused. “The Zorida told her father that the food on your ship was excellent, even though you yourself were . . .” she trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

I tried not to gawp. “Ah, really? I was under the impression . . . you know what, never mind. I can do the Kikas, it’s the Zoks I don’t know about.”

Perimal promised to send what information she could, and when she left, I looked at Fog, who was scowling.

“Didn’t you tell me the Zorida constantly complained about the food? About how it was cold?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “So I guess the issue was actually . . . personal.”

Fog shook his head as he turned on the oven. “That becomes . . . dangerous, Franny. A personal dislike is an opening for all sorts of accusations. I do not like how vulnerable we are right now.”

I pulled out the bins of vegetables that needed prepping. “I agree, but we’re going to have to count on Starfleet having our backs here. They agreed to this escort duty on our behalf.”

“In any case, show me at least how to prepare a Kika,” Fog replied. “That way the responsibility is shared.”

After we’d made the quiches, I did, running the program and showing Fog all the steps. My back was starting to ache by now, and he shooed me off, promising to keep an eye on the gallery. I toddled off to lie down for a while, still chewing on a few thoughts I wasn’t quite ready to vocalize.

If the Zorida had lied, then it was to cause disruption, and the first line of thought was that she was after Jon. Since the Zorida was a spoiled little princess it made sense to me; he was not only in
charge of the ship but a studly handsome guy to boot. Add to that that I was doing a job she found revolting . . . yeah that didn’t help either.

But now she was back, and she’d brought her Daddy so I wasn’t sure what that meant. Was she still interested in Jon? Or was this truly a matter of establishing diplomatic ties with Starfleet and the other planets?

Too confusing. I fell asleep without figuring anything out.

--oo00oo—

The first dinner was a three-course number heavy on vegetarian offerings—at least for the Vulcans and Tellerites. Sath had set up a long table in the Mess hall to accommodate the party, and it thrilled me to see everyone in dress uniforms. Reed was the only one who looked comfortable in his, of course. Jon didn’t fidget too much, and Hoshi was utterly elegant. She could wear a burlap bag and still look dainty in it, to be honest. T’Pol was in one of her fancier suits and from the way Trip was eyeing her he approved of it, ahem.

I of course stayed in the background. Word from the Admiral was that I could be hostess if I wanted to; as the captain’s wife I had that option, but the double burden of cooking and hosting was a lot, especially with a baby on the way so I opted out. And in any case, if the Perseians weren’t fond of food prep people I sure as hell wasn’t going to irritate them further by sitting at the same table with them—discretion, valor and all that.

And my new plates were on display. Just the sight of them sent a little spark of delight through me and I fought the urge to mention them to everyone. I think Jon could tell though; he gave me one of those supportive smiles when I looked up from admiring his setting.

“Sure you don’t want to go into the dinnerware business?” he whispered.

“And give up all this glamour?” I shot back, but grinned as I served up a ratatouille I knew he’d love.

The real test of diplomacy was going to be how the vegans were going to react to the Perseian meals. As honored guests, the Zemulun was at the other end of the table, flanked by his daughter the Zorida and the Vulcan representative. I set the artfully skinned Kikka down in front the Zemulun, pleased with the way it looked on a bed of lemongrass and seared mushrooms. His daughter got a smaller one, just as elegantly done.

She shot me a quick look, pupils narrowing into slits; no love lost between us. I moved away and began serving the other guests, doing so as unobtrusively as I could. Fog helped, and we returned to the galley where I sat with a clear view to the table. Sath was out there serving the drinks; he’d let us know when it was time to start clearing for the next course.

Damn but it felt good to get off my feet. I rubbed my aching spine and thought about whether I could puree some of Kika livers and make a sorbet for the Perseians as I watched everyone eat.

Unlike his daughter, the Zemulun didn’t use the silverware. He popped his claws out—and that was a hell of a sight—and raked them through the little body on his plate, slashing it into bite-sized pieces, bringing the entire dinner conversation to a halt for a moment as he did so. But he just nodded and motioned for people to carry on, and apparently they did, although sort of cautiously after that. Those claws of his reminded me of my Misono knives—big, sharp and hard to ignore.

From this angle I couldn’t see too much of the Zorida, but she seemed to be dominating the
conversation at her end of the table. That meant she wasn’t eating, and that annoyed me for a couple of reasons. It would give her an excuse to throw a fit about the food being cold, for one, and it meant she was probably trying to charm the guests. I’m not sure how that would fly with the Vulcans and the Tellerites, but the humans . . . some of them might be cat people.

We got the nod from Sath about half an hour later, so Fog and I moved out to collect plates. As I moved around the far end of the table, I passed by the Zemulun, who looked at me as I removed the pile of bones on his dish. And by looked, I mean stared with those big lavender eyes.

Under his breath I heard him say one word.

One word.

I forced myself to stay calm and walked back to the galley with my tray, trying not to tremble.

‘Delicious’ never sounded so threatening.

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