

STAR TREK

QUARTERLY

SPRING 2024

HAILING ON ALL FREQUENCIES

Welcome to the Spring 2024 issue of Star Trek Quarterly! This quarter, we've got a Star Trek tea room, fanfic, spinoffs, and more!

This is the NEXT TO LAST ISSUE of Star Trek Quarterly. If you've been thinking about sending in a submission, now is your last chance! Just email your submission to startrekquarterly@gmail.com by May 31. Please include your name as you'd like to be credited, along with any of your social media you'd like to promote. There are no guidelines for what to submit – it could be an essay, a review, a report on an event, art, poetry, fiction, fake ads, cosplay photos...don't be shy, just send it in! As long as I can put it in a PDF, you're good to go.

Looking forward to seeing what you come up with for the final issue!

Live Long and Prosper,

Sarah Gulde

Editor-In-Chief



Cover by Karen Roberson. Twitter: @karenroberson. Website: karenroberson.com.

Cover art by Bobby Linn. Insta: @thebobbylinn13525

This page: artwork by Amanda Ellis. Website: amandajellis.com. Instagram: @aje.jpeg



EMPEROR GEORGIU'S
TEA ROOM



In December 2022, Trekkies in Portland, OR were delighted when a Star Trek-themed tea room opened its doors! Emperor Georgiou's Tea Room has Trek-themed tea services (such as the Emperor service on the next page), a giant mural of Michael Burnham, and uniforms are always welcome!

Queer, Black, and neurodivergent-owned, the Tea Room is also a great place to work. The owners reinvest their profits back into the company and staff, and do not get paid more than their lowest hourly waged employee.

In August 2023, the Tea Room had an unexpected special visitor when Tawny Newsome stopped in to say hello! She told them that writers had heard about the Tea Room and support the idea.

For a current tea list and reservations, please visit their website at

<https://www.emperorgeorgiou.black/>.





EMPEROR TEA SERVICE

Spring 2024

Bottomless Pot o' Tea

Choose from our Tea Menu

Georgiou's Muffin

served w/ a Lemon Glaze & Vegan Butter, sweetened w/ Agave
CHOICE OF: BLUEBERRY OR CORNMEAL

Pomegranate Scone

served w/ Strawberry Rosé Jam & Vegan Clotted Cream
GLUTEN FREE & VEGAN VERSION AVAILABLE FOR +\$1

"Ham" & "Cheese" Blackberry Onion Tea Sandwich

Field Roast Mushroom Balsamic Deli Slices, Vegan Smoked Provolone, & Arugula,
w/ Blackberry Sage Jam & Onion Jam
GLUTEN FREE OPTION: CUCUMBER & VEGAN CREAM CHEESE SANDWICH +\$1

Mini Raspberry Beignet

served w/ an Elderflower Glaze
GLUTEN FREE/VEGAN OPTION: DOUBLE CHOCOLATE BROWNIE
W/ AN ELDERFLOWER GLAZE

\$35.00/PERSON

Splitting/sharing of services is not available

DECREES FROM THE EMPEROR






Seating Time: 1.5 hour Time Limit is enforced on busier days.

Substitutions: Sandwich can be replaced with an additional serving of any other item.

Gluten "Free": Despite our best efforts to avoid cross-contamination, due to the small size of our kitchen, *our gluten-free items may still contain small amounts of gluten.*

Check-Splitting: Limit of 3 cards per party.

DIETARY KEY

 = Gluten Free  = Vegan  = Contains Gluten  = Contains Dairy  = Contains Eggs



REGIONALPANCAKE

The Lost and Found

By Curator

She had been lost before.

Moving as a child from the Illyrian side of the city to the non-Illyrian side, hope for increased safety as consolation for leaving a part of her identity behind.

He had been lost before.

Refusals overridden, his would-be captors gaining control of his computer to falsify assent for a descent into fantasy, life in unreality as corrosive as the battery acid that powered his radiation-damaged heart.

Starbase records made clear Spock's betrayal and, once Una reached Talos IV, it didn't take long to locate Chris— his illusion screaming in pain from fire-borne punishment, his true form immobilized in his support chair.

The rage she needed to defeat Talosian mind control came easy.

In the shuttle she'd... procured... Chris declined her algorithm to match his speaking voice, choosing instead to use a computer default, no intonation of anguish or joy, no movement in his scarred face or change to his mechanized, steady respiration as he answered her questions.

"My best guess is Spock exploited that you'd be away from Starbase Eleven for a few weeks. He knew he was disobeying my orders and committing mutiny. He did it anyway."

"If the Illyrian doctor is willing to try, I understand the risks."

“Leave Vina behind. She made her alliances clear.”

So it's at an Illyrian colony far from Federation arrogance or authority that his DNA unfurls and re-forms. Genetic engineering is usually performed before birth, but this is his rebirth, no longer the Christopher Pike who upheld Starfleet ideals but a Christopher Pike who is wary of a Starfleet that would tolerate a sham court martial rather than search for a greater truth.

Is Una reborn, too? Her belief in something greater than herself, in a Starfleet that could, in fact, become what she had hoped it to be in her idealistic younger years, that belief is withered, gone, replaced by allegiance to people, not an organization.

His skin is pockmarked, his voice reedy, gait unsteady. Genetic engineering isn't a miracle cure.

Her sense of purpose has telescoped from appreciation for differences to appreciation for those who share her values.

Are they still lost?

Isn't everyone?

But to be lost together... a shuttle course laid in toward a curious-looking cluster of stars, his hand a comfort on her shoulder, her soft hum the music of his naturally-beating heart... to be lost together... is something like being found.

Story by Curator. Tumblr: curator-on-ao3.

Artwork by Regionalpancake. Tumblr: regionalpancake.tumblr.com.

ON RAFFI

by Anika Dane

I've said often that Ro Laren was the first Star Trek character that resonated with me on a personal level, the first that I felt represented me. I met Ro at the same time as the Riot Grrrl Movement and they both gave me permission to be unapologetically angry in a way the rest of my childhood did not. And in a way the rest of Star Trek did not. Gene Roddenberry famously believed his utopian vision of the future should not include interpersonal conflict within the crew. Discord, dissent, and difficulty should come from external forces who were less advanced than the Federation because humanity evolved past them.



The sixties was a tumultuous time . I get why Gene wanted to imagine a "better" culture where everyone got along and embraced their differences. It's idealistic. It's aspirational. It's humanist. And it's the kind of thing that will work out well for Jean-Luc Picard. But not so much for Ro Laren or Raffi Musiker.

Raffi is the unPicard. She's not his opposite or his anti because they are both heroes. But she's his flip side.

Jean-Luc lives on a family estate in France with robots and servants to take care of his legacy wine production. Raffi lives in a trailer in the desert and trims her plants alone.

Jean-Luc has had a long storied career. He rose quickly in the ranks, evaded court martial after losing a ship, was made captain of the flagship, saved the universe a dozen times, convinced the Federation to go all in on saving the Romulans, and after quitting because they broke that promise, he was still one of the most sought after voices in the Federation and saved the universe three more times. Raffi was dishonorably discharged (partly because of her association to Picard), forced to pretend to be even more of a mess than she actually was in order to do her job, and any credit for her work and all her accolades were classified.

Jean-Luc put the needs of the Federation ahead of the needs of his family. Beverly chose to prioritize the safety of their son and raised him away from Jean-Luc. The narrative sympathizes with Jean-Luc. Raffi put the needs of the Federation ahead of the needs of her family. Jae chose to prioritize the safety of their son and raised him away from Raffi. The narrative sympathizes with Jae.

They both struggle with mental illness, with post-traumatic stress. They both throw themselves into work to stave off the anxiety, to quiet the demons. They both make mistakes in their career and in their personal lives. Raffi is punished far more for all of it.

Jean-Luc is reserved, Raffi is bouncy. He's stand offish, she's in your face. Jean-Luc is confident to the point of arrogance, Raffi is insecure to the point of insolence. He avoids drama, she incites drama. He hides his damage behind a veneer of responsibility, duty, and honor. She wears her damage with defiance. He whispers and everyone strains to hear him; she screams and no one listens. Jean-Luc uses words as weapons. Raffi uses weapons as words.

Jean-Luc is wise and Raffi is clever. Jean-Luc is diplomatic and Raffi is honest. Jean-Luc is deliberate and Raffi is reckless— except when the opposite is true. Jean-Luc talks through issues, Raffi solves problems. Jean-Luc assumes he's the smartest person in the room and everyone defers to him. Raffi assumes she's the smartest person in the room and is most often dismissed.

Both Jean-Luc and Raffi are rebels. They break the rules and fight the establishment in the name of the greater or moral good. Jean-Luc lectures and Raffi investigates. Jean-Luc is overt and Raffi is covert. Jean-Luc is indignant. Raffi is tired. He fucks around, she finds out.

As with Ro Laren before her, Raffi Musiker makes me feel seen, gives me someone in Star Trek to relate to. When I was younger I thought it was because I had a messed up childhood, a fractured family, a whole lotta trauma, and a mental disorder. I thought I was too damaged to fit in on the Enterprise. And I was angry about it because Star Trek's reputation as "Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism" sounds like I should definitely belong. The promise of Star Trek is that **everyone** belongs, that everyone is accepted and no one is too damaged to fit in.

(And yes, I know, "Star Trek" doesn't equate to "Starfleet" and "Starfleet" doesn't equate to "the Enterprise". Except it also does. Certainly the promise of "we are Starfleet" is that the **ideals** of "we", where "we" is whatever crew we are watching at the time but in the mainstream collective understanding is "the Enterprise" or they wouldn't have renamed the *Titan* at the end of Picard S3, are the **ideals** of "Starfleet", are what "Starfleet" is **meant to be** and **meant to represent** and those **ideals**, e.g. "Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism", are what "Star Trek" is all about.)

But as I've grown up, so has Star Trek. The new wards of Trek realized interpersonal conflict within the crew is both normal and necessary— in life and certainly in story. And the modern series suggest that a messed up childhood, a fractured family, a whole lotta trauma and/or a mental disorder are actually required for admission to Starfleet. *Star Trek: Picard* is trauma all the way down. There is not a single

character untouched, not a single one who can't be described as damaged, as too damaged. And yet they all end up in Starfleet.

But still, it is *Star Trek: Picard*. Picard is the peak of the mountain, the top of the skyscraper, the bridge of the starship. Picard is the protagonist of the story. And even though his childhood is an actual literal nightmare, even though every version of his family is broken, even though he's been blow up and glued back together both literally and figuratively more than anyone, even though he's struggled with mental illness for his entire life, even though he's confronted with his mistakes and his regrets and his contrition over and over throughout the show, even though he almost loses almost everything again and again, even though the finale is open-ended and ambiguous, even with all that, I still don't, can't, relate to Jean-Luc Picard.

I don't see myself in Jean-Luc's mistakes. I don't see myself in Jean-Luc's trauma. I don't see myself in Jean-Luc's life. I see myself in Raffi.



We're not the same, me and Raffi. In some ways she's doing better than me, in others she's worse off. Our lives share some plotlines but others are inconceivable. For example, I've only ever wanted to be a spy. I'm a white woman and I know there are things about Raffi and her experiences that I will just never understand fully, never feel on a deeply personal level. In terms of "representation matters" Raffi represents some parts of my identity and we diverge on others. But in terms of "this is the character in this show that represents me" it's Raffi. Which is weird, because it should be Seven. And then Beverly. Also my OG Trek rep Ro Laren was on this show. But no, on *Picard* I relate to Raffi.

I've been a Star Trek fan for decades and I've yearned for my reality, my society, to move toward Trek's promise by even the tiniest fraction (instead it's going backwards but that's a rant for another essay). But that whole time, since I was a kid glomming onto Ro Laren, I never believed it was for me. And I still don't. The idealized promise of Star Trek is that everyone belongs. The reality is Star Trek's utopia™ is made for the Picards of the world. The Raffis are required to make it work, in many ways that utopia is built up on top of them, but they don't get an automatic invite. They have to ask for space. Sometimes the Picards say no. Sometimes the Picards assume not saying anything is a yes and ignore that it can just as easily be interpreted as a no. Sometimes the Picards assume that since they didn't have to ask no one has to ask and they don't even notice the Raffis said anything (see the flashback in "The End is the Beginning" for a very good example of this).

Sometimes the Picards don't even notice the Raffis said anything and that's why sometimes the Raffis act out. Get loud, get physical, get drunk. Throw punches, burn bridges, make a scene. Sometimes acting out is the only way to get attention. Picard knows that, he acts out all the time. And Starfleet pays attention. Everyone pays attention. He's a hero for it even when vilified. That's what *Star Trek: Picard* is **about**.

Fans (#notallfans) don't like that Raffi is an addict. (I'm sure most, if not all, of those fans also don't like that Yvette Picard has bipolar disorder but, again, this is not that essay.) Different fans give different reasons:

- addiction is a mental illness and mental illness will be eradicated by the 24th century
- addiction is a personal failing and Starfleet wouldn't accept people with those kinds of problems
- addiction is a negative character flaw and I don't want Star Trek to include people like that
- addiction is a weakness and Raffi is supposed to be a Strong Female Character™
- addiction is a real world problem and I don't want it in my escapism

To which I say:

- gross, ableist, and all evidence to the contrary
- gross, ableist, and all evidence to the contrary
- gross, ableist, and boring
- gross, ableist, sexist, racist, and boring
- gross, ableist, boring, and you can choose a different escape

Raffi creates space for so many people to feel included in the promise of Star Trek's utopia™. Raffi is a Black woman, an addict, neurodivergent, a divorced mother, law enforcement, a conspiracy theorist, queer, a grandmother, a teacher, a spy, an officer, a mentor, a survivor. Does Picard have a whole bunch of identities that a whole bunch of people relate to? He sure does and that's great! Raffi being multifaceted takes absolutely nothing away from Jean-Luc Picard. It takes nothing away from Star Trek. It takes nothing away from people who do relate to Picard or don't relate to Raffi. It takes nothing away from anyone! Raffi being multifaceted makes Star Trek more inclusive. Raffi being multifaceted makes Star Trek better.

Raffi doesn't have to represent all of me to represent me. But someone has to represent some part of me in order for me to feel represented. And Raffi makes me feel represented. Raffi exists in Star Trek, in Starfleet, even on the *Enterprise*. That means I can, too.

Find Anika at her website, manicpixiedust.com.

STAR TREK: THE UNDISCOVERED SPIN-OFFS

By Matt Cheung

This era of *Star Trek* has boldly taken the franchise into new territory. *Lower Decks* and *Prodigy* brought animation back into canon. *Strange New Worlds* gave us the first musical episode as well as an animated crossover. It seems that Paramount+ is intent on expanding the *Trek* universe by developing new shows like *Starfleet Academy* and movies like *Section 31*. Yet for every smash hit like *Picard*, there were several ideas for spinoffs that never made it into production. Eager to explore the final frontiers of storytelling, the producers of *Star Trek* also pitched several reality shows and two sitcoms that never made it to air. Here at *Star Trek Quarterly* we have an inside source* that gave us a list of failed *Star Trek* pitches.

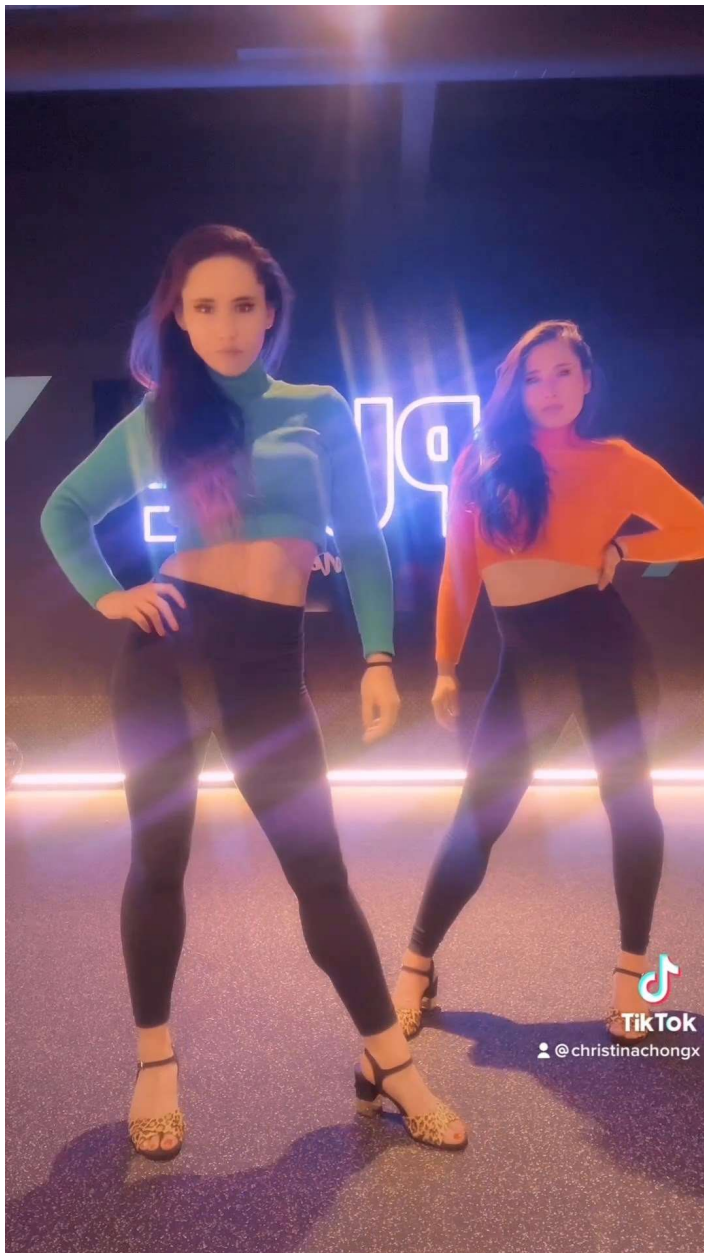
Down on your luck and far from home? Would you love a home cooked meal that won't cost you an arm and a latinum? Watch "Cooking with Neelix!" Everyone's favorite Talaxian is here to boost your morale with affordable dishes anyone can make.

Neelix shows us how to make comfort food like Leola root stew, appetizers like Leola fries, and main dishes like stir fried Leola root. He'll also have some of his famous friends drop by the kitchen to share their favorite recipes. Don't miss "Cooking with Neelix" this fall on Paramount Plus.



If the *Voyager* era doesn't suit you, Paramount+ is also capitalizing on Anson Mount's popularity. *Part talk show, part cooking show, Captain Pike invites Starfleet's finest for delicious meals and scintillating conversations. Captain Pike's recipes are so tasty, they'll make you see the future. This fall only on Paramount Plus, it's Ad Astra Per Asparagus.*

"Subspace Rhapsody" showcased the versatile talents of the *Strange New World* cast. Paramount+ wanted to capitalize on that with two talent competitions.



First, Christina Chong scans the galaxy for the best dancers in *So You Think You Khan Dance*. *Will the Betazoid breakdancers defeat the Klingon Crunkers? Will the Cardassians waltz their way into victory like they danced their way to Bajor? Will the Borg assimilate everyone with their contemporary styles? Find out who wins the biggest dance battle in the Alpha Quadrant this fall only on Paramount Plus!*

Paramount+ also wanted to create an interstellar rival to *American Idol*, so they tapped Rebecca Romijn and Ethan Peck to host *Star Trek: The Search for Talent*. The description promises intergalactic fun.

Bolian singers, Nausicaan comedians, Orion fire-eaters, the most talented species in the

Federation will compete to win a free trip to Risa and one million bars of gold pressed latinum! This fall only on Paramount Plus!

Star Trek Lower Decks proved that comedy can work in the Alpha Quadrant, and Paramount+ briefly flirted with two sitcom ideas.

When the students at Starfleet Academy constantly compliment Tilly on her retro-23rd century style, Tilly decides to open her own hair salon! Ensign, professor, and now hair stylist, Tilly assembles her own crew to take hairstyles into the future in Star Trek: Strange New Curls! This fall only on Paramount Plus!



Lower Decks gave us a glimpse of *Deep Space Nine*, but why not a complete return to everyone's favorite space station? *Benjamin Sisko* returns and fulfills his dream of retiring on Bajor and opening a restaurant. But can he run a restaurant like he ran a space station? Get your Ketracel White hot sauce ready, it's *Sisko's Fire Cave Kitchen!* This fall on Paramount Plus.

Sadly, the writers' and actors' strikes took a toll, and these shows never made it out of development. Their ideas, though promising, will never see the light of day. Who knows perhaps some of these elements will appear in 2024 in new seasons *Prodigy*, *Lower Decks*, or the final season of *Discovery*. Like Captain Kirk said, "There are always possibilities."

**I'm the inside source. I made this all up.*

THERE'S NO DENYING IT.
SHE *IS* PRETTY.
JACK INHALES DEEPLY.
"YOU SMELL AMAZING."
*HE... HE CAN
MAKE THIS
WORK.*



Gotta Admit, It's Pretty Sweet

By Curator

Jack's chest aches.

Makes sense — he's been benching near his max lately. Gotta keep the pecs in shape. No pain, no gain.

Except, um, ow. This really hurts.

His eyes open to lights that are bright, too bright. He's in sickbay, his back on a biobed, and Dr. T'Ana's head moves in front of him, blocks some of the light, and her mouth isn't turned down in a frown like it usually is. It's almost as if ... as if she's trying not to laugh at something.

"Glad to see you're awake, loverboy."

Loverboy?

Oh, well, yeah, of course. He's no slack in that department. Always hits the home run, kicks the field goal, drops the puck.

Wait, is dropping the puck good or bad?

And why does Dr. T'Ana seem so happy?

"You're a fully modern human again." Furry hands tap at a medical tricorder. "You can go home. Take your wife with you."

The lights don't seem too bright anymore, but Jack blinks. "My ... my what?"

"Your wife." Is Dr. T'Ana actually purring? "Your DNA reverted to an earlier state and when security went into the cafeteria to bring you in here to be cured, you were carrying your wife around and refused to leave without her. Everyone affected by the DNA reversion doesn't seem to remember what happened, so consider yourself lucky to have a keepsake. Ensign Tendi has her for you. Pick her up on your way out."

Wife.

This ... this marriage can't be legally binding — not if he wasn't truly himself due to some sort of DNA reversion.

Oh, wait, what if his wife is really pretty?

Okay, maybe this marriage is legally binding.

But Jack never considered himself a “marriage” kind of guy. More of a “thanks, that was great” kind of guy. Is he getting too old for that, though? Did he, as a caveman, tap into some sort of hidden desire to ... to settle down?

His chest still aches, but there’s hope in there now. Maybe this marriage Jack didn’t think he wanted might be the best thing for him. Like when Q didn’t want to be human but, while Q was human, he learned empathy then gave Data the gift of laughter and corrected the course of that moon.

Yeah.

Jack swings his legs around, hops off the biobed. Sure enough, Ensign Tendi is waiting at the door and she has ... a brown paper bag in her hands?

What, did his wife order lunch to go or something?

“I’m glad you’re feeling better, Commander.” Ensign Tendi smiles up at him. “Lieutenant Shax had to stun you on the highest setting to subdue you. Your chest might hurt for a day or so.”

“No pain here.” Jack tries to flex his pecs but they hurt too much. “Anyway, what’s this I hear about a wife?”

Ensign Tendi holds out the brown paper bag. “She’s in here, Commander. I took the liberty of keeping her warm for you. I wish you both the best.”

His wife is ... in the bag?

Oh, no — what if he married a tribble? Jack is barely ready to be married. He’s definitely not ready to be a father.

His hand shakes as he reaches for the bag — confidently, his hand is shaking in a confident, self-assured way. “Thank you, Ensign.”

Definitely not a tribble. Whew. Too heavy.

Does Jack smell cinnamon?

He nods to crewmembers in the corridors. Closes his eyes when he’s alone in the turbolift. It’s not rude to be ignoring his wife if he’s taking a power nap ... a standing power nap.

The smell of cinnamon is almost dizzying.

He strides to his quarters, gently lays the bag on his coffee table and sits on the sofa, his gaze on the mysterious, brown paper bag that holds his wife.

He wouldn't have married an exocomp, would he? Exocomps can be mean.

Okay, it's not that he's afraid to open the bag. Of course not. This is just a big moment and ... he's going to do it. Jack is going to open the bag.

Paper unfolds under his fingers.

He peers inside.

His wife is ... three dozen churros?

Uh, are these sentient churros?

Better try a standard greeting.

"Hi."

No response.

"So, um, I understand that we're married."

No response, just sugar and cinnamon glistening on perfectly browned pastry dough.

There's no denying it. She *is* pretty.

Jack inhales deeply. "You smell amazing."

He ... he can make this work.

"Then, those Delta shift ensigns started a petition to be able to use power from the deflector dish to increase sensor range." Jack paces across his office. A little extra cardio, yes, but he's also so bleeping annoyed. "Don't they understand that the deflector dish is supposed to be *deflecting*?"

Olivia doesn't say anything.

She doesn't have to.

God, she's amazing. These months of marital bliss have taught him so much about relationships.

“You’re right, you’re right.” Jack drops to his knees in front of Olivia’s open bag. “I was a young hotshot once, too. I need to be more patient with the ensigns. I’ll work on it. I promise.”

Olivia doesn’t say anything.

Jack’s door chimes.

He grabs Olivia’s bag and stuffs it into a drawer. It’s not that he’s embarrassed to be off-the-books married to a bag of churros — an eminently reasonable bag of churros that agreed to an open marriage, to let him do that thing he likes that no other woman has ever agreed to do with him, and even to some personal “refreshing” whenever she’s started to seem a little stale — it’s that he really shouldn’t have his non-commissioned spouse with him during working hours.

It’s just nice to spend the extra time together.

They are still in the honeymoon phase, after all.

Jack slides the drawer closed. “I’ll get you when I’m done, Olivia.”

The door chimes again.

Only one person is that impatient.

Jack is about to ensure his irritation is clear in his voice, but he remembers just in time — he promised Olivia he would try to be more patient with the ensigns. So Jack’s pecs rise with a deep, calming breath and he calls out as cheerfully as he can, “Come on in, Ensign Mariner.”

She waltzes in like she owns the place, sits crooked in a chair as if she’s Captain Riker or something.

“Hey, do I smell cinnamon?”

“No.” Jack can’t let his mind drift to his wife’s beautiful brown freckles while he’s on duty. “What do you want?”

“I want to talk to you about Delta shift and their stupid plan to mess with the deflector dish.” Mariner’s nose crinkles in disgust. “You can’t let them get away with it.”

Normally, Jack would actually agree with Mariner on this one.

But he promised.

“When we get Delta shift’s petition, we’ll evaluate it fairly. If anyone on this ship has good ideas about power distribution, we need to listen.”

“‘We’?” Mariner’s head tilts, interested. “What do you mean ‘we’?”

Son of a bleep.

“I mean your mother and I will evaluate the petition.” Not that he would confer with Olivia. That’s not what Jack meant at all. “This is a captain-first officer decision, and your mother and I are fully capable of handling it. Do I make myself clear, Ensign?”

“You sure do.” Mariner stands.

She’s up to something.

Not just standing. Like, “up to something” in the sneaky, mischievous way. Not only the “newly vertical from sitting down” way.

“Everyone has a role on a starship.” Is Mariner launching into a speech? “Sometimes, we wait to review misspelled petitions from rotten, Delta shift jerks who laugh at Beta shifters even though Beta shift is, like, a million times better. Sometimes, we stop injustice at the source. Because some problems can’t be deflected. Some problems are for dealing with directly, Beta shift to Delta shift, ensign to ensign. There’s nothing more important than my friends, and I won’t let a bunch of stupid Delta shifters come between us and that power supply.”

And she’s gone, doors sliding closed behind her.

If words were weights, Mariner would be the most buff officer in the fleet. But what was that she said about her friends?

There’s nothing more important than my friends ...

Jack’s eyes burn with shame as he glances at his computer screen.

So many personal messages he’s been ignoring.

Subject line: “Where have you been?” from Honus the bartender.

Subject line: “Missed seeing you at pole-dancing class — again” from Nurse Westlake.

Subject line: “Pool party wasn’t the same without you” from Matt the whale.

In his drawer, Olivia is silent.

What has he done?

“Thanks for meeting with me, Dr. Migleemo.” Jack squats to sit on the counselor’s sofa. A little extra leg work never hurt anyone.

“Of course, Commander Ransom.” Dr. Migleemo chuckles to himself. “One must never overcook a soufflé.”

What?

Not worth asking.

Keep focused on the mission at hand.

“Anyway, I’m worried I’ve messed up my friendships because I’ve been spending too much time with my, um, with my wife.” Jack’s arms cross — not easy over his pecs, but he’s used to it. “The marriage may not be legal, but it means something to me ... to us.”

“Congratulations!” Dr. Migleemo flaps with excitement. “I had no idea. For how long have you been married?”

Jack can’t help but smile. “Four months, two weeks, five days. The best four months, two weeks, five days of my life.”

Dr. Migleemo taps at a padd, eyebrows furrowed. “Am I correct that your marriage coincided with your transformation into a caveman and the captain’s decision to lock you in the cafeteria for your own safety and for the safety of the crew?”

“Oh, that. Yeah.” Jack has read the reports. He evidently swung on power cables as if they were vines, beating his chest and half-howling, half-yodeling. The whole thing seems more Tarzan than caveman, but Captain Freeman couldn’t keep a straight face when Jack asked her about it, so he didn’t bother trying to argue terminology.

“Well,” Dr. Migleemo practically preens, “a primordial bond and a matrimonial bond is very much po-tay-to, po-tah-to, in my opinion. I’ve done extensive research on the subject, and what you’ve experienced is the natural pull of the bonded pair. In time, this bond normalizes to become one of the many bonds we experience — romantic, platonic, familial, workplace, adhesive, et cetera, et cetera.”

That ... that makes a lot of sense.

Why do people say Dr. Migleemo is the worst counselor in the fleet? That’s some good emotional context right there.

Jack stands, clasps Dr. Migleemo on the shoulder. “Thank you, Dr. Migleemo. I’m going to go normalize my bonds.”

And Jack is in the corridor, striding with purpose, chest out — well, that’s nothing new — and speaking into the air to activate the comm system. “Ransom to Honus, Westlake, and Matt. Besties meeting in Cetacean Ops in five minutes? Swimsuits and brewskies?”

Over the comm, there are three affirmations: “On my way,” “Yeah, buddy,” and a series of squeaks that translate to, “Pool party! Pool party!”

“What’s this I hear about a meeting?” Lieutenant Commander Stevens falls into step with Jack. Where the hell did Stevens come from? “I’m on duty right now, but I can —”

Jack doesn’t break stride, just holds up a hand. “No need. Duty first. I’ll see you at tomorrow morning’s command briefing.”

Why does Stevens’ face look as if someone just told him all the isolinear chips had been pulled from an engineering computer, leaving the ship vulnerable to the gravitational pull of a collapsing star?

No time to ask. Jack would be on duty himself right now if that petition from Delta shift hadn’t mysteriously missed the deadline. Mariner probably has something to do with that. Sometimes leaving the lower decks to their own devices makes everything easier.

Quick pit stop in his quarters to change into a bathing suit — and offer an explanation.

“Olivia,” he addresses the bag on his coffee table, the bag that keeps her from getting stale too quickly, the bag that ensures she’s safe in her own special world important for her well-being, just like Jack’s friends are important for his well-being, “I’m going to go hang with my besties. We both need to have many types of bonds. It’s a normalization thing. You understand, right?”

Olivia doesn’t say anything.

Bleep.

“I’m sorry.” Jack steps over, opens her bag, tries not to get distracted by light glinting perfectly off her granules of sugar. “Olivia, I hope you understand that I want to go hang with my besties. Not only right now, but plenty of other times, too — I know I lean on you pretty hard sometimes, and I need to remember to keep all kinds of bonds in my life so I can be the best Jack I can be for our bond. Is that okay?”

Olivia doesn’t say anything.

But, as usual, the sparkle in her cinnamon tells Jack everything he needs to know.

He gives her a quick kiss — “Thank you. You’re the best.” — and closes her bag so she won’t get stale too quickly. Towel slung over his shoulders, bathing suit waistband at the just-right spot to highlight his abs, Jack rushes to Cetacean Ops.

He’ll apologize to Honus, Westlake, and Matt. They seemed cool on the comm call, but it was a bleep move to be so wrapped up in his marriage that he didn’t make time for his friends. The four of them have been through a lot together, so his besties will forgive him.

Right?

The doors open to Cetacean Ops, once-familiar humidity like coming home.

And there’s a banner hung on the bulkhead behind the tank: “Congratulations to the hubba-hubba-hubby!”

Matt. That banner had to be Matt’s idea. And Honus holds a tray of Jack’s favorite brewski — Lunar Lägerbombs — and only Westlake could have chosen the perfect Spanish guitar music sensually streaming through the sound system.

Jack stares at his besties, each of them grinning, Westlake already in the tank with Matt.

Honus steps forward with the tray. “You think scuttlebut about your matrimonial endeavor hadn’t reached the bar? We’ve been looking forward to celebrating with you — once you could spare some time away from the missus.”

These guys ... these guys are the best friends ever.

There’s a lump in his throat the size of a free weight, but Jack manages to speak around it. “Thanks, besties. Thanks for ... for everything. I’ve missed you guys and I’m going to be better about spending time together.”

There’s a series of squeaks from Matt that translate to: “Glad to hear you’ll be around more. So, how’s life?”

“Life?” A grin breaks out on Jack’s face and it’s as if his toned chest could burst with happiness. He’s got his wife and he’s got his besties — important bonds of love and care and support. “I’ve gotta admit, it’s pretty sweet.”

Story by Curator. Tumblr: curator-on-ao3.

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