

C A R A M E L S P I C E

By C. Underwood

"Lie back against me."

Lourdes Courtesan, *Avenger's* latest Chief of Recreation, drew Lt. Teri Castille back against her. She could feel the young woman tremble. The room was still, the soft thrum of power and oxygen recyclers in the background, contrasting with the throaty sound of Lourdes' voice, soft like warm caramel, but firmly directive.

"Good girl." Lourdes reached around, underneath Teri's arms, bringing her hands slowly against her sides, pulling upward ever so lightly, smoothing out the soft satin of the Kimono robe Teri wore, a gift for the afternoon.

"Now," Lourdes said, her fingertips brushing the underside of Teri's breasts through the satin material, "relax. Lay your head over my shoulder."

Teri responded as directed, her head finding purchase nestled against the Delvian's neck. Teri could smell the scent of lilac and a heady musk she couldn't quite place. Her lips parted in response to Lourdes' ministrations, Lourdes' hands now caressing her breasts fully, the gentle pressure that of an expert masseuse.

Lourdes brushed a lock of Teri's hair, the colour of burnt sienna, from her mouth, then returned her hand to Teri's right nipple, which stiffening to the touch, engorged by the rush of blood. Teri let out a low pitched breath.. not quite a moan...yet.

BEEP!

Lourdes' head fell forward, her delicate chin resting on Teri's shoulder. "I don't believe this..."

She tapped the communicator inlaid into her leather choker. Lifting her head, "Courtesan for hire."

"Excuse me?" came the voice on the other end.

"Nothing. Courtesan here. How can I help you?"

"Captain Maldonado wants to see you, Ms. Courtesan. He'll be in your office momentarily."

"Damn," said Lourdes under her breath, her hand covering the communicator's speaker at her throat. "Sure enough. I'll be there in two shakes of a dycat." She tapped off the communicator and returned her attention to her companion.

"Sorry, Teri. Have to run," said Lourdes, gently pushing Teri forward, freeing herself. "We'll reschedule the massage therapy for tomorrow."

A few minutes later, Lourdes had reached her office and pulled on what passed for a uniform, a sleeved corset of dark purple and gold brocade, and a smart black skirt. She tossed a few PADDs on to her desk to afford the casual observer the thought that she might be busy, and pulled her blond hair back with one hand, clipping it into place. Thusly coifed, Lourdes wore the slightly tousled look so that she might appear to have been busy with something with a vague similarity to paperwork. She had barely had time to sit behind her desk and flip on the viewer, when the chime announced someone at the door.

"Welcome, Bienvenue, Come on in," she beckoned.

Captain Maldonado entered, dressed in his standard uniform, affectionately referenced as a "monster maroon". He was a young Human gentleman, aged in the mid-thirties of his life, his hair a dark wiry brown. Of Puerto Rican descent, she had often heard the female members of the crew comment on how they were disappointed that he was already taken. And from what Lourdes could tell of him, it was a poignant truth; he was definitely a catch.

"Lourdes," Carlos began, and was quickly interrupted as Lourdes offered him a chair.

"-Lourdes," he began again, this time as he was offered a coffee. Two sugars and a touch of milk. "I've been in contact with Star Fleet regarding some of your 'references'."

"Oh really?" Lourdes feigned. She'd had her personal file tagged so she knew when anyone was reading it. "And how is the vice squad these days?"

"I'm sure—" Carlos realized the jig was up. She knew. "— Well it seems that *this* meeting wasn't entirely unexpected."

"Not entirely," Lourdes remarked, as if she'd had this conversation a thousand times before.

"Look, Judy has received inquiries from half your staff as to your qualifications, and I was forced to look into it further. Due to the glossy veneer of your files, I thought—"

"They were a little too well buffed," Lourdes retorted candidly.

"You might say that," Carlos responded, taking a sip from his cup.

"No doubt you nearly spilled your last coffee when you started rummaging through my background."

Carlos wondered how she knew that, but realized quickly that there might be some splashup on his collar he had missed cleaning up.

"Yes, well..." Carlos set down the cup gingerly. "It was, to say, 'colorful'."

"Yes, well, if one can call being an ex-porn star, to use your people's colloquialism, and a professional Dominatrix for the past 11 years colorful, then color me a kaleidoscope."

Carlos was glad he wasn't holding his coffee; he wasn't counting on this level of candor. "You're very open about all of this."

"Shouldn't I be?" said Lourdes, waving her hand. "When anyone can downlink a vid of me prostrate before ten sentients, some of them with tentacles, one tends to dismiss shyness."

"Yes," Carlos said, recovering, "I would imagine so."

"I'm sorry, Captain." Lourdes sounded very apologetic. "I've been so very rude." Her voice sounding like that of liquid caramel, she went on. "You came down here to interrogate me, and I haven't offered you cake."

Lourdes tapped a switch on her desk. "Se'ele?"

"Yes, Ms. Courtesan," came the voice over the 'com.

"Would you be a dear and bring some coffee crumb cake to my office? The captain is getting peckish," Lourdes requested.

"Affirmative. Se'ele out."

A few moments were passed chit-chatting until the door shushed apart behind Carlos. The Vulcan-looking woman entered and placed the requested confection on the desk with aplomb. She expertly dropped a cloth napkin into the captain's lap and handed him a small saucer into which she placed a square of cake. Without a word she glanced across the desk at Lourdes, who nodded almost imperceptibly, and Se'ele was gone moments later.

"Well that was weird," said Carlos, taking a bite.

"I expect so," said Lourdes candidly, "She was your Executive Officer for a time, was she not?"

"Touché."

"I make it my business to stay well informed," said Lourdes, "something my predecessor would appreciate, no doubt."

"No doubt," said Carlos. "My wife came up with a slogan for it: 'Your personal life is my business.'"

"I like the sound of that. I'm going to have to steal it."

"Feel free. I don't think she'd mind," Carlos said, putting down the saucer of cake.

"Thank you. I will." Lourdes nodded. "As for Se'ele, you should just give it time. She's healing, but it's a slow process."

Carlos nodded. "Last time she seemed to rush it. She wasn't ready to come back to command. I think she pushed herself too hard."

"Or others pushed her too far too quickly."

"How so?"

"I see the way people look at her, when she's flitting about. The new crewmen, mostly. They assume she's a Vulcan and they treat her accordingly. I think that pointy eared finish tends to instill too much confidence in folks."

"I see," Carlos commented. "So you think Star Fleet Psych just assumed—"

"They probably did. Being partially Vulcan, and being trained at the VAS, they probably just assumed her mental training would compensate."

"But it didn't. As we all found out."

"Well, they didn't take into account that maybe she didn't want to keep her emotions in check anymore. That repressing them gave fuel to that instilled persona. Too much power."

"Navaani was trouble. We're just lucky she only wrecked the sickbay when she finally sedated herself. Damn near put her in a coma."

"Damn near killed her," corrected Lourdes. "Ann Marie mentioned the dosage was exceedingly high."

Carlos nodded.

"Well, rest assured, she's getting the help she needs here. Both for her continuance and for her guilt. Best thing to do is just leave her be 'til she's ready."

"Sounds like a plan," Carlos capped that thread of conversation. "Now, about my visit."

"Yes. I imagine you came to see if I was as seedy as my background would intimate."

"You know, I'd appreciate a little bit of credit here," said Carlos. "Your ability to put words in people's mouths is beginning to wear."

"Sorry, Captain. 9/10ths of my business is doing exactly that."

"Does it work?"

"The tips can be lucrative," Lourdes breathed.

"Oh, you're good," Carlos wrested himself from yet another tangent. "I'm going to have to stay on my toes around you."

Lourdes bit her lip; the retort was simply too easy. "Your visit," she prompted.

"Yes. As I said, I checked out your background at the behest of some concerns from your staff. I wanted to tell you that though there is quite a bit of color, I believe everyone is entitled to be judged on what they do and say, not what by what's in their past."

"How kind of you," Lourdes said diplomatically. She disliked being "allowed" to have a past, colorful or not. She didn't need or want anyone's opinion on the matter, or their permission. Lourdes was a big girl.

"That probably didn't come out right." Carlos picked up on the subtle cues.

"It's all right, Captain," Lourdes took the opportunity to smooth some ruffled feathers. "The fact that you corrected yourself speaks volumes as to your character. I know what you meant."

"Good. I wouldn't want there to be a problem."

"Of course."

"So with all that in mind and out of the way, I was hoping to ask for your assistance on something?"

Lourdes leaned forward, all ears.

"As you've probably heard by now, the Avenger will be supporting a 'spiffy' new Marine Strike Group—"

"The 769th," Lourdes supplied.

"Yes. They'll be coming onboard in October and I'd like you to set up a reception. There will be some Star Fleet and Marine Brass in attendance and—"

"You're not happy about this, are you?" Lourdes broke in.

"Sorry. It's just 'spiffy new' doesn't seem complimentary."

Carlos weighed his options. His opinion had been well-voiced in Fleet circles; he didn't think it would matter if the general populace heard it now. "Well, no."

"Why not?" asked Lourdes, delicately.

"Well, for one, *Avenger's* mission has always been primarily one of peaceful exploration. I don't think running around with phaser-happy personnel goes a long way toward supporting that statement."

"Fair enough. Fair enough," Lourdes commented, "but after that little problem on Iskedraan..."

"WHERE DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THAT!?" Carlos reeled on her.

"People talk, Captain," Lourdes said, nonplussed. "And remember... Your crew's personal lives are my business."

"Damn it." Carlos calmed. "Nothing travels faster than classified information," he said, more to himself than Lourdes.

"And bad news."

"Agreed. Which brings us back to the topic at hand." Carlos channeled. "Admiral Tolwyn feels that Avenger could do with some additional... 'capability'... just in case something like the Iskedraan incident happens again." Carlos let the word "capability" hang in the air for a moment, subtle testimony to exactly what he thought of THAT assessment.

"But you've got a feeling that's not the whole reason."

"That's right. I've known Tolwyn for some years now, and since he got access to *Avenger*, nothing we've done has ever been what it seems. There's always some underlying motive."

"I see," said Lourdes. "I can't help you with Admiral Tolwyn, but I can give you a bit of advice."

Carlos listened.

"Forewarned is forearmed."

"Now—" Lourdes picked up a PADD from the desk. "As to the MSG ceremony... What did you have in mind?"

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