

Tiger Cruise

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1342) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1342>.

Rating: [Mature](#)
Archive Warning: [No Archive Warnings Apply](#)
Category: [Gen](#), [M/M](#)
Fandom: [Borderlines](#)
Character: [Leonard "Bones" McCoy](#), [Hunter](#), [Ensemble Cast - BAN](#)
Additional Tags: [Border Patrol](#), [Crew as Family](#), [Recovery](#)
Language: English
Series: Part 3 of [Borderlines: Book I - We Sail At the Break of Day](#)
Stats: Published: 2024-02-09 Words: 5,420 Chapters: 1/1

Tiger Cruise

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Summary

Repairs, at least to the body. A foster mother and daughter reunion, with a much less welcome brother-little sister reunion. A bartender wipes the bar—one spot repeatedly, before going to rub a spot on an older brother. Two bonds talk. The brother and sister talk, too.

Notes

NOTE: A Tiger Cruise is a contemporary naval concept where families of crewmembers are taken on a short trip on the naval vessel.

Shards

Leelix III
Forward Operating Base Merlin
2296

Ensign Decker Sinclair walks into the sickbay. Since she had come off watch, overseeing some of the repairs to the *Comstock*, she was hoping to catch Siobhan Lincolnton awake, to see how she was doing.

On watch and watch, she hadn't really had a great deal of time that she wasn't working or sleeping or eating to catch her captain awake. She'd heard that the lieutenant j.g. was going to be okay; she was healing from the electrical strike that had burned through her shoulder, but there might be an issue with one of the shards of plastic that Dr. McCoy had found in the white of her left eye.

She hadn't been able to speak to Lincolnton; Commander Stone-Hunter hadn't heard anything else, either.

Decker feels herself blush as she thinks about some of her off time that might've been available and synced with Lincolnton being awake.

When she and an engineering ensign from the *Hornbeck*, the sole *Lancer*-class patrol/escort cutter in their squadron, had grappled behind one of the temporary supply tents near the sheltered revetments for the cutters.

She had thought that she'd needed to feel something to release the tension, after the adrenaline rush of her first battle, when she had shoved him up against the outer wall of a revetment, with both of them fumbling to open their trousers and come together.

She'd managed to keep her screams down, as the two-minute encounter hadn't exactly done what she had thought it would. She was still as tightly wound as one of the strings of Siobhan's guitar that she'd seen hanging in her quarters, after she'd reported aboard.

All of those centuries before, if felt like, when it had actually been less than two days.

Nearly dying from one of the arcs that had hit Lincolnton was just one culprit, an instant after she'd recoiled from shoving her away from her exploding console. Among other instances in the battle.

She shakes her head as she makes her way to sickbay. Decker is fairly certain that the other ensign, Mortenson, would probably think that he had made a conquest. He'd intimated that he was probably the best she'd ever have. At least until she'd reminded him that he'd been the one against the wall, after they'd both consented to the act.

She hadn't said anything about him fumbling more than she did to get to the two-minute mark.

Decker steps into the ward. Her body is immediately treated to an incredible amount of warmth, centered around that place that Mortenson hadn't exactly been able to excite. She breathes out carefully, hoping that the person producing those waves wouldn't notice her.

Captain Chandra lies prone on a medical table, most of her covered by a sheet. Her uniform lies on another table, she is resting her arms and chin on a pillow. She notices that the rear of the discarded trousers are dotted with small splotches of blood.

Decker's eyes widen as she sees the part that is uncovered. Doctor McCoy is carefully extracting pieces of something from her Captain (L)'s ass. Her eyes follow the long legs all the way down to her surprisingly dainty feet and back up to where McCoy is working.

She wonders if she is going to be able to visit Siobhan, as her heart is racing and she suddenly feels that the tautness in her body that Mortenson hadn't been able to calm in his two minutes of glory has increased tenfold.

She finds herself hoping that Siobhan is still asleep, so that she can find relief. Maybe that bartender, Theelia, isn't busy now. She closes her eyes as she hears a snort from the other side of the ward.

No such luck. Siobhan is fully awake and sitting up, clad in a hospital tunic, trying to suppress her laughter at either Decker's expression or the intense blush that is the bane of anyone with her pale, freckled countenance.

She looks at Chandra, who is still resting on the pillow, a hint of amusement on her face, between wincing as McCoy pulls a particularly contrary piece of shrapnel from her rear. Decker is looking into the blue-gray eyes, trying not to look at the bronze skin that is being attended to.

Chandra's toned arms and shoulders under the top part of the sheet, as well as other parts that are slightly exposed are distracting enough.

"Sorry, Captain," she says. "I just came to visit Lieutenant Lincolnton," she says.

There is a hint of a wider smile as Chandra looks over at Siobhan who is still in the throes of mild merriment. "And it appears Lieutenant Lincolnton is appreciative," she says in a dry voice. She looks back at her doctor. "I didn't know that the repair of my ass was going to be such a spectator sport."

McCoy doesn't rise. "Well, it serves you right when I find that my captain's command chair is covered with blood, and she's leaking when she walks." His blue eyes flash fire. "Two shifts later."

Decker is witness to a contest of two sets of angry blue eyes. McCoy turns to Decker, ignoring the angry looks fired his way. "Ensign, I need Lieutenant Lincolnton to get up and walk around," McCoy says. "Why don't you take her for a walk? Don't go too far and don't let her convince you into letting her do too much, so that you have to carry her ass back in here. I'll finish ministering to the afflicted's ass and maybe cut back on your blushing."

That of course causes another blush. She moves over to the other medbed and practically yanks Siobhan up to her feet and out of the sickbay.

Decker is suddenly very conscious of the other redhead on her arm. She wonders if it is a byproduct of whatever-it-was from Chandra. She steals a glance over at Siobhan. The slightly—three years—older woman is a few centimeters shorter than Decker, and her red hair is a mass of tight curls haloing out from her head and shoulders, rather than Decker's mostly-straight waves. She is not as thin-framed as Decker, either. She is solid, in shape, perhaps a bit more than just in shape. Her Jamaican heritage is evident in her features; her Irish in the slightly less dark skin.

Light brown, almost liquid brown eyes, surrounded by masses of freckles—maybe even more than Decker has—complete the package.

Decker curses to herself, shaking her head.

"A little birdie told me that you were scratching an itch, even before Banshee Actual turned up the pheromones."

Decker says nothing, but files that definition, along with the sensation.

"You okay?"

She exhales, then nods.

"You know, you didn't have to go scrounging for some of that itch-scratching," Siobhan says quietly.

"Well, there's not another midshipman or equivalent rank on the *Comstock*." She smirks. "Had to go 'scrounging,' as you call it. Unless I was going for Ishimoto."

Siobhan winces at that. "Maybe a few decades ago. So how was it? Itch scratched?"

"Not exactly," she replies.

Siobhan is silent for awhile. "You know that you are kinda in the captain's club, Decker," she says.

Decker stops. "I'm not the same rank. And it's only temporary."

Siobhan starts to walk again. "This ain't the Fleet. Border Patrol has different, well everything."

Decker is silent for a moment. "What about Chandra?"

Siobhan's eyes widen, then crinkle in a grin. "Oh, so you got a bit of a crush on our Captain No-Pants?" she says.

Decker keeps silent again. The blush nearly lights up the coming darkness.

Siobhan takes her hand, growing serious. “She’s changed a lot, from what others tell me. She’s a lot more serious than she was before…” She trails off.

“Before what?”

She lifts her hand, tracing it along the right side of her head. Decker nods.

“She seems to take that oath of celibacy a lot more seriously, since then. That little burst was the first I’d felt since Vostus.” She falls silent, as if she is contemplating something. A memory.

Decker doesn’t even ask about that particular little world. “I guess we better get back before the Doc sends out the hounds,” Siobhan says. She looks directly at Decker.

“Maybe you can help me recuperate when I get out.” She grins. “Ain’t a lot else to do out here at Merlin, or on the boats.”

Family Matters

Chandra closes her eyes as the two young officers leave. Sinclair in particular, seems to be in a great hurry to depart.

“You might’ve started something there,” McCoy says.

Chandra shakes her head. She doesn’t meet McCoy’s kind expression. “I don’t know. It might’ve already been in the works, seeing we’re in the ass end of nowhere,” she replies. “Or I could be the cause of it.”

“Speaking of the ass end,” the doctor says. He sets down his tweezers, then runs a scanner over the affected area. A hypospray in the right cheek and he pulls the sheet all the way down. His wise eyes meet hers.

“What is it, Chandra?”

“I slipped,” she says quietly. She looks up at McCoy. “Len, I don’t know if I’ll ever be right again.”

He nods, his eyes on hers. She wonders if she can keep his gaze. Finally he reaches out and touches her bare arm. “I’m just an old country doctor, Captain. But I know when someone’s mental and emotional health is suffering.”

Chandra says nothing.

“Why are you taking the oath so seriously now? Those who care for you say that since your injury, you’re taking it more seriously. Are you afraid of something?”

Chandra’s eyes flash. “Who the hell have you been talking to?”

“Me,” says a steady voice at the entrance of the sickbay.

Chandra exhales at the sight of the older woman who could take more credit for raising her than anyone else. Including her birth parents. She sees the single feather hanging from the right side of her medium-length dark brown hair, with auburn highlights except for a single white streak down the middle. Her dark blue eyes gaze patiently at her, as they had since she had been a child. A prickly little shit, in spite of her people’s reputations for joy.

A joy tempered by the abandonment by her status-conscious mother and her bondmates.

“Hello, Admiral,” she says. “I wondered if you’d show up.” She smiles as her heart twists. “Afana,” she whispers, a word from her own language.

Hunter pulls her into a deep embrace. “Dahlah,” she replies in the same language. Beloved.

Chandra feels the smirk against her cheek. “Somebody told me I’d get to see you getting your ass fixed.”

McCoy laughs. Chandra narrows her eyes as he makes himself scarce.

“So are you here to tell me what all I did wrong?”

Hunter continues to gaze at her evenly. Chandra suddenly feels like she is twelve years old again. Finally, Hunter smiles. “I figured you already took care of that.”

“So what are you doing here? You choose this time for an operational inspection, Chief of Staff?”

“Nope. Not the CofS anymore. I’m now your boss’s boss.”

“They’re giving you the division?”

Hunter nods. “Yeah.”

“And the wing? Mandala’s not going to be able to take it over. She’s going to need time.”

“I know. We actually are going to make do with two wing commanders, for now, until we can find someone.”

“Good. Did you see Mandala before she shipped out?” Chandra closes her eyes at the memory of the pain on her godmother’s face. Not just from the loss of her right leg above the knee, but at the covered bodies of her longtime yeoman and the young guard outside her door.

“No,” Hunter says. “She was gone before I got here.” She closes her eyes for a brief moment. When she opens them again, she says, “I read your reports. You did good. I hope your new security commander can get some answers from the wreckage. I also think your shiny new XO should get something for what she did.”

“Already put her in for a Bronze Cluster with ‘V’,” Chandra says.

“She’s got good genes,” Hunter replies with a smile. “You’re wondering why I’m not advancing you to Wing?”

Chandra breathes out. “I figured you thought I might have my hands full trying to rebuild my goddamned Group.”

“Got it in one, babe. And I like to think you’ll get your dream someday.”

“Nothing wrong with this one,” Chandra replies, knowing where Hunter’s heart is.

Hunter shakes her head. “My dream doesn’t have to be your dream, Dahlah. I know where your heart lies.”

Chandra looks away, then changes the subject. “So if you’re taking over the division, then who’s going to be Chief of Staff?”

Hunter’s eyes are expressionless. “I guess that’ll be up for the new Chief of Special Operations.”

“Jokan is being replaced?”

“Yeah. He’s going to the Board of Admiralty.”

“So, put out to pasture,” Chandra says.

“You’d think that.”

“Who’s getting the command?”

Hunter exhales, looking at Chandra. “Harriman.”

Chandra feels her teeth grinding. Samuel Harriman. The father of John Harriman. Chandra’s captain on the *Enterprise-B*.

The man who, while he wasn’t incompetent, wasn’t up to the job of commanding an *Excelsior*-class starship. Particularly one with that history and tradition. He could be, given time, but his father had jumped and pushed to get him that command, as his first starship command, with only heavy and medium scout ships under his belt.

One that his father himself had been passed over for, way back when Chris Pike had given the original up.

She comes alert as she feels the spike of the Link. She exhales as she recognizes it.

She once again grits her teeth. Hunter shrugs. “He asked if he could come. He has diplomatic credentials as a member of the Federation Council, not just the Representative Assembly.”

Chandra turns, not bothering to cover up when the sheet falls.

A very large, uncharacteristically large—some would say massive—Deltan stands there, his golden eyes staring at her.

She wonders when she’ll get the dressing down.

“Our mother needs you, Chandrelle,” Djinn na’Songet’ii et Omra says.

“So she sent you to come fetch me, Trah-Ehbray?”

She curses herself at her slip. She sees his eyes flash in triumph at her use of that Deltos word.

The word for brother.

Chandra turns to Hunter, who watches both impassively.

Tell Your Bartender

Agon Zh’qithiq wipes down the particular area of the bar. He looks around the room at the few patrons they have after the attack by the unknown marauders. Agon has his ideas about those attackers, based on his less savory connections, but he keeps his own counsel about that. There are still signs of damage from the initial attack, in both the bar and the living quarters above. The bar’s damage is mostly repaired; you always repair your money maker first, as Theelia had said, when they had first found themselves on Leelix, after their misfortunes from their shared past lives.

He realizes that the human server, Wasu, is watching him, shaking her head. He had just polished the same one square foot of bar over one hundred times. He closes his eyes for a moment, listening in his mind’s expectations to Theelia gently chiding his work ethic.

He’d never wanted to be one-third-owner in a bar. Nor even a full owner. He had once had, for a brief time, the only job he’d ever wanted.

Chief Engineer of a Federation Starship. An ultra-heavy cruiser, no less—the closest thing to a dreadnought Starfleet had, but they had refused to call it that.

He feels a strong gaze on him. He looks up to see Theelia looking at him. Her eyes are soft, as if she knows what he is remembering.

She had been the navigator of that ship.

Agon realizes that he is just able to see her eyes, as she looks at him over the shoulder of a taller young woman with red hair falling loosely in waves down her back. She realizes that the two women are slow dancing to the music playing.

They rotate around and he sees the young woman's face resting on Thee's shoulder. Her eyes are closed and Agon can see that the young woman, who wears a partial Starfleet uniform, is absolutely calm as she sways. There isn't a care in the world on her face.

Knowing Thee, that might not have been the case when the young officer had come in.

Agon senses a presence in front of him. He breathes out at the large figure in front of him.

"Hello, Djinn," he says.

Djinn continues to gaze at him. Finally, he smiles and says. "Hey, Agon. How's the private sector?"

Agon wonders if he is going to have to punch him, but he realizes that Djinn, who deep down is probably one of the most decent beings in the world, hadn't meant anything by the phrase.

He feels his jaw clench. Decent except where his little sister is concerned.

"Have you spoken to her?" he ask.

A cloud comes over Djinn's face. "I only got one sentence out. I probably could've chosen more wisely, if she was going to show me the door. It didn't help that Hunter was there."

Agon lets one side of his mouth quirk up. He shakes his head. "Never get between Mama wareg and her cub," he says.

"Probably a good plan."

"So do you have a place to sleep?"

"Just my ship."

"What do you want, Djinn?" Agon asks bluntly.

"I just want to talk to my sister," he says. "Our mother—the prime mother, who bore us both—needs her. She's sick."

"So she needs Chandra, after basically ignoring her in favor of you, since you were the first born and one that seemed to conform to the family's Guild ties."

This time Djinn shows a grin. "Or so they thought."

"By then it was too late," Agon says.

"I just want to talk to her," Djinn finally says. "I want to see my sister."

Agon is quiet for a moment. He looks at Theelia, who is now across the room. There is no sign of the young Starfleet officer. He raises his eyebrow at her. After a moment, she gives her patented devilish grin.

He turns and looks into Djinn's golden eyes. "Come on. Let's go up to my place. We'll see how the rest of the night and the morning goes."

With that, Djinn reaches over the bar and kisses him gently.

Meditations

Chandra starts awake, sitting bolt upright in the bunk. Fortunately, the Group captain's rack isn't inset into the bulkhead; she doesn't slam her head into the overhead. She looks over at the status repeater near her bed. Everything appears to show green, except for a few yellows denoted for the repairs.

Two red lines show, denoting the crew strength and numbers. It is directly opposite the bright green for the measurement of crew morale. She isn't sure how that is measured, or who measures it. She lifts her strong hand, her left, and moves it over her smooth forehead. As always, as of a year ago, she somehow manages to touch the ragged end of the scar, the one that her surgeons, including Len McCoy, hadn't been able to fix.

Not that she'd wanted them to. It served as a reminder every time she saw her reflection. She gets up and pads over to the side table. There is a bottle of single malt Irish whiskey there, secured in a rack. Much like the two that she had left at the Sunset Grille, for issue to any of the crew or officers of her command ship. Much like the remainder of the case that she had been given.

By a certain Starfleet Intelligence officer.

She lifts the bottle, then replaces it in the rack. She sighs and fills a water bottle from the cooler. As she does, she looks at herself in the full-

length mirror on the door of the head. Besides the large one on her skull, her body does possess several other scars here and there. She runs her hand over her torso. She sees the woman in the mirror grin as she thinks of the young ensign stumbling over herself, when the Threads had activated, while McCoy was removing most of the window from the living quarters of the Grille from her ass.

An activation that doesn't occur with any regularity in the last year. As she continues to look at herself in the mirror, she shakes her head, hoping that Decker had found some relief. In another time, she would've helped her.

Chandra feels a presence come into her mind. In spite of the controlled emotions of the owner of the presence, it is bright and airy.

Not bad, th'y'la, the presence says. *As Jamie would say, you still got it going on.* Chandra feels her heart leap, and then fall at the Vulcan word. A word with so many meanings. Sister. Brother. Friend.

Lover.

She sees T'varilyn's amber eyes come into focus in her mind. As always when she appears, with the nature of Chandra's people, T'Varilyn is nude, even though she remembers her not just for the physical, but for the emotional.

For the heart and mind, not just for the body. Just like all Deltans

"How are you, my love?" she asks, not bothering to suppress her words to only her mind, since she is alone. She walks over to the bed and moves to the center of it, crossing her legs.

"I'm good. Except for the whole being dead thing," she hears in her mind, as if T'varilyn was sitting across from her. She shakes her head. Even when alive, even with Vulcan mores, T'vari had possessed a dry, sometimes dark sense of humor.

Chandra takes in a shuddering breath. She feels the warmth—even warmer than a Deltan's—of an embrace as T'varilyn's body envelops hers. A hand rises to her cheek. "I'm okay. I'm with my loves. I know what they know and feel."

Chandra sees an indistinct figure in her mind. She can just make out it is male. "How is he?" she asks.

She feels T'varilyn's exhale. "You know it doesn't work like that. The two halves of my katra aren't exactly linked. I can just tell you that he is alive. I don't sense any pain." She pauses. "Not any physical, that is."

Chandra starts as she feels a tap in the center of her forehead. "Of course, neither of my two dumbasses that I'm somehow saddled with for eternity, at least until they decide to dump me in the Hall of Ancient Thought, can seem to be in the same room together for more than an hour or two," T'varilyn projects.

Chandra rolls her eyes at the free-ranging snark, born of over a century of contact and living among others than Vulcans. Not to mention the freedom of being dead. "Don't tempt us," she says. "You're a pain in my ass."

"Takes one to know one." They both fall silent, but revel in the tight embrace in their minds.

"When are you going to go see your chosen family on Delta IV?" T'varilyn asks. "Are you going to complete the bonding?"

Chandra remains silent. She feels an eyeroll. "Spare me from my stubborn dumbass," she says, her voice even to anyone who didn't know her.

To Chandra and one other, the voice drips with exasperation. Especially with what had become her favorite human epithet, used frequently and freely when the three of them were alone, to describe her much younger bondmates.

"You need the contact. Not just the video calls, sharing in family celebrations," T'Varilyn says. "If not them, then forget that silly oath. One of those two young women, who were trying not to burst when you were in sickbay. Kaylin. Even that dunderheaded security officer you're getting. His Orion half certainly knew how to play you like your original family's larachord."

Chandra again, remains silent.

She hears and feels the sigh in her head. "Lie back down. I'll see what I can do."

As Chandra falls asleep, her mind quieted, at least for now, she thinks of that other former bondmate. She sees no distinct sensations. At least until she sees him standing in a room, dressed in civilian clothing, that doesn't look Federation.

With three Romulan officers. One female, two male. Dressed in military uniforms.

One of the males wears the distinctive insignia, from intelligence reports, of the Tal Shiar.

The human's clothing appears rich, but there is an added golden collar with a silver medallion on it, around his throat.

The symbol of the Romulan praetorate.

Awakenings

Djinn na'Songet'ii et Omra comes awake slowly in the morning light. Beside him, Agon shifts slightly, murmuring in his sleep. Djinn looks down at him, then reaches down and kisses him quickly. He swings his body out of the bed, careful not to disturb his bedpartner, lifting the muscular forearm gently from his chest, then laying it back down on the bed.

He dresses quickly, then looks down at Agon's body, which is exposed completely in the bed. A part of him is tempted to strip out of his clothing, lie back down and start his mouth down the Andorian's broad blue body. He shakes his head, then turns and walks from the bedroom.

He stops short in the outer office. There is a press of coffee on the table. He turns as he feels a burst of the Link. Theelia sits there, clad in an open robe, sipping her coffee. Her eyes glance up and down his now-clothed body; he reciprocates with her mostly unclothed. He walks over at her nod and pours himself a cup of the Deltan roast that humans and many other species love as well.

He notices that the couch is empty; there is no sign of any dance partners from last night.

“Are you heading out, then?” Theelia asks in her light accent.

“Eventually,” he replies easily.

She smiles, then nods slightly. “So you’re going to try one more time?”

He is quiet for a moment, then says, “I’m stubborn. Just like she is. I’m going to throw myself on the mercy of the court.”

“That might work. If there is a flogging included,” she replies. “But you might enjoy that.”

“Possibly. Just as much as she will enjoy giving it.”

“Oh, she has people for that.”

“That nice young woman who you were dancing with, last night, for instance?”

“I don’t know. Riding crops were mentioned during the dance, but not a cat o’ nine tails.”

Djinn feels his eyebrows rise at that. He tries to get the conversation back on track, away from the young officer’s acceptance of spanking. “Are you and Agon okay? Are you finding yourself after…”

She smiles again. “We’re getting there. Just not sure what our ‘silent partner’ is going to do.”

He closes his eyes. He can feel her uncertainty through the Link, as well as in the ‘flavor’ of the Threads, as their shared pheromones are known. Djinn opens his eyes. He nods. “Let me know what I can do,” he says. “It’s not an empty promise.”

She smiles. “I know. You’ve never been one for empty words. It’s part of your charm.” The smile turns devilish. “Glad he got something besides the cheap serving of Djinn.”

He snorts, then finishes his coffee. He reaches down and kisses her. He raises his eyebrows at the tastes, but says nothing.

The large port watch at the hatch of the cutter stares at him with much less regard. He crosses his arms above the duty belt with the holstered phaser and adds skepticism to the low regard.

“You’re the Captain’s brother, right?” says a light voice from behind. The watch snaps to some reasonable approximation of attention.

He turns and sees the young officer that had been Theelia’s dance partner. She appears to be freshly showered and is clad in uniform cargo trousers and the newer maroon pullover with the white lines of her discipline, an embroidered delta, and the single solid embroidered pip of her rank on the collar.

“I am. I’m not sure she will claim me, ma’am.”

“Just Decker. I’ll take you to the wardroom, then I’ll ask her if she wants to see you.” She narrows her large, dark eyes, that seem to take up much of her face, along with the freckles. “Her word is law, though.”

“Deal,” he says. “I’m Djinn.” She nods, turning to the the watch. He returns her nod. “Very well, XO.” He steps aside.

Djinn is soon standing in a room, or a compartment, as they call it in naval parlance. He sees that there is a set of blankets, sheets, and a pillow on the couch.

He feels the familiar presence behind him. He turns and exhales sharply. He can feel his eyes tearing slightly.

His sister is only a bit shorter than he is, maybe a handlength. She is dressed in the same uniform trousers that Decker was, but with a sleeveless vest showing her arms, as well as some of her chest.

A brand new metal Starfleet delta, one that had been in existence for nearly two decades, is on her chest above the crossed arms. This new version has the four pips of her rank on it, for use with this or the undershirt of the service dress uniform. He locks on her eyes. They appear to be more gray than blue.

The sign that she too, might be grieving something.

There is more movement as Decker comes into the compartment with an anxious glance at them. She moves to the couch and gathers up the covers.

Djinn sees Chandra track over to her. One side of her full lips quirks up.

“Mr. Sinclair, you’re the XO. Claim yourself some quarters. I can’t have the number four officer on this ship living like a transient.”

“Aye, sir,” she manages. Djinn gives her a warm smile as she exits the compartment.

“She worships you, by the way. Not just you, but Hunter’s daughter, Kaylin. And maybe not a little bit of that young woman who was

injured.”

“Siobhan.” She nods. “Just hope she turns that worship into learning, rather than walking around all moon-eyed.”

“It didn’t stop you, as I recall Hunter once saying.”

She turns her gaze on him, with the eyes more blue than gray at this moment. “Djinn, why are you here? I know you want me to go pay homage to our Afana-pra, but I don’t have time.”

“You don’t have time for the mother that bore you? That gave us life?” he asks.

“The one that passed me off to someone else when I didn’t conform to her plans for me?” Chandra adds.

He moves closer to her. When she doesn’t object to his closeness, he takes her in his arms. After a moment or two of stiffness, she relaxes her arms to her side. “I’m sorry,” he whispers into her right ear. He lifts his lips to the scar, then slowly traces it with his lips.

“I didn’t agree with ta’ella. She doesn’t even know I’m here.” he admits. He drops his hands to run along her arms. He doesn’t prompt her, but she puts her arms around his back, then moves her arms to the back of his neck.

She exhales, feeling the strong, fast pulse in his throat against her wrist, where it rests. She feels something grow in her throat. She sees a tear drop down on his lips.

They aren’t from him, but he is close. He reaches down and kisses the tear under her eye.

“I just want to have my baby sister in my life again,” he says.

She reaches out with the Link, even though they’re not exactly engaged in the acts that usually powers that particular connection.

Family bonds can be strong.

Chandra senses no deception. She relaxes.

He reaches out with his strong hand. He grasps the back of her skull and pulls her forehead to his. She lifts her left, switching hands and touches the back of his skull.

They both rest there. Content with where they are in the journeys of their lives.

For this moment.

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