

feel me like a steel knife

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by [violet_pencil](#)

Summary

It's not that complicated, but you're going to need a bulletproof soul...

or: Mariner is a trigger-happy baby and her heart is right between Tendi's sharp white teeth.

(Starts right at the end of season two's "We'll Always Have Tom Paris" and covers the time between that episode and through to the end of "Mugato, Gumato.")

Notes

(Written for Ericine in the 2023 Monster Smash fanfiction exchange.)

Most of the time, I'm cool underneath

Most of the time, I can keep it right between my teeth

— Bob Dylan, "Most of the Time" (alternate lyrics)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

"A bee?! You honestly expect me to believe—" It's been five minutes and Ransom is *still* on about the bee thing. Mariner tucks her tongue into her cheek and tries not to roll her eyes. Repairing the shuttlecraft will be a great project for Billups' nerds in Engineering; they're probably already salivating at the thought of all the cool upgrades they'll be able to add. So what's the big deal? "And what about you, Ensign," Ransom says, turning sharply as Tendi steps down out of the shuttlecraft. "Did *you* see this... *bee*?"

"How would she have seen it?!" Mariner interjects. "Sir? Where's that in her job description, sir? Where in the regulations does it say we've all gotta be good at spotting bees?!"

"All right, that's it. Brig," Ransom says, folding his arms under his pecs, like he knows that makes them stand out more. Hot idiot.

"Ugh, whatever!" Mariner says, and stalks off, annoyed. Not at being sent to the brig, which is a pathetically soft punishment. Oh no, don't give me a private room! My own private suite where I don't have to listen to Rutherford giggling in his sleep about capacitors, Boimler's twitchy anxiety-dream breathing and Tendi constantly climbing in and out of her bunk to pick up the blankets she kicked off! Mariner can hardly sleep without it, these days. But it's not like she gets lonely in the brig, or anything stupid like that. No, Mariner is *mostly* annoyed that there was probably a better way to word her objection that Tendi doesn't spot bees professionally... right? She could have said: Tendi's studying to be a doctor, not an apiologist!

...Ugh, why didn't she think of that two minutes ago! That would have been tight!

Really, the brig isn't bad. Okay, some security bro is probably monitoring her movements, so Mariner can't get up to most of the shenanigans that she'd get up to if she had a really, *truly* private room. But after dinner the gang comes and hangs out, and Tendi even brings some of her rare Klingon acid punk B-sides.

Boimler leaves early for his meetup with Tom Paris: chat with a nerd, meeting adjourned! Mariner can't blame him. A real *Voy* hero buying you drinks! She won't admit it, but yeah, she's a tiny bit impressed. Rutherford sticks around for a while longer, though he seems kind of mooney, and eventually he drifts off too.

But Tendi stays, and stays... and stays, even as the lights dim as night shift kicks in all over the ship. She scoots closer to the thin force-field so that the two of them can bend their heads close together and crank the music up, and... it's nice. Like really having a bestie. It's been a long time since Mariner has had a bestie, and she usually manages to screw it up. Luckily Tendi seems like the forgiving type.

After a while, both of them harmonizing quietly with one particularly punky howl, Tendi looks up into Mariner's eyes, squinches up her face, and smiles, maybe wider than Mariner has ever seen her smile before.

"Huh!" Mariner says, startled. "I never noticed before, but you have little fangs!"

"Oh, yeah," Tendi says, pushing her tongue against one, the flash of lush green making the white stand out even brighter. She blushes sweetly, her freckles vanishing and reappearing. "I had them sharpened a while back and never, uh, regrew the originals..."

"Oh, definitely don't! They look badass!"

"Really? They're not too noticeable, are they? I don't like drawing attention to them, they're just so... flashy. I worry they're not professional."

"Okay, just because you're in Starfleet on a majority-human ship, please don't internalize traditional mainstream human-centric beauty standards! That way lies tears! Truly, a vale of tears," Mariner says, but Tendi still doesn't look reassured. "I mean, they're not *very* noticeable? I wouldn't call them a distinguishing characteristic or anything. If I was just drawing a picture of you I probably wouldn't include them. Although I guess it would depend on the art style, right? Like, a realistic portrait is going to have more details versus a more simplistic, uh, what's the word I'm thinking of? *Cartoony*—"

Tendi clears her throat loudly, and Mariner changes course, leaning back.

"I mean like, if you were drawing *me* you wouldn't include this big scar on my boob," she says, casually pulling her lapel aside to reveal a long, dark, slightly curving vertical scar, one of the really good ones that she'd showed off to Ransom when they'd been captive on that one planet that one time. "Maybe if you were *trying* to illustrate every cool scar I have on my body, but it's not one of my iconic visual details— *You* know what I mean."

"I'm not sure," Tendi says, confused. "Would I be drawing you naked?"

"Would you *like* to?" Mariner says, and honestly she's not even intending to flirt! Or, she's not flirting with *intent*. There's a difference, right?

She stares at Tendi. Tendi stares back. Mariner's gaze slips lower, to Tendi's mouth, her chapped green lips, softening, opening— her *fangs* gleaming—

Mariner leans closer to Tendi. Tendi leans closer to Mariner.

They both bonk their faces right into the brig cell's force-field, both recoiling at the slight shock. Tendi overbalances, falling over backward from her crouch.

"Uh, haha, wow!" Tendi says, pressing her hands to her face.

"Whoo!" Mariner says, eyes wide. "That happened!"

The track ends. Tendi looks down and hastily starts another one. They listen to Klingon acid punk.

Mariner's heart is racing.

"So wait," Boimler says over breakfast the next morning, "I just remembered, you guys never told us what Tendi's special assignment was!"

Tendi tenses up and kicks Mariner in the ankle. Mariner glares at her. No, she's not going to tell everyone about Dr. T'Ana's horny antiques; it would be all over the ship in ten seconds, and who would Dr. T'Ana take it out on? Tendi, obviously. Come on, Mariner is better than that. "It was boring!" she mumbles through a mouthful of French toast, drenched in delicious replicated syrup and also, delicious newfound freedom from the brig. "Just a fetch quest. Lots of paperwork. No biggie!"

Boimler narrows his eyes at her, clearly repressing a seethe of jealousy.

"Ooh! Fetching!" Rutherford looks excited. "What forms did you fill out?"

"Who can remember?! But we had fun!" Tendi claps her hands together. She's mildly convincing; probably because she's trying to protect Dr. T'Ana. If she were lying for personal gain, she probably wouldn't be able to pull it off at all. Some people are like that. "So much fun!"

"I thought it was boring," Boimler says suspiciously.

"Oh, um! Anything can be fun if you put your mind to it!"

"That's true!" says Rutherford.

Boimler switches his laser-focus back to Mariner. Oh boy. This guy knows her too well. She swallows hard, waving her hand in his face to

break the eye contact. "Honestly, it was nothing! We mostly did girl stuff, you know? Girl bonding! Girl trip!"

"Girl stuff! Gals being pals!" Tendi chimes in, and Rutherford coughs, choking on his oatmeal. Boimler's eyebrows practically go through the roof.

"Not gals being pals! That's a different thing," Mariner says. "Our girls' trip was regular pals. Regular pals who happen to be gals."

"I don't get it." Tendi looks back and forth. "What's the difference?"

"Girl trip *bonding* is babes being besties. Gals being pals are banging."

Tendi blinks. "We aren't banging? I thought we were!"

"Hot goss alert!" Rutherford says, delighted. "When did this happen?"

"When *did* this happen?" Boimler demands. "How much did I miss while I was gone?"

"No, no, no. Look. I understand the confusion. Banging can be both an adjective and a verb," Mariner says loudly. It's too early in the morning for analysis of interspecies linguistic implications. "Banging the *adjective* is what we are: awesome, sick, cool as shit, banging! All of us, collectively! We are not verb-banging. We have not banged. None of us have... unless there's something the three of *you* aren't telling me."

"Aw, you guys would be such a cute couple, though," Rutherford says. "Or should I say— cou-PAL. Of pals! Gal pals! Get it?"

"Okay, goodbye, I'm leaving, I'm leaving this conversation," Mariner says, standing up and stalking away.

"Good! I'm with Mariner!" Boimler announces, and actually gets up and hurries after her as she leaves the mess hall. "Seriously, you have the right idea," he adds, throwing his arm over her shoulder. "The four of us are a stable social unit; it's risky enough that we socialize so much outside our scheduled shifts! We don't need the unit cohesion of our friend group disrupted by in-group banging."

"Yoiks," Mariner says, appalled, but she doesn't throw off Boimler's arm. She missed this dumb skinny boy when he was gone on the *Titan*, she really did. "Hey, do you know where the big hyperspanner is? The really big one with the vise crank grip that you could practically unplug the warp core with? Where do they keep that thing?"

"Equipment bay twelve, the lockers against the starboard wall; why?"

"Because one of us really needs to *loosen up*—!" Mariner says, cracking up before she can even finish the jab.

"Funny!" Boimler says acidly. "Oh, I'm so glad I'm back! I missed this, for sure!" He sounds very sarcastic. But he doesn't pull his arm away, either.

Real talk, though? Boimler is not even wrong. Banging your friends is usually not a great idea. Not that Mariner has never had friends with benefits; sometimes they even stayed friends. But it's risky to cross that line with someone you really— well, it's like she told Tendi back on their girl trip. Better to just keep it shallow. Better to not get too close. Because (and this is the part she *didn't* tell Tendi) the fact is, Mariner's always the one who gets in too deep. The one who gets left, standing there while her ex-friend, ex-everything says something like "I don't know why you're so upset, it was just—"

Just.

You know, *just* not as important to me as it was to you, I guess! So fuck it. Call her burnt out, but it's from experience, shit she's learned about! Mariner is going to stick to her bad babes of any and all genders. Aloof assholes who will keep her at emotional arms' length, who won't *let* her get too close. No one can say Mariner hasn't learned her lesson, because she has. Not again. No thanks.

Time goes by. The lower deckers do their boring-ass tasks. Bunk time, listening to Rutherford's happy little giggles as he dreams. Sonic showers. Daily maintenance, weekly maintenance. Hanging in the shuttle bay with the gang. Taking on Rutherford and Boimler in anbo-jyutsu, going easy but still pretty much wiping the floor with them. Only making fun of them a tiny little bit afterwards. Writing reports. Lunch in the mess hall. Quarterly maintenance. Tendi and Mariner, kissing in the narrow elevated catwalk that stretches all the way down the starboard warp nacelle—

Mariner drops her toolkit and it goes clattering to her feet and bounces off the edge of the catwalk and down into the guts of the nacelle and she should *probably* think about what the plan is to retrieve it, but: she's kissing Tendi! How—! Why—! Where—? Okay, they're in the starboard nacelle doing quarterly maintenance, she knows *where*, but— Holy fucking shit!

It's not as if Mariner's been thinking about it. It's not like somewhere in the back of her head she's *surprised* that this is how it went, because this wasn't the plan. She definitely hadn't been making secret plans. To be patient and sweet and nice and encouraging. It's not like she's been staring at Tendi's mouth—

Okay, she's been staring at Tendi's mouth!

And now they're kissing!

Tendi's humming excitedly as she slides her tongue into Mariner's mouth, her sharp teeth pressing against Mariner's lower lip. She presses in, and a delicate slice of pain hits like an electric shock. Mariner hisses, jerking back. "Did you just bite me?"

In the dim, soft light of the nacelle's interior, Tendi's eyes are huge: innocent, horny, apologetic and smug all at once. Mariner's about to try and reassure her that she didn't do anything wrong, but then Tendi just grins, wickedly, and leans in to suck at Mariner's lip, the very tip of her tongue teasing the cut. Her little wiry body shudders as she tastes Mariner's blood, and Mariner's hands clutch her narrow shoulders.

"You look surprised," Tendi says, pulling back. "So you didn't see that coming? Badass Beckett Mariner, the scandal of the quadrant? I surprised you?"

"Are you making fun of me?" Mariner's jaw drops. Biting *and* sexy banter!? Holy shit: Tendi has game!

"I'm making fun of you a little." Tendi rolls her hips against Mariner's thigh. "Gals being pals? No, that's different!" she says, and scoffs.

"Oh, you're mean!" Mariner says, a shock rolling through her body, down from the top of her head and up from her feet and meeting somewhere right about where the top of Tendi's thigh is edging between her legs. Because it's true, Tendi isn't just some sweet cupcake muffin — she's a certified badass! A 'kick a guy in the face and make him kiss your boots' type badass, or in other words... just Mariner's type! Mariner's face heats up. "You have game— hot damn, Tendi has game," she mutters to herself. Tendi grins widely, the sun breaking across a green ocean, just: sparkle, sparkle, sparkle.

Her fangs sparkle too, white and sharp. *A falling knife has no handle*, as Mariner's dad always says. But sometimes your hands are already moving. Sometimes you gotta grab.

"I mean I'm curious," Tendi says. Her hands slide up from Mariner's waist, brushing teasingly over her breasts, and grab at either side of her opened jacket. With one hand on each side... just one tug and she could peel Mariner like a grape. Mariner's face *burns*. It's stupid. All she's wearing underneath is her boring beige uniform bra, and it's not like they haven't seen each other before in every possible state of undress— sweat-soaked and stripped down, sparkly clean in just a towel, covered in translucent slime— but this is different.

Oh, this is different. Tendi's *looking* at her. She leans up and catches Mariner's mouth in a long, slow kiss, then nips sharply again, fangs pressing deep. With their bodies pressed this close together she can *feel* Mariner tense, every muscle in her body clenching pleurably, and even more tellingly, she can feel Mariner relax into it as the pain hits, sending sparks and shocks all through her body. Her hips roll forward without her permission, and she gasps, a breathy, shocked noise. Tendi shivers like she's using her whole body to soak up the sound.

"What are you doing?"

"Testing your equilibrium. Do I have your attention?" Tendi says, giving Mariner a gentle shove. She isn't making fun. She's sincere.

"You have it," Mariner says, regaining her balance with what feels like way too much effort. "but I— My attention tends to drift?"

"I know. I know you," Tendi says confidently. "And I— I really like you, Mariner."

"How much?" Mariner says, trying to sound flirty but suddenly, unexpectedly, coming over a little queasy.

"A lot," Tendi says with a big grin, and Mariner— wants her so bad, and Mariner— oh no—

—Mariner freaks out.

She pulls back. She pulls into herself like a butterfly going back into a caterpillar. It feels about as gross as it sounds. "So listen," says some horrible part of Mariner, talking through her mouth, like an evil Mariner from the mirror universe, or a transporter clone, an android duplicate, an evil Bajoran Pagh-wraith— "You're cute and all, but maybe this isn't a great idea?"

"Oh?" Tendi says, wide-eyed. She freezes up and steps back, all that rising daddy energy gone in a single moment, like Mariner just reached out and reversed her whole polarity.

"I mean, look, if you want to be friends who fool around, sure! I'm into it!" Mariner says, frozen-cold. There's a part of her that's yelling for Tendi to look closer, push harder, not take the brush-off; she's searching Mariner's face desperately, and for a second Mariner almost thinks Tendi sees through her. But if eyes are windows to the soul then Mariner's are just full-strength force-fields and flashing warning beacons— "Here's the thing, I think you're just going to, like, be *more* into it than I would? Like, emotionally?"

"Oh!" Tendi's shoulders hunch, and she suddenly looks incredibly small.

"Hey, c'mon, kid, I'm just looking out for you," Mariner says, and reaches out and chucks Tendi under the chin, and hates herself *so* much.

"Sure! Well... thanks!" Tendi says, with a big, big smile. No fangs, though. Her freckles are standing out like the craters of meteor strikes on her suddenly pale cheeks.

"I should probably find a grapple cable or something," Mariner says, looking over the edge of the catwalk to whatever depths her toolkit disappeared to.

"Great idea!" Tendi calls after her as Mariner runs away. She only sounds a little squeaky. "You know what you're doing!"

Later that night, Mariner tells herself that she did the right thing, curling up tightly in her blankets like a particularly spicy burrito. A confusion, lust and heartburn burrito. She's *protecting* Tendi, she tells herself. Tendi doesn't know any better, but Mariner does. Mariner knows herself. She's a fucking monster, a falling knife, she'd devour Tendi in three bites and then what? No! Remember what Boimler said: unit cohesion! Friend group stability!

But as it turns out: Boimler is a two-faced fucking liar! Because over the next while, Mariner starts to notice that there's something going on

with *him and Rutherford*. It doesn't happen every night, but pretty regularly, the two of them start sneaking out of their bunks late at night. Whispering and shushing and laughing as they tiptoe off together, exactly like two people looking for privacy for some nighttime "unit cohesion"-disrupting activities— what is she supposed to assume?

And they're gone for over an *hour* sometimes, which— well, they *do* both seem like the snuggly type. So, good for them that they each found someone who *also* likes a cuddle after sex. Even so, they come back all tired and sweaty and panting and sometimes *giggly*. Once or twice Mariner is pretty sure she heard Boimler *limping*, not to mention all the little marks and bruises that show up on his peach-pale skin when they're crammed into the communal sonic showers in the morning— anyway, it's way more than Mariner ever wanted to know about Boimler and Rutherford's personal time.

And it is really not helping with her mental efforts to put this thing with Tendi behind her. How can she stop thinking about what a terrible coward she is, not wanting to ruin her new friendship with Tendi, when Boimler and Rutherford took the leap, and it's clearly working out for them! They seem cheery and bright-eyed despite all the sleep they're missing, and it hasn't seemed to affect their professional relationship or their friendship at all. Mariner needs to know how! How are they doing it? And she can't even gossip about it with Tendi, because they've been avoiding each other, so— it's burning up inside her! It's eating her up!

You would think they would get tired of each other, right? Working together most days, eating meals together, and even— Mariner notices as she steps into the mess hall one evening— even socializing in their off hours. She narrows her eyes at them darkly. They're currently sitting over in their regular booth against the windowed wall of the mess hall, opening a box that seems to contain the parts to a super dull-looking board game. You know, the kind where you trade sheep for replicators and wood for latinum and everything goes in these boring little stacks of tokens and you *still* have to have a PADD to track all your shit, because *spreadsheets* are key to your strategy— Okay, the point isn't that resource board games are hideously boring and Mariner hates them! The point is... are Boimler and Rutherford *dating*? Not just banging, but dating?!

She drifts to a shadowy corner of the bar and stares at them as they play, heads bowed over their little PADDs, hands occasionally bumping as they move the tokens around the board. Sometimes they high five each other. Nerds.

After a while, Honus the bartender approaches her, narrowing his eyes. "Get you something?"

"I'm fine," Mariner says. She's not fine. She's thinking about Tendi. "You know what, wait, come back! Hit me. Aldebaran whisky."

She's tried to tell herself that Tendi isn't her type! She likes bad boys, bad girls, bad non-binary babes! That's the type of person she usually ends up with, and the type of person you usually end up with... well, that's your type! Right?

So she fooled herself into thinking that Tendi was a heartless badass, because she punched her muscle man cousin and made him smooch her stompy leather boots. But Tendi's not a monster like Mariner. She really *is* a sweet cupcake. All Mariner would do is break her heart.

She sighs and raps her knuckles on the bar. Honus brings her a third shot.

It's not going to happen. Which means Mariner has to admit to herself: she wishes it could. She doesn't want Tendi to be her usual type, mean and awful and aloof. She wants that cinnamon roll sweetness, she wants to shove her face in it and get sticky. She wants to dive deep. With Tendi she can't just dip a toe in and act like it's all good. Tendi's the kind of person who runs surprisingly deep, whose heart would never run dry. Sweet water from the rock... and Mariner is thirsty as hell. She can't stop obsessing about Tendi's freckles and little square hands and the way it would feel to cup the back of Tendi's head in her own hand, feel the soft-sharp prickle of her buzzed-short hair against the soft, soft skin of her palms. She loves how Tendi blushes, loves the way her eyes gleam greener when she gets excited about, oh, upcoming advanced training workshops on interspecies empathy and culturally informed healthcare. She's cute and compact and surprisingly toppy... oh, Mariner is into it. Mariner is deeply, deeply into it.

Maybe too deep.

It's just too bad she's too fucking shit scared to ever do anything about it.

"Fuckballs," she says aloud, and Honus gives her a dark look. "Look, Honus, you really gotta cut me off when I get into the whisky."

"And why's that?"

"Because of my top secret black ops training," she hisses at him, "obviously!" And she's about to admit that was sarcasm and maybe ask if he has any advice about banging Orions— he doesn't really seem like the type, but then again he's Starfleet hospitality, and you never really know who's done what— but he glances both ways, quickly, then leans in closer.

"Black ops training, is it?" he says softly, wiping the counter down in front of Mariner with a stupidly small cloth.

"Yeah. I was programmed to protect myself at all costs," Mariner mutters. "To always defend myself. No matter who gets hurt."

What's *that* if not the truth?

Days go by and shift into weeks. Breakfast. Maintenance. Getting yelled at by Ransom because he overheard her calling Lt. Commander Stevens "Oatmeal Man." A boring stellar cartography mission, getting some *slightly* higher resolution scans of a whole area that's already been thoroughly mapped. Whee! A big argument with Boimler as to whether *vortices* or *vortexes* is appropriate terminology for a formal report; Mariner goes for common parlance while of course Boimler is going to die on the hill of the technically correct *vortices*, and somehow it blows up into a big thing and they don't speak to each other for a day and a half. Fine, whatever! Lunch in the mess hall. Boring-ass diplomatic missions for the bridge crew, boring-ass nothing for the lower deckers. Whenever Mariner and Tendi have to interact, Mariner tries to be cool and Tendi is clearly trying to be nice, just the politest, sweetest little muffin and Mariner wants to fling herself into a gas giant and sink slowly

to the bottom of the gravity well and get crushed to death by atmospheric pressure. She has dinner by herself, most nights, because Boimler and Rutherford are still playing their dumb board game— it can't possibly be the same playthrough this whole time, can it? God, Mariner would jump out an airlock. Fuck a resource game. Anyway, she refuses to be a third wheel. So she's stuck by herself, but you know what? That's fine. That's totally fine. She's cool and fine being alone.

Who needs a stable social unit when she can sit alone in a dark corner of the mess hall playing Honorable Stabbity Hand, the super fun knife game she learned from a Klingon waiter on Deep Space Nine? Who needs the gang when Mariner can sit, shrouded in complexity, and spin black ops yarns to Honus? He loves it. "*Watch your own back, came in and go out alone—*"

It feels like years go by. She keeps thinking she's going to get over Tendi and she just... doesn't. So much for their girl trip bonding. It feels like Mariner's punching herself in the heart every time Tendi looks at her and her face falls; every time Tendi laughs and then looks sad. Mariner wants to yell, she wants to scream. She starts spending time in the gym when she knows Tendi's elsewhere. If she just runs hard enough, fights hard enough, maybe she can sweat out all this poison. Or at least wear herself out enough to sleep at night.

So she's in the gym doing stretches when she spots Rutherford and Boimler, all suited up in anbo-jyutsu armor and apparently up for a rematch. Not much of a challenge for Mariner, except for the challenge of holding herself back from really hurting them. "Glad you're still into this," she tells them as they step into the ring. "I was worried maybe I came down too hard on you last time."

They just laugh, eyeing each other with barely repressed glee. "Hopefully we picked up a few of your moves!"

Yeah, hopefully not, Mariner thinks. Just be in love, you two dumb nerds! Don't try to be like me. She slams the anbo helmet visor down over her face, blocking out the light, cutting off her field of vision. Great. Alone with herself in the dark! God, just stop thinking about it!

She's distracted. Her heart's not in it. She can hear the two of them circling her, the creaks of their armor, the air moving around them— she moves to strike, Rutherford parries her blow, and the next thing she knows she's gotten absolutely fucking smashed in the face, hard. It hurts. She spins, falling to her hands and knees, scrabbling for her visor. There's blood in her mouth. Did they— did he— did motherfucking Bradward Boimler just knock her TOOTH out?

It's her own fault. She knows it is. That just makes it worse. Behind her, they're talking but she can't make out the words through the buzzing in her ears and the rage roaring in her heart.

They edge towards her carefully. "Ah... Are you okay?"

"I didn't mean..." Boimler says weakly. Well, that doesn't fucking matter, does it? It never matters whether you *mean* to hurt someone or not. It just matters that you did. That you did something you can't ever take back.

"I'm great," Mariner says, poking her tongue at the gap in her teeth. Everything smells like blood. "I can finally get in a real workout!"

She slams the anbo visor down and strikes, and strikes, and strikes. In the dark you can't tell who you're hitting. Who you're chasing down and beating over the head for being an idiot. Stupid Mariner. Hopeless. Awful. She deserves it. So much for not hurting her friends. Well, she's just a monster, isn't she? Mariner knows this about herself. Maybe it's about time that everybody else does.

Afterwards she flees the gym and sneaks into sickbay, brimming with adrenaline and regret. She glances around guiltily for Tendi, but doesn't see her anywhere. Mariner lets out a sigh of relief, then yells as a clawed hand lands on her shoulder. She didn't hear anyone coming up behind her, but Dr. T'Ana moves like a— well, you know.

"Settle down, Ensign," Dr. T'Ana growls. She looks up at Mariner, slitted eyes narrowing at her bloody lip and chin, and raises one furry brow, voice heavy with irony. "Now what seems to be the problem?"

Mariner is horrified to realize that if she tries to talk she's going to burst into tears. Raising a shaking fist, she opens her hand, showing Dr. T'Ana her busted tooth.

"Right," Dr. T'Ana says, and pushes her over to a biobed and grabs a handheld tool and sticks it right up into her mouth. The cold metal pointy bit hits the exposed nerve and for a millisecond it hurts like SHIT. Mariner doesn't even have time to scream though, because something flicks in her head and suddenly *nothing* hurts and everything is fine.

Mariner laughs a little as Dr. T'Ana grabs her jaw to keep her mouth open. Wow! Everything is fine!

She should've gotten Boimler to knock her tooth out weeks ago!

"Thahh hhh ggg hhhg yhh," she tries to tell Dr. T'Ana, afterwards.

"What?" Dr. T'Ana says, looking up from the sanitizing station.

Whatever she gave Mariner wears off a lot slower than it kicked in. Which means she can talk before the loopiness has fully worked its way out of her system. "I said that's how they *get* you," Mariner says. "They try to get close. They try to figure you out. Know things about you. That's how it all gets ruined—" She cuts herself off, squeezing her eyes closed. Cool. Super fresh and cool. Emotionally humiliating herself in front of senior staff. The perfect end to a perfect day. What time is it, anyway? Oh yeah: eleven hundred hours.

"Yep. That's how they get you..." Dr. T'Ana mutters, patting her hand. Then there's an ominous silence. Mariner cracks an eye open to see her

working on something on a PADD. Trying to delete something off a list, it looks like, but the system won't let her? Still bleary-eyed, her hands leaving trails, Mariner grabs for the PADD and hits the unwanted entry with a little switch-up she coded for fun once. It's just a couple lines of code that doesn't delete the list entry, but replaces it with a placeholder. It's user-readable, but the computer will be unable to identify or search for it.

If she were thinking straight she wouldn't show off a hack like that in front of a high-ranking officer like the Doc, but Dr. T'Ana just goes "Hey!" and then "...Oh huh," and then "thanks, kid."

"Sure!" Mariner says cheerily. Hey, sometimes you want to be invisible. Sometimes you just want to—

"Now get lost!" Dr. T'Ana orders.

Mariner shakes herself out of it and hops off the biobed, all her aches and pains settling back in as clarity returns. "Right. Yes, sir."

She's forgotten all about it by the time they get the news about their latest mission: going down to a planet to preserve some mugato—mugatos? Mugati? Whatever. All Mariner can think about is how glad she is that Tendi isn't going with them, which is an awful way to feel, but lately she feels like her mask's got a loose screw. She's not sure she'd be able to keep up the act. She regrets it later, though, when Boimler and Rutherford reveal that they fucking fell for all her Section 31 tall tales, which gets her captured by a gang of Ferengi poachers and thrown in a cage. Tendi would have slapped some sense into them, if she'd been there!

Or would she have?

It's an awful thing to think about, but there's nothing else for Mariner to do, stuck in a mugato pen, her wrists aching where she got snagged with Ferengi energy whips. The whole compound smells like wet fur and gumato poops. She puts on a stone face for the Ferengi and after a while they mostly leave their prisoners alone; she can see them whispering and conferring, and she even feels a hint of sympathy for their scabbly desperation. Because honestly, what's the plan? They can't kill a half dozen Starfleet officers, their main customer just left the planet, and all their magutos escaped, so... they're kinda completely fucked.

Sympathy doesn't stop her from heckling, though. "Hey, you know you guys can just replicate stuff, right?"

Yeah! says Mariner's brain. Who goes through their life pointlessly hurting other beings when there are better and easier ways to live?

Shut up, brain! says another part of Mariner's brain.

Eventually (thank the great bird of the galaxy) Rutherford and Boimler show up to save the day. With... a compromise. Mariner can't help but sigh, watching them work. What a power couple. Gonna be a love for the ages. She can't even tell herself that she isn't into it. Honestly? They're great. Good for them.

"Huh," Shaxs mutters under his breath, watching them. "The game is not only dangerous, but it's most strange."

They make it back to the *Cerritos* on a wave of goodwill and projections of profit. Boimler and Rutherford even apologize to Mariner for thinking that she was a heartless motherfucking killer who rips into people with her teeth and spits their heart's blood on the ground like it's poison. Haha, right? So funny. And Mariner apologizes for self-sabotaging her own relationships and being sort of massively creatively awful, a full-blown monster and an all-out problem, and every word is like ashes in her mouth!

"You know what *I* think," Rutherford says, "I think this is a great opportunity for you to learn some Diplomath!"

"Oh yeah!" Boimler says enthusiastically, scooting aside to make room. "A triple dip!"

"Settle down!" Mariner grumbles, reluctantly sliding into the booth. "Wait, it's actually called *Diplomath*? For real though?"

For real, apparently.

She tries to be present and enjoy the game (though Boimler explains at length that Diplomath isn't really the kind of game you *enjoy*, more the kind you *endure*—) but eventually she has to give up and just get *out*. Just be with herself for a while. The worst punishment of all. Maybe she should go kick something over a railing and get Ransom to throw her in the brig for violating safety regulations. Monsters should be in cages, shouldn't they?

With a start, Mariner realizes Tendi is coming towards her in the corridor, rubbing her arm thoughtfully. Tendi looks up and sees Mariner and *super casually* turns around and walks the other way.

Mariner takes a deep breath. Moment of truth: has she learned anything from the away mission? Could it be that the moral of the story is... love conquers all? Or at least, that it can give you a fighting chance to escape a dark cage? That maybe a little honesty and plain dealing can turn a monster into something or someone that you want to have around?

If Boimler and Rutherford can do it... Can't Mariner and Tendi, too?

Mariner cracks her neck, takes another, deeper breath and chases after Tendi. Grabbing her by the elbow, she pulls her quickly into a supply closet. The doors hiss closed and dim blue light falls over them both, softening Tendi's wide, startled eyes.

"Hey... what's wrong?" Mariner starts. Like she doesn't know.

"It's nothing!" Tendi says, staring at her boots. "Everything is fine!"

"You can talk to me," Mariner says plaintively. Tendi is still rubbing her arm, like it's sore. "We're still friends, right?"

Tendi sighs and doesn't look up. "You just— you think you know someone, and then it turns out they were hiding who they really were? And when you actually *realize*, that's great and you're happy with yourself... but then you think, was it a test? Was it just a test to see if you would try hard enough to find the real person behind the fake label they put on themselves?"

"Oh no," Mariner squeaks. Emotional sincerity! She swallows hard, telling herself to stand firm.

"So you chase her down and you don't give up and you just don't know how to make it clear you're trying to help, not *hurt*— like, it doesn't hurt to let people *know about you*, so that they can *help* you and *care* for you—"

"Tendi!" There are tears in Mariner's eyes! No!

"And then you fall down a Jeffries tube and the bones in your arm snap like twigs and it really hurts!" Tendi says, which— what?

Maybe it's a metaphor? Whatever. Mariner bursts into sobs and throws her arms around Tendi. "I'm so sorry! Oh, god, Tendi! I'm such a jerk! I've been pushing you away because I'm just a big dumb coward—"

"Oh gosh," Tendi says, and she almost sounds like she's about to cry. She better not, because Mariner is going to stop, like, any second now. "I missed you so much! Especially with Boimler and Rutherford sneaking off to practice anbo-jyutsu all the time, and—"

"Wait," Mariner says, a howling in her ears like a warp core with its plasma aflame. "What?"

"What?"

"Is THAT what they were... Getting up in the middle of the night and sneaking off and... coming back all sweaty... " Ah. Right. They weren't secretly romancing it up; they were practicing martial arts. "So listen," Mariner says shakily, "there are some things I might need to think about..." and Tendi puts her hands on Mariner's lapel and collar and actually does it, the thing Mariner's been dreaming about for what, weeks now? Months? Feels like years. They're in space, okay? Time dilation is a factor— anyway, Tendi rips Mariner's jacket open, exposing her boring bra, her dramatic scars— her beating heart, it feels like.

"Multi-task. Humans are good at that," Tendi says, super toppily, and Mariner's pussy clenches like a vise.

"Tendi, you have to know I'm a coward," Mariner says, as she shrugs her jacket off and lets it fall to the floor. Tendi nods approvingly, clearly not paying attention to anything she's saying. "No, seriously. Do you ever feel—" Mariner stops, her throat tight, and starts over. "I feel like— sometimes I feel like I'm just a falling knife. You know? Everybody just step back and watch Mariner fall. Don't try to catch me. You'll just get hurt."

Tendi tilts her head back a little to get a better look at Mariner, then reaches out and grips her tightly by both elbows. She looks like she's really thinking about what to say next, which is reassuring; Mariner doesn't think she could take it if Tendi just reflexively said something chirpy like "Oh it'll all be fine!" or "Let's just take it one day at a time and have a positive—"

"The thing is," Tendi says, something chilly and sharp curling into her voice, "I'm actually really good with knives."

Mariner shudders like a starship that just took a direct hit to the shield generator. She can feel her defenses shimmering into nothingness. Her skin prickles. She feels exposed. She kind of hates it. She kind of *loves* it.

"Oh-h?" she says, trying to sound casual.

"Yeah. If that's something you're interested in," Tendi says, cool as an Andorian cocktail.

Mariner's eyes get even wider.

Suddenly Tendi breaks into a glorious smile, and Mariner sighs in relief, just in time for Tendi to wind her up tight again: "But I've always preferred to just use my teeth. I feel like it's more intimate."

"Teeth are good," Mariner says, and yelps as Tendi leans in and bites her sharply just under the ear. She has so many questions. How serious is Tendi right now? What's in an Orion's pants, anyway? How soundproof is this storage room? How long before they have to be in their bunks for lights-out? How much does she really care? "Teeth are *really* good."

"There you go," Tendi says, and nibbles dangerously down her throat. Mariner *shrieks*. This is going to be a fun visit to Sickbay— and then her whole body shudders as she realizes that *Tendi is a medic*, that she can fix Mariner up herself. She can go as far as she wants to— bite as hard as she wants to— tidy Mariner up and then take her apart again— and Mariner wants that so bad.

"I want to be good," she breathes, as Tendi lays bites all over her shoulders and breasts, licking hotly up that one scar on her chest, and wait, *who said that?*

"I know you do," says Tendi. "I know you."

Maybe she really does. That's a terrifying thought—

But it's all right. Tendi's got her.

Tendi's got her right between her *teeth*.

End Notes

It's just another shot to the heart

It's just a sure shot in the dark

It's just another place in the stars

Wonders on every side, life in marvelous times

Life in marvelous times

— Mos Def, "Life in Marvelous Times"

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