

## Let's play Twister, let's play Risk

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## Let's play Twister, let's play Risk

by [violet\\_pencil](#)

### Summary

"What do you know about Orion biology? You know, the biology... of Orions?"

(Or: what time is it? It's ~~amok time~~ fuck o'clock!)

### Notes

Written for bimichaelburnham for the First Time challenge, riffing on the prompts "Late Bloomer" and "Ritualistic loss of virginity."  
Thanks to VTsuion for beta.

Takes place sometime after Episode 3x08 "Crisis Point 2: Paradoxus" but before 3x09 "Trusted Sources."

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

## Chapter 1

On course, on schedule, the *Cerritos* was bound for Altair Six.

Mariner had just finished the first half of her shift and was heading back to the shuttle bay for a quick churro break. She was grumbling to herself as she went, more than a little disgruntled about their current mission— Altair Six of all places! Back in the day it would have been worthwhile. A century ago, legendary ships like the *New Jersey* had been sent to this sector to help the locals rebuild their infrastructure and repair their ecosystems after a long and grinding interplanetary war; the original *Enterprise* had even been there once to commemorate their first peacetime democratic elections. That was what Mariner had joined Starfleet to do, the stuff they ought to be doing all the time!

These days, though, Altair Six had been at peace with their neighboring system for like a hundred and seventeen years. Now they were just one more boring Federation-lite world, where the sun came up in the same place every day and you looked at the same two moons every night and everybody had like four full-time hobbies to help them deal with the crushing boredom of living on a planet where nothing interesting ever happened.

So why was the *Cerritos* going there? Well, after all this time, Altair Six was thinking about joining the Federation. Mariner honestly hadn't believed it when she'd seen the mission briefing. They hadn't even officially applied yet! This was just the lead up to their world government's diplomatic statement of intent advising they were going to form a planning committee that would administrate the different technical work groups that were going to negotiate the terms and compose the text of a *potential* official application. And since Starfleet didn't have anything better to do, they were sending three different starships— three!— just to show they were taking it seriously. Cocktail parties, diplomatic mixers, days of speeches about the long and boring history of statesmanship and productive dialogue between Altair Six and the Federation— ugh! Mariner could think of a *hundred* better things they could be doing.

"Hey, Mariner, got a minute?" Boimler said, jogging up from behind her.

"Not only do I have a minute, I have literally every minute!" Mariner said crankily. "It's not like we're going to be doing anything important for the next two weeks!"

"Oh good," Boimler said, falling in beside Mariner as she headed down the hall towards the entry doors to the backup shuttle bay. He looked pinched and worried, actually even more than usual, and she looked at him and groaned.

"Okay, what kind of trouble has 'Bold Boimler' gotten himself into now?"

"It's not me, it's Tendi!" Boimler said. He caught Mariner by the arm, stopping her before she triggered the door's sensors. "Haven't you noticed she's been weird lately? Like... restive?"

"Restive? What does that even mean?" Mariner blinked. Sure, Tendi had seemed keyed up lately, a little high energy, but wasn't that more or less normal? She'd skipped out early on breakfast this morning, said she needed to do some inventory in Sickbay before her shift... but she hadn't shown up for dinner last night either, come to think of it. Mariner frowned. How long *had* it been since she'd last seen Tendi sit down for a meal, or even a snack? "Wait, is she not eating?"

"Yeah. I actually, um, I checked the replicator logs and I don't think she's actually eaten anything for a couple of days."

"Isn't that a violation of her privacy rights?" said Mariner, who knew full well that it absolutely was. "Oh, you nosy boy. Bad Boimler!"

"I know, I know, but I was concerned!"

"But are you sure that something's *wrong*? I mean, what do you know about Orion biology?"

"You mean... the biology of Orions?"

"Yeah, that's what I just said?" Mariner said, narrowing her eyes. "Who knows, maybe it's fine if she just doesn't eat sometimes. Or it could be some kind of cultural thing. It could be a lot of totally normal things!"

"Yeah, but if it's something normal, why wouldn't she just tell us?" Boimler persisted. "It's not like we would be weird about it."

"Like, not any weirder than we're being right now," Mariner said, "having a top secret meeting about snooping on our friend and obsessing about minor changes in her personal habits?"

"This isn't a secret meeting," Boimler weaseled. "We're just... two people having a hallway conversation!"

"Ooh, we talking about Tendi?" Rutherford, said, popping around the corner. He was carrying a tray with a fancy silver plate cover on it.

"Maybe," Mariner said. "Whatcha got there?"

"Uh, nothing," Rutherford said, "just my grandmother's special recipe for arroz caldo."

"Yeah? What's the occasion?" Mariner asked, raising her eyebrows.

"No occasion! It was practically already in the replicator, I just had to spend a couple hours tweaking the pattern. But it's no big deal! 'Cause Tendi says she feels fine! Um, not that this is about anyone specific. Not that it's a thing at all! Because... it's not!"

"Sure, totally," Boimler said. "But *hypothetically* if someone wasn't feeling well... maybe they'd like some soup?"

"Oh, my Lola's soup would be great for that!" Rutherford said, hoisting the tray happily. "It's got chicken for protein, and ginger and garlic actually have some pretty potent medicinal properties for most carbon-based species, so maybe she— You know, maybe someone would want to try some! *If* they weren't feeling so hot."

"Yeah, well, give it a shot," Mariner said. "I mean, it's just soup. It couldn't hurt, right?"

"Ensign's personal log, stardate what the fuck o'clock!" Mariner hissed under her breath, bracing her hand against the locked door of the refresher cubicle. "Tendi threw chicken soup at Rutherford, threatened to break Boimler's neck for snooping, rampaged through the ship, and hijacked the Captain's yacht! I barely made it on here before she took off!"

There was a tentative knock at the door. Mariner flinched. "Mariner? Are you in there?" Tendi asked hesitantly. "Can we talk?"

"End log!" Mariner said quickly. She looked at the door suspiciously. Judging by the sound of her voice, maybe roaring rage-monster Tendi had turned back into her normal self? It could be a trap, though. She braced herself, then hit the button to open the door. "Heyyy, Tendi," she said carefully. "How you feeling?"

"I'm totally fine! I just need a leave of absence," Tendi said. She had her sleeves rolled up to her elbows, exposing the paler skin of her inner arms, and she was running her short nails up and down the soft skin there like something was itching her from the inside. "There's an Orion outpost not far from here, so..."

"Oh! Well, you know, great," Mariner said, circling around her and edging towards the navigation station in the cockpit. "I definitely encourage everyone to take advantage of all the shore leave they're entitled to..."

"And I have the time accumulated! So what's the problem? No problem!" Tendi said. She was talking just a bit too loudly, her eyes burning just a bit too brightly. "I just need some rest!" Her hand shot out, fastening around Mariner's wrist and gripping hard, stopping her from heading any further towards the yacht's navigation controls.

"Hey," Mariner said, yanking at Tendi's grip, but unable to free her wrist. Damn, had Tendi always been so strong? Slowly, Mariner realized she wasn't going to be able to overpower Tendi by herself— at least, not without hurting her, and for so many reasons, that wasn't an acceptable option. She planted her feet and switched tactics. "You really think we're going to get wherever we're going?" she said. "When Starfleet realizes we're headed for an Orion base with all this proprietary technology, every ship in the sector is going to put themselves in our way." And maybe that was true and maybe it wasn't— personally, Mariner doubted that her mom was going to disrupt the diplomatic festivities on Altair Six to announce to everyone that her personal yacht had been hijacked by her own daughter— but hopefully it would get Tendi to *think* about what she was doing.

Tendi blinked, opened her mouth, then closed it again. She shook her head, and for a second it looked like the fog was clearing. "Oh," she said, "oh... gosh. I'm gonna be in so much trouble!"

"No, no!" Mariner said. Not if *she* had anything to say about it, anyway. Maybe it was some kind of weird telepathic alien influence, or maybe if Tendi didn't get the right kind of Orion vitamins in her food it made her melt down and punch comm speakers to death— the point was, Tendi clearly wasn't acting from her own volition. All Mariner needed to do was get her back to the *Cerritos* and start filling out the after-mission report, so she could make that very clear. "Let's just turn the ship around, huh?" she said, gesturing towards the cockpit. "And I can help you do the paperwork for your leave! That way we can submit the request right away, just as soon as we get back."

"Okay," Tendi said, looking around at the interior of the yacht as if she wasn't quite sure how she'd gotten here in the first place. "Okay..."

"There we go! All good," Mariner said as she set a course back to the *Cerritos* and engaged the impulse engines.

"Yeah," Tendi said, gazing blankly off at nothing like a sleepwalker. "Good..."

"Why don't you... get some rest?" Mariner suggested. For a second it seemed like Tendi hadn't even heard her, and then she walked slowly back towards the doors that led off the main space and into the yacht's small sleeping quarters. Mariner watched as Tendi drifted into the small room, climbed slowly into the single bunk inset into the wall, and tossed from one side to the other, rolling herself up in a ball of blue blankets. The door hissed closed.

Mariner sat down between the door to the sleeping quarters and the ladder that led up to the main exit hatch, not wanting to get too far away. "Ensign's log, new entry," she said softly. "Ensign Tendi seems to be... under stress. I have her under medical surveillance. Everything is good. We're all fine down here..." She groaned and rubbed her hands over her face. "Ugh, end log."

She spent the next twenty minutes or so chewing on her own knuckles and thinking hard. How were they going to get out of this without Tendi getting knocked back to cadet or thrown in the brig? If Boimler and Rutherford testified that she'd been acting weird lately— if Dr. T'Ana could find *something* to explain her behavior— maybe they could get it all written off as some kind of medical-psychological emergency? She glanced back towards the room where Tendi was sleeping. They'd be within communications range of the *Cerritos* soon enough. Maybe she could slip a message through to Rutherford. If she used the yacht's sensor array instead of its comms, she could deliver the message as a text string, right into his implant's display screen. The bridge officers wouldn't be able to eavesdrop, and they could start getting their story straight. Already plotting, Mariner headed up to the cockpit, and glanced over at the screens showing their course and speed.

Wait a minute—

"Tendi!" Mariner shouted. She sprinted back out of the cockpit and into the sleeping quarters, diving for the pile of blankets and shaking it until Tendi emerged, blinking woozily. "Did you turn us around? We're heading back towards the Orion outpost, and I'm locked out of the

controls!"

"What?" Tendi sat up. A PADD fell out of the blankets onto the floor, showing [NAV AND COMMS LOCKED] in very big, all-caps, bright red letters.

"Tendi!" Mariner said. "What did you do!"

"So here is a very funny thing, I don't remember doing that!" Tendi said weakly. She grabbed the PADD and tapped frantically at the buttons, but it just buzzed and beeped angrily and wouldn't respond to any of her commands. "Oh no," she said, her voice wobbling. She slid out of the bunk onto the floor, a blanket falling around her shoulders. She clutched it and burst into tears.

"Oh, no, no!" Mariner knelt next to her, pulling Tendi into her arms. "What is happening?"

"It doesn't matter! Just knock me out! Throw me in the brig!" Tendi said, sobbing hysterically.

"There's no brig on the Captain's yacht, you know that! Just tell me what's going on!"

"I can't! I can't talk about it!" Tendi said, gasping for breath.

"Why not! Come on! If I'm gonna get kicked out of Starfleet over this, I deserve to know why, don't I? Tendi! You were going to be a Captain someday— your career can't end like this! Just tell me—"

"I have to go to the Orion outpost," Tendi said, "or I'll die!"

"Die?" Mariner demanded, "what do you mean, die?" She grabbed Tendi by the shoulders, ducking down to try and stare into her eyes.

"I can't talk about it!" Tendi said, looking away.

"You can't just say you're gonna die and not explain! Is there a price on your head, is someone threatening you? Is this a Syndicate thing?"

"No, and it's super offensive of you to assume that!" Tendi said, some of her usual spark returning. "There hasn't been a Syndicate contract out on my life since I graduated Starfleet Academy, except for the one time, and I dealt with it! And also there's another one now, because of the thing with the Karemma, but I'm *going to take care of it, okay!?*"

"Whoa, okay! I mean, give me some credit," Mariner said, her mouth moving faster than her brain, "at least I didn't guess it was some wildly kinky Orion fuck-or-die sex ritual!"

Tendi shrieked and tipped over sideways and started wailing.

"Oh," Mariner muttered, "yeah, now that I think about it, that actually does make more sense."

## Chapter 2

Less than an hour later, Mariner set the transporter to activate on a ten-second timer, then quickly ran over and stood next to Tendi on the small two-person transport platform. They beamed down to the surface of the Orion planetoid, appearing at the edge of a purple and turquoise forest, just at the edge of the tree-line. It was late in the day, and colorful clouds swirled in a yellow-green sky.

Down the slope from Mariner and Tendi, a dip in the landscape created a kind of natural amphitheater. A large circle of bare ground in the middle contained a ring of roughly carved stones surrounding an ancient stone arch with a notch in the top. All around the perimeter of the grounds there were small groups of Orion pirates, some dressed in casual mismatched layers of black on black, some in gaudy pirate finery. There were old-fashioned latinum-coin bikini tops over embroidered silks, long leather coats studded with precious metals in elaborate patterns, flowing skirts made of layers of sleek, translucent sashes, a whole lot of thigh-high boots, and generally an air of sumptuous piratical decadence.

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The other thing that Mariner noticed was a lack of obvious weapons. Odd for a bunch of Syndicate gang members and unaligned bandits, but there it was: no phaser rifles, no hand weapons, not even a knife or an energy-whip.

She looked back at Tendi, opening her mouth to ask 'What now,' and blinked as she realized that Tendi had already yanked off her boots and was stripping off her uniform. Well— she *did* have a banging body, and it *was* kind of hot and sticky down here.

"Should I, uh—" Mariner said, pulling at the lapel of her jacket, but Tendi just shook her head without looking back.

The oldest Orion that Mariner had ever seen was slowly approaching. She had long red hair streaked with white, most of it bundled up into an impressive hairdo of elaborate braids. She was followed by half a dozen hot Orion butches of various ages and genders. Their armor definitely looked more sexual than functional, but Mariner noted their hard faces, well-defined muscles and wary eyes. No matter what they were wearing, these were warriors.

Tendi was down to her bra and undies at this point, and she knelt and bowed her head as the elder approached. Once again, Mariner grimaced, not sure what she should do, but no one seemed offended when she just nodded respectfully.

"D'Vana Tendi, Mistress of the Winter Constellations. The sky shines, and your Time has come," said the elder Orion.

"Yes," Tendi said breathlessly.

The elder's eyes moved slowly to Mariner. "You bring an outworlder to witness your sacred joining?"

"She's my friend," Tendi said. "We've saved each others' lives. We stole a ship together once. Not this one," she said, glancing upward, "uh, a different one."

"You mean the time we stole the *Phoenix* in Bozeman, or the time we borrowed the *Cerritos* out of dry dock? I guess the time we hijacked the Karemna delegation's ship would count too, right," Mariner chimed in, trying to be helpful. "Man, now that I think about it, we've stolen a lot of ships—"

Tendi still didn't look back. "She's one of my people. Am I not allowed to bring my people, to witness my Time?"

"It is permitted." The Orion elder gestured in approval, and Tendi nodded, bouncing a little on her heels. "Therefore, take your place, D'Vana Tendi. Show us all the power of the Orion heart, the glory of Orion strength. Take your place, and let the rite of blood and fire begin!"

"Blood and fire?!" Mariner said. "Wait, what?" Tendi turned and glared, hands balled up into nervous fists, but said nothing.

"Of course," said the elder. "How else shall the Mistress of the Winter Constellations prove her power, but through vaguely erotic combat in the arena, followed by—"

"I'm sorry, combat in the arena?" Mariner demanded. "Nobody said anything about—"

"Shush!" Tendi said fiercely, taking half a step forward. Around Mariner, all the ceremonial guards took a simultaneous step or two back, and a few of them even dropped to one knee. Even Mariner swayed, feeling Tendi's pheromonal power smash into her like a crackling wave of heat from a sudden plasma fire.

Holy shit, Mariner thought, her mind spinning as she fought the compulsion to sink to her knees and kiss Tendi's bare feet. It was all starting to make sense. No cultural ritual was random and totally meaningless; if a lot of people did something the same way for thousands of years they usually did it for what they considered to be a pretty important reason— and taking this wild power swelling up in Tendi and giving it a purpose, a singular focus, an *outlet*— yeah, all of a sudden that seemed like a pretty good reason.

Tendi turned and walked away, stripping off her bra and letting it fall to the ground, then stepping out of her underwear and leaving that behind as well. Mariner hissed through her teeth, watching. Okay, so she'd always wanted to see Tendi naked, shouting orders, stepping on someone's neck— but even in her most horny imaginings, it had never been quite like *this*— A flock of ritual handmaidens fell in behind Tendi, shaking bells and waving ribbons, and wild cries rang out from the surrounding levels of the amphitheater. Mariner shivered, hard, and shook her head.

"Hot damn," she said, and looked over at one of the Orion guards, a woman about Mariner's age with an jeweled eyepatch, her hair cut in an asymmetrical fade so that a shock of hair fell loosely over the scarred side of her face. "Is that normal?"

"D'Vana Tendi is special," said the guard fiercely. "Don't you know that?"

"I know that! I'm one of her best besties! I helped her hijack a ship to get here!" Mariner said, stretching the truth a little. "So wait, what happens now, she's got to fight someone?"

The guard cocked her head, studying Mariner curiously. "What? No. How much did she tell you about the rite?"

Well— not much, honestly. Mariner had never really seen Tendi cry like that before, and she hadn't had the heart to interrogate her too deeply. She'd got the general idea, if not the specifics, anyway. Apparently most Orion females (and a few rare males) started developing their pheromonal abilities some time after puberty. Pretty much all Orions with these abilities could at least sense others' pheromones and mildly affect another person's desires, especially if that person was already attracted to them. A few were still even stronger; even without that base level of connection, they could influence others into doing things they normally wouldn't do. And the very rarest, strongest, most powerful Orions had the power to manipulate dozens, even hundreds of other people at once, to inspire or terrify them— to bond others to them permanently— even to create a kind of permanent emotional and sexual link that was almost like telepathy.

Apparently everyone from Tendi's old life had been expecting her to be one of those ultra-powerful, once-in-a-century Orions. And when she finally came into her power, they figured she'd consolidate all the squabbling pirate clans and competing Syndicate rackets under her thumb and lead them to a new age of wealth and conquest as some kind of legendary pirate empress. But to develop your powers to that level, Tendi explained, they expected you to have sex. A lot of sex. But Tendi had never— she'd said she'd just never felt like it was right. Not the right person? Not the right time? Mariner had been desperately curious, but she hadn't asked, using all her self-control to just shut up and let Tendi tell her story at her own pace.

Anyway, they'd all waited... and waited... and waited, and it just hadn't happened. Not only had Tendi not developed kinky superpowers, she barely had measurable pheromonic levels, and she'd still never had sex. The more they'd tried to pressure her into doing it, the more she'd pulled back, until finally she couldn't take it any more and had run away to Starfleet Academy. She'd disappointed her whole clan, Tendi had explained bleakly. They'd had such great expectations and she'd turned out to be just— nothing.

"What the hell!" Mariner had said, petting Tendi's hair as she sniffled. "Tendi, you're wonderful, you're an amazing person. You're smart and stubborn and a total badass! Even if you never develop your pheromones— honestly, so what! If they can't see how great you are, it's their loss and Starfleet's gain! You don't owe them anything. Fuck those guys!"

"That's nice of you," Tendi said, "and I don't want you to think everyone was awful. Some people did try to be nice about it. They kept telling me not to give up hope, saying maybe I was just a late bloomer," she said, twisting up the hem of the blanket between her hands, "and, uh, well... I guess they were right."

"What?" Mariner said, and then "oh—"

"It's happening," Tendi said, voice soft, almost a whisper. She ducked her head down, hiding her face, and Mariner's mouth went dry as she watched a deep green blush spreading hotly on the back of Tendi's neck. "I can feel it happening. I started sensing... I started feeling other people's emotions a week ago. It just keeps getting stronger every day. I think I *am* going to have the power they all thought I would. So I have to go home. I have to be with other Orions. It's like... what's that animal on Earth that's compelled to go back to where it was born, to spawn or die?"

"How the hell would I know, I grew up on starships," Mariner said. "Beagles?"

"Yes," Tendi said, looking up earnestly. "Exactly. I have to go back to the ancient ceremonial grounds of my people and perform the traditional rites, in order to fulfill my biological destiny, like a beagle." She pressed her lips together hard, like she was trying to keep something in, then bit her bottom lip, white teeth gleaming. "Would you... would you come with me? The ceremonies don't take that long, but... it's all really Orion." She sighed sharply. "You'd probably think it's horrible."

"Hey, I'm a pretty horrible person," Mariner said, dying a little of internal mortification. She'd just had a quick flashback within a flashback to that time she'd asked Tendi to cheat at dom-jot by using her pheromones, and Tendi had flinched hard and said *I'm not that kind of Orion!*— "You've been pretty patient with my kind of awfulness over the last three years. If you want me to come, of course I will. But would they let me? Is it allowed?"

Tendi took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. All of a sudden Mariner was very, very aware of Tendi's body pressed up against her: stacked, muscled, *so fucking hot*— Tendi's breasts brushing her arm—

"It's my right," Tendi said. "I'm allowed to bring— I'm allowed to bring certain people."

Mariner snapped out of her flashback as bells and gongs and horns suddenly resounded with a harmonic, triumphant blare. In front of her, in the center of the open space, the lush grass faded away. In the bare, powdery dirt there was an irregular ring of nine roughly hewn and shaped stones. These stone seats, or maybe small podiums, created an inner circle about twenty feet across, with a stone arch in the middle.

As the crowd of gauzily clad handmaidens walked away, each of them leaving in a different direction, Tendi was revealed, standing under the arch.

They'd dressed her up in a gold bikini, a purple sash around her waist, and what looked like a crown on her head. Around the amphitheater, here and there, people started rising to their feet. Some stripped off their coats and let them fall to the ground, stretching and flexing their bare muscled arms. Some prepared by tying strips of fabric around their foreheads, and a few were painting dark stripes under their eyes and drawing Orion symbols on their arms, loops and circles with squiggly dotted tails.

"Wait, what the hell," Mariner hissed at the guard with the eyepatch, "does Tendi have to fight all these people at once?" Normally she wouldn't be worried, but today Tendi didn't really seem like she was at her best, and there were at least eight people stepping into the open space, all eyeing her hungrily.

"The Mistress?" The guard gave her an incredulous look, then stepped closer. "You don't understand, human. The Mistress speaks the challenge, and the challenge of fire and blood chooses."

"I need you to tell me," Mariner said through gritted teeth, "exactly what that *means*, without a lot of poetry."

The guard stared forward dreamily. "As it was in the dawn of our days... as it was in ancient times..."

"I will punch you in the throat. Speed it up!" Mariner hissed as the warriors began to step into the circle.

"All right, fine! She's the Mistress of the Winter Constellations, and she's going to be an Empress— can't you feel it?" the guard said, her deep green lips parting as she stared across the circle at Tendi. "She's going to have the power to capture bodies, souls, hearts and minds. The *only* way for her to truly master that power is to *use* it. The Mistress will pleasure the strongest warrior, fulfill their every need and desire—"

"Oh my god," Mariner said, her stomach suddenly roiling. "They're all fighting over who gets to fuck Tendi?" Was this what Tendi had meant when she'd said Mariner would think it was horrible? Not that there was anything wrong with banging a random sweaty stranger in leather and eyeliner— in fact, that was how Mariner had spent a lot of her favorite shore leave time as a cadet. But was *Tendi* into it? Even if Tendi's powers were coming in, did she want to be fought over, claimed like a prize?

"Humans!" the guard said through her teeth, disgusted. "No, of course not. The Mistress chooses. The combat ends when she calls halt, and whichever champion— or champions— that she deems worthy will kneel at her feet and be taken into her soul's embrace."

"Oh, so it could be like a group thing," Mariner said, trying to sound casual and cool and accepting and totally respectful of alien cultural mores. And honestly, she was— she really was! She *wasn't* judging! If Tendi wanted to do this ceremony and just get it all over with, then— well— fine! Mariner really didn't know why this whole situation had her feeling so sick and twisted up. She tried to laugh. "The more the merrier, right?"

The guard sighed shortly. "You still don't understand. You think it's about *fucking!* Anyone can fuck. But someone like D'Vana Tendi, a true Empress-in-Waiting, with that kind of power—" She shuddered, just a little too sensually, smoothing her hands down over her armor-clad hips. Mariner gave her a little bit of side-eye, but not too much, because she honestly wanted to hear more.

"When your pheromones mesh with hers," the guard continued, her voice going breathy and distant, "oh, you all think it's about *control*, about manipulation, but it's not like that. It's so much greater, so much more. When an Empress touches her tourney's champion, she'll have infinite and precise control over their mind and body..." She gasped slightly. "And every ounce of that control is devoted to stripping away the veil between you and the most perfect pleasure you've ever experienced. No fear, no shame, no questioning. Just the Empress and her hunger, the fire that consumes but never dies."

"Oh, like topping from the bottom, sure," Mariner said. She was starting to breathe a little heavily herself.

"Humans," the guard said under her breath. "Put a human label on something alien, and you think it's just the same as something you already understand. It's not like that. The Empress is going to take her tourney champion beyond the limits of every desire they've ever dreamed of."

Well, joke's on you, I'm into that shit— Mariner swallowed hard and didn't say it.

The truth was, she'd always found Tendi ridiculously, mind-numbingly adorable. After their girls' trip last year when she'd seen Tendi kick ass dressed in a leather pirate outfit she'd upgraded "adorable" to "oh my fucking GOD." But she'd never said anything, never tried to make even a friendly pass— after getting to know Tendi better, it was blatantly clear that she just wasn't *interested* in that sort of thing.

And the thing was— there were a lot of people in Starfleet who had apparently spent way too much time during their formative years poring over technical manuals and building ships in bottles, and they mostly ended up being pretty clueless about sex and romance. Take Boimler for example, who definitely *had* some base level of interest, but who never, ever recognized when he was being blatantly hit on, not once that Mariner had ever seen, not in all his stupidly tall life. Even *he* still occasionally managed to go on a date! But Tendi never had, not in all the time Mariner had known her.

For a long time, Mariner had harbored a secret hope that maybe Tendi was just like Boimler. Maybe she just took her own sweet time figuring out if she liked or was attracted to someone. Which would be fine! Especially if maybe someday she looked up at Mariner and blinked and said "Oh hey!" ... But it never happened, and the longer Mariner waited around, the harder she'd hoped, the more pathetic she'd felt. Because as time went by it seemed clearer and clearer that Tendi just wasn't into any of it, not sex, not relationships, anything. Either that or she was one of those people who didn't experience attraction outside their own species. But either way, Mariner was out of the running.

"You're right," the guard said, and Mariner gasped slightly as she realized that, standing so close, breathing in Mariner's sweat and hormones, the other woman could probably sense at least the rough direction her thoughts were trending in. "You don't have a chance, not really. Even if you won the tourney, even if she chose you— you'd never truly appreciate D'Vana Tendi's power."

Mariner jerked her head to the side so fast her neck cracked. "Wait, I'm sorry, what? *I could get in on this?*"

From halfway across the amphitheater, so far away she couldn't possibly have heard, Tendi's head snapped up with equal force. She turned her whole body in Mariner's direction, her eyes burning like a white-hot spotlight as they locked onto Mariner's eyes.

"Are you kidding?" Tendi said, her voice cracking with surprise, and the acoustics carried her voice to Mariner as clearly as if she were six inches away. "You'd really— *Me?*"

"Fuck yes!" Mariner said, breathless. She could almost see the hot, humid air shimmering in the center of the circle, as if Tendi's temperature had suddenly just jumped twenty degrees. "Do you— *can* I?"

A sudden knowledge came to her without any sense of *how* she knew: of *course* she was allowed in the tournament. Mariner wouldn't even have been allowed to witness this rite if she didn't— if she didn't honor Tendi with her desire, with the pure yearning of her body, the ache in her heart—

"Get in here!" Tendi ordered at the top of her lungs, pointing to the ground at her feet, and the whole amphitheater erupted in chaos and noise.



## Chapter 3

Afterward, Mariner never actually remembered stepping into the bounds of the circle, or stripping off her uniform top and fighting a dozen or so Orion cutthroats and warriors, tits out and blood pumping.

What she remembered was the silence, the eerie beautiful silence as she stood victorious among her fallen foes, and a soft hum in the back of her mind, like a gentle hand guiding her with a tender touch.

What now? Mariner didn't have to wonder. She knew. She turned and walked towards Tendi, and when she reached the edge of the rough circle marked by stones, she stopped and took off the rest of her clothes. The breeze felt good on her sensitive skin.

Tendi was standing in the center of the circle, framed by the great stone arch with the notch in the top. Behind her, the sunset was melting into shades of turquoise and purple and royal blue, with occasional streaks of pink and gold revealed as the clouds roiled above the arena. Fiery backlit clouds outlined Tendi in golden and crimson light, like a halo around her whole body.

Her short hair was wild and disarrayed, topped with a reddish, coppery circlet studded with smaller collections and bursts of jewels and filigree, as if half a dozen other crowns, necklaces and bracelets had been torn apart and reformed into this single crown, worth a galaxy's ransom. She was wearing twisted hoop earrings dripping with thin green glasslike beads that caught the light and sent green spots of light dancing over her face. Someone had painted her eyelashes with something that lengthened and thickened them, and also given her some truly impressive dark green eyeliner wings, accented with speckles of gold glitter. Her mouth was painted a deep, lush, oceanic green that made Mariner thirsty just to look at.

She was wearing a metallic bikini made of gold wire and delicate chains, limned with more of those green beads, and knotted, beaded tassels falling from the upper curve of each hip to brush over the outside of her legs. The purple sash fell to the ground behind her like a bridal train. More green beaded chains hung from a sort of starburst-like necklace, falling over her breasts. Every bead was gleaming and glittering individually in the changing, colorful light of the sunset. Mariner inhaled deeply. Tendi was a galaxy, glittering with stars; she'd never been more beautiful.

They stood and looked at each other.

"D'Vana Tendi," came the voice of the elder Orion, from the edges of the circle. "Will you choose your champion?"

"As it was when the first sunrise lit our homeworld, as it is today, and as it will be until stars burn cold, I make my choice," Tendi said. She raised her arm slowly.

She and Mariner were both breathing hard; Tendi's chest was heaving, the sun gleaming green off the sweaty curves of her breasts. And Mariner realized, in the silence that seemed to have captured the whole world, that she and Tendi were breathing in unison— every breath in and out, locked into sync with each other. She stared, heart pounding, blood tingling in her fingertip, and wondered if their heartbeats were matching too.

Tendi pointed directly at her, and Mariner's knees wobbled, just a little. "This one."

Mariner closed her eyes and walked forward. She stopped when Tendi wanted her to stop. She heard the soft pad of Tendi's bare feet coming closer, the brush of beads moving over Tendi's skin and shifting against each other. Mariner moved her hands behind her back, then frowned—that wasn't quite right— Oh. She lifted her arms up instead, bending her elbows so that her wrists were crossed behind her head.

Carefully, gentle hands looped a rope around her wrists, binding them. She listened as the tail end of the rope was thrown over the arch, dropping into the notch so that it wouldn't slip off the top and fall to one side. With a tug, Mariner's hands were raised over her head. The rope pulled slightly, not lifting Mariner off her feet but taut enough so that she couldn't quite relax. The rope trembled as the other end was pulled tight and tied off.

Tendi came closer, laying a shaking hand against Mariner's bare back.

"I think we both know you could get out of this if you wanted to," she said, and Mariner flexed her wrists thoughtfully. As the sun sank lower in the sky, it was shining a little awkwardly into her eyes. Instead of squinting, she just closed her eyes, letting the sun paint colorful streaks on the inside of her eyelids. Sure, she *could* get out of this if she needed to, but why would she?

"Oh," Tendi whispered, something deep and almost awed in her voice. "You really don't want to. You want—"

Mariner let her mouth fall open. Tendi's touch was like the sun, wherever she moved her hand— up, to playfully brush her fingertips over the back of Mariner's neck, sweaty under her hair. Down, to run the heel of her hand firmly down Mariner's spine, stopping just at the curve of her ass. Intense, burning primary colors lit up under Mariner's skin. She was a living stained-glass window, and Tendi was her light. She was here for Tendi, to allow Tendi to create beauty through her, from her. To glow with Tendi's glory.

She could hear Tendi circling around in front of her, could see the shape of her even with her eyes closed, the sun behind her. Tendi wanted her to open her eyes, so she opened her eyes.

"You want to give yourself to me," Tendi said, still sounding awed, surprised, disbelieving. Mariner breathed deeply. She didn't need to speak. That would be beside the point of the rite. Her body was responding, her heart racing and her arousal rising, fresh sweat sweetening the air between them. All Tendi needed to do was breathe her in.

Tendi reached up, and pulled Mariner down, kissing her deeply. Her mouth was cool and sweet, and Mariner wanted to chase the sweetness with her tongue, wanted to fall back into it and drown. Blinking hard, she found herself grateful for the rope at her wrists; at least she wouldn't

fall over.

When Tendi pulled back from the kiss, she looked into Mariner's eyes. What did she want? She wanted what Tendi wanted to give her. What did Tendi want to give her?

"Oh," Mariner said, and writhed, instinctively pulling against the ropes, giving way to Human panic for a single blink. It was too much, to be known so deeply and so intimately— nobody could know you like that and truly accept you, could they? No one could get so close and not be turned off, and most people weren't even as fucked up as Mariner was, most people didn't have a heart that was basically a fucking junk-shop, full of anger and lies—

"Look at me," Tendi said, and Mariner flinched out of her spiral. There were tears in her eyes; there were tears in Tendi's eyes. "I shouldn't have to tell you," she said. "I won't tell you again." Yeah, Mariner was starting to get it now. Back home nobody would dream of playing this kind of sex game without days of prep and discussion first— check-ins, safewords, ground rules— but this wasn't a game, and Tendi didn't need those things. She was an Orion empress in full control of her power. She could read the subtlest variations of Mariner's desire, every reluctant fear and every trembling lust— and even beyond that, Mariner was safe in her hands. She had never been more sure of anything; she knew it like she knew the laws of physics. Tendi would never do anything that Mariner didn't truly want— not because that would ruin the ancient ritual, but because she was *Tendi*, lovely kind sweet darling Tendi—

Beautiful Tendi, painted and adorned. She drew her hand back in a theatrical sweep, and heat pulsed between Mariner's legs as helpless gratitude and sweet shame rolled over her in equal measure.

Tendi slapped her hard across the face, and Mariner gasped as the hot shock rolled through her, her face heating beautifully where Tendi had made contact. Tendi gasped too, sweet and shocked, her own arousal surging; Mariner could feel it.

"Oh, oh, please please please—" Mariner blurted before she could stop herself. But apparently just flat begging didn't count as disrupting the ritual, because Tendi just smiled.

Unexpectedly, she turned and walked away, circling within the interior of the stone ring. Mariner let herself drink in the sight.

As Tendi circled the perimeter of the ring, Mariner realized that she was looking out, at the Orions gathered to observe the rite. The idea that they were all watching didn't bother her. She almost wished there were *more*— Tendi should have more people appreciating her, seeing her for the glorious being that she was. It was like when people gathered to watch a starship launch from the shipyards. It wasn't the thing itself; it was the power and precision it represented. The greatness of a whole society, narrowed to a single point, to create beauty and strength that would go on and on, an expression of their truest self, their yearnings and their drives.

Somewhere in the back of Mariner's mind, some tiny insecure part of her wondered why she wasn't straining against her bonds, wasn't sassing Tendi to get her to come back and do more: pay attention to me, don't leave me alone—

Something lashed at her delicately, a faint sting like an insect-bite landing on the back of her upper thigh, and Mariner tipped her head back, blinking up at the swirling colors of the fading sunset. She could hear the faint whirling of something moving through the air, could see it out of the corner of her eye. She didn't move her head to look, just waited, and Tendi gave her exactly what she wanted, unpredictable and perfect, lashing her again and again with a beautiful beaded whip, landing sweet luxurious stings like biting kisses on Mariner's calves, her thighs, her unprotected ribs, the undersides of her bare arms. She circled further, stinging the sides of her breasts and her tender belly, carefully letting the lash curl around and slap the back of Mariner's knees as Mariner winced and moaned.

"You're so beautiful," Tendi said. She almost sounded as if she were going to cry again. "Oh, Mariner!"

Delicately, she tossed the lash aside, and continued to circle. She stepped behind Mariner, and someone else handed her something. Some kind of small container, maybe? Mariner could hear her twisting off the lid. She was finding it easier and easier not to be curious; easier and easier to wait. When Tendi came back into view, she was holding a small round jar that looked like it had been carved from a single fire opal. She was holding it in her right hand, rubbing the thumb of her left hand into the slick pink substance; reaching out, she brushed her thumb over Mariner's top lip, leaving a generous smear there, then caught Mariner's bottom lip and dragged her thumb more slowly over its lush surface as well. Mariner's mouth immediately started to burn and tingle, the sensation intense— it was something like spice and something like a hot salve. Her mouth felt like it had a million nerve endings, like every molecule of air was a caress, a torture, both at once.

"Oh no please," Mariner breathed, and Tendi reached for her breasts, catching her as her body trembled, catching Mariner's breast in her hand and rubbing her thumb firmly over one nipple, then giving the same treatment to the other. "Oh god—!"

Her nipples were sparking, burning. She tried to twist away, but there was nothing to twist away from. She couldn't lick her lips, couldn't press them together to stop the scream building in her throat; she knew without trying that it would just make it worse. All she could do now was moan, open-mouthed, as the fiery sensation built and sparkled. Tendi leaned in close, hooking an arm around Mariner's neck. She looked dreamy as she nestled between Mariner's breasts, laying her head against Mariner's shoulder and breathing across her throat, swaying with her as she trembled.

"You want more," Tendi said, "I don't believe it, I never thought... oh, Mariner!" She sounded so gentle, so happy, and Mariner's body clenched as she felt Tendi smile against her skin. She knew even before Tendi's hand moved what she was going to do. Her internal muscles fluttered in pleasure and terror as Tendi pressed her left thumb to Mariner's belly, a few inches above her navel, and slowly dragged a stripe of prickling, agonized pleasure down, down, down. She dipped her thumb deeply into Mariner's belly-button, pressing the slickness deep inside and twisting, and Mariner gritted her teeth, trying to keep her lips apart even as her jaw locked. She panted hotly through her teeth, suddenly seconds from coming.

Tendi didn't want her to come yet. It was hard, so hard to draw back from that edge, but Mariner knew that Tendi didn't want her to come. But Tendi didn't want her to flinch, either; all Mariner could do was let her head fall back and keen helplessly, enduring Tendi's gentle touches. The suggestive, rhythmic push of her thumb.

She didn't know how much of this she could take.

She knew exactly how much of this she was *going* to take— exactly as much as Tendi wanted to give her. Exactly as much as Mariner wanted to take.

"Tendi," she said, almost voiceless, "Tendi, Tendi—"

Tendi licked sweat from Mariner's throat as her hand slowly, inexorably crept down towards Mariner's aching cunt.

"Oh," Mariner said, as she realized, and gave Tendi what she wanted. "Empress D'Vana, Empress, oh, please, Empress!"

She knew she'd gotten it right as Tendi's hand slipped down. She showed mercy and sadism at once, moving past the place where Mariner most wanted to be touched and smearing the last of the salve in thick stripes onto Mariner's inner thighs. Mariner bucked, keening. God, how much longer could this go on, how much more perfect could it be? In another five minutes, Mariner was just going to weep, or maybe evolve into an enlightened energy being and go live in a nebula— but no! She hadn't even gotten to touch Tendi yet! It would be a shame to leave mortality behind before she got to—

"Oh," Tendi said, "oh, oh, oh—" and Mariner slipped her hands out of the looped rope, because Tendi wanted her to, because Tendi wanted to be touched and she wanted *Mariner* to do it—

She tumbled Tendi down onto the soft, powdery dirt. She was going to make Tendi come. She was going to make Tendi scream, she was going to make her *cry* with pleasure, while the whole Orion outpost watched her do it. And then after that, *Mariner* would have earned it, she thought. After that, *she'd* get to come— She saw Tendi's eyes widen, her pupils expanding in shocked delight.

"You want me," Mariner said, almost a plea, half an explanation.

"I want you," Tendi said, sounding almost startled, and a huge smile spread across her face. "Oh, Mariner, I really do!" She lifted her arms up like vines to wrap around Mariner and drag her down.

Six hours later, the Orions beamed them back up to Mariner's mom's yacht.

Their uniforms had been pressed and cleaned. Tendi had brushed her hair and washed off her makeup. They both looked like the pinnacle of respectability; just two tidy, well-scrubbed Starfleet ensigns. Mariner still felt a little itchy though. They'd only had an old-fashioned water shower down at the outpost. Even though she knew it was a really Human-centric judgement, she couldn't help but think it was a weird misuse of natural resources to actually use *water* to clean off, when sonics worked just fine. She'd scrubbed herself down with the most scentless soap the Orions had been able to provide, but as she surreptitiously sniffed herself, she still smelled a bit like a Risian beach towel. At least they'd been able to dig up a wrap so she didn't have to get her hair wet.

"Well," Tendi said brightly, clapping her hands together as they headed for the cockpit, "there can be no excuse for the crime of which I'm guilty, and I intend to offer no defense!"

"Oh, come on, it's going to be fine." Mariner dropped into the chair at the navigation console and threw her leg up over one of the arms, letting her head loll back against the seat. She paused. "Hey, how *come* Starfleet hasn't shown up here yet?"

"Oh," Tendi said, "well, uh, while I was getting my hair and makeup done I had the local Syndicate smuggling operation plant some false sensor readings along the warp trail between Altair Six and here and uh... Well, basically I asked them to fake our deaths?"

"You did WHAT?" Mariner flailed, almost tipping over as her leg slipped off the arm of the chair.

"I mean, not convincingly! There were tons of anomalies in the data! I'm sure the *Cerritos* caught on right away that it was a hoax— I just needed them to go looking somewhere else for a while. It seemed like a good idea at the time!" she said defensively. "When we get back we can just explain that, uh..." She stopped and thought. Mariner could almost see reality sinking back in. "Uh..."

"...that we were real stressed out and needed some good old-fashioned traditional shore leave?"

"I don't know," Tendi said, sinking down into the command chair. "I don't think good old-fashioned traditional shore leave involves hijacking a ship, beaming down to a dangerous planet, and actively participating in ancient violent sacred sex rituals."

"Incorrect on so many levels. You need to read more old mission reports," Mariner said, then moved closer. "Hey, what's the matter?"

Tendi wrung her hands, hunching forward. "Am I going to get kicked out of Starfleet?"

"For what?" Mariner said in disbelief.

"Uh... kidnapping? Hijacking? Faking your death? We didn't fill out the change of relationship status form before we had intimate contact! I threw soup at Rutherford!"

"They don't kick you out of Starfleet for ANY of that," Mariner said firmly, "and especially not if it's because you had to go home to participate in some culturally significant kinky sex thing that's supposed to be a secret! God, look at Vulcans, we've all been pretending we don't know about their weird secret sex stuff for like hundreds of years!"

"Vulcans have weird secret sex stuff?"

"Oh my god, where have you even been! Yes! It's a whole thing!" Mariner leaned forward and took Tendi's hands in hers, pulling her forward

so that she leaned her head on Mariner's shoulder. "You *really* need to read more old mission logs," she murmured into Tendi's hair. "Especially if you're going to be a Captain someday."

Tendi blinked up at her. "You really think I could be? I mean... still?"

"I really do. Also, there is some real sexy stuff in those old reports, I'm telling you. Now come on, quit worrying," Mariner said. She pushed Tendi back into the command chair and sat back down at the navigation console, spinning her chair around so that she could tip her head back and look upside-down at Tendi, grinning.

After a moment, Tendi couldn't help but smile back, just a little. "Well... all right."

"Give the order, Empress," said Mariner teasingly. Tendi shivered, exhaling gustily. Just the faintest hint of her warm breath on Mariner's cheek sent pleasure rolling and jolting through her body.

"Okay. Yes," Tendi said firmly. "Lay in a course for Altair Six... and Mariner?"

"Yeah?"

"Call me Captain," Tendi said, propping her ankle on her knee and leaning back, shoulders back and chin high.

"Aye, Captain," Mariner said. "Laying in a course for Altair Six."

Tendi sat back in the command chair and beamed. "Let's go mind the store."

## End Notes

Post-reveals note: I don't usually change the "date posted" on my revealed challenge works. But with author reveals happening on Sept 15th, the original air date of "Amok Time" in 1967... it was just too good to pass up. Happy 56th anniversary of Fuck or Die Friday!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!