

Close Quarters

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/785) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/785>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Star Trek: Lower Decks
Character:	Ensemble Cast - LDS
Additional Tags:	Fluff , Sharing a Bed , Humor , Friendship
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-07-30 Words: 479 Chapters: 1/1

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Summary

It always sucks when your captain is possessed by an evil ancient mask, but hey, every mission has its perks.

It wasn't every day your captain got possessed by an ancient mask that gave her godlike superpowers. It was more like, every week. What was really special about this instance was that the entire lower decks barracks had been transformed into a mystic jungle. The scorpions had psychedelics in their stingers. The boa constrictors were lined with all-seeing eyes and could tell you exactly how you would die if you were patient enough to wait for them to write it out in the sand pits by slithering around. And if you could read cursive.

"Who the hell can read cursive?" Mariner complained, tossing a gravball at the ceiling.

"I know how to read cursive," said Boimler, sitting up in bed.

"Yeah, but like, among the normal people in this crew," Mariner said.

"I'm normal!"

"Orions don't use cursive," Tendi said, her hands folded over her stomach. "We have a series of scientific glyphs and flashing lights--"

"You mean pirate code?" asked Rutherford.

"It's not pirate code!" Tendi's expression fractured. "Well, some pirates use it ... for piracy... but mostly--"

"My implant has a cursive-parsing program," Rutherford said, holding a finger to his eyepiece. It flashed green, and his eyes darted over the ceiling, tracing the water-stains left behind from Captain Freeman's last magical possession, when Deck 8 was turned into a primordial swamp. "Hey!" said Rutherford. "The ceiling says 'Gortok.' Does that mean anything? Gortok?"

Mariner aimed her ball right at the biggest water-stain. It bounced back down at a near-lethal speed, and Boimler scrambled over her to catch it.

"Ow!" he said, shaking his hand. "That stung my palm!"

"Hey, give me back my ball!"

"Mariner, it's Hour Eight of Delta Shift, we need to get some sleep, not listen to your ball thwacking against the ceiling until it caves in," said Boimler. He tucked the ball beneath the small of his back and laid down at an awkward angle, his hips canted. "Now if you don't mind," he said, pulling a sleep mask over his eyes. "Lights: off."

The room plunged them into darkness. Slowly, a cracked nightlight flickered to life in the corner, in the shape of a glowing blue horg'ahn. Rutherford turned his implant to dark-mode. Tendi fluffed her pillow. Mariner kicked her feet and shimmied her hips at a disruptive pace until she was comfortable.

That was the other unique thing about this latest Ancient-Evil-Mask-Possession. With the lower decks destroyed, all the ensigns had been assigned their own room.

Well, shared room. With one bed. For every four ensigns.

"Snug, isn't it?" said Rutherford cheerfully, his elbow digging into Mariner's ribs. Boimler rolled over, his heels kicking Mariner in the shins. On the other side of Rutherford, Tendi snuggled close enough to use his chest as a pillow and started playing Orion sea shanties from her wrist-chrono.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Mariner said.

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