

Habit

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Summary

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Early in the morning, when Riker dragged himself out of bed, the first thing he did was reach for Deanna. Not physically, but mentally. While he washed the sleep off his face and tried to scrub some semblance of normalcy into his bed-rumpled hair, his mind sought out Deanna's by instinct.

She was already dressed, the stiff uniform collar irritating her neck. She was standing somewhere near a replicator — maybe her room but maybe the bridge lounge, since Riker could sense her sampling someone else's emotions. Her own were even-keeled and peaceful, lulled into a meditative happiness by the warm scent of a cup of mocha in her hands.

Energized, perky, and ready to face the day. A fond smile tugged at Riker's lips.

He really hated her sometimes.

He wasn't late, but Deanna checked in on him by instinct anyway. Bridge shift would start in ten minutes and Will was only just now leaving his quarters. He'd skipped breakfast, if the hollow feeling in his gut was any indicator, and sleep still clung to his mind like a fog.

But she could tell when he passed a crew member, because every time he met someone else's eyes, a little spark of pleasure went through him. She could picture his smile all too well — his eyebrows arching, his blue eyes shining. He wouldn't slow his pace, though; he'd keep up that bull-headed go-forward walk of his all the way to the bridge.

Behind Deanna, the turbolift doors hissed open. Still connected to Will's mind, she felt the fog of sleep lift away. A clarity descended on his brain, concentration kicking in.

And in the midst of it all she felt a flare of pure delight and knew his eyes had rested on her.

She'd been in her office most of the day, and Will had been on the bridge. This wasn't abnormal. He scarcely noticed she was gone — although the crew would note that on the days Deanna left, Commander Riker was noticeably more restless. His leg bounced when he was sitting down; when he was standing, he paced from one station to the next and routinely bugged Data at the helm. His thumb rubbed circles on his forefinger; he stroked his beard; he shifted from foot to foot, trying in vain to find a comfortable position for his back.

And he reached out to Deanna, unconsciously, just as she reached out to him.

Sit down, for God's sake, she said. *You're making me restless.*

And at the same time, Will caught a vivid glimpse of Deanna's office, of the way she'd been fidgeting, clasping and unclasping her hands while her patient spoke.

Sorry, he said, and he pulled away, a little less fidgety now.

"Commander?" said Data.

"Yes, Mr. Data?"

"Why are you smiling?"

Riker wiped the grin away.

His away missions were the worst. Shipboard, Deanna rarely got to tag along; her other duties interfered. So when Will went planetside — which was often — Deanna stayed behind, radiating tension, her stomach a tight knot.

Meditation only helped so much. Especially because the holodeck was booked and she couldn't call up a reasonable replica of Betazed's steamy waterfalls, her favorite place to clear her mind. She settled for her quarters instead, cross-legged on the floor with her back straight and her diaphragm open. She took deep breaths, working to radiate serenity instead of concern.

And by habit, as peacefulness took over, she checked on him.

Do you come here often? he was asking an alien woman, leaning on the surface of her food stall so his ass poked out behind him. Her eyes glittered; arousal pooled low in Riker's gut.

Deanna pulled the connection shut with a scowl.

It was just a one-night stand, and Will wasn't jealous. First of all, he had no right to be. He and Deanna weren't dating. And second of all, why be jealous over a single night of sex? He'd had plenty of his own; he was just sad for her, that she couldn't find someone who stuck around — someone who really appreciated her — someone who—

Who was he kidding? Deanna could have a thousand devoted husbands if she wanted them. She had one-night stands because she, like Riker, liked it, and because the ambassador from Vrong was almost impossibly handsome (in a fragile porcelain-doll kind of way, which Riker had to admit was appealing, and not just to Deanna). And so he knew where they were right now (Deanna's quarters) and he had a pretty damn good idea what they were doing [REDACTED], so he knew better than to check on her.

But when he lay down in bed, freshly showered and with his sleeping pills already kicking in, Riker reached out to her anyway. Not maliciously. Just by habit.

And Deanna's orgasm ripped through him so intense it left him gasping for breath.

Riker stared up at the ceiling, his chest heaving, his skin slick with sweat. A rush of arousal and pleasure soared through his body in an instant, and dimly he heard himself shout, felt his hips jerk and his back arch against his will. The aftershock left his muscles spasming. Dimly, he became aware of a wet warmth in his pajama pants and checked in shock, just to confirm ... yep. He'd gone from fully soft to coming in his pants, untouched, within three seconds.

And now, boneless, he collapsed onto his back and let sleep take him, still hazily connected to Deanna's mind ... while she and the ambassador geared up for Round 2.

Served him right for eavesdropping, he supposed.

When she checked on him, it wasn't just by habit. He'd escaped from the Malcorian hospital just five hours earlier and he'd been stuck in medbay ever since, his emotions a steady rise and fall of tension, anger, panic, shame. Every hour — just about — the surge crested and washed away, left him drained. Beverly had contacted Deanna in private after the first incident, and Deanna had promised to call her immediately when she sensed Will was at his breaking point.

In the sickbay, Beverly approached Will, tentative and slow. He'd been incredibly quiet since he woke, like his teeth were glued together. His eyes darted to Beverly as she approached; he offered her a weary smile.

"It's okay," Beverly promised. "You don't have to speak. I just have to check on your ribs."

Not the ribs again. They'd been broken just long enough to thwart Beverly's cellular regeneration technique, and every time she inspected them, it meant lifting Will's shirt, touching his bruised skin. His emotions tightened; a headache built behind his skull and left his eyes watering. Breath stuttered in his lungs as Beverly pulled his shirt up to expose his chest.

Eyes closed, Will — and Deanna — saw a flash of memory, a Malcorian doctor, her eager gaze darting down Will's body. It was just a fragment of a memory, one Will didn't want to see, and when the Malcorian's face glimmered in his mind, he forced the image to fracture, brushed the pieces into the darkest corners of his mind, where Deanna couldn't see.

I'm sorry, he said miserably, and Deanna jolted. She hadn't realized he could sense her — but he must have felt her shock, her sympathy. She started to withdraw, to give him space, and the misery swelled.

Don't go, he said.

So Deanna stayed.

It was habit.

Every night, before he fell asleep, he reached for her. He always waited till his sleeping pills kicked in, when he felt his muscles loosen

and his breathing even out. He didn't want any of the day's tension to bleed through to her, so he waited until there was no tension at all. Just the thick cotton fog of chemical sleep settling over his brain and smoothing his emotions away.

She wouldn't feel the stinging irritation left over from his meeting with Admiral Blackwell. She wouldn't feel the mild worry that he'd interpreted Jean-Luc's expressions incorrectly or accidentally insulted Geordi at lunch. She would have no inkling of a mission gone wrong, if there was one; no shadow-remnants of grief or self-hatred, if it applied.

But Riker was, even on his bad days, fairly even-tempered. There was typically nothing bad to feel, nothing he could accidentally project onto Deanna to ruin her sleep. But still, he waited for the sleeping pills to turn his emotions into cold, opaque glass.

He reached out to her. She wouldn't feel the way he ached for her. She wouldn't see the way his soul lit up when he caught sight of her. She wouldn't know the way his whole mind turned to her at night, sought her out, listened at her door.

She wouldn't know.

But when Riker reached out to her by habit, just as he fell asleep, Deanna reached out, too.

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