

Culture Shock

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Summary

For once, Riker is given *official permission* to sleep with an alien woman.

For once, it doesn't go well.

The planet was called Hondrum, and their warp travel capabilities were brand-new. Drug trade abounded in the streets, especially among the adolescents, and Riker suspected some of the sex workers in the hotel bar belonged to a lower social caste — although the diplomats insisted there were no castes on Hondrum. The bartender and some of the girls shared distinctive natural markings on their throats, and they had a mutual habit of lowering their heads and tacking, "Honored One" onto the end of their sentences. This was a habit the rest of Hondrum didn't seem to have.

"I don't think they're as enlightened as they'd have us believe," said Riker. "*Every* member of the Federation has its social issues; I don't like that they're trying to hide theirs."

Picard hummed in agreement, keeping his face blank. He'd stayed aboard the Enterprise while Riker scouted out Hondrum's senatorial district; the top diplomats for Hondrum had been beamed directly aboard the ship, and now Picard reviewed their paperwork with a furrow between his eyebrows.

"It's difficult to say," he said with a sigh. He pushed his padd away from him, nursing a headache. "Number One, I'd like you to do more reconnaissance on this potential *lower caste*. Return to the hotel bar. Engage with someone ... *chatty*." Picard made a face at the idea. "An individual, ideally, who does *not* have these markings on her throat."

"You think the higher caste might be more likely to discuss it?" asked Riker.

"I believe the higher caste is more likely to slip up," Picard said. "I trust your ability to discern the truth between the lines."

Riker nodded, curling one hand over his mouth as he gave it some thought. The bar. The low lights. The glittering snug-fit dresses. An impish smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

"I've never been ordered to sleep with a local before," he admitted.

Picard gave him a sour look. "Dismissed, Number One."

Still grinning, Riker loped out of the ready room. There was a good stock of folks who wanted to visit Hondrum — either again, for pleasure, or for the first time. He reviewed the personnel files as he walked, mentally assembling a relaxed away team — Geordi, Data, Deanna (if she was free; she'd missed her chance to go the first time around), plus a handful of folks from engineering who always got overlooked when it came time for the good stuff. Riker sent out his inquiry messages just as he reached his quarters on the ninth deck.

Sleeping with a local. And in an official capacity too! How the hell was he going to write this up in his after-action report? He bit back a smile.

And while he waited for responses from his away team, he programmed the replicator to spit out some truly flattering civilian clothes.

"I don't understand why Captain Picard would *order* you to do this," said Deanna with a note of exasperation. She was leaning on the bar in a sleeveless jumpsuit, her arms and legs bare, a belt cinching the material around her waist. Dark waves of hair fell over her shoulders and down her back, and Riker's eyes kept tracking sideways to study her, instead of studying the sex workers who lined the walls. The

way the light caught in her hair and turned it a fuzzy auburn-blue. The sparkle in her black eyes, the curve of her lips.

"We need to get a raw overview of Hondrum's social issues," Riker said, focusing on his drink. "The captain thinks this is the quickest route to that goal."

Deanna gave him a hooded look. "And of course, you didn't protest."

A slow blush spread over Riker's cheeks. He tried to hide his smile by taking a sip of Hondrak rum, but his eyes slid sideways to Deanna, once more appreciating the play of light over her delicate bone structure. Her eyes softened a little.

"I think I ought to go," she said a little indulgently. "I'm interfering with your work."

"What? No—"

"Will, no one's going to approach you if you're parked at the bar talking to me," she said. Especially not when he was looking at her like *that*, his face so soft and his eyes glistening. She clapped her hand over Riker's forearm and nodded to someone over his shoulder. "Besides, I think you've got your first bite."

He raised his eyebrows at her and tried to keep his smile under control. He didn't turn around until his features were appropriately composed — somewhat bored, not too eager. Of course, the mask fell away as soon as he saw the woman smiling at him. He could never resist smiling back; it spread across his face like melted butter, and the woman's stiff workplace smile softened a little, turned into something a little more real.

"You have coin?" she asked, sliding into the seat next to him. With her sitting and Riker standing, they were almost the same height.

"Yes, ma'am," said Riker. He patted the glittery silver fanny pack Geordi had leant him, earning another genuine smile.

"What, no pockets?" she asked, scanning his open-chest tunic. And lingering rather pointedly on the open-chest part, where curls of dark hair covered Riker's skin.

"My culture doesn't use money," Riker said. "Pockets are out of style. Anything we need, we can holster or clip to a belt."

"I see." She hooked her fingers into his belt with a wry grin and tugged him closer, letting her knuckles brush over the outline of his prosthetic. Riker allowed himself to be lured. Heat spread to his face at the closeness of her lips — and her pupils dilated, and her throat flushed a pale blue, so he supposed she liked the way he looked when he was turned on. "Why don't we go somewhere private?" she suggested.

He studied her face from beneath his eyelashes — her cheekbones, her lips. He didn't answer aloud; instead he placed one broad hand on her waist and nodded to the bar's exit.

He let her lead the way. She shifted her grip on his belt to the small of his back, letting her fingers trail over the firm curve of his ass as they walked — and Riker kept his hand around her waist, keeping her close to him. In the hallways, here and there, he passed members of his away team and greeted them with a smile and a nod, usually earning a roll of the eyes — a blush from Wesley — a shake of the head from Geordi.

It was going to be a good night, Riker thought.

It was not a good night.

Geordi was on his way back from the bar, his head swimming pleasantly with the buzz of real alcohol. Hands in his pockets, head tipped back, he watched the hum and glow of energy coming from Data as he monologued on the local sense of humor and how it differed from Terran values. In the distance, only dimly, Geordi was aware of a commotion — raised voices, a clatter of objects, a shout — but it was only when Data stopped talking and cocked his head that Geordi forced himself to pay attention.

"Wait..." He listened closer to the hollering down the hall. "Is that...?"

At that exact moment, Counselor Troi poked her head out of a nearby room, her hair mussed and her eyebrows furrowed. She caught sight of Geordi and Data and rushed out to join them.

"Is that Will?" she asked.

Down the hall, Riker roared "Wait just a damn min—"

There was a crash of glass and ceramic as something shattered on the hotel wall.

"Uh-oh," said Geordi. "I guess his date didn't go too well."

"That's unusual for Will," said Troi. She held herself back, but the concern on her face made it clear she wanted to investigate. Luckily Data was already striding forward, oblivious to the social swamp he was walking into. Geordi and Troi jogged to catch up to him — around the corner — closer to the raised voices — to—

Oh dear.

Riker hopped from one foot to the other, trying to duck the objects being thrown at him — currently, those items were a pair of high-heeled shoes, one of which struck him in the chest and bounced back so his date could throw it again — all while clasping what appeared

to be a silk pillowcase over his genitals. He spotted his crewmates and raised one hand in a desperate wave. The crowd of alien onlookers glanced over at the Enterprise's away team with open curiosity.

"Help me out here!" Riker shouted over his furious date.

"Deceiver! Pervert! Fiend!"

Troi raised an eyebrow. Geordi instinctively took a step back.

"I'm not a *deceiver*," Riker retorted, looking only mildly peeved. "I didn't know you didn't know!"

"In what way has Commander Riker deceived you?" Data asked.

"In what way?" The woman's face contorted with rage. She darted into the room with the away team following her more slowly, poking their heads in the door. They watched as she tore the bed apart and returned, clutching something tightly in her fist. Riker blushed a deep red, as if he knew what she had, and tried to back away — but the crowd pushed him right back.

Just in time for Riker's date to throw an erect penis at his face.

"Ow," Riker said, as it smacked him in the lip. He caught it, one-handed and clumsy, before it hit the floor. Troi's face spasmed; she glanced sideways at Geordi, trying to keep a professional mask in place. "As I was trying to tell you," Riker said, shaking the penis for emphasis, "this isn't meant to deceive you. It's a prosthetic."

The alien crowd backed away a few steps, all eyes on the prosthetic, all of them faintly alarmed. Many of them appeared disgusted. One fellow looked like he might puke.

"Oh, for God's sake," said Riker, spinning to see their reactions — and treating his crew to a view of his ass, where there were fresh paddle marks turning his skin red. He held his penis aloft. "Haven't any of you ever seen a prosthetic before?"

"He tricked me," said the alien woman, her voice wavering. A wave of humiliation and anger poured off her, thick enough to make Troi flinch. "He's a woman."

"Oh, of all the outmoded, barbaric philosophies—"

Geordi eased past the alien woman and into the hotel room, silently collecting Riker's clothes. Troi moved forward at the same time, touching Will gently on the arm. He lowered his prosthetic, his cheeks catching fire when he saw her.

"We should go," she whispered.

He must have seen the trouble in her eyes. She could sense it from the crowd — disgust and ignorance turning into rage. Sympathy for the alien woman building into a vengeful lust for action, for some way to 'fix' what she had gone through. Riker glanced back at the men who surrounded him, his eyes wide, and by that point Geordi and Data had joined their circle and were shoving Riker's clothes into his hands. Data tapped his communicator, head on a swivel, waiting for danger.

"Lieutenant Data to the Enterprise," he said calmly. "Four to beam up."

And golden light froze them in time just as tensions reached a breaking point. The hotel room faded away. They rematerialized in the blink of an eye in the transport room, Riker still nude, with his prosthetic hidden away in a pile of crumpled clothes.

"Hi, O'Brien," he said miserably.

"Commander," said O'Brien, totally professional. Troi slid a hand up to Riker's shoulder and gave him a gentle squeeze. Most of his emotions were centered on righteous indignation — a form of irritation that came over him whenever a visitor to the Enterprise said something off-color about Geordi's VISOR, or Troi's half-Betazoid heritage, or Data's yellow eyes, or Worf's ... well, Worf. But underneath the indignation, there was a hot flush of humiliation, too, and his cheeks were stinging, and his heart was pounding in his chest. Adrenaline, anxiety, high enough to bleed into Troi's mind.

"How did it go, then?" asked O'Brien mildly as they all stepped down from the platform.

"It did not go well," said Data. "The local culture is astonishingly ignorant of prosthetic science."

"*Data*," said Geordi wearily.

"It went great," said Riker firmly, holding his clothes between his legs.

"*Will*," said Troi in the same tone Geordi had used.

"It did," he insisted, looking down into her eyes. His face was soft, no masks — he let himself look wounded, didn't mind that she saw. "My mission was to get a sense of their social issues — their true social issues, not just the censored version those diplomats tried to sell us. Well, I figured out what I needed to know."

"And then some," Geordi muttered. He clapped Riker on the back as he stepped past. Data watched the gesture and then copied it carefully, mimicking the exact angle and placement of Geordi's palm. Riker offered him a weak twitch of the lips in return — not really a smile, but close enough. As they left, Troi took Riker's hands and rubbed the pads of her thumbs against his fingers in gentle circles.

"Are you alright?" she asked softly.

He huffed, letting the irritation take over and bury all the other emotions swirling inside him. "I will be. It's not like we've never encountered a primitive culture before."

True enough, but still, her heart ached for him. She gave a goodbye nod to O'Brien and hooked her hands around Riker's elbow, leading him out of the transport and into the hall. At least he didn't mind being nude; he scarcely seemed to notice the crewmembers who passed them by. Troi gave Riker some silence to process what had happened as they walked to his quarters. She kept a finger on his emotions, watching the quiet ebb and flow, embarrassment at war with hurt at war with outrage.

"I think Captain Picard would understand if you took some time to yourself before reporting in," Troi said finally, when his emotions had cooled a little.

He sighed through his nose. Inside the turbolift, he adjusted his grip on his clothes a little, loosening up. After all, there wasn't much point in keeping covered up around Deanna. "I think I'll just get it over with," he said, eyes strained.

"It's your choice."

He nodded gratefully.

"...But I do think you should get dressed first."

He looked down at his crumpled clothes like he'd forgotten all about it. A smile cracked through the darkness on his face. "What, you don't think Jean-Luc would approve?"

"He might not care. But you wouldn't want the diplomats in there with him to start chucking vases at your head and calling you a pervert."

Riker barked out a laugh. His blush increased at the same time — still a little raw, but willing to take a joke. While the turbolift hummed and whisked them to Deck 9, he shook out his clothes and got his prosthetic back into place. Troi waited until he had his trousers on to ask the question really weighing on her mind.

"How did she find out, anyway?"

Riker clasped his trousers with a snort. "It, ah, it fell off."

"It fell off?" Troi raised an eyebrow. "It's not supposed to do that."

"No. Well. There was a lot of..." He chewed over his words. "I think the angle of the desk, plus the impact of the paddle, plus my body weight shifting against the release button... plus the way she twisted it..."

"*Twisted* it?"

Riker held his hands up in the universal gesture for peace. "Listen, Deanna, I don't pick apart *your* bedroom experiences."

"But she *twisted* it?"

Riker put on an exaggeratedly dignified expression as he adjusted his tunic. "Please, Deanna, no more questions. I've been through so much today."

He was joking, of course, but he really had been, so Deanna softened up and let the humor die. He almost looked like he regretted saying anything. But then she took his arm and rested her head against his shoulder, and he hesitated a moment before he leaned into the touch. His lips brushed against her hair in a gentle kiss.

"They really *are* unenlightened, Will," Deanna said. "I'm sorry you had to go through this."

He gave a slight shrug, careful not to dislodge her head from his shoulder. "It's okay, really. The Federation is supposed to be free of prejudices like that — but even in Valdez, sometimes..." He trailed off, his eyes distant. But his emotions were steady, stable, so Deanna didn't push. Finally, he took a slow breath and looked back down at her, and this time it was with a smile. Not his usual smile, bright and easy. This one was slow, brittle. But it was real.

"What?" asked Deanna in a murmur.

His eyes trailed over her face. He pursed his lips, but the smile remained. "The Federation is *supposed* to be free of prejudice," he repeated. "The Enterprise truly *is*. I should have thanked Geordi and Data for stepping in."

"You don't need to. You've done the same for them."

"Well, thank *you*, since you're still here."

"Is that all?" asked Deanna.

He let his breath out in a sigh. She could sense his emotions leveling out, the anger and hurt mostly gone. "That's all," he said.

Good, Deanna thought. She squeezed his arm and bumped her head against his biceps in a little nudge.

"Well, don't thank me yet," she said. She imagined Will swinging his prosthetic in the air, red-faced and indignant and totally nude as he shouted at the alien crowd. "Just *wait* till Captain Picard reads my report."

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