

Lean On Me

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/732) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/732>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Star Trek: The Next Generation
Relationship:	William Riker/Worf
Character:	William Riker , Worf
Additional Tags:	Hurt/Comfort , Pre-Slash
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-11-28 Words: 1,612 Chapters: 1/1

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Summary

Riker is injured.

Worf feels like it's his fault.

Worf could fight anything. As security chief, it was his *job* to fight anything ... or to neutralize the threat before a fight could occur. He sparred with Commander Riker every morning to keep in the fighting spirit; he accompanied every away mission he could, especially the dangerous ones; and he could draw his phaser in the blink of an eye.

But this wasn't an angry alien or a wild animal he was dealing with. This was a *mushroom*.

And Commander Riker had crushed it with his boot.

"Ah, damn," said Riker mildly as the mushroom released its spores. Black particles caught on the wind and blew right up Riker's body to land on his exposed hands. It happened in a split second. One moment they were hiking along what seemed a fairly innocuous terrain, admiring the exotic spiky plants and colorful fungi. The next, even as Riker studied the spores on his hand, his face twisted in pain.

"Oh, it *burns*," he said, trying to shake the spores off. His expression didn't match his voice. His voice was calm, conversational, but before he'd even finished, his face collapsed into a rictus of agony. Worf lurched forward, ready to pluck the tiny black specks off Riker's skin, but Riker jerked away. "No, don't touch it!"

Worf froze, his eyes widening. Beneath the spores, Riker's skin began to redden. His eyes squeezed closed; his lips stretched back to bare his teeth in a grimace of pain.

And then the spores *sank*, eating holes in Riker's flesh, dipping into the divots left behind. Blood oozed out around the black specks and dribbled to the ground.

"I don't like that," Worf said.

Riker let out a whimper that might have been a "me neither." He stumbled to the nearest boulder and collapsed onto it. Weakly, holding his wounded hand away from his body, he raised his foot and showed Worf his boot. On the underside, where he'd stepped on the mushroom, some sort of acidic substance had eaten holes in the leather. The same way those spores were eating holes in Riker's skin.

Worf leapt forward and jammed his fingers into the mouth of Riker's boot, all but ripping it away from his foot. He yanked Riker's sock off next, discarding it in the grass, but it was too late. The black specks were just now reaching Riker's foot and eating away at the skin. Another choked cry escaped Riker's lips, all words lost to pain.

"Worf to Enterprise," said Worf, tapping his communicator. Alarm tinged his voice; he reached out and grasped Riker by the forearm, steadying him. "Two to beam up."

The biofilter would take care of the spores, he told himself. It would dissolve them on sight. Then all Beverly would need to patch up was the holes left behind. Riker gasped out, bowing his head as the spores dug deeper. By instinct, it seemed, he reached for Worf with his uninjured hand, fingers twisting in Worf's uniform. Flecks of blood and dissolving flesh dripped from his hand like foam.

Then the beam caught him and Worf had a few blessed seconds where time stood still, where the pain stopped and the guilt froze in its tracks. Where he could pretend Riker wasn't injured at all.

Medbay was quietly busy by the time Worf finished his after-action report. He hadn't unclenched his fists since the moment he surrendered Riker to the medics. Klingon dignity required that he leave Riker alone to suffer — having a witness to one's pain was worse than the pain itself. But human dignity was ... different. Riker was different. The fighting spirit of a Klingon, able to adapt to their customs and eat their food with relish, capable of keeping up with Worf in calisthenics. But sociable, warm, outgoing, and....

Sensitive, Troi had said once. The term still rankled Worf, but perhaps it was applicable. In any case, he suspected Riker would be ... put out, if Worf didn't visit him at least once.

So that was why he did it. Not to set his own mind at ease. Just for Riker.

"Are your wounds healing properly, Commander?" Worf asked, his voice coming out stiff.

Riker glanced up. He'd been moved from the biobed rather recently; his uniform was stained with his own melted flesh and blood, but he flexed his abs and sat up gamely enough. And then swayed. And almost fell off the bed, if Worf hadn't rushed forward to catch him.

"Dizzy," said Riker blithely, resting his head against Worf's chest. "It's the painkillers."

Worf tried not to show how much that worried him. He let Riker lean against him for a moment — a long moment — and then took him gently by the shoulders and pushed him back.

"Your hand...?" Worf asked, scanning down Riker's body to his bandaged hand and foot.

"As good as it can be," said Riker. He held it up so Worf could inspect the bandages. "Whatever was in that mushroom, it's laudably resistant to Bev's cellular regeneration technique. I'll have to heal the old-fashioned way."

Worf had heard the spores reached Riker's bones. He imagined the painstaking process of naturally healing holes in the very marrow of one's skeleton and had to work hard to keep any expression off his face. Somehow, Riker sensed his concern anyway.

"Don't worry, Mr. Worf. Once the flesh heals there's a nifty bone-knitting laser that can work me back together. It'll just take time."

Time. Worf let out his breath in a slow, shuddering sigh. He nodded and paced away from Riker's bed, cognizant of Riker's piercing blue eyes on his back.

"I am pleased to hear this," he said finally. "It would be the height of dishonor to be slain in battle by a fungus."

Riker just laughed. "You wouldn't let a fungus kill me."

"It appears I had no say in the matter," said Worf gravely. Riker waved this argument away with a bandaged hand.

"If you hadn't been there to take my boot off, I'd probably have lost my whole foot."

"I do not consider this a victory," said Worf, eyeing Riker's foot. "As security chief, it is my duty to foresee any threats to my crew."

"*Your crew?*" asked Riker softly, his eyes sparkling.

"*Our crew*," said Worf, bristling.

"Worf, it was a mushroom."

"A mushroom I should have blasted off the face of that godforsaken planet before it ever touched a member of Starfleet," Worf rumbled.

"I'm the one who stepped on it," said Riker, half-laughing now.

"Then I should have grabbed you by the collar like a Klingon monster-pup and ensured you did not hurt yourself," said Worf stiffly.

"Well, I wouldn't protest being carried," said Riker. He settled back on his bed, his injured foot propped up on a pillow. "Bev says I'll be on crutches for a while."

Worf made a thick snarling sound deep in his throat, a sound of Klingon distress. He imagined Riker stumbling through the corridors on crutches, wearing his injury like a humiliating badge of failure. Worf's failure. And he couldn't help but think of the wordless cries of pain Riker had made, the way he clung to Worf as they beamed up and afterward, how the medics had to wrestle his hand out of Worf's so they could transport him to sickbay. All of it melted together in Worf's mind. The pain. The instinctive way Riker looked to him for protection when he was hurt. The weariness still clear on Riker's face, the knowledge that these wounds couldn't be healed in an instant, that he'd be bearing these scars and limping through the corridors for weeks, maybe months, maybe...

"Hey," said Riker. He nudged Worf with his injured foot, then winced. "Mr. Worf, while I appreciate your concern for my well-being, I am a full-grown man, and the first officer of this ship. *My* injuries are not *your* problem."

He started to nudge Worf again, so Worf grabbed him delicately by the toes and lifted his foot away.

"Stop that," Worf grumbled. "You will injure yourself further."

Riker's stern command expression dissolved at once into a boyish grin. "Your concern is touching, Mr. Worf," he said, just cheekily enough that Worf regretted ever visiting him.

"I am *not* concerned."

"Of course not," said Riker politely. "Hey, will you help me to the head?"

Worf gave a short sigh and nodded. Without thinking, he planted a hand between Riker's shoulder blades and helped him sit up. And without thinking, he swung Riker's legs off the bed with one hand looped under his knees, carrying him bridal-style. And Worf made it three steps toward the head before he finally noticed the smug expression on Riker's face.

"I will drop you where I stand," Worf said.

"I'll just have to hold you tighter, then," said Riker, clasping his hands behind Worf's neck. He said it casually, not flirtatiously, but Worf's shoulders hunched and he heard himself growl even as his cheeks warmed.

"Do you *truly* require my assistance to the head?" he asked.

"No," said Riker cheerfully. "I just wanted to see how you'd react."

He laughed as Worf's blush deepened, and he only complained a little when Worf tossed him (gently) onto the bed. With pristine dignity, Riker adjusted his uniform and re-wrapped a bandage that had come loose.

"Dismissed, Mr. Worf," he said in a regal impression of Captain Picard.

Worf was already halfway out the door, chased away by his own damnable blush. His shoulders were up to his ears and he was practically growling, but still, he heard — soft-voiced and affectionate and low — the way that Riker muttered:

"Not concerned, my ass."

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