

Ocean

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by [jamaharon](#)

Summary

Counselor Troi helps Commander Riker apply his sunscreen.

Hours later, he's forming a very interesting tan.

"Counselor."

Troi pushed her sunglasses up to squint at Captain Picard, now dressed in the standard-issue Starfleet swimming trunks. Pillars of sand stuck to his damp legs and he was distinctly sunburnt on the dome of his skull.

"Captain," Troi greeted. "Care to join me? The weather's cool under here."

"Is this a custom weather-control beach umbrella?" Picard asked, eyes glittering.

When Troi just flashed him a wolfish grin, he joined her and breathed a sigh of relief. In the shade, it was a good twenty degrees cooler than out in the sun, where everyone was either sweating or nursing their burnt feet. Or, like Riker, organizing a boisterous game of water volleyball.

"I had a question for you, Counselor," said Picard.

"Ask away, Captain."

He folded his hands over his knees. His eyes drifted. Since they landed on this beautiful planet, Riker had taken over the morale side of things, as he always did. He fit perfectly into the role of a warm, avuncular captain, something Picard treasured about him — especially since Picard still struggled to connect with his crew. He had a natural talent for making everyone feel welcome and treasured, a knack for remembering personal details, likes and dislikes, favorite cocktails ... and he was excellent, too, at stoking half-hidden rivalries when he organized teams. It made for a good show and a great deal of fun for those who deigned to participate, and Riker could usually rope anyone into doing so. Right now, he was laughing uproariously, his hair soaked and dripping after Alexander dunked him underwater.

Picard watched them with a sigh.

"Did you apply Commander Riker's sunblock, Counselor?" he asked.

A mischievous twinkle entered Troi's eyes. She put her sunglasses back on and leaned back in her beach chair, the picture of statuesque dignity.

"Perhaps," she said.

"Then he's unaware of the...peculiar pattern of his suntan," Picard said.

"He may know," said Troi, biting back a smile. "He felt me tracing it on his back, after all."

"Hm..."

In the ocean, Riker spun around with a great splash of water and caught the volleyball against his wrists. It bounced back into the air in a glorious arc, and when Riker turned, he showed his back to the beach. It was still Starfleet-pale along his shoulders and down the edges of

his torso, but in the middle, there was a deep bronze tan in the form of... Well, Worf might have written out some insult. Geordi might have drawn a dirty picture.

Troi had drawn a heart.

Picard glanced sideways at Troi. She was reveling in her mischief. She didn't seem to realize how utterly un-mischievous it was. But maybe — in fact it was quite likely — her impish little grin was less about making mischief and had more to do with what she anticipated when Riker learned what she had done, when he saw the evidence in his bathroom mirror. The softening of his eyes. The slow smile. The slight blush when he realized what kind of message it sent to the other beachgoers, cheeky and possessive.

"A good prank, Counselor," Picard said.

"Thank you, Captain," she said.

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