

Fire

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Summary

A single word from Worf, and suddenly Riker is watching his ship crash all over again.

And there's no one to blame except himself.

It was just a training exercise, which was lucky, because one moment, Commander Riker was standing tall, with his hands folded at the base of his spine and his shoulders straight, surveying the bridge. And the next moment, Lieutenant Commander Worf said, in his steady voice, "Fire!"

And when Riker turned his head to look out the viewport, he was astonished to see a lush green planet hurtling up to meet them.

Not real, he knew at once. Nausea tightened his gut like an iron wire around his intestines, and he'd barely had time to process the vision before he broke out in a trickling sweat that soaked his collar and left his skin prickling. It wasn't real. He'd seen this planet before. He'd watched it grow through the viewport until it was all he could see. Until he could see the people running on the surface, frantic to get away from the Enterprise as it crashed — and the cities racing by underneath them, so heavily populated, so full of potential casualties — and Deanna at the helm, her shoulders tight, her teeth gritted, her anxiety screaming in his head.

He looked at the helm. Mr. Worf was sitting there, he knew. But it was Deanna he saw, Deanna as she'd been that day. And when he tried to find his voice, it strangled to death inside his throat.

Because she was at the helm. On the bridge. And if they crashed, she'd take the brunt of it. They'd lose her. He'd lose her.

And he could feel the fire licking at his feet even now.

Imzadi, said a gentle voice inside his head.

That, too, could have been a remainder of the crash. She'd called to him during the fire, through the choking smoke. But then, her voice had been laced with pain, with fear, and he'd been injured, frantic to find her, his uniform melting to his skin. But now, all he felt was a wave of ice-cool calm.

Look at me, she said, and despite himself, Riker turned to the helm. This time, when he blinked, he saw the station as it really was, with Worf in the chair. He almost stumbled when he spun around to see Deanna.

She gave him a gentle smile. In her mind — not physically, but mentally — she beckoned to him, held out her hand, wanted to feel his fingers curling around hers. Riker let himself imagine it: her skin against his, her palm against his palm, that light squeeze she liked to give him whenever they locked hands. He still saw the fire eating his boots, his trouser legs, still felt its heat against his skin, and that dull roar in his ears, pulsing to his heartbeat: *Your fault your fault your fault*—

But he took his seat next to Deanna and wiped the sweat from his forehead and said, steady and clear, "Once more, Commander."

"Aye, sir," Worf said. He readied the dummy lasers for one more round of target practice. "On my count. Three...two...one..."

Riker glanced at Deanna. She glanced at him. He half-expected to see the reflection of a fire in her eyes, the same thing he'd seen that day when he found her in the rubble and pulled her to her feet. But he saw nothing but himself, and in his eyes, of course, she saw nothing but her.

"Fire," Worf said, and Riker, still looking at Deanna, relaxed in his seat.

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