

Fruit

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Summary

“Diabolical,” Troi said.

“Maybe.”

“Conduct unbecoming of an officer,” she said, searching for a better foothold on the alien tree.

“Well, that’s a little too far,” said Riker with a grin.

The insides were a pale, glistening orange-pink, almost like a sunset over water. It tasted sugary-sweet, almost painful when it hit the teeth.

“It’d make for a great burrata,” Riker said, wiping the fruit juice from his chin. “This, plus some tomatoes...”

“Please don’t ruin a perfectly good fruit by subjecting it to your cooking, Commander.”

Another fruit fell to the ground at his feet and thumped in the grass — elegant and wild, with feathery blue blades that reached up to Riker’s knees. He angled his head up to watch Troi climb a little higher, arm outstretched to shake a branch overhead. For a moment, he was young again — back on Betazed, watching her climb steadily up the twisted trunk of a local tree, her muscles shifting beneath her clothes. Graceful like a gymnast. And then she’d challenged him to a feat of endurance, both of them hanging from separate branches and fighting their bodyweight, and she’d won. She’d won by a mile.

Mouth dry, Riker took another bite of fruit. “You need any help?” he called.

Troi just laughed. “I don’t think these branches could hold you, Commander.”

“Well, I’ll just supervise,” he said, “and catch you when you slip.”

She gave him a disapproving glare and shook the branch hard. Another three fruits fell to the ground and Riker gathered them up in his wicker basket. Guinan would be thrilled when he brought these back. They’d make for fantastic margaritas, too. Or bellinis. Or hell, even cobbles, but he suspected most of the crew would prefer cocktails to desserts.

He was so deep in thought that he didn’t hear the next piece of fruit coming until it thumped him on the skull.

“Foul play,” he said at once, rubbing the knot on his head.

Troi gave him a cheeky grin. “Don’t be so distracted, Commander,” she said. “You’re protecting me, aren’t you? What if a wild animal charged in while you were daydreaming about...”

She gave him a knowing look.

“About...?” Riker said, calling her bluff. “Go on. Tell me. What was I daydreaming about?”

Troi blushed and looked away, archly shaking the next branch.

“I was daydreaming about cocktails, for your information,” Riker said, a smile tugging at his lips. “Prosecco and a fruit puree. Or some

tequila, some Triple Sec, some lime juice—”

“I didn’t take you for such an alcoholic,” Troi said, stretching for the branch to her left, laden with pink fruit.

“I’m not,” Riker said. “But I am a dedicated poker player, Counselor. And it’s never easier to win a game of poker than when your opponents are all drunk.”

“Diabolical,” Troi said.

“Maybe.”

“Conduct unbecoming of an officer,” she said, searching for a better foothold on the alien tree.

“Well, that’s a little too far,” said Riker with a grin. He held out his basket, anticipating the next round of falling fruit. “If you’re *that* up in arms about it, you can always join me. Maybe after you win a hand or two, you won’t—”

The branch beneath her foot snapped.

Troi slipped.

Things happened fast after that. The basket of fruit crashed to the ground at Riker’s feet, and he smashed straight through the wicker as he leaped forward. There was a bone-jarring thud of weight against his body as Troi fell into his arms — a wrenching of his back that left him crying out even before they hit the ground — and then the hard, flat earth rising up to meet them.

And Troi’s hair tickling his face. And her body against his, small and delicate, her chest rising and falling as she caught her breath. And that beautiful blue grass arcing up over their heads, dappling the silver sky, and the smashed pieces of fruit all around them, that tangy, sweet scent in the air.

Troi put both hands on his chest and pushed herself up, straddling his waist.

“Are you alright?” she asked breathlessly.

“Are you?” Riker asked, his back twinging.

“You’re in pain.” She was probing his mind now. “Your back...”

“I’m fine.” His hands settled automatically on her hips. With his thumb, he traced a circle on her hip bone. “Deanna...”

Her eyes widened at the use of her first name, even though he’d said it a million times before. Even though they were constantly slipping. A light flush colored her cheeks, the same pretty pink as the fruit.

“What?” she asked, and her body was warm against his, and Riker reached up, slow and gentle, and cupped her cheek in his palm. He pulled her closer and she leaned in readily, almost eagerly, until their lips were almost touching. “What?” she said again, searching his face.

“You have fruit juice all over you,” Riker said, and he turned her face to the side and licked the juice off her cheek like a dog greeting his favorite human at the door.

“William Riker!”

He was laughing too hard to care about being scolded.

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