

Death Letter Blues

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Death Letter Blues

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Summary

It's Picard's job to tell Commander Riker that his father has died. It's not a job he relishes.

But the news doesn't seem to bother Will at all.

Notes

Heavily inspired by Gail Christison's "The Daedalus Factor", which I had just read in Make It So #7 when I wrote this fic. But Gail's story veered too close to the show's tone re: Kyle for my taste, and I wanted to explore it from a less Kyle-friendly POV, with a little hint of slash thrown in to boot.

Picard knew Kyle Riker was dead — he'd been the one to deliver the news to his first officer. But anyone who saw Will Riker in the hallways in the days after his father's death might question it, because there was no sign that Kyle's son was grieving.

Riker declined his bereavement leave and showed up to his bridge shift the way he always did, with a bounce in his step and a wry sparkle in his eye. He teased Lieutenant Worf; he flirted with the diplomats who had come aboard two days before; he arrived on time (so Picard had heard) for his jazz band in Ten-Forward, and performed admirably (and even, Guinan said, stayed a little later than usual, so caught up in the fun that he lost track of time). In the weeks after Kyle's death, Riker amicably refused counseling, gently rebuffed Wesley's good-natured offers to talk, and went about business as usual.

But today, finally, Commander Riker was on leave.

This was not related to Kyle. Picard knew that; Riker had submitted his one-week leave request two months ago, before Kyle died, and Picard had stamped his signature. It was rare for an officer's leave requests to sync up with the *Enterprise's* course through the stars, so holodeck leave requests were not uncommon. Last Picard had heard, Riker intended to spend his week camping in the simulated wilderness of Alaska.

Of home.

The creek bubbled, cold water pushing through cracks in the flimsy ice shelves that still bisected the river here and there. The stones were coated in a slick layer of algae and frost, dangerous to step on, but in-between, wherever possible, one could glimpse the flash of sunlight off silvery fish scales as they wound their sinuous bodies through the gaps.

Snow blanketed the forest; here, where an antique tent was propped up, Riker had scraped the drifts away with his hands, exposing hard earth underneath. At night time, northern lights would turn the sky a wavering green, and one could be forgiven for thinking this was a simulation of Alaska in mid-winter. But as Picard picked his way through the snow, it was a brisk four degrees, warm enough that his insulated uniform kept the chill at bay.

He knocked a clump of snow off the tent to announce his presence. Even before he rounded the corner, he could see Riker's long legs poking out of the tent flap, his boots warming by the fire. Riker leaned forward, eyebrows rising as he saw the captain.

"I was just making coffee," he said, and sure enough, there was a pot simmering over the fire, real old-fashioned coffee bubbling inside.

Picard took a seat at Riker's side and accepted a cup.

"This is quite the antique," he said, nodding toward the tent.

A ghost of a smile touched Riker's eyes. "That's Alaska for you," he said. "Any other place, they'd give you a collapsible shelter and a hoverlift to carry it. In Alaska, you're lucky to get a bundle on a stick."

Picard hummed noiselessly. "You might have programmed the holodeck for a shelter with indoor plumbing, of course." He glanced up at the pale sun. "As you programmed it, I presume, for summer temperatures with a winter view."

Riker grinned at that and checked the coffee. "Not my idea," he swore. "That's the damn safety protocols coming into play. I guess the *Enterprise* doesn't much like the idea of her first officer freezing to death on Deck Four."

"Indeed not," Picard grumbled. He accepted a speckled cup of coffee, the heavy ceramic warm against his hands. Riker made one for himself and was already drinking it before he sat back down, never-mind the scalding of his lips. Subtly, Picard peeked past him to the mouth of the tent, primitive, with no amenities — just a patched red bedroll, faded from years of camping in the sun, and a battered tackle box that had once been green and was now a colorless gray. A child, decades ago, had used his house key to scratch his initials into the plastoid: W.T.R.

"May I?" asked Picard, gesturing to the tackle box.

"Mm," said Riker. He flapped his hand, too busy sipping coffee to give a proper response. Picard only got a quick glimpse of him as he reached for the box, but that glimpse stamped itself right onto the pleating of his brain: the part of Riker's lips, the boyish fall of hair over his forehead, the stark lines of his lashes over closed, deep-set eyes.

He didn't look like he was grieving. He looked sleepy, content, like a steady, hard-working first officer taking a much-needed break. A first officer, Picard thought, who had been alone since junior high; who had learned how to rely on himself for survival, how to lead others and stay calm in a time of crisis; who had not, in the 20 years since Kyle Riker left, asked anyone for help. With anything. At all.

Picard flipped the tackle box open and studied its contents, hand-tied fishing lures, thread and feathers expertly wound together around the barbed silver flash of a hook. He glanced out at the river, some old memory turning in his head.

"This must be Curtis Creek," he guessed.

Riker twisted his lips into something resembling a smile. "Did I tell you about that?"

"You mentioned it," said Picard, "when I invited you to join me in the horseback riding simulator—"

"Invited? You damn near ordered me!" Riker laughed.

"—and we had that mild tumble into the waterway," Picard finished. "I believe you said, 'I haven't inhaled that much water since I fell into Curtis Creek, winter of '45.'"

"It was spring," said Riker, amused. "Otherwise I wouldn't have survived. And besides, we weren't really in danger of drowning in that simulation. I was more worried about breaking our necks."

"Balderdash," said Picard. "This holodeck has a cushioned floor."

"Does this feel *cushioned* to you?" asked Riker, rapping on the hard earth beneath them. He stretched out his legs with a groan. "I'm numb just from sitting here."

"Well, clearly you don't get enough practice in the camping simulator," Picard said. His voice softened a little. "You'll have to use it more often."

Riker glanced out at the river, the sparkle in his eyes more genuine now. Steam wafted up from his cup of coffee, held so carefully between two hands. It touched his lips, moved up his cheekbones, obscured his eyes.

"No," he said finally. "This isn't Curtis Creek."

Picard glanced sideways at him. Slowly, Riker's chest rose and fell.

"It's—" He met Picard's gaze, a hint of self-deprecating humor shining through. But for what reason, Picard couldn't guess. "Well, I don't know the name," Riker said, "if it even has one. But it was my favorite spot for a while, as a kid." Back to the water, to the slow-moving fish and melting ice, his eyes went distant again. "I'd sneak out to Curtis Creek in the mornings to fish, and in the evenings, I'd sneak out *here*, just to enjoy the quiet."

Picard thought of Riker's jazz band in Ten-Forward, of his easy sociable manner with members of the crew, and said, "Forgive me, but it is a tad difficult to imagine *you* seeking out quiet, Number One."

Riker grinned. "Well, sometimes I had company," he acknowledged, flushing a little.

"Your father?" asked Picard, searching Riker's face.

Slowly, the glimpses of humor boxed themselves up and disappeared. "Just friends," said Riker with a stiff shrug. "Lovers, when I got older. My father didn't come here."

“Then you discovered this location on your own?” asked Picard. He could imagine a young Riker exploring the woods by himself, making a map of the wilderness in his backyard. But Riker shook his head.

“No, actually — the *first* time I came here, yes, it was with Kyle. He took me camping here when I was eight. But after that, it was just me. I asked him to come back a dozen times, but he never did.” He shrugged again, his eyes tracking the brown leathery scales of an Alaska blackfish in the water. Then he raised his cup of coffee, pointing down the river. “See that flash of red?”

Picard turned, but all he saw was froth. Riker eased his cup of coffee closer, tracing the fish’s approach.

“It’s a Dolly Varden trout,” he said. “Beautiful fish, bright green scales with a red streak on its belly. The meat is pink, like salmon. I caught one for the first time when I was nine, but I couldn’t bear to eat it.”

He put a palm over his stomach as if remembering a long night of hunger, and then it crystallized in Picard’s brain that for all the nights he spent here camping as a child, even before Kyle Riker left, Will depended on himself for food. He spotted the fish as it darted by, pink spots shining in the light, and his mouth went dry.

“Is that really how you like your coffee?” he heard himself ask, his voice so stiff it was almost harsh. Riker looked at him in surprise.

“Sir?”

The confused furrow of his brow was somehow too much. Picard stood, dusting off his uniform, and pointed impatiently at Riker’s ceramic mug.

“You take it black,” he said almost disapprovingly.

“Yes…” said Riker. He glanced down into his cup, a bemused smile tracing his lips. “It’s how I’ve always had it.”

“But is that the way you *like* it, Number One?” Picard persisted. “Is it to your *taste*?”

Riker just stared up at him, confused but smiling, and in his eyes there was a numbness, a flatness, that went down to his soul. Pale, blue, the same color as a melting river in early spring, or shadows on the snow at dusk.

“If I’m honest,” said Riker, “this is just how my dad made it on that first camping trip, when I was eight. I’ve never tried it any other way.”

He gestured for Picard to sit down, but didn’t seem particularly put out when Picard walked away instead. Riker balanced his cup of coffee on the rocky ground and reached for his tackle box, thumbing through the lures he’d tied in his spare time. The crunch of snow faded as Picard disappeared through the arch, leaving Riker alone again: just himself, the bubble of the river, the soft tickle of feathers and the scratch of twine against his thumb. He’d been looking forward to this trip for months now, in a low-level back-of-the-mind way — he’d known he would enjoy it, and he’d known too that he would start to miss his crew, the busy day-to-day of shipboard housekeeping, and that he would cut his vacation short to be with them again. But neither of those predictions were true now. He tried to motivate himself to bait the line, but instead his hands released the fishing lure of their own volition and closed the tackle box. He traced the scratches in the plastoid case — his initials, from his first-ever fishing trip with Dad — and set the box aside. With his knees curled up to his chest, he laced his fingers around his shins and stared out at the river, trying to instead build up the urge to leave. To go back on-duty, or just take his leave from bridge shifts and wander the ship like a civilian.

But that didn’t sound appealing — and it didn’t sound *un* appealing — and his dad was dead — and it didn’t sound like anything at all.

“Arch,” came Picard’s striking voice, and Riker sat up a little straighter, blinking in surprise. He composed his features, listening to the slow crunch of footsteps on the snow. He hadn’t expected Picard to come back, but here he was, his stern face set in a noble scowl that wasn’t at all convincing. He sat down brusquely at Riker’s side.

“Take this,” he ordered, and he held out a silver canister. Their fingers brushed as Riker took it, a flash of warmth, of skin on skin, before he registered the chill of metal against his hand. He uncapped the canister even as he said,

“What is it?”

“Cream,” said Picard.

Riker barked out a surprised laugh. Then he cut himself off, staring in astonishment as Picard handed him a little porcelain dish filled with sugar cubes. He must have printed it straight from a replicant template, probably one intended more for children’s tea parties than for adult use.

“What…?” said Riker.

“Modify it to your taste, Number One,” said Picard, “or hand me your coffee and I will do it for you.”

The arch tone of command faltered a little as he spoke, until his voice had softened and he was looking at Will with unguarded eyes. Speechless, Will handed his cup of coffee to Picard and watched him work. The black, untainted bitterness inside turned a sweet-looking shade of brown, light and appetizing, a swirl of white that leaked into the black and softened it into velvet. Picard stirred in two sugar cubes and presented the cup of coffee to Will like it was a gift.

Will hesitated. A tremor knocked his fingers against the ceramic before he managed to grab hold. He stared down into the light-colored coffee, inhaled the scent, not sure what to think.

“You ruined it,” he said softly, half-smiling.

Picard laced his fingers over his knees and said nothing. Until now, although Will knew intellectually that Picard's eyes were hazel, he'd never really seen it. Something about the lighting on the bridge, or the severity of command decisions, seemed to turn them a shade of brown so dark it was almost black. But here in the snow, in sunlight, it was easier to tell, and it made him look younger somehow. Open, easier to read.

Will took a sip of coffee. He let the heat, the flavor, rest on his tongue, and he was eight years old again, trying not to make a face as he forced himself to swallow the bitter coffee Dad had brewed because he knew it was all Kyle Riker had brought to drink — and he was fifteen years old again, making the same dark coffee for himself in a desperate bid to keep awake at school after staying up all night to fix the house's broken heating unit — and he was twenty years old, at the Academy, watching his classmates load their coffee up with milk and sugar, thinking in amazement, *You can do that?* And then deciding *not* to do it for himself.

Why? Because he was used to the taste by then. Because he liked the bitterness, or thought he did. Because he'd never had it any other way.

Will closed his eyes.

"How is it?" Picard asked softly, gruffly, and now he was close enough that his arm touched Will's, body heat seeping through their clothes. Will searched for his voice and found it low and hoarse.

"It's sweet," he said.

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