

## Boys Don't Cry

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## Boys Don't Cry

by [jamaharon](#)

### Summary

Kyle Riker causes cross-generational damage wherever he goes.

### Notes

This is mostly canon-compliant, with some small tweaks - Kyle Riker is still alive, and Will Riker leaves the Titan when Thad is 8, but continues taking off-world assignments from time to time. (Actually, for all I know, that last part is canon; I can't remember when Riker canonically left the Titan to settle on Nepenthe).

Kestra was four when she met "Grandpa". He wrinkled his nose at her and said, "Call me Kyle," his voice clipped in a way adults had rarely, maybe never, used with Kestra to that point. Kestra shrugged the command off without concern; the concept of "grandpa" was entirely new to her anyway. Until yesterday, when she felt the spark of dismay in Captain Will Riker, she hadn't even known her dad *had* a dad.

"Oh, God," he'd muttered from the other room. "We're supposed to provide *transport*."

"About time you got a taste of it," Mom teased. "All those times the Enterprise escorted my mother..."

Dad just gave her an aggrieved look, mostly feigned. But his discomfort was real, and he'd certainly made himself scarce once Kyle arrived. With Mom in the counselor's office and Dad on the bridge, the distasteful task of hospitality fell to the kids. At noontime, Thad and Kestra were stuck in the family quarters, sitting on their hands while Kyle pattered around the kitchen.

"...making food for a bunch of toddlers," he was muttering to himself. "...Starfleet Intelligence...fifty-five years of my life..."

"He's not actually angry," Thad whispered to Kestra.

"I know," she whispered back, offended. Her empathic powers were better than Thad's, in her humble opinion. She eyed the old man as he picked through Dad's cooking utensils. "Why doesn't he just use the replicator?"

"I know my way around the kitchen, young lady," said Kyle waspishly. "Your dad learned how to cook from *me*."

Thad and Kestra shared an unimpressed look.

"Now, what do you want to eat?" Kyle asked, his gnarled hands planted on his hips.

Thad would want the same thing he always ate; he refused to change it up. Usually Dad was happy to make something different for Kestra, but she wasn't sure Kyle would offer the same leniency. She glanced sideways at Thad.

"Cheese toastie and tomato soup, please," Thad said.

Kyle gave a flamboyant little bow, and Kestra and Thad cracked their first smiles. Beside her, she could feel Thad's tension waning. His stomach always got tied into knots when their schedule changed, when they ate anywhere other than home, anything other than Dad's cooking. He claimed it made him sick.

“How old are you, kids?” Kyle asked as he worked the stove.

“Four,” Kestra said, her voice piping from the kitchen table. “And Thad’s six.”

“Six?” Kyle gave them a quick backward look, his eyes hooded. “You ever cook, Thad?”

“No,” said Thad, mystified by the question.

“We could get you a little stool, help you reach the stove.”

Thad just looked at Kestra, puzzled. She shrugged.

“What about dishes?” Kyle asked in the same pleasant voice, barely audible over the pop and hiss of sizzling butter. “You ever wash the dishes?”

“Wash?” Thad asked.

“What do you do, just put them in the matter reclamator?”

“Yeah...”

What else would they do? Kestra mouthed a question to Thad, and it was his turn to shrug. As if he sensed the question, Kyle said,

“Back home in Alaska, I used to make your dad hand-wash the dishes after every meal.”

“Dad makes us wash our hands *before* eating,” Kestra said.

Kyle stifled a laugh. He moved away from the strangely tense topic of hand-washing, his voice drifting off into the past as he cooked. He told them about Alaska — which Kestra imagined to be a sunny tropical place with purple palm trees, like Thad’s imaginary Mellis Island — and the hunting trips he took Dad on as a kid, which made Thad’s eyes sting and Kestra’s stomach twist. Kyle caught sight of their queasy faces as he turned around, two plates at the ready.

“Oh, you’ll get used to it,” he said dismissively. “Your dad wasn’t happy the first time he killed anything, but...”

“Then why?” asked Thad, his voice small.

“In some places, you just have to. Your food doesn’t come ready-made from a replicator, or hand-delivered by a house chef.” Kyle slid the plates in front of them. Melted cheese poured out from between two slices of crusty, wrong-looking bread. While the kids stared, horrified, at their plates, Kyle set down two wooden bowls filled to the brim with toxic red sludge. Thad blanched, his eyes darting over the white streaks in the cheese, the pink slices of ham, the glint of green vegetables floating in his tomato soup.

“This isn’t a cheese toastie,” said Kestra. Beside her, she sensed Thad’s emotions rising in a squall.

“Yes, it is,” said Kyle patiently. “There’s even cheese baked into the bread.”

“It’s *not* a cheese toastie,” said Thad, sounding choked.

“Yes, it *is*,” said Kyle again, a bit less patiently. “It’s my own recipe. Look. Bread, butter, cheese, ham...”

Thad ground his fists into his eyes at the word ‘ham’.

“Your father loved this recipe when he was a kid,” Kyle complained.

“Not with *ham*,” Thad protested, his voice small and broken. Kyle went still, his eyes sharpening like a shark sensing blood in the water. Slowly, he narrowed in on Thad.

“Are you crying, Thaddeus?” he asked softly.

Thad nodded, still covering his eyes.

“He always cries when—” Kestra started, but Kyle shushed her without even glancing her way.

“Look at me,” said Kyle, his voice laced with command. “Thaddeus, uncover your eyes.”

Sniffing, Thad obeyed. Kyle held his gaze, cool and unimpressed. Kestra could sense the guilt and concern beneath the surface, a fainter version of what Mom and Dad felt whenever the kids cried, but she doubted Thad could sense the same.

“You’re too old to cry, Thaddeus,” said Kyle flatly. “Especially not over a grilled cheese sandwich.”

“It’s *supposed* to be a cheese toastie,” Thad choked out. “Not a grilled cheese.”

“It’s the same thing!” said Kyle, exasperated. He sat heavily across from Thad, his face hardening a little as he took Thad’s chin in his hand. “Boys don’t cry,” he said firmly.

Kestra and Thad stared back at him silently, Thad’s face still streaming with tears. Shock and confusion pulsed between them in a shared brainwave. Thad mopped the tears from his face and shot Kestra a questioning look.

*Boys don't cry*, Kestra mused.

....*Since when?*

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"Your dad is simply a crier," said Mom matter-of-factly, adjusting the ceremonial pins on Kestra's tunic. "He can't help that."

"He could *try*," Kestra said, and she felt the warm brush of Mom's breath on her face as she huffed out a laugh. Thad stood beside Kestra, only seven, but tall enough to fall in rank with the twelve-year-olds during ship events. Only today they wouldn't be standing in the ranks, where they could whisper and play quiet games. Today they'd be forced out in front of everybody just to give Dad some flowers.

Kestra wrinkled her nose.

"I don't want to give him flowers," she said.

Mom half-smiled. "And why not?" she asked lightly, tugging on the hem of Kestra's tunic. "Are you angry with him?"

"I *will* be if he cries in front of everybody," Kestra decided, though really she just hated this uniform. Mom gave her a funny look.

"Your father is retiring his command," she said. "It's a big moment for him."

"So?"

Mom considered it, head cocked. "If you deliver the bouquet all grumpy, it might worry him."

"It won't worry him," Thad broke in, his voice soft and sure. "He'll think it's funny."

Kestra stamped her foot. "He *will*, Mom! And you do, too, I can tell!"

Mom tried not to laugh. "Alright, well, what about you, Thad? Will you deliver the flowers?"

Thad gave Kestra a smug holier-than-thou look that made her leap for the bouquet.

"I'll do it!" she shouted, almost crushing the flowers between her palms. "Geez, Mom!"

"You'll *both* do it," said Mom warmly, guiding Thad's hand until his fingers closed around the bundle of flower stems. "Get ready."

Onstage, the speaker — some old Admiral that Kestra didn't know — droned to a halt. Mom pushed Kestra and Thad out ahead of her and then took the lead, striding through the bright lights to Dad's side with a natural poise that always reminded Kestra of a princess. Embarrassment and affection rolled off Dad in waves; he was the life of the party, as Mom said, but he didn't care for the spotlight. He held his hand out to Mom, a smile tugging at his lips, and then glanced down and saw his grumpy, well-dressed children and their mangled bouquet.

His face crumpled.

"Oh man," Kestra muttered.

"Don't cry," Thad whispered, horrified, but it was too late. Dad scooped them both up, already in tears, and crushed them to his chest. The bouquet fell to the floor while Thad and Kestra resisted the hug, squirming in his arms. "*Dad!*" Thad cried.

Dad just lowered his head and squeezed them tighter, sniffing audibly. Kestra twisted her head to look at the audience, ready to fight anyone who was watching — but they were *all* watching. And smiling. And clapping.

Resigned, Kestra leaned into the hug.

"You're so gross, Dad," she whispered.

He just laughed.

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"Nepenthe is way cooler than a starship," Kestra declared, her voice ringing out through the forest. Ahead, the crunch of dead leaves and old twigs quieted as Dad stopped in his tracks. He looked over his shoulder at her, eyebrows raised.

"Really?" he asked.

Kestra and Thad exchanged a 'well, duh' glance.

"Yeah," Kestra said. "It's *way* better."

A grin started in Dad's eyes and quickly spread across his face. "The great outdoors," he said with relish. "You know, I'll never knock the holodeck, but there's some things you just can't replicate."

Kestra gave him a solemn nod. Like the smell of decaying wood and brittle autumn leaves, or the whisper of cold wind against your face. Even the textures were subtly different. She'd never realized before, but everything in the holodeck was a little too rubbery, too smooth. The real world was so detailed that she could sit in a tree hollow and stare at the damp black bark for hours, memorizing the pockmarks and whorls, each one like a fingerprint left behind by some dead or sleeping giant.

And Dad had grown up someplace like this, and he'd abandoned it to live on a crappy starship. That was something Kestra just couldn't comprehend.

Ahead of her, Dad had marched on, but now he stopped again and raised his hand.

"What?" Kestra asked, then covered her mouth, eyes wide. She'd forgotten the hand signals they developed before going out. Thad shot her a reproving look, but Dad just looked amused. He motioned for Kestra and Thad to join him ... then winced at the loud crackle of debris under their feet.

They settled in at his side, leaning on a fallen log. Kestra burrowed into her dad's warmth and peered out at the clearing ahead of her. A sandy-furred little animal stood just meters away, its beady eyes blinking at the sky.

Dad gestured for Kestra and Thad to raise their bows. He'd helped them make the bows just yesterday, a long afternoon of carving and sanding, with sawdust tickling Kestra's nose and making her sneeze. She struggled to notch an arrow, but it kept falling limply away from the string. Quietly, Dad shifted onto his side and helped her, holding the arrow straight.

He was so focused on her that he didn't notice when Thad's arrow lanced out and caught the little animal in the throat.

Thad made a choking sound as the animal fell, his eyes wide and horrified. Dad bolted upright, an autumn leaf caught in his hair.

"Good shot, Thad," he said, but his voice was laced with concern. "I didn't think — are you alright?"

Thad turned away from both of them. The tips of his ears turned red as he struggled not to cry. Kestra's heart pounded, sharing Thad's mortification, his memory of what Kyle Riker told them. Dad, though, just looked baffled. He put a large hand on Thad's shoulder and gently pulled him into a hug.

"It's okay, Thad," said Kestra awkwardly. "That was a piklie. Piklies have a religion that makes them *want* to die."

"What?" said Thad and Dad at the same time, one of them trying not to sob and the other trying not to laugh.

"It's true!" said Kestra with all the authority she could muster. "Picklies long for the sweet release of death. I read about it in Thad's book."

"Picklies aren't real," said Thad, his tearful voice muffled against Dad's jacket. "I made them up."

"Or maybe you're an oracle, and the stuff you make up is all told to you by the wood spirits," Kestra said stubbornly. Dad made a strange coughing noise as he tried not to laugh. He patted Thad on the back and then hoisted him up, letting him hide his face against Dad's shoulder.

"Maybe we'll save the hunting lesson for another day," Dad said, holding out a hand to Kestra. "Tell me more about these picklies."

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It was rare that Dad "had" to go back to the Titan, but Mom said it was necessary.

"If your father didn't go back sometimes, he'd die of boredom," she said.

Dad didn't seem bored to Kestra. When he was with them on Nepenthe, for months at a time, he was easily the happiest person Kestra knew. The other dads seemed like pale, thin shadows next to him. He could play with Thad and Kestra in the woods for hours, until the cold had turned their noses red, and then he carried both of them home like they weighed nothing; he flew Thad to his doctor's appointments every week and kept up a cheerful stream of chatter the whole way, pretending not to understand Thad's worldbuilding just to provoke him into talking more; he hosted parties on the lake where the sunset was like melted butter reflecting in the water, prepared feasts where the spices either danced on Kestra's tongue or made her esophagus close up, played poker, harassed Kestra and Thad with his trombone—

But when he left for Starfleet, he always came back seeming calmer, more relaxed. When he came back, he took Mom's hand with a silent smile, hugged Thad and Kestra without a word, without any jokes. It was always a quiet night when he came back: gentle music, crackling fires, companionable silence, a hint of melancholy to be away from Starfleet, and soul-deep joy to be back with his family.

When he came back. *If* he came back.

One day, Dad didn't come back.

"Your father is dealing with a serious incident," Mom said, her face drawn. Kestra's empathic abilities were fading by that point — and Thad's had faded entirely — but she could sense concern in Mom's mind, light enough that she knew Dad himself wasn't in trouble, serious enough that it made Kestra's stomach tighten into knots.

"What kind of incident?" Thad asked, and Kestra could see from his face that he was scared to ask it.

"Some of his crewmen were killed on an away mission," Mom said, her voice gentle. She drew them to her to explain. "Your father still feels as though he's the captain. Every death feels like it's his fault. You remember when Ensign Wheeler died? Kestra, you would have been four..."

She remembered. She'd woken up to a wave of guilt and grief, all of it coming from Mom and Dad's bedroom. And she'd sneaked out of bed and padded to the door in her bare feet. It whisked open when she neared it, treating her to a glimpse of darkness inside, of Mom sitting up in bed with her arms curled around Dad's shoulders, his face hidden, his fingers tight against Mom's hip. He didn't stop crying when Kestra came in, but he caught his breath, wiped his face, asked her what was wrong. Wordlessly, Kestra climbed into bed with

them, let herself be sandwiched between Mom and Dad until the quiet crying stopped.

“He still feels that way,” Mom said. “Some days worse than others. And when something bad happens, it’s your father’s job to let the families know.”

“So he’s not coming back?” asked Thad warily.

“He’s coming back,” Mom promised.

And he did, but he came back pale.

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Dad had been known to cry when reunited with old friends, or when saying goodbye to them; Kestra would never forget the way Uncle Worf stormed off in a huff when Dad’s voice broke, as if the sign of weakness offended him. Dad cried sometimes when listening to music, especially if he remembered it from his childhood, and if Kestra caught him listening alone, she could sometimes coax him into telling stories about Grandma, a woman she’d never met.

Dad could sometimes be caught wiping away tears when Mom explained in detail the plot of a sad novel she’d read ... and he was never embarrassed about it, either. He broke down in the transport once, on the way back from the hospital, and sent Kestra and Thad inside so he could be alone. He occasionally got misty-eyed when teaching Kestra something new, or walking through the woods on a particularly beautiful day. He had been known, sometimes, to choke up on holo-calls, and he never bothered to hide it.

By the time she turned twelve, Kestra had probably seen Dad cry hundreds of times. But he didn’t cry at Thad’s funeral.

Photos and drawings lined the walls; she remembered that sunny day when Dad constructed a homemade deckle and mold for them using old picture frames, and when she closed her eyes she could call up the scent of boiled plant pulp, the mushy feeling of it against her palms as she and Thad made paper sheets to draw on. Thad’s favorite necklace, made of seashells that glimmered pink in the light, or white in the shadows, hung on the loop of his urn; Mom had been with them that day, barefoot in the creek, as they dipped their hands in mud to collect the shells.

Dad, voice husky, had claimed this morning that he didn’t want a funeral, didn’t believe in them — but it was a human burial rite, Mom said, so she insisted. For Kestra, apart from Starfleet memorial ceremonies, it was her first.

She held Mom’s hand. She listened to the perfunctory speeches from family friends. She shook hands with Kyle, his face drawn and pale, and with funeral guests who had stopped seeing her as Kestra and started seeing her as the dead boy’s sister. She looked at the museum of Thad’s life, the handmade dictionaries and maps of fantasy worlds, the paper drawings and seashell necklace, and wondered if her parents would keep all her embarrassing childhood stuff too, or if they’d be less careful to preserve it, since she was still here.

She kept an eye on her dad, who stared past the urn with unseeing eyes.

He didn’t cry once.

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“You know,” Mom said a week later, her voice slow, “when I met your father, he didn’t know how to cry.”

They sat at a hand-carved table halfway between the kitchen and the living room. Kestra vaguely remembered watching Dad build this, getting in his way — Thad trying to help, only to get scooped up and wheeled through the air. She ran her thumbnail over a crude picture she’d scratched into the wood surface when she was nine. One of Thad’s fantasy creatures, a squirrel warrior, rendered by a child’s unskilled hand.

“Did you hear me, Kestra?” Mom asked softly.

Kestra glanced up. Darkness battered at the windows; it was night on Nepenthe, with no moonlight shining through, and Dad was down at the lake. Had *been* down at the lake for hours, alone, with his hands shoved in his pockets.

“I brought him a sandwich,” said Kestra, her voice small. “He wouldn’t eat it.”

Mom’s eyes softened. Her hand shifted across the table to cover Kestra’s. “He’s going to be okay, Kestra. *We all* are. It’s just that...”

Kestra swallowed against a tightness in her throat. She searched for something to distract her.

“What do you mean, he didn’t know how to cry?”

Mom caught her breath and sat back, eyes stormy. Once, Kestra would have been able to read her, regardless of how closed-off her face was. But now she had nothing to go on but Mom’s expression: distant, a little affectionate, a lot sad.

“You know, his mother died when he was very young,” Mom said.

Kestra hadn’t known. She’d *assumed*, but it was something Dad never talked about. Thad told her once — she blinked, her vision blurring. Thad told her once that he believed, until age 13, that Grandma must still be in Alaska somewhere, listening to the blues. From the way Dad talked about her, she’d never died. She’d just faded out of his life somehow, the same way Kyle did.

“He was five years old when it happened,” Mom said. “Do you know what his father told him at the funeral?”

Old memories stirred in Kestra’s head. She pursed her lips and met Mom’s eyes.

“Boys don’t cry,” she guessed.

Mom’s mouth softened into a sad smile. “Exactly,” she said. “And he was still living by that motto when I met him. All through our relationship — and then our long friendship on the Enterprise — he kept to that old mantra. Do you know what finally broke the dam?”

Kestra’s eyes darted down to Mom’s wedding ring. Their engagement seemed a likely guess. Then she reconsidered. Maybe that wasn’t good enough, but Thad’s birth...

Mom, as if reading Kestra’s thoughts, shook her head.

“Not Thad’s birth,” she said softly. “Yours.”

A knot loosened in Kestra’s chest. Thad was the linguistic genius, the kid with the bright imagination, the sensitive one, the funny one, the one who died. She could define Thad a million ways and barely knew how to describe herself yet, couldn’t see far enough into the future to imagine who she would be in ten years, or even five.

But she was the one who made Dad cry for the first time. Kestra turned to the window, blinking rapidly, and watched a shadow emerge from the treeline, shoulders hunched. Clouds drifted away from the moon, allowing a shaft of pale white light to shine down on Dad’s hair. He glanced up by chance, like something inaudible had called to him, and met Kestra’s eyes.

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He didn’t cry at the funeral. But that night, with Deanna curled against his left side and Kestra on his right, they all did.

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