

## Orcas Off the Coast of Valdez

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## Orcas Off the Coast of Valdez

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### Summary

In which Kyle Riker tells everyone in Ten-Forward a 'funny' story about his son, and Geordi, Worf, and Data decide to get Will a gift.

There was a palpable tension between Commander Riker and the prim, sharp-eyed little man who visited the Enterprise as a consultant. It wasn't until Geordi overheard Dr. Pulaski call him "Mr. Riker" that he understood why. The news spread fast, in hushed whispers, like a warning: *That guy Commander Riker hates? That's his father.*

And the unspoken order was 'Show some tact.'

It would be poor form to openly swarm Kyle Riker, so the crew satisfied their curiosity by swarming Ten-Forward instead. Luckily, the old adage "like father, like son" applied — Kyle Riker loved to socialize as much as his son Will, and he was all too happy to hold court at the bar. Right now, he was entertaining a veritable crowd with stories about his career, his love life (or lack thereof), and of course ... his son.

"You know, it's funny Will ended up here," said Kyle genially, nursing a whiskey near the bandstand. "Did he ever tell you about that story he wrote when he was — god, he must have been no older than nine."

"I have heard no such story," Worf said in a rumble, his arms crossed. He'd taken an almost antagonistic stance toward Kyle, which was proof he liked him — feet planted, arms crossed.

"It was a school project," Kyle said, tipping his glass toward Worf. "Some sort of ... transport accident, if I remember correctly, beamed him right onto the Enterprise. Only—" His lips twisted into a smile half a second before he chuckled, almost against his will. "Only Will was obsessed with *orcas* at the time. That was his favorite animal. So the Enterprise's crew was all killer whales. Killer whale at the helm, killer whale in the captain's chair..."

A ripple of laughter went through the crowd; even Geordi, who hadn't decided what he felt about Kyle just yet, allowed himself a smile. Beside him, Data just cocked his head, puzzled by the laughter.

"It's about the absurd," Geordi whispered to him.

"I do not understand," Data whispered back.

"I'll try to explain later. Humans love the absurd."

Geordi turned his attention back to the crowd.

"I ought to program some orcas into the holodeck," said Wesley with a mischievous grin.

"Oh, don't," said Kyle. "Dear God, that son of mine can turn *anything* into an argument — he'll never forgive me about those damn orcas."

He said it light-heartedly, enough so that Wesley — frowning just a little — asked him what he meant. And Wesley was just a kid, but he was a smart one; he had enough social grace that he wouldn't have asked if he'd known what kind of story Kyle would tell.

"Oh, it was silly," Kyle said, waving the question away. "There was this ... this beached orca down by the sea one day. I thought, well, this is a good chance for Will, introduce him to anatomy, maybe instill a love of science."

"So you took a *child* to see a dead orca?" said Dr. Pulaski, her voice so dry that Geordi couldn't tell if she was scolding him or just amused. Knowing her, a bit of both.

"In my defense—" Kyle started, and then he bowed good-naturedly to the sea of voices calling him out. "Okay, okay, there's no defense," he admitted with a charming little smile. "It wasn't one of my brighter ideas. We couldn't get the stench of dead fish out of the aircar for *weeks*."

Geordi could see the crowd relaxing, their moment of mild outrage melting into pure humor. Not him, though. His jaw tightened, his arms crossed over his chest.

"What happened?" he asked, voice level.

Kyle's eyes found Geordi's face and darted over his VISOR. Data turned to study Geordi as well.

"With the dead orca," Geordi said.

No one else could see it. To Geordi, it was like a dark shadow crossing Kyle's face. A sudden slowing of the heartbeat, all of Kyle's inner functions turning cold as ice. The telltale sign of a controlled diplomat, someone who could sense they were in trouble.

"Oh, it was terrible," said Kyle, none of this darkness showing in his voice. He made a face and took another sip of whiskey. "God, he was distraught! Here I am, so excited to introduce my son to the wonders of *veterinary science*—"

Another ripple of laughter.

"—and the poor kid takes one look at that orca and just *wails*," Kyle said, unable to hold back a sheepish smile. "I remember hiking back to the aircar like this—" He stumped around in a circle, like a small child was attached to his leg. "—with Will clinging to me and just bawling his little eyes out, the whole time." He paused for laughter, and this time, he was obvious enough about it that Worf's eyes flashed and he glanced sideways at Geordi, a sharp, knowing look that meant he'd noticed it too. "Poor kid," said Kyle, staring fondly into his glass. He waited for the laughter to die down, then took a quick breath and said, "He had this stuffed orca, right? A toy, like a teddy bear. Slept with it every night — though he pretended not to. If you ever mentioned it, he'd get all embarrassed and swear up and down he was too big to sleep with a stuffed toy. Well, sure enough, we got home from the beach that day and that stuffed orca went right in the trash."

Another wave of laughter, more controlled this time. The story was over; the crew broke up gradually, chuckling among themselves, telling each other similar stories — or stories they seemed to *think* were similar, but really didn't hold a candle, in Geordi's view.

"My dad tossed out my all-time favorite starship model when I went to the Academy," said an ensign at Geordi's side, laughter lacing his voice. "I never forgave him! Limited-edition U.S.S. Hood with the platinum hull, and he *tossed* it!"

And:

"Ugh! I still remember when Mother made me pack up all the dolls I wasn't using anymore. I was distraught! ...Of course, I hadn't so much as *looked* at them in years..."

Maybe Geordi couldn't blame them, but he had to get away before the flare of anger inside him started to show. He made his way out of Ten-Forward, conscious of Worf on his heels and Data at his side. The rest of the crew was, perhaps, missing some vital information — something only Geordi was privy to, and maybe Worf, maybe Troi. He'd been on an away team with Riker once, early in their time on the Enterprise, on a chilly oceanic planet not too different from Earth, but a lot more primitive — and they'd set up camp on a cliffside near the ocean, and one morning he'd woken up to find Riker curled up on the edge, hugging one knee to his chest and watching the cold sea. The wind ruffled his hair and lifted the collar of his coat; his eyes strained against the rising sun.

"There was a cliff like this back home," he said to Geordi, keeping his eyes on the ocean. "If you stood on the edge, you could see pods of orcas swimming down below. On a clear day you could even see them beneath the surface." Then he glanced over at Geordi, a quick up-and-down look, as if seeing him for the first time. "I used to sneak out of my house to go there," he said with a crooked smile. "Every morning before school."

"You weren't allowed?" Geordi asked, trying to make sense of that word 'sneak.' Riker's smile faded naturally and he turned away again, his gaze raking slow and appreciative over the sea.

"I suppose I was," he said softly. "I never got in trouble for it. I just ... you know how it is. Sometimes you just need to get away."

Then he shrugged and stood, so tall that his shadow blocked out half of the rising sun.

"I didn't do it past the age of nine or ten, anyway," he said with a half-shrug. "I guess I got bored."

Or he was dragged face-to-face with the rotting carcass of his favorite animal, and suddenly his escape from home was ripped away. Geordi paced out of Ten-Forward and down the hall, his face tight. When he entered the turbolift, Worf slid through the doors with him, both of them silently stewing. Data skipped through a moment later, barely making it past the closing doors. The turbolift hummed and whirred.

"If my father had destroyed my favorite *bat'leth*," said Worf, his voice low and dangerous, "I would have killed him where he stood."

Geordi's shoulders relaxed a little. "I hear you," he said, hoping Worf was speaking in hyperbole. "I can't believe..."

"It is a standard feature of human behavior for children to develop sentimental attachments to their playthings," said Data. "To sever this

attachment before the child is developmentally ready would perhaps be ... ill-advised."

"Oh, it's ill-advised, alright," said Geordi. His hands tightened into fists. "I can't believe he told that story with a smile on his face."

"It is no wonder Commander Riker *dislikes* him," said Worf in a low rumble.

"And is it just me, or was that story *designed* to be embarrassing?" Geordi asked. "Sure, he framed it like he was poking fun at himself. But all that emphasis on Commander Riker's reaction... He sure made a point to tell us how many times Riker cried."

"It is my observation, Lieutenant, that humans are *frequently* embarrassed by the emotional outbursts commonly experienced during childhood," said Data. "I anticipate a sub-optimal reaction from Commander Riker when he hears this story."

Worf made a growling noise of agreement, deep in his throat.

"Nothing we can do about that," said Geordi glumly. "He's gonna hear, regardless."

"Perhaps we can take preventative action to mitigate the negative effects," Data said. "Humans react positively to *parties* and *gifts*."

"We're not gonna throw him a party, Data. Imagine the banner. *Sorry Your Dad Traumatized You. Have some cake.*"

"A gift, then." Data's eyes went glassy as he processed something internally. There was a faint, barely-visible vibration of his golden irises as he searched his database. "Lieutenant, may I make a suggestion?"

"Go for it," said Geordi warily.

The turbolift spat them out on Deck 7. At a leisurely pace, they followed Data to the nearest replicator, where he punched in a template code at rapid speed. Worf and Geordi leaned closer to see what would materialize. Then they leaned back, Worf with his arms crossed, Geordi chewing the inside of his cheek.

"Risky," Geordi declared.

"*Too* risky," said Worf.

"With all due respect," said Data, "I have analyzed Commander Riker's preferences and I am 98.833333% certain he will react with polite appreciation."

"That's it?" said Geordi doubtfully.

"It is the best scenario. I can recite a combination of 12 million other options if you like."

"No," said Geordi quickly. He reached into the replicator's tray and removed the gift, squeezing it lightly. "Polite appreciation isn't so bad. I'm just not sure I want to be the guy who gives it to him."

He looked from Worf to Data, waiting for a volunteer. Worf shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. Data stared at Geordi with all the indifferent curiosity of a pet lizard. Neither of them stepped forward, and Geordi waited a moment for the necessary courage to well inside him, but it didn't come. He looked uncertainly at the gift in his hand.

"We'll sneak it into his room," Geordi decided.

"An excellent battle strategy," Worf said.

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The worst part of having his dad onboard was that Riker couldn't *quite* contain his irritation. He tried to be polite; he tried to keep the resentment locked up; but against his will, it bubbled out anyway, starting with snide comments and ending with an outraged argument every time. It made him look like a surly teenager ... even worse, because he wasn't willing to go into all the reasons why he was irritated, so no one knew if his anger was justified or not. And that included him. He still couldn't be sure he had a right to be angry, but he knew one thing for certain: having Kyle Riker on the Enterprise was like poking needles through a half-healed scab.

To top it all off, no one seemed to have a problem with Kyle except for Will. Some part of him — a large part — had secretly hoped his dad would act like a beast — that his cold, distant behavior would leave all of the ship as uneasy and uncharitable as Will. But the hyper-critical, borderline-neglectful figure from Will's childhood was gone. Instead, Kyle moved through the decks with the same social grace and charisma as his son, making friends and telling funny stories everywhere he went.

And that smarted, too. Seeing his own most pleasant traits in a man who'd never shown them before. Wondering how much of his own personality came from Kyle. The sting wasn't quite as bad as the bruises he'd gotten during their anbo-jytsu match ... but pretty bad nonetheless.

Will entered his quarters and let his best Academy posture drop, one hand flying to his side to massage his bruised ribs. He leaned on the nearest table with a soft groan. Every muscle ached from impact — and if Beverly were still here, he'd just go to her and get a hypospray for the pain, but there was no way he could bring these injuries to Dr. Pulaski. Part of him would feel like a child. Part of him would feel like a *rat*, running to tell the teacher that he got hurt on the playground, sabotaging Kyle's best shot at romance since Mom died.

So he bore the bruises like an adult, and he felt like a little kid anyway — small and powerless and patronized, even with Kyle Riker away.

Will shook his head, trying his best to dispel these thoughts. If he kept up the self-pity, Deanna would sense it eventually, and the last

thing he wanted was for her to check on him and see how stiffly he was moving. What he needed was a thorough shower to wash the sweat out of his hair and the soreness from his bones — and a good meal — and a long, dreamless sleep to forget his father even existed. Warily, Will limped through the narrow living space to his bedroom.

And there he froze.

Someone had been in his quarters. He eyed the narrow cot he called a bed, every muscle in his face pulling tight. There was an object resting on the covers, against his pillow, that hadn't been there before. An object that tightened his throat and left his whole body tense.

"Computer," he said, voice low, "tell me who entered my quarters."

The computer chimed. A melodic voice answered him: "Your visitors today include Geordi La Forge, Worf Rozhenko, and Data Soong."

The knot of anxiety in Will's stomach melted away. "They left this for me?" he asked, crossing to the bed.

"Affirmative," said the computer.

Will's lungs stuttered. He reached out, holding his breath, and let his fingers brush against the gift. It was soft to the touch — almost silky, exactly how he remembered the stuffed orca he'd had as a kid. This one was bigger, the black-white swirl of color a little different, with stuffing that crinkled at Will's touch. But other than that... it was a dead ringer for the toy his mother had replicated for him from the hospital gift shop just before she died. The one he'd thrown in the river in a fit of tears when he was nine or ten, because the sight of it made him sick, made him remember the scent of dead fish and rotting seaweed so vividly that it curled inside his lungs.

None of those terrible memories resurfaced now. Now, holding the stuffed orca in his hands, Will just remembered the foggy, shining lights of the hospital, those last few days sleeping in his mother's bed, the smell of antiseptic and the gentle tone of her voice as she combed her fingers through his hair. He held the stuffed orca to his chest, as he had when he was a little kid, just before Mom died, and he let his eyes slide closed, and he squeezed it tight. He couldn't remember what his mom's hugs felt like. But he remembered that once she'd tucked him against her side, and he'd squeezed the stuffed orca tight, just like this. It was the best approximation he had, the closest thing to a memory of warmth and love. The light pressure on his chest; the softness of the fabric against his skin; the half-forgotten, maybe half-fabricated memory of his mother's voice, her words lost to time. Just that gentle, soothing tone sending him to sleep.

Later — maybe just a few seconds, maybe half an hour — a twinge in his bruised ribs brought him back. He wiped his eyes with a choked laugh and let the orca fall to his bed. Will stared at it, half-smiling at himself, half-grimacing, and shook his head when his lips started to tremble. He hit the shower glad there was no one here to see him, feeling somewhat silly. Silly — and childish — and small.

But not bad, really. Not bad at all.

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