

The Rite of Brotherhood

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The Rite of Brotherhood

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Summary

Shortly after Riker's father leaves the Enterprise, Worf invites his commander to take part in a Klingon tradition.

The only thing is, Riker isn't sure he's allowed to participate.

“You’re sure?” Riker asked.

“If you consider yourself competent,” said Worf, voice stiff.

Riker kept his poker face firmly intact as he thought it over. He was tempted, for sure. He enjoyed Worf’s lessons in holodeck calisthenics programs — was probably the only human who did — and he had this terrible affliction, some disease he’d carried since childhood that made him respond to questions like “You game?” with answers like “*ARE YOU?*” usually followed by leaping feet-first into some sort of dangerous sparring match, spine-damaging sports game, or grueling marching band practice.

But today he hesitated. First of all because his shoulder still smarted from his anbo-jytsu match yesterday. And his leg. And his lower back, but when *didn't* that hurt? Second of all because said anbo-jytsu match had been with his own father, who *apparently* loved to use illegal moves to beat his own son into the ground, and third of all because thinking about his dad made Riker’s poker face wobble just a little too much, and fourth of all...

“Tell me more about this ceremony,” Riker hedged.

Worf inclined his head. “The Rite of Brotherhood is a traditional feat of masculinity for our kind. It is practiced between male schoolmates and friends, between fellow warriors. Between *brothers*.”

“I gathered as much from the name,” said Riker, stretching his sore shoulder. “Would you describe it as a bonding exercise or more of a competition?”

“All bonding exercises are competitions,” said Worf.

Riker would just let him have that one. It was probably true where Worf came from. Instead of arguing, he gave it some extra thought. His injuries. His stiff muscles. Worf potentially cracking open his skull or hammering on his ribcage in the name of brotherly love.

“You are chicken,” Worf declared.

“Who taught you that phrase?” asked Riker, smiling a little. “Ensign Crusher? Lieutenant LaForge?”

Worf stayed solemnly quiet, with the dignity of someone who absolutely never snitches.

“You know, you’re supposed to say ‘bawk bawk’ at the end,” Riker teased him.

“Yes or no, Commander,” Worf said.

Always so rigid.

“I’m game,” Riker said. “Are you?”

But for the rest of the day, when his injuries bothered him or he remembered his match with his father, Worf’s voice seeped into his head

and echoed there.

A traditional feat of masculinity, he said. And Riker was suddenly nine years old again, ecstatic that his dad wanted a tomboy, that he let him cut his hair so short and bought him that bulky fishing vest from the surplus store, that everyone who looked at him said "Who's this young fellow?" And furious that Kyle Riker always answered with a name that felt utterly wrong. That he still stepped in to take over when a show of strength or courage was required — baiting the hook, reeling in the biggest fish, killing and cooking them, telling Riker to look away when the guts spilled to the floor. Outmoded views, but common enough back home. Memories he'd been glad to leave behind when he joined Starfleet, safe with his new name, new skin.

Worf had invited him to complete the Rite of Brotherhood. Any other day Riker wouldn't have hesitated. Why did it suddenly feel like a lie to say yes?

They met in the holodeck rather than the dojo. Worf had already programmed it before Riker arrived, in traditional Klingon fashion: dramatic lighting, sharp angles, vaulted ceilings, not-too-comfortable-looking mats. Riker nodded to Worf as he stepped inside, then took a moment to pace the chamber and study the decor. His own reflection stared back at him from a few shiny surfaces, a little warped.

A little wrong.

"Look, Worf..."

Behind him, there was a sound of creaking leather as Worf warmed up for a fight. Riker turned to face him. He didn't know much about Klingon society beyond what he'd learned from casual conversation with Worf, but he knew how significant their rituals were. To be invited to participate was an honor. But to be invited under false pretenses...

"I think I should tell you something before we start," said Riker.

"Now is not the time for words," said Worf briskly. Despite the tightening in his throat — and the distinct start of nausea in his stomach — Riker smiled. He crossed the chamber and put a gentle hand on Worf's arm.

"It's important," he said, voice soft.

Worf stopped mid-stretch and looked him in the eye, more attentive now.

"I'm not sure we should go through with this," Riker said.

"You have lost your nerve."

So tempting to say yes. Let Worf's opinion of him diminish for a little while. Better than telling him the truth. But that was nonsense — as Riker had admonished Worf once, over their dress uniforms, it was an outmoded way of thinking, and if he couldn't trust his crew with this...

Well. But could he trust his crew with this? A muscle twitched in Riker's cheek and he looked away. So far, he had told none of them. Only the medical personnel, and of course Deanna, knew. It was part of the reason he'd been so on-edge during his father's visit: fifteen years of baggage and one dramatic secret waiting to be let loose, and all of it safeguarded only by Kyle Riker's sense of decency.

"What is it?" Worf asked, and some of the stilted Klingon machismo had left his voice.

"Rain check," Riker said. He squeezed Worf's arm, mostly just to prove to himself that his numb fingers were still working.

"Commander—"

"It's nothing." Riker attempted a pale smile.

"You are unwell," Worf decided. "You have never shrunk from a challenge."

"I'm not shrinking," Riker promised. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "Okay. Let's do something else. You pick the sport — or the martial art — and we'll spar, but not the Rite of Brotherhood, okay?"

Worf's eyes darkened.

"It can be Klingon," Riker assured him. "It's not about culture. It's only a matter of..."

Words failed him. He searched for an alternative to suggest, but his mind was disobeying him. It kept showing him half-forgotten memories instead. That awkward first year at Starfleet, right after the surgery. The way his stomach bottomed out when his father stepped out of the transporter and saw his son for the first time, beard and all. Worf searched Riker's face, which was almost certainly blank — he knew how to keep it blank — and then moved closer. Slowly, he returned the gesture from earlier, his fingers closing over Riker's forearm.

"Your father is indiscreet," Worf said, voice low.

Riker only blinked. He was working so hard to keep his features composed in an affable mask that he couldn't feel anything or process those words.

"He spent many evenings in Ten-Forward," Worf said. "He spoke about you. I thought you knew."

“No,” said Riker weakly.

“Do you understand my meaning?” Worf asked, studying Riker closely.

Riker bobbed his head in an ambivalent nod, a hot-cold flush washing over him from head to toe. He tightened his grip on Worf’s forearm by instinct. Anyone walking in would see them standing close together in silence, clinging to each other’s arms, and the mental image would have normally made Riker laugh — but suddenly it was a little difficult to draw breath.

“He said...” Riker started. It came out as half a question.

“He said little,” Worf said. “But it was enough.”

“For example?”

Worf hesitated now, showing his teeth a little. “Prideful boasting.”

“But that can’t be all,” said Riker, with a smile he didn’t feel. He blinked rapidly, his head swimming a little.

“No,” said Worf. “It was not all. He spoke of...” His face creased with an expression Riker couldn’t totally read, painful and apologetic. “...of a daughter,” Worf said carefully, “and his ...confusion... to find her gone.”

Riker nodded. Still, outwardly, he was calm and unemotional. He let his hand slip away from Worf’s arm and studied the battle room. Partially it was just to turn his head, to hide his face a little, relax his muscles before he had to don the mask again. So his fears had been founded. Kyle had likely told half the ship, and Starfleet members weren’t prone to gossip in Riker’s experience, but still, the news was bound to spread.

He shouldn’t care. He didn’t care. It maybe wasn’t politically correct to care, outside rural Alaska, in the stars. But still, he ran a hand through his hair and stared at the holodeck floor and wondered how the hell he was going to force himself to walk out of here and face the crew.

“Commander,” said Worf softly.

Riker turned to him with a pleasant, inquisitive hum, his mask back in place. Worf’s strange expression was still there, still marring his features, as awkward as his posture.

“I knew,” Worf said simply. “When I invited you.”

“Obviously,” said Riker. Then the meaning caught up to him and he almost keeled over, blinking more rapidly than before. A surge of heat rushed to his face; his vision blurred. “Oh,” he said casually to the floor, voice steady. “You knew.”

“Yes,” said Worf.

And still he’d invited him to the Rite of Brotherhood. Of ... what had he called it? A feat of masculinity for warriors, for friends.

“Oh,” said Riker again, a little choked now.

“But I can see you’re temporarily unfit,” said Worf kindly, “so I will withdraw from the Rite for today. Only to avoid killing you.”

“Thank you, Worf,” said Riker, and they both pretended not to hear the tears in his voice. “I, uh, appreciate not being killed.”

“I thought you might.”

Worf reached over to the control pad, and at the tap of his fingers, the dramatic lighting of the Klingon battle arena faded. Now there were no shadows and nowhere to hide — no reason to stay here, either, with the match called off — but Worf made no move to exit, and neither did Riker. He kept his head bowed. Only when he absolutely had to did he raise his hands and wipe his face.

There would be no fight. There was no reason to stay. But Worf placed his hand on Riker’s shoulder, and they stayed anyway.

Just for a while.

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