

Find Your People

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Summary

Wesley isn't eating.

The sickbay was full.

In the primary bio-bed, still unconscious, lay Commander Riker. His blood-stained uniform had been stripped away. He looked diminished like this – smaller, paler – but Wesley didn't have much time to think about it before Nurse Ogawa blocked his view.

On the other side, Dr. Crusher was tending to Worf's injured arm. It wasn't much – just a gash – but Wesley could see through to the bone. He swallowed hard, his eyes stinging, and tried to turn away.

"Hold still," the med tech snapped. She grabbed Wesley by the ear and jerked him back into place. He didn't even have time to grimace; by the time he processed the pain, she was shining a regenerator over his swollen eye. "There," she said grimly. "You can go."

Tenderly, Wesley probed the skin where just a second ago, a bruise had been forming. His cuts and scrapes were healed. His sprained wrist felt good as new. But he slid from the bio-bed slowly, and his eyes roamed over the rest of the security team – Worf, ordering Beverly to leave him with an honorable scar; Lieutenant Gonzalez nursing a concussion, Ensign Riley clutching at a broken tooth, Commander Riker still asleep, with Nurse Ogawa washing the blood from his knitted brow.

All because of Wesley.

He left, hands numb, throat tight.

The debrief went about as well as Wesley could expect. He couldn't explain why he snuck away from the team. Not to Picard. He couldn't explain why he froze up, why he failed to help his comrades when the locals attacked. And he had to play dumb, pretend he didn't understand which district he'd snuck into – all of which just lowered Picard's opinion of him even further than the fight itself already had. Wesley went planet-side to Nerox III as Starfleet's boy genius. He left with some new, less flattering labels: *reckless, stupid, incompetent*.

But if Picard knew the truth, those labels would be even worse. Wesley sat alone in his quarters, tuned into the medical comm his mother used to keep an eye on sickbay when she was off-shift. She didn't know he accessed it sometimes. If she did, her opinion of him would plummet just like everyone else's.

Disgusting, said a voice in Wesley's head. He clenched his hands tight, until his nails bit into his palms and left white crescents on his skin.

He had no choice. He had to do this. He needed to hear that Commander Riker would pull out of it. Wesley replayed the injuries in his head. Deliberately at first, then compulsively, against his will. He could hear the whistle of Worf's phaser. See Commander Riker's wide eyes, pale blue stark against the shadows. The crash of a steel-toed boot against his ribs as three men held him down. The skull-breaking impact as they slammed Riker's head into the wall. The flash of a serrated knife before Worf roared in anger and took the last attacker down.

Wesley folded his arms over his aching stomach. He hadn't eaten all day, but his gut felt tight and small, like there was no room for anything new in it. He kept his eyes on the medical comm even as he raked short, blunt nails up his sleeve and over his forearm. It was three long hours before his mom's voice came over the comm, paging Nurse Ogawa.

"He's stable," she said, and the tension in Wesley's muscles melted into something cold and uncomfortable, not quite relief.

"Is he awake?" Ogawa asked.

Riker's raspy voice patched through: barely audible, scraping out of his throat: "I'm fine." The comm ended, and in the silence, there was nothing to distract Wesley from the ever-deepening spiral of coldness curling into his bones. Etching deeper, scratching through the cartilage, leaving scars across the marrow, like worm-trails on wood.

The comm beeped again. Not the medical comm this time: the badge that Wesley had earned the right to wear as an ensign. Counselor Troi's voice crackled into the privacy of Wesley's room. Gentle, sympathetic, warm.

"Wesley..." she started.

He hung his head and scratched his own arms hard enough to draw blood.

It was three days later when he saw Commander Riker alive and well in Ten-Forward, smiling brightly at something Geordi had said. Wesley froze in the doorway, took it in: Riker with his leg up on the chair, his face turned away, his teeth flashing – uniform pressed and free of blood, posture loose, no sign of pain.

He turned away.

It was four days later when Picard handed him a PADD with Wesley's personnel file called up. There was a written demerit where before there had been nothing.

"Counselor Troi tells me you've been wrestling with a lot of guilt," Picard said, his face drawn in a severe frown. "Guilt is often a good thing, Ensign Crusher. It tells us when we have done wrong. It guides us to be better." He took the PADD away. "Listen to that feeling," he said.

Wesley stood there, frozen, until his eyes stopped stinging and every emotion went numb.

It was five days later that his mom said, "Wes, you're not eating."

He stabbed a fork into his food and moved it around.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He told her. Not about the district he snuck into. He told her about the demerit on his record – and Captain Picard's speech.

"He said I *should* feel guilty," Wesley said, staring at his dinner plate.

Beverly finished her food in silence – quick, economical bites, no sound except the scraping of her fork against ceramic. She tossed the plate into the reclamator and reached for her blue doctor's coat.

"You're leaving?" Wesley asked, tracking her with his eyes.

"I have to be on shift in fifteen minutes," said Beverly, not quite apologetically. She paused halfway across the room, ran a gentle hand over Wesley's shoulder. He jerked away. "Wes," she said impatiently.

"I'm fine," he muttered.

"Captain Picard has a responsibility to his crew," Beverly said. "Anything could go wrong on an away mission. There are thousands of factors outside of his control. What he can control is the level of his team's competence."

Wesley stared at his plate until his vision started to blur, unfocused.

"If his crew sneaks off without telling anyone, or goes places they're not supposed to go--"

"I get it," said Wesley numbly. His mother studied him – sighed – moved away.

"I'll check back in with you tonight," she promised, and then she was gone. Wesley's fork shifted. The tines scraped across his plate and poked through the knit weave of his duty sweater instead. The sharp points ground against his skin, leaving indents, pressing harder, breaking through.

It was six days after the incident on Nerox III that Wesley decided he was better off dead.

On the bridge, his piloting was flawless.

In engineering, he was quiet – withdrawn – but he worked efficiently. He got things done.

In the galley, he replicated meals, but didn't eat.

In his quarters, when he was supposed to be sleeping, he sat awake in bed, his lights turned off, his PADD propped on his knee. He chewed absently at his knuckles as he read about the Eugenics Wars. It had been centuries since the genes for 'sexual deviancy' were identified. Hundreds of years since people like Wesley were eradicated. How many years had it been since they started coming back? He was sixteen. He'd never met someone like him before.

Except on Nerox III. In the red-light district. Where he'd been caught – where the men had turned on him – where Commander Riker had almost been killed trying to 'save' him, because he was too cowardly to admit why he was there. Wesley laid back on his bed, his knees bent up, his ribs poking through his sweater in a visible ridge. He folded his arms over his eyes and focused on his breathing: long and slow.

Yesterday, Geordi had noticed the marks on his arm. He'd blamed it on an away mission. On the bridge, if anyone asked, he'd say it happened in engineering. But for now he'd switched to hurting hidden areas no one else would see: the narrow line of his hips, his upper shoulders, his collarbone, his ribs. Beneath his clothes, his skin was stinging, unused to the slow natural healing process that he forced it into every day, with new wounds. The lack of food made his head swim, but it was better than choking down replimatter that tasted like wet dust to his numb tongue. He listened with half an ear while Beverly got ready for her shift, fabric whispering, doors hissing open and shut—

He was alone.

Wesley pushed his feet to the edge of the bed and let the weight of his shoes swing his legs down. He sat up, weathered the static in his vision, the sense of dizziness that washed his thoughts away. He crossed to the replicator automatically, without thinking. Laser scalpels were prohibited from the generic crew templates, but pocket knives – for whittling – and razor blades for shaving were still available, for those who liked a more traditional experience. Wesley keyed for a pocket knife, extra-sharp.

It would be easier to explain this one away, if anyone checked his replicator log. He tested the blade against his thumb and watched a translucent layer of skin peel up. No blood. He rolled his sweater up, tucked it under his chin, held his skin taut as he sought out a blank space to carve into.

They'd touched him here. Broad, callused hands sneaking under the hem of his uniform. The warmth of a stranger's palm against his bare skin: ticklish, ultra-sensitive. Either to pleasure or to pain. Wesley angled the blade against his stomach and sliced into his skin – a long, thin line, straight down toward his navel – a welling of blood, too slow for his liking; if he cut deeper, it would flow faster. But—

The door chimed.

Wesley folded his sweater back down. He wiped the blood on his undershirt before tossing the knife into the reclamator – if any blood got into it, an automatic report would be filed, and he'd be found out in no time. He turned to face the door and said, voice calm, "Come in."

The door hissed open. Commander Riker stood in the entrance, his eyebrows raised.

"Wes," he said, breaking into a smile – slow and natural. "Hey."

"Mom's in sickbay," Wesley said.

"I know," said Riker, stepping inside. "I was looking for you." He stopped in the living room and gave Wesley an odd look, eyebrows furrowed. "Why don't you come out here and we can talk?"

Out *there*? Why bother? Wesley obeyed without understanding why. His heart raced. Did Riker know something – was he trying to get Wesley away from the replicator? Or worse, did he not want to be alone in the bedroom with him? By the time he reached Riker's side, Wesley was struggling to keep his face blank. He knew his eyes were wide; he had to hope Riker would take it as an ensign's nervousness, talking to his first officer. But Riker looked at him *differently* – softly – and clapped a hand over his shoulder and gestured for him to sit down.

"You ever been to Nerox III before?" he asked conversationally as he hooked his leg over a chair.

"No," said Wesley.

"You must have studied a map, then," said Riker.

Wesley stayed silent. He *had* studied a map. And he'd read every report he could find. But that was easily explainable as part of an away team's duties. He locked his hands together on the table and saw, too late, the raw red spots where he'd chewed his knuckles.

Riker caught his hand.

"Wes," he said, turning Wesley's palm face-down. "What's this?"

Wesley's face burned hot. "I—"

"You haven't been eating," Riker said. He scanned Wesley's face. "You know, I've been to Nerox III before. I know those back alleys pretty well."

Wesley jerked his hand out of Riker's grasp. "Why are you here, Commander?" he asked. "Did Counselor Troi send you?"

"Why?" asked Riker. "What do you think she's sensing?"

Wesley averted his eyes. Slowly, Riker sat back in his seat.

"Like I said, I've been there before," he said gravely. "Wes, that district isn't safe."

Wesley closed his eyes. He saw – again – the crash of Riker's head against the wall, the flash of a knife. "I know," he said.

"No, it wasn't safe for *you*," Riker stressed. "Whatever deal you struck with them, they weren't going to stick to it. They would have stolen every credit and sold your combadge on the black market. Guys like that prey on young Starfleet officers like you."

"Like me?" Wesley asked, his eyes hard.

Incompetent. Reckless.

Aberrant. Disgusting.

“Or like me,” said Riker levelly, meeting Wesley’s eyes. “When I was your age.”

Beneath his sweater, Wesley’s skin was itching. It begged to be touched again, like that man in the alleyway had done. And it begged to be cut open.

“What were you like,” he managed, “when you were my age?”

Riker’s eyes shifted away. “Perfectionist,” he said. “Strict. Ambitious.”

Wesley studied him – not sure he believed him. He couldn’t square it with the Riker he knew today. If he were describing a young Captain Picard, sure – but Riker was easygoing, fun-loving. ‘Strict’ wasn’t a word Wesley would ever use to describe him. And ‘ambitious’ – not for a guy who’d turned down three commands to stay right here.

As if he could sense Wesley’s thoughts, Riker met his eyes again. “Listen,” he said. “Your dad died when you were five years old. My mom died when I was two. Your mom left last year for Medical Command. My dad left when I was fifteen, too. That’s enough to make anybody a perfectionist. Nobody leaves you when you’re perfect, right?”

“You sound like Counselor Troi.”

“That’s a compliment.” He spread his hands wide. “And we all grew up learning from the same textbooks, Wesley.”

Wesley’s heartbeat slowed. “What do you mean?”

“Wes, how many ways do I have to say it?” Riker folded his arms on the table. “I learned about the Eugenics Wars as a kid, too. Every single individual – in certain categories – was wiped out. When I was first joining the Academy, as far as we knew, evolution still hadn’t brought those people back.” He raised an eyebrow. “Where does that leave people like you and me?”

Wesley’s face spasmed. “You’re–?”

Riker caught Wesley’s hand before Wesley even realized what he was doing – how quickly his nails had gone to the unhealed cuts on his arm.

“On the Enterprise,” said Riker, slow and clear, “there are twenty-six of us. You know half of them by name.” He let Wesley’s hand go. “Find your people, Wes.”

He stood to go. He didn’t look back. Behind him, Wesley gripped his biceps, fingers curling against the cuts beneath his sleeves. He closed his eyes. He pictured the man in the alleyway, the rough slide of his hand against Wesley’s skin.

The door hissed shut.

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