

Haptics

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/574) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/574>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Star Trek: The Next Generation
Relationship:	Data/Geordi La Forge
Character:	Data , Geordi La Forge
Additional Tags:	Touch Starvation , Hurt/Comfort
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-06-15 Words: 919 Chapters: 1/1

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Summary

No one ever thinks to touch an android.

No one except Geordi.

Data wasn't working right.

A systems check showed nothing was wrong. But on the bridge, Data's reactions were 0.0001 seconds slower than usual. His processing speed was down by 0.02%. His curiosity seemed dimmed, somehow, and although Commander Riker kept using more and more bizarre old Terran metaphors – as if to test him – Data didn't cock his head and ask for a definition even once.

“That's it,” said Geordi at 2200 hours. “You're coming with me.”

He'd caught Data just outside the bridge after shift. Data furrowed his eyebrows, but he followed Geordi gamely, like he always did.

“Where are we going?” Data asked politely.

“To the diagnostic station,” Geordi said, stepping into the turbolift. “I want to run a systems check.”

“I have already conducted a systems check,” Data volunteered. “I discovered no tangible reason for my processing delays.”

Right. Geordi side-eyed him through the VISOR. No one else had noticed Data's 'processing delays' – only that it was harder than usual to tease him. But Geordi had noticed something no one else could, and it was this: Data's light was fading.

Looking at an android through a VISOR wasn't the same as looking at a human. Geordi didn't see the bio-electric impulses of a living creature. Those impulses were always a little ugly, somehow. They were messy; they showed up on his VISOR as a riot of clashing colors, the visual equivalent of someone slamming their foot down on a keyboard to hit as many discordant notes at once. But Data was different. Looking at Data was like looking at liquid gold. Soothing warm veins of sunlight, with white twinkles blinking off and on so rhythmically, it was like watching music. Normally, when Geordi's headaches got too severe, he could just look at Data to rest his eyes. But today those internal lights were strangely muted. The twinkling white sparks were slow and gray.

Something was wrong with him, and if Geordi were a superstitious man, he'd say the problem was in Data's soul.

“Come on,” he said as the turbolift doors opened. He wrapped his fingers around Data's arm in a gentle squeeze, leading him out – and Data stiffened, his feet stopping mid-step. He raised his chin, looking weirdly confrontational, but before Geordi could ask, Data just nodded and led the way. It didn't escape Geordi's notice that Data shook his arm away at the same time.

Hm.

“Shirt off,” Geordi murmured as they reached the diagnostic room. The sensors registered that it was Data and Geordi coming in, so the lights stayed off: darkness, soft and cool, because both of them could see without the lights. Data shrugged out of his tunic in that darkness, golden skin on display. He settled into the diagnostic chair like most men would settle into their own beds, but Geordi wasn't sure that Data had ever tried sleeping.

Would he sleep alone? With other people? Not that he had anyone. Suddenly Geordi's throat was tight, and he hesitated, fingers hovering just centimeters from Data's skin.

“I'm going to open your access panel now,” he said, his voice almost steady.

Data's only response was a bowed head, shoulders tight. When Geordi touched him, bare fingers pressing down on Data's back, the artificial muscle beneath his skin was firm. The panel swung open at Geordi's touch, and there it was: Data's light, Data's music, Data's soul. All those wires and circuit boards, that unique, beautiful positronic neural system laid out like a map, so logical and orderly that Geordi sometimes felt it had been made for him.

"Alright," said Geordi softly. "I'm going to check inside."

Data kept his head down. Slowly, Geordi eased two long fingers into Data's back. Warm, always warm. The wires brushed against his fingertips, so light they tickled, and at that very first touch, Data squeezed his hands tight on the edge of the chair.

"Alright?" Geordi asked.

A beat.

"I am fine," Data said, his voice strange.

Geordi sank his hand a little deeper. His free hand ran over the back of Data's head, his scanner glowing a pale blue. The tip of it brushed against Data's hair, lifting a strand or two out of place, all in a search for any hiccups in the android's programming. But there were none. Inside Data's back, Geordi twitched his fingers, letting the wires curl around his knuckles.

Data gasped.

"Alright?" Geordi asked again.

Data clutched the edge of his chair tight. Inside him, Geordi's fingers made a gentle twist and then held still, soaking up the wires' warmth. His thumbnail brushed against a circuit, just an easy scrape, the sort of thing that Data shouldn't even feel – but it made his toes curl.

How long had it been since anyone touched him? How long since anyone put their hand on his shoulder, or shook his hand?

Geordi sighed. "There's nothing," he said apologetically, and he leaned his head against Data's bare shoulder before he could stop himself. "I'm sorry."

He could feel Data's hair tangling with his own, as Data leaned his head back. He could feel the heat of Data's artificial skin against his forehead, the almost-painful pinch of pressure against his VISOR. He could feel his own breath reflecting back onto his lips, warmed by Data's skin.

And he could see that golden light inside of Data glowing just a little brighter.

"It is alright, Geordi," said Data. "I believe my systems will sort themselves out with time."

And he leaned into Geordi's touch.

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