

## Changes

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/575) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/575>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Star Trek: The Next Generation</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Data/William Riker</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Data</a> , <a href="#">William Riker</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Trans Male Character</a> , <a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a>
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-06-23 Words: 7,572 Chapters: 1/1

## Changes

by [jamaharon](#)

### Summary

Will Riker has one major secret.

But when he's injured on a mission with Data, he can't keep the secret hidden any longer.

The explosion vaporized their only communicator, and when the dust cleared, Lieutenant Commander Data stood alone. A protective glaze over his eyes wiped the particulate away, but still, through the smoke and with the sudden changing of the landscape — clods of earth and uprooted trees — it took him a moment to realize Commander Riker was no longer with him. He located the commander half a second later, supine on the ground.

Bleeding.

“Commander, are you conscious?” asked Data calmly.

Riker’s hand slid down his stomach, where a patch of blood was seeping through his uniform. His head lolled back, lips falling open. By the time he groaned, not quite lucid, Data was already at work. He cut the uniform away — “My apologies, Commander” — and applied a stasis patch to the wound on Riker’s side. The other wounds were more minor. What he assumed to be shrapnel in Riker’s upper arm turned out to be some kind of implant, shattered by the blast. Data picked out the remnants and closed the gap with another patch, and then he cradled Riker’s unconscious body against his chest and stood.

Safehouse. They had passed a safehouse on their way here. It had no technology; like the rest of this planet, it was completely Luddite, and they would not be able to contact Starfleet. But there, at least, Commander Riker could rest and heal.

So he set off with Commander Riker in his arms.

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Riker’s tongue was made of cotton. He tried to speak, but it was too heavy, too dry. When his eyelids slid open, the world around him was hazy and blurred, the light so low he couldn’t make out much but shadows. Then a yellow-tinted blur resolved in front of him and his vision cleared.

“Data,” he said in a croak.

“I believe the fever has broken,” said Data. “Allow me to check your temperature, to insure your systems are engaged in proper thermo-regulation.”

He placed a cool palm against Riker’s forehead, and it was so soon after waking up that Riker flinched by instinct, then relaxed. He leaned into the touch, more amused than comforted.

“Yes,” said Data. “All clear.”

“Thanks, doc.” Riker sat up on his elbows. His shirt had changed, from Starfleet red to something local and homespun, the deep neck sliding open to reveal his chest, his scars. He grimaced. “What happened?”

“Our communication device malfunctioned,” Data said. “You were struck by shrapnel in the resulting explosion.”

Riker laid back with a groan deep in his throat. “That explains it,” he muttered.

“Explains what, Commander?”

“Why I feel like the Enterprise ran me over and dragged me halfway to Orion,” Riker said. He shifted his legs beneath the blankets, checking that they still worked, and became aware for the first time of itchy bandages on his stomach and arm, of strange material clinging to his calves. He twitched the blankets off his hips and sat bolt upright, suddenly wide awake. “Data, did you change my clothes?” he asked, his voice jumping up an octave.

“Yes,” said Data simply.

Riker’s heart thudded against his chest. He glanced from the new pants to Data, unable to speak. And Data just stared back at him, as if he didn’t understand. Suddenly Riker’s throat was tightening; he swallowed convulsively, his mouth so dry it made a clicking noise, and searched the room. Wooden walls, dirt floor, woodstove burning in the corner...

“Water?” he asked, his voice faint.

“Of course, sir,” said Data. When he turned away, Riker’s expression cracked. He curled his knees up to his chest, hyper-conscious now of the unfamiliarity of these clothes, the bandages against bare skin. He squeezed the wound on his right arm, where his implant had been... was it gone now? He couldn’t feel it under there; he knew the shape of it, the weight of it, better than anything. Better, even, than the brush of Deanna’s mind against his own. But then Data was turning back to him with a canteen in his hand, and Riker boxed his expression up and locked it away.

“Thank you,” he murmured as Data passed the canteen over. His hand shook; he took a drink, praying he wouldn’t spill any of it. Cool, like a first officer, he assessed the facts: so the implant was gone. And Data had seen him naked. Riker concentrated on the water, cool and soothing against his parched throat; as long as he focused on that, his heartbeat would slow down and the tight coils of his brain would unwind a little to let him think. When he capped the canteen again, he forced himself to say, “Data...”

Data looked at him, head cocked.

“Nobody knows,” said Riker. His voice came out calm, authoritative. But his nervous system was shattering apart. The canteen slipped out of his numb fingers and thudded to the floor. “Sorry,” he said, and then his head swam and gravity tilted, and the next thing he knew, Data was guiding him back down to the mattress, his face impassive.

“You have lost a not-insignificant amount of blood, sir,” Data said. Riker clutched at his sleeve.

“Data. You can’t tell anyone.”

Data was silent. Did he know what Riker meant? Did he understand? Because he must have noticed, but he was staring at Riker so blankly that hope sprang up, the way it always did, and Riker’s heartbeat calmed a little. It was just possible that Data didn’t understand the significance, or didn’t care.

“I understand,” said Data finally, crushing that irrational hope. “But surely someone must know. Your father, for example.”

Riker’s chest tightened.

“And unless I have misinterpreted your relationship, there is also Counselor Troi,” Data said. “Not to mention Doctor Crusher, Captain Picard—”

Riker thinned his lips and focused on his breathing. Slow, shallow.

“Commander Riker?” asked Data.

In, out. He should let go of Data’s sleeve, he knew. But he couldn’t force his fingers to unlock. And he should relax into the mattress, but his body was stiff, and he couldn’t help that either.

“Commander Riker,” said Data again, softly, and then he reached for something out of Riker’s scope of vision. A rag, local cloth, soft like velvet. Riker flinched, inhaling sharply, as Data pressed it to his cheeks. That gasp turned into a choked sob, and only then did Riker realize he was crying. He closed his lips again, furious with himself, and willed the tears to stop even as Data gently wiped them away.

“My implant...” Riker started, and he sounded miserable even to his own ears. Ragged.

“It can be replaced,” said Data calmly.

“But not soon,” Riker said. He squeezed his eyes shut. His chest stuttered, protesting as he tried to even out his breath. By reflex, he shifted his grip on Data’s wrists, clutching at him, and Data eased a little closer to allow it.

“Not soon,” Data agreed. “But not so distant as you might think. The Enterprise will return for us.”

“Months from now,” said Riker weakly.

“And in the meantime, I will endeavor to construct another communication device. We may be able to call them back ahead of time. If nothing else, we can update the local array for farther reach.”

Riker waited for him to go on, to list more reasons not to despair. But there was nothing. And that should be enough. He forced himself to let it go, to stop worrying. But still, but still...

The strength went out of him all at once. He sighed, voice thin, and slumped against the pillow. He pretended he wasn’t crying, still, and

Data pretended he wasn't patiently wiping the tears away — because that was what you did for the wounded, even if technically Riker's fever had broken and he was no longer sick.

He fell asleep again, sick to his stomach, and knew the Enterprise couldn't come soon enough.

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He had never seen Commander Riker cry before, but over the next night, it seemed he never stopped. Data sat in the corner, where the shadows from the fireplace hid him, and tried to hold perfectly still so as not to make a sound. Sometimes, it was clear, Commander Riker wasn't fully awake. His head lolled to the side in his sleep, firelight flickering over his face, and his breathing grew ragged, his voice sneaking out in the form of tired, painful sobs. There were few tears. He was perhaps too dehydrated to produce them properly, but they came out every now and then, leaving streaks on his ruddy cheeks.

Nightmares, Data supposed. Or a sleeping anxiety attack. Was there a difference? He turned to watch the fire instead.

In the morning, when light filtered through the dirty window panes, Riker stirred. The first thing he did, before he fully woke up, was wipe his eyes on his sleeve. He sucked a thin breath through his teeth and sat up on his elbows, squinting now. Data watched him search the room for something, and when his gaze lit upon the toilet in the corner — no door, no lock — his face tightened like a screw.

"Data," he said levelly, "can you go outside?"

Data tilted his head to the side. "Certainly, Commander," he said. "May I ask why?"

Riker opened his mouth, then closed it. "No," he said firmly. "Come back in five minutes."

Data blinked, a little affronted, but he obeyed. Outside, a light snow was blowing, but the flakes melted as soon as they reached the ground. Data studied the brown earth, the dead blades of grass, and counted down the seconds on his internal clock. When he walked back inside, at five minutes on the dot, Riker was standing by the furnace, one hand flat against the wall for support. His legs shook, but he met Data's eyes with the same calm expression he wore on the bridge.

"How are you?" he asked, his voice tight. "You weren't injured in the blast at all?"

"No, sir. I am completely unharmed."

A pause. Riker's eyes were tight. "Can you run a systems check to make sure?"

"Of course. One moment." Data held perfectly still, maintaining eye contact as he initiated the wellness program. A hint of strain entered Riker's face as the seconds ticked by. "All systems functional, sir," Data said finally.

"Good," Riker murmured. He poked at the fire, his grip on the iron a little twisted from the injury on his arm. "How long have I been out?"

"Forty-two hours," Data said. Riker gave an absent nod and shut the woodstove's glass door. He sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees. Without seeming to realize it, he reached over and clutched his wound, the one where his implant had been.

Data accessed his databases. Centuries of written records unfolded in his mind. Images, names, memoirs, laws. In the Eugenics Wars, people like Commander Riker had been wiped out. Even now, they were rare, still working up to the numbers they'd had before 1992, and subject to abuse and ostracization. Especially in small traditionalist towns like Valdez, Alaska — and even in Starfleet.

"Does Captain Picard know?" asked Data, doubting his earlier assessment.

Riker looked up, his face lined. "I'd appreciate it if you forgot that conversation," he said softly, his voice unusually grave. "You shouldn't put any weight on the things people say to you when they're feverish, Data."

"Your fever had already broken," Data pointed out. "But I will gladly forget the one hundred seventy-two sentences you uttered when your temperature was high."

"What other sentences?" said Riker, eyebrows shooting up.

Data paused the program he'd just initiated to wipe them from his mind. "If you wish to know, I will recite them for you," he said. But Riker was already distracted. He got to his feet, paced around the dirt floor of the safehouse, stopped at Data's side. He looked down at Data with wide eyes, searching his face.

"Can you do that?" he asked. "Can you forget the things you saw?"

"Sir?"

A muscle jumped in Riker's cheek. He turned away. "No. Belay my last, Data. I can't ask you to do that."

Data canceled the memory wipe. He watched Riker's back, uncertain. There was tension there in the line of his shoulders, where the muscles were tight. Riker scrubbed a hand through his hair and left it standing up in tufts, unkempt.

"I did not choose my sex," said Data finally, without emotion. "But Lal, who was an exact copy of my mind, did. Therefore, I have reason to believe that if given the opportunity, I might have chosen to be female."

Riker turned to look at him then. His expression was too difficult for Data to parse. They stared at each other, one with a face too twisted and complex to read; the other, so truly emotionless that there was nothing to interpret at all. Finally, Riker looked away. He gathered a

deer-hide coat from a musty trunk at the foot of the bed and shrugged one arm into it. The other, his injured arm, caught painfully at the elbow, and he grimaced as he tried to force it through.

So Data helped him. Gently, he tucked the bandage close to Riker's arm and guided the coat into place, one inch of fabric at the time. Riker went still, his breath shallow, slow, as if he didn't want to disturb Data while he worked. But then the sleeve fell into place and Data extricated his hand from inside the coat, his fingers skimming down Riker's arm, over the wound.

"Thank you," Riker murmured.

"It would be inefficient for you to dress yourself unaided, sir," said Data pragmatically.

"No, I meant—" But Riker's gaze skittered away and he took a step back, and a draft from the chimney came between them. "Thank you," said Riker again, voice firm, and then he squeezed Data's arm and moved away.

"Where are you going?" Data asked.

"To the nearest outpost," Riker said. "I'll need food. Supplies. Components for a communicator, if I can find any." He took a slow breath, and when his lungs were full, he offered Data a dazzling smile. "Did I ever tell you about the time I built a communicator inside a burning building on Tezwa III?"

"No," said Data, curiosity piqued.

Riker gestured for Data to join him at the door. "Walk with me. I'll tell you on the way."

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They called it the quiet season, because for six months of the year, the atmosphere prevented any communication with the outside world. The old signal array on the edge of town had rusted through; its dish was sunken in the dirt, where a groundbird had made a nest inside the dip. One month after the explosion that stranded them here, Data watched as Riker crouched before the dish and plucked the strands of old dried twigs away.

"It's not much use," he said regretfully. One long tuft-tail was growing straight through the rust, and when Riker pulled on it, a section of the dish came off with the stem. "It's rusted through in most places. See how shallow this is?"

He punched his thumb straight through the saucer.

"I would advise you not to expose yourself to tetanus, Commander," Data said.

Riker wiped his thumb on the grass. He kept one hand on the rim of the dish and hefted it over his shoulder as he stood — but he winced at the weight. "It's like this thing was custom-designed to pinch my axillary nerve," he said with a grimace.

"I do not believe it was designed to be carried by humans at all," Data said.

Riker's only response was a grunt as Data gathered up the rest of the array. To him, it was practically weightless. He followed behind as Riker started the slow, laborious hike back up the incline, into town. The hill was just steep enough that Riker had to grasp at the weeds above him and hope they'd hold his weight; otherwise he'd go tumbling back into the untilled field below. Data supported him absently with one hand on Riker's lower back. His mind was focused entirely on calculations: how they might melt this material down and form it into something more useful. But he was shaken from his reverie at the top of the hill, when Riker abruptly dropped the dish and straightened up with a groan.

"Sir?" said Data.

Riker waved him off. "I'm fine." But his face was slick with sweat. "It's heavier than it looks."

There was one easy solution for that. Data picked up the dish one-handed and added it to his load. Across from him, Riker stretched his sore arms — and at first, his pride seemed unwounded, but gradually that changed. Although Data was an android, and Riker had seen plenty of evidence of his superhuman strength before, his face became closed-off and he glanced away.

"Sir?" Data asked again.

"Ah, nothing," Riker murmured. He squinted at the sun. "We'll need some serious heat to melt that dish down. I'm going to check in town and see what I can find."

"Would you like me to accompany you?" asked Data, but Riker was already waving him off.

That was the paradox of living here. To build a communicator, they needed money. To get money, they needed to work. Data had no need for rest or food; he could work ceaselessly, without breaks, and he could do things no ordinary man could do. But when the villagers saw his too-white skin and yellow eyes, they shied away. And Riker was powerfully built enough, and charming enough, to talk his way into just about any job.

So Data left him to it.

In the safehouse, Data worked to strip the rust away. Late spring was cycling into early summer, and they still had months before the Enterprise would arrive — and longer still until the away team located them planet-side. This morning, Riker had spent an hour forcing the safehouse window open, chipping steadily at the paint that sealed it shut. A faint breeze picked up flakes of rust as Data worked and sent them swirling around the room. Some of them settled into the bucket of cold water Riker used for laundry, lending color to the soap bubbles. Riker's old bandages hung from the bucket's edge and dripped water on the dirt floor.

Why he had his bandages out, Data couldn't say. He scraped the last of the rust from the dish and sat; his internal clock showed an hour had passed. He expected six more to go by, at least, before Riker completed a job, but he'd barely settled down when the safehouse door creaked open and Riker stepped inside.

"Commander," said Data pleasantly. "May I assume you had no luck?"

Riker seemed to avoid his gaze. He closed the door, looking oddly drained for only an hour's work. His hair was mussed now: overgrown, he'd started soaking it with water and slicking it back in the morning, but by midday, wind and sweat would make it wild. Strands of it clung to his beard as he removed an archaic transistor radio from his belt.

"It might not work," he said, tossing it to Data. "But there may be some components we can strip away."

Data caught it with some surprise. "How did you acquire this?" he asked.

Riker hesitated. He knelt before the water bucket and plunged his hands into it, scrubbing sharply at his skin. Blunt nails dug into the lines of his palms, and Data thought he understood — after digging out the communications array, Riker's hands had been caked with dirt. But now, they seemed clean, as if he'd washed them already, and was washing them again. Data cocked his head to the side, eyebrows furrowed.

"Commander," he said slowly, "how did you acquire this?"

A shadow passed over Riker's face. "I fixed an old widow's doorstep," he said, scrubbing his hands.

"I believe you are deceiving me," said Data levelly.

"Okay," said Riker in easy agreement. "Then let's say the information is need-to-know."

Data hesitated. Not because he didn't trust Commander Riker, but because there were bags beneath the commander's eyes that hadn't been there before, a muscle jumping in his cheek.

"Are you ill?" Data asked.

Riker squeezed one hand with the other, wringing out the water. He sat back on his heels. His eyes stared blankly at the bucket, at the bandages.

"I *don't* feel well," he admitted in an odd tone. "But that's not..."

Data waited. Riker shrugged one shoulder, slow and boneless. He glanced sideways at the array, and the ever-present sparkle in his blue eyes seemed to dim.

"You know," he said in a long exhale, "it seemed heavier than it should have been."

Geordi would call that a change of subject. Data assessed the array; he'd carried it, so his database had automatically cataloged and stored its weight. "It weighs sixty-eight point zero three eight nine kilograms, sir," he said. "Allowing for minor decay during transport."

Riker nodded absently, his face pinched.

"That is significantly higher than many humans are capable of carrying, sir," Data said.

"Not really." Riker's eyes roamed down the edge of the dish, his expression soft and weary. "Not for me."

Data couldn't read his tone. He shifted, certain now that it was his turn to 'change the subject', but unable to think of anything. Riker's gaze snapped sideways at the slight movement, and when he caught Data shuffling his feet, he seemed to box his weariness away. He stood with a stagger and caught his hand on the wall.

"We still need something to melt the satellite down," he said with an air of command — gentle, but firm. "I'd like you to take point on that while I—"

Make dinner, Data expected him to say, since it was dinnertime, and Riker had not eaten since 0500.

"—go for a run," Riker finished.

Data blinked. He cocked his head. Before he could ask, Riker explained,

"I've been neglecting myself, Data. Most officers are required to log three hundred hours of physical training per week; without the holodeck, I kind of let myself go." He patted his stomach as if he'd gained weight, a gesture Data knew from Chief O'Brien, but if anything, Riker had been whittled down over the past month. His odd jobs, and the long hours hunting for parts, had shaped him into muscle and bone, not too different from the way he'd looked years ago, when he found Data in the holodeck for the first time and whistled an old tune.

"Commander..." Data started, unsure how to word it, unsure why he didn't want Riker to go. But Riker nodded at him — as if to say 'dismissed' — and left the safehouse before Data could say a word.

Past sunset, when Data returned, Riker was already asleep. The water bucket was empty; the bandages were gone. A dirty teacup rested on the table, stained with dregs of bitter earthroot tea from the healer down the hill.

There was no sign that Riker had eaten an evening meal.

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“Sir,” said Data two months after the explosion. “I believe I have located a device which can melt down our satellite array into reusable parts.”

Riker paused. He stood before the water-stained glass in their safehouse. At first, he’d been trimming his beard, carefully shaping it into square edges, but now he’d stopped shaving and was pushing at the skin on his cheeks, his eyes dark.

“Where?” he asked, just when Data was about to repeat himself.

“There is a blacksmith one hundred and twelve kilometers south,” Data said.

Riker dropped his hands, eyebrows raised. “A forge,” he said slowly. “That might work. You already spoke to him?”

“No.” Data hesitated. “I learned of his existence from Syndic Keery. He indicated the blacksmith may not be amenable to sharing. He is very protective, sir, of his forge.”

“Aunworld technology, do you think?” Riker asked, using the local word for technology left behind by the spacefarers who first settled here, before a more primitive lifestyle took over.

“It is possible, sir,” Data said.

“It’s possible he’s just a budding capitalist, too,” said Riker wryly. “Why share his secrets when he can charge for them?” He ran a hand through his beard and watched his reflection closely. “Well, we won’t know unless we try.”

Data eyed Riker. He’d been going for longer runs lately, with less food. Some nights, Data returned to the safehouse and found Riker shirtless on the packed-dirt floor, the muscles of his shoulders flexing under too-tight skin as he forced himself to complete just ten more push-ups. Nutritional intake had decreased to a concerning degree even as labor increased. The result was that Riker had a lean, hardened look to him, sunburnt like the locals — and like the locals, too, Data felt just one more day of labor, just one more skipped meal, would tip the scales.

Diplomatically, he said, “Shall I secure transportation?”

Riker’s eyebrows shot up. “You don’t think we can walk it?”

“It is a distance of one hundred and twelve kilometers, sir,” Data reminded him. “My database suggests such a distance would be difficult for any Starfleet officer. The potential medical supplies and rest time needed would outpace our travel expenses quickly. It would be more economical to walk.”

“Yes, but where are you going to find transport?” asked Riker with a grin. Before Data could parse whether this was a rhetorical question, Riker waved it away. “I know a guy in town who’s heading south soon for the market in Kerma. He might let us ride in the back.”

“Ride in the back?” Data asked.

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For 112 kilometers, the horse-drawn cart jostled over a dirt road. Clouds of dust painted Data’s skin an almost-human hue. Beside him, Riker sprawled out on a pile of hay and grinned widely at anyone they passed, unconcerned by the yellow twigs sticking out of his hair. As for Data, he was pretty sure at least two of those twigs managed to worm their way into his servomotors.

Geordi would not be pleased.

“I’ll check you over when we get off,” Riker called cheerfully — and then the cart went over a particularly large clod of dirt, and Riker winced as his lower back slammed right into a bale of hay.

“Perhaps we will check each *other* over,” Data said. Riker stole a glance at him, his color heightening a little, and he plucked a strand of hay out of Data’s hair with a smile. At the brush of Riker’s fingers against Data’s forehead, Data said, “Sir, your body temperature reads one degree below standard.”

“You can tell that just from touching me?” Riker asked.

“I am simply interpreting the data provided to me, sir.”

Riker pulled away a little. He turned to watch the countryside go by. A little girl, still wearing the red-dyed clothes that meant she was pre-marriage, raised her hand in a wave, and Riker waved back.

“When we arrive, I suggest you rest first, and see to your nutritional needs,” Data said.

“If we have time,” said Riker with a noncommittal nod.

Data opened his mouth to argue, but Riker was faster. He turned the other way and leaned so far over the edge of the cart that Data shot a hand out and grabbed Riker by the belt.

“We’re almost there,” said Riker, staring down the road into the city. Data gave him a moment, then jerked the commander back into the cart with him. “Hey, Kal,” Riker called to the driver, “you happen to know where the blacksmith is?”

“And the nearest inn,” Data added, his voice firm.

“An inn in Westok?” Kal asked. “I suppose you can work for room and board. Or sleep in someone’s barn.” He glanced back at them with a grin meant specifically for Riker. “Shouldn’t be too difficult for you, eh? Always a widow’s doorstep to fix.”

“Or some hay to roll around in,” Riker agreed, but his eyes were strangely dull.

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They slept in a barn that night.

“Not my first time doing this,” Riker claimed. He’d spread a dirty blanket over the hay and now he lay atop it, resting on his elbows as he counted coins. “When I was a kid — not that there were many farmers in Valdez—”

Data tore his gaze away from the glass-less window. Outside, rain was sheeting down against a black sky, visible only where it bounced off blades of grass. Specks of water made it through the window pane to bead on Data’s skin.

“Commander,” he said, “forgive me for asking, but did you not have a home in Valdez? I was under the impression you grew up there.”

Riker continued counting his coins. His expression closed off — just for a second — but then it relaxed again and he offered Data a smile. “Sure, I had a home. A log cabin. Sort of rustic.”

Data waited, saying nothing.

“I ran away sometimes,” Riker said. “Lots of kids do.”

“I see,” said Data. He checked his database. Indeed, in Sector 001, it was common for adolescents on the cusp of adulthood to leave home unannounced. In a world with readily available replicators and a culture of kindness, it was no difficult matter for a teen in need of independence to strike out on his own.

“But sir,” Data said, “why not stay in a youth hostel?”

The coins clicked and slid against each other as Riker stacked them up. “They don’t let you into youth hostels when you’re eight years old,” he said.

Data had not considered an eight-year-old runaway. Statistically, this was common only on non-Terran worlds, where rates of child neglect and abuse were still high. He moved away from the window, where the hay was getting wet, and sat by Riker’s side instead.

“Once,” said Riker pleasantly, his eyes on the coins, “it started raining like it is today. Only Valdez at the time was in a high-gravity bubble — they used to run experiments like that for a year or two, to see how it affected everything: tides, agriculture, wildlife, human development. They’d just pop a force field down and get a high-grav generator running, and your whole life would change. When it rains in a high-gravity bubble, the raindrops *hurt*.”

Data calculated how tall Riker might be if he *hadn’t* spent a year in high-gravity as a child, but he kept that information to himself. Instead, he stretched out his foot — he had seen Geordi do this once in Engineering, to get the attention of a distracted tech without making them feel ‘called out.’ Data calculated the amount of force so that it would feel ‘gentle’ and nudged Riker’s leg.

“There was a barn nearby,” Riker continued. “And there was this old couple, gray-haired, Aleut — I’d seen them before because they had a grandson, and they’d take him fishing at Curtis Creek sometimes. I mean, Data, they had the *best* house. Massive treehouse, horses, kayaks, a piano...” He scooped the coins up and tucked them away. “I crawled into the loft in their barn just to wait out the rain, and I found these old toys buried up there. The straw was so musty, they must not have changed it in decades. And the toys were faded. Action figures — soldiers. They must have belonged to their son when he was a kid, and I figured he must have lost them...”

His eyes went distant. He shrugged. “I used to sneak back there,” he said. “I’d pretend the toys were mine, and they were my grandparents.” He glanced out the window. “I fell asleep once and accidentally spent the night. I woke up the next day, near noon, and their grandson was over with them, playing with the horses. I heard them call him over for lunch: grilled cheese sandwich, fresh tomato slices, a popsicle, huge Salmonberry Cosy — non-alcoholic, I’m sure.”

He said that with a sparkle in his eyes, like it was a joke. Data didn’t get it, and made no effort to laugh. After a moment, the sparkle faded.

“Can’t believe I still remember the lunch they made for that kid,” Riker muttered. “Every detail of it.” He rolled over onto his back and folded his hands over his ribs, staring at the barn’s rafters. “I never came back after that.”

Data waited. “Commander, do you believe we have sufficient funds to secure use of the blacksmith’s forge?”

Riker’s hand squeezed into a fist over his rib cage. “I hope so,” he said lightly. “But if not, I can always find work.”

Data didn’t feel fear — or any emotions — but he had predicted Riker would say that, and with that prediction came an uneasy click of the processor. He settled down in the hay at Riker’s side and stared at the rafters too, trying to discern what patterns a human eye might find in the wood grain.

“I am sure your father was pleased,” he said finally. “when you returned home from the barn. If you were there overnight, he must have noticed you were gone.”

Riker’s face tightened. He offered Data a flat smile. He didn’t speak.

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The blacksmith was a squat, stout man named Nettie. A thin red beard climbed up his cheeks and disappeared into his hairline; pale deep-set eyes glared out at them from a pudgy face. His skin was pocked, either by disease or by the way he tended to his forge without protection; it was feasible, Riker thought, that those acne-type scars might actually be tiny burn marks. But he wasn't about to ask.

Instead, he stepped into the stable where the blacksmith worked and ignored Nettie entirely.

"Hey there," he said softly, coaxingly, to the stallion in the nearest stall. The blacksmith was a horse-guy, Riker could tell. Some people just radiated it. Woo their horses and you wooed them. The horse's liquid eyes glinted as it pushed its snout into Riker's outstretched palm. "What's your name?" Riker asked.

The horse shuffled its feet, hooves clicking on the floor. From the corner of his eye, Riker saw Nettie do the same.

"That's Red," he said gruffly.

The horse was black, not chestnut, but Riker smiled appreciatively nonetheless. He stroked his hand up the horse's snout to scratch its ears.

"What can I do for you?" Nettie asked, and his voice had softened a little. Barely noticeable, but Riker was fine-tuned to pick up on things like that. He eased away from the horse with a gentle chuff and stuck his hands in his pockets. Discreetly wiping the horse slobber from his fingers, Riker said,

"I'm in need of a forge, but I don't think I have the money to rent it from you."

Taken off-guard by that admission, Nettie relaxed his shoulders a little. "How much do you got?"

Riker, his fingers mostly dry now, dug the coins out of his pockets. He stepped closer, holding the coins in his cupped palms, and allowed Nettie to count them. At the same time, slow and sensual, Riker rubbed one of the silver pieces between his thumb and forefinger.

"How'd you earn that?" Nettie grunted, his face set in a scowl.

Riker raised an eyebrow and allowed his eyes to crinkle.

"Can't you go earn some more?" Nettie asked.

"I don't know," said Riker with a slow smile. "Can I?"

If Nettie had been lying to himself, he couldn't manage it anymore. His face closed off. He looked Riker up and down, apparently unimpressed.

But still looking.

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They used the forge unsupervised, and Riker didn't speak. He helped Data when necessary; he winced a little when the sparks hit his bare hands; but mostly he just stood there, with his hair mussed and his eyes far away.

Six hours later, as the sun went down, they hitched a ride out of town. Riker rested his back against the side of the wooden cart, the reformed material of the old dish cradled in his hands. The wind pushed his hair back so Data could see the gouges on his temple, close to the hairline. Nail marks, short and shallow.

"Commander..." Data started.

Subtly, Riker shook his head. He didn't even glance Data's way, but the message was clear: no talking where the driver could hear them. Data closed his mouth, but for the rest of the ride he studied Riker and made no effort to hide it. Staring directly at him, he cataloged the tuft of hair that had been pulled from the commander's scalp; the rough bruise forming on his jawline; the new tear in his homespun shirt.

The relaxed, almost satisfied set to his face.

They reached the safehouse past midnight. Stale air filled the living space they'd grown to call home. The water bucket, unemptied since they left for Kerma, had developed a greasy layer of black gunk on the surface, a foul smell that made Riker wrinkle his nose as he came in. He wasted no time scooping the bucket up and hurling its contents out the window.

"Commander..." Data started.

"Data. We don't have to speak about it." Riker shook the last few dregs of water from the bucket's rim. "It's in the past."

"He injured you," said Data stubbornly.

A grin flashed across Riker's face, quick and feral. "He wanted a fight," he said. "Some guys do."

He set the bucket down with a muted thump on the dirt floor. Data's eyebrows furrowed.

"Commander," he said, "may I ask you a question?"

Tension rippled across Riker's cheekbones, tightening the skin there. He stuck his hands in his pockets and his chest expanded in a slow breath. "Sure," he said on the exhale.



“There is an element of human behavior which confuses me,” Data said. “There is physical evidence that you were harmed during this encounter, yet there is also physical evidence that you...”

Riker wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “Enjoyed it?” he guessed.

Data chewed his words. “Yes.”

“That’s because I did,” said Riker with some satisfaction. “I liked every minute of it. Is that a problem?”

Yes, thought Data, but he blocked the positronic subroutine that would have made him say it aloud. Instead he said,

“I believe Counselor Troi would be concerned, Commander.”

Riker’s face darkened. He grabbed the bucket again and brushed past Data, heading for the river. Data followed him. A different man might have struggled to keep up with Riker, whose long-legged stride cut through the tall grass like it was nothing. But for Data, it was no trouble. And for Riker, there was no escape.

“I believe you are exhibiting what the counselor calls self-destructive behavior,” Data said.

Riker stopped by the river. “Let’s agree to disagree,” he said, dipping the rim of the bucket beneath the surface. “I haven’t done anything that isn’t necessary.”

“There are other ways of generating income, sir,” Data pointed out.

“But none quite so enjoyable,” said Riker with a hard smile.

“Nor quite so risky,” Data pointed out, and the smile slipped away. “Remember, I have seen you without clothing, Commander. Your physiology does not match what these villagers expect to see.”

“Then they don’t have to see it,” said Riker, turning his face away.

“I fail to see how that is possible.”

“Data. It’s possible.”

“And in any case, sir,” Data persisted, “it is not entirely your promiscuity which alarms me. Your daily caloric intake is far below standard for a male of your height, even at rest. Your daily exercise regimen is on-par with Lieutenant Worf’s, and what is appropriate for a Klingon is not necessarily appropriate for a human.”

“Well, I’m fine,” said Riker firmly.

“You are not fine,” Data said as Riker filled the bucket. “You are bleeding.”

Riker settled the bucket on the grass nearby and then froze, his brain catching up to Data’s words. He looked up, eyebrows furrowed, one hand grazing the gouge wounds on his temple. Data gestured to Riker’s legs.

Only then did Riker see the spots of blood on his thigh.

“Have you been harmed?” Data asked, his voice carefully neutral.

“That’s not possible,” said Riker numbly. He dabbed at the blood: still wet. “We didn’t—”

He cut himself off as realization sunk in. No. It shouldn’t be happening. He hadn’t been eating; he’d been working himself to exhaustion, long hours during the day and lung-destroying runs at night. The healer on the edge of town had given him a special tea that was supposed to slow it down, to stop it — but now—

“Commander?”

Riker didn’t realize he’d moved onto his foot slammed into the bucket and splashed water down his boots. Data’s long, strong fingers curled around his upper arm and held him steady.

“This shouldn’t be happening,” he mumbled, and then a wave of regret locked his jaw up so he couldn’t say anything more. He offered Data a pale smile and tried to shrug him off, but Data wouldn’t go.

“I agree, Commander, that your partner should not have hurt you,” said Data — and if it was possible, he even sounded a little chiding. And a little concerned. But Riker grimaced and pulled away.

“He didn’t, Data. We didn’t do anything like that. It’s just...”

He searched for a way to change the subject, to deflect. While he was occupied, Data maneuvered him to the nearest chair and put gentle pressure on Riker’s arms until he sat. Clean bandages, the kind he wrapped around his underwear and cleaned in secret, were pressed into his hands. He clutched them to his forehead, bowing down until his face was hidden. Eyes squeezed into narrow slits, all he could see was the bandages’ off-white blur, the cracked skin across his knuckles and the bled-pale calluses on every finger.

He’d been working himself to the bone. He’d been starving himself dizzy. And still...

“Commander,” said a soft, level voice above him, and suddenly Data’s fingers were carding through his hair. “Might I make a

suggestion?”

Riker froze, his throat locked up.

“I will help you,” Data said. His thumb stroked across Riker’s scalp in a slow, soothing circle. “Will you let me?”

Data, said a guilty voice in Riker’s chest, should not be coming up with ideas to calm his commanding officer down. No junior officer should have to. Arms and core aching, like he’d just finished a long day at the mine, Riker forced himself to sit up and nod. He kept his face composed as Data pushed his hair back on his forehead — a lingering touch, a slow slide of synthetic skin as Data pulled away. His heart thudded in his chest as Data prepared a bowl of warm water and dipped a rag inside.

“Data...” Riker started, his voice strangled.

It was gentle. It was slow. Data’s long fingers untied Riker’s trousers, pulling on the strings so lightly Riker couldn’t even feel the tug. He lifted his hips by instinct, even as his mind rebelled, and one firm hand supported him even as Data peeled the pants away. The sight of blood on his thighs turned Riker’s heart cold, shut off his emotions.

But Data’s warm hands brought him back. It was just the right side of clinical, being tended to like this — the wet heat of the rag against his skin, the gentle rub as Data washed the blood away. His prosthetic lay limp against his thigh, two inches of synthetic skin burned off by the explosion, a dead giveaway of his status that Riker would never let anyone else see. But Data handled it with the respect and care of a seasoned nurse, his expression always focused, always nonjudgmental, as he washed Riker clean.

He glanced away to dip the rag in warm water again. Candlelight played over his sharp face, cast shadows on his cheeks. And when Data turned back, Riker darted his hand out and grabbed the rag, his fingers twining with Data’s through the fabric, holding him tight.

He pulled Data in for a kiss.

Quick, desperate, grateful, teeth clashing — and then Data kissed him back, in a practiced little peck so precise that Riker just knew he’d learned it by watching tutorials, and he couldn’t help but huff an affectionate laugh against Data’s lips.

“I can handle it from here,” he murmured.

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It was quite simple, in Data’s mind, but humans often struggle to understand simple things.

Will Riker was Will Riker. What his body did or looked like mattered very little when it came to this fact. Data would still be Data if he were reduced to a pile of circuits with no shell — and he would still be Data if those circuits were uploaded to the Enterprise itself, or to a bio-chip inside Spot’s brain, or to Geordi’s VISOR.

In the months it took for the Enterprise to locate them, Data learned that he and Riker were similar in ways. Riker wished to change his body. Data wished to change his mind, to be as human as possible. He told the commander as much over a fire that summer, when the stars were high and the flames layered a soft glow over Riker’s face. He listened, eyes crinkling, lips tugging into a smile.

“Well, nothing can be more human than pleasure,” Riker said.

When the Enterprise picked them up, Data’s hair was decidedly mussed.

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