

The Waiting Room

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Summary

Data isn't overly familiar with the Enterprise's sickbay. It's unlikely he'll ever be a patient there, after all, and so far he's only had incidental reason to stop by.

But he's very familiar with the waiting room.

An android could not get sick.

Humans could, of course. In his first three months aboard the Enterprise, Data learned this lesson well. He was the only crewmember uninfected by the Murun virus which swept the ship and left the bridge crew incapacitated. That first day, Data was the only officer to hold the bridge; he steered the Enterprise through an ion storm and out the other side, and he did it on his own, with neither fear nor pride.

The next day, as Dr. Crusher cured the ill, Data was given leave to visit those still suffering.

"It is an appreciated favor, sir, but not a logical one," he said mildly to a still-sniffly Commander Riker. "The bridge crew is still seven members short of optimum staffing. As the only member who does not require rest—" The sound of violent retching came from the bridge head. "—or bathroom breaks, I shall remain at my post," Data finished.

"You're friends with Geordi, aren't you?" Riker said. With his throat still sore, his voice came out low and creaky, a far cry from the stiff-backed officer's voice he usually used. He and Data had barely spoken to each other in their time aboard the Enterprise; he didn't have a good baseline for Riker's human moods and emotions, but he suspected he saw a touch of impatience and perhaps affection in the human's eyes.

"I am," Data said.

"Then he'll want you to visit him," said Riker simply. Data studied his gaunt cheeks, his pale skin, the glimmer of a feverish sweat in his hair. "And besides, it'll give you a chance to study humanity in a new light."

Data cocked his head. "That light being, the manner in which human efficiency is inhibited at suboptimal operating standards?"

"That light being, how we care for those in need," Riker said.

Data considered it, his head still tilted to the side. "I am well-acquainted with human medical procedures, Commander," he said.

Riker thinned his lips in an unsuccessful attempt to hide a smile. "Well, medical care is part of it," he said. "But I mean, just being in the waiting room shows that you care. It'll bring Geordi some comfort, don't you think?"

"I am unsure how to calculate that, sir."

Riker narrowed one eye and clapped Data on the shoulder, his palm slick. "It will," he said, and his gaze slid away, focusing on Counselor Troi, who had been there in the waiting room when he woke up. He allowed himself that smile from earlier.

"Trust me," he said.

The next time Data visited the sickbay waiting room, it was Riker's turn in the biobed. Androids did not get injured on away missions; humans did. And in this case, the hostile aliens had targeted their phasers at a positronic man, only for a man of water and meat to jump in

front of him.

“And electricity,” Riker croaked when Data repeated that ‘water and meat’ part. “Electricity is the important part, I think.”

“*Common sense* is the important part,” Dr. Pulaski scolded. “Data, can you wait outside?”

“Certainly.”

He retreated to the outside hall and took a seat, listening to the muted sound of Dr. Pulaski’s lecture. *He’s an android, Commander Riker. You’re a human. I get the sentiment, but maybe next time, make sure you’re risking your life for something that can actually die!*

Plastic chairs stood empty on either side of Data, with their backs against the soft white walls. Humans considered soft white to be a soothing color, Data knew. It was a largely cultural interpretation. Once, both white and black had been symbols of death, of mourning, but that association faded in the 22nd Century, and was mostly forgotten now.

Data, when staring at a white wall, was not soothed. This had nothing to do with Commander Riker’s wounds (which were perfectly survivable). It was simply not possible for an android to feel soothed.

That was all.

Sickbay itself was not ‘familiar’ to Data, in the sense that humans meant when they said the word ‘familiar.’ Of course, Data had memorized every detail of the sickbay upon his first visit, and made sure to update his memory bank whenever he visited. He could, if necessary, perfectly recreate a picture of the Enterprise’s medical unit, whether by pencil, oil paints, or scribbles in the sand. But by human standards, Data hadn’t visited often enough to become familiar.

The waiting room was a different matter.

When Geordi LaForge tested a new VISOR, Data was in the waiting room, his palms flat on either knee. When Deanna Troi caught an empathic virus, Data sat in the waiting room with Commander Riker at his side. Riker’s leg bounced in a nervous tic strong enough to shake his chair; Data sat stock-still.

He was there in the waiting room when Worf was wounded in battle. He was there, his prosthetic skin still tingling, when the Borg implants were removed from Captain Picard’s head. And he was there when Tasha Yar’s body was brought to the morgue for processing, his back straight and his face expressionless. He would be there, he supposed, if he could be, so long as the Enterprise’s crew lived. If he had access to the medical unit where they were being treated, whether for battle wounds or for age itself, Data would sit calmly in the waiting room without emotion, waiting for the call.

An android doesn’t get sick. An android doesn’t get injured.

An android doesn’t die.

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