

Pretending Not to See

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Pretending Not to See

by [jamaharon](#)

Summary

Sometimes, feigning blindness is the kindest thing to do.

Or: Will Riker gets kidnapped by aliens. When Worf and Data mount a rescue mission, they find Riker naked and injured in a prison cell ... and Riker's biggest secret is revealed.

Commander Riker had been kidnapped.

That was typical. Worf had grown accustomed to rescue missions where Riker was involved. They usually went the same way: he and Data would beam down and take out the kidnapers. Riker would smile and make some cheeky comment (usually while covered in blood)(sometimes while actively dying of his injuries) and they'd make their way back to the Enterprise, to Beverly's expert medical care, safe and sound.

This rescue mission wasn't typical.

For one thing, due to the heavy magnetic shields on this planet, it wasn't possible to beam down. They had to take a medical shuttle in and out, with Beverly ensconced in the medsuite at the back. But this mission was different in more ways than one. Riker's injuries were severe but treatable. Worse was the fact that they'd shaved his beard for him, leaving his cheeks scraped and raw; worse still was that he wasn't allowed any clothing, and when Worf and Data broke into his prison cell, Riker wasn't smiling.

He wouldn't stand up, at first. They tugged gently at his arms, trying to coax him to his feet (well, as gently as Worf and Data could manage). But Riker refused to budge, and eventually Worf had no choice but to lift Riker bodily and carry him out.

When he did that, quite accidentally, he discovered what Riker was trying to keep hidden. He pretended not to notice, kept his jaw clamped shut, didn't say a word.

And now, back on the shuttle, with Riker seeking medical treatment in the back...

"What precisely did they mean," Data asked in a low voice, "when they said they returned Commander Riker to his natural state?"

Worf kept his eyes on the viewport, his whole body tight with anger. He hadn't understood either, at first. Not until he picked Riker up. Then it all clicked into place. The lack of clothes, the shaved beard...

"He is a shifter," said Worf, keeping his voice low, too.

Data cocked his head, eyebrows furrowed. "I am unfamiliar with this term."

Worf glanced over his shoulder at the medbay door. "It is slang," he said reluctantly. "For someone who ... I do not know how to explain it."

Data's eyes went distant, the way they always did when he was checking his database for a dictionary definition. Gradually, he snapped back to the present. "Shifter," he recited. "A noun meaning 'one who shifts gender presentation, i.e. male to female or female to male. Often accomplished through surface-level modifications, such as hormonal treatment, surgeries, or prosthetics.'"

"Quiet," Worf hissed, glancing over his shoulder again. No sign of Riker. Good.

"You believe Commander Riker is one of these ... shifters?" Data asked. Then, faintly disapproving, "Is this term considered polite?"

“No,” Worf said. “Not really.”

“Then I will not use it,” Data decided. “What is your evidence?”

Evidence. Worf shifted in his seat. “I saw it,” he said. “When I lifted him. They’d taken away his…” His cheeks warmed a little. “His prosthetic.”

“They removed an essential piece of Commander Riker’s body?” asked Data, eyebrows raised.

“It appears so.”

“For what purpose?”

“As they said. To return him to his ‘natural state.’” Worf paused, taking a moment to digest his own anger. “They likely destroyed it.”

“Is it possible to acquire a replacement?” Data asked, always pragmatic.

“I do not know,” Worf said. He busied himself with the shuttle controls. “Probably. But…”

“But in the meantime,” Data said, “Commander Riker’s dignity is bruised, to use a metaphor. And we would be wise not to bruise it any further.”

“Yes.” Worf relaxed a little, now that he knew he and Data were on the same page. He breathed a little easier ... only for five minutes or so, because it wasn’t long after that that the medsuite’s doors slid open and Riker appeared, pale and thin in the loose-fitting hospital pajamas Beverly had replicated for him. His hair was clean now, freed of the matted blood that marred it before, but it was still messy, and with his beard and uniform gone, he looked much younger. He walked toward them a little too quickly, a little too jittery — still shaken, and conspicuously flat between the legs.

He took the empty seat to Data’s right. After a moment of staring out the viewport, eyes blank, Riker curled his long legs up and pulled them to his chest, turning himself into a tight ball. He rested his chin on his knees.

“My ears are burning,” he said flatly.

“We were not discussing you,” Worf insisted at once, his voice hot.

“We were indeed discussing you,” Data admitted at the same time.

“Only good things, I hope,” said Riker, still flat. There was something deeply wrong with his affect. The jokes were there, but the tone didn’t match, and his face was like a rubber mask.

“Our discussion did not reflect poorly on you, Commander,” Data assured him. “Rather, we discussed or implied our negative opinions regarding your captors.”

“Oh,” said Riker, and that was all. His hands were tight on his pajama pants. “You mean…”

Worf stayed silent, hoping Data would fill in the blanks with some useless factoid or rambling aside. But Data, damnably, stayed silent too.

“You mean you ... saw…” Riker started awkwardly.

More silence. Data glanced at Worf, looking for leadership. On the other side of Data, Riker’s mask was fracturing as he worked to stay distant and professional, without a hint of emotion in his eyes. Devastating, Worf thought, to keep that secret so long, and so successfully, only for alien interference to drop the floor beneath one’s feet. To have one’s secret exposed against one’s will, and to one’s comrades. One’s fellow warriors. The longer he thought about it, the more he had to suppress a growl.

“They have attempted to turn you into a woman,” said Worf finally, bristling with disapproval. “A most pathetic attempt, sir. This crude alien experiment cannot change who you are.”

“Clearly they were unsuccessful,” Data agrees. “It is obvious you are still very much a male of your species. I can sample your hormonal levels and brain patterns to prove it, if you wish.”

“Dr. Crusher will have you back to normal in no time,” Worf said, his voice a rumble in his chest. “And we will rain fire and blood upon your captors the next time they stumble across our path.”

“Don’t,” said Riker, long-suffering.

This was a good strategy, Worf decided. “A barbaric practice, sir,” he said, and he meant it. “But not a permanent one.”

“There are many surgeries designed to replace mutilated genitalia,” Data agreed. “You will be back to status quo in no time.”

“Don’t,” said Riker again, his voice thick now. He scrubbed at his eyes with the heel of his palm and turned his head away. With a sniff, he rested his cheek on his knees, his face hidden. Worf and Data shared a concerned glance ... and Worf might have convinced himself it was fine, but a moment later he heard the quiet hitch of breath, the helpless rush of tears.

On Data’s far side, Riker curled up tighter, his face twisting. He sniffed again, desperate to stay quiet. There was nowhere to hide, not in a shuttle this small, so he *had* to be quiet. But it was kind of them to pretend they didn’t know. And devastating that they did. That they’d

found out this way. And a liquid heat was moving through his chest and stomach, tightening his lungs like a vise. His throat ached, sore from the effort it took not to cry, to lose his dignity even worse than he already had. He tried to take a breath, shaky and steadying, and heard himself sob instead, a broken sound — near-inaudible, but still so loud in the quiet shuttle.

And then he couldn't stop. Quiet and restrained, with his face turned away from his men, Riker dissolved into tears. The sobs bubbled up against his will, each one bitten back and stifled. Still audible, no matter how hard he tried. And it was pathetic, and he knew it, and that just made the tears come faster, until they were rolling down his cheeks and leaving a wet stain on his pajama pants, and all he could do was clutch at his own sleeves and bury his face in his arms and try to disappear. Back to a world where they didn't know. Where they hadn't seen.

Data's warm fingers curled around his arm and squeezed. Behind him, the medsuite door hissed as it opened, and he sensed Beverly's presence before he felt her hand between his shoulder blades, rubbing a soothing circle into his skin. Worf stayed silent, his eyes fixed resolutely to the viewport, pretending not to see.

The least he could do, he told himself as Riker stifled another sob. The very least.

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