

Orange Blossoms and Rust

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Orange Blossoms and Rust

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Summary

Scotty returns to the station where he was born. He's not sure why.

Notes

Based on a heartbreaking but ultimately hopeful AU that Steff spun, with young Scotty growing up on a rundown station far from Earth. And although his mother loved him, she could barely care for him. But kind hands protected the little boy—as often as they could.

It took him nearly an hour to collect his baggage. And he honestly couldn't say whether it was anxiety or the artificial gravity making him fumble. Either way he felt—heavy. The shuttle attendant still gave him a sunny smile when he finally disembarked.

“Safe stay, honey,” she drawled. He couldn't begin to guess her age, but perhaps she'd been an attendant for a terrified seven year old and his disintegrating mother on the reverse trip, twenty years before. He couldn't remember a single face or voice from those disorienting days—save his mother's—but he'd recognized the kindness.

Scotty stepped onto the station where he'd been born, and took a tangy breath of heavily filtered air. He expected to feel—something. He didn't know what, exactly—*familiarity? Affection? Fear?* but had expected something.

What he felt was tired.

He shouldered his pack (the gravity was *strange*, there had to be something off there) and trudged down the falsely gleaming main corridor in the direction the overly-colorful handmap he'd been handed said was the station hotel. There were shops everywhere, plated in white and chrome that didn't quite hide the gray conduits, trying to sell him personal robotics, or dusty station memorabilia, or what purported to be leather handbags. Or—yes. That one was the legal sex workers.

His mother's place, somewhere deep below, hadn't gleamed at all, though she had purchased their living in the same way. (So had he, though just the once. An experience he'd been able to shrug off until the day, abruptly, when he *hadn't* been able to. 'Ah,' his therapist had said delicately when he had walked in, utterly bewildered. As if Brian had anticipated it.)

This station didn't feel like a place that could contain the first seven years of any life, much less his. It was liminal, he decided as he unpacked his trousers into a faux-wooden drawer. A queen bed dominated the space, and vague reproductions of entirely forgettable art lined the walls. The shower around the corner was sonic, though a placard announced that a water upgrade was available at a premium price. One he could easily afford, but wouldn't pay for on this trip.

(He had a water shower at home, and the loveliest human on Earth to share it with. Who would kiss him sweetly in the mornings while they touched past each other on their way to work, minty toothbrushes in their mouths; or who would come to bed warm at night, smelling of orange-and-honey soap, and reach for him in the dark, all damp hair and lips that tasted of the Earth and the Sea.

There had been a whispered offer, a week ago. “*I'll come with you, if you'd like.*”

Scotty had levered up on his elbow. He'd imagined that bonnie trip, with a hand tucked in his and a voice to speak for him when he lost the words.

"I think I need to go alone," he admitted. An apology. A *plea*, really, even if he didn't know whether he wanted to be talked out of his choice, or to have it gently approved.

Neither of them could read his mind, alas.

"I know.")

He stepped into the hotel shower, because it seemed to be the thing to do. Afterward, clean—if cold—he sat naked on the bed for some minutes before deciding he should have some dinner. He considered calling it in, but the concierge had recommended a fusion restaurant.

Level two was the floor he was meant to ask the lift for. But he hesitated alone, his arms folded across his chest. The doors opened again, and the new passenger startled to see him, then asked the computer for level five. At level five, someone else got on, wanting level seven. And down and down until he was the last one aboard at something like level 27. A grizzled Andorian with one too-short antenna paused before the doors closed and turned to look at him. "It's rough down here," the Andorian warned.

"Aye," Scotty agreed, arms still firmly folded, and the Andorian shrugged and let the door close.

Scotty finally spoke to the lift. "Thirty," he said, his voice scraping, and the lift shuddered a bit as it hit the bottom of the shaft.

The doors opened, and *there* were the emotions Scotty had expected when he came aboard the station, though he was still entirely incapable of naming them.

He *knew* these halls. The pattern of the conduits, packed tight. *Chipped* at, dangerously thin over the searing plasma—heat for warming cold hands or burning the spoil out of food. He could *smell* the plasma, sharp over the top of sweat and piss and sex, finally placing a scent memory he'd never been able to explain. The reactor throbbed through the soles of his feet. Away from the conduits, with empty space only *centimeters* away through the skin of the hull, the cold ached with bitter familiarity.

He walked. He had no idea why he was here, but if there was a reason, it was on Level 30.

He shook his head to the half-dozen propositions from the whores. "Ah, but you're so clean," one of them sighed wistfully at him, trailing her fingers across the small of his back. He turned back and tucked his hotel keycard into her hand, and she lit up.

"Anything in particular you'd like?" she asked flirtatiously.

"Order some food," he told her. "And call and ask them to turn on the water. Invite some friends." She gave him a sultry wink, and then blinked in surprise when he caught her hand and gently kissed her knuckles. "It's paid through the week," he continued, because he wouldn't be going back to the room.

(He'd stayed at the station hotel four times, he remembered now. Or his *mother* had, whenever she was lucky enough to be purchased for some passing businessman's pleasure between his meetings. She always came to fetch Scotty when that happened. He remembered marveling at the water shower, and making a nest of fine clothing on the floor in the closet, sleeping warm while his mother spread her legs and bought them a night behind the safety of a locked door.

The longest they'd ever spent was a glorious week. When his mother's client was out, they cuddled together watching vids and eating room service until the key card rattled in the door and Scotty dashed back to the closet. He hadn't been fast enough the last time, just avoiding enraged fists, and he'd mourned losing the chicken dinner which hadn't arrived yet. Still, they'd laughed about it together for weeks, his ma on a joyous high that hadn't yet spun her into shaky exhaustion.)

A hundred meters down the corridor, he grabbed a hand that reached to pick his pocket, catching a thin wrist with a speed that startled both him and the thief. They looked at each other, wide-eyed, and then Scotty sighed and handed over a handful of notes to the skinny kid.

"I don't put out," the lad said, chin rising.

"I didna ask ye to," Scotty growled. "Is there still a market down by the reactor?"

"Yeah," the kid said cautiously. "But you'll *really* get robbed there."

Scotty jerked his chin. "Off w'ye," he said, and the lad scampered away.

The market nearly put him on his knees. A moment before, he couldn't have summoned a single image of it; he wouldn't have been able to describe it at all. But he walked through an illegally propped-open pressure door, and it unlocked his memory.

The laughter from the black market shops was loud, and if it was sharp, it was also real. These were people hanging on the edge of survival, but they were alive. The market was all food and drink and drugs and wares, and if it was grimy and half-lit, it was also more genuine than the shops up on Level 1.

"Oranges!" called a voice. "One fer ten, or three fer twenty-five!"

Scotty breathed through his lips, in and then out, and if the market was familiar, this shop was *unchanged*.

"Three," he said softly, and the wizened shop owner hopped on a sore hip to fill the order. His hair was sparse and white, his apron stained, but the lines in his face moved easily around his smile.

Scotty dropped thirty credits on the counter.

"Oh, it's twenty five, sir."

“Ezekiel,” Scotty said softly.

The man blinked, and blinked again, and then sat so swiftly and heavily that Scotty reached for him.

“Oh, gods. *Wee Montgomery?*”

“Aye, sir,” Scotty said, clasping the shop owner’s arthritic hands, and looked around to give the man a moment.

He tried to imagine a tiny, silent child walking this market. He saw, now, the desperate danger. And that Ezekiel, in lifting that boy to put him behind his counter, had drawn a thin but real line of protection around him.

“How are ya here?!” Ezekiel boggled. “Why?! And ... ya grew up. *Ya lived.*”

“Can I buy ye dinner, sir?” Scotty asked.

“Oh, I wish I could,” Ezekiel said wistfully, his smile cracking. “But there’s half a day’s work, still.”

“And what if someone bought all your oranges?” Scotty said.

Ezekiel hesitated. “I won’t take charity,” he said. Not belligerent, or even proud. Just a fact.

“Of course not. But I do like oranges.”

Ezekiel patted his hand fondly, and now Scotty could see the way light reflected strangely off the lenses of failing eyes. “You always did.”

Ezekiel had peeled oranges for a tiny boy, whose entire existence was the bottom floor of a run down station, and told him stories about the vast orange groves and the rolling sea far away in Florida. He told bright and happy tales about trees and flowers and birds. Scotty wondered, now, if Ezekiel had ever seen those things himself.

“Close up shop, Ezekiel,” Scotty said, abruptly certain why he was here. “If ye wilna let me buy your oranges, then tell them—your son has come in.”

“I’m not your father, boy,” the shopkeeper said reluctantly. “If your ma told ya that ...”

(Scotty knew, with absolute certainty, that his mother hadn’t had the money to buy two tickets to Earth. That was why her seven year old child had thought to make some coin the way she did. And yet, they’d been gone within *days* of the first and only time he’d sold himself. He wondered what dreams Ezekiel had given up, when he gave Cait Scott everything he had. In the bewildering blur of leaving everything he’d ever known, Scotty remembered that Ezekiel had come with them to the shuttle platform. He’d straightened his collar with trembling hands, before tucking an orange into his pocket. “*For the journey,*” Ezekiel had whispered brokenly into his ear, and then fled with tears streaming down his face.)

“Of course ye are,” Scotty interrupted. “Not my father in blood, I know that, but in everything else that counted? Of course ye are.”

“*Ya lived,*” Ezekiel whispered in wonder, and lifted Scotty’s palm to his face. “Oh, gods. *Ya lived.*”

Scotty still had trouble naming his emotions, but had learned over the years to feel them all the same, and didn’t wipe at the tears on his face. “Your son’s come in, da,” Scotty said gently. “Will ye please close up shop, and let him take ye home?”

“Home,” Ezekiel breathed shakily. “Did ya ever go see the orange groves, Montgomery?”

“They go forever,” Scotty said. “And da, the smell of the orange blossoms ...”

Ezekiel closed his eyes in tremulous ecstasy. “My son...?” he said hesitantly.

“Aye.”

“... come to take me home?”

“Aye,” Scotty said fervently.

Ezekiel nodded, a short, jerky, teary movement. “It’s so good to see ya, son,” the old shopkeeper said at last, and stood, face settling into the lines of his smile, even as he leaned on Scotty’s arm.

“It’s my son!!!” he shouted out, voice cracking, and the marketplace quieted, the people of Level 30 turning to look at him. “My son, home, and come to take me home! Oranges for everyone, today!”

Scotty grabbed two off the counter before it was overrun, and held them up before wrapping his arm around the thin shoulders that had carried him, in every way.

“For the journey.”