

One Minute

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One Minute

by [SLWalker](#)

Summary

(2245 - 2254) - This is the story of the free agent who acts as the primary contact between Scott and the rebellion while Scott's confined to Earth.

Notes

I'm not quite sure how to warn for this, or what to say about it. But if I could make only one suggestion as the storyteller to you, my potential reader: Read it with your whole heart, if only because it broke no small part of mine to tell it. And thank you, many years back, to Asp and Teddog, without whom I would not have written it or posted it.

Chapter 1

Well, we busted out of class, had to get away from those fools;
We learned more from a three minute record, baby,
Than we ever learned in school.
Tonight I hear the neighborhood drummer sound,
I can feel my heart begin to pound,
You say you're tired and you just want to close your eyes
And follow your dreams down...

Well, we made a promise
We swore we'd always remember:
No retreat, baby, no surrender;
Like soldiers in the winter's night with a vow to defend:
No retreat, baby, no surrender.

-Bruce Springsteen, **No Surrender**

For one minute, I pretend.

I pretend a lot of things. I pretend this never happened. I pretend that it did, but it turned out differently. I pretend that I'm a decent human being. I pretend I'm not scared out of my mind.

I pretend that I can make some kind of difference.

Just-- I need you to understand, it didn't *start* like this. In fact, it started with a one-off meeting in an alley to pass on information, a couple years ago now. That's what I do -- I trade in information. Doesn't matter what kind, as long as I make a profit on it. I do whatever it takes to get info for trade. Business people use me a lot. So does the rebellion. I can move around a lot easier than most rebels can, just because I'm a loyal Empire citizen on the surface, and no one really looks twice at me.

So, it started with an exchange of information in an alley. I didn't really notice anything about him then worth a second look, except a certain-- not aura, but *presence* that suggested he'd be capable of doing real damage to someone if he wanted to. Except, he had to be crazy. Because the 'information' he gave me? Was a toothpick. The fucker gave me a toothpick and a note to take to the rebellion. Seriously.

But hey, whatever, he paid me. If he wanted to waste good Empire credits on sending toothpicks to people, that was fine.

So, it went on like that. Two meetings, three. And the only thing I really noticed then was that he kinda creeped me out. Never smiled, never even raised an eyebrow. Just looked at me like I wasn't even human. Maybe that's why I stopped thinking of *him* as human, but I'll get into that later.

Fourth meeting, right? Toothpick, credits, and a pair of muggers decided it was a good night to roll someone. It was only after it that I pieced together what happened, though.

I was only starting to get scared by the time it was over.

No shit. He had the blade in the heart of the guy on the left, then pulled it out with his other hand and brought it back-armed around to put it right through the eye-socket of the other one. Just like that. That fast.

"Holy shit!" I kept saying that, over and over, and I'm on my ass because I tripped over my own feet scrambling backwards. There were two dead guys in the alley, and I barely even knew they were there before they were dead.

But-- he didn't even blink. Didn't smirk. Didn't do anything except flick the dagger free of blood. Later I figured out that it was a frictionless blade, his own work, but right then I'm just staring and gasping, though I finally quit going, 'holy shit.'

He barely gave me a glance, then he turned around and walked away.

After a few minutes, I got myself together to go the other way. But boy, did it stick with me. I kept going over it, again and again, in my head. Slowed it down in my mind, as well as I could, just to really grasp what it was I saw. I think that was where I started really eying him. Not like-- not like you do someone you want, but like you do *something* you want.

God, I'm a fuckup.

The alleys were always low-lit. And he always wore black. The only time he didn't was once when he must have been running late, and then he looked almost normal in a Starfleet uniform, except for that cold look. But other than that, he was always in black, and always far enough away from me that he was more like a shadow than anything else. But that shadow just kept following me, even after he was gone again.

I don't know exactly when I decided that I'd do just about anything to get within that three feet of space that was the difference between life and death. I just did. I really wanted to get that close to him, this crazy, shadowy fucker. Maybe because no one could? I don't know. Or maybe

I do.

A few more meetings, and I took a chance.

"Price?" he asked. He never raised his voice, never spoke more than absolutely necessary, always just kept a tone to match his expression; cool and even.

I swallowed, but I managed to sound confident. "One minute."

He narrowed his eyes at me, briefly. Not in anger, though. It was just a look that demanded an answer.

"One minute where you stay your blade," I said, and I was proud of myself for sounding as sure and flippant as I did. Inside, I was shaking like a leaf. The fact he just gave me a short nod made it worse.

I flattered myself with the idea that I could somehow faze this guy. That there was some space, between the cold business-like certainty and the deadly swiftness, that I could reach.

The first thing I really noticed was that he was shorter than I thought. You'd think that I woulda had a good idea of his height by now, but I didn't. But I was kinda shocked that he was probably a good three or four inches shorter than I am. Enough that he had to tip his head up a little to keep his eyes on mine.

My heart was pounding out of my chest, but he was just as cool and expressionless as ever, even with me right there practically in his face. Up close, he was all black and white; in the low light of an alley there was no color, just contrast, and he was really pretty good-looking. Like the kind of guy who could turn someone's head, if only he'd learned how to smile.

I deluded myself that I could faze him a bit. Later, I'd figured out that the only reason why I got my one minute then was because he had already measured me and decided that I wasn't a threat. And, really, I wasn't. I just wished I was.

I was having a hard time not breathing too fast, but I thought I was doing a really good job of it. Still took me about a half of that one minute to put a hand on him, though; I traced my fingers down from his temple to his jaw line. He didn't react. Didn't look surprised, upset or anything, just watched me coolly. Didn't pull away, didn't even look like he cared in the least.

I sure did, though, because holy shit, I was *this close* to this-- this crazy, shadowy bastard. I think I probably would have kissed him then just to see if I could get away with it, but I didn't get the chance -- right as I tucked my fingers under his chin, right before I was about to lean in, I felt the point of his dagger against my ribcage. Not digging in or anything, it was just there, but the message was clear.

Minute's up.

I don't doubt he gave me the whole minute. Just like I don't doubt that he would have used that dagger. But I backed off, and once I was out of his three feet, he turned around and walked away without looking back.

I didn't get over it the rest of the night.

Emboldened by that first minute, that's what I asked for from then on. I was losing money on him, but hey, I was still getting what I wanted. Or-- I thought I was at first. I finally did kiss him, but it didn't bother him any more than anything else did -- he didn't fight it, didn't pull away, sure didn't return it. Do you have any idea how hard it is to kiss someone who doesn't give you anything back?

I raised the stakes after awhile. I was getting kinda frustrated. I wanted a reaction. I wanted-- I don't know. I wanted something.

So, I told him I wanted one night.

He gave it to me. Didn't even blink. I mean, no sex -- I doubt he woulda cared about that, even, he viewed his body as he did his mind and his dagger; weapons, useful tools, no sentimentality. But the line that couldn't be crossed was that I couldn't compromise him being able to defend himself in any way, and there's just no way to get laid without being compromised. So, no sex. And after awhile, I got-- bored, I guess you could say. I went over every last millimeter of him, and I *still* couldn't get a reaction out of him. And he wasn't dangerous to me, inside of the time I took.

I left him alone more after that. Still took his time, but I used him for other things. Mostly as a bodyguard. He was really an effective bodyguard -- standing behind me, black clad contrasts, silence and eerie intensity while I did my thing. I could gamble, I could get high, I could get drunk, and I knew that if he was there, I'd be perfectly fine. The only time I got in his space then was sometimes to throw an arm around his shoulders for a moment and bite his jaw, usually in some dive, just to show everyone else, "Hey, look what I got." Not hard. Just to show off and make a point.

But-- he was never mine.

He still isn't.

Right now, I don't want him to be. I just want him to keep breathing.

He was too good a bodyguard. One look from him was usually enough to scare people off who might have caused me trouble if I was alone.

But I got careless; I cheated some guys in a game of cards and they spat hate at me across the table, but they didn't dare make a move on me. Not with my shadow there. And weeks passed by, I forgot about it, and that was when everything went to shit.

Four of them. There were *four* of them. They came through the door of the club we were in; it was pretty quiet there, but even then, it was almost instant chaos. I ended up under a table. I have no fucking idea how I got there, down in the peanut shells and stale beer.

He had to have been in knife fights before, where he couldn't use the element of surprise, but this was the first time I'd seen one. Just from the knees down, though. The four guys who'd been planning on taking me out must have known they'd have to contend with him, and they were growling, threatening, snarling. He never made a sound. Watching from under a table (what does that say about me?) I could only half make it out, but one by one, those guys fell.

The last one he nailed didn't die instantly, though, and that surprised me. I crawled out from my hiding spot, and that last guy, who had to outweigh my shadow by fifty or more pounds, was drowning on his own blood but wasn't dead.

And my shadow was fucked up. Nothing too obvious, but he had his feet apart to try to keep a steady stance, and he was breathing through his mouth, something I'd never seen from him. He didn't look scared, just dazed, and I said, "Hey, what's wrong?"

I don't think he really heard me; he didn't even pick his head up from where it was hanging a bit, and after a moment he tried to put a hand on a table to steady himself, but he ended up hitting the floor on his shoulder instead.

I wasn't really scared then, except for the rush after being almost jumped by four guys wanting to pay me back for cheating them, and it's hard to be scared for someone who's really more machine than person; more shadow than human. The fact that he was in black made it hard for me to see what had happened, but I checked him over anyway and the only thing I found was a scratch, not even as bad as a paper cut, on his left palm. Didn't take a genius to guess that those guys had been packing poisoned blades. More than a scratch, and my shadow'd be dead as a doornail.

As of now, he was just fucked up pretty bad. Not quite there. His hands were chilly, and there was a really glazed look to his eyes, which was even creepier than the sharp, cold light usually there.

If this gives you an idea just how much of a piece of shit I can be, I thought about leaving him there. He's not attached to me, aside from my usefulness; I'm not attached to him (liar), aside from the fact that he's a good bodyguard and easy on the eyes. I thought about leaving him there.

But I didn't. Though, the first thing I did was take his dagger off of him; I can't believe he actually took the time to put it back in its-- you know, I'm not sure *what* you'd call it. It's not like a sheath. More like a holster, really light-weight, really clever, strapped to his inner right forearm. Muscle-controlled. I wondered how many times he cut his own hands practicing to get to the point where he could have his dagger in hand in a heartbeat. But I took it off him; he tried to pull his arm back, but he wasn't in any shape to put up a real fight. I figured that if I was gonna drag or carry him anywhere, I didn't want to risk getting stabbed.

He didn't really put up much of a fight when I got him across my shoulders, either. Brief struggle, but then he was still, and I guess maybe he blacked out. He was solid, too. Like, real dense, compact weight. Not too heavy for me, but enough that I knew my shoulders were gonna be screaming at me later for this.

The only person left in the bar was the tender, and he looked freaked out. The guy who hadn't been dead was finally dead, laying there with blood leaking out of his mouth. I didn't bother paying my tab. I didn't see myself coming back to this place.

The good thing about living my kinda lifestyle is that you learn where you can drag an unconscious assassin and not have people ask you questions. I sprung for a cheap motel room. Dropped my shadow on the bed. He wasn't really out cold, but close -- kinda somewhere just under the surface, and I guess he must've been hurting too, but if there was one thing I'd figured out about him it was that he could ignore sensation like no man I'd ever seen before. I guess he'd managed to train himself to the point where even dazed and messed up and poisoned, he still gave away nothing.

Now, I really wish-- maybe I really wish--

I don't know.

I wish that I never got a look past that coldness. How can I wish that and still--

How do I even *live* with this?

It was easier then. I figured I'd go call some buddies and see if they knew of anything I could do. If I were a real mean prick, I woulda dropped my shadow in front of a hospital, and they woulda figured out who he was and called Starfleet, and then he woulda been in the hands of some really fucked-up people. By comparison, I was definitely the safer bet.

Of course, I wasted some time. I actually chatted with these guys on the comm. Only found out from some of the smarter ones that there wasn't much I could do; he'd either outlast the poison, or it'd outlast him. I was probably gone about twenty or thirty minutes.

The problem with wanting something, is that when you get it, you have to live with it. I thought I wanted a reaction. To unsettle my favorite, cold-blooded obsession. It's only now that I realize that I wanted to see how a living being, someone with a beating heart, could become little more than a weapon who never smiled, never frowned, never felt. Who could kill someone without blinking.

Why the fuck did I ever want that?

Because in the end, he killed me.

The first blow was the raging. I had never, ever seen anything, any *flicker* of anything from him, so stepping back into that room and finding all fury and snarling and desperation-- I was shocked. I froze. The door slid closed behind me, and I wasn't even sure I was breathing. And he was attacking the wall with the kind of violence that was the polar opposite of his usual icy approach to everything. I don't even remember what he was snarling.

If it had been one of my drug buddies, hallucinating, I woulda found it funny. But it wasn't.

I thought that was bad. It was. But it got worse. Because the snarling and desperation turned to begging and desperation and it felt like a knife right into my chest. And he was still clawing at that wall, long bloody trails, bright red even on the kinda dark tannish wall-paper, and sometimes he would seem to get another wind and snarl again, but he was more pleading, and I--

It was around there that I realized I wasn't seeing *him*, but an echo of who he used to be. And like a ghost, he was replaying the last terrible moments of his life.

I've never heard anyone sound so plaintive. The inflectionless voice I barely knew was sharper than any dagger when it had that note of grief and terror and pleading in it and you could literally hear his heart breaking, or how it broke then.

I thought that was the worst. But it wasn't.

It was when he finally slid down in the corner, with only one name being repeated, still drawing ruined fingertips down the wall that I nearly choked to death and I was on my own knees, and I don't even know how or why but maybe it was because I was seeing something and I knew-- I knew what had happened, at least enough of it to know *why*, and over and over, he just kept crying, "Jenna," and it *hurt*, until he finally quit.

It was when he quit even that, a bloodied, broken ghost, that I think I died. On my knees, across the room, trying to breathe.

How could I live with that?

I don't know how long it all went on. How long he was at that wall. How long we sat in silence; blood and tears on his side, shock and pain and fear and everything on my side. I don't know how I even moved after that. He didn't. Stayed in that corner, wedged between the wall he'd torn his hands to pieces on and an end table. Didn't hear me, didn't see me; still just a ghost of someone else, someone who died there in a place no human being should ever be in. Torn to death, not with a knife or any other weapon, but with the fact he loved someone once.

It wouldn't have been so hard, maybe, if I had spent the last couple of years getting to know someone who had expressions and inflections, but I hadn't -- for two years, he had just been a shadow. Now, I knew why he was.

I was shaking, but not in any good ways. Tried to drag him out of the corner, but he wouldn't budge. I tried to move the end table, but it was bolted to the floor, probably so some shithead like me wouldn't steal it. His hands were cool before, but now he was burning hot, and I think that as strong as he was, he'd move only when he wasn't breathing anymore.

I tried to get myself together, but I was fucked up too, though in entirely different ways. Finally I got an idea and pulled out my own drug kit. Most of my stuff, uppers and downers, were all street creations, but Blue's based off of real medicine, even in street version, so I snagged that vial, and then I remembered that the kind of dose it takes to get me stoned would kill him outright, and even a small dose might, but there wasn't much choice, so I knocked it down by three quarters.

For a moment, I wondered if I shouldn't just give him a quick end right then. I know that probably sounds bad, but after seeing what happened-- where's the mercy in all of this?

But I didn't. Loaded the hypospray and put it right into his neck, and it was instantaneous that he went deadweight, so fast that I thought I mighta killed him anyway. Like a puppet when all the strings snap at the same time. But he was still breathing; faint and a bit fast, but breathing, and I didn't know what to do first, he was frying alive and bleeding all over the place, still bleeding from where he'd literally friction-burned the skin off his finger tips clawing the wall, nails torn, and he was so lifelessly still.

I scrambled and got a direction; tore up the top bed sheet, cheap thing, and bound up his hands as well as I could, and then I dragged him into the bathroom and dumped him into the shower, clothes and all, and turned it on kinda lukewarm. Tried to keep his hands out of the spray, and tried to make sure that he didn't end up drowning after all this, and I was still reeling.

My Dad's friend came back when Dad died, and told me how, and told me he'd been almost cut in half by a malfunctioning airlock door, and they couldn't get to him in time, and he'd screamed, or so it was said, for my mother and me and my sister until he died there, and this is the first time in years I remember this, watching my shadow's blood and tears wash down the drain.

I wasn't a good kid, even before Dad died, I palled around with the same kinda people I do now, and maybe Dad's friend thought he'd scare me straight, but I ran the other way. I was fifteen and I ran away, got into a gang, then drugs, then this--

This--

I ended up battling for the shadow all night. I didn't want him to quit breathing without someone around who knew his name, or who cared about him more, who could maybe find the name he'd been repeating on that wall. It was constant; get him cooled off, and he'd be okay for awhile, but then deteriorate again, and it was constant and in between those moments I thought about shit I hadn't thought of in years, and I thought about him and what I'd seen, and I wondered what the fuck was so wrong with this world that we ended up like this.

If he killed me with his heartbreak, though, maybe he brought me back to something else; still out of his head, in one of the really bad moments, he'd said to someone, "I'll be all right," and I thought it must be the girl, but what really hit me wasn't that he sounded scared, but that he was trying to sound *brave*. And that under both the fear and bravery was a warmth that I think I would do anything to give back to him.

He's sort of on the other side of it all now, just about at dawn. Sleeping across from me, just sleeping, though I know he doesn't want to be because he'd managed to drag himself back to this world, this now, long enough to look at me (brown eyes, his only real color) and he was himself again -- expressionless, if still dazed, but himself. And he fought to stay awake until he just couldn't and drifted back off.

So, for one minute, I pretend.

I pretend that he's sleeping here because he trusts me to watch over him. I pretend that it matters, if not to him then to my Mom, when I brush at his hair like she used to do to me when I was sick. I pretend that I'm a better person than I am. I pretend I'm not terrified.

I pretend a lot of things.

Most of all, that I can give him back his life.

Chapter 2

And now young faces grow sad and old
And hearts of fire grow cold;
We swore blood brothers against the wind,
Now I'm ready to grow young again,
And hear your sister's voice callin' us home
Across the open yards;
Well maybe we could cut someplace of our own,
With these drums and these guitars...

'Cause we made a promise
We swore we'd always remember:
No retreat, baby, no surrender;
Blood brothers in the stormy night with a vow to defend:
No retreat, baby, no surrender.

-Bruce Springsteen, **No Surrender**

I can never pretend it was easy. There's nothing easy about this. I wish I could pretend that it was all magical and wonderful, but it's never that. But y'know? The things that matter in life are never easy.

I'd drifted off in that motel room, and when I woke up, he was long gone. No notes, no nothing; he took his dagger and vanished. And after getting some sleep, I started trying to scramble back to-- to what I knew. What I understood. Clawing for a life that I couldn't live anymore, just like he'd clawed that wall for his.

He has a name now, but we'll get to that later.

But I-- I don't know. I couldn't live like that anymore, but boy, I tried. I hit the drugs and booze harder than I ever have. I tried to dope myself past the dreams, past the memories, past him, past me, past everything. We did meet up, but I couldn't even stand to look at him. But if he knew that I knew, he never showed it. As cold as ever. He must've known a doctor, because his hands were fixed up, just a few scars to show the horror. I couldn't look at his face, so I looked at his hands, and I wondered how he could even pretend that none of it happened. Even if he didn't remember the replay, he had to have seen that wall.

I didn't take his time, his space or anything, just credits, some mumbled number that didn't mean anything to me, and then I got out of there and found some buddies to get totally blown away with. It went on like that for about a half a year. I was out of control. I was trying so fucking hard to get away from it all. No more pretending, I kept telling myself. Fuck this scene.

I finally went too far. Left contact info for him, not the other way around, while I was blitzed out of my head, because I wanted to tell that fucking shadow how much I hated him, and I wanted him to kill me, and I wanted this to end.

I--

It hurt. Everything *hurt*. Because with his ghost, all mine came back to me. My Dad. My Mom. My sister, and I'd start sobbing in dingy bathrooms, and I got why he was clawing against a wall, because I wanted to claw my own heart out. That kind of pain makes you react with your body, because your soul is screaming. And I hated him so much. I hated him because I was okay, you know, before him.

It was before dawn in that damn alley in Belfast, and I was so fucked up that I couldn't stand, I was just laying there and I was hoping someone would take me out. And he showed up. I know it wasn't because he cared. I know he only did because I was useful. Because I was able to ferry information better than anyone else to date.

"I hate you," I kept saying over and over, and he didn't care about that either, just dragged my drugged, fucked up, sick body off the ground and to some close-by hotel, and dropped me on the bed. And then stood guard, my shadow, my silent sentry, *fuck* I hated him.

He must have taken some leave. Stationed in Belfast, I was later to learn, because Starfleet kept him on an extremely short leash. He was only starting to get some off-base freedom when we first met. Even then, he wasn't allowed to leave Ireland, let alone Earth. How strange it would have been to him, if he could feel, to have been born amongst the stars, only to end up tied to the ground.

But anyway, I was such a mess. He stayed. I detoxed. I lost it. I raged and screamed and bawled and he never batted an eyelash. I even swung on him once, but he just side-stepped it, and then coolly watched me as I lay on the ground sobbing into the cheap carpeting. Three days. I only remember parts of it. I remember being sick, and he was a merciless bastard, he'd just drop me in the shower like I did him and turn it on. I know it wasn't revenge. I doubt he remembered much of anything from when he'd been sick and messed up. He was just brutally efficient.

I tried to get him to knife me, but then I was too sick to even try that anymore, and I only remember flashes and lots of groaning and crying, and long hours of silence. I only remember him falling asleep once; lightly, every sound had him awake and alert again, and I was to learn that was always how he slept when he wasn't messed up. Too light for dreams.

I wished that I could do that.

I came out of it, finally. Still felt sick and hollow, but my head was clear and most of the tears had dried, and he was still there, still just watching me like I was little more than a piece of human wreckage, and--

And that's what I was. It's hard to be dishonest with yourself when someone looks at you and sees right through you. All of your strengths, all of your weaknesses. No condemnation. He just sounded my soul and found me to be worth exactly this much.

I got to my feet, and I was really shaky but I knew I could walk. And looked into those cold-lit eyes that were colored for warmth, a warmth stolen from them, and I still hated him, but I hurt for him, and for me, and for Dad and Mom and Rachel, and for everything. I didn't say anything, and neither did he. We just regarded each other for a moment, then I got myself together and got away, and headed back for the crappy flat I lived in.

I don't know how many times after that I'd pull out my kit and look at my drugs, or how many times I stared at a liquor store. I wanted to, with everything in me. I wanted to escape for awhile. I'd sit there for literally hours, looking at these things that would numb it all, and then I'd pull myself away. I stopped talking to the people I used to hang out with. I started saving money. It was slow, and I still wonder how I did it, but I did.

I still met him. Still took his credits. But I could look him in the eye now again. I still wonder what he saw when he looked back at me.

I started trading information for information with the rebellion at the end of that year. It was all stuff that was a matter of record, stuff the Empire either already knew or didn't care about, but to me, it was-- it was so important. I had to pick up a real job in order to survive, so I became a dock-worker.

Because the stuff I got back from the rebellion about my shadow was really only priceless to me.

The first thing I got was his name. Montgomery Edward Scott. Then I got more. Born out of an extramarital love affair between his mother and a man named McMillan, but he was adopted immediately by the man who would raise him, Robert Stuart. He kept his mother's surname, but if there was any resentment about his conception, there was no anecdotal evidence for it. Everything I found out about his family, living onboard the *C/V Esperanto* (my god, the history of that ship's name sang out to me), was that they stuck together like glue. It's all oral history, stories passed on through ranks of people, but if there's one thing you can count on about rebels, it's that they can keep a story intact through whole generations. I guess because that's the only way to guarantee it'll survive.

Most of what I heard was just about how brilliant an engineer he was-- is. He's still a brilliant engineer. I don't even question the toothpick anymore; I don't know what's on it, but I'm sure something is.

But even then, so little of that mattered to me, because sometimes I'd get something about *him*.

Or, who he used to be.

He was onboard another cargo carrier, the *Ci Bach*, on loan to do upgrades and repairs for a few weeks, when the *Esperanto* was blown out of the sky by an Empire ship. They'd gotten away from one with the warp drive that he'd installed, but a second got them, and that family loved him so much-- so much that they died rather than surrender. The Empire was looking for him. They died so that not a one of them could be tortured into giving him up.

He was fifteen. I can't imagine how much hurt he had to live with, just from that alone. I don't know if he ever found out that his family chose to die for him, but he survived anyway. He had to grow up real fast, and I doubt that engineering anything after that was the fun it had to have been for him to enjoy it so much before, but he did it.

The *Ci Bach's* crew called him Scotty, and in my head, I call his ghost that sometimes. Because when I look at him, I see the shadow he is now. But I never wanna forget that there was something bright there once.

And when I tell him my name for the first time, I don't tell him A-Jay, what my buddies used to call me-- I tell him my name is Andy. The name my family used to call me. He doesn't call me that, and he can't possibly know what it means. But I give him that anyway.

My name is Andy.

It's the anecdotal, human stuff that I learn about him that hurts me even when it makes me smile. It's hard. Don't ever let me tell you it's easy, because I get some little piece of his story from other rebels, and there are times when I can feel the love and hope shining across the years and distances, and I have to go back to my flat and stare at my now dusty drug kit. I have to sit there and I think about forgetting it, or trying to, and I think about my own ghosts. Mom went to pieces after Dad died. I ran away, but she went to pieces, and in the end, I lost all of them -- my Mom hanged herself in the house I grew up in. Rach, I found out, was shuffled into the system and ended up dead at sixteen from a drug overdose. Must run in the family.

But he fought back. Managed to carve out some little place in the universe, not just for himself, but for a family.

I spent so many hours looking at my kit thinking about that stuff.

The name he'd cried on the wall was Jenna. Jenna Richmond. She was another engineer and another Empire orphan, and had been onboard the *Ci Bach*, and they'd struck up a love affair, even though she was four years older than him. And from the life and death of the *Ci Bach*, the echoes of them singing dirty spacer songs back and forth in the engine room ring through the lightyears.

When I learned that and spent hours staring at my kit, I could still hear him crying for her.

And then there were the children. Never learned their names. Just that they existed, two more orphans. And that Scotty had been a good father for his age and inexperience; uneasy, uncertain, but the story goes that he loved those kids so much, even just a kid himself, that he would have rather been grounded and abandoned than let go of them.

And I hear him in my head going, "I'll be all right," with so much fear and trying to be brave, and all the warmth there for his Jenna and those children, and it was probably when he hid them, then turned around to stand ready to face the Empire.

I think that's when I found out that you can sometimes hate someone and love them at the same time. While I stared at my kit, thought about my family, South Bristol, the pain I faced at the same fucking time I was facing his-- I hated him. And when I thought of that kid, seventeen, ready to die for his family even though he was scared?

I love him. I love him because even though it all went bad, and it didn't end the way good stories should, he was ready to give his life to try and make sure that it did. I think I sometimes wish that they had just killed him. But they got his Jenna a week later, and instead they broke his heart and will and he died on a wall. Destined to breathe on, but not really live on.

I'll make it clear here that I don't pity him any, only mourn for him. Only wish that there had been some mercy then, in all of that. And that the kid I love woulda lived past seventeen, even if that means I wouldn't have the shadow of a man left behind.

But I think sometimes that I also love the shadow he is now, if not for different reasons and in different ways than I love the kid who once was there.

He's just shy of twenty-seven now. I'm sort of surprised at that; that means I met him when he was twenty-three, and the whole awful night in the motel was only a month after his twenty-fifth birthday. I started piecing together this story awhile ago. Now he's almost twenty-seven, though he doesn't really look any different than he did at twenty-three or twenty-five, but I guess I'm surprised because I'm not quite two years older than he is.

I take his time again. He gives me nothing. But I take his time again, and instead of making him guard me in dives, or tolerate being handled, I take him out to dinner.

Funny, huh?

I take him out. I know he's pretty dangerous in crowded places, so it's almost always quiet all night cafés and diners, all over fucking Ireland. I don't get in his space, at least not on purpose. Sometimes when we're walking, we're almost matching shoulders, but then I remember and give him his three feet. He paid too high a price for it, for me to just flippantly take it. And I keep him a night, sleeping at least three feet apart in somewhat better hotel or motel rooms, and let him go after breakfast the next day.

If he's surprised by the turn around, of course, it never shows. But god, I'm just-- I love being around him. Not like I'm trying to toy with a weapon, but because I'm trying to see if there are any burning embers left behind in the ashes the Empire made of him. I know he can never be that brave kid I love again. I know that, and I'm okay with it. But I hope that maybe with enough time, maybe he can live as something else, something just as bright.

Just like I am, now.

So, I take him out. And that's where we are now, in a café, sitting in a booth. And I chatter at him like some kind of wide-eyed kid myself. I've got a business idea. I want to start up a consulting firm to help commercial fishermen get financing for boats and gear. I got the idea from him, or rather, from his family. *Esperanto*. Means *to hope*. I remember the story my father told me; the Gloucester fishing schooner of the same name, a beat up but beautiful vessel, that won over the famed Canadian *Delawana* in a race, provoking the Canadians to build the even more famed *Bluenose*. The beaten underdog won. It sings out to me.

I chatter, he just listens and doesn't comment. You know, I used to think his coldness was creepy, but now it's just something I'm used to, and I keep talking because maybe some of my words will filter past that down to those embers that might be left behind.

"Can you imagine?" I say, and I'm grinning and gesturing, and taking sips of my coffee and looking across at him. "I can totally do this. I've got a business plan, wanna see?"

No answer. He just looks at me, but for a second I think that he almost looks exasperated by my constant yammering on, and I shove the papers across the table. He watches me for another moment, then looks down at the papers. And then, damned if he doesn't ask me for a pen, and the next thing I know, he's revamping my entire business plan.

And I watch him work, and I just wanna laugh. A good laugh. The best kind of laugh. I watch my shadow across the table, focused on ripping my hard work to pieces and making it better, and I don't know how to put into words what kind of joy that is, what kind of hope, or even *why*.

But I know that it matters.

If I love the kid he used to be, then I think I'm *in* love with who he is right now, just for making me feel those things.

It's not easy. I don't pretend it is. But then, the things that matter in life never are.

Chapter 3

Now on the street tonight the lights grow dim,
The walls of my room are closin' in;
There's a war outside still raging,
You say it ain't ours anymore to win;
I want to sleep beneath peaceful skies
In my lover's bed,
With a wide open country in my eyes,
And these romantic dreams in my head...

'Cause we made a promise,
We swore we'd always remember:
No retreat, baby, no surrender;
Blood brothers in the stormy night with a vow to defend:
No retreat, baby, no surrender...

No retreat, baby, no surrender.

-Bruce Springsteen, **No Surrender**

I miss him into my soul.

Eventually, though, Starfleet took his shackles off, and he was assigned to space, away from the Theories and Design Division in Belfast. But I don't think that he felt any comfort at being back out there with the stars he'd been born under and died under, and I know I didn't take any comfort in it. I can't tell you how badly I bled for that loss. Even if he couldn't, I think I might have enough for both of us.

I at least knew he was going to go. Not from him, naturally, but I think that my contacts in the rebellion, who had to make arrangements for information transfers with him when he wasn't earthbound anymore, knew how attached I had gotten. They just casually told me that he was gonna be leaving with the *Enterprise* in a month. Maybe pity. I don't know.

We'd been at this-- whatever it was for years by then. He was thirty-one, I was almost thirty-three, and I could easily picture us spending the rest of our lives in this strange balance we finally got to. Even his silence, even my chatter. I was a pretty successful small-time businessman by then on top of my side-job, and he had enough freedom that I could drag him all over the planet.

God, I loved those days. I still laugh when I think about them, even though it hurts.

I dragged him everywhere. Seriously. I took him with me to all the places you're supposed to see on Earth. Like a silly tourist. And after pulling him to all these places, I'd keep him for a night or a weekend and lay in bed laughing over the day, and he'd never smile, but I think that it meant something to him somewhere. I think that because later--

Well, I'll get there eventually.

But yeah, I pulled him all over kingdom and creation. I think one of my favorites was probably Hawaii, if only because the poor guy couldn't get away with wearing that damn black sweater and had to settle for a t-shirt, had to keep his dagger in hand, and got a bit of a tan. And he just sat there in the evening while I was swimming, probably keeping silent guard, and I can still see him sitting in the really pale sand, painted in the sunset, hair all ruffled up in the sea breeze, and I carry that one in my head.

There were probably a hundred little cafés and diners, and late nights where I talked his ears off. Careful about how I'd steal into his space, but trying really damn hard to get to his heart, and I know now that there maybe was something warm under the ash. Like, for as long as I'd known him, he only drank water, but one night he ordered tea with dinner, then kept doing that. I didn't point it out, but it was something that I was just happy about, y'know?

Years. I mean, it wasn't constant over the years, but it was *years*. Really, I only managed to snag his time away from him once or twice a month, at best once a week, depending on how much stuff he had to transfer to the rebellion. But I took all I could get and I got so good at seeing him that he had stopped being a shadow to me a long time ago. How he moved, where there were warning signs, where I could get him mellow enough that I could put my weight on him for a couple minutes before he'd get up and move.

I even got him talking once in a rare while. Never like conversation. Always something engineering related; a theory I was curious about, or a practice. And he'd explain it, rather patiently. And I knew that he kept his words cut down to next to nothing, but when he spoke enough, I could hear the cadences he once had so long ago, not quite gone. Enough of what his voice would have been that it was nice listening. It's funny, it took me years to even realize that he had an accent. But it was a great accent. Kinda rising and falling, not exactly music, but the hints of music.

I loved those days so much. I was perfectly happy even when we just stayed in one place in silence. But it was fun to run around, too. I had a whole lot of life to make up for missing, and another life I wanted to try to give a chance to.

I was reeling when I found out he'd be gone. Desperate. Wondered what it would take for me to keep him. I woulda done anything, y'know? I woulda begged.

I eventually did.

I think there was something warm under the ash, because I asked for a whole week. And I got it. He gave me one week. Took leave, not long before he was due to ship off, in exchange for a *toothpick*.

I took him sailing.

Before it all went wrong, my Dad was a good sailor, and he taught me. I was amazed at how much I remembered. I rented a really good sized schooner, probably big enough she really needed four people to handle her, but it was just me and him. Beautiful boat named the *Bearclaw*. Cost me a whole lot, but it was something that I needed to do. We put out from the Maine coastline I hadn't seen in years; I couldn't make myself go back to South Bristol, but we left from Maine and I think Dad woulda smiled at that.

Even raw with the knowledge that I'd be losing him soon, it still had its really good moments. Like-- he was seasick. Can you believe that? Scott's the last person I'd ever expect to be seasick, but damned if he wasn't. He had his hands on the bulwark, and he was breathing through his mouth, something he only did when he was sick or messed up somehow, and looking a bit greenish.

I really had a hard time not laughing at him, because he's-- well, he's *him*, so here he is seasick and that's so utterly normal. So damn mundane. I stood next to him and kept a straight face. "Look at the horizon, not the waves," I said, and he flicked me a sidelong glance, then did as I said. And then I went and rummaged around until I found some crackers and brought those back.

He was working on those for the rest of the day.

Other than that, though, he was a pretty damn good deckhand. Very quick to pick up everything I showed him. And after the first day or so, he got a lot better about the seasickness, and was generally able to move around pretty well. Though, it was wild to me that here, on the deck of a schooner, I was the one who was all sure-footed and he was the one who was a step slower.

I knew I was on borrowed, stolen time. It was still good time, though; I put the bow of the *Bearclaw* to the horizon and we just sailed. The first two days were sunny skies and good wind, though not perfect; the third day, we hit a patch of dead air and lolled for half of it, but that was okay. Did some deck work, in the sun. Then the wind came up, and I spun the schooner to run ahead of it, danced her bows into the waves and watched the shiver of the sails. She handled beautifully, and there were long periods where I grinned just because.

I don't know if he did or not, but I caught him in a moment that had to be something other than cold; his head back, eyes closed, just aft the staysails, in the sun. I don't know what he was thinking. I don't know if he was thinking at all, but I do know he was feeling the wind and sun. I was really glad of that, too. And that's another picture I have in my head, that I hang onto, that hurts, that I love.

"I'd do this forever," I'd said, and we were sitting on deck with the wheel lashed, with dinner and tea. It was evening, and the air was starting to get chilly, and night was falling with a sunset that I knew meant we were gonna be heading back to Maine in some rough weather. "What a world that would be."

Oh, god, what a world that would have been.

We did get rough weather, a nor'easter that came down on us, but we handled it. It raged, then settled into rain and still breaking waves, and we ran ourselves ragged, but I thought it was exhilarating. Like being alive. Really alive, and I howled back at the thunder, and laughed back at it, and it didn't matter that I was on borrowed time.

Do you see?

I was so happy there.

Scott never seemed worn out, but he must have been, because he turned in before I did when the weather calmed down and was half-dozing when I came in. Not like I couldn't sleep somewhere else, but I wanted company, specific company, *his* company. And I flopped down next to him, still all hyped up on the storm. Of course, the second he'd heard me, he was wide awake. I still wonder how he was able to do that; sleep that light and not die of exhaustion eventually.

I chatted at him, all exhilarated still; propped my head on one hand and combed at his hair with the other. I couldn't really help it. I was happy, and under that I knew that once we got back to land, this was it. This whatever it was would be gone.

He always just tolerated that kind of thing, even back when I was a fuckup trying to toy with him, even now when I meant it. It probably felt a lot more comforting to me than it did to him. I found a few strands of silver-white in his otherwise still black hair, and it was the only sign I ever saw that he wasn't somehow eternal. I knew I was in some danger of developing laugh lines at this point. He had none. Just a few strands of white hair, buried in the black, and it was while I was mapping those with gentle fingertips that it hit me all over again.

I struggled with it, too. Not to beg. Not to really give away just how-- just how desperately I loved him, just how scared I was of losing him. I put up the best fight I could, but he must've known something wasn't right; he went from looking at the ceiling to looking at me, and I couldn't take it.

"We can run," I said, and I'm just-- I don't know. Really fucking desperate. "I can sell off everything, and I'll bet we could get somewhere." And I felt a little like I couldn't breathe. "Y'know, someplace better. Some *better* world than this one."

It had been the only time, in all these years, that he'd actually said anything to me without some kind of-- prompting or whatever. And I could hear a flicker of something there, something that I couldn't identify, but it hit me right in the chest. And he said, "It's too late."

It broke me all to bits. I buried my face in his shoulder and cried my heart out. I didn't even care if it seemed weak or desperate or heartbroken, because that's exactly what it was. I don't know, still don't know, how anything that could have been-- been so much happiness, as brutally as it all started, could hurt so much to lose.

The funny thing is, though, that the same thing I think I fell in love with him for, that hope he made me feel, was the same thing that hopeless statement gave me. Because the simple fact that he said it at all meant something.

If I carry a lot of pictures of him in my head, it's that I held onto him the rest of that night that I carry in my soul. And miss into my soul. That he let me, really. He didn't hang on back. I didn't ever expect him to. But he let me hold onto him; my arm draped over his side, my nose to the back of his neck, all the way until sunrise. I probably woke him up a hundred times, just because I'd tighten my grip to make sure he was there, but he endured it and I like to think, pretend even, that it was something warm.

He's been gone a year now, and I still look for him. Still ache for him. I did end up selling my business. I got full-time into the rebellion, and I like to think that I'm making a difference. I've managed to get a few people hidden. I know that I'm doing it for him. I also know that I'm doing it to keep busy, so I don't try to suicidally chase after him.

And I started searching for Jenna Richmond, even though I know that if I ever find her, I'll lose even the hope I hang onto. If she's still alive, she's buried somewhere; a different name, a different life, but if she's out there, I know that once she meant so much to Scotty that he died with her name, and maybe her name could give that kid a chance to crawl out of the ashes.

And the shadow, no longer a shadow, that I fell in love with-- I'd lose him, but I think that would be worth it.

But was he worth all of this?

I find my answer.

He looks across at me, and it's been almost a year and a half, and it's--

There's no cold light in those eyes now. When he looks at me, there's sorrow there. But what really gets me is that there's warmth there, too, and I *know* what that means.

I know already.

I could kill him, logically, and put up a fight and die. And logically, I could ask him to let me live, and then I could be tortured to death by the Empire for whatever information. Maybe they'd even know that I love him, and hurt him to break me. I know, though, that none of those are an option for us and so does he. We don't have much time; the ship's overrun, and they just sent him down here to clear out engineering and make sure the damage the *Enterprise* did doesn't make her blow up before they can take prisoners.

I know. So does he.

"Care about nothin' they can use against you," he says. Then he closes his eyes for a moment, and I hear and see that sad certainty and it hurts so bad. Then he looks at me again, and quieter says, "Love nothin'--" his voice cracks, but he finishes, "-- *no one* that they can take from you."

And I know he's explaining why. And my eyes are burning, and I'm scared, I'm terrified, but I cling to that, just like I clung to him that last night on the *Bearclaw*, and even though I have to swallow before I can reply, I still raise my chin to answer, "They can't take me from you now."

He tips his head to the side, regards me, and that grief is for me. That *warmth* is for me.

He nods once. "I know."

The tears are burning my face now, and I make it easy on him. I put myself right there in his space. No deals, no bargains, no safety margins.

And he gets an arm around me, the left, I know the dagger's in his right hand, and I put my chin over his shoulder, and he rests his head over tight against mine, and I know those white strands I found are still in his hair.

I'm so scared. But he's giving me one minute. One minute I don't have to steal. One minute I don't have to bribe or bargain for. One minute where he's mine, the warmth in the ash. And I think about hope. And I think about love. And I think about whether he was worth this. I think a million maybes. Maybe we coulda gotten out. Maybe I coulda found Jenna. Maybe if we just had a little more time. Maybe-- just maybe.

Maybe there's some better world than this.

I don't want that warmth to die here with me. I do know that.

The minute's almost up, and he says, quietly, "I'm sorry, Andy."

I know he means it, and I know this hurts, and god, I want him to know all about the maybes and believe in them, and I want him to know that he saved my soul, even if my life ends now, and I want him to know that I love him down to my last cell.

But my time's up. I give him two words, my last two, and I mean them with everything I've ever been, and ever could have been.

Yes, he was worth it.

"I'm not."

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