Integration

by [jamaharon](#)

Summary

Rutherford has his implant removed, and slowly, all his old least-favorite, half-forgotten traits come back.

"There. No more implant," said Dr. T'ana brusquely. "You can thank me later – now get off my bio-bed, I got a patient with near-fatal dilithium burns coming in."

"Did you say fatal?" whimpered the patient on the hover-gurney.

"They're dilithium burns, you dumb fuck, of course I said fatal!"

Rutherford jumped off the bio-bed. Oblivious to the chaos around him, he let Tendi draw him away, her gentle hands closing around his forearms. He took a tentative step, then another.

"Am I blinking?" he asked. "I feel like I'm blinking."

There was a puff of air as Tendi waved her hand in front of his empty eye socket. "Nothing?" she asked.

"Nothing? Tendi, there's no eye in there, of course I can't see out of it. But seriously, is my eyelid moving?"

Tendi poked at the loose flap of skin – and Rutherford flinched back with a yelp, one hand covering his eye where the implant used to be.

"Okay, it's sensitive," he said through clenched teeth. "Good to know."

"Are your memories back?" Tendi asked, leading him to the medical replicator. "Do you remember what happened before you got all … cyborg-ised?"

"Not really," Rutherford said. There was a hum of energy as the replicator got to work, and he obediently submitted to a hypospray full of painkillers. "Hey, do the medical replicators really pull from the sewage tanks for molecular stock? Billups always says he'll tell me when I'm a lieutenant."

"No, that's just the galley replicators," Tendi said. She guided Rutherford toward the door. "Come on, big guy. I think a bit of rest and relaxation is just what the doctor ordered."

"That doesn't sound like Dr. T'ana– hey, do I get to keep my implant? For old time's sake? Don't tell me she threw it away–"

Tendi pushed him through the door.

At the end of Delta Shift, when the bunks were empty, Rutherford tucked himself into bed. It was the same as always: he had his Starfleet pajamas on (never washed, to retain optimal softness), his sheets were fresh from the sonic to remove all traces of other shifts, and the long surgery had left him just exhausted enough to fall right asleep.

Or so he thought.

Eyes closed, he flicked a muscle deep in his eye socket, the same automatic movement he would move to swivel his eyeball – if he had one – or open the menu in his implant. Except his implant was gone. Rutherford could visualize the white noise options, the artificial light blockers, the rest program that bled into his brain and sent him into Stage 3 sleep without delay. But he couldn't *access* that program. It was gone.

In the darkness, Rutherford clasped his hands over his stomach and absently scratched at his knuckles. Huh. He hadn't had to deal with insomnia in a long time… not since … the memory scratched at the pleating of his brain, but it wouldn't quite come. Maybe it wasn't there any longer. Parts of him had died, where the implant anchored to his brain. But he'd never mourned those parts before.

He didn't miss the anger.

He didn't miss the cruelty.

He didn't miss the self-destructive disregard for rules, the disdain he used to hold for Starfleet, the cocky self-assurance that everything he touched was gold–

No. Those memories were gone. Those sections of his brain were hard, scabbed-over, grey. He was missing something there, yes, but it wasn't the old Rutherford.

It was the implant that he missed.

The implant had been gone for only three days when Rutherford's other eye hazed over.

"Purely neurological," T'ana said, holding her scanner close to Rutherford's head. "Not much a dermal regenerator can do for you. But if you want to hope in the neuromodulator…"

So there he was, his head encased in medical-grade plastoid, lights flashing in the darkness over his blind eyes. Rutherford watched it the same way you watch a dream: not with your eyes, but with the inside of your skull, clouds of color etching onto bone. Slowly those lights coalesced into a trail of sparks. They wormed into the coils of his brain, sank into the organic matter there, found the dead spots where his implant used to be – the scars.

It kissed his wounds. He could almost feel the warmth of touch. Just like when he still had his implant: this was what he saw every time he closed his eyes. Not just schematics; not just enhancement programs.

Color. Warmth.

He woke up from the neuro-modulator still blind.

"Maybe it's psychosomatic," Tendi said.

Part of him had been waiting for her to say that. He slammed his food tray clumsily to the galley table. "I'm not a basket case, Tendi," he snapped. He caught his drink before it toppled over and slammed it into place, splashing trixian bubble juice all over his hand.

Silence. He could practically feel the stares.

"No, that's okay," said Tendi brightly before he could apologize, or even really regret it. "I actually like being snapped at. It's an Orion thing."

He deflated. "Tendi, you hate when people are mad at you."

"No, I love it!"

"You're just saying that so I won't be mad at you!" Rutherford sat down with a sigh. "Maybe it *is* psychosomatic," he said, rubbing his eye – the one he used to think of as his 'good eye.' "Dr. T'ana couldn't find anything wrong with me. She wants me to see Counselor Migleemo until my eyesight comes back, but…"

Tendi gave a sympathetic hum. "But why would removing the implant lead to psychosomatic blindness?" she asked. "You *wanted* the implant removed, didn't you?"

Rutherford rested his cheek on his fist. He remembered waking up for the first time post-surgery, when the implant was new. No friends, no memories. But not unhappy. And not alone. So long as he had his implant, he was always 'together'.

"I just didn't realize it would take so much of me with it," he said.

An engineer loves engineering. What better way to enjoy the thing you love than to become a part of it? Once, when Rutherford closed his eyes, he saw a brain-computer interface laid out before him, an overlapping map of light inside the darkness. Once, he could access a menu that showed him every lobe of his own brain, allowed him to adjust all the parts about himself he needed the most … and erase all the parts he didn't want to see.

The implant made him happier: more helpful: more efficient. The implant took away his anger, opened up the doors inside his mind that closed when he was just a kid. Wonder. Curiosity. Eagerness. Life, true life.

And in return, Rutherford made the implant better: more accurate: smoothed the rough corners of its programming, until its code could be exported to a hundred different medical facilities. It was his implant's code that gave an epileptic on Jondura control over her seizures, the ability to turn them on and off like a light. It was his implant's code that let a quadriplegic on Xelos IV walk again, use his hands, shrug his shoulders–

No. Not 'his implant', like they were two separate entities.

"It was us," Rutherford whispered to himself in his bunk. He placed a hand over his empty eye socket where the implant used to be.

But all the best parts of him were gone.

He pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes with a sigh. There was nothing in the darkness. No light. Just that old messy anger. The darkness. All those parts of him he'd retouched, edited, cleaned away…

"Rutherford?" said a soft voice below him.

Rutherford rolled toward the wall. His bunk creak as Tendi grabbed the edge and pulled herself, standing on her own mattress to touch his back. She could barely reach. Her fingertips brushed his shirt, a touch too brief and cold to ever compare to what the implant gave him.

"Rutherford," she whispered, "I know you're not asleep." She hesitated. "You never go right to sleep anymore."

He really should turn to face her. It would be polite. The old Rutherford would have done it – or at least unlocked his jaw and spoken to her. But this Rutherford couldn't manage it, no longer had the override codes that would have shut down these emotions and forced him to answer: bright and chipper, never getting anybody down.

Tendi's fingertips trailed down Rutherford's back. She grabbed a gentle handful of his shirt and clung on, not quite pulling him to face her. Just holding him, as much as she could.

"Hey," she said, barely audible. "Remember when I asked you why you liked engineering so much? You don't have to answer. Just think about it."

He remembered. They'd been hiding in a Jefferies Tube – not exactly shirking off – Tendi studying, and him hard at work, just happy to have a companion.

I've never been good with people, he'd said. *Computers are easy. They're simple, they're clean. You just program them right and they do exactly what you tell them to! And if they're broken, then you just figure out what's wrong … and you fix it.*

That's what he had done. He'd fixed it all. Every suboptimal part of him had been excised, muffled, locked behind a firewall. Now it was back, a raw and throbbing wound, a lack of focus in Engineering, outbursts in the galley, age-old blackness seeping in…

But:

Of course people aren't like that, Rutherford, Tendi had said. *People are messy. We're – you know, vulnerable. But that's what makes it so rewarding, right? If we could just fix everything that was wrong with us by running a diagnostic, then we wouldn't need other people at all.*

But nobody really likes messy, Rutherford said. *Nobody likes vulnerable.*

You like me, don't you? You like Mariner and Boimler…

Tendi's hand clenched tight on his shirt. Her knuckles brushed his skin through the fabric, just a touch of warmth. Nothing like his implant.

But it was enough.

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