

## Broken Fall

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## Broken Fall

by [SLWalker](#)

### Summary

(2244) - Corry tries to find his way through life on Vulcan, and finds out quickly that he may be in over his head.

*I shoulda taken the discharge.*

There was no bitterness to the thought. It should have been bitter; Corry even wished, a little, that it was bitter. But it wasn't. It had become something of a litany, bred from homesickness and weariness and raised on an abject exhaustion that wasn't like anything he'd ever experienced before.

He set his datapads down on his desk, and the neat stack slipped to send them spilling across the surface.

That little thing was enough to make him have to lean there, two-handed, just to regain his composure.

*I wanna go home.*

It was the second part of his litany, and no matter how many times he thought it, it still sounded plaintive and heartsick. There was no desensitization, no distance gained by repetition. He thought it many times and he meant it every single time.

Four and a half months into the two-year exchange program, and Cor already knew that there was no way he could make it through. He was going to fail. He couldn't keep up with the coursework, he couldn't seem to find enough time to even eat or sleep in any normal amount, and every time he got an assignment done, another was handed to him before he was even allowed to feel relief. He wasn't even really learning, he didn't think; it seemed like he would manage to finish something, and then he'd immediately forget it as he started something new.

He had known when he arrived on Vulcan that it wouldn't be easy. He knew that it would take a lot of focus and discipline to finish a course that was designed for a species hardwired for stamina and memorization. Where most of the Vulcans he went to school with had only to go over something once, Corry had to go over it until it was branded into his brain, and that meant even less time in a schedule that didn't take any human weaknesses into account.

He had known it would be hard, but he never realized the depth of it until he was already drowning.

He managed to push himself up to stand straight, wavered there, and stared for some indeterminable amount of time at the disks spilled out across the desk. It seemed like it would be too much for him to even pick them up. He made himself do it anyway. Then he checked his messages. He didn't know if he was relieved or miserable or anything when no letters were waiting for him there. From his parents, or Rach, or Scotty, or even the occasional stray letter from Jerry or Joe. He had no time to properly reply, or even much left in him to really hear or read what was being said to him, but without them he felt disconnected.

He had known it wasn't going to be easy, but now he knew for certain that he would fail.

He didn't know why he was even trying.

He didn't even know when he fell asleep, laying on the spartan mattress, until the alarm woke him up. And then he got up and went to go through it all again.

It was dark and quiet and cold, and he was in over his head and drowning.

Corry wondered why that actually felt good.

He couldn't breathe, or he didn't think he was breathing; he felt like he was floating in salt water, or zero-g, or-- something. But it felt good. He was still, and it felt good to be still, and he was so desperately tired that he would have done anything to *stay* still.

Something disturbed it.

*Let me go*, he thought, a plea.

From somewhere deep, into some place he was only starting to understand existed, a familiar voice whispered:

*"Don't pull me out o' the dark, just to go there yerself."*

And that was a plea too. And it was a plea Corry already knew that he could never deny, so long there was anything left of his soul to fight with.

With half a sob, he opened his eyes just in time to feel the uncomfortable press of a hypospray against his arm. It was bright and he winced away from the light, the brief shadowy afterimages of two faces peering down at him seared there in his head for a moment.

"Ensign," a calm voice said, though it took him a moment to understand he was the one that the voice was talking to, "continue to lie still."

"What happened?" he managed to ask, after a few moments where he struggled hard to get his bearings. His head was clearing, though the sharp ache that had caught his breath in his chest as he was waking up was still present. Tri-ox, that's what they'd given him. It always left a little bit of a weird aftertaste, or an impression of an aftertaste. Considering that he'd been getting pretty regular supplements of it since he'd gotten to Vulcan, it wasn't hard to put it together.

"You collapsed in class," the other voice said, and he recognized it. T'Shae; one of his classmates. Immunopathology scientist. Almost as tall as him. Kind, in that quiet Vulcan way. "The healer is currently awaiting the test results, to ascertain the cause."

"I'll be all right," Corry said, and it was automatic, and then he realized just how much he sounded like Scotty right then, and for reasons he couldn't even begin to guess, that made him both wince and smile.

There was a long pause, and then he understood that the cold he felt was because someone had a cool compress on his head. And T'Shae replied, "Given the current circumstances, I don't believe that statement has any basis in fact."

Cor didn't know if she meant that as a joke or not, but he chuckled anyway, quietly, even though he still felt that ache inside. He was about to try talking more when the healer came back, and started asking a series of questions. Unable to rally any sort of resistance to it, Corry just did his best to answer them.

Finally, the healer said, "You are suffering a severe case of exhaustion, both mental and physical. I'm recommending to your instructors that you be--"

"I'll be all right," Corry said again, and in an instant he was on the edge of panic. "I can keep going."

The healer blinked once, an eloquent expression of confusion. "That is illogical, as was your unwillingness to come forward and explain the difficulties you have been facing."

*I wanna go home*, he thought, but something made him say, desperately, "I'll figure out a way to-- to balance my studies, but please don't have me cut, I'm sure there's something I can do, maybe some kind of--"

T'Shae put a palm on his chest, very effectively stopping him from sitting up to prove that he was fine, but it was the healer who cut him off from begging, "I am not recommending you be removed from the program. What I *am* recommending is that you be given a medical leave of absence from class for the next four days with an allowance for more if we assess you're not recovered. I'm also recommending you be put on a restorative diet based on correcting the current deficiencies your system is attempting to operate under. I've also ascertained that you're carrying two courses that you don't need to finish the program, and I'm going to recommend that you be removed from those classes. That should allow your instructors to schedule rest and meal periods more appropriate to your physiology."

There was a very long moment where Corry just stared, numb, trying to grasp what was being said to him. Then he huffed a breath out hard, almost gasping for air as he scrambled to understand everything. "I-- I thought that I had to-- that the program--" After a few more attempts to explain, while T'Shae and the healer both waited patiently, he finally managed to say, "I didn't think that I could do that. I mean, I thought that what was scheduled was what I had to take to participate in this."

"That, too, is illogical. This program schedule is structured for Vulcan students, and you're not a Vulcan." The healer didn't frown, but for only a moment, it looked like he wanted to. "Your inclusion in this program is not intended as a means to make you into a Vulcan student. It *is* intended to explore the viability of regularly and formally cross-training students between our cultures, and it would be both ineffective and detrimental if our potential human students in the future couldn't be allowed to learn within the limits of their own physiology."

There was nothing Cor could think to say at that moment. He just kept staring, and breathing, and struggling to understand it all.

"In the future, Ensign, I would strongly advise that you bring such difficulties to those who will help you work around them." The healer didn't seem put off by Cor's silence. "However, for the next four days, you're to be restricted to rest; light activity only, and a dietician versed in human physiology will create a meal program."

The healer wasn't put off by Corry's silence, but it was doubtful that either he or T'Shae understood what happened next.

Corry curled up on the bed, buried his head in his arms, and fell to pieces.

How long he slept was something that, even after he woke up, he wasn't quite able to figure out. It seemed like a century, and while he slept he dreamed. It was probably the first time in months that he even *could* dream, but he wasn't sure.

Not surprisingly, Corry dreamed of home.

Mostly it was just fragments. No plot. He sailed in Johns Bay on his first little ketch, when he was twelve. He ran home to his mother when he'd fallen once and cut his elbow playing around on the rocks that made up the shoreline of Rutherford Island, when he was six or seven. He ran full out into his father, when his father came back after being gone for a month away. He laughed at his sister when she got a faceful of angry cat in a dress. He wandered the rocks and rivers and roads, and even this far away, even dreaming, some part of him was relieved that it was so clear in his mind.

In moments towards the end of his dream, he settled on the opposite side of the brace of his best friend, on the *Lady Grey*, two hours before the sunset. A place where he had started to understand the real value of peace.

"*I wanna go home*," he said, and though he got no reply from Scotty, he knew it was heard. "*Come with me*."

A voice that didn't belong aboard the *Lady Grey* was what woke him up, before he got any answer. Corry blinked a few times in the warm, filtered sunlight coming in through the opened skylights of the infirmary. His face felt stiff, but he was still too out of sorts to feel all that self-conscious that the tears had dried there, probably after he'd crashed back into oblivion.

T'Shae was watching him curiously. "Who were you talking to?" she asked, and Cor realized that he'd been talking in his sleep.

"My best friend," Corry replied, cautiously sitting up. He felt steadier, and the air was a little richer than usual. When he figured out that it had been made so for his sake, he felt almost absurdly grateful for the kindness.

"The one you were court-martialed with," T'Shae said, raising her eyebrow a fraction before letting it drop again.

For some reason, that succinct summary amused Cor. He chuckled, "Yeah, that's the one."

T'Shae merely nodded, and then offered over a tray. Fruits, mostly, some Vulcan native and some imported from Earth, and a cup of Vulcan spiced tea. He took it after a moment, maybe a little startled to realize that he liked the spiced tea, and had tried it before, but couldn't remember that he had until now. "Thanks."

"The healer has left standing orders that you're to remain under close observation until you're sufficiently recovered and released. If you would prefer to eat in the adjacent meditation gardens, however, that would be allowed."

There was a second there where Cor paused with the cup midway to his mouth. He must've been feeling better; he felt a little spike of defiance at being told he was stuck in the infirmary.

Still, after all this, even after some sleep that made him feel more alive and human, he knew better than to offer any protests. So he nodded and got to his feet, a little wobbly at first, knees feeling watery and head swimming some; he pressed a smile for T'Shae, though, and steadied himself on the bed before she could reach out to catch him.

"I've studied some aspects of human culture," T'Shae said, once Corry was properly on his feet and walking with her. "I fail to understand how associating with someone who was complicit in blatantly defying the rules and regulations of an institution that you both voluntarily entered is logical, after it's been proven that such an arrangement is detrimental to your goals."

That wasn't a huge surprise to Corry. There were Vulcan words for friend, for brother, for family in general. But he so rarely heard them used here at the Science Academy that it wasn't even funny. It seemed, at least within his immediate range, everyone fell into the category of 'associates' or 'classmates'. If the Vulcan students socialized with each other, it wasn't readily apparent and it *certainly* didn't include him.

He tried to think of how to reply, and finally settled on the truth, "It's not logical. But it's worth it."

"Why?" she asked, and there was no judgment in her voice. Heavens knew, Cor had gotten reasonably good at seeing and hearing an undercurrent of judgment since he'd arrived here. But she just sounded curious.

"Because there's more to life than goals," Corry answered, certainly. "Sometimes..." and there he faltered, trying to figure out how to even explain it, then continued, "Sometimes you have to do things, even contrary to the rules, because they're the right things to do."

"Ah. Ethical concerns." T'Shae still didn't seem to understand it, and continued, "However, the circumstances which you were involved in were clearly and concisely a violation of said ethics."

Corry chewed on that, as they walked into the gardens. It was a climate controlled area; still warm, warmer than the infirmary had been made for his comfort, but beautiful. A stream ran through the center and branched off into little rivulets, running over dark red rocks, amidst a veritable forest of green. Carefully planned and executed, but beautiful regardless. An oasis, and not dissimilar from ones he knew existed naturally out into the various preserves and parklands that the Vulcans maintained.

He sat near the water, carefully balancing his tray on his knees, and after a few moments, T'Shae joined him.

"From a logical standpoint, none of it makes any sense," he said, and it was an agreement again to her first statement about it. Then he fell quiet, munching on a piece of fruit as he tried to think of how to actually put to words so many things that couldn't be. "I wish I could explain it all nicely, and neatly, but I don't think there's any way to. I mean, it just *is*. I guess we coulda done everything by the book, but..."

"But?" she asked.

"That's not how things really work." It was a fairly lame explanation. But Corry tried anyway.

It was obvious that T'Shae still didn't understand, though she was peering at him like she wanted to. And, Corry supposed, that was a good enough reason to at least continue to try. Even if it was just for his own sake.

He took a sip of his tea, and mulled it over some more. It was funny; Corry never really had any trouble finding words, until he managed to make friends with Scotty. And then he started learning, maybe still was, that some things can't ever really be put to words -- you could only live in those things, and breathe them, and know them, and believe in them.

"Why do Vulcans still have families?" he asked, suddenly.

T'Shae looked a little taken aback by what had to sound like a willfully ignorant question, but she still replied, "It's logical. Procreation is necessary for the continuation of the species. Child-rearing requires proper supervision and guidance by parents. Assets and survival are easier managed with a family group than without. Mutual cooperation allows for a better and more equitable division of labor."

"Yeah, but why do they stay together after the children are grown? Why do siblings keep in contact?" Corry persisted, leaning forward a little bit without realizing it. "Why do parents get married in the first place? If the sole reason is procreation and child-rearing, assets and survivability, why the ceremony? The robes. The *kusek-van-kal* and *kep*."

"There are other benefits as well. Marriages are arranged on Vulcan to further the standing of the families involved," T'Shae pointed out.

"But why?" Corry shook his head. "How is that logical? A contract could accomplish the same means of shared assets and even child-rearing -- why climb the steps to the temple to perform the ceremony? Why are children betrothed to their intended, when adults could work out a legal arrangement that would settle the same thing?"

There was a long moment there, and T'Shae appeared to be thinking, though there was the barest hint of something that looked like amusement on her face. Corry could sympathize, though -- he himself had never given a whole lot of thought to the subject of human marriage, or any family relationships for that matter, before. It was just a part of the fabric of life.

"A civilization without some foundation of tradition and continuity wouldn't survive," she finally concluded. "It would no longer be a unique civilization. If all things were created by the legal system, inevitably we would lose that which makes us who we are, as a culture and society. The family relationship helps provide this tradition and continuity."

"Right." Corry took a few more sips of his tea, then set it aside and asked, "Have any friends here? I mean, here at the Academy?"

She blinked. "I have many associates--"

"No, no. Friends. People you hang out with." He tried to think of a way to explain it so that it would make sense to someone who handled their relationships differently than he had grown up knowing. "Uhm-- people you don't have some reason to be around, except that you find their company-- mutually beneficial? Pleasurable?"

"I believe that 'mutually beneficial' and 'pleasurable' would both be logical reasons to spend time with individuals," T'Shae replied, dryly.

He chuckled at that, caught and knowing it. "Touché. I guess that's what I mean, yeah."

T'Shae raised an eyebrow. "So, what you're trying to say is that, despite it potentially being detrimental to your long-term goals, you find the company of your friend to be mutually beneficial or pleasurable in other ways, if not necessarily logical."

"Well, yeah, kinda." Corry waved his fork around in a kind of hopeless gesture. "What are goals worth, really, if you're all alone? I mean, what's the *point* of life? There's this whole thing right now in some parts of Earth culture where people are kind of trying to just-- do away with the concept of family. They're pushing for everyone to do away with all that, their platform being that humans should dedicate themselves to their own betterment and the betterment of society, and that the family relationship distracts from that and should be done away with as a relic of more primitive times. But-- if we did that, it'd be just like what would happen if Vulcan turns its back on its acknowledgment of family and ceremony."

"A loss of continuity, and of culture," she said, eyeing him with a kind of curiosity that made him want to duck his head. She did seem to be giving it ample consideration, though.

"Yeah," Corry replied, looking down at his tray and then rubbing at his eyes one-handed; his strength fled right around the same time, scant as it was, and a much stronger exhaustion landed in its place.

A little sleep had clearly *not* fixed all that had gone wrong with him, and even in the heat, he was starting to shiver intermittently, but he still said, "I dunno, T'Shae. I guess what I'm trying to say is that my family means more to me than the rules, more to me than anything, and my best friend is a member of that family, even if we get in trouble together, even when he drives me crazy, even if half the time I still can't fathom what's going through his head." He shook his head with a wry smile. "But then, I guess that's part of being a family, too."

There was a long pause, and then T'Shae said, "You should rest. I'll walk with you back to the infirmary."

Having the distinct feeling that this conversation might come up again, Corry just nodded and finished his breakfast, or lunch, or whatever it was, then stumbled his way back to the infirmary to rest some more.

The next few days were spent wandering between the infirmary and the meditation gardens. T'Shae did come back, and Cor was touched that she had volunteered to bring him his meals; they spent some time discussing philosophies and deeper thoughts than he usually dove into. She also taught him some more about the many and surprisingly beautiful traditions her own home region adhered to, and how they differed in large and small ways from other cultures on Vulcan. They didn't dive into the subject of friendship again, though, not then; not intentionally so much, they just happened to range everywhere else.

He got antsy, though, even before the healer had informed him that his mother had been notified of his condition *days* ago. After that, it became nearly unbearable and he sincerely considered breaking out of the infirmary long enough to send her a message that he was all right.

"It's a fact that she would be informed if you were in serious condition," T'Shae had said, not quite understanding why Corry was pacing the length of the infirmary, agitated, and had been for about two hours. "The lack of news should be--" a pause, "--a comfort?"

Corry wanted to snap at her. Not because of her, or the words even, but because he was so keyed up right then that he wanted to snap at anyone. But he knew better than to take it out on other people, too; had learned that lesson hard and had taken it deep to heart.

After a moment where he forced himself to breathe, he calmed down enough to say, "We're not the kind of people who do well without news. The more information we have, the better prepared we are to deal with things."

"Understandable," she said. "However, your agitation does nothing to alleviate the situation, only to compound it."

"If I sit still, I'll explode," Cor replied, frankly. "I know what it feels like when you're stuck with no information about someone you love, and the only thing you know is that they're in trouble and you're helpless to do anything about it."

"Your father," T'Shae said, rather than asked. Corry had told her some about what had happened there just the day before.

"Yeah." Cor stopped pacing for a moment and sighed, running both hands through his hair. "I don't wanna put my Mom through it. She takes things better than-- than any of us, I think, but I just don't wanna put her through this waiting and worrying thing. And now she's been doing it for *days*, and I've been stuck in here without computer or comm access."

"Have you considered asking me to send a message?" T'Shae asked, raising both eyebrows.

Corry stared. "You'd do that?"

"Yes." T'Shae seemed amused by his surprise. "Given that *I'm* not restricted to the infirmary, it's a simple matter to call her in your place."

It felt like he'd just had a giant load lifted off of his shoulders and chest all at once, and Corry huffed out a breath, a bit weak-kneed. "I wouldn't be able to thank you enough."

"Thanking me isn't necessary," she said, and this time he *knew* she was teasing him. "It's the logical thing to do."

And at that, even if he couldn't guess as to exactly why, Cor laughed.

It was strange that the knowledge he would be back in class the next day would be a relief, but it was. He still wasn't entirely sure he wouldn't fail out of the program, but he felt alive enough to try his best not to. A renewed determination, in a way.

Cor had even missed the very spartan quarters assigned to him a little. He didn't know why, so much, but it was at least his own private space where he was allowed to laugh -- when he was *able* to laugh -- and not receive any of those judgmental looks. A place where he was allowed to just be himself, even briefly.

The very first thing he did, even before he checked his messages, was call his mother.

She was fairly composed now, though he knew she'd likely been far more frazzled before T'Shae had sent her a message. Now, she looked relieved; still concerned, but steady. He barely took a breath before he launched into it, "Mom. I'm really sorry I couldn't call, they had me locked up in the infirmary, even though I was okay enough after the first day or so; it wasn't anything big or anything, I just..."

"What happened?" she asked, eyebrows drawn slightly, once he got done rushing out the words and then trailing off.

"Pushed myself a little too hard," he said, not quite able to keep the somewhat ashamed smile off his face. "I just-- got carried away and couldn't see how to stop."

There was no disappointment in her eyes, no judgment. "Are you all right now? Have you worked things out so this won't happen again?"

"I think so." Corry mused on it for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, I think so. They cut two classes I didn't need, and I just got my revised schedule right before I was released from the infirmary. I mean, it'll be tough, but it looks like it's do-able." He looked down at his desk for a moment, wincing internally. "I-- I dunno. I guess I didn't realize how hard this would be until I was already in over my head."

He didn't need to look up to know that she nodded, and understood. That sharp ache of homesickness came back in force, and he couldn't make himself look up to add, "I wanna come home."

"I know."

She didn't need to add that if he did, she would support him. That his father would, too. He knew they would; neither of his parents ever allowed him to doubt that he would always be able to come back home, back to his safe harbor, if the storms threatened to overwhelm him.

Somehow, it was that certainty that made his next words possible. He looked up, jaw tight, somewhere between pride and grief. "I can do this."

There was pride in her eyes as well, and equal measures of sorrow. "I know that, too." She smiled then, and it was loving and a little sad. "Try to keep in touch, whenever you've got time? And call Scotty, I think I may have worried him while we were trying to find out what happened to you. I updated him last night, but I still think you should call him."

Before he realized it, Corry groaned quietly, though it wasn't all that sincere. He was more touched, but not really that surprised, that his mother had kept his best friend in the loop on this. Still, he didn't look forward to the ear-chewing he would probably get; Scotty hated worrying, and the more worried he was, the more agitated he could get, sometimes on a real exponential curve. Something they had in common. "Yeah, I will." He took a breath. "I love you, Mom."

She looked at him for another long moment, a look he'd gotten many times over many years -- a mother taking in sight of her son, and not quite knowing when the next time would be that she'd have the chance. "I love you too, Andy."

They didn't say goodbye, just gently broke the call.

Corry sat for a minute or so after, just long enough to steady himself. To make sure he was ready to handle any anxiety-provoked ranting, and talk his best friend back off of it. That was a lot easier when they were actually stuck living together, absent the times when they'd lost touch, but he was ready to sit and listen to it all night now if it'd make Scotty feel better.

Carefully, he dialed the number and then waited, not quite able to brace himself for it.

The look he got when the comm connected was plenty enough to confirm his suspicions; a fierce-eyed, smoked-off look. Corry winced again, then looked back up apologetically. "Hey."

There was a long moment. *Here it comes*, Corry thought.

And then Scotty breathed out and closed his eyes, and if not for the nature of physiology, Cor would have thought he'd probably been holding that breath since he first heard news something bad had happened. Maybe, in some less literal way, he had been.

"Are ye all right?" Scotty asked, after nearly a whole minute ticked off where it was obvious that he was letting go of any rants he might have saved up.

Corry had been expecting a tirade, and when it became clear that wasn't going to happen, he nodded. After the emotional chaos of the past-- geez, most of a week, never mind the very long stretch of purgatory before that, he wasn't even quite sure what to say. But he finally gave it a shot. "Yeah, I am. Are you?"

Scotty nodded. "Aye, I'm all right."

It was an automatic reply, the kind completely decoupled from any actual reality, and Corry knew it. Though, Cor supposed that despite Scotty looking pretty tired, he probably was mostly all right. "Will you do something for me?" Corry asked, not quite suddenly.

"What d'ye need?"

"Go and check on my Mom and Dad soon?"

There was a long moment where Scotty looked pretty confused. Corry couldn't entirely blame him. But he didn't look unwilling, and so Corry added, "Please?"

"I suppose I can. But why?"

Corry shook his head. "I guess because I know that they'd probably wanna keep it from me if something was wrong, unless it was so wrong they couldn't fix it by themselves before I'd catch wind of it."

Scotty chuckled quietly at that. "Sounds familiar."

"A bad family habit," Corry replied, and knew that Scotty was referring to him, and also probably didn't have the first clue of how encompassing that statement actually was. On all parts. "So, if you go and check on 'em, you can come back and tell me how they look." *And if you go and check on them, they can check on you at the same time.*

Scotty still seemed a bit baffled, but then shrugged with both eyebrows and shoulders. "Aye, I will. Might be a couple weeks, my schedule's gotten a wee bit out o' control, but I will."

"Thanks," Corry replied. Then he half-smiled. "I'm gonna get some sleep. I think you should probably do the same."

"Yes, *mother*," Scotty grumbled, and there was a flash there of exasperated good humor. "Considerin' who that's comin' from, I don't know how much weight it has."

"Yeah, well." Corry grinned, and finally really felt like himself again. "Still."

"Right." Scotty rolled his eyes, in a very obviously fake expression of irritation, then shook it off with a laugh. "All right. I'll talk to ye soon, then, I suppose."

"You bet." Corry took a breath. "Sleep well, Wolf."

A very not-fake look of peace crossed Scotty's face, and then he nodded. "G'night, Cor."

The knowledge that T'Shae was leaving wasn't new; Corry had already known that she was only taking a few classes for the sake of furthering her education and updating her credentials, and wouldn't be around much longer. But he was sort of surprised at just how sorry he was that she was going. In the two weeks since he'd been released from the infirmary, she had helped him where she could to arrange his studies and schedule his time a little better, and even though he was still in for a long-haul of exhaustion, her help had been invaluable in at least making sure that he got a decent amount of sleep most nights, and time to bolt down some food.

She had also pulled him into a small group of Vulcans from her home region who she socialized with in her off-hours; one of them was her cousin, another was majoring in the same bio-engineering track that Cor was, and the last two were from another city and had only met at the Academy. He really only was able to sit with them for meals, and then for a half-hour after classes ended for tea, but it made a huge, positive impact on his sense of isolation and loneliness.

The unexpected friendship with T'Shae hadn't been in force for long, but certainly long enough for Cor to know that he'd always be grateful for it. He walked with her to the doors of the Science Academy after she'd already had her partings with her associates, helping her carry her luggage. "Illogical," she had said, "as there is not enough that I require assistance." To wit, he had replied, with joking gallantry, "What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn't?"

Now they stood as she waited for the skimmer that would take her to the spaceport.

"I dunno how good a penpal I'll be, but I'd like it if we tried to keep in touch."

T'Shae nodded. "I would prefer we do as well."

There was a long moment of quiet, and then Corry said, "I know that it probably doesn't make much sense, but I'm really grateful that I got to know you. And that you've helped me so much."

"Gratitude is unnecessary." T'Shae lifted her chin a little. "I have found our association to be..." There was a pause, and a not-quite-concealed twinkle in her dark eyes. "...mutually beneficial."

The skimmer pulled up, and they packed her luggage into the back seat. Not quite able to resist, Corry teased, "So, friends then?"

It was after they stood upright that T'Shae leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, an incredibly human offer that touched him deeply; in that bare moment of contact, in a way that surprised him, he could actually *feel* something like he'd never quite felt before, her mental presence, and affection, a thread of genuine warmth that wound its way through that brief connection.

T'Shae stepped back, then, as composed as ever. "Yes. Friends."

It took Corry a couple of seconds to regain his own composure, and then he straightened up and offered her a salute, expression falling still as he returned that kindness. "Peace and long life, T'Shae."

"Live long and prosper, Andrew," she replied, formally, returning that salute.

He stood long enough to watch her ride away, and then feeling the parting, and gratitude and the lingering trace of her affection mingled in with his, he went back inside.

*"...to my knees. Hell, above my knees in some places. I swear, I've never seen that much snow in my life."*

Corry chuckled quietly, as he finished putting his datapads in the neat organizational shelf that T'Shae had arranged for him, so that he could just grab the ones he needed without worrying where they were.

*"Anyway, though, it was bloody cold. I don't know how ye lot manage to survive there. It got cold in Aberdeen, and we'd get snow once in awhile, but never like that. Come to think of it, I wonder why the hell they don't send cadets up there for Basic Training."*

Cor couldn't reply to it, though he wanted to. It was just a voice-letter. But he didn't fail to appreciate that it was recorded; Scotty almost universally preferred writing things down or typing them, versus talking. The fact that he'd taken the time to actually voice all the things he probably never would have tried writing was surprising and incredibly sweet, even if Corry knew he couldn't really return the favor for lack of time.

*"Go into the Canadian rockies? Hell no. Send 'em all to Maine. 'Here, survive this!' It mighta been cold in arctic training, but I don't remember there bein' nearly that much snow. And the wind! I'll have ye know, I about froze to death just shovelin' off the walkway for yer parents."*

Once everything was organized, Corry flopped down on his bed, just listening. Sometimes smiling. For some reason, the idea of his best friend going and shoveling snow for his parents was-- something. Kinda wonderful. Warm. Because he knew that his parents would never have asked for it. And he knew that his mother wouldn't have let Scotty go without giving him a cup of tea or coffee to warm up with, too.

*"I couldn't stay long, though. Had to get back here, get some sleep and then I got this-- this-- crate! For lack of a better term, that I had to try'n fix. Ye shoulda seen this one, Cor, it was like lookin' at somethin' that a first-year engineering cadet woulda put together after a night o' binge drinkin'. It took me some eleven hours just to bring it into the safety guidelines, and my supervisor was breathin' down my neck the whole time..."*

Corry never heard the rest of it. He just tuned the words out, still smiling to himself, then pulled his blanket over his head and fell asleep in peace.

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