

Bookends

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Bookends

by [SLWalker](#)

Summary

(2246) - He didn't have any brothers, and hadn't really gotten to understand the concept of siblings from an adult perspective. For that matter, he hadn't even started understanding the concept of friends until he was out on his own; he'd been certain, for the longest time, that he didn't really need any friends so long as he had something to tear apart or put together or design or fix.

He wondered if this was what it was like to be a younger brother. He thought that it was.

The air was so cold that the snow underfoot crackled sharply with every step. On the patches of road that had been cleared, there was still a frozen cast to everything; the whole world was mostly painted in monochrome. Aside from the bright bits of color from store signs, South Bristol was buried in the kind of gray-toned quiet that could only accompany winter.

There were a few times that Scotty cursed his own decision to walk, but he doubted that even if he could rewind time and make the choice again, that he would do anything differently. It had become something of a personal tradition to leave the cab at the swing bridge and walk onto Rutherford Island, and along West Side Road. At first, he'd done that mostly as a method of burning off a little energy so he wouldn't be quite so nervous walking up to the house, but now it had become more of a chance to--

He wasn't really sure why he did it. Except that in a place that seemed to be fixed, there was something both comforting about its lack of change, and likewise something just as comforting in watching the seasons change around it.

Not quite so comforting was just how cold it was, though. The air was downright biting, and there wasn't even really anything more than a tickle of a breeze. Even in two layers, plus a coat, plus good boots, he'd halfway lost touch with his legs and he was pretty sure his hands would refuse to do anything until they were warmed up again. Aberdeen and Belfast could get a bit chilly, but Scotty had never quite known what the words 'wind chill' meant until he first met winter in mid-coast Maine.

As such, he didn't really get to enjoy any of the scenery; he had his head down and his collar up and was mostly focused on the entirely solid ground underfoot.

Still, despite the walking, and the fact he'd been here a fair number of times now, he had to brush off some measure of hesitation when it came to actually knocking on the door. It certainly wasn't that Corry's parents ever made a big deal of him showing up; if anything, he thoroughly appreciated that when he did, they just treated it as though it was a perfectly common thing to have this relative outsider around. Their lives were like the town itself; steady, for the most part, routine and comfortable. In retrospect, it was a lot easier to see why Cor had been such a wreck when his father had been sick. It was a giant rock thrown into an otherwise calm pond.

Regardless, it was considerably less nerve-racking to knock now than it had been a couple years ago.

Melinda opened the door; that wasn't much of a surprise. Corry's mother was a stay-at-home type, a breed that Scotty had never known in his own family, though she freelance wrote magazine articles about various aspects of that lifestyle and had earned a respectable income for it.

"Cold enough for you?" she asked, giving him the usual once-over to make sure he was alive and in one piece, even if it was a very cold piece.

He'd gotten better at not ducking under that look, even if it did still feel a bit strange. "No, ma'am. I can still feel about a third of my body," Scotty deadpanned back.

She laughed, then, taking his coat once he managed to coordinate himself enough to get it off. Though she didn't fail to give a bit of a disapproving look at the fact he was only wearing his uniform shirt, and a work shirt over that. "Andy's running a little late. He had to track down one of his professors to turn a paper in."

"I'll have to thank him for tellin' me about it," Scotty said, offhandedly, absently flexing his hands to try to get some sense of feeling back into them. Corry's habitual unwillingness to give advanced warning for things hadn't been changed by two years on Vulcan.

She chuckled again, stepping off into the kitchen once she'd hung his coat up. "He was pretty excited about some of the research topics that are up for grabs down there. I'm just hoping that he thinks twice before bringing some of them home, though. There's only so much I'm willing to donate my kitchen to furthering Starfleet's knowledge-base."

Given that Scotty had been involved in a few of those kitchen-based lab tests, he could more than easily sympathize with her on that. He was willing to do just about anything Cor asked of him, but that didn't mean he particularly liked playing lab assistant -- or lab-*rat* -- especially since biochemistry held no real interest for him.

After a few moments warming up by the door, he finally took a couple steps into the kitchen, though he didn't really have much else to say.

"I guess that when he gets further into it, he'll probably have to spend more time in a proper lab." Melinda didn't seem put off by holding a mostly one-sided conversation; she just set about preparing to make dinner, pausing only to put the teapot on the stove. "I think I'll like reaching into my fridge for eggs and not having to move petri dishes."

Scotty nodded, not sure if she saw it or not. He usually felt more comfortable in the kitchen than he did anywhere else; the only other place where he felt pretty much at home was the recliner that had unofficially become his in the living room, where he had a very bad habit of nodding off while Corry gave a heartfelt dissertation on cells and things that were, in Scotty's mind, completely boring.

This kitchen was all pale yellow and white, completely different from his mother's, classically plain and it felt like morning in there most of the day. Except in the late hours, when there were only the lights on over the sink, and then it felt mellow and mild like evening. The only contrast was the kitchen table, old hardwood, though usually there was a white cloth on it. Frankly, he was shocked that Cor's mother put up with lab testing on that table; it had to be a century old.

She talked idly about things, and he made it a point not to tune her out, even though his mind was devoted more to introspection than anything else. He didn't indulge in it that often, but these people seemed to provoke it. It was a mystery to him why, just as much as it was a mystery that he let himself be drawn into the routines here, even if it was only for short periods of time amidst the much longer stretches of work.

"Here, sit down," she said, after outlining her latest writing projects, and Scotty obeyed it without a pause. That was another thing he had figured out gradually over the past year or so -- that in a manner almost disconcerting, Corry's mother could tell him to do something and he'd answer it more willingly than he did orders from his commanding officers. Didn't understand that one, either.

On the other hand, the fact she gave him a cup of lemon tea with a little honey in it might have had something to do with it. "Thanks," he said, immediately holding the cup two-handed in an attempt to finish thawing his hands out.

"You're welcome," Melinda replied, ruffling his hair up, then going back to her dinner-making ventures.

He didn't bother fixing the mess she'd made of his hair. Random, casual affection in this household was the rule, and not the exception. Scotty still wasn't all that good at accepting it, but he'd had little choice but to get good at enduring it. Well, sort of enduring it. It was nice, but it was very foreign as well. A pat on the shoulder or a hug hello or goodbye came as easily to these people as everything else seemed to.

At least it didn't make him want to bolt out the door anymore, though.

"I'm hoooooome," Corry sang out from the front door, dragging Scotty out of his train of thought and making him grin. Corry loved to call him melodramatic; Scotty loved pointing out that it was the pot calling the kettle black. "Man, is it cold out!"

"It'll be cold in if you don't close that door," Melinda replied, smiling to herself. Then the click of the door closing made her shake her head.

Cor shed his coat in record time; unlike Scotty, he was wearing more like four layers, and he had his own skimmer now that ensured he didn't have to do any walking if he didn't want to. He breezed into the kitchen, kissed his mother on the cheek, then promptly dropped into a chair at the kitchen table, addressing both of them and neither of them at once, "It's supposed to get even colder tonight, too. I should go out, I still haven't shaken off all that Vulcan dust."

"That's mad," Scotty said, shivering briefly at the thought. It was far too cold for him in the daylight, let alone after the sun was down.

"It is not." Corry grinned, setting his gloves on the table, then leaning back again. "Just because you're part reptile doesn't mean we all are. But hey, it might do you some good. Toughen you up a bit, get some proper Maine blood into your veins."

"Ayuh," Scotty said, smirking a little at the theatrical eyeroll Cor gave back at that.

"No late night, sub-zero ventures." Melinda handed her son a cup of tea, giving him a pointed look at the same time. "He's not dressed for it, and you both have to go to work in the morning."

Cor sighed out heavily in mock-disappointment. "Guess I'll entertain myself with the thought of testing the cryonic capabilities of island winter, since I won't get to put it into practice."

"Bastard," Scotty muttered, hoping it was loud enough for Cor to hear, but not his mother.

Corry grinned, mouthing back, "*I know.*"

"What're you two doing tonight, anyway?" Melinda asked, apparently unaware of the two taking mild, age-old potshots at each other behind her. Or maybe just kindly ignoring them doing so. "And should I bother making you dinner, or not?"

"The plan is--" Cor stood up, taking a deep and unnecessarily dramatic breath before saying, "I am going to make science history! I am going

to push the bounds of reality, making mankind rethink their entire place in the universe! I am going to--"

"What he's sayin', ma'am, is that we're probably goin' to sit here talkin' about what to do with ourselves, and that we're gonna end up watchin' bad vids in yer living room the rest o' the night," Scotty said, speaking up loud enough to cut Corry off. "That's the rough translation, anyway."

--I am going to strongly reconsider testing the cryonic capabilities of island winter on certain parties in this room right here and now," Cor continued, unfazed.

"And that's him sayin' that I'm right."

"All right, dinner for four," Melinda said.

There was a long pause, while Corry looked as sinister as he could manage (which was about as sinister as one of those baby seals or whatever animal it was with the big, heartbreaking, liquid eyes), and then in true form, he shrugged. "Okay, I'm gonna go put a vid on."

It wasn't really that they didn't go out and get themselves into trouble; in fact, since getting back from Vulcan in mid-September of the year before, most of their days off and several evenings besides were spent doing something together. Sometimes barhopping, sometimes working on Corry's schoolwork, sometimes working on that skimmer, sometimes just wandering around. Scotty had even been talked into sailing a few times when it was still autumn on the family's little ketch, and found out that he got seasick just as easily as ever. But he still, inevitably, let Cor talk him into going out on the sea again.

If most of his existence had been more about endurance than anything else, about surviving by the day or the moment and moving forward without much connection to a past, then South Bristol was where he suddenly had something to measure his life off of.

Scotty blamed it on the chair.

The recliner was big, built for Aaron Corrigan's tall frame, and since he was close to half a foot shorter than Corry's dad, he had a lot of room in it. It was also absurdly comfortable. In the morning it caught the eastern sun, and it was more positioned for reading a book in the afternoon than watching the vidscreen at night.

He told himself, every single time, that he would not get so comfortable in that chair that he'd end up sleeping there all night. And every single time, he ended up nodding off anyway. So, for about four months now, he'd ended up knocking out there not quite two dozen times, and it was after the first dozen that he'd sort of figured it out.

It was one of those mornings where the sun was coming through a frosty window, very low and yellow still, that he'd drifted back to his senses to the sound of Corry's mother making breakfast in the kitchen. Buried in a fleece blanket, his boots set neatly beside the chair (which couldn't have been his doing; he was no better about putting them away nicely now than he had been as a cadet) and the realization was just as drowsy as the process of waking up.

Even before the *Lady Grey*, before everything, back over that Thanksgiving leave he hadn't even wanted to take, he'd slept in this same spot and had felt, at the time, something he only recognized now as being *safe*. And for a moment, he felt the time, and the same things, and the different things.

Then he'd promptly pulled his blanket back over his head and fell back to sleep until Melinda woke him up for breakfast.

Nonetheless, he didn't protest to himself quite so hard after that about the possibility of spending the night in a recliner. It was more of a token argument than the real thing; even on the mornings where he'd have to wake up before it was decent in order to beat it back to work, he didn't really regret it.

This was one of those nights. He wasn't much for watching vids or anything else, and never had been. It was in the middle of some really badly made one where Corry was ranting theatrically about the impossibility of biochemistry creating radioactive zombie Vulcans that he put up his token protest for all of two minutes and then dove headfirst into oblivion.

He didn't even know exactly what woke him up again. Just that something had, something in the back of his head, an instinct half-familiar and all worrisome.

The kitchen light was on, but it wasn't morning; a quick look at the clock built into the vidscreen told him that it wasn't more than two hours or so after the last time he remembered it being. He managed to drag himself out of his warm little den there, and was still rubbing at his eyes when he stepped into the kitchen.

Corry looked like he was wide-awake and all distracted, that look that echoed back to when he found out his father was sick, but there was no sign of anyone else. He nearly leapt out of his skin when he turned around and saw Scotty there, though he didn't yell out. After a moment, staring, he breathed out hard, "Cripes, you scared me."

"What's goin' on?" Scotty asked, squinting a bit from the kitchen light.

"Just-- nothing you need to worry about." A statement which, of course, had the exact opposite effect. Corry picked his skimmer keys up from the kitchen table. "Go back to sleep. I'll be back before morning."

Without giving himself time to think about it, Scotty leaned out of the kitchen, grabbed his coat off of the peg it was hanging on in the

hallway, then eyed Cor. "So, where're we goin'?"

Corry's expression went from half-distracted anxiety to wholly exasperated. "Scotty..."

"Corry." There could be no doubting that tone.

After a very long, silent moment where they measured each other's conviction, Cor sighed. "It's Rach. She called, and she's in some trouble, and I'm just gonna go down to Boston to get her, okay?"

"What're we waitin' for?" Scotty asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Damn you," Corry said, though it was far more resignation than curse. He shook his head, still scowling a bit. "Go get your boots on, then." And with that, he stalked out of the kitchen and headed upstairs.

Not having the vaguest clue of what was going on, Scotty went and did just that. He was already back in the hall and about to drag his coat on when Corry came back down and threw a sweater at him. "Put that on."

He did as he was told, though he had to roll the sleeves up a bit. "No cryonics tonight?"

There was a pause and then Corry shook his head with a slight, wry grin. "Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow."

Scotty nodded, pulling his coat on over the borrowed sweater. "After work, though."

Even the attempted levity didn't really do much for the drive. It had been pretty cold in the skimmer until it had time to warm up; usually, it could be remote started and toasty by the time it was used, but they didn't waste time waiting for that, and didn't want Corry's parents to hear it running outside anyway.

Corry had fallen silent, mostly focused on driving and probably some on seething. He didn't pay much mind to the speed limits; part of working on the skimmer last year had been adding a cut-off to bypass the computer that recorded its speed, a tattle system, and the other part had been adding a small sensor array that would pick up and disperse any scanning from law enforcement, either automated or otherwise. Scotty didn't have any real qualms about engineering either modification; initially, just for fun. Now, apparently, they'd get a real test.

He didn't venture to ask what kind of trouble Rachel was in. He'd only seen her a few times in the past few years; she was going to college in Boston, and didn't come back to Maine very often. He probably spent more time there anymore than she did. When she was around, she didn't seem the same as she had when they'd met and he'd briefly fallen madly in love with her. She was more aloof, for one, and seemed to only be around because she was expected to be.

At first, it had been easy to sympathize with that. But after awhile, he had to kind of wonder why she wouldn't want to be home.

He didn't really pay attention to the speed or the drive. It was kind of funny to him, sometimes, that he'd never actually bothered to go and get a license for a skimmer. He could pilot a shuttle, and he'd even piloted a starship in a simulator, and he'd held the helm of a schooner in a gale, but he'd never actually gotten a skimmer license. Not that he hadn't driven one before. But he just never got his license.

He was still a bit sleepy, even after the cold and the worry, and left his head leaning on the passenger-side window, mostly watching the narrow crescent moon. It felt kind of dream-like. Surreal, in a way. A wee hours of the morning, way-too-fast drive down the coast, glowing dash lights, moon, silence.

"She's high out of her mind and surrounded by strangers," Corry said, probably an hour into the drive. Like he couldn't believe it, and was pissed off about it, and scared, and not knowing what was going to happen. "Pretty new drug on the market called Tee on the streets. We were just studying this shit two weeks ago in class."

Scotty didn't even begin to know what to say about that, but he picked his head up and looked over, frowning.

"This is stupid." Cor stared fixedly ahead; Scotty could hear his teeth grinding together over there. "What... I don't know. It's really goddamn stupid."

"Aye," Scotty said. No doubting he agreed. It was hard to process the idea. Even harder to wonder what the hell a drug would do for her, when she was going to college, and had a loving, supportive family at home, and how anyone could be foolish enough to risk that kind of thing. Never mind the idea of being in some drug-altered state of consciousness around strangers; that was downright terrifying all by itself. Alcohol was one thing, and he was pretty careful even there, but what Rach was doing--

Still, that line of thought was filtered a bit, even now, through that surreal cast. It was hard to believe. It didn't really work with how he wanted to view reality, even if it was reality.

Cor growled, though Scotty knew it wasn't directed towards him, just towards this-- this madness, this stupidity that dragged them out in the dark hours to pick up an idiot girl. Corry because she was his sister, Scotty because he wouldn't let his best friend go into a bad place alone.

"You shouldn't be here," Corry said, after another few minutes of grinding his teeth.

Scotty wasn't entirely sure how to reply to that one, either. But he gave it his best shot, crossing his arms. "Why? 'Cause yer sister's an idiot

and ye don't want me knowin' that?"

Corry spared only the briefest glance over, but it proved that he hadn't been thinking that at all. Then he went back to glaring at the road. "No."

Well. It didn't take long for the real reason to click, but they didn't say anything else. Scotty frowned to himself, going back to watching the moon.

He'd never really connected with his own sister, not after they were older. There were any number of reasons why, some big, some small; when they were both wee'uns, he remembered feeling like he'd do anything to protect her, and even after they stopped getting on, he still loved her. But them being anything like close had been most of a lifetime ago now, and what little they did interact nowadays tended to be stilted or even outright hostile. He still tried, though, sometimes. Even if it usually ended badly.

He didn't have any brothers, and hadn't really gotten to understand the concept of siblings from an adult perspective. For that matter, he hadn't even started understanding the concept of friends until he was out on his own; he'd been certain, for the longest time, that he didn't really need any friends so long as he had something to tear apart or put together or design or fix.

He wondered if this was what it was like to be a younger brother. He thought that it was. It was easy to want to believe that Corry didn't want him there because Cor didn't want him seeing anything less than the happy side of that family's life.

Except, it only took a look and a word to explain it, and the reality was that Corry didn't want him there because you don't put someone you try to protect into dark places. Yank them back out, maybe, but you don't put them in there.

"Ye're not allowed to do that," Scotty said, decisively, though it surprised him when he did.

"Do what?" Corry asked, his frustration fading for a moment in light of confusion.

Scotty gestured, aimlessly. "Ye're not allowed to watch my back at the expense of yer own. It's give and take, or not at all."

"It's not always that simple."

"Still."

Corry shook his head. "You're here, aren't you?"

It wasn't for a moment that Corry wanted him to be, and Scotty knew it. But it was a good enough answer for now. He let it go there.

"I suppose it's a moot point to ask you to stay put," Corry said, calmly, as they stood in front of the house.

"I suppose it is," Scotty replied, surveying the building critically. It looked like it was about a month away from being condemned. A few lights were on, little shards of brightness that came through the holes in the dark colored drapes meant to keep prying eyes out.

It wasn't really surprising that he wasn't the least bit apprehensive. Scotty wasn't sure what that said about him, that he could work himself into a nervous wreck around wonderful people in a beautiful town, but that he didn't even feel a flicker of fear at the idea of walking boldly into some drug house to retrieve a hopefully unharmed Rachel. He wasn't sure he wanted that answer, either.

Cor had resigned himself to the fact that he had someone at his back, though he still looked unhappy about it. But after a few moments, he went into business-mode, and Scotty knew Corry wasn't really afraid for his own safety either; any apprehension he had was for his sister and his best friend.

Well, all right, they shared that.

Corry didn't say anything else. He walked up to the door like he owned the place and pounded on it; Scotty stayed a few paces behind to the right of his shoulder, waiting to jump in if anything bad happened. He would have taken point, but this would have to do.

Nothing terrible happened. Some guy opened the door, obviously stoned, totally oblivious to the other people behind him screaming at him that he shoulda checked to make sure it wasn't the police for several moments. He turned around to tell them to shut up, then when he looked back, he got a face full of Corry, who spoke in chillingly normal tones. "Where's my sister?"

"Whu...?" the guy asked, wavering back and forth some.

"Rachel. Where is she?"

"Oh. Man. She's upstairs. You her brother? That's really--"

He didn't get much of a chance to say what that really was; Corry shoved him aside and walked in, and Scotty followed, picking up the vigilance his best friend had left at the door. No one really seemed all that interested in interfering, though. Half of 'em were strung out on some extremely ragged looking furniture, and all of them looked like they'd be lucky if they could recite the alphabet.

Still, he kept himself on alert as they climbed the steps. Even if he could out-think these twits with three quarters of his brain missing, they still had him and Cor outnumbered at least five to one. He didn't pay so much attention to the actual surroundings, though this was the first time

he'd ever been in this sort of place; just stepped over the occasional body sprawled out in the hallway and kept on edge for any kind of attack.

If there was any real apprehension, it was when they were checking rooms. The silent fear being that they would find Rach dead or worse in a place like this.

Luckily, that turned out not to be the case. She was laying on a bed, alone, long legs nothing more than dead-weight hanging over the side. Corry stepped over, shaking her; she didn't really do much stirring, though. Just enough to swat at him.

"I'll carry her," Cor said, still business-like, but the shaky note in his voice gave away just how badly this was bothering him.

"Ayuh," Scotty replied, and it had the effect he intended. Corry shot him a slightly exasperated look, but looked more centered after it.

It didn't really take long. Cor slung his sister over his shoulders in an entirely unceremonious manner; no damsel-in-distress ride for Rachel tonight. It was only then that she really roused herself and started cussing dazedly at him.

They both tuned her out. Down the steps, though her pissing and moaning managed to catch the attention of some of her buddies or whatever-the-hell they were. A couple struggled up, and the one who'd answered the door turned around and just about got in the way.

Scotty had the empty, discarded bottle in hand before he even really knew he did; his mind caught up, though, and he smashed it on a nearby table, causing the entire group to jump. And without a blink, he tipped his head to the side a little and pointed the jagged neck of it at the guy in the way. "Step aside, or I'll gut ye like a fish."

It was an even tone, and they must have realized that he meant it.

He was still watching the door and still gripping the broken bottle when Corry came back from putting Rachel in the back seat of the skimmer.

"Wolf..."

Scotty pulled his attention from the door and looked at Cor for a moment.

Corry shook his head. "C'mon, Wolf. Let's go home."

It was as much gentle warning as it was anything else, and then he had a past again; a before, to go with the now. Scotty nodded, tossed the broken bottleneck aside, and headed back for the skimmer without looking behind him.

The ride back was, if anything, quieter than the ride down. And that said a lot. Rachel fell asleep; Corry offhandedly related that she'd probably be sobered up again by the time that their parents were awake, and that was it.

The moon was gone, and that just left them and the occasional groan from the backseat, and no sign of the sunrise. Just dashlights. The world was a whole lot sharper, though, in that way that things get clearer when you're really too burned up inside to think much, just observe.

The road from Boston went from being new territory to being something more familiar; the last couple of legs, from Wiscasset, through Damariscotta, then down to Rutherford Island and South Bristol were the same as the road to Augusta. Scotty wasn't too sure exactly when this had become familiar ground, and he didn't really devote any of his thoughts to trying to pick apart why it would feel like relief, being back in this area, and why (at the exact same time) he could feel such a spike of irritation at Rachel about it. It just was.

It was only after they parked the skimmer, and just before he went to carry his sister in that Corry said anything, and then it was only two words. "I'm sorry."

A million years and a million words wouldn't explain what that meant, but it was about brothers and dark places, and Scotty understood it anyway. And even if he would have had a million years to come up with an answer, it still would have been the same one:

"I'm not."

"Ye've gotta tell 'em."

By that point, not even an hour before the light would really fade into the sky, Corry had already insisted Scotty call off from work. It had been another of those moments where they stared at each other, testing the seriousness of their respective stances, and Scotty was the one who gracefully bowed out of it. Give and take. Corry didn't want him working in space after a night like that, and he had plenty of personal leave time.

This wasn't quite so easy or graceful.

"Do you have any idea what that would--" Cor stopped himself, then paced a few steps in the kitchen, before stopping and trying again, "It's not that simple."

"Didn't say it was. But ye'll not do her nor them any favors by dealin' with it yerself."

The idea of informing Melinda and Aaron Corrigan, two of perhaps the most decent, well-adjusted people in existence, that their daughter was a screw-up of the finest caliber wasn't a pleasant prospect. And Scotty could definitely appreciate the strong desire their son had to just deal with it on his own, and not throw another big rock into the calm waters of their lives. If not for the fact that these people-- these people *mattered* to him, he would have probably been perfectly willing not to pipe up about it himself.

"How do I even do this?" Cor was on the jagged edge of nervous exhaustion, sometimes pacing, sometimes just stopping and staring off at something for a moment. He'd been handed a cup of coffee about a half-hour ago, and it was still full and now cold. "I-- geez. I don't know. How do you even...?"

"Preferably with comfort food close at hand," Scotty replied, half-joking, dragging things out of the cupboard. "Breakfast."

Corry eyed him for a few moments, almost incredulously, but it went away. Then he shook his head with a tired chuckle. "Comfort food? French toast?"

"Sure, if ye want." It really didn't make much of a difference what he had to whip up, so long as he could do something. Scotty couldn't help but admire the organization of Melinda's cupboards; they were easily as neat as those in his own mother's kitchen, though admittedly, not quite as stocked with everything under the sun. "Anything else?"

"Bacon." Corry thought about it, his agitation fading. There was a bit more to comfort food than the actual finished product; the process of making it was the most important part. "Except for Dad, he likes ham."

"Bacon, ham, french toast. Aye aye." Scotty smirked to himself as he set Corry's lab experiments out of the way to get the eggs in the fridge, then slid the crate down the counter. "Break up five o' those in a wide pan."

Corry smiled dryly as he moved to do as he was told. "Aye aye."

Corry wasn't very good in the kitchen, and he tended to be about two seconds away at any given point from a cooking catastrophe, but Scotty didn't kick him out. Just kept intervening before breakfast could become a disaster, falling into a routine he'd never actually been a real part of in this house, and finding it about as absurdly comfortable as that damned recliner.

These people were early risers; Aaron had retired from the SCE after the incident that nearly killed him, and had opened up a consulting firm in Damariscotta, which meant he was home far more than he used to be. He still took the occasional business trip, but his usual life now was to wake up early and go to work, then come home. Last evening, he'd done that and commandeered the vidscreen to watch the news for an hour, then he'd spent the rest of the evening in the kitchen talking to his wife over tea, the occasional sound of laughter making it back to the living room.

Just like Melinda, he pretty much treated Scotty as though he were just another member of this household, right up to delegating the occasional chore, and right down to an unstated and silent expectation that Scotty would keep himself out of trouble. It was next to impossible not to respond instinctively to that kind of thing. But in a good way, not in a smashing-a-bottle-on-the-table's-edge way.

"Did I miss a holiday?" Aaron asked, when he stepped into the kitchen and found them cleaning up from the cooking part of breakfast. Outside, the horizon over the bay was starting to just really get colorful, past the frozen windows.

Scotty shook his head; Corry did the actual answering, "No, Dad. But breakfast is ready. Coffee?"

"Sure." Aaron sounded a little puzzled, but he wasn't given to all that many words and was probably waiting for an explanation as to why his son and his son's best friend had commandeered the kitchen.

Melinda wasn't too long in following. She had the rather impressive ability to always look like she was awake and ready for things; Scotty had yet to see the woman genuinely frazzled. She could convey disappointment in a glance, and she could get pretty angry, but he'd never really seen her be anything less than fairly composed about it. He had to fight down two things at that realization: The first, a frown at the idea that even her composure was going to be shot by what was going to be said soon, and the second that he really wanted to go and read Rach the kind of riot act that would involve lots of words he almost never resorted to using.

That fight got about fifty times harder when she was so grateful for breakfast, too. Wisely, he left the talking to Cor and just kept washing dishes. The ability to focus thought into action was a handy one to have. He was really more expecting that when this went down, he'd probably be kicked to the curb. Or, he wanted to expect that, even if somewhere deep down he was starting to have an unexpected faith that it would take a pretty serious crime on his part for these people to ever cast him out.

The faith turned out to be right, in the end; after the halting explanation, still Corry's talking, and the silent backing-up of the facts on Scotty's part, both of them temporarily ceased to exist. And when Rachel stumbled down, looking drowsy but sober again, it didn't take her a nanosecond to realize what had happened; she stopped in the doorway, looked at her parents, then leveled a reproachful look at the two who had ratted her out.

She got nothing but identical stony looks back.

"C'mon," Corry said, one step above a whisper, and they made themselves scarce, leaving Rachel to face the parents alone.

Hiding out down in the basement was sensible; it was quiet, out of the way, and they could do laundry. There was also a heavy bag down there to box with, but neither of them had the energy to throw any punches, even if there was plenty to be angry about. Or, there would be plenty to be angry about, but after the night and after the morning, it was hard to really feel much of anything but tired and wanting to not think much more about it.

But they couldn't have stayed there forever; after the occasionally raised voices filtering through the floorboards above died off, Cor had found his humor somewhere, even if it was rather sorry at the moment. "C'mon, let's go test some cryonics."

That didn't happen, of course; if anything, Scotty felt like a mummy in that many layers, and all of them aside for his own trousers too big on him, but he had to admit that it made sneaking out the back door and walking a lot less frigid and uncomfortable. Looked like a fisherman, too; Corry's civilian wardrobe mirrored his hometown, and even if he wasn't a native, Scotty sure looked the part of Midcoast Maine.

Felt a little the part of it, too. They ended up in the café, sitting at a booth, both of them with their legs stretched out on the seats and an arm on the table. Bookends. Very tired bookends, even with a carafe of coffee and two cups in hand.

"I'm kinda surprised we're all still here," Corry said at length.

"Why?"

"I dunno. It's just--" Cor shook his head. "I don't know. I guess I probably wouldn't blame you if you never wanted to come back here."

Scotty frowned at that, looking over, though he only echoed his own prior question. "Why?"

"Because," Corry replied, and managed to fill in all of the reasons in that one word.

"Take the bad with the good," Scotty said, and he meant it. "Lab testin' on a kitchen table or tryin' to help stupid sisters."

Cor chuckled at that, but only nodded. And they fell quiet again, but it was a comfortable kind of quiet. The kind you find when you're just too beat to really do much more than appreciate that you're still alive, still breathing, still in one piece even if you're not sure it was the same piece as it was the day before.

After awhile, Scotty pushed his coffee out of the way and propped his head on his hand; not a steady enough stance to sleep, but more than secure enough to drift there awhile, and not do any thinking about what would happen in the next hour or day, or week. Just knowing that the before was safe, and the now was the same.

He was probably actually pretty close to being asleep at the table when he heard Corry sit forward, and that was enough to make him open his eyes and look over to make sure everything was all right.

There was no mistaking that attentive look; Scotty followed it himself and found himself looking at a woman up at the counter. Pretty in a kind of austere way; her brown hair was pulled back severely into a tight braid, and she looked muscular enough that she could probably put up a mean fight if she were so inclined. He chewed down a grin and looked back at Corry. There was a different dimension to that expression, though. It was like the far deeper cousin to the infatuation they'd both shown towards Maggie back at the Academy. "Who is she?" he asked, keeping his voice down.

"Abigail Hanson," Corry replied, not looking away from her.

"Really?" Scotty had to look again. He remembered Corry had once pointed her out as one of Rachel's friends, that summer before he'd left for Vulcan, but it had been at a distance. Though, Scotty remembered her looking a lot more fragile then than she looked now. "Followed her father?"

"Kinda. He was a marine, she's shore patrol. Her Dad still lives here, but..."

"But ye haven't gotten the nerve up to ask her out?"

Corry managed to tear his attention away from Abigail long enough to give Scotty an irritated look. "I'm working on it, I'm working on it!"

"Right." Scotty got to his feet, and was thoroughly amused at the horrified look Cor gave him. He didn't even make it two steps, though, before Corry had gotten up and dragged him back by his collar. "What? I was just gonna ask if she wanted some coffee," he said, innocently, though he didn't put up a fight. That might end with him in a headlock.

"I'll ask her out, I swear. But gimme a little time, okay?"

There was enough sincerity in the exasperated plea. After a few seconds of pretending to think about it, Scotty let Corry off the hook, shook off the hold and sat back down. But he still found it kind of funny that Corry watched her all the way until she was out the door again. There was something about the whole thing that felt like hope.

And for a moment, he was aware of the before, and the now, and in a way that was almost wonderful, something down the road that was only an impression. But a good one.

Maybe even a great one.

It didn't last long, but it lasted long enough.

The *Enterprise* had already been launched back in late November of the prior year, but despite the fact that he missed her being in the Fleet Yards, Scotty was still able to focus pretty much on the work of the day, and the occasional dream that one day when she left, he'd be going with her. Nonetheless, there was enough to tie him to Earth that he didn't pine too hard; far less than he ever would have expected before all of this, when everything in him was focused entirely on getting out amongst the stars.

He still had no intention of living his life grounded. On the other hand, though, it was starting to dawn on him that no matter how far he ended up getting from Earth, some part of him would be tied back to his home world. And back to Maine.

There was no neat and clean ending to the whole mess with Rachel; a week later showed no resolutions, just that it would be an ongoing process and that life would continue regardless.

Corry showed up in the Fleet Yards at the end of that week, something that sort of shocked Scotty, who had been expecting to finish up his usual shift plus half another and then just go planetside tomorrow on his day off.

"Figured I'd keep you company on the way home," Cor said. "Well, that and things are still a little stilted in the house. But not like it was the first few nights."

"No surprise there. But I wasn't plannin' on headin' down 'til tomorrow." Scotty dropped on his bunk long enough to start pulling his EV suit off, after he tossed his gloves on the table. He'd worry about making it all neat later.

"Plan's changed, then." Corry grinned, setting the bag he'd brought along on the table beside the gloves, and was awarded one of those 'what else is new?' looks. "Plus, I've switched my focus from testing the cryonic capabilities of island winter to testing the protective factors of insulation on skin cells by proper island attire."

"In English?" Scotty asked, getting his suit off, and feeling a quick chill when he was back down to his usual uniform.

"Mom went and got you a proper wardrobe. She said that you're not allowed to wander around Maine without being dressed for it."

Scotty shook his head, a little exasperated if not touched. "She didn't have to do that."

Cor shrugged. "Take the good with the bad, right?"

"I'm guessin' no protests are allowed."

"Good guess."

Scotty just nodded; give and take, fair enough.

"And I picked up the sequel. *Radioactive Vulcan Zombies, II*," Corry paused there dramatically, then in a loud whisper added, "*The Return*."

Though, in that moment, Scotty wondered wryly just how far that philosophy had to go.

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