

Forty-Eight

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1002) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1002>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Star Trek: The Original Series
Character:	Montgomery "Scotty" Scott , Andrew "Corry" Corrigan , Caitlyn Scott
Additional Tags:	Major Character Injury , Parent Death , Bad Parenting , Grief , Mourning , Complicated Relationship(s) , Anger , Medical Trauma , Involuntary Commitment , Child Abuse , Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) , Hopeful Ending
Language:	English
Series:	Part 26 of Arc of the Wolf
Stats:	Published: 2023-10-07 Updated: 2024-09-21 Words: 15,607 Chapters: 9/18

Forty-Eight

by [SLWalker](#)

Summary

(2248) - Off into space at the beginning of the Four Years War, Scotty remains an ensign on the Denevan run, seemingly out of the action and away from the front lines. But a side-swipe from a battle sends him to take up another kind of war, much closer to home.

Notes

This is the hardest story I've ever told, at least so far.

Prologue

Prologue

February 3rd, 2248
The Horizon Sun

[He watched the sparks falling.](#) Orange trails, bright white at the bottom, then nothing; they disappeared before they hit the decking. Watched them fall; he caught a fragment of thought that they were pretty, but then it was gone. He didn't move. Just watched them erupt, trail, fall, vanish.

There was smoke in the air, too; another fragment, the shipyards and the *Lady Grey*, but this didn't smell like woodsmoke. Smelled like electricity. Like metal.

Where was he?

He tried to remember for a moment, but then the question slipped away, like a breeze through his fingers. He didn't try to move, just watched. It hurt to breathe. Why did it hurt to breathe?

It was dark. Somewhere, buried, under the pain and under the mental fog, he could hear the low, uneasy thrum through the deckplates and knew that it was wrong. Impulse engines were under strain. The regulations systems were bypassed, forcing the engines to operate outside of their safety margins.

Who did that? he wondered, abstractly.

Oh. Wait. He did.

Didn't he?

He didn't remember.

More sparks fell. Pretty; orange trails, white pinpoints which looked like falling stars, then nothing. He watched them passively, quietly, not moving. He couldn't move. It hurt to breathe. His whole body hurt, but most of it was centered in his side and hip, crushing pain, enough that it sent his mind skipping across broken bits of thought before he could actually grasp any of those pieces. More pain in his right shoulder, which he was laying on, and that was a damp, sticky, sharp pain.

Where was he?

He wasn't sure. He tried to remember how he got here. What happened? He wasn't scared. It hurt, he was shivering, but he wasn't scared. He didn't think he had been scared when it happened, whatever it was.

He blinked a couple times, drowsily, watching the sparks. He felt sick, too. Cold down to the bone. Dizzy. It hurt, and there were long moments where that was all he actually knew; just pain, overwhelming, sending his mind skittering across the broken pieces into nothingness. The same amount of pain, but sometimes he could see past it to the sparks.

What happened?

He tried to remember for a moment, but couldn't. Different light now; blue-white. He couldn't seem to hear anything correctly; everything sounded muffled and distant. Blue-white light, moving. It wasn't as pretty as the sparks raining down. He barely noted it; only noted it for real when something came between him and the sparks he was watching, and he rallied then only briefly to look at the blur of blue and white light and a face.

He didn't see the concern on the face, or hear the reassurance in the tone. All he saw was a flash of something silver and he *knew* what that was--

In a single heartbeat, pain didn't matter, nothing mattered but escape, and he was fighting to get away from the flash even though that made the hurt hit a peak that drove what last remnants of thought he had right out of his head, but it didn't matter because he had to get away, had to fight, had to-- had to-- *get away, get away now, escape, run, get--*

Something else, living, tried to stop him, but he didn't hear the shouting and didn't-- he had to run or fight, *right now, get away--*

--there was a brief, sharp pressure against his neck and a hiss, and he knew then that he was trapped, and that there was no way out, and the very last thing he was aware for was a broken, terrified sob that he couldn't help.

And then nothing.

Part I.

Part I.

January 14th, 2248
(Twenty days earlier...)
The Horizon Sun

The third red alert in less than forty-eight hours was enough to make Scotty ponder, however tiredly, the absolute inconvenience of war. Never mind the politics. Never mind the loss of life, property and safety. It was also just damn bloody *inconvenient*. That alone was reason enough to think it wasn't worth it.

Being away from the front lines didn't change the fact that it touched everything outside of the light of Sol; that no matter how life happened on an old freighter hauling miners, supplies or raw ore for processing, every part of it was still informed by war.

The Federation might not have started it, but hopefully it would finish it and soon. They were already going to be two months overdue getting back to Earth, by virtue of diverting around battle-zones and dedicated military corridors, by virtue of being redirected to do emergency transfers of supplies where newer freighters had been pulled for more critical military work, and Scotty was tired out. He wanted his leave time, he wanted to go back and spend too much time in Maine, sleeping in a recliner, and this nonsense was throwing a large spanner into that plan.

It wasn't that he liked the Klingons. He just didn't like the senselessness of war itself. It was a waste, all around; lives, property, time, credits, everything.

"Two frigates and three wardragons," Chalmers said, when Scotty made it to the engine room, darting through the door with only one boot tied. It was a habit to note what exactly they were being diverted for, as though that somehow made it seem more justified.

Scotty had stopped caring about that the *last* time they were deployed, but he didn't even have the motivation to say anything about it, either.

"Aye," he acknowledged, pausing only long enough to tie his other boot before heading to the impulse control panel. He supposed he could have tacked on the 'sir' -- Chalmers was a lieutenant and the chief, despite them being the same age -- but formality had dropped by the wayside fairly early on. The *Sun's* entire engineering staff was a barebones four, where her optimum number would be fourteen; instead, there were three regular shifters, and Scotty just working whenever they needed him. Which was most of the time.

His 'official title' was engineering adviser. His reality was that he was pretty much a glorified swing-shifter who didn't get to do much advising, but did get to do a helluva lot of overtime work.

In these situations, though, it was all hands on deck, everyone watching monitors and waiting to leap into action anywhere on the ship they might have to. Thatcher made it in next; fresh out of Engineering school, he was practically bouncing with frantic energy and enthusiasm even after a year of this drudgery.

There were times when Scotty wondered how he could think of the twenty-three year old as being too young when he was only just a couple months shy of twenty-six himself, but then he thought that maybe it was because of how Thatcher acted around him; he'd been a first-year cadet when Scotty was a fourth-year, and had therefore been around for what had happened with the *Lady Grey* and the fallout from that. And because of that, Thatcher had this rather peculiar notion that Scotty was some kind of-- of exciting daredevil, some rebel without a cause.

Scotty had been vaguely amused by that particular characterization at first, but only at first. Then it got a bit annoying.

"What's going on out there?" Thatcher asked, going and joining Chalmers as he monitored the warp drive's control panel. Mostly it was a precautionary measure; so long as they didn't get caught up in the battle, they'd be fine. Old as she was, the *Sun* was a decently maintained ship.

She wouldn't survive a battle, no, but as long as they kept her out of it, she'd make it home.

Scotty only half-listened as Chalmers gave Thatcher the same report, and Thatcher speculated excitedly on what the engineers on the frigates were doing. Scotty might have once done the same himself, but he had a feeling that it would just make him feel worse about the whole damn situation.

Finally, Cayo Perez made it in; an easy-going, mild-mannered Spaniard, he never seemed to take anything as being an emergency, even when it occasionally was. Scotty wasn't exactly all that friendly with any of them, but out of all of them, he got along best with the laid-back Perez.

Sometimes, he had to wonder if that was Corry's influence.

"I was having a good dream before this," Perez said, as he came over to the panel Scotty was working on and only gave it a quick, appraising look before crossing his arms and leaning on the wall. "My girl, a feast, a big bed." He smirked. "No cubes."

That was another thing they got along on -- both of them were mean cooks, and both of them *hated* the ration cubes that the synthesizer spit out.

Scotty snorted. "This ever comes to be, I'll expect ye to send me some of it."

"Not the girl," Perez said, with a grin.

"No, the food." Scotty shot him an amused sidelong look, then shook his head. "Though, ye know, if she had a choice between us, I'm sure she'd send ye a wedding invite as a consolation prize."

Perez made a face, despite looking ready to laugh. "Culero."

Scotty didn't need that translated; he just handed it right back without looking away from his panel again, "Twlft din."

"That's a new one," Perez said, after a moment or two. "I thought that it was 'toll-toine'?"

"Same thing, but in Welsh."

Perez snorted. "*Asshole*."

Chalmers didn't bother to stop them from insulting one another; after a weak little suggestion to stay professional on deck, he gave up early. Scotty glanced back to find the chief looking faintly exasperated by Thatcher's chattering on, and wryly reflected that maybe it wasn't just him who felt somehow too old for twenty-six. Maybe they all felt too old, another of those things to add to the list of why war was a miserable waste.

It wasn't that they had any major incidents, and there was only a handful of times when they could have really been in danger had things gone wrong. But living under the constant yellow alert and the frequent red alerts added a sort of tension into the atmosphere, on top of the marathon schedule. Getting more than four hours of sleep at a time was next to impossible. Because of the under-staffing, or the diversions, or the calls for all hands on deck, none of them got much in the way of real rest. And days off were almost unheard of unless they were offloading or reloading on a large scale.

Scotty had to finally surmise that it had to be a bit like being a blue-water sailor, minus the brutal living conditions and scurvy. Survival was entirely dependent on the ship's survival; without the ship surviving, they were all dead.

So, no matter how tired they were, there could simply be no other option but to work anyway.

This incident was over fast by comparison; they were out of the area that was considered within battle-range. Battles in space could and sometimes did cover lightyears; the only way to avoid them was to give them as wide a berth as possible and push the engines.

"All right, we can stand down," Chalmers said, looking at the time on his watch. "Thatcher?"

"Sir?" the young man asked, looking eager.

Chalmers grinned. "Go get Scotty and I some coffee."

"Does that mean I can go back to bed?" Perez asked, while a slightly crestfallen Thatcher slumped off to go and do as he was told; Perez wasn't due on shift again until midnight, though given that it was only about 0900, he'd be back in the engine room any number of times before then, for whatever reason.

"Yeah, get some sleep." Chalmers smirked a bit. "While you still can."

Perez needed no further encouragement; he shot a wide, mocking grin at Scotty, then crabbed out the door before anyone could go changing their minds.

Scotty already knew that Chalmers sending for coffee was a sure bet that the chief needed him around to do something and wrote off the notion that he'd get to hit his own bunk for a few more hours. He didn't even bother asking, just finally took the chance to rub his eyes and then give the chief a grin. "So, what's first on the list today?"

His quarters were dark when he made it back to them, late into the afternoon. He'd dashed out leaving the lights on, but they'd turned themselves off automatically after a time; he palmed them back on, then leaned on his desk with both hands after the door closed, feeling just about every tired, aching muscle he had.

Chalmers, in a fit of worried inspiration, had wanted to double-check all of the safeties and connections on the impulse drive controls. That had been exhausting, dirty work; some of those panels hadn't likely been opened since the last time the *Sun* was fully refit, twenty years before.

The news was somewhat worrisome. While most of the connections were all right on first inspection, on a more thorough look they weren't capable of handling the kind of energy transfers they had been able to when they were new. Not even by half. It wasn't a critical thing now, given the amount of redundancy built into the system, but if they ever did get caught in a battle and needed to maneuver quickly while pushing the engines, it was likely that the safeties would blow, leaving them adrift.

Scotty had managed to boost the efficiency a little higher; replaced what connectors he could, given the very limited number they had as backups, created a few more new from materials on hand, and had cleaned the whole system out the good old-fashioned way -- by hand. It was all he could do without more time, tools and materials, and none of those things would be available until they made it back to Earth.

He took a deep breath and then let it out slowly, finally relaxing a little bit. It wasn't that it was a stressful day, so much. Just a long day, to go with many long days on this run, especially since the war was heating up and more sectors were destabilizing. And those long days added up to long months.

And now a long *year*.

His last furlough on Earth had been a painfully short few weeks after forty-five weeks away, and he'd just about slept through the entire first three days, only really managing to navigate around the Corrigan family home half-awake, prone to falling asleep on whatever surface he happened to be sitting on, leaning on or otherwise. He didn't even make it out the front door until the fourth day and even *then* he'd felt kind of groggy.

This next furlough was shaping up to be more of the same, but at least he knew that no one in that family would blame him if he crashed as hard as he felt like he might.

After a moment where he strongly considered just crawling into bed and to hell with a shower, he grabbed some clean clothes and went to go and take one. He still nearly fell asleep upright; sonic showers weren't even close to as good as the real thing, but any port in a storm. It was something he'd pondered before: There was no denying, especially for an engineer, that the sonic shower was more effective and efficient. But one of his professors in the Academy had also quoted a study; ninety-four percent of all human households on Earth had water showers installed, not sonics, despite the effectiveness and efficiency.

He could only conclude, half-asleep, that it was the therapeutic value. The feeling of hot water, soothing tension and weariness, and the warm steam, and even that sudden chill on getting out of the shower before you dry off. No sonics could replace that; it was tangible and concrete and immediate and real.

One of the first things he was going to do when he got home was take a hot shower, a proper shower.

More than half asleep by the time he got back to his quarters, Scotty only barely registered that he had a message on his monitor, blinking for attention. He was expecting Corry to call soon; it had been a week or so, and Cor was having a time of it himself. Rachel was apparently trying to make a clean break from the rest of her family. And on top of that Abby had, in a manner that had left Corry reeling, broken off their relationship; not in a way that was unkind or anything, or maybe even permanently, but because she had told Cor she needed to deal with a few things.

Corry had been dazed by it. Scotty felt for him, too; it wasn't hard to see just how in love Cor was with the woman. But it had been a rocky relationship, even visible from a distance -- her constantly drawing back, Corry constantly trying to figure out what he was doing wrong.

Frankly, Scotty wasn't sure what to make of any of it. He was only sure that he'd do whatever he could to keep Cor afloat, in this or in anything.

Feeling that now-long-familiar stab of homesickness, he sat down and scrubbed at his eyes, then pulled up his inbox.

It only took him a second, even as tired as he was, to realize that it wasn't Corry writing to him this time. There were two messages, and feeling more alert by the second, he sat still for a long moment, trying to shake off the extremely uneasy feeling he had growing in his gut as he looked at the senders.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he could already hear that protest to the universe that he knew from experience would never be answered.

"No."

After a very long moment where he just breathed, nearly having to remind himself to, eyes closed and jaw knotted, he finally steeled himself as well as he could and opened the first one.

*From: McKenna & Co.
Aberdeen, Scotland, Earth*

Mister Scott:

We would like to take this time after the notification of the death of your mother to offer our own condolences...

It was two hours after that when the Captain showed up to handle said notification.

But in the end, Scotty didn't really hear it anyway.

Part II.

Part II.

January 23rd, 2248
The Horizon Sun

He only knew the date when he was told what it was.

It still hadn't mattered. Passing time didn't change anything. Before, Scotty would have probably automatically tried to run down the numbers to guess how long it would be before they made it back to their own solar system, back to Earth, but it didn't even cross his mind. Chalmers mentioned the date-- for some reason. He didn't know what. And it flitted across his thoughts for just a moment, then it was gone again.

Mostly, they walked on eggshells around him. He registered that because it pissed him off, though only so much as he could bother being pissed off. *He* wasn't the one who died. He still worked, lived, breathed; there were too few engineers to allow for any bereavement leave. He still worked well, too, losing himself in the flow of energy patterns and connections and mechanical noise; losing himself through his hands and his skill and a need to set something right. It wasn't like he was going to fall to pieces and start sobbing like a child in the engine room.

He noted their caution because it pissed him off, but even that was far away.

He didn't know what to feel. There was one strong surge of anger, because after getting her letter with the solicitors', he got into it with his sister; they gave him all the subspace time he needed to make calls, and so he had called her. He wished he hadn't. It had been a very long time since Scotty actually snapped back at her when she got that passive-aggressive tone, but this time he did -- they were snarling over the line. Her in tears, him just-- just *mad*.

He hadn't started off mad, but she hit every single sore spot he had inside and it only ended when she cut off the connection. He would have gladly kept raging right back at her.

But then the call was over and the rage faded and he half-forgot that he'd even felt it in the first place.

He didn't really know what to feel. Guilt, or anger, or sorrow, or-- he didn't know what to feel at all. So, he didn't even try.

All he really knew was that it didn't feel *real*.

But it wasn't that he denied it. Heart attack, on a personal transport coming back from some event on Io Station. Medics tried to revive her. Failed. She was pronounced dead after transfer to the closest medical facility, but she was likely dead within moments of hitting the deck. He got that, those cold facts. Believed them. There was no reason not to believe them.

Just...

He believed the facts. Why didn't those make it real?

They walked on eggshells around him, and Chalmers tried to rearrange the schedules so that he could be off-shift more. Scott wouldn't have any of it. He went in and worked; preferred working, really, because then he felt as normal as he could. There was still a kind of impending sense of doom that ran 'round and 'round in the back of his mind, but he could mostly focus himself into the work.

The engine room, consequently, was slowly becoming cleaner and more organized than it ever had been before. Chalmers had tried on the first day to offer condolences and then had backed off when Scotty just peered back at him unblinking. The chief hadn't bothered him since then, though there were times it looked like he wanted to say something. Thatcher was the only one who persisted; talked about a dog he had that died when he was seven, and how you have to grieve and accept and-- some other such nonsense.

Normally, Scott would have just tuned the chattering out once it became clear that it was just chatter. Mostly he did this time, too. But then Thatcher went and put an arm around his shoulders.

He nearly put Thatcher through the bulkhead, and it was Perez who barely stopped it.

Thatcher was white in the face. Chalmers was anxious too, staring wide-eyed. Only Perez stood his ground, giving Scotty's arm a tug and looking like he was ready to fend off a fist if need be, saying calmly, "He's learned his lesson."

After another moment of staring at his petrified crewmate, Scott shrugged it off; let go of Thatcher's uniform collar and went back to work. Chalmers started breathing again and Thatcher scurried away looking ready to break down into tears.

Perez stood a moment longer, but didn't say anything. Then he just gave Scott a solemn pat on the shoulder and headed back to his own post.

And for reasons Scotty couldn't quite piece together, that last act was the one that bothered him the most.

It wasn't that he really meant not to call Cor back, when he got the first message that he'd missed his best friend calling. He was going to, but then he forgot. Then Corry wrote and the letter was short and filled with worry, even just in text on a screen, and Scotty was going to call then, too, but he didn't know what he would say. He tried to imagine the conversation, but it didn't work; the words dissolved and left him going back to the engine room to look over the next bit of maintenance he had to do. He could work there, could focus there, could *think* there.

The letter after that bordered on frantic, and not too far on the heels of the first. And finally Scotty managed to not put it off anymore, and forced himself to call.

He still didn't know what to say. It was only about two seconds before Corry was asking what was wrong, and six seconds before Scotty automatically answered that he was fine, and then it was a whole eternity of silence. Minutes or hours. Could have been either.

"*Scotty, what happened?*" Corry asked quietly, finally, and Scotty only really heard it because it had been silent for so long.

He thought again about how to explain it. About what to say. But without even actually meaning to, he just said, "My mother's dead."

Silence fell again, mercifully. There, he'd said it. Three words, stating the facts. He didn't try to sketch in the details, because really, they made no difference. Corry barely knew her anyway, had only met her the once, and it wasn't like it probably hadn't made some news outlet somewhere -- Caitlyn Scott really was renowned, was famous at least inside of culinary circles -- so he could probably find the rest on his own.

Still, they were only three words, but Scotty had never spoken them before. Three words, but he didn't know what they really *meant*. She hadn't been on Earth that three weeks he had been the prior year; he didn't even try to go back to Aberdeen once he knew she wasn't going to be there and hadn't been planning on staying there even if she had been.

They had exchanged two letters that whole first forty-five weeks he'd been in space.

So, rather than Aberdeen, he'd just had himself transported to the public platform station in Augusta, Maine; landed on the same platform he'd landed on so many times before when coming back from Lunar or the San Francisco Yards, and then he walked down the steps, bracing himself with little success against the inevitable half-tackle, half-hug that Corry ambushed him with, and he'd laughed even as he was knocked partly off of his feet and then lifted *completely* off of them.

He didn't even *realize* the lack. The loss of. He didn't feel any sorrow over his own mother not being there; it just didn't really occur to him that he *should*.

Not until now. Not until it was too late.

Silence held there, long enough that he forgot he even had an open comm line. But then Corry asked, voice drawn tight with grief and pleading, "*Tell me what I can do?*"

And Scotty *heard that*.

Not just with his ears, not just through a distance, but right next to him; not some stranger, not a solicitor who wanted him to sign forms or go over the will, not a sister who still hated him for some reason he couldn't even fathom, but his best friend, his *brother*, who wanted to *help*, of all things, and--

Scotty shook his head, staring at the comm mic with his eyebrows drawn, trying to-- to--

And it hurt.

It was only when he started breathing again that he realized that he'd stopped, and it was only when he saw the light next to his monitor that he realized he was still connected, and he shook his head harder, an outright denial, even if he didn't know what the hell he was trying to deny.

"I've gotta go," he said, panic creeping into his voice.

He didn't even give Corry a chance to reply, just slapped his palm down on the button, disconnecting the call.

Part III.

Part III.

February 3rd, 2248
The Horizon Sun

There was nowhere to run on the ship, but he tried anyway.

Not in the most literal sense; literally, there was nowhere to run, the *Sun's* habitable areas were small and cramped, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter, because if he couldn't scramble outside of his own skull, then he could certainly scramble around mad inside of it; a beam of light in a house of crazed mirrors, or something pacing in a cage in some zoo, as though it hadn't seen those same walls and corners countless times before.

The still-time after the news was delivered had been shattered on a plea across subspace, and he had no idea how to return to it, or to what he'd managed to put together in the space immediately before it.

Scotty had half-forgotten what it was like to live within moments only; had half-forgotten what it was like to live without any definable past or future, where everything was more about breathing and refusing to die than it was actually living. He hadn't *needed* to remember it; hadn't needed to remember the reasons for it, either. He had things he wanted, and lessons hard-learned to look back on, and he had-- had--

Had.

He couldn't really seem to remember now, though, that he ever actually had anything.

It wasn't that he didn't try to remember. Or that he didn't *want* to remember. Even frantic, scrambling in every direction at once, he tried to slow down and stop and fight his way back to whatever place he'd been in *before*. But it didn't work. There was no peace to be had anywhere, not even in his job; he did it and lived it and even in the middle of that was only aware of the job and the desperation. All wrapped into one thing. Maybe even the same thing.

The living world around him only registered with him when it encroached on his space, and he snarled back at it. Otherwise, there was no time, no people, nothing except work and oblivion and sometimes food, and always desperation and defiance. Distilled, those things were everything he was.

And after the bulkhead landed on him, all that was left when his shipmates tried to help him was the defiance.

The first sign that something was wrong should have been the red alert, but by then, the crew had heard that klaxon sound so many times that it had lost its impact. But then it was followed by a shipwide shudder, and suddenly it all became real again.

Scotty had been working in a maintenance corridor down along the outer hull surrounding the cargo holds; still only aware of the world when it dared breach his space, the shudder was enough to snap him back to himself in an instant.

They'd dropped out of warp.

He dropped his tools and took off for main engineering.

The next impact wasn't a shudder. Something slammed into the *Sun*, and he hit the hallway bulkhead with his shoulder. Lights flickered. Artificial gravity shifted, pulling, then lightening, before settling again.

"Dammit," he said, under his breath, and then he took off again the moment anything like equilibrium returned.

Something out there was trying to kill them.

He barreled through the doors to Main Engineering only to find *disaster*. Smoke made it hard to see, and Chalmers was shouting across the room for Thatcher to rewire the backup warp control computer by hand if he had to. Scotty could vaguely hear Perez calling that the safeties on the impulse relays were pushing into the red, and he wasn't even sure he was moving until he was practically on top of Thatcher.

"Move," he ordered, after choking down a cough, not really giving Thatcher time to do it before he was shouldering his way into that space, getting into the mess of wires and connectors himself. The kid looked over for a moment, then moved further out of the way.

"Come on!" Chalmers called out, getting frantic, and Scotty winced at the sight of the computer.

It was *fried*; they'd taken a bad hit, probably close by, and something had caused a surge through the system that hadn't been stopped by the various safeties. He didn't have time to figure out exactly where, but one thing was certain: They needed to get out of this situation and as fast as possible.

He grabbed hold of the blackened mess and yanked it out from its standardized connection points, barking towards Thatcher, "Get in the cabinet and pull the other wiring harness!"

Thatcher hesitated a second too long, and Perez bellowed across the room, "Move, asshole!"

"Life support's flickering in and out on Deck 2," Chalmers yelled, over the din. "Anyone with a free hand do something about it!"

Thatcher grabbed a hold of the new wiring harness and literally threw it to Scotty, then managed to pull himself together long enough to see what the damage control computer said; he grabbed a tool kit and headed out.

One fire at a time. Life support flickering, provided the hull remained intact and uncompromised, was not the worst thing. The worst thing was that they were working under impulse and maneuvering thrusters only, and they needed warp drive back online *now*.

Scotty wired in the new harness, swiftly, then flipped the safety breaker and managed to boot the system despite a half-blackened and mangled panel. "Backup's online!"

"Still showing no warp!" Chalmers yelled back, after a quick glance up from the impulse control panel.

"We're not going to have impulse in a few minutes, either," Perez replied, sounding calm in the chaos.

The *Sun* rocked hard again. The lights went out and were replaced by the lower glow of the emergency lamps.

"I've got a plan," Scotty said, pulling his penlight out of his pocket and sliding in to pull the access panel off of the impulse drive control system. Without wasting a second, he scrambled into the access crawl way behind it, calling back, "Perez! Grab me a cable!"

He didn't need to specify what kind; Perez was a fine engineer, and he was certainly good enough to grasp what Scotty was attempting. The cable he grabbed was a high-energy line from the closet, nearly twelve centimeters in diameter, and he halfway crawled over Scotty to be able to hand off one end. "The whole system will blow."

"Aye, I know," Scotty replied, balanced on his elbows. The *Sun* shuddered, and both of them had to pause for a second before moving again. "Connect up the other end to the bypass, and tell the Chief he needs to buy us as many seconds as he can."

Perez nodded, backing out. In the background, amidst the chaos out there, Scotty could hear Chalmers almost hit the roof with incredulity at this plan. But there was no way to survive this by staying still. Scotty didn't need to see the scanners, see their enemy. He just knew it.

The fact that they were still intact, though, suggested that they were probably just caught in the crossfire. Either way, they needed to get out.

He quickly wired the cable in, then backed out, pulling his penlight out of his teeth. "Ready!"

"This is going to get us killed," Chalmers replied, but he was already rerouting control from the warp computer to the impulse computer. "Call the bridge and tell them we'll have warp for maybe ten seconds at the outside."

No one ever got the chance. Something exploded into an arc flash, bright and loud like lightning.

Chalmers didn't have time to even scream before he'd been sent flying to land in a messy heap, hands and forearms smoking. A rattle of something like gunfire cascaded through the crawl-ways behind the wall that Scotty had just been in. Perez managed to throw himself clear of his panel in the nick of time.

The *Sun* was adrift.

"Get him outta here," Scotty said, after a split second where he considered all possible options and came to one inevitable conclusion.

"You can't be serious," Perez replied, grasping it only a moment later, as Scotty was heading for the panel that had just fried their chief like that wiring harness had been.

Scotty snatched up a small piece of debris along the way and then dropped it on the panel; when it didn't react, he crouched and eyed the insides, squinting against the visual distortion left over from the arc flash.

If there was anything left working in the damn thing, they might live.

"Will ye just do it and not quibble with me?" he asked, as he switched the control circuits over to backup and ran a quick check to make sure the panel was functioning, even if only barely, before darting to grab another length of the same type of cable that he'd used to bridge the first connection and dive back into the crawlway.

"You'll be dead," Perez replied, bluntly.

Scotty answered, even as he moved, "If I don't, we'll all be dead."

He didn't wait to argue with Perez any further, just started rewiring the connections to bypass the blown safeties. From one end to the other. The *Sun* rocked harder; Scotty couldn't work any faster than he was, but that was fast.

Maybe even fast enough.

When he came back out, Perez had gotten Chalmers to the door. "Still alive," he said, voice hoarse.

Scotty only glanced over on the way back to the panel. "Go, because he probably won't be if this goes wrong."

Perez looked torn. But after a precious few seconds, where it seemed almost eerily quiet even amidst the madness, he nodded and dragged the chief out of the blackened engine room.

For just a moment, Scotty was well aware of being alone; for just a second, in the smoke and chaos, he felt like he was drowning.

But this time, there was no one there to hold his head above the water.

The captain had desperately been trying to maneuver them out of the range of battle on impulse only; the two frigates that danced outside with four D7s did their best to protect the cargo carrier caught in the crossfire. They'd been knocked out of warp by the spatial distortion caused by the firefight; what was only a skirmish to the more powerful ships was catastrophic to the *Sun*.

Then a disruptor blast that had probably been intended for a frigate hit them starboard and knocked the drive controls out completely. And then, unable to handle the demands, the impulse safeties had blown.

The sole medic aboard had been trying to deal with the multitude of injuries. The supercargos and ops staff lent as much of a hand as they could. The engineering staff, severely undermanned, just tried to get them out.

In the end, it came down to Scotty.

He overrode the safeties that had blown and sent direct power through the system; warp and impulse control both routed right through the same cables, drawing from their main reactors, far too much power for the system to survive for more than a few seconds. But it was a few seconds that allowed the *Sun* to jump to Warp 1. To maybe get her out of battle range.

The makeshift connections blew; raw power superheated the air, expanding it in the access behind the wall. The remaining wiring inside the computer melted, the bulkheads bulged and started to give, though they held until the heat was shunted to vent out.

A brief moment of speed, of utter chaos, of destruction, then the ship was cast adrift to float dead in space, with minimal life support and no maneuvering at all, just laboring, unguided engines operating outside their safety margins but taking them nowhere.

By the time that was over, so fast that human thought almost couldn't comprehend it, Scotty was on the floor of the devastated engine room. He was just beginning the process of picking himself up off the decking, dazed and half-deaf and feeling the heat and smelling the smoke, a piece of shrapnel from an exploded computer buried in the muscle of his right shoulder. He didn't even know what made him look up.

The bulkhead yawned down towards him.

And even though he had no time to get out of the way, he tried anyway with a defiant growl that was cut mercilessly short.

Interlude I.

Interlude I.

"In my family, what happens on Sundays is foreordained. What comes on weekdays comes from something within us and for which we are responsible, and if it is from something deep within us it is called 'grace,' and is."

-Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*

June 12th, 2243

The Lady Grey

On the North Atlantic

When he tried to grasp what had happened, he found it impossible. Like trying to hold onto the wind or pick up a wave. Even as he kept acting, kept moving forward, getting his jagged and tired crew together, even as he worked to settle the *Wildstorm's* orphans, he couldn't escape a persistent question that dogged him.

Part of what scared Corry was that he didn't have an answer to it.

He was standing on the bow, trying to shake it off; they had just set sail again, moving forward. But all Cor could do was try to avoid looking at the question, because the lack of an answer scared him. Terrified him. The possible gaining of an answer terrified him even more.

Then that question came to stand next to him.

They stood in silence for a long time; Cor wasn't sure how long. Too long, maybe. And every time his best friend shivered, still hypersensitive to chill after being hypothermic, he felt pain lance through his heart.

"I could have killed you," he said, at length, voice cracking despite his best efforts. He knotted his jaw, then, unable to look away from the gray-cast sea, afraid of what expression he might be getting back. "I gave you an order that could have killed you."

There was a long pause there, and then Scotty replied, "I followed it knowin' it could. And I woulda gone even if ye hadn't given it."

The part that hurt the most was that Corry knew that it was the truth.

He tried to breathe and not to think about it, but he still found himself imagining what life would be like if Scotty had died down there, saving the ship and crew. He tried to grasp what this world would look like, what *anything* would look like, if his best friend had drowned there in the North Atlantic.

He tried to fathom how he himself could continue breathing, having given that order; tried to fathom how he himself could have a beating heart after that, even if Scotty would have gone orderless.

What do you do, when something important is snuffed out and leaves an empty place in the universe? And what size would it be? What scope? How much of *himself* would have gone, too?

Corry still had no answer, but the question terrified him.

"How would I have lived with that?" he asked.

There was no answer in the silence. Just asking the question was almost more than there was any coping with, and the faint hitch in Scotty's breathing beside him let him know that it wasn't just him who felt it.

It was silent for so long that it seemed like the world had stopped.

"I'm sorry," Scotty said finally, and his voice was tight. It made Corry flinch, more internally than externally; he didn't want to understand what that meant, because that meant it would become real, become the truth, and they will have left behind something that they could never go back to, even if he wasn't sure exactly what that was.

He closed his eyes for a moment, hard, against the anger and the fear and the grief; closed them on the sea and on the question and on everything.

"*I'm sorry,*" Scotty said again, and it was a raw sound; the kind that could only come from someplace deep.

There was an eternal moment that was less than a heartbeat in length; then, unable to bear it, Corry yanked himself back together and looked over to answer, and it came from someplace deep, too: "I'm not."

And he meant it. As scared as he was, he meant it. Even if that meant they'd left a universe of certainties for one where there were only questions that couldn't be asked nor answered.

Where you go, I'll follow.

It had been a silent promise, and Corry never, ever let himself forget it.

He just never realized, in his youth, how hard it would be to keep it.

Part IV.

Part IV.

"Yet even in the loneliness of the canyon I knew there were others like me who had brothers they did not understand but wanted to help. We are probably those referred to as 'our brothers' keepers,' possessed of one of the oldest and possibly one of the most futile and certainly one of the most haunting of instincts. It will not let us go." - **Norman Maclean**; *A River Runs Through It*

*February 10th, 2248
Baltimore, Maryland*

The antiseptic smell of Starfleet Medical faded to the natural smell of a snow-covered world, a lot of it slushy and dirty, then finally to that of an apartment he was starting to know too well and hating more with every day.

He could smell the soup his Mom made when he came in, but she was gone again; back to South Bristol, back home to check on the household and check for any messages that might not have gotten forwarded about Rach, to make sure Dad was okay, to make sure home would be there when they made it back.

If they made it back.

Corry ached so much to go home right now that he was almost afraid he never was never going to be able to. That the safety of Rutherford Island, pinned between the Damariscotta and Johns Bay, was getting further and further out of his reach the longer that he was away from it. And, when he let himself follow those dark thoughts, he wondered if he wasn't somehow punishing himself by *not* going back for at least his days off; if he was subjecting himself to Baltimore's bustle and gritty streets because he hadn't been able to better fulfill the promises he had made almost half a decade before.

Needless to say, he tried hard not to let himself go there in his head. And, needless to say, it often happened anyway.

He palmed his lights on, then stood just inside the doorway for a moment. He only had this place -- one of the thousands of identical highrise apartments afforded to Starfleet Medical personnel working or training at HQ -- because there were times when it was too late to commute back to Maine, but now he'd been living in it for a week straight and it was one of the most miserable weeks of his life.

It wasn't the first time he and his mother had gone through this; the waiting and the soul-chewing worry that came when someone they loved was hurt and they couldn't even reach out to help. That was why his Dad was still in Maine, too, waiting for the other lost party to make it back. But at least Rachel was still alive and as of last word, physically okay. Just--

Corry's lip twitched in a snarl and he flung his coat to thump against the back of the disheveled couch.

Stupid.

Stupid sister, Scotty had once referred to her as, and in this moment Corry agreed. They were both cursed with stupid sisters, for that matter. Scotty's was almost as bad as Rachel; maybe in some ways, worse. At least Rach was just stupid in the sense of being crazy and young and careless, but Clara seemed to be-- *mean*. Malicious.

He'd never spoken to her before this week, and he halfway hoped that he never would again, unless it was to blast her ears off.

At first she called for information, and at first seemed almost polite; reserved, but polite. But before long she turned a biting kind of cruel, and even though Cor could see the pain behind the icy fury in her eyes, he wanted to reach right through the comm and shake her.

She could insult her brother with lilting words, she could make barely veiled references to Corry's family being (poor) substitutes, she could do all of this with a straight face, but her eyes sparkled with that anger.

Cor didn't snarl back at her, though, not at first. Mad as she was making him, he made every effort to be polite. Some part of him had to try to be; whether or not he liked to admit it, Scotty had more than one family and had just lost one of that family not even a whole month before.

He tried to be polite because he wanted to respect the fact that just because he and his family had willfully 'adopted' Scotty didn't mean he got to be disrespectful with the family that had created him.

That didn't last long.

"You know what? Fuck you," he'd said in the end, snapping every word off sharply, when it was perfectly clear that being polite would go no further. And for that matter, that he could make it go no further. He was so mad it burned in his chest, fierce and bright, and he still wasn't sure how he managed to keep an even tone. *"He's ours. You wanna know more, then you can goddamn well wait until he tells you himself. But if you call me again, I swear, I'll come over to Aberdeen and rip your comm box out of the wall personally."*

Hanging up on her after that had been satisfying, but only for about two seconds.

But after Corry had paced and seethed for awhile, he actually started understanding a whole lot of things for the first time.

At first, last year, when Corry was delivered the formal and official paperwork giving him power of attorney in case Scotty wasn't able to exercise it himself, he had been surprised. But he figured that it might have had something to do with the fact that he was also listed, at the same time, as Scotty's first emergency contact officially in Starfleet's records. Melinda Corrigan was the second.

It had been a surprise, and Corry was touched, but he hadn't really thought too hard about the *whys*. It seemed like a perfectly sensible thing to do. He was sure one of the reasons was so that Starfleet couldn't keep one in the dark if something happened to the other; since they weren't biologically related and they didn't have any paperwork declaring them family, this was as good a workaround as any. For Corry's part, he had Scotty listed as one of his first contacts, second only to his parents, after he'd had that brief breakdown on Vulcan.

Now, though--

When Corry looked up, he had been pacing for probably a half an hour, his coat still laying on the couch where he'd flung it, the smell of warm soup fading away, and the burst of energy falling off to a painful exhaustion.

He looked around this apartment that he hated, and the gray world outside filled with dirty snow through the windows, and the sleeping bag he slept in so his Mom had the pull-out bed while she stayed here with him, trying to be his rock while he tried to keep it together so he could hopefully be his brother's.

I wanna go home, he thought, and it sounded resigned, there between his ears. He closed his eyes, wavering slightly. *I want us all to go home*, he corrected, and it hurt.

And then he sighed and went to hang his coat up, and get some soup, and try to sleep and wait.

Corry had taken a whole lot of lessons away with him from when his father had been sick. Every natural inclination made him want to fall into a cycle of obsession when something bad happened to his family, but while time hadn't given Cor as much wisdom as he wished, it did give him the ability to keep that inclination in check.

He knew that letting himself fall to pieces would pretty much be the last thing that would help anyone, including himself.

Still, he couldn't force himself to just quit thinking and worrying, either. He kept making himself go to work, but his work suffered; he was slower and his concentration was half-way shot. Mercifully, most of the people who worked with him were sympathetic; if not that, at least tolerant.

He did a fine job of failing to sleep well, then when morning came, he got up. It had been this way for a few days, and he had a bad feeling that it would be too many more before it was all over.

Stumbling around the apartment, he made a pot of coffee. It wasn't even a gesture that had any thought attached; he just did it, and then tried to clean the place up. Mom would be back this afternoon or evening, and he didn't want her to have to do it. He wasn't even so sure he wanted her here at all, because her trying to take care of him made him feel guilty. He appreciated it, but--

He stared into his coffee mug, once he was done getting the apartment in passable order. After a few sips, he kinda forgot he was holding it.

But what?

Cor didn't know. He just took a sip of his coffee, then winced when he found it cold. Thought about a whole lot of things, and almost all of those in fragments; mostly, though, that he wished Scotty was here.

Stop mourning for someone who's not dead, Corry snapped at himself, mentally, and then set his mug in the sink and headed out the door to work.

Corry had come to know Starfleet Medical very well when his father was sick. He had spent whole days on the headquarters campus, not knowing at the time that he would someday be working and schooling there. It had taken him months after he did start going to classes there to shake off that uneasiness about it; to get into the mindset that he was there training to be a biomedical engineer, not there as a son waiting to hear that his father had taken a turn for the worse and was dead.

Now he wasn't sure what to see the place as again, and that was only gonna get worse whenever Scotty was actually brought back to Earth; this was where he was gonna end up. And suddenly, Corry didn't know whether he felt immense relief that his best friend was gonna be in the finest medical establishment in the galaxy, at least for humans, or if he felt that no place could possibly be good enough or safe enough.

For now, he did his best to just view it all as work. He went in through the front doors after getting off of the train, trying to make every step into something holding him in the present. Back when he actually started to see this place as something good, he had admired the tall, smoked transparent aluminum main building, with its beautiful (if not sterile) looks. All cool colors, lots of crystalline facets. Even the regular-ward

rooms here for patients were pretty nice; more cool colors, but large and private and with plenty of furniture for visiting friends or family to even stay and sleep.

Now, though, he just--

He thumbed into the secure levels, trying to remember what he had to do today. Once he'd left again yesterday, he had immediately forgotten what he was working on, immediately was caught again in the tangled web of plans and panic.

He still didn't remember by the time he got to the biotech lab. He just went in, only remembering then that he hadn't shaved since the day before, and headed for the terminal where he could call up his assignments and class schedule.

"No word, huh?" Helston asked, looking up from where she was rebuilding a medical tricorder, in the process of calibrating it properly to be able to read and understand biological lifeforms.

"Nothing," Corry replied. And the word kept echoing in his head for the rest of the day.

Part V.

Part V.

*February 12th, 2248
Boston, Massachusetts*

He tried to imagine what it would be like to be outside of the living world for a month. Part of it for the sake of having even some clue of what Scotty was gonna go through when he found out he'd been in oblivion for that long. Part of it because he wished he was in oblivion himself for it.

It was seven hours, give or take, from Baltimore to Boston by driving. Only about fifteen minutes by transporter, and that was including the time it took to go to the public transport station.

Corry drove anyway.

He drove around the college buildings, hoping to catch a glimpse of his sister's blonde hair in the winter gray landscape. Drove around those backstreets, too, hoping for the same. Went to all of the places that the public transit systems didn't, and when he did, he knew that he was looking for someone who wasn't even here. She had been here, just before winter break. But then, seemingly out of nowhere, she dropped out of her classes and called home to say she wouldn't be there for Christmas.

At Christmas, she called only to say she was alive and fine, and not to worry about her. A few weeks ago, before Corry's world became utterly unrecognizable, while he was still reeling because his best friend's mother had died and his best friend wouldn't even respond to any letters or calls, she called again and offhandedly said not to worry again. Then nothing.

She had no clue.

She wasn't here, but he drove anyway. Stopped at the empty lot where the old brownstone had been that he and Scotty had hauled her out of only a couple years ago, high on drugs and surrounded by the kind of people who made their whole lives around that sort of thing.

He just sat looking at the vacant spot in the landscape, and thought.

The civilian population of the Federation had a funny sort of view on the war. Freedom of the press was still a fact, yet the coverage on the war with the Klingon Empire was rather sparse. Maybe a fifteen second news spot. No names read off of casualties. No detailed overview of battles.

No 'your brother was caught in the line of fire and just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, then had to go and get a bulkhead dropped on him.'

As he sat looking at the empty lot, Corry realized that the Federation had a funny view on a whole lot of things. Drug abuse wasn't spotlighted at all; the only reason he had any understanding of it was because it was a part of his biochemistry classes. As though if they ignored the problem, it would vanish. And if it didn't vanish, it was still someone else's problem. That they were too enlightened a society for this old dance.

Mental health was another screwed up topic. As though they truly had eliminated poverty and energy needs and messed up families, so therefore people shouldn't need to have mental health services. And when they did, it was because there was something fundamentally wrong inside of their heads that could be fixed by a machine and a stay in a ward, or a drug and a stay in a ward.

Not because sometimes it was the world that was messed up, and that people were still vulnerable to that fact.

He thought about all of it, sitting there and watching the snow start to fall again; wondered, too, when the city had torn the place down. It had looked like it was pretty close to being condemned a couple years ago.

He wondered if he was here in the hopes that he could find his sister and save her and maybe save himself at the same time. Maybe if he could do that, then he wouldn't feel like his life was completely out of control. Maybe if he could save Rach, then he would feel steady enough and secure enough to handle the inevitable disaster that was going to be Scotty.

He wondered, too, when the world had become so unrecognizable that he couldn't see a way to do any or all of those things. That he couldn't even see the way to save himself, let alone his siblings.

Finally, he thought that it was less than half the time from Boston to South Bristol than it was from Boston to Baltimore.

He pulled out the compass that he had taken to carrying with him again; a gift, something of a talisman, that he had kept on him the entire time he was on Vulcan. When he made it home, of course he had put it away since he didn't want it to be damaged or worn. But now...

"It's so ye can find yer way back home."

He looked down at the crystal face for a moment, as the needle pointed north and he looked up again to the northeast.

Then he turned around and headed back for Baltimore.

His mother was there when he got back, late into the night. The apartment was clean and there was a meal sitting on the small counter that made up the kitchen's entire work area. She was asleep on the couch, though; the vidscreen was still rattling off the local weather from the twenty-four hour repeating newscast.

There had been a number of reality-checks that Corry had to handle when his father had been sick. One of those was the catalyst for everything that happened after that. It wasn't just that his Dad was sick. That was bad, that was scary, but that wasn't what drove him to try so hard to find a cure.

It was that his mother, who had always seemed sure of the exact right thing to do, didn't. She didn't know what to do. She tried to be strong for her kids, but there were more than a few times when Corry caught her sobbing when she thought no one would see.

He couldn't really wrap his brain around it back then. He didn't think any less of her, but he did feel even more scared then. Because this was his Mom. She always knew the right thing to say, the right thing to do, the right thing to focus on; always knew how to keep things together. She was smart and strong, and unlike a whole lot of people, Corry was never embarrassed to introduce his friends to her as a kid.

His Mom still couldn't come across those childhood friends without getting a hug and a kiss on the cheek, even long after Corry and they had moved so far apart that it was hard for him to even hold a real conversation with them.

It was when he saw his Mom crying that he realized how helpless he actually was, and then went off on a desperate tangent to fix it. And that tangent had nearly cost him his career in Starfleet and the still-then-tenuous trust of his best friend.

He had learned a whole lot about everything from those days. About his Mom, and what it meant to be an adult. About how sometimes you had to leap before you had any answers and hope that you would come out of the other side still intact. About how strength wasn't necessarily tied to stoicism.

He made himself a plate of dinner, then packed the leftovers away for her. Sat down and ate at the chair to his work terminal, chewing the food mechanically and feeling the day. Boston. Baltimore. The long drive between the two, and almost all of it trying to grasp hard at what fragments of his life were still recognizable.

Almost all of it failing to, too.

Finally, he finished eating, then covered his mother over with the blanket laying on the back of the couch.

She didn't have any answers about this, either. Not about Rach, not about Scotty. No one did.

He just hoped that they survived long enough that they maybe could someday find them.

Scotty's current medical records read like an ongoing natural disaster, the kind of disaster where there was large-scale destruction, and everyone did everything right, but where there was still absolutely no way to come through it unscathed and there was a guarantee that the devastation wasn't over yet.

By February 4th Corry had been informed, per protocol; he was the first to know, and then they went down the list. That was miserable enough; Starfleet got ahold of his mother before he could gather his tattered thoughts enough to do it himself.

But by February 5th, hands still shaking intermittently, he put in the request for his brother's records and was summarily denied. That was when he pulled out the power of attorney.

By the 6th, Starfleet had grudgingly (very grudgingly, given that they were both Starfleet officers, but Corry was using civilian court authority) turned over said records. It took Corry hiring an attorney, but it worked.

And by the 7th, Cor had them memorized.

He didn't feel any better for the knowledge, but for him, ignorance was never bliss. There was no torture worse than that of being blind and deaf and helpless; at least he could overcome the first two, in the hopes of tackling the last.

On the other hand, he was grateful that Scotty was all three of those and completely out of reach of everything, and would likely be until Starfleet Medical could actually put him back together.

For everyone's sake, especially his.

That was why Cor tried to imagine what it would be like to wake up after the better part of a month where no time had passed. To have that much time just vanish.

Finally, he tried to imagine how he was going to deal with it all and was scared that he didn't know. All he knew, aside the dry facts, was that Scotty was going to be a disaster. In a whole lot of ways.

Medical records always worked backwards, starting with the most recent reports. For Corry's part, he got updates once a day, though for a few days now the updates were all the same. It wasn't, then, like reading a novel where the plot unfolded slowly; the end wasn't there yet, but at least the worst of the terror of not knowing was abated instantly, because the first line was always status.

Stable.

A stable status didn't mean everything -- or anything -- was fixed. It only meant that Scotty was alive, and otherwise out of critical danger; he wasn't in any condition that would likely necessitate further emergency life-saving intervention, though the possibility was always there. Given he'd gone into VFib on the table, shortly after being transported to the *La Flesche*, it was a good thing Cor had read *stable* first, because reading about *that* had caused him to have an instant meltdown, right there at the terminal.

The second listing was always vitals, with the time of day they were recorded. Of course, those were monitored continually, but unless there was some reason, they were only documented every half-hour. Given that he was in the tank, his vitals were all very low, but stable in that state.

The tank was officially known as the Simulated Zero-Gravity Patient Transport Device. But really, everyone called it the tank, even the engineers who had designed it. Actual stasis wasn't possible yet for any real length of time for complex organisms like human beings, though it worked well for simple organisms; the tech had been around for a long time, but it just could never be refined to bring it into safety standards. Given that working and traveling in space changed how medicine had to be handled, and stasis wasn't finely honed enough, the tank had to be created.

Its biggest benefit was that it really did simulate zero-g. The gel it was filled with was excellent for evenly conducting heat or cold, it had no detrimental effects on skin cells and it was perfectly sterile. The tank could be used for long-term transport, so long as there was good supportive care.

Corry wholeheartedly approved of its use in this case. One, because he had actually repaired a few tanks since he had started working here, and knew how they worked. Two, because it gave doctors a practical option: Wait until Scotty could be handed over to a specialist. Because it was a pretty fair bet that if a trauma surgeon tried to do the job of an orthopedic surgeon in this case, Scotty would probably never walk again. And the only orthopedic surgeons available who were qualified to repair that kind of massive damage were on Earth; there weren't enough of them to begin with, and the closest ones to where the *Sun* had been damaged were here.

So, he was not only in probably the safest place he could be, but he was kept in deep hypothermia to keep him from trying to heal before he could heal properly. There were other benefits to that; medications had come a whole lot further than they once were for keeping a person stable in that state, and with a much slower metabolism, it took a lot less to do it.

Most of all, though, he was comatose and therefore couldn't feel any of it; not pain, not cold, not fear, not anything at all.

No matter how far into the more technical aspects Corry sometimes went, trying to understand everything, he never forgot to be grateful for that. Even if it meant dealing with the fallout.

That left him with the details. It had taken two trips under a laser scalpel, first on the *Horizon Sun*, then on the *La Flesche*, to actually stop the nearly uncontrollable internal bleeding. There were a fair number of victims of that little engagement, and the fact that Scotty got pushed right to a priority position in the surgical lineup said a lot. And his condition when he was did not read stable; it read *critical*.

His left hip had been utterly pulverized. Not just bone, but soft tissue; nerves, tendons, muscle, everything. Much further, and his leg would have been shorn right off. The right side took some secondary impact damage, but not to the same degree. There were only two things that saved him from being paralyzed.

The first was a tool and parts cabinet. Standard issue, welded to the floor, it usually stood almost as tall as a man did and certainly had more of a solid foundation than one. After the bulkhead fell on it and Scotty, it was compressed down to a couple feet. If it hadn't been there, nothing would have saved him. He would have been dead instantly.

The second was the angle of the impact itself; Corry could only guess, as much from personal experience as forensics, that Scotty had been doing his level best to pull himself off the ground, and with one arm damaged, he'd been mostly on his right side when he'd turned back to look up. His hip took the impact and shattered, mostly right around the joint itself, but the stresses had been even to both sides. Hence the secondary impact damage.

The engineer in him would doubtless understand that. Corry did too; he understood it well enough to thank whatever mercy existed in the universe for it. Because as bad as the damage had been, it could have been worse and it would have only taken a few degrees difference in the angle of impact for that to happen.

Those were the details. Corry already knew that Scott's records had been consulted over and still were being consulted over with the finest of Starfleet Medical, Orthopedics, in Baltimore. Knew that if anyone could fix the physical damage, these people could. Knew that after they did, Scotty was still looking at long-term medical leave and physical therapy.

But when it came to thinking it all out, Cor always found himself ending in the same place.

It wasn't the pain Scotty had been in, even though that hurt Corry's heart to imagine. It wasn't even that he would have died there, without so much as a hint of self-pity, having gone and put himself right into the maelstrom to save his ship and crew. Corry knew Scotty could and would consider that an acceptable sacrifice, even if he himself could never think it was -- Scotty would fight right to the bitter end to survive, but if he died in the line of duty despite that fight, he still would have died well.

It was the sheer level of *fear* that came after that, when that medic was trying to save him.

It had taken Corry years to understand, and he wasn't always sure he did even now, that when you took away all of the civilized trappings, what was left of Scotty was something wild. Something that operated on split-second instincts and gut-level intuition; right, or wrong, but sans the careful consideration that permeated every other facet of his life.

Corry didn't know why, but he did know that it was there. It was one of the things that had made it so hard to win Scotty's trust in the first place. Corry was sure, too, it was also one of the things that made him so loyal. It was watching him tilt his head and listen for something he could hear and Corry couldn't; it was knowing not to startle him at the wrong times, or in the wrong place.

It was watching him fight. It was watching him try to learn how *not* to fight.

And it was what had him fighting to protect himself, operating purely on instinct and terror, even almost fatally wounded on the *Horizon Sun*, even against people who just wanted to help him.

It didn't even matter that Corry wasn't sure what had scared him so badly. All he knew, for certain, was that the very last thing Scotty felt was soul-deep terror, innocent and absolute and wild terror, and that was enough to break Corry's heart.

Part VI.

Part VI.

February 20th, 2248
Baltimore, Maryland

Not much had changed in a week, except that he had finally managed to convince his Mom to go home and stay there. It hadn't been easy; there could be little doubt who he inherited his persistence from. His Dad had always been the quieter strength. His Mom, the tenacity.

But finally he convinced her that since nothing had changed with Scotty, and Dad was probably lonely and no doubt out in the snow with a pair of still-damaged lungs, she should go home. Three days ago she had. Corry knew the minute Scotty was on Earth, she'd come back.

It was good to be alone, honestly. Cor wasn't sure why, though. All his life, he'd been pretty social. A large part of that maybe came from commuting to and from work; the drive time from South Bristol to Augusta and then back was usually spent listening to music and thinking, often thinking about stuff that he didn't really take much time for during the day.

Now he had a lot of solitude and a lot to think about, and it somehow seemed unfair that he just didn't have quite enough strength to do it.

The hardest part in the day to day wasn't the new stuff he was scrambling to cope with, it was the familiar stuff. Getting his coffee in the morning, regardless of where he was. Stopping at a restaurant to sit down and have a bowl of clam chowder. Sometimes even taking a half hour to just go seaside, even in Maryland. It was those things which hurt the worst, because those were the things that should be comforting and familiar, in an otherwise screwed up world.

More damning, though, was that he kept those little routines in the hopes that he could just step back into his life again. Even though he already knew logically *and* from experience that he would never again be able to go back to before all this happened, his heart tried to convince him anyway.

Tried to convince him that if he just held on long enough, it would all be okay again.

He took his coffee with him, parked the skimmer and then walked the rest of the way to Starfleet Medical's main building. Most of the day was spent working, and after a couple weeks of clawing madly for enough focus just to survive the day, something in him burned out and he just did the job and did it fine, working mechanically but diligently. It made the time fly, really. And between assignments and his classes, he could often be found chasing the very busy Doctor Pedersen around the campus. Probably the finest orthopedic surgeon in the galaxy for the human skeletal system, Pedersen was all at once the type who couldn't stand still and who still managed to seem utterly calm.

A nice guy. Corry liked him. Just wasn't entirely sure that, even if he was the best, he was good enough.

But after realizing that Corry had a vested, legal interest in one of his patients, Pedersen at least took about two minutes a day to give Cor an update, before speeding off to his next surgery or consultation or therapy check-in.

That was how Cor figured out that Scotty was probably gonna be in surgery for about fourteen hours getting put back together with a mix of hardware and lab-grown bone, and that was how he started to realize he needed to come up with some kind of idea or plan for damage control.

It was after he'd burned out enough to work with singular focus that he came up with the plan, but his focus remained; the plan got pieced together after the day ended. And it was in the quiet routines that he should have found to be a comfort that he realized for the first time something that had never even crossed his mind before.

It was *survival*.

The revelation was enough to make him stand still for a good hour along the concrete piers, and he didn't even know the hour had passed, so wrapped up in his own thoughts as he was. He didn't notice the sleet start up, he didn't notice the tide start to retreat, he didn't notice anything.

He remembered back when Scotty had been working on the *Lady Grey*; Corry had resented the Hell out of it at the time, resented the Hell out of the fact that the guy who was supposed to be his best friend wasn't there to support him as he tried to search for answers to help his Dad. After the fire, of course, he got notice as to why Scotty had chosen the *Grey* as the singular cause of his life, to the exclusion of everything, and that had been one heck of a wakeup call.

But it was only now, years later, that he realized that the same place he had to go in his head to work like he was, was the same place Scotty was so familiar with that it was a fundamental part of his mental makeup. Then and now.

That when you stripped away the methods, you came back to that same fight for survival.

It was now, years later, that Corry wondered about the hows.

And the *whys*.

He walked a fine line after that, and he knew that he was.

Something undefinable settled into his thoughts that gave him an internal quiet, like a lake frozen in winter, enough that the more frantic moments of scrambling thought cooled, slowed.

But Corry wasn't sure it was a good kind of quiet even then. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to look at what was *under* that ice, or to find out how very deep the water below it was.

And he wasn't sure he would be able to stop himself from doing so, either. Even as he tried to decide what to do about the line he was balancing on, that thin sheet of ice viewed horizontally, he found himself glancing through the facets of their shared history; found himself looking back with older -- if not always wiser -- eyes, catching things he didn't think to put together before.

For instance, Corry had come to a fairly early conclusion, at the end of a fist, that acting like a perfectly normal roommate while sharing a room with Scotty was never going to work. He knew even before they shared a dorm room that Scotty was a bit odd; wary and reserved and not exactly Mister Fun. Corry got rebuffed so many times just trying to get Scotty to come out and have a few drinks with him and the guys that he almost gave up.

Of course, persistence paid off, but it took a fair amount of time. Even the most stodgy of cadets, like Sean Kelley used to be, were willing to go out and relax after all the coursework was done. Scotty, on the other hand, went from coursework to hobby work to general maintenance of his tools and equipment. He was perfectly happy being left to himself, his only companionship books and tapes and machines.

Corry couldn't fathom it, though, so he kept asking and asking and finally Scotty gave in, probably just to shut him up. A whole group of them met at one of the Belfast taverns that didn't automatically bar the engineering cadets (in retrospect, it probably said something that most of the places serving alcohol in Belfast *did*), and after a good hour of being completely awkward and quiet, Jerry and Joe and Corry managed to draw Scotty into a long and eventually drunken conversation about the future of the *Constitution*-class design.

It got steadily easier after that, easy enough that Corry even forgot for awhile that it had been hard in the first place. And really, once he knew everyone and loosened up, Scotty was fun to be around. He was smart, no less so when he was drunk, so it was never like hanging around with a moron. Sober he was gifted with a lot of dry wit, and plastered he got chatty and silly and wasn't afraid to poke fun at anyone, including himself.

Even drunk, though, he never got so personal that he talked about his life before Starfleet, or his thoughts on things outside of engineering. But it didn't matter. He won some friends, and later on when things went bad, those friends stayed loyal to him even though they couldn't always understand some of his decisions and choices.

But Corry lived with him, by then. He learned fast that Scotty didn't like having his personal space invaded, and his personal space included their dorm room. When he'd lived in the barracks, of course, he'd adapted to being constantly surrounded by people. But when he was in the dorm, and had a retreat with a door he could lock, he defaulted to preferring that space be quiet and neat and mostly solitary.

Cor didn't realize how big a leap of faith it actually took Scotty, though, to share that space with someone else. Not until he looked at it now, through the filter of the years.

Really, Corry just adapted. The first lesson he learned was not to host any get-togethers in their room without making sure it was all right with Scotty. For his part, he willingly did so.

The second thing he learned was that giving Scotty a shake to wake him up meant getting a fist in the face. At the time, he had been so shocked that he couldn't even discuss it. Worse, though, was just how guilty Scotty was about it -- he could barely stand to even look Corry in the face in class, let alone after class when they were back in their room.

They both felt bad about it and because of that, they never brought it up again. After that, Corry knew better than to wake Scotty up again like that, for both their sakes. It just became second nature to watch how he did things until he didn't even think about it, unless he had a specific reason to do so.

Heck, eventually there were times he actually took full advantage of that startle reflex just because it made a practical joke perfect. Times when he went into it ready to dodge the fist and knowing that Scotty would forgive him, even if it did involve being shocked to awareness and the victim of a joke.

Corry never brought it up again, and he adapted, but he thought about it now like he hadn't in a very long time.

It was while he was going over their mutual past, the events that made up their lives since that first meeting at the academy, that he realized just how dangerous the line he was walking was.

Just how quickly and easily he could cross it; just how impossible it would be to ever take back that choice, too.

The closest he came was reading back to the beginning of Scotty's medical records nearly eight years prior, which started with his assessment for Basic here in Baltimore when he was eighteen. Unless there was some chronic condition or serious reason, Starfleet didn't maintain civilian medical records from pre-assessment. That was the same case here.

The assessment was good, really. According to the doctor who'd done it, Scotty had been deficient in some trace minerals and vitamins, but was otherwise in excellent condition; he was fit, he had really good visual acuity and hearing, there was nothing worse wrong with him. And it was no surprise about the deficiencies, either; Corry used to have to pester him to eat properly, especially if he was buried in a project.

It was in the other notation, though, that Corry saw his line.

While it obviously wasn't enough to disqualify Scotty from Starfleet, or even affect him at all into adulthood, the prior Type II growth-plate injury to his right shoulder still showed up in the scans; a healed injury with no complications, but noted anyway because it kept it from being a surprise should any later treatment come up that specifically related to that shoulder joint.

Given how much studying Corry had done in the past several weeks about orthopedics, he knew what a Type II growth-plate injury was -- it was an injury that happened in children, for any number of reasons, because their skeletons weren't hardened as they would be in adulthood. The bones actually gave before the joint did; where an adult would have a dislocated shoulder, a child had a growth-plate injury.

There were a million potential benign reasons for it; for a kid who grew up around horses, who went hang-gliding at least a few times in his teens, who scrambled around wrecked machines in a salvage yard for a job, there were so many possible explanations for an injury like that.

And yet Corry knew instantly, deeply, instinctively, *painfully* that whatever the truth was, it wasn't going to be benign at all.

For a moment, a lot of answers to questions he had never asked -- the hows, the whys -- were within his reach. In his own head. Through the power of attorney he held. For a moment, the scientist in him even reached for them.

And in the last second, the brother in him slammed the doors closed.

As hard as it was, as much as he wondered if he wouldn't be able to find some way to help by stepping over the line, there was another thing, maybe even the most important thing, that their mutual past had taught him: Once you cross that line, you can never go back.

And if you're going to cross it, then cross it together.

No question nor answer meant more to him than the hard-won trust Scotty gave him.

Corry closed the file, turned off the terminal and went out for a walk.

Interlude II.

Interlude II.

Can ye hear the road from this place?
Can ye hear footsteps, voices?
Can ye see the blood on my sleeve?
I have fallen in the forest, did ye hear me?
In the loneliness,
oh, the loneliness,
and the scream to prove
to everyone
that I exist.

[-Frightened Rabbit: *The Loneliness and the Scream*](#)

*February 16th, 2235
Edinburgh, Scotland*

He looked down at his bruised, scabbed knuckles and listened to his mum talking to the doctor, though only half-heartedly. She'd chattered lightly the whole two and some hours from Aberdeen to Edinburgh about things unrelated to the bruises, and he had tried to figure out how to answer, but talking was just out of reach. He'd maybe managed a few dozen words the entire week, and most of those were 'aye, ma'am,' or 'no, sir,' and he knew he was in trouble, he'd been fighting again, but he couldn't summon up any explanation, any more than he could summon up words.

Montgomery hated fighting. But it seemed all he was capable of, these days. Fixing things and breaking things. Fixing machines. Breaking noses.

His own face smarted quite a bit; the lad who'd been harassing him was a lot bigger, and a lot older, and Montgomery had lost that one, but he'd gone down swinging anyway.

Why they couldn't just have him checked out in the hospital in Aberdeen, he didn't know. Coming all the way down here made no sense, but his mum must have needed to do something else in Edinburgh. Montgomery's life had always bent to hers; he didn't think, not even then, that it could have ever been otherwise.

The nurse who stepped into his peripheral vision wasn't very old, and she had on a bright colored lab coat, the sort geared towards children. He might have found that laughable, in a cynical way, but that required having heart even for bitterness and Montgomery just *didn't*.

He managed to force a half a smile for her, though -- the other half was too sore -- and then went back to rubbing his knuckles, the pain radiating up the fine bones of his hand and into his forearm.

It drowned out the dull ache the cold, wet air outside had caused in his right shoulder, at least.

"Will ye come with me?" the nurse asked, leaning over and smiling more, and her more genteel accent made him half-smile again more genuinely, though he still didn't quite feel it.

He bobbed his head in a nod and stood up, looking to his mum to make sure she knew. She nodded back to him, and something in her expression sort of-- sort of threw him a bit, something he couldn't quite get a grasp on, but it made him uneasy.

Even so, the nurse was nice. He flinched his way through the careful examination, sitting up on the table, and then she was running a dermal regenerator over the cuts and scrapes, though there wasn't all that much that could be done for the bruising itself. He'd been through this a number of times now, though admittedly, it had become a fair bit more regular the past couple months. Some part of him was tempted to engineer his own dermal regenerator, just to save all the trouble.

He was almost done when his mum walked in with a doctor, who was one of those large types with a fixed smile that didn't seem wholly real, and once he was finished being patched up, Montgomery hopped down from the table, waiting to go.

"I'll be back tomorrow, t' check on ye," his mother said, not really looking at him.

There was a long moment where that didn't quite filter in, and Montgomery frowned, confused. "...tomorrow?"

"Aye. Ye'll be just fine, they're just gonna sort ye out," she said, more quickly.

But even before she was done speaking, his heart slammed into high gear so hard it *hurt*, the *realization* of what must be happening, that she was *leaving him here*-- and instantly he looked for the doors, and they were both occupied by orderlies just stepping in--

--he snapped a look back at her, eyes wide, heart racing. "...Mum...?"

She still wouldn't look at him; the nurse who'd patched him up set a hand on his shoulder, and without thinking he jerked away from it, backing away from the table and staring at his mother, and then she said, "They're just gonna take care o' ye, fix what's gone wrong, y'ken?"

"I'm nae *broken!*" Montgomery shot back, incredulously, and there were the orderlies closing in, all of 'em a lot bigger'n him, and every nerve-ending *screamed* for him to run, and his voice cracked as he pleaded, "Mum, *please...!* "

"Ye'll be fine," she said, her voice quivering, and the doctor put an arm around her shoulders and was leading her for the door--

--and he *bolted* for that door, panicked--

--and never made it.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!