

## On the Nature of Wind

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## On the Nature of Wind

by [SLWalker](#)

### Summary

(2242 - 2243) - Finally within reach of what he hopes will be a solid career as a Starfleet Engineer, Scotty's at the top of his Academy class and less than a year from gaining his commission when he gets thrown head-first into an unorthodox final project. What starts out as an anachronistic irritation, though, quickly turns into something much bigger and more challenging, and before long he finds himself being tested in directions he'd never even considered as he starts to work out just what it is that he's made of, not only as a future officer, but as a person. And a friend.

### Notes

The prologue for this story was written all the way back on October 18th, 2001; the epilogue was posted on June 6th, 2008. (It took me that long to finish it.) It was the first novel-length fic I ever finished and posted. It's undergone some revision since then, as I clean it up. You can read ONOW without reading the rest of the series! It was originally written first and I think it can still stand alone, though I do think it fits best in context with the rest of the Arc of the Wolf. It's also something of a sequel to 'In Theory' in the novel Kobayashi Maru.

I never realized when I started this tale -- this story of love and hope -- that I'd end up writing a whole fictional biography. I sure am glad I did, though.

This story would not be here at all without the help of numerous people. So, to Maguena, both Jens, Karen, Ehz, Kay, Kris, Asp and several others: thank you. I've lost touch with some of you, but I've never forgotten any of you or how much support you've given me.

## Prologue: True North

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*Monday, January 10th, 2242  
Andrews Lecture Hall, Theater 6A  
Starfleet Engineering Academy  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth*

The chatter in the back of the hall was more of a buzz than a solid noise; whispers that broke occasionally into silence, then started up again just as unfathomably. Few people seemed to be concerned with what was going on in the front part of the room, where most of the underclassmen were studiously taking notes; those in the back were the upperclassmen who were taking notes not on the subject but rather on the teaching style.

Andrew Corrigan wasn't doing either. A third-year cadet, his only reason for being in the room was because Maggie Mersea was there. He had no urge to help teach the youngsters, especially Basic Language, but Maggie said she wanted to teach and he wanted to be near Maggie, so he signed up for a study period that had nothing to actually do with studying.

Unless, of course, one was studying beautiful ash-blonde women with legs to eternity.

"Corry!"

Corry pulled his attention away from his fascination with Maggie and looked over at Sean Kelley, shoving down a sigh. Sean was about as much fun to talk to as a brick wall; if it didn't somehow involve his grades or his class ranking, it wasn't worth his attention.

Still, there were a few times he had given Corry a hand on a project, and even if he was a bit of a condescending bastard, he could summon the occasional moment of geniality, so Corry did his best to pretend to be interested. "Yeah, Sean?"

"Do you have today's assignment for SS&D?"

Yep, he looked beseeching. Corry hadn't noticed Sean's absence in the class, but apparently he needed a bailout. Digging through his own disorganized notes and textbooks, he pulled out the folder for Year Three Station Structure and Design, and offered the paper over. "It's due on Monday. Captain Bligh will be pretty pissed if you don't turn it in."

Sean chuckled, copying the assignment down on a spare sheet of paper. "Yeah, bad enough that I missed class."

"Where were you, anyway?"

"Trying to finish my project for Captain Ahab. Got it in just before the deadline." Sean finished writing and offered the paper back over, looking relieved.

Corry couldn't blame him. Most of the officers who taught the third and fourth year cadets were downright disagreeable, hence their nicknames. Their excuse for being rough was a weak one at best, the whole spiel about 'how would they react to authority on a starbase or starship if they couldn't handle it in the academy'. As far as Corry was concerned, they had all gone through six months of Basic Training, and that was some of the harshest discipline they were ever likely to encounter outside of wartime. Why beat a dead dog?

Shaking his head, he blew those thoughts off as he turned his gaze back to Maggie. There was just something about her, and it had nothing to do with the fact she was one of the small handful of women in his class that was available and not dating anyone else. To think that would imply that he was desperate for a female companion, and dammit, Andrew Corrigan was never desperate for anything. Back in South Bristol, he had a few girlfriends, and any one of them would--

"Oooh, this oughta be good."

Sean's voice -- or tone of voice -- cut through Corry's rapt fascination. Corry glanced up, and Sean gave him a smirk and nodded to the podium. "That's him. That's the snot that swept in here and snatched my ranking."

Corry frowned, trying to figure out what Sean was griping about. Class ranking? Firmly dragging his thoughts away from romance (at least for the moment), he looked at the podium, where one of the first-year cadets was about to recite some basic Vulcan phrases. How could a first-year steal a third-year's ranking? Then it came back, the more than few whining sessions Sean had gone into over the past month or two about some cadet or another who had transferred over from another Academy.

In all reality, Corry hadn't paid much attention; he had better things to keep his mind on than class ranking. Glancing back at Sean, he tried to keep the amusement out of his voice as he replied, "The supposed grading-curve killer? I dunno, Sean, is he even old enough to be here?"

"Just go ahead and laugh, Corry. It's real funny when some little brat comes in out of nowhere and takes top of the class." Sean's voice faded into a mutter, "Bet he's some admiral's bastard kid or something."

Corry tuned him out, looking back at the podium. The cadet down there looked like he'd be lucky to make it out of the class without passing out, let alone with a passing *grade*. He was white-knuckling the podium like a novice in zero-g, pale, baby-faced, stuttering around an accent that could've been anything but definitely didn't work well with the careful enunciation of the basic Vulcan dialect.

Corry tried not to laugh, but the poor guy looked downright terrified, and the attempt at 'what is your current heading?' was almost unrecognizable. "You sure, Sean? No way he's an upperclassman."

"Wanna bet?" Sean sulked, glaring darts at the black-haired cadet below. If looks could kill, everyone between him and the guy behind the podium would be vaporized. "He's in ASD with me, and you'd think he was some kind of damn genius or something from the way ole Ahab talks."

Corry raised an eyebrow. There was no way the somewhat pathetic looking cadet below could have gotten into Advanced Starship Design. He probably couldn't even pass Basic Language, and that was a throwaway class. "Pearson thinks he's a genius?" Corry snickered, leaning back in his seat, "Maybe I oughta see if he'll tutor."

"I told you, I'd tutor you if you wanted. You don't need to go to that brat."

Corry smirked. Geez, Sean was really holding a grudge about that ranking thing. It wasn't the end of the world if someone graduated second in the class instead of first, was it? If Sean's world revolved around that, he really needed to get himself a date and something resembling a life.

The chime ended the class, saving the 'curve-killer' from the second part of his somewhat hopeless oration, and Corry picked up his notes, watching Maggie as she walked-- no, not walked, *glided*--

She was just beautiful. A love-sick sigh threatened to break away from him, but he held it back.

In the meantime, though, Sean was still muttering as he headed down the steps, and he must've said something to the cadet who had been at the podium, because the room went silent lightning fast and everyone left in the room was watching. Corry looked between the two: Sean Kelley with his somewhat arrogant, barbed look, and the other guy, who was probably about two seconds away from trying to turn him into some sort of punching bag.

Corry wasn't entirely sure why he acted, but later he figured that it was mostly pity. Trotting down the steps, he neatly stepped between the two near-snarling cadets and put on his best disarming grin, taking full advantage of how tall he was compared to the both of them. "Tell me if you need any of your other class assignments, okay? Sean?"

Sean looked up at Corry, probably debating on whether it was worth the trouble to continue antagonizing, but he must have figured it was better to walk away and nodded stiffly. "I'll do that."

Corry notched the grin up another few levels, needing all of the disarming ability he had, and Sean walked out without a backwards glance. The rest of the remaining cadets, both upper and lower classmen, filtered out themselves, clearly more disappointed than anything that someone had broken up a potentially entertaining fight.

Breathing a faint sigh of relief, Corry turned back to the other cadet, who was still fairly lit up. "Don't mind him, he's an ass sometimes."

"Sometimes," the other cadet echoed, brown eyes narrowing on the exit with almost vicious intensity, as if he could bring Sean back to finish what was started by sheer staring power. It might have been a more effective look if he didn't look like he still belonged in high school, Corry reflected. "Most o' the time, if ye ask me."

"All right, 'most o' the time'," Corry agreed, amiably. The glare he got in answer was like supercooled liquid coolant, and he chuckled as he shook his head, "Geez, you need to relax. Calm down, take a few deep breaths, then you can give me your name."

For a moment, it didn't seem like the advice would be taken, but it ended fairly quickly. "Montgomery Scott. Scotty, tae most people."

Corry nodded, grabbing a few stray papers and offering them over. "Andrew Corrigan, mostly known as Corry the Magnificent."

Scotty took the papers, one eyebrow raising slightly now that he'd apparently managed to rein his temper in, looking skeptical. "Is that yer proclamation, or--?"

"My delusions of grandeur entirely," Corry interrupted, grinning in the most charming manner he had as he leaned on the desk. "I have a theory, you know. Care to hear it?"

"Maybe."

"Well, listen anyway. See, my theory goes like this: Really good engineers are always known by their last names. Always. Bell, Edison, DaVinci, Cochrane, Corrigan--" Dialing up the grin, Corry leaned over the desk and dropped his voice, "But Sean Kelley is always just Sean."

Scotty looked up, with a bit of a thin, lopsided smile back. Tilting his head, he seemed to ponder it for a moment, then looked back at Corry with a quirk of the eyebrows, as if conceding the point. "Good theory."

"Thanks! And now that we've discussed serious universal theory," Corry said, "I have a proposition for you." Taking note of the wary glance he got, he frowned. "Wow, the world's just out to get you, isn't it?"

"Nae the world, just the entire third-year class."

Corry waved a hand, dismissively. "Okay, let me put it another way: I'll get you through Basic Language, and you get me through SS&D."

Scotty paused in his meticulous organization of his notes, books and computer tapes, and Corry raised both eyebrows hopefully. After all, his parents would kill him if he failed in one of his more important courses, and Basic Language had been a breeze for him. It was practically fail-safe, and the terrible, awful curve killer looked like he could use a friend, or at least someone to hang around with who didn't give a hoot about his class rank.

Scotty weighed the idea, looking for all the more like he was trying to divine the future and figure out if it was a good idea. It eventually had to come down to common sense, though, and then he shrugged. "What the hell? Ye've got yerself a deal."

# Part I: Balancing Equations: Chapter 1

## Part I: Balancing Equations

A soul in tension is learning to fly,  
Condition: Grounded, but determined to try,  
Gotta keep my eyes from the circling skies,  
Tongue-tied and twisted, just an earth-bound misfit...  
...I.

[-Pink Floyd, Learning to Fly](#)

### Chapter 1:

Thursday, November 24th, 2242  
Malone Road Dormitory, Room 17  
Starfleet Engineering Academy  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth

"All right, I've got no less than fifty credits saying that it won't stop raining within the next month."

Scotty didn't look up from the computer. The mere sound of rain water dripping on the floor told him two things: That Corry had missed the shuttle from the main campus, and that he was not thrilled about that fact. "No bet here."

"Have you even moved since I left?" Corry asked, as he threw his coat into the closet with a wet-sounding slap that had Scotty wincing.

"Hm mm." Scotty had just gotten a new batch of upgrade schematics and plans that were going to be performed on the USS *Constitution* when she was back in port, and saying that he was obsessed with the starship and the class that would be named for her would have been a hell of an understatement. Not only did he have every article, journal and schematic he could get his hands on, but he had managed to bribe one of the higher-up officers to pass on any new information.

He couldn't think of too many better ways to spend an evening than by catching up on his reading, especially given the rain.

"Anyway, I was talking to Admiral Pirrie," Corry was saying as he moved around his side of the room and doubtless tracked water everywhere, "and he agreed to our four-day leave."

For a long moment the comment didn't process, mostly because Scotty was focused on something else and the words had been casual enough that they were slotted into the background soundtrack of his life. It must have been duly noted *somewhere* though, because after reading another four or five lines, he glanced up, eyebrows furrowed. "Wait, I didn't request leave."

"Nope, you didn't. Well, you *did*, but only electronically." Corry grinned back, flopping back on his bunk. "I requested leave and you're coming with me."

"Ohhhh no. I'm stayin' right here," Scotty answered, shaking his head and turning back to the monitor. There was too much he wanted to get done and it would be hard enough with the idiotic simulations they seemed to run the senior cadets through every other week. Well, not *every* other week, but way too bloody often for his tastes. "I've got three different articles due, and that mockup warp core in Pearson's class--"

"But you're coming with me because I'm not going to feel guilty about leaving you here over Thanksgiving."

This was one of those times Corry was irritating him, just a bit. Not that Corry ever irritated him for more than a half-hour tops before he gave in, but this time, he just wasn't going to let the other cadet talk him into anything. It had already happened a surprising number of times.

And the last time, he had slept through an entire day to avoid the hangover. Or, tried to.

Scotty rubbed over his eyes before dropping his hand to eye his roommate. He knew better than to ask how Corry had managed to request leave on his behalf *electronically*; it was a fair bet it involved unsanctioned access to his student account, though. "That's one o' those culture-specific holidays, Cor. And not even one o' the *good* ones, for that matter."

Corry whistled a few notes, then sat up again and leaned forward. "So? It's a chance to eat a lot and take time off with no penalties, what else does it need to be? And anyway, the proper response to a Thanksgiving dinner invitation is, 'Thank ye, Corry, ye're too kind to lifeless little me.'"

Despite himself, Scotty laughed. Corry just loved imitating him (often with worrying accuracy), which probably went back to the Basic Language lessons not quite a year before when Corry'd had the painstaking task of tutoring a mostly language inept student.

Well, inept at speaking them; reading them was easy enough. He shook his head again. "Not on yer bloody life. Not now, not ever."

"All right, forget the thank you. But you're coming with me, because not only did I tell Mom I was bringing you along, but I already booked two transatlantic tickets."

Scotty was pretty sure he was telepathic. He could almost hear the, '*Ha! Let him try to weasel his way out of that one* .' "No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes!"

"No, and that's final!"

"Yes, or I just beat you unconscious and drag you there."

"You wouldn't."

"Bet me?"

He would. "Bastard."

Corry whooped in triumph, jumping to his feet and doing a quick victory-dance. Scotty glowered at him as downright maliciously as he could, which was pretty damn weak since it was impossible to be angry when your roommate was dancing some elaborate swinging two-step, oblivious to the ridiculousness of it. But Scotty at least wanted a point or two for the effort. Waiting until Corry was finished flailing around, he tapped his fingers on the desk. "When're we booked, then?"

"In three hours," Corry replied, hopping from foot to foot excitedly.

Three hours?! Oh for the love of-- "Corry, I want to reiterate. Ye're a bastard. A sneaky, lowdown, devious, malcontent-- oof!"

Well, that saved him from dragging his carryon out of the closet. Scotty sighed, a sort of resigned sigh, and got started on packing. True, he hadn't protested too hard against the idea, but it would have been nice to have some advanced warning. But then, advanced warning was a luxury when dealing with Cor, not a privilege or necessity. He'd learned that the hard way when Corry had asked whether they were going to become roommates and had decided to move him in months later without so much as a word of warning; by the time Scotty was able to gather his wits to protest, the deed had already been done hours before while he was in class.

And this was after Corry spent *months* following him around, persistent like some big, friendly dog, wearing away at his resolve to stay focused on his schooling and keep to himself.

Of course, if not for Cor, he might not have been able to pass the much-hated Basic Language course. It would have been a serious setback to have tested out of his entire first two years worth of Engineering school only to be held back over something as downright worthless as a course that no one ever put to practical application.

Like the universal translator would go out and it'd be critical to speak in ancient high Vulcan to ask for directions. Right.

Thankfully it didn't come to that; he was the youngest senior cadet and first in the class, and all it took was learning to live with the force of nature that was Andrew Corrigan, to not punch him out for constantly correcting his *alleged* accent, to get used to living in the same small room, to not get into too much trouble when they got up to some shenanigans, and--

All right, none of that was particularly easy, and Scotty was still getting comfortable with this friendship business -- something different and deeper than learning how to get on with his squadmates had been -- but thus far, it had been worth it.

And really, a few days off didn't sound *too* bad. It wasn't the first -- or third, fourth, eighth -- time Corry had asked him along, so Scotty knew it was really only going to be a matter of time before he gave over on it. Might as well make it now when he had three hours of warning instead of later when he might have three *minutes*.

Besides, if nothing else, hanging around with Cor was guaranteed to be entertaining in some fashion. If Scotty had really discovered his own sense of humor properly in Basic, he had most definitely burnished it to a high shine since he started hanging out with Corry.

"Ever been to Maine?"

Scotty shook his head, grabbing his civilian clothes and packing them away. "Been to New York, and Maryland." Half under his breath he added, "And California. Coulda lived without that one."

"Which part, Basic or Command School?" Corry asked, still wearing his 'vacation or bust' grin.

"Command School." Basic had been surprisingly painless after the initial adjustment; Scotty still exchanged letters with his squadmates, for that matter. Command School, however, had been weirdly isolating after Basic and a lot more stressful.

Corry started shoveling his clothes carelessly into his own bags. "Well, Maine's colder than this, but we get sunlight a hell of a lot more often. And we live in South Bristol, right there on the coast. Half of it's on an island. You'll like it, and dammit, put that book down!"

"What book?" Scotty asked innocently, eyebrows up as he hid the 55th edition of *The Ships of Starfleet: A complete technical reference to the most state of the art vessels* behind his back.

Corry must not have been fooled, because he wrestled it away not more than three seconds later, feinting left, then right, and taking advantage of his height to do it. "There's no way you're going to have your nose buried in a book over the entire leave. Cripes, you need a life."

"But..." Scotty was trying not to look pathetic. He knew he was failing, but damn, he was trying.

"No. You're not going to take that or any other remotely engineering-based material. This is vacation! Relaxation! A break from the norm! A

chance for peace! An opportunity to--"

"Point taken, Mum," Scotty replied dryly, snatching the book back and putting it back on the shelf neatly. The prospect of four days off campus without any sort of trade-related material was akin to hell; engineering wasn't a hobby or a career, it was his *life*.

Corry must've caught the slightly-- well, obviously unhappy tone and sighed, "Look, there'll be enough to do without working on something school-related. Besides," he continued, his voice jumping from chiding to obscenely cheerful, "we're gonna be the greatest engineers ever to work for Starfleet. Might as well have fun while we still can."

"Engineering *is* fun," Scotty answered, tossing a longing glance at the halfway torn-down phase inverter sitting on his workbench. He was pretty sure he wouldn't get his way, though, even if he had gotten down and sobbed for all he was worth. Of course, compared to his former fate of being a starship captain, four days on leave wasn't too bad, books and bits or no.

*Just four days, he thought. How bad can that be?*

The constant drumming of fingers on the back of the seat practically drowned out the wind that buffeted the transatlantic shuttle, and it had only been fifteen minutes. Out of a two and a half hour flight.

Had Corry known his roommate was going to get fidgety, he might have just let him take the book, but this was the first long-term leave he'd convinced (or bullied) Scotty into taking. Their occasional weekend jaunts usually ended up in the student's lounge on campus or pub-crawling through Belfast -- or trying to, since most places took one look at them, knew where they came from and promptly kicked them out -- but that was a quick run that lasted one night and the next day was spent recovering from it. And it had taken months just to get Scotty to quit working or studying long enough to do even *that*.

But this was four entire days in Midcoast Maine, and if the trip over was any indicator, it could turn out to be a long four days for the high-strung Scotsman.

"You could try for a rhythm. You know, something other than 'tap, tap, tap'," Corry suggested, leaning back in his seat.

"I could be workin' on my term project too." Tap, tap, tap.

"You could, but then you'd miss out on a great dinner, with all kinds of dishes and desserts."

"I can cook, Corry." Scotty looked over, pausing in his drumming for a moment, one eyebrow going up. "Are ye sure that yer parents know that I'm along for the ride?"

"Absolutely sure." Corry beamed his trademark, mile wide grin. "Trust me! When have I ever led you wrong?"

"Last month when I woke up on the floor with my bootstrings tied together and a hangover? The same time I missed turnin' in a paper 'cause I was sleepin' it off?" Scotty clearly tried to suppress a smirk, but only partially succeeded. "Or the time before that when we were almost nailed for violatin' curfew, all because ye wanted to spy on Maggie?"

"Hey, the guy she was with was a scumbag," Corry defended, frowning at the thought. She had been so nice in turning him down the fifth, sixth and seventh times that he had asked her out that he had to make absolutely sure that she wasn't going to get into trouble with the lieutenant she was dating.

Of course, the mishap with the napkin had been entirely accidental. Corry had no clue how that itching powder made it onto that single napkin, and dammit, just because he was mysteriously missing twenty credits out of his personal account meant absolutely nothing.

"Aye, perhaps he was," Scotty admitted, crossing his arms and finally relaxing for a moment or two. He wouldn't admit it aloud, but Maggie had caught his eye too -- evidenced by the way he blushed almost to his ears every time she so much as said *hi* to him -- and he hadn't been the one to slide into the kitchen of that particular restaurant with the offer and with Corry's credits in hand, nope.

(Not that Corry didn't know. But he figured that they could both afford to dream about the same person since neither of them had any real chance of getting her romantic attention.)

He took the moment of silence to actually get his thoughts in order, leaning forward a little again to look out of the window. It wasn't often he had a moment of peace, between classes, scenarios and having a roommate that didn't seem to know what sleep was a full eighty-five percent of the time.

Far below, illuminated by scattered rays of moonlight, the wind spun seafoam into long streaks, visible even through the broken cloud cover and at the height and speed they were traveling. Corry smiled a little at the sight of it. "Looks rough out there. Did you know that back in the old days, the wind could get so bad out there that the waves would just break a ship apart?"

Scotty nodded, looking out himself. "Had to've been pretty damn brave, I suppose. I think I'll stick to starships."

"Easier to die on a starship."

"Really?"

"No. Not really. Well, not back then." Corry leaned his elbows on the back of the seat in front of him, still looking out. There was something beautifully dangerous about the ocean in a full-gale, something he grew up seeing on the shores of Maine.

Growing up in New England meant that he grew up with the stories of a time when ships still sank, and life or death could depend entirely on the wind and the vessel and the skill of the men onboard. "It's kind of hard to believe that it's been almost a century since the last time a vessel's gone down and someone actually lost their life," he added, shivering a little at the thought.

"I wouldna say that's a bad thing," Scotty pointed out, craning his neck trying to see down through the thickening cloud cover to the Atlantic's surface.

"Not at all, but we've gotten everything so fail-safe here on Earth that it's almost impossible to do *anything* wrong." Corry knew that Scotty would be the last person in the quadrant to understand, but he tried to explain anyway, "See, if we can't fail, we can't succeed either. Not unless we go out into the stars. But people used to go out on the water and that was like their final frontier, their lives on the line. Kinda makes me wish I was born about five hundred years ago."

"Why? I mean, ye've got a handful o' sheets, a pile o' lumber, and if somethin' *does* go wrong, there's no emergency transport, no backup systems, nothin' standin' between you and the deep." Scotty shrugged, going back to drumming once he lost interest in the view out the window. "If I'm gonna give my life, I'd want to do it out there. *Up* there. Where I can make a difference, instead of relyin' on the right winds."

"Have you ever even been sailing?"

"No. Been out on power boats with my uncles, though, a few times. Fishin', mostly, not too far out."

Corry grinned, trying to break away from the somewhat philosophical feeling that had fallen. "Sounds like you were pretty sheltered."

Scotty gave him a brief, down-his-nose look, eyes narrowed a little. "If I were sheltered, I wouldna been allowed to hang glide. Tell me *that's* not wind related."

Cor waved it off. "Yeah, but hang gliding's different. That's a land-based thing."

"I went out over the water a few times. I just prefer the land scenery."

"Suuure. Uh huh. Right. Yep. Yessiree." Corry smirked, knowing full well exactly what the response to that needling would be.

Right on cue: "Ye're such a bastard sometimes."

Corry sighed happily, looking up at the ceiling with a self-satisfied look. "I know."



## Part I: Balancing Equations: Chapter 2

### Chapter 2:

Friday, November 25th, 2242  
139 West Side Road  
South Bristol, Maine, North America, Earth

Corry was right, it was colder in Maine. A *lot* colder. The wind was biting sharp, and whipped along the coastal road as the cab deposited the two cadets in front of the house. The sky seemed to be clearing, though, the slivered moon catching a few glances down between cloud banks; sunlight was forecasted for the next day.

Scotty pulled the edges of his coat a little tighter, teeth chattering despite his best efforts not to let them. The cabbie who'd driven them there seemed to like having a window cracked, and the ride from Augusta had been long, cold and silent for his part, mostly spent tuning Corry's aimless chatter out, something he had become an expert at.

Now he was standing outside facing four days with no books, nothing to fiddle with, just a head full of idle thoughts and no where to really put them. He was already beginning to regret this.

"Wow. Man, it's a great night!" Corry grinned, setting his bag down and turning to the small inlet across the road where the tide was coming in. "Wouldja look at that."

"I'm lookin' at that," Scotty answered, thinking that his nose was going to freeze off while Cor communed with nature or whatever he was doing. Still, he wasn't about to interrupt; he'd heard more than enough about how much Corry loved Maine to understand how the other cadet felt, even without any frame of reference of his own.

Then again, South Bristol *was* on an island, and he was going to be a popsicle if he stood there much longer. "Corry--"

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Corry turned back away from the ocean and to the house, grabbing his bag. "Time is it?"

"Just shy 0100. And not gettin' any earlier."

Corry smiled and bounded up the porch steps of the two-story colonial, taking his keys from his pocket and unlocking the front door, revealing a warmly lit interior. He stepped in, then tossed a glance back over his shoulder.

Which-- was right about the same time that Scotty decided that maybe it wasn't so cold, not really. Realizing just how utterly out of place he actually *was*, he wished he could transport back to the dorms, all the while wondering why he let himself get talked into this. He'd only met Corry's parents once, when they visited after the three-week summer break between one academic year and the next, and he sure as hell didn't know them well enough to want to invade their house. He gestured over his shoulder awkwardly. "Maybe I'll just go and--"

Cor sighed, walking back down and dragging Scotty up the steps by an arm, though not particularly roughly. "No time for chickening out now, Scotty."

*Remains to be seen*, Scotty thought, even as he protested, "I'm not a chicken!"

"Then stop acting like one!"

Scotty might have found a retort to that somewhere, but then Corry's mother stepped out. "Shhh, boys."

"Sorry Mom," Corry said, dropping his voice and letting go of his bag and his roommate to hug his mother. "Is Dad in bed?"

"He just turned in about an hour ago." She stepped back after returning the hug, smiling a warm, patient-looking smile in Scotty's direction. "Are you two going to come in before we let all of the heat out?"

Corry grinned, stepping past his mother and immediately heading for the kitchen door, off to the right. Scotty fought down a wince -- oh, god, he felt like some kind of invader or some sort of bloody leech, or something *other* than a Starfleet cadet -- and eventually gave into the idea of warmth and followed. The door clicking shut behind him didn't do much for his nerves, though.

It wasn't that he hadn't liked Corry's parents when he'd first met them, because they seemed like such nice, genuine types -- and clearly loved their son deeply -- but he sure felt like he was abusing their hospitality now.

Corry's mother Melinda was giving him a look, and he got the impression from that alone that he wasn't the first unwitting victim dragged to this house. Shaking her head, she only chuckled, "Standing there isn't any less dangerous than sitting in the kitchen. We only bite when provoked."

Scotty blinked once or twice before he figured out it was a joke; nodding, he found his voice somewhere, "Aye, sorry, ma'am. Just--"

"He's a chicken, Mom," Cor said from the kitchen doorway, already holding a cup of tea and a warm turnover.

Scotty rolled his eyes with as much force as he could. "I'm not a chicken."

Melinda tilted her head, clearly suppressing a smile. "I don't know, Andy, I don't see any feathers."

"Plucked chicken?" Corry asked, shrugging.

"Not poultry at all," Scotty said, shooting the other cadet a slightly mocking smirk, "*Andy*."

Corry returned the smirk without skipping a beat, obviously going for the primitive nuclear warhead option to return fire with: "Then stop acting like it, *Monty*."

Melinda watched the short battle, amused, then pushed past her son to step into the kitchen while Scotty cringed over the invocation of that particular nickname. "Andy, why don't you come over here and put that engineering education of yours to work? This thing won't heat up."

"But *Mom*." Corry looked down at his turnover, then his tea. Since it was clear he was about to start whining, Scotty just pushed past him, though not without a little shoulder-check in retaliation.

"What sort o' power source?" Scotty eyed the oven, kneeling in front of it. If Corry wouldn't let him have his books, maybe he could at least do *something* useful to repay his hosts.

Melinda turned on the overhead light. "Just electricity. I've been thinking of getting one of those new independent fusion ovens, but I haven't had the time to really weigh any pros and cons, with Rachel wanting to visit all of these different colleges." She sat down at the kitchen table, watching.

"Ye'd only need one o' those if ye were plannin' on cookin' a whole ox. It'd be overkill outside of a large-scale production facility." Unless one wanted to do some half-baked home-based testing of impulse engine design theories, anyway, provided you didn't mind possibly blowing yourself and half a klick of your neighbors up in the process. But he still grinned briefly at the mental image of Mrs. Corrigan trying to shove a whole ox into the oven.

Pulling his penlight out of his pocket, he turned it on and halfway crawled into the small space, looking at the connections between the heating coils and where they drew their current. That was probably the problem there, since the rest of the stove worked; the metal wasn't conducting the current right. Primitive; he was used to working with matter and antimatter, with plasma-based impulse engines.

It had been awhile since he tackled a kitchen appliance. Years even, he didn't know how many.

But then, everyone started somewhere. He'd torn down a bad intercom box for his first real attempt at repair, somewhere about when he was five? Maybe four. But it had just fascinated him, the way a person could push a button and talk to someone across the house or across the country, or across an ocean, or all the way up in space. Just by pushing a button. So when he'd come across that old piece of machinery down in the basement, he'd sat there with his father's tools and tried to learn how it did what it did and why, and every little thing.

Of course, it hadn't worked like he might have wanted it to and he'd ended up breaking it worse, having no idea how to take that thing apart right back then, but it was a start and made him all but itch to start pulling other things apart. It had almost been worth the trouble he got into over it, too.

They tried to keep him away from the technology after that; sometimes they succeeded, but it never lasted forever because he only just kept getting *better* at fixing things.

The things that he could fix, anyway.

He backed out of the oven long enough to pull the safety breaker, then went back into it. Balancing himself on the side wall, he stuck the penlight in his teeth and pulled his multitool out of his coat pocket.

He could faintly hear Corry and his mother talking, but didn't pay it much mind. After all, it was more important to fix this than try to converse, and he would be the first to admit that talking was not his strong point.

He scraped at the end of the heating coil, shaking his head slightly at the carbon buildup on it. It was old; probably older than he was, come to think of it. But a bit more, should have it done. The oven was stuffy and not entirely comfortable, what with the way he was balancing, but tight spaces were never a problem for him. Engineers had to be able to work in tight spaces; access crawlways, underneath equipment, and--that should do it! Grinning again around the light in his teeth, he carefully pushed the coil back into the back panel, listening for the telltale click of connection before getting back out of the dark space.

He flipped the breaker back, then crouched in front of the open door; before ten seconds had passed, his face was being baked and he backed off, closing the door so it could preheat. "Got it."

Corry mimed looking at a watch. "Wow, a full five minutes. I think you're slowing down in your old age, Scotty."

It wasn't five minutes, but there were better battles to fight. "Didn't see you jumpin' to the rescue, Corry," Scotty said, standing and brushing his hands off on his trousers absently, once his light and multitool were back in their appropriate pockets.

"You're an angel," Melinda said, offering a mug of tea and giving her son a brief, pointed look.

Scotty took the mug, wiping the dust from his not-often-used charm with a winning smile, more to needle Cor than for any better reason. "Not in the least, ma'am."

"Kiss ass," Corry snipped, and was rewarded with a light whap in the arm from his mother.

"Honestly, Andrew Jacob, you would think that after all of that Starfleet education, you would be willing to fix the oven yourself and not leave it to your guest." Melinda didn't have much of an edge on her voice, but that could have been because she had turned to setting the temperature.

Scotty held the mug two-handed and mouthed, *ooh, Andrew Jacob*, behind her back, then had to gnaw down a snicker at the glower he got back for it.

Cor rolled his eyes at least twice as hard as Scotty had earlier, sipping at his tea before answering, "Mom, he's my *roommate*, not a guest. He's the guy who leaves his boots where I'll trip over 'em every other damn day, and insists on staying up all hours of the night talking to himself--"

--while ye sit over there and chatter about Maggie," Scotty interrupted, "and leave yer half o' the room in complete shambles, then have the nerve to borrow *my* tools when yers get lost in that maw--"

--after I get done trying to talk you into going to bed at a reasonable hour so the workbench light's not keeping me up, and after I get done throwing your boots in the closet where they belong--"

--even though my boots're the only things that I don't bother to put away--"

--instead leaving them in the *middle of the floor*--"

"All right, gentlemen," Melinda finally broke in, closing the oven door on the turkey and turning to give them both a look. "If you're going to argue all night, you can sleep outside."

"Sorry, Mom," Corry answered, practically in unison with Scotty's, "Sorry, ma'am."

"Drink your tea, then go to bed."

They didn't even make it to the living room before they were taking potshots at each other again.

The ray of sunlight crept from the window's edge across the wooden floor of the living room, over the couch, settled across one corner of the room, went up over the end table with the half-full cup of cold tea on it, and finally, over the sleeping cadet in the recliner. He didn't move, didn't so much as twitch, knowing somewhere in his subconscious that there wouldn't be a class to get to, that he was warm and comfortable, and that he could take his time coming back to the world of the living.

Needless to say, Scotty still didn't spend much time sleeping, though mostly these days because he was rocketing towards a career he couldn't have even dreamed of when he was still in Aberdeen. He could go a few days on high-wired concentration, so wrapped up in a project or a theory that sleep never crossed his mind. It wasn't that he didn't get tired, he just never noticed. And when he finally did crash, he slept like the dead until he had to be awake for his first class of the day at 0630, and was up again without much effort.

But for the moment, there wasn't anywhere to be and there wasn't a thing to do, so there likewise wasn't much point in waking up.

It was finally the sounds of ceramic or china or something otherwise plate-like that pulled him from the black, heavy, dreamless sleep he'd fallen into. Blinking a few times into the bright light flooding through the window, he frowned slightly to himself and was looking around for a clock when he sighted one of the prettiest girls he'd seen in a long time; or, at least, since he'd been in Historical Engineering with Maggie yesterday.

Deductive reasoning might have told him that this was Rachel, Corry's younger sister, but just waking up all he knew was that she had long legs, blonde hair, and looked really damn good.

"Don't even *think* about it."

And speaking of Corry. "Think about what?"

"She's way too young for you."

Scotty managed to turn his head enough to see Cor, who was kicked back on the other chair in the shadows. "Too young...? I'm twenty!" he protested, incredulous. "Ye'd think I was a bloody geezer, the way ye're talkin'."

"She's sixteen!" Corry waved a hand, as if he could throw the entire notion right out the window. "Besides, she has a new amour every week. You'd be number thirty-six, or something."

Scotty didn't see anything wrong with that, but by the time he looked back, the lovely Rachel was gone, and he was pretty sure that any attempts to flirt would be headed off at the pass by her older brother. Not that he was a very good flirt, mind; every time a girl showed more than a passing interest, his brain and mouth parted ways and one or the other stopped working entirely. "Lookin's not a crime."

"Do yourself a favor, and don't. She'll just break your heart, and then you'll blame me."

"Nu uh."

Cor sighed, then made an almost unforgivably blatant attempt to change the subject. "Dinner's almost ready."

"Really?" Scotty was quite proud of himself for not asking if Rachel would be on the menu. He knew that would earn him a swat quicker than he could get the question out; much as he had found a great hobby in needling Corry over the past year, it wasn't worth being smacked.

Corry had gotten pretty good at reading his expressions, though, and narrowed his eyes at that not-quite-concealed smirk. "Ohhh, just go and get washed up, and if I catch you eying her up again, I'm gonna put you headfirst through the incinerator."

"Yes, *mother*," Scotty answered, sing-song, and in a good imitation of Corry's voice. He crawled out of the massive chair, stretching out and trying to remember how he'd fallen asleep downstairs instead of up in the guestroom. The last thing he could remember was Corry talking to his mother and that was it.

Rubbing at his eyes one-handed, he grabbed his boots and carryon with the other and headed upstairs.

"He's kinda cute. A little shorter than I like 'em, but cute," Rachel said, stepping into the living room after Scotty was up the steps and out of earshot.

Corry shot her an irritated glance. "Whatever happened to Bill?"

"Last month." She plopped down in the recently vacated chair, smiling over at her brother with a distinctly wicked look. "Smells good too. Girlfriend? Boyfriend? Romance in general?"

"Not that I know of," Corry sighed. He never knew when she was serious or joking, but this little ribbing could be either. Whatever happened to the sweet little girl that used to play with dolls and dress the cats up? He wasn't sure who he was feeling more protective of right now, his sister or his roommate. Talk about a tough spot to be in.

"You don't have dibs, right?" Rach asked, smirking broadly at him.

Corry closed his eyes, long-suffering, and then remembered something and eyed his sister anew. "What about *Rodney*?" he asked, drawing the name out with all of the torment he could wring out of the two syllables. "Wasn't he number thirty-five?"

Rachel made a face, shaking her head. "He was too handsy. Practically pawed me every time we went out no matter how many times I said no."

"Did he?" Corry's eyebrows jumped to the top of his forehead. "Maybe he needs a lesson in how to act on dates."

"No, I got him good. Dumped him in front of the whole school during lunch one day." She smirked again, obviously enjoying the memory. "He's an ass."

"He was the perfect man, last time you wrote me. 'Oh, Andy, he's just so nice and sweet, and he even brought me flowers!'" Now it was Corry's turn to smirk. The idea of some cretin trying to make out with his little sister without her explicit consent pissed him off, but the chance to get under her skin was just too good to pass up. And hell, as a bonus, maybe if she was annoyed enough she wouldn't string Scotty along like she no doubt was considering doing.

"Ohhh!" Rachel stood and pointed an accusing finger at him, though it was more time-honored sibling banter than anything serious. "Andy, you're just as mean as you were when you moved out. Do us all a favor and don't move back anytime soon!" Then she stomped out, muttering a few obscenities intentionally loud enough for him to hear.

"Home sweet home," Corry whispered to himself, grinning and kicking back to finish reading the local forecast on the news screen. Seemed like they were in a stretch of clear skies, and in the back of his mind he wondered if he could get away with taking the boat out. True, November on the North Atlantic wasn't exactly prime sailing weather, but by the time good weather came around, he'd probably be starting his internship on some freighter or something.

And that was--

He dreaded it, no matter how much he told himself he didn't and shouldn't. And the thing was, he really did like being an engineer, and it was a job he could live with, but he couldn't imagine spending a great deal of time in space.

But-- planetside assignments were coveted enough by the higher ranks that he stood almost no-chance of getting one. Just like most other cadets on the same track as him, he'd have to do his time in space before getting a chance to come home.

And the idea of years out there, away from family and the ocean and all that he grounded himself on, felt bleak.

"What's the forecast like?"

"Four more days of sunny skies, Dad," Corry answered, dragging himself back to the moment and happier thoughts, looking up at the figure in the doorway. People always told him that he looked like his father -- the same blond hair and blue eyes, the same tall, wiry build, even the same smile. When he was a teenager, he hated the comparison. Now, he was beginning to appreciate it; there were far worse people to be like than Aaron Corrigan. "How long're you home for?"

His Dad leaned on the door frame, crossing his arms. "I have to head back out tomorrow, but only for a week. I was thinking of stopping by the campus and visiting."

"I'd like that," Corry chuckled, thumbing the power button for the reader off. "We don't have another simulation scheduled as far as I know, so any time you wanna drop by's okay by me."

"Hear you've made it into the top thirty of your class."

"Twenty-seventh!"

"Better than last year," Aaron said, smiling his approval and somehow making it seem less like a sappy-parent thing and more like a respectful-colleague thing. He was in the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, and mostly concentrated on planetary architecture. Last month it had been building a life-support station on Amara VI, this month it had been hollowing out mining tunnels on a stationary asteroid, and next it could be anything. "Plan on keeping it up?"

"Long as Scotty keeps letting me copy his notes," Corry replied, grinning. He was only half-joking, but he wasn't about to tell his Dad that.

Aaron shook his head with a low laugh, turning back to the kitchen, and Corry leaned back in the chair and watched the sunlight creeping across the floor. Thanksgiving was never hectic in this household, and he appreciated that. Last Thanksgiving had found him trampling around an abandoned space station with the rest of the cadets, working under a time limit and trying to restore more than emergency life-support. This was preferable.

He wasn't really sure how long he was lost in his own thoughts -- about his career, about his family, about Maggie and where she was spending Thanksgiving or even if her family celebrated it -- but the call for dinner pulled him away from it. Standing, he slipped into the kitchen and sat down; Scotty was about three paces behind, looking like some kind of animal about to be sent to the chopping block, a kind of quiet dread on his face.

It didn't seem to actually be any worse than the usual social awkwardness Cor's roommate tended to drown in on the regular, though, so Corry debated on sympathy and decided to stick to amusement. He leaned over and murmured, "See chair. Sit in chair. Scoot chair to table."

"See Corry. See Corry get beaten. See table go flyin'," was the aside-whispered reply.

Corry beamed a smile at his mother, his father, his sister, mostly trying to cover up the fact that he stood up, reached over, viced down on the back of the Scotty's neck and forced him down into a chair. "Turkey smells terrific, Mom," he said over Scotty's low grumble.

"Why thank you, Andy, and when you finish mistreating our guest, please get out the carving utensils," Melinda answered, not even looking up as she finished setting the different dishes on the table.

"She couldn't have seen that. How'd she see that?" Corry asked quietly, not sure if he was impressed or irritated by the fact that she had, settling back in his own seat.

"Dunno," Scotty replied in a sullen whisper as he rubbed at the back of his neck. He still looked like he was waiting for someone to stick a noose over his head. Well, until Rachel gave him a smile, the exact kind of smile her brother *knew* was aimed to rope in the unsuspecting and dopey. And Scotty must have forgotten about the noose he had been waiting on, because he went from zero to smitten in under two seconds.

Cor just sighed and shook his head at the inevitable heart-bruising that was going to take place before going to get the carving knife out.

Regardless of the little tiffs, though, it was a certain kind of wonderful to sit down to a home-cooked meal, surrounded by the people he loved and the safe familiarity of the house he was raised in.

Looking on as his mother took her place, and as his father finished adjusting his silverware, and as his sister made lovey-eyes at his now stupidly grinning roommate, he thought maybe that it really didn't get much better in life than this.

"I just don't get it. Not one damn bit."

Corry raised an eyebrow, glancing over at Scotty, who was strung out on Dad's recliner and staring forlornly at the ceiling.

It wasn't like Cor hadn't tried to warn Scotty that Rachel would just lead him on, but then, his advice was never heeded. "I told you so."

"Ye're just so sympathetic, I don't even know what to do," Scotty shot back, sarcastically, then went back to looking heartbroken. Apparently, spending two whole days following Rachel around like a lovesick puppy only to get the inevitable brush-off had devastated him for *life*.

At least to look at him, one would think that.

Corry rubbed over his face like he could scrub his vague annoyance off with the palm of his hand. He'd tolerated the whole charade, knowing exactly what the outcome would be, and now he was expected to console someone who had just been *asking* to get burned.

"Look," he said, bluntly, "she's a maneater and you're being silly. What were you expecting, everlasting love? Roses and white dresses and a big ole wedding? Cripes, Scotty, get over it."

He wasn't surprised when he didn't get more than a 'hrrmph!' in answer and a crude bit of sign-language that was easily interpreted. It wasn't hard to offend Scotty; at least he usually got over it fairly fast.

This time the silence lasted a full three minutes before Cor heard the muttered, "Bastard." Which was another way of saying that Scotty couldn't stand being left to his own devices for more time and needed something to keep his interest; if he didn't have a machine to bury himself in, Corry was apparently the second best distraction. There were more than a few times in the past several months where Corry

wondered if maybe the other cadet should have been put on medication for hyperactivity.

Or, barring that, somehow hooked up to the power grid; he could likely run half the eastern seaboard all on his own.

"Yes, but where would you be without me?" Cor asked, looking over again.

Scotty waved a hand in the air in a dismissive gesture. "Back at the Academy? Doing somethin' involvin' my future career?"

"No. You'd still be a third-year trying to pass Basic Language, shunned and miserable, and tripping over your own boots every five minutes," Corry laid out, matter-of-factly. "And I'd still be a third-year, trying to pass Year Three SS&D, loved and adored, and *not* tripping over your boots every five minutes."

"Ye're right, it's all yer bloody fault," Scotty chuckled, tipping his head back far enough over the armrest to peer at Corry upside-down. Putting on an almost desperate voice, he continued, "I shoulda known gettin' mixed up with the likes o' you woulda been trouble. Now here I am, just completely devastated and contemplatin' jumpin' from a cliff, all because--"

Corry barely managed to chew a smile down. *Barely*. "You have melodrama down to a fine science."

"I'm insulted. This is genuine, pure, complete heartache!" Scotty pressed a hand to his chest, over his ostensibly broken heart, still looking at Corry with an absurd amount of fake woe. "I'm dyin' here, Corry, and ye just have to go and twist the knife."

Cor raised an eyebrow, holding onto his composure by some miracle. "If you're heartbroken, pal, I'm Surak of Vulcan."

Apparently, though, Scotty was well over his lovesickness, and grinned quick and bright. "Nice to meet ye. Did ye know that I happen to be Bonnie Prince Charlie?"

"And here I thought you were Johnny Walker."

"Just happens to be a barely tolerable whisky, if one has to make do with *blended*. I suppose that'd work too."

"Spoken like a lush. Or a snob. Or a snobby lush."

Scotty snorted back at him. "Tasteless hack."

"But at least I'm not a chicken."

"No, but ye may be a turkey."

"Rich, coming from the goose."

"Uhm-- would that make ye a, uh-- penguin?"

Corry rolled his eyes, but finally gave into the laugh he'd been holding back. "Ye're pathetic."

"Yes, *mother*."

## Part I: Balancing Equations: Chapter 3

### Chapter 3:

Tuesday, December 6th, 2242  
Weikman Lecture Hall, Theatre 2B  
Starfleet Engineering Academy  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth

Falling back into a schedule was sort of like reading a book that's been read a thousand times. You knew what was coming, spent a few hours re-reading, and occasionally you might cross a paragraph you'd read before and never properly appreciated. That was what Historical Engineering and Design class was like as well; going over the old and familiar, and gaining a new appreciation for it. The professor was a commander in Starfleet whose love for engineering was surpassed only by his love of history, hence making it the perfect combination for him to teach.

He wasn't a bad teacher either, and his passion for the subject was infectious. Scotty wasn't the most historically-inclined student, reserving his attachments for modern day designs, and even he found the occasional lecture that made him look up from whatever schematic he was poring over to listen.

This was not one of those days.

Going over Cochrane's first designs was terrific, getting a real in-depth view on how the man's mind had worked when he had basically invented the modern age; it was a whole different experience from trying to self-study the same.

The advent of the impulse engine had been another really intriguing lecture. He'd even found something mildly interesting in a study of nuclear powered naval destroyers. Then they went back further in their studies, into the age of petroleum-based internal combustion, then steam, and finally back to wood and sailcloth.

Corry loved it, Scotty couldn't stand it, and the last two nights had brought on two arguments that had reached almost epic proportions over which each of them believed to be true; Cor thought that to understand modern starships, one had to understand archaic sailing ships, and Scotty most adamantly disagreed.

And now, sitting in the back of the theater, Scotty had basically tuned out the entire proceeding and concentrated on the fuel-mix ratios for the *Deravian*-class freighters, which went right along with a recent battle the *Constitution* had engaged in with some Orion raiders. Historical Engineering was an elective, taken mostly for the credit, and even if he didn't do more than take common sense guesses on the exams, he could still pass it.

So he didn't hear the next words, but if he had, he *might* have started to worry.

"As this is my last year, gentlebeings," Professor Barrett said, pacing in front of the podium, "I've decided to do something a little different. I understand that every other year, we've taken a written exam, and that's what you're expecting. But since this is the last time I'll have the distinct pleasure of teaching cadets, we're going to have a practical final exam."

Waiting until the students quieted down, he stepped back and drew a few lines on the chalkboard, the most elementary lines of a sailing vessel. That drew more concerned whispers, but he continued without a word of reproach, "This year, we're going to be building vessels. More specifically, sailing vessels, all the way from an initial design to the final launch, and perhaps even further. This project will take the rest of the year, and we'll begin next week, so prepare yourselves."

"Sir?" One of the cadets in the front row raised his hand, eyebrows drawn in a frown. "This sounds awfully time-consuming, will it interfere with our other classes?"

Barrett smiled, leaning on the podium. "Well, Mr. Jansson, that might depend on how much you can get done in class, and on your personal time."

Jansson cringed, probably not wanting to ask anything else for fear of the answer, and Corry jumped in without hesitation, "Will we have a choice on what sort of vessel we're building, Professor?"

"I'll have you all broken into teams and assigned a specific material to work with, but so long as you're historically accurate, the design's entirely your discretion." Barrett glanced at the chronometer, then back at the student body. "Assemble any questions you have and I'll answer them tomorrow." As if on cue, the chime ended the class.

Now the chime was akin to Pavlov's work with the dog; even the most engrossed senior cadets heard it through whatever technology-induced haze they had fallen into, and Scotty wasn't any different. Corry had speculated aloud on the feasibility of building one just for the sake of getting Scotty to pay attention when he was otherwise disinclined.

Of course, Cor never followed through on the half-threat, but the chime still had pulled Scotty back to the moment.

Corry had bounded up the steps to the top of the hall in the meantime and was now waiting impatiently for Scotty to finish organizing his books. "This is just gonna be great. In fact, I can't think of a better final."

"Final? In December?" Scotty didn't look up, sure he was just hearing things. No one had finals in December, unless it was only a semester

class, and none of his classes were.

"Did you even hear a word? Hell, a syllable?" Corry leaned on the back wall, one eyebrow going up.

"Nu uh. See, 'bout two weeks ago, the *Constitution* had a run in with not just a pirate ship-- oh no, a whole damn fleet o' the bastards. So there they are--" Scotty set his books down and gestured with both hands, having no trouble visualizing what he was describing, "surrounded on all sides, takin' hits from every quarter. Shields go down, she's practically floatin' dead in space, an' Cohlburn -- that's her Chief -- he has t'rewire the whole bloody relay system, reroute power directly from the engines, can't even use the converters or the regulators--"

Corry rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "Can I just guess at the end? It works, the ship survives, and goes on to demolish the whole pirate fleet."

Scotty shot him a dirty look, pausing in mid-gesture. "No, but she set 'em runnin'."

"I was close." Cor smiled a genial, somewhat disarming smile. "So you heard absolutely nothing about how, for our final, we're going to be designing, building, and maybe even sailing something with real, honest-to-god sails? You know, those ships you call archaic piles of lumber?"

Scotty blinked once, twice, and when it clicked he had to run it back a few times just to make absolutely *sure* he'd heard that correctly. "Ye're kiddin'!"

"Nope!" Corry said, beaming. "And care to guess when we're starting this little project?" Apparently taking the dumbfounded shake of the head as a 'go-ahead', he dropped the metaphorical bomb, "Next week."

Scotty finally looked at the blackboard. When he saw the lines, he wanted to crawl into a dark hole. "Next-- next week? As in, actually next week? We're gonna start workin' on *this* next week?"

Corry sighed happily, starting down the steps and for the exit. "I knew you'd be thrilled."

"Displacement, buoyancy, rightin'-arms an' rightin' movements, deep-v instead o' shallow draft-- ohhhhh *god*." Scotty buried his face in his hands and moaned softly, just trying not to let the headache he had drive him to throwing himself out the window. This entire business of building a sailing ship was mind-numbing -- in fact, he could feel his brain cells dying a slow, painful death.

It didn't help that out of twenty team members, Corry had placed him as head shipwright.

"It's not that bad, is it? It's engineering, at any length," Cor pointed out, closing the door behind him and setting down the three bags he'd brought.

"He's been mumbling about it since you left." Jerry Jansson stood from where he was perched on the table, setting aside an ancient book to go snoop in the bags.

Scotty scowled, pulling the drawing board back onto his lap and looking down at it. He'd been working on it for the past week when he couldn't find literally *anything else* to do, and still felt utterly hopeless at it. Corry had decided that they were going to be all traditional Maine, and build a schooner -- well and good, aye, but the mathematics were agony.

Just the business of translating the *words* used several hundred years ago into actionable effort was a whole process unto itself. It wasn't like there were a whole lot of dictionaries that spanned between the late 1800s and the 2200s.

And, frankly, Scotty resented the hell out of the fact he was stuck doing this instead of something that would actually have a bearing on his future career. "A'right," he said, glaring at his teammates, "lemme see someone else do this. Lemme see one o' you try'n figure out these calculations and make bloody sense of 'em."

Corry shook his head and stepped over, peering over his shoulder. "You have a whole group here who'll help. It's not like you have to do this alone."

"GZ, the rightin'-arm, is drawn from G perpendicular to the direction of buoyancy--" Scotty frowned deeper still, raising an eyebrow up at Corry. "Tell me again what this has to do with modern shipbuildin'?"

Corry picked the drawing board up, looking over the rough drawing for a moment before replying, "Okay, look at it like this. In starship design, we have a keel, a center of gravity for gravity-well purposes, a displacement for any low-atmosphere flying. It's not that different. Just-- I dunno, try thinking of it like a starship, but on water."

"Suuure, a starship on water." Scotty leaned back, crossing his arms. "Why, that's bloody brilliant, isn't it? Just imagine that starships have buoyancy, angles of heel, metacenters and inch trim movements."

"Exactly!" Corry chirped, beaming a blatantly false grin, passing the drawing board back. "And at least try to have fun with it."

"Hey, Corry! Are you gonna let us eat, or do we have to wait for a finished schematic?" Joe Albright asked, calling from the table where the bags were still sitting.



"Nah. We'd starve to death." Corry shot his roommate a sharpish look before going back to the table himself, ignoring the fact that Scotty was glaring darts right back at him.

Instead of having the common decency to at least *acknowledge* the look he was getting, though, Corry fished out the burgers, tossing one to Albright. "Can you believe I paid three credits apiece for these things? Processed veggies made to taste like meat, and they charge three credits for it."

"Welcome to modern economics," Jansson chuckled, already through two burgers and heading into a third. "Supply and demand? Nu uh. Gouge the hungry cadets! Make 'em beg!"

"Or pay out through the project budget." Corry sat down on a chair, kicking back and munching at the food, though it looked like it was a half-hearted effort at best.

Albright smirked. "Well, if we're not going to build a ship, at least we won't be hungry when we fail, right?" he asked, and Scotty thought about telling Joe where he could stick *that* particular opinion.

"Just fat and slothlike in our misery!" Corry howled, melodramatically, holding the burger out in one hand and putting his other hand over his heart, "But soft! What shout through yonder doorway breaks? It is the calisthenics officer and we are the victims! Arise, fair cadets, and slay that chunkiness, which is congealed about your bellies!"

"Oh man," Jansson laughed, crumpling the wrapper and throwing it into the bag, "I don't think Shakespeare had that in mind at all."

"Shakespeare never attended Starfleet Engineering Academy, either," Albright answered, glancing at his watch. "Hey, shouldn't we be getting back to the dorms? It's getting late."

"Yeah, yeah."

"You two go ahead," Corry said, taking another bite of the sandwich before throwing it away. "I'll see about getting our head architect to move a little quicker."

*Will ye, then?* Scotty worked his jaw and cracked his neck, bracing for the argument that was about to take place, eyeballing Corry across the room.

"Good luck." Jansson shrugged, pulling on his cadet-issue jacket. "Give me a call if you need anyone to take over."

Cor frowned, leaning back in his chair. "All right. See you guys later." Waiting until they were out of the loft, he stood and stretched as if he was somehow oblivious to the fact that he was being watched. He just took a deep breath and let it out, then started back across the room, pausing a few feet away and offering, in a tone that seemed half-conciliatory, "You know, the sooner we get this done, the sooner we can move onto something else."

Pity Scotty wasn't remotely interested in reconciliation right now. He tipped his chin up, eyes narrowed. "It's pointless! A damn waste o' time, completely and totally foolish, no matter how ye look at it."

Corry rubbed at the bridge of his nose, not answering right away; when he did, his voice was even and calm, "Listen. I know you're less than thrilled about this whole thing, you've made that perfectly clear from the outset. But this isn't just your grade, this is the whole group's grade too."

Scotty barely bit back a growl, stung by the tone even more than the words, and set the drawing board down. He stood and snatched his coat from the back of the chair, before rounding back on his roommate. "I know that. I understand that perfectly, but if ye wanted a happy trooper, Cor, ye shoulda picked someone else."

"But I didn't, and dammit, this is your responsibility!" Corry leveled a hard look at Scotty, holding it until Scotty looked down at his boots. "Look, I'm not going to just hand this over to someone else. You're the best designer here, and as soon as you can drag yourself away from this fog of self-pity, we can get this project moving."

"Ye're a *bastard*," Scotty snapped back, face hot as he picked his head back up, biting each word off and getting very little satisfaction out of the small wince Corry gave back.

"Hate me if you want, but I'm not going to let you moan and groan about how stupid this is until we're all trying to explain why we failed our final," Corry said, after a moment, going back to that even voice of before. He took another deep breath and let it out, and when he continued, it was notably softer, "I know this isn't your idea of a good time, but if I didn't think you were the best man for the job, I wouldn't have appointed you. Use that genius of yours and make the best of it; do that, and I'll buy the scotch."

"Ye'll have it by the deadline, and not a day earlier." Scotty pulled his coat on, not sure at that moment whether he was more furious or more hurt by the dressing down he just got. For that matter, he wasn't even sure why he felt either of those so keenly as he did, but he also wasn't going to stick around until one of them ended up saying something that they couldn't take back.

Without a backwards glance, shoulders square, he all but marched out.

Morning came inevitably, bringing a still soft rain and the smell of sea so strong that it permeated everything. Corry drifted awake to the

buzzer, reaching back with one hand to smack the off button sloppily without opening his eyes.

It was too early to go to class; too early to think of anything but staying in bed, for that matter.

The evening before had been spent in a stew of frustration and guilt, and the sense that even if he'd been right, he'd handled things poorly. He *knew* how much Scotty resented having to work on something that didn't make any sense to him, and no matter how much Corry loved the idea of them designing and building a schooner as a project, he could get where his roommate would be chewing tacks about it.

On the other hand, he was the project leader; regardless of friendship, it was his job to make sure things were happening apace.

On the other *other* hand, though, he couldn't immediately think of many worse things than being on the outs with his best friend.

He had spent a bit of time sitting with the board himself the night before, looking over Scotty's sketches and notes and admiring what was there, even if what was there wasn't much yet. Despite himself, he'd found himself smiling at some of the notes, too: *Schooner, fore and aft, LOD ≈ 106', LOA ≈ 157', Beam ≈ 26' - GZ? GM? ITM? Help?* And he was a little surprised and a little more guilty yet about the fact that some of the figures had been worked out longhand under those notes, too, with translations and formulae scribbled down along the side. When he'd come back to their room, he'd hoped for a chance to actually talk things out, but Scotty hadn't been back yet and he'd fallen asleep waiting.

Now it was still too early, but he was awake anyway when the secondary buzzer went off, and smacked the off button again, a little harder.

He didn't really want to open his eyes, not wanting to face the fact that his best friend was probably still angry with him, but he finally heaved a sigh and did so, sitting up and then glancing around.

Scotty was long gone himself, apparently. His second pair of service boots *and* his civilian pair were even put away neatly in the bottom of his closet; testament that Corry must have struck a nerve. He hadn't been there when Cor had come in last night, and if not for the boots, Corry would never have guessed the other cadet had shown back up.

Feeling another pang of self-recrimination, he opened his own closet, trying to figure out how he could patch things up between them.

His uniforms hung neatly, sharp grays that he actually tried to keep nice and crisp for class. Reaching to grab one, he stopped short when he saw the note hanging by engineer's putty from the shelf, and after a moment puzzling over it, he pulled it down to unfold and read it.

*Cor,*

*Here they are, every last one of them -- every last one of them that I could manage anyway. Albright should be able to check them and if he could finish the weight distribution studies, I would be in his debt.*

*Scott*

Corry smiled a little, half-bemused, half-relieved, before folding the note and pulling the old-fashioned notebook down. Sure enough, in slightly shaky but otherwise neat block lettering were the equations, from the righting movement to the center of buoyancy above the keel, all done in longhand and with notations and citations in the margins. Even the inch-trim was worked out.

He didn't want to think too much about how long and hard the night must've been for Scotty to have pulled off a feat like that, but he did think about where he could find a good bottle of Scotch. After all, fair was fair.

Slipping the note into the front cover, he set the notebook on his dresser and went back to getting dressed for the day.

*It had* been a long night, spent under the overhanging roof of a dockside building in the cold damp air, using the weak light from above to write. One hand with a pencil, the other turning the pages of the shipbuilding handbook -- written circa 1845, though a modern copy for the sake of preservation -- and Scotty had worked out every single equation that he could until he was too tired to see straight.

Why he did was well beyond him. When he'd told Corry that he wouldn't have it until the deadline, he had been serious. Deciding wisely that he needed more time to cool off before putting himself back in proximity to his roommate, he'd checked in with Security, let them think he was in for the night, then snuck out and headed down for a walk along the docks.

Pacing the concrete in the dark, listening to the tide lapping against the piers, he tried and mostly failed not to let that whole damn argument eat at him; Cor might have been right about him dragging his feet, maybe in the hopes someone in the administration would pull veto on Barrett's idea of a final, but even beyond the project, Scotty wasn't quite sure how to reconcile what it was to be at any real odds with his roommate.

Finally frustrated by the anxious and tired loops his mind was running, though, around midnight he'd decided to just work on the project's equations a little and cut down on what he'd have to do the next day. It was a quick walk back to the dorms, and it hadn't been hard to scale the fence and slip into the basement window that was always left open by the last cadet who had been doing laundry that night.

It took maybe a half-hour to get in and back out, a task Scotty had gotten damn good at since moving into the dorms. He'd gone back to the docks, found a spot out of the rain, pulled the books and notebook from where he'd shielded them under his coat, and gone to work.

Now, at not quite a quarter to ten in the morning, he could barely stay awake. The lecture hall was nice and warm, pleasant after being chilled all night by mist, and he really wanted to nod off and sleep through the rest of class. Or skip out altogether and go to bed. Or even get a nice,

hot cup of coffee-- never mind. Long hours were an unbeatable part of being an engineer in the service.

"Hey."

And there was the other half of the reason he'd stayed out all night. Trying to muster up some indignation and failing, Scotty glanced sidelong at Corry, who'd somehow managed to slip into the hall without him noticing. "What?"

Corry winced slightly, setting his books down on the desk. "Thanks for finishing the equations."

"Welcome."

"...are you still mad?"

"Noooooo, o' *course* not." Really, he wasn't too angry now, but it didn't hurt to make Corry squirm. As far as Scotty was concerned, he deserved it a little at least; Corry might have ultimately been right to deliver that dressing down, but it didn't take the sting away. "Give those t' Albright?"

"Yep. He was overjoyed; he says he can have them all polished and finished by Tuesday, a whole three days before deadline," Cor said, quietly, leaning on his books and looking down at the guest lecturer. "I really like the design, you know."

Scotty frowned slightly, leaning back and crossing his arms. He wasn't in the mood for small talk, being friendly, or anything that required energy. "Aye."

"And I went out and got you something." Corry grinned in sudden good-humored pride, pulling an old, square bottle out of his carryon and offering it over. "Fair's fair and all."

"Cor! Bloody hell, put that away!" Scotty answered in a quiet rush, once he got a good look at the label. "Are ye daft, pullin' that out in here?"

"Nah, she's not paying attention," Corry answered, but he put the scotch away just in case. "It's some good stuff though, cost me a bundle so you'd better appreciate it."

"Ye're bribin' me."

Corry pegged his eyebrows up, a hopeful and earnest look that was almost impossible to brush off as anything less than sincere. "Is it working?"

Scotty chuckled, shaking his head. So much for staying mad. "Aye. It's workin'."

Barrett was indeed pleased, probably not having expected the cadets from Team C to finish stage one early. He had assigned Corrigan as the leader, partly for the sake of prior experience and partly because he was reasonably people-oriented, and they had drawn wood to work with as their primary material. Team A had gotten aluminum, no easy find in the modern day. Team B had gotten steel, Team D had fiberglass, and so forth.

So looking over the finished equations, he seemed happy with the progress. "Gentlemen, I'm impressed."

"Thank you, sir," Corry answered for the rest of his team. He tried to ignore the looks they were getting from the rest of the class; it wasn't their fault they seemed to have the majority of the talent. "Do we have permission to move onto the next stage?"

"Absolutely. I'll give you a list of distributors. I take it you've worked out which woods you'll be using?"

Albright spoke up, having adjusted Scotty's figures enough to work with the different densities, "Yes, sir, we've decided we're going to work with oak primarily."

"Very good. I'll expect your detailed schematics by the next deadline," Commander Barrett said, offering the notebook back to Corry. "Good luck."

Cor took the notebook and turned to leave, the rest of his team following on his heels. Most of the twenty-member crew was waiting to start the actual work, reading up on the physical process of building a ship and working with the timbers; the design team was the one working on the more mental level. Jansson was in charge of working on the material plans, Albright was the man who had to adjust the initial equations for every change made in the ship, and Scotty was heading up the overall design, in charge of the schematics. Not that he had to do it alone, since Albright and Jansson were damn good designers as well, and Corry was willing to help even if his main design strengths were generally smaller scale.

It was a good team, and Corry was pretty sure they wouldn't have any trouble with the rest of the cadets either. He just regretted Maggie being assigned to Kelley's team and not his; it just tickled him when she returned his smile on the way out of the hall.

"Now we're movin', baaaaby," Jansson sang, impromptu, skipping a step. "Team C, as in c-ya later."

"Ye're too cheerful. Stop it," Scotty teased, in a good mood himself. With the worst of the architectural math out of the way and no more discord in their dorm room, his disposition had improved considerably.

"I'm just thinking about the looks on all of their faces when we came trotting in with our finished math. I mean, you could just *bathe* in the stench of anguish." Jerry stopped outside of another theater. "I'll catch up to you three later, and we'll see what we can get done before break."

Corry grinned, waving. "Thanks, Jer." Albright had just peeled off to chase after his girlfriend, and the entire atmosphere at the academy had taken a turn for the better; it might have been the rain pausing for a break, but it was more likely the upcoming winter break.

Tossing a glance at Scotty, Corry asked, "Ready for another stretch?"

Scotty thought about it for a moment, shifting his books from one arm to the other. "Honestly? No. But I can do it."

"We still have that whole bottle of Scotch to celebrate with."

"Aye, but we have class tomorrow, too."

Cor shrugged, but let it drop at that. "What're you doing over break?"

Scotty blew a breath out that sounded resigned. "Mum wants me home for Christmas. You?"

"Eh, same here. Care to hang out for New Years?"

Scotty stepped out of the building, holding the door open with his foot for Corry, mulling the idea over and eying Cor with a slightly calculating look that instantly made Corry wonder what he was getting into. "Aye, why not?" Scotty asked, finally. "But you come over to Scotland, this time." He shrugged, adding with a smirk, "Give ye a chance to meet my family."

## Part I: Balancing Equations: Chapter 4

### Chapter 4:

Saturday, December 31st, 2242

Unmarked Drive in BFE

On the Outskirts of Aberdeen, Scotland, Earth

The moment he got there, Corry understood all of a sudden exactly why Scotty had been so nervous first walking up to his house in Maine. It wasn't so much the uneasiness of being in a strange place; in this case, on a long driveway outside of Aberdeen proper, half-secluded in the woods, with a stiff wind blowing out of the North and the underlying smell of another country altogether.

No, it wasn't that, it was knowing that you were going to talk to people who you didn't know, and try to make a good impression because that was what was no doubt expected of you by your best friend and co-conspirator. That was why he stood outside of the brightly lit house for a good twenty minutes in the cold, mustering his courage.

The house itself was a story and a half of stone and wood, and the windows glowed in a cheerful welcome. All around were people's vehicles, and that alone was an odd lot, from an actual shuttlecraft off in the clearing to the right, to a horse-drawn carriage tied to the fence along the drive. Raucous laughter occasionally drifted out from the cracked door, and every once in awhile a shout was heard for something or other.

So Corry took his time getting up his courage, trying to figure out how he would fit into Scottish customs, since from what he had heard rumor of, they were far flung and varied. He paced, rubbing his hands together, and hoped for salvation.

Of course, what he ended up getting could only *dubiously* be called that.

"So ye plan on standin' here all night, just bidin' yer time?"

Corry turned back, raising an eyebrow at his roommate, who had snuck up in the shadows. "I'm-- I'm just admiring-- I mean, I'm taking a breath of fresh air. Long ride here, you know."

"Aye, right." Scotty stepped over, sticking his hands into his pockets. "I didna think ye'd make it."

"Didn't," Corry corrected, though more jokingly. Near a year ago, he'd been more serious about toning down that accent for the sake of getting Scotty through Basic Language; now it was halfway habit. "And I did."

Scotty twitched at the correction, probably suffering flashbacks to when he was being stopped every sentence. "Sorry, *didn't*. And speakin' of, my cousins decided tae tell me I was talkin' odd."

Corry grinned. He counted that as a success. "Yeah? Well, that just makes my day. But I haven't quite succeeded in getting you ostracized yet."

Scotty smirked at that briefly, something flashing across his face for a split second before he shrugged. "I've ostracized myself. Mum went and put me in charge o' watchin' the whole lot o' brats. And while they may well be bonnie lads an' lassies every other day, they've been spoiled rotten all evenin'." Tossing a glance back at the house, he snorted. "I'm in no rush whatsoever tae get back in."

"Makes two of us, then," Corry muttered, leaning on the fence that lined the driveway, side-eying the horses a few meters down from him for a moment before looking back to Scotty. "Anything I should know before going in there? Like-- culture-specific greetings, or um-- and do I have to eat haggis? Or wear a kilt? Or do some sort of weird sword dance?"

"What?" Scotty blinked, then shook his head, amused. Dropping his voice to a conspiring whisper, he leaned forward and confided in perfect deadpan, "Corry, whatever idiot tourist guidebook ye read tellin' ye this muck, throw it out. How the hell have ye lived in Belfast for almost four years, where ye can practically *spit* the distance tae Scotland, and ye still buy intae this nonsense?"

Corry frowned. "But I thought--"

"Know what she made? Steak an' potatoes, oysters, um-- Chaudrée de l'Atlantique au saumon--"

"Huh?" Corry asked, trying to ignore how the French accent was utterly butchered.

"Salmon chowder. French salmon chowder."

"Like chowder as in something not unlike *New England Clam Chowder*? Red or white?" This was already beginning to look a little brighter. Corry was almost sure he would have to go through arcane rituals, and now someone was presenting him with a sort of homelike dish.

"White, and it's somethin' like that, aye," Scotty admitted, with a barely concealed smirk.

Corry thought about it for a moment. "So I won't have to eat haggis?"

"Noooooo."

"And you have something like clam chowder?"

"Ayeeeee." Glancing to the door again, then back at Corry, Scotty raised his eyebrows. "Ready tae give this a try, or should I go and slay a

sheep first, bathe in its blood and chant a spell tae keep the demons away from ye?"

"I think I'm ready." Corry steeled himself as well as he could, walking towards the house. He wasn't sure what he expected when he opened the door, exactly, but he certainly noticed that there were people everywhere. *Everywhere*. Older people, people his age, children-- it was a *madhouse*. Even for Cor, who loved a good party, the sheer chaos of the place made him feel like he was being assaulted.

Backpedaling slightly, he ran into his roommate, who gave him a shove. "Uhhhh..."

"Now who's the chicken?"

That got Corry to blow off his surprise and knock his shoulder against Scotty's. "Am not."

Scotty rolled his eyes in exasperation, leaning on the doorframe and pointing. "All right, we'll start nice and easy. That's my mum Caitlyn back there, the one dishin' out soup. She's the reason we're eatin' French food. And o'er there's my father, Robert. He's an artsy type-- does interior designin'. The sterling example of humanity he's talkin' to is Clara. She's my sister, and thinks she's the best thing to come to the art community since Monet. Still with me?"

Corry nodded seriously, filing the names in his mental cabinet. "Still here."

"Good." Scotty nodded to a middle-aged woman sitting on the couch, surrounded by children of all sizes. "And that'd be Colleen, one o' my aunts, and that brood beggin' her for candy consists of -- in no particular order, mind -- Mary, William, another Robert, Tara, Heather, Heck -- I still think he was named as a joke -- Fiona (for my Nan), Kathleen, and Eileen. Now, they don't all belong tae her; some're Stuarts, a couple o' McGowans, yet more Scotts."

"Is that all? Please say that's all," Corry whispered aside, just trying to remember a few of those names -- and that was only about a fourth of the people actually in the room. He was suddenly glad his family was so contained.

"No, we still have the rest o' the aunts, uncles and cousins. Includin' the ones outside on the back deck." Apparently taking some mercy, though, Scotty grinned. "But I'll let ye take a--"

"Montgomery! Who've ye got there, lad?"

--break." Taking a deep breath, Scotty shrugged at Corry and started weaving his way through the people, clearly trying hard not to step on any children who happened to be underfoot. After looking back over his shoulder to make sure his roommate was following -- which Corry *was* -- he made his way to the back table where his mother was. "Mum, this is Cor-- er, Andrew Corrigan, my roommate at the Academy."

"Oh, I'm so happy tae meet ye!" She seemed to be, too. She practically beamed. "Ye ken, it's really good Monty has a friend, he was always so *shy* as a bairn--"

Scotty wasn't quite able to stifle a tortured grimace. "Mum--"

"Ne'er ye mind, Montgomery, ye just be a good lad and get a few more bowls from the kitchen."

"Aye, Mum," Scotty said, with a sigh, slinking off down the dark hallway towards the other brightly lit room.

Corry resisted the urge to take his turn to smirk, though some part of him was wincing internally in sympathy. But it *was* kind of nice to see the tables turned somewhat, and he offered over his best schoolboy smile to Caitlyn. "Ma'am, it's a pleasure. And this chowder smells just terrific."

"Ye mean that? Here, let me get ye a bowl, ye poor thing, ye must be starved after flyin' o'er here from Maine." Smiling in turn, she went to ladling out some of the white soup.

Taking that few seconds to get his bearings, Corry finally started relaxing. Aside from the hustle and bustle of so many people, the house itself was very-- warm toned and lively. It wasn't as brightly lit as his parents house, instead having a sort of mellow lighting, and a fire was burning in the stone fireplace. Every spare piece of furniture was in use, and it seemed like everyone was relaxed, just a rather large family gathering. Though, he did idly wonder how Scotty managed to survive living in a place that got this loud on the regular.

Taking the bowl that was offered to him, he smiled thankfully at Caitlyn. Cripes, but it was almost uncanny how much Scotty looked like his mother; same coloring, same lines. It wasn't hard to see who had inherited what from whom. "You're a professional chef, right?"

"Aye, spent my whole life cookin'. Monty told me ye hailed from Maine, and I thought ye might like somethin' that reminded ye o' home a bit." Pausing for a moment to fix a lock of hair that had fallen loose from her bun, she looked around the room. "And speakin' of, where's that lad gotten tae? It doesna take much tae distract 'im, does it?"

Corry nodded in diplomatic agreement, though in the back of his mind he was wondering where she got that from -- trying to distract Scotty when he was working was like trying to get blood out of a stone. Admittedly, it still remained one of Corry's favorite hobbies. He took a bite of the soup, then asked, "Want me to go find him?"

"If ye like. Kitchen's just right down there."

Nodding smartly, Corry took his bowl with him as he made his way back towards the kitchen. Stepping in, he didn't immediately find Scotty; well, not until he looked around the corner of the counter and found him fiddling with the garbage incinerator, anyway. "Your mother's looking for you."

"In a minute," Scotty replied, distractedly, sitting back for a moment to squint at the readout panel. "I *just* got this thing workin' a few days ago, and the ancient piece o'-- never mind." Taking a moment to sigh, with an expression that could only be described as 'henpecked to bloody

ribbons', he looked back up at Cor. "Bowls, right?"

"Yeah. I'll get 'em if you want, though."

"Ye'd have my eternal thanks."

Corry chuckled, shaking his head and searching through the cabinets until he found the bowls that matched the one he left on the counter. "You look like you need to get out of here."

Scotty scoffed, quietly. "Understatement o' the century there."

"So what're we gonna do?"

Scotty stood, brushing his hands off and leaning on the counter, thoughtfully. "I was thinkin' that if we decided to avoid runnin' around the whole o' Aberdeen with the family, we could be smart lads and spend Hogmanay doin' a little -- how to put this politely? -- ditchin' the relatives and gettin' stupid at the pubs."

"Hmmm. Hang out with your brood or go drink, hang out with your brood or go drink--" Corry grinned, mischievously. "I think I'll take option B."

"Aye, I thought ye might," Scotty said, looking downright relieved, before picking up the asked-for bowls.

Corry had been intending to do that, but with a shrug, he just finished the chowder while Scotty took the bowls out to his mother instead.

It wasn't that he would have minded going around and doing whatever they were supposed to be doing, but after seeing just how many people were there and how messy it all felt, the idea of branching off seemed a lot more appealing. And he was getting the impression that his roommate needed some kind of rescuing at this point, too.

(Only later would he realize that his being invited at all was almost certainly the set-up for an excuse for Scotty to leave.)

For now, he rinsed the bowl out, then crossed his arms, waiting until Scotty made his re-entrance looking even more harried and frazzled than before. "Clean getaway?" Corry asked, not without sympathy.

"Clean as it ever gets, in this house," was the surprisingly cynical answer, given in a mutter. Zipping his jacket, Scotty tossed a glance to Cor. "Ready?"

Corry shrugged, standing up straight. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"So, here I was, took off like a bloody fool in the middle of a gale-- a'right, wasnae the middle o' the gale, but the wind was kickin' up. An' me, bein' the patent divvy I am on occaaaasion, jus' stayed aloft, clingin' tae the bar for dear life." Downing what had to have been his umpteenth straight shot, Scotty leaned on the bar with a distinctly plastered look. They still hadn't made it into the actual city, having stopped off at one of the smaller roadside taverns for *just one drink*.

That was several *just one drinks* ago; they had started the night pretty much like they had every time they'd gone pub-crawling over the past several months, by eventually leaping into a wager on who could drink more quicker and still remain standing. After knocking down a couple of shots, Scotty finally seemed to relax; after several more, he somehow stumbled into telling a hang-gliding story.

Corry laughed, as much for the way the whole comedy of errors was relayed as for the mental images it produced, shaking his head and wiping at his eyes. "Didja land safe?"

"Nooooooo, oh no, nu uh. I'm really--" Nodding a few times, Scotty leaned closer, practically draped against Corry's shoulder, whispering, "--dead. As a doornail." Sitting back up again with a bright grin, he continued, "O' course I landed safe. Right smack in the middle of a bale o' hay, had tae wade through cattle, got back tae Edward's stinkin' tae high heaven. Was a right bonnie trip, that."

"I once took the boat out alone in a storm." Corry nodded as well, with a seriousness that was bordering goofiness, draining his own glass and gesturing for another. "Was all kinda windy out there, white capped waves, and here I was on a skiff getting the hell beat outta me. Made it back alive, though, unlike you."

"Aye, poor dead me. I'll drink tae that."

"And I'll drink to being alive."

Picking up his shot, Scotty took it in one belt, which was no doubt less painful this late in the festivities. Slamming the glass down on the bar upsidedown, he looked at the clock, squinting; when Corry followed the look, he saw it was almost 2200, and they still weren't even into the city proper, having been ranging around the woodlands surrounding. "We havetae go."

"I dun wanna move, though," Cor complained, though he pulled himself up off of the barstool reluctantly. "Tell me again why we took the horses?"

"Couldnae convinced anyone tae let us take a real vehic... ve..." Not quite able to get the word right, Scotty finally settled on, "ye ken."

"Ayuh." Tossing down a handful of credits and not even bothering to count them -- and shaking his head at Scotty giggling over the *ayuh* there -- Corry half-walked, half-staggered out to the tree where they had tied the two horses they'd hijacked quite slyly from the carriage.

Looking up at the largish beast, he tried to figure out how to climb up, what with riding bareback like that. Hard enough when he was sober, but now that he was officially getting just a bit tipsy, it was proving to be impossible. "Can't we just lead 'em?"

"Ye wanna walk?" Taking the bridle and half using it for support, Scotty led his steed (the put upon beast that it was) over to the steps of the tavern. After about three tries, he succeeded in getting up onto the horse's back, and promptly gave Corry a smug little look. "See? Easy as can be."

"Smartass."

"Just c'mon."

Following the other cadet's example, Corry took a few tries of his own before clambering up. Taking the reins into his hands, he looked down both ways of the darkened road, pretty oblivious now to the cold wind that was still powering down from the north. "Which way?"

"Thattaway," Scotty said, nodding proudly towards a footpath (or maybe bridle path) into the woods. "I know a short... short..."

"...shortcut?"

"Aye, that." Then Scotty paused and started giggling again. "I mean, *ayuh*, that."

Corry rolled his eyes so hard he almost fell off the horse again, though he ended up chuckling himself even as he asked, "Is that a good idea?"

"Ye wanna get there afore midnight, aye?" Pulling on the reins and bringing a whole new meaning to the term *drunk driving*, Scotty headed for the path, singing some barely-coherent Gaelic-sounding tune.

After a moment, still not sure it was a good idea, Corry followed.

"We're lost." And forgotten, and with no hope of rescue. Corry was getting a little more clear-headed by that point, at least clear enough to notice that the path they had been on was long gone and it was a bit chilly out there. Add in the fact that the horses were about ready to declare a strike -- if he was reading the occasionally laid back ears right -- and it was starting to look bleak.

"We're not lost, just--" Scotty pulled his horse up short, looking around blearily. "Tempor-- uhm, misplaced."

Corry shook his head, then took to surveying the area again. The moon was out, which shed a little light into the trees, but that didn't offer much in the way of direction. "Is all of Scotland this sparsely populated?"

"Nu uh, we shoul'da come 'cross somethin' somewhere by now. Unless we're goin' in circles."

Which was possible, Corry had to allow. They were engineers, after all, not navigators. "Time is it?" he asked, rubbing his eyes briefly.

"Dinna ken."

"Great."

"Mum's gonna murder me. Aye, she'll just string me up an' that'll be the end o' that." Leaning over the horse's neck for a moment, Scotty groaned. "I'm a dead man."

Corry was laughing before he could stop himself. "We established that, didn't we?"

Shooting an irritated glance back, Scotty sat up straight again. "A'right, really dead this time. *Double* dead."

"I won't let 'er kill ya. Who'd design the ship if you bit it?" Cor nudged his horse up until he was alongside Scotty. "Besides, you're *only* my best friend. And think about it! How many Starfleet cadets can say that they got lost in the woods on horseback, drunk, and lived to tell about it?"

Apparently deciding to take advantage of the setup, Scotty lowered his voice to an almost sinister level, eyeing Corry with a wicked look, "Who says we're gonna live?"

Frowning, Corry held that gaze. "Of course we're gonna live. Someone's bound to find us."

"But how soon?" Clearly having all too much fun, Scotty set his horse to a slow walk, circling Corry. "There're stories of all sorts in these parts. In fact," he continued, lowering his voice further still, until it was just above the sound of the wind in the trees, "once I heard 'bout this group o' highwaymen, y'ken, the men who usetae jump from the trees and cut the throats of innocent travelers."

A little spooked, either because of the booze or because his friend was very good at taking advantage of bad situations, Corry swallowed hard. In some part, he knew he was being taken for a metaphorical ride, but he still found himself shivering at a breeze that cut through the trees.

"That's bullshit," he said, trying to sound sure, turning on the horse's back to keep an eye on Scotty. "There haven't been reports of



highwaymen for centuries."

"Oh, but ye never know, do ye? Maybe they're just waitin'; waitin' for someone daft enough to wander away from the lights, away from the safety o' the city. Common 'round these parts, all the way up past the third world war. Cut-throats, radioactive mutants--"

"If there were highwaymen, they'd never bother with two cadets," Corry tried, lamely.

"Waitin' in the trees, watchin' for a chance tae *leap down*--"

Something rustled loudly in the brush, and that was all the influence Corry needed to lose his sense of reality. He almost jumped out of his skin and kicked the horse in the side entirely by accident, and then he held on by the sheer force of terror when it half-reared up, and only just managed to grab onto its mane in time when it took off at a full gallop.

The sound that escaped from Corry's throat was one he would never admit to under pain of death, and was subsequently followed by a number of yelps that numbered something higher than a baker's dozen.

He was getting close to screaming at the tops of his lungs -- perhaps with the result of convincing any Scots within hearing distance that a murder or a supernatural event was taking place -- when Scotty managed to catch up and reach out, getting hold of Corry's runaway horse by the reins and slowing them down.

It was only after both horses were stopped that Scotty started laughing his damn head off, almost falling off his own horse for the force of it. "Cor-- oh, god, the *look* on yer face--!"

Corry glared ice chips, panting for breath, feeling multiple welts on his arms, his chest, his *head*. Not caring whether he'd be able to get back up -- and shaking hard enough he probably *wouldn't* be able to -- he slid down and broke off a thin branch from a sapling nearby. "Just keep laughing."

"It was a stick--! I threw a bloody stick, an' ye lost yer mind." Oblivious to the fact he was due some payback, from the receiving end, Scotty was rubbing the tears out of his eyes and giggling all the way up until Corry swatted him across the arm.

Corry waited until the yelp quit echoing before saying, "Well, you have your stick and I have mine."

"I'm not apologizin'," Scotty said, then fell to rubbing at his arm with a pout, even though Corry was pretty sure it was more surprise than real pain, given his coat. "Ye dinna have to get *mean* about it."

"You scared the hell outta me!" Corry had a brief debate with himself about whether to also explain that he could have *died*, decided that was maybe melodramatic, then finally decided he had gotten the point across and dropped the branch. "Now, before we get into any more trouble, do you have any idea where we are? Or what time it is?"

"No," Scotty answered, looking a bit more sober now. Relatively speaking, anyway, compared to what he had been. "I suppose if we head in one direction, we should end up somewhere. I mean, there's only so far ye can get before hittin' another road."

Corry nodded, still breathing off the wild ride through the forest, dragging himself back up onto the horse's back with some difficulty and taking the reins in hand. He held a hand over his (still pounding) heart for a moment, then gestured. "All right, lead on."

Scotty eyed him askance. "Turn my back on ye? Ohhhh no, by all means," he said, with a sweeping *after you* gesture.

Corry counted to ten quickly in his mind, then pointed out, "You know your way. I don't."

Raising an eyebrow, Scotty asked, "Ye sure? We are lost, after all."

Corry had little choice but to concede that point, but he still sighed as heavily as he could before nudging his horse into a walk, taking the lead.

It was the booms of the fireworks going off in Aberdeen, signaling the new year, that finally gave them the right direction. Of course, by that point, they were both too cold and tired to think about turning around and heading into the city, so they simply sang a few verses to *Auld Lang Syne*, talked back and forth about the great days gone by, and came to the conclusion that this jaunt would probably be remembered simply because of its relative stupidity.

So when the lights of the house came back into view, and the two cadets trudged their tired horses up the lane, it was a welcome sight. One of those, 'you're still alive no matter how stupid you've been' sights, which generally greet the baffled, the moronic, and the young and foolish. They had fulfilled at least two of those requirements, and if they hadn't yet fulfilled the other two, then they were certainly close.

Most of the vehicles were gone, though the carriage that the horses had come from and the shuttlecraft in the field were still there. Shaking his head, Scotty was the first one to stop; slid off of his horse and tied the reins to the fence, close enough to the water trough that had been set up for them.

"My butt's gonna hurt for a month," Cor complained, following his friend's example, then patting the big animal's neck in thanks for not killing him. "I've never ridden a horse that long." Then he paused, squinting, doing a quick skim over his memory. "In fact-- I've never ridden a horse *at all*. Just those little ponies at the Lincoln County Fair when I was-- I dunno, five? Six?"

"Well," Scotty said, amiably, "if anyone tells ye it's like bein' with a woman, ye can tell 'em to take a hike."

Corry scoffed; talk about an erroneous comparison. "*That's* pleasurable. This wasn't."

Shaking his head, Scotty chuckled and headed for the house, then paused; after another moment of petting the horse, Corry realized he was being waited for and followed. His whole body ached, he could feel at least one good welt on his brow from his wild ride through the understory of the forest, but thus far, he wasn't regretting the trip.

(In retrospect, he should have knocked on wood when he had that thought.)

A gut-wrenching, blood-curdling, almost inhuman howl came out of nowhere.

One second, Corry was freezing in place in absolute *terror*, barely making out the shadow-shapes that glowed in streaks and were black otherwise and immediately flashing back to tales of *highwaymen* and *radioactive damned mutants* of all things--

--and in the next, he hit the ground on his back hard enough to knock him breathless.

There was a bit of a scuffle somewhere off to his side; Corry was just about to start swinging himself when his assailant asked, "So, what d'ye think we should do tae our horse thieves 'ere?"

"Oh, I dinna ken. Skin 'em, maybe?" another voice asked back; there was a brief beat and a thump and then it added, "Ach, nephew, watch where ye're slingin' that elbow, lad."

The one sitting on Corry didn't seem to pay any mind to that second part. "Aye, that'd work mos' times. Wouldna learn anything that way, though."

"D-- do I get a vote in all o' this?" Scotty asked, sounding breathless and shaken.

"Course not." The man who had been pinning Corry to the ground stood up and offered a hand down.

Corry took it and clambered to his feet, trembling head to toe; through some kind of bioluminescent paint, the face of the nightmare that had tackled him to the ground grinned broadly, thus making itself even *more* nightmarish.

Needless to say, Corry edged over until he was side-by-side with Scotty, who was shaking about as hard as he was.

"Cor, these--" Scotty paused for a moment, where he clearly tried to find a polite word instead of a curse, before gritting out, "--*gentlemen* happen t' be my uncles."

"Wonderful family," Corry murmured, eyes still wide and heart still hammering.

"Charlie's the name, lad," the one who'd had Corry pinned said, grabbing his lifeless hand and shaking the stuffing out of it. "The horses ye decided to *borrow* happen tae be mine."

"Nice to meet you." It really wasn't, but Corry said it anyway for politeness sake.

"This one's Edward," Scotty muttered, gesturing to their other assailant. "Mum's brothers, an' both a bit wrong in the noggin."

Edward frowned, swatting at his nephew's head lightly, though clearly not trying to actually land said swat. "Watch yer tongue, Montgomery. We prob'ly saved ye a chewin' from yer mother."

"A chewin' would be preferable to bein' scared gray!" Scotty protested, ducking away. "Were ye just layin' in wait?"

Charlie grinned, oblivious to the way Corry cringed when he threw an arm across his shoulders, though he had to reach up to do it. "We saw ye ridin' back the road-- just got here maybe twenty minutes ago. Thought we'd don some warpaint and give ye a proper greetin', o' sorts. O' course, lad, if'n ye want us to tell Cait what happened--" Seeing Scotty blanch even in the low light, he chuckled, "Well, we didna tell 'er *yet*."

"So how 'bout we just use this as a learnin' experience? Ask afore ye borrow a man's horses." Seemingly satisfied with how this was playing out, Edward nodded and headed back for the house; after giving Corry a friendly squeeze, Charlie headed off after him.

Scotty waited until the men were out of earshot before leaning on the fence with both hands and taking a few good, deep breaths, shaking his head. "Unfair."

"If you wanna call foul, I'll deny knowing you," Corry replied, leaning beside his roommate, trying to come to grips with his second big scare of the night. His heart was still pounding, which wasn't helping his various welts and scrapes any. "Man, I'm half tempted to just hop the shuttle back to Belfast tonight. At least I know I'm safe on campus."

"Take me with ye, if ye do," Scotty said, in a rush. Looking back at the house, he added, "I love 'em, Cor, but ye know that old sayin', 'too much of a good thing' an' all that."

Nodding emphatically, Corry had no problem agreeing, "Aye."

## Part II: The Lady Grey: Chapter 1

### Part II: The *Lady Grey*

Today  
    you were far away,  
and I  
    didn't ask you why.

What could I say?  
I was far away.  
You just walked away,  
    and I just watched you.  
What could I say?

How close am I  
    to losing you?

[-The National, About Today](#)

#### Chapter 1:

*Friday, February 3rd, 2243*  
*Malone Road Dormitory, Room 17*  
*Starfleet Engineering Academy*  
*Belfast, Ireland, Earth*

The still-quiet streets of Belfast had been a relief after Aberdeen. It wasn't a tangible thing, like a well-worn sweater, but it was comforting nonetheless. It had effectively been Corry's home for almost four years, minus holidays, school breaks and personal leave. He knew the streets, the little shops to get food that wasn't designed to kill your morale, the brick dormitories and the docks. He had grown to love Ireland, despite complaining heartily about the weather, and though Maine was always his first home, Belfast had become his comfortable second.

It hadn't even taken a day for them to fall back into their habits and routines. Some cadets hated leaving home to come back, and some took a good week or two to settle back in, but Corry and Scotty fell right back into their hard-earned rhythm. After waking up in some pain, drinking enough coffee to send an elephant into spasms and working half-heartedly on the schematics for the project, night found them on their respective sides of the room, pursuing their respective relaxation. The next day was basically the same, and since classes didn't start again until the third, it was all to the good.

When classes did start again, it was with the smooth transition of Starfleet. A new year didn't mean much to the top brass, aside from the fact that they had to type a different date into the computers when they filed the paperwork. It was a little more sentimental to the students -- a new year, a new start, a new chance to take a step towards the stars. The senior cadets were usually the most excited, putting in for their positions on whichever ships they wanted to serve with and most of them aiming for the newly commissioned *Constitution*-class, of course. The best among them would get it, and then it'd go down the line.

Scotty didn't have much to worry about. He was the current valedictorian. He had a choice of anywhere he wanted to go to serve, and already knew what ship he wanted. That was his brass ring.

Corry was still plagued by misgiving about leaving Earth behind to wander the stars. No matter how much he tried to get excited about the prospect of leaving his home planet and exploring the outer reaches of the galaxy, he just couldn't manage to. He was worried about going up there; he got homesick just *thinking* about it, and even engineers on one of the big ships were knocked off regularly by hostile lifeform attacks, equipment errors, being assigned to landing parties.

Dying was a big problem, but the idea of some subspace message informing his family of his demise was even worse.

So he set his sights closer, and concentrated on the schooner so that he wouldn't have to dwell on it. They had their schematics in well in time for the deadline, the materials were delivered, the models were built quickly and efficiently, and they were ready to start laying the keel.

The model that they kept in their room was more for looks. It hadn't been built to be used in the actual process, and the cutaways and such were kept in the mold loft in the Harland & Wolff Shipyards, in berth #22. But this was their personal copy of what the schooner would look like, and since it seemed like ninety-nine percent of their free time was spent working on it with the other cadets, they figured that they deserved it.

She was narrow-bodied; slim and with a deeper draft. The foremast stood shorter and the mainmast taller, the fore-and-aft rigged sails simple enough to handle with the minimum number of crew, even taking into account their sheer area. She had a slightly raised quarterdeck (Corry's

insistence), a main deck and then the below decks and bilge. It had taken the four members of the design team and three more commandeered cadets from the construction team a week solid, every day for hours, working on her plans -- drawing them *by hand* like proper shipwrights of old, no less -- and the work had not been in vain.

The name she ended up getting, though, was the direct influence of the cloth used on the model's sails. Having nothing else to work with, Scotty had decided to sacrifice one of his older uniform shirts and so she ended up with gray sails. It hadn't taken long for Corry to start calling her the *Lady Grey*; first named for her sails, and as an afterthought (for the sake of explaining it to Barrett) for the unwilling nine-day queen. The name stuck; it had a nice sound to it, and it was unanimously decided to keep it for the christening.

"You know, I've thought about it and thought about it," Corry said, tapping his pencil against his temple to emphasize, "and now that we're actually gonna build this thing, we're pretty well-researched, and ready, we still have no clue what to do with her."

"Do? Hopefully set her floatin' an' collect a nice grade for the effort," Scotty replied, sitting on his bunk cross-legged, before going back to scrutinizing the model. "I don't know what else there is to do."

Cor apparently decided to take that as a conversational setup. "There is something: We could finish and then learn how to sail her."

"I'm an engineer, not a sailor," Scotty pointed out, not taking his concentration away from the model, squinting a bit at it as he double-checked the standing rigging to make sure it matched the blueprints in the mold loft. Even if the model was just for looks, he didn't see any reason why it shouldn't be *accurate*.

"Can't be both?"

"I suppose I could, but ye have to remember one vital piece of information, Cor: Once we finish this, it'll be June and less than two months before we ship off. Not much time to learn. Plus, what makes ye think Starfleet would even let us? They're frontin' the bill."

"Welllll, I already know how to sail smaller boats and I've been crew on larger ones, and I'll bet fifty credits that there're at least a few other people on the team who can sail." Corry hummed briefly, the vocal equivalent of a shrug. "I think we can pull it off. I mean, even the higher-ups can't really grudge us a chance to sail what we built."

Scotty finally looked up again, an amused grin crossing his face. "We've not even laid the keel down yet, and ye're already plannin'. Don't count the terranians before they hatch."

Corry grinned right back. "I'm not. I'm counting chickens."

"Almost the same thing."

"Except one's green and looks like a peacock."

"Aye, but it tastes like-- chicken!"

Corry laughed, shaking his head and laying back on his bunk. "Now there's a saying that's been around since the dawn of time."

"Probably because it's so bloody true. Think about it: Man goes off intae the stars, carryin' the hopes for all mankind. Comes across the first planet he sees, lands, decides to kill himself some wild game, just for a change o' pace. And, since chicken taste happens to be a universal constant, what's it taste like?"

"Chicken!"

"Aye. And that's why we still say that everything tastes like chicken," Scotty said, matter-of-factly, finally setting the model aside and picking up the tentative construction schedule they had worked out earlier. He still wasn't entirely thrilled with the whole process, with how time-consuming it was, but every time he considered complaining he likewise thought about incurring the wrath -- or oddly worse, the *disappointment* -- of Andrew Corrigan, and decided that it wasn't worth it.

He shook his head, adding, "I don't think we have that much to worry about, though. Four months should be more'n enough, even with our manpower."

"Yep, that it should," Corry said happily, standing up to go to his desk, where the light on his computer monitor blinked that he had a message. "Long as no one mutinies, anyway."

"Eh, we'll make 'em walk the plank or some other such nonsense." Trying to picture that, Scotty grinned. He wouldn't mind building the ship just so he *could* make someone walk the plank; the complete absurdity of it would be good for a laugh at the very least.

Still, he didn't think anyone was going to mutiny; so far, everyone had taken a liking to the *Lady Grey* because she was such a break from the norm. Even he didn't outright hate the work he was doing now that he'd gotten past the initial brainstorming and had resigned himself to it. From here, it was more manual labor; making the parts fit the theory, making something that could float and carry herself by the power of wind.

He still would have preferred matter and antimatter, or plasma, or maybe even nuclear power, but wind would have to do. It wasn't like he had a choice in the matter.

The click of the monitor turning off had an odd sound, one that rang a bell in his subconscious and gave him pause from his pirate notions to look up. Then he realized, more instinctively than not, that it wasn't the click that was wrong but something else, something that changed the entire feeling of the room in less than a second, and the look on Corry's face backed it up. "Somethin' wrong?"

Cor blinked a few times, as though he'd forgotten he wasn't alone. "Uh, yeah-- I mean, no. I mean, I've gotta go."

Scotty raised an eyebrow. Eh? Go where? "What is it?"

Corry didn't answer immediately, grabbing his carryon out of his closet and grabbing his clothes from the top drawer, shoving them into the bag without much regard for their welfare. When he finally did think to reply to the question, he only spared a brief glance at his roommate. "My Dad-- something's wrong, I gotta go home."

"Anything ye need?" Quick on the uptake, Scotty already was up and offering Corry's boots to him. Whatever it was that had so completely stunned Cor into this state had to be serious enough to not take too much time with questions of what or why. He could always get those answers later.

"Yeah, get my assignments for me if you can. I'll try'n be back quick as I can be, and if I can't, I'll give you a call." Taking the boots and pulling them on, Corry laced them up quickly and tied them, then stood and grabbed his coat. Not even taking a few seconds to pull it on, he all but dashed out the door.

Scotty followed, perplexed and worried. He hated the idea of sitting by while something not-good was happening, and on an impulse, he called after his roommate as he headed down the steps, "Corry!"

Cor paused a flight down, looking back up. "Yeah?"

"If ye-- I mean, if there's--" Scotty tried, aiming to reassure and falling woefully short of the mark.

It must have been clear enough, though. Corry flashed a brief, grateful smile. "I know." And with that, he turned and left.

Letting the door slip closed, Scotty frowned to himself and walked back to the dorm room. That was certainly odd -- in less than five whole minutes, something had changed. Something wasn't right. Shaking his head, he closed the door to the room and went back to sit on his bunk, eyeing the monitor. He could easily get the message, whatever it had been, but that would have been a betrayal, and if there was one thing he wouldn't do it was betray his best friend.

So, he firmly put that thought out of his mind. It was only a matter of time until he found out, and when he did, he was sure that it wouldn't be that bad; worry always made things seem about a million times worse than they actually were.

Feeling a little better with that realization, he pulled the construction schedule back off of his desk, where he'd tossed it to help Corry pack. With the leader gone, the project would fall onto his shoulders as head shipwright, and he sincerely hoped that whatever was wrong would resolve itself in time to turn that responsibility back over. He didn't particularly *want* to lead; that was why he'd been so miserable in Command School.

It wasn't the leadership that was weighing on his thoughts, though. It took only an hour of jotting down notes on who should work when before he realized that it was something else entirely.

It was too quiet.

After months of being stuck in the same room, good times or no, Scotty had gotten so used to Corry's presence that it was almost eerie to *not* have him there.

Certainly there were times when one of them was gone, but there was a strange quality to this silence. It was too complete, too heavy; no idle conversation to ignore, no pencil scratching on paper, no clicks on the keyboard, nothing. The other cadets had gone to bed, no doubt, or were keeping quiet, so there wasn't even background noise.

Too quiet. Mentally berating himself for being silly, since he'd only been left there alone for a relatively short period of time, Scotty went back to working on the schedule. It wasn't like he didn't like being left alone; there was no counting the number of times he'd been trying to work on something he considered of major importance only to snap at Corry for breaking his concentration. Once or twice, he'd even chased the other cadet out with a spanner and threats of serious physical harm, which Cor always took with good humor.

After the initial adjustment period -- in fairness, not the easiest time -- they just got good at living together, each edging towards a middle ground and into a comfortable compromise.

That was the way it was. But there was no one to get harmlessly snippy with, and maybe that was the real problem. No one to be annoyed with, no one to get over being annoyed with.

No one to threaten to throw his boots out the window.

"Ye'd think he's been gone a decade, not an hour," Scotty finally said, then blew out a breath; it was sad that he was enough at wit's end that he was talking to *himself* like some kind of rocket.

Being worried was what made it so quiet, though. He didn't know what was going on. Worse, though, the best friend he had was facing something, alone, and he couldn't do anything about it; couldn't help, couldn't fix things.

Well, sitting there staring absently at the notebook wasn't going to get anything done, and thinking too hard about something that couldn't be changed wouldn't either. Finally deciding that time would tell, Scotty flicked his light off and settled in for bed.

But his thoughts were still an ocean away.

Corry was actually missing for longer than anyone had expected. That alone frazzled Scotty, who was no more accustomed to the quiet days later than he had been after the first hour. So, instead of pacing their room or digging out his old headset for something to listen to, he spent most of the time until curfew down in the shipyards. It was the only place he really could think of that lent some distraction.

It was on the morning of the seventh day that Scotty finally resigned himself that he would have to inform Barrett that he was taking the project over, even if only temporarily. Steeling himself for what he was sure would be a messy situation, he stepped into the hall just as Barrett was wrapping up a class for a few first-years. "I'll expect the essay on Monday. You can either give it to me on tape or on paper, but the formatting should be exact either way. Dismissed."

Waiting for the cadets to filter out, Scotty took a deep breath and approached the professor. "Sir?"

"What can I do for you, Mister Scott?" Barrett asked, glancing up from his desk. "Trouble on the final?"

"No, sir," he answered, taking a few steps closer. "I was-- well, I came by to tell ye that Mister Corrigan's out on personal leave, and I'm takin' over his duties until he returns."

"All right. Anything else?"

"Er-- no, sir, nothin' important."

Barrett smiled slightly, finally giving Scotty his full attention. "I find it hard to believe you'd come over here just to tell me that you're covering for your friend until he gets back. I *was* informed, you know."

Uh oh. Searching through his mind for an explanation for something so blatantly obvious -- of course he knew that the professor would have been informed Cor was on leave, that's just common sense, good job there forgetting *common bloody sense* -- Scotty finally settled on a weak, "I... forgot, sir."

"Forgot," Barrett echoed, smiling a patient, if not perhaps amused, smile. "You once rattled off the entire list of specifications for the *Constitution* -class starships from memory to me. I don't exactly see you as the forgetful type."

"A lot on my mind?" Scotty imagined a hole, six feet deep. "The *Lady Grey*, sir, she takes up a lot o' time."

"*Lady Grey*, eh? Apparently you've taken to shipbuilding better than Mister Corrigan thought you would." Barrett was clearly not ready to let this drop. "So tell me, cadet, how do you feel about being the head of this project?"

Make that ten-- no, twenty feet. Just to be consistent with the measuring. Scotty knotted his hands behind his back for the sake of not fidgeting. "Well enough, I suppose. Sir."

"Your transcripts say you were booted out of Command School," Barrett mused, leaning on the podium and crossing his arms. "They didn't specify exactly *why*, but they hedged something along the lines of 'difficulty adjusting to a command position.'"

"Aye, sir," Scotty answered, dutifully. Did *everyone* know about that? "I think I make a better engineer, sir."

Barrett smiled again, a little more reassuring this time. "I'll agree with that. So, now you're effectively commanding a crew of nineteen on a project you didn't agree with, your friend is gone for all intents and purposes, and you're starting to lose your memory. About right?"

"Aye, sir." Railroaded right into that one, he was.

"Then here's the prize question: How do you *really* feel about all of this?"

Scotty blinked once or twice. He knew damn well how he felt, but he didn't pause to think someone actually might be concerned about that when he was doing all right with his coursework, with the project, with just about every quantifiable metric. "Feel, sir?"

"Feel," Barrett chuckled. "Go ahead, no one's going to bite your head off for being human, unless by some chance you happen to be Vulcan."

"No, sir," Scotty answered, with a wry grin. He certainly wasn't unemotional, not even by the most liberal standards. Pulling himself back from the moronic mental image of himself with pointed ears and eyebrows, he finally calmed down a little. "I suppose-- well, worried, for one. And put upon."

"Put upon because of your schooner, I take it?"

"Aye, sir."

Looking up at the ceiling, Barrett smiled to himself. After a moment, he looked back at the cadet. "Here's something I want you to think about, and put it somewhere that faulty memory of yours won't discard it: You feel like you're somehow being asked to do something you don't think is important, or act in some way contradictory from what you see yourself as. But," he said, before any protests could be voiced, "that's the nature of wind, Mister Scott. You can work with it or you can fight against it-- but no matter how much you might not like it, you can't change it."

He left behind a very baffled cadet when he walked out.

Scotty was still chewing on that when he went back to the shipyards that evening. Sure, it was some sort of great moral that was supposed to make his entire life make sense, some brilliant insight to be gleaned about destiny, the winds of fate or something else, but he didn't believe in destiny.

A man made their own destiny, and if it couldn't be changed, then what was the point of trying?

Damn Barrett for putting something philosophical in a brain meant to work with the technical. Now that would probably be the first thing that came to mind whenever someone started questioning what they would do with their life, and he'd just parrot it back to them even if he didn't believe it.

He scoffed at that thought, irritated by the mere possibility. Like hell he would.

Unlocking the door to the indoor berth, he stepped in and hit the lighting control. The panels in the walls lit, the panels in the ceiling lit, and the *Lady Grey's* keel became visible. Well, the start on her keel; it wasn't finished yet, and wouldn't be for at least several more days. Looking at what would be the backbone of the oddest project he'd ever worked on, Scotty tried hard to find some feeling of attachment for the wood and lead.

It didn't shock him when he didn't find anything more than a weary resignation that this is what was going to be eating away at his time for the next several months.

It was chilly in there, but then, considering the size of the place, that wasn't too surprising. Professor Barrett had been kind enough to arrange for an indoor berth to build the ship in; the only concession he would make historically. The whole room was nearly two hundred feet long, supported by duradium beams that arched the tall ceiling. The massive doors at the end led to the ramp, which in turn led into the mouth of the River Lagan, and from there into Belfast Lough.

Closing the door with a sigh that seemed amplified in the long, tall berth, Scotty started up the stairs to the mold loft, which at least had some space heaters to help take the edge off. Maybe there would be something to do there to distract him from philosophy, from worrying about Corry, from life in general, too.

The mold loft had taken on the nature of a hide-out for the cadets who worked there. There were a few pinups on the walls, most of them of leggy humans with a come-hither look. There was a cooler pushed against the wall by the drafting table, and Scotty took a wee bit of juvenile amusement in thinking about how much contraband they had locked up there. A few bottles of hard liquor under the ice, a hand phaser that someone had 'borrowed' from the security division just because they could in the desk, Jansson's dirty magazines-- one good raid in there would have them all demerited to oblivion.

But then, they were left mostly to their own devices, off campus and in charge. He hadn't had quite as much trouble taking over command as he thought he would; his main problem was worrying about the person he'd taken command from. He'd tried to call Corry's house in Maine and didn't get an answer, which chewed at him to no end, and he'd stopped by their room between classes to see if any messages had been left.

So when he first heard Corry's voice, it was with some disbelief. Needless to say, he got over it quickly.

"Hey, chief."

"Cor! Where've ye been? And what happened?" Scotty stopped himself before he could ask fifty more questions. He didn't realize how relieved he was, even, until he let that breath out.

"Johns Hopkins and a good scare," Corry said, closing the loft door before sitting down behind one of the draft tables and rubbing at his eyes, wearily. "I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to tell you before now; been a hectic week."

"Eh, I made do." Not in any great hurry to explain how much of that time had been spent fretting about it, Scotty leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, giving his roommate his undivided attention. "Though I'm damn curious, to tell ye the truth."

"Well, lemme see." Closing his eyes, Corry tipped his head back, taking a moment to reply, "Dad was out there on a project; this time, he was with a team who was putting a set of steering thrusters on an asteroid almost entirely made of ruthenium. It was pretty routine, they were going to get it so it could be guided to a processing station."

"Aye, makes sense."

"So they get the thrusters fitted when this dust storm comes in. They made it underground safe, and the asteroid was pretty stable. Well, Dad had a microbreach in his EV suit; nothing serious, he sealed it off without a problem before the emergency sensors even sealed off that section of the suit." Taking a deep breath, Cor plowed on, "But-- this storm was carrying something, some kind of bacteria or something from god only knows where, and it got into the air circulation system. Next thing Dad knows, he can't breathe right, he's coughing and choking for air, and they have to bring a ship into this mess, emergency transport him out."

Scotty frowned at that; he knew on some level that this conversation wouldn't be going the way it was if Cor's father was *dead*, but he was also very aware that Corry didn't seem all that relieved right now, either. "He's all right-- right?"

"Yes and no." Corry winced. "They got him stabilized, but every time they took the respirator off, he started choking again. They warped him back here; even had him transferred to the *Valley Forge* to get here faster. When I left, he was already back and in the hospital."

Definitely not good. Echoing the wince, Scotty made himself ask the next question, "Did they find anything?"

"They gave him a full blood transfusion, shot him up with all kinds of antibiotics; he can breathe okay now, but they don't know if it'll get

better, or if he'll slip back into whatever reaction it caused. Right now, they're just doing all kinda tests." Leaning forward and balancing his elbows on his knees, Corry went back to rubbing his eyes. He looked tired out, and frustrated and torn. "He's been in quarantine. Mom can't even hold his hand."

Scotty finally willed himself to sit down, even though some desire to *do something* to help made his bones itch. It was a relief to have a reason for the silence, though; a good reason for Cor not to waste time calling, and a good reason to worry himself. He had liked Cor's Dad, even though he hadn't had much a chance to talk to him over the break, what with being too busy chasing after Rachel.

But it was never particularly right when something bad happened to good people; it went against the most basic fabric of everything decent in the universe. "If there's anything I can do, just tell me."

"Been doing pretty good so far," Corry offered, smiling as well as he could apparently muster. "Looks like you have a good start on the *Grey's* keel."

"Aye. It's a pain, though. We mis-cut the boards on Sunday, had to re-cut everything; apparently they didn't understand it was in yards and not meters," Scotty said, somewhat glad to have changed subjects. "It's a royal pain, tryin' to work with old-style measurin'."

"Blame Barrett." Cor stood up, trying to stifle a yawn and failing. "Well, I think I'm gonna turn in."

Scotty shrugged, grabbing his coat from where it hung on a peg in the wall. "I'll walk with ye; have yer assignments on yer desk, but that can wait till tomorrow." Besides, it was nice to have someone to talk to again, and he'd missed Corry more than he would have admitted, even to himself.

Corry made his way down the steps to the main floor, chuckling dryly, "Maybe I'll switch careers and become a medical student." Opening the door and stepping out into the mist, he waited for his roommate to catch up. "Seems to be all that's on my mind, now."



## Part II: The Lady Grey: Chapter 2

### Chapter 2:

Friday, March 3rd, 2243  
Harland & Wolff Shipyards, Berth #22  
Team C Headquarters  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth

She was starting to take on the look of a ship, instead of just a long, thick wooden stretch up on the cradle. The foremost seven ribs were up, braced by boards and re-enforced by the ribbands that stretched the length so far, a temporary way to keep everything lined up until more of her structure was in place to hold it all together. It required manual labor, she received manual labor, and most of the twenty-man crew who spent their hours working on her went to bed with sore muscles and a sense of accomplishment.

And it was getting harder for her head architect to think of her as a complete nuisance, though Scotty usually found a reason. The wood nails weren't sturdy enough, or the templates hadn't been calculated quite so far as he might have liked, not making it to the millionth of a decimal.

Not that it would have mattered, given the tools they had to work with, but he was by nature a perfectionist, even if it was his own idea of perfection and not everyone else's.

But she was beginning to look like he'd planned, so there was something to be said for her. Pausing for a long moment to scrutinize the barely started structure, he really did wonder what Starfleet would do with her when she was finished. *If* never crossed his mind -- it was when, and that was that. Donate her to one of the few remaining maritime schools? Offer her over to a travel agency, where she could join one of the few remaining large sailing vessels in making credits on 'historical' cruises?

Historical. Grinning sardonically, he shook his head; they were historical all right. About as historical as flying to Pluto on one of the personnel transports. What would these people do, sit around on her deck while watching the subspace network news, sipping on elaborate cocktails and being served by an Andorian? Oh aye, historical right down to the comforts of home.

Well, he'd be damned if *his* ship would-- be--

Frowning, Scotty stopped pacing the length of the skeleton. Since when did he think of the *Lady Grey* as *his* ship? She was an annoyance, that was what she was. No more his than the slip they were building her in. Starfleet owned her. He was just building her.

Shooting a glare at the backbone of the schooner, he quite firmly put any thoughts of ownership -- literal or metaphysical -- out of his mind and walked back to where Corry was poring over a textbook. "Havin' any luck?"

"Nothing yet," Corry answered distractedly, flipping through a few more pages. He had fallen to reading every medical textbook he could get his hands on of late; it was a bit unnerving how completely he'd fallen into it. "You practically need a medical degree to understand some of this stuff."

"We're engineers, that's why. We think in terms o' technical," Scotty answered, shrugging. He didn't want to get into another medical discussion about bacteria that floated on solar currents from planets long since decimated, or whatever it was. What he really wanted was for Cor to take back over on the project.

Well, eventually. As soon as he was ready.

"Hey!" Jansson's voice echoed, causing the other two to cringe slightly. Of course, he didn't seem to care at that particular moment, bounding over with a very self-satisfied expression. "I just finished the template for the amidships ribs."

Scotty grinned again, pleased with the news; as long as things were going this smoothly, they might even finish well ahead of schedule, which would give him time to do things more relevant to a future as a starship engineer. "Did ye? It'll be a week before we get that far, but those'll go quick enough."

Jansson shrugged, leaning on the wall next to Corry's chair. "Well, at least I know my part's done for awhile. Does that mean you'll cut my hours, sir?" he teased, tapping Corry on the shoulder.

"If you want," Cor answered, not looking up.

"What, ye find a date who'll look at yer ugly mug for any length o' time?" Scotty asked, innocently, putting on his best 'pure sugar and spice and everything nice' expression, folding his hands behind his back and rocking heel to toe. "I'll get ye a case o' Scotch, if that'll make it easier."

"This coming from the most hopeless romantic in the world, yeah," Jansson retorted, good-naturedly. "The last person you asked out told you that they might be available when you finally started shaving. And stopped stammering."

"Aye, but at least I didn't have to shave a sheep and try'n make it look presentable."

"No, you just up and took the sheep out without even bothering to--"

"Hey, if you two plan on keeping this up, take it somewhere else, all right?" Corry said, flatly, finally looking away from the book long enough to skewer both of them in a glance. "I'm trying to read here."

The other two cadets exchanged a brief, slightly surprised look, and Scotty frowned. "Corry, ye could put the book down for a minute or two, ye know."

Corry sighed, an impatient sound, and closed the textbook. "I could, but I'm not going to. What I am going to do, though, is find somewhere quiet, and you two can toss your sheep-shagging jokes without worrying." Without waiting for a response, he stood and headed for the door.

Jansson scratched his head, looking after Corry. "I think he needs a vacation."

"He needs somethin'." Scotty shook his head, uncertainly, trying to ignore the anxiety grabbing him somewhere just south of his throat. "I wish I knew what."

He hadn't meant to snap. It was wrong to bite the heads off of your friends, no matter how annoying they got, and Corry pondered on what would prompt him to be so downright foul to Scotty and Jerry. It wasn't like they weren't being themselves, just goofing off a little bit, and it certainly wasn't like they didn't deserve to be a little silly. Those two, plus Joe Albright, had been shouldering the burden that was honestly Corry's for a month now.

Sighing to himself, Cor tucked the medical textbook under his arm and continued for the dorm. He was so close to finding something. Something that would take the edge off of his anger and inability to stand by while his father lay in the hospital still, something that would make it all right again. Corry was no fool -- he might not worry himself stupid over grades like Sean Kelley, but that had no bearing on his intelligence, only on his coursework.

The streets were quiet and dark, and he tried hard not to let the feeling of heaviness overwhelm him. It got dark so early, and the lack of sunlight wore even heavier than normal, bearing down on his very soul and making everything seem dull and colorless.

Still, the air tasted good and clean, there was the underlay of salt that was so much a part of him, and a warm room waiting for him when he made it back. It wasn't an unreasonably long walk, and though the shuttle would have had him back there in a matter of minutes, it was better to take the chance to think.

Kicking at a stone, he watched the ground. There were at least fifteen different known spaceborne bacteria strains with similar symptoms, and though none of them were what had attacked his father, he felt certain that he might find a clue or a key there. Closing his eyes in a wash of anger, Corry tried to banish the mental picture of his Dad laying there behind the transparent aluminum, covered in tubes, and of his mother with her hand pressed to the wall, tears in her eyes from all of the worry, the love, the stress.

Sure, he was doing better and better by the day, but still.

It wasn't *fair*. There was such a sense of injustice there that he couldn't help but feel like someone or something was trying to take away the near perfect life he'd had and replace it with some sort of living hell. Taking a deep breath, he unclenched his teeth before he could chip them. He'd already chipped one tooth while in a fit of anger, and he didn't want to do it again.

Finally arriving at the dorms, he nodded to the security officer on duty, trying not to look too miserable. Taking the short trip to the building, he keyed in his student ID code and stepped in when the door unlocked.

It seemed far too noisy in there, what with everyone back in from their evening out. Weaving his way through the other cadets clustered on the bottom of the stairwell, he headed up to the second floor and unlocked the room door, slipping in and closing it with a sigh of relief. The building was old, mostly kept to historical specs so that it wouldn't clash with this old sector of Belfast, but at least the walls weren't too thin and there wasn't much noise that bled in from the adjoining rooms or hallway.

It was good for Corry; he was so tired of people.

So tired of everything.

"I need a vacation," he murmured to himself, setting the book on his desk and sitting on the bed for a moment to gather his mental strength before delving back into it. Rubbing at his eyes, he tried to imagine what Scotty must have thought about being snapped at. It wasn't often that Corry snapped at his roommate; in fact, usually it went the other way. He'd seemed taken aback, though, like it was a bit of a surprise; not angry or hurt, just kind of 'huh?'

Well, Corry would make it up to him someday, if for no other reason than guilt. Right now, though, he had work to do and information to find, so he took the book in hand again and settled back to pick up where he'd left off.

He'd gone though a good twenty pages, reading with the feverish intensity of an obsessed researcher, before he registered the door opening and looked up. "Hey."

"Evenin'," Scotty answered, dragging in something that looked like a piece of hull plating from a starship. "Feelin' any better?"

"Yeah," Corry said, offhand, watching the strange proceeding. What the heck was Scotty doing now? "Sorry I snapped at you and Jer like that."

"Eh." Scotty shrugged one-shouldered after he set the metal down. He stepped out of the room and carried in something else, something that looked sort of like a coil assembly with a portable power source attached. "Find any new information since ye left?"

Cor set the book aside, now fully curious about what was going on. "Uh, a little. Nothing that wasn't common sense, though."

Now there was a long length of cable and a heavy looking bag. "Seems like most o' the medical community states the obvious. In my humble opinion, anyway."

"What're you doing?" All right, Corry couldn't hold back any longer. What did a sheet of metal, a coil, a power source, a cord and a bag have in common?

"Wait for it." Grinning, Scotty went and retrieved the last of his enigmatic objects, which put an end to the mystery. Leaving the last bag on his desk, he set the sheet metal on his workbench, tossing a glance back at Cor. "Guess yet?"

"Cooking," Corry chuckled, shaking his head. He should have figured that out from the beginning, but with all of the strange objects Scotty had dragged in over the past year, he never knew what to expect. Last time the other cadet had gotten the itch to cook, he'd just up and 'borrowed' the stove from downstairs, rigging antigravs to it and keeping it jammed into their room for a night before sneaking it back into the dorm's kitchen in the morning.

Apparently, this time he was intent upon making his own. "What's the occasion?" Cor asked, smiling both fondly and bemused.

"What's the date?"

"Uhm..." It took a minute to count the days from the last time Corry had bothered to look at a calendar. "March 3rd?"

"Keep thinkin'," Scotty said, already working on his homemade range.

Corry pondered it for a moment, and when it hit him he could have kicked himself. "Your birthday. Dammit, it completely slipped my mind!"

"Don't feel bad, I almost forgot myself." Sealing the wide coil to the sheet with a cold-weld epoxy, Scotty shrugged again. "Like Italian?"

"You don't have to cook for me, too," Corry protested, not very persuasively. He'd skipped lunch and he loved Italian. His stomach immediately rumbled in answer to his failed protest, but he still asked, "Isn't this your day to be pampered?"

"No," Scotty said, wiring the coil with expert precision. "I *like* cookin'."

Corry leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms and watching. "You're one of the weirdest people I know. I mean, you cook, you invent, you hang glide-- you won't drink wine, you'll fight over Scotch being the best whiskey, but you don't like haggis and you prefer Italian. Did it ever occur to you that your fancies are kinda-- I dunno, contradictory?"

"Cookin's kinda like engineerin'; put the stuff together and make it work. I tolerate haggis, but Italian tastes better, so I cook Italian. And I don't mind wine, but only with certain dishes, and never just on its own. Scotch *is* the best whiskey, and hang-glidin' was the closest I could get to flyin' without a civilian pilot's license," Scotty replied, easily, still wiring away.

"I guess, but see, I'm from Maine, I like New England clam chowder, I sail-- all those are in line."

"Ye like Italian too, ye happen to have a taste for Anaquarian whiskey, which to me tastes like runoff from a chicken farm--" Scotty put a smaller piece of metal he'd had stashed under his workbench on top of the coil, fixed it there, then plugged the wire in. When it heated like he expected, he grinned brightly to himself before finishing the statement he'd started, "I suppose it's all personal taste."

Corry shook his head to himself over the complete lack of safety features on that homemade range, but didn't bring it up. "Yeah, guess so."

"So what's medical research have to do with engineerin', sailin' and clam chowder?"

Corry frowned slightly, shifting his seat on the bed. "Call it a side hobby."

"Aye, hobby," Scotty said, pulling out a jug of water and a fairly large pot. "Garlic?"

"Definitely," Cor answered, somewhat relieved that the subject had been dropped at that. He hated having to justify himself. "Not making your own sauce?"

"Not enough time. I can bash somethin' decent together with the jarred kind, though."

"What're you gonna do on a starship, where you can't get any of the stuff you need?"

"Hydroponic gardens?" Scotty tried, with a shrug, salting the water that was now on his homemade stove. "I guess I'm stuck livin' with what their cooks see fit to cook up, or I get good at beggin', borrowin' and barterin' for ingredients."

Corry smiled offhand, watching for a moment. Scotty wasn't long in getting as absorbed into his cooking as he did into his engineering; putting the sauce on, spicing it up with an assortment of different traditional herbs, adding the rigatoni to the water, working on the cheese-crusting garlic bread, and after a few minutes, Corry went back to his reading.

At least the atmosphere of the room had taken on the easy feeling of camaraderie that it had been missing the past few weeks.

"Well," Corry said, lightly, as he set his plate aside, "if you ever get sick of engineering, you could probably make a good living as a chef."

"Mum taught me," Scotty explained, long since finished with his dinner and sipping on a glass of good red wine. Italian was one of his admitted exceptions; according to him, one did not drink Scotch with Italian. Because it was a crime. "It was that or bein' left behind o'er the school breaks."

Corry grinned, standing and getting himself a glass of the wine, shaking the dust off long-ago required courses in high school about dysfunctional historical societal roles to take a potshot at his roommate. "You're gonna make someone a terrific housewife someday, Scotty."

"Aye?" Scotty asked, dangerously, picking up a fork and chucking it at Corry, jumping on the opportunity and proving he'd likely been stuck with all of those same courses. "With this level o' talent, no one'd have enough to pay *my* dower."

The fork struck Corry in the side of the head, but he was snickering too hard to get angry over it. Maybe if it had gotten him with the prongs he might have paused, but instead it just amused him more. "Oooh, did I hit a nerve? Sorry, now I know what to get you for your birthday. Just think three words: Pink, ruffled and apron. Then you'd for sure get a good-- what was it? *Dower?*"

"Ye do, and so help me, I'll just wait till ye fall asleep and see what a high powered energy current can do to the human body," Scotty growled, unplugging the wire from the homemade stove with comical exaggeration and waving the end at Corry as if it was some kind of venomous snake. "I'll just stick this thing up yer nose, and watch ye burn."

Corry managed to chew down a smirk. "Because I complimented your cooking and said someone would be lucky to have you as a housewife?"

"Because ye insulted my so-called masculinity," Scotty said, smartly, nodding as though he'd just delivered a particularly good speech. "Never mind threatenin' to put me in somethin' pink, that's bloody *criminal*."

"Masculinity," Corry echoed, trying and failing to maintain a neutral expression. "Well, I suppose if your so-called masculinity has survived the cooking lessons and the skirts, you're not about to lose it over a pink apron, fashion crime though it is."

Scotty frowned, apparently not finding that part funny. "Now wait. A kilt is NOT a skirt, it's a kilt, and I'll not have ye sayin' anything against it. Besides, I only wear that to formal family events."

"All right, all right," Cor said, though he definitely couldn't help the amused and placating tone. Waiting until Scotty gave him a black look and went to cleaning up his homemade kitchen, he picked up the textbook and went back to reading. He did feel better now that he had something in his stomach and a little banter to make up for the past weeks of quiet.

He resolved himself to spending less time with his nose in a textbook; maybe that would make the overall anxiety lighten.

## Part II: The Lady Grey: Chapter 3

### Chapter 3:

Friday, March 17th, 2243  
Malone Road  
Starfleet Engineering Academy  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth

Amidships the ribs were finished, and for the first time the construction team for the *Lady Grey* had found a steady routine. That made all the difference in the speed that she was being completed, and meant a great deal to the heads of the project in that they could see their drawing coming to life.

The actual project leader, though, hadn't stuck too hard to his resolution to spend more time engineering and less time researching modern medicine. If anything, Corry had fallen even farther into his obsession; one night he'd stumbled across a medical journal with an article devoted specifically to categorizing space-borne bacteria, and that was the end of that. Now he only came down to the shipyards intermittently.

Scotty took the brunt of the work with more and more consternation every day. Over the past two weeks, he'd gone from being in a reasonably good mood to downright short-tempered, people started actively avoiding him again, and a few of the cadets under his supervision had started to grumble despite making good progress.

Cor's temperament wasn't much better; he went from the extreme high of being on a good trail to the anger and frustration of the hopelessness of it, to the guilt of leaving his best friend to take on the duties that weren't his. But he didn't slow down, nor stop. He couldn't, and every single time that he thought about it, he panicked himself back out of it.

It finally got to a point that Scotty couldn't stand it anymore, but instead of trying to get through to the brick-skulled Corry, he just turned around and went to Barrett. Maybe to just give a half-concealed plea for *someone* to step in and make it right. Heavens knew, he couldn't seem to find a way to do it.

Catching up with the commander after classes had ended for the day, he launched into it before he had time to talk himself out of it. "Sir? Could I have a moment o' yer time?"

Barrett paused on the walkway, no doubt heading towards his house on the other side of the campus. "Yes, Mister Scott?"

"--well, I wanted to talk to ye about Cor-- Mister Corrigan, sir." Inwardly, Scotty winced; no part of him wanted to do this, but things couldn't keep going the way they were. "He's not worked on the project since what happened with his father, and-- I mean, I dinna mind takin' his place, but..."

"But...?" Barrett prompted, though from his tone, he already had a good idea of what the situation was.

"But I'm startin' to think it's a bit too much, sir," Scotty finished, not able to keep the miserable note from his voice.

Barrett's frown colored his entire face dark. "Would you like me to remove him from his position?"

"No, sir, I just-- I dinna ken." Scotty shook his head, clasping his hands behind his back and looking at the ground. That was just it: He *didn't* know, and it was driving him crazy.

"There are only two options. You can lodge a formal complaint, which is the course of action that I suggest, or you can continue to act as project leader and let him get credit for your work." They were harsh words, though Barrett delivered them frankly and without an edge.

"That's it. Two options, and neither of 'em *right*," Scotty said sharply, before he remembered who it was he was talking to. Taking a deep breath, he looked back down at his boots. "Sorry, sir."

"I understand that it's a horrible thing to stomach, but what happens when you're on a starship, where everyone depends on everyone else to stay alive?" Barrett asked, gesturing down in Scotty's line of sight for him to look up, though not to any avail. "I know he's your friend, and I know it's against every single heroic ideal you've got, but think about it. This time it's a class project, Mister Scott, and next time it might be monitoring engine outputs and overload gauges. This time you've got the option, but next time you won't and it could be you, your ship and your crew."

Scotty's jaw knotted as he thought about it. It was such plain common sense that it was damn hard to imagine any other course of action. "What would happen to his grade?"

"He'd lose a lot of points, but he could probably still pass so long as he does something between now and then."

"And if I don't file a complaint?" Scotty asked, finally looking back up and meeting the professor's gaze unflinchingly. He was pretty sure he already knew what his course of action was going to be, struck now with one part inspiration and one part desperation.

Barrett smiled a sort of sad smile, no doubt sure himself. "Then this conversation never took place. Just keep in mind what I told you, though, because you're not always going to have the range of choices you do now."

By the end of the next week, the ribs of the ship were finished and the tension in berth #22 was so thick that it could choke a person. Even Jansson, who normally was easygoing, had started getting edgy; it wasn't long before he'd pretty much cornered Scotty in the mold loft to protest. "We've got four cadets saying that if I don't file a complaint against you or Corry, they're just going to up and drop the class."

"So *file it*," Scotty challenged, raising his eyebrows. He was well aware that the pace he was working the other cadets bordered inhumane, and that this was quickly becoming his own obsession, but there was no backing down now.

"Look, you know I won't do that to either of you, but don't you think it might be a good idea to just slow down a little bit before we lose everyone?" Jansson all but pleaded, looking more concerned than angry.

Scotty sighed, impatiently, and rubbed at his eyes. It wasn't Jerry's fault; he needed to keep reminding himself that just because he'd plotted this course, that didn't mean the rest of his team had.

But it was a lousy place to slow down right this second, too. "I'll make ye a deal, Jer," he finally said, shoulders feeling almost unbearably heavy. "If we can get the fore crossbeams in by the middle o' next week, I'll cut back the hours and we can take it a little slower. But we need somethin' other'n a couple o' boards supportin' the ribs in front."

"I *think* they'll go for that. Most of them were taking it pretty well, just not those four. Uhm, Harrison, O'Sullivan, Thylita and Midlinn, if I remember right." Jerry leaned on the wall. "Mind if I ask you something, chief?"

"Depends," Scotty answered, forcing a half-smile back.

"Why're you covering for Corry like this?" Jansson asked, eyebrows drawn. "Not that I'm complaining, 'cause he's my friend too, but I kinda wanna know what *your* reasoning is."

Well, that wasn't necessarily an easy answer to come by. There were a few times Scotty wasn't entirely sure why himself, though usually those moments of indecision faded back to the determination he was currently working on. Dropping the self-imposed wall for a few minutes, he took a deep breath. "Honestly?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"Remember when I said he needs somethin'?"

"Yeah. Back before he got too buried in-- whatever this is." Jansson frowned for a moment, and then it was like the metaphorical lightbulb and he smiled not a few seconds later. "You're trying to finish her fast, aren't you? So that he'll snap out of this and start being Corry again."

"Think it'll work?" Because in all honesty, Scotty wasn't entirely sure himself if it would. He wasn't really sure of anything. But it was worth a try; Cor had just loved the idea of having a real sailing vessel, he'd loved the schooner when she was still just lines on a schematic.

Maybe when she was whole and sitting in the water, he could fall in love with her all over again. Maybe he'd come *back*, then.

"It's damn well worth a try," Jansson said, nodding emphatically. "Well, I've got your back on it. Here's hoping it works."

"Aye, here's hopin'."

Jansson flashed a brief smile and went back to the part of the loft where the templates were kept, and where he was now working on the structure beams. Most of them were already cut for the forward part of the ship, so it probably wouldn't be too much effort to get them up.

The acting project leader took a few moments to relax, something he just didn't do all that often anymore. Not going back to the dorms had turned into a necessity for Scotty, who had it worked out pretty well: Go back right at curfew, sign in with security, then slip back out once they'd acknowledged that he'd gone into the dorms. Anymore he slept more in the mold loft than he did in his room, and he honestly doubted that Corry even noticed the absence.

*Well*, Scotty thought, sardonically, *at least he won't be bitchin' about my boots*.

It was a hollow enough thought, though, and he had gotten used to silence again after all. He wasn't even sure if it was worth the effort, trying to get Cor to come back from this land of medical terminology and lab tests. He wasn't sure if it was worth barking orders at a troop of cadets who, though they were obligated to work, weren't obligated to throw heart and soul into his fight.

That was why he'd given Jansson the okay to cut down the hours; mostly to keep his workforce and be more fair minded, but some small part of him harbored the fear that he'd become just as lost and obsessive as the person he wanted to help.

And under that was something even more-- unsettling? Unexpected? But it was starting to dawn on Scotty, the realization that he had ended up tangled up in Cor's life and mental health and in a fashion he'd never *intended* to be. That at some point, it had just-- happened.

He didn't *know* if he was in over his head, but he was worried he might just be.

He scrubbed at his brow for a moment, as if he could literally scrub those thoughts out of his head, and he was just turning to get back to work when the door opened again.

"Mutiny in the ranks, sir," Albright said, sticking his head in.

Scotty looked up, mostly expecting it to be a joke, but Albright looked dead serious.

Well, hell, they'd finally had enough just when he was starting to dial it back. Feeling more tired and frustrated than worried, Scotty nodded his acknowledgement, took a minute to grab his coat and then he headed after Albright, down the steps and onto the main floor.

Sure enough, there was a battle brewing, and it looked like Keith O'Sullivan was the ringleader; not too big a surprise, there, the man was something of a notorious rebel long before this.

Squaring his shoulders and doing his best to forget the fact that the stolid Irishman was probably a solid thirty kilos heavier than he was, Scotty stepped into the middle of the crowd, going for his best officer's voice. "What's the meaning of all o' this?"

"The meanin', *sir*, is that we're downright sick and tired of being driven like dogs," O'Sullivan answered, without a trace of hesitation. "My hands're practically bloody and we haven't had a day off in a week."

"Ye'll get yer day off, soon as the forward crossbeams're up. Anything else?"

O'Sullivan smirked, and without so much as a word of warning took a swing. It was by sheer luck Scotty managed to duck under that fist, or he might have ended up with a busted jaw on top of everything else. Leaping backwards a pace and running into Albright, heart hammering with that instant rush of adrenaline, he snarled, "Aye, real smart there, takin' a shot at another officer. Right good thinkin'."

"That's because ya think ye're just the regular dictator," came the furious answer, and O'Sullivan leaped after Scotty for another try. And he might have been big, but he was *fast* and managed to land his punch this time, knocking Scotty a good few meters back and to the ground. "Well, *sir*, maybe ye're not as big as ya think ya are."

Jansson had joined the party by then, and he and three other cadets managed to catch O'Sullivan and hold the irate mutineer back. "Should we call security, *sir*?" Jansson asked, voice strained as they wrestled with the man.

Scotty shook his head, getting back up on his feet with iron in his mouth and *fire* burning up the rungs of his spine, coiling in his limbs. "Hell no," he said, taking his coat off and flinging it aside.

"Uh-- he could turn you into ground meat," Albright said tentatively, looking between the two. "And this is not exactly professional Starfleet conduct here."

O'Sullivan and Scotty both gave Albright an exasperated look, but then Scotty looked back at Jansson. "Jerry, let the jackass go."

"Scotty--"

"Just do it," Scotty snapped; after a moment where they were clearly unhappy, though, they did as they were told.

O'Sullivan shrugged them off with a sneer, but he didn't seem to be in any real hurry now that he knew that there wouldn't be any security involved. Looking fairly pleased with the fact he'd landed the first punch, he smiled, no doubt for the sake of anyone else who felt bitter about how hard they'd been worked.

A few of the other cadets smiled back, and his buddies looked downright worshipful. After all they'd learned about maintaining discipline in the ranks, it probably *was* kind of empowering to see the man in charge get some back for it, especially after recent weeks.

So, he never really saw it coming.

Scotty slammed into O'Sullivan with every bit of weight and ferocity he had, a soundless leap and execution, and the two of them slid across the ground, scattering cadets in their wake; O'Sullivan didn't even have a chance to throw arms up before Scotty had the man's collar in one hand and punched him so hard in the nose with the other that he could feel the bone and cartilage give, his own teeth bared in white and *red*, and something that couldn't have ever been called a smile.

There wasn't even a rustle of movement after that.

Point made, Scotty got up and stepped back several paces, shaking his bruised hand out and cracking his neck, ignoring the fact that his jaw throbbed as he stared O'Sullivan down. O'Sullivan, seeming somewhat stunned by this turn of events, didn't move for a very long moment before crawling back to his feet, protecting his face with his cupped hands, tears streaming down his face.

There wasn't anything particularly smug about him now, and maybe seeing his own blood dripping in thick gobs onto his shirtfront was enough to take the fight from him. At least for now, anyway.

It was Jansson who broke the silence, asking either or both of them, "Anyone need a doctor?"

Scotty just shook his head. His jaw was aching with fierce intensity and he was having a hell of a time wrestling with the *anger* O'Sullivan hitting him provoked, but he still had all of his teeth and nothing was broken. That alone was enough of a reason to count his lucky stars; if the other cadet had followed through better, he'd probably be on a soup diet for a few days until the doctors had him properly patched up.

O'Sullivan apparently didn't want to lose any more face, and shook his head as well. "I'll walk on my own, thanks." Shooting Scotty a glare and giving him a wide berth, he headed for the door.

"That's the last we'll see of him, I'll bet," Albright sighed, then looked at the rest of the team still gathered there in near silence. "C'mon, crew, back to work."

"Any bets on me spendin' tonight in the brig?" Scotty finally asked, breathing off the heat and an ache much older than this as well as he could, wincing a little as he prodded at the spot where O'Sullivan's fist had landed. He'd bitten his cheek when he'd hit the ground, the bruise was

probably going to be impressive and he could already feel where the soreness was going to settle, but it was nothing that wouldn't heal on its own in a few days.

Jansson frowned, looking somewhere between comically serious and honestly serious. "I'll put ten credits on you getting away without so much as a slap on the wrist."

"I'll bet against that," Lewis, one of the construction cadets, said as he picked up the first crossbeam they were going to put up. Grinning apologetically at Scotty, he added, "You did break his nose, after all."

"All bets're good, but I'm hopin' Jerry here's right." Scotty smiled back as well as he could, stepping over to help carry the board. Maybe he could use the less-depressing attitude in his favor and get some more solid work done. "Well, in the spirit o' not losin' any teeth, anyone who wants to go can. Volunteer work only, at least for tonight."

The order was passed around, and it kind of surprised him when all but the three who were in with O'Sullivan stayed. It was somehow very heartening to see a rally like that, particularly after all that he'd put those cadets through; from the minute their classes ended to curfew, minus meals, every day for over a week straight.

If he hadn't been in charge, he might have gone the way of the mutineer, honestly.

But at any length, the remaining cadets stuck around, and Scotty intermittently worked with the construction team and iced his jaw; he didn't look forward to explaining the bruise the next day, but it was still better than wasting time with the small, rather apathetic medical staff on campus. Security hadn't shown up yet, and he was determined to get as much as he could done before they did.

When the hush fell over the floor of the berth, he was pretty certain it was a troop of security personnel coming to haul him to lockup. Looking around one of the ribs, he was honestly taken aback when it was Corry.

Cor looked a little like he had slept for weeks on end and was just waking up. His hair was longer than he usually kept it, dark circles hung under his eyes, and his overall appearance was just disheveled. He walked across the floor with measured caution; a stranger in their midst, in a way, even if he was supposed to be the most familiar among the crew.

Scotty frowned to himself and went back to pounding the wood nail in, breaking the silence, and before long everyone else went back to work, all but ignoring the project leader. He wasn't about to call Corry over, more because he didn't have a clue of what to say rather than because he didn't want to say anything. He did; he wanted to tell Cor to snap out of it, look at the work that had been done, look at what was being done for *his* sake.

But words like that were far too hard to come up with, and Scotty had no clue of how he'd even try to explain, so he did what he knew he was better at and worked.

"Looks like she's really going to be something special," Corry said, uncertainly, once he'd found his way over to his roommate.

"Aye," Scotty answered, evenly, giving the nail one last whack with the mallet. Sounding resentful would probably drive Corry back to his little world, and sounding too friendly might do the same. It was a tightrope act and he was more afraid than he'd ever want to acknowledge about stepping wrong.

"I was wondering if you wanted to go and hit the pub before curfew." Corry looked along the length of the ship, kind of blankly. "I wanted to celebrate-- they finally released Dad from the hospital, and all, and it looks like the bacteria's been fully purged."

"I would, but I've got a bit left to do here." Pausing for a moment, Scotty balanced himself on the rib, trying to untangle the knot of anxiety and hope and resentment twisting in his middle. "If ye wouldn't mind waitin' for a half hour or so, I could?"

"I guess," Corry said, rather quietly. Looking around for a moment, he finally climbed up onto the keel, movements awful clumsy-looking for a man who knew how to dance like Cor did.

Jansson climbed back up right after him and gave him a tight smile, then slid around him and tossed the new icepack in Scotty's general direction. "Head's up, chief."

Scotty ducked under it, only barely catching it in his right hand before giving Jansson a look. "Tryin' to finish the job?"

"I don't know, you *have* been a bit of a dictator lately," Jerry answered, jokingly, before going back to his post on the starboard side.

"What happened?" Corry frowned, looking even more lost and confused.

"Mutiny!" Scotty chuckled, shaking his head and leaning back on the rib, feet on the brace. He tipped his head to show off the darkening bruise along his jawline, then shrugged. "He got it back in spades, though."

Corry eyed the bruise, some expression on his face that Scotty didn't know how to read; his hand came halfway up like he wanted to reach out, but then he dropped it. "Who was it?"

"O'Sullivan." Scotty put the ice back against his face, not quite able to stifle the flinch. "I up and broke the bastard's nose, though. Ye shoulda seen it, Cor."

"I was talking to Dad's doctor," Corry said, as way of explanation. The look he got in answer, though, seemed to make him edgy. "What?"

Trying to find the right words, Scotty took a deep breath. Back on the tightrope again, it looked like. "D'ye think maybe-- well, now that he's feelin' better, ye might wanna spend a little more time down here?" he asked, and was glad he didn't sound as pathetic as he felt.



Corry sighed, running his hand through his messy hair. "Just because he's out of the hospital doesn't mean he's out of the woods. Anything could trigger another reaction."

"I'm not sayin' not tae be worried, just that-- ye know. Maybe it's time to worry about the rest of yer life too? What with yer grades, and--" That didn't sound like it was supposed to. Scotty cringed mentally and wished he could build himself a time machine, go back two minutes, and strangle himself before he had the chance to bring it up.

"My grades are okay," Corry answered, a little too quickly and far too defensively. "And I actually helped out, because I sent them an entire list, a whole thirty pages of known strains along with similar symptoms and treatments."

There wasn't any immediate reply that came to mind. Scotty couldn't honestly see an engineering cadet making any huge breakthrough that experienced Starfleet medical personnel hadn't already thought of, but he wouldn't say that. He'd already dug a hole and anything else might end up landing him in it. "Maybe ye should think about goin' to medschool," he finally said, heart sinking like a stone.

"Maybe I should." Corry looked down at his watch. "Hey, we'll go have a drink later. I should probably go back to the dorms and finish my paper for Pearson."

*Maybe ye should start it, not to mention the last three,* Scotty thought, tiredly, but he only nodded and said, "Aye, maybe later."

Corry nodded back, stiffly, and climbed down. He exchanged a few greetings with cadets as he made his way to the door, and then he was gone again.

Who even knew when he'd be back. Scotty groaned softly and let his head fall back against the wood, closing his eyes and clenching his sore jaw, though even that little burst of pain didn't distract him from the hopeless feeling washing over his head and clutching him by the throat.

Maybe if he'd tried harder, he could have swallowed his whole leg instead of just his foot. The whole damn thing. Or maybe someone offered tact implants; that would make his life a lot easier. Or maybe he would give that time machine serious consideration and change everything.

"You shoulda gone with him," Jansson offered, helpfully.

The only answer Scotty had was another groan.

"It's generally not a good thing when cadets start dropping classes this close to the end of the year," Barrett said, pacing in front of the podium, between that and the three cadets lined up at attention. O'Sullivan had dropped the class earlier that day, his nose knit together (but still discolored); Thylita and Midlinn had followed soon after. "When I told them they'd have to go through one of their superiors in order to file a formal complaint, they asked to drop the course. Now, the reason for this could be one of two things: They could have asked to file a complaint and were turned down, or they could have been afraid to ask for fear of retaliation."

Jansson audibly swallowed. "Well, sir, it's a little more--"

"Is it?" Barrett stopped, looking at the anxious cadet sharply. "Four of you were put in charge of this. Now, normally this would fall on the project leader to explain, but since he's still missing in action, as it were, it comes back on you. If this is the type of behavior you have here, heaven help the ship and crew you get assigned to if you graduate."

"It's nae his fault, sir," Scotty said, quietly, wishing that talking didn't hurt so much. On several levels. "I was the one workin' 'em too hard, and it's my responsibility."

"No, it isn't." The professor sighed, rubbing at his temples with both hands. "The only thing you're technically responsible for is not turning over any complaints you've received. How long do you plan on pulling double-duty? How long do you plan on allowing Mister Corrigan to abuse your good intentions and the hard work of your team?"

"Sir, I was the one who received the complaints." Jansson looked like he was going to his own funeral, but he'd apparently taken the jump when he'd told Scotty he'd watch his back. Even as lousy as this whole mess was, Scotty was touched by that. "By the time they were brought to Mister Scott's attention, O'Sullivan had already made up his mind," Jansson added.

"Why didn't you act on them?" When he didn't get an answer, Barrett shook his head in clear disappointment. "Loyalty is one of the finest traits a person can be blessed with, but there does come a time when you have to put concern for your crew before concern for your friends."

The three cadets didn't have any answer to that, either. Albright broke his stance to study his shoes, Scotty did the same, and Jansson looked downright miserable as he stared at the wall. It wasn't that easy, was it?

After a very long two minutes, where the silence couldn't be cut with a plasma torch, Barrett finally sighed, "All right, standing here in silence won't fix any problems, nor will it make them any clearer. Dismissed."

The relief was pretty thick -- if likely short lived -- as they made their way out, though Barrett wasn't quite finished. Waiting until they were nearly to the door, he called, "Mister Scott!"

Scotty paused with his foot in midair, closed his eyes for a moment in resignation, then turned around. "Sir?"

"What happened to your jaw?"

"I-- uhm, I ran intae somethin', sir."

Barrett's face was fairly inscrutable. "Strange, that's what O'Sullivan said about his nose. The senior cadets this year seem to have a clumsy streak in them, wouldn't you agree?"

There was only one answer to give, so with a red face, Scotty gave it. "Aye, sir." Without waiting for further comment, he turned and stepped out.

## Part II: The Lady Grey: Chapter 4

### Chapter 4:

*Monday, April 10th, 2243  
Harland & Wolff Shipyards, Berth #22  
Team C Headquarters  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth*

The workflow lightened, easing off from the brutal pace Scotty had demanded of the crew in order to finish the basic skeleton of the *Lady Grey*. General morale was up, even though there were four people missing: three of the mutineers, absent Harrison, and Corry. There wasn't any bickering, and the team had solidified quite a bit since the 'Mutiny of Berth #22'. If they could have gotten Corry back, it might have been a perfect project from then on out.

Corry still wasn't back. He vanished for days on end, chewing up all of his personal leave time and then some, and came back with the look of the ignorantly blissful and a sheaf of lab results. He'd put in for a transfer to Starfleet Medical. He had barely exchanged a handful of words with his roommate, who had fallen into a silent, grim stoicism that was tired and familiar ground.

Lately Scotty didn't really seem to have much to say; when he did talk, it was one or two word answers unless it involved something engineering-related, and even then lacked his usual passion for the subject. He was still in motion, though; if anything, he'd gone into overdrive.

When he'd cut back the hours for the rest of the team, he'd taken it on himself to pick up the slack as much as he humanly could. There was only so much he could do, physically, but whatever there was he did without a word. When the rest of the cadets left for the evening, he came back to work.

That was how the *Lady Grey* really came to be something more than just a class project, though Scotty still wasn't ready to acknowledge it to himself that she was. What would the use be anyway? If he started to genuinely care about her, what good could even come of it? She was a *class project*, she was a hopefully passing grade.

She was--

Scotty looked down at the sandpaper he'd picked up, clenching his teeth together in a moment of heartache, the kind that was sharp enough to cut his breath short.

She was part desperation. She was part *please don't leave*.

He shook his head, trying to shove those thoughts away, throat tight; he had already cut the boards that were going to be laid the next day, the start of her hull and the start of the next phase of the project, and so he couldn't do anything more than sand the beams on her forward section to prepare. There wasn't even a need to; the wood was the best quality they could afford to get, and it was already fairly smooth, but he if stopped for one minute--

He hadn't heard the door open and close, so when a voice overrode the sound of sandpaper, he nearly leaped out of his skin. "It's a little late to be working, isn't it?"

Scotty blinked a few times once he succeeded in *not* having a heart attack, eyes wide and sandpaper crushed in his closed fist. After almost an entire minute, he managed to say, "Aye, sir."

"You do realize that it's 0200. Four hours after curfew," Barrett stated, rather than asked, as he climbed up onto the sliding ways, balancing easily in the massive ribcage of the schooner. He was dressed in civilian clothes, but even at that hour looked alert. "I can't quite figure you out, cadet."

"Sir?" Scotty didn't want to get into anything philosophical, but he could smell it coming a click away. Frowning briefly, he put the destroyed sandpaper into his jacket pocket.

"Staying here all hours, working even when there isn't anything to do," the professor elaborated, gesturing at the general area. "Three days and nights, every free hour you've got. Isn't it a bit much?"

"No, sir." Scotty put his hands behind his back, balancing neatly himself and wondering exactly how Barrett knew how many hours he was spending in the berth.

Smiling a half-smile, Barrett picked up a clean piece of the sandpaper and turned it over in his hands. "Captain Pearson decided to tell me today that your grades were slipping, that I was the reason, and that if I didn't come and tell you to pay attention to your important studies, he'd have to speak to Admiral Pirrie."

Well, that wasn't a good thing. Pearson was known for being a bit irate; Scotty had figured out himself that the captain was less than pleased with his performance lately.

"Are you a Starfleet engineer, Mister Scott, or an ancient shipwright?"

"--a bit o' both. Sir."

Dragging himself back to the present with a hint of a smirk, despite not really finding any humor in it, he asked, "What did ye tell him, sir?"

"To go pound salt." Barrett gave him a full smile this time. "In those terms. I added that my class was no less important than his, whether it was practical or not, and that you were a good enough engineer to guess your way through his class and get a passing grade. Needless to say, he wasn't particularly pleased."

"I suppose not," Scotty chuckled in agreement. If there was one thing he alternatively liked and hated about Commander Barrett, it was his ability to catch a person completely off-guard. Liked it when Barrett did it to someone else, not so much when Barrett did it to him. "Though I seem to remember ye mentionin' somethin' about duty."

"What's the use of mentioning it, if the people I mention it to won't listen?" Barrett shook his head, wryly adding, "You'll figure all of that out on your own, I have a feeling. It would have been nice to have spared you, Jansson and Albright the pain of finding out the hard way, but I suppose some lessons are best left to play out on their own."

"Aye, sir."

"Sanding, eh?" Barrett found himself a spot and experimentally scraped the paper over the wood. "It's been a long time since I've done anything like this. Restored an old cabinet my mother had left behind."

Scotty frowned. He didn't really care for company, and Barrett's company almost always meant some sort of meaningful conversation. "Sir, ye don't have to do--"

"Back to work," the commander ordered, evenly. "You were planning on being here anyway, so when 0530 comes around, I'll buy breakfast. And tomorrow night, Mister Scott, I don't want to see you here. I want you in your room at curfew. If I catch you out tomorrow, I'll actually turn you in."

It took a moment for Scotty to process it, though all he could really say was, "--d'ye ever sleep?"

Barrett looked back over, one eyebrow going up. His face was set in stern lines, worn by age, but there was a sparkle in his eyes that was unmistakably young. "Do you?"

So much for that. With an appreciative half-grin, Scotty got a new sheet of sandpaper went back to his sanding.

Not a word was said until 0530.

It was a fair enough bargain, and Scotty did go back to his room at curfew. Stepping in, he palmed the lights on and tried not to breathe a sigh of relief when he found Corry still away. Even though he wanted the other cadet back, he had no idea what he would even say; every time he'd tried to tackle the subject, it felt like he was making things worse, so it was just easier -- relatively -- to stick with his original plan and try to *work* through it, instead.

He plunked down on his bed and unlaced his boots, kicking them off with something approaching extreme prejudice and smirking satisfactorily as one landed in the middle of the floor and one bounced off of Corry's bed and onto the ground by the door. Hell, it wasn't like anyone cared to complain, was it?

Never mind. It wasn't worth getting bitter over. There was plenty else to get twisted up about.

Leaning back against the wall, he tried to unwind a little. After days on end of being not only awake but working, absent the occasional catnap he couldn't quite avoid, he couldn't argue that he wasn't tired out. He felt like he could sleep for a century easily, just let the whole world pass him by.

He shook his head to himself. It was pretty bad when it got to the point where he envied the men and women they used to send out on sleeper ships. But how bad was it, to go to sleep and wake up a century later? The advances in technology alone would make it fascinating.

But enough of the technological advances of the twenty-fourth century. Scotty leaned over and grabbed the ASD textbook from his desk, trying to force himself into the mindset he would need to research for the latest paper he had due in Pearson's torture chamber-- er, class. No easy feat, since he was still stuck on the applications of 19th century shipbuilding.

At least they hadn't had any scenarios scheduled aside from the simulations they could run on Earth or at Lunar Spaceport, or he might have been in more serious trouble; it was hard enough to concentrate on the *Lady Grey* and write technical papers on the latest Starfleet advances at the same time.

The whole process of reading and taking notes evaded him, though. He couldn't make it through a paragraph without completely slipping off into some unconnected thought; for once, Scotty couldn't concentrate, couldn't tune into the mindset of a Starfleet engineer. Maybe being worn out had something to do with it; concerned, tired, frustrated, hopeful, thoughtful. Too many conflicting emotions and no real energy left to fight them off. After a few minutes waging a losing battle, he threw the book back onto his desk, flopped back onto his bed, and stared at the ceiling.

What he *wanted* was to be working on the schooner. It was a relief to be able to fall into an effort of manual labor like that, something he'd liked as a teenager too, even if it was hard on a body. Holding his hands up, he studied them with a clinical disinterest; they were worn rough,

salvage yard rough, scored with dark red marks from nicks and scratches alike. No little pinpoint burns from torching, but still the kind of battering that came with physical effort.

His hands hadn't been rough like this since he graduated from Basic, and by then, he mostly just had callouses from the phaser and phaser rifle; so much of the modern engineering trade required delicate hands-on work, a careful and steady touch.

You didn't have to dig wooden splinters out of your fingers on a starship.

Damn her.

Putting his arms back behind his head, Scotty went back to giving the ceiling a glare for lack of having a better subject to direct it at. Damn her, not for tearing his hands up, or even for taking up his time now, but for making him want to spend more time still than he already had. Hadn't he given enough to that schooner yet? Hadn't he spent night and day down there? And now he was almost miserable not being there.

And Barrett, too, deserved to be cursed for eternity. He always seemed to know what they were thinking, all of them, like he was some sort of telepath. Scotty didn't *want* to be understood. At least, not *that* well, well enough to know how to twist him up and set him spinning like a top. Corry had, and look where that had gotten him.

Pity that Barrett seemed to have already managed to do the same, with his wee-hours visit and metaphorical philosophies.

Like the nature of wind.

What the hell was that supposed to mean, anyway? Scotty wondered what book the professor was pulling these from. Wind was wind. It had something to do with hot and cold air, and that was it. And you didn't *have* to go with it or fight against it; a smart person would simply find somewhere and wait it out, would endure it, rather than go into some kick of bravado and rage against the elements. They would find the best way to survive, however they had to.

Go with it or fight it, take it on the bow or the stern, upsea or down. Sink or float, it all came back to what decision a person made.

He almost had it figured out before he fell asleep.

The rhythmic rapping noise was out of place in the engine room of the *Constitution*-class starship, where the captain was busy telling him that if they didn't get the warp drive back online, they were going to die, and where he was busy telling the captain that it was impossible but that he could do it anyway. And he was just about to receive a commendation when he woke up.

The door. Blinking a few times and realizing that he couldn't be much further from the engine room of a *Constitution*-class starship, Scotty pulled himself out of bed and somehow convinced his body to make the short trip to the door. Opening it, still not entirely awake, he frowned.

Albright had no such problems, wide awake and cheerful as all hell. Sickeningly cheerful, Scotty thought, not saying a word as he stepped aside and let the other cadet in, trying to pull his fuzzy head together enough for language.

"Coffee?" Joe asked, not waiting for an answer before shoving the thermos in Scotty's direction. "Sleep well?"

"Aye, thanks," Scotty said, taking the coffee with a perplexed expression. Usually he didn't see anything of Albright until classes started at 0630, and since it was-- "Dammit!"

"Are you all right?" Albright tilted his head, eyebrows drawn.

"It's 1400! I was supposed to be in class!" This would look really good to Pearson and Barrett, not to mention the entire crew of the *Lady Grey*. Knowing that it would be pointless to try to rush it this late, Scotty put the thermos on his desk and sat back down on his bed and did his best to figure out where in the name of god those thirteen or fourteen hours went, staring at Cor's clock across the room with dismay. That was an insanely long time to spend asleep, especially for him, and he didn't feel all that well-rested despite it.

Just-- lost. Disoriented.

Albright shrugged, kicking the boot by the door out of the way. "One day won't get you drummed out of the fleet, unless they've really raised their standards. Besides, Jerry took charge, so no time was lost."

"Still."

"Corry stopped by too."

Raising an eyebrow, Scotty looked back up from where he'd had his face buried in his hands. "Oh? Better note that one in the books."

Joe winced, leaning against the wall. "I wanted to say that too, but it's kind of mean. He said they still haven't turned in his request for a transfer, though."

"That's because he's an engineer, not a doctor!" Stopping himself before he could launch into a tirade, Scotty stood and went about getting a clean uniform put together. He could probably spend an hour ranting about this sudden change of career Cor was planning, even if he'd been the one to originally suggest it, but he was already disgusted enough by the notion to just bite down on it. "Never mind."

"Never mind what?" Corry asked, stepping in behind Albright. He didn't notice Albright cringe, though it might have given him pause to wonder why if he had.

"I was sayin' that the reason ye haven't been transferred is because ye're an engineer, not a doctor," Scotty answered, matter-of-factly, even though he was only able to actually *look* at his roommate through his dresser mirror.

Corry just raised an eyebrow back, not commenting.

"I'll see you down in the yards, Scotty," Albright said, shaking his head, then stepped out of the room.

Scotty couldn't blame him. The tension had just gone up on the scale and was approaching unbearable again. He gave a halfhearted wave, even if it was too late for Joe to see it, and went back to getting his gear in order for the day, doing his best to get himself *together*. There wasn't a chance of him making it to any of his classes, his last class ended at 1500, but if he stayed in that room, he'd probably choke to death on his own frustration.

He gnawed on his lip as he slung his towel over his shoulder and turned back, and he was almost ready to say something sharp to his roommate, almost ready to make it known just how pissed off and-- and bloody *miserable* he was when Corry picked his second pair of service boots up from their messy spot halfway across the room and put them in the closet automatically. Just like so many times before.

How one single action, so insignificant, could hurt that much he'd never figure out.

Words lost, and not so much angry now as just very sorry, Scotty grabbed his clothes and walked out.

The well-worn frustration wasn't quite back by the time Scotty made his way into the shipyards, still supplanted by that heartache. Honestly, he would have preferred frustration. Hell, he would have preferred being thrown into a pool of acid. Anything was better than feeling regretful over bloody *footwear*.

Stepping into the berth, he closed the door quietly and made his way to the front of the *Lady Grey*, where most of the cadets were working. One team of four steamed the boards in the tubes in the back of the building, carried them up to the cadets on the starboard or port side, whichever the planking was for, where they were then fitted onto the skeleton. It was a pretty organized system, really, even with the limited manpower.

Jansson was still in charge, still giving orders as a few of the other cadets fitted the board on top of the next. Waiting until it looked like they were well-started, he paused and gave Scotty a grin. "Welcome back, chief."

"Sorry," Scotty said, sheepishly. "I didn't mean to sleep half the day."

"You probably needed it, you were looking pretty rough." Jerry shrugged, gesturing to the work. "Besides, we did all right."

"Looks like it." Smiling a vague half-smile, Scotty grabbed a pair of gloves and then stepped over to help brace up the board while it was being nailed to the skeleton. They were working from the bottom up, though he was still debating on whether he wanted to just keep going up, then work their way aft, or stay on the bottom. The planks weren't terribly long, staggered enough to allow for maximum strength, and he couldn't honestly see if it mattered either way, so long as they were cut accurately.

The *Lady Grey* was getting her skin now, one step closer to a floating vessel. The boards had enough give from being steamed to mold easily to the ribs, jointed to the stem from inside the hull, and caulked on the outside once the wood had dried out again.

"Wonder if we shouldn't try'n commandeer a few more people," Scotty pondered, aloud but to no one in particular.

"I guess we could," Jansson said, picking up the conversation as he helped brace the plank. "What've you got in mind?"

"Keep on like we are, but get ourselves about twenty more people. That way we can have one team on the port side, one on the starboard, the team we have on the wood-steamin', and a team workin' on th' inside of the boat. Startin' on the bilge, the ceilings, y'know?"

"Good luck finding volunteers." Jansson chuckled, stepping back once the holding nails were in place, "Your reputation precedes you, Wolf Larsen."

Scotty furrowed his eyebrows, bemused. "Who?"

"Wolf Larsen. He was a fictional character in an old book we had to read in secondary. Real tyrant."

Well, *that* was reassuring. Scotty rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "Thanks."

Jansson seemed to be entirely amused with his literary allusion and continued, "In fact, he had a schooner too, a fast one called the *Ghost*. A smart fellow, but he had a real complex going. Sound familiar?"

Scotty forced down a smile he was more than a little relieved to feel and picked up a scrap piece of wood, holding it like a club. "Complex? I'll show ye complex, Mister."

Jansson snickered, knocking the board aside, "Aye aye, Cap'n Larsen."



## Part II: The Lady Grey: Chapter 5

### Chapter 5:

Thursday, April 13th, 2243  
Weikman Lecture Hall, Theatre 4A  
Starfleet Engineering Academy  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth

The name stuck, just like the *Lady Grey* had stuck to the schooner. Scotty took it with somewhat mixed humor; occasionally he would give someone a glare over it, but most of the time he tolerated it, and it didn't take too long for him to answer to the name Wolf Larsen -- or some variation on it -- despite his best efforts not to. It wasn't pegged to him in bad spirits, he knew that much, though there were a few times he was afraid he might have more in common with the fictional tyrant than comfortable.

Just for the sake of curiosity, he'd looked the name up in the library database and spent an hour or so reading the book. Larsen was a sympathetic villain, he concluded. Someone who you could despise and respect at the same time, intelligent but unbalanced, obsessive and unconcerned all at once. More'n a wee bit unhinged and ultimately slated for a bad ending.

That made him honestly wonder if that was what the other cadets of Team C thought of him. And maybe whether they had a *point*.

"I hear your ship's coming along nice, Cap'n Larsen," Maggie said, lightly, breaking into his thoughts and effectively deleting anything but gibbering nonsense from his mind.

"Er-- aye, she is," Scotty answered, or rather, stumbled. Standing quickly, he set his books aside and tried not to look too idiotic. For some reason, his new name sounded a lot better coming from her rather than from one of his teammates. "And what about yer team?"

"Slow," she admitted, smiling a tired smile. "How's Corry? He hasn't been around much lately."

Oh, just go and bring up that thorn in the side. Frowning a little, Scotty wished in the back of his mind that he had the courage to ask her out, to tell her that Cor wouldn't appreciate her in his current state, to offer his eternal love and devotion, or any of the above. "Still aimin' for the science division."

Maggie echoed the frown with one of her own, shaking her head. "I wish he wouldn't be so serious about that. After all of this schooling, he should want to be an engineer."

"Aye, he should." The way her hair pooled on her shoulders, just barely regulation, was something close to bewitching.

Hell with it, you only live once. "Maggie?"

"Hm?" she asked, looking back at him with those gorgeous eyes.

Scotty shifted his weight from left to right to left, mentally smacking himself for being so damn hopeless. "Would-- I mean, if ye-- well, maybe someday ye could let me buy ye dinner? Or cook it? I mean, if ye dinna care to, that's all right, but maybe if ye--"

Maggie smiled, shaking her head. Leaning over, she kissed him on the cheek. "You're a sweetie, but I'm seeing someone." Stepping back, she picked up her books, turned, and walked out.

He was getting used to hearing that 'you're a sweetie, but' line; still, Corry had been right. She was just so nice when she turned you down that it was impossible not to fall even more in love with her. Flopping back in his chair with a somewhat soulful sigh, Scotty wondered absently exactly what it was with blondes, and her in particular, that made him into a complete idiot.

Never mind. The peck had been worth the rejection. If that was standard issue rejection material, maybe he should try asking girls out more often. Maybe he could get more than a peck if he looked pathetic enough. He hadn't gotten so much as a hug from Rachel, but then, Rachel was just a girl, and Maggie was a genuine woman. All woman, top on down, with that hair and those legs--

Cutting himself off before he started drooling, Scotty stood again and grabbed his books. It wouldn't do at all to be found with a vacant, drooly expression by the next class due in. Taking a deep breath and mentally chalking this one up to experience, he walked out of the hall.

It was a fairly short walk across the road, through the gap between Andrews and the cafeteria, and over the lawn to the administration building. Barrett's office was on the first floor, and he tapped lightly on the door, not wanting to intrude if the professor was too busy to speak with him at that given moment.

"Come in," Barrett said, not looking up from the computer screen.

Scotty stepped in, closing the door behind him. "I'm not interruptin' anything important, am I, sir?"

Barrett shook his head, turning off the computer. "Not at all. What's on your mind?"

"Manpower, sir. I was wonderin' if I was allowed to recruit a few more people for my team."

"Depends." The professor shrugged, leaning back in his chair. "Do you think you can convince a group of cadets to work on something they won't be getting credit for?"



"Depends," Scotty echoed, grinning a bit. "If I could, would ye allow it?"

Barrett grinned back, taking the challenge and adding to it, "Depends on whether or not you'd agree to bring your grades back up to where they should be."

"I could; 'course, that depends on havin' some help down there. We're understaffed, and ye know, sir, that *does* cut into my study time."

"You drive a hard bargain, Mister Scott."

"Aye, sir, but a necessary one."

Thinking it over for a moment, Barrett twiddled his thumbs. He let the silence hang for a hair longer than comfortable before striking a smile. "I'll let you recruit if you'll give me your word that Captain Pearson will not come to me anymore and complain about my monopolizing your time. A few more hands should give you ample time to study."

Not one to allow the opportunity to beat Barrett at his own game pass, Scotty didn't answer immediately, likewise waiting until it was almost unbearably quiet by pretending to consider it. When he did answer, though, it was with no small amount of certainty. "Agreed, sir."

"Battle stress test for the *Westchester* frigate class, stage one," Jansson quizzed, taking a whack at a woodnail with his mallet.

"Lab test: Prolonged phaser blast on a section of the hull plating at 121 degrees centigrade to minus 156 centigrade, vacuum chamber, increasing atmospheric pressure per hundredth of a kilo 'til one full atmosphere's achieved." Scotty smirked, leveling off the woodnail with a chisel once it was seated. "Right?"

"Right. Stage two?"

"Lab test: Simulated disrupter fire, section of hull plating, same temperature variations, same durations and changes."

"What's the maximum duration for the screens fully charged, Klingon disrupter fire, full power, tight beam?"

"Uhm--" Scotty paused for a moment, calculating it out in his head as well as he could, stalling by clarifying, "*Westchester* only, right?"

"Yep," Jansson chirped, driving in the next nail.

"Between two minutes and two minutes, twenty seconds."

"I talked two first-years into joining the team."

"Did ye?" Scotty grinned, somewhat glad to have a break in the grilling. They'd been at it for an hour, alternatively asking and answering questions. "How'd ye manage that?"

"First I had to assure them we only called you Larsen as a joke," Jansson chuckled, setting the mallet down and climbing down from the ladder. "Then I promised them a bottle each of my homemade brandy for every week they put in."

Scotty climbed down from his own perch, shaking his head in infinite sadness. "For shame, corruptin' the children like that. Someone oughta turn ye in, Jerry."

"Hey, they're too new to figure out that it's easy to sneak contraband on campus. I just took advantage of the situation."

"I won't complain, then. What time is it?"

Jansson looked at his watch, then winced. "2125. I should probably be getting back to the dorms. For that matter, so should you."

"Aye, in a minute." Scotty acknowledged the good-bye wave, then looked over the work they'd done over the past few days, since he'd approached Barrett with his request. So far, the two cadets Jerry had just bribed were the only two, but it was a start. They were making damn good progress, anyway, and that would make it even better.

Wanting to do one more round before going back to the dorms -- and hoping he wouldn't run into Corry -- he started to walk around the bow to look over the starboard side. A couple more weeks of this, and the *Lady Grey* would be over half-completed. Finish her hull, finish her below decks, construct and install the steering mechanism, step in the masts, run the lines, rig the sails, and she'd be genuinely seaworthy. The cosmetic fittings and extra gear aside, she'd be ready to go.

He wasn't sure why he stopped, but he did. Right in front of her, he stopped in his tracks and looked up at her dead on.

He blinked.

Her bow rose well above his head, this massive construction of wood, tar, iron-- blood and sweat. *His* blood and sweat, and a few times now, almost his tears too. It was a strange feeling, looking up at her like that; really *seeing* her for the first time. Seeing an entity, not just a project. Seeing something he'd fought for, something real and defined; not finished, but more than a concept, more than just timbers fixed together.

Something he was *building*, not just something he had fixed or modified.

Frowning unconsciously, he took a step back. He'd imagined the schooner completed several times, always with an eye on the next technical task he'd have to complete to take her to that point, but he'd never thought of her as a *living thing* before.

Had never pictured her as something that he had brought to life from the numbers on up.

Shaking his head hard, trying to physically get rid of the thoughts, he turned to finish his round. Not even a half-step later, though, he looked back up at her.

Masts to the sky, bow to the waves, sails billowing in the wind, salt water flying; in that single moment, he saw her as clear as can be, and no matter what happened in the future, where he ended up, what other ships he might grow to love, he would never forget that mental picture.

Taking a deep, somewhat shaky breath, he didn't even try to finish rounding the bow, just turned around and sprinted out of the slip as fast as he could.

When Scotty finally slowed down, stopped running like the hounds of hell were on his heels, he was on the pier and fairly breathless. The air had a chilly edge on it, something that reminded him right quick he'd left his coat back in the shipyards, but he couldn't have forced himself to go back even if he'd managed to throw every ounce of willpower he had into it.

Not now. Maybe tomorrow, but he couldn't look at her now.

It wasn't so much the schooner he was running from, but the idea of it: No matter how much of his heart and soul went into building her, he wasn't going to get the pieces back because he wasn't building her for *himself*. He was building her for his best friend, instead; a wild attempt to make things right the only way he really knew how.

He just hoped, desperately, that he would manage to get her done before Corry was gone for good.

Trying to calm down, he crossed his arms tight across his chest and continued to walk along the pier. He certainly didn't want to go back to the dorms now, not in the face of everything that had happened, and he couldn't bear to go back to the slip and look at the *Lady Grey* again, the physical embodiment of his own desperation. That left precious few places to wander, to think, or to try not to think.

The water was quiet, and for once, it wasn't raining or even misty. The sky was clear above, stars sparkling in a million different strengths and colors, a promise of far off worlds and entirely new things to encounter. He had always looked forward to the day he could get there, and escape the entire gravity of the planet he stood firm on now; escape all the things holding him to the surface. He had always looked forward to being out there, an engineer on a starship, testing and retesting his talent and hopefully becoming something more than confused and frustrated and desperate, something more than a mess of awkwardness and anxiety.

Well, it was a nice dream anyway. Sighing, Scotty found himself a bench to sit on and did his best not to let the cool air get to him. It was too late to go back to the dorms now without being interrogated; it wouldn't be any better when he showed up in class the next day, but at least he'd have time to mentally prepare himself for the dressing down.

For now, he didn't want to think about that, though. He didn't want to think about that, about the exam he had in the morning, about Cor and his screwed up obsession, or about the *Lady Grey* and how she had become something Scotty had certainly never intended her to be.

But she was still there anyway. No matter what he did, he couldn't get that damn schooner off of his mind. Not even thinking about the *Constitution*, the ship he wanted so badly to be on next time she came into port, could get him to stop working on the *Grey*. It was an obsession, no less enthralling or vicious than Corry's; in pretty much every way, they were intrinsically linked, feeding off of each other like a miserable, power-hungry infinity loop. Corry worked on finding an antibiotic that wasn't necessary for a bacteria that had been purged, and Scotty worked on building a schooner that was an impractical distraction from his future career; each working to help someone else and both left in torment over it.

It made no bloody sense.

Why? Why was he even working on this with the feverish intensity of a madman, when it would never lead to anything good? Was it even for Corry, or was it for himself?

People *left*. He knew that; he had always known that. People left, and Cor wouldn't ultimately be any different from that; even if Scotty somehow managed to finish the *Lady Grey* and get his best friend to come back now, their futures were going to diverge because of their careers anyway. They weren't likely to be assigned together, and Corry would eventually be like Eissa and Ahlgren and Rios and all of Scotty's squadmates from Basic: People he cared for, had all but shared boots with, was willing to die for, but were still relationships maintained via letters that got fewer between as time went on.

People left, but the idea of *letting go* here felt something beyond awful.

Scotty pulled his knees up, resting his feet on the bench and burying his head in his arms. He was rattled; shaken up and desperate to make enough sense of it not to be shaken up, not to feel like everything was falling apart. Part of him wanted to run back to the slip and bury himself back into the work that had served so well as a focus, and part of him just wanted to give up. Let her stay the way she was, or leave her to be someone else's concern.

Anything had to be better than sitting in the cold, Belfast night. Anything had to be better than being torn apart between the logic, the *common*

*sense*, that told him to settle down and focus on Starfleet and the emotion that screamed to finish the *Lady Grey* -- to finish her, to drag Corry down there when she was set afloat and force him to look, hopefully before it was too late.

It wasn't that he wouldn't have given almost anything for Cor; his life, his career even. If it came down to it, he wouldn't have hesitated to die in Corry's place.

But what could he do when he couldn't even have that opportunity? When the death facing his best friend wasn't a death of the physical sort, but the death of every dream he'd ever held onto, every wish he'd ever given, every single thing that made him the person he was?

What sort of death was that?

More importantly: What could Scotty really do about it?

Not a whole hell of a lot, he concluded, miserably, head still buried from the world. He couldn't talk it out; the words were so hard to find, even if tact wasn't an issue. There was always the *Lady Grey*, but no guarantee that even a fully finished schooner would give Corry pause. No guarantee--

Sad all the way to the center of his spine, he might've jumped off the pier and let himself drown if he were inclined in that direction. Not because he was facing any tangible problem, no, nothing that could affect the rest of the galaxy, but because no matter what he wanted to do, it always seemed so difficult. A million engineering disasters were easier dealt with than one serious, cut to the bone emotional crisis.

When the hell had he started over-thinking everything, started letting how he felt interfere with what he knew he needed to do, anyway?

That was a complicated answer, but he knew it was when he started feeling responsible somehow for Corry. When he'd decided to watch Corry's back, like Corry had tried to watch his when he was helpless and in over his head.

Now he was paying for it. A less stubborn man might have given up long ago and figured that it was a lost cause, but Scotty wasn't a less stubborn man. Confused, uncertain, but he sure was bullheaded enough to make up for it.

(Whether that was for good or doom, even he didn't know.)

Still, if he just had an answer to the problem, a way to make it all right with a clear-cut, definite, surefire plan, he'd be set.

If life were just that simple.

## Part II: The Lady Grey: Chapter 6

### Chapter 6:

Friday, April 14th, 2243  
Pier 44  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth

The sun came up with the sort of color that could never be duplicated in photos, holos or paintings. It glinted first off of the clouds that wisped along the horizon, starting off in dull, washed out colors before climbing in intensity to a bright, scalding red. It was breathtaking to see the sky like that, so vivid it seemed it could burn.

Scotty had given into common sense at some point, sneaking into the dorms to retrieve his civilian coat, and couldn't summon up much more than the opposing feelings of relief and sorrow at Cor's bed being empty. He probably could have stayed in, but anxiety sent him back out and he ended up sitting across from the Queen's Quay to watch the sky come back to light.

The sunrise at least got him out of the looping tracks his mind was running and provided a distraction from the clawed-open feeling in his chest.

Finally dragging himself away from the bench, he stretched, painted orange in the light and stiff and sore from the night outside. It was one thing to be working all night, and another thing to be sitting idle; old lessons he knew, and yet still he'd stayed out. Shaking his head at himself, he started back for the campus.

Barrett intercepted him halfway. One look at the professor's face was enough to let Scotty know he was in for it; still, before he had a chance to start to explain, Barrett confirmed that instinct. "I don't know exactly what career-destructive tendencies have overcome you this time, but *generally*," he said, spitting the word 'generally' out, "it's a good idea to at least check in before you decide to spend a night AWOL."

Not able to think of a quick enough reply, Scotty stood at attention before he even realized he had adopted that stance.

"Do you even know what time it is?" Barrett asked, an edge on his voice that bordered downright icy.

Perturbed, Scotty really did try to find an answer. He racked his tired mind trying to count the hours or remember when about the sun was supposed to rise this time of year, but that didn't help. Finally, weakly, he settled on, "I'm not sure, sir."

"Not sure." Shaking his head, the anger just seemed to vanish from Barrett, replaced by disappointment. "Security's looking for you. It's one thing to be a few hours late, but when you don't even make an attempt to check in for an entire night, that's bordering on downright foolish."

"Aye, sir." Trying his hardest not to cringe, Scotty bit on his lip. He really was in for it, not only from Barrett, but from the security division on campus. Technically, they really *could* have called him AWOL. A very quick and damaging blow to his career.

The commander didn't say anything for a moment or two, just studied his student's face, as if trying to understand what would warrant this sort of behavior. Finally he continued, though, more gently than before, "You're already late for your first class. If I were you, I would do my best to be on time for the next one."

"Aye, sir," Scotty answered, dutifully, and started at a jog for the dorms. Barrett's voice stopped him a few paces later, though.

"Did you find it?"

Scotty's eyebrows drew together. "Sir?"

"Whatever you were looking for," Barrett said, with an eerie certainty, like he knew exactly what it was tearing up Scotty's mindset so badly. "Did you?"

Scotty frowned, replying honestly, "Not yet, sir. I'm still workin' on it." Waiting for the nod of acknowledgment, he turned back and jogged away before he could be dissected any further.

It didn't end with Barrett, though, and Scotty didn't expect it to. Security made sure to take a piece out of his hide as well, though they didn't end up calling him AWOL. The reprimand that would be in his permanent Starfleet record was enough -- any time he came up for promotion, he was sure that someone would look at it and hesitate. Even if he never committed another breach of protocol, they would still notice that one.

Bureaucracy. One of the miserable constants in the universe.

He managed to get back to the dorms in decent time, rush through a shower and with his hair still wet and the horrible feeling that the day would only go downhill, he almost missed the final chime to get into Pearson's class. Skidding through the doors right as it rang, he was greeted with the Captain's full unhappiness.

"Nice of you to join us, Mister Scott," Pearson said, coolly, bringing the attention of the entire class down on the still-panting cadet. "I wasn't sure if you were going to grace us with your presence today."

Sean Kelley snickered, loud enough to carry, and Scotty raked him with a brutal glance before looking back at Pearson and adopting a more appropriate expression. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Well, take a seat. Advanced warp physics waits for no individual."

"Aye, sir," Scotty answered, keeping the relief from his voice only by force of will. Darting up the steps, he picked the furthest possible seat from the front, fell into the chair with the grace of a dying animal, and tried to get his thoughts in proper order.

After an entire night of being almost insane with confusion, his mind resisted any attempts at being organized. It was another thing to add to the list of things going wrong so far. Once, a very long time ago it seemed, he had loved this class. Now it was a pit from hell, and he sure was coming close to falling in.

Forget the class, life itself was rapidly becoming a sick rendition of Dante's *Inferno*. Shaking his head at the thought, Scotty just did his best not to look too conspicuous. He wasn't in any sort of state to answer questions, take notes, do anything besides try damn hard not to lose his mind and fall to pieces.

And --that was when Pearson decided to remind him and the rest of the class that they had an exam.

*Forget renditions*, Scotty thought, taking the paper as it was passed back to him. It *was* hell, custom tailored. Scowling at the paper and wishing he'd at least put forth some real effort to study the night before rather than sit melancholy on a bench by the river, he figured he could guess about half of them. Jansson had grilled him pretty well on what they were supposed to be tested on, but that was already a distant memory.

He closed his eyes for a moment and rubbed at them, trying to breathe off the weight in his chest and the sensation of his heart running away on him; thought about Cor showing up with a truly geriatric bottle of Scotch only a few months ago, a bribe or apology, and just that was enough to make him want to walk out of the lecture theater and find somewhere to have a breakdown in peace.

But he finally managed to get his head back to where it was supposed to be, giving his full attention to the paper. It wasn't easy to call on the engineering talent that had served him so well all the way up to now; instead, it seemed like it was hiding from the current state he was in just like he wished he could. Normally he could find his way blindfolded around the facts, theories, practicalities and applications of engineering, and now he was struggling just to get through a one sheet examination.

One sheet of paper, nothing to be afraid of.

Smirking in a slightly unbalanced manner, Scotty read it over once, read it over twice, and made an effort to answer the questions. The bargain he had made with Barrett kept him from just guessing his way through, normally a tactic he only used when he wanted to go and read up on a journal or troop through a schematic, and now a tactic he was tempted to use just to get it over with.

Still, once he actually focused enough, it wasn't hard. Most of the quizzing he had gotten the night before filtered back in a subconscious manner, presenting itself automatically. It was about the only bright point in the day so far.

He already had a feeling it would remain so, too.

He'd been relieved to go back to the slip by the end of that day. Even after the revelations of the night before, it was still the most comfortable place he could find within walking distance. The rain had started again, ruling out the pier; his room was just too damn unhappy even without Corry--

That just left the shipyards and the *Lady Grey*.

The ships that men have sailed upon were often referenced throughout history. They captured the romantics, the semantics, the dreams and ambitions of human beings from the first time that a person set afloat a piece of wood and discovered that they could take to the water, become creatures of the ocean even if they could never really be a physical part of it. It was enough for them to be a spiritual part of the sea.

The ships had changed; became faster, better equipped, more capable of surviving a full gale. They'd evolved like the human race had, and even by that point, in the middle of the twenty-third century, they had not lost their ability to grab hold of a human heart. Humankind had moved into space, taking their love of their vessels with them, sailed the stars like they had the oceans, and it could never be said that there wasn't a bond between a ship and those who were aboard her.

The ocean wasn't finished with humankind just yet, though.

Scotty didn't think of romanticism. He didn't contemplate the great evolution from the raft to the boat to the ship to the starship, nor did he pay a great deal of attention to how spiritual it all was. All he really did understand was that there was something there, something amazing, that wasn't explainable.

He was too tired, too close to losing it to understand much else. Ever a glutton for punishment, he'd worked from when classes ended to now. All evening, though, he hadn't once dared cross her bow, not sure he could take really *seeing* her again, and all the things she represented as

she stood there. To him. To Cor, maybe.

Now, though, right before curfew and alone with the *Lady Grey*, he found himself back in front of her. It was almost like his feet had moved for themselves and before he knew it, he was there again, reminded again of everything he didn't want to be reminded of.

Was it really that long ago that he had hated her? Honestly?

And now she was one of the few things he could depend on. He had tried all day to understand why he had allowed this to happen; why he'd allowed himself to care. Why he even cared in the first place, beyond the wish to finish her for Corry.

Where exactly the transition had taken place was hard to say -- it was more of a progression than anything. It was every nail that he'd hammered in himself, every inch he'd sanded, every late night spent working until his hands bled from it. It was a simple equation, really; the more that he put of himself into her, the more she gave back until they really weren't so much two separate entities, just some measure of parts of one another. It had just taken him until last night to admit it.

Stepping forward, Scotty leaned his forehead against the wood, eyes closed. The sturdiness of the schooner, no matter how incomplete she was, was reassuring. She was solid; a structure he could lean on, carry his weight because right then, he wasn't sure he had the strength or the courage to do it himself. The whole day had been hard, from one problem to the next to the next, to go with the weeks that had been hard before it, and at least here he had something to lean against so that he could take a moment to breathe.

If only she had the answers, he would be all right. But she couldn't tell him what to do; even if she could, he didn't think he could do more than just stand there, leaning on her as though she were the only thing between him and whatever darkness waited beyond them both.

"I think ye might be the only friend I've got left," Scotty said, a sad echo chasing his voice that seemed even more desolate in the dark slip. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, to get enough strength to stand on his own again, he let the schooner go.

He didn't look back when he walked out. If he had, he was sure it would have snapped him in two.

He chose to walk back to the dorms, rather than catch the shuttle. He couldn't remember the last time he'd actually taken the easy route back, but it hadn't been within the last couple of months. Before, the notion of walking out in the rain when there was an easy alternative was best left to fools, romantics and people itching to catch a chill; now he found it gave him a chance to think on his own without the direct influences of anyone else.

Not that anyone had ever been able to influence Scotty's way of thinking. Maybe his life, maybe his career, but not how he thought, not how he dealt with things. He'd fought his heart right out to protect that.

But now suddenly they could and it was eating at him with the persistence of a hungry lion; somehow, these people were able to disrupt his perfect formula, this balance he'd achieved between life and work, work and life until they were both the same thing. They could get to him without even being there.

Like Barrett, and the moral that was supposed to make it all make sense. The nature of wind, which tickled at the back of the Scotty's mind almost constantly, and which he still didn't *get*. Logic said that it had something to do with destiny and the winds of fate; what else could it be, with a reference like that? But his heart was telling him otherwise, telling him very much against his will that this could be something more important than a simple end-of-the-story moral that went right along with the 'happily ever after' line.

So he thought about it, tried to understand it like he understood how to repair a piece of equipment. It resisted being figured out, though, just like he resisted being figured out, and just like Corry's motives for the career switch resisted being figured out.

In that sense, maybe Scotty did understand.

But he still wasn't ready to give up on Cor, even though it seemed more hopeless by the day. Story morals could wait, but friends could only wait so long before they became complete strangers. Oh, sure, you could sit down and chew over old times with a cup of coffee or a shot of Scotch, but that was it. There was nothing more to it besides the sad ruminations of what could have been and should have been if it hadn't all gone so bloody wrong.

Stepping into the gate and nodding to Security, he did his best to mentally prepare himself for the idea that Corry might be there when he walked in, and that he might be called on to converse in a manner that wouldn't be blatantly picking a fight.

He didn't want a fight, no, but-- he knew that everything he wanted to say would get him one.

The walk up the steps and down the hall had to be what it was like walking to a gallows; it went too quickly and he was still woefully unprepared. He stared for a long moment at the door, dread expanding in his chest, then finally managed to force himself to turn the knob and step in.

And any ideas of conversation instantly gave way to having that dread *realized*.

Corry glanced up from his dresser, offering a half-smile of greeting. "Evening."

His bags were packed-- literally. They sat beside his bunk, which was made and squared away with the Starfleet issue blanket rather than the blue wool blanket he usually had on it. The bookshelves were cleared off, pictures and posters had been taken down, the computer tapes were

put away-- it was almost like walking into someone else's room.

Scotty froze, putting it all together in his mind frantically. "Leavin'...?"

"Yep!" Cor finished shoving his knickknacks from the dresser top into his carryon. "I'm outbound at midnight for Baltimore."

"Why...?"

Corry raised an eyebrow, looking at his roommate through the mirror. "Because my transfer came through?"

Blinking a few times, still almost out of the door, Scotty looked between the bags, the dresser and the mirror again, scrambling to just-- he was just-- and he had been so sure that the transfer wouldn't have come through until after he had a chance to finish the *Lady Grey*, and maybe sabotage Corry's career change using her, but--

Now-- now every bit of work he'd put into her had been for nothing. Corry was really going to do it. He was really going to leave, all smiles and joyous celebration at something that could be the biggest mistake of his life.

*God.*

"Ye're makin' a mistake," Scotty said, with a certainty that harbored no hesitation, panic gnawing a hole under his breastbone. He didn't have anything left now but words; if Corry was just going to walk away-- "I think this'll be the biggest mistake ye'll ever make."

"Yeah, you and everyone else." Corry shrugged, nonchalantly. "This is what I want, though. At least wish me good luck."

"No."

"No?" Cor paused in his packing, turning to look at him, looking halfway between surprised and *irritated*. "Whaddyou mean, no?"

*Now or never*, Scotty told himself, shoulders set in defiance of this, life and everything else, even with his guts twisting and his heart pounding. "I'm not gonna wish ye luck on screwin' yer life up."

Corry's eyebrows drew together, and he crossed his arms, no less defiantly. "Who says I'm screwing my life up? How do you know that this isn't the best thing for me?"

"Cause I *know* you," Scotty answered, desperately, finally giving voice to at least some of what he had been wanting to say for the past months. "I know ye love yer father, and ye're scared tae death o' losin' him, an' I know ye dinna wanna go intae space, an' that ye somehow think this is gonna make all of it all right, but Cor, it's *not*. There's no runnin' from what's chasin' you!"

"That's the problem with you." Corry shook his head, but he was obviously stung by the words. "You don't have faith in anything, do you? You don't trust me to make a decision like this."

"No, I don't," Scotty said, bluntly, before he realized how that probably sounded and winced. "I mean--"

Corry's jaw knotted briefly, then his lip curled. "Gee, thanks. Nice to know that you really care that much, so much that you're willing to be around just long enough to tell me I'm a hopeless screw up."

"I didna say that!" It took Scotty just about every last bit of his willpower to keep from burying his fists in his own hair. "I'm sayin' that ye're about tae walk out o' here, an' dammit, I *know* ye'll regret it!"

"How?" Patience wearing thin, see-through thin, both of Corry's eyebrows went up at the challenge. "Are you gonna tell me that you're able to see into the future, too?"

"No! But what'll happen when ye go through all o' this, an' give up four years-- count 'em, *four years* o' yer life, just on a maybe?" Unable to stop himself, Scotty launched into an imitation of Corry he knew very well was going to hit close to home, "'Well, cripes, my Dad's okay and now I'm a lieutenant and it only took me until I was thirty-five, but that's all fine because now I'm out here charting bacteria that floats around on solar currents trillions of clicks from home on this ass-backwards little ship. Life's wonderful!'"

Cor's face slowly went *red*, and Scotty knew before he was even finished that if he hadn't just crossed a line, then he'd gotten far too close.

"Exactly when did you start to give a damn?" Corry finally asked, deadly calm, but with his fists still clenched at his sides. "Since when did you start to give a damn about me, anyway, about anything other than being an engineer on the *Constitution*?"

Caught off guard, Scotty scrambled for a moment before answering, "I-- I don't know, I just--" And he didn't know. There was just some point, over the months, that he decided that Corry was worth it. Worth caring about. Worth *trusting*. Even worth dying for.

"Right. And that," Cor snapped, sharply, "is because you don't. Well, I'm sorry if *I* care about more than machines! I'm sorry if I give a damn about something besides a starship or some idiotic class project!"

"The *Grey's* more'n a project!" Scotty shot back, clenching his own fists, if only to try to stop his hands shaking.

Corry didn't even hesitate. "It's a pile of wood! You said it yourself, she's a waste of time, completely foolish! What, you're going to tell me that you care about her now? No, you don't. Christ, I wouldn't be surprised if you were some kind of machine on the inside, because I sure don't see someone made of flesh and blood writing off as much as you do. What if it was your Dad, huh?"

"I'm not writin' anything off!"

"You wrote *me* off," Corry said, his voice low and cold. "All I wanted was-- but no, you know what? That's fine. It goes both ways. I'm glad I'm getting out of here-- it's sure better than listening to you pretend like you actually give a good goddamn."

Trying to get back up off the ropes, Scotty let the silence hang for a long moment as he tried to grab words and form them into sentences, or offer a rebuttal, or--

Or even *breathe*. "Is-- is that what ye think?" he finally managed to ask, reeling.

"Oh yes," Corry whipped back. He picked up the model of the ship and tossed to the floor between them. He didn't look down, just kept his gaze leveled on Scotty, who met it through a tunnel. "If this is all you claim to care about in your life, then god help anyone who thinks they might have a shot in the dark at being your friend."

It landed like a knife, just that exact pain, carried in the sound of something wooden breaking; landed sharp and sliced his breath down to nothing.

Scotty stared back for a moment, head spinning; took in the anger and the *dismissal* written on his best friend's face, the look of someone who was just done with him, who was *sick* of him, and--

He had one hand halfway up. He didn't know why. He dropped it and staggered around and made his way back out blindly, everything from his throat to his middle *seized*; made his way down a landing before he could manage to get even half a breath in, fought for through his teeth, and he was scrambling out the basement window before he could get a whole one, even serrated.

By the time he stumbled to folded against the other side of the outside fence, back against brick and limbs trembling, he couldn't see for the tears and was doubled over with his fists in his hair, crying almost too hard to breathe, let alone think.

Just another broken cry out of *no*, thrown out against the universe for some twist of injustice, embodied, and not for the first time. Nor would it be the last.

The universe didn't answer. But then, it never did.



## Part II: The Lady Grey: Chapter 7

### Chapter 7:

Friday, April 14th, 2243  
Malone Road Dormitory, Room 17  
Starfleet Engineering Academy  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth

The shuttle was due to pick him up at the terminal down the road in an hour, and Corry was packed to go. He had everything clean, neat and organized. All that was left was to carry his two bags and his one carryon out, present Security with his transfer orders by the gate, and walk away for good.

It sounded so simple, but it wasn't.

It was *supposed* to be simple. He wasn't supposed to second-guess this. He'd worked really hard to even convince headquarters he should be allowed to transfer, and it was stupid to wait around any longer than he had.

He sure as hell wasn't supposed to be feeling like *this*, like he had just-- just set fire to a hard-won bridge.

Sweeping his half of the floor with a broom, Cor was stalling and knew it, making excuses not to go yet. That he was waiting for his roommate -- former roommate? -- to come back so he could-- maybe explain or patch things up, or apologize, or--

Not that Corry had been wrong. Oh no, he was right about everything that he said. He *had* to be right about it, because if he wasn't, then he'd just done something unspeakable. And he wasn't *capable* of being that cruel; even at his angriest, he'd never once turned around and tried to really hurt someone. And Scotty was still his best friend, no matter how machine-absorbed and odd he was.

And now-- now Scotty was probably off fuming about all this.

Finally unable to stand it in his peripheral vision, Cor dropped the broom and picked up the model of the *Lady Grey*; her main mast had snapped and it caused all the rigging that had been so painstakingly put into place to snarl up into a bird's nest.

He shook his head to himself, and didn't stop shaking it, as he tried and failed to put the pieces back together, a futile task without both glue and patience. Anyway, Scotty *had* to be off fuming. It really wasn't hard to offend him, and of course he'd be offended by this, and he'd maybe even be right to be, but that was all it was. He probably headed back to the real *Lady Grey*, even, to go bury himself back into work.

Had to be.

Scowling, Cor set the broken model on Scotty's dresser, then picked up and threw the broom into the corner, pacing a few steps back and forth. Why did they have to get into a fight, instead of just saying 'see ya later?' like everyone else? That way, in a month or two, they could have met up in a bar somewhere, tossed back a few drinks and it would have been just like it always was; joking and laughing, being silly and calling each other chicken over whatever they possibly could.

There wouldn't be the accusing silence that faced him now.

"Shut up," Corry whispered, as if someone had said something. But there was a reason that he'd fought back like he had. And it wasn't like Scotty was innocent of any wrongdoing; he had spent the last couple of months completely absorbed into working on the *Lady Grey*, instead of taking a minute and *listening*. He'd been down there day and night, not even trying to be a good friend, just working on that ship like it was the only thing in the world, the only thing that meant anything, as if somehow--

--as if somehow that ship could make up for Corry being lost in medical books, snappish and impatient and emotionally absent, when he wasn't literally physically absent.

For the first time, Corry began to understand what had been going through his roommate's mind, and for the first time, he began to try to see himself as Scotty might have seen him lately. To wonder what it must have felt like, being confronted with one's best friend as a half-absent ghost, who only showed up long enough to be short-tempered. Who just took for granted--

Cor looked into his mirror, nearly having to force himself to do it, and when he did, something inside of him cracked so hard that his hands started trembling.

What he saw there-- the *anger* on his face, in his eyes. The bitter twist of his mouth. What he saw there was-- was what?

Miserable.

Was what?

*Mean.*

And what had he just done with it?

There was nothing-- not career, not anything worth this. A sick feeling creeping into his veins and twisting in his stomach, he grabbed his coat and pulled it on, then dashed out the door.

Maybe it wasn't too late to stop this bridge from becoming ash.

His feet had it in for him. Still stunned and bewildered, Scotty wasn't even thinking of where he was walking. He just was. Where didn't matter anymore, or even why, though his feet seemed to know where they wanted to take him, and that was back to the shipyards.

He'd stumbled away from the fence in no particular direction and with no particular plan; now, he still had none of those things, just muscle-memory leading him to the same place he'd been walking now for months. As if he hadn't had enough heartache there.

But it didn't matter, because at least there he would be able to get in out of the cold, misting rain, crawl up onto the *Lady Grey*, and hopefully sleep through the next decade or so in peace. Finding somewhere even peripherally safe had become his sole concern in life all over again. Beyond that just-- didn't exist.

Belfast was quiet. It was a heavy quiet, almost tangible in its weight. The streets were slick from water, black pools on a black road; a black world altogether. No moonlight shining through the clouds, and even the street lights and business lights didn't cast so far as they normally did, cut off by the mist. Back at the Academy, the dorms were winding down and everyone was going to bed, and in the industrial district, no one was out and about. No one passed him on the bridge.

The shipyards were just as silent. So far, Scotty had been the only one who actually stayed there into the deep night hours; in the daytime, the entire area was filled with the sounds of industry and shipbuilding. The students who had projects, the Harland & Wolff employees building dyna-carriers in the massive berths down the way.

Not now, though. Now it was a place best suited for ghosts and emotionally exhausted cadets.

Except-- the air tasted strange.

It pinged in his subconscious, just like the monitor turning off had when Corry had found out about his father. It wasn't a feeling that slammed into him, but it was still enough to make him take notice. An uneasy feeling; something was wrong. Instinctively, even on the edge of dropping, he knew something was wrong.

He didn't stop walking, but he did manage to focus on that. Before, he'd known fairly quickly what it was that had disturbed him enough to register, but this time there was no one to tell him. Frowning, Scotty picked his pace up a notch or two, trying to reconcile in his head what could have given him pause like that. It had to be *something*.

Crossing around the side of the slip three down from his, he tested the air like an animal might, trying to gauge what was off about it. The mist was there-- that was normal. The salt water, it was ever present and one of the constants in his life. It was something else, something that didn't belong; something that he, being only human, had a hard time discerning.

A hint, drifting in and out; a ribbon of it when the air shifted.

...

It was *smoke*. It was *woodsmoke*.

The *Lady Grey* screamed.

It was a sensation that, later in his life, Scotty would become very good at recognizing; the feeling of knowing something he loved was in danger. It wasn't a literal noise, it existed only in his head, and he had never felt it before now, but in the time between one breath in the next, he knew beyond any doubt that his ship was in danger.

That instant, nerve-shattering realization was enough to set him running before he had time to decide to run.

Skidding around the corner, he was off balance and barely able to recover before he ended up sliding out into the wet concrete. The mist made it hard to see, even with the lights on every berth, and it was only when he got closer that he was able to make out #22, and the wisps of black smoke curling out from under the door.

She was still screaming; a wail that reverberated in his head, bouncing between his ears and completely driving any remnants of thought from his mind; a keening shriek, an alarm, a *plea*. If he had more experience in getting past that initial terror, he might have seen the black-clad figures vanish into the shadows, and he might have realized what danger he was in, but he didn't.

So Scotty had no way of knowing if it was he who ran into the pipe or if the pipe ran into him, but it caught him across the abdomen hard enough to drop him in his tracks and knock the air from his lungs.

The pain was enough to temporarily get him past the *Lady Grey*, and more than enough to make him wish, with a calmness that would have been amusing if not for the situation, that he had worn some sort of body-armor. Trying to get a breath of air, he looked up just in time to see the pipe swing again, heard someone shout, and by willpower alone found enough concentration and strength to scramble backwards before the metal could take his head off of his shoulders.

It literally parted his hair, and someone cursed -- apparently his ability to recognize English had suffered -- and still gasping, Scotty dragged himself to his feet, about ready to start swinging back. Pipe or no.

The smell of smoke came on even harder then, though, and the entire fight and any concept of pain fled with it. Not even glancing back at his assailants, he took off for the slip.

Corry was a good several minutes behind, jogging steadily and trying to figure out what to say. He had no idea of the drama that was being played out, aside from his part in it. If he had, he would have run until he collapsed or until he got there, whichever came first, but he didn't know.

All he knew was that he had a lot of self-examination coming, and if he was lucky, he could somehow save a friendship before it was too late.

He did notice a small group of people, though, a tight little knot of bodies walking on the opposite side of the street across the bridge. They were just shadows in the fog and rain and blackness, moving quickly. They were talking, too, but too softly for him to hear, and before he had a chance to take a closer look, they were gone, vanishing into the night.

Noticing them gave him a distinctly uncomfortable feeling. What the heck were people doing out in the industrial district this late? It was too dark to work outside, and most of the shipyards and mills had closed hours ago. There was only one restaurant in that area, a little family place that was open in the day, so they weren't out to eat. Frowning to himself, Cor figured that they must be cadets, out after curfew and trying to remain inconspicuous-- but why in *this* part of town?

Something wasn't right. He knew very well where most cadets hid out, and it sure wasn't around there. It was as far away from campus as they could reasonably get, far enough that they weren't automatically bounced out for being cadets, and where there were night clubs made for those who didn't want to be asked questions, where sweethearts could rent a room and where the younger cadets could play pool and have a few beers. Corry had spent his entire first two years in places like that.

Unconsciously he picked his pace up, crossing a dark road and fumbling to key in the entrance code for the Harland & Wolff main personnel gate. Muttering a few obscenities when he punched it in wrong once, then twice, he was just about ready to climb when the lock clicked open.

He knew Scotty well enough to know that he'd be with his ship, down in #22, and though it was a long walk, it wasn't so long that he wanted to turn back. He could always catch the 0300 shuttle and still be able to report on time in Maryland; apologizing couldn't wait like the shuttle ride could.

Not if he wanted to keep his friend.

He was just rehearsing *how* he was going to explain or mend things when the smell of smoke hit him full in the face like a slap, stopping him cold in his tracks.

He knew instantly: The *Lady Grey* was on fire. Whoever was crossing the bridge before was responsible.

*Scotty was in there.*

Gears turning in his head at a frantic pace, he broke into a run.

The sight of the smoke pouring out of the door when he got there, boiling out black, jolted him so hard he stumbled a pace before finding his stride again. But without a backwards thought, he took a deep breath, closed his eyes and then plunged through the smoke and through the door.

Heat blasted his face; every instinct he had screamed for him to *leave*. So, he found the wall and kept pushing on instead.

Logically, he would find Scotty working on the environmental control panel; the panel had to be malfunctioning, or it would have already sounded the alarm, sprayed the suppressant down from the ceilings and out of the walls, suctioned the smoke out-- he had to be there, somewhere in that nightmare.

Eyes closed involuntarily, Cor groped along the wall, trying to remember the layout of the building. The mold loft was up high, and fireproof. The building itself wasn't in any danger; it could withstand several thousand degrees celsius; the schooner was in dire straits, though, and so were they, if they didn't get out of there.

Moving as fast as he dared, he ended up running smack into another body.

Existence had been reduced back to one breath at a time for Scotty.

He didn't remember having a future, a past, a name; all he had was the breath he was holding, hopefully the next one that would replace it, and his hands.

He had always been good at fixing things, working on things; he could do almost anything with a thought in his head, his instincts and his own two hands. It was one of the things that set him apart from almost every other engineer in Starfleet.

That talent was being tested like never before.

The slip was black, pitch black, and he was blind in the smoke, deprived of the ability to even see what he was doing. He couldn't fight his eyes open even if he had been able to see farther than his nose. Sounds were muffled, mostly crackling; no roar, just a distant crack or pop that said there were flames somewhere in all of that darkness.

He didn't have the ability to breathe with any certain regularity; if he risked it, and tried, he'd pass out before a minute was up.

So there was nothing but the scream, the air he had and his hands. He'd managed to feel his way along the wall, trying to find the environmental control panel, the main access to the fire-suppression unit that would have kicked in if it was working properly. It was a chance in a million, a literal shot in the dark.

The building would be fine; oh, it was fireproof, but the *Lady Grey's* only chance at rescue lay in the hands of her head shipwright, a smoke-blind and desperate cadet.

The air closer to the floor wasn't uncontaminated, but it was clean enough to keep him from choking; he kept having to duck low to get even half a breath. It burned, something he took no notice of after he'd finally found the panel.

After fumbling for half a second, he found his multitool in its usual pocket. Not even really thinking, just letting his hands think for him, he somehow pried the panel free, so focused that even with his eyes closed, the smoke rolling, the scream in his mind, the need for oxygen, he was able to find his way around the inner workings of the unit on the wall.

No air.

Blackness wasn't closing in, because it was already black, but the scream was fading and so was everything else. Jaw knotting, he ducked down again, took another breath, felt it scorch his throat and upper chest, then went right back to work on what little air he had.

When someone ran into him, he shoved them back hard without thinking; he didn't know who it was, and didn't care. At least whoever had rigged the panel had done a shoddy job on it. There were only two wires disconnected; one to the main system, one to the backup. He found them when something zapped one of his fingers, low enough voltage to sting, and felt his way to the others.

He didn't even have air left now; he was on borrowed time, fighting the instinct to breathe.

As disconnected as the wires were, he experimentally touched two ends together. No sound, no sight; touch was his last sense.

A spark. He felt that.

He snapped his hand up and tripped the breaker off, then quickly twisted the wires together; he didn't know if he was reconnecting the backup or the main, but it didn't matter. Once the two ends were reconnected, he flipped the breaker back on again, waiting.

Someone tried to drag him off before he could confirm the system had booted and he shoved them away again. Then the reflex to breathe finally overrode his conscious decision not to; with his lungs full of smoke, even his sense of touch was fading to nothingness.

By then, all that was left was courage, struggling for oxygen.

Having been pushed off twice and getting close to suffocating himself, Corry was to a point where even he didn't have logic or sense left. Picking himself up from the floor, a new breath of air in him -- however contaminated -- he felt his way back down Scotty. Just as the calibration on the panel finished running, the alarm came on, and the fire-suppression system kicked in full force, he latched onto Scotty's arm with a grip that brooked no argument and started dragging him back for the door.

Breaking out into the fresher air of the Belfast night had to have been the biggest relief he'd ever felt. Letting Scotty go, he staggered a few steps, coughing and choking on the smoke that he'd taken in.

Clean air had never tasted so good, so full of promise that he'd survive to do something right with his life.

Finally getting his breathing under his control, at least somewhat, he forced his mind away from the thoughts of being alive and basically in one piece and turned his focus back to his roommate, who was still struggling for air, down to his hands and knees, coughing up a storm. "Scotty?"

Scotty didn't answer immediately; even when he managed to stop hacking up a lung, he was still fighting for air, so Corry did what came automatically and reached out to help, even if it was just a hand on his back--

--and that was when Scotty landed on him like a hurricane, slamming him back to the ground, knocking the air right back out of his lungs.

Corry froze with a little wheezing cough, the shock of his landing jolting through his limbs and sparking in his vision from where the back of his head hit the pavement; above him, pinning him to the ground, Scotty looked downright lethal, wearing the black from the soot and the blood pouring down the right side of his face like warpaint, teeth bared in a flash of white and eyes narrowed.

And before Corry could even *start* to think of words, Scotty had found his: "Care tae say somethin' now, ye sorry son of a bitch?! C'mon, Cor. C'mon, tell me all about what I've written off!"

"I-- I'm sorry, I--" the words were out before Corry even realized his mouth was moving.

"Sorry?!" That clearly wasn't what Scotty wanted to hear. He drew back his fist without so much as a pause, one hand twining through the fabric of Corry's coat, and Corry closed his eyes and waited for the blow to land, and-- and--

--and then it *didn't*.

Corry pried his eyes open just in time to see Scotty open his hand, looking stunned and soulsick; he let Corry go and scrambled back, then to his feet, shaking hard and breathing harder.

Blinking a few times, Corry followed suit and picked himself up, shivering. With a certain dazed detachment, he wondered how it was that his best friend had held back. He had recognized that look, burning black in Scotty's eyes, and what made Cor feel just as soulsick was that he had seen that in himself not even a half an hour before. "I didn't mean it. I didn't mean any of it," he said, the first words that came to mind; truth, even if it was too late to take back the damage he'd already done.

"Bloody lot o' good that does now." Reeling, Scotty brushed a hand across his forehead, and seemed vaguely surprised to see it come away red.

Overlooking a potential flare up, Corry took a cautious step towards Scotty, ready to duck out of the way if need be. "You better sit down," he said, halfway reaching out to offer a steady hand, heart twisting.

Lip twitching in a warning snarl, Scotty stepped backwards, biting his words off and seemingly unaware of the tears that were cutting tracks in the mask of smoke and blood. "What d'ye care, anyway? Ye should be on the damn transport, headin' off f'r that glorious future ye've got all planned out! Doesna matter if anyone cares, if anyone mighta been willin' tae do most anything tae keep ye from screwin' yer life up, no."

"You were always down here!" Corry finally cried, exasperated. "How the hell was I supposed to know?!"

Scotty's eyebrows drew together and after a long beat of silence, he asked, "Ye dinna get it, do ye?" Shaking his head with a half-sobbed laugh, he turned and started to walk away, unsteady and battered.

Corry debated a full two seconds, then gave chase. "Get what?" Not getting an answer, he grabbed Scotty's shoulder and dragged him back, still half-expecting to be decked. "Get what, Scotty?"

"I was buildin' her for ye," Scotty replied, smiling a half-smile that had nothing to do with humor. Looking at Corry, he said simply, "That's why I was here."

It made sense, then, and Cor almost wished that it didn't. It clicked, the final tumbler to the whole equation, and he had never, ever felt like such a miserable human being as he did in that moment.

Swallowing, he had to clench his teeth against the-- the heartache before he could say, "God, I'm sorry."

"Doesna much matter now." Scotty closed his eyes, wavering a little on his feet. "Wish I woulda realized sooner, though, that ye dinna deserve her."

He was right. Maybe that was the hardest part to face-- Scotty was right. Corry didn't deserve the *Lady Grey*, and he certainly didn't deserve a friend who would have poured heart and soul into her for his sake. He could see it all now, a master plan by a master engineer who worked better with his skill than words, he could see the thought behind it, and the pure selflessness in it. He could see the driven need to finish her before it was too late, the reason Scotty hadn't had him removed from the project, the desperate hurt in his eyes when Corry had turned around, thrown the model at his feet and dashed that hope.

Trying to find some way to say all of that, he looked back up, heart in his throat.

Not that Scotty was likely to hear it; he gave a faint half-shake of his head and then his knees buckled and Corry barely managed to catch him before he hit the ground, heart on the pavement just the same.

## Part III: Righting Arm: Chapter 1

### Part 3: Righting Arm

Clean out yer mouth, this is not what it's for,  
There's still a bloodstain from the spill of the war.  
Pick up yer sorrow, this is not who we are,  
I won't cry uncle having come so far.

It's all right, it's all right,  
It's just blood under the bridge,  
And I'm too tired to fight,  
The affliction will be fixed;  
Oh, it's all right, it's all right,  
It's just blood under the bridge,  
Put down the knife  
And watch the blood under the bridge go by.

[-Frightened Rabbit, Blood Under the Bridge](#)

#### Chapter 1:

*Saturday, April 15th, 2243  
Malone Road Dormitory, Room 17  
Starfleet Engineering Academy  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth*

The world didn't look the same on the other side.

The sun was out, which seemed to be a miracle in Belfast. As days went, it was gorgeous; lazy strings of white clouds drifting across the spring sky, tracing shadows across the lawn, playing light across the floor of the room and it was surprisingly soothing to Corry, who felt very worn and hollow.

He had called the first chance he had gotten and had his transfer held off. Since Security wanted to grill him about the incident in #22, it wasn't an issue he could debate anyway. Harland & Wolff wanted to know why their slip had been broken into, Starfleet wanted to know why they had no less than two curfew violations, one arson and one wounded cadet to deal with, and Corry really, really wanted to know who had hurt his best friend and set the *Lady Grey* ablaze.

So most of the night was spent running around, and now in the late morning, he had a chance to sit down, a chance to really think rather than simply react. He knew he should have been trying to get clues into who had committed such an act, but he wasn't going to get anywhere trying right that moment and paddling against the current wasn't going to do anything more than frustrate him.

The only thing to come of thinking about it was anger, hot and painful, and Cor was honestly *tired* of being so damn angry all of the time.

So instead, he found himself thinking about his own actions.

As threadbare as he felt, he didn't flinch internally as badly as he had the night before when Scotty had initially given him notice of what was really going on outside of his world of medical research, but he still felt sick to the very bottom of his heart at everything that had been said before that.

It was hard to grasp how it had all gone so *wrong*; it all seemed to be falling apart now. He had thought the world had come to an end when his father had taken ill, and admittedly, that had been terrible in every sense of the word.

But he hadn't been the one to do that; he hadn't been the one causing that suffering.

This time, he was the guilty party. Not the only guilty party, no, because whoever had sabotaged the *Lady Grey* had some fault in it, but if he hadn't turned around and hurt his best friend, then none of it might have happened.

It wasn't easy walking in someone else's shoes, especially Scotty's. It wasn't easy to realize that not only had the other cadet thrown himself into the project, but Jansson and Albright had backed him up; that all three of them had rallied around Corry to protect his grades, and Scotty had fought at the forefront to try to protect *him* during all this, even as bad as Cor was messing things up.

It wasn't easy seeing any of that, and being too late to really do more than try to clean up the awful mess he'd made of things.

The *Lady Grey* wasn't in as bad a shape as he had expected, at least. After the smoke had cleared, the paramedics had let him go and he had to give his reports; between sessions of that, he had a chance to look the schooner over. From the thickness of the smoke, he had expected her to be ash, but she wasn't. Her amidships ribs and crossbeams were charred, and her keel in that area had taken some scorching, but aside that, she was intact.

What had really caught was the stockpile of wood, and it had only just caught onto the *Grey* a little before Scotty had shown up. If he hadn't

been there, and if the fire had continued, she would probably be unsalvageable. That was no doubt the plan of the saboteurs.

Like his ship, Scotty hadn't fared as badly as he seemed to initially. Corry had made damn sure to get the paramedics on scene as quickly as possible; at first, he was expecting it to be something critical, if not fatal, just from the amount of blood and the fact his best friend was passed out cold, but all it took was a shot of tri-ox and something else that Cor didn't catch to bring Scotty back around. He was kind of dazed, but the paramedic didn't seem worried; Corry would have hovered more and bombarded said paramedic with more questions than the dozen he already had asked, but by that time, the authorities were demanding his attention in no uncertain terms.

Whatever had happened after that, he didn't see except in moments, but somehow Scotty had managed to get out of a trip to the campus infirmary -- which, given the staff only consisted of a few almost-retired doctors and nurses, wasn't actually a shock -- and was already back in their room asleep in bed by the time Corry got back after sunrise. So, he had to at least be okay *enough*.

Physically, anyway. Cor wasn't so sure mentally. But he'd have a chance to figure that out later; right now, he just wanted to try and come up with an apology and figure out how to repair the damage he did.

And find out who did the rest of it for some good, old-fashioned payback. That sounded like a good plan.

An unhappy little noise pulled him away from his thoughts and Corry winced in sympathy, tilting his head at his roommate. "Welcome back."

"--huh?" Scotty asked, looking dazed half out of his mind as he sat up, putting his shoulder to the wall, squinting against the light.

Corry frowned. "The stabilizers they shot you up with are probably throwing you for a loop; how're you feeling?"

"Awful," Scotty replied, thickly, closing his eyes again. That eloquently summed it up with a word.

"You look awful," Corry said, eyebrows drawn. Scotty looked a lot worse than he was medically; tangled black hair a sharp contrast to his ghost white face, all together just exhausted. "It'll get better, though, and you don't have a concussion, so that'll cut down how long you feel miserable."

"Good." Apparently not entirely awake, Scotty just put his back to Corry and dragged his blanket back up over his head, closing himself off in no uncertain terms.

Corry gave a slow nod to himself, heart heavy but determined. *Message received.*

Waking up was a slow process; all fits and starts and brief flickers at the edge of his mind of older fears, before the familiarity of the dorm room brought him back to the present again.

The night before was a series of fragments; Scotty remembered a paramedic scanning him with a tricorder and he remembered sitting still while the paramedic sealed up where his head had been sliced open -- apparently that second pipe swing *had* found its mark -- and he remembered feeling cold and detached, removed from himself.

He remembered the flash image of his blood on Cor's hand and sleeve. And the way the smell of smoke stuck to everything, hanging in the mist.

He *didn't* remember how he managed to talk his way into being released. Or where Corry had gone after the first few minutes. He vaguely remembered running through the sonic shower once he was back in the dorms, some kind of common sense telling him not to crawl into his bed covered in ash and smoke and blood, but everything else was lost.

Now, it was dark; he blinked a few times, turning to look at Cor's clock, feeling stiff and sore pretty much from head to foot, some spots worse than others. The glowing numbers refused to come into focus, though. His chest ached some and his throat felt scraped raw, but at least not as bad as they had the night before.

Still, the faint -- and familiar -- sound of Corry's breathing across the room told Scotty all he really needed to know.

He closed his eyes, letting out a breath, then just shook his head. Something to be dealt with later, if at all. In the meantime, he could smell smoke clinging to him; when he reached up and prodded at where he'd been cut, there was still some blood dried hard in his hair. It was faintly sore, that spot, but mercifully a mostly-healed kind of sore.

Any which way, he didn't want to spend any more time wearing the scent of arson and anger.

Scotty had never in his life come so close to a line he'd sworn to himself that he would never cross as he had the night before, pinning his best friend to the ground, a swing of his fist away from something that there would be no taking back. Because it was one thing to break O'Sullivan's nose, it was one thing to fight in self-defense, it was even one thing to fight over matters of pride, but it was a whole different thing to pin someone you cared about to the ground with the sole intention of *hurting* them.

It was a whole different thing to come so close to beating someone else for the sick satisfaction of it; as if all those layers of pain could be erased by turning someone else into pulp. As if being hurt was a reason to cause hurt.

Just the memory of Cor's face -- his *fear* -- was enough that Scotty had to pause on the edge of his bed and bury his face in his hands, trying to breathe off the queasiness, trapping a cracked sound behind his teeth, hunching over his own knees.

He'd fought from his single digits; fought in self-defense, fought over slights that felt like daggers at the time, fought classmates and local lads and cousins, fought until he was expelled from one school and he'd mostly stopped fighting then because--

Because--

Stop, he told himself, gritting his teeth, a rolling shudder crawling from his spine to the rest of him. *It's the 15th of April, 2243. Take a damn shower.*

That was enough to get him up, at least; he still felt dizzy and shaken, but not in any danger of passing out. He moved as quietly as he could, getting fresh clothes out of his dresser; he could barely deal with himself right now, let alone deal with Cor if he woke Cor up, so slipping out the door was a necessarily silent affair.

It didn't take too long to wash the blood out of his hair. There was a hell of a red and purple bruise across his middle from his first encounter with the pipe, but it wasn't too tender so long as he didn't go pressing on it; much higher, he might've ended up with broken ribs. But the steam from the shower eased a bit of the ache in his chest and throat, at least.

Most of that time in the shower was spent with his head laid way back in the hot water spray, breathing careful, measured breaths whenever he bothered to drop his chin to take them. Scotty had no idea what he was going to do *after*. He doubted he'd be able to get into the shipyards, security would certainly have been tightened. And if there was even a point to going; if all that was left of the *Lady Grey* was charred wood, then going there would be a particularly mean bit of self-punishment.

Going back to their room was even more fraught. That didn't leave too many options.

Still, he couldn't very well spend all night in the shower room; it wouldn't solve anything, only delay it. He finally made himself reach out and shut off the water, though it took another minute to actually *move* beyond that; to get out and dry off and get dressed.

There was a fair bet that even the usual escape route -- the basement window -- was now cut off, but testing it was the only idea Scotty had; if it *was* still open, maybe he could go walking the piers again. And if it wasn't, then at least he could get himself a bottle of water from the automated commissary on the ground floor and maybe sit in one of the study rooms until he felt less-- less paralyzed by it all. Until he felt less like just shattering into tears and sobbing until he was wrung out. Or shattering *because* he was.

It was just his luck, though, that he stepped out of the stairwell doors and found himself face to face with his roommate in the otherwise darkened lobby.

They stood in silence for a longer-than-comfortable moment, tense and on guard, but then Corry was the first to break it. "Hey," he said, voice on the quiet side.

There was no part of Scotty that wanted to do this; somewhere between the scattershot of fight-or-flight sparking all through his arms and legs, and the sharp pressure of grief and anger in his chest, he managed an icy nod back and made to go around Cor to go and get that bottle of water he'd been thinking about.

Corry side-stepped to give him more room, but turned to follow anyway, though not too close. "You look a bit better."

There was a half-moment where he wanted to turn back and snap, but truth be told, Scotty didn't even know *what* he would snap. Or what good it would do. Instead, he punched in his student code and snatched the bottle of water when it was delivered.

"Maggie was asking after you. She said she'd come by tomorrow-- well, *today*, and see how you were." There was a beat, then Cor went on, "And Jerry stopped me on my way back from the cafeteria to tell me I was one of the biggest assholes in the whole Federation. That I didn't deserve the *Lady Grey*."

That was actually a little satisfying to hear. Scotty pressed the bottle to the side of his face for a moment, just so the cold on his skin would distract him from everything else he was feeling, then said, "I'll have to thank him when I see him next."

He still didn't want to do this, but he knew full well from past experience that Cor would just keep following him until they had this out. So, half-resigned and half still-- something, angry or-- or frustrated or hurt or-- whatever it was, he turned around and put his back to the wall, cracking the cap on the water to take a sip, and less than thrilled by the fact his hands were trembling some while he did it.

Still, Corry looked about as contrite as a man could. He clasped his hands behind his back, quirking his eyebrows in an expression that could only be called self-effacing. "He was right. *You* were right." He closed his eyes for a moment, visibly swallowing, then opened them again to add, "I-- I don't know. I didn't think. Or-- I guess maybe I thought *too* much. I couldn't get it out of my head, what happened to Dad. Just-- the *helplessness* of it. But I should have-- I should have tried harder to remember that I have obligations here--"

*That* was enough to set Scotty bristling. "I'm nae--"

-- *no*, never," Corry interrupted, in a rush, hands coming out as if he could somehow pat down invisible hackles. "I meant my classwork. My degree. My commission. My position as project lead for the *Lady Grey*. Never you."

There were about four or five different things Scotty wanted to do then; run, maybe, or put the cap on the water bottle, or snap that he didn't want to *do this*-- there were so many things that he didn't end up doing any of them, just pressed his shoulders back tighter against the wall, teeth locked together hard enough his jaw was aching from it.

Cor apparently took that silence as room to keep going, though, because he did. "I'm not gonna pretend I'm not interested in going into medical or sciences now, because-- *I really* am. But-- I should have balanced those things. I should have--" He closed his eyes and laid his head back for a moment, breathing out towards the ceiling before finishing, throat bared and voice tight, "--I should have done a lot of things better than I did. I didn't mean what I said to you. I swear, if I could go back in time and shoot myself before I did, I would."



“That’s a paradox.” Not that Scotty hadn’t thought the same at least *once* since everything had started deteriorating around them, but maybe if they just-- just got this over with, maybe--

*Maybe what?* he wondered. *What comes next, after all this?*

“I know. I mean-- no. I mean--” Corry took another deep breath, then plowed on, voice ragged, “I mean that what I said to you, what I did, was cruel. And that no, I don’t deserve the *Lady Grey*. And I don’t deserve a friend like you. What I mean is, god, Scotty, I’m *sorry*.”

The force of the apology was almost a physical thing; the weight and the sincerity of it. Scotty couldn’t remember a single time he’d ever been apologized to like that by anyone else, not as a reflex, but as if it really *mattered*.

And it never occurred to him that Cor was lying to him with it, not even for a heartbeat.

In a way, that was an answer all its own.

He closed his eyes and leaned his back against the wall, throat aching in a manner completely unrelated to smoke inhalation. Tried to find some kind of-- direction, maybe. He knew he wasn’t blameless in all of this; that he *hadn’t* listened to Cor past a certain point, that they’d both ended up in some spiral of distance and avoidance and the consequences of both those things.

But he’d never had to-- to decide whether to repair a friendship before. They’d both crossed or near-crossed lines they shouldn’t have, and if it happened once, it could happen again, but--

“Why?” he asked, finally making himself look at Cor again, though he wasn’t even sure *what* he was trying to ask; some combination of things, maybe. Why rebuild? Or why try to start over?

Why not just walk away before they could do any more damage to one another?

He didn’t quite even know what he was asking, but Corry apparently did.

“Because I *know* you,” Cor said, unhesitant, eyebrows drawn, tone raw. “I know you can’t stand people getting too close to you, ‘cause if they do, then they know how to hurt you. I know that I’m the last person in the world you wanna trust right now, because that’s exactly what I went and did. I know that the *Grey’s* something special, and that you went through hell and back for me, not because you had to or anything, but because that’s *you*. And I know me well enough to know that even if you want me to go, even if I leave now and we don’t speak again, you’re still the best friend that I’ve ever had and ever *will* have.”

It was an echo of what Scotty had said himself, the night before, and he was *aware* of that; more, though, that it was the truth. That he didn’t even *doubt* that it was the truth.

Which was still an answer, all its own.

He took a slow, deep breath, slow enough that it only trembled a little on the exhale; closed his eyes for a moment and then took a leap of faith. “Did ye get into the slip?” he asked, carefully, capping the bottle of water and then crossing his arms with it still in hand.

Corry blinked, no doubt caught off guard by what had to feel like a *non sequitur*, but after his own pause, he nodded just as cautiously. “She had some damage on the keel, more on the port side. It can be patched, at least. Six of the port side ribs are completely unsalvageable, and two of the starboard. The crossbeams between them are pretty bad; it hadn’t really caught on good by the time you got there, and all of the damage is amidships.”

Just the knowledge that the *Lady Grey* wasn’t a pile of ash was enough that Scotty felt like sliding down the wall. It took another moment of just breathing to get his knees steeled back up, that was how intense the relief was. “...we’ll have to get Jerry to pull his templates.”

Cor looked like he was still working his head around the not-quite topic switch, but he nodded. “We’ll need to order a whole new stockpile of wood, too. That was most of what burned.”

All right. All right. They had something like a plan, anyway. Scotty nodded himself, starting for the stairwell. “Let’s go upstairs, pull the schematics.” This didn’t exactly *solve* everything, but it was more than they’d had ten minutes ago.

Though--

He stopped parallel to Corry; thought for a second, then just said, “I’m sorry I didn’t listen.”

Cor didn’t answer that in words; instead, he bumped their shoulders together in that casually affectionate, easy way of his before turning for the stairwell himself, and gave back a little smile as he held open the doors. “We’ll see what we can get done before we have to start answering questions all over again. I’ll show you what I noticed and you can tell me how we plan on fixing it.”

If being apologized to with such weight was new to him, so was being granted forgiveness in such a graceful manner; in unfamiliar waters, Scotty nodded back and started up the stairs.

Corry apparently wasn’t quite done, though. “Scotty?”

“Aye?” Scotty asked back, pausing and looking back, half-bracing in case he wasn’t going to like what followed.

“Thank you.” Corry pressed his mouth into a line briefly, then elaborated, “I woulda probably given up on me a long time ago.”

Somehow, Scotty doubted that, but he just snorted. “I *suppose* ye better be thankful I’m not you, then.”

It was a poor joke, or an attempt at one, but Corry answered it in all sincerity, "More than ever."

## Part III: Righting Arm: Chapter 2

### Chapter 2:

Tuesday, April 18th, 2243  
Harland & Wolff Shipyards, Berth #22  
Team C Headquarters  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth

Even streaked in white and black, charred amidships, she looked like the beginning of something grand.

There was an almost ethereal quality to the *Lady Grey*, lit in the dimmed lights of the berth, not even half completed. It could have simply been the way the lights reflected off of the fire-suppressant grimed on her frame, or maybe it was the way that the black soot complimented the white, but it gave her an almost ghostly appearance.

It was the first time that the cadets had been allowed back into the shipyards; not just Team C, but the entirety of Barrett's class. Even then, there were a number of stipulations from both Starfleet Security and Harland & Wolff's managers; it was probably a lucky thing, in the end, that they were even given an opportunity to continue the work that they had started.

Scotty was the first one in, pausing just inside the front man-door to palm the sliders to bring the lights up. Corry stepped in a pace later, looking around and frowning to himself over the mess. There was white powder everywhere, blanketing the tools and mixing with the grays and blacks of ash and soot, but it was a far sight better than boiling smoke. "It'll take forever to clean this up," he said, just taking it all in again.

Somewhere behind them, the rest of Team C was filtering that way from their last classes of the day; Corry wasn't looking forward to facing them, or the work it was going to take to re-earn both their respect and their trust, but he was incredibly determined to do just that.

He'd had little trouble requesting that his transfer be held off until after he was finished with his engineering classes; it had been so hard to even convince them to transfer him prior to graduation that they were probably breathing a sigh of relief that he was going to at least finish one field of study before jumping to another.

That meant, though, that he had a *lot* of work ahead of him to even pass the rest of his Year Four engineering classes, to go along with the work it was going to take to repair his friendships, starting with his best friend.

The past few days had been fairly quiet between them -- not too surprisingly -- and if Corry had to step backwards and remember how to be patient, then that was a very small thing to offer. The important thing was that just like the schooner, the bridge they'd managed to build between them was only a bit damaged and scorched, but still repairable.

Scotty hadn't answered his lament about the amount of clean-up due; instead, he was scrutinizing the *Lady Grey* from just inside the door, mouth in a straight line as he scanned the schooner from bow to stern, no doubt making notes in his head about what needed to be done and how; there was only so far notes on a schematic could go. Corry didn't interrupt, instead taking another, longer look around--

At least, he was until Scotty grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him along.

Corry allowed himself to be pulled, a little surprised by the role reversal from usual, even as he eyed the schooner himself and made his own mental notes as they walked her length, having to dredge his memory some to bring back what he needed to in order to plan repairs. Of course, he had researched shipbuilding like he had medicine, with the same sort of intensity but less obsession, and even as he eyed the *Lady Grey*, that knowledge presented itself.

When they finally stopped, he was still turning the repair ideas over in his mind right up until Scotty gave his arm an insistent shake and he looked up.

And then *up*.

"*Oh*," Corry breathed out, eyes wide, mouth hanging open.

Towering over his head was the mostly-completed bow of the *Lady Grey*, a graceful upward curve into flared sides; from that angle, her incomplete status wasn't readily apparent, absent her rigging and bowsprit. But the lines once sketched on a board were now turned into a tangible reality -- a tangible *beauty* -- and seeing that, real and solid, was enough that his heart ached from it.

"She's beautiful," he said, eyes stinging, reaching out just to press his fingertips to her stem; the *scope* of her was enough that it left him breathless. Because he had been down to the slip while he was trying to transfer, if rarely, but he had never really allowed himself to look at her like this.

"I wonder if they all felt like this," Scotty said, from beside him, head back as he looked up at her as well. "Shipwrights, I mean."

"They almost had to." Corry looked down at the white left behind on his fingertips from the fire-suppressant, then rubbed them off on his trousers.

A reminder that even in her beauty, she was wounded.

"Be a shame if they didn't." Scotty blew a breath out and brushed a little at the white powder, turning it into a cloud. "Don't know how many o' them had to deal with arson, though."

Corry felt his own jaw tighten without any permission from his brain at the mention of that; he had speculated some on it with Scotty over the past few days, and both of them had a feeling they knew who the culprits were -- who else would hold a grudge strongly enough to bring it down in blood and ash? -- but knowing it and having proof were two different things.

"Think we'll be able to finish her in a month and a half?" he asked, firmly dragging his mind away from thoughts of vengeance.

Scotty tipped his head over, eying the schooner; after a long moment of clear calculation, he said, "*Maybe*. I think it depends on how fast we can get a replacement stockpile o' lumber and how determined we are. The cut in hours is gonna put a hurtin' on us."

"Maybe I can take an advance on my inheritance and hire people," Corry mused, only about three-quarters joking. "On top of recruiting like I'm running for public office, I mean."

He was heartened to get a half of a laugh out of Scotty, but Scotty didn't get a chance to reply to that before another voice interrupted: "It might have to come to that."

The two exchanged a glance, then stepped out from in front of the schooner; closer than either of them expected, Barrett stood there with his hands clasped behind his back, giving no indication whatsoever how long he might have been eavesdropping on them. "I hadn't ever intended commerce to get involved with this final," he went on, "but then again, I hadn't anticipated arson and assault. If you end up deciding to hire people, Mister Corrigan, I won't hold it against your team's grades, though I'll also have to allow the other teams the same courtesy."

"Thank you, sir," Scotty replied, neatly, apparently unfazed by the professor's unexpected presence. "Any word from Security on the saboteurs?"

"None." Barrett shook his head, expression grim. "The footage from the external cameras is missing for that entire block of time and the forensics teams weren't able to find anything."

"I have a few ideas who it might have been," Corry said, with a slight smirk. "I tried to tell Security, but I don't think they believed me."

"O'Sullivan and his lot." Scotty crossed his arms, nodding. "Only ones we could think of who might've had a motive."

Barrett frowned, looking around for a moment before eying the two cadets again. "You do realize that it won't be acceptable if you decided to take justice into your own hands."

"Us, sir?" Scotty replied, eyebrows up innocently. "Oh, no, sir. We wouldn't do that."

"Not in a million years," Corry added, just as innocently, turning up the charm to be on the safe side. "We have far too much work to do to spend time plotting revenge."

Barrett's eyebrow went up and he narrowed his eyes at them, apparently knowing better. "Gentlemen, do yourselves a favor and don't even think about it. I'll mention it to Security myself, and perhaps that will prompt them to look further into it, but if you know what's good for you, you'll heed my advice. Theories do not make evidence, and you may find yourselves in more trouble than it's worth." Taking a deep breath, he finished, "Now you'd best get to work; with the restrictions, you've got to make the most of your time."

When the rest of the team arrived, they did indeed get right to work; they only had from 0630 to 2000 now, with the restrictions that the shipyards had placed on the entire class's schedule.

Albright, in all of his quick thinking, had rigged up a pump and the *Lady Grey* got her first taste of brackish water from the mouth of the River Lagan. Three cadets manned the hose they used to spray off the mess that had caked on her, while Jansson supervised a team of five starting work on recreating the damaged ribs with what little wood they had stashed in the mold loft for templates. The rest were set to work carefully tearing out the damaged ribs and crossbeams under Lewis's watchful eyes.

Scotty and Corry spent most of their time on the comm link; the former because he was still on light-duty status after the fire, and the latter for the sake of haggling the best price for the wood they had to reorder.

"What do you mean, twenty-four credits a board?" Corry asked, doing the best he could not to pace in front of the comm box in the mold loft too much. "We're ordering it in bulk, here!"

"*Twenty-four is bulk for that many board feet!*" the voice on the other end said. "*Since y'all happen to be a bunch of students, though, I might be willin' to take it to twenty-two.*"

"And if I call Southwest Oak Express, they can give it to me for fifteen." Exchanging a conspiring look with his roommate, Corry put on his best lawyer voice to add, "I might have to wait two more days for my lumber, but it's a more fair price."

"*Nobody sells oak for fifteen a board,*" the other man shot back, though he didn't exactly sound too confident in himself.

"They do if they have their own nursery and farm." Faking a yawn, Cor leaned on the wall beside the box. "I'm in a hurry, though, so you give it to me for eighteen a board, and I'll take it."

"I'm not goin' lower than twenty-two."

"And the best you'll get out of me is eighteen."

"...twenty-one."

"Eighteen and the highest praise we can sing. Great word-of-mouth advertising there."

"How much did y'all say you were orderin' again?"

Corry glanced over at Scotty, who puzzled over it for a moment before grabbing the drawing board and writing down a number, then turning it and showing it. Nodding, Corry tried to sound casual as he said, "We'll need an order of five thousand board feet, cut to--" pausing for the moment it took his roommate to write down the length, he continued, "twenty-five feet each. Just to start."

"Eighteen credits happens to be damn low for quality wood like ours."

"Maybe so, but since we're building a wooden schooner in a historical fashion, we'd be more than willing to tell everyone who provided the wood for such a handsome craft. She'll be a novelty, *everyone's* gonna want to see her."

There was a long pause on the other end, then finally the salesman came back with a sigh, "Twenty, and free delivery via cargo transporter."

Corry sighed heavily himself, before letting it remain quiet for rather a long moment. Then, putting on a slightly defeated tone, he finally gave in. "All right, it's a deal. I'll have the credits sent to your accounts receivable in four hours, you'll have the coordinates for transport, and that wood had better be here by tomorrow morning." Thumbing the off button, he grinned. "How was that?"

"Less'n what we paid for our first stock," Scotty admitted. "We'll have to do all of our own cuttin' and trimmin', but with a little good luck--" He shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Eh, we'll be fine."

"Speakin' o' wood, though, who the hell is Southwest Oak Express?"

"I dunno," Corry said, lightly, shrugging back as he pulled out his notepad with the comm codes for the rest of the businesses they needed to contact. "Apparently, neither did he."

Scotty chuckled, shaking his head with a slight, wry smile. "If ye happen to get everyone down, we might not be too far over budget."

Corry keyed in the next set of codes, sparing a glance at Scotty to ask, "How much do we have left?"

"After this? Probably close to thirty-thousand. We might get more thanks to the sabotage, but it won't be too much, I have a feelin'."

"Guess we'll just have to be frugal." Cor leaned back on the wall as the comm connected. "Iron Works Intergalactic? Yeah, I'd like to speak to your manager in charge of sales..."

So ended the first day of work on the schooner *Lady Grey* after her brush with fire. Scotty didn't want to leave, not this early, not so soon after he'd gotten there. What he really wanted to do was some actual physical work on her, but he wasn't quite back to normal himself yet.

Not physically, still prone to the occasional cough, and-- honestly, not quite emotionally, either.

He knew the general mood of the team was all on a bend towards vengeance of some sort; knew, too, that every last one of them had the same suspects in mind that he and Corry did. He wasn't quite sure yet, though, how he felt about it all *himself*; angry, aye, but even that felt muffled and filtered through a kind of exhaustion.

Though, he definitely felt a stab of anxiety at leaving the slip behind as the shipyards shut down; even though he knew that the chances of the saboteurs coming back to finish the job were close to nonexistent now that everyone was being watched so much more closely, it still felt entirely too possible.

"She'll be all right," Corry said, tone on the reassuring side, breaking into his thoughts and pulling his attention away from Berth #22.

"Aye, I know. Logically, anyway." Scotty shook his head at himself and headed down the wide boulevard which ran down the center of Harland & Wolff's shipyards, and back towards the dorms.

Cor kept pace with him; the past few days had been a strange, half-familiar dance between them, a callback to when they only barely knew one another and Corry spent most of his time in cheerful, unrelenting attempts to make friends and Scotty spent most of his time rebuffing said attempts. Whenever Scotty thought back on those times, he mostly remembered the persistent invitations to go out drinking, the constant joking -- appropriately timed or not -- and the *very* constant language corrections.

But-- sometimes he remembered the other moments, too; times when Cor would show up to their tutoring sessions bringing along a thermos of coffee or a sandwich for him. Or when he'd invite himself along to walk with Scotty back to the barracks, even though he had a dorm room of his own, apparently just for the sake of chatting some more. Or that one time he mother-henned Scotty after Starfleet's annual vaccination

clinic had laid him low.

Just-- moments, in retrospect, of kindness.

Scotty hadn't even given them overly much thought at the time. And eventually, he gave in to the constant invitations, went drinking with Cor and some of the other cadets from their class (including Jerry and Joe), had a surprising amount of fun, and he started returning those moments of kindness, too. He'd take his turn to bring coffee or tea or dinner; by the time Cor had declared that they were going to be roommates, that sort of mutual thoughtfulness had become a habit. His social life got a thousand times more complicated -- namely, he *gained* one -- but he didn't regret it.

"You're about a thousand parsecs *thattaway*," Corry said, as they walked, well behind the rest of the workers leaving the yard. "You okay?"

"Aye, I'm fine," Scotty answered, rubbing at his brow for a moment before folding his hands behind his back again automatically. "A bit tired, maybe. Not sure what to do between now and curfew, since we can't be here."

Corry nodded, then shook his head. "You still look tired. Might be an idea just to turn in early tonight, catch up on your rest so you can get cleared as fit for duty."

The paramedic had done a handy job patching him up, and he'd gotten out of the trip to the infirmary that night, but that hadn't saved Scotty having to eventually report there so they could give him clearance to return to active duty status. Even if active duty currently only consisted of attending classes, studying for finals, writing papers and building a schooner, he still was beholden to Starfleet protocol and he'd automatically been pulled off duty when he'd been assaulted.

And then when he *had* gone to get clearance, two days ago, they had taken one look at the paramedic's records, done a series of their own scans, and then told him he was only cleared for light duty; that his level of fatigue was unacceptable and that he would remain on light duty until they determined that he was sufficiently rested and recovered.

It stuck in his craw something fierce, that, but he didn't have any recourse but to obey it; even if he could have ignored the medical orders, he couldn't ignore Cor leaning on him over it, so it was just easier to try to rest and pretend that it felt like it was making any notable difference.

That business -- resting, recovering -- was made a bit harder by the number of times he found himself back in the slip, in the dark, in the smoke; whenever things were quiet long enough, that was where his mind went back to, and repetition didn't seem to dull the memory's fangs any.

Scotty was an old hand at not letting himself think too hard about things that left scars, but this one was proving persistent in a manner he'd not had to deal with in a hell of a long time.

It wasn't quite the same, though, either; he didn't feel any *fear* over it, exactly. Aside from the possible loss of the *Lady Grey*, anyway. The echoes of desperation, aye; the every-cell-alight need to *move*, to answer the instinct that manifested like a death wail in his head. But-- not fear, quite.

Something else. Something he wasn't very well-equipped to work out, unfortunately.

He must've gotten lost in his own head for awhile again, because the next thing he noticed, they were out on the Queen's Quay, having left behind the shipyards; it was a path Scotty had walked so often in the past several months that there had been no thought attached to it.

"All right, you're *definitely* not here right now," Corry was saying, catching him by the shoulder and stopping them both, which was right about when Scotty realized he was about to walk face-first into one of the light posts on the walkway. Cor's eyebrows were drawn together as he asked, "So, where are you?"

He'd gotten pretty used to having his expression scrutinized like a roadmap since they'd met, but that didn't mean Scotty always was willing to allow it; he just gently pushed Cor's hand off and started walking again, neatly weaving around the pole he'd almost gotten too friendly with. "I don't know. Nowhere, in particular." He gestured at his head, a flick of the fingers. "Just-- the fire. When I'll be allowed to work again. That sort o' nonsense."

Corry followed after a moment, falling back into step. "Anything you wanna talk about?"

Scotty shook his head. "Not really. It's nothin' too bad, anyway." He knew the subject change was pretty unforgivably blunt, but he made it unrepentantly: "I wonder where we can find ourselves a saboteur."

"I don't know. I think he's rooming in the Stranmills Road Dormitory." Corry shrugged, looking up at the sky, letting that subject change go without comment.

"He wasn't the only one, though. But I can't remember how many I saw; I just know it was no less'n three."

"I think it was four. At least, that was how many I remember seeing when I crossed the bridge; they were going the other way."

That tracked. Scotty frowned as he tried to piece it all back together again; so much of it was just in fragments. At the time, it had stopped mattering quickly to him who had tried to take his head off because his ship was in danger. In retrospect, it still didn't matter overly much, aside as a clue. "Someone shouted, but I don't remember whether the voice was familiar or not. Wasna the same person who swung the pipe, though."

There really *weren't* a lot of physical clues to be taken from it. Certainly not enough to hold up as real evidence anyway. And Scotty wasn't even sure how they'd go about getting evidence; he was good at tracking down mechanical faults, but investigating crimes was outwith his skills.

He just shook his head again. "I don't know. I think the only recourse we might have'll be playin' at espionage."

"That could be fun," Corry said, a smirk stealing across his face. "Then, once we know for sure, we can make 'em walk the plank."

Completely despite his mindstate -- or lack of -- Scotty huffed at that in amusement. "A regular pair o' pirates, then?"

"Ayuh," Corry said, before stroking his chin thoughtfully. "Maybe I can be Blackbeard..."

Scotty managed to bite back the almost-by-now-reflexive giggle at the *ayuh*; still, it was the first time in awhile now that something had him even wanting to laugh like that. Instead, he made a long show of eying Corry's blond head, one eye closed. "Aye, that's a right good idea."

"I'm a little limited on options," Cor answered, grinning back. "Besides, we can't all have really cool names like you, *Wolf*."

"Hey, I earned that one fair and square."

Corry snorted back. "I personally think it should be something like pup. Or cub. Or mutt. But if you insist."

Scotty rolled his eyes with as much force as he could, reaching over and giving Corry a mild, sideways shove, just enough to get the point across. "Ye're such a bastard."

Cor looked almost content as he hop-stepped to keep his balance and replied to that old barb with a smile. "I know."

## Part III: Righting Arm: Chapter 3

### Chapter 3:

Monday, April 24th, 2243  
Harland & Wolff Shipyards, Berth #22  
Team C Headquarters  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth

Once the wood came in, work proceeded with the speed of determination. Once he was given a clean bill of health, Scotty supervised and threw himself into the construction; just about every other thought he had was devoted to how he would be able to see the schooner to her completion despite everything currently working against Team C. It had taken him a few more days to *get* that clean bill of health -- made some easier by things returning to mostly normal between him and his best friend, and by the increasing distance from the fire, both of which made sleep easier -- but once he did, he had no trouble putting everything he had into trying to see the *Lady Grey* to her launch.

Corry certainly did his share in the slip of late, too; not only making up for the work he hadn't done before, but trying to rebuild the relationships he'd neglected with the rest of his team. Even then, though, for a little while every day, he spent time focused entirely on finding the saboteurs. It gave him a satisfaction bordering downright evil to tail O'Sullivan around, eavesdropping whenever he could, to see if the mutineer made any mention of the *Lady Grey* and what had happened.

And it was while Cor was playing spy that he stumbled across a related bit of intrigue: While Team C -- in part -- had taken to teasing Scotty about being a tyrant by nicknaming him after one (the villainous Wolf Larsen), various underclassmen had a-- *different* take on it. Different enough that it had taken Corry overhearing it a few times before he even realized that it was his best friend who was the subject of the whispered awe and speculation.

From what Corry could gather, Scotty busting O'Sullivan's nose was where that origin story began, but then the rumors about the arson started snowballing it way further than that, and Scotty was achieving something of a legendary status because of it.

Now, to various underclassmen, he was just called *the Wolf*.

Corry also thought that if he asked around, he'd probably get a lot of different stories as to why.

It mostly bemused (and amused) Cor, who had to fight down the affectionate urge to tell all these starry-eyed junior cadets that the object of their fascination was actually just socially awkward and not at all the daredevil they were no doubt picturing, but even as he was entertained by the thought of Scotty having a bunch of groupies -- which would baffle Scotty to *no end* -- he still felt a little shiver down his spine when he overheard one first-year cadet murmur to another what sounded like an accurate retelling of how Scotty had busted O'Sullivan's nose, teeth bared and bloody as he did it.

Having been jumped and pinned and snarled at by the same person, Corry had no trouble visualizing it.

Beyond that sideways bit of intrigue, though, Corry mostly was hunting for conclusive evidence that the saboteurs were the same people they suspected.

But oddly enough, it wasn't Corry who produced the biggest key to the mystery, it was Harrison. The quiet cadet had been the only one of the original mutineers who had stayed with the project; it was a fair guess he was playing double-agent, but thus far, there had been no proof.

Until he sought out Jerry Jansson not long before they were to finish work for the night, anyway.

"Jerry?"

"Yeah?" Jerry asked, putting his mallet down. It had been another grueling day; first classes, one short simulation in zero-g, then working on the ship, and he was looking forward to crawling into his bed.

Harrison shifted his weight nervously, glancing around as if to make sure no one else was listening. "About the fire--"

Jerry blinked, but he somehow managed not to give away any surprise on his face. Keeping his tone neutral, he prompted, "What about it?"

"Well, I heard some things."

"Go ahead."

Harrison cast another glance around, looking for all the world like he was being stalked by a troop of professional assassins. Clearing his throat, he dropped his voice to a whisper, "Keith was talking about it-- you know, saying that it was a good thing someone set her on fire because he'd been damned if his work would go to someone else's grade. He didn't actually say he did it, but he said that it was deserved."

Jerry nodded, though he was somewhat disappointed. If O'Sullivan hadn't actually admitted to it, then it would be very hard to do anything about it besides keep an eye on him. "Is that all?"

"Nu uh. He's volunteered for Team B."

Now *that* was more interesting. Team B, led by Sean Kelley. They were building a steel full-rigger, and as far as Jerry knew, they were behind schedule. It wouldn't have shocked anyone on Team C if Kelley had whispered a word or two to the Mutineers of Berth #22 about working for



Team B as retaliation, though Jerry didn't think Sean would ever resort to sabotage himself. "Did he mention anything else about the fire?"

Harrison frowned, swallowing hard. "One last thing-- he said that 'it was a bleedin' shame the tyrant didn't lose his head'. I'm assuming he was referring to Scotty."

"All right. Thanks John. I'll be sure to inform the rest of the team leaders." Oh, would he. This might be just the information they needed to proceed.

"But no one else, right? This stays between us, right? 'Cause I would get the hell beat out of me if anyone knew I told you all of this--" Harrison said hurriedly, visibly pale at the thought.

"Not a word," Jerry promised, cutting him off. "Hey, you're on our team, and we stick together."

Nodding and looking a little relieved, the other cadet replied, "That's why I told you."

"You are not going to *believe* who's dating Maggie Mersea." Cor stepped into the room, flushed and breathing hard. He'd almost missed getting in before curfew; apparently, he'd had to run to make it under the wire.

Scotty frowned to himself as he sat on the dorm room floor, schematics spread out all around him. He was currently trying to figure out a schedule alternative that would allow them to make up some time on the construction; it was counting down far too quickly for his tastes.

The week before, they had conned, bribed and begged eight more people to join the team. That brought the grand total up to twenty-seven. Still not enough.

"I give up, tell me," he said, half-absently; that kind of gossip might have been more interesting before all of this, but nowadays, he had his hands full with another lass altogether.

At least, until Corry decided to drop a bomb: "Keith O'Sullivan."

Forgetting about the schematics that quick, Scotty looked up with wide eyes. "Ye're kiddin'."

Corry shook his head, looking as though he was blown away by it himself. "I saw her dancing with him across town." Pacing a few steps and only just avoiding the blueprints on the floor, he ran both hands through his hair, agitated. "I knew she went for the bad boy type, but I really didn't think she'd stoop that low. And she was wearing that dress-- you know, the black one."

"The low cut one? The one that almost shows off her--"

"*That* dress."

Scotty groaned. After all, not only was she dating such a scumbag, but he hadn't even been there to see her in that dress, which was *very* flattering. "And I missed it?"

"Forget the dress, look who's she's schmoozing with!"

"Well, then I've got a bit more for ye to chew on." Sticking his pencil behind his ear, Scotty leaned back against his bunk. "Harrison told Jer a few things-- said our boy there was talkin' about how he was glad she got burned, and how I shoulda lost my head."

Corry frowned, sitting down on his bunk. "Well, that kinda backs up that we think he did it, but it's not solid evidence."

"How many people knew about the attack on me?"

A lightbulb went off. Corry paused for a moment, eyebrows drawn together. "You know, most everyone knew you were hurt, but as far as I know, only me, the paramedic, the security people, the campus docs and maybe admin knew exactly *how*?"

"Unless they happened to be there?" Tilting his head, one eyebrow up, Scotty jerked his chin up with a little grin. "I've got one more for ye, though."

"Fire away."

"O'Sullivan's up and volunteered to work for B."

"Holy--" Corry stood, then sat, then stood again, like he couldn't figure out what to do with himself at that revelation. "Sean's team. Since he's dating Maggie, he might be trying to get in good with her--"

"--or he might be tryin' to get that ship finished and rub our faces in it." Smirking, Scotty crossed his arms. "Now, ye don't suppose we're gonna let that happen, do ye?"

Cor's face went through a few emotions; first musing, then determined, and finally, a downright wicked smile crossed his face. "You know, Sean's room is right downstairs, and he *does* room alone. Think we should pay him a polite little visit?"

Scotty got to his feet, returning the smile in kind. "I think that'd be a fine idea."

Gesturing to the door with a graceful sweep, Corry was somehow mischievous and fierce all at once. "After you."

"You can't do this! This is a complete breach of protocol!" Sean's voice was kind of squeaky, but then, Sean wasn't exactly in a great position to begin with. The Malone Road Dormitory was only three stories tall, but looking down it probably seemed a whole lot taller.

"As far as I know, so is burning another person's final," Corry said pleasantly, keeping the frightened Sean from pulling away from the edge of the roof. "Wouldn't you agree, Scotty?"

"Oh, aye, absolutely," Scotty answered, just as amicably. Arms crossed, he leaned over slightly to look at the ground below. "Tis a long drop. I think it could kill a man. Or, at least, put a powerful hurtin' on one."

"Look," Sean said, no doubt as reasonably as he could manage in his trembling voice, "I didn't have anything to do with that. I may not like you, but I sure as hell wouldn't stoop that low."

"Well, since ye happen to have one of my mutineers workin' for ye now, and since this mutineer was talkin' about the fire, and since he seemed to know just a wee bit *too much* -- gettin' my meanin'?"

Corry nudged Sean a hair closer to the edge, taking full advantage of the fact he was bigger than the other cadet. "So anything you might know, spill it."

Sean tried uselessly to backpedal; Cor tried just as uselessly not to find it gratifying. "God, I will, just get me off this roof!"

"First the information, then you move."

Sean held perfectly still for almost two entire minutes. It didn't bother his captors, seeing as how they were in no rush, but he was obviously upset. But finally, he managed to say, "I didn't know they were planning it, but Keith was talking about it the next day down in the cafeteria. I think he was fishing for some kind of praise. I was there, and so was Mark and Maggie. Maggie looked unhappy, and Mark just brushed it off."

"Did he actually *admit* to it?" Scotty asked, both eyebrows up, drumming against his own upper arm as he watched Sean's face.

"Yes and no," Sean replied, gulping and trying to keep back from the edge of the roof. "He was kind of vague, but he said something about wishing that he could finish the job."

"It sounds kinda like an admission to me. What d'you think, Scotty?" Corry pulled Sean back from the edge finally, now that he had gotten pretty much what he wanted.

"*Kinda*? No, it just does."

Sean's trembling toned down a little now that he wasn't staring death directly in the face. "What're you going to do?"

"Nothin' ye need to be concerned about, Mister Kelley." Scotty started back across the roof, headed for the access door, sounding decidedly smug. "Ye'd best concentrate on yer own ship."

Corry smiled sweetly as he gave Sean a little shake pre-release, adding, "And if you're really really smart, you'll forget this little unpleasant incident ever happened at all." With that, he turned and followed his roommate, leaving behind a very shaken cadet to think about things.

Scotty was waiting at the bottom of the steps, eyes narrowed, when Corry bounded down to join him. "Think he should walk the plank?" Corry asked. "I think he should walk the plank."

"Hm," Scotty answered, absently, staring at the wall as he continued thinking. After a moment, he murmured almost to himself, "I didna think Sean would have done that; he's an ass, but not *that* bad. And I know O'Sullivan wasna workin' alone, so we still have a few more people to find."

"You've got an idea."

"Aye, a little notion." Finally looking back at Corry, Scotty grinned. "But never mind that for now. What d'ye suppose we do a little more spyin'?"

"Tonight?"

"Why not?"

Corry sighed happily, having an unrepentant amount of fun with this espionage business. "Ah, vengeance will be sweet."

"Ah, 'twas beautiful, m'lads, beautiful." O'Sullivan was kicked back on his bunk, a glass -- not a shot -- a *glass* of whiskey balancing on one knee. The informal dinner suit he wore was half-disassembled. The jacket was on the floor, his shirt was unbuttoned and some wine had stained one pantleg. It was in the wee hours of morning, when most would be in bed, but not Keith and not John Harrison, and not Tanner Thylita. Those three gents were clearly quite happily awake.

They weren't the only ones. Cor sat on one side of the window, back against the brick wall of the Stranmills Road Dormitory, and Scotty sat on the other side. They were silent; even their breathing was as soft as they could get it, though it was doubtful that the three cadets indoors would hear them anyway. They hadn't bothered to change out of uniform; gray and black worked well enough as camouflage, but Corry had at least worn a hat to keep his hair covered.

And they waited.

First O'Sullivan had come back and started chatting with Thylita about class the next day. Then Harrison had shown up some time ago and they all discussed what they were going to do on the break before assignment. It had gone on and on, and now it was Keith reliving the date with Maggie.

In graphic detail.

Corry was fuming over it, his face red in anger. Scotty wasn't really thrilled either, but he was more worried about his best friend blowing a gasket and giving up their cover. They couldn't afford to be caught in the act of spying, out after curfew, especially not now.

So, figuring that distraction might work, Scotty picked up a stick and drew a tic-tac-toe board between them in the dirt. So far, it was working; Corry was worrying more about the game than about defending Maggie's apparently dubious honor.

And the target kept chattering. His companions were obviously enjoying it, though the two cadets outside were almost miserably bored. Once he'd finished beating his roommate four times consecutively, Corry erased the board and wrote: *'I never knew spying was so boring.'*

Scotty leaned over and read it, a grin crossing his face. Taking the stick back, he wrote under that: *'It'll be worth it, I think.'*

*'I don't know, he seems to be happy with his current convo.'*

*'Wait til he has another glass.'*

Corry shook his head and erased the whole thing so he could continue the painstakingly slow conversation. *'What are you planning?'*

*'Wait for it.'* Shaking his head back, Scotty gave Corry an enigmatic little smile. He wasn't about to pony up his ideas just yet.

*'No clues?'* Cor wrote, eyebrows raised hopefully. He was desperately curious to know what Scotty was conjuring up, and had asked that particular question several times now.

Tilting his head, Scotty thought about it, translating in his head for a few moments. Then, with very careful precision, he erased the message in the dirt and wrote in his neatest lettering: *'La mer ne pardonne pas.'*

Corry gave him the hairy eyeball for that one, snatching the stick and writing, *'FRENCH???'*

Scotty probably would have had to work harder not to start laughing at Cor's indignation, if not for the fact that the conversation inside got exponentially more interesting.

"You know," Harrison was saying, "the schooner's coming along pretty damn well now."

Scotty and Corry both looked up in unison, holding their breaths. They had no way of knowing which side of the fence Harrison was playing -- given the fact that he was still friendly with Keith, he could have very easily been working both. A regular double-agent. Admittedly, he had given Jansson the warning of who he thought did it, but that didn't mean he didn't have a master plan.

"And those bleedin' bastards are gonna get credit for the work you, an' me, an' Tanner here did." O'Sullivan's voice didn't raise, even under the influence of the whiskey, but it had taken on a bitter, resentful tone. "I lost a credit already."

Harrison's voice was glib, lighthearted and smooth. "Yeah, but they got some grief at least."

"Not enough, in my humble opinion. If I get another shot, I'll see they get more."

"Hey, just don't leave me behind. Last time was wild," Tanner said, just as lightly. As if it were some sort of game. As if they hadn't committed arson, assault and potentially could have committed manslaughter.

That was it. Scotty erased the last messages and wrote fast, all the while kicking himself mentally. *'We should've brought a recorder.'*

*'Too late now.'* Corry wrote in response, after he'd grabbed the stick back. *'But now we know.'*

Nodding slowly, Scotty mused on it for a minute while they listened. Unfortunately, the conversation had already turned back to Maggie, but now they did know beyond all doubt. Now they knew who the ringleader was, and at least one of his underlings.

Scotty smiled a bit wickedly, erasing the messages and motioning for Cor to follow him. Slipping out of the bushes, he was already working hard in his head on the next part of their vengeance-- and the next part of the *Lady Grey*.

If he'd been thinking more in the moment, he might have noticed Cor didn't follow him sooner; as it happened, though, he got all the way to the road before he realized and went back to tug his grim-looking roommate along with him.

When the alarm woke Scotty up at 0600, he was not particularly pleased. His first desire was to smack the off button, but he managed to overrule that. If he slept through class, he would never be able to bring his grades back to their usual high standards, and while he found himself caring less about that than was necessarily good, he also knew he needed to at least *appear* to be on his best behavior.

Until then, though, he buried his face in his pillow for a moment to yawn, mind only on one thing: Coffee.

"*La mer ne pardonne pas*: the sea is unforgiving," Corry said, softly, once he ascertained that Scotty was awake. "I didn't know you could speak French. Especially after you nearly bombed Basic Language."

"I can't," Scotty replied, stifling the second yawn. Scrubbing at his face, he finally sat up. "Not well, anyway. I can read it, though. Don't remember much, but Mum taught me some years ago. Enough to read recipes and apologize for bein' underfoot whenever she took me along to Paris." Then, bobbing his head to the side, he admitted, "--taught myself a bit more colorful stuff on top o' that, though."

Corry nodded with a little huff of a laugh, leaned against the wall; he didn't look like he'd slept very well, but that might have been excitement or anticipation. "Thermos of coffee on your desk."

"Ye're a lifesaver." Grabbing the thermos, Scotty poured the coffee into his well-stained mug and sat back, eyes closed, just inhaling the aroma like that would hurry some sense of wakefulness.

"Normally I'm a bastard."

"Aye, that too. But not right now."

"You're being generous this morning."

"Had a good night. We've got swabbies to walk the plank." Scotty grinned somewhat mischievously; even after all of this, he still found a hefty dose of amusement in the idea of making people *walk the plank* like a proper pirate.

"Yeah, I know." Corry sounded like he was trying to be upbeat, but was failing completely; it didn't quite fit with the way the night before had gone, at least from Scotty's perspective.

Opening his eyes briefly, Scotty asked, "What's wrong?"

Corry glanced up, startled. "Huh?"

"Somethin's wrong," Scotty said, unhesitant, closing his eyes again and sipping at the coffee. It just wasn't like Cor to be that quiet, particularly when he was itching for revenge just as badly.

There was a beat, then the sound of Cor getting to his feet. "Yeah. I'll explain it later on, though. I want to confirm a few things before I do."

Scotty quirked his eyebrows back. Fair enough, then; they both had their cards close to the chest for the moment, though not for any bad reasons that he could imagine. So, he only said, "Aye, and I'll let ye in on the plan later too." He couldn't quite help grinning again. "I think ye'll like it."

The decision to linger after they'd gotten enough confirmation that O'Sullivan had been the ringleader and his cronies were the ones behind the burning of the *Lady Grey* had been completely selfish: Corry had wanted to see what else O'Sullivan had to say about Maggie. Part of it was some worry for her sake, dating someone who was willing to resort to *arson*; part of it was an almost morbid curiosity as to what she could possibly see in someone like that.

He had been just about to chalk it up to an unsolvable mystery and follow Scotty -- and go look up a French dictionary -- when something had ended up stopping him cold in his tracks.

"She up and bitched about me hittin' him all night, though. Didn't figure her for bein' *that* squeamish, and it wasn't like we did any permanent damage to the little tyrant."

Corry had been so stunned by it that he hadn't put up any resistance when Scotty came back and dragged him out of the bushes. He tried to scramble around the circuit between shock and denial, but even as he did, he knew Keith O'Sullivan had no particular reason to *lie* about that there, amongst his friends.

Still, Cor didn't want to just take it for fact until he could confirm it for himself, so he went back to their room with Scotty, translated the French and then, when 0530 came around, slipped out long enough to get his best friend some coffee. As little as had been said about the fight that night the *Lady Grey* had been burned, he'd been trying to quietly work on repairing this friendship, and that meant going back to the good-natured persistence and thoughtfulness it had been built on in the first place.

Now, feeling somewhere between wired and exhausted, he managed to track Maggie down between classes. She was walking alone, which was a relief for Corry -- if O'Sullivan had been there, it would have been a lot harder.

Sidling up to her with a sweet little smile, he didn't even give a hint to what he was planning on talking to her about. "Heya, Maggie."

Maggie smiled back, shifting her books and tapes to her other arm. "Hi, Corry. How are you?"

"Not too bad. Just a little tired; we've been working really hard getting our ship back up to specs." Frowning, Corry was watching her reactions like a hawk; a discreet hawk, but a hawk nonetheless.

"Really?" She shook her head, her blonde hair sliding over her shoulders. "That was so awful. Who would do such a thing?"

Corry sighed, heavily. It wasn't all an act; watching her hair move over her shoulders was enough to make him have to yank his mind back from the inevitable thoughts that came up. "Yeah, it was pretty bad. But we think we might know who did it."

"Oh?"

"We think Lewis might have gotten upset about the work. I've talked to him a few times, and Scotty treated him kinda bitter, if you know what I mean."

The relief in her eyes was unmistakable, but her acting besides was perfect. Her eyebrows drew in concern, her face was composed, her voice was soft and compassionate. But her eyes told the story; it confirmed Corry's worst fears about her.

She had been there. She was lying.

"Well, I hope that someone does something about it," Maggie murmured. "Tell me how it goes, all right?"

"I will," Corry answered, smiling warmly. After she had walked away, he added under his breath, "You'll be one of the first to know."

## Part III: Righting Arm: Chapter 4

### Chapter 4:

*Tuesday, April 25th, 2243  
Malone Road Dormitory, Room 17  
Starfleet Engineering Academy  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth*

"All right, let's hear it." Jansson sat at the workbench, a bottle of dark beer sitting beside a project Scotty had long since forgotten about. The design team for the *Lady Grey* hadn't had a chance to say much more than a few sentences to each other recently, at least outside of shipbuilding; most of their time was spent working after class until the time limit.

It had been another hard day. All of the repairs were finished in record time, and a good bit more of her hull had been laid out--

--and there wasn't a cadet on the team who hadn't looked at Scotty oddly when, an hour before the limit was up, he had ordered them to stop working on the hull and to start on the bilge.

It was a mystery what was on the shipwright's mind. Corry was closer to a clue than anyone, and even he hadn't guessed.

Scotty apparently wasn't in a rush to give up his secrets, though. Sitting on his bunk, a rolled blueprint beside him, he was sticking strictly to coffee. This time, he had built the suspense up like a professional. "Corry, by all means," he said, gesturing.

"Well, we all know that yesterday Harrison came forward and told Jerry about O'Sullivan's yammering," Corry said, smoothly standing. He still wasn't in a great mood, given what he'd found out earlier, but that wouldn't stop him. "Scotty and I decided to do a little more digging. We took Sean up on the roof and grilled him under threat of death--"

"Bet that's why he missed class today," Albright said, grinning.

"Probably." Corry smirked at the memory. "But anyway, he basically confirmed our suspicions that O'Sullivan had been behind the burning of the *Grey*. So, once we finished with him, we decided to go do a little eavesdropping. Spent hours sitting outside of O'Sullivan's room. Harrison was there, so was Thylita."

Jansson leaned forward so far he nearly fell off of the stool, and Albright wasn't a whole lot better. This was definitely the first they'd heard of it.

Corry enjoyed the expressions they were wearing, and drew out the moment for all it was worth. Scotty wasn't the only master in suspense.

"Go on," Joe prompted, once he'd had all he could take.

"Well, to cut a long story short, Thylita had been in on it." Cor put his hands behind his back. "They both agreed they'd do it again if they got a chance. Scotty here took off, and I stayed behind for another minute or so--"

Now Scotty was looking a little bit tense as he obviously put together that he'd missed something himself.

"--and O'Sullivan said that Maggie had chewed him up one side and down the other for attacking our shipwright here."

Three stunned looks in one sentence. Corry was on a roll tonight -- even if he hated to think that Maggie was in on it, he still couldn't help but enjoy the fact that he'd managed to get all three of them with his little revelation.

Scotty finally found his voice again. It took a minute, and he was still pretty clearly shocked by it, but he managed to ask, "That was why ye happened to be so upset?"

"Yeah. I didn't want to believe it, you know. So I went and talked to her; told her that we thought we knew who did it. I swear, guys, she got this look like 'oh God', until I told her we were suspecting Lewis. Then she looked relieved."

"Lewis'll love that," Albright muttered, quietly, shaking his head and sounding like he was still trying to wrap his brain around it.

Corry got it, too. It was hard to imagine Maggie doing anything less than nice. It was even harder imagining her doing something so downright devious.

"That's three." Jerry took a hard slug of beer, apparently needing it right then. "At least three people in on the sabotage."

"And no less'n two on Sean Kelley's team." Taking his cue, and the stage, Scotty finally pulled his schematic out. Unrolling it with the finesse of a very planned movement, he laid the paper out in front of him on the bunk.

The other three cadets moved over to look. It was a schematic for the *Lady Grey*, a side view showing her entire length. The schematic itself was original, but there were hastily written notes, and a few things added to the drawing. Well, honestly, it was more than a few things.

There were *several* things.

Corry almost fell over. Unlike the other two, he knew immediately what had been changed, and what those changes meant. After a minute,

Jansson looked up, and only ten seconds after that, so did Albright.

Corry's voice was very soft, almost a whisper in the dead silent room. Looking up and meeting his roommate's gaze, he couldn't keep the mix of admiration and surprise out of his words. "La mer ne pardonne pas."

Scotty nodded once, as elegantly as a pragmatic engineer possibly could. "The sea is unforgiving."

"This-- is the craziest shit I've ever seen," Jansson whispered, touching the schematic as if to confirm it was real. Albright laughed a manic, stunned little laugh next to him.

Finally giving a blade-sharp grin, Scotty leaned back and crossed his arms. "Twenty-four guns, lads. We're gonna arm her with twenty-four guns."

To say that it was going to be easy would have been a bald-faced lie, but to say that the cadets weren't determined would have been even worse. They had spent the rest of the night planning it out, too excited to sleep and talking a mile a minute. When 0530 rolled around, they ran down to the restaurant by the shipyards, and had a quick breakfast. Speaking in coded whispers, they were stealing sly, conspiring glances across the table and generally acting like a group of barely grown humans with an outrageous and potentially stupid plan.

And when classes started at 0630, they began to set the gears into motion.

Albright immediately went down to the machine shop, taking an inventory of the equipment kept there. It had been decided that, in order for the *Lady Grey* to keep her trim, they would have to find an alternative weight for the guns. Ships cannons were originally made of iron and some weighed literal tons; the *Grey* was a schooner, though, and there was no way she could support the weight of twenty-four iron cannons and keep her racing-style handling. So it was up to Joe to come up with an alternative, and being the mathematician who had done the bulk of her weight distribution studies, it was only right.

Skipping out of his first three classes, Jansson spent his time alone in the shipyards, building templates for the gun ports. Scotty had allowed for twenty guns on her first below deck, and four guns mounted on her main deck; two bow chasers, two stern chasers. The twenty below were going to end up being twenty-four pound shot; in ammunition alone, she would have a lot of added weight, but Albright would have to be the one to determine how much they could carry without drastically affecting her sailing performance.

Scotty simply worked on his classwork. Pearson was quite pleased to have his star student back in what he considered to be the proper frame of mind for a Starfleet engineer, and Scotty was quite pleased that the captain wasn't breathing down his neck. After all, if Pearson couldn't see into his thoughts, he couldn't see just how far from that state of mind the cadet actually was.

And it fell to Corry to be the actor. The best of his troop, he found Barrett in his office between one class and the next. He stepped in, smiling. "Sir?"

"Yes, Mister Corrigan?" Barrett looked up from his desk and the slew of papers there.

"I was going to ask you if you plan on having a sailing day, once we're finished with our final." Corry put his hands behind his back, practically radiating enthusiasm. No easy feat after barely surviving on a single nap over his midday break for the past couple days. "I mean, after all the hell we've gone through -- pardon me, sir -- I think we should at least be able to take the *Lady Grey* out."

Barrett raised both eyebrows. "Do you think you can get her finished before the deadline? Because of the sabotage, I was going to just grade the entire class on what they have finished."

Cor nodded. "Yes, sir, I think we'll have her done. Mister Scott has reworked our entire construction schedule, along with a few minor plan changes."

"Plan changes?"

"A few little things that might make it go smoother," Corry said, careful not to let slip any nervousness he might have felt. If Barrett asked for the revised plans, the whole thing could go under. "And frankly, sir, after all he's gone through, it's only fitting he gets to take his ship out."

Barrett smiled, chuckling, "His ship. Well, I'll send a memo out and see if anyone else would like to participate. I think the idea of a few windjammers out there again would be very idyllic. A good note to retire on."

A brief flash of guilt shot through Corry, but it was far too late to change tracks now. Maybe not literally too late, but the line had been drawn and they were going to step over it no matter what it took. "I think Team C would really appreciate it, sir."

"All right, let me see what it would take. Is that all?"

"Yes, thank you sir." Cor stepped out. When the door closed, he took a deep breath to get his thoughts in order, prepare for everything he'd have to work on next, and walked away.

Meanwhile, back in Harland & Wolff's Berth #22, Albright was giving his report to Jansson. Pacing the floor of the mold loft, the mathematician ran down the figures. "I think it's possible to get the cannon weight down to just about three hundred pounds apiece. That'll add about one and a third tons to her on the twenty full cannons; it's not too significant, compared to what it would have been."

"What'll we be using?" Jerry didn't look up from the schematic, a ruler in his other hand and a timber on the floor.

"A duradium and steel mix. Best part is, they can withstand higher temperatures than the iron could, and the duradium's strong enough to resist warping and scarring." Almost jumping from the pure energy he had, Joe Albright was grinning like a madman. "Man, Jerry, if we do this, we'll go down in *infamy*."

"Go down is right," Jerry chuckled, setting the ruler aside. "Our careers are gonna come to an end."

"Not if I can help it," Corry broke in, closing the door to the loft. "I'm gonna do everything in my power to make sure we still have jobs after this."

Jansson took a few hard breaths. He had almost expected it to be someone who could stop them in their tracks now, before they had even gotten started. "You scared the hell outta me."

"Sorry." Not looking particularly apologetic, Cor knelt beside the schematic. "Barrett's going to try to get us out on the water when we finish. We *have* to have this ship done by next month, even if it means going on the sly and sneaking in here like a bunch of spec ops types."

"The four of us can't do it alone." Albright went back to pacing, working on it out loud. "The rest of the construction team needs to be let in on it, and if anyone leaks, we are in really deep shit. Deep enough to bury us for archaeologists to find in a couple hundred thousand years."

Corry shook his head, standing again. "The only person I'm worried about is Harrison. But I think we can find a way to deal with him."

"For a month?" Joe frowned. "We can't very well keep him away from here for a whole month."

"We can if we send him out to get the sails made, the brassworks, the ropes and pulleys-- we'll lose points for not making all of those ourselves, but on the deadline we've got, we'll just have to take the hit."

Jansson finished cutting the timber to its lengths with a specialized cutting torch. Not entirely historical, but then, they were running so close to the wire that the templates just couldn't be a waste of time. "Are you ready to send him out today? Because in a few hours, I'm going to have the first port ready to fit, and then everyone who sees it will know."

"I could. Won't be easy, but I could." Corry took a deep breath. "I'm going to see about ordering double sets of everything, in case he can't be trusted. The last thing we need is to finish this schooner and end up having no sails or something."

Albright gave Cor a shove, impatient and ready to go. "Get to it, then!"

The project leader flashed a beaming grin, waved and ran out the door.

"Now, ye all know what happened here-- and ye all helped bring it to rights again." Scotty hated public speaking. He didn't mind barking orders when he had to, but trying to come up with a speech was like being rolled over razor blades.

Still, it was his idea, and his job to make it clear what would be done. So the other twenty-odd cadets stood on the floor while he balanced on the *Lady Grey*, and he did the talking. "But ye also know that Security's basically closed the book on the whole bloody affair, and those who did it still haven't come to any sort o' justice."

The agreement was quiet, but unanimous. Harrison was gone, and the rest of the team had been loyal pretty much from the get-go, even when pressure had built up.

Steadying himself, Scotty continued, "I won't assume all o' ye want to get 'em back for what they did, but I'd like to think I'm not the only one who does. So, to cut right to it: The design team's decided to arm the *Grey* with guns. And if it all works out, and the senior cadets get to take their ships out, we're gonna retaliate then."

That certainly got a response. The entire group broke into noise, everyone talking at once. Scotty made no effort to speak over the din, just settled back to wait for it to quiet down. Though, given the general responses, it seemed to be greeted with more skepticism than downright refusal.

There wasn't a cadet in that building who didn't feel something for the *Lady Grey* by now. Even those who weren't originally part of the team had grown to enjoy it simply for the reason that they were a part of something grand. She wasn't a starship, but she was something special anyway.

Those who had been there for the entire affair had felt wronged by the sabotage. Those who had joined up just a week or so ago sympathized. And all of them knew that even if they did go through with this, it wasn't going to be them who really paid the ultimate price -- that would belong to the men in charge, simply because it was their responsibility.



So when it finally lightened somewhat, and the chatter became tolerable, Scotty sketched in the details. Once finished with that, he offered anyone who wanted it a chance to walk away without any repercussions.

Not a single person did.

Team C went to work on the *Lady Grey* with renewed vigor. Oh, they had cared before, but now it was something entirely different. Now, it was practically destiny-- that or they thought it was just incredibly neat to arm a ship with cannons and blow someone else's ship up. Either way, they were practically singing.

Corry helped set the first gunport. He could say that there was a lot of exhilaration in that alone; in a sense, they were bringing to life what they had planned only the night before. Smiling to himself as he braced the frame with a few other cadets where her hull had been cut to make it fit, he couldn't help but wonder if Starfleet would appreciate how well they were working as a team now, even if they didn't agree with what was being worked on.

It was going to be rough when it all played out and he knew that every single one of them *could* be brought up on charges -- conduct unbecoming, assault, reckless endangerment -- and that any number of things would be flung at the cadets when it all played out. But Andrew Corrigan knew one thing for certain -- if anyone was going to take the brunt of it, he was.

Scotty wouldn't like that. Corry knew that already; he could see it coming a parsec away. After all, Scotty had put so much into the *Lady Grey*, and he had worked out this whole plan to attack at sea, so he would naturally want to take responsibility.

Well, Corry owed his roommate one. Musing on it as he held the wood, ignoring the strain in his arms, he had decided that much last night while they were planning. Oh, he still wanted to transfer to the medical division, still wanted to learn more about the sciences, but until that night when the *Grey* was burned, he had no real clue about what he would be giving up. Maybe Scotty didn't intend to show him-- in fact, he absolutely didn't. But he'd provided a hell of a wakeup call anyway.

There was something incredibly visceral in holding your deadweight, unconscious best friend. In cleaning his blood out from under your fingernails and the grooves of your skin after.

That was why Corry had gotten so protective, though he'd tried to keep it from getting overbearing. He always had been some, but that had notched it up considerably. The whole night had terrified him, smacked him hard upside the head and made him think about just how ridiculous he had been. It had all added up; knowing about the *Lady Grey*, and about why she was so important to Scotty, knowing that not only had he been outright heartless to someone who was only trying to watch out for him, but someone else had been-- Corry was determined to make up for it. It would take awhile, and he didn't care if he seemed like a mother hen, but he wasn't going to give up.

Friends like that just didn't come along more than once in a lifetime.

Stepping back when the port had finally been braced there, he wiped his forehead off with the back of his arm. It seemed like they had so far to go, and not enough time to get there; like they would be running so close to failure that it made a permanent home outside of the door.

"We'll get her done," Scotty said, as though he could have read Corry's thoughts. "Oh, she'll be somethin' to see, Cor. Somethin' special."

Corry grinned in answer, turning to face his best friend. "Yeah?"

"Aye, damn straight." Scotty sounded like he believed he was invincible; gone was any sign of uncertainty about whether they were going to have enough time. "I'm hopin' Barrett comes through with the sail."

"I think he will." Chuckling to himself, Corry moved over to start working again, laying down the hull planking. That attitude of invincibility was infectious, and it wasn't long before he was just as convinced that she would be done and that it would all work out how they planned.

It was into the next week when Barrett called a meeting. It was the first time since the day after the sabotage that his entire senior class was all in one room, and the amount of talking was almost unbelievable. Only Team C really knew why everyone was there, and they were talking themselves -- though it was plotting they were doing, not speculating.

Barrett waited patiently for it to quiet down, standing in front of his podium with his arms crossed. It was a stance officers tended to adopt when they wanted to be listened to, and after so many years, the old professor had it perfected. It didn't take more than thirty seconds for the room to fall silent; conversations tapered off, voices softened to whispers then to nothing, and everyone waited to hear what he had to say.

"Cadets," Barrett started, smiling warmly at the whole class. "I've called you here today to propose something. Something I think you'll all like quite a bit."

*No doubt we will*, Scotty thought, a grin crossing his face before he could stifle it. Forcing himself to look blankly interested, he leaned his elbows on the desk and listened.

"Now, I know you've all put a great deal of work and thought into your finals. I'm very proud of the way the teams have pulled together, and of how hard you've all tried. So, instead of simply grading you and leaving it at that," Barrett said, smoothly, "I've arranged for a race."

Almost immediately the chattering started again, rather like a flood. Corry, looking ready to launch through the roof in pure excitement, leaned over to whisper, "A race! My god, it's too perfect!"

"Shhh!" Scotty hissed, though he just wanted to jump himself. Corry was right, it *was* too perfect.

"Now, you'll all be graded before the race on what you have completed by the original deadline, and the race itself will have no bearing whatsoever on your academic work. This is purely for fun, cadets." Barrett looked excited himself, a rare sight to see, as he walked over and uncovered the blackboard. "Naturally there has to be some incentive to win, because all of you are going to have to learn how to *sail* these creations of yours. So I arranged for a unique prize--

"The winner will have the opportunity to name the next Starfleet vessel commissioned after their own vessel, and the entire team will have a plaque onboard this starship giving them credit."

If the idea of racing hadn't won them over, the prize sure did. 'Fleet vessels were usually named by the top brass, after some historical figure or some historical ship. That one group of cadets would have that opportunity, an opportunity to be remembered in such a way-- it was incredible. The whole theater was deafened by the cheering; the enthusiasm couldn't be cut with a fully charged phaser bank.

Barrett didn't even try. On the board, underneath the rules for the race and the prize, he wrote: '*Full details will be sent in a memo. Dismissed.*'

Jansson ran over as the cadets began filing out, leaping every step like a jackrabbit on stimulants. "A race! A race, a race, my ship for the race!"

"I can't believe it," Corry laughed, shaking his head and still looking ready to launch. "Oh, this couldn't be more perfect. If I planned it all myself, it couldn't *be* more perfect."

"Ohhhh yeah, ohhhhhhhh yeaaaaaah..." Albright giggled, bouncing back and forth. "We have to get back to the slip. As in right now. Hell, as in ten minutes ago!"

Scotty grinned. "Race ye?"

"GO!" Corry took off first, dashing out of the door and almost running over a few stray cadets in the process. The other three chased after him, as they ran through the halls and out of the building.

## Part III: Righting Arm: Chapter 5

### Chapter 5:

Friday, May 5th, 2243  
Harland & Wolff Shipyards, Berth #22  
Team C Headquarters  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth

Open the seams, caulk between the planks. The wood didn't want to give now that it had dried and tightened to the frame of the schooner, but to make her as watertight as she would have to be to face the seas, it was necessary. Pull the wedges, let the boards settle on the cotton, tar and strands, let it dry and smooth it over.

The next seam. It was a progression, following behind the team who laid the final boards to rest on her stern and transom. There was a symmetry there; they all had a job and knew exactly how to do it.

In the old days, working outside, ships took a long time to build. Back then, there had been no lights or indoor berths big enough for these crafts, so builders had to work in the elements, all seasons. There had been no crafting devices so precise, no tricorders to standardize measurements, and there had been no Starfleet cadets so determined to either sail into glory or ruin.

The twenty-four gun schooner *Lady Grey* was something purely unique.

The team who worked on her had long since abandoned several of the historical practices they were originally using, turning to more modern ways of getting the job done faster. But even though they now cut the wood with precise micron torches, measured to the decimals of a millimeter to insure there would be no re-cutting needed, they still walked away with tar under their nails and calluses on their hands.

Scotty had managed to find a nice middle ground, and that just thrilled him to no end. Now, instead of trusting an old hand-saw with his timbers, he could use the technology that he loved so much to make the schooner that much better. After all, he was building her to last. He might end up failing the class and being held back a year, but he sure was going to have a nice legacy for it.

Her hull was almost finished. Taking a break from the work, one of the very few he allowed himself, he stepped back and trained a sharp gaze over her starboard side. Inside of the hull, another group of cadets worked on putting in her ceilings and bulkheads, and a team of three worked with Albright on the cannon problem. The bilge would be done just after the hull, maybe a day later at most. Her below decks would be finished a few days later, and then they could lay out her main deck.

Frowning slightly, he ran through the math again. For the most part, she would be all right with the guns on her first below deck, but if she heeled too terribly far over, those ports would be underwater. She had a lot of freeboard for a schooner, but less than a ship that had been designed from the start to carry guns.

And the last thing he needed was for her to start taking on water through the gun ports -- one of the things he had to compensate for when he decided to turn her into a warship. He couldn't very well turn around and start all over now.

Mulling the problem over, he paced up and down the length of her hull, trying to figure out a way to make those ports as watertight as possible. On a rough day, wind on the beam, she would heel a fair bit; one good gust could put those ports under, and it would take half the crew on the pumps to get the water out. Meanwhile, her center of gravity's been changed, as well as her righting arm, and if they ended up in a gale, she could well go down on that alone.

"I've been thinking," Corry said, pausing himself and jogging to catch up to his pacing roommate. "The recoil on those guns -- it's gonna be something serious."

"Mm hm," Scotty replied, not really paying much attention. He was worried about the guns, but he was more worried about the *Grey's* structural integrity.

Cor didn't seem to take any notice of the absent look, and continued cheerily, "Well, you know there'll normally have to be a bunch of guys on the breeching ropes, right?"

"Aye." Well, no, he hadn't known that, but he got the idea quickly enough.

"Well, what if we were to get a really strong rubber-type-thing, and set it up to be connected once the gun's run out? I mean, it'll have to be able to absorb the shock and not bounce the cannon through the hull, but I'll bet we can find something in the database we can use."

Scotty nodded, still working on the other problem. "All right, look into it and--" Blinking a few times, he stopped, thought about it, ran it over logically. "Corry, ye're a genius!"

"Am I?" Corry grinned, brightly. "I thought you'd like it."

"The gunports! Line the gunports with a seal, dog 'em down right good--" Jumping once in pure excitement, Scotty took off for the mold loft.

He was just at the top of the stairs when Jansson sang out, "Port side done!" and it was the sweetest sound in the world.

"Polaris-- and Etamin, and over there's Deneb." Pointing up at the spanned ceiling of the slip, Scotty was definitely in a mood that could only be described as 'out there'.

The foredeck of the *Lady Grey* had been started, and on a whim, the two roommates had climbed up there. It didn't take Scotty too long to stretch out on the decking; seemingly on a whim, he started naming stars, pointing out where they would normally be if there was nothing between him and them but air and sky. "Altair and Vega, o' course."

Corry sat against the bulwark, just listening. It was desperately late-- or early, however one looked at it, and the front of the slip was dark. They had two weeks and five days to finish the schooner; it was going to be so close to the wire that it was downright frightening. Her bilge was completely finished, as were the belowdecks, but it still felt nail-bitingly tight.

Day and night cadets worked in shifts, sneaking into the shipyards like bandits whenever the yards had been closed down to them. One team would work solidly from 0630 to 1430, mostly composed of whoever could afford the personal leave time to cut class. The next team worked from 0230 to 2000, made sure they were seen leaving, then crept back in and worked until curfew. And, from curfew at 2200 to 0630, the small graveyard shift work. Corry had managed to talk another ten people into joining the crew before all of those, most all of them underclassmen who wanted some rebel credibility.

Working a full twenty-four hours in shifts required lots of illegal dealings (breaking and entering came to mind), and it required hacking into the security cameras to run a continuous loop of the night-time, empty shipyard, and it required lots of silence and sleeplessness, but the ends justified the means. At least, to Corry they did.

It was the only way they could hope to complete her, and so far it had worked fabulously. Between their shifts, they slept and studied for their other finals, and it wasn't uncommon to hear them shouting back and forth during legal working hours, quizzing each other in test preparation.

It was still going to be desperately close.

"D'you think we'll get her finished?" Corry asked, quietly, before he even realized it.

Not looking away from the imaginary stars, Scotty said confidently, "Aye, I think we'll be done in plenty o' time."

Cor nodded, though he wasn't convinced. Even with their extra hands, even as well as they had the system worked out, it was too close to call in his opinion. "How long do you think it'll take to step in the masts once we have the deck finished?"

"A day to get 'em in, another day or so to properly fit the collars and run the shrouds." Scotty shrugged, awkwardly, then went back to his imaginary stargazing. "Capella, and Regulus-- 'course, they all just have numbers we can use, but those sound so bloody impersonal."

"The sails and that should come in soon. I did order doubles for everything."

"Alioth, Dubhe, Markab..."

"You're really into that, aren't you?"

"Mm hm."

Corry looked up at the ceiling of the slip, halfway wishing he could see the stars that were being named. But it was raining in Belfast and all there really was up there were a whole lot of archways and plating. Shaking his head with a wry chuckle, he stretched out on the decking himself, putting his arms behind his head. "Orion's gone, I think."

Scotty nodded, almost solemnly. "Aye, up and runnin' from that scorpion. T'would be a miserable thing, bein' chased for all eternity like that."

"Yeah, I think it'd get old after so long." Corry pointed to a spot on the ceiling. "Big Dipper."

"Little to the left," Scotty corrected, good-naturedly, pointing in the right direction. Yawning, he added, "Right up there, and follow it to true north."

"True north is one degree off Polaris."

"Picky, picky."

Corry shook his head, closing his eyes with a smile. "You corrected me, it's only fair I return the favor."

"Eh, I just think ye're *persnickety*."

Corry gasped in mock horror. "*Persnickety*?! This from you? Yeah, you just keep thinking you're the head honcho, Pup, and I'll just keep pulling your ass out of the fire."

"Wolf. That's *Wolf* to you."

"Maybe Cub, maybe Pup, maybe even Mutt-- but not Wolf."

"Bastard."

Corry shook his head to himself with a grin. "That's me all right."

Steadfastly ignoring him now, Scotty just went back to his constellations. "Draco, Leo, Perseus..."

It only took him another three minutes to talk himself to sleep.

"Gun ready!"

The quiet Irish field had been singing softly in the wind before they showed up. The grass had danced in the breeze, the day had been gorgeous and the countryside was a perfect picture of peace and quiet. For kilometers around there was nothing but trees and grass, a cottage or two, and this lovely serenity that could permeate the body and revive the spirit of man.

Then they showed up and ruined it all.

"Run 'er out!" Corry barked, in a voice that would impress anyone who knew how he usually spoke. Standing there in his civilian clothes, striking a dramatic stance, he could have really been a pirate.

Albright, Jansson, Lewis and Sallee pulled on the tackles, bringing the gun up to the makeshift port that sat so oddly on the countryside. Scotty stood well behind the gun, while Balimer prepared to pull the cord and fire.

Corry grinned, just because he could. "Fiyah!"

**BOOM!**

The gun recoiled, perhaps going a little bit further back than intended, and though it didn't smack into Scotty full force, it still knocked him backwards into a patch of mud. The cannonball whistled through the air, thudding into the ground loud enough to be heard even at a distance of hundreds of meters.

"Bloody hell," the slightly surprised Scotty muttered, getting back to his feet and giving the gun a glowering look. "Reload!"

"We should check the recoil," Corry commented, pleasantly, beaming a smile at his less than thrilled roommate. "Seems she's flying back further than we thought she would."

Scotty growled, brushing the mud off-- or trying to. In the end, he only really succeeded in making himself dirtier. "Ye just figured that out, did ye?"

"Oh, come on. On some pleasure planets, a mud bath costs a fortune."

"Corry?"

"Yeah Scotty?"

"Shut up."

Corry snickered, watching as the inexperienced gun crew did their best to swab out the cannon, reload the powder and ball, and take up the tackles. It certainly took them long enough, but then, it wasn't like they weren't going to get better with practice.

Even learning how to do this much had taken some research; Corry, though, was an aficionado of old vids (the cornier the better) and so it hadn't actually taken him long to scour all his favorite Federation archives for old naval movies.

A huge amount of information had been lost during World War III; the internet was the first major target by *all* sides of the conflict, and after an age of digitization and the destruction of physical books and materials considered obsolete, whole generations of knowledge were lost.

The Vulcans had succeeded in saving a surprising amount in their stealth reconnaissance prior to First Contact, but even they were only able to do so much.

Even two hundred years later, the trauma that astronomical loss had caused lingered in humankind's eccentricities: The cadets had data tapes, but they also had hardcopy books. They turned in papers *on* paper, though sending them digitally was also an offered option. Starships had analog consoles, rather than touchscreen, because it was far easier to isolate a circuit and repair it on the fly, leaving the rest of the console still functional. Touchscreen PADDs were commonplace, but relatively few people trusted those with the truly important stuff.

Despite all of the loss -- in culture, in knowledge, in *life* -- that World War III had caused, though, there were still old copies of films; things preserved in their original format in archives. Documentaries. Fiction. Since then, they had been re-digitized and were searchable, though this time, the originals were kept.

It was by digging those up that they started to learn how to fire a ship's cannon; at least *some* common sense filled in the rest of the gaps.

If one could call building *actual cannons* any kind of common sense.

"Gun ready!" Albright hollered, a note of joy in his voice, presumably because his cannon was performing like he expected.

Cor gestured grandly to his roommate. "By all means."

"Run 'er out!" Scotty yelled, standing well to the side this time, hands clasped behind his back. The gun crew was a little faster this time working the ropes; the cannon's wheels squeaked a little bit, but performed essentially how they were supposed to. Once the gun was back to the port, Scotty called out, "Fire!"

**BOOM!**

They watched the trajectory; it really was kind of impressive. And besides that, it wasn't easy to get a cannon, ammo and powder into the middle of nowhere -- it was kind of nice to see it hadn't gone to waste.

Corry waited until the ball hit the ground before saying, "Just a pointer."

Scotty rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Aye?"

"It's not 'fire', it's 'fiyah'." Nodding smartly, Corry took the next one. "Reload!"

"What's the damn difference?"

"Finesse, my backwards little Scotsman, finesse!"

"All right, *Hornblower*, whatever ye say."

"Gun ready!" This time Jansson got to sing it out. Their time was definitely improving. Taking up the tackles, he looked back expectantly.

Cor struck another dramatic pose, mostly so he could needle his best friend. "Run 'er out!"

Shaking his head with a long-suffering sigh, Scotty watched the gun being pulled back to the port. They wouldn't have another shot there, not with the way the wheels were digging ruts into the ground, but they could always move the whole ensemble over.

"FIYAH!" Corry bellowed, extra loud for good measure.

**BOOM!**

"I think it'll be impressive," Scotty mused, jogging over in all of his mud stained glory to help push the gun. Corry, grinning enough that it made his face ache, headed that way to help himself by moving the makeshift port and setting it up in a new spot.

Albright was beaming as he helped pull the cannon into its new position. "So what do you think, Wolf? Good machinery?"

"The best," Scotty answered, honestly. "Ye've outdone yerself, Joey."

"Hey, I helped," Jansson protested, though not very strongly.

Corry finished dragging the makeshift port over. "All right, maties, back to work." Giggling somewhat maniacally, he could help but adding, "ARRRRRR!"

The other five cadets gave him a worried look, and he cleared his throat. "Sorry-- reload!"

"Arrrrr?" Scotty asked, stepping back to join him, one eyebrow raised in completely unnecessary judgment.

"Seemed like the right thing to say," Corry explained, turning a little red. "Besides, we need to get into the spirit of it somehow, right?"

"Oh, absolutely." Scotty was laying the sarcasm on with not just a trowel, but a bulldozer.

"Gun ready!"

"Run 'er out!" Scotty called, quite smartly in his own opinion. When the gun was in place, he smirked and barked, "FIRE!"

**BOOM!**

"Fiyah, dammit, fiyah." Corry shook his head. "Amateur."

"Cor?"

"Yeah?"

"Feel free to take a long walk--"

--I know, I know, off a short pier. Reload!"

It went on like that for another twenty minutes or so, one shot after another flying across to the hill on the other side of the small river below them. Their times were improving, as was their aim. They were feeling quite proud of themselves when something beeped insistently.

Scotty frowned, pulling his communicator out of his pocket and scraping the mud off of the case before flipping it open. "Scott here."

The voice came over the small speaker, calm but with an underlying edge of urgency. "*You guys had better pack up your gun. If what I'm hearing through the grapevine is correct, Starfleet Security's being sent out to investigate some odd happenings right in your vicinity.*"

Corry swallowed hard, and the rest of them all edged in close to hear. Taking the communicator and ignoring the glare he got from Scotty, he

asked, "When was this?"

"About ten minutes ago, so you'd better get moving post haste."

"All right, out." Corry flipped the communicator closed and shot an anxious look around the group. "We've got maybe three minutes to ditch this gun and get out of here."

"So what the hell're we standin' here for?!" Looking around frantically, Scotty was no doubt trying to figure out exactly how they would get a three hundred pound gun, plus all of the ammo and powder packed into the air van they had rented.

Albright immediately started pushing on the gun, but it wasn't in the direction of the van. "C'mon, we have to move!"

"Where're you going?!" Corry asked, looking between the gun and the van, the gun and the van.

"The river!"

"Oh shit!"

"Sounds about right," Scotty muttered, grabbing an armful of the gunpowder bundles and making for the river like a greyhound.

Jansson didn't even pause, just threw himself into pushing on the twenty-four pounder with Albright and Sallee. Balimer was flushed as he grabbed a cannonball and raced for the river as fast as twenty-four extra pounds would allow, and Corry was almost giddy as he followed the example.

About halfway down the hill, Jerry and Joe let the cannon go, and it headed for the water seemingly under its own power.

The sound of shuttlecraft engines in low atmosphere flying mode became evident.

Albright summed it up for all of them as he ran back and grabbed another two of the cannonballs, struggling with the weight. "Shitshitshitshitshit!!"

"Ohmigodohmigodohmigod," was Corry's chosen litany, as he ran back for more ammo. They only had another two left after that, but the sound of those engines had worked them into a frenzy.

Scotty grabbed those last two cannonballs, sliding on the wet grass. It clearly wasn't good luck he was having that day, though; the momentum, the slope and the added weight was enough to throw him completely off balance. His feet slid right out from under him and he slammed down onto his back with a wheeze.

Corry was still catching his breath, but he reached out and gave Scotty a hand up. At their feet, those two cannonballs were the only serious evidence left -- at least, provided no one went dredging the river or examining the hill on the other side too closely.

When the shuttle landed a dozen meters away, the whole group was back together. And while they no doubt looked like they were up to absolutely no good, proving any wrong doing would likely take at least *some* effort.

"We've received a report about--" The first officer, one of those square-jawed-built-like-a-brick-outhouse-and-eats-nails-for-dinner-types, said without preamble. However, upon observing a group of cadets and their baby-faced, none too tall, filthy to the skin mascot, his voice trailed off.

"Report, sir?" Scotty asked, eyebrows up in pure, undiluted innocence; it was such an effective look that Cor had to choke down a snicker.

Blinking a few times, the man got his bearings. "--report about a noise disturbance in the area. What do you know about this?"

"It was me," Corry apologized, stepping up to his best friend's shoulder in an attempt to at least take part of the heat. "I had beans for lunch, sir."

The second officer, the one who looked rather like he would be the poor guy who ended up walking into a cave alone, phaser undrawn, to an untimely ending started snickering. He looked like he was only a year or two older than them. "You're telling us that it was--"

"Yes, sir, I am." Cor nodded smartly, elbowing Scotty when he started choking on his own laughter.

Lieutenant Eats Nails scowled. He clearly didn't like being joked with. He shot a look back at Albright, still in his uniform, and so obviously fighting a laugh himself after Corry's comments. "You're a cadet-- are all of you?"

Joe just couldn't keep the quaver from his voice. "Yes, sir, Engineering Division."

"And you?" The older man leveled an icy glare back at Scotty, who probably couldn't have answered with a straight face even if he wanted to. "Name and rank."

Before he could stop himself, Scotty replied, gesturing to the cannonballs at his feet, "Montgomery Scott, Fourth Year Cadet and man in charge o' ball bearings. The official ball bearer."

"It's a good post for him, sir. He loves playing with balls." Corry knew he was gonna pay for that somehow, but it was such a perfect setup that there just wasn't any resisting it. "And I think it's better than being a pallbearer, if you know what I mean, sir."

That was it. Albright fell over, laughing helplessly. Jansson and Balimer were literally crying. Sallee was gasping for air between violent giggles. And poor Scotty, who had already had a hard time trying to keep from just breaking down, finally did, keeling over unceremoniously.

and laughing so hard he didn't make a sound.

Corry was the only one who fought back the temptation. "Really, sirs, we were just going for a nice walk in the countryside, and those beans caught up to me, and that was the end of it."

The five cadets and the younger security officer just howled harder.

Lieutenant Eats Nails growled. There wasn't much he could do and it seemed like he knew that. He gestured sharply, no doubt trying to save face. "Clear out, and get back to your campus."

"Oh, yes sir, absolutely, sir."

The older officer marched away. The younger one managed to wave to them, still laughing up a storm, and followed.

Corry started laughing himself, almost doubled over with the force of it, once it was clear they'd gotten away with it; he got to enjoy that for precisely fifteen seconds before Scotty reached out, snatched his ankle, jerked on it hard, and sent Cor sprawling into the mud. Then he went right back to laughing himself into stitches.

One cannon, ammo and powder included, was a worthwhile sacrifice for that day.



## Part III: Righting Arm: Chapter 6

### Chapter 6:

Wednesday, May 31st, 2243  
Harland & Wolff Shipyards, Berth #22  
Team C Headquarters  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth

The final week under the deadline was one of frantic energy. It passed in a blur; that was the only way to really describe it. The high energy, take no prisoners, final crunch blur that exists for anyone fighting time, fighting right to the last few moments to finish something they had already put so much into.

It didn't help that everyone had finals to worry about, as well as assignment paperwork. Scotty hadn't even bothered to fill out his; he had basically taken up residence in the shipyards, one high-wired mass in motion. That last week was his last chance to beat the odds, and one could never accuse him of being anything less than confident that he would. He basically took his other finals without studying, just using his expertise to see him through the worst of it.

This was the one that counted.

Tomorrow morning, she would take to the water.

It seemed pretty far away, really. After an entire six and some odd months of his life that he'd put into the *Lady Grey*, tomorrow would be when she became what he had built her to be: a sailing vessel. Looking back on that six months, he couldn't be sure of whether he'd always done the right thing, but he did know one thing beyond a doubt.

It had been worth it. Even through the fighting, the anger, the uncertainty, it had been worth it.

It was her last night in her cradle, and his last chance to see her from her bow for a very long time, maybe even forever. Tomorrow she would slide into the River Lagan and he would be running around the below decks checking for leaks, testing the running rigging, dropping and hauling up the anchor; in short, making sure she was ready to handle the real thing.

Tomorrow, she wouldn't be his anymore.

Starfleet owned the *Lady Grey* on paper. Starfleet had fronted the bill for her and they legally had ownership over her. After the race, they could order her to be sold, or they could sign her over to one of the historical societies-- they could even have her dismantled. Scotty knew all of that.

That didn't change the fact that she became his ship. Starfleet might own her on paper, but he owned the *Lady Grey* in every way that really mattered. Or maybe she owned him.

Honestly, he didn't know which it was, just that she was his ship and he was her builder and that was all there was to it.

Until tomorrow. Tomorrow she would officially be a sailing vessel, created as a class final for a grade, and after the grading was over, she would be Corry's.

It was a lot easier to take it this time around.

He stood there in the darkened slip, a few yards in front of her, and took in the sight of her, still and waiting. Her bowsprit angled sharp and long above his head, stays attached, staysails furled and ready. Her bow was sharp and her sides flared, a washed gray color; there was no visible trace of the gunports either on the outside of her hull, or on the inside. In the end, he'd masked them with extremely thin veneer planks, fixed in place; they only had to hide the gunports until she was on the open sea and out of the pack anyway, and rebuilding the frames post-launch would be easy enough.

She didn't look like he had pictured, gray instead of stained brown, but that was all right. She was beautiful anyway. Made for speed, made for the wind, made to fly.

It was hard not to be sentimental now, this close to the end. Scotty smiled to himself, stepping forward and leaning on her stem much like he had before, when his world was falling down around his ears. This time, though, there wasn't any misery in the motion. He didn't need the *Lady Grey* to hold him up; he could just take the moment of silence to really appreciate her.

Tomorrow, she would belong to someone else. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing, though, that when it was all said and done, she would still own part of him. Life dictated that it couldn't last forever, and that a person's first love isn't usually their true love, but no one ever forgot the first.

And he would never forget her.

"Just do it, already!" Jansson was practically jumping up and down with pent up energy.

Corry frowned, holding a bottle of Jerry's homemade brandy in hand, since that seemed far more appropriate than some impersonal champagne. Glancing at Scotty, he said, "I still think you should do it."

"And I think ye'd better get crackin'," Scotty replied, with a grin. "Literally."

"If you don't, I will." Albright crossed his arms from where he stood on the foredeck, leaning on the port bulwark to look down at them. "Can't send a ship out without dedicating her properly."

Corry looked around, but apparently this duty was going to fall on him. Wincing, he smashed the bottle over her bow, sending shards of glass and booze every which way. "I hereby name thee *Lady Grey*."

The entire crew broke into wild applause. This was their payoff, and now there was nothing between them and the sea. They cheered their throats sore, and finally got down to the business of launching the officially named ship from her safe haven.

The sliding ways had been greased down with artificial tallow, and all but a handful of the crew ran outside to take up the ropes they'd use to guide her to her dock.

Jansson had the privilege of setting the ship into motion, clicking the switch in the front of the slip that worked the gears. The ways engaged, carrying the *Lady Grey* far enough to allow her own weight to take her the rest of the way.

It was an experience in itself to see that. Corry watched from where he was on the ropes; watched as she crept forwards a few inches, then a meter, then picked up speed. Her bow slid into the mouth of the Lagan smoothly; on either side, the water parted in an unbroken arc. If the sun had been out, there would have surely been a rainbow.

And in less than a minute, the *Lady Grey* was afloat.

Silence reigned for longer than that, a bubble that cut off the sounds of the teams on either side of their dock, cut off the industrial noise, cut off even the sound of the water washing lightly at her planked sides. Nothing else was respectful enough; each member of that team were in their own thoughts, each reliving a moment they worked on her, each thinking of the part they had in something grand.

It lasted for a small eternity before finally someone broke the reverie and started hauling on the port side ropes single-handedly. Eventually everyone gave in and helped out, but they didn't speak even then; only pulled in unison, bringing the *Lady Grey* up to the massive fenders and tying the lines off to the cleats.

Cor was the first to actually speak, though when he did, it wasn't in anything more than a whisper, "Oh, cripes."

It was enough to break the spell, though, and before long the entire dock was all noise; excited chatter, reverent whispers, stunned proclamations. Corry still wasn't quite able to get his voice above that quiet tone, not quite able to get over the indescribable feeling of seeing the schooner that had once only been lines on paper now wood on the water.

Scotty was actually a lot more vocal; not cheering, whispering or proclaiming, just speaking in a calm, certain voice, "Should get aboard and sound the hull."

Corry nodded, pretty much forcing himself away from the cacophony of thought. "Yeah. Shouldn't be any problems, though."

"Better safe than sorry." Gesturing for a few people to help with the gangplank, Scotty helped them guide it up and against the schooner's side. Then, taking a deep breath, he climbed up and onboard, and Corry was only a couple steps behind.

Albright jogged over, his shoes making an almost knocking sound on the decking. "I've already been around the fo'c'sle; there are a few small drips here and there, but that's supposedly normal."

"Nothin' too serious, so long as we don't spring a real leak." Starting off for the stairs to the below decks, Scotty was a little startled when Corry grabbed him by the arm and hauled him back. "What the--?"

"Take a look," Cor said, softly, pointing down the way.

O'Sullivan stood on the end of Team B's dock, his arms crossed as he watched the *Lady Grey* and her crew. And on the side of Sean Kelley's ship, the steel square-rigger, was a name in red.

*Queen Mary*.

"Well, *that's* subtle." Scotty's voice was a mixture of amusement and ire. "Ye think they're tryin' to tell us somethin', Cor?"

"Noooo, I think it's perfectly innocent." Corry smirked, likewise unsure of whether he should be angry about it or amused by it. The fate of Lady Jane Grey had been sealed by Queen Mary I-- at the end of a chopping block. "But nonetheless, history's not gonna repeat itself this time."

"Well, the real Lady Grey didn't have the benefit of--"

"--a determined crew, a damned good architect, and all sorts of other happy things," Corry interrupted, not wanting to bring the cannons up for fear of spies. But the feeling in his chest was nothing less than fierce. "Now let's go make sure she's ready for it."

Commander Richard Barrett stepped onboard the *Lady Grey* two and a half hours later to no small amount of decorum. Lined on either side of the schooner on her main deck was the entirety of Team C. The cadets who had started, the people who had volunteered, the people who had probably been bribed-- every one of them stood at parade rest, eyes forward.

Albright piped on an old bosun's whistle, the second piping of the traditional trill that signaled a high-ranking officer coming aboard. The pipe's effect was instantaneous and the entire assembled crew snapped to attention.

Barrett smiled. It was hard not to, seeing how sharply they'd responded. And it was somehow very appropriate to him that Albright used an old pipe rather than the new electronic ones Starfleet preferred. "Permission to come aboard, Mister Corrigan?"

Corry stepped forward from where he and his design team were, face set in uncompromising lines. "Permission granted and welcome aboard, Commander."

"Thank you, Captain," Barrett replied, slipping easily into the formality of the moment. Holding his electronic clipboard in one hand, he glanced up and down the length of the deck. "Are you prepared for your tour of inspection?"

"Yes, sir, we are."

"Then lead on."

"Aye aye, sir!" Turning, Corry barked at his crew, "*Dismissed!*"

A fine-toothed comb would have been an understatement. Barrett went all the way from the forepeak to the rudder, noting everything. The design team nearly passed out from holding their collective breaths while he walked the belowdecks, just waiting for him to discover the hidden gunports. They hadn't even risked putting the rings in for the breeching ropes, let alone actually having the cannons onboard, but as closely as Barrett was looking at everything, it was still nerve-wracking.

It was somewhere around there that he turned to look back at the cadets who were tailing his heels. "Why a gray wash on the hull?" he asked, then went back to looking around.

"It's her warpaint," Scotty supplied, helpfully, and got a firm elbow in the ribs for it. He gave Corry a look, but immediately stopped when Barrett looked back again. "Well, it is a race, sir. Ye don't really want everyone knowin' exactly where ye are, right?"

Barrett raised an eyebrow. "All the vessels are going to have transponders and communicators, per maritime law. Visual camouflage won't make much of a difference, will it?"

"Maybe not. But still, ye have to admit, sir, she looks fine."

"She does look fine. Though, honestly, I will have to take points off for the modern tools used to build her." Barrett frowned, shaking his head. "I wish I didn't have to, but even working to repair the sabotage damage, you could have kept to more traditional tools. Even if you wouldn't have finished her, I would have been glad to grade what you had already done."

Albright spoke up this time, "We understand that, sir. The design team's willing to take responsibility for that, and if you could have it reflect on our grades instead of the whole team's, I think it would be appropriate."

"I appreciate the maturity of that, Mister Albright, but I'm not going to change the policy." Barrett shook his head, making no effort to hide his unhappiness at the prospect. "This was a whole team project, after all."

"Yes, sir," the cadets mumbled, in near unison. Everyone on the team was dedicated to the cause, but if they could have taken the brunt of it, it would have been better for everyone. Still, there was no turning back now.

"Let's continue," the professor said, turning to start his walk forwards. He never looked twice at the inner hull of the schooner, where the ports were hidden.

Corry and Scotty exchanged a brief, relieved glance -- so far, so good -- and fell in behind.

They had assembled again after the inspection, all of Team C. Barrett paced the deck for a few moments, tallying up the scores on the clipboard he carried with a few taps on the tiny keyboard.

The tension in the air was more than a little apparent, and there wasn't a cadet aboard who was in this for a grade that wasn't worried about

failing.

It was sad that even after all they had gone through, they were in danger of that fate. Barrett took a deep breath, reading off the scores and double-checking, then triple-checking them to make sure.

Looking up at the crew, his voice was somber as he passed the verdict; after six and a half months of work, it came to an hour and a half appraisal. "Due to the fact that modern tools were used to finish construction on the vessel, and due to the fact that her sails, brassworks and a few of the mechanisms weren't created by this team, I've had to carefully evaluate this vessel and the workmanship. I've come to the conclusion that the design could not be faulted, and that the actual workmanship could not."

Noting that they looked a little more at ease with that, he continued, "I also took into account the sabotage and the attack on your head shipwright. These did factor into your grade. I didn't hold your going over budget against you, seeing as how you had to reorder the wood burned in the fire, and that factors in as well.

"I want to say something before I tell you what grade you've got." Barrett's tone softened, though he didn't change the volume of his voice. "It's not easy to come back against the odds you were facing, cadets. All of you have shown yourselves to be of the finest fabric Starfleet has; the kind that doesn't run away from the adversity of a situation, but keeps on fighting through it.

"I would like you to know that if I were grading this project on those qualities, you would all get one hundred percent. I've had the honor of teaching some very fine cadets in my day-- and I'm very honored to have had you in my last class. I want you to remember that."

He took a deep breath, looking at each and every one of his students for the briefest of moments, long enough to let them each see personally just how much he meant those words and just how much he regretted this. "Team C, of the gaff-rigged schooner *Lady Grey*, you have received seventy-two percent."

To their credit, they took it well. A few of them broke formation to look at their feet and Corry reprimanded them quietly. Most of them, though, held their heads up and refused to allow it to show just how much that would hurt their grade point average.

Out of all of them, Scotty had the most to lose. He had managed to hold onto his ranking as the first in the class only by the very skin of his teeth, but this would knock him out of that spot and likely allow Kelley to take it over again, and maybe even a few others. But out of all of them, he took it the best; jaw set, eyes lit with determination, not even a hint of despair in his stance.

Barrett handed the official printout to Corry, and Albright piped the bosun's whistle as the professor turned and walked off of the schooner. That left them to absorb what had been said, and eventually Corry looked back up from the paper. "Dismissed."

Most of the cadets meandered over to see it for themselves, and the handful of others went back to discussing points of the ship. To say that it was completely miserable would have been a lie, because most of them had realized a long time ago that their grade certainly wouldn't be perfect.

To actually see it in print, though, was disheartening enough that it was very quiet on the *Lady Grey's* decks.

The day had worn long for Corry. From 0630 when they had headed to the shipyards to launch the *Lady Grey*, to 1200 when they had been graded, to 1600 when he had finished his final paperwork for Starfleet Engineering Academy and officially re-requested his transfer to Starfleet Medical, to a rushed supper in the cafeteria and some errands, and now back to the docks again.

It was getting late, and now that classes were over for the year, he didn't have to be back for curfew. In August he would probably be in Maryland while everyone else was getting their full commissions and starting their first assignments. After the race, he was going to go back home; when the next school year started the week before July, he'd have to vacate his dorm room, and that left him a month and a half to absorb everything that had happened to him.

But he didn't want to go back to the dorms, so he went back to the ship instead. Climbing the gangplank, he took a few minutes to appreciate the complete quiet of the dock, and of the schooner.

It was hard to believe he could remember when there was nothing to her but the start of a keel, and now he was standing onboard the real thing. The *Lady Grey*.

It was hard to stay unhappy about the grade while he stood on the finished product.

The schooner was dark. Normally her lanterns would be lit, but since she sat at dock, there wasn't really a need to. There were lights on across the river and on the docks, but they did little to break up the blackness onboard. Above, the sky was clearing; clouds moved lazily, and the stars that could be seen were all the brighter for it. The moon was near full, and when it glistened on the *Grey's* decking, she seemed to be almost blue.

"Nice night."

Corry didn't even startle, though he hadn't really had more than a sneaking suspicion that his roommate was onboard. Turning, he glanced back at Scotty before looking at the sky and replying, "Yeah. Almost like a dream."

Scotty didn't say anything else, just let the companionable silence fall. It really was a fine night; warm for Belfast, which didn't have a very

large temperature variation to begin with. The fact that it wasn't raining did a lot for that notion, and so did the break in the clouds.

"Finish your paperwork in time?" Cor asked, after awhile.

"Aye. Finished it by 1400. And Pearson seemed to think my final for his class was somethin' I actually took time on." Scotty shrugged, one-shouldered, and edged back to sit against the bulwark. He had turned in the first three stages of a starship design he'd done just for *fun* the year before, and had received all sorts of praise, enough that even Corry had heard about it second-hand as he ran errands. "Figured I'd come back here and keep watch for any rampagin' war parties."

Corry chuckled, going back himself to perch next to his roommate. "Good idea. They already made it clear that they're still holding a grudge."

"Have a bigger one to hold when we're finished."

"That they will. And I, for one, can't wait." Corry chuckled, wryly, "Of course, I might not be so thrilled when my career ends in a court martial, but eh."

Scotty nodded. "Well, worse comes to worst, we end up livin' out our lives as civilians."

"Awfully nonchalant, coming from you." Corry raised an eyebrow, looking over at his best friend. "You all right?"

Scotty raised both, an amused grin crossing his face. "Aye, I'm fine. Just too tired to worry myself stupid over somethin' that can't be changed." Shaking his head, he looked back up at the sky. "She's a good ship -- worth fightin' for."

"Yeah." Looking back up as well, Corry said, quietly, "I'm glad you kept fighting for her, too. I don't think there're very many people who would have."

"Why?"

"Because I look at them, and they see the final as a grade and a chance to be mildly famous. Then there's this team, and you in particular, who don't care about the grade but about the schooner herself." Smiling slightly, Cor took a deep breath of the salt-tinged air. "She's your ship, chief."

"My ship." Scotty shook his head again, still watching the stars. "She was mine, y'know. From the first time I stopped givin' a damn about this, that or the other, and started carin' about what would happen to her, and what would happen to you. And she was mine up until this afternoon."

Pushing himself up with both hands and finally looking back at Corry, he smiled a little and said, "She's yer ship now, Mister Corrigan. And I couldna think of a better man for her." And with that, he headed down the deck, hands behind his back as he walked a self-appointed patrol.

Corry opened his mouth, but he didn't know what he would even say; by the time he might have, the moment was over and he was only left with the need to grasp this. Just like Scotty, he knew that literal ownership of the *Lady Grey* belonged to Starfleet. But just like Scotty, he knew that wasn't what mattered most, either.

His best friend had built her for *him*. And now at the end, handed her over, heart to heart.

Cor rubbed over his mouth, swallowing the lump in his throat; thought about everything they had gone through this past year, everything they'd faced, everything they'd nearly lost and everything they'd gained, and he thought about what he had been *given*--

The schooner glowed in the light of the moon, soft blues and grays. Her sails looked almost ethereal, bright even though they were furled. She breathed with the tide.

Corry sat quietly on the bulwark, listening to the sound of the water, and in that moment, he was more grateful than any words could express that he'd taken a chance on the harassed, hyperactive, wary cadet who had turned out to be the best friend he would ever have.

## Part IV: Zero Moment: Chapter 1

### Part IV: Zero Moment

Then spoke the thunder

DA

*Datta*: what have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart

The awful daring of a moment's surrender

Which an age of prudence can never retract

By this, and this only, we have existed

Which is not to be found in our obituaries

Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider

Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor

In our empty rooms

-T.S. Eliot; The Waste Land

### Chapter 1:

*Tuesday, June 4th, 2243*

*The Lady Grey*

*Belfast Lough*

*Belfast, Ireland, Earth*

"Come get your duds in order, 'cause we're bound across the water...!" Corry's voice cut across the waters of Belfast Lough as he sang. Typically it was a sea shanty, traditional to working onboard, but the entire crew of the *Lady Grey* was on the port side railing, singing for the crew of the *Queen Mary*.

"*Heave away, me jollies, heave away!*" Team C answered, in not perfect but intelligible unison.

"Come get your duds in order, 'cause we're bound to leave tomorrow...!"

"*Heave away, me jolly boys, we're all bound away!*"

Of course, the *Queen Mary's* crew did their best to ignore the entire affair. It wasn't easy to ignore that many people singing at the tops of their lungs, but they were trying pretty damn hard to do so. A few of them looked over, and Sean Kelley stood on his quarter deck in cadet dress uniform, snorting in disgust, but that was all of the reaction that Team B would give.

Corry had specifically taught this shanty to Team C, mostly for one verse. It was a bit of a hint to Maggie, but then, they were on the starting line of the race and a bit of foreshadowing now couldn't hurt at all.

But right now, Scotty was busy on the refrain. He could sing beautifully himself, something that he engaged in on occasion -- Corry always got a kick out of it, because not only was Scotty incredibly good at it, but it was also often in *Welsh* -- and so his voice carried like he did it for his day job. "Sometimes we're bound for Liverpool, sometimes we're bound for Spain...!"

"*Heave away, me jollies, heave away!*"

"But now we're bound for old Saint Johns, where all the girls're dancin'...!"

"*Heave away, me jolly boys, we're all bound away!*"

Corry grinned, taking that beat to wave frantically in Maggie's direction. She didn't look up then, but when he launched into the next line she did-- "So it's farewell Maggie darling, 'cause now I'm gonna leave...!"

"*Heave away, me jollies, heave away!*"

Maggie looked suitably flattered.

Corry grinned even more broadly. "You promised you'd be true to me, but how you did deceive me...!"

Maggie no longer looked flattered. If anything, she looked like a shadow had just crossed her face, and that *did* catch the attention of a few select cadets on Team B.

"*Heave away, me jolly boys, we're all bound away!*"

Team C, on the other hand, looked about ready to just fall over laughing. If the race excitement wasn't enough, and the realization that in about twenty minutes they would be going to sea for two weeks wasn't, heckling the other team *definitely* was.

Corry wasn't finished yet, though. The decision to weaponize music had been a few days in the making; the sea shanties were easy for him, having grown up with them, so it hadn't taken him long to teach Team C a handful of them while they were sail training, turning them into

something of a riotous choir.

But that wasn't quite enough for him.

Oddly, it was from *Scotty* that he got the idea for the other song; he had been looking for something about betrayed love, but nothing in the modern charts was really doing it for him, no matter what search terms he used. He mentioned his problem, and within five minutes, *Scotty* had a few of his own collection narrowed down and handed Corry his old headset from Basic.

Cor, being a fan of old films, was kind of surprised to find out his best friend was a fan of old *music*; the newest stuff *Scotty* kept was from right after World War III -- the entire (short) collection of albums from a very angry Irish band called Raining Nails, which was apparently his very favorite -- and a fair chunk of the rest of his collection dated all the way back to the twentieth century, which not-so-coincidentally was back when music was still released on physical media and therefore wasn't completely lost in the Digital Disaster of 2026.

("Why, though?" Corry had asked, after he had listened to some of it. A lot of it was a bit too heavy for his tastes, but it was an interesting insight into what *Scotty* liked, anyway. Which-- some of it was upbeat, if in a complicated way, but a lot more of it really *wasn't*.)

Corry was still chewing over the answer days later; *Scotty* had said, without blinking, "People were angrier, then.")

Listening, though, one was definitely left with the impression there were a whole lot of failed romances in the late 1980s.

Now, having practiced for *days* in the shower -- much to the chagrin of the other people in the Malone Road Dormitory he was moving out of soon -- and having indeed conscripted his fellow cadets to help out, he spun back towards the other ship, focusing on Maggie and wailing it for all it was worth into an imaginary microphone, "Shot through the heart, and you're to blame...!"

And just as rehearsed as before, the rest of the *Lady Grey's* troops jumped in, "*Darlin', you give love a bad name!*"

"I play my part and you play your games...!"

*"You give love a bad name!"*

Even twenty yards away, Maggie's look of horror was unmistakable. Corry just reveled in it, and he didn't fail to take notice of her running up to the quarterdeck to speak to the immaculately turned out Kelley.

Not more than ten seconds later, *Scotty's* communicator beeped; Corry stopped covering Bon Jovi long enough for *Scotty* to answer, "Aye, Sean?"

Sean sounded downright pissed off as he answered, "*Pipe down over there! You have Maggie upset, and dammit, the race hasn't even started!*"

*Scotty* smirked, devilishly, eyes narrowed a little on the steel full-rigger across from them. "Did we? Give the lass our sincere apologies."

*"Sincere, right."*

Corry meandered over, leaning over his roommate's shoulder. "Hey, Sean."

*"Corry! Dammit, what're you trying to do? Wage psychological warfare on my crew or something with that screeching voice?"*

"We're just having some fun," Cor replied, a very study in nonchalance. "We'll quit."

*"...well, good."*

*Scotty* shook his head. "About the race, Sean--"

*"What about it?"* the irritated cadet asked.

"No hard feelings, all right?"

Sean took a moment to reply, but when he did, it was even more obvious that he didn't have a clue. Arrogance seeped into his every word. *"Course not. Good luck, Lady Grey."*

"Same to you," Corry said. After *Scotty* closed the communicator, he added, "You're gonna need it."

"And we're back! If you're just joining us this fine day, welcome to the exclusive coverage of the Starfleet Engineering Academy's tall ships race, brought to you by the Terran News Network! Standing here with me is the visionary behind this event, Professor Richard Barrett, Commander in Starfleet and the head of the History Department at the Academy." Chip Wagner's teeth were pure white, his brown hair was brilliantly combed and highlighted, his tan was the perfect shade, and his voice had all of the smoothness of fine silk. And he knew it, too. "Tell me, Professor Barrett, where did you get this unique idea?"

Barrett clasped his hands behind his back. Behind him, the crew of the *Lady Grey* was hanging over the side of their ship, waving and trying to get on camera. Off to the right, just in view, the *Queen Mary's* crew were doing the same. "Well, this is my last year here at the Academy, and since I've decided to retire, I wanted to 'go out with a bang' as it were."

"Wonderful." Chip flashed a smile and the cameraman had to turn down the gain on his camera so as not to blind the audience. "Now you say that every cadet in your senior class spent half of the year working on these ships?"

Barrett nodded. "They did. I'm very proud of the effort they've put forth."

"But why sailing ships? These engineering cadets will be out in space onboard Starfleet's finest vessels, why not have them work on something more modern?" Now Wagner was playing the serious, interested reporter.

"I *am* a history professor," Barrett pointed out, ignoring the shouts of 'Mom!' and 'Dad!' behind him on the two remaining ships in harbor. "Most of the cadets have very little insight into the foundations that Starfleet was built on; that of the world's Navies. To give them a better appreciation for the labor that went into building a fleet of ships, I gave them a single vessel and a budget to work with, as well as a material. I believe they have a better understanding of the hard work that our history originated from."

"True, true." Chip turned and looked at the ships. "These last two ships, why are they being held back?"

"Handicap for the race." Barrett looked as well, smiling a half-smile at the waiting vessels. "These are the two largest vessels, and they're rated the fastest. In order to be more fair to the other racers, we've held them back."

"What can you tell us about them?"

"Well, that vessel over there," Barrett said, pointing to the *Queen Mary*, "is the *Queen Mary*, under the command of senior cadet Sean Kelley. She's a steel ship, a square-rigger-- called that because most of her sails are rectangular in shape. Her length is at one hundred and eight feet overall, and her beam is at twenty-six feet. She's the official ship of Team B." The camera panned elegantly over the ship as she sat in harbor, waiting to start her race.

Chip nodded seriously, shifting his stance so his back was to the camera. "And the other?"

Barrett smiled. "The gaff-rigged schooner *Lady Grey*, captained by Andrew Corrigan, likewise a senior cadet. She's had somewhat of a rough time, but her crew's turned her into quite a vessel. She's mostly made of oak, one hundred and fifty-seven feet sparred length, and likewise twenty-six feet at her beam. She's fore-and-aft rigged, see the difference? All of her sails are lined up along her centerline, while the *Queen Mary's* are across the beam."

"Both fine ships," Chip Wagner commented, passing by the historical allusion without realizing it. He flashed another smile back at the camera. "Now that you have the basics, we're going to check in with the Belfast Harbor Master, who's counting down the last few moments until these ships are given the go. Andrea, over to you."

Andrea smiled at her camera, trying to stand onboard the small power cutter sitting between the tugs that would pull the *Lady Grey* and the *Queen Mary* out of the Lough. "Thank you, Chip. Here we have the master of the harbor, Gregory Jackson. Mr. Jackson, how much time do we have left?"

"Don't bother me, woman, I'm busy, cancha see?"

Not put off, Andrea smiled even sweeter. "How do you think the race will turn out?"

There was a sigh and a beat, and the grizzled old sailor looked back at her. "I think yew better shut up an' let me pay attention to the--dammit!" Grabbing the pull cord on the horn, he gave it three sharp bursts.

"And there we have it! The racers are officially given the go!" Andrea beamed at the camera. "Back to you, Chip."

Chip pulled his tongue back into his mouth, but not quickly enough to miss being caught on camera. Barrett was completely ignoring him as he watched the tugs pull the last two ships out of harbor to the excited cries of their respective crews.

Clearing his throat and turning red under his immaculate tan, Chip concluded, "We'll be checking in on this race over the next two weeks. Tune in for a special at 2100 GMT for more information! This is Chip Wagner for TNN, signing off."

Getting the cannons aboard the *Lady Grey* had been difficult at best. Not only were twenty-four guns, plus ammo, powder and accessories hard to hide in the first place (thank everything for storage rental), but getting them from the storage building to the ship without being spotted took some clever thinking.

And some *very* smooth transporter operation.

Scotty grinned as he paced the gundeck, stopping every once in awhile to make sure the twenty-four pounders weren't going to come loose and knock a hole in the schooner. It had been his quick calculating and even quicker hands that had allowed the cannons to be transported onboard. No easy feat; the design team had managed to commandeer the cargo transport platform on campus as a supposed experiment, relieved the volunteer cadet on duty, and then rolled the guns in at three in the morning.

Six at a time, the transporter tied into the satcom sensors, fine tuned to constantly check even the slightest movement of the ship, and he had transported those cannons on board. By the time 0600 rolled around and the last four eighteen pound deck guns were stowed in the cargo hold, he was so worn out from the fine adjustments that taking a nap down in the fo'c'sle had been a requirement.



But now, into the evening, sleep was pretty far from his mind. It probably had to do with the fact that the *Lady Grey* was on her way out into the ocean, and she was moving under his feet in a motion he still wasn't used to, even after a few days of sail training in the Irish Sea where he'd been absolutely bombarded with a new set of skills. They hadn't even rounded Ireland yet; if this was typical of life onboard, then he would have a hell of a time when they were into the Atlantic proper and facing more serious wave action.

"...hull speed. We'll have to really make some time if we're going to catch up to her after we round the marker."

Albright's voice disturbed Scotty away from his thoughts, and he stopped pacing the gundeck long enough to look back and ask, "What're ye plannin'?"

Jansson frowned briefly, stepping down the way. "We're trying to make an educated guess at the *Queen Mary's* speed and our own. Trying to guess where we'll catch up to 'em, mostly."

"I think we'll end up catching them well into our return trip. She's got the advantage over us while she's going with the wind, but not against it." Joe crossed his arms, leaning on one of his guns. "We're already catching the *Barely Afloat*, and the *Queen Mary's* falling further behind us."

"*Barely Afloat*." Scotty couldn't resist a snicker at that. Team F's ship was more of a boat -- fiberglass -- and, well, barely afloat. Her crew had all been terrific, though, genuinely nice lads and lasses. "How far's the *Queen Mary*?"

"Five clicks. She'll never catch us, not how well we're tacking right now. Wind's out of the southwest, and Corry's got us moving really really good." Jerry grinned, brightly. "You trying to hide down here? We could always use a lookout up on the mast, you know."

Scotty shook his head, crossing his arms. "I can barely stand on deck, never mind the climb up there."

"I think you're just a chicken," Corry said, bounding down the steps and joining the little group. He smiled, so openly happy that it was hard not to smile back just because. "It's not that bad. Hell, I'd even go with you."

They couldn't be serious about this. Scotty's eyebrows went up and he tried to keep the uneasiness he felt suddenly from showing. "I think I'll pass on this one."

"You were up there when she was in the slip. What's the difference?"

"She's movin', that's the difference!"

"It's a great view. Just like flying."

Scotty took an involuntary step backwards, running into one of the cannons. This little joke was starting to go too far. "No, I'm stayin' down here. I dinna need tae end up a splatter on deck."

"C'mon, you're halfway there." Corry kept his voice nice and calm; there was no reason to rush, after all. "Just one foot rope at a time."

The ropes were moving, the ship was moving, everything was moving except Scotty. He was too busy clinging to the ropes to move; eyes squeezed closed, knuckles white, breath coming in shaky gasps. He wasn't afraid of heights, Corry knew that for a fact, so it had to be the motion of the schooner that was getting to him. "Bastard."

"I know," Cor said, balancing easily beside his fear-frozen best friend. He decided it'd be better not to mention to Scotty that everyone who wasn't working below was watching; might end up making him even more nervous. "Now look, you helped run these lines yourself. They're not going to give out on you. Just don't look down, pick your foot up, and take another step."

Well, it was up or down at this point, and since down was probably going to be even more nerve-wracking, Scotty chose up. Still gripping onto the shrouds, he pulled himself up to the next foot rope.

Corry followed, being as careful as he could not to jostle the lines any worse than usual. "See? Now we're over halfway."

"Never again."

"Eh, you say that now, but I think you'll be fine when you get there."

Scotty whimpered and went up another rung. "Makin' me *more* seasick, that's all this is doin'."

Corry chuckled, "This is a nice, calm day. It could be a lot worse."

"Shut up."

It went on like that, as the shrouds got closer together and Corry had to abandon his roommate to climb ahead. To Scotty's credit, he didn't panic when left to fend for himself; by then, there was no way to *uncommit* to the trip, anyway. When he finally made it up onto the small platform high on the mainmast, he was trembling and green in the face, but still alive and in one piece.

Corry leaned back against the mast on one side, bracing himself by holding onto the edges of the platform. The tops of the masts moved a lot

more than the deck below, and the last thing he wanted was to be pitched over the side. "You look kinda like a Vulcan, what with that complexion."

"Hnn," Scotty answered, dazedly, grabbing onto the masthead and clinging to it like he had the ropes.

Corry didn't comment. Better to let Scotty work it out; now that he was up there, he'd be all right. Might just take a little time.

The sun was nice and bright, and aside from a few traces of high clouds, it was clear. Almost like the powers that be wanted to prove they really were under way, leaving behind the rainy and overcast demeanor of Belfast.

It wasn't hard to imagine what it would have felt like for the sailors who used to do this all of the time; the world looked a whole lot bigger from onboard a ship at sea, than it did orbiting above.

Off of their stern, only visible now by the tiny white spots of her sails, the *Queen Mary* sailed. Closer aft was the *Barely Afloat*, having saluted Team C when they passed with honest good humor. And ahead, somewhere, were the rest of the ships in the race. They had a hell of a head start, but Corry knew that the *Lady Grey* would catch up. Even if she was disqualified, she would be in the lead when she was.

The sails billowed in the wind, and he had no trouble sitting comfortably even at her angle of heel. This was his heritage, after all; salt water and waves. Onboard his own schooner.

Smiling a proud half-smile, Corry tossed a glance at Scotty, who was still clinging to the masthead. He didn't look quite so frantic now; not so green around the gills, even though he still hadn't dared to open his eyes and take a look out from his perch. Corry kept his tone down, accounting for the wind. "Getting any better?"

Scotty nodded. After a moment or two, he chanced a look out over the water, taking a few very measured breaths. And when he fixed his gaze on the horizon, a trace of a smile crossed his face as he spotted the *Queen Mary*. "Back there aways, isn't she?"

"Yep. She'll have the advantage whenever the wind's on her stern, but she can't take going against it like we can." Corry grinned, relaxing a little now that he didn't have to worry about his best friend panicking up there. "I told you it was a nice view."

"Hm," was Scotty's noncommittal response. But he gradually let go of the mast and braced himself like Corry, looking over the bow of the ship.

It was blue on blue for eternity.

"Plan on staying up here for sunset? I don't think anyone will mind our absence."

"Depends on whether I care to try climbin' down in the dark."

"Sun doesn't set for another hour."

"I'll think on it."

Corry huffed a little laugh. "Fair enough."

Scotty did think about it, but only in the back of his mind. He was more interested right then in the way the wind danced in the sails ahead of him on the foremast, and the way that the light of the sun caught on the canvas. The motion of the schooner didn't seem so jarring, even for how much the top of the mast moved compared to the deck; the sounds of the crew working below were distant. There was a good, stiff breeze, and that was really the only thing up there with the two cadets.

Nothing but the wind.

Scotty could have said he had plenty of experience with wind, because hang gliding depended on it in some way or another, but on the mainmast of the *Lady Grey* it was more-- concrete, more something to work with than ride over. Which was exactly what the schooner was doing right now, heeled over in a fairly stable manner and rolling over swells easily.

So, he moved with her, rocked with the motion of the ship, losing some of the queasiness so long as he kept his eyes on the horizon or closed altogether. Like a fixed part of the rigging, rather than something apart, he swayed, listening to the sound of the sails, the sound of the water far below, the wind, the stays as they creaked.

The breeze softened with the coming of night, so subtly that neither Corry nor Scotty really thought about it. They noticed it on a more primitive level, lost in their own thoughts or lack of thoughts, not giving it conscious effort. The *Queen Mary* didn't exist, nothing existed but them, the schooner and the reddening sunset. It lasted an eternity and went far too quickly, breathtaking out there where there wasn't a single soul. The slow descent of the sun, the way it grew and turned to fire red as it fell, the light flaring on the wispy clouds in orange and gold.

Caught in a perfect moment of life, as the sun vanished from the sky, the two cadets on the mast forgot to breathe.

## Part IV: Zero Moment: Chapter 2

### Chapter 2:

Wednesday, June 5th, 2243

The Lady Grey

On the North Atlantic

-ding-ding-

The ship's bell rang clearly, and even through the deck it was still easy to hear.

-ding-ding-

The bell was made of brass, not too large, not too small. Even had the *Lady Grey's* name and the year cast into it. But mounted on the quarterdeck, its sound could reach the crew almost anywhere, and if anyone happened to be sleeping *under* the quarterdeck, it was far too close to be ignored.

-ding-ding-

Scotty regretted having the bell cast already.

-ding-

Seven bells. His half-sleeping brain managed to calculate what time it was -- 0330. Half-past three in the bloody morning. He was due on watch in a half-hour, and the sun wasn't even up yet. It almost made him wish that he was back in class, back where there was a set schedule that didn't alternate every day like the watches would on the *Lady Grey*.

Corry had set the schedule yesterday, and unlike the traditional days of sail, set it up so there were three watch crews rather than two. That was a kindness; not being able to sleep more than four hours at a time would have made the trip insufferable quickly. There was nothing quite like a troop of tired, mostly untrained cadets trying to fit into the harsher life onboard a ship at sea to begin with. To actually have to stay completely in tradition would have been unbearable.

Not that Scotty was thrilled. The bell was struck every half-hour, signaling the time, and every single damn time it rang, it jarred him awake. Now, in half an hour, he was going to have to go up there, try to be alert, and shiver in the predawn light. His only consolation right then was imagining what he was going to do with that idiotic bell when he made it back to land.

Dragging himself out of the bunk and staggering over to the carry-on he hadn't bothered to unpack yet, he somehow found a set of warmer civvy clothes with the bare light from under his doorframe, before remembering to light the artificial recreation of an oil lantern. Why he'd given into the idea to move back to the officers' quarters was beyond him right then, when it had made perfect sense the night before. He was technically the first mate, aye? The night before the idea of an actual bunk, a room of his own, and getting away from the fo'c'sle and the gundeck, where the majority of the crew slept, had seemed like a sound one.

Now, having been kept up all night not only by the constant motion of the ship, but the nerve-wracking ship's bell, he thought that he could handle the snoring, grunting, groaning, and babbling that went on in the fo'c'sle, so long as he could get away from that incessant *ringing*.

Someone knocked on the door. Blinking once or twice, he eyed it like it was a completely unnatural thing. They knocked again, he blinked again, and finally managed to say, "C'min."

Harrison stepped in, looking wide-awake. He had been assigned the job of the ship's head cook, partly because he didn't seem to like the idea of working on deck, and partly because the design team of Team C still held a grudge. The day before, when he'd caught sight of the guns, he had tried to get off of the schooner, no doubt to get word to the *Queen Mary*. Thankfully he'd been cut off at the pass; now all they had to do was keep the emergency communicators away from him. "Coffee?"

Even halfway sleeping, Scotty smirked to himself. He knew that Harrison was probably going to try to either simper or sneak, but he was going to do something. "Aye, I could use it. Damn bell kept me up."

"I'll bet." Harrison set the thermos on the table, looking around. "These cabins are pretty small. And I thought the dorm rooms were bad."

"Better'n sleepin' on deck, at least." The bell would be even worse up there, no doubt. "How're ye handlin' it?"

"I like it." Harrison nodded, still looking around. "The galley's not bad, just kind of cramped. Nestled between the guns and all, you know."

"We'll fix that, eventually," Scotty said, going for nonchalant. He was just waiting for Harrison to come right out and ask what the guns were for, but if the other cadet hadn't figured it out yet, he had to be completely stupid. "Ye're on the middle watch, or just up early?"

"Just up early; couldn't sleep with the ship moving like it is." Harrison shrugged. "I'm sure I'll be tired enough tonight to sleep."

"Hope I am too," Scotty muttered, entertaining thoughts of taking the bell down and heaving it overboard. He wouldn't do it, but it was nice thinking about it. Finally pulling himself back to the real world, he offered a faint, tired grin. "Thanks for the coffee."

"No problem." Harrison took his cue and stepped out, closing the cabin door behind him.

Flopping down in the rather small chair that went with the rather small table, Scotty gave serious thought to crawling back into his bunk and trying to sleep again. What dissuaded him ended up being the realization that the bell would ring again in about twenty minutes, and he would have to be cleaned up, awake and out on deck. Technically he was Officer of the Watch; technically because he was the second highest 'ranking' cadet, but in all reality, it was just a title. Until he knew something about sailing, the experienced people were really in charge.

Hell. Shaking his head and trying to dissipate the fog, he staggered out of the room and went to get some water to wash up with. Never again would he take for granted the convenience of a nice, hot shower. Never again would he forget to appreciate being able to turn a knob or push a sensor strip and turn water on.

By the time eight bells rang, he was up and on deck, thermos clutched in both hands. The sky was starting to lighten, a slow gray color, and the breeze had picked up. Lewis was giving orders down on the main deck, and Scotty climbed up the steps to the quarterdeck, where Cor was at the wheel. "Mornin'."

"Morning!" Corry looked tired, no doubt because he had the middle watch from midnight to four, but absurdly cheery despite it. "We're on the port tack, wind's out of the north northwest, we're heading southwest by south, nine points off."

"In Standard?" Scotty asked, eyebrows drawn. He held his coffee closer, seeking some comfort in it.

"Um-- we're going southish because the wind's out of the northish and making good time-ish." Grinning, Corry gestured one handed to the wheel. "Ship's yours, Mister Scott."

"Time-ish? And I'm not takin' the wheel. I don't know the first thing about steerin'!"

"It's easy. Hold it here until told otherwise by someone who knows how to sail."

"Easy, hm. Like climbin' the mast." Raising one eyebrow, Scotty looked at the wheel doubtfully.

Corry sighed slightly, grabbing him by the arm and dragging him over. "Take the wheel or I take the coffee."

Scotty frowned, taking the wheel with one hand and clutching the coffee with the other, possessively. It was blackmail, but who could he complain to on the high seas? "All right. But if somethin' goes wrong, don't say I didn't warn ye."

"You'll be fine. There're a few good sailors on this watch to keep things in line." Stepping back, Corry looked out over the stern towards where the sun would be coming up. "Okay, I'm gonna hit the rack. Need anything, just shout for me."

"Aye aye, Cap'n." Scotty grinned slightly. He might have saluted, if he didn't have his hands full. "Sleep well, Cor."

"Will do." Tossing a brief wave, Cor bounded down the steps and vanished.

All right, just hold it there until told otherwise. Scotty could do that. It wasn't nearly as technical as building the ship had been, nor was it as hard to absorb as the sail training had been. For days he'd been bombarded with information on this and that, and now it was a relief to be told 'hold there until told otherwise'.

It struck him as amusing that he could build a ship, but didn't have the faintest clue of how to actually *sail* that which he built.

Officer of the Watch-- ha. Bracing the large wheel with his knee, he managed to get the top of the thermos unscrewed. Simple job or not, coffee was still a prerequisite. Piping hot, black, strong coffee.

It turned out, though, that steering the *Lady Grey* was probably one of the more mundane tasks onboard. Scotty wasn't sure if it was typical of the first mate to stand in as quartermaster, but then, it was a lot better than pretending like he actually knew how to sail. Lewis and Corry could take care of all of that; aside from having to correct the course a few times because she drifted with the wave action, being at the helm was a nice, easy job.

And a strangely enjoyable one as well. There was something nice about feeling the ride of the ship through her wheel; something about feeling, rather than seeing, the sun come up and knowing that it was following them as they made for westward. He could have argued that he would be bored, but he surprisingly wasn't. It took an hour to get readjusted to keeping his footing on the constantly moving deck, but at least the seasickness was pretty much gone, and after that he wasn't long in getting lost in it all over again just like he had aloft.

Scotty could almost get used to this sailing thing, if only he could learn to stand the bell and the fact that his bunk moved while he was trying to sleep.

But it looked to be a nice day, and that was a relief. It wasn't as clear as it had been the day before, but there was still ample sunlight to chase away the chill, and since they were heading sort of southish, it was bound to get a little warmer. Occasionally someone would come back to chat, or to just stand and enjoy the moment. Between that, steering and professionally daydreaming, it was certainly not boring.

Not quite a starship, but not bad at all.

Starship duty would consist of three shifts, eight hours apiece. Starships wouldn't move constantly; well, they would move, but those onboard wouldn't be able to tell, so long as the inertial dampers were actually tuned right. There would be no bell rung every half-hour, setting his teeth and making him cringe in anticipation, or shattering his sleep. All there would be in the way of constant noise would be the warp engines

humming; humming through her superstructure, a much more easy lullaby.

But then, there would be no sunlight glinting off of the deck, no canvas to whisper or boom in the wind. There wouldn't be the comforting smell of wood, salt and sunshine. And there wouldn't be the subconscious realization that the world he was now in was the world where it all began; all of the dreams of exploration that were realized or shattered, all of mankind's need to see what was on the other side. He could honestly understand what Corry meant when he had said, months ago, that he wished he could have been born five hundred years earlier.

If he did end up drummed out of Starfleet and denied the stars, Scotty was certain that the ocean, at least, would always be there.

Eight bells. Snapping back from his far-flung and almost philosophical notions, he glared at the bell balefully, imagining how nice it would be to take a hand phaser and melt the damn thing into a molten pile of brass. It took him a minute and a tap on the shoulder to realize that his watch was up and it was time to relinquish the helm to Albright.

"Anything to report?" Joe asked, apparently not noticing the bellicide notions Scotty was entertaining.

It took him a moment to recount the information he'd been given, even if it still didn't make too much sense to him. "Port tack, wind's backed down to northwest, and we're seven points off, headin' south by southwest."

Albright nodded, seriously. And then, a good thirty seconds later, he asked, "In Standard?"

Scotty grinned. "Wind's northish, we're headin' southish, and makin' good time-ish."

"Ahhh, I see." Joe grinned back, taking over the wheel. "Any special instructions?"

"Hold 'er steady until told otherwise."

"Sounds good to me."

"It is," Scotty said, and meant it, then headed down the steps to pace the main deck a bit. He wasn't particularly tired, not now that he'd had his coffee and his watch was over, though after his next shift at 1600, the first dogwatch, he had every intention of going below and sleeping. Cabin or fo'c'sle, whatever struck his mood at the time; maybe the fo'c'sle, where the bell was a distant notion.

A few cadets meandered, most of them having been woken up only ten or fifteen minutes before. They were a ragged looking lot; scrubbed clean swiftly, their rumpled civilian clothes and half-lidded stares were constants. It really was a somewhat harsh existence, compared to the almost easy schedule at the Academy. Something more akin to Basic, but without a hot shower at the end of the day.

*"Strike the bell, second mate, let us go below,  
Look away to windward, you can see it's gonna blow,  
Look at the glass, you can see that it has fell,  
And we wish that you would hurry up and strike, strike the bell!"*

Jansson's voice was teasing as he sang, stumbling slightly on the deck and giving Albright a comedic salute from the main deck. The fact that the watch had just begun only added to the amusement.

Scotty shook his head, calling over to Jerry, "He hits that bell, and I'm gonna pitch ye overboard."

"Keep you awake too?"

"Aye. I'm thinkin' it's closer to torture than timekeepin'."

"Yeah, I hear ya," Jansson walked over with ease, despite the angle of heel, before grabbing a shroud fixed to the weatherside bulwark and looking down into the water. "I guess we'll have to get used to it, though, if we're going to be here for two weeks."

"Or we throw it over the side and say it was an accident." Scotty shrugged, lightly. Now there was an idea that would get him through the rest of the day. He could think of a million excuses; the more outlandish, the more funny.

"I swear, sir, it was there one minute and gone the next," Jerry laughed.

"A giant squid came on deck and ate it."

"Pirates boarded and stole it."

"The klingons transported it off."

"The rays of the sun reflected perfectly off of the compass, created a tight beam of heat, melted the bolts, and it crashed to the deck and rolled over the side." Jansson nodded, perfectly composed. "We tried to save it, but it was too late."

Scotty laughed. It was so against the laws of probability that it was almost believable. "I think the squid would be more likely."

"Nah."

"We could say a freak wave came and wiped it out."

"We could, but that's too easy. Needs to be something completely insane. I don't know, something like Poseidon came from the seas, looked at the bell and decided that he wanted it for his collection," Jansson said, standing straight again.

"He's welcome to it." Smirking, Scotty amused himself with the thought. "Let him keep the fishes up or somethin', just so long as I don't hear it

again."

-ding-ding-

Oh god.

-ding-ding-

*Someone shoot the damn thing*, he thought, eyes still closed, not picking his head up from the piece of wood he was leaning on.

-ding-ding-

"I love that sound," a voice said.

Scotty frowned briefly, mostly asleep. He was leaning on the triangular board that reinforced the bulwark, that to his shoulder, the railing of the ship to his back. He didn't know if it bothered him that the board was speaking in a drowsy voice, but what it said didn't thrill him very much. "Sadist."

"Nu uh."

Corry's voice. So, either the board had learned how to speak, or Cor was on the other side. Rubbing at his eyes, he finally sat forward and looked around the edge. Sure enough, Corry had mirrored him. "I hate that thing. Everyone but you, and the rest o' the sailors, hates that thing."

"You'll get used to it," Corry replied, not moving, eyes still closed. "You slept right through four and five, so it can't be bothering you too much."

"That's 'cause I didn't get to sleep all night." Going back to his makeshift bed, Scotty closed his eyes again. It was surprisingly comfortable; the reinforcing brace kept him steady and gave him somewhere to lean his head, the bulwark supported his back, the ship's movement wasn't enough to throw him off. He was a little surprised to find out that it actually *was* a little easier to sleep on the deck. Now the only thing disturbing him was the bell, and that wouldn't ring for another half-hour.

"The helm's a-lee!"

The shout re-woke both of the cadets up less than ten minutes later. "We're switching tacks," Corry said, sounding entirely too awake.

"That's nice," Scotty answered in a mumble, barely cracking his eyes open.

"C'mon, you should watch. Might teach you something." Getting to his feet, Cor stretched briefly in the sunlight, cracking his back in no less than seven places and probably making everyone within hearing distance wince. "See, the jibs and the fore staysails are all loose, and we're coming around-- Scotty, wake up!"

"Corry..."

"Yeah?"

Scotty gave him a brief, annoyed look, but then he figured that he was up and it would be pointless to continue. Crawling to his feet, he stumbled under the roll of the deck. "Ne'er mind."

The *Lady Grey's* bow was into the wind, mostly carrying herself on momentum. The sails made an odd sound, unable to fill at that angle. But Lewis was well on top of the action, and when the time came shouted next to the crew of half-sailors, half-cadets, "Off tacks and sheets!"

The lines were thrown off, and they rushed back to the foremast from the main, nearly running over anyone in their path. The ship was in a position where she could be put in irons, unable to move because she was caught dead on the wind. But slowly, she overcame the force, and before long it was apparent that she would make it to the starboard tack.

"Foresail haul!"

It was actually interesting, watching the schooner respond to the commands. She was now one and a half points off of the wind, and the crew pulled the lines, bringing the sail on the foremast around to its new position. Scotty raised an eyebrow, making mental notes; it was amazing how well it actually worked in practice.

"Let go and haul!" Lewis yelled, as she settled slowly onto her new course. She was running close to the wind, and the wave action seemed far more jarring. More jerky and clumsy, even if the *Lady Grey* was anything but. The crew started belaying the lines anew to keep the gaff from splitting anyone's head open and it felt a little like the schooner was running over large chunks of gravel.

"How long's it supposed to be like this?" Scotty asked, already disliking the change in movement, stomach rolling uneasily.

Corry thought about it for a few moments, having no trouble whatsoever with his footing. "Probably about six or seven hours."

"Wonderful." Shaking his head, Scotty headed for the steps. Maybe he could go and find himself some crackers.

The first dogwatch was from four in the afternoon to six, a two hour watch used to alternate the schedule. It meant that every day one shift had a break and only had to stand watch for six hours instead of eight, but since everyone got a turn, it wasn't disputed.

Scotty, for one, was glad that his shift was short. When four bells were struck, he made for the galley, double-checked to make certain no double-agents had sabotaged his food, and made a beeline for his cabin. By now he couldn't have cared less about the bells or the ship's rolling and heaving along the water; the only thing on his mind was sleeping until the middle watch at midnight.

"Want some company?" Corry asked, leaning around the edge of the door.

It didn't particularly surprise Scotty that he didn't bother knocking. Heavens only knew, they'd been living in close quarters for over a year, putting up with each other's eccentricities and habits; it was actually a little weird for Scotty sleeping alone in a room now, even one only the size of a somewhat okay cloak room. "If ye don't plan on keepin' me up."

"Who, me? Never." Closing the door behind him, Corry flopped down across the table from Scotty, grinning happily. "Just about done with our first real, genuine, official day as a ship's crew."

"Mm hm."

"You sound incredibly enthusiastic."

"Just tired," Scotty said, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. "Not lookin' forward to watch."

Cor shrugged, reaching over to steal a cracker. He narrowly avoided getting his hand smacked, and leaned back with his prize and an innocent expression. "It's only four hours, so it won't be too bad."

Scotty eyed the purloined cracker. "S'ppose not."

"We're making really good time." Corry nodded, munching on the stolen food with a slowness that screamed 'ha! I got away with it!'

Eh, it was only a cracker. One measly saltine, which had been a very big staple in Scotty's diet lately, what with the schooner underway. "Good."

"Learn anything today?"

"Aye. Learned why Starfleet doesn't keep to tradition concernin' the bells."

Corry grinned, finishing the cracker and brushing the crumbs off of his hands. "You hate it that much?" he asked, reaching for another.

This time he wasn't quick enough. Like a cobra striking, Scotty smacked his wrist lightly, though he made no mention of it whatsoever. He just continued the conversation like it never happened, "Aye."

"Well, I'll be sure to strike the bell more softly if I'm on watch and you're down here." Corry stood, stretching his arms above his head. "And on that note, I'm gonna get back up there."

"Wake me at midnight?"

"Sure." Corry made for the door, then stepped back and grabbed a handful of the saltines before Scotty could protest. "Sleep well." And with that, he walked out.

"Thief," Scotty muttered, without any real annoyance in his voice. He had a stash secreted away in one of the galley cupboards now, so it wasn't a huge loss.

Shaking his head, he got to his feet, stumbled through his bedtime routine, and then made the short trip to his bunk, just as seven bells rang. The brassy tone seemed almost in line with the rise and fall of the deck, choppy as it was, and though both were annoyances, they weren't quite enough.

By the time eight bells rang, he was dead to the world.

## Part IV: Zero Moment: Chapter 3

### Chapter 3:

Saturday, June 10th, 2243

The Lady Grey

On the North Atlantic

There was something to be said for the quiet of the ocean at night. Without the man made lights that dominated even some of the most serene places, the stars were at their brightest. Standing on the deck, it wasn't hard to imagine that every single one of them was visible, and even the half-moon didn't completely destroy the illusion.

After six days at sea -- and the three days of sail training on the Irish Sea before that -- Corry felt entirely comfortable with captaining the *Lady Grey*. She was the largest sailing vessel he'd ever commanded (or sailed aboard), but all of the principles he'd learned throughout his life translated easily. Added to a natural instinct for the vagaries of the sea, and he couldn't have been more at home.

Beyond the aching beauty of being under sail with a wide-open ocean surrounding, there was the sense of being *small*. So much of life was about moving in the fastest manner possible to destinations far beyond the light of Sol that it was easy to lose all perspective on one's own size in comparison to it; it took going to the frontier anymore to elicit any kind of wonder and awe for what had become routine.

For Cor, though, the ocean had always fulfilled that. The boom and salt and spray of it; the sensation of flying along on sailcloth. But the days of sail were long gone, when one could spend their whole life on the ocean, be it fishing or fighting or transporting cargo.

It made him sad to think about it; he had grown up learning how to sail from his earliest memories, his Dad teaching him, and once he was old enough to go out solo, he could happily spend a whole day out on the water, putting in on islands and then taking off again, hair bleaching under the light of the sun and sea salt drying on his skin. But there were no cargo-carrying careers like that now, unless one wanted to go into space.

Instead, in a month or two, he would begin another four years at Starfleet Medical HQ in Maryland, provided he wasn't kicked out of the Fleet. Hopefully another four years of being planet-bound, able to just hop on the public transport platform between Baltimore and Augusta. And another four years that he could sail, and hopefully put aside the idea of going into space and leaving almost everything behind.

Corry wondered, in the back of his mind, if he would love the stars so much when he was actually out there, or if they would just become something else to take for granted.

He did a lot of that, or he used to. He used to imagine that his parents would always be there, and his father's brush with death had shattered that illusion. He used to think he had found a tragic true love in Maggie Mersea, and now that was ruined too. Hell, he'd even taken his best friend for granted -- the one friend he'd had to work hard to make and keep -- and both he and Scotty had suffered for it.

Well, if the fates were trying to teach him a lesson, they'd succeeded. He certainly appreciated everything he had, more now than he ever had before.

In this case, the stars. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes, imagining for a moment that this wasn't just a brief thing -- imagining that this could go on forever, and he could somehow dream back the hands of time and progress.

If only that was possible, he could truly point the bow into the horizon and just sail forever.

"I'm goin' to be up there someday," Scotty said, rather quietly.

Corry opened his eyes and glanced over, not terribly surprised by Scotty's sudden appearance. "Yeah? And here I was hoping I could talk you into going pirate and staying here."

Scotty shook his head, eyes still tracking the stars. He obviously wasn't entirely awake yet. "Wouldna do much good here, but up there..."

"You could make it here." Corry nodded, not sure if he was joking or serious. "Imagine it; I'll be captain, you be my first mate, and we can get some of the other guys to stay on. And we just sail."

"Aye, it's called AWOL."

"So? We'll build a sensor screen. They wouldn't be able to scan for us, and even with shuttles, it'd take 'em forever to find us. If we had sensors, we could see 'em coming a parsec away." To himself, Corry grinned. "Just picture it! Landing in some small port, somewhere that's not so modern, and then sailing off again like a ghost ship."

"Pirate ships," Scotty continued, with a snort, "and steal all their crackers."

Corry chuckled, "Why not? There're enough yachts roaming around, and you can bet they'll be good for a raid. Before you know it, we have a whole fleet, and we can just ride the seas pirating."

"Make 'em walk the plank." Scotty grinned himself. No surprise to Cor, Scotty had been dreaming about making someone walk the plank since before they'd even really started the *Lady Grey*. "Come up alongside, open the ports, and scare the livin' hell out of 'em."



"Basically," Cor said, with a sudden sort of solemnness. "I'm telling you, Scotty, it could work. We could really do it, you and me."

It must have dawned on Scotty that Corry wasn't kidding. Blinking once or twice, he looked over, fairly alert now. "Ye're not serious, right?"

"Why not?"

"Cause it's insane! Even with the best tech in the universe, we couldna get away with it. Ye really think we could evade planetary defense?"

Corry nodded; even as he did, he knew it was wild dreaming, but for just a *minute*, he grabbed for it like it was real. "Hell yeah. If anyone could, it's us. You're smart enough to build all kinds of tech to hide us, and I'm experienced enough to sail this ship almost anywhere on this planet. We're a damn good team."

"Aye, the best, but--" Scotty sighed. "It's madness, though I don't know if it's any more mad than decidin' to go and sink our competition. But in the end, it's just another way of runnin'. In the end, I'm still gonna do my level best to get on a starship, and in the end, ye'll still do your level best to stay here."

"I'm not--" Corry wanted to say that he wasn't running.

But really, he was. And not only from one thing. Somewhere behind his silly, reckless dreaming was a world of things he didn't feel strong enough or brave enough to face, and yet the truth was that he had to anyway. There was no going around it. No escaping it.

Just-- choosing how to live with it.

"If ye want it, really want it, I'll do everything I can. Build ye sensor screens, deck this lass out to the point where she'd be nothin' more than a ghost." Scotty nodded, though he still looked entirely not-thrilled with the idea. "And I suppose that for a while, ye'd probably be able to hide, but that doesn't make it any less madness. Still, if ye want it, I'd do it. But I'm not stayin' grounded forever, if I have any choice. Not even here."

It *was* insane and Corry knew that. He knew how farfetched the idea was, and just how much it would cost him if he went through with it. It was a dream for dreamers. But for one brief moment, he had wanted nothing more than to reach out and grab onto it. And now, heart both heavy and warm, he smiled and shook his head. "You would, too, wouldn't you?"

"Aye, I would."

"But you'll still leave."

"Right."

"Guess it'll have to wait then," Corry said, wryly, putting his hands behind his back. "We still have retirement, right? Maybe when we're out of the service we can go out and cause mischief and mayhem."

"Now there's an idea," Scotty said, no doubt relieved that he wouldn't be called on to commit any serious crimes in the near future, aside from the one he'd already planned and started executing. Running over the notion a few times, he nodded, more seriously than before. "Retirement, then. If the *Grey's* still here, we'll use her, and if not, we can always buy a boat."

"So it's a deal?"

"It's a deal."

Scotty was still toying with the notion, even as he took the rounds and made sure everything on the schooner was in order. He was still running over it, over being a sailor of some sort whenever he retired. Starfleet service for officers was fifteen years -- they trained for four (or in his case, three), and the rest of the time, they put that training to use. That would make him thirty-six when he hit the minimum service requirement, and forty-one whenever he was eligible for full retirement pension.

Really, he had figured he would be a career officer. There until he died or they kicked him out. And he couldn't imagine being forty-something period, not at twenty-one, with his whole life ahead of him.

But Corry's wild dreaming did strike a nerve. Scotty wasn't unduly sentimental, but he could be a dreamer; it was what had driven him to want starship duty in the first place. Dreaming of being the best in his field, with a starship and a whole universe to help explore. He might have gone into Starfleet originally as an escape, but that hadn't been the case for awhile now.

It was all right there, right within his reach. The *Constitution*, the future.

Well, it was before he had decided he wanted to sink another person's ship, anyway.

They were going to fire on the *Queen Mary* in only a couple of days or so, and he was going to be looking at real charges and real punishments. If anything went wrong and someone lost their life, there wouldn't be a career on anything but a prison asteroid.

Not exactly what he had in mind when he'd joined up.

It wasn't often that Scotty doubted his initial decision, but this was one of those times. He had taken so much into account, all the way from how they would get the *Queen Mary's* crew off of their ship to how they would attack, but he didn't allow himself to think that it could go horribly wrong.

Still, even if it went perfectly, he was looking at a possible end to everything he had dreamed of, no matter his reasoning. A board of inquiry wouldn't look at his motivations. All they would know was that he'd failed to go through the proper channels, and now there was answering to be done.

Scotty was still a fighter, though. Bowing one too many times to the whims of others had steeled his resolve, and if there was a stand to be made, it was going to be on the North Atlantic. He could have quit pursuing the matter once Security had closed the book on the sabotage, but there was no part of him willing to bow under pressure the way he might once have.

For now, though, he was on the quarterdeck, lost in thought, looking aft at the sunrise. The ocean was strangely calm, and they weren't moving nearly as well as they had been. The *Lady Grey* couldn't have been making more than a few knots, just bowing along gracefully on her port tack. Even he wasn't having trouble with the motion, not as easy and smooth as it was.

Sunset had been spectacular for days, but somewhat dull the night before. Sunrise, however, seemed to be making up for it. Scotty grinned to himself, leaning on the stern taffrail, just enjoying it.

For some reason, though, he couldn't completely get lost in it. There was something in the back of his mind that offset even that sight. Thinking on it, he tilted his head slightly, narrowing his eyes. It wasn't Corry's crazy idea, even though he knew he'd be giving that more thought over the next couple days. And it wasn't the schooner, because she was in fine form, all elegance in motion.

The sky was brightening by the minute, near an hour into his watch. The world was so calm that Scotty could almost pretend it was like one of his sister's paintings, caught in immortality. All red, climbing in intensity until it was nearly painful to look at.

It was there, leaning on the rail and highlighted crimson, that he realized something.

It had been red the morning before the *Lady Grey* had been burned, too.

It had become almost a custom for Scotty to nap up against the bulwark, usually so that he was in the sun and so that he could offset the fact there were always going to be bells rung during the night hours. That had earned him a mild initial sunburn and then a decent tan after, if nothing else, but other than that, it was just the most effective way he'd found to actually get some *sleep*.

It was *almost* a custom because they'd only been out there for five days, but out of five, he'd ended up sleeping better on deck than he did in his cabin for four of them. Why was a mystery, because the bell still rang out its time every half-hour, but there was just something to it, something oddly relaxing.

Just not today.

He'd spent most of the morning watch checking everything. The lines, the hull, the steering, everything. But so far as he could tell -- and who better to look? -- the *Grey* was in peak condition. He'd checked the positions of the competition, too; *Wildstorm* was still comfortably in the lead, *Queen Mary* was behind. Everything was fine.

All he'd really managed to do was wear himself out, and still ill at ease he went to his usual spot, curled up between the brace and railing, and tried to sleep it off.

Whatever it was that had gotten Scotty all worked up had infected Corry as well. Just five hours after he'd turned in, he was back on deck, pacing around and looking ever westward.

And, because Corry was uptight, it bled into everyone on watch. Before long, he wasn't the only one pacing around.

Shaking his head, he made the rounds and checked everything, just like Scotty had during his watch. Once he was satisfied that everything was all right and good, he went back to where his roommate was dozing restlessly, kicking lightly at his boot.

Scotty jumped, and probably would have been on his feet and swinging had he been on dry land. Taking a shaky breath, he gave Corry a baleful look. "Was that necessary?"

"Not really," Corry replied, jokingly, "but you're welcome." He smiled for a moment, then went back to being more serious. "Can't sleep, huh?"

"I was tryin'," Scotty said, standing. "And I mighta succeeded, if ye weren't so bloody cold-hearted."

"A mortal blow, thou hast dealt me." Cor struck a terribly dramatic pose, turning his tortured eyes to the sky, doubtless knowing full well that he was making an ass out of himself. "Pray, my good man, pull this knife from my heart lest it freeze there!"

Scotty rolled his eyes, failing completely at chewing down a laugh. "I see we're hostin' the finest actor of an age aboard."

"Two knives! Knave! Two knives in less than a moment, so swiftly that the thrust was a blur to the eye. Prithee do not be so cruel, sir, for my wounded self cannot bear the agony of betrayal, and the wounds are truly mortal." His eyes widening, Corry clutched his chest, slowly

dropping to his knees and somehow managing to do it on a moving, canted deck. "My god, it has happened, this is the end! The fates have decreed it, and I, a simple sailor, must now be snipped clean, without so much as a last strand to cling to--" Choking, he dropped onto the deck, looking up at the sky. "Goodbye, goodbye, oh sunny days and fair weather-- goodbye, life, thou hast been unkind and unjust... goodbye--"

Scotty mimed looking at a watch, tapping his foot, shaking his head. "Can we skip ten years? Might be close to the end o' the soliloquy."

--goodbye, acting career, you died before you were even realized!" Laughing, Corry stood again. "C'mon, it wasn't *that* bad."

"Don't quit yer day job."

"Especially not right now," Balimer cut in, having watched for half of Corry's great testament to acting, and who now actually stepped forward and made his presence known. "Routine check-in with Starfleet's good, but they're forecasting a weather disturbance."

Corry's face went serious in an instant. "How bad?"

"Right now, it's at Force 7; out of the southwest, wind at thirty knots with gusts up to sixty, waves projected at five meters average, and seven significant." Balimer nodded. "They don't think it's going to get any worse than Force 8, though."

Corry nodded himself, thinking on it for a long moment before he said, "It probably won't. Even at Force 8, we can pretty much push right through it; be a bumpy ride, we'll need to keep pointed into it, but it wouldn't be dangerous. Can you signal the other ships and make sure they're aware and have charted their positions versus ours? *Wildstorm* and the *Queen Mary* were both close enough to get caught in it with us the last time we estimated their positions and they're both smaller than we are."

Balimer nodded and headed away again with one of their communicators, leaving Cor to rub his bottom lip with his thumb, pensively.

Scotty, in the meantime, just shook his head. *Bumpy ride*. He didn't like words like that, particularly when they were used in the same sentence. That meant he would probably be seasick as all hell until it blew over, unless by some miracle he was cured of that particular ailment.

Before Cor had a chance to go further into some discussion of weather patterns, Scotty said, "I'm goin' below. Maybe try'n get some real sleep before this hits."

"Good idea. Chances are, most people'll be wide awake when it gets rough." Corry smiled slightly, face thoughtful, likely still working out how they would approach the weather. "Talk to ya later?"

"Aye," Scotty answered, offhand, looking westward. For some reason, despite all self assurances that it was more of a weather disturbance than an actual storm, he couldn't shake the feeling that whatever it was, 'bumpy ride' wouldn't do it justice.

Still uneasy, he shook his head and started for the steps.

## Part IV: Zero Moment: Chapter 4

### Chapter 4:

Saturday, June 10th, 2243

The Lady Grey

On the North Atlantic

The first kiss of an ill wind was nearly always enough to make anyone familiar with the ocean stop and look around nervously at the sky. It just was; a primitive understanding, maybe, or maybe it was something as simple as some long-disused instinct. Usually there were signs long before that; a wave out of place, a dropping barometer, or the predominant winds shifting directions almost on whimsy, backing around the compass.

All of those were signs of a storm, but the first actual touch of ill wind was the clincher. Anyone with a lick of sense knew to start dogging down the hatches and securing any loose deck gear.

The crew of the *Lady Grey* was no different. They knew there was heavy weather on the way, but when the first gust rattled the rigging, every single person on deck paused in what they were doing and started looking skyward.

After a solid week of sailing practice, most of them fancied themselves sailors, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing in fair weather. It gave them the confidence to carry out their duties efficiently. But this wasn't going to be fair weather, and that dreamlike flight of fancy was trickling away.

Of course, Scotty never fancied himself a sailor, no matter how good he had gotten at walking on deck. He knew better; he was a good shipwright, but as for being a sailor-- no. Oh, he enjoyed the ocean and he absolutely loved seeing the *Grey* perform, but when it came right down to it, he didn't pretend to be even half as efficient as most of the rest of the cadets.

So reeling around on deck during a storm was probably one of the last things he wanted to do.

And, of course, Corry was the exact opposite. Proficient, dauntless, completely fearless; he was a sailor through and didn't pretend not to be. When the wind started rattling the sails, when the waves started rolling in higher and choppier, he grinned an almost feral grin at the challenge and prepared to meet it head on.

Standing on the weather side railing, braced against the schooner's angle of heel, they watched the blackening sky as the rest of the crew scurried around nervously. All the necessary orders had been given.

All that was left to do was wait.

"Best place to be is amidships and on the centerline," Corry offered, helpfully, though he didn't take his eyes off of the black clouds. He didn't need to; he *felt* the irritated glance Scotty gave him. "What? It's true."

"Nooooo, *really?* I didn't *build* her or anything, couldn't imagine how those stability ratings work without outside instruction."

Corry grinned again, more amused now. The biting sarcasm was typical, but the undertone of nervousness wasn't. "Just thought I'd remind you. Better bring along your crackers."

Scotty tried for a scoff and ended up with a chuckle. "Keep it up, and I'll mutiny. Keel haul ye, or somethin' along those lines."

"Sure, I can see you trying to order the crew around without me. 'Pull that rope thingy, turn the wheel thattaway, an' see about gettin' me some crackers.'" Cor snickered, crossing his arms. "Face it, you need me here."

Scotty didn't deign to look over, just reached across the gap and whapped Corry in the back of the head lightly. "'Well, cripes, since I'm so completely in love with myself, I might as well go and save the universe while I'm at it.'"

Corry frowned briefly, but not seriously. "Oooh, Pup came up with a good one. Let's note that one down in the books."

"Wolf. If ye're gonna call me somethin' canine-related, get it right."

"Sorry, Mutt," Corry said, this time ducking under the intended assault.

Scotty waited until he was standing straight again, then nailed him a little harder in the head. "Bastard."

Cor smoothed his hair back down, shaking his head with a laugh. As long as he could keep his second-in-command in decent spirits, the rest of the crew would be all right. He might have been the captain, and a good captain, but the crew didn't gauge how scared to be from *his* reactions. They looked to Scotty.

If he was genuinely upset, it was because there was a very real reason to be.

Up until now, he'd been edgy -- checking the barometer, calculating out different scenarios, double checking the charts -- but not much worse. Corry intended to keep things going in exactly that direction, so he said, "All nicknames aside, it won't be too bad. Nothing that the *Grey* can't handle."

"Aye, I know," Scotty answered. More to himself, he added, "She's a hell of a good ship."

Corry smiled, finally turning back to look at the deck crew running around. "Don't go forgetting that while you stumble around with your crackers." More seriously, he added, "And for god's sake, if a wave hits wrong, find something to hold onto and don't let go."

It was a sound that couldn't easily be described. Somewhere between a shriek and a moan, the wind tore the air to shreds and made its eerie cries through the rigging of the *Lady Grey*, very effectively adding to the sense of inherent loneliness that came with being so far (so terribly far) from dry ground and safety.

The boards creaked at the stress of the waves she was occasionally slamming into, but even then she didn't seem to be in danger. She wasn't making much headway, but her bow was kept relatively into the waves, her sails were reefed short for the sake of not careening blindly, and Corry was at the wheel, steering a path into the teeth of this 'weather disturbance.'

Really, it wasn't a bad storm. The waves were large enough that the deck was constantly rolling, and sometimes they hit a larger breaking wave and white water washed across the deck before exiting out the scuppers, but the *Grey* wasn't slewing off to the sides or threatening to pitch-pole, either. The wind was howling, but it wasn't so awful that they couldn't keep going.

The decision had been made to keep on course; if it were really a serious storm, they would have hove to and rode it out. And if it was deadly, they would have called for emergency evac.

So it wasn't bad. Really.

Scotty told himself that over and over, braced as well as he could be in the scant shelter of the stairwell below the overhang to the quarterdeck. Mentally, he reassured himself that this would be fine and that he absolutely would not crawl to the leeside bulwark and lose his breakfast, lunch, dinner, and every single damn saltine he'd been nibbling at since it started getting rough. No, he could handle it. No little weather disturbance would take him down, nu uh.

He could hear Corry whooping it up above him, and in a brief flash of immaturity wished something harmlessly unpleasant on his best friend; maybe it wasn't a nice thing to wish, but then, he wasn't in a really nice mood at that particular moment.

The deck rolled to starboard, he leaned to port, waged battle with his sense of balance and gradually won. Felt rather like his stomach was left to starboard, though, and as for any thoughts of ill will towards Cor, they went right over too.

Scotty just didn't have the resolve it took to stay on his feet *and* think about Corry's disgusting good humor at the situation.

Trying to take his mind off of it, he wrapped an arm around the brace and pulled one of the emergency communicators out of the pocket of his high-vis storm coat, thinking that maybe there would be something hopeful on the weather band and he wouldn't have to suffer for too long. He flipped it open and fiddled with the dial, then held it up close to his ear so he could hear the tiny speaker over the wind, waves and general hellishness on deck.

Except there was nothing to hear but static.

Frowning, momentarily forgetting about the storm, Scotty checked to make sure he had it tuned into the proper frequency. The communicators weren't perfect, but they were certainly powerful enough to cut through some rough weather; he could pull in starships in *orbit*, let alone the planet-wide weather band.

It was right, and there was *still* nothing but static.

It could have been the communicator, but it had been working just a couple hours ago when they'd checked the forecast for updates. It wasn't storm interference; there was a little lightning, but nothing powerful enough to short out the range on a subspace device like that.

He frowned deeper still, unconsciously finding his sea legs once he stopped thinking about the maelstrom and started focusing on the problem at hand. Twisting the dial again, this time aiming for Spacedock's powerful transmitters, he held it up and listened, uneasily. If his communicator was out, and if everyone else's was as well, then they really were alone out there.

For some reason, that fleeting thought made Scotty shudder from head to toe.

Maybe it was water damage. Nodding to himself, he went over the likelihood that enough water had seeped into the usually watertight circuitry. After all, it was raining-- no, not raining, *pouring*. Add in the spray from waves hitting the ship and the overall moisture content of the atmosphere, and it was almost a certainty.

So why, when he had such a good reason for the communicator to be out, did he still feel like he was in a desperate situation?

Shoving those thoughts aside, Scotty slipped back to the steps and headed down below, where he could check the delicate internal circuits without risking any further damage. The artificial oil lanterns didn't provide much light, but at least there was more there than on deck, and if he was desperate enough, they had plenty of stronger emergency lamps stowed away.

It wasn't much quieter down there, but quiet enough. At the bottom of the stairwell, he braced the toes of his boots against the opposite wall, leaned back, and tried one last time to tune in something. Anything.

The white noise of static seemed unbearably loud, even with the storm howling above.

*God, we're alone*, he thought, digging through his pockets to find his multitool and penlight. Logically, he should have gone and checked to see if the other communicators were working, but he figured he'd at least confirm it was just water infiltration that took this one out first.

He was just about to pry open the casing and check for damage when a break came through the static. No transmission, but a break. Something that momentarily cut the noise. Sinking down until he was sitting at the bottom of the stairwell, half-shadowed in the back and forth dance of the lamps, he listened.

Static-- emptiness-- c'mon, *something* caused that. Maybe they weren't totally on their own out there, maybe something was there and the universe wasn't compacted to the small space of a wooden schooner on the North Atlantic.

He realized, abstractly, that sometimes the universe could really be that small. And that he was even smaller.

But not as small as whoever it was whose voice made it through the static, the wind, the creaking. Not that small. With dawning horror, he heard the cry through the night of someone far more frightened and alone than him.

*"Please, god... someone hear this... ..capsized, going down... .."* a broken sob, *"I don't wanna die like this."*

Corry stood the helm alternately for Lewis and he was loving every minute of it. Sure, most of his crew looked positively sick and ready to give up sailing forever, but for him, this was the ultimate high. Starfleet could keep their starships, their so-called adventures to other worlds. When compared to the feeling of facing off, one-on-one with nature, their recruitment posters of 'Adventure! Exploration! Advancement! Join Starfleet Today and See the Universe!' seemed pretty laughable.

He thought himself a part of this, as elemental as the wind he was fighting. He never once thought of himself alone out there. Holding on with an unwavering grip, feet braced apart, he was just about to whoop again triumphantly when Scotty stepped in front of the wheel.

There was something in his expression, in his eyes, that completely and totally stopped Cor in his thoughts. Like slamming into a brick wall. He didn't even have time to blink before Scotty jumped into it, "Communications're out, we've got a ship down somewhere, ahead or behind, I dinna ken, but someone's in trouble."

It took a few seconds for Corry to grasp what was said. "Down?"

*"Down,"* Scotty affirmed, with a deadly intensity. Desperately, he half-begged, "Corry, go!"

Cor leapt into action. He could always get the details of his best friend's reasoning later; right now, he didn't have time to ask. Grabbing Scotty unceremoniously, he shoved him in the direction of the wheel, not taking the time to see if he got the hint. Then, sliding on the wet deck, he nearly ran into the bell post.

***-ding-ding-ding-ding-ding-ding-***

The bell clanged hard, the brass notes loud and sharp. It struck fear into just about anyone who could hear it, too; this wasn't the watch being called, this was an emergency.

Lewis came skidding up within the minute, "What is it?!"

"Ship going down, don't know where," Corry said, hurriedly. "Get three people to stand lookout on the bow, three on the stern, and two on each rail. Tell 'em to look for anything -- lights, shadows, blurs -- anything!"

Lewis nodded sharply. "You'd best get someone to try to raise Starfleet."

"Communications are *out*," Scotty interrupted, probably having snatched someone to take the helm for him. "I dinna ken how I got even that, but it was broken up all to hell, and there's no way we can get Starfleet."

"We'll get the boats ready to swing out," Corry ordered, more calm now that things were being set into motion. "We'll need to be ready to heave-to in an instant, no less, so I want all hands on deck. I don't care if they're puking everywhere, I want them out here."

"Boats're already bein' prepped." Nodding sharply, Scotty looked less than patient as he awaited the next task to be carried out. "We'll need someone to try'n raise 'em again, and get a position, or their last position, their ident, whatever they can."

"I'll get someone on it." Corry felt a brief flash of gratitude that he had a first mate who was capable of taking the initiative, but didn't allow himself to dwell on it. "Keep at the helm; just hold on and keep us on course, no matter what. I'll have any course corrections relayed, and see if someone with a tricorder can't pick up their emergency transponder signal."

"Aye aye, sir," Scotty replied, before turning and going back to his post.

Corry looked after him for a second, then headed down onto the main deck to coordinate the rest of the crew.

The *Lady Grey* battled her way into the night. Looking through the spray, rain and mist, her running lights might have seemed almost ghostly; green, white and red, glowing as brightly as possible. Lewis had mounted a high powered emergency searchlight on the bow, hoping to see enough ahead to avoid any collisions, and it really was the only strong source of light in the wind-torn night.

It wasn't just a weather disturbance anymore, it was a full-throated gale.

And it was the crew that distinguished themselves, proving that Starfleet had not wasted their time on training them. Gone was the grousing; they were all too busy to worry about themselves right then. If Barrett would have been able to see them, he would have been more than proud of all of them.

All but one, that is.

Exactly when it happened couldn't be said, but when Albright went to sound the hull and make certain she wasn't leaking anywhere, he stepped down onto the lower hold floor and found an inch of water.

On the quarterdeck, waging a one-man war to try to hold the *Lady Grey* on course, Scotty didn't fail to notice that the schooner wasn't reacting quite right; she was almost sluggish, and didn't want to respond readily to the course corrections that Corry shouted back. It was he who had sent Joe down to make certain they weren't taking on water.

Really, he knew before Albright ever showed back up. It was in the deck, the wheel, the different sounds; it just didn't *feel* right. He had always been apt at listening to his instincts when they said that something was wrong; now wasn't any different, but for context.

When Albright stepped onto the quarterdeck, all it took was one, brief glance to confirm the truth. The wind shrieked above, a nerve-wracking sound, but it wasn't the cry above that made Scotty shiver, and it wasn't the driving rain either. It was another cry altogether.

For one moment, he was back in the pitch black slip, fumbling with the wires, smoke-blind and breathless, fighting to save his ship as she wailed in his head--

--and in the next, he was moving. "Joe, take the wheel!" With that hasty order, he barely waited long enough for the other cadet to take over before sprinting across the deck. One good wave would have put him right overboard, but fate wasn't that cruel, and he literally slid into the bulwark, grabbed onto it, and all but leapt down the steps to the main deck, landing rough but on his feet.

Corry was still racing around, shouting back and forth with the lookouts, and Lewis had his team on the sails. The entire main deck was almost surreal; lit by nothing but the hastily installed deck lights, spray from the waves washing every which way before washing out of the scuppers, people stumbling and tripping around as they did their best to comply with orders, some of them tethered and most of them wearing life-vests and beacons. Scotty nearly ended up running into more than a few people as he headed for the bow, sliding this way and that on the boards, but he made it without knocking anyone over.

He ended up sliding right into Corry, who only just kept his footing. Cor turned, no doubt ready to start chewing out some other clumsy fool, and stopped when he saw who it was. "Aren't you supposed to be at the wheel?!"

"The *Grey*," Scotty managed, panting. "We're takin' on water."

"Oh *shit*." Corry's eyes widened. "How bad is it?"

"Losin' steerage, and she's rollin' further, rightin' slower." Finally catching his breath and getting his tattered thoughts under control, Scotty stood a bit straighter on the heaving deck. "We get knocked over, and we'll lose our rightin' arm that much quicker."

They both knew the math there; if she kept taking on water, then all it could take would be one reasonably large freak wave to hit her on her beam and she would be over. She wouldn't be able to right herself with the water shifting inside of her hull, changing her center of gravity. "Zero moment point," Cor said, sounding stunned. "God, we can't stop, though--"

"Sir!"

Scotty and Corry turned in unison, though it was Corry who asked, "What?"

Balmer tripped and stumbled over, clutching the communicator in one hand. "It's the *Wildstorm*. She's on her beam ends and downflooding, they have two boats in the water but the rest can't be launched, her masts are down, most of the people are on the hull. Signal keeps getting stronger, I told 'em to set up an emergency beacon, flare, something."

"Good!" Turning again, Corry barked up to his forward lookouts, "Look sharp, guys, we're getting close!"

"*Corry*." Scotty couldn't keep the desperation out of his voice.

Cor looked back. It was time for a command decision, and they both knew it -- if they didn't heave-to and patch the hull, she would become more and more vulnerable. If they did, the *Wildstorm's* crew would be in the cold water on a sinking ship that much longer, and there were a thousand and one ways to die on a ship going down. They couldn't take the crew away from Lewis to have them man the pumps, not until they were hove-to. Rescue crews didn't even know they were in danger, what with the comm out and the requisite emergency transponders clearly not working.

One way or another, it was a point of no return, no matter what they did.

Corry took a deep breath. "We have to keep going; hold her together, Scotty. However you can."

There was a long moment, and even amidst the chaos, it seemed almost quiet.

Then, nodding smartly, Scotty answered, "Aye aye, sir." And already trying to plan ahead, he turned and headed for the stairs.



## Part IV: Zero Moment: Chapter 5

### Chapter 5:

*Sunday, June 11th, 2243*

*The Lady Grey*

*On the North Atlantic*

For once, the sound of trickling water wasn't soothing. It wasn't like listening to rain running down a window, or a small waterfall in the woods, or even a brook running over stones. Oh, the basic sounds were the same, but this time, it meant something wholly different.

This time, it meant that the *Lady Grey* had been dealt a potentially mortal wound.

His sea boots sloshed in the water as Scotty made his way along the dark corridor, deep inside of the *Grey's* superstructure on her lower most deck, below her waterline, his hand light cutting a bright path through the gloom. Most of the lanterns were out, probably because no one had been down there to check them and swap the rechargeable batteries, and he found the presence of the torch he held reassuring.

Down there, where the wind and the chaos on deck were muffled to near nonexistence, the sounds of the ship were that much more powerful. More than once, a loud creak made him jump. There were a few times that she rolled and he found himself up against the wall, praying through the cacophony inside his skull that she would come back to rights again.

So far, she hadn't let him down.

The noise of her laboring through the water wasn't nearly so distinct as that wail in his head, though. It wasn't a sound that could be described in human terms, because it wasn't a human voice; it wasn't any voice, it was just *there*. Just like the constant white noise air makes, only noticeable in a silent room, except this wasn't even white noise. It was louder, sharper and completely indescribable; familiar, but only to him. Instincts manifest, and possibly in a kind of madness.

The bilge was under his feet, and filled with water now. Stepping carefully, Scotty shined the hand light down at the floor, looking for the hatch.

He had originally put it there so that they could get the hose in and pump any water out; now he wanted to see if there was some way to get into the bilge and survey the damage. It wasn't by any means a huge space, but he knew he'd be able to fit. Though, it might require oxygen of some sort, even in short supply.

Tucking the light under one arm, he reached down and flipped the clasp, then pulled the handle.

It came up easier than he expected; much easier. In fact, far, *far* too easily.

Water gushed up, given a swifter and easier exit than the consequences of hydrostatic pressure, temporarily shocking the hell right out of him. With something of a startled yelp, he barely fought the urge down to jump away, turn tail and run up to the main deck.

It was a brief battle, and he had to use every ounce of his weight and the roll of the deck forward to force that hatch down and lock it tight again.

Stumbling back and landing on his rear in two inches of frigid sea water, Scotty toyed with the notion of having automatic electrical pumps installed if they got out of this alive. "Sorry, lass," he murmured to the schooner, shakily. It was a stupid move on his part, and warranted an apology.

The hull creaked again, reminding him that this was still a very real issue and one that had to be dealt with as quickly as possible. But he couldn't see a way to repair the ship without diving under her; not without putting her at more severe risk, anyway. The numbers were there to back it up, too-- sixty-four pounds per cubic foot of water, plus density variation for temperature and depth below her waterline, versus volume of the bilge, free surface movement of liquid, maximum stresses of three inch oak deck planking--

*Damn.*

Crawling to his feet, he mentally ran through the list of emergency supplies onboard. There had to be something there, something he could use. He turned, casting one last glance at the bilge hatch.

Then he looked up.

Standing there, looking pale as death and trembling from head to toe, was Harrison. Scotty startled for a second time, backing up and nearly landing himself right back down on the floor. "Bloody hell!"

Harrison jumped back as well, eyes wide and panicked. For a moment he stood there like someone who wanted to run in several directions at once, then he apparently made up his mind and picked a way. Whirling, he headed for the steps.

Left behind, floating in the water, was a box of charges.

Scotty blinked, looking down at the box. It really didn't click with him right at that moment. It had never once occurred to him that one of the *Lady Grey's* own crew would try to hurt her, no matter the grudge; maybe Kelley's team, maybe someone outside of the group, but not one of her own. Not after all that had happened and all they had gone through just to get there.

Not even a weasel like Harrison, not like *this*.

When it did come together, like a red hot coil tightening in his chest, he took off after Harrison, sliding around the edge of the stairwell and bounding up the steps. He was a half-minute or so behind, but when he did end up catching up, just outside on the main deck, he leapt on the other cadet in what could well have been the most graceful move of his life to date.

They slammed into the pump handle, ironically. Harrison took a few blind swings, panic stricken. He managed to connect once, but every other strike hit open air.

Before he even had time to cry out, he was pinned down on the deck.

Needless to say, Scotty was living up to his nickname of Wolf. Teeth bared and voice low, somewhere between whisper and growl, he gave Harrison a good shake and demanded, "*Why?*"

Harrison didn't answer, just quivered with his eyes the size of saucers, throat working as he swallowed again and again.

It took a moment of gritting his teeth before Scotty was able to uncurl his fists; everything in him was *screaming* to punch Harrison's lights out. To punch his lights out and then maybe *keep punching--*

But it wouldn't serve any real purpose aside from his own enjoyment. And he wasn't gonna go down that road.

Instead, shaking his head in disgust and managing to unclench his teeth before he ended up needing a trip to a dentist, he got to his feet and dragged Harrison up, all but throwing him at Corry, who had been watching with his mouth hanging open. "There's the hull leak."

Corry nodded, blowing a breath out. Collecting himself, he latched onto the saboteur. "I'll make sure we lock him up. What's the situation down there?"

"Bad. Can't get into the bilge, so any repairs'll have to be done from outside." Scotty gave Harrison one last growl, then went back to dealing with the immediate crisis. "*The Wildstorm?*"

"Close. Real close. We should be on her any minute," Corry said, casting a nervous glance up at the bow.

"Cor, I'm goin' to have to--"

"*Wildstorm* off the port bow!" Sallee bellowed back, unwittingly cutting off the shipwright in mid-sentence.

The reaction was instantaneous. Corry had to have been waiting on the very edge for it, and when the shout came back, he yelled to his crew, "Bring the fore about! Helm, five to port! All hands on the lines!"

Scotty got back out of the way of the flurry of cadets in motion, fairly sure that there wouldn't be anything he could do. Most everyone else had more experience in actually working the lines, and he had a big enough problem to deal with as it was. Grabbing 'hold of a shroud, he strained his eyes to see the *Wildstorm*, but through all of the gloom and confusion on deck, he couldn't even catch a glimpse.

The *Grey* rolled under his feet, and he tightened his grip on the line. She wasn't answering to her helm as quickly as she had been before the sabotage, and she needed to be able to in order to avoid getting her rudder tangled in the *Wildstorm's* rigging; if she lost steerage, her lifespan was cut to minutes. She would turn beam to the seas, and end up just like the ship she was there to rescue.

"C'mon, lass, not much further," he whispered, without realizing it.

It was hard as hell to think with all of the noise. The shouts of the crew yelling 'heave!', the wind shrieking, the waves hitting, the distant background cries of the *Wildstorm's* crew shouting for help, the creaking; there was no peace to be found outside of his own skull, and really, none to be found inside either.

Slowly, the *Lady Grey* came about. Her sails were rigged to cancel out her forward motion and still keep her bow into the waves. There were almost thirty people aboard the schooner, and every single one of them was going to be devoted to saving the lives of the cadets in the water.

But-- there was only one person who could save the *Lady Grey*.

His eyebrows drew together in that moment of realization, as he cast a look at his crew, trying to save lives and do the right thing. For a few seconds, the noise seemed to fade away and everything took on another quality.

It was like looking through a window into another world, and not being a part of it. Alone, again, even among so many people.

For some reason Scotty couldn't even begin to fathom, it made him sad. Taking a deep breath, he watched as they started lowering the boats, then turned and headed below.

The North Atlantic in this area was somewhere between 7 and 9C; cold enough to sap the life from anyone in the water for more than a very brief period of time. The wind was easing up, though, and so was the rain. Rescuing the *Wildstorm's* crew might not be as dangerous as it would have been ten minutes ago. The waves -- driven ahead of the front and lingering after at a significant height *above* what the last forecast had predicted, confused and crossing each other -- were still a problem, but a more manageable one without the wind on top of them, crazing

them further than they already were.

Corry stood by the falls of the lifeboat, waiting impatiently for the sailors who were going to man it. They were all gathering emergency first aid kits, survival suits, lights and life jackets, and he tried not to get too anxious waiting. His crew had performed incredibly well, even this far out of the element they were trained for. That, in some part, was one of the reasons they were still afloat.

The seven crewmates finally leapt over the boat's side, settling themselves as quickly as they could, and Cor gave the order to the crew on the falls, "Lower away!"

He wasn't there to see Harrison sneak away. In all of the bustle, he hadn't been secured; still, he had seemed like he could do little harm, standing at the starboard side bulwark, staring out to sea. Cor had more important things to worry about than locking him away and hadn't thought Harrison would create any more of a hazard now that he had been found out, and now that his own life was hanging in the balance as well.

If Corry *had* noticed, he might have wondered exactly what Harrison was doing, dragging on a survival suit stolen from the rescue crew and then jumping over the side and swimming into what seemed like nothingness. And if he had looked, he might have seen the *Queen Mary* out there, with one of her boats launched only a hundred or so feet away, almost invisible in the rain, mist and waves, bobbing like a cork.

Not that it would have mattered anyway.

"Jerry! Go below and get every thermal blanket you can get your hands on." Looking around the deck, he trotted over to Lewis as Jansson followed orders. "Do you think we can spare anyone to man the pumps yet?"

Lewis paused in retying a line. "Maybe a few. You'll have to have them alternate, though; that kind of work exhausts people fast."

"Gotcha. Send 'em over. I have to get back to getting the other crew onboard."

"Aye aye, Captain," Lewis chuckled dryly, then went to round up people to start to pump out the water collected in the hull.

Corry watched him go, then went back to the bulwark, just as the *Wildstorm's* first boat arrived.

Everything was proceeding according to plan.

Everything was going wrong.

There wasn't any other way to put it; every single thing that could throw a serious spanner into his plans happened. There wasn't enough epoxy to patch a dinghy's hull, let alone that of a schooner; no one had anticipated a major hull leak at sea that an emergency call on a communicator couldn't mitigate. There was no serious diving gear, just a half dozen emergency oxygen canisters that guaranteed, at their grand total of six, four minutes of air; Scotty figured that could be *maybe* about twenty minutes of diving time, but would likely be less. But all of the rest of the oxygen canisters were with the emergency first aid kits and the crews using them. And there *were* survival suits, but every one of those was in use by the rescue team, either for them or the safe transfer of the *Wildstorm's* survivors.

Not enough time, not enough air, not enough materials.

Scotty ran around the below decks, gathering what he could from various lockers. He complained under his breath about it about it the entire way, but that was more to distract himself from how terrifying the prospect of diving under the boat was, and the inevitability of having to *anyway*.

After all, there wasn't a hope in the world of changing the simple facts: The *Grey* was going down. She now had near a foot of water on her hold deck, and with every single drop, there was more and more stress on the boards and a steadily shortening righting arm. Something was going to give, or something would knock her over, but left alone, she had no hope. She would sink.

It was inevitable.

Leaping down the steps, he landed in that foot of water. There was now only one lamp still burning. Her nose went into the trough of a wave, and the water came rushing down the deck, nearly taking him right off of his feet.

"Dammit," Scotty said, to no one in particular, fighting the movement of the water as her bow rose again and he had to battle his way along a deck that couldn't decide if it was uphill or down. When he finally made it to the room he had been aiming for, it was a foot and an inch. Water was coming up through the floorboards, where the caulking had sprung.

It was rapidly reaching the point of no return; as Corry had called it, the zero moment point. It was that point where her center of gravity, now altered by the water, canceled out her natural buoyancy. And once that point was passed, there was nothing that would save her.

With that much water inside of the hull, that point was getting closer by the second.

Digging through the equipment that had come loose from all of the wave action, Scotty was closer to panic than he wanted to admit even to himself. Of all of the people onboard, he knew the numbers better than anyone. Her fate was his, and determined the lives of every single person onboard and every single person they were trying to save. If he failed, it wasn't just the schooner herself at stake.

He almost whooped for joy when he found the lightweight life raft, a backup of backups. Snatching it and a long coil of rope, he made back for the gun deck where the rest of his ship-saving gear was stowed.

Corry didn't know what his best friend was planning. If he had, it was a surefire thing that he would have put a stop to it. On a storm-surged ocean during the pre-dawn hours of morning, it was courting a deathwish.

It's said that there's a fine line between courage and stupidity, and Montgomery Scott was walking right on it. Not to say that he was usually foolish, at least not before this; if anything, he tried to err on the side of caution most of the time. Double-check everything. Always have a backup plan. In fact, have a backup plan for the backup plan. Go a few more backups deep after. Caution had kept him alive.

Scotty was probably the last person in the galaxy anyone would expect to throw all of his chips down on one hand, particularly one this incredibly *bad*.

That thought made him pause on the taffrail, looking into the streaked waves that were all the more menacing for the *darkness*, for the way they appeared out of the rain and the night and into the fragile radius of light around the roiling schooner.

They were oddly silent, at least compared to the nightmare howl of the wind. Mountains marching, dissolving, reforming, then smashing themselves against the *Lady Grey*, only then becoming thunder. He could feel it reverberate hard enough that it was like being punched in the chest.

It was like getting a glimpse at the very end of all things.

And it was a reminder, yet again, of just how small he really was. How small they all were. But forward, people were running around, hustling to tend to the half-frozen rescues, pulling more people out of the water, and generally doing all they could anyway.

And then, there he was, hesitating. Finding a reason to stall, maybe half-hoping in the back of his mind that someone would stop him. He ran through the list one more time: O2 canisters, check. Light, check. Epoxy, check. Life raft, check. Rope, check. A float to keep his head above the water when the cold shock hit, check.

He had everything that he could have that might make any kind of a difference.

It wasn't exactly *fear* stopping him, though; more, the *facts*. Aye, he was afraid, who wouldn't be, but that was grounded in basic, immutable facts. He had maybe -- optimistically -- twenty minutes of dive time, but he would lose the ability to swim effectively before that, in all likelihood; would lose his manual dexterity even earlier. The patch probably wasn't going to require fine motor control, but he had no idea how big it would need to be.

He also wasn't a particularly strong swimmer, let alone an experienced diver.

Everything he'd ever learned -- growing up in a port town on the North Sea, occasionally going out on boats with his uncles, and in Basic during survival training -- was that if you ended up in cold water, try to get back out of it. If you couldn't get out of it, try to curl up on yourself, stay put and conserve heat. *Definitely* don't intentionally submerge yourself and then stay that way, because that was pretty much a kind of suicide.

By diving, he was going to be doing everything wrong willfully.

Every single thing.

*C'mon*, he pleaded with himself, heart hammering in his chest, trembling with the thunder of the waves hitting the schooner. *Jump*.

The waves heaved and the *Lady Grey* rolled sluggishly; she was fighting the heavy seas and her ever-shortening righting arm, and she was the single only thing between the people relying on her and the ocean that would eat them all without mercy when she could no longer protect them.

Ultimately, it was that knowledge that gave him the nerve; Scotty took a deep breath, clutched the float tight to his chest, closed his eyes and threw himself out into the end of all things.

Forward and above, the exhausted, waterlogged and emotionally threadbare cadets -- crew and survivor alike -- kept pulling themselves together.

"How many more have we got?" Corry asked Lewis, as the bos'un came aboard from lifeboat three.

"Everyone's out of the water now," Lewis answered, grabbing hold of the bulwark and leaning on it for a moment or two. It was a hell of a lot of work to pull soaked and torpid people from an ocean and still keep a lifeboat from being capsized by waves. The fact that Team C could do it was no small compliment. "A head count shows no casualties, but there are some pretty hypothermic people in there; they were in that water

about twenty minutes before Scotty even heard them, near as anyone can tell."

Cor nodded, mentally running through the checklist of things that still needed to be completed. He had control of the sailors, they had a few men on the pumps, everyone else who wasn't in the midst of those tasks were tending to the unexpected guests.

Now-- now for the hull leak. "We're going to have to get some people on patching the hull. Right now, the pumps are only slowing it down a little." Frowning, Corry looked around the deck. "Where's Scotty?"

"Haven't seen him," Lewis said, standing straight again. "Want me to go looking?"

"Yeah, send him up here. I need someone good to supervise repairs."

Lewis nodded and trotted off, fairly spry for being as tired as he no doubt was. Corry took a deep breath, turning to the next task at hand. Seemed like there were a million things to do, and every single one of them was vying for space at the forefront of his mind. But the wind was calming fast, and though the waves were still high, at least visibility had increased.

Only peripherally, he was aware that the sky was starting to creep into light.

Turning and walking to the opposite side, he helped one of the shell-shocked crewmembers of the *Wildstorm* down to the sheltered quarterdeck, where there were people who could help them below. Then he went back forwards.

And then he nearly lost his footing, he stopped so fast.

Standing on the deck, looking like he was about to drop right in place, was Sean Kelley.

Corry froze for a second, then jolted forward, heart giving a tired, overwrought leap. "*The Queen Mary?!!*" he asked, praying that the steel ship hadn't met a fate similar to the *Wildstorm*. If she had--

Sean shook his head, reeling and shivering so hard he could barely stand, apparently not able to find enough strength to answer in more than a word. "Safe."

Corry bit on his bottom lip, mind racing; he moved to support the other cadet and get Sean below where he could strip and dry off and maybe warm up and then Corry could find out what *happened*.

A sense of fear gnawing deep in his gut, he led Sean back to the quarterdeck.

It was so much more brutal than he'd thought it would be.

The shock from the cold was expected. Scotty had known that was coming. And he had known that the waves were big enough and fierce enough to knock him around relentlessly before he'd be able to get his breathing back under control.

He had known that it would be physically painful.

He had known it would be *dark*.

Even knowing all of that, even knowing it would *be* brutal, didn't come close to the reality of being surrounded by black and growling mountains of seawater; of being almost thrown into the air and then sliding down into the trough again. Or of how panicky he felt, thrown right into hyperventilating amidst those monsters, clinging to that float for all he was worth. Even after he managed to regain control of his lungs, sometimes he was driven under by a wave breaking right over his head, battering him down like a giant fist.

In all of that, it was desperation and willpower alone that let him keep his head, let go of that float and dive under the water, taking advantage of the weight of his waterlogged clothes and the gear he had tethered to himself to help.

Clutching the large, high-powered light he'd hooked to his jury-rigged harness and swimming as well as he could, battling against the turbulent water so he could find the bottom of the *Lady Grey's* hull in all of that, he could already feel how much this was going to take out of him. But he dove deeper still, trying to get down to where the surface motion of the water wasn't jerking him around so much; the last thing he needed was to end up right under her without realizing until it was too late and have her come down on him.

One proper whack from a schooner with a hundred and ninety-one tons of displacement and that would be it. He would be dead and everyone above him would not be too far behind.

Even with the light shining out -- the strongest one they had aboard that could be carried by hand -- the darkness was near complete.

Along the beam of it, bright became green, which then became nothing.

He couldn't have been thrown too far from her, because he was tethered to her taffrail where he'd gone over; he'd given himself probably three times as much rope as his most generous estimate of what he'd need, but even then, there was a limit. But it was hard to even--

And down there, how impossible it really was knowing which way was which--

He could have been turned around, or--

It was the cavitation that gave her away; shoved him hard as her stern came down off a wave, and the displacement pushed him just barely far enough that her rudder didn't take his face off.

It flashed in the beam of light, whisper close, visible in a wild mess of bubbles.

He couldn't hear the terrorized little noise he made in his throat at that, the roar was fierce even under the water, but he could *feel* it.

Shaking -- from cold, from shock, from the soul-freezing *fear* of having just nearly met a gory end, it didn't even matter which -- he kicked backwards in the water enough to hopefully avoid a repeat, and managed to get a breath of air off of one of the canisters, nearly choking from the unfamiliar blast of the mechanism working, but at least it took the worst of the sharp edges from the horror of nearly having his ship land on him.

*Move*, he told himself, and pushed deeper as he made to get under the *Lady Grey* properly, ears aching fiercely for the pressure as he did; wasn't even that deep, but it ached all the way to his jaw. Just another piece of the torment, but when he turned back up, taking another breath, he could *just* make her hull out as it ghosted in and out of the fragile beam of light, still hove-to, riding out the storm.

Nineteen minutes left, maybe, of diving time given his air supply. Maybe. Less, before his limbs quit. Less still, before he lost manual dexterity.

He'd been in the water at least five already.

Approaching his own zero moment, Scotty pushed past the cold and started hunting for the leak.

The gundeck was a mass of bodies; the *Wildstorm* wasn't anywhere the size of the *Lady Grey* or the *Queen Mary*, but she still had a team of twenty and all twenty of them, plus some of the crew of the *Lady Grey* and the *Queen Mary's* captain, made for cramped quarters, as everyone tried to perform first aid and warm up too-cold fellow cadets and get information.

Corry ended up just taking Sean back to his own cabin, which was about the size of a large walk-in closet but was quieter than the other areas; he paused long enough to borrow a set of Scotty's clothes -- Scotty and Sean were close enough in size -- and then didn't talk as he helped Sean strip to skin and get dressed in the dry clothes.

Sean's teeth were chattering and his whole body was wracked with shivers, and Cor's hands were shaky from the constant surge and retreat of adrenaline, but they made good speed on the whole operation despite that. It was as he was mostly dressed again that Sean managed to force out, "I jumped."

It stunned Corry; the idea that anyone would risk jumping into that ocean right now without dry survival suits, oxygen tanks and a whole crew of people ready to pull them back out was *terrifying*.

"God, Sean, *why?*" he asked, grabbing his blanket from his bunk and wrapping it around the other cadet before crowding Sean back to sit in the chair at the chart table that Corry had bolted to the floor

"They wouldn't stop." Sean didn't make any effort to take hold of the edges of the blanket; didn't make any effort to wipe away his tears, either.

"For us and the *Wildstorm?*" Corry asked, as he pulled that blanket tight himself, then crouched, holding easily to the rolling deck as he searched Sean's expression. He could feel the *Lady Grey's* wounds, too, but if they were in danger of being attacked by the *Queen Mary* right now, while they were in the slow but steady process of sinking--

Sean shook his head. "Jamming communicators-- and-- and transponders," he got out, though it took him a few tries. "Tried to-- to get them to help, but--"

"But they wouldn't." Corry swallowed, mouth twisting; there was an instant war in his chest between the horror and the *rage*--

But it would have to wait.

"They didn't stop," Sean repeated again, voice breaking. "I m--"

Whatever else he might have said was lost as he dissolved into sobs.

His own throat aching in empathy, Corry closed his eyes hard, then stood. "Get some rest, Captain Kelley; my bunk is yours for now. You're safe. And-- we'll figure out the rest later."

He didn't wait for an acknowledgment, just slipped back out; one thing at a time, and right now, that was going to have to be fixing the *Lady Grey*.

He went hunting for Lewis and Scotty.

The hull had taken a fair bit of damage; the hole wasn't huge, but it was *ugly*. That weasel Harrison had managed to effectively place the charges from the bilge to essentially peel some of her hull planks away from her skeleton, and when Scotty got a real look at it with the big light, his heart might have hit his boots, if not for the fact he was already freezing to death.

Just keeping up on the schooner was work, given the wave action and his own stiffening muscles. His hands were getting more and more useless, too. Every single motion was using up heat and oxygen he couldn't have spared even before he dove properly, but--

But he wasn't done yet.

But his ship wasn't safe yet.

Getting the patch in place wasn't easy, but between kicking and elbows and raw desperation, he'd gotten that liferaft unfurled and covered the hole, after disabling the auto-inflation. The boards still clinging to her skeleton, though, meant that suction wasn't going to hold the patch in place without it being fixed there, so it was a bloody good thing he'd brought along that epoxy, but then he needed both increasingly clumsy hands to use it; he could knock the cap off on the bottom of her hull, but applying it took both hands because they weren't working right.

The big light that had seen him this far looked terribly eerie as it sank down into the darkness as he abandoned it.

The light of his penlight was even more fragile, where it was gripped hard between the epoxy bottle and his palm, affording him just *enough* visibility to see what he was doing.

Once he was working, though, he was making headway; it was while he was working, putting together the numbers at the speed of thought, that he realized that he wasn't going to have enough time. He was going through air faster than he'd expected to, he was already cold and exhausted, he was losing mobility, the damage was just *too much*--

It would take an outright miracle to save the *Lady Grey* at this point.

Fixing the raft to the hull of the wounded schooner wasn't anything that mentally difficult, even, but the physical effort of it was just more than he had in him. Not if he wanted to get out of it alive, anyway; despite the realization that diving was dangerously close to suicidal, he *had* built time into his estimate to get back out. To escape from under her and get himself back above water and hopefully get someone's attention to haul him out before he couldn't keep his head up anymore.

Scotty had always held onto two things in his life; his right to breathe -- to *exist* -- and his ability to fight for that. When everything else was taken from him, he'd had that, and he'd held onto it no matter how hopeless his defiance. And no matter how much he'd sometimes wanted to stop.

Whatever else, he was a survivor. A fighter.

He'd had to be. No one else was going to do it for him.

He'd wondered more recently what he would ever be willing to give those things up for, and he'd even come to some conclusions about it. But even when he'd gone into the smoke to try to save the *Lady Grey*, there was no part of him that really thought his life was on the line. His heart, aye. But not his life.

And-- now it was. And his ship and crew were over his head right now, hanging in the balance.

It really only came down to one choice with two possible outcomes: Sink or swim. Fight or retreat. Breathe, or not, but no matter how hard he railed against the universe for its injustices, nothing was going to change it.

That only left him alone and the question of what he'd be willing to give up his right to breathe for.

*Zero moment.*

Even in the dark and cold, he bared his teeth back at the universe.

If a miracle wouldn't be given to him, he'd just have to make his own. The universe be damned.

## Part IV: Zero Moment: Chapter 6

### Chapter 6:

Sunday, June 11th, 2243

The Lady Grey

On the North Atlantic

The lifeboats were being battened down; in the heavy, dim, gray predawn light, the rain had mostly turned to a cold but faint drizzle. A few of the shell-shocked *Wildstorm* survivors threw in and helped the *Lady Grey's* crew secure the deck gear and work on putting her back in Bristol fashion, or they watched as off some ways away, the last of the *Wildstorm* vanished below the waves. Everyone else was just trying to recover or help their rescues recover.

Except Corry.

He would have stopped and taken a moment to admire that camaraderie, if not for the frantic searching he was doing.

There was at least three feet of water in the hold even with men on the pumps. He'd headed down there right after leaving Sean because he'd thought maybe Scotty would have tried to get at the damage from the bilge, and the only way to get there was from the hold. He'd gone down there expecting to find Lewis, Scotty and repairs already underway.

Corry had known that his ship was damaged. Had known it was a potentially mortal wound. He'd *known* it. But until he saw that black water rolling like an ocean inside of her hull, a miniature tide answering to the waves down there in the dark, he hadn't realized how *badly*.

No one was down there, and it was only then that he remembered what Scotty had said--

--so any repairs'll have to be done from outside--

--and he turned and pounded up the stairs, past the over-occupied gun deck, up onto the main deck and that was when he ran right into Lewis, who was throwing himself down from the quarterdeck, eyes filled with fear and -- so much worse -- *apology*.

Corry knew the horrible truth the instant before Lewis even opened his mouth to say, "He's not aboard. But there's a rope anchored to the taffrail."

The invisible lance through his heart jerked a wounded sound out of Corry, even as he bolted up the stairs of the quarterdeck.

The penlight vanished like a firefly; bright, to green, to nothing; tumbled and flashed

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away from him and he remembered when it was gifted to him. Sixteen, at the salvage yard; he'd just disproven Perera's beautiful theory about linked Klingon shielding systems three weeks before. Mister McMillan had given the penlight to him, then walked away, never to return.

Later, though; later was the first time he saw a firefly. A field exercise in Basic, in the North American south. A moment of wonder; light, in the darkness.

He'd run out of strength even before he ran out of air. It wasn't even a panicky moment; by then, he was beyond tired. Beyond cold.

*Beyond.*

He took one last breath, but couldn't even reach for the next canister. Somewhere above or sideways or behind, the *Lady Grey's* hull was patched; his last uncoordinated swat had sealed the last bit of the liferaft to her, and he'd tried to swim, then. He maybe even succeeded a little.

Now, though, he'd lost all orientation.



*It's April*-- he thought, but that wasn't quite right.

Across from him in the lobby, lit in monochrome, his best friend;  
between them, all the unspoken heartache and a choice to be made.  
And at sea, Cor beside him, on the other side of the brace of the bulwark, a bookend.  
Before that, then-- go far enough back, to a podium.

Up or back or sideways, the *Lady Grey*; blood and sweat and tears from the keel on up;  
up or back or  
beyond.

No one had ever shown him, when he was younger, that there were things worth giving up your right to breathe for.

It was dark. A place he knew well.

His chest hurt, in some distant way. He thought he'd be able to breathe, though, if he tried, that he wasn't really underwater, that all this darkness--

He'd been drowning for awhile now;  
forever now;  
breathing in the water was just a formality, aye?

*It's March*-- he thought, but-- not quite

right

*It's*--

something grabbed around his chest, something stronger than a rope

*It's*--

--the smear of white or gray or--

"Don't fight," the voice said, and it was panic-stricken; even distant, sharp with fear and--

--he didn't know if he was fighting or not or breathing or not or--

"Please!" The voice was closer, had become a plea so raw it ached to hear it.

He knew that voice.

*Corry*.

He'd lost all orientation. Somewhere above the iron gray sky, Polaris was one degree off True North and he was here, or there, or--

But it turned out that he *was* breathing, if raggedly, and it turned out that he wasn't down in the dark anymore, that his head was above the still rolling water, and that the band of steel around his chest was what was holding him up, instead of what was holding him down, and so he did

something he'd never done before and stopped fighting--

--and managed to make his mouth work long enough to ask, "Got me?"

And Cor answered, after a moment, confusion creeping into the fear in his voice, "I've gotcha."

An answer, all its own.

"A'right," Scotty said, and was somewhere he had never been before; here, or there, or elsewhere.

He just laid his head back against Cor's shoulder and, for the first time in his life, trusted that someone else would fight for him.

## Part V: Across the Line: Chapter 1

### Part V: Across the Line

Dawn points, and another day  
Prepares for heat and silence. Out at sea the dawn wind  
Wrinkles and slides. I am here  
Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning.

-T.S. Eliot; East Coker

#### Chapter 1:

*Sunday, June 11th, 2243*  
*The Lady Grey*  
*On the North Atlantic*

He didn't get his sense of time back all at once; instead, consciousness was a series of moments and impressions, strung along by the sound of voices, and he might have been more worried about it, except Cor's voice was the thread tying them all together, at least at first.

He didn't have anything left in him to open his eyes, anyway, so he wasn't sure how long it was. Only that it *was* long. He knew, vaguely, that he was being moved around and that things were happening around him, but finding even enough strength to acknowledge it was out of his reach.

He didn't have anything left; he'd given it all.

Or-- almost all.

He was breathing yet; that, though, had been a gift.

He wasn't cold, until he was again. Turned out a person couldn't sleep and shiver at the same time, so there was some undefinable purgatory where he was too beat to be properly awake, but too cold to escape it. Breathing overwarm air didn't stop the shaking, neither did whatever heated thing he was wrapped up in; he didn't know how long that went on, either, but it was long enough that it felt like forever.

Then, finally, at some point there was no marking, he was gone again into a sleep so heavy that he didn't even dream.

Scotty was a little more put together the next time he managed to find his way back to the world; enough to feel the ride of the *Lady Grey*, enough to know from that alone that she was safe. The rocking of the waves was less than it had been during the storm. He was sore straight through, like every muscle had been overworked. Felt warm enough, but it also felt tenuous, as if anything could take it away again.

Time was fragile.

Something was tickling his face.

He furrowed his eyebrows, then he managed to fight his eyes open for the first time since he'd been in the ocean and saw nothing but blond hair. It was more than he necessarily had in him to pick his head up, neck stiff and protesting, but he did; more yet, to process Cor's relative position to his own.

Somehow, Cor managed to sleep in a chair with his arms tucked around himself and remain stationary despite the rocking schooner; he had his head on the bunk next to where Scotty's had been.

*So, this is what it feels like*, Scotty thought, but he wasn't sure what *this* was or what exactly he was feeling. Only that it was important.

Unable to keep his nails into consciousness, he put his head back down, pressed his brow to Corry's crown regardless of the tickle, and fell back to sleep again, if a bit easier.

Cor was gone when he woke up the time after, what *felt* like a fair piece of time after; he thought he was maybe delirious when he found himself looking at Sean Kelley, sitting with the chair back at the table.

"They're pack animals, you know. Family animals," Sean said, hitching Corry's blue blanket up tighter around his shoulders, after a moment where they just stared at one another. "Wolves, I mean. I grew up in Montana; at dusk, you could hear them singing."

It wasn't a *non sequitur*, exactly. It *was* more than Scotty knew how to process. He took a deep breath -- aware again of what that *felt like* -- and let it out; felt how much it weighed to do that, too. "M nae sure ye're 'ere," he said, mouth not wanting to work right; still, he felt it was necessary to let Sean know that he might not actually be real.

Sean didn't seem to care whether he was real or not. "World War III was the best thing for them," he said. "Even though Colonel Green's army devastated Bozeman. And Livingston. Even with the radiation. They didn't have to survive so many of us anymore." He closed his eyes; in the soft light of the cabin, his face was shining with tears. "We go and pick up a tray from a cafeteria, but they have to fight every day to eat. Or for space to live. For everything." There was a beat, then he opened his eyes and said, "I jumped."

Scotty still wasn't sure he wasn't dreaming -- or hallucinating -- Sean sitting there. But he said, "Me too." Solidarity for a feeling, he thought.

"I know." Sean freed his arm from the blanket and scrubbed his forearm across his face, voice tight. "It's terrifying, isn't it? I don't know how to even-- say how horrible it was. How *lonely*. You know?"

Scotty thought about the black, growling mountains of water. "Aye," he said, closing his eyes again; if Sean was the product of delirium, it probably didn't matter so much anyway.

Sean was quiet for a moment, then said, "No one jumped after me."

It didn't sound like a lament, so much; more like a man putting some kind of realization together.

"I woulda." Scotty didn't need to think about it; whatever bad blood had existed between them before just didn't seem important now. But it wouldn't have ever, he knew. He would have jumped after Sean, or anyone else; it would have never occurred to him not to.

This was, though, the first time that he *realized* that. He didn't know what that changed, if anything.

Sean made a sound like a laugh, if a laugh could be that fractured. "I know *you* would have. I would have jumped for you, too. I guess I kinda did, in a way. I guess we both kinda did. But that's not what I meant."

There was no understanding that right now; there would have to be a time later for it. Scotty hummed back something of an acknowledgment, even as the rocking of the *Lady Grey* and the tenuous sensation of being warm and too heavy to move was pulling him away again.

Right at the edge of *gone*, he heard Sean say, "Now I know why they call you Wolf."

It was the next morning altogether before Scotty would have considered it fair to classify himself as fully coherent. Mostly because he woke up very aware of every bit of abuse he'd put himself through and was desperately craving a cup of coffee.

It also turned out that Sean Kelley was *not* a hallucination; he found that out because Sean was still there when he woke up properly, still feeling a bit shaky, but otherwise clear-headed and capable of fighting off gravity in order to get up.

Sean apologized for borrowing his clothes, a rather surreal greeting; Scotty didn't actually care, because he was in someone else's Academy sweats, someone who was a size up from him, and he hadn't the first memory of when or how that happened. But he did shoo Sean out so he could get dressed in something he could wear out on deck.

When he got up there, feeling as if it had been a lot longer than it had since the last time he'd seen daylight, he was a little surprised that they were moving forward; down below, he hadn't quite put it together. But the sails were set and the *Lady Grey* was bowing along, though not very swiftly.

The ocean that had nearly ended them all before was oddly gentle now, nothing but rolling swells.

Even with his storm coat on -- he'd left that behind on the gun deck before he'd jumped, and was grateful that someone must have returned it to his cabin -- being outside had him shivering here or there whenever the wind hit him wrong. But he managed to dodge the inevitable questions from everyone who laid eyes on him by asking where Cor was.

Apparently, no one wanted to get in the way of whatever discussion they were expecting to happen there.

As he looked at his best friend, standing there up on the foredeck, Scotty could understand that sentiment. But he took a deep breath and headed forward nonetheless.

He still didn't know what to say when he got there. Cor glanced over, and it was clear enough from his face and the shadows under and in his eyes that the whole thing had taken a hell of a toll on him. Then Corry looked out forward again; he gave a half-shake of his head, seemingly entirely to himself.

It was quite awhile before he said anything; when he did, though, his voice was uneven and filled with bewildered hurt, "I could have killed you." He knotted his jaw, then, and narrowed his eyes at the sea before adding, "I gave you an order that could have killed you."

Scotty wasn't sure what he could say to that; of all the things he'd been expecting Corry to say, that hadn't even been a possibility. But he thought carefully about his answer before saying, "I followed it knowin' it could. And I woulda gone even if ye hadn't given it."

It was the truth. And, he thought, it should have been *some* reassurance; it wasn't fair for Cor to carry that on his shoulders, anyway. There needed to be a command decision at the time, someone needed to do the work; anything less, and they might have all died there.

Corry shook his head, eyes scanning the horizon; then he asked, "How would I have lived with that?"

And any answers that Scotty thought he tentatively had dissolved, just that fast.

He opened his mouth to try to offer *something*-- but there was nothing there. Because it wasn't a question about command decisions or duty or what work needed done; it wasn't a question of necessity. At least, it wasn't any straightforward one.

It wasn't the kind of question that could be papered over with platitudes or philosophy or self-sacrifice, either; it couldn't be answered because there *was* no answer. He hung on the end of the question and tried to imagine what he'd be feeling, if their positions were reversed; if he'd been the one giving the order.

If he'd been the one who'd found that rope and *realized*.

The invisible hand that grabbed his heart was nothing but ice, cold and sharp enough that it caught his breath short.

"I'm sorry," he said, because it was all he *could* say. Not for diving, he didn't actually regret that, but--

But Scotty had *felt it*, before he dove, that other world that he wasn't a part of, looking through to the one that he still was, then. That other world, the one where you no longer had certainties. Where you only had questions that couldn't ever be answered.

And then, he had made a choice and became a part of it.

Except, he didn't go alone. When he'd crossed that invisible line, his best friend had stepped across it with him. Had given up a place in the world they both knew and understood, and stepped into something else.

And neither of them could ever go back again.

"*I'm sorry*," he said again, and it came from his soul.

There was no deference in the reply. Corry just looked over, resolute.

"I'm not."

"I didn't know what was going on until it was too late," Sean said, looking far more put together, though just like the rest of them, he likewise looked like he was still exhausted. "I can't really tell you much about the system they've got set up, but I know that it jams your frequencies, then sets up a kind of 'ghost' of your signals so that anyone monitoring thinks you're safe and somewhere else."

It was early afternoon before anyone aboard the *Lady Grey* felt capable of gathering to discuss strategy; by then, it had been a day and a half since the storm had ended, and even then, it seemed no one was in particularly good shape. But it couldn't really be put off any further, so Corry quietly passed word around for all of the people in charge to meet in his cabin.

It was tight with all of them stuffed in there, and there'd probably never been a more unlikely group gathered, but it at least allowed them to properly exchange information face to face without having to bring two whole crews in on it.

"Why the *Wildstorm*, though? I mean, hell, you've got a ship going down and you don't stop?" Lewis sounded more than a little pissed off about it, leaning on the wall with his arms crossed.

"I--" Sean sighed, rubbing at his forehead, hunched a little over his own knees from where he was sitting on Cor's bunk. "I don't honestly think they believed it. I mean, visibility was awful. The only reason I even saw you guys myself was because you had your emergency lights on, and I think they thought it was all a ploy so that they'd stop and you could fire on 'em."

"Which means they knew about the guns." Corry shook his head, holding his coffee mug close to his chest.

"Well, yeah," Sean said, smiling for the first time since he'd come aboard, though it wasn't in humor. "Did you genuinely think no one would catch wind of that? *Everyone* knew about it."

Maya, the *Wildstorm's* captain, piped up there dryly, "Can confirm. Some teams were running betting pools about it."

"We *wanted* to think we got away with it," Scotty piped up, getting a chuckle from the majority of the group gathered there, though he didn't feel his own deadpan humor right then. "The power o' wishful thinking."

"Wait. If they didn't know what was going on with the *Wildstorm*, why did they jam her transponder too?" Lewis asked, after a few moments where they were all chewing it over.

Sean shook his head, plainly exasperated. "I have no idea. I really didn't know anything. We picked up you guys trying to call the *Wildstorm*, and we picked up them calling for help, and I tried to get everyone to heave to and help out. But they refused, and Keith just said to keep going. And everyone did."

It was a small comfort that Keith O'Sullivan would probably be facing a whole lot worse at the end of this than the *Lady Grey's* commanders, but Scotty would take it. "So, what we're sayin' is that he committed high seas mutiny, Harrison committed high seas treason, and we're about to go and commit high seas piracy. And that's all we really know."

"Succinctly," Corry replied, with a wan smile.

"Which makes us, by far, the most cut-throat senior class of engineering cadets ever to darken the Academy's doorstep," Lewis said, bobbing his head to the side and sounding just a wee bit proud of that fact.

Maya snorted, shaking her head. "Speak for yourselves."

"So, what do we do now?" Albright asked, having been staying in the background and watching the discussion in rapt fascination.

Scotty shrugged. "We go on." He couldn't really see any other alternative; they were still being jammed, anyway, so unless they figured out how to crack through that, they were still on their own out there.

Though, he did have to agree with Lewis: They really *were* a mercenary lot.

"The *Queen Mary's* gonna round the corner, if she's running full and by, probably tomorrow morning. Given our hull damage, though, we can't really risk running all out. She'll hold, but she won't take too severe a beating." Corry handed his coffee cup off to Scotty, standing and pacing around, even though he only had about two strides to do it with. "I guess we could try modifying some tricorders to see if we can't break through her jamming and call Starfleet about what happened. I can't imagine that the *Wildstorm's* crew wants anything more to do with the water, let alone high seas warfare."

"You've got that right," Maya said, shaking her head again. "Look, personally I'm not going to stop any of you from doing your-- I don't know, white whale chasing, but yes, please, leave my crew out of it."

"Trying to get through to Starfleet *would* be the smart thing to do," Lewis said, sighing. "We'll probably still get into some trouble for having cannons onboard, but if we don't use 'em--"

"That's a shame," Albright muttered, though he didn't sound like he was too against the idea of giving up the fight.

Scotty listened to them, absently taking a sip of the coffee he was holding before making a face at it. Then he shoved it back at Corry as he paced by, though he didn't bother saying anything about it. "All in favor o' not fighting?"

Sean, not surprisingly, put his hand up; Maya's was up a split second later. And after a moment or two, Lewis and Albright followed suit, though clearly a lot more reluctantly.

Cor took his coffee cup back and stopped pacing, raising an eyebrow at Scotty. But he kept his hand down.

"Good." Scotty stood up, tossing a dry half-smile to the other four. "That way, when we see this through, ye've all done the right and proper thing by tellin' us it was a bad idea."

And with that, he walked out.

With two of the *Wildstorm's* boats, plus the regulation number of their own, Scotty figured that taking one and doing a little work on it couldn't hurt. It wasn't like he was making it unusable; if they really needed to abandon ship, it'd still function as a lifeboat. But it would also serve as something else, in the meantime.

Something a little more unorthodox.

The *Lady Grey* had a small compliment of extra booms and gaffs. The idea being that if anything happened to one of them, she could be repaired at sea. She also had a full suit of extra sails, and any number of extra coils of line.

Scotty had commandeered a good portion of the forward deck, having chased off pretty much anyone who would get in his way, and was in the process of building a miniature *Lady Grey*. If there was one thing that he had figured out about sailing, it was that getting an idea of scale on the ocean wasn't an easy thing; there were any number of ways to fall for a trick of the eyes. And a trick was exactly what he was engineering.

"C'mon. If I'm gonna be called on to do any fancy sailing, I've gotta know what the plan is."

Corry had been watching and occasionally helping with this little endeavor. He'd already guessed that it was a decoy, but he hadn't managed to guess what purpose the decoy was going to serve.

"I need to know where she'll be, and when," Scotty replied, stepping in the little main mast he'd created out of one of the *Lady Grey's* spare gaffs.

"I don't know if I can give you exact coordinates," Cor said, as he helped from the other side of the boat, starting to hook up the standing rigging to the mast. "I can take a bunch of really good guesses, but that's about it."

"It'll have to be good enough, then."

"Then what?"

Scotty focused on the task at hand for a minute or two, then glanced up. "We're gonna lay in wait. Douse our lanterns, send out our decoy here, and we're gonna wait until she's close enough to breathe on, preferably in the dark."

Both of Corry's eyebrows went up at that. "Night attack?"

"Boardin' attack. I'm not about to go firin' on her while she's manned. But if she's lookin' at a decoy--"

"Then she won't be looking at us. And at night, without our lanterns?"

Scotty narrowed his eyes, looking off at the sea past Corry and the *Lady Grey's* bulwark. "We'll be the *Ghost*."

## Part V: Across the Line: Chapter 2

### Chapter 2:

Wednesday, June 14th, 2243

The Lady Grey

On the North Atlantic

The fog wasn't planned, but it couldn't have been any better if it was.

The *Lady Grey* had drifted through the peasoup haze that had risen from the sea only a short time before the *Queen Mary* was due to arrive. Running under jibs and staysails only, she crept through the water rather than bounded; all those on deck, only enough to keep her under control, didn't speak above whispers.

They had been playing something like chess for the better part of twenty-four hours, sailing the *Grey* into position, adjusting her course when needed. After the decoy was finished and outfitted with running lamps, Scotty had put some of his improvisational talents to rigging a tricorder and communicator to try to track the *Queen Mary*, despite all jamming. The tricorder for its detailed information, the communicator for its range. It had taken him hours, some of those spent growling under his breath at not having enough tools for the job, but he'd finally done it.

They could have probably used it to contact Starfleet. But they didn't. Regardless of their guests, Team C -- who had started this -- was determined to see it through.

But when it came down to it, only two people on that team planned to take the fall for the rest.

More probably would have. They were a loyal lot. But part of loyalty was knowing when not to ask for it.

The decoy looked the part, even if she didn't have the size. She set sail into the fog, this little boat that mimicked a schooner, complete right to her port and starboard running lamps, and her masthead light. Still tethered back to the schooner, of course, but that one thin line wasn't enough to destroy the illusion.

The fog, in the approaching dawn form, was starting to ease up. With any luck the distortion of it, as well as the sometimes strange perspectives at sea, would convince the *Queen Mary* that the *Lady Grey* was just half-drifting aimlessly in her path.

The real *Lady Grey* was dark, silent and invisible. If the decoy was a phantom, a trick, then she was the real ghost. Team C, absent only a handful left to sail the *Grey*, were waiting in the lifeboats already launched from her side, still connected to the falls to keep them from drifting off. They were all counting on the element of surprise in this venture; counting on the *Queen Mary* not seeing them, but seeing their decoy. Counting on the other crew not to even knowing they were there until it was too late.

The order had been passed for absolute silence before they went down in the boats. All vital communication took place via whispered relay, and that was it.

That left the quiet moments before the attack for reflection. Most of the *Grey's* crew of cadets were a mix between determined and giddy; it was exciting, if nothing else. While the danger of the storm had put a razor's edge on what had originally been a daring coup, nearly everyone still felt that it was a chance to do something outlandishly bold, possibly fun and certainly well-deserved.

Especially since they'd basically come to the conclusion that Starfleet just couldn't afford to court-martial *all* of them.

Corry sat shoulder to shoulder with his best friend, occasionally casting a look at the tricorder whenever Scotty uncovered the screen he had his hand over to check it himself. Other than that, though, Corry didn't say anything.

They hadn't done much talking in the past few days; it seemed like neither was exactly sure of what could be said. But they kept silent company anyway.

It still felt like they were in the water, though. It was a feeling that Cor hadn't been able to shake, despite his best efforts. He had tried to find something funny to say, or even something serious, but he kept running into an invisible wall; he couldn't feel anything definable as humor.

For that matter, he wasn't exactly sure what all he felt. He only knew that he felt shaken to the very bottom of his heart.

He only knew that he felt angry. And helpless. And lost.

*"How would I have lived with that?"*

When his father was sick, he knew that he was afraid and desperate, so he threw himself into trying to fix it, and while that had been the wrong thing to do -- at least, the way he did it -- it had given him space to find his way back without feeling helpless. After the fire, he was miserable and more than a little regretful, but he dug deep and he apologized and he set to work making things right again.

But this was the first time he'd ever had to genuinely look at that question. Not the question of what he would do to prevent the bad things from happening, but how he would live with it if he *couldn't*.

The fact that he didn't even have an *idea* of what the answer would be to that question--

Scotty shivered beside him briefly, probably a chill brought on by the fog, and Corry glanced over. Despite the look and quick nod he got back



-- "*I'm all right.*" -- it still bothered him. It was hard enough to grapple with the actual events; what it took to save Scotty, not only from the water, but the fire before that.

But he also was trying, and failing, to grapple with the miserable question of how he could have lived with it had he not been able to do either of those. And the-- the self-directed anger for having been the one giving the order that could have killed his best friend.

And finally, soul-deep *rage* towards those who'd set up both situations.

He didn't regret following Scotty into the fire, or the water. He never could.

But someone was gonna regret both of those happening in the first place.

He gestured to the tricoder and then looked at the screen when it was shown to him. It was just about the time to go, and he asked Scotty, "Ready?"

"I'm ready," was the quiet answer.

Corry nodded, unsmiling, then started whispering the orders down the relay.

"What is it?" O'Sullivan asked, having been practically dragged up on deck from his hammock. He squinted into the dark and the slowly lifting fog, trying to get a clear idea of what exactly he was supposed to be looking *at*.

The fact that the faintest edge of gray, dawn light had just started rising made it even more difficult.

It looked like a ship; a masthead light, a port and starboard running light, and the vaguely defined phantoms of white sails. But there was no way that it could be; they were in the lead, by far. And the *Lady Grey* was crippled.

"Looks like a ship to me," Maggie said, quietly. "But--"

"Shit!"

The single yell came from aft from the lone lookout; the *Queen Mary* had taken in sail and she had barely been moving to begin with, her steel hull making it harder for her to make use of the very light air, so posting more than one lookout seemed pointless. O'Sullivan couldn't guess at why they'd be yelling.

And then chaos broke loose.

Swarming over the sides and pulling themselves over the bulwark and through the scuppers were people, dark shadows in the still-dim light.

What was worse, though, was that Keith recognized some of them even then.

"Bleedin' *hell*," he muttered, and got ready to fight.

When the *Grey's* crew came aboard the *Queen Mary*, the world went mad.

Over twenty bellowing cadets scrambled aboard with makeshift grapples, hitting the deck with wailing war-cries, going from the bulwark to leaping on anything that moved, sometimes to the point of tackling *each other*.

Corry dodged two fists, one flying body and nearly ended up knocked back over the bulwark by another not two seconds after his feet hit the deck. "Cripes!"

"Reminds me of a barroom brawl," Scotty commented, both eyebrows up, as he neatly sidestepped whoever it was who had nearly plowed Corry overboard, having gotten aboard first. "Little more messy, though."

"You people are crazy!" that body said, then got to its feet and ran aft.

"Can you imagine this with swords and muskets?" Cor asked, having to dodge out of the way of one of their own teammates giving chase to whoever it was that just questioned their sanity.

"No, not really." Scotty shook his head and consulted his tricorder after looking up, no doubt making sure that he wasn't about to get ran into, decked or anything else. "I'm gonna try'n find whatever they're jammin' us with."

Corry nodded, then caught a glimpse of O'Sullivan across the deck swinging on Albright, who mercifully ducked in time. The gray light was beginning to rise at the same time as his own blood was. "I think I'm gonna do a little payback."

Scotty picked his head up to follow the look, then frowned, eyebrows drawn in a worried look. "Be careful. He throws a mean right."

"So do I." Cor bared his teeth in a smile that felt nothing at all like humor and started across the deck. He was just about to pick up speed and do a little body-checking when Maggie ran into him with a startled cry, trying to flee Jerry and Lewis.

"Corry, what are you doing?!" she asked, frantically, grabbing onto his arm and looking for all the galaxy like a damsel in distress from one of those old movies he collected. "This is-- this is--"

"Deserved," Corry answered, as he pulled free then took her arm, though not very hard, and held her there for Lewis and Jer. "Here, guys, one arsonist for the plank."

Maggie looked aghast; then, when she realized she was caught good, she started cussing at Cor even as the other two guys got a hand each on her arms.

"Love you, too, Mags." He gave her a sardonic smile and a mock salute, and then kept on going.

It was a clever little rig. Likewise tricorder-and-communicator based, just like his own modification, but much larger and more powerful. Overall, Scotty counted three different cannibalized tricorders, two communicators (likely one each for them and the *Wildstorm*), and the damned thing used the *Queen Mary's* mainmast as a sort of giant antenna. Probably, if he could see inside that, he'd find out exactly how.

Despite the fact that he was in the guts of the enemy's ship, despite the fact that the rig had put roughly fifty lives in genuine danger, he had to take time to admire the work itself. Whoever had come up with it and implemented it had a flare for improvisation he could appreciate, one engineer to another.

The sounds of the madness taking place up on the main deck were pretty well muffled down in the hold of the *Queen Mary*, though he could hear a couple of really good brawls going on up there. He was sort of surprised at himself for how little he wanted to get involved, too; it felt like any prior taste for violence he might have had lurking in his soul was firmly snuffed out in the North Atlantic a few days ago. Not that he still wasn't capable of a fist-fight, if it came down to it; he'd defend himself if he had to.

But the act of *not* fighting was still so new that Scotty wasn't sure exactly how to live with it yet.

Corry, on the other hand--

He frowned to himself, even as he studied the contraption in front of him. He didn't want to disable it yet; once it was shut down, Starfleet would realize that the *Wildstorm* was gone and that no one was where they were supposed to be, and it was a sure bet that they would be there in very short order.

But that wasn't what was really preying on his mind.

Scotty couldn't blame Cor for being a little off-balanced, and he certainly couldn't grudge any righteous anger, but the idea that the same leap into the water that had saved his own life might have cost Cor something that made him-- made him *Corry* was more than a little upsetting.

That his best friend could have given up something vital, just to protect him.

He'd tried to shake it off, but it was a persistent worry that had been dogging him for days. Even after the firm reassurance that Corry wasn't sorry about how things had played out.

Out of the two of them, Corry was the big-hearted, optimistic one who had been practically sickened by the rage that had gotten ahold of him before the fire; he sure didn't spend his life with his fists up, ready to take a swing at anyone or everyone the way Scotty had before.

And while they'd both been adrift and somewhat distant, still trying to find where they stood in this world, that grim look that Corry had been wearing earlier bothered Scotty.

He looked at the contraption again, and then shook his head. He could come back and deal with this later; whatever else, it couldn't be his priority. Then he turned around--

--and Harrison was holding a phaser.

"It's too late," Harrison said, voice shaking, practically crying from fear. "It's too late."

Keith O'Sullivan was one tough fighter. He'd managed to stun Joe Albright pretty bad with one blow, and he'd managed to knock down a few other cadets immediately after. Even while the rest of the *Queen Mary's* crew was being taken down right and left, he was still on his feet.

He was just finishing up with another one when he turned around and got slammed across the face hard enough to put him on his knees.

Corry shook his hand, eyes narrowed as he looked down on the other cadet. "I owed you that one."

O'Sullivan smirked, spitting blood on the deck before he looked up, wavering a little, then jerking his chin upwards. "Ain't you I was after, Corrigan. But if ye're that worried about yer little boyfriend, it's not me you should be lookin' out for."

"What d'you mean?" Cor asked, scowling.

"Harrison lost it when ya boarded. I'm bettin' he went to get that phaser we had hidden below-decks."

"Ye really don't wanna do anything stupid," Scotty said, keeping his hands out to his sides, and holding still otherwise. Harrison looked like he was about two seconds from having a major panic attack, and the idea of what he could do in the grip of that panic was chilling. "It's one thing to do a bit o' sabotage, but phaserin' someone--"

"Maybe we can make a break for it. Starfleet won't do anything to me if I have a hostage." Harrison nodded, a bit manically. "It wasn't supposed to happen like this. You know that, right? I mean, no one was *really* supposed to get hurt."

"Aye, I know." Scotty was a little surprised to find that he believed that. But that didn't take away the fact that he was pretty sure that Harrison was desperate enough or frightened enough to hurt or kill now, though. "Why don't we-- why don't we come up with some idea, and maybe then we'll all get out o' this in one piece, aye?"

Harrison shook his head, as the tears ran down his face. "It's too late. You know? It's too late."

"John--" It'd be a damnable thing to die just when you're really starting to grasp what it is to be alive. Scotty shook his head, trying to stay calm and cool about this himself. But for some reason, he couldn't get the thought out of his head that if he died like this, after all of this--

There was a roar of the likes that he had never heard before, and the reason he was alive to begin with ran into Harrison so hard that they both rebounded off the bulkhead. Even as fast as Scotty could be on his feet, he barely had time to process what was happening before Corry was snarling at Harrison, now pinned and half-stunned on the deckplates.

Cor didn't say anything; hit the other cadet with already bruised, bloodied knuckles, and he was radiating rage. Not like the rage he'd had when he and Scotty had it out, not that cold anger, but something else, and it was-- was--

This was it. *This*.

If he would have died like that, something else in someone else would've died with him. And if his life was saved in the Atlantic by not fighting, then this was his moment where he had to fight again. But not for his life, or for his right to breathe, or in plain defiance of the universe, but for something that his best friend was a swing of a fist from losing.

"*Stop*," he said, and it was a sharp note he couldn't remember ever using before now. "Corry, *stop*."

"I'm sick of this," Cor snapped, but even with his fist drawn back again, and his eyes narrowed on Harrison, he held still there. And even with the anger in his voice, there was an edge of desperation under it. "How the hell are we ever gonna be okay, when these things keep happening?! And this little-- little *fuck-up* didn't even care. He coulda killed you, and it never woulda even mattered to him!"

That was some language Scotty never heard out of his best friend before, and it was enough to make him fall silent for a moment. He didn't know what to say. What could he say? He didn't have the answers that they both once did, before that line was crossed, even if he was starting to get that those answers then were rarely the right ones.

But he needed to say something, and was desperate enough to say something.

"I *know* you," he said, and drew in a deep breath. "I know you. And this-- this isn't worth what ye'd give up. The part o' you that ye'd need to let go of, it's not *worth* it."

Corry tightened his grip on Harrison's coat, not taking his gaze off the other cadet, who was clearly terrified, quivering. "I'm tired of us getting knocked down! We're still in the water." There was a beat, then he bared his teeth. "I *want* to."

"That's why ye shouldn't." Scotty shook his head, hard, trying to keep the frantic feeling he had digging a sharp point into some spot just below his breastbone from getting into his voice.

"He deserves it," Cor said, but he was wavering, his mouth twisting and tears spilling down his face.

Still in the water. He was right. They were still in the water, but this time--

"Don't pull me out o' the dark, just to go there yerself." And it was a plea, and maybe defiance, and certainly desperate.

The universe never stopped for heartbroken pleas or primal defiance, but maybe it paused when you answered one of its infinite, unanswerable questions.

"What if I couldn't have saved you?" Corry asked, and he was the one fighting for oxygen, here and now at this time, looking to Scotty for an answer he probably didn't believe existed.

And Scotty gave it to him.

"You already have."

## Part V: Across the Line: Chapter 3

### Chapter 3:

Wednesday, June 14th, 2243

The Lady Grey

On the North Atlantic

"It's gonna be a good sailing day."

Cor's voice still sounded shaky and teary, which wasn't too surprising. Scotty still felt shaky and not a little raw himself, though out of the two of them, he was in better shape and therefore quietly stepped into the leadership role as the battle transitioned into the aftermath. He took to directing their crew on what to do with the now-secured prisoners, directing that the boats be hoisted and secured, at least long enough to allow his best friend to get his head together.

He paused in his coordinating then though, looking at Corry, who had his face into the wind that had dissipated the last of the fog left after the sun rose. "Aye?"

"Yeah. A good wind and a following sea."

Scotty tried the same trick, sticking his face into the wind. But he couldn't seem to tap into exactly what sixth sense told Corry that. After another moment, he quit trying and went back to rattling off orders to the crew, albeit on the low-toned side.

Still, the comment stuck with him.

"If O'Sullivan doesn't walk the plank willingly, can I push him?" Albright asked, still rubbing his head from where he'd been hit, as he made his way over.

Having been on the receiving end of that fist, Scotty could sympathize. "Ye'll get first go, Joey."

"Good." Joe took a breath, looking at Cor, worry cutting across his expression. "You okay, Corry?"

Corry just nodded, not looking away from the ocean, swaying easily with the motion of the *Lady Grey* like a fixed piece of the schooner.

"Where's Lewis?" Scotty asked, glancing around the deck.

Joe half-shrugged. "Still making sure our prisoners are comfortable. We're kind of a packed ship right now. Want me to go get him?"

"Not yet."

Jansson was the next to join the impromptu design team reunion, looking tired but cheerful in the orange light. "Well, what's left? We've got prisoners, we're still afloat-- time to go sink the *Queen Mary*?"

There was a long pause, and Scotty thought about it. "Cor-- ye sure about that weather?"

That got Corry to look away from the wind, and he nodded, sounding a little better. "Yeah, I'm sure."

Scotty nodded, gave Corry a pat on the shoulder, and then walked away.

"Where's he going?" Joe asked, looking after the shipwright.

"Take her."

Sean Kelley was standing at the bulwark, looking at the *Queen Mary* with an expression that could only really be called complicated, but that was enough to jerk his attention right back to the immediate vicinity. He blinked in surprise, eyeing Scotty as though he hadn't quite heard that right. "Huh?"

Scotty looked at the steel full-rigger himself for a moment; took her in as a piece of engineering instead of a target, and he found himself smiling. Then he looked back at Sean. "Yer ship, Captain Kelley. Take her. And as many o' yer crew as ye need to sail her; just leave us the saboteurs, and promise ye won't disable that jamming device until sunset."

"Seriously?" Sean still looked a little shocked, but there was something else in his expression and voice, too; for the first time since he jumped -- since *they* jumped -- he looked genuinely happy, a smile breaking across his face. "You're not going to sink her?"

There was nothing at all left in Scotty that thought that was the right thing to do, now. "No."

Though, then a thought occurred to him. He worked it over once or twice, and found himself having to fight down a laugh. "Don't win the race,

though."

"But you guys aren't going to be able to," Sean replied. He didn't sound like he was protesting, though, more like he was just confused.

"We're not, no."

"So, who will?"

Completely despite his best efforts, Scotty grinned. "After all o' this? I want Command to have to name a starship '*Barely Afloat*'."

Sean stared at him for a moment, incredulously. And then he started laughing, hard, practically to the point of tears.

"You what?!" If the fact that they were cutting the *Queen Mary* loose wasn't enough to break through Corry's distraction, then the fact that the *Barely Afloat* would win the race was. It was absurd. And even though he was still reeling, the back of his throat was tickling with a laugh at it. "That's-- that's really absurd."

Scotty nodded, eyebrows up, perfectly earnest. "Aye, it is."

"So, what're we gonna do between now and sunset?" Joe asked; unlike Corry, he had been laughing pretty much from the moment the announcement was made and still was chuckling. So was Jansson.

"Good sailin' weather, right?" Scotty shrugged, crossing his arms and leaning back against the bulwark. "We sail. Heave to before sunset and throw some bastards overboard for a quick swim, and then wait for Starfleet to show up when they realize what happened."

It was amazing how you could want to laugh and cry at the exact same time. Corry huffed out a breath, trying to get the feelings back under control, but he couldn't quite do it. After the struggles, after the repeated near-death experiences, after all of it-- he almost couldn't breathe, but it was in a good way, not in that terrible way where he felt like he was sinking into some place where man was never meant to go.

"I mean, ye'll have to mind the repairs," Scotty was saying, looking off to the horizon. "And ye might have to put up with me heavin' over the lee bulwarks, or finishin' off the saltines--"

Cor swallowed hard, taking a few deep breaths. Shaky all over again. But he managed a slightly cracked, "Thank you."

"It's what I built her for." Scotty chuckled, dryly. "I kinda lost sight o' that."

"Yeah, me too," Corry said, and didn't feel too bad at having to wipe his eyes on his sleeve. But he was smiling, even if he didn't exactly know why, and it felt good. Right. Geez, he felt okay; dazed and raw, but--

He felt right.

"Pick a horizon," Scotty said, half-smiling. "I'm goin' and takin' a nap."

In the end, the *Lady Grey* took the bone in her teeth and ran; drove rainbows from under her bow, every thread of canvas rigged flying aloft. Hauled over to a portside tack, she nearly buried her lee rail under the sea a few times.

The *Wildstorm's* crew, despite their gratitude (and the promise that they would tell all about the rescue at sea by the *Lady Grey* at whatever hearings would be due soon), ended up going with the *Queen Mary*. Most of Kelley's crew ended up going with him, too, aside the saboteurs; it was doubtful that they'd do anything but be well-behaved themselves with that many people to keep them in line.

Which left the original Team C with their prisoners, but no one was thinking about that right now. There was a certain sense of relief in the air, almost tangible, certainly as substantial as the wind that had the *Grey* bowing and dancing through the water.

As though they had faced the real trial, regardless of what Starfleet would end up doing.

Half-dozing, sometimes asleep, sometimes adrift, Scotty was sure that was exactly what it was. The storm was over. There was nothing that a court-martial could do to him that came close to what he had lived through and nearly died for; nothing that they could take from him more important than what he'd lost and gained. In the fire. In the water. On the *Queen Mary*.

And now. There against the bulwark, in the play between sun and shadow from the sails, only occasionally getting jolted when the spray made it up over the weather-side rail where he was reasonably sheltered from wind and water.

He drifted there, tired all the way into his soul, but a good kind of tired. Just weary, and peaceful, and still. He probably could have gotten up and pretended to be a sailor; hauled the lines, manned the wheel or just stood watch, but in the end, this was the spot that he had come to think of as his. Braced against a bulwark, secure enough that he didn't feel seasick. Even the bells being sounded didn't bother him, and he'd grinned a bit drowsily at the realization that he was actually kind of relieved to hear them ring for the normal watches again.

She wasn't a starship, but he wouldn't have traded her in that moment for any starship.

This was what he built her for. To sail fast, full and drawing, under the command of someone who loved her and who was now probably living and breathing this day back on the quarterdeck.

It was as close as Scotty could get to turning back time for awhile, and it had cost a lot of everyone, but it was worth it.

The *Lady Grey* was where she belonged, and so were they.

-ding-ding-

Corry smiled, but didn't open his eyes. The air was pretty warm, even into the evening, and after the hours he spent on the quarterdeck or on the mast, or hauling lines, trimming sails, running the *Grey* as hard as her patched hull would allow, it was nice to sit and rest for a short time. He still felt raw, like his nerve endings were all exposed, but it wasn't in a bad way.

-ding-ding-

"I love that sound," he said.

"It's not too bad," was the grudging reply from the other side of the brace. "What time is it?"

-ding-ding-

"Start of the First Watch."

"Already?"

"Ayuh," he said, and then shook his head with a smile at the inevitable giggle that answered him. Even if that was the point of him saying it in the first place.

-ding-ding-

It was hard to believe how fast the day had gone. Not to say it was a short day; sunrise to now, 2000 hours, in the summer on the Atlantic, and it would be awhile more until the sun set. But it still had gone fast. Cor had only just slowed down a half-hour or so ago; settled down on the other side of the brace from Scotty, letting his crew handle the sailing for awhile.

There were a bunch of times he thought about dragging his best friend away from his spot there to show him something, but in the end, Corry had decided that if anyone deserved to spend a day dozing in peace, it was Scotty.

The fact that it was peace, something Corry wasn't sure he'd ever actually seen from Scotty before, made it worth it.

Cor didn't let himself think about what was going to happen at twilight, when Starfleet showed up. He would have to give up his ship, and then there would be inquiries, court-martials, maybe even prison time. He didn't regret anything, but he didn't plan on thinking about it until he didn't have any other choice. For now, they were on the ocean.

"I, uh..." Corry chuckled at himself, shaking his head. "I wouldn't be here if not for you. You know that, right?"

There was a long pause, then Scotty grumbled, "Don't go gettin' sentimental on me, all right? I'm drawin' the line at heartfelt discussions."

Cor had to laugh at that one. After everything, maybe there was a good point to that plan -- what could anyone ever really say about it all?

Maybe they'd already said it, in all the ways that mattered.

"I've gotcha," Corry said, not entirely out of the blue, and he knew that it would be understood. If only because it was the first time he was starting to really get it himself.

He could hear the smile in the answer: "I know."

The deck was a bit rowdy, but that wasn't anything like a surprise. After the past few days, people were having fun; the certain knowledge that things would all come to an end shortly had something to do with it. It was decompression, in a way; trying to release some stress before it was over.

"Arrrrrr!" Jansson said, striking a pose, sounding and looking like a fool and obviously not caring.

Scotty was absolutely sure that Corry would make Jerry look like a top-billed Shakespearean actor, regardless.

The 'prisoners' were busy glaring darts at everyone else; tied quite well and with sailors' knots, the only one of them not glaring was Harrison. He was still looking kind of stunned, kind of miserable, kind of terrified. Scotty couldn't blame him; impulsive as he himself had been of late, Harrison's terrors and ambitions had gone much further.

He paused from watching the plank being put out for this little high-seas 'execution', a moment of indecision, then headed over. O'Sullivan gave him a long, hard look; Scotty only briefly returned it, one eyebrow up, then ignored him further.

Harrison looked at him in appeal, but Scotty wasn't quite ready to grant one. Still, he wasn't about to go kicking a man while he was down, either. "They can't kill ye," he said, without any preambles.

"They can kill my career," Harrison replied, swallowing, then looking elsewhere. "Send me to prison to break rocks. I mean, I held a phaser set to kill on you. That's prison time right there."

"Aye, it is." The fact that the phaser really had been set to kill made Scotty's stomach do a flip, but he managed to keep that out of his voice. It was over now, and he was still alive; dwelling too hard on the *could have happened* would only add stress he didn't need right now. "But that doesn't change the fact that ye'll live to see tomorrow."

"I guess not." Harrison didn't look like he believed it. But, Scotty reasoned, it wasn't his job to comfort someone who could have killed him; only to be fair about things.

Maybe Harrison would figure out what the important thing was, in the end. Maybe not. At least Scotty had.

"All right, swabbies, let's send some blackguards to the briny deep!" Corry's voice cut through any introspection, and everyone on deck looked at him. Then looked harder. "Mister Albright, please scan and make sure there are plenty of sharks in the near vicinity!"

Albright was too busy staring to acknowledge the order. In fact, everyone on deck was too busy staring to do anything *but* that.

The fact that Cor was in full, stereotypical pirate regalia had something to do with it. Absurdly bright colors, with a fake gold hoop in one ear, with fake hook covering his hand, and a not-so-fake cutlass in his sash, he looked like he'd stepped out of a storybook.

But it was the huge, obviously false black beard that was hanging to his waist that did it.

"What arrrrrrre you waiting for?!" he barked, brandishing his hook high. "Get to it, ya slacks!"

And the entire deck crew, with the exception of the prisoners, busted up laughing.

Corry kept playing his mad pirate routine, generally insulting his crew with the worst imitation oaths ever, but eventually Albright managed to quit laughing long enough to report, "Twenty-three sharks in a half-mile, Captain Blackbeard!"

"ARrrRRgh! And bring on the chum!" Corry replied, pulling his cutlass dramatically once he made sure that no one would be accidentally impaled.

While they were doing that, he made his way over to Scotty, quieting a little. "What?"

Scotty just shook his head, slowly, trying his absolute best not to start laughing again. But it was a fight he was losing. "Ye look like--"

"Like a fearsome, deadly pirate about to turn people into chum?" Cor asked, grinning, eyebrows pegged up.

"Like an *idiot*," Scotty finished, and was still laughing when Corry dragged him to the side and threatened to pitch him overboard.

"Mister O'Sullivan! For mutiny, piracy -- arrr, we be hypocrites! -- assault and various other nefarious deeds, we're hereby offering you to the sharks! And may whatever higher power you believe in-- well, to hell with it! Over with the bastard!"

Far and away, Corry's pirating routine was more memorable than throwing the prisoners overboard. Simply because, despite some growling from the mutineers, the real theatrics were in Cor's over-the-top performance.

O'Sullivan didn't actually put up any fight, probably to deprive them of the joy of throwing him over. He clearly wasn't afraid; despite all talk of sharks, everyone knew that the scans had been confirming the lack thereof. And all of the prisoners had life-vests on before they were pitched over, along with two teams of cadets ready to haul them out again.

As such, Keith just gave a long, narrow-eyed look at the crew and Scotty in particular, then stepped off the plank.

As the rescue crew was busy working on hauling him out, Maggie made the walk. She was trying to take a page from her boyfriend's book, but wasn't doing nearly so good a job of it.

"This is absurd!" she said, setting her heels and requiring the cadets escorting her to the plank to half-drag her the rest of the way.

Corry briefly dropped his mad pirate persona for a moment, grinning back at her brightly. "Well, yeah. That's kind of the point."

She didn't apparently get it, just stared at him, incredulously. The cadets stuck her on the plank, then nudged her out. "Why?!"



Scotty was the one who ended up replying, with a smirk. "Cause it's good for a laugh."

And it was. Not only did she screech when she was pushed off of the plank, but she likewise screeched when she hit the cold water. It was gratifying actually getting a reaction from one of the mutineers, at least, since O'Sullivan had taken it with such stoicism.

Harrison was the last one, largely because the crew of the *Lady Grey* felt the most strongly about his deeds. While O'Sullivan had a part, and the others did as well, Harrison was the one who nearly sunk the schooner and likely had masterminded quite a bit of it.

As of now, he simply looked miserable, as though any fear of being pushed overboard couldn't compare to the internal grief. If not for the fact that he had been so much a part of the whole mess, Scotty would have probably felt more badly for him.

Corry was about to say something, face gone grim despite his terrible costume, but Scotty cut him off; he didn't raise his voice much, but after only a few words, the entire deck fell silent.

"I don't think any of us were particularly thinkin' when we got started on this whole mess. I know I wasn't. And," he shrugged there, "I don't really think we've got all that much right to judge ye. I'm guessin' the inquiry we're all gonna be facin' here shortly will do a better job than us lot can."

Harrison looked briefly relieved, but then Scotty shook his head and the look faded as he continued talking. "I'm not gonna pretend this isn't revenge. It is. Ye damn near destroyed this schooner, damn near killed a whole lot o' people, and I don't think there's any possible explanation or excuse ye could give that'd make any o' that acceptable. We all made our share o' mistakes. But when it came down to givin' up the race and everything else, or continuin' on and maybe costin' lives, we made the right call."

There was a long pause, and Scotty nodded to the 'executioners', who pushed Harrison up onto the plank. It wasn't a huge struggle, but it was enough of one.

It wasn't all that satisfying, watching Harrison start to panic. But the next words were.

"We made the right call." Scotty tipped his chin up. "Consider yerself lucky that ye'll someday get the chance to make the right one yerself."

The sun settled down on the horizon, low and vivid. Things had quieted down again; on the quarterdeck, it was nearly silent, just the sounds of the sea and the light of the sunset throwing out the last warm colors of the day in a brilliant display.

The taffrail he'd gone over to dive under the schooner was warm under his hands, and the internal calm he'd managed to find today was still entirely present. It was, for the moment, just the sea and the schooner and himself. Corry was up aloft on his platform, or had been last time Scotty had looked, and was doubtless soaking in these last moments on the Atlantic, steeling himself for the inevitable, reflecting on the same strange inevitability that had led them here.

But it wasn't really fate. Or destiny. Still all about choices; which ones could make you, which ones could break you. Upsea or down. Sink or swim. Maybe even live or die.

The universe may or may not notice.

Scotty nodded to himself.

To hell with the universe. It could ask all of the questions it wanted, and some of those could never be answered. And he could ask it all of the questions he wanted, and those wouldn't be either. When it came down to it--

When it came down to it, regardless of the universe, regardless of everything, the choices were still his own.

"Shame we won't get to use those guns," Corry said, stepping up to the taffrail just as the sun's bottom red-orange edge touched the horizon, likely just down from his time aloft. It didn't sound like he was all that bothered by it, though. More just a random, slightly amused comment.

"Aye, I think Joey may be mournin'. All that work, and they'll never be fired."

"Yeah. Probably be melted down or something." Cor leaned on the rail on his elbows, taking a deep breath and letting it out, watching the sun sink faster.

Scotty nodded himself, and mirrored the motion. "They'll be here in probably a half hour? Give or take."

"I know."

Half down, sunk into the ocean, the sun was all red now. Good sailing day tomorrow, even if by then they would likely be behind bars or at least confined somewhere.

"Didn't the navies do somethin' with the guns, to salute other ships?" Scotty asked, at length.

"Yeah," Corry said, with a side-long glance. "They'd fire their cannons. Show that they were willing to put themselves into a vulnerable position, since it takes time to reload, as a salute to another nation's ship."

Scotty looked over, one eye closed, grinning some. "Well, we *do* have cannons..."

Corry grinned back, just as the sun left the sky.

And when Starfleet's shuttle showed up in the twilight, hovering near the *Lady Grey*, for the first time in centuries a gun salute was fired by a ship at sea.

## Part V: Across the Line: Chapter 4

### Chapter 4:

Tuesday, July 4th, 2243  
Administration Building, Inquiry Hall  
Starfleet Engineering Academy  
Belfast, Ireland, Earth

It took weeks. Weeks of cadets being paraded in front of the board of inquiry, weeks of testimonies, weeks of Starfleet trying to get over the black eye from the media that, not only had they not known what was happening at sea during the jamming incident, but had nearly lost people due to it-- and that they were court-martialing cadets, often considered the best and brightest that the Federation had to offer.

The buzz eventually faded in light of interesting developments in the cold war between the Klingon Empire and the Federation, but the inquiries didn't.

They couldn't very well court-martial the entire group of nearly sixty cadets that had been involved. When it came down to it, four of them were formally charged -- O'Sullivan, Harrison, Corrigan and Scott.

They had indeed made the history books -- the second time for Scotty -- but instead of for some accomplishment, they were noted down as the first cadets ever court-martialed in Starfleet history.

O'Sullivan ended up being offered a choice between years of community service and a dishonorable discharge, and took the discharge.

The last time Scotty saw him was two days before his own sentencing; O'Sullivan dressed in civilian clothes, Scotty in his black dress uniform, outside of the inquiry hall.

"See ya in the merchant service, maybe," O'Sullivan said, and Scotty was surprised that the dark glower he'd been getting from the other cadet since the mutiny wasn't there anymore.

"Aye, maybe," Scotty replied, not exactly sure what to make of this unexpected amiability.

O'Sullivan looked around the marble hall, his gaze finally settling to rest on the flag of Starfleet. "Never really was meant for this." Then, with that reflection, he half-shrugged with a grin that was rather nonchalant considering the circumstances. "Good luck. Ye put up a good fight, for a tyrant."

Despite his best judgment, that made Scotty chuckle. And despite everything, he meant his reply: "Good luck to you, too."

The very last thing he ever heard about Keith O'Sullivan was that he had blown his own ship to kingdom come, a captain at thirty of a ship he bought himself for cargo carrying, taking a Klingon battle cruiser with him. And when he heard about it, Scotty could only reflect that maybe the mean-as-a-snake Irishman wouldn't have chosen any other way to go out of the game.

In the meantime, Sean Kelley had gotten away without so much as a reprimand and kept his spot as the first in the class; the board considered his leap from the *Queen Mary* to warn the *Lady Grey* a moment of moral courage -- and one of their senior cadets actually acting like they felt their senior cadets *should* -- and made sure that word spread about it. They even tried to commend him for it.

Sean didn't have any of it.

He stood in front of the board, pointed to Scotty and said, "If you commend me, you have to commend him, too. If you give me credit for courage, you have to give it to Mister Scott, as well. We both braved that storm, we both leapt into that ocean, and we both did it for every right reason."

Scotty didn't know if it actually made any difference in deliberations, but he'd been more'n a little touched by it.

Harrison took the worst of it. He not only had been charged with the worst crimes, but he had lied during the proceedings, adding perjury to the list. Thus far, everyone else had been honest about it all -- some out of fear, some for the sake of honor -- and Harrison's lies stood out like a beacon. It finally came out that he had been behind manipulating the whole thing because if Kelley, Scotty and a handful of others between the two teams were sunk, career-wise, he would be the top of the class. So he had taken the tension already there, then further pitted the teams against one another, and apparently just got in so deep he couldn't see his way back out again.

Led away in restraints, on his way to break rocks on a prison asteroid for five years, Harrison looked defeated and broken-spirited, and no matter what had been done and said in the past, Scotty never quite forgot that look.

That had left Corry and Scotty, finally, who stood together for the last round of it, and stood outside together waiting for the sentencing.

"Is it bad that I'm more afraid of going home and seeing Mom and Dad than I am of what's gonna be said in there?" Cor asked, arms crossed as he looked out of the windows.

"Not really." Scotty wasn't really looking forward to explaining to his own family, either. At all. While there had been some communication between Corry and his family since the inquiries started, none of it had really done much to ease the disappointment, and that would only get worse when this was over.

Scotty hadn't even attempted to call his own, though they had been informed.

The cadets had been honest about it all. Scotty saw no point in trying to find loopholes, or play the system to get out of it. Not only would that be against his own nature, but it would be downright dishonorable to boot. When the charges came up, he made no effort to fight the ones that he knew he was guilty of, and only dug his heels in on the ones that were genuinely unfair or inaccurate. Corry had done the same.

The conviction was already over and it had been, at least, honest.

"Well, the worst case scenario is that we end up like Harrison. The best case scenario-- uh--" Corry laughed, albeit quietly. "Help?"

"We don't get charged by the civilian court for high seas piracy?" Scotty replied, with a half-grin and a shrug. "Damned if I know what's gonna happen, Cor."

"If we're still in Starfleet when this is over, I'm betting we'll be kept ensigns until we're fifty." Corry glanced back at his best friend, looking wryly amused at it all. "Sure I can't talk you into going pirate? The *Grey's* in dock, not too far away."

"Oh, I've had my fill o' that, I think." After a moment more thinking on it, Scotty added, diplomatically, "For now, anyway."

Corry just nodded, still smiling some, and it fell to silence again. But-- a comfortable silence. Really, even a peaceful one. When the deliberating was over, they would go and face whatever was due them, even if they didn't know what that would be.

Together, into the fire and the storm.

The board consisted of Admiral Pirrie, Captain Pearson and Captain Robert April, who had been overseeing the construction work on the four new *Constitution*-class starships being built in orbit. Starships that, at this point, Scotty wasn't so sure he would ever get to see with his own eyes. If there was any real sorrow for how things had happened, it was that he might never get to step foot onto the *Constitution*, the starship he'd been dreaming of now for years.

But before he could give his heart to a starship, he'd had to give his heart to a schooner. And that, he was sure now, was no bad thing.

"Do you have anything further to say in your defense?" Pirrie asked, eyeing the two cadets standing at attention in front of the table.

"No, sir," Scotty said, knowing he was speaking for the both of them. "We made choices we can live with, or die with."

April raised an eyebrow, his mouth in a straight line, but something like amusement written in his face despite it. "That is a rather decisive lack of remorse, Mister Scott."

"Nothin' can be done to change it now, sir. Only live with it, and we can do that."

"He speaks for me, too, sirs," Corry said.

After a moment, April nodded and Scotty thought that maybe the captain understood that. But April didn't say anything more, simply looked over at Pirrie. "Admiral?"

Pirrie stood up, looking at his students, who looked back steadily.

"Mister Corrigan," he started, walking around in front of the desk, pacing back and forth with his cane, "you had recently requested a transfer to the Medical and Sciences Division in Baltimore. Needless to say, that request is now very much denied."

Scotty didn't need to look over to know that had hit Cor hard. Despite how he had gotten tangled up in the sciences, the other cadet had still found a real passion for it in the end that wasn't obsession-driven, a passion that he'd never really had for engineering. Scotty winced himself internally, too.

"However, Commander Barrett and several other instructors have mentioned that you have a good deal of potential, if not a rather notable lack of discipline." Pirrie stopped in front of Corry, facing up to the cadet. "Therefore, Starfleet is prepared to give you a choice. An exchange program is being considered to allow cross-training between our own Medical and Sciences Division and the Vulcan Science Academy. Commander Barrett has already arranged for you to have a position in the test program, firmly believing that the discipline of Vulcan would do you some good. This board is in agreement. In the meantime, your commission will remain probationary for one further year, revocable at any point should you get yourself into trouble."

Scotty could hear Corry draw in a bit of a sharp breath. The Vulcan Science Academy was perhaps the toughest, and the best, school in the entire quadrant for the living sciences. He could get a degree there, and the finest of training, within two years instead of four to six.

On the other hand, the kind of focus and discipline needed to complete that kind of work was astronomical. Never mind that he would be far from home, family, the ocean and everything he loved.

"Your other option," Pirrie continued, "is to take a dishonorable discharge and be barred from any further involvement with Starfleet for a period of ten standard years."

"Yes, sir," Corry replied, a quaver in his voice. "Do I-- do I have time to make a decision, sir?"

"You have three days. The program starts in two months." Not giving Corry any further attention, the admiral turned his gaze to Scotty.

Scotty didn't let himself relax from where he stood at attention, but he didn't flinch under Pirrie's look, either. There really was nothing that could be done to him that fire and water and fear hadn't already tried to do, and the least he could manage himself in this moment was to face the consequences of his own choices with a steady heart.

"You-- are a sore disappointment." Pirrie sounded it, too, something that did sting a little. "Despite some debatable marks that you've gained in this time-frame where you were in the midst of trying to destroy your promising career, your academics have been top rate. It's been unfathomable to us how a good student could turn reckless and irresponsible in so short a time. Ultimately, we can only conclude that you may have just been too young to graduate and perhaps missed some vital training within that extra year that could have saved this from happening."

Scotty had a damn hard time not growling at that one. The thought that he was at least a year younger than the rest of his class hadn't even crossed his mind, really, and to have that blamed for his decisions felt like a slap across the face. He went to reply, briefly grinding his teeth together.

Pirrie must have noticed that look. He knew Corry did, because Cor broke stance to look over. And even though he only caught it out of the corner of his eye, Scotty knew what the message was.

He kept his mouth shut.

"As such, given your high marks as well as your apparent lack of readiness for active duty, you're going to spend another year under a probationary commission. In that time, you'll be expected to attend courses on good conduct as well as perform community service on Lunar."

Lunar Spaceport. About as far from a shining start to a career that Scotty could see, within Starfleet. The notion of good-conduct classes galled him, too.

"Further, you'll be spending three years on corrective action, with a firm eye being kept on your performance. Your other option is to take the dishonorable discharge, just like Mister Corrigan." Pirrie raised both eyebrows. "Are you able to live with *that*, Mister Scott?"

For just a split second, Scotty thought about taking the discharge, thought about taking O'Sullivan's route, thought about it all. But it was a fleeting thought. He'd fought too hard to get this far.

Now he would heave to, ride out the gale, and set sail again when it was over.

"Aye, sir." Scotty nodded, smartly. "I can."

It was after all of the paperwork, and after the bell had been rung signaling that the inquiries were all finally over, that Scotty got to talk to Barrett again. He hadn't really been looking forward to seeing the disappointment he was sure to get from the Commander, who had been nothing but fair throughout the entire thing.

And so it had surprised him to no end when that disappointment never appeared.

"Did you find it?" Barrett asked, with that same eerie certainty, the same question he had asked the morning before the *Lady Grey* had been set ablaze. Standing outside of the hall, as the sun was setting on Belfast, he looked like he already knew the answer to the question that he was asking, too.

Scotty clasped his hands behind his back. "Aye, sir, I believe so." He took a moment there, thought about how to word his response. How to show that he'd found the answer to that question, had even fought for it, when the universe didn't want to give it up to him.

"It's not destiny or fate; it's life, and whether ye sink or swim, fight or don't, live or die, the choice on how ye face it is still yours," he finally said.

Then he nodded, putting the final and perhaps most important part in, "Still mine."

And that was the nature of wind.

## Epilogue: Fair Wind

### Epilogue: Fair Wind

It's all to the wind,  
It's all in our hands;

'Cause we break,  
And we burn,  
And we turn it inside out  
To take it back to the start,  
And through the rise and falling apart,  
We discover who we are.

[-Lifehouse. Who We Are](#)

*Saturday, August 19th, 2243  
Starfleet Academy Main Campus Commons  
San Francisco, California, North America, Earth*

The chatter at the back of the crowd was more of a buzz than a solid noise; whispers that broke occasionally into silence, then started up again just as unfathomably.

San Francisco was surprisingly sunny and warm. There was a good haze that made the Golden Gate Bridge look ghostly, but no true fog like there had been that morning. People had gathered, admittedly slowly, over the course of the hours approaching mid-afternoon, and it seemed as much like a big picnic as anything else.

Of course, the area near the water's side was packed, and the view was less than perfect higher on the hill and further back, but it was still all right.

Scotty had just gotten off shift at Lunar, having rearranged his hours as best he could to be here. He needed a shower in the worst possible way, and probably had more black grease showing on his face than clean skin, but that had its benefits, too: People gave him a reasonably wide berth.

Well, most people.

"You look like a grease monkey," Corry said, pulling no punches. Dressed in his new science blues, he looked clean, neat and not like someone who left his half of their former room in shambles. Unfortunately, Scotty knew perfectly well that appearances could be deceiving. "Smell like one, too," Cor added, wrinkling his nose up jokingly.

"Sympathy's as legendary as ever," Scotty replied, with a scoff, crossing his arms and glancing down at his stained up coveralls. "Been called worse, though."

"Like chicken. Or puppy. Or cub."

"Bastard."

Cor chuckled, "Yep. That's me."

Corry was leaving in four hours for Vulcan; had grabbed the last transport he could to the desert world that would still allow him to report on time. And despite all possible banter, Scotty knew that his best friend was struggling with it. As much as Scotty had been reaching for the stars, Corry had been trying to keep his feet on the ground (or on a boat's deck), and two years spent so far away was going to be difficult for him.

Then again, they'd managed to do some rather difficult things over the course of-- well, of a long time. In Scotty's case, maybe even a lifetime.

He had gone back with his best friend to South Bristol, had stood at Cor's side while the inevitable explanations had to take place with Corry's parents, and then he had gone back to Aberdeen alone to give his own report, despite Corry trying to insist on going, too.

In the end, though, there was no fury, just a kind of defeated, apathetic disappointment in his actions. And where he might not have been able to stand that in the not so distant past, at least not without walking around expecting something terrible to come down on him, Scotty could live with it now. It stung a bit, but he could live with it.

Somewhere back in all of that had been the very last thought he would ever have, about what he owed them, *if* he owed them; somewhere back in all of that, the last threads of control they had over him had parted.

He wasn't exactly sure what would happen from here, for him or Cor or any of them. He really only knew that he would keep his head up and work himself back out of the mess that they had gotten into; eventually, provided nothing else happened, he would be let off of corrective action and even if he had to fight for every single promotion from there on out, he still felt that it was worth it. Right or wrong, it had been worth it.

The schooner that had been a very big part of all of it was due to be tugged into San Francisco Bay, having been brought across the Atlantic, through the Panama Canal and up the coast by dynacarriers.

"I'm kinda glad they're tugging her in," Corry said, after a few minutes of quiet. "I don't know if I can take seeing her under sail without me."

Scotty wasn't sure that he could take it either, even if he still wasn't much of a sailor. But both of them loved that schooner, and even though there were a few scars they had gotten from working on her, it was doubtful that they'd trade those. Seeing the *Lady Grey* sail without them would be a little too much. "At least she's gonna have a good home, though."

"Yeah." Cor laughed, shaking his head, "I wish I could be here to see the first sail-training crew from Command School try to take her out. That'd be a more painless riot."

It had been Barrett's idea to send the ships built by the Engineering cadets over to the Command Division for sail training. An old naval tradition that had long since fallen out of practice, it was a way to salvage the tarnished reputation that the windjammers had gotten due to the race. The pitch hadn't been hard to make, and it was accepted by the brass without much fuss.

Now, as to the *Barely Afloat* -- the decision had been made to honor the deal that they had made, but that really had a lot of accompanying fuss. And that alone, despite hearing about it in the middle of one of those damnable good conduct classes, had forced Scotty to put his head down on his desk to keep his laughter from disrupting everything.

Command would honor the deal, and dedicate a starship with that name, but would immediately re-dedicate it to a name that was just a little more dignified.

When he called Corry about it, Cor had laughed so hard that he couldn't even really breathe, just setting Scotty off all over again. And while duty and scheduling conflicts had meant they didn't see all that much of each other in the time since the court martial, at least compared to when they lived in the same room, they still had managed to keep each others' spirits up.

That would get a lot harder in short order.

"Almost forgot," Scotty said, having been prompted by that last thought. He pulled the smallish box out of his pocket, rather glad that the box itself wasn't all that important, given the current state of his hands. "Here."

Corry looked at it for a moment, then took it and eyed Scotty, imitating his best friend in a worrying accurate way, "'Don't go gettin' sentimental on me, all right?'"

Scotty laughed, "I'm still drawin' the line at heartfelt discussions."

"Well, good," Cor replied, rolling his eyes. "Wouldn't wanna go have any of those, nope." But he was still smiling about it when he opened the box, and then the smile faded. "Cripes, Scotty..."

It hadn't been easy to get ahold of the pocket compass, but Scotty refused to spend serious credits on anything that had been less than well-made and he figured that it was an entirely worthy gift. Maybe not five hundred years old, but a solid three or so, it was one of the finest ones that had been made and still worked, despite some wear on the cover.

"This-- really had to cost way too many credits," Corry said, obviously getting a little choked up.

Scotty waved that off, even though he was kind of touched by the reaction. "Wasn't that bad. Besides, a decent piece of equipment like that's never really a bad investment."

Corry struggled to get himself composed, and finally said, "Thank you."

"It's so ye can find yer way back home," Scotty replied, not looking over, with a bit of a smile.

Corry nodded in his peripheral vision, a quick bob of his head, and Scotty wryly reflected that they really were getting into dangerously sentimental territory here. Still, though, if he couldn't be there to go and bolster his best friend's spirits, especially on Vulcan where Corry wouldn't likely have all that many people to joke with, a reminder couldn't be a bad thing.

He was polite enough not to look over at Corry wiping his eyes, either. Supposed that the same thing that made Cor who he was, was the same thing that made him get all misty-eyed when emotion got the better of him, and that it was a good thing.

"Well, uh-- since we're already all sentimental--"

"Speak for yerself," Scotty interrupted, a somewhat weak attempt to lighten the atmosphere.

"--here. Since you lost yours saving the *Grey*."

After a moment of staring at it, Scotty carefully took the new penlight.

He had reached for his old one countless times since he lost it, and missed it quite a bit when he was trying to work on something in cramped or low-lit places; he had kept putting off replacing it because it felt somehow wrong to just replace it with some mass-market version.

That penlight had really never left his possession from when it was given to him to when it slipped from his fingers under the *Lady Grey*, and despite not really saying anything about it, he had mourned the loss.

It was both surprising and not surprising at all that Corry had noticed anyway.

He looked it over, not holding onto it too hard for the sake of not marring the new matte black surface with the grease from his hands. Then held it out of his own shadow to read the little letters, etched silver, around the light-end of it.

"Wolf," he said, and wanted to make a joke about it being puppy, cub or mutt, but he couldn't quite make himself speak past the constricted feeling in his chest.

"In case you find yourself in the dark," Corry said, steadily, "at least you won't be there alone."

Mercifully, at least for his pride, Scotty didn't have to reply to that. He was having a hard enough time trying to even breathe past it. Like all of it -- the past couple of years, and all that had changed, and all he had gained, and lost, and given up, and still searched for -- all of it was summed up in just a few words. What it was to face the fire, what it was to face the water.

What it was when you trusted someone else enough that they could save you from both, and the dark cold places you knew too well.

The tug materialized out of the haze, and behind it like a ghost was the *Lady Grey*. Trim from stem to stern, clean practical lines, built from the keel up with blood, sweat and tears. The rest of the crowd got louder, pointing and talking in excited tones, at the first full-sized sailing vessel to grace the Bay in a very long time.

They didn't say anything, just stood and watched as she became more distinct, clearer, her fine details coming into focus. Kept watch as she was pulled to her new home on Hyde Street Pier, where there was a flurry of first year Command cadets who were staring at her in awe, their silence and stillness easily apparent even at a distance.

There was nothing more to say, at the moment. After the crowd moved, heading closer to the pier where the schooner was now being tied up, they both turned around and left, Scotty putting his new penlight in the usual pocket occupied by the old one.

There was nothing more to say, at the moment, about it all.

It had all been said already.

They walked away together.

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