### A Matter of Trust

by **PrairieDawn**

**Summary**

One year after a defrosted Khan temporarily killed Enterprise second officer James Kirk, permanently killed fifteen thousand people on the San Francisco waterfront, and critically injured Leonard McCoy's ex-wife Jocelyn and daughter Joanna, the doctor attends a medical conference held on Starbase 4. James Kirk accompanies him on his way to sign on as the first officer of the hospital ship Nightingale, serving under Captain Christopher Pike.

When Jocelyn arrives unexpectedly on the starbase to leave McCoy with sole custody of his daughter, his life is placed on a collision course with a certain Vulcan healer named Spock.

Complete. Updates Saturdays.

**Notes**

Special thanks to Soren, TexMex007 and robokatra for beta reading. Just so you know, the M rating is for detailed medical casefic and suicidal ideation on the part of one or more main characters, not for sex. Don't get your hopes up. If any smut occurs in this AU, it will
be in a separate epilogue.

Also, both Kirk and McCoy spend a portion of this fic behaving as though their brains have short circuited. This is because they both have mental health issues they are not addressing, and when your heart gets broken and pasted back together, it ends up with sharp edges that cut the people you love.

Chapters 5 through 8 detail a really bad day in which both of them fall off the deep end. They get better. I promise.

See the end of the work for more notes.

- Inspired by Trading on a Counterfeit Alliance by myobsessionisshowing
Prologue

Stardate 2236.104

Nero’s body servant Nhia lay on the floor of his quarters, a secondhand blanket the only separation between herself and the chilly plascrete, exactly where she needed to be. Nero, sated with contraband chocolate, snored on his bunk. She slid to a sitting position and reached into her elaborate coif for a long, slender pin, hollow on the inside and filled with deadly poison. She scraped the pin against the textured surface of the floor until a sharp nib formed with a bead of thick, clear fluid at the end.

She turned her attention to Nero. There had been discussion of the wisdom of killing him, but several members of his crew had nearly the knowledge of the future that he had, and a few, technical specialists, had considerably more. The Narada was too big a prize for the Tal Shiar to risk its loss or worse, its nature becoming common knowledge. In the dim light, she sought the telltale curve of his lowest rib as his chest rose and fell. With a single, precise movement, she drove the pin up under his ribcage and into his heart, then out again just as quickly. He cried out once, loudly, then more hoarsely. The bed shook with his twitching. She rolled underneath it and lay still until he stopped moving, practiced fingers reaching over her head to slide the pin into a small crack behind a set of shelves, where the wall met the floor.

The agent slid out from under the bed and picked a thin film of golden false skin from behind her ear, placing it over the pinprick in Nero’s side. She disheveled her hair still further, tugged her brief, sheer slip off one shoulder, and dug her knuckles into her eyes until they were bruised olive and wet with tears. She screamed, the shrill sound sure to alert not only the other lover she had taken aboard the ship, but also every man sleeping in the berth nearest Nero’s quarters.

Velik reached her first, as he ought to given that he had been keeping watch all night waiting for just this moment. She buried her face in his chest. “He’s dead!” she screamed for the benefit of the gathering crowd. “He cried out, but when I looked, he wasn’t breathing and now he’d dead! What’s going to happen to me?”

“Shhhh, shhh. I’ll take care of you,” Velik said, stroking her hair. He bent to whisper in her ear. “I have dispatched the second in command. The ship is mine.”

She snuggled into his shoulder, calculating how long it would take for her to prove herself an able crewman, rise through the ranks, and remove the sentimental idiot whose sweat she inhaled. She gave it a year, perhaps two.

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Stardate 2252.94

Spock removed his Healer’s whites for the last time; the loose bloomers, the tunic, shorter and a little more form fitting than most formal clothing, the simple white pillbox hat. Each he folded with the deftness of long practice, tucking them precisely into the small box he would present formally to his uncle—after he spoke to his parents. He replaced them with new travel clothes, the
soft black fabric comforting against his skin. He wondered if his father would note their anonymity, the complete absence of the symbols of his clan.

It was a logical precaution, as was the bag already packed and resting by the door. He had taken his leave of I-Chaya this morning. The transport to Earth would not leave until tomorrow, but he could stay the night on the orbital platform with other departing passengers at need. He did not want to endure the awkwardness of delaying to change his clothes if his father responded to his announcement according to his expectations. He resisted the urge to look in the mirror, collected the box and the large, flat envelope on his dressing table, and closed the door to his room behind him. His parents and uncle waited in the small, informal dining room of their city cottage.

Sarek and Amanda waited side by side, close enough to touch under the table. His father’s face was schooled to blankness, his mother’s wary. His uncle stood near the door in his own whites. “Mother. Father,” he said, choosing to speak Federation Standard as a point of emphasis. “The Adepts at Gol have declined to complete my certification as a Healer for the third time, citing neurological differences between myself and full Vulcans that make it impossible for them to determine my mastery of all required techniques. My petition to substitute empirical testing has been denied as well. I have, as of today, terminated my apprenticeship with my Uncle Sovar and will be seeking a more appropriate venue for my skills.”

His mother stood abruptly to plant her hands on the table. “This isn’t right! You should fight this!”

Spock shook his head. “Mother, I have been presenting my case to the Adepts for over a year. My efforts have taken time away from my research and further studies. They have also consumed a considerable portion of Sovar’s valuable time. I am not content to remain his apprentice in perpetuity. Most full Vulcans I have encountered during my training have hesitated to allow me to diagnose and treat a simple infection, much less conduct the more invasive and delicate mental work for which I am best suited.”

Sarek spoke next. “Will you then be joining the Expeditionary Service with the VSA? I was told that you had been invited to do so.”

“No.” Spock replied. “I have had no intention of associating with the VSA in any capacity since I learned of the stipulation placed on you at the time Michael joined. As mother would say, they had their chance. I have been accepted at Starfleet Academy Medical, where I will pursue a medical degree in the human fashion. I look forward to the chance to—”

“You will not do this,” Sarek said. “You will reconsider the VSA’s offer, or failing that, enter the diplomatic service with me. I would take you as my own aide.”

Spock felt his lips tense for a moment. He took a fraction of a second to master himself and continued. “To reward the VSA’s insult on myself, on our clan, and on you and mother would be illogical and, I believe, dangerous. I will not enable their racism.”

“Then the diplomatic service, where you might publicly demonstrate your excellence for all to see. In addition, the opportunities for travel will provide ample chances for you to find an appropriate bondmate.”

“As will enlisting in Starfleet, Father. I did not devote eight years of my life to the study of healing to become secretary to a diplomat.”

“I have already lost one son to human emotionalism. I will not lose two.”

“And, what, precisely, is wrong with human emotionalism?” Amanda asked, turning so quickly
toward Sarek that her gown swirled around her.

Sarek’s mouth snapped shut as he turned to regard Spock’s mother for a long moment. “Emotionalism is acceptable in a human. Our son is not human. As you have always understood until now.”

“Because he has to be better,” she clarified. Spock could hear the challenge in her tone. His father apparently could not, or chose not to.

“Yes, he—” Sarek stopped himself at the look on her face. “That was not my intention, my wife,” he revised.

“It is illogical that our son must be twice as proficient to be considered half as valuable as his peers.”

Spock waited to speak while his parents glared silently at one another for a beat too long. “Father. Mother. What is, is. I did not ask you to meet with me to obtain your permission, but to inform you of my future whereabouts. I will not allow myself to become a wedge between you. Live long and prosper.”

“Peace, and long life,” his mother responded. His father said nothing.

He turned to his uncle. “T’Kahr Sovar. I return these garments to you in order to signify the termination of my apprenticeship. I value the effort you put into my education, despite the result.”

Sovar bowed slightly and received the box. “You are a skilled Healer, regardless of the questionable judgment of the examiners at Gol. I release you from your apprenticeship. What you have learned will serve you and others well wherever you make your home.”

He found it more difficult to control his emotional response to his uncle’s endorsement than to his father’s rejection. The human sentiment, “Thank you, Uncle,” escaped his lips.

“One does not thank logic,” Sovar said, the barest hint of fondness in his voice.

With that, Spock collected his bag from the doorway and walked out into the deep gold sunshine, not intending to look back.

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Stardate 2259.185

The hum and faint squeak of a type II support chair roused Leonard McCoy from the monotony of catching up with reports. “Captain Pike,” he said without turning around. “You’re welcome to visit, but there’s been no change since last time.”

“So he’s not worse,” Pike said. His voice was still softer and more breathless than it had been before the attack that nearly killed him, though there were better than even odds that he would walk again.

McCoy turned to face his former captain. “No, he’s not worse, thanks to Sulu and Uhura.” He spared a sideways glance at the biobed where Kirk lay, no longer dead, but not yet able to draw breath on his own. The ECMO machine hissed continuously, delivering oxygen to his tissues while sparing his ravaged but healing heart and lungs. “We’ll reduce the drugs in a few more days, start letting him work his way out of the coma.”
Pike eyed the pile of papers listing off the edge of McCoy’s desk. “I see you work in here. Do you sleep here too?”

McCoy shrugged. The answer was yes, but he didn’t need to confirm that to Pike. McCoy had no intention of going anywhere until Kirk woke up, not even to sleep. The fold out cot next to his desk was comfortable enough, and he’d sleep better knowing he wouldn’t miss an alarm. At least there were fewer of those now, enough so that he was finally catching up on the rest of his paperwork—not to mention the correspondence that had built up over the last few days. “Albieri and I think it may be possible to reproduce the serum in scalable form.”

“What do you mean?”

“We can grow the regenerative enzymes and shepherd cells in vitro. It will still be a while before the serum is widely available, presuming there aren’t unforeseen side effects,” again he regarded Kirk lying peacefully in his biobed, “but we may be looking at improving our treatments for radiation damage, disruptor burns, possibly even spinal cord injuries.”

“Well if Kirk pulls through, when he pulls through, sign me up as your second test subject,” Pike offered.

“You’ll be the first to know.”

Pike directed his chair to its spot beside Kirk’s bed. McCoy went back to flipping through nearly two weeks of ignored correspondence. He had worked his way forward to messages sent three days ago, two days after Kirk had died and been resurrected and roughly 15,000 citizens of San Francisco had died permanently. There was one from Jocelyn’s lawyer. What could she possibly want now? Probably found out McCoy was Earthside and wanted to demand some other unreasonable concession from him. He’d already given Jocelyn everything he had. He’d legally acknowledged himself as solely at fault for their divorce. He had given her control of all of their assets, including their home. He’d allowed her control of all of their friends, most of whom wanted nothing to do with him anyway after the way he’d behaved. He had even signed away his parental rights in trade for a promise to share a photograph a month, photographs that had at first arrived like clockwork, but had become more and more rare until now his most recent was over a year old.

He had allowed himself to be erased so completely that Joanna believed his best old ex-friend Clay Treadway was her biological father. A hollow opened in his gut as he tapped the file open. He’d almost have called it a premonition if he were a suspicious man.

Dr. Leonard McCoy:

Please contact me at your earliest convenience about an emergent matter concerning Jocelyn and Joanna Treadway.

Ms. Rhianna Bell.

What could be so urgent that a lawyer would use the term emergent? He thought about his response, stifling the urge to be catty and replying with his own brief message.

Ms. Rhianna Bell:

I am at Starfleet Medical in San Francisco. I have attached a direct link to my comm unit. Please let me know what you need so emergently.
Dr. Leonard H. McCoy.

He sent the message and returned to churning through his inbox, expecting to hear from her in a couple of hours. His comlink chirped. McCoy swallowed and picked it up. If it was Bell, this could be more serious than he’d thought. “This is McCoy,” he said.

The voice on the other end of the line spoke rapidly, breathily. “Finally! You are impossible to reach! Never mind that, this is Ms. Bell. I’m so glad I found you.” There was a short pause. “It’s about Jocelyn and Joanna.”

The flesh of his hands and feet chilled. He swallowed a knot in his throat, knowing that tone. He’d used it himself too many times in the last few days. “What’s happened?” he managed to say.

There was a pause on the other end of the link. “They were on the waterfront. In San Francisco. Joanna is--very bad. You need to be here.”

McCoy swallowed, blinked back the memory of a daughter too young to walk when last he’d seen her in person. “How bad?” He needed to know. He didn’t want to know.

“Bad enough some nurse is getting sanctioned for switching her tag and sending her to Tokyo with a dead kid’s routing number.”

He took a moment to wrap his head around that. Joanna had been classified as beyond help and was only alive because someone disagreed with that assessment and broke the rules in a career ending kind of way. He forced himself to focus on the present.

“You need a medical consult?” he forced out. There could be no other reason for them to call on him. Jocelyn had made it plenty clear Joanna wasn’t his daughter anymore.

“Jocelyn’s still unconscious. Clay. Clay’s dead, and so are Jocelyn’s parents.”

McCoy swallowed acid. Back when they all used to live in Atlanta, when his plan had been to finish his residency and take a job at Atlanta General or the CDC, he’d been as close to Clay as he was to Jocelyn. Closer in some ways. He’d always hoped that, whatever happened, they’d reconcile someday. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he managed to choke out. “He was a good man.” A better man than McCoy was. “Where are they?”

“Jocelyn’s in Sydney. Joanna’s at Tokyo Children’s.”

The chances Joanna or Jocelyn would be anywhere near McCoy or even each other was vanishingly small. The nine thousand or so injured survivors had been beamed to intensive care units all around—and above—the planet in the hours following the disaster. He breathed a slight sigh of relief on hearing Joanna was at Tokyo Children’s. They had an excellent reputation. The most likely reason Bell would need him to see Joanna forced itself into his mind at last. “Just tell me now. Is this about withdrawing life support?”

“Not yet,” Bell said.

McCoy was not reassured. “Right. What are my rights here?”

“Jocelyn kept you as a second next of kin with medical power of attorney if she, Clay, and her parents were unavailable.”
“That means I can access her records. Get my contact info to whoever’s in charge of their cases. I want to see both of their charts. I have an extremely critical case of my own I can’t leave for long, but I’ll arrange to stop by Tokyo Children’s, then Sydney later today if I can.”

“How extremely critical?” Bell asked, probably wondering why McCoy wasn’t leaping out of his chair to beam over immediately.

McCoy glanced at Pike, who still sat beside Kirk, one limp hand clasped between his own. “Critical enough I’ve been sleeping in his room.” He sighed. “It’s the lieutenant commander who damn near died of radiation poisoning while making sure that only one starship crashed into San Fran.” Damn near was a damn lie, but they weren’t making public just how dead Kirk had been. “I’ve been overseeing an experimental treatment protocol.”

“I see. I’ll have the PICU attending in Tokyo contact you.”

“Thank you, Ms. Bell.” She signed off. He sagged into his office chair.

Pike turned his chair to face McCoy. “I’ll get Dr. Albieri.”

“Thanks, Captain,” he breathed. He leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees and run his shaking fingers through his hair. Shit. Shit. Shit. What were they all doing in San Francisco anyway? The absolute horrible fucking luck.

He pulled out his datapad to flip through his pictures of Joanna, to the last picture Jocelyn had begrudged him. Joanna had just turned four. She was at a splash park in downtown Atlanta in a sodden green sundress, her dark hair corralled into curly pigtails, her eyes closed, face uplifted. Her toes were bare and pink, her hands outstretched to catch glittering droplets of spray. He was going to see her again. Under any other circumstance he would have considered that fact a miracle. Today the prospect filled him with nothing but dread.
McCoy has put his Starfleet career on hold for Joanna, while Jocelyn limits his ability to be anything for her but a medical consultant and occasional babysitter.

McCoy, however, had finally gotten hold of the Vulcan Healer in Canberra he’d been sending letters to for months. The results had been disappointing. “I wish you would reconsider, Tirov,” he said, trying hard to keep his voice level and politic. “Joanna needs physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, and at least three more surgeries and none of the specialists will touch her, literally, until she gets the telepathy sorted. You’re my last hope. Please.”

The Vulcan Healer on his screen stared through him, somehow managing to convey his contempt without moving a muscle. “As I have stated previously, I am not accepting human patients at this time, nor do I expect to in the foreseeable future.” The slight contemptuous emphasis on the word “human” cost McCoy the last of his composure.

McCoy threw up his hands. “It’s nice to know your cultural purity is more important than my daughter’s life--” Tirov cut the connection on McCoy’s rant before he got properly warmed up. Its energy exploded down through McCoy’s legs, shooting him out of his chair, which rolled backward to hit the couch with a startling thump. Joanna flinched, either at the noise or more likely at the emotional turmoil he was probably broadcasting at her.

He really shouldn’t lose his temper around her. “I’m sorry honey,” he said, “I’m just frustrated.”

Jim and Joanna turned their attention back to their game. They sat on the floor, Jim cross legged, Joanna with her legs stretched out to form an ell that bracketed the plastic tiles scattered haphazardly between them. She scrubbed at the splint that held her right hand in a neutral position. The heavy gauze sock pulled over it and clipped to her clothes in the back, where she couldn’t reach it kept her from scratching the arm and hand raw. Dr. Hanabi had done an excellent job on her face. It looked—like her face. He could see Jocelyn in her reconstructed cheekbones, himself in the set of her eyes if not their chocolate brown color. The damage to her left motor cortex wasn’t obvious until she smiled. He’d have liked to join them, but in his current state he’d be likely to stress Joanna into throwing a tantrum just by getting down on the floor with them.

Damned cold blooded, bigoted, insular hobgoblins—he stomped to his armchair and dropped into it. He would never have thought, when he was waiting to see if Joanna would wake up from the coma last year, that out of all the damage to the left hemisphere of her brain a blown antenna complex in her relatively spared frontal lobe would be the thing to cause the most trouble. Esper
ratings in his family tended to run high, nothing spectacular, but enough that the combination of Joanna’s injury and, he suspected, what he’d done about it had been enough to break through the natural barriers that kept humans a mostly psi latent species. Hence the fruitless search to find anyone willing to work with a brain damaged, medically fragile, intractable six year old telepath.

There were only two Vulcan Healers on the entire planet and neither of them would even look at Joanna’s chart. The tiny, fledgling practice at Lakehead had only one practitioner qualified to treat her and a waiting list fourteen months long. Not that he’d passed up putting her on that waiting list. He and Jim resorted to trying to learn how to build mental shields from an article on the net, just to make it a little easier on Joanna when she came to visit. He didn’t think their efforts were especially successful. Jocelyn wouldn’t even try.

McCoy leaned back to watch Jim and Joanna at their game. Joanna considered the picture of a kitten on an upturned tile. Her face lit up, her hand darted out and she flipped over a tile to reveal the matching kitten, a lopsided smile blossoming across her face. She collected three more matches in close succession before conceding her turn, her left hand turned palm up toward Jim as if to say, “Think you can do better?”

Jim grinned at her, then reached up to squeeze McCoy’s arm. His recovery had been nothing short of spectacular. Long, yes, but he had been up and walking in six weeks, out of rehab in three months, and well enough to pick up a full teaching schedule at the Academy by the spring term. He’d taken his first steps on the same day as Joanna opened her eyes.

The door chimed. “Come in,” he said.

The door slid open. Jocelyn stood in the doorway, her embroidered messenger bag over her shoulder, one hand tight on her cane, the other holding a lollipop to tempt Joanna to the car. Her hair was neatly bobbed and dyed burgundy. “Thank you so much for watching Joanna for the afternoon so I could get my hair done, boys. Could you help me get her to the car?”

Her eyes rested on their daughter and her easy smile, the one he married her for, bled away to be replaced by a tightening at the corners of her mouth, the slightest wrinkling of her brow. “Time to go home, Joanna,” she said.

“We’re not leaving for Starbase 4 until tomorrow,” Jim said. “We could keep her for the night. Give you a break.”

Jocelyn rolled her eyes. “Don’t be silly. You wouldn’t have the least idea how to deal with her overnight.” Her lack of trust twisted McCoy’s insides. He was a doctor. He had “dealt with” far greater challenges than Joanna for a lot longer than a single night, not least the great gangling idiot playing kiddie games with her on the floor. “I think we could handle it.”

She shook her head. “Just help me get her to the car.”

Jim collected the lollipop and held it out to Joanna with that innocently flirtatious smile of his. He signed walk, and car, pointed from Joanna to the door and held out the lollipop.

Joanna snatched at the lollipop with her left hand. Jim pulled it out of reach. “Don’t try that with me, I’m a certifiable genius.”

“Certifiable something,” McCoy said.

Joanna looked from Jim and the lollipop, to McCoy, to her mother and back again. She took her sweet time adjusting the brace on her right foot, there to keep her spastic calf muscles from
permanently pointing her toes, then stomped after Jim and Jocelyn, scowling. McCoy followed them down to the aircar. They had tried to teach her Federation Standard Sign, but abstract symbols so far eluded her, both on her picture board and in the gestural language, so her communication was limited to a few dozen signs that looked enough like what they meant for her to remember them.

Getting Joanna into her car seat was an exercise in faith, much like getting Joanna to do anything. She was as stubborn as both her parents and the damn telepathy meant that if anyone tried to physically make her do something she either turned into a rabid weasel or worse, had a seizure. According to her neuroscan, she had exactly zero ability to decipher spoken language—a fact she took advantage of every time she pretended not to understand what pointing meant.

Kirk smiled and chucked his head at the car seat, lollipop in hand. Joanna gave him a stink eye but clambered into the seat and fastened the harness herself, one handed, then pointed emphatically at the cup holder. Kirk dropped the lollipop into the cup, stem side down. “Pleasure doing business with you, ma’am,” he said. It was an unusually good day.

Jocelyn turned to McCoy from her seat in the hovercar, one foot still on the ground. “You’ll be back in seven days, right?” she said.

She was always confirming things with him. She’d not done that before her injury, hadn’t needed to, but though she was mostly recovered, she still didn’t trust her own memory. He nodded and added, “There’s only one appointment scheduled for while I’m gone. The nurse practitioner at the gastroenterologist’s needs to do a routine check of her GD tube. He gets pissy if her food logs are incomplete, just so you know.”

“She won’t try to eat for me anyway,” Jocelyn said. “Except lollipops.”

Maybe that’s because you make everything into a battle to be won, McCoy didn’t say. Jocelyn shut the door and the aircar lifted away smoothly, already tied into the global navnet. “She still doesn’t trust me,” he said.

Kirk shrugged. “She trusts you to make all of the medical decisions. You hand pick Joanna’s doctors. You go to every visit. You know her care plan backwards and forwards. Hell, didn’t you even find Jocelyn’s rehab coordinator?”

“That’s different. She’s always thought of me as a competent doctor. It’s everything else she thinks I’m lousy at. And for a while, right before we got divorced, I was a train wreck. She’s got plenty of reasons to doubt me.” He sighed and scrubbed at the beginnings of a headache. “Lately it hasn’t been picking and choosing, though. It’s calling in favors to find someone who will work with Joanna at all. I just wish Joce trusted me enough to let me spend some time with her. More than as just a once in a while babysitter.” He sat down on the sun warmed cobblestone ledge. “You know Pike wants me back out there.”

Jim sat beside him. “I want you back out there. Even if we’re not on the Enterprise.” He plucked a petunia to twirl between his fingers. “They’re doing a complete redesign from blueprints. Five to six years with no ship named Enterprise out there.”

McCoy stared into his clasped hands. “I can’t leave Joanna here. I need to be with her—as much as her mother will let me.”

“Besides, Nightingale, am I right?” Kirk made a face. “Ridiculous name for a starship.”

“You just hold on a minute,” McCoy said. “I gotta tell you. The fact it’s Nightingale makes my decision a lot harder. A ship like that, having those resources behind me the next time I have to
cure some damn space plague? That’s not just a standard bearer like Enterprise where we’d spend most of our time putting out political brush fires and ferrying pretentious diplomats around, that’s a research hospital with warp nacelles.” He turned his face to the cirrus-streaked blue sky. “I could make a real difference there.”

“You make a difference everywhere. Meddler.” Jim followed his gaze. “They could have given it a less frilly name though.”

“I’m guessing you don’t know much about Florence Nightingale.”

Jim scoffed. “Founder of professional nursing. Also statistical epidemiology, if I remember right. Took no shit from anybody, so basically you if you’d been born in the nineteenth century and a girl.”

“If I’d been born a man in the nineteenth century I’d have died in a sanitarium like Semmelweis.”

Jim stood. “I’m going to go wash my hands and make myself a sandwich. Care to join me?”

“Dammit, Jim!” McCoy had hoped to stump his friend with the Semmelweis reference at least. Given the man was both a damn genius and a history buff, he didn’t know why he even tried.

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McCoy hated the actual space travel part of space travel every time he was in a ship small enough to feel the vacuum of space close about him. It was just his imagination, but that didn’t make it any less unpleasant. Starbase 4 at least was big enough he could pretend he wasn’t inhabiting a tin can in a vacuum. It even had an admittedly artificial blue sky during station daylight hours. Jim strode ahead of him, absolutely perfectly healed, as though he’d never been bathed in deadly radiation. Never do that to me again, McCoy thought. It would be good for Jim to get back aboard a starship, though it was hard to believe that, after this week, it might be a year or more before McCoy saw him again. He’d packed light for the conference on Starbase 4, his uniform being more than sufficiently formal for the lectures and panels he’d be attending and even the ones he planned to deliver. His scrubs would serve for the tours of the Starbase’s legendary medical facilities. Starbase 4, nearly a third the size of the massive Yorktown, straddled the line between large hospital and small city, touting itself as the largest space based medical facility in the Federation, and the Nightingale, Jim’s new posting, was its flagship.

Today the convention center lobby was awash in Starfleet blue on the backs of a dozen and more species. His breath caught involuntarily when he saw the points on the ears of a man several meters from him, half obscured in the crowd. Probably a research scientist, he told himself. He knew of only one Vulcan medical doctor in Starfleet. He’d corresponded with him briefly about a paper on activation of cell division in microglia making the peer review rounds last year. Something Something Spock, that was the name. The figure vanished into the milling blue clad bodies around him.

“You promised you’d listen to me practice my speech tonight,” Jim said.

Jim had been tapped to give the opening speech for the conference despite not being any kind of health professional. The conference itself was focused on lessons learned from the Vengeance disaster in San Francisco, so the organizers thought it fitting to present a patient’s perspective. McCoy wouldn’t be giving his mostly truthful talk about the serum he’d developed to save Jim’s life until the day after tomorrow. “Of course. Let’s grab a bite and meet in my billet. Are we
“anywhere near each other?”

“Nope. I’m not even on the same end of the station as you. Sushi?” Jim suggested.

“Never going to happen.”

Jim consulted the tourism brochure on his data pad. A Starbase with a tourism brochure, McCoy hardly believed it. “Ethiopian?”

“Now you’re talking!” A Starbase with an Ethiopian restaurant. Mercy. “Lead the way.”

A couple of hours later they adjourned to McCoy’s hotel room, pleasantly stuffed with excellent Ethiopian cuisine. Jim paced the floor of the hotel room, data pad in hand. “I hate public speaking.”

“How can a ham like you hate public speaking? You love people. And talking. Just put them together.”

Jim countered, “How can you like public speaking? You don’t even like people!”

McCoy lay back on his bed, his legs crossed, his arms supporting his head. Watching Jim get worked up over nothing was the perfect after dinner entertainment. “That’s my secret. They all deserve to hear from me.”

Jim frowned at his data pad. “I’m not reading the last part right now. The rest of it, you think it’s okay?”

“It’s more than okay, honest. It’s exactly the tone they’re trying to set. I especially liked the bit about the techs and researchers who never see a patient in person. They don’t get thanked enough.”

Jim tossed his data pad on the other bed and fell backwards onto it, arms outspread. “I feel like drinking.”

“You’re giving that speech at 0800 hours.”

“I still feel like drinking. Heavily.”

“Well I don’t. Not tonight. I’ve still got my own presentation to work on and unlike you, I’m supposed to fill two hours, not ten minutes.” No way was he letting the kid rope him into some misadventure that would end with him showing up at all of tomorrow’s panel discussions visibly hungover.

“I thought you finished it weeks ago.”

“There’s some new data I want to add from the early patient trials.”

Jim turned his head to look at him across the space between the beds. “Bones?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“Are you really going to leave Starfleet, move to Atlanta and work a desk job at the CDC just because Jocelyn wants you to?”

“No.”

“Good.”
McCoy sighed and stared up at the textured swirls in the ceiling. “If I leave Starfleet, move to Atlanta and work a desk job at the CDC it will be because Joanna needs me and if that’s what I have to do to keep her in my life, that’s what I’ll do.”

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to Soren and Filat for beta reading and to everybody on the Discord for brainstorming and listening to me rant.

Also I would note I wrote a whole novella with no (or almost no) telepathy in it right before this. So I've earned another indulgence. This is me we're talking about here.
Triage

Chapter Summary

McCoy is unexpectedly confronted by a disturbing image, which causes him to make a terrible mistake.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: Mention of graphic injury and vomiting, neither of which is described in detail.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“…and I know I’m grateful to be a part of it.” Jim looked down from the podium, directly at McCoy, and it was all he could do to keep from tearing up in front of God and everybody.

Jim stepped down. There were more speeches after his, about an hour’s worth, which McCoy endured quietly and Jim endured with much fidgeting, then they were all freed from their uncomfortable chairs for a ten minute break. Jim made a break for the door. McCoy followed to grab a water and take a look at the schedule. “Case Studies of the Breakdown of Rule Based Algorithms in Mass Casualty Triage: Lessons Learned from the Vengeance Disaster.”

The title wasn’t exactly a surprise. A good third of the talks at this conference related directly to the Vengeance disaster, as they were calling it. “Jim?”

“Yeah?”

“I think I’m going to give this presentation a miss,” he said. “Where were you headed for the next hour or so?”

“Looking for a friend.”

“Mind if I join you?”

Jim’s hesitation suggested that he’d been hoping for a little alone time with said friend. McCoy looked back through the doorway to the main lecture space to see the Vulcan he’d spotted on the concourse prepping for his presentation. He called up the program again. “Presenter: Healer S’chn t’Gai Spock, Fourth Year Neurosciences Resident, Starbase 4.”

“Never mind, Jim. Go have your fun. Maybe I’ll catch you at lunch.” He took a seat near the back, just in case he needed to step out for a minute. He’d watch the presentation, ask a few intelligent questions afterward, and maybe ask after that paper from last year. Then maybe this Spock would be willing to look at Joanna’s chart, at least point him in the right direction. He could sit through this. For Joanna.

Spock took the podium at exactly 0900 hours. He nodded slightly to a tech at the back of the room,
who dimmed the lights so the images on the screen would be easier to see. “Esteemed colleagues,” he began. “This presentation concerns the manner in which emotional and intuitive decision making subverts the intent of triage algorithms during high stress mass casualty events. The appearance and behavior of injured persons when encountered by first responders is critical to my thesis, and as a result, images of persons injured and killed during the Vengeance disaster will be displayed on the screen. These images may be disturbing to some viewers.”

He paused for several seconds. A few people quietly excused themselves. McCoy forced himself to remain seated. He could feel himself tensing for shock. This was too close, too soon, and he knew it. He pulled out his data pad to take notes.

Spock was, surprisingly enough, an engaging speaker. He left the podium behind, choosing instead to stand in front of the enormous images rising behind him on the giant screen, at first of flowcharts and algorithms. The first four case studies were yellow tags that should have been red, this-can-wait that should have been treat-first-treat-fast. Three of those four had, according to Spock, died unnecessarily. In every case, Spock focused on characteristics that should have been irrelevant to the first responders’ decisions, but appeared to have affected their work. One yellow tag who died was a large man in Starfleet uniform who had insisted he should be passed over. Another was an Andorian who had criticized the first responder’s skills.

The next four cases were red-tagged victims who should have been tagged black, including a small boy who had a flatline neuroscan and had been worked on by several medics for over half an hour before he was finally declared. Spock stopped for a moment to allow the audience to catch up with their notes. “The fate of this child leads directly into the next case I will discuss. Case number 2840, JLT. Five year old female with traumatic brain injury and severe facial trauma, initially categorized as black tag, expectant.”

Too close, too similar, McCoy thought. Maybe he would just step out for a minute. A floor to ceiling image appeared, the child on the screen blood spattered, her ruined face completely unrecognizable. But the riot of dark brown curls framing that face like a halo brought to mind the picture saved on his pad of a little girl in a green sundress. His mind registered the three letter code. JLT. Joanna Leigh Treadway.

He heard nothing Spock said from the moment Joanna appeared on the screen. He stumbled out of the lecture hall and immediately vomited his entire breakfast into a large potted plant. He felt no better. He was too large for his skin, the picture of Joanna loomed in front of his eyes, blotting out the planter in front of him.

He was on the floor. A noise came out of his mouth that didn’t sound human, even to him. He curled in on himself, pressed the heels of his hands to his streaming eyes and forced himself to breathe through the tremors racking his body. Hands, small, soft, feminine hands wrapped around his shoulders. Whoever it was crouched in front of him. She took a glass of water from someone else standing nearby, more felt than seen, a pant leg brushing against his side. “Keep breathing,” she said. “The kids get to me too.”

He shook his head, still unable to remember what words were. “I’m Christine. Christine Chapel.” He licked his lips. She handed him the water to sip, slowly. “You’re Leonard McCoy,” she said, surprise in her voice.

He nodded. He was regaining control of his limbs. He didn’t think he could stand, but he moved from his awkward crouch to sit on the floor. “Thank you,” he mumbled into his drink. “I’m not usually like this,” he said. “It’s just.” He shook his head to clear it. “That was my daughter up there.”
Now that the initial shock was subsiding he started to get angry. That Vulcan was going to condemn the nurse who took that little boy’s routing number and transferred it to Joanna. He was going to argue that Joanna’s life had no value. That she should have died. “I’m going back in there,” he growled, hauling himself to his feet.

Chapel blocked his path. “Oh no you’re not. You may have a bone to pick with that man up there but you will not interrupt his presentation in front of all your colleagues.”

He tried to sidestep her. She stood her ground, arms folded across her chest. “Are you trying to protect him?” McCoy demanded.

She caught his arm again. “I’m trying to protect you. You march in there right now and you will make a fool of yourself in front of five hundred of your peers. There is a time and a place and right here, right now is not it.” She led him to a bench. “You need not to be alone right now, so I’m going to sit here with you.”

He let her. He nursed the anger like a shield against his pain. This was about Joanna. If fight or flight were his choices he’d take fight. He finished the water, crushed the paper cup in his fist.

People were beginning to trickle out of the lecture hall. He forced himself to wait until it emptied, then flung the remains of his cup on the floor and stalked away from Christine Chapel. He was going to find that damned Vulcan. He was really starting to hate Vulcans, their cold condescension, their close-guarded secrets, their bland, smug faces. S’chn t’Gai Spock was speaking to Geoff M’Benga and an older doctor he didn’t know. He didn’t feel like giving the bastard time to finish his conversation.

His breath quickened. His cheeks and ears flushed warm, anticipating a fight. He ignored the other two doctors, approaching Spock from the side, disregarding his personal space to get right up into his face, almost but not quite touching. “Just who the hell do you think you are?” he shouted. “What gave you the right to put my daughter on display like that, like some kind of exhibit?”

Spock turned toward him. Blinked. Opened his mouth to respond.

“Shut your mouth I’m not done, you damned unfeeling robot. I know these people. They’re my colleagues. Friends even some of them. And you stand there and point to my baby girl and tell every one of them that she shouldn’t be alive? That her survival is a mistake?”

“You misunderstand,” Spock tried to say, his voice measured. Infuriatingly soft.

It was all McCoy could do not to punch him. He did raise his hand, finger pointed to jab it into the Vulcan’s chest, only catching himself at the last moment to ball that hand into a fist and jam it up against his own teeth. “Don’t talk to me, I don’t want to hear it,” he said after a pause to catch his breath. “You just listen, and you tell all your Vulcan friends. Joanna’s life is not a mistake. She’s not less valuable just because she isn’t one of you.”

“If you would calm yourself so that we could discuss this rationally…”

“No, I will not be rational. You’ll find my ability to be rational is compromised where my daughter is concerned.” He turned slightly to see M’Benga and the woman with the silver bun watching him. M’Benga had moved subtly closer to Spock as though to protect him. McCoy blew out his breath, then turned away from Spock to face M’Benga. “I’ve said my piece.” He turned on his heel and strode out of the lecture hall in search of somewhere he could get a stiff drink.

*
Spock watched the man who had accosted him walk away. He focused on his own breath, willing his body to stop responding to the secondhand distress to which he had been subjected.

“You all right?” Dr. M'Benga asked him.

Spock nodded curtly. “Do you know who he was?”

M'Benga made an abortive gesture at his waist, as though he intended to stuff his hands into pockets he realized he didn’t have. His lips pinched together in a way Spock had learned meant he had committed a social faux pas. Again. “Leonard McCoy.”

“The Leonard McCoy who developed the new regenerative serum?”

“Yes,” M’Benga confirmed.

Spock nodded. “I still do not understand. He implied that I argued for his daughter’s death, when I did not.”

“I’m sure you saw him leave. Back row, aisle seat?”

McCoy left as he was detailing the facts of the case, before he presented his interpretation. “He did not hear my presentation of the case.”

“No. And among humans it is considered very bad form to present case studies of close family members of your audience without informing them first. We can compartmentalize, if we have to, but not without warning.”

Spock looked to the open doorway. “How ‘bad,’ precisely?”

“You could be formally reprimanded for this, if McCoy presses the issue.”

“I did not know. The names were different. Treadway, not McCoy. There were so many cases to examine I simply did not connect the two of them.” The surprise was wearing off and he was able to consider the effect he must have had on the brilliant doctor whose work he admired—not that his admiration changed the gravity of his error. He had caused psychological harm, perhaps grave harm, to another being unwittingly, for insufficient cause.

“I must speak to him,” he said.

M’Benga stepped slightly into his path, a substitution for taking his arm they had worked out shortly after he arrived for his residency here. “No, not yet. Give him time to cool off.”

“I must meditate upon an appropriate response.” As a resident, he was required to attend at least six hours per day of lectures and panels. He had hoped to attend the panel on burn treatments scheduled in—five point three minutes ago. He was late already.

“Meet me for lunch?”

Spock did not sigh. Of that he was almost certain. “Layla Rose, as usual.”

“Of course. Best sandwiches on station.”

Spock returned to his quarters as briskly as he could manage. He could spare only an hour before he would be expected to assist at the “Changes in Field Assessment of Concussion” panel, so he elected not to change out of his uniform. He settled onto his mat. “Lights, thirty percent.”
The lights dimmed. Years of training in the healing arts had given him the ability to place himself into a passable meditative state within seconds, but he needed to allow his mind to settle more naturally, the better to sort through his reaction to the man he had inadvertently harmed and to formulate a proper response. M’Benga had served as a sort of mediator between Spock and the non-Vulcan members of the staff for most of his residency—he believed he could credit his attending for his success at integrating with the rest of the staff on Starbase 4 as well as he had.

M’Benga would expect him to present his own analysis of his and McCoy’s behavior before giving any advice. It was, Spock understood, a valuable pedagogical technique, but Spock found it extremely inconvenient in the moment. He would rather not analyze a human’s response to his behavior at the same time as he was mastering his own reactions. Once he had settled himself into an appropriate level of calm, he identified shame as the primary emotion to be wrestled into submission. It was difficult, as it was necessary to acknowledge that he had been in the wrong—he was always in the wrong, a part of him whispered in a hundred Vulcan voices from his childhood and youth. Intrinsically. It was necessary to acknowledge his culpability while not allowing it to rouse the Gordian knot of psychological reactions that led in his case to a paralysis of inaction. It took the best part of his allotted hour to wrestle that knot of shame into submission, leaving him precious little time to formulate a hypothetical course of action worth presenting to M’Benga.

* * *

“Day drinking, really Bones?”

The ice clinked in McCoy’s glass. He set the empty glass down. He wasn’t really drunk, quite, but the urge to punch the bland look off that damned Vulcan’s face had subsided. “It’s not my morning,” he said.

Jim slid into the seat across from him and dropped a basket of fries and breaded something on the table. Shrimp, he gathered, or a reasonable facsimile. “You eat yet?”

McCoy shrugged. An arm slid around him, curly hair pressed up against the side of his face smelling of vanilla and oranges. “You’re on vacation, Bonesy, why are you so grumpy?”

Red curls. “Gaila!” He smiled in spite of himself. “What are you doing here?”

“Signing on with the Nightingale, of course. They need a software expert in Ops, and there are a couple bioscience researchers working on viral encryption. I’ll have to brush up my biochem, but it sounds exciting!” She wriggled her shoulders a little before turning McCoy loose. “Seriously though, you look terrible. What happened?”

He shook his head. “Some jackass used Joanna as an example in his presentation. I just wasn’t expecting it is all.” He regarded his empty glass again.

“You want me to beat him up for you?” Jim said, probably half joking. Hopefully half joking.

“Good luck. It was a Vulcan.”

“I could take a Vulcan I bet.” He popped a breaded shrimp into his mouth.

McCoy rattled the ice in his glass. “I should have expected it. Joanna has case study written all over her.” The tag switch alone created a dilemma that would entertain medical ethicists for a good decade. “I’ll just have to ask the rest of the presenters in advance if they’re discussing case number 2840. Should have done it in the first place.” He nibbled miserably at a fry. “You know what the worst part is?”
“What’s that?” Gaila asked, taking the bait.

“He’s listed on the program as Healer Spock, not Doctor Spock. That’s the only reason I went to his talk in the first place. I thought I might get in good with the guy and maybe he’d agree to, I don’t know, at least review Joanna’s chart and give me some suggestions.”

“I don’t get it. He owes you big time. How is that bad?” Jim gestured to the fries and shrimp, encouraging McCoy to eat. He wasn’t in the mood.

“I reamed him out good after the talk. Said some things I don’t think he’s going to let me take back.” He stared at the greasy basket in front of him. Still not interested. “Hell, I think I’d have hit him if Christine Chapel hadn’t stopped me. You know how Vulcans are. He won’t even speak to an emotionally compromised human like me now. Besides, why would he care about some kid he thinks should have died?” He checked his chrono. “I’ve got a panel in ten minutes. Infection control procedures. See you.”

*  

“Infection Control Procedures” was followed by “Chemical Mechanisms of Neuron Repair,” which the Vulcan attended. McCoy made sure to sit at the opposite end of the hall and ignored him completely, though his question about using nitric oxide molecular signaling in astrocytes as leverage to direct cellular regeneration caught his interest, even if the speaker had answered the question with half a dozen confused blinks and a change of subject. The Vulcan saw him just as the seminar was ending. McCoy made accidental eye contact and rushed out of the room when he tried to approach. He wasn’t up to dragging an insincere apology out of his throat—at least not one that had any chance of being believed.

He met Jim and Pike for dinner as they’d agreed. He wasn’t sure what to expect of Italian Tellarite fusion cuisine, though for all their less than pleasant personality traits, Tellarites definitely knew how to cook. He hadn’t expected to be served by a teenaged example of Italian Tellarite fusion, a plump girl with warm brown eyes and a generous smile under her typically pushed in Tellarite nose. They all ordered the special. “You ought to all order something different so you can try each other’s choices,” she told them.

Jim knew better than to argue, given that they wanted to eat sometime today. “All right then, pick your favorite off the menu and bring it for me, and…” he looked around the room to catch sight of a short, chubby human man in an apron. “Your dad’s favorite for Bones, here.”

“Can’t stand by your decisions so you want me to make them for you? Fine, I’m going to enjoy this.” Her tone was belligerent, but her eyes twinkled. She strolled away with a swaying, almost dancelike gait.

Pike wasted no time. “I want you for the Nightingale.”

McCoy shook his head. “We’ve been over this. I’ll be dirtside for the foreseeable with Joanna.”

“Bring her with you. There are forty kids on the ship. Plenty of medical facilities for her needs, and we dock here when we’re not on assignment. You’d have access to the best medical minds in the Federation. I’d say better than in San Fran.”

McCoy shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. My wife has custody. Officially I don’t even have visitation rights. I’ve got to stick around to make sure she keeps up with Joanna’s treatments, explain all the medical stuff to her. She’s not a hundred percent herself anymore.”
Jim turned to Pike. “He goes to all of Joanna’s appointments and half of Jocelyn’s, keeps track of all the schedules, and I swear he’s spending almost all his free time looking for anything to help Joanna. Jocelyn’s using him.”

“She’s my daughter, Jim. I’d do it anyway. I did it for you while you were recovering. Anyway, much as I’d love to take you up on your offer, I can’t.”

Jim turned to McCoy with his terrible idea face. “Why don’t you ask Jocelyn if you can take her for a few months? Hell, why don’t you tell her you’re taking her for a few months. It’s high time you got a judge to revisit that lopsided custody agreement you two have.”

McCoy regarded the bottom of his glass. “Jocelyn won’t even let me keep her overnight. Hell, it’s only been the last few weeks she’ll let her visit at all outside doctor appointments. And that’s just because she can’t handle taking care of Joanna by herself all the time.” He turned back to Pike. “Joanna’s high maintenance. She needs a one on one aide at school, a night nurse for constant supervision so she won’t elope or hurt herself, she hasn’t relearned how to eat so she’s got a GD tube—she needs somebody to be focused on her or she won’t just not get better. She’ll get worse.”

“We can get her all those things,” Pike said.

“If it were up to me, I’d tell you I’d think about it before I said no. But it isn’t up to me. Jocelyn wants me to take a civilian position at the CDC in Atlanta so she can be closer to her friends and family. I’ll probably be out of the fleet as soon as my commitment ends.”

“We’d hate to lose you,” Pike said.


She had been the one who told him to get as far away from her and Joanna as possible when the divorce finalized. But she’d been right. “You don’t know what went on before I left,” he told Jim. “And it’s better you don’t.”

He got up from the table before the food even came and stalked back to his room to lie down. He wasn’t even in the mood to drink. Jim came by about an hour later with his meal in a box. McCoy lay on the bed on top of the covers. He ignored Jim when he slid the box into the fridge. And when he sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. He didn’t know for sure when Jim left. He had fallen asleep, too tired to care.

Chapter End Notes

Comments welcomed and answered (like even if this is two years old by the time you see it.)

Background, backstory, fake and real science also explained on request because it's fun.
He couldn’t seem to be rid of that Vulcan.

He’d spent the early morning talk nursing a coffee which he now had tucked under his chair. He hadn’t had a thing to drink since lunchtime yesterday, and that had only been a couple of shots of bourbon, but he had slept so long and so poorly that he felt hungover anyway. Came from skipping dinner.

The talk itself, on using the diving response to drastically slow neurological oxygen demand in the absence of drugs, had been interesting. He could see using it in the field, probably on Jim the next time he threw himself off a cliff or some such. If he had ice water to dribble up the Captain’s nose, that was. And if he were going back into the field anytime soon. After the talk, people gathered in clusters to discuss the presenter’s research. He could see Spock discussing something with the presenter, a slight black woman with a ready smile. The two of them, accompanied by M’Benga, the man who’d been so protective of Spock before, moved to sit in a small alcove. She gestured to something on her data pad, and they both nodded. Spock pulled out his own pad and traced over it with a finger. He asked a question. Both M’Benga and the presenter laughed, then Spock reached up to press two fingers to the bridge of her nose for about five seconds.

In public. When he removed his hand, she seemed to take a moment to gather her wits about her and nodded, then they went on with their conversation as though nothing unusual had occurred.

That was not something he had expected to see in his lifetime. And it made him even angrier at himself. If this Vulcan was willing to pull out the voodoo for what appeared to be a casual demonstration at a medical conference and that friend of his didn’t even look surprised, he might have been willing to do Joanna some actual good. This Spock could well have been his daughter’s last shot at moving forward with her recovery and he’d blown it by running off at the mouth about a mistake there had been no way for the man to have prevented.

His data pad chimed with a message from Jocelyn. He tapped it.

**Meet me for lunch at Layla Rose. Eleven a.m.**
Jocelyn was here? How? Where was Joanna? What reason could she possibly have to ambush him at an offworld medical conference over a day’s travel from Earth? And again, where the hell was Joanna? He rushed out of the conference room to find Jim. No way he was meeting with his ex-wife without backup.

*

Spock had a standing lunch date with Geoff M’Benga at Layla Rose. The human doctor humored his preference for routine in exchange for getting him out of the lab for “healthy socialization” and Spock appreciated the wide aisles and light suffused aesthetic of the coffee shop, featuring cascades of live greenery. It reminded him of his mother’s bower at home. He ordered a cup of dal and a GLT, which had already been cut into bite sized squares by the proprietor and served with a fork, per his preference.

“You know,” she said, eyes twinkling with merriment. “I prepare my son’s peanut butter sandwiches the same way. He’s four.”

Spock accepted the good natured insult with grace and turned his attention back to Dr. M’Benga. “I have written an apology to send to Dr. McCoy, but I wished for you to read it first. I believe I have included all required elements.” He sent a copy to M’Benga to read on his pad.

“Hmm. OK, you’ve expressed regret. You explain how you happened not to realize the patient was Dr. McCoy’s child. I see you taking responsibility here.”

“I wish to make amends as well, but I do not know what can be done.”

“Maybe you should ask him.”

Spock shook his head. “You said an offer to make amends should be specific in order to be effective. Asking the person you have harmed how to right the situation places an unfair burden on the one harmed.”

“Well, there is some nuance to that. You don’t know Doctor McCoy, so you can’t know how to repair a relationship that does not exist.”

“I admire his work,” Spock said. The man connected concepts Spock would never have put together to solve problems that had eluded other researchers for decades, and he seemed inevitably to do so when he had few resources and little time to avert disaster. The fact he was no longer working in space was a great loss to Starfleet.

“As do I. And I hate to admit it, but I didn’t know he had a kid either.”

“What would you do in my place?”

M’Benga set his data pad to the side and folded his hands in front of him. “I think you’re going to have to talk to him in person, not just send him a letter.”

“A letter is more serious, to conform to the gravity of the offense.”

The older doctor leaned forward. “A letter is you avoiding talking to a person who is mad at you.”

“I am better able to present myself effectively in writing. I may be able to perceive the emotional state of persons with whom I am interacting, but the data I receive is both overwhelming and conflicting.”
“And you’re still no good at reading body language when you’re fully shielded.”

“No.”

“Did you take my advice about viewing holodramas?”

He had, but he suspected that both the expressions portrayed and the characters responses to them were exaggerated in order to maximize conflict. “I have made limited attempts, but the body language and responses used in holodramas do not closely match that of real beings at times.”

“Have you viewed any of the videos intended for autistic humans?”

“I have, but they are produced for children and do not capture the complexities of adult interaction.” They had been in fact, intended for children with more challenging forms of the condition, who had significant difficulties parsing language and interpreting even the broadest, most straightforward expressions. Given that the prevalence of autism spectrum neurotypes in Starfleet hovered between seven and eight percent he was surprised the admiralty had not looked into producing more age and situationally appropriate instructional materials for its cadets. “I assure you, I am not intentionally neglecting this area of my education.”

“I think we’ve drifted off the subject a bit. If you ask how you can repair the situation in person, you are more likely to get a real answer. That’s all I’m saying.” M’Benga took a bite of his panini. “And no, I am not coming with you.”

A woman entered the establishment, pushing a large stroller with the squared off, utilitarian look of a medical device. The proprietor moved a couple of chairs out of the way to clear a space. The woman, a tall long limbed human with a dyed-burgundy bob and a look he usually saw on surgeons after a double shift, maneuvered the stroller past his seat.

Spock’s right arm spasmed, his fist clutching hard enough on the fork to leave a crease in the palm of his hand. He held up the other hand to belay further conversation from M’Benga while he sought the source of the problem. It had not originated in his own body. It was human in flavor, though the rhythm of the mind from which it originated was inconsistent, dissonant, and powerful enough to bleed through his shields. He focused on the white laminate of the table for a moment while he strengthened them. The burning reduced in intensity, but he could still feel it running down his arm and into his hand, into his posterior upper right quadrant and over the right side of his face. The pain was similar in intensity to a migraine headache, though usually such headaches confined themselves to the head, hence the name.

The woman crumpled into the seat next to the stroller, one hand pressed to her forehead.

“Is something wrong, Spock?” M’Benga asked.

“I am unsure.”

He had just narrowed the source of his sudden discomfort to a child curled awkwardly in the stroller when Dr. McCoy walked into the restaurant accompanied by a male companion Spock recognized from his remarks at the opening of the conference. It was Commander Kirk, the first person on whom the serum McCoy developed had been used. McCoy pulled up a chair across from the woman. “Jocelyn, what are you doing here?” he demanded. He noticed the child in the stroller and dropped to his knees. “You brought her with you? On a shuttle? Wait a minute, is she sedated? You can’t just sedate her and dump her in the stroller, it compresses all the nerves in her neck, makes the neuralgia worse!”
McCoy turned his attention back to the child. “Hey, Joanna, I’m going to move you, okay?” The words were accompanied by a tremor in the doctor’s weak telepathic field, almost as though he were trying to shield himself.

The woman started talking over him. “I wasn’t going to, but you know how she gets. She was bothering the other passengers with all her screaming. I had to do something.”

Spock was deeply uncomfortable overhearing the conversation, found himself wanting very much to be of assistance in repositioning the child he now realized was case number 2840, and in addition knew that if he were to attempt to remedy the situation he was likely to call even more attention to the family and himself. He sipped his tea and glanced at M’Benga, hoping to obtain some clue as to how he ought to behave.

“What!” McCoy gingerly settled his daughter into a less slumped position, pulled three padded bolsters out of the pocket on the back of the stroller, and arranged them around her. He walked around the table to stand behind his chair. “No you’re not putting her in a home. We’ve been over this. Joanna won’t last three months in one of those places.”


“I can’t do it anymore, Len. I can’t watch her suffer like this.”

M’Benga prompted, What do you think you should do?

“Then give her to me. I already handle all her medical. I’ll look after her.” McCoy took the datapad she handed him. “I’m not signing this. Also not Terasin. Who prescribed that? You have to give her the butalbitol if you’re going to take her out around a bunch of strangers.”

The child is in distress. Should I offer assistance? Spock clarified. M’Benga shook his head minutely in response.

“Dr. Bradley said we shouldn’t give her the butalbitol because it can be addictive. See, this is why I can’t keep this up. I don’t have the memory I used to. It’s easier for you, you know. You don’t know what she was like, before all this. You never got to know her.”

“And whose fault is that?” McCoy replied.

Commander Kirk stood abruptly. “I’m going to take Joanna outside for some air.” He took the stroller in hand and wheeled it with what looked like practiced ease out of the restaurant.

“You know exactly whose fault it is. Just sign the paperwork. There’s a man here on the station to pick her up.” She shoved a data pad at the doctor.

McCoy dropped the pad on the table between them. “No. I’m not sending my daughter to die
among strangers. I want custody. I’m not ready to give up on her yet.”

“So what? You’re going to take care of her by yourself? Your boyfriend is leaving for a tour of duty. You can’t handle her every day. She’ll break you and then what will you do? Help her escape her miserable existence like you did your father?” This time McCoy’s pain washed over Spock through his already compromised shields. He began to understand why his inclusion of Joanna’s case had been so distressing. Spock was trapped in his seat, witnessing this conversation which ought to be private, but was being conducted in a most public location. The woman drew a small gathering of onlookers.

McCoy stood, his body half-turned toward where his partner had taken the child. “She’s not as miserable as you think she is. And I’ve told you a hundred times he’s not my boyfriend.”

“So what? You’re going to take care of her by yourself? Your boyfriend is leaving for a tour of duty. You can’t handle her every day. She’ll break you and then what will you do? Help her escape her miserable existence like you did your father?” This time McCoy’s pain washed over Spock through his already compromised shields. He began to understand why his inclusion of Joanna’s case had been so distressing. Spock was trapped in his seat, witnessing this conversation which ought to be private, but was being conducted in a most public location. The woman drew a small gathering of onlookers.

McCoy stood, his body half-turned toward where his partner had taken the child. “She’s not as miserable as you think she is. And I’ve told you a hundred times he’s not my boyfriend.”

“Sure.” She looked away from him, back to the data pad. “Fine.”

“Fine what?”

The woman, Jocelyn, scrubbed her face with the palms of her hands, then sat with her face covered for thirteen seconds. Finally, she looked up. “Suit yourself. She’s yours. I’ll draw up the papers for you to sign and send them to you. I’m going home.” She got up from the table, weariness loading every limb, and walked out, leaving McCoy alone.

McCoy strode out of the restaurant after her. Spock looked to M’Benga, and when M’Benga voiced no objection, he followed.

McCoy and his companion were standing in a small alcove with the stroller, presumably waiting for the lunch crowd to clear slightly before moving on. They were speaking in urgent, low voices.

Spock approached them. “I hope I am not interrupting,” he said, knowing that he was. The little girl in the stroller continued to broadcast her distress unawares. It took considerable discipline not to address the child’s pain immediately, but he would not do so without ensuring informed consent from her parent.

“We’re a little busy right now,” Commander Kirk said. McCoy shook his head sharply at Kirk.

“So I see.” He turned to go.

McCoy crossed his arms. “Wait.” He met Spock’s eyes deliberately, if hesitantly, as if the act itself were uncomfortable. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you like I did,” he said. “There was no way you could have known Joanna was mine. I’ll just have to check with all the presenters from now on, so I’m ready for it if it comes up again.”

Given the tension in McCoy’s posture and the anger McCoy was still projecting, Spock wasn’t certain the doctor’s apology was sincere. But Spock had not been looking for an apology anyway. He reviewed his memory of the doctor’s words the last time they spoke. You stand there and point to my baby girl and tell them she shouldn’t be alive. Of course. “I did not argue that your daughter should not have been treated.”

“What?”

Spock continued. “In her particular case, the black tag was issued by an inexperienced first responder who had already seen several gruesome fatalities in close succession when he encountered your daughter. He assumed based on the severity of her facial injuries that she was either dead or dying and failed to perform even a cursory scan.” Spock found his attention wandering to the child herself, the pain still radiating up from her like heat from a furnace. He
clasped his hands in front of him, the right hand in his left, squeezing a little harder than he might have done under other circumstances.

Commander Kirk took a step closer to McCoy to rest a hand on his arm. The doctor’s heart rate slowed somewhat in response. “So if he hadn’t black tagged her?” McCoy prompted.

“The cricothyrotomy would have been performed immediately, resolving the respiratory compromise that resulted in hypoxic damage to the cerebral cortex. She would have arrived at an appropriate facility roughly thirty-four minutes sooner. The damage caused by bleeding into the brain tissue would therefore have been reduced.”

Spock waited while McCoy’s anger bled away, not entirely, to be replaced by a heavy sorrow that might be worse. He filled the awkward silence. “I regret having subjected you to emotional distress, then and now. I, too, can see no way in which I would have known of your relationship in advance, however, I believe that if I were to provide the list of patient identification codes at the beginning of the lecture, prior to showing the images, it might be possible to provide more warning.”

“Yeah,” McCoy said. “Maybe.”

Spock pressed on so his apology could be complete before it was forgotten. “I wish to make amends in some concrete fashion. Is there any way I could be of service?”

There was a long silence in which McCoy tugged desperately, unconsciously at Spock’s mind, confirming his suspicion that the man was an empath and probably, like most humans with the ability, had no idea. The circumstance was not uncommon, empaths were almost as common in medicine as autists were in Starfleet generally—and were not infrequently the same people. McCoy finally found his words. “I have had some difficulty finding appropriate care for Joanna. Perhaps you might have some suggestions?”

“I would welcome the opportunity,” Spock said. He could not in good conscience leave the child in her current state. “The child is in considerable pain. May I attempt to provide some relief?”

McCoy pulled out his medscanner and hissed through his teeth. “Ouch. Yeah, do whatever you can.”

“May I see the scan?”

McCoy passed him the data pad. Spock scrolled to blood chemistry. “I am giving her glucagon. Her blood sugar is quite low.” He collected an ampule from his satchel, placed it in a hypospray, and crouched in front of the child. “Joanna, I am giving you a hypospray so it will be safer to ease your pain.”

The child’s heart rate increased and Spock could feel the wave of panic rising from her, but the Terasin prevented her from responding in a way that could be seen. He caught her left wrist between his fingers, seeking out the contact point at the medial wrist joint. He spoke aloud for Dr. McCoy’s sake while shifting lightly into the child’s pattern, a task made more difficult by the asymmetric damage to the cortex and the inappropriate drug she had been given. “Be still. You are safe.” He caught an image of the fight between the child’s parents as a source of some distress. “There is no need to be afraid. Your father is here and the conflict is over.”

Joanna quieted somewhat in response, enough that he could press the hypospray to her throat without causing panic. He could tell even from the light contact that her pain was mostly originating in the brain itself and would therefore require much more invasive efforts to fully
alleviate, but he could calm her and resolve the muscle spasms, which would make some difference. He pressed fingers high on her neck, where the accessory nerve inserted into the spinal column and damped nociception from that location, then pulled her forward to relax each muscle group in the upper back in turn along with the portions of her right arm that could be accessed. The gauze covered brace hindered his efforts. Once finished, he replaced the bolsters to hold her head in a neutral position, then withdrew.

“I was able to reduce her level of pain from a 9.1 to a 6.5, I believe. I can do no more while she is sedated. If you bring Joanna to my office later this afternoon, we may discuss her case in more detail. I understand you have much to do, and little time. I will therefore take my leave.”

“Thank you, I,” McCoy caught his eye and his mind was flooded with such gratitude, far more than he was owed for such a small thing, that he found it rather disconcerting. “We’ll be there. I’ll bring her chart.”

McCoy turned to Jim. “I have to be back downstairs in half an hour,” If Jocelyn was telling the truth about when she gave Joanna the meds, she ought to start coming out of it in another hour or so.

Kirk bent to carefully wipe Joanna’s mouth. “I’ll keep an eye on her. We’ll watch some Wile E. Coyote.”

“It’s two hours, plus however long I get roped into answering questions and I won’t be reachable. You’ll have no back up.”

“S’fine. She likes me. Let’s take her back to your room and get her settled and then you can do your presentation and tell Pike you’re coming with us on the Nightingale. You know you want to.”

“What I want is--Jim, I can’t figure all of this out right now. Let’s just get her back to the room.”

He could feel eyes on him in all the corridors, the medical staff running differentials in their heads based on Joanna’s foot and arm braces and the subtle asymmetries in her rebuilt face. He hoped none of them would comment. He wasn't in the mood to discuss her case with curious interns like she was a specimen on display.

He imagined the shield thing like the article in the magazine said, though without a lot of conviction that it did any good, then carefully scooped her onto the bed. He’d have to leave in fifteen minutes and he didn’t even know when Jocelyn last fed her, though her blood sugar had been low enough before the healer had done whatever. He ought to get a nutripak started before he left.

She opened her eyes when he got her laid out as comfortably as possible. She followed him around the room with those eyes while he puttered. The drug she’d been given was more a paralytic than anything else. It produced a deep lassitude and lack of motivation to move, but did nothing for pain or anxiety. It also meant he didn’t want to give her anything else for fear of respiratory depression, especially if he was going to be leaving her with Jim. He hoped whatever the healer had done wouldn’t wear off too quickly. He pulled a nutrient pack out of her back and hooked it up to the
GD tube. “I’ll be back as soon as my presentation is over. I’ll leave my link on vibrate in case you have to get hold of me.”

He closed the door on the two of them. This is not a good idea, he told himself, but he knew he didn’t have much choice, either. Health care providers had come from a dozen systems to hear him speak on the new serum, and even if he was going to have to lie a little about its origins, it promised to be exactly the game changing breakthrough that it appeared to be that day almost a year ago when a dead tribble had come to life.

Chapter End Notes

I love comments. Comments cause infodumping and the dropping of head canons and generalized gushing.

Also a mom note: I feel so much for McCoy and Joanna. Some of the stuff with Joanna's central pain syndrome comes from our family struggle with controlling my older daughter's chronic daily migraines, which she had from age 10 to 11 and are finally under control.
The Way Things Break

Chapter Summary

Joanna escapes Kirk's supervision, resulting in a terrible accident for which Kirk may never give McCoy and McCoy will never forgive himself.

Chapter Notes

An event occurs in this chapter that some may find triggering and which I do not fully explain until chapter 7. A brief summary of what McCoy thinks happened appears in the endnotes. The event is marked by TWO asterisks at the beginning and end of the relevant section.

An explanation of what really happened will be provided in the comments on request.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was good that speakers took mandated breaks once an hour. McCoy chugged a glass of water, found a quiet corner, and checked in with Jim on the vid. “How’s Joanna?”

Jim looked to his side, offscreen. “Not too bad right now. Keeps looking around the room for something.”

“What’s she doing now?”

“Jumping on the bed.” He turned the datapad so it picked up the image of Joanna jumping methodically on the bed, head down, left arm folded over the bound right one.

“Worse things she could be doing,” he said. “We’re meeting with that healer in his office at 1500 hours. I can help you get Joanna back into the stroller. Think you can handle a feeding?”

“Do we have time after you get back?”

“Not if there are questions.”

“There will be questions, won’t there.”

“Yeah, I’m just hoping they’re the right kind.”

He broke the connection to find the Vulcan healer standing patiently beside him. “Doctor,” he said. “Healer,” McCoy replied. “Problem?”

“No. I had meant to inform you of something you might find of interest.”

“Yes?”
“As of now, four different people have inquired as to whether I am the source of the biological material you used to develop the regenerative serum.”

McCoy felt both of his own eyebrows crawl toward his hairline. “Really. You?”

“My mother is human. The cellular component of the serum bears a resemblance to regenerative cells found in Vulcans while expressing human cell surface proteins.”

“Really?” McCoy said. “If it weren’t rude, I’d ask you for a blood sample so I could make a detailed comparison. Unfortunately, I cannot reveal the identity of the donor. It’s highly classified. I can tell you I didn’t steal any of your blood.”

“I did not believe you had. As to a sample. I believe one could be spared.”

“I would be happy to provide you a sample of shepherd cells for comparison. Perhaps we could collaborate on a paper.”

“That would be a worthwhile endeavor.” The lights blinked twice, signaling everyone to return to their seats. McCoy had the oddest feeling that he’d just been propositioned, in a very Vulcan sort of way.

He climbed the steps back to the podium, heartened if puzzled by their brief conversation. The lights dimmed so his slides would show more clearly and he returned to his presentation. “The first formulation was very rough, and contained a lot of extraneous material we eventually removed from the cultured serum we’ve been using in clinical trials. That said, the first iteration of the serum was produced under tremendous time pressure, as my critically injured patient was expected to continue to deteriorate slowly even in stasis, and we calculated we could only keep him there for roughly eighteen hours.”

“We administered the serum fourteen hours, twenty five minutes after patient JTK was placed in stasis. He began to show marked improvement in tissue perfusion within five minutes of the first infusion. We brought his temperature up rapidly as function was restored to the damaged tissues. Scans have been provided documenting the improvement at fifteen minute intervals in the first twelve hour period. Patient showed detectable brain function at six hours post infusion, was weaned off ECMO at seven days post infusion, and awakened fourteen days post infusion—”

His datapad jittered softly on the podium. He continued detailing Kirk’s recovery on autopilot while he called up the message. “Twenty days post infusion, a second volunteer received the first of three infusions. Each of these were followed by improvement in motor function in the lower extremities, though not by the extraordinary tissue regeneration shown by the first patient.”

He looked down at his pad. Joanna ran off. Tracking her now.

He realized he had stopped talking. “Sorry, momentary technical issue. Hold on folks.”

He typed back. I’ll find a way to bow out.

He had no idea how he was going to bow out gracefully. None. He looked over the room full of faces. Joanna was his now and he needed not to be afraid of what people would think of him. Of her. He stepped away from the podium and said, “Look, I’m sure some of you know already that I have a lot of personal connections to what happened in San Francisco last year. My best friend almost died stopping the Enterprise from falling out of the sky like the Vengeance did. My daughter was critically injured that day as well. Because of circumstances I was unable to anticipate in advance, she’s with me on the station, and she needs me right now. I will get back to
this as soon as I can, but for now, if you’ll forgive me.” He hurried down the stairs, up the aisle to the double doors, and out into the hall.

He held his data pad in front of him while he walked and pulled up the telemetry on Joanna’s tracker. He thought someone might be following him but he didn’t have time to deal with them right now. He’d give even odds it was Chapel. According to the tracking device around her ankle, Joanna was still in the hotel block, fortunately. He hurried across the wide atrium that formed the center of the convention center and made his way to the turbolift. He was getting closer. If he had a little more time to sit down with his data pad he could overlay a map of the station so he could see exactly where she was. She wasn’t moving anymore. Her life signs were still stable, fortunately.

He hoped she hadn’t gotten herself somewhere she could hurt herself. How had Jim let her slip away like that? McCoy had given him one job… He entered the turbolift, slammed the button to the floor it looked like Joanna was on, and turned around. His tail wasn’t Chapel as he had thought. The doors closed instead on the healer’s face.

He should have held the door. He should have held the door. He should have held the door. The turbolift door opened. He was on the floor where the buffet suite was set up, a space where conference attendees with short breaks between seminars, panels and workshops could grab a bite to eat. He stopped a woman he didn’t know coming out of the room with a cup of coffee and a sandwich wrap. “Did you by any chance see a little girl run through here?”

The woman frowned her disapproval, but gestured down the hall with her wrap. McCoy glanced down at the tracking on his data pad, but when he looked up, he could see Jim standing outside a closed door. He broke into a jog. “She in there?”

“It’s a linen closet I think. She jammed the door.”

“How did you let her—” he stopped himself. First get her out, then yell at Jim. “Have you called for a site to site transport?”

“I wasn’t sure you wanted everyone to know we—I—lost her. Also we don’t have custody yet, and Jocelyn’s not answering her comlink. I think she’s already left the station.”

“There could be toxic chemicals in there! Call for the transport, we’ll deal with the consequences afterward.” Jim got on the link to explain the situation to station ops. McCoy leaned against the door, trying to think. Talking to her would just make her more upset, and if she were upset, she might just…he still remembered the day she drank half a bottle of shampoo. It had been a bad pain day. Fortunately, shampoo was not particularly toxic, though getting it back out of her hadn’t exactly been fun for anyone.

A figure strode up the hallway towards them, not running, but walking as fast as a person could while still plausibly walking. It was the healer. “Is there some manner in which I may be of assistance?” he said.

McCoy was equal parts relieved and mortified. “I can’t see how,” he said. “Joanna’s shut herself in the linen closet. Jim’s on the line to see if someone can authorize a site to site transport but—” he paused to listen to Jim’s voice and it sounded like he still hadn’t been directed to the right person to ask, “it looks like it’s going to take a while.”

“Is the door locked?” Spock said.

“Doesn’t have a lock. Jim thinks she pushed something up against it.”
“Perhaps.” He regarded the door. “I believe we have sufficient cause to inflict damage on hotel property. Vulcans are significantly stronger than humans. May I attempt to open the door?”

“Knock yourself out.” The Vulcan approached the door, pressing his hands together as though to gather his strength. “Wait a minute,” McCoy said. “Be careful. She might be holding the door closed with her body.”

Spock raised an eyebrow, then nodded concession. “I believe I can ascertain her location.” He stared off into middle distance for a moment. “Please be silent.” After another beat, he turned back to them. “She is two meters away, near the rear of the closet. I can hear her breathing.” He reached up to slam his hand into the top corner of the door, hard. Inside the closet, Joanna shrieked at the noise and kept shrieking.

The door bent inward about fifteen centimeters. Spock turned his back to the door, braced against it, and pushed back until the material curled on itself enough that someone could squeeze inside. McCoy did so. Joanna’s cries were beginning to draw a crowd from the buffet down the hall.

“Jim, he’s got the door open. We don’t need transport,” McCoy said.

“Right.” Jim started to extricate himself from the call.

The inside of the linen closet was about two meters wide and three meters deep, but deep shelving along the sides and back made the space inside a little cramped. Spock had peeled the door back enough that he and Jim could stand in the doorway, but climbing inside with him would make the cluttered space uncomfortably crowded. From inside, McCoy could see where Joanna had worked a wedge of plastic into the joint where the sliding door should have retracted into the wall. She was curled in the back of the linen closet under a pile of towels it appeared she had pulled off a shelf, still screaming. He had to get her back to the room. He dug through his bag. He hesitated to sedate her again not knowing what all Jocelyn had dosed her with on the trip out. Normally she was good about keeping track and maintaining an appropriate schedule, but today her behavior had been so erratic he just didn’t know.

He didn’t have any of Joanna’s sedatives with him anyway. She wasn’t supposed to be with him. He hadn’t expected to be practicing any medicine at all on this trip, though he did have a full array of Jim’s hypos just in case he discovered a new allergen. The meds Jocelyn brought with her would be back in the room.

McCoy crept closer to Joanna. “Come on, darlin,” he said, hoping his voice would be soothing enough. And how did that wall thing go? Bricks? He imagined bricks built up around himself as though he were sealing himself inside a chimney, which was stupid, really stupid and he knew it probably did no good at all. He held out his arms, but she wasn’t looking at him. Maybe his tone would get his meaning across. He could only hope. He reached for her, trying to make sure his hands touched only her clothes. She scrabbled backward and kicked him hard right below the sternum, knocking the wind out of him. He fell backward for a second, wheezing. He ought to just get out of there. Maybe the healer…but no. Dealing with Joanna when she was this worked up was too much to ask.

Just get it over with, he decided. He got his feet under him and reached forward to pick her up, planning to hold her to his chest just long enough to get them both out of the closet. His hands closed around her waist to pick her up. Her struggles untucked her shirt and light exploded behind his eyes and it hurt and he was scared and he just had to get away go away and there was a blinding noise and a loud flash like an explosion.

**He couldn’t think around the tornado whirling behind his eyes. The ribs of the shelving dug into
his back. His vision cleared. Joanna lay on the floor, limp, eyes half closed and a red handprint already rising on her cheek. He heard a scuffle and thump beside the door and tried to turn his head, but his body wasn’t obeying him. From his limited vantage point he saw Jim scoop up Joanna and pass out of his sight. The brief scuffling noise must have been him climbing back out of the linen closet. McCoy’s hand stung.

McCoy still couldn’t move, or he didn’t want to. He must have hit her. He must have hit Joanna. He hit Joanna. He heard another, fainter noise from the direction of the door and this time his head turned in response to his command. The healer was standing over him, a neutral expression pasted on his face over God only knew what intentions. Idly, McCoy wondered if Vulcans summarily executed child abusers.

McCoy struggled to his feet. The room spun around him. He hung on to a shelf for balance. Joanna must have kicked him harder than he’d thought, or perhaps he’d hit his head on the shelving. There was a spot just at the back that was tender and puffy when he reached back to touch it.

“Where will your friend take the child?” the healer asked.

It took a moment for the words to make sense. The healer had asked a question. Question generally expected answers. Right. “My room, probably. This tower, room 516B.”

“May I assist?”

“No, I can walk,” McCoy growled even as he swayed on his feet again. “You can stay the hell out of my head.” The last thing he needed was to have the healer’s judgment against him confirmed. Spock stepped over the part of the door that was still sealed and waited for him in the hallway. McCoy followed once the way was clear. The persistent vertigo was joined by a pounding headache that he richly deserved. Spock started toward McCoy’s room, up one level and down a long hallway. He slowed his steps to allow McCoy to keep up, even waiting when McCoy had to stop and brace his hand against the wall to breathe through sudden bouts of nausea.

McCoy made himself sick. He wanted to stop, and think, and figure out how to solve this massive situation he’d gotten himself into but he didn’t even know where to begin. Start with the fact that he’d just slapped Joanna hard enough to leave a bruise. He struggled to remember why he’d done it—even to remember having done it. The mark had been right on her face and there hadn’t been anyone else in the room at the time. And his hand stung like it had hit something, the last two fingertips already fat and throbbing with nascent bruises. But why? He might be a pain in the ass to get along with but he hadn’t actually struck anyone outside the line of duty since his teens. His early teens. And that kid had been bigger than him.**

He didn’t know himself at all, apparently. It would be appropriate for Jim and Spock to press charges. More than appropriate. He would make sure they did, and then he would serve whatever time, do whatever psychological counseling, medication, brain rewiring was prescribed. He would give up his medical license without a fuss and quietly disappear.

That led him to Joanna herself. What would happen to her, trapped in limbo between a parent who didn’t want her anymore and another who was demonstrably unfit? She’d end up in the system. Few kids did anymore, and the ones who did usually were genuinely better off for it, but with all the challenges Joanna presented—she’d be sent straight to that residential facility Jocelyn had lined up. And she’d be dead in three months. Six at the outside.

Maybe Jim would take her. He was good with her, losing her today notwithstanding. The healer stayed close to his side, one hand held out as though to catch McCoy if he stumbled, or, oddly, as though he wanted to offer the arm for support—which he was sure a Vulcan would never do. He
and Spock arrived at his door. McCoy palmed the lock. It flashed red. Jim had locked him out of his own room. His frustration was replaced with a grudging sort of admiration. Good man. He turned to Spock. “Jim changed the door codes. If you tell him you’re out here I’m sure he’ll let you in. I’m just going to stand over here, out of the way, until I catch my breath and then I’ll be out of your hair.”

The healer turned to him. “You will do no such thing.”

McCoy leaned against the wall beside his door and bent over at the middle, keeping his head low. The headache was evolving into one of those migraine like nausea inducing monsters. Fine. Perfect. “I just hit my kid. Aren’t you afraid I’ll do something else violent? I shouldn’t even be near her.”

“I believe I can prevent any further accidents.” Spock knocked briskly on the door. “It is Lieutenant Commander Spock. I have Dr. McCoy with me.” Accidents. What the hell was he playing at?

Even McCoy knew that was not what an accident looked like.

Chapter End Notes

When attempting to pick Joanna up, McCoy experiences a brief blackout, after which the evidence strongly suggests that he slapped her.

On request I will provide the actual circumstances in response to comments (It's a bit trippy and will require a bit of infodumping, sorry). However, I encourage you to let yourself inhabit McCoy's headspace for a while. How would you feel if you thought you had done something you swore you would never do, yet feared, like all parents do, that you might?

Next week you get to inhabit Kirk's headspace about it. It ain't pretty either.

Also Also I was at a complete loss for how to tag this. I tried. Any suggestions from people who did read the whole chapter would be welcome.
Kirk loses his best friend. McCoy loses himself.

Kirk didn’t think, he just scooped up Joanna and ran. He knew damn well he should never have turned his back on her, but he hadn’t realized how fast she could slip out the door and into the conveniently placed turbolift at the end of the hall. As soon as the door clicked shut behind her, he’d pulled on his shoes to follow, but even with the brace on her foot and that uneven gait of hers, she was a quick little thing.

He should not have stopped to put on his shoes.

He had to get back to the room where all of her things were and then figure out what the hell to do. He thought Bones was his friend, but all he could hear was the sound of that slap. He vowed to himself a long time ago, after Frank and before worse than Frank, that he would match the next person he saw strike a child blow for blow, and then make sure they could never come near a child again.

He had not been able to keep his promise every time, but he had tried. When he got back to Bones’ room--to McCoy’s room, he corrected ruthlessly, the biosensor recognized him and let him in. He let the door slide shut behind him and lay Joanna on the bed. She was worryingly still. He took a moment to reassure himself she was breathing, then he turned back to the door and used McCoy’s code to authorize changing the biometrics on the locks. McCoy didn’t need to come in here. Kirk wouldn’t have come back except all of Joanna’s things were here.

All of Joanna’s things.

Crap, he didn’t know her medication schedule, or how to put her nutrient suspension into her GD tube, or if she had any of that nasty nutrient suspension—and he remembered that stuff less than fondly—in her bags. She’d been fed before McCoy left to give his presentation, but how often was he supposed to feed her? He’d have to figure it out. He pulled the lilac colored, sparkly bag out of the basket behind the stroller’s seat and laid the contents out on the hotel room’s second bed. Jocelyn probably had a list in there somewhere. Two sets of clothes, a bag of hypospray cartridges and liquid medications to be added to Jo’s nutrient suspension, a spare splint and foot brace, the little toothbrush that fit over Joanna’s finger so she could brush her teeth, her plush python, crayons and a pad of paper. The door buzzed to warn him that someone had tried to enter without authorization.

McCoy who was not Bones, he supposed. He’d have to talk to him eventually, if only to get a copy of her care plan. He’d also need to see him in person to beat the shit out of him at his earliest opportunity, but he wouldn’t be doing that in here where Joanna would have to watch—even if she did seem to be out like a light.

There was a knock at the door. He really wasn’t in the mood to talk right now.
“It is Lieutenant Commander Spock. I have Dr. McCoy with me,” a baritone voice said through the door.

The voice sounded familiar. “I’m in here with Joanna Treadway. I don’t want him anywhere near her.”

“The child and the doctor are in need of treatment. I will prevent him from behaving inappropriately.”

Can you prevent me from behaving inappropriately? Kirk didn’t give a tiny little shit what Joanna might have done to McCoy. He could just suck it up and get out of here. “You can come in. He can’t.”

“I require his consent in order to properly assess the child.”

It was that Vulcan who had torn open the door to the linen closet. McCoy’s voice joined the healer’s, more muffled though, as if he were further from the door. “It’s fine. I’ll be on my way in a minute.” He sounded as terrible as he deserved.

“You will not,” the healer said.

Kirk unlocked the door. McCoy’s companion entered first. The Vulcan escorted McCoy to the chair by the desk and indicated he should sit. McCoy crumpled into the chair, burying his face in his hands.

“May I have permission to examine Joanna?” the Vulcan said to McCoy.

McCoy mumbled into his hands, “I can’t give it. I don’t have custody.”

Kirk looked up from sorting Joanna’s things on the bed. “You’re her medical liaison.”

McCoy nodded slowly. He pulled out his data pad and tapped it briefly. “There. It’s all in order. Her chart’s up—it’s long, but I keep the highlights flagged.” He curled back into himself, elbows resting on his knees, face buried in his hands. “I’d appreciate anything you’re willing to do. You don’t have to get your precious Vulcan hands dirty or anything, just. Just, if you can point Jim in the right direction.”

The Vulcan quirked his eyebrow. “I assure you I know how to use a bathroom sink.”

Jim sputtered. That was actually pretty funny. “Um, no, not what he meant. Jim Kirk, by the way. Commander.”

“Are you the other parent?”

“Friend of the family. Friend of Joanna’s, I guess,” he amended. “What McCoy meant is we’ve been trying to get a Vulcan healer in to see Joanna for a good eight, nine months and none of them will even look at her chart.”

“I see.” Kirk thought he could detect disapproval in Spock’s tone.

Jim continued. “She’s got a blown shunt. Telepath. There’s pretty much nothing for her on Earth but a lot of lingering prejudice.”

“That fact was—is—apparent.” Spock walked over to the bed and sat down beside Joanna. After a pause he rested his hand on her face for about thirty seconds by Kirk’s count, then sat up again, the
expression on his face changing only slightly. He picked up the bag of ampules and a hypospray and flicked through the ampules with one finger until he found what he was looking for, then slipped the three ampules into the slots on the hypospray. “Lexorin, Placelsin and diphenhydramine. She will require rest. I will complete a full neurological exam when she awakens and present my recommendations.”

Spock brushed back Joanna’s curls with one hand to press the hypospray to her throat. “You seem to be familiar with her. I suppose you understand that you should avoid unnecessary physical contact at this time.”

“Of course I do.”

“Good,” Spock said. “I will remain here as long as I am needed.”

Kirk’s reflexes and attention were still in battle mode, attention switching from brief checks on Joanna, to tracking Spock’s movements in the room, to assuring himself that McCoy remained in his nonthreatening posture in the chair. “Mind if I talk to McCoy outside?” he said.

“Please return as soon as practicable. The doctor requires attention as well.”

“I’ll be right back.” He walked over to McCoy’s chair, grabbed him under the arm, and pulled him to his feet. His former friend didn’t resist the movement in the slightest, though he took a moment to find his feet. Kirk gave him that moment before leading him out of the room and into the hallway.

He wasn’t half here, in a hotel defending a child he loved at least as much as he loved himself for all he’d known her less than a year. He was more than half back in Riverside, hiding bruises under makeup and long sleeves, taking the successful swing at Frank that even the arresting officer hadn’t anticipated before they hauled him off to Tarsus.

Bones had put him back together at the Academy. They had put each other back together, and then Bones had put him back together he’d lost count of how many times since. And then he had to do the one thing for which Kirk had absolutely no forgiveness. He walked fast. McCoy struggled to keep up. He didn’t need to go far, just to a door marked “stairs” at the opposite end of the hall from the turbolifts. He pushed McCoy through the door and down to the landing between flights.

McCoy leaned against the wall where Kirk put him, eyes cast down at the floor.

“I don’t want to know why. I don’t want to know how you lost control of yourself.”

McCoy didn’t even respond.

“There is nothing you can say that will fix this. You get that?”

McCoy nodded.

“Look at me.”

McCoy raised his head. Kirk slapped him as hard as he could. Blood colored McCoy’s lips. He slid to the floor. It wasn’t enough. Kirk took aim with a foot pulled back, but McCoy hadn’t even curled up to protect himself. He couldn’t make himself dole out more than an eye for an eye. He squatted down next to his former friend. “Understand this. We are done.”

He left McCoy in the stairwell. The healer was waiting for him.
McCoy wasn’t sure how long he lay in the stairwell in his own vomit. Long enough for the skin of his cheek to be pink with a mild acid burn on the opposite side to where he’d been slapped. His eye was swollen shut, both lips split when he reached up to feel them. He had work to do.

He forced himself to his feet, staggered down a flight of stairs to the floor below his own and opened the door. He made his way down the hall to the nearest bathroom and shut himself into a stall to work before he realized he didn’t have his bag or data pad. Well, that wasn’t helpful. He’d have to use a public terminal, and it was likely he was wanted for arrest by now, certainly if anyone but Spock or Jim saw what he had done. It was still likely Jim had pressed charges already, unless he was wisely waiting until McCoy was able to pull up the custody documents Jocelyn should have sent by now. Jim would hate being grounded, but Pike had said kids were welcome on the Nightingale, so maybe that would be less of a problem than it seemed.

He cleaned himself up in the sink. There was a public access space on each floor. He found his way there, ignoring the other occupant’s frank staring, and accessed his account. Jocelyn had sent the custody documents, fortunately. He signed them. He expected to have custody of Joanna for no more than a few minutes while he drew up paperwork for Jim. It took surprisingly little time to make the changes, though the documents were certainly going to confuse the hell out of Bell. He sent the paperwork to Jim first, hoping he’d open it and sign the damn thing quickly. He dropped a short note along with it containing Bell’s contact information so he’d be able to make it all nice and legal.

His headache—concussion, possibly, Kirk had a hell of an arm—made it more difficult to remember what his next steps ought to be. Station security, right. He took the turbolift, garnering a couple more stares from people he vaguely recognized but whose names he didn’t recall, then flagged down a station security officer. “Can you tell me the way to the nearest security station?”

The security officer immediately took him by the arm. “Let’s get you to the emergency room,” he said. “Did you see who attacked you?”

“Yes. No. That’s not important, I got what was coming to me.”

The security officer turned him face on and lifted his hair out of his eyes. “Can you walk? How many fingers am I holding up?”

McCoy snapped his arm free. “I’ll find it myself.” He stomped away, hoping he wouldn’t be followed. There were nav panels on the walls. He leaned into one of them. “Guide me to station security.”

“Nearest station security kiosk. Follow the red dots down this corridor. Take the second right. Station security kiosk ten will be on your right.”

He didn’t bother to thank the algorithm. The security kiosk wasn’t manned so he sat for a while. A body planted itself next to him. “Bad day?”

He turned at the sound of the woman’s voice. Chapel. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, Commodore Yeogai does. He’s been looking for you since you left in the middle of your presentation.”

The presentation. The first of three he was scheduled to give. Today, tomorrow, and the next day. He wondered if he’d be allowed to keep his data pad so he could organize the materials for
someone to present in his stead. Was Albieri here? “I don’t think I’ll be able to keep to the schedule,” he said.

“Are you sick?” She studied his face. “Someone beat you up. What the hell happened? I heard a rumor you had an argument with a woman at Layla Rose and you left with a kid. Did the woman you were with hit you?”

“No.” How could he get her to leave? The truth ought to do it. If he could get himself to say the words. “My ex-wife left me with my daughter. She ran off from my hotel room and had a—” it wasn’t really fair to call it a tantrum. “She was upset. Fought me when I tried to pick her up. I shouldn’t have tried to pick her up, but she was screaming and it was drawing a crowd and I panicked and.”

Chapel waited for him to finish. “I slapped her. I don’t get it, I haven’t hit anyone, I mean anyone who wasn’t actually trying to kill me, since I was a kid. I’m an asshole but I don’t hit kids.” He could feel her tense and move slightly away from him. “So I’m waiting here for station security. I’m going to take my court martial and once my sentence is up I’ll be out of the fleet. So not much chance I’m going to be speaking tomorrow. Sorry.”

She was silent for a long time. “Where’s your daughter?”

“In my room. With Jim Kirk and a Vulcan, Something Spock. They’ll take care of her. Better them than me.” He traced the pattern of silver strands in the floor tiles with his gaze. “Hey,” he said just as she was standing up. “You’re the CMO of the Nightingale, right?”

“Will be, yes.”

“You really should check out that Spock guy. He’d be great for the Nightingale.”

“I know.” She walked away, heels clicking on the shiny floor tiles.

McCoy waited for fifteen minutes, then hauled himself to his feet to look for a dive bar. There probably weren’t any dive bars on a station this respectable, but one never knew.

*

Another hour found him leaning over the railing of the mezzanine, where a tame waterfall ran over black and silver sheet glass, backlit with twinkling lights. He was nowhere near drunk enough to jump. Where had that thought come from? He’d thought about ending it once before, right after the divorce papers were signed, when Jocelyn made it clear she wanted a whole planet between them. He wouldn’t have really stepped in front of that shuttle rather than inside it, but he had thought about it, rolled the possibility around in his mind while he watched those fresh, pretty young men and women in their garish cadet reds filing inside. Until he saw the one guy who looked as rough as he was. Jim Kirk. If he hadn’t been there that day, McCoy wasn’t sure he’d have gotten on that shuttle. He scoffed at himself. Pike would have kidnapped him.

It was probably good he left his bag in the hotel room. Too much temptation in those little ampules. He let himself lean a little over the edge to allow the waterfall to fill his whole vision. It would be a bad place to jump. The fall probably wouldn’t kill him.

Whoever was standing beside him now was an incredibly quiet walker. He stood up a little straighter, but didn’t turn to see who it was. If it was station security they’d cuff him shortly. He wondered whether he could get up and over the rail before they grabbed him and abruptly found himself too weary to move. His data pad was handed to him. He took it automatically.
“Pardon the intrusion.” It was the healer. Spock. “You are needed in your room.”

“Not going back there.”

“James Kirk misunderstood the nature of what occurred. He has agreed not to press charges for the moment.”

“What’s there to misunderstand? I hit her. She’s six years old. She was lost and scared and hurting and I hit her.”

“You were not yourself,” Spock argued.

“You don’t know that.”

Silence. Then, “No. I do not know for certain.”

“Then I’m not going back.”

Spock changed his tactic. “I was able to examine Joanna’s records. I have included a preliminary summary.”

“She awake then?”

“Yes. I have not completed a full neurological exam at this time. Due to her level of anxiety, I believe I will need to allow her to become comfortable with my presence before I do so. It was necessary to engage in a light meld while she was unconscious in order to repair some damage which occurred during the uncontrolled mental contact between the two of you.”

McCoy nodded acknowledgment. Uncontrolled. So slapping her wasn’t the only way he’d hurt Joanna. He should walk away right now. Walk right out of all their lives. If he wasn’t so unsure of Joanna’s legal status, he would. But he wasn’t going to risk Joanna being sent to live with strangers or in a residential treatment school that would be entirely unprepared to meet her needs.

Spock continued to press him. “As I said, I came to request that you return to the room. I have exacted a promise from Commander Kirk not to strike you again.”

McCoy gripped the railing, hard. “He can hit me again if he wants. It’s all the same to me.”

Spock turned to him with one of those armor piercing looks that made him wonder if the Vulcan was reading his mind. They might not be touching, but they were mere centimeters apart after all. The back of his neck prickled. “You truly believe you were fully responsible for your actions earlier today?”

McCoy rolled his eyes. “Somebody else didn’t slap her.”

Spock turned to face the waterfall. “I would prefer to continue this discussion in a more private location. As I am guaranteeing your safety from Commander Kirk, so I will guarantee Joanna’s safety from you.”

He had to go back to the room to collect his things anyway. Especially if Jim was going to be stupid and not press charges. “All right, I’ll go with you.”

“Thank you. I did not wish to call security, and given your mental state when I arrived, I did not believe it wise to leave you alone.”

McCoy felt just a little pissed at the implications of that. “What do you mean my mental state? I
“I didn’t ask you to go rummaging around in my mind.”

“I am trained to recognize the signs of suicidal ideation and to take steps to prevent self harm. I did not rummage around in your mind, as you say. If I did, you would know.”

“Well that’s good I guess.” He was going for snappish. The words came out resigned.

They walked silently, side by side, Spock pointedly taking the side nearest the mezzanine rail. When they reached the turbolift, he said, “I did, however, briefly interrupt your volition until I was able to engage you in conversation. There seemed an unacceptable likelihood that you would jump.”

“Is that an apology?”

“No. It is a disclosure. It is my understanding that apologies are reserved for when one has overstepped.”

“Are they now?”

“Of course, Dr. McCoy.”

Chapter End Notes

Trauma can make a person do stupid things. As usual, I love and answer comments, and welcome questions about why I allowed the characters to do what they did. In Kirk's case, remember he's essentially having a flashback, which can make people make decisions they would never make if they were thinking clearly.
Kirk, Spock, and McCoy struggle with the emotional fallout surrounding the accident.

When Spock returned to the hotel room with McCoy, Joanna and Commander Kirk had commandeered one bed and the holoscreen. A children’s cartoon from the pre-holographic era was playing, the warm colors casting pastel swirls over the two of them. The other bed was made and empty of the items that had been scattered across it. There were only two chairs in the room, a dark green, upholstered recliner with a footrest and the executive chair at the desk. Spock seated himself in the executive chair to settle his thoughts. McCoy perched on the edge of his bed. As soon as McCoy was seated, Kirk shifted his body so as to interpose it between McCoy and Joanna. The child scooted to the far edge of the bed and turned away from the screen to watch them with a pinched expression.

After a moment, Spock crossed the room to stand in front of McCoy, who stared resolutely at the floor. He calibrated his medscanner and ran a brief physioscan. “What do you think you’re doing?” McCoy said, ducking the device. “What goes around, comes around,” Commander Kirk remarked. The words were light, almost teasing, but the tone was hard. McCoy flinched.

Spock perused the results on his data pad. McCoy was suffering from dehydration and low blood sugar. Spock suspected that he had skipped a meal, possibly two given that it was now early evening station time, making up the calories with alcohol. Nitric oxide levels were elevated, exactly as he expected they would be. “Dr. McCoy,” he said, firmly. The doctor remained hunched at the edge of the bed, not acknowledging him. Spock continued. “You are badly dehydrated, your blood sugar is low, and your blood alcohol content is 0.04. You must eat, drink, and rest. Left to your own devices, you will recover within a day or two, but I suggest you allow me to assist, given that you have a number of functions you are expected to attend tomorrow.”

He provided a bottle of flavored electrolyte solution from among the several he habitually carried in his satchel. “Drink this.” He placed the bottle in the doctor’s hand, holding it there until McCoy’s fingers closed around it.

“You’re not my doctor,” McCoy said. He consumed the beverage nonetheless. “And you haven’t offered me any explanation for why Jim’s not over here justifiably beating the crap out of me for coming back here.”

“As I said, I insisted that he refrain.” His directive had deeply disturbed the commander, though he refused to divulge the source of his distress on questioning. Even now his body language was that of a trained security officer watching a dangerous criminal, not a man concerned for his partner. It was difficult to reconcile his current behavior with their former emotional resonance.

Dr. McCoy regarded his daughter and the Commander. “I’m not safe here.”

“No one is going to harm you.”
The doctor pulled his arms in closer to his body and avoided Spock’s eyes, both defensive postures. “No. I’m not safe. What if I fly off the handle and hurt somebody again? I’m--unbalanced or something.”

An insightful remark under the circumstances, as the doctor was clearly still suffering ill effects from the incomplete meld. “Agreed. However, I do not believe you are a threat under the circumstances.”

McCoy swallowed loudly. “I’m a monster. Look me in the eye and tell me I’m not.”

“I intend to. Please sit all the way on the bed.” McCoy scooted back and turned to sit cross legged on the bed, eyes still fixed on his own hands, which were now wrapped around his ankles.

Spock seated himself facing McCoy, thinning his shields just enough to ascertain his pattern and ensure that when he did reach for the doctor’s mind, the transition would be smooth. He expected that, even after obtaining consent, he was likely to encounter significant unconscious resistance that might necessitate a period of adaptation. “I believe it would benefit you to review your memory of the events of this afternoon. In addition, you are suffering from rhythmicity disturbances that ought to be corrected.”

“Rhythmicity disturbances?” The doctor’s tone was dubious.

Spock considered a cursory explanation, but a colleague of McCoy’s stature deserved a more thorough response. “A moment.” He lifted his medscanner. “I would record a neuroscan to demonstrate.”

“Fine, fine,” McCoy said, irritated. Curious. He used his irritability to preempt social interaction and mask fear. Spock wondered if this was a habitual behavior or merely a response to extreme stress. Given Joanna’s need for a lengthy course of treatment and education, Spock expected he would be interacting professionally with McCoy for an extended period of time. Understanding his response to stress would be valuable in preventing further missteps on his own part.

Upon completing the neuroscan, he pulled up the results on his datapad alongside the scan he had taken of Joanna, then lay the device face up between himself and McCoy. “Observe the alpha lines. I have separated the four most prominent rhythmic features onto separate tracings. Yours is on the left, Joanna’s on the right.”

McCoy examined the tracings, a spark of interest lighting up his otherwise dismal affect. “Joanna has extra peaks.”

“They match your secondary rhythm, here. You are carrying traces of hers, at a lower amplitude. Under some circumstances, shared rhythmicity is benign or even beneficial, especially here in the tertiary and quaternary rhythms, but here, the base rhythm itself is being interrupted.”

“It almost looks like a heart throwing PVCs.” McCoy failed to disguise his interest.

“Precisely. And the effect on brain function in humans is similar to that of a mild concussion. My intention is to present a wave of equal and opposite phase to cancel the offending pattern.”

“And you’ve already done that for Joanna?”

Spock pulled up the second neuroscan he’d recorded of Joanna. “As you can see.”

“Mystical bullshit, my ass,” McCoy said.
The words might be interpreted as insult, but at this point Spock welcomed any engagement from the doctor. “I do not understand.”

He shook his head. “Not you. Something one of Joanna’s physical therapists said while she was in the rehab center. Told me to ignore the telepathy because it didn’t matter and she didn’t go in for any of that mystical bullshit.”

There were a number of medical professionals on Starbase 4 who professed the same attitude, branding his talent and training as religious belief, to be “respected” but not given any diagnostic weight, or as superstition worthy of ridicule, especially coming from a species that professed to be devoted to logic. “I have encountered that attitude myself. I believe that were I human I would find it frustrating. What did you do?”

“I found another physical therapist. Terrific guy. Got her back on her feet. When he shipped out I never found anyone to replace him.” McCoy sighed and set down the data pad, his eyes fixed once again on the bedspread. “Don’t get me wrong, Healer Spock, I don’t think there’s anyone who can advocate for Joanna more effectively than I can, and I plan to keep doing it for as long as I can. I just don’t think it’s a good idea for me to be around her anymore. Not if I can’t keep from hurting her.”

“I see.” Joanna suffered from postictal amnesia that had completely erased her memory of the event beyond his ability to reconstruct. From what Spock had witnessed from the doorway, however, he was nearly certain of what had actually occurred. Unfortunately, the doctor was unlikely to be convinced without incontrovertible evidence. “Shall we begin?” he said.

“What? Oh.” His heart rate, just audible at this distance, increased sharply. Spock was accustomed to patients unaccustomed to telepathy reacting with fear, often combined with embarrassment. He had also found that calling attention to the reaction made it worse.

“May I?” he prompted.

“Right. Um, yes, go ahead.” His heart rate increased even more.

“Take a deep breath, and release it.”

McCoy’s breath hitched slightly. His hands clenched into fists. Spock sequestered his personal impressions of the man to present only the calm, focused presence appropriate to healing. He raised both hands to cradle McCoy’s face, closing his own eyes to better visualize the rhythms that required redaction. He found the dissonant pattern by feel and brought his own music to bear, stilling the dissonance that caused pain and interfered with thought and replacing it with a consonant harmony.

_Music?_ An imperfect but useful analogy, Spock said.

McCoy, calmed by Spock’s carefully crafted presence, responded with delight followed with, as might be expected, embarrassment. _Sorry. It’s beautiful here._ More embarrassment as he realized his inability to censor his thoughts.

Spock returned their focus to the task at hand. _Remember earlier today, when you entered the linen closet to retrieve Joanna._

A moment of refusal, then resigned acceptance. Spock caught the first thread of intention and followed it back to the beginning of the recollection. As with all human memory, it was stored
diffusely and incompletely, a network of associations that must be reexperienced to be recalled in acceptable detail—and in this case, fragmented still further so that the doctor had no conscious recall of the critical moments. Spock isolated McCoy’s consciousness slightly from the memory itself, so that the memory could be analyzed without having so much emotional impact that McCoy would be unable to draw appropriate conclusions.

There. McCoy crouched before his panicking child, concerned for her safety, but also about the opinions of his peers. It had occurred to him, only for an instant, to request Spock’s further assistance, but Spock was a near stranger, and he had feared--*You were Joanna’s last hope. I couldn’t afford to offend you.*

*Your prior experiences led you to believe that I would be judgmental and unwilling to render aid.* He had brief dealings with both of the healers living on Terra, neither of whom were Syrannite, and was not surprised at their behavior in the slightest.

McCoy and Joanna had been close enough to each other that their mutual panic flowed through their familial bond to create a feedback loop, fear feeding on fear until neither was capable of rational thought. The moment he took hold of Joanna they were thrown into an uncontrolled mental contact, like a meld but without the matching of rhythm and frame of reference that allowed for the smooth exchange of thought and emotion. They broke against each other and Joanna lashed out, struggling to escape, and in the confused internal space, had connected with the motor tracts in McCoy’s arm rather than her own.

*She slapped herself with my arm?*

*So it would appear. Your error was in allowing fear and social pressure to direct your actions, rather than taking the time to pursue a logical course of action. A human failing, but not monstrous.* He allowed the meld to dissolve, remaining in contact long enough to assist McCoy in regaining normal consciousness. His hands once more folded in his lap, he said, “As you see, you remain the kind of person who would never strike a child. You must merely take care not to allow Joanna to control your limbs in future.” He spoke the last aloud specifically for the Commander to hear, and was rewarded with a derisive little scoff.

McCoy cast an anxious look in Commander Kirk’s direction. The commander shook his head minutely and remained on the bed between McCoy and Joanna. “And just how do I do that?” he asks, his tone suggesting he didn’t expect a useful answer.

“You learn how to shield your mind properly. The attempts I have observed have been less than effective.”

McCoy grumbled, “You try to teach yourself based on vague written instructions.”

“That would be difficult, particularly if those instructions were written in Federation Standard. The hour grows late, and you must sleep. May I repair your injuries?”

“I’ll keep them, thanks.”

An illogical position to take, but he chose to pick his battles, as M’Benga would say. “May I suggest we retire for the evening and discuss Joanna’s treatment plan in the morning?”

“Someone won’t be sleeping,” McCoy said. “Joanna wanders at night, and as you’ve seen she’s a magnet for trouble.”

“Indeed.” Spock considered. “Between the three adults in this room, we have three standard rooms,
each configured with two beds.”

Kirk made fleeting eye contact with McCoy, but seemed to force his eyes away to look instead at Spock, cocking his head with a grin that clashed with the confusion and distress he radiated all too plainly. “Why does this sound like the beginning of the fox, the hen, and the grain problem?”

Ah, the logic puzzle in which one must transport a fox, a hen and a sack of grain across a river, one at a time, without the fox eating the hen or the hen, the grain. “There are similarities, I suppose. Joanna must be supervised by someone who will not fall asleep. I am the only person who can be certain of that. Neither you nor Dr. McCoy would be wise to allow a minor child to be alone with an unknown adult overnight. Neither you nor Dr. McCoy are comfortable with McCoy being in Joanna’s presence.”

He paused. “Commander, would you be willing to allow Dr. McCoy the use of your room for the night?”

Commander Kirk considered the question. “Why can’t he use your room?”

Spock had not considered the possibility. “My room is not configured for comfortable human habitation at this time.” The fact that he was uncomfortable with a near stranger occupying it didn’t factor into his decision.

After a long pause, Kirk said, “Fine. I don’t want him sleeping on a couch in the convention center.”

“Dr. McCoy, what is your schedule tomorrow?”

McCoy was silent for several seconds, then said in a low and flattened voice, “I’m scheduled to give the next part of my presentation from ten to noon.”

“May I have your word that you will go directly to Commander Kirk’s room, replicate and consume a healthy meal, and retire immediately afterward?”

“Yeah, whatever.” The brief elevation in mood that frequently accompanied a successful meld had faded with surprising speed, leaving the doctor despondent once more.

“Do I have your word?” Spock repeated.

“Yes,” the doctor said.

“Very well. I can forgo sleep for a night with ease. I will remain here and keep watch. The commander will take one bed, Joanna the other. I will meditate in front of the door, so that Joanna will not be able to leave without stepping over me. We will meet here at 0700 hours to discuss Joanna’s treatment plan in light of each of our Starfleet assignments. Agreed?”

“I’ll walk him there. I’m sure you can handle her for half an hour,” Kirk said.

“I do not know if that’s wise.”

“I can be an adult for that long, Healer.” The use of his title, bitten off, was clearly not intended as complimentary.

“No. I will call a colleague to escort you.”

“I don’t need a chaperone,” Kirk protested.
“I don’t want Jim—the commander in trouble,” McCoy said. “Keep him out of it.”

“He is in it, regardless of either of your wishes,” Spock said.

Kirk pressed his lips together, tension building visibly in the hardened muscles of his arms and jaw. He pressed his lips together hard, then turned, just for a moment, to McCoy. “Gaila. I can call her.”

McCoy roused himself from staring at the floor to nod. “She won’t let either of us get out of line.”

“No, she won’t,” Kirk agreed. He pulled out his data pad. “Hey Jim,” a female voice said. “You look terrible, what happened? I heard Dr. McCoy got mugged or something.”

“It’s complicated, but could you come to his room as quick as you can?”

“Sure, Jim, I can be right there. Anything I should bring?”

He smiled then, still sad but genuine. “Just yourself.”

McCoy collected a change of clothing and disappeared into the bathroom. He returned in a moment, then returned to his uneasy perch at the edge of the bed. Neither man spoke for the next several minutes. Joanna slid off the far side of the bed to tiptoe toward Spock with wary curiosity. After taking him in from several different angles, she poked out one finger to touch the back of his hand, then snatched it back. She tilted her head and smiled with recognition. She reached out to poke him again. He pulled his hand away with a shake of the head.

The door chime sounded. “Come in,” Kirk said.

A bright green woman in a red Starfleet uniform as bright as her copper hair rushed in and immediately pulled Kirk into a hug. “So, what happened?” She noticed McCoy next. “Who did that to you?”

“I did,” Kirk said. “He made me call you because he thinks I can’t walk him across the station without doing it again.”

“What? You two are like this!” She crossed the first two fingers of her right hand, then sat down on the other bed close enough to McCoy to touch from knees to shoulders. She wrapped an arm around him. He flinched away.

“Gaila Vro,” Spock said.

“I’m surprised you remember me.”

“I remember all my patients, even those I met in the Academy. Compound spiral fracture of the tibia and fibula. Tell me, have you put away the skateboard in favor of less hazardous pursuits?”

Gaila grinned. “Nope! You can pull my board out of my cold, dead hands.”

“May I never have to. Are you willing to accompany Commander Kirk and Doctor McCoy to Kirk’s quarters and return Kirk here?”

“Sure. What happened?”

“I’m afraid I cannot discuss the situation without their leave to do so.”

“I’ll get it out of the two of them eventually. You ready to go?”
Kirk nodded. McCoy followed the two of them out the door without speaking. Spock turned his attention to Joanna. Kirk mentioned she enjoyed puzzles. It was unlikely she would be able to grasp the complexity of kal-toh, but the game could be played competitively or used as an open ended logic puzzle, and he had a set among his belongings.

He pulled out the set. Given Joanna’s aphasia, he could not expect her to understand his words, but he elected to speak to her anyway. “I enjoy a game of kal-toh on occasion before bed. Would you care to join me?”

She flinched, flashing anxiety at the sound of his voice. He relaxed his shields enough to allow her to perceive his benign intentions. The kal-toh set rested open in front of them, a tangled mass of silver sticks suspended above a base containing finely calibrated electromagnets. He removed one stick from the tangle and replaced it in a different location. Several other pieces changed position, causing the tangle to subtly change shape. Joanna squinted at the game, suspicious.

Spock moved another playing stick. The design shifted again. Joanna reached up with her left hand, but froze a centimeter from touching the game. He encouraged her with a nod. She pulled out a stick and held it close to her eyes, as if to determine what it was made of, then poked it into the center of the stack. The tangle sagged into something resembling an Earth haystack.

“The goal is to increase symmetry along any plane,” he explained, but as he selected a stick to remove, she reacted with a jolt of anxiety and the half-smile fled her face.

He gestured her around to his side of the desk. She shook her head. He selected his stick and moved it. Very little changed. She reached toward the pile tentatively, snatched a stick, and put it next to Spock’s. The pile became slightly more triangular.

He opened his mouth to tell her she had done well, but she pressed her lips together and stepped back. So. Speaking itself made her anxious. If she were frequently given directives and punished, or if she merely felt the disappointment of adults when she failed to understand, her reaction made sense. He resolved to keep his words simple and rare until she trusted him. Perhaps, with meditation, he could recall the several hundred signs he had invented as a small child with his mother before he was able to speak. Their concreteness might serve as a bridge to her learning Federation Standard Sign. Joanna’s occipital lobe had been relatively spared from damage and might allow her to learn to process visual symbols with greater ease than sound based languages.

They worked their way, stick by stick, toward a triangular pyramid while they waited for the Commander to return.

* 

Gaila walked behind Kirk and McCoy, “So I can keep an eye on you.”

McCoy walked next to Jim, but not with him. Their steps usually fell in sync; this time, one or both of them broke that rhythm so that they walked just out of step with each other. It felt wrong. McCoy wanted to say something, anything. He hadn’t earned the right to speak. Might never earn it back.

Jim wasn’t in the conference bloc, but was housed in ‘fleet billets for officers awaiting transfer to their posts. Pike would be nearby. They stopped into front of his door. He keyed in, typed in his code, and gestured for McCoy to place his palm on the lock to add his biometrics.

McCoy paused on the threshold for only a moment before walking inside and dropping his bag on the small desk. The door slid shut. He turned around to punch in something simple. Soup and
bread, maybe. Jim was still standing by the door, his thumbs hooked into the waistband of his pants, scowling. Gaila leaned against the wall between the two of them, one foot pressed back against the wall, he arms crossed in front of her. “OK, spill it.”

“Not now, Gaila,” Jim said. “We’ll talk later.”

“Uh uh. Now.”

Kirk turned to her. “He hit his kid. I saw it. I hit him back. End of story.”

“Is that true?” Gaila asked him.

“Pretty much,” McCoy said. She didn’t need details that didn’t really matter in the long run. “Can you give us a minute?”

“Sure,” she said. “I’ll stand out here. Leave the door open.” She slipped past Kirk into the hallway.

The Commander—McCoy tried to keep his eyes on his rank stripes—frowned at him. “I hate this,” he said.

McCoy nodded understanding. “I’m the one who fucked up.”

Jim didn’t answer for a long time. “Yeah.”

“I’m Frank,” McCoy said.

A curt nod. “Yeah.” Jim didn’t leave, so he must have more to say. “You promised you’d never leave.”

McCoy shook his head. “I didn’t promise I’d always deserve you.” He’d proved over and over that he didn’t deserve family.

Jim nodded, lips pressed into a wrinkled line. “You really want me to be Jo’s dad?”

McCoy mashed the tears out of his eyes with the heel of one hand. “Who else? Jocelyn won’t take her back. You’re good with her. She likes you more than she’s ever liked me.”

“I don’t know how to do all that medical stuff.”

“You can learn. I can teach you if you can stand to be around me that long, or that healer can if he sticks around. I can handle organizing her appointments remotely.”

Jim heaved a breath, eyes locked on the floor. “Can I think about it?”

“Until you leave with the Nightingale, yeah.”

He looked up, past McCoy’s face and to the ceiling, eyes liquid and shining. “OK. I’ll think about it.” The door slid shut behind him and he was gone.
Stupidity Hangover

Chapter Summary

Morning. Kirk, Spock, and McCoy consider their options in the harsh light of day.

Note: This chapter includes a character contemplating self harm.

Kirk startled awake at the sound of a soft, measured baritone saying, “It is not necessary for you to wake the commander at this time.” It took his groggy brain a moment to remember that there was supposed to be someone else besides Joanna in his room. He opened his eyes. Joanna herself stood at the foot of his bed with the corner of his bedspread in her hand. She was wearing fresh clothes and her hair was damp from a shower.

“Joanna,” he said.

She tugged the bedspread down half a meter, exposing his body to the waist. Fortunately, he was sleeping in his black undershirt.

The Vulcan healer sat in the executive chair by the room’s desk, a data pad in his hand. He did not look like someone who had been up all night. He clapped and Joanna turned her head toward him. He pointed to the other bed, which was already made, and held up her foot brace. She tiptoed over to the bed and sat, then held out a hand, archly, for the brace. It was always difficult to get it back on her after she showered and the muscles of her right leg had a chance to shorten.

“Good morning, Healer,” Kirk said.

“Good morning, Commander.” He returned his attention to Joanna, handing her a candy colored picture book instead of the brace. Once she was occupied, he pressed his fingers into the hollow behind her knee and down her calf in what looked like a precise pattern, then kneaded the calf muscles. Joanna ignored him. He put on her knee sock, checking for wrinkles, then slipped the foot brace on and tightened it easily.

“Something to think about,” Kirk said. “I have to meet Captain Pike for coffee. Will you be all right staying with her?”

“Yes. The temporary block I placed yesterday has begun to degrade. Shall I place a new one before Joanna’s pain level increases?”

“Oh. Sure. Look, you don’t have to ask about every little thing. Just make sure it gets in her treatment journal so Bones—so Dr. McCoy knows. I’m going to take a shower.” He grabbed his clothes and headed into the bathroom, half hoping the healer would do whatever all while he was in there. The whole business made him nervous. It pushed his “protect Joanna at all costs” buttons.

Kirk did some of his best thinking in the shower. He did his very best thinking in the Captain’s chair in the middle of a crisis, but that was beside the point, and his life had crashed head on into a different sort of crisis. He knew, intellectually, that Bones hadn’t actually lost his temper and hit
Joanna. But his insides still twisted every time he saw the doctor’s face, and the way Bones had just fallen to pieces—it seemed like he must be culpable in some way the healer wasn’t admitting to. He should have asked for help. He shouldn’t have been in such a hurry. Kirk knew what kids were like when they’re were scared. Traumatized. You didn’t corner them, that was the worst thing you could do. How could Bones have forgotten that?

He stepped out of the shower feeling worse than when he’d gotten in. Still too angry at Bones, at McCoy to forgive him, still mad at himself for not being a bigger man. Skin still singing with aftershocks anytime he tried to think too hard about what had happened, because thinking about that moment, trying to make sense of it, took him back in time to places he did not want to revisit. He cleaned his teeth, combed out his hair, and shaved, the familiar movements settling him enough that his hands didn’t visibly shake. By the time Kirk left the bathroom, dressed and ready to meet Pike, Spock and Joanna were engaged in a game that involved making shapes out of silver sticks. “I don’t suppose you play chess,” he said.

“I do,” Spock said. He stared at Kirk for a fraction of a second too long. “Perhaps we can play in the future.”

“Okay. Good.” He ought to try to make friends with the healer, for Joanna’s sake. “I’m meeting up with Pike and--and McCoy now. See you in an hour or two.”

*  

McCoy’s door chimed.

He was pretty sure it wasn’t the first time. He rolled out of bed to answer it knowing Jim was going to be on the other side of the door. It was only 0615. The walk back to his own quarters might take ten minutes, and getting ready to go fifteen. Which meant Jim had stolen twenty minutes of sleep that was rightfully his.

He reminded himself he no longer had the right to be pissy about it.

“Come in,” he said. The door slid open in response to his words. Jim was with Pike, and they were both bright eyed, showered, and in uniform. Morning people, gah. “Give me a minute,” he told them. He grabbed the clean uniform he’d left crumpled on the desk and escaped to the bathroom. Knowing they were waiting for him, he didn’t linger in the shower, just washed off the stink of a little bit of alcohol and a lot of depression, pulled on his uniform, brushed his teeth and finger combed his hair because he hadn’t thought to take the comb from the bathroom in his own room. He didn’t have his depilator and he didn’t think he ought to use Jim’s even if he wouldn’t have hesitated just this time yesterday.

On second thought, he would have hesitated, but only because he’d rather not share face germs with anyone he wasn’t kissing regularly. He smoothed his hands down his pants before leaving the bathroom, wondering if Pike was there because Jim had changed his mind about pressing charges. It was 0623.

“Let’s get coffee,” Pike said briskly. He backed his chair out of the room, spun it around, and wheeled toward the turbolift, Jim at his side.

McCoy followed Pike and the commander without a word. The nearest coffee shop wasn’t far. Starbase 4 did little to combat the stereotype of doctors and their coffee. McCoy had counted at least fifteen different coffee shops and kiosks in just the few parts of the station he’d seen.

McCoy ordered, “Black. I don’t care, just black,” and thumped into a chair. Pike and Jim followed,
Jim bearing a ridiculous filled frosted donut that was likely to put him into an early grave. Pike had a couple of croissants filled with ham and cheese, one of which he handed pointedly to McCoy. The click of low heels on polished flooring made McCoy turn his head. Chapel.

“You really ought to run a dermal regenerator across that face,” she told him, then slid into the fourth seat at the table, her own cup of coffee, pale with cream, in hand.

Pike took a sip of his coffee and said, “You’re being assigned to the Nightingale, like it or not.”

McCoy stared into his coffee. “What does the Commander think of that?”

“I think you’ll be a valuable addition to the crew,” Jim said. His tone was careful, brittle, and he didn’t look McCoy in the eye. So. This was Pike’s idea.

McCoy sighed, tired in a way he was sure coffee wouldn’t help. “I’m getting out of direct patient care.”

“And I think that’s the dumbest thing I ever heard,” Pike said. “But if you need some time, there are plenty of research positions aboard.”

Chapel frowned. “Are you sure about that, Captain Pike?”

“I’ve read the medical report Healer Spock submitted concerning the doctor and his daughter. The situation was an unfortunate accident, regardless of how McCoy insists on interpreting it.”

“Forward that report to me, would you?” Chapel said.

McCoy nibbled a corner of his croissant. Working beside a former friend would be hard. Too hard, he thought. For both of them. Better to make a clean break. “I don’t think I’m staying in Starfleet.”

Pike set down his cup of coffee. “Sorry, McCoy, you know how it is, you spend three years in the Academy, you owe three years of service. You’ve given Starfleet two.”

“There’s always a dishonorable discharge,” McCoy said.

“Not going to happen,” Pike said, more to Chapel than to McCoy. “We’re all to be moved in to the Nightingale three days from now. We dock at Starbase 4 between missions. Chapel will determine where to place you, Doctor.”

McCoy set down his croissant, no longer able to feign an appetite. “I’ll try to make myself useful, then.”

Pike rolled back from the table. “I was glad to hear you decided to offer a position to Healer Spock,” he said to Chapel.

“You shouldn’t make your staffing decisions based on a civilian dependent of a crewmember.” But I’m glad you have, McCoy added silently.

Chapel contradicted, “You must not have had a chance to look at this guy’s record. I’d be a fool not to snap him up before somebody else takes notice.” She added to McCoy, her voice turning cool, “I plan to review the healer’s account in detail, Doctor. I’m afraid I can’t spare any more time this morning, gentlemen.”

Pike rolled away from the table and headed for the lift, clearly expecting Jim and McCoy to follow. McCoy trailed a few steps behind them both, numb.
Spock watched Joanna twirl in the space between the beds, moving the stick she’d liberated from Spock’s *kal-toh* set like a conductor’s baton to the strains of the Firebird Suite. He put on music for himself and was surprised by Joanna’s interest. She had little or no functional auditory tissue in her left temporal lobe, which should have rendered her right ear useless for all but identifying loud noises. Her left ear was a cosmetic reconstruction. The middle and inner ear on that side had been entirely destroyed, and the surgery to replace them with an implant had been put on hold until she was deemed able to cooperate with the physical therapy necessary to get any use out of it. The fact that she appreciated music indicated she had independently begun the process of rerouting information coming from the right ear to structures in the right temporal lobe. Sometimes he forgot just how resilient humans really were.

The door chime sounded. “Come,” he said, not wanting to turn his back on Joanna while she was dancing around with a blunt, but still slightly hazardous stick. Commander Kirk and Doctor McCoy entered, followed closely by a man he had not met, but believed to be the captain who would be commanding the Nightingale.

Kirk perched on the end of the bed. Captain Pike, who used a lightweight support chair, rolled up next to him. McCoy stood in the doorway, shifting his weight from foot to foot, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

Pike spoke first. “Gentlemen, the Nightingale is shipping out in four days and I want all three of you aboard her.” He turned to Spock. “Dr. Chapel requested you specifically. Now, you still have the option of refusing, but remaining assigned to a Starbase like this you run the risk of overspecialization, and your Academy records suggest you probably don’t want to do that. You scored extraordinarily well in general sciences and even in the few command exercises we require of medical specialists—better than most Vulcans, in fact. I know you’ve been working toward doctorates in particle physics and biochemistry. I think you’d benefit from a chance to get some field work under your belt. What do you say?”

He had not been expecting the offer. “I will have to speak to Dr. M’Benga,” he said.

Pike nodded. “All right then. Chapel plans to put you in neurosciences under Arnaaluk Lavoie. McCoy, we’re attaching you officially to Luci Ribera in epidemiology, but Chapel’s hoping you’ll float to wherever you’re needed.”

“I don’t want to risk hurting anyone.”

Spock felt the need to clarify. “Dr. McCoy was not in control of his limbs when he accidentally struck his daughter. It would in fact be more accurate to state that his daughter struck herself with his arm.”

“I put her in the situation that caused the injury,” McCoy insisted. “And it was still my hand.”

“I’ve read your report, Spock. Doctor McCoy, the best way for you get your head out of your ass is for you to get back up on the damn horse,” Pike said, mangling his metaphors badly. He turned to Kirk. “Commander, you’ve already confirmed your appointment. I expect decisions from the two of you by the end of the day. Gentlemen.” He nodded to each of them, spun his chair around and headed for the door, dodging Joanna on the way out.

Joanna decided she’d had enough of dancing and sat down on the floor, still waving her baton. Kirk regarded her. “We all have some decisions to make, and Joanna is at the heart of them. I’m not willing to have her bounced around the system, so I signed the custody agreement last night.”
His phrasing suggested a certain ambivalence. Was he uncertain he wanted to commit to raising a child? McCoy was by no means unfit. His decision to relinquish custody in the first place had been rash, brought on by guilt and significant injury. If Spock chose to do so, he could have the agreement nullified.

Kirk gestured toward the doctor without looking directly at him. “Dr. McCoy, you still have medical power of attorney.”

McCoy flinched, turned the movement into a nod.

Kirk waited a beat for McCoy to speak for himself, then said, “Healer Spock, are you willing to complete the neurological exam now?”

Spock considered the question. “I completed the first portion this morning. Mapping the damaged regions will take more than one session. I have reviewed her chart and can provide direction on that basis.”

“So? What’s the plan?” Kirk said.

McCoy remained distressingly, if unsurprisingly silent. Spock continued. “I have had the opportunity to observe Joanna awake for a total of three point two six hours during which time I have drawn some conclusions about her strengths and challenges. First, the central pain syndrome must be addressed. Both by direct observation and two calibrated neuroscans early this morning, the amount of discomfort she endures on a regular basis has averaged 7.6 out of ten.”

“She regularly hits 8.5 to nine on my scanner on bad days,” McCoy noted. It was the first time he had spoken.

“Where is she right now?” Kirk asked.

“Four point two. The temporary block is able to reduce the severity of her symptoms, but not eliminate them. The process of rerouting the damaged networks will take time. The telepathic ability, which I note is referred to by obfuscating euphemisms throughout her chart, can be addressed at the same time. Each of these issues will require repeated treatments and training which at present I am the only practitioner available to provide. Ideally these treatments would be scheduled every other day—a schedule which is clearly impossible if Joanna and I are not in the same general location.”

“If you sign on with the Nightingale--” Kirk said.

“Indeed. I had not considered leaving Starbase 4 until now. I have not yet considered all of the implications to my career.” He would be leaving a familiar environment in which he had cultivated professional relationships with colleagues that facilitated his work with patients and his independent research. It would take time and effort to build new such relationships and educate colleagues on the working parameters of his healer’s training. Despite this, there were intriguing opportunities to pursue through ship duty—and he already felt a certain responsibility for his newest patient.

McCoy responded to his long silence. “Look, Spock,” he said, “I may not be worth shit as a father, but you’re my kid’s last hope. If there is anything I can do to convince you to go to the Nightingale with Jim and Joanna—with Commander Kirk and Joanna—tell me and I will do it.”

Spock regarded him. “Are you completely serious?”

“Dead serious.”
Spock enumerated his requirements. “You will also sign on with the Nightingale. You and the Commander will both learn effective shielding techniques so that you will not pose a hazard to Joanna. You will both enter counseling to come to terms with the events of yesterday, as neither of you appear to be doing so on your own. I will provide a list of practitioners on the Nightingale. And you, Doctor, will continue to provide patient care and conduct research as you have done for your entire Starfleet career.”

“I don’t need to get over anything,” Kirk lied.

“You don’t need me on the Nightingale with you all,” McCoy insisted. He seemed to deliberately disengage from the conversation and curl in upon himself. The feeling was duller, heavier than grief or anger or guilt, and after a moment Spock realized he was overstepping and tightened his shields. The doctor appeared to sense his withdrawal and hunched still lower. Spock reminded him, “Joanna needs you.”

“I don’t--I can’t--” McCoy fled the room, medical bag clutched to his chest. Joanna got up and ran to the door, but it closed and locked before she reached it.

Spock stood to follow the doctor. Kirk’s unwillingness to acknowledge his former partner’s pain was becoming a significant issue. “Joanna has not yet had her nutrient supplement. I leave you to it. I suggest you not turn your back on her again and if you do, do not stop to put on shoes.” He wasn’t angry, precisely, when he left the room. As he walked briskly toward the turbolift, he chastised himself for his dishonesty. He was angry. Between Kirk’s unwillingness to forgive McCoy and McCoy’s unwillingness to forgive himself, he found both men profoundly frustrating. The emotion acknowledged, he set it aside to put his mind to the task of finding McCoy as quickly as possible.

It turned out to be not as difficult to find McCoy as he thought it would be, fortunately. The doctor was almost exactly where Spock found him the last time, though this time he was seated with his back to the waterfall, his back against the transparent aluminum half wall that formed a safety barrier. He held a handful of ampules in his hand. A hypospray lay on the floor next to him.

Spock dropped to the floor in front of him.

“You again. Planning to interfere with my volition?” McCoy didn’t even look up.

At this distance, Spock could easily perceive the gist of McCoy’s mental state even through shields. Under the circumstances, he believed it safer not to prevent the transference, but instead schooled his own mind to project serenity. “Have you injected yourself with anything?”

“No. I was trying to decide what would hurt the most.”

Truth. At least in that he had not yet misused the medications in his bag. “Return the hypospray and ampules to your bag. Now.”

McCoy did so, slumping further. Spock collected the bag, placing it a little behind him so it was out of McCoy’s reach.

“You grieve the loss of a friendship you valued.”

McCoy shrugged. “You could say that. And the man I thought I was.”

“You have not ceased to be yourself.” In this state, a man as invested in self loathing as McCoy
would perceive his reassurance as merely an opportunity to disagree. However, he found he could not leave the words unsaid.

“Then everything I thought I was before was a lie.” McCoy looked up at him. “You know I can tell when you do that.”

“What?”

“You’re listening in.” He tapped his temple.

“I believed it medically necessary.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to stop.” Again there was that near panicked reaching of which McCoy was not consciously aware. “I mean, I don’t think you need to keep tabs on me or anything.” The shame returned, sharp and ugly. “I must seem monstrous to you.”

Spock was not certain why he elected to shift position so that he was sitting beside the human doctor, leaning against the transparent aluminum barrier. “You are not monstrous.”

The doctor snorted. “How would you know?”

“I have known the monstrous more intimately than I care to recall, and I have known you. You are—quite the opposite.”

McCoy bent forward, head bowed so it rested almost between his knees. His anguish was palpable. For a moment, his shoulders shook, silently, until a sob, sharp with inhaled breath, tore from him. “I can’t do this,” he said.

He had seen human colleagues cry before. It came with the territory, medicine being a fight against disease, suffering and death that could never be fought to better than a stalemate. He never knew what to do, how to respond. His soul ached to provide comfort by means that would most likely not be welcome. McCoy was a fascinating counterpoint to his own mental landscape, a mind that tempted contact in a way that very few had before, but he could neither extend his mind further nor withdraw without risking harm. He could only be still and wait for the storm to pass.

The tears spent themselves. McCoy said, eyes still fixed on a point in middle distance, “What do I do? Jim’s going to the Nightingale, so that’s where Joanna will go, too. I can’t stay away from them on a ship that size.”

Spock considered his next words carefully. “It puzzles me that neither of you have discussed Kirk’s own responsibility for what occurred. She was left in his care and he allowed her to escape his supervision.”

He thumbed the tears out of his eyes. “She’s fast. Hang around with her long enough she’ll escape your supervision too.”

Based on the morning’s babysitting experience, Spock could believe that. Still, the asymmetric assignment of blame disturbed him. He chose to respond in practical terms. “The only logical solution is for both of us to accept Captain Pike’s offer.”

“Guess you’re right.” McCoy grabbed the rail and pulled himself to his feet. Spock followed. “I have a presentation to prepare,” he said.

The immediate crisis appeared to have passed, though without resolution. “I do not believe you should be alone, under the circumstances.”
“I won’t do anything stupid.”

“I cannot trust that statement. I have work I can complete without disturbing your preparations.”

“Suit yourself.” McCoy started back toward Kirk’s old room. “Don’t need a damn green blooded Vulcan shadow...”
The Cold Light of Day

Chapter Summary

Spock calls Kirk to task for his behavior. Shockingly, Kirk lets him.

Chapter Notes

Finally turning the corner here with Kirk. (It seems like forever, but it really has only been a single in universe day.)

Kirk paced the hotel room to which he had been effectively grounded. Spock had rearranged their housing until the end of the conference so they wouldn’t be spread all over the station. The four of them, Spock included, shared a three bedroom suite with a fold out couch. Someone had to be with Joanna at all times until they found aides watch her while they worked, and neither Kirk nor McCoy himself was comfortable with McCoy taking a shift. So for the next two and a half days until they all shipped out, Kirk had days and Spock had nights. Kirk noticed that Spock always found a reason to be with McCoy wherever he went, like a mother hen. He reminded himself that they weren’t friends anymore and tried not to care that McCoy was in such a bad place that he couldn’t be left alone. He mostly failed.

He was supposed to be interviewing aides. He had no idea what to look for in an aide, but Spock and McCoy thoughtfully left him a list of interview questions. No one had yet responded to the request placed on the Starfleet intranet.

The door chimed. “Come in,” he said.

Joanna looked up at the sound, then returned to the Lego Enterprise scattered on the living room floor, a gift from Spock, who referred to it as “a therapeutic exercise in visual interpretation and fine motor control.” Kirk was not fooled, especially after Spock sat on the floor with her for an hour helping assemble the nacelles.

Gaila swept through the door carrying a tote bag and wearing a brief lilac wrap that made Kirk wish he wasn’t babysitting. Except he wasn’t babysitting, he reminded himself. He was Joanna’s guardian now. “Good afternoon! How’s my favorite warrior princess?” Gaila said.

She set down the bag in the kitchenette, gracefully stepping between drifts of mostly white bricks, then lowered herself to the floor with a move worthy of a prima ballerina. She waved at Joanna, who gave her the slightest smile before returning to her project. It hadn’t taken Gaila long to notice that Joanna didn’t much like chatter directed at her. Joanna handed her the section of the instructions that involved connecting the pieces that made the model starship’s lights work. Gaila collected a small tray from the stack on the floor and rifled through the scattered pieces. Kirk sat down next to her, careful not to sit on any of the hard little bricks.

“Two thousand three hundred pieces,” he said. “I have to assume this would be appropriate for a Vulcan child Joanna’s age.”
“Or Spock’s age,” Gaila said. “How you holding up, Jimlet?”

Jimlet? That was a new one. He rifflèd through the piled bricks with his hands. There was something deeply satisfying in the rustling sound and cool touch of Lego bricks in quantity. “I’m OK. Though I had hoped to spend some time getting to know the Nightingale before I ship out. Nightingale. I still can’t get over that name.”

She snuggled into him. “I think it’s pretty. So, when do you want to start the interview?”

“Interview?” Kirk sat up straighter. “For what?”

“For Joanna’s aide. I’m going to be on the Nightingale too, working on programming computer models for the bioscience and epidemiology teams. I’ll have time to take the after school shift.”

“I don’t think you have the qualifications we’re looking for.”

“Joanna likes me, I’m responsible, and I’m a quick study. And I dated this Yaozha girl at the Academy. They’re telepaths—she gave me a few pointers on the whole shields thing. I’m perfect!”

“Of course you’re perfect,” left his mouth before he could recall it.

“Glad you think so! Hey, Let’s watch Fantasia 2240 later!” She gave him another squeeze, hopped up to dance around the Lego and made her way to the kitchen. “I was thinking Joanna might like to make glow slime. I thought cookies first, but I remember you said she doesn’t eat.”

“You can get her to eat something, I’ll hire you on the spot.”

“Oooh, a challenge! Any rules?”

“Um.” That had been a joke. He tried to remember everything McCoy had told him about why Joanna didn’t eat. “OK, so, Joanna’s got some trouble controlling her muscles because of the brain damage. She had a trach for a while, and a bunch of surgery on her face. And all that time when she couldn’t eat means her gag reflex is really overactive. The first few times she tried she choked or hurt herself, so she doesn’t want to try. We’ve had a little luck with smooth, sweet, room temperature foods she doesn’t have to chew.”

“Hmm. OK. So my project is to tempt Joanna with tasty treats. Can do!” She turned to straddle his lap and leaned in for a strawberry lip balm flavored kiss that Kirk found confusing in the extreme. He needed to figure out how to get past all the different cultural assumptions and the fact she very much liked to mess with him to figure out what kind of friends they were. Especially now that they were going to be serving together.

She slipped off his lap to join Joanna with the Lego. “I bet you have work to do, Commander Big Shot First Officer. I can keep an eye.”

They had biometric locks installed on the inside of the doors for as long as they’d be here, so Joanna was unlikely to escape again, and he did have a growing backlog of work to do. He might have to wait to make social calls around each of the departments on the Nightingale until they all moved in, but he could at least get a start on the paperwork so he didn’t end up having to do it in a mind-numbing all night marathon. He didn’t leave the living room, but he did pull out his data pad, move from the couch to the desk with its larger work screen, and pull up the First Officer’s predeployment checklist.

“So what really happened between you and Bones?” she said.
A part of him wanted to burn all of McCoy’s bridges in retaliation for what he did. For betraying his trust. McCoy was supposed to be the steady one, the one who didn’t fall apart no matter what happened. And the doctor was right, it was his hand, not matter what the healer said. If it had been Kirk in that position, he was sure he could have stopped himself. So he didn’t know why he said, “We’re working through some stuff. I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

Gaila rolled her eyes at him. “That’s all right, I’ll find out. I have my ways.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.” He’d made a small amount of progress on the personnel files when the door chimed again. “Come in,” he said. He looked behind him to check Joanna’s location in case she bolted for the door. The Lego had been put away into a clear bin, the half-finished Enterprise resting in a sea of tiny bricks. Joanna was in the kitchen stirring something while Gaila held the bowl. Slime, Kirk presumed. He turned back to the door just as McCoy entered with his ubiquitous Vulcan shadow.

McCoy trudged through the living room without raising his head and shut himself in the bedroom nearest the door. Spock looked from Kirk to Gaila and Joanna in the kitchenette. “Lieutenant Vro, I did not expect to see you here.” Gaila walked with Joanna to the small dining table and pulled out a chair for her, holding onto the bowl with one hand while Joanna kept stirring. Once Joanna was settled with her task, she wiped her hands on a towel and turned to the healer. “May I ask the purpose of your visit?” Spock continued.

“Hanging out, doing girl stuff. Later I’m gonna see if I can do something about Joanna’s hair. You three have no idea how to deal with long curly hair and it shows.”

The healer nodded. “Dr. McCoy is unwilling to supervise Joanna at present. Would you be willing to do so? I have matters to discuss with the Commander.”

Kirk set down his data pad. “I don’t know. What if there’s a problem??”

“The door locks from the inside. Take a moment to brief Gaila on her behavioral triggers and those needs likely to occur,” Spock said firmly.

He wasn’t getting out of accompanying the healer on his errand. “Um, Gaila. Don’t unlock the door. Don’t let her in McCoy’s room. Bathroom door doesn’t lock right now, don’t reprogram it. Maybe hold off on putting her in the bathtub until Spock’s around, just in case. You already know she doesn’t like to be spoken to directly. Spock, she’s applying for one of the aide positions.”

Spock’s forehead creased minutely. “I believe that would not be inappropriate. Shall we go?”

“Go on, we’ll be fine,” Gaila said. “I’ll message you if I have a problem.”

Spock turned to the door, but paused before going out. “Gaila, would you look in on Dr. McCoy in a half hour’s time?”

“Sure. Is he not feeling well?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Spock, I would rather Gaila didn’t…” Kirk started to say.

“Dr. McCoy poses no threat to the Lieutenant.”

“That’s not why—”
“I believe it would be wisest to continue this discussion elsewhere.” He left the room to stand in the hallway, waiting for Kirk to follow. Kirk closed the door tightly behind him and followed, feeling uncomfortably like he had as a kid when he had been called to the office—back before he had convinced himself he didn’t care. He tried to convince himself he didn’t care now.

*

Kirk followed Spock out of the convention center entirely and into the hospital proper. He stopped at the scent of disinfectant and swallowed, then suddenly wondered if the Nightingale would smell like that everywhere, even on the bridge. What was he getting himself into?

Spock stopped and turned toward him. “Is there a problem, Commander?”

Kirk shook his head. “Where are we going?”

“My office.”

Kirk made his legs move forward and ignored the growing weight in his stomach. He was going to have to get used to this feeling if he was going to serve on a flying hospital and was it too late to request reassignment to the Romulan neutral zone? They stopped by a small, plain, numbered door and entered a room barely large enough for two computer workstations to sit back to back. Spock took one seat. “Sit,” he said.

Kirk elected to remain standing. “What’s this about?”

Spock’s eyes narrowed. “Your behavior toward your partner puzzles me. I have looked at your record and an absolutist attitude has generally not been shown to be one of your faults, yet you have rejected my explanation of what occurred between the doctor and Joanna out of hand and persist in reminding him of his perceived transgression both in your actions and by withdrawing all positive interaction. I must ask whether you are displacing your feelings of responsibility for what occurred onto him.”

Kirk bristled. “Oh so now you’re Counselor Spock? What do you know about feelings? And he’s not my partner.”

“Former partner, then. And my experience with human emotion is extensive, largely privileged and beyond the scope of this conversation.”

Former partner? Kirk wondered if everyone assumed that he and McCoy were together or if it was just the healer. Who had been in McCoy’s head. Shit, had he misinterpreted their relationship himself? He didn’t think so. “I’m willing to accept responsibility. But I can’t just forgive and forget.”

“Why?”

No sense lying. It would probably be obvious and Spock was unlikely to let a lie go unchallenged. “Because I can’t stop seeing it.”

Spock inclined his head to acknowledge Kirk’s admission. “You were abused.”

Kirk didn’t take a seat, but he did let himself fall heavily against the doorframe. He picked at the seam between the frame and the wall with a fingernail. “Yeah. It’s right here,” he held his hand up, inches from his own face, “All the time now. I thought it was behind me.”

“But it is not.”
“Guess not.” He was walking such a fine line right now. Even mentioning that time could--could nothing he was not going there. “Anyway, it’s not the kind of thing I want people to know. Any people. And nobody else should have to see,” he had to swallow. “Some of the stuff I saw.” The echo of shouting was already in his ears. Too late. Shouldn’t have said anything.

The healer tilted his head. “There is a sculpture behind me. In black granite. Do you see it?”

It was a complex, organic swirl of smooth, shiny granite, deep charcoal in color and flecked with pale inclusions. “Yeah,” he said wondering if Spock was trying to change the subject. *Useless little delinquent,* the half remembered voice said in his head. He wasn’t even sure which voice it was. Frank’s? Kodos? His own? *Not worth the trouble to feed you.*

Spock’s voice cut through the imagined ones. “The sculpture forms a single ribbon. Trace the path with your eyes. Focus on nothing else. I can assist you in maintaining focus, if you wish.”

“You won’t see anything?” He tried to follow the ribbon of stone through its complex gyrations while Frank and Kodos vied for his attention.

“No. I will only provide an anchor.”

Kirk chewed his lip but nodded after a moment. He found following the path through the sculpture a difficult task, as the stone wove in and out and around itself, but that was probably the point. He suspected the degree to which the glittering stone fascinated him was probably not quite natural. The shouting stopped. Quiet settled around him. He finished tracing the sculpture and opened his mouth to speak.

Spock shook his head slightly. “Again.” So Kirk traced it again, more slowly this time. When he faced Spock again, the healer nodded approval. “Good. You are more disciplined than I first thought you to be.”

“You see why I really don’t want to see a counselor and open up that whole can of worms.”

“I believe I do. We should be able to speak more freely for a brief time without triggering any further adverse events. You have made past attempts?”

“Some. Most of the time I’m fine. It’s just a few things. People hurting kids. Wasting food.” He swallowed. “Tell Bones I said you could ask him about when I was thirteen.”

“I will do so.”

“Can Joanna understand what happened? I mean—is that something she can ever get past?” Even knowing what really happened, Kirk was still not sure he could, no matter how much he wanted to.

Spock looked at him for a long time. “She doesn’t remember.”

Kirk’s eyes threatened to jump out of his head. Seriously? “What did you do, wipe her memory? That seems kind of unethical.”

“I did not remove the memory, nor would I have done so, as it would have served as a useful teaching tool. The incident caused cascading electrical discharges in the brains of both Dr. McCoy and Joanna similar to those occurring in certain types of seizure, more severely in Joanna’s case than in Dr. McCoy’s. In Joanna they produced approximately twenty three minutes of postictical amnesia. The memories are not present because the brain was incapable of forming them at the time.” The Vulcan’s professorial calm was steadying.
“I wish I could forget the whole thing. Not that I’m asking.” If he could only forget without the healer seeing the rest of the shit sundae of which yesterday was just the cherry on top.

“It has been too long for the memory to be cleanly excised. And I believe that the experience will prove of value to you once you have integrated it. May we speak of the doctor, now?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“I am not asking you to resume your relationship. I am merely asking that, given that you will of necessity interact with each other as crewmates and co-parents—”

“He’s not my co-parent either.”

“As the person making decisions about Joanna’s medical care, then. You will be required to interact with each other.”

Kirk paced the tiny office, glad to have an open door at his back. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Again, I am not asking you to resume your relationship—”

“We’re not a couple! Never have been. Not like that.”

Spock regarded him. “Do you make it a habit not to allow others to finish their sentences?”

“Sorry.”

“I am only asking that you consider the effect your behavior has on both the doctor and on Joanna.”

Kirk shifted from foot to foot. The room was too small to let him pace. “I’ll try.”

“Do I have your word?”

“You have my word.”

“That said, given that you must develop some semblance of shielding soon, when would you prefer to begin?”

Kirk swallowed. “I’ll figure it out for myself,” he lied. “Don’t put yourself out.”

“I remind you of the conditions I laid upon both you and the doctor. As regards shielding, I will attempt to provide written instructions superior to those you have encountered in the past.”

“Fine.” Written instructions. Kirk supposed he could at least read them through, stall a little longer. Counseling though. That was just. No. He didn’t think he could put himself through that again.

“How many previous attempts as resolving your trauma have you made?”

“Half a dozen, maybe?”

“I am willing to discuss methods used on my home world that might prove more effective, if you wish.”

Kirk shook his head. “Talk to Bones first. I guarantee you’ll take back the offer.”
Another one of those long pauses. “Very well. I will escort you out.”

Their walk back to their quarters was silent, but a little less tense than the trip to Spock’s office had been. When they returned to their temporary shared quarters, Spock said, “You are responsible for assigning quarters to senior staff and department heads. I request that my room adjoin Dr. McCoy’s.”

“Submit a request in writing and I’ll consider it.” He knew the Vulcan wanted to keep close tabs on McCoy, but he didn’t know if he wanted the two of them ganging up on him. He suspected they’d be formidable working as a team. An irresistible force.

Joanna ran to the door as they entered, holding a small bowl of glittery blue slime. He threw on a smile and gave her two thumbs up in lieu of words. She walked away, mollified, poking her fingers into the bowl over and over. Spock took his leave and disappeared into Bones’ room.

He hadn’t been much older than Joanna when Frank’s drinking had gotten worse. The first time he’d had to lie in the emergency room. The worst part was how much he missed Bones, even in the face of everything. But he had said his piece and made his choice and indulging his need to hurt Frank wouldn’t make the whole situation any better. He should let it go, let the Vulcan deal with Frank—McCoy, he meant, Bones, he wanted to mean--and move on with his life.

He forced a smile back onto his face and went to the kitchen to help Gaila pick up, slid an arm around her and squeezed. Joanna’s smile vanished as soon as he came near. She ran away from him, trying each of the bedroom doors and finding them all locked. Kirk followed her to the first, but that only made her more frantic, so he backed off and let Gaila follow her around the room until she wedged herself under the endtable by the couch.

He could see her trembling. “Gaila, I think I should go out for a bit. Hold down the fort until Spock, um, comes out of the bedroom?”

“Sure,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine. I just need to get some air.” He needed to go for a run. There had to be a gym on this station somewhere. He hit the palm lock on the door a little harder than he intended. His hand stung. He escaped into the hallway, planning to find a treadmill, or better, a track to run the tension out of his body. A part of him was disappointed that sliding doors didn’t slam.
McCoy moves to the Nightingale, hoping to get some distance from the situation he's in. Spock follows.

McCoy lay on his bed in earshot of Gaila and Joanna on the other side of the door and pondered the stages of grief. He had meant to put his thoughts, his feelings, into categories, try to make some sense of them, though he wasn’t sure what good it would do. All he managed was a recursive spiral of doubt and recriminations. Denial. He wondered whether he were still in denial and if so, what he was denying. Maybe the act of denial happened when he took custody of Joanna in the first place.

If so, at least it had found her Spock. Anger. Anger was easy to identify. Anger and contempt, turned inward like an ingrown toenail, as though his ribs were curling into the center of his chest and grown sharp as claws, digging into lungs and heart. He might have drawn that image from a half-remembered nightmare. Anger so far had kept bargaining at bay and good riddance to bargaining. He didn’t have use for false hope, thank you very much.

Depression, though, was an old friend. He could settle into depression’s arms for months, though depression made him a waste of oxygen, especially out here in space where it was in limited supply. He was already a waste of oxygen and worse, he found himself thinking for the hundredth time today—and there was depression’s buddy anger, wearing its self-loathing hat. Terrific. He and depression had a thing going, they were practically a couple, him and depression. He’d accepted that if he’d accepted nothing else.

Over his protests Spock had taken him out to lunch with Geoff M’Benga after his presentation. McCoy had been lousy company even by his own standards. Their attempts to draw him out had been obvious, though thinking of them as condescending wasn’t fair. They both strictly avoided asking after his health, sticking instead to discussing his research, and after the first question about the serum had sent a shot of anxiety burning through his chest, they had both studiously avoided mentioning that as well. He hadn’t thought he was that obvious, but he supposed he didn’t exactly have to be around the healer—and he tolerated Spock’s sampling of his emotional state only because he suspected that the alternative would be a formal evaluation and probably a seventy-two hour hold.

McCoy had promised the hobgoblin he would shower, rest, and not do anything stupid. He wouldn’t have showered if he hadn’t been committed to another round of public discussion of the serum he’d developed, this time in a panel focusing on the first promising results coming out of clinical trials.

He should have given the serum to Joanna when it would have helped. Or not at all.

There was a small lie in everything he had said, beyond that of the serum’s origin. He hadn’t given the serum to Joanna five days after she was injured, when he’d first transported to Tokyo Children’s to see a child he knew only from photographs, swathed in bandages and regen gel. He hadn’t given it to her the day Jim woke up—fuck, tears? Now? He’d waited one more week, as Jim had spent more time awake and coherent and it became clear that the man they were getting back was in essence the same as the one they had lost. A small part of him blamed the serum for the
extra surprise that had gotten in the way of Joanna’s rehab. Though that talent, or curse, had not been in Khan’s bag of tricks so far as he knew. Even Jim didn’t know about the three infusions he’d given her at three, four, and five weeks after her injury, at the same time as the documented infusions he’d given Pike. He still didn’t know whether those were responsible for Pike’s ability to walk most of the time, with braces, or if that was down to the captain’s bloody minded obstinacy.

The door slid open. “Lights, twenty percent,” that too smooth tenor said.

“Your room’s the next one over,” McCoy said. He sat up on the edge of the bed.

“I am aware,” Spock replied. “I wish to examine you briefly to determine whether the arrhythmias have remained in abeyance.”

Of course the healer wanted in his head again. McCoy ought to say no because he wanted that contact again, badly now that he thought about it, even a few seconds of a soft barrier between himself and his pain, but he didn’t deserve comfort.

“I will not intrude beyond what is necessary at this time,” Spock said, misinterpreting his hesitation.

He was too weak not to nod.

“Breathe in and release, as before.”

He couldn’t look up this time, but he did obediently draw in a single deep breath and let it out. Fingers settled lightly at temple and cheek and there was a faint, floating vertigo which faded in an instant. The hand was withdrawn. McCoy’s hopes for respite were dashed and he hunched further forward to bury his face in his hands so the other man wouldn’t see him cry again. “Am I good then?”

“The resonances have faded.”

That was a nonanswer if he’d ever heard one. “Well then, since you don’t need to monitor me anymore, I should move out before Jim—before Commander Kirk gets a restraining order.”

“I completed the first set of direct analyses of Joanna’s neural pathways. Would you care to go over the report and recommendations?”

McCoy shook his head. “You’re her doctor now. Kirk doesn’t want me involved. Best to make a clean break.” He stood, feeling as though the gravity in the room had doubled while he was lying down. They were putting people up on the Nightingale today. There would be no harm in moving in early. He could get a lab space set up and still come back for command performances at the conference. Having work to do would occupy his mind. “I’m going to pack. See you on the Nightingale.”

“Commander Kirk suggested I ask you what happened to him when he was thirteen.”

McCoy scrubbed his hands over his face. Nodded briskly. “He can’t talk about it himself, not sober anyway.”

“I offered to assist with the nightmares and flashbacks. He told me I would change my mind if I knew what had happened to him.”

McCoy shrugged. “I assume you won’t. You might want to, though.” He kept his eyes on his own hands, clasped in front of him. “So. He left an abusive stepfather when he was twelve. Went to live
with relatives. On Tarsus IV.” The healer had, if possible, gone even more still. “Jim’s one of the Tarsus nine.”

Spock waited another several seconds before responding. “I see.”

“I don’t know everything he saw. I don’t know everything he did. Can I assume he’s having nightmares again?” Jim’s flashbacks and nightmares were so virulent McCoy swore they were contagious.

SPock confirmed with a curt nod. “I will inform him that I have not been dissuaded by this information. He indicated that he has attempted counseling in the past, with limited success.”

“At least once at the Academy that I know of, and once back on Earth earlier this year. I take it I’m a trigger now.”

Spock didn’t say no.

“I’m moving over to the Nightingale today,” he repeated, expecting Spock to argue with him. “I need time to set up my office.”

Spock looked like he was about to say something, maybe try to dissuade him from leaving, but after a beat he stood, turned to him and raised his hand in that vee thing Vulcans did, saying, “Live long and prosper.”

McCoy didn’t think he was likely to do either under the circumstances, but he’d try to make it through the week. See how it went. “Yeah, okay,” he said. A corner of his mind registered as Spock walked away how beautifully he moved, all precision and grace, and he shut that thought down with the ease of long practice. His belongings were still in his suitcase; no need to pack after all, except to collect his toothbrush from the bathroom.

He kept his head down on his way out and tried not to let his eyes wander to Gaila and Joanna where they sat on the floor drowning unfortunate Lego Starfleet officers in glittery blue slime. The door didn’t open for him. He almost walked straight into it before he remembered the palm lock. He would not look back. Stick to what you’re good at, he told himself.

*

The Nightingale was an impressive ship. McCoy hadn’t intended to stop to sightsee at the giant plasteel windows that looked out over the spacedock, but he’d gotten turned around looking for the ‘fleet transporter block and found himself taking a break on a bench. She was bigger than Enterprise by about half and her interior was arranged differently, almost three quarters of it a sickbay with a hundred bed hospital that could in a pinch be expanded to four times that, a suite of state of the art labs including a proper BSL-4 biohazard containment lab with four biobeds, complete with an entirely separate ventilation system from the rest of the ship. They could conduct research on almost any plague without putting the rest of the ship at risk, and better yet, the lab existed as a detachable module that could be separated from the ship in the event they had to work on an especially hazardous organism.

McCoy hefted his duffel back onto his shoulder and found a nav panel to get himself the rest of the way to the transporter. He reconstituted with the same number of arms and legs as he left with and checked his data pad for his room assignment. It looked like all fourteen staff physicians were housed on the same deck in singles with shared bathrooms. He stayed in his room only long enough to drop his duffle, hoping he wouldn’t run into his suite mate and have to socialize, then
found his way to the lab deck, only then realizing that Spock still had his medkit.

There were a pair of women in the lab already, another doctor and a medtech by their insignia. They smiled when he came in the door and he scowled back. “Dr. Luci Ribera, epidemiology,” the taller one said, walking over to him and holding out a hand to shake. The medtech hung back, though she stared at the both of them for a moment before going back to putting away glassware on the slightly tacky shelves that would keep it from bouncing around in the cabinet and breaking in the event of “spatial turbulence.” In McCoy’s experience, spatial turbulence too often meant people shooting at you.

“Leonard McCoy,” he supplied, accepting the handshake but keeping it as brief as he could. Didn’t want to give the false impression that he might want to get to know these people.

Ribera’s smile faltered briefly, but she barreled forward. “I hear you have to be a jack of all trades on the capital ships. A little biochemistry, a little infectious diseases, a little emergency medicine —”

“A lot of emergency medicine,” he corrected.

She nodded. “I’ll bet. You doing the self guided tour?”

“Could say that. Have the workstations been assigned yet?”

“I think it’s pick one and squat. Same as office space, but at least all the attendings get an office with a door.”

“Thanks.” He turned briskly away, determined to pick a workstation in an unoccupied room so he wouldn’t have to socialize any more today.

He found his unoccupied workstation between the biochemistry and microbiology labs, in a wedge shaped alcove that had likely been overlooked because it was oddly shaped, but once that was taken into account, had more usable space than the rectangular work stations. He could put another set of shelves in the back corner for samples, a multiphase incubator against the back wall, and a couple of gene sequencers under the window that overlooked the microbiology lab. It was the perfect lair, a little out of the way to discourage casual visitors but close enough to two lab spaces to give him access to the large scale equipment without his having to roam the halls. Hell, if he put a food replicator and a fold up cot in here he’d never have to leave.

Though if he were to become properly the Phantom of the Medlab he’d need a mask. He’d have to forgo the cape for sanitary reasons, of course. He chuckled to himself, then his eyes started to burn and fill again and he turned his face to the wall until he got his composure back.

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Spock schooled himself to patient observation while a manic firework whirled through his carefully constructed mindscape. Neural reconstruction might be the most effective way to restore function to the damaged networks in Joanna’s left hemisphere, but it was by its very nature participatory—it could not easily or ethically be done to someone, it had to be done with them, and Joanna was the worst possible age, too old to allow her psyche to be carried passively and too young to stay on task for more than a couple of minutes at a time.

The promise of eventual freedom from pain was too abstract to hold her attention in the moment, so he allowed frequent breaks in which Joanna amused herself by stretching the boundaries of what a completely imaginary space could look like. Tribbles, or possibly guinea pigs, sprouted from the
boundaries of the space like fuzzy mushrooms to follow her around, gradually fading when her attention wandered. She had put considerable effort into constructing a bower out of yellow daisylike flowers the size of small trees. He made a point of memorizing it in detail so it would be there for their next session in two days, justifying the indulgence as a step in teaching her how to control her own abilities. Fortunately he didn’t need her full attention to note areas of damage to be redacted later.

He called her back to task. She returned to him, her identity manifesting as a golden, starlike object that threw off spiralling sparks. He’d been concerned, briefly, that the sparks were a sign of some instability until she had pushed forward a memory of a hazardous looking children’s toy which consisted of a sparking flame on the end of a stick. Like the toy, she left a trailing afterimage wherever she went.

The portion of the mindscape in which they were working resembled a giant spiderweb strung with fairy lights. He directed their attention to the problem of the hour, a damaged circuit that was supposed to diverge, carrying sense data from Joanna’s right hand to associative centers in the parietal lobe. Its self repair mechanisms had become confused and had made several reverberating loops that tracked back to pain centers, causing phantom pain. There were a number of these loops of different sizes in her postcentral gyrus, each of which would have to be damped, then encouraged to reroute back to whatever associative regions still functioned in that heavily damaged region. He held out hope that she would regain usable sensation in her arm, but the regions integrating data from her hand and fingers were not merely damaged, but entirely missing. Were she Vulcan, nothing further could be done, but human brains were unusually flexible. There might be the possibility that they could borrow processing space from another region to restore some sensation and mobility in time.

It took a few moments for her to settle, but once she did, she was able to effectively place dampening pressure on the circuit, following his lead. They held pressure for forty-four seconds before her attention wavered and he perceived that she was growing too fatigued to continue. She caught his intention and her mood flipped suddenly, her age and the damage to centers of emotional self regulation in her temporal lobe kicking off what could best be described as a temper tantrum. The sparkler exploded.

Joanna’s mind grabbed at him. He could put a stop to the behavior efficiently and immediately, but if he did she would learn nothing from the experience. Instead, he lightened their connection without her assistance until they were still threaded together, but had returned to awareness of their bodies, thus removing the reward while maintaining support until her violent emotions ran their course.

He understood why she hated to leave. In their working melds she was free of pain and able to communicate without the words that slipped through her consciousness without imparting meaning. Unfortunately, she made her displeasure known by flinging herself to the floor and screaming loud enough to bring Vro and Kirk running from the other room. Spock sat back, crossed his arms, and waited for the storm to run its course.

“Is she okay?” Kirk said, his tone accusatory.

“I allowed her to grow too fatigued. She lost her composure when it was time to end the session.” He addressed the room, “Stravinsky, Firebird Suite with accompanying visuals from Fantasia 2000.”

It took another full minute for Joanna to notice her favorite music was playing. Finally, she sat up and moved to get a better view of the holoscreen, though she spared a moment to favor Spock with
a theatrical scowl. Spock gestured Vro and Kirk back to the living room to take a seat. “As we discussed, we are working first on the damaged regions in the postcentral gyrus that are responsible for her central pain syndrome. I plan to begin teaching shielding techniques at the beginning of each session starting the day after tomorrow. Once her shields are adequate, I recommend she return to physical and occupational therapy on a twice a week schedule on the Nightingale.”

Kirk, who clearly had been too distressed to listen to Spock’s explanation, stared through the open door to Joanna’s bedroom. “Does the—does what you do hurt her?” His instinct to protect Joanna was still giving him pause.

“No. There will be redactions that may prove uncomfortable, but I have scheduled those for after we have established a working relationship.”

Vro hopped up to poke her head in Joanna’s door. “Wanna make something gross in the kitchen?” She cupped an imaginary bowl with one hand and pretended to stir with the other.

Joanna pointed to the holoscreen. They sat together until the end of the song, then hopped up and went to the kitchen. “What are you making?” Kirk asked, his voice suspicious.

“Vanilla pudding, but we’re going to add colors to it.” She turned to Spock, smirking. “And then we’re going to lick it off our fingers like savages.”

Spock was absolutely certain that he harbored no romantic or sexual interest in Vro, but embarrassment still warmed his cheeks in a not entirely unpleasant way.

“She’s just teasing you,” Kirk said.

Dr. M’Benga never teased him. There were a couple of people on Starbase 4 who did, one of them definitely not kindly. Rowan Ellis, on the other hand. He had come to terms with leaving, but he would miss Rowan’s benign practical jokes as much as he would M’Benga’s kindness and good advice. Vulcans offered their friendship only after long acquaintance; Spock was generally no different, though he needed more companionship than most Vulcans admitted to requiring. That fact often put his needs at odds with his cultural conditioning.

He had resigned himself to a long spell of loneliness once he transferred off Starbase 4, but between Vro, whose infectious friendliness was by no means typical for Orions, his need to build some kind of professional relationship with Kirk and Joanna, and his ongoing concern for Dr. McCoy, he seemed to be surrounding himself with connections at an almost human pace. It was both troubling and strangely invigorating.

He spent the next several minutes watching Kirk, Gaila, and Joanna interact and trying to determine whether Kirk and Vro were a couple. He had mistaken Kirk and McCoy for one previously and was beginning to wonder if it was simply a feature of Kirk’s personality to maintain a verbal and physical closeness with his—friends?—that approached couplehood without the exclusivity.

Kirk returned from the kitchen with a bowl of vanilla pudding in each hand. He passed one to Spock and sat on the couch, leaning toward him with a grin. “You should try it. They made enough to share.”

“How little of this concoction can I consume without offending them?” he asked.

“I’m gonna say five bites.” He emptied his own bowl efficiently, apparently unconcerned by the
strange colors. “So, when we get to the Nightingale are you going to room with us?”

“As I requested, I will be occupying a room adjacent to Dr. McCoy. However, you may wish to consider ‘rooming’ with Lieutenant Vro if she is amenable.” He forced himself to take five quick bites of the pudding in succession. Kirk offered to take the remainder off his hands. “Excuse me.”

He crossed the room to where Vro and Joanna were indeed eating the pudding with their fingers, Joanna in tiny, experimental quantities. “Joanna,” he said.

She turned to look at him. “I am leaving now.” He accompanied the words with gestures that weren’t quite signs, pointing to himself, then to the door.

She responded with an exaggerated pouty face. As he was leaving, he noted that Kirk had not merely rinsed the remainder of Spock’s pudding out of the bowl, but had eaten it. Given what he now knew, that was no surprise.

Spock returned to his own quarters to collect a few personal items to carry over to the Nightingale, so as not to waste a trip, then made his way to the hospital ship to confirm the location of his quarters. Once there, he took from his duffel the afghan his mother had crocheted for him shortly after he left for the Academy. It had a complex pattern in light brown, gold and burnt orange that reminded him of home and facilitated meditation. He spread it carefully over the Starfleet issue bedcoverings, then removed his polished obsidian incense burner to place it on the shelf cut into the wall. His copy of the Kir’Shara would rest on shelf above the bed along with the works of Tolkein, Carroll, and Juster. He owned few paper books, but these held significance either as cultural touchstones or reminders of his family.

The few items he collected were not yet sufficient to make the space seem like his own, but the rest of his belongings would be delivered tomorrow before they shipped out. He still had a few minutes before the end of Alpha shift and hoped to meet informally with the head of his department, an Arnaaluk Lavoie. He didn’t recognize the combination of syllables and wondered what species they were. He navigated the hallways with only a couple of mistakes, both of which could be blamed on last minute changes to the deck plan.

The neurology department had a block of offices, several treatment rooms, and two surgical suites. There were no meditation rooms or private rooms with chaises appropriate for melds; he’d learned from experience that most psi-latent species had difficulty remaining sitting upright during extended or deep rapport without the aid of couches or chairs with padded sides, and requiring them to lie on a biobed tended to increase their anxiety. He would determine his status here before suggesting that one of the treatment rooms be refurnished to his purpose.

A short woman with a very round face, dark, smiling eyes and long, Vulcan-straight hair, black streaked with gray approached him as he entered the lab. “You must be Doctor, ah, Healer Spock. Which honorific do you prefer?”

“Healer,” he said. He was stretching propriety using the term, given Sovar and Gol disagreed with one another as to whether he had completed his apprenticeship, but the distinction served as a reminder to human colleagues of his atypical training.

“Dr. Arni Lavoie. Head of Neurosciences. To be honest, we weren’t sure whether to place you in neuro or psych.” She pronounced her name as though it were French in origin.

Spock nodded. “During my Starfleet medical training my focus was in neurophysiology and endocrinology. My Healer’s training focused predominantly on neuroregenerative techniques, though I may be of service with psychiatric disorders in Vulcan patients.”
“So you would prefer to confine your more esoteric practices to Vulcan patients?”

Spock appreciated her clumsy attempt to be politic. “No. Not at all. It is more that human designed psychiatric treatments may prove of limited effectiveness with Vulcans. The Syrannite school, in fact, tends to value working with Vulcans’ capacity for self-healing, and therefore tends to rely on what you refer to as ‘esoteric techniques’ for diagnosis and treatment before resorting to technological means. I am, however, a fully trained physician in the Starfleet tradition as well.”

Arni nodded. “I’ll be sending out advance directive forms this week. If you could pop in a couple of notations about specific techniques you’re likely to use routinely or in emergencies, we can save ourselves a lot of informed consent headaches.”

“I will do so. In general, Starfleet considers interventions that affect only the brainstem or peripheral nervous system in the same category as general medical procedures, while those affecting higher brain functions fall into separate consent categories in much the same manner as surgical procedures. I will forward you the forms Dr. M’Benga and I designed.”

“Could you give me a couple of examples?” she said.

“Certainly. A brief demonstration, perhaps?” He tried to find excuses to demonstrate the less invasive techniques as soon as possible on making a colleague’s acquaintance. Most psi latent species harbored both fascination and fear as regards the mental arts, and the sooner the simpler procedures were demystified, the sooner a professional relationship could be established.

“I suppose that wouldn’t be inappropriate,” Lavoie said, cautiously.

“Pull up your sleeve.”

She rolled the sleeve of her scrub top and held out her arm.

“I will touch the posterior aspect of your arm, just superior to the elbow joint in order to block sensory signals from the hand. You may find it helpful to occupy your mind with a simple task, such as reciting a poem.”

She nodded understanding. He grasped her arm lightly, applying pressure to the hollow just above the elbow joint, and shifted rapidly, avoiding the doctor’s conscious mind to the extent possible while matching her base pattern. She was reciting in a language that was certainly not French. He ignored the wisps of images, catching only one incidental one of a bear in its natural habitat, and centered his attention on blocking signal from the ulnar nerve.

“Is that surgical grade anesthesia?” she asked.

“It can be. It can be made to persist for up to ninety seconds in a human without having to refresh the block, so if I am working alone I have the use of both hands.”

“I see. I don’t think you need to demonstrate a more invasive procedure at present. Perhaps at another time when we all aren’t so busy.”

“Quite.” He added, “I find myself in the unusual circumstance of coming aboard with an existing patient with complex medical needs. Do you have a moment to suggest members of the staff I could consult?”

She gestured him to a conference table and took a seat. “Sure. Who’s your patient?”

“The patient is a six year old human female with a traumatic brain injury, the child of a fellow
officer. She presents with right sided partial paralysis and global aphasia, complicated by induced telepathic ability. I am looking for a recommendation for an occupational therapist, a physical therapist, and an educational aide.”

“I see. I’ll take a look at the crew roster and see if I have any recommendations. I’d like to make you Min Carvalho’s primary physician as well. She’s five, a Vulcan/Human hybrid like you. Type 1 diabetic--developed with neither Vulcan liver islet cells nor a human pancreas.”

“Send me her chart and I will review it at my earliest opportunity.” He did not intend to specialize in Vulcan medicine to the exclusion of all else, but he acknowledged that he was likely the most knowledgeable on the ship. It was to be hoped that Vulcans in Starfleet would be less prejudiced than his potential patients at home.

“Good! I’ll get it right to you. Pick an office wherever you like. There’s a slightly larger one at the back where you can lay out a meditation space, if you think that would be helpful.”

“It would. May I alter the furnishings in one of the patient treatment rooms?”

“Of course. Take the one next to your office and let the quartermaster know what you need.”

“I will do so.”

“Good,” she said. “For now I’ll leave you to get settled in.”

He found the indicated office and remained just long enough to program his codes into the computer and lay a cloth embroidered with his Healer’s oath across one end of the desk as a territorial marker. He wished to locate Dr. McCoy before returning to the Starbase.
In the midst of settling into their new roles, the crew of the Nightingale receives its first mission.

Four days of mandatory socializing exhausted McCoy when he was at his best. He hadn’t been at his best for a while. Probably, to be fair, since the Vengeance disaster. Hearing the telltale shift in background noise that said the Nightingale had gone to warp was, for once, a relief. No more presentations, no panel discussions, no optional-but-mandatory meetings over coffee. He’d arranged his office to his liking, terrified the tech staff into leaving him alone, and was reading through the last few days of flagged journal articles when his office door chimed.

Spock. Who checked on him at least three times a day and had contrived to be assigned his suitemate. On the one hand, his constant presence had begun to fill the hole left by the loss of Jim’s friendship. On the other, Spock probably only spent time with him because Pike put him up to it. “Dr. McCoy, a moment of your time.”

“When I picked this office it wasn’t for it to turn into Grand Central Station,” he snapped.

Spock ignored his outburst. McCoy was beginning to think he was immune. “It concerns a patient.”

“I told you, I’m not Joanna’s primary medical contact anymore. You are.”

There was a brief pause in which McCoy imagined Spock calling on whatever gods he might call on for patience, then he said, “It is not Joanna.”

“And it’s not something you can handle yourself?”

“This is a long term problem for which your experience in cell culture and human genetics would be of great value. I believe you would find it an interesting challenge.”

“Why me?” He knew the answer. McCoy was Spock’s pet project. Spock had the authority to require him to submit to counseling and medication to treat his depression, but for some reason he’d decided not to risk the potential damage such an order would do to McCoy’s career. So he’d decided to dog him until he accepted help or got better on his own. “All right, what’s the story?” he said, against his better judgment.

“Min Carvalho. Human/Vulcan hybrid, born with neither a human pancreas nor Vulcan islet cells.”

“So no insulin/glucacon antagonist pair.” He thought for a moment, then pulled up Vulcan glucose metabolism on his work screen and speed read through a short paragraph while Spock waited. “How did they survive fetal development?”

“Vulcan mother. The mother’s insulin and glucagon analogs passed through the placenta. At present, Min has an implant that delivers the hormones which must be filled daily. She suffers significant dietary restriction due to the absence of two other pancreatic enzymes.”
“So you’d like to grow them a pancreas.”

“That or introduce cells that will produce the necessary hormones into her liver, where they would reside if she were full Vulcan. However, because of her hybrid physiology, it will be necessary to produce chimeric cells. A somewhat similar repair has been achieved in the past on a four month old hybrid infant, but because Min’s parents are in Starfleet, there are additional legal concerns.”

“Let me guess. You need to find a way to make this happen that doesn’t impinge on genetic augmentation techniques proscribed by small minded nincompoops.” Technically, the proscription did not preclude lifesaving treatments, but the definition of lifesaving could be fuzzy around the edges. At least the problem wasn’t in the nervous tissue. Every genetic change made to neural structures required approval by a review board, which generally worked in a timely fashion for better known diseases such as Tay Sachs, but took an inordinately long time to approve procedures on new diseases. Children with rare conditions died waiting for approval on occasion—and an uncomfortably large number had spent years in long term stasis.

Spock confirmed his suspicions with a nod. “In this case, the rules are more stringent than in the prior case, as Min can be kept alive with artificially administered insulin and glucagon, while in the other case, the child would certainly have died.”

“Does the law take into account the shortening of lifespan that will occur with imperfect control of blood sugar and gradual resistance to artificial insulin uptake in body cells?”

“I am uncertain.”

“I’d like a look at the precedent case.”

Again, Spock hesitated. “The name and personal details have been redacted from the records, but given the small number of Vulcan/Human hybrids in existence, what details remain make it impossible to render the patient anonymous.”

Of course. “And the methods used might disqualify him, I mean them, from their career of choice?”

“The methods used would not result in disqualification, but could interfere with timely career advancement due to ingrained prejudice among the admiralty.”

McCoy nodded. “You can count on my discretion.” He realized as he said it that not only had the damn hobgoblin hooked him with a complex problem worth his time and energy, but he’d also provided him with a secret to keep. An offer of trust McCoy had failed to recognize in time to stop it.

Still, it gave him an opening. “Healer?”

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Keep an eye on Jim for me, would you? I know you’re seeing him regularly.”

“I am.”

“The flashbacks. Are they affecting Joanna?” Shit. He promised himself he wouldn’t ask about Joanna.

“To an extent.”
McCoy turned back to his work screen. “Probably doesn’t want you to find out what’s going on up there. I wish there were more I could do, but there isn’t. We’ll just have to live with that.”

“I am unsatisfied with that conclusion. I will speak with him again today. Good day, Doctor.”

“Yeah, yeah, you tricky little hobgoblin. Leave me alone, I’ve got to find articles written in Standard on Vulcan glucose metabolism.”

“I wrote a review last year. I will forward it with both patient records, as well as a set of instructions on constructing a mental shield. I do not know how effective it will be without an experiential reference, but it may be more useful than published efforts.”

McCoy waved him out the door.

*

“It’s not your day to see Joanna,” Kirk said when he opened the door to his quarters to see Spock standing there in his blue duty uniform.

“I am not here to see Joanna. We need to discuss your PTSD symptoms.”

Kirk scrubbed at his hair. “I’m fine.”

“You are not fine. I have acquired a prescription for you. Dr. McCoy confirms that you are not allergic to anything in it. It may be administered orally or by hypospray. Your choice.”

“I’d rather not use any drugs.”

“You have repeatedly rejected other options.”

“Fine. I’ll take the pills.”

Spock reached into his satchel to produce a small bottle of pills. “Take two now. Then one each morning and night.”

Kirk made a show of reading the label, though he had no intention of taking any medications. “Right.”

Spock remained standing where he was. “When I said now, I meant now.”

Kirk set the pill bottle on a low table. “You don’t think I’ll take them.”

“No, I don’t. May I come in, Commander?”

Kirk stepped aside to let him in, more because he had no good excuse to keep him out than because he really wanted him there. The healer’s eyes remained fixed on the pill bottle. Kirk snatched it up off the bed. It rattled in his hands like a venomous snake.

Spock skirted the edge of the room, walking around him so that he was no longer between Kirk and the door. The move was paradoxically both comforting and unnerving. His back brain appreciated not feeling trapped, but he knew that Spock had done it on purpose, that he knew that Kirk’s past made him wary of being cornered. “How much do you know?”

“I asked Dr. McCoy, as you suggested I do.”

“I can get a handle on it myself. I don’t need help, and I don’t need anyone else to know the
details. Dr. McCoy already knows as much as I’ll ever tell anyone.” He could feel his own heartbeat in his chest, his throat, his thumbs.

“Understood. You are showing signs of neurological instability. I would suggest that I administer a dose of medication by hypospray to forestall a flashback.”

Yeah, he could feel it coming on too, thanks. “Stay the hell out of my head!” he snapped.

He thought he might be able to detect annoyance hiding in that bland expression. “I anticipated the possibility that discussing your symptoms would trigger them. Hence the hypospray.”

Kirk clenched his fists. “I don’t like doctors.”

“Then don’t think of me as a doctor.” He held the hypospray low in one hand, kept the other visible but low at his side, deliberately non-threatening. “For Joanna’s sake if not for your own.”

“Fine. Gimme the shot. For Joanna.” Spock approached slowly, but hit him with the hypospray fast and backed off quickly. His chest still felt tight, and he was still hearing the echoes of the things he told himself, the things Frank told him, the recriminations that ran through his head after Tarsus. He was restless, wanted to run.

“The medication will take two to three minutes to take effect,” Spock told him. He took a seat. “I could assist further without—”

Kirk turned away from him to pace, ignoring the offer. The trouble with this kind of flashback, the kind built of his own words in his own voice, the things he told himself to punish himself for having lived was that it was so easy to feed. A part of him wanted to dwell in it even though it hurt. He needed to talk about something else. Other words to overwrite the ones in his head. “Are you settling in okay on the Nightingale? Need anything?”

“My fellow staff have been most accommodating. Also, the fact that my room is at the end of a row is helpful. Did you choose that placement intentionally?”

“I talked to Dr. M’Benga. He said you’d function better if you had more privacy. I could have gotten you a fully private suite with your own bathroom. So you wouldn’t have to share.”

“I prefer my quarters as they are now. Have you had the opportunity to attempt the strategy I suggested for constructing a shield?”

“The meditation? I read through it. I don’t do meditating.” He stopped pacing to brace his hands against the desk. “So, what do I have to do to get out of seeing another counselor?”

“You suggested that I would withdraw my offer to assist were I to be made aware of the nature of your trauma. I wish to make it clear that the offer stands.”

“I did things I’m not proud of,” he said. The knot in his chest loosened just a little as the medication started to take effect.

“Do you believe that you should continue to suffer for those things because you live?”

Vulcans sure cut straight to the chase, didn’t they. “Maybe I do.”

Spock fixed him in his gaze. “Do Dr. McCoy and Joanna deserve to suffer with you?”

“Why do you have to make this about Bones, anyway? You’re on his side!”
Spock let his words hang in the air. Waiting for Kirk to take them back? Waiting for him to throw him out of his quarters? Kirk crossed his arms and waited. Spock said, “If I am on anyone’s side, it is Joanna’s.”

It all came down to that. If Joanna was worth putting his best friend through hell over, she was worth putting himself through—well, through whatever it would take. “Fuck,” he said. “OK. What do I have to do? To fix this.”

“Are you willing to discuss means by which you may regain control of your responses to events which recall your prior trauma?”

It took Kirk a moment to parse that. “Discuss, yeah. I guess.”

“May I have prior consent to intervene, should this discussion trigger an adverse event?”

Adverse event? “I think I’ll be fine.”

“And if you are not?”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Yeah, fine, whatever.”

“Very well.” Spock looked decidedly unconvinced. He took a seat at the breakfast nook in the suite he and Jo shared with Gaila. Their side had two bedrooms with a small dining and sitting room, while Gaila’s studio space would connect to theirs through a shared bathroom. Together but not together. Which kind of summed them up. “The goal is for you to be in control of your own mind’s responses. In post-trauma disorders, the brain creates aggressive associational links between the memories and emotional states associated with the traumatic events, distorting your perceptions.”

“I have heard all this before.” Though he had to admit this was the first time he hadn’t felt talked down to.

“So you know your condition is not a failure of will, though training the mind and the will can alleviate your symptoms.”

“I’ve tried meditation. Makes it worse.” Worse was an understatement. The week he’d tried it, on his therapist’s insistence, he’d slept a total of four hours in the first four days, missed several classes, and on the fourth day had gotten stuck so badly Bones had to sedate him.

“What else have you tried?”

“Psychotherapy. Talking it out. I can’t do it. I talk about it and I’m back in—and I can’t talk anymore. Tried that for I don’t know, months. Two different times. Um. Meditation like I said. Disaster. Changing my habits, distracting myself—that only works with a really, um, compelling distraction.”

“I assume you have tried medication?”

“Yeah, same one as you just gave me. It worked well enough to get me through a round of talk therapy at the Academy. But it took a year.” He straddled a chair across from Spock, the chair back serving as both a trivial barricade and a place to rest his elbows. “I really did have it under control before Vengeance.”

Spock nodded understanding. “Radiation poisoning would have damaged the existing neural networks. The serum would have allowed the cells to repair themselves, but could not recreate the
pathways and blocks you made to sequester your traumatic memories.”

So he was starting over. That year working with Dr. Nichols had been rough even with Bones to sit up with him when things were especially bad. She’d told him it would get worse before it got better. He didn’t think he could handle the getting worse part again. Not without going on leave, and not while trying to figure out how to parent Joanna.

Spock was still talking. Kirk hoped he hadn’t missed much. “Given sufficient time and an effective medication, you can regain control. It might be possible to combine closely supervised meditation with meetings with a counselor on the Nightingale. It would be more efficient to combine those meditative techniques with repairing the structural damage in rapport.”

“So I assume that would be a lot worse but a lot faster? Like I’d have to live it all over again or something?”

“You would not relive the experience—not entirely. In effect, you would be able to make use of my detachment from the situation and emotional control to place the experiences in their proper context.”

He paused, as though expecting an answer, but not quite long enough for Kirk to give him one. “We are both on shift in one hour. Perhaps we could meet tomorrow to make a plan.” He bowed slightly and let himself out.

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“I’m getting an urgent call for assistance from the Constellation,” Lieutenant C’Ruv said.

“On screen,” Kirk said. He put his feet down and took a moment to brush the shoe prints off the seat of the Captain’s chair. Pike took the conn for Alpha shift, Kirk had Beta and a rotating group of four or so lieutenant commanders shared Gamma and Delta between them. He had been relieved to find that the ship didn’t smell at all like hospital anywhere except in the hospital proper.

A prim woman with a tight bun appeared on screen. “Nightingale, this is Captain Louyan of the Constellation. We’ve come upon another attack by the Narada. It’s a mixed human/Tellarite colony. Liquo 2. Tropical climate, heavily forested. Colony population around ten thousand.”

“We’ll be there with all deliberate haste.” Kirk swallowed. The Narada had been committing acts of piracy and terrorism throughout the Federation for decades now. The ship was an enigma, faster than should be physically possible, nearly invulnerable to weapons, and of a design that defied categorization. Its first recorded appearance had been thirty years ago, when it appeared out of nowhere, spraying death and lightning. Its first target had been the Kelvin—the ship on which his father died while giving the surviving members of the crew precious additional seconds in which to escape. “We’ll be there.”

“Official Starfleet policy on Narada attacks is not to engage unless at least three capital ships are present to intercept. Set course for a location two hours out at warp and await further instructions.”

So the Constellation was just hiding behind a gas giant or something while the Narada murdered civilians? Arguing with the captain of the Constellation was the captain’s job, though. “Will do. We will update you shortly.”

The captain of the Constellation cut the connection. Kirk tapped the comlink on the arm of his chair. “Captain Pike, we’ve received a distress call from Liquo 2. It’s the Narada.”

“I’ll be right up.”
“Nav, give me a heads up on the Liquo system. How close can we get using Oort objects for cover?” The Oort field was a patchy cloud of icy boulders that surrounded and flowed between most of the local star systems, occasionally dropping comets into inner solar systems. The largest objects were the size of moons, the smallest, glittering icy dust.

Chekov looked up from his station. “We will not be able to locate specific objects until we are within two light-years of the star, however, records indicate at least one object the size of Pluto we could use for camouflage.”

“Distance from this Pluto sized object to Liquo 2?”

“Zero point six eight light-years. Correcting for local subspace curvatures along the route, one hour and forty minutes at maximum safe speed.”

“Plot it and get us underway.” The turbolift door whished open, admitting Pike, who stepped onto the bridge using only one of his canes for support. It must be a good back day. “Captain Pike, we’ve plotted a course to the edge of the Liquo system. Our orders are to stay out of sight and range until the Narada leaves. Current plan is to use an Oort object for cover while we take stock of the situation.”

Pike was staring down at him with an amused expression. “Good. May I have my chair back?”

“Of course, sir.” Kirk hopped out of the chair.

“What’s our ETA?”

“We’re fifteen hours out,” Chekov said.

Fifteen hours was an eternity in a battle. Kirk paced, fists clenching and unclenching. Pike turned to him. “Commander, we are not the only ship being called to the colony. There are doubtless other vessels closer to the action.”

“So we get there in time to bag and tag all the bodies.”

“Commander Kirk, you were fully aware of this ship’s mission statement when you signed on. We don’t engage. We’re not even called into a fight.”

Kirk clenched his fists at his sides, then forced them to relax. “Sir, permission to confer privately in your office?”

“Granted. Mr. Sulu you have the conn.”

The captain’s office sat just off the bridge, a small, utilitarian space with a desk and three chairs. Pike leaned against the table. Kirk could just make out the edge of one of Pike’s braces through his uniform pants. “Say what you’ve got to say, son.”

“Captain, are you and I here because the Admiralty doesn’t have confidence in us?”

Pike folded his arms across his chest. “Why would you say that?”

“Well, we both came off some pretty serious medical leave. Neither of us will ever be a hundred percent again, though you got to admit I’m a little closer than you.”

Pike sighed. “I’ll never be posted to a front line ship again. You just need seasoning—maybe a little practice being patient. In a few years you’ll be up for your own command and with your
record, you’ll be able to write your ticket. I’d note though, you’re not going to be able to take a kid on a heavy cruiser.”

“No, I guess not.” Gaila had Joanna for beta shift, which left Kirk covering mornings. Stepping onto the bridge this afternoon had felt like coming into work after a full day at work. At least, if Spock’s timetable wasn’t excessively optimistic, she’d be able to start school in a couple of weeks.

“How are things going with Joanna?” Pike asked.

“Okay I guess. She starts PT tomorrow with Sami Peters.”

“How about you and McCoy?”

“We’re not speaking.” He’d almost gotten to the point that he could trust himself to speak to him, but he had burned that bridge. Thoroughly.

Pike shook his head. “Well, that’s too damn bad. That man is the best friend you ever had or will ever have. You’ve had your time to process or whatever it is you think you’re doing. Make it right.”

Kirk regarded the floor. “I don’t know if I can do it this time. Not for him, not even for you.”

“I’m telling you to do it for you. Have you seen a counselor yet? We’ve got four on staff, five if you count Spock.”

“I’ve tried traditional counseling. CBT, DBT, psychoanalysis.” He scrubbed through his hair so it stuck straight up. “Spock wants to try something else. Something Vulcan I guess. Sounded a little like a combination of the DBT and some of the stuff he’s been working on with Joanna.”

“And you’re on board with that?”

“Scares the piss out of me. But yeah. I’m going to give it a shot.”

Pike nodded. “It’s going to have to wait until this mission is over though. I’m sending you down to coordinate with whatever government the colony has running when we get there. Are Gaila and Spock your only coverage?”

“Spock said he knew someone he was going to ask, but for now, they’re the only two Joanna knows.”

“All right. I’ll take Gaila off the duty roster for the duration of the mission.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Thanks aren’t necessary, son. The bunch of you have had quite the situation drop in your laps, and a mission coming up this quickly you haven’t had time to build a lot of redundancy. Just clear everything with Gaila so she’s not blindsided.”

*

Sixteen was a lot of chairs to fit around a conference table. The first staff meeting had been scheduled for three days from now, but a distress call from a colony under attack had put them first in line to respond, hence a full staff meeting at 2200 hours ship’s time, near the end of Gamma shift. Dr. Chapel seated herself at the head of the table. McCoy found a chair about a third of the way around. Dr. Ribera slid in beside him.
The room filled quickly. McCoy identified Chief of Surgery Ditya Puri, a Tellarite he thought was called Bosh, and Roman Mendeleev, a cardiologist he knew from the Academy and who claimed to be related to the inventor of the periodic table. Spock slid into the seat on McCoy’s other side.

“Now that we are all here, I’ll take a moment to introduce myself. ‘I’m Dr. Christine Chapel, your Chief Medical Officer. You may call me Commander or Dr. Chapel, or Nurse Chapel if you prefer. All apply. My doctorate is in nursing administration and epidemiology.’”

“Now, as we do not have time tonight for a lengthy discussion of shipwide policies and procedures, I intend to assume you are all the professional Starfleet officers you appear to be. As some of you already know, one hour ago the Nightingale received orders to respond to a Narada attack on a mixed human-Tellarite colony at Liquo 2. We will be arriving at the Liquo system at approximately 1200 hours tomorrow and will proceed to the scene per orders from the Constellation.”

“How many casualties should we expect?” Hasan asked.

Chapel shook her head. “I wish I could tell you, Dr. Hasan. The colony population is around ten thousand souls. It is likely that by the time we arrive, the Narada will be long gone. Their MO is to hit the largest settlement with that giant drill they have, use deep charges to cause severe earthquakes, and bail before Starfleet has a chance to engage. Occasionally they use the attacks as an opportunity to test chemical or biological weapons, but never the same ones twice. The Narada has taken out a total of eight Starfleet heavy cruisers in the last thirty years, along with several ships from the Andorian, Tellarite, and Vulcan fleets.”

“Is the Constellation engaging?” Bosh demanded.

“If they are, we can expect a ninth heavy cruiser down, but not enough additional survivors to change the count much,” Chapel said.

Bosh pushed back his chair to stand, shouting, “So we just follow them around and pick up after?”

Chapel stared him down. “Sit down, Dr. Bosh. We’re better defended than the other three capital medical ships, which is why we’re assigned this operating theater, but we’re still a warp-capable hospital, not a warship. Now is not the time to entertain speculation on the Federation’s plans for taking down the Narada. Ready your departments for mass casualty and get some sleep. It’s likely to be the last you’ll be getting for a few days.”

The conference broke up into smaller groups. Bosh stomped over to McCoy and Spock. Federation has let that rogue ship terrorize the border areas for far too long,” he declared.

Spock regarded him with no more than an upraised eyebrow. “It is illogical to dwell on situations beyond our sphere of influence.”

Hasan and Puri approached the group just as Bosh replied, “Spoken like a damned pacifist.”

Spock was undeterred. “Ten point two years ago three ships from the Vulcan Expeditionary Force joined with two Tellarite vessels and four Starfleet ships in a joint attempt to destroy the Narada. All but two of the attacking vessels were destroyed, the surviving vessels having escaped only because one of the Vulcan ships inflicted significant damage by ramming the aggressor.”

“You point?” the Tellarite said.

“In order to effectively engage the Narada, additional technological advances will be needed.”
“Or we’re just throwing ships into the sun,” Puri added. “We’ll be building teams of six. One physician, two allied health, three others, divided between ops and security to do the heavy lifting. Most of those will be pulled from the Constellation.”

Hasan nodded. “We’ll be looking at a lot of crush injuries, burn victims from any fires, and emotional trauma among the survivors. Some Narada attacks have included attacks on the ground, most have just destroyed colonies from orbit.”

“We’ll want to coordinate with the locals as much as possible. The first thing we’ll need to do is determine how much of the medical infrastructure is intact on the planet,” Puri said. “Chapel should be in contact with the CMO on the Constellation and eventually with whoever we can find on the ground, but there’s a good chance we’ll need to identify local first responders on arrival.”

“Agreed,” Hasan said. “Get your departments ready and stock your kits. We’ll meet at 0900 with our nurses and security to break into response teams.”

Spock, predictably, followed McCoy out of the conference room. McCoy was feeling less than charitable. “Guess you’ll get a chance to put all that research into triage into practice. See if you can stick to the algorithm when you have to pick between two dying kids.”

The healer kept his silence while he walked beside McCoy for several seconds, then said, “I do not relish the opportunity.”

McCoy reached out to catch the Vulcan’s elbow, stopped himself at the last second. They were on their way to what was probably going to be a mass casualty—at best, it would be—and McCoy needed to get his business head on his shoulders. And Spock had no idea what they were getting into. Not really. “Thing you’ve got to know. Sometimes the algorithm will be wrong. Sometimes you will. It’s inevitable. You just have to accept that and do the best you can for as many as you can.”

“Have you considered how Joanna’s circumstances will affect your ability to do so?”

McCoy stopped short. He had within minutes of the distress call coming in. He replayed scenarios in his head, over and over, and Joanna featured in most of them. The image of her lying on the ground, surrounded by twisted metal kept flashing in front of his eyes. “I have. Remember, I’ve been in the field before. I spent a year as Puri’s second on Enterprise before the Vengeance disaster. What about you?”

“I have not been present at a mass casualty event. I find myself concerned that I might spend resources on a patient who cannot survive, especially if the patient were conscious and suffering.”

McCoy nodded. “That’s what the isomorphine is for. Don’t be afraid to use it. Respiratory depression is minimal, controls anxiety as well as pain, and you can increase the dosage to provide surgical levels of anesthesia if the patient turns out to be better off than you thought they were.”

Spock nodded. “I have applied pharmaceutical methods for inducing specific mental states, including pain reduction and anesthesia, but I have been less than satisfied with their precision.”

Starbase 4 had definitely been too sheltered a place for Spock to develop into a proper field medic. Terrific. “Well, you can’t just pull out the voodoo all the time where we’re going. I can guarantee you the patient load is going to be too high. I’m afraid you’re going to be stuck with conventional medicine like the rest of us mortals.”

“I must take exception to your characterizing the science of healing as an obscure religious rite,
Doctor. Your potions may be more suitable to the circumstances on Liquo 2, but telepathy based treatment modalities are in no way ‘mystical bullshit.’

Nice comeback, referencing potions and pulling a phrase he’d used himself to complain about Joanna’s doctors. A worthy opponent. Dammit. He wasn’t up to being nice today. “I know,” he admitted. “I’m just on edge about the whole thing. Like Pike said, I gotta get back on the horse’s ass.”

“I think,” Spock said, clearly about to correct his idiom. He stopped himself. “Thank you for your insights, doctor. I will see you at 0700 hours.”

They parted where the hallway split, taking them different directions. McCoy returned to his workstation to pack his bag with the mix of emergency drugs he expected to need. He’d be needed to help set up the synthesizers to work overnight to make more for the morning. Chances were they were going to need it.
Baptism by Fire

Chapter Summary

Spock experiences his first mass casualty.

Spock stood on the transporter pad at 1335 hours, his field pack in hand, a silver haired, stocky woman who introduced herself as Nurse Gavrilo beside him. A medtech took his place behind Spock on the pad. Three security officers flanked them. All four wore heavy safety gear, hard panels in their uniform jackets that would protect their torsos from impact, thick gloves and form fitting helmets. As Chapel predicted, the Narada was gone a mere four hours after the distress call came in, long before the Nightingale reached the Liquo system. The Constellation moved in as soon as it was gone to provide what help it could.

“This your first mass casualty, son?” Gavrilo asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Nervous?”

“No,” he answered before assessing his own mental state in detail. Vulcans did not admit to nervousness.

“Well, you just stick by me and we’ll get through this.”

He would have preferred to “stick by” Dr. McCoy, but the physicians had been divided, one to a team, the less experienced placed with the more seasoned nurses.

Spock’s field assignment at the end of his third year of medical school had been with two other students on a StarFleet outpost near the Klingon border. Nothing of import had occurred, the only major medical mishap being a breach of one of the atmospheric containment bubbles—the one covering the recreation facility. It had been at a time of day when the facility was not in heavy use, and thus only three people had been affected—all of whom had been dead for nearly forty minutes by the time they were retrieved from their resting places on the world’s crater pocked surface.

Spock determined that he was not nervous as such, but he harbored no illusions that he was prepared for the next forty-eight hours. They materialized in the middle of a debris strewn street. The buildings around them were reduced to piles of plascrete, broken bricks mixed with cracked and curved sheets of flexible wall material. The scent of decay filled the air. His nostrils narrowed.

A human woman in medical blues strode up to their beam down point. “Nightingale team?”

“Team 4,” Spock confirmed.

“All right, we’re not wasting doctors on triage. You three, sweep that apartment complex. You, Doctor--”

“Spock. The technical term is Healer.”

The woman pursed her lips. “Well aren’t we just precious today. Follow me.”
Spock swallowed the desire to defend his choice of honorific and resolved to answer to whatever he was called. He followed the medtech to a series of white tents erected in a clearing in the thick forest surrounding the town. Scorch marks suggested the clearing had been artificially and recently made for just this purpose. She pulled open the flap to reveal ninety-four stretchers in four rows, with aisles in between. The number of injured bodies, many of them conscious and in severe pain, slammed straight through his shields, pulling in directions too numerous to balance against. He stopped walking forward just long enough to tighten his shields—when treating this many patients in such a small space, he would have to try to rely on “conventional” medicine as McCoy warned.

His guide looked him over, never losing her sour look of disapproval. “Peel off all that extra kit, you’ll need freedom of motion. You can stack it outside. How are you at surgery?”

“Adequate.” He stepped outside to take off his helmet, gloves, and body armor, then picked up his satchel and slung it back over his shoulder.

She walked him to a station at the end of a row. “Do what you can with what you’ve got. Get them stable and move on. Once they leave this tent they go to critical care and then up to the Nightingale if they need follow up surgery. If your equipment runs out of power, raise a hand and one of our runners will bring you fresh. I’ll take you to your spot. When you finish with a patient, flag them and a pair of runners will take them. Same if one dies. Got that?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” It looked like an assembly line, except that he was expected to reassemble broken people.

“Start here.” She led him to one end of a row and left the tent, presumably to collect another doctor.

His assigned nurse was near his age and not wearing a Starfleet uniform. A colonist, then. “Nurse Mira Kariuki,” she said.

“I am called Spock,” he said.

The stretchers rested on racks that brought them up to the height of a surgical table. They didn’t have full biobed capability, but the stretch cover did send basic vital signs to the clipboard sized panels at the bottom of each bed. His first patient was a Tellarite male with an abdominal injury.

“You gonna stare at him all day?” a tall, slender Andorian said from his post on the next row.

Spock ignored the insult, took out his tools, then switched on the sterilization field and went to work. Kariuki examined the arrangement of his instruments on the fold out pad. When he finished with one instrument, she took it from him and replaced it, handing him the next. The nurse had already anesthetized their patient, but it still took time for him to adjust to the lack of subtle feedback from conducting tissues. Working gloved and tightly shielded was going to be more difficult than he anticipated. Five point five minutes into a surgery he expected would take eight point one, the Andorian commented again.

“Don’t spend time making it pretty. He’s not your only patient.”

Again, Spock did not bother to reply as he was working as efficiently as the tools and circumstances allowed. He completed the surgery, provided a Tellarite-safe antibiotic, and moved on to a woman with a depressed skull fracture, which took only seventy-one seconds to repair with a microtractor and vascular repair kit. Her intracranial pressure felt elevated even through his gloves. He confirmed his impression with the scanner, increased her level of sedation and put in orders to critical care to give mannitol as long as her ICP remained above twenty.
Kariuki flagged the table for the runners. “You’re not bad,” she said. “You a surgeon?”

“One of my specialties is neurosurgery. I am accustomed to spending considerably longer on a single patient.”

“I think we all are.”

Kariuki was a competent scrub nurse, though she alternated between periods of pressured chatter and morose silence. At two hours, eighteen minutes into his shift, after losing a patient he had to admit he would have lost regardless, he had thrown his gloves into the recycler with a little more force than strictly necessary and not applied a new pair, choosing instead to rely on the sterilizing field to prevent transfer of pathogens. He’d also started modulating his shields rather than keeping them tight as he became accustomed to the presence of so many other minds in the small space. It was just too difficult to change his technique so radically under circumstances that were already high pressure enough. He pushed his mind into a meditative state that allowed him to float among the more distant minds in the room so that they didn’t pull at him to the point of distraction.

As soon as a patient was removed from a rack by a pair of runners, other runners slotted a new one into their place. The first four hours passed without his becoming aware of fatigue. He treated forty-one patients in that time and pronounced ten others, all but three of whom had been dead when they reached him. There had been one woman he thought he might have been able to save had he not been restricting his techniques to those that he could accomplish quickly and without exhausting himself, but the effort and time he would have taken to treat her effectively could have cost more than one life waiting for his attention.

The second four hours brought them into local night. The Andorian was gone, his grating criticisms replaced by a welcome familiar drawl. He looked up to see Dr. McCoy changing out of a bloodied smock to throw on a clean one. More patients began to arrive conscious, suffering without the benefit of pain medication. He could neither hold himself separate from them, nor properly shift into their pain and draw it away. He resorted to a dizzying dance, projecting an imprecise comfort to assuage suffering while his new nurse, a Tellarite with a mottled gray face, adjusted the dosage on the hypospray for body mass and species and pressed it to the patient’s neck. After ten seconds pause for the analgesic to take effect, he could move on to treat the patient. Fatigue began to slow his movements, but hard-shielding would have taken even more out of him. He detected and set aside his frustration.

His adjustment must not have been wholly invisible. “It’s harder when they come in hurting. You doing all right?” McCoy asked in a brief lull. Spock wondered if it were mere courtesy or if the extra effort he was expending showed.

“I am adequate,” he said, and continued to work. More patients arrived on stretchers and on foot. Spock noted the tightening around McCoy’s mouth and forehead each time a new patient appeared. The doctor pressed his palm to the back of his neck from time to time, trying to massage away his own headache.

“Hey, Spock,” McCoy said, some time in the early morning, when they had been treating patients for fifteen hours. “I’m out of juice. How much local anesthetic do you have left?”

“Twenty-five doses.”

“Give me fifteen. I’m faster than you.”

He passed the ampules to the doctor and kept at his work.
By just after daylight most of the surgical cases had either been moved to post operative critical care on the ground or on the Nightingale. McCoy and Spock switched to ambulatory care together. McCoy had been watching the healer for signs of fatigue and hadn’t noticed any until he crossed the room and the irritating prickle at the base of his skull disappeared. He returned to his post and there it was again, an ache that felt both like and unlike the other times he’d noticed the presence of the healer in his mind. “You need a break,” he told Spock, who followed him wordlessly, and perhaps a bit less gracefully than usual, to the tent that served as a rest area for for rescue workers.

The first case of respiratory distress arrived under a large tray of pastries and not, at first, as a patient. She introduced herself as Dr. Naishi, passed a couple of carafes of coffee to McCoy, and set the pastries down on a corner table that had been set up as an impromptu break room. McCoy juggled the carafes until she cleared enough space to set them down as well. She cough-snorted into the crook of her elbow, Tellarite fashion, turning her head to avoid spraying the pastries, and said, “All right, ladies and gentlemen, scans for everybody. You pass, you stick around for four more hours. You fail, back to the staff tent with you for a nap.”

Hasan opened his mouth to argue with her and she shushed him and pointed one stubby, three fingered hand at the plate of pastries. “Eat, drink, and get your scan done, human.” She scanned him, pronounced him acceptable for the moment, and moved on to McCoy.

McCoy sat for the cursory scan after he stuffed a surprisingly tasty fried donut into his face. Naishi read his blood chemistry and neurotransmitters to determine whether he had become dangerously fatigued. She frowned at it for several seconds before pronouncing him “Acceptable…for now, but your nitric oxide is high.”

She turned to Spock, ran the scanner over him. “The absolute fuck,” she said. “Hold on, it’s got to be the scanner. Let me try that again.” Using the centuries old technique of turning it off and back on again, she reset and recalibrated the scanner. After a second scan she looked Spock up and down. “I calibrated the scanner to Vulcan normal and you don’t look near as bad as this thing says you should. What gives?”

“I am half human.”

“And where do I find normal parameters for that, Mr. Fancypants?”

“My pants are not fancy.”

McCoy almost dove in to explain the Tellarite’s remark when he realized the healer was baiting her. He had to turn away to hide his growing smirk. Naishi continued, “Your nitric oxide is flagging red, too. What are you two doing, huffing the stuff? And that’s not a normal scan. I’m pulling you.”

“No,” Spock said. “Let me see the results.”

“And let you give me a bunch of BS about how you’re fine?”

McCoy held out a hand. “I’ll look at it.”

“You know each other?”

McCoy grunted, which wasn’t enough of a statement to be a lie, regardless of how she interpreted it. She handed him the data pad and coughed again. McCoy skimmed it. Half the values were in the red, but as far as he knew, that could be normal for the healer. “Eat, drink, and tell me if your
efficiency drops below eighty percent,” he said as though he knew what he was talking about.

“How long have you had that cough?” Spock asked Naishi.

“It’s nothing,” she said. “We all have it. Moving debris around kicks up a lot of dust.”

“The humans as well?”

“Yeah, why?”

Spock continued his line of questioning, the apple turnover in his hand forgotten. “And for how long has it been painful?” She tried to suppress the next bout of coughing, but McCoy saw her wince.

“It’s fine. You’re just trying to get me back for making you follow the rules.”

“I am not. You are in pain and your breathing sounds effortful, more so than I would expect if dust were the only issue. It is possible the earthquake and resulting fires released toxins that have irritated your lungs.”

“I’m fine,” she insisted.

McCoy decided Spock needed some backup. “It’s not about you. If everyone’s coughing, there could be something hazardous in the air. Just let us do a quick scan of your lungs. What harm could it do? You’ve got to take a break anyway.”

“Suit yourself,” she said. “You’re wasting your time.”

McCoy ran the scan. He managed to suppress the desire to swear, but both Dr. Naishi and Spock must have been watching his face. “What is it, Doctor?” Spock asked.

“Have a look,” he said. After a brief pause, he added, “Both of you.”

Naishi reached behind her to set down her donut, unable to take her eyes off the scan. The pastry missed the table and fell to the ground. “Looks like my lungs have been sprinkled with salt.” Her tone shifted from its usual challenge to a combination of scientific interest and worry.

McCoy zoomed in on the faint cloudiness until a single alveolar sac filled the screen. “Some kind of opaque mineral deposit, still microscopic. Wait, do you have any cells in your lungs with flagella?”

“Of course not, the only flagellated cells in the Tellarite body are sperm and eggs, just like in humans.” Naishi nodded firmly. “We need a sputum sample and a biopsy. Who wants to take a chunk of my lung?”

“Human egg cells don’t have flagella,” McCoy corrected absently. He found a sample vial and took the sputum sample, labeled it, and gave it to a runner for analysis on the Nightingale. “Level three containment, at least,” he told the colonist. Disturbingly, as she walked away with the box containing the vial of sputum, the runner coughed, low pitched and crackling.

Naishi pulled the privacy screen around the nearest treatment table. “And now for the tissue biopsy. Through the chest wall would be quickest. I’ll just lie down right here.” She pulled off her scrub top and lay down. “I’d rather not be sedated, if you don’t mind. Work to be done.” She coughed again.
As soon as she was down on the table, Spock was all over her, fingers grazing over an ankle, a wrist, along the base of her ribcage. McCoy had noticed the habit almost as soon as he’d been moved to the workstation next to him. He’d expected that a Vulcan healer would reserve physical contact for rare, specific circumstances, but Spock’s fingers traced over his patients’ bodies, seldom out of direct contact for more than a few seconds at a time. “Are you able to hold your breath and refrain from coughing for thirty seconds?” Spock asked.

“I can give it a shot.”

McCoy shook his head. “I’d rather you were sedated so I don’t tear a giant hole in your chest wall when you cough.”

“Sedation will put me out of commission for too long. I’ve got work to do.”

“I will suppress Dr. Naishi’s urge to cough for that amount of time, if that solution is acceptable to you both?”

“Are you up to that sort of thing right now?” McCoy asked.

Spock nodded curtly. “The procedure is not particularly taxing.”

“Your call, Dr. Naishi,” McCoy told her.

“I make a great guinea pig,” Naishi said. “Hah, I must be nervous, making a pig joke. I never make pig jokes.”

“Where is the cough reflex located in Tellarites?” Spock asked. McCoy suspected he knew, but was, again, making Naishi feel more in control of the situation.

“Primary apneustic center,” Naishi supplied.

Spock picked up his data pad and started scrolling through it. “I believe accessing directly through the brainstem proper rather than the vagus would be ideal, to reduce the risk of nausea.”

“You’re the neuro guy. I’m just a heart surgeon.” She snorted, then broke into another bout of coughing. “Let’s get this show on the road. Hurts more, lying flat.”

McCoy palpated Naishi’s ribcage until he found the right spot, placed the biopsy tool, which for all the advances of the past couple centuries was still, essentially, a fat, hollow needle into position, and set the tissue regenerator on his tray. “Whenever you’re ready,” he told Spock and Naishi.

Spock took his cue. He was standing at the head of the exam table, looking down at Naishi. “I will not be accessing higher brain function. It would be helpful if you were to occupy your mind with a neutral task, such as visualizing the muscles of the leg in alphabetical order.”

“Alphabetical order?”

“The task should provide sufficient challenge to occupy your full attention.”

“Right.”

Spock tucked one hand behind Naishi’s head and after a few seconds, said, “Proceed, Dr. McCoy.”

Naishi neither breathed nor moved for the fifteen seconds it took to take the sample. “All right, you can breathe now,” McCoy said. He finished the job with the tissue regenerator and packaged the sample to send up to the Nightingale.
Naishi sat up and pushed gently at the spot where the needle had gone in. “Well, now that’s done, let’s get back to work. Alphabetical order, really. Was that the best you could come up with? I think I ought to take you out of circulation after all.” Naishi, for her part, insisted on returning to work immediately, keeping up a steady stream of commentary as she did so. She chatted with her fellow colonists while Spock and McCoy treated them.

An alarm flashed on his comm ten minutes after he sent the biopsy to Luci Ribera in infectious disease. He checked the message.

**Bioweapon suspected on planet. Suspend all ground to ship transport. Intraship quarantine in effect.**

The message was chilling, even if it was expected. Most of the patients they were treating were green tags now, though other Tellarite colonists with the unusual cough started to trickle in. The numbers steadily increased.

In an hour, he saw fifteen. In the next half hour, another thirty, three of whom were humans. He sent another biopsy up to the Nightingale. More concerningly, Naishi took to sitting down to see patients and accepted the offer of a mild analgesic.

McCoy’s comlink beeped. “This is McCoy.”

“Luci here. I’ve identified the pathogen. It’s a heterotrophic coccolith that produces calcium carbonate plates and spines on the interior surface of the alveoli. Incubation period around thirty hours. Not sure yet whether it can be transmitted person to person, so I’m ordering full quarantine for the time being.”

“You have a DNA template test?”

“I do. I’m sending down kits as fast as I get them made. So far on the Constellation and Nightingale everyone who has been on the planet’s surface is infected, and everyone who hasn’t is clean, but we’re quarantining and retesting all the topside staff who have had contact with colonists. Any information you can give me about course in previously healthy patients would be helpful.”

McCoy nodded. “I’m sending you imaging and blood chemistry on three Tellarites and three humans, all health care providers. The earliest presenting cases are starting to show some dyspnea, fatigue, and increased respirations.”

“Same here. I’ll send you my analyses as they come in. You’ll probably be busy with patient care, but any insights would be appreciated.” She signed off.

A runner brought a pack of tests. McCoy sent Spock around with the swabs. The first Starfleet personnel, all first responders from the Constellation, started to appear in Spock and McCoy’s tent, which was quickly becoming the coccolithic pneumonia tent. Runners set up beds.

“Dr. McCoy, may I have a swab?” Spock said from behind McCoy.

McCoy took the swab to collect his own sample, then handed it to Spock. After a minute, he said, “Positive, I assume?”

“As all the others.”

“What about you?”
“I test positive for the presence of the organism. It remains to be seen whether I will develop symptoms.” He tossed McCoy’s swab into the biohazard incinerator. “You should rest.”

“I’ve got about six, seven hours before I start showing symptoms. I’ll rest then.”

Spock regarded him for too long, probably weighing the likelihood that arguing with him would make him take a break. “If you take two hours now, you will have four hours before you develop symptoms. The progression of the disease is not so rapid as to prevent your continued activity for at least four to six hours after that.”

“Your logic is damned annoying,” he told the Vulcan, but headed off to the staff rest tent anyway. “You come get me in two hours!” he shouted on the way out. He found the staff tent nearly full, beds occupied by coughing, wheezing colonists wearing medical armbands. There was no sense sitting up and brooding when he’d said he was going to sleep, so he lay down, closed his eyes, and was asleep within a handful of breaths.
Red Queen Running

Chapter Summary

As the effects of the Romulan bioweapon begin to take effect, McCoy encounters Kirk, who has managed to injure himself as usual.

For the first ten minutes or so, Gaila was afraid she was going to have to give up on Joanna’s hair and cut it all off. She’d supplied an abundance of bubbles, bath crayons, and a waterproof datapad. She’d gone to the trouble of properly meditating for a good half hour while Joanna napped and had cajoled a refresher on shielding from Spock before he headed down to Liquo 2. It hadn’t taken much cajoling. For a Vulcan, he was really quite a sweetheart, and it hadn’t taken a genius to tell how smitten he already was with Joanna.

The apple scented silicone based lubricant she’d worked into Joanna’s hair with gloved hands was a special recipe intended just for cases like this. Dan Christie’d put her onto it when she’d mentioned her plan, noting that a lot of people came back from traumatic situations, strand or capture, with seriously matted hair, and it could be an important step in their recovery to get it back in order. The industrial grade conditioner soaked into the mats in Joanna’s hair slowly.

Gaila gave a comb to Joanna, took one for herself, and set a small pair of scissors beside her for the worst bits. She demonstrated how to comb out the tangles from the ends. Joanna rolled her eyes sagely and started to work on the hair framing her face, while Gaila went to work on the back. It was slow work, but they were both diligent. Gaila started to sing an Orion nursery nonsense song. After a couple of verses, Joanna hummed along. Combing out Joanna’s hair took over an hour and a bit of thinning out at the nape of her neck, but they finally had her curls tamed, dried, and corralled into neat braids. Joanna grinned into the mirror.

Gaila’s datapad chimed. She flipped it on to see Jim’s worried face. “What is it?” she said.

“It looks like the Narada left a bioweapon on the surface. We’re all quarantined down here until we find a cure. Could be a few extra days.”

Gaila looked down at where Joanna was sprawled on the floor with a puzzle. “I’ve got Joanna. You just do your job, okay?”

“Gaila,” he said gravely. “I’ve sent you some guardianship papers. I sent the same set to Chris. I need you to sign them. In case none of us come back.”

She swallowed. “It’s that bad?” Joanna sat up, alerting to Gaila’s distress.

He shook his head. “Just a precaution, I’m sure,” he lied.

“Okay, I’ll sign them once she’s in bed.”

“Thanks, I owe you big.”

“You really do,” she said, forcing teasing into her tone so he’d worry less. “Talk later, OK?” They might be needing her in bioinformatics, especially if whatever they’d been exposed to was an engineered organism. Romulan bioweapons often incorporated characteristics of computer viruses.
into their DNA, so that sometimes the mere act of uploading the agent’s DNA sequence would cause systems to crash. It was a tactic she’d worked on counteracting as part of her senior coding project at the Academy.

She rang up bioinformatics first. “You guys having any software trouble?”

“The sequencer just crashed and the antimicrobials database is running slow, why?”

“Just sequester everything you’ve uploaded data on the bioweapon into and run malware diagnostics. I’ll be down as soon as I can.”

She flipped through her list of contacts. “Hey, Sonny? You think you can handle an extra kid? I got some high priority work to do and the guys are all dirtside.”

The young man on the other end of the line nodded. “I’ll bring Minnie over to you. How are you set for art supplies?”

“There’s not a lot here. Jocelyn didn’t pack much and the boys were too busy being idiots to shop for her.”

“Kyi Terel has a girl about Jo’s size, are you short of clothes?”

“Three outfits is all I’ve got. So yeah. But we can worry about that later. I need to get to bioinformatics like, fifteen minutes ago.”

“OK, I’ll grab Minnie and meet you in ten.” He turned his head. “Minnie, get your drawing box and your shoes. We’re going on a visit.”

“Thanks, Sonny, you’re a lifesaver.” She took a couple of minutes to put Joanna’s favorite holos at the top of the queue, then pulled up the most recent research on Romulan bioweapons while she waited for Sonny Carvalho and his daughter to arrive.

*  
McCoy found Spock in ambulatory care running a dermal regenerator over a minor wound in a woman’s leg. The woman was conscious, responded to his directions, but did not otherwise acknowledge his presence. Her breath rattled in her chest. McCoy waited for him to finish, then said, “You’re looking a little peaked, even for you. Do you need to take a break?”

Spock set down the dermal regenerator. In the single two hour sleep cycle the doctor had allowed himself, the mix of patients had changed from mostly ambulatory patients with minor injuries to mostly respiratory distress, along with surgical cases that had been retained on planet due to the quarantine. “I am adequate. I am merely unaccustomed to working under these conditions. I find the crowding reduces my efficiency.”

“Would you tell me if you weren’t ‘adequate’?”

Spock ignored the question. “Dr. McCoy, do you require additional rest?”

McCoy shook his head. “Nah, I’ve had coffee. Just kind of shaky is all. Overactive mirror neurons. Speaking of which, they want everybody with psych training to tent five,” he said.

“I see. Overactive mirror neurons? Tell me doctor, is there a particular reason why medical personnel use masking euphemisms for empathic and telepathic ability? I noticed the phenomenon in Joanna’s chart earlier, and now you are using another such euphemism yourself.”
“I’m not—I wasn’t—shit, I do not have the energy to explain human nature to you right now. You and I are needed in the psych tent.” Spock followed McCoy to tent five. Several people inside were shouting loudly, most but not all of them Tellarites, judging from the accents. Spock stopped a couple of meters from the door. “I believe my skills would be best put to use elsewhere. Perhaps assisting you with finding a cure for coccolithic pneumonia.”

McCoy rounded on him. “Look, kid, we go where we’re sent. You’ve got mental health services training and not just whatever you got on Vulcan. I saw your transcript.”

“I was able to pass objective tests. I have no aptitude.” The Tellarite nurse had, after all, informed him yet again that he lacked appropriate bedside manner.

“Bullshit.”

Spock continued. “I was unable to form relationships with my Vulcan peers while growing up. I alienated my family upon joining Starfleet. I have formed few relationships since joining Starfleet. I have—poor social skills.” The term had been used more than once in his presence from the time he was small. “I am in human terms, autistic.”

“Yeah, well, me too and I’ve never let that stop me from doing my job. Geoff M’Benga thinks the sun rises and sets on your ass. We do not have time for you to have a crisis of confidence.”

“I could do more harm than good,” Spock protested.

“Sit down.” McCoy gestured to one of the plastic folding chairs placed outside the tent.

Spock sat.

“Maybe you’re not exactly warm and cuddly—on the outside,” McCoy said. “But I’ll tell you what you are. You’re steady. Reliable.” He sat down in the chair next to Spock and laced his hands together between his knees. “When everything crumbles to rubble, you’re the one thing still standing. Hell, you’re the only reason I’m still standing.”

Spock realized that McCoy was not just reiterating a stereotype of what Vulcans were supposed to be, but was speaking from his own impressions. He found the implications gratifying. “I am merely doing my job.”

“So let’s go do it, then.” McCoy got up. “Look, I know it’s loud and crowded. Don’t worry about being human for them. Just be you.”

Spock rose to follow him.

There were one hundred thirty people in the tent, plus or minus ten. The fact that he could only estimate the numbers to two significant digits was a distressing indicator of his fatigue. There was an absolute limit to how much psionic energy any shielding can filter out of a corporeal being’s consciousness, and Spock had been walking a tightrope between shielding and reaching nearly the entire time he’d been on the surface of Liquo 2. It tired him as though he had spent the last day and a half carrying a sixty kilogram pack. He hadn’t been this far out of his depth since his first day of plebe summer at the Academy.

The number of crying humans was smaller than he had expected. The main sound assaulting his ears was the nonstop-high volume arguing among the Tellarites and no small number of humans in the far corner of the tent. He was well aware that forceful, belligerent argument was a Tellarite cultural staple and an important coping strategy, but the sound of the voices, in pitch and volume, made him suspect that they were yelling so they wouldn’t have to hear themselves think. McCoy
left him for the crowd of shouting colonists in the far corner, adding his own voice to the fray at an impressive volume.

Spock turned instinctively to the opposite corner of the room, near the door where the worst of patients, the suicidal and catatonic were brought by family or friends or even strangers in hopes of keeping them safe until proper care could be found. A Starfleet nurse caught him by the elbow. He flinched, a response he was usually able to suppress. The nurse looked up at him and winced. “Sorry, sir. I didn’t realize it was you. That crowd over there’s getting rowdy. We’re moving these folks to tent nine, now that it’s up. Could you help out with transporting the ambulatory ones? Once they’re in, give standard sedation and neurostabilizers.”

“Have all of these patients been checked for concussion?”

“Supposed to be, but they haven’t all kept their tags, so it wouldn’t hurt to check them again before you dose them. I don’t have to tell you to elevate the heads of all the beds.”

“No. Are the effects of the parasite becoming a significant issue yet?”

“Only in patients with preexisting respiratory compromise.”

He nodded acknowledgment, then knelt before a middle aged human man staring off into space. “Sir, let me take you somewhere quieter.”

The man didn’t respond. Spock took a moment to settle himself before taking the man’s arm to lift him to his feet. The hollow, dragging emptiness didn’t so much pour into Spock as pull him out of himself. Long practice allowed him to keep his feet, discipline kept his mind from seeking a meld. The man stumbled forward, not caring where he put his feet, his weight resting heavily on Spock’s side. The patient’s heart raced and skipped.

They reached tent nine, which was lined with cots and still nearly empty. He lowered his patient onto the cot, ran a quick scan for concussion symptoms, and checked the patient’s tag for recent medications. He’d had all the neurostabilizer it was safe to give him.

Now that it was quiet, he could clearly hear the skipped and doubled beats of his patient’s heart. He looked around for a nurse. “Nurse, do we have a supply of beta blockers?”

“No in this room. Stress cardiomyopathy?”

“I believe so. I can resolve the arrhythmia presently, but I would prefer to administer a beta blocker as well to prevent recurrence.”

“Of course.” She conferred briefly with a runner, who left the tent.

He briefly considered returning to the surgical tent to collect a cardioversion kit, but decided it wasn’t worth the extra effort and loss of precision. “Nurse, the procedure will take between fifteen and sixty seconds. Could you see that we are not disturbed?”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

He guided his patient to lie down. “Your heart is being damaged by stress hormones. It is not beating correctly.”

“May I attempt to return it to a normal rhythm? Doing so will ease your pain and allow you to rest.” He knew better than to provide saving his life as a reason at a time like this.
There was neither acquiescence nor refusal. Spock was uncertain the patient was capable of either at this point, but given that his condition was life threatening and he didn’t intend to impinge on higher brain functions, the ethical concern was minimal. He allowed the rapport that had been developing since he’d begun the walk to tent nine to deepen slightly, his patient seeking comfort if not fully understanding its source, then shifted his focus from mind to brain, to the tracings of conducting tissues running through the body like conduit.

Dr. M’Benga deserved the credit for insisting that he learn to apply this particular technique to the human heart. Objectively he knew that he was using signals traveling along the vagus nerve as landmarks to locate the sinoatrial node, then sending pulsed inhibitory signals to slow the sinus rhythm. The subjective experience was of following a trace of energy from deep, primitive spaces marked in abstract lines of light down and in until he reached a spot of frantically pulsing brightness. He held it gingerly, quieting it until its rhythm matched his memory of what a normal human heart rhythm felt like. As with any metaphorical representation, the map both was and was not the territory.

He found he could not immediately withdraw from the patient, who clutched at his hand, the first unaided movement he had made. *Don’t leave me* an unspoken whisper, not quite even words.

In for a penny, in for a pound, M’Benga would have said. *I cannot stay long, but I can help you sleep.* he offered.

*My name is Kellan.* It was an offering and a slight unknotting, the words an admission that whoever he had lost, Kellan still existed.

*I am called Spock. Be at peace now.* He guided Kellan toward sleep, deliberately waiting until he was well into the beta stage before disengaging, his internal clock noting he had been in rapport for two point six minutes. He found on withdrawal that he could not immediately move or speak, so focused his attention on his own breaths hoping he could return himself to adequate functioning.

The nurse was watching him. He felt compelled to explain himself as soon as he found his words. “I am aware that I have broken with usual procedure. My shields failed as I was guiding this patient to the tent. Once that occurred, there was little sense in returning to less precise methods of treatment.” He turned back to Kellan and administered the beta blocker and sedative. “He will likely sleep for several hours. I have coordinated his tag with my data pad and will receive an alert when he wakes.”

She sighed. “How much did you see?”

“I refrained from examining his memories out of consideration for his privacy, as the specific circumstances were not relevant to treatment.”

She dropped to the tarp covered ground next to Spock. “His wife and kids were trapped with him for several hours. They were all seriously injured and died before we could get to them.”

Spock stood. “My failure to remain detached will cost my availability for some time. I must meditate until I can maintain a shield.”

“And I suppose you haven’t eaten since you got here either,” the nurse guessed.

He considered evading the question. “I ate part of an apple pastry several hours ago,” he admitted.

“Then you’re owed a rest anyway. Take four hours. Get something to eat first. Staff rest tent is tent eleven, main mess is tent five.”
Spock took his leave of the nurse and found his way to tent five. Despite the unpleasant odor of cooking meat products, the smell of food immediately triggered hunger. He selected a peanut butter sandwich and a banana as the least objectionable options and sat down to eat, intending to use the sandwich bag as an alternative to utensils.

“It’s a mess out there,” one nurse was saying to another. “You think the colonists will pick up and leave?”

“They lost, what’s our count, about 1800 people? They’ll leave if they have any sense.”

“Tellarites are too damn stubborn.”

Tellarites were not stubborn, Spock thought, but he did not have the energy to correct his companions at the table. They were belligerent and and preferred to conduct their debates at high volume, but they made their decisions on sound principles. Spock suspected it would be human sentimentality that would lead the colonists to stay, if they did so. “It is likely that the bioweapon contaminating the colony site will require at least temporary evacuation,” he noted.

“Well, if they do decide to stay, when the Narada comes back we’ll be able to fit the survivors in a shuttlecraft.” Dr. Puri slid into the seat next to Spock and slid a paper plate and plastic fork across the table to him. “They just refilled the dispensers.” Spock set his food down and began to cut it into bite sized pieces.

The medtech continued her spiel. “Pisses me off that Starfleet treats that Romulan monstrosity like it’s a force of nature. Like it’s in the same category as that cosmic string fragment that tracked through the beta quadrant a few decades ago. We should be gearing up for war.” She waved her forkful of fruit salad for emphasis.

Puri took a sip of her coffee. “If they were, you wouldn’t necessarily know. I, for one, am a little suspicious of the number of capital ships commissioned to come out in the next five years. I think we’re biding our time until we have a real shot, then we’re going to throw the kitchen sink at them.”

“And by then the Romulans will have a whole fleet of Naradas.”

Spock set down his sandwich. “The fact that the Romulans do not already possess such a fleet suggests that they either cannot replicate the technology or have pressing reasons to avoid doing so.”

“So what, we just let them take out a colony or outpost every few months? The Neutral Zone is meaningless if the Narada can take whatever it wants, whenever it wants.”

Spock noted, “In any case, vocal speculation by members of Starfleet concerning future operations in a location that has a significant chance of being monitored by our adversaries is counterproductive.”

“Loose lips sink ships,” Puri translated.

“Precisely.” Spock collected the detritus from his place and returned it to the recycler, then settled himself onto a cot to meditate for thirty minutes, the maximum time he felt he could spare from his duties.

* 

All McCoy’s previous work in psychiatry could not have prepared him for this. He found himself
in a muddy, irregularly shaped clearing full of colonists, about three fourths of whom were Tellarite, refereeing a no holds barred cathartic football game punctuated by verbal altercations that largely refrained from becoming physical, though he had been accidentally knocked to the ground and run over by the participants enough times to know he was going to need a session with a tissue regenerator later.

Several of the younger Tellarites seemed to get some relief from using him as a verbal punching bag, and frankly shouting back at them did his own soul good, releasing some of the pent up pressure of sixteen hours straight of patching up patient after patient as fast as he could go. Most were already suffering from a small amount of dyspnea, but the activity didn’t cause it to worsen and the positive effect on the colonists’ mood was worth it, in McCoy’s opinion.

He’d lost sight of Spock when he’d taken charge of the knot of angry colonists in the mental health tent. He hoped the Vulcan was still doing okay. He had a feeling the kid wasn’t nearly as invincible as he pretended to be. He limped back to the staff tent for a shower, grabbed a minimalist ham sandwich and another coffee and made his way to the nonemergent clinic tent. They were still getting a steady stream of minor injuries, colonists who had foregone treatment to settle into the pop up shelters or to help with recovery efforts and found their injuries needed treatment after all, along with Starfleet personnel and colonists who injured themselves during the recovery efforts. Those colonists and Constellation officers whose infections had progressed to the point that they were no longer able to work were housed in other tents.

“I’m fine, let me walk—oh, okay maybe not walk, not right now—” a familiar voice said from behind the single row of trees separating the clearing from the nonemergent clinic.

McCoy followed the two colonists supporting the gold shirted officer between them. They helped Commander Kirk onto an exam table. The other doctor in the tent was already working on another patient, so McCoy reluctantly approached. “Sorry, Commander, I guess you’re stuck with me,” he said.

Kirk nodded. “Fell through a floor. Landed badly,” he said through clenched teeth. His eyes looked wrong, too bright, and was his face a little round under the coating of gray dust?

Kirk scratched idly at his chest. “Jim! Commander! How long have you been itching?” He pulled out a hypo preloaded with epinephrine, the barrel tinted blaze orange so he could find it in an instant, even in near darkness. He scooped up a bit of gauze, dumped water on it from his canteen, and swept path across Kirk’s forehead and cheek, revealing angry pink mottling. He jammed the hypo to Kirk’s throat.

“Ow, hey!” Kirk shrugged. “I don’t know, I just noticed.”

“That ought to hold you for long enough for me get a look at your leg.” McCoy flipped through his med bag for an ampule of the one local anesthetic he knew wouldn’t send Kirk into anaphylactic shock. “Your pants are ruined anyway, let’s just cut off the leg,” he said, earning an alarmed look from Kirk. “Of the pants, infant—Commander.”

A nurse cut off Kirk’s pant leg while McCoy ran the medscanner. “You’ve got a nice clean nondisplaced fracture of the tibia and fibula. Little pinch and your leg should go numb.” He pressed the hypospray to the popliteal fossa behind Kirk’s knee, counted to ten to give the anesthetic time to work, then moved the leg to lie on the table, the better to access it with the bone knitter.

“You need to specify a new primary physician,” he told Kirk, conversationally, while checking the bone knitter’s progress on the scanner. “If I were you I’d go with Dr. Hasan. He’s a sharp guy,
good with emergency medicine.”

There was a pause, far too long to be accidental, then Kirk replied, “It’s fine. You can still be my
doctor.”

McCoy finished the repair in silence, switching from the bone knitter to the tissue regenerator to
patch up a nasty bruise forming along the medial calf. “Just don’t make an orphan out of my—I
mean, you gotta be careful. You’re a dad now.” The realization that he, Kirk, and Spock had all
been exposed to a bioengineered form of pneumonia with no cure occurred to him at that moment.

“I am careful.”

“My ass. You just came in here covered in hives you claim not to have noticed. You’re staying
here until we figure out what you reacted to. And Commander, get on your comm and transfer
temporary guardianship of Joanna to Gaila. She’s not down here, is she?”

“Gaila’s a programmer. Of course she’s not down here. And I did, before I left. With Captain Pike
as back up.”

“Well I wasn’t expecting to see you down here either, Commander,” McCoy said. “Sit here for a
minimum of sixty minutes before you bear weight on that leg. And do not leave this tent until I,
personally, give you the okay. We need to run a panel, find out what you’re allergic to.”

“Doctor,” a nurse said, clearly about to protest his instructions.

“A moment,” McCoy said to him, then took the young fellow outside the tent. “That man never
does what he’s told. If I tell him thirty minutes rest he’ll give me five. I’ll be lucky to keep him
from leaping right back into that rubble tomorrow morning.”

“One of those,” the nurse said, twisting her lips into a half-smile.

McCoy nodded. “And he’s allergic to about eighty different things, last I checked. I keep a list.”

“So what’s going on between the two of you?”

McCoy shook his head grimly. “That’s not something you need to know.” He returned to where
Kirk sat with his leg propped, chugging a bottle of water.

The Commander coughed wetly. McCoy scanned his lungs. “Short of breath?”

“A little, but so is everyone else.”

“Not to the extent you are. Your lungs are full of fluid.” He whacked himself on the forehead with
the scanner, not hard enough to break it, and said, “Queasy?”

“Well, yeah, but it’s not pretty out there, you know?”

“You’re reacting to the coccoliths.” Kirk’s body was reacting to the organism in his lungs like
people had reacted to the 1918 flu. His lungs were filling steadily with his own fluids. He could
drown from the inside out in hours. “Come with me, you’re going to the ICU.” He wanted to send
him up to the ship where Dr. Marchesi could keep a close eye, quarantine be damned. He also
wanted not to let him out of his sight at all. He flagged a runner. “Get him to ICU. Tell them to
give 50 mg diphenhydramine and oxformimab for cytokine storm. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

He needed to check on Spock. No one else was likely to with the Vulcan reputation for
invincibility, and when they’d gone their separate ways the healer had looked like he was barely staying upright. He caught the arm of a passing nurse. “You seen Spock? Tall, dark hair, pointy ears?”

“Back corner of the rest tent,” she said. McCoy would have liked to think that Spock made a sensible choice to go lie down for a while, but he didn’t believe it for a minute. He just hoped he’d gotten to the tent under his own steam. The burning knot of an incipient bout of anxiety curled into the space below his breastbone. He tried to ignore it. He did not have time to indulge his sympathetic nervous system.

When McCoy got to the rest tent, it was full of colonists and rescue workers from the Constellation, propped up on cots so they could breathe more easily. Spock and a couple of other people walked from cot to cot, adjusting the resting angles. The cots worked like the deck chairs around a pool, the ends able to be raised and lowered to function as a chair or bed. The sound of low voices mixed with the sound of coughing.

McCoy found Spock first. The healer looked no worse than the rest of them did now. “You get a chance to take a break yet?”

Spock looked at him for a beat too long before saying, “I found it necessary to meditate for thirty minutes. Has there been any progress on neutralizing the coccoliths?”

“I haven’t heard anything from Ribera. Commander Kirk came down to help with search and rescue. He’s reacting to the coccoliths.”

“Is it serious?”

McCoy nodded. “Cytokine storm. Gaila and Pike have guardianship, just in case.” There was no way that the Romulans would concoct a nuisance plague. This thing was likely to be fatal for all of them in a matter of days unless they came up with a cure, fast. “I’m heading to the respiratory ICU tent.”

“I will accompany you.”

McCoy couldn’t bring himself to say anything as sappy as thank you, so he just ducked out of the tent, expecting Spock would follow.
The situation on Liquo 2 grows more dire by the hour. McCoy has a breakthrough on the ground.

By early afternoon nine tents were filled with the most rapidly progressing cases of pneumonia, all patients with existing respiratory illness or injuries, the majority of them Tellarites. Recovery efforts had been suspended. Fortunately, they had already exhausted their efforts to locate living colonists under the rubble. There were two alarms going off at the same time for the third time since McCoy took over the unit. Nurse Elta jogged toward the more distant one. “I’ve got this one. I’ll call you if I need you.”

McCoy rushed to the other bed, where one of his TBI patients was seizing again. He upped the anticonvulsant to the highest dose. The soft sound of the heavy fabric curtain that served as a door made him startle. Not more patients, not yet, he half prayed. It was Spock, looking more like a barely ambulatory green tag than a colleague, but welcome all the same. He suspected he looked no better. “Spock! Just in time.”

Dr. Bosh, who had been waiting for another physician to relieve him, tucked his pad back into his bag and was caught by a fit of coughing that had him holding onto a tent post for support. He straightened. “I’m going to the meeting with the colony administrators. Back in an hour.”

“It will be helpful to have a Tellarite among the Starfleet representatives,” Spock noted.

“I know.” He led Spock to the pair of chairs he’d placed dead center in the tent so he could sit, but still run from one end of the ward to the other at need. The fact that the biobed where Jim lay was right next to the chairs was merely fortunate coincidence. “The staff to patient ratio in this room isn’t supposed to drop below two patients per staff member. Right now we’re at four nurses, two assistants and the two of us. Eight staff and eighty patients.”

McCoy took a deeper breath to try to still the tickle in his throat. Spock turned toward him. “You are symptomatic.”

“I already checked in with Ribera. It’s just a little cough right now. It’s been thirty-three hours since we got here.”

Two alarms went off at the same moment. “I’ll take this one,” McCoy said, directing Spock to the other. McCoy checked the medscan. “Oxygen sats are too low.” He turned up the oxygen mix on his patient’s mask and the alarm stopped. “What do you have over there?”

“Possible pulmonary embolism. Administering heparin.”

Another alarm went off before Spock even finished speaking. It was Jim’s biobed. “He’s already on a hundred percent oxygen,” McCoy said before he even got to the bedside.

“Understood. A moment.” Spock was beside him in an instant, fingers settling on the bridge of Jim’s nose.
“What are you doing?”

After a beat, Spock lifted his hand and turned to McCoy. “Inducing a diving response to reduce cerebral oxygen demand. The technique is faster and less taxing than inducing coma at the thalamus.”

“From the conference.”

“Indeed. Unfortunately, Tellarites never went through an aquatic phase and therefore have no such mechanism.” He regarded Jim. “His temperature is 41.1 degrees Celsius on antipyretics.”

McCoy pressed his lips together. “I know I said to pace yourself. But if there’s anything more you can do,” he flung up his hands. “I can’t. I cannot watch him die. Not now.”

The Healer regarded them both quietly. “There are states in which the body’s capacity for self-healing may be optimized. If his temperature can be brought below forty degrees I can attempt to assist the Commander in achieving such a state. Are you in a position to consent on his behalf?”

“Legally, yes,” he qualified.

Spock brushed aside the qualification without comment. “Very well. Do we have any cooling blankets?”

They added an additional fever reducing drug, one that he didn’t like using because it could damage the hypothalamus used long term, then wrapped Jim in cooling blankets from head to toe. McCoy watched his temperature creep downward. He took his pulse by hand, several times, between making the rounds of the other critical patients, just for an excuse to touch him. Spock pushed a chair close to Jim’s biobed and made him sit in it, taking over the running for half an hour. He ignored the rawness in his throat and the growing ache in his chest, both of which could be pneumonia or grief. The temperature readout ticked downward. 39.8. “Spock,” he said.

The healer returned. “You have charge of the room. This may take several minutes.”

“Understood. I’ll get out of your hair.” McCoy deliberately crossed to the other side of the room so he wouldn’t be tempted to interfere, sending Elta to keep an eye on Spock in his stead. He paced between the rows of portable biobeds, knuckles pressed to his teeth. Thinking. The last few hours had, along with the insidious onset of a cough and itching lungs, brought more information about how the disease would progress. The parasite produced calcium carbonate plaques along the interior surfaces of the alveoli. The tiny, shell-like plates and spicules prevented oxygen and carbon dioxide from being exchanged efficiently and grew together into inclusions large and sharp enough to slice through the delicate tissues, causing bleeding. The most fragile Tellarite patients were already coughing blood; Ribera estimated that half of the infected humans would be incapacitated roughly twenty four hours after symptoms first appeared and death would follow in roughly another twelve. The Tellarite patients were unlikely to last so long. They needed a solution within about eight hours or the Tellarite colonists were going to start dying in large numbers, followed by the human colonists and first responders from the Constellation.

An idea occurred to McCoy. He contained it, rocking heel to toe and casting surreptitious glances in Spock’s direction until the healer stepped away from Jim’s bedside to meet him. “Well?” he said.

“I believe I was successful.”

McCoy could hold onto his idea no longer. “What do you know about marine coccoliths?”
“Next to nothing. Why, doctor?”

“Well, about three hundred years ago, Earth’s oceans started to become more acidic because of increased carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere.”

“And?”

“The coccoliths couldn’t make their calcium carbonate shells. They died off.”

Spock raised an eyebrow. “You wish to acidify the environment of the lungs in an attempt to slow the ability of the parasite to produce calcium deposits.”

“We add carbon dioxide to the mix we’re giving patients, one to two percent of the total. The pH in the alveoli will drop and the bugs won’t be able to make shells.”

“Which may kill them.”

“And even if it doesn’t it buys us time.”

“The side effects will be unpleasant.”

“Most patients will tolerate the acidosis. The most fragile we’ll put in comas, but we only have respirators for fifty and staff to maintain even fewer.” He grabbed his datapad to call Dr. Ribera. “Luci, I need as many canisters of carbon dioxide as you can get to us, along with atmospheric concentrators.”

“You want to lower alveolar pH?” Ribera said.

“You got it.”

“That’s brilliant!” Ribera continued, “I think we may have a breakthrough up here. If you can buy us sixteen hours with your carbon dioxide stopgap we should be able to finish our tests and scale it up.”

He looked over his shoulder at Jim. “Do your best to make it eight.”

*

Spock assisted McCoy in setting up the canisters in their tent. The condition of the eight thousand surviving colonists was rapidly worsening. The three hundred Nightingale crew members on the ground were still ambulatory; everyone else lay propped on beds and cots or lay on tarps spread on the ground, some not even under the cover of tents. There were not enough oxygen masks to go around, nor enough people to take care of the sick.

Dr. Bosh suggested sealing and filling whole tents with the high oxygen, high carbon dioxide mixture—it was a significant fire hazard, but better than leaving the majority of the colonists untreated. Spock was as yet asymptomatic, so spent the bulk of his time carrying oxygen and carbon dioxide tanks from tent to tent, while McCoy spent increasing amounts of his time sitting at the Commander’s bedside, arms resting on the side of the biobed over one of Kirk’s, the better to arch his back to get a little more air.

Despite their best efforts, colonists started dying shortly before dawn, right around the time the humans from the Nightingale became too ill to tend to them efficiently, and continued to do so even after Ribera sent the first batch of the cure. The lung damage was just too severe in the most fragile patients. The Pasteur and a large cargo carrier arrived to help during the wee hours of the
morning and took the bulk of the refugees, while Nightingale took two hundred of the most severely injured survivors. Commander Kirk survived through the expertise of Dr. McCoy, who balanced the need to suppress his overactive immune response with the need to prevent his lungs from being overrun with protozoa with rapid changes in drugs and dosages.

“I would not have anticipated that combination of treatments, Doctor,” Spock said, just as they were beginning to infuse the azole variant that promised to wipe out the coccoliths.

“The first version of the serum had a lot of impurities. Jim was allergic to a few of them, so I’ve done this balancing act before. Watch his histamine levels, he hasn’t reacted to azole class drugs yet, but there’s always a first time.” McCoy turned his head to cough.

The runners who would take Kirk back to the Nightingale for further treatment arrived. Spock helped unlock the antigrav on the portable biobed and walked alongside it with McCoy until another pair of runners called him away to assist another patient.

When the Starfleet ships left orbit, 7114 of the original 10,202 colonists were still alive.

*  
The ground based staff, including Spock and McCoy, were all required to take six hours of rest before returning to duty. Dr. Marchesi threatened McCoy with sedation if he didn’t go to bed. He forced himself to turn his back on Jim and return to his quarters. He spared ten precious minutes to shower before collapsing into bed, and allowed himself fifteen to dress and eat before his shift started. Under any other circumstances, he’d be off duty for at least 24 hours to give his lungs a chance to heal, but almost the entire medical staff were in the same condition as he was, and the patients weren’t going to take care of themselves while he lay around waiting for his chest to stop aching and his cough to fade.

He met Spock in one of the five critical care wards operating on the Nightingale, looking after twenty of the sickest patients, with a pair of nurses to keep them company. He hadn’t been allowed to stay in the ward with Jim, though they had allowed him to check in long enough to assure himself that the Commander was on the mend.

The only unoccupied nurse rushed toward the latest alarm. “Blood pressure’s crashing,” he said.

Four quick steps and Spock was at the bedside. McCoy followed to watch, but let him do his job. He wasn’t a baby resident, for all that he looked barely out of undergrad. He’d proved himself and then some down on Liquo 2. Spock scanned the information on the biobed while the nurse pulled down the blanket to expose the patient. McCoy ran down the differential diagnosis in his head, prepared to advise Spock on next steps. “The patient is bleeding into the abdominal cavity,” Spock said. “Administer sufficient anesthetic to prepare for surgery.”

An abdominal bleed was certainly a possibility, but by no means the only one. “Spock, are you sure?”

“I can see increasing abdominal distension.”

McCoy called over his shoulder. “Terel, get me four units of type A positive, stat. Computer, do we have any other thoracic surgeons topside?”

“The remaining surgeons are occupied with procedures or off duty at present.”

“Great. Let’s hope this guy doesn’t bleed out before we get him to a surgical suite.”
“I can induce vascular spasm if I can locate the bleed,” Spock volunteered. He tuned the biobed to display the abdominal cavity, searched briefly, and centered the pointer device on a faint flicker. “Superior mesenteric artery five point four centimeters downstream of the abdominal aorta.” McCoy checked his assessment on the monitor. Spock bent over the patient to tuck one hand behind his head, then drew the other hand downward from the xiphoid process until he was directly over the bleed.

“Administering norepinephrin,” McCoy said, a little louder than he ordinarily would. Spock had that spacy, checked out look on his face again, the one that made McCoy doubt if he could hear him. He pressed the hypospray to the patient’s throat.

“I am having difficulty visualizing—much better, thank you doctor.” Another short pause. “I have it.”

Have what? He almost asked, then realized that Spock was sending some kind of telepathic message to the patient’s damaged artery, forcing it to spasm closed. McCoy tried to pretend that he wasn’t impressed. “Can you walk?”

“How far must we go?”

Nurse Terel was staring. “Don’t goggle,” McCoy told him. “Pull the bed out of exam two, stat. We’ll make an operating suite. I don’t want to try to get these two out a door and down a hallway to surgery, but there’s not enough room to work in here.” Terel ran to drag the bed out of the exam room and remove the room divider. “Elta, get another doctor in here. The three of us are going to be occupied with this patient. You’re going to need help with the rest.” While he talked, he pushed the first half liter of blood into the patient and hung the second.

Terel signaled from across the hall. He and a medtech McCoy didn’t know yet had cleared a path to the treatment room. The biobeds in critical care were designed to move so a patient didn’t need to be transferred from bed to bed in just this sort of circumstance. McCoy gestured to the medtech to take the side opposite Spock. “Coming around behind you,” he said and bent down to engage the biobed’s antigrav, careful not to bump Spock.

“Take it smooth and easy,” he told Terel and Spock. Spock stumbled once, but caught himself on the edge of the biobed. Once they were in the treatment room, McCoy flipped on the sterile field. “I’m going to scrub in. Don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone.”

He cut his routine short, even though he hated relying on the sterile field. Terel had the patient draped and his instruments laid out for him. He spared a moment to check the patient’s scans. The neuroscan was barely registering. Shit. “Terel, our guy could code any minute. Stay alert.”

He made his way down to the damaged artery, Terel handling the retractors. Spock hadn’t moved. The patient’s brain activity on the monitor was so low that if it didn’t improve he’d have to declare him brain dead, making this whole surgery a waste of time. “Hey Spock, what’s going in there?”

He got no answer this time. When Jim has been in whatever mental holding pattern Spock had put him in on Liquo 2, he’d had much more brain activity than this patient. Either the healer was trying to keep the patient alive, or he was trying to keep him almost dead. As long as he wasn’t talking, McCoy couldn’t be sure either way. Once the blood was suctioned out of the abdominal cavity he could see the vessel, spasmed tight, only a trickle of blood coming out. He repaired the vessel, but ran a second scan for other bleeders and found another small one to repair as well. Once the wound was closed, he sent Terel back to the critical care ward to take some of the pressure off the other nurses.
“Spock?” Still no damned answer. “Snap out of it!” He shook him by the shoulder. Nothing.

Now what? He tapped the sheet next to the Vulcan’s hand. He’d take a scan, but he had no idea what Spock was supposed to look like when he went wherever the hell he had gone and a scan wouldn’t tell him what to do about it.

The last time he’d done something as stupid as he was about to do he’d—well, he’d lost his best friend and his baby girl and ruined his life. He opaqued the window glass. “Spock, I’m going to touch you on the back of the hand, and then we’re going to have a little talk about this shit so I don’t have to guess what you’re up to all the time.”

He had intended to tap once, sharply, maybe shout at the Vulcan again, but at the last second he slid his fingers along the patient’s side to press them gingerly against the side of Spock’s wrist. The skin was cool and tingled slightly. McCoy felt suddenly, intensely dizzy, his vision tunneling until a second cool hand clasped the back of his wrist and his stomach settled. Spock disentangled himself. “Your concern is misplaced. I am undamaged.”

McCoy blinked his vision clear. “What the hell happened? I left to scrub in and when I got back I couldn’t get word one out of you. You are not allowed to scare me like that or I swear I will slap you.” The implications of his threat make him sick to his stomach and he swallowed.

“That would have been effective,” Spock replied blandly.

“Gah!” He threw up his hands and turned to face the wall. “Just—dammit! The patient’s probably brain dead anyway.” He knew even as he spoke that what he said was neither true nor fair.

“The patient is not brain dead.”

“Well, I suppose you’d be in a position to know. Nice if you’d told me before you pulled your little stunt. What were you doing?”

“I merely inhibited brain activity in order to lower metabolic oxygen demand and preserve neural tissue while you repaired the vessel. As I have done on previous occasions.”

“Not like that you haven’t! I spent half an hour thinking I might be operating on a dead man. Next time you keep me in the loop.”

“If you would—” Spock trailed off and, while he didn’t precisely faint, he sat down deliberately but quickly on the treatment room floor and leaned back against the wall.

McCoy crouched beside him. “Uh uh, not again. What do you need?” It occurred to him that Spock might not have actually taken that mandatory six hours of off duty time, especially as short staffed as they were.

Spock opened his eyes. “Fluids and solitude.”

“All right.” He stood. “Terel, help me get this patient back to the biomonitoring station.”

Once the patient was squared away, McCoy grabbed a bottle of electrolyte replacement solution, set it beside Spock and returned the bed to the treatment room. “Drink all of that and lie down in here. You’re done for the day. I’ll be in to yell at you in no less than six hours.”

*I’ll be in to yell at you, McCoy had said. Not talk to you. That boded poorly. Spock availed himself*
of the opportunity to sleep and meditate, though he knew that outside the room other doctors were working well beyond their capacity because he had been unable to effectively pace himself.

After awakening, he resumed his shift in critical care for another eight hours without seeing McCoy again. During that time he tried and failed again to confine himself to conventional medical techniques. By halfway through his shift he had given up the effort so that when McCoy returned, he was in light rapport with a comatose teenager while typing notes into his data pad with his free hand.

To his credit, the doctor waited until he completed the assessment to speak to him. Spock looked up to find him standing at the foot of the bed with his arms crossed, putting on an annoyed face that hid a thread of--amusement? That was unexpected. “Doctor.”

“Healer.”

“I was merely logging the patient’s status.”

“And?”

“There is massive hypoxic damage to cortical regions. It will not be possible for some time to assess whether enough tissue and functional neural structure remains to allow meaningful recovery. I suggest reducing stress on brain structures as much as possible while allowing natural healing processes to occur for the time being.” He paused. “If a next of kin can be found, the patient might be a candidate for your cellular regeneration serum.”

“Quit trying to distract me. Elta told me you kept working when we got back to the ship instead of going to your quarters, against Dr. Lavoie’s orders.”

“The number of uninfected staff was insufficient to provide adequate patient care. I judged that, as a Vulcan, I was capable of continuing to serve.”

“When I suggested we bring your Vulcan ass aboard this ship I did not except I’d be riding herd on a second reckless idiot with a death wish.”

“Second?” Spock said, puzzled.

“Oh, that’s right, you’re not familiar with that side of Jim ‘I’ll just leap into certain death because Bones will fix me’ Kirk yet are you?”

“I was never in any danger,” Spock asserted.

McCoy leaned into his personal space. “And you know what? I have no way of knowing whether you just lied to me. I don’t know how things worked on Starbase 4, but I am not willing to stand by and just assume you know what you’re doing.”

Spock felt his posture harden. “Is this the position of Dr. Lavoie as well?” To his knowledge, Dr. Lavoie was his immediate supervisor, not Dr. McCoy.

“Don’t look at me like that. Nobody’s asking you to confine yourself to standard Starfleet medical technique, and Dr. Lavoie and I have had a conversation about you, yes.”

Spock set the data pad down so he could give the doctor his full attention. “I made the attempt.”

“You made what attempt?”
“I attempted to confine myself to conventional techniques when I first arrived on Liquo 2, and again early in my shift today. I found the effort prohibitively difficult, both in the energy required to maintain my shields at a level that would prevent the transfer of information and in the need to rely on instrumentation rather than direct observation.”

McCoy settled back off his toes, forehead wrinkling in confusion. “You’re losing me.”

“Imagine I were to supply you with headphones that would block most sound and required you to use only a medscanner to assess anything you might hear. Heart and breath sounds, the patient’s tone of voice when describing symptoms, the crackles and pops that indicate damage to joints and bones—you would have to read them as numbers or printed words on your data pad.”

“That would take some getting used to,” McCoy allowed.

“Now imagine that in addition you are required to hold onto the headphones with your nondominant hand at all times.”

McCoy nodded understanding. “Nobody’s asking you to do that. Just tell us what’s going on and don’t run yourself into the ground.”

“I pushed myself no harder than anyone else on staff. You included.”

McCoy tensed. “I have my reasons.”

“Of which I am aware.”

Another alarm went off, interrupting them. McCoy leapt up first. “Follow me.” When he reached the patient’s bedside he stopped. “Walk me through the assessment. Your way. If you have to go nonverbal you tell me first and what you’re up to.”

Spock identified the patient as a twenty four year old Tellarite female with severe thoracic injuries and antibiotic resistant secondary pneumonia. He looked up at the biobed monitor. “Oxygen sats have fallen below alarm threshold, suspect fluid buildup or possible embolism. Could you suction and take a high resolution scan of the lungs?”

“I’m seeing an embolism. Giving heparin—humans and Tellarites are damn near identical biochemically.”

Spock turned to the pleural scan. “Not the ideal location for surgical intervention and I hesitate to induce local vasodilation, given that may move the clot deeper into the pulmonary circulation.”

“Let’s give the clotbusters time to do their job.” McCoy checked the patient’s reflexes. “Wonder what she looks like to you,” McCoy said, the question clearly rhetorical.

Spock chose to take advantage of his reputation for misunderstanding human conversational patterns. “Do you wish to see?” He allowed his hand to hover over the back of the doctor’s wrist.

McCoy responded to the suggestion with a pulse of emotion, not the fear or recoil he might have expected, but a sharp spike of grief and longing, quickly quashed. Spock was about to withdraw the offer when McCoy breathed, “All right then.”

It took more effort than Spock thought it would to keep the contact light and professional in tone. McCoy reached out to trace the path of the patient’s brachial nerve with his finger. “Orange. I would have thought yellow.”
“Nerves are printed in orange in Vulcan anatomy textbooks, hence the association.” He could feel McCoy’s mind settle against his, growing more still, less agitated.

“What’s that red ghosting?”

“Other conductive tissues. Muscle, glands, the tunica media in the arterial wall. The structures are easier to visualize if you close your eyes.”

McCoy closed his eyes for a beat, then opened them. “Not much.”

“No.” Spock paused. “Vasopressors can help resolve the vasculature.”

“Still, like grasping at spiderwebs in the dark.”

“Indeed.” Spock released McCoy’s wrist. They stood across from each other. Spock kept his eyes on the real time pleural scan on the monitor at the head of the biobed, watching the blood flow tracings. “There may be circumstances in which passing information subvocally would be more efficient than relying on speech. The situation with the abdominal bleed earlier, for example.”

McCoy nodded. “Makes sense. That something you can just do?” Tension settled back into the doctor’s shoulders.

“It would be easier with a trained partner.” Observing McCoy at work had solidified a personal interest in the man that began when they first met. He was brilliant, compassionate, precise in his work, and not too in awe of Spock’s Vulcanness to confront him at need. For the time being, he set aside his need to find a human male to bond with; he had years to accomplish that task and no idea if McCoy were even consciously attracted to men. He did, however, need a partner and confidante. Healers tended to be much less entire of themselves than other Vulcans and Spock was no exception. “There is another matter I would like to discuss, privately.”

Suspicion colored the doctor’s next words. “What kind of matter? If this has to do with Joanna, I already told you I can’t go near her and I’m not even supposed to look up her chart. She’s your patient now.”

“It has nothing to do with your self imposed isolation from Joanna.” Not as such, he amended to himself. His daily social interactions would be much simpler if the Commander and McCoy were reconciled, and Joanna’s mental health would be improved by seeing her father again regularly. “Though she misses you more than you know. She asks after you every time I see her.”

This time the grief pouring over Spock was neither slight nor brief, though the doctor channeled it into anger as was his habit. “You don’t know when to stop twisting the knife, do you.” Spock flinched, but McCoy kept going. “I told you, what’s done is done. You have to take a side and you can’t pick mine.”

“Isn’t that my decision?” Spock challenged, compounding his error.

“Dammit, you really don’t get it, do you? You’re like a damn child. Joanna needs you. I don’t need anybody.” He turned his back, as though hiding the tears in his eyes would make it harder for Spock to perceive his pain. “I’m going to switch places with Dr. ch’Shev on the main ward. See you around.”

He was out the door before Spock could formulate a response.
Kirk, Spock, and McCoy each consider their relationship status while nothing else of critical import goes on for once.

Kirk had been stuck in Sickbay for a full twenty four hours recovering from the pneumonia, to which his body had reacted with its usual near fatal immunological enthusiasm. He’d spent the last eight hours of that wide awake and crawling right out of his skin. Marchesi hadn’t wanted to let him leave until his heart rate and blood pressure dropped. His heart rate and blood pressure weren’t going to drop until he was away from people in scrubs and shiny antiseptic surfaces, bright hospital lighting and that slightly sharp, poorly disguised perfume common to hospitals everywhere he had ever been.

Bones didn’t visit. He supposed he deserved that.

He sat propped in the biobed, too tense to sleep, while nurses checked his vitals and shook their heads. He wanted to see Bones, flashbacks be damned. He wanted to see Spock, who at least might understand if he said he needed to be out of the hospital. He supposed that they were probably sleeping and used that assumption as an excuse to keep himself from asking for them. It was stupid. He knew that intellectually, but his lizard brain, which both wanted and didn’t want to see both of them, was paralyzed.

In the end he was rescued by Spock. He walked in the door, conferred briefly with Marchesi, and was ushered to Kirk’s bedside, where he took one look at him and said, “Your level of distress is unwarranted by the current circumstances.”

“You think?” Kirk snapped back.

Spock turned his attention to Kirk’s chart. “Is there a reason you can discern, aside from the omission of your medication?” He turned to Marchesi. “The commander is taking—” he trailed off and pointed to the datapad for Marchesi’s benefit. “His current condition is doubtless a result of doses missed while he was unconscious.”

“I don’t like hospitals,” he said.

“So I see. Dr. Marchesi, would it be possible to discharge the Commander to his quarters, provided a member of the medical staff monitors his vital signs?” While he spoke, he crossed the room to a cabinet, loaded a hypospray, collected a monitoring bracelet, and returned to stand next to Kirk. He handed Kirk the hypospray with a pointed expression.

“Does he know how to use that?” Marchesi protested.

Spock’s expression managed to convey the depth of his irritation without involving any facial muscles. “The technique is simple, Commander. Place the hypospray against your upper arm and depress the button at the top. The dosage is already set.” He was facing Kirk, but clearly speaking to Marchesi. The intent, however, was clear. Kirk obediently dosed himself. It didn’t hurt as much as when someone else did it. Spock handed him the programmed bracelet and he locked it around
his own wrist.

Spock turned back to Marchesi. “The Commander will recover more effectively in his own quarters.”

“All right, but if his vitals get worse, he has to come back.”

“Acceptable. Commander. Doctor.” He nodded to each of them in turn. “My services are required elsewhere.”

*  
Kirk’s orders were to go straight to his quarters and rest as much as possible. The walk to the turbolift convinced him that following doctors’ orders this time would be a good idea, so he directed the lift to his quarters on the family deck. The hallway seemed a lot longer than he remembered.

The door slid open, and his first thought was that someone must have broken in. Bodies littered the floor, far too many than should have been in his quarters. His heart leapt into his throat, but he forced himself to breathe slowly for the few seconds it took for him to process what he was seeing. They were children, faces peaceful in slumber, bodies half in-half out of a rough ring of sleeping bags on the floor. He counted four. The monitoring bracelet stopped beeping its warning as his heart rate slowed.

He picked his way through the obstacle course toward Joanna’s room.

“Shhhhh.”

There was a little girl curled up at the foot of Joanna’s bed with a datapad in her hands. Joanna was sleeping at the top end of the bed. The awake-far-too-late child slid off the end of the bed to pad toward him in slippers, a tiny little thing at least a head shorter than Joanna, with neat black pigtails not quite hiding pointed ears. Once she was standing directly in front of him, she looked up and said, “My father is asleep in your bed. I will wake him.”

“Who is your father?” he said. Spock hadn’t said anything about having a child.

“Santiago Carvalho. He designs prosthetics and implants, so his skills were not needed. He has been looking after all of us.”


“In her room. Healer Spock left two hours, fourteen minutes ago. He watched The Princess Bride with us.”

“Why aren’t you sleeping?”

“I’m not tired.”

Logical, Kirk thought. He followed the little girl into his room. She stood beside the bed. “Father, Commander Kirk is here.”

Carvalho, who turned out to be a tall, almost willowy man with shiny black hair that stuck up at odd angles around his yawning face, forced himself fully awake as soon as he registered who was standing beside his bed. “Commander!” He looked from Kirk to his tiny daughter and back. “It’s good to see you, sir. I’m sure you’ll be wanting your bed.”
Did he look that bad? Probably. “I’ve been ordered to rest,” he said, ruefully.

“I can change the sheets.”

“No need. How is Joanna?”

“Fine, now. Dr. Lavoie upped her pain meds until the Healer was able to get topside.”

“And my quarters are full of children?”

“I wasn’t busy, so I volunteered. I already had two extra when Gaila called. If she hadn’t picked up on the malware encoded into that bioweapon’s DNA sequence, it would have shut down the medical computers entirely. Might have even gotten into nav and life support.” He paused. “She said you were welcome to sleep in her room if you’d rather.”

Kirk sighed, which triggered a bout of coughing. He tried to keep it quiet. “I’m not up to, I’m not ready for, I don’t know what Gaila wants from me.”

“Well it’s not just a good—” he looked down at his little girl’s interested face. “She’s been worried sick about you. If you don’t take her up on her offer, at least go in and let her know you’re okay.”

“Right.”

He took a detour through the bathroom to wash his face, then decided a shower was in order before he inflicted his hospital room stink on Gaila. He got a little woozy in the shower and had to sit down for a couple of minutes, but managed to wash the smell of sweat and Hibiclens off himself and work his way into sweatpants and a t-shirt.

Gaila was sprawled face down across her bed. For a moment, Kirk contemplated grabbing a spare blanket and lying on the floor, but she rolled over and offered him a sleepy smile, then scooted over and patted the bed behind her. “I’d be the big spoon but I think we’d fall off the bed.”

“I heard you saved the day,” he told her, sitting down behind her. What energy he had left deserted him entirely and he lay down without mulling it over further.

“Nah, I just did my job. Same as you. Except I didn’t fall in a hole and break my leg.”

“Who told you that?”

“Like I’m going to compromise my sources. She reached back to swat him with a pillow, but pulled all the force out of it at the last second and swiped his chest with a gentle tap.

“I’m not that fragile.”

“Could have fooled me.” The timbre of her voice changed, softened. She blew a lock of hair out of her face. “You had me worried, there, for a while.”

“You didn’t visit, did you?”

“Right after you were brought up. You didn’t look so good.” She nuzzled back against him. It was a measure of the beating his body had taken that it completely failed to respond to her proximity. He didn’t quite know what possessed him in that moment, but he propped himself up on one arm just long enough to kiss her on the forehead before nuzzling his cheek into her mango scented hair. He fell asleep wondering again what exactly this thing they had was.

*
After three days on the planet, followed by two more ferrying their fragile passengers and another four hundred refugees back to Starbase 4, the ship was so quiet it was almost eerie. The refugees and patients had, save a dozen or so too delicate to move, left the ship for the station, along with at least half the crew complement.

McCoy took advantage of the lull to study Min Carvalho’s medical history in hopes that he could craft a solution to her metabolic problem using only unaltered genes from her biological parents. It was permissible to include existing genes from either or both parents in any order to construct the islet cells he planned to introduce into Min’s liver tissue. The process was not unlike the insertion of genes from McCoy’s father’s Y chromosome into his own gonads in order to confirm his gender when he was a child. Legally, he was allowed a considerable amount of leeway in gene expression, but he was not permitted to make changes at the base pair level or introduce genes from any individual other than Min’s parents.

It made for an artificially complex puzzle.

McCoy smelled Ethiopian food. His chest tightened in the impossible hope that Jim might be outside the door. The chime sounded. “Who is it?” McCoy asked.

“It’s your captain, open up.”

“That an order?”

“Take out isn’t going to eat itself.”

“Fine.” McCoy shoved pads and flimsies in his drawer. “Come in.”

Pike rolled into McCoy’s office, the clamshell boxes of injeri and doro wat balanced on his lap. He set them on McCoy’s desk, while McCoy pulled plates and napkins out of the to go bag. “I noticed your decision to stay out of patient care went out the window.”

“Mass casualty will do that.”

Pike tore off a strip of flatbread and collected a dollop of the brightly colored chicken stew. “You know a fair percentage our missions are going to be mass casualty events of some kind or other. It’s what we’re here for.”

McCoy evaded the question. “Back in the chair?”

Pike shrugged. “Overdid it a bit.”

“You’re not the only one. You know, I ought to have Spock take a look at your spinal cord. He might have a couple of ideas I haven’t thought of.”

“Hmm. Maybe. How’s he working out, by the way?”

“Half genius, half idiot. Kind of reminds me of Jim. Commander Kirk.” Pike’s eyes got slightly rounder for half a second when he said that. “I mean, they’re different people and all,” McCoy stammered in an attempt at damage control that made it worse.

“Jim will come around eventually, you know.”

“I don’t know. I think it’s best I recognize that what we had is broken and move on.” It wasn’t so hard to say this time. McCoy guessed that was a good thing. “So anyway, Spock. Good kid. Damn lucky we scooped him up before some other ship grabbed him. One thing to keep in mind though.
He might be Vulcan, but in a situation like we had on Liquo 2, close quarters, working as fast as we can, changing patients every few minutes, he’s got no more stamina than a human. Maybe a little less. And he won’t admit that.”

“That kid’s only three years younger than you.”

McCoy paused to do the math. Fourth year resident plus Starfleet medical school—he would have to be close to thirty. “He looks like a damn baby. Vulcans must mature more slowly along with living so long. Anyway, he’s a little unorthodox. Make that very unorthodox. I have to assume M’Benga’s been enabling him for the last four years.”

“Is that going to be a problem?”

“I read him the riot act a couple days ago and he sent me eighty pages of detailed technical analysis, divided by body system and annotated with ethical considerations and energy use profiles. And a four page summary I actually understood.”

“That had to be M’Benga’s influence. I’ve read papers on warp field dynamics written by Vulcans and it always turns into a game of find the verb.”

McCoy shook his head. “Seriously, the man can write. I’ve got a translation of his on sugar metabolism in Vulcanoid species. It’s heavy, technical material, but just a joy to read, especially after the poorly written crap that makes it into the xenomedical journals. And he emailed me the only instructional piece on telepathic shielding I’ve ever seen I could actually make heads or tails of. That I’m going to request to have published ship wide, maybe ‘fleet wide, but I need to know if he wants his name on or off it first. I’m hoping for a chance to collaborate on some papers, and since we’re both floaters rather than department heads, there are a lot of opportunities.”

Pike leaned back in his wheelchair with an appraising look that made McCoy feel like squirming and looking at his toes. “Well,” he said. “Getting back to work seems to have done you some good. I think this is the first time in a week I’ve seen you genuinely interested in something.”

“I’d better get back to it. Thanks for bringing lunch. And seriously, make an appointment to drop by neurosciences before we get called out again. I’d like to hear what Spock has to say about your back.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

McCoy knew a bullshit put off when he heard one. “I’ll make you the appointment myself. Workaholic.”

“Says the workaholic.”

It appeared that the Nightingale would be docking at Starbase 4 whenever it was not actively engaged, which meant Spock might be adding a home on Nightingale rather than leaving Starbase 4 entirely. There were distinct advantages to that circumstance, not least that he was able to indulge in an occasional social engagement with his mentor. Today, though, he had serious purpose behind his visit with Dr. M’Benga.

Meeting at the minigolf course was M’Benga’s idea, not his. The older doctor took a moment to line himself up with the ball before giving it a tap that sent it into a tiny water hazard next to an implausibly large seahorse wearing an even more implausible saddle. “Your turn.”
Spock lined up his own ball. The game itself was not difficult for either of them, but provided a motor activity so they could talk without the intensity of a lunch date, when they would be expected to focus on each other the whole time. “I am concerned about one of my colleagues on the Nightingale.”

“McCoy, I assume?”

“Yes. He is suffering from depression and anxiety, both in expressed affect and in observed neurological function and neurotransmitter levels.”

“From what I hear, he has reason to be unhappy.”

“He believes he deserves to be, despite assurances to the contrary. I do not understand why he is unwilling to accept the results of his own logical analysis.” He stopped to order his observation for M’Benga’s benefit. “I do not believe that he will actively harm himself at this time--”

“Or you wouldn’t be here with me,” M’Benga noted.

“Precisely. But he engages in self harm by omission. He fails to eat or sleep on a regular schedule and he avoids recreational and social opportunities necessary to optimal health in humans. I believe he is using work to distract himself.”

“And you want to know what to do to help your friend.”

He hadn’t been quite ready to claim that term. “I am uncertain whether Dr. McCoy considers me a friend. However, his daughter is a patient and his mental health indirectly affects hers.”

“You’re self-justifying.”

“Possibly.” He missed his shot. M’Benga would probably draw a number of too accurate conclusions from that fact. “I wish to pursue a professional partnership, but I am uncertain whether my interest is as a colleague, or whether I wish to remain in proximity to more easily monitor his mental health.”

M’Benga relaxed his grip on his club, so that it dangled next to his leg, forgotten. He grinned. “You’re sweet on him!”

“I fail to understand the idiom.” He understood the idiom perfectly, but needed a moment to regroup.

M’Benga did not dignify his statement with a response. He waited for Spock to complete his turn, then gestured to a bench. “There are few things more difficult than watching someone you care about suffer, especially if they can’t or won’t help themselves. All I can tell you is to be the best friend you know how to be.”

“I do not know how to be a good friend.”

M’Benga’s laugh was sharp and brief. “Someday you’ll give yourself a little credit. Fine. You like concrete instructions, I’ll give you concrete instructions. You want him to eat? Bring him food. You want him to socialize? Find an activity you can cajole him to do with you. In your cases, probably something research related, though that hardly counts as recreation. Touch him as much as you’re willing to, as much as he lets you. You know as well as I do humans need that.”

Spock considered M’Benga’s advice. “I can do those things. But if he realizes I am…”
“Courting him?”

“Seeking his friendship,” Spock corrected. “If he realizes my attentions are deliberate, he may isolate himself further.”

“That’s a risk you may have to take, for his sake if not for yours.”

* *

When Joanna and Min arrived at the Starbase 4 Kaleidoscope, both of them stopped short, feet planted on the lightly padded carpeting, taking in the massive central children’s recreation area with wide eyes. There was a large, meandering climbing structure, streaked with slides and dotted with play nests and alcoves festooned with variously configured swings. They’d been warned away from the fun house and tunnel mazes, those activities being better suited for older children.

Kirk resisted the urge to hover, instead taking a seat at one of the adult sized tables surrounding the play space. Spock followed his lead. Sonny Carvalho seemed less certain. “She’s so much littler than the others,” he said, poised to follow the girls.

“Min is only slightly smaller than an average Vulcan child her age,” Spock reminded him. “If they go where we cannot see them, we will follow.”

Min’s attention lit on a group of tables, rounded things with towers and drawers full of small treasures, the towers spreading into canopies shaped to look like mushrooms and flowers. She waved at her older, taller friend to follow her and they set about exploring the bins of art supplies and inset data screens with instructions for projects to complete.

A teenaged boy wearing a nametag knelt beside them. Min took up a defensive position between the facilitator and Joanna, explaining something quietly and collecting several sheets of paper from him to share.

He nodded, then showed Min how to tape the paper to the table so Joanna could color without using her right arm to hold the paper down. He looked up, spotted the three men at the table, and approached. “Hi, I’m Steven,” he said. “Those your girls?”

“The little Vulcan is mine. Joanna’s his.” Sonny Carvalho pointed out Kirk.

“They’re cute. The little ones tend to produce a lot of art in a short amount of time. Would you like a bag to carry it all home?”

“Sure,” Sonny said. The boy, who might have been fourteen, handed Sonny, then Kirk small fabric bags. “Min was very informative about her friend’s special circumstances. Is there anything I can do to help her have fun here?”

“Perhaps,” Spock said. “It would be best if older children were discouraged from using the same table. We are attempting to expose her to other children gradually.”

Kirk added, “She’s not likely to respond well to roughhousing.”

The boy, Steven, nodded. “I’ll make that my shy kid table then. Nice to meet you all,” he added, then turned back to lean casually against a faux tree trunk near the girls’ table, keeping an eye on the art area without interfering.

“Nice kid,” Kirk noted.
“The play space assistants are chosen from among the older children on station. It is a coveted position, requiring recommendations from teachers and others,” Spock said. “I have accompanied young patients here on occasion.”

“You had kid patients?”

“Of course. Not many. Nine since I began my residency, counting only those between the ages of four and twelve.”

“That’s actually kind of reassuring,” Kirk found himself saying. “They get along really well, don’t they?”

Sonny grinned. “They hit it off when Gaila brought her over last week. She’s all Minnie talks about lately. Joanna likes purple. Joanna has the best curly hair. Joanna knows how to play kal-toh.”

“Joanna knows how to place the pieces into the game space. She does not yet understand the game,” Spock corrected.

“Neither does Minnie. I hear you and that, what’s his name, Leonard McCoy, are trying to build Minnie a pancreas?”

“Dr. McCoy has spent considerable time on the project.” Spock caught Kirk’s eye. “As I had hoped, Min’s circumstances proved an irresistible puzzle. It is gratifying to see his affect improve, even slightly.”

“It’s…I’m grateful that you’ve kept an eye on him.” Kirk kept his eye on the girls so he wouldn’t have to meet the Vulcan’s eyes, but at that moment Joanna scowled at Min, pointing to a container of something sparkly in a way that Kirk couldn’t help but associate with Bones. McCoy. Bones.

“Were you romantically involved?” Spock asked him.

Jim coughed. “Why, you want to date him?”

Spock was silent for a little too long for Kirk to have been wrong. “I merely wondered as to the character of your prior relationship.”

“Bones is about the only person I haven’t been romantically involved with at some point or another. I suspect that’s part of why we’re so good together. Were so good together. It’s complicated.”

“He is not interested in a romantic relationship with a male.” Was that disappointment in Spock’s voice?

“His wife left him for his ex-boyfriend. He swore off relationships after that, he told me. Took me most of plebe summer to take the hint, though.”

“Do you believe you will ever reconcile?”

Kirk shrugged. “I hope so. I’m still seeing—I’m still having flashbacks.”

“I am aware,” Spock confirmed. “Are you taking the medication?”

“Yeah. But the flashbacks. That can’t keep happening. Not with Joanna around.” He forced himself to turn back toward Spock. “I know we put off getting this mess in my head sorted. I have to warn
“You it’s a minefield up here.” He tapped his own temple.

“I find it extraordinarily unlikely that you could damage me. Are you willing to commit to a time?”

“I think soon. It should be soon. Before I get cold feet.” Cold feet, cold hands, cold all the way up his back. He gripped the edges of the bench hard, distracting himself with the pressure of the rough plascrete under his fingers.

Sonny offered, “I can take the kids back to my place for dinner. We’ll make potato soup. Maybe Minnie can convince Joanna to eat some of it.”

“This afternoon, then,” Spock suggested.

Kirk wondered if it was too late to remember a pressing appointment. “Fine. Okay.” He looked over toward the girls. No girls.

“I will retrieve them,” Spock said, already out of his seat and striding in the direction they had last seen Minnie and Joanna.

Sonny leaned over to mock-whisper to Kirk. “I think your healer friend has a thing for your doctor friend.”

Kirk shook his head. “I think if he’s that obvious about it Bones already knows and it probably scares the crap out of him.”

“Because Spock’s Vulcan?”

Kirk shook his head. “I can’t think of anything Bones would want to do less than fall in love.”

“Spock’s going to be crushed.”

“There’s probably nothing Bones needs to do more than fall in love,” Kirk amended.

Sonny tapped his lip with a knuckle, contemplating. “Spock’s brilliant, and he’s possibly the kindest person I have ever known, but he’s kind of a space cadet. I mean, for a Vulcan.” The healer reappeared, herding Min and Joanna out of the fun house they’d disappeared into.

“Well, aren’t we all technically space cadets here?” Kirk said.

Sonny grinned. “We’re just going to have to give them a push in the right direction.”
Deja Vu All Over Again

Chapter Summary

In which the author turns a mind meld into a shovel talk. Because all the other ways of receiving the shovel talk have been done already.

Spock returned to his office ahead of Kirk. He took a few minutes to meditate in the treatment room before Kirk’s scheduled arrival. If he did not appear, and Spock believed there was a 34% chance that he would not, it would be necessary to consult with Dr. Christie in order to determine their next steps. Kirk’s response to hospitalization had been sufficiently troubling that, if Spock’s own assistance were rejected or proved insufficient, it would be necessary for him to submit to more traditional psychiatric care.

In the end, the commander appeared exactly 94 seconds before their scheduled appointment and offered a breathless apology while standing in the doorway. He flashed a falsely bright smile and scrubbed nervously at his hair.

“There is no need for apology, Commander, as you are not late.” Spock stepped aside to gesture him into the room.

“I wanted to be early.” Kirk prowled through the room, ducking to peer at the large work screen, which was turned off, picking small items off the shelves, reading the titles of the books in a barely audible mutter. Spock allowed him to become comfortable with the space in his own time. Eventually, his circling led him to the center of the room a meter away from Spock, hands hooked into his waistband in lieu of pockets.

“Sit wherever you prefer.”

Kirk’s eyes darted from the chaise, to the pair of high backed, padded chairs, to the mat on the floor. He took a couple of restless, hesitant steps toward the mat. “Should I take off my shoes?”

“It is generally customary, but you may do what makes you most comfortable.” He slipped off his own shoes and settled himself on one side of the mat, collecting the shoes to tuck them behind him.

Kirk sat cross legged across from him, then spent a few moments apparently attempting to determine what to do with his hands. He settled on resting his forearms on his knees and letting them dangle in front of him, a posture that gave the impression that he could move from tentative rest to defensive action in a moment if the need arose. “So. What now?”

“First we must discuss the goal for today. The resolution of your multiple prior traumatic experiences will require considerable time and effort, more than can be exerted in a single day. I suggest we begin with an attempt to resolve your current issue with Dr. McCoy.”

“And how do I do that?”

“At present, your mental map of the doctor has been erroneously coupled to experiences in your childhood and adolescence. We will attempt to downregulate those pathways, so that you can place
the events you recently witnessed into the proper context.”

“Well if you put it that way,” Kirk quipped, a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

Spock chose not to be baited. “Shall we proceed?”

Kirk nodded sharply, his face hardening into the professional focus he had frequently observed in officers awaiting complex orders. Not exactly the best mindset for this kind of work, but it would suffice. He adjusted his own approach to complement, taking a moment to observe the commander’s pattern and shift his own mental rhythms to match before reaching out.

Kirk suppressed the natural tendency to startle admirably and followed his lead. The consensus mindscape formed around them smoothly, impressively so given Kirk was an admitted novice to the process. This is a mission, he was repeating to himself. I have a job to do and I will do it. Spock suspected Kirk would be surprised to know that his coping mechanism was in no way unique.

Focus your attention on your memory of the triggering event. Analyze it as though it were a security recording. I will add my own memory for you to examine as well, as though you were viewing the scene from two different angles.

Despite a sharp spike of fear and negation lighting up their shared space like sheet lightning, Kirk did as instructed. Spock insinuated himself into the experienced memory, slowing and sharpening the images by drawing from his own recollections. They stood exactly as they had, in the doorway, McCoy reaching for his daughter and curling up abruptly in a precise mirror image of Joanna’s posture, an arm flailing out and catching Joanna in the face and he held the memory still in that moment. What do you suppose Dr. McCoy was thinking in this moment?

Uncertainty. Anger? Frustration? His memory tracked to the stepfather, Frank, winding up to slap him, a memory with the well worn quality that suggested such events were frequently repeated during Kirk’s childhood. Kirk’s mind grew agitated, and Spock noted the node that had been activated and suppressed it.

Remember that you are gathering objective data, he reminded, then directed Kirk’s attention to McCoy’s face and posture. What do you see?

Kirk finally focused his attention on the frozen image of his friend’s face. Fear.

Dr. McCoy’s body was, in that instant, under another’s control. I can assure you, the experience is extremely distressing. Spock allowed the memory to roll forward, Joanna lying on the floor, Kirk’s eyes focused only on her. And another association leapt to the forefront of Kirk’s mind, several of them crowded together, images of men and women and no small number of children, lying contorted and glassy eyed on the ground, some bearing blackened streaks of phaser burns across their bodies. Again, Spock traced the association and suppressed it. Spock added his own memory of McCoy lying unconscious against the set of shelves. He waited until Kirk assimilated the accurate memory, ensuring that the association with the dead colonists on Tarsus 4 did not become pathologically strengthened.

I’m sorry, you shouldn’t have to see—

Do not concern yourself with my well being at this time. Are you prepared to enter a closer rapport?

Confusion, then assent without understanding. Spock considered retreating in order to explain further, but identified Kirk’s actions as a deliberate choice to trust, and respected that choice as the
gift it was intended to be. *There will be an impression of falling,* he warned, then drew their minds together so that they could influence Kirk’s neural networks directly.

He spared them a moment to orient themselves, Kirk responding with fascination at the pattern of his own neural network displayed before them. They solidified the work that had begun within the memory itself, identifying the oversensitive pathways and reducing their responsiveness. The fix would only remain if it were regularly reinforced, the negative associations replaced with positive ones.

*Try to recall positive memories of the doctor in as much detail as you can,* he instructed, intending to withdraw so that Kirk could do so with as little interference as possible. Instead, Kirk moved to maintain the contact at its present level.

*I want you to see.* Kirk pushed forward the first memory that came to mind, of being held as though he were a child through some nightmare brought on by the old trauma Spock had just witnessed. That memory folded into another of studying late at night over cups of cooling coffee. Sitting together in the cockpit of a shuttle, McCoy at the helm, gripping the controls so tightly their covers cracked. The trickle of memory turned into a cascade, then eventually slowed and changed character. Spock detected a wisp of mischief, then found his attention being directed to features of McCoy’s appearance, his eyes, his deft and objectively beautiful hands, the view from behind him and he realized Kirk was dwelling upon the finer points of McCoy’s attractiveness for Spock’s benefit. He sensed Kirk’s amusement, but with it, an undercurrent of steel. *He deserves someone like you. But. You hurt him the way I did and I’ll cut all your fingers off and feed them to you.*

Spock had no reason not to believe him.

*

“My name means glow in Golish, but Daddy also named me for Minerva McGonagall in Harry Potter. He said so. Minerva means wisdom, and Minerva McGonagall is much wiser than Dumbledore, in my opinion,” Spock’s patient of the moment was saying, “but my favorite character is Hermione Granger because she’s very smart and mostly logical most of the time and she has lots of curly hair.”

Spock finished checking the power source and connections on Min Carvalho’s insulin/glucagon dual pump and backed away so she could tuck it back into her undershirt. “Tell me, have you read *Alice in Wonderland*?” The moment he said the words, he considered whether providing the loquacious Min another topic to expound upon was wise.

“Yes I have. My favorite part of that one is when Alice is talking with the Caterpillar and she has to figure out which side of the mushroom will make her bigger and which will make her smaller. Did you read *Through the Looking Glass*?”

“I have, though it is time for you to return to school now.”

“Why doesn’t Joanna go to school?”

“It is not proper for me to discuss the circumstances of other patients, Min,” Spock said.

Lieutenant Carvalho lifted his daughter down from the exam table. “You and Joanna can play after school.”

McCoy entered just as Min and her father were leaving. “You were going to send me Min’s latest scans,” he said, though his head was turned away from Spock to watch the Carvalhos head down
“Yes. I thought we could discuss them over lunch, either in the restaurant quarter or my office.” McCoy’s office, despite the fact that he frequently took meals there, was an unwelcoming space with no personalization of the decor save a growing proliferation of pads and flimsies on every surface. It resembled a prison cell in Spock’s opinion, and he was nearly certain that resemblance was being deliberately cultivated by the doctor.

He was trying to put Dr. M’Benga’s suggestions into action. While the doctor claimed to prefer to eat alone, he had been able to induce him to take a lunch with him the last two days, even if one of those lunches had merely been a nutrient smoothie consumed while standing in front of his gene sequencer waiting for a readout. He found trivial reasons to bring McCoy research materials and lab results, usually in the form of asking the doctor questions to which he already knew the answers. It was, he knew, disingenuous.

“I’m really not hungry right now,” McCoy said.

“Perhaps a smoothie then. Any flavor preference?”

McCoy sagged in defeat. “Anything but peach.”

Spock nodded. “I have some concerns about Min’s liver enzymes. In addition, she has lost one point two kilograms this month.”

“You think there may be other metabolic issues we haven’t considered?”

“Not necessarily. My suspicion is that she is producing insufficient growth hormone. She has also become more active. Her energy needs have increased, and I believe she may be increasingly fermenting sugars in her tissues to make up the deficit. It would explain the headaches she is failing to report as well as the increased liver enzymes as her body attempts to metabolize the excess alcohol.”

“Did you kick up the responsiveness of the pump?”

“Two percent. I will reassess in one week.”

“I sent two islet cell models to your datapad last night. Could you see if there are any major differences between them I haven’t already flagged?”

Spock almost said, “Of course,” but stopped himself.

“I have a moment to examine them now. Come to my office.” McCoy hesitated, then followed him out of the exam room, around to neurology, and toward Spock’s office. The treatment room he had modified was next door to it, and Dr. Lavoie had allowed him to have the doors reconfigured so that the office opened directly into the exam room, rather than requiring one to leave the office and turn the corner to the exam space.

While McCoy had elected to place himself in prison, Spock considered it the height of logic to appoint his office and treatment room in a manner that promoted his comfort and focus. Colored wall paneling and replicated furnishings were not difficult to obtain. His office walls were a soft yellow, the picture frames and art accented with dark, chocolatey browns.

He’d brought warmer tones into the treatment room, which had a chaise, two padded armchairs, and a braided rug on the floor, along with a rectangular meditation mat in one corner large enough for two to sit facing each other. His copies of the Desiderata, gifts from his mother, one in Standard
calligraphy, the other his mother’s own translation into Golish, hung on the walls.

McCoy whistled appreciatively. “How do you rate a reading room?”

“Requisitioning materials to personalize a workspace is not difficult, and Starbase 4 has a community of artisans I make an effort to support. And this is not a reading room, as such. It is intended primarily for seeing patients, hence the medical equipment secreted here,” he opened a decorative cabinet to reveal an imaging station, “and here,” he opened another to pull down a wraparound that allowed real time analysis of biochemical processes in vivo. It occurred to Spock that he was engaging in behavior his mother referred to as showing off.

He led McCoy to sit beside him on the chaise, the better to view his large, mobile workscreen. The doctor sat gingerly, eyes narrowing, though he did not give voice to any suspicions. Spock sat next to him, leaving exactly thirty centimeters of space between them, and called up the annotated images of the two cells. Since his talk with Dr. M’Benga, he had found contriving reasons to feed McCoy and to discuss research projects relatively straightforward. The suggestion that he find excuses for physical contact was much more difficult, and not just because Spock had schooled himself against such casual indiscretions from childhood.

It wasn’t that he didn’t ever touch anyone. Healers touched patients frequently, more frequently than human physicians, assessing physical and mental state more efficiently and precisely in many cases than a medscanner could manage. The matter was that Spock never touched casually, and McCoy, despite knowing him for only a couple of weeks, knew it. There was no way a brush across a wrist or shoulder would fail to be noticed and remarked upon—most likely with significant negative consequences. Kirk’s “accidentally on purpose” style of interaction, which Spock had been studying intently for days, would simply not work in his case.

McCoy pointed out the crucial differences between the signalling molecules in both islet cell variants, pulling up three dimensional models of each enzyme. The difficulty in part was that, unless the match between the hormones themselves and the signalling system that caused them to be released when the body required them were absolutely perfect, she would gradually become insensitive to both molecules and would be back on an ever changing regimen of synthetics, to which she would also eventually fail to respond. And a perfect match would require altering the gene sequence coding for either the receptors or the hormones.

“I did mean to ask,” Spock said, after they agreed upon a set of chimeric cells to move to the next stage of simulation, “When you intended to complete your end of the agreement we made when I elected to sign on with the Nightingale.”

“Has Commander Kirk held up his end of the bargain yet?” McCoy challenged.

“He has in fact done so, yes. As you are his primary physician, it would not be technically unethical for me to discuss details, but I believe that it would be unwise to do so.”

McCoy nodded. “Did you actually get him to go to counseling?”

“No. And I believe I understand why. I have imparted some meditative techniques that have reduced his PTSD symptoms somewhat.” Kirk was not particularly well suited to quiet meditation, preferring to settle his mind in the context of physical exertion, but he had attempted a couple of forms that might allow him to settle himself in circumstances when he could not excuse himself to go for a run. He had been given strict instructions not to attempt them without a chaperone.

“How much did you see?” McCoy asked.
“Enough.”

“Yeah. Kid had a supremely fucked up childhood. It’s a miracle he turned out so well.”

“He is aware of the part you played in the making of that—miracle.” He paused, wondering if his next words would help or harm. “You should know he made the decision to confront his fears because they were harming Joanna. He is very protective of her.”

“Good. She deserves that.”

Spock could feel the doctor closing off. It had been the wrong thing to say, or possibly the wrong way to say it. “Commander Kirk would like to arrange for visitation.”

“I’m not—” he stopped himself. Spock heard the good enough that the doctor did not say. He was growing more uncomfortable with not addressing the doctor’s empathic talent directly. It made him much more difficult to shield against, and Spock was unsure McCoy was aware of it. “I’m not ready.” McCoy said.

“Concerning your end of the bargain. Have you sought counseling from Dr. Christie or one of his residents?”

“I don’t want to talk to a therapist. I just want to be left alone.” He stood and crossed the room. “Stop trying to fix me. I’m not your patient.”

“My concern is not—” this time he was the one who had to stop himself. He bowed slightly. “As you wish.” He let his gaze linger on the doctor for a second too long. McCoy left him alone in his reading room. Belatedly he hoped that McCoy had not seen The Princess Bride.

*

Bridge crew are never really off duty, even when they’re off ship. Kirk and Gaila were in the middle of watching a musical version of Star Wars put on by the Starbase 4 community theater when Kirk’s comm vibrated. He left Gaila in her seat to answer it, knowing she’d understand the interruption of the ambiguous maybe a date, maybe not a date thing they were on.

He figured the call had something to do with Joanna.

“Kirk here,” he said.

“It’s Pike. You need to get back to the ship. We’re leaving for Deneva within the hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

He collected Gaila himself, noticing while he did that a few other guests were also quietly leaving their seats. Once they were in a slightly less public space, he pulled up his data pad for the mission parameters. Apparently the Farragut went to Deneva to investigate the disappearance of a supply ship that had been headed that way and found some kind of plague that had the entire planet locked down in a level four quarantine.

He handed the data pad to Gaila. “I’ve got a brother on Deneva,” he said. He hadn’t seen Sam since he left home at fifteen. They’d started a hesitant correspondence on Bones’ insistence while Kirk was still at the Academy. He’d sent a card when his wife had a baby. They’d sent a card when he graduated. It was a thread thin, stilted relationship, but it was a relationship.

Gaila, to her credit, did not tell him she was sure he was okay. She spun him around and wrapped
him in a hug tight enough to squeeze the air out of his lungs, then took his arm to pull him along toward the transporters.

“We’re not really that close,” he said, but in his head he was trying to remember Peter’s birthday and calculate just how old he was.

*

There were only five of them at the conference table this evening: Chapel, Lavoie, Ribera, McCoy, and Spock. Chapel passed each of them data pads with the most recent updates from the Farragut, though they had all read the report the CMO of the Farragut had sent. Spock had, again, contrived to sit next to him. It was getting old. McCoy was not so fragile that he needed to be supervised every damn second.

Chapel addressed the group first. “Farragut’s given us their data on the two crewman who were infected. The autopsy on Ensign Parks is on page 4, and the running data file on second officer Szuri is on page 3. Both officers have a grouping of four puncture wounds to the upper back on either side of the spine. Foreign tissue rapidly spread along major nerve roots and into the brain stem after infection.”

“So the transmitting organism isn’t microscopic.” McCoy said.

“Probably not. I think we’re looking at an organism with a diameter between twenty and a hundred centimeters delivering the pathogen. It is, however, also possible that the hosts themselves may develop structures that serve as delivery systems for the parasite.” Chapel told them.

“So we need to figure out how to kill the free living delivery systems, if they exist, and the parasitic forms, preferably without killing the patient,” Lavois concluded.

“And we’re going to be doing this on a massive scale. The population of Deneva colony at the last estimate was one million, one hundred forty thousand people. It is unknown how many have already died. Starfleet has indicated that it reserves the right to order a scorched earth option, should it prove impossible to effectively quarantine the disease to the system.”

“So we’re on borrowed time.”

“Exactly. The parasites are able to coerce actions out of individuals who are infected by producing excruciating pain. It is also clear that the parasite can kill its host outright if provoked. Ensign Parks died as he attempted answer questions about what happened on the ground. Consequently, anything we can find to limit the parasite’s power over an infected host is also of value.”

Chapel turned to Ribera. “I’d like you to put together a protocol for delivering any cure we might find to the population. Farragut so far has not sent anyone else to the surface since their people were infected, so we have no sample parasites with which to work. I’d like you to put together a team to go down to the planet’s surface and collect at least five of these things to take directly to level 4 containment for study.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“McCoy, I want you on the surface team. We’re going to find one of the delivery organisms and figure out what will kill it.”

“Right.” They’d be beaming down to a plague planet full of torture parasites. Joy.

“Lavoie, I want you working on biochemical inhibitors that might reduce the ability of the
organism to affect its hosts. In addition, you’re on cures. You know brain tissue, you know what we can use near and on it that will not kill the patient. Szuri will be transferred here when we reach orbit around Deneva. You’ll be taking over her care.”

“I’ll have a space ready for her in the biocontainment ward.”

“Healer Spock, I hate to use you as ambulatory imaging equipment, but I’m going to need to know as much as I can about how the parasites connect to their hosts. I’ll need a detailed exam of second officer Szuri—but do not subject yourself to unnecessary risk. I’d like you on the away mission as well.”

“Of course, Dr. Chapel. I am accustomed to serving as ‘ambulatory imaging equipment’ and can forward you a protocol within the hour.” He looked pointedly at McCoy, as though he expected him to say something. He went on. “It might be useful to interview other Farragut crew who went down to the surface of Deneva to determine precisely how the two crewmembers became infected.”

“The other two members transponders were deactivated. It is believed that either Szuri or Parks killed them before they returned to the Farragut.” McCoy wondered what kind of torment could induce a Starfleet officer to murder their companions within an hour of contact.

“We arrive at Deneva in three Standard days. In the mean time, keep in touch with your counterparts on the Farragut. With any luck, we’ll be well on the way to figuring this thing out before we arrive. Dismissed.”

“Doctor McCoy,” Spock said.

McCoy stopped in the doorway. “What is it, Healer Spock?”

“This organism assaults the nervous system. I will not have you going to the planet’s surface undefended.”

“This is about that damn shielding thing again, isn’t it.”

“It is.”

“You planning to proposition the security staff we’re going down with too?”

Spock folded his hands at his waist. “I have considered it. The ability to block psionic attack would be a valuable skill for a security officer. However, as you have additional reasons to benefit from acquiring the skill, I considered it prudent to ‘proposition’ you first.”

“What reasons?” He knew the Healer was talking about him seeing Joanna again, but he didn’t want her back in his life just to lose her again the next time he screwed up. The lack of shields was a useful excuse.

“You would make better use of and suffer less from your own empathic ability were you to able to direct it as you chose. You would be better equipped to parent your daughter as well.”

Wait, what? Never mind that. He had no good excuses and the need to keep from pissing Spock off enough that he’d drop Joanna as a patient limited his insult options. “You’re not going to let this go, are you.”

“No.”
He was losing his touch. Tired. He was tired of foggy brain, tired of not sleeping even when he bothered to try, tired of having to convince himself every morning that if he could just get far enough in to some compelling research problem he’d feel like himself again. “Fine. It’s late. We’ll discuss it tomorrow.”
McCoy was dead certain that the only reason he was feeling as jittery as if he were going on a first date was his own cultural baggage. That certainty didn’t help his nerves in the slightest, nor did the fact that Spock was not only a nice looking man, but a good man in that rare way one hardly ever saw in real life.

He dispelled the notion by showing up at Spock’s office on his lunch break and in his scrubs. Spock merely made matters worse by suggesting they hit the mess together before working on the shield. McCoy didn’t know which to find more disturbing, the possibility that Spock didn’t trust him to feed himself unattended or the possibility that Spock wanted to go to lunch with him because he liked him. Even if it weren’t the middle school definition of like. Given the way McCoy had behaved over the last couple of weeks, Spock would be completely justified in the former, and utterly insane to even contemplate the latter.

Jim Kirk and Gaila were already ensconced in some engrossing conversation conducted over burgers and fries, a conversation that included sidelong glances at him when they thought he wasn’t looking. He punched in a Greek salad even though the replicator wasn’t great at raw lettuce, noted Spock’s choice of a tofu based curry and sat down to focus resolutely on his plate. “So, have you had a look at Parks’ autopsy yet?”

“I have. It appears that the parasitic filaments insinuate themselves into the subarachnoid space surrounding the spinal cord and medulla and branch into the larger nerves servicing the trunk and limbs. Given the number of filaments, surgical removal is likely to be prohibitively difficult.”

McCoy nodded over his salad. “When we get samples, we need to determine whether we’re going to need to plan for the effects of toxic breakdown products—if we can figure out how to kill the things. They’re apparently made of some kind of exotic matter, which explains why they weren’t picked up by the transporter biofilters or ship to surface scans.”

“I believe it would be beneficial to bring in an expert in particle physics, perhaps from the Farragut, to work on the problem. I have done some study of subspace particles in my leisure time—”

“Course you have,” McCoy muttered. Spock lifted an eyebrow at his aside. Back to shop talk. Shop talk was safe. “The Farragut CMO, Davis, said he estimated that there was a little over a kilogram of parasitic material spread throughout the Ensign’s body, mostly in and around the spinal column between C2 and T5, but with some spreading into the medulla, along cranial nerves nine and ten and down through the spinal column and the major nerves of the trunk and limbs.”

“The lack of extension into the cortex suggests that…”

“Ugh, disgusting. Could you two possibly talk about brain parasites somewhere else?” Gaila plunked down next to McCoy, gave his shoulders a fast, unavoidable squeeze, and sniffed. “Whoo, stressed out much?” She looked from him to Spock and back and shook her head. “I think I can taste the cortisol in the back of my throat. Eck.”
“Ms. Vro,” Spock acknowledged. “Were you intending to join us?” His tone was not encouraging.

“Have a seat!” McCoy said, forcing cheer into his voice. “We’d love to have you.”

“Mhmmm perky isn’t the same as stupid. Seriously though, you are both too wound up to be discussing the mission like nothing else is going on.” She sat down on McCoy’s side. “What’s up?”

“It is a private matter between myself and the doctor. If you have no further topics of conversation to suggest, please allow us to complete our meal in peace.”

“Fine.” She stood back up. “Have a nice whatever the hell this is.” She waved a hand between the two of them. She returned to her conversation with Kirk, though McCoy could tell she was still watching them.

He picked up his half eaten salad. “I’m done. You?”

Spock regarded Gaila, two tables away. “I believe so.” They dropped off their trays.

McCoy followed Spock back to the turbolift. He rubbed his chilled, prickling hands on his pants. He thought the weight he’d been carrying around for weeks was bad, but the anxiety was back too, with a vengeance, in a way it hadn’t been since—probably since Jim—Commander—Fuck it, Jim—decided he needed to learn to fly. It didn’t even need to be about anything. The slightest hint of nervousness and off he’d go.

He was so used to working in spite of it that it crept up on him this time around, what with all the very real reasons he had to be out of sorts. Yesterday he’d sat in his office staring at a single page of Min Carvalho’s test results, barely aware of the passage of time until the ping of a message interrupted his foggy brain. Fuck. Options, options--he could tell Spock before they got back to his office, maybe beg off for today, maybe beg off the whole mission, go back to his quarters and self medicate with some half decent bourbon he’d picked up on Starbase 4. He could not say anything and hope the healer didn’t notice. Probably not realistic. Everybody had to notice, not just the telepath and the super smeller. If he didn’t notice, he would as soon as—yeah. Best give the man fair warning.

“So you know,” he said, as casually as he could manage.

Spock turned to him as the turbolift doors opened and they were suddenly in the middle of a crowd. He focused on Spock’s back and followed just him, not paying attention to the turns in the hallways or opening and closing doors until they were back into the main bay of the neurosciences department. “So I know?” Spock prompted.

“I might just be having a panic attack.” He noted, and hated, the rising pitch of his voice. He followed Spock to the little room next to Spock’s office, legs moving on automatic, and crunched himself against one end of the chaise lounge. “Also your fault. Couldn’t leave well enough alone.”

“You have not been ‘well enough’ since we met.”

McCoy bristled. “And I bet you’ve been itching to fix me the whole time. Well I got news for you, I’m used to my kind of broken and–”

Spock interrupted, “I find suffering distressing. Yours, particularly, as it is undeserved. But I do not perceive you as broken.” He sat at the extreme opposite end of the chaise, gingerly, as though he might break it. Or him.
McCoy looked down at his hands, clenched them to stop them scrubbing up and down his thighs. “I don’t think you should try to teach me anything today. Just let me sit here for a bit and I’ll go back to my quarters.” He tried to count his breaths. Lost count.

Spock nodded. “Later, perhaps.”

“Never, more likely. I don’t think I could keep this professional.” His tongue tripped over the words, stuttering on “professional.”

“That is my burden to bear, not yours.”

“I don’t think I want to keep it professional. I mean.” It wasn’t even that he wanted a Relationship. Just a relationship. And that was too much to ask. “I mean I’ve got a shortage of friends right now, and I know I’d just be a burden to you--practically a patient, really. I’d be using you.”

The exasperation in Spock’s tone lasted for only the first couple of words before he schooled his voice back to its neutral smoothness. “I have been attempting to earn your companionship since you accosted me after my presentation. I am fully aware that I too, frequently require support, and when I have, you offered it without reservation. Let me return the favor.” Spock held his silence then, long enough for McCoy to cycle three full times through breathing in, two, three, four and hold two, three, four and out, two, three, four and wait, two, three, four. McCoy suspected the healer was counting along. Spock shifted position on the chaise, the rustle of his scrubs against the fabric a signal that he was about to speak. “I could guide you into meditation. Until the adrenaline release resolves itself,” he said.

McCoy’s breath caught. “Do you have any idea how much I want that?” He intended his words to come out hard, even sarcastic, but his voice faltered and what was supposed to be a challenge ended up sounding more like a plea. Waves of hot and cold scattered across his skin, down his arms and into hands grown numb and shaking. He swallowed. “I just want five minutes that it doesn’t hurt to exist.” He thumbed tears out of his eyes.

Spock was no longer sitting at the far end of the chaise, but right next to him, stiff and awkward, hands clasped tight in his lap. “I think you ask too little.”

“Please.” How helpless and contemptible he must look, hunched over on himself with his tears falling so fast they made his vision blur. Spock’s arm brushed against his knee and there was a firm pressure of fingers at his wrist, as though his pulse were being taken but on the opposite side, where the ulnar nerve passed closest to the skin.

The world didn’t fall away like he thought it might, though he felt or heard a certain hollowness, a blank, staticky not quite sound that in a moment wrapped entirely around him. It reminded him of nothing so much as being outdoors in heavily falling snow, the fat flakes absorbing all sound but a faint whisper as they touched the ground.

He felt another touch, light and brief at his temple and slide sideways on the chaise fabric until his tear streaked face pressed against Spock’s shoulder. The healer’s arm rested across his back, a hesitant, experimental gesture.

Nothing happened for an amount of time McCoy couldn’t quantify. His thoughts tried to race, but disappeared into the blanketeting quiet. He was still aware of his cold hands and tight, burning chest, but the feeling didn’t get worse like it ought to have and over time, it faded. He tried to formulate questions, but they too slipped away like snowflakes too small and ephemeral to catch. Eventually, he slept.
McCoy woke up on Spock’s couch. He wasn’t really surprised. If he’d worked through his panic attack on his own, either by drinking himself into a stupor or just rocking in his office chair for a couple of hours—where anyone could have walked in on him—he would have ended up sleeping afterward. And awakened with the mother of all headaches. Score one for meditation or whatever. Spock was sitting in the armchair, sipping tea and reading reports off his data screen. “What time is it?” McCoy asked.

“1714 hours. We meditated together for forty-four minutes, then you slept for three hours, eleven minutes.”

He reached into the satchel by his feet, fished out a beverage, and passed it to McCoy. “Drink. Now would be an ideal time to commence your instruction.”

A sting like a hot, curled wire awoke just under his sternum. “This is probably as good as I’m going to get,” he said. He hoped he’d used up his body’s supply of epinephrine and cortisol. That wasn’t actually possible, he reminded himself.

“Understood. Do you recall the metaphor you created. The snow.”

His qualified fondness for snow had come up at the Academy of all places, on one of those rare February days when the temperature dropped just low enough to let huge, torn confetti sized clumps of white fluff drift out of the sky for hours. He hadn’t liked tromping around in it for the next day and a half while it turned inevitably to slush and mud, but he had been impressed at how completely it soaked up sound and color as it fell, leaving everything church quiet and in soft focus. “Anyone finds out I like snow I’ll have my Georgian citizenship revoked.”

“I doubt that to be the case.”

McCoy stopped an eye roll in progress. “Hyperbole and you know it.”

“Psi latent individuals generally have difficulty maintaining a shield because they cannot perceive a difference in their own perceptions when the shield is in place.”

“Can’t tell if you’re being loud if you’re deaf.”

“Precisely. That should not be a concern in your case. I am at present only lightly shielded. Focus on what you sense.”

“I don’t sense anything.”

“You have not made the attempt. A moment.” Something shifted around the healer. He looked flattened, dimmed somehow. Like he’d been replaced by a holographic projection of himself. There was a sudden absence of a sound that he had been ignoring, as if some facet of the Nightingale’s life support system had just cycled off. “And thus.” And he was there again, real as life.

“What did you do?”

“I raised my shields to the greatest extent to which I am capable, then returned them to the level at which I ordinarily maintain them. Recall the state you achieved earlier. Use the memory of snow as a focal point, and imagine gathering that opacity to sound and light around yourself.”

McCoy frowned. “I’m no good at this right brain fluffy crap.”
“I am not here to judge you.”

“Bullshit,” he muttered. First the feeling, then the image. Making his mind be quiet was not his strong suit. He caught the shadow of an idea and settled into a quiet space, wondering if it had been shaped in his mind and left there for him to find. It was easier to imagine snowflakes settling around him now, surrounding him with silence.

He opened his eyes and thought that, just maybe, the dimple Spock made in the universe was less. Not gone, but less. “Am I doing that right?”

“A credible first attempt. You will require practice to maintain a shield at that level. For now, however, I want to you to attempt to construct ice.”

“Ice?”

Spock inclined his head slightly, acknowledging the question. “It is easier to extend an existing metaphor than to create a completely new one. The shield you projected will protect Joanna from accidental contact, but it will not serve as an adequate defense.”

“That sounds like kind of an advanced lesson, there.”

“It is. However, you have some natural aptitude, and time is short.”

Apparently McCoy’s silence in response to all of Spock’s dropped hints hadn’t sent the right message. “About that natural aptitude. Did you look up my medical records or something?”

“It is as evident as the color of your eyes.”

“That’s reassuring,” McCoy snapped. And what was Spock doing noticing what color McCoy’s eyes were anyway? “Just don’t go spreading it around.”

Spock dismissed his complaint with a raised eyebrow. “First, center yourself and form the shield as you did before.”

McCoy did as he was told. Again, he felt distanced from his surroundings, or at least from Spock. “Now imagine yourself moving down and in, and the shield growing thicker and harder.” He did so, but the sudden feeling of being entirely alone added to the association of ice with being cold and he startled himself out of the visualization, heart pounding.

There was a hand on his shoulder, cool and solid and real. He pressed back at the floaty feeling in the back of his head, grateful. “Pretty sure being entombed in ice is a horror trope.”

“Indeed. I had not considered that. Consider what your aggregative forms—the snow—could change into that you would consider a metaphor for strength and safety.”

“Well, what do you use?”

“My own framework is somewhat more abstract, and is built around woven threads, an extension of how I perceive my familial bonds and, incidentally, neural networks. You appear to have an affinity for aggregates of particles.”

McCoy found himself settling into the problem solving role. He might not be great at people, always going to extremes, too much or too little, but he was good at puzzles. And this kind of defense had the feel of a puzzle to be solved. “Huh. Somehow I thought yours would be made of Lego.”
McCoy felt Spock’s amusement though the healer didn’t crack a smile. “Joanna’s takes the form of implausibly large flowers.”

McCoy chuckled. “I think it’s the color I’m focusing on,” he said. “Maybe if I think of being surrounded by a bright light…”

*

The Nightingale pulled out of warp to a storm of shrill intership chatter. “On screen,” Pike said. Kirk hovered at Pike’s shoulder, one hand on the back of the captain’s chair.

Farragut ordered in Uhura’s voice, “Beggars’ Night, stand down or you will be disabled.”

“Have to make it stop. They hate it. Hate this,” the voice at the Beggars’ Night’s comm shouted, frantic and shrill.

“Beggars’ Night, this is your last warning!”

Beggars’ Night put on a burst of speed, barreling toward Deneva’s G3 class primary. Farragut turned to follow, but did not leave orbit, presumably because doing so might provide an opportunity for the half dozen other ships in orbit to try to leave the system entirely.

Farragut took its shot, but Beggars’ Night was too distant for the hit to do much damage. “Can we catch them with tractors?” Pike said.

Iwe replied from Engineering while the Nightingale worked itself too slowly up to impulse to catch the Beggars’ Night. “We’re not going to be able to get close enough. Nightingale’s big and slow.”

While they watched, helpless, the cargo vessel aimed itself straight into the heart of the star. “I’m free! We’re free, we killed them!” the voice crowed in brief elation before the ship’s fragile nav shields failed and it vanished in a puff of boiling vapor.

Kirk scanned the six remaining ships and corrected his prior thought. Five of those ships wouldn’t be going anywhere. Three had phaser damage to their warp and impulse engines. Two others floated dead in space, their airlocks blown, sensors showing then to be accompanied by floating icy debris of the right mass to be human bodies. Pike signalled the comm officer to open a channel.

“Farragut, this is Nightingale. We are here to assist as requested.”

“Nightingale, we’re glad to see you.”

“Sending coordinates to beam your second officer directly to the Level 4 biocontainment ward.”

There was a sigh on the other end of the line. “Nightingale, be advised. Lieutenant Commander Szuri’s condition deteriorated while in stasis. She is likely already dead.”

“Under advisement. Resuscitation teams will be on Standby. Pike turned to Chapel. “Alert your team.”

Chapel spoke. “Ribera, Spock, McCoy and Bosh prepare for patient transport. Attempt resuscitation if possible.”

“On standby,” Ribera’s voice said over the comm.

Kirk’s comlink buzzed.
Pike turned around to frown at him. “Waiting for a call, are we?”

“No, I mean I keep it on for emergencies, but…”

“Well come on, share with the whole class.”

Kirk flipped it open. The message had been sent on encrypted tight beam from the Farragut’s communications cache. It was almost two days old. And from Sam.

“I think we do need to hear this,” he said. He played the message, hoping he wasn’t going to hear something he didn’t want to hear in public.

There was a crackle of static, a blank, open channel sound that lasted almost four seconds before a female voice, speaking just above a whisper, said, “This is Aurelan Kirk. I heard the Enterprise is coming. I hope you get this. We haven’t had long range communications for two months now.” A pause.

“There are these things here. They look a little like amoebas but they’re about thirty centimeters across. They inject people with something, hurt them to make them do things they don’t want to do. They’ve got Sam. They’re everywhere.” Her voice broke on a sob. “Please hurry!”

There was another pause. A long one, then, “This is Aurelan. It’s been eighteen hours since my last message. I’m hiding in the house with Peter. Sam’s--Oh God Jimmy I had to do it, he came in the house and he begged, Jimmy, he begged! There are three. No, four of them here I can see. They ignore Peter. He’s too small for them to want him. But they’re going to get me and then who will take care of him? What if they make me hurt him?” The message cut off abruptly. A third message, much shorter. “Please hurry! I’m afraid they’re going to make me hurt Peter. Please.”

“Commander,” Pike said.

Kirk locked his hands behind his back so Pike couldn’t see them shaking. “I know where their house is. Let me go down there. It’s our best lead.”

Pike measured him with his gaze. “All right, Jim. Give the coordinates to Chekov. You’ll go down with Spock and McCoy and three security officers. Turei, Giotto, and Engid. Full biohazard gear, all of you and when you return, straight to the level four ward. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed, Commander.”
Chapter Summary

The landing party arrives at Sam and Aurelan Kirk's home on Deneva. To say it goes badly would be an understatement.

Biohazard gear was bulky, hot, reduced dexterity and visibility and was utterly necessary in a situation like this. The suits Luci Ribera modified had an extra layer of protection in a sort of hooded vest worn under the main suit, constructed of finely woven steel mesh. Kirk slipped it on over his uniform shirt and adjusted the hood before pulling on the rest of the suit. The level four suits were as self-contained as suits used in vacuum, though they were sealed differently because suits for use in vacuum needed to keep air from getting out, while biohazard suits had to keep pathogens from getting in.

The six of them suited up together and gathered their gear. There were a couple of large, metal boxes in which organisms could be contained, collection vials for patient and environmental samples, resuscitation equipment, patch kits for the suits, and Phaser IIs to subdue large, resilient hazards. He stood next to Giotto to beam down.

“Last minute seal check,” Kirk said. “Everyone check your partner’s seals. Giotto, you’re with me. Engid you’re with Spock, and Turei, you have McCoy. Medical stick tight to your escort. Security keep aware of your partner’s suit integrity.”

Kirk held up his arms and turned around slowly in front of Giotto, allowing him to verify that all seals were intact and the suit was pressurized. “You’re good,” Giotto said. Kirk then verified Giotto’s suit integrity. “You too,” he said. “Chekov, put us down at the coordinates I specified.”

“Yes, Commander, sir.”

Deneva, like many established colonies, had a population that was mostly concentrated in a single large city, with smaller population centers radiating outward. Even with a population of over a million, the colony itself filled only a few hundred square miles of the planet’s surface. It was a San Francisco sized postage stamp on a planet that was otherwise mostly wilderness. Sam and Aurelan Kirk lived in the first ring of suburbs, a short Metro trip from the downtown amenities, but far enough out to have a freestanding house rather than an apartment.

The transporter caught the team up in its beam and deposited them on a square of lawn in front of a little square house. The streets were eerily empty. Kirk stepped to the front of the group to knock on the door, Giotto hovering beside him, his phaser drawn but pointed at the ground. He tapped the door chime.

Nothing. He hit it a second time. Still nothing. He knocked. After a beat, he turned to Giotto. The security officer placed a code override device on the door lock. The door slid open after a couple of seconds, emitting the unmistakeable miasma of human decay.

He could hear Peter crying. Bones pushed past him into the house, Engid close behind him. Sam lay on the floor, eyes wide open. Kirk didn’t need a doctor to know had been dead for at least a day. An overturned chair lay next to him. Aurelan was curled in a fetal position on the couch, her
hands fisted into her long red hair. Her breath came in short gasps, her face a rictus of agony. Spock knelt beside the woman and Kirk followed, leaving a little space between them, each of them shadowed by their security escorts.

“I’ve got a little boy here, two, maybe three years old,” Bones said.

Kirk pushed away from the couch. “Do whatever you can for Aurelan,” he told Spock. He rushed over to the little boy he’d never met in person. “Hey Peter, I’m your uncle Jim. We’re going to get you and your mom out of here.” He squeezed Peter’s hands and rubbed his back for a moment while McCoy held him, more for himself than for Peter, who just stared at him and hiccuped, bewildered. “Is he all right? Is he infected?” he asked Bones.

Bones pushed up the back of Peter’s shirt, prompting the toddler to try to squirm out of his arms. “Not a mark on him.” He ran a scanner over him, then passed the sniffling toddler to Turei and dropped to the floor beside Sam. “This your brother, Commander?”

Kirk crouched next to Bones. “Yeah, that was Sam.” Bones nodded, the gesture less pronounced through the layers of suit. “It’s all right. We weren’t close.”

Bones twitched. He looked down at his scanner for a moment the way he did when he couldn’t figure out what to say. “But you wanted to be.” He sighed and turned his attention to Spock and Aurelan. Kirk followed. There was nothing more he could do.

Spock had Aurelan by the shoulders. Bones knelt beside him, medscanner out. “Aurelan, can you understand me?” Spock said. His sister in law opened her mouth as though to speak. Her mouth worked, soundless for a moment, then she screamed. Spock pawed through his satchel and came up with a hypospray. He pressed it to Aurelan’s throat.

Kirk turned back to McCoy’s escort. “Turei, take Peter and beam back to the biocontainment lab to get him checked out. We’ll be up with Aurelan in a moment.”

Aurelan watched him vanish. “Peter’s safe,” she choked out. “Please, they want…they want…”

“Mr. Engid, keep watch,” Spock said.

“Always do,” Engid replied. McCoy positioned himself so he could see the biomonitor on the front of Spock’s suit.

Spock framed Aurelan’s face with his gloved hands. She fought him, her screams growing louder. “You’re safe now. We’re taking you up to the Nightingale,” he said, then turned and shook his head. “I cannot establish the level of rapport necessary through the biocontainment suit. We need to take her back to the ship.”

“They—it’s a trap—” she choked out, then screamed once, shrilly, and fell forward into Spock’s arms. Dead?

“It may not be too late,” Spock said, “We need to get her aboard.” Five colonists burst through the door. Kirk turned and pulled his phaser, taking one down. Two of them ducked around him to grab McCoy’s arms even as Kirk dropped a second with a phaser. Spock shoved Aurelan at Engid. “Get her to Lavoie!”

He lunged toward one of the men holding Bones, Spock already clinging to the other. They could not beam up while tangled up in violent, infected colonists. Engid, at a little remove from the fray, called for a beam out and disappeared with Aurelan in a whirl of golden particles. Spock reached up to grab at one of their attackers’ shoulders, but nothing happened and he gave up the tactic to
throw the man away from them. In his peripheral vision, Kirk could see that Giotto was down, but his main concern was Bones, who was now surrounded, along with Spock, by four men who were methodically shredding his suit. Kirk punched one, who rolled away and rose immediately to engage Spock, who was now two on one against attackers who shrugged off serious injury and seemed stronger than any human had a right to be. The others peeled back the yellow plastic of Bones’ suit, dragging him backward out of it. A pale dinner plate sized object whipped past him, ricocheting off his own suit’s faceplate.

Kirk took his attacker down with a close shot. He could see a long vertical rent through the side of Spock’s suit and flattened, slime slicked creatures edging up to the tear. Spock tore the colonist holding McCoy’s left arm away hard enough to break the man’s arm and, Kirk thought from the popping sound and shriek of pain from the doctor, possibly Bones’ arm as well. The other colonist whipped up the woven mail covering McCoy’s back. There was a flash of gray-white, and one of the fluttering creatures affixed itself to McCoy, high on his back, just below the neck.

Spock had just enough time to throw a punch that Kirk was certain shattered the colonist’s jaw before McCoy arched his back and shrieked. Bones’ weight fell onto Spock. The healer pulled at the creature. It popped off with a sucking noise and landed at his feet. Spock allowed McCoy’s momentum to carry them both to the ground, tossed Bones’ helmet aside and immediately started to tear at his gloves. His hands were clumsy, shaking with his haste.

The two colonists who were still up and moving crowded around Giotto where he lay and started to pull open his suit. He framed them in his sights and hit all three with a heavy stun charge. The colonists collapsed against the wall.

Kirk took a fraction of a second to assess their situation, Giotto on the ground, three gelatinous pancakes suckered to his suited back, another of the things trying to creep into the rent in Spock’s suit, unnoticed by the nearly suicidally preoccupied healer, and grabbed a containment box. He yanked the creature out of Spock’s suit first, then ran to Giotto, not trusting that their metal vests would protect them indefinitely. The other three creatures went into the box along with the first and he latched it tight.

Spock was still wrapped around McCoy’s stiff, seizing body, fumbling with his gloves. Kirk gripped his wrist. “Not until we’re back on the Nightingale.”

Spock flung him off and returned to struggling with the glove. Kirk hit the ground, hard, but tucked into a roll that probably spared him broken bones. When he caught his breath, he grabbed Giotto and hit his comlink. “Kirk to Nightingale, four to beam up!”

* 

Legion’s memory of their previous conquests was limited; only so much information could be carried in the bare handful of hosts that carried them across the sky to each new hunting ground. A few things they knew, though. When new hosts came from distant worlds, it was imperative to make them part of themself, else Legion would have no new hosts once they used up the world on which they found themself, and in time they would be forced to go into hibernation.

This latest host promised to be worth the sacrifice of the one they had used to procure it. Legion’s little messenger released the toxin that paralyzed at the same time as it proved Legion’s power to the host, then began to grow inside it. The process of integrating the new host would take hours, but Legion would have limited access within minutes, as the messenger’s strands found their way up the host’s spinal cord. Legion devoted a few moments to investigating the behavior of their other hosts. Legion’s intelligence was vast, but broad, distributed. They could monitor the behavior of thousands of hosts at a time, but their understanding of their prey’s world was limited, their
knowledge of strategy almost nonexistent.

When they devoted a strand of thought to the newly connected host, they were shocked to the point that they had to recoil, to determine what to do next. They read the chemistry of the body, the tension in the muscles, the sounds emerging from the host’s mouth to determine whether they had the host’s full attention. There was nothing. A wall, as though the host were able to prevent itself from being affected. Puzzled and disappointed, Legion triggered the cascade that would destroy both messenger and host. It would try again at another time.

*

Spock had just enough presence of mind to devote the fraction of a second of transport to taking a mental snapshot of the doctor’s katra without the encumbrance of biosuits or bodies, then was dropped back into the muffling confines of his suit. It had been twenty-nine seconds since the parasite attacked.

Someone was shouting at him. Several someones. Lavoie tugged McCoy out of Spock’s arms, hampered by his seizure-stiffened arms and legs, while Spock tore at the fastenings on his glove, clumsy with the overwhelming pain signals pouring into him from McCoy, his vision darkening with their intensity even through the layers of his suit. Kirk, Lavoie, and Ribera pressed around him, heedless of his lack of shields. A hand grabbed his left glove, efficiently stripping it from him, the brief graze of its smallest digit against the medial edge of his palm identifying it as belonging to Commander Kirk. Thirty-seven seconds.

Kirk pulled off his helmet and began working the back fastenings of Spock’s suit, while Spock, having regained a small amount of control, shouted, “Get Dr. McCoy to a biobed, stat. Keep him prone.”

He slipped one hand around the doctor’s wrist to increase the amount of contact, but devoted a small amount of attention to sliding the other under his body to help Lavoie and Kirk lift him to lie face down on the biobed. “Dr. Lavoie, protocol two,” Spock said. “I’m going in.”

“Oh monitors,” he heard faintly, already shifting, fast and hard, fifty-six seconds after the creature injected McCoy. He was afraid it had already been too long. Nearly every sensory nerve in McCoy’s body was firing, driving signal that didn’t even have to target the pain centers to be perceived as pain—there was simply too much overwhelming sensation. Fast acting neurotoxin, Spock surmised, meant to incapacitate until the parasite could establish itself. The doctor had no awareness of time or self, but merely existed, a knot of terror and anguish Spock steeled himself to join in hopes he could find the source of the agony and stop it, so he and the doctor could pool their resources and regroup.

It was like diving headfirst into fire, into acid, into an electrical circuit. For a moment, he, as much as McCoy, was incapacitated, unable to do anything but continue to drive down into the pain, hoping to find McCoy at the bottom of it. There.

The cold. It burns. Then McCoy snapped to awareness, found Spock’s mind, and shifted his focus—and finally they fell out of themselves and into a blank, uncolored emptiness that contained no pain and very little of anything else. Spock made no assumptions about the longevity of the space, but immediately sought out landmarks, built a faint, minimalist mindspace that would take little energy to maintain, and divorced McCoy from any awareness of his body. They would have respite from the pain here and they could hope that Lavoie and Ribera would be able to get McCoy on to life support so his body would continue to function.

Horror was the first coherent emotion to emerge, and as soon as McCoy regained the ability to do
so he clung, again that change in pattern, effortless, negative effort in fact, an adjustment that was like falling together. McCoy was not the first human to adapt so quickly to Spock’s mind. It was a human trait, this flexibility, one full Vulcans lacked and his uncle had openly and fondly envied in Spock, whose hybrid nature gave him a share in that adaptability.

McCoy stirred at the perceived compliment, a slight sting of rejection, as he responded to all compliments. *We must build a strong barrier here, to keep the parasite from being able to control you.*

And at once McCoy was at full attention. *Show me.*

They began, as always, with soft falling snow, calming and stilling, then layered on the image of light, bright as a sun, hard as glassteel. Spock caught McCoy’s intentions and lent conviction to the metaphor, McCoy following precisely, his proficiency an effect of the near perfect synchrony of the meld they had formed. They took a moment to rest and consider their situation, Spock carefully picking up the threads that would allow him to assess how McCoy’s body was tolerating the assault. They were, all at once, not alone.

The thing pressed against the barrier, first gingerly and then once, sharply and so hard their fortress rang with the impact. Finding the barrier unbreachable, it withdrew. Spock moved to follow, urging McCoy to remain in the more protected space. The creature’s access was limited. It could not shift to join their minds…it barely had a mind. It wanted, it needed power over the body by coercing its owner, and if it could not reach the owner it would destroy the body. It was connected to a much larger, more intelligent mind—linked to it, as though it were a neuron, or more likely, a small ganglion that formed a greater whole, bound in subspace. The greater entity became aware of them, probed the barrier. Spock was tempted to follow it, to try to communicate with it directly, but feared that to do so would lead to his and McCoy’s immediate deaths without gaining any information about the entity that he could hope to pass on. He understood enough from the brief, glancing contact to know that the entity was assessing whether to allow McCoy to live.

No. The creature needed to be given hope that it could use McCoy if it were persistent. McCoy would have to make war with the thing, and they would have to remain in control while allowing the creature to believe that it could, eventually break its host. He picked up the threads he’d retained to monitor McCoy’s heart rate and breathing and felt a sympathetic cascade already beginning, one that would quickly lead to heart attack and death if it were not stopped.

He followed the trace, changing his focus from mind and metaphor to brain and following impulses as lines of light. The creature could reach only as far as the medulla, so far as he could tell, so he located the clusters of intention, not even quite thought, and damped the circuits so they could not continue to fire out of control…the creature became aware of him and tried to attack, directly, clumsily—it really was not particularly intelligent, just very well evolved to perform its singular task.

He contacted McCoy again. *I am sorry, we will have to endure the creature, not merely hide from it.*

Terror, refusal. *It’s not worth it. It hasn’t been for a long time. Let the thing kill me.*

M’Benga would have referred to his next action as dirty pool, but Spock fought back, pushing forward images of Joanna, laced with his impressions of how much she missed her father, and of the frantic efficiency with which Kirk had stripped Spock and McCoy so that Spock could attempt to save his life. Kirk was still there, an anxious presence near enough to be sensed, waiting within a meter or two of the biobed.
It was not enough. Spock tried another tactic. You are the one patient we have the chance to observe from the moment of infection. We need you to live so we can learn how to beat this thing and save the people of Deneva.

A hesitation.

We need you to live.

Resignation. What do I do?

Spock returned to their sanctuary, knowing he had at most a minute to work. Trust me.

Acquiescence. He called up his memory of the shape of the doctor’s katra, the analog, irreducible component of mind carried in the tetryon neutrino field associated with a living, intelligent brain. He shifted again toward the doctor, engaging a closeness that was terrifying in its implications if he stopped to examine them, which he chose not to. The doctor followed suit and there was again that brief and effortless falling and they became one person, who knew precisely what to do.

That person, Lennock? part of him supplied, apparently thinking himself witty. He quickly threaded a line of communication through the sanctuary they had built, a sort of backchannel through which communication and support could be maintained, then he returned them both to their bodies. They fell back apart and into pain, a buzzing that grew to a tingle, then to a rising, enveloping burning that covered them both. McCoy resisted consciousness. You have to wake up.

McCoy opened his eyes. Spock withdrew the hand he had pressed to McCoy’s face, but not the one wrapped tight around his wrist. He could limit the pain only somewhat without alerting the creature to his continued presence, but the difference was enough to make consciousness endurable for the doctor.

Lavoie noticed they were back among them first. “Healer, report,” she said.

“The creature is a component of a hive mind. A neuron, or more precisely, a ganglion attached to a larger brain, most probably through subspace tetryon neutrino interactions. Individually, the parasites are no smarter than a hamster.”

“A rabid hamster,” McCoy mumbled into the bed.

“Implications?”

“I would prefer to discuss them out of McCoy’s immediate presence.”

“Good, because we need to chat. Kirk, with me.”

Spock released his grip on McCoy’s wrist, transferring his support to the link they had created. McCoy stiffened. “I will return shortly,” Spock told him.

They adjourned to Lavoie’s office. Kirk stepped forward, eyes wide, face twisted into a scowl. Lavoie held up a hand to stay him. “Not yet, Commander.”

He had thrown Kirk off him while attempting to remove his gloves, contrary to protocol, on the planet’s surface. “I did not acknowledge your orders while you were responsible for my safety. I regret my behavior. My logic was temporarily compromised.” Another thought occurred to him. “Are you and Giotto unharmed?”

Kirk answered. “He has a bump on the head and he’ll be out for a couple more hours sleeping off a
heavy stun, but I got all the parasites off before they could penetrate the suit.”

Lavoie cut him off. “What’s going on in McCoy’s head?”

“The parasite is able to directly access the spinal cord, medulla, and two sensory cranial nerves, including the vestibulocochlear. Because of this, the doctor and I believe the hive mind will be able to hear what he hears. However, if information needs to be provided to McCoy that we wish to keep from the parasite, visual information enters superior to the extent of the neural infiltration. It cannot directly read his mind, though it can send orders through the vestibulocochlear nerve to the auditory cortex, and the hive mind, during its time on Deneva, has learned Federation Standard. They cannot control the host’s movements directly, only coerce by causing pain.”

“Noted. You were down for almost twenty minutes, and during that time, McCoy coded twice. What’s his current status?”

“Eighteen point four minutes. We are currently linked through a channel the parasite will be unable to affect. I can provide physiological support and moderate, though not completely relieve, his pain. We can also communicate through the link without being detected. However,” he paused to gather his thoughts.

“However?”

“The moment the parasite believes it has no further use for McCoy, it will kill him. We will have to allow it small victories and lead it to believe that McCoy has only limited ability to resist until we are able to effect a cure. Did we obtain samples of the free living form?”

“Four of them, thanks again to the Commander. Ribera is already taking scans.”

“And Aurelan?”

“We were not able to resuscitate her.”

Spock nodded acknowledgment. “Understood. My condolences, Commander.”

“Commander Kirk,” Lavoie prompted.

Kirk waved his arms at Lavoie, clearly frustrated. “Well, see, now that he’s gone and apologized--”

“He expressed his regrets. You are still entitled to say your piece.”

Kirk crossed his arms and frowned. “You attempted to break biocontainment against orders. You distracted me at a time when I could little afford it and put both me and Giotto at further risk as a result.” His gaze, though, kept straying over Spock’s shoulder at McCoy through the glass wall of the office. “But in your place I might have done the same thing.”

Spock found himself unable to respond to the last admission immediately. Something inside him, a piece of unfinished business, resolved. “Acknowledged. If I had not focused on removing my glove, we would have been able to beam out roughly twelve seconds sooner and, after we returned to the ship, gotten Dr. McCoy to the biobed five seconds sooner. During that critical time, my inability to prioritize my actions reduced our team’s efficiency and delayed McCoy’s access to treatment by 43.5%.”

Kirk nodded curtly. “Just—keep him with us. Okay?”

“Understood.” He would not make promises he did not know that he could keep.
They'll Burn, Bones

Chapter Summary

McCoy and the Nightingale team fight the neural parasite. It isn't going well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What will kill me is if you don’t let me out of this bed!” McCoy snapped. “Where’s my uniform?”

“Dr. McCoy, please sit back down,” Ribera said, trying to guide him back to the bed. “Your pain levels are still sitting at a calibrated eight point six out of ten. You can’t help yourself or anyone else this way.”

“Bullshit I can’t. I need to stay busy. Let me stay busy.” He didn’t feel like a real person in a patient smock and stocking feet. “Scrubs and ship shoes at least. You can stick your scanners wherever you want to and I’ll still feel like a damn doctor.”

“All right, I’ll have Elta grab you a set of scrubs.”

“And my data pad.”

“And your data pad.”

The parasite wound around McCoy’s spinal cord produced pain mechanically, by compressing the nerves it encircled in their sheaths. The pain was similar to that of carpal tunnel syndrome, or to striking the ulnar nerve at the olecranon process. It was a deep burning, needling sensation that extended from the back of his head, through his trunk and down his limbs to his hands and feet, sparing only parts of his scalp and face. When it wanted something from him, the compression increased until, even through Spock’s filter, it was debilitating. He found himself taking short, hissing breaths through it until it abated enough for him to think. The fact this was the kind of pain his six year old daughter had endured every day since she awakened both horrified and amazed him. He knew she was tough, but he’d never really understood how tough.

McCoy settled back onto the biobed to look at his own scans, wincing where his back rounded against the pillows. As Spock had suggested, the pain sensor on his biobed and by extension, on the monitor tucked into the bandage covering the puncture wounds on his back, was set to detect nociception at the ventrolateral medulla, rather than pain perception at the thalamus. If he were to give a number to the pain actually felt, he’d put it closer to a six, seven if he were honest with himself. The block he and Spock constructed changed the way his brain responded to the compression of his spinal nerves.

It did not, however, protect him from progressive damage to those nerves. He could see the inflammation clearly on the screen as his immune system tried in vain to attack a pathogen that only half existed in normal space. Aurelan’s autopsy suggested that was how the parasite killed its hosts, either slowly as the body’s immune processes eroded the myelin sheath around the nerves, or quickly by releasing a toxin that induced anaphylaxis. He was deeply grateful the parasite had
not chosen Jim as its victim—with his off kilter immune system, he wouldn’t have lasted ten minutes.

He had put in a pair of earplugs as soon as he was able to make the request, and the rabid hamster in his spine objected strenuously until he removed them. He was sure further demands would follow. Attempts to administer medications by hypospray had resulted in similar objections. Clearly the hive mind had encountered attempts to reduce its effects with medication.

Ribera returned with his change of clothes and his data pad. “Do you need help dressing, doctor?” she asked.

“No, I can take care of myself.”

She left the data pad on the bed with him. The parasite made him clumsy, but he managed to change his clothes and straighten the sheet on the biobed before sitting in the chair beside it like a damn doctor, not a patient. He collected the data pad, which had been loaded with images of the free living amoeboid morph. The internal structures were hazy and marked with notations that the imaging equipment had difficulty penetrating the organism. Near infrared produced the best images of the internal structures, needle sharp injectors attached to venom sacs that coiled like cnidaria.

Spock entered his room with a smoothie, not peach, and a small plate of brownies. “Jim made them for you.”

“A peace offering?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Go ahead and have one. I’m not hungry.” He set the smoothie on the bedside table after taking a sip.

“Chocolate does not agree with me. Jim went to a great deal of trouble to obtain the ingredients. They are his own recipe.” There was a gentle tap at the back of his mind. They were avoiding using the back channel to excess, in hopes the hive mind would not detect it. Spock wouldn’t use it just to urge him to eat.

McCoy cleared his data pad and typed a question mark on it, then nibbled politely at a brownie. It was the recipe Jim had used before, chunky with chocolate chips and pecans, though the frosting had a strange flavor the chocolate couldn’t mask. Like grass clippings. Oh. He ate the rest dutifully. Clever, he wrote.

“Indeed.”

“How much flavoring did he put in?”

“One gram per brownie.”

McCoy felt his eyes widen, but on a moment’s thought, if they were using the cannabidiol as a neuroprotective agent, the high dose made sense. “I’ll save the rest for later.”

“That would be prudent. You have been cleared to work in the lab on the specimens as long as you are in my presence.”

“Good. Keep myself busy.”
He followed Spock to the lab, where four of the amoeboid morphs rested in four separate bell jars. One of them made a squeaky, bubbling noise that sounded for all the world like a fart. “Dr. McCoy! It’s good to see you up and around,” Ribera said. “Healer, can you vouch for him?”

“At present he is in control of his behavior.”

Ribera continued. “We started with chemical agents. Acids, alkaloids, hyperbaric oxygen. Nothing works at dosages the human body can withstand.”

McCoy’s entire body suddenly spasmed as though he had walked into a forcefield. **We require control of the ship. Infect your captain.** The voice in his head was made of a thousand crackles stuck together. It had neither the resonance of a human voice speaking into his ear nor the feel of subvocal communication, which was more like the memory of words than it was like speech, the shape of words unspoken in the mouth.

“No!” he said. “It wants me to——” **Be silent.** He fell to the floor, unable to keep his feet.

“I am going to restrain you, doctor,” Spock said gently, but gripped his arms firmly. He tested the grip and could not move.

**Fight him.**

“I can’t, he’s stronger than me!” he shouted at the thing.

**What does the creature require?** Spock asked through the backchannel.

**It wants me to take one of the parasites and infect the captain.** “Let me go,” he said aloud. “I won’t do anything. Let me go.”

**Return when you are alone. Collect one parasite and infect your captain.**

Spock released his arms. “Are you in control of yourself?”

“Yeah. Just. Just don’t leave me.” So. The thing was smart enough to give an order to be followed later, and to demonstrate what would happen if the order were not followed.

“I will remain here,” Spock said aloud, but his real answer came through their hidden link, a wordless bolstering of his strength that was more than just a layer of insulation against the pain. He questioned it, not in objection but out of curiosity about what it was. He couldn’t think of a neurochemical mechanism that seemed to map to what he felt. **Later,** Spock said. **I will orchestrate an opportunity for you to try and fail to retrieve the parasite.**

He wondered how long he and Spock could string the thing along without allowing him to do any real harm. He imagined losing himself so much to the pain that he would break his oaths, hurt his family, compromise the mission and shuddered. **If I become a danger, kill me,** he said. **I will not allow you to be used as an instrument of harm.** Somehow Spock’s acknowledgment that, if the worst should happen, Spock would take on that burden was more reassuring than if he had merely asserted it would never come to that. He suspected Spock’s phrasing had been deliberately vague, that he had plans McCoy couldn’t be allowed to know, but there was no one he would rather trust with his life. Or with the end of it, if it came to that.

*“You left yourself two security officers short,” Pike said.*
Kirk paced the small conference room off the bridge. “I know, I know. I should have sent Peter up with McCoy.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know. I was all but sure Sam was dead, from Aurelan’s transmission, but seeing it. Made it real. I should have known I’d be compromised and put Giotto in charge of the team.”

Pike pressed his lips together, accepting the explanation if not condoning his actions. Kirk stopped in front of him. “A million and change, down there,” he said. “Or, what is it now?”

“About eight hundred thousand and falling” Pike said. “If the rate is steady, there won’t be anyone left to cure in a month.”

“Have we gotten orders yet?”

“That team of ours had better come up with a cure fast,” Pike said. “Standing orders are to disable any ship that tries to leave. Farragut’s already taken out the spaceport, but there are sure to be a few private ships out there. If we can’t find a cure, if we can’t administer the cure in a timely fashion, if we lose even one ship, the whole place goes up. Neutron radiation first followed by enough bolides to completely melt the surface.”

“And the kids?”

Pike slammed his palms on the table in frustration. “Shit. I mean, it’s good the parasites aren’t going for babies and toddlers, but the brass isn’t going to let us go down there and collect tens of thousands of orphans while those things are around to pick off all the adults.”

Kirk couldn’t let his mind go there. Not now. “I won’t let that stand unchallenged, sir.”

“Speaking of which, you’re off duty. Go check on Peter in the biocontainment lab.”

“Yes, sir.” Kirk left the bridge for the biocontainment lab, hoping against hope there would be some good news he could report back to the captain. The lab was still attached to the ship, but there was an additional short hallway with an airlock he had to pass through. He punched in his code.

“A moment, Commander,” the voice on the other side of the door said. It was only a moment, then the door hissed open and he stepped over the threshold. “Dr. Lavoie,” he said. “I’m here to see Peter.” Another breath and he tucked his hands into his waistband, cursing the lack of pockets in his shipside uniform. “And Dr. McCoy.”

* 

A nurse led him to the patient room they’d set up for Peter with a bed low to the floor and a box of toys collected from around the ship—he recognized a squish toy he knew belonged to Joanna. Spock was sitting on the floor with Peter in his lap, flipping through the pages of a picture book with brightly painted pictures of dinosaurs. Kirk smiled in spite of himself. The Vulcan was an absolute baby magnet. “And which of these interests you the most?” he was saying.

“My favorite is Therezinosaurus, because it has really big claws,” the three year old said, miming giant claws with his fingers spread. He turned on hearing Kirk outside the door and fell silent.

Spock stood, scooping the boy up with him. “This is your uncle, Commander James Kirk.”
Peter took one look at him and clutched Spock’s scrub top tighter as though he’d prefer the healer were his uncle, thank you very much.

“Uncle Jim,” Kirk said.

“I want mommy,” he said, then buried his face in Spock’s scrubs.

“I know,” Kirk said. There wasn’t much else he could say.

Spock rubbed circles into Peter’s back, a gesture that struck Kirk as not particularly Vulcan. The toddler settled, and after a minute, squirmed out of the healer’s arms and back into his room. “I should return to assist Dr. McCoy in the lab,” he told Peter. “You will be able to see me through the window.” Kirk followed him into the lab. When he looked over his shoulder, Peter had his nose pressed to the window glass.

“How is he?” he said, gesturing in Peter’s direction with his chin.

Spock stopped in the corridor to face him. “Peter? Distraught, as one might expect, but physically healthy. You are aware that you are listed as next of kin.”

“I thought they had friends on the planet they’d chosen.”

“At present it is impossible to determine whether those friends live.”

Kirk swallowed. “I don’t want this to haunt him for the rest of his life.”

“We are monitoring him for signs of failure to integrate his experience. Given a stable environment, he will recover, and given his age, he is unlikely to retain much conscious memory of the events he witnessed over the long term.”

Kirk bit his lip. “Can’t you maybe--help that along a little?”

“I would prefer not to at this time. Again, because of his age. He will know something terrible happened, and if he is not allowed to retain what accurate memories he can, he will fabricate others that will likely be much worse. Be assured Dr. Christie and I are monitoring the situation.” Kirk frowned at the floor. “I appreciate your desire to spare him pain.”

“What is, is, right?” he said.

Spock raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Precisely. You wished to speak to the doctor,” he reminded.

The lab was set up like a daisy, with the lab equipment in the middle and patient rooms, all able to be individually sealed, forming a ring around the outside. Kirk followed Spock into the main research area, where McCoy stood next to Dr. Ribera, a squishy amoeba thing squeaking at both of them while they conferred over a data pad.

Kirk thought that, for a dying man, he looked better than the last time he’d seen him. His face and hands were slightly reddish and puffy, his eyes a little too bright, and the muscles of his jaw were rigid, but he looked fully engaged in his conversation with Ribera. He even bent down to eye level with the thing in its containment vessel to poke the plasteel with a fingernail. “We’ll get you yet, you ugly little loogies.”

Kirk cleared his throat. “Bones,” he said, his voice cracking on the name.

Bones looked up. “Am I, now?”
Kirk fixed his gaze on the thing in its containment vessel. “Yeah.”

McCoy turned back to his data pad. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Thanks for the brownies. They were an interesting recipe.”

“Spock helped.”

“I’m sure he did.” He indicated the creature in the bell jar with a gesture. “We’re running out of things to try.”

Kirk nodded, then chewed his lip nervously for a moment before replying. “They’ll burn, Bones.”

“What?”

The fragments of memory that remained of his time in the irradiated chamber, skin burning and peeling, stomach heaving, head splitting in agony, would not leave him since his talk with Pike. “The babies. If you guys can’t fix this, we’re going to hit the whole planet with hard radiation. Don’t make me burn babies, Bones.”

“We’re doing our best.” He sounded weary. Almost resigned.

Kirk regarded the thing in its container. His hand curled into a fist, fingernails digging hard into the palm. “Do you know, when we first got here, there was a ship. It broke away from the Farragut and flew itself right at the sun. And right before—right before its shields failed and it burned, the man inside shouted with the most absolute joy. He said they were gone. He was free.” Kirk shook his head. “And then a second later he was gone.”

“I’m not ready to make that trade just yet, Jim,” Bones said.

“I wanted to show you something.” Kirk pulled out his data pad and hit the com link. “Gaila, is Joanna up?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Can you give her the comm for a minute?”

“Sure.”

Bones shook his head. “No. Not now. She can’t see me like this.”

“You need to see her.” After a few seconds, Joanna appeared on the screen. She grinned broadly when she saw Bones’ face, reddish and puffy as it was. On the bottom of the screen a string of icons appeared. A smiley, a crying smiley, a heart, crayons, paper.

Kirk repeated the crayon and paper icons. Joanna’s face disappeared for a moment. A few keystrokes later a hand drawn picture appeared, black construction paper with silver gel pen squiggles and a large yellow star. McCoy considered it, puzzled. “Yeah, no idea what that is,” Kirk agreed. He typed the crayons, paper, and a photograph of McCoy.

Another image appeared on the screen. It was a picture of the four of them, Gaila the most identifiable with the green skin and orange hair, Kirk with exaggeratedly spiky yellow hair right up next to Bones in his blue scrub top, Spock sitting on the floor next to a spaceship.
“Why is Spock on the floor?”

“They spend a lot of time on the floor with the Lego. I think Spock likes them more than she does.”

Spock shrugged.

Bones covered his face with his hand. “I—would you say goodbye for me.” He took a few steps away from the group.

“Excuse me,” Spock said. He followed McCoy with those quiet footsteps and stood a few centimeters behind him, arms crossed, head down.

Kirk tapped in a waving goodbye icon and closed the data pad. Spock reached out to take Bones’ elbow and Kirk decided it was a good time to make himself scarce.

*

The voice in McCoy’s head was growing impatient. He waited until the lab cleared out that night, then slipped out of bed, broke the lock that kept him in his room, and padded into the lab in stocking feet to consider the nearest containment chamber. The main lab was empty save a lone red shirted sentry dozing with his back against the door. He put in the passcode to open the containment field and picked up the thing with gloved hands. It oozed over them, sending a slimy tendril under the cuffed sleeve of his scrubs, questing for something. It stung, briefly, like a nettle, and withdrew, growing firmer and more compact. McCoy presumed it was able to chemically sense that he was already infected. **Infect the leader.**

McCoy didn’t dignify its request with an answer. He waited behind the big gene sequencer until the sentry left to use the restroom, then carried the thing out of the lab wrapped in a spare gown. He used his own code, which had not been changed, to leave the level four biocontainment module and walked down the short hall that connected it to the rest of the ship, pointedly not looking behind him. He made it to the turbolift without being stopped and did not allow himself to dwell on his solitude. A pair of engineers were working inside the wall on the hallway where the senior staff has quarters. They were swathed head to foot in protective gear. The work was painfully noisy, enough so that the amoeboid in his hands trembled.

He used his medical override to open the door to Pike’s quarters and walked all the way inside to where a figure lay curled up under the blankets. He set the creature down, gently unwrapped it, and was halfway to the door before the light flipped on and two red shirted officers flung him to the ground. The parasite unleashed its frustration, and he curled on the floor, fingernails cutting his palms, until he passed out from shock.

*

“Did it work?” he asked as soon as he could get words out. He was lying in his biobed, Spock and Ribera flanking him. The amoeboid replied first. **You will make another attempt.**

Spock’s answer followed close on its heels. **We were able to recapture the free living morph. I believe you effectively deceived the hive mind.**

He tried to sit up and found he was restrained, at the chest, hips, ankles, and wrists. “As you have proved unable to resist the creatures orders, you will be restrained until you regain control.”

**Are you prepared for the test we discussed this evening?**

McCoy swallowed panic, nearly choked on it, but forced a nod. This test was designed to shut
McCoy down entirely, as though he were dead, for ninety seconds, during which time the parasite would, they hoped, also be incapacitated. If they were lucky, they would be able to find its primary control center and destroy its connection to the hive mind. If he were expecially unlucky, the attempt would kill him. He lay on the biobed, knowing he might not wake up, trying to control his shaking. Spock stood over him, ready to press him into unconsciousness so his brain would be better cushioned from the shock.

“Give us two minutes before you begin the protocol,” he said, before resting both hands over McCoy’s face and guiding him out of his burning body. They paused in the blankness of the backchannel. *May I take your fear?* He assented wordlessly, then understood why permission for such a simple thing was necessary. The feeling was almost like being pinned down. His thoughts were not his own, his attention held by a compelling pattern, whirling spots of brightness that gradually settled into gentler, drifting patterns. He might have been imagining it—he probably was imagining it, but he thought Spock took longer than necessary to ease him down. He was sure there was no need for them to pause in this liminal space, or for the healer to have constructed for him such a realistic hallucination of sitting on a bench swing in a gazebo, Spock close beside him. It was summer, warm and green and sunny, but little white puffs drifted through the air regardless. Cottonwood seeds.

The pressure relaxed, as soon as he no longer needed it. He allowed himself to breathe in the warm breeze and feel the dappled sunlight on his closed eyelids. A part of him suspected Spock did not think he would live through this test and had drawn a memory from his mind to give him a last moment of peace. He realized that under the blanket that covered them, his hand was being held, tight. The light faded. He felt himself grow heavier and heavier. He couldn’t make himself breathe anymore. It was too much effort to draw in air against the weight. He felt his heart skip and shudder, then felt nothing more.

Chapter End Notes

I promised I wasn't going to kill anyone you love. Everybody breathe.
McCoy awoke, having neither died nor been cured. Pins and needles still burned their way across his skin as sharply as ever, but he felt too weak to move. Spock was still there, at the side of the biobed and inside, an invisible support. He closed his eyes, licked his chapped lips. He had forgotten something important. Something Jim said to him. Something about burning children. “The sun.” The words came out a harsh whisper.

“What about the sun?” It was Arni Lavoie’s voice he heard.

“Jim said—the Commander said a ship flew into the sun, and right before its shields failed the man inside said he was free.” He coughed. Spock took a moment to place a straw to McCoy’s lips. He drank, the liquid sweet and brackish on his tongue. “Something coming from the sun must have killed it.” There was no command to be silent. No backlash. The hive mind’s attention must be elsewhere. Maybe it thought he was dead.

Spock turned to him with a small headshake, then typed into his datapad so that his words appeared on the large screen all three could see.

**It follows that some form of radiation capable of penetrating the vessel was able to kill the parasite before the host died. What forms of solar radiation have been tried?**

Lavoie flipped to the list on her datapad and copied it to the main screen. They had tried alpha and beta particles, subspace radio signal carriers, one high channel, one low, three in the middle. Gamma through X-Rays on the electromagnetic spectrum. But nothing longer wavelength than UVB.

“Wait,” McCoy said. He tried to sit and failed. Spock raised the end of the bed for him. “Pull up the imaging we did yesterday.” He stopped himself from speaking aloud, then tried to raise his shaking hands to tap his keyboard and failed. *Our best images came from the near IR beam. That suggests the beam will penetrate the organism,* he sent.

“It was two days ago, Leonard,” Spock corrected. *It is possible a source of energy that would not appear to have enough power to damage the organism will resonate with one of its components to cause damage.* He repeated their observations in written form on the screen.

McCoy was warming to his subject. *Like microwaves resonate with water molecules. We know that it can’t be in the range already emitted by the human body. Test infrared light, 100 nanometer increments starting at 3000 nm and working our way up toward the red end of the visible spectrum.*
Lavoie read Spock’s hastily typed transcript and added,

**Run tests for one, two, and five minutes. Brightest light without causing damage, then brightest that won’t cause fatal damage.**

It occurred to McCoy that the exchange would have been easier had Spock just brought Lavoie into it mentally, but Spock shook his head. *I do not wish to risk revealing the presence of our communications channel to the parasite.* He left the room to assist with the tests, but he never quite left. McCoy recalled sitting in an imaginary gazebo with Spock with a clarity that exceeded that of most of his waking moments these last couple of days. He worked his way up to sitting, drank another smoothie and ate another brownie. A fresh plate had appeared beside him while he was unconscious.

He might soon be free of the demanding voice in his head, the constant pain and the threat of agony—and free of that ever present support and then what would he do? He realized suddenly that when the parasite took him and Spock had been required to make himself a constant presence in McCoy’s mind to help him endure, he had taken away the other pain, the weariness and shame he’d been dragging with him since, if he were honest, long before the conference on Starbase 4. The anxiety was gone too, which felt strange, as close as he was to being tortured to death from the inside, but to be absolutely fair, four grams a day of one of the most powerful anxiolytics out there was probably responsible for that one.

When the parasite was gone, there would be no need to continue neuroprotective agents, nor would there be any need for Spock to stay linked to him. He lay in the bad, lonely and aching, not letting himself touch the link for comfort. Another half hour and he felt up to leaving the room to pad into the lab in his stocking feet. Spock was standing in front of a containment chamber. At the bottom of the chamber lay a small, brownish smear, above which a thin stream of vapor curled. Spock turned to him. *One thousand thirty nanometers* he said, *With a second resonating peak at eight hundred ten nanometers. Creates a harmonic that shakes the tetryon components free of the normal matter components.*

“Okay,” McCoy said. “Let’s do this.”

The parasite twisted in his back. Could it small the remains of the other one? **Kill him and destroy the ship.**

“No,” McCoy said. The pain smashed into him with no gradual ramping up this time. He curled into a ball on the ground, Spock immediately falling to his knees beside him. *What is the demand?*

*Kill you,* he sent through the backchannel. *Idiot thinks killing you and destroying the ship will save it.

Spock’s hands clasped the sides of his head and the voice screeched, **Touch him and he dies!** Spock scrabbled backward.

**Kill him now,** it said. Liquid fire poured along every dermatome.

*Agree,* Spock told him.

*No.*

*I will stop you. I am stronger and faster than you. Especially now.*

McCoy gasped, “Okay, okay.” He hauled himself to his feet, searched for a credible weapon. Not
an effective weapon, a credible one. The parasite seemed to sense that he would be unable to make any kind of physical attack unless it backed off, so it released the pressure a little. There. If he put his back into it he could tear the monitor off its hinge and try to hit Spock with it. Spock stood nearby, playing the part of the confused onlooker, as though he didn’t know what the order had been and was attempting to obey the one directive sent loud enough for him to hear.

He grabbed the screen and wrenched. It was screwed on tighter than he thought. Spock circled, neither willing to approach nor to leave him alone. McCoy climbed onto the lab table and kicked at the hinge until it snapped, grabbed the screen and held it up over his head. If it connected, it could do serious damage.

He hesitated. The pain crept down his neck and into his shoulders, a warning.

*Trust me.*

He raised the screen over his head and lunged at the healer. Spock sidestepped the screen so it glanced off his body, reached around it and grabbed McCoy by the shoulder, near the neck. Everything went dark.

*He regained consciousness to the grating unsound of the parasite, demanding he wake and move. Destroy the ship. Destroy everything. It sounded frantic, almost manic, and it squeezed shocks down every part of his body so that he could not have moved to do its will had he wanted to.*

He assumed it would kill him shortly, tried to feel through the burning nerve pain for the ache and itch of anaphylaxis, but he felt no tightening in his bronchi and his breath came no harder than it had before. He was dimly aware of hands stripping his clothes off him, reassurances spoken and felt, *You’re safe, you cannot hurt anyone, struggle if you need to.* Spock was okay, he realized, relieved.

He fought then, weakly and with no effect hoping that his efforts might convince the creature to grant him respite. There were at least four people holding onto him now, walking him forward. The sting of a hypospray at his throat and his heart started to race. Epinephrine, and a high dose, by the feel of it. Whatever they planned was likely to trigger the creature to release its killing toxins, then. The hands shoved him into some kind of box. He opened his eyes on blackness. The floor and sides of the box were tiled in smooth plastic, the seams dividing out palm sized squares. There was something on his face. A mask, like a sleep mask, heavy enough it must contain some kind of metal shielding, covered his eyes.

There was a sound like a breaker being flipped and he was bathed in heat. For the briefest instant, the creature spasmed inside him and he screamed, unable to stop himself, but then the pain faded, not evenly or all at once, but piecemeal over several seconds. *Stand up. Grab the bars at your sides and place your feet shoulder width apart.*

He struggled to his feet on pins and needles, flapped numb and burning hands against the wall until they contacted the bars, and stood so that the radiation would penetrate. Near infrared light should penetrate about 4 cm into the tissue, deep enough to reach the parasite everywhere it touched. His skin was growing hot, the temperature in the little closet rising disturbingly high.

A buzzer sounded, the door opened, and McCoy stumbled out naked as a newborn, but free. He raised a hand to the mask over his eyes to rip it off, but his hand was gently redirected. He could feel light touches skating across his stinging skin, the blurring of sensation that came with the healer’s touch. McCoy swayed on his feet, into someone’s arms. “Try to stay on your feet until we
run the dermal regenerator over you,” Ribera said.

McCoy licked cracked lips. “How bad are the burns?” Spock could feel behind him, fingers tracing down his neck from the base of the skull and along each nerve root in turn, seeking and testing, a whisper of reassurance accompanying each touch as he confirmed the parasite was dead.

Lavoie answered his question. “Not too bad, mostly just some irritation. First degree over about 15% of the body surface. Backs of your hands and forearms, top of your scalp and soles of your feet, patches on your upper back and behind where you were sitting against the emitters.”

“And my eyes?”

“The mask should have protected them.” She lifted the mask off. His eyes stung, but he could see once they adjusted to the light. “We left you in about three times longer than probably necessary to kill the parasite, to be sure.”

McCoy nodded, his head clearing already, though he still felt foggy and detached, probably from the contradictory medications and the effect of Spock messing around with his nervous system. He’d run fingers down the length of the nerves in both arms now and was working his way down, dermatome by dermatome to the small of McCoy’s back, which tickled. McCoy bit his lip, suddenly worried about what might happen, bodily, when those light touches made their way down to trace the nerve routes in more private areas. Given he was in a room full of colleagues.

_I will suppress those responses_, Spock assured him. McCoy was torn between gratitude and mortification. He wouldn’t need to block much, McCoy thought. His libido had been all but absent since Khan and that was another thing he didn’t need Spock to know.

Well hello, he thought. He might still look uninterested but those fingers traced lines of brilliance across his ass and down the backs of his legs, and then between and he had forgotten how nice it was to--okay time to calculate drug dosages in his head for a while.

A light wrap was placed around him and tied loosely in the front, then he was led to a biobed so Lavoie could run the dermal regenerator over the soles of his feet. A straw was put to his lips and he sucked down electrolyte solution. He forced his mind back to business. “All right, so we know this works. How do we deliver it to, how many people? And would one of you get me some pants?”

“Prednisone and Esolix to downregulate your eosinophils,” Ribera said.

“Current scans estimate planetary population at 780,000, though it is possible some people are hiding in difficult to detect locations underground. It is likely that not all persons are infected,” Spock said.

McCoy nodded and immediately regretted it. “How long a pulse do we actually need?”

“Twenty seconds, we think. And if the power level is high enough we should be able to get through clothes.”

“But not walls or rock.”

Lavoie nodded, “Right, and we need to not only kill the parasite in vivo, but also find and destroy all of the free living morphs.”

“Get this data up to the captain, stat. We’ll need security and engineering on it.”
“And you will rest,” Spock said.

“Not now, Spock, when we finally have a chance to beat this thing. I intend to see this through. And didn’t I ask for some pants?”

He tried to get out of the biobed and immediately collapsed on jelly legs into Spock’s arms. He was lifted effortlessly back into the bed. “You will be kept apprised of all developments.”

Once he was lying down again, his body made it clear that it was not going to let him keep going. In spite of himself, he closed his eyes.

*

“Parameters, medical?”

As the head of the infectious diseases department, Luci Ribera spoke for the team. “We need to deliver roughly twenty watts per square centimeter of infrared radiation at eight hundred ten and one thousand thirty nanometers to the body for twenty seconds in order to kill the parasite. Radiation could be delivered via type I phasers or phaser cannon for area effects, but will not penetrate structures. It will be necessary to locate and treat infected individuals and destroy free living morphs.”

“The Fleet wants assurances we can prevent the spread of the parasite,” Pike said.

Fortunately, ship interiors can easily be irradiated at these wavelengths without damaging equipment or crew, and now that we can scan for it, any infestations shouldn’t get out of hand,” Ribera said.

Kirk knew she was couching her argument to give Pike the best means to prevent the scorched earth order to come down from Starfleet, and he was grateful for it. His gaze strayed to McCoy, who sat beside Ribera looking like he ought to still be in a biobed. McCoy acknowledged him with a smile that Kirk assumed was supposed to be reassuring.

“All right, give me the bad news.”

“We’re going to need all of the medical staff in body armor to go house to house to find all of the infected and the amoeboids—and we’re talking about over seven hundred thousand people to assess, and while we’re doing it the parasite hive mind is going to be actively working against us. Ribera, be aware there will be limited local power. Farragut took out the fusion plant to prevent sabotage, so onsite solar is all we’ll be able to access.”

“And they’re likely to need support because of failures in social structures for some time, too,” Kirk noted. “We’re going to find a lot of unattended, traumatized young kids.”

“Not to mention once we get rid of the parasite, most of the infected are going to need medical support during the recovery period. Dr. McCoy was infected for a little over two and a half days and shows considerable residual inflammation along the afferent nerve tracts as his body clears the normal matter components of the parasite. I’m most concerned about lingering neuropathies, systemic autoimmune reactions, and Guillain-Barre.”

“And that’s not even considering the post-traumatic stress.”

Pike nodded. “All right, first steps. Kirk, get together with Chekov, Giotto, and Turei to modify phasers. Contact the Farragut with the instructions as well and make some stationary emitters to clear amoeboids. Remember we’re going to be needing 20 second bursts so I’d piggyback the light
treatment onto a stun charge. Medical, let’s fabricate some more light emitting arrays. For now, we’ll deploy the mobile hospital on the ground and plan to move to the city hospital once it’s cleared.”

“We’re going to need backup. Hippocrates is closest this time, but they’re almost two days out. I called it in as soon as we had a confirmed cure. Every minute we delay more colonists die. I want boots on the ground as soon as the containment suits and phaser mods are completed. First teams down in one hour or less. Uhura, can we count on Farragut for security support?”

“You can, Captain Pike. I’ll be coordinating security with Kirk on the ground.”

“Excellent. Dismissed, all of you and keep me posted.”

*Kirk and Spock were both in the first group to head to the surface, along with Engid and Turei. They were part of a group of twenty, all outfitted with the new, modified suits. These were more streamlined than the others, but heavier, as they were entirely constructed of the fabric backed metal mesh. Instead of faceplates and gloves, the suits were snugly fit around the face and at the wrists.

“First order of business is to take up a defensible position, then search and treat as we find colonists,” Kirk said.

Lavoie added, “When you see colonists, stun and administer the light treatment. Once that’s done, come in with the immune stabilizing cocktail and take patients to a medtent. We’ll need a space set up for small kids—they’re likely to come in malnourished, sick, and injured. As colonists recover we’ve got to get them rolled into the process, because there’s no way we can treat three quarters of a million people ourselves. We have got to get colonial resources and personnel on board fast.”

They beamed back down to the empty street. Kirk pointed out a large building on a hill. “Deneva city hospital. That’s our HQ. Security teams one through three sweep the building. Four through six keep an eye on ops while they assemble the poptents. Spock, Lavoie, Security team one, with me.”

It was a good thing Pike knew Kirk needed to be doing, on the ground, not administrating on the ship. He strode toward the building, the healer at his side, flanked by their security escort. “You have your shit together, Healer?” he said.

Spock nodded. “I believe so. I was unprepared for my response to the attack on Dr. McCoy.”

“Yeah. He gets to you like that.”

The hospital appeared to be defended. The front doors were blocked by large pieces of furniture. Amoebas clung in the dozens to the underside of the eaves. Giotto gestured for the four of them to space themselves about a meter apart and they opened fire at once. The phasers spread red tracer light over the amoebas while the IR set their surfaces to boiling. Kirk wrinkled his nose at a fishy odor as they disintegrated.

“What kind of reception do you think we’re going to get?” Giotto asked.

“They may shoot on sight. We’ll need to warn them when we approach, even if that increases the risk of being attacked by infected colonists.”

They walked the perimeter of the building destroying amoebas that had taken refuge in the shade.
Where the late afternoon shadow fell, hundreds lay, squeaking, on the ground and up the walls. Ten more minutes of work cleared the area, though he suspected the things were like mice or roaches. Every one they saw meant a hundred they didn’t. Around the back of the building was a mass pyre, bodies reduced to ash strewn with fragments of bone and the wormlike remnants of the parasite. At a service entrance, two men stood side by side, lit by spotlights and carrying phaser rifles. They turned at the sound of the team’s footfalls and voices and aimed their rifles.

Kirk and the others threw up their hands.

“Starfleet!” one of the sentries said. “Where the hell have you been?”

Kirk stepped forward, Spock beside him. “We’re with the hospital ship USS Nightingale. Farragut called us in a little over four days ago when they lost four people investigating you all going radio silent.”

Spock walked toward them, sidearm holstered, hands outspread at his sides, not threatening. He stopped short about four meters from them. “Tell your medical staff the parasites can be killed by a twenty second burst of 810 and 1030 nanometer infrared radiation.”

“That would explain why the spotlights keep them away.” The sentry flipped open his communicator. “Julia? The cavalry are here. Six of them anyway. If they’re legit, they may have a cure. You want to come down?”

“Better than bringing them inside,” a woman’s voice replied over the comlink.

“Bring a security escort, just in case.”

“Will do, Yun.”

“Do you have any infected inside?” Spock asked.

Yun shook his head. “We euthanize on sight. Have to use high power phasers. Disintegrates the body, leaves those little parasite bits behind.”

“What do you need from us first?” Kirk said.

“We need food and medicine. Diapers and baby formula.” He chucked his chin at something behind them and Kirk turned.

A man struggled toward them, limbs moving jerkily, as though he were forcing every step. A child of about four walked beside him, holding the hand of a toddler. “Please,” he said, falling to the ground. “Go, Dari,” he said to the child, who stopped still in front of the security detail.

“Healer,” Kirk said. Spock turned away from the door sentries to approach the man.

“Don’t get too close,” the man warned them. “I have—I have to…” he reached behind him and pulled an amoeba off his back, where it had presumably been hiding. It rested in his hands. “I don’t want to hurt you. Dari, please, run!”

Kirk got down low and beckoned. Dari took a hesitant step forward, pulling her little sibling along with her. The man darted forward and grabbed another amoeba out of Dari’s clothes. The action cost him. He dropped to the ground, screaming. “Commander, now,” Spock said, falling to his knees beside his patient. Kirk disengaged the stun charge before pointing the phaser at both of them.
Spock flipped the man prone. “Dari, don’t look,” the infected colonist cried out, just as Kirk bathed the two of them in infrared. Spock waited for a count of five before switching his hold so that he was gripping the man’s shoulders from over his head, allowing Kirk to get a clear shot of his whole body.

“Full respiratory arrest. Anaphylaxis,” Spock said. He injected his patient with a preloaded hypo, then settled a hand over the side of his face.

“Daddy!” Dari screamed, running back toward him.

Kirk caught her by the arm. “It’s OK, Dari, let the healer work.” She struggled in his grip. Giotto, beside him collected the toddler before he could wander off.

The man gasped and lay still. Spock looked up. “He’s alive, but we need to get him to treatment. The parasite intended him to use the children to smuggle parasites into the hospital complex.” He tugged open his bag, selected a couple of additional hypos and administered those as well. “Can we bring him inside?”

“I’ll go check,” one of the sentries said, ducking inside the door. Giotto helped Spock turn the man onto his back.

“Happens several times a day. Once we didn’t search a kid close enough and we lost a nurse,” the remaining sentry told them.

“What’s the threshold age?” Kirk asked.

“It’s a weight we think. About twenty kilos. So you have people sweeping the city?”

“Yes, but not enough. We’ll need more.”

A woman appeared at the back door wearing makeshift body armor and flanked by two more people armed with phasers. She looked overhead warily before stepping into the spotlights. “Bring the patient over here,” she said.

Spock carried the unconscious man to the doorway. The woman ran a medscanner over him. “I don’t see evidence of the parasite, but it’s hard to get a read on them with a scanner. It’s almost like they’re not quite real.”

“They are largely, though not entirely composed of subspace matter,” Spock noted. “This individual is suffering from demyelinating inflammatory processes. I have administered agents to reduce inflammation and forestall anaphylaxis, but the patient will require extensive supportive care to reverse the degeneration of the spinal nerves.”

The woman nodded. “Back when we first started seeing cases, before we were shooting on sight, we found the disease progress was inevitably fatal, leading to death between one and six weeks postinfection. It’s not a pleasant way to go. Come in, let’s get this one to a proper biobed and I’ll get you a comprehensive list of what we need here. Bring the children, but strip them down first.”

Kirk complied, glad at least to have found a knot of civilization in this place. The six members of the first response team were led into the hospital, flanked by local security forces. It was crowded, and dimly lit for a hospital, but well organized. Every room had areas marked out on the floor in tape, cots and blankets arranged in rows.

Spock passed the patient in his arms to a pair of nurses. The lobby appeared to contain mostly staff, working at makeshift board and brick desks. Their movements were slow even when they hurried.
Quick steps followed by a moment against a wall. Chairs were not sat in, but collapsed into. Hands rubbed futilely at headaches and across tired eyes. A woman, tall, dark skinned, and gaunt, rushed over to him to clasp his hand with both of hers. She turned to Spock to do the same and he sidestepped her.


She took a second to process the information. “Of course. Sorry. I’m Milly Wahad.”

“James Kirk. We need a base of operations so we can get aid to you as quickly as possible.”

Wahad scanned the room. “Here.” She took them to a mostly cleared off space with a folding chair. “Our most immediate needs are food, water, baby formula—food started getting scarce a couple of weeks ago when the supply chains broke down. And any medical people you can spare.”

“Our people will be canvassing the city looking for infected for the moment. We’re setting up temporary structures near the hospital to house additional patients.”

“Sensible,” she said. She handed him a more comprehensive list in hardcopy. He scanned it and sent it up to Supply on the Nightingale. He saw the privation in their faces more clearly now and dug through the bag he carried in lieu of pockets, coming up with half a dozen protein bars.

He couldn’t bring himself to part with all six, to his shame, but let just one slip out of his fingers into the recesses of the bag unseen. He handed Wahad the other five, hand shaking a little so two of them slithered to the floor. Spock retrieved them smoothly to set them on the corner of the table. Wahad tucked them into her pockets. “I’ll get these to the cafeteria where they can be rationed out fairly,” she said.

She left them. He swallowed and stared down at the table, his vision swimming. Dammit. He could not afford to shut down now. Spock flipped the hardcopy over, placed it in front of Kirk, and produced a pen. He started drawing a complex design of loops and squiggles. Kirk shook his head. Spock tapped the pen at the top corner of the page, where the pattern began. Right. Kirk followed the pattern with his eyes for a count of ten, long enough to regain control of his voice. “I’ll be fine here,” he told Spock. “You’re needed elsewhere. Report back on the hour.”

“You should take a booster.” He produced a hypospray. Unlike Bones, he was not given to jamming the things into Kirk’s neck without warning. Kirk waved his permission at the hypospray and pulled out his datapad for the latest updates from the rest of the team. He couldn’t quite focus on the words in front of him yet. There was a cool pressure and a twinge as the contents hissed into the skin of his throat. “Give yourself two more minutes before you attempt to continue working. I will remain.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.” Kirk waved him off again, but he did pull the paper back in front of him to work the pattern the Healer had drawn, and it did occupy him enough to keep the worst of the ghosts at bay until his medication kicked in properly. Exactly two minutes after Kirk waved him off, Kirk heard the faint rustle of the metal hazard suit as Spock walked away. He needed to be at his best right now. They might have a cure, but they hadn’t managed to deliver it to however many thousands of infected people, and he had no idea what kind of assault they might expect from the parasitic hive mind as it realized it was beaten.
I told you I wasn't going to kill him.

Also, just so you know, if one attempted to deliver light bright enough to penetrate walls and basements from orbit to a planet's entire surface (as described in the original episode), you would ignite the atmosphere. It would not be pretty.
McCoy, Spock, and Kirk were supposed to be able to handle anything, weren't they?

Leonard McCoy’s hands were not supposed to shake.

He was not supposed to drop instruments or need the help of a nurse to load ampules into hyposprays. He was not supposed to have to lean against biobeds to keep his balance on his still half-numb feet. He considered the possibility that he might not recover his manual dexterity at an artificial remove, the half dozen neuroprotective and neuroregenerative drugs coursing through his system making a bland and fuzzy buffer between himself and his ruminations.

The Nightingale was nearly devoid of staff. They’d kept six physicians topside. Three residents, along with McCoy, Ebarye Bosh, who hadn’t yet fully recovered from his bout of cocolithic pneumonia, and Ryn ch’Shev, who was topside at least partly to look after Bosh and McCoy, though Mendeleev had also recommended that the Andorian not be allowed anywhere near the neural parasites, given their lower ability to recover from neurological compromise.

None of the three of them appreciated their exile, necessary though it might be. There was plenty to do--running the synthesizers to provide all the supplies needed on the ground was a full time job by itself, if a dull one, insufficient to distract McCoy from his lingering discomfort. He hesitated to call it pain, given how intimately he’d become acquainted with just how all encompassing truly excruciating pain could be, but if he were honest with himself he was still hitting five to six on the scale much of the time, and the biobed he was required to sleep in confirmed that assessment.

The Denevans had also requested a large supply of what was being called the “McCoy serum” against his express wishes in order to help rebuild the myelin sheaths of some of the most severely affected colonists. That task kept him busy culturing shepherd cells and training a second year resident to look after the cultures any time he couldn’t. He’d been up late last night writing the research board about the “unique opportunities afforded by a large population recovering from the same injury” and the “humanitarian need to get Deneva colony back on its feet,” while in the back of his mind he worried about the fact that the serum had only been in use at all for a year and they had no idea if it would have long term side effects.

Or whether the serum might produce a generation of Joannas. Lying on his face while the very young, very nervous first year resident used a microinjector to apply a more conventional myelin stimulating drug to each of his dorsal root ganglia, McCoy missed Spock. He felt hollowed out without his constant support, and lonely without the backchannel Spock had carefully excised while he slept through his body’s efforts to rid him of dead parasite residue. He wished he knew whether his feelings were based in something real, something that might be worth building into more than friendship or whether they were an artifact of their necessary intimacy. It must be the latter, he thought. Spock could feel nothing for him but perhaps pity.

He missed him anyway. He longed for that moment in an imaginary gazebo and wished it had been
real. He wished they could take a walk somewhere with no patients and maybe McCoy could ask
him about his family, why he’d gone into the healing profession, why he had left his home to be a
stranger in a strange land. Hell, he’d be happy just to listen to that smoothly didactic voice discuss
biochemistry over raspberry smoothies.

He had it bad. Dammit.

*

Spock was only supposed to answer questions after they were asked. Preferably aloud.

He had been awake for four days, too-brief meditation breaks stolen amongst meals taken while
reading charts, and his shields were slipping so badly they barely deserved the name. The wards
were as crowded as those on Liquo 2, and every bed held a patient who had failed to recover when the
parasite was killed. The two most common sequelae that landed patients in the hospital were
overzealous immune reactions, up to and including cytokine storms that had killed half a dozen on
this ward alone, and Guillain-Barre syndrome, which affected fifteen percent of the recovering
colonists, the worst of whom had been placed on ventilators while their immune systems were
convinced not to destroy their spinal cords. He had heard from Dr. ch’Shev that McCoy had
developed a mild case, but was responding well to therapy.

He was brittle and off balance without McCoy’s forceful reminders to eat, meditate, and sleep
every now and then “for God’s sake, before you kill someone.” The Denevan medical staff had
zero experience with Vulcan healers, as might be expected, so he found himself explaining and
justifying himself constantly. He knew McCoy wanted to be down here as much as Spock wanted
his company, and there were plenty of Denevan doctors and nurses putting in shifts with still
healing bodies, but Chapel had been firm in her insistence that McCoy was to stay topside.

He collected a precious bag of McCoy’s serum from the cooler and considered its chill weight in
his hand for several unnecessary seconds before crossing the critical care unit to the third bed from
the left, along the back wall. Patients receiving the serum had their beds marked with red flags.
This one was a nine year old boy on a respirator with severe Guillain-Barre and spinal cord damage
from having carried his parasite in a body too small to endure it. Children were specifically
excluded from the clinical trial, but Lavoie had allowed a compassionate use exception for this
boy, who was certain not to survive without the serum.

He hung the bag, ensured the child was at the correct level of sedation, and returned to his place in
the corner of the room. The space where his connection to McCoy had been while they battled the
parasite ached like a wound. He found himself worrying at it during these stolen moments of
meditation, the way he might a missing tooth. Or a missing limb.

Spock knew that sometime in the next half decade he would be required to seek a mate. It had been
made clear to him that due to his atypical mind and his hybrid status a sufficiently compatible
Vulcan would almost certainly not be found. His great aunt T’Pau had told him to seek a human
like his father and brother had. McCoy was both admirable and compatible, but he did not want to
take advantage of the human during a time of such vulnerability. He wanted to talk to McCoy
about anything that wasn’t medicine or Joanna. He wanted to understand what made them different
and yet so alike. He wanted to have him always in that space in his soul with no emergency to
justify his presence.

He did not understand love in the human sense, but as Dr. M’Benga had said once, you don’t have
to understand a lake to fall into it.

*
Kirk was not supposed to have to leave his post because he couldn’t handle a briefing.

As the hospital on Deneva’s administrator explained, Deneva’s social structure had remained mostly intact for the first six months of the infestation. The parasites took months to mature and release ameboid flyers from the bodies of their unfortunate hosts. The first parasites caused only the pain of their presence. Each, alone was only about as smart as a cockroach—McCoy’s hamster was a gross overestimate—so it took a quorum of many thousands of infected before the hive mind emerged and began giving orders.

Independent Deneva had sent requests for aid roughly four months into the infestation, a little less than a month after they had discovered it themselves, but these were quiet requests, sent through medical channels. The independent colony considered the parasites to be a medical and scientific problem, not an existential threat. Until two months ago, when the hive mind appeared to reach a critical size. It then coerced the infected to destroy every satellite in orbit and all of the subspace boosters in the space of a day, isolating the colony.

Soon after, the extent of the infestation became clear. At that time, she had estimated, the number of infected colonists had been about thirty thousand. People ran for the countryside, hid in makeshift shelters. Adults would be infected, leaving only small children under the age of eight or nine untouched. The oldest of those, so much younger than he had been when his world crumbled around him, gathered with younger siblings, scrounged for food, grew malnourished and sick while watching the youngest and weakest die.

He could not tour the hospital anymore to estimate the supplies needed. He could not look at the listless children lying three to a cot and twelve to a room. He could not hear about the tens of thousands of orphans they were trying to identify, could not spend one more minute matching all the volunteers on the Nightingale who had offered to look after children with offworld family on their journey back to the Starbase.

He had a flashback on the children’s ward bad enough Spock had been called to snap him out of it, after which the healer had called Pike to insist that he be relieved of duty for a minimum of twelve hours. Once back on the Nightingale, he walked the halls for an hour until he was calmer, for Joanna’s sake, then returned to the three bedroom family suite he’d gotten with Gaila even though they weren’t a couple exactly. They weren’t not a couple, exactly, either. He stood outside the door and knew he wasn’t ready. He couldn’t go inside and paste on a happy face for Peter and Joanna and two other little kids he didn’t even know. Gaila had commed him to let him know she and Chekov had matters well in hand. He wasn’t needed yet, wasn’t expected, certainly.

He roamed some more, found himself in the hospital quarter despite the sting in his nose from the antiseptic putting him into a mindset he really didn’t want to revisit. He leaned against a wall, covered his face with his palms to allow the scent of his own sweat to drown out the smell of hospital, and pushed himself down into a space that smelled more like baked earth and hot summer grass, sounded like the trickle of creek water and wind blowing high in the branches of a cottonwood.

“Computer, give me the location of Dr. Leonard McCoy.” This was cheating.

“Dr. McCoy is in the biochemistry pod, cubicle three.”

It was probably not a good idea to bother Bones in his office. He walked to the Biochemistry lab anyway. It was near the beginning of gamma shift. He thought the lab would be quiet, the lights dimmed, but it was bustling with men and women in white scrubs. A large portable synthesizer was parked in the middle of the floor, churning out ampules of drugs which were being packaged onto hand trucks to be transported to the surface.
“I’m looking for Dr. McCoy,” he said to the room at large.

A tall, slender black woman set down a rack of bags full of amber fluid. “He’s in his office. We made him take a break.”

“If he’s asleep, don’t wake him,” a short blonde man said as he passed by, pushing a hand truck. The willowy woman smiled, “Or we’ll poison your next meal.”

Kirk followed her pointing finger. He peered through the window. Bones had three data pads laid out on his desk and was scrolling through the one closest to him. He covered a yawn with his hand. Kirk knocked.

“Need a hand with something?” he said, popping out of his chair fast enough to knock one of the datapads onto the floor. He looked ruefully at it.

“It’s Jim.”

Bones drooped. “Come,” he said, his voice scratchy and slow with fatigue.

Kirk entered the small room. Bones was still staring at the data pad on the floor. Kirk swept it up and deposited it back on the desk, realizing that the doctor might not be able to bend to pick it up himself.

“Thanks,” Bones said without looking up. “What’s the situation on the ground?”

“The hive mind appears to have decided that going into hiding is its best shot. We’re having to search every basement, closet, and cave for infected. We’ve found and treated something like sixty thousand, now that we’ve equipped the locals. We’re sending some of our own injured up here for treatment, along with a couple of residents to help look after them.”

“Good plan,” Bones said.

The conversation died, swallowed by their awkward staring. Bones turned back to his datapad. Kirk stayed put, watching him, knowing he’d been dismissed and having no reason he could justify to stay. “You’re not Frank,” Kirk said.

“No, I’m not.”

Kirk couldn’t meet Bones’ eyes while the doctor was staring at his datapad. “I’m sorry.”

“You took my bones, Jim.” He looked from his desk chair to the cot pushed up against the wall and stood slowly, took two careful steps, and dropped slowly, painfully onto the cot. He leaned forward to reach for his shoes, stopped, and leaned back against the wall in defeat.

Kirk knelt on the floor beside the cot. “When you needed me, I wasn’t there. I was worse than not there.”

Bones licked his lips. “When we met, I told you I had nothing left but my bones. When you pushed me out of your life, you took those. I had nothing.”

Kirk took off Bones’ shoes and slid them under the cot. “I know.”

“I’m not okay,” Bones said.

“I know.” He perched carefully on the edge of the cot, not wanting to jostle Bones.
“I’m in love with a goddamn Vulcan.”

The admission brought a smile to Kirk’s face, and he chuckled. “I know.”

“Who’s only doing his job, keeping my ass functional.”

“I think he’d like to do something with your ass.”

McCoy sputtered not quite a laugh. “I kind of doubt that.”

Kirk shook his head. “You have no idea how much time I spend with that Vulcan. He’s got it bad. Every other word out of his mouth is about how the two of us need to reconcile. How good a man you are. How brilliant you are. He’s like a thirteen year old with a crush.”

Bones still sat with his head tilted back against the wall, his eyes closed. He rubbed his hands over his face. “God help me. Must be nauseating.”

Kirk scooted himself up onto the cot, next to Bones. “It’s kind of cute, really.” He slid an arm around him, hesitating when Bones flinched. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s ok. I’m just kinda sore.”

“Where?”

“Pretty much everywhere. You didn’t just come in here to apologize. You look about as bad as I feel. What gives?”

Kirk tapped the back of his head against the wall, twice. “A lot of kids left alone for a lot longer than little kids ought to be left alone. Spock made me take twelve hours leave. I should be able to handle it better.”

“You and me both.”

Kirk waited until he had Bones’ full attention, then said, “I want you to have Joanna back. Full time. I mean, as soon as you think you can handle it.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“With Spock’s help you can. And I think it needs to be pretty soon. I’ve got three Denevan kids in my quarters.”

“Three?”

“Couple we’re keeping until we get them to relatives on Earth. And Peter. I’m keeping Peter. The couple Sam and Aurelan had lined up didn’t make it. We found them yesterday.” He leaned forward to cradle his forehead in his laced hands. “I don’t think I could handle not knowing if he was okay.”

“At least I know that between you and Spock, Joanna will be.” Bones shrugged off Kirk’s arm. “Enough canoodling. I need to catch a little shuteye before delta shift. You going to be okay?”

“I’ll go hang out with Gaila and the kids.”

“That’s not what I asked you.”

“I’ll be fine.”
Bones snorted. “Yeah, right.” He gestured to a box in the corner of the office. “If you’d rather stay here, I’ve got a bedroll or you can use my workstation.” He half slid, half scooted his way down until his head rested on his pillow. Kirk stood to give him space for his legs, then pulled out the bedroll and a datapad.

Kirk spread the bedroll on the floor next to Bones’ cot. By the time he made himself comfortable, Bones was already asleep. He tried to go over the ordering stats, but found that Chapel had claimed that task in his queue, and he wasn’t up to trying to juggle numbers around the shortages until Hippocrates could get here day after tomorrow.

He pulled up an old, hell, practically ancient novel he’d read a couple of dozen times before—had he been only seven or eight the first time?

Brian Robeson stared out the window of the small plane at the endless green northern wilderness below. It was a small plane, a Cessna 406—a bush-plane—and the engine was so loud, so roaring and consuming and loud, that it ruined any chance for conversation…

Chapter End Notes

Bonus points for identifying the work referenced at the end, which is a very Jim Kirk book, in my opinion....
Your Healer is Broken

Chapter Summary

Spock overdoes it on the planet's surface, and McCoy has to come to his aid.

Chapter Notes

4000 words of self indulgent trippiness, with a floppy clock as garnish.

By the beginning of Delta shift, when McCoy was back on duty in a critical care ward full of Denevan kids, he was feeling, if not well, at least ambulatory. He got himself the rest of the way to functional with coffee and his scheduled dose of analgesic.

This was a room he did not want Jim anywhere near. Most of the Denevan patients were being treated in facilities on the ground, but the Nightingale and Farragut had begun taking children who were being sent to offworld relatives. Some were small enough or lucky enough to have escaped the parasite—as fully a third of the population had—but others, some as young as six or seven years old, had suffered the effects of the parasite as well as the loss of their homes and families.

He started down the line of beds to familiarize himself with any changes that had occurred over the last twelve hours; new patients, new treatments, new complications. “Serum LHM3B,” he read aloud. He flipped back to the front page. “Nurse, this patient is under fourteen. Why are we using the new serum? I explicitly excluded children from the study group.”

“Dr. Lavoie approved compassionate use for patients who were likely to die within twelve hours without the treatment.”

“Why did she not come to me about this? I’m head researcher on this project. I know the potential side effects better than anyone else.”

“I can imagine few side effects worse than death.”

“You have a limited imagination.” He could not voice his suspicions about Joanna’s condition without exposing himself to accusations of hypocrisy, or worse, malpractice, so he just scoffed loudly and continued reading down the seven year old’s chart. “How many?”

“Up here, only this one. Half a dozen more down on the planet. All that variety of fulminant Guillain-Barre we’ve been seeing in about one in two hundred patients. We’ve got one hundred fifty or so adults on the therapy as well.”

“Right. Before you add any more kids up here, let me know. I have concerns about possible side effects in children that may require specialized care.” The nurse nodded and moved off, and McCoy continued down the row. One teenager had died while he was working a shift in biochemistry, a cytokine storm in his case, something the serum did nothing to combat and, he was beginning to suspect, might make worse. No treatment cured everything.
The door whished open. Spock took a few steps into the room, swaying slightly. "Dr. Chapel sent me," he mumbled. "She said it was about a patient."

McCoy approached, but slowly. Spock looked like hell. "You’re in no shape to be seeing patients."

Spock blinked, tortoise slow. "She said you should check your data pad for details. I suspect subterfuge."

There was, indeed, a priority message on his pad from Chapel. He tapped it, half expecting the message he saw on the screen.

**Your healer is broken. Fix him.**

He closed the message. "My healer." He looked back at Spock, who seemed affected by an invisible breeze. "Sit down before you fall down."

Spock half fell into a chair. "I assume that I am the patient."

McCoy nodded. "Nurse Haymon, pull somebody to cover for me. Let’s get you to your office. It’s closer than your quarters."

"A moment." Spock did not get back up.

McCoy crouched in front of him, dropping his voice low enough that Nurse Haymon ought to know not to eavesdrop. "What do you need right now?" Spock felt like a howling wind. Or an open wound. McCoy settled back on his haunches to give the man a little space.

"I am merely fatigued."

And that was some high order bullshit. "This a kind of fatigued Vulcans can die from?"

Spock hesitated far too long for McCoy’s comfort. "I do not believe my life is at risk at this time."

"You sound so sure. I am totally reassured by that.” McCoy hoped Spock could identify sarcasm. "Can you walk? I want you out of the ward."

"That would be wise.” He struggled to his feet. McCoy occupied himself with the calculus of standing close enough to catch him if he should fall, but far enough away to dodge his occasionally weaving steps, all the while trying to imagine a whiteout around his mind. "Please do not,” Spock said as they reached the door to the treatment room adjoining Spock’s office.

"Am I doing it wrong?" He dismissed the shield with an imaginary gust of wind and immediately felt a sort of pull to the left, where Spock was standing.

"No. I.” The door slid open and he clutched the frame. “I am holding onto you for balance. In a manner of speaking.” McCoy held out an arm for Spock to take. “No. Not yet.” They walked into the room. Spock dropped onto the chaise.

McCoy tuned his medscanner and ran it over Spock, then sent the results to the large screen on its rolling armature. "You up to interpreting this for me? All I can see is your neuroscan looks like a ball of yarn after a cat got at it."

Spock stared at the neuroscan for long enough McCoy worried he might have fallen asleep with his eyes open--or had an absence seizure. The fingers of his right hand twitched about twice per second. He started speaking just as McCoy turned the scanner back on him. "I have picked up several resonances from patients I was unable to clear, as I had no time or space to effectively
meditate on the planet’s surface. I allowed the situation to progress to a point at which I cannot restore my mental function on my own.”

“So we get you to another healer?”

“At need. I would prefer not to engage the services of a healer. I have had poor experiences with all but a few, and those few I do not wish to know that I have compromised myself.”

“Don’t want your teachers to know you screwed up?”

“I do not.”

“So you don’t think you can meditate your way out of this.”

“Not alone.”

He kind of figured he knew where this was going, and guessed Spock was either unable to put his needs into words or was afraid to. “You want to hang out in a pretend gazebo for a while and uh,” he shouldn’t say this, really shouldn’t, “hold hands or something I wouldn’t object.”

Again, there was a silence that stretched too long, accompanied by a blankness in his gaze that didn’t look like mere hesitation. “While the offer is appealing, I fear that I require more active assistance.”

“Not a problem.” He hoped he sounded more sure than he felt.

“The meld is likely to be chaotic. You will have to be the one to provide structure. If you cannot you may do more harm than good.”

“Like when Joanna and I—the accident we had?”

Spock nodded. “It is too much to ask. I will contact my uncle.”

“The hell you will.” Spock seemed completely unable to avoid projecting his discomfort and disorientation. The air twisted sickly around him. McCoy thought. It could be weeks before they could get Spock back to Vulcan. “Just tell me what to do. I’m smarter than the average bear, I’m sure I’ll figure it out.” He sat down on the chaise and let his hand hover over Spock’s wrist.

Spock moved away. “I believe, if I take two hours to meditate in your presence, I will be stable enough to instruct you. You may use the time to eat and rest, that you will be better prepared to assist me.”

Two hours to eat and rest, or worry and pace, more likely. Spock crossed the room on unsteady legs to collapse onto his meditation mat. McCoy felt stretched, as if Spock were still holding on for balance, as he had said, but was now too far away to do so easily. Spock arranged himself into a sitting position and closed his eyes. McCoy grabbed a couple of pillows off the chaise and forced his protesting limbs to sit at the other end of the mat with his back resting against the wall. He sent a message to Lavoie, detailing the situation and asking her to set up remote real time surveillance, so they could work undisturbed while still having backup in case things went pear shaped. He wouldn’t be able to go anywhere and still be available for Spock, so getting a meal wasn’t realistic. He had ration bars and Gatorade in his bag. That would have to do.

The door chimed a few minutes later. “Who is it?” McCoy asked.

“It’s Arni. I brought dinner. Or breakfast. Whatever.”
She’d beamed up from Deneva based on McCoy’s request. He hadn’t expected so much. “Come in, but be quiet,” McCoy said.

Arni Lavoie tiptoed in, saw McCoy and Spock on the floor, and sank gracefully into a crosslegged position on the floor beside them. She passed McCoy a dish of vegetable lo mein and a fork. “How is he?”

McCoy shrugged. “Bad. I don’t know how bad, though. He’s trying to meditate for a while, then I guess we’re going to try something.” He waved his hand in the general direction of his head. “He was having a hard time putting thoughts into words.”

“Lost in translation?”

McCoy shook his head. “Nothing so benign. I think he’s having complex partial seizures. Mostly confined to the temporal lobe. Looked like a bit of ataxia, too.”

“So he’s planning to cure stupid with more stupid?”

McCoy shrugged. “Hair of the dog, I guess.”

Lavoie took a fresh scan of the healer, crossed the room to perch on the chaise, and frowned at it for several minutes. “I don’t know what to do about something like this.”

“We won’t be able to get him somewhere they do for at least a week. Maybe two. I don’t think it’s wise to do nothing for that long.”

Lavoie sighed grimly. “You sure you’re comfortable with whatever he has in mind?”

“I don’t know. I can’t make that decision yet. I don’t know what he wants to try, exactly.”

“You’re not filling me with confidence.” She took a look at the scan again. “I want you both to wear monitoring bracelets. I’ll be in my office, right over there.” She left the bracelets, pointedly, on the shelf in front of the work screen.

McCoy pulled up his backlog of charts, hoping the relatively unchallenging task would help him relax. It didn’t. He checked the scanner at ten minute intervals, noticing what he hoped was a gradual improvement. Two hours passed, then a third. He needed a proper meal, but if he moved more than a couple of meters from Spock, the readings grew worse again. He dialed the mess, asking for a meal. Beans and rice, with salsa this time. Quick and filling. A kid from the galley brought it by.

He’d barely finished when Spock took a deep breath and opened his eyes. McCoy set aside the containers. “You feeling better?”

“Somewhat.” He stood without stumbling and crossed the small room to sit on the chaise. McCoy followed.

“So, can you explain what you need in words a country doctor can understand?”

“I believe you are underselling your intelligence, Doctor. In order to repair my own mind, I must be able to create a construct by which I can visualize the damaged areas. I find I am unable to do so through meditation alone.”

“So how can I help?”
“A construct formed by two minds is more stable than one created in isolation. I believe that, working together, we can create a working frame of reference that will facilitate my recovery.”

“So what do I do?”

“The construction of a mental workspace requires the identification of mental patterns common to both participants in a meld and building a metaphorical landscape out of those patterns.”

That made very little sense. It might have something to do with noticing, the way Spock noticed that he was calmed by the memory of snow. He would just have to wing it. “I hope that makes more sense once we’re actually doing it,” he said. “Lavoie wants us to wear these.” He passed Spock a monitoring bracelet.

“A reasonable precaution.” Spock snapped it on.

McCoy tapped his comlink. “Arni, you around?”

There was a short pause, then, “I’m here. You two getting started?”

“Looks like it.”

“I’m on the scanner.”

McCoy turned back to the healer. “All right, what do I do?”

“Calm your mind. When you are prepared, you may use the psi point overlying the ulnocarpal joint. I will provide additional bandwidth via the craniofacial psi points as the meld settles.”

McCoy nodded, settling back on the cushions. “I think I should probably tell you. I may have a—” he would not use the word crush. Too middle school. “A potentially romantic interest in you. Or I may just be reacting to all the, you know, the fact you’ve been in my head a lot.”

Spock kept his eyes fixed on the monitor screen. “I must confess a similar interest, though perhaps with somewhat different parameters given our different cultural backgrounds. It is the fact of our affinity, as well as your natural aptitude, that increases our chances of success.”

“I want to try something.” McCoy carefully tugged Spock’s shirt down to cover his wrist.

“A layer of clothing will prevent any rapport from proceeding to a meld.”

“Exactly my plan. I want to take it slow, since I’m making it up as I go.”

Spock appeared to consider for a moment. “I do not believe your plan is likely to do harm. Proceed.”

McCoy nodded, then shifted position on the chaise so they were sitting side by side. He didn’t meditate as often as he probably ought to, especially given the empathy thing that he hadn’t realized was anything but disconcerting trivia in his medical file, but he did practice a short form, usually to focus his attention and steady his hands before surgery. He held his focus on his breathing until his heartbeat slowed to only a little faster than normal and his body felt like it had settled deep into the cushions. He acknowledged and dismissed the residual burning nerve pain centered in his upper back, then found Spock’s crackling tangle beside him, tried to feel the shape of it, imagined he could see him; roaring, speckled gray static shot with a deep orange red the color of Georgia clay. He thought the red was right and good, the gray wrong, distress made visible.
He bumped the side of Spock’s wrist with the backs of his fingers to locate it without having to open his eyes, slid his first two fingers down the diaphysis of the ulna down to the small ridge at the end, then fitted two fingers into the gap just proximal to the carpal bones, still keeping a layer of fine knit fabric between them.

Even with that layer of fabric to slow them down he felt a hazy, spinning vertigo not unlike what he’d felt the few times he’d caught himself in the moment of falling asleep. The sensation was just familiar enough for him to follow it down, and just painful enough to make him hesitate. At this bare remove he could tell Spock was trying to control his own discomfort, a word that seemed wrong to McCoy. The sensation was something that was far more unpleasant than discomfort implied, but wasn’t exactly pain. It encompassed nausea, spinning vertigo and a sort of unsettled disorientation in which time and space didn’t seem to flow properly. He recognized the feeling for what he felt from Joanna when he was near her and was afraid. Spock seemed to withdraw slightly.

I’m fine. Give me a minute.

He didn’t want to continue until he had some idea of the pattern he was seeking, the essence he wanted to strengthen at the expense of the dissonant, sharp tasting—tasting?—patterns breaking up Spock’s normal rhythm and there. The deep orange red, that belonged to Spock, and the tessellated triangles, and the sound like a hum in the key in which Spock normally spoke. That was enough to hold onto and he let go, drifting into chaos, toward those few patterns his mind had wrapped metaphors around and seeking an image to hold them together. Somewhere he had been and could remember clearly. He thought of his grandmother’s house, the garden in springtime, rich red earth and peas climbing up strings stretched over frames made of old pipe. The buzz of honeybees from the hive behind the tool shed. He hooked Spock’s wristband with the same two fingers to push it out of the way, settled them back into the hollow, skin on skin, and free fell, capturing the red and transmuting it into clay soil, warmed by the sun and reflected up into a cloud streaked sunrise.

His construct became abruptly more real. Spock coalesced beside him, not himself, yet, just a sort of puckering of the air. McCoy sat on a railroad tie on the garden’s border, looking up into a faceted sky that couldn’t decide whether to be faded blue or peachy pink. That’s a weird looking sky.

The humming deepened, turned into Spock’s voice. You do seem to have incorporated surrealist influences.

McCoy concentrated for a moment, experimentally, and a clock the size of a dining room table drifted out of the sky to drape itself over a fencepost. He turned his head and Spock sat beside him in something not too unlike white scrubs. Smiling at his attempt at humor. Time didn’t seem to move right. He couldn’t tell if they rested there for seconds or minutes. How long have we been here?

I am uncertain.

That was not reassuring. McCoy regarded the sky. Its crystalline facets glittered and refracted with indirect sunlight, becoming less skylike all the time until the garden was enclosed in a dome made of flickering triangles, light passing from one to the next in complex patterns. Here and there, the lines of light would meet and break against each other like waves, sending chaotic ripples through the dome. Spock’s attention was fixed on the dome, as if he were observing, or perhaps even directing the light show. Are you able to shift further into my frame of reference? Spock asked.

Maybe. Can you show me what you mean?

Focus on me. Allow the space around us to become more abstract. Reinforce the changes that seem
McCoy tried. The not-Georgia around them vanished as though he let out a held breath. This time he was not moving toward Spock, but moving with him. He had the sense that if he had a clue what he was doing there would be some cleaner, more precise way of going about it, but wishes weren’t horses and pigs didn’t fly. The only way to move them closer he could imagine was not exactly platonic, and he feared that instead of helping Spock recreate himself, McCoy would remake him into what he thought he ought to be.

*I trust you in this,* came the response.

McCoy turned his attention to his sense of where Spock was and fell into memory, a woman’s face, gritty red sands settling on a doorstep and stones encrusted with glittering crystals, lined up neatly in boxes with labels hand lettered in a swirling script. A melody low and soft, the notes pleasant but unimportant, the meter ticking like a metronome about twice as fast as he wanted it to—he thought himself into a rhythm exactly half as fast, slowing himself a little and they fit together without strain. They drifted more into synchrony with each other. The triangles kept their shape, but came to resemble stars connected by lines of light, which McCoy realized Spock was examining and changing, bringing discordant, clashing patterns back into harmony. It felt as though they were one overlaid on the other, the space around them small and close. He felt that if he were to move just—so—he would dissolve entirely. He had the sense that to do so would be welcome, but again he hesitated. Could he return the trust he had been granted to that extent? He felt a question—a request and an offer. He needed to ask. *Is this a need or a want?*

His hesitation was read and understood for what it was. *We have accomplished what was necessary. Rest and meditation will complete the process. I thank you.*

*And this?* He thought of the possibility that they could take their connection further, and abruptly remembered that they had before, briefly, when they first fought the parasite.

*We should speak of the consequences before we proceed. I will dissolve the meld, but I would prefer to remain in light rapport for a time.*

McCoy’s relief must have been evident. He flowed back into his body, which was stiff from sitting in one position for too long. Spock’s head rested on his shoulder. The empty place where the backchannel had been was no longer empty, but bright and lived in, threading them together. “Does this mean we’re a couple?” he said, his voice sounding loud and almost raspy in his ears.

“If you wish.”

“I think I do. That other thing—that we almost did. Would we have been sort of--married?”

“Such is not always the consequence of a union of that kind, but for us, I strongly suspect the beginning of a marital bond would have formed. Something that should be discussed at length before entering into, and not at a time when our judgment is compromised.”

McCoy turned toward Spock. “I think I need to ask you something potentially embarrassing,” McCoy said.

“Yes?”

He blew out a breath and resolved to just come out and say it. “Sex. I mean there’s no rush. I’ve been so preoccupied I’ve hardly thought about it for a year, now. But I gotta admit I tried to look up you know, cultural norms for Vulcans, and I found nothing. Do you even?”
“We do. I have not. Is your lack of interest your usual state?”

“No, I’m bisexual, like most humans.” He sighed. “To be honest I think it’s anhedonia. I should work on that. For your sake and Joanna’s. I don’t want to be a joy sponge forever.” He stretched, feeling his spine pop in several places. “Think you’re up to walking back to my room? I do not want to sleep here.”

“I am not ready to engage in sexual activity at this time,” Spock said.

“I said sleep. Which is what you need and apparently,” he yawned, “So do I.” He pulled Spock to his feet by a shirt covered wrist.

They made their way to the turbolift. Spock noted, “You are still clearing the organic debris from the parasite. In addition, the work you just did is quite taxing.” He paused. “Sometimes I forget how taxing. Vulcans in general require four hours of sleep out of every twenty four and can, at need, forgo such for extended periods of time, though not without consequences. Healers, especially of the Syrannite school, require nearly as much sleep as humans.”

“And you haven’t been getting it.”

“No. Hence the situation I arrived at today.”

They arrived at McCoy’s door. “We could stay in your room if you prefer,” he said.

“I keep the space at twenty eight degrees Celsius.”

“I’ll just wear less. You’d benefit from the familiar surroundings.”

They took a few more steps down the hall and Spock palmed the lock open. His room was done in oranges and golds, much like his office was. McCoy stopped in front of a piece of elaborate fibercraft covering one wall. “Jocelyn is a fiber artist,” he said. “She’s very good. Does well for herself.”

Spock flipped back the covers on his bed. “This crocheted blanket was made for me by my mother. It arrived at the end of my plebe summer.”

McCoy nodded. “My name is Leonard, by the way. My friends call me Len, the ones that don’t call me Bones. That nickname is contagious.”

“I knew your name already, Len.” He left for their shared bathroom. McCoy waited until he emerged, then took his turn to brush his teeth. He stopped in his own room for a lightweight t-shirt and shorts and to drop his uniform in the ‘fresher, then returned to find Spock lying on his back like a vampire in his coffin.

He slid in beside him. “I’m assuming my being around is a net positive for your brain reset thing?”

“It is. Physical contact would not be unwelcome.”

McCoy turned on his side to gingerly rest his arm across Spock’s body. “Lights five percent,” he said. Boldly, or what passed for boldly in his mind lately, he rested one leg over Spock’s, and moved his head to rest on the not-yet-asleep man’s shoulder. Spock shifted under him, getting comfortable, and followed McCoy into sleep.
"Mmmmmm," Joanna said with exaggerated enthusiasm, the spoon in her left hand, laden with applesauce, waving in front of Noor’s singularly unimpressed face. The baby shoved the spoon away with one chubby hand.

Joanna looked to Kirk, sitting beside her, for assistance. Kirk shrugged. She looked at Noor, pointedly, and put the tiny bite of applesauce in her own mouth, forcing a smile. Noor wasn’t fooled, but at least Joanna was eating, sort of.

Gaila perched on a bar stool in the breakfast nook, something warm and vanilla in a mug beside her, her datapad in front of her while she reviewed lines of code. “There’s some dema fruit in the cooler. Could you get it for me?”

Kirk leaned off his own stool to reach for the door to the cooler, overbalanced, and nearly fell off, but he did get the door open. He retrieved the small yellow fruits and set a handful in front of Gaila.

Peter and Yusuf sat on the couch, quiet. He thought they were watching something on the holoscreen, but when he’d looked a couple of minutes ago, the screen was off. They were just sitting, wide eyed and still, side by side, looking at nothing. Kirk took the bag of dema to the couch. “Don’t leave pits in the cushions,” Gaila said.

“I would never,” Kirk replied. He sat down on the couch to one side of the boys and scooped Peter onto his lap, the little boy’s limbs stiff, but not actively resisting. Yusuf crawled closer to lean into Kirk’s side. “Play Elizabeth Samm’s Dino Worlds,” he told the holoscreen.

Yusuf curled in closer, both small hands wrapped around Kirk’s arm. Peter’s stiff posture only gradually relaxed as the children’s program continued. Dr. Liz rode a bubble like hovercraft through a landscape of brightly colored plants, unobtrusively filming and describing the large saurian animals found on Tau Ceti 4, one continent of which had been set aside, free of human colonies, in order that these large, dinosaur like creatures could exist largely undisturbed.

He passed a dema fruit to Yusuf, then prepared one for Peter, carefully tearing it in half and working the pit free with his thumb before handing the fruit to the little boy. Distracted by the program, they were both willing to eat slowly, rather than jamming food into their mouths as fast as they could. Joanna padded in from the kitchen with a bowl of cheese flavored animal crackers tucked into her left arm. She set them on the table without comment, gathered a small handful, and sat on the floor to watch and lick the salt off of them. Kirk grabbed a handful of his own to share with the boys.

He recognized a temptation to do more to comfort the two boys, who he could imagine were suffering in their own ways from whatever they had experienced on Deneva, but he understood, maybe more than a lot of the other crew members probably enacting scenes like this all over the ship, that not every moment had to be therapy, and sometimes it was good to just curl up in a safe
place, watch dinosaur analogs browse among ferns, and grind cracker crumbs into the couch.

*A*

“Aren’t you and Bosh supposed to be on one shift per day?” the head biochemit, Rumi Tanaka said, sliding out from under a replicator that had blown a circuit.

It was fifteen minutes after the end of Alpha shift. McCoy had pointedly not awakened Spock in the morning and had put him on a mandatory twenty four hour leave, short staffed or no. “I’m picking up Spock’s shifts. He shows up here, you kick him out.”

Tanaka sat up at the sound of the door swishing open. “Speak of the Devil,” she said.

Spock stood in the doorway, in uniform, looking almost like himself. “I do not intend to disobey doctor’s orders today,” he noted. “Precisely when did you list yourself as my primary physician?”

McCoy shrugged. “Start of Alpha shift. M’Benga’s still your specialist, but I needed to make sure you stayed out of critical care for the next day or so.”

“Understood. Commander Kirk and Joanna are waiting for you in the rec room.”

McCoy looked around the room for a suitably pressing task. He shook his head. “I’ve got cultures to transfer. You people put too many patients on that damn serum.”

“Aliyah can handle the cultures,” Tanaka said, traitorously. “Go.”

McCoy’s palms were sweating again. “Let’s take a walk,” he said to Spock, then headed out the door. He didn’t want to discuss the situation with Joanna in front of a biochem lab full of people. He knew there were rumors circulating, some of them wildly inaccurate, some of them a little too accurate for comfort. Once they were outside, McCoy continued. “I don’t think I’m ready.”

“Attempt the shield.”

McCoy did as he was asked. He still felt cotton headed and distant when he tried, as though he’d taken a mild sedative. “It’s not this, though. I don’t know if I can be somebody’s dad, full time. I mean Jim’s good at kids. They love him.”

Spock kept pace beside him, hand folded behind his back. “The fact remains that you are her father.”

They made their way down the hallway, past what looked like holoprojections of their colleagues. “How the hell do you walk around like this all day? Nobody looks real.”

“It takes time and practice to filter sensory input to a level you find comfortable. You will improve.”

McCoy scoffed, then caught Spock’s elbow to stop him and turn him so they faced each other. “What about you? Are you going to overwork yourself into whatever the hell you had going yesterday every time there’s a mass casualty? Because it looks like we’re going to see a lot of them.”

“I will endeavor to pace myself.”

“You’ll pardon me if I don’t believe you.”
They exited the turbolift on the family deck. A pair of little boys, maybe four years old, ran by, followed by a harried looking young man.

Spock sidestepped them gracefully. He stopped in front of an already open door, waiting for McCoy to catch up. McCoy caught himself hiding behind Spock. They walked in together. He struggled to look cheerful, unaffected, not like he was so nervous he could barely keep his hands from shaking.

Kirk walked up with a doll on his hip and pulled McCoy into a hug with his free hand. No, that was absolutely wrong. He could not do this with cardboard cutout Jim and where the hell did that doll come from? He looked again. Where the hell did that baby come from? He let the shield go with the mnemonic they had created, blowing it away. Spock looked askance at him and he shrugged. He’d set the damn thing back up when Joanna got close, and not a second before.

“This is Noor,” Kirk said, bouncing the baby a little. “Her brother Yosef is…’ he tracked around the room with a finger, “there.”

McCoy followed his gaze to where a pair of little boys, one about three, the other closer to five, were sitting in a sandbox. “How is Peter doing?”

“Pretty okay. He has nightmares. We’ve spent a night or two on the couch. Every night on the couch. But we’ll get there.”

“How is,” McCoy swallowed. “How is Jo?”

“See for yourself.”

McCoy followed Jim’s gesture to the ball pit, where Joanna was throwing the little plastic balls at hoops with varying degrees of success, low key cheered on by Min Carvalho. She still had the brace on her arm, but the gauze had been removed, and once in a while, when she threw a ball, her arm swung out of its guarded position by her side. Her hair was neatly braided, rather than in snarls. She caught sight of him and ran toward him, one green ball still clutched in her left hand.

She met his eyes for a spare second, then dropped the ball on the ground to mime scribbling. McCoy noticed that the fingers of her right hand still didn’t move, but he hadn’t expected them to, not really. He copied the gesture and she nodded.

He handed her his datapad. She dropped to the floor at his feet, intent on drawing.

He turned to Spock. “You got her to stop ripping up her arm.”

“It was the first priority.”

“I’m glad.” He shuddered involuntarily at the memory of his own pain. A hand on the small of his back calmed him. “I’m fine,” he protested without much conviction and leaned slightly into the touch.

Joanna hopped up, data pad held emphatically toward him. It held a line drawn portrait of a smiling little girl with curly lavender pigtails. McCoy smiled broadly and nodded, collecting his happiness that she was happy and, not really knowing what to do with it, just dwelled on it in her general direction.

She raised the datapad over his head and held it almost into his face. Jim leaned in to have a look. “Oh yeah. She wants to color her hair. Lavender. I kind of told her she had to ask you.”
“How did you manage to get that across?”

“A lot of pictures of you. Every time she asked.”

A temporary opaque wash wouldn’t do her any harm, he guessed. “Can Gaila do it?”

“In the bath, yeah.”

“Fine.” He didn’t want to deny her something she really wanted. Especially a way of expressing her personality. He nodded. She bounced up and down in place a couple of times, grinning. “We’ll send a picture to your mom, see how she likes it.”

“You are evil,” Jim said.

Joanna looked around the children’s rec room until she caught sight of Min on a mini trampoline and pelted away. “She looks happy,” he said.

“Wait until she starts school next week.”

McCoy frowned. “Are you sure it’s not too soon?”

“There are only seven kids in the class. It’s mixed four and five year olds. We decided to put her in that group so she could be with Min. You should take some time to meet the teacher.” Noor wriggled in Jim’s arms. He turned around to set her in a soft sculpture crawl space, then perched on the half meter high barrier intended to keep the crawlers contained and safe from older children. “I’m having the steward move her things to your new quarters. There were a few of the larger ones available, so you have a spare bedroom for a night nurse or whoever.” He indicated Spock with an insufficiently subtle look.

“I don’t need you meddling in my...” There was a commotion in the trampoline corner. “Uh oh.” McCoy jogged over. Three preschoolers were mobbing Joanna, who had dropped into her defensive pillbug position and was breathing way too fast and headed for a meltdown. This time at least he remembered the damn shield before he waded into the pile, scooped her up under her arms and picked his way back over to where Jim and Spock had settled.

Joanna clutched at his clothes, still hyperventilating. McCoy expected, frankly hoped Spock would take her off his hands, but aside from changing position so that he was between the two of them and most of the room, he did nothing. He set Joanna down. She buried her face in his pant legs below the knees. Just be calm for her and she will recover on her own.

“I am not calm,” he muttered. There was another little person at his elbow. A little girl someone in pigtails. He looked down. Min Carvalho looked up at him, face pinched but still, a failing attempt at the appearance of emotional control. “Joanna just needs a little break.”

Min nodded curtly, her hands tucked neatly behind her back. “I will be patient.” She stood at his elbow, unmoving, eyes fixed on Joanna.

McCoy opened his bag and pulled out his pad and medscanner, then handed the bag off to Spock so he didn’t have to put it on the floor where curious little hands could do themselves harm with its contents. He handed the pad to Min. “Hold this for me, please.”

“Yes, doctor,” she said, perfectly mimicking the intonation of a nurse. McCoy stifled a smile. He ran the scanner over Joanna out of what was probably an abundance of caution. He handed Min the
scanner and took the data pad to look at the result, which he couldn’t interpret except that it didn’t look really awful or perfectly normal. He handed it to Spock, who gave it a very cursory glance that said he didn’t actually read it.

Min sidled closer to her friend. “Joanna is my best friend. I don’t want her to be scared.”

“Best friend?”

“Yes. We draw pictures and make modeling clay and build blanket caves. Mr. Kirk showed us how to make blanket caves.” She used the distraction of talking to slip around him so she was standing next to Joanna, then, centimeter by centimeter scooted closer until her leg bumped up against Joanna’s curled up body. McCoy opened his mouth to tell her to back off, but Min was already whispering something not-Standard at Joanna, whose body tilted until she leaned against Min’s legs.

Min looked up with a look that was a cross between innocent sweetness and steel. “Best friend.”

Spock looked around McCoy again, taking in the two girls and said, “So, doctor, would you benefit from assistance arranging your living space this evening? I am scheduled to work with Joanna before she goes to bed, but I could come early.”

McCoy mused, “My kid has a best friend. Jo has a real friend. Her parents aren’t like, making her or something, are they?”

“No,” the voice from below said, clearly indignant. “Joanna has pretty hair like Hermione Granger and she is good at drawing and she never teases me.”

Joanna rose to her feet and looked up at him, her lower lip still pushed out a little. Not scared or overwhelmed anymore, quite. Just sad. She held up her arms, as though asking to be picked up.

McCoy hadn’t held Joanna since she was eight months old, when Jocelyn moved out one day while he was pulling a double shift. After Vengeance, by the time she was strong enough to be out of a biobed, her talent, such as it was, had emerged, and there were no hugs from then on. Not knowing if he was making a mistake, he thought the blizzard around himself again and everything receded except himself and Joanna. He lifted her into his arms and she wrapped arms and legs around him tight and squeezed. He turned her face to the uniform fabric at his shoulder. He dared to turn his head and rest his lips against the hair at the crown of her head, breathing the scent of her hair, Gaila’s vanilla and mango scented shampoo and little girl sweat. The shield wasn’t quite up to it, he floated a bit on sorrow and relief and the feeling of--Daddy--that wasn’t a word or an image, but just was—and when he stumbled a little backward there was an arm around his back to hold them both up.

Joanna slithered down out of the embrace and, apparently satisfied, followed Min to a toddler free corner to draw on the walls with markers. Spock turned toward him. His arm slipped off McCoy’s back, ending up at his side so that the backs of their hands touched. McCoy felt the slightest stirring warmth of a kind he thought had left him. It wasn’t a sunrise worth, he certainly wasn’t ready to drag Spock around a corner to an empty bedroom and ravish him—though the bubble of mirth that accompanied Spock’s faint blush was worth the image he’d called to mind. It was more like the faint periwinkle streaks of light in the eastern sky before dawn, a promise of a sunrise not too far in the future.
Making Home

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

Last chapter!

(Though not necessarily the last time I will visit this AU. I've never been able to leave a story well enough alone.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kirk and Gaila scanned the shuttle arrival concourse for Jana and Besan Ahmed. Yusuf clung to Gaila’s hand, the other thumb corked in his mouth, a habit he was a little old for, but this was by no means the time to break him of it. Kirk bounced Noor, who was amply entertained by the passing crowds of exotically dressed and shaped people while holding on to Peter’s hand tightly. The two year old swung, pendulum fashion, from feet planted like a pivot, though Kirk wasn’t sure if he was merely entertaining himself or was working his way up to an escape. A few other uniformed officers and techs stood waiting for this particular shuttle along with them, each with a child or two to shepherd.

A long line of people emerged from the door that led from the shuttle bay, breaking apart to their various destinations. Two hijabi women dressed in flowing floor length dresses appeared toward the end of the line, walking hand in hand, scanning the concourse for he could guess the four of them. He waved. The shorter woman caught his eye and waved back, then they changed course to come toward Gaila and Kirk.


Kirk put a hand to his chest and bowed just the slightest bit toward each of them. “Commander James Kirk, USS Nightingale. This is Lieutenant Gaila Vro. Have you met the children before?”

“Yusuf came for Eid three years ago. I can’t imagine he remembers us,” Jana said. “We have a home in Cyprus. It is a good place to raise children. I hope that we both have the energy to start over.” She indicated Peter with a smile. “Yours?”

Kirk shook his head. He used Besan’s decision to reach for Noor at that moment to collect himself while he passed her to her grandmother. “Peter’s my nephew. His parents also lost their lives on Deneva.”

“So you’re in the same boat we are.”

“I don’t think so, quite,” Jana teased. “You can’t be a day over, what, thirty? And I’m only saying
that because twenty is too young to be a Commander. But it’s good you have a partner to help you.”

“Oh Gaila and I aren’t a couple,” he said on reflex.

Gaila squeezed him into a half hug. “We’re not a traditional couple,” she corrected.

Kirk started. That statement was the closest she’d gotten to defining their relationship at all since they’d started to serve on the Nightingale. Sure, she was around all the time, and sure, they’d had some fun in the bedroom a couple of times—between missions, near death experiences and what was becoming an endless parade of children in his quarters, there hadn’t been that many opportunities. He was pretty sure she was also sleeping with a pretty little nurse. And while he hadn’t had time for any trysts lately, he was absolutely pining after security officer tall, dark and Maori. “Really?” he said.

Gaila smirked.

Kirk found himself rambling at Besan. “I sent you a list of things they seem to like to eat, activities they’ve enjoyed. Yusuf likes sandboxes and chess. Well, playing with chesspieces. He needs to be in therapy when you get back to Earth.”

“We’ll take good care of him,” Besan assured him.

Kirk nodded, unable to shake his worry. “I had some bad stuff happen to me when I was younger, and I didn’t work it out at the time. Just, you know, don’t let him fool you into thinking he’s bouncing back on his own.”

Jana extricated Yusuf from Gaila’s grasp at last. He disappeared partway into her voluminous skirts, peeking out to observe Besan. Jana stroked his hair. “I am glad that the children have been in the company of someone—some people—who care so much about them, even knowing them for such a short time.” She turned pointedly to her partner. “Don’t you, Besan?”

“Of course,” she said. “Forgive us. It has been a long time since there were children in our house, and the suggestion we might not be up to the task hits a little close to home.”

“I’m sure it does. I know it does for me.”

“We have a connecting flight, soon, and would like some time to get acquainted, if you don’t mind?”

“Not at all,” Kirk said. The grandmothers smiled their goodbyes and headed off down the concourse. As soon as they were lost to sight, Kirk turned to Gaila. “Walk with me.”

He lifted Peter into his arms and walked alongside her. Gaila kept her arm around his waist.

“What are we to each other, really?” he said.

“I don’t do monogamy,” she said.

“Well, neither do I. I mean, we both have reputations to uphold.”

She giggled. “Our reputations exaggerate and you know it.” She reached up to rake her fingers through his hair in a way he knew made it stick straight up. “I am totally on board for being Peter’s mom.”
“Permanently?”

“I’ll watch him deflower his groom. Or bride. Or any combination thereof.”

Kirk’s mouth fell open. “That is not a human tradition.”

Gaila’s laugh exploded out of her hard enough to double her over. She backed off a couple of steps, still doubled over while she pointed and wheezed. After almost a minute, she regained her composure and said, “It’s not an Orion one either. But the look on your face…priceless I tell you. Would do it again in a minute.”

“I’m not kidding around, Gaila.”

She giggled around the aftershocks of her mirth. “I’m not either, Jim.” She let go of him to lace her hands together in front of them both. “Orion family relationships are complicated. Woven together. Even when those families are broken by men who think they ought to be able to treat woman and kids like they’re things. I can’t be with just one person forever—or until you get yourself killed—any more than you can.”

“I’m not going to let myself get killed.”

“Again, you mean?”

“Fine.”

She wrapped an arm around Kirk and Peter. “I want us to be a family. And I want, maybe someday, to bring another person or two or three in. Maybe that sweet looking best friend of yours and his sweetheart of a boyfriend.”

Jim chewed his lip. “Or that little nurse you’ve been seeing?” But Bones. He just wasn’t sure. He loved the man, these last few weeks had proved that to him, if nothing else. But he was pretty sure Vulcans were rigidly monogamous—and what if the only reason he and Bones weathered all the things they did together was because they weren’t a couple? At least not that kind of couple. “Please don’t seduce Bones,” he finally said. He put on an airy smile. “He’ll have a heart attack.”

“I think you underestimate the strength of his heart. Besides, he really needs to get laid.”

“Gaila! Peter.” He chucked his head at the admittedly oblivious toddler.

“Right, sorry.”

Kirk bit his lip. He let himself mull over the idea of building the family Gaila envisioned, tried to decide whether he would feel stifled by all the attention. He didn’t know whether it was Gaila’s suggestion that did it, but the first people he thought of in that family were Bones and Spock. If they could even think of him that way. “Okay. As long as nobody moves in until everybody who already lives with us agrees. And give me a little time to get Peter settled.”

“Deal. Except if it’s your hunky best friend and his hot Vulcan.”

“Gaila!”

*

Joanna was a woman on a mission. She crossed her arms archly in front of her until her entourage assembled at the gates to the kindergarten, here, a literal children’s garden that dominated one
corner of the kaleidoscope deck on Starbase 4. “You, you, you,” she signed, pointing to McCoy, Min, and Spock in turn. “Come see my flowers.” Her gaze rested most pointedly on Spock.

They followed like ducklings.

Joanna led them through an archway marked with elaborately braided, living strangler figs that formed a lattice which was in turn adorned with morning glory vine. The sensory garden tempted her away from her mission for a time. Spock stood beside McCoy, not touching but closer than would be customary for colleagues while Min and Joanna brushed their hands through the raised beds of lemon mint and thyme and bent to smell the fragrances released.

That only held them for a moment, though, and Joanna was off and running, down the center of the arboretum and around the corner to the sunflower maze, where she stopped in front of the eight foot tall yellow flowers, arched one eyebrow in a perfect imitation of her mentor, and skittered out of sight among the tall, hairy stems, Min close behind her.

“Implausibly large flowers?” McCoy said.

“I believe this is a new installation. Previous mazes have featured corn and ivy trained onto trellises.” He tilted his head to regard the giant blooms. “I have seen black eyed susans. My mother grew them in her small garden. Helianthus giganteus,” he read off the label. “Giant sunflower.”

They settled onto a park bench, with what McCoy’s mama would have called “room for their guardian angels” between them. The girls couldn’t get lost. The only outlet emerged next to the entrance and even if it didn’t, the thumping footfalls and squealing would give them away. He ought to be happy. By all objective measures, he ought to be. He had his work and his research to occupy his mind. He had cheated death twice in the last month, not counting personal crises. He had his little girl and his best friend back in his life, for good, he resolved, though the possibility of losing them again lurked at the back of his mind and burned in his chest. He reminded himself to breathe through that fear. Spock glanced in his direction but he shook his head. I’m good, he said. And he would be. Happiness came upon him now in precious flashes, brought on by Joanna’s smile or an elegant gesture or turn of phrase from Spock. Spock’s response came in the form of a wordless caress, warm and light. Like sunlight on his skin. Somebody wonderful loved him. There was a reason to be happy, even on a bad brain day. He bumped Spock’s wrist with his knuckles and raised two fingers. Spock met them with his own, intensifying that brightness and sending a spark of genuine heat southward.

The moment was interrupted by two small girls skittering to a stop in front of them. Min had her arms crossed and her lips pursed primly. Joanna rolled her eyes and pretended to gag, then pointed out of the arboretum to the jungle gym. McCoy nodded approval and the girls pelted away.

A few minutes later, Joanna and Min were posed upside down on the playground equipment, two sets of pigtails dangling down, Min’s straight and glossy black, Joanna’s in lavender ringlets. Joanna waved. Min made an upside down ta’al. He snapped the shot and turned the two of them loose.

He turned his head and noticed a tall, slender woman with a shock of burgundy hair who reminded him so much of Jocelyn he had to look again. It was Jocelyn. She was standing off to the side of the playground with her embroidered bag and hair as bright as raspberry juice. She’d caught his eye three or four times, shied away each time until she seemed to come to a decision and walked toward where he sat beside Spock. The woman McCoy married back when they were young and romantic and silly had been compelling in her confidence, heralded by the metronome click of her high heels, the bird of paradise brightness of her clothes, and that brilliant smile. Today she looked
uncertain and as small as a woman her height could manage.

She stopped in front of him to lean on her cane. “We need to talk,” she said.

McCoy turned to Spock. “Can you keep an eye on the girls?”

Spock nodded. “They will not go farther than permitted this time, I believe.”

McCoy snorted. “You have more faith than I do.”

He led Jocelyn out of the main play area to Daniel’s Cookies and Confections, which had a few fancy wrought iron tables and chairs arranged in front of the counter. “Hey Dan,” he said to the tall, wiry man behind the counter. “Could I get four of the almond springle cookies?”

“Dark or milk chocolate?”

“Dark.”

The cookies were pressed flat, with a fancy, doily like design on one side and a thin glazing of dark chocolate on the back. He passed his comlink over the PADD to record his patronage and took the bright aquamarine, crinkling bag back to the table. She toyed with the cookie he handed her.

“Joanna seems happy here,” she said.

“You’re seeing someone?”

How long had she been watching them? “Yeah, never expected that to happen. We’re taking it slow,” he said, before he realized she didn’t mean found in exactly that way.

Jocelyn’s eyes grew round. “Wait. You’re seeing someone? What does Jim think about that?”

“I don’t think you’ve earned the right to ask about my personal life,” he bristled, then caught himself and made his shoulders relax. “Anyway, yes, I found someone to work with Joanna. He’s gotten the chronic pain better under control, though he says it will be a few more months work to completely get rid of it, and he’s been working on the, ah, telepathy thing too. She started back to school Monday.”

“Does she eat?”

“About a hundred calories of stuff like yogurt or pudding a day. It’s going to be a while before that gets worked out. She’s learning to sign, slowly, concrete nouns and verbs, but she is learning.”

Jocelyn took another nibble of her cookie. “These are amazing, by the way.” She stared off over his left shoulder for several seconds, her face pensive. “There’s a wonderful artists’ enclave here.”

“Spock mentioned that. Have you had a chance to visit?”

She was silent for a time. He let her have as long as she needed, knowing that collecting her thoughts took longer than it used to. “I’m relocating.” She looked off into middle distance. “I tried going home, Len. I just—I couldn’t make it work. I’m not that person anymore.”

“So you’re coming here?” He set his own cookie down, his chest suddenly tighter. He reminded himself to breathe. “I’m not giving her back. Joanna’s making so much progress—I’m not willing to risk that.”
“Leonard, I didn’t come here to fight with you.”

“Then why did you come?”

She shook her head. “To start over. To see Joanna, at least sometimes.” She looked in the direction of the jungle gym, though the girls weren’t visible just then. “To tell you I’m sorry.”

McCoy didn’t know how to take that. He had deserved the way she behaved six years ago. He didn’t think he really deserved the way she’d treated him since Vengeance. But Jocelyn never apologized. It wasn’t in her nature. Hadn’t been, before, he corrected himself. “It was never about you. I mean, not letting you be with Joanna, not letting you—replace Clay.”

He nodded. “I miss him too.”

“I felt like if you just stepped in and became her Daddy, she’d forget him. It would be as if Clay had never been. Like his life didn’t matter. And he mattered, Len. He was thirty two. He didn’t have time to do anything.”

He nodded around a bite of chocolate springerle. They really were exquisite. Labors of love. He let himself think about Clay. Clay hadn’t been the kind of person who needed to do anything but be with the people he cared about. And protect them with the tenacity of a wolverine if he thought their happiness was threatened. It made him an amazing lawyer. McCoy would bet it made him an incredible dad. “I loved him too, Joce. I mean, not the way you did. Differently than you did.”

“Does she remember him?” she asked.

“I can’t imagine she wouldn’t. He was her father for four years. I should—do you have a picture of the three of you we could put up in her room?”

Jocelyn smiled tightly. “I can send you one.”

“So you’re really going to stay here? On the Starbase?”

“Yeah, I really am.” She chased a crumb on the table with her finger. “So what’s with the purple hair?”

“She takes after you. Gotta be her own person.” He finished the first of his cookies and brushed the crumbs back into the bag for neatness sake. “Friend of Jim’s did it for her.”

“I do want visitation, you know. And I’ll sue for it if I have to.”

“What is it with you and suing for things?”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. Come on, I’ll introduce you to Spock.”

Jocelyn and McCoy picked up their table, collected a wipe from the courtesy basket, and wiped the table down for the next guest. He waved to Dan, the local God of Baked Goods, then walked back with her to the bench behind which Spock stood. As they approached, he said, “Spock. Joanna’s mother, Jocelyn Treadway.”

“It is good to meet you.” His tone was perfectly neutral, but McCoy caught a wash of protective wariness. Spock moved closer to him.

“Spock has been working with Joanna.”
Jocelyn nodded. Studied him. “I am grateful,” she said, choosing her words with almost painful care. “That you found time to assist my daughter.”

“I was distressed to learn that my colleagues rejected Joanna as a patient out of hand.” He paused. “I was not, however, surprised.”

“So, that little girl I saw her running with. Yours?”

“No. The daughter of a mutual acquaintance.”

Jocelyn’s eyes narrowed, then widened along with her smile. “Is this your paramour, Len? What did you do, seduce him?”

“I object to the suggestion that seduction would be necessary to induce me to accept a patient.”

McCoy chuckled. “Pretty sure he seduced me.”

“Well,” she said. “I’m glad you’re happy.”

McCoy’s smile faded.

“I really am glad,” she said. “I’ll leave you to it, then. It was good to meet you, Spock. I hope you will visit the artist’s enclave in the near future.”

“I will,” he promised. They watched her retreat.

“Do you believe that I seduced you?” Spock asked, concern tingeing his tone.

“Of course not. I mean, there’s been precious little ravishing going on.”

“Have you decided by what means you wish to pursue correcting your serotonin deficit?”

McCoy crossed his arms across his chest. “Time release synthetic. For now I’m using hypos, since I’m still getting over the Guillain-Barre, but I plan to put in an implant with a taper. So I don’t forget when things get busy.” Spock nodded, possibly disappointed. “And guided meditation, don’t give me that whipped puppy look. If we’re to be a couple I can’t be entirely dependent on you to maintain my brain chemistry. I mean more than happens anyway.”

Spock quirked an eyebrow. “I would be amenable to orchestrating a release of oxytocin at some time in the near future.”

“We’re going to need to work on that dirty talk. Maybe after we get Joanna to bed this evening?”

“Perhaps. There is no emergency currently requiring our services.”

“No. There isn’t. For a change.” He raised his voice a little to be heard over children’s voices. “Min! Joanna! It’s time to go home.” Home. He liked the sound of that. He had a home. Two, really, since they maintained quarters on both Starbase 4 and the ship, but what mattered was the space they shared, Spock and Joanna and him, and always around even if they weren’t sharing quarters, Jim and Gaila and now little Peter. Trusting himself was still a struggle, being comfortable in his own head would probably always be a struggle, but it was a struggle worth taking on, and he didn’t have to do it alone.

Chapter End Notes
All's well that ends well.

So. An offer. If you'd like an epilogue, I've got a couple in mind, but I'm not sure which to tackle first. Either I can reward all you slow burn fans with the smut you probably hoped would be here, or I can give you some cute fluff with Min, Joanna, and a certain figure from Brazilian folklore.

Either way, the companion piece will be independently posted and titled. Thanks to everyone who stuck with me through the whole thing.

End Notes

I may not tell you where everyone is in this AU, or where the butterflies flapped their wings to cause it, but I'm willing to answer any question that isn't a major spoiler. And a lot of those, really.

Also, please, please if you have questions or concerns about plot decisions, ask or remark away. I have been known to make clarifying changes and discuss controversial ideas with readers. Also PLEASE tell me if you think I'm missing a tag. I do the best I can but I'm only human (probably).

Minor plot point inspired by myobsessionisshowing's splendid McKirk fic, "Trading on a Counterfeit Alliance"

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!