

## Echoes, Silence, Patience and Grace

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## Echoes, Silence, Patience and Grace

by [SLWalker](#)

### Summary

From rebel to assassin to his final endgame, the mirror version of Montgomery Scott across the years.

### Notes

This story is very plot heavy and not a little grim, though I think it has its incredibly human moments, too. I'll leave it up to you, the reader, to decide how they feel about it in the end. There are side-stories that go with it, though, tales that go deeper into the events that play out, though you don't need to read those to understand this. Feedback is very much wanted.

## All Through the Night

2239

*Nothing fixes a thing so intensely in the memory as the wish to forget it.*

-Michel de Montaigne

When he woke up, it was with something grabbing his hair fiercely, hands pinning his wrists and probably the thing connected to the hands sitting on his hips.

"Owowowow--!"

Scotty might have put up more of a fight, if this were the first time this had happened to him. But since it wasn't, he just protested about it and finally pried his eyes open to look at his assailants.

Practically sitting on top of his head, with two fists full of his hair and the biggest four-toothed grin in the world, was one of the three finest faces to wake up to. Even if it did mean hair-pulling.

And the accomplice to this mission was the second of those three, grinning wickedly as she had him pinned to the bed.

"Mornin' Joshua," Scotty said, barely managing to close his eyes and move his head far enough not to be drooled on. "Mornin' Jenna," he added, to the strawberry blond sitting on him.

"You're late," Jenna said, with a smirk, as she finally let him go to try to save his hair from the baby who was doing a good job of trying to remove it. "My shift ended," she continued, checking her wrist chronometer, "five minutes ago."

If someone would have told him two years ago that he would end up where he was now, Scotty wouldn't have believed them. In fact, if someone would have told him two years ago that he would ever feel happy again, he would have probably told them to go to hell. That it was impossible.

Life had a funny way of proving people wrong.

He finally managed to untangle his hair from Joshua's fingers and sit up, looking back automatically to make sure the baby wasn't going to end up falling off of the bed or anything. If someone would have told him six months ago that he would do these things as a matter of instinct, he probably wouldn't have believed them, either.

"A'right, a'right. Lemme get dressed, at least." He got up, leaving Jenna to keep an eye on Joshua while he tried to get his head together properly and the rest of his clothes off the floor where he'd left them the night before. "Where's Kayla?"

"In the galley. Just had breakfast."

Scotty nodded, pulling his coveralls on, and then looked around to figure out what he was missing. It finally came to him, and he pulled his boots on, hopping around on one foot at a time; one would think that remembering footwear would be a foregone conclusion, but he'd proven that notion wrong several times now.

"Ye got him?"

"Yeah. I'll let you know when it's your turn," Jenna said, picking the baby up and standing. "Have a good day at work," she added, half-mocking.

Scotty rolled his eyes, kissed her on the cheek, then headed for the galley. He needed a cup of coffee, and he needed to go visit the third of those faces that was so fine to wake up to. And then he could get to work.

The galley of the *CV Ci Bach* was tiny, but then, so was the rest of the ship. Two decks, twelve crew members, two passengers, two children. Scotty had been in charge of engineering for a year and a half now, switching off shifts with Jenna, and was as much at home aboard the cargo vessel as he could ever be anywhere.

He knew, originally, that his family had come from Scotland, on Earth; knew that from stories that his aunts and uncles used to tell him. He still sounded somewhat like his heritage, though over the years, he was pretty sure that the accent everyone told him he had was just as much spacer as anything else. He'd been born in space, and was sure that he would die there as well.

Thinking about them didn't hurt like it used to. That, he blamed on the three faces he'd come to adore.

The final of that strange trio was busy driving Shaffer nuts in the galley.

"Kayla, *no*," Scotty said, the minute he walked through the door and saw the two-and-a-half year old on top of a stool, reaching for a cabinet.

She eyeballed him, paused in the middle of her act of infiltration. "Want chocolate."

"No." He was pretty sure that girl heard 'no' more times, just in the past six months, than he had in his entire life to date. He got an arm around her on the way past, and in one easy motion, without even pausing on his way to the coffee pot, deposited her on the floor.

"I've given up trying," Shaffer said, shaking his gray head. "I don't know how you do it, Scotty."

"Neither do I," Scotty answered with a wry grin, as he pulled his coffee mug down off of its ring and set it on the counter. Behind him, Kayla proceeded to throw a fit. He'd gotten good at juggling children; he had likewise gotten good at tuning them out. He turned around, putting his back against the counter once he had his coffee in hand, and rose his voice enough to be heard, "Did the captain give ye an ETA?"

Shaffer watched the temper tantrum the toddler was throwing, but said anyway, "Four more days. How's the engine?"

"Should be done by then."

Adding warp drive to an independent cargo vessel like *Ci Bach* was a strict violation of Empire law. In four days, Scotty was going to do just that.

Rebel children; the orphans of the Empire.

*Ci Bach* was just one of many. Scott had grown up in a rebel family. His family. He'd grown up on little ships like this, which smuggled political prisoners or other rebels or food or supplies, and had only stepped foot on a planet a dozen times in his entire life. He grew up in the engine room of his uncle's ship; his mother, adopted father, aunts and cousins and uncles were all rebels. He knew all of the codes, all of the signals; he'd already managed to make a name for himself in rebel circles as the engineer people went to, to give their vessels as much of an edge against the Empire as they could get.

At fifteen, he became one of the orphans.

At seventeen, he was practically raising two more, practically married to Jenna, practically an adult. Some moments he was certain he was; some moments, he had to stop and ask how exactly he ended up here.

"Well, you're gonna have to live with gruel again for breakfast, until we can pick up our provisions next stop," Shaffer said, gesturing to the pot on the stove.

"I'll stick with the coffee," Scotty answered, with a bit of a joking wince. He carried that in one hand, got the much calmer Kayla under one arm, and headed for work.

Work in this case was the nearly complete warp engine assembly in the cargo hold of the *Ci Bach*. It had taken a year, and a lot of begging, borrowing and time to get all of the parts; the main part of the reactor had come from a salvaged Empire cargo vessel, and the rest of it had to be put together from odds and ends.

It would only do warp two, and only then in short bursts, but since it was next to impossible to get ahold of antimatter and dilithium crystals, it was still an impressive feat. Running off of the plasma driven impulse engines, it wouldn't be a match for any of the Empire ships, but it might be enough to surprise one and escape. The added bonus being that it didn't leave a traditional warp trail behind, being fuel-based -- the signature would mostly seem like just another impulse trail among many.

It wasn't the first warp engine Scott had cobbled together from next to nothing, and likely wouldn't be the last. His biggest problem, aside getting ahold of parts (or manufacturing them himself and thereby getting ahold of raw materials) was having to serve as tech support for half a quadrant of rebels. It was hard for him to explain over a subspace channel how to repair something; he worked the best when he could see it himself, dive into it, get his hands on it.

He had dropped Kayla off to the ship's medic; while he and Jenna had inexplicably ended up the 'foster parents' of those orphans, there was no way that he was going to try to work with a toddler underfoot, and it was dangerous to boot. Luckily, the Captain wanted the engine more than he wanted a childfree ship.

For Captain Winslow, the choice had come down between losing a damn good engineer, or keeping the children onboard until some genuinely decent place could be found for them. In the end, he chose to keep the engineer, who refused to part with the children.

Scotty still hadn't figured out if it was his wisest move, but he was certain that it was his best. Even if he still sometimes felt like he was playing the part of an adult, without actually having made it there. Even if he had gotten and was still getting a crash course in child rearing.

Even if he still sometimes felt scared out of his mind at this life he'd managed to end up living.

He couldn't stomach the idea of those children being sent to some orphanage; out here in the colonies, it was a guarantee that they would always be little more than shadows. If not for the fact that he'd been fifteen and already a fair hand at his job, he would have ended up the same way -- dropped off, shuffled into the crowd, left behind. Childhood was a very short period in the rebellion.

Winslow had thought he was out of his mind.

"No. *They go, I go.*"

*"Goddammit, you're seventeen! You're barely old enough to take care of yourself!"*

*"I'll learn, then, but they're not goin'. If they go, I'll go with 'em."*

Winslow was a decent man, but a practical one. There wasn't a whole lot of room for sentimentality in this life. The colonies, especially, were filled with lost children; these two were just two more mouths to feed, two more little bodies underfoot. But in the end, Winslow capitulated, and Scotty found out very quickly that there was absolutely nothing in the world like pacing the length of an engine room with a four-month-old on his shoulder, after spending three hours cleaning up after a two-year old decided that engine grease was akin to fingerpaints.

There were plenty of times in those first few weeks that he thought about changing his mind, and even more times when he wanted to curl up in a ball and go back to being a child himself, and he wasn't quite sure even now how he'd survived this long.

One thing he knew now, though, was that he wouldn't change it.

Not for anything.

Because at the end of the day, he'd go back to the cabin that he and Jenna shared, and there would be a good woman there who liked him a lot, if not loved him, and two children who would decide that he was great fun to roll around on the floor with, and even though it wasn't the family he once had, it was the one he loved.

It was home.

*"Holl amranta'r sêr ddywedant,*

*"Ar hyd y nos.*

*"Dyma'r ffordd i fro gogoniant,*

*"Ar hyd y nos..."*

*"Golau arall yw tywyllwch,*

*"I arddangos gwir brydferthwch,*

*"Teulu'r nefoedd mewn tawelwch*

*"Ar hyd y nos."*

"What does that mean, anyway?" Jenna asked, drowsily, not opening her eyes.

"Not sure. I think part of it means 'all through the night,' but other'n that, I couldn't tell ye."

"It's beautiful."

"Aye." Scotty had a hard time trying to stifle a yawn, and in the end, just gave up on the effort. It was warm, and he was the unwitting pillow for three bodies. A baby on each shoulder, and Jenna laying sideways, using his stomach to prop her head. "My mother used to sing it. It's Welsh, I think; one of her grandfathers was Welsh."

"Mm. My mother used to sing racy spacer songs," Jenna said, and he could hear her grinning. "I think I'll leave the lullabies to you."

"Unless we want these two cussin' like spacers, aye."

She was quiet for a moment, then she sat up and he opened his eyes to look at her. He had a feeling she was going to make that into a discussion, and he was right. "You know I never planned on raising kids, right?"

It wasn't the first time she'd said it. Still, she kept going along with him, despite that. "Ye did say that," Scotty replied, closing his eyes again.

"I'm twenty-one. Jesus, you're seventeen!" She paused when the babies stirred, then quieted her tone. "Do you really think this is sane?"

"Really? No."

There was a long pause there, but he didn't interrupt it. Jenna would, in the end, do what she wanted to. If there was one thing he'd learned about the woman, it was that she had no trouble going after something that she wanted, once she decided that she did want it. There had been plenty of times over the past year or so that he honestly wondered what she could possibly see in him.

She finally sighed, and it was intentionally exaggerated. Then she laid back again.

"Keep singing."

He chuckled, then did as he was told. He didn't know in those moments that this would be the last night he had with them, his entirely unlikely family. Didn't know that he would sing the lullaby his mother sang to him as a child for the last time.

Didn't know that he'd never sleep so peacefully again.

And never forgot that.

*"O mor siriol gwêna seren*

*"Ar hyd y nos.*

*"I oleuo'I chwaer ddaeraren*

*"Ar hyd y nos...*

*"Nos yw henaint pan ddaw cystudd,*

*"Ond i harddu dyn a'i hwyrddydd,*

*"Rho'wn ein golau gwan i'n gilydd,*

*"Ar hyd y nos."*

2267

*All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near. Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him.*

- Sun Tzu

Collins hated being an engineer.

He had grown up under the belief that the real service of the Empire didn't fall within the realm of thinkers, but within that of warriors. That to become a hero of the Empire, one had to fight bravely. He had read of the great heroes who had come before; men of vision who had saved the Empire from certain chaos. Men who had courageously defended the people under the Empire's protection by battling countless unseen enemies with honor and valor.

Needless to say, by the time that he was in Starfleet, the ideals had given way to the reality. And the reality of it was that the enemies were often far outnumbered and outgunned, that the Empire worlds enjoyed prosperity by giving up freedoms for their safety against powerful foes that didn't actually exist.

Collins didn't really care that much, though. What he did care about was promotion. Rank accorded a certain degree of freedom and security; he had seen the bodyguards of some of the senior officers, and imagined what it would be like to have his own. He had seen the Captain's woman, first belonging to Kirk, then to Spock. He had seen the decadent dinners that the officer's mess served. He wanted that. The security, the women, the dinners.

But first, he had to put himself into a position to get it.

His target had no body guards. In fact, Collins had to sincerely wonder how the *Enterprise's* chief engineer had gotten his reputation. The man might have been smart, but he was half-mad, or wholly mad, and aside from being a hardass about his department, generally seemed to be harmless. In fact, he was humming some kind of children's song, obscenely cheerfully, as he worked at a panel.

Collins had watched for a month, ever since he came aboard with the latest group of engineers assigned, and he was ready to make his move. Phasers weren't allowed in Engineering; too much delicate equipment could end up damaged if a fight broke out, but he had a dagger under his clipboard and was confident at how easy it would be.

He never had a chance to drop the clipboard and wield the blade.

The moment he stepped within two feet of the chief, he saw only a flash of red, black and gold, and the last thing he remembered was terrible pain in his chest, blinding pain.

He didn't even really have the chance to realize that he was dying.

The two medical assistants were laughing it up. Sickbay was quiet; the only occupancy consisted of those two, an again drunken Doctor Leonard McCoy and the corpse of technician Collins.

Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott of the *ISS Enterprise* watched them for a moment, thoughtfully. They didn't know he was there; they were too busy acting like idiots. Teasing McCoy, asking for some bourbon, making fun of the body bag that would end up, in all likelihood, flushed out an airlock.

After another moment he spoke up, not bothering to raise his voice above a normal speaking level. "Out."

They both jumped slightly, spinning and reaching for their phasers before they realized who it was. He raised an eyebrow; they dropped their hands. And then, grumbling, they gave him a very wide berth on either side before hurrying out the door.

"I really hate you," McCoy said, without any preamble, pushing himself to his feet from behind his desk.

Scott didn't bother answering that. He'd heard it all before. Instead, he just stepped forward and dropped the bag he'd brought on the desk.

"No, I really do," McCoy reiterated, slumping back down into his chair. He glared at Scott, then at the bag, then poured himself another drink. "One a month, give or take? I'm getting really damn sick of writing these peoples' families, dammit."

Three sheets to the wind. It was an almost normal state for the CMO. Not quite to the level of incompetence, but toeing the line of it. Then again, McCoy was one of the few people onboard this ship who could afford to get drunk. No one was stupid enough to try to kill the best doctor onboard, or piss him off too much.

This scene had played out before, and Scott was sure it would again. So he just stepped backwards from the desk and clasped his hands behind his back. There was another good thing about McCoy's relative immunity -- the doctor talked. Could afford to talk.

"Dear Missus..." McCoy stopped there for a moment and eyeballed the paperwork on his desk, taking a moment to read it in his state before continuing on, "...Collins. Your son died bravely in the service of the Empire.' Someday, I wanna tell them the truth. 'Dear Missus Collins. Your son died because our chief engineer stabbed him in the heart. If you have another baby boy, raise him to have half a brain in his head."

Collins had been, in Scott's opinion, another one of those that he labeled to himself as beyond hope. Raised to believe in the glory of the Empire, entered Starfleet and then was pushed through vicious training to be a good soldier. Fight for the glory. Then he'd fallen into the true nature of Starfleet over the years in the ranks; corruption and ambition.

Then he fell to a blade.

Scott didn't really feel any regret over it. This scenario had played out so many times over so many years that he just didn't think much of it anymore. The only certain thing was that he'd end up having more of his staff beg to transfer out, and within three or four months, not a single one of the faces in Engineering now would be the same.

Except for his.

McCoy was still going on, drunken rambling for the most part, and Scott listened without a good deal of thought about it. Most of it was just complaining about having to write those damned letters, about those damned idiots, and how it was a damned waste, all of it, all the time.

Finally taking a brief break from his tirade, McCoy gestured to the bottle. "Wanna drink?"

Scott shook his head. While he sincerely doubted that anyone else would take a shot at him for now, he knew far better than to touch anything that would dull his reflexes. The last time he'd touched alcohol was his seventeenth birthday; he wasn't about to start again now.

"I think Spock's gunnin' for you," McCoy said, as casually as if he were talking about the weather. "He was askin' me for all the records I had on you yesterday."

It was a foregone conclusion that McCoy had complied. Likewise a foregone conclusion that Spock wouldn't find anything there. It was just another move in this never-ending game. It had been going on for nearly five years now; the only thing noteworthy about McCoy's admission was that Scott knew Spock counted on him hearing about it.

"You got a family? What am I gonna tell them, huh?" McCoy didn't wait for an answer, just picked up his glass and took a sip, then continued, "You know, my Dad was a 'fleet doctor. Used to write home about how great it was, how he was doing a great service." The doctor muttered a few things that could only be cursing said father for it. "I don't know how he coulda lied about it like that. I don't know how he coulda... coulda..." There was a pause, and McCoy looked into his glass, then finished with a sort of tired sorrow, "Coulda."

Despite himself, Scott shook his head, though he didn't move otherwise or bother to speak up. Just listened, watching the drunken doctor as he wrestled with himself. With everything.

"I don't... I do. I do know, 'cause I write Joanna and I tell her that I'm doin' a good thing. I tell my baby girl that I'm saving lives." McCoy looked back up then, and asked a question that Scott knew he could never answer. "What kinda man does that make me?"

"Ye'll want to send that to his mother. Collins, I mean," Scott said, gesturing to the bag. McCoy was still looking at him, but he didn't have anything else to say; at least, not anything that would make any real difference.

"Get outta here."

Scott nodded, though he didn't move for a moment. Then he did think of something, though he doubted that Leonard McCoy would ever understand it, or even believe it.

"Your father was a good man, McCoy."

And then he turned around and walked out.

2239

*In the name of Hypocrites, doctors have invented the most exquisite form of torture ever known to man: survival.*

**-Edward Everett Hale**

The problem with first impressions was that they were really hard to shake. No matter what you're told about a person later, or what you're supposed to believe about them, that first impression still lingers somewhere in the back of your mind. And if it's at odds with what you're supposed to believe, that leaves you in a place you just don't want to be in.

David McCoy's first impression *of* the kid was horror. But not *at* the kid.

He couldn't have been an adult yet; he still had the finer lines of a teenager, though there wasn't anything fragile there. Probably had another inch or two to go before he was at his adult height, and he gave the impression he was due a bit of mass, too. But right now, what horrified McCoy was that this kid was only maybe a handful of years older than his own son.

And was in a place he never, ever wanted his own child in.

Starfleet Intelligence officers were picked for either their size or their ability to commit violence without much in the way of remorse. The two on either side of the kid, probably half holding him up, were there for their size. The one who'd beaten the kid bloody was there for his mean.

"Jesus, George," McCoy said, though he regretted it after he did.

George Kirk narrowed his eyes. "Don't go bleeding heart for this one, McCoy. He's the engineer of a hundred and forty-seven deaths."

"Piss off," the kid snarled, and McCoy was half impressed and even more horrified at the level of defiance he was managing. He already had a black eye, a bloody nose and a split lip, plus a nasty gash in the side of his head; given his jagged breathing, it wasn't all he was suffering from. And in that moment, McCoy wanted nothing more than to tell him to shut up, not to bring any more down on himself.

George growled back, got a handful of blood-soaked black hair and yanked the kid's head back so far that it put him on his knees. "I haven't even started with you, yet." He got another snarl, but apparently, he was waiting to level even more violence and let go. "Make sure he'll live, McCoy." And with that, he stalked out.

"Git," McCoy told the two hulks that remained, looking uncertain. They looked at him blankly, then did as they were told.

"You got a name?" he asked the boy, who was picking himself back up, or trying to. All he got back was a baleful, black-eyed look. Couldn't blame the kid. If he was a rebel, then his future was pretty damn bleak and his only contact with the Empire was brutality and blood-shed.

The worst part was that there wasn't much David could do about it. He'd seen George break a lot of people in his day, of every species they'd had contact with. That was what he did. And just as many times, McCoy had to hold his tongue and remind himself that he was saving far more lives than not, and that if he got in the way of these things for any single individual, tens or dozens or hundreds more wouldn't be saved.

This was the first time, though, he'd ever seen George take on someone who was barely more than a child. Devoted family man, devoted servant of the Empire at home, he was a sadist amongst the stars, but never against someone this young.

McCoy shook his head to himself and grabbed his tricorder, though by the time he turned back, the kid had managed to get himself under one of the lab tables, back to the wall. His hands were locked behind his back, but McCoy supposed that his feet were still effective enough weapons.

David sat on his heels. He didn't want to lay a hand on the kid, not after that beating, so he did his best to get a good tricorder reading from a distance. George was a bit too good at his job; he could inflict a whole lot of pain without causing any critical damage, and the tricorder backed it up. Suffering, but not in any major danger of dying. Some blood loss. Mild concussion. Two cracked ribs. Countless bruises.

Eighteen at the outside.

"Whatever you're protecting..." David said, looking over the top of the tricorder.

There was a brief flash through the fear and rage of something else, though the kid didn't say anything, then it was gone and he went right back to wide-open hatred.

McCoy already knew about the hundred and forty-seven people that George had mentioned. A cargo vessel suspected of smuggling for the rebellion had been cornered by an Empire starship. Pinned down, unable to escape, the cargo carrier self-destructed and damn near destroyed the starship. It had a warp drive, and due to the added power, it had been one hell of a blast.

It was only a guess that the boy ready to fight or die under the table had been behind that ship having warp drive, but the words 'damn shame' came to mind. And not about the Empire personnel who'd been killed, either.

George came back to check an hour later, snapped at McCoy that he wasn't supposed to be playing hide and seek, and then went under the table after the kid. It wasn't much of a fight. George took a couple of kicks, and there was a good bit of snarling from both of them. And with one hand bitten so hard that there were broken bones, he beat the kid utterly senseless with the other.



"Stop playing around, McCoy," George said, coolly, as the doctor knitted the bones together in his hand. "It's way the hell too late for that one."

It lasted a week before George finally broke the kid's spirit.

It was a long week for McCoy, who wasn't able to shake off the violence any better days into it than he was the first day. He didn't waste any time whenever the guards dragged the boy back to sickbay, just promptly sedated the heck out of him so he would be out of George's reach for as many hours as McCoy could get away with to treat him.

Even just before the silent war ended, though, there was still a lot of defiance. When he wasn't sick, he was suffering, and when he wasn't suffering, he was in oblivion. There wasn't any mercy there, either. But even then, he still snarled back at George, still put up the best fight he could. It was heartbreaking.

When George brought him back the last time, though, his hands were free and his head was hanging, and David knew that George had finally found whatever it was that it took to break another living being. No guards; George had him by an elbow, not even really holding on hard, and when he let go, the kid dropped to his knees and didn't move.

His hands were bloody, but a quick tricorder reading showed that he didn't have another mark on him since the last time. No more bruises, no more damage, no more broken bones. Just torn up hands. Whatever had been done to him was done on some level not physical.

"Maybe if headquarters doesn't hang you, Mister Scott, you'll get the opportunity to give back to the Empire." George spoke formally, even warmly, and McCoy wanted to reach out and slap the security officer across the chops for that one.

The kid -- Scott -- didn't answer, didn't even seem to hear it. Just sat, staring blankly at something distant that only he could see; broken heart, silent tears. And McCoy thought that death would have been far more merciful.

"See to it that he eats and rests," George said, as though he didn't just commit some atrocity, and then headed out of sickbay.

McCoy followed, lowering his voice to a whisper, "What part of your soul did you just sell to do that to him?"

For a second, George's face cracked from being pure officer to something like regret, or grief, though David didn't know if it was for what he'd done, or just that he wouldn't get to kick the hell out of his favorite punching bag anymore. "I didn't do a damn thing to him. Just managed to get my hands on his family and had a... chat with his little girlfriend in the room next door."

*Jesus.*

"We do what we have to, to preserve lives and our way of life," George said, and the scary part was that he believed it. Then he walked away.

In the end, McCoy told Scott everything, though it was a long time before he even knew whether he was being heard or not. Told him what it was to fight the Empire from inside of the Empire. Told him about the lives that he had managed to save; even spoke honestly about the lives he quietly ended before they could be tortured to death by the likes of Starfleet Intelligence. Told him the deepest secrets of the rebellion. And when he finally got a flicker of a response, he taught that kid how to protect himself and how to be invisible.

In the end, he didn't know who was the worse monster, him or George. Because if George was the one who managed to break Scott's spirit--

David was the one who gave him the tools to cut out his own heart.

## By the Numbers

2267

*Making no mistakes is what establishes the certainty of victory, for it means conquering an enemy that is already defeated.*

- Sun Tzu

The single best tool against the Empire wasn't a blade, a bomb or even the finest of technology.

It was, in fact, a toothpick.

The numbers that Scott worked out on the deckplates in his quarters were simple. The carpet rolled back, and a grease pen in hand, it took him only minutes to work out the numerical values that he needed in order to pass on information to the rebellion. He never knew, at least not since he had killed his last contact, a mercy-killing, whether or not the information would be found. Nonetheless, he put it out there, and in the places he knew would most likely be inspected at some point or another by those who knew how to find it.

Most of the time, he was working on program coding; he was better with the mechanical aspects of things, but he had all of the time in the universe to come up with the programming that he would need to make the machines do what he needed them to do, when he needed them to do it. Picking away at it piece by piece; fifteen years or so, give or take, for this part of things. He didn't measure time, really. Only numbers, only mechanics.

His quarters were likely the most secure place on the ship. No real high technology; the traps he had set were primitive and effective, and couldn't be seen with a tricorder scan from the outside. Ritualistically, coming back here meant patiently disabling and resetting each one; the trip-wires, the minor chemical-based explosives, everything.

Other than his traps, his quarters were barren. No worth to him aside the relative safety to work on things. To walk in, one would see nothing; even under the carpet, after he finished backing up his work, the decks were scrubbed again spotless.

Scott wasn't paranoid. Where most upper-echelon officers gave in to paranoia (Kirk and his Tantalus field, for instance), he simply knew that if the traps didn't get his enemies, then he himself likely would. It had been a very long time since someone had gotten close enough to him to actually wound him -- of the scars he still wore, the newest were almost nine years old now.

It was another certainty that if someone did manage to take him out, then he would take everything he knew with him. No win, but no loss.

Spock was his biggest concern; even then, only an analytical concern. The new Vulcan captain of the *Enterprise* had been acting oddly since the switch between universes. It was unheard of that he would tip any part of his hand by asking McCoy for records with the certainty that it would get back to Scott -- this silent game they'd been playing for five years was conducted entirely on unspoken levels.

Scott wasn't afraid of Spock. Merely aware of the Vulcan's ability to perceive things that humans wouldn't notice. There were times when they made brief eye-contact and measured each other from a distance; expressionless, emotionless, calculating. He never did figure out what Spock had seen that had made him suspicious enough to start searching, but the fact that there was never any move made proved that he had found nothing solid. Creature of logic. Unable to trust his own gut instincts, but they were there.

Spock's own logic was what crippled him, really. And when they measured each other, without any sort of emotional concerns such as fear, Scott knew exactly where Spock's weaknesses were. Intelligent, extremely intelligent. But crippled by his own strict adherence to things having to make sense to himself.

Scott double-checked his numbers, though he already knew that they were right. This was a very simple message, comparatively, than the programming codes that he worked out, encrypted then to his own key, backed up. His next shore leave, and he would deliver the message.

He existed in this state most of the time; when new intake came aboard, he had no problems playing a wounded wing, drawing some poor fool into chancing a shot at him, then those people who witnessed it would beg to get out. He kept his staff in that perpetual state of fear, not by sending them to the agony booth, not by screaming at them, or beating on them, but simply by being unpredictable. Sometimes one might stick around a few months, the longest was four to date, but their own fears and imaginations usually ended up driving them to find some other ship or some other division to escape to.

Sometimes one or two came aboard that weren't tainted by the Empire; good engineers who really wanted to just do their jobs, and those were the only ones that he felt a flicker of regret over. They were also the ones that needed to be driven out fastest, lest they actually see what it was he'd been slowly doing.

When he was done with his numbers, he took the tricorder he'd made of broken pieces and parts, and the laser scalpel he'd gotten ahold of, and backed it all up...

...to a toothpick.

Notched between the value of 0, two atoms knocked out of the dense wood, and the value of 1, three atoms, was the simple message. He always made more than one copy; later, on shore leave, he would mark something else that would eventually be looked at with the value now stored on the toothpick. Numerical simplicity, a fraction that when it was decrypted could pass on an extraordinary amount of knowledge.

If anyone did ever even think to look at the toothpick, and manage to figure out that there was information stored on it, they would have to figure out how to understand it. But those who needed to know what it said already had those tools. And they would take that information,

and perhaps in weeks or months or years, be able to act on it by saving someone. Hiding them from the Empire's long-reaching arms.

It was one of the rare times, though, that the message contained didn't have a bearing on the overall movement. It was, in fact, his silent way of paying back a long-ago mixture of kindness and crime.

It was only a name.

*Joanna McCoy*

2247

*"What broke in a man when he could bring himself to kill another?"*

-Alan Paton

He'd done his job too well.

"I have enough regrets that if I started now and rattled 'em off straight through, it would take years. Guess that's the way it goes, though. You can't live in this world without having to do things you know you'll never be able to answer for to God."

David picked up his glass of peach brandy and took a sip, then set it down again. Looked across the table at the young man who stood across from him, who would not get a second look from most people until they slipped up, and then they would never have the chance to.

"They managed to recruit Leonard while I was off. Promised him an education, you know. And since all he ever heard from me was how great it was to be a 'Fleet doctor, he jumped at the chance. Medschool paid for, automatic commission to lieutenant, nothing but sunshine and clear sailing."

If Scott cared, it never showed. He just looked across at McCoy, dispassionately. Cool, calculating. Somewhere in his mid-twenties, he had an average build, and walked like an average man, his only claim to anything that he had good lines and strong contrasts. But mostly he could blend in with a crowd, just average, until someone got within his arm's reach, and then he became grace, quick and merciless, soundless, but it wasn't the grace of salvation.

David had done his job, George had done his, and what was left was a weapon that didn't feel joy, let alone the hate and grief that should have been his right. Just cold calculation; no spark, no warmth, no hope.

David had seen that grace once, and was impressed and horrified by it. Though, to be honest, he was the one who taught Scott how to make a clean kill, without causing any unneeded suffering; a background as a doctor enabled a lesson in anatomy that had nothing to do with healing. He supposed that the kid had gone from there and learned how to use that knowledge effectively. He wielded a dagger with the kind of artistry that could only have come with long hours and years of practice.

So, David talked. Partly because he knew what the end of this conversation would be. Partly because he knew that he wouldn't be judged, good or bad, for anything he said -- regardless of their past experiences, Scott merely weighed and measured McCoy just the same as he did everyone else. Strengths, weaknesses, how much of a threat David was, how much he was worth. It was easy to confide in someone who didn't give a damn about you, especially not enough to condemn you.

David had long since condemned himself.

"I left a good trail. Not enough to be suspicious, just enough to let those fuckers know what I've been up to all these years. Len's clean. He's still in school, and they sure don't hand out brochures there about what it's really like. They might question him, but they'll figure out that he didn't know anything."

He took another sip of brandy, then looked into his glass, thoughtfully.

"I'm dying anyway. Don't want my son to have to be the one who ends it all, before this disease ends me. Maybe if he keeps his heart clean, someday he'll be able to get out and live with himself."

No spark, no warmth. Not even a sympathetic blink. That was another reason David was here.

He stood up, picked his glass up, and drained it. Looked at Scott, who just looked back at him; fierce intelligence, but no emotion there. And the kid stood with that grace that wasn't salvation, still and waiting.

"I left enough of a trail that when they find out who did it, it'll put you a few good steps further from any suspicion. Not much of a gift, considering. But I think by the time they hear anything of you, it'll be too damn late for 'em."

David nodded once; knew that when he took three steps forward, it would be over. But he did have one more thing to say, and it was from the still beating heart of an old man, a father, that had somehow survived all of these years and sorrows.

"I have a lot of regrets. A lifetime. That I wasn't home for my son, that I'll never know any grandbabies... that even for all I gave up, I couldn't do more. I know that I've done things I can't possibly answer to God for, too."

He paused there, in compassion for someone who didn't give it to himself.

"A lifetime of regrets. You're one of 'em."

Three steps, and David McCoy was dead before he hit the ground.

## Waiting

2268

*Be extremely subtle, even to the point of formlessness. Be extremely mysterious, even to the point of soundlessness. Thereby you can be the director of the opponent's fate.*

-Sun Tzu

The endgame was near.

The fact that he was here at all was just a literal indication of something he had been sensing now for several months, a quiet instinct that prompted things to be wrapped up, moved along, prepared for. Near could mean months or days, but after all of this time, there was something like an ending in sight. He didn't know what the ending would be, only that one way or another, he would be ready for it -- if he lived, and succeeded, then the results would be predictable so far as his own involvement. If he died, then still no loss.

Captain Spock stood across from him at the briefing table. Dressed now in command gold, but he eschewed the extravagant uniform styles of his predecessor. Expressionless, as always, but Spock could never quite manage to mask the light of curiosity in his eyes with which he tended to view things -- mostly scientific endeavors, but sometimes people, and he was wearing that curiosity now.

Scott just waited. This meeting was unprecedented, but he saw no reason to treat it as anything but professional and casual. Inwardly, he took measure of the Captain as well as the body-guards. Outwardly, he simply stood quietly, patiently. Still.

"You may go," Spock told his body-guards, a clipped command but not angry. Efficient.

The three guards did; one human, two vulcans. All three left reasonable room on all sides of the engineer, a fact that did not escape him, though any grim satisfaction from having trained the entire crew of this ship to stay out of his reach had long since faded.

Once they were out of the room, Spock looked back. "Your promptness is appreciated."

"Sir," Scott replied, an acknowledgment of the statement.

There was no rush; in other meetings, with other people, the silence that fell would be considered awkward. Not here. Here it was only silence, where Spock took time to consider carefully how he wanted to speak and Scott waited. Always waiting.

"I have been reviewing the personnel transfers," Spock said, at length. He didn't sound accusatory; didn't really sound like anything. Most humans would find that seeming unreadability to be disturbing.

Most humans.

"The efficiency of Main Engineering and your division is well within all established parameters. Regardless, your division also has the highest rate of staff turn-over, not only onboard the *Enterprise*, but throughout Starfleet."

It still didn't sound accusatory, but the light of curiosity was there now. And perhaps a harder edge under it. Scott wasn't sure exactly; he only knew that Spock was taking his time getting to the point. He didn't bother replying. There was nothing to reply to. It was a statement of fact.

The captain looked, if anything, like he wanted to say something that he wasn't sure he should. They were still playing cat-and-mouse. Scott never did bother to count coup, on who won what round, or lost. Nonetheless, the fact that he was here, and that Spock looked almost uncertain, was filed away in his mind.

The endgame was near.

"I would strongly prefer if you improve the staff turnover rate in your division," Spock finally said. It did not seem to be what he had wanted to say.

"Sir," Scott answered. Another acknowledgment. He knew perfectly well that there was nothing, either on the surface or even visible at all that incriminated him in anything. Self-defense was an entirely acceptable reason to kill. He couldn't even be accused of being a bad supervisor, in comparison to some other divisions. His staff was terrified of him, but they were mostly obedient and efficient for however long they lasted, and he never had to use an agonizer.

He just kept them nervously peering into shadows, and glancing around corners. Jumpy. He was fairly sure most of them would rather throw themselves into the anti-matter stream than get within his three feet.

Therefore, while Spock could prefer that the turnover rate was lower, he could do nothing to force that issue without leaving his own position vulnerable. Scott's record, from the very beginning of his involvement with Starfleet, was absolutely unassailable. The fact that he had once been a rebel was the only thing that could make someone question, but the last thirty years had been spent proving his loyalty.

They stood in silence. The captain still looking on the verge of saying something. Scott still waited. Still waiting, always waiting.

For thirty years, he had been proving his loyalty.

For thirty years, he had been giving all of his design talents, all of his engineering ability to the Empire. Once they had him, he never made another protest. Never even hesitated to follow an order. And piece by piece, they used his mind to better Starfleet's entire line of ships. In

fact, there could not be many left in service today that weren't somehow influenced by his designs. He was even assigned, finally, to the *Enterprise* in order to constantly improve the *Constitution*-class design specifications while they were in use. His improvements were, of course, given a rigorous look-over by the teams in Belfast.

And every one was included.

Spock looked at him, and something in the captain's eyes looked almost disturbed. "One more thing, Commander. The other universe-- I have read your report, but I was curious as to your opinion on it."

Scott didn't blink. "I don't have one."

There was silence for a moment.

"Dismissed."

Scott gave a nod, a brief bow of the head, then turned around and walked out.

2255

"Everything that we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see."

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

It was the first and last time in two years that he saw fear in her pale eyes.

The smoke was rolling thick, turning the ground forces into little more than blurs of shape and movement, provoking even more terror on top of the attack itself. Firelight lit the bottom edge, and the night was still filled with screams and fear, and the sound of phaser fire.

She was afraid. Standing a bare ten feet from him, on the outskirts of the settlement, the reason for her fear stood behind her in the form of three natives. An adult and two children, their wide, dark eyes flooded with tears from grief and smoke, they stared at him just like she did.

There wasn't much time to contemplate a decision. Only time to make one.

"Go," he said, both to her and to the two natives who were hiding behind a piece of wreckage, the two that he had dragged out of the maelstrom, to the edge. He had no control over whether they would live or not. Could only give them a chance, a small one, and hold no hope that it would make a difference.

They stared a moment longer, then the group of now five bolted; grabbed each other and ran.

Number One hesitated only briefly, looking at Scott, and the fear left her pale eyes to be replaced with something like respect.

He gave her nothing back, simply stood for that moment in silence, then turned around and went back into the smoke and firelight and darkness.

Despite not bringing attention to himself, the *Enterprise's* Chief of Security had taken notice of Scott fairly early on, when Scott had to act swiftly to assure himself an unassailable place in the hierarchy of shipboard life. It wasn't that Captain Pike encouraged such things -- in fact, his ship was the least violent in Starfleet -- but there was still inevitably bloodshed. While most of his superior officers knew that Starfleet would consider his death to be a very big problem, most of the junior officers didn't and therefore, Lieutenant Scott was subject of a few assassination attempts simply because he was another step in the ladder.

Those officers didn't survive.

Orloff had noticed after the third one fell in less than two weeks; all three killed with one knifestroke, by the same blade. The Chief Engineer, a slightly unbalanced woman named Barry, had been less than pleased with losing crewmembers, but she eventually fell to her assistant chief and it no longer mattered.

Scott found no use in killing outside of self-defense; he never sought targets, but regardless, enough sought him that his reputation walked ahead of him.

Orloff, impressed with the cold, easy way that Scott could dispatch someone, decided to make use of that talent. And so, regardless of rank or division, Scott spent as much time under the orders of Security as he did of Engineering. It was not a position that he had intended to gain, but he followed his orders regardless of what they were without any hesitations.

Sometimes those orders involved bloodshed.

Orloff noticed him first; Pike, likely told by his intensely loyal Security Chief, noticed soon thereafter. One year, then two, and Scott had never failed to act on an order. He showed no ambition, no weaknesses of greed or desire, simply did his job well and quietly. He was outside of the scheming and plotting, and again and again proved that he was efficient and reliable in both engineering and assassination.

And again and again, Pike sent him to perform the tasks that needed to be done, and well, and swiftly, and silently.

When Starfleet Intelligence came aboard the *Enterprise*, they made no announcements or explanations. They came onto the bridge, took Number One from the helm, and dragged her away. There was no fear in her eyes, then; Scott saw none of what he saw on Betazed's surface as she left, just the same dignified coolness she had always carried herself with.

Pike tried to demand an answer as to what was going on, but didn't find it. Regardless, the Captain called Orloff, an adept investigator in his own right, to the bridge to have a discussion. To find out if there was anything that could be done to save the first officer from whatever fate was in store for her; to find answers that might prompt her release.

The answers came too late for Number One.

Pike himself did the deed. The buzz from the guards at the door of the brig was that the Captain had gone in and spent several moments

speaking to her low and calm. And then, he had embraced her and in that grip, slid the knife almost gently between her ribs. He showed no grief as he stepped out of the brig after he laid her to the floor, simply nodded to the guards and left.

Scott knew that she had been Pike's lover, and found out subsequently that Pike had known that she was a part of the rebellion, and had always turned a blind eye to the small things so long as they stayed small.

Small was three lives of the natives of Betazed, a population being culled like herds of cattle because their empathic and telepathic abilities could be a threat to the Empire. Not all of them. Some were left alive, likely to be used by the same Empire that killed most of their population off. The officers who did it, this joint mission between the *Enterprise* and the *Farragut*, believed that they were saving the Empire from a terrible threat. No doubt that everyone else who heard it would believe it too.

But rebels, or former rebels, knew how to see past the party line and how to see the truth.

Number One tried to save a mere three, a small thing. Send them into the wilderness to hide. Scott had taken two more to the outskirts of the settlement for the same reason, a carefully calculated risk. But after she left with those five charges, after Scott had gone back to perform his duties, she had been spotted by one of the *Farragut's* crew.

And as she was the first officer of Starfleet's finest, Intelligence had moved swiftly and certainly.

The starbase was quiet in the night hours, and he was nearly invisible as he navigated it. Armed with the tools of his trade, he moved through the access crawlways, disabling the traps and resetting them as he went, and did so easily and patiently with an eye on how long it took him.

In the most senses of the word, he wasn't 'here' at all -- the transporter used to put him here had been scrambled carefully to mask its effect, and the tricorder he carried interfered with any lifeform readings that he put out, an old trick of the rebellion.

He was simply a shadow, a wraith, following his orders.

The orders, he knew, were not ones to better the Empire or the rebellion. They were revenge, pure and simple, but he followed them as he did all others. Pike's orders.

When he slid through the narrow vent, into the quiet quarters, he wasn't rushed nor frightened. Just stood for a moment, eyes already adjusted to the darkness, assessing his position and his adversaries. Two rooms; the first with the elder man, the second with the younger, both with ox-blood hair.

Scott killed the younger man first, before he was even truly awake. The only sounds a quiet, strangled cry and then the death rattle.

The elder was long since a skilled Intelligence officer, and was out of his bed, going for his phaser by the time Scott had stepped back out. And for a very long moment, eyes burning with hatred and recognition, and grief, George Kirk looked at Montgomery Scott.

The moment broke when Kirk went for his phaser, snarling something incoherent and broken-hearted, knowing that his son was dead.

But just like Number One, it was too late.

In the end, their tongues were delivered to the young officer of the *Farragut*, who had been doing his duty by reporting on Number One's rebel activity on Betazed. No one knew who killed George and Sam Kirk, or who ordered their tongues to be delivered.

But when James Kirk transferred to the *Enterprise* two years later, there was something broken and hateful in his eyes that might not have been there before.



2268

*So in war, the way is to avoid what is strong and to strike at what is weak.*

- Sun Tzu

He was terrified, but he went anyway.

The bars were dimly lit and filled with people who couldn't be on the right side of Empire law; the types that made anyone with any self-preservation instinct run the other way. Species from all over the Empire conglomerated there, drawn by a mutual hatred of the very government that had reduced most of them to little more than indentured servants.

Everything in Leonard McCoy screamed to turn around and run, but for once, his need to know overrode his well-instilled terror.

He was desperate. He questioned. He begged for information; he thought, even, that he got the occasional sympathetic look. But the facts were the same: No one talked. He didn't know the right codes, didn't know *any* codes. All he knew was that he was a father, desperate to know what happened to his daughter.

Joanna was missing. McCoy hadn't even known until the last shore leave, when Starfleet Intelligence took him to an interrogation room on Starbase 11 to question him. At first, they were monsters. He was drugged. Scanned. Over and over, questioned. Threatened. But after the truth serums, and after the truth-scans, it became apparent to them that he really didn't know anything.

They didn't explain much. Merely told him that his daughter was believed to have been a collaborator for the rebellion, and had disappeared.

Now, McCoy was desperate to do something that terror had kept him from for years -- find the rebellion. Find out what happened to his daughter.

Deneva's seaside was a dark, miserable place. Hateful. The whole planet was once beautiful, but industry and over-mining had turned it into a sorry little ball in space in very short order. And clustered along the seaside were bars and taverns and broken little shanties that housed a large population of people with no where else to go. No one came here of their own free will, unless they were looking for trouble.

Or looking for answers.

There was only one man who had given him any real sympathy; a bear of a man, older but strongly built, with gray hair and sea-foam eyes. "Ye shouldna be here, Starfleet. People'll just as likely kill ye as look at ye."

"I have to find my daughter," McCoy had replied, trying to stop his hands from shaking. He wanted a drink terribly; could feel that need trying to pull right out of his veins.

"Ye willna find anything here, except death," the man said, then pulled on his fisherman's coat and left.

He was as close to a sympathetic contact that McCoy had; after a few moments, guts still quivering inside of him, he followed.

He stepped out into the darkness and looked both ways, trying to find that glimmer of hope again. Maybe that man could at least point him in the right direction. He spotted the man heading north and went to follow.

But death found him first.

He didn't even hear it. It came out of the shadows like a wraith; silent, merciless. One moment, he was walking and in the next, he had an arm around his throat pulling him back, and the point of something very sharp pointing into his right kidney, forcing him to try to arch away from it. Not breaking the skin, but if he tried to struggle, he knew it would.

"I don't have any money," McCoy said, and he could hear the tremble in his own voice. "I'm just looking for my daughter."

The voice he heard back, quiet and as cold as a winter wind, should have been at least some small comfort. But it wasn't. It drove a shard of terror into the pit of his gut that caught his breath just under his throat.

"Ye've only got two choices, McCoy. Run, or die."

McCoy scrambled to try to piece that together; figure out what it meant. "R-run..." He tried to swallow past the pressure on his throat. "Run where?"

"After him. Don't look back, and don't stop."

It started to sink in there that this wasn't just a tacit approval to search for information. This was something far bigger; McCoy realized, in a way that made him want to just break down right there, that he was being told to escape. Go AWOL. Not return to the *Enterprise*. That he was being told to join the rebellion. He didn't say anything until he felt the dagger tip dig a little deeper, just a little, a prompt.

He fought to speak, and he shook worse. "How d-do I know that he won't kill me? That I'll be safe?"

It was only then that he was let go of, and given a light shove. And as scared as he was of turning back, he did it anyway.

Scott stood still, head tilted a little to the side; clad in black, he was damn near invisible in the darkness. But that wasn't what made McCoy shiver -- that was what was in the engineer's eyes. A promise; a brutal, razor light that offered no mercy or comfort. "Ye don't. But ye can take your chances with him, or with me."

For a long moment, McCoy stood frozen. He looked at the assassin. Finally, his eyes settled on the dagger, and with a hitched breath in, almost like a sob, he turned around and ran north.

Twenty-four hours later, the *Enterprise* left orbit without Leonard McCoy.

Just like his daughter, he had disappeared.

2259

*All the old knives  
That have rusted in my back,  
I drive in yours.*

**-Plato's Phaedrus**

Orloff was laying at Lieutenant Commander James Kirk's feet, and the young man had a distinctly satisfied smile on his face. Scott knew that was indicative of his personality; the past two years that comprised Kirk's service to the *Enterprise* were filled with that sort of thing. Having come aboard as a Lieutenant, Kirk had began his bloodshed from the first day and showed no sign of slowing down.

To most, it would seem like random brutality. But Scott was adept at seeing connections, be it in machinery or in people, and it had only taken a short amount of time for him to see the patterns of Kirk's killings.

One by one, Kirk was systemically taking out those loyal to Chris Pike. Many of them were acts of self-defense; it was a certainty that Pike was trying to take Kirk out at the same time. And with every death, every transfer, Pike became more and more isolated among his own crew.

Now Pike's security chief, and perhaps the last man who would die for his captain, did. It had been an act of desperation; Pike sending someone who he knew would be loyal to his dying breath. Once, he might have sent Scott, but despite Scott remaining as steadfast in his compliance with orders as ever, Pike had not called upon him for assassination in a very long time. Part of that, no doubt, due to the erratic behavior he had been suffering since his 'accident', when a phaser overloaded and he couldn't throw it far enough to escape the blast. It had horribly burned half of his body, leaving him in a constant state of pain.

Many of the crew thought that it had been Kirk's engineering that caused that, though there were a few whispers that it had been Scott's doing instead; only Scott knew for certain that it hadn't been his work, but Kirk's, and that it hadn't been intended to kill, but to maim, to wound, to hurt. There was no evidence, it was just a matter of seeing the patterns and connections.

Orloff's death here was self-defense, but it didn't matter; one thing that Kirk's cold smile showed was that he still got what he wanted, and Orloff would have died one way or the other.

Kirk looked at Scott next, and it was a measuring look. The three of them had been sent to go through the old laboratory, once run by a long-dead species of scientists, engineers and artists -- there was a good deal of technology there that could be of benefit to the Empire, and Pike had ordered a full inventory. Scott, of course, was there as an engineer; he had been given no orders to the contrary. His mission was simply to inventory what the laboratory held. Orloff was there supposedly as security, but the truth was, he was there because Kirk was there, and Kirk was only there essentially to die.

"You're a good engineer, Mister Scott," Kirk said, and it was a statement that could have meant any number of things.

"Sir," Scott replied. An acknowledgment of the statement, nothing more.

There was a long moment there, and then Kirk stepped around Orloff's body, his Empire-issued dagger still covered with blood. Scott didn't tense; already knew that if it came to a knife-fight, Kirk would be hard-pressed to survive it.

It didn't seem that Kirk was planning on that, though. He stopped a good several feet away, eyes narrowed slightly, thoughtfully, on Scott. "You should be chief by now. Should be higher than lieutenant, too. Loyal officer, and Pike hasn't quite given you your due, has he?"

Scott saw no real need to reply to that, but his mind already put the pieces together and he knew then that he wouldn't need to kill James Kirk this day.

"Rumor in the Science division is that there's a weapon here, disguised as a surveillance device, that has the power to make people disappear." Kirk didn't move, his voice even and calm. "I'm not an engineer. I couldn't, in theory, install this device myself and I don't believe that I trust my contacts in Engineering enough to do it for me... just yet." There, he raised an eyebrow, with a half-smile that looked both fierce and imploring, all at once. "I'm going to be the captain of the *Enterprise*, Mister Scott. With or without your help. That only leaves one question: Will you serve me now, or later?"

Scott and Kirk inventoried the laboratory. Only after that, did they report Orloff's death.

Only one thing went unreported and unrecorded. And Christopher Pike's days were numbered with a name:

*The Tantalus Field.*

## Watchtowers

2269

*"Be subtle! be subtle! and use your spies for every kind of warfare..."*

-Sun Tsu

The disappearance of Leonard McCoy didn't impact most of the crew, but its effect on Spock was immediate. Not so much to the casual observer. Not even really to a more informed observer. But Scott was neither of those -- his own plans and survival depended a great deal on being able to predict Spock's next actions. Just like every captain before him.

Marlena Moreau rarely left her captain's side these days. Certainly she appeared to be on the bridge for official business, manning the science station professionally while Spock was in the center chair, but the change in duties from when she worked down in the labs doubtless meant more than simple desire for a different assignment.

Spock's own behavior also changed. Subtly, of course. It took months. There was no paranoia in him; he was methodical and meticulous, carefully arranging his pieces on the proverbial chessboard. His first several missions were so successful, likely benefited in part by the Tantalus Field he'd inherited and also by his own logical nature, that Command was entirely willing to declare him the most effective captain in the fleet. Kirk's former title, now belonging to his former first officer.

Little by little, though, his style changed. He was still entirely effective, but his reputation preceded him by so much now that violence was a last resort and not a first, as it had been for so long.

This took place gradually. So did staffing changes. M'Benga was now in charge of sickbay and had been since McCoy left. Spock had actually hired the doctor himself when he came aboard, using his own fortune, and now Spock's personal physician was in charge of the entire medical department. But the other changes were more careful. Chekov was transferred. Uhura survived the careful, precision cuts, but had been sent to work down in linguistics. Riley just vanished one day, about two weeks after losing his temper on the bridge and firing on a suspected rebel cargo carrier, destroying it before anything could be confirmed.

Standing apart from all of it, the patterns were easy enough for Scott to see. This wasn't the first time he'd been through this sort of thing; the only difference between the way Spock was surrounding himself with more trustworthy people and the way Kirk and Pike had before him was in the silent, careful, thoughtful nature of it. Kirk and Pike had done so mostly ruled by their gut instincts. Spock did it by the route of logic.

It was that logic that was mostly a benefit to Scott. Spock still had found nothing to implicate him in any wrong doings, despite the turnover rate in Engineering being high. And without any sort of evidence to act on, it would be illogical to remove an effective officer, particularly one still protected by those at Command, from a station he served well.

There could be no disappearing act in Scott's future -- part of his original deal with Kirk had been to program the device to be unable to lock onto him. Perhaps Spock could find the programming and undo it, but to do that he would have to take the device offline. And even if he would do that, he would have to decipher the language and find that piece of coding. It had taken Scott several weeks of work to do so himself.

There was still no doubt that Spock was watching, Tantalus Field or no.

It was only after observing the careful moves that Scott was able to really see why McCoy's loss had prompted more decisive action. It wasn't because McCoy had been the most valuable asset to the *Enterprise*.

It was because Spock had been grooming McCoy as an ally.

And it was when Scott realized that, that he realized what Spock's endgame was.

"Engineer. We are about to enter the Tellun system. Make certain we are ready for battle, should the Klingons wish to dispute our presence," Spock ordered, and in a rare display, actually looked Scott in the eyes while he gave the order.

"Aye aye, sir," Scott replied, evenly. Then he turned and headed for the turbolift.

Spock's endgame was now clear. His logical picks of crew members, the change in his actions after McCoy's disappearance, the way he was now dealing with potential obstacles. His question, now months ago, about the parallel universe. And Scott was certain that he would have to be more careful than ever in his dealings with the captain, and the crew as a whole.

But his blade had already been lined with a poison fatal to Vulcans for weeks.

## Betrayals

2267

"Betrayal is the only truth that sticks."

-Arthur Miller

Kirk's first four years in command were among some of the best that the *Enterprise* had ever seen. Bold in a way that Pike never was, James Kirk had no qualms about dashing forth and finding his own way to make a profit, or to quell an uprising, or to deal with new contacts as they pushed further out into space.

For Scott's part, it was also a profitable time, but in other ways. Kirk accorded him a high amount of personal space, and while the Captain demanded a great deal of both the ship and engineering staff to keep up with his bold maneuvers, he left it up to Scott entirely on how he would run his department and didn't interfere. True to his word, once Kirk rose to the center chair, Chief Brien was given a transfer; not death, the reasonably amiable man didn't warrant it, but an immediate transfer to another ship. And Scott was given the title of Chief.

The first four years were profitable for the ship. Brutal, as well. Murders on Kirk's *Enterprise* far exceeded the number that happened on Pike's watch. And Kirk encouraged it. He had quite a number of loyal people beneath him, and he had no qualms about allowing those on the lower decks to squabble amongst themselves for a higher position; it kept their eyes off of the highest position. In that first four years, no one took a shot on Kirk's life.

In the fifth, though, things changed.

"Call McCoy," the captain said, stepping down off of the transporter pad with blood on his ripped shirt and murder in his eyes. The landing party of four that had went down with him did not register as lifeforms on the transporter sensors. Only their communicators indicated their existence.

Scott put the call in, not asking nor commenting. But it had not been hard to guess what had happened down there; for the first time since he had taken command of the ship, Kirk had become a target. Scott also knew that all of those men who had beamed down had seemed steadfastly loyal to Kirk all the way up until they no longer were.

There was murder in the captain's eyes. But there was also a certain hurt, betrayed look right underneath of it.

McCoy came to the transporter room, obviously nursing a hangover, and sealed the wounds that had been bleeding freely on the transporter room floor. "Jesus, Jim," the doctor muttered, quietly, as he worked.

"Don't talk to me, Bones." Kirk stood still for a moment, breathing hard, and then he looked up again. Worked his jaw for a moment. "Chief, have Mister Spock meet me in Briefing Room 2. And beam up those..." His mouth twitched there, violently. "...things and have them taken to the morgue."

"Sir," Scott replied, then went about it.

Pike's death had seemed a relief for most of the crew of the *Enterprise*. His erratic behavior often left them whispering about the chance he would lose control at precisely the worst moment and get everyone killed. While Kirk was a more daring captain by far, he was predictable in that daring -- when bad situations arose, he reveled in them. Many of the crew did as well, under his guidance. He reveled in them and he handled them with swiftness and brutality.

In terms of how he conducted himself with the crew, though, he was practically friendly. He demanded obedience, but he was good to his women, and when he tired of them, he made certain that he sent them to a position where they would be comfortable. He was respectfully distant with Spock most of the time, though occasionally they could be found discussing Spock's research in the mess hall. Each crew member doubtless had felt that their captain genuinely cared about them, and Kirk had never had to bloody his hands after taking command.

In the fifth year, it changed. As though waking up from a honeymoon, and realizing that even seemingly loyal hearts would give themselves over to ambition and greed, the broken hatred that had been the fuel for Kirk's rise to power in the first place came back. Not all at once, but it really only took two more attempts on his life before that change became permanent.

His body guards were handpicked; before, he never had them nor seemed to need them. Little by little, he began to close himself off from the crew that he had once treated with amiability.

Having been there through both the rise of power and the subsequent time after, and having remained perhaps one of the few people Kirk never questioned the loyalties of, Scott was in the unique position to understand that this change would lead to Kirk's death. Not only because the crew would view him now as a target, instead of an inspiration. But also because there was something inside of James Kirk himself that required people to be loyal to him, required him to seek a connection to others. Cutting himself off from it could only lead to an ending.

The first true loss of control was Sulu. A new helmsman, without much time under his belt, he was a reasonably easy-going young man. Too easy-going; he made the mistake of making friends with the wrong person. And when DeSalle made an attempt on Kirk's life, and Sulu pleaded with the captain to end the DeSalle's life quickly rather than slowly as he was in the process of doing, Kirk came around with his dagger. No warnings, just a snarl and movement.

The result was a long stint in the agony booth; Sulu still bleeding from a deep, long gash in his face, until he was nearly a puddle on the floor of it along with his own blood and tears.

Kirk destroyed something inside of Sulu then, though Scott only overheard the details and had not witnessed it himself. The torture went on for most of a day, and by the time that it ended, there were no tears left and McCoy could only pick up the pieces.

But McCoy wasn't allowed to heal the scar. And the once outspoken doctor, who could get away with questioning his captain and be treated with tolerance, fell strangely silent. He would find no more tolerance from Captain Kirk.

Two more years passed. Kirk was still efficient, and ruthless; more ruthless than ever. But just like Pike before him, paranoia had started to grip him. In his loneliness, he turned to no one. Even his woman, Marlena Moreau, had been closed out of his life, though not his cabin or bed. It had been whispered, when they first took up together, that he might even marry her someday; those times were gone, and from the outside, the only reason why Kirk likely kept her and didn't choose another was simply because she was familiar and predictable.

His reliance on the Tantalus Field was, of course, the thing that Scott paid the most attention to. For quite a long time, the device was dormant. But as assassination attempts started happening, and as Kirk became more paranoid, people started disappearing. It would not be too much longer before so many disappeared that word got back to Command and the Tantalus Field would be discovered.

Kirk had to have known the last time they went on an away mission that his time was drawing to a close. And with an underlying desperation in his eyes, he must have known that the mission to Halka was perhaps his last chance to salvage anything. To win so much profit, through their dilithium, that the crew would realize they were richer with him than without him; that the fear of vanishing into nothingness would be offset by their account balances.

He handpicked the team. Uhura, who was good at keeping herself alive, but was too busy just surviving to take a shot at Kirk. McCoy, who despite now falling to silence and desperation and a bottle, had yet to take a life with his own hands. That left precious few allies.

"Chief," Kirk said, having left behind the last man that he still trusted to watch the ship, and now calling upon the last one he trusted not to put a knife in his back, "follow me."

Scott nodded to Kyle to take over to transporter controls, and stepped up onto the pad.

2269

*The quality of decision is like the well-timed swoop of a falcon which enables it to strike and destroy its victim.*

-Sun Tzu

There was one split second, in all the long years, where Scott could see all possible paths and choose.

Sensor feeds of outside events were only fed to Main Engineering in potential battle situations. Once the *Enterprise* was under yellow alert, the connections came to life. There were several reasons why it happened that way; during normal cruising, or survey or anything else, there was no need for the engineering staff to know precisely what was going on.

In battle situations, though, there had to be some degree of anticipation. Damage control teams needed to be dispatched, relays and connections rerouted in an instant, power shifted throughout the starship's frame. The bridge coordinated some of this, but not all of it; in the heat of battle, engineers needed to be able to act, and often more swiftly than they could if they had to await specific orders to do so.

Spock never ordered a yellow alert. Despite his words to his Chief Engineer, he never ordered a yellow alert.

The Tellun system was more than a little rich in dilithium. It also tended to be covered in Klingons. And while the Terran Empire had beaten the Klingon Empire several times now, quite bloodily, it had cost quite a bit to do so.

Most of the crew was not up to date on the movements of the political machine that ran everything, but Scott was. Most of the crew, too, had no idea that the Tellun system was rich in dilithium, but Scott did -- he knew specifically because it was his job, as a designer and engineer, to understand dilithium purity. It had been an accidental discovery a number of decades ago that the Tellun system had such quantities of nearly pure dilithium, but the proximity to the borders of the Klingon Empire had dissuaded the Terran Empire from acting.

Most of all, Scott knew that nothing had changed on that front. Especially since they now had the Halkan crystals to power the fleet. Now that Spock had secured the Halkan crystals, pushing back any need for the Empire to press forward on the Tellun system.

Spock was here of his own volition. Orderless.

Engineering had no sensor feeds, but Scott was able to patch into them. It was a calculated risk, more of one than he might have taken at any point prior, but he needed to confirm what he had realized on the Bridge before he took action himself.

If he took action, it would be a final, decisive move. If he succeeded, then the Empire would be closer to destruction than it had ever been, since it rose. If he failed, still no loss.

Either way, it was too late.

It was the proverbial lion's den, and Spock ordered a course for the *Enterprise* to glide right into the center of it.

His crew performed, despite the information the sensors were feeding them here on the bridge. Apprehensive, but any hesitation to follow his orders was met with a quiet reprimand and they stopped hesitating fairly quickly. He did not think they trusted him, but it did not matter. They would perform, and he had chosen them specifically because they would. Because they were controllable.

Ahead was the culmination of a lifetime of observation, three years of careful maneuvering and an alliance of the likes the Empire had never seen before.

The system was filled with ships. Klingon warships of every size and disposition, as many as could be afforded to this venture. Many were old, but there could be no doubt that they were well-armed.

Many more were armed with cloaking devices. And likewise sitting were Romulan warbirds, now outfitted with warp drive, alongside Vulcan battlecruisers. None of them were a match for Starfleet's finest ships in speed, but they were more than a match in firepower.

Unlikely allies, but all with one thing in common: After decades of either war or oppression, they were ready and willing to give the Captain of the *Enterprise* support in his goals.

They were ready to help him become Emperor, to end the wars and subjugation, to bring about a new and profitable era of alliances. To bring about a new Federation, of sorts, which would allow all involved to reach their ultimate goals.

"Communications," Spock ordered, evenly, "please put me through to Captain Kang of the *IKS Mara*."

Marlena spoke up quietly as the communications officer on duty did as he was told, "Captain. Someone has patched into the sensors from Main Engineering."

It was not unexpected. This was something Spock had prepared for, and once he finished speaking with his battle group, he would put a decisive end to the game that they had been playing now for years. "Acknowledged, Lieutenant Commander." He looked at his personal

guard, two Vulcans of many to whom he felt a respect for, and spoke quietly, "Report to Main Engineering and apprehend Chief Scott. Alive, if possible."

They offered him a brief bow, then turned and moved to the turbolift. Spock turned back to the screen just as Kang opened the connection. Everything was going according to his plans.

He just didn't know that it was too late for him, too.

There was one split second, in all the long years, where Scott could see all possible paths and choose.

One second, one choice.

There was no point in wasting any time. He had been preparing for this moment for thirty years. One little thread in a thousand thread cable at a time. One more pin on a circuit board. One more letter in programming codes. One minuscule addition in the design of starships, of freighters, of cruisers; one by one over thirty years of designs. Starfleet had used his mind for thirty years to create these designs. They were all given a thorough check.

And every one was included.

There was no sense in wasting time. He knew he had a choice; if Spock succeeded in what he was doing right this moment, the Empire would become his. It may be less bloody. It may be more fair and just. It may even show more mercy. It was within Scott's ability to allow Spock's coup, by not acting. Either way, he knew that Spock was going to have him removed from the picture, and likely not alive. It didn't matter; it hadn't mattered in a long time.

But that was never the point.

For only a moment, he tipped his head back and closed his eyes; for only a moment he breathed. Then the moment was over. The endgame was here.

"Computer. Voice print recognition."

*"Scott, Montgomery. Chief Engineer, ISS Enterprise. Recognized."*

"Run AJC2254."

One choice. Scott made it with one order, barely more than a whisper.

"Execute."



2267

*The sunlight flashes off your windshield,  
and when I look up into the small, posted mirror,  
I watch you diminish--my echo, my twin--  
and vanish around a curve in this whip  
of a road we can't help traveling together.*

-William Collins

He had known the moment he materialized that he was not onboard the *ISS Enterprise*. From there, it had taken next to no time for Scott to piece things together. The uniforms. The lack of phasers and daggers. The lack of saluting. The underlying hum of the ship herself; not a note off, but slightly different chords than he was accustomed to listening for. The ion storm.

McCoy had taken Kirk and Uhura to Sickbay. Kirk was taken because it was clear that he was becoming even more unraveled now; the desperation that had been in his eyes when they beamed down to Halka had increased exponentially when they beamed back to a ship not their own. Uhura went because there could be no doubt she wanted to stick with something familiar.

It wasn't long before they were discovered, but it was long enough.

Scott accomplished two things in that time. The first was to look up two poisons in the Starfleet database. He didn't marvel over the lack of security, the same security that made such information on his own *Enterprise* impossible to retrieve. While he had contingencies, he preferred to take the most direct path to his objective. The opportunity to find a better method here quite literally came out of the sky, and he saw no reason to question it. He memorized what he needed, then moved on.

The second thing he did was begin calculating how they could return to their own universe.

He didn't get to finish. The Security guards came and retrieved him, and he knew that it was likely Kirk who had given them away, in a mad rush to reassert control over a situation that none of them had any hopes of controlling. Scott put up no resistance. These people, who smiled at him in corridors and who went bladeless, were no threat to him.

The last thing he saw before they took him to the brig was a brief image of this other Scott, the one who was native here; in the surface of the computer screen, a man who was used to smiling and worrying both, and wore the lines of it. Who had never fallen to George Kirk's hand, had never become David McCoy's weapon, had just been an engineer. From the hum of this ship, a good one. Who had strewn over his desk a mess of photos that he was in the process of organizing of the people in his life.

Scott didn't know most of them, but he knew a few. And when Security took him by his elbows, and he went without any fight, it was with those images lingering in his mind, of some universe where things had worked out better.

Kirk was the last one they had brought to the brig, fighting the whole way. After two years of slowly going mad, it was fairly clear that something inside of his mind broke when it appeared that the very last people he trusted had turned on him. First with Spock, this universe's Spock. Despite Scott trying to tell his captain that this wasn't their universe, Kirk didn't heed it -- too betrayed, too lost, too far gone now. He raged.

The second person Kirk believed betrayed him was Scott himself. Because once this Spock came back, an unsettled look on his face, he ordered the guards to bring the engineer out. Then all of Kirk's fury turned on the engineer, who had obviously been collaborating this behind his back. He was stunned before he could attack.

The rage was gone from his features, in this unconscious state, but the hurt remained.

It was too late to do anything about it. And knowing why he was being summoned, Scott followed Spock under guard to a nearby briefing room, then stood still and waiting.

"The formula you were working on before being apprehended," Spock said, clasping his hands behind his back, "it was to return you and the others to your own universe."

"It was," Scott replied evenly, mirroring the Vulcan's pose.

Compared to the Spock that lived aboard the *ISS Enterprise*, this one's face was an open book. And right now, that book had turned to a dark, unsettled chapter. There could be no doubt that Spock had seen what else Scott had been researching. There could also be no doubt that he could do very little about it.

"We have a very limited time frame within which to work. You already have found the key." Not nearly so certain as his counterpart, this one paused for a moment; a trepidation most humans wouldn't notice, but that was as clear as day to Scott. "We must have our own crewmates back. You must return to your universe. I cannot accomplish this without your assistance, but also cannot allow you to harm this ship or this crew in any way."

"I have no intention to," Scott said. "There's no logic in it."

It was true, of course. And Spock had to have known that. But it was equally obvious that what Scott had been researching was upsetting to the Vulcan. It lived on his face even now. "I don't know if I should trust you," he finally admitted.

Scott never blinked. "Read my mind. But frankly, it doesn't matter if ye trust me or not, Spock. We both have one goal, and that's to get everyone back where they belong."

It could not have been an easy decision, to send someone armed with deadly knowledge found in the *USS Enterprise's* computers back to a universe where that knowledge would be put to use without any attempts to stop it from happening. But Spock really had no choice in the end, no more than any of them had. And while he kept a full detail of guards on Scott down in Main Engineering, and later in the transporter room, he asked nothing more and worked alongside the engineer until all of the connections were made.

Just before he engaged the transporter, Spock looked at the four people who were mirror images of his own crew, and there was a measure of sorrow in his eyes. Maybe compassion. Maybe mercy.

"It does not have to be this way," he finally said to Scott, as he engaged the beam, right on time.

"It's already too late," Scott replied.

He didn't know if Spock heard him. But when they materialized on their own ship, their own first officer was waiting for them. Kirk was coming to his senses then, though not fully there; when he saw the Vulcan, his face twisted and he lunged with a roar.

Scott didn't wait to see what happened. He walked out and didn't look back.

It was after that, that he told McCoy that his father was a good man. It was after that, that he put Joanna's name out to the rebellion so that they could find her, using the very codes that her grandfather had taught him. To hide her from what was coming, what was inevitable.

But it was before Scott chased Leonard McCoy off on Deneva, to join the rebellion, to get out and live with himself if his heart was still clean enough, that he sent his last messages. One, of course, was McCoy's name. A second was for the rebellion to be prepared, and told them exactly what to look for; they had to be ready to mobilize in an instant.

The last could well have been a dead letter, in all senses of the word. Sent perhaps to a dead woman, who might never see it even if she lived. It had nothing to do with the rebellion, nothing to do with his plans, nothing to do with anything but the lingering images of some other world, though not from the other universe. Some better world that had once existed here. Someone else's, who died long ago with her name. Besides that name, it only said two things:

*He died loving you. There's nothing of him in what I'm about to do.*

# Finality

2269

*If they will face death, there is nothing they may not achieve.*

- Sun Tzu

Three things happened nearly simultaneously.

The first thing that happened was the *Enterprise* sending a subspace transmission. Encoded Priority One, it zipped across the galaxy faster than the speed of light, hitting relays and delivering itself to every ship in Starfleet, as well as every other ship that was listening for just such a transmission. It wasn't encrypted. It didn't need to be. It was just one data packet that instructed those ships as to what they were to do.

But the communication's officer wasn't the one who sent it. He was only aware it was away when it was too late to stop it; by the time he turned to inform Captain Spock, who had just finished speaking with Captain Kang, that they had sent a message that seemed to appear out of nowhere, the second thing happened.

The bridge went dark.

Instantly there were murmurs of confusion, and Spock's calm voice requesting a status report. But the coughing started before anyone was able to give him one. The third thing had happened; poison flooded the *Enterprise's* ventilation system. Four hundred and twenty-odd people died; the humans who ran the ship. It only took them about thirty seconds to do so.

The Vulcans on their way to Engineering lived. Spock lived. He realized what was going on as the last weak sounds of the life surrounding him faded out, in the darkness. In a flash, what he had never been able to answer before began coming to him now. And coughing himself, lungs and nasal passages irritated by the poison that was only slowly filtering out of the air, he found his way to the turbolift shaft.

Through the deckplates, the *Enterprise's* engines started singing.

Half of the Starfleet was completely incapacitated. Adrift, dark, no life support and no emergency measures working that would prevent this very thing from happening. The tiny connections, placed one at a time over thirty years, came to life all at once with one program that was received by every ship that took the Priority One message.

All of them took the message, and many of them became nothing more than floating coffins.

The rest were in various states of chaos. Some had not had enough of Scott's designs incorporated to actually be completely disabled, but they found themselves without one or more crucial systems. None of them that received the message had communications anymore. Onboard, their captains scrambled to restore order and restore the systems that had gone down.

But before many of them could even do that, the rebels came. They came in battered but perfectly functional ships. Armed lightly, but even light arms could destroy a starship without shields... the rebels came from all places, every cell on every world, every rebel cargo carrier, all of them having been told that this was what to wait for.

All of them took the message, too, and many of them became cruising executioners.

The Empire's Headquarters on Earth heard nothing of it. One moment, subspace communications were working perfectly. In the next, there was silence. The message hit the last relays, deleted all Starfleet frequencies, then looped back through and overwrote the programming so that the rebel codes and signals alone could pass through, allowing the rebellion to coordinate.

Some ships were taken. Others, destroyed.

The Starfleet was in ruins; the Empire, blind and deaf to what was happening inside of its borders.

And through space, now heading towards Earth, the *Enterprise* screamed.

Spock held out no hope that his new allies could catch the *Enterprise*. Given the sound of her engines, she was well beyond any speed they could reach. His only chance to stop her was by going to Main Engineering.

He managed to navigate his way down the turbolift's shaft, even in absolute darkness, climbing down the rungs carefully and as quickly as he could. He even managed to gauge what decks he was passing as he did so. It was a long way to Engineering, but Spock was moving more

swiftly than humanly possible.

The lights came on when he got halfway there, and he moved even faster.

The deck that housed Main Engineering was silent, absent the howl of the *Enterprise's* warp drive. Laying in the corridor were the bodies of his crew, many of them with faces twisted in a last gasp. Spock didn't need to confirm that this was the scene he would find throughout his ship, and that if anyone lived, it would only be his guards and the human who had set this into motion.

The hope he held out that his guards had been among those who had lived was dashed, however, when he saw the human.

Scott stopped when he saw Spock, and then stood reasonably straight. His hands were stained with green blood that was still dripping off of the dagger he held in his right hand. He didn't smirk, as many humans would. If not for the circumstances, they could be standing across the briefing room table from one another, measuring and calculating, as they had many months before.

For the first time in years, Spock was at a loss for what to say.

Scott spoke for him: "Ye can't stop her. I can't even stop her now."

There was a strange note of weariness in the engineer's voice. Spock did not fail to see the darker spread of human blood on the already red shirt, or the soak of it into the gold sash. "It seems an illogical waste of resources," Spock finally said, now seeing the last few pieces click into place. "I was preparing to bring about a new Empire. Indeed, I would not have allowed you to live to see it, but it would have achieved many of the goals you hoped to accomplish with this."

"I hoped for nothing," Scott said. "If I succeeded, then no more Empire. If I failed, still no loss."

There was absolutely no reason to believe that Scott was lying when he said it was too late to stop the *Enterprise*. It would be illogical; to have been capable of setting a plan of this scale into motion, the assassin had no doubt made certain that he had proofed it from interference as well as possible. While Spock knew he could find a way, he also knew he would not be able to find it before it was already too late.

That left him very few options that he could accomplish in the time frame he was certain of.

He gave Scott a wide berth, ready to snap the engineer's neck should he turn with his dagger, but Scott never did. Merely put his shoulder to the bulkhead. Without a sickbay, or a doctor, he wouldn't survive much longer; already pale and obviously in shock, he would likely not even live long enough to see his plan come to its inevitable end. There was no point to killing him now, aside vengeance, and it seemed somehow disrespectful in light of Scott's end game, so carefully played, to do so for such a poor reason.

Spock paused, sparing a precious few seconds as he stood parallel to the assassin. "Was it worth it?"

The weariness that had been an impression before became a state of existence, and despite all logic, Spock knew that it had nothing to do with Scott's wounds. It was the most human look that the Vulcan had ever seen from this man; a profound exhaustion, as the engineer looked into some distance that had no measure.

And for only a moment, Spock saw. Grasped that it wasn't just this one coup, or this one lifetime, but a million lives. All of the systems and races and people conquered or destroyed by the Empire. All of the lives lost fighting against that oppression. The lives of the men and women laying in the corridors here; the lives of the rebels who had been tortured to death.

It was a question to humanity.

"No," Scott replied.

And it was an answer to the very universe itself.

"I understand," Spock said, and he did.

He didn't look back as he continued on his way, now heading for the main shuttle deck in the hopes that when he launched free of this missile travelling past warp nine, his shuttle and he would survive.

Before she blasted into the light of Sol, she jettisoned her antimatter into space. The resulting explosion was catastrophic to the sector it took place in, but not to any living beings. The *Enterprise* continued on, now through momentum and physics alone, with her impulse engines automatically acting as thrusters to adjust her course.

There was no one to stop her; Starfleet was in chaos. The rebels were fighting for freedom; the Empire was fighting for its very survival. There was no one there to halt the *Enterprise* or destroy her before she could carry out the final objective that she had been programmed to achieve.

When she hit the atmosphere of Earth, fire shrouded her shields, and when those went down almost immediately, she burned herself. There was no time for San Francisco to brace itself. No time for those who controlled the Empire to transport away. No time for Starfleet's Main Academy to evacuate.

The city and a good portion of the surrounding area died swiftly in an explosion the likes of which Earth hadn't seen since WWII; tremors

rocked the planet, and shock waves radiated out. Many of those who died were the top officials of the Empire, including the Emperor. Most of the top brass of a battered and bewildered Starfleet were wiped out as well.

Millions more of innocent civilians died that day, too.

There was no one left to apologize, or provide any answers. No comforts to be given to the survivors, that the antimatter had been ejected so that Earth might survive. No mercy afforded to those who had created the weapon capable of this; capable of grace that led not to salvation, but destruction.

For millions of people and for Scott himself, 'too late' came to an end that day.

That left only chaos. And the future.

# The Future

2272

*Wish I were with you, but I couldn't stay;*

*Every direction leads me away...*

*Pray for tomorrow, but for today*

*All I want is to be home.*

- **Foo Fighters**, "Home"

He listened to the news feed coming through the speakers with half of his attention, as the other half concentrated on the small child sitting up on the table. Bright kid. Three years old. McCoy didn't fail to recognize the significance of that.

The sunlight was poking its way through the clouds, and on Deneva, things were still chaotic. Nothing like they had been three years ago, though; nothing like the bloody wars that rocked this world and so many others.

Now, the chaos was about living again. Rebuilding infrastructure. Restoring services. Destroying what last lingering traces of the Empire remained here.

McCoy looked at the little boy; a rusty-haired, gray-eyed kid with a smart look to him. The son of one of the rebel leaders in this area. The same rebel leader who McCoy had chased into the night, leaving behind the knife that had been pointing into his kidney. Man was way too old to start a family, but that hadn't stopped him; really, though, McCoy couldn't complain about the results.

"Am I done?" the child asked, both eyebrows up hopefully.

"Yeah, kiddo. You're all good," McCoy replied, ruffling the boy's hair before lifting him down off of the table. "Tell your parents to find you some more greens, though."

"Aye, sir!" the kid said, snappily, then grinned and took off out of the room.

McCoy put his stethoscope back on the tray, then took a breath and looked out the window. Business had been tapering off, slowly but steadily, over the past few months. There had been a time, just after Deneva declared its independence, that he ran for days on end at a time trying to keep up with the wounded. There weren't many doctors, and that was nearly so fatal as the war had been, as Empire forces and rebels collided here, three years ago.

The Empire still stood, though it stood in tatters. It managed to hang onto Sol and a half-dozen other worlds certainly, then a handful more only tenuously even now. Emperor Spock had taken his throne a little over two years ago; that was enough to make McCoy smirk, from a distance, though he wasn't sure why. There wasn't really anything funny about it. Not for Spock, or the Empire, or the free worlds that were trying to find their way back to governing themselves.

Spock had managed to take that position by offering help. Bringing Vulcan aid and supplies, and healers to a terrified and hurting world that had been ravaged for months. Bringing Klingon cruisers to patrol around worlds outside of Sol, to protect them from any scavengers (and there were many) who would swoop in. His woman was gone; when he came forth, he did so alone and with a certain... humanity that McCoy had been genuinely taken aback by.

He had even reached out to the rebels, but the rebels would have none of it. An Emperor was still an Emperor; the Empire was still something that they had been fighting for decades to end. McCoy didn't blame them. Not now, not after all this.

But for their part, the rebels raised a conditional white flag inside of Sol. There could be no doubt that they still aimed to end the Empire's reign all the way back to Earth where it had started, but were willing to keep the fighting to the worlds that were still battling for their right to govern themselves for now.

Deneva was ratifying its new constitution today.

He had quit drinking; had no choice but to quit drinking, really. Once he joined the rebellion, McCoy had to become very useful, very quickly. There were a few things that helped him do it. A real purpose, for one -- not just patching up Starfleet's officers from attacks, but helping people who had been fighting for something more than power or glory. That had been a big part of it.

The second part was Joanna.

It was rocky. It still was rocky, for that matter. When all of the trappings were stripped away, and all of the formalities were gone, they had no option but to get real with each other and quickly. They fought, they hurt each other with cutting words, and after all of that, they started healing each other's wounds. Sometimes even the ones they had inflicted and still did. Sometimes the ones left over from their former lives.

She worked with him at the small clinic, a nurse who was studying to become a doctor. No university currently stood on Deneva to give her a

degree, but her father and his father had been healers, even though they had often forgotten that, and it was in her blood.

They were both a part of this rebellion now. And knew they would die as members, if not of battles along the way, then of old age. Some were carefully vetted into it, and they were two of those.

Most people were born into it, though. That little boy who McCoy had been giving a check-up was one; born a rebel, would die a rebel, just like his genetic half-brother had.

Even amongst the rebels, no one knew what Montgomery Scott was. To some, he was a brutal mass-murderer who had done something so terrible that the ends couldn't justify the means, even as they tried to make the most of those ends. To others, he was a martyr, a word that rankled McCoy -- sacrificing his soul and life for the greater good of humanity.

For McCoy, though, and for those others who had known him even peripherally, he was neither. He was what he was, nothing more or less.

And for a very few, he didn't truly exist at all.

In their minds and hearts, that name belonged to someone else, a young man who had died in 2239.

She had been vetted as a rebel. Her strawberry blond hair was faded to gray, and a face that should have been beautiful wore ancient scars. McCoy probably could have removed them for her, but when he offered, she only replied that they were a part of who she was and she wasn't ashamed of them.

It took him a long time to come to see her as a person unto herself; when he heard the whole story, it was almost impossible to stop looking at Jenna Richmond as part of a catalyst that had changed the shape of the universe. But eventually, as he got to know her, he realized that she was only human. Just like the rest of them.

He stopped by her little shack on the way back to his own; inside, her adopted son was carrying around his infant boy, singing quietly in some language that McCoy didn't recognize. He gave Josh a quick smile, then gestured to the radio that was sitting silent on Jenna's kitchen table. "They're going through the constitutional process, you know."

She chuckled, moving around the table to clear it from dinner. "Yeah, I know I'm missing history, here."

"So, what's the excuse?" McCoy asked, mostly joking.

Jenna stopped and then shrugged. "Why listen to that, when I can listen to him?" she asked, nodding her head towards her son and grandson.

McCoy fell quiet for a moment to listen. Still didn't recognize the words, but it was a beautiful song. "What is it?"

There was an expression that crossed her face that he had seen before, often enough to know what it was. "It's an old Welsh lullaby."

Then she smiled, tipping her head to the side and closing her eyes, touching on the ancient memories that went with her ancient scars:

*"Oh, how happily shines the star,  
"All through the night,  
"To light its earthly sister,  
"All through the night.  
"Old age is night when affliction comes,  
"But to beautify man in his twilight..."*

*"We'll put our weak light together  
"All through the night."*

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