

## **The cure for headache**

by mazaher

May 1st, 2011

::

*McCoy is fighting his personal ghosts, and losing. Kirk and Spock give him a much needed hand.*

*Love comes in many different forms, and not every one of them has to do with sex...*

*It all began with one random phrase sneaking into my mind:*

*"There is a knot of pain behind his eyes he can't seem to loosen."*

*Dedicated to ewin, who seems to be needing a hug. I only wish this story could be less dark.*

*Inspiredly betaed by the totally awesome athens7, who never fails to make me feel like maybe I can write worth a damn.*

::

"Trouble in Sickbay".

This is what Lt. Uhura whispers, barely within Spock's range of hearing, while she passes the Science station on her way to the head for a faked "urgent personal need", just after getting an in-ship encrypted memo from Nurse Chapel.

Spock nods imperceptibly in acknowledgment, types the last fourteen digits of the equation he's working on, saves his file, stands up, turns toward the Captain's chair, and composes himself into informal rest position.

"Captain, the need has arisen for discussion of certain results pertaining to the research now under way on bioconstants in alien marine species. If possible, immediately."

Kirk glances at him curiously.

"Lt. Sulu, you have the conn. Page me in case you need me."

"Aye, Captain, sir."

Sulu is always glad to clock in some command time.

As soon as they're off the bridge,

"Where?" Kirk asks in a low voice.

"Sickbay," Spock whispers back.

"Bad?"

"Indeed."

"Damn."

::

It had all begun with a call for help. A Jurgla merchant vessel from Calypsos, aka Delta Piscium V: a non-Federation planet with an aquatic dominant species functionally akin to the smaller Terran cetaceans. Their environmental controls had failed after a close encounter with a swarm of abrasive debris which had ruined the solar panels feeding the system. When the Enterprise had reached them, the liquid in the tanks had lost more than half its methane content, four of the Jurgla on board were already dead of asphyxia, and the remaining five were in critical conditions.

The Engineering department had broken a couple of records putting together emergency tanks on the Enterprise, and Dr. McCoy had passed the medical databanks through a fine sieve trying to find whatever information could be useful in order to try and save the Jurgla who were still breathing.

The results had been scarce: Calypsos only entertained occasional commercial relationships with the Federation, and precious few data were available on Jurgla biology. The universal translator didn't much help, as the five live Jurgla barely managed to communicate.

The rescue had therefore happened largely on "intuition, good will and duct tape", as per the Captain's recommendations. Things seemed to be looking marginally better when the survivors were finally floating in the jury-rigged tanks (McCoy tried not to think about the four rigid corpses held in stasis in the lower deck), but then the operation had taken a nosedive.

The doctor had been in Sickbay, jotting down hasty notes about the concentration of methane which seemed to work best, when he had been summoned urgently back to the tanks in Storage Bay 7. A distressed Uhura had helped with translation as one of the Jurgla breathlessly strained to whistle, in the melodic chant of the species, a request McCoy had sworn to himself he would never, ever listen to, not again: the oldest of the survivors, a big female with a net of thin scars crisscrossing her pale gray skin, demanded to be extracted from the tank and left to die.

McCoy had turned as white as a sheet. A difficult half-hour had ensued, during which he had learned, through the halting, broken speech of the marginally recovering Jurgla, that such form of assisted suicide was sanctioned on Calypsos by law and tradition, as a kinder alternative to slow suffocation when the breathing apparatus failed.

Yet he had refused. As the Jurgla held fast on their demand, he had pleaded, threatened, begged, shouted. Uhura had finally called the Captain.

"Bones, they have a right to follow their customs. She wants to do it! She doesn't want to die that other death. We did what we could. \*You\* did what you could. Let her go!"

"Not on my shift." Bones wasn't raising his eyes from the corrugated metal of the floor. "I can recalculate the methane to water ration. I can boost the osmotic pressure by magnetizing the liquid. I..."

"Dr. McCoy, regulation 567.9 issued by the Interplanetary Conference held on Formalhaut XI on Stardate 2218.65 states that non-Federation species transported on Federation ships have a right to perform any and all rites of passage which are customary for said species; lacking independent evidence, it will be assumed that the declarations of the applicants as to the tenor of the customs invoked are correct."

Spock's voice had been clipped and cool, and peremptory.

McCoy had stared at him with desperation in his eyes. Then he had turned on his heels and had marched out without a word.

Within the next 36 hours the remaining four Jurgla were stable or recovering. McCoy had come back when all had been over with the old female, and had remained on shift until the last patient had been out of danger. Then he'd called for M'Benga to relieve him, had shut himself in his study in Sickbay, and for another 24 hours he hadn't emerged.

::

Now he's still there, sitting at his desk, an empty glass and a full bottle in front of him. He hasn't drunk a drop, but all the same there is a knot of pain behind his eyes he can't seem to loosen. He sits there and doesn't know what to do. He can't even think. He doesn't allow himself to, for the one thought that keeps buzzing around him, feeding the most monumental headache he remembers ever having after the night his divorce was finalized, is the image of his father half a minute after he was dead.

Killed.

By the hand of one Leonard H. McCoy, MD, his son.

A life fully lived, his father had said. A death too painful. I beg you, he had said, his voice weak and rasping but still so warm, so calm.

Human words in Standard in a half-dark hospital room at night, Jurgla whistles across methane-laced saltwater in a tank, the same message, the same plea.

Let me die in the way I choose.

McCoy closes his eyes, sets his throbbing head on his arms extended on the desk, fingers knotted. He can't even cry, and the pain is like a knifeblade between his shoulders.

The buzzer comes alive all of a sudden, once, twice. After the fourth press of the button, a voice comes from the other side of the door.

A voice he used to know... a voice he used to obey.

But nothing matters now.

He barely raises his face, listens to words which have no meaning, again hides his eyes in the furrow between his useless limbs, seeking darkness and an oblivion that eludes him.

The lock clicks, disengaging. The door slides open.

"Bones!"

He doesn't need to look up to recognize Captain Kirk and Commander Spock. Jim and Spock, his friends. He must find some words for his friends-- but explaining is so difficult. He decides he doesn't even want to try.

"Go away."

"Oh, Bones..." Jim steps nearer.

"Go \*away\*, damn you!"

"Bones."

A hand touches his arm, stills there for a moment, then starts to rub, gently, on his shoulder-blade.

"What do you want?" growls McCoy.

"Just to be here with you. I know, and Spock here knows, that there is nothing we can really do to make it better. But we are here. We don't want you to feel you are alone to face this."

A pair of red-rimmed eyes, made greener by grief, stares at the blue eyes of the Captain.

"Go away, both of you. Alone is what I deserve to be, useless idiot that I am, and if there is no god to give me what I deserve, I will get it myself. Fuck off before I kill someone else."

McCoy wipes his hair from his face and sits up straight in challenge.

"What you deserve? What you \*deserve\*?" Kirk grabs him by the shoulders and stares back at him, his mouth a thin line of pain.

Then he draws a breath.

"Fine. What you deserve. Right. Do you trust me, Bones? Do you trust us?" He drops his hands, just looks.

These are his friends, who are worried for him. McCoy glances at Spock, standing tall and silent at Kirk's side as a pillar of calm; he feels the warmth of Kirk's body wrapping him in the damp cloud of emotion, sweat, tears, a blessing he can't feel anymore, chilled to the marrow as he is and dried up by his grief. Trust may be the last thing Bones will ever feel, but he does trust his friends.

"Yes," he breathes.

"Good. 'What you deserve', coming."

Kirk turns to Spock.

"Spock, on the cot. Hold him."

Fast as lightning, McCoy finds himself stretched on the small camp bed he keeps in a corner for his occasional catnaps between shifts. His arms are above his head, easily blocked by one of Spock's hands. Kirk kneels above him on the other end of the cot, knees at each side of his shins, hands on his own thighs.

He doesn't touch Bones yet.

"What you deserve. What do you deserve for being a competent doctor? One of the most brilliant medical researchers in the Alpha Quadrant?"

Kirk carefully lays his hands flat on McCoy's chest, fingertips kneading very gently on the thin blue tissue of the tunic.

McCoy tries to squirm away, but he's pinned at both ends, helpless.

"Stop! Let me go" he hisses.

"Remember, you trust us," Spock's voice answers in his ear, soft as a caress.

Kirk doesn't stop.

"What do you deserve for your dedication? All those double shifts after you've patched someone of us up, and you're not sure yet that all will be well?"

Kirk's hands slide slowly down along McCoy's sides.

"What do you deserve for all those missed meals when you sit next to a biobed instead, watching data blimping on a screen?"

The heels of Kirk's hands rub McCoy's belly in circular motions, tracing a double inverted spiral on the taut muscles.

McCoy's arms tense, and Spock's pressure on his wrists increases slightly.

"What do you deserve," the low chant continues "for the sleepless nights?"

Kirk stretches forward, touches his palms to McCoy's eyelids, sliding them away again and again with the gentlest pressure toward the temples.

McCoy's headache begins to crawl, the knot becoming alive like a ball of angry snakes inside his head. He squeezes his eyes shut, while a stabbing pain comes up his throat. He tries to gulp it down. It sticks there, smooth and hard.

"What do you deserve for the times when nothing is enough and death takes somebody and your heart breaks?"

Kirk's hands frame McCoy's face in a repeated caress, his quiet words coming in small puffs of warm breath.

"No," McCoy whispers, his eyes still closed.

"Yes," Kirk answers, still stroking, stroking.

"I can't... I don't want to... Stop, please stop."

"You can. Trust us. You said you trust us. ...What do you deserve for being brave enough to let another free to choose?"

"No!" McCoy twists in their hold now, trying to get up. He opens his eyes wide, and what Kirk sees in them is near panic. "I'm not brave, I'm a coward, a traitor who forswore his oath. Let me go! This is not what I deserve!"

"Your oath? Let me see. Spock, how does the Hippocratic oath go?"<sup>1</sup>

" 'I swear to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant: I will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk, and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow.' " Spock recites clearly and quietly, his fingers not losing his grip.

"If I'm not mistaken, the list of your published works runs to five pages, and your footnotes are the paragon of the galaxy." Kirk has also closed his eyes, and runs his hands up and down McCoy's long frame as he talks.

Spock goes on.

" 'I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug. I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being, whose illness may affect the person's family and economic stability. My responsibility includes these related problems, if I am to care adequately for the sick.' "

"Call that as you wish, call it good bedside manners or protectiveness, call it tlc or mother-henning, there are 457 people on this ship who can give witness you have it. What's next, Spock?"

" 'I will not be ashamed to say 'I know not,' nor will I fail to call in my colleagues when the skills of another are needed for a patient's recovery.' "

"I guess we'll have to ask M'Benga for his opinion, won't we? All apart from the consultations archive you've built, which amounts to what, a zillion terabytes of subspace vid files...? Go on, Spock."

" 'I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure.' I must say, Doctor, that your fastidiousness as to periodical check-ups of perfectly healthy and functional crewmembers is one exceedingly irksome feature impinging on my work schedule."

Spock is human enough that he can't resist taking his chance at needling the doctor, and Kirk gives him a small smile. Spock's eyes squeeze fractionally in that catlike not-smile of his, and he goes on.

" 'I will remember that I remain a member of society, with special obligations to all my fellow human and non-human beings, those sound of mind and body as well as the infirm. I will respect the privacy of my patients, for their problems are not disclosed to me that the world may know.' "

While he's still finishing his enunciation, Kirk is whispering to Spock:

"Now turn him around. Right so, place the pillow a bit to the side, so he can breath while I work".

Kirk begins to carefully knead McCoy's shoulders, working his way from the tips of his wide straight shoulderblades to the space between, and slightly up to the seventh cervical.

"Hey, I bet it aches... you're all tense here. Did you know this is the place which gets busted by responsibility overload?"

He presses his thumbs in opposite, enlarging circles until McCoy lets out a grunt and Kirk feels the muscles relax slightly.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Hippocratic oath, 1.3, Modern version*, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippocratic\\_Oath](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippocratic_Oath). I altered slightly the order of the items and added the reference to non-humans for the sake of continuity.

"There... Do I need to remind you of how your off-shift time, your brandy, your conversation and your devilishly penetrant questions are always free to all who need them, and who know whatever they say will remain a secret? Do I? But there is more. Spock?"

"I will apply, for the benefit of the sick, all measures that are required, avoiding those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism. Most especially must I tread with care in matters of life and death. It is given to me to save lives..."

"...but it may also be within my power to take a life; this awesome responsibility must be faced with great humbleness and awareness of my own frailty."

It is McCoy's voice, muffled by the pillow, that ends the sentence. "Above all, I must not play at God," and here it breaks, and the pain that makes his head and throat ache now explodes in violent sobs which wrack his whole frame.

Spock lets him go. Kirk turns him over, pulls him up to himself, and holds him as Bones cries out all the tears he never cried for the inevitable, final failure in his battle against death.

Spock climbs gracefully on the cot at his back and hugs him from behind.

"If I do not violate this oath, may I enjoy life and art, respected while I live and remembered with affection thereafter. May I always act so as to preserve the finest traditions of my calling and may I long experience the joy of healing those who seek my help." So be it, doctor," he recites, his chin on McCoy's shoulder.

They just hold him silently, allowing the long-withheld tears to spend themselves.

At last,

"Bit better?" Kirk asks.

"A bit," McCoy acknowledges, searching his pockets for a handkerchief and accepting with a muffled thanks the one Spock offers.

"So this is what I deserve...? It looks like an annotated edition of the Hippocratic oath is a good cure for headache. Especially self-inflicted psychosomatic headache ...Thank you."

"You're welcome." Kirk answers with a smile and a last one-armed hug.

"Now off you go meditate, or at least wash your hands, Spock. You must feel all soiled with my human emotions."

Spock raises his hands, turns them over for McCoy to see.

"There is no need, Doctor. My hands, as well as my mind, are completely clean. The meaning of IDIC implies that, in this possibly boundless universe, there is a rightful place for Jurgla death rites, and an equally rightful place for your sensitive conscience. I am thankful for both. Most especially for the latter."

And for this once, Dr. Leonard H. McCoy is left without words.

::

Stardate 2011:04:28:08:13

Classified report -- For the eyes of the Captain's only

Jim,

it appears that the short-term support therapy we performed on Dr. McCoy has produced satisfactory results.

According to information garnered from Nurse Chapel, Lt. Uhura and Dr. M'Benga, our friend has consumed food, had a night of relatively easy sleep, has resumed duty, and has even been seen smiling at a salacious Russian story recounted to a rapt audience in the mess hall by Ens. Chekov.

The wounds of the heart may be the hardest to heal, but it is indeed possible to a truly great soul to live with them, and even turn them into an eventual benefit to others as well as oneself.

I am finding I have much to learn from Dr. McCoy.

Spock

::