

Odes, Epics, and Other Signs of Esteem

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Odes, Epics, and Other Signs of Esteem

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Summary

He thought he was taking mortality in stride.

He wasn't.

Chapter 1

Leonard McCoy couldn't believe he was going to get out of this with a slap on the wrist and surprisingly minimal paperwork. In fact, it had been almost insulting how quickly Spock had rustled up the correct form, as if Starfleet had experience with officers needing to change their file from human to mortal ex-god, as evidenced by the existence of form *106.2b Declaration of Change of Species Designation*.

The senior staff were taking it well enough, he supposed. It had been a few weeks and they were still occasionally regarding him like a science experiment, but otherwise called him Leonard or Doctor McCoy and made space for him to join them for meals.

If they'd tried to call him Eros, or, even worse, *Cupid*...

Jim on the other hand was taking it wholly in stride in a very Kirk-like fashion. His earlier insecurity seemed to have melted away after just one night together. That way Jim walked with his pelvis leading said it all, legs swaggering out to the side as if he had a sign pointing to him saying, *lover of the god of erotic arts, right here*. Leonard had caught him preening in the mess hall when they had showed up for breakfast *obviously together*. There'd been a hush in the conversation, then a muted surge of what was clearly gossip and Jim had briefly placed a possessive hand on his shoulder and winked before strutting over to the coffee dispenser.

That night, in bed together, exhilarated that Starfleet's official response had come back: acceptance of the form, an update to Leonard's file, and orders for Jim to proceed with another diplomatic mission, Leonard traced a finger down the younger man's bare belly and murmured, "Abs like these have turned the tide in wars."

Jim laced his fingers together behind his head and grinned, the better to display his physique. Leonard rolled his eyes fondly. Turned the tide of wars yes, but not in the way Jim was thinking. Starfleet kept Jim fighting fit, but he didn't have the build of an Achilles, Hercules or Hector—those men couldn't get their arms to sit naturally at their sides. No, Adonis, Paris... Patroclus. A seasoned fighter to be sure, but classically handsome and not overly muscle-bound. The perfect balance, so far as Leonard was concerned.

*And someday one will say, one of the men to come
Steering his oar-swept ship across the wine-dark sea
'there's the mound of a man who died in the old days,
one of the brave whom glorious Hector killed.'
So they will say, someday, and my fame will never die.*

Never, not the fate for his Jim. Leonard had promised that to himself when he'd smuggled the younger man onto the Enterprise. Jim wasn't going to be a forgotten footnote in some history of Starfleet, dead far too young. He shivered; surging upwards to press a kiss to Jim's lips.

It shouldn't have been a surprise that their next diplomatic mission didn't go any more to plan than the previous one. The twin suns were low in the sky as Jim's security detail circled

around them, phasers at the ready. Civil war. Leonard brushed a bead of sweat back from his forehead before it could reach his eyes. They'd beamed down into a goddamn civil war.

Now they were outgunned and outflanked; the rebel faction having surrounded them after launching an assault on the palace complex in the capital city.

*So on they fought like a swirl of living fire -
You could not say if the sun and moon still stood secure,
So dense the battle-haze that engulfed the brave
Who stood their ground to defend Patroclus' body.*

Sunlight glinted off something metallic and Leonard just *knew* what that heralded— perhaps even more so than the Enterprise's security officers. The red-shirted kids were focused on the immediate threats: dusty rebels brandishing knives and short-range projectile weapons closing in on Jim. He didn't think, just moved, diving forwards and shoving the younger man with all his strength as a sharp *rat-tat-tat* echoed off the stone buildings

Jim was yelling, but the words were somehow indistinct as Lieutenant Anders took his captain by the arm and forcibly dragged him out of the square and deeper into the citadel.

Leonard rolled over on the ground and dirt clung to his hair. Jim was safe, but Leonard was bleeding very human blood into the dusty road. He could hear the words recounted so many times before:

*Come, Friend, you too must die. Why moan about it so?
Even Patroclus died, a far, far better man than you.
And look, you see how handsome and powerful I am?
The son of a great man, the mother who gave me life--
A deathless goddess. But even for me, I tell you,
Death and the strong force of fate are waiting.
There will come a dawn or sunset or high noon
When a man will take my life in battle too--
flinging a spear perhaps
Or whipping a deadly arrow off his bow.*

The pain that had been biting hot was quickly dimming to a muted roar, fading along with the rest of his senses as shock took over. Someone grabbed him and he was lifted into the air with a sickening jerk. A flash of red and black then blue and he realized Spock and one of the security ensigns must be carrying him. Leonard gasped, swallowing down bile as the bright sunlight was replaced by shadow and the suffocating heat of one of the back alleys. The motion seemed endless, until they rounded a sharp corner and the world tilted sideways then rolled as he was lowered onto the ground.

Leonard glanced down and a hysterical giggle rose in his throat. Blood, blood, blood... it shouldn't have been a novelty because he was a doctor, dammit, but this was *his* blood staining the front of his uniform and dripping onto the dun colored cobblestones.

"Bones!" Blue eyes wide, Jim crashed to his knees and made a grab for Leonard's lax hand. "Are you okay?"

The giggle escaped then, because, shit, *did he look like he was alright?* The worried frown on Jim's face deepened in response and Leonard tried to say something more appropriate, but his tongue didn't want to cooperate.

"Spock," Jim turned his head to yell, "Get us out of here!"

The Vulcan barely looked up from where he was doing something complicated with a communicator and Lieutenant Anders— Leonard dimly remembered the pre-mission briefing including warnings about beam-out windows and atmospheric interference.

"What do I need to do?" Leonard vaguely registered Jim's words, but his swirling thoughts didn't settle until the younger man tapped his cheek and repeated, "Bones! What do I need to do?"

Do? Leonard frowned, then focused on his body only to be confronted by a wave of pain that made him groan aloud, plaintive and shocked at the intensity of it. Jim's tenuous grip on composure seemed to waver at the sound, hand fisting in the fabric of Leonard's sleeve.

"Captain?" Ensign Peters was suddenly crouching beside them. "Can you tear his shirt open so we can get at that chest wound?" Jim could, of course, gripping and ripping the uniform in half before Leonard could take a breath to prepare himself.

Leonard's vision tunneled into a grey cone of pain as he realized they were treating him for a sucking chest wound. Another point of pressure on his shoulder felt like a hot iron and he choked, gasped, and the echo of *rat-tat-tat* in his ears made Leonard release a sob that there could be *three* bullet wounds in him. The world lurched again as they sat him up and he was leaned against something firm but yielding. Gold. Jim.

"Easy, Bones, easy," Jim's voice, almost panting. "I've got you."

Forehead tucked against Jim's sweaty cheek, Leonard only let out a whimper.

Chapter 2

“Hey,” the word was softly spoken, with a slight rasp to it. Leonard surfaced from what could only be a pleasantly drugged oblivion to Jim leaning over the biobed. When his eyes focused a stressed frown on the younger man’s face melted into a warm smile. “Welcome back.”

“HMMMM.” Leonard’s tongue felt thick and heavy in his mouth, everything not very sharp around the edges.

Jim seemed to know how to help, as he raised the head of the biobed and helped Leonard sip some water before he gently asked. “You okay?”

Was he okay? Nothing hurt—that had to be a good sign. Bypassing the question, he asked, “When can I get out of here?”

Jim frowned. “You were shot twice, Bones. Once through the shoulder and the other led to a collapsed lung. M’Benga had you in surgery for over two hours, and then six more under the tissue regenerators.”

One could still hope. “So...”

“He wants to keep you in here overnight for observation, then he’ll release you to my tender care.” Jim paused while Leonard took another greedy sip of water, then asked, “What happened, Bones?” He licked his lips, as if struggling to find the right words to explain what he meant. “You seemed kind of out of it.”

The urge to protest *I’d been shot!* was strong, but confronted with the naked concern on the younger man’s face he admitted, “I’ve never been *hurt* before, Jim. Not really.”

Jim frowned, “You mean?”

Leonard quirked a crooked smile. “God, remember. I’m pretty new to this whole bleeding thing, much less mortal peril.”

It was... not what Jim had expected. Unsure how to reply he settled for, “What’d you think?”

“Well,” Leonard rolled his eyes and asserted, “pain sucks.”

Jim huffed a laugh of surprise. “Amen to that.”

“Bleeding,” he frowned, “why is it different when it’s your own blood?”

“Well, you know,” Jim shrugged, “I guess it’s related to the fact that you’d be the one dying if you lose too much of it.”

“Smartass,” Leonard leaned forwards and Jim obligingly ducked down for a kiss. It was nice, so he begged another kiss and then chanced, “Hand me my chart?”

Jim snorted, “Oh Hell no.” He pressed another kiss to Leonard’s lips to soften the blow. “I’m under orders: twenty-four hours of observation, *then* we can let you have a look at your chart and you can have whatever little stress-out you want on the way to my quarters. M’Benga promises everything is okay. You’ll be back on light duty in three days and can hit the gym again in five— *gently*.”

Leonard huffed, but was mollified by another kiss. He felt... odd... if he were honest. Detached from his body in a way. Maybe getting some more sleep was a good idea. Jim seemed to sense it as well, as he lowered the head of the bed until Leonard was almost flat on his back. Succumbing to the instinct to close his eyes, the doctor sighed as a warm hand brushed sweaty hair back from his forehead. Mustering some lingering strength, he mumbled, “And if such fate expect my life, where death strikes I will lie.”

“Bones?” Jim sounded concerned, which didn’t make sense because they were back on the Enterprise and everything was going to be fine.

Leonard tried to make a reassuring noise, but sleep came too quickly.

“Argh!” Leonard flinched back, flinging a hand up in surprise and wincing at the answering ache in his shoulder. Shot, he remembered. What a shitty thing to add to his list of human experiences— Jocelyn would be laughing her heart out, if she had one. From the foot of the bed Spock simply raised one perfect eyebrow. Scowling to mask his embarrassment, Leonard growled, “Warn a guy, wouldja! Hovering over me like that.”

“I was simply waiting for you to wake up fully.” The Vulcan shifted to a posture more suited to parade rest and inquired, “Are you well, doctor?”

This time Leonard didn’t swallow down the urge to raise an eyebrow and retort, “I got shot!”

“That is not, in fact, what I am referring to.” Moving closer to the head of the bed, mindful of the strengths, and limitations, of the privacy screen, he began, “As half-Vulcan, I will outlive my friends...” Spock paused and inclined his head before continuing softly, “and I have been more acutely aware of my own mortality since the loss of my planet.” Leonard’s tongue felt thick in his mouth. “While your moods were changeable, even by human standards, I had not previously observed you to be prone to melancholy. Since your past was revealed, I have observed at least four instances of that mood, too subtle perhaps to be noticed by others, but I believe my interpretation is correct.”

The black bile. Leonard grimaced, retorted, “My people *invented* melancholy.”

Instead of replying directly, the Vulcan softly said, “Like the generations of leaves, the lives of mortal men. Now the wind scatters the old leaves across the earth, now the living timber bursts with the new buds and spring comes round again. And so with men: as one generation comes to life, another dies away.”

Leonard found he had to swallow an unexpected lump in his throat before he could gruffly reply, “Didn’t know you were familiar with the classics, Spock.”

“My mother was a particularly well-read woman, with a fondness for Earth’s antiquity. Vulcans do not typically believe in bedtime stories, but she would read to me at night when I was small.” Continuing, Spock admitted that he was acting on a hunch, “Your words were somewhat indistinct as we carried you, and you may not have even realized you were speaking aloud, but the passage felt familiar.”

That naked truth prompted a response in kind. “Sometimes,” Leonard swallowed again, “I feel so *old*. And Jim— he’s so *young*. Smart. Beautiful. Kind. Brave— too brave for his own damn fool good sometimes.” A flicker of quickly suppressed emotion crossed the Vulcan’s face, as if he particularly agreed with that part of the assessment. Thinking back on the figures who had dominated the narrative winding its way through his mind, and the other vibrant men and women who had caught his eye over the centuries, Leonard continued, “Jim’s unique. Incandescent, sometimes. But I’ve met a few humans like that before, and they tend not to grow old.” Rubbing a thumb over the standard issue med bay blanket, he softly confessed, “It surprised me yesterday, to see that maybe I should worry about being snuffed out so quickly as well.” Choking on a laugh, Leonard added, “I guess fear of death is what keeps us alive.”

Spock bowed his head in acquiescence as he replied, “Illogical though it may be.”

Huffing a breath that made his chest twinge in warning, he blurted out, “I was just being Leonard McCoy— and once I met Jim I even thought I was *good* at it too.”

“And Leonard McCoy was a recent affectation?”

Leonard sucked his teeth— only Jim had heard this before, and even then in a piecemeal fashion, late at night. Eventually, he nodded. “I wasn’t lying about that. I did go to medical school— thought I’d try something different— and had been playing the human in Georgia for a while. With my previous powers it was easy enough to pop up as a twenty-one year old and go from there.”

“If your previous primary persona was that of Eros...” Spock frowned, calculating, roughly a millennia was unaccounted for, perhaps more. “In the intervening time?”

“I sort of...” Leonard shrugged, struggling to explain things he didn’t quite understand himself, “slept, some. Pretty sure there were a few centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire before things got interesting again in Europe, but Hell if I remember. It was a damned depressing time to be a god. I hung around the Pacific Islands for a while— they were positively enlightened compared to how repressed everything was getting elsewhere.”

“Fascinating.”

“I’m glad someone on this ship thinks it is.”

Like a true scientist, Spock pressed on, “May I inquire, doctor, how you came to be mortal?”

Oh, that was a doozy of a story, and not unembarrassing. In retrospect, he'd wonder if some drugs from M'Benga might have loosened his tongue. "I surfaced from Olympus a handful of times before the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood caught my eye. They had models dressed up as maidens, Ophelia in ponds and everything. Calliope said it felt like the old days. The Oceanid Electra's daughter— and Hesiod was right about the hair— she took the name Jane and modeled for them. I hung around for a while before we got together— she knew what I was. Once we outlived them she changed her name to Jocelyn and we spent time in Vienna and Paris, mostly with the arty set. The wars were awful and afterwards everything felt tired and worn-out so we retired to Olympus for a while. Argued. Turns out we were less well suited to each other when we weren't playing at being mortal while loosing a few arrows at people for general amusement.

"Then the Eugenics wars were a time to keep our heads down, but once things seemed to have settled I suggested we try Earth again— put the spark back in our marriage. We lived it up for a while, but eventually even that seemed routine. I wanted to try something different, so we set up as humans and started living a life in Georgia. Turns out she liked that even less than hanging out on Olympus." Leonard frowned, memories of harsh words and the slap of a hand across his cheek made him pause. "I dug in my heels. I liked healing people for a change, and damned if I wasn't good at it. I thought she'd see sense, or maybe just go and wait for a century or so." Cheeks pinking, he admitted, "I guess I underestimated the situation. She said if I liked it so much I should just go live and die with them. Unfortunately, the others agreed."

"Nyota described seeing you on the shuttle to the academy." The full description had in fact been quite colorful.

"Three months after." And damn, he'd been a mess. "They took the bow and arrows and everything. All I had left was my wings, and even those I decided to hide. She even took me to a *human* court to dissolve our *human* marriage and won possession of our *human* house after claiming that she'd put me through medical school. Last I heard she was partying it up in Macau."

The sour note was unmistakable, and after a glance at the blood-pressure readings Spock decided he'd best change the topic. "The stories..." The Vulcan's tone softened. "I believe my mother always wondered if they were true."

Leonard smiled, almost sadly. It was so long ago, and yet, "Hector was brave, and Odysseus and Penelope were clever, and Helen was beautiful, and I can show you where they buried Achilles, but you wouldn't believe such a humble windswept hillside is where he lies."

The corner of Spock's mouth curled, as if fighting a small smile of his own. He remembered a hot breeze and cool fingers stroking through his hair, a melodic voice whispering, "*Sing, O goddess, of the anger of Peleus' son Achilles, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs and vultures...*" Remembering himself, the Vulcan took a step backwards. "I should leave you to your rest, doctor."

"Spock—" Leonard's lip curled as if the words were a surprise even to himself, "Thank you."

With a nod, the Vulcan took his leave.

Leonard shivered as Jim traced a fingertip over the patch of new pink skin on his chest, then his shoulder. It had been too close—his chart had been clear enough. If the beam-out window had been ten minutes later...

Jim knew it too. Leonard could tell from how the younger man had gripped him almost feverishly once they had been released to the captain's quarters. Both were off-duty for forty-eight hours. Somehow, Jim had managed to de-escalate the tension on the planet and even brought both sides to the negotiating table. A treaty was on the verge of being ratified: peace for a generation that had only known mistrust and conflict.

Leonard cleared his throat, but there was still a husk of exhaustion in his voice as he softly said, "They'll recite poems about your exploits, kid."

"Poetry?" Jim's forehead crinkled and he sniffed derisively. "Forget that." Waving a hand expansively, he proclaimed instead, "The Ballad of Jim and Bones—that's what I want. It's got a ring to it."

"Oh," Leonard rolled his eyes, "it's something all right."

Blue eyes dark in the low light, Jim asked, "Are you okay, Bones?"

Looking around the small bedroom, decorated with knick-knacks from various planets and Jim's gym shorts carelessly draped across the back of a chair, he felt an unexpected tug in his chest. *Nostos*. Somehow, in amongst the death of a planet and insane Romulans and roaming the stars they'd had a homecoming without even realizing it. Smiling, Leonard ran a hand over the younger man's arm as he replied, "Yeah, Jim. I am."

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