

Cinderella in a Party Dress

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Cinderella in a Party Dress

by [SLWalker](#)

Summary

(2253-2254) - Brand new doctor Leonard McCoy unexpectedly scores his first posting on the USS *Enterprise*, where he'll serve through his surgical residency, but before he even gets on the ship, he runs into a complication.

Literally.

Notes

Okay, some quick and important notes: This is primarily written with The Cage/The Menagerie and D.C. Fontana's cast from Vulcan's Glory in mind, but the SNW versions of the crew are so damn charming that characterization from there and Discovery will still probably sneak in here or there. The timeline is also pretty much old-school TOS-based, rather than Discovery/SNW, so the war with the Klingon Empire in this timeline was from 2246-2250; Robert April commanded the *Enterprise* until 2250, while Pike and most of his senior staff commanded the *Yorktown*, and they were involved in the war. The aesthetic will largely be TOS, though maybe with some nicer uniforms than in The Cage. LOL!

Len McCoy is 26 in 2253, and this is his first actual posting; that's the big canon divergence. Scotty's backstory follows the Arc of the Wolf up to this point, but you don't really need to read that to enjoy this; the upshot is basically that the man's a whole person with a whole life, and so long as you remember that, that's enough.

Anyway, this story is absolutely a lark, written as a treat for myself when I need a break from the heavier works. If you like it, feel free to lemme know, and maybe more will come of it.

Chapter 1

She didn't look how he expected.

Hanging in space outside of the station she should've looked awkward, tall as she was, long-necked like a swan. Instead of awkward, though, she looked strangely handsome.

Poised, maybe. A lady with some dignity.

Len was no engineer and even he thought so, as he leaned on the rail of the station's observation deck, getting a look at the ship he was newly assigned to. She was nothing like the last ship he had been aboard, anyway, which had reminded him of a pancake with legs.

Given the *Enterprise* was gonna be his home for at least the next few years, it was probably for the better that he liked the look of her. Serving out his surgical residency in Starfleet hadn't exactly been his plan when he'd gone into med school, but then again, a broken home hadn't been, either.

He'd sworn, when he left home for pre-med, that he wasn't gonna make the same mistakes as his Dad; that he wasn't gonna try to be both a doctor and a family man, 'cause he knew full well that both required deep commitment, and that it was a fool's errand to try to balance those two lives at the same time. At least not early on, anyway.

But then there was Jocelyn. And then there was Joanna, unexpected, nature's most beautiful curveball.

And then, after a couple good years and a couple more less-good ones, there was this.

The *Enterprise's* reputation preceded her in every possible way, as did the reputations of her captain and crew. She was considered the shining pinnacle of Starfleet; that Len was able to even get a spot aboard her felt like too much good luck at once, especially right out of his abbreviated Basic Training and OCS.

But if a man was gonna run for his life, he couldn't really run much further than as a cutting-edge frontier explorer. He didn't feel dangerously *soulsick* like he had when he had walked into that recruitment office, but Len couldn't pretend that he wasn't still on the run, either.

The better part of a year had made the heartache bearable, made it so things could get him to smile again, even if he still hadn't made much headway towards anything recognizable as a full recovery. (How could he? Every single day was one day less to watch JoJo grow.)

But maybe if he ran far enough -- learned enough, saved enough lives -- he'd get there eventually.

Right now, future crewmates of his were moving down the transparent corridor on the level below him in waves as they were released for shore leave; for expediency, they were transported from the ship to the station, where there were more platforms to direct them to their requested destinations on the ground below. Most of them were dressed for relaxation; a lot of them were wearing beach wear, light shifts and flowing outfits, though there were others dressed for colder climes. Casperia Prime had a little something for everyone.

Except Len, apparently. Who'd been waiting there for two weeks for this transfer and had the good fortune to attend a conference on frontier medicine while he did, but who otherwise just didn't have any real reason to go out and enjoy the place. No one he knew attended the conference, and while he made a few good acquaintances, none of them were the types to go out and have drinks and maybe take in the local color with him after.

It made for a pretty boring time. And there was only so much poolside drinking he could justify to himself, and a very fine line to walk without bordering alcoholism like he had been before signing with Starfleet.

So, the idea of getting to go up and settle in on the *Enterprise* while a good sized chunk of her crew was planetside was actually pretty damn soothing. He could get the lay of the land, get unpacked and get started reviewing records so that he'd be able to hit the ground running when they departed.

Slowly, the waves of Starfleet personnel tapered and then vanished altogether; Len checked the wall clock and nodded to himself. Much as he hated the idea of getting into a transporter, especially when he could *see* the ship right there, there were no hard-docking facilities at this station for anything bigger than a cargo shuttle. And no one was about to send a shuttle just for him, either; instead, he had to wait his turn to beam over until after everyone else going ashore had finished transporting.

Sighing out, he waited until the last possible minute, then turned to head for the turbolift so he could go get into the transporter queue.

He was hefting his carry-on and mentally reviewing the map of the *Enterprise* he'd been studying since he'd gotten his assignment, and later on, he would blame those things for his part of the collision that followed.

He stepped out of the turbolift, moving briskly, and ended up slamming into someone coming the other way in a similar hurry.

It knocked Len backwards into a desperate stumble to keep his footing, the arm not weighed down with his carry-on pinwheeling; for a whole ten seconds, he wasn't sure he'd stay on his feet, but then mercifully found his balance again.

He shook it off, thinking maybe to offer an apology, medical assistance, or -- if the other party turned out to be an asshole -- an ear-chewing, when his mouth went dry.

Real damn dry.

The first thing Len's mind registered was a bare knee; the second, *pleats*; the third, *red*. The rest was more akin to a mental burst of white-

noise static as he tried to make those things fall in with the rest to form a cohesive thought, especially since the rest was a kind of compelling he'd never actually contemplated before that very moment, looking up at him from the floor in shock.

He was still trying to grasp that when the other half of the collision scrambled back up to his feet, face flushing; they both gaped at one another for a long moment, then tried to talk at the same time.

"I'm sorry, I didn't--"

"Are you okay, did I--?" Len started, then held his hand up to stop them both before they could continue to talk over each other. "I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked, that hand coming down and out in something of an offer to treat any injury he might have accidentally caused.

The other man -- looking like doe-eyed innocence and surprise while dressed like *sex on legs* -- gave a hurried shake of his head as he edged around Len. "Nothin' worse'n my pride, anyway," he said, in an accent Len couldn't immediately place, aside 'probably Celtic'. "Sorry again about that, I shoulda been lookin' -- or maybe slowin' down--"

"It's okay," Len reassured, automatically, trying very damn hard not to let his gaze drift on down from the man's face. Which was almost as red as the streaks of glitter sparkling in his black hair. "I was in a hurry myself."

"Aye, and speakin' of, I have to be--" the man said, gesturing awkwardly down the hall before stepping backwards a few steps; he offered Len an embarrassed little smile, then turned and walked away with no small amount of haste, pleats swaying.

He was just as compelling from the back as he'd been from the front, [somewhere between punk and pretty](#), and Len was looking after him for a good minute after he'd vanished, palms sweating to go right along with a cotton-dry mouth.

It wasn't often that men caught Len's attention. The last one, before he ended up with Jocelyn, was his friend Mark in his freshman year in high school, a crush that didn't and couldn't go anywhere, given Mark's attractions were towards female-presenting people. And eventually the crush part faded into genuine affection and maybe a little jealousy, the latter part for just how effortlessly handsome and social Mark was.

Len wasn't exactly *awkward*, but he was something of a wallflower, which was why Jocelyn had been such a surprise and delight, and maybe - in retrospect -- why he broke his own promise to himself that he wasn't gonna try to be a family man and medschool student at the same time.

A pretty feminine type would turn Len's head even after he was married, even if he'd never dream of straying, but it was only a rare man who could do the same. Not for any lack of willingness, that just happened to be how he was wired.

His collision partner had driven his mental map of the *Enterprise's* corridors right on out of his skull.

Beaming out to the ship had happened during Len's formidable distraction, and before he knew it, he was wandering around lost and trying not to think too hard about the encounter. Especially since it was the first time he'd felt attraction -- genuine attraction -- towards another person since the separation.

All right, get it together, he told himself, mentally, before stopping and looking around for the lettering on the intersections of corridors that would tell him what section he'd ended up in. Or even what *deck* he was on.

Which was definitely more important than working out whether that was a skirt or a kilt. Or why the man's calf-high leather boots were laced with a brilliant red ribbon.

Or why that skirt or kilt or whatever it was had a short span of the same kind of ribbon acting as corset-style lacing between silver eyelets on both sides of it before culminating in a pair of bow-ties, especially since it was riding low enough to rest on the man's hips. Or why there were silver chains draping artfully from the leather belt over the front panel, to go with a tight black t-shirt that left absolutely nothing to the imagination.

And Len was especially having one hell of a time dragging his mind away from those goddamn *pleats*, which were also black, except for where they parted to reveal a black-and-white plaid pattern underneath.

Len rubbed his bottom lip with his thumb, eyes unfocused. Almost had to be a kilt, then, right? That would make the plaid more properly *tartan*, which meant the accent was definitely something Celtic.

Then he groaned quietly and rubbed over his face, tried again to shove those thoughts out of his head, and made a more determined effort to find his quarters before he could go and rewind that memory for the fifty-third time and see what other details he could tease out of it.

Phil Boyce was an old man of the venerable sort -- snow white hair, bushy eyebrows, sharp blue eyes and all -- but it was his ready, lopsided smile that endeared Len to him pretty much from the start. "Doctor McCoy," Boyce said, greeting him with a handshake. "Welcome aboard."

“Just barely a doctor, Doctor Boyce,” Len answered, smiling a little sheepishly as he shook the CMO’s hand. “Thanks. I didn’t expect you to be here, figured you would have already beamed down for shore leave.”

Boyce shook his head, taking his hand back only to rest it on the back of Len’s shoulder, guiding him towards where, presumably, his new office would be. “I’ll be down there before the night’s over, but I thought I’d help you get settled in and answer any questions you might have before I go.”

“Much appreciated, sir.” Len glanced around the sickbay; it wasn’t a huge space, but it was bigger than the one he’d seen on the last ship. “I dropped off my carry-on in my quarters, once I found ‘em, then I figured I’d have a look at where I was gonna be working.”

“Not interested in seeing more of Casperia Prime?” Boyce steered Len to the door to the office that already had his name outside of it.

Leonard McCoy, MD. Despite everything complicated that went with that title, it made Len smile as he stepped in and looked around; it wasn’t a very large space, but he did like knowing it was *his*. “‘Fraid not. I spent two weeks there and the conference was the highlight; I’m fixin’ to get to work, now.”

Boyce didn’t seem to have an opinion on that, which was kind of a relief. He just nodded and leaned on the door frame, keeping it from sliding closed. “Wish we could have gotten here earlier, I was hoping to attend that one myself. But I’ll pick up a recording while I’m down there, and we can talk about it after I’m back.”

“I’d like that,” Len said, drawing his fingers across his desktop, then turning around and resting his rear against the edge of it. “I don’t wanna keep you, if you’ve got better things to do. Thought I’d just get started with the lay of the land and crew records while I waited for the cargo transport to send the rest of my luggage.”

“I don’t mind sticking around for awhile yet. This isn’t my first time at Casperia Prime.” Boyce raised his eyebrows in a shrug. “How about a martini, a tour and a gam?”

“Sounds good,” Len answered, and was pleasantly surprised with how genuinely he meant that.

If nothing else, it would probably keep him from spending too much more time contemplating his be-kilted collision partner.

It was a good thought that absolutely failed to pan out.

“There’s no damn way,” Len said, shaking his head as he looked at the PADD, the words slipping out before he could close his lips on ‘em.

Boyce just had one of his eyebrows up now, when Len realized he’d spoken aloud and looked up. “No damn way what?” Boyce asked, curiously.

Len felt his face heating a bit, but he still gestured and cleared his throat to answer, “Oh. He doesn’t look like he’s thirty-one, is all.”

The tour had gone fine; Len not only had all of Sickbay mapped now, but Boyce had also taken him through all of their medical and scientific laboratories, and that after making him a hell of a martini. Then they came back, and Len asked if they could go over the medical files of those aboard who had any ongoing issues or special needs; folks with medical conditions that needed to be monitored or managed, folks who required special treatment for whatever reason. There were only fourteen of those out of the *Enterprise*’s complement of 206 souls, and he figured that would go quick enough.

It also meant that he ended up looking at the face of his collision partner a lot sooner than he’d anticipated.

Boyce seemed bemused. “How old does he look? Because frankly, Len, all of you look like kids to me.”

“I dunno. My age, if even that.” Len picked up the glass of water he’d gotten himself in lieu of a second martini and took a sip.

While the standard crew portrait was not nearly as eye-catching as red glitter and red ribbon and a kilt, the man looking back at him wasn’t any less attractive in it. Not as *punk*, maybe, but definitely still kinda pretty. Dressed in the rose-tan uniform of ops, he wore a serious sort of look, but there was a kind of sharpness in his dark eyes that Len found -- unfortunately, he was sure -- appealing.

Lieutenant Montgomery Scott. Engineer and the officer of the watch for the graveyard shift for engineering. Interestingly enough, he also was listed as a bridge officer and had a command rotation every week where he was in charge of the whole ship.

Len shook his head to get himself back on task, trying to shove any even *slightly* untoward thoughts back into the ether they came from. Nothing good could come of dating co-workers, no matter how comely.

“Artificial left hip?” he asked, glancing up; that seemed to be the main issue, from what he could see.

“A bulkhead landed on him back in ‘48,” Boyce explained, not even bothering to look at his own PADD, clearly answering from memory. “He was assigned to the Denevan cargo-carrier *Horizon Sun* when she was knocked out of warp by the spatial distortion caused by a skirmish with the Klingons. They ended up caught in the crossfire, lost all propulsion, and Scott managed to pull off some kind of engineering miracle to get them to warp for about two seconds and out of the line of fire. He saved the ship, but before he could save himself, the bulkhead came down on him.”

Len had been on Earth during the war, and therefore partially insulated from it; still, he knew it resulted in a lot of young people with permanent injuries. He grimaced at the explanation, even as he tabbed over to the imaging scans, studying them for a moment; he wasn't an ortho specialist, but he still knew what he was looking at and for. "More than the standard amount of hardware, but it looks like it's pretty well healed; do we even need to manage it?" he asked, glancing back up at Boyce.

"For that, I've just had him coming in for updated scans every quarter to make sure there's no uneven wear on that joint. And even that's not really necessary, but I don't intend to stop." Boyce drummed his fingers on his desk. "That's the least important reason he's on the special-cases list anyway."

Well, that sounded ominous. Len tabbed to the notes, skimming them; the most interesting thing there was mention of a genetic anomaly and a short list of recommendations about drug synthesis, though. "Do I want to know the most important reason?" he asked, trying to force his eyebrow back down to neutral.

Boyce eyed him thoughtfully, then apparently made a decision, shaking his head. "My reputation as an unrepentant gossip is not only fair, but well-earned, as you'll doubtless find out. But I think I'll hold my cards close this time, Len," he said, not unkindly. "At least for now, when it comes to what I have clearance for and in terms of my own working theories. But I can offer a piece of invaluable advice, if you'll have it."

Phil Boyce didn't gain his acclaim in medical circles by hiding in private practice somewhere or by chewing up subordinates and spitting them back out; even if Len felt some pique at being reminded of how new he was, not only to the *Enterprise*, but to Starfleet as a whole, he knew better than to take it personally.

Or to turn down advice from a doctor of Boyce's caliber. "I'll take it," he said, with a nod.

Boyce nodded back. "Handle that one with care," he said, then held a hand up to keep Len from speaking up and saying -- as he was going to -- that he wouldn't dream of doing anything else with a patient. "I don't mean in the standard way of compassion, that's a given; kindness *will* go a long way with him, though. But what I mean is: Scott's not going to respect your hard-earned education or your equally hard-earned title until you've gained at least some of his trust. And the only way to do that is to be both direct *and* patient with him. If you end up having to treat him for anything, take the extra minute -- provided you have it -- and explain what you want to do. Don't try to butt heads with him, because you'll probably lose. And if you do win, you'll *certainly* lose."

That was a lot to absorb, especially that last part, but it was good advice. Len was early enough in his career that he couldn't fathom being *impatient*, at least not without pretty extraordinary cause, but he knew that people in their profession tended to harden over time. And not everyone responded well to that, though he also had a feeling Boyce was referring to things he didn't know yet.

"Got it," Len said, after a moment and a nod, taking one more glance at Scott's portrait before moving onto the next file. "Lieutenant Spock?" he asked, raising his eyebrows, intrigued all over again, albeit for different reasons.

Boyce nodded, smiling a little in clear and genuine fondness, and moved along with him.

Captain Pike beamed back aboard before the second half of his crew was released for shore leave and the first due back. And the first thing he did once he was back aboard was schedule a meeting with Len.

The man's reputation walked far ahead of him; Pike was considered one of the finest captains ever to grace Starfleet, not only during wartime, but also in times of peace. He was highly decorated and was known to be hard, insofar as he ran his ship with military discipline in place, but he was also said to be fair and collaborative, and a hell of a teacher.

Just like with Boyce, Len liked Pike right off, though he *did* feel a little small in the man's presence.

"Doctor McCoy," Pike said, offering his hand across the desk, his startlingly ice-blue eyes narrowed a little in obvious good humor, above the subtle smile on the corners of his mouth. "Welcome aboard, though I hear I'm a few days late on that."

"Captain Pike," Len answered, shaking the man's hand before offering a shrug and a smile of his own. "I think, when you're the captain, you're always technically on time for that kinda thing."

Pike's smile morphed into a grin, and he gestured to the chair across from his desk. "I like that. I'll have to remember it, though I'm not so sure I can get away with using it. How've you been settling in?"

Len sat down. "Fine so far, sir. Gettin' a feel for the ship and crew. I've finished reviewing all of the crew records, though y'all'll have to give me a little more time memorizing names."

"You'll have it before you know it. We don't even have enough people to qualify as a village aboard," Pike said, shaking his head and settling into his own chair, relaxing back into it just to regard Len anew. "I know you're with us for the duration of our five year mission; do you have everything you'll need to work through your surgical residency?"

"Yessir," Len answered, finding himself smiling a little sheepishly. "Don't wanna speculate too hard about what the transporter techs were thinking when they beamed my cadavers into stasis storage, but between those, simulation and live practice, I think I'll do just fine."

"That's what I like to hear." Pike nodded, shifting his PADD closer and tapping it with his fingertips. "We do have some colony visits scheduled ahead before we're back out into the unknown, and they're often glad for visits from medical personnel, especially when we're

bringing new equipment and supplies."

Len had stopped at a couple of colonies while transferring, and he had enjoyed both visits, brief as they were. "I'll be sure to brush up on 'em, then."

"Definitely still in the university mindset, I see. If there's anything myself or my senior staff can do to help you along, Doctor, I hope you'll let us know." Pike grinned again, such a frank and charming look that *not* grinning back would have been a challenge.

Not that Len felt any desire to be contrary like that, as he tipped an imaginary hat. "Much obliged, Captain."

The rest of the senior staff were all as accommodating as the CMO and Captain were, though Len *did* have a hard time reading Lieutenant Spock's expression. The half-Vulcan seemed remote and borderline wary of him in a way that Len found almost unnerving, though he'd interacted with enough Vulcans -- and their occasional back-handed criticisms on human scientific endeavors -- that he knew remote didn't necessarily mean *unfeeling*.

Though he supposed, given Spock was the first -- though not the last -- Vulcan to join Starfleet, the wariness probably made sense.

It couldn't have been easy to be surrounded by humans, even if you were half-human yourself. And Spock was three years younger than Len and already bearing the weight of a whole division on his shoulders, which was no small thing.

Len didn't know what to make of him yet, maybe, but he figured it would shake out with time; in the meantime, he'd err to the side of compassion and keep an open mind.

All in all, Len was happy with this assignment. The crew was well-integrated and not all human -- though mostly so, as yet -- and they seemed to largely get along. He liked everyone he'd been working with in Sickbay, so far. His quarters weren't large, but they were comfortable.

The ship herself had a lived-in feel; as precise as Pike seemed to keep things running, like a well-made clock, Len could all but feel the love the *Enterprise's* crew had for her. So many of these people clearly felt this ship was their home, and while he didn't necessarily think he'd ever be one of 'em, he *did* find that a likable quality in his crewmates.

And finally, he'd even managed to put aside his crush on a certain engineer in the past week, which was gonna make his onboard life a lot easier to handle.

"Perfect," he said quietly to himself, as he set his favorite coffee mug in a place of honor on his new desk, with Joanna's baby scrawl proclaiming him the #1 Doctor forever immortalized on the side, beautiful and bittersweet both.

Once again, it was a good thought that absolutely failed to pan out.

Len had been practicing aortic resectioning well into the night; by the time he was done with his cadaver -- for this, anyway -- his eyes were aching and he wanted nothing more than to grump his way through a sonic shower and then sleep. That was all that was on his mind as he came out of the turbolift on his deck--

--and damn near ran into Lieutenant Scott.

Again.

This time they both managed to pull up short with only centimeters between them, avoiding an out and out collision; for a heart-pounding few seconds, Len somehow was able to process the near-miss adrenaline rush *and* the half-baked thought, *he sure smells nice* before they took a couple steps away from one another.

"Sorry, I was-- uh--" Scott gestured with the toolkit he was carrying; apparently, even *not* dressed like sex on legs, he was prone to blushing.

"It's okay. At least it didn't end up in a collision this time," Len offered back, trying very hard to chalk his heart rate up to the surprise and not the company.

There was a moment where it looked like Scott was about to flee, giving Len a distracted-looking nod and even lifting a foot, but then he stopped and seemed to come to some kind of decision before facing Len again and straightening his shoulders. "About that-- I'd appreciate it if you'd not mention seein' me dressed like that to anyone else," he said, straight-forwardly, even though he remained all flushed.

Damn, he was *still* pretty. Len wasn't sure why he kept expecting that to change.

"Not even leavin' a glass slipper for me," Len joked, before he had time to realize how *that* could be taken. Once he did, though, he gave himself a mental kick in the rear end, cleared his throat and offered the confused engineer a smile, taking Boyce's advice to heart. "I don't know what you're talking about. I just beamed up here and got lost looking for my quarters. I've never seen you before in my life."

The confused look turned into one of relief, and Scott closed his eyes and blew a breath out before giving Len a more easy expression back, switching his toolkit into his left hand and offering his right to shake. "In that case, I'm glad to meet ye, Lieutenant...?"

"Doctor Leonard McCoy," Len answered, shaking the man's hand, not failing to catch the surprised blink the gentle correction got him. "Len to my friends, though," he added, something of an invitation. "And who do I have the pleasure of meeting for the first time--?"

If Scott recognized the invitation as such, he still didn't miss a beat. "Doctor. Lieutenant Montgomery Scott. I'm sorry again about almost runnin' into ye; if this *weren't* the first time we were meetin', I'd venture it's gettin' to be a habit," he said, taking his hand back and looking kinda sheepish as he scratched at the back of his head, though the blush had finally faded.

"I could think of worse ones," Len handed back, with a chuckle, before gesturing over his shoulder. "It's okay, really. But I should be getting to bed." *Before I accidentally flirt some more.*

Scott nodded back, switching his toolkit back over to his right hand, apparently oblivious to the fact that Len's mouth kept sneaking away from him. "Aye, and I should be gettin' to work. But-- sleep well, Doctor," he said, this time flashing a bit of a grin, before heading off in the direction he had been going before their impromptu meeting.

Oh hell, Len thought, as that grin went to work on him, going to try to answer that with something like 'you too' and failing, mouth and feet both glued in place, face warm and butterflies nesting in his gut. *This is gonna be a long trip.*

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

The inline link is to an archive-locked story on AO3 that isn't transferred here yet, but will be.

Once they were properly underway, and Len was really getting into the routine of shipboard life as a member of the crew, rather than as a passenger, dealing with his surprise crush on a crewmate became a lot easier. They didn't share shifts; Len mostly worked days and afternoons. And they didn't run into one another in any of the rec areas. Occasionally they crossed paths at the end of the third shift and the start of first, but those little brushes didn't lead into conversation or anything.

And so, mostly Len was able to put it all into perspective. Human attraction was a funny thing, but unless he decided to propose a one-night stand -- which would be a bad idea, since they were gonna be living on the same ship for years -- there was nothing to be done for it. And without anything more to build it on, it'd hopefully fade with time.

It was also harder to worry about when he had his head full of other concerns.

Namely, being served divorce papers.

They came with such a note of godawful finality; the realization that this really was *it*. It was listed as 'no fault', Jocelyn asked him for nothing, but she did want full custody of JoJo, which probably made sense because it's not like you could take a kid on a starship.

Well, what did you think was gonna happen when you ran off? he had asked himself, scornfully, after the heartstopping adrenaline at opening the files had faded, and after he pressed his palms to his eyes and breathed through his unparted teeth until the pressure backed off enough.

When he had walked in on Joce and Clay, at the time it had been shock and pain that drove him out. And then after, the deep *grief* that his wife had-- had cheated on him in their shared bed had kept him away, circling their common ground, barely able to be in the house they had bought together. That time was spent eating up every hour of hospital work he could to avoid it, while she stayed with Joanna at her parents' house.

And then, driven on by his own nigh-on suicidal depression and skirting awful close to alcoholism, he'd joined Starfleet because maybe putting his life in the hands of the service would keep it out of his own long enough to recover some.

It had worked. He had to go through both an abbreviated Basic Training and Officer Candidate School -- 'cause he was gonna be commissioned right to lieutenant -- and those had been hard enough to keep his mind firmly in the present and also make him appreciate all the folks who went in straight, without an advanced degree to give them a boost. Starfleet had a hell of a lot of educated people working for them, but a pretty significant number of them tended to go in right when they hit adulthood and earn their degrees through the Academy.

Depending on what was happening in the wider galaxy, service in Starfleet was more or less like military service in days long past. The past several years, that answer was *more*; while there were sometimes different kinds of jostling that didn't quite elevate things that far, the war with the Klingons was significant and a blow to the teeth of the more outlying areas of the Federation.

Len was a little surprised at how much he *hadn't* known what was happening beyond the light of Sol, now that he was learning it by both experience and osmosis.

At least, though, the intellectual stretch was keeping him from falling back down that hole he was on the edge of, knocked right back to it when those papers landed in his inbox.

His colleagues helped, certainly. Phil Boyce was every bit as fine a CMO and teacher as he'd come across at first and that Len could have ever asked for; he was genial and patient and had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the *Enterprise's* crew, not only medically, but often interpersonally. He'd ended up being Len's ear a few times already, despite his reputation as a gossip, and it wasn't long until titles were dropped. Though, Len still sometimes called the man 'sir', just because of his own upbringing and because Phil inspired that kind of respect.

Oddly, he also found something of an unexpectedly enjoyable relationship with Lieutenant Spock, too. While the half-Vulcan had stayed aloof at first, their second colony visit had them working together on the surface to deploy a new modular combination science lab and infirmary, and by the end of that few days, they had found a pretty good rhythm even as they snarked at one another. Or, rather, as Len snarked and Spock pretended to be above the willingness to snark, yet somehow managed to deploy it like a deadpan master.

Len wasn't sure he'd ever chance calling them friends, but he liked seeing Spock and feeling himself gearing up for another battle of wits.

Beyond those two, he had started learning names and quirks quickly. Captain Pike, for example, was the kind of man who could demand a hell of a lot of discipline from his staff, but make every bit of their efforts feel appreciated even as he did. He never failed to give credit where it was due. And his crew, almost universally, adored him; if there was anyone of the over two hundred people on the *Enterprise* who didn't, Len had yet to find them.

The ship's exec, Number One -- Una Chin-Riley -- seemed aloof at first, much like Spock, but had a rapier wit and confidence in spades, and a devastating smile when she gave it. She and Phil were both gossips, and along with Chief Engineer Cait Barry, they formed the ship's unofficial newsroom, a trio that it only took a week in space for Len to dub 'the Menaces', much to their humor.

Even though he'd liked everyone he had encountered, though, Len was also aware that the only one he was able to allow past his guard so far

was Phil.

He might've never been a social butterfly, but he *did* minor in psychology, and he knew that his struggling in that arena was probably a side effect of the blow to both his ability to trust and his self-esteem that he received when Joce did what she did.

He-- just wasn't sure what to do about it.

Or even if he *should* do something about it.

He was thinking on that conundrum when he came through the doors to Sickbay, half-distracted, heading towards his office for a few steps before his mind caught up to his vision and he promptly stepped backwards again, raising an eyebrow at Lieutenant Scott.

The engineer was leaning on the wall, arms crossed, and he was giving Phil the evil eye with his bottom jaw pushed forward; it was such a smoky look that Len wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

So, instead he asked, "You okay?"

"Perfectly fine," Scott answered, clipped, not taking that glare off of Phil. "Which makes the reason I'm here absolutely bloody *pointless*."

Phil had been talking to Siregar; he finished whatever he was talking about with her before turning his attention back in their direction, expression easy-going, to tackle that particular complaint. "It's a ten minute scan, Lieutenant, and your shift ended a half-hour ago. I know it's a month early, but with you going on leave--"

"Ye've been scannin' that same joint since I came aboard, Doc, and it's not wearin' at all, let alone badly," Scott said, though now that he had Phil's focus on him, his tone got considerably less snappish.

Phil nodded in agreement. "Very true. Though, you also have ligaments and tendons to take into consideration, and that inflammation three scans ago is worth keeping an eye out for."

Scott rolled his eyes in a theatrical expression that had Len ducking his head for a moment to hide his grin. "And I'd been crawlin' through the guts o' this ship for hours before that, sir. A couple ibuprofen and I was fine."

"Well, I worry," Phil just answered, offering a smile and gesturing. "Come on, ten minutes and I can send you off Earthwards with a clean conscience and a peaceful heart."

Scott shook his head, shoulders slumping; after looking over at Len with a '*can you believe what I'm putting up with?*' expression, though, he sighed out and followed Phil back to the full-body scanner.

It really did only take ten minutes and Len found several reasons not to retreat to his office, so he got to hear Phil ask on the way back, "And what are you picking up for me?"

"A stasis box o' quahogs. Ye know, sir, I've got *one* carry-on that's actually mine; I'm gonna be wearin' the same three sets o' clothes for two and a half months 'cause o' requests like that."

"Ah, but I asked *first*, if I remember correctly." Len looked over in time to see Phil smile and pat Scott on the back. "And I can claim regional privilege from my dear northern neighbor."

"Wait, are you *taking* anything?" Len asked, inadvertently cutting Scott off before he could offer a retort, heart giving a little wrench in his chest even as they both looked at him.

Scott gave Phil an arch, sidelong look, then shook his head. "Aside my clothes and a few gifts, no. Since my luggage allotment comin' back is gonna be taken up with everyone else's requests."

Len swallowed, then asked, "If I gave you a letter to take, would you drop it in the mail for me when you get there?"

Something must've been evident on his face, because Scott's eyebrows drew together, a kinda worried expression, and then he nodded. "Aye, o' course. That wouldna be any trouble."

Len nodded back, offering the best smile he was able to manage. Which wasn't all that great, but he wanted points for the effort. "When are you going?"

"Three days, at the rendezvous with the *Garrett Morgan*," Scott answered, head tipped over a little; the look put Len in mind of his crew portrait, that bit of sharpness there. Not quite piercing, but--

Phil had somehow managed to disappear, and Len ended up turning his gaze down to the floor between 'em, crossing his arms. "It's just somethin' for my daughter," he said. "I appreciate you being willing to take it."

He wished he'd thought to pick up souvenirs on Casperia Prime. Some small presents for her. He'd sent her back things before, but he'd figured after joining the *Enterprise* that the opportunities would be fewer and farther between, so he'd wanted to wait to get the perfect kinda thing--

"Doctor McCoy? Are ye all right?"

Len shook himself out of it and looked up again, taking in the clear concern on Scott's face. "Sorry, Lieutenant. I, uh-- yeah. Well," he said, offering a self-deprecating smile, "I'm workin' on it, anyway. Thanks for asking."

“Ye’re welcome.” Scott seemed ready to go, but then he paused again. “Do ye want me to grab ye anything, while I’m there? I don’t know how much time I’ll have, but--”

Given Len’s first instinct was to ask for booze, he knew better than to take that offer. Instead, he shook his head. “No, mailing a letter for me is more’n good enough. I know it’s kinda old fashioned, but there’s nothin’ like paper for writing what matters.”

“Aye,” Scott agreed readily and emphatically, which was kind of a surprise; most engineers Len knew tended to prefer less archaic means. “I’ll stop back in a couple days, then, pick it up.”

Len nodded, managing to curb his urge to thank the man again. Though he couldn’t resist asking, “What has you heading back, if you don’t mind my asking?” ‘Cause frankly, that was a *lot* of personal leave time to burn through mid-mission.

There was a long moment where Len had the feeling he was being measured up again, but then Scott smiled (causing Len’s heart to do an inconvenient little lurch) and his expression softened to something so-- so damn sweet it almost ached to see. “I’m hopin’ to get there at the right time to meet my first niece,” he said, clasping his hands behind his back and rocking on his feet once in a little bounce. “It’s gonna be close timing, given all the connections I have to make, but--” he trailed off, shrugging good-naturedly.

“But worth it.” Despite his own sorrows, Len couldn’t help but smile back.

“Oh, aye,” Scott said, voice warm, nothing but love and pride written on his face. “My brother’s firstborn? There’s nothin’ worth more’n that.”

If not for staring down the barrel of divorce, Len thought there that his crush mighta burgeoned into something a hell of a lot more serious, but everything was still a little too raw.

Instead, he said, “Well, *Uncle*, congratulations,” and got back a bright laugh and a beaming grin that lingered on the edges of his heart as they parted ways.

He paused before retreating into his office, though, stopping where Phil was back working at the nurse’s station desk, because he had to ask, “I thought you said not to butt heads with him?”

Phil looked up, eyebrows raised, then the corners of his mouth curled up in a self-satisfied smile. “That wasn’t headbutting, Len. That’s what I call truly excellent progress. In fact, I’m almost positive he was only [two seconds from calling me a Masshole](#).”

Len couldn’t even begin to parse that one out, partly because he wasn’t sure what Phil thought that was actually progress *from*, but also because--

“Wait, *Masshole*? What the hell’s a *Masshole*?”

Amusing as the brief lesson on New England rivalries ended up being -- Phil being from a small town south of Boston and having spent most of his life on shore living on Cape Cod, and Scott having a shore address in Maine -- Len still wasn’t able to escape the fact that he had a letter to write.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t see his own mistakes looking back. What made all of this so damn bad was that he *could*.

Even though a lot of the exploitation of medical students had been removed from the system, even though a number of erroneous beliefs about the necessity of hellishly long hours and brutal competition had been cut out of medschool, it was still a hard course to chart, especially in such a widely populated and diverse galaxy. He couldn’t just be a doctor to humans; he had to have at least some knowledge of how to treat other species of the Federation. All of that meant an incredible amount of study.

Len’s problem was how much he had ended up *loving* what he was learning.

It was too damn easy for him to lose his head in his studies; to look up from textbooks or computer terminals and find hours had passed, more than he’d expected, and that he’d missed the alarms he’d set to get him home in time to eat dinner with his young wife and baby daughter because he’d been so absorbed.

So many times, he came in late to find Joce asleep in a chair with food stains on her shirt, JoJo’s toys spread on the floor of their living room, and his dinner covered and kept warm in the oven.

The deep love he felt for her in those moments masked the truth for a long time: He wasn’t *there* with her.

It was only more recently that Len had to honestly look at it all and ask himself if he’d deliberately ignored the signs that were there, that she was unhappy. If he’d willfully turned a blind eye to his own shortcomings. On the other side of it, it was a lot easier to look back and see where there might’ve been some denial on his part, fueled by both his love of study and plain old human failing.

That meant he knew he was gonna sign those papers. It was just a matter of making himself do it.

That also meant that he needed to come up with words for his little daughter that acknowledged that her daddy wasn’t there anymore, and that he had responsibility for that choice, while not trying to pin blame on Joce or leave JoJo thinking that she could have had any fault.

It hurt that it would have been a hell of a lot harder, had he actually been the father he'd set out to be, rather than the kind of father he was raised by.

It was six years since Len had followed his Dad's wishes and ended the life-sustaining measures that kept the man alive, albeit in pain, only for a cure to be found a short time after. And he was still haunted by the *could haves* and *should haves*. By all the things that went unspoken, unsaid, unlearned. His whole life, every memory of his Dad was colored by *work*, by the faint scent of disinfectant, by pastel scrubs and polished floors and hopeful or heartbroken families belonging to other people. Plenty of travel, he never wanted for intellectual stimulation or new experiences, and he didn't exactly *resent* it, but--

But he'd never known the man, not really. Both of them, instead, were haunted by Mama; on the earliest edges of Len's memory, the scent of magnolias and her long hair -- same color as his -- under his cheek.

And then the forever space where she no longer was.

He never got to know his Dad as a whole man. And now his daughter--

He covered his eyes with his hand as he sat behind his desk, mouth quivering; there was no one to witness his tears, but he hid 'em anyway.

And then, finally, he grabbed a pen and a sheet of paper and started writing.

My sweetest JoJo--

He sent the letter back with Scott, and he signed the forms dissolving his marriage and transmitted them back to Earth, and then he spent the next several weeks in a fog of grief, self-reflection and work.

Like father, like son, after all.

Despite his mourning, though, there were a lot of small kindnesses paid to him, further cementing Len's place on the *Enterprise* and further proving what kind of people he had the good fortune to call crew.

No one knew the score but Phil, either, so it had to be a case of them just paying attention and seeing he was down despite his best efforts to show otherwise. He found himself invited to lunch with Captain Pike and Phil a few times, and even took 'em up on it the second time they asked; neither pressed him with questions, and despite how he felt, Len got drawn into a conversation between the two old friends, smiling some as they bantered together and tried to enlist him on one side or the other of the debate.

(He remained neutral, of course.)

Even Spock seemed to take some notice; when he brought Len a set of lab results for a tertiary survey the *Enterprise* was contributing to, he also brought along a small container of a spiced tea from Vulcan with a slightly stilted explanation about its ability to offer increased mental focus thanks to certain chemicals released during steeping. Len, caught off guard, thanked him without any wit or edge and was touched by the way Spock's expression softened almost imperceptibly.

(Spock wasn't wrong, either, but the pleasant thing wasn't even the nice boost on focus, but the way it warmed Len's belly and lingered on his tongue. Real damn comforting, actually, which he suspected might have been the real point.)

Sometimes, it was just someone's press of a hand to his shoulder or a question about how he was feeling.

Len supposed it kinda had to come with the territory; when you had only a couple hundred people in a relatively contained space, far from home, and when your lives were necessarily entwined for your very survival, the healthiest course to chart was one of kindness. And he knew he was lucky to be aboard a ship where that seemed to come naturally.

The time didn't pass quickly, but it did pass, and it coulda been a hell of a lot worse.

He was still a little frustratingly relieved to come into Sickbay one morning in time to catch Scott -- just back aboard, still in his civvies and looking absolutely exhausted -- thumping a stasis box on a biobed in front of Phil, though. "Yer *blood mollusks*," Scott said, with just enough melodrama to flavor the words.

"Did you just semi-cleverly accuse me of taking bribes or kickbacks, Lieutenant?" Phil asked back, even as he was tapping the camera display on the top of the box to get a look at his haul. "Because that would imply that I'm somehow doing you an organized-crime style favor in exchange for these, and we both know that you don't see it that way."

Apparently the question caught Scott off-guard, because he *tried* to hand back some no-doubt acerbic reply and floundered for a moment, then just shook his head with a sheepish little grin. "I suppose not."

That had Phil smiling, affection plain on his face. "However, you did do *me* a favor, so I would happily share the dinner I plan on turning these into with you?"

Scott waved that off, blushing. "No, but thanks." He tilted his head at Len, then. "I brought ye back somethin', too. If ye don't like it, though,

blame him, since he suggested it," he said, thumbing over at Phil.

Phil clearly took some pity on Len (busy gaping in surprise and not having an immediate reply) because he said, loftily, "Mister Scott, you truly are a prince of Maine. Now, if you'll excuse me--"

Len caught the beginning of Phil's smirk as he turned away to take his box to his office, and also happened to catch Scott narrowing his eyes after Phil and muttering, "*Masshole*," under his breath, so blatantly insincere that it was downright adorable.

Before Len could even ask what he was unexpectedly brought from Earth, he was laughing for the first time in weeks.

The humor felt good, but it didn't last long.

The gratitude at the gift, on the other hand--

"It's somethin' called an-- azalea?" Scott said, eying the relatively small portable greenhouse and even smaller plant in it, inadvertently doing Len a hell of a favor by not looking at his face. "I think that's how it's pronounced. I don't know, I like lookin' at flowers and that, but couldn't name most o' them."

It took Len a couple swallows to reply in any steady manner. "Yeah, you got it. It's a wildflower. Believe it or not, there used to be some that grew at the back edge of my family's backyard, right up against the oaks and pines."

"In-- Georgia, aye?"

"On the outskirts of Atlanta." Phil must have given Scott some background. Len managed to wrestle himself back to something like composure, offering the engineer a smile. "Thanks. I've never tried growing anything, but I think there are enough botanists around to keep me from killin' it."

"Ye're welcome."

Simple as that. Like he *didn't* just bring Len a gift of Georgia's state wildflower -- living! -- all the way from Earth. Len shook his head, kinda amazed, and then said, "I'm wondering, though, did you even get a full night's sleep since you left?"

Scott quirked his eyebrows dismissively; Len was starting to think that the man could write whole paragraphs with them. "No, not really. I'm fine, though."

Len picked up the azalea carefully, deciding to not challenge that -- despite it being obvious that Scott had a very selective definition of 'fine' - - and instead raised his own eyebrows. "I *do* hope you brought pictures to show me."

"Seconding that," Phil added in from across the room, the unrepentant eavesdropper. "You can't take six weeks of leave and cross half a quadrant twice over without showing us why."

Scott had been about to say something to Len, but then he straightened up his shoulders and tipped his chin up and asked Phil, "Oh, is that so?"

Phil looked up from the table he was working at, straight-faced. "Yes. Ship's rules. I didn't make them, I just enforce them. Pony up, Uncle."

Scott absolutely failed to hide a smile, though he put up a valiant effort, crossing his arms and putting his nose in the air. "Aye, well, I left 'em in my quarters."

"Sorry, no excuses can be accepted," Len broke in, shaking his head in mock-censure. "Better go get 'em before the Captain hears about this."

"And ye're sayin' there's no organized crime goin' on here." Scott shook his head, rubbed at his brow and then headed for the door, scoffing at them on the way out. "For shame, gentlemen."

Phil waited until he was gone to chortle (there was no other word for it), "I *knew* he'd get around to calling me a Masshole eventually."

Len found himself laughing all over again as he went to drop the flower off in his office and then go work up a fresh batch of headache remedy at the drug synthesizer.

"Oh, look at her," Len said, voice hushed, as Scott flipped through his photos -- printed out on actual paper, Len noted -- and took in the newborn wrapped up in a stripey yellow and gray blanket and her uncle's arms. All red-faced and squished and bundled and beautiful. It made Len's heart ache to the bottom; the baby in the picture, the man holding her like she was the most precious thing in the universe, the ghost of Joanna in his own arms, all at once. "Ain't she perfect?"

Phil was occupying the other side of the engineer, head tilted as he did the same. "Beautiful," he agreed, low warmth.

“Allison,” Scott said, some complicated note in his tone that Len couldn’t name, only feel resonate in his own chest. Bunch of things all tangled up, around a core of love. “Got there about sixteen hours before she took her first breath.”

“How long did you get to stay after?” Phil asked, not quite managing to mask the gentleness of the question. Or that he sounded like he already knew what the answer would be, if not in literal time, then in how it felt.

Scott glanced over at him, inscrutable, then blew right past that question without even bothering to wave to it on the way by, asking back pointedly, “Anyway, are ye satisfied, the two o’ ye?”

“Nope,” Len said, not sure which man he was coming to the rescue of. When Scott raised eyebrows at him, he clarified with a smirk, “Now you’ve gotta bring in every updated picture you get.”

“Len’s right. The Medical Mafia insists,” Phil added; he headed back to the work he’d been doing, but not before pressing a hand to Scott’s shoulder for a long moment.

Len knew that gesture well after these past weeks. Sympathy. And maybe a little forgiveness.

And *I see you*.

Apparently, Scott did, too; he pocketed his photos and didn’t look up again until Phil was back across the room.

“Anyway, before you go runnin’ off, I’ve got a gift for you in turn,” Len said, definitely knowing which one he was rescuing this time, as he reached back and picked up the orange vial to wag it at the engineer. “For that headache and neckache you’re doing an admirable job pretending you don’t have. Fresh brewed, comes with Leonard McCoy’s 100% no-vertigo, no-drowsiness guarantee.”

Scott just raised one eyebrow this time, eying that vial before looking back at Len again. Though there was enough amusement in his expression that Len felt reassured by it. “Didn’t figure I was that transparent, Doctor.”

“Nah, you’re not. I just have a finely honed nose for sniffin’ out pains in the neck,” Len said, tapping the side of his nose with a forefinger and giving a quick little wink. “Comes from being one. So, what do you say, let me return the kindness?”

That got a huff of a laugh, then Scott blew out a tired sounding breath, shrugged out of half of his civilian jacket and gave Len his arm. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem, Lieutenant.” Len shot him in the bicep with it, then set the hypo aside while Scott rolled his shoulder. “It works best paired with a nap, but that’s not a requirement. Any which way, you’ll feel better in about a half-hour.”

Scott looked around for a moment like it was only just catching up to him that he was beat, then ran a hand back through his hair, sending it even further into disarray. “Actually-- a nap doesna sound like too bad an idea.”

“I can guarantee you won’t regret one. And in that case, sleep well.” There was a momentary itch in Len’s fingers to reach out and touch, maybe pet that hair back down, but he was able to shove it away pretty easily.

Scott -- mercifully unaware of Len’s little turn of fascination -- gave him a nod and another, “Thanks,” and headed out the door, pulling his jacket back on as he did.

Len looked after him for a moment, then shook his head with a smile; he was just about to head back for his office to read the instruction booklet that came with his new azalea when Phil said, in admiration, “You know, you just pulled off the single most deft capture-and-release I’ve ever seen someone pull on him. Including me.”

That got an incredulous little bark of a laugh out of Len as he looked over at the CMO. “*Capture and release?* Next thing I know, you’re gonna tell me I should location-tag him while I’ve got him and make sure to check his fangs.”

Phil seemingly thought about it, then pointed at Len and said, “You know, that’s not the worst idea I’ve ever heard--” But he stopped himself when Len’s eyebrow made it up under his bangs and shook his head, smiling more softly. “No, seriously, that was really good. Nice work.”

It put Len in mind of their first conversation about Scott -- *handle that one with care* -- and he half-smiled back at Phil there, a little glow of pride and pleasure at the praise in his chest, before continuing on into his office.

(The days started coming just a little easier after that.)

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