

# CADUCEUS

by Connie R. Faddis

The mummy was in an excellent state of preservation -- even the soft nerve tissue beneath the anterior exoskeleton was intact. Eighteen hundred years had taken a toll of most other corpses in the catacombs, despite the severe cold of Alcestis' upper strata.

Doctor Calvin was ecstatic -- a preliminary remote scan showed that the corpse was not shot through with the tumors of plague; perhaps it had died a natural death. Calvin was sure he was on the right track. He slipped on his anti-contamination gear and entered the sealed dissection cubicle itself: this cadaver demanded his direct presence, not manipulation by remote control.

He labored in excited anticipation for an hour, charting organs and making extensive verbal and visual notations for the overhead recorders. He took cultures of several interesting tissue samples, and ran a lengthy computer analysis on the traces of frozen circulatory fluid. It wasn't until he plunged a specimen of 'heart' muscle into the vat of cryogenic fluid that he noticed, violently, that one of his gloves had developed a puncture.

Calvin was not in the habit of cursing, but he let go with a vehement obscenity and dropped the specimen. He strode immediately to the decontamination booth, sealed the door behind him, stripped off everything he was wearing, and stuffed the garments into the disintegrator. Fuming, he wryly considered crawling into the disintegrator himself. Instead, he activated the cleansing beams, and scrubbed and bombarded his skin with aseptics. He ran through the procedure twice, to be sure.

Then, aggravated further by the physical sensation of having been par-boiled, Calvin threw on a sterile lab coat and stepped through the other seal of the booth to the connecting control room. He snapped off the recording system and stared glumly at the monitors. The valuable specimens and cultures were still in there, but the hole in his glove had done double damage: it had contaminated the evidence at the same time the evidence had contaminated him. The corpse, the data, were useless now, compromised by the zoo of alien viruses and bacteria that are the barnacles of human existence. Sighing, Calvin shut off the monitors, reset the sterilization unit, released the safety catch, and pulled a lever.

Inside the dissection chamber, unseen by Calvin, a terrible blaze of white light vaporized every organic particle there -- corpse, specimens, culture

medium, and microorganisms. The throat of an erupting volcano could not have been more sterile.

Calvin was already on his way to the station's canteen for a desperately needed cup of coffee. And the alien infection he'd absorbed was already on its way to his bloodstream.

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A thin snow dusted the upland deserts of Alcestis, splashing into all the north-facing crevices in the stiff, persistent wind. Doctor Leonard McCoy leaned forward in the co-pilot's seat and swept the horizons through the shuttlecraft's forward windows, drinking in the visual environment of the desolate little world. The view suggested a skin-cracking dryness; the patches of snow were incongruous.

"There it iss," Ensign Chekov pointed.

The vermilion surveyors' domes perched on the rim of one of the still distant mesas: an intrusion of gaudy color amidst pervasive pastels under thin streaks of high clouds. Chekov banked the shuttlecraft in a long, careful approach, lining up with the mesa.

"Clifftown Station to *Galileo*," the radio crackled. "We have you on visual."

"*Galileo* acknowledging," Chekov replied. "ETA in four minutes. Stand by with those wind-anchors."

"Standing by," the radio confirmed.

Nurse Chapel came up behind Chekov's shoulder and peered past him.

"Brrrrrrr," she commented. "I'd better break out the thermal suits."

"And," McCoy added, "it's time to give us all another immunity booster shot."

"What disease do you think the survey team picked up?" Chekov asked as he piloted.

"If I knew that, we probably wouldn't have had to come here," McCoy answered, rooting through his supplies. "I'd have radioed a treatment and prescriptions from the ship."

"Yes, 'take two aspirin and call me in the mornink'," the ensign quipped.

McCoy answered him with the mild sting of a hypospray.

Chekov put the *Galileo* down precisely where the waiting ground crew indicated, and shut down the engines while the craft was being anchored. Even so,

the little ship rocked in the vicious winds.

"Achust your hoods closer," the Russian warned his shipmates. "Siberia iss a resort compared to this."

They stepped into a bitter squall; the forty meters to the nearest pre-fab shelter were ice-stinging, hang-onto-the-guideropes-for-dear-life minutes that left everyone panting, lips numbed and eyes and noses streaming. McCoy let himself be led to a bench, seeing the inside of the dome through tear-blurred eyes. The deafening howl of the wind died as doors whined closed, and a blast of heated air drove out the cold. Someone was helping him out of the insulated suit, and he dragged a freed arm across his eyes to clear his vision.

The first clear look he got of his helper chilled him through more than the squall of the open mesa. The young man, a tarnished-brown human of probable Melasian descent, was marred with dry white blisters. His hands were clumsily bandaged. Yet his movements were vigorous and his color was good. The other surveyors in the room seemed equally functional.

McCoy climbed out of his suit's leggings and pulled up his tricorder, switching it on and passing it over the man who was helping him. The young man smiled.

"You're Doctor McCoy," the man guessed. "I'm Telerio Takanna, drilling engineer."

McCoy nodded and reached out to touch Takanna's hand, but the engineer pulled back.

"I don't think you'd better touch us, sir. We think it might spread that way."

McCoy ignored him and turned the man's face to examine the lesions more closely.

"Relax, son, we've immunized ourselves as thoroughly as science knows how. Now, how long ago did these blemishes appear?"

"Three, four days ago, I forget," Takanna shrugged. He began to fold McCoy's insulated suit with the mindless expertise of the veteran explorer. "But I feel okay so far. Some of the others are sick. If you'll follow me, I'll take you below to the infirmary, and Doc Calvin can fill you in."

"Doc Calvin?" McCoy mumbled. Something nagged at the back of his mind. "You didn't tell us you already had a physician."

Takanna didn't respond. McCoy frowned, and then he realized that the engineer had turned away enough that the cups of his ears were directed elsewhere. Hearing loss and lesions! The doctor sifted his mind for any

infection he knew to fit those symptoms, and came up with a blank,

"Did you say something, Doctor?" Takanna said, tearing his eyes from watching Christine Chapel peel off her suit and reveal her legs.

McCoy smiled to himself.

"I said, we'll be needing our equipment from the shuttlecraft --the big biocomp and the portapharmacy first."

"The wind should slow in an hour and we can get everything then with a lot less trouble, if it's all right with you," one of Takanna's companions suggested.

"Yes, it'll wait an hour," McCoy agreed. "Let's have a look at the infirmary."

Takanna led them down a steeply sloped tunnel that cut neatly into the heart of the mesa. Their footsteps echoed around them, and the soft lighting revealed rich textures on all surfaces, sculpted reliefs of wonderful complexity, crazed near the surface by the stress of fluctuating temperatures. There were scenes that spiralled down the passage, subtly linking together as though they should narrate a story, a myth or prayer of some bygone hero or deity.

"Watch your step," Takanna warned. "I trip over myself everytime I walk this tunnel."

"Iss this some kind of writink?" Chekov asked.

Takanna slowed his pace until he was beside the ensign.

"Not so anyone can decipher it," the engineer said. "Pretty, isn't it? Kind of makes you sorry the race died out."

They admired the designs as they walked. The floor became damp as they went deeper, escaping the permafrost effect that sometimes penetrated to 200 meters on this ice-age world. Some form of fungus or algae grew over the sculptures wherever the overhead lighting was mounted, tinting the beige stone with bright patches of orange and pink.

"Why aren't you living in the prefabs?" Christine asked the Freyan woman escorting her.

The heteroplasic head, offset on the Freyan's shoulder and grafted to the clavicle, twisted to gaze at the human while the Freyan's natural head watched the tunnel ahead.

"We moved into the subterra about the third day after we arrived, after the winds blew one of the prefabs into the canyon along with two members of our team. The domes are anchored now, but we have found that it is more comfortable down here, and more spacious."

"You live in the ruins?"

"Not ruins, but abandoned grottos. You may have noticed as you flew in that there were no surface remnants of the great civilization that lived here. The beings never marred the surface ecology, they built underground."

"Yes, our starship's records mentioned that," Chekov interrupted. "Iss that why this planet iss nicknamed 'Catacombs'?"

"That's a crock of nonsense," Dr. McCoy snapped, not wanting anyone to pursue that line of thought.

"No, it isn't," Takanna contradicted. He took a turn into a side passage, leading down a brighter, less inclined passage. "Most of the mesas in this part of Alcestis are honeycombed with tombs."

"Tombs?" Chekov gulped.

"I didn't hear you, Ensign," Takanna said. "What did you say?"

Chekov shook his head and walked closer--a lot closer--to the others. He imagined the twisted corpses that must be behind every thin casing of sculpted wall. But then the passage ended in a fitted prefab doorway, obviously scavanged from one of the domes. Takanna swung it open and warm, pleasantly dry air poured into their faces.

The grottos within were an elaborate series of sizable chambers strung together by long tunnels, like pearls on strings, a great ~~macrame~~ complex executed in stone. The majestic carvings that filled every square centimeter of the main access tunnel from the surface were present in the grottos too, but here the carving was relieved by high walls of the natural rock, beautiful in itself. The spaces defined by the rock were pleasing, even to human senses. The effect of the furnishings and equipment installed by the surveyors was unexpectedly aesthetic, and the combination of native architecture and alien comforts gave a distinctly "homey" impression. Little wonder the surveyors moved in: the place was a palace and cathedral combined.

Doctor McCoy paid little attention to the decor, though; he visually scanned every person they met in the living quarters, professionally ticking off visible symptoms in his mind. Later, when he had all his equipment, he'd give all thirty surveyors a thorough physical, take cultures of the lesions, inject the lab animals he'd brought, and pin the problem down. It didn't look promising, though: even discounting the few non-human team members, he noted a confusing sampling of different symptoms on different people. Yet always there was the one consistent symptom: the white blisters marring hands, arms and cheeks. He was still grinding through mental texts, pondering the data, when Takanna knocked and opened a door scrawled "TEMP INFIRM" in yellow engineer's chalk.

A clutch of cots held a dozen patients in the immense, echoing chamber. Off to one side, under a bewildering complex of sculpted symbols, an iron-haired man in a rumpled lab coat sat on a stool, examining one of his patients.

Takanna coughed to get the man's attention, then shrugged, grinning.

"Hey, Doc, the *Enterprise* team is here," he called politely.

"This is Doctor McCoy, Nurse Chapel, and Ensign Chekov. Doc Calvin."

Doctor Calvin swung around and glared directly at McCoy.

"Hello, Leonard. I see you're leading Starfleet's local 'salvation army'," he grated. "Come to pull my chestnuts out of the fire?"

McCoy was dumbstruck with dismay, not by the acrimonious greeting so much as by this forgotten ghost out of his past. The awkward silence drew out. Then McCoy's well-exercised wit saved him.

"I see you haven't mellowed a microgram, J.D.," he heard himself drawl with satisfying dryness. He strode over to Calvin's patient and inspected the woman's life-readings, and the sloppy dressings on her arms, which Calvin had been applying when they'd interrupted. "Your technique hasn't improved much either," McCoy added.

Calvin shrugged defensively. "Pill-pushing and bone-splinting is your racket, not mine."

McCoy gestured impatiently for Calvin to move, then took the seat to redo the bandages. His hands went about their business automatically while his brain busied itself sorting forgotten grievances.

Jefferson Davis Calvin! How far had the man's fortunes fallen, to reduce him from noted researcher and lecturer to a planet-survey's M.D.-- a post usually filled by doctors right out of their internship? McCoy scrutinized his antagonist out of the corner of his eye, while Calvin made clumsy apologies to Chapel and Chekov.

Calvin had not aged gracefully. He looked a good bit older than the sixty-odd years he carried. The hint of leftover babyfat he'd displayed as a professor at med school had melted away to gauntness, and his yellow-grey hair was long overdue for a trim. He wore a dun-colored lab coat that looked like it had been slept in. McCoy's frown deepened, and he turned back to the others.

"We'd better get down to business," he said curtly. "Christine, get the list of patients and personal statistics, then match up symptoms and compile a data bank for the medical computer. Chekov, we won't need you for a while, but you might look into getting our equipment down here as soon as that

wind lets up outside. Calvin, let's take a look at your medical log, then the tissue cultures."

Chekov took care of transferring the medical equipment, then left the doctors to their work and made a tour of the underground facilities with Takanna. The mesa was a maze of tunnels, most of which were not decorated. Pavel stepped up to the wall of one of the smoothed passages and inspected the stone closely. It looked like it had been dug out by a phaser.

"Not our work," Telerio offered. "Doc Calvin's part archeologist, and he thinks these tunnels could be two thousand years, standard, some older."

"The extinct native culture?"

"I imagine."

"Hev--hev you efer followed these tunnels?"

"Sure, but there isn't much to see outside of the complex we're occupying. Most of the tunnels take a sharp dip. Too steep to climb without a rope, and they just keep going down."

Chekov's sense of adventure was intrigued.

"Anyone efer climb to the bottom of one?"

"Once, Mikki Fo did. It was almost a thousand meters down, and when she got there, there were only more passages just like this one. And we were all worn out by the time we pulled her up. One of these days I want to rig up a power-lift so we can go down some of the really deep wells, and come back up without sweating."

Chekov laughed.

"We could set up the pulleys together," he suggested. "We both should hev a few hours free time, maybe tomorrow?"

Takanna glanced down at his bandaged hands ruefully.

"I can't climb, but I'll run the engine for your line if you're game to go down alone."

It was the kind of challenge Chekov would never refuse.

Doctor Calvin paced the length of the equipment-crowded laboratory, his hands clenched inside the pockets of his coat. Several times he glanced over McCoy's shoulder at the computer readout screen, then resumed pacing.

"Sit down, will you?" McCoy snapped. "I can't concentrate with you jogging in place behind me."

Calvin ignored him.

McCoy sighed and pushed himself back from the console.

"One inconsistent symptom after another. Except for the blisters," he complained. "I have no idea what we're dealing with."

"There's the sinus congestion," Calvin reminded. "Nearly everyone had that the first day after the blisters appeared."

"The computer's never heard of a combination like that, and neither have I. For all I can tell, we could have three or four different, completely unrelated infections going here at once."

Calvin eyed him.

"Well, at least I've lived to hear you admit that you don't have all the answers," he told McCoy sharply.

McCoy bit back a sarcastic reply. It was no use provoking Calvin more; they were going to have to work together, or else they would end up staying on the planet until the disease either killed them, or they were no longer contagious.

"I've put on twenty years since med school, J.D.," he said finally, "and I've had some humbling experiences."

Calvin, silent, glared at his own reflection in a polished metal cabinet. He scratched absently at the blisters on his hands and ignored McCoy's gesture of truce.

After a few minutes, McCoy snapped off the computer and spun in his stool to look at Calvin.

"Listen, Calvin, maybe we're not taking the right approach-- those cultures might need weeks to incubate," he said. "Let's try another tack. Tell me, who turned up with the first blisters?"

Calvin continued to study his reflection, but he shifted uneasily.

"I did," he rasped.

"You! Do you have any idea what the source of the infection might have been?"

Calvin tore himself from the contemplation of his image and pounded out a set of new instructions on the computer console. The screen produced a visual display of an autopsy tape--an autopsy of a mummified alien, the species of which McCoy recognized immediately.

"A Keeris--a space gypsy!"

"No, not a modern Keeris," Calvin corrected. "A native of this world, dead eighteen hundred and nine years, standard. Though I do think



the gypsies' species originated here."

"What do the Keeris have to do with the infection?"

Calvin sighed.

"A puncture developed in one of my gloves while I was dissecting this corpse. The blisters appeared the next day. I think most of the ancient Keeris were wiped out by plague of some sort."

McCoy was infuriated.

"You had no business going into tombs here. This planet, this whole system, is under archeological interdict."

Calvin refused to be cowed.

"Archeological interdict by my own recommendation, McCoy. There have been three surveys here before. I was in two of them. I'm an archeo-pathologist, or have you forgotten everything I taught you in med school?" he grated, then added in a more reasonable tone. "There are archeological--and medical--treasures here that have to be protected from the insensitive. Do you know what the survey teams found here, Leonard? Do you know why they keep coming back here to take another look around? They've found *oil*. Natural petroleum. Maybe by the carrier loads."

"Natural oil's pretty rare stuff, Calvin, what makes you think there's enough here to make profiteering worth while?"

"It isn't rare on certain classes of planets. Earth itself used to be swimming in the stuff--used to *burn* it for *fuel* before the Eugenics War. But the base molecules of Alcestin crude are the stuff of jewelers' grade plastics, and worth--oh, it would take a Vulcan to estimate the wealth. Simply incredible."

"And what does oil have to do with opening tombs?" McCoy accused.

Calvin looked at him blankly.

"Why the place would be overrun. Miners, mining equipment, large-scale operations, looters, amateur grave robbers--it would be terrible. There's be no valid evidence left of the Keeris, inside of a year."

"If you knew about the Keeris, and the oil, and the plague, then you had no excuse at all. You should have notified the authorities, McCoy raged. "And if you had any suspicion of viable plague here, you should never have opened a single tomb!"

"I don't have to apologize for my decisions to you," Calvin growled, at bay.

"Dammit, I think you do!" McCoy yelled. He pulled up the sleeve of his uniform and stuck his arm under Calvin's nose. Tiny white pustules

were beginning to raise on his skin.

Calvin gazed, transfixed, at the arm, horror slowly displacing the anger in his eyes. Abruptly, he spun on his heel and was gone out the door.

The elegant room set aside for the survey team's mess hall, called 'the canteen', was the main socializing center, and Christine Chapel soon felt as comfortable there as she felt in the rec rooms of the *Enterprise*. She was teaching the Freyan woman, Yed-Paolor, some basic nursing skills so there'd be more hands to help in the infirmary, and the women became friends almost immediately.

Playing cards with Yed-Paolor was a startling experience, though. Paolor, the heteroplastic personality, would presumably be playing her hand when Yed would look over and make a suggestion about strategy. Watching two parts of a single being debate with each other over a card game was both amusing and disconcerting. On top of that, Yed felt no compunction about discussing Paolor's hand in detail, so that Christine could hardly help knowing every card the Freyan held. It was a hopeless effort: Freyans simply did not understand the concept of secrecy, even on so simple a level.

Yed-Paolor left after several hands, with a deprecating but humorous opinion of human entertainments.

Christine hurried to finish her lunch. She'd promised Mikki Fo she'd relieve her in the infirmary at 1300 hours. That was in thirty minutes, and she wanted to shower first. She was just putting her tray into the dish jockey when Dr. Calvin came into the room, trailing nearly visible clouds of anger. She nodded to him politely as she passed him.

"Oh, Ms. Chapel?"

She stopped.

"Yes, Doctor, is there something I can do for you?"

Polite. Noncommittal. The man was a mystery to her.

"I fear I was rather--discourteous--when we met yesterday. I've been meaning to apologize properly. If you're not in a hurry--if you have time--would you join me over a cup of coffee?"

She met his eyes, and the anger had gone out of them, replaced by embarrassment, apology, shyness, hopefulness. There was a *need* in him for companionship, a need for which Christine had a particular weakness.

"I do have a few minutes--" she said, firmly putting her preconceptions about him aside. She joined him at one of the tables and sipped

the coffee he brought over from the dispenser.

"I'm afraid my--" Calvin began.

"Is it true--" Christine said at the same instant,  
They chuckled nervously, and Calvin waved Christine first,

"I asked Doctor McCoy where he'd known you before--I hope you don't mind, but it was obvious and I'm a curious person--and all he said was that you were a Nobel Prize winner in medicine, where he went to school," she said. "I'm interested because I was a close friend of Roger Corby, and he won a Nobel Prize for medicine too. I thought you might have known him."

"No, I never had that pleasure," Calvin said, "A pity, since we were both specialists in archeo-pathology. But it's a big galaxy, I read that he met a rather horrible end, frozen to death by androids or some such thing,"

"Something like that," Christine said softly, staring into her coffee cup.

Realizing he'd cast a pall on the conversation before it'd gotten started, Calvin chose a safer topic.

"Well, anyway. What do you think of our 'digs', if you'll excuse a poor pun?" he said, gesturing at the great dome of ornate designs that capped the room.

Christine snatched at the overture of levity,

"I think," she said animatedly, "that I would never have dreamt of living underground until I came here. When I was a child, my parents took me along on a tour of Earth's Middle East, and I saw a dozen mosques with hand-carved or mosaic latticed domes. They were delightful, but they wouldn't hold a candle to this."

Calvin smiled warmly. "Interesting that you compare this to a place of worship. I have reason to suspect that these grottos may have been housing for some kind of religious order that once flourished here,"

"Like a monastery or convent?"

"Very much like that, though more in the terran eastern tradition than the better-known christian manner. I call it 'the Order of the Caduceus'."

"The Caduceus is the human symbol for medicine," Christine recalled, intrigued.

"True, but the name's associations fit here, in their way. I think the cult here was a mingling of religion and medicine," he said. Suddenly he leaned forward as though to convey a confidence. "If I'm right, the cult worshipped members who attained the power of full Empathy."

"Healing empaths are very rare," Christine mused, surprised by Calvin's ardent tone. "What makes you think someone could *attain* empathy? All the empaths I've ever heard of were born that way."

"Have you ever heard of the 'space gypsies'?"

"The Keeris? What about them?"

"They are the descendents of the race that lived here," Calvin told her. "And none of them are empaths. Telepaths, yes, but not empaths. Yet empaths existed here two thousand years ago, before a plague came. I have evidence of that."

"What kind of evidence?" Christine asked cautiously.

"You're skeptical, of course. I understand that. I have some data from autopsies I've performed on preserved remains. Also, I can read some of the hieroglyphs," he said quietly.

His modesty, so entangled with altruistic egotism (that was confusing enough!), shocked her. This world was supposed to be an archeological mystery, and Dr. Calvin was keeping his incredible discoveries practically to himself.

"If empathy is a learnable technique," she said carefully, "that knowledge would be a breakthrough in medicine comparable to--to Pasteur's vaccine. Why haven't you contacted Federation authorities to get professional archeologists here?"

"Oh, I have," he said, distressed. "They don't believe me. They said my findings were ambiguous. They warned me to keep out of the tombs."

"What you're doing is illegal, then," she said playfully.

"That's not important," Calvin said fiercely, missing her levity. "What is important is finding out how the ancient Keeris artificially stimulated empathic healing. I must discover it. No price would be too high."

Christine sat back in her chair and really looked at Calvin for the first time. So much about him reminded her of Roger Corby: the basic shyness about everything but his work, the social awkwardness, the single-minded view he took of his work's importance, the idealistic *drive* for knowledge. Calvin was a lot older than Roger had been, of course, but there was an attractiveness to Calvin's face despite the frosting of dry blisters across his cheeks, and he had an endearing smile. She decided she liked the creases around his eyes. They probably were the result of too much squinting into electron microscope viewfinders, but she preferred to attribute them to 'smile lines'. She wondered briefly what Dr. McCoy found in Dr. Calvin that he disliked so vehemently. Then she noticed the time,

"Oh heavens, I'm late! Poor Mikki will be starved,"

She downed the cold dregs of her coffee and rose, Calvin caught at her fingers hesitantly.

"Please, Ms. Chapel. I hope I didn't bore you," he said uncertainly. "And I am sorry about the poor greeting I gave you yesterday. Would you have dinner with me after your shift tonight? I program a very good stroganoff."

Christine smiled her warmest smile in answer and headed for the infirmary. She decided she definitely liked Dr. Calvin. And it was refreshing to meet an attractive man with such tangible emotions.

"I think we're ready to try it now," Telerio Takanna said. He pulled the dummy weight back onto the ledge of the intersecting horizontal tunnel and began to unfasten it from the end of the lifeline,

"How many meters of line are there?" Chekov asked, snapping the freed cable onto the harness at his waist.

"Twenty-five hundred," the engineer assured him. "This well 'bounced' bottom on the sensors at eighteen hundred, so you'll have plenty of slack to pull if you want to wander around down there."

Chekov peered once more into the black hole into which he was about to drop. He could only see down about forty meters, where the illumination of Telerio's mining lamp faded sharply into shadow. A stiff, cold breeze wafted up from the well,

"Having second thoughts?" Telerio teased.

Chekov straightened and studied the Melasian's wide, grinning face. It was an open face, a trustworthy face. He returned the grin and gathered the short loop of slack line in his hands, then scrambled over the ledge. The chill wind stung his cheeks.

"You okay, Pavel?"

"Lower away!"

The engine hummed to life and fed out cable in a smooth, gradual descent.

Chekov quickly dropped out of the range of Takanna's lamp, but he did not immediately turn on his own. He relaxed in the harness and looked up, watching the shrinking circle of brightness at the top of the well. Within minutes, it had diminished to a tiny point of light. Complete blackness closed around him and the peculiar environment of the well pressed on his senses. The updraft, blasting in the cups of his ears, stripped away his body heat even through his miner's jumpsuit. The wind carried an odor he hadn't noticed

before: dank, like moist earth, with a curious tinge of sulfur,

Suddenly alarmed, Chekov flashed his lamp into the pit coming up below him. It looked just as it had above: empty. He switched the lamp off and settled back into the harness, beginning to shiver with cold, wondering how far it still was to the bottom,

The speaker in his equipment belt crackled and Telerio's voice squawked in his ears.

"Half way mark, Pavel," the voice said. "Everything all right?"

"The wind-chill factor iss freezink me to death," Chekov complained, but he was grateful to hear Takanna's voice, his link to humanity, to the world of normality. He dropped the rest of the way in silence.

Solid ground leaped up to touch his feet, and Chekov found himself on his knees before he could orient himself. The cable kept coming down on top of him.

"Ho! Telerio! I'm here!"

The cable stopped feeding.

"One small step for a man, . . ." Chekov said,

"What was that?"

"I said, there's a nudist colony down here!"

"What?"

"*I said I'm here!*"

"Oh. What's down there?"

Chekov stood up and disentangled himself from the excess cable, starting to reach for his lamp. Then he realized that he could *see* the walls around him. They were vaguely defined by a dim, delicate kind of glow that seemed to emanate from the walls themselves. He shut his eyes and then opened them again to determine if what he was "seeing" was actually retinal "noise." It wasn't. There really was light, and he seemed to be becoming adapted to it very fast--already he could pick out the outlines of another of the mysterious carvings that appeared at every tunnel intersection.

"I think I found another street sign," he told Telerio.

"A what?"

"A street sign, I think that's what the intersection carvinks are."

"Speak up, I can't hear you."

"*Turn up the demn receiver!*" Chekov bawled.

"It's up all the way."

"Oh."

He could make out the carvings quite clearly now, and conjectured that some kind of natural phosphorescence in the rock, maybe reacting to his body heat, was the source of the illumination. It wasn't enough light to move around in, though, so he snapped on his lamp. The sudden glare stabbed his eyes, and he shut it off immediately. When he opened his eyes again, the tunnel was much brighter. Apparently the rock strata captured both infrared and visible radiation. He could now see reasonably well without the lamp, and realized he was in yet another featureless tunnel, only this one cut off almost horizontally.

"Feed me some more slack, nice and slow," he radioed, remembering to raise his voice. "I'm goink for a walk,"

"It's about time."

Chekov's footsteps crunched down on scattered debris, and he listened to the echoes kick around the passage and die. The sounds had a more shallow tone than he'd become accustomed to in the upper levels. There ought to be a turn ahead in the tunnel. Then he heard it: the plink-plink of dripping water.

He endured the blaze of his miner's lamp to negotiate the odd, downward-spiralling rotation of passage, and found himself in an expansive, luminous chamber. He stood, shotbolted to the spot where he stopped, and frantically rearranged his mind to comprehend what he had found.

There is something universal about places of ceremony that has nothing to do with decor or architecture, sect or species. It is a sense of *presence*, perhaps a lingering extrasensory impression on the place itself of the aspirations and prayers of its congregation. There was no altar, no idol, no seating matrix, yet Chekov knew he was in a place set aside for ritual or meditation. A wide pool of green-glowing water dominated the chamber. Water dripped into it from some place high in the stalactitic ceiling. Then something moved behind one of the stalactites, and Chekov swung his lamp up to pinpoint it.

Beady multiple eyes stared down at him out of a profusion of thin, hairy limbs. One of the limbs moved to shield the red eyes from the glare. Another limb felt around on the ceiling for a firmer foothold.

Chekov spun and scrambled for the vertical well, nearly garroting himself on the tangled line behind him.

"Telerio! Pull me out!"

"Hey Chekov?"

"Up, man! *Get me out of here!*"

He could hear scrabbling sounds of spidery legs behind him. At the same time the extra cable began to disappear up the well. The reflective red eyes came around the spiral in the tunnel.

Then Chekov was yanked off his feet and hauled upward. Spinning out of control on the end of the shortening line, he banged his head into the vertical wall. When Takanna finally pulled him up onto the ledge at the top, Chekov was unconscious.

No one seemed to believe him,

Dr. Calvin listened to him attentively, and cross-examined him in minute detail, but made no comment, only grabbing some tape decks out of a drawer and cornering Dr. McCoy at the other end of the room. Christine Chapel, meanwhile, shaved away a hunk of the ensign's hair and applied an adhesive patch on the cut, nodding patiently as he told his story to her for the fourth time. Finally Dr. McCoy checked him over with the medical tricorder, clucking like a worried hen, and told him he had a fever--he ought to rest. Even Telerio seemed to think he'd been hallucinating.

Chekov slumped in a chair in the canteen, holding his aching head.

"Look, Pavel," Telerio was telling him, "whatever you saw wasn't real. It's true that the creature you think you saw matches the description of the beings who used to live here. But they've been extinct for at least eighteen hundred years."

Chekov shook his head,

"Maybe you saw a statue, then."

"I saw a livink beink. It followed me beck to the shaft,"

Chekov said. "If I hedn't panicked..."

"If you hadn't panicked, you wouldn't have hit your head, and that's all," Telerio said, suppressing a grin.

"I want to go beck down,"

"No one's going back down," Telerio said firmly. "Haley Druen is sick, and now Melissa O'Hallohan. That leaves me in charge, and there are some twenty rigs to shut down yet, and I'm not about to waste time or manpower on adventure, not any more."

He reached across the table and pulled Chekov's hand from his coffee cup, turning it to the light.

"Anyhow, look at those blisters. And Doc McCoy said you're running a temperature."



Chekov scowled,

"So iss the doctor," he said, "and you haven't accused him of hallucinatink."

"Even if there are beings down in the pits, they never come up here, so what does it matter?"

"It metters! Don't you see? I saw them and I ran. All of my training, everything I believe in, told me I should hev stayed and tried to communicate with the beink. But all I could think was that I hed to run!"

The ensign's sense of guilt and self-disappointment projected around him like a sodden cloudbank. Telerio studied the bandaging on his own hand, waiting for the fierce gloom to dissipate, but when it didn't, he leaned forward anxiously.

"Listen, everyone is starting to feel ill. Your case of whatever-we-have isn't as advanced as most of ours, I'm going to need you, right here. Maybe, when the crisis is over, you and me will go back down the shaft to hunt your creature, all right?"

Chekov squinted at Telerio skeptically, then relaxed into a resigned smile. He reached across and offered a careful handshake.

"You're the keptain," he capitulated.

Mirrors were Christine Chapel's enemies. They chronicled more than the passage of years; for her, they were an inexorable conscience that derided her with every frown line. She had a face full of sighs.

Now, staring into the glass, she was waiting despondently for the white blisters to encrust her cheeks as they had her hands. She was the last of the



landing party to develop symptoms. Now, the fifth day, everyone was becoming ill and short-tempered, and she'd retreated into a washroom to escape the constant cross-fire between the normally-genial Dr. McCoy and the erratic Dr. Calvin. She didn't care for this new, embittered side of McCoy that he was revealing. And, she was finding herself increasingly drawn to Calvin, and spending more and more of her off-duty time with him. She didn't understand why McCoy and Calvin detested each other; she wasn't sure she wanted to know, either. She just wished they'd call it off, at least until the crisis was over.

After several long minutes, she slapped water onto her face, dried it, reset her features to prim neutrality, and went back into the lab.

McCoy and Calvin were still pitted in their verbal duel, which roared around the stone chamber. The computers behind them chattered away, sorting through data that no one was scanning.

"Your suppositions are based on pure fantasy," McCoy said, "We don't have time to chase after Chekov's hallucinations--or yours. There are half a dozen people in the next room, dying right now,"

Calvin was florid with indignation.

"Stop addressing me as though I were some insensitive, irresponsible monster, or a raving lunatic!"

"If you aren't, you're a damn fine actor,"

"I'm more of a scientist than you'll ever be, I taught you everything you know."

"Some scientist! You'd gamble lives and precious time on a myth, J.D. A *myth*.

Calvin picked up a heavy box of tape decks and angrily plunked them on the desk in front of McCoy.

"if you'd look at my evidence, you'd know I was right. If we've got the Keeris' plague, then finding the secret of the Caduceus is our only chance."

McCoy caught Christine's withering look and took several deep breaths in an effort to calm himself,

"I did look at your 'evidence'," he growled. "But you're so goddamned wrapped up in your treasure hunt that you're oblivious to everything else. Calvin, even if there were a Caduceus, once, it couldn't save its own race from the very plague we're fighting now. They *died*, J.D. The Keeris are all *dead*."

"The space-Keeris--the gypsies--they're alive," Calvin said, pouncing on McCoy's attempt at rationality. "And Chekov saw a live Keeris in the pits. Some of them escaped, so there must be a cure. There must be."

McCoy hammered the computer console.

"Yes, there's a cure! It's right here in the data, or we're all dead."

"That data will tell us nothing. Not in time."

"Then we'd better make out our wills," McCoy said, shaking his head in his gesture for the hopelessly incorrigible. He turned back to the console and punched reset buttons to scan the material he'd missed while arguing. Over his shoulder, he called, "Are you going to help with this morning's test results, or are you going back to the infirmary?"

His voice carried a tone of incensed dismissal, and Calvin complied, disappearing into the next room in silent fury. McCoy swung his gaze to Christine--as cold a stare as she'd ever seen.

"And what are you going to do, Nurse?" he snapped.

Stung, Christine followed Calvin. She had no patience for McCoy's ill temper. In the infirmary, she went directly to the ward-monitor and checked to see which of the fifteen patients were due for medication. McCoy was prescribing a pan-spectrum antibiotic, which seemed to slow the progress of the disease in some of the patients. Christine loaded a hypospray with the prescriptions and made the rounds.

Ensign Chekov looked up from the patient he was tending when Christine approached. He greeted her with a weary smile.

"How do you like being a nurse?" she said, forcing herself to match his smile.

"It's borink work," he said, "but also wery sad."

The nurse recalibrated the hypospray and turned Chekov's patient over to give him the shot. Doctor Calvin came over from attending the Andorian geologist, joining Chekov and Christine, opened his mouth to say something, but conversation was aborted by a piercing alarm that echoed with loud whoops around the cavern. Calvin and Christine sprang up as a unit.

"Stay here," Christine told Chekov, and she scurried behind Calvin to the bed of the endangered patient, grabbing the emergency kit as she ran.

The young woman's skin had gone the frightful orange of Freyan asphyxiation. Calvin yanked the pillow out from under Yed-Paolor's heads and bellowed for the respirators. Christine slapped one into his hand and pressed the other mask to the nostrils of the Freyan's heteroplastic head. The lungs inflated, but neither brain initiated an exhalation response. Calvin emptied the lungs mechanically and tried again. No reaction. He shot a hypo of stimulant

into each throat in the hope of jolting at least one brain into autonomic function, but it was useless: the woman had decided to die. Her bright orange skin had flushed to near-vermillion.

"All right!" Calvin howled. "All right!"

He stood back helplessly and watched the encephalon reading plummet.

"Die if you want to," he added in a broken whisper.

After a long minute he reached over and removed the respirators, deflated the lungs, and switched off the individual monitor. A few minutes more, and the corpse stopped twitching. The lidless faceted eyes filmed over, and both of the Freyan's faces relaxed into an expression of peacefulness.

Christine Chapel, who had seen many friends die, sobbed in the privacy of her mind.

From behind her, unnoticed until now, Dr. McCoy said softly, "The first one. It's started."

The eighth day at Clifftown Station was particularly quiet. Twenty patients lay abed in the infirmary. The other twelve people divided their time between caring for the bedridden and helping the desperate research effort. Most of the station itself was shut down.

Dr. McCoy contemplated the autopsy he'd done on Yed-Paolor. The monitor displayed three series of four plates each in a recurring loop, over and over automatically, and to McCoy, each one said 'Death', and 'Death', and 'Death'. He still had not pinned down the specific cause of the disease, but its results were before him in graphic detail: the Freyan's body was a ghastly clump of intertwined tumors, tissue gone mad, some cancerous malignant abnormality that affected every gastrointestinal and lymphatic organ until the torso was strangled with bulk and vital systems shorted out.

McCoy was sure that if he finally found the invading microorganism --if such it was--it would not be a native to Alcestis. More likely it was a unique life-form brought to the planet during the hey-day of the Keeris' interstellar trade. It had wiped out Alcestis, and only the Keeris who stayed away in space survived. The catastrophe, and even its place of origin, had gotten lost over the Keeris' centuries of wandering, until they were finally the space-gypsies, the nomads without a birthplace.

There were beginnings of the tumors in all the surveyors, now. McCoy had tried everything he knew: antibiotics, cultured serums that were probably sterile, and other chemotherapy; transfusions of circulatory and

lymph fluids; radiation therapy; acupuncture; electrolytic alignment; treating the symptoms where he could not find the cause. All, so far, had been ineffective. The antibiotics seemed to slow it down if started in the early stages, otherwise he knew he and his staff would be much less mobile and lucid than they still were; but all that meant was the comfortless realization that he, Christine, and Chekov would outlive the others by a few days.

And then Christine, tired to the bone, mixed up several of the culture slides, processing by accident a few that she had already processed the night before.

McCoy pounced on the electron microscope, and sent Christine scurrying into the infirmary for Calvin.

"There it is," McCoy sighed, adjusting the focus on the microscope's monitors. The screens displayed three slides, each a specimen from a different organ in Yed-Paolor's cadaver, each clustered with colorless, featureless spheres.

"What about the other four microorganisms you tracked down?" Dalvin said sourly.

"I'm reasonably certain now that they're concurrent infections, probably native air-borne diseases that our immunological injections would normally have prevented," McCoy said. "They're more annoying than dangerous, but we wasted time on them and missed the primary infection until now."

"The problem was that normal procedure stipulates culturing from living, or very recently living tissues," Christine said, "but the primary infection didn't show up until we analyzed tissues that had been dead almost a day. It was an accident that we even looked at these."

Calvin nodded absently, frowning at the glassy spheroids. He punched instructions on the molecular analyzer, and the computer built an atomic model on its monitor. For all that the spheroids were featureless, their molecular composition was insanely convoluted, and several of the valences were impossible--but there, nonetheless.

"Insidious thing," McCoy said. "Confuses our immunological functions, opens the gate to other infections, and meanwhile fills us up inside with tumors like some amuck super-carcinoma. And it isn't even alive by any accepted definition--couldn't be. It isn't a spore, or a bacterium, or even quite a virus."

"But an ugly killer," Calvin said. He turned to McCoy, his eyes

widening. "Leonard, we must find out how the Keeris descendents here survived the original plague, If the secret of Acquired Empathy is still known--"

"Not that again!" said McCoy.

"All right, all right, assuming that the Caduceus is purely mythical, Chekov still reported seeing a Keeris in the shafts, and if any Keeris survived, there *must* have been either some immunity or cure. And a cure is what we need."

"Chekov?--he didn't see anything; he's just a kid," McCoy said, easing himself into a lab chair. He was beginning to ache inside. "Just last year, he fell ass over tincups running from an ordinary corpse."

"Mister Takanna ran several new sensor scans after Chekov's accident," Christine added uncertainly, "and the results were inconclusive,"

"Sensors are confused by the high metallic content in some of the bedrock strata," Calvin said, excitement coloring his flecked cheeks. "Look, Leonard, you've tried everything you know, every antibiotic and radiation that a human can survive. Look at the tests you've run. Okay, you've had a look now at the construction of the infectious agent, but what difference will it make if you've already tried everything? The only thing that's had any effect on the cultures is mechanical crushing. You can't crush a disease. What have we to lose by trying to hunt the Keeris?"

"Time," McCoy snapped, "which we have very little of." He fixed his eyes on the molecular construct, and noticed that his vision was beginning to blur slightly at the periphery. "There are several things we haven't tried yet," he added neutrally.

"No, you haven't tried standing on your head, or signing a treaty, or farting on the slides!"

McCoy did a slow burn, but turned neutrally to Christine. "Nurse, I'm sure you're tired. Why don't you check into the infirmary to see if anyone there needs a hand, then take a break and have some coffee?"

The nurse threw him an inscrutable look and left. McCoy waited until the door had shut behind her, then spun in the chair to glare at Calvin.

"You jackass." Calvin made no reply, so McCoy continued, "It would be the greatest pleasure if I never had to look at your face again, but we're both here, and we're stuck with each other. You could at least have the decency not to undermine the morale of the others by attacking me in front of my staff." He glanced at the door through which Christine had left, adding, "And while I'm on the subject of my staff, I don't like what you've been up to behind my back. Keep your god-damn hands the hell off my nurse."

Calvin jerked straight, his eyes glittering resentfully, but his voice was deadly quiet.

"If you have no personal claim on Ms. Chapel, I suggest that you mind your own business."

"Christine is my associate and my friend, and I won't have some emotional jackal preying on her sensibilities. She deserves better than you. Just leave her alone."

"You have no right--"

McCoy snapped at that.

"What you did to my marriage gives me every right!" he said with baiting relish. "You're the lowest kind of back stabber."

Calvin's temper cracked. But instead of the tirade McCoy expected, Calvin lunged at him, tipping the chair over backwards and crashing them both to the stone floor. Papers and tape decks and slide mounts flew, and Calvin pummeled at McCoy clumsily, totally enraged. McCoy fended off Calvin's blows, managing to twist out from under him and capture Calvin's thin arms. Gaining his knees, McCoy pinned the arms behind the man's back. Calvin wrestled desperately, but McCoy, younger and still healthier, had an easy advantage.

"You bastard! You bastard!" Calvin said through his gasps.

"Calvin, calm down," McCoy said, shaken. "Calm down and I'll let go."

"No, you want to hurt me," the older man blurted, "you want your revenge, go ahead--maybe we'll both feel better."

McCoy shoved Calvin from him, self-disgusted, and swayed to his feet, but the bottled-up bitterness poured out full force.

"I do want to hurt you," he said raggedly. "Twenty years ago I might have killed you if I had the chance. How else could I feel? My God, man. You stole my wife!"

Calvin rolled over and half-sat against a console, the fury draining from him in a wave that left him weak. He looked up blearily at the younger man standing over him, hands clenched and face grey, and saw him as a human being for the first time in twenty years. And for the first time in as long, Calvin saw and faced the reality of his own suppressed guilt, recognized his defensiveness as the source of his animosity. His stomach cramped with pain that was more than the effect of the disease.

"Is that what you think?" he said. "That I seduced her from you?"

McCoy's malice, too, was dissipating, replaced by an internal emptiness.

"You were the most prestigious name at the university, the Nobel Prize winner, the handsome, the wealthy, the single great J.D. Calvin," McCoy said, almost whispering it. Despair loaded his voice. "And I was an intern on a

shoestring budget with a wife and child, living in a two room student apartment. You offered everything Arriana ever wanted, how could she resist you?"

Calvin winced. "No...Leonard, listen to me, Arriana pursued me."

McCoy gaped at him vacuously.

"No, that's not so."

"We were friends once, Leonard, I'm not lying to you. She started it; in the beginning, I even tried to discourage her, God knows how terrible I felt about it...but it got so out of hand, I'd never had women pay much attention to me before, not as a man. I wasn't much for socializing, you know that...the great Solitary Academician," he said. He closed his eyes in bitter memory. "Arriana seduced me. I wanted her to, but it was her show. What a fool I was. But she said she *loved* me, that she'd never loved anyone before, not like me, and she was so beautiful. Beautiful. Those eyes...and she said she loved me..." he murmured.

"It's not true!"

Calvin only stared at the overturned chair, lost in thought.

"She loved *me*, McCoy persisted, but the words mocked him. He sat back heavily on the lab table, all the stamina washing out of him in a rush, and he closed his eyes tightly, trying to sort through the storm of confusion. How could it be?--and yet it unquestionably was. A twenty year assumption, almost an article of faith in his life since that time--all falsehood. Arriana seduced Calvin. One corner of McCoy's mind was shrieking "No!", but his intellect examined the evidence. He'd known Arriana, lovely Arriana, had been a flighty girl when he'd married her, but he'd hoped the security and love he gave to her would help her to outgrow her instability. But *she'd* seduced Calvin? For a moment a flush of relief swept through McCoy, but then he realized that ultimate insult to his ego, the truth that had made it preferable to blame Calvin; not that Arriana had been lured away, or even that he himself had been unable to supply the luxuries her fantasies demanded, but that she had left him of her own initiative, rejecting him entirely and deliberately. She'd *used* him. With a terrible inner wrenching, he cast away his former conviction. He wondered, then, almost impersonally, whether she'd ever loved him at all. And it struck him, too, that Arriana had performed that exact, cold-blooded act on Calvin as well.

"I wonder," he said hollowly, "who she's using now?"

Calvin wrested himself out of his miasma and sat up straight against a computer cabinet, unable to look at McCoy at all.



"You haven't kept track of her," he said. It wasn't a question, it was an appreciation.

"Um? No. No, I didn't want to know anything. Our daughter, you remember Joanna, got letters from her for a few years, then they stopped coming."

"Joanna? I heard your sister raised her," Calvin said.

McCoy nodded. "The last I heard was when you got the divorce."

"Arriana left me for Quentin Hsu,"

"The clinical psychologist?"

"She was with him for two years. Then she lived with Moulteen Van Hasselblad, the concert synthesist,"

McCoy sat in embittered silence, sorting through the wreckage of his illusions. "Calvin--" he began, then amended, "...J.D." His voice shook. "I'm sorry. I didn't know...about any of it."

He crossed the space between them, offering a hand to the older man, who still sat on the floor. Calvin gazed up at him, his mouth trembling. For a long moment their eyes were locked, two men inevitably pitted, inevitably bound, by their hopeless love for the woman who'd used them, and now it was all over. Perhaps it was time for a new beginning. Then Calvin accepted the proffered hand and was pulled to his feet.

"We'd better get to work on the next tests," Calvin said, stooping to gather the scattered tapes.

They beat their swords into plowshares.

J.D. Calvin was too ill to think. He stared blankly into the awful, silent mouth of one of the vertical shafts, but he did not react to it. It was there. He was there. There was nothing else.

His hands were useless now, gone spongy and swollen in a mass of lesions. He'd been unable for the past two days to reason with enough lucidity to back up McCoy's research, and now he was unable even to tend to the bedridden. But he refused to take to a bed himself, though Nurse Chapel had coaxed and nagged him. No, he'd had to come to the pits. He felt as though he still had unfinished business there. His mind was numbed with guilt. People were dying--people were *dead*--because of him. But he'd only wanted good things, to recover lost knowledge. To try to end pain. Where had he failed? What had gone wrong?

Footsteps crunched behind him and he turned lethargically.

"Doctor Calvin?" a woman's voice echoed. A lantern flashed toward him, picking him out of the gloom.

Christine Chapel dropped down next to him at the rim of the well. Some part of Calvin's mind noticed how worn she looked. The blisters marred her pleasant features.

"I've been worried about you," she was saying. She looked like she meant it. "I think you ought to come back with me to the infirmary."

Calvin blinked in the brightened light of the additional lamp, and he came awake slowly. He looked around as if this were the first time he realized where he was, then groaned as she pulled him up.

"Any progress?" he managed, collecting his thoughts a little.

Christine draped his arm around her shoulder and clasped his waist to support him, then led very slowly up the sloping tunnel.

"Not yet," she said, not lying, but omitting a good bit of information. Of what use would it be to tell Calvin that McCoy had gone to the surface radio hut to call the *Enterprise*? The decision had had to be made; their luck had failed, and lack of time left no alternative.

They'd walked about thirty meters when Calvin wilted, and insisted on sitting down again on the carved stone floor. She sat him with his back to a vertical surface and let him rest, slumping down next to him. She pointed the lamp away from their faces, but in the reflected dimness she saw how his face had become snowed under with blisters, his neck had swelled to goiter-like proportions. He was terminal. He wouldn't last another night.

"We're going to die here," he wheezed dazedly, but it was not a protest. One of the terminal stage symptoms was a profound emotional depression that left no energies for perseverance.

"Yes," Christine said simply, and felt Calvin's bandaged hand creep up her arm to touch at her cheek. She met his eyes, mildly flustered.

"Leonard said... you love a Vulcan," he said, a slight, addled amusement in his eyes.

Christine frowned, realizing she hadn't thought of Spock for days.

"Sometimes," she said, and sighed another sigh to Spock's account.

"We both try to ignore it."



Calvin nodded knowingly, a weak, childlike smile on his dry lips.

"I envy him," he said, dropping his arm.

She shuddered to the depths of her soul.

"Don't," she said, and put her free hand over his. "Please. Don't."

He saw that she was crying and swallowed painfully.

"I...could love you," he offered, grieving with her grief. "Christine?"

"I know," she said. She felt torn, which was useless and ludicrous; in a few days it wouldn't matter at all whom she loved, or might love, or in what way. But Calvin, a friend, was here now.

"We're dying, Jeff," she said, for that was the final solution, and she embraced him with soft sadness. They clung to each other, without hope, but not without comfort. They didn't hear the quiet scratching at the pit's edge, the scuttering behind it. Spidery limbs the length of a man skittered over the rim, and clusters of red reflective eyes glittered in the gloom.

It had been "night" on the *Enterprise*, now orbiting Alcestis, when Doctor McCoy had called in his report, Lieutenant Palmer had answered his hailing, and Mister Spock had been in command. McCoy was relieved that it had been Spock who'd heard his recommendations, and not Jim Kirk. For all that the Vulcan's imperturbability had frequently outraged and worried McCoy, it had made this necessary conversation easier: the necessary recommendation that Alcestis be quarantined indefinitely, the necessary goodbye.

For it *was* goodbye. There was no longer any hope at all of finding a cure. Eight of the surveyors were dead, the rest were dying, and he himself no longer had the strength or mental acuity to continue the research. He'd tried everything he knew, and anything else he could think of, and failed. Spock had offered to call for medical volunteers to beam down and continue the research, but McCoy had reluctantly forbidden it--the volunteers couldn't possibly find a cure in time to save those already infected, and they would only contract the disease themselves. No, the planet had to be sealed off, and he and all the other carriers of the plague left to their fate. It was the only logical choice. Even Spock had not argued that.

Across the communications hut, Pavel Chekov watched McCoy with hooded eyes, but at the doctor's order, he shut down the transmitter. The few clicks were loud as clods of soil falling on a coffin.

"Mister Spock will wake up the Keptain to tell him," Chekov commented. McCoy nodded wearily.

"They'll hang around in orbit for a few days, probably. Kirk won't go until he's sure it's over."

Chekov dropped his eyes, and his gaze fixed on his gauze-swathed hands.

"Doctor. How long do we hev?"

"Depends on our individual resistances. You, Christine and I should have a few more days. The others won't last that long."

"I watched Telerio die,"

"You shouldn't have stayed. Christine was with him."

"We were friends."

McCoy, out of his own haze of pain, felt his heart lurch for Chekov's grief and fear.

"He didn't suffer, Pavel," McCoy said. "None of us will suffer. I'll see to it."

Chekov squared his shoulders and lifted his chin.

"Yes, Doctor," he said quietly.

"Doctor McCoy!" a voice was shrieking. Nurse Chapel burst from the tunnelway, her hair wild and her arms flailing. McCoy caught her.

"Christine! You shouldn't exert yourself like this. What's wrong? Am I needed below?"

"--no--" she gasped, breathless, then swallowed to try to talk.

"--we saw them--Jeff and I--three of them--we saw--"

"Jeff? Calvin! Christine, pull yourself together. What's wrong?"

But Chapel shrugged out of his grasp and clutched at Chekov.

"You were right!" she panted, her face tremulous. "The Keeris--we saw them too!"

"I wasn't crazy?" Chekov said.

"Three of them" Christine said, and she made an effort to calm herself and regain her breath. She swung back to McCoy. "Doctor Calvin and I both saw them. They were exactly like Dr. Calvin's autopsies, and they were Keeris. They came up out of the shaft that Mr. Chekov went down, and they scared the daylights out of us. let me tell you!"

"What did they do?" McCoy asked, bewildered that he'd ever be asking that question.

"They came up into the lantern light, and they walked up to us, only they walked upside down on the ceiling. They had red eyes, maybe ten of them to each one, and they looked just like overgrown spiders, with black hairy legs and markings on their bodies that glowed green. They just looked at us, at Jeff and me, for a few seconds, and I screamed, and they went back down the well. And Jeff sent me to get you."

"I'm not crazy!" Chekov laughed, shaking his head.

McCoy stared up at the sky through the hut's transparent dome, and frowned thoughtfully. He'd been wrong again about Calvin--and never so glad to admit it.

"Ensign, do you think you're still up to a climb?"

"I think so, sir, if we use the motorized pulley to descend."

"Christine?"

"I'll take care of things in the infirmary."

"Where's Calvin?"

"I'll find someone to help me get him into a bed."

"All the equipment we need is in one of the storage rooms where I left it last week," Chekov said. "We can go down whenever you're ready, sir."

McCoy still stared into the sky. Stars spattered the zenith, and McCoy experienced a wave of longing--and revitalizing hope.

"I'll never be readier," he said.

Tired. Tired through and through, McCoy eased down onto a broken-off stalagmite and listened, eyes closed, to the roar in his ears slowly quieting. Chekov sat cross-legged on the damp, uneven floor of the passage and panted painfully. After a minute, he unsealed the front of his miner's jumpsuit and sighed. The constant wind through the caves was numbing cold, but the last hour of walking, jumping, and swarming up ledges in this unaltered, natural part of the caverns had left both men sweating under the synthetic fabric.

They'd gone down the well where Chekov had descended before, and they'd gone directly to the chamber with the pool of phosphorescent water, but there'd been no Keeris there. Beyond the chamber, the catacombs had begun, and McCoy and Chekov had followed endless galleries, passing numberless tombs. Always, the natural walls had glowed with an unnatural light, transmuting the invisible heat of their bodies into dim but visible light. There had been other chambers like the first, each with its greenish pool, each without attendants. With their own sense of direction hopelessly confused, and their tricorders' directional readings ambiguous, the humans followed random tunnels. Not a few times they found themselves circled back to a room they'd been through before. This was the third time they'd ended back in this particular chamber. They knew, because it had a unique double pool at its center.

McCoy dragged the gloves off his stiff, swollen hands and fumbled in his medical kit for the hypospray. The light here was uneven, and he held the

instrument up to catch as much illumination as the pools afforded, setting it for a strong stimulant. He hunched down next to Chekov and pressed the drug home against the Russian's bared chest. Then he administered a dose to himself. They both sat, silent, while the stimulant took effect,

After a time, McCoy asked, "How long have we been down here?"

Chekov yanked the tricorder up and checked.

"Almost six hours."

"Seems like six weeks."

"Da."

"How're you holding up?"

"I'm all right," Chekov lied.

"For a wet-behind-the-ears youngster," McCoy said, smiling, "you have more than your share of pluck."

"You are doink well yourself, Doctor, for an old man,"

"Ready to try some more spelunking, sonny?"

Chekov nodded, but he didn't push up.

"I'm not sure any more that it wasn't an hallucination," he said, perplexed.

"What? Seeing the Keeris?"

"Yes."

About to answer, McCoy bit back words as a flood of agony scorched through his insides. He must have made some pain-sound, because Chekov had hold of his arms and was asking him if he were all right. The inner searing eased off somewhat, and McCoy straightened.

"Doctor? Another attack?"

"It's passed," McCoy breathed. "It's okay now."

Chekov didn't suggest sedation--he knew enough to realize that narcotics and stimulants didn't mix. He pushed to his knees and struggled up with McCoy.

"We'd better go on."

The doctor nodded and took a deep breath, reaching for his gloves--and froze. A cluster of red eyes stared down at him from a few steps away. Scalp prickling, McCoy glanced around him. Chekov, too, had gone utterly still.

The Keeris were all around, at least a dozen of them. Some hung with acrobatic ease from the stalactites overhead, but most were at floor level, surrounding the humans. They were half-again a man's height, though most of it was legs, and they definitely were close kin to the space gypsies--giant spider-like beings, with ten legs each as opposed to a terran arachnid's eight. Having seen

space-Keeris. McCoy was not repulsed; he'd always thought they were an exotically attractive species, with their glossy, filament-covered appendages, green-marbled abdomens and startling multiple eyes. But while the gypsies were a likable, gregarious bunch, these beings were an unknown.

Chekov shifted subtly, reaching for his pack and the universal translator in it.

As though shot from a gasgun, loops of fine sticky threads sailed across the intervening space to catch and tangle Chekov's arms. An instant later, both he and McCoy were immobilized by the Keeris' extruded silk. McCoy did not struggle, he waited.

One of the beings skittered down from the ceiling and walked directly to the humans, settled itself for a moment, and reached with two of its forelimbs to touch delicately at McCoy's temples, McCoy went rigid. Ever since the trauma of having been mind-raped by the Spock of the alternate universe, he'd *hated* any kind of telepathic contact, but he clamped down on the part of his fear that was over-reaction, and forced himself to think friendly, nondirected thoughts, calming thoughts.

*We are friends, we are friends,* he concentrated.

Alien perceptions exploded in his skull.

*Soft-limbed worms speak? Your thoughts touch us!*

*We are peaceful beings; we come in peace.*

*Truth. Why have you come?*

*We hope you can help us. We have an illness,* McCoy imparted.

*What can be done?*

*If you take us to your healers, they may cure us.*

The concept of "healer" precipitated a flurry of confusing images. Then, *Explain. Allusion unclear.*

McCoy thought about Calvin's research, the data he had gathered, his hypothesis of the existence of Acquired Empathy. He was careful to couch his thoughts in apologetic tones, emphasizing Calvin's scientific interest and the survey team's ignorance of the existence of sentient beings in the mesa. The Keeris scanned it, then broke the telepathic contact. It touched, very briefly, the arachnid next to it, who touched at the being next to it, and so around to the others until the last touched at the first, completing the circle. Cold, horny pedipalps reached for the doctor again, and the impact of the alien minds almost jolted him into insensibility; but they probed him, supporting his weight as he sagged. There seemed to be some madman's argument going on in the back of his head, like trying to listen to a debate from the back of an empty, reverberating hall. For a moment he thought his

brains would boil, but then the internal pressure dissipated, leaving only himself and the one Keeris mind.

*We shall take you to the Old One. It cannot help you, but we will take you to it.*

*"The Old One--is a healer?"*

*Yes. No.*

And it broke the link,

McCoy's legs went rubbery, and he began to slide to the floor, but more horny appendages caught him--utility limbs, not the specialized communicatory pedipalps--and lifted him easily. McCoy squeezed his eyes shut as he was portaged up the cavern wall, comfortably supported by the aliens' powerful grip. The Keeris were agile beyond belief, despite his dead weight, and they skimmed along the uneven ceiling with wonderful grace and speed.

In a few minutes they were into a more brightly illuminated part of the complex, where the rock faces were finished and sculpted like the chambers the surveyors occupied. In myriad cul-de-sacs that trickled with the glowing water, McCoy saw clumps of fungus-like growths in a kaleidoscope of color. Some of the plantforms, obviously cultivated, were as iridescent as mother-of-pearl. One grotto held mushroom-like shoots that blazed with their own inner light, a saturated magenta, and they perfumed the outer passage with an agreeable fragrance.

Dazzled, the doctor marveled at the diversity of evolutions, where Arachnida on Alcestis could become intelligent herbivores while Arachnida on earth were primitive predators, filling a secondary niche.

Their passage took them by other Keeris, engaged in a variety of unidentifiable tasks, and each ceased its work as it was passed and joined the silent, ceiling-skimming procession.

They came, finally, to a vast, vaulted room, a place permeated with that same compelling aura of sanctity as Chekov had felt in the chamber near the vertical wells. Dozens of pools of radiant water made an emerald diadem around the periphery, but the center of the room drew the eye: from the highest vault dropped a massive, cylindrical canopy, like a curtain around some Holy of Holies, entirely woven of the Keeris' own natural silk. Intricately spun, it fell to the surface of the great central pool, reflecting the green glow its full length.

The Keeris released McCoy and Chekov, and the humans stood in silent awe. One of the Keeris who'd carried the doctor touched its pedipalps to McCoy's head again, and McCoy tried again to relax his irrational alarm, to accept the communication.



*The Old One is within.*

*Inside the veil?*

*Always.*

*May I enter?*

*Useless. It cannot help you.*

*It is the healer?*

*Yes. No.*

*Why, then, did you bring us here?*

*It is what you named 'Caduceus'. You desired it.*

*I do not understand. Why is it the healer, but not the healer?*

*It is the healer; it no longer heals.*

*It once healed?*

*Yes.*

*But no longer?*

*Yes.*

*Why?*

A barrage of concepts histories, myths, theories, and private doubts poured from the Keeris into McCoy, information coming so fast that he could not absorb much of it. The Keeris sensed that, and disengaged the meld again, shifting the human to a sitting position on the intaglio floor.

At almost the same moment, Chekov broke communion with another of the Keeris, and grimacing, hand to head, he sank beside McCoy. Behind them, the chamber was filling with other Keeris, who scuttled across the floor or took to the ceiling.

McCoy forced his mind clear to examine the ensign's vital signs with the tricorder, but the instrument had gone haywire--some interference or energy field must be confusing its mechanisms. Chekov, though, seemed to pull himself together.

"We're sunk," McCoy said. "Calvin was wrong. There's no technique to acquire Empathy. Only an ancient natural Empath who survived the plague but couldn't stop it, and the Empath is senile or crazy and hasn't healed anyone since the civilization fell."

Rubbing his eyes with his sore knuckled, Chekov roused himself.

"Iss thet what he--it--told you?"

"That's what I've deduced. It was pretty confusing. But the gist was, these beings don't know how to heal empathically, and the Ancient behind the canopy is too old, or demented."

"Do they all live thet long? How did they surwife the plague?"

"I don't know," McCoy said thoughtfully, though thinking was becoming an excruciating effort. "What did you learn from them?"

"That they are kind people, if we can call them that. Shouldn't we ask how they survived the plague, Doctor? There must be almost a thousand of them here."

"I'll see," McCoy said. Forcing himself to calmness, he gestured to the Keeris standing close, putting his hands to his temples to signal for a meld. The Keeris obliged, locking onto him again.

*How is it that the plague destroyed all the others, but did not destroy you?* McCoy inquired.

*The Old One was able to cure some. Eight-tens and two lived to lay eggs. Few birthed alive, but we are the children's children's children. The illness comes to hatchlings yet. Some grow; most die.*

Natural mutational immunity, McCoy's professional mind reasoned automatically. But the Caduceus cured eighty-two.

*Means?* the Keeris questioned.

*Means I am confused. The Old One is the healer of the eighty-two?*

*Yes, so it comes by touch from the forebears.*

Oral tradition by touch-telepathy, McCoy translated, then asked, *How is it that you live briefly, but the Old One lives yet from the time of the plague?*

*It is the curse of the Stone.*

*What is that?*

The Keeris registered bemusement that the Soft One would be so ignorant, but answered patiently, *The Stone gives the curse of life. The Old One can not die.*

*Immortality is a curse?*

*If life is agony, is death not to be desired?*

It was starting to make some sense.

*Does the Stone also give the gift of healing?* McCoy asked hopefully.

*Yes. And no.*

Ambiguities again.

*How 'yes'?* the human asked.

*The Old One was born on the Stone.*

That had the sound of a myth-confused correlation.

*Then how 'no'?*

*One who only touches the Stone cannot heal. But if one is born there, he is the One.*

*How is one born there?* McCoy asked desperately, trying to penetrate the legend to get at the facts.

*He must become the New One.*

*Can it be done?* McCoy persisted.

*Who would wish to take the curse upon himself?* the Keeris explained simply.

McCoy thought furiously, trying to piece it together. The Stone-- that was the source--of what? Immortality of some sort, and a kind of Empathy... an incomplete Empathy, as flawed as the image of the Stone: for the healer cured others, absorbing their injuries or diseases, but *it couldn't heal itself*. The implications jarred him. The empathic ability seemed to burn itself out, somehow, limiting the capacity to assimilate deformity...but the Empath didn't die. Not ever. It went on indefinitely, endlessly, all that sickness and pain bound up in it, with no escape...no release. The curse of the mysterious Stone that came from...God knew where,

The doctor's mind cowered, yet somehow he knew he was at the threshold of some ominous choice. That "born on the Stone" business--it had the implication that there might be some way of transferring the Empathy. But, as the Keeris had pointed out, who could make such a choice? None of the Keeris had done so since the time of the plague, though with the high hatchling mortality, a functional Empath, even a limited one, would be enormously desirable to the Keeris' struggling culture.

A blitzkreig of sudden physical pain doubled McCoy over again, and the Keeris severed the meld with an abruptness that left both communicants stunned. Far away, Out There Somewhere, McCoy sensed Chekov calling him back urgently, but the spasms in his viscera were the only reality, and he gasped harshly, trying to master them.

The seizure was long in passing, and when he could sit up again, he was willing to consider the choices. His thinking was deteriorating, but the attack had driven home one realization: that it would only be a matter of hours before he'd be helplessly--and terminally--doubled over like that, in pain that would be a lot worse. And the others, up in the infirmary, were dying right now.

But there was the Choice. If he made that one, he would have his pain, and the others', and there would not even be the mercy of death. He'd go mad, no doubt of it, and he'd be a raving, screaming lunatic far into the remote future, generations and millennia after those he might save now would be dust. After ages of deliberation, he gestured again for a mind contact. The Keeris complied with equal reluctance.

*Can the Old One never die at all?* McCoy asked.

The Keeris centered its mind in his again.

*If you are born on the Stone, it is said the Old One will find rest,* it told him, *but there would be none for you.*

It had caught the drift of his thoughts, and while there was not disapproval, there was honest warning.

*Am I permitted to view the Old One,* McCoy asked hesitantly, *before I decide?*

*It is not forbidden, though the Old One is sacred. Only do not reach for its mind while it is on the Stone unless you have made that choice,*

And the Keeris cut the contact, unwilling or unable to elaborate further.

McCoy gazed at the broad, glistening lake, the milky shroud that brushed its surface. Within the translucent curtain he could make out an undefined dark shape atop a lighter mass. What would it be like--look like--after all the centuries, all the suffering? Terrified, but compelled, McCoy had to know. Had to see. He struggled up, Chekov helping.

"Stay here," he said, and staggered to the edge of the sunken pool, No one stopped him. The water glowed, pea-green, like earth's new leaves filtering sunlight. McCoy wondered vaguely whether the Keeris had green blood. No, no, they were iron-based, but clear, like fish-blood, and-- He dragged his mind back into focus. The pool glittered, inviting, its surface serene. He stepped down into it and sank up to his thighs. It was agreeably warm. He began to wade toward the veil at the center.

He approached it laboriously across the wide, rippling lake, and all was silence but the little lapping sound of the water as he walked, and the muffled roar of distant echoes. His mind lolled into a sort of peace, and increasingly vapid unconcern. The soothing, tepid water was up to his waist as he neared the curtain, and it was with a soporific lethargy of mind and body that he lifted it and stooped inside the sanctuary.

For six heartbeats he just stared, transfixed. Then, face contorting with shock, he came to life, spinning away, reeling against the canopy as every cell of his being revolted in mindless horror. Shuddering so that he could not stand, he choked as he slid into the water, but clung to the fold of silk with pure instinct while his mind shrieked at the hideous vision that persisted, though his eyelids were pinched shut as though vacuum-sealed,

It was too grisly to contemplate, that seat of all ugliness, that living tangle of disease-infested loathsomeness. Its exoskeleton bulged and twisted with deformity, and inner tissue extruded from each abscessed joint, oozing with a cloudy syrup that seeped over the pearly stone and scummed the veil-ringed inner pond.

To look again was beyond McCoy's strength. His stomach heaved relentlessly, but his own illness had long emptied it. He hung by the native silk and screamed inside his brain and never tasted the blood his teeth drew from his lips. Stupified, and weak with fear, he could only think, *Not that for me. Not that!* He wanted out, had to get out, but his legs refused him, and he could only scabble uselessly in the filmy water, and cling to the curtain so he didn't go under again. The horror was overwhelming.

After an eon of paralysis, he managed to regain his feet, though the curtain still took most of his weight. His mind began to come out of shock a little, and he tried to slow his asthmatic gasps, calm the tide of hysteria. When he could force his eyes open again, he stared out through the gauzy veil--and *away* from the Stone--with a frantic compulsion.

They were out there: the sea of red eyes, watching. He watched back numbly, gathering what tendrils of reason he could still find. They were there, and they waited, hanging from the great ceiling like so many scarlet-sparkled chandeliers, or standing on the vast carved floors like many-legged candlelabra. Chekov, a stark, solitary taper, glowed silver in his miner's jumpsuit. The ensign sat, motionless and silent like the Keeris, and McCoy tried to focus on his distant face, but was too far away to read the human's features. There was no need: a nimbus of desire, of breath-held hopefulness, was permeating the chamber. They were waiting, and they hoped. McCoy could feel the need, focusing on him like an electric field, running cold thrills over his wet skin. He hugged the veil and trembled.

*Decide*, their thoughts implored.

*I can't!* he wailed.

*Not that!*

His thoughts wove a flight that touched at home and dreamt of stars, of love; of Jim and Spock and his grown child; of Calvin and the surveyors; of death and songs and shadows; and he chose.



He turned around.

It was a dreary, tuneless song that Christine hummed, not realizing she hummed it at all. Had she known, she would have recognized it: *Dies Irae*; and had she had the strength, she would have been annoyed. But it was taking all of her strength just to stay at her post--the lab stool she'd set by the infirmary's central monitor. Eleven of the monitor lights still glowed. Christine watched them gloomily for any change, her only arsenal the loaded hypodermic of sedatives she clutched in her spongy, gloved hand.

The smell of sweat and pain was heavy in the room. She'd kept the deathwatch too many dismal hours. The oppressive smell, the oppressive gloom, the oppressive and constant pain, had dulled her other senses and narcotized her thoughts. She hardly noticed when the door swung in.

Arachnid forms pushed through the opening and scuttered up the walls and out of the way, and she gaped at them with wide eyes, jamming her fingers into her mouth, but not screaming this time, for two silver-suited human forms appeared in the doorway, one supporting the other. She stumbled off the stool and across the room towards them, her gaze fixed on Chekov, and it was some wish-fulfilling illusion, for the Russian was untainted--was thoroughly healthy!

"You found the Empath--" she began, then settled her gaze on McCoy.

Or some horrible parody of McCoy. His features were drowned in the running sores of the deathbed stage of the plague, and he had no neck for the swollen, tumorous glands in it. For every symptom that Chekov had shed, the doctor seemed doubly afflicted. Only the ensign's strong grip was keeping the doctor from crumpling. But that ghastly face raised up to look with sunken eyes at her, and the leprous lips addressed her.

"...How...many?" McCoy rasped, and even his voice was distorted.

Christine grimaced. She couldn't bear to look at him. But she managed to answer.

"Twelve of us left," she said. It was hard to stand up straight. It was hard to think. She didn't realize she was falling until Chekov caught her and half-dragged, half-carried her to a vacant chair. He left her draped in it, and went over for McCoy, who'd clung to the doorway.

The doctor, aided by Chekov, knelt on the floor in front of her, and Christine regarded him with dread. What was happening? McCoy raised his hands, hidden in some silky fabric, and he touched her cheeks, then clasped

her face between his palms with a piercing tenderness.

"Christine," he breathed, and his eyes seemed to look into her. His hands tightened, pinching her flesh against her cheekbones, and he stiffened as though electrocuted. A stab of white pain penetrated her, and she could *feel* his mind seep into hers, in a curious, peripheral mindmeld. But she knew he was a psi-null!

A roar of agony ripped through Christine, and she sank against McCoy's body, though that awareness was dim compared to the pain. But it was a wonderful pain: the cries of healing tissues, and it cascaded through her, peaking sharply, then ebbing to nothingness so quickly that she felt totally drained. Outside of her mind, she could feel her body pressed to his, his mouth on hers, his breast to hers, his arms wrapped around her and hers around him. The embrace, and the meld, slackened, but as his consciousness retreated from hers, she sensed the backlash of his triumph, his immense personal satisfaction in the experience, which was greater than the price he paid to heal.

Then her mind flipped back into full and separate awareness. She sat up stiffly and took a long, deep breath. She felt more tired than when she'd been ill, but otherwise she felt fine. She glanced down at her arms. The blisters had disappeared. Hesitantly, she drew off a glove. Her hand was unmarked. Eyes widening, she gazed down at Doctor McCoy, who knelt limply on the floor. He looked, if anything, more gross, more loathsome than before. But behind the sunken eyes, behind the physical torment, was an incredible, preternatural vitality.

"You're the Caduceus," she said.

McCoy only nodded.

"Oh, my God. My God," she said urgently. "Doctor McCoy, can you cure the others?"

The vitality flickered, then steadied.

"...Help...me...up."

Between them, Christine and Chekov got him to the closest occupied bed. The patient, Mikki Fo, was comatose. Straddling her, McCoy bent and embraced her clumsily. Christine tried to support the unconscious woman, but McCoy gestured her away. The rictus of empathic contact snapped him straight, but whatever else he felt, sensory or emotional, was becoming unreadable in that ruined face.

Christine saw the changes this time. McCoy's flesh literally crawled, swelling, heaving, distorting. He was a nightmare out of some morbid horror-film, as though sprayed over with pastiflesh to imitate some primeval

evolutionary dead end. A scream erupted, suddenly, and McCoy rolled off the woman --was pushed away by her hysterical flailing as she squirmed out of his ghastly embrace. Christine grabbed Mikki's arms and shook her until the shrieks declined into sobs and the woman could make sense out of what she was told, but it took precious minutes. As soon as Mikki was calmed, Christine ran the medical scanner over her just to be sure, and then turned to McCoy.

The Empath lay in a depleted heap on the floor, but Chekov had pulled McCoy's sweat-pasted head onto his own lap. Christine quickly examined him with the tricorder, then pondered the extraordinary readings. The blood pressure and pulse were impossibly high, the pain level was near the top of the scale, the metabolic rate had increased tenfold--yet there were no signs of circulatory damage, no deterioration or dysfunction of vital systems. It was as though he'd been infused with an upshifted vitality, like an atomic-powered ship had been overhauled with an ion-powered engine.

"Can he do that to the others, too?" Mikki murmured. She was whole, but still shaken, and sat on the bed with her knees pulled up to her chin, avoiding the sight of the disfigured being on the floor.

Nurse Chapel had to force herself to function rationally. With a reluctance to touch McCoy that brought a bitter bout of shame, Christine assisted him to sit up.

"Can you help any more of the others?" she asked. "Can you keep this up?"

"Forever," the monstrosity wheezed determinately.

He was too feeble now to walk at all. Chekov and Christine carried him to the next cot--Doctor Calvin's--and watched McCoy initiate the rite again. It took longer this time, a struggle that wrenched wails from both participants. When Calvin sat up, finally, the sickness cleansed from his flesh, he was jarred to speechlessness.

From one patient to the next, the healing was continued, one weary healing after another. McCoy took longer and longer to complete a cure, and longer to rest in between. Awestricken, Calvin watched each time: the intimate body contact, the lowgrade telepathic rapport, the transmutation of the patient's symptoms to the Empath, the pain level that was immeasurable. Most of the patients, insensate at the initiation of the contact, would awaken in a panic of horror, and several had to be sedated.

Harshly disappointed in the flaws of his original theory, Calvin dragged the facts behind the legends out of Chekov and McCoy between the healings--



and found himself both astonished and anguished at the truth. No escape from that "gift"? Calvin could barely comprehend it. He watched as the successive empathic contacts diminished McCoy's physical kinship to humanity, drained his ability to communicate lucidly.

After the eighth cure, Calvin suddenly realized that the personality dubbed Leonard McCoy was dimming, guttering out like an oxygen-starved flame. That mind was drowning under the burden of pain, and what little was left was caged in a stinking, gelatinous clump of tissue that quivered as it sobbed. The other recovered surveyors stood by in dread-filled silence. The Keeris clung to the ceiling, motionless. Only Christine, resolutely competent, and Chekov, whose young face was slicked with tears and aged with anguish, could still bring themselves to touch that--thing--any more. The last of the patients was healed to the sounds of throat-torn shrieks, and McCoy crumpled. Christine had a hypo of sedative ready and pumped it into the whimpering form, but the powerful drug might as well have been distilled water. Calvin showed her the tricorder reading, the pain level still off the top of the meter.

"What can we do for him?" she whispered,

"I don't know," Calvin said helplessly. "Probably nothing."

The Keeris suddenly clambered down from the ceiling, and two of them faced off and began to spit silk at each other, constructing what looked like a kind of cat's-cradle between them.

"What's that?" Calvin wondered.

Chekov sighed deeply, his whole manner subdued by the last few days, the last few hours.

The Keeris brought him up here that way," he explained. "It's like a litter. They never touched him. I think they want to conserve his power for their hatchlings."

"What will they do with him?"

"They will take him back to the Stone."

The implications began to strike home.

"He'll never see humans again!" Christine protested. "We can't let them take him away."

But Calvin understood, with an insight that shocked him.

"It's no use," he said desolately. He's finished for us. Look at him; he isn't even human any more.

Rigid, they watched the Keeris arrange their net around McCoy's body, suturing him into it by spitting silken loops around him. Their silk covered

him like a cocoon, binding the festering flesh and hiding the grotesque tumorous growths that had split his silver miner's suit.

"They'll take care of him," Calvin groaned. "He'll be well cared for. Forever. Or until the next Caduceus releases him."

The Keeris finished, and lifting the limp form with great care, they bore the Empath slowly, reverently, from the room.

Calvin stared at the open doorway, his mind in a turmoil. He didn't listen to the exclamations of the agitated surveyors, didn't notice when Christine dropped her head into her lap and finally wept. He was transfixed by a flood of internal anguish. Eighteen people, friends all, had died in this place --because of him. It was wrong! He'd come here to help people, to *end* suffering. He'd believed that service was all he had to offer, and now not even that dream was left to him. What McCoy had had to give to effect a healing was unspeakable. It was an abomination, an utterly impractical capability, not true Empathy but some grisly anomaly. Calvin's mind reeled in bewildered torment, but a hand on his shoulder startled him back to reality.

"Jerr?" Haley Druen was calling.

Calvin turned to the geologist.

"Jeff, listen, what do we do now? Are we still carriers of the disease?"

Calvin grimaced, pulling himself together. "Our instruments say no. We're clean of just about everything. But we can't stay here, there's no guarantee that we won't come down with the disease again, or pick up something else in our depleted states. We'd better radio Starfleet to be picked up. We'll have to be quarantined for a while, to be sure, but I think we can safely leave."

"What about the station?" one of the others asked.

Calvin just shook his head. He no longer cared about the station. The past week was like a bad dream, suddenly over, and he'd awakened to find reality as harsh as the nightmare--had awakened in Leonard McCoy's agonized embrace.

"Ensign Chekov," Calvin called, "do you think the *Enterprise* will be too far away by now to come back for us?"

Chekov roused himself from a silent miasma to answer.

The chances are good that the ship is still in orbit around Alcestitis, sir. I suggest that we call and ask Keptain Kirk for orders, since he has jurisdiction in emergencies like this."

"Does the *Enterprise* have quarantine facilities for the bunch of us?"

"Yes, sir, the starship class wessels hev quarantine facilities for up to fifty persons," Chekov recited.

"Call, then, and make arrangements," Calvin said, rising. Behind his words, he was formulating another decision. He must hurry before the Keeris disappeared into the pits. He added, "Get everyone the hell off this planet and take all our records to be copied, and make sure your captain understands that he's to inform Starfleet and Federation civil authorities that Alcestis is a plague world; no one is ever to set foot here again."

"Understood, Doctor," Chekov said. "Will you come up to the communications dome with me to talk to the Keptain?"

"No. I have a matter I still have to attend to," Calvin said, and added dolefully, "It might be best to destroy all the corpses here. Use a phaser. And some good prayers."

He crossed the infirmary and stood in the doorway, his face averted, but Christine had caught the odd look that flickered across his face.

"Jeff!" she called, frightened. "Where are you going?"

He turned, and his eyes caressed her for a long moment. He almost said, "To pay my debts." Instead, he said, "If I'm not back in six hours, leave without me."

And he rushed down the echoing passageway.

The last four of the ill-fated landing team were preparing to beam aboard the *Enterprise*, directly into the specially prepared quarantine facilities on the ship, when the Keeris came out of the tunnelway into the communications hut at almost the last minute of the six hours Calvin had requested. They bore a slack human form: Leonard McCoy's. It was not that loathsome remnant they'd taken from the infirmary, but the man in his original human state, whole and unblemished. The Keeris eased him into the humans' waiting arms and vanished back into the bowels of their world, as Christine, Chekov, and the others huddled over the doctor, making the transporter chief wait. The nurse felt frantically for signs of life.

"He's breathing," she blurted. "Pulse is a bit fluttery, We'd better get him up to the ship."

They put arms under McCoy to haul him into a position for transport, but Christine turned back to peer down the sculpted passageway into the mesa. It was vacant, plunged in gloom and silence. All was silence.

Chekov's communicator crackled to life.

"Mister Chekov, what's the delay down there?" Captain Kirk's voice demanded.

"The Keeris just brought Dr. McCoy," Chekov reported.

"McCoy? What's going on down there? Where's Calvin?" the radio insisted.

Chekov looked to Christine, and she turned to lock eyes with him. She knew. The realization was scrawled across her wan face, legible in the grim purse of her mouth. She'd suspected it all along, but now she knew. They all knew. At her gesture, Chekov surrendered the communicator to her.

"Nurse Chapel here, Captain," she said dully. "Doctor Calvin is dead."

In a sense it was the truth. The totality of truth.

"Stand by to beam up," Kirk's voice ordered.

Christine stepped to the other side of McCoy, positioning him between her and Chekov, and pulled the doctor's body close to her with fierce protectiveness. She took a last, numbed look through the transparent dome at the frozen little planet clad in glimmering twilight. Then it dazzled out in the effect of the transporter beam, and the humans went home to the stars.