

CHIVALRY'S NOT DEAD

by Catherine Edwards

(from Crosssignals Three)

It was much too late to light a candle. Jacob Wells had been cursing the darkness for some time now. The Tunnel patriarch shifted for the twentieth time in half as many minutes, willing the dull throbbing ache in his hip to give up tormenting him and settle into some semblance of ease. With a grunt and a restless toss, Father threw himself into a sitting and winced as pain shot through his leg and back. He sighed wearily, reaching for his cane.

There was nothing for it, then, but to get up and try to walk some of the stiffness out. Father put both hands on the firm mattress and pushed himself to his feet, grimacing as his weight fell heavily on the tender joint. He dressed quickly, trying not to think about the pain, and succeeded only in putting his shirt on backwards. Disgusted with himself, Father jerked the garment around and shouldered back into it. Perhaps, he thought without much hope, Vincent would be in the mood for a walk and some company.

By all rights, a good night's sleep should be a given for any starship captain, Jim Kirk thought dismally, but somehow it just never worked out that way. He rolled slowly onto one side and hung his arm off of the bunk, grunting as his muscles rebelled. No good. His back was still killing him from a six-meter drop onto his... pride. Knowing that the landing party was leaving without him did little to improve his mood, but at least he wasn't in Sick Bay. He made a face and sucked air in between his teeth as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood, cursing high-gravity exercises and Andorian fighting forms and anything else that seemed appropriate. It kept his mind off of the shooting pains in his lower back. Still, he rationalized, there was no harm in seeing them off. He reached for his uniform, tying the olive wrap-around in place.

"You're lucky to be alive," McCoy had grunted, but Bones always had something to say about Kirk's idea of exercise. "A couple of laps around the gym, morning and night, and you'd drop those extra pounds. Stop trying to act like you're a kid, or you're going to die young." Kirk had merely nodded, hurting too much to protest, and keenly aware of Spock's watchful eyes on the Doctor's ministrations. Getting hurt was bad enough - looking hurt would get him bundled off to bed faster than you could say "Hailing frequencies open." Holding that thought before him, Jim Kirk squared his shoulders and took a step. His back spasmed painfully and Kirk made a face, gritting his teeth. He thought again about asking Bones for a painkiller, but anything strong enough to do the trick would put him out for the next two weeks. Time travel, as they were finding out, was a tricky thing, and he didn't want to be out of commission while his ship flew the stars of the twentieth century. He took another step. Better, he thought. Another. Better still. Now - if he could just figure a way to get into his uniform pants...

Vincent was not there. Father peered around the tidy room in consternation, unprepared to find Vincent's chamber empty, and indulged in a moment of unreasonable annoyance. He may have gone Above, a little voice in Father's head prompted gently, and Father brushed the thought away absently. Sheepishly, he realized how childish he was being. Vincent was grown, after all, and grown children

didn't need to ask permission or gain approval. Still, Father thought to himself, surely a note was not too much to ask... With a sigh, and another wince, he turned and made his weary way to the Pipe Chamber.

The door swooshed open and Kirk stepped smartly into the hallway, walking with his usual confident stride. Each step was agony, but there were only two men on the ship who would be astute enough to sense that, and he wouldn't have to worry about them much longer. This time, Jim thought dimly, you're really gone and done it. He was slowly coming to the realization that this injury was not going to tolerate much jostling, but he'd be damned before he'd let Spock know that he knew that, much less McCoy. Still, he was going to put a good... face on the injury and see his men off if he had to crawl to the transporter room and be carried away. There were some things a captain just had to do, and he'd always done them - in spades.

Grimly, Kirk comforted himself with that knowledge and swallowed the bitter necessity of being left behind when the landing party beamed down to twentieth-century Earth and attempted to rectify the damage caused by a bit too much twenty-third-century traffic in the vicinity. Early experiments in time travel had been clumsy, and not altogether intentional, and the backlash friction from too many displaced travelers swooping through the skies had made a measurable "wound" in the skin of space/time that cushioned the Earth from immediate immortality. It was their job to "heal" that wound before history was rewritten, leaving the present in peril. The whole mission made Kirk as antsy as an Aldebaran cat in a room full of rocking-chairs. He resented having to sweat it out from the bridge, when he wanted to be on the surface leading the charge and playing referee for his First Officer and the acerbic McCoy. Lost in thought, he rounded the final corner. A very young lieutenant spied him as he approached, and saluted with enthusiasm. Kirk turned and, without thinking, raised his arm and fired off an answering salute that sent shards of pain tearing down his torso. Kirk caught himself before he gasped and forced the air back into his lungs.

Well, he reflected when the pain had dulled to mere anguish. I suppose there are worse things than being stuck on the bridge...

"Not here, you say?" Father murmured, leaning heavily on his cane and a convenient pipe.

"No, Father," Zach said solemnly. "Pascal left the night watch to me." That last was said with no small pride, and Father smiled fondly and reached to ruffle Zach's hair, catching himself just in time. He patted his shoulder instead and looked Zach in the eye.

"I'm sure his faith in you is entirely justified," Father affirmed.

Zach positively glowed under Father's praise, blushing to his hairline. A message tapped its way through the pipe overhead and Zach whirled, cocking his head on the side, in imitation of Pascal. Father left him listening, and started for the kitchen. When all else failed, a late-night snack with William was a cure-all for any number of bothersome things.

"Yes, Spock - I know what Jim told you about staying out of sight, but he didn't tell you to put us down on the left side of nowhere," McCoy insisted. Spock gave the Vulcan equivalent of a perturbed sigh and arched a sculpted eyebrow at the Doctor.

"The 'left side of nowhere', Doctor? The coordinates I used should have put us down precisely ..."

McCoy waved his calculations away, peering intently at the readings his tricorder was registering. "There's an opening almost to the surface ahead. I think that's our ticket out of here." He hurried on before the Vulcan.

Out of the Doctor's sight, Spock wrinkled his high forehead. Human colloquialisms never ceased to

amaze him, and Dr. McCoy seemed full of them. He glanced at this own tricorder, automatically confirming the information, and followed McCoy through the darkness.

He found him eying an ancient-looking ladder with considerable suspicion. While Spock watched, McCoy reached for the closest rung and gave it a hefty tug. It creaked and wailed, and the Doctor's hand came away red with rust.

"I don't like it," McCoy said stubbornly. "This ladder doesn't look all that inviting, if you ask me, and besides, it shouldn't even be here, miles beneath the city. It's as though they were expecting us." He ran another scan on the hanging ladder, getting the same reading he'd gotten three times already.

"Precisely who are you referring to as 'they', Doctor?" Spock asked mildly. He put one foot on the ladder and swung up. "We are on your home planet, far from human habitation, and there is no alien presence at this time, so far as we have been able to determine. This ladder was undoubtedly erected in order to effect repairs on the waterways beneath the streets. Since the pipes on this level have long since fallen into disuse, there is no reason for paranoia concerning the presence of the ladder. We are deep beneath the streets of the city and, our mission will not take us even as far as the surface. There is no danger to us, or to this culture, so long as nothing goes amiss."

Smarting from Spock's comment about paranoia, McCoy eyed the ladder suspiciously and reached for a rung. "Everything will be fine - unless something goes wrong," he murmured. Spock turned and nodded slowly.

"I believe I just said that."

Someone else must have had the same idea, Father thought as he neared the kitchen. Light spilled out into the hallway and there were murmurs and the comforting sounds of jovial conversation. Curious now, Father hastened his steps as much as his sore hip allowed and peered through the chamber door.

The room grew quiet. Movement and commentary ceased all over the packed room. Every head turned to gaze uncertainly at Father, while glasses were concealed and bodies buried. An almost overpowering odor assaulted Jacob's nostrils, and he pulled back sharply while the captive audience shuffled and whispered furtively. Never one to overlook a dramatic opportunity, Father played his part to the hilt. He settled his reading glasses on the bridge of his nose and circled the makeshift still slowly.

"I'm very, very disappointed," Father said heavily. He turned and pinned William with the full weight of his stare and the gruff cook squirmed uncomfortably under the scrutiny. Pascal's ears flushed pink and he dropped his eyes in the face of Father's disapproval. Mouse stood frozen where he stood with an expression of utter panic on his face.

Vincent was trying, unsuccessfully, to escape notice by pressing back against the wall. Standing head and shoulders above most of the others. Vincent's feline features and magnificent mane of tousled, golden hair made him stand out in any crowd. His conspicuousness was not helped by his self-conscious attempts to hide the jelly jar of whiskey in one large, hirsute hand. Vincent wished, hastily and desperately, that Catherine was here with him, or he with her on the moonlit balcony of her apartment, but it was too late for wishful thinking. Fate had been benevolent to Vincent when it landed him in Father's capable hands, but Fate, like Luck, was a lady, and seemed to take a perverse pleasure in abandoning him at the most inopportune times. Vincent put the best face possible on the situation and sighed.

"I'm very disappointed," Father continued frostily, "that you were all participants in this... little escapade and ..." Words failed him, and Father took a deep, steadying breath. "... and not one of you bothered to include me."

No one breathed for the space of a heartbeat. Pascal shot William a startled look and William

shrugged fractionally. Vincent's eyes were as wide as they would go and Mouse's whole body was pitched forward in astonishment.

"Well, don't just stand there," Father said indignantly. "Somebody pour me a drink!"

The silence held for a full two beats, before the room erupted once again. William sloshed a generous amount of the pale liquid into a mug and pressed it into Father's open hand, laughing and thumping him companionably on the back.

"You really had me going," he admitted. Father beamed at him, pleased with his little joke, and lifted the mug in silent toast.

"Serves you right for trying to keep it a secret. There's nothing like a little nip after dinner to take the edge off of the cold," Father admitted. He put the cup to his lips and drank. There was a second of absolute silence when Father's eyes flew wide and his throat threatened to stop working ... permanently. Then Jacob coughed and sputtered and all but fell over while William laughed heartily and thumped him on the back - this time in earnest.

"Yes," William admitted with a deep chuckle. "And this is nothing like a little nip."

It was very late when Father started back to his chamber, full of good cheer and carrying a mason jar of same. The pain in his hip had dwindled, without disappearing, but it was definitely an improvement. Despite the isolation of his world from the world Above, the change of seasons was always hard on his joints, and getting more so as he aged. That thought made Father sigh, but the melancholy did not last long. It was impossible to brood in his present state. He trudged contentedly toward his room, clutching the jar firmly in his free hand.

I'm an idiot, Leonard McCoy thought to himself, as he put one foot obstinately above the other on the hanging ladder. He'd stopped counting rungs after one-hundred-and-thirty-two, deciding that he just didn't want to know. What had he said to Jim about staying in shape...? His arms ached from hauling his weight up, rung by rusty rung, and he was uncharacteristically out of breath. He gazed around the cool, cavernous tunnels uncomfortably, feeling distinctly as though he were being watched. Being underground gave him the creeps - always had. Above him, Spock was almost out of sight, navigating the climb with lean, Vulcan grace. McCoy tried to think of something appropriately nasty to say, but his mind was blank and he hadn't the breath to say something anyway. More out of boredom than interest, McCoy looked down.

I'm an idiot, McCoy thought again, clinging with both hands and praying that the world would stop spinning before he had to take another step. The world righted itself after a few dizzying swings and a grateful McCoy grasped the ladder in white-knuckled hands and squinted toward the top.

"Doctor? Are you quite all right?" Spock called. McCoy could see a flash of blue in the dimness. He used it as a point of reference and concentrated on the ascent.

"I'd be a heck of a lot better if you hadn't set us down in the center of the world, thank-you, but I'll live."

There was a slight pause. "Would you like some assistance?"

What I'd like, McCoy thought, is a pair of antigrav boots and a new set of lungs. What he said was, "No - I'm right behind you."

"Doctor...?" Was he hallucinating, or was Spock's voice edged with concern? McCoy heard the dull clang of Starfleet issue boots descending the ladder and the blue blob grew bigger.

McCoy waved him back up the ladder irritably, belatedly thinking that that was not a particularly wise idea. He regained his deathgrip on the sides of the ladder with relief. "I don't need any help!" he grumbled. The Vulcan paused again, obviously doubting the Doctor's assertion. In spite of himself,

McCoy softened.

"I'll be there in a minute, Spock. Just ... remind me not to look down." Grimly, he put his foot on the next rung.

"The closer I get, the further it seems," Father grumbled to himself. Between the twinge in his hip and his diminished motor coordination, the walk up from the kitchen was proving to be a chore. Father stopped for a moment's respite, leaning heavily on his cane and taking deep breaths. The muted sound of voices reached his ears and he looked expectantly around the corridor's curve, hoping against hope that it was another adult. It simply wouldn't do for the children to find him clutching a jar of moonshine! In a moment of inspiration, Father slipped the jar down into one huge cloak pocket. The bulge was inconceivable, but perhaps if he stood thus... He waited with (rather) bated breath for the voices to become faces.

He waited in vain. Father stood for a full two minutes alone in the hallway, waiting without result for the mysterious arguing voices to reveal themselves. He closed his eyes, listening intently. As if on cue, the noise stopped abruptly, and Father was left in the silence.

"Good grief," Father mumbled. "Now I'm hallucinating," He snorted in disgust. "Serves me right," he humphed. "The next thing I know I'll be talking to myself..." He trailed off abruptly.

The voices were back, and closer. They weren't coming from around the corner, but... from below! Hastily, Father searched his memory. There were no known tunnels directly below this one, only the deep spiral staircase off to the left, and the voices weren't in the right place for that. They were slightly off-center and getting louder. His heart thumping frantically in his chest, Father had a sudden inspiration.

Suppose, his mind prompted reasonably, there's more than one way down - or up! Obviously there was, for the voices were growing in volume and clarity. Completely sober now, Jacob pressed back into the shadows and waited.

Spock applied physics, pressure, and a good bit of old-fashioned muscle-power to the huge stone blocking their access up. Squatting beside him on the narrow ledge, McCoy peered up without much hope.

"I don't know, Spock..." he began. Even Vulcan muscles couldn't---

It budged. Miraculously, the immense stone budged the merest fraction of an inch. McCoy came to his feet and put his shoulders under it as well, adding his returning strength to Spock's. Together, they heaved, and the rock went scraping reluctantly to reveal a smooth, man-sized hole in the ceiling. Spock turned and looked at the Doctor, cocking an eyebrow in a way that McCoy would call insolent, and Jim would have heartily approved.

"You were saying, Doctor?"

"Don't be so smug," McCoy retorted. "See if I ever book you for a travel agent."

With a growing mixture of curiosity, terror and surprise, Jacob watched a section of the floor being maneuvered from below. There was a moment of silence, then a spare, blue-shirted figure put powerful shoulders through the hole and lifted himself onto the tunnel floor. So intent on being quiet was he, Jacob almost stopped breathing. The man in the blue and black jogging suit turned and peered back into the hole.

"Give me your hand, Doctor," Father heard the man say, the voice cool and precise. Unable to see clearly from his hiding place, Jacob squinted in the dim light. He could just make out a hand

stretching through the hole, and the first man grasped it, lifting.

There was a sudden, crashing sound of ground crumbling and the ledge gave way beneath McCoy's boots. His grip on Spock's arm became a lifeline, and he held on with all his strength while Spock threw his back into it and lifted him through the opening. McCoy's mouth was dry, his palms sweaty, and he had just gained a quasi-firm hold on the sides of the hole when Spock's grip, loosened by perspiration, broke free. Surprised, Spock stumbled backwards into the wall, knocking himself smartly on the back of the head.

Jacob quelled his immediate impulse to go to him with difficulty, still watching.

With a muffled oath, the second man hauled himself out of the opening and dropped to the fallen man's side, reaching automatically for a pulse in the limp wrist. Even if he had not heard the first man speak, Jacob knew from watching that this man was a doctor. Still muttering under his breath, the doctor ran some sort of odd instrument over the prone figure and clucked over the readings. Unable to help himself, Jacob edged closer, while the doctor reached for a hand-sized instrument of some sort on the back of his belt and flipped it open. He adjusted the dial and spoke into it, and Jacob's blood began to run cold. It was a walkie-talkie! These men were some sort of policemen, or government workers! Heaven help Vincent - heaven help them all - if their world were found out!

"McCoy to Enterprise. Man down. Two to beam up," the doctor said crisply into the walkie-talkie. There was a pause, then, "No, Mr. Spock has a nasty bump on his noggin, and he needs medical attention." There was another pause, and Jacob strained forward to hear, but the words were lost. "No," McCoy answered at last. "I don't think there's anything to worry about, but I can't complete our mission without him."

There was some response, but the tinny voices would not carry to Jacob's straining ears. Still, his ears were full of new words. Enterprise? Beam up? Mission? Perhaps these men weren't policemen after all! Perhaps they simply needed help getting back to wherever they came from. Father hesitated. The risk was mind-boggling. Still, if he didn't act now, the place could be crawling with people trying to find their missing men, and the result would be disastrous. The fallen man was very still, and the concern on the second man's face deepened as he checked his instruments once more. Squaring his shoulders resolutely, Jacob stepped out into the dim light of the hall. He walked forward slowly and put his hand on the kneeling doctor's shoulder.

"Can I be of some help?" Jacob said quietly. "I'm a physician."

The doctor looked up in consternation, blue eyes wide with shock. Before he could react, the transporter took them all.

Kirk strode painfully around the transporter room, doing the captain's equivalent of wringing his hands. Scotty looked on with carefully concealed amusement, but the younger crewmembers simply stayed out of Kirk's way.

"I knew it," Kirk muttered, more to himself than anyone within hearing range. "I should have gone with them." Impatiently, Jim peered over the Scotman's shoulder at the mute controls. If it made Scotty uncomfortable, he never let it show. He shifted so that the instrument readings were visible, never once looking as though he were accommodating a perhaps, overanxious captain.

"Beaming them up now, Sir," he said simply, and moved his hands over the instruments like a master. The familiar whine filled the transporter room and Kirk relaxed, already moving towards the platform where two familiar forms were taking shape---and a third column of sparkles coalesced into a very bewildered, completely awe-struck Tunnel-dweller.

Everybody stared. Kirk stopped in mid-kneel, casting incredulous looks at an apologetic McCoy, and trying to check on Spock's condition without taking his eyes off of the intruder. Jacob was making wild promises to himself concerning the potential future consumption of any carbonated spirits and coming to the unhappy conclusion that it wasn't going to help him through this. Kirk gestured behind him, but Scotty already had security guards on the way. They were practically at the door now. Kirk stepped between his officers and the unfamiliar gentleman standing mute on the deck.

"I'm Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise. Who are you and what the devil are you ..."

"Jim." McCoy caught the captain's arm, and his voice was barely audible, pitched for Kirk's ears. "I think that's his line. He saw Spock fall. He's a doctor. He was just... trying to help."

"Bones!" Jim turned and shot McCoy a look.

"I know. I didn't even see him. We were on a ledge. Spock was hauling me up and the ledge gave out. Spock pulled me up, but lost his balance and knocked himself out when he fell."

"Spock? Fell?" Kirk said slowly, trying to take it all in.

"I know," McCoy repeated. There was some part of him that couldn't help finding this amusing. As if on cue, Spock stirred, and McCoy helped the groggy First Officer to his feet.

Jacob got his first good look at the olive-tinged skin, the delicately pointed ears and eyebrows, and considered sitting right down on the floor and refusing to move until this hallucination desisted. Before he could act on that thought, the captain was approaching him again, smiling his best disarming smile.

"Let me try that again," he said smoothly. "I'm Captain James T. Kirk. You're on my ship. I apologize for the inconvenience. You bea - ...came aboard with my officers because you were in physical contact with one of them when he... returned. I assure you it was an accident, and we'll do everything we can to return you to your... home."

"Where... could you please tell me...?" Jacob trailed off, unable to form a complete sentence, and accepted the handshake of the man wearing captain's stripes.

It was just as well. The captain of the Enterprise caught him as he tumbled forward into unconsciousness. Moments later, Spock caught Kirk as his battered back muscles gave out. Grumbling contentedly, McCoy hustled them all off to Sick Bay.

Jacob stirred groggily and tried to open his eyes. When he did, a sharp pain shot from his temple to his toes and he screwed his eyes tightly shut, and cursed himself for having joined William's late-night party. Disjointed memories floated in nonsensical patterns around his muddled brain and he rested uneasily in a state of almost-awakened restlessness.

What a dream he had! Men in strange uniforms roaming the tunnels, one with pointed ears even! Good grief! What would his overactive imagination think of next! He chuckled feebly and found that the pounding in his head increased. He squelched the laughing and satisfied himself with a grimace. The pounding did not lessen, however, and he covered his eyes with both hands and sat up determinedly. Perhaps a little late-night reading will clear my head, Father thought absently, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and stretching his toes for his slippers. They were not there. Father stood up anyway and was surprised to find the floor warmer than he'd expected, and lower than he remembered it. Still shielding his bloodshot eyes with his hands, Father stumbled toward the bookcase and encountered a rather solid piece of furniture with a crash. Where the devil was the desk---?! He heard footsteps approaching and turned blindly toward the sound.

"Vincent?" he called. "Is that you?"

One quick glance from beneath his hands told Jacob that his desk wasn't the problem, and that his

dream had been no dream. His eyes flew wide, flooding his brain with a good deal more light than it was in the mood to assimilate at the moment, and saw the man he had hesitantly identified as a doctor coming towards him. Jacob stood his ground, since there was very little else he could do.

"Well," the stranger said in a pleasant Southern drawl. "I'm glad to see that you're feeling better." Gently, McCoy caught Jacob's elbow, steered him towards a chair and sat him in it.

Father sagged gratefully into the seat and accepted the mug that was pressed into his hands. He took a suspicious sniff, and his eyes grew even rounder. Coffee - home-brewed from the smell of it! The aroma was heaven. If they were going to poison him thus, so be it. He took a tentative swallow, let the hot liquid trickle down his throat, and then gulped the rest of it eagerly when nothing dire happened. Patiently, McCoy watched.

"Where... am I?" Jacob murmured when the mug was drained.

The man in the blue shirt took the empty mug from his hands and filled it again from an odd-looking pot. "Right now, you're in my Sick Bay." He set the mug on the table between them and held out his hand in a gesture of greeting. "I'm Leonard McCoy."

Jacob took his hand - some customs change very little over time - and looked at him intently, blue eyes to blue. "You're a doctor."

McCoy inclined his head slightly in a gesture that reminded Jacob of Vincent. "Yes."

Father shook his head slightly, remembering his manners. "My name is... Jacob. Jacob Wells." He started to continue, hesitating briefly, but something in the man's eyes reassured him. "If you please," he said with quiet dignity, "could you tell me where I am?"

"You're on the Enterprise," McCoy said carefully.

"The Enter... A ship?"

McCoy nodded. "Yes."

There was a studied pause. "A... starship?" Father ventured.

McCoy swallowed, his mind racing. Damn the man's memory! "Yes," he said at last, settling on honesty as the best option under the circumstances. He saw in Jacob's eyes the calm acceptance of what appeared - at least for the moment - to be. The older man squared his shoulders and lifted his chin, bracing himself.

"Did I... 'beam up' here?"

Damn again. Mutely, McCoy nodded, and was surprised to see a wry smile quirking the corners of Jacob's mouth.

"I can't say I care for the process," Father said dryly, and was rewarded when McCoy grinned in response.

"I know just how you feel," he said softly.

Jacob grasped the arms of the chair determinedly and attempted to stand. McCoy reached a hand to steady him.

"Watch it there. You were in pretty rough shape when we...," he began, but the older gentleman had already gained his feet, obviously favoring one leg. McCoy's eyes moved instinctively toward the cane propped unobtrusively against the desk, and Jacob, following his line of sight, reached for it. Strewn near it on the desk were the various personal effects Father had on him when he had inadvertently stumbled upon adventure, including a flat-topped jar of pale whiskey. Their eyes fixed silently upon it and Father coughed, a little embarrassed.

"An evening of... indiscretion," Jacob mumbled, and McCoy nodded with genuine empathy.

"I've had a few of those, too," he said softly and, taking Jacob's arm, began the tour of what might just have to become home.

I didn't join Starfleet to spend half my life lying under a console, Uhura thought grimly, rewiring the panel from the inside out. A lock of hair fell into her eyes, and she stuck out her lower lip and blew it back into place. Beside her ear, a pair of boots paused and Scotty squatted down to floor level and peered at her handiwork.

"How's it comin' Lassie? Were you able ta make head nor tail from the instructions Mr. Spock gie ya?"
"Sort of," she mumbled. "Help me up."

Uhura scrambled to her feet, surprisingly graceful under the circumstances, and her hands danced nimbly across the board.

"Cross your fingers, Mr. Scott," she sighed, and tripped the final switch. Uhura held her breath for a full minute as the new program clicked and chirped its way reluctantly through the system.

With a mechanical belch, one of the viewscreens thrummed to life, revealing a slowly undulating wave. Beside herself with excitement, the lovely communications officer clutched Scotty's arm hard enough to cut off circulation.

"Mr. Scott," Uhura said with quiet pride. "If you could see time, that's what it would look like." She closed her eyes, and allowed herself a moment of basking, before turning to grin at the Chief Engineer. "Am I something, or am I something?" she teased.

Gently, Scotty loosened the deathgrip hold on his wrist and wrapped her small hand in his, squinting at the board for a long moment.

"Aye, Lass," he said at last, with awe in his voice, and he squeezed her hand tightly. "You're something all right." They exchanged hurried glances, knowing the necessity for speed. "I'll go get Mr. Spock." Uhura nodded quickly, and Scotty gave her hand a final squeeze before striding with haste for the turbolift.

These corridors, Father thought to himself, are very much like the Tunnels - one wrong turn and you'd be lost forever. Obediently, he followed McCoy down first one curving corridor then the next, his mind all awl with the overload of information Leonard McCoy had given him. With professional courtesy, McCoy had shown him around the lab with no little pride and Father had returned the courtesy by giving a sketchy description of the world he had helped create, beneath the teeming city streets of New York - with a few important exceptions.

All the technology - all the advances that had been made in two - hundred years - left Father feeling astounded and rather glum. If indeed his stay here was permanent - and he didn't believe for one minute that it was - then he was going to be hopelessly behind. So much was possible now that wasn't possible then - or was it now? He didn't know anymore.

"Why don't you let me fix your hip?" McCoy had prompted helpfully, explaining the simple - simple! - process of bone regeneration. Whether from fear, a sense of dignity, a misguided martyr complex, or a combination of all three, Jacob only knew that he could not quite say 'yes' and let go of the literal thorn in his side. Sometimes, he reflected dryly, we cling to our pain because it's the only thing we can be sure of.

"Thank you, but no. A little suffering," he had informed McCoy solemnly, "is good for the soul."

Despite his reluctance to accept the good doctor's ministrations for himself, Father could not shake McCoy's thumbnail description of the battery of sophisticated genetic testing equipment. What he wouldn't have given for five minutes alone in the lab when Vincent was small! The impossible promise

of answers to the questions of a lifetime dwelled within the Sick Bay walls, tantalizingly out of reach. Just as well, he reflected dismally, since ...

They rounded a corner and came to an intersection heavily populated with crewmen and crewwomen. Jacob came to a dead stop, staring in wonder as Lieutenant M'Ress strolled gracefully past. The young Caitian woman walked with the typical feline grace of her race, tail swishing sedately to balance each elegant stride of her long, sleek-furred legs. Her almond eyes were large and deep, the pupils narrowed to dark, vertical slits as she made desultory conversation.

"--- not just another birthday," she was saying to the young woman with her. "I think some of it's being in the service. There are days - weeks even - when I don't think anyone on this ship even notices I'm a woman, much less..."

She trailed off, feeling the weight of eyes upon her, and turned to fix Jacob with a penetrating, if not unfriendly, stare.

"Hello?" she said quizzically. "Have we met?"

Dumbfounded, Father stared, and M'Ress gave the distinct impression of blushing without actually doing so. McCoy jumped in quickly with introductions, wondering what the devil had gotten into Jacob. He was staring at M'Ress with thinly-veiled astonishment and such a look of recognition that it gave the Doctor more than a moment's pause.

Father found M'Ress's delicately-clawed hand in his, mumbled some apology and stumbled through an introduction.

"Forgive me," he said at last. "I didn't mean to stare. It's just that..." He swallowed, mesmerized by the interested flick of M'Ress's long tail beneath the scant uniform. With a heroic effort of will, Jacob forced his eyes up and center and gathered his dignity around him. "It's just that you... remind me of someone." He covered her hand warmly with his and smiled. "Charmed to meet you, M'Ress."

Once again, the young Caitian woman appeared to blush prettily, demurely dropping her eyes.

"My pleasurrre," she purred, and Jacob felt the tiny, clawed tips of her fingers press against his palm before she released his hand. After the initial shock of the similarities had worn off, his fine scientist's reflexes had kicked in full force. He was already noting the multitude of differences between the communications officer and Vincent, but the feeling of familiarity persisted. There was a joke in there, Jacob's mind prompted, about cats and familiars... He banished the thought before it could escape his lips and followed Doctor McCoy down the hall.

Further down the hall, but not quite out of earshot, M'Ress turned to her bemused companion and gave a wry smile. "Well," she said lightly. "Somebody noticed I'm female."

"You want to tell me about it?" McCoy probed gently after Jacob had been settled into empty quarters. Jacob looked up quickly, surprised by the man's discernment.

"No," he said quickly. "I don't..." Once again, Father's fears were allayed by the warmth and compassion in McCoy's eyes. He sighed and looked away for a moment, groping for words.

"You said Lieutenant M'Ress reminds you of someone you know. How do you mean?" Could this man have had contact with a Caitian before today? McCoy wondered.

"He's not exactly like your Lieutenant M'Ress. There are differences that rule out any possibility of them being the same species, but she - M'Ress - resembles my son to a very great extent," Father said matter-of-factly. At McCoy's startled look, Father shook his head slowly. "I don't know who his birth parents were. He was found as a baby, left on the street near one of the hospitals. Someone found him, brought him to me. I raised him as my own - with my own son."

The scene in Sick Bay replayed itself in McCoy's head, and he remembered the name Jacob had

called out. "Vincent," he said with certainty, and saw Jacob's answer in his eyes. The puzzle pieces were falling into place.

"Is that - is he - why you live apart from others? To protect him?"

Jacob looked up sharply, bristling a bit, but mastered it quickly. "No. Our world was taking shape before I even dreamed that someone like Vincent could exist. He... brought us together, solidified our bond as a community. Fortunately, our world does offer protection for him from those that don't understand, who hate and fear the differences that make this one special, that one unique." Father looked up into McCoy's face, his face aglow with a father's love. "Vincent is my son. I love him, and no matter what sort of life you may be able to offer me here, I want to see him again."

For a single moment, Leonard McCoy let himself think of his only daughter, and the pain was almost more than he could stand. He felt the unbidden sting of tears in his eyes and Jacob reached to clasp his arm, recognizing some deep grief on his face. The moment passed, as moments do. McCoy put on his best officer's face and walked out into the halls of the great ship.

Jim unfurled himself stiffly from the bunk when the buzzer went off the first time.

"Come," he called, knowing it would be Spock, or McCoy - or both - coming to inform him of the present status of the mission, their impromptu guest, and to inconspicuously check up on their captain.

The door swooshed open on a hesitant McCoy, standing uncertainly in the doorway. Jim rolled gracefully to his feet, and the agony it cost him was worth the split-second of stunned relief on the Doctor's face. In spite of himself, Jim felt a smile tugging on the corners of his mouth. The thrill of putting one over on the good Doctor was extremely rare - and extremely satisfying. Kirk got a handle on his face and motioned the Doctor to a chair, settling his hip on the edge of the desk. McCoy took the proffered chair and sprawled in it, running a weary hand over his face.

"Spill it, Bones," Jim prompted. "How's our 'guest'?"

"Well, after sobering up and deciding this isn't a hallucination, Jacob's taking it a lot more calmly than I expected," McCoy admitted. His eyes were thoughtful for a moment. "I get the feeling that man is used to surprises."

Jim nodded slowly, knowing exactly what the Doctor meant. "So do I, Bones. How much does he know?"

"Enough. I haven't tried to keep much from him. He's bright, and he wants to go home as much as we want to send him there, but he knows enough to be a threat to the future if we send him back now."

"You mean our future," Kirk asked, and McCoy swallowed. That hadn't occurred to him.

"Yes," he said at last. "He could change the future - 'our' present."

Jim shifted uncomfortably, as much to ease his mind as his body. His next words were hesitant.

"What about a wipe?"

"Absolutely not." McCoy was adamant. "Not in my lab. You know how I feel about those things."

"I know, Bones. I don't like them either, but..." He suppressed a psychological shiver. As tenuous as memory often was, the thought of deliberately altering someone's personal past was disconcerting. "To tamper with a man's memory - sometimes your memories are all you have," Jim murmured, thinking of the many times a long-distant memory had saved or comforted him. The shiver was back, and he banished it immediately and moved on to more practical things.

"Any other ideas on how to get him back to where - and when - he belongs without letting the proverbial cat out of the bag?"

McCoy looked thoughtful. "Well," he began hesitantly, "Jacob was pretty tanked up when he arrived here. I've been reading up on some early studies of the effects of alcohol on short-term and long-term memory. Sometimes we don't remember much about what we do or say when we're inebriated." He looked up at Kirk wryly, blue eyes piercing. "Know what I mean?"

It took a special talent to make a starship captain blush, but McCoy in his needling mode was a force to be reckoned with.

"I... know what you mean?" Kirk agreed.

"Seems to me," McCoy drawled, enjoying Kirk's discomfiture immensely, "that the last time you had cause to study the effects of alcohol on memory loss, you threw your back out the first time. Remember that?"

The blush deepened. "Yes, Bones. But what did you find out---"

"That little bar down on Liberty? The one with---"

"Yes, yes, Bones, " Jim said testily. "Where are you going with the research?"

The Doctor sighed and shook his head. "I don't know, Jim. I thought I was onto something for a while, but now I'm completely out of inspiration."

Jim shot him an incredulous look, crossing his arms across his chest and fighting a grin. McCoy --- rendered speechless! It was almost too much to believe.

"Well, come on, Bones. What are we going to do?"

"What do you mean, what are we going to do? You're the Captain---"

"Yes, but you're the one with all the answers---"

"I never said I had all the answers to---"

"Funny, I distinctly remember---"

If looks could kill, Jim Kirk would have been a dead man. A very unamused McCoy was glaring at him, and Kirk felt the old familiar smirk trying to climb up his face. He broke off teasing his old friend and put his hand on McCoy's shoulder in a conciliatory manner.

"Okay, okay, Bones," he said at last. "Truce. We have other more urgent matters to work on. Maybe Spock will think of something."

Somewhat appeased, McCoy settled back in his chair. "Speaking of Spock, aside from a knot the size of a deerbird egg on the back of his head, your First Officer is fit as a fiddle. I returned him to active duty half an hour ago. We're going back down as soon as he's finished recalculating the interphase points." They exchanged long looks. "We haven't got much time," McCoy added unnecessarily. The expression of Jim's face told him that his captain already knew that.

A stray thought skittled across Jim's mind, and this time, he let the slow smile spread across his face.

"Funny you should say that, Bones," Kirk teased. "I thought that time was the one thing we had a bit too much of lately." McCoy smiled in spite of himself, shaking his head and shooting a sideways look at his chronometer.

"You know," he began, "I thought Spock would have---"

A strident buzz cut off his next words. Jim said "Come" again and Spock stepped over the threshold with his typical, almost legendary timing, nodding marginally to the Doctor and giving his captain a skillfully disguised onceover that fooled no one in the room. He did not sit, preferring to stand in an attitude of relaxed attention.

"Lieutenant Uhura has been able to modify one of the sensors adequately to register time-sensitive waves. With it, we should be able to detect any disturbances in the normal flow of time, and effect

repairs if necessary."

Kirk was nodding, mentally making a note to record a commendation for Lieutenant Uhura. McCoy was momentarily lost in thought, rolling some problem over and over in his mind.

"I am ready when you are ready, Doctor," Spock said simply. He nodded to the Captain. "With your permission, Captain, we'll return to Earth and complete our mission."

Jim nodded slightly, granting the approval Spock need not have asked for, and gritting his teeth against not being able to accompany them. Dragging himself back to the present, McCoy came to his feet and started towards the door. After a second, Spock followed and Kirk took up the rear, walking with them to the transporter.

Pascal's excellent hearing was almost legend among the Tunnel Dwellers. Coupled with the gift of perfect pitch, Pascal's finely attuned auditory talents made it next to impossible for him to remain unaware of what went on around him.

If his eyesight had equalled his hearing, he might have seen two shadowy forms slip past the Pipe Chamber entrance, might have noticed that their garb was decidedly unusual, might have sent a tip-tapped message on the pipes in time to halt their progress... but none of those things happened. Spock and McCoy made their stealthy way toward the heart of the Tunnel community.

"What's this thingamajig supposed to do anyway?" McCoy hovered over Spock's shoulder anxiously, blocking what little light there was. The lean Vulcan did not even look up, continuing to fine-tune Uhura's little wonder machine. They stood uneasily on the remains of the crumbled ledge, working as quickly and quietly as possible. The muted sound of voices carried down to them through the stone as people passed in the tunnel above them talking, laughing, and completely unaware of the weighty events transpiring beneath their footfalls.

"Doctor," Spock answered at last, and there was that in his voice which implied that even Vulcan patience could be worn thin. "The integrity of time and space has been violated in this area. Indeed, it was very likely our presence here - and now - that caused the seismic shift that led to our encounter with Doctor Wells. We are endeavoring to rectify the damage before it creates a time paradox that alters the future and threatens our own existence."

It was McCoy's turn to let his patience thin. He turned and regarded his fellow officer with a look that would have wounded at twenty paces and killed at ten.

"I know that," he snapped. "I meant, how's it supposed to repair something we're not even certain we've found?" It was a valid, if somewhat inaccurate, question.

"The principle is really very simple, Doctor," Spock began in his most insufferable lecture mode. "This device registers time as a continuous wave in any direction we calibrate it for. When we locate the time rift, we should be able to set up a counterwave to nullify the damage done."

McCoy nodded, catching on. "Kind of like using a laser to close a wound." Spock looked discomfited, but nodded once.

"Somewhat," he admitted, turning the machine a quarter turn to the right. "But the analogy breaks down eventually."

McCoy smiled, bemused. "All analogies break down eventually, Spock. I thought you knew that."

But the jibe fell on deaf ears, Spock was adjusting dials with his head cocked attentively to one side. McCoy tried it, heard nothing, and shook it off uneasily, wishing for the comforting feel of a moving starship beneath his feet. Spock continued to listen for something outside the Doctor's auditory range, a look of absolute concentration on his face.

"What's it doing?" McCoy whispered. Spock regarded the serenely undulating wave with a distinct

look of confusion on his face.

"It is not---"

Abruptly, there were voices nearby and the sound of stone scraping over stone. Someone was moving the rock they had so carefully replaced to conceal themselves!

"I don't know, Mouse," a quietly compelling voice murmured. Soft leather crunched on the sandy floor above them and a golden shaft of light illuminated the space directly above them. "I doubt Father would have come this way. I'm not even sure I knew it was here."

Scarcely breathing, McCoy and Spock pressed back against the rough stone wall as the lantern hobbled above them. McCoy prayed; the Vulcan did whatever it is that Vulcan's do in moments of crisis.

"Stone's been moved," Mouse insisted in his own curiously ungrammatical way. "Father came by here. Had to, Vincent."

Vincent! McCoy shot Spock a quick look, and firmly resisted craning his neck to peer up at Jacob's atypical son. Any movement - any at all - would give them away. There was a deep sigh, and the lantern moved away. The welcome sound of rock grating over rock was heard and McCoy took a deep breath, preparing to sigh.

He never got the chance. The breath went out of him in a whoosh as the ledge beneath his left boot disintegrated. Lightning-quick, Spock snapped out a hand and grabbed McCoy around his right wrist, causing McCoy to swing out from the ledge.

I'm an idiot, McCoy thought for the third and possibly last time since the day had begun, and clenched his eyes shut tightly, waiting to fall.

It never happened. Spock's grip on his arm had cut off the circulation to his fingers, but McCoy didn't care. He made no move to free himself until they both stood on the diminished ledge.

The miniature sensor was whirring now, and Spock knelt and read the sensor's screen, eyebrows knitted together. McCoy was finally breathing and his fingers had begun to tingle.

"What's it doing?" he asked again.

Spock looked up and arched an eyebrow in puzzlement. "The readings indicate that there is no longer a rift in the space-time continuum. There is no wound, no need to repair it."

Dumbly, McCoy stared. "Are you telling me there's nothing wrong? We kidnapped a doctor, risked our ship in time travel - we've both been hung off a cliff today and there's nothing wrong?!" Spock nodded and McCoy rubbed his forehead wearily. "Why?" he asked at last.

Spock straightened and looked discomfited again. "I do not know," he said stiffly, and flipped his communicator open with alacrity. "Two to beam up, Mr. Scott."

Even as he spoke, the ledge began to give out and the dizzy, weightless feel of free-fall tugged at the edge of McCoy's senses. A familiar tingle began in his hands and feet.

"Never thought I'd be so glad to have my atoms jerked around," McCoy muttered to himself before the transporter beam snatched them up in mid-fall.

They had been gone less than an hour. Spock stepped onto the bridge as though everything unusual hadn't happened within the last twelve hours, with McCoy dragging his heels. Kirk swivelled to cock a captainish eyebrow at this First Officer and made a promise to stop swivelling until his back healed.

"Well, Mr. Spock?"

Spock looked at the captain mildly. "Yes, Captain?"

Kirk's other eyebrow climbed. "The mission, Mr. Spock. Did you... fix everything?"

"We did not," Spock said matter-of-factly, and hastily continued as Kirk came out of his chair, injured back and all, to stare at him. "For all practical purposes, the anomaly in time seems to have righted itself - with very little help from us."

There was a noticeable pause while the Captain struggled to think of a proper way to phrase his next question. He leaned forward, studying the Vulcan's face. "Would you care to define "little", Mr. Spock?"

McCoy shot Spock a warning look that was completely unnecessary. Spock folded his arms behind his back. "No, Sir."

A startled silence, when every eye on the bridge turns to peek at the discomfited Vulcan.

"What did you say?" Jim whispered.

"I said 'No, Sir,' Sir," Spock repeated. His eyes bore into Kirk's, promising that nothing horrible would happen if the absolute, total, unadorned truth were not spoken this minute on the bridge. Jim turned around to look at McCoy, who warned him off with a look that promised a very boring week in Sick Bay bed, Obviously outnumbered, Kirk surrendered, trusting to their judgement.

"Very well, Mr. Spock," Kirk said at last. "Carry on."

"What a day," McCoy said to himself. There was no one to hear him in his tiny office, nor see him when he stretched both arms over his head and eased the stiffness in his neck. Thinking of stiff necks made him smile, and he knew that he was going to have to answer to Jim for his part in the unorthodox solution to the problem of time – eventually - but right now, he didn't care. Spock was busily minding the bridge, Kirk had been (gratefully, he thought) packed off to rest his back, and Jacob had been settled in for his first night in the twenty-third century. McCoy indulged in another stretch and a yawn, closing his eyes and letting his mind drift along.

There was a crash in the outer lab and a furtive silence that made McCoy leap to his feet, reaching for the phaser he kept in the top drawer of his desk. He deactivated the automatic door opening with a simple code and pressed against the cool surface, ears straining. People were in the lab at all hours, true, but some sixth sense of the Doctor's was going off like gangbusters and he took a deep breath and plunged through the doorway, levelling his phaser at the back of the hapless intruder.

With a start, McCoy recognized Jacob's back and watched with interest as Jacob removed the intricate genetic scanning equipment from the plexiglass case and looked at it for a long moment. For two full minutes, Jacob struggled with his conscience, then turned almost sadly and replaced Pandora's box on the shelf.

"What in blazes do you think you're doing in my lab?!" McCoy demanded. Jacob froze, then turned slowly, with the air of one prepared to take the consequences, squaring his shoulders and wrapping his dignity like a cloak around him.

"I'm sorry, Leonard. I came here because I thought I wanted to know something," Jacob admitted. He caught the Doctor's gaze and held it. "It seems I was mistaken."

Slowly, Bones nodded, understanding this man better, and liking him all the more for it. Jacob held his hands out before the Doctor without protest.

"I suppose," Jacob said quietly, "you're going to lock me up now."

The phaser dropped to his side, and Leonard McCoy smiled a smile that was completely free of cynicism. "No," he said slowly. "Now I'm gonna buy you a drink." He took Jacob's arm and steered the startled man down the hallway. "And I'm gonna buy me one, too. I think we both need one." He turned and regarded Father thoughtfully, and there was mischief in his eyes. "Jacob," he queried. "Have you

ever had a mint julep?"

Father had acquired a taste for mint juleps by the time the door buzzer set up an insistent buzz and McCoy stumbled unsteadily to the door. Scotty stood there glowering in the doorway, frowning fiercely at the Doctor and even more fiercely at the half-empty glass in the Doctor's hand. McCoy beamed at him, oblivious to his displeasure.

"Aye," Scotty said with a sigh. "Ah shoulda known, after that little song and dance you pulled on the bridge." His tone was dour, but his eyes sparkled in a way that said he'd have done it himself, had he thought of it. "What's a man got ta do to get in on the drinkin'?" Scotty demanded.

McCoy waved away the engineer's mock disapproval and grabbed the Scotman's sleeve, dragging him toward the table.

"Shut up and pour," McCoy suggested. Scotty did.

William's whiskey blazed down his throat like liquid fire. The intricacies of time travel had become remarkable more obvious after a few drinks, and time itself seemed to have very little meaning to anyone in the room.

"Must have aged during transport," Scotty said haltingly, staring with respect at the half-empty jar.

"I beg your pardon," Jacob began indignantly, but Scotty placated him with a companionable thump on the back. "The whiskey, laddie," he clarified. "I was talkin' about th' whiskey."

Introductions were simple and to the point. The more refined techniques of getting to know one another were left up to them.

"Montgomery,eh?" Father had said slowly, staring at his glass. "I married a girl named Margaret. Her father was a Montgomery, too." His eyes grew misty and far away. "He called her Maggie," Jacob whispered.

"Maggie," Scott repeated slowly. He eyed Jacob for a moment, and when he spoke, his voice was gentle. "Red-headed children, I suppose?"

That brought Jacob sharply back to the present. He exchanged long looks with McCoy.

"Well," he began. "Not exactly..."

"Captain." Spock's voice caught Kirk in mid-stride, and he turned reluctantly and faced his First Officer with ill-concealed guilt. Against all recommendations and his own better judgement, Kirk was once again walking on the injury. Sleep had not come, and the combined effects of pain, worry, and curiosity proved impossible to combat all at once. A leisurely night tour around the ship would undoubtedly help him unwind and might shed some light on the problem of what to do with their accidental guest. The hazel eyes met Spock's. There was no recrimination in them - just a complete understanding of a particularly stiff-necked human. Kirk smiled sheepishly and nodded once in acknowledgment. Without another word, Spock fell into step with his captain, shortening his long strides to match Kirk's more halting ones, and they made the rounds together.

The jar was empty, and the level of cheer in the room had risen with the passage of time.

"You oughta let me take a look at that hip of yours," McCoy repeated obstinately. His tongue felt thick and fuzzy, but it worked.

Father snorted derisively, followed closely by a hiccup. "In - in your condition?" Even slurred, his words conveyed his opinion about Dr. McCoy's condition with little room for misinterpretation.

"Never been better," McCoy insisted belligerently, thumping his chest with his knuckles for emphasis. He tried to stand, but his legs wouldn't cooperate, and he sank slowly back into his chair. Unsteadily, he swung around to look Jacob blearily in the eye. "Well," he drawled. "I never felt better..."

This struck them both as extremely funny and they giggled uncontrollably, leaning on each other. Scotty shook his head and mumbled something about Scotsmen being the only ones able to hold their liquor. He took another gulp from his glass, absently noting the way it still made his ears burn and his throat tighten up. It wasn't Scotch, Scotty admitted reluctantly, but it wasn't bad.

The halls were quiet on the third watch, and the Enterprise sailed gracefully through the timewaves of the twentieth century. Kirk fought the urge to tiptoe past McCoy's door to his own, moving quietly nonetheless, and stopped cold when he heard the unmistakable sounds of giggling. He spun around the exchange startled looks with Spock, whose ears had already picked up the strands of hilarity coming from behind the Doctor's door. Spock traded looks with his captain and joined Kirk outside the door.

"Bones?" Kirk called. There was a break in the laughter, and he called again. "Bones - it's Jim. Everything okay?"

The door whooshed open and the overpowering smell of alcohol almost bowled Jim over. It took him all of two seconds to assess the situation, then he grabbed Spock's sleeve and hauled him in behind him, hastily shutting the door.

Jacob was mumbling groggily to himself, his head resting peacefully on the table, and Scotty was staring with the utmost concentration at the far wall. Jim walked around and knelt down next to McCoy's chair, swiveling it around so he could face the Doctor. McCoy grinned from ear to ear and grasped Kirk's shoulder.

"Bones," Kirk began.

"Hiya, Jim!" His bloodshot eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Aren't you s-s'posed t'be resting?"

"I am resting," Jim murmured, and cast a hasty look over his shoulder. "Make some coffee, Mr. Spock," he said wearily. "I have a feeling this is going to be a long night."

Coffee was set on to brew and a hot-water shower was running in the bathroom. Jim put his arms beneath McCoy's armpits and attempted to move the Doctor toward the shower stall, but his back didn't want to cooperate. Spock stepped forward, frowning absently in concentration.

"Captain," he began. "Perhaps I should..."

Jim looked up at his First Officer patiently. "Mr. Spock," he began. "How much experience have you had in sobering up officers?"

Spock was thoughtful for a moment as Kirk bent to his labor again. "Excepting yourself?" he queried mildly. Jim looked up at him and smiled - through his teeth.

"Yes, Mr. Spock," he said silkily. "Excepting me." Spock started to comment further, but the fire in Kirk's eyes was warning enough. He reached for McCoy's boots and they stumbled toward the running water.

McCoy coughed and sputtered indignantly, but they succeeded in getting him through the shower and poured two cups of hot coffee into him before he could protest. Jim had a third waiting for him when McCoy gathered his muddled wits about him and grabbed for Kirk's arm.

"Get that mug out of my face," he demanded belligerently. Jim shot Spock a bemused look.

"He's starting to act like himself," he murmured, but McCoy reached for his throbbing temple and scowled blackly.

"Captain," he said solemnly, sounding remarkably sober. "I've been doing some research on the effects of memory on alcohol." Something struck him odd about what he'd just said and he replayed it slowly in his mind. "I mean memohol on ... alcohmem on... aw, hell, Jim. You know what I mean."

"Yes, Bones," Jim said, trying to hand McCoy the steaming mug. The good Doctor would have none of it, however, and twisted his face away, stumbling unsteadily to his feet.

"I don't want any more coffee," McCoy said hotly. "I'm not as tanked as you think I am." Kirk was openly skeptical, trying to keep the smile off his face. "And wipe that blasted smirk off of your face," the Doctor demanded. He sat again, suddenly, but retained enough composure to point at the peacefully sleeping Jacob. "Jacob is so smashed now that I'd lay credits to croissants that he won't remember a thing. I'm not even sure he ever really believed it wasn't a hallucination. If we deliver him to his own room, he won't even know for sure."

Kirk looked at Spock, almost daring to hope. "Mr. Spock?"

Spock looked quite uncomfortable. "A distinct probability," he admitted at last.

McCoy nodded emphatically, wishing he hadn't, and hiccuped loudly. "Heluva lot better than a wipe," he insisted. Still, Jim hesitated. This was for real. Time was not something to be taken lightly, or out of turn.

"Jim." McCoy put a hand on his captain's arm and looked him soberly in the eye. "This is a man's life we're talking about. A life he wants. A life he deserves to live out. Surely that's worth a few risks." His grip on Kirk's arm tightened. "Please."

Kirk shot Spock a questioning look, and the Vulcan nodded slightly. "The odds are acceptable."

The captain of the starship Enterprise bent and put his arms beneath Father's shoulders, knowing as he lifted that this was the final blow to his overtaxed muscles. He was going to have to take some down time, but first things first.

"Mr. Spock," he said with a sigh. "If you'll be so good as to get his feet?"

Jacob stirred groggily and tried to open his eyes. When he did, a sharp pain shot from his temple to his toes and he screwed his eyes tightly shut and cursed himself for having joined William's late-night party. Disjointed memories floated in nonsensical patterns around his muddled brain and he rested uneasily in a state of almost-awakened restlessness.

What a dream he'd had! And what a headache it had left him with! Men in uniforms roaming the tunnels, starships and time travel and heaven only knows what else. What would his overactive imagination think of next! He chuckled feebly and found that the pounding in his head increased. He squelched the laughing and satisfied himself with a grimace. The pounding did not lessen, however, and he covered his eyes with both hands and sat up determinedly. Perhaps a little late-night reading will clear my head, Father thought absently, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and stretching his toes for his slippers. They were not there. Father stood up anyway. The floor was cold and sandy beneath his feet. He was surprised at how relieved he was to feel that. Still shielding his bloodshot eyes with his hands, Father stumbled toward the bookcase and encountered - nothing. He heard footsteps approaching and turned blindly toward the sound.

"Vincent?" he called. "Is that you?"

"No," William said quietly. "It's just me. I wanted to make sure you made it back okay. Vincent..." William trailed off suddenly and did not finish his thought.

"What about Vincent?"

An uncomfortable silence fell on the room while William fidgeted.

"Well," Father prompted irritably.

"Vincent... checked in on you earlier. You weren't here and he thought..."

The light dawned for Father. "Oh," he said, with righteous indignation. "He did, did he?"

William nodded, then his eyes narrowed slightly and he looked at Jacob quizzically. "Where were you, anyway?"

Jacob started to bristle, but he could think of nothing to say, and there were disjointed pieces of totally impossible dreams skittling madly across his mind's eye. He settled for raising himself to his full height and looking William levelly in the eye.

"Thank you for checking on me, William. I wasn't quite myself after the party last night." He allowed himself a sheepish smile. "It's been quite sometime since I indulged in anything so potent as your home brew, and I... appreciate... your concern. I'll... talk to Vincent later."

William nodded again. A man was entitled to a few secrets. He reached in his pocket and pulled out another pint jar of potent liquid, setting it on Father's nightstand. "That's the last of it," he said simply, wanting Father to know. "Save it for when you're feeling better." He turned and walked through the open door.

Jim regarded the blue concoction in his tumbler with very mixed emotions, watching the sparkle and shimmer of the pale liquid against the glass. His eyes met Spock's over the top, and held.

"McCoy says this will work?" Jim asked unnecessarily.

"Yes, Captain. A very effective deep muscle relaxant with accelerated healing properties."

"And he promised I'll be up and around - back to normal - by the time we sail into familiar territory?"

Spock nodded slowly and Kirk sighed. There was no point in putting off the inevitable. He raised the glass in silent toast to the Vulcan and downed it in one gulp.

The room began to spin slowly, and Kirk reached to steady himself, but Spock was already there, his arm firm under his captain's elbow.

"Well," Kirk said, hearing the fuzziness in his voice. "McCoy sure knows his liquor." He started to stumble, but Spock was there as well, guiding Kirk onto the small bunk and swinging his legs up matter-of-factly. Jim tried to focus on Spock's face, but it was indistinct, and he closed his eyes instead.

"Bones always said you had a good bedside manner, Spock," he mumbled drowsily. Spock's face flickered for an instant, and when he spoke, his voice was dry.

"Dr. McCoy says a lot of things."

Jim smiled, running a hand over his face. He started to speak, but lost the words before his tongue would cooperate. His head fell softly to the side and his breathing settled into the deep, regular pattern of sleep. Spock stood in the silence for a moment, watching the steady rise and fall of Kirk's chest, but the moment passed quickly. He turned and walked out into the hall.

Dreams were funny things, Jacob reflected absently. Sometimes, dreams could seem more real than the things you could actually have. With a start, Father thought of Vincent and Catherine, and a new level of understanding opened up. Yes, dreams were powerful things.

But the side effects were murder, his aching body prompted. He turned and glared balefully at the "inspiration" that had inspired a totally bizarre night's dreaming, wondering when on earth he might be

brave enough to imbibe again. He rubbed his tired eyes again and opened them, blinking in surprise. The nightstand was bare. Gone was the flat-topped Mason jar and its contents - gone in a hazy sparkle of lights. Father blinked again, and refocused his bloodshot eyes. Still, nothing. He stared in consternation at the empty space that had recently housed a Mason jar of fine whiskey. As suddenly as it had disappeared, the canister reappeared, sans the whiskey. After what seemed like a very long time, Jacob managed to swallow. He reached out hesitantly and picked up the empty flask, holding it up to the light. With a philosophical shrug, Father turned to set it back on the table - just as William stuffed his broad shoulders back inside the door. He started to speak, then caught sight of the empty jar. He shot Father an incredulous look, and Jacob smiled feebly, trying to stuff the container out of sight.

"Well," William said at last. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

Somewhere, on a starship hurtling determinedly toward home, a half-Vulcan First Officer was minding the store for his healing captain, while a Southern gentleman and a dour Scotsman lifted glasses of William's finest in silent toast.

"To friends in far places."

"Aye. And closer to home."

END