
A Civilized Man
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by Lynda Carraher©

McCoy ran.

It seemed that his universe was bounded by the distance his aching legs could claim with each step; blocked down to a blur by the sweat that ran into his eyes; soundless except for the blood that roared in his ears; without sensation except that of pain as the dry, oxygen-poor air rasped into his lungs.

McCoy ran, and at times it seemed as if Stavis ran with him, but he knew that was wrong. Stavis was dead because he wouldn't run, because he dared stand up to the grey-skinned Thanlonn who now claimed dominion over the land of the Ka'ardeshi.

He felt the ground tilt up under him, and he used his hands again, raw and bleeding from the slopes he had scrambled up in the last ... what? Two days? It seemed longer.

He climbed, and the sensation of heat in his hands told him it was black rock that he climbed. The hands encountered a shape, ragged, hot, and he pulled himself past it, collapsing in the sparse shade. He rubbed the sweat from his eyes and pulled at the air that did not nourish.

When he could breathe again without searing his throat, he pulled himself around the shelter, searching across the heat-dancing land.

There was movement in the distance. A man-figure, skimming over the thick t'kev McCoy had broken in his flight. The lemony smell of the broken brambles still clung to McCoy's clothes. But his pursuer was taking the easier course, hovering above the tops of the meter-high brush on that floating disc.

Not fair, not fair, something in McCoy's mind sang, as though it were a game. The Thanlonn had everything in his favor -- the floater, the

food and water he carried, the advantage of being born and bred to this oxygen-poor world. Everything except a weapon. Stavis had taken care of that, even though it cost him his life.

Run, his mind said. *Run, McCoy*.

And the rest of him -- blood and bone and muscle -- said: *You can't*.

I will.

He dragged himself up and began the climb.

The rocks. Stay in the rocks. He'll have to leave the floater. Or wait you out.

How long can you go on, old man?

Not old.

Young, then?

No. But not old.

He was leaving handprints now as he climbed, scarlet markers that burned brown almost the instant his shadow passed over them. There was a singing in his ears and a roaring in his chest, as if someone had opened the door to a smelter furnace, and suddenly he, too, was floating.

Now, he thought. *Now it's fair*.

* * *

His throat hurt.

That was the first sensation. Others followed, and his mind cried out for the floating darkness, but he couldn't retrieve it. Consciousness was coming back, and with it came the protests of an abused body.

Then, incredibly, there was moisture on his lips. Warm and brackish, but wet. He opened his eyes to the lipless, pebble-skinned face of the Thanlonn. The eye stalks wavered toward his movement, and he instinctively tried to scuttle away, only to be caught by a hot and dry hand. .

"Give it up." The voice was metallic, flat. English pronunciation did

not come easily to Thanlonns, with their Saurian heritage. "It wass a good run, but you losst."

McCoy glared at him, fully awake now, aware that his hands were held behind him by something metallic and hot.

"Drink, now. I don't want you to die on me. Not yet."

There was enough anger in McCoy to make him turn his head away, but the three-fingered hand caught his hair and held him immobile as the cup pressed against his lips. Instinct took over then, and he worked the water over his swollen tongue, hating the need that let him accept it.

"Enough. More later." The Thanlonn sat back on his heels, eye stalks wavering slightly as he studied McCoy with the sense that was both less and more than sight. He stood, hauling McCoy upright by one arm. "Thiss time, we both ride."

McCoy let himself be guided to the platform, leaning back against the waist-high support framework for balance as the floater lifted off soundlessly.

"If you're looking for a place to hide the body," McCoy pronounced, "this is as good as any."

"Perhapss. But ssomeone will come looking for you, Terran. Ka'ardeshi disappear all the time. But a rich Terran who hiress a guide ... that iss different. Your body hass to be found, and found in a way that iss not susspiciouss."

The Thanlonn had a great deal of trouble with the last word. McCoy hoped he would choke on it.

"Stavis wasn't a guide. He was a friend of mine."

"You should pick your friendss more carefully, Terran. And they should sstay on their Presserve."

"That *was* Preserve land the last time I was here. Before Thanlonn Mining found pergium on it."

The pilot came as close to a shrug as his bony frame would permit.

"Thingss change."

"So I notice. Tell me, did you find out your mine tailings would poison the Ka'ardeshi drinking water before or after you started strip mining?"

McCoy thought at first that the Thanlonn was not going to answer. He seemed to be paying very close attention to the piloting of the floater.

"You ssee too much," he said finally.

"I see you're taking these people's planet away from them."

The response this time was abrupt and heated. "Sstop meddling, Terran! We Thanlonn have been on Ka'ardesh for over two hundred yearss. Thiss iss an internal matter!"

"That's what the fox said when they caught him in the henhouse with his mouth full of feathers."

The comparison was lost on the Thanlonn, and he made no reply. But the peppery musk of his anger was strong in McCoy's nostrils.

He leaned back again on the railing, trying to find a comfortable position. There wasn't enough room to sit, barely enough room for both of them to stand on the small disc. And it was going to be a long trip. The floater, he knew from bitter experience, had a maximum speed of perhaps 10 kilometers per hour -- just about the speed at which a healthy man could run. He wasn't sure just how much straight-line distance he'd put between himself and the high lake, or even whether that was their immediate destination. But he knew they were a long way from anywhere.

In the silence and the heat, he found his mind wandering, retracing the steps that had brought him here.

It had started with the best of omens. A long layover on Thanlo, the only other inhabited planet in the Ka'arian system, meant extended liberty for most of the *Enterprise* crew. For McCoy, it meant a trip to Ka'ardesh, a chance to renew his friendship with the bandy-legged Stavis, and a chance to wet a fishing line in the clean and icy waters

of the Ka'atdeshi Preserve, that last unspoiled portion of the planet.

But the Thanlonn, whose conquest of the stone age Ka'ardeshi predated the system's admission to the Federation, were not satisfied with the plunder they had already removed. Stavis hadn't understood the meaning of the timberkill any more than he could explain to McCoy why his wives had delivered only stillborn or deformed infants for the past three years.

In the face of McCoy's explanation of strip mining and of the deadly effects of pergium tailings in the water supply, he had remained stolid and outwardly unaffected.

He became angry only when McCoy asked him if the lake was still part of the Preserve. He admitted his poaching even as he defended it by right of centuries of use.

They had still been arguing it out when the Thanlonn guard appeared. He'd cut Stavis down with a blast from the ugly stunner he carried, not counting on the strength and determination of the tough little Ka'ardeshi. Stavis's intent had been to turn the stunner on the Thanlonn, McCoy thought, but the weapon must have had a dead-man's switch or other safeguard built into it. McCoy would never know. Because when it went off, it blew itself -- and Stavis -- into very small pieces. That was when McCoy started running.

Now all that was left was the memory of that flight; a memory augmented by a body that was one huge ache. He was getting lightheaded again from the unrelenting sun and from his empty belly. It had been a long flight down the mountainside and into this desert with nothing to sustain him on the way but the assumption that capture would be fatal.

Perhaps it would be yet, unless he found a way to free himself, to get back to the Ka'ardeshi village where the rented skimmer waited. Only he wasn't sure just where that was anymore. Or even where he was.

He had a better idea by the time the Thanlonn brought the floater down at dusk. It flopped over like a child's top, the curved

hemisphere under the passenger platform making it ungainly when grounded. *Damned stupid engineering*, McCoy thought. *Needs landing legs. Scotty would take care of that in a minute.*

But Scotty was quite a distance away .. Much further than the Thanlonn, who stepped free of the conveyance with a grace that spoke of long use. McCoy was less practiced and off balance with his hands bound. He fell awkwardly and slid across the platform, ducking his head at the last instant to avoid the railing. The movement and his momentum sent him sprawling; angry, humiliated, and bruised.

The Thanlonn left him to untangle himself, breaking t'kev for firewood and setting the lemony pitch ablaze with a pocket lighter.

McCoy used the time to check the angle of the setting sun, swallowed up by the mountains. He had come from there, he knew. And in the southern foothills, the Ka'ardeshi village stood. He had his goal now, and they were nearer it, though he had no idea just yet how he was going to attain it.

The Thanlonn took his own time with the meal, possibly enjoying the audible growls of McCoy's stomach. It was difficult to read emotions on that inhuman face. The mouth was just a broad gash, the nostrils slitted in a neat diagonal line under the smooth round earholes. There was no exterior ear, and McCoy wondered irrelevantly just how well the Thanlonn could hear. The sight organs doubtless gave him much more information. Balanced on flexible stalks, they sensed light and heat and movement, though the race was known to be color-blind. McCoy calculated how much leeway that would give him, in a hot, brushy landscape, if he kept still. Once he had gained the desert, running might well have been the stupidest choice possible.

It was all academic now.

Finished at last, the Thanlonn pulled a second food pack from the edge of the fire. He freed McCoy's hands and stood back to watch as the Terran juggled the hot foil packet. There might have been amusement on his face.

McCoy couldn't tell, and he didn't really care. The mass inside the foil was vile smelling and worse tasting, heavy with something fibrous and nearly unchewable. It was quite possible, he realized, that the food would make him violently ill. He didn't care. It at least gave his digestive juices something to work on besides his stomach lining.

He accepted another cup of the warmish water. It was the same cup the Thanlonn had used, and the brim was crusted with bits of food. McCoy turned it in his hands until he found a relatively clean spot, and drank. He drained the cup and held it out for a refill, but the Thanlonn shook his head. He took the cup away and reached behind McCoy to bind his hands again.

"Hey, gimme a break. I'm not going anywhere, and those things hurt."

The only response was a sharp tug on the manacles to make sure they were fastened. McCoy winced as the metal bit into his chafed wrists.

"You're really enjoying this, aren't you?"

The eye stalks wavered at him. "Enjoying what?"

"Pushing people around. Blowing them away with that nasty little stunner you had."

"It'ss my job."

"Killing people?"

"If I have to." He settled down several meters away from McCoy. "What you Terranss don't understand iss that killing iss a natural insstinct."

"We understand it. And we also understand it's an instinct that has to be controlled in civilized beings. I have a friend who once said that the mark of a civilized man is his capacity to decide he's not going to kill today."

The Thanlonn made a sibilant noise that might have been laughter. He used a Thanlonn word McCoy didn't need to translate in order to understand.

"We are all killerss, Terran. Even you."

"No. I'm a physician. I don't take life."

"You could be pushed into that action, Doctor. If I freed you and handed you a weapon, I would be dead in an insstant. And I would desserve it."

"No."

"An interessting argument. But not one we are apt to ssettle tonight. I have no intention of giving you the opportunity." He pulled his backpack close and stretched out, pillowing his head on it. "Good night, Doctor."

* * *

By the middle of the second day, they were well back into the mountains. McCoy was beginning to have a vague idea of where they were when the Thanlonn changed course, away from the valley in which the deadly lake gleamed.

There were no answers to his questions, and McCoy began to have the prickly feeling that he might have a painful interview with Thanlonn Mining officials before his "accident" was arranged.

He had little appetite for the packet the Thanlonn handed him at camp that night, and he sat staring moodily at its still bubbling contents as he rubbed the circulation back into his hands.

"You had better eat, Terran."

An idea crept into his mind, and he carefully folded his legs under him, half rising. "There's something in it."

"Jusst food."

"No. Looks like a bug or something."

"You are sseeing thingss again."

"No, really. Take a look." He lifted the sizzling packet, ignoring the sting of heat in his palm.

The Thanlonn ambled over, wavering his eye stalks. "Where?"

"Look -- right there."

As the angular form bent forward, McCoy thrust up, smashing the packet and its blistering hot contents into his captor's face.

The Thanlonn gave an eerie, whistling scream, clawing at his head, spinning away in pain. He blundered into the coals of the fire, falling face down, and McCoy smelled pepper and burned cloth and something like bacon popping in a skillet.

Jesus, he thought. *I didn't mean--*

Then instinct took over, and he lunged forward, catching a thrashing leg and hauling the writhing form out of the coals. The fabric of the Thanlonn's shirt was melting, eating its way into the grey skin like acid, and McCoy ripped at it, scrubbing his own hands in the dirt to deaden the liquid flame.

The Thanlonn's face was a ruin of charred flesh, one eye stalk completely gone, the other swinging convulsively by a single tendon as he clawed at the pain source.

"Stop it!" McCoy made a grab for the hands and was knocked away by a flailing limb. He scrambled back and threw himself across the charred torso, pinning the thrashing arms.

"Stop it, I said! You're only making it worse!"

The Thanlonn bucked under him, still shrieking. McCoy straddled him, holding the arms down with his knees. He brought his hands tight against the wide flared breathing slits, thumbs pinching shut the pumping artery in the leathery throat. In a matter of seconds, the Thanlonn went limp, unconscious from the pain or the lack of oxygen, or both.

McCoy got up slowly, turned away, and gave up to the wracking spasm of dry heaves, a reaction he hadn't permitted himself since the first time he'd ever done an autopsy. It wasn't just the sight and smell of ruined flesh -- God knew he'd seen enough of that, treated enough of it. What sickened him was knowing he had been responsible for that ruin -- had thrust out at living flesh with intent to destroy. And had, in that first instant when the Thanlonn screamed, felt triumph in

the act.

By the time he was in control again, the Thanlonn was stirring weakly, making mewling sounds that threatened the newly-won stability of McCoy's stomach.

He found the canteen and debrided the burns as well as he could. His own hands were blistered, and he used the last of the water on them, cursing impotently for his medikit, abandoned at the camp he and Stavis had made days ago.

There was nothing in the Thanlonn's backpack that looked even remotely like a first-aid kit, but he did find a lightweight cloth-like wrapping around the food packets.

It was too tough to rip, and he was seriously considering using his teeth on it when he remembered the knife the Thanlonn wore at his belt.

He crossed quickly to the long, slender form, and freed the knife. The Thanlonn stiffened and made a gesture as if to prevent McCoy from taking it.

"Don't fight me, dammit! I'm trying to help you."

"No!" he rasped.

McCoy ignored him, cutting the fabric into long strips. As gently as possible, he lifted the charred head, noting the blistered ruin of the remaining eye stalk and the pinkish fluid that seeped from it. He wrapped the strips around the flesh, clumsy with his own burns.

"I'm sorry I don't have anything to give you for the pain. You'll just have to tough it out."

Incredibly, the Thanlonn breathed his sibilant, chilling laugh. "You're a fool," he said. "Why do you not jusst put me out of my missery?"

McCoy turned his attention to his own hands, wrapping the last of the strips around them.

"I told you -- I'm a doctor. Now tell me how to steer that floater and which way to point it for the closest help."

"No."

"You don't seem to understand. You need proper medical attention, and you need it fast. If you don't get it, those burns are going to infect, and it's liable to kill you -- if fluid imbalance or shock doesn't do it first."

"I'm already a dead man, Doctor."

"Not yet. Not if I can help it."

"I'm blind, you idiot! And I let a Terran take me! There'ss no place ... no p-place..." He trailed off as a convulsive tremor shook his lean form.

McCoy held him down, held the clawing hands away from the crude bandaging until the seizure ran its course and the Thanlonn went limp.

McCoy hauled him to the floater and used their two belts to lash him to the railing.

He studied the alien controls in the thin moonlight and threw toggle switches until he found the right one.

The floater hummed upright, yawing violently, and McCoy hauled on the textured handgrips until he achieved a precarious balance. In the process, he discovered that the socket-mounted handles also acted as a throttle, controlling his forward speed.

It was harder than it had looked when the Thanlonn had done it, and McCoy, muscling the floater over the rough ground, gained a new respect for the strength of the alien. He began to have some understanding of why being "taken" by a mere Human would be such a humiliating experience that he would say he preferred death.

But did he? Had *he* said it, or was that the pain talking?

Another light flashed on the panel, beeping, the third one to send an untranslatable signal since McCoy had thrown every switch he could find in his attempt to get the thing off the ground. He had no attention to spare for it, no time to worry over what it might mean.

He should have.

His first real indication of malfunction was when the noiseless craft suddenly began to emit a long, high whine. The floater almost simultaneously lurched straight up like an alpha spike on a brain-wave scan, and a jet of flame burst from the hemisphere beneath his feet.

He had no chance to decide whether to bail out or ride it down; it careened wildly and then crashed, sending him spinning, sliding, rock and bramble tearing at him until he slowed and stopped. Really stopped, body and brain, for the first time since he'd pushed the boiling food packet into the used-to-be face of the Thanlonn. Stopped, on hands and knees like a dumb beast, torn, bleeding, shaking, pounding at the ground with one slow-motion fist, hammering at the mute and unresisting earth, like a great clock striking somewhere, pounding slowly, and some voice in the back of his mind tolling out the rage and the frustration and the futility -- damn ... damn ... DAMN ....

* * *

Dawn, and the mist rising slowly from the damp ground.

Dawn, and the swollen red eye of Ka'ar floating up over the ragged horizon like the eye of a drunk coming off a four-day binge.

Dawn, and McCoy walked slowly, the sleep cracking and flaking off his mind like the dried blood cracking and flaking off his face.

He rolled to his knees, the movement waking him fully with pain, and knee-walked the few meters between himself and the Thanlonn.

Somehow, last night, after the crash, after his own descent into impotent anger, he'd pulled the limp and unresisting figure loose from the tangled frame of the floater, found the pack, and covered him, wondering if there was any point in the action, if there would be life under the blanket in the morning or only cold and stiffening meat.

Remembered alien biology, years back, guided his hand to the pulse point in the throat. The skin was hot, dry, dusty-feeling, the pulse

hammering faint and fast. How fast was it supposed to be? That, he couldn't remember. Faster than a Human's, he thought; slower than a Vulcan's.

He wished he hadn't remembered those two reference points. Either presence now would have been welcomed. A strength to lean on, a mind to draw on. Not this ... this disfigured lump of flesh, alien in mind and body, convinced only of the innate savagery of sentient beings; this killer, pursuer, captor, victim ... all of these by turn.

He took his hands away from the leathery throat, flexing his fingers, trying to work the stiffness out of them.

"Damn you, Doctor."

The voice startled him; he had not been aware the Thanlonn was conscious. "You had my life in your handss. Why did you not take it?"

"Because it was ... in my hands. You're my patient."

"I am your death ssentence. We were only a day'ss walk from the Ka'ardeshi village when you took the floater. Alone, you jusst might make it. With me, you will not."

"Don't get noble on me. I'm responsible for the shape you're in."

"Not noble. That iss your word, your idea. Never ourss. When you took me, you took my life. And now you will not give me my death. Damn you, Doctor."

"Save your breath. You're going to need it."

"For what?"

"Our walk. I know roughly where we are, what direction the Ka'ardeshi village is from here. A day's walk, you said. In this kind of country, that's about forty klicks."

"Then go. Take the pack, and go. I will not."

"You will, if I have to drag you. As for the pack, forget it. I'll tell you what's left of your survival gear, Thanlonn. A blanket, a belt knife, the lighter, some fishing gear, and a bottle of pills that could be

anything from water purification pellets to suicide caps -- and if you think I'd believe you if you told me what they were, forget it. There are no more food packs, no water, no direction finder that I can use. Now come on."

He put an arm under the Thanlonn's thin shoulders and tugged him to his feet.

"I can not ssee. How can I walk?"

"Hang on to my belt. Let's go."

For a healthy man, a rested man, a sighted man, it would have been a challenge.

For these two, battered by their mutual violence, burned, blinded, exhausted at its beginning, it was torture. They were still climbing, toward the crested ridge McCoy knew he could follow to the village, toward help; and even though the slope was gentle, it was rock-strewn and treacherous. The top loomed before him like a never-ending wave crest that seemed to move away even as he advanced on it.

He could hear the Thanlonn's breath whistling through the breathing slits, hot and fetid on the back of his neck, could smell the peppery musk of the race, and something sweetly nasty growing under the filthy, ragged bandaging across the ruined eye stalks. The weight of the alien on his belt was like an anchor, and a slow rage warred inside his mind.

You'll never make it, not with him.

I can't leave him out here to die.

He'd do it to you, in a minute.

I'm responsible for the man's injuries, dammit!

You were defending yourself. If you'd killed him back there at the campsite, would you have regretted it?

Yes.

Really?

Mid-morning, and the crest only meters away. From somewhere in the brush, swarms of gnat-like insects rose, drawn by sweat or blood or both, settling on the open cuts on his face, clotting around his eyes and nostrils.

He slapped at them with both hands, the cloying smell of their crushed bodies making his stomach roll. He felt the swing of weight on his belt as the Thanlonn stumbled, and then another tug, at his side, at the belt knife as it was jerked free.

McCoy swung around, breaking the handhold, arched his body in an outward curve as the knife whistled past his belly, snagging the front of his shirt and ripping it open. Fury erupted in him.

"You stupid goddam lizard! What are you doing?"

There was no answer; just a step toward him and another swing of the knife.

"You can't even see me, you dumb bastard!"

"I do not need to ssee you, Terran. I can ssmell you -- you stink like a ndagz'l rotting on the beach! And I can hear you." He cocked his head, bird-like, and moved his free hand, palm up, searching like a sensor dish. "And I can feel your body heat. We are more evenly matched than you think."

As if to demonstrate, he made an uncannily accurate lunge, the blade streaking out. McCoy shifted, and the Thanlonn's free hand clamped down on his wrist, jerking him in for a thrust that sliced through his shirt and laid his ribs open. McCoy hooked one foot around the Thanlonn's leg and pulled his feet out from under him. They went down in a tangle, and McCoy caught a bony elbow under his chin as he landed on his back in the rocks. He squirmed out from under the other's weight, and lunged across him, fists driving at the chest and the ruined face, pinning the knife-arm with one knee.

The Thanlonn jerked both legs up, throwing McCoy off balance, and landed a glancing kick in the Human's groin. McCoy rolled away, gaining his feet, and went in head down and swinging as the Thanlonn scrambled upright. Again, the knife swung, and McCoy

caught the Thanlonn's wrist in both hands, bringing it down hard over his upraised knee. He heard the bone crack as the Thanlonn's momentum sent him cartwheeling, the weapon clattering to the ground.

McCoy snatched the knife up and lunged again, his knees catching the small of the Thanlonn's back as he struggled to regain his feet. He went down hard, breath going out of him in an explosive grunt, and McCoy straddled him, swinging the blade up, up and back, for a final double-handed blow that would end this, now, permanently.

At the top of the swing, he stopped suddenly, realizing the Thanlonn had gone still, but tensed -- conscious, waiting. Waiting for McCoy to deliver the deathblow, to confirm what had been said that first night: "We are all killers, Terran. Even you." He realized suddenly what the purpose of the attack had been. "You will not give me my death," the alien had said. The Thanlonn *wanted* to die -- *wanted* to goad McCoy into killing him, because he could not live a cripple; because proving McCoy would kill was the only victory left to him.

His hands, clenched around the blade's hilt, began to shake, the tremors running down his lifted arms, wracking the long muscles of his back and torso.

He stood up, slowly. Transferred the knife to his right hand and threw it, as hard as he could, its metallic surface flashing in the sun. Then he dropped heavily to his knees, fighting down sickness at the beast revealed within him.

"No," he panted. "No. I'm not going to kill today."

He reached out one shaking hand and rolled the Thanlonn over. The bandaging was torn half away, revealing suppurating flesh that oozed a pinkish, foul liquid. The Thanlonn began to shudder, making strangled, gasping noises, trying to roll away again, and McCoy realized with a gut-wrenching certainty that the alien before him was crying -- great, gulping, choking sobs of utter defeat, of total, soul-shattering failure more bitter than a dying breath, naked and destroyed before an enemy he held in contempt.

McCoy reached out again and touched a shoulder, both shoulders, as the Thanlonn attempted to pull away. Raised the battered and broken form to him, holding it close, as if he could transfer strength and comfort through the skin.

"It's over," he said. "All over. We can make it. I know we can. Come on. Help me -- help yourself. Just a little further," he lied. "Just a ways. Get up. Please."

There was no response now, not even the grotesque sobs. McCoy put his shoulder against the Thanlonn's chest, lifting him into a fireman's carry. He pushed up, staggering under the weight, and settled the Thanlonn's form more securely across his back.

McCoy walked.

The gnats followed them, swarming, feasting. A rhythm grew. Three steps, and wipe his face on his own shoulder to clear his nostrils and mouth. Three more steps, and a repeat.

Ka'ar climbed, reached its zenith, and began the long slide down, and McCoy walked. There were dancing lights behind his eyes, and a warm, sticky flow from his side. He walked, head down, and sucked at the thin air, and shifted the unresisting weight across his back and shoulders.

The weight of his burden, the sun's heat, the insect swarm, his own horror at the savage revealed within him, melded together into a tide that battered steadily at the barriers of reality. Something deep within his subconscious mind, some last line of defense against gibbering madness, recognized the assault, curled around it, until physical reality retreated to some distant, objective plane that no longer had any actuality for him.

In his own mind, he was clean, rested, strolling a neatly tended path with the Thanlonn -- whole and lucid -- walking companionably alongside. And they were talking about what it meant to be a civilized man, about the one way to shackle the beast within.

The words rolled off his tongue, beautiful words about brotherhood and mutual trust and evolving together to the point where that

decision -- I'm not going to kill today -- no longer had to be made consciously. And that the first step in achieving that level was to acknowledge its existence, to understand that the choice was always there, always your own. I'm not going to kill today. But if I do -- if I must -- that does not mean I cannot choose differently tomorrow.

It was a symphony of word and thought, and McCoy's only regret was that Jim was not there to add his eloquence; that Spock was not there to point out the pure and beautiful logic behind it.

It was like rolling a great stone from the mouth of a sepulcher -- the striving, the pushing, the movement for a new angle of attack, and all for one goal. To open the dark pit where the soul of a man, of a race, lay entombed. Not dead -- never dead! -- but only sleeping, only waiting for the light to be revealed.

And the stone did move, the light did stream in to illuminate and transfuse, and one alien creature, one thinking being, stood transfigured by the power of a thought.

I can decide. I have that choice. I'm not going to kill today.

They stopped then to seal the bond of understanding with a look and the beginnings of a handclasp. In a moment, they would cross the barriers of physical form and incompatible thought processes; they would build a bridge; they would be brothers.

He was annoyed only that someone else seemed bent on intruding on the moment. There were voices in his ears, spouting words he didn't recognize, and he thought, *Go away. Can't you see this is important, this moment, this gesture? Leave us alone.*

But the voices were stronger, more insistent, and the Thanlonn's figure was drifting away from him, the gesture incomplete, the bridge between them shattered. The neat path and the fading figure of the Thanlonn fell away. He was back on the ridge, with a weight on his back and sweat running into his eyes.

He blinked it away and raised his head.

There were six of them, Ka'ardeshi hunters, with their game bags sagging empty, standing bandy-legged and cautious at this strange

apparition, this half- Terran, half-Thanlonn specter, black with swarming gnats and dried blood.

I'm hallucinating, he thought. *Reality was back there, a moment ago, and this is just--*

Then one of them stepped forward and touched him, and the last flickering ember of strength went out of his legs, and he sprawled forward with his face in the dirt and the weight of his burden pinning him down.

Then the weight was gone and strong brown hands were turning him, lifting him, and there was water in his mouth and on his face and a tugging at his ruined shirt to expose the wound on his side.

He pushed them away, struggling for his feet like a drunken man.

"Help him," he forced out. "The Thanlonn. He's worse..."

Golden, feline eyes sought mates in other Ka'ardeshi faces, then slid away to the tatter of rags and flesh they had pulled away from the Terran.

McCoy followed their gazes, and he knew. Knew by the awkward, unmoving position, by the stillness of chest and throat, by the sudden quiet of the Ka'ardeshi, that the Thanlonn was dead.

He threw off their restraining hands and staggered toward the unmoving form. "NO-O-O-O!" There was no sanity in it, no rationality. It was a maniac's howl at the waning moon, the shriek of a wounded beast, tormented beyond endurance.

He dropped to his knees alongside the empty husk of flesh, gathered it in his arms as he had done once before. "No," he insisted. "Nononoooooohhhh ... " The head lolled back, the last shreds of cloth falling away to reveal the ruin, the lipless mouth stretched in a frozen grimace, mocking him.

McCoy wept.

Holding the Thanlonn against him like a mother with a dead child, neck bowed with grief for the alien, for himself, for victor and vanquished, not knowing which was which, no longer caring. Wept

for a thousand-thousand years of civilization torn away to nothing when two man-beasts faced each other with murder in their hands and survival in their minds. Wept for his own failure as a physician and as a civilized man, for the Thanlonn who could not believe it was possible to choose not to kill, who died still not believing it.

The Ka'ardeshi looked at him, looked at each other in silence as the late afternoon sun filtered through the tree branches and the insect sounds made a shrill counterpoint to the Human voice.

McCoy wept.

THE END