

FALL OF NIGHT



by

a
STAR TREK
fanzine

PAM BADDELEY

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to Gary

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

As you read through this story, you may notice that a couple of the illustrations don't quite match the text for detail.

I sent photocopies of the pages we wanted illustrated to Martin, with a note of any details of background, etc, that weren't included in the text of that page, and didn't make the details for these particular illos clear in the notes.

We were pushing a print deadline in order to get the zine ready in time for Galileo Con, and there wasn't time to ask Martin to rework them. We therefore decided to print them as they came rather than miss out any of Martin's artwork, which we're sure you'll agree is, as always, very good.

1 THE NIGHTLAND

Urg's ponderous, shaggy bulk edged closer, drawn by the ice-blue light ahead. Another step. Her eyes, accustomed to the ruddy darkness of the barren landscape at her back, watered as she raised her heavy head on its squat, powerful neck, to peer up at the brilliance above. But the effort was too great. After a few moments, she was forced to let her head loll forward again. Cautiously, she took a few shuffling steps; she was almost at the barriers. Their odd glow made them clearly visible, the same colour as the shimmering, dancing light between them. Blue... Urg's mind could scarcely comprehend it. From a distance, it appeared as purple - Urg could almost understand that; after all, it was like red. But close up like this... blue. She reached out a large, hair-covered hand as if to touch the dazzling light, but snatched it away before it came too close. She knew from experience how painful the briefest touch would be. That was why it was forbidden to touch the light; one of the People might die if she or he touched it for too long. But Urg had once defied the prohibition and touched the light. Even she could not say why. Only that it had hurt.

She dilated her great nostrils, sniffing at the light barrier. It had no scent; that was strange, for it must be alive, and all living things had a scent. Again she tipped back her head to study the enormous black shape of the pyramid with the bright cluster of lights at its summit. Different yet again - they were white. Urg's great dark pupils, deeply set beneath her overhanging forehead, stared up at them. A dark shape momentarily crossed in front of one of them; she gripped her club more tightly. Meat - that's what the shape meant. The age-old knowledge of the People, passed down to Urg by her mother, said there was much meat inside the strange mountain. Only the blue light barred the way. This had been so for as long as the hoariest elder could remember, and long before that - so long that none of the People could imagine a time without it. They only knew that it had been this way ever since the sun had grown larger, and redder, and colder.

Urg recalled the lore of the People to mind. They had kept watch on this mountain for a long, long time. It was told how creatures had once emerged from an opening in its base and carried the barriers in closer. The blue light had followed, the circle of death diminished, and the People and all the creatures of the Land had crowded in more closely. Since then, the creatures had re-emerged many times and had done strange things with their forepaws to the barriers but they had not carried them in any closer. But one day they would, and the People would be nearer their goal. It might take one generation or a hundred, but the blue light would die and then the People would not go hungry for a long, long time.

Urg swung round; a change in wind direction had brought her the scent of danger. She peered into the red light and the stark, black shadows, but her eyes, so sensitive to light, were still dazzled by the blue and white radiances. She raised her club defensively, then turned to meet the sudden draught of air to her right.

But she was too late. The huge black shape of the hound was already launched in a mighty leap. She saw its darker form against the darkness, looming above her in mid-air. Then she was down, the beast's snapping, slavering jaws closing in on her neck. Her powerful hands locked on its windpipe as the animal's forefeet clawed wildly, its tough nails scraping at her chest. But her thick insulating coat of hair protected her; only the great jaws, dripping saliva, remained a threat. Needing both hands to fend the dog off, Urg had dropped her club; now, feeling its hot, fetid breath on her face, she longed for the fallen weapon or even for her stone knife. But that was thrust through the leather thong tied round her middle and she could not release the dog; it would be at her throat in an instant.

Exerting her great strength, Urg forced the hound over onto its back, Rolling with it, she squeezed with her great hands, cutting off its air and trying to kill it by strength alone. Her teeth bared themselves in a savage growl as her brain became fogged in a crimson haze of fear and bloodlust. She did not see the inky shadow that crept from the downwind direction.

The second hound sprang...

James Kirk deactivated the small screen on the desk in front of him, and sat back, massaging the tension from his neck muscles. As he digested the information gleaned by an earlier, unmanned probe, he found nothing to boost his optimism. This would be no easy mission. Normally, that would have been bonus - a challenge that would be a welcome break in shipboard monotony. But something about Mari-ama oppressed him with the weight of age-old dreads and superstitions. Even the name - that of a Scandinavian death goddess - boded trouble.

The planet's image haunted him still; a dark landscape bathed eerily in the red light of its dying sun; a land populated by lurking, shaggy forms. It reminded him of a scene from some medieval hell, and over it all, those two structures dominating everything; the only evidence of sentient life on the entire planet. Gigantic pyramids, facing each other across a barren, rocky plain; the smaller, completely dark and seemingly lifeless, the other, one kilometre high, Kirk reminded himself; in colloquial parlance, it was over half a mile high!

Determined to shrug off the sense of foreboding that had descended upon him, Kirk left his cabin and headed for the bridge. It would be another five hours before the Enterprise would reach Mari-ama; until then, he would put all these uncharacteristic doubts from his mind in the practical preparations of organising the landing party detail.

2 BEACON OF DEATH

My eyes sore and strained, I deactivated the screen and moved to the window for a moment, looking out. The sun was sluggishly dragging itself up into the blackened sky; it is old, old and tired. The old books and the tapes speak of its youth, when it burned so brightly that it hurt the eyes to look at it. Regarding that swollen, angry-red globe, I tried hard to visualise it, to picture the whole world lit as brightly as the corridors of the Pyramid. But I failed, even though I remembered seeing it all on tapes, years ago. There were deep green seas then, limitless water; not just the thin stream that emerges from our faucets - distilled, purified, used and reused time without number. No, the seas were different - free and open, sparkling in golden sunshine beneath a lavender sky. And there were plants, too; not the stunted, twisted bushes on the plain below or the delicate, pale green vines and fruit trees that grow food for us and replenish our oxygen. No, these were tall, sheer trees, each topped with a verdant coronet of leafy branches. Brilliantly coloured flying creatures had darted between them or perched to sing in their branches. And there were gushing rivers full of jumping fish. No, I haven't consulted those tapes since I left the training centre. I could have seen them any time I chose, in the library on Level Two Hundred. But they're too painful - too cruel in contrast to the world visible from our windows.

Red light suddenly flared in the north, jolting me from my reverie. I lunged for the observation telescope, frantically jabbing at the controls

beside it. Unforgiveable! After all the stern warnings of my mother and teachers over the years - my chance to become an Acolyte ruined by failure to concentrate? Of course, anything I could see would be recorded by the Observers, but I would have proved my unworthiness by missing it. I had to make good use of the few time units I had left; there were a score of other candidates due to follow me.

I had keyed in the 'record' sequence and I now watched the monochrome image displayed on the screen. The 'scope, of course, picks up an infra-red image and translates it into a form our eyes can see. The first time I had seen this instrument, on an educational tour as a little boy, I had wondered why the builders of the 'scopes hadn't constructed them to display a colour image - had they lacked the technological expertise? When I had asked my instructor, she had told me to be quiet; a junior Observer was close by, having just demonstrated the machine. Since then, I've come to my own conclusions. Our forefathers were wise; what would a colour image show but the ever present monotony of red and - where the light fails to penetrate - the absolute black of space?

The fire I had spotted showed glaringly white on the 'scope. Around it moved light grey shapes, their movements grotesque as they performed a lumbering dance. I thought I knew what they were, but had to be sure, so I made an adjustment to the magnification. The head of one of the creatures rushed towards me until it filled the screen; the image was blurred since the creature was moving and 'scope resolution is less than perfect, but it was clear enough. My first assumption was confirmed; I was looking at one of the mutations that inhabit the outer world - eckloi. I watched them for a little longer, hoping they might serve my purpose. Although their behaviour was tediously familiar from my studies, it was possible that they might now show some quirk of behaviour not previously Observed. That would be better than nothing since I needed a new Observation - however minor - in order to become an Acolyte. None of the other candidates in this year's class had seen anything noteworthy, and any Observation would probably win me the coveted post.

The eckloi continued to cavort mindlessly, their large clumsy bodies with the enormously enlarged chest cavities making their ponderous and ungainly movements almost comical. We of the Pyramid are a small, lithe people but it has been suggested that the eckloi are descended from others like ourselves. I admit that they have social customs of a sort - their dancing, for example - plus rudimentary weapons and the knowledge of fire. I once read a couple of books in the library, written many generations ago, that speculate that the eckloi were our distant relatives - that even their name was a corruption of 'exiles' - but I thought it unlikely. It would have been unbelievably cruel to exclude people from safety - kinder to kill them. Of course, other theories have been advanced... the other Pyramid... but I pushed that thought away. Safer not to think of it.

Bored, and finally convinced that the eckloi would not be my salvation, I programmed a random tracking pattern. Perhaps the 'scope would find something interesting on its own. For a while, its screen showed only darkness and I glanced nervously at my wrist chronometer. Soon it would be Ard's turn. Out of my several hundred rivals for this post, he figured most prominently. Even at training centre, he had always competed against me for better marks, though I've never understood why. I was always willing to bow out, slip away into daydreams of becoming Chief Observer. But even when he beat me, he still hated me - perhaps because I'd let him win?

I dismissed him from my mind; my only chance was to concentrate. As if to rebuke me, the scanner flashed, signalling that it had located a heat source. Two large, grey quadruped forms appeared, seeming to worry at a darker shape on the ground just beyond the Barrier. I punched in

magnification; the shape wasn't completely dark, after all - there was a faint greyness. A quick glance at telemetry confirmed what I had already guessed - the readings were consistent with the cooling curve of a once-living organism. The animals had just made a kill; it was too indistinct to identify, but I hoped it was an eckloi - that'd be one less of the brutes.

The animals themselves were easily identifiable as a pair of the savage hounds that were once so plentiful but have now largely disappeared from our 'scopes. Two theories have been advanced for that - either the creatures have left for better hunting grounds or they are dying out. I think the second is more likely; the lights of our Pyramid draw living creatures towards it, so what better hunting grounds could there be? Earlier in my watch I had seen one of the eckloi standing just beyond the Barrier, staring upwards. They know our lights mean life... and meat. I shuddered, and reached for the controls.

At that moment, realisation hit me; I'd neglected to activate the recording sequence this time. I froze, not even breathing. How could I forget such an elementary step - drummed into me from hours of training? Supposing this observation had been fruitful and I had bungled my chance? Fumbling, I reactivated the tracking. Within moments, the 'scope locked on to another heat source. This time I made sure I set it to record. My hand left the touch sensitive panel, then halted in mid-air as my brain tried to register what I could see on the screen. No, it couldn't be. It was impossible!

I had made my Observation. But when I saw what it was - I could only wish I had never seen it...

3 EXPEDITION TO DANGER

"Problems, Spock?" Kirk spared a momentary sideways glance at his First Officer.

"Only as anticipated, Captain. The intense radiation is causing interference to our instruments."

Kirk nodded; the unknown radiations emitted by the dying sun, in addition to the ordinary long-wave radiation that was to be expected, had already ruled out the transporter. Objects used in test runs had returned in a disassociated condition, their molecules scrambled. He glanced back at the other members of the party, all safely strapped in, their faces showing a little concern but no undue anxiety. "Everyone all right?"

Sian Masters, exobiologist, and the other two scientists nodded. The three security guards responded with a prompt "Yes, sir." Kirk looked expectantly at his friend 'Bones' McCoy, knowing he was unlikely to get away with a mere affirmative from him. True to form, McCoy drawled, "Isn't it about time Spock got his pilot's licence?" Kirk smiled, facing forward again, and wondered if this would be the start of another of the famous sparring matches, but Spock was too busy at the controls.

Kirk checked his instruments; they continued to fluctuate. By now, the view from the forward ports told him that they had entered the atmosphere of Mari-ama. Their flightpath was a little steep, but still controlled. The atmosphere now enveloping them scarcely diminished the interference; at this high altitude, especially, it was far too attenuated to screen out the star's harmful rays to any noticeable extent. He gave up trying to make sense of the readings, and concentrated instead upon the surface rushing up to meet them. Bathed in the eerie light of its sun, it

was red, but - wait - there! A bright speck of light, growing larger as he watched; the larger pyramid, its lights the only thing clearly visible in the ruddy gloom. They had decided to take advantage of this navigation beacon.

The light swept past in an arc as Spock levelled the shuttlecraft out and brought it round for a landing. The pyramid loomed, enormous, beside them, a beached antediluvian monster with only its upper portion visible. For a moment, Kirk thought he glimpsed dark forms amid the brilliance, then they were left behind as the craft descended, coming to rest with a slight jar.

In moments, McCoy was out of his seat to check that everyone was all right while Kirk tried to contact the Enterprise on the shuttlecraft's transmitter. Static roared from the speaker; wincing, he turned down the gain. "Kirk to Enterprise," he began insistently. "Kirk to Enterprise."

To his relief, there was a reply, though indistinct and marred by interference. Uhura's voice rose and fell in volume, just barely distinguishable. Speaking slowly and clearly, Kirk reported their safe landing and co-ordinates, and stated his intention to carry out a preliminary investigation. As he signed off, satisfied by Uhura's acknowledgement that she had deciphered his message, he saw that the others had checked their equipment and were getting into their environmental suits.

Kirk was first to leave the shuttle, carefully stepping clear of the tangle of flattened thorn bushes that had cushioned the vehicle on landing. Eyeing the sharp spines in the light from the open door, he was thankful for the protection of his suit. The others followed, straining to see in the sudden transition from the brightly lit interior to the relative darkness outside. The red light shimmered strangely on their silver suits, turning them to the colour of blood.

The shuttle secure, and its lights extinguished to save power, Kirk led his party to the shelter of a large rock outcropping. With his usual consummate skill, Spock had brought the craft in to land behind the only available cover; although it would not be completely hidden from above if the pyramid's inhabitants possessed suitable instruments, only its roof would be visible, hopefully overlooked in the deep shadow behind the outcropping.

Spock was taking readings of the oxygen level and temperature of the surrounding atmosphere. In moments he confirmed the findings of the initial unmanned probe - both oxygen and temperature were uncomfortably low. That was another reminder of the relative comfort they enjoyed inside their self-contained environments.

Spock added, "The widespread interference is also affecting tricorder readings, Captain, though they appear to be stable for our immediate environment. I detect no other life form within a radius of ten metres - "

"But there could be plenty beyond that," McCoy chipped in, pessimism surfacing as he consulted his own tricorder.

Kirk waved aside the jibe. "Let's check out the pyramid." In compliance, Spock edged around the rock outcropping to direct his tricorder at the pulsating violet light beyond, without being seen by any watcher above. It was possible that the beings within the structure took no interest in the world outside, but if so, they would surely not have provided themselves with so many windows.

While Spock was thus engaged, Masters, Armitage the botanist and

Hjortsberg the geologist conducted their own investigations. Hjortsberg tapped free a sample from the outcropping while Armitage sawed through one of the fibrous branches of the thorn bushes. Two of the security team accompanied them, the third remaining with the senior officers. Momentarily unoccupied, Kirk gazed around at the strange landscape with its weird stunted bushes swaying gently in a breeze he could not feel, and its grotesque rock structures, moulded by the wind of aeons. His crew glinted garishly in their dark crimson suits; at close quarters this place was even more like hell. He checked that his phaser was still clipped to the belt of his suit.

The speaker by his ear crackled into life. "It's a high intensity forcefield, Captain. Momentary physical contact would prove extremely painful - and prolonged for more than ten seconds would become lethal to humanoid life."

"A defence to keep the animals at bay, Spock?"

"Evidently."

"Well, we won't learn anything else here; I think it's time to check out the other pyramid. Get the others together while I contact the ship."

Inside the shuttle, his eyes watering as the white overhead lights flickered on, Kirk sat at the controls and thankfully removed his helmet for a while. Although the suits were equipped with radios, only the shuttle's transmitter would be powerful enough to reach the Enterprise through the massive interference and so the landing party would be out of contact with the ship for the next six hours. This time, reception was even worse, but Kirk managed to deliver his message nevertheless. Then he rejoined the others.

They set off, keeping close together, the security team with phasers in hand and set on stun. Spock took the lead, using his tricorder to give advance warning of any dangerous life forms, Kirk a few paces behind. Following them were McCoy and Masters, scanning to left and right of the party respectively. Privately, Kirk's opinion was that anything which came within the tricorders' reduced range would be on top of them anyway, but he said nothing. It would be all too easy to impair the morale of his people, faced with such a disorientating environment. Already he could sense the onset of a headache behind his forehead.

Spock's superior eyesight kept them on course for the darkened pyramid, which formed a blacker shape against the other jet black shadows. Kirk recalled that it lay to the north west and, from what he had seen on the tapes and from his view as they landed, it was about seven kilometres from the inhabited pyramid.

The attack was sudden.

Masters scarcely had time to call out a warning before the creature bounded into view on their right, swinging a heavy stone club. At the same moment, Spock and McCoy picked up other readings. The security guards opened fire, one felling the boldest creature, the others aiming for the shadowy forms behind it. There were howls of fear as the phaser beams split the gloom, finding their targets.

The rest of the party had acted swiftly, bunching themselves in a defensive circle, the scientists hastily unclipping their phasers. But the demonstration was sufficient. McCoy reported that the life forms to their left were rapidly retreating and a quick check by Spock and Masters revealed the same. Cautiously the party spread out a little, Masters and McCoy examining the three bodies left behind.



"Humanoids, Captain," Sian Masters announced. "But their physiology has dramatically altered - adaptations to the cold and the low oxygen level. Thick body hair, enlarged chest cavity... Skull size and cerebral development does indicate that they still possess at least a rudimentary intelligence."

"Jim, I think we should get out of here," McCoy broke in. "We can't be sure how long the stun charges will last - this one seems to be coming round already."

"Right. We move on - and stay alert," cautioned Kirk.

Keeping a little closer together than before, the party left the spot, eyes intent on the gloom around them.

4 INVESTITURE OF AN ACOLYTE

The large hall was buzzing with conversation - half-excited, half-fearful speculation. My heart was racing with both emotions as I waited, the palms of my hands clammy. I kept wiping them against the sides of my tunic, surreptitiously, but it didn't seem to help. I was the topic of a lot of the talk, I knew. A novel sensation, one I didn't much care for. I tried to concentrate instead on mentally rehearsing my part in the forthcoming ceremony, but it didn't do any good. By now, the Observers were filing in and I couldn't pretend that this was any ordinary investiture; I hadn't scraped through on the strength of some new facet of eckloi behaviour or even a brand new mutation. For the first time in millenia, an investiture was being held before all candidates in that year's class had had their chance. Normally, all the candidates after me would also have had a turn and only if one of them failed to make a more interesting Observation than mine, would I have been appointed at the usual time. But the Observers had decreed that nothing could surpass what I had seen, and secretly, I had to agree. Still, it was not comfortable to be here, wearing the purple cloak and tunic which I had coveted so long. Making me more uncomfortable was the knowledge that Ard's eyes, burning with hatred, were fixed unwaveringly on me; I'd unguardedly glanced at the first row earlier and seen his face, darkened with rage.

My feverish thoughts circled round to the one thing I'd tried to keep them away from - my Observation. A pale light, winking on and off in the darkness. Innocent... just a light... but what it meant! Sweat broke out on my forehead just thinking about it. I remembered the nightmarish feel of it; slowly wrenching my gaze from the screen as if fighting paralysis, to look out of the window. It had taken me a few moments with my unaided eyes, but I had found it. The notion I'd tried to block from my mind earlier, when watching the eckloi, had intruded with a vengeance. The uncertain light outside the Pyramid makes it difficult to judge distances, but even the smallest child in training knows what lies in that direction. The thing that the old texts call 'the Dark Pyramid'.

A light where no light should be... I had stepped up close to the window to blot out the reflection of myself and the room; my shocked face like that of a stranger. Pressing my nose to the plexiglass, I had looked out. Yes, there to the north-west; a denser darkness and a great black shadow on the earth. And from its summit, that beacon winking on and off. Somehow I had torn myself from the window, my heart racing as if it would burst, and staggered to the intercom. In all my glowing fantasies, I'd never imagined anything like this. I'd fumbled for the switch and incoherently stammered out my report, knowing that the Observers had already seen it. But it was Procedure, and the Observation was now officially 'mine'.

Ever since the public announcement of my Obsevation, petitions had been flying back and forth through the levels of the Pyramid, demanding that the power to the public 'scopes be restored for the first time in generations. Everyone wanted to see the light for themselves. However, it had vanished by then and I don't think the Observers would have agreed anyway. But to partially satisfy the clamour, they played a copy of my recording over the public videocast system; an unusual event in itself. Normally, the vidcast is only used twice a year now - to transmit the Festival of the Completion Date celebrations and the Investiture of an Acolyte - an economy measure imposed long ago, to save on energy.

A hush gradually descended as the crowd caught sight of the Chief Observer, her disc-shaped headdress, which represents a 'scope, rising above her distinguished silver hair. In moments, there was absolute silence except for the humming of the air circulation vents and the click of one of the wall-mounted cameras. The hall was full to capacity but thousands more were watching on the public monitors. Investitures are always well attended as one of the few interruptions in the usual monotony, but there had been extra competition for seats this time. The responsibility weighed heavily on my shoulders.

Hoping my nervousness wouldn't show, I left my place and mounted the steps onto the stage, luckily without stumbling. I bowed as protocol required.

"Darcon, I hereby appoint you as Acolyte, watcher of the darkness, custodian of the viewscreens, keeper of the recording instruments." The words that had been spoken to so many others, that I had imagined being said to me in daydreams. And I felt no different - none of the elation, the sense of achievement I had always anticipated. The reality was not as good as the dream, after all.

While I puzzled over this, the Chief Observer turned to a young woman beside her who held a small cushion. On it rested a silver brooch, miniature of the Chief Observer's headdress. The mark of the Observer grade. But I found myself studying the young Acolyte who held it, while her elder's attention was diverted. Her hair was light brown, only a little darker than her golden skin, and her name was Maran - we had already been hurriedly introduced. It was she who had led me to the wardrobe master to be outfitted with my uniform. Maran, Acolyte of two years' standing; according to custom, the last Acolyte appointed, took charge of the next, and none had been invested last year. Then I turned my attention back to the ceremony as the Chief Observer stepped forward to pin the brooch to the breast of my tunic.

I bowed, then intoned the correct response. "I swear to Observe for the people of the Pyramid, to watch the darkness and to guard them from all danger." Then, my legs weak with reaction, I somehow stepped down from the stage and found my place in the ranks without crumbling to the floor. All I felt was relief that I had got through the ritual without stammering and disgracing myself and my mother. She had been given a place of honour in the front row, but I didn't look for her now in case I met Ard's stare of murderous envy.

As we filed from the hall, Maran slipped into her place in front of me. "What's wrong with you, Darcon?" she hissed. "You look as if you'd failed instead of getting the brooch. What I wouldn't have given for an Observation like yours!" I would have replied, but a junior Observer in front of us turned to look, lips pursed with disapproval. We continued along the corridor to the bank of elevators in silence.

Miserable, I wished I could explain. I almost wished that Ard had made Acolyte in my place rather than have had to see that evil light winking

on and off in the darkness.

By the time that Maran and I left the others, getting out at the Two Hundred and Seventieth Level, I felt a little better. While I entered the male Acolyte's dormitory, Maran waited outside. The room was dimly lit as always, and the curtains that normally gave privacy to each cubicle were pulled back. Normally, Third Shift would have been asleep at this time but they had all postponed their rest to be at the Investiture. Only a few unlucky individuals from First Watch - my own - had lost the draw and had to remain on duty.

For a moment I looked around in confusion, then spotted my few belongings piled on one of the beds. Quickly I removed my ceremonial cloak and stowed away my things. Everything had been arranged so quickly that I'd scarcely had time to go home, grab my belongings and see my mother. It had not really hit me yet how different my life would be, most of my time occupied by my new duties and in making new friendships.

But I would still be able to go and see my mother after duties if we both stayed on First. A whole new life. For a moment I felt like going to see the Chief Observer to tell her that I had made a big mistake. But that was just momentary panic. Ever since childhood I'd longed to be an Observer; most children do. None of the other jobs - no matter how vital - in hydroponics or the many recycling and reprocessing plants, or in maintenance - possess the prestige of the Observer grade.

By now, other Acolytes were drifting in, talking quietly among themselves and heading for their own beds. Most called brief congratulations which I shyly acknowledged. I still couldn't believe it myself. Seven hundred candidates; young men and women who would now have to choose one of those less glamorous occupations. I had been unbelievably lucky and couldn't help wondering if I would have been so fortunate all those millenia ago when the Pyramid had bustled with thriving millions. Thousands of candidates had taken their turn in those days, each allowed only a brief time and several 'scopes had been employed. Now we used only one and candidates had almost an entire shift; long enough to become bored and distracted, as I had discovered.

I roused myself, realising I'd fallen into one of my daydreams again, and hurried outside. Maran was impatiently tapping her foot. "Where have you *been*? We have to hurry." She turned on her heel and marched back to the elevators. My heart sank; I didn't think I'd made a good impression. Not that I stood much chance in the first place; my skin is not the attractive gold of most people my age but darker, making me look older than I really am. My eyes are a nondescript muddy brown, my nose too long. The best thing is my hair; glossy and black, it goes well with my darker skin colour. But I'm not vain about it, not wishing to follow Ard's example. The best looking male student in our year, he spent half his time admiring his reflection and the rest enjoying the admiration of female students. Sighing, I consoled myself with the knowledge that I now wore the purple and indigo of Acolyte as I followed Maran's tall, straight figure along the hallway.

Thankful for the rest, Kirk leaned against the rock, wishing he could remove his helmet and massage his aching shoulder muscles. The slight headache he had noticed earlier had developed into a steady pounding behind his forehead, as if a tiny sculptor were at work there. Other members of the party had complained of the same symptoms and were also showing signs of fatigue, so he had called this rest stop.

McCoy, moving among the group, was dispensing painkilling shots, using a hypo specially modified to penetrate the toughened fabric of the suits. At first, Spock had declined, but McCoy's keen eyes had detected tiredness in the Vulcan's movements during the journey, even if he could not see Spock's face clearly through his visor. Now he moved on to Kirk, adjusting his hypo for another shot.

Kirk beckoned him close then, switching of his radio, asked, "Is it serious, Bones?"

McCoy tapped his tricorder. "Not so far as I can tell from this. Leastways, not in the short term." He glanced round at the others to ensure that no-one was too close, then leaned closer. "Prolonged exposure, though, Jim - well, that's another thing. Some degree of disorientation is almost certain."

"Hmmm... Well, don't worry, Bones. It shouldn't be long before we reach the other pyramid."

McCoy turned his head, peering into the gloom. "Let's hope company doesn't pay us another visit."

"I think we scared them off - perhaps they'll associate our phaser fire with that forcefield and give us a wide berth. Non-red light must be pretty startling around here."

"I hope you're right, Jim."

Kirk could not help smiling. "What happened to your natural optimism, Bones?" Then, when his friend did not reply, "Taken your shot?" His own headache was beginning to recede already.

"Hmm?" McCoy had been looking in the direction of their goal; now he turned back and adjusted his hypo, self administering the painkiller with practiced hands that were not clumsy, despite the protective gloves. "Any ideas about that pyramid, Jim? It looks pretty lifeless to me."

"Hard to say, without going there," Kirk quipped, feeling sufficiently recovered for an exchange of banter. He glimpsed a wry grimace behind his friend's visor. "If you're concerned about disease organisms, we're all going through a full decontamination, remember?"

"Yeah - well, the sooner we get off this lump of rock, the better I'll like it," McCoy remarked with some asperity.

Kirk sighed despite himself, his thoughts echoing the doctor's words. Still, nothing had gone wrong so far, despite his initial misgivings. Providing that their luck held, they should be back on board inside five hours. The thought should have consoled him, but somehow it didn't...

5 THE DWELLER IN DARKNESS

Maran and I emerged from the elevator onto the Two Hundred and Seventy Fifth Floor, the highest level of our Pyramid. The first thing I noticed was the sheer space; high above, the great walls of the structure came together in their apex. The space beneath, consisting of one large room, was only dimly lit, to make the task of reading the many 'scope screens easier.

All my life, I'd dreamed of stepping out on to the floor, of seeing the massed banks of instruments, the 'scopes - each with its own attendant

- lining the four walls. This is the summit of our Pyramid, but we speak of it as the heart.

Many times I'd imagined this moment; a crowd of smiling faces, hands stretched out in welcome as the junior Observers would mill around me, their voices a babble of friendly greetings. Behind them, the senior Observers would stand with dignified mien but with quiet satisfaction on their dark faces as they relived their memories of when they, too, had been admitted to these hallowed ranks, many years ago.

But it was nothing like that.

Instead, an Acolyte, only a few years older than I, glanced up as we entered, then, uninterested, turned back to her instruments. And that was it; there was no stir of interest, not even stares of curiosity. It was as if they saw a new Acolyte every time cycle. I noticed Maran eyeing me with a look of wry sympathy and realised that she knew how I felt - because she'd felt this way too.

In silence, Maran led me to the banks of instruments at the centre of the room. Here were screens with control panels mounted beside them. She asked me to sit while she pulled across another chair and then went to fetch a tray of video recordings.

"These are old Observations," she explained. "Well, I say 'old', but they're quite recent, really. Only made in the last few centuries." She inserted a wafer-thin square into the slot in the control panel and tapped out a sequence. I watched intently... but was more interested in her slim fingers than in what she was doing. With an effort, I focused my attention on the screen in front of us. It had activated in the usual pattern of light and dark; as I watched, some eckloi wandered into view and the 'scope began to track them. "Not very interesting, but this is what we do most of the time," Maran continued. "We check the recordings. If they're routine, we pass them on to Borast. He's our direct superior, one of the junior Observers. If he concurs, he'll return them to us for erasure."

In the top right hand corner of the screen, figures in green showed the date and time of the Observation, the moments passing into oblivion with each ungainly step that the large creatures took. Strange to think that they had been dust for centuries - as had the Observer who had recorded this.

"Erasure?" I echoed stupidly. Lost in a daydream as usual, I'd obviously misunderstood.

"Yes, so that we can use them again."

This time it did get past my natural defences. My shock must have been obvious to her. Down in the lower levels we are taught to revere the Observers. Their Observations are carefully preserved over the millenia and studied... or so we were always told in training centre.

"It's not as bad as it sounds," Maran coaxed. "Tapes have always been erased. Once the Observers have analysed the candidates' recordings, for instance - "

"But that's because other copies exist!" I broke in, agitatedly, then realised that my raised voice was causing some of the junior Observers nearby to turn round. Struggling, I lowered it. "The Observers had their own copies of those."

Maran shrugged. "Anything of real significance is kept, Darcon. They just need the tapes, that's all."

All! I opened my mouth, but a junior Observer called Maran's name. She leaned across me to deactivate the screen, then hurried away. Dazed, I removed the ejected wafer. Recordings, digitally imprinted on mineral coated, microscopically thin wafers packed inside a tiny square... Funny how we still call them 'tapes'... and funny, too, how my mind pursues irrelevancies like that when I'm trying to avoid facing up to unpleasant facts. I looked up at the apex, lost in darkness, above me, almost expecting it to fall in on me. How could Maran be so indifferent? But the answer came immediately. She had had two years to get used to it. I tried to quell the sick feeling in my stomach as I remembered the lesson learned in training centre. A long time ago, the Observers had decided that there were no longer enough people to justify heating and lighting the entire Pyramid. The years of the Exodus had followed, during which everything moveable had been stripped from the lower one hundred and thirty five levels and transported to those higher up. Then, apart from the elevator shafts and the conduits that carry our power from its source deep in the volcanic bowels of the planet, the lower levels had been sealed off. The materials brought from them had been recycled or stockpiled for future use, and the instructors had assured us that there was no foreseeable shortage of anything... except energy. That alone placed a limit on the lifespan of our race.

But now... Tapes were being wiped and reused. And the apparent indifference - how long had it been going on? How long did we have left?

My doubts brought with them a forbidden thought... something that was to grow and to gnaw at the foundation of my faith in the Observers... in the tenets of Pyramid life itself. Maybe the Observers were a little too secluded from the rest of the people? Out of contact with ordinary feelings?

Maran, her errand done, returned and sat down to resume my instruction, but saw at once that I had still not recovered from my initial dismay. "What's wrong? Not still worried about the tapes, surely?"

I didn't answer directly. Instead, keeping my voice steady, I asked the one question that burned for an answer though I dreaded to hear my fears confirmed. "How far back have they been wiping?"

I waited for her to say 'the Completion Date'; Mother always maintained that, even as a child, I had a well developed streak of pessimism. But all Maran said was, "Thirty millenia."

I found I had been holding my breath and let it go. Thirty thousand years was nothing; a long while after the world dwindled to the cold, dark place it has become.

"You didn't think the first Observations had been wiped, did you?" Maran laughed, softly. "They're too full of interesting detail. Routine ones from darktime - that's all you'll be seeing on this." She tapped the screen.

Feeling a complete fool, I smiled. "Of course. Stupid of me."

She smiled in return, her warm brown eyes twinkling. Well, at least she found me amusing. "Ready?"

I nodded, and she leaned forward to activate the screen.

Kirk suppressed a sigh of weariness, concentrating on lifting one foot, placing it ahead and then following suit with the other. They had been walking for an hour and a half now, and the confinement of the suits, the need to stay constantly alert and, most of all, the disorientating effect of the lighting, had drained them all of energy. Twice now, fleeting traces of humanoids had been picked up on the tricorders but each time gone too quickly to gauge how many individuals were tracking them. For they were being followed, Kirk was convinced; his intuition had been too reliable in the past for him to ignore its promptings now. The creatures had learned caution, never coming in close, but the fact that they were out there somewhere was telling on the nerves of the party. A glance back at the others confirmed Kirk's earlier perceptions; although he could not see their faces clearly, he could tell by the leaden quality of their steps that they were tiring. He faced forward again; yes, even the Vulcan's movements were less spry than when they had first set out, although he never faltered.

Wait... what was that? Something small and clear. He blinked; perhaps it was a disturbance in his vision. He had better let Bones know if he got a chance; if it started affecting the others, they would all be in trouble. No, there it was again.

"Spock, do you see it?"

"Affirmative, Captain. The interference remains too prevalent for one hundred percent certainty, but I estimate the light to be emanating from the summit of the second pyramid."

"Hmmm - we'd better take this carefully, Spock." Well, it was a relief to know that the flashing white light had a basis in reality.

"Looks like I spoke too soon, eh, Jim?" McCoy's voice crackled on Kirk's suit radio. "They've fixed us a welcome committee." There was a pause while he checked his tricorder. "No sign of the humanoids. You don't think they could be behind it, do you?"

"I doubt it, Bones. From what we've seen, they seem to have regressed to a stone tool culture."

Vividly, Kirk recalled the upraised stone club brandished by the charging humanoid.

Before long, the light was looming higher and higher above them, its intermittent flashes causing startling shadows to leap into life, then vanish, only to reappear moments later. By its luminescence, the surface of the pyramid was revealed as jet black. Although the impression was only momentary, the light seemed to fall into it each time rather than be reflected. At last the tricorders were registering the gigantic structure but their information was scanty; its substance was metallic, but of an unknown kind, and since Spock's tricorder showed no surface corrosion, its quality was impressive. However, it defied all attempts by the party's instruments to penetrate beneath that surface, which Kirk suspected was due to an innate property of the material itself rather than the ever present interference.

As they drew near to the base, they encountered a fallen shape. Examination revealed it to be identical to the posts sited round the other pyramid; this had also had a protective forcefield. *What could have got through a barrier like that?* Kirk wondered. But perhaps the inhabitants had been hit by a more subtle attack - disease, perhaps?

The thin beam from above had picked out a hairline crack, extending from the base to a point approximately five metres above the ground. Spock

soon located another, seven metres from the first, and another connecting the two at their highest point. Presumably this was the way in.

"Well, we know one thing about the builders," McCoy drawled. "They had pretty big heads."

"Doctor," Spock responded in his most correct, humouring-the-idiot tone. "They would, no doubt, have required a large entrance in order to convey inside any sizeable items of machinery and other equipment. In addition, given the size of this structure, there were probably many millions of them and it would have taken several days to bring them all safely inside, even with a doorway as large as this."

"Or maybe they knew you were coming," McCoy retorted.

Diplomatically, Kirk stepped in. "Well, whatever the reason, this is a very impressive piece of construction. Any idea how we can get in, Spock?"

"It is logical to assume that the door mechanism was adjusted to operate only from the inside once the inhabitants had entered. Therefore it is probable that our phasers will be necessary, Captain."

Kirk detected the faint hint of regret in his friend's voice at the notion of damaging the alien architecture. But having come this far, they could not turn back without at least some of the answers. Kirk unclipped his phaser and ordered the others to prepare to synchronise their fire on a spot about half way up on the left of the doorway. But the command to fire died on his lips.

A sudden hum of hidden machinery made the whole party step back involuntarily as the massive door began to rise. It moved slowly but without any jerkiness or protest, giving no indication of decay, as they watched, phasers ready. Then the humming abruptly ceased as suddenly as it had begun and the door halted - at a height of just over a metre.

Above, the beacon continued to flash on and off, but failed to penetrate the inky black interior revealed beyond the low gap. Spock and the other scientists stepped closer, tricorders scanning, then reported that they could detect nothing inside.

Kirk nodded. "Spock, Easton, come with me. The rest of you - wait here." He ducked under the huge door, shadowed by Spock and the security guard, before McCoy could protest. Spock and Easton unclipped their torches and added their powerful white beams to Kirk's own. The large chamber in which they found themselves seemed to be merely a hallway, featureless except for the alcoves that lined its far wall. A thick layer of soft dust rose and swirled about their feet as they moved, but soon resettled in the thin atmosphere.

"Bones... it seems to be all right. You can bring the others in - " Before Kirk could finish, McCoy had joined them. Together, the landing party examined the alcoves; each contained a door with strange but identical symbols on the wall beside it.

"Elevators, Spock?"

"Logical," Spock replied, studying the symbols. He referred to his tricorder. "I can detect no power reading, unfortunately."

"Hmmm... " Kirk ran the beam of his torch over the nearby wall. "I don't suppose they thought of stairs?" A subdued hum greeted his words.



"Captain - " Spock's tone was even, yet Kirk, accustomed to the nuances of his friend's voice, detected an underlying urgency. Then he saw why; the door in front of Spock was beginning to rise.

"Get back, everyone," he ordered crisply. As Spock joined them by the still-open main entrance, Kirk murmured, "Are the tricorders completely unreliable now?"

"I think not, Captain. The substance from which these walls are made seems to be screening out a lot of the atmospheric interference. I did in fact detect a slight power surge at the moment that the door began to open - but not before."

"This place gets trickier by the second."

The door continued its slow glide upwards, the beams of their torches fixed upon it. There was a collective murmur as it finally halted.

The cubicle beyond was empty.

Kirk sensed the sighs of relief from the others. He did not relax, however. The sense of foreboding that had troubled him since the start of this assignment had grown stronger.

"I don't like this, Jim," McCoy said, beside him. "First the outer door - now this. And the beacon. It's as if someone's inviting us in - 'Come into my parlour,' as the spider said."

Privately, Kirk agreed. There was nothing he would rather do right now than march back to the shuttlecraft. But whatever the risk, he had a job to do. "Spock, Ensign Easton, come with me. Bones, we'll keep in constant contact - if we're not back in one hour, return to the shuttle and rendezvous with the Enterprise." He moved towards the open elevator, followed by Spock and the security guard. The one hour deadline would still allow the others two hours to get back.

A dark form trailed after them; Kirk turned and directed his torch at the man's chest. The familiar craggy features took on a strange, spectral appearance lit like this from beneath. Despite himself, Kirk shivered.

"Bones?"

"Jim, I'm coming with you."

"No, Bones - you're needed here. I hope I don't have to make that an order."

"All right, Jim, you win." Graciously conceding defeat, McCoy wandered back to join the others in their subdued, slightly nervous chatter. As the elevator door began to descend, sealing the Doctor and the others from view, Kirk felt an uneasy sensation in the pit of his stomach. Then the elevator began its smooth upward glide...

6 LET THERE BE LIGHT!

I sighed, leaned back in the chair and stretched.

"I warned you it was boring work," Maran said, ejecting the tape and placing it in a tray marked 'For Inspection'. "We can take a short recess now if you want."

I nodded and got up, following her past groups of chatting Observers and into the elevator. At the Two Hundred and Seventy First Level we got out and made for the Observers' meal hall. Obtaining our drinks from a dispenser, we sat down at the nearest table. Maran leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

"Maran," I began cautiously, recalling something she had said earlier as we had left the assembly hall.

"Hmm?" She did not open her eyes.

"That light - from the other pyramid. What do you think it means?"

"Means?" Her voice was lazy, as if she were not really listening.

Yes... " My heart was thudding with fear. "Who - or what - is behind it? What do they want?"

Maran shrugged. "No one knows. Not likely to find out, either." She crossed her legs, idly swinging one foot.

"But... wouldn't you like to find out? I mean - remember the expedition - the one that vanished last time the light came on."

"Good reason for not wanting to find out, surely?" She opened her eyes, a puzzled frown on her face.

"I - I thought you - you might be interested. What you said before - that you'd have given anything to have seen it - "

"Oh, did I say that? Yes, perhaps... It would've looked good on my report, that's all. Meant promotion a year or two early, maybe. But I don't want to *know* about it. Do you?"

Heart sinking, I listened and saw the growing doubt and suspicion in her eyes. "No, of course not," I said quickly. "They - they said to watch out for instability - they told us that in training centre."

Maran suddenly laughed, breaking the tension between us. "You had me worried for a moment! You thought I was unstable! I'd better be more careful what I say in future."

I smiled, relieved that my standard excuse had worked. Mother's always said I'd be unlucky some day; I remembered how she'd shielded me when I was a child - her halting explanations of how I was just mischievous, just teasing my classmates when I spoke about the dark pyramid or going outside. I also remember the coldness in their clear brown eyes as they listened, then agreed that correction was not necessary - yet. Then she had taken me back to our apartment and smacked me, tears in her eyes, because they would know if she did not and it would have meant a worse beating by my tutors. I didn't fully understand then what 'correction' meant, but the word had always filled me with dread.

A sudden announcement on the speaker system made us sit up sharply. "All Acolytes and Observers to the Observation Level immediately." Before it could be repeated, we were already out of the door and running for the elevator.

During the short ride upwards, Maran wondered aloud. "What could have happened? That's only the second general announcement since I've been here - the first was for your light." Then the door opened and we stepped out. All the 'scope screens were activated, each with a cluster of Observers around it. Maran hurried away to join the other Acolytes but I wandered

over to one of the vast windows, searching. Yes, there it was again! Heart hammering, I rushed over to Maran.

"You see what your talk has done, Darcon?" she said, grinning. For a moment my heart sank but then I realised that she was only teasing. There was an answering grunt from one of the Acolytes, a big fellow seated at the screen beside us, but he did not look round. 'My' beacon winked on and off, bringing my dangerous curiosity to the fore again; who could be responsible? Not eckloi; they had fire, but this was clear, white light. I glanced anxiously at the faces around me but they were composed, showing only a vague professional interest. When the light merely continued to blink on and off, they began to drift away, bored. Only the one at the screen - assigned there on duty - remained with me. I looked round at the other screens and saw that the other Observers had also returned to their posts, so I reluctantly rejoined Maran.

She was inserting another tape into the panel. "Back to work?" I asked.

"Of course. We can't watch that thing all workshift; it's boring, anyway."

I nodded, keeping my thoughts to myself. For years, I had found it very difficult to accept that other people had no curiosity, no interest beyond their regular round of duties, leisure time and sleep. Things like this light were not just forbidden - others simply had no interest in them. Blank indifference. I tried to cultivate that exterior, but it was difficult - and occasionally my mask slipped as it had done earlier with Maran. Because I'd misunderstood a chance remark, I had come close to being hauled away to the Physicians for correction. I shivered and pulled my chair closer, to mask the reaction. With an outward confidence that I certainly didn't feel, I prepared to study the next record.

The ride up in the elevator took place in an uncomfortable silence. Kirk tried hard not to think of their chances of escaping from the elevator car if the door refused to open.

At last, though, the hum of machinery died and the door slid slowly upwards. Without waiting for it to open fully, Spock stepped out, scanning for life forms -

The door descended with amazing speed. Only Kirk's quick reflexes catapulted him beneath it, the metal just missing the soles of his feet by millimeters. Spock turned, and helped him to his feet. With one accord, they jabbed at the panel beside the door, but the humming sound had already returned.

"Evidently the invitation was meant for us alone, Captain."

"Or you alone. I think I just had the edge on it." Kirk resolutely refused to envisage the result if he had not.

"Jim? Spock? What in tarnation's going on up there? We've just had Easton on to us - the elevator's bringing him back."

"Yes, Bones - turn your volume down a little, will you?" Kirk knew the effect that the Doctor's excited outburst would have had on Spock's sensitive ears.

"Wha - Oh. Sorry, Jim. This better?"

"Much." Kirk directed his torch at the nearest wall, as the Vulcan was already doing. The lift shaft apparently ended here; the four faces of the pyramid sloped upwards, but their convergence was too high overhead for the light to reach. Through a vast window directly ahead, they could see a blaze of white light; the upper portion of the larger pyramid. The dimmer forcefield at its base could not be seen from this distance, however.

"Bones, I think we're at the summit. It appears to be one large room..."

"Anything else, Jim?" McCoy sounded worried.

"Not yet... I'll keep talking." Kirk went over to where his First Officer was examining the surface of a bank of instruments. "There are instrument panels, Bones... as far round as my torch will reach. Make anything of them, Spock?"

"Fascinating... According to my tricorder readings, these consoles are six million years old - approximately."

"Six... Any chance of error, Spock?"

"Negative. The atmospheric interference is being screened out by the material used in this building's construction. The consoles themselves appear to be constructed of an unknown alloy, one extremely resistant to corrosion."

Kirk traced a gloved hand over the panel surface, wiping away thick dust. The metal beneath was pitted but amazingly well preserved considering its vast age. "They built to last," he murmured, again playing his torch over the nearest consoles, the further ones just bulks in the darkness. No remains of the inhabitants or of any other artefact of theirs; their atoms probably formed the dust drifting around his feet.

Spock had laid his torch down on the console while he cleared more of its surface. "Captain, I believe this was a scanner of some kind."

Joining him again, Kirk saw the cracked panel of glass or a synthetic equivalent.

"Then the inhabitants of the surviving pyramid probably take a similar interest in the outside world," he commented.

"Jim? What is it? What've you found?"

"It's all right, Bones. This seems to have been a nerve centre for observing life outside."

"Well, not much else to do on a planet like this, Jim." McCoy was obviously trying to sound cheerful but Kirk could detect the concern beneath. He, too, was feeling decidedly ill at ease. To cover it, he said, "Care to speculate on what happened here, Spock?"

"Well, Captain, the structure itself appears intact. I fail to see how primitive humanoids of the type we have encountered could gain access to the pyramid unless they had help from within; therefore, I submit that an epidemic of a deadly disease would be the most probable explanation."

"Bones, has your tricorder detected any organism that might - ?"

"No, Jim, nothing. The place seems sterile. Of course, if it happened millions of years ago, there wouldn't be any trace."

"Another possibility, Captain, is that they experienced an irreversible power loss; for instance, that they were dependent upon geothermic forces which became exhausted."

"Yes... they built in the wrong place, overestimated the energy available... unseen factors, maybe." As Kirk spoke, he realised how unusual it was for the Vulcan to offer explanations on so little evidence; it was contrary to his customary scrupulous preference to wait for more data. Could his friend also be speaking to cover nervousness? He could no longer deny it in himself; the uneasy feeling which had increased since they entered the pyramid was now building by the second. He moved towards the elevator. "You could be right; there could just have been enough residual power left in the system to operate the door and the elevator; maybe they were triggered by our voices." He pressed the panel by the door, willing the elevator to activate. "Anyway, that hour's nearly up; we'd better be getting back to the Enterprise."

"Jim - "

Spock, calling him by name; but his voice - strained, barely recognisable.

Kirk sensed, rather than saw, the nimbus of light that materialised behind him. He spun, flinging up his arm instinctively to protect his eyes, and tried to get closer.

The light was burning, burning his mind... He couldn't see Spock - the light was too bright. He tried to step closer... Agony, his mind -

As Kirk collapsed to his knees, McCoy's voice barked in his ears. "Jim! What is it? Jim! Jim!"

Then it was gone, drowned in static.

7 THE PLACE OF PAIN AND DESPAIR

"Chief Observer... Something appears to be happening in the other pyramid."

I pushed back my chair and ran to the window, quite forgetting my unnatural excitement. But my action went unnoticed as the others followed, though not so rapidly. The whole summit of the other pyramid was ablaze with light!

My fingers clenched on the edge of a console in front of me and I felt cold sweat break out on my skin. Whatever that light was, I felt it meant evil. I shuddered. Then the light was gone, plunging the land into night. The others turned away, shrugging, but I remained at the window, the pattern of light still burned on to my eyes.

The blinding white light faded. Groaning, Kirk raised his head, trying to remember where he was. Then he saw Spock in the light of his fallen torch and forgot all else.

The Vulcan was standing rigidly, head tilted back. It was too dark to see his face through the visor, but Kirk knew instinctively that something was wrong - very wrong. He stretched out a hand towards his friend. "Spock - ?"

"Jim? Jim, are you O.K.?" McCoy's voice burst against his ears.
"Jim, what the devil's happening up there?"

"Bones," Kirk said softly, fearing to disturb the Vulcan's unnatural rigidity. There was a sense of unreality about this, as if they were both part of a tableau arranged for someone else's entertainment.

"Jim, are you all right?"

"I think so... Bones, there was a light a moment ago - around Spock. It's gone, but he... I think something's wrong." Carefully he got to his feet and approached Spock.

"Jim, be careful. We don't know what it is. *Something* killed the people here - "

"You don't have to remind me, Bones," Kirk replied quietly. Mentally he cursed himself for not acting on his inner warning voice. But what could he have done? Told Starfleet that he had 'feeling' that this planet should be left alone? He reached out for his friend's torch, still lying on the console, and cautiously directed the beam at the elevator door. The reflected radiance from the silver metal showed him the Vulcan's face, turned in profile to him. The eyes were shut, head tilted back, lines of strain and suffering thrown into sharp relief. Then he moaned; a sound of pain and despair that shook Kirk to his heart.

"Spock!" he pleaded.

The Vulcan's head slowly turned towards him, the eyes still closed. Suddenly they opened. Kirk stepped back in shock, staring. Spock's eyes were no longer eyes -

They were burning orbs of white light.

As Kirk watched in horror, blue flames sprang from the floor, flickering and weaving themselves around the body of his First Officer, growing taller until they writhed around Spock's shoulders. Spock - or whatever now wore his body - stood unmoved, unharmed by the strange fire. The flames grew still higher, dancing round his head but never obscuring the terrible intensity of the twin beams that lanced from his eyes.

Dimly, Kirk was aware of McCoy's voice clamouring in his ears, demanding to know what was happening, but a conviction was rapidly growing inside him that he knew the purpose of that azure energy. as he launched himself towards Spock, the flames billowed out into a circular field -

- and abruptly winked out.

Shaken, I began to turn away from the window when something else caught my eye. Another light from the dark pyramid; softer this time... blue. My throat dried; should I speak, draw the others' attention to it? Wouldn't that make me stand out again - make it obvious that I alone still remained at the window? As I stood there, torn by indecision, I heard a muffled exclamation of surprise from the deep voice of the Acolyte at his screen beside me.

"Another light, Chief Observer - "

Again there was a migration to the windows, accompanied by muttered speculation. I heard satisfied comments about the gratifying range of new Observations. Moments later, the blue light flickered out. I blinked,

half dazed, and turned away with the others, back to my station. I had forgotten Maran, and waited for her to question why I had not returned to work after the last interruption, but, apart from a puzzled look, she did not allude to it.

Time passed; I found it hard to concentrate on work that only bored me when there was something mysterious - dangerous but fascinating - going on in that other pyramid.

Yes, I reminded myself. *Something that might as well be happening on the other side of the planet.* Dark and cold separated it from us more effectively than distance.

At last it was time for the first meal break. Some of the others came with us to the meal hall but the remainder stayed at their posts; like all other tasks in our society, Observing was carried out according to rota. We were joined at our table by the burly young Acolyte I had noticed earlier; a glance revealed three rings at his belt. So, he had been chosen the year before Maran.

"Darcon, this is Vars," Maran introduced us. We nodded politely to each other."

"Your fame has preceded you, Darcon," he remarked in the voice that seemed to originate deep within his powerful chest. I shrugged, feeling embarrassed. "Never mind," he continued. "They'll forget all about you once this is over."

"Over?"

"The lights. They stopped before, after all. Once whatever or whoever it is realises that we won't be stupid enough to send another party."

"Oh, yes." He was referring to the story I had mentioned to Maran, which we had been told in training school. The first time that the beacon had been seen, a party had been sent to investigate, but had never returned. "Yes, I'm sure you're right," I said, doing my best to sound uninterested. "I'd have preferred to have seen something ordinary, though; I'm not used to being the centre of attraction." Of course, by that I meant *official* attention, since I certainly couldn't complain of being mobbed. But the sooner the people in power forgot about me, the better I would like it.

Our meal proceeded, interspersed with conversation. As we finished, the bell sounded, signalling the end of mealbreak and we headed back for the elevators. Stepping into the waiting car, Maran said, "I think you can manage by yourself now, Darcon."

"Oh... all right." My face must have dropped at the prospect of an even more boring time without the pleasant distraction my tutor provided.

And so it proved; it seemed to take for ever to empty my rack of tapes into an inspection tray. But finally two chimes overhead announced the commencement of Second Shift. I leaned back in my chair, stretched, and rubbed at my stiff shoulder muscles.

A voice against my ear startled me. "Don't let the Observers catch you relaxing; we're still on duty till Second get here." It was Vars. Nodding, I quickly sat up straight, and noticed Maran looking over and grinning. Feeling foolish, I smiled back.

Within a few sub units, the Second Shift was spilling out of the

elevators; our signal to go.

"Come on, lazy." Maran slapped me on the shoulder. I quickly got up and followed, packing into the car with a host of other Acolytes and junior Observers. "I'm going for a stroll... like to come?" she asked. Pleased, I nodded.

We got out at the Two Hundredth Level with some of the others, and headed for the public walkway that spanned the Pyramid's four sides at this point. Many others, also newly come from their duties, were already taking exercise. The others of our grade headed off in the opposite direction, leaving Maran and me alone. As we walked slowly along, a sense of gloom began to descend on me; one of the moods I was prone to.

"You seem preoccupied, Darcon. Not still worrying about that light? It can't harm us."

I shrugged, trying to shake off my mood. Before I could reply, however, I noticed some sort of disturbance in the distance. Shouts of alarm began to echo faintly down the walkway, rebounding off its high ceiling. "Something's wrong - " I began, but Maran had already broken into a run, her indigo shoes pattering softly on the metal floor.

By the time we got there, quite a crowd had gathered. We halted on the outskirts, a little out of breath, listening to the nervous mutterings.

"What is it? What's wrong?" I asked. Those nearest us turned, and seeing our indigo and purple garments, drew back deferentially to let us through.

"I'm not sure, Observers," said one man, nervously. "A - a devil, someone said. From the Dark Pyramid - "

"Nonsense!" My own fear made me snap out a denial in self-defence. "Nothing can get inside - "

The man shook his head, worriedly. "I'm not sure, Observer, it's only what I heard - "

Maran was already making her way into the heart of the crowd, her passage easy due to the distinctiveness of her garments. "Come on, Darcon," she called impatiently. I quickly followed. At last only a few people stood between us and the clear central area of the mass. I caught a glimpse of two tall, bland-faced figures, side by side; their domed caps, green in colour, sent a shiver down my spine. Attendants to the Physicians; I didn't want to get any closer to them. I reached out to grab Maran, but she had already reached the front of the crowd. Reluctantly, I eased a little nearer. Now I could see that they held someone between them; his head was bowed and he slumped on his knees as if unconscious. But I could see right away that he was a stranger... his clothes were wrong. That did it. Drawn by my damning curiosity, I peered over the shoulder of the woman in front of me, for a better view.

The man groaned. Frightened, the crowd drew back though the Attendants were unmoved. They didn't even spare him a glance, their gaze being directed over the heads of the people, obviously waiting for the arrival of their superior. I heard another low moan and suddenly realised that the Attendants had bent the stranger's arms behind him; no doubt he was in some pain. Slowly he raised his head. There was a collective gasp from the edge of the crowd.

"Back - back!" came a terrified shout.

Immediately, there were screams and outcries. Driven by those around me, I was forced to back away too, my brain reeling and my gaze riveted to that upturned face.

At first, it was the colour that struck me... I suppose what struck everyone. We're used to a wide range of skin tones - from the pale yellow of the new-born right through the golden brown of the young and mature to the steady darkening of age. But this... an unhealthy, unnatural, pale... nothingness. Only the hair and eyes held any colour and even those I didn't notice, just the skin. Forcing myself to look away, I noticed that one of the Attendants held some kind of headdress in his free hand; silver, like the stranger's suit. I looked back at the pale man; he seemed dazed, his eyes roaming restlessly as if trying to focus.

Growing more and more frightened, the crowd pulled further back. The angry shouts of citizens at the rear, demanding to know what was wrong, gradually died into silence while the Attendants eyed us with cool contempt. The screams of fear subsided, leaving an unnatural quiet. Then there was a renewed disturbance at the back of the crowd. More frightened murmuring followed and glancing behind me, I saw why. The tall green headdress of a Physician loomed over the heads of the citizens, who visibly seemed to shrink into themselves as they drew back to give him passage. The Physician stepped up to the stranger. With a visible effort, the latter fixed his bleary eyes on the face beneath the headdress.

"So, something from Outside?" the Physician pondered aloud. He looked to the taller of his Attendants. "Where was it found?"

"In an alcove near the elevators, Physician." I noted the uneasy respect in the Attendant's voice. "A citizen reported it. When we arrived, it was unconscious."

"And you brought it onto a public walkway instead of taking it straight up in the elevator?" The Physician's tone was heavily sarcastic. "Perhaps you wished to educate our good citizens - you don't think the training centre does an adequate job?"

"N...no, Physician." The Attendant's cool poise had risen a few degrees. "We were informed that you were taking exercise on this level, and since you were the nearest Physician to take charge... " His voice trailed off uncomfortably.

The Physician glanced quickly round at our carefully neutral faces, his impatience obvious. But he must have decided not to reprimand his staff in front of us, because he merely snapped, "Follow me," before stalking away towards the nearest exit. The crowd hastily parted for him, and his Assistants pulled the stranger to his feet. As they forced him, stumbling between them, I heard an almost incoherent murmur.

"Spock? Where's Spock?"

Then they were gone, and with loud, nervous chattering, the crowd slowly broke up and drifted away in small groups. I looked round and saw Maran, gazing anxiously about. Thankful for a familiar face, I dodged between citizens to rejoin her.

"Darcon, what was it? Horrible... " She shivered in the warm, temperature-regulated air, wrapping her arms around herself.

"I think we'd better report this to the Chief Observer," I said, feeling shaky myself. Together, we make for the nearest exit.

It was a relief when he could stop at last and sink onto a hard bench, pillowing his head on his arm. The room around him continued to drift in and out of focus, the silver-grey metals of the walls and the glare of the harsh overhead light making his head ache. After a while, however, it subsided and he was able to think clearly again.

Spock. Where was he? Kirk tried to concentrate, going over the sequence of events in his mind. He remembered exploring a large room... then he was here, held painfully in the grip of two very real, well-muscled specimens. So what had happened in between? Cautiously, he sat up, relieved that the room remained steady. Why did he feel that there was something incredibly important that he had forgotten? He tried to remember but the more he strained to do so, the more elusive that memory became. All he was left with was a vague impression that it had something to do with Spock...

A section of the wall in front of him slid upwards into the ceiling, and a tall shape wearing a conical green headdress stepped in. Kirk caught a glimpse of a heavily built figure in green tunic and trousers and domed cap in the room or corridor beyond before the door slid down, leaving him alone with his visitor. Hands clasped before him and almost hidden by the full, hanging sleeves of his outer robe, the newcomer eyed Kirk intently. Kirk returned his scrutiny as best he could, determined that his captor should not place him at a psychological disadvantage. The other's face was smooth and unlined, the fringe of silver hair protruding beneath the headdress starkly visible against his dark skin. Young or old? Kirk was well aware of the dangers of jumping to conclusions based upon Human physiology and social customs. The man's dark eyes continued to study Kirk from head to toe. Finally, the alien spoke.

"What are you?"

"My name is James Kirk. I'm - "

"I didn't ask your name, I asked *what* you are!" the alien snapped.

"A stranger." Mindful of the Prime Directive, Kirk racked his brains for a point of origin that it would be safe to tell this man. Obviously he could hardly pretend to be a denizen of the cold and cheerless plain outside; that would not fool these people for a moment.

"Yes, I know." The man's voice held a note of malice... unless that was Kirk's own imagination. "From the Dark Pyramid."

Kirk stared back, while his mind raced down pathways of thought. Evidently, he must be in the other pyramid - the inhabited one. "You brought me here?"

The other's face twisted in vindictive triumph. "You condemn yourself! I thought you would attempt to deceive us - to pretend you had come from some other Pyramid far away."

Kirk's heart sank; he had really blown it. But if he had not, he realised, it would have made little difference. Any answer he could have come up with would have been twisted to fit this man's preconceived ideas. He forced himself not to draw back as the alien thrust his body forward, leaning intimidatingly above the Captain.

"How did you get in?"

Something was coming back to Kirk... Light. Perhaps it was best to tell the truth on that score. "There was a... light," he began slowly. "A

white light, then... blue flames. I don't remember... They came at me, or - I fell into them."

The alien straightened up with what in a Human would have been a smirk of satisfaction. "Good. That agrees with the reports supplied by the Observers. Lights of the colours you describe were seen in the Dark Pyramid. Now all you have to do is tell me the rest - why are you here and what lives in that place? What is the nature of the master you serve?"

"I don't know anything more," Kirk said, effecting a helplessness he was not far from feeling. "I'm a stranger... I wandered near that darkened pyramid... the door opened and I went in... "

"Enough of your lies!" A look of blind fury seized his captor's face, but as Kirk tensed, expecting a blow, the other subsided. "You'll tell us soon enough," he said, contenting himself with a malevolent smile. "The instruments of truth and obedience shall be prepared." Chuckling unpleasantly, he returned to the blank wall which rose almost silently. In a moment, he was gone.

8 ORDEAL BY QUESTION

I tapped the floor restlessly with my foot, unable to relax, while my fingers played with the hem of my tunic, twisting and untwisting it.

"Oh, sit still, Darcon!" Maran was as nervous as I, I realised, though she showed it as bad temper. With an effort, I stilled my foot and clasped my hands together. Maran stood up. "If only we knew what was happening! The Chief Observer's been gone so long!"

"I'm sure she'll make an announcement when she gets back," I said, trying to console her.

"I suppose you're right. If only it hadn't taken us so long to find her." She sighed and glanced at the wall chronometer. "Well... it's nearly Third Bell. I think I'll get to bed. Fair rest, Darcon."

The hour had passed. Since the sudden loss of communications with Kirk, the landing party had attempted to force open one of the elevators, but their phasers had failed even to mark it.

"We can't just abandon Jim and Spock," McCoy raged.

Awkwardly, Lt. Masters reminded him of the Captain's directive. "There's nothing else we can do here, Doctor. Maybe the ship's sensors will be able to find them."

Doubtfully, McCoy was forced to give in. There were other lives to be considered. "All right, Lieutenant," he said heavily.

Brk waved Brk First Daughter back impatiently. "It is not time." What did her First Daughter know of the concerns of a chief? She was not even old enough to have a name. "The creatures are still inside. Wait."

Brk First Daughter subsided sulkily, settling back into cover, her

stone club brandished aggressively in her brawny fist. Brlk glanced back; two large, liquid eyes blinked sleepily above the shoulder of one of the males. Satisfied that Brlk Second Daughter was safe, Brlk settled down to watch.

She did not have long to wait. The strange glittering creatures emerged slowly from the mouth of the dark mountain, pausing indecisively for a moment before forming into a group and moving off towards Brlk and her band. She sensed the tribe stir around her but a quick hand signal ordered them to silence. The creatures must be clear of the mountain and their escape cut off to ensure success.

Brlk eyed the dark structure with superstitious dread; a thing of ill, it was normally given a wide berth by the People. And something was wrong. Brlk knew with the wordless conviction characteristic of her kind that a slumbering evil had stirred again, to disturb the land once more. Her kind's intelligence had been dimmed like their sun, but not extinguished. Without knowing why, she linked the strange lights and these silver creatures; they must be from the other mountain, though they had not been seen to emerge. But the light they used as weapon confirmed that; when the stricken members of the tribe had returned, dazed and confused, one had been killed by his terrified comrades before Brlk could call order with her club. The returned ones were not wraiths of the dead, she had declared; no-one could die twice. It could only mean that the power of the creatures was weakened - and perhaps their barrier, too, could no longer kill. Young and foolish, Grom First Daughter had rushed off to try it for herself and been slain by its invisible death. So there were now two deaths to be avenged. And there would be meat, too, a welcome change from the tasteless, fibrous branches that formed the staple diet of the People. Yes, there would be a foretaste of the great feast which would one day befall the descendents of Brlk's kind.

The opening in the dark mountain was closing now and the creatures were very near. Brlk tensed, gripping her club more tightly...

Lt. Masters frowned as her tricorder registered humanoid readings. "Doctor," she said urgently. "Humanoids - "

"Phasers - "

As McCoy spoke, the large shaggy forms broke cover just ahead and lumbered towards them. Phaser beams stabbed out and two keeled over, but this time the others kept coming - no longer afraid. Some detached portion of McCoy's mind absorbed this evidence of their adaptability even as he unclipped his phaser and fired -

A club felled Easton with a sickening thud, audible even through the Doctor's helmet. The botanist, Armitage, screamed as another humanoid wrestled him to the ground. McCoy dropped one of the attackers and had to leap out of its way as momentum carried it forward. The unconscious humanoid hit the ground heavily behind him. Scrambling to his feet, the Doctor froze in horror at another scream from the botanist, seeing the crude stone knife descend. He recovered and fired, the humanoid collapsing across Armitage. As he started forward to help, a club caught him a glancing blow on the skull and he went down, unaware of the beam that hit his young attacker.

Dazed, McCoy got slowly up, staggering a little with dizziness. Shiels, one of the other security guards, came over and helped him across to a small boulder on which he sat gratefully. Sensing the man hovering

anxiously over him, McCoy waved him away. "I'm all right, Ensign. See to the others."

After a few moments he had recovered sufficiently to check his tricorder and medikit; luckily both were undamaged. He got up and went over to Shiels.

"Easton's dead, sir - his skull's been crushed. Armitage is in a bad way."

McCoy nodded, looking round at the other crewmembers who were all getting shakily to their feet or helping others. Speedily, he administered a painkilling shot to Armitage. The Lieutenant's eyes opened muzzily and he lifted a hand towards McCoy.

"Rest easy, Armitage. We'll get you back to the shuttle - " As he spoke, the Doctor knew it was hopeless; the young botanist would never survive the journey. Armitage moaned softly, his hand falling limply to his side. The Doctor's scanner confirmed what his senses told him. He got slowly to his feet and, in answer to the security guard's question, shook his head. Then he went over to check the others.

Masters had sustained bruises and abrasions but insisted that she was fine. Hjortsberg the geologist had, McCoy suspected, a dose of concussion, but treatment would have to wait until they were clear of this hostile environment. Reluctantly, he had to agree to the suggestion made by Shiels that the two dead men be given makeshift burial under rough cairns of stones, since the party's reduced strength made it impossible to return the bodies to the shuttle. This was done by Masters and the two remaining security guards as quickly as possible and then the party moved off, leaving the stunned humanoids already beginning to stir.

Chief Observer Temara tapped her foot impatiently, her gaze fixed on the blank wall opposite. Through that doorway, two time units ago, had gone an Attendant, supposedly to inform the Chief Physician of her presence. She had bristled under the woman's scarcely veiled insolence and her anger was now building to a peak. She was not accustomed to being kept waiting. It was now nearly one point five past Third Bell; usually she would be in her bed, fast asleep.

At last the door slid upwards and a tall figure stepped through. The man's clothes - under-robe of pale green and over-robe of dark green - showed him to be a Physician while the silver emblem on his tall conical headdress proclaimed him Chief of that grade. Despite her own exalted rank, Temara had to quell a momentary uneasiness that was legacy of her childhood training.

"Chief Observer Temara," the Physician said, smiling, but his dark eyes remained cold.

"Chief Physician Senro." She waited for him to enquire as to the purpose of her visit.

"You wished to see me... An official matter?"

"Yes. I've been informed that you have a stranger in your custody - a very odd looking stranger."

A flicker of annoyance crossed Senro's face. "Yes, that is correct. I believe the creature originates from the Dark Pyramid."

Temara suppressed the exclamation that hovered on her lips, her outward calm matching Senro's own. "How did he come here?"

"Unknown... at present. It is undergoing questioning for the moment; I am in personal charge of the examination. That is all I can tell you."

"I see." That, she realised, was why she had been kept waiting; Senro's enthusiasm for questioning was well known. Careful not to show her distaste, she asked, "When will it be possible for us to see him?"

Senro frowned. "You will receive a report of our findings. It is unnecessary for you to see the creature, Temara. Your business is Observation of life outside the Pyramid, not internal security. That is my province."

Temara felt a warning tingle down the nape of her neck. Was it possible that the Observers had lost contact with daily life? What had the Physicians been doing while her people stared out into the darkness? Such arrogance towards the holder of her office did not bode well. Summoning every shred of will, she retorted, "This *does* concern us, Senro. You say the stranger comes from the Dark Pyramid - well, that is one of our special objects of Observation. You must be aware that a large number of phenomena have been Observed from there recently - the lights. This stranger must be able to account for them and clear up several mysteries on file." She awaited his next objection but, to her surprise, none was forthcoming.

"Very well. You may visit - once questioning is over. Providing the creature survives, of course."

Temara nodded. "I shall require unrestricted right of access for myself and my staff."

Senro frowned momentarily but still did not demur. "So be it. The visits will take place under the supervision of a senior Attendant... in case the creature shows violence."

"Of course. Though I doubt if he'll be capable of violence after questioning."

Senro smiled nastily. "I'm glad you appreciate our efficiency."

Kirk lay back in the reclining chair, too weak to fight the restraints. Sweat bathed his whole body, staining the simple grey tunic he now wore. His arms still trembled, the nerves strained by the intensity with which his hands had gripped the armrests. As his heart slowed, he reluctantly opened his eyes, squinting against the brightness of the overhead lighting. Without moving his head, he looked from side to side; there was no sign of his tormentor and he breathed out a sigh of relief. Then, cautiously, he raised his head as far as the restraint across his chest would allow, to see more of the room. The dispassionate gaze of an Attendant met his own, but the man made no move to prevent his scrutiny. Slowly, Kirk looked round, noting the instrument banks so recently employed in monitoring his pain levels and in analysing his physical responses. Throughout the torture, he had stuck to his story, flimsy though it was. He was a traveller from another pyramid, whose curiosity had led him in search of other communities, and who had wandered into the darkened pyramid. His tormentor, whose name appeared to be Senro, did not believe a word of it, naturally, but under the devices used on him so far - which operated by inflicting high intensity pain - his command training would not break. He knew he would die before he broke the Prime Directive... which



wouldn't be long if the torture continued. If it had been only himself at risk, he could have accepted it fatalistically. But Spock was in danger. If he had also been transported here by the strange lights, he must be in hiding - possibly hurt - forced to avoid the inhabitants because of the Prime Directive.

Kirk frowned. Something at the back of his mind, about Spock, was nagging at him again. Something wrong... wait... he had seen Spock, enveloped in the white light, before the blue flames had appeared. White light, burning in his mind - so what had it done to Spock?

The door slid open, Senro's tall headdress ducking beneath it. The man advanced until he stood at Kirk's left, looking down at him with a mocking smile. "You are highly honoured," he began smoothly. "No less a person than the Chief Observer herself has asked to see you. Perhaps I'll postpone the next session for a while... we don't want to disappoint her, do we?" When Kirk failed to answer, he continued, his hard, malevolent eyes seeming to bore in the Captain's. "I know you feel pain, creature. My instruments register it. So why not spare yourself fresh agony by telling me what I want to know?"

"I've already told you everything. I came here by accident - I mean no harm to you or your people - "

"My people?" Senro chuckled. "I imagine you mean the rabble, the assorted citizenry? Yes, they are mine in a way, since they all fear me and my staff. Even the Observers... Yes, it was very satisfying, to see the uneasiness in Temara's eyes." He spoke musingly as if to himself, then, recollecting his task, his voice hardened. "Well, perhaps I shall discontinue this questioning until they've seen for themselves. They may get more out of you - though I doubt it." He turned away to speak into an intercom. "Wake senior Attendant Lilan and tell her to report to correction therapy immediately."

A short while later the door slid open and another figure entered, wearing the green tunic and trousers of a Physician's Attendant, but possessing the unmistakably finer features of a woman beneath the green cap. Kirk blinked back his surprise; somehow he had not expected women to belong to this torturer's caste. Spock would be perfectly justified, he realised, in criticising such an outmoded, illogical assumption.

"Lilan, I want you to take charge of this subject. Take it to the holding cells and restrain it - it is to have no food or water until two units past First Bell. Since I expect important visitors to examine it, you must remain on duty for the present."

"I understand, Chief Physician." The woman eyed Kirk with curiosity and a little distaste.

Senro turned to Kirk again. "Discomfort may help to loosen your tongue." He turned back to the intercom. "Laboratory, is the report on the creature's garments ready yet?" A nervous voice at the other end replied in the affirmative. "I'm on my way down." Senro swept towards the door which rose to allow him passage. Lilan approached Kirk, her face as dispassionate as those of the other attendants he had seen. She released his restraints with a small control box at her belt. Kirk still could not move, trying to gain control of his unsteady limbs.

"Get up," the woman commanded but with no inflexion in her voice. Gritting his teeth, only pride motivating him, Kirk slowly obeyed, leaning on the chair as a wave of dizziness briefly washed over him. Lilan waited for Kirk to step slowly to the door, hanging back for him to precede her; evidently she had no fear that her charge would attempt escape. Kirk had

to admit to himself that he was as weak as a kitten. Only now was the ache in every abused nerve in his body subsiding.

Slowly, they made their way through featureless corridors, women and men in green tunic and trousers hurrying past them on errands. Finally, Lilan ordered him to halt, and operated her control box. A door slid upwards, revealing a cell so devoid of individuality that Kirk could not have told it from his old one. He hesitated, wishing he were strong enough to make a break for it, but a gentle push from Lilan sent him tottering into the room.

"Stand against the wall."

Kirk saw the four metal restraints; anyone held by them would be forced to stand spreadeagled against the wall, unable to move at all. He suddenly recalled Senro's reference to discomfort. He had to resist in this at least - for the sake of his dignity if nothing else. "No." He slowly shook his head to emphasise his refusal.

Lilan shrugged, her manner indifferent, and went a few paces along the corridor to press the button of a wall intercom. "Assistance required at cell fourteen." She returned to the cell, her expression calm. Kirk debated whether he should try to overpower her. Moments later, two short but burly male Attendants entered at a run. One glanced to Lilan for instruction while his fellow eyed Kirk with a peculiar relish that the Human did not like.

"Restrain him," the alien woman said, calmly.

Kirk tensed himself to resist but the two men, both a head shorter than himself, seized him without effort. He struggled in vain as they dragged him over to the wall and forced his wrists and ankles into the metal cuffs. Adjusting the controls on her box, Lilan pointed it at each restraint in turn and they clamped shut, pinioning him helplessly.

"Why are you doing this?" he demanded. "For pleasure?"

Lilan met his angry gaze with an expression of blank incomprehension. "This is my allotted task," she replied, her tone suggesting that that explained everything. "This is my role in society."

"Your role - torturing people?" Kirk's rage increased in response to his complete vulnerability,

"Torturing? I do not understand."

"Giving pain."

Lilan's eyebrows rose. "Oh, I see. Correction *is* sometimes necessary. It is regrettable but for the good of the Pyramid erring individuals must be restored to the right path."

Calmer, Kirk spoke again. "I... I'm not a member of your society. If I've done wrong, it's because I'm a stranger here - I don't know your ways."

"I don't know what you are - the Chief Physician has not discussed that with me." She started to turn away, followed by one of the Attendants. The second man, however, who had been eyeing Kirk with a glint of anticipation, lingered. With a savage grin, he swung back his fist and drove it into Kirk's stomach. Half expecting it, the Captain had tensed his muscles, but the blow still wrenched a grunt of pain from him.

Lilan turned sharply, her face registering an emotion at last; anger. "Ard! Come here!" Reluctantly, the man obeyed but faced her with a stare of defiance. She returned it levelly. "Did my orders include ill treating the subject?"

"Senior Attendant, the creature is from the Dark Pyramid - everyone says so."

"That is for those greater than us to decide, Attendant. I know that you are new here, but you must learn to follow orders. If you cannot, another grade may suit you better."

Sullenly, the other bowed his head. "I am sorry, Senior Attendant."

"Very well, I shall not report it, in view of your inexperience. But see that there is no repetition. You may go - both of you." As the two men left, Lilan cast a look back at Kirk, her glance almost sympathetic, he thought. Then she left the room and the cell door slid down, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

9 COMPASSIONATE VISITORS

From my seat at the end of the line of Acolytes, I listened intently to the Chief Observer's announcement. On the benches in front, junior Observers also sat motionless, while the serious dark faces of the senior Observers opposed them across the circular space at the centre. All eyes in the Observers' meeting hall were on Temara, including the bleary ones of those who had been wakened early from their sleep - such as me. Nearly every Observer and Acolyte was here, except for a handful of Second Shift individuals who had remained at their posts.

Temara concluded her short statement and then dismissed Second and Third; the former to return to Observation, the the latter to sleep since this time cycle was nearly over and it would soon be First Bell again... and back to work for me. I felt tired out, between my lateness in getting to sleep through thinking about the stranger, and our early awakening. Relieved, the other two Shifts filed out, their voices a soft murmur as they discussed what we had just been told. Then, without having to consult, we rose and closed up the gaps in our ranks before reseating ourselves on the benches. Temara eyed us all appraisingly.

"I've decided that we shall avail ourselves of this opportunity without further delay. A small team, consisting of myself and selected individuals, will see the subject now." We got to our feet as she began to move slowly around the room and between the rows, studying each of us intently. As she passed, she tapped one or two individuals on the shoulder in the traditional manner; each went to the centre of the circle. I regarded them with envy; since the initial shock had worn off, I'd thought a lot about the pale skinned stranger, my tireless curiosity pursuing one theory after another. But I knew I wouldn't have another chance to see him - I'd only just been appointed, after all.

Then a light touch on my shoulder made me start. I stared after Temara's retreating back, then stepped out of line.

"Where are you going?" Maran hissed.

"I've been chosen," I whispered back, hardly believing it myself, then joined the group in the centre. It was only as I saw Gudru, who had twelve rings to his belt, also leave the row to stand with us, that I realised what must have happened. My darker skin had misled Temara into believing

me one of the older Acolytes on this shift - like Gurdu. My mouth dried. Should I point out her mistake? Belatedly, I recalled the respectful tones of the man I had talked to in the crowd - 'Observer' he had called me. My darker skin and the colour of my clothes had fooled him; he hadn't realised that I only wore Acolyte's uniform.

Dismissed, the others were filing out to relieve Second Shift at the 'scopes. I wondered how to explain, but Borast, my direct superior who had also been selected, was already speaking. "Chief Observer, this is Darcon, the newest Acolyte. He was only appointed last time cycle."

Temara turned to me, eyebrows lifting in surprise. Her dark, penetrating eyes appraised me. "So it is. Well, it's of no account - the experience will stand you in good stead, Darcon."

I mumbled my thanks and then followed her out with the others. In the elevator, I squeezed myself into a corner and kept quiet, staring at the floor. I could feel Borast's disapproving glare, and didn't want to annoy him further.

At Level Two Hundred and Twenty Five, we got out. I felt a familiar dread sweep over me at the sight of a green uniform. In my eagerness, I'd overlooked the fact that it also meant entering the stronghold of the Physicians for the first time in my life. To quell the uneasiness in my stomach, I concentrated on the appearance of the corridor that confronted us. It looked quite ordinary... identical to those on other levels, but I knew its innocence was only at the surface. Some of the rooms that opened off it might hold the too-curious, too-questioning... people like me. Despite the pressure to conform, there are always a few in every generation.

I'd often imagined these halls - ringing with screams of agony, pleas for mercy - but there was only the soft murmur of the air circulation system and the footfalls of passing Attendants. Far from hastening to greet us, they seemed indifferent - even slightly contemptuous - towards us.

Surprised and a little shocked, I glanced at Temara and saw anger in the set line of her mouth. But then a slender woman, taller than the norm among our people, approached. Her uniform differed from those of the passing figures by the addition of a silver armband, and I guessed that she must be a senior Attendant. She welcomed us, introducing herself as senior Attendant Lilan, and asked us to follow her. As she spoke, I studied her appearance; the golden brown of her skin showed her to be still in young adulthood and the short hair protruding from beneath her domed cap was as dark as my own. She was probably about twenty-five years-of-the-Pyramid in age. Her manner was distant but polite and I found her difficult to reconcile with the figure of the brutal, vindictive Physicians' Attendant of popular imagination.

We followed her along a few corridors, halting at last by a door identical to all the others except for the number above it. As she unlocked it with her control box and we followed her inside, I got my first good look at the stranger. I was shocked at the suffering evident in his appearance.

His odd, one-piece silver garment was gone, and in its place he wore a short-sleeved technician's grey tunic, so tattered and stained that its original blue stripe at hem, cuffs and neck was hardly visible. The tunic of a Med-Tech - my father's grade. Where had they got that, I wondered, but the answer came immediately - from some other poor victim. The stranger had been leaning back against the wall, eyes closed, but at our entrance he stirred and opened his eyes. He was manacled against the wall,

wrists and ankles far apart; how long had they kept him like that, I wondered. They had probably put him through questioning, too, and given him no food or water. I edged closer to the Chief Adviser, deciding to speak up about that, at least, but she moved forward to stand directly in front of the stranger. He met her gaze steadily. After a few moments, she spoke, but not to him.

"Senior Attendant, has the stranger had food or drink?"

"No, Chief Observer. The Chief Physician's order was to leave him without either for another two time units."

Temara turned to her. "I think our enquiries will be made easier if he is given some water, don't you?"

I felt a surge of pride at the Chief Observer's words. No one actually rules the Pyramid, though there are committees of responsible citizens to handle every detail of management, but if you were to ask any citizen if anyone can be said to rule, the answer would undoubtedly be the Chief Observer. At least, that's what I felt then; the Observers were held in such awe and respect. The senior Attendant obviously felt this was so, since she nodded and left the room.

While she was gone, Temara introduced us all. The stranger, his voice a dry croak, replied that his name was Jameskirk.

"An unusual name," Temara commented.

Behind me, Borast murmured, "At least it can talk."

I felt a surge of annoyance. The stranger was clearly a being like ourselves, not a thing. Ashamed, I suddenly realised that Borast's attitude to this stranger was not unlike mine towards the eckloi. Maybe they could speak, could think of themselves as people!

Bearing a cup, the senior Attendant returned. She directed her control box at a section of wall to our right, and a panel slid back, revealing a faucet. Filling the cup, she offered it to Temara, but the Chief Observer indicated me. Swallowing nervously, I took it and lifted it to the stranger's lips. Tilting it slightly, I let him drink a little, then withdrew it. "Not too much at once," I cautioned. He nodded and, feeling more confident, I allowed him to drink again. At last it was all gone.

"Thank you." I heard the sincerity in his voice and smiled shyly before stepping aside to allow the Chief Observer to speak to him. The other Observers still hung back a little, grouped behind her, while the Attendant had withdrawn to the doorway, watching impassively. A subdued hum from the vidcamera mounted above her made me realise that she had activated it to record the proceedings.

"Where have you come from, Jameskirk?"

We listened as he told how he had left his Pyramid in search of other communities. Investigating the Dark Pyramid, unaware of its reputation, he had found its door open and an elevator had taken him to its summit. There he had seen a white light and been swallowed by blue flames, so that he remembered nothing more until he had wakened here. Incredulous - yet paradoxically with growing hope and excitement - I heard his words. Could there really be other Pyramids, beyond the range of our 'scopes? Pyramids we had lost all record of?

"Why did you leave your Pyramid?" Temara asked, puzzled. The very idea of anyone exchanging the warmth, light and safety of their Pyramid for

the cold, darkness and danger of Outside was incomprehensible to most people

"To find others... see if other people still survived... "

"Do you have a grade of Explorers?"

The moment the question was out, I could have bitten off my tongue. The last thing I had wanted to do was draw attention to myself, and now all eyes were turning to me in astonishment. Thinking quickly, I shrugged and said, as nonchalantly as I could, "Other Pyramids may not follow the same teachings."

To my relief, Temara nodded. "Yes, that's true. Others may not have had our salutary lesson - no abode of evil close by to teach them the folly of curiosity about Outside."

For a moment I thought he hesitated, then he looked away, speaking in a low voice. "I had friends but we were attacked. Men with clubs - "

"Eckloi." Temara nodded. "You're very lucky to be alive. They are savage, and voracious for meat - any meat."

He looked up and I noticed that his eyes were a clear light brown - not so different from ours. "Please tell... Senro?... that I meant no harm. I didn't mean to cause your people alarm - I came here by accident."

"That may be so, but internal security is in Senro's hands. He must do as he sees fit to guard the Pyramid." Temara turned to the Attendant. "I have finished for now, thank you. I may wish to see him again later, or send members of my staff."

The younger woman nodded. "The Chief Physician has ordered that you be given every assistance."

"Please convey to him my grateful thanks." Was I alone, I wondered, in detecting a note of irony in the Chief Observer's voice? She nodded to the stranger then led the way out. I was last, the senior Attendant waiting to lock the door behind me. Temara and the others had already set off along the corridor. I looked back and saw Jameskirk, eyes closed, again leaning his head against the wall... trying to sleep, perhaps. Then I handed the empty cup to the woman, who activated her control box, locking the door behind us.

"Senior Attendant... " I began, hesitantly. This woman still puzzled me, by conflicting with the picture of the Physician grade that I carried in my head. Here was no relish for cruelty in her eyes, only a distance and the absence of emotion. "The stranger... what will happen to him, once the Chief Physician's finished questioning him?"

She shrugged. "He might be put on display for educational purposes, I suppose. But if he's an agent for evil forces... it might be safer to have him publicly executed."

"Executed?" I hadn't thought of that.

"Yes, to set minds at rest - knowing the threat is eliminated." Evidently she had misunderstood the motive for my questions.

"Yes, yes, of course. Thank you." I hurried away to catch up with the others.

Kirk was jolted from his uneasy doze by the sound of footsteps. Opening his eyes, he saw the female Attendant who had taken charge of him. She was setting down a tray on a low metal bench which now protruded from the wall. Seeing him awake, she approached, pointing her control box at the manacle which held his left ankle, then his right. He slumped, held only by his wrists as he tried to make his numb legs support him. As the woman released his arms, he collapsed, but she caught him and helped him over to the bench, apparently without difficulty, even though she was half a head shorter than he. Relieved, he sat down, trying to massage away the aches and pins and needles from his limbs.

The woman held out a bowl containing a steaming, porridge-like mixture. "Eat this - it's good." Sensing his difficulty with physical co-ordination, she set it down beside him. Carefully, he spooned some of the mush into his mouth. Its taste was as bland as he had expected, but he supposed prisoners' fare was much the same everywhere. The woman waited while he finished it.

"What's this?" he asked, picking up a small slab of what appeared to be compressed, dried fruit.

"It will give you energy - you will need it, Jameskirk." Her voice held a note of regret... or was it his imagination? He bit into the chewy substance, finding it sweet and distinctly tasty after the porridge. This did not form part of standard prison rations, he suspected, but quelled the impulse to ask why she was showing him even this small kindness. "Thank you... and please, call me Jim."

"Jim? I thought your name was Jameskirk," She pronounced it as one word; so had the others, he realised.

"Yes - James is my first name." Seeing her puzzled frown, he explained further. "In my... pyramid, we have two names. Friends call me Jim."

She raised an eyebrow - a gesture that reminded him poignantly of Spock. "You think of me as a friend?"

Kirk chose not to answer. "You haven't told me our own name," he pointed out. Vaguely he recalled that Senro had spoken it, but the condition he had been in had made concentration difficult.

"Lilan," she replied shortly. "We have one name only... and a registration number." She waited as he drained the cup of water on the tray. "Do you wish to relieve yourself now?"

Kirk's eyes widened at the straightforwardness of the question, but he nodded, appreciating its practicality. Lilan pressed a small button set flush into the wall and a panel slid back, revealing recessed sanitary facilities. "You can operate this for yourself," she explained, and demonstrated each control. Then she walked to the door. "Tap on the door when you are finished."

As the door slid down behind her, Kirk smiled despite his predicament. At least they understood privacy here. He realised that he would be manacled again if he did not take this opportunity to escape. But first things first...

The facilities included a water faucet, as he already knew, but there was also a soap jet. Feeling cleaner and fresher than he had for hours - and with the added fortifying effect of the meal he had just eaten - Kirk moved to the door. Standing to one side, he stretched out an arm and tapped

on the door with his fist. As the door slid upwards and Lilan stepped inside, he aimed at her neck with the side of his hand -

- and met empty air. But the blow Lilan directed at his stomach *did* connect - painfully. Before she could follow it up, however, he rolled away and was on his feet, running down the corridor.

A violet beam stabbed out, striking his lower spine. Instantly, he went down with bruising force. He pushed himself up but his legs were a dead weight. Horrified, he realised that he was paralysed from the waist down. Lilan rolled him over, sticking the needle-barrelled weapon he had failed to notice before back on her belt.

"That was foolish, Jim," she said, without rancour. Then she bent and pulled him up to a sitting position, before hoisting him onto her shoulders in what he would have called a fireman's lift.

Back inside the cell, Lilan pushed Kirk's upper body against the wall, still supporting him as she removed the control box from her belt. "Put your wrists in the manacles, Jim." When he failed to obey, she said calmly, "If you don't, I'll simply call for assistance."

Realising that it was better to submit with dignity, Kirk complied. The manacles closed over each wrist in turn, then Lilan bent to secure his ankles. He could not feel the metal bands closing around them. Afraid, but determined not to show it, he waited until she had straightened up.

"The paralysis is only temporary, Jim. But when it wears off, you will wish you hadn't tried to escape - it will only add to your discomfort." She picked up the tray with its empty containers. "Where did you hope to run? You cannot leave unless you use the same way you got in. Is there such a way?"

Kirk shook his head. "No, I don't think so," he admitted.

"I've seen many here - many who questioned our way of life. Some confessed their error and were rehabilitated. Others were stubborn to the end... They died, cursing us. Cursing me." She paused, her gaze distant, focused on some past event. "You're not one of our people, but if you were... I'd guess you belong in the second category." Her eyes refocused on him. "I'll try to help you, but you mustn't make things impossible for me. If you try to escape again, you'll only be more closely guarded and I won't be able to ease your pain." She turned away. "The Chief Physician will question you again in one time unit."

"Lilan." She faced him again, waiting. "What made you decide to do this, to become... " He hesitated, unsure of the title.

"Senior Attendant to the Physicians? I was born to it - my parents were Physicians. As I may become, perhaps."

Left alone, Kirk had only his thoughts for company. Unlike the others of her... profession, grade... was that what they called it?... Lilan seemed sympathetic. But that could be a trap in itself - the standard interrogation ploy. One would be hard, sadistic, the other friendly, persuasive, even seemingly compassionate. Softening up, they called it. He certainly wasn't going to fall for the oldest trick in the torturer's manual.

That left only his worries about Spock to deal with. And for those, there was no panacea. If Spock was found, there would only be the same treatment in store for him, too. For a moment, Kirk had been tempted to confide in Lilan, fearing that Spock might be lying injured or dying

somewhere. But if he were trying to escape... Kirk couldn't destroy his friend's only chance. Besides, he couldn't discount the possibility that they already had Spock captive, somewhere else.

Lilan had been right about one thing, he realised. Life was returning to his legs... sharp needles of pain piercing them. The increasing torment was made worse by his immobility. All he could do was bite his lip and choke back the moans of pain as his legs rapidly became a mass of red-hot agony.

Red stars danced behind his closed eyelids. Oblivion began to loom comfortably around him. He opened his eyes... the room was far away at the end of a tunnel, a receding circle of light swallowed up by the dark.

Thankfully, he plummeted into the blackness and knew no more...

10 OLD FASHIONED HOSPITALITY

Dimly, Kirk was aware of someone shaking him... repeating his name over and over again. He swam up towards it. Spock? It must be - it was so insistent, so demanding that he wake up. His friend had found him...

Wait - the concerned voice had gone, replaced by another, angry and with subtle undertones of violence. Hard, stinging pain - once, twice - across his face, jolted him fully awake. A third openhanded blow jerked his head against the metal wall behind him, sending an agonising reverberation through his skull. The voice spoke again, gloatingly. "So... its face can hold some colour."

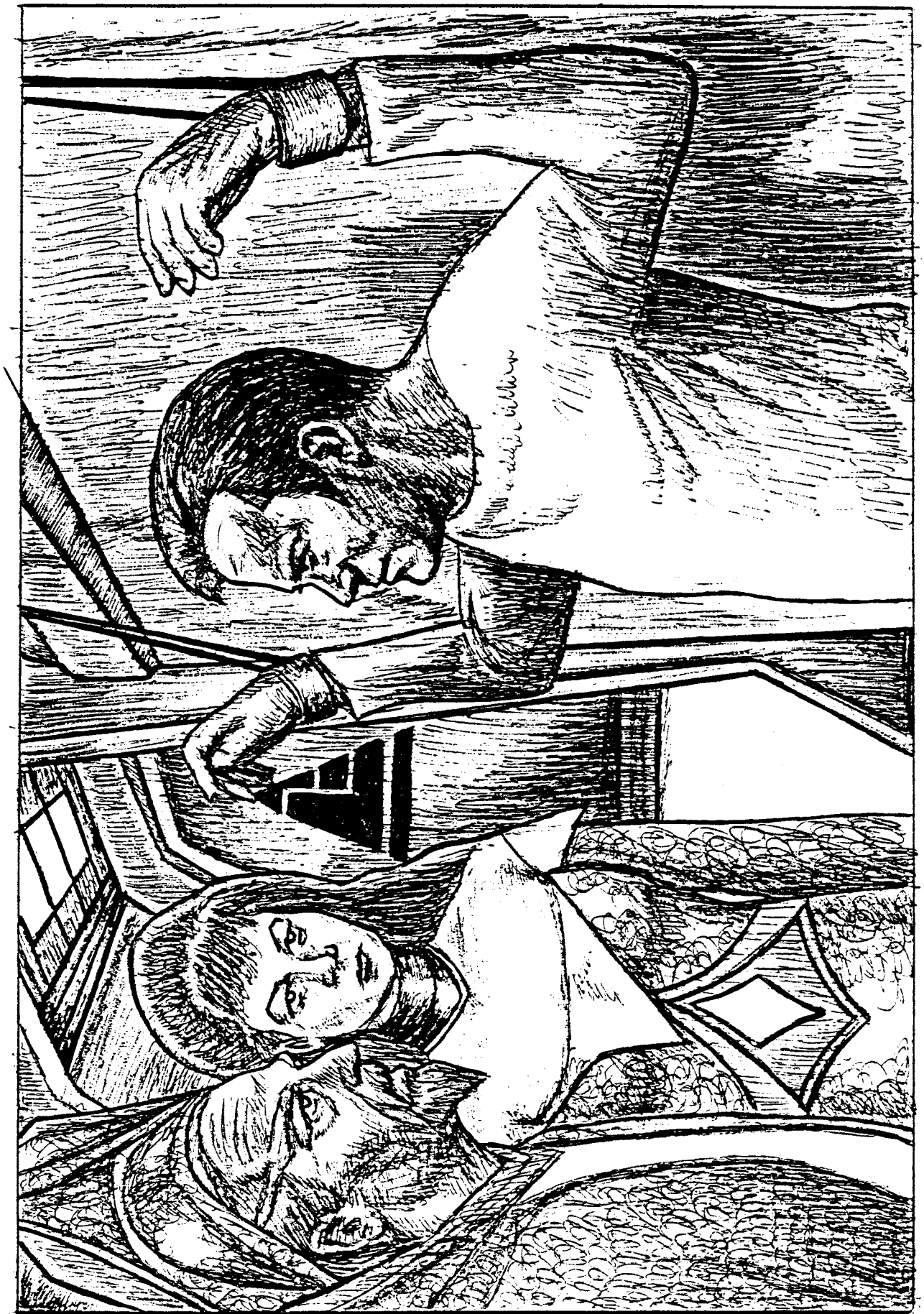
Kirk opened his eyes. A face, surmounted by a tall green headdress, swam into focus. Behind Senro, he saw Lilan, her eyes seeming to plead with Kirk in her expressionless face - but for what? To tell everything and spare himself pain? Well, General Order One forbade that, and in any event, he had the feeling that they wouldn't believe the truth if they heard it. These insular, self absorbed people couldn't even believe in the existence of other communities on their own planet. As far as they were concerned, they were the only intelligence in the entire universe - they and the force which they feared and which they were convinced had sent him.

"Release it and bring it to the correction room," Senro ordered. Lilan moved to obey as the Chief Physician left. Ruefully, Kirk compared the man who had just gone with his own Chief Surgeon; at least Bones and the others should be safely back on board.

Lilan spoke quietly but urgently as she helped him to the door. "If you're holding anything back - anything at all - tell him for your own sake. Make it less painful for yourself."

"I've told him all I can, Lilan," Kirk said, regretfully. "I know as much about the other pyramid as he does."

Lilan shook her head. She did not speak again as she supported him through the corridors to the torture chamber - as he thought of it. As the door slid upwards, the first thing he noticed was a young woman in a red tunic strapped into the chair which he has so recently occupied. Senro, who was adjusting some instruments, waved vaguely towards a stout, high-backed chair which had been placed directly opposite the female prisoner. Lilan led Kirk to it and strapped him in, securing him so that his head was held in a device with side panels, forcing him to look straight ahead.



"Lilan, you've been on duty for eight time units, correct?" The senior Attendant replied in the affirmative. "Very well. You may leave for recreation period now. Make up for your lost sleep - you will need to be especially alert while you are in charge of this creature."

"Thank you, Chief Physician." Lilan bowed, and with a last compassionate glance at Kirk, left the room. Senro spoke into an intercom.

"Senior Attendant Jervan, report to correction therapy." He smiled unpleasantly at Kirk, deactivating the voice link. "Have no fear, Jameskirk - that is correct, isn't it? These devices will not be used on you... this time." He gestured to the young woman imprisoned in the torture chair, her chest rising and falling rapidly with her panicked breathing, her golden skin damp with sweat. "You are unfamiliar with our way of life, so allow me to explain. This is an Agri-worker, fourth class. Rather young to be undergoing correction, you might think; only nineteen years-of-the-Pyramid, barely out of training centre."

"You don't have to torture her - it's me you want," Kirk grated, but the Chief Physician ignored the interruption.

"You may be surprised to hear that we have our eyes on others much younger than she. Some learn wisdom as they grow, and become model citizens. Others persist in questioning our secure way of life and eventually the lies and excuses of their parents can no longer shield them. We have had a file on this one since she was seven years-of-the-Pyramid, but we do not correct below eighteen years due to the neurological damage that would result to a growing child. We allow them to think that we believe their parents' excuses. If they grow wise, all is well, but if they merely learn to dissemble on their own behalf - we trap them eventually." He tapped the young woman's bare arm. "This one wasn't very bright. She became so excited and agitated when she saw the public vid broadcast of your lights, that her co-workers realised her instability." He smiled, relishing the anger in Kirk's eyes. "I don't think she'll need as much correction as you. I've learned to make very accurate assessments of pain tolerance merely from brief observation." He took a metal headband from a rack on the wall behind him and began to lower it onto the prisoner's head. She tried to avoid it, moving her head from side to side, but he forced it roughly over her temples. Then he moved across to the instrument banks, beyond Kirk's line of vision.

"Chief Physician, please... " The young woman's voice shook with fear. "I... I know I did wrong. Please... "

A low hum emanated from the control console, building with the power.

"I'm gratified to hear that," Senro's voice said. "But we must be sure." Kirk heard the sound of the door opening. "Gag the subject, Jervan."

A man, stockily built and a little shorter than most of the people Kirk had seen here, stepped into view, taking a band from a pouch at his belt and unrolling it. He stepped behind the prisoner; pity for her and anger at Senro gnawed at Kirk's stomach.

"For God's sake, Senro, let her go." As he spoke, he knew it was hopeless to plead with a man like the Chief Physician, but his own nature would not permit him to stay silent while another was tortured. The young woman screamed for mercy, but the sound was cut off as the gag bit cruelly into her mouth.

"Her punishment has no relevance to your case, Jameskirk. Even if you were to tell me everything, I would not release her. This is merely a

demonstration, proving that no matter how you resist, I shall win." Senro paused, checking his readings. "Yes... we are ready to begin. Half power to start... "

The young woman's body stiffened, then began to jerk despite the restraints holding her. She struggled to breathe as every nerve in her body reacted to the pain stimulator. Unable to look away, Kirk watched in horror and fury. He recalled the agony he had suffered in that chair - a memory he had resolutely pushed to the back of his mind until now. Senro had stepped behind the torture chair so that he was again in Kirk's field of vision, a look of intense enjoyment on his face as he watched his victim's helpless writhing. Abruptly, Kirk felt such a surge of black, unreasoning hatred that he would have given much to wipe away that obscene pleasure, replacing it with terror as his fingers closed around Senro's throat. Then he realised that the Chief Physician was watching him, triumph on his face; he had seen the raw emotions playing on Kirk's. Determined not to break, Kirk lowered his gaze to the young victim whose struggles were noticeably weaker, and set his features in a stony mask.

Smirking, Senro turned away to deactivate the machine, its power hum whining down into silence. The girl slumped in the chair, her eyes closed, and Kirk feared that she was dead. But as Jervan came forward at an unseen gesture of Senro's, to unfasten her restraints, she stirred feebly, moaning as the gag was pulled from her mouth. The senior Attendant pulled her to her feet, showing none of the compassion which Lilan, however subtly, had displayed. As he released her, she fell to her knees, groaning.

"Well? What have you learned?" demanded the Chief Physician.

"My error, Chief Physician." The prisoner's voice was a harsh whisper.

"Louder."

"I... repent. I beg forgiveness... " She began to sob as reaction set in.

"Good. And you will not do it again, will you? You will not question your betters or ask the purpose of Pyramid life. You will not seek to learn answers to matters that do not concern you."

"N-no. I - I - am content."

"Excellent. Remember that few have survived a second bout of correction therapy. If you lapse into error again, your lesson will be much more severe." The young woman shivered, unable to speak. "All right, Jervan. Take her to the Med-Techs; she's their concern now." Senro stepped in front of Kirk as the shorter man dragged the weeping prisoner from the room. "You see how we deal with offenders. She is of my own blood - my own kind. A creature like you cannot even expect the mercy I showed to her."

Furious, Kirk retorted, "All I've seen is how courageous you are while torturing helpless people - why don't you try someone who isn't tied down?"

Sero smirked. "You desire armed combat? I cannot oblige you, unfortunately." He stepped away, sitting down in the vacated torture chair. "But you've just reminded me of something... there are older methods of persuasion just as effective as this modern one. Perhaps I should revive one of them for your entertainment?"

"No, thanks. The entertainment around here seems to be laid on just for you." Despite his inner resolve, anger began to slip through again.

Senro chuckled, obviously enjoying himself.

"Yes, I'll oblige you when Jervan returns. But not in the privacy of your cell; a treat like this should be enjoyed by as many as possible. Good experience for my staff, also. Yes, the more I consider it, the more I like the idea." The door opened. "Secure the creature, Jervan, and bring it with us."

Released from his chair, Kirk found his hands bound behind him in metal cuffs and himself being frogmarched from the room in the wake of Senro. This time, however, he was taken past all the cells, continuing on into a hall where green-clad figures looked up from their food in surprise. Jervan gave Kirk a number of hearty pushes as they proceeded along a central aisle between tables; presumably bravado to impress his co-workers. At the far end, Senro stopped.

"Take him into the exercise hall. I shall return shortly."

As the Chief Physician proceeded into the corridor beyond, hurrying away to the left, Jervan shoved Kirk to the right, then halted him and stepped forward. A door rose, revealing what appeared to be a gymnasium. As Jervan grabbed Kirk by the arm and propelled him inside, the women and men using the gym equipment left off their exercise and came over.

"What's *this* doing here?" asked one. She wore only a green vest and shorts but the silver armband on her bare golden brown arm showed she was Jervan's equal in rank.

"The Chief Physician will be here soon to explain - that's all I know."

Speculation followed Jervan's statement as the door re-opened and more people began to drift in - presumably from the mess hall Kirk had just seen. One or two started nervously as Senro's voice spoke coldly from hidden loudspeakers.

"All Attendants and Physicians currently on duty, report to the exercise hall immediately."

Before long, the hall was filling up, a ring being formed around Jervan and his prisoner. Kirk stood quietly, feet apart, eyeing the crowd keenly. If someone decided on a little fun before the Chief Physician got here, he would be ready for them, hands secured behind his back or not. But no-one hit him this time, although their expressions were far from friendly.

Abruptly the loud chatter ceased as the all green headdress bearing its distinctive silver symbol of manacled hands made its appearance over the heads of the crowd. Senro's orders came, crisp and clear, and four Attendants, all a head shorter than Kirk, emerged from the crowd and dragged the Captain across to a climbing frame. Swiftly, his hands were freed, but with four well-muscled people holding him, he could do nothing but maintain an outward show of calm fearlessness as his tunic was tugged down his shoulders. The thin belt at his waist held it but his upper body was left exposed. He was then fastened, face forward to the metal bars, arms stretched out to either side. Senro hadn't been kidding, he surmised to himself; he was about to become the recipient of a good old-fashioned flogging. Gritting his teeth, he waited for the first blow.

When the touch came it was like nothing he had expected. At first cold, feather light - then a sudden, sharp tearing pain in his back. Another followed, and another; they did not abate but instead worsened. Sweat dripped down his face and he shut his eyes tightly, concentrating on

not crying out. Senro's voice sounded close by his ear.

"Perhaps you haven't encountered these before, Jameskirk. They are chadak, small creatures that used to dwell in the streams and rivers that ran so freely on the surface. They sucked the blood of living creatures. Our ancestors brought them inside because they form the staple diet of the fish that supply us with protein. Many years after, a talented individual in our grade realised their potential as an instrument of correction. Of course, they have been abandoned in favour of our correction machines, but I think you'll agree that they're surprisingly effective. And the pain lasts much longer, of course." All through his monologue, Senro repeatedly applied fresh chadak to Kirk's flesh. A groan of pain escaped from the Human's lips. "A pity that we abandoned them, really... but our modern devices have the advantage of causing no permanent damage to the adult subject. Of course, in your case, that consideration has no real weight."

Kirk opened his eyes momentarily; through a red haze he saw a small water tank beside him, held by an Attendant. A gloved hand was dipped in, then withdrawn, carefully holding a small fleshy mass, at the centre of which was a gaping maw lined with serrated teeth. Through the burning agony of his back, he heard Senro continue. "I must admit that you are a surprisingly resilient individual to have borne this without a scream of plea for mercy. I'll have to decide what else to try; perhaps a glance through the old textbooks might help. What do you think, Jameskirk?"

But Kirk was beyond answering, even if he had wanted to. He sagged limply against the bars, unconscious.

Red hot needles traced the skin of his back. As Kirk slowly drifted up towards the light, pain constituted his whole awareness. He drew back, trying to find the refuge of nothingness again, but some inner strength told him it was better to face the pain. After a while, the agony steadied sufficiently for him to open his eyes a little. He was lying face down on a metal bench, his arms bound behind him. Green clad legs suddenly loomed near his face; instinctively, he closed his eyes. A voice spoke above him.

"Hasn't he wakened up yet?"

"No, he's been out for two Shifts now. Wish I'd been there to see it, instead of on rec period."

The first voice chuckled. "If I was him, I'd never want to wake up." Laughter followed, then the same voice spoke again. "Well, it's gone First Bell - not like Lilan to be late."

"Could be leaving him without food or water for a bit longer."

"Still should come and tell us, so's we can go off duty," the first voice grumbled.

"Let's have some fun while we're waiting - "

Kirk felt himself seized by the arm and rolled over. Moments later, he hit the floor, landing on his back. His manacled arms broke part of the impact, but the fall still tore at his bloodied back. He groaned, trying to roll over.

The first voice laughed. "You certainly woke him up, Kel. Come on, let's tell Jervan she hasn't reported. He can lock up for us."

"What - report a senior? What've you been drinking?" There was the sound of a door opening. "Oh - Observers. What are you - I mean - "

"Our presence has been authorised by the Chief Physician," a man's voice replied. "Of course, you can always check - "

"No, no, it's just that we weren't told, Observers. We're Third Shift, you see - waiting for a First Shift senior to come and relieve us. Perhaps you'll get someone to lock up after you go?"

As the first voice finished speaking, footsteps receded and there was the sound of the door opening and closing. Kirk opened his eyes. Figures, dressed in violet and indigo, were bending over him. As his vision stabilised, he saw there were three - man, woman and a young man - at least, he looked younger than the other two, though it was difficult to tell with these unlined faces. But he was the same person who had given Kirk the water. All three faces were concerned; the man turned to the woman.

"It looks worse than last time. Do you think it's been beaten?" Yes, definitely a man by the voice; now that Kirk felt so hot and strange, their smooth faces swam confusingly. The - young man? - knelt down and laid a hand gently on Kirk's arm.

"What is it, Jameskirk? What have they done?"

"Leeches... " It was a struggle to speak; his tongue was strangely large and furry. It must be thirst, he thought dazedly.

"Leeches? I don't understand." The other moved round to help Kirk to sit up. The Human sucked in his breath at the pain the movement cost him. He heard a gasp.

"Darcon, what is it?" the woman's voice asked as the other two crowded round. He heard their horrified exclamations.

"What could have done that?"

"Doesn't look like a beating, does it?"

"More like... the flesh has been... chewed," the woman said. "And the peculiar shape of these abrasions... "

"Jameskirk, can you tell us what happened?" It was the one with a boy's light timbre in his voice. The other two still persisted in talking about Kirk as if he were a thing instead of a person, but despite his pain, the Human responded to the genuine concern he sensed in the boy.

"Senro put... bloodsuckers... on my back... " He tried to remember the word. "Ch... ch... "

"Chadak?" the woman asked... or was it the man? The room was so hot... and he was so tired...

"Observer, they use those in the protein farm, don't they? As fish fodder?" Kirk still recognised the younger voice. He struggled to keep his eyes open, to focus on the wavering forms crouched around him.

"A new form of corrective therapy, presumably," one of the others said - yes, the woman. Kirk recognised the distaste in her tone. The boy was more open.

"It's horrible!"

"Darcon," cautioned the - man? "Your compassion for others - even creatures as alien as this - does you credit. But you must be discreet. We all disapprove, of course we do, but if we say so aloud... Well, it might be seen as criticism of the Physicians. You do understand, don't you?"

The younger man bowed his head. "Forgive me, Observer."

The other patted him on the shoulder. "I'm not too old to have forgotten how impetuous young people are. Just be more careful in future." He looked to the female Observer. "Well, Uan, there's little we can do here. It's obviously in no state to talk."

"Observer," the young man put in. "Can't we ask them to give him medical attention?"

The other sighed. "I'm afraid not. This is probably all part of the therapy." He looked kindly at Kirk. "I'm sorry we can't help you," he said, then rose and went to the door, followed by the other two. The young man looked back, then halted. The others eyed him.

"Why don't you stay, Darcon. Fetch some water for... Jameskirk. You can contact us if there's an improvement." Woosy though he was, Kirk noticed the warmth in the smiles exchanged by the two older people.

"Very well, Observers." Was that a note of eagerness in the young man's voice?

The woman was looking at her wrist... a chronometer, perhaps? "We'll be back here in... one point seven five time units, Darcon. That'll give us all a few sub units to get back to the Observation deck."

The young man nodded and waited till they left, then turned to Kirk. "Don't worry, I won't be long. I'm going to fetch a cup for some water." Then he was gone, leaving Kirk alone with his pain.

"But there must be something we can do, Scotty! Jim and Spock have been missing thirty-six hours!" McCoy raged helplessly, watched by the sympathetic eyes of the Chief Engineer.

"Leonard, ye ken as weel as I that there's nothing. Our sensors willna' operate through this interference; we don't even know if they're still in the pyramid. And we canna land a fleet of shuttlecraft wi' high powered cutting gear either; it's strictly low profile doon there."

"I know, Scotty, I know. But they're in trouble, dammit!"

Scott decided to change the subject. "How's your patient?"

"I've released him from sickbay, but told him to stay off duty for a couple more days - and report back if the headaches don't clear up." *Hjortsberg should be all right, McCoy thought, though concussion can be a funny thing.* However, the geologist had only had a mild dose and should be fine; giving him something for the headaches would only blank out the natural warning signal. Watching the planet on the main screen, McCoy was unaware of the look, close to hatred, in his intensely blue eyes, hatred of that benign-looking globe turning slowly in the red light of its dying star. Frustration flared again. "We can send in another shuttle, can't we?" he demanded, knowing the answer even as he spoke.

"Landing in almost total darkness on rough ground with no instruments?" The Scot's tone was gentle. "Leonard, we've been over it before. We chose the other pyramid as marker buoy for that reason. We've got some pretty good pilots, but there isn't one I'd trust to bring a shuttle down safe in those conditions - except Mr. Spock." As he said it, Scott instantly felt a pang of regret at the look on McCoy's face. As well as a day and a half of inaction, anxiety and frustration, the good Doctor was also suffering from guilt at allowing his friends to go off alone into danger, without him. "I'm sorry, Leonard - me and my big mouth."

McCoy shook his head. "It's not your fault, Scotty. No-one can stop Jim haring off into Lord knows what - or Spock tagging along to make sure he's all right. If anyone can get them out, Spock can." He projected as much confidence into his voice as he could, for the sake of the eavesdropping bridge crew, but deep down he had doubts. Before all communication had been lost, Kirk had spoken of a light enveloping Spock. Maybe Jim didn't have the Vulcan's help this time...

Yes... yes... it was right. Had to be when it felt so good.

Not even a scream. Just the sheer terror in their eyes, and then -

No! I am Spock... I am a Vulcan. The mind rules - the mind - I am in control... control...

SILENCE!

Good. Quiet now in my... what? That part - the physical part... Body? Yes. Its struggles have been stilled. For... the... moment.

They have found it. What I - we - left of the first one. Let them wonder. Puzzle. Soon it will all turn to fear. We will play with them... for a while. Until...

Until it no longer amuses us.

11 THE DEATH OF A BRAVE MAN

Holding Jameskirk as gently as I could, I supported him as I tilted the cup to his lips. After a while I lowered it.

"Thanks," he said. I smiled, tentatively; it was strange to think that I had actually touched this man, whose flesh was so sickly pale, as naturally as I would one of my own people who needed help. And there was no difference - at least to the touch - between him and one of them.

I set down the cup on the bench beside me. "I'm sorry... " I began awkwardly. "Please understand - I - I think you've been treated barbarically. Don't believe we're all like the Physicians."

"I don't." Despite his suffering, I could detect no hate or rancour in Jameskirk's tone or manner.

"Do - do you have an Explorer grade?" I asked hesitantly, needing to know. His eyes flickered to mine - puzzled, I think... or wary? They were a warm brown, as I'd noticed before; not so different from our standards. I thought I knew what was wrong. "I'm not trying to trick you - I don't work for the Physicians. I just want to know." I heard the yearning in my

voice but I didn't care; I had to tell someone. "I want to know if there are other places - places where they don't correct you if you want to find out - find out - I don't know - just anything."

"Yes, there are other places... " Jameskirk spoke with difficulty, I thought. His colouring was a little different... redder, I thought. I wondered what that signified. Concerned, I felt his forehead; it was hot.

"Jameskirk, are you... " I broke off, remembering the wounds on his back. Infection? They had to tend him - they couldn't let him die - not now. I had to find out - had to. I tried to help him over to the bench but he was taller than me, and as heavily built as Vars. He appeared to be having difficulty in controlling his legs and it was all I could do to support him. At that moment I heard the door open and looked up, a guilty expression on my face - I know because that's how I always look, according to Mother, even when I haven't done anything to be guilty about.

It was the senior Attendant I had met earlier... Lilan, yes, that was her name. As she saw me, she started guiltily - or was that my imagination? "What are you doing here?"

"Sitting with him - the other Observers told me to wait," I said, trying to sound as unconcerned as possible.

"And how did you get in here?" She came over and helped me get Jameskirk onto the bench. He sat, slumped forward, his eyes closed.

"We - we arrived as two Attendants were coming out. They told us to ask a senior Attendant to lock the door when we left."

"Hmph!" The woman sounded angry but her eyes were on Jameskirk. She bent round to study his back, seeing the angry red wounds encrusted by dried, blackened blood. "It's worse than they said... " I sensed her shock but when she looked round at me, her face was closed, impassive. "Stay here while I fetch some cloths."

Nervous, anxious, I awaited her return. I tried speaking to Jameskirk, but he was now semi-conscious and almost slipping from the bench so I concentrated on just sitting beside him and keeping him from falling off. I was very relieved when Lilan returned, locking the door behind her. She came over with a bowl and some cloths draped over her arm, eyeing me with suspicion.

"I have to tend him - or he'll die. And Med-Techs are not allowed on the Physician levels."

I listened, realising that she was justifying her compassion in case I should report her. "I won't tell anyone, I swear... by the blood of the Founder."

Her gaze never wavered as she stared into my eyes. Feeling very uncomfortable at being scrutinised like that by an Attendant, I somehow managed not to look away. "All right. Stay to help," she said as if I'd passed a test. She turned away to fill the bowl with hot water from the wall faucet.

"Won't... won't they find out anyway?"

She shrugged. "I'm in charge of him... subject to Senro." She set down the bowl and came over. "How is he?" She raised one of Jameskirk's eyelids to examine his pupil and shook her head. "He's nearly out. Help me to lay him down."

Together we got him onto the bench, face down. She removed the cuffs from his wrists with her control box, then handed me some of the cloths she'd brought and a cutter from the pouch at her waist. "Cut those into strips."

"Wha - oh, yes, of course." As I made the bandages, she began to bathe his wounds with another cloth. He stirred a little and groaned softly, but did not regain consciousness.

"I could have brought some bandages from Med centre when I went for this," she said, taking a small tube from her belt pouch, "but they would have been too conspicuous."

I stared. "You got that from the Med-Techs?"

"Yes. As soon as I came on duty and heard about this, I went down there. It took me a while to persuade the woman - she knew someone must be very badly injured for one of us to ask for medicine. She kept insisting that we should bring him down or let her come here - that's why I wasn't here earlier." She emptied the blood-red water into the waste outlet and began to apply the ointment gently. "All Med-Techs are the same - that's why we get more of them here than any other grade. Always questioning. Hardly surprising when they see the results of our correction."

"What about the people I saw when we arrived?" I began, trying not to sound too eager to hear the answer. "A woman and man of middle years - in recycle plant tunics."

"I didn't see them... but I can guess. An Agri-worker was corrected on my last shift; you know it's Procedure to correct the parents too."

"Of course," I said - evenly, I hoped. I was thinking of Mother. Sheltering your own offspring is considered deviant. I watched as Lilan continued to rub the ointment carefully into Jameskirk's wounds; their red colour probably signified inflammation, I realised.

"You show a lot of curiosity - Darcon, isn't it?" I started, too horrified to bluff it out as she looked up. "Don't worry, I won't report you... After all, you're still young." She eyed my belt which lacked the rings which an Acolyte acquires for each year of apprenticeship. "I was fooled at first, I'll admit. You must be the new Acolyte." I nodded, my throat still tight with apprehension. "You're only a year younger than that Agri-worker - but you qualify for correction now. You should be more careful."

Still horrified and amazed, I struggled to get the words out. "Why... why... "

"Why don't I report you?" She held out her hand and dumbly I placed a bandage in it, then helped her lift Jameskirk as she passed the strip of cloth beneath his body. "You're still young enough to learn; I don't go *looking* for subjects. If they're brought in, it's different; I have to do my duty. I don't want to see you brought in, Darcon, so try to still your doubts, your questions... your curiosity." She tied off the ends of the bandage and took another. Heart thudding, I helped her to lift Jameskirk again. He groaned deeply but did not wake up. "Strange... chadak have never been used in a long time... except for that case about fifteen years ago. He was a very stubborn man... and you remind me of him, somehow." I stared, still unable to speak. "Yes," she continued, with the air of one reminiscing. "I was still at training centre then, but my parents talked about the case... In fact, it's required reading for all Attendants." She looked at me, pausing in her work. "I suppose you didn't realise that we have to study? Not just correction techniques but important cases of

deviance?"

"Uhm? N-no... "

"It *is* strange. The man I'm talking about even looked a little like you - older than his years."

"What was his name?" My curiosity overcame the paralysis of my tongue.

"Tolm." She fastened off another bandage and began to wind yet another round the chest of the unconscious man.

"Tolm? That was my father's name... " My voice trailed off in shock. "No, it can't be... "

"What happened to your father?" Her crisp tone cut across my confusion.

"Happened? He was killed in a recycle plant accident. He was tending injured workers when some more machinery collapsed."

"And when was this?"

"When I was three... fifteen years-of-the-Pyramid ago..."

"Hmmm... " Lilan finished her work. "I think he'll be all right for a few minutes." She got up and went to the door. "Are you coming?" Bewildered, I followed her outside, along a few corridors to a door marked 'DATA ACCESS'. No-one appeared to be about in this section, but I was doubly relieved when the door rose to reveal an empty room. Lilan locked the doors behind us and gestured to the consoles with their winking coloured lights. "This is where we keep the files on suspected deviants and the records of correction therapy on those we bring in."

"Is there a file on me here?" I whispered.

"Probably. All the more reason for you to be very careful." She crossed to an access terminal. "We can tap computer records of all grades from here. Feed in the particulars of your father's death."

I swallowed, finding that my throat had gone dry, then sat down at the terminal. Data accessing is part of elementary training but somehow I found that my mind had gone blank.

"It's all right. Tell me. I'll do it."

Haltingly, I told her all I could remember. After a short pause the screen flashed up the phrase 'IN PROGRESS'. There was a further, frustrating delay, then - 'NO CORRELATION'.

I stared in disbelief at the glowing letters. "But how can that be? I demanded angrily. "It's true, I tell you... " My voice trailed off as I remembered just to whom I was speaking. But the senior Attendant did not appear to have taken offence. Instead, she fed in her own data, requesting a file.

This time a face flashed up on the screen with a name and some other data; including 'date of termination'. Only thirty three, and yet he *did* look older... and yes, there was a resemblance. Lilan tapped in another sequence and the display was replaced by 'HISTORY OF DEVIANCE'. I read it, trying to quell the sick feeling in my stomach.

The man had been under scrutiny because of his eager curiosity, since his earliest years in training centre. True to form, as he grew older, that curiosity developed into a tendency to question his tutors... to ask dangerous things like why couldn't people leave the Pyramid if they wore protective gear and took their own air supply... or could there be other, inhabited Pyramids that we knew nothing about... all the questions I remember from my own childhood. I knew as I read that I too must have a file reposing somewhere in the capacious memory banks of the Physicians. Dates, incidents...

Odd; there was a gap from the time he had left training centre to his eventual discovery fourteen years later. He must have learned cunning, learned how to conceal his inner doubts. In Med training, he had met a young Hydroponics worker who had required treatment for a minor ailment. They had pair bonded eventually and applied for a child permit. After some time, one had been granted and they had had a son... Darcon 39149 AH.

I stared at the screen, glad that I was sitting down; I don't think my legs could have supported me. That was my name, my number, and my date of birth against it. The woman's name was different... but my mother must have changed it - and probably moved to a different district, a different area of Hydroponics, to escape those who knew, who would pity or shun her. She had had me to consider, too; I could well imagine the sort of taunts that neighbourhood children could have used against me.

Against each registered name/number was another... Files on both of us? Of course; standard Procedure. I looked up at Lilan and saw her concerned expression.

"Do you want to continue?" Unable to answer, I just nodded. She tapped another sequence in. "I can't let you see your own file - or your mother's. This is irregular enough. But it's not current, and I think you have a right to know."

Now the details of my father's discovery and therapy rolled onto the screen. He had been caught while consulting old records in the library - not Observations nor Pyramid history but data on the Dark Pyramid. Not knowing file number and clearance code, he had triggered off a warning buzzer in the Chief Physician's office, and received standard correction. Mother had been interrogated but her testimony showed that she knew nothing of Father's deviance and since she had never shown any sign of it herself, she was released. As a standard precaution, they were made to live apart and temporary accomodation assigned to Father.

Father had been busy while living alone on his year's probation. Though on the surface he had appeared to be broken, he was stronger than they thought. So, using his darker skin to advantage, he had attacked and changed clothes with a junior Physician, leaving the man tied up in a storeroom. Using the knowledge of the Physicians' levels that he had gained during his enforced stay, he had reached this very room and made a computer search. This terminal - not rigged to sound an alarm, unlike the ones in public areas - had given him the file number and clearance codes and the rest had been easy. But he had been challenged by a Physician on the way out, and captured. The bland, emotionless recital of his second session of therapy followed.

I turned away, tears pricking my eyes. My father had been a brave man - much braver than I. "They murdered him..." The words stuck in my throat.

"Darcon, they couldn't let him live - he'd seen confidential data, proscribed to all but Physicians and Observers. And he'd already shown his resistance to correction. They tried the chadak, but he only cursed them."

"You said your parents told you about it - " My voice sounded like a stranger's; bitter, angry.

"Yes... They were both there when the chadak were applied. Then - when he refused to recant - he was taken from the cell and executed."

"Publicly, of course." I laughed, almost insanely. Everything was swirling around in my head like a whirlpool of chaos - Jameskirk, my father's face, Mother fearfully begging me not to ask any more questions, Jameskirk's bloodied back - like my father's!

"No, that might have had negative results. Other deviants might have tried to get at those files. And it would have undermined belief in the effectiveness of correction."

I bit down hard on my lip to hold back the tears that now replaced the laughter. My poor mother... terrified all those years that I would end up like *him*. A little more under control, but still unable to face Lilan, I asked, "Did they correct Mother, too?"

"No - the second offence was committed during separation. I - I think what happened to your father was thought to be correction enough." I felt a light touch on my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Darcon. Please believe that."

I nodded, "I... I don't blame you." I couldn't say any more; the tears were still too near the surface.

"I've shown you this as a warning, Darcon. Now you can see that you must forget your doubts... put them from your mind forever. Even if you hide them for years like he did, they'll betray you in the end. I don't want the same thing to happen to you."

I nodded, wanting to leave. Lilan sensed this and deactivated the terminal.

Together, we walked back to Jameskirk's cell. As we reached it, Obar and Uan came towards us. For a moment, I was confused, before I recalled our arrangement. Was it only one point seven five units ago? It seemed a lifetime.

"Ah, Darcon, there you are. Any luck?" When I only looked blankly at him, Observer Obar prompted, "The subject - Jameskirk - did he say anything?"

"Er, no. He... he's feverish... ill."

"Oh yes, those wounds." Obar looked hopefully at Lilan. "Perhaps the Chief Physician will allow him treatment? Well, I don't see the need for us all to come next shift, do you, Darcon? Perhaps you could see... Jameskirk... by yourself next time?"

"Junior Observer Borast would have to agree," I said flatly.

"Don't worry about him." Obar winked at me and, belatedly, I understood. He meant for us to continue our arrangement, with he and Uan spending time elsewhere. They probably intended to pairbond - Observers often bonded to Observers. My nod was rewarded by Obar's beaming smile. "Well, thank you, senior Attendant. We... er... our colleague will call again next First Shift."

Lilan nodded gravely. "I shall expect him." She turned away to enter the cell while, mind numb, I followed the two Observers to the elevators.

12 THE TRUTH UNFOLDED

Lilan wrung out the cloth and placed it across Kirk's forehead. Since the fever had set in, she had remained on duty, snatching sleep on the cell floor or fetching slabs of dried fruit from the meal hall, to keep herself going.

A bleep from her wrist chronometer alerted her to the fact that her official duty shift would begin in fifteen sub units. In reality, she had been at work continuously since her last shift - a whole time cycle. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and smoothed her crumpled uniform. When she looked up, she was startled to see Kirk looking straight at her.

"How do you feel?"

"Weak as a kitten," Kirk replied, then smiled slightly at her puzzled frown.

"I'd better check your injuries again."

Wincing, Kirk sat up, gritting his teeth as she unwound the bandages. "Hmmm... I think you will be all right, Jim. Your wounds are healing."

"How... how long have I been out?"

"Just a time cycle." It was Kirk's turn to frown. "You measure time in a different way, Jim?"

"Yes, in... days." Kirk drew in his breath as Lilan again dressed his injuries with the ointment and started to wind on fresh bandages.

"Days? That means nothing, I'm afraid. If it's a help, I believe our time cycles are based on the original rotation period of the world. Now we divide them into three equal parts - work, recreation and sleep. And there are three Shifts; I am on First." She picked up another bandage. "Jim, I must warn you - don't tell anyone that I have aided you in this way. Only the young Acolyte, Darcon, knows - no-one else. It would be... unfortunate for us both, if this was discovered."

"I understand. Thank you."

Lilan shrugged. "I don't agree with all the Chief Physician's methods... though I cannot admit that to anyone else. But... if you are holding back, Jim - tell him. I don't pretend that it will save your life, but it'll spare you further suffering."

"I've told him everything I can, Lilan," Kirk said, remembering the last time she had told him to be frank, when he had been taken to see the young woman tortured. He looked keenly into Lilan's face as she concentrated on tying his bandages; was she really taking a risk for him, or was this another game of his torturers?

She sensed his scrutiny and looked up. "You don't trust me, Jim? No, I don't suppose I would trust you if our positions were reversed." She helped him to pull his tunic back around his shoulders again, concealing the bandages. Standing, she said, "I'll get you some soup."

"Lilan... thank you again - for everything." He was rewarded by a slight smile that broke the habitual neutrality of Lilan's face, before the door closed behind her.

"Darcon... there's been another murder." Maran was looking very worried.

"Murder... Oh, yes." Forcing myself to concentrate, I recalled the news that had come last duty shift. "Like the other one?"

"Yes. An Agri-worker this time - they found her hidden behind some machinery on Level One Hundred and Thirty Eight. Her eyes were open - staring." Maran shivered, glancing around the meal hall as if afraid that one of the quietly eating Observers was the murderer.

"Sit down - I'll get you some soup," I offered, trying to calm her. Smiling shakily, she took a seat while I went to get two bowls of steaming vegetable broth from the dispenser. Privately, I thought that any corpse with its eyes open would stare... still, it was best to keep off the subject. I set the soup before her and she relaxed visibly as she spooned it into her mouth.

"I hope they catch the person soon," she said. "It has to be the worst kind of deviant. I mean, there hasn't been a murder for at least five generations."

"Maran, don't worry about it, please."

"How can I stop? There's never been a murder like this, has there? A quarrel, yes, something done in anger, but... someone who kills twice and hides the bodies - "

"Maran - "

"The Med-Techs can't even tell how they were killed - died of fright as far as their examinations show. I don't understand - "

I put my hand on hers, reassuringly, to dam the flow. "Drink your soup," I said as forcefully as I could. As she did so, I withdrew my hand. "The Physicians have put a guard team of Attendants on that level. They've increased vigilance. Whoever it is will soon be caught."

Maran nodded, controlling herself with an effort as I could tell. "Yes, yes, of course you're right."

I sipped my own broth, its warmth relaxing me as I slipped into a reverie. I was too busy with concerns of my own to worry about these murders. Now I had all the information I needed, I had to make my plans...

After the shock of discovering the truth about my father, I had returned to work, numbed. But that had worn off soon enough, to be replaced again by a whirlpool of ideas and thoughts chasing each other round my brain. I had known that I had to get to a computer terminal again; there was still something I had to find out. What secret had my father died for?

I'd spent the rest of that workshift in a daze, so that I had finally put all the tapes back in their original tray to be checked again. When Second Bell had sounded and our reliefs arrived, I had headed for the dormitory, after declining a suggestion from Maran and Vars to work out in the Observers' exercise hall on the grounds of tiredness. But I had hidden in one of the male hygiene cubicles near the dormitory until the bustle of shift changeover had died away, before hurrying to our computer room.

As I had hoped, no-one was there, it being too early for the new shift to require special data. Seating myself at the terminal, I had hastily

punched in my request for the access code of the file I wanted. My heart had thudded, driven by fear of discovery, fear that this terminal too would be primed to activate an alarm. But I had hoped otherwise, since the Observers were entitled to this data; it was directly concerned with their work, after all. My only reason for not requesting this access openly had been my conviction that the lowest Acolyte would not be entitled to see it.

After a short pause, the access number had flashed up and I had punched it in, together with my Acolyte clearance code; would that be sufficient? Even when the words flashed up on the screen, I could hardly believe my luck. Finally I deactivated the terminal and left, careful not to be seen. Returning to the dormitory without seeing anyone, I had drawn the curtains around my bed and sank down onto its cushioned surface to think. It had all been so easy. I was struck again by the contrast between my father and myself, as well as our similarities. The same curiosity - yet he had had all the courage. A Med-Tech, he had *sought* the information, unaided by my special privileges - and died for reading the file I had seen so easily. Guilt threatened to swamp me but I concentrated on my discovery.

The Dark Pyramid had been founded at the same time as ours, to take another population. It didn't make sense to me, but it seemed that this smaller population, distinguished by their fair skin and light coloured hair had been excluded from the main structure. Again I pondered my reaction to seeing Jameskirk for the first time... but after all, that was because no-one like him had been seen for millions of years. Surely such people would not have been physically repugnant when seen daily? I gave up the puzzle, more interested in this hint of Jameskirk's origin. Perhaps some had escaped the doom that had fallen upon the lesser Pyramid?

The doom... A mere ten millenia after we had retreated inside our gigantic refuge - when our sun still shed a light of sorts and radio communication between the structures was still possible - a call for help had come from the smaller Pyramid. A panic-stricken voice had spoken of an evil force that had possessed their people and driven them mad; then the radio had fallen silent. A public referendum had been held via vidscreen; power use had been much freer then. The majority had held that no-one should risk going to the aid of the others when they were probably all dead already and we could risk bringing the peril upon ourselves. A short extract from a contemporary report had impressed itself upon me:

'The others are genetic inferiors and have probably fallen prey to some malady inherent in their makeup; in any event, we are well rid of them.'

As time passed and no danger threatened our Pyramid, fears were eased and the fate of the lesser Pyramid ceased to be a topic of interest.

Millions of years had passed, and then... the light had been seen on the summit of the lesser Pyramid. Public 'scopes were still active then and the citizens were soon in a turmoil of anxiety and speculation, with calls for investigation growing louder. Finally, a group of courageous citizens, believing that someone must be alive and signalling for help, left the Pyramid in secret. Tracked on the 'scopes, they were seen to enter the Dark Pyramid but did not return.

The Chief Observer had proclaimed the Dark Pyramid to be a place of evil and issued the Physician grade, which had been growing larger to deal with the increasing number of disturbed citizens, with wider powers. It was decided that curiosity about the Outside, especially the other Pyramid, would only lead to the breakdown of our society. The public 'scopes were disconnected and a programme of drug induced suppression followed, combined with education for all citizens on the evils of curiosity. Eventually

tranquillity had been restored. A temporary breakdown in one of the water treatment plants about fifty years afterwards had revealed that the drugs might now be gradually withdrawn from the supply; the citizens briefly deprived of suppressants had shown no symptoms of anxiety. The minds of the people had been turned inwards to the brightly lit, secure world of metal corridors because they could no longer bear the boundless, dark, mysterious world beyond. Only the Observers had continued to watch the outside, but even they, I now realised, usually kept their gaze upon the small, safely contained portion of it revealed upon their viewscreens. Meanwhile, the Physicians' power had grown until they ruled in all but name... and their function switched from treating those maladjusted to our claustrophobic existence, with drugs and other therapy, to rooting out and neutralising threats to Pyramid security - throwbacks like my father and myself.

I woke from my reverie to feel Maran's hand on my shoulder. "Are you all right, Darcon? I thought I was the one worried about the murders?"

The empty soup bowl cupped between my hands had gone cold while I brooded. Forcing a smile, I said, "Hmm? Oh, yes, I'm all right, thanks. Is it time to get back?"

"Yes, come on." As we hurried after the others, she asked, "You've got next First Shift free, haven't you? Thought what you're going to do?"

"Well, it depends... If Mother's free during the period, I'll see her then, otherwise I'll ask if she can get time off too."

"You must miss her. I know I missed living with my parents the first year. Well, if you can't see her at rec period, what about taking up our offer?"

"Hmm? Oh, the exercise hall, you mean? Yes, I will... I'll call Mother next break and find out what her plans are."

According to Lilan when we had visited this duty shift, Jameskirk was recovering, though too weak to talk to us. I had to get things moving.

During the next break, I called my mother in Hydroponics. As I'd feared, she had already arranged to meet friends after work, but asked me to wait while she spoke to someone. When she came back to the intercom, her voice was cheerful. "Darcon, someone's agreed to exchange with me, next duty shift. When should I expect to see you?"

"About second unit?"

"Fine. I have to get back to work now, Darcon. I'll look forward to seeing you. Take care of yourself."

At zero point five next time cycle, I was roused from sleep by stirrings in the cubicles around me. As I pulled back my curtains, I saw the other Acolytes dressing - except for two still in bed like me - also on leave.

"It's all right for you lazy ones," grumbled Vars, who had the bed next to mine. "Some of us have to work."

"We'll be getting up when you're still snoring another time, Vars," retorted one of the others from his bed opposite.

"Well, you'll have to get up soon, anyway," Vars answered. "Third Shift will be down for their sleep soon and you won't be able to sleep for their snoring."

I put on my wrap robe and sandals and hurried through to the showers with the others. Stepping in beside Vars, I said, "I'm not wasting my free shift even if they are - I'm going to see my mother."

Rubbing a bar of cleanser around his neck, Vars asked, "Not strolling around the gardens with Maran, then?" and chuckled as he saw my expression. "Ah, I forgot - it's not *her* free period though, is it?"

Before I could think of a scathing reply, I remembered something. "Oh, no! Observer Obar expects me to go to the Physicians' Level with him. I forgot to tell him I wouldn't be working."

"Don't worry, I'll tell him. If you like, I'll take your place - I expect he only wants you to cover for him and Uan while they disappear for a while."

"How did you - " Recollecting myself, I stopped but Vars was laughing.

"Don't look so worried! I've covered for them in the past. I expect they'll ask for a bonding permit soon."

Smiling, I thanked him. It was good to have made two friends among the Acolytes and I would be sorry to lose them. But I knew that the time for that was fast approaching - and I would not even be able to say farewell.

The buzzer sounded inside the apartment. Soft footfalls approached the door and it then slid upwards, revealing my mother. Her face lit up with pleasure as she saw me and my bashful grin. We embraced and I followed her inside.

"Well, what's it like, Darcon? Is it what you expected?"

"Not exactly... it's... well, boring, mostly."

She laughed. "Most jobs are, Darcon. They won't put you on the important work right away."

"No, I suppose not... " We sat down and Mother dialled hot drinks for us while I chatted about my work. Well, mostly about the people rather than the work itself. I told her I checked out old Observations but didn't tell her why; I knew she would be as horrified as I had been. Gradually I shifted the conversation on to my visits to Jameskirk.

"Well, that can't be boring, Darcon, at least. I heard that the Physicians had found a stranger - do you think he's from another Pyramid, then?"

I nodded eagerly, my heart beating faster as I led up to the question I was bursting to ask. "He's not a... a monster - I don't care what the Chief Physician's said. I saw his condition after they used the chadak on him - and I was there when he was fevered. He's a person, like us; he just *looks* different, that's all."

Mother nodded, looking a little uncomfortable. I knew why, now.

"The Pyramid he comes from... That's different, too," I continued carefully.

"Has he told you that?" she asked, a little sharply.

"No, he won't talk about it at all. I think he's afraid the Physicians will find it and harm his people somehow. But it *must* be different - they let a party set out to find us - explorers."

"Party? What happened to the rest of them - killed on the way, I suppose?"

I shook my head, not wanting to frighten her. "No, they went inside the Dark Pyramid, thinking there might be people inside. Then the force there sent him here somehow - perhaps by accident, I don't know. The important thing is that his people are *free*, Mother. They can question - there's no correction to frighten them."

"Darcon." My mother's voice held real fear. "You're not going there, are you? I haven't told you before, but... your father... "

"Mother." I laid my hand on hers. "I know about Father - I found out. Don't worry, it's all right; I understand why you didn't tell me."

"Darcon, promise me you won't do anything stupid."

"But Mother, it's not stupid. Don't you see? We can go with him - "

"Why? Why do you want to go? You've got a good position here - why throw it all away?"

"Mother, it's like a cage here, like one of those places they kept animals to be stared at. I can't *live* like this any more; always on my guard, always having to watch how I act, what I say."

My mother shook her head. "No, no, Darcon! It's safe here - safe - "

"Safe? Mother, they used to drug us - after the light was first seen, people couldn't bear it any longer, couldn't bear being trapped in here with something evil out there waiting. So they drugged the water supply - for years. They only stopped when they found out it wasn't needed any more - people were tame, like - like a lot of stupid gloeb fish waiting to be netted."

"Darcon! Darcon, don't - don't talk like that." Mother rose and paced the room, wringing her hands. I followed and tried to put an arm round her but she shrugged me off. "Do you want to die like your father?"

"Father didn't have my advantages. He couldn't go and look at forbidden files without getting caught - but I have! He didn't have someone to guide him to a place where he could be free - we do! Mother, we do!"

"Darcon, you said he's been ill - he may die. They might even execute him - "

"But he's recovering; we have to be ready. I've got a plan, Mother. I know that Level, I can - "

"No! I don't want to hear. I'm not coming!"

I stared in shock at her bowed grey head. "Mother, *please* - "

"Darcon... " She turned away and I knew she was crying. "If I don't know your plan, I can't betray you."

"Mother, I can't leave you here to face those - those murderers. You *must* come."

"Have you any idea what's out there?" she cried, spinning to face me. "Even if you *can* steal protective suits, food, air tanks... what about the wild animals? And if we *did* get there, what then? Suppose they're only looking for another Pyramid because their power supply is running out, hmm? You don't *know* what they're like!" She sat down, striking the arm of her chair with the flat of her hand. "No, Darcon, I'd rather face correction than go Outside."

"Mother... " A lump caught in my throat.

"Darcon, please - *please* - give up this insane idea. Nothing good can come from Outside! It killed your father; don't let it kill you."

"The Physicians killed my father, not the Outside." My voice sounded flat; I was drained, empty. There was... nothing more to say. I turned to go, but paused at the door. We looked at each other for a long moment, then I whispered, "Take care of yourself, Mother," and quickly hit the door activate.

Outside, I leaned against the wall, tears blurring my vision until I realised that a child from one of the nearby apartments was watching me curiously. I straightened up and walked as casually as I could towards the elevator.

When the door slid upwards, I stepped inside before I realised that it wasn't empty. A group of Med-Techs was chatting inside. I caught a snatch of "really *is* in need of correction - " before they saw me and voiced a greeting. I forced myself to reply with a smile; I couldn't afford to show deviant behaviour. Though I felt myself so marked out that it should be obvious to anyone what I was. For a moment I thought of going back to plead with Mother again, but knew there was no point.

When the door opened and the Med-Techs stepped out, I followed them absentmindedly, then realised that someone was calling my name. I looked up and saw Uan and Obar hurrying towards me.

"We didn't expect to see you here, Darcon. Vars told us you'd gone to see your mother," Uan commented.

"She went to see a neighbour. She'll be back shortly," I said, hating myself for the lie.

"Very wise. Don't waste your free time standing around in corridors when there's all this to be enjoyed." Obar waved a hand expansively round at the formally laid out flowerbeds and winding paths. I smiled, the muscles of my face feeling tired and stiff; I had never thought very highly of the gardens. For me, they're too painful a contrast with the beautiful forests and fields seen on those old tapes. When we entered our Pyramid, we brought only the functional and the necessary with us; plants and small trees that could provide food as well as oxygen. The huge trees and most of the beautiful flowers had been left behind to perish as conditions outside worsened. However, a few species of flowering plants and bushes had been rescued to form this garden area; a concession to a people starved of the beauty of growing things. Now, adjusted at last to bare metal walls and recycled air and water, they could probably manage without it but strolling in the gardens had become a major recreation.

"They let us see Jameskirk this time," Obar continued. "He's definitely improving... though just as uncooperative. We left Vars deputising for you."

A genuine smile came to my lips this time. I was glad also to hear that the Observer had now picked up my habit of referring to Jameskirk as a person, not a thing. I checked my wrist chronometer. "I'd better go - she's probably back by now."

"We'll see you next workshift; enjoy yourself," Uam said.

I took the next elevator compartment and headed for the food processing level. As a member of the Observer class, I could go more or less where I liked without question. Apart from a respectful greeting, workers I met were generally too much in awe of my grade to strike up conversation. It wasn't easy but by Third Bell, I had collected what I needed; containers for water, food preserves and some small oxygen cylinders. I had hoped to store them in my mother's apartment but since that was now impossible I took each item to the Acolytes' dormitory, hiding it in the lower drawers of the unit by my bed, before going back for another. As I have few possessions, there was plenty of room. I saw a few people on the dormitory level as I came and went, but fortunately not the same people, and if questioned, I planned to say I had forgotten something and was returning for it. At last, only the protective suits remained. I would have to leave them until our escape, since they were kept in a storeroom on the One Hundred and Thirty Fifth Level - the lowest still inhabited. I knew they would be in good order, kept ready for the periodical checks of the forcefield barriers. After stowing away the last item and locking the drawers, I spent the last unit before Third Bell working out in the exercise hall. Vars and Maran were not there this time, but as I returned to the dormitory I found that the rest of my Shift had begun to drift in from their after work activities.

"Have a good leave?" Vars asked.

"Yes, thanks. My mother is well."

"Good. Very proud of you, I shouldn't wonder."

I nodded, smiling, thankful that the question didn't really require an answer.

13 PANIC

The two Plastics-recycle techs chatted as they entered the large bay area where the waste arrived for sorting into the many huge bins.

"So I told him, you'll never get durables out of that mix; the proportions are all wrong."

"No, he never did know his job - "

"You're telling me! Anyway, when they came out of the moulds, you should have seen them! You could've bounced them off the walls! Better let training centre have them for children's balls, I said - "

Their laughter was drowned out by the loud rattle of another consignment of waste plastic tumbling down an input chute.

"What an idiot! They should send *him* to training centre, never mind the salt shakers - "

"Berek, look" The other's mirth changed abruptly to horror as she grabbed Berek's arm and pointed. On top of the huge mound of waste plastic in front of them sprawled a man's body, arm hanging limply down. As they watched, transfixed, another discharge of items almost covered him.

"No, no... not another one..." the male tech breathed.

"Berek, you get him down. I'll get the Med-Techs."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because he'll be buried if you don't," the woman yelled, running off to the nearest intercom.

Reluctantly, Berek began to mount the unstable, shifting mass. Reaching the spot where the hand still protruded, he began flinging off loose plastic to uncover the body.

I now had everything I needed for our escape, apart from the suits... Well, nearly everything. A weapon would be very useful; hopefully, I could acquire one from the Physicians. But first I had to visit Jameskirk officially one more time - to make sure he would be fit to travel and to tell him my plan. As before, I accompanied Uan and Obar to the cell. Jameskirk was sitting on his bench, unfettered but looking even paler than before and a little thinner. I also noticed tiny creases on his face around his eyes and mouth, that deepened when he smiled a welcome. I suppose they had been there before, but I had been too distracted by his colouring, or else his illness had made them more pronounced. Accustomed to smooth faces, these creases intrigued me.

"Are you feeling better?" Uan asked, kindly.

"Much better, thank you." I felt this man's charm once again; his face was open, honest. Perhaps all his people were like that? What would it be like; a society where no-one had to hide his true self. I could hardly imagine it, but I knew it must be wonderful.

"Well, we'll leave you to get on." Obar winked at me as he and Uan left. I had hoped Lilan would go with them but she stood by the door, watching impassively. My heart sank as I took a seat on the bench beside Jameskirk.

"Are your wounds healed now, Jameskirk?"

He smiled. "Nearly... and my name's Jim."

Puzzled, I looked over at Lilan. "His people have two names," she explained. "His are James and Kirk. But friends call him Jim."

I felt a warm glow inside at this evidence of his trust in me.

"The infection is all gone; he will be completely healed in a time cycle or so," the senior Attendant continued.

"What about..." I looked over at the empty restraints fixed to the wall.

"I have informed the Chief Physician that Jim is too weak to cause any trouble." I looked up in surprise at her words; so she, too, was classed among his friends. Then I immediately realised that I was thinking like a

child, jealous of sharing friends with others. She had helped him far more than I - so far. And I realised too that she was not recording this interview. Then the door suddenly opened behind her; she stepped quickly aside. "Yes?"

The Attendant framed in the doorway glanced towards Jameskirk - Jim - and myself and froze. I stared back in shock.

"You!" The word was full of hate. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Ard," I replied. "I didn't know you'd become an Attendant."

No, but I might have guessed it. There seemed to be two types of people in the Physician grade; those who believed they had a job to do but did it with compassion, and those who were attracted to the grade by the opportunities to cause suffering that it offered. I swallowed and waited for him to move.

"Well? I thought you were on Second Shift, Ard."

Apruptly, Ard recollected himself, turning back to face the senior Attendant. "I - I am, senior. But we've all been recalled for extra duty."

"Indeed? I have not heard of this."

"I believe an announcement will be made shortly, senior. I - I came to tell you that the patrols report two further killings; one body found in Plastic recycle, the other in a fish pool on Level One Seventy Nine."

I stared; the protein farm was only forty-six levels beneath this one.

"The Chief Physician has ordered patrols to cover those levels," Ard continued.

"Very good. That will be all." As the door closed behind him, Lilan commented, "You know each other, Darcon."

"Yes... he was in the same class as me in training centre. He's always hated me - I don't know why."

"Jim knows him too," she replied. "But do not worry," she continued, addressing the man beside me. "I will see that this door remains locked when I am not here."

He nodded. "He spoke of killings."

"Yes, there have been four people killed in the last few time cycles. You wouldn't know, of course, but there hasn't been a murder for about four hundred years-of-the-Pyramid, until now. I believe the last one was over an argument about bondmates. These recent killings have no apparent motive at all."

Jim frowned, deepening other lines on his face. I realised that his skin must be less resilient than ours; was that why his people had been dismissed as genetically inferior? Or had there been more than one light-skinned race on our planet? "Are there any clues?" he asked.

"None. The first two victims were an Agri-worker and a man from one of the water treatment plants - different levels entirely," Lilan explained.

"Which levels?" he asked. When she had told him, he asked, "And Plastic recycle?"

"One Four Five... " She broke off. "Yes, they're moving upwards - slowly at first, and then the jump to the protein farm. But if that other body was found in Plastic recycle... I'll be back soon." She left, closing the door.

"Jim," I said quickly, "I have a plan to get you out of here." I saw the sudden hope, instantly quelled, in his eyes.

"There's someone I need to find," he said. "If you can help me..."

I almost groaned as the door reopened and Lilan re-entered; she must have used the intercom just outside. "I checked," she said. "The body came down a waste chute; it could have come from almost any level. Well, Jim, I have passed on our theory - that the murderer is moving *up* the Pyramid. No use wasting patrols on levels where he or she has already been."

I looked at Jim, whose face was creased in anxiety. There was a shadow in his eyes; the news of the murders had disturbed him more than I would have expected, given his own situation.

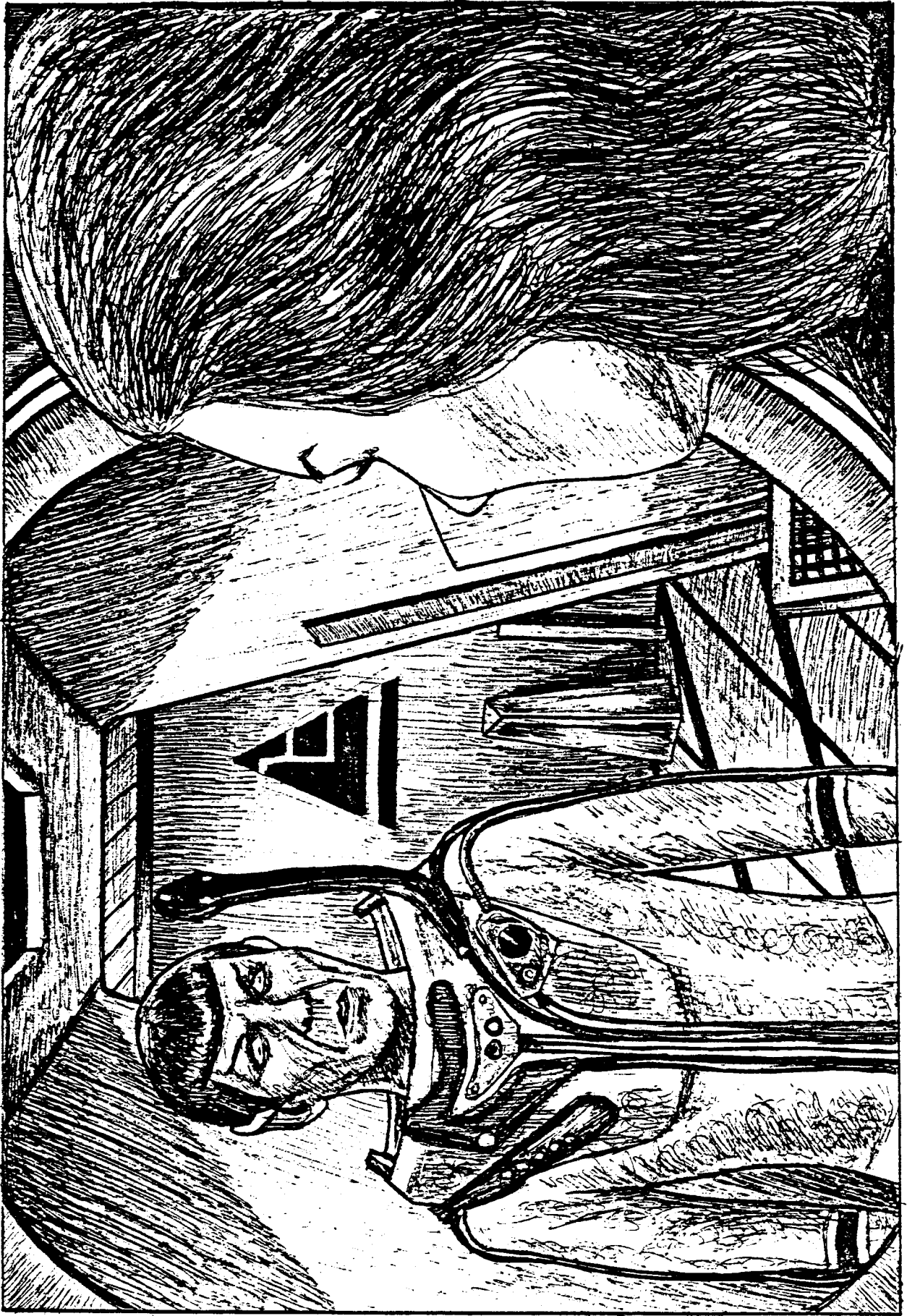
"Perhaps these deaths will keep the Chief Physician's mind off you, Jim," I said, trying to reassure him. He half smiled, but I could tell that he was still worried.

"It has kept him very busy," Lilan confirmed. I desperately wanted to discuss my plan with Jim and tell him how well I had prepared everything, but Lilan showed no sign of leaving us alone again. However willing she had been to overlook my former aberrations, I knew her tolerance had its limit. I couldn't risk confiding in her.

The rest of the visit until the return of the two Observers passed with inconsequential chatter. Jim had a lively curiosity about the ways of the Pyramid and I enjoyed explaining its institutions, the duties of each grade of citizen. He was like the real friend I had never had; there had been too many barriers of caution and distrust on my side for me ever to be truly myself with anyone. Jim was particularly intrigued by my description of the Observers and their work, probably contrasting it with the bold adventurousness of his own Explorer grade, I thought. *They* would not be content with merely watching life on the Outside through a 'scope. Perhaps there would be a place for me in that grade; I hoped so. I tried encouraging him to speak a little about his own life but he would not and I longed to explain that once we were beyond the Pyramid forcefield we had nothing to fear from the Physicians. There would be no pursuit. I had memorised the sequence for deactivating a section of the protective barrier; my computer research had been most fruitful. Although I recognised the enormity of such an act, I knew the failure alarm would alert the Screen techs and they would have an armed emergency repair team out there before eckloi or anything else could get inside the screens... at least, I hoped so.

All too soon, it was time to go. As I stood up, my eyes met Jim's and I read a message of concern in them, mingled with a cautious hope. I nodded and said, "I'll see you again soon, Jim."

The man with eyes of fire dropped from the open ventilation shaft.



The grid covering the opening clanged loudly to the floor as the man stepped forward, moving like a machine. At the ring of metal, Ectru looked up, frowning. What was that at the end of the hall... shaped like a man but wearing a glittering silver garment. And... the eyes... burning silver! She gasped in fear. Other workers along the assembly bench had also seen it. Panic-stricken, they scrambled away.

"The Physicians... where are the Physicians?" Ectru muttered, diving for the nearest wall intercom. As she fumbled with the controls, horrible screams broke out. She whirled, seeing those nearest the creature clutch at their heads and fall to their knees. Frantic, she turned back to the comm.

"Duty officer, Physician Level Two Twenty Five," a slightly bored voice responded.

"Physician, get a patrol down here - quick - "

"Slow down, citizen. State level and area." The disembodied voice was suddenly alert.

"One Eighty Five, section ten. *Please* - it's here - " She looked back along the hall again. The creature was stepping slowly forward, inexorably. Workmates lay on the floor, screaming; abruptly, they convulsed and were silent. She suddenly realised that she was the only one left - everyone else was dead or had escaped. Terrified, she made for the open doorway. She raced through it, collided with a group of Attendants who had been assigned guard duty on this level.

"Citizen, what - "

Ectru grabbed the woman's arm, ignoring the usual proprieties. "Kill it!" she yelled. "The murderer - kill it!"

The Attendant shrugged her off and drew a neural paralysers from her belt, setting it to kill mode. The others had already done so, firing at the advancing creature. But the purple beams had no effect.

"Aim for the head - the clothes must be resistant," the female Attendant ordered. Obediently, the purple beams were directed upwards, stabbing out once more, but they were merely absorbed by a silver corona that had appeared around the man-thing's head. Ectru shook her head in disbelief. All her life she had been raised to fear the Physician grade as the ultimate arbiters of life and death. If they could not destroy this enemy, no-one could.

"Aaaaagh!" The female Attendant dropped her paralysers and clutched at her head, the other Attendants doing the same. Ectru backed away, wide-eyed. But the creature had stopped, and came no closer. After a moment, the Attendants straightened up and turned to face Ectru. Horrified, she saw the blank, mindless eyes, the twisted madness of their features frozen in malevolent grins.

"No...o...o... " Ectru ran, feet flying in panic. The Attendants turned to the creature for guidance. The light touch it retained on their minds was enough to ensure their complete obedience; too much pressure would have killed them - like the others. As it was, this much had rendered them criminally insane.

"Let it go," the cold voice spoke in their heads. "It will spread the fear."

Soon the hall was empty save for the contorted corpses. The

Attendants were gone -

- despatched to their new duties.

14 ESCAPE!

"Darcon... Darcon... "

The voice was insistent, the hand shaking my shoulder even more so. Irritated, I opened my eyes.

"What is it?" I saw Vars leaning over me; even in the subdued dormitory lighting, I could see that he was worried.

"Something's happened on One Eighty Five; they've found some Assembly workers dead - just like the others. And the ones that escaped say a silver creature with fiery eyes killed them."

I sat up, the news penetrating even my befuddled brain. I grabbed my wrist chronometer from atop the storage unit by my bed. Its readout showed another one point five units to go before First Bell. "How do you know - who told you?"

"Kos came down and told me," Vars explained. I supposed he must mean an Acolyte on Second. "Temara wants to see you. Kos couldn't stop to wake you so he gave me the message. Let me know what she says, hmmm?" I nodded as I shrugged off my sleep robe and struggled into uniform.

I had to ask the way to the Chief Observer's apartment, and halted nervously outside to press the buzzer. The door slid upwards immediately and I stepped in, finding Temara seated at her desk, dressed in her sleep robe and wrap robe. She too had been aroused from sleep but even without her official robes still managed to maintain her dignified bearing.

"Sit down, Darcon."

I obeyed, growing more afraid each moment that my plot had been discovered. "You've seen more of the stranger than any of us," she began. I nodded, throat dry. "Don't worry, Darcon. I know about Obar and Uan," Temara said, smiling. "You don't have to be afraid of betraying them."

I swallowed. "You... you knew...?"

She nodded. "They're both good at their work. That's why I assigned them both to this visiting; it's good for them to have this time together. So don't worry; we won't mention it again."

I smiled, relieved that I appeared to be safe for the moment, yet ashamed at having to deceive this just and thoughtful woman. "This is not about Uan and Obar. I intend to go and see the Chief Physician; in view of something very serious which has happened on Level One Hundred Eighty Five. I feel he'll want to question Jameskirk again."

"Jim," I corrected automatically, then realised to whom I was speaking. "Forgive me, Chief Observer, I didn't mean - "

Temara waved aside my apology. "No, please explain, Darcon." She listened as I briefly told her about Jim's two names. "I see. Well, the Chief Physician will no doubt expect - er - Jim - to give him the answers; you might be able to persuade him to spare himself pain." She got up and went to the door that presumably led to her sleep chamber. "Be at the elevators, Darcon. I'll join you shortly."

Heart hammering, I waited. Would I have a chance to speak to Jim about the plan this time? In a few sub units Temara hurried towards me, dressed in her robes. In silence, we descended to Level Two Hundred and Twenty Five.

When we got there, all was chaos, Attendants running in all directions. I caught a glimpse of Ard but he was too preoccupied to recognise me as he hurried past. I led Temara to Jim's cell; the door was locked, naturally enough. To my relief, I saw Lilan approach.

"Chief Observer," she began, respectfully, "the subject has been taken to correction therapy."

My stomach sank though I should have expected this. If Jim should die...

Temara was speaking. "Please take us there."

Lilan hesitated. "He may not admit you; correction is restricted to Physician grade - "

"Take us there!" Temara's tone permitted no refusal. Nodding, Lilan led the way. Fear knotted my insides as I trailed after the Chief Observer. To actually enter the room where so many had suffered... my father among them. Where I, too, might suffer if this plan failed. Worst of all, to go before the Chief Physician.

All too soon, we halted. The door opened and we ducked beneath it, entering a room full of winking instrument panels. A figure wearing a conical green headdress spun round, dark rage on his features as he saw us. The manacled hands on the headdress told me who this was.

"Lilan!"

"Don't blame your staff, Senro. I insisted on coming here."

I marvelled at the Chief Observer's calm; I was quivering with fright. With a visible effort, the Chief Physician subsided.

"Very well. Return to your duties, senior Attendant."

Lilan bowed and left. Quailing behind Temara, I hoped I would not be noticed. Then I saw Jim, strapped into a reclining chair. Sweat beaded his face and darkened his tunic, and I knew he had already been questioned.

"Has he told you anything yet, Senro?"

"No," snapped the Chief Physician, brows drawn down angrily. "He admits nothing."

Temara crossed to Jim and spoke gently. "Jim, if you brought someone with you, don't try to shield him any longer. He will be captured just as you were, whether you keep silent or not." I heard Senro hiss with anger.

"I - I'm sorry - I don't know anything... "

Furious, the Chief Physician rounded on him. "You try to shield your Master. Let's see if you can take a higher intensity." He turned to a control panel.

"No, wait!" I yelled without thinking, then wished I could disappear as the Chief Physician's shrivelling gaze focused on me.

"Yes, Senro, let Darcon speak to him." Temara stepped to the Chief Physician's side and spoke quietly. "I believe he has built up a trust with this man; he may be able to get your answers without pain."

I saw Senro's grimace at Temara's reference to Jim as a 'man', but he only said, "Very well." He took his hand from the panel and folded his arms. Nervously, I stepped forward.

"Jim... have... have they told you anything? What's been happening, I mean?"

"No... only that someone - another stranger - has been seen... " I sensed the effort that it cost him to speak.

"Jim, this man wears silver - like the clothes you wore. He - he's the killer - "

"No... not Spock. Never - " The shock in Jim's eyes gave way to horrified realisation as he saw Senro's leer of triumph. "Darcon... " I heard the hurt reproach in his voice. Stung, I laid my hand on his arm.

"Jim, I don't mean to betray you - I just think you should hear the truth. He has eyes of fire - people saw him this time."

"That's enough!" Senro pulled me away and I realised, too late, that I might have shown myself too friendly with an enemy of the Pyramid. "You can see now that there is no purpose in lying to us. This creature kills without a touch; people fall at its feet, dying. It's your Master - admit it."

Jim shook his head, helplessly. "You don't... understand. I... All right, I do know... who you mean. But... something - happened - in the other pyramid." He looked up at the Chief Physician who stood menacingly over him, and his face was open and unafraid. "Please - " he said, and I knew that he pleaded not for himself but for his friend. "Let me go to him. I can stop him. Something happened - a white light - it affected his mind somehow. After... after I fell into the flames... my mind was numbed - I couldn't remember what happened. You must let me go to him."

"You expect to deceive us so easily? This - Spock - is your Master."

"No, listen! I might be able to stop the killings - if I can just speak to him. I'm his friend - he might be able to fight this thing if I can reach him somehow."

Senro punched a comm button. "Two Attendants to correction therapy immediately." Jim closed his eyes, obviously exhausted. As Ard and another man entered at a run, Senro snapped, "Return this creature to its cell and restrain it."

Jim's eyes opened. "Wait!" he insisted. He looked at Temara. "I'm trying to help you," he said more gently.

She shook her head. "Where internal security is concerned, I do not interfere." She stood aside as the Attendants unfastened Jim's restraints and pulled him to his feet, gripping him tightly by the arms. As soon as he had been marched from the room, the Chief Physician turned his bleak, cold eyes on me.

"Perhaps it is time that the Observer grade was vetted," he insinuated. My heart sank, cold sweat breaking out anew on my body.

"How dare you?" Temara flared.

Senro held up his hand. "Let's hear the boy speak for himself. I want to know how such a friendship can develop."

Somehow I forced myself to meet the gaze of those malevolent eyes, speaking calmly and dispassionately. "Friendship, Chief Physician? I've just followed my orders - to gain the creature's trust and make questioning easier."

Apparently satisfied, Senro grunted and turned to Temara. "Perhaps I spoke somewhat hastily, Chief Observer." Facing me again, he said, "It seems you missed your true vocation, Acolyte. You would have made a good Physician." I made myself nod and smile as if I accepted it as a compliment.

Temara broke in. "Very well, Chief Physician. There seems little else we can do here for the present."

"You are always welcome, Temara."

Gratefully, I followed Temara out, anxious to get away as soon as I could. For suspicion to fall on me when I already had a file in their databanks... I could only hope that the Chief Physician had really believed me. If I could only stay out of his clutches for another time cycle...

Somehow, I got through my shift, saying little to my colleagues and trying in vain to concentrate on my work. Visits to Jim would be suspended for the immediate future, Temara had told me; she didn't know there would be one more, unofficial, visit. As I came off duty, I heard Maran calling me. Heart sinking, I halted and turned to her with what I hoped was a friendly smile.

"Darcon... I haven't seen much of you this shift. What's the matter? Aren't you feeling well?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm just... I was wakened early, I'm a bit tired, that's all."

"Oh, yes, Vars did mention it. Why did Temara want to see you?" Briefly I explained. "And they think you've got that thing's confidence?" she asked sceptically. I shrugged. "They must know what they're doing, I suppose," she said, looking doubtful. Worried, I decided I'd have to waste time soothing her suspicions.

"What about eating with me? I know it's a little early - "

"All right."

Over food, we chatted about trivial events and gossip. The talk around us was more subdued than usual; I attributed that to the effect of the latest killings. Though I fretted inwardly at the lost time, I tried to console myself with the knowledge that I would have needed this final meal in the Pyramid anyway. Whatever physical arrangements Jim's suit had had, the ones I intended to steal were not designed for long term use. Thankfully, they had some provision for elimination, but eating and drinking would have to be accomplished with our helmets off. Considering the cold and the low oxygen content of the air, we would have to restrict ourselves to the odd bite, and mouthful of water. But I put these worries to the back of my mind to concentrate on allaying Maran's suspicions.

By the time I left, saying that I was going early to bed to catch up on lost sleep, Maran seemed happier. Hurrying, I kept a look out for other people, but reached the dormitory without meeting anyone. I crossed the

room as quietly as I could so as not to disturb the sleeping Second Shift. Then, heart beating wildly, I unlocked the storage unit behind the concealment of my cubicle curtains and packed my supplies into a bag I had taken from a storeroom during my profitable excursions to the lower levels. As I left, I glanced round at the curtained beds, but there was no movement or sound except muffled snores.

Apart from a gun, there was one other thing needed for our escape; a disguise that would ensure that no-one questioned me. Otherwise, my presence on the Physician Levels, off duty, would be wondered at. My father had taken the uniform of an Attendant, but all Attendants would be known and recognised; an Observer, however, was another matter.

As I'd hoped, Obar's one room apartment - which he merited as an Observer of middle rank - was still deserted. I took the spare uniform from his closet and hurriedly changed into it, bundling my own into my bag. Then I checked the corridor outside; empty. It was still too early for most of my Shift to retire. Clutching the bag, I hurried to the Elevators, the knee length robe I now wore hampering me a little with its unaccustomed folds. There was an anxious moment while I waited for the next compartment, but when it arrived it was empty, as I'd hoped. I got in, punching Physicians' Level Two Twenty Five, and my Observer grade code which would override any pressing of buttons on other floors. By now my heart was pounding furiously and sweat was dampening my stolen uniform. I had been incredibly lucky... how long would that last?

The door opened and I got out, forcing myself to walk at normal speed towards Jim's cell. The only Attendant I passed ignored me. I reached the cell; the door was locked, just like before. Was Jim inside, or back in correction therapy? I checked my wrist chronometer. Lilan's Shift had, of course, gone off duty at the same time as myself. All I had to do was locate a senior Attendant and ask for this door to be opened; if I behaved naturally, there was no reason for anyone to deny my request. But I hadn't considered Lilan's conscientious attitude to her work. I hadn't taken two steps away before the door at my back slid upwards. I turned, startled.

"Oh, Observer, do you - " Lilan broke off as she recognised me; I sensed her reaching for the paralysers at her belt. Instinctively I lunged forwards, aiming for her neck. She fell with a groan. Surprised, I stared down at her; though we all learn such skills in training centre, the Physician grade was highly trained in unarmed combat. It could only have been the unexpectedness of my presence that had enabled me to overcome her. Then I looked up and saw Jim in the doorway.

"How is she?" he asked with concern. Abashed, I realised that it hadn't been me, after all. I crouched to check.

"It's all right, She's just unconscious."

Jim lifted Lilan and carried her inside. Following, I glanced upward, but the vid camera was not operating. Jim laid Lilan on the bench and levelled her control box at the door, closing it.

"I've brought everything we need - except the environmental suits. We'll get those on Level One Thirty Five," I said, pulling my Acolyte uniform from the bag. "Get into this. I've got some food dye that will do for your face and hands." Jim rapidly pulled off his tattered tunic and drew on the indigo trousers. As he donned the tunic and took the belt I offered him, he looked at me questioningly.

"Environmental suits?"

"Yes. I have oxygen, rations and water. I hope your Pyramid is not

too far, Jim," I laughed, only half joking.

"Pyramid?" Jim began rubbing the golden brown dye into his face.

"Yes, of course. We're going to escape - you're going home."

Jim stopped, doubt in his eyes. "And... you're coming with me, Darcon?"

"Of course. I've planned everything; I don't think I'll be missed for a while. And I have the sequence to shut down part of the forcefield."

Jim half turned away as I watched in confusion. He didn't seem pleased at all. Then he turned back to me, his expression a strange mixture of regret and determination. "I'm sorry, Darcon. I can't leave."

"What? Jim, what are you talking about?"

"I have to find Spock... my friend. Something's wrong. I have to help him. Stop him killing any more of your people."

Horrified, I grabbed his arm. "Jim, please! Don't you realise what I've done? I've gone against every rule of our society - read forbidden files, stolen, worn the robes of a superior - " I pointed to Lilan's prone form. "She can testify it was me! I can't go back - not now. Don't you understand? I have to get out of this place, *have to!*"

Gently, Jim disengaged my hand from his arm. I realised that I had been digging my fingers into his flesh. Then he finished rubbing his face and neck with the dye and began working it into his hands. "I'm sorry, Darcon, but I have to help my friend... and your people."

"All right, if you can't come, draw me a map. Tell me how to get there!"

Jim shook his head; I saw pain in his eyes. "I can't do that either," he said heavily, going to the door.

"Why not?" Desperately, I went towards him, with some idea of hitting him, of stopping him by force.

"There's... there's no way you can reach my home. It's too far away." I heard the gentleness in his tone, saw compassion in his eyes. My clenched fist trembled; I stepped back, shaking my head in disbelief.

"What are you?" I asked, my throat tight. "What are you? Something from the Dark Pyramid... something sent here to destroy me... to betray me? Was the Chief Physician right?"

Jim shook his head but I saw sorrow on his face. "I'm sorry - I can't tell you." He pointed Lilan's control box at the door, opening it. I followed him out, feeling dazed as I watched him lock the door. There was a tight feeling in my head; a pressure as if my head would explode. With a last regretful look at me, Jim turned and strode away. I could have tried to stop him... but why waste energy? His tall, powerful figure in purple and indigo blurred, running together. I realised that I was crying.

"Jim... Jim..." I whispered. "I thought you were my friend... Destroyer..." The bag containing my hard-won supplies dropped from my hand. With only one person, those supplies would last for double the time and yet... With no goal to aim for, what use for me to go wandering off into the dark? What use to die of starvation or suffocation - or be torn apart by eckloi? Nothing. Nothing at all. There was no other Pyramid.

I don't know how long I stood there, stunned, my mind... empty. Then came the sound of running feet. Suddenly panic-stricken, I turned to re-enter the cell for Lilan's paralysers but the door was locked; Jim had locked it.

The word rang in my head, over and over. *BETRAYER!*

In moments, the green-clad figures came into sight, needle-barrelled neural paralyzers in their hands pointed at me. My numbness had vanished; terrified, I turned to run but two figures stood at the other end of the corridor. One in dark and pale green robes, in tall green headdress with badge of manacled hands... the Chief Physician. The other...

The other wore Acolyte's uniform. Light brown hair, cut short, framed a golden brown, narrow chinned face. Light brown eyes focused on me with an expression of... what? Pity... with hurt, and revulsion at my deviant behaviour. I knew instinctively that it had taken a mind of refined cruelty - the Chief Physician's - to think of bringing my other betrayer to face me.

"Why?" I would have asked more but the word stuck in my throat, choking me. I leaned against the closed door for support.

"Oh, Darcon... " I saw tears in her eyes. "I liked you... I really did. But you're... ill."

The polite euphemism brought me to the edge of hysteria. "Mad, don't you mean? Twisted? Evil?"

"Darcon, I - I had to do it - "

The Chief Physician put an arm round her shoulders like a comforting father. "Yes, you were not quite careful enough, young man. Your colleague's doubts led her to follow you... to see you steal those robes." He looked at her. "You have done your duty, my child, painful though it is. Darcon will be well cared for; he will be able to return to society and take a useful role... though not in the Observation grade, of course."

"You were right," I said, meeting those vicious, triumphant eyes. "He is evil - he's from the Dark Pyramid."

"Indeed?" I detected the puzzled note in Senro's voice and suddenly realised that he was unaware of Jim... Jameskirk's escape. He thought I had been unable to get into the cell... as, indeed, I should. I felt a mad glee, a pressure in my chest and head and knew that if I started to laugh, I wouldn't be able to stop.

"Yes... He betrayed me... tricked me into freeing him."

"What!" The roar of angry disbelief confirmed my intuition.

"He attacked your Attendant and locked her inside. I asked him to take me to freedom, but he wouldn't - he's gone." I looked back along the corridor, at the statue-like figures of the Attendants, each with neural paralysers ready. As the Chief Physician lunged forward, snatching the control box from his belt, I stepped away from the door. I caught a glimpse of Lilan sitting on the bench, head in hands, then I dived past the Chief Physician, running desperately. Maran gasped then flung herself to the floor as the purple beams stabbed in our direction.

In the moment before they hit, I hoped the paralyzers were set to kill.

15 HALLS OF THE DEAD

Kirk peered cautiously from the cover of a pile of crates containing spare parts. No-one was in sight. He slipped out from hiding and quickly ran the length of the hall, past the long work benches with their discarded tools. At the far end he halted, listening at the closed door for voices.

The anxiety for Spock that ate away at his insides now had a companion in the weight of guilt bowing his shoulders. Darcon... a young man whom he had regarded as a friend and who now probably looked on him as a betrayer. Lilan, too. But it was Darcon most of all. He blamed himself for not seeing it, for encouraging Darcon's dissatisfaction with life in the pyramid. But there was nothing he could do. He *couldn't* tell Darcon the truth, for that would mean breaking the Prime Directive. His presence here was bad enough without compounding it. He would have to live with the knowledge that Darcon probably hated his guts, had risked his own position - perhaps was even now undergoing 'correction'. He only hoped he could undo the damage he had caused, or at least atone for it by ending the killings. Full circle, his thoughts returned to his desperate worry about Spock. If he couldn't get through to him, couldn't stop him any other way...

Resolutely pushing that thought to the back of his mind until it would have to be faced, he concentrated on the present, pressing the control panel beside the door. The door slid smoothly upwards, and he peered out into the corridor beyond, then froze.

"God in... "

Horrified, he stepped out, staring at the prone bodies littering the entire length of the long corridor. Swinging round, he saw it was the same in the other direction. Women and men, in the uniform grey tunic and trousers of technicians, the coloured band at hem and cuffs proclaiming their speciality, lay contorted with eyes open and blankly gazing. Overcome in one shattering instant, Med-Techs, Agri-workers, Recycle plant attendants and all the rest, were united in death, all differences forgotten.

Picking his way between the bodies, Kirk made for the intersection ahead. More bodies lay here but these were different in appearance - their faces frozen in grimaces of pain. They had died differently... but how? He found it difficult to accept that Spock was responsible for all this. Spock... Shaking his head, he rounded the corner into the other corridor.

After leaving Darcon, he had headed for the level he had heard mentioned by Senro - One Eighty Five - reasoning that the entity which possessed his friend would still be lurking here after his first full-scale attack. It had taken a combination of guesswork and counting the number of times that the level indicator above the door flashed its incomprehensible symbols, to operate the elevator and halt it at what he hoped was the right level. It seemed that he had guessed right; but all he had found were bodies, and evidence of a hasty, panic-stricken evacuation in the form of dropped tools and the odd discarded shoe. It seemed that he was the only person alive down here... an eerie sensation.

Abruptly, a sharp sound rang out - like a plastic cup hitting the metal floor and then rolling to silence. He stopped, looking back along the corridor. Of course it was possible that something had overbalanced on the edge of a bench... As the possibility crossed his mind and he faced forward again, he saw one of the figures sprawled on the floor ahead pick itself up. A man in green. Kirk instinctively backed away from the malevolence in the grin... the eyes. As he watched, the needle thin barrel of a neural paralyser came up and the man's face tilted back, his dark face



split by maniacal laughter. Then the purple beam stabbed out...

Kirk dived to the floor, missing the deadly energy by centimetres, then scrambled up and charged. The man's laughter cut out and he aimed again. Desperately, Kirk launched himself in a flying tackle. As his arms closed around the man's legs, toppling him backwards, he felt the beam graze his scalp, cauterising the nerves. They went down together, Kirk lunging for the gun. The other man's strength was phenomenal, his eyes staring with frenzied hatred into Kirk's as he snarled like a wild animal. Somehow Kirk locked his hands around the man's wrist and held on, keeping the gun pointed away from him as he tried to angle his knee for the other's solar plexus. He slammed the man's wrist against the floor, once, twice... the paralysers came free. Kirk wrenched round, kicking it away.

An anguished cry came from the man beneath him. Startled, he saw the dark eyes widen in shock as another scream was torn from the other's throat. Then the Attendant twisted once and lay still. Shaken, Kirk climbed to his feet. Whatever had controlled the man had obviously decided that his use was over and had callously killed him. Aware of his danger, Kirk stepped away and snatched up the neural paralysers, feeling a little better, though he doubted its effectiveness. How close did the creature have to be in order to kill someone it controlled? Close by... or did its hold on the dead man's mind mean that wasn't necessary? And if it *did* control Spock... how could he harm his friend? Kirk suddenly recalled the noise he had heard earlier. He examined the paralysers, found it set on what appeared to be maximum, and dialled it back to its lowest setting. Unconsciously, he touched the top of his head, which still felt strange; a small patch no longer seemed to have any functioning nerves.

Kirk stiffened as a second green-clad figure emerged from the intersection which he had just left. Another Attendant; obviously one of the patrols he had heard about had met the entity and been taken over. The entity; he wouldn't say Spock, not yet. The thought of the suffering his friend might now be going through, host to a creature that took such delight in killing... Resolutely, Kirk directed his full attention on the advancing figure.

This time his attacker was a woman, but her face too was animated by the same malevolence. Her features twisted briefly in a spasm of madness before returning to a mindless grin identical to that of his erstwhile assailant. Kirk raised the paralysers and fired. The beam flared out, surrounding the woman in a momentary halo, then winked out. She stepped forward, still grinning... then slowly toppled, folding to her knees. She hit the floor and lay still. Breathing a relieved sigh, Kirk lowered the weapon and glanced at the corridor behind him. In the distance, he was sure he could make out an elevator. He set off again, picking his way between the contorted bodies.

Intent on his passage, he did not see the green clad figure raise her head and stare after him with a fixed stare of pure evil.

"And I wish to state, for the record, that my mother is innocent of all blame. She did not aid me or betray the Pyramid in any way." I reached over to press the deactivation button before sitting back wearily. My confession was complete; every deviation from the norm that I could remember from nineteen years of life. Needless to say, the period since my Investiture had been the most eventful. All I had left out was Lilan's part in it... the least I could do for her.

I got up to pace the room yet again. Despite what I had said about

Mother, I knew it would do no good. Standard Procedure to correct the parents - wasn't that what Lilan had said? But hadn't Mother suffered enough, losing her bondmate? And now me - correction at least, if not execution. I leaned against the wall trying hard to choke back tears, then pushed myself away. What was the purpose of crying? I'm no hero; I knew I'd beg, plead - on my knees to Senro, if necessary - say whatever I had to, just to keep my life.

The door slid upwards and I jerked in fright before I saw it was Lilan entering. Her face was drawn, her golden brown skin dark around the eyes. I felt a pang of remorse; she obviously hadn't fully recovered from that blow of Jameskirk's. Or perhaps it was more than that - she must have paid for her trust in other ways. The Chief Physician had surely had something to say to her concerning Jameskirk's freedom from restraints. Then I saw the silver band was gone from her arm; they had reduced her rank to Attendant. I saw regret in her eyes, yet somehow knew that it was for me, rather than for her own plight. And I remembered that she had tried to save me and knew I wasn't worth her sympathy.

"Sit down, Darcon," she said gently. Fuzzled, I obeyed.

"Lilan, I - I'm sorry - for everything... "

She shook her head. "Darcon... what I have to tell you... It's bad news, I'm afraid... very bad."

I felt myself grow cold inside though I had half expected this. "They're going to execute me?" My voice sounded strange, detached.

"No, no, nothing like that. It... it's your mother."

I stood up, trembling. "I knew they'd correct her, Lilan, I - " I broke off as she looked away to conceal her reaction. Feeling weak, I sat down heavily. "What is it?" I whispered.

"The lower levels... we've lost contact with them. They're... they're being sealed off. People who've come from there say... Attendants are killing people. They - "

"What levels?" I demanded loudly.

"One Thirty Five to One Ninety."

"But my mother works on One Ninety. You can't - " I stopped, anger growing. "It's a trick!" I glanced at my wrist chronometer. "It's only nineteen point two four. She's on First, like me - it's still sleep period... " My voice trailed off as I saw the pain in Lilan's expression.

"A worker on Second went sick; your mother was asked to switch Shifts."

"No -" I shook my head, determined not to believe it. It wouldn't be real till I did. "You said people escaped - "

"A full tally's been taken; your mother is among those missing."

I turned away, sensing Lilan follow, and felt her hand on my shoulder. "Darcon - I'm so sorry... "

"It... it's a trick. Part of correction... " I stumbled on brokenly. "Senro told you to tell me... because... because I know you."

"Darcon, it's true. I wish it wasn't, but - "

That was when my unbelief failed me...

The door slid shut behind Lilan.

"Well?" demanded Senro. "How did he take it?"

"As... as expected."

"Good - he broke, then. Well on the way to satisfactory correction. It shouldn't take long under half power."

Lilan stepped closer. "His mother may still be alive. We don't know what happened on those levels."

"We know well enough. You're too soft hearted, Lilan. All your years of hard work to reach senior Attendant... now you'll have to do it all again. You're fortunate that you're not scheduled for correction yourself; if you hadn't proved yourself over and over in the past, I'd have my doubts about your lack of judgement."

Lilan listened wordlessly, head bowed.

"Toughen your ideas, Lilan, or you'll never attain Physician rank. All right, return to your dormitory. You can catch a few units sleep before you return to your normal duties."

Kirk moved quickly, keeping his head down and trying not to draw attention to himself; he knew his hastily applied food dye would not stand up to close scrutiny. But luck was on his side; the people he encountered, few at first then more and more, were too busy running, their faces pinched in growing alarm, to take much notice of those approaching. He reached an alcove and darted in, letting the growing stream bypass him. People were sweeping each other along, all caught up in a rising tide of fear. Perhaps it was merely the news of what had occurred on the lower levels or perhaps... perhaps the entity was here?

That thought in his mind, Kirk plunged into the flood and began to fight it, trying to make headway towards the place they were all coming from. Hands beat at him in frenzy as faces loomed up and then sped past, glazed eyes not really seeing him. Shoulders cannoned into him with bruising force. But he would not relent. The thought of Spock in need of help, whom only he could help - *maybe not even me* came the traitrous thought that he instantly pushed away - would not let him give in.

"Admission restricted; security code required."

The man's fingers desperately clawed against the metal door with its painted logo, then he spun, sobbing for breath. He was in time to see the silver clad figure advance towards him; this security corridor was a dead end and his escape route was now blocked. The man pressed himself against the door at his back. "Keep away! No - keep away!" His screams rose into a wordless howl of pure terror before he slid to the floor, jerked and lay still, his face blanking into a death mask. The silver form slowly advanced towards the closed door, stretching forth a hand. Obstinate,

the door remained shut. Removing an access panel from the wall behind it, the creature began to tamper with the exposed circuitry. After a short while, the door slid upwards. The creature entered, approaching one of the computer banks within.

For an instant, the silver glow emanating from its eyes fluctuated. The creature faltered, sweat breaking out on its forehead, and put out a hand to steady itself against an instrument panel. "No...o...o," its voice groaned. Then the entity was back in control, only permitting the animal part's expertise with such mechanisms as the one before it to come to the surface. The inconvenient scruples of the host mind were once again suppressed.

Fully dominated, Spock set to work.

Pausing in an open doorway to get his breath back - and also his bearings - Kirk ruefully rubbed at his bruised shoulder. The crowd continued to rush past, its speed unabated. Feeling ready to brave it once more, he edged forward, the door starting to close behind him. Suddenly a strident klaxon rang out. Simultaneously, the corridor lighting began to flash on and off in synchronisation with the sound. Cries of alarm rang out and the hurrying citizens faltered, slamming into each other.

"What is it?" yelled one.

"The Barrier! Something's wrong with the Barrier!"

As the answer came, more citizens hurtled themselves frenziedly into the back of the obstruction. People went down screaming as others tried to run over them. Kirk hastily pulled a young woman to her feet just as the crowd erupted into motion again. Too frightened even to thank him, she leaped out from the doorway and was hurled away with the others.

"Where's the control centre?" Kirk demanded, grabbing a man as he struggled past. The man pushed angrily at him, trying to free his arm. "The control centre - where?" Kirk insisted.

"Two Thirty," the man snapped then tore himself free and raced away. With a goal now, Kirk launched himself from the doorway and battled his way along the corridor.

Brk stood, watching the vast mountain with its large unblinking eye, her shaggy coat of hair stirred by the strengthening wind. The plain around her was more than usually watchful to one of her heightened senses; agitated by the recent excitements. It was a long time since the creatures had even emerged behind the safety of their barrier of death, much less braved the dangers of the plain.

After their attack on the group of creatures, the People had found two dead ones left behind, covered with stones. Eagerly they had uncovered the bodies and tried to remove the strange, glittering skins. Finally they had succeeded in tearing and ripping them off with the help of the sharpened stones that served them as knives. The taste had been... unusual, but not unpleasant.

Inwardly, Brk exulted. It was the first time that the People had ever defeated the creatures. Longingly she studied the base of the

mountain. If only her band could gain admittance during her time of leadership - what glory! Her name would be sung down every generation for as long as the People endured.

About to turn away, Brlk blinked. The barrier was... flickering. Her slow reasoning processes had difficulty in grasping the fact. Could her wish have caused this? As she stared in disbelief, the strange blue light gave one final flutter, then vanished.

The barrier - gone. Brlk's mind struggled to understand... to accept. It *must* be a trick. If she tried to cross the perimeter, the barrier would flicker into life again, killing her instantly. But... it remained lifeless, dark. And a sound began to intrude above the keening wind; a strange grinding rumble...

In a blinding instant of triumph, Brlk knew her time of glory was here. *Now*. She would be Brlk, Mother of Meats, Leader of the Time of Feasting. She gave tongue to an ululating cry of triumph; the summons to her band, to all her People, to all the creatures still alive in the Land. Twice she gave voice. Then, mouth dripping saliva, she surged towards the gaping square of darkness at the base of the mountain...

16 ENCOUNTER

Kirk halted, momentarily winded, looking up the dimly lit staircase. A lucky hunch had led him to try the seemingly dead end which terminated in a wall decorated in bold black symbols. He'd known that they had to have an emergency staircase *somewhere*. Now he climbed steadily, counting each landing he reached. It had been no use trying the elevators, now packed with panicked citizens trying to reach the highest levels.

Two Thirty at last. It was here that he expected to find Spock... and whatever possessed him. Memory was returning at last; a vision of Spock with eyes of silver, surrounded by flickering blue flames. He still could not recall how he had managed to follow his friend across the gulf between pyramids, but he reasoned that short term amnesia must be a side effect of the transfer process - at least for Humans.

He approached the door panel to his left; it slid slowly upwards. Ducking beneath, he was instantly alert for danger. But there was no-one in sight as he walked quietly to the intersection and checked the other corridor. No bodies either... Wait, what was that at the far end, by another insignia-painted door? An exit to the stair well? It seemed unlikely. Perhaps that was the power room he sought. Cautiously he approached. The bold black signs came clearer; they were different to those that indicated the emergency stairs. And that was a man's body, contorted like the others he had seen. He gripped the neural paralysers; it would probably have no effect on the entity itself. His best chance lay in trying to get through to Spock... if there was anything left of his friend to reach. Sweat broke out on the palms of his hands; he wiped them on the purple tunic and licked dry lips.

Suddenly the warning klaxon and flashing lights stopped, the corridor lighting dimming to half power. At the same instant, the door in front of him began to rise. He stepped back involuntarily as the silver clad legs came into view. Up... up... the door rose to its full extent, revealing a figure that chilled Kirk's blood. Spock's face... rigid. Eyes that blazed in the dimness.

"Spock - " Waves began to batter against his mind. Fighting them, he clutched at his head, staggering backwards, terror rising inside him as the

pressure increased.

Wait! What had killed those people - their own fear? He tried to relax, letting the waves wash over him, through him. A terrible risk... if he was wrong... but yes, the pressure was still there - but bearable. Heartened, Kirk concentrated on breathing steadily, calmly, to stabilise his metabolic responses and suppress fear.

"Who... are you?" The voice that grated from Spock's throat was his yet not his, distorted as if by terrible agony.

"Spock - it's me - Jim."

"Jim...? We... don't know... you."

"Spock knows me. Let him - let him come through - " Kirk struggled to speak through the pressure in his head. Stay calm, he told himself.

The silver light from the eyes dimmed for an instant. "Jim? Yes... my friend... my Captain... "

Abruptly, pain lanced through Kirk's head. Screaming, he fell to his knees...

Painfully I shrugged my shoulder, trying to ease a cramp in my arm muscles. After being told about my mother, I had been fettered to the wall of my cell as Jim had been. Jameskirk. I tried to forget the man I had looked on as a friend.

How much longer would I have to wait before they took me to correction? Ever since I was a little boy, I had listened with dread to the wild stories about correction, how excruciatingly painful it was. I had had a taste of that in the aftermath of being shot by the paralyzers; when I had wakened up, my whole body had been a mass of tingling pain. But I had been able to massage the worst of it away. Then they had brought me the recording device and made me produce my confession. I had done everything they wanted without resisting; why couldn't they get it over with? I had lost all track of time; it seemed I had been secured against this wall for many time units. But the discomfort probably made it seem longer than it really was...

The door began to rise. My heart beat fast, as I expected to see the Chief Physician come to gloat before taking me for correction. But instead, it was - Ard. I felt my heart leap painfully as I saw the savage glint of triumph in his eyes. He grinned, stepping into the room. "Well, my old friend Darcon. Not top of the class any longer?" As he came closer, my skin crawled with fear and sickness rose in my stomach.

"The other Attendants - " I began.

"Don't worry. No-one will disturb us. They're all too busy - seems there are a few disturbances on the lower levels." As he spoke the lighting began to flash on and off while, from the corridor outside, a warning klaxon blared.

"The Barrier!" I gasped.

Ard halted, looking uncertain, but then shrugged and grinned, his face bestial in the alternate glare and darkness.

"Shouldn't you be at your post - it's an emergency!" I said desperately.

"The Engineering techs can deal with it; what else are they for? Besides, we have unfinished business, Darcon. I always knew there was something wrong with you... deviant." As he finished, he bunched his fist and drove it into my stomach. I cried out, jerking against the restraints but unable to double up because of them. "Yes, you need - " *fist to my jaw* - "some correction therapy - " *another blow to my stomach* - "of my own." Another blow, knocking my head against the wall. I tasted blood; felt it trickle from the corner of my mouth as I hung, barely conscious, in the manacles. Then he grabbed my hair, forcing my head up. I groaned and tried to focus my eyes, but everything wavered in an aching red mist. "Still awake? Good, there's more. By the time I've finished, even if women will still look at you... you'll be no good for anything but looking." He paused, then grinned as he saw from my face that I'd understood. Then he brought up his knee...

The pain was worse - far worse - than anything he'd done before. I screamed - screamed till my throat was raw. When I stopped, tears of agony rolling down my face, he grabbed my jaw roughly. "That was just the first one - "

I gasped in fear but then his eyes rolled upward and he toppled, crashing to the floor. I tried to see; a blurred green figure stood in the doorway.

"Darcon... " As it approached, it resolved into a slim, solemn faced woman.

"Lilan... " A fit of coughing seized me. I rode with it, feeling as if my body was coming apart like a worn out tunic. Then I felt the restraints open and strong arms help me to the floor. My legs were useless jelly and I sat, bent over, hugging my wounded body. I wiped blood from my face and looked up, in time to see Lilan leave the room. Afraid that she was leaving me alone, I tried to get up but was too weak. In between the klaxon's blaring, I could make out her voice.

" - is Attendant Lilan, re - "000000000000 " - I repeat, respond pl - "000000000000 " - Duty Officer, please - "000000000000 " - anyone there at all?" I recognised the rising concern and exasperation in her voice. Then she returned and crouched down by my doubled-up body. "Do you think you can walk?"

My jaw felt swollen to twice its normal size, my stomach and ribs were a mass of raw aches. But, trying to suppress nausea, I gasped out, "I - can try - "

Lilan bit her lip. "I'm sorry to ask you this, Darcon, but I can't raise anyone. The Barrier could be down - and something's wrong with central power."

"Don't worry about me... you have to get - to your post."

"No, I can't leave you here." Somehow she got me to my feet and helped me out of the cell. Every step was a fiery agony until I began to feel it would be luxury just to lie down and die. At last we stopped and I realised we were by an elevator. "I don't think it's working - we'll have to use the emergency stairs," Lilan said, sounding worried. Inwardly I groaned but kept my reaction to myself, knowing she had enough problems.,

"Wh - where are we going?"

"I want to get you to a safe place. The highest levels should be best; your own grade."

"No, I'm just a bu - burden."

"No you're not. I want to make sure you'll be looked after. Then I'll try to find Senro. Someone must know what's happening."

I wondered if I should point out to her that I was now an outcast, not fit for the high office of Observers' Acolyte, but somehow couldn't find the energy. We were now heading down a small corridor to the outer shell of the pyramid; ahead of us was a door marked 'EMERGENCY STAIRWELL.' I wondered how I could climb hundreds - thousands - of steps but knew I would have to. As we entered the stairwell and began our climb, we heard screams echoing from far below, over the muffled sound of the emergency klaxon. Grimly, we kept on upwards in silence, while I gritted my teeth against the pain. Before long, the screams had been left behind.

The lighting here was constant, but dim. As we came out onto yet another landing, I peered at the words inscribed on the wall; 'Level Two Hundred and Thirty One'. I bit back a groan of despair. Had we only come six levels?

"Sit down and rest, Darcon."

"No - we have to keep going. But there's a 'scope on Level Two Thirty Five. We... we can see if the Barrier's down." As I spoke, my tongue clumsy in my swollen nouth, I realised that the sound of the klaxon from the main body of the Pyramid had stopped... that it had, in fact, been absent for quite a few sub units. I wondered if that was good or bad.

"All right, we'll have a look at that 'scope." Together, my arm round Lilan's capable shoulders, we climbed on.

Kirk gingerly raised his head to look up at the figure still in the doorway. The silver eyes never wavered. "Yes... all is... clear."

Kirk's head beat with pain under the pressure of the entity's mind - but at least it had ceased probing him. Shakily, he got to his feet.

"Why... why are you going this? Why kill these people?"

"They... deserve to... die... " Spock's voice grated.

"But why?" Kirk persisted.

"Came... from beyond... we were... one... then. We... I... came to... the other place... No-one would... join... No-one would... open. I... did not... understand, I tried to... force them. They... the physical part... ceased to function but... their minds... absorbed into me... part of... me."

Listening, Kirk struggled to focus on the meaning behind the words. An alien force, arriving at the other pyramid, killed its inhabitants through... ignorance? "Your form of communication is painful to us."

"Yes, though... your mind... stronger. But they... they could not join... Waited... so long... so alone... "

"Why didn't you go back - return to your point of origin?"

"Life is... motion... That is my... existence, but... power not sufficient... Too weak... Alone so... long. Then the others... came... "

"Others?"

"Yes... part of me remembered... the part made from the... first ones... remembered... hated... the others."

"Why?"

"The first ones... called for help... The others... would not... listen... Different... physical part... different... They left us to die... killers... so we destroyed them... Now we destroy... all of them... "

"Wait! You're letting their minds control yours! It's not *your* hatred; you've got no reason to hate these people - "

"No... reason? Not... my... I don't understand. Confusion... We waited... for one strong enough... He came - the one called... Spock. We needed a... physical form to wear... Too weak now... Physical form needed for killing... for vengeance."

"No! You must give that up! It's not your fight. Please, release Spock - "

"I cannot... "

The silver clad figure staggered, clutching at the wall for a moment, the glow in its eyes fading a little.

"Fight it, Spock!"

"Jim, I... am - " The pain-racked words were cut off as the eyes again blazed with inner fire. "There is... nothing... Nothing else... We can never return... Sun's radiation too weak... *We* are too weak... "

"Please - release Spock!"

"We cannot. This form... now part of us... It will soon... cease to function... so will we... Peace... But first - our revenge..."

Kirk began to move towards it. "This is senseless. You want to kill innocent people - for something done by their ancestors. Try to see - your mind has been confused by the bitterness of those who died - " He took hold of Spock's arm; the reaction was instantaneous. Savagely, he was thrown against the corridor wall, hitting it heavily. As he slid to the floor, semi-conscious, he was aware of Spock standing over him, the Vulcan's gloved hands reaching for his throat...

"It's bad," Lilan said flatly. Beside her, my arm flung around her shoulders for support, I stared at the screen in horror. The Barrier was gone - deactivated - its supports toppled to the ground. A few eckloi lumbered towards the unseen entrance as I watched - presumably stragglers.

"The eckloi, the creatures from Outside - that must be what we heard. The Pyramid - they're inside the Pyramid... " My voice sounded odd; I realised that tears were rolling down my face. "This is Jameskirk's doing - him and his *friend*. They've turned off the Barrier - destroyed us. Destroyed the Pyramid."

"We don't know that it was Jim," Lilan pointed out, "Or that the killer is his friend - "

"You weren't there when he confessed," I said bitterly. "He called the killer 'Spock' - asked to be allowed to go to him - to stop the killings." My choked laughter turned into a cough that racked my body painfully.

"Be careful, Darcon. Come on, I must get you to the higher levels."

We returned to the stairwell and continued up through the residential levels. The lighting seemed dimmer and flickered uncertainly. "Destroyed..." I mumbled, unable to see the steps in front of me through my tears. By now the experience was becoming unreal to me - like a bad dream. Maybe I would wake up eventually...

"Spock - "

In vain, Kirk tried to pry the vicelike grip of the Vulcan's hands from his throat. Spock's face, pale and dripping sweat, grimaced as he stared blindly into Kirk's. There was a roaring in the Human's ears and a blood-red mist clouded his vision...

The Vulcan staggered, releasing Kirk. Choking, hands to his abused throat, the Human staggered away, seeing the silver clad figure on its knees. Standing behind Spock was a short, burly man, his face as youthfully smooth as all the others Kirk had seen here - but familiar. Ard. His teeth were bared in a savage grin as he lifted the heavy metal bar he had used to strike Spock from behind. Then he looked up and saw Kirk.

"You! If I'd know I was saving you, I wouldn't have wasted the effort."

The Vulcan's bowed head raised, eyes dark once more. A smile of pure joy curved Kirk's lips. "Spock. You're all right - NO!" he cried as Ard brought down the bar. Spock's eyes blazed silver; the other man tottered back, the weapon slipping from his fingers and clanging to the floor. With a cry of anguish, he gripped his head in his hands.

"Spock, no! Fight it, Spock - fight it!" Kirk grappled with his friend, trying to pull him away, but he was flung aside. Dazed, he struggled to his feet in time to see the green clad figure on the floor convulse once then lie still. "Spock..." he groaned.

The creature turned the Vulcan's body to face Kirk. "Hate..." Spock's voice grated. "More hate... fear... absorbed... These creatures deserve... to die..."

"You mean - you're still absorbing their minds? That's how you kill, isn't it?"

"I shall... kill you..."

"Listen to me - we can communicate, remember? I'm the only one you can join with, apart from Spock. You've seen my mind - you know what you're doing to him - "

The creature appeared to consider Kirk's words. "Yes... I... may spare you... but... all others must... die."

"No! Kill me if you must, but spare them! Free Spock!"

"Why should... you care... what happens to... them? They are not... your friends. They... harmed you... "

"They didn't understand. They were afraid. We shouldn't have come here - none of us should have come here."

"Because... you may not... interfere?" Whether the entity was probing Spock's memories or analysing the information gleaned during its mental contact with himself, Kirk was not sure. "This society... ended... "

"It's not too late to save it - if you stop now," Kirk insisted.

"If... I did... harm has been done... "

"Yes, I accept the blame for that. If I hadn't ordered the search party to the other pyramid - "

"We had waited... so long... storing our energy... and when you came... the one, Spock... was our means of revenge... We have little energy for motion... Our last was used... to transport here... Now only enough remains... to absorb... to probe... to destroy."

"But you didn't come to this planet to kill, did you?"

"No... I was old... nearing the end of my maturity... It is the Pattern... to travel the universe... and settle at last... to create new life. But... I misjudged... the planet was not... suitable, the sun... did not generate... the correct... energy... I could only conserve... my own life... uselessly, not... create anew. The... creatures here... could not help me... to leave."

"Through no fault of their own," Kirk declared. "They didn't have the capability for space travel. But when you killed them through ignorance, you absorbed *their* fear, *their* hate of the people in this pyramid. You've acted on something outside yourself - alien to yourself."

"Yes... alien... Can you help... me? I... cannot leave... this body without... energy... violet energy... "

"If I can get you to the ship, I can take you to another solar system; the nearest has a younger sun that should be suitable... " Desperately, he hoped his words were getting through to the entity.

"Yes... I see it... The physical part... Spock... His mind... I see the sun... It is young... vigorous... Yes, I agree... " As Kirk watched, the glow in Spock's eyes died. He started forward, hands extended in greeting - just in time to catch Spock as he folded to the floor.

"Spock! Spock!"

The Vulcan's eyes, dark once more, opened slowly. "Jim... The alien has retreated to the lowest levels of my mind."

"Don't try to talk." Kirk supported the Vulcan into the central power room and helped him into a chair. "I'll get you back to the ship somehow." Beneath his efficient facade, he was deeply concerned. The Vulcan trembled with fatigue he could not fully conceal, and his lean body seemed reduced to little more than skin and bone.

"Jim, I estimate that the alien can only last for another forty-three point five hours."

"What happens if it dies while you're still linked - " Kirk halted as he read the answer in Spock's eyes. "Don't worry, I'll get you to the ship." He turned to the control panels. "We have to find a way to signal the ship, somehow, to let them know we're still alive and where they can pick us up... Spock, the entire power supply for the pyramid is channelled through here... I think I've got an idea."

"Why have we stopped?" I asked, looking up and blinking. Then I saw the heavy barrier door blocking our path to the next landing. "That's it, then; they've sealed the upper levels." The inscription on the landing just below us read 'Level Two Hundred and Forty'.

"Wait here," Lilan said, lowering me to sit on the steps. She hurried down the stairs to the exit on Two Forty. The door there rose sluggishly and she ducked beneath it without waiting for it to open fully. Numb, I waited, hugging my bruised ribs and stomach. As the moments passed and stretched into sub-units, tension grew inside me. I stood up and edged my way down to the landing. Just as I reached it, a hum started and the door began to rise again. Frightened, I froze to the spot as the agonisingly slow door went higher... higher... But it was only Lilan's slim green clad figure that slipped under it. She stepped over to support me.

"You gave me a fright," I admitted. She nodded solemnly, and glanced up at the next landing and the obstruction. "I managed to get through to the Observer levels on the intercom. They're going to open that door for us."

"Good! What's the matter, though? You don't look very pleased."

"We must be very careful, Darcon. They're very suspicious... fearful. It seems that some of our people have been... possessed. It took me a while to convince them that this isn't a trap."

My jubilation deflated a little. Impatiently, I stared at the door above us, willing it to move. With a rumble and squeak of protesting mechanism, it began to do so. Instinctively, I stepped forward, but Lilan held me back. "Wait!"

The door continued to rise, noisily but more quickly than the exit from the stairwell had done, revealing the purple clad legs of several people on the landing beyond.

"It's all right, they're Observer grade - "

"Wait!" Lilan insisted.

The door ground to a halt about three quarters open and a party of women and men stepped forward. Acolytes and an Observer. Borast. I felt my heart sink at their stern, suspicious faces. "Be ready to lower again quickly," Borast said over his shoulder, and I realised that someone must be opening the door by hand. "All right, Darcon. Step away from the Attendant."

Fuzzled, I obeyed. Then I saw one of the Acolytes point a neural paralysers at Lilan. "No!" I shouted. "What are you doing?"

"Attendants have been possessed, Darcon," Borast said evenly. "You can come in, but not her."

"B-but she saved my life - she's not possessed!"

"I've only your word on that - and you were denounced as a deviant just before this crisis. We don't have to offer you safety either."

"Observer, it's the truth, I swear - by the blood of the Founder." I leaned against the wall, feeling near to collapse.

"Observer, I'm inclined to believe him," a strong voice put in. Overwhelmed by relief, I recognised the speaker as Vars.

"Hmmm... Well, if you say so, Vars..." The Observer appeared to reconsider. "All right, you may enter, Darcon. Whether you'll stay is the Chief Observer's decision. And you'll accompany us also, Attendant. Relinquish your paralysers."

"Observer, I have to return to my post - " Lilan began, but Borast shook his head.

"The Chief Observer may wish to question you to verify certain facts. Put down your paralysers on the stairs, half way up, and then withdraw."

I waited as Lilan obeyed. Vars and the other Acolytes descended, one picking up the paralysers. She examined its setting and I was close enough to see that she redialled it to 'kill' mode. Then, while Vars put my arm across his broad shoulders, Lilan's arms were twisted behind her and she was marched up the stairs at gunpoint. I watched her go with quiet dignity, unresisting. "Vars, don't let them hurt her. She saved my life - "

"Don't worry, she'll be all right. They're just taking her to Temara. Come on."

Together we followed as quickly as I could manage, urged on impatiently by Borast. As we passed beneath the raised doorway, I saw two Acolytes turning a hand crank set into an uncovered circuit in the wall. "Has the power failed on this one?" I asked.

"No, some techs managed to cut the power to all these barrier doors. You probably know that the lower levels were sealed off, but someone managed to open them again. Probably that creature, whatever it is. The techs are trying to bypass central power right now," Vars explained.

"How much of the Pyramid is still in our control?"

"Only these upper thirty five levels. As far as we know - from vidcam surveillance before we lost that too - eckloi and other creatures are running amok through the lower inhabited levels. We thought everything below One Ninety One was cut off but the doors were reopened, as I said, and they've got at least as far as Two Twenty. The elevators are completely dead now though; that's one good thing." As Vars chatted, probably to keep up my spirits, we began to pass people sitting against the stairwell walls. All ages, all grades, they watched us pass with wide, blank eyes.

"Refugees," Vars explained, without my needing to ask. "Their rooms are in the invaded levels. These are the lucky ones. Though we've got scarcely any food up here and the water will dry up before long with reduced power to the pumps - that's if it's not contaminated anyway."

Self pity clouded my vision. "That's it, then," I whispered. "The end of the Pyramid."

"No! We're going to take the fight to the enemy, Darcon. I don't know how, but we will... somehow."

17 NEW HOPE

Kirk paused, listening intently as he peered into the dimness below. The Vulcan, whose arm was thrown across Kirk's shoulders, raised his head with some difficulty. Spock had kept going on will power for some time... and there was still a long way to go. Kirk only hoped that the message which the Vulcan had used most of his remaining strength to program into the pyramid's computers would do its job. He glanced round at the stairwell lighting, but it remained dim but steady. The lighting for the main pyramid was on another frequency; only that had been affected by the Barrier's failure earlier and only that would be responding to the instructions Spock had programmed in. Although Kirk had no wrist watch, he guessed that they should be coming into operation any time now.

He pressed on, the need for urgency gnawing at his stomach. He would need to get Spock to the lowest inhabited level - One Thirty Five - for the protective suits Darcon had spoken of. Even though he would be able to stand the cold and low oxygen outside the pyramid, he doubted if Spock, in his weakened condition, could.

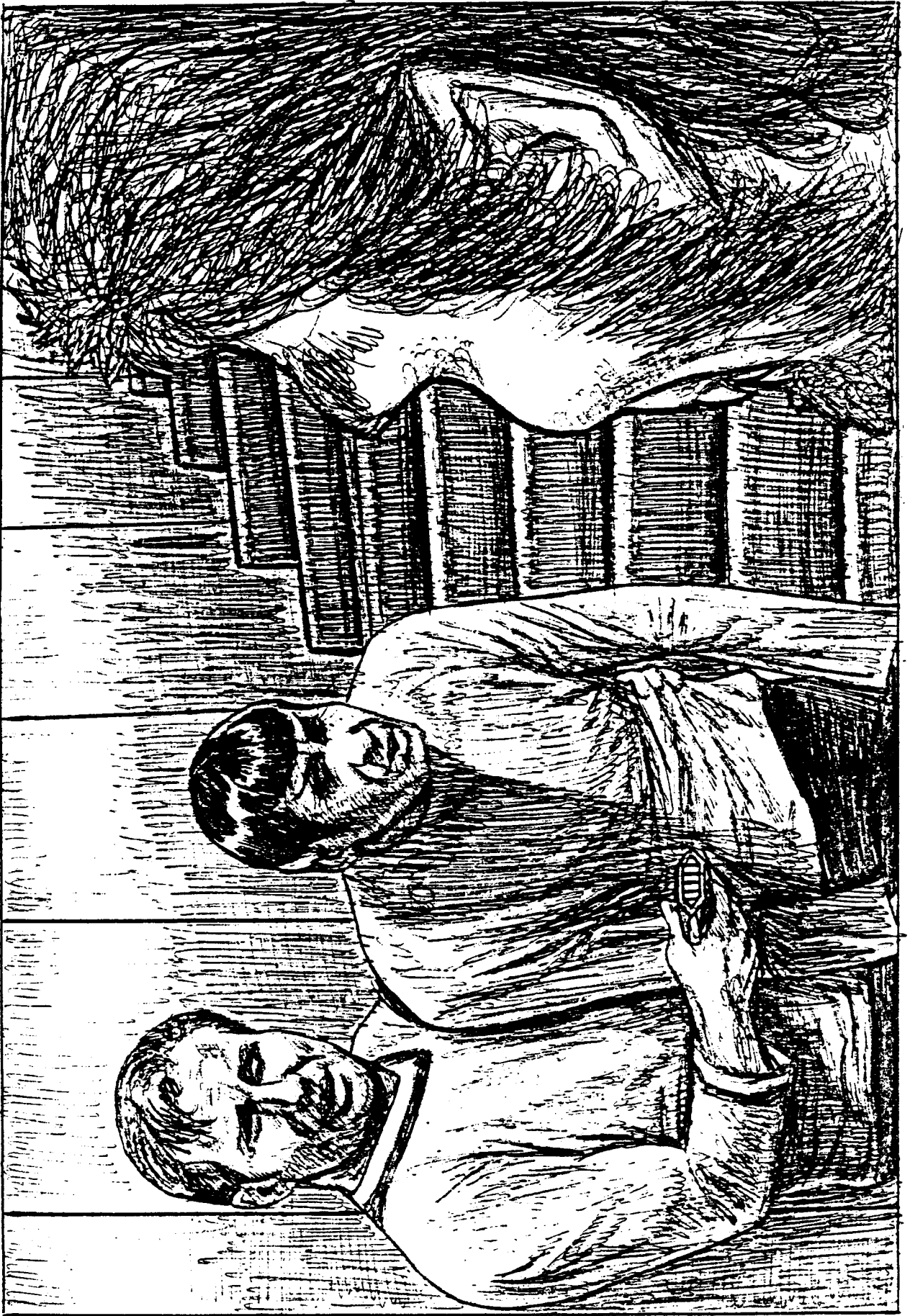
It must be nearly half an hour since they had left the central power room; by careful counting, Kirk reckoned they must now be approaching the landing for Level Two Sixteen. If only the elevators were still in operation; even though he was moving as quickly as Spock's impaired stamina would permit, it would take them hours at this rate.

As the thought crossed his mind, Kirk became aware of a dark shape crouched on the landing below. He gripped the neural paralysers in his free hand and halted, aware of Spock's harsh breathing. The shape moved, advancing up the steps towards them, on all fours as if unfamiliar with the mechanics of climbing stairs. The dim lighting revealed a glint from bared teeth. Taking careful aim, Kirk fired, just as the creature launched itself upwards with a fierce howl of bloodlust. The purple glow illuminated the stairwell, revealing the creature frozen in mid-lunge, a look of surprise on its neanderthal-like face. Evidently one which had not been in the attack upon his landing party. Then it crashed heavily onto the steps and lay still. In the comparative darkness, Kirk carefully picked his way downwards, helping his friend along, and they eased their way past the unconscious humanoid - or would hominid be more apt now, Kirk wondered - a young specimen by its smaller, less muscular build. Hoping that most of its kind would be occupied with their gruesome feast on the main levels themselves, Kirk nevertheless held the paralysers ready as he helped his friend ever downward.

We had only been climbing for a few sub units after passing through the barrier door when a commotion on the stairs above made Vars halt. Anxiously, I listened, as excited voices gabbled their warning. I heard Borast raise his own voice to calm them, there was some more talking and then our whole party continued upward once more. "What is it?" Vars asked the two Acolytes just ahead of us.

"The lighting on the upper levels - it's flashing on and off again," the woman said.

"Yes, but not the same as before," added the man beside her. "There's a sort of pattern... different intervals between flashes, short flashes and longer ones." He sounded worried and I didn't blame him; what could it mean? Already, the shocked people we passed on the stairs were stirring, frightened murmurings rising in volume. If they should panic and bolt, I



didn't give much for my own chances.

"Quiet! Quiet, all of you!" Borast's voice boomed from ahead of us. "There is no need for alarm. Our technicians expect a breakthrough at any time. Remain seated where you are, and have faith in the Chief Observer." This seemed to calm them a little, though I sensed the effect would only be temporary.

Before long, we were passing a gang of Electrical and Engineering techs, feverishly at work on a sector of wall where the panels had been prised off to reveal conduits, cables and junction boxes beneath. Borast stopped for a brief consultation on their progress before hurrying on.

"They're trying to redirect power," Vars explained. "We've got another team in the Observers' computer room. If we can divert power from central, then we can get back essential services. You've noticed that it's getting colder, I expect?"

I nodded. There was an unaccustomed chill on the stairs, a coolness I had never experienced before, and I found myself shivering.

"Lighting's only on half everywhere and air circulation is well below normal," Vars whispered. "If the techs don't succeed, we don't have to worry about starving or dehydration."

By the time we came out on to the Observation deck, I was ready to collapse, soaked in sweat and my legs trembling with fatigue. But I forced myself to stand upright, knowing that Lilan's safety depended on my speaking in her defence. The deck looked very different from when I had last seen it. Firstly, it was crammed full of people, all Observer grade by their uniform. All three Shifts must be here at once. Of course, I realised, since our residential quarters were just below the summit of the Pyramid, most of my grade had survived... my former grade, I mentally corrected myself. Secondly, the lighting, reduced to half power, flashed on and off in a disconcerting pattern.

Observers and Acolytes drew back to leave a narrow corridor, and preceded by Borast and the armed Acolytes pushing Lilan along, I advanced towards Temara, leaning on Vars for support.

"So, it wasn't a trick," the Chief Observer commented. I shivered and looked down at my feet, ashamed.

"Attendant! Where was your grade when this creature took over - when it let in the eckloi?" an angry voice out of the crowd demanded.

"Yes; my parents are Agri-workers - what's happened to them?"

The crowd at once began to jostle Lilan, the Acolytes holding her arms making no move to protect her. One man struck her heavily from behind. I started forward, but Vars held me back.

"Stop!" Temara cried. "Stop this immediately! Are we eckloi too?" The crowd gradually grew quiet. Temara's dark eyes met mine. "Why were you in the company of this Attendant - Lilan, isn't it?" she asked, mildly.

"Yes. She - she saved my life, Chief Observer. I was secured in a cell; a man - another Attendant - was beating me," I explained through swollen lips that made my voice strange to me. "She was bringing me here for my own safety. She's - she's a good person, not like the rest of them - "

Another outcry broke out, and I heard a few shouts of "Deviant!" this

time. Heart thudding with fear, I leaned on Vars and tried to look calm. Again Temara called for silence. "Is this so?" she asked Lilan.

"I was bringing Darcon here to receive attention for his injuries, since I couldn't find anyone to tell me what was happening," Lilan explained. "After that, I planned to search for one of my superiors."

"All deserted their posts, most likely," a voice put in.

"I feel there's little purpose in your returning to your own Levels," Temara began, ignoring the interruption. "As far as we could tell before we lost surveillance, eckloi are at large and moving freely through all the lower levels. You may stay here."

There were mutters of protest, but no-one dared to speak openly. Then a voice called from over by the central banks of instrument panels.

"Chief Observer, a tech wishes to speak to you."

Temara made her way over to her control desk at the far end of the instrument panels. Everyone waited anxiously as she spoke into the intercom there. "Temara here."

"Chief Observer, we have rediverted central power - " An enormous cheer cut off the rest of the woman's words. Simultaneously the lighting flickered, then strengthened to its former brightness and remained steady; whatever had caused it to flash on and off to an unknown pattern had been bypassed. Temara straightened up and waited for the hubbub to die down while Borast and a few of the more senior Observers yelled for silence. After a moment of two, Temara again bent close to the comm.

"Repeat your message, please."

"We've diverted main power to the computer room on Two Seventy Three. Lighting is restored to full power and we've cancelled the interference pattern that was affecting it. We can now guarantee air circulation, water supply, heating and lighting to all higher levels. We've now got our people working on the vidcams and elevators - and we can restore the Barrier as soon as the supports are re-erected."

"Excellent. As soon as you have any pictures, feed them up here. And please inform your people of my heart-felt thanks on behalf of all the people of our Pyramid. I'm afraid that we must ask something more of you, however; as soon as the elevators are restored to our control, a team of volunteers will be needed to tackle the restoration of the Barrier. Rescue teams will also be required to go to the aid of any trapped survivors, but these will be drawn from other grades."

"Understood, Chief Observer. We're happy to have done our duty. I don't feel there'll be any shortage of volunteers from our grades. Ah - " There was a pause while another voice spoke indistinctly. "Chief Observer, I have someone here who thinks he can help - a storage tech."

Someone snorted contemptuously near me. In the Pyramid hierarchy, those who looked after the stores tended to be persons not intelligent enough for other work.

"Put him on," Temara ordered. There was the sound of nervous throat clearing, and then a man's voice spoke diffidently.

"Er... Chief Observer, there's a substance - a gas - I think might be useful. It's stored on Level One Seventy Two, section nine. It... it was for use against vermin - "

There were a few sniggers among the listening crowd. I think tension demanded some release for them. However, I had already been through so much in the last few time cycles, that I felt nothing could affect me again. As for the small mammals that lived in the ventilation shafts, only venturing out for food, well... nothing had succeeded in getting rid of them in all the millions of years since they had first sneaked into the Pyramid with us.

"Well, you see," the man continued, "they found out that the stuff was too strong. I mean, it was made so it wouldn't harm plants or fish - and it wasn't meant to harm people either - but it made people sick, and so - well, it was put in the stores out of the way. I think the Biochem techs meant to destroy it, but - well, it's been there a few years-of-the-Pyramid now, forgotten, I think - "

Temara had listened patiently to the man's nervous explanation. "You think it could kill the eckloi and other creatures?"

"Well, it would probably make them very ill - I mean, that would put them out of action."

"Indeed it would. How much of the gas is there?"

"Ten cylinders, I think."

"And would you be willing to go with a party of volunteers - show them where to find these cylinders?"

"Y-yes. Yes, I would, Chief Observer."

"Very good. Could you put the Engineer tech back on, please?"

There was a pause, then the other woman spoke again. "Chief Observer?"

"Could the gas be dispersed in the lower levels without affecting the higher?"

"If we close down our air circulation for a while - and boost theirs to maximum - yes. We've got a few Biochem techs down here; I'll see if they know how long it'll remain effective or if we can get any answers from the computer."

"Good. I shall convene a meeting in point five of a unit's time in the hall on Two Forty Two. Please pass on the word. And please also ask a Med-Tech to come up here - we have an injured Acolyte."

Before she had even closed the comm link, the shouts of people volunteering for the rescue mission rang out deafeningly. I found myself among them - and for an instant wondered why. I didn't want to be a hero. But then I realised. Somewhere in the Pyramid, the man who had betrayed me still lurked. Because of him, my mother was dead, my society almost in ruins. But I still had something to live for -

- to kill Jameskirk.

McCoy sat hunched forward, leaning over the seat in front of him. "Can you see it yet, Scotty?"

The Chief Engineer made another adjustment to the helm to keep them on

course. "Not yet, Leonard." The shuttlecraft's receiver spluttered into static-filled life.

"Enterprise to Mr. Scott. Come in please."

Seeing that Scotty was fully occupied at the controls, McCoy stretched out a hand and activated the transmitter. "Receiving you, Lieutenant."

"The message has ceased transmission, Mr. Scott." Uhura's voice battled through the static.

"Aye, Lieutenant. I'm just - aye, now I can see the pyramid. We'll be touching down soon. Scott out."

McCoy switched off the transmitter for him, reflecting that it was lucky they had such an alert and informed crew - alert enough to detect the fluctuations in the pyramid's weakened lighting, and informed enough to recognise old fashioned Morse. *Thank heavens for Lt. Uhura*, he thought.

"Strap yerselves in; we're comin' in tae land," Scott cautioned. McCoy quickly obeyed. The others - two security guards and Sian Masters, who had volunteered - were already in their places, faces showing controlled tension as the craft swept into its approach to the beacon. The pyramid's lights were back up to full strength, McCoy noticed. Again he wondered what was going on down there. The message - that Jim and Spock were still alive, that Spock needed medical attention, and that a shuttle should rendezvous with them at the same spot as the previous landing - had set his imagination working overtime.

Jim and Spock - in the other pyramid, the inhabited one? How - by a transporter beam, perhaps, one strong enough to overcome the interference from the planet's sun? Tension gripped him as the craft came in to land, and touched down under Scott's expert guidance, though a little bumpier than Spock's had been. Who would have expected the Captain and First Officer to be in the inhabited pyramid and even if they had, how could they have hoped to rescue them with the Prime Directive in force?

Donning his helmet and gloves, McCoy was first to pile out of the shuttle, the others quickly following in their environmental suits. They had landed behind the same cover as before. Cautiously, they picked their way over the flattened thorn bushes and crept round the rock outcropping to peer out at the massive structure beyond. The lethal forcefield that McCoy remembered was gone, its supports toppled impotently. Beyond, the entrance to the pyramid gaped blackly like an open maw. McCoy started forward, but was halted by Scott's hand on his arm.

"No, Doctor, we wait here." When McCoy began to protest, the Chief Engineer forestalled him. "Nay, Doctor, we cannot risk breaking the Prime Directive. The Captain told us to meet him *here*." He looked back at the others. "We'll take turn and turn about - two at a time, one to watch the pyramid and one to keep guard - while the rest of us wait in the shuttle. Sheils, you wait here with me and the rest of you get back in the shuttle. You too, Leonard."

Reluctant, but realising that Scott was right, McCoy returned to the vehicle with Masters and the other security guard. After the helpless waiting on the Enterprise, it had felt good to be doing something at last, but it had returned to the same, soul-wrenching thing - waiting. Gritting his teeth determinedly, McCoy settled down for the long wait.

I listened, fretting, as Temara finished speaking. The painkillers given to me by the Med-Tech had done their work; now I felt impatient for action. As she called for volunteers and many began to come forward, I joined them. Vars hurried after me.

"Wait, Darcon. Where are you going? You're in no condition for this."

"Vars, it's something I have to do. I feel fine now."

"Yes, but for how long? A few time units until the painkillers wear off - "

"A few time units'll be long enough for what I have to do. I'm going to find him - find the creature who betrayed me, betrayed us all."

"Darcon, give up this bitterness," a new voice said. I turned in surprise to see Lilan behind me. "No good can come of it."

"I can punish the criminal who did all this!" I exclaimed.

"You don't know that he did. Maybe he tried to stop his friend - maybe he's already dead."

I shook my head. "No. I think I know where he'll be heading for - if he hasn't got there already. He and his friend will want to escape - and for that, they'll need the protective suits on One Thirty Five. I know I mentioned it to him when I - when he tricked me."

"Creatures from the Dark Pyramid won't need suits," Vars objected.

"Oh, but they do - or he does, at least. He was wearing one of his own when they first captured him."

"Yes," Lilan agreed. "The analysis team was baffled by the material; it seemed to be made of something unknown to our science - not mentioned in the oldest records."

"I'm going." I started forward again. By now some order had been restored, certain experienced or technically skilled individuals having been appointed team leaders by Temara. Now they were picking their teams.

"I'd like to go," I said, eagerly, pushing forward. "Which team is going to One Thirty Five?"

A team leader, a Med-Tech, looked at me in surprise. "The Engineering and Electrical techs are the only ones going there," she said. "I think they've already gone. Why do you want to go there - all our people are trapped above One Ninety?"

Awkwardly, I shrugged. "Sorry, I meant One Seventy Two - where that gas is."

"Oh, that team's over there." The woman waved vaguely before turning back to her potential recruits. I thanked her and hurried over to the place where I could see a group of Biochem techs and a man wearing the yellow stripe of the lowliest maintenance grade. A storage tech, I guessed.

"Is this the team going for the gas?" I asked him.

"Er - yes, that's right." Sure enough I recognised the same diffident voice that had spoken to Temara on the comm link. "That's the team

leader." He pointed to a female Biochem tech who was issuing the team members with makeshift weapons; tools, sharpened pieces of metal which might have been broken up wall coverings, and lethal looking spraycans. These last were only handed to fellow Biochem techs, and I guessed they were dangerous chemicals. I made my way through the group towards her.

"I'd like to join," I said as firmly as I could.

"Yes? You're..." She took in my bruised face, my rather stained and torn grey tunic - the Physicians had removed my stolen robes while I was unconscious - and I could see the doubt in her eyes.

"Med-Tech, fourth class," I said promptly, picking the lowest, least skilled of the Med-Tech grade. The blue stripe at hem, neck and sleeve was just barely visible on my faded garment and I suddenly realised that this must be the same tunic Jameskirk had worn until he had changed into mine. My skin almost crawled at the thought, but I willed myself to hide the reaction, knowing that the Biochem tech's eyes were on me.

"All right, you could be useful." She handed me a heavy wrench. "Lead the way," she said to the storage tech.

As we headed out of the room and along the corridor to the elevator and waited our turn in the line of volunteer groups, I did not look back. I was afraid I would see the uncomprehending gaze of Vars, or Lilan's sad look of disapproval.

My heart was beating fast as the elevator slowed and stopped at One Seventy Two, though I knew that we were probably safer here than if we'd been with one of the groups going to rescue trapped survivors. According to the vidcam surveillance, most of the creatures had headed for the inhabited levels above One Ninety. Since the evacuation, the only people left down here would be the dead, killed by the creature or the possessed Attendants. The question was - where were those Attendants?

The door opened and our leader signalled one of her own grade to accompany her. Together, spray cans at the ready, they both peered out into the corridor. I released a sigh of relief when they waved the rest of us on.

The corridor was deserted. I started at the sound of the elevator moving upwards to collect the next foolhardy team of volunteers.

"This way, technicians," the store tech said humbly and we followed him along silent, empty corridors. Turning a corner, we halted in shock. A bloody mess - bones, a disembodied hand and torn, stained scraps of clothing - met our eyes. I swallowed, glad that I had not eaten for some time.

"It's all right," our leader whispered. "Probably a corpse left by the creature and found when the eckloi came this way. Keep your eyes open for eckloi, though." Together, we advanced, edging past the remains while keeping our attention on the corridor before and behind us, and not on the remnants at our feet.

"This is the store room, technicians," the storage tech whispered at last. Gripping our weapons, we moved towards the door. It rose at our approach, revealing a large room crammed with storage racks. The technician started forward but the team leader halted him.

"Wait! There may be something in there. You." She turned to me. "Remain here and keep guard. If you see anything coming, yell."

I nodded and watched as the others crept carefully inside. The door closed behind them.

Now was my chance to get back to the elevator and head for One Thirty Five. But if I left them - and something came - how could I face myself? I waited, torn by indecision, gazing along the corridor and listening intently.

The door behind me rose, making me jump. But it was only my teammates, pulling a small transport trolley loaded with cylinders. "No sign of trouble," I said quickly.

"Good. Right, come on - and stay alert, everyone."

We started back the way we had come, while I grew increasingly despondent. How could I slip away? We reached the elevator, waited for the car to descend to take us to safety. The door opened, the team began to pull the trolley inside... It caught. The elevator, its mechanism slightly out of adjustment thanks to all the power level disruption, had not stopped exactly level. I leaned my strength as the rest of the team pulled and pushed to get the trolley inside.

A sudden roar made me look up. An eckloi - appearing enormous to my terrified gaze - stood at the corner, waving a stone club. It bared yellowed fangs, which dripped saliva.

"Push!" yelled the team leader. With a fear-strengthened effort, we pushed at the trolley. It moved -

"I'll hold it off!" I yelled, before I even realised what I was saying, and ran towards it, waving my wrench. Behind me there was a loud crash as the trolley went into the elevator compartment.

"Med-Tech, wait!" yelled the team leader.

Another voice rang out. "He's dead - come on."

I stopped, spun and saw the elevator door closing. Suddenly terrified, I lunged towards it but the mechanical hum told me I was too late. I turned again and saw the eckloi begin to lumber clumsily towards me. Yelling, I threw the wrench.

I'd been quite good at such things in training centre - when I put my mind to it. The heavy tool bounced off the eckloi's skull and clanged to the floor. Taking advantage of that, I ran.

As I headed round the corner and along the next corridor, heading for the elevators in the next section, I heard the thudding footsteps behind me. The creature had a thick skull. Terrified, I ran, breath coming in panicked bursts. Up ahead - the elevators. I skidded to a halt beside them and punched the call button, then looked back. The eckloi had slowed to a lumbering walk, confident that its prey was trapped. I punched the button again, looked in the other direction - and froze.

A green clad figure... an Attendant. Blood of the Founder, that look on her face - grin of evil... madness. I pressed myself up against the elevator door, instinctively trying to hide.

After a few moments, I realised that the woman had not actually seen me. She was wandering endlessly, gazing with blank eyes at the floor, her face permanently fixed in that mindless, evil expression. The possessed had killed without mercy - so people had said. But this one looked as if she had no purpose... Had the creature that controlled her gone?

I looked back at the eckloi, still advancing. What did I have to lose? Heart thudding, I ran at the Attendant, pushed her roughly back against the wall and fumbled for the paralysers in her hand with panicked fingers. As I got the gun free, she scrambled to her feet, gibbering, and lunged at me, but I sidestepped and aimed the paralysers at the advancing eckloi. It roared with fury, throwing itself forward, but the purple beam stabbed out and caught it full in the chest. Slowly it toppled. I spun round, ready for an attack by the Attendant, but she had sunk to the floor and was rocking herself back and forward, crooning some childish song to herself. I started at the sound of a door opening, but it was only the elevator. Confident and heady with triumph at my success, I dived into it and programmed the controls for One Thirty Five.

Just be there, Jameskirk, just be there, I said to myself as the compartment descended.

Revenge... I could almost taste it.

18 REVENGE!

One Thirty Five... unless Kirk had miscounted, this should be it. But it wasn't safe to relax his guard just yet; despite their luck in not encountering any more of the humanoids, he wasn't going to count his chickens as hatched. There was still a long way to go before he got Spock safely to the shuttlecraft which he hoped would be waiting. And that would not be the end; he would have to come back and try to undo some of the harm that had been done. He was not sure how, but his sense of responsibility wouldn't let him turn his back on these people. Unwittingly or not, he and his friend had caused this disaster and ultimately it was his doing, when he had ordered the investigation of the seemingly deserted other pyramid - even if he was obliged to do so under Starfleet orders.

He paused, waiting for the door from the stairwell to rise. It did so rapidly - was power restored? If so, the survivors must have found a way to divert control to whichever few levels they still held. Hope stirred within him; perhaps the survivors could regain control of their home... provided they could expel the neanderthals. He wasn't sure how he could help them to do *that*.

Supporting Spock, he moved cautiously into the corridor beyond. The lighting was at full power, as he saw instantly, screwing up his eyes to see after the relative gloom of the emergency stairs. It remained steady, not flashing on and off in the Morse pattern Spock had programmed, which further confirmed his suspicion that the people who lived here had regained control of their power supply. However, he saw no sign of anything amiss. Considering the vast number of places to search, he was momentarily tempted to leave his friend here while he went to look, but he felt a reluctance to do so in case a neanderthal should wander in from the stairwell. Even if he left the neural paralysers with Spock, he could not be sure the weakened Vulcan would be quick enough to use it. Besides, if the suits were kept for work on the external forcefield, they would need to be near the elevators in case of emergency.

Together, Kirk and his friend began a circuit of the corridors in the central core of the great structure, checking room after room for the protective suits. At last, as Kirk was beginning to wonder if they would be doomed to search for the rest of their lives, the next door rose upon a welcome sight; rows of suits upon racks. Unlike the Enterprise models these were a dull grey, but their function was unmistakeably identical. Feeling real hope for the first time, Kirk helped Spock into the room and began to help him out of his silver suit and into one of the pyramid's own.

"Wait, Jameskirk."

The voice made Kirk freeze. Slowly he looked round, knowing who he would see.

"Yes, it's me, Jameskirk," Darcon said. The paralysers in his hand trembled. The young man was also dressed in an environmental suit.

"Darcon," Kirk began. "I can't take you outside - "

"I don't want to go Outside," Darcon snapped. "But if you're wondering why I'm wearing this... " He smiled bitterly. "Very soon now a certain substance will be coming through the air ducts, something that's going to make the eckloi - and anything else down here - very sick. When it does, I intend to be wearing my helmet." Darcon's gaze flickered to Spock, who hung limply on Kirk's shoulder, barely conscious. "Who... He's the creature!" he cried in alarm. He raised the paralysers.

"No, wait!" Kirk insisted, interposing his own body between Darcon and Spock. "He's no threat to you - to anyone. He was possessed by a creature - an alien. He was acting against his own will."

Darcon stared at him. "Wh... his eyes?" He had caught a glimpse of Spock's face. "They're not silver, not burning... "

"No, that was the effect of the alien," Kirk said carefully.

"He's not possessed any more?" Darcon asked eagerly. As Kirk hesitated, wondering how to answer without arousing Darcon's fears anew, the young man grinned. "Good. Then I can kill you both!"

"Darcon - "

"You deserve to die! You and your friend - you came to destroy us!"

"Darcon, no! We didn't mean to come here at all. It was an accident, a mistake - "

"An accident," Darcon laughed. "Turning off the forcefield, letting in the eckloi - an accident. You came from the Dark Pyramid to destroy us - you can't deny it!" Again he raised the paralysers, his arm trembling. "I'm going to kill you!"

Helpless, Kirk waited. The lives of Spock and himself were nothing compared to the damage that would be done if he was to break the Prime Directive. Standing in front of Spock like a shield, he waited... and thought he saw something in Darcon's face. A struggle. The young man trembled violently, steadying the paralysers with his free hand. "I'm going to kill you!" he repeated. Kirk saw the tears in his eyes.

After a moment the paralysers were lowered and Kirk realised that Darcon could not bring himself to do it.

"I've thought of a better way," the young man choked. "What you've done to me is nothing - you should pay for what you've done to us all. I'm going to take you to the Chief Observer."

"Darcon, I never meant to hurt you or betray you - "

"Move! Out of the door. I am taking you to an elevator. You will answer to the survivors of my people!"

"Let Spock go; I'll come with you, do whatever you want. Spock is

innocent - "

"Him! He's the monster who killed all my people!"

"He was possessed - forced to do it against his will. Darcon, he's a good man - the best I've ever known. Let him go, please." The young man did not answer, looking doubtfully at both of them. "Darcon, can't you see - he's dying anyway... it's what the creature has done to him. Let him go and I'll come with you."

For a moment he thought that Darcon wavered but then he shook his head. "No. No, you should both pay. Go on!"

Slowly, Kirk helped Spock out of the door and along the corridor, herded by Darcon. He thought of running, of reaching the emergency staircase, but he could not leave Spock. He coughed as something tickled his throat; what was what strange smell? Abruptly he remembered what Darcon had said. "Darcon - the gas!"

"What? What sort of trick is this - " Darcon broke off, coughing, and a look of horror came into his eyes. "My helmet!" He started to go back, then paused indecisively. "Come with me." Kirk started back, obediently. They reached the room where the suits were stored. By now Kirk's eyes were streaming and he heard the coughs that racked Spock with growing alarm.

Darcon staggered across the room, the paralysers slipping from his fingers as he groped for a helmet. Behind him, Kirk hurried Spock over to the racks of helmets and through his tears, somehow managed to get a helmet fastened over his friend's head. Then, coughing painfully, he turned, to see Darcon slumped unconscious, a fallen helmet lying beside him. Stumbling across, Kirk fitted the protective globe over the young man's head before grabbing a suit from the racks and struggling into it.

As the cylinders already linked to the back of the suit began to pour their refreshing atmosphere into his lungs, flushing out the choking gas, Kirk's head cleared. Hurrying over to the Vulcan, who was leaning against a wall, he helped his friend from the room and back towards the elevators. Now that he knew they were working, Spock should soon be in safe hands, and it seemed that the people were taking care of their own problems. Behind him, Darcon began slowly to stir.

As Kirk helped Spock from the elevator into the near total darkness of the ground level, he saw that the great door was wide open. Beyond, the forms of people in protective suits were silhouetted by the dim ruddy light of the sun; technicians working on restoring the forcefield supports, he realised. Carefully, he walked Spock to the doorway and peered out. Only two technicians were at work on a re-erected support nearby, the rest were further off, scarcely visible in the gloom. The nearest two were intent on replacing a damaged component.

Hoping that their suits would be sufficient passport, Kirk began walking as casually as he could across the intervening space, hoping also that it would not be too obvious that he was supporting the Vulcan beside him. Luck was with them both; although one of the working figures glanced up once, there was no reaction and the technician went back to work. With a last glance behind to ensure that they were not being followed, Kirk plunged with relief into the cover of the rocks behind.

"Jim? Thank God - " McCoy's relieved greeting was barely audible to Kirk through the material of his suit; unlike the Enterprise's protective suits, those of the pyramid lacked communicators. But the welcome he received once safely inside the shuttle was unmistakeable.

I raised my head, sick and giddy, not knowing where I was. After a moment, the sensation receded a little and I sat up groggily. Helmet... I had got my helmet on. Strange... I didn't remember doing that. I got to my feet, staggered, and leaned against the nearest rack of suits for support.

Jameskirk... Jameskirk was gone. And his friend. Too late. They would take the elevator down, return to the evil place they had come from. I was too late to stop them... but I had to confirm my belief.

Using strength I didn't know I possessed, I reached the nearest elevator and headed for Level Two Thirty Five. With the gas dispersed throughout the lower levels I had nothing to fear from eckloi or other beasts - and I had to reach that 'scope. Now, when no-one else - not even the Observers - were concerned with anything happening Outside the Pyramid, I had to know.

I reached Two Thirty Five, raced as fast as my suit would allow to the great window where the 'scope was situated. As I fumbled with the controls, misgivings seized me; perhaps they would return as mysteriously as they had come, cheating my last chance to learn their origin. The 'scope screen flickered into life; good, the power to this had been restored, also. I quickly set it in a search pattern to cover the area of approach - or departure - before the Pyramid entrance.

Grey figures came into view; my heart lurched for a moment, but then I realised that they were working on the Barrier supports - technicians from the repair teams. I scanned beyond; found only the lifeless rock outcroppings beyond.

Wait - what was that? A shape - a large oblong box - no, not exactly. Like nothing I had ever seen before! And the energy reading! The opening on the front glowed more brightly on the screen than an eckloi campfire! I expanded the field of view to take in the technicians again. They worked on, heads bent over the open panels, not even looking up as the thing continued to rise from behind the rocks and soared from view, gone in an instant. Open mouthed, I stared at the screen, then recollected myself and dashed to the window, craning my neck to see as a bright spark disappeared from the corner of my eye. Gone!

The sky - they had come from the sky! Not the Dark Pyramid! Mind in turmoil, I struggled to understand, to accept. Those bright sparks in the sky, the specks of light that the old records told us might be suns like our sun had once been, young and bright... Could those, too, have worlds like ours? Perhaps... Jim had spoken the truth when he said that I could not reach his Pyramid?

My mind swimming with strange thoughts and new ideas, I turned away and went in search of the Chief Observer.

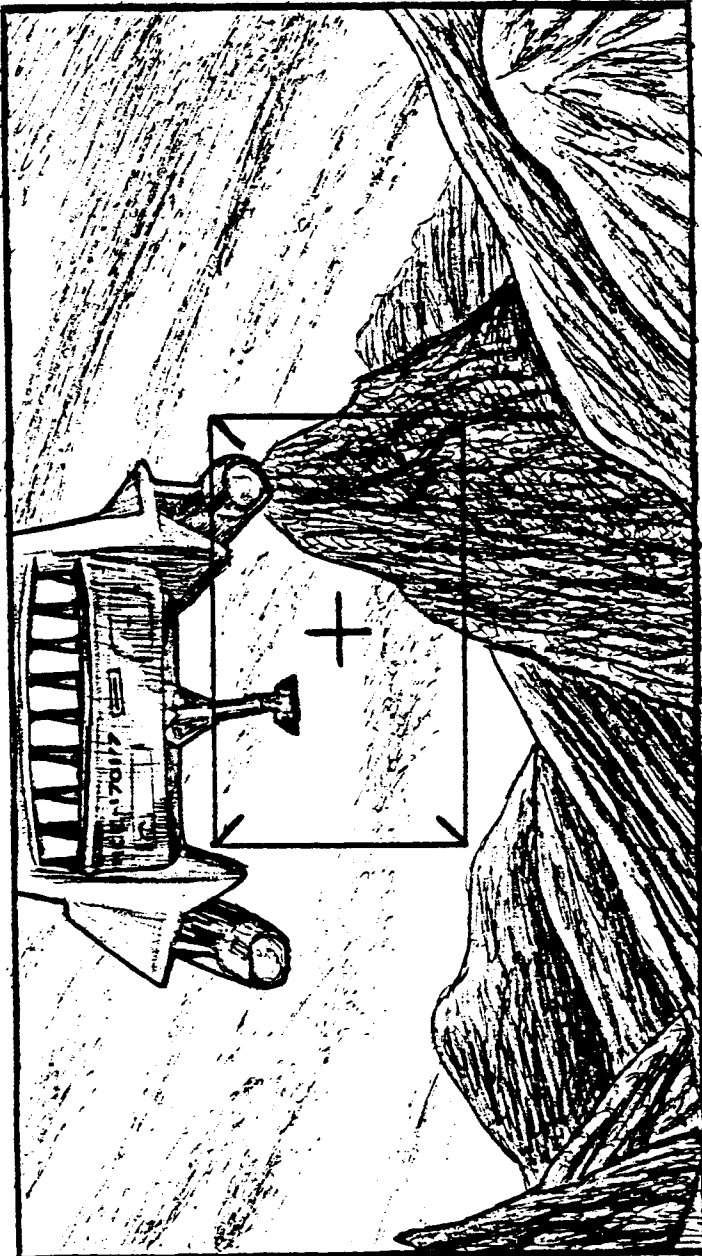
"Aren't we close enough, Jim?" McCoy asked anxiously. The protective heat shields had been raised to shut out the fierce glare of the white hot sun ahead. Kirk consulted the instruments.

"Spock?"

The Vulcan had suddenly frozen, his eyes staring blankly. As Kirk watched uneasily, his friend's eyes glowed silver, then a ball of light drifted to the ceiling of the shuttle, momentarily dazzling them. Then it

OBJECT UNIDENTIFIED
POWER READING: 427004.3 CL
MAGNIFICATION X 8
REFER TO COMPUTER -

GRID REFERENCE Q150090
ELEVATION: 700.0427
COM. REF. : POSSIBILITY - HOSTILE



UNIDENTIFIED

UNIDENTIFIED

was gone.

"Spock, are you all right?"

This time the Vulcan blinked and then turned to Kirk, nodding. Relieved, Kirk turned the shuttle back towards the Enterprise. As he brought the shuttle round to dock with his ship, the heat shields lowered again, the bright sun slipped into view once more. Suddenly, between them and the sun, to their right, a light flashed on and off with an odd rhythm. Shading his eyes, Spock read out the message. "Thank you... and goodbye."

As they watched, the light dimmed, went out, and then a new, white spark shot from the space where the other had disappeared, streaking off into space.

"The new life it spoke about..." Kirk said softly. He turned to the Vulcan. "Welcome back, Spock."

There was an answering warmth in his friend's dark eyes. "It's good to be back, Jim."

The heavy red globe crawled upwards into the black sky. There was no difference, no change since that moment when I had stood here and seen the thing that had changed all our lives. I turned away from the window, sighing. So many... gone for ever, my mother among them. I sat down before the 'scope, my new silver uniform rustling, glad to be alone for a while after the many hectic time cycles of reconstruction and renewal.

The immediate events following Jim's escape had not been pleasant. The groups of volunteers sent in to clear the lower levels of unconscious eckloi and other creatures had been told only to drag the brutes beyond the Barrier's re-erected supports and leave them there. Word had eventually reached the Chief Observer of the butchery being carried out with the eckloi's own clubs, but she had said nothing, appreciating that the survivors had to vent their rage and grief on something now that the killer had apparently disappeared. Few people beside myself know what really happened; the time is not yet right to make it public.

Many time cycles had passed before the Pyramid was once more the clean, orderly place it had been. The bodies had finally all been found and sent for recycling, such identification of the dead as was possible being made. What remained of Senro had only been identifiable from his silver headdress badge. The eckloi had, thankfully, done little damage to our crops and fishpools, but the ornamental garden, so popular with off-duty citizens, had been almost totally destroyed. I don't think it's really missed, though; it's surprising what you can learn to live without.

Once the practicalities were out of the way, the Chief Observer had convened a gathering of the newly appointed heads of grades. I had been required to tell everything I knew about Jim - including his departure - and a decision made... one very important to me. It had been the forbidden quality - the mystery and glamour - of the information I had sought, that had lured me into becoming the dupe of Jim, of betraying my people. This had not been my fault, Temara had declared, because I had been driven into it by the wrong-headed policy of the Physicians. In fact, the actual concept of a Physician grade was wrong in itself; from now on, all genuine cases of maladjustment - those who could not learn to co-operate and live harmoniously in our society - would be dealt with by the Med-Techs, but with compassion. So the correction machines had been broken up, their parts recycled. And our insular viewpoint would change; a transformation

marked by the inauguration of a new grade, the Explorers, to be drawn from existing grades until firmly established in its own right.

The dreaded green uniform was now banished forever from the corridors of the Pyramid, and in its place - silver. Silver for the strangers who came from outside. I am a part of the new grade, as is Lilan. The old records in the Library - thankfully saved by the conscientious efforts of the staff in locking them away out of sight - are now being searched by my grade for information on paths once abandoned - research into a form of travel that will eventually take us beyond our world. The virtual extinction of all life Outside the Pyramid has made it safe for us to carry out experiments there; one benefit of the recent catastrophe. We have a new hope that our race will not end when the energy in the bowels of our planet is finally exhausted.

Now that the anger has faded, I wonder about Jim. Did he tell me the truth after all? Was his arrival here an accident, compounded into a tragedy by our suspicions? If we had not treated Jim as a threat to us, but had allowed him to go straight to his friend and stop him - even before the killings began - would it all have been avoided? Was it we, ourselves, who carried the seeds of our own destruction, not him? The people still carry a garbled account in their minds of a silver-clad stranger who came only to kill, but I believe that, eventually, they will be ready to understand, when our society has grown more open-minded and free. As I trust that it will, under the clear and compassionate guidance of Temara, who has been voted our Administrator for her unpanicked handling of the past crisis. Only her authority had enabled us to overcome the disaster, only she had kept us from disintegrating into panic. She is now much honoured among us, and I hope will continue to guide us for many more years-of-the-Pyramid.

It will probably not be within my own lifetime, but I believe that in some future time cycle, members of my new grade will venture forth into the darkness and enter the light of new suns. And perhaps they will meet face to face with descendents of Jameskirk - Jim - not as enemies, but as friends.

CAPTAIN'S LOG: STARDATE 4127.1

I have just learned of the satellite placed into stationary orbit around Mari-ama, to warn all space traffic to keep away, and to watch the pyramid. The first reports it has sent back have been... intriguing, to say the least. High energy readings have been detected on the plain close by the pyramid; the former desert has become a hive of activity.

I've often thought, since the months when it happened, about the young man Darcon who befriended me and how I was forced to betray him to avoid breaking General Order Number One. Maybe one day he'll be able to understand... and forgive.

I hope so.

I truly hope so.



