

TOWER OF TERROR

Jennifer Guttridge

The tower stood a mile high against the angry red sky. Crimson clouds drove furiously past its pinnacled tip and dark seas lashed the black cliffs at its base. It was built of blocks of ancient black stone and was covered with the dark green slime of ages. The cold wet rain beat against it and the wind howled hollowly around its sides.

Spock shimmered into existence on the planet's barren surface within sight of the tower, and was immediately driven to his knees by the force of the storm. The wet and the bitter cold of the wind stabbed at him through his uniform. Involuntarily he gasped and wrapped his arms around himself. He was alone on the rocks between the sea and the sky. The five men who had stood with him on the transporter platform had not materialized--he had no way of knowing their fate.

With hands already numbing from the cold he fumbled with the tricorder. Its warbling whistle was torn away by the wind. Its readings were haywire, a jumbled mass of information, which shifted and varied even as he tried to make sense of it. He took his communicator from his belt and flicked it open. "Spock to Enterprise," he called with tense urgency. "Spock to Enterprise, come in...Mr. Scott!" He held the communicator to his ear, but there was no response from the starship.

He raised his eyes, narrowed and squinting to the jagged skyline, and his gaze fixed at once on the tower. It had been less than an hour since the Captain of the Enterprise had disappeared from the Bridge amid a pealing cackle of maniacal laughter. And it was here, on this single planet within sensor range, that Spock had come to search for his captain. He had set out as one of a well-equipped landing party of six, and now he was alone--wet, cold, out of touch with his companions and with equipment that failed to function. Spock looked down at the rolling black sea that smashed itself to pink foam on the rocks far below. The spray rose high and added its strength to the rain. It tasted sharply bitter and stung on his skin like mild acid. The cliff dropped away beneath him straight to the water, there was neither a reason nor a way to descend. If Kirk was to be found anywhere, alive or dead, it would have to be in the tower.

Carefully, without rising, Spock got his feet under him and began to climb. There was what might, eons past, have been a faint path wrenched grudgingly from the diamond hard rocks. It was broken and cracked now, offering no security, but it served to guide him. It was a treacherous path, covered with a thick layer of undisturbed slime. There were no grips for his feet and very little for his more sensitive fingers. His feet skidded out from under him and left him hanging precariously by his fingertips above the yawning abyss that led to the sea and certain death far below. The muscles in his arms surged with Vulcan strength as he pressed his elbows against the rock and pulled. Inch by inch he dragged himself back onto the path, muscles cracking and the breath rasping in his throat. He lay still for a long time, his head raised and thrown forward as his heartbeat steadied from its furious pounding. Then he moved one hand ahead of him, seeking out a fresh hold. Rain shot up his arm from his fingertips, his nails were broken and torn.

Teeth gritted, he pressed on, hugging close to the surface of the cliff, the water streaming down into his face and his eyes. Twice he slipped back, coming almost to the edge of that fearful drop, and stopping himself only by pressing his body painfully hard to the rock with stomach and thighs until the slithering ceased. Then with infinite caution he would drag himself back and regain the ground he had lost.

The climb went on without end. He was nearly blinded by the constant flow of water into his eyes, and grew insensitive to the wet and cold. He forgot the Enterprise--the warmth and comfort of her corridors. He forgot the racing red sky with its hanging pot-bellied storm clouds, and he forgot the gaping pink jaws of the black sea. There was only one thought in his mind, one memory--Kirk's face looking at him sideways with that half-smiling understanding expression about the eyes. And it was that which made him climb on.

He reached upwards, searching automatically for another hand hold. There was none, nor was there the usual wet rock. He blinked the rain from his eyes and looked up. There was nothing above but the raging sky. His eyes were on a level with the flat top of a cliff. Straining on his muscles he heaved himself up and crawled on hands and knees several yards before he sank down with his legs folded under him to rest.

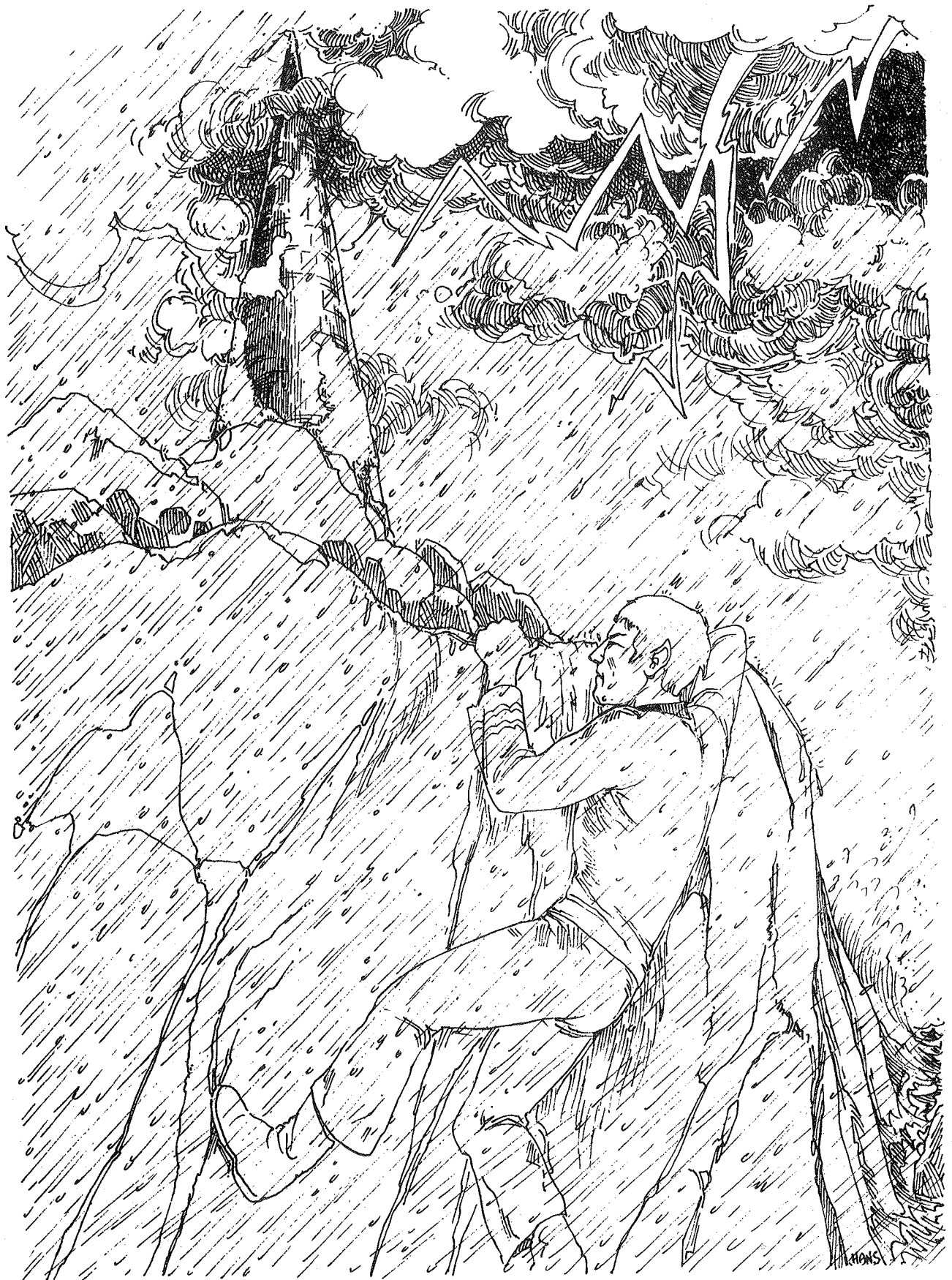
The rain lessened and almost stopped, but the wind blew fiercer and became icy cold. Spock quickly realized that he could not stay there for more than a few moments. He was already too thoroughly chilled for his body to function efficiently, and he was afraid that his mind would soon become sluggish too.

There were no other buildings on the plateau. The tower stood alone, a massive structure perfectly round, with three hundred feet or more across at its base and rising straight up black and forbidding until its height was foreshortened and lost in perspective.

Spock took a deep breath that fully expanded his lungs and got to his feet. The wind howled and dragged at him in a frenzied final attempt to drive him off the edge and down into the sea. He staggered almost to his knees and pushed back determinedly. Slowly he progressed in his efforts towards the tower, and after a moment the wind relented.

This tower was no crude medieval construction; indeed it was the product of an advanced technology. It was built of massive blocks, each block perfect and measuring twenty feet to a side, and each fitting so closely with the next one that there was not the slightest space between them. The tower was old, so old that its antiquity challenged that of the rocks on which it stood. Time had eroded the blocks so that the tunnels worn by wind and rain had welded them together as one. And the entire structure was coated by a thick layer of the same familiar slime.

It took Spock more than an hour to walk around the base of the tower, running his hands over it, examining it closely in the sombre red light, searching for a chink that would indicate an entrance. He was certain that Kirk was inside, and where Kirk was, he was determined to be also. Eventually he came back to the place where he had scraped a mark in the slime and knew that he had made a complete circuit of the tower...and that there was no way in. He crouched down beside the wall and tried the communicator once more--nothing but a disconcerting and stubborn wail came



from the device. He put it away and consulted his tricorder. It seemed almost inert, as if the readings it had been constructed to receive were deadened before they could reach the sensitive instrument. Only the faint quivering of one meter betrayed the presence of a weak or well-shielded power source. But that one signal gave him confidence and encouragement that there was a promise of possible success in his search within the structure of the tower.

He stepped away from the tower and turned, holding his phaser in his hand, prepared to blast his way in. He looked at the wall curiously. In one small area the stonework seemed to be unstable, shimmering. He moved closer. The stone seemed solid enough, yet there was something odd about it. He put out a cautious hand to touch it, and his fingers sank into it as if it were a thick viscous liquid. Thoughtfully, he looked at his hand and then at the wall. There was little doubt that this odd phenomenon was intended as a way in, but already his agile mind was working on the possible connotations. Possibly the opening of this portal was periodic, but unlikely. It was more probable that his presence had in some way activated it, which in itself meant that he was intended to enter. It was his intention to do so in any case, but this open invitation disconcerted him.

Keeping his phaser gripped firmly in his hand, he stepped forward into the wall. He immediately felt the unpleasant tugging sensation of a powerful repellant force-field pulling at the flesh of his face. He closed his eyes and put his head down to relieve the feeling and forced his way in. Beyond the forcefield was a room that filled the whole of the base of the tower. The walls were smooth and covered with a strange mural of twisting half seen shapes, none of which he could name, although some stirred a distant memory of similarities in his mind. He stood with his back to the wall, allowing his eyes to become accustomed to the odd sourceless light that filtered into the vast hall. The floor was marked into squares as if laid with flagstones, although it was quite solid. At the opposite side of the room a broad staircase swept up in the beginnings of a spiral, vanishing into darkness beyond the high ceiling. He turned and touched the wall behind him. The place where he had entered a moment before was now solid stone...and there was no sign of the portal. His line of retreat was cut.

"No," a voice said softly from behind him. "You cannot escape."

Spock turned, pressing himself back against the wall. The hall was as empty as before.

"You were determined to come," the voice said. "And now you will stay."

"Who are you?" Spock called. "Where are you?" There was no echo; his voice fell flat and dead in the vastness of the chamber.

"Who I am is of no consequence, and where I am is for you to discover...if you wish to."

Spock's eyes were busy trying to locate a movement to trace the source of the voice, but it seemed to have none. It was simply in the room when it spoke and absent when it was silent. "You have Captain Kirk here," he said. He had uttered it as a statement, not as a question.

"Kirk?" the voice said musingly. "Kirk? Do I have him here?"

Spock stood away from the wall. "You took him from our ship and brought him here. I've come to take him back."

"You are bold to come here, Spock," the voice went on. "Bold and determined. We shall see how far your determination and your courage will take you. If you want Kirk, then find him."

"Why have you brought us here?"

The voice chuckled, an alien gurgling sound that held a distinct quality of evil malice. "You require a reason?" the disembodied voice asked. "Very well then, Spock. Let us say that my reason is to find the measure of the man. Look on it as an experiment."

Spock sensed that he was alone, that the presence which had engineered Kirk's removal from the Enterprise was no longer giving him its full attention. There was only one remaining way out of this chamber, and that was a stair that led upwards into the tower. Spock started to walk towards it. No sooner had he left the sanctuary of the wall than the floor began to shift around him. The black squares of the floor changed, elongating into rectangles that vanished into the mists of distance. Spock stood still, puzzled, and looked back. The wall that he had left moments before was no longer in sight. He took a step back in that direction; the floor tipped so that he was trying to walk up an impossibly steep hill. The shift threw him off balance and he fell in a tangle of limbs. The floor picked itself up and wrapped itself around him, becoming not only floors but walls and ceiling as well. He had an immediate claustrophobic sensation of being stifled, but quelled it quickly with a surge of impatient Vulcan discipline. The markings moved and flowed, contorting into odd curved shapes that threatened to close down on him and crush him. His breath tightened in his throat as he cowered tensely against the floor that was also his ceiling. The moving shapes grew larger, closer. He put out a hand to fend them off, and felt nothing. He could not even see his hand. He compressed his lips and controlled the knot of fear that formed itself abruptly in his gut. He brought himself to his knees and drove himself to his feet.

The floor lay down and became as it had been before, receding into the distance in endlessly stretched rectangles. Spock looked around him. He was alone, nothing moved on this seemingly endless checkerboard. He had lost his sense of direction. Everyway looked exactly the same as every other. He turned a slow circle, his breathing steadying. His eyes became calm, studying and calculating. He began to walk, following the black lines on the floor to prevent himself from going in circles. Nothing changed around him. No matter how far he walked there was as much endless distance in front of him as there was behind. He didn't stop to consider it, he kept walking without pause even to rest. Progressing with stoic Vulcan patience he occupied his mind with thoughts, not of his present predicament, but the ordered thoughts of Vulcan logical progression, the solution of each problem flowing smoothly into the next question.

He was not expecting the readjustment to relative normalcy, but neither was he surprised by it. He stood only feet from where he had started out, uncounted moments before. He accepted his situation and began to walk once more towards the curving staircase, and this time he reached it without incident. He looked up and at once began to climb.

Beyond the level of that first ceiling, the darkness closed in around him like a black canopy, and smelling warm and fetid. Spock paused to survey the area; he found his eyes useless--so utter was the darkness, that he might have been blind. He concentrated his attention on the sensitivity of his ears. At first there was no sound. Then he heard a soft but quite distinct pumping noise. Moving silently on the balls of his feet he moved on up the steps, his shoulder brushing the wall. He came to the end of the steps and found a level floor once more under his feet. He was close now to the gentle rhythmic pumping. Keeping close to the wall he tried to edge his way around it, feeling his way in the darkness with outstretched fingers.

Something moved in the darkness. He felt it move with all the nerves in his body, for it was that sort of a movement--a low creeping stalk that made the hair stand erect on the back of his neck. The pumping beat became more rapid, the heartbeat of some creature stirring from rest into activity. Spock froze, his back to the wall. He heard the sound of claws scratching on a stone floor. There was a long silence during which neither man nor beast moved. A pain developed in Spock's chest and he realized that he had stopped breathing. He drew in air and gathered his wits. There was no sound from the creature except for the steady pumping of its heart. Spock stretched a hand along the wall ahead of him, and took a slow soundless step. The creature's claws scraped the floor. It knew he was there and was stalking him. Either it could see in the darkness or it had senses more acute than his.

For a moment the instinct of his ancestors welled up inside him--the instinct to turn and flee in blind panic and terror from something he could not see and could not understand. The feeling subsided before he could act on it. He moved on, pressing hard against the wall. The creature moved with him, keeping pace. It was wary of him, cautious but moving closer, as if it could smell his vulnerability and the primitive terror lurking beneath his rigid discipline.

Spock knew the sensation of fear, he had felt it before, and he knew that it was that which he nurtured now in the pit of his stomach. The creature was very near now, he could smell the hot musky scent of its body and hear the pound of its heart so close that he would have only to hold out his hand to touch it. At the very idea his flesh recoiled. The muscles in his face tightened, his fingers dug into the stone of the wall, and he swallowed the saliva that flooded into his mouth.

The beast snarled. Spock heard a distinct footfall, the scratch of talons scarce a yard away. Instinctively he backed away and stumbled in the darkness. He went down off balance, and the creature leaped. He felt a gush of its rancid breath on his face the second before it struck. And then it was upon him, overshooting him slightly because it had expected him to be on his feet, but its weight nonetheless sufficient to shove him down onto his back. His hands closed on a lion-like ruff about the beast's shoulder. He acted automatically according to his Starfleet training. He wrapped his leg around the beast's sinewy flanks and heaved with his thigh. They rolled. The creature snarled in his face and he smelled putrid flesh on its breath, and the stench made his head weak. Probes of bone and muscles, and his fingers found their way through the ruff to the solidly thick neck. He felt for nerves and blood vessels, knowing that they must be there and that they had to be found soon. Claws carved into the flesh of his upper arm, he felt his skin tear. His grip tightened on the creature's neck. He felt its muscles twitch and convulse and then become still, a dead weight in his arms. He let himself fall from its body

and lay there on the floor on his back in the dark, his breath rasping painfully in his throat. Except for his own gasps and the regular thumping of the beast's great heart, there was complete silence. No sound penetrated the tower from the storm outside, if the storm still raged. But Spock was not concerned about conditions outside. His thoughts were within himself, introverted. There was a sick feeling of fear in his stomach that refused to be conquered, and a trembling of released tension in his limbs. A fire burned in his arm and shoulder and coursed through his veins. He lifted his hand to his arm. He felt hot blood on his fingers and a soreness that went deep down to the bone. The pain brought him back to full awareness, of the creature unconscious but still very much alive in the darkness, of the pounding in his ears of his own rushing blood, and of the complete darkness which surrounded him. He rolled onto his belly and got his knees under him. His head was throbbing. He shook it and climbed onto his feet. He put a hand to his shoulder and steadied his arm.

He was lost in the darkness, not knowing which way to turn. Dragging his feet to avoid stumbling he felt his way around the twitching body of the beast and struck off into the black. There were many tense moments of blind groping before he came to the wall. He pressed his hands gratefully against its roughness. It, at least, seemed something stable to which to cling. Spock spread himself against it and began to move around its slight curve.

He found the first step by stumbling over it. He began to climb. The darkness continued. The steps were shallow and awkwardly spaced, a step and half a step. The climbing made his legs ache and his eyes became sore from trying to penetrate the darkness. He found that by stretching out both hands at arms length he could touch a wall on either side. He climbed on, his mind racing ahead. He felt more secure now, knowing that he had passed the chamber of the great beast and was closed in on two sides.

The alien presence he had encountered earlier had insinuated that Kirk was in the tower somewhere above him, and had also implied that its own form might also be found somewhere within. Spock wondered if he would encounter the alien before he discovered Kirk, or if he would find them both together. He considered briefly the problem of the return to the Starship, and then decided that the problem could wait for solving until it arose. Nevertheless, some portion of his mind pondered the difficulty.

His attention was focused ahead of him, up the staircase. So it was that he remained unaware of the scratching on the steps for some uncounted seconds. Then it impinged upon his consciousness and he spun, slamming his back against the wall. It was his first thought that the clawed beast was again pursuing him. He quickly discovered that he was wrong. It was a softer sound, more scuttling than the scraping of large claws. A sound as if of...rats? Spock looked back the way he had come, and downwards. There was a galaxy of pale pink twinkling stars, down near where the level of the stairs must lie. The scuttling sound came again, and the pink lights shifted. Spock flattened himself against the wall, feeling the cold hardness of his phaser come into his hand. It gave him assurance; at least this time he had a target to shoot at.

The button-round, glittering spots came closer, lurching as each small creature jumped up the sloping steps. The shining dots were eyes; three of them to an animal and arranged in a triangle. The eyes blinked in rapid succession, one-two-three, thus giving rise to the star-like twinkling effect. There were dozens of them,

swarming up the steps after him. He could hear the scamper of tiny feet and the scratch of minute claws. He aimed carefully at the leading group of eyes and steadied his elbow against his side. His finger tensed on the button. Spock felt abruptly sick as the phaser clicked--the disconcertingly final double click of a spent energy pack.

He tried the button again, making sure the contacts were right home. It was useless; the device was inert. He cowered against the wall, fighting the impulse to hurl the phaser with all his might at the advancing hoard. They came on with the stealth of the utter darkness and mindless determination. Spock made himself consider his alternatives. There were only two: he could turn and flee up the steps to whatever waited in the darkness above. Or he could stay. He knew instinctively that if he fled, they would come after him--moving faster than he could, closing on him, catching him, dragging him down.... And would the alien be watching, coldly, dispassionately? Or thrilling to his cries and reveling in the smell of his spilt blood? Spock's hands twisted into tightly clenched fists. He would not give it the satisfaction! He wondered at himself, startled at the passion of his feelings against the alien.

He looked down at the twinkling pink eyes with their rhythmic blinking. They were all around him now; there was no escape either up or down. Spock returned the phaser to his belt and prepared to fight.

They came upon him in two waves, scurrying and scampering over each other to get at him, their pale rose eyes flashing, an excited mewling coming from their unseen mouths. They washed over his feet and on up the legs. Fast as he pushed them down, others swarmed up to take their places. Panic began to build up inside him. And then they started to bite. He felt the needle sharp teeth piercing his clothing and his skin. Pain spread out from the wounds. The creatures were attaching themselves to him, clinging with sharp hooked claws as they sucked his blood.

Spock lashed out at them in unbridled horror, knocking them away. He felt soft hairless bodies that were rapidly bloating, small angular limbs and large flat fronted heads. As he tore them from him he felt his own flesh tear where their claws had locked into it. The dislodged creatures returned promptly to the attack. Then panic took control. He wrenched the beasts from him and hurled them down with all the force his Vulcan muscles could summon. They landed with a soggy mashing sound as soft bones broke and lay still, the pink glow dying from their eyes. Desperate hope added itself to the panic. Spock found himself taking a savage delight in smashing the vulnerable bodies. Hearing them break on the stones drove him into a frenzy.

The mewling ceased, the last of the pink eyes dimmed and went out. He was alone, his weight against the wall and only the raggedness of his breathing destroyed the descending silence. His chin was wet with saliva. He hesitated and then raised his arm and wiped it away with his sleeve. Keeping his back firmly to the wall he allowed himself to sink down onto his haunches and rest his head on his arms. There was no peace. He found his ears straining for the scratch of claws, and his eyes piercing the blackness in an attempt to locate the blinking of pink eyes. There was to be no rest. He got up and lifted a foot forwards and upwards onto the next step. His foot slipped and he went down, floundering in the mess of smashed corpses. His hands closed on them and they rubbed against his face, still warm.

It was then that he recoiled and fled, scrambling up the stairs like an animal on hands and feet until there was no longer the soft mush under him, but only the hard

stone. And still he drove himself upwards, putting as much distance as he possibly could between himself and the horror behind. Finally, his body refused to go on. He fell flat, his breath wrenching great sobs from him, his fingers scratching at the stone as if trying to dig a place to hide. He closed his eyes and shuddered.

The trembling of his limbs took a long time to cease and when it was over he felt weak and drained. He opened his eyes and there was light. A thin gray light that permeated down from above. The steps curved away in front and behind, leading down into darkness and the known, and upwards into the light and whatever mysteries lay above. Whatever it was up there, Spock had no doubt that for him it would not be pleasant. He pulled himself up and sat on the steps to examine his injuries and take stock of himself. His left sleeve was dark with blood and his shoulder was beginning to stiffen, fast becoming useless. The wounds the clawed beast had inflicted were deep and painful. The smaller injuries of the rat creatures looked less serious, but around each bite was a spreading bruise where they had sucked at his flesh.

He looked up at the steady light that came down from around the curve of the inner wall. He could not go back, neither did he want to go on, but he could not sit there forever. He gathered himself and started upwards once more, following the continuous upward bend more easily now that he could see. The light remained constant. At every step he could see a little further around the curve and always he expected to see something new lurking there, waiting for him. But always, the steps were empty. He found this apparent cessation of hostilities surprisingly disconcerting. There was an uncomfortable knot in his stomach that seemed to swell. He found himself increasingly reluctant to go on, but knew that if he once stopped he would be incapable of starting out once more. Vulcan as he was, he was incapable of recognizing the sensation as one of soul-wrenching dread.

It came almost as a relief when at last there was movement on the steps ahead. Spock froze at once, assessing this new threat. It was a very quiet movement, softer than the scurrying of the pink-eyed creatures. For a moment he frowned, unable to make it out. Then, as he watched, a thick dark substance began to ooze over the edge of the farthest step he could see. It moved slowly. Spock had no doubt that by traveling back down the staircase into the darkness he could easily outrun it, but backwards was not the way he was going. Whatever this was, it had to be faced. Cautiously, he began to climb up towards it.

The leading edge dropped over the edge of the next step. It was a dark brown, almost black semi-fluid, the consistency of thick syrup or of hot tar. It looked hot and gave off a thin white vapor and hissed softly as it progressed. And there was a smell, a stringent acid smell that struck fear into Spock's heart.

He pulled the useless phaser from his belt and tossed it forward. It landed in the middle of the form with a plop, and immediately the substance began to smoke and foam around it. The hissing grew louder and the phaser lost its outline and began to vanish. Spock knew only too well what a corrosive powerful enough to dissolve duralized steel would do to his body. The liquid was advancing slowly; there was still time for him to retreat from it, but Spock's decision that he would not go back had been made--and he had inherited a legacy of stubbornness from both his ancestral races. He would not go back and most assuredly he could not go forward, the substance would eat very rapidly through him rather than flow around him. He had to find another way out of its path.

The walls on either side were solid and too smooth to climb, and the stone ceiling was too high to reach. He could think of only one solution. He leaned

his back against the outside wall and ignored the steadily advancing flood of corrosive. Half closing his eyes, breathing deeply he forced his body to relax every muscle, preparing it with Vulcan firmness for the ordeal of endurance which was to come. An ordeal which he knew could easily end in a painful if relatively rapid death.

When he looked again at the steps, the substance was bare feet away from him. He flexed his shoulders, finding his arm awkward and unresponsive. Dispassionately he watched it descend the last step and begin to inch thickly towards his feet. There was still time to delay the moment, to run from this encroaching enemy. Acid fumes rose up and stung his eyes. The substance hesitated as if giving him time to think, to reconsider. Too much time! Spock set his face and firmly controlled the primitive panic. The corrosive rolled on, swifter now, trying to catch him unaware.

He waited until the last moment, until it was bare millimeters from his boot, and then he took a deep breath and swung himself up. His shoulders set solidly against one wall, his feet pressing against the other. He braced himself back against the stairwell and the corrosive began to swell under him and on downwards.

Time lost its perspective of meaning. Spock refused to allow his mind to measure its passing. For a while the position was easy to maintain. The left arm troubled him and he tried to ease it, taking the strain on the breadth of his back. He didn't attempt to look down. He could hear the hissing and see the fumes rising up around him and he could smell the acid odor--and that was enough. He regimented his mind and directed his thoughts into an ordered flow leaving only a part of his awareness to maintain the necessary tension in his muscles to keep him in place. For a while he succeeded, and then he began to feel the pain of tiring tendons and aching muscles. He found himself locked in position and the strength in his joints failing. He arched his neck and took the weight on his shoulders. The deep wounds in his arm opened and the blood began to run once more. Spock gritted his teeth against the pain, and one leg at a time flexed his calf and thigh muscles.

The corrosive fumes were affecting him, rising into his brain and numbing his thought processes. One foot slipped. Recovering it he threw himself off balance and lost his sound grip of the wall. His muscles cracked and knotted and from then on it was only a matter of time--of fighting the failure of his own body. The crippling ache of exhaustion flooded in from his legs and back, and then the twisting pain of cramp wrenched a cry from him. He fought it, his face contorting, his teeth chwing at his lip until he tasted blood. His torn nails scratched at the wall as he tried to arch his back. Agony screamed back from the muscles, faintness swept through his brain. He called on his body to press harder into the walls. It failed to respond. The sweat of fear broke out, cold on his burning skin. The light faded from before his eyes. A pit opened in his mind and he sank into it. And he fell.

Spock's first sensation on awakening was of pain. His first thought was that all along he had been wrong and the humans right--that there was a heaven and a hell, with an Overlord above all. He opened his eyes to look upon the glory and found himself on the same gray lit staircase. He was on a layer of black crystalline substance the consistency of rubber, and the smell of acid fumes in his nostrils. The molten mass had set to form this layer of padding over the stone edges of the steps, and there was little doubt that it had saved him from fatal injury in the fall. As

it was, he could feel severe pain in his chest and thighs. Using his good arm as a lever he tried to sit up. Something pricked in his chest and then pain stabbed through him. He sat quite still and did some internal exploration. He had a broken rib which was turned inward, its tip hard against a lower lung sac. He knew the danger and straightened slowly into a sitting position. He lifted his shirt and probed gently at the fresh tender bruise under his skin. It needed setting and strapping--and the place for that was aboard the Enterprise in Sickbay. There was nothing to do now but go on. He climbed with his injured arm held tightly to his side, bracing the rib. He limped leaning frequently against the wall to rest. He rarely looked up, scarcely caring what was above, knowing only that he must go towards it. For him the universe had ceased to exist, there was only the tower with the interminably long staircase with its lurking horrors. He had lost count of the hours he had spent there. He had forgotten the reason for this everlasting climb. He knew only that he must go on, to reach something...someone....

A vibrant humming in the air brought his attention back to reality. The light was bright now, a hard white glow which increased with every step. His heart rate quickened and dread stirred readily in his stomach. He kept close to the wall and limped steadily upwards, nursing his side as he went. The staircase ended, and once again after what seemed all of eternity, he stood on a flat even floor. The room was vast and filled with humming brilliance. The walls were lined with glittering machines, chrome facade and crystal screened. More machines made long ranks in the center. Each unit was working competently and without fuss, lights flashing in an array of colors and rhythms.

Spock could almost have felt at home had it not been for the situation, his pain and the fact that a single glance told him that each of the machines, their functions and the concepts on which they were constructed were utterly alien to him. He moved slowly into the room, disregarding the machines as harmless, mere stage dressing for whatever was to come. He walked very quietly along the wall of the room, looking down each rank of whirling busy machines expecting some waiting danger but finding none. He paused to consider, and it was then that his eye caught the glitter of movement. It was not life as he knew it; indeed, it was not biochemical life at all. The harsh light glinted on it metallicly.

Spock fell back and waited, his back to a machine casing, his slanted eyes deep and watchful.

The thing came into view. It was a machine, but like no other machine he had ever seen. It flowed steadily over the floor as it trailed metal skirts. It was basically dome-shaped with a broad belt of blue metal and faceted crystal between the dome and the skirt. From the belt extended six flexible tentacles. They were formed of armored cup-jointed segments, and in the tip of each was a number of orifices and sensory units.

Spock waited, his arm held tightly to his side, his breathing shallow to avoid the pricking of the broken rib tip. If the mechanism was to kill him then it would do so, but that did not seem to be the name of the game. It advanced to within ten feet of him and stopped. Its inner workings were completely silent, the first machine Spock had ever encountered where that was so. Amid the busy whir and clatter of all the other mechanisms it seemed odd.

A tentacle extended towards him, the segments pulling out of each other until it was inches away from his face. Spock could see quite clearly the fine gold mesh of the sensor pads and almost feel the scrutiny he was under. The tentacle swayed up and down, scanning him from head to foot.

"Copper based biochemical life form," the device announced in a flat but surprisingly clear tone. "Place of origin: Archileon One."

Spock recovered from his initial astonishment and his eyebrows climbed down out of his bangs. "Correct," he said warily. "And you, sir?"

"I am not programmed to respond to inquiries," the device said. "My task is to identify and evaluate, and to act upon my evaluations."

Spock had a nasty feeling that its evaluation of him was not going to be favorable. "Who is responsible for your programming?" he asked.

"I am not programmed to respond to inquiries. You are a biochemical life form. This area is allocated specifically to electro-mechanico-servo mechanisms. You are superfluous here; therefore, you will be disposed of."

Spock couldn't argue with it, nor could he fault its logic without knowledge of the thing's working basis. The sensor swept over him again briefly.

"I am a superior life form," he said quickly. "It is my right to go where I please, as and when I please."

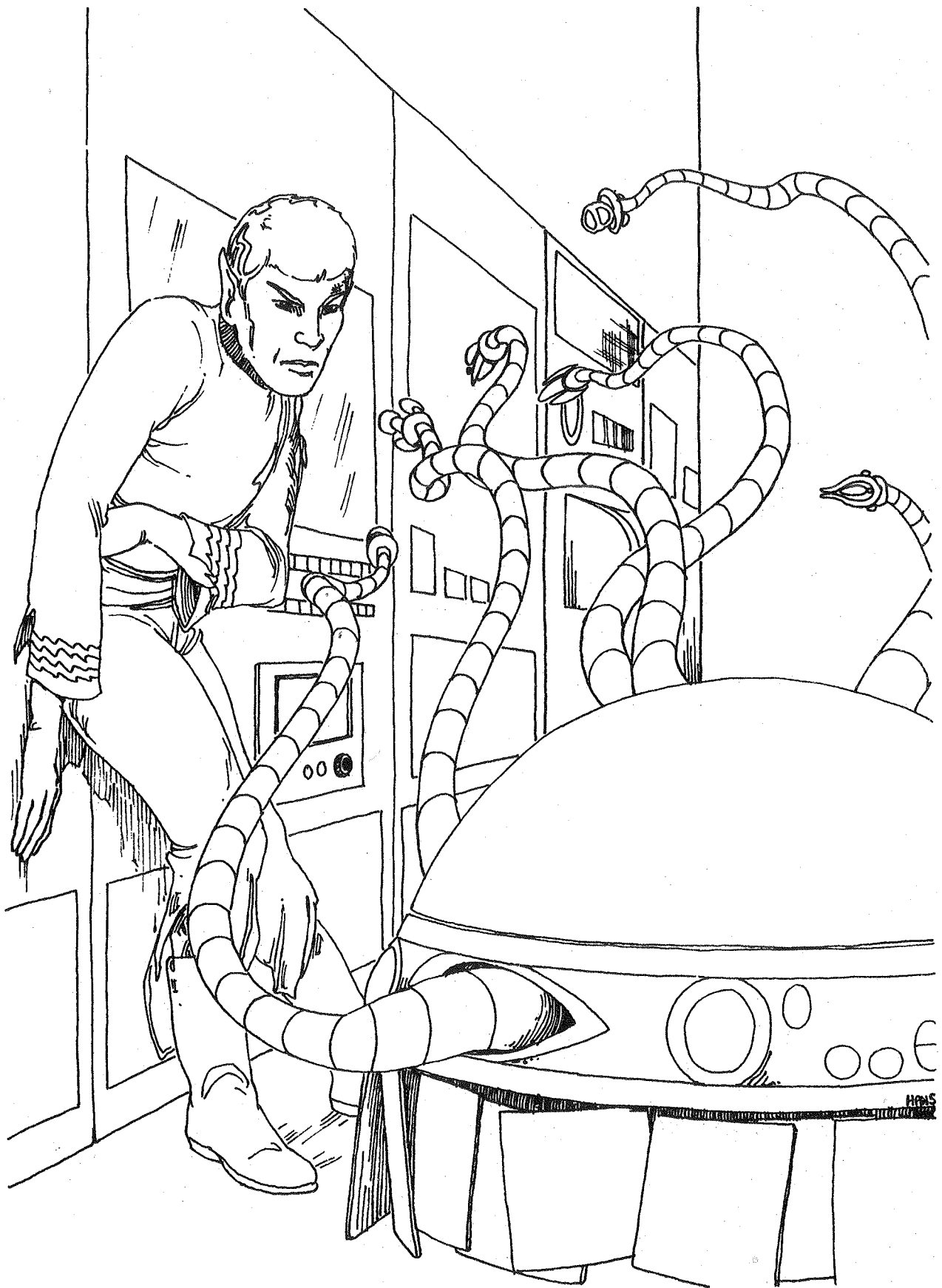
The device was momentarily silent, as if considering. Spock started to edge himself around the machine behind him. "If that is so," the device said at last, "then your right is not applicable here. This area is allocated to electro-mechanico-servo mechanisms. You are a biochemical life form; therefore, you must be disposed of." The tentacle tip raised towards his face. Spock turned and ran.

The machine consoles stood shoulder to shoulder in their ranks. Spock had to run a long way before he found a gap through which he could squeeze. He turned, long enough to send a stabbing glance back the way he had come. The tentacled dome was where he had left it, turning slowly towards him but not following. Spock would have felt better if it had chased him. Its failure to do so made it seem very confident of its ability to 'dispose' of him.

He cut through into the next corridor, fled along it and cut through it again. He stopped, gasping, amazed and frightened by his own condition. Already he was thoroughly winded, and half doubled up with pain as the fractured rib tore into the lung sac. He looked left and right and continued to run, slowly, limping, heading away from the area where he had last seen the device.

It was instinct that made him keep back, low down beside the last machine of the rank, and his instinct served him well. The tentacled mechanism swept past, moving quite rapidly with a fluid grace that denied its bulk and construction. Its tentacles were spread out in a fan in front of it, the tips raised. Spock knew that it was trying to 'smell' him out. He waited until it had passed out of sight, then left his cover and started to move back the way it had come, working on the theory that having covered that area once, the machine would not return. Unfortunately, the machine was not working on the same theory. It passed through a rank of machines and entered a corridor at one end just as Spock slipped unobtrusively in at the other end.

For a moment he froze, and then began to back up. The device continued its state-ly advance, its gleaming silver reflecting in the metal surfaces of the machines it passed. Spock decided he could outrun it. He turned, already on the balls of his



feet, and found it there in front of him. His mouth involuntarily opened in astonishment. He looked back to where he had last seen it, checking the simplest solution first--that there were two devices. There were not. The passage between the machines was empty. Spock shot the approaching device another glance and turned once more to flee, and this time he saw it happen. The mechanism flicked out of existence behind him and appeared instantaneously in front. He knew now why it had been in no hurry to pursue him. It could transfer itself to any position in a split second, rotating itself through some other plane of dimension.

Spock gave up the attempt to escape. The device closed with him and raised two tentacled tips towards his face. "You are a biochemical life form," it said in the same impersonally flat tone, "you must be disposed of."

"No," Spock said, putting authority into his voice. "You are a servo-mechanism. It is the nature of servo-mechanisms to have been created. It is your nature to serve, not destroy."

"I was created to serve the mechanisms in the area. That is my nature."

"Your creator was a biochemical life form," Spock said, not allowing desperation to creep into his tone. "Is it in your nature to destroy your creator?"

"I am not programmed to respond to inquiries. Knowledge of the creator is not within my programming." The tentacles extended, moving their tips closer to his face. He could see the small orifices in the tapered end. There was a hiss and a pale greenish gas began to escape. The gas was not unpleasant, it had a sweet smell, but the first breath of it made Spock gasp. The lung stabbed itself on the rib and he cried out in pain. He backed away until he came up against a console and could go no further. The device followed, trailing green gas.

"You are a biochemical life form," it said. "You will be disposed of."

"Yes," Spock agreed, cowering against the machine. "I am a biochemical life form. All biochemical life forms are liars. I am a liar! Every statement I make is false! You must destroy me!"

The flow of choking gas cut off abruptly and the cloud began to disperse.

"You are a liar," the mechanism mused in its flat voice. "You say I must destroy you, yet as all your statements are false that cannot be the truth. If your first statement that you are a liar is false, then you are not a liar. In which case, your first statement is a lie and although you have told the truth you are a liar. Therefore, when you say that I must destroy you the statement is false. But as you have stated that you are a liar and that statement is true, then it is a false statement that all your statements are false...." There was a dead click from somewhere inside the dome and the device became silent. Its tentacles lowered slowly to the floor.

Spock followed them down, sliding his back down the machine casing until his rump settled on the floor, and he could rest, his arms wrapped around himself, trying hard not to cough the last of the gas from his lungs.

"Well done, Spock," a voice said softly.

Spock looked up sharply. The voice had been the slightly hissing female voice of the alien. "You have more than determination," it went on. "You have courage and stamina as well."

"Where are you?" Spock asked. "Are you afraid of me, that you will not show yourself?"

The alien chuckled gently like a mother chiding her child. "Afraid? Of you? No. However, perhaps you have earned something. Look, and you will see."

There was an electric-blue shimmering high in the air above the ranked machines. It resembled a long blue cloak hanging from thin shoulders to an unseen floor. Spock squinted up at it, but he could make out no sign of a face above the cloak.

"Where is Captain Kirk?" he asked.

The cloak swayed. "That is for you to find out, Spock," the alien said softly. "You have come a long way, but there is yet far for you to go."

Spock shook his head, "I cannot go on."

"The way is up," the alien went on as if it had not heard. "If you want your Captain, you will go."

The blue shimmer faded out of sight, but beyond where it had been was an opening in the wall and the beginnings of a staircase.

Spock felt a great weariness grow up inside him. No matter how willing the mind, the flesh was too weak. But he knew that if Kirk were at the top of those steps then he had to climb them, and he knew also that the longer he sat there the stiffer his body would become. He wrapped his arms around himself to brace the rib and slowly pushed himself onto his feet. Pain stabbed through him and his head swam. He limped awkwardly to the foot of the steps and looked up. If there had been darkness above, he doubted that he would have been able to go on, but the light did continue on around the curve of the staircase. It was not the harsh merciless light of the machine room, but a gentler gray radiance. Keeping his left arm held tightly across his chest, he used his other hand to steady himself against the wall and climbed up into it.

The climbing became routine--one foot above and in front of the other. Then a stride and an awkward half stride, and up again. He let his legs do the work and take the strain, keeping his body as still and immobile as possible. He kept close to the outer wall, taking the longest way around because it gave him a view of the steps slightly further ahead. It became more and more of an effort to lift his head. His legs became heavy. His feet dragged. He stumbled heavily on a step and the broken rib jabbed sharply into his lung. He gasped and pressed his forehead against the stone, fighting down the pain and waves of faintness. He stayed there against the wall and took stock of himself. The weakness was caused by no external factor; it was a deeply imbedded failure within him, and it meant that his time was running out.

He wrapped his arm tightly into his chest and climbed on. His head hung, his breath came in great gasps that tore at his sore lung. His hands became damp and there was a sharp salty taste on his lips. He frowned. It was not often that he sweated. He realized that the temperature had been rising steadily, and that it was already higher than that of his own native world. He wiped his face and pressed on, knowing that he climbed into heat.

The light remained constant, but the temperature continued to climb as he continued. The staircase began to narrow. His clothes were soaked and his face running

with sweat that dripped from his nose and chin by the time he reached the top. There was a narrow opening through which he could pass between the walls. Beyond was a vast chamber that might have come from Dante's Hell itself. There was a narrow ledge that ran from where he stood three quarters of the way around the curving wall to a similar opening on the far side. In between, about eight feet below the ledge, was a thick oily substance that boiled with placid plops and angry bubblings. The air was filled with smoke that made his eyes smart and sulfur fumes that made his head spin and scorched his lungs. Clearly he was intended to use the ledge to traverse the chamber, and try as he might he could discover no other way across it. He tested the ledge tentatively with his foot. It was uneven and the surface loose and crumbling, but the basic structure seemed sound. He put his weight on it and it held. He started forward, leaning into the wall, placing each foot carefully, keeping his weight balanced on the balls of his feet, ready to spring as well as he was able.

Below, the mud hissed and steamed and gave its flat flopping plops. He found that if he looked down the acrid fumes rose directly into his eyes and blinded him. He kept his head up and the thinned blood made his head faint. The heat was intense. It had drained all the sweat out of him and his mouth was dry, his tongue swollen and sore.

He seemed to have been walking on this tightrope of a ledge forever. The exit was in front of him, a short distance away, a black rectangle of safety in the wall. He fixed his eyes on it determinedly, and knew in that same instant that it was an error. His brain was in no condition for such an effort of concentration. The rectangle slipped. Spock clutched desperately at the wall. Beneath his feet the ledge cracked and crumbled. He felt himself falling and flailed with desperately clutching fingers. He caught the broken edge of the ledge. His weight jarred onto his hands. The flesh of his hands tore, his body stretched out, opening the wounds in his shoulders and impaling his lung on the point of the broken rib. He cried out, a sharp agonized scream that was wrenched out of him. He threw back his head and snatched at the air, his lungs heaving regardless of the pain.

Stretched out as he was, the toes of his boots dipped into the boiling mass below. His body jerked as the pain seared through him. He twisted, trying to fold his body and lift his legs clear. The edge of the ledge crumbled beneath his fingers. The dust fell into his eyes. He shifted his hands, first one and then the other, feeling the pain of his torn fingers and the even more intolerable pain of burning on his feet. The sweat that he thought had dried out of him broke afresh from his skin, running down his face and dripping from it to mingle with the blood and dirt on his shirt. He summoned the strength of the Vulcan stamina within him and strained on his elbows. The blood ran down his back from his shoulder. The muscles in his arms knotted and shook. He bent his arms at the elbows, raising his body by the sheer power of his elbows and wrists. His teeth bared with the effort. Tears sprang from his eyes. His joints cracked.

Fraction by fraction, as he dragged himself up he watched the coarse structure of the broken stone pass downward in front of his eyes. He could smell the cloth of his trousers burning and the tickling needles of pain as the tiny hairs that grew from the skin of his legs scorched and withered. His eyes came level with the broken path. He shifted his weight onto his bleeding right hand and stretched out the other over the surface of the path, his fingers scratching for a grip. He found one and changed his weight precariously onto it. His fingers slipped and held. He moved the first hand up to share the strain and heaved his chest over the edge and back onto the ledge.

He lay with his sides heaving and his fingers hooked into the crumbling surface, his legs still dangling. Then, as his breathing steadied, he finished the job of pulling himself up. There was a thick sweet taste in his throat that was coming up from inside and he knew that the punctured lung was bleeding. His feet were burned too badly for him to walk, so he crawled with agonized slowness on hands and knees the remaining distance to the second opening. He fell through it and lay gasping on the stone slabs of the floor beyond.

He was conscious, in a distant dreamy sort of way. He was only vaguely aware of the suffering of his body. The pain had become an all-pervading continuous dull ache that was part of his world, and he accepted it as such. He felt the rapid throb of his heart in his side. His breath rasped in his dry throat, the blood sang in his temple. The heartbeat faltered....

"Spock," the voice echoed down from around the other side of eternity. "Spock!"

Spock stopped breathing and listened.

"Spock!"

The voice came from above, from around the curve of the spiral staircase, and the voice was that of Jim Kirk.

Spock pushed himself over onto his belly and looked up, keeping very still and quiet. There was no further sound. All he could hear was the thick plopping of mud in the chamber behind. The light continued on up the stairs, lighting each stone step and laying over it the inky black shadow of the next. Of their own volition his hands and legs began to move. He crawled up the steps on his hands and knees, leaving an emerald trail behind him. His brain was scarcely aware of what he was doing, but Kirk was above, close above, he had heard him call him by name.

There was a sighing sound from above. A wistful lonely sound. A sound that made him remember, oddly, the bleak mountain peaks of his home. The air became cold, he felt its chill on his skin and felt it moving against his face.

The staircase took one last turn, and then there was a racing red sky above his head.

The top of the tower had been broken away, the roughness of the broken stones worn smooth by untold ages and covered with a layer of dark green slime. The three top steps were wet and as Spock dragged himself over them he could feel the burning coldness of rain on his face. He crawled to the very edge of the tower and looked down. Far, far below, down all the length of the tower and all the length of the cliffs on which it stood, he could see the angry pink lashing of the sea, reduced to insignificance by distance.

Spock looked at the broken wall and at the wet stones that formed the floor that was now the top of the tower, and was puzzled. And then, slowly, realization dawned. He had come to the top of the tower. He had walked, climbed and crawled through the whole length of it. The alien had lied to him, and here at last the alien had tricked him. Kirk's voice had called to him from this plateau where the wind howled so mournfully and the rain lashed. And yet Kirk...Kirk was not there!

Spock lowered his body onto the wet slabs and lay still for a long time, watching the racing red clouds with dead eyes, letting the rain run into his mouth and soak his hair. Then he cried. Great dry wrenching sobs that were torn from the human

deep down inside him and which were whipped away by the wind. And when it was over and everything was drained out of him, his eyes closed and his mind sank into the blackness of merciful oblivion.

There was a smooth hard floor under him, a floor of pale yellow marked into squares by bold black lines. The chamber was circular and around its walls was a misty indistinct frieze. On the far side of the room, leading up into darkness, was another stair.

Spock looked at it from the level of the floor, without interest, without even raising his head. There was a blue glimmering above the steps and a woman appeared. She had a pale pointed face and long straight dark hair. An electric blue robe hung from her narrow shoulders to the steps on which she stood. She gazed down on him from the depths of shaded eye sockets without moving or speaking. For a while they regarded each other silently. Then Spock gathered his will and raised himself painfully onto his elbow.

"Are you real?" he asked.

The alien inclined her head gravely. "I am real, Spock. This is not illusion. Your injuries are real, are they not?"

"Why...if you intend to kill me...why have you tortured me?"

"My intention has never been to kill you," she said. "I have merely provided you with an assortment of opportunities to die. Your bones would not have been the first to litter these floors."

"Why?" Spock asked in a whisper. "Why did you bring me here?"

"No one brought you here. You came."

"To find my Captain!" It was almost a sob.

"Your reasons are your own," she said coldly.

"Why?" he asked again.

The blue robe swayed, shimmering. "As was said in the beginning, to find the measure of the man.

Spock allowed his head to hang, looking down at the floor. When he raised his eyes again, she was still there, watching him quietly. "Where is Captain Kirk?" he asked.

The woman raised both arms inside the cloak, spreading it. "Here," she said.

Jim Kirk stood at the bottom of the steps, looking dazed. He saw the alien and his face became puzzled, and then he saw Spock. He ran across the floor and gathered the Vulcan's body into his arms. Spock's hands twisted into the gold shirt, clinging to him, leaving green stains in the cloth.

"Jim?" The voice was a hoarse whisper that he could barely hear.



Kirk raised his eyes and looked at the alien. "What have you done to him?" he demanded.

"He will tell you...if he wishes you to know."

Kirk looked down at the bloodstained body he held in his arms. "He's been butchered," he murmured. "Why? Why have you done this?"

"I have done nothing. He ran the gauntlet of the tower by his own choosing and for his own motives. If you wish to know them, you must ask him. Although I doubt he will tell you. You may return now, if you wish, to your vessel."

Slowly, starting with the face and ending with the blue cloak, the alien faded out of sight.

Kirk felt gently around the Vulcan's waist and found his communicator on the belt. He opened the lid. "Kirk to Enterprise. Come in."

"Scott here, sir. Where've you been?"

"Jim! Are you all right?!" McCoy shouted over Scott's voice. "We've been scanning that planet for two days!"

"I'm all right, Bones," Kirk said.

"Captain, is the First Officer with you?" Scott asked. "He beamed down...."

"He's with me, Mister Scott," Kirk looked at the bundle in his arms and held it close to him. "Doctor, have a medical team standing by in the transporter room. He's going to need it. Mister Scott, beam two!"

PROTEST! WRITE! SCREAM!

The Space Program needs support. President Carter has ordered NASA to cut its budget. One of the victims is the Halley's Comet probe (to say nothing of the projects which might have benefited from the technology and knowledge the probe would have meant). Write the President, Write Dr. Robert A. Frosch, Administrator, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Washington, D. C. 20546. Then write your senators and congressman, and urge others to do so. The support for space exploration is there. It's up to us to help it become visible.

OUR LITTLE CORNER

Over a thousand species of our fellow voyagers on this planet are endangered. Many will become totally extinct in the wild in the next twenty years. The Wildlife Preservation Trust International, Inc., 34th St. and Girard Avenue, Philadelphia, Penna 19104 is the American branch of Gerald Durrell's organization, the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, which supports a zoo dedicated to establishing breeding colonies of these endangered species in captivity. Any profit Archives may make will go to this organization. I urge you, too, to write for information, read Durrell's entertaining books, and contribute to this cause.