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DISTRESS CALL!

by William Rotsler



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Plot-Your-Own-Adventure Stories™

STAR TREK II® Distress Call!

BY WILLIAM ROTSLER

Illustrated by John Speirs



WANDERER BOOKS

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For Fran Evans, who came
through when needed,
as usual

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Summary: Aboard the U.S.S. *Enterprise*, Captain Kirk and Mister Spock respond to a distress call from the planet Varda III. The reader is allowed to make decisions which determine how the plot will proceed.

[1. Science fiction. 2. Literary recreations]

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CAPTAIN'S LOG

Stardate 8001.4

The U.S.S. *Enterprise*, on routine patrol, has received a distress call from the vicinity of Varda III and we are responding as interplanetary law requires. Admiral James T. Kirk, commanding.

"Mister Spock?"

"Yes, Captain?" The lean, dark science officer turned toward the commander and raised his pointed eyebrows.

"What do we know of this Varda III?" Kirk asked, knowing that the Vulcan would have retrieved the information from the ship's computer once the distress call had been received.

"An Earth-type planet within five points of Terran norm," Spock said. "It is believed to have once been the base for a race of space-traveling humanoids, now thought extinct. The call could only have come from an archaeological team from Luna University, who are conducting a dig there."

Kirk frowned and rubbed his jaw. "Pretty far out, aren't they?"

"Not unusual for such research teams," Spock responded.

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“Lieutenant Uhura, keep trying to raise them,” Kirk said.

“Aye, sir, but their fading call indicated either a power failure or . . .” She hesitated. “Or interference.”

Kirk thumbed his command intercom. “Lieutenant Commander Chekov to the bridge!”

In a few moments the elevator door hissed open and Pavel Chekov walked quickly to Kirk’s position. “Keptin,” he said briskly.

“Mister Chekov, prepare a team of six security men and a medical assistant for planetfall in—” He looked at a clock. “Two hours.” Kirk looked at Spock. “Any precautions needed?”

Spock shook his head. “No, Captain, at least none are indicated.” His eyebrow went up. “But I should point out that there must be some reason for the distress call.”

Kirk nodded and gestured at Chekov. “Go armed and alert, and keep in touch.”

“Yes, Keptin!” the young officer replied. He turned briskly and strode into the elevator. He did not smile until the doors had closed behind him, then a happy smile broke across his face.

Action! He thought. My own command on an unknown planet!

*If you follow Chekov directly to the surface of Varda III,
turn to page 3.*

If you first reconnoiter the planet, turn to page 4.

Chekov used Spock's lifeform readings as a target and brought the shuttlecraft directly down toward the crescent of green along one of the many oceans.

The security men tumbled from the spacecraft and set up a defensive perimeter. Starfleet had long ago determined that there was danger in even the most innocent-appearing of alien planets and had prescribed certain precautions.

The jungle was a tangled web of tubular plants, each fighting for precious water and sunlight. Leaving two men on guard, Chekov took the rest of the landing party through the jungle toward the spot indicated by the lifeform readings.

They emerged into a man-made clearing and saw the domes of the Terran archaeological team near the sharp angles of the star-shaped buildings they were excavating. Medic Narva Moktar pointed out an entrance in the structure and suggested they investigate.

*If you decide to go immediately into the star-shaped building,
go to page 6.*

If you decide to look around a bit first, go to 7.

4

Chekov assembled a team of red-clad security men and a combat nurse, Narva Moktar, a slim and attractive medic from Liberia, United States of Africa, Earth. He hustled them aboard the shuttlecraft, and they soon dropped away from the orbiting *Enterprise* and began circling the planet.

"Two small moons," reported Narva. "Varda's gravity is point eight of Earth's, so we'll be a little light."

The shuttlecraft spiraled closer to the surface as Chekov watched through telescopic sensors. "Rather an arid planet," he said. "Deserts, with strips of green along the many oceans."

Although they listened carefully, they heard no further messages on the interplanetary distress channel. "We'll go lower and see if we can spot anything," Chekov reported to the *Enterprise* bridge.

"*There are intermittent lifeform readings in Sector Twelve West,*" Mr. Spock told the landing party by radio.

"Aye, sir, we'll investigate."

The shuttlecraft flew in low over the bleak hills of the western desert, then came upon the green coastal strip. Narva pointed out the overgrown ruins of some kind of ancient structures ahead, and the shuttle was set down in a clearing.

The security men leaped from the ship and immediately set up a defensive perimeter, their phasers at the ready. Leaving two men to guard the vessel, Chekov took four men and Narva toward the low buildings they saw ahead.

The jungle around them was different from anything Chekov had seen before. The plants were like soft cactus, built to soak up and retain all the moisture they could. There were short, fat tendrillike plants that moved sluggishly, weaving toward the Terran intruders.

The landing party broke through the jungle into an area that had been cleared by phasers and saw before them the partially unearthed archaeological site. Nearby was a cluster of inflated domes and the usual tools and necessities of an archaeological dig.

But before them was a series of star-shaped buildings, tier rising upon tier, made of shaped stone and with an entrance at each inner joining of the triangular sections.

Narva held up her tricorder so that Chekov could read it. "Some kind of lifeform readings in that building," she pointed out.

Chekov nodded and flipped open his communicator to report in.

If you go directly into the star-shaped building, turn to 8.

If you decide to investigate further before entering, go to page

10.

6

Chekov watched with admiration as the lithe, dark-skinned Narva Moktar strode ahead, her large, liquid eyes alert. She was from the same Terran nation as his old shipmate Nyota Uhura—the United States of Africa—but not from the same area. She was a good medic, which was why he had chosen her from the several Dr. McCoy had suggested, but he also knew she had, in American terminology, a “good head on her shoulders.”

They entered the passageway and turned on their lights. Cold stone, ravaged by the ages, formed the corridor. It was almost featureless at first, but soon they came upon a mural carved into the stone, then another. The passage slanted down, and they followed it.

Chekov unaccountably felt a quiver of fear. There was something about this long-dead temple or building or whatever it was that made him uneasy.

“Sir!” the security man in the lead called out. “Look at this!”

Chekov hurried ahead. What he saw made his eyes widen. In niches built into the ancient wall were nine human beings. They stood erect, their hands at their sides, eyes closed. They were dressed in worn Luna University jumpsuits.

*If you want to look around before rescuing the scientists,
go to page 14.*

If you are in a hurry to rescue them first, proceed to page 15.

"We'll circle, first," Chekov said. The ground had been cleared only along a hundred yards or so of the building. Further on it was jungle, with vines creeping up the tiers of the star-shaped buildings and small bushes and trees growing from crevices.

7

"A very ancient structure," Medic Narva Moktar said, looking at her tricorder. "Twenty-five to forty thousand years old, at least."

There were strange tubelike plants big enough to swallow a human, and buzzing insects in many colors and shapes. The flowers—if indeed they were flowers—were small, rather dull in color, and plentiful. Some kind of small armored creature scurried away through the leafy underbrush as they approached.

Chekov halted the party and peered ahead. "More of the same," he said. "Let's go back and enter one of the cleared entrances."

If you want to go in the first entrance, go to page 12.

If you decide to enter the second entrance, proceed to page 13.

8

Chekov's eyes slowly adjusted to the dim interior of the ancient structure. On the walls of the passage were carved murals of humanoids and strange beings, which may have been animals or aliens.

They proceeded cautiously, their flashlight beams probing every nook and cranny. It was cool but not cold, the air dry and faintly scented.

Chekov flipped open his communicator. "Chekov to bridge."

"*Bridge here,*" Captain Kirk responded. "*What have you found?*"

"Nothing yet, Keptin, just some murals and—"

Suddenly the floor seemed to drop away. Narva screamed, and the lights of the security men went out as they plunged into darkness.

On the bridge of the Enterprise, Captain Kirk called out Chekov's name several times, then stood up from his command chair. "Mister Spock! Order Doctor McCoy to meet me at the transporter room! I want a fully armed security team as well!"

“Yes, Captain,” Spock said. “May I point out, sir, that you may have need for a science officer?”

Kirk grinned at him. “That’s as good an excuse for getting into the action as any, Spock. Come along. Mister Sulu, you have the conn!”

“Aye, sir,” Sulu said, moving to the captain’s chair.

At the transporter facility Captain Kirk assembled three teams of armed security men. “Doctor McCoy, you will take Team One; Mister Spock, you will command Team Two; I’ll take Team Three. We will land in the areas I have selected and proceed to investigate.”

Dr. Leonard McCoy’s face bunched up in annoyance. “Jim, I’m not a combat officer, let me—”

“Bones, they may need your help. Rely on Lieutenant Castora.” Kirk briskly stepped toward the transporter disks. “Let’s go, everyone.”

*If you choose to follow Dr. McCoy and Team One,
go to page 18.*

If you choose to follow Mr. Spock, go to page 19.

If you select Kirk’s team, go to page 21.

Lieutenant Commander Chekov led his team along the side of the ancient star-shaped building. They noted the small insects and the odd little flowers, suspicious of anything, as was proper on a totally new planet. "You never know your friends—or your enemies—on new planets," Dr. McCoy had often told them.

"Sir," Narva Moktar said, pointing to another entrance into the structure.

"All right," Chekov said. "With two ways in, we can hope there are two ways out."

They entered the building cautiously, stepping over pieces of broken rock and flashing their lights along the dark, silent corridors. The passage took a turning, and they were out of sight of the rectangle of light that marked the exit.

Chekov put in a call to the bridge of the *Enterprise*. "We have seen nothing yet, Keptin," he said. "We are—"

On the bridge they heard his yell of surprise, then the sounds of frightened men . . . and then silence.

"Chekov!" Lieutenant Commander Uhura said sharply. "Come in, please!" She made several more attempts, then looked at Admiral Kirk. "We've lost contact, sir."

“There is something in the stone of the building, Captain,” Spock said. “Without a specific guiding beam we can’t focus, and therefore cannot beam them up safely.”

Kirk slapped his armchair controls. “Security! Two teams, fully armed, to the transporter room immediately! Mister Spock, you’ll take your own team down! Mister Sulu, you have the conn!” Kirk all but leapt toward the elevator door, which hissed open before him.

*If you follow Mr. Spock and his team to the surface of
Varda III, go to page 16.*

If you follow Admiral Kirk, go to page 17.

12

They hesitated a moment at the first entrance, flashing their lights down the dark stone passageway, then proceeded with caution. Almost at once they heard a scuffling sound, and into their light beams hopped a rabbit as big as a Shetland pony, complete with top hat and a big watch.

“Oh, *no!*” groaned Chekov, remembering what he had been told of an incident long before he came aboard the *Enterprise*, of a shore leave on a planet in the Omicron Delta region. There a computer programmed a thousand years before by a now-dead race fulfilled various fantasies of its visitors.

It couldn't be, he thought. Omicron Delta was light-years away.

The rabbit stopped and peered nearsightedly into their lights. “I'm late,” he said, and hopped off down a dark side passage.

“No,” moaned Chekov, shaking his head.

“What, sir?” Narva Moktar asked, her dark-skinned face anxious.

“Didn't . . . didn't you see that?” Chekov asked. “Please say you saw it.”

If you want Narva to have seen the rabbit, go to page 24.

*If you don't think Chekov saw something real,
proceed to page 25.*

They approached the entrance cautiously, entering slowly. But the passage contained nothing more dangerous—or exciting—than some carved murals.

The corridor slanted downward, twisting and turning. Here and there they found niches with many balls, cones, cubes, and other shapes, glowing in soft colors. They put their lights into a room filled with soft tubular forms hanging from the ceiling, then into another chamber filled with fuzzy lumps of blue.

Chekov stared, realized they were not some sort of mutant tribble, and ordered his team to go on. The passage branched a short distance ahead.

“Commander Chekov!” Narva Moktar said, pointing down her light beam.

Chekov blinked in surprise. There were more niches in the wall, as far as their beams shone. A few were empty, but most were filled. A figure stood in each niche, seemingly dead on his or her feet. Chekov recognized two Klingons and a Romulan at once, then a hairless Deltan. Two Vulcans were opposite, a plantlike Phylon, then four Dohlmens, two Argelians, and an armored Thrix. At the edge of the beams Chekov could just make out several blue-skinned Andorians, their white hair gleaming in the light.

“It’s . . . it’s a museum,” breathed Narva Moktar.

“Are they alive?” Chekov asked intently. Moktar ran her sensor over the first figure, a bearded man in his middle years, then nodded. She went down the line, then tested the Klingons.

“All alive, Mister Chekov, but . . . in stasis.”



If you believe Chekov can break the stasis, go to page 26.

If you think he might have difficulty, go to page 27.

The point man called out to Chekov that there was something he had to see. Chekov's light bobbed as he hurried forward, then his light steadied on the same target as the security man's.

Along both walls of the corridor were long, coffinlike niches, and in each roughly hewn niche lay a figure. In the first nine niches were the Luna University team. Then came two Klingons and, opposite, a Romulan. Flashing his light along the passage, Chekov recognized a Deltan, two Vulcans, a plantlike Phylon, a Daarlin, Argelians, a Thrix, even some Andorians.

"What is it, sir? A cemetery?" the security man asked.

Narva Moktar ran a sensor along the first body, then another, then hurried across to the Klingons. She turned to Chekov to report. "They're alive, sir, but in some kind of stasis."

"What did this?" Chekov wondered aloud.

The transporter beams set down Kirk's and Spock's teams a short distance apart, and Spock immediately took his team toward the far entrance, leaving Admiral Kirk to take the closest. Spock ordered all phasers set to "stun" and then plunged quickly into the excavated entrance to the immense cluster of ancient, star-shaped buildings.

Spock kept his eye on Lieutenant Lex Nakashima, a brilliant young computer expert of Japanese-American descent. This was his first alien planetfall and far different from his formerly sheltered life surrounded by massive computer banks.

The stone passage was dark. Their lights flashed along its length, revealing only dust at first, then the skeleton of some kind of creature. Spock paused next to it, noting the decayed shreds of clothing and the moldering remains of a weapons belt.

"A Thrix, I believe," Spock said. "Fascinating. They have been extinct for centuries." He motioned down the corridor. "Continue, Lieutenant."

The transporter beams glittered and shimmered as Admiral Kirk's landing party materialized on the cleared turf before the large, star-shaped cluster of ancient buildings. Spock's group materialized moments later, and Kirk sent him to enter the building by an entrance further north.

"Mister Larek," Kirk said, turning to the young Vulcan ensign on her first training mission, "take the lead."

The dark-haired young woman said, "Yes, sir," crisply and formed up the security detail to march off toward the nearest entrance. Kirk watched her with approval, for she had all the qualifications of an excellent officer. If only she could learn a little human compassion, he thought to himself.

Teaching young officers the responsibilities of command was a constant and ongoing task all starship commanders had to undertake. No amount of computer simulation at starbase training centers could fully qualify any officer. Kirk sighed and moved ahead with the others, pulling out his phaser.

"Phasers on 'stun,' " he ordered.

If you wish to follow Admiral Kirk, go to page 35.

*If you want to accompany the young Vulcan officer,
proceed to 36.*

“Bones” McCoy looked sourly at his second-in-command as he struggled into the medical combat pack. “Mister Castora, what experience have you had in first landings on alien planets?”

The young officer smiled. “Very little, sir, but the archaeological team was here first, and it *is* an Earth-type planet.”

McCoy grimaced. “You can get killed in a lot of places on Earth, too. But come on, let’s get this over with.”

The transporter beam always made McCoy slightly sick, and he had never been able to fully accept that his body was routinely disassembled and reassembled. He always expected to get his hands or feet on backwards.

Before him he saw the crumbling ancient ruins of the Vardan buildings, which seemed to be something like a series of star-shaped pyramids. Farther down the cleared area he saw Spock’s team materialize, then the Captain’s.

“All right,” McCoy grumbled. “Let’s go see what this is all about.” He looked uncomfortably at the security men, their phasers in their hands and their hard eyes searching every spot where an enemy might hide.

If you choose to climb the building first, seeking other entrances, go to page 28.

If you choose to follow McCoy directly into the alien building, go to page 30.

Spock's eyes narrowed as he watched the advance scout enter the crumbling entrance. Logic told him that he was a highly trained officer, whose experience was valuable to Starfleet and to the *Enterprise*, as well as to his friend, Jim Kirk. But still, he wished it were he who led the party into the Vardan structure; he hated to endanger any person, human or Vulcan.

The scout signaled that it was safe, which Spock knew to be a relative term. His team advanced and entered the passageway. Just before entering, Spock signaled the *Enterprise* of their action.

"Which of these passages did Commander Chekov use?" one of the security men asked Spock as they edged along the dark passage.

"Unknown," Spock responded. And equally unknown was what had happened. There was so little information that even the Vulcan officer could not arrive at any logical conclusions.

"Sir!" the advance scout called out. "We're coming to some kind of large room!"

"Careful!" Spock ordered. He and his team edged closer, and found a vast space, artificially created, which plunged into darkness below them. Their flashlight beams failed to reach to the bottom, but revealed glints and glimmers of something down there.

Spock noticed a wide, worn staircase that went down the side of the immense, steep-sided space. It was too big to be called a room, but it was not one of nature's caverns, unless someone—or some thing—had artificially smoothed the sides.

Faintly, they heard distant scuttlings and a low moan. "Proceed," Spock said stoically. He flipped open his communicator, but there was too much interference this deep inside the strange, star-shaped building. Spock closed the communicator and put it away. They were on their own.

James T. Kirk listened carefully as his team shuffled cautiously along the passage he had selected. The wall murals were less worn and more brightly painted as they proceeded through the intersecting maze of passages and side branches.

Which had Chekov selected? wondered Kirk. Maybe he had not even entered through this corridor. The head of his security team looked back at him as they approached another branching corridor, and Kirk waved him to the right. At the last branching, he had selected the left-hand passage. There wasn't much in the way of choice: both were dark, ancient, cold, and, except for murals, featureless.

Then he heard the shout of the point man. "Admiral Kirk! Come here! Look at this!"

Kirk trotted forward, his phaser ready in his hand, his team with him. He came around a turning in the passage and found he was looking at an immense glowing ball of yellow light.

"Ensign Gottlieb, use your tricorder!" Kirk snapped.

The young woman's fingers trembled slightly as she aimed the device at the glowing ball of bright yellow light that floated in a spherical room of shiny black rock, reflecting and re-reflecting the yellow light until the whole thing was blinding. Her fear, as well as Kirk's, was that it was radioactive.

“It’s not radioactive, sir!” she reported gratefully. “It’s some kind of energy source, self-replicating. I do not know the fuel, or the purpose. But I . . . I think it’s harmless.”

“Let’s hope so,” Kirk said, gesturing for the team to continue. Chekov and the archaeological team from Earth had to be here somewhere. But *where?*

Now, which passageway to take?

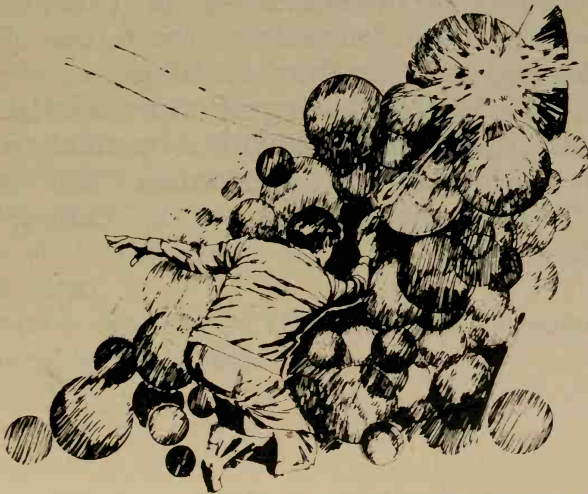
If you take the right-hand passage, go to page 32.

If you take the left-hand passage, turn to page 33.

The passages seemed to go on forever, and Chekov was increasingly aware of the pressure of millions of tons of stone over his head. He kept a quiet watch on Narva Moktar, the medic, and on his security team. Leadership was a great responsibility, which he felt keenly.

They all stopped when they heard a slithering sound. They looked at one another for explanation, but before anyone could act, a flood of soft red balls came sweeping along the passage. Narva screamed, and Chekov thumbed his phaser to "kill" and sprayed the wall of red balls with deadly fire.

But nothing stopped them—the soft red objects, rubbery and clinging, were quickly smothering Chekov and his entire crew.



For a quick solution, go to page 38.

For a strange experience, go to page 40.

“You mean the rabbit, sir? Of course.” She looked at him critically. “It was quite large. Of course I saw it.”

“Didn’t, didn’t you think it . . . peculiar?”

“Naturally, sir. It was not a typical Terran rabbit, sir. Not even the genetic engineers have given powers of speech to a rabbit.”

“But don’t you—” He stopped. He was not setting a good example of leadership. “What do you make of it?”

“Either the genetic engineering here is considerably in advance of Federation science, sir, or it was an illusion.”

Chekov felt flooded with relief. “Which do you think it was?”

“Since Varda III has had no prior known connection with Terran literature, sir, I suspect an illusion, perhaps drawn from the minds of the archaeologists . . . or from one of us.”

She put forth this suggestion so calmly and logically that it took Chekov a moment to understand the underlying meaning. “You mean, something, right this minute, is reading our minds?”

If you want to follow the white rabbit, go to page 43.

If you wish to continue the search, go to page 44.

“What, sir? Did I see what?” the young African medic asked. Her eyes examined Chekov expertly, seeing his shock and concern.

“Uh . . . nothing, Mister Moktar, nothing.” But his eyes betrayed him, looking nervously toward the dark tunnel where the creature had disappeared. “Go on, continue,” he ordered his men.

A few steps farther and Chekov stopped again, his mouth gaping open as he saw in a niche at the side of the passage a large green-scaled dragon, calmly cleaning his claws with the barbed tip of his long tail. The dragon looked up with lazy, hooded eyes and gently burped.

“Excuse me,” he rumbled politely.

Chekov turned to Moktar and forced his voice to be calm. “Um, Mister Moktar, do you notice . . . uh . . . anything unusual in this area?”

She frowned and looked around. He saw her eyes pass over the section of wall that housed the dragon’s niche, but she did not blink an eye. “No, sir.” She looked anxiously at him. “Sir? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Chekov said, turning slowly back.

No niche. No dragon. Only a terrible suspicion that he was going mad.

If you think Chekov is going mad, turn to page 41.

If you believe him to be the victim of a trick, turn to page 42.

Chekov flipped open his communicator. "Chekov to *Enterprise*." Captain Kirk responded, and Chekov filled him in on what had been found.

"We'll lock on your coordinates," Kirk said, "and beam them up."

Better have security ready in the transporter room, Keptin," Chekov said. "There are Klingons and a Romulan here."

"We'll bring them up six at a time, and I've dealt with Klingons before, Mister Chekov."

Chekov turned and saw the first six of the scientists dissolve in a glitter cascade of light, then disappear completely.

“What can we do to bring them out of it?”
Chekov asked the medic.

“We can transport them to the *Enterprise*, sir.
We have the proper equipment there.”

“Very well,” Chekov said, and reported the
situation to Admiral Kirk. The nine scientists
were beamed aboard and then, in groups of six,
all the others. Then finally Chekov and his team
were enveloped in the tingling, glittering trans-
porter beams and found themselves on the *En-
terprise*.

And looking into the muzzle of a phaser set on
“kill,” resting in the hand of a leering Klingon.

"Jim and Spock are going to the other entrances," McCoy said. "Let's go up a few tiers and see if we can find a way in from there."

"A pincers attack, sir?" Lieutenant Castora said.

McCoy frowned at him. "Don't get warlike, son, I just want to increase the odds that someone gets to Chekov and his people."

"Yes, sir," Castora said, directing the security team to begin scaling the stone walls. There were enough finger- and footholds in the old stone crevices, and they were up one tier very quickly.

McCoy turned around. "Is that an opening in the next tier up?" he asked. They boosted a security man up, who reported that an entrance, partially blocked, did exist. Within moments McCoy and his team were standing on the grass-grown second tier.

They could see the layout of the buildings more clearly now, a ring of five star-shaped buildings, with five levels each, and some sort of domed structure in the five-sided enclosure within.

"It's clear!" a security man called from just inside the second-level entrance. They entered cautiously, their footsteps ringing on the worn stone flooring.

"Eerie," McCoy muttered, looking at the carved stone murals.

Then the advance scout called out. "Sir! There's—" Then came the rumbling of sliding stone and the scream of the security man. McCoy was hit and knocked unconscious.

If you choose to investigate immediately, go to page 48.

If you choose to advance cautiously, go to page 49.

"Lights," Castora said, and several powerful beams illuminated the dark stone passage. McCoy saw murals cut into the stone and stopped to examine them, but Lieutenant Castora urged them on.

"Someone might be hurt," the young officer said, and McCoy had to agree.

"You know, Lieutenant," McCoy said, "I think I'm getting too old for stumbling around in the dark in some alien apartment house."

"It suggests more a municipal structure, sir," Castora said. "Perhaps a religious facility as well."

"I have two perfectly sensible experiments ongoing up in the *Enterprise*," McCoy mumbled, stepping gingerly around a pile of stone debris from a fallen section of roof. "I should have sent one of the medical orderlies."

"I'm certain that Commander Chekov would like the best medical assistance possible if he—"

"That's enough, Lieutenant," McCoy said. "I am properly reprimanded."

"Sir, I didn't mean that—"

There was a sudden rumbling of sliding stone, a rush of cold wind, and the lights were knocked from the hands of the team.

Spock directed his team down the wide staircase, their flashes probing the mysterious depths in vain. Their footsteps echoed on the stone. Then the lead security man hissed a warning, his light pointing down the steps.

They all stopped, hearts pounding, as they heard the scrabbling of something sharp on the stone. A pair of eyes glittered in the darkness farther down the stairs, circling the huge room, and the man in front aimed his phaser.

"No!" Spock snapped. The security man hesitated, frightened at the unknown. "That's an Orwellian rat," Spock said. "It has a distinctive set of light-refractive eyes."

"But, sir," the security man said, "Orwell Four is twenty light-years from here!"

"You are correct, Sergeant, but it undoubtedly came with the archaeological team. Rats, I regret to say, have accompanied the human species wherever it has gone."

A nearby security man managed a grin. "And on Vulcan, sir?"

Spock looked at him and raised an eyebrow. "Since they serve no purpose in Vulcan ecology, it would not be logical to permit them."

The chastened crewman nodded as the rat scurried away into the darkness. They proceeded cautiously.

As they went into the right-hand passage, Kirk's men immediately saw a difference. The walls, instead of square-sided rough old stone, became smooth, the ceiling arched, the floor curved. Soon they were moving through a perfectly round tunnel of glistening dark stone.

"Careful," Kirk whispered as they heard echoing sounds ahead. "Phasers on 'stun,'" he ordered.

The tunnel continued, but now deeply cut symbols were seen in the polished stone walls: circles with centered dots, triangles, and spirals, wavy lines, and clusters of tiny diamond shapes. Obviously some kind of alien language—but what did it mean?

The softly echoing sounds ahead grew louder. Was it friend or foe?

Admiral Kirk took a tight grip on his phaser and continued moving down the passageway, deep within the strange alien building. Then he received a call on the communicator from Mister Spock.

Once they entered the left-hand passage, Admiral Kirk saw the differences at once. Here, for the first time, were a large number of rooms. They appeared to be storage rooms, and could be entered through doorless arches. Inside were strange objects indeed.

The first rooms they investigated had tags from the Luna University research group, each carefully numbered. But it was the many strange objects that captured the attention of Kirk and the *Enterprise* members.

The first room contained heaps of eight-sided cubes, glowing a faint light blue. Ensign Gottlieb picked one up, and at once the color changed, darkening into violet, then into a deep red. When it started to pulse, she dropped it at once and it gradually faded back to the featureless blue.

The young officer, on her first mission, looked at Admiral Kirk with wide eyes. "It, it seemed to be a part of me, sir. It . . ."

"Take it easy, Ensign. Are you harmed?"

"No, sir, but . . . but it brought back memories, very early memories—childhood memories I thought I'd forgotten . . ."

"Very well, Ensign." He gestured for the team to continue. "We must find Chekov and the archaeologists."

*If you continue to investigate the storage rooms,
proceed to page 51.*

If you hurry on, go to page 52.

Nakashima put his phaser in his other hand, then wiped his wet palm on his uniform before transferring it back. He peered into the dimness of the corridor ahead, trying to make believe this was some kind of elaborate game simulation where all the senses were involved. But he couldn't quite do that: it was too real, too harsh, with too many possibilities around each turning of the corridor.

Am I afraid? he wondered. Of course I'm afraid. Any sensible entity should be afraid. But that does not mean I'm ready to panic. He remembered something Mister Spock had said: "Whenever fear drives you to panic, remember that that is the worst possible time to panic. Think of the options."

What do we fear most? Nakashima thought. The unknown, of course. Our own imagination works against us.

The young officer grinned. But the familiar never excited anyone like the unknown, he thought. He moved ahead, into the unknown.

To follow Lieutenant Nakashima more closely, go to page 53.

To stay at Spock's heels, proceed to page 54.

The cool, dark stone passageways inside the great complex of star-shaped buildings made them all feel the weight of time and the alienness of their situation. It also made them all nervous.

Admiral Kirk pushed them ahead. Time, he knew, could be of the utmost consequence. Better an hour early than one second too late, was his belief.

They came to a section of the passage that had collapsed. Crumbling stone had fallen from the ceiling, shattering a large section of the floor, collapsing it all into a dark chamber beneath.

"Mister Chekov!" Kirk called out, but there was no answer. Only a few specks of wandering dust noted that something had happened recently. Kirk ordered the team to descend, which they did gingerly and cautiously, not wanting to cause any further collapse.

Ensign Larek pointed at a few spots of drying blood. "Someone was injured here." She held her tricorder to the red droplets. "It's human blood, Captain."

"That way," Kirk ordered. Their lights swung into the dimness of the great cavern, and they started forward.

A security man cleared his throat, and the sound echoed eerily in the darkness.

Ensign Larek moved cautiously ahead of the rest of the team, keenly alert to every noise and stone around her. The place was much too cold for her, far from the comfortable 125 degrees Fahrenheit of a pleasant Vulcan day. She had long ago learned to endure the bone-chilling temperatures humans considered temperate, and to wear the skin-hugging heating garment most Vulcans wore off their native planet.

She thought about what Mister Spock might do under these circumstances. Even though he was only half Vulcan, he had achieved considerable credit in the vast area of space dominated by the human race. There were Vulcans who thought participation in the human society was unworthy work, but Larek thought they were wrong.

The human sphere of influence was where the action was. She had spent all too much time in contemplation on Vulcan. She did not approve of either the Klingon or Romulan societies, and they, with the human society, were most of the galaxy. If you had to choose, she thought, the human society, with all its flaws and distressing tides of raw emotion, *was* the most interesting and certainly the freest.

Proof of that, she thought, was that she was here, as a serving officer in the Federation fleet, the lancepoint in the thrust of human intelligence into the unknown.

It excited her, and few things did. Starfleet Academy had not been particularly difficult. The insolent hazing by humans had been annoying, but only because it had distracted her from her studies. Her contempt for the level of emotional maturity of human beings had deepened the more they revealed their intolerance. Only a few of the humans had ever offered a hand in friendship. She had eventually come to prize those few shaky friendships. It was one of those friendships that had led her to work to get selected to the crew of the *Enterprise*, a famous ship.

She had been tempered in the incredible voyage into the interior of the vast entity that was V'ger and had been pleased to be selected to stay aboard the *Enterprise*, although, of course, it was only logical to retain efficient officers.

The young Vulcan edged up to a side passage, then carefully peered around. Her eyes widened.

Chekov tumbled over and over, carried along by the flood of red. He hit himself several times on the walls, then the soft red blobs seemed to surround him more tightly, protecting him from the cutting edges of the stone.

The flood slowed, then stopped, and the balls seemed to ooze away reluctantly. Chekov looked around in bewilderment. Where he was was in a very ancient chamber, with stones worn by time. A kind of luminous lichen blotched the walls but gave enough light to see.

What he saw were all of his team, shaking loose from the last of the soft red blobs, but all apparently safe. The red objects rolled and inched and oozed away, back down the corridor, leaving them alone.

“What happened?” Narva Moktar asked in a shaky voice.

“You were dealt with,” a voice said, and a tall, gray-bearded man stepped into the room wearing the tattered remnants of a stock Federation jumpsuit. “You were infection. So were we. I’m Galen Tripp.” He indicated the other humans coming through the door behind him. “These are the rest of my group from Luna University.”

“The blobs,” Chekov said. “They are like antibodies?”

Tripp nodded. “We were dealt with just as you were.” He gestured around at the bleak stone walls. “We had no way to escape, no transporter. They just fill the passages and carry us back.”

Chekov grinned and flipped open his communicator. “Transporter room, lock on these coordinates.”

END

The red tide carried them roughly along a passageway, smothering them with their soft warm bodies. Chekov fought, but it was like punching clouds.

After a rough ride he found himself dumped on a stone floor. His sight was returned as the red balls rolled and oozed and crept away into fist-sized holes in the floor, and disappeared.

Chekov looked around, seeing by the blotched light from patches of luminous lichen on the old stone walls. Seated in the lotus position were a number of humans wearing tattered Luna University jumpsuits. One of them opened his eyes slowly and stared at them a moment before speaking.

"I am Galen Tripp. You must be our rescuers. Please pardon us, we'll be with you in a moment." Then he closed his eyes again.

Chekov looked at Narva Moktar, and she shrugged. "Are any of you hurt?" Chekov asked. The team members shook their heads, looking warily about for more red blobs. The young Russian officer got to his feet and looked around. There was one opening out of the room, and Chekov strode over to it. The corridor beyond was dimly lit with glowing lichen, and he started to walk down it.

The red blobs came up out of the holes and gathered around his feet. With a horrified cry, Chekov toppled over and fell. The red blobs flowed over him.

Chekov's team proceeded slowly into the dark stone passages of the immense star-shaped building. He nervously gripped his phaser, his palms sweaty.

Am I going insane? he wondered. I saw what I saw, yet the others did not.

They turned a corner, and Chekov saw the soft light of a window in the stone wall. Ordering the others to stay back, he approached it with a dry mouth.

The window looked out upon the snow-covered housetops of his beloved Moscow. Chekov blinked. It was not a model, nor a projection. He was looking out a window at his hometown. There were the aged minarets and fantasy onion-domes of St. Basil's and the dull stone walls of the Kremlin. On the edge of the old city he saw the magnificent new archaeological structures, the monoliths that housed a million people each: Red Star, Leningorá, Spirit of Tomorrow, and Kaliningrad.

People walked the snowy streets, aircars flitted through the tall buildings as they had all his life. He could see a sign for a department store, a patriotic projection on a low-lying cloud, a surface car with engine trouble.

"A trick," he muttered. "Some kind of trick."

Chekov was sweating. It was too cold for him to be sweating, and he shot nervous glimpses at Moktar and the rest of his team. They seemed to be eyeing him secretly.

They think I'm mad, he thought. He walked quickly ahead of them so that none of them could see his face. Maybe I *am* going mad, he thought.

He rounded a turning in the passage and stopped. Ahead of him was an arrogant Cossack on a horse, sword at his side, a sneer on his bearded face. Without a moment's hesitation the Cossack dug heels into his war-horse and charged right at Chekov, his long, curved sword barely missing the stone ceiling as he waved the blade.

Chekov fired instinctively, his hand pointing the phaser straight at the hated Cossack. The horse whinnied and tumbled, the sword striking sparks from the stone as he fell.

Chekov dodged, his head striking the wall, filling his mind with pain and light.

"Are you all right, sir?" Moktar said, bending over him.

Chekov looked around. No horse, no Cossack. "I, I tripped," he muttered. I'm not setting a good leadership example, he thought bitterly to himself.

It must be an illusion, he thought. But it *seemed* so real!

“Go into that passage,” Chekov said, pointing after the rabbit. His team moved quickly, their lights still probing the darkness.

Their footsteps echoed on the stone floor, and their whispered comments were blurred by the echoes. “Keep quiet,” Chekov ordered. He moved to the head of the team, all his senses alert, but his heart pounding.

They came to a door, a rather ordinary wooden door made of planks with a close grain, and with hinges of excellent craftsmanship. It creaked open, and Chekov’s eyes grew large.

The passage opened into a large formal garden. The ceiling was barely seen as wispy clouds of mist drifted across. Below, in a formal garden, sat a haughty queen and a phalanx of stiff-backed guards. They were humanoid, except that their faces were caricatures of the type they represented: haughty and arrogant; crafty and bitter; humble and plain; evil and treacherous.

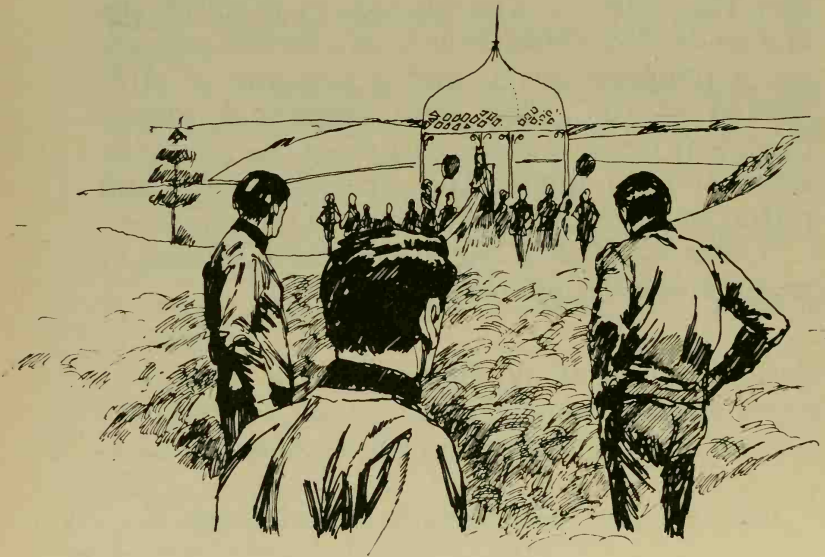
“Come here!” the queen beckoned. “Come at once!” she said impatiently.

44

Chekov ordered his team after the rabbit, and they moved quickly along until they came to a thick wooden door. It opened with a creak, and Chekov blinked.

Beyond the door was a room so vast that clouds of mist blurred the ceiling. A formal garden filled the room, and there was the smell of newly mown grass. In the center of the garden, in an ornate white gazebo, sat a haughty queen and her bizarrely garbed court.

“Come here!” she ordered. “You! Come this moment!”



“Don’t move,” the Klingon said. The second Klingon took the weapons Chekov’s team had. “Now let’s just go to the bridge, shall we, human?”

“What happened?” Chekov asked Moktar.

“The transporter beam must have nullified the stasis,” she said.

“Shut up,” the Klingon said. With both Klingons armed and the *Enterprise* crewmen helpless, there was nothing Chekov could do as the Klingon thumbed the phaser to “stun” and dropped everyone but Chekov and his fellow Klingon.

“Now, human,” the Klingon said, gesturing with the weapon. “Your captain will be glad to see us, I imagine.”

In the transporter room of the Federation ship, medics took the last of the Luna University scientists off to sick bay. Dr. McCoy thumbed a wall communicator. "Admiral Kirk."

"Kirk here. What's the prognosis, Bones?"

"A simple stasis I can break down with neuroallozine, Captain, but what put them into it?"

"I'm going down to find out."

"Be careful, Jim," McCoy said.

"I'm always careful," Admiral Kirk said, with a smile in his voice.

McCoy punched the communicator and grumbled noisily. "Oh, sure, all the time. He loves that bridge and he hates not being where the action is. He'll be the death of me."

"This structure, sir," Moktar said. "Maybe there is some kind of life here still, some kind of . . . guardian."

Chekov frowned. "We've seen nothing. And it's a very old building, older than recorded human history, I imagine."

"Pardon me, sir, but that doesn't mean there isn't something still here. *Something* put all these creatures in stasis."

Chekov nodded. "See about getting them transported aboard. Have guards ready for the Klingons and that Romulan. I'll look farther along."

Moktar nodded, and Chekov gestured for a security man to accompany him. They flashed their lights over some furry anthropoids he couldn't identify, a single, rather battered human in an early spacesuit, and a dolphinlike creature in a liquid-filled spacesuit. Then there were some empty niches, then just the plain walls.

"That's it, sir," the security man said. "Nothing more."

"No," Chekov said. "There's more. There is also whatever put those people into stasis."

The security man looked nervous. "Are we, uh, going to look for it, sir?"

Chekov smiled faintly. "No need; it will find us." The security man paled.

Chekov was right. They were found.

Leonard McCoy came slowly to consciousness. His head throbbed, and there was a lump on the side of his head. A flashlight beam angled oddly at the ceiling from a pile of rubble. McCoy staggered to his feet, calling out to his men and women.

One by one they sat up, shook dust and debris from their bodies. McCoy went from one injured member to another, administering first aid. "What happened?" a security man with a bleeding shoulder asked.

"This is a very old building," McCoy said, looking around warily as he sprayed on a bandage. "It's unsafe. Part of it fell on us."

"What about Mister Chekov?" Lieutenant Castora asked, wincing at a sprained wrist.

"We'll find him," McCoy said grimly. "The *Enterprise* never abandons its people, of that you can be certain."

"Sir!" called out a security man. "Over here! I've found something!"

Dr. McCoy regained consciousness with a loud groan. In the darkness he ran a quick mental inventory of himself and found that his worst injury was a lump on the head. Then he saw lights moving, casting eerie shadows on the ancient stone walls.

“Who’s there?” he said, shouting at the shadows.

50

Spock and his men were nearing the bottom of the vast pit. They had circled the walls of the pit several times as they went down. From time to time they heard noises above, and there were still noises below.

“Proceed cautiously,” Spock ordered. Soon they were only a few feet from the floor, and their lights revealed a strange sight. Spock pulled out his communicator and flipped it open.

“Captain Kirk.”

“*What is it, Spock? Where are you?*” Kirk’s voice came scratchily from the communicator’s speaker.

“At the bottom of a great central pit, Captain. There is something here you must see.”

“*Coming, Spock. Kirk out.*”

If you want to have Kirk join up with Spock, turn to 66.

If you want McCoy to join with Spock, turn to page 67.

“Look at this, Admiral,” a security sergeant said from one of the storage door entrances. Kirk strode swiftly ahead and looked in.

The room had simple wooden bins filled with pale tube much like man-sized beige and tan and dark brown sausages. But what struck Kirk was that one bin was filled with what appeared to be cocooned human figures!

“Ensign!” Kirk ordered Gottlieb. She hurried forward and ran her tricorder over the shapes, peering anxiously at the readout panels.

She looked at Kirk, shaking her head. “Some kind of proto-life, sir. Definitely not human, but . . .”

“But what, Mister Gottlieb?”

“There’s some kind of primitive life forces at work, sir. As if . . . as if they were duplicating human life in some way.”

Kirk made a quick decision. “Come on. We’ll investigate that later.”

Gottlieb nodded and started toward the exit. She accidentally brushed one of the shapeless “sausages” in a bin with her hand and hurried on.

After the team had moved down the passage-way, the sausage she had touched quivered and began to slowly change shape. If there had been someone there to see it, they might have recognized the features of Ensign Lydia Gottlieb slowly forming at one end of the tan tube.

If you want to continue to investigate the mysterious items in the alien storage rooms, proceed to page 68.

If you want to find the archaeologists and Chekov, go to page 69.

There was so much to learn here, Kirk thought. The knowledge of an entire race seemed to be here, if they only had time to study it.

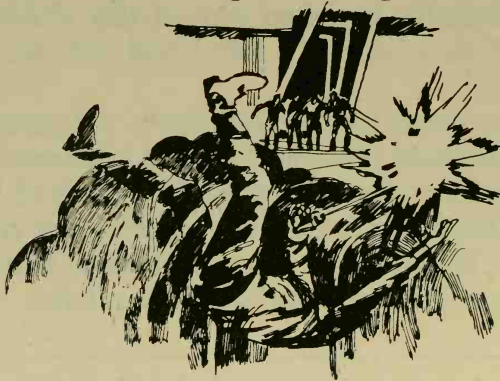
But that was not the priority: finding the *Enterprise* crew and the scientists took first place, and the sooner the better.

Kirk halted his team when they detected a warm glow ahead. "Proceed cautiously," he ordered, and they began to advance slowly.

The glow came from a tanklike pit in the stone floor of a larger cavern. In the pit was a gelatinous substance, softly glowing, with dim movements visible deep within the mass.

A security man, phaser in hand, drew close to the edge. "Sir, it smells like—!"

A blob of the stuff surged up from the surface and in a moment covered the crewman, pulling him off his feet into the pit of goo. He yelled wildly and fired his phaser just before he was covered over, sinking into the pit.



Lieutenant Nakashima was the first to see them. He sent out a shout and started to run ahead, then abruptly stopped. Ahead of him were the nine scientists they sought, lying as if dead in the stone passageway. But where was Mister Chekov? What had downed the archaeologists?

“Very good, Mister Nakashima,” Spock said at his shoulder. “Proceed cautiously, and logically.”

Nakashima started forward, flanked by two security men, their phasers ready in their hands, expecting anything. What they didn't expect was the bodies of the scientists to disappear in a blink. There one second, reading strongly on Spock's tricorder, then gone; the dials dropped to zero.

“Fascinating,” Spock murmured. No slow transporter beam scan, no molecular displacement apparent. And the scientists *had* been there, giving weak but positive tricorder readings. “Teleportation?” Spock wondered.

Then blink—something was there, something terrible.

Spock's tricorder lit up. There was some kind of life ahead. He alerted the security detail and listened carefully. The dark passages had whispering echoes, distant rasping sounds, and soft unintelligible murmurs. These sounds disconcerted the men, but Spock tried to sort them out.

There was a sudden burst of flaming energy along the left-hand wall, and the stones exploded from stress. A phaser beam, coming out of the dark, had disintegrated a great scar into the ancient stone. Spock's men dived for the floor, but his sharp command kept them from firing back.

"Who is there?" Spock called out.

"You'll not get us!" a voice cried back in Interplanetary English. "We'll die before we become your mind slaves!"

"Doctor Tripp!" Spock called out, naming the leader of the archaeologists. "We're from the U.S.S. *Enterprise*! We are answering your distress signal!"

"No, no," the voice in the dark growled. "It's a trick!" Another phaser beam seared a groove along the ceiling and partway down the wall, showering the crew members with shards of burning rock.

"I'm glad he's a lousy shot," Nakashima muttered.

"Perhaps he's only trying to scare us off," Spock said. Then he shouted at Tripp. "Doctor, who or what do you think us to be?"

"The Fi'lakas, of course: the Guardian! Don't try to trick us!"

The red blobs released him back into the room again. Galen Tripp opened his eyes and sighed. "I should have told you. You can't fight them. Phasers don't work, they heal themselves too fast."

"That fast?" Chekov said, shocked.

Tripp nodded. "To them we are antibodies. They were the protectors of the city when the Vardans were alive. They can handle anything: electrical energy, acid, venom, anything. So we are trying the only thing left."

The archaeologist looked at his eight companions. "Now we have a focus, a place to go."

Chekov tugged at his communicator. "I'll have them beam us up. I'll give them the coordinates and—"

"Don't bother," Tripp said with a faint smile. "The blobs removed a lot more than dead cells and harmful bacteria from our bodies. They removed poisons from the mind."

With that he began to fade, eyes closed, a smile on his face. The others followed, and in a moment they were gone. Chekov flipped open his communicator. "Transporter room, this is Chekov."

"*Mister Chekov,*" Scotty said in exasperation, "*who are these people who just beamed aboard?*"

"We'll explain when we get aboard, Commander Scott. Prepare to beam us up."

END

Chekov looked around, but he saw only the four guards on each side of the queen's throne. They were armed with ornate swords and ferocious glares. He hefted his phaser in his hand and whispered, "Cover me," to his team.

"Your Majesty," he said. "I am Lieutenant Commander—"

"I know who you are," she snapped. "Come here at once, I tell you, or I'll have your head."

Oh, *no*, thought Chekov. Another *Alice in Wonderland* fantasy! Wait a minute: there are nine of them . . . and there are nine members of the archaeological team!

"I didn't catch your name, Your Majesty."

"I didn't throw it, young man. But I'm Queen Galena, and I rule the depths."

"I'm sure you do, Your Highness," Chekov said, "but I'm looking for nine Federation scientists who—"

"I am quite aware of the subject of your search. The distress signal was a very unwise action on the part of one of my subjects." She glared in the direction of one of the guards, who blushed furiously.

58

“Highness, this is perhaps an impertinent question, but—”

“*All* questions are impertinent, young man.”

“But are *you* those missing scientists?”

Her eyebrows went up. “Oh, darn,” she said. “You are no fun, Mister Chekov.” The crown, the royal robes, the formal garden, everything misted away. What was left were nine Terran scientists with foolish grins on their faces.

Chekov and his people moved carefully along the stone passageway. From time to time they heard rumblings ahead, odd, echoing noises that made them nervous. Then they came upon a large thick door. It opened easily enough, though it creaked. What lay beyond made Chekov gasp.

It was Red Square itself. Phalanxes of twentieth-century tanks surrounded them, their primitive chemically fired weapons pointed right at him! Helmeted Russian soldiers aimed what were to Chekov ancient weapons at him. Beyond lay the Kremlin and St. Basil's.

It came up the dark passage like a great blob of pale blue mush. Chekov fired at once, his phaser set on "stun." The security man fired, too, but the blue mush rushed over him, enveloping him in its blobby folds. The man screamed, and Chekov thumbed his phaser to "kill."

The phaser crackled and the brilliant light of dissolving molecules filled the stone corridor. The blue mush shrank back, dumping the unconscious security man at Chekov's feet. He fired again and the mush pulled back, but Chekov could see he had not done it any real harm.

Chekov seized the security man's wrist and dragged him roughly along the floor, back toward the niches. The mush began to slowly roll forward.

"Beam us up!" Chekov hollered. He fired again, then again, in long, energy-devouring spurts. He saw the last of the stasis-bound figures dissolving in the shimmering columns of transporter light, then Narva Moktar and the rest of the team.

The blue mush clogged the passage, flooding forward. Chekov's phaser fired again, then the red light of power dissipation lit up. He tugged at the security man's limp body as the blue mush rushed forward. Chekov had never been so grateful as when he felt the tingling of the transporter beam.

Later, he reported to Captain Kirk. "Sir, I suggest we leave the Guardian to guard whatever it is it guards."

Kirk nodded. "It has only one purpose and does that well, without seriously harming anyone for long. Yes, Mister Chekov, I agree. Mister Sulu, set course for Starbase Six. The archaeologists will want a rest." He turned with a smile to Chekov. "And how do you feel, Mister?"

Chekov managed a smile. "I . . . I don't think I'll be eating mush for breakfast for a while, Keptin."

END



As they approached the turbolift, Chekov began to shake, and his eyes bulged with fear. The Klingon stuck the phaser roughly into Chekov's side. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," Chekov said at once, his mouth twitched.

"Something wrong?" the other Klingon said. He put his phaser to Chekov's face. "Tell me!"

"I don't want to die," Chekov trembled.

The Klingon sneered. "These Federation types, they're all cowards."

"No, something is wrong," the first Klingon said suspiciously. His hard-gloved hand seized Chekov's arm. "What is it?"

Chekov's eyes widened and he blurted out words desperately. "Security procedures! We have to be authorized to go on the bridge! Or we'll be vaporized!"

"You're authorized, are you not?" the Klingon growled, and Chekov nodded. "Then get us onto the bridge, human!" he said, shoving Chekov into the turbolift.

Captain Kirk and his team materialized outside the alien structure and looked around. There was always something different and exciting about breathing the air of an alien planet. He had never gotten used to it and had never ceased to be excited by it.

This was a fragrant planet, he thought, smelling of spice and flowers. Then he gestured at Sulu and the security detail he had brought down with him.

“Mister Sulu, take half the team and enter the passage on the left. Keep in touch.”

“Aye, sir.” Sulu gestured and marched off. Kirk could barely restrain a smile as he entered the right-hand passage. Sticking his nose into the unknown was one of his greatest thrills. Not even attaining Admiral’s rank had dulled that feeling, he thought. I’ve missed it. I should get back to it.

Kirk and his half of the security team moved ahead.

If you want to follow Captain Kirk, proceed to page 80.

If you desire to follow Sulu, go to page 82.

"It's Commander Chekov!" the security man shouted. McCoy and the rest of his team rushed along the passage until they came upon a fallen mass of debris. Sitting in the dark, dazed and dusty, were all of Chekov's team.

"Doctor McCoy," Chekov said huskily, his smile weak. "We found the archaeologists . . . or rather, they found us."

At that moment a group of people in jumpsuits came along the passage from the other direction, bearing stretchers. McCoy looked up from his medical work. "You don't look in distress to me!" he snapped.

The leader, a bearded man in his middle years, grinned. "We were. Some kind of disease we liberated when we opened this tomb. But we caught it in time."

"I'll report to Keptin Kirk," Chekov said, reaching for his communicator.

"I'll do that, Chekov," McCoy said. "You just take it easy. We'll have you back on the *Enterprise* in no time."

END

"It's me: Chekov!" The voice came from the group of lights casting long beams through the settling dust.

"Then get over here and help!" McCoy snapped in relief. "There may be people hurt here!"

"This place is falling apart," grumbled a deep voice McCoy did not recognize.

"Who's that with you?" McCoy asked, getting shakily to his feet.

"Doctor Tripp, Galen Tripp," Chekov said. "We found the archaeologists!"

McCoy found his own light and flashed it on the scientists, seeing an assorted group of male and female scientists in frayed jumpsuits. "You look all right to me," McCoy said. "Why the distress signal?"

"We opened something in a storeroom and apparently released some kind of disease," Dr. Tripp responded, bending over an unconscious security man. "But we found the cure in time." He looked up at McCoy. "It wasn't a false alarm."

"What kind of place *is* this?" McCoy asked, gesturing at the ancient structure around them.

"A very old race, who just lost the will to live. They lost their curiosity and lost their sense of adventure. That's fatal in an intelligent race."

"I've had enough adventure for today," McCoy muttered. "Let's get these people out of here."

END

66

Admiral Kirk and his team came out of a passageway and found themselves on the edge of an immense, dark pit. The call from Mister Spock had been from the bottom, at the base of a winding staircase. The team hurried down, phasers in hand and at the ready.

At the bottom they found Spock, whose team had their lights on what they had discovered at the bottom of the pit. Kirk gasped.

“Spock! What is it?”

“I’ve taken tricorder readings, Admiral. As best I can determine, it’s an organic machine of immense age.”

They looked at the dark shape that towered over them, soft glows barely seen deep within it, a slowly moving mound of protoplasm.

“It’s a doctor, Jim,” Spock said softly. “There are nine lifeform readings within, conforming to the nine members of the Luna University team. They have evidently contacted some kind of disease.”

Kirk looked sharply at his science officer.

“I know, Admiral,” Spock said. “We may have been exposed.”

Yells of surprise and pain echoed through the dark passages of the alien building. Dust choked the air and bodies thrashed about. McCoy's hand found a light and switched it back on, swinging it around his position in an attempt to discover what had happened.

The first face he saw was that of Lieutenant Commander Pavel Chekov!

"Chekov! What are you doing here?" McCoy demanded angrily.

Chekov grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, sir. We fell through some kind of trap, or maybe the stone had just rotted away. We were lost and . . ." He grunted as he climbed to his feet. Around him others were getting up and dusting themselves off.

"We couldn't go back, so we kept going," Chekov said. "We climbed and then . . . again, the floor just collapsed. And here we are, Doctor."

"Are you hurt? Any of you hurt?" McCoy went quickly from person to person. He set a broken arm and shielded it with inflated tubes of plastic, holding the arm rigidly. He injected two others against infection from cuts, then got all the team members to their feet.

"I don't like this place," McCoy grumbled. "Let's find Jim and the scientists and get out of here."

In a few moments they came out on a ledge surrounding a vast pitlike room. Far below they heard voices—human voices. Chekov heard his name mentioned, and realized it was Captain Kirk.

Kirk stopped in amazement as he passed one of the open arches. Inside this treasure room were piles of translucent globes, from the size of baseballs to some larger than a man could encircle. Within each globe were dimly visible collections of mysterious objects.

One globe held what appeared to be golden disks. Another had a hundred or so glowing fuzzballs of amber light. Two had dull gray bars of metal. Several were filled with liquid, dull green in color; when one of the security men came close, the liquid warmed up in color, into the blues, then orange, then a sparkling red, causing the crewman to jump back, leveling his phaser.

“Hold it!” Kirk snapped. “No shooting! We don’t know what we might be releasing!”

Reluctantly, the security man lowered his armed phaser, eyeing the globes suspiciously.

“Keep moving!” Kirk ordered.

Moments later, they found the pit of proto-plastic gel.

Kirk hurried his team past the storage rooms, with their mysterious stores of odd items, and on toward the faint echoes of sound ahead.

There was one prime loyalty in Jim Kirk's heart: the *Enterprise* and her crew. That had always been and always would be Kirk's first priority. That one of his officers and several of his crew were in danger—possibly even dead—filled him with anxiety and set his senses on their keenest awareness.

The echoes ahead grew louder. There was someone—or some thing—there.

"Hold it!" Kirk yelled as others of the team ran forward. He didn't want any of them captured by whatever it was in the pit.

They could see the red jacket of the struggling security man moving sluggishly within, and the thin red beams of his phaser firing stunning blasts.

Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, it ended. The gelatin substance flowed away, piling up around the edges of the tank, slopping over onto the floor, leaving the gasping and wild-eyed security man floundering in the center of a hole, surrounded by quivering walls of gel.

"Come to the side!" Kirk ordered.

"But, sir!"

"It'll move out of your way!" the Admiral insisted, and it did. Sluggishly it parted before the amazed crewman, letting him through to the side, where two of the *Enterprise* team lifted him out.

The security man looked down at himself, blinking. When Kirk asked him if he was all right, the man said, "Sir, I, I don't believe this, but . . . I had a scar here, on my hand. Now it's gone!"

A monster filled the passageway, scaled and steaming, all teeth and claws, its many eyes gleaming in their lights. Instinctively one of the security men fired, but the "stun" beam had no effect. The creature took a step toward them, its claws scraping on the stone, its massive jaw swinging open, giving them far too much of a look at rows of teeth and a maw of pulsating red meat.

The security man thumbed his weapon to "kill" and fired again, then again; another one of the red-jacketed men fired as well. The great beast only quivered and advanced on them, jaws dripping, eyes bulging, long, sharp tail whipping back and forth.

Spock ordered the men to stop firing in a sharp command, then stepped before them. "Mister Spock!" Nakashima cried out and grabbed at his arm. But Spock shook him off and advanced slowly, his phaser in its holster and his hands out in the ancient Vulcan gesture of friendship.

"He's mad!" exclaimed Nakashima, gasping, then his mind clicked over into a new line of possibilities. The Vulcan never did anything without a reason, he knew. Nakashima prepared to back up the actions of his commander.

But it made him very nervous.

"We are Federation personnel," Spock called out.

"We don't know that! The Guardian is very clever," Tripp yelled. "At first it seemed to be human, like us. That's when we lost Alicia. Then it came to us like a beautiful woman and we lost Abdullah. Then it—" The voice choked. "It came as my wife . . . my dead wife."

"How can we prove we're not the Guardian?" Spock said.

"You can't!" Tripp growled, firing again, exploding a section of wall. The security men hunched under the shower of broken stone and looked at Spock.

"I'm coming to you," Spock said.

"I'll shoot!" screamed Tripp.

"No, I don't believe so," Spock said.

"Mister Spock!" Nakashima said, reaching for him.

But Spock was standing in the center of the corridor. Then he began to walk slowly into the darkness.

The first thing they found was a sleeve, ripped from a uniform, and bloody. Grimly, Kirk's team moved ahead. Their lights shone on a pyramid of dull cubes. Farther on, another stack of cubes, but these had been topped and one of the cubes broken into. Inside, they saw, was a tangle of soft white tubular shapes.

Near the wall of the cavernlike room they found a raised platform and, on it, a dull gray sphere. When Ensign Larek stepped onto the platform, a light began to glow within the sphere, which was larger than a human couple could embrace. Larek leapt back, but the glow continued to grow, pulsating and brightening redly.

... urr ... ahh ...

The sounds were in their heads all at once, like distant groans. The humans stepped back, but the sounds continued. It made their heads throb slightly, but there was no escaping it.

... ooo ... you ... murr ... you ... arr ... you ... are ... strang ... gerrs ...

"Yes," Kirk said quickly, his eyes squinting against the pain in his temples. "We are from the United Federation of Planets. We received a distress call from others of our race. We mean no harm, we will not interfere. We did not know there was intelligent life here."

... I ... am ... not ... life ... I ... am ... Guardian ...

“A robot?” Kirk asked. “We wish only to remove the other humans. We will not interfere.”

... *I ... am ... Guardian ... humans ... here ... violate ...*

“We had no intention of intruding. The archaeologists were here on a valid scientific mission, but we will take them away and—”

... *my ... masters ... dead ...*

“Yes, we’re sorry about that, but—”

... *humans ... stay ...*

“I’m sorry,” Kirk said. “I can’t permit that. We must take them away with us. We will leave you alone.”

... *no ...*

Kirk paused and glanced at Ensign Larek. “No, we cannot take them away, or no, you do not want to be left alone?”

... *not ... alone ...*

Kirk smiled in sympathy. “You’re *lonely!*”

... *lonely ...*

“If we can see my men, Mister Chekov and the others, then perhaps we can discuss with the archaeologists about staying—unharméd, of course.”

... *yes ...*

“Where are they?” Kirk said.

“Here, Keptin,” Chekov said. The lights of Kirk’s team swung to cover a distant wall, where could be dimly seen a long line of human figures. Kirk recognized Chekov and his team, just coming out of a daze. The others were strangers.

Ahead, the dark stone passage opened into a large, well-lit room filled with gleaming machinery. The contrast, after the medieval atmosphere of the ancient stones, was considerable.

Larek waved Admiral Kirk ahead, but with a cautionary gesture as well. Kirk looked around her and saw the huge room filled with the smoothly functioning machinery.

Quietly, they all advanced, phasers ready. They paused in the shadows and looked into the big room. It was several hundred feet long, the walls of the same ancient stone, but the center was all gleaming, ultra-modern machinery.

Whispering into his communicator, Kirk ordered Commander Scott to beam down, and in a few moments he was there. "What do you make of it?" Kirk asked.

The Scot frowned as he traced the maze of tubes, tanks, pumps, storage bins, and other sleek machine shapes. It was quiet, considering its size, with only a soft hum and rhythmic soft thumps and gurgles. There were no human or nonhuman supervisors in sight, and whatever it was making or doing was not discerned.

"It's some kind of factory, sir," Commander Scott said. "And I can tell you one thing: it's Klingon!"

For trouble with Klingons, go to page 89.

For more trouble with Klingons, go to page 90.

Suddenly, Chekov startled himself by laughing. His voice ran out across the great square, and Narva Moktar glanced at her superior officer as if he were insane.

"Fantasy!" Chekov said, choking with laughter. "It's not *real!*"

Even as they watched, the tanks and soldiers faded, the walls of the Kremlin became the dull stone walls of a large room. The colorful domes of St. Basil's faded, too, leaving only nine grumpy-looking scientists staring ruefully at Chekov.

"You're no fun," one of them said.

"I told you we should have been using some really scary illusions," another said.

One of the men sighed loudly. "I'm Galen Tripp, whoever you are." He waved at a golden cone with a number of dots and squiggles on it. "We found this Vardan illusion machine, and I'm afraid we just . . . stopped being serious."

"We *played*," giggled a gray-haired woman.

"Almost got you, though," another man smiled.

"Maybe next time," Galen sighed.

Chekov pulled out his communicator. "*Enterprise*, this is Chekov. Mission accomplished."

"We should have tried Tolkien," one scientist said. "Or Attila the Hun." He smiled in fond memory. "Or Disney."

END

"You didn't play the game," one of the men said, pouting. His caricature of a face had softened and changed into a rather homely but ordinary face. The queen became a he who needed a shave.

"We found an illusion generator," the former Queen Galena said. "It has really been fun."

Chekov sighed. "I'm certain it has." He flipped open his communicator to contact the *Enterprise*.

"I told you we should have tried *A Thousand and One Nights* on them," one of the scientists grumbled. "They wouldn't have caught on so quickly."

END

"Bridge, this is Lieutenant Commander Chekov. Security Clearance Alpha Gamma Ten Slash Omicron Beta Six."

"Proceed, Mister Chekov," Captain Kirk said briskly.

Chekov gave the Klingons a sick smile, his hand trembling. The turbolift hummed softly, and he kept an eye on the indicator. Just before the lift stopped, he groaned and bent over, his face stricken. "I . . . I . . ." Then he fell down to his knees and slumped toward the wall, unconscious.

"Humans," sneered the Klingon.

The doors hissed open and phaser beams slashed into the elevator, crumpling the two Klingons.

"Are you all right, Mister Chekov?" Admiral Kirk asked.

Chekov rose with a smile. "Yes, Keptin. I'm glad you understood the signal."

Kirk smiled. "I've dealt with Klingons before, Mister Chekov. Now, the scientists." He pressed a stud on his command module as crewmen removed the unconscious Klingons. "Sick bay."

Dr. McCoy reported. "*Some kind of defense mechanism still exists down there, Jim. It zapped everyone who entered. There's even a Thrax here.*"

*He's a historical treasure house all by himself!
The Thrix have been extinct for three hundred
years!"*

"Excellent, Bones. Kirk out." He turned to Chekov, smiling. "Good job, Mister Chekov. Return to your duties."

Chekov smiled and entered the turbolift. He wondered if the medic, Narva Moktar, had plans for dinner.

END



The stone corridor seemed endless. Dark, dank, and mysterious, it went on forever, twisting and turning, slanting down, going up. Then they heard a slithering, and they all took a tighter grip on their phasers.

They found the Guardian—or it found them—as they rounded a turning. It filled the corridor floor to ceiling and side to side, a thick, sluggish wall of wet grayness. But even as they watched, it began to change shape and color.

One of the security men gasped as a human being seemed to step through the grayness. It seemed to gain color in moments, first in the flesh of the “face,” then in the details of the clothing it wore. A United Federation of Planets Starfleet uniform was “colored in” as they watched, an exact replica of the ones they wore, complete with admiral’s stripes and the face of James Tiberius Kirk.

Kirk—the real Kirk—noticed that a thin string of gray still reached from the duplicate’s back to the hall-filling mass behind it. “Who are you?” Kirk asked.

“I . . . am . . . the . . . Pro . . . tect . . . tor.”

“I understand,” Kirk said slowly. “We did not mean to intrude, but only to rescue those whom you have, um, put in stasis.”

"They . . . were . . . in . . . vaders." Kirk found it eerie to talk to a blank-faced replica of himself. "You . . . may . . . re . . . move . . . them."

"We have," Kirk said. "May I ask what you are protecting?"

"I . . . pro . . . tect . . . my . . . mas . . . ters."

"The people you imprison were seekers of knowledge. They meant no harm."

"Yes."

Kirk didn't know what to say next. "Do you have any knowledge your masters did not specifically tell you to protect?" he asked.

"No . . . I . . . pro . . . tect . . . all."

Kirk nodded. "We did not wish to interfere. We will go now, if you'll permit us." Kirk pulled out his communicator and spoke softly into it. "Scotty, prepare to beam us up."

"Aye, sir."

"Is there anything you need? Anything we can do for you?"

". . . No . . ."

Kirk nodded. "We'll leave you to your job, then. Scotty, we're ready."

Kirk watched his duplicated self step back, and he trembled as he saw the figure being absorbed into the mass. "Yes," he murmured, "stand guard."

Lieutenant Commander Hikaru Sulu flashed his light along the dark stone corridor. It seemed innocent enough, he thought, but he had been in space long enough not to rely on appearances alone.

Something, after all, had put members of a wide range of races into stasis. Neither Romulans nor Klingons were pushovers, so he had better be very, very careful.

When that "something" came at them, it was from an entirely surprising direction. With startling speed a green mass of dull green goo flowed out of the side passages, welled up behind them, and flooded down the passageway ahead of them.

Surrounded, the *Enterprise* crew members beamed blast after blast into the tidal wave of gooey protoplasm that engulfed them. Their phasers seemed to make no difference. As fast as the beams of raw energy disintegrated great gobs of the green stuff, it replaced itself, and came on, silently.

The green tide flowed up and over Sulu and his men. They went down firing and yelling, but in moments there was no one left, only the sluggishly flowing river of green goo.

"Find out about the disease, Spock!" Kirk ordered. "The rest of you, stay back."

Spock lifted his tricorder again and approached the great protoplasmic mound. He reached out with his hand and touched it, then grunted as he made mental contact.

In a moment he stepped back. "It's all right. They are releasing the patients now. And they are cured."

"Spock," Kirk said. "What was that like?"

"You mean contact with the Healer? It was pleasant enough. It's a very logical machine, programmed eons ago by the original inhabitants of Verda III. It could heal all their ills except one, Captain."

The protoplasmic mound began to extrude globules of matter, and Kirk could see human figures within. The gelatinous material flowed back, leaving unconscious but alive human beings on the stone floor.

"What was that one failure?" Kirk asked as he watched the teams examine the archaeologists.

"There is no medical cure for a failure to advance, Jim. The Vardans simply grew bored. They looked neither inward for answers, nor ventured outward, into space. They died of . . . boredom."

“And the disease?” Kirk asked.

“One which was not fatal to the Vardans, but which the Healer has now cleansed from the planet, seeing it was harmful to humans.”

“And Chekov?”

“Here, Keptin!” a voice called from above, on the steps. “We fell into some kind of trap, sir, but we got out.”

“Very good, Mister Chekov. Ensign Gottlieb, take command of the archaeologists. Let’s get out of here!”

“Whatever that is in the tank is some kind of restorative,” Kirk said. “Interesting, but we can’t stay to investigate. Keep moving!”

The passage took a turning, then slanted downward. The walls grew smoother, the ceiling lower, until Kirk’s team was walking along carefully on the slippery floor, bent over. It grew increasingly colder, and Ensign Gottlieb shivered.

“We’re well below ground level, sir,” she said.

“I’m aware of that, Ensign,” Kirk replied. “If we just—” Kirk halted as their lights revealed a series of stone tanks not much bigger than bathtubs. Within them, one in each tank, were Lieutenant Commander Chekov, his team, and nine strangers.

"Doctor Tripp, I am a Vulcan, not a human," Spock said. "But I am real, not an illusion."

"I'll shoot!"

"I don't believe so, Doctor. You have not really tried to kill anyone, you have been acting out of fear." Spock was in complete darkness now, though he knew he was outlined against the light beams behind them. "It would not be logical for you to kill me if there is any hope that I am who and what I say I am."

There was no sound from the archaeologist. "Come out," Spock said. "The Guardian was just protecting this temple. If we leave, there will be no more danger."

A light snapped on, and Spock could see the exhausted survivors staring at him, their faces still filled with fear. One of the men held out his hand, offering Spock the phaser.

"Keep it," the Vulcan said. He pulled out his communicator. "Transporter room, lock on these coordinates and prepare to beam up seven survivors."

A smile slowly grew across Tripp's bearded face. "You passed the test," he said.

"You mean when I let you keep your weapon?" Spock responded. "That was only logical. The Guardian would have disarmed you."

Spock turned toward the security detail. "Now we must find what trouble Mister Chekov has gotten into," he said.

END

"It was as if we were frozen," Chekov said as he staggered toward Kirk. "But our minds were working. There was this voice in our heads, asking questions."

"These are the scientists?" Kirk asked, and Chekov nodded.

"What sort of questions?" Ensign Larek asked Chekov.

The young Russian officer shrugged. "Terran history; the food we liked; reproduction; law. It seemed fascinated by ice cream." Chekov shook his head. "How long were we there, sir? It seemed like days!"

"Less than an hour, Mister Chekov." He flipped open his communicator. "Kirk to bridge. Have Doctor McCoy beam down with a medical team."

Admiral Kirk turned toward the full sphere with the pulsating glow within. "I thank you. My name is Kirk, Admiral James Kirk."

Kirk was momentarily distracted by the shimmering arrival of Leonard McCoy and a medical team, then he returned to the sphere again. "We'll check over everyone, then beam back aboard and—"

... no ... I ... Am ... Guardian ...

Kirk blinked. The pain in his head was intense. "I'm afraid I must insist. Once we get aboard the *Enterprise*, we can discuss the topic of someone staying behind."

... no ...

Kirk staggered with the mind blow. Phasers were swept from their holsters by the security men but they, too, staggered back, dropping their weapons as they suffered a mind hit.

Phaser blasts lanced across the cavern room from a side passage, and the dull gray sphere glowed fiery red, but did not disintegrate.

"Spock!" Kirk called out, his throat constricted with pain.

"Here, Captain!"

"Beam us up!" Kirk ordered, his hands to his head.

Spock flicked out his communicator, then lurched back as the Guardian struck at him and his men. Spock stayed on his feet, but his team fell, moaning. He fired again, and while the phaser beam played on the sphere they did not feel the stabbing pain in their heads.

"Captain, your phaser! Mine is running out!" Spock said. Kirk grabbed a weapon and fired on the sphere.

"Get us beamed up!" Kirk ordered.

"Sir!" Ensign Larek said. "There's some kind of electrical field around us now. We can't beam up!"

And Kirk's phaser blinked red as the charge began to dissipate.

For Kirk's solution, turn to page 100.

For Spock's solution, proceed to page 101.

“Klingon!” Ensign Larek said. “That’s not logical! This is a very old Vardan structure!”

Kirk said, “Which is a good cover for whatever they have in mind. That must be what happened to the archaeologists and to Chekov.”

“What do we do, sir?” Scott said.

“Find our people,” Kirk said grimly. “Then see what the Klingons have in mind. This planet is in Federation territory!” He pointed at the machinery. “Scotty, find out what that does. Ensign Larek, come with me!”

If you stay with Scotty, proceed to page 102.

If you go with Admiral Kirk, continue to page 103.

“What are Klingons doing here?” Kirk demanded. “This is a Federation planet!”

Scotty shrugged. “It’s Klingon machinery without a doubt, but it may not be run by Klingons, sir.”

“They are not known to be generous with their technology, Scotty,” Kirk said. He turned to the young Vulcan officer. “Mister Larek, your appraisal of the situation.”

The Vulcan female blinked, then spoke quickly. She knew she was being tested as part of her training. “Sir, I’d destroy the machinery—”

“Not until we find out what it does, and why,” Kirk said. “Go on.”

“I’d continue the search for the scientists and Mister Chekov, then transport back as quickly as possible.”

“Then?”

“Sir, the Klingons are in violation of treaty by just being here. Starfleet regulations say—”

“Yes, Ensign, I know what they say. Scotty, you figure out what they’re making here, and report back. Mister Larek, take the point. We are continuing the search.”

“Aye, sir!”

Back on the bridge of the *Enterprise*, Admiral Kirk pressed the stud to activate the log. "Captain's Log. Stardate 8001.5. We have rescued the archaeologists from a stasis trap on Varda III and are proceeding to Starbase Six. Also recovered were a number of space travelers, including a real live Thrix, which Doctor McCoy says is a living fossil. Kirk out."

Kirk settled back into his chair, and watched the stars begin to blur as they went into warp drive. A good day's work, he thought.

END

It seemed to last forever. Just the motionless suspension of mind and body. Even thoughts moved at the pace of snails. Sulu fought to clear his mind.

*Fight . . . it . . . he thought. Do . . . not . . . surr
. . . ender . . . keep strug . . . gling . . . the Enter-
prise . . . Kirk . . . body . . . can . . . not . . . move
. . . body . . . move . . . mind . . . caught . . . by . . .
green . . . glop . . . keep . . . trying . . .*

He felt nothing, not heat, not cold. He saw nothing, heard nothing. The deprivation of all his senses was the ultimate prison.

*My . . . mind . . . is . . . still . . . free . . . slow . . .
but . . . free . . .*

Con . . . tact . . . alien . . .

But . . . is . . . it . . . in . . . tell . . . i . . . gent?

*May . . . be . . . bio . . . log . . . i . . . cal . . . ma . . .
chine . . .*

Hel . . . lo?

I . . . mean . . . no . . . harm . . .

Then pictures seemed to form in his mind. Blurred, fuzzy, erratic, fading and returning. Picture of a bright, sharp-edged building, the star-shaped building. Tall, handsome creatures, only faintly humanoid, strolled about. There were sparkling spots in the daytime sky, disks that rose into the sky carrying people, works of sinuous art, the sound of tinkling music.

Be . . . fore?

The people looked up as a bright flash exploded in their night sky. They aged swiftly, the sparkling spots died one by one, the disks stopped moving, the people died, one by one.

There was a pool of green, deep within the star-shaped building. Beyond, seen in Sulu's mind, were glowing blobs of light, sparkling obelisks and shimmering spheres. Then, slowly, the glows and sparks and shimmering stopped and all was dark, except for the dull green glow from the pool.

A Thrix entered, flashing his light cautiously, and the pool flowed out. The Thrix ran, but the pool caught him and placed him in a niche. One after another the invaders were caught and placed carefully in the niches. None escaped.

Then Sulu saw himself, standing in a niche, eyes closed, seemingly dead. Then, as if in a dream, he saw Captain Kirk appear, speak into his communicator. He felt the tingling of a transporter field, and the image of the green pool faded.

"Are you all right?" McCoy asked, running his twinkling sensor over his body.

"The others?"

“All right, all of them,” McCoy said. “In fact, they’ve never been healthier. Whatever that stuff is, it regenerates the body beautifully, dissolves the neurotoxins.” McCoy smiled. “You could have lived forever in that place.”

Sulu snorted. “Thanks, Doc, but no thanks.” He saw Captain Kirk enter. “Ready for duty, sir!”

“Very well, Mister Sulu. Set course for Starbase Six!”

“Aye, aye, sir!”

END

"We're on our own," Kirk said, his mind racing.

"Not quite," Ensign Larek pointed out. "There are other *Enterprise* landing parties in this building."

"It's a very big building, and our communications have been severed," Kirk responded.

A voice rang out through the stone passageway. "Human! Federation dogs! Your end is near!"

Kirk edged closer to the corner, then called back. "This is Federation territory! You are in violation of treaty!"

"Laws were made to be broken, human! That is Klingon law!" He laughed harshly. "What we do here is our business—and you'll tell no one!"

"There's a Federation ship in orbit, Klingon! It can devastate this planet in moments!" Kirk called back.

"A petty bluff, human! They will not do so while you are here, and soon it will be too late!"

Kirk turned to Larek and whispered a command. "I'll keep them occupied. You see if you can find and knock out their jamming field. The moment you do, transmit our coordinates and have us beamed out of here."

"What about Mister Chekov and the scientists?"

"I'll take care of that. Move!"

Leaving two of the armed Klingons to guard the Federation crewmen in the ancient Vardan trap, the Klingon leader strode arrogantly back toward the automated factory.

Luckily he liked to talk to the other Klingons, boasting of how the mighty humans would soon be drooling morons. His loud, boastful words gave Commander Scott time to hide in the maze of the machinery.

“Ah,” the Klingon said. “The first are coming out. Look at them, Klaar, nicely packaged in stasis bubbles.”

“And look at this,” Scotty said, rising up, his phaser sending stunning pulses into their startled bodies.

The maze of corridors and passages within the immense star-shaped building almost ruined Kirk's sense of direction, but at last he emerged behind the Klingons. He could still hear the occasional burst of phaser fire, and the insults being thrown back and forth.

Kirk blinked as he heard some of the epithets the young Vulcan ensign was using to taunt and keep the Klingons' attention. Where did she learn *those*? he wondered.

"Ready?" he whispered to the security men, and they nodded. "Go!"

They jumped out into the corridor, phasers firing, and the six Klingons toppled. Within moments Kirk had established contact with Spock, McCoy, and the *Enterprise*. Then he went back to the automated factory to discover what Commander Scott had figured out.

"Mind spores, Captain. They'll rot the brains of anyone within minutes. I imagine the Klingons expected to seed the air of Federation planets with them, sir. They spoil, you know, and you can't refrigerate them—which is why they had to make the dreadful things close in, within Federation territory."

"Destroy all of it, Mister Scott. Every molecule. And Mister Chekov?"

98

“With the scientists, sir. The Klingons zapped ’em all good. Going to use the lads as guinea pigs, they were!”

“Very well, Mister Scott.” He flipped open his communicator again. “Bridge, this is Kirk. Yellow alert. We suspect a Klingon vessel at any moment. Prepare to give it a surprise!”

"The figures in there don't move," Ensign Gottlieb said, peering into the tank. "They must be the scientists in some kind of suspended animation." She looked up at Admiral Kirk. "How do we get them out?"

"Tickle it," Kirk suggested. He put his phaser on the very lightest energy level, one used sometimes for warming things. A slightly higher level could start a campfire.

Kirk aimed his phaser at the gelatinous substance, well away from any of the nine figures trapped in it, and fired. At once there was a quiver across the surface, then the tank erupted in great columns of formless gel. In the center of each blob was one of the human figures. The columns flowed over the edge of the tank and deposited the bodies, then flowed sluggishly back into the tank.

One of the figures stirred and opened his eyes. "I'm alive," he croaked.

"Mister Larek, fire!" Kirk ordered. The Vulcan's weapon played a series of deadly pulses over the sphere as Kirk organized the people.

"Get everyone out," he ordered McCoy. "Gottlieb, Nakashima, Mister Chekov, you help!" He gathered phasers from several of the security men. "Get going!" he ordered Larek, aiming his phaser at the now fiery sphere.

"But, sir!"

"That's an order, Ensign. You cannot learn to give orders until you learn to take them!"

"Sir!" she said and spun on her heel.

"Spock!" Kirk called. "You're rear guard!"

"Jim, you can't stay here!"

"Spock, *go!* That's an order!"

Spock narrowed his eyes, then turned to run after the last of the *Enterprise* crew escorting the weak and confused scientists.

The phaser in his hand began to blink red, and Jim Kirk picked up another one. The weakened beam from the first weapon wandered off target, and Kirk grunted as a mind strike got through and staggered him.

Follow Mister Spock on page 107.

Follow Admiral Kirk on page 108.

“Everyone out!” Kirk commanded. “Follow Spock! Mister Larek, collect those phasers and give them to me!” he said, pointing at some of the weapons dropped by the security men.

She moved quickly as the others helped the dazed scientists out of the cavern. Kirk tucked a flashlight under his arm, gathered up several weapons, and continued the deadly rain of pulses on the sphere. “Mister, run for it!”

“Sir, let me stay,” the Vulcan female pleaded. “It’s not logical, an admiral staying behind—!”

“Mister Larek, you tell Spock I’m proud of you, but get the blazes out of here!” One phaser blinked into the red and he started firing with another before he dropped the depleted one. “Move!”

“Sir!” she answered, and ran. She paused at the passage’s entrance and looked back, seeing Kirk back slowly away, keeping a steady blast onto the Guardian’s sphere. She turned and began running after the others.

She did not see Kirk stagger and fall to his knees as his beam wavered for a fraction of a second. The second blow from the Guardian slammed Kirk back against the worn stones, and the phasers were knocked from his grasp. He cried out as the Guardian struck again.

Commander Scott ran his eyes expertly over the complex of machinery, tracing power lines and the path of raw material. Small, mindless robots dumped rocks, earth, and vegetable matter from the outside into a hopper. A fusion torch stripped the molecules to atoms, and the atoms were sent along a mass accelerator to be magnetically dropped off, atomically pure, in collection bins.

Then the material was re-formed into something at the other end of the big room. Scott, accompanied by two security men, went down that way, hardly noticing Kirk, Larek, and the others leave to explore further.

At the end of the assembly line he stared at the end product, then flipped open his communicator. "Commander Scott to Captain Kirk! Wait'll you see what the Klingons are up to!"

They left Scotty examining the machinery. Uhura reported that there were no Klingon or other starships in the vicinity. They proceeded along the dark corridors, past pits of silvery disks, past rooms containing pillowlike bundles of shimmering pink, past niches filled with dusty golden rods, and through another room with worn walls and a great silver star imbedded in the floor.

Without warning, metal grates slid from the ceiling in front of them and behind, trapping them. At once Kirk whirled and triggered a phaser blast at the metal bars.

But the thick metal only glowed warmly and did not disintegrate.

A voice echoed down the hall. "Surrender, humans! You are trapped!"

If you want instant action, go to page 109.

If you want to look things over first, proceed to page 110.

Kirk and Larek proceeded carefully down the stone corridor, the security detail behind them. Commander Scott remained with a two-man guard team investigating the machinery.

Kirk stole a look at the young ensign, approving of her alert attitude and quick decision making. Swift decision making was often the reason some survived when others didn't. That made him remember the Klingon salute: "Survive and succeed."

Klingons were tenacious, crafty, and intelligent, Kirk knew from bitter experience. But they were also prey to egotistical emotional responses, even more so than human beings, and were fanatic duelists.

His thoughts were interrupted as six Klingons stepped out of a side passage. Both groups were surprised, but it was the Klingons who began firing at once.

Kirk ordered his men back into a room they had just passed, a dark chamber filled with soft cubes of beige plastic. Two of the security men kept up a returning fire as Admiral Kirk motioned Larek to him.

"Go that way," he ordered. "Take two men. Flank them and attack, but put your phasers on 'stun.'"

"But, sir, they are shooting to kill—!"

"That's an order, Mister Larek!"

She nodded, motioned to two of the men, and ran out.

"I'm Galen Tripp," the man said, getting up on one elbow and looking around.

"Doctor Tripp?" Kirk asked. "The head of the archaeological team?"

Tripp nodded, smiling as he saw the other wet figures of his party stir and awaken. "We triggered some kind of terrible disease here," he said. He gestured at the tank of gelatin substance. "This . . . *this* cured us and kept us alive until help came."

"Then you don't know where Chekov and my missing people are?" Kirk responded. He snapped orders for half of his crew to get the scientists outside so that they might be transported up to the orbiting *Enterprise*. And the rest were to continue searching for Chekov and his team.

"Don't bother, Keptin," Chekov said, stepping into the light. He was dusty, his uniform torn. He gestured apologetically at his ragged team. "We discovered just how fragile some parts of this place are," he explained. Then he held up a strange golden object, a star-shaped sculpture with jewels on the edges.

Dr. Tripp reached for it with a hoarse cry. "The Star of Vardan!" He took it into his trembling hands. "This will unlock the vaults we found below! The knowledge of a race will be ours!"

"Not before you return to the *Enterprise* and clean up," Kirk said. Then he smiled, already mentally preparing his Captain's Log, Supplemental.

"Ensign, put your phaser on 'stun' and spray that first tank," Kirk ordered. The young officer shot him a quick look, but did as she was ordered.

The gel that filled the tank flowed back, then surged up over the edge, leaving Chekov untouched at the bottom. He blinked his eyes and sat up.

"Keptin Kirk! What . . . what heppened, sir?"

"Apparently you were in a kind of alien hospital, Mister Chekov. Mister Gottlieb, will you release the others?" He turned back to the young Russian officer. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, sir, I . . ." His tongue explored his mouth, then he grinned. "Except that now I have a whole tooth instead of one with a good Russian filling, sir!"

"Excellent, Mister Chekov. Assemble the teams. We're going back to the *Enterprise*."

END

“Hurry!” Dr. McCoy urged as they ran back with the rescued scientists, leaving Kirk as rear guard. “Outside we can be beamed up!”

A security man was helping each of the dazed scientists, who looked about them as if it was all a dream. “It’s been *years*,” moaned the scientist in charge.

“It only seems that way,” one of the young officers, Ensign Gottlieb, said. “Actually it’s been about a day since the *Enterprise* received your distress call.”

“A day?” The man’s mouth gaped open.

“Keep moving!” McCoy urged. He looked at Spock, trotting along stoically next to him. “What about Jim? We can’t leave him like that, Spock!”

“We received direct orders, Doctor.”

“To blazes with direct orders! That’s *Jim Kirk* back there!”

“First things first, Doctor McCoy; that is only logical.”

“Blast you and your logic!” McCoy said heatedly. “*Do* something, you green-blooded Vulcan!”

“Really, Doctor McCoy, your persistent insults serve no purpose.”

McCoy made a nasty sound and took the arm of a faltering scientist.

Mister Spock looked tense, and as hard-looking as any of them remembered ever seeing him.

Follow one response on page 114.

Follow another response on page 115.

Kirk fought the blinding pain and fired blindly in the direction of the sphere. When he felt a momentary lessening of the spikes of pain in his head, he steadied the phaser, and the pain went away as the Guardian sought to protect itself from the fiery pulses of the weapon.

Kirk backed away, still firing, starting another series of pulses from a newly charged weapon before he discarded the deleted older one. He reached the passage back to the surface and took two of the weapons and blasted away until they were blinking red, then he tossed them aside as he turned to sprint through the stone halls, his flashlight bobbing.

The mind whip made him weave and fall, but he clawed himself erect and struggled on, half-blind, his head ready to burst. But with every step, the influence of the Guardian grew slightly less.

Kirk lurched through the passages, uncertain of the turnings, but always taking the upward passage. He passed rooms filled with strange tentacled objects, and pits of softly glowing gel. He crossed a low room filled with pure white pyramids of some kind of crystal, then through a hall lined with pillars of golden light.

He came to a dead end, doubled back, feeling the stabs at his mind increase. His vision blurred and he ran into a wall, but he kept moving by willpower alone.

Without hesitation, Kirk began firing at the wall. "Shoot!" he ordered the security personnel. Their phasers quickly blasted a hole in the stone, and Kirk led them through into another passage.

As they ran long, Larek said, "That was quick thinking, Admiral!"

"Never," Kirk said, "fight by the other man's rules!"

He rounded a corner and called a halt, setting a guard on their back trail. He flipped open his communicator, but could not get through to the *Enterprise*. They've set up a jamming field!"

"Won't that alert the *Enterprise*?" Larek said.

"Yes," Kirk nodded, "but they won't know what it means. It also means that we can't beam up or bring anyone down."

Kirk looked around desperately for a way out, but there seemed to be none. A phaser beam struck out of the darkness, and one of his security men grunted and fell unconscious.

“Live to fight another day,” he said to Ensign Larek before calling out to the Klingons. “All right! We surrender!”

“Throw out your weapons!”

Once the phasers lay beyond the bars, six Klingons came swaggering out of the darkness. The leader sneered at Kirk. “Only six Klingons defeated an *admiral* and a superior force of numbers? How humiliating!” All the Klingons laughed.

“What are you doing here?” Kirk demanded. “This is Federation territory!”

“A terrible navigation error, I’m sure,” the Klingon laughed. Then he sobered. “No, human, this is the first step of the final battle! This is the outpost of the Klingon empire! It is from here we shall seed the air of Federation planets with mind spores!”

Kirk gasped. The automated factory he had seen was really an accelerated organic factory. The life of the deadly mind spores was very short. They couldn’t be refrigerated, so the manufacturing point had to be close to the target. Two spores in the air of a planet would reduce the population to approximately half its IQ within three days!

The Klingon laughed again as he saw realization devastate Kirk’s face. “And you, humans, you will be the test subjects for the first batch of mind spores!”

"Can't talk to you now, Scotty," Kirk said into his communicator. The wall above him exploded in a shower of red-hot rock fragments as a Klingon phaser blasted it.

"Ensign Larek," Kirk snapped. "I want you to keep up a return fire while I outflank them. Keep their attention." He pointed at three of the security men. "You three, with me!"

Jim Kirk ran hard back down the cold, dark hall. The Klingons had ambushed them, but for some reason had their phasers set on "stun" instead of "kill." Kirk had dragged the unconscious crewman to safety as the others kept up a covering fire.

But now he had to outflank and destroy the ambushers. What *were* Klingons doing here? It was a stupid violation of treaty, for they were not here in force.

Well, he thought, I'll figure that out later. First things first—and first was the neutralizing of six Klingons!

Ensign Larek ran down a corridor, then crossed over, as her instinct told her they had passed behind the Klingons. She had the crew extinguish their light beams, then proceeded cautiously. In moments, peering around a corner, she saw six Klingons firing down at Admiral Kirk.

And one of them saw her. A ferocious snarl on his face, he swung his weapon around. But the Vulcan was quicker. Her phaser stunned him, and he fell limply. Before the others could turn and fire, Larek and her men had brought them down.

"Admiral Kirk!" she called. Moments later, Kirk flipped open his communicator.

"Kirk to Scott. Report!"

"Scott here, Captain. I figured out what them scallywags were up to, sir, and why they were doing it here. You'd better come see, Captain."

A few minutes later, Kirk was looking down at the product of the secret Klingon factory. "Mind spores," he said grimly.

“Aye,” Scott said. “Drop a pair of them in the atmosphere of a planet and within seventy-two hours the IQs of intelligent races would be halved! But they spoil quickly, which is why they had to incubate them here. I suspect a Klingon ship will be along in a few days. And this was the first crop, as it were, Captain.”

“I think we’ll have a reception ready, don’t you, Mister Scott?”

“Aye,” Scotty nodded. “The mind-destroying devils!” Then he smiled. “We found Mister Chekov and the others, all well, sir, just down the way.”

END

Kirk stumbled back from the Guardian's dull sphere, firing without letup. His head throbbed, but he kept up an accurate fire until his phaser began to blink red. He tossed it aside and brought up another, but in that fraction of a second the Guardian broke through and struck Kirk a mental blow that sent him lurching back to hit the wall.

... no ... leave ... stay ...

"Sorry," Kirk gasped, firing again. "I'm not going ... to ... stay ... here ... just to keep you from being ... bored!" He emptied that phaser as he backed away, not making the mistake of letting up the deadly fire on the powerful Guardian.

Kirk made the passageway entrance and emptied the last power of his two remaining phasers into the hotly glowing sphere, then threw them down and ran as fast as he could, his flashbeam swaying across the cold, rough walls, back toward freedom and the *Enterprise*.

Spock heard a faint cry from a side passage and flashed his light. He saw the staggering figure of his captain, arms out, feeling along the wall.

"Spock!" Kirk yelled hoarsely. "Is that you, Spock?"

"Here, Captain!" Spock said. He motioned for the others to keep moving and ran back to grab Kirk in his powerful arms. "Are you all right, Jim?" he asked intently.

Kirk grinned through the pain. "What is that I hear in your voice, Spock?"

Spock was embarrassed at his burst of emotion, but he tried not to show it. "An unwarranted display toward a superior officer," he apologized, but Kirk would have none of it.

"I'm glad to see you, too," he grinned. "I'm afraid . . . I'm afraid I'm not too well right now, Spock."

"I'll help you, Captain."

"You always have," Kirk murmured.

Spock's hands reached out toward the scaly head of the many-toothed monster. The wet-looking eyes followed him, the creature's tail whisked back and forth viciously, but it made no other move.

The Vulcan's hands touched the armored scales. "My mind to your mind," Spock murmured. "My thoughts to your thoughts."

Then he screamed.

The security men brought up their weapons, but Spock held up a hand. He had fallen to his knees, but his hand still was in contact with the hideous creature. "No!" he said.

The Vulcan got shakily to his feet and stood there for a long moment, then stepped back. The creature lifted a clawed arm, then vanished.

Nakashima blinked. "Sir, what—"

The nine archaeologists popped into view with a soft poof of displaced air. They groaned, and Spock ordered them beamed up at once. He turned to the still-staring young lieutenant.

"Mister Nakashima, your evaluation."

"Sir, it . . . What you did . . . I . . ."

"I performed the logical action, Mister Nakashima. I contacted the opposition. What you saw was the last living Vardan—or Lassfapan, in their language. It is old and dying. The scientists were . . . pets. I persuaded the creature to release them. But there is a task for you, Lieutenant." Nakashima raised his eyebrows. "You will bring down a molecular transceiver, then transfer all nonclassified material in the ship's library."

“But why, sir?”

“The Lassfapan likes to read, Lieutenant; don’t you? Be certain that you include the greatest of Vulcan books, the *Doon-par-tak-nor*. I think it would especially like that; I always did.”

“Yes, sir,” Nakashima said.

“Oh, and the rules for that ancient Terran game, Dungeons and Dragons. I think it might be appropriate.”

END



Jim Kirk seemed to be floating for hours in a bath of intense pain. Everything hurt, from his hair to his bones. Then, just as suddenly, he was free of pain. He lay panting on the cold, dry stone. Several of the dropped lights sent shadows crazily over the walls.

The Guardian glowed dully as Kirk sat up, dazed. His head ached, but it was a fading pain. "Why didn't you kill me?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

... not ... right ... you ... no ... harm ...

Kirk got shakily to his feet. He felt as if he had been ill for months. "Why did you spare me? Why didn't you put me against the wall and amuse yourself with my mind as you did the scientists you captured?"

For a moment the Guardian did not answer. Then it spoke in his head, and Kirk thought he detected a sadness in its telepathic message of flat, slow words.

... you ... command ... you ... are ... responsible ... you ... are ... needed ...

"Was that part of your programming?" Kirk asked.

... no ... it ... is ... something ... I ... learned ... responsibility ... is ... taken ... not ... given ...

"And you are responsible for this place?" Kirk said, indicating the dark caverns. "What if I . . . what if I give you something to relieve the boredom?"

. . . yes . . .

Kirk smiled. "I'll have the gift beamed down. I think—" Kirk smiled. "I think you'll find my gift endlessly fascinating."

. . . yes . . .

Leaving the transporter room, Captain Kirk thumbed a wall switch. "Bridge."

"*Bridge here, Captain,*" Uhura responded.

"Commander Uhura, that litter of kittens you keep hidden in your cabin—"

"*Captain, how did you—*"

"That's my job, Uhura. Would you be willing to part with three or four of them, in the interests of relieving boredom?"

"*Captain, I didn't know you were a cat person.*"

"It's a gift, Uhura, to one very bored Guardian. The pick of the litter, mind you. Bring them to the transporter room."

"*Aye, sir,*" she said with a smile in her voice.

END

Ensign Larek ran as hard as she could, outdistancing the two security men sent with her. Her flashlight bobbed erratically as she ran. Her idea was that the jamming device must be close to the other Klingon machinery, but what she found as she came to the big room was Commander Montgomery Scott being held by two burly Klingons while a third held a knife to his throat.

“You heathen scum!” Scott said defiantly. “I found what you’re up to here! Mind spores!”

“Exactly, human. Two of them in a planet’s atmosphere and within a day or two . . .” He laughed nastily. “The planet’s population has only half the brain power and are suitable for slaves!”

“You did it here, closer to the inner Federation planets, because they spoil so easily,” Scott said.

The Klingon laughed. “I should feed one to you, human, but I don’t have time. The first ship will arrive within a day. No, I’ll just cut your throat and—”

Larek thumbed her phaser to “kill” and sent a shower of shots into the machinery. Then she moved it back to “stun” as the angry Klingons turned. Commander Scott kicked the feet out from under one who still held him, and gave him a right cross to the chin.

It was Larek's excellent shooting that downed the others. She ran out. "Are there more?" she snapped.

Scott shook his head. "No, it's an automated factory. Chekov and the others," he pointed, "are down that way. The Klingons were going to test the first mind spores on them."

Larek shivered. "And the jamming station?"

"Down there, too, I imagine. But first I must destroy—totally destroy—this factory." He picked up his phaser from the unconscious Klingon leader. This was one time the destruction of machinery would please him.

END



Zaarek, the Klingon on the viewscreen, looked wild with frustration and anger. "Those are renegades!" he snarled unconvincingly. "The Klingon Empire does not violate treaties!"

Kirk smiled. He had shown the glowering Klingons in the brig to the commander of the Klingon vessel that had come out of warp drive only moments before.

"Then why did you come here?" Kirk asked, almost sweetly.

"To . . . to . . . to answer a distress call!"

"I'm certain they will take that into consideration at your court-martial, Commander Zaarek."

"My court-martial?" His eyes flared in anger.

"Yes, I believe the Klingon high command does not care for frustration of their plans. You are free to go," Kirk said airily. His gaze shifted to Spock, who nodded slightly.

"Oh, Commander," Kirk said casually, as he saw Spock's finger depress a button. A single powerful beam overcame the shields of the Klingon ship. A Klingon officer had quickly given the secret setting codes when Kirk had suggested casually that the Vulcan mind meld would drain the Klingon of all memory, leaving him a vegetable.

"You forgot something," Kirk smiled, talking to the Klingons as all six captured enemy were transported aboard, direct to their bridge.

On the viewscreen, they saw the Klingon commander glaring at the shimmering forms of the disgraced Klingons appearing. Growling, he abruptly broke contact.

Kirk sighed. "I feel rather sorry for them. They will suffer more at Klingon hands than at ours." He looked at Spock. "Too bad we can't use that decoding setting again sometime, but I imagine they'll be resetting them all through the Klingon fleet."

"At considerable expense and discomfort," Spock responded.

"Couldn't happen to a nicer bunch of blood-thirsty villains," Kirk said. "Mister Sulu, set course for Starbase Six."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The *Enterprise* swung into course, then the stars blurred and ran like water as the great Federation ship went into warp drive.

END

“Congratulations, Scotty,” Kirk said happily.

“May I add my congratulations as well, Commander Scott,” Mister Spock said.

“Are all the spores destroyed?” Dr. McCoy asked, looking around at the smoldering ruins of the Klingon factory.

“Aye, every one. I made certain of that,” Scott said. “I’ve no wish to halve my mind, Doctor; I have precious little as it is.”

“Chekov and the scientists, they’re all right?” Kirk asked McCoy.

“Just fine, Jim. Just the usual headaches after being hit by phasers on ‘stun.’ Do you know, those Klingons were going to use them as test subjects?”

“Yes, Bones, typical Klingon ruthlessness.” He flipped open his communicator. “Mister Sulu, beam us up!”

END

"I'll take the conn, Mister Sulu," Admiral Kirk said, dropping wearily into his command chair.

"Aye, aye, sir." Sulu looked his superior over critically. "Pardon me, sir, but are you all right?"

"A headache, Mister Sulu, the great mother of all headaches. And a few scrapes and scratches." He grinned lopsidedly. "And a vast delight in being alive."

Kirk thumbed a stud. "Sick bay. Doctor McCoy, report."

"Everyone's all right, Jim, or will be, with a little rest. You'd better report in here, too."

Kirk sighed. "I'm fine, Bones. I'm just where I should be. I take it the archaeologists would not mind a trip to Starbase Six?"

"Mind it? They'll love it. They think they've been on Varda III for half their lives!"

"Very well, Kirk out. Mister Sulu, Starbase Six."

"Aye, sir."

Admiral James T. Kirk settled back in his chair, his eyes on the screen that showed the vastness of space and the millions of stars, and felt sad.

I'll never visit them all, he thought. Then he grinned. But I can try.

END

Captain Kirk stepped down from the transporter disk rubbing his temples. He saw several of his officers waiting for him, anxiety on their faces, and he forced a weak smile to his face. "And what is this reception committee, Lieutenant Nakashima?"

The young officer looked nervous. "Sir, we, uh, we were worried about you."

Kirk's smile widened. "Really, Mister Nakashima? Such a lack of faith."

"A lack of faith?" exclaimed Ensign Gottlieb incredulously.

Kirk nodded. "That's why they pay me the big bucks, Ensign, to come through."

Ensign Larek spoke up. "Sir, I cannot believe you are a Federation officer for the *pay!*"

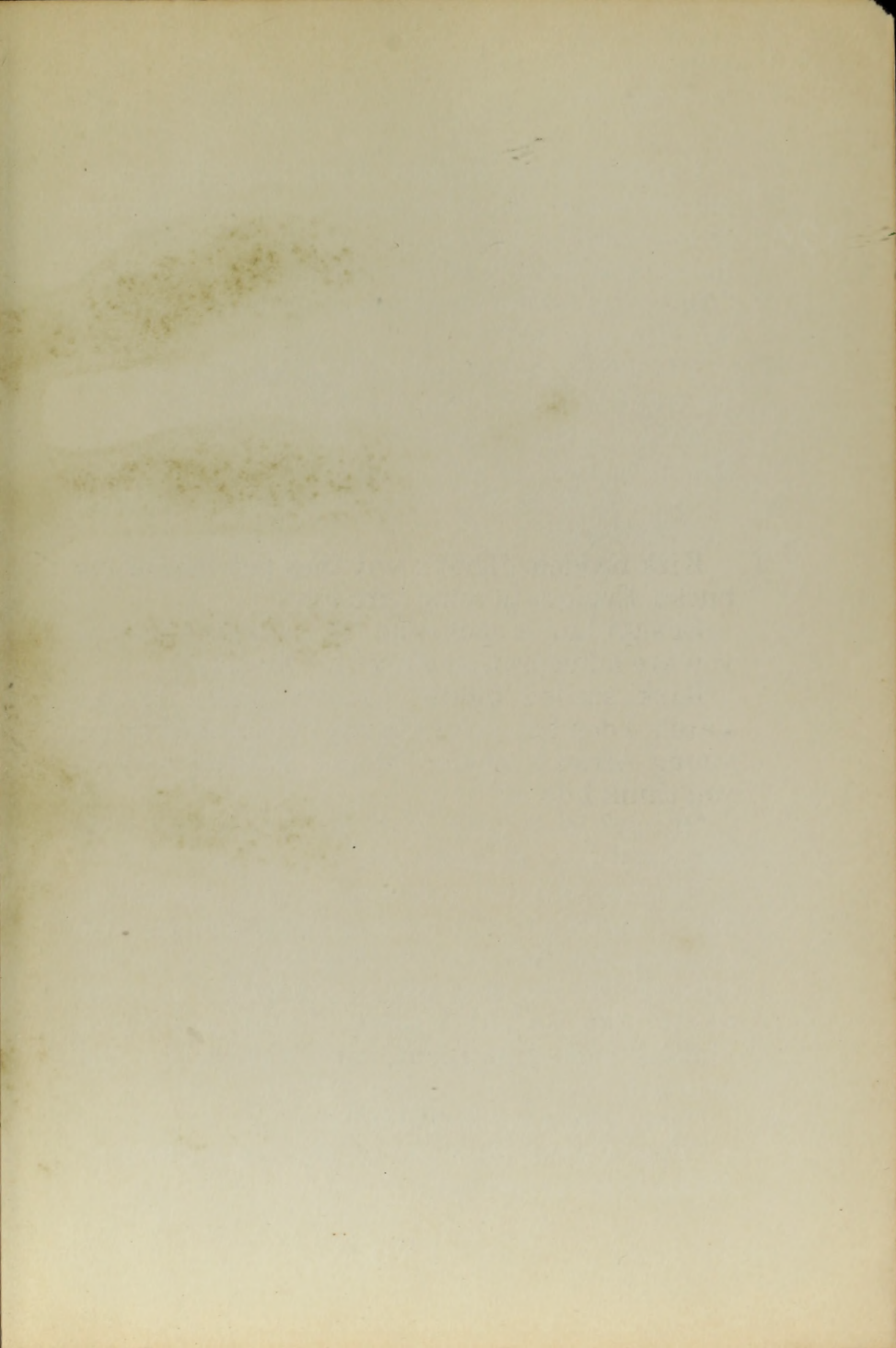
Kirk smiled again. "You're right, Mister Larek, I don't do it for the pay." He looked at the young African medic. "Mister Moktar, why do you think I do it?"

"It, sir? Risk your life?" Her smile was wide and brilliant. "Because you love it, sir."

"Mister Moktar, you are far too perceptive. You'll make all your commanders nervous." He stepped into the turbolift, then turned to face his officers. "By the way, you all did well. I'm proud of you." The turbolift doors slid shut, and Narva Moktar looked at Lieutenant Nakashima and grinned.

"Hey, that's not bad at all."

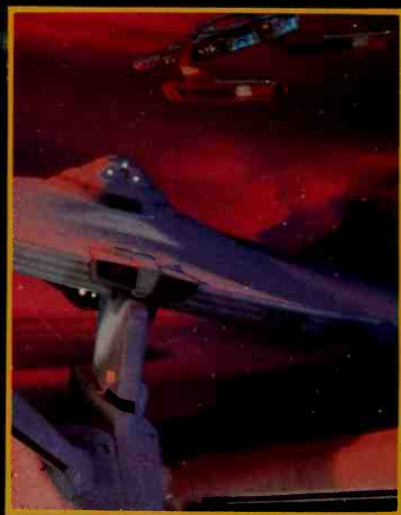
"That's what they pay us the big bucks for," Nakashima answered.



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