

The Abode of Life

by

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Printed in the U.s.a. TO CAROLYN AND
LEW

"May I call to your attention,
Captain, that our present course takes
us disturbingly near the reported gravitational
turbulence reported

by Federation ships in this sector of the Orion Arm?" As usual, Spock was both punctilious and logically correct in his assessment of the situation. Captain James T. Kirk turned in his command seat and glanced at where his Vulcan First Officer was looking at him from the navigation station of the Bridge of the USS Enterprise. Kirk smiled. "I am, Mister Spock. May I call to your attention the fact that Star Fleet Command sent the Enterprise out here to investigate that reported gravitational turbulence?" He looked thoughtful for a moment, then added, "I was told it would be an easy, straightforward scientific exploration mission to make up for the fact that we've seen more than our share of Klingons lately"

"I was present at the mission briefing, Captain," Spock reminded him.

"Then why the note of caution?" Kirk wanted

to know. "Probably,"
said Doctor Leonard "Bones" McCoy as
he stepped onto the Bridge
from the turbolift, "because our Science Officer
needs to inject a bit
of
speculative hazard into a mission that's turned
out to be nothing but
a boring tour of largely uncharted space. As a
respite from continual
action, this RandR scientific exploration
mission's driving your crew
batty, Jim." "I'll second that," Sulu
remarked from the helm.
"We've held the same heading now for seven
watches"
Kirk smiled. His people needed the rest and relaxation
they termed
"boredom." It had been a rough tour out on the
edge of the Organian
Treaty Zone. Not even a month of shore leave
on Starbase 4 had
eliminated his own fatigue. And he was certain the
rest of the crew
was no better off than he. Kirk had actually
looked forward to

their current mission: cruising along the inner edge
of the Orion
Arm, taking data. They were far from Kfingons and
Romulans. His
crew needed the break that a purely scientific
measurement and
charting mission would involve. "Be that as it may,
steady as she
goes, Mister Sulu," Kirk gently told his
helmsman. "And don't get
too lax. I might become difficult and pull
an emergency phaser
drill to keep you on your toes." "The crew would
welcome it," McCoy
said. "Jim, I know we've had some difficult
missions recently, but
this crew thrives on such things. Give them a
long and uneventful
assignment such as this, and they'll go soft on you."
"That I
doubt," the Captain of the Enterprise
said. "Lieutenant Uhura, you
don't seem to be bored." Uhura removed the
receiver unit from her
ear and smiled at her commanding officer, a definite

breach of her

usual efficient Bridge behavior.

"Actually, Captain, handling

routine communications has been a welcome

change. My division needs

to regain its proficiency in handling standard,

normal procedures

again. And do you realize I haven't had to open a

hailing frequency

even once since we left Starbase Four?"

Kirk chuckled at that,

remembering the one time his

comm officer almost broke under stress and complained

about incessant

and repeated opening of hailing frequencies. "Quite

seriously,

Captain," Spock persisted, "we are

penetrating totally unexplored

space where we are not precisely certain of the

shape of space

caused by gravitational anomalies. The data

returned by the Scout Ship

Phoenix were quite incomplete because they did not

penetrate as closely to

the edge of the arm as our course has already taken

us."

Kirk sensed that something was bothering Spock.

"What seems to be the basis

for your concern, Spock? You didn't appear to be
disturbed during the

mission briefing at Starbase Four.

Explain."

"I had insufficient time to thoroughly study the
data during that briefing,

which was exactly as its name implied: brief. In
fact, too brief in

relationship to the possible hazards we might
face," Spock explained. He

turned to the library computer console and called up
an image of the

galactic sector in which the Enterprise was
currently operating. Kirk rose

from his seat and came over to Spock's side to get
a better view of what

his Science Officer was trying to explain.

He found that McCoy was at his

side as well.

Projected on the screen was the known galactic
region from Mark 10D to Mark

25D. The computer image of the Enterprise was

shown skirting the inner edge
of the Orion Arm about 10 kiloparsecs from
Starbase 4. Spock didn't bother
to use the electronic cursor to point to what he
was talking about; he
merely used one of his long Vulcan fingers. "As
we already know from our
extensive experience in crossing the void between the
Orion Arm and the
outer Perseus Arm of the Galaxy, there's usually
considerable gravitational
turbulence at the edges of galactic spiral
arms. This turbulence is
analogous to that which one would see when mixing a
granular material with
a liquid using a circular motion."

"Analogous, but not the same, because analogies
never bear a one-to-one relationship with the real
universe," Kirk pointed
out.

"True. However, the Federation has charted the
zones of maximum
gravitational turbulence in the rift void between
Starbases One, Ten, and
Eleven and the Outpost Colonies at the edge of the
Romulan Treaty Zone . .

. and traffic consisting of both Star Fleet and commercial vessels

carefully avoids these zones. There's no acceptable theory concerning the gravitational turbulence on the edges of galactic arms at this time.

However, I suspect that such turbulence is caused by the fact that, unlike stellar motions in the galactic arms themselves, stellar motions at the edge of the galactic arms are almost random in nature. In turn, this would produce interacting gravitational fields which, essentially, distort the fabric of space itself." Spock turned to his Captain and added, "Of course, this verbal description is extremely imprecise because of the semantic illogic of our language. I've not yet been able to formulate a logical mathematical model of this hypothesis, but I'd be happy to show you the mathematical model that I've managed to derive thus far, imprecise as it may be at this time

his

Kirk held up his hand. "Spare me, Spock.

When it comes to field tensors and

translational dynamic matrices, I struggled

through them at the Academy and

understand them. But when you can get your hypothesis

into such a shape

that you can explain it in the imprecise words of

language, it means you've

got your hooks into it."

"I beg your pardon?" Spock put in,

raising one eyebrow.

"I think what the Captain's trying to tell you,

Spock, is that words

sometimes convey a more meaningful explanation of the real

world than

mathematics," McCoy said with the usual

cynical tone in his voice that

arose when he confronted the logical

Vulcan on such matters. "A long time

ago, I learned that mathematics

will tell you only the logical consequences of your

initial assumptions . .

. and since assumptions are rarely logical, the

mathematical results that

come from illogical assumptions are garbage."

Spock's other eyebrow went up. "Doctor,
I see no reason for you to insult
me. I fully realize that you prefer to protect
the image of your medical
art as an arcane activity not subject to the
logic of science, but there
are some aspects of the universe quite logically
predictable by means of
mathematics Otherwise, we'd be unable
to navigate anywhere in space."

"Gentlemen," Kirk broke into what was
obviously growing into another basic
philosophical confrontation between his Science
Officer and his Medical
Officer, "shall we confine such discussions to the ward
room, please?"

Spock, what are you really trying to tell me?
Speculate if you have to. But
specify." It came out as an order.

Spock reacted suitably. "If we continue
on our present heading, we have
once chance in three hundred
sixty-four-point-six-seven of entering a
sector of highly warped space caused by this
gravitational turbulence. I

cannot predict the consequences."

"As I told you, speculate," Kirk snapped.

"Space may be warped or even folded by gravitational turbulence. We probably wouldn't be able to detect such a folding until we'd crossed it, because our sensors aren't optimized for such work. It would've been more logical for Star Fleet Command to send a properly equipped exploration ship out here instead of a heavy cruiser such as the Enterprise. However, I realize that one does not argue with Star Fleet Command. Because we couldn't detect such a fold in space, we could end up crossing a "discontinuity" that might transport this ship over very large distances in unknown directions. And it might be very uncomfortable. I'd venture to predict that it might overstress the structure of the ship

his

"And with no advance warning?" Kirk wanted to know.

"Perhaps some indications. As we grow nearer to the

zone of greatest

turbulence, we could expect to experience some effects."

"Such as?"

The whole structure of the Enterprise suddenly bucked, shuddered, then steadied again. It was enough to throw McCoy to the deck, but both Spock and Kirk managed to grab the console and the bridge rail respectively.

"Such as that, Captain. Only much worse."

Kirk was back at his command seat immediately.

"Sections report. Damage?"

Uhura's calm and professional reply came at once over the chatter of intership communications from all departments.

"Negative damage, Captain.

A few people shaken up."

"Helm and navigation, negative damage,"

Sulu reported. "Holding course."

McCoy was on his way to the turbolift.

"They'll need me in Sick Bay," he muttered, and was gone.

Scotty's voice chimed in over the intercom,

"Negative damage in

Engineering, Captain. But that was a horrendous jolt! Did we ram something?

Or was it a pothole in the road to the stars?"

"I don't know, Scotty!" Kirk shot back. "Stand by. Steady as she goes, everyone." He turned to Spock. "Well, Mister Spock?"

Spock was busy at his library computer console, peering into the hooded viewer. "As I suspected, Captain. A gravitational anomaly due to interstellar turbulence."

"An anomaly strong enough to affect a ship of the size of the Enterprise cruising at Warp Factor Four?"

"Affirmative, Captain. And more to come if we follow this course," Spock warned him. "The Phoenix data are somewhat out-of-date since the stars and the turbulence vortex centers seem to have shifted since they probed this area several years ago. I'd suggest extreme prudence in proceeding further, Captain. I can't predict what we'll encounter in the way of space strains."

When Kirk had to make a decision, he could make one fast. "Sulu, reduce speed to Warp Factor Two, same course. Mister Spock, sensors at maximum sensitivity and range. We'll continue, since it's our mission to explore these gravitational anomalies and chart them if possible. Other ships will follow in our track because this sector of the Federation's territory has yet to be explored and opened to colonization. Lieutenant Uhura, Yellow Alert, please. And have Mister Spock prepare a data dump for transmission to Starbase Four." What Kirk did not add to this was that the data transmission to Starbase 4 was a hedge against the Enterprise running into trouble further along. Under such conditions, the data would at least get back to Star Fleet Command, where it would be available to others.

He punched a control on the arm of his seat.

"All hands, this is the Captain," he announced, his voice ringing through the

passageways and
compartments of the ship. "As you're all aware,
we're on a scientific
exploration mission that has a good chance of holding
surprises such as the
one we just encountered. That was only a mild
gravitational anomaly,
something we were sent out here to chart. There will be others
to come. And
it's likely to be a bit bouncy. Please
secure all frangible materials and
fixtures. And be prepared for sudden jolts.
We're proceeding at reduced
Warp Factor to minimize any future
shocks. Carry on."

He punched off the circuit and looked
around the Bridge. They were a good
crew. Each of them was busy at his post, doing
what was required with a
cool and professional efficiency. "Mister
Spock, will you put on the main
screen the computer analysis of space strains
ahead based on gravitational
sensor findings, please? And steady as she goes,
Mister Sulu"

Captain's Log: Stardate 5064.4

What started out as a re/l scientific mission

has

turned into one with some danger associated with

it as I should have suspected. Any time we ven

ture into uncharted sectors of the Galaxy, we

must

anticipate and be prepared for the unexpected. In

this case, we knew the gravitational anomalies

were here, and they've been one of the basic

reasons why the Federation hasn't established out

posts, colonies, or Starbases across the

interarm

void in the Sagittarius Arm. We haven't

encoun

tered any further gravitational

anomalies, but we'll

proceed with care, approaching the inner edge of

the Orion Arm gradually, taking data as we

go. In

a way, this possible hazard benefits my crew

be

cause they were beginning to become bored and

restless with routine. Because this new hazard

involves the Enterprise against the universe rather

than against hostile life forms such as Klingons,

Romulans, and others that we've encountered in the past, it's indeed a form of "relaxation" for us because it's different and allows us to pit our minds against the forces of nature rather than against the forces of alien life forms. Naturally, this is probably

most exciting to Mister Spock, who's been engaged in an almost compulsive display of continuing work with the sensors and the ship's computer, taking and evaluating data with what is for Spock an almost feverish intensity of effort.

It's been more than ten watches since he's left his post

on the Bridge. Doctor McCoy seems unworried about this continued activity on Spock's part, advising me that Vulcans often show the capability

to work for long periods of time without what we would consider to be "rest," especially when the activity involves such logical and cerebral work as

Spock is now engrossed in.

There were a few more jolts, none greater than the first that had shaken

the Enterprise. The crew was almost beginning to get used to them. The first jolt had sent seven crew members to Sick Bay with bruises, cuts, and contusions. The second one caught only two people unprepared. After that, the shocks seemed to become part of the ship's routine, a sudden and unexpected happening that served to keep people on their toes and alert.

Spock was recording and analyzing copious amounts of data. A continuous series of data-dump messages went out over subspace radio to Starbase 4, an activity that kept Uhura busy.

Things had almost settled down to routine again as the Enterprise cruised along the inner edge of the Orion Arm. On one side of her, toward the Orion Arm, the sky was full of stars, while on the other there was but a band of wan light from the millions of stars of the Sagittarius Arm across the 800 parsecs of the interarm void.

Then it happened.

Kirk was resting in his quarters when the wall opposite his bunk appeared to shimmer and wave as if it had been made from gelatin. He felt a burst of nausea pass through his body such as he'd once experienced when he'd been through a transporter that was badly out of phase. The next thing he knew, he was flattened to the overhead, then dropped roughly back into his bed with a thump that caused the bunk supports to complain with a groan of stressed material. There were other noises that accompanied this severe overload of the ship's gravitational-field generators, noises from both the ship and the crew that penetrated the bulkheads of his cabin. Groggily, sick to his stomach, and very much shaken, he rolled to the floor and managed to stand up. He slammed his palm down on the wall intercom switch.

"Bridge, this is the Captain. Report!"

The intercom was dead.

Only then did Kirk realize that the emergency lighting was now on. He

staggered as the ship's internal field struggled
to reestablish itself
again. When he got to the door to his cabin, it
wouldn't open; he smashed
the emergency latch cover and opened it manually.

The ship's corridors were full of moans,
cries of pain, and screams of
anguish. Kirk shut them out of his mind; he
couldn't stop to help any of
his crew right then; he had to get to the Bridge.

The paramedic crews from
McCoy's department would be along soon to take
care of the injured. Kirk
had the entire ship to worry about.

The turbolifts were not operating, so Kirk
resorted to the companionways
and gangways. It had been a long time since
he'd entered the Bridge through
the emergency doors, which he had to operate
manually. What he found when
he stepped onto the Bridge was disarray.

Sulu was sprawled on the floor beside his post.
Uhura was also injured,
holding her elbows and trying vainly and
valiantly to respond to distress

signals and calls coming into her station from all over the ship. Spock had taken over Sulu's post next to a battered Ensign Chekov, who was bleeding from a deep cut across his forehead. Scotty, with his uniform tunic torn, was desperately working at the engineering station.

Kirk knelt next to Sulu momentarily, only long enough to learn that his helmsman was still breathing. Then he snapped to Spock, "Report."

"Extreme gravitational anomaly," Spock managed to get out. "Actually, a 'fold' in the fabric of space, so to speak.

There was no way to tell that it was coming, because we have no sensors that can detect such a thing."

"Injuries?"

"We don't know. The ship's fields went down momentarily, actually reversed themselves, then came back. Communications are out in some sectors of the ship," Spock fired back.

"Uhura." Kirk got to her side. "Anything broken? Are you badly hurt?"

"I . . . I hit the ceiling," she mumbled.

"When I came back down, I landed
on both elbows. I wasn't ready for it . . .
or I would've relaxed and
rolled with it I don't know if anything's
broken My arms just
hurt terribly"

Kirk punched a button on her panel.

"Sick Bay, this is the Bridge. McCoy?"

"Jim, I'll have a team up there just as quickly as
I can," McCoy's harried

voice came back. "There're injuries all
over the ship." And the circuit was
cut from the other end.

Kirk did not react to this curt reply from his
medical officer. He knew
that McCoy was under terrific pressure at the
moment. There'd be a
paramedic team to the Bridge as soon as
McCoy could get things organized.

Yeoman Rand appeared through the emergency exit
of the Bridge. She was
disheveled but apparently unhurt. "Yeoman,
are you all right?" Kirk wanted
to know.

"Yes, sir. I thought I would be needed most

here," Janice Rand replied.

"You are indeed. Take over emergency medical aid to Uhura, then Chekov, then Sulu," Kirk ordered. He turned to Scotty, knowing that Janice Rand would handle the Bridge-crew injuries without further attention from him.

"Scotty, engineering status report," Kirk snapped.

The engineer was shaking his head sadly as he took reports coming in from his engineering department. "Minor damage to the ship's structure, Captain.

We have life support, impulse power, and one warp drive unit functioning.

There's considerable damage to the second warp drive unit, the full extent of which I dinna know yet."

"Can we make warp speed?" Kirk wanted to know.

"Aye, but with only one unit, the best I can give ye is Warp Factor "I backslash vo

. . . and that's full-out with the good unit wide open

. . . and subject to

possible breakdown, since I haven't had the chance to check for possible

damage there," the Engineering Officer replied, not looking up from the engineering consoles.

"Mister Chekov, take the helm," Kirk ordered. "All engines stop. Let her drift in space until we find out where we are.

Mister Spock, give me a position. Where are we?"

Spock moved from the helm and walked back to his library computer console.

Kirk joined him, watching his first officer bring systems back on line and check them out. "Captain, the Stellar Inertial

Navigation System has completely lost alignment. We still have the galactic time base pulse in operation, and the course record and data banks

appear to be secure. I may be able to reconstruct what happened. But as you can see, the course-record data bank indicates a major discontinuity."

"Which means that somehow the Enterprise has jumped through normal space,"

Kirk added.

"Quite correct. As I pointed out earlier, the

gravitational anomalies in
this area could create what amounts to a fold in 'the
fabric of space,' the
Vulcan continued. "According to the data here, that is
exactly what has
happened. We were thrown across such a fold in
space, caused by an
extremely strong gravitational anomaly, almost
like jumping through a black
hole or Dirac discontinuity."
"Spare me the theory, Mister Spock.
Right now, I need to know where we
are," Kirk told his First Officer, his first
thoughts being of the ship and
its crew. "We can run over the theory later when
we know where we are and
where we're going."
"I'll put a visual panoramic scan on
the main screen," Spock remarked. He
then addressed the ship's computer in the verbal command
mode, "Computer,
scan and analyze the visual, ultraviolet,
and X-ray spectra of the stars in
the panoramic sensor scan. Match and
identify any known star groups and give
me a hard copy printout of same. Store the

data for possible use in

realigning the SINS."

"Working," the computer's vocoder-created female voice replied tonelessly.

Kirk turned to watch the scan on the screen.

"Let's have full magnification

and image intensification, Mister Spock. It

doesn't look like there are any

stars out there at all."

And there weren't.

At full intensity, the best the scanners could

pick up was the faint band

of light emanating from the stars in the galactic

plane.

"Reporting," the ship's computer voice said.

"No known star groupings are

recognized. Further instructions, please."

"Computer, run analyses of selected star

groups assuming a ship

displacement of several hundred parsecs toward the

center of the Galaxy and

adjusting stellar parallax accordingly," Spock

ordered.

"Working."

"Are we still in the Galaxy, Mister Spock?"

Kirk wanted to know.

"Affirmative. I have the Shapley Center identified," Spock remarked, gazing into the hooded viewer of the library computer console.

"But there's considerable interstellar dust along the plane of the Galaxy. Therefore,

I'm having great difficulty identifying any known star groups. I'll need at least two recognizable stellar reference points in addition to the Shapley Center before we can realign the SINS."

"But where in the Galaxy are we?"

"I can't give you a precise answer yet, Captain."

"Speculate, then."

"Very well. We jumped an estimated distance of about three hundred parsecs, and we appear to be in the void between the Orion and Sagittarius Arms.

This is totally unknown and unexplored space, Captain. I can't locate a single individual star at this time."

Yeoman Janice Rand stepped up to Kirk and reported, "Sir, I've stopped the

bleeding from the cut on Mister Chekov's forehead,
and Lieutenant Uhura's
arms appear to be only bruised, not broken. I
gave her a mild analgesic
injection into each forearm. That will ease the pain
until Doctor McCoy can
make a professional examination. But we'll have
to get Mister Sulu to Sick
Bay as quickly as we can get a medical
team up here."

"How about it, Lieutenant?" Kirk asked
gently. "Can you continue to run
your post temporarily?"

"Yes, sir. I hurt, but not badly enough to ask
to be relieved."

"Good. First, raise Starbase Four and report
what's happened. Then get me
a summary of internal damage and injury
reports."

"Right away, sir." Although Uhura's face
showed that she was indeed
injured, she stuck to her post, inserted the receiver in
her ear, and began
to attempt to communicate with Starbase 4.

"Three hundred parsecs," Kirk mused, doing

the calculations in his head.

"That's a long trip at Warp Factor

'Itvo"

"One hundred twenty-two-point-two-five

real-time years, to be precise,

Captain," Spock put in.

"And that's just to get out of this void and back into the

Orion Arm,"

James T. Kirk added. "Scotty,

we've got to get that warp drive unit

repaired and back on line."

"Aye." The Engineering Officer nodded. "We

can't crawl across the galaxy

with only one unit working. We'll all be old and

gray by the time we get

back to Starbase Four."

"What will it take to fix the warp drive unit?"

Kirk wanted to know.

"I canna tell ye yet," Scotty

replied. "My first priority is to make sure

that all internal systems are functioning, and

we've just about got

everything back now. I'll get to work examining the

warp drive unit. I'll

have an answer for ye shortly."

The doors to the turbolift swished open, and

Bones McCoy entered with a team of four paramedics.

"Well, it's about time," Ensign Chekov remarked.

"Half the crew injured, most of the turbolifts out, and you expect ambulance service?" McCoy snapped, obviously under pressure and rushed to a far greater extent than he liked. He looked around. "Who's hurt here?"

"Better get Sulu down to Sick Bay right away," Kirk pointed out. "And Uhura and Chekov both got banged up... McCoy was at Sulu's side at once, his medical sensor out and checking the Helm Officer. "You're right. He's got internal injuries. How about you, Uhura?"

The Communications Officer was busy at her console, and she didn't hear the doctor's question. McCoy walked over to examine her, and she seemed oblivious of him. Finally, she spoke to Kirk.

"Captain, I'm sorry, but I can't raise Starbase Four. In fact, I

can't raise anything on subspace frequencies, not even the usual data exchange buzz or the ship-to-ship channels. Nothing but Jansky noise and subspace whistles."

"Which means I'd better get busy on that drive unit or we'll be out here in the middle of nowhere forever," Scott remarked, heading for the turbolift.

"I'm going down to Engineering, Captain. I'll let you know the status of the other drive unit as quickly as I can." And he was gone.

Kirk looked at his First Officer. "Spock, I hope you can get that SINS unit aligned again. In the meantime, Mister Chekov, put the Shapley Center on our stern and hold a course directly away from it back toward the

Orion Arm. Make Warp Factor One. I don't want to overstrain our remaining warp drive unit." "Aye, aye, sir."

Captain's Log, supplemental

We are limping back toward home, the Orion Arm of the Galaxy, at Warp Factor One. By random matrix techniques, Spock

and the ship's computer have located us approximately three hundred sixtyfive parsecs into the interarm void between the Orion and Sagittarius Arms at galactic coordinate Mark twenty-one-point-zero-one and a distance of approximately sixteen hundred parsecs from Starbase Four. This extreme distance, plus the presence of considerable interstellar dust along the galactic plane at the edge of the Orion Arm, explains Lieutenant Uhura's inability to raise Starbase Four on subspace radio. Commander Spock has managed to complete a rough realignment of the SINS, providing us with rudimentary navigational capability. Sensor probes out to the limit of range have located a few Population Two stars scattered through the interarm void, but we're not close enough to any of them to determine whether or not they possess planets And we're going to have to find a planet or a planetoid to orbit in order for Lieutenant

Commander Scott to effect repairs to our second warp drive unit, which is completely inoperable. In fact, its repair will require materials that Scott will have to extract from a material source in order to fabricate parts.

Without a second warp drive unit, we're doomed to crawl across the interarm void for perhaps years before we are able to get a distress signal to Federation facilities. On the other hand, the jump interrupted a data-dump transmission to Starbase Four, which means that Star Fleet Command knows the Enterprise is in trouble somewhere. We can only hope that a search-and-rescue mission will be dispatched, which is the reason why I've instructed Lieutenant Uhura to broadcast an assistance call on all Federation emergency frequencies. However, since we can't count on getting any help, we must do the best we can to save ourselves, because I will not abandon the Enterprise even if we happened to discover a habitable planet

but were unable to repair our warp drive. We'll
get home with our data . .

. and I will do everything I can to ensure that it
doesn't take forever to
do it

Most of the superficial damage had been
repaired, the injured had been
treated, but the Enterprise continued to limp along
at Warp Factor One with
all sensors operating at the extreme limits
of their ranges. Kirk spent
most of his time on the Bridge during the next
several watches. He couldn't
bring himself to admit the possibility of an
extremely long voyage back to
the charted and populated Orion Arm. It
wasn't his training but his
experience that gave him a totally nonlogical
gut feeling that something
was certain to happen to change the existing situation
for the better. He'd
been in too many tight spots and through too many
emergency situations. Not
only did he have to maintain a personal
appearance of hope for the morale

of his crew, but his own personal makeup wouldn't permit him to do otherwise.

He knew the only thing he could really count on was change.

Sooner or later, something was bound to turn up to alter the present predicament.

And it did.

It was Uhura who spotted it. "Captain," she remarked to him in the middle of the sixth watch since the jump, "I'm picking up something very strange."

Her fingers were delicately adjusting controls on her comm console. Anticipating her commander's question, she went on, "It's very weak, but it has all the characteristics of radiation from a transporter system . . . except it's

behaving as though it were a side-lobe transmission or even a suppressed carrier side-band . . . and it's continuous, not sporadic and intermittent as it would be if a single transporter were operating on sequential objects.

It's as though there were many transporters working almost

constantly . . .

."

Kirk had turned his seat to face her console.

"There isn't anything we know of in the Galaxy that puts out the characteristic transmission pattern of a transporter, is there, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. That's a very special scan and phase pattern."

"That's what I thought. It's not natural. Can you get a fix on it?"

"Affirmative, Captain. Shall I patch the data to the logic and integrating unit of the ship's computer as a sensor input?"

"Yes. Mister Chekov, man the library-computer position until Spock gets here," Kirk snapped. "Get us a course line on the source of that transporter radiation. If it's coming from the interarm void, it means somebody lives around here and uses transporters." He slapped the all-call switch on the arm of his seat. "Commander Spock, report to the Bridge on the double."

Chekov, plastiskin covering the gash on his forehead, was working the computer already. "I have a preliminary course line, Captain. The transporter radiation source appears to be coming from Bearing zero-seven, Mark ninety. No range data."

"Lieutenant Kyle," Kirk addressed the helmsman, "turn to Bearing zero-seven, Mark ninety. Put that source on our nose. Maintain Warp Factor One. That transporter-type radiation can be coming only from a nonnatural source, which means an intelligent life form somewhere nearby, which may mean an inhabited planet. And that means Scotty may be able to get our warp drive repaired. Uhura, Yellow Alert until we find out what or who is responsible for that transporter radiation."

"Lieutenant Uhura, you deserve a commendation," Kirk said as they watched the image of the planet grow on the screen.

"Thank you, Captain, but I didn't discover this planet. I merely noticed the unusual transporter signals coming from it,"

Uhura pointed out.

"Yes, but you didn't dismiss the data as spurious," Kirk reminded her.

"This star shouldn't be here, and should not have a single planet orbiting it."

Doctor McCoy, whose hard work over the past few days had patched up most of

the crew, merely watched from the side of Kirk's command seat but couldn't

refrain from commenting, "The universe is not only stranger than we think;

it is stranger than we can possibly imagine."

"I believe," Spock said from the library

computer console, "that your

statement was made back in the twentieth century,

Doctor"

"Probably," McCoy replied. "In my

experience, I've found very few ideas or

concepts that're original. Everybody seems

to reinvent the square wheel at

one time or another."

"Well, regardless of the philosophy,

gentlemen,

we've located a highly unusual situation,"

James Kirk observed. "And it'll likely permit us to save ourselves and get the Enterprise back into Federation territory."

"But we are in Federation territory, Captain," Sulu said. "The UFP Negotiated Exploration Treaty permits exploration out to 4750 parsecs from Sol, and we're certainly well within that boundary."

"I stand corrected, Mister Sulu. Amend my statement to read "explored" Federation territory." Kirk was relieved, and both his expression and mood showed it. The planet looming up on the screen looked too good to be true.

It had polar caps, a cloud-rifted atmosphere, abundant oceans, and several continents. It appeared to be Type M, terrestrial in nature, a rocky planet with water and an atmosphere. Spock had diverted his efforts from determining a precise location of the Enterprise because their newly discovered planet was becoming extremely interesting as the ship came

within range that permitted accurate sensor readings.

"How about it, Mister Spock? Any interesting data to report yet?"

Spock's head was buried in the hood of the library computer console.

However, he looked up, jotted a few notes on a pad, and turned to his

captain. "My survey is superficial, Captain, but I do have some preliminary data that are rather fascinating"

"Well, don't keep us in suspense, Spock," McCoy snapped.

Spock ignored the ship's doctor, or at least he gave the impression of so doing, which probably angered McCoy more than if

Spock had made some numbing, ultralogical retort. "The mean planetary diameter is nine thousand

seven hundred fifty kilometers, and its surface gravity appears to be seven-point-eight-four meters per second squared . . . or about

eight-tenths of a standard gee. I'll have better data once we establish

standard orbit. My preliminary data indicate the planet's in an orbit point-nine-three-seven-five astronomical units from its primary, with an orbital eccentricity of zero-point-nine-eight. Other data which are highly preliminary include an inclination of the spin axis to the orbital plane of only a bit more than twelve degrees. Length of its solar day is twenty-six hours, twelve minutes, and thirty-four seconds with a probable error of five-point-six-eight percent. I'd estimate the length of its year at three hundred eight days, four hours, and seventeen minutes with a probable error of plus or minus thirty-five minutes."

"Close enough for Federation work," Sulu mumbled to himself.

"Good." Kirk sounded excited. "Any atmospheric data yet?"

"Negative. I anticipate acquiring said data within an hour after achieving standard orbit."

"And what are all those numbers supposed to indicate?" McCoy wanted to know. "Spock, you're certainly capable of presenting an outstanding snow-job-was

"I beg your pardon?"

Kirk glanced at his ship's doctor, well aware of the rivalry between the highly logical and scientific First Officer and the pragmatic, emotional, and also scientific Medical Officer. "Snow doesn't exist on Vulcan," Kirk gently told the doctor. "Actually, the numbers are telling me a great deal, Bones, just as your biosensor numbers reveal the condition of your patient to you in Sick Bay. For example, take the diameter and the surface gravity.

The combination of the two tells me that it's a rocky planet, definitely

Type M, and the gravity's strong enough to hold atmospheric gases such as oxygen and nitrogen. Its distance from the star and the eccentricity of its orbit tell me that it's probably warm enough for

our use. There're polar
caps, oceans, and clouds. All of these
data combine to tell me that liquid
water and atmospheric water vapor exist. The
axial tilt-about half that of
Earth-also tells me that it
doesn't have pronounced seasons, so the polar
caps probably don't change
size. This also means reasonably mild
planetary weather. Do you agree with
my speculation, Mister Spock?"

Spock thought a moment. "Your conclusions may be
a bit hasty, Captain. In
general, I'd agree with you. It appears to be a
warm, comfortable planet
with abundant water, which probably means
luxurious plant growth . . .
which in turn means some sort of animallike
life to provide a balanced
ecology. Because of the large extent of the oceans which
serve as a heat
sink, I'd suspect that the general planetary
climate is very steady, with
no violent weather patterns. However-was
"However," Kirk broke in, "every time we come
upon a new planet, we find

out how little we really know about

planetology."

"Quite true, Captain. There's a disturbing

factor that I haven't

mentioned."

"And that is?"

"This is a Class G3 star, Captain, which is

very much like Sol. However, it

appears to possess the characteristics of an

irregular variable star."

"You mean it's likely to blow up on us?"

McCoy wanted to know.

"No, Doctor," Spock said with great

patience. "It

means the stellar constant its output of radiant

energy

and stellar particles from its thermonuclear

processes

is slightly unstable. It varies to an

as-yet-unknown

degree. I'm not certain at this time whether this star

will increase or decrease its output, and I'm

unaware of

the triggers that cause the change."

"In other words, Bones," Kirk remarked, "this

star has the hiccups."

"Well, it certainly couldn't be too unstable too often," McCoy pointed out, indicating the greens and browns of the continents as they appeared on the screen. "It'd burn or freeze everything right off the surface of that

"I suspect our landing parties are going to find some rather unusual flora and fauna that have adapted to these stellar changes," Spock pointed out.

Kirk nodded. "I agree. We've certainly made an outstanding discovery here . . . an isolated planet orbiting an irregular variable star in the interarm void. It'll undoubtedly provide the Federation with a good new facility on a trade route that'll eventually develop through the void to the Sagittarius Arm. While Scotty and his engineering gang work on the warp drive, we'll occupy our time with the most complete survey we can make of this place."

"There's another disturbing factor, Captain," Spock remarked.

"Well?"

"The transporter radiation."

Uhura piped in at this point. "The closer we get to the planet, the stronger the transporter radiation becomes. It's almost as though there's a planet-wide network of transporters working almost constantly down there.

There's no interruption of the signals. There's none of the phase and scan buildup we'd expect from the irregular transporter use here on the Enterprise. It almost reminds me of the nearly constant transporter activity around San Francisco and Star Fleet Headquarters on Earth."

Kirk thought about this for a moment, watching the image of the planet continue to grow on the screen as the Enterprise approached it. "Any signs of intelligent life, Spock?"

"Affirmative, sir: the transporter radiation."

"How about cities?"

"We're still too far out, Captain."

"Any communications activity in the electromagnetic or subspace spectra?"

"Negative, Captain," Uhura reported.

"I've been sweep-scanning from ten kiloHertz to a hundred gigaHertz in the electromagnetic spectrum and keeping very close watch on the subspace spectrum. There's

nothing, sir. No radiation at all. Just background noise from the star itself. If there's intelligent life down there using transporters, the absence of communication radiation is very unusual."

"Spock, do sensor scans detect any vehicles moving in the planet's atmosphere, or space vehicles operating beyond the atmosphere?"

"Negative, Captain."

"Why," Kirk thought aloud, "is there apparently intelligent life down there advanced enough to have transporter-type technology, but no communications activity and no space travel? What sort of a life form are we going to encounter that could develop on an extremely isolated planet around an

irregular variable star located several hundred parsecs from any other star?"

"As I believe the doctor mentioned earlier,"

Spock observed, "the universe is usually stranger than we can imagine."

"And the crew of the Enterprise should've learned that by now, shouldn't

we?" Kirk replied, standing up and looking over

Sulu's shoulder. "Mister

Sulu, please put our defensive screens up

in case whoever's on that planet

does indeed have some sort of space defense

system and decides to take a

potshot at us as an unannounced and unwelcomed

intruder into their

isolation. I'll not risk the ship in that regard.

And put your phaser crews

on standby alert. Assume standard orbit and

secure underway operations.

When we get a better picture of what's going

on down there, we'll organize

a landing party to beam down. In the meantime, Mister

Spock, continue your

planetary survey activity. We're going

to need all the data we can get
before we can beam down. There're a lot of questions that
I'd like to have
answered before we go down there because, above all, we
have to keep
General Order Number One clearly in mind
if we're dealing with an
intelligent species that's been this isolated .
..."

Captain's Log: Stardate 5067.7

The Enterprise has been in standard orbit around
this planet for four
watches. Sensor probes indicate the presence
of a wide variety of life
forms, but there's no visible transportation
activity on the planetary
surface below. There're no ships plying the
oceans, no aircraft in the
atmosphere, and no space-travel activity.
Yet we see evidence of farms,
villages, and even some cities-although I'd
hesitate to call them "cities"
as we know them. And there's no communications
activity in the
electromagnetic or subspace spectra.

Something lives on this planet, some

species that's advanced enough to develop transporter technology and the energy sources required to power such a system.

We haven't spotted the energy sources yet, either, although they might be passive solar types.

Both Lieutenant Commander Scott and Commander Spock believe that any culture possessing transporter technology would be able to assist us in the repair of the warp drive unit. If not, there're obviously mineral resources that Scott could use for raw materials to complete his repairs because he reports that the warp drive unit can't be repaired without fabricating new components . . . and we don't have them aboard.

Therefore, we're going to have to utilize the resources of this planet in one manner or another.

However-and I specifically want to go on record in this regard-I'm faced with a dilemma. If there's intelligent life on this planet-as there indeed seems to be, although they're ignoring us in

orbit-how are we going to make
contact with them and permit Scott to repair our
ship without violating the
Prime Directive?

On the other hand, we may find a sufficiently
advanced culture here that
we'll have to establish
preliminary diplomatic relations between the Fed-
eration and their political organizations.

This dilemma isn't firm. Spock's
acquired
enough data on the planet at this point to permit us
to take an initial landing party down to its
surface.

Therefore, I'm beaming down with the initial
landing party on the next orbit. This is the only
way

we can get the answers that we must have.

The landing party convened in the transporter room.

Kirk glanced at each of
them-Scotty, Bones McCoy, and Yeoman
Janice Rand. All had beamed down to
alien and possibly dangerous planets
before. They were professionals, and
they knew what they were doing. Kirk had left
Spock with the conn, and he

could therefore dismiss the welfare of the Enterprise from his mind and

concentrate on the job that had to be done: facing the unknown.

Lieutenant Kyle at the transporter controls was apprehensive. Sweat stood out on his forehead as he manipulated the controls.

"Captain, I'm having a lot of trouble selecting a suitable refmaterialization point for your party down there. The transporter traffic is terrific on the surface."

Scotty stepped over to assist him. "Lad, find a hole, lock on it, and beam us when you get phase lock," he told the young officer. "Since there's absolutely no communicator traffic down there, you should be able to lock on any of our communicators at any time to beam us back up. Keep your data channel to Lieutenant Uhura open."

"Do you see any problem with beaming us back up if necessary, Scotty?" Kirk wanted to know.

The engineer rejoined the landing party. "Negative,

Captain. I've trained

these people well; they'll be able to cut through to us all right."

"Very well." Kirk looked around at his party.

"Let's go. 99

They took their places on the transporter platform. "Energize," Kirk snapped.

Kyle hesitated, worked some controls.

"Well, mister?" Kirk asked the transporter officer.

"Looking for a suitable break in the traffic down there to get you through, sir. There it is! Energizing."

The landing party materialized in a beautiful gardenlike glade with a small pond fed by gurgling water from a brook. Trees arched overhead into a blue and cloudless sky. There were artifacts tastefully placed here and there-benches, seats, tables, and what appeared to be statuary.

Kirk found himself not three meters from a beautiful humanoid woman nearly a head taller than he. She was dressed in a loose-fitting short white tunic

belted at her thin waist. Hung over her shoulder on a baldric was a hand weapon that looked like a pistol. Although she was tall and slender almost to the point of being somewhat gangly, the alien woman was otherwise totally humanoid except for her golden bronze skin color.

She looked stunned as Kirk and the landing party materialized in front of her.

"Captain, look out!" Janice Rand cried.

And the landing party discovered that they had a welcoming committee of two others, apparently young males with similar dress and appearance to the woman.

Except that they were positioned on both sides of the landing party with hand weapons drawn and pointed at each other . . . and the landing party.

"Cover!" Kirk yelled quite unnecessarily, because the other three members of the landing party had already reacted according to their training.

Along

with Kirk, they dropped and rolled, bringing out hand phasers as they did so.

Two nearly simultaneous explosions from the humanoids' handguns shook the glade. There was the solid sound of a projectile hitting one of the trees, followed by the whistling of another projectile ricocheting off some surface to warble off into the distance.

White smoke having the smell of rotten eggs, the characteristic odor of exploded black gunpowder, filled the air.

By the time it cleared sufficiently, Kirk and his landing party were on their feet again, phasers out, and crouched in a position ready for action—all except McCoy, who had his tricorder out rather than his hand phaser.

There came a shout in an alien language from the woman, who withdrew her hand weapon very slowly, grasped what appeared to be the metal barrel, and proffered the complex breech and grip end toward Kirk.

The two young men followed suit, except that they

merely dropped their
weapons to the grass and extended their hands before them,
palms upward and
touching at the edges.

The actions of the three humanoid aliens were
obviously ones of surrender
and submission.

One of the young men said something in an unknown
language.

"Translators," Kirk ordered, clipping his
Universal Translator to the front
of his tunic. "Bones, they look humanoid.
How about it?"

"No question about it," McCoy replied, studying the
tricorder display. "But
the preliminary scan doesn't match with any of the
other known galactic
humanoid species. First guess is that they're
as similar to humans as
Romulans are to Vulcans."

Kirk reached forward and carefully took the hand
weapon offered to him by
the humanoid woman while Scotty stooped
down to retrieve one of the
discharged weapons. Kirk had no time to do more than

glance at the weapon

he held, but his Academy training and familiarity with hand weapons, both ancient and modern, told him a great deal from that quick glance.

The weapon was a pistol with a short, unrifled barrel

having a bore approximately fifteen millimeters in diameter. It was fired by a percussion hammer, and Kirk could see no means for semiautomatic operation. It was single-shot and breech-loading.

The really strange thing about it was its total lack of any sighting mechanisms-no front blade or pin sight, and no rear notch or peep sights.

There was no way to accurately aim the weapon.

"Well, Proctors, aren't you going to take us?" one of the young men said, his words being rendered understandable by Kirk's Translator.

"Orun, I told you the Proctors had discovered our link with the Technic," the young woman snapped. "But, no, you and Othol had to get into an affair of honor instead!"

"Othol implied I'd broken faith with the
Technic," one of the young men
replied angrily. Surprisingly, he was even
taller than the woman or the
other young man, and he wore a bright green cloth
headband rather than the
yellow one of the other male to hold back his long
black hair. "I had no
recourse under the Code but to seek satisfaction
. . . which has been
carried out."

"Yes, but the cost!" the young woman said. "The
Proctors have taken us."

"Hold on," Kirk broke in. "We're not
"Proctors." We're visitors."

The shorter of the two men, the one called Othol,
looked very suspicious at
this remark. "Visitors? From where? You don't
look like us. You don't dress
like others we know. And your equipment is different.
You must therefore be
a specially bred unit of Proctors." He
offered his hands, palms up and
wrists together. "So, go ahead and take us,
Proctors."

"We are not Proctors," Kirk repeated.

"We're visitors."

"How can that be possible?" Othol asked.

The young woman broke in at this point. "Othol, they may be right. Do you hear his strange words coming from his mouth, then familiar words coming of the device on his tunic? Do you see the equipment the woman and the other man have, some sort of unknown sensing device, probing us?"

"But where else could they come from?" Othol wanted to know. "This is the Abode of Life in the Universe. There is no other place, Delin."

"What's the name of this world?" Kirk suddenly asked.

"Mercan," was the sound that came from Delin, the woman.

"The Abode of Life," were the words that came from Kirk's Translator.

"Jim," McCoy put in, "it makes sense.

They have no moon, no other planets, only their star, and they can't see any other stars here, even on the darkest night. The concept of the inhabited galaxy

isn't part of their

thinking. When Spock analyzes this language,

I'll bet he finds there're no

words for "star" or "star flight" or

"astronomy." And if you haven't got

words for it, you don't think about it."

Naturally, McCoy's Translator stuttered

and voiced the Federation words

relating to astronomy as he spoke them; even the

simple Translator had

already determined through its programming that these

concepts didn't exist

in the structure of this new language.

Orun, the tall one, had been listening and now

spoke up. "Delin may be

right, Othol. Their speaking devices are something

I've never seen before,

and I'm aware of all of the advanced work

of the Technic. And the device

has just spoken our words mixed with words that have no

meaning. These

people can't be from the Abode of Life."

"Not from Mercan? Don't tell me that you

believe that new hypothesis of

Partan's that Mercan came from the Ribbon of

Night and that we didn't

originate here?" Othol fired back.

But Delin obviously didn't want to get into a

discussion at the moment. She

appeared to be worried about something. "You're not

Proctors?"

"We're come not Proctors," Kirk repeated.

"I'm Jim Kirk. This is Janice Rand."

The word "yeoman" wouldn't translate. "This is

medical expert Doctor McCoy.

And this is my Technician, Montgomery Scott.

We're visitors. We do indeed come

from the Ribbon of Night. We need assistance from

your Technician. In return

for your assistance, we may be able to offer you

valuable information for

your Technician." Kirk didn't yet fully

understand the social organization

they'd stepped into, but he was reasonably certain

that the "Technic" was

the organization of scientists and engineers, the ones

who'd developed and

built the transporter system in use on

Mercan. These tall, ectomorphic

humanoids were a golden find, and it was highly

probable that they were not

so primitive that they couldn't be brought into the Federation. Their lack of cosmological concepts bothered him, however, because such a thing could serve as a major stumbling block to acceptance by the Federation. In addition, it might mean that Kirk would be violating General Order Number One, the Prime Directive. In fact, he was well aware that he may have already done so.

"If you're not Proctors," Delin told him, "then you're in great danger from the Guardians. You must come with us at once. We were expecting Proctors and would have left here if Othol and Orun had not been required by the Code to seek redress because of an impolite remark. Come!"

There was the unmistakable ringing song of transporter materialization that suddenly filled the air of the glade.

"Too late!" Othol yelled, grabbing Delin's handgun from Kirk and diving for cover behind a statuelike object.

A squad of black-helmeted, armored, and armed men, their very tall and lean bodies covered with bulletproof plates and each with a sigil of authority on his shoulder, materialized in strategic locations around the glade.

"Proctors!" Orun warned, started to run, and then stopped in his tracks as one of the black-garbed forms fired a handgun twice over his head, obviously with deliberate intent to miss and warn that the next shot might find its target.

And the landing party from the Enterprise suddenly found themselves completely surrounded by tall armed men, each with a handgun pointed at them.

It would have been difficult for anyone to tell which group was the most surprised-the four from the Federation landing party or the ten armed and armored Proctors of Mercan. Both stood there and stared at one another for a split second.

It was Kirk who broke the momentary silence by snapping the order to his people, "Put away your phasers." This remark was immediately rendered in the Mercan language by his Translator, except for the word "phaser," for which there was no Mercan equivalent. Kirk was counting on that, because the landing party slipped their phasers back under their tunics.

At the Academy many years ago, Kirk had been exposed to ancient gunpowder firearms, had worked with them, and knew what kind of physical havoc their projectiles could wreak. Unlike the clean disruptive energy bolt of a phaser at partial power, a firearm's bullet did extensive localized damage as it tore through tissue, with its shock wave literally blasting living flesh apart. He didn't want McCoy to have to cope with such injuries to the landing party at this time and under these conditions. "Stand. Don't move," came the order from a large

Proctor who was armored and medallioned to a greater degree than the others, indicative of the fact that he was probably the leader. But he was obviously as mystified as Delin, Orun, and Othol had been a few minutes earlier when these strangers had materialized in their midst. "Great Abode!" the Proctor leader muttered in awed tones that he could not disguise. "These Technic people are becoming stranger by the day . . . and obtaining more advanced equipment all the time." "We're not Technic people." Kirk directed his remark at the Proctor squad leader. "In fact, we're not Mercans. We're visitors." There was dead silence as the Proctor leader tried to evaluate the situation. It was obvious that he was confused. He'd come expecting only the three young Mercans, not this group of four strangely dressed, short, and highly varied people carrying strange equipment and speaking strange sounds that became words through a small device they carried. Furthermore,

they carried no handguns, only strange pouches
of equipment that buzzed and
hummed and sang as they were pointed at the
Proctor squad.

"Who are you?" the Proctor leader asked
imperiously. "What part of the
Abode are you from?"

Kirk had nothing in his hands. He spread them
palms up before him to show

that he carried no weapon. "I'm James

Kirk, the leader of this group. We're

visitors to Mercan." The word "visitors" was

rendered by the Translator as

"guestsstravellersstwanderersstsearchers" before it

ran out of synonyms

searching its newly created self-program of the

structure of the Mercan

language.

The Proctor leader turned to Orun. "We've

come to escort you, Orun, along

with your companions Othol and Delin, under the

orders of Guardian One

Pallar. You three are charged with conduct contrary

to the Code because of

your open advocacy of the Technic of

which you're members. The Guardians can no longer tolerate this disruption of the Code of the Abode. Now, who are these Technic people? Why do they look this way, and why are they dressed in this fashion? Why do they speak a strange tongue?"

"They're not Technic; they're visitors, as they claim," the young Mercan replied. "I'll readily admit that I'm of the Technic, but I also truthfully state to you that these people are not Technic. They materialized here only a short time before you and your squad arrived, Proctor Lenos And I certainly feel honored to think that we're so important that the Prime Proctor himself would lead the squad to apprehend us."

"Your disrespectful attitude will change with retraining," Proctor Lenos remarked. "Otherwise, I'd demand that you defend yourself here and now

And I'm ordered to bring the three of you to Celerbitan alive, not with bullets in your hearts." He looked around at

the four from the Enterprise,
unsure of exactly what to do. "We'll take
the four of you back with us as
well. The Guardians will certainly want to see
what the Technic has managed
to accomplish in total secrecy."

"Translator, stop," Kirk ordered his
device quietly, causing it to cease
translating his words into the Mercan language.

To the three other members
of the crew of the Enterprise he said, "No
resistance. No violence. We'll
go with them. Obviously, the Proctors are the
police, and we happen to be
in the hands of the police chief of these parts."

"Maybe the chief of police can get us to the
chief of government, whatever
that may be," McCoy suggested.

"That's exactly what I had in mind," Kirk
said. "We keep it calm. Scotty,
please keep that temper of yours under control; your
job is technology
assessment."

Proctor Lenos was beginning to fidget, not being
able to understand what

Kirk was saying. Kirk sensed this
and ordered his Translator back into action.
"Please excuse me, Proctor
Lenos," Kirk said with the most punctilious
manners and a slight diplomatic
bow. The highly stilted and overly polite
language of Mercan made it easier
for Kirk to phrase his sentences so the
Translator would reply in stilted
terms. He didn't like their language with its
overly formal structure. But
there it was; what could he do but work with it? "I had
to give instructions
to my people not to offer any objection
to accompanying you. We'll be most
happy to go with you and meet your Guardians."
This willing cooperation was apparently commonplace
to Proctor Lenos. He
turned his armored head and looked around. "Orun,
where are your compan-
ions?"
There was a definite smile on Orun's face.
"Why, Proctor Lenos, I suspect
they managed to stroll away in the confusion caused
by your confrontation
with these strange people."

There was obvious frustration in Lenos' voice.

"We'll get them. If necessary, we'll monitor all transporter activity until we get them."

"That's a large order, Proctor," Orun reminded him. "What's the current use rate? More than a thousand million individual transports from one place to another daily?"

"We have means," Lenos said darkly. Then to Kirk he said, "I have no warrant to return you to Celerbitan, James Kirk. However, I exercise my authority as Prime Proctor to require your presence at Celerbitan before

Guardian One because of your unusual appearance and equipment."

Kirk said nothing. He couldn't. He didn't even know what the rules were.

But he knew that he'd find out quickly at Celerbitan, if that was the planetary seat of the political power base . . . and he was now quite aware of the existence of an exceptional power base: the Guardians; who must be

the rulers, because there was a police organization, the Proctors, whose job must obviously entail enforcing the dictates of the political leaders.

But he also knew that he might be wrong. On more than a thousand worlds of the Federation, there were many more than a thousand different ways that intelligent beings organized themselves. He couldn't expect to find a situation here, developed in isolation, that would have any similarity to anything he knew.

But these Mercanians were humanoid, and all humanoid species shared a number of things in common, including political power bases sustained by threat of physical force for noncompliance with political and social rules.

He didn't think he could be totally wrong on that one.

Strangely, the Proctors didn't search the landingparty members, nor did they attempt to take the tricorders that both Janice Rand and Bones McCoy kept running, sensing, and recording. Kirk

guessed this was probably

because none of the landing party carried anything that appeared

to the

Proctors to be weapons.

"Stand by to travel," Proctor Lenos ordered,

removing a control unit from

his equipment-laden baldric. Scotty's

attention was riveted on the control

unit as he attempted to fathom its use and

construction. Kirk also looked

closely at it, while Janice Rand focused

the attention of her tricorder on

it.

The Prime Proctor rubbed his finger across

various portions of the small,

palm-sized unit . . . and they were somewhere else.

The first words spoken were McCoy's: "I knew

these people weren't

civilized. Anybody who'd use a

transporter to get around the surface of a

planet can't possibly be civilized."

"Quiet, Bones," Kirk snapped. "You're

in no position to object."

"I dinna believe it," Scotty breathed.

"They must have developed

transporter technology at a very high level indeed. The Proctor required no communication with a main transporter crew, and the system delivered us here where there's no transporter. We must have gone through one or more relays en route . . .

."

Scotty was right. They weren't in a transporter room or unit but had materialized in the foyer of a grand edifice. It was a huge hall open on three sides, its roof supported by massive pillars and columns of a completely unique design fabricated of metals with beautiful sheens and textures. The building was perched atop a high hill on an island, because all around was an ocean.

It reminded Kirk of the view from the Acropolis at Athens on Earth.

But this edifice was not the Temple of Diana on the Acropolis, nor did it resemble it in any way. These Mercans were not at the same technical level of ancient Greece, because from the building alone

Kirk knew they'd mastered advanced technology in several areas comalth without closer inspection he couldn't determine the exact degree. Their architecture was an indication of their distechnology, even though it was totally alien, as could be expected in a civilization that had developed in complete isolation.

Almost as soon as the entire party materialized, Proctor Lenos announced, "I'll notify Guardian One of your presence here. Please make yourselves comfortable, and please don't hesitate to ask my Proctors to bring you anything you may require. I also request that you don't attempt to run away . . . because this squad of Proctors is my personal squad . . . and they don't miss."

And he strode down one of the hallways of the huge building.

Kirk looked at his landing party. They appeared to be as mystified as he at

the polite and mannered way they'd been treated
by what obviously were the
police. It had never happened to him this way before.

He switched off his

Translator.

"Well, we've certainly discovered ourselves a
dandy
little planet." Scotty was the first to speak up.

"With the sort of
transporter technology they've got, plus
what I can see from their
buildings, their clothes, and their weapons, they may
be our equals in
engineering in some areas."

"Do you think it's advanced enough that they could help
repair the warp
drive, Scotty?" Kirk wanted to know.

"I haven't seen their energy sources. I dinna
ken if they have
matter-antimatter technology or not. But with
transporter technology like
theirs, they obviously have the industrial base that'd
be useful in helping
me rebuild that warp drive . . . even if they
don't know what a warp drive
is

"Captain," Janice Rand put in, "Commander Scott mentioned a lack of technology in communications and transportation systems. If the Mercans have a planetwide transporter system, why would they need communications or a transportation system? They already have both in their transporter system. If they want to talk to somebody, they just transport to where that person is. If they need to ship freight or cargo anywhere on the planet, they put it through a transporter"

"Which means they've got very powerful energy systems," Scotty pointed out.

"That may mean that they've already got matterantimatter," Kirk observed.

"No, Captain, they could do it with ordinary hydrogen fusion," Scotty pointed out. "That's why I dinna ken if they've got the energy sources. But they've got energy, all right. No question about that."

"Bones," Kirk said, turning to his ship's doctor, "any data? Are these people really as closely related to humans as they

appear to be? If so, how
did they get out here in the middle of the Galactic
interarm void?"

"One question at a time," McCoy replied. He
looked down at his medical
tricorder. "I don't know the details of
internal structure and physiology
yet. And it would
be of great help to have blood and tissue samples
for analysis back in Sick
Bay. I could give you a solid answer under those
conditions. But they look
like kissin' cousins to us. They appear to have
muscular structure,
articulation, and sensors similar to ours. They're
probably tall and skinny
because the gravity here is eight-tenths standard and the
climate is
generally warm and semitropical over most of the
planet."

"How about my second question?" Kirk wanted
to know.

"I'm glad you asked that question," McCoy
replied slowly. "Are there any
other questions? Seriously, I don't know, and I
wish I did."

"Maybe we should just ask them where they came from,"

Janice Rand

suggested.

"That's a good idea, Yeoman," Kirk said.

He turned on his Translator and

walked slowly over to the edge of the building, where

he could look out

over what was obviously a city spread out below and

around the hill. He

turned to Orun and asked, "Is this

Celerbitan?"

Orun nodded. "It's the headquarters of the

Guardians and the Proctors

You're really from some other place, aren't you?"

"What I've told you is true," Kirk

replied. "We don't come from Mercan."

"But where do you come from, then?"

"Probably the same place your ancestors

did. Where did Mercan begin? How

did it start? Where did the Mercan people come from?"

"You don't know the story of the Creation of the

Abode?" Orun asked

incredulously. Then he nodded. "Of course, if

you come from somewhere else,

you couldn't know."

"Where did you come from?"

"From the Spiral of Life that's duplicated by the spiral of the basic

chemistry of life itself," Orun explained, then

paused. "Some call it the

Ribbon of Night because that's the only time it can be seen in the

sky. We, the Technic, believe that the ancient

legend may be true because

there's some evidence now that the Ribbon of Night or Spiral of Life is made

up of a very large number of suns like our own,

except that we don't

understand why we can't see them as suns like ours.

Some of the Technic

believe that it's like a light that's seen from many

steps away and gets

smaller as you take more steps away from it."

It suddenly occurred to Kirk that he was dealing with a completely new

phenomenon here. "Steps" and lesser dimensions were

all that the Mercans

now possessed. They didn't need distance

dimensions when a transporter

could take them around their planet in a fraction of a

second.

A world without distance!

And a universe without astronomy, insofar as the
Mercans were concerned.

What other fascinating mysteries did this
unusual civilization of humanlike
beings hold?

It would be a bonanza for Federation
xenosociologists.

And if the Sagittarius Arm was the direction of the
future expansion of the

Federation in its efforts to colonize and populate
those parts of the

Galaxy, Mercan would become an important
way station on the trade routes
between the Arms.

And it could destroy Mercan.

Kirk couldn't help thinking of other cases on
ancient Earth where unique

cultures developed in isolation had been
totally and completely destroyed
by newcomers.

He didn't want Mercan to go the route of the
Aztecs or the Incas.

He knew that his first task, therefore, was in conflict
with his

responsibilities as the commanding officer of the Enterprise. As the Captain, it was his obligation to arrange for the repairs to his ship. But as the ranking representative of the United Federation of Planets and operating under the dictum of the Prime Directive, he had to put aside for the moment his starship-command responsibilities.

He had to unravel the social aspects of this Mercan culture first. Was Mercan ready for the Federation and the changes that relations with the Federation would bring? Or would he have to manage to get the Enterprise repaired and somehow leave without disrupting this civilization, leaving the inevitable decision on interaction up to the Federation?

Kirk strolled casually back to his companions and turned off his Translator. "I don't know exactly what we've gotten into here," he told his party. "But we will

not repeat, not-violate General Order Number

One

until we find out more about Mercan."

"I agree with you, Jim," McCoy put in.

"I've been watching and listening,

too. This place, this culture, these people, are

unique. We should disturb

them as little as possible until we have more data."

"But I've got a warp drive engine up there that

has to be repaired," Scotty

complained, "or we're going to stay here for a very long

time indeed. And

sooner or later these Mercans are going to discover

the Enterprise orbiting

over their heads. How can we help but disturb them

then, eh?"

"Scotty, for all we know, the Mercans may have

the transporter technology

to reach up there to the Enterprise and simply

transmute it into a signal

that won't materialize anywhere . . . ever,"

Kirk warned.

"Aye, there's that," the engineer admitted.

"Yeoman, ho* about your input here from the

woman's point of view?" Kirk

wanted to know.

"Captain, we've probably already disrupted this culture by simply beaming down a landing party," Yeoman Rand replied thoughtfully. "But unless we're very careful, I think it could turn into a situation like a woman trying to raise a feral child . . ."

"Go on," Kirk prompted her when she paused.

"A feral child doesn't have cultural programming,"

Janice Rand explained. "No matter what we do, we've changed things already.

And this feral culture could react to us in a way we can't anticipate. In other words, Captain, my woman's intuition tells me that we're in great danger"

Yeoman Janice Rand was correct.

Kirk wasn't surprised to see Proctor Lenos return with another tall but older man who stepped up to the landing party and said in a cordial tone,

"Welcome to Celerbitan and to the Guardian Villa. I'm Pallar, Guardian One of the Abode."

The punctilious, mannered, diplomatic, and almost stilted words of greeting nearly caught Kirk off guard. Then the reason for it dawned upon him. Even Pallar, the Guardian One of Mercan, carried a visible holstered firearm.

In a culture with a code duello such as this one, it's a necessity that a person have the most gracious manners, even to strangers. Boorish actions can't be tolerated in a close society such as the Mercans possessed, a society that was truly planet-wide because of their transporter system.

A Mercan was required to back up his manners with his life.

It put another trump card in Kirk's hand .

. . because the entire

Enterprise landing party was not visibly armed.

Or so he thought.

Kirk returned the greeting with equal good manners.

"Guardian Pallar, I'm Captain James

T. Kirk." He introduced each of the

other three members of the landing party, then went on,

"Thank you for your
kind welcome to Celerbitan. We're very
pleased to be here because we've been
in great trouble and have come to Celerbitan to request
your gracious
assistance."

Pallar adjusted the baldric over his shoulder.
In common with the other
Mercans, except the Proctors, he was
dressed rather simply in a tunic
belted at the waist, a headband of a bright color
and intricate design, and
a baldric or bandolier over his left shoulder
with a number of pouches
attached to it. His firearm hung from this baldric
at his right thigh. On
a planet such as Mercan, with little axial tilt,
large oceans, and no
pronounced seasonal change, clothing for warmth
wouldn't be required, just
as on Vulcan. However, this culture was
different because it apparently
didn't embrace elaboration and intricate
decoration as did the Vulcan
culture.

Well, Kirk thought, each culture's

different, and that's what makes the
universe so interesting.

Pallar's hawklike face betrayed no emotion
as he looked carefully at each
of the landing party in turn, then came
to Orun. "You appear well, Orun.

Ah, why is it that when a person becomes
responsible-old he often strays
from the tenets of the Code of the Abode? Orun,
your activities with the
Technic and those of the Technic itself are beginning
to threaten the peace
and tranquillity of the Abode. I asked
Proctor Lenos to bring you to
Celerbitan under a Proctor warrant issued
by the Guardian Justice because
I want to speak to you about your activities and those
of the Technic."

"Guardian One, I have nothing that I would speak
of under any circumstances
or conditions," Orun replied with strained
gentility.

"We'll see. We're patient. The Sun of the
Abode will not always remain this
quiet . . . and there's the question of admission to the

Keeps . . ."

Pallar said calmly.

He turned to Kirk. "In the meantime,

Captain Kirk,

I'm told that your group was found with

Orun and his companions. You all

have strange names, strange appearances, strange
clothing, and strange

speech. I also see that you go about unarmed. All

of you must be Technic

constructs or products of Technic

development."

"Guardian One, we're not of the Technic,"

Kirk told him quickly and with

sincerity. "I'm permitted under my code of

conduct to reveal to you as

Guardian One, the unquestioned leader of the Abode,

that we don't come from

Mercan. We're from another place. We're

anxious not to disrupt the way of

life here, and I'm certain you're concerned about that

possibility. I be-

lieve our discussion won't go further than this

group until we've both

determined that our presence here won't cause

problems with the Code of the

Abode."

Pallar did not say anything for a moment. This was certainly not the response he had expected from Kirk.

"You're not of the Abode?" Pallar said slowly. "If not . . . and if . . ." He stopped.

"I certainly understand why you feel that you're alone in a vast and empty universe. I've seen your night sky," Kirk told the Mercan leader. "There's nothing in that night sky to tell you differently. But do you know that Mercan probably came from what you call the Ribbon of Night? Do you know what makes the Ribbon glow in the sky at night?"

"You're a strange person, Captain Kirk," Pallar observed. "Everyone on the Abode knows that we once came from the Ribbon of Night a long time ago. And the Ribbon of Night's probably composed of vitaliar rocks such as we have on the Abode that glow naturally of their own accord in the dark. The Abode

is rich in these rocks that are used in our power
systems. Therefore, the
Ribbon of Night must be composed of uncountable
pieces of such rock ranged
all around the sky. It's the place-where we
originated because there's
where the energy and the power existed to create
Mercaniad the Sun and
Mercan the Abode . . . and all
the life that's on the Abode. It's our destiny
to maintain this unique thing
called life in an endless night of nothing
except the dim glow of our
heritage."
"Guardian Pallar," Kirk said, taking the
plunge, "I told you that the four
of us are not from the Abode, and you can see that for
yourself. We come in
a giant travelling device from the Ribbon of
Night, which contains billions
upon billions of suns such as Mercaniad and
billions of worlds such as the
Abode. You can't see these suns as individual
lights because of your great
distance from them. The Ribbon of Night teems with
life on worlds like the

Abode. You are not alone."

Pallar said nothing and did not move. But Kirk saw Proctor Lenos stiffen.

Orun, on the other hand, became visibly excited, as though he were hearing the confirmation of things he had tentatively started to believe.

"Technic heresy," Lenos growled.

Pallar held up his hand. "Indeed, it sounds like that. Captain Kirk, what you say flies against all logic, reason, and evidence. You speak in the words of the Technic, but with such interesting new interpretations that I, as Guardian One of the Code of the Abode, must learn more about these new Technic beliefs in order to properly refute them. I have no recourse but to believe that you and your three companions are important new developments of the Technic, perhaps the creation of beings that can withstand the Ordeal without requiring the protection of the Keeps. It's obvious to me that the Technic capabilities are not yet

perfect, for they've created in
you a species of being that is mentally incomplete
. . . and therefore I
must consider the four of you less than sane by the
standards of the Code.

I don't insult you deliberately, even though
all four of you are not armed
. . . which is another interesting Technic warping
of the Code. As Guardian

One, I therefore require that you not be permitted
to utilize the traveler
and that you remain on Celerbitan so all the
Guardians may meet with you.

Please surrender
your traveler controls to Proctor Lenos." His
hand was on the butt of his
sidearm as he said this, because he was well aware of the
fact that he might
have insulted these four strangers and therefore be
required to defend
himself, Guardian or not.

But Kirk and his party made no move whatsoever.
"We don't carry anything of
that sort," the Captain of the Enterprise told the
Mercan leader, aware of
the fact that he'd run up against a barrier he

couldn't hope to overcome

immediately.

Pallar asked his chief Proctor, "Lenos, do

they carry traveler controls?"

"They carry strange devices, but nothing that I

recognize as traveler

controls."

To Kirk, Pallar spoke apologetically.

"I must ask the Proctors to search

you physically to ensure you don't have traveler

controls that would enable

you to leave Celerbitan."

Kirk shrugged and smiled. "We're your guests,

Pallar. Why should we want to

leave? You're the one we wish to speak with. You're

obviously the leader

among leaders, and you're the only one who can

possibly help us."

Kirk and the three others probably could have taken

the Proctor squad in

hand-to-hand, but it might have led to potentially

irreversible

consequences. There was some communication now between

Kirk and Pallar;

Kirk's full intention was to keep that channel of

communication open and to
expand it. He was curious about the
Technic, but whoever the Technic was,
they were not the supreme political power on the
planet. Pallar was . . .
or at least represented the group that was.
So he silently signaled his landing party
to submit to search without
resistance. They were a trained and disciplined landing
party. He hardly
needed to let them know.
The Proctors, of course, came up with the
equipment that each of the
landing party had-hand phasers,
communicators, McCoy's medical kit, and the
tricorders.
Pallar looked at each of them carefully. "Do
you recognize any of these
Technic devices, Proctor Lenos?"
"Guardian Pallar, I've made it my
business to become acquainted with all
Technic devices," Lenos told him with some
confusion in his voice as he
turned each device over in his hands. "I
don't recognize any of these.
There is nothing here that resembles anything I've

seen before. And there's
no device that remotely resembles a traveler
control."

Pallar was obviously in a quandary. Any of the
devices might be
lethal-either in the hands of these four strange people . .
. or if taken
from them. Any of these devices might have
surveillance or probing
characteristics--or might even detonate after a set
period of time if taken
from them. There was nothing that resembled a Mercan
weapon. But he asked
anyway, "Captain Kirk, please explain
these devices to me."

Kirk indicated the tricorder. "This device
has been analyzing and recording
the various characteristics of the Abode for our future
study so we may get
to know you better and thus not disrupt your culture.
These"--Kirk
indicated the phasers-"are protection for us against
things on the Abode
that may be dangerous to us. And these"-he pointed to the
communicators--

"could be considered as a means for us
to indicate status to one another."
Kirk had couched his words carefully in positive
semantic terminology he
hoped would be acceptable to Pallar.
It was. "I see nothing here that could be dangerous
to us. But I must give
you a careful warning. Should you attempt any
violence, the results would
certainly require the immediate services of your
health expert here. I see
no reason to strip you of your sigils of
recognition and status . . . and
there's certainly noth-
ing here on Celerbitan that we would object
to having recorded and analyzed
by your devices, for I'm certain that anyone,
Technic or not, knows
everything there is to know about Celerbitan . . .
except for the Mysteries
of Mercaniad, which reside only in the minds of the
Guardians. Lenos, please
see to it that all of them have comfortable quarters . . .
including Orun,
who shall also be our guest as he tells us about these
four new Technic

people. But monitor all traveler activity into their quarters; we don't want any Technic people to materialize and try to assist them in any sort of violent escape" He turned to Orun and put forth his hand. "Orun, please surrender your traveler control to me. The Guardian One has the right to restrict your freedom by Guardian warrant under the Code."

Orun gave the older man a small hand-held device similar to the one Lenos had used to transport all of them to Celerbitan, but he gave it up with obvious reluctance.

Pallar then went on, addressing them all, "It's my intention and my duty to call a conclave of the Guardians on Celerbitan to investigate you and your three companions, James Kirk. We'd planned only to warrant the reeducation of Orun and his compatriots . . . and we'll do that after we've had the opportunity to learn more of you and study what must be done to prevent you

and others like yourself from disrupting the Code of the Abode. You'll be given comfortable quarters and permitted the freedom of Celerbitan, since it's not possible to leave this island without using the traveler, whose use is prohibited to all of you. Orun, you may remain with your strange Technic companions."

With that, the Guardian One placed both hands before his long face, then separated them sideways, obviously the Mercan gesture of greeting and/or farewell.

"Whew!" Scotty breathed. "Talk about longwinded . . ."

"Scotty, you're betraying the fact that you're only a few generations removed from Gaelic savagery," McCoy remarked.

"Doctor, under different circumstances, we might have a little workout in the ship's gym because of that remark . . ."

"See what I mean?" McCoy said with a smile. "We don't have the Mercan code duello, but we have our own code, don't we?"

Kirk flashed them the hand signal to be quiet.

They were led by Lenos and the Proctors to what might

best be termed a

villa overlooking the wine-dark sea of Mercan

not far from the Guardian

Villa. There, the Proctors simply left

them.

"Strangest jail I've ever seen," McCoy

remarked, noting that there were no

bars on the windows and no latched and bolted

doors.

Kirk was investigating everything he could, and said as

he checked doors to

see where they led, "What did we expect?

There's not a boat or ship on that

ocean. There's not an aircraft in the air.

There's no way we can leave

here. And the Guardians have such ubiquitous power

through their Proctors

that we'd be cut down in a moment if we tried

any violence . . . which

isn't to our purposes anyway. We aren't in

any danger at the moment, and

we're being treated well by our standards as

well as by theirs. And we've

established a channel of communications with the top man on the planet.

We're in better shape than we were a few days ago, when the best we could do was to limp along at Warp Factor Two with the anticipation of several years to get home."

"So, what do we do now?" McCoy wanted to know.

"Wait and gather data," Kirk explained.

"Each of you has a specialty plus an individual viewpoint. You'll each come up with different data and with different interpretations of what you see. Together we may be able to come up with some sort of rational answer to what's going on here."

"But I've got a crippled star ship up there in orbit that needs repair,"

Scotty complained.

"Is there any danger that the Enterprise is going to malfunction by orbiting this planet for a few days or weeks, Scotty?"

"No, but we canna go anywhere, and I canna get that warp drive unit

repaired if we just sit here."

"Scotty, you've got a whole new technology to decipher," Kirk pointed out to his engineer. "You may not be able to repair that warp drive unit here unless you can unravel the Mercan technology to find out what parts of it can be useful to you. You've got a tremendous job to do," Kirk reminded him.

"Right you are. Thank ye for puttin' things back in perspective, Captain."

Kirk whipped out his communicator and snapped its cover open. "Enterprise, this is Kirk."

"Go ahead, Captain," Uhura's voice came back.

"We're under house arrest by the humanoids living on this planet," Kirk reported. "We're all right. We're located on a large island apparently in the middle of one of the oceans in their planetary capital called Celerbitan. Have Mister Spock pinpoint our location from this transmission."

Now, stand by for a verbal report as well as a playback of our tricorder data."

For the next several minutes Kirk gave a verbal report into his communicator. Then he used the communicator to transmit a data dump from the tricorders of Janice Rand, McCoy, and Scotty.

Spock's voice came from the communicator after this was completed. "I have all the data in the library computer, Captain, and I shall analyze it along with all additional data you send up. I must say, this is a fascinating discovery."

"Do you mean you're excited, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Sir, my terms were most precise. And it will be interesting to compare this Mercan culture against those we already know of . . ."

"Undoubtedly, Mister Spock. But in the meantime, we've got to study and unravel this culture. We've got to make repairs here, and what we find out

Mercan will determine how we go about the job,"

Kirk told his First Officer

over the communicator. "We'll feed data to you

as often as we can. And

please communicate any interesting findings or

correlations you come up

with."

"Of course, Captain," Spock's voice

replied. "In the meantime; I'll also

keep watch on this irregular variable star . . .

which is far from being

stable in any regard. I'm running computer

analyses now in hopes I can warn

you of any impending increase in its stellar output

that might create a

hazard to you on the surface or to the Enterprise

here in standard orbit."

"Very well, Spock. Let me know the moment you

have any data on the star .

. . . which is called Mercaniad, by the way."

"Very good, Captain. I'll tag the computer

data with that name and so list

it in the stellar catalog."

"That's all for now. Kirk out."

Orun, the young Mercan, had been watching this with

fascination. "You are not from the Abode," he said, his voice tinged with an emotion that might be termed jubilation . . . although Kirk could find no reason why Orun would be jubilant.

"I told you the truth," Kirk remarked.

Orun was both excited and apparently overjoyed, but yet disturbed. "I have heard the Technic theories, and I have believed them . . . but to find out that they are apparently true gives me a very strange feeling"

"We know what you mean," McCoy told him gently. "The truth sometimes hurts a great deal"

"Where do you come from? How did you travel here?"

Orun began to ask, his questions almost falling over one another in his anxiety to learn.

Kirk sat down on one of the chairs that had been designed for the longer, lankier Mercan physiology; it wasn't very comfortable for him because the seat was so high that his legs barely touched the floor. "...Orun," he told

the young Mercan, "we'll tell you and the
Guardians everything. But, before
we can explain to
you in words and terms that you'll understand, we have to know
something
about the Abode. and about those of you who live here.

We've seen many
places like the Abode and we know of many people and many
living things from
all these places. To explain them to you so that it'll
mean something, we
must know what you believe, how you think, and how you
live your lives.

Otherwise, we might tell you things in a way that
you simply couldn't
understand. So . . . sit down. We have lots of
time. Tell us about Mercan .

. . the Guardians, the Proctors, the
Technic . . . the stories and legends
about where you came from and where all this began. Tell
us your stories .

. . ."

Captain's Log, recorded into a tricorder
on Mercan, exact stardate unknown
at this moment.

Orun has spent a long time telling us about Mercan. A lot of what he's said amounts to something similar to the fairy tales, legends, and religious stories that we tell our own children. They're fables and parables. But there isn't the wide variety of stories from Mercan that there are on Earth, because there's something totally unique here on Mercan: one single, planet-wide culture with little variety or variation caused by regional differences because the Mercans have had their transporter system now for generations. This has leveled out their planetary culture It's going to keep xeno-sociologists of the Federation busy for a long time to come . . . if our initial contact here doesn't disturb the culture so deeply that it destroys this unique discovery. I keep thinking of two cultures of Earth that were so completely destroyed that practically none of their heritage remains: the Mayas and the Carthaginians. None of us dare make a mistake,

because if we do, two possibilities face us.

Either we'll never get the

cooperation of

the Mercans to repair the Enterprise, in which

case this data will sit here

until another Federation starship discovers this world.

Or we'll impact this

culture so strongly that it'll shatter . . . and

I'll have destroyed a

people in order to save my command

Orun's story was recorded word for word on

Janice Rand's tricorder. The

transcript was later relayed into the library

computer of the Enterprise,

including the comments, questions, and interjections of

Kirk, Janice Rand,

Scotty, and McCoy.

Orun began, "We in the Technic now have

different interpretations of the

original story of the Beginning than that

approved by the Guardians because

we began to discover new meanings to parts of the old

legends. We agree on

many parts of these legends, so I'll tell you the

original stories we're

all told, starting when we're crawling-old,
playing-old, and learning-old."

Janice Rand interrupted with, "Is that how you
determine your physical
ages-by referring to the most obvious actions a
person exhibits during
certain periods of life?"

"Of course. Is there any other way to do it?"

Orun asked her in return.

The yeoman made a quiet aside remark
into her tricorder: "Mercans don't
count physical age in terms of revolutions of
Mercan around Mercaniad.

Question: Is this because the irregular variable characteristics
of

Mercaniad also alter its gravitational constant,
thereby changing the
length of time required for Mercan to
complete an orbit? Or is it because the lack of
tilt to the poles reduces
the impact of the seasons? Does this mean a lack
of time awareness and time
concepts? The language contains tenses, but no
time references."

Orun continued, "There was a Beginning of Energy in
Disorder. From this

Disordered Energy, Mercaniad formed from Energy that slowly began to be organized. It swept through the Ribbon of Night, accumulating Energy as it did so and following the evolving Spiral of Life, the vortex or helix motion that is the motion and form of all. During this long journey through the Ribbon of Night, accumulating the energy and matter it would later need to serve as the energy source for the Abode of Life, Mercaniad's energy attracted the additional matter to form the Abode of Life. And once the Abode of Life had formed, Mercaniad's helix path swept away all other matter and energy, leaving only Mercaniad and Mercan to form the basic foundation for the Abode of Life. And Life was created on the Abode, including our forebears. Once everything was available on the Abode of Life, the Great Change took place. Mercaniad and Mercan were thrust from the Ribbon of Night into the void, where we could

begin our work as
custodians of the Abode of Life. Mercaniad
became changeable, challenging
us in order to keep our wits sharp"

"Were there always one people on the Abode?" Kirk
asked. "Or were you once
divided into many groups?"

"We were divided until the Guardians
organized themselves at Meslan on the
north straits of Fron Midan, where they formed
a group whose early history
is much like that of the Technic today," Orun
explained. He reached into a
pouch of his baldric and brought forth a small
cube. He triggered it in
some manner that Kirk didn't see, and the cube
began to unfold itself into
a color relief map that Kirk recognized was
the planet itself.

Topologically, it was possible to do such a thing,
comb Kirk didn't
understand how. However, it alerted him to the fact that the
Mercans
may have achieved much of their current technology,
including their traveler
system, from a basic foundation of topological

mathematics.

One of the continents of Mercan was wasp-waisted with

an inland sea, Fron

Midan; that was closed to the west by a slim

peninsula and on the east by

a large island forming a northern strait,

dominated by a city symbol called

Meslan, and on the south by an islandcity symbol

named Sandar. It was easy

for Kirk to see how the Mercans at both

Meslan and Sandar could dominate

and control seagoing trade into and out of this inland sea

which was, for

practical purposes, the only one on the

planet. Furthermore, Fron Midan

straddled the equator.

"The original Guardians discovered two things.

The first of these was the

secret to the Mystery of Mercaniad."

"What's that?" Kirk wanted to know.

"Mercaniad is changeable to challenge us and

to remove from the Abode those

who are not intelligent enough to seek deep shelter

when it begins to enter

a period of increased activity we call the

Ordeal. Until the Guardians

learned how to predict the coming of the Ordeal of

Mercaniad, millions of

us were killed during every Ordeal . . . all

except those who managed to

find deep shelter in the Abode."

"What's the nature of this Ordeal?" Doctor

McCoy spoke up. "Is it extreme

heat, extreme cold, or some other change?

Does it kill everything on the

surface of the Abode?"

"It's not simple, as we of the Technic have found

out," Orun went on. "The

Ordeal strikes down Mercans. It kills us

outright very soon after it

begins. The Ordeal is only partially heat;

there's something else to it

that we don't understand yet. But the

Technic is working on it."

"Sounds like a combination of increased activity across

the entire

electromagnetic spectrum," Scotty

observed, "all the way from the

microwaves up through

infrared to the ultraviolet and perhaps to X rays

as well."

"Spock will get the answer to that one," McCoy pointed out. "But what does the Ordeal do to the rest of the life on the Abode?"

"Our animals sometimes die, but most of them begin a Long Rest. They stop where they are and enter a state of reduced life force."

"Hibernation caused by elevated temperatures or increased levels of electromagnetic radiation," McCoy muttered. "That's an interesting variation on the hibernation syndrome"

"But do Meman people go into a similar Long Rest?" Kirk wondered.

"No," Orun replied. "And we don't know why . . . yet. Some of the Technic have a very tentative hypothesis that we dare not speak of outside the Technic organization. There are some who are beginning to think that the Mercan people came to the Abode after life was formed here, perhaps to act as custodians"

"We keep running into something like this all through this

portion of the

Galaxy," Kirk remarked. "The basic humanoid group is everywhere, with differences only in minor characteristics. Orun, there may be more truth to your Technic hypothesis than you realize.

We've seen it ourselves, and we still haven't pieced together what originally caused the Galaxy to be populated by humanoid forms, all related to one another in various ways. But

please go on. And please pardon our interruptions of your tale with these asides and observations."

"It's no offense," the Mercan replied.

"I'm learning as much as you are.

Some of it's difficult to accept, but .

. . I suppose that sooner or later

we must all put away our dreams and

fantasies of our playing-old lives . .

. and perhaps we'll have to do it all our lives from now on."

"You're beginning to understand something all of us have had to learn the hard way," McCoy observed.

"You said that the Guardians discovered the Mystery of

Mercaniad," Kirk put

in. "How did this give them their Abode-wide

political power?"

"At first, they simply chose those they would permit

into their original

Keep. But they couldn't maintain a secret like that

forever because of the

other very powerful group from Sandar, here on the island

dominating the

southern straits into Fron Midan." Orun

indicated his map. "The history is

long and complex. I can tell you briefly that those

original Guardians from

Meslan who knew the Mystery of Mercaniad

made an agreement with those

people from Sandar who become the

Proctorate. And together they were able

to unify the whole of the Abode because the Guardians

developed the

traveler many, many generations ago from the knowledge they had

uncovered

as a result of their studies of the Great Change

that flung Mercaniad and

the Abode out of the Ribbon of Night."

Scotty was shaking his head. "How did they

manage to start from nothing and

develop a transporter?"

"Are you so certain that they started from nothing, Mister Scott?" Janice

Rand observed.

"What are ye getting at?"

"How much technology has Homo sapiens on Earth developed and then forgotten as we've progressed? For example, I can't dress a deerskin to make a coat.

And I doubt that you can chip a flint spearpoint .

..."

"You're right, lass."

"Federation teams can dig into that aspect later,"

Kirk pointed out. Then

he said to Orun, "So the Guardians

developed the traveler and made an

agreement with those who become the Proctors . .

. and together they

unified the Abode?"

Orun didn't nod; he simply raised his

head quickly in the Mercan manner of

signifying agreement. "You understand very well and very quickly."

"We know similar stories on other abodes,

Orun," the star-ship captain told

him.

"It's a long story and not a very happy one,"

Orun went on. "There were

many who died because they were denied access to the Keeps

by the

Proctors."

"About these Keeps What are they and where are they located?" Kirk

wanted to know.

"They were built a very long time ago by the

Guardians, and they're located

deep under the oceans comSel Anthol, Sel

Ethan, and Sel Mican. There are no

actual entrances. Only the Guardians and the

Proctors know the traveler

coordinates so that people can go there during the

Ordeal."

"A very neat system of keeping people under control,"

Scotty remarked.

"Look at it another way," McCoy

suggested. "It's their way of maintaining

social order"

"Or the status quo, was Scotty added.

"Is there much of a difference?" McCoy wanted

to know.

"There is," Orun broke in. "I understand what you mean. But you must understand that much of the social order on the Abode is maintained by people themselves through the Code of the Abode, which requires we maintain proper respect for each other as the basis of our very lives" And he patted his sidearm hanging from its loose holster on his baldric.

"That doesn't make sense to me, Orun," Janice Rand said. "How can you revere, respect, and maintain life when you're permitted and even encouraged to take each other's lives?"

"How do you do it in your abode?" Orun wanted to know.

"Well, we have laws and judges and trials and"

Orun patted his sidearm again. "So do we. Our sidearms are used only in personal affairs. However, if I'd managed to kill Othol during the engagement that was in progress when you traveled to us, I would've had to answer to the Proctorate for the correctness of

my action, with the possibility of final appeal and review by the Guardians. And the Proctorate also serves to maintain social order where large groups of people are involved"

"And that's the reason why Lenos was after you as part of the Technic?"

Kirk knew this question-and-answer session was giving him only superficial

answers . . . but it was telling him enough about the strange culture of

the Abode that he could begin to think about options available to him. "Did

the Technic split with the Guardians over matters of interpretation of the

Code of the Abode, Orun?"

"No, the Technic grew from our everyday work supplying each other with

food, water, shelter, health, and the rest of the elements that make up our

commerce with one another. That portion of our lives is of no concern to

the Guardians or the Proctorate."

"Well, I'll be . . ." McCoy started

to say, then brought himself up short.

"Free enterprise operating in what seems to be a scientific-religious police regime."

"We've seen stranger arrangements," Yeoman Rand reminded him.

"Which all goes to prove that almost any social system will work . . .

except that some seem to work better than others,"

Kirk observed. "Orun, if

the Technic grew from what all of you learned in the marketplace, what is

the Technic group and why are the Guardians apparently upset about it?"

"The Technic didn't concern the Guardians when we started only a few

generations ago," Orun told Kirk. "But the

Technic has grown. It's now

larger than the Guardian organization. But, more important, the accu-

mulating findings of the Technic are leading us to ask questions about the

age-old teachings of the Guardians. Pallar

fears us because of what we're

learning and because we're starting to question some of the accepted portions of the Code. of the Abode."

"And what are you learning, Orun? What is the

Technic heresy that I've

heard both Pallar and Lenos speak about?"

Kirk asked.

"We've developed new materials that are

different from the metals we dig

from the Abode, things that are made from living

materials and other things

that are made from basic nonliving chemicals.

We have entirely new

health-maintenance and disease-control materials. And

we can do things with

life that the Guardians don't understand.

We've discovered the laws of

genetics and we've delved into cell chemistry.

A lot of this came from our

efforts to develop better grain and fruit

crops for the steppes of Lacan,

Canol, Badan, Eronde, and particularly

Sinant. We now have food crops that

can't be damaged by the Ordeal. And we've

discovered that the story about

the Spiral of Life is correct: the basic

chemicals of life are formed in a

double spiral"

"The DNA and RNA molecules," McCoy

put in.

"So we think that the old story of the Beginning is

perhaps more correct

and actual than allegorical," Orun

explained. "We did come from the Ribbon

of Night, but we don't know why the story also

calls it the Spiral of Life

... If we came from there, is the Ribbon

really only like the glowing

vitaliar rocks of Lessan, Partan, and

Othan? If we came from there as life

already, is there perhaps other life out there in

the Ribbon, too? That's

our current thinking and some of the questions we have in the

Technic."

Kirk thought for a long moment before he finally said,

"What do you think

about our story, Orun?"

"I believe what you say."

"Does it bother you?"

"No. As far as I am concerned, it doesn't

contradict any of our basic

beliefs at all . . . and it certainly

doesn't conflict with the Code of the

Abode. None of you have violated the Code,

even though you go about unarmed

...."

"We're not unarmed," Kirk admitted. "We

carry weapons, but none of you

recognized them as weap-

ons . . . so we'll just leave it at that. You have

my word that we'll not

use our weapons except to protect ourselves.

We can also do a lot of other

things that you don't know about, but we aren't here on the

Abode to change

things or to show off our powers. We're

here because of an accident to our

traveling device very much like the ancient event that

threw Mercaniad and

Mercan out of the Ribbon of Night. We could

travel from Celerbitan and back

to our traveling device at any time we wished,

but that wouldn't do us any

good right now. We need to find out more about you and the

Abode because we

badly need your help. In return, if it works

out properly, we may be able to

offer the people of the Abode a great number of very good

things by

rejoining you with the other life abodes that exist in the
Ribbon of Night."

"In other words, Orun, you are not alone in the
Universe," Dr. McCoy added.

Orun thought about this, too. "I can't speak for the
rest of the Technic .

. . and certainly not for the Guardians. We'll have
to see. Pallar is

extremely suspicious of the four of you and sees
you as a new threat from
the Technic."

"I don't understand why the Guardians
fear the Technic and want to hold
your group down," Janice Rand said. "You could
learn so much from one
another."

"The Guardians fear that the Technic will
certainly discover the Mystery of
Mercaniad if we keep on learning and growing.
And once the Technic does
that, the Guardians have only the Proctorate
left . . . and who knows in
which direction the Proctorate will go when that
happens?"

"But certainly the Guardians must keep up with the
technical progress

you're making in the Technic. The Guardians could solve the problem very simply by admitting the Technic into the fold."

"I don't believe that idea has ever occurred to the Guardians. I'm fairly certain that such an idea has not been considered by the Technic, because we're afraid the Guardians would try to stop us from learning new things and from trying to find out where we really came from," Orun observed with some surprise. "I think it would be very difficult for the Guardians to do that. They appear to be linked too closely with the existing Code of the Abode because they are the Guardians of that. They forecast the Coming of the Ordeal of Mercaniad and they are the final court of appeal in our society."

"In other words, your Guardians have become high priests of a semireligion," McCoy growled.

The Translator had great difficulty interpreting and rendering McCoy's statement in the Mercan language. McCoy's

unit stuttered, stammered, and
finally went silent without completing the translation.
Orun didn't get the
meaning of the doctor's statement at all, but the
rest of the Enterprise
landing party did
Kirk sighed and looked at the others. "Well,
it certainly looks like we've
stepped right into the middle of a rather delicate
social triangle . . .
and at just the wrong moment. Pallar's
already looking at us as part of the
Technic and a threat to his group."
"The Guardians may not be able to help us
anyway, Captain," Scotty pointed
out. "If they don't involve themselves with the
technology of this world,
the best they can do is get in our way. I think
we're going to have to deal
with the Technic if we want help. Certainly
no high priest is going to get
that damaged warp drive repaired by chanting some
arcane words over it. If
that could be done, I'd carry some experienced
witches as part of my
Engineering Department . . . which might not be a bad

idea for the future,
by the way, because I recall watching witches work in
the far-off days of
my youth"

"Don't go mystic on me, Scotty," Kirk
snapped, knowing full well that his
Engineering Officer wouldn't. The Captain of the
Enterprise bit his lip and
thought for a moment. "We're in rather bad shape if
we want to
request help from the Technic . . . because the
Guardians seem to have us
under house arrest. How are we going to get to the
Technic under these
circumstances?"

Orun smiled, which involved drawing- his lips
back to expose his white
teeth. A Mercan's smile was humanoid, but
it was a gross exaggeration of
the wide variations of a smile developed on
Earth. "We won't have to get to
the Technic, James Kirk. They'll come to us.
I don't know how, but they
will. Delin and Othol were not taken by the
Proctors. . . and I'm certain

they returned to the Technic with news of your arrival. I fully expect that we'll be rescued right out from under the noses of the Guardians and the Proctorate, because the Technic has a few tricks of their own."

Kirk knew then that his worst fears were being realized. He was being drawn inexorably into the social fabric of this strange, isolated world, whether he wanted to or not. The accidental visit of the Enterprise to this lost planet couldn't help "but disrupt the social order here, especially when that social order was plunging toward a major change created by the confrontation of two groups in what was a universal syndrome of societal growth: change versus the status quo.

The Mercans on the Abode of Life were maturing out of a social adolescence into an era of logic and reason, following the paths well-documented by other civilizations on other worlds.

Kirk happened to have stumbled into the situation at the most critical

moment in time.

And he didn't quite know how he was going to handle it.

"Mister Spock, what did you think of that last tricorder transmission for the library computer?" Kirk asked his First Officer over the communicator.

"It was quite adequate, Captain. No data dropouts, and the transmission quality was . . ."

Kirk sighed and often wished that his First Officer were not so highly

logical that every statement was taken in its literal meaning. "Mister

Spock, I was inquiring about your reaction to its contents"

"My apologies, sir. Federation language is often imprecise and nonlogical.

To answer your question, Captain, I suspect that we have indeed found a

lost planet," Spock's voice came back.

"Everything points to the strong possibility that Mercaniad and its planet were thrust into the interarm

void by the same sort of gravitational anomaly that caused our problems

with the Enterprise. I also suspect that the
gravitational strain placed
upon Mercaniad by the transition was the cause of
its current instability
as an irregular variable."

"In short, it shook up that star a bit, too."

"Quite correct, sir."

"Any comments on the humanoid inhabitants?"

"That's Doctor McCoy's department,

Captain. But

it's no surprise to find a remnant of the

general humanoid life form here-if

this star system did come from the Orion Arm, as we

suspect-since this life

form seems to have been seeded rather randomly throughout this

sector of the

Galaxy. I would indeed like to beam down and compare

it to the culture of

Vulcan"

"In due time, Spock. Our appearance alone

has been enough to shake up the

Mercans. They're having enough trouble adjusting to us,

so I don't want you

to beam down just yet. I'm sure you understand . .

." Kirk didn't go any

further along that line of thought. He wasn't

afraid of insulting Spock by
reference to the Vulcan's highly different
appearance. Kirk was instead
counting on the possibility of using Spock at a
later point if it really
became necessary to convince the Guardians of the
ubiquitous nature of life
in the Galaxy

But he was getting tired of waiting. Several days
passed during which
nothing happened. Pallar didn't reappear, and
they didn't see Lenos again.

The quarters afforded them were comfortable and pleasant,
although the
landing party from the Enterprise had some difficulty
really becoming
comfortable in quarters designed for humanoids more
than two meters tall
with very long legs.

They were well-fed, although the food was different from that
on the
Enterprise. And it was for this reason that Kirk had
brought Doctor McCoy
along. The party's intestinal flora was
incompatible with the Mercan food,

a situation that was commonplace in interstellar exploration and even in interstellar commerce. Bones McCoy was completely prepared to handle this contingency. The landing party found themselves incapacitated by Proxmire's Syndrome for only a few hours. They were free to wander at will around the city and island of Celerbitan, which was just about the only entertainment available to them.

Orun had

shown them the Merc4n equivalent of books-- small cubes like

Orun's map of Mercan that unfolded into sequential sheets of paperlike substance with printing on the sheets in the as-yet-undeciphered Mercan written symbols that looked so much like Arabic script on Earth.

Scotty asked for-and got Mercan scientific and

technical books, then discovered to his disgust that he

couldn't read them, much less even understand the drawings, symbols, and schematics which followed

a

totally different set of conventionalized standards
than

he was familiar with.

"It's gibberish," the engineer complained. "I never
thought I'd come up
against a technology I couldn't understand. But I
canna even get started
with Mercan technology."

"What seems to be the big problem, Scotty?"

Kirk wanted to know.

"There is no time base"

"What?"

"Our basic measurements are distance, mass, and
time. The Mercans have no
concept of time. They use force, mass, and distance
with their "time" unit
derived from the work equation . . . which makes it
all very messy to
handle."

"Somewhat like the number system in the Russian and
French languages on
Earth," Kirk observed.

"Eh?"

"Counting in either of those Earth languages is
complicated," Kirk pointed

out. "But it certainly didn't keep scientists who used those languages from coming up with some outstanding work in mathematics, science, and technology. Obviously the Mercans have overcome what appears to be a serious mental problem to us."

"That they have . . . but their transporter technology may turn out to be neglected technology, Captain."

"Oh? What do you mean by that?"

Scotty thought a moment before he tried to explain.

"Well, you know the engineer's outlook on any system: If it's working, let it alone! The traveler system's been working for them in a perfectly satisfactory manner insofar as they're concerned, so they're following the same approach. Why should they try to improve it? It's working. Therefore, their technology in that field has degenerated to the level needed only to repair and maintain the system . . . which is always a considerably lower-level technology than that required to design and build

it in the first place."

"Well, do you think the Technic might have some additional information that the Guardians don't have?"

"Undoubtedly . . . but we've yet to get to know the Technic and their level of technical sophistication, Captain. In the meantime, I've got to try to decipher this mess of pottage"

Kirk shook his head. "Transmit your data up to Spock. He's got the library computer to work with. It shouldn't take him very long to come up with a conversion program."

The four of them, escorted by Orun, walked about the "City" of Celerbitan.

There were no transportation vehicles on the streets, and Kirk finally got used to the almost continual ringing of transporter activity as people and goods appeared and disappeared around them. How did they know where to transport to?

That question was answered when Orun's cubical topological map of the Abode

turned out to be the Transporter Directory.

Orun had only to indicate on

the map with his finger the place where he wished to go,

and the basic

coordinates were displayed, the map folded and

unfolded to depict the

intended destination in even greater detail on a

smaller scale, and the

coordinates more refined by continued passes through the

Directory.

It was obvious that the Mercans possessed the

electronics capability to

build sophisticated picocomputers . . .

because that's exactly what the

Traveler Directory turned out to be.

However, Orun couldn't use the traveler because his

control unit had been

taken from him.

And this really locked them up in the City of

Celerbitan and confined them

to the island itself, which was several dozen kilometers in

extent in all

directions. They were imprisoned as securely as

if there had been bars on

the windows of their quarters.

No wonder Pallar wasn't concerned over the

possibility that they'd get

away.

Celerbitan wasn't the Earth equivalent of a

medieval city. It was so spread

out that it resembled no city Kirk had

ever seen. There were no real

streets. With the traveler, nobody needed

streets. The best term that Kirk

could find to describe Celerbitan was "a

randomized collection of

structures used by people."

It rained every night, but the days remained sunny and

warm. It was a

typical bland maritime climate with even

temperatures and a lack of harsh

temperature extremes. Scotty found it

unexciting. McCoy said it reminded

him of a series of nice summer days on the

Georgia coast.

Celerbitan revealed that the Mercan civilization

was extremely advanced and

at least the equivalent of that of Earth,

Vulcan, Ahzdar, or Heimal. The

Mercans were in control of most of the forces of

nature on their planet,

and they were using natural resources and energy for.

their social needs.

They possessed all four of the Kahn

Criteria: the extractive industries,

the manufacturing industries, the

service industries, and the quaternary

activities "done for their own sake."

To some extent, the delay of several days that

permitted Kirk to look into

the culture of Mercan lifted a great weight from

his mind.

If the Mercans could psychologically accept the

fact that they were not the

sole abode of life in the universe without

causing the entire fabric of

their civilization to come apart, Kirk felt certain

that Mercan would be-

come part of the Federation in an expeditious manner.

The big question was: Would the Guardians accept the

real truth and adjust

or adapt to it? And how about the Proctors?

McCoy was also busy. His medical tricorder

was almost constantly in use. He

complained to Kirk, "With all this data, I really

need to have my Sick Bay

lab to work with. The raw data is fascinating, but

I need my more

sophisticated facilities on the ship."

"Why, Bones," Kirk kidded him, "I always

thought that you were the

practical-country-doctor type who really

didn't need all that fancy

technology to make a diagnosis."

"When working with humans, that's the case, Jim.

But I can't even do a

blood-chemistry work-up without the lab. And that's

an absolute necessity

when dealing with an alien life form. Look." He

held up a small vial full

of reddish-tan fluid. "I got Orun

to permit me to take a blood sample. Here

it is: Mercan blood! I need to get back

to my lab with it . . . and soon,

in case some of these blood components and groups

begin to break down."

"Bones, I can't let you transport back to the

ship," Kirk told him. "Pallar

would want to know where you went . . . and I don't

know if he has the

ability to throw some sort of a shield around us

to prevent us from being

transported out of here in a hurry if we had
to later on-was
"Captain," Scotty interrupted the discussion,
"there's nothing to prevent
us from transporting that blood sample back up
to the ship. We just take it
some place in the City other than our quarters,
hide it, have the
transporter crew lock on the coordinates
when we hide it, and then let them
transport it back up to the ship after we've
gotten back to our quarters."

"Good idea, Scotty. Pallar may be
monitoring transporter activity around
our quarters or around us when we're scouting through the
city . . . but if
Orun's right, he can't monitor all the
transporter activity all over this
planet." He turned back to McCoy. "If
we get Orun's blood sample up there,
can Doctor M'Benga and Nurse Chapel
handle it?"

"Why, sure. M'Benga's a good biochemist,
and Nurse Chapel certainly knows
that lab inside and out," McCoy replied with a
grin.

"Let's go," Kirk snapped.

They found a quiet part of Celerbitan with an open, grassy field. Kirk and

McCoy stepped out into the field, and Kirk called on his communicator,

"Enterprise, this is Kirk. Uhura, get

Spock on."

"Right away, sir."

"Spock here, Captain."

"Lock the transporter on the coordinates of this transmission. You will be

beaming up a small vial of Mercan blood for lab analysis by M'Benga and

Nurse Chapel. We'll leave the vial in this spot once you've locked the

transporter on it. But don't transport it

for thirty minutes, to give us

time to get back to our quarters. Is that clear,

Mister Spock?"

"Quite clear, Captain. The transporter room reports it has locked onto your

coordinates."

Thirty minutes later, back in their quarters

near the Guardian Villa, Kirk

heard his communicator bleep. "Kirk here,"

he snapped into it.

"Captain, this is Spock. The transfer of the blood sample is complete."

"Any problem, Spock?"

"None, sir, except the usual trouble trying to work through the incredible amount of transporter activity on the planet."

"Well, they use their travelers to go everywhere here," Kirk pointed out.

"We can only hope that the Guardians weren't monitoring anything being beamed from that park clearing. Have Doctor M'Benga get to work on that blood sample as quickly as possible and get the data to Doctor McCoy when he's finished."

On one trip through Celerbitan, Orun was insistent that the four from the Enterprise obtain sidearms.

"You're openly unarmed," the Mercan pointed out.

"Do you know what that means?"

"Orun, I told you we're armed," Kirk reminded him. "But what does it mean to go about unarmed here?"

"It means that you think so little of life that you're unwilling to protect even your own. It means that you cannot be offered ordinary courtesies because you're obviously unwilling to back up your own actions with your life if necessary."

There seemed to be a basic paradox, a touch of illogic, or a contradiction in Orun's statement, but Kirk was not about to argue it. He knew that one does not question another's cultural beliefs of that sort. He could and would question the Merkan belief that they were the sole abode of life in the universe because he felt that he could substantiate his argument.

Questioning or arguing the gun-toting convention was another matter.

"Only children less than responsible-old can go about unarmed without being considered as outcasts," Orun went on. "The only reason why you haven't been accosted and made to yield is that I'm with you and that you look and

dress differently. This has confused people. But I
can't guarantee that it
will continue to do so, because we're certain to meet
someone who'll
discount your appearance and the fact that I, an armed
citizen, have
stooped so low as to accompany you99
"We'll arm ourselves," Kirk told him without
hesitation. "But how do we do
it? What do we trade for the firearms?" The
Mercans must have some concept
of money because of their planet-wide commerce.
Kirk hadn't seen it. And he
didn't have any of it.
Orun answered his question by taking them to a firearms
shop. The Mercan
selected four of the best weapons, complete with
metal-cased cartridge
ammunition and baldrics. Orun simply
signed the chit.
"Who's paying for these?" Kirk still wanted to know.
"The Guardians," Orun told him with a
smile. "The
bankers will simply deduct the amount from the
Guardians' accounts and add
the amount to the accounts of the shopkeeper."

"Don't you exchange symbols of value?"

"Why? The bankers keep the score."

"But suppose the Guardians won't permit the transfer of money for this?"

"Then they'll take it out of my account, and the bankers know my account identification from my traveler control . . . which is in the hands of the Guardians right now."

The Mercans thus revealed to Kirk another aspect of their culture that would ease their way into membership in the Federation.

The Mercans not only had the concept of money, but of credit or money that exists in the future. Furthermore, they had computers capable of keeping track, and therefore needed no "hard money" such as gold. Some computer technology would, of course, be a technical fallout of the traveler system . . . or a precedent of it.

Although McCoy normally carried a hand phaser on a landing party such as

this, the doctor objected to wearing the
firearm. "Jim, I'm a healer, not
a killer. I'm probably going to end up taking
some of these steel
projectiles out of one of you before all this is
over, anyway, and I don't
think a medical man should go around with a deadly
weapon in view."

"Were any of your ancestors medical men,
Bones?" Kirk Asked.

"Of course. Even back before the American
Civil War, a lot of the Georgia
McCoys were doctors. My family has a
proud history of healers in our family
tree, suh."

"Then I would suspect," Kirk went on
gently, "that many of your honored
ancestors not only carried swords in
antebellum days, but also carried
pistols when that was part of the accouterments of a Southern
gentleman

.... Bones, you can keep it unloaded if you
want, but you should wear it,
because I don't want you
to be treated as an untouchable in this civilization.

When in Rome . . ."

McCoy sighed in resignation and slung the
baldric over his shoulder. "I
know. When in Rome, the thing to do is to shoot
Roman candles"

Janice Rand offered no objection to carrying the
heavy weapon. She'd seen
what Kirk had seen, and she knew the meaning of the
weapon in this culture.

"I may never shoot it, Captain. I prefer
to use my hand phaser if it
becomes necessary to protect myself."

Kirk knew she would, and that she wouldn't
hesitate to use either the

Mercan sidearm or her hand phaser if it
became necessary. Having had Yeoman

Janice Rand along on several landing parties on
some very nasty planets,

Kirk knew she was perfectly capable of shooting
first-and very
accurately-and questioning later if the occasion should
require.

As Kirk had noticed shortly after beaming down
and getting his first look

at a Mercan "social-purpose weapon," it
was fairly crude by the standards

of gunpowder firearms. It had a barrel of good steel about thirty centimeters long with a bore of about fifteen centimeters. The barrel was smooth-bored, not rifled. The bullet was short for its caliber, made of steel, and round-nosed-not a very accurate projectile for use in an unrifled firearm, because it would have a tendency to tumble in flight at any range beyond a few dozen meters. The cartridge case was steel, untapered, and had what appeared to be a center-fired primer. The propellant was plain, well-made black powder of a grade Scotty called "FFFF-GO." The weapon was singleshot, with a simple push-turn-lock bolt. It was not well-balanced in Kirk's hand. Furthermore, there were no sights on it.

The Mercan social-purpose weapon was inaccurate, difficult to use, and deadly only if the bullet happened to hit a vital organ. This was borne out when Orun took them to a practice range.

At ten paces--about ten meters--accepted by the Mercans as the standard distance where one squared off against an opponent, only Kirk could hit the silhouette target the size of a Mercan.

McCoy passed up the opportunity for target practice, saying that he wouldn't be using the weapon under any circumstances. Besides, he found himself busy attending to the sore wrist of Janice Rand caused by the tremendous recoil of the hand weapon.

"It makes a lot of noise and leaves a big cloud of stinkin' smoke smellin' of hydrogen sulfide, but ye can't hit a thing with it. It wasn't really designed to be lethal. Either Sulu or I could make a better firearm than this in the ship's machine shop. . . or we could modify this one so that it'd be accurate with a muzzle velocity that'd really hit hard," Scotty observed. "However, it does one thing very well indeed: it gives ye the satisfaction of having complied with the rules . . .

loudly and

vigorously."

"Which means we'd better not give these people hand phasers until they give up dueling," McCoy observed, "or there'll be wholesale slaughter on this planet."

They had visitors waiting for them when they returned to their quarters below the Guardian Villa. Pallar was there with six other Guardians, three of whom were Mercan women.

"Good day, James Kirk . . . Janice Rand . . . Leonard McCoy . . . Montgomery Scott . . . Orun ar Partan," Pallar greeted them as they entered their villa.

"Good day, Pallar." Kirk returned the greeting as graciously and politely as Pallar. "We were not aware that you were to visit us. I'm sorry that we weren't here. I hope you haven't waited long."

"Not at all. No offense, James Kirk," Pallar replied. The long-winded mannerisms of Mercan bothered Kirk, but he remembered that he was now armed

with a Mercan sidearm, a fact that was not lost upon
Pallar.

"Ah, I see that you are again armed"

"No, Pallar, we're armed with your weapons for the
first time, because we didn't wish to violate one of the
basic customs of

Mercan," Kirk explained. "We haven't
met your colleagues, Pallar."

The Guardian One rectified this immediately,
introducing each as a Guardian
of varying rank-Tombah, Noal, and Johon were
the men; the women were
introduced as Aldys, Parna, and Jona.

Pallar did not elaborate on their
rank or their individual interest or
specialty. However, Kirk did note that
none of them were introduced by any name other than
what appeared to be
their Mercan given name, in contrast to Orun, who
bore the lineage name of

"ar Partan." Someday, Kirk thought, he'd get
all the customs sorted out.

However, he wasn't even certain of
all the customs of a well-known place
such as Vulcan yet. The xenosociologists were

certainly going to have a
field day on Mercan, if the Guardians would
permit it.

"And to what do we owe this visit?" Kirk wanted
to know.

"My colleagues here are experts and
specialists in both the operations of
the Technic and in the history and interpretation of the
Code of the Abode,
particularly as it relates to our legends of the
Beginning," Pallar

explained. "We wish to question you about your origin and the
Technic
procedures that produced you."

"Guardian Pallar," Orun spoke up,
"I'm a member of the Technic and proud of
it. I tell you in all truth that these four are not
of the Technic, nor did
the Technic produce them through bio-engineering."

"That's quite impossible!" Guardian Johon
snapped. "They're obviously not
normal Mercans. Look at them! They're
short. They're more heavily built.

They don't have our skin color. And they're
dressed in clothing that's
different from anything worn anywhere on the Abode.

If they're not the
result of Technic work, where else could they have
come from?"

"Guardian Johon," Kirk snapped, his hand
going to the butt of the Mercan
pistol he now wore at his right
side. The Guardian who had spoken so sharply
reacted in a like manner. "Your
Code requires that a person be ready to back
up his manners with his life;
we are now prepared to do so if necessary. Your
Code, if I understand it
correctly, also requires that a person speak
the truth as he knows it. I'll
tell you the truth as the four of us know it. If
you'll accept it as the
truth after you hear it, even though it may strike
at the very roots of your
basic beliefs, we can then proceed to discuss
what we can do so that the
facts we present to you may have the least impact
upon your way of life.

Will you listen?"

"We'll listen, Technic," said the woman
Guardian Parna. "However, be aware

of the fact that we believe the Technic capable of
manipulating minds as
well as physical bodies."

"We're capable of doing neither," Orun put
in. "What we're able to do with
animals is one thing. With people, our technology
isn't to that point yet
. . . and probably won't get there"

"These four mutants tell us otherwise,"

Guardian Noal growled.

Kirk faced him as well. "Will you listen,
Guardian?"

"Reluctantly, James Kirk."

The star-ship captain turned to their leader,

Guardian One Pallar. "Your

Code speaks of manners and polite treatment of
people, Pallar. The actions

of your Guardians seem to be otherwise. We

haven't threatened you, even

though we're capable of controlling power far beyond
anything I've yet seen

on the Abode. We wish to cooperate,

yet we're answered with insults. We

have no desire to unduly disturb the life of

Mercan, and we offer to assist

you in reducing the effects of our visit here. I

have no interest in seeing
either the Guardians or the Technic prevail in
the struggle that seems to
be growing between your two groups. I don't
expect you to change your
beliefs at once, but I'd like the opportunity
to tell you who we are, where
we came from, and why we're here on the Abode.

Under those
conditions, will you instruct your colleagues to withhold
their comments and
attempt to maintain open . minds?"

"Tell us your tale, James Kirk. My
revered colleagues, I entreat you to
listen so that we may discuss it later."

It was probably one of the most difficult tasks
ever faced by Captain James

T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise. He'd
encountered more advanced races, such as
the Organians, as well as primitive
humanoid races, like those on Neural.

He'd dealt with Klingons, Romulans, and other
alien creatures, such as the
Horta. But never before had he encountered an
advanced, sophisticated

humanoid culture like that of Mercan, isolated from the rest of the Galaxy since beyond the memory of any inhabitant and relying only on legends that had probably been garbled far beyond their original meanings by telling and retelling over the ages. Insofar as there was time at Star Fleet Academy, he'd been exposed to many aspects of xeno-sociology and diplomacy, even to the extent of running simulations of hypothetical incidents.

There were going to have to be some changes made in the Academy curriculum in this regard, Kirk thought. He knew he was literally facing the Mercan equivalent of the Holy Inquisition here . . . and it had been a long time since Earth humans had had to undergo such an ordeal. As he recalled, it took 346 years for religious leaders on Earth to pardon and forgive Galileo. Kirk hoped that it wouldn't take that long on Mercan.

Kirk began by asking, "Your legends of the Beginning say that Mercaniad and

the Abode came from the Ribbon of Night,
sometimes called the Spiral of

Life, correct?"

Pallar nodded. "Our remote ancestors came
from the Ribbon of Night once the

Abode was completely equipped to serve as the
Abode of Life in the Universe

. . . and it's been our duty to maintain the

Abode of Life as the sole

place where life exists in the Universe . . .

."

"But all this started in the Ribbon, right?" Kirk
persisted.

"Unquestionably," Tombah interjected. "I've
made a study of the ancient
legends from the remnants of the records that are still
in our sacred

possession here. There's no question of the fact that
Mercaniad and the

Abode, with everything on the Abode as you
see it today, once came from the
Ribbon of Night."

"And, Guardian Tombah, since you're a
recognized expert on the subject, how
were Mercaniad and the Abode formed in the Ribbon?"

Kirk persisted, trying
the approach of asking questions in such a way that the
answers of the
Guardians would eventually lead them to the final
conclusions Kirk
desired--an old trick of debate that he'd
learned the hard way from
Lieutenant Commander John Woods, one of the
most irascible and brilliant of
his professors at the Academy those long years
ago.

"By accretion of the glowing rocks of vitaliar
material of which the Ribbon
is composed," the Guardian replied without
pause. "Much of the Abode is
made up of this vitaliar material. The same
phenomenon that causes vitaliar
to glow with light in the dark provided the energy
to assemble the basic
building blocks of life, the spiral
molecules that contain the genetic code
...."

"Have you been able to duplicate this process?"

Kirk wanted to know.

"Of course not. We are here to ensure that life
survives, not to attempt to

duplicate it other than by natural

processes," Tombah snapped back.

"The Technic has done so," Orun put in.

"It is no secret that we can now

reproduce the spiral molecule from basic

chemicals. However, we cannot yet

assemble such molecules to produce a living

organism as simple as a

mud-worm."

"Why, that is a gross violation of the Code of the

Abode!" It was the first

time that the woman Aldys had spoken up, and it was

with high indignation.

"We are creating life, not destroying it,"

Orun pointed out.

Pallar raised his hand. "Honored colleagues

and guests. We, the Guardians,

came here today to ask questions and get answers.

Instead, we have been

answering questions. And we have been telling these

Technic people things

that every Mercan knows from the time of learning-old.

James Kirk, you're

intelligent and clever. But we will ask the questions."

"Honored Guardian," Kirk fired back,

"you gave us permission to tell our story of where we came from. You didn't stipulate how we were to tell that story. I choose to do so by an ancient technique known to us as the Socratic Method. When I finish, you'll know where we come from and why. May I proceed?"

"You speak of methods we know not of," Aldys replied.

"In that case, perhaps you'll learn as much from us as we're learning from you, leading to a closer friendship because of shared information," Kirk said smoothly. "I'm certain that Guardians don't stop learning things once they have attained the status of Guardianship."

"Proceed, James Kirk. Whether your story is true or not, I must state a fascination for your logical thinking processes," Pallar admitted.

"I wish Spock had heard that," McCoy muttered to himself.

"Very well, Guardians of the Code of the Abode, the four of us look different and speak differently because we came from the

same place that

you came from: the Ribbon of Night, which is truly

the Spiral of Life

because it contains billions of stars like Mercaniad

and places like the

Abode." Kirk held up his hand to quell the

explosion of emotional comments

that started to come from all the Guardians at this

remark. "This

information doesn't invalidate the Code of the

Abode. The Abode is indeed

the only place where life exists in this part of the

Universe. But life

does exist elsewhere in the Ribbon of Night where
your ancestors came from.

Some of this life is similar to you-as you can see.

We all come from an

abode called Earth or Sol III.

There are several hundred more of us who

together have come to the Abode by accident from the Ribbon

of Light in the

same manner that Mercaniad and the Abode were

transported here. Our

traveling world that we built ourselves is in your sky

now, and we can make

it visible to you tonight as it passes overhead.

We're prepared to prove to

you, Guardians, the truth of every word I've said.

Doctor Leonard McCoy is

prepared to work with your Guardian medical and health
experts to show you

that we're similar to you and yet different . . .

."

"This is gross nonsense!" Johon snorted.

"Guardian Pallar, must we listen

to such obvious fabrications of untruths that fly in

the face of the Code

of the Abode and all our legends and truths of the

Beginning?"

"There is nothing incompatible between your beliefs and

what I've told

you," Kirk put in quickly. "It is perhaps an

extension of your

beliefs-additional information, if you will. But we have

no intention of

attempting to undermine your authority on the

Abode or to destroy your

cultural heritage because that is contrary to our

basic code of behavior."

"The Technic manipulation of their bodies and

minds has rendered them all

quite insane, Guardian Pallar," Noal broke
in. "I submit that it's quite
proper for us to detain them as animals and
to undertake a thorough
biological examination of them in order to assess
this latest Technic
development. Since there are four of them, this
provides us with sufficient
samples to perform autopsies on one or two of
them while at the same time
leaving live ones for psychological probing . .
. ."

"Over my dead body!" Scotty growled.

"Shut up, Scotty. That's the way it may
be," Kirk told him quietly.

"It's gettin' a bit out-o'-hand, Captain.

Time we showed them what we can
do."

"No, Scotty, they'll just consider it to be
another Technic development
that they didn't know about," McCoy observed.

"Don't worry, they're not going to use us as
guinea pigs," Kirk promised.

But he knew he was going to have to think fast to work his
way out of this

one. If he couldn't work with the Guardians as the political-social leaders of this planet, he'd have to work with the unknown Technic, whose only contact with them at this point was their fellow prisoner, Orun.

But why hadn't the Technic shown up to rescue Orun?

Pallar was still considering the remark from Guardian Noal. "That would take a full conclave of the Guardians.

Permission to do such things to a life form that so closely resembles us would be a matter of utmost concern and would require considerable discussion. I cannot order what you suggest, Guardian Noal."

"Then I request that messengers be sent to convene the Guardian Group," Noal replied.

The Guardian woman Parna held up both hands and spoke for the first time.

"Guardian One, it will be difficult to comply with Guardian Noal's request.

Observations of Mercaniad indicate that a major Ordeal will occur before

we'll be able to convene. Our efforts will have to be diverted to the Protection of Life against the Ordeal. We must begin moving people into the Keeps before Mercaniad dips below the horizon at Celerbitan tomorrow."

"Duty before all else," Pallar sighed.

"I therefore suggest that these Technic constructs be detained in the

Guardian Keep until the Ordeal is finished. Then we may proceed with our conclave and studies," Guardian Jona suggested.

"I have a better idea," Guardian Noal put in. "As the Guardian expert on health and medicine, I submit to you that these constructs may have been designed by the Technic to withstand the Ordeal. I think we should leave two of them on the surface to find out if this is true and take two of them into our Keep for later study. If two of them survive on the surface, we'll still have four to work with. If they don't, we'll have two of them that

have been protected in our Keep."

Kirk felt that it was time to assert himself as a

Mercan if that was how

the Guardians were going to treat him. "Guardian

Noal," Kirk growled,

slowly and deliberately moving his hand toward the

butt of the pistol hung

from the baldric at his right side. "The four of us

take offense at being

labeled animals. We demand an immediate

apology or satisfaction. All four

of us demand this!" He noted with pleasure that

Scotty took the hint and

had moved his hand to his gun, followed by Janice

Rand and Bones McCoy.

Pallar quickly stepped between Kirk and

Noal. "Guardian Noal! You will

refrain from such comments! Even if these four are

Technic constructs, they

are still Mercan and are behaving according to the Code of the

Abode . . .

regardless of their beliefs. They are much too

valuable to be allowed to

engage in a duel with you or anyone else. Should

you prevail over any of

them, I would be forced to declare that you had destroyed a

valuable

individual and that you had provoked the engagement.

Unhand your weapons,

all of you!"

"I don't understand your classification of them as

valuable, Guardian One," Noal said,

removing his hand from his gun.

There was a sly look on Pallar's long face.

"Consider it in this light,

fellow Guardians: they are Technic people. As

Guardians, we have the

age-old right to deny traveling to the Keeps during

the Ordeal. We will

therefore deny them this right . . . and deny Orun as

well. The

consequences will certainly fall in our favor . .

.."

"Of course." Guardian Johan brightened.

"If we make this known-and it will

be the first time in many Ordeals that persons were denied

the safety of

the Keeps-the Technic is certain to attempt

to rescue them."

"At which point we'll be able to secure additional

Technic people for

questioning, perhaps some whom we do not know of at this time,"

Guardian

Jona added.

"And if they're not rescued by the Technic,

we'll find out whether or not

these Technic constructs can withstand the Ordeal

outside the Keeps,"

Guardian Noal said with head held high in

approval. "However, may I suggest

that we deny the Keeps to only two of them,

Guardian One? If they don't

survive, we'll still have two."

"Who do you suggest should be denied?" Pallar

asked.

"James Kirk, who's voiced these

heretical statements, and the obvious

Technic member of the group, Engineer

Montgomery Scott," Tombah

recommended.

"Very well," Pallar said in obvious conclusion,

and drew himself up to his

imposing full height. "It is the ruling of the

Guardian Leaders One through

Seven that James Kirk, Montgomery

Scott, and Orun ar Pathan be denied the

protection of the Keeps during the forthcoming

Ordeal because of their
refusal to fully accept the tenets of the Code
of the Abode and their
belief in the heresies of the Technic. So be it!"

He spread his hands
before the five literal prisoners, mannered as
usual in the Mercan tradition, and added, "We
must now unfortunately take
our leave. Proctor Lenos and his squad will
arrive for McCoy and Rand
shortly after Mercaniad rises tomorrow."

Immediately the Guardian group left, Kirk
took out his communicator and
flipped it open. "Enterprise, this is
Kirk. Let me speak with Mister
Spock."

"Spock here, Captain."

"Things aren't going as well as expected, Mister
Spock."

"Indeed? It appears that the system's star is
getting ready to drastically
increase its stellar constant."

"Aha! So you found out about that independently?"

"Of course, Captain. The normal monitoring
of the stellar wind, the

gravitational pulsing, the neutrino flux, and the density of the flocculi are standard measurements of stellar instability.

These data plus other factors permit me to estimate that the probability of the star undergoing an unstable phase is almost unity."

"Do you have any estimate of the possible intensity of the flare-up, Spock?"

"Negative, sir. It appears that there will be moderate increases in the emissivity of the star in the infrared, visible light, and ultraviolet wavelengths. I'm not certain of any increase in gamma radiation. However, some of the data are unusual because I've not been able to correlate them with any radiation that is normally produced by a Class G star."

"There may be a lot of things about Mercaniad that are unusual because it got bounced around in that space fold, Spock."

"True, Captain, but I haven't been able to ascertain any increased radiation levels beyond those I mentioned . . . and

they shouldn't be of a
level that will cause permanent harm to humanoid
life forms, although
surface conditions may become uncomfortable from
an environmental point of
view."

"Well, Spock, let me know, because Scotty
and I
have been banished from the protective Keeps,
although they're going to let
McCoy and Yeoman Rand into the Keeps as
experimental controls"

"I take it, sir, that they didn't
believe your story and that they've
decided to experiment upon you as unusual life
forms?"

"As you would say, quite correct. Is there any
possibility that this
stellar flare-up will damage the Enterprise?"

"I need to confer with Mr. Scott, Captain.
I'm not certain that we have
enough power in the remaining dilithium crystals."

"Scotty, confer with Mister Spock on your
communicator," Kirk remarked. He
listened for a moment as the engineer talked with the

Science Officer. What

he heard was not encouraging.

Finally Scott reported to Kirk, "Spock and

I agree, based on the data he's

relayed to me. The ship's shields will certainly

withstand the increased

stellar radiation from the infrared up through the gamma

rays, provided the

intensity increase in orbit doesn't exceed a

fivetimes increase for more

than fifty hours. Beyond that point, we begin

to drain the remaining

dilithium reserves rapidly."

"Do we have enough reserves to move the Enterprise

far enough away from

Mercaniad to get it out of danger if

Mercaniad's radiation should exceed

that level and duration?" Kirk asked.

"Negative, Captain," Spock's voice

came back through the communicator.

"Such a maneuver would gravely deplete the

remaining dilithium crystals

that we'll absolutely require to return to the

Orion Arm, where we may be

able to call for assistance from Star Fleet Command."

"Unless we can find dilithium crystals here on

Mercan," Scott added.

The situation was getting more difficult all the time.

The Guardians and

their Proctors were going to split up

his landing party, which would mean that the Guardians would have

two

hostages-Janice Rand and McCoy. He and

Scotty, with Orun's help, could prob-

ably manage to survive the Ordeal, even if

it meant transporting up to the

ship when it got too bad on the surface of

Mercan. But not even Spock was

certain that the ship would survive the flare-up of

Mercaniad if the star

became too energetic or if the flare-up lasted

too long. And there was no

way to know at this time.

Plus there was some strange data that not even

Spock could evaluate

concerning the forthcoming flare-up, data that could make

things worse..

"Spock, can the transporter room lock on this

signal? We may have to get

Yeoman Rand and Doctor McCoy out of here,

regardless of the circumstances

with the Guardians. Scotty and I have to stay here,
on the assumption that
the Technic is going to attempt a rescue
during or before the Ordeal." It
was a decision that Kirk didn't like to make, but
he felt he couldn't
afford to have his landing party split up, putting his
Medical Officer and
a woman member of his crew in the hands of the
Guardians and Proctors in an
unknown place, the Keeps At least, not
while some of the Guardians
believed them to be animals and therefore suitable for
vivisection.

"Captain," Spock replied from the
Enterprise, "you're surrounded by so much
transporter activity on the surface in your
present location that
Lieutenant Kyle can't hold
dematerialization lock on any of you. And this
transporter activity appears to be increasing,

[*macr]

"There's going to be a lot of transporter
activity down here in the next
twenty-four hours, Spock. The powers-that-be
are moving the whole

population of the planet into the deep Keeps

underneath the oceans, using

the planetary transporter system."

"I have the transporter room on heel-to-toe

watches

and Yellow Alert," Spock replied.

"We'll attempt to get de-mat locks on you

and hold them for as long as we can under the

circumstances, Captain. But

you must realize that we may not be able to transport

immediately at any

given time."

"We'll keep that in mind, Mister Spock. But

I'm also concerned about some

of that unusual data you've picked up coming from

Mercaniad. Any further

analysis on it?"

"Negative, Captain."

"Very well, speculate. What does it look

like?"

"Nothing I have seen from a Class G star," the

Science Officer reported.

"But it bears some resemblance to some of the rare and

little-understood

emissions that come from some Class K stars . . .

."

"Jim," Bones McCoy, who had been listening to the conversation next to

Kirk, said seriously, "that sounds like Berthold Rays"

"You may be right, Doctor McCoy," Spock's voice replied.

"But from a Class G star, they may have effects we don't know about.

Berthold Rays themselves are bad enough!"

McCoy added. "Incapacitation after several hours' exposure, followed by tissue disintegration during the agonal period, followed by death within seventy-two hours."

"If that's true," Scotty put in, "it means that the people aboard the Enterprise are in trouble, because that's hard radiation, and it takes a lot of shield power to stop it. We may not have enough."

The situation was indeed deteriorating. Kirk had a last-ditch course of action, one that he was extremely reluctant to take. He could shift into the "conquistador mode," putting on a show of

force with the phasers of the Enterprise and perhaps even bringing down the shuttle craft. He didn't want to do that. He had to work something out because the Mercans could be far too important to the Federation. In addition, the prohibition against a flagrant violation of General Order Number One ran deep within him. The Prime Directive is violated only in the most extreme cases, when all alternatives have failed.

All of the alternatives hadn't failed yet, but they were disappearing rapidly.

"Captain Kirk, I am not going to go with those Proctors to some suboceanic cave as an experimental animal unless you give me a direct order to do so,"

Yeoman Janice Rand said firmly.

"Neither am I, Jim," McCoy added. "What kind of nonsense is this, anyway?"

As a doctor, I'm the one who's supposed to do the biopsies and autopsies, not the other way around."

"James Kirk, I'm certain the Technic is aware of our predicament," Orun put in. "Delin and Othol have undoubtedly given their full reports by now, and we may even be under surveillance by the Technic. They may be waiting for the proper opportunity to come to us with traveler controls so that we may join them in our own Keeps . . . which are a great improvement over those of the Guardians and Proctors because of what we've learned about the nature of the Ordeal"

Kirk made up his mind right then. "We're not going to let Pallar and Lenos split us up," he stated flatly. "In the first place, we're a team, and that's why each of you was selected for this landing. Second, if the Technic does attempt to make contact with us as Orun claims they will, I want all of us to be there . . . and I do not want to have to search a whole planet to find the other half of my landing party."

It was a direction that Kirk didn't want

to take, but the actions of the Guardians in not accepting even part of the truth of his story were forcing him in that direction. However, he began to see new options opening up for him as a result. He would have to walk a fine line between the conquistador and the diplomat, but his new options did permit him to utilize all of the power that he'd reluctantly held in check up to that point.

"Right now," Kirk went on, "we're going to stop being cooperative. We're going to start giving the Guardians some problems . . . and that means making ourselves very hard to find. The next step in the process is making ourselves very difficult to handle for the Proctors."

He pulled his hand phaser from under his tunic. "Everyone, check phasers on stun . . . and we use them if the Proctors try to stop us."

"Now you're talking!" Scotty put in with a smile.

"I was beginning to wonder what it would take to bring

you back to-being

Captain James T. Kirk," Bones

McCoy added. "You certainly waited long enough to take action. I was getting a little bit worried about you, Jim."

Kirk ignored McCoy's comments. "Orun, I take it the Proctors have no real way of locating us if we leave here," Kirk questioned their Mercan companion.

"That's true. They'll have to search for us, but they can do it by traveling to many places quickly, completing a search that would otherwise take a long period if they had to walk."

"We'll still make it as difficult as possible for them. How about the Technic? Will they have the same trouble finding us?"

"I don't think so, but I don't know everything that the Technic possesses in this regard"

"Which means that they can locate us if they want to," Kirk snapped. "All right, everyone, let's go.

Orun, lead the way and take us to a place that they won't think to look for

us."

Kirk was back in action, and his landing party was glad of it.

As they left the villa, Kirk flipped open his communicator. "Enterprise, this is Kirk."

"Uhura here, Captain."

"Inform Mister Spock that we're leaving our host's villa. They're threatening to split us up. We're going to make ourselves hard to find, so even Spock may have trouble locating our coordinates."

"He's already having trouble, sir," the Communications Officer's voice reported. "The transporter activity on the planet is increasing rapidly."

"It's going to slack off by sunset, Celerbitan time, Uhura.- By that time, the population will be in the Keeps, and Mercaniad will be well along into its current phase of instability. We'll keep in touch. Kirk out."

Captain's Log, supplemental, stardate unknown, inputted on a tricorder

somewhere on the Mercan cityisland of Celerbitan.

It's not easy to hide from Proctors. They

seem to be everywhere in

Celerbitan, passing the word to people and urging them

to transport into the

Keeps. The Keep for Celerbitan appears

to be in the depths of a very large

ocean called Sel Ethan directly

south of this island chain. As a result of

our uniforms and our different appearance, we're

holed up in what appears

to be a large warehouse full of pallets,

boxes, and other packed goods in

the foothills north of the main city and the

Guardian Villa. Orun suggested

that we obtain some Mercan clothing, but I vetoed

this because there's no

way that we can look like Mercans, even in their

simple loose-fitting

clothing. We're just too short for

anyone to mistake us for Mercans. It's time and

effort that would have been

wasted anyway, because even if we were taken as

Mercans, the Proctors would

try to herd us into the Keep . . . and there we'd

certainly be discovered.

We're well hidden now, and most of the local population of this area has been evacuated already. We have water in a stream that runs past this warehouse and through a semitropical forest outside, so we can hold on for quite some time with our emergency rations. However, Orun fully expects us to be contacted by the Technic before sunset tomorrow. As far as we know, the Proctors haven't followed us here. Our tricorders show no life-form activity within a kilometer or so that would indicate Proctor presence.

Another supplemental report, sundown, one Mercan day before the Guardians predicted the start of the Ordeal. Looking at Mercaniad through the haze of the ocean air on the horizon, it becomes quite apparent that something is happening to the star. It has sun spots large enough to be seen with the naked eye. Even at the bottom of this atmosphere it's possible to see extensive prominences beginning to extend from the

photosphere around its
disc. I don't think anyone has watched the
antics of a Class G irregular
variable at this range before. I hope Mister
Spock is getting copious data.
Spock was. Kirk's communicator whistled
at him about midnight, awakening
him from a rather fitful sleep on some fluffy
plasticlike bags of fiber
product stored in one part of the warehouse. He
pulled out his
communicator, flipped it open, and told it
softly, "Kirk here." "Spock,
Captain. I have some bad news."
"I've been afraid of that, Mister Spock.
But give me the specifics."
"The stellar activity is increasing at a much
greater rate than I'd
anticipated or than the computer had calculated
on the basis of available
data. We have thirty hours and
seventeen-point-five minutes until the
stellar activity will theoretically peak, and it may
hold that intensity
for as long as sixty-two hours, plus or minus
forty hours as a three-sigma

value. The maximum stellar activity will
raise the spectral classification
of Mercaniad to Class F1 . . . far above
our original expectations"

"That's trouble," Scotty's voice came through the
gloom of the darkened
warehouse near Kirk. He moved over toward
Kirk. "That'll drain our power
reserves to the critical point. We canna
make it through with the
Enterprise at this distance from the star."

"Quite correct, Mister Scott," Spock's
voice came back, emotionless as
usual. "There is only one chance in four thousand
nine hundred and
eighty-seven-pointnine-five that the shields of the
Enterprise will offer
sufficient protection for the crew, and we can
anticipate at least
two-thirds of the crew being overcome. It is not
simply a matter of
electromagnetic spectrum radiation from the
infrared through gamma rays,

Captain. The unusual radiation you ordered me
to speculate about earlier is

now increasing to the point where I can begin to analyze it."

"Berthold Rays, Mister Spock?" Kirk wanted to know.

"Not precisely, since Berthold Rays have been known to emanate only from Class K stars," the Science Officer went on. "It appears to be a far more energetic form of Berthold radiation with a very high energy content."

Kirk discovered that McCoy was also awake now and at his other side. "Which means that the effects will be intensified, and that the agonal period will not only occur sooner but be more traumatic," the doctor put in. "That's enough to fry us for certain, except in a very deep cave, and it certainly isn't going to be healthy for anybody on the ship, Jim."

"And celestial mechanics won't let us just park the ship in orbit in the shadow of the planet for that long. Mercan has no natural satellite and no Lagrangian points." There appeared to be only one option now open to the

captain of the star ship Enterprise. "Spock, as quickly as you can get any sort of transporter lock on us, beam us all up. We'll simply have to use the energy to pull us away from Mercaniad until things calm down. When and if they do, we'll have to deal with the Mercans in the best way that we can at that time. But I will not risk the lives of the crew and the safety of the ship. Mister Spock, five to beam up."

He started to get to his feet, and the others followed suit, assuming locations for transporting. Janice Rand awakened Orun and pointed out where he was to stand.

"Captain, I believe there is an alternative," Spock's voice came back.

"This star is in a transition state at the moment. There's one chance in seventeen-point-three that we may be able to dampen the intensity of its flare-up, and one chance in three hundred fourteenpoint-seven-nine that we may be able to stabilize it permanently as a

Class GO star."

"What do you have in mind, Spock?"

"My analysis indicates that an additional energy input of quite small proportions—a trigger effect, as it were—will damp the runaway nuclear and gravitational surges within the star," the Vulcan reported. "Captain, I propose to put two photon torpedoes into Mercaniad, one at each stellar pole simultaneously, with each traveling at Warp Factor Two. Those torpedoes will be deep within the star before the star can react to them.

I will fuse the photon torpedoes for delayed detonation so their energy release occurs deep in the stellar core"

"You spoke of a very long chance that it would dampen the activity, Spock.

What are some of the other possibilities?"

Kirk queried, because he had detected a note of hesitancy in Spock's voice that only he, the Captain, would have noticed because of years of close association with the

half-Vulcansthalf-human.

Spock was silent for a moment. "There is one chance
in four hundred and
ten-point-three that the photon
torpedoes will cause Mercaniad to nova . .
.."

"I don't like those odds, Mister Spock.

We're almost better off doing
nothing at all rather than trying to tickle an
irregular variable star."

"Sir, as I stated, there is an excellent
chance that this action will
dampen this stellar flare-up. The chances of causing
the star to either
stabilize or nova are of the same order of
magnitude, but are far greater
than damping it. Your alternative, sir, is
to beam aboard so that we can
withdraw and return when the flare-up is over . .
..

Kirk was used to making decisions firmly and
expeditiously when necessary.

He'd been evaluating the options in his mind even
as Spock reported to him
and proposed the star-busting operation. In view of

what he felt he had to

do-get his ship repaired, which-would require the
assistance of the

Mercans, which in turn would mean bringing
them into the Federation if they
would come-he came to a decision.

"Belay the order to beam up, Spock. You're
authorized to attempt to torpedo

Mercaniad. However, do it before local sunrise
here and be prepared to beam

us up on a moment's notice and jump at once
to maximum possible Warp Factor

if you do succeed in triggering a nova."

"I will have to compute the optimum time to dispatch the
photon torpedoes,

Captain. It may not be possible to do the job before
the star is in your

local sky down there. However, as I told you,
creating a nova is the

slimmest chance of all. But you can be assured that

I will take whatever

actions are necessary to save both

the landing party and the ship, should something go awry."

"I'm sure you will, Mister Spock," Kirk
told the communicator.

"He will," McCoy put in. He knew the

Vulcan, too. Spock wasn't a conniving
First Officer eager to assume command. He disliked
command as much as Kirk
relished it.

"Do I have your permission to proceed with the launching
of two photon
torpedoes at Mercaniad at my. discretion,
Captain?"

"Yes, Mister Spock, you do. Keep me
informed."

"And just remember, Spock, we're down here on
the surface without the
ship's shielding that you enjoy," McCoy
snapped.

"I presume that was Doctor McCoy,"
Spock's transmission replied. "Please
remind him that the ship's shielding isn't going to do
any of us up here
any good whatsoever if the torpedoing does not work
.... But also remind
him that I do not intend to fail. Spock out."

Orun was more than interested in the communicators.

"I've heard you speak
into those little devices, James Kirk, and I've
heard them speak back to

you. I haven't questioned you, since I was afraid that my interest would arouse the interest of the Guardians or Proctors. What are they? Small calculators that reply to you verbally instead of by digital or analog display?"

"I'll bet that your ancestors had them once," Kirk remarked. He showed his communicator to Orun. "If I was on the other side of Celerbitan, and you wanted to talk to me, what would you do?"

"Why, I would simply use my traveler control to query the Central Directory concerning your location, and then I would merely travel to where you happened to be," the Mercan replied.

"Suppose you didn't have your traveler-control unit? Suppose you were caught as we are now without your traveler control?"

How would you talk to me?" Kirk persisted.

"I would not. I could not," Orun told him bluntly.

"Ah, but we can. Since we don't have travelers of the sort you use here on

Mercan-ours are of a different type-we've developed these communication units to pennit us to talk to each other instead of traveling to see one another when we want to talk. It saves a lot of time."

"But who are you talking to?"

"To another person like myself in the traveling device that brought us to Mercan." Kirk flipped open the communicator. "Enterprise, this is Kirk.

When is your next pass over the island chain where we are located, Uhura?"

"One moment, Captain. Let me check with Lieutenant Sulu Approximately five minutes, Captain."

"Thank you, Uhura. Kirk out." He snapped the cover shut and replaced it under his tunic. "Orun, come outside. I want to show you something."

The diurnal convection clouds that brought rain to Celerbitan in the early hours of every morning hadn't yet started to form. The sky was still relatively clear outside the warehouse.

Stretched across the sky was the
Orion Arm of the Galaxy, a murky
river of wan light whose individual stars
weren't visible to the naked eye. Kirk watched with
Orun for a moment. Then
he pointed off to the southwest. "There. Do you see
it?"

A bright, gleaming point of light was moving
southwest to northeast across
the sky at an angle of about five degrees to the
equator.

Much as Kirk was in control of himself, a lump
arose in his throat when he
saw that moving point of light. There she was, the
Enterprise. And here he
was on the ground. Unless he could manage to work
things out down here, his
ship was in trouble . . . perhaps even doomed.

Orun had a different reaction to seeing the moving
light in the sky. It was
probably the very first time he had ever seen anything
moving in the night
sky of

Mercan. "It . . . it is hard to believe!"
he whispered as he stood there
watching the Enterprise move across the Mercan

night sky in its standard
orbit. "I . . . I have believed your story,
James Kirk, because it's in
concert with things that I wanted to believe . . .
things that we were
discovering from our own searching into the ways of the
Universe But
it's different to actually see something like this and to know
that what we
believe is probably true"
"Son, I know how you feel." It was
McCoy's gentle voice from behind them.
"Sometimes it's difficult to accept the fact that
dreams and beliefs can
come true. When the world turns out the way you want
it to, it's sometimes
more frightening than if it had stayed the way it was."
"Aye." It was Scotty's voice. "Be
careful what you ask for, because you'll
get it was In the gloom, Kirk could
see that his engineer was
watching the bright light of the Enterprise pass across
the sky with a
wi/l longing of his own. Star Fleet people are
rarely at home on planets

....

"Will your traveling device come back over?"

Orun wanted to know when the

Enterprise disappeared below the horizon.

"Every two hours," Kirk said, but his

Transjator broke down on that

statement because, as Scotty had pointed out, the

Mercan language had no

time reference in its structure other than terms for

indefinite time

periods.

Orun looked around furtively. "I think we

had better get back inside," he

warned. "The Proctors have devices that can sense

our body heat. If they're

looking for us, they'll be doing it with infrared

sensors."

"Bones, any sign of activity on the

tricorder?" Kirk asked.

"Negative, Jim. Nothing except a few

small life forms in the thicket over

there."

"Orun's right, Captain. If the Proctors

have infrared

sensors, we're sitting ducks out here in the

open. At least the building

there masks our body-heat signatures,"

Scotty pointed out.

Back in the warehouse, Kirk decided they'd have

to do more than just hide

out there. They'd have to be prepared to detect any

Mercan approaching the

warehouse in the night, and they'd also have to be

prepared to defend

themselves against Proctors if necessary. "We've been

lax on our security

... especially since we're fugitives right

now," he said. "Bones, can you

set up for an omnidirectional life-forms

scan on your tricorder with an

alarm that will alert us if anybody comes near?"

"I think I can do that, Jim."

But nothing happened for the rest of the night. Kirk

managed only a fitful

sleep, anticipating the imminent beeping alarm

of McCoy's tricorder at any

moment. It seemed strange to him that the

Proctors were apparently so

ineffectual that five fugitives couldn't be

quickly located and

apprehended. He thought about this as he

tossed and turned, and it finally occurred to him that the Proctors were probably more pomp, show, and bluster than an effective police force.

Kirk had gathered that the Guardians had considerable political power over the people of Mercan because of the Guardian possession of the Mystery of the Ordeal--the ability to predict the flare-ups of the Mercaniad irregular variable star.

This ability to predict natural activities of a life-and-death nature to all Mercan life would indeed bring in its wake inevitable political power.

The Mercan culture, with its easy access to travel around this world, had enabled the Guardians to unify the planet as Kirk had rarely seen before.

It was a classic case of One World, one people, one culture, and one political power base--just like Earth and Vulcan.

But as a result, the Mercans were so unified by their Code, by their obvious social need for the combined astronomical predicting and judicial

activities of the Guardians, and the occasional police activity of the Proctorate, the Proctorate itself had almost degenerated into an organization whose only real function was to maintain a show of force.

Mercanians were far too law-abiding.

When Kirk came to that conclusion, it answered a lot of questions about their treatment since arriving on Mercan.

No Mercan could conceive of walking away from a house arrest. It was just unthinkable.

Which meant that the Proctors were perhaps less of a force to be reckoned with than Kirk's own cultural bias had originally been willing to admit.

The Proctors were not a planet-bound version of Star Fleet. In essence, the Proctors were just the Palace Guard, the remnants of a true military force backing up a political force. Once the political force was so firmly consolidated, the real need for the Proctorate became less. The Proctors

were one step away from being ceremonial in nature.

And that, in turn, explained to Kirk's satisfaction why the Guardians appeared to be so inept and so confused in their handling of their newly arisen competition, the Technic. They just didn't really remember how to consolidate power once they had it. Their Guardian power had been uncontested for so long that they took it almost for granted. The Guardians couldn't handle the upstart Technic-whoever they might be because other than Orun, Kirk had no positive knowledge that such group even existed on Mercan.

Dawn came like a blast furnace.

There was no question in anyone's mind that the Ordeal was about to commence and that it would be an ordeal indeed.

It grew very hot very quickly as Mercaniad rose above the horizon.

"Jim," McCoy pointed out, monitoring the output of his tricorder, "if something doesn't happen pretty quick, we're in big trouble. Spock is

right: that star is emitting a very powerful form of
Berthold Rays. If we
don't get some shielding between us and that star
within a matter of hours, we might as well forget
the whole thing."

Kirk shook his head in frustration. His options were
rapidly disappearing
again. He couldn't wait for the invisible Technic;
they might not show up
at all. He couldn't count on Spock's
actions in torpedoing Mercaniad; it
might occur too late to save the party on the
ground from the lethal
effects of the radiation from Mercaniad. He had
to get his landing party
and Orun back to the Enterprise, where they had some
shielding.

"Enterprise, this is Kirk. Spock, we're
getting a bellyful of these
hyper-Berthold Rays down here," Kirk
snapped into his communicator. "When
are you scheduled to torpedo Mercaniad?"

"Optimum time would appear to be in ten
hours and forty minutes, Captain."

"That's too long. We'll fry down here. Beam

us up."

"Captain, transporter activity on the Island of Celerbitan has increased again with the coming of sunrise there," Spock reported from the ship.

"There's so much activity that we may not be able to beam you up at all."

"Have him get down to the transporter room himself," Scotty suggested.

"Between Spock and Kyle, there's not two people on the Enterprise right now that know more about the transporter!"

"Mister Scott, I am in the transporter room now," Spock's voice came back.

"We are trying to lock on you. We can't get a scan-lock."

"I'll take my chances down here on Mercan with Berthold Rays rather than get scrambled in a bad transporter beaming,"

McCoy growled. "Unless Spock gets a clear lock, beam up without me. It's bad enough to go through that thing when it's working right."

"As a matter of fact, Captain," Spock's voice went on as though McCoy had been completely ignored, "there is strong

transporter activity in the immediate vicinity of your signal at this moment. I would suggest an immediate tricorder life-form scan around you at once, because something is beaming into your area now. And I can't beam you out under those circumstances."

Through the walls of the warehouse, Kirk heard the ringing song of a transporterstraveler materialization.

Spock's words galvanized Kirk into action.

"Phasers out and on stun," Kirk snapped, pulling his phaser from beneath his tunic. "Rand, Bones, tricorder sweep. Where are they?"

"Outside the building, Captain," Janice Rand reported, swinging her tricorder around.

"How many?"

"Three of them, sir."

"Do we take up defensive positions in here?"

Scott wanted to know.

"No, they might burn this place down around us.

They're still

materializing, so they aren't organized yet.

We'll attack before

they get the chance." Kirk headed toward one of the

big doors to

the warehouse. "Rand, McCoy, cover Scotty

and me. We'll go for

the stream and get them in cross fire. Once

we're down, we'll

cover for you."

Although Kirk was in a lighter gravity field

than standard, he

discovered that he didn't move faster than

Orun, who beat him to

the door, his Mercan single-shot firearm drawn

and ready to blast

away for effect if necessary. The Mercan assumed

a crouch in the

doorway, firearm held out in front of him with

both hands, ready

to fire.

But Orun dropped his gun to his side, then

holstered it just as Kirk and

Scott got ready to make their dash through the door

to the streambed.

"James Kirk, hold! Our visitors are
Delin and Othol with a Technic leader!"

Orun shouted. "They've come, just as I knew they
would."

Kirk held up his hand to his landing party and did
not put his phaser away.

"Orun, check them. Make certain they're
alone. This could be a Proctorate
trap."

"It's no trap," Orun told him. "Not with a
prominent Technic leader in the
group." The tall Mercan walked out into the glaring
sunlight toward the
group of three Mercans which was approaching the
warehouse from the forest
margin near the stream.

"Whew!" McCoy breathed a sigh of relief.

"Talk about the cavalry coming
over the hill to the rescue at the last moment . .
.."

"You're an incurable romanticist,
Bones," Kirk remarked, securing his
phaser as he saw for himself that it was indeed the
rescue group that Orun
had forecast.

"Well, perhaps not at the last moment," the doctor added, correcting himself. "But another couple of hours in this growing Berthold radiation would have made it the last moment."

Kirk flipped open his communicator.

"Enterprise, this is Kirk. Spock, the transporter activity you detected was a group of three of their technical people coming to rescue us."

"Thank you for reporting, Captain. We were getting ready to beam you out of there," Spock's voice replied.

"I don't think that will be necessary now, Spock.

We've made contact here with the group that has the best chance of being able to help Scotty."

"Very well, sir, but there is still considerable transporter activity going on within a ten-kilometer radius of your location, alth.not enough to prevent us from obtaining a good transporter lock on you. Prudence dictates that we maintain readiness here to beam up a large party if necessary," the First Officer of the Enterprise

suggested.

"Logical, Spock."

"Of course, Captain."

"Kirk, come!" Orun called out to them.

"Keep this channel open, Spock." He turned to Janice Rand. "Yeoman, keep your communicator open to Spock. Secure phasers, everyone. Let's go meet our rescuers."

Kirk recognized the woman Delin and the other young Mercan, Othol, both of whom had been present at their original beam-down site. They greeted the Federation party with palms up, the Mercan sign of welcome. A tall Mercan man, obviously older than the rest, with thinning head hair and a spotty loss of protective skin coloring on his high cheekbones and other prominent high points of his face, extended his palms up to Kirk. "Welcome, James Kirk. And welcome to your companions. I am Thallan of the Technic Peers. Please accept the apologies of the Technic for not coming to your aid

before this, but we could not do so without creating a confrontation with the Proctorate"

"Your apologies are accepted, Thallan,"

Kirk told him, offering him palms up in return. He started to introduce the remainder of his landing party, when Thallan interrupted.

"We know of them, James Kirk. Formal introductions should wait until we have traveled to the safety of our private Keep under Eronde," the Technic leader said. "We dare not stay out here too long because Mercaniad is becoming more active every moment. We're also in danger of the Proctorate discovering our traveling here, in spite of their heavy activity in getting the populace into the Keeps. . his He handed a small device to Kirk while Orun distributed others to the Federation landing party. Kirk recognized it as a Mercan traveler control.

"Thallan, we're not from Mercan. We don't know how to operate these."

Thallan nodded. "As I had expected from Othol's report. Very well, if you'll follow my instructions, we'll travel to our Keep"

The Technic leader's brief lecture on operation of the Mercan transport-control unit was interrupted by the ringing sound of multiple transporter materializations around them.

Within seconds, the entire group was surrounded by nine armed Proctors who materialized with weapons drawn and ready.

Prime Proctor Lenos himself materialized not five meters from Kirk and Thallan.

"Long life to you, Thallan. And to Othol and Delin as well," Lenos said with just a touch of mockery in his voice. "We knew that if we waited long enough, you'd rise to the bait in this trap and attempt to save your

Technic constructs. Now, hand me your traveler controls, all of you. We are going to travel together, but not to Eronde."

"Proctor Lenos, you have no right under the Code

to detain us," Thallan

protested, making no move to surrender his
traveling control.

"I'm operating under a warrant from the Guardian

One to detain these four

Technic constructs and any Mercan who is
accompanying them," Lenos replied

in less than cordial tones, the cultured
mannerisms of Mercan slipping away
under the increasing emotional strain of the encounter.

"They've made

insane statements to the Guardian Group leaders

concerning the truth of the

Code of the Abode and the accepted legends of the

Beginning. Hand me your

traveling control"

"They're not Technic constructs, nor are they

part of the Technic group,

Lenos," Thallan replied, still holding

his control. "I haven't seen them

before and know of them only what Othol and Delin here
have reported to

"They're not from the Abode, Lenos," Orun

repeated. "I've told the Guardian

One this fact. He doesn't believe me."

"This is why all of you must travel with me,"

Lenos commanded. "You are all afflicted with this insanity and will require retraining. We will travel with you all to the Retraining Keep, where you'll be examined by the Guardians and subjected to retraining . . . except that your deformed constructs here will be used for medical studies . . ."

Insofar as Kirk was concerned, this was getting out of hand again very quickly, and the Proctorate trap he'd feared had now been sprung and was leading them into a worsening situation. In addition, it was getting hot!

Beads of sweat stood out on the faces of the other three members of his party, and sweat ran down his own face and into the corners of his eyes, making it difficult for him to see without rubbing his eyes. Now he knew

why the Mercans wore the headbands

It was a situation in which he was going to have to act.

Kirk turned his head to Janice Rand, who was standing next to him. "Do you

have the comm channel open?"

"Yes, sir."

Kirk stepped between Lenos and Thallan and looked up at the armored

Proctor, who towered above him. "Lenos, it is time I proved to you that I'm

right!" He called loudly so that Janice Rand's communicator would pick up

his voice, hoping as he did so that Lenos wouldn't overreact. Lenos didn't;

he merely stared in disbelief as Kirk spoke.

"Enterprise, this is Kirk.

Spock, beam down immediately. Transporter crew, stand by to beam the entire group back aboard on my command."

He was counting on Spock's disciplined mind to follow orders precisely and immediately . . . and he was not disappointed.

Almost at once, there was the ringing of the transporter beam from the

Enterprise off to his left. He hadn't noticed before, but there was a

slight difference in the sound between the Mercan traveler and the

Federation transporter unit.

Spock appeared, his gaunt form almost as tall as

the Mercans around him but
with his upswept eyebrows and pointed ears a
definite and obvious
difference. Spock had not only acted immediately but
also anticipated
Kirk's command, because he had a tricorder slung
over his shoulder and a
Type II hand phaser nestled in his right hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Mercan, permit me
to introduce the First Officer
of the star ship Enterprise and my
second-in-command, Mister Spock from
Vulcan . . . another abode of life,"
Kirk announced with exaggerated
politeness.

Thallan was obviously surprised by this appearance
of the Vulcan, but his
expression slowly turned into one of excitement and
pleasure as he drew his
lips back in a Mercan smile.

On the other hand, Proctor Lenos appeared
confused. He looked at Thallan,
then at Kirk, then at Spock. "How did you
do that?" Lenos asked in disbelief. "We've put a traveling blockage in

the central traveler-control system to prevent anyone from traveling here except with my traveler code."

"There's a slight difference in the way our traveler works, Lenos," Kirk put in, taking a guess.

"Quite correct," Spock added. "We detected the suppressor field and were able to phase around it. And we're ready in the ship, Captain, to take whatever action is necessary."

Kirk took out his phaser and signaled his party to do the same. "All of you will travel with us. We have a Keep in the sky, our traveling device which is going around the Abode at this time. Lenos, you and your Proctors will please give us your firearms at once."

"We are the Proctors here! We give the orders! Not you!" Lenos snarled, reaching for his sidearm. "Proctors! Fire on this construct!"

The Proctors didn't have a chance. One of them raised his multi-round long-barreled pistol, but that was as far as he got. Spock reacted first.

The Proctor dropped to the ground, stunned into unconsciousness by Spock's phaser bolt.

By that time, Scotty and Janice Rand had dropped four of the other Proctors in the squad, using the stun setting on their hand phasers.

Kirk didn't even have time to react, so well-trained were his people.

There was absolute silence for a long moment while the reality of what they had just witnessed sank in for the remaining Mercan Proctors . . . and for the other Mercan people of the Technic group who were there.

"Thank you, Spock," Kirk said.

Spock was resetting his phaser. He merely raised his eyebrow.

"What . . . what happened to my Proctors?"

Lenos stammered, lowering his firearm. The remaining three Proctors in his squad, seeing their leader do this, also lowered their weapons.

"They're merely unconscious. They'll be all right in a short while," Kirk

said. "I told you we weren't from the Abode.

I'm sorry that it took

violence to demonstrate something to you that you could not

believe. Now,

hand us your weapons, Lenos. Thallan, if your

Technic people will keep

their weapons holstered, I won't require that you

surrender."

"James Kirk, you and your companions are

obviously not from the Abode, and

you possess technical power in weaponry far beyond

ours," the Technic

leader said. "We're at your mercy, sir."

"On the contrary, you are our guests," Kirk

replied smoothly. "And that

includes you, Lenos. We've got

seventeen to beam up, so we'll start with

the Proctors first in groups of six"

As Kirk had expected, the Mercans were totally

dazed when they materialized

aboard the Enterprise. This gave the ship's

security detachment time to

step onto the transporter stage, one man to a

proctor.

"Put the Proctor squad in detention

cabins," Kirk ordered. "Thallan, Orun,

Othol, Delin, Lenos. . . please come with
Commander Spock and me to the
Bridge. Scotty, you've got work to do conserving
power for our shields.

Bones, find out what happened to Orun's blood
sample and come to the Bridge
with the details as soon as you have them."

"Right you are, Captain," Scotty murmured,
and disappeared toward a
turbolift that would take him to the Engineering
Section.

"It's good to get back . . . and considerably
cooler, too!" was McCoy's
comment. "Now what's taken M'Benga so long with the
analysis of that
sample? . . ."

The Technician people seemed a good deal less
overwhelmed by the star ship
than Proctor Lenos, who gaped at everything.
There was no question about
it: there was fear in the Proctor's eyes. Kirk
knew that the Enterprise was
quite beyond the Proctor's comprehension. But both
Orun and Delin actually
seemed to be overjoyed at seeing the different

technology around them in

the star ship.

Kirk took them to the Bridge. As the

turbolift doors opened, Spock

immediately went to his library computer console.

Kirk waved his hand

around the Bridge. "Mercans, this is the control

center for our traveling

device."

"This is only a Technic mockery,"

Proctor Lenos objected. "Somehow,

somewhere on the Abode, Thallan, you've managed

to construct this very

unusual Keep. I must congratulate you on

doing a magnificent job. It's

certainly much more comfortable than the Guardian

Keeps . . . and shows

evidence of a technology far greater than anything

we or the Guardians had

ever suspected."

Thallan was looking around, obviously

impressed,

but in an intellectual sense rather than with the sense

of fear and

apprehension that Lenos was exhibiting. "Lenos,

you know that I'm one of the

oldest of the Technic group. You may not know that

I sit on the Technic Peer

Panel of Thirteen that provides advice and

guidance to others who have

declared for the Technic Belief. As a member of this

Panel, I know what's

being done on the Abode. Lenos, I speak the

truth, this is not of the

Technic!"

"But what else can it be?"

"Proctor Lenos, your mind is no different

than mine except that I have been

trained to accept and adapt to new ways, new

things, and new thoughts,"

Thallan told him. "You've been trained

to follow the orders of the

Guardians without question and to accept their dogma . .

. without

question. You may have a difficult time accepting the

reality of this

change that has come to Mercan from the Ribbon of

Light. You'll have to

learn to accept this change . . . or you will no

longer be able to function

as Prime Proctor. In fact, all of us are

going to have to learn how to
accept some changes we never anticipated, even
in our wildest heresies
about the Code."

That, of course, was precisely what was worrying
Captain James Kirk at the
moment.

But in spite of his concern over the possibility of
having violated General
Order Number One, Kirk's first thoughts were of
his command-the Enterprise
and her crew, who were now in mortal danger, with very
few options
available. In fact, Kirk had had
to narrow his range of options
considerably by the pressure, of events.

He did have a new option now, however. He had
the Prime Proctor of Mercan
aboard the Enterprise, for use, if not as a
hostage, then as a bargaining
point with Pallar and the rest of the Guardians once
the immediate problems
presented by the instability of Mercaniad were
solved. And he'd had to
bring aboard the star ship at least four
intelligent, technically cognizant

inhabitants, some of whom knew what they were seeing on the Enterprise and who'd be able to apply the Federation technology to the technology of Mercan once they returned to the planet. The point of no return had passed; there was no way that the Enterprise could ever leave Mercan, irrespective of how Scotty managed repairs, without leaving a permanent alteration of the Mercan culture behind. The door to any sort of unobtrusive visit had irrevocably closed behind Captain James T. Kirk.

Regardless of the internal conflict within him, Kirk had his priorities sorted out and knew what had to be done. If these priorities resulted in a flagrant violation of the Prime Directive, he was prepared to accept the consequences . . . even if it meant losing command of the star ship he had to save as his first priority.

"Mister Spock," he asked his Science Officer, leaving the Mercans for a

moment and stepping over to where Spock was working with the library

computer console, "what is the situation with Mercaniad?"

Spock did not divert his attention from the console.

"Captain, I've been out of touch with the situation for several hours now because of the need to be present in the transporter room. I'm updating myself at this time.

The best report I can provide right now is sketchy at best."

"Well, give me what you've got, Spock. What's that star doing?"

"Still increasing its emission constant across the entire electromagnetic spectrum and emitting an increasingly intense quantity of what could be termed hyper-Berthold Rays."

"How long before the ship's shielding might be compromised?"

"Unknown at present, since I have not been able to ascertain a definite trend because of instabilities even in the instabilities of this star," the

Vulcan replied unemotionally. "It's the first

Class G star of the irregular
variable type that we've had the opportunity
to investi-
gate and observe, Captain. The other Class
G stars of this type do not
behave this way because they're accompanied by one or
more very large
gas-giant planets like Jupiter which produce
a demonstrable effect because
of gravitational attractions."

"Mister Spock, do I have hours before I must
make a decision . . . or only
minutes?"

Spock stopped his work at the console, looked up
with his eyes focused on
nothing in particular, and thought for a long moment before
replying,

"Captain, my best estimate indicates that you
have seven-pointthree hours
before the radiation overcomes our shields. This is
assuming, of course,
that we're not able to launch the photon torpedoes
into the star as planned
before the radiation level becomes too great . . .

."

"Keep me informed, Mister Spock. If we have to use some of our precious power to pull back from Mercaniad, I want to know as soon as possible so we have time to evaluate all the options."

Spock's head was back in the hooded viewer of the library computer console.

"Sir, you can rest assured that I will inform you of any data as quickly as I have it in hand."

Captain's Log: Stardate 5076.8

We can do nothing but wait for data from Spock's observations.

I gave the Mercans a quick tour of the ship after leaving the Bridge. The

Prime Directive has already been compromised, and there was the chance that

I might learn something more about the level of sophistication of these

isolated people. I'm encouraged, but the Mercans may be learning more about us than we are about them.

Once Thallan discovered what Spock was doing, he and Othol began to

cooperate with Spock, providing an unsuspected source of information on

past Ordeals and the behavior of Mercaniad for the library computer to work

on.

I didn't suspect that Orun knew enough

physics to be of assistance to

Commander Scott . . . but he has. Orun is

down in Engineering with Command-

er Scott, advising the Engineering Officer of the

exact nature of the

radiation from Mercaniad so that the shields can be

selectively adjusted to

reject the most intense parts of the spectrum,

thus saving power. Delin's

in Sick Bay working with McCoy in the

laboratory, assisting him in a

complete biological work-up of the Mercans,

donating her own blood and

biopsy tissue samples as well as working

alongside Doctor McCoy in the

analysis, thus saving him considerable time.

These members of the Technic group on Mercan

are intellectually brilliant

people, and I wouldn't worry about the Prime

Directive and about the

possibility of bringing Mercan into the Federation if

I were assured that
all Mercans were of their quality of
intellectual sophistication. These
four are certainly our equals in many areas of
science and technology,
albeit sometimes from a totally different viewpoint
and approach, as one
might suspect from their isolation.

However, I know that all Mercans aren't like these
four Technics. Having
dealt with Pallar and his Guardian
group, I frankly face a problem that I
don't know how to solve, much less even how
to approach at this time. It
appears that the Guardians won't give up their
dogma about being the sole
abode of life in the universe. When these four
Technics get back to Mercan
with their acquired knowledge, they may feel strong enough
to attempt to
overthrow the Guardians. If this is the case,
I may have triggered a
planetary civil war . . . and I must take
full responsibility for having
done so if it occurs.

My big problem is Proctor Lenos, who

appears

to be in a state of shock at the moment after seeing
the Enterprise.

In fact, my biggest problem may be the
Proctorate led by Lenos and even

Lenos himself. He is not a stupid person. He
may well convince himself of

the reality of the Enterprise and of the subtle flaws
in the Code that

he's charged with enforcing. If he does
come around, which way will he go

and which way will he be able to take the Proctorate?

These must be considered as pure speculations inserted
into the record

merely to indicate the development of my own line
of thinking as we

proceed toward what appears to be an inevitable
confrontation that will

undoubtedly cause a drastic change in the
culture of Mercan.

I have insufficient data to take action here at this
time. In fact, I have

insufficient data to act at all until Mister
Spock reports

"Captain Kirk, Spock reporting," the

intercom unit over Kirk's bed barked.

Kirk hadn't realized he'd been so tired.

He'd just stretched out for a

moment . . . but a quick look at his chronometer

indicated he'd been asleep

for several hours. Shaking his head groggily, he

reached for the intercom

reply switch. "Kirk here."

"Captain, can you come to the Bridge at once,

ply" ...[*macr]

"I'm on my way." Kirk didn't even

bother to ask why. If Spock wanted him to

come to the Bridge, it was because the Science Officer

either had something

he wanted to show to Kirk or something that he

didn't wish to entrust to

the security of the ship's intercom system.

It took Kirk less than a minute to get

to Spock's side on the Bridge. Both

Thallan and Othol were with Spock.

"Report, Mister Spock."

"Captain, request permission to launch the

photon torpedoes at once, sir."

"Of course, Mister Spock. Why do you need

my permission to take an action

I've already approved?" Kirk wanted to know.

"Because of negligence on my part as the Science Officer," Spock replied

without emotion.

"Negligence? Explain."

"Sir, I was called away from this station to provide the necessary assistance to the transporter crews for your rescue from the planetary surface," Spock explained.

"During my absence from this post, the situation with Mercaniad's instability got beyond my control. It required all my time since beaming up from the planet, plus the assistance from the Technic people here, to bring myself and the library computer up-to-date on the Mercaniad situation"

"Spock, get to the point."

"I now have discovered that it's too late to damp the flare-up of Mercaniad by launching photon torpedoes into its core."

"What do you mean, Mister Spock?" Kirk asked. "Specify."

"Mercaniad progressed into its flare-up far more rapidly than I'd

anticipated," the Science Officer explained.

"Additional data provided to me by Thallan and Othol have now been analyzed by the ship's computer. I have performed an independent analysis by linearizing some of the data to simplify the equations. My results agree with those of the computer by a factor of two-point-three-nine percent, which is well within the limits of agreement one should anticipate utilizing the linearization methods I adopted."

Kirk mulled this over for a moment. Then he asked, "What would happen if we sent those torpedoes in there now?"

"May I have approximately two-point-four minutes to make the calculations, Captain? They're exceedingly complex because we are dealing with fusion reactions under very unstable conditions ...ddment

"Get busy, Spock. Time's running out,"

Kirk told him, and got out of his Science Officer's way, knowing better than to bother Spock at a time like this. He dropped into the command seat and punched the

intercom button. "Mister Scott, this is
Kirk. What are the latest estimates
on the shielding?"
"Captain, I dinna know if she'll hold for
another ten hours . . . which
isn't enough to protect us all the way through the
Ordeal . . . if Mister
Spock's numbers are right . . . which
they usually are. I can't keep these
shields up enough to stop all those hyper-Berthold
Rays, sir."

"Suppose you were to divert all available stand-by
power into the shields,
Scotty? Would they hold?"

"What would you like me to shut down, Captain?"

"As many internal systems as possible. As many
absolutely nonessential
circuits as you can drop off-line without getting us
into a situation where
we couldn't move in less than a few minutes'
start-up time again. Drop the
shields against ultraviolet; that won't get through
the hull, no matter how
strong it gets, and if it discolors the paint, so
what? Drop the level

against infrared, turn up the life-support temperature controls to the point where it endangers our electronics, and let us sweat a little bit if we have to."

"Aye, sir, will do! But that'll give us only about four more hours of protection And when we get through, we won't have enough power left aboard to boil water for tea."

"Scotty, just do the best you can . . . but maintain only enough shielding to keep us from being fried."

"It would help, Captain, if we could get nearly all the crew as far from the outer hull as possible," the Engineering Officer suggested. "Mass decreases the lethality of Berthold Rays"

"Thanks, Scotty, we'll work on that one."

He switched off and directed his next question to his helmsman and Security Officer. "Mister Sulu, are you prepared to activate the maximum-radiation security procedure?"

"The 'storm-cellar' program? Yes, sir.

But packing four hundred people into
a space usually occupied by
about fifty gets a little too cozy if we have
to stay in there for more than
twenty-four hours, sir. Sanitation gets to be
a problem, too"

"It may be discomfort or death, Mister
Sulu," Kirk reminded him.

"Yes, sir, I know that. We'll have
to evacuate the Bridge for the maximum
protection, Captain."

"I'm aware of that, Mister Sulu. What's the
problem, since you were
concerned enough to bring it to my attention?"

"We're getting a lot of stellar-proton and
chargedparticle flux, as well as
electromagnetic radiation and hyper-Berthold
Rays, sir. I'm having to ride
herd manually every minute on all our automatic
systems. One stellar proton
through the shielding and through one of the picocircuits in
the autopilot
. . . and we could be into the atmosphere below in
less than one orbit."

"So you're telling me that somebody's got to stay

up here and monitor the

automatic systems in the face of this extreme

stellar storm, is that

correct?"

"Yes, sir. And I'll stay."

Kirk thought about this for a moment. "No, Mister

Sulu. 'Sacrifice'. is not

a word that's used in any of the Star Fleet

Regulations . . . and it's not

in my vocabulary, either. If it gets that bad,

we won't stay here. Mister

Chekov, plot a stand-by course of least-energy

that will take us far enough

from this blustering star for our shields to protect us."

"Aye, sir. I, too, would rather be alive and

short on power than to just

sit here and boil like a samovar," the navigator

replied with a wry smile,

then got down to work on plotting the course.

"Captain, I have numbers for your consideration

now," Spock announced from

the hooded viewer. "If we place two

proton torpedoes into the core of Mer-

caniad precisely twenty-three-point-one

minutes from now, there is one

chance in five-point-three that the star will stabilize

or damp its

flare-up. The alternative is
not an ordinary nova, sir, but a supernova
beginning with a core collapse,
progressing to a chromosphere and photosphere
-- blow-away, and culminating
with a total collapse into a neutron star that
worsens into a black hole."

"Recommendations, Spock?"

"With those odds, Captain, I would prefer to defer
any recommendations."

"No sporting blood, Mister Spock?"

Sulu asked rhetorically.

"Mister Sulu, Vulcans do not gamble,"

Spock reminded him.

"But I have to," Kirk pointed out. "I don't
like the odds, but I can't get
better ones. If we go, we'll go in a blaze
of glory. Otherwise, we've got
a reasonable chance of making it." Kirk paused a
moment. He knew that there
were other factors involved, including an entire
planet and its population
of millions of humanoids with a unique and
advanced civilization. They

would survive the Ordeal in the safety of their suboceanic Keeps as they had done for uncounted generations. But the USS Enterprise and 430 people aboard her, accompanied by a small contingent of Mercans, would not survive. There was no time for a detailed analysis, nor time for any agonizing appraisal. The decision had to be made . . . and it had to be made now.

The situation facing James T. Kirk, star-ship Captain, Star Fleet, United Federation of Planets, was but one reason why there are so few citizens of the Federation who manage to ascend to the heights of Starship Command.

"Mister Sulu, arm and prepare to launch two photon torpedoes. Get fuze settings and course coordinates from Mister Spock. Execute immediately."

"Aye, sir."

"Data is on the weapon control bus," Spock announced.

"Launch when ready," Kirk said quietly, well aware

of what he'd just said. He was doing more than merely tinkering with the workings of a star; that could be far less explosive in the long run than the tinkering he was doing with a humanoid civilization, a tinkering he could no longer avoid.

"Data is loaded. On-board guidance read-back checks. Internal power." Sulu manipulated switches. "Fire One.... One away. Fire Two.... Two away."

The unmistakable sound of the launching of two photon torpedoes rang through the Bridge.

"Cross your fingers," Chekov muttered.

"Don't let Spock see you do it," Sulu said to him sotto voce.

"Uhura," Kirk said, turning his seat to face his Communications Officer.

"Full library computer data dump into at least three courier drones and get them on their way toward the Orion Arm as rapidly as feasible. If this star goes supernova, I want some record of what

we did running ahead of that

"shock wave so that a Federation ship may intercept it someday."

"Yes, sir. Shall I continue transmission of routine distress signals on all subspace channels?"

"By all means. Somebody may pick them up,"

Kirk remarked. "If Star Fleet

Command doesn't know we're in trouble out here, they'll start wondering

where we are eventually. They're going to ask questions about what happened

to the Enterprise, and if they happen to detect a supernova out here,

they'll come looking . . . if they don't already have something coming at

Warp Factor Eight anyway"

"Courier drones have been launched, Captain."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Spock, the situation on the torpedoes, please."

"Sensors are tracking both. They are both on course. Impact simultaneously

at both stellar poles in . . .

four-point-three minutes . . . and

detonations will be nearly simultaneous with their entry at Warp Factor

Two."

Kirk noticed Thallan and Othol standing beside

Spock now, both looking a bit bewildered.

"Thallaa, do you understand what

we've just done?"

"f Barely, James Kirk," the elder

Technic replied. "Your Translator devices

do not precisely convert the meanings of some words because

they do not

exist in our language. But I can manage

to follow most of it. My biggest

problem-,and I'm certain Othol shares it is the

fact that I'm having some

difficulty in adjusting my concepts of the

Universe to fit in with what I'm

seeing and hearing."

"Three-point-five minutes," Spock

announced.

"We've launched devices toward Mercaniad

that will penetrate the interior,"

Kirk attempted to explain. "Once inside,

they will release a great deal of

energy of a specific kind. If we've done it

properly, if the computer is

right, if all the data you've given us is

correct, and if we have a
considerable amount of luck-which is a word that
doesn't translate for you,
I know-the Ordeal will stop and
Mercaniad will settle down into a stable
condition hereafter. No more Ordeals. On the other
hand, if everything that
all of us know turns out to be wrong . . . or
if we didn't do everything
precisely right, Mercaniad will explode."

Thallan was silent for a moment. Then he asked,

"If Mercaniad explodes,
what will happen to the Abode?"

Kirk said nothing, just shook his head.

"You took that chance, a chance that you would destroy a
whole planet, a
whole people, a whole culture?" Othol wanted
to know.

"I had no alternative. If your Guardians
had cooperated, we might have
worked out some arrangement that could have eliminated all
of this," Kirk
observed.

"Why did you come to Mercan in the first place?"

Othol asked, suddenly
angry. "We were developing whole new ways

to live together. In three generations, we would have changed all of the Abodel

Why did you interfere?"

"In three generations, you would have discovered what we already know,"

Spock added, "and you would be trying this yourself. As a matter of fact, your assistance to me has taught me that you already have all of the basic data to try it. You would have found some factor that would drive you to it."

"But you signed the death warrant on a whole planet without even asking us about it!" Othol persisted.

"Othol, that "death warrant" includes everyone on this ship as well. I had no recourse but to make that decision. We didn't come here deliberately. We tried to interact with you in such a way that it would offer the least impact upon your way of life. But the powers-that-be on Mercan had closed minds. I'm sorry. Anyway, the chances are in favor of the action working,"

Kirk said. Inwardly, he didn't like it any better than Othol did.

"Sometimes you don't have the luxury of time enough to do things your own way. Circumstances usually force your hand and change things, whether you want them to change right then or not."

"One minute," Spock announced.

"Sulu, give us the view of Mercaniad on the main screen," Kirk ordered. His

Mercaniad was just rising over the limb of Mercan, the Abode of Life. As it came into full view, the disk of the star could be seen to be pulsating,

sending out long streamers of filamentary prominence material. Its surface

was mottled with sunspots. Invisible on the screen was the stream of

charged particles which made up a greatly increased stellar wind. Without

the shielding of the Enterprise, the human and humanoid life aboard her

would have been blown out like the flame of a candle in a wind.

"Thirty seconds. Torpedoes on course.

Sensors will lose them in ten seconds

as they begin to enter the corona."

"I'm not certain that I like the idea of having a front-row seat for a possible supernova," Chekov muttered.

"Fifteen seconds. Do you intend to warn the crew, Captain?"

"Negative, Mister Spock. If it goes supernova, those of us right here will have only about two seconds to realize what's happened. We're all disciplined enough to expect the end at any moment among the stars"

"Zero. Torpedoes have penetrated Mercaniad," Spock announced.

The attention of everyone on the Bridge was riveted on the forward viewscreen, except for Spock, who had his face buried in the hooded viewer of the library computer console. Except for the throbbing of the internal systems of the star ship Enterprise, there was no sound on the Bridge.

There was no change in the visual appearance of the star on the viewscreen.

Kirk whirled in his seat and swarmed up

to Spock's console. "Any change,
Spock?"

Spock did not remove his face from the viewing
hood. "Negative, Captain.

The torpedoes released such a small amount of
energy compared to that of a

star that we'll not see any change for at least
nine minutes. Even a Class

G star is a very large mass and cannot change
immediately . . . unless it

goes supernova . . . which it has not done . .

. and which it is not going

to do after all, because it would have blown away its
photosphere by this

time."

There was a large sigh of relief that emanated from
Ensign Chekov, but Sulu

remained impassive as usual. Uhura, who was
a bit more emotional, merely

dropped her face into her hands as she closed her
eyes.

Kirk slapped the Vulcan on the shoulder in
obvious elation and relief. "You

did it, Spock!"

Only at that point did the Vulcan remove his
face from the viewing hood and

querulously raise one eyebrow.

"Sir, was there some doubt? The numbers were right. They had to be right. Mathematics is a logical science, Captain, and the logic of our calculations was indisputable. The probabilities were in favor of this outcome. I really do not understand this display of emotion.

Kirk shook his head. "Spock, you're probably the first individual to tamper with a star knowing full well that it could blow us all away . . . and you managed to do it. I'll certainly see to it that this accomplishment of yours is properly entered in your record, along with a suitable commendation for cool-headed logic"

"Captain, how is it possible to thank logic?"

Kirk--and the rest of the crew of the Enterprise on the Bridge--couldn't suppress laughter, which was not directed at Spock's reply so much as it was a release of the incredible tension of the past few minutes.

It didn't take long after that to see that something was

indeed happening

to Mercaniad on the viewscreen. Spock switched spectral response to look at the star in both the ultraviolet and the X-ray wavelengths, then had a look at the stellar wind components and the stellar magnetic and gravitic fields. They were changing. It was patently obvious that Mercaniad was no longer pulsing, no longer shooting forth the stellar fireworks of prominences, and no longer increasing its output by spurts of activity, each greater than the last. It was settling down, pulsing occasionally, quieting slowly.

"Bridge, this is Engineering," Scotty's voice broke through the quiet activity of the control center. "Captain Kirk, the radiation level's dropping rapidly and the hyper-Berthold Rays now have a decreased intensity. If this keeps up, our screens are going to hold with no increase in power required to maintain protection. Don't tell me that Spock was

wrong about Mercaniad?"

"Not at all, Scotty. As a matter of fact, Spock is now the only Star Fleet Science Officer who's managed to tickle a star and get away with it," Kirk replied with a smile.

"Did the photon torpedoes do the job?"

"They did indeed, Scotty. You can stand down from shield-monitoring alert now. Spock has probably got that errant star quieted down to a well-behaved Class G type."

"Orun says that's not possible," the engineer came back. "No Ordeal has been this short in duration."

"Tell him that things have changed, Scotty."

Captain's Log: Stardate 5077.5

Let the record show that it was the concept as well as the actions of

Commander Spock, First Officer and Science

Officer, to attempt to stabilize

the irregular variable Class G star called

Mercaniad by a triggering input

of energy from two photon torpedoes. The chances of success were marginal,

and the operation proceeded with my full authorization

and with my full

awareness of all of the possibilities, including

those associated with the

success of the venture. The able assistance and

willful cooperation of three

humanoid inhabitants of Mercan and members

of their Technic group Thallan,

Othol, and Orun-were vital in the execution of

this activity because they

provided much of the long-term data on

Mercaniad that was unavailable to

Spock and the library computer. The behavior of

Mercaniad during its

flare-ups, locally termed the Ordeal by the

Mercans, was also important data

that was provided by the three Mercan experts.

Although the activity was conceived and carried through

by Spock, it was

done with my full authority, and I accept full

responsibility for whatever

the consequences may be.

A continuous watch on Mercaniad since the

detonation of the photon

torpedoes in its core has revealed that

Spock's initial conclusions were

correct. The star is rapidly stabilizing
into what appears to be a regular
Class GO star with all the characteristics of stable
Class G stars
throughout our sector of the Galaxy. The output of
hyperBerthold Rays has
diminished to practically zero;
complete data on this heretofore unreported
phenomenon is stored in the
library computer for later analysis and
interpretation by Federation stellar
specialists.

However, this stabilization of Mercaniad will
undoubtedly result in the
destabilization of its humanoid civilization.

We have willfully destroyed
an irregular astronomical occurrence upon which the
stability of their
culture was based. Under the circumstances, I
had no alternative or option
available to me that would have permitted me to save the
Enterprise and her
crew from certain destruction. Therefore, I took
the responsibility upon
myself to openly and willfully violate the Prime

Directive and General

Order Number One, realizing in advance that any stabilization of this star

would alter the culture and life-style of the

humanoid inhabitants of

Mercan beyond any possibility of restitution.

My course of action in the immediate future is not apparent to me at this

time. I have aboard the Enterprise leaders of two of the three political

and social groups of the Mercan culture:

Prime Proctor Lenos and Technic

leader Thallan. It therefore appears to me that I must attempt to convene

and moderate a meeting between the Guardians, the Proctorate, and the

Technic in hopes of helping them create for themselves a stable new order

on the planet in the total absence of the major lever possessed by the

Guardians to maintain their position in the culture: the Mystery of the

Ordeal, the Guardian ability to forecast with accuracy the flare-ups of

Mercaniad.

Mercaniad will no longer create the Ordeal because

of our actions.

Although I may have saved the Enterprise and her

crew, I am forced to ask

myself the question: for what have I saved her?

The Mercan science and technology may certain-

ly be up to the task of providing Lieutenant

Commander Scott and the

Engineering Division with the necessary support to repair

the warp drive

unit that's required to permit us to return

to the Orion Arm and Federation

Territory. But will the Mercans help us? Or

will their energies instead have

been diverted into a planet-wide civil war because

of my actions and

decisions?

The door signal on Kirk's cabin sounded.

"Come in," he called.

The door slid open with a swish, revealing

Spock's tall silhouette against

the passageway lights. Kirk did not get

up from where he lay stretched out

on his back on his bunk.

"I do not wish to disturb you, Captain."

"Come in, Spock. You aren't disturbing me."

The door slid shut behind the First Officer. "I

have some data that needs

to be brought to your attention, sir," Spock

began. "Your intercom seems to

be inoperative."

"I needed a few hours of quiet. I've been

thinking, Spock."

The First Officer's right eyebrow went up.

"Don't look so querulous, Spock. Even a

star-ship captain needs a few

moments of peace and quiet occasionally. And even a

star-ship captain can

engage in logical thinking. . ."

"I am well aware of the human need for

occasional quiet contemplation. That

is one trait shared by both humans and

Vulcans," Spock told him. "The ship

does not require your immediate attention in standard

orbit while we're

waiting for the Mercans to discover that the

Ordeal is over. However, I did have two

items for your consideration. One:

Mercaniad is settling down into a stable

Class GO star as predicted and will

attain stable status in approximately

eight-point-three hours. It will then

probably remain as a stable Class GO star for

nearly a billion years15

"That means that the Guardians will start to come out of

their holes to

find out what's going on," Kirk remarked. "And

we'll need a plan of action

by that time."

"True, Captain. But we are beginning

to detect occasional bursts of

transporterstraveler radiation on the surface

in the vicinity of

Celerbitan. The Guardians may be coming out

early, having already detected

the rapid decrease in stellar intensity."

Kirk sighed and sat up on the edge of his bunk.

"Thank you, Spock. That

data gives me a time frame within which I'm going

to have to work."

But Spock did not step toward the door once

he had given his report.

"Captain . . . Jim, you haven't been on the

Bridge for two watches, which

is highly unusual for you under circumstances such

as these. I presume

that, logically, you're extremely concerned over the

possibility of
violating General Order Number One in
addition to questioning whether or
not the Mercans and the Technic in particular will
fight a civil war instead
of permitting us to help them in return for helping
us repair the warp
drive. Am I correct in my assessment of
your predicament?"

Kirk looked up at the tall officer who, with his
half-human and half-Vulcan
heritage, could often see deep within the thoughts of his
human colleagues
with an empathy beyond that possible to a human. It
wasn't often that Spock
permitted himself to address his very close friend
James Kirk by his given
name, even in private. In this regard, the First
Officer's manners were
quite Mercan in character. "Sit down, Spock.
You've pegged my problem
precisely. I may have handled this thing so
badly thus far that I don't
know if I can carry it
through from here . . . even if I forget the Prime
Directive entirely and

concentrate solely on saving the Enterprise and the crew."

Spock didn't answer immediately, but appeared to ponder his captain's words carefully. Then he said, "Jim, we were placed in a highly unusual position by circumstances over which we had no control. You had no alternative but to act in an opportunistic fashion in your handling this totally unique Mercan culture"

"No, Spock, that's not entirely it," Kirk objected with a wave of his hand.

"I should've listened more carefully to you when you warned of the gravitational anomalies near the rift"

It was obvious that Spock did not accept that premise. "Totally unpredictable. We were operating in uncharted space"

"Be that as it may, we found the Mercan civilization . . . and I operated with the naive assumption that they were logical, rational humanoids. I was

lulled into this by the extreme politeness of Mercan social customs. I

didn't act forcefully enough or quickly enough. The

Mercans-the Guardians

in particular-are no more rational or logical than any other humanoid race

. . . even Vulcans," he added guardedly.

"You are correct. Even Vulcans. It

requires years to achieve complete

control over emotions, even for a Vulcan. Very

few Vulcan Masters manage to

achieve complete, logical rationality in their

thought processes, even

after the long and arduous ordeal of the Kolinahr, was

Spock admitted. He

hesitated for a moment as though he were highly

reluctant to admit a

personal matter even to a friend as close as Jim

Kirk, the only human whom

he could call his t'hy'la. "It is my hope that

someday I shall be able to

return to Vulcan and study under the Masters

to achieve this total

rationality of logical thought . . . when we get

back."

Kirk rose to his feet. "Spock, there you have

what I was just in danger of

losing: hope! Not if we get back, but when we

get back! I was beginning to

lose hope!"

"I'm sorry. That's my mother's human

heritage making itself visible through

me," Spock apologized.

"But I needed to be reminded that it's one of our

human strengths," Kirk

told him. "I'd run out of options, Spock.

I could see only two paths open

to me."

Again the right eyebrow of the First Officer went up.

"And you believe

these to be . . . ?"

Kirk ticked them off on his fingers. "One: because

we have such a slim

chance of being able to repair the warp drive, I could

order the crew to

beam down to Mercan, where we might be

able to live out the rest of our

lives, perhaps working toward the repair of the drive,

perhaps just waiting

for the Federation star ship that will undoubtedly follow in

our track and

find this truant star system. Two: I've
violated the Prime Directive
already, so I could continue on this path and intervene
to an even greater
degree in what I'm sure is going to turn
into a civil war between the
Guardians and the Proctors on one side and the
Technic on the other. The
second option gives us a slim chance to get the
warp drive repaired
eventually if we back the Technic in the
overthrow of the status quo

And we'll win with our advanced weaponry. But the
damage, Spock! The damage
to the culture of Mercan is a price that even
I, a non equals Mercan, am not
willing to

payea[*macr]

Kirk fell silent. Spock continued to look
at him in anticipation. When Kirk
did not continue, Spock asked, "Why do you think
there are only those two
options?"

"They're the only ones I can foresee at this
moment with the information I
have in hand."

"There are more," Spock stated flatly. "As with

any consideration of future

activities, there's a continually branching

decision tree that lies ahead

. . . and that decision tree has more than the two

stems that you

mentioned, Jim."

"Do you have something to add?" Kirk wanted to

know. This was perhaps the longest private conversation

Kirk had ever had

with the taciturn First Officer.

"I do. There are two items that have been part of

our Star Fleet training

and education," Spock pointed out. "The first of these

is one that I have

seen you carry through on many occasions: One does not

capitulate until one

is absolutely certain that there are no further

alternatives. I believe

that Lieutenant William Burrows of the old

United States Navy, the

commanding officer of another USS Enterprise in

1813, said, "The colors

must never be struck." The second is one that

I've watched you inculcate

into young officers aboard this ship and is just as important: Don't make any decision concerning future action until and unless it is absolutely necessary to do so. If you will pardon me for bringing it to your attention, Jim, I detect that you have possibly neglected both"

Kirk didn't reply for a long moment, then said, "You're right, Spock."

"We were assigned to this mission on a 'rest-and-relaxation' basis," Spock went on quietly. "We were all exhausted when we began . . . and we have not had the time or the circumstances that were anticipated to permit us to come back to the sort of alert duty status of which we are normally capable. In short, Jim, I believe that Doctor McCoy would certainly confirm the fact that you and many other human members of the crew are still fatigued . . . a physical and psychological fact that's had a definite bearing on performance"

"And you're not exhausted, too?"

"No, I am not. As you know, I am capable of greater endurance than humans."

"Okay, Spock, so much for the McCoy approach . . . although I appreciate that you brought it to my attention. I'm sure I'll get it from McCoy, once Bones can break himself away from Sick Bay,"

Kirk observed. "What do you believe our options are at this point?"

"Let's consider the facts," Spock said persistently. "No matter what we do from this point, we've already caused irrevocable changes in the Mercan culture and life-style. Therefore, the Prime Directive no longer has any meaning or bearing on this case. It cannot logically be considered as a valid restraint."

"True. Unfortunate, but true."

"Perhaps not unfortunate. That assessment may be premature. It depends on how the Mercans are handled," Spock pointed out.

"The second fact is that the Mercans have a well-advanced civilization that's technically competent.

In my own judgment, based upon working with Thallan and Othol since they came aboard, I must report to you that they are adaptable, intelligent, and at least as advanced in most respects as nearly every one of the present members of the Federation were at the time they were contacted and joined the Federation."

"I'd sensed that in the Technic people we beamed up," Kirk admitted. "But you haven't tried to deal with the Guardians or the Proctors, Spock.

They're as pigheaded and hidebound as any high-priest class or military caste we've ever run into."

"Perhaps. But I have spent some time with Prime Proctor Lenos, too. He was beamed aboard as a very confused man who had his value system completely destroyed by the Enterprise and the physical fact that we were not from the

Abode of Life," Spock pointed out quietly. "He needed help . . . and so did the other members of his Proctor squad who have been in detention since

coming aboard. Because of our remote similarity in appearance, he sought me out."

"I can understand that, Spock. We must be like pygmies to them."

"There is more to it than ectomorphism," Spock said. "Their militarism

really isn't military at all. It bears

faint resemblance to the Romulan

philosophy. It's not merely an approach that

uses the application of

physical force to uphold traditions, rules,

codes, and regulations; it's a

feeling of duty that you and I would understand, an

obligation freely taken

to guard, to

prevent harm, to rescue and succor in

addition to acting on behalf of the

Guardians."

Kirk thought for a moment about this, because it triggered a

memory deep

within him, something that once had been said at Star

Fleet Academy during

a discussion of paramilitary history. Ah,

yes! Lieutenant Robert Henley!

"You must remember," the military historian had told him, "that all military, paramilitary or police organizations do not necessarily have to be instruments for the application of physical force to coerce desired action. They can be like the classical model upon which much of Star Fleet is based: the old United States Coast Guard"

"Then you think we can possibly work with Lenos?"

Kirk wanted to know.

"It is quite likely."

This was a new wrinkle in the situation, Kirk realized. Perhaps with the Proctorate teamed with the Technic, the Guardians could be forced to . . .

No, that wouldn't work! Kirk wanted them to establish a modified form of the stable culture that they had originally found on Mercan upon their arrival . . . but without the important parareligious factor of the instability of Mercaniad.

"Stability . . . was Kirk muttered.

"Sir?"

"They must work out a system that will give them the same sort of stability they had, Spock."

"Agreed, Captain. Like all humanoids, they are basically a violent race. On Vulcan, we exorcised emotions to overcome our violent nature; the Mercans have ritualized it in their code duello. Since the destabilizing factor was external-our accidental arrival here-perhaps an external factor can also be the new stabilizing factor," Spock suggested.

"Membership in the Federation?"

"Precisely, Captain."

"But are they ready for it? The Guardians . . . the Proctorate . . . ?"

"Vulcan was brought into the Federation under similar conditions, Captain,"

Spock reminded him. "One of the drivers was the desire of both parties for an exchange of valuable information not otherwise obtainable!"

"Spock," Kirk said quietly, "you don't know how much I value our relationship and your logical inputs to my

decision-making process"

"It is my . . . duty, Captain."

"Do you have any recommendations concerning the situation?"

"Captain, I am not qualified in matters of interplanetary diplomacy . . .

."

"Dammit, Spock," Kirk reprimanded him gently, "I'm asking for more of those logical inputs."

Spock didn't reply immediately. Then he said,

"Parleys would seem to be in order. A transfer of information is always a helpful start in any negotiation"

"Ummm . . . Spock, suppose the Guardians won't talk?"

"Then, Captain, you may be reluctantly forced to assume the role of a benevolent dictator"

"A Hernando Cortes? Forget it, Spock. I couldn't play that role."

"How about a Douglas MacArthur, sir?"

Before Kirk could reply to that, the door signal activated. "Who is it?"

Kirk called, obviously irritated at an

interruption at this particular moment, when he had established such an unusual and helpful rapport with Spock.

"Doctor McCoy, Captain. Are you all right? Your intercom doesn't answer."

Kirk sighed. "Come in, Bones."

The door sighed open and McCoy entered. As the door slid shut behind him,

the Medical Officer saw Spock. "Sorry.

Didn't mean to interrupt a conference, gentlemen." Then he peered closely at Kirk. "Are you all right,

Jim?"

"Tired, but otherwise functional,

Bones. Perturbed

and frustrated, perhaps, by the course of events, but

that's part of this

job."

"Better come down to Sick Bay and let me check you over for possible side effects of exposure to those hyper-Berthold Rays."

"Has there been a problem with any of the other members of the landing

party in that regard, Bones?" Kirk wanted to know.

"Not so far. But I'd like to keep tabs on the four of us."

"Heal yourself first, Bones. We've got some real problems with Mercan,"

Kirk snapped at his Medical Officer, and was immediately sorry he'd done so.

"Well! Fatigue has caused a bit of irritability-in my medical opinion,"

McCoy observed.

"Bones, if you came here to check on my welfare, you've got your diagnosis," Kirk told him curtly.

"That was only part of the reason, Jim," the ship's doctor admitted. "I

know the social situation with Mercan is bothering you; I saw that down on

the planet." He indicated a report board in his right hand. "I've got a

great deal of bio data now, thanks to Delin .

. . . And, Jim, if Delin is

an example of the level of intelligence and technical know-how on Mercan,

these people are going to be very effective Federation members. Why, they know some things about bio-engineering we haven't even thought about yet.

"I suspected as much," Spock put in, raising the left eyebrow this time.

"Okay, Bones, brief me. Do you want to do it here or in the Briefing Room?"

"Oh, this will do fine."

"Very well, report."

"Jim, the Mercans are so humanoid that we could interbreed with them,"

Bones McCoy announced. "Just like the Vulcans."

"I expected that, too," Spock remarked.

"And what logic led you to that conclusion, Spock?"

McCoy wanted to know.

"Bones, never mind. If we're that close to the Mercans biologically, do you have any data that might indicate their basic heritage?" Kirk asked. "In other words, were you able to determine from blood analysis where they could have come from?"

"Well, now, blood fractions don't tell the

whole story in this case," the
doctor went on. "Delin permitted us to perform
biopsies on her and allowed
us to conduct a complete medical work-up, including
internal scans. There's
a definite resemblance to Vulcan genetic
makeup, in spite of the fact that
there's little superficial resemblance in the
DNA. When we were down on
Mercan, I sensed they were more Vulcan than
human, which they are, in spite
of subtle differences in genetic and internal
structure. So the Mercans are
not of the basic root stock of humans.
In the galactic humanoid matrix,
they probably occupy a position between Vulcans
and humans, but they're
closer to the VulcanRomulan group. One thing
for certain: the Mercans are
going to cause great confusion in
xeno-anthropology. I tell you, Jim, this
has been as frustrating to me as it's been
exciting. With all apologies,
Spock, I think the Mercans are probably more
like humanized Vulcans."
Spock was nodding.

Kirk noticed it. "Spock, have you come to some conclusions that McCoy and I haven't because of your own background?"

"In a way, Captain. I suspected the possible Vulcan humanoid branch similarity in the Mercans the moment I first beamed down. It was reinforced during my meetings with Prime Proctor Unos," Spock explained. He paused for a few seconds, then added, "I was able to sense . . . to achieve . . . to accomplish . . . I'm sorry, but you have no concept and therefore no terminology to describe it. There is a Vulcan word, unpronounceable for your speech mechanisms It doesn't precisely mean "mind meld," which you have seen me accomplish

The closest terminology that I can think of to describe it is "mind touch," although that is also imprecise."

"Empathy?" McCoy volunteered.

"Something of that sort, Doctor. It's undoubtedly the factor that caused me to suspect the close resemblance to the

Vulcan-Romulan humanoid genetic

group

his

"All right," Kirk said, beginning to pace back

and forth in the cramped

space of his quarters, "now I'm beginning to get

a handle on how to proceed

here. We're going to attempt to parley. But I

want our team to consist of

myself, Spock, McCoy, and . . . was Kirk

thought for a moment. "And

Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott.

We'll speak first with the four

members of the Technic that are aboard. Then

we'll speak with Lenos and

three of the Proctors of his choice from his

personal squad that are

aboard. Spock, I want you and Doctor

McCoy to interface with Lenos and his

Proctors initially; I want you to give them a

complete tour of the

Enterprise with as much of an explanation of everything

as they are capable

of grasping. In particular, I want you to show and

explain to them our

weaponry and our transporter, Spock."

"Understood, sir."

"I'm going to hold parleys on the Enterprise
between the four of us and the
four Mercans of the Technic and of the Proctorate
. . . separately."

"Jim, I- know it helps you think, but this pacing
back and forth is not
only difficult here in your quarters with the two of
us present," McCoy
interrupted, "but it indicates your nerves are about
as taut as a tent rope
in the rain. I want you and Scotty
to work out together for thirty minutes
in the gym . . . today! That's a medical order,
suh."

Kirk had stopped his pacing. "Very well,
Doctor;" he snapped, knowing that
the ship's doctor was the only person aboard who
could give him a direct
relating to physical and mental health. "You're
right, I need it."

"So does Scotty," McCoy added.

Kirk pointed at the doctor. "But, Bones,
once we've completed those initial
parleys aboard, you're beaming back

to Celerbitan with us as part of the
landing party that goes to talk to the Guardians."
"Why me?" McCoy wanted to know. "Damned
if I want my molecules scrambled by
that transporter again."
"Because this time we're beaming down with the full intent
of forcing the
Guardians to parley-and this time I will not
hesitate to use force if
necessary," Kirk told him firmly. "If the
Guardians continue to be stubborn
and dogma-bound, there're going to be some
fireworks comfirst from the
Enterprise up here, then from the landing party on the
ground. And
considering the damage those Mercan muskets can
inflict if one of their
bullets ever hits one of us, I want to have a very
good medic on hand!"
The regular Briefing Room was not used for any
of the meetings with the
Mercans. Kirk chose instead to set up a
complete briefing and conference
room on Deck 11 in the Interconnecting
Dorsal of the ship. There was a
definite reason for this: the standard lounge on

Deck 11 had viewports on both sides of the room through which the outside of the Enterprise, the slow march of the planet Mercan beneath the orbiting star ship, and the brilliant glow of the Orion and Sagittarius Arms of the Galaxy or the disc of Mercaniad, could be seen at all times by everyone in the room. The psychological impact was felt even by Kirk the first time he walked in to inspect the facilities before meeting there with the Technician.

Kirk had gotten used to the claustrophobic life to which every star traveler must adapt. Serving aboard a star ship means living in a closed artificial environment with no actual view of the outside universe except as may be provided from time to time by viewscreens.

Kirk's duties rarely permitted him to visit the lounge decks in the Interconnecting Dorsal where viewports were provided through which crew members could actually see out

of their little artificial world.

So the visual impact of actually seeing

Mercan and

the glittering bands of light of the Galactic Arms

was almost overwhelming,

even to him. He stepped out of the turbolift and

walked to the port side,

where he stood for a long moment, watching the blue,

white, green, and brown

surface of the Abode of Life slide past.

He turned to find Scotty at his

side.

"Captain," the Engineering Officer said softly in

a highly unusual

expression of Gaelic emotion, "sometimes I

dinna think we take enough time

to smell the flowers as we go tearin' around the

Galaxy"

If the setting had that sort of impact on

Lieutenant Commander Montgomery

Scott, who usually saw beauty in nothing

except engineering drawings and

operational manuals, Kirk knew that this was the

proper site for the

discussions with the Mercans

If only he could now manage to get Pallar

and the other Guardians up here

to see this without using force to do so!

Insofar as Kirk was concerned, there was no question about

it: he had to

force them to come here if necessary. If the Guardians

persisted in acting

like stubborn children, Kirk had resigned himself to the

fact that he would

have to rub their noses in it . . . hard.

He thought he knew what the reaction of the

Technic people would be, but

had serious doubts as to how Lenos and his

Proctors would behave. However,

Kirk underestimated the psychological impact

in both instances.

When Thallan, Delin, Othol, and Orun

stepped off the turbolift onto the

Deck 11 lounge, all four of them stopped

dead in their tracks at the sight

of the universe beyond the viewports on both

sides.

Kirk stepped forward to welcome Thallan, but

found that the Technic leader

was utterly stunned by the sight. The elderly

Mercan merely looked from

side to side, trying to fit what he was seeing into his own concepts.

"Welcome, Thallan. There is your Abode of Life," Kirk told him.

In spite of what was now an extensive exposure to the Mercan language, none of the people aboard the Enterprise had really learned how to speak it, and

Translators were still used . . . although everyone was getting used to them by now and hardly noticed them except when the devices failed to make a translation and uttered the equivalent of a stammer.

This was the case with Kirk's Translator when Thallan gave vent to an emotional quasi-religious phrase in the Mercan language that simply would not translate. Yet, from Thallan's tone of voice, Kirk knew that the

Technic leader was emotionally stirred. He finally pulled himself together to the point where he said to Kirk, "I have spent my life on the Abode, working to justify the belief that there was more to the universe and to

life than just the Abode I was elated when
we traveled to the
Enterprise, but it was just like working in the windowless
Keeps. Even the
viewscreens you have did not give me the feeling that
I'm getting now. Here
I am facing the reality of what I've mentally
believed all my life . . .
and it's almost too much for me to accept."
Kirk had timed the meeting carefully. As the
Mercans stood there in awe of
the sight before them, the white-bright disc of
Mercaniad touched the
curved horizon of Mercan, slipped below the
planet's limb, and splayed
bands of color in both directions through the
Mercanian atmosphere. As
quickly as it happened, it was gone.
And the brilliant bands of the Orion and
Sagittarius Arms of the Galaxy
became visible, brighter than the Mercans had ever
seen them before, now
that there was no atmosphere to attenuate the light.
"Thallan, why didn't you tell us it could be so
beautiful?" Delin wanted to

know.

"Because one cannot truly describe beauty that one has never experienced .

..."

Othol was at the starboard viewports, looking out at the galactic arms.

"There is where we came from. And, Kirk, you say those are uncountable numbers of suns like Mercaniad?"

"Some of them are bigger than a hundred Mercaniads," Spock pointed out.

Thallan shook his head. He indicated the three young Mercans. "They will have an easier time adjusting to these new realities than I, even though I

have thought about them for longer than they have lived."

"Honored guests of the United Federation of Planets," Kirk said, the Translator sounding out the full syllables of the formal, stilted-sounding

Mercan language in response to Kirk's use of the full formal Federation language of diplomacy. "Please sit down

so that we may talk. I've asked

Mister Spock, Mister Scott, and Doctor McCoy to join me so that your group

and my group may be of equal size and importance. Yeoman Janice Rand won't take part in our discussions but will make a record of them for the mutual use of both our groups, should we wish to refer later to some matter we have discussed. Is this arrangement satisfactory to you?"

Kirk had deliberately eliminated the usual conference table because in the entire time he had spent on the Abode, he'd never once seen the Mercans sit around a table. When he and the rest of the landing party had been grilled by Pallar and the Guardians, there'd been no table.

Kirk knew why. Everyone was armed . . . including the four Star Fleet officers and Yeoman Janice Rand, all carrying Mark II hand phasers in full view. In addition, Kirk wore the Mercan sidearm that Orun had purchased for him in Celerbitan.

Armed citizens operating under a code duello could not confer in an environment where part of them was hidden as it would be if

seated around
a table. Only Yeoman Rand was seated with a
small desk beside her on the
aft side of the deck. Nor could Kirk assume
that firearms would be placed
upon the table; he assumed that a sidearm in a
holster was the only
acceptable place for it to be when it
wasn't in social use by the Mercans.

He was right.

"Would you care for refreshment?" Kirk asked after
they had seated
themselves in a semicircle of seats facing one
another.

Thallan declined. "We assume you have asked us
to meet with you so that we
may discuss the new situation on the Abode
created by your arrival here and
your subsequent stabilization of Mercaniad."

"Partly," Kirk replied.

"I'm not certain that the four of us are authorized
or qualified to speak
for or on behalf of the Technic group in matters
involving the future
course of events on the Abode," Thallan
pointed out.

"Would you wish to return to the Abode at your convenience to discuss matters with your Technic Peers?" Kirk asked. He was willing to do that for any of the three groups, but he was not about to let them go back down without an escort from the Enterprise: a group of selected security people.

"We can arrange that easily. But for now, we would speak with you as temporary representatives of the Technic Peers. We also intend to speak privately with a group from the Proctorate as well as with a group of Guardians here in this room where they can see what everyone else has seen.

We'll then bring all three groups here to meet together concerning your future political arrangement on the Abode while we of the United Federation of Planets sit by to advise you concerning the Federation, should you care to apply for membership."

"You intend to bring these three Mercan groups together?"

"We do. And we will not interfere with the deliberations
that must take
place between them."

"You don't intend to side with the Technic in bringing
about the new order
of things on Mercan?" Othol asked
incredulously.

"We don't live on the Abode. It's your
problem that you must solve
yourselves," Kirk explained. "Under the provisions
of our own code, we
can't intervene in your affairs on the Abode."

"But was Othol began.

"But, was Kirk broke in, "we can assist you
by showing you, the Proctorate,
and the Guardians how similar problems of living
together have been solved
on other abodes. That's one reason why I
asked you to meet with us now.

When the Proctorate and the Guardians each
meet privately with us, they'll
be told and shown the same things that we'll tell and
show you. But how we
tell and show you things will depend upon your answer to this
simple
question: Do you now believe that we came from the

Ribbon of Night out

there" ...Kirk indicated the glowing spiral
galactic arms outside the starboard
viewports-"and that there might be other abodes
similar to yours there as
well?"

"Yes." All four Mercan Technics
answered together without hesitation.

"Good. That makes our job easier," Kirk
replied. "Each of us has worked
with the library computer of the Enterprise to assemble a
visual

presentation of the Universe as we now believe it
to be, accompanied by a
brief description of life on some of the abodes
of the Federation and an

outline of our individual specialized fields
of knowledge. I'll discuss the
Federation and its history. Mister Spock will
give you a brief rundown on
the general level of scientific knowledge. Doctor
McCoy will discuss our

medical technology as well as the life forms of
some of the abodes. And

Mister Scott will talk about our technology,

engineering, and the star ship
Enterprise. But this is not a unilateral
meeting. Once we have told you
about us, we want you to tell us about yourselves, about
Merican, about the
Technic, and about your knowledge. Everything that we
do together must
always be a mutual exchange, and the first thing that we
must exchange in
order to achieve later agreement is information about
one another. Is this
agreed?"

Thallan looked upon the dark surface of his world
below, then out at the
galactic arms thrown across the black sky of
space. "I didn't expect that
you, with all
your power and weaponry, which far exceeds ours, would
meet us on an equal
level. Our own history is not devoid of
stories of conflicts and conquests
of the stronger over the weaker before the days of the Code
of the Abode
when the contests were brought down to the level of
individual
confrontations. James Kirk, you of the Federation

are not only stranger than
we originally thought you must be, but stranger than
we ever thought
possible."

"You're not describing just the Federation,
Thallan. That's the way we look
upon the entire Universe!"

Captain's Log: Stardate 5079.3

The plan of the meetings that was thrashed out between Mister
Spock, Doctor

McCoy, Mister Scott, and I may work after

all. I'm very encouraged after our

meeting with the four Mercan Technics . . . but

I have to keep reminding

myself that this is the easiest of the three Mercan

groups we're going to

meet. The Technic group will most certainly

make my job easier, even though

they're initially opposed to granting any position

to the Guardians in the

new arrangement; the Technic people aboard believe

that the Guardians' role

is no longer required and that the Technic can now

assume that mantle of

semipriesthood. But Thallan and the rest have

to mull over what they saw and
heard during the meeting . . . and they're not
stupid people. They all took
copious notes during our presentations, writing
furiously in that script of
theirs that appears so much like Arabic. Thallan
wants to return to the
surface, but I don't want to let any of them
off the ship until we've met
with the Guardians . . . which are going to be the
toughest of the three
groups to work with.
I'm trying very hard not to play the conquistador
role by leading these
people in any direction.
They've got to work out their differences them
selves. None of us aboard knows enough about the
Mercan civilization yet to force a viable
arrange
ment on them that would work, much less endure
long enough to prevent a planetary civil war. The
only thing I insist I must do is to keep
hammering
away at them, if necessary, to compromise and
come to an agreement. That is why these meetings
will take place here aboard the Enterprise, where

one disenchanted or stubborn faction can't go storming out of the conference to whip up that civil war. I won't let them off the ship to do it. I must

make this work . . . or it will be a long time before Star Fleet has the opportunity to listen to this

....

Kirk didn't meet Prime Proctor Lenos and three of his Proctors on Deck 11, as he had the Technic group. He showed up with Spock, Scotty, and McCoy in the staterooms where the Proctors were being kept in security detention.

Basically, Kirk didn't want to take any chances with the chief paramilitary person of the Abode, although he knew that he'd be required to follow protocol. Therefore, the Federation group would accompany the Proctors from their detention staterooms along a well-planned route to Deck 11 with ship security personnel stationed inconspicuously along the route . . . all armed with phasers set for stun. The Federation group wore full dress

uniforms, and both Kirk and Scotty carried their
Mercan sidearms in
addition to hand phasers in full view, Scotty
draping his baldric over his
shoulder and kilt.
"Proctor Lenos," Kirk announced as they
entered the Prime Proctor's
stateroom, "the four of us from the United Federation
of Planets would be
honored to have you and three of your chosen Proctors
accompany us to a
place where we may talk as equals concerning the
future of the Abode. This
will be a peaceful exchange of information between
equals. As such, we'll
return
your weapons to you for the meeting so that we may indeed
be equals. But our
code does not match your code, and I must tell
you that we'll permit no
violence on the part of the Proctor group. Will you
agree to meet under
those terms?" Kirk extended Lenos'
longbarreled Proctorate repeating firearm
butt-first toward the Prime Proctor.
Lenos looked the Federation group over carefully,

noting that each was
armed, some properly with Mercan weapons, and all
with the strange but
powerful weapons he did not understand. He also
noted that they'd dressed
differently than he'd seen them before; their clothing
bore more ornaments
and sigils of rank and was therefore obviously
attire worn when conferring
with those of extremely high position such as himself.

He stood up, reached
for his armored helmet, placed it upon his head, and
reached for the weapon
that Kirk extended toward him. "It is agreed.

I would prefer to talk and
exchange information than to sit in this room doing
nothing. There is much
that we must talk about, and much that I would like to know."

"There may be more to know than you're aware of,
Prime Proctor," Kirk told
him, releasing the weapon to him.

It was an unusual parade that strode through the
corridors and passageways
of the Enterprise to the turbolift—a column of
twos with each Proctor being

accompanied by one of the Federation parley group. The security forces were not in evidence.

When the turbolift door swished open on the Deck 11 meeting room and Kirk stepped out with Lenos at his side, the Prime Proctor marched ten steps into the room . . . and stopped. Fortunately, this was far enough into the room to permit the others to clear the turbolift.

Mercaniad shone through the starboard viewports, which had been polarized to cut down the glare.

On the port view, the Proctors could look down and see the island of Celerbitan passing beneath the orbiting star ship. There would be no question in the mind of any Mercan that

this was Celerbitan, for all who used the traveler would have learned the geography of the Abode through the Traveler

Directory. Again, Kirk's planning group had thought through every detail of each separate meeting,

and this one was timed to provide the proper impact for the Proctors.

It overimpacted Lenos.

He slowly removed his helmet,
muttering something in a voice so low that
the Translators couldn't pick it up. His
helmet suddenly clattered to the
deck and he became ramrod-stiff, staring out the
viewports toward his home
planet for the first time, seeing and yet not wanting
to see.

Spock, who was right behind him, saw what had
happened to the Prime

Proctor. "Severe psychotrauma," the
Vulcan First Officer observed, and
stepped around in front of Lenos.

He was quickly joined by McCoy, who looked at
the Prime Proctor and said,

"He's probably on the edge of catatonia,
Spock."

Spock nodded, then placed his right hand over the
Prime Proctor's face. His
own face showed strain as he closed his eyes.

"Spock, no! You've never tried mind meld
with a Mercan before!" Kirk
objected. "They're close enough to you that you could-was

"Captain, Spock must try," McCoy

replied, because Spock was totally
concentrating on Lenos. "The Mercan's
gone into traumatic psycho-shock. He
can't permit himself to believe what he's seeing,
because his Proctorate
training won't allow it. Spock must break through
that . . . or you'll
never be able to confer with any Proctor up here."

A low moan came from Spock, who then began
to mumble Vulcan and Mercan
words. Finally he groaned, "Yes . . .
yes.... It is not all wrong

It is only part of what is true The
Abode is real You are
real.... This is real. . . ." He gave an
almost

explosive exhalation of breath, then opened his
eyes and removed his hand
from Lenos' forehead.

Lenos' eyes snapped open and he looked
directly at Spock. "You have been
very helpful, and I will not forget it, Spock."

Spock turned his head to Kirk and explained
quietly, "A Proctor cannot
permit himself to faint"

The other three Proctors did not go into the same

degree of psycho-shock as
Lenos, but one would not expect that from other than a
Proctor who had
exhibited the discipline and mental rigidity
to rise to the very top of
such a paramilitary organization. However,
McCoy and Spock spoke to each of
them quietly, more to assure themselves that there was no
problem than to
offer the sort of therapy that Spock had conducted
with Lenos.

When the eight sat down together, Kirk realized that
this would be a
meeting of paramilitary men rather than a meeting of
scientists, as with
the Technic group. It was fortunate for Kirk that
he was a star-ship
captain.

"We're meeting here," Kirk announced, "so that
you might see for yourselves
that I spoke the truth when I said we did not come
from the Abode but
traveled in a small world from the Ribbon of
Night."

"James Kirk," Prime Proctor Lenos

said with exaggerated lack of emotion
that was betrayed only by his eyes, "I could not
believe you then because
what I'd been taught to believe could not be
expanded to include the truth
of what you said. Now I see the Abode on one
side and Mercaniad on the
other . . . and I know for the first time that we're not
on the Abode. I
accept this as reality. I must therefore also accept the
other things that
you've said, even though they may conflict with what
I have known to be
truth"

"Prime Proctor," Kirk replied with
equal lack of emotion and curtness, "we
don't require that you or any Mercan change
your belief in the Code.

However,
the reality of the Universe will require you to add
new information to the
Code . . . which will not really change the Code very
much at all."

"Why do you wish to show us these things and to talk with
us?" Lenos wanted
to know. "With your power, your weapons, and

your traveling world, will you
be displacing the Guardians by force and require the
Proctorate . . . or do
you wish to discuss an arrangement with us for
participation in the
conflict in exchange for our services thereafter?"

"Neither. We meet because there are changes that you must
understand," Kirk

tried to explain. "The role of the Proctorate
need not be changed
drastically if suitable agreements can be reached
between the Technic, the
Guardians, and the Proctorate."

"I find it difficult to believe that you don't
intend to conquer and rule,"

Lenos said bluntly. "We haven't had
conflict and conquest on the Abode for
uncounted generations, but we have stories from the time before
the Code,

when such things occurred. You have the capability for
conquest. We would
fight, but we might not win. With my background and
training, I must tell

you that we haven't fought for so long that it would be
difficult for us at

first . . . then difficult for you later, even with
your capability."

Kirk said slowly and carefully, "We don't
choose to use our capability for
conquest except to prevent conflict between Mercans
because of the change."

There were times when the formal and stilted language
usage of Mercan had
its advantages, and this was one of them.

"What is this change you speak of?"

"Mercaniad will no longer create an Ordeal.

To save ourselves, we were
forced to tamper with Mercaniad to stabilize it.

There will be no further
need for the Guardian Mysteries of the Ordeal.

There will be no further
need for the Keeps. There would be no need for change
if only the Guardians

and the Proctorate knew this, but the Technic knows
it, too . . . and all

will know it soon," Kirk explained. "We're
speaking of this separately to

the Technic, to the Guardians, and to you, the
Proctorate. Then we'll bring

all three groups to the Enterprise so that
together you may discuss and work

out solutions for the change without having to resort to conflict."

"You'd speak of this with the Technic?" Lenos asked indignantly.

"We've done so because they knew of the change of Mercaniad."

"An open conflict with the Technic would pose no problem for the Proctorate," Lenos boasted.

"So? You just told me that you hadn't fought for many generations. Thallan

of the Technic has told us that the Technic is capable of building and

using weapons superior to yours; they haven't fought, either, so you're on

equal ground there. But they may have superior weapons. Do you wish to risk

losing to them? Or would you be willing to talk about an arrangement

first?" Kirk paused for a moment and added,

"Lenos, I have fought. I tell you in truth that I'd rather come to an agreement by talking than to fight.

I've seen my friends killed; I've seen my enemies die. It doesn't produce

personal satisfaction for a paramilitary person
such as you or me to fight.

As Captain of the Enterprise, I'm trained
to fight if absolutely necessary
. . . but only if there's no other recourse!

Am I correct in saying that
your Proctorate training is the same?"

Lenos thought about this for a long moment during which he
watched

impassively as Mercaniad slipped behind the
edge of the Abode and the

Ribbon of Night became visible. Then he said,

"Captain James Kirk, at first
you were strange and different. Now I see that you and
your people only

appear to be different. We think alike in many
ways. I believe that we may

be able to work together to accomplish our real duty which
is the

prevention of conflict. Please tell me what you
recommend the first joint
action should be"

Kirk smiled. He'd won two out of three
now. "Prime

Proctor, I suspect we've both been
taught that the first action to take in

any operation is to obtain and evaluate information

upon which future action

may be soundly based. Is this correct?"

The Prime Proctor of the Abode of Life

inclined his head upward in the

Mercan gesture of affirmation.

"Then let us first exchange information about one

another so that we may

work together more soundly toward the goal of stabilizing

and expanding the

Code of the Abode."

Captain's Log: Stardate 5080.7

In a few minutes, I'll beam down with a landing

party to the island-city of

Celerbitan and the Guardian Villa on the

surface of Mercan, the Abode of

Life. This is probably the most critical

phase of our attempt to stabilize

the civilization of Mercan.

Our meeting with the Technic group led by Thallan

revealed that their

technology is welladvanced due to the copious

amounts of iron, aluminum,

and copper available on or near the surface of the

planet, with

high-quality lodes deep in the mantle, where the Mercans built their Keeps generations ago. These lodes and ore bodies have been relatively undisturbed because, without a large moon and tidal strains, Mercan is a tectonically stable planet with little movement of its continental plates.

Thus, it's been easy for the Mercans to develop the iron-based technology we find on nearly all Type M planets inhabited by humanoids.

Although the Mercans seem to have forgotten a lot of the older technology that preceded the universal use of their traveler system, my Engineering Officer believes that the Technic possesses the necessary technology in metallurgy, materials science, and antimatter know-how to provide us with raw materials and finished parts built to Scott's specifications, even though the Mercans don't have antimatter warp drives yet. We shouldn't expect that they'd direct their technology toward star flight

anyway. They've developed anti-matter as a compact power source for their traveler system.

In the course of talking with the Technic members, we learned that Mercan

is also rich in the basic material for an antimatter energy system. The

Mercans call it "vitaliar," but Scott says it's an alloy of several

elements of the matter-antimatter system. There are also some low-quality

dilithium crystals on the planet, but the

Mercans never thought to use them

in their antimatter systems because they had developed different but more

complex techniques. The use of the Mercan dilithium crystals in our systems

would not produce the efficiencies we require .

. . but there're a lot of

these low-quality dilithium crystals on

Mercan if we wish to make some

modifications to use them. Scott's

looking into this now as an alternative

if we need additional dilithium crystals for

our return journey.

We might be able to effect repairs here without the Guardians and without establishing a restabilized civilization on Mercan. But we'd save ourselves and leave a shambles behind. With the technology possessed by the Mercans, there might be nothing left when we got back . . . and I'm sure the Federation will want to establish diplomatic relations, if not offer outright Federation membership to these people. Mercan is in a critical location to support future Federation exploration and colonization of our treaty-permitted sector of the Galaxy in the Sagittarius Arm. In addition, it has valuable ore deposits; even the low-grade dilithium crystals are of value to commercial star ships that don't operate at the high warp speeds of Star Fleet vessels.

Eventually, perhaps in less than a century, the Klingons are likely to work their way this far toward the center of the Galaxy. If we don't have Mercan in the Federation, I know the Klingons would indeed

play the conquistador

role . . . if they left anything at all

except their own fleet base here.

I want to put my thoughts on record before beaming

down, because this is

a critical operation and I want a record

to remain, should something

happen.

But we're going down in force this time.

Lieutenant Commander Scott will

have the conn in my absence. My landing force will

consist of Mister Spock,

Doctor McCoy, Lieutenant Sulu, and

seven of our most experienced security

officers under Sulu's command. I intend to convince

Mar and the Guardians

to beam up willingly to meet in the ship. If they

won't agree to parley in

the Enterprise, I have Prime Proctor

Lenos as a hostage if I wish to use

him as such. I'd rather not, since he

appears to understand the situation

now and is willing to confer, however reluctantly,

with the Technic and the

Guardians. If Pallar abandons Lenos,

we'll get Pallar up here by force. We
may have to stun a few Proctors or even some
Guardians to do it.

At this point, I'm not averse to using coercion
in the form of physical
force to bring the Guardians to conference. We've
got too much to lose

In an unusual move, Kirk inspected the
landing force before beaming down,
wanting to make absolutely sure
of every detail because of the critical nature of this
mission.

"Spock, I want you to carry your hand phaser in
the open where it'll be
visible," Kirk told his First Officer, noting
that Spock had apparently
placed the Mark II phaser under his tunic, where
it would normally be
carried.

"Captain, a Vulcan never appears in
public visibly armed with a weapon
except in Kal-if-fee," Spock objected.

"On Mercan, you must appear visibly armed,"
Kirk ordered. "In the Mercan
culture, if you're not visibly armed, you're a
nobody."

"At your request, Captain, I will follow the local custom," Spock replied.

"Are you sure I really have to wear this again?"

McCoy indicated his Mercan

sidearm. "I certainly don't intend to use it."

"Wear it, Bones. It's your option to use it or not. You're the medic on this mission. Even though medics don't want to fight, sometimes they have to."

Kirk stepped up on the transporter stage to look over his landing force.

"I'll repeat the general order for this mission, gentlemen: if you have to shoot, shoot to stun and not to kill, regardless of what the Mercans do if a fight breaks out. I don't feel it's necessary to repeat any of our recent briefing unless any of you have questions. If you don't understand something, ask now and not on Mercan, where we've got to act in a unified manner. So, for the last time, any questions?"

There were none.

Kirk stepped into a transporter locus and quietly said, "Landing force, prepare to beam down. Places, please."

Then, as everyone stood at the ready, Kirk gave the command, "Energize."

Kirk had selected the spot where they had materialized in the Guardian

Villa with Lenos and Orun those many days ago.

There was no one in sight.

"Follow me," Kirk snapped. "Security, cover our rear and check each alcove as we pass it." He strode toward the corridor where he had seen

Pallar appear during their first encounter. It ended in a heavy set of double doors. Kirk merely pushed one open and went through.

And found himself face to face with a seated circle of about two dozen

Guardians, apparently in conference session.

He strode into the chamber far enough to permit the rest of his landing force to get through the door behind him and array themselves on either side of him.

Pallar rose to greet him. "James Kirk, welcome. We thought you'd perished in the recent Ordeal along with Proctor Lenos and his group."

Following Mercan custom, Kirk replied, "Greetings, Pallar. We're all alive and well, thank you. You may be pleased to learn that Prime Proctor Lenos and his group of Proctors, as well as Thallan, Orun, Delin, and " Othol, are alive and well, too."

"You were able to overcome the Proctors and find the safety of a Keep?"

Pallar asked incredulously.

"Yes and no," Kirk told him. He still carried his phaser in his hand, as did the rest of his landing force. But the familiar Mercan sidearm was holstered at his side. "Our Keep is in the sky . . . in the traveling device we used to journey here from the Ribbon of Night. Your Prime Proctor and the Technic group are there." Guardian Noal, seated at Pallar's right, was looking over the landing

force carefully. He sneered. "Pallar, he is still insane, as before.

These biological constructs of the Technic are obviously able to withstand the Ordeal . . . but I'm truly surprised at the variety of form that the Technic has been able to achieve. Consider the one with the pointed ears"

"Pallar . . . Guardians . . . we didn't come here to argue the reality of our source with you," Kirk said firmly. "A great change has come over Mercaniad, and this change will create drastic and sweeping changes in your civilization here on the Abode."

"What do you know of Mercaniad?" Guardian Parna asked, rising to her feet.

"Ah, you've noticed?" Kirk asked the rhetorical question with a smile.

"Mister Spock here, a citizen of an abode called Vulcan, will be happy to explain it to you."

Spock looked directly at the Guardian council and said in his usual emotionless tone, "Mercaniad has been

stabilized. I calculated that the placement of high-energy antimatter explosives we call photon torpedoes in the core of Mercaniad would damp the irregular oscillations in its stellar output. Therefore, I caused those two photon torpedoes to be injected into Mercaniad. Your sun is stabilized. There will be no more Ordeals."

"How have you of the Technic been able to do this and to determine this outcome?" Parna asked directly.

"We aren't of the Technic," Kirk told her, "but Spock knows stellar physics. Mister Spock . . ."

"Your Mystery of Mercaniad is no mystery to those of us in the Star Fleet of the United Federation of Planets,"

Spock explained carefully. "Your ancestors learned how to measure the critical parameters such as neutrino flux and gravito-inertial radiation, both of which emanate from the stellar core. I am certain that those instruments left to you by your ancestor

Guardians will now show that there is minimal variation
in these parameters

...."

"The Technic has learned the Mysteries of
Mercaniad," Guardian Tombah
growled.

"We aren't of the Technic," Kirk repeated.

"But the Technic knows of this
already. However, it doesn't make any difference.

With Mercaniad
stabilized, the Mysteries of Mercaniad no
longer have any validity."

"Pallar, I warned you!" Guardian Aldys
shouted at the Guardian One. "We
should have had the Proctor-
ate move against the Technic earlier, before they
learned. Now it is too
late!"

"The Technic didn't learn any of this from their
own experiments," Kirk
tried to point out. "They learned from us."

"The general populace doesn't know of this
yet," Pallar pointed out to his
colleagues. "There are only a few who know.

Aldys, you and Parna were very
effective in explaining why the recent Ordeal was

so short. So the citizens
of Mercan still believe in us. Therefore, fellow

Guardians of the Principle

Council, I submit to you that there is only one
thing that we can do at
this point. Do you agree?"

"Kill them!" Noal shouted.

"Destroy them before they can inform," Aldys put
in.

"Proctors!" Tombah yelled.

Three doors to the chamber flew open to reveal
Proctors in their openings.

Kirk was the first to fire. But the concentrated
phaser fire of the
lightning-fast security people dropped the other
Proctors almost
simultaneously.

The Guardian Johon, seeing this, reacted
instinctively by going for his
Mercan sidearm. Spock dropped him
instantly with a stun bolt from his hand
phaser.

"Hold!" Kirk shouted above what could become a
melee as he reset the output
of his phaser. With cool aim, he fired a

phaser bolt into the floor in
front of Pallar. The floor grew hot, then
blew up in an explosion of shards
driven by the vaporization of the latent water in the
flooring.

That stopped the confusion.

"We didn't come here to argue with you and your
Guardians, Pallar," Kirk
stated flatly. "We possess more weapon power
than you can possibly imagine!

This has been only an example of it. The
Proctors and Guardian Johon are
unhurt; they'll regain consciousness shortly.

All the Proctors on the

Abode cannot

possibly stop us, because this time we've come in force
to show you the
truth of that fact."

Pallar stared at Kirk for a moment, then at each
member of the landing
force. "What do you want of us?" he finally
asked.

Another Proctor appeared in an open
doorway to the chamber, and the landing
force from the Enterprise heard a sound few of them
had ever experienced.

The Proctor fired as he had been trained to do:

the first shot went over

their heads. The explosion of the Proctor's

firearm was followed by the

slap sound of the bullet's shock wave as it

passed centimeters over their

heads. The Proctor was immediately stunned

to unconsciousness by a phaser

bolt from one of Kirk's security men.

"First of all, call off the Proctors before we

become angry and somebody

gets hurt," Kirk snapped with obvious

irritation in his tone.

As four more Proctors appeared in the

doorways, Pallar held up his hand to

them. "Cease, Proctors! Secure

your weapons!" the Guardian One ordered.

"Now, again, James Kirk, what do you want of

us?"

"You and three of your Guardians. You may

choose who accompanies you," Kirk

explained. "We'll travel to our Keep in the

sky for a meeting between us,

conducted in peace. Then, you'll meet with an

equal number of

representatives from the Proctorate and the
Technic in our Keep for the
purpose of working out between your groups a stable
social situation here
on the Abode."

"We have a stable situation," Guardian Jona
remarked.

"Not any longer," Kirk pointed out.

"Guardian Pallar, this is one of the most
elaborate and insane plots I have
ever encountered," Noal complained. "These Technic
constructs are not
sane."

"I presume that you're a medical expert,
Guardian Noal?" Kirk asked.

"I am."

"Permit me to introduce my medical expert,
Doctor Leonard McCoy." Kirk
indicated the ship's doctor.

"If you're wondering whether or not we're
Technic constructs," McCoy said
slowly, "I can easily show you data on blood
chemistry alone that proves
beyond a doubt that the Technic couldn't possibly
possess the technology to
create us. You're familiar with bloodchemistry

technology?"

"Of course. That's one of the most primitive of medical technologies," Noal replied in an insulted tone.

"Of course. No insult intended, Guardian, so please stay away from your sidearm," McCoy went on. "I'm a medical man, not a warrior. You may kill according to your Code when you have to, but I don't follow that sort of a code. But let me give you some basic data.

Your blood chemistry is based on a hemoglobin molecule arranged around an atom of copper. Well, the hemoglobin of Mister Spock here from the abode called Vulcan is also based on copper. But the rest of us have a hemoglobin molecule based on iron.

There're other differences in the blood groups, but the hemoglobin fraction is the easiest to check if you have any question about it."

There was a moment of hesitation on Noal's part before he replied, "I would like to look at your data, Doctor McCoy .

. . and perhaps I might want to

take some blood samples myself. Technic
biological know-how may be more
highly advanced than we know."

"It isn't," McCoy added with finality. "But
mine is. Come see for
yourself."

"And we're ready to prove to the rest of you that we
are who we say we

are," Kirk broke in, moving quickly into the
sudden opening in the

Guardians' stubborn beliefs created by their
medical expert's

condescension. "We have the power to simply step in
here and take over by

force, but that's not our code. We want
to repair our abode and return to

our people in the

Ribbon of Night. But you are the ones who are
going to have to continue to

live on the Abode, and you are the ones who are
going to have to solve your

own problems your own way. We are here to help you
if you want help. Or you

can try to solve your problems without what help
we're permitted to give

you. But you must solve those problems or your

civilization is going to come
apart very quickly without the unifying factor of the
Ordeal. Since our
arrival here by accident started this whole affair, and
since we had to
stabilize Mercaniad to save ourselves, we want
to see to it that our actions
do not totally destroy your civilization. Therefore,
we want you to meet on
the Enterprise to work out the details of the
transition to your new state
of affairs . . . which is now quite different than you
have ever dreamed
possible"

"You want us to confer in your Keep in the sky?"

Ridiculous!" Tombah

laughed.

"Spock, how's our timing?" Kirk wanted
to know.

"Overhead in two minutes thirty-four
seconds, Captain."

"Have them stand by the phasers," Kirk ordered, then
turned back to Pallar.

"Come with us out into the open. We'll show you our
Keep in the sky as it

passes overhead."

The Guardian group looked at one another.

"Well, come along," Kirk urged. "Or are you afraid I might be right? Are you afraid to face the reality of the Universe? Or do you intend to continue living in a fantasy? You don't have to leave the Guardian Villa to see for yourselves. Come anywhere outside where you can see the sky."

"This is most unusual," Guardian Parna objected. "I know what's in the sky. It's now after sunset, and we'll see nothing but the Ribbon of Night."

"I can promise you more," Kirk put in. "Come along and see for yourself."

Some of the Guardians came with more reluctance than others. But Pallar led the way at Kirk's side.

The high hill of the Guardian Villa overlooked the island of Celerbltan and the western skies of Mercan. Mercaniad had just set, and there was a glow across the entire western horizon.

"Enterprise, this is Kirk," the star-ship Captain spoke into the

communicator he flipped up in front of his face.

There was a look of astonishment on Pallar's face as Scotty's voice came back, "Scott here, Captain. We're comin' over your horizon now."

"Okay, Scotty, light her up," Kirk ordered, and turned to Sulu. "Mister Sulu, take over."

Sulu flipped out his communicator.

"Enterprise, this is Sulu. Chekov, are you standing by?"

"Affirmative, Sulu," Chekov's voice replied. "We are tracking the targets that you defined."

"Continue tracking. Stand by for further commands,"

Sulu told him, but did not close his communicator.

Kirk was looking at the western sky and finally saw it.

It was a brilliant, coruscating point of light. Scotty was illuminating the lower surface of the primary hull with laser light, at various

frequencies, bouncing the laser illumination off the

ship's lower shields
to prevent loss of coherency. It made the
Enterprise shine and coruscate
with the characteristic corpuscular appearance of laser
illumination and
with the brilliance of a minus-five-magnitude star.

It changed colors as
Scotty changed the frequency of the laser
illumination.

"There's our sky Keep, Guardians," Kirk
pointed out.

It was impossible not to see it.

There were gasps from some of the Guardians.

The sight was totally new to
all of them. Some of them obviously grasped and
accepted it. Others were
obviously having trouble doing so.

"We have power aboard our Keep, the
Enterprise, that's greater than
anything you have known," Kirk said almost
pontifically to the Guardian
group. "And
we'll now prove it to you. Mister Sulu, you
may proceed with the
demonstration."

As the colored light that was the Enterprise rose

toward the zenith, Sulu

softly gave an order into his communicator.

"Chekov, this is Sulu. Set both

forward laser banks at broad dispersion, phase

lock, and fire a ten-second

burst at the ionosphere."

A glow emanated from the spot of light in the

sky. Then the whole evening

sky lit up as the phasers of the Enterprise

excited the ionosphere over

Celerbitan, producing a brilliant aurora

that laced the blackness with

streamers of orange and yellow light, spreading from

the point of light of

the Enterprise poleward in both directions.

It was a brilliant display of scientific

fireworks. It had been used before

to impress more primitive peoples than the

Mercans. Kirk was counting on it

to impress the Guardians in a different way,

since they were considerably

above the primitive level in intelligence and

civilization.

Then came the piece de resistance. "Port and

starboard phaser banks, tight

beam, phase lock, target the ocean five kilometers west of Celerbitan, two-second burst. Fire at will," Sulu ordered.

Twin beams of incredibly white light emanated from the Enterprise and speared through the Mercan atmosphere, ionizing a pathway as they penetrated. They focused and struck the Sel Ethan ocean five kilometers off the west shore of Celerbitan, where the water suddenly boiled. It didn't last long-only two seconds comb it was enough to boil a square kilometer of ocean and leave a rising cloud of steam.

As the Guardians gaped at this obvious and blatant display of star-ship weapon power, Kirk said to Pallar, "That's the Enterprise, our Keep in the sky. Prime Proctor Lenos is there. So are Thallan, Orun, Delin, and Othol.

We invite you to select three of your Guardians and travel with us to the Enterprise for discussions."

"How do I know that this isn't a trick to eliminate us?" Pallar asked.

"You've demonstrated weaponry that could conquer the

Abode, causing a

conflict and conquest like those in the old legends."

"Conquest is not part of our code," Kirk

explained, then pointed out, "And

if we'd wanted to destroy you rather than to talk,

we could have done so at

any time since we arrived here . . . and with great

ease, as you just saw."

He displayed his communicator. "You originally

believed this to be a sigil

of rank. It's more than that. It permits us

to talk with those on the

Enterprise. was He spoke into it.

"Enterprise, this is Kirk. Lieutenant

Uhura, please put Prime Proctor

Lenos on."

"Uh . . . Captain Kirk, this is the

Prime Proctor," came back a voice that

was unquestionably that of Lenos. It was also obvious that

he was unused to

any remote-communication device.

Kirk handed the communicator to Pallar. "Speak

to your Prime Proctor,

Guardian One. But be advised that Thallan is

also there and listening."

"Uh . . . Lenos, are you all right?"

"Yes, Guardian One. Will you be traveling here for meetings?"

"Lenos, is it true?"

"It's true, Guardian One. I'm in the Enterprise and watching the lights of Celerbitan pass below me. I've already spoken with Captain Kirk privately.

So has Thallan. Both of us urge you to travel here with a Guardian delegation for conferences. I'm convinced that our future on the Abode is at stake."

"You cannot speak for Thallan. Can he speak for himself?"

"Yes, Guardian One, this is Thallan," the voice of the Technic leader came back. "I confirm everything that Prime Proctor Lenos has just told you. We of the Technic are willing to meet with the Proctorate and the Guardians, because a great change is upon us. There will be no more Ordeals. But we must speak together of this and work out a peaceful solution. Otherwise, I

fear there will be

conflict, because your prime Guardian Purpose

no longer exists to hold

Mercan civilization together."

Pallar dropped the communicator to the floor.

"I refuse to permit any

discussions in which the Technic participates on an

equal footing with the

ancient and respected Guardians of the Code,"

he growled. "The Technic was

the cause of this, and the Technic must suffer the

consequences of

overthrowing the established ways of the Code . . .

."

Keeping his eyes on Pallar, Kirk bent down

and picked up the communicator.

Then he stood up and stared directly up at the

Guardian One. "Pallar, I've

tried to act with diplomacy and decorum. You've

replied time after time

with bigoted, biased replies and reactions.

I'm willing to forgive those

because I understand your background. But since you will not

cooperate

willingly, I regret to inform you that you have no

choice but to meet with

us and with the Proctorate and the Technic on the Enterprise. Will you

choose the three Guardians who will accompany you? Or shall I do it?"

The reaction from Pallar was instinctual. He shouted, "Proctors! Help!"

"Landing force, Plan B," Kirk snapped.

The Enterprise landing force moved more quickly than the Mercans because

the chosen members of the force had been thoroughly briefed on what to do

when that order was given.

Kirk had preselected the Guardian conference group that would accompany him

back to the Enterprise should Plan B need to be implemented. With his

phaser on stun and accompanied by Spock and Sulu, he dropped all the

Guardian group save Pallar, Tombah,

Noal, and Parna.

As he was doing this, the rest of the landing force formed a precise

encompassing grid around the Guard-

ians, phasers at the ready for the Proctors who

did indeed show up in the

corridors leading to this outside balcony as

well as on the parapets above

it.

The Proctors got off a few shots. The

slugs whistled past, slammed into the

floor, and spalled chips and shards before

ricocheting off into the

darkness. But the Proctors' weapons were charged with

black powder; they

hadn't progressed to smokeless, flashless gun

propellants. As Lenos himself

had pointed out, it had been a long time since

there'd been any real

fighting on Mercan. The flash of the Proctors'

guns provided immediate

target information to Sulu's security men . . .

who didn't miss with their

phaser bolts.

"Enterprise, Kirk here. Plan B. Beam us

up now."

Nothing happened. The communicator had

obviously been damaged when Pallar

had dropped it.

Spock reacted at once, flipping out his own

communicator . . . only to have

a stray bullet from a Proctor gun slam it

out of his hands. The bullet went

through Spock's hand as well:

Even the stoic Spock could not suppress a cry

of anguish.

McCoy was at Spock's side immediately.

Spock was in obvious pain from the

slug that had literally shattered his right hand. But the

First Officer

didn't fall or faint; he tried to get his hand

phaser into his left hand to

use it. "Spock, stop that," McCoy snapped

at him. "You're wounded and out

of action. Shut up and quiet down so that I can

get to work on your hand."

It was Sulu who, in the midst of the fire fight,

got his communicator out

and transmitted the beam-up order.

To the utter amazement of the Proctors who had the

group under attack and

who were valiantly trying not to hit the

Guardians, the twelve from the

Enterprise and four Guardians dematerialized

before their eyes, leaving

nothing to shoot at.

"I'm sorry, Pallar," Kirk apologized

as their materialization in the
transporter room of the Enterprise was completed.

"You wouldn't come
willingly, so we had to bring you anyway. Whether
you know it or not, the

entire future of the Abode's at stake . . .

and the Guardians were the only
group standing in the way of resolving the
problem. I'm not going to let you

stand in the way of getting a stable culture
reestablished on the Abode."

Pallar looked around at the strange surroundings.

"This is your Keep in the
sky?"

"It is. And you're my guests," Kirk told
the four Guardians that had been
transported up.

"Spock, can you walk to the Sick Bay?"

McCoy said as he stepped off the
transporter locus with Spock.

Some of the yellowish color had drained from

Spock's face. It was obvious

he was in severe pain, but his stoic nature

wouldn't let him exhibit the

agony he felt in his right hand, from which green

blood dripped to the transporter locus. "Yes, Doctor, I believe I can. Captain, please carry on without me until Doctor McCoy has repaired the damage of this wound. Then I will join you."

"We'll both join them as soon as I say you're fit to do so, Spock. You're my patient now," McCoy said as he escorted the First Officer from the transporter room.

Kirk turned back to the Guardians. "Please follow me, Guardians. We have much to show you"

Pallar shook his head. "You can't keep us here against our will. And I refuse to surrender my traveler control to you, because a Guardian never surrenders his traveler control, even to a Proctor. We will all travel out of here back to Celerbitan at once."

Kirk held up his hand. "I wouldn't advise it, Pallar. Do your transporter relays extend their capabilities into the skies? You know that they don't, and so do I." Kirk was frankly bluffing on this

one, but he based his bluff
on the fact that the Mercans had never considered
traveling or transporting
off the surface of Mercan. Therefore, he
surmised, their transporter system
probably couldn't reach out into standard orbit. "Do
you want to take the
chance of materializing high in the sky over the
Abode? If you do, you
won't have another chance; you'll die immediately."

"I don't believe you." It was Guardian
Tombah.

"You don't have to. I can show you," Kirk
replied. "I'll simply advise you
not to try it until you have a chance to see for yourself
what's involved.

If you decide to try, and if we can't rescue
you with our traveling device,
I'll get another Guardian from the Abode
to replace you in the meetings."

Tombah had his traveler control out, but he
hesitated before passing his
hand over it to activate it. Pallar remarked
to him, "James Kirk may be
correct, Tombah. Do you wish to risk your

life, knowing what happens to one
who attempts to use the traveler without full
coordinate information?

Please, Tombah, I don't wish to lose
you."

It was obvious to Kirk that Pallar was slowly
beginning to open his mind.

One thing for certain: Pallar was as basically
intelligent as Prime Proctor

Lenos. Leaders
don't rise to the top without a considerable amount of
intelligence and
wisdom, regardless of the culture in which they
live.

Kirk stepped down from the transporter platform.

"Please follow me,

Guardians. You'll not be asked to meet with the
Proctorate or the Technic

until you've had the chance to see what they've seen
and until you've also

had the chance to discuss its meaning and implications
among yourselves."

As the Guardians followed Kirk, accompanied
by Sulu, it was Guardian Tombah

who remarked, "This Keep doesn't look like
anything that I know the Technic

has been able to accomplish."

Stepping into the turbolift, Kirk told him,

"I told you we were not of the

Technic. And if you'll continue to look and

evaluate what you see, you'll

understand that this is the abode in which we've

come from the Ribbon of

Night."

"That remains to be seen," Guardian Parna

remarked with some hostility in

her voice.

"You'll see it," Sulu added.

They did. The turbolift stopped at Deck

11 in the Dorsal Connector, and the

group stepped out into the conference room set up in the

former crew

lounge.

The reaction of the Guardian group to the view through

the ports was

totally different from that of the Technic or the

Proctors.

Pallar and Noal went to the ports facing

Mercan, while Parna and Tombah

stood looking out through the dimmed polarized ports

toward Mercamad. They

said nothing for several long minutes while they
watched their home planet
pass beneath the star ship and the brilliant white
disc of Mercaniad march
across the sky, finally dipping below the planet's
limb. When the Ribbon of
Night became visible, Pallar turned to his
colleagues and remarked in a
quiet voice, "Fellow Guardians, we can
no longer refuse to face the facts
that are being presented to us. If we persist in our
old
beliefs, we will go down before the Technic's
onslaught upon the old ideas
because they now have the new information."
"I agree," Guardian Noal added. "It's
very difficult to accept the reality
of what we see . . . but we must do so in the
face of the possibility of
losing our own sanity . . . and whatever control
we may have left over the
peace and tranquillity of living on the Abode
. . . ."
"If I know Prime Proctor Lenos,"
Tombah put in, "I predict that he's
already accepted the new reality. He will not side with

us in any conflict

with the Technic"

"But how do we maintain and consolidate our

position in the face of this

new information?" Parna wanted to know.

"We accept it as an extension of the Code,"

Pallar tried to explain his

jumbled thoughts. He turned to Kirk. "James

Kirk, I apologize for our

actions."

"No apologies are necessary, Guardian

Pallar. It's difficult to accept new

information that may not totally agree with what one has

previously

believed to be true. My people have had to do it many

times in their

history as we have grown from savagery to the

interabode civilization of

the United Federation of Planets."

"I'm now very interested in your legend of the

United- Federation of

Planets," Pallar replied. "I'd like to hear

more about it."

"Please sit down." Kirk indicated the

circle of chairs. "We'll show you

what we've shown the Technic and the Proctorate

...."

Captain's Log: Stardate 5081.3

All three groups are aboard the ship now, although they're still isolated

from one another. We know

they're discussing the new situation among them-

selves. Thallan's asked to beam down

to Mercan to

talk with the other leaders of the Technic group. I

permitted him to go, accompanied by Orun and

Sulu. Apparently Prime Proctor

Lenos has absolute authority within the

Proctorate to make whatever

decisions he determines to be best, which is

understandable in a

paramilitary organization. The Guardian group

has not asked to beam down for

consultations with their organization. I was probably

correct in picking the

four Guardians that we beamed up; they're the

true leaders and top people in

the Guardian organization.

I've asked each of the three groups to indicate

to me when they're ready to

meet with the other two. I haven't placed a time

limit on this. However, if
it drags out for more than several days, we'll begin
applying pressure to
hold the joint meeting. But I'd like to have
each group work through their
own position, using their own logic and their own
intimate knowledge of
their position in the Mercan culture.

Spock advises me that this is the best way
to proceed. He cites the history
of several planets as precedents.

Addendum here: I want this log to include a
special commendation for both

Lieutenant Commander Spock and Doctor
Leonard McCoy, but for separate
actions. Spock is to be commended for his bravery
and behavior while
gravely wounded in the right hand by a Proctor
bullet; he was willing to
continue to fight even though he was obviously in
extreme pain and agony.

On the other hand, Doctor McCoy is to be
commended for the quick and
professional action on his part in coming to Spock's
aid under fire and for

a marathon session of seven hours in surgery
rebuilding Spock's right hand,
a feat that required an unusual knowledge of
Vulcan-human physiology and an
extreme competency in surgery. Spock has
been returned to duty, albeit with
his right hand covered with plastiskin to accelerate
healing.

There's nothing to do now but wait for the Mercans
to assimilate the data
we presented to them concerning the Federation and the
possible options
available to them in reorganizing themselves. At the
moment, time is not
critical. However, should news of the stabilization
of Mercaniad manage to
leak from the Guardians still on the planet or from the
ranks of the
Technic, some of whom may have already detected it,
we might be faced with
a time-critical situation. I sincerely hope
this doesn't happen. I'd rather
that the reorganization conference here on the
Enterprise proceed without
the pressure of an impending civil war . . .

.

The setting for the joint meeting was different from that for the meetings

with the individual groups. Twelve chairs were arranged in a precise circle

in the center of the room. Toward the forward end were four more chairs

where Kirk, Spock, Scott, and McCoy would sit under the Seal of the United

Federation of Planets on the bulkhead. And off to the side was Yeoman

Janice Rand's desk and recorder. Kirk had deliberately not included the

Federation contingent from the Enterprise in the circle of twelve Mercans.

The protocol had been of concern to Kirk. Who should be the first group to

arrive? The last? Would the order of entrance imply ranking of a group?

Spock arrived at the most logical solution.

There was basically no protocol

to govern the situation, only logic, at which the Vulcan was most adept.

When Spock had explained his proposal, even McCoy couldn't resist giving

him the highest of all compliments, "Logical,

Spock. Brilliantly logical."

Spock merely raised his right eyebrow because it was an unusual accolade from the ship's doctor.

It was ethnic full-dress Star Fleet uniform for Kirk, Spock, McCoy, and Scott, uniforms that were formal and similar to indicate that this was considered as an extremely high-level conference and with different dress to indicate a unity in diversity among members of the United Federation of Planets. And all four Star Fleet

officers would be visibly armed, not with the Mercan sidearms, but with the hand phasers that were now recognized by the Mercans to be sidearms highly superior to those of the Abode.

Spock would escort Prime Proctor Lenos. McCoy would escort Guardian One Pallar. And Scott would escort Thallan, of the Technic Peers. Thus escorted, the three Mercans met for the first time aboard the Enterprise simultaneously at the turbolift that would carry them to Deck 11.

As anticipated, the atmosphere at the initial greetings at the turbolift were extremely cool but punctiliously correct in the Mercan fashion, even between Pallar and Lenos. But the three Mercans recognized that high protocol was being observed here, something that they now knew was as much a part of the Federation's culture as it was on the Abode. The Mercans knew and understood this protocol, even though it was strange to them.

The escorted leaders were met on Deck 11 by Captain James T. Kirk in full dress uniform. Within seconds, the second turbolift arrived with the remaining three members of each Mercan group, each group accompanied by a single protocol escort from the security division in full dress uniform.

However, the protocol escort didn't leave the turbolift, which closed its doors after depositing the Mercan groups.

The meeting had been choreographed as precisely as a classical ballet. The

three Mercan groups found themselves seated in a circle facing one another.

But before a single word was uttered, the anthem of the

United Federation

of Planets blared from audio transducers in the ceiling of the conference

room. Simultaneously, Kirk and his officers

came to attention and faced the

UFP Seal.

It was a show loaded with schmaltz and ceremony .

. . and it was deliberate

on the part of the Star Fleet officers, who had

planned it carefully. The

Mercan groups knew right from the start that this conference was theirs,

but that there was a higher organization, the UFP,

looking over their

shoulders. And, following the individual group

briefings the Mercans had

attended, all of them knew what the UFP was.

The Mercans probably didn't

understand what the anthem signified, because they'd heard the music only

occasionally during the individual briefings, but they

certainly understood

manners, diplomacy, and protocol because of their

armed, polite society.

Whether or not all the Mercans really accepted the reality of the UFP

remained to be seen, insofar as Kirk was concerned.

As the music faded, Kirk remained standing. "I

welcome the representative

groups of Mercan, the Abode of Life, to the

United Star Ship Enterprise of

the Star Fleet of the United Federation of

Planets," he began formally. "We

are honored to host this conference that is so vitally

important in the

reorganization of the structure of the civilization

of the Abode. We are at

your disposal for assistance of any sort. Should you

request it, we would

be honored to provide a counselor of your

choice from among the four of us

to act as moderator of your meeting. However,

since this meeting concerns

the affairs of the Abode, we must decline to act

in any manner to lead the

conference or otherwise provide active

direction of your deliberations. You

have grave problems to solve among yourselves . . .

and the solutions must

be the ones that you arrive at because you and your people on the

Abode

will be the ones who must henceforth live with those

solutions and their

consequences. Please feel free to proceed."

The Mercans looked at one another wordlessly for a

long minute after Kirk

sat down.

Then Pallar stood. "I would speak privately

with the people from the

Abode," he told Kirk. "It is my

understanding that none of you from the United Federation of

Planets speak

our language yet. If that is the case, would you

be kind enough to turn off

your language devices. If you do understand our

language, I request that the

four of you leave the conference room, along with

Yeoman Janice Rand, so

that we may speak privately."

"We haven't had time to learn your tongue,

Pallar. We'll turn off our

language translators until you signal us

that you wish them turned on

again," Kirk replied, reaching down

to switch off the Translator hung from
a chain around his neck like a pendant.

"Gentlemen," he told his officers,
"please turn off your Translators."

Pallar immediately sat down, and a polite,
softspoken conversation began
between the twelve Mercans. Kirk was worried.
He hadn't anticipated this.

"What's going on, Captain?" Scott wanted
to know. "Why would they want to
discuss something in private?"

"I don't know," Kirk said with an edginess in his
voice. "Yeoman Rand, are
the security guards standing by, just in case?"

"Yes, Captain," she replied. "Four of them
are in the turbolift at this
deck behind the closed doors. I have communication with
them."

"Good. Gentlemen, I presume your phasers
are on stun, just in case?"

"Captain," Spock put in quietly, "I
don't think that this is an illogical
act on their part at all. This is the first time that
any of these people
have had to face one another and talk their

way through a solution. I

submit to you that their request for privacy is an
act of face-saving on

their part. They do not wish to let us know of their
weakness: inexperience

at political and diplomatic bargaining and
compromise."

"I agree with Spock's analysis,"

McCoy added.

"I hope you're right," Kirk told them.

"There is too other logical explanation,"

Spock reminded him.

"Spock, sometimes things don't proceed
logically!" Scott interjected,

sounding strangely like Doctor McCoy. "The

only things that play by the

rules ail the time accordin' to logic are

engineering devices; they're

rational! Haven't you learned that humanoids

aren't rational?"

"I have, Mister Scott," Spock replied

coolly. "Humans, for example, are not

rational beings; they are rationalizing beings."

"I dinna ken whether I've just been insulted or
not!" Scott muttered.

"On the other hand, the Mercans are more like humans

with a Vulcan

background," Spock went on, unperturbed as usual. "Their private discussion is rational."

"I still suspect trouble," Scott admitted.

Pallar suddenly stood up again and, using sign language, requested that the Star Fleet officers turn on their Translators.

"We must apologize for requesting privacy," the Guardian One began. "But we're completely unfamiliar with the protocol and means of conduct of a meeting such as this. The twelve of us therefore request the assistance of the representatives of the United Federation of Planets. Although you refuse to lead us, you've stated that you'll assist and advise. Is this correct?"

Kirk nodded, and since he was not certain that Pallar understood the gesture, added, "You're correct, Guardian One."

"Very well. It would be a great honor and we would

be greatly in your debt

if you would provide such assistance and advice.

The Technic requests that

Engineer Montgomery Scott join their group as

adviser, while the Proctorate

asks Lieutenant Commander Spock to sit with

them. The Guardians would

request that Doctor McCoy advise and

assist us. Together, our three groups

from the Abode request that Captain James

Kirk preside over this meeting as

moderator."

Simultaneously, all twelve Mercans

rose, moved

their chairs back to widen the circle, and left a

place where the Star Fleet

officers could place their chairs.

"This is a very unusual request," Kirk

began.

"This is a very unusual meeting," Thallan

added.

"And the circumstances are unique," Lenos put

in.

"We don't ask you to violate your

code of the Prime Directive and General

Order Number One," Pallar went on. "You

offered assistance. We're
requesting it in a way that we jointly believe will
help us the most."

This was a totally new slant to the meeting, and it
placed it in a
completely different perspective insofar as
Kirk was concerned. It put him
in charge of running the meeting, a position that
he'd attempted to avoid.

And it put his officers in the difficult position
of having to advise the
Mercan groups. It was not the way Kirk would have
wanted to see the meeting
proceed. He saw himself in the conquistador role
again, and he didn't like
it.

On the other hand, the Mercans themselves had
requested it after private
consultations among themselves. No wonder Pallar
had asked for privacy in
discussing it; the Guardian One had been afraid
that the other groups might
not agree, and this would have been viewed by the
Mercans as an insult to
the officers of the Enterprise.

But why had they jointly agreed to it so quickly, for it had taken them less than five minutes? And why was the meeting progressing so smoothly right from the start? Why weren't there more objections from various factions? Why wasn't there any obvious argument?

And why had the Mercans agreed to-and in fact insisted that the officers of the Enterprise assume such an active role in the discussions?

"I'll agree to act as moderator of the meeting, which is a position in which I won't be forced to impose my cultural biases on the rest of you,"

Kirk replied with caution. "However, I can't speak for my officers. It's up to each of them to individually agree to advise and assist the Mercan groups as you've requested. But before I ask them, please answer a question for me . . . and don't be afraid to speak truthfully, because I won't take offense at the truthful answer.

Why have you requested us to step in to advise and

assist you in the
reestablishment of your cultural organization when
you know that we believe
you must do the job yourselves?"

Pallar spoke first. "We of the Guardians have
never had to do this before.

We don't know how to do it. We've discussed
matters with the Proctorate
before, but we've always been the ones who have given the
final directives,
even though those directives may have been based
on the recommendations of
the Proctorate."

"We don't know where to begin," Prime
Proctor Lenos went on. "We're like
children who have just become learning-old."

"We never expected that the awesome
responsibility of having to reorganize
our civilization would ever fall upon our shoulders,"

Thallan added. "In
the Technic, we were interested only in arriving at
the truth about
ourselves and the Universe. We had no anticipation
that our role would grow
to the point where we'd be called upon to actually run

the Abode."

"But why the sudden agreement to cooperate?"

Kirk wondered aloud.

"Didn't you want that when you established this meeting and went through the protocol as you did?" Pallar asked in return.

"Of course. But I didn't think that you'd agree to agree this quickly,"

Kirk admitted.

Thallan smiled the broad, toothy grin of a Mercan. "Ah, just as we once underestimated you, now you have underestimated us, James Kirk."

"This is the only rational approach toward solving the problems," Lenos pointed out. "The other approach is to fight . . . and we haven't fought for a long time. And I really don't want to fight, as we once discussed, James Kirk."

"And since it's the only rational approach, did you believe that we would be any less rational than you humans and Vulcans, once presented with irrefutable data?" Pallar admitted. He

looked at Scott, Spock, and McCoy.

"Come, join us, we have much work to do. It will not be

easy. We will not

always agree with one another in the process of

establishing the solution.

But we need and want your help because you have, in your

own cultures,

solved some of the problems we face. We may not

adopt your solutions, but

we want to, know how and why you arrived at the

ones you did."

"It will be an honor to help you work toward a

logical solution," Spock

told them.

"I'll also consider it a personal honor and a

deep responsibility to advise

you as best I can," McCoy agreed.

"I'll also consider it a high honor

to participate with the Technic group,"

Scott put in.

Under the circumstances, Kirk was very

glad that Janice Rand had her

tricorder running to make a record of these

proceedings. He was once again

concerned over General Order Number One, but the

record would show that the
people of the Enterprise were asked to step in and help.

They took their
positions in the circle.

Then there was dead silence while the Mercans
simply looked at Kirk.

"Citizens of Mercan, begin," the Captain of the
Enterprise remarked
uneasily.

"Where?" Pallar asked.

"How do we start?" Thallan asked.

"What should be discussed first?" Lenos wanted
to know.

It was Kirk who didn't answer immediately.

How do you write the Constitution for Utopia?

He recalled the Star Fleet Academy
class in xenosociology in which they'd
tried to do just that, and it started out the same way: where
do you begin?

At the beginning, of course, he realized.

"The Guardians and the Proctorate
didn't always exist on the Abode," Kirk
pointed out. "Go back into your legends and
stories. Tell us what happened
and how the civilization of the Abode was established
as it was when we

arrived. Then, we'll go on from there.

Correction: you will go on from

there, because then you'll know how to start and in which direction to go."

Captain's Log: Stardate 5099.5

It seems incredible that we've done it in ten

short days. It took fifty-five

delegates one hundred and twenty-two days

to draft the Constitution of the

United States of America in 1787 . . .

and even then it was an imperfect

document that required continual alteration for

centuries thereafter. And

it took over a hundred people, accompanied by staffs

totaling more than a

thousand assistants, nearly two years to draft

the Articles of Federation

of the UFP on Babel. More years of work were

needed to come up with the

statutes for the Interplanetary Court of

Justice and those regulating

interplanetary commerce.

But the twelve Mercans, assisted by four

officers of Star Fleet Command,

one yeoman, and the library computer of the USS

Enterprise, have, in ten

days, drafted what the Mercans proudly call
the Enterprise Agreement.

How good is it? How long will it last? I wish
I knew.

Unlike those who drafted the Constitution of the
USA, we had the knowledge

of the known uni-

verse available instantaneously at our

fingertips in the ship's computer

memory banks. Unlike the delegates to the

Babel Convention, there was only

one planet with three power groups involved.

Maybe this wasn't a hasty agreement after all.

Maybe it will work. But the

Mercans are going to have to find out for themselves because

they're the

ones who wrote the Enterprise Agreement, and

they're the ones who agreed to

abide by it. Scott, Spock,

McCoy, and I acted only as advisers,

providing

the inputs the Mercans wanted from the history of the

planets of the

Federation.

The Agreement isn't simple. After all, the

Mercan culture isn't simple. In our short stay here, we haven't even started to unravel it, much less experience a great deal of it. For example, the Mercans possess highly developed entertainment arts, both passive and performing. They have an educational system, but we haven't had the chance to see it because we've been too busy; it must be a good system, because it trains their citizens well in a complex planet-wide culture tied together by the cheap and instantly available traveler system. Mercan is something like Earth might have been if travel had turned out to be as universal as communications there.

The crux of the matter was going back to the roots of the system that had existed when we arrived here. I'll leave a lot of the analysis up to the Federation xeno-sociology and anthropology teams who will follow. But it's very simple and goes right back to the basic

definition of a social organization, something we knew about on Earth for centuries but which was turned into a science when the first space colonies provided a means to test social systems in isolation. In any social organization, an individual relinquishes some basic rights in order to participate in the greater security of the group.

This requires some modification of individual behavior, plus some means to coerce an unwilling individual into the proper mode of behavior. This requires laws, rules, regulations, and codes of behavior. I live under several every day and don't even bother to think about them. The Mercans have lived under similar conditions for as long as they can remember.

When the Mercans realized that the end of the Ordeal would not require a complete change of social organization, but a modification of what already existed, it was relatively simple, according to my First Officer, Mister

Spock, who has already analyzed the outcome
to his logical satisfaction.

Once the Ordeal was no longer a factor in
Mercan life, none of the three
groups was either a challenge or a threat to the other.

The Guardians were just that: the guardians of the laws
of Mercan. It was

unfortunate that their remote ancestors, being the
intelligentsia of the
planet at the time, also discovered the Mysteries of

Mercaniad that
permitted them to predict the Ordeal. That grew
out of proportion with

respect to the real role of the Guardians; they
are the ones who enact and
interpret the rules of conduct between Mercans and
their various

institutions. Once the Guardians
understood that, they became the de facto
government of the Abode . . . as they really were
all along. And under the

provisions of the Agreement, they'll attempt
to expand their ranks. They
think they can do it by means of competitive examination
once they've

learned how our lawyers are trained and then
admitted to the legal practice
by examination. Well, we'll have to see how it works
for the Mercans . . .

The Proctorate, on the other hand, is the
Mercan equivalent of the social
organization that enforces the rules of social
conduct. Elsewhere, they
may be called the police, the military, the
guard, or Star Fleet. There was
not much need to change the Proctorate under the
Enterprise Agreement be-
cause they already have their own procedure for
selecting, training, and
admitting new members. I have no reservations
about the possibility of the
Proctors taking over; in the first
place, as Lenos admitted, they haven't
fought in a long time because the code duello takes
care of most of the
fighting urge of the Mercans of both sexes. (I
don't think I mentioned the
fact that the Mercan women, including Delin,
carry sidearms as well, and
that the Mercans protect their women but have no

chivalrous code that we

humans inherited from the Arabs.) I know why

Lenos and his Proctors chose

Spock to sit with them; like the Proctors,

Spock is basically a very violent

man who keeps his emotions under tight control and

who doesn't like to fight

. . . except during pon farr, when I

personally know that Spock can be very

violent indeed. And to some extent, I too understand

the Proctors. The

militarystnaval profession is a strange one

because of the reluctance of its

professional members to engage in the

activities of the profession.

The Technic, who thought they were the political

saviors of the Abode,

discovered when the chips were down they really didn't

want the job because

they were interested in things, not people. This isn't true

of all the

Technic members, because those who were the staunchest

anti-Guardian Tech-

nic's would probably have made better

Guardians, even though they were

rebels. The Technic was afraid of the Guardians who were afraid of the Technic. After all, the Technic was discovering things that didn't match the dogma of the Guardians; the Guardians were afraid that the Technic knowledge would unseat them as "keepers of the faith," so they tried to suppress the Technic. They were a threat to each other. In stabilizing iad and removing the Ordeal as a factor in Mercan life, we didn't realize at that time we were removing that threat. The Technic knows now that they're free to investigate anything they want to, but they also now realize that this freedom of inquiry carries with it the obligation to openly disseminate what they learn, especially to the Guardians, who, in turn, now realize that they must modify the rules and codes on the basis of new information from the Technic.

I think it's stable. But I'm not sure. The Enterprise Agreement includes checks and balances, and one of the most important

of these is the,
willingness of the Mercans to accept the Articles of
Federation of the UFP.

Now, at last, we can get busy putting the
Enterprise into shape to return
to the Orion Arm. But the best that I can do is
look over Scott's shoulder
and try to smooth out diplomatic problems that
occur

"Captain, it isn't goin' to work. I canna
get these Technic people to
follow my instructions. They keep comin' up with
their own little
improvements," the Engineering Officer complained
to Kirk. "I give 'em the
worn part . . . and they give me back
three exactly like it: worn out, even
to the scratch and rub marks!" "Well, what did
you tell them, Scotty?" Kirk
wanted to know.

"I told 'em to make me a new part just like the
old one."

"And they did, didn't they?" "I'll say they
did!"

"Why don't you give them a drawing instead?"

"Because their dimensional system is different and their number system is a mess, as I told ye before. Also, their alloying techniques are different."

"Have you tried showing them the warp drive and explaining it to them? Wouldn't that help them understand what you want from them?"

"I did that, Captain," Scotty kept complaining. "Othol understands it perfectly, he says. And he keeps wantin' to make improvements in my engines."

"Well, they've taken a different cut at antimatter power. Will some of the improvements work?"

"I canna tell until we try to exceed Warp Factor One. And if the improvement doesn't work right, it's a kind of final way to do testing. I don't think you could call it 'nondestructive testing' under any set of rules."

Kirk knew that this was just his engineer's way of discharging tension,

although he didn't dismiss it entirely from his mind.

They were still a

long way from a Starbase, and the Enterprise had

to be able to sustain Warp

Factor Six once under way.

But Kirk was breathing a lot easier. The

remaining problems were mainly

technical in nature; they could be solved, given

enough time. And with the

Enterprise Agreement, time was no longer as

critical as it had been.

As a matter of fact, it gave Kirk the

opportunity to give his crew a little

of the "rest and relaxation" that their original

scientific survey mission

had been intended to provide. It would serve

another purpose as well,

because the Abode would be petitioning for membership in

the Federation .

. . and a shore leave by thoroughly briefed Star

Fleet personnel would pro-

vide an interesting two-way street of information and

understanding.

Since Enterprise personnel on the Abode

would be subject to the Code, the

obvious person to brief them on it was Lenos,
Prime Proctor of Mercan.
Lenos only had to do it once. Kirk assigned
Uhura to make a briefing tape
to be shown to all personnel before beaming down. This
tape not only
provided the necessary information on the ultrapolite
Mercan culture for
the Enterprise crew members- some of whom were from
some planetary cultures
that were rather loose
and frank in comparison- but also gave Kirk a
valuable documentary to take
back.

Naturally, there were confrontations, as there
always are when two greatly
different cultures interface. But Kirk's
standing order was to wear hand
phasers in sight, set to stun, there being severe
penalties for those crew
members who fired a phaser on Mercan with any
other setting. In spite of
the crudity of the Mercan hand weapons, some of the
Mercans turned out to
be reasonably good marksmen. Bones McCoy
had to patch a few holes in some

of the crew members and remove steel slugs from others, including the scrutable Mister Sulu, who was not the samurai he thought himself to be

....

But Sulu turned up with a magnificent collection of Mercan hand weapons for which he traded part of his collection of Earth swords. Somehow he managed to get several members of Scotty's harried engineering crew to fit out a crude shooting range down in the secondary hull. Kirk didn't discover this until much later, although Sulu regaled his Captain with the glories of collecting Mercan firearms.

Several weeks passed. The repairs to the warp drive were indeed extensive and were not ameliorated by the difficulties of matching Star Fleet technology with Mercan technology.

"I'm taking aboard a large quantity of these lowgrade Mercan dilithium crystals, Captain. We've made up a unit that uses several of them in

parallel, and we can operate them as standby units. I dinna want to trust this long trip to dilithiums whose condition may have been strained by the gravitational jump that brought us here."

"When can we plan to get under way, Scotty?"

Kirk wanted to know. Things seemed to be working out well on Mercan, and Kirk wanted to get moving again. The sooner they got back to Starbase 4 and the sooner the Federation was able to send a ship back to Mercan, the better.

The Enterprise Agreement might be working now, but only Kirk knew how fragile it might become if the Federation did not respond with its presence in short order.

Scott held up four fingers of his right hand.

"Four days . . . if I can make this bloody Mercan technology match with ours. We've got a lot of testing to do

his

"Then everything's been basically repaired?"

"Aye, but I dinna ken it will work, Captain."

"Mister Scott, we will break orbit in six

watches and proceed under impulse power so you can make your tests in an under-way situation," Kirk instructed him.

"Captain, if something blows, we're in trouble."

"It won't blow, Scotty. You're too good an engineer to let that happen."

Any chance of engine trouble, Kirk knew, was possible but remote. It would be a concern until the ship passed Warp Factor One, but Kirk was willing to risk it.

He was far more concerned about the course home. If they encountered any of the extreme gravitational turbulence that had brought them to the Abode in the first place, it could mean real trouble with a hay-wired warp drive unit . . . which is what Kirk considered it to be until Scott had the chance to go over it very thoroughly with the sophisticated equipment of Starbase 4. He put Spock, Sulu, and Chekov to work on the problem of getting back to the Orion Arm in the safest and

most expeditious fashion.

"I see no problem, Captain," Spock remarked in an offhand manner. "Having once been through such a gravitational fold, I'm aware of the sensor indications that precede the event. As a result, I can assure you that I will be most vigilant indeed to ensure that it doesn't happen again."

"I know that, Spock. But let's make sure."

The departure from Mercan was, as Kirk expected and wanted it to be, formal in the best sense of Mercan politeness. The first ceremony took place in the atrium of the Guardian Villa overlooking the wine-dark sea around Celerbitan. Gifts were exchanged first, Kirk presenting Pallar with a tricorder in reciprocation for an elaborately decorated traveler control from Pallar. That control unit would be of great interest to Federation technical people, and Kirk knew that the Technic would pore over the tricorder, giving Mercan its first communications information technology

other than the computers of its traveler,
commercial, and educational
systems. There were no flags, no anthems, no
twentyone-gun salutes; those
were not a part of Mercan protocol. But it was
different during the second
and final ceremony in the recreational garden on
Deck 8 in the Enterprise,
where Kirk, Spock, McCoy, and Scotty
beamed up with the Mercans. There was
an honor guard, the UFP banner, and an
anthem. Such things would be part of
the diplomatic scene at UFP Headquarters,
and Kirk had no real choice but to
carry on the tradition here, in spite of its
wide divergence from that of
Mercan.

Kirk was not surprised when Pallar, Lenos, and
Thallan-representing the
three major organizations of Mercan presented
the two ambassadors pro tem
from Mercan to the Federation: Delin and Orun.

"I know you first met these two as young rebels with the
Technic," Pallar
explained, "but, as you understand now, they would have been

outstanding

Guardians except for their excessive

curiosity. Under the Enterprise

Agreement, it no longer makes a difference. I

believe they're open-minded

and intelligent enough to properly represent the

Abode to the Federation .

. . and I rather envy the things they're going to see and

learn about."

"We'll have stories to tell when we return,"

Delin promised.

"And this time I think you'll all believe

them," Orun added.

Once the three Mercan leaders had beamed back

down, Kirk reverted to his

role of star-ship captain with great relief. But

he did remember his

diplomatic role

enough to ask, "Delin, would you and Orun wish to watch

our departure from

the Bridge?"

He didn't need to ask.

In the command seat again, Kirk knew they were going

home in spite of the

strange and sometimes baffling repairs that Scotty

had made with Mercan

help. Kirk knew his ship. He knew she was ready for star travel. He looked around the Bridge with satisfaction. "Departments report, please."

Chekov did not look up. "Course plotted and laid in."

Sulu did turn and flash a brief smile at Kirk. "Ready to leave orbit, sir."

Kirk punched a button on the arm of the seat.

"Mister Scott, how about it?"

"As ready as we'll ever be, Captain."

Kirk turned to face Uhura, who was sitting impassively at her console. "I'm afraid we haven't kept you very busy on this mission, Lieutenant," he remarked.

"That's quite all right, Captain. I've enjoyed the rest," Uhura replied with a smile.

"Well, we'll get you busy again. Put Mercan on the main screen and keep it there as we leave orbit."

"Aye, sir."

Spock was sitting passively with his fingertips

together forming a steeple.

"Sir, the ship is ready in all respects for star flight."

"Thank you, Mister Spock. Mister Sulu, impulse power. Take us out of orbit.

Accelerate to Warp Factor Point-nine-five and report reaching."

"All ahead on impulse power. We have left orbit."

It was slow at first, but the image of Mercan.cd be seen getting smaller as the Enterprise moved gradually away from the planet under impulse drive.

"You have a beautiful Abode," Kirk told the two young diplomats. "I'm sure that it'll be a most welcome member to the Federation."

Orun's voice was a bit unsteady, and Kirk noticed a tear in the corner of Delin's eye. "It's not at all like using the traveler for the first time; it is more like becoming responsible-old and leaving home to make a new home."

Delin merely rubbed her eye and added, "Well, Orun, is it anything like you imagined it to be in that argument that led to your

confrontation with

Othol . . . and that was interrupted by the arrival of

Captain Kirk?"

The young Mercan looked at his companion. "No,

it's not. And please do

not remind me of that again, because I missed widely

. . . ."

"I'm glad that you did," Delin admitted. The

turbolift door swished

open and Bones McCoy walked in,

making his usual post-departure

visit to the Bridge, a ritual that he rarely

missed unless there

was serious work to be done in Sick Bay. He

stepped to the side of

the command seat and watched the image of Mercan grow

smaller on the

viewscreen. "Congratulations, Jim. It's not

every star-ship captain

who manages to bring a whole new civilization

into the Federation."

"Bones, it wasn't easy." "Knowing you, I

never had the

slightest doubt you'd manage to bring it off."

"I did."

"I know you did. I'm responsible for periodically reviewing the captain's log." Kirk nodded as he watched Mercan grow smaller on the screen. "Bones, in some ways, I still feel like Hernando Cortes or Francisco Pizarro

"Really? It seems to me that there were other ship captains who discovered new civilizations and managed to arrange for the amalgamation of those cultures into the mainstream," McCoy observed quietly. "Have you ever considered comparing yourself to Commodore Matthew C. Perry instead?" Spock left his post at the library computer console and walked over to stand on the other side of the command seat from McCoy.

"If it will make you feel any better, Captain, Mercan had a very high probability of being discovered by the Federation, since it lies directly in the path of the Federation's exploration and colonization

efforts

into the Sagittarius Arm. Our own discovery of

Mercan falls well

within the three-sigma limit of the probability of

its discovery in

this century "And I suppose that bit

of statistical

gobbledygook also falls within the same

three-sigma limit you

quoted when you wanted to tickle Mercaniad,

Spock," McCoy

interjected acidly. "Doctor, I'm

surprised that you don't use more

statistical evaluation in your medical work. Although

I am

appreciative of your efforts in rebuilding my

right hand, I must

say I was appalled when you were not able to give me

any

probabilities concerning whether or not I would ever

be able to use it

agattn" "Spock, I don't run

my Sick Bay that way. When I

do a surgical-reconstruction job such as your

hand, I know it's

going to be all right. I don't need any
statistical analysis to
tell me whether or not I'm doing my job
Of course, your job
may be different"Gentlemen . . .
gentlemen!" Kirk
remonstrated. "Let me add that it's obvious
neither of you learned
anything about tactful mannerisms from the
Mercan culture." "On
the contrary, Captain," Spock replied. "I
found the Mercan culture to
be highly logical. As Doctor McCoy
himself pointed out, the Mercans
are similar to Vulcans, especially in the realm
of logical thought
processes. And I might add, Captain, that
you handled the entire
situation on Mercan quite logically." "Thank you
for the
compliment, Mister Spock." "There is no
logical reason to thank
me, Captain." "Spock, there you go again!"
McCoy burst out in
frustration. "Can't you accept plain and simple
gratitude?"

"Doctor," Spock said slowly, "gratitude

is an emotion signifying

resentment, another irrational emotion."

OF LIFE 207

"Captain, we're approaching Warp Factor

Pointnine-five. Standing by

the warp drive," Sulu announced from the helm.

Kirk pushed the

intercom button for Engineering. "Scotty, how

did the tests come

out?" "I think she'll work, Captain." "Are you

positive,

Scotty?" There was a brief silence. "Aye,

Captain. I've done my

best on her. She's ready." "Forward view on

the main screen,"

Kirk snapped. "Forward view," Uhura

replied. The screen showed no

stars, only the band of the Orion Arm ahead.

"Helmsman,

accelerate to Warp Factor Trvo." "Coming

to Warp Factor Two."

There was just the briefest shudder in the Enterprise.

The band of

light that was the galactic arm spread in the

middle, widened into
the star bow of relativistic velocities, then
blinked into
nothingness, to be quickly replaced by the
computer-generated scene
as reconstructed from subspace stellar
emissions.

"Engineering, report." "She's running

beautifully, Captain," was

Scotty's obviously delighted reply.

"Mister Sulu, accelerate to

Warp Factor Six." Kirk rose from his command

seat. "We're going

home," he said quietly, as much to his ship as

to his crew.

