Sunset and Evening Star

by LeslieFish

Summary

A time-travel mission gone wrong traps Kirk in the past and returns the Enterprise to a different and challenging future.

Notes

Note: This story takes place approximately 3 months after events related in "Proof Positive," by Sharon Emily in "Showcase 2" c. 1973. "Sunset And Evening Star" was originally published in "Fesarius V" - TJ Burnside, Editor, 1982.

Original artwork by Leslie Fish.
Captains's Log

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I disliked this mission from the start. For one think, I've had too many bad experiences with time-travel to like this jaunt. For another the nature of this assignment – rescuing ancient art treasures via transporter from ancient Rome, just before the city was sacked and burned by the Ostrogoth Conquerors – requires taking the ship around the sun, rather than stepping through the Guardian of Forever. Time-travel puts Kaffbein stress on the engines, which in turn puts stress on chief engineer Scott, and limits the visit it only four days – which puts stress on the eager research party. Nerves are tight all around.

Third Problem is the running fight between the research party's Chief Historian, Dr. Agnes Day, and the top archeologist, Dr. Ellison Hawk. I'm not sure what their professional dispute is, but their obvious personality clash has a lot to do with it. Agnes is young and pretty, sweet and dedicated, proper and pious, dutiful and relentlessly high-minded. Hawk is as darkly handsome as he is short, has the pride, courage and temper of a bantam rooster, and is cheerfully radical in personal tastes and professional ideas. They can't seem to help hating each other's guts. Agnes thinks Hawk is a destructive, cynical, atheistic sex-maniac. Hawk claims – loudly and often – that Agnes is a frigid, sanctimonious bigot. From the hour they came on board, they've been at each other's throats. Who the hell had the bright idea of putting them on the same research team? Spock has been obliged to break up fights between them several times a day and the strain is beginning to show. They're on the ground now and I don't envy Spock's situation.

When Kirk got the call from Spock, commenting delicately that some "command interpersonal diplomacy" was required, he could make a good guess as to what the problem was. Knowing from glum experience that beaming the contenders back to the ship would cause still more trouble, he stopped at the supply room for a minimal period costume – a long hooded cape that covered him from head to foot—before he went to the transporter room and beamed down.

He materialized in the prearranged spot, a long door-less alley just off the Via Sacra. 5th century Rome had lost the sanitary habits of its heyday, and the alley was full of garbage; Kirk tried not to breathe the stench as he picked his way up the alley to where Spock stood, looking almost annoyed, blocking the scene from any possible glances of passing natives. Sure enough, Day and Hawk were faced off above their tricorders, arguing fiercely, just barely managing to keep their voices down. Agnes, in the costume of a mendicant nun, looked like a petulant angel. Hawk, dressed in the fashion of a semi-skilled tradesman, resembled a slightly-scruffy satyr. Spock, wearing a long cape similar to Kirk's, wore a look of weary, grim neutrality. Kirk pitied him.

"All right, what's the problem?" he asked, as he came up to them. "It'd better be good this time."

"I assure you, sir, I didn't start this," Agnes Day began, turning toward him with a look of sweet appeal that was marred by her obvious indignation. "It's entirely this – Mr. Hawk's doing."

"Captain, we've run into a serious snag in carrying out our assignment." Hawk snapped, making no effort to hide his pique. "Half the treasures aren't here."

"What?"
"Apparently, Captain," Spock put in before either of the others could reply, "There was a mistake in our data. Some 52 percent of the art objects we were sent here to rescue have already been lost or destroyed."

"Why? What happened to them?"

"Obviously the decadence of this culture has spread to its appreciation of art," Day explained. "Most of the pieces have been sold, given away, destroyed through negligence or vandalism—"

"Vandalism before the Vandals ever showed up?" Hawk laughed shortly. "No sir, there's another explanation, and it's damned important when you consider today's date."

"According to the contemporary calendar," Spock clarified, "Today is Easter Sunday."

"Of course!" Agnes sneered at Hawk. "That's one of the reasons we chose this particular date: everyone will be in church, praying. We can visit the old pagan temples without being seen."

"In church? …Oh." Kirk floundered, then remembered that by this time—the middle 400's—Christianity was the official religion of the dying empire. Rome was a Christian city now, and even those few who retained pagan sympathies wouldn't dare miss a church service today. "That makes sense. I don't see why we can't get into the temples without trouble and make off with the remaining art treasures. Where's the problem Dr. Hawk?"

"The problem is that they won't just be in church!" Hawk was practically dancing from foot to foot. "I tell you, I've studied the archeological evidence and I know what I'm talking about! It wasn't just negligence or greed that lost us half those treasures, it was—"

"There he goes again," Agnes interrupted tearfully. "He makes a personal point of calling Historians liars! No matter what the accounts of the period say, he claims they're all—"

"Biased!" Hawk almost yelled. "Don't fool yourself into thinking that an historian can't hold a grudge, or slant a story, or tell only half the truth, or write outright lies if he—or she—thinks it's good for Humanity to believe one thing instead of another—"

"And of course only the archeologist—the man with the shovel—can find the truth. Right?"

"Break it up!" Kirk snapped, seeing where this was going. "Hawk, get to the point, if you have one."

"The point is, Captain," the little archeologist fumed, "that the art treasures stored in the ancient temples were deliberately destroyed—deliberately and systematically—by the new master of the city—"

"He's referring to the Church!" Agnes almost cried. "He's always looking for excuses to—"

"I can prove it!" Hawk insisted "Dammit, listen to me! The study crews we've put in those temples are in danger, great danger, until we know for certain which way the destruction's going today."

"Destruction…? Explain." Kirk turned to the archeologist. "What danger are you talking about? What does the date have to do with it?"

"Everything!" Hawk glanced past Spock to the mouth of the alley. "Look, the crowds will be getting out of church soon. They'll form a procession to march through the streets. We have to pull all our people back until we find out which way that parade is going—and, better still, where it's not going. Do you understand? Will you do that much?"
That made sense anyway. "Spock, attend to it," Kirk told him. "Get the teams to keep out of sight until the procession's gone."

Spock duly pulled out his communicator and spoke hurriedly into it.

"That," Agnes sniffed, "will cost us several hours of priceless study time."

"Believe me, it's necessary." Hawk glowered. "You don't know—and I'm sure that Little Miss Sanctimony here wouldn't tell you, or bother to remember it—but Easter Parades weren't always harmless little fashion shows. Here and now, there's nothing you'd want to meet less—except maybe the Goths themselves. It's a crazed mob, drunk on self-righteousness and bent on destruction! That's what happened to all those missing statues and painting and—"

"Just listen to him!" Agnes wailed. "He's trying to persuade you to keep the study teams idle for hours and hours, on this ridiculous excuse, with no evidence whatever! The things some people will do just to flatter their own sense of importance—"

"My importance, nothing! If you'd look at the eye-witness accounts and the physical evidence, even you'd have to admit that until as late as the 19th century, Easter parades had a nasty habit of turning into pogroms! It's an old, old tradition, Little Miss Sweetness and Light, and a pogrom is exactly what we're facing here!"

"'Pog…' what?" Kirk struggled to keep up.

"'Pogrom,'" Spock explained, "is an old Earth term for a form of riot, in which the believers of one religion would attack believers of another religion, in an attempt to convert them."

"'Convert or die,' sort of a small crusade," Hawk elaborated. "Specifically, it's an old Yiddish word describing the periodic attempts of their good Christian neighbors to do them in and rid the world of 'heathens.' Pogroms often started from the church doors on Easter Sunday. It's a very old game, Captain."

"And you think that's going to happen here, today?" Kirk took a quick look out of the alley. There was no one in sight. "What makes you so sure?"

"First, the fact that more than half of the old temples in this city have been looted, burned and smashed in a manner that couldn't possibly be accidental. Second, that fact that pogroms have, for centuries, started on Easter Sunday. Third…" He smiled unpleasantly at Agnes. "The fact that organized religion has a cute habit of turning fanatical and bigoted when faced with people who prefer not to believe in it. Add 'em together and what've you got? A clear and present danger, I say."

Spock gave a quiet sigh. Kirk could understand his attitude perfectly. Hawk seemed to delight in iconoclasm, as if his favorite food was roasted Sacred Cow, and religion was on of his favorite targets; he'd been know to rave against it for hours. On the other hand he was a brilliant and justly famous archeologist; he knew his subject well, he wasn't inclined to cry wolf, his hunches tended to pay off and his warning were usually worth listening to. It wouldn't hurt to get a second opinion though. Kirk mentally crossed his fingers, turned to Agnes and asked her what she thought.

"I think," said Agnes, putting her hands together and making her face and voice calm. "That Mr. Hawk is the sort of embittered atheist who wants company in his misery. His unfounded accusations and hysterical attacks on religion reveal a deep fear: fear of loneliness, fear of himself, and ultimately fear of God. He cannot be rational on this subject.

"Thank you, Dr. Day, for your psychology report." Hawk gave her an ironic little round of applause.
"Now let's call up Dr. McCoy and get his opinion on Roman History."

Like Punch and Judy, thought Kirk, rubbing his eyes. "Stick to the point, Miss Day. Do you think there's much possibility of the Easter parade turning into a riot that could endanger the ground parties?"

"I strongly doubt it," she replied firmly. "Recall that at this period Christianity had just risen to ascendency in Europe, sweeping away the old pagan cruelties and corruption on a tide of religious reawakening. People hungered for God, for the simplicity and purity of Christ's message, which had not yet been confused and distorted by the political opportunism and worldly concerns which crept in later. People at this time were generally concerned with the spiritual aspects of life, trying to live according to Christian precepts, preparing for eternity—"

"So busy worrying about the next world that they neglected the sewers in this one," Hawk sneered, kicking emphatically at a heap of garbage. "They let their army fall apart and were overrun by the Goths if you'll recall. Let's hear it for the spiritual life: bleeaaaaaahh!"

"'Man does not live by bread alone!'" Agnes snapped at him.

"Man sure as hell doesn't live with it!"

"Back to the point!" Kirk almost roared at them. "Are you saying, Miss Day, that there's no danger of a riot? No harm in letting the research team continue to take the art objects out of the temples?"

"I can see no reason why anyone should be in danger today."

"Bullshit!" yelled Hawk. "Captain, at least have someone keep an eye on that parade and warn the teams if it starts coming their way. Dammit, nothing's as dangerous as a crowd drunk on self-righteousness!"

"All right, Dr. Hawk, we'll do that little thing." Kirk had had exactly enough of this squabble. "In fact, the two of you will get that duty. Mr. Spock, call the ship and have them locate the procession; we're going to go and watch it."

Both Hawk and Agnes started to say something, stopped, looked at each other, and shut up. Thank god, Kirk thought, waiting while Spock made the call. Maybe this little jaunt will keep them quiet for the rest of the day. If so, well worth the effort. I wouldn't mind watching the parade anyway... Spock got the coordinates and led the way out of the alley. Kirk fell in beside him, leaving the two scientists to follow at a short distance.

As they plodded silently down the ancient emptied streets, looking for signs of a procession, Kirk couldn't help noticing how worn and tattered and ancient the city looked. He saw houses of stained and crumbling stone, empty lots cluttered with rubble and garbage, sad dry fountains and broken aqueducts, raw sewage stinking in the rain gutters, weedy holes in the pavement of the streets that had once been the city's pride. The air was thick with bad smells, heat, buzzing flies, and the colonnades of broken white pillars suggested uncovered bones. Like an unburied corpse, half rotted away, Kirk thought. So this is how a dying empire looks.

From somewhere ahead came the chiming of bells and many voices singing hymns. The sweet solemn sound contrasted eerily with the depressing scene around them. Kirk smiled as he thought of the obvious analogy—and how fitting it was on Easter.

Spock must have noticed it too, for he murmured a New Testament quote: "Behold...the resurrection and the life."

"I was merely considering the applicability of certain religious symbols," Spock replied, pokerfaced. "The theme of spiritual rebirth is certainly appropriate in this setting."

"Oh, indeed." Kirk smiled again, considering how much his friend had changed through the years, especially since… "You know, Spock, I doubt you would have noticed that before your last time travel expedition. It must have had quite an effect on you, meeting the real Jesus of Nazareth."

"Affirmative," Spock replied stiffly, giving the slightest impression of a blush. "I found it a most fascinating experience."

"No doubt. 'Most fascinating,' he says. A human would have been dithering with adjectives. Uncounted millions of people would have wanted to make that trip, meet the Master themselves… You know, Spock, you never did tell me about it."

"Some experiences, Captain, are impossible to put into words."

"Yes, yes, that's precisely the problem," Agnes put in, smiling radiantly. Of course she'd heard of Spock's famous time-journey; most historians had. "That's why the Gospels are so often misinterpreted, why it's so difficult to explain to people who haven't experienced it—" She glanced sidelong at Hawk. "—what it's like to feel the presence of God, to be joined in spirit, to- to- Oh, words are so inadequate!"

Kirk looked away, unaccountably embarrassed for Spock's sake.

"Indeed," Spock replied, pulling the hood of his cape a little closer around his face. "Language barely applies to the situation."

Kirk could detect the discomfort in Spock's voice, and judged it was high time to rescue him. "Quiet everybody," he warned. "We're getting close."

That was true enough. There was a crowd ahead of them, jostling and peering toward the growing sound of singing and bells. The party quietly joined the throng, a little perturbed by the distracting smell of unwashed clothes and bodies. Kirk wondered if this was one of the poorer sections of town; the people, what one could see of them under their loose, heavy clothes, didn't look very well-fed or healthy… He abruptly forgot about them as the procession approached.

At a distance, the oncoming parade was a vision of ethereal loveliness gracing a dull world. A contingent of men in gold-trimmed white robes advanced, holding up a great gold crucifix that glittered with gemstones, or swinging gold censers that billowed clouds of sweet smoke. Directly behind them, in an ornate gold-trimmed litter carried by dark-robed monks, rode a man in elaborate red robes and a distinctive cardinal's hat, both embroidered with gold thread, as were the gloves on the hands he raised in a gesture of blessing. After that, pressed so close that they seemed to be jockeying for position, came three men in gold-trimmed white robes with matching tall mitred hats and long white stylized shepherds' crooks sheathed in gold foil and gems. Behind them came a chorus of white robed boys singing a stately hymn. And after them, more dark-robed monks ringing sweet-toned hand bells and carrying stiff banners with images of saints on them. Behind that contingent surged the enormous crowd of worshippers in their Sunday best clothes.

Kirk hadn't seen many religious procession in his life, but this one, he thought could compare with the best of them. Agnes murmured an appreciative prayer. Hawk sneered furtively. Spock said nothing.
It wasn't until the procession came past them that the little party could see the flaws in the façade. Kirk was startled to notice that the robes of the marchers were muddy up to the knees—which made sense when he glanced at the broken and pitted street. The gold embroideries and the upraised hands were crusted with long-embedded dirt. The bejeweled officials were unhealthily fat and the plain-robbed monks were startlingly lean. There were lice visible in the hair of every bared head, and fleas hoping among the billowing robes. The boys' chorus was not really made up of boys; they were grown men, undersized and oddly fleshy, with smooth beardless faces and high tremulous voices—and Kirk shuddered as he understood that they were eunuchs. What's wrong? What's wrong with all these people? he wondered, coming up as if from a dream to the chill realization that where in all this crown—with the exception of himself and his people—was there one face or body not marred by the subtle bone-warping of rickets, or the pocked skin and snaggled teeth of disease and malnutrition, or the stains of years worth of dirt, or the glassy eyes of fever and mania. Not one untouched.


"The poor things," Agnes murmured, her eyes filling with tears of pity. "It's the climate, the poverty, the effect of this wretched city... And of course, their medicine wasn't as advanced as ours."

"It's the neglected roads and sewers and broken-down water supply," Hawk insisted. "Not to mention the lack of baths. The pre-Christian Romans were very big on baths—not to mention exercise and balanced diet—but your dear Church closed down the public bath houses and declared daily washing vain and immodest—"

"Quiet!" Kirk hissed at them, although there wasn't much chance of them being overheard. Their immediate neighbors had fallen in with the marching crowd, which was beginning to chant 'Alleluiah!' quite loudly. "Come on let's follow them. See where they go." He led the party into the fringes of the crowd, close enough not to look out of place, far enough away that they wouldn't be overheard if they kept their voices low.

"Besides," Hawk continued in a slightly gloating undertone, "Ancient Greek and Roman medicine wasn't that bad. Their preventative medicine was excellent, their surgery wasn't bad at all, their psychology was extraordinarily good, and their understanding of dietetics was downright surprising. The Greeks were physical-culture nuts and the Romans had a national fetish about public health. Then along came your beloved Church with its scorn for the physical, its liking for bread-and-water diets and holy fasting, its pious otherworldly concern—"

"Famine and plague have little to do with religion," snapped Agnes, pointedly not looking at Hawk. "'The rain falls upon the just and unjust alike.' When such disasters happen, some religions give people more comfort than others."

"Sure, by telling them that it's God's punishment for their sins!" Hawk chuckled. "That might hold water if the 'sins' were practicalities—like ignoring hygiene, or letting the topsoil erode; but for some reason the 'sins' are always just the opposite: being too 'worldly,' taking too much care of themselves and their health, not spending enough time and attention—and money—on religion, not being sufficiently obedient to God and His Official Servants. Hah!"

"You're distorting the facts, exaggerating small failings all out of proportion, ignoring the obvious blessings—"

"And you're ignoring the obvious evils and their causes!"

"Keep quiet, both of you!" Kirk snapped, grateful for the covering noise of the crowd's rhythmic chanting. "Remember where we are and what we're doing! We're not here to argue, but to observe, remember? I don't want to have to remind you again."
Hawk shrugged. Agnes looked away. They both—thank whatever—shut up.

Ahead of them the crowd moved faster and the rhythmic chanting took on a loud, ragged, frenzied tone. The meticulous order of the parade began to break up; the white-and-gold vanguard sheered to one side and the gold litter with its red-dressed occupant veered off to the other, the beardless choir crowded behind the halted cross, as if it were a battle standard. They changed their tune to something like a quick march while the three men in mitres ranked up before the gold litter as if in military order. This development had obviously been planned. The black-robed squadron of monks handed over their banners to the choir and then continued straight ahead, no longer ringing their bells but beating on them with large and very serviceable-looking clubs that they had pulled from under their robes. The sound of the bells was no longer sweet, but harsh, electric, hot and discordant, grating on the nerves.

Someone began shouting furiously in a high, fierce harangue. Kirk couldn't tell if it was the red-robed man or one of the mitred three before him, but the shouting came from somewhere over there. It was hard to make out the words above the deep and eerie growling of the crowd, but the few fragments the translator could catch sounded ominous: "defend…true faith…smite down…sins…godless…cleanse the city…accursed of God…servants of Satan…purify…” and again "smite down." The crowd lunged forward and began to run, yelling wildly.

"Which way?" screeched Hawk, clutching at Kirk's arm "Where are they going? We've got to know!"

Kirk led them, fast, to a nearby cracked pedestal denuded of its former statue, scrambled up on top of it and stretched to look. Directly ahead, at the end of the street, stood a small classic temple of pale stone—and the crowd was headed straight toward it. He pulled Hawk up beside him and pointed.

"Oh, no!" Hawk wailed as he saw it. "Not that one" The temple of Rome Defended, the personification of the city—besides the art treasures, the priceless records—Captain, if there's anyone inside that temple—"

Spock snapped some brief orders into his communicator, then closed it and pulled out his tricorder. He aimed it at the building, and frowned. "Captain, the study team in that building has just beamed up, but I am getting human life-form readings on my tricorder. Someone is still inside."

"Who?"

Before Spock could reply, the answer became visible. An old woman in threadbare white robes came out onto the porch of the temple. The surging crowd, surprised halted for a moment at the foot of the stairs. The old woman looked calmly at the enormous mob and began to speak. Her voice was as old and frail as the rest of her, and Kirk could catch only bits of phrases: "…what right…disturb the scholars here…do no harm and break no law…preserving the memory of our ancestors…honoring the spirits of the virtuous dead…maintaining…civic virtue and strength of the city…this uncivil uproar…to behave on a holy day…go your way in peace…"

Incoherent screams from the dark-robed men in the lead drowned the rest. The crowd roared again and surged forward like a tidal wave. Kirk got a brief glimpse of dark robes billowing, clubs rising and falling, and then the old woman sank down and disappeared in the heaving sea of bodies.

"No! No!" screamed Hawk, lunging forward.

Kirk caught him just in time, pulled him off the pedestal and dragged him into concealment behind it. Spock pulled Agnes Day down beside him, and they all crouched silently in the shadows, listening to the crowd bellow and smash ahead of them. The noise went on for a long time; smashing stone,
hammering of metal and crackling flames sounded clearly above the joyful whooping and snarling of the mob. Kirk couldn't be sure if he heard screams. Smoke and ashes and the smell of burning began to drift past them in the sullen wind. Hawk buried his face in his hands and sobbed. Agnes kept her eyes tight shut and moved her lips in silent prayer. Spock did nothing, but his face was very pale. They waited.

After an immeasurable time the noises faded. The rumbling of the crowd drifted away, following the renewed singing of the choir and the ringing of the bells. Kirk gritted his teeth at the bitter irony of that sweet sound leading the growling horror.

"I think we can get up now," Kirk whispered, edging his way around the crumbling pedestal.
The others followed him silently. They saw no one else, no further danger. The street seemed empty of life. At last they slipped out of hiding and got a clear view of what the mob had done.

The graceful little temple had been turned into a gutted, fire blackened ruin. The columns had been pulled down, dropping the porch roof to a rubble of broken stone and tiles. The delicate carvings on the column heads and fallen lintel and all around the door had been carefully and deliberately smashed to powder. Charred rags of once fine hangings and priceless manuscripts were strewn on the porch and stairs and the mud-filled street below, mixed with fragments of snowy marble that had once formed splendid statues. As the four approached, a hot wind puffed out of the doorway, carrying big dark ashes and foul smelling smoke. Kirk chose not to speculate on exactly what was burning inside.

The body of the old priestess lay on the porch, partly covered by the rubble of the fallen roof. Only one out flung arm was recognizable; the rest of her body resembled a bundle of bloody rags. At first Kirk thought that her head was buried under a clutter of fallen tiles, but as he climbed to the top of the stairs he saw that, in fact, her skull had been crushed. The broken tiles barely covered the spilled porridge of blood and brains and bone and hair. He turned quickly away and stared into the temple, where an oily bonfire of smashed furniture and torn manuscripts was guttering in a roomful of barren rubble.

Hawk, weeping quietly and making no effort to hide it, slipped past him into the temple and paced around the central room, searching for something, anything, left un-smashed. Kirk looked back down the steps to be sure the others were all right and saw Spock and Agnes picking their way up the stairs.

Something moved behind them. Kirk started to reach for his phaser, but then he saw that it was only an old man in an old patched toga. He tottered up to the foot of the steps, stared at the destruction for a long moment as if having trouble believing it, then clutched his hands to his old white head and began to wail.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" he howled. "Oh, these decadent times! Oh, that I live to see this! Oh, the curse of long life in so vile an age. Ai! Ai! Ai!"

Spock and Agnes edged away from him, looking for escape routes, but there was no need of that. The old man didn't seem to notice them at all. He continued to cry and tear his hair, not paying attention even when a young woman with bad teeth and frightened eyes ran up and took hold of his arm.

"Grandfather, please be quiet!" she hissed at him, throwing fearful, apologetic glance at the little party on the stairs. "You—you are disturbing these good people. Come. Come home and lie down. You're not well." With one of her hands she clutched a heavy crucifix pendant at her throat, squeezing it for luck or reassurance.

"Nothing is well!" cried the old man, shaking off her other hand. "Nothing in all this wretched world...Ai, ai, the world is sick unto death and nothing escapes the plague—not even the memory of valorous ancestors, not even the honor due to the virtuous dead, not even the love of bravery or beauty or the safety of the city. Nothing, nothing..." He beat his frail old fist on his bowed head.

"Grandfather, you're distracted; you don't know what you're saying." The woman looked nervously up at Agnes, Kirk and Spock and repeated loudly: "He's old and sick, and he doesn't know what he's saying!"

Kirk, wondering why the woman was so frightened, dutifully nodded agreement.
The woman turned back to her grandfather and tugged emphatically at his clothes. "Come, come, you mustn't stand out here in the bad air. Do come home, now. You wouldn't want the neighbors to see you like this, would you?"

"I no longer care!" the old man pulled himself free, stumble toward the stairs and sat down. He pulled the end of his patched toga over his head and rocked to and fro, groaning. "Let them see, let them see, let them hear, let them run and tell the priests. Let me be taken and burned. I no longer care!"

"...Burned?" Kirk echoed aloud, shivering.

"Yeah, burned." It was Hawk, smoke-stained and bitter-faced. He'd come out of the temple with only one salvaged item in his hands. For one horrible instant Kirk thought it was a severed human head—but then he saw that it was the broken-off head of a statue, superbly carved and realistically painted, a portrait of a strong-face handsome woman with calm gray eyes and dark-gold hair tucked under an incongruous tall-crested helmet. Hawk cradled the sculpted head as if it were a tiny baby, on thumb gently tracing the flawless arch of a carved eyebrow. "The penalty for 'idolatry' is death by burning. Didn't sweet Aggie tell you that?"

"'Idolatry?' But-but what harm is he doing?"

"He's showing respect for the statues and temples of the old pagan gods, that's what. Even if he's doing it only to honor his ancestors, that's enough to get him killed—and probably get his whole family run out of town, too." Leaving, Kirk to think that over, Hawk turned from him and started down the stairs.

The woman saw him coming and must have assumed the worst, for she grabbed the old man and tired to drag him to his feet. "Grandfather, get up! Hurry! Do you mean to have us all killed for you folly? You'll have us all burned!" Her voice rose to something close to a scream.

"Run away, then!" shouted the old man. "Run off and save yourself! When you hear word that you grandfather is dead, you may say to everyone: 'Alas, it comes as a great surprise to me! But then, his mind has wandered much of late, and who knows what a doddering old fool may say.' Yes, save yourself! Go on, run away from me! I'll tell the priest nothing of you, even if I live so long as to see them. Indeed, I'll be happy to forget you, you wretched craven sow. Be off!"

"Jus as you like!" snapped the woman, pulling her headscarf close around her face. "Ruin yourself alone, old fool!" She turned and ran away up the street.

"Yes, run!" the old man threw feeble shouts after her, "Run! No Lucretia, you! No Veturia...eh, not even the courage of Nero's wicked mother. Ai Ai, even the strength of our women is gone...ah..."

Hawk cane to the bottom stair and sat down beside the old man, who glance up at him with a face too tired or fear. "Are you in much danger?" Hawk asked quietly.

"Perhaps." The old man shrugged. "That wretched sow won't speak, for fear. The priests have all gone off. No on is here save you and your friends..."

"Don't worry about us; we won't tell anyone. We too....honor the memory of the virtuous dead."

"The glory that was ours... So few remember anymore, or wish to." The old man looked carefully at Hawk, as if not quite believing that anyone else could share his feelings, and noticed the object in his lap. "What have you got there?"
"It was the only thing left," Hawk explained, showing the carved head.

The sight set the old man off again. "Ai! Ai! Rome is shattered!" he howled. "Now the last guardian spirit flies from the city! Nothing remains!" He pressed his trembling old hands to the statue's cheeks as if her were touching the face of a dead lover. "Lost...oh, lost..." he moaned. "Now let the plague come and take us all. Let fire devour every house. Let the savages to the north burst through the gates and trample our last dust underfoot. Our virtue is utterly gone."

_Hell, that's exactly what is going to happen!_ Kirk thought, shivering at the old man's prophecy.

"Fascinating," murmured Spock, dispassionately taking tricorder readings. "A perfect example of 'magical thinking,' not unlike belief in voodoo. He assumes that what befalls the idol will befall the city it represents. Amazing to see such primitive thinking in an educated person, as he appears to be."

"The Romans were a very superstitious people," Agnes explained. "The consulted fortune tellers, believed in omens of all sorts, saw spirits in every shadow. Christianity came as a great relief for them, offering a simple and unified body of prophecy and promising protection from all those menacing 'spirits.'"

"...Relief?" Kirk muttered, looking around at the still-smoking ruins.

"No, virtue is not completely gone," Hawk sighed. With a brief look of regret, he handed the carved head to the startled old man. "Keep it," he said. "Hide it somewhere safe, give it to someone you can trust, and don't let the memory fade. You understand? Remember, and make sure the world remembers." He stood up and helped the old man to his feet. "Get out of this city. Go to Venetia, or Sicily, or some out-of-the-way place where no one will bother to look for you—and go soon. You're not safe here, and neither is she." He touched the statue's flawless forehead one last time. "Take her away from here. Hurry."

The old man nodded rapidly, gibbering thanks and blessings. He hid his prize in the tail of his ragged toga and doddered away down the street as fast as his old legs would carry him. Hawk watched him go, then turned and plodded back up to the broken porch.

Kirk met him halfway up the stairs. "Hawk, why did you do that?" he asked. "You said it was the only thing left in the temple, out of everything we came to get..."

Hawk defensively hitched up his shoulders and glared at the Captain. "To avoid tampering with the future," he snapped. "When I got that piece out into the light and took a good look at it, I recognized it for a fragment that survived the fall of Rome in the usual way. In our time, it's on display at the Greater London Museum—as intact as we just saw it, except that the paint's worn off. That's why I couldn't take it with us, had to give it to one of the natives to preserve. See?"

"Was that the only reason?"

Hawk met Kirk's eyes for a moment, then looked away. "No," he admitted.

"You're not showing much scientific detachment," Kirk smiled. "You're not supposed to get involved with the natives, much less worry whether or not one old man has something to live for."

"So, maybe I'm a soft touch for scholarly old men..." said Hawk, moving on up to the porch. He paused beside the body of the dead priestess. "...And brave old women."

Kirk made himself look at the ragged body, noticing that her fingers were torn where someone had yanked off her rings. He hoped that someone would come by eventually and give her a decent burial. Spock too looked at the body and frowned, probably wondering about the same thing. Agnes, beside
him, folded her hands and began to murmur a prayer.

Without warning, Hawk went wild. "Don't you dare!" he yelled, swinging a roundhouse punch at Agnes. Kirk barely grabbed his arm in time. "Don't you dare mumble your pious mumbo-jumbo at her, not after your nice holy co-believers murdered her! Leave her to the gods she believed in, you bitch! You sanctimonious—" Spock ended his tirade with a judicious nerve pinch, and caught the little archeologist before he could fall.

"Pitiful," commented Agnes, unruffled. "Obviously neurotic. Like so many people who have no... nothing to believe in, he has no reliable standard for behavior and is becoming erratic in his actions. I don't think he'll remain on the university staff much longer."

Kirk held back a moment's impulse to slug her himself. "I don't think much of your prediction, Miss Day," he commented between his teeth. "After all, your last one was wildly wrong." He waved at the destruction around them. "'No danger,' you said!"

"All human beings are fallible," she answered calmly. "It's our nature to err."

*If I have to talk to her for one second more I really will slug her, Kirk thought, clutching his hands together until his knuckles cracked. He saw Spock staring at him and was grateful for the diversion. "What is it, Spock?"

"I was...just thinking, Captain..." the Vulcan answered reluctantly. "It does not appear to be true that 'a soft answer turneth away wrath.'"

"It didn't work for her, did it?" Kirk snapped, jabbing a finger at the old woman's corpse.

Spock looked down, then away. Even someone who didn't know him could have seen the pain on his face.

"No one's perfect," Agnes insisted. "No one, and nothing—except God. That's why forgiveness is so necessary."

"Forgive?" Kirk could not help asking, glancing around at the scene of ruin and death. "Forgive this?"

"Yes," said Agnes.

Kirk looked at Spock, saw the confusion and pain he was struggling to hide, and was bitterly ashamed of being human. "Let's beam back up to the ship," he said, badly in need of something else to absorb his attention.

Spock, equally grateful for the distraction, took out his communicator and hailed the ship. He spoke briefly with Scot on the bridge, and frowned at the answer he got. "We should hurry, Captain," he said. "There is solar radiation approaching from recent sunspot activity, which may interfere with the transporter."

"The sooner the better." Kirk's eyes kept straying back to the dead priestess. He wondered who in this rotting city would have the courage or decency to bury her, or if she'd be left to the crows.

Spock obligingly relayed the order to the transporter room, and the familiar hum and sparkle filled the air around them. They materialized a moment later on the transporter pad. Without a word, Agnes stepped off the pad and strolled out the door. She looked as if she had professional business to attend to, and perhaps indeed she had. Spock lifted the still unconscious Hawk to his shoulders and followed the historian out the door, right past the gaping transporter technician.
"Just a minor accident," Kirk explained, not wanting to go into details. "Spock's taking him to Sickbay to check for bruises." The small lie annoyed him. He started off the pad, reaching under his cloak to take off his ground party gear, and stopped right where he was. Something was missing.

"Oh, no," he groaned, checking to make sure. All I need, losing 23rd century items in 5th century Rome...Tricorder, phaser, translator, and communicator—Hey, where's the communicator? — Damn, I know where... He remembered exactly where he'd been standing when he'd grabbed Hawk to keep him from punching Agnes: right there beside the old woman's corpse. He really didn't want to see that sight again—but his own unwillingness angered him. "Beam me back down, Mr. Kyle," he said. "Exact same coordinates. I can't leave that lying around in ancient Rome."

"But, sir—"

"It'll take me less than a minute. Hurry, before some native finds it."

"Aye, sir." Kyle obligingly pushed the levers down, and the Captain faded away in a cloud of sparkles.

The intercom beeped for attention and Kyle answered it. The caller was Spock, announcing that the expected burst of solar radiation had arrived, and ordering the suspension of all transporter activity for the next 2.75 minutes. Kyle turned several degrees paler than usual and shakily explained that he'd just beamed the Captain back down to pick up a dropped communicator.

Spock promptly attempted to call the Captain. He tried for the next 2.75 minutes, with no success. Exactly 30 seconds later Spock and a Security detachment, disguised in native dress, beamed down to look for him. The found the ruined temple just as they'd left it, and they found the lost communicator near the body of the old woman, but Captain Kirk they didn't find at all.

To Be Continued in Chapter II: Transporter Malfunction of the Month
Kirk materialized nine feet above the ground and came crashing down on a pushcart. The pushcart promptly collapsed. Kirk was too dazed at first to notice more than his aches, pains and ringing head. Then he became aware of three things: the pushcart had been full of fresh fish, he’d landed in the middle of a large and interested crowd, and the pushcart owner was having hysteric.

“Robber! Clumsy oaf! Wretched magician!” screamed the little peddler, his tunic flapping as he dance furiously around his crushed cart—and fish. “Why can’t you damned sorcerers look where you’re going? I’ll have the law on you! I’ll have your license revoked! I’ll complain to the Imperator himself! Wretch! Robber! Slave!” He picked up a relatively undamaged fish and beat Kirk over the head with it.

Kirk didn’t even try to fend off the blows. He just pressed his hands over his face and groaned. What a hell of a way to break the Prime Directive! was all he could think. Kyle’s coordinates must have been incredibly off base. All around Kirk a huge crowd of people in long tunics and sandals were pointing, shouting, peering and laughing. …Laughing? He wondered, daring to raise his head and look. The peddler’s impromptu weapon fell apart with a last squish and the exhausted little merchant subsided into panting barnyard curses and threats of lawsuits. Kirk barely noticed him. Where the hell am I? The people look different, sound different…different buildings… The transporter! What did it—? Where—?

A man wearing ancient Roman style armor, but carrying a bundle of sticks instead of a sword, stomped up and grabbed Kirk by one arm and hauled him partly to his feet. Kirk got up the rest of the way, shaking scales and fins and bits of fish out of his clothes. The soldier, or whatever he was, took a step back as he realized that Kirk stood a head taller than he did. In fact, Kirk was a good bit taller than everybody present. The crowd whooped and laughed some more. The little soldier hunched up his shoulders, put a mean look on his face and bellowed: “Awright, Magician; let’s see your license!”

…”license?” “Uh, I don’t have it with me. This was an accident, I swear.”

“So it was an accident, was it?” the little soldier sneered. “Ho, I’m sure it was! We don’t want to go around smashing pushcarts and disturbing the peace on purpose, now do we?”

“My pushcart!” the peddler sobbed. “And 20 weight of fish, smashed to ruin! He’s wrecked my business! Deprived me of my livelihood! I have a wife and three children and—”

“True, true, true,” the soldier purred, trying to grab Kirk by the collar and shake him. He wasn’t very successful at it. Annoyed, he kicked Kirk in the shins, grabbed his cloak as far up as he could reach and brandished the bundle of sticks. “Smashing private property! Blocking a public thoroughfare! Disturbing the peace! And practicing magic without a license!” he trumpeted. “Off to court you go, Magician! I’ll wager you’ll have to pay your weight in sliver for that little ‘accident.’ Make way, people! Make way!”

Kirk groaned again, casting a last hopeless look around for the communicator and knowing he wouldn’t find it. Sure enough, he didn’t.

“Here, here, it’s not as bad as all that,” said a new voice. Kirk turned and saw a short, burly, middle-aged man standing in his path, grinning from ear to ear. “Publius there—” he jerked a thick thumb toward the sniveling pushcart owner. “—Lives next door to me, and I can tell you right down to the last sestertius what that pushcart was worth, fish and all. The fine won’t be too high. Here, officer;
stop hitting that man.”

Astonishingly, Kirk’s ill-tempered captor obeyed. “Uh, well certainly, Sergeant,” he fumbled. “I just want to be sure that he doesn’t get away… I mean, a big stout fellow like that and a magician…”

“Not a very good magician, obviously,” said the ‘Sergeant,’ amiably taking Kirk’s arm. “Tell you what, I’ll come along to and make sure he doesn’t escape. In fact, if you’ll turn him over to my custody, I’ll march him down to court myself. Will that satisfy you?”

“Oh, by all means. Uhm, I hereby deputize you to escort this- this person to court.” The ‘officer’—apparently some sort of local traffic cop—eagerly handed the ‘Sergeant’ one of his sticks and promptly disappeared into the crowd. The crowd, seeing that the fun was over, began to break up.

“He still remembers that I got him his job,” the Sergeant laughed. “A little clout can be useful. What did you say your name was?”

“Kirk. James Kirk. Look I came here by accident, and I really didn’t have any control over where I fell. I don’t even know where I am! Do I have to, uh, go to jail? What’s the law here? You said the fine wouldn’t be too bad…”

“One thing at a time, D-Démas? Kir-Kirke? Like the legendary Greek sorceress who turned men into swine? It sounds Greek, anyway. You from Greece? No? Well, friend Démas, you were lucky enough to land in Rome itself, where the laws are not only fair and honest, but promptly applied. Thanks to the Imperator’s reforms, you won’t find a corrupt official anywhere in the city. I can’t speak for all the towns in Italy, of course, much less of towns in the provinces, where the governors sometimes get lazy and let inspections slide, but here in Rome you can be assured of getting a fair and fast trial. In fact, with any luck, you may even get on the docket today.”
“How nice…” Kirk shivered. “Tell me, uh, Sergeant—”

“No. I’m not a sergeant anymore. I’m just plain Gaius Equarius now. I work down at the racetrack.”

“Uh, pleased to meet you, Gaius. Look, uh, this was an accident, as I said, and I don’t have any money with me, and…uh, what happens if I can’t pay the fine.”

“Hmmm, that’s not good…” Gaius scratched his chin as he steered Kirk through the people and pushcart crowded street. “I’d hate to see you sent to the slave block for such a piddling offense…”

The slave block!”
“There, there, calm yourself! It’s very unlikely, sir, very unlikely…unless you get some judge with a really vicious temper… More likely, you’ll just be ordered to work it off. Oh, that means they’d send you to work for Publius and I can think of far better masters…. Ha! I have it! I was going to hire another stable boy anyway. Look Démas, I’ll offer to pay the fine for you, and then you got to work for me at the racetrack, see?
The pay’s good, I won’t dock you too much, and you’ll be able to work off the debt in no time. How’s that sound to you? Is it a deal?”

“Deal!” Kirk gasped in relief. “Whew! I can’t thank you enough. Uhm, but I have some friends who’ll be looking for me; when I can catch them, they’ll be able to repay you right here. In fact, they’re probably searching at the, uh, Temple of Rome Defended right now. Can we go by there on the way to court?”

“Certainly. It’s only two streets out of our way, and there’s no hurry. Is that where you were trying to go when you landed on Publius’ pushcart? Hee! Hee! It must’ve been the will of the gods! Publius cheated on his defense taxes last year. Ho! Ho! How fitting!”

“Um, yes…” ‘Will of the gods?’ ‘Imperator’s reforms?’ All these healthy, fearless people, dressed differently…no fear of ‘magic;’ it just has to be licensed… He speaks of the temple as if it were still standing… Was the transporter off in more than just…physical aim? He walked a little faster, as if trying to keep ahead of a growing, horrible suspicion.

“Here we are.” Gaius Equarius led Kirk around a corner and into a wide street. “That’s it, just ahead. Do you see your friends anywhere about?”

Kirk stopped dead. He clutched his hands together and began to shake. Beyond the passing crowd, the Temple of Rome Defended stood white and clean and perfectly intact. “No…” Kirk groaned softly. “Oh, no…”

“There, there, Démas. Don’t take it so hard.” Equarius patted his arm. “We’ll com back after the trial and see if they’ve arrived by then.” He led Kirk away, back toward their original course. “I’ll pay the fine and your friends can repay me when we find them.”

“We…might not find them right away…” Kirk trudged up the street, feeling as if his boots weighed a ton apiece. “Is that stable job still open?”

“Certainly. Have you ever handled horses before? You’ll have to join the union, of course…”

Kirk nodded blank agreement as Equarius chatted on. …transporter…solar flare… he tried to understand, I’ve been thrown into an alternate universe! Through the mirror… Will Scotty, or Spock, realize what’s happened to me? Will they guess it in time? Knaffbein stress…the ship will have to return to the present—it’s own time, soon, within a day or less… How long? How long can they afford to keep looking for me? I have to find some way to signal them, and fast!

“We’re getting close to court,” said Equarius. “Crowd’s thick here. Mind you stay near me, Démas.”

Kirk nodded and dutifully stayed close. Equarius was right; the crowd-pressure was amazing. People pressed elbow to elbow about the open market stalls—vendors selling everything from fresh vegetables to gold-work, fish mongers yelling their tradition leather-lunged abuse. Sharp-eyed customers considering and choosing and haggling, all of them shouting and waving their and gesturing articulately, like…like Italians. Kirk grinned at them fondly, even as he struggle to get through them. Equarius led the way like an experienced ice-breaker leading a cargo ship, past the shrilling vendors and buyers, through a ring of gossiping businessmen swapping hot tips and elaborate speculations, across the broad stairs where orators by the dozen harangued politely attentive
audience, through colonnaded porches where solemn philosophers argued patiently with their followers. Kirk considered that a scholar could spend a lifetime studying just his one public square.

“What is this place?” he asked.

“The city Forum,” Equarius replied. “Come on, this way.”

Kirk noticed that the tightly packed crowd moved with a subtle orderliness, everybody keeping toward the right-hand lane going up the street, and to the left side coming down it. At the intersection stood another uniformed man—obviously a traffic cop—obviously directing traffic. Kirk smiled as he thought of how old this game was. The crowd noises became distinct fragment of conversation as he grew used to the sound, and the translator relayed them steadily into his ear.

“—so I says to her, ‘Aemelia,’ I says, ‘Far be it from me to tell you how to handle you own husband, but if you want my advice—”

“—dare call that theatre? I’ve seen better tragedies scribbled on the notebook margins in my penmanship class—”

“—so I put 10 sesterces on the stupid nag, just like my stupid brother-in-law says, and I lost my tunic on the stupid race, and now my wife says: ‘You stupid—”

“—but if my brother can get the job on the freighter, in two years we can make enough to move out to Praeneste—”

“—look it’s a five-room flat and at those prices you can’t beat it, even if the neighborhood isn’t exactly the Palatine, and—”

“—all right, so I break my back to get the kid a good education, so who’s asking for gratitude? But I expect maybe a little respect after all the sacrifices we make for him. So what does the brat do? Calls me an old fogey, right in front of his mother and aunt, and I’m supposed to put up with—”

“—20 sesterces for this dress, and I swear I’ll just die if Lucius doesn’t notice—”

“—Senator Cornelius is a horse’s ass, and I don’t care who—”

“—such a bargain—”

“—get a job—”

Kirk felt his sense of space and time slipping. This wasn’t at all like the dying city he’d last seen, and not at all like the ancient Rome that he had studied back in his Starfleet Academy history courses. It was more like one of the modern cities on any of a dozen Federation worlds, save for the lack of vehicles. Too clean, too healthy, too well-made… and too late in time, he decided. Alien time-line, where Rome was a very different kind of place. How to get word to Spock? Even if he realizes what’s happened to me, how will he find me among all these people? How can I let them know where I am? How…?

“Here’s the courthouse,” said Equarius, pointing to an imposing white building with the look of civic responsibility all over it. “Eh, you can’t go into court with your clothes stinking of fish! Here, let’s go around to the back, and I’ll explain to the clerk, and then we’ll find the nearest bath and drycleaner’s.

“Drycleaner’s…?” Kirk surreptitiously checked his translator. There didn’t seem to be anything wrong with it.
“Sure… Or do you call them ‘fullers?’ You know, folk who clean woolen cloth by rubbing it with fullers’ earth. That sort of thing.”

“Oh. Of course.” What kind of ancient Rome is this? Technology higher than in my timeline. How?

Equarius led him through an unassuming back door, down one corridor after another, finally into an office crowded with shelves full of scrolls and tablets and desks full of scribbling clerks. Equarius marched boldly up to the main desk, and a somewhat harried looking balding man behind it, and heartily clapped him on the shoulder. “Hey, Sponsorius,” he said, “How’s the world treating you today?”

The clerk flinched, looked up, turned purple, and finally sputtered: “I don’t have the money! On my mother’s honor, I don’t! Look, my daughter’s getting married, and you know what a decent wedding feast costs these days, not to mention the dowry, and you know my wife’s very tight with the household budget, I haven’t been able to sneak a sestertius past her, and— and— For the love of the gods, Gaius, I can’t let her know I’ve been losing money on the horse races! She’d skin me alive! And if the under-clerks found out, I’d never hear the last of it… Look Gaius, I get paid next Ides—with a bonus. Can’t you wait—”

“Wait?” purred Equarius, clearly enjoying this. “Oh, I can wait, old friend, but this friend of mine can’t.” He pointed, with a flourish, toward Kirk. Sponsorius, taking his first good look at Kirk, grew very round-eyed and gave a little squeak of dismay. Kirk could imagine how he must look—not to mention smell—towering over the little clerk’s desk in his long, hooded cloak with its ominous and reeking stains. “His name is Démas Kirke,” Equarius went on smoothly, “and he’s the defendant in a small claims case. He’s in something of a hurry. Do you think you could squeeze him onto the docket for today?”

“Oh! Oh, certainly, absolutely!” The fat little clerk fairly gibbered with relief, pulling out a scroll and scrawling on it with a wood-reed pen. “Ah, you’re in luck! There’s room in…Heh! Chamber 4, Judge Softie’s court! His docket always moves fast, as one could guess. Yes, he’ll have room at about the fourth hour. Er. Would that be convenient, Citizen…Kirke?” The reed pen slipped in his stubby fingers as he filled out the information in the blank part of the scroll. Equarius reeled off the data, giving his address for Kirk’s (He’s visiting with me at present”), stable hand as Kirk’s occupation (with a sidelong wink), and the name of the plaintiff with considerable satisfaction. Sponsorius gave Kirk a perfectly horrified look when he heard the nature of the offenses—disturbing the peace, smashing a pushcart, practicing magic without a license—and Kirk managed to look properly ominous while suppressing a smile. Equarius departed with a last comment of: “Ides of the month, then. I’ll see you at the baths after work.” Sponsorius was wonderfully relieved to see them go.

Equarius was guffawing openly as he led Kirk back out into the street. “Ho! Ho! Eh, Démas, excuse my use of you to, er, prompt Sponsorius about his six-month overdue debt, but I just couldn’t resist, you being such a great tall fellow… Heh! The look on his face! Well, it also improved your chances considerably. ‘To kill two birds with one stone,’ as they say… Judge Softie, is it! One couldn’t ask for better lock. Now let’s find the nearest fuller and bath.”

“Uhm, Gaius, it isn’t that I don’t trust you, or anything like that, but, uh, I have some…er, magical gear with me, and I- I’m under oath not to let it fall into the hands of of- of uninitiated people, and… Well, I think, I’d better keep my clothes with me.”

“Ah, I see you’ve heard about the little problem we’ve been having at the baths lately—young rascals running off with people’s clothes while they’re bathing. How disrespectful the young are these days! But don’t you worry, Démas; I know which bath attendants are honest fellows, and I’ve
a good bit of cash with me, so I’ll hire someone to watch our gear and someone else to run you
clothes to the cleaner. Ah, here we are…” Equarius led Kirk up the stairs of a huge public building,
from which came the sounds of a large crowd and an undercurrent of splashing. “The Baths of
Agrippa, largest and most extensive in the city. Also the cheapest.” The little Roman waved one
hand in a grand oratorical gesture, as pleased as if he owned the building himself. “Surely you’ve
heard of the Agrippa: the Imperator’s best friend and one of Rome’s greatest generals. Couldn’t have
won the war without Agrippa, everyone says. He was a great one for public buildings, too, and a
great defender of the labor unions. It was a terrible loss for Rome when he died, but he left us many a
fitting monument.”

‘Labor unions?’ Kirk gave his translator another quick check. Alien universe, all right. ‘Agrippa?’ I
seem to remember the name…from one of my Military History courses, I think... He dutifully
followed Equarius through a huge vestibule of artfully-tiled floors, walls and ceilings painted in
remarkably realistic style, and larger-than-life statues that were painted in the same realistic fashion.
Two archways led inward, and Kirk noticed that the women in the crowd went through one of them
and the men through the other. That didn’t fit with what Kirk knew of ancient Rome, either. In my
universe, the Roman baths were famous for all sorts of immoral goings-on. Whee: lovers assignation!
Naked lusts! Underwater orgies! …Underwater orgies? How do you do it underwater without
drowning? This I have to see! …in the interests of science of course… He followed Equarius into the
dressing-room, ready for just about anything, including a wall-to-wall orgy on the floor.

Consequently, he was startled to find nothing going on in the dressing room but a lot of Romans
dressing and undressing, and several bath attendants playing dice while keeping an eye on the
clothes. Equarius waved him toward an unoccupied clothes hook and went off to haggle with a
couple of the attendants. Kirk gingerly took off his cloak, a bit nervous about all this casual nudity in
public. Then he noticed the other Romans ogling his odd clothes, and undressed in a hurry. He put
his tricorder and gear-laden belt on the hook, hid them beneath his socks and underwear, and shoved
his boots against the wall below. When Equarius came trotting up with an attendant in tow, Kirk
handed over his fishy smelling cloak, trousers and shirt without comment. The attendant looked at
Kirk, looked at the clothes, wrinkled his nose and padded off muttering something about ‘outlandish
barbarian fashions.’ Kirk covertly examined his translator, making sure that it wasn’t conspicuous.

Equarius stripped off his clothes, hung them on the next hook, paused to shake his head ruefully at
his slightly potty belly and gave Kirk an admiring glance. “Heh, you’re in pretty good shape for a
magician,” he commented, giving Kirk a playful thwack on the stomach that made him blush. “Look
at me—an old soldier, and already going to fat. Ah, times! Ah, manners! The wife’s right; I ought to
get more proper exercise. Gods know, if I don’t pleasure her rightly, she just might up and divorce
me. Come on, let’s go wash.” He ambled off, nonchalantly naked, toward another tall archway. Kirk
walked after him, trying to look calm and cool, reminding himself that if he blushed again it would
show all over, and impatient to see the infamous baths in full swing.

In point of fact, the Roman baths were full of an awful lot of citizens doing nothing more exciting
that taking baths. There was a hot-water pool (crowded), a warm-water pool (more crowded), a cold-
water pool (still more crowded) and a steam room (not too crowded, fortunately), and Equarius led
him through all of them. Kirk was especially intrigued by the steam room: the steam was piped up
through vents in the floor, and they had to wear wooden beach clogs to protect their feet. Equarius
found two seats together on the wooden bench that ran around the walls, between a woefully fat
citizen who was grumbling to his neighbor about how hard it was to lose weight, and a towel
wrapped nonentity who was grumbling to his neighbor about his mother-in-law’s nagging that was
driving him so crazy that he spent as much time as possible hiding in the steam room. Kirk wished he
could have brought in the tricorder to record some of the comments.

Both men recognized Equarius and hailed him. “Hey, horse trainer,” said the fat man, “what’s the
news at the track? Any tips on tomorrow’s races?”

“Now, now, Inflatus, you know I work for the Blue Team,” Equarius replied, shifting around on the bench until he found a comfortable position. “It wouldn’t do to be disloyal to my team. But if you really want to know, I must admit that the Greens have just gotten a fine set of matched grays from Iberia. If the owners have the sense to let Fulgurus drive those lovelies, they’ll be cursed hard to beat.”

“Thanks for the good words. Who’s your big friend?”

“Démas Kirke, my new stable hand. Démas, meet Inflatus and Subditus, more friends of mine.”

Kirk murmured polite greetings. The towel wrapped Subditus gave him an admiring look. “Eh, Démas, you’re big enough to toss Gaius’ horses around; damn near big enough to intimidate my mother-in-law. Greek name, too… Ah, you’re Macedonian. Right?”

“Ah, not exactly. I’m from a little further away.”

“Not from Thrace, are you?” Subditus edge away from him on the bench.

“…Thrace? Er, no…” Think! Where did my ‘way-back ancestors come from? “Actually, my relatives came from Ireland. Some of them, anyway…”

“Of course! From your size, I should have guessed.” Inflatus grinned and slapped his knees. “I was sure I’d seen faces like yours before, years ago, when I was a poor traveling merchant… Ah, wild Hibernia, beyond the furthest border… But where did you get the Greek name?”

“Hah, don’t you know that Greek merchants have been dealing up there since before Carthage fell?” said Equarius. “Now my guess is that Démas is from a merchant family? Anyone want to take bets?”

“That’s a pretty good guess,” Kirk admitted, grateful for the neat cover story they were inadvertently giving him. “Actually, I’m a ship’s captain, ranging in the…outer sea.”

“Oh, that explains everything.” Subditus chortled. “I hear it’s pretty wild country along those coasts. Is this your first visit to the big city? I’ll bet you don’t see baths this good out there.”

“True,” Kirk grinned. “This is the first decent hot-water bath I’ve had in a long time.” Sonic showers just aren’t the same thing.

“Oho! Well, enjoy yourself, Démas. There are worse places to hide from your mother-in-law, I can tell you.” Subditus stretched his hands gratefully into a soft jet of steam. “Mmmm. I truly pity folk who don’t have good baths. How on Earth can they take decent care of their health?”

“From my experience, they don’t.” Inflatus shook his head in remembered amazement. “When I was out in the Eastern provinces, I saw some incredible things: whole cities where you couldn’t find a single man, woman or child in good health! Just looking at the condition of the people is enough to make you sick. Of course, they’ve never had public baths, or clean water, or sewers, or toilets, or any kind sort of plumbing. In fact, if you try to bring in such innovations, they shy away from them as if decent sanitation were the work of some evil god.”

Subditus guffawed.

“Don’t laugh,” Equarius put in. “I know what he means. I recently saw a bunch of them—visitors to the city, some trade delegation or other—they sent a message to the Senate, claiming that the public baths were—hear this—‘dangerous to the moral health!’ I saw it, and I swear it’s true.”
“Could it have been a joke?” Subditus clearly did have trouble believing it. “What could they possibly have meant by that?”

“Orgies, maybe?” Kirk couldn’t help asking. Just one little orgy.

“Orgies?” Equarius scratched his head. “I’ve never heard of anyone performing the Dionysian Rites in a public bath! The Rites of Bacchus, maybe… I recall that several months ago a handful of drinkers from an overly long party stumble into one of the smaller bathhouses in hopes of sobering up, and one them got a cramp and nearly drowned… But that’s all I can think of that remotely resembles a god-frenzied celebration in a bath. Then again, you know how rumors fly. Could that be what those easterners were complaining about?

Kirk gave his translator a suspicious look.

“No, no…” Inflatus frowned. “I’ve heard complaints like that before. Some of those people really believe that soaking up warm water and taking care of one’s health lead to ‘a vain preoccupation with the flesh’ and a turning away from the ‘humility and asceticism which is man’s proper direction.’ They can go on about it at great length, often ending with a thundering chorus of ‘Vanity, vanity, all is vanity!’ Truly amazing nonsense.”

Kirk felt a chill in his bones that note even the steam could touch. “I…seem to have heard those words before,” he murmured. …A universe away. Here, it hasn’t spread to Rome…yet.

“I don’t doubt it,” grumbled Inflatus. “That’s a popular theme with a lot of weird eastern religious cults. Now, I’ll be the first to admit that a little humility and asceticism are good for one: decent self-discipline, and all that—”

“Oh, indeed,” said Equarius, pointedly eyeing Inflatus’s potbelly.

“—But any sensible person would say ‘Nothing in excess’ about humility and asceticism too. Become too much of an ascetic, and you’ll starve to death. Don’t laugh; I’ve seen it happen. As for humility, believe me, that can become a form of vanity in itself. I once saw a case, out in the eastern provinces again, where they don’t seem to know the meaning of the word ‘moderation,’ of a character who called himself a holy man, if you please, and… Uh, no. Really, that’s too disgusting a story.”

“Oh, go on, Inflatus; you’ve just gotten us interested.”

“Very well, but I hope you have strong stomachs. This man spent 20 years—20 years, mind you!—going about in the same ragged sheepskin, never bathing, sleeping in ditches, eating only what he could beg or pick from garbage heaps, and preaching to anyone who would listen—or who could stand to get near him, for that matter—about how fine and holy it was to live as he did. He gained some small following in Syria, which tells you something about the state of philosophy in that place. He was well on his way to becoming a national health problem when his demanding humility—or inverse vanity, as I call it—led him one step too far for his followers. Ah, Démas, are you familiar with a disease known as leprosy?”

“I’ve heard of it.” Kirk shuddered.

“From your look I see that you have. Well, this so-called holy man made a point of chasing after the poor victims of leprosy, and—would you believe?—kissing the wounds! That was too much, even for the most benighted of his flock. They treated him like a leper thereafter, quite sensibly. Surely enough, he eventually died—of leprosy.”
The others made assorted noises of disgust. Kirk bent nearly double, fighting down not only his stomach but a host of ugly memories and uglier speculations. That other Rome...little side-notes in the history texts...the sickly parade...gaggles of vision-crazed sadist and masochists. Holy hysterics! They haven't gotten far yet, here, but they're on the road...they're creeping up on your clean, healthy, prosperous city...Where in the hell do they come from? What drives them to such horrors? ...and in such numbers?

“Oh, now look what you done!” Equarius complained, peering worriedly at Kirk. “You’ve made poor Démas ill with that story. You should have known; coming from Hibernia, he couldn’t have expected anything like that.”

“I’m sorry, honestly.” Inflatus really did sound contrite. “But I warned you, remember…”

“No, no, you don’t understand!” Kirk insisted, pulling himself back upright. “I have seen horrors like that! I thought they were rarities, oddities... I didn’t know there were so many of them, no before— I didn’t know they were here—in this—in Rome. I didn’t know what ideas drove them... I thought it was simple insanity or special conditions…”

“Huh, that’s just the trouble,” Inflatus grumbled. “It isn’t simple madness; it seems to be some form of mass lunacy, and catching. A contagious form of mental disease... Hmmm...”

“Contagious!” Subditus hitched his towels closer around him and looked nervous. “What are the symptoms?”

“Ah, as near as I can recall, the first symptom is an obsessive concern with ‘the next world’—which is what they call life after death, or the realm of the spirits, or some damn thing like that. Then there’s a growing and corresponding neglect of this world—that is, the one people live in. This neglect, of course, makes it much easier for one’s home and surroundings to deteriorate; the afflicted let their houses and cities turn into pigsties, don’t remove their garbage, don’t wash, let their roofs develop holes and their local governments get corrupt, and so on. I recall a case of a whole town in Judea—”

“Hold; what of those fools marching into the Senate House with their complaints about the baths?” Equarius cut in. “They certainly weren’t ignoring the government.”

“Oh, that happens too. Such folk often make ferocious—even impossible—demands of the local government. They don’t want anything practical, mind you: tax-reassessment or equitable land distribution or public works projects for the unemployed—no, nothing like that. They always want, if you please, some sort of moral position backed up by law. ‘Close the wine shops!’ the say, or ‘close the baths!’ or ‘expel all philosophers!’ or ‘close all the schools’—save those which teach only their pet philosophies. ‘Close the libraries,’ they say—or else burn all books whose philosophy conflict with theirs. ‘Shut down the games,’ ‘close the gymnasias,’ ‘shut down the theaters, and the music halls, and the art galleries.’ Ah, it’s clear what their wishes are; they want to do away with anything that makes folk happy, healthy, wealthy or wise! Why? Hah! Because only sick, poor, miserable fools would ever flock to their banner or swell their ranks! No, don’t laugh; I’ve seen it happen. Yes, to gain converts and power they’ll deign to involve themselves in civic life. Faugh! Better they stayed home.”

“Back to the point. What comes next?”

“Well, of course, deterioration of the surroundings, decay of civic life, makes such folk even more contemptuous of this life and more concerned with the next one. They take that for proof that they were right all along and you cannot convince them otherwise. It’s a deadly cycle, much like a whirlpool.” Inflatus rubbed his hands, as if washing them in the stream. “Now in this part of the world, when someone reaches that stage of preoccupation he usually recognizes that he’s ill—or at
the very least, his relatives recognize it for him—and off he goes for a rest at one of the temples of Asculapius. They have a good rate of cure, I’ve heard. In less civilized parts, however, credulous folk believe that madness indicates the presence of a god, so the sick man is encouraged in his sickness—even imitated in it—until he dies of some filth borne disease or other effect of worldly neglect, like the leprous holy man.”

“Yes,” Equarius considered, “I think I have seen a case or two like that. The poor wretches had gotten to the state of ferocious hatred for the annoying physical world, a passionate contempt for the body and its needs… Hmm, that’s what it was with poor old Gurses. His wife had him dragged off to the Asculpians after he tried to whip himself to death for, so he said, ‘unclean lusts.’ It turned out that his offense was nothing worse than admiring the famous whore, Fundusaltia. That’s harmless enough, but he’d cut up most of his skin atoning for it by the time the Lictors got to him. Tragic case. Tragic.”

“Disgusting, I call it.” Inflatus glowered. “I know, one should be tolerant of poor madmen, but I confess that I can feel nothing but disgust for creatures like these. Perhaps I’ve seen too many of them; it begins to grate on the sensibilities after awhile. I mean, not only is such madness of a loathsome sort, but their hypocrisy is so terrible! In the name of self-denial, the take delight in torturing themselves—and others—for their ‘own good.’ In the name of humility, they pride themselves on crawling lower than any beast. Ugh! Vile folk!”

“Hold there,” Subditus spoke up. “I recall the famous case of Claudianus Fundus. You remember, he started the same way but went mad in a different direction. He because so obsessed with dirt that he hardly ever left the bath, insisted on having his clothes boiled before he would wear them, and would eat nothing but steamed turnips for fear of ‘contamination,’ he said. Needless to add, he ceased to embrace his wife as well. She had him taken off to the Asculpians after he nearly drowned from falling asleep in the bath. Is this a variant of the same madness?”

“Oh, indeed!” snorted Inflatus. “I dined with his son-in-law recently, and he told me what the priests learned. Fundus’ obsessive scrubbing was rooted in the same sort of mania; disgust and hated for the physical being. The only difference between him and filthy holy man was that Fundus fought ‘the filth of this world’ while the holy leper rolled in it to prove his ability to rise above it. Perhaps that’s why Fundus was eventually cured, and the other simply died. They both despised the physical world, the body, life itself. Ah, call me cruel if you will, but I sometimes feel that the best way to deal with such creatures is to send them speedily into that Next World that they adore so greatly.”

“Throw them to the lions?” Kirk gulped. Is that how it started?

“Hah! What self-respecting lion would eat such?” Inflatus laughed. “Lions don’t eat man-flesh unless they’re starving, and a lion starved enough to eat something that smells that bad—and some of these ‘holy madmen’ really stink let me tell you—why, the lion would be so weak that a child could escape it, or an old man knock it down with his fist.”

“Ho! Ho! You’ve been hanging around more than my racetrack, I see,” Equarius chortled. “Learned a thing or two about lions, eh? How much do they eat per day?”

“Enough to run Ostentus into debt! If he doesn’t get a good animal trainer soon, and put on a good show for the autumn crowd, he’ll have to sell out. Now if Agrestus was still around there’d be no problem; he could get the big cats to jump through flaming hoops! Unfortunately, a jealous husband put him in the temple of Asculapius for a good long stay…”

The talk fibbled off into sports gossip, and Kirk leaned against the warm wall, letting it all run past him. He wanted to forget about the earlier conversation and just drowse in the steady heat. He knew he should be racking his brains for some way to tell Spock where he was. He wondered how he was
going to deal with this upcoming court case. He had no answers for any of a dozen questions and his brain felt tired.

After a while Equarius shook him awake. “Come, Démas; it’s almost the fourth hour, and we have yet to dress. There’s not even time for a descent massage before we go. My fault; I wasn’t watching the time.”

Kirk obediently followed him into the drying room, where he discovered that Romans dried off with scrapers, not towels, and then rubbed their skins with olive oil. Then they went back to the dressing room, where they found the attendants marveling over Kirk’s recently returned clothes. One of the men apparently had interests in the clothing business, and he pestered Kirk for information about the marvelous material of his shirt. Kirk made assorted excuses and got out of there fast.

Fifteen minutes later, Kirk and Equarius stood in small claims court and were called to the bench. An official read off the charges and the tearful Publius elaborated on them, and the judge looked sympathetic. Worried, Kirk studied the judge, wondering just how good his chances were.

Jude Softie didn’t look very formidable; he was a small man, even compared to the little Romans, and slender, gray-eyed and apparently somewhat nearsighted. He had blond hair threaded with white at the temples, a gently and intelligent and surprisingly handsome face. His toga was sloppily wrapped around him, as if he’d absent-mindedly thrown it on. He looked exactly like the sort of man who would be called ‘Judge Softie.’

“Practicing magic without a license?” he said, peering nearsightedly at Kirk. He had a nice, calm, level voice. “Now that’s a serious charge, young man. The fine is quite steep, I’m afraid. It has to be, you know; if magicians ran about unlicensed, the unscrupulous sort could do all sorts of mischief, and we’d have no end of trouble apprehending them. Now this little prank of yours did no more harm than break a pushcart and cause a small public disturbance, for which you should be grateful, but the fine is still a heavy one. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“Er, yes sir,” Kirk said, thinking fast. “Your honor, I wasn’t practicing magic—I had it practiced on me. A friend of mine, who happens to be a magician of sorts…” Scotty would howl over that description! Kyle would probably blush… “Er, he was trying to send me from my ship to the temple of Rome Defended, and he…sort of …miscalculated.”

“Right into my pushcart!” wailed Publius. “To squash my fish!”

Everyone in the court guffawed, including the judge.

“It could have been worse,” Kirk added. “He could just as easily have materialized me a mile up in the air or underground.” …That’s true… Goddam, I was lucky!

Everyone in the court appreciatively shivered.

“Indeed.” The judge turned to Publius. “Citizen, do you have any evidence that this act of destruction was deliberate?”

“Uh, no…” Publius scratched his head. “I don’t see why a perfect stranger should smash my pushcart…”

“I assure you, sir,” Kirk added, “I had no intention or desire to land in a pile of fish.”

“At least you came down soft,” said the judge. He waited for the resultant laughter to die down, and then rapped for silence. “Démas Kirke, I hereby find you guilty of accidental damage to private property and minor involuntary disturbance of the peace, and hereby fine you the amount of one
solidus. All other charges are dismissed. Are you able to pay the fine immediately?"

“Uh, no.”

“I’ll pay it, your honor.” Equarius stepped in. “He can pay me out of his wages.”

“Do you accept this arrangement?” the judge asked. He raised a doubtful eyebrow at Kirk’s vigorous nod of agreement. ‘Hmm, if I know anything of Equarius the horse trainer, he’ll keep you working hard. Then again, you’re a big strong fellow, and shouldn’t have too bad a time of it. Next case!’

Kirk walked out the courtroom feeling a trifle dazed. People in this universe seemed to accept magic as a matter of course, something to be regulated, like traffic, but not feared—as if it really existed. He wondered, with a shiver, if ‘magic’ really did exist in this universe.

“Well, since that’s done, shall we go home?” asked Equarius. “Oh, that’s right; you wanted to go back to the temple of Rome Defended. No problem: the crowds are thinning out. Must be near dinnertime. Eh, I hope the little wife got enough groceries to feed a surprise guest for dinner… This way.”

The temple of Rome Defended was empty now, save for a priestess tending the ritual lamps. There was no one on the porch and few people on the street. Kirk studied the neat little white building, pondering where and how to leave a message.

…Not with the priestesses. Too much danger: mistakes, misinterpretations, discovery… Nobody. … Write it on the wall? Where? Not inside…nor on the front porch or walls; they’re probably scrubbed clean every day… Side walls? Back?

Kirk walked around the little temple until he came to the blank rear wall. Sure enough, the stones were scribbled with assorted graffiti. He couldn’t read the Latin, but many of the meanings were clear enough: a man’s name accompanied by a crude drawing of the south end of a north-bound donkey, a woman’s name next to an address and a list of comments, an exaggerated anatomical sketch of a female torso, an equally exaggerated drawing of male genitalia, a stick-figure cartoon of a pompous looking man being bitten in the rump by a toothy bear, and several similar items. Kirk smiled fondly at these cheerful proofs of humanity’s eternal jolly irreverence, then crouched down and hunted about for a sharp, hard stone.

He scratched the words carefully into the white marble, far up the wall, at a little above the eye-level of a certain tall Vulcan who, he knew, would think to look there: CPT. J.T.K.—SUNDOWN, WHenever POSSIBLE.

Equarius was fidgeting impatiently when Kirk came back to the front steps. “What took you so long?” he grumbled. “Carving a message or pissing on the wall?”

“Carving a message. Look Equarius, I’ll have to come back here every night, just at sundown, until I find my friends. They’ll look for me here.”

“No problem. Lots of people stop to pay their respects to the gods at sundown, though usually at home. Speaking of which, let’s go there before my little wife sends the lictors out looking for me.” He trotted off down the street, and Kirk followed with no further comment.

To Be Continued in Chapter III: Writing On The Wall
“Nothing? No indications whatever?”

“No sir, nothing.” The Security team leader was hard put not to squirm under Spock’s penetrating stare. “We fine-combed the whole neighborhood, tricorders on maximum, and couldn’t find any sign of him—except for traces from that first visit, I mean…”

“Very well. Dismissed.” The Security team gratefully scurried away. Spock turned back to the transporter platform and curtly ordered Mr. Kyle to beam up the research-mission team. Only three of the researchers materialized; the other three pads were loaded with assorted statues, hangings, paintings and manuscripts. The scientists clearly had done much better at taking their quarry than the Security team had. Hawk was not among them. Spock stopped Agnes Day as she stepped off the pad and asked why the archeologist was missing.

“Having rescued the last of the relics, Dr. Hawk assumed that he could take the remainder of his time to hunt for our missing Captain” She sniffed politely, indicating what she thought of his chances. “He seems to think that his archeological skills qualify him as a detective, better than the trained security personnel.”

“And did you and your party see any indication of the Captain’s whereabouts while rescuing the art treasures?”

“I’m afraid not.” Day looked puzzled by the question. “It was growing dark, and we had to move quickly. There simply was no time or opportunity for searching about.”

“I see,” Spock answered tonelessly. He turned to wave forward the waiting technicians with the antigrav carts.

“Mr. Spock…” Day caught his arm. “I understand how you must feel about your Captain, and how upset you must be over losing him.”

“I appreciate your sympathy, Dr. Day.” Spock edged away from her. “I believe your co-workers are nearly finished removing the art treasures from the transporter.”

“But you mustn’t despair of finding him, Mr. Spock; you mustn’t lose faith. That’s the important thing. Remember that all things are ultimately in God’s hands, so nothing can be truly lost. You’ll find him again, one way or another. If not in this world, then—“

“Dr. Day, you co-workers are leaving and the objects must be secured. If you will please accompany them…”

“Oh, of course.” She took two steps toward the door, then paused, turned, smiled gently at him and added: “I’ll pray for you.”

Guessing that any response at all would keep her talking, Spock gave only a polite nod and turned back to the transporter. He ordered Kyle to locate and beam up Dr. Hawk with not further delay. Listening to the hum of working machinery and the sound of the retreating research team, he tried to analyze the reasons why Dr. Day made him so uncomfortable. Her blatant emotionalism was embarrassing, of course, but most humans were at least equally emotional and he didn’t react as strongly to most of them. Perhaps it was her relentless self-assurance, her cheerful and total lack of doubt that he found annoying; but then, wasn’t self-confidence considered a virtue, not only on Vulcan but in Starfleet? Certainly it wasn’t her beliefs; he had, of necessity, had to admit to the truth
of them after that time-journey to 1st century Judea to meet the Master himself…

_He existed then. Perhaps, in some form, He exists now. All the Organians are, and more…_

“There he is sir,” Kyle announced with satisfaction, prodding the transporter directional controls. “I’ll have him up in a minute.”

Spock reluctantly pulled away from the edge of the bright memory, reminded of his here-and-now duties. It occurred to him that such an experience as he had had with the Master might have an almost addictive effect on a mind less disciplined than his own—a primitive human’s, for example…

_Humans such as we saw earlier, he realized. If, as the Master promised, He was psychically present thereafter…if, with training, even a primitive human mind could contact such a being… No wonder that they became so entranced with such contact that they allowed their physical surroundings to deteriorate!_

A faint smile pulled at the corner of his mouth as he watched the figure materialize on the transporter pad. He had an answer now for Hawk’s accusations.

But as Hawk jumped off the pad and ran up, waving his tricorder, it was obvious that religious argument was the last thing on his mind. “Spock!” he yelled, “I’ve got something! I found it on the rear wall of the temple of Rome Defended, ‘way up above the regular graffiti, up where only Kirk could have reached—and it’s written in Federation Standard! Look! He opened the tricorder and took out the tape. “Here, put it on a viewer! Quick!”

Spock snatched the tape and pushed it into the console viewer, his earlier thoughts completely forgotten. The image on the screen showed some views of the ruined temple, then a sweep across the rear wall where an ancient Latin inscription could still be made out under the more recent smeared crosses and badly-spelled words of prayer.

_CPT. J.T.K—SUNDOWN WHENEVER POSSIBLE._

“Yes,” Spock almost whispered. “Beyond doubt, the Captain. When was this written, Dr. Hawk?”

“You’ll have trouble believing this, but… Judging from the oxide deposits in the marks, I’d say…” Hawk paused to glance worriedly at Spock. “Not less than four centuries ago.”

“What?” Spock turned to give Hawk a piercing stare.

“I know what I’m talking about.” Hawk bristled. “Chemical and radiation dating procedures are some of my strong points. I don’t know how it happened, but that message was written more than 400 years ago. I’ll stake my professional reputation on it. Now just how the Captain came to be standing there, then, I don’t have any idea.

“Transporter malfunction…” Spock murmured, looking away and thinking hard. “Dr. Hawk, can you give me an exact date on that inscription?”

“With a little time in the lab I could probably get down to within a year. I’m sorry, but I can’t do better than that; oxide deposits are affected by all sorts of environmental conditions; radiation emissions and decay curves are affected by other factors. There are always irregularities.”

“Do your best, please. It is vital that we get the information as quickly as possible.”

“On my way.” Hawk started out of the transporter room.
“Wait,” Spock hailed him. “Dr. Hawk, how did you know where to look for this valuable clue?”

“Oh, hell, that’s an old archeologist’s trick,” Hawk laughed. “‘Always look for promising graffiti sites’; they teach you that in your first classes. In fact, a smart archeologist makes a point of hunting up the public toilets before anything else; they’re always literary goldmines. That’s where we found the oldest Latin inscription in Rome, you know.”

“Indeed?” Spock’s curiosity was piqued, despite himself. “What did it say?”

“It said, in modern terms: ‘Favius peddles his ass’.” Hawk grinned like a Cheshire cat.

Spock suppressed a furious blush; he should have expected as much from Hawk. “I see. Thank you, Dr. Hawk. Please proceed to the lab.”

Hawk, thank whatever gods he listened to, did just that.

Spock watched the little archeologist scurry off, then turned to the intercom and called the bridge. “Mr. Scott,” he asked, “How much longer can the ship safely remain in this time period?”

“Na more than another 28 hours, sir,” Scott gloomed back. “The Knaffbein stress is beginnin’ ta cut into engine capacity by more than 8 percent.”

“Would it be possible to take the ship still further back in time, to a period three centuries earlier?”

“No sir!” ‘Tisna possible!” Now wi ‘oot strainin’ the engines sa badly thot we couldn’a get home again!” The engineer sputtered with indignation. “We can go back to oor own time, but we’ll hafta stay there at least 36 hours for the crystals ta recover completely.”

“And after the resting period, would there be any impediment to another journey into the past?”

“No, we could do it then.”

“Very well. Have Mr. Sulu lay in a solar-parabolic course to return us to our own time, due to commence in one hour.”

“Whot?! Ye mean ye’re abandonnin’ the search? Leavin’ the Captain trapped here?!?”

“He is not here, Mr. Scott. He is trapped still further back in the past—some 400 years ago, to be more exact—and by your own admission we cannot go back to rescue him until we have first returned to our own period and rested the engines. Spock out.”

“400 years…?” Scott gulped, just before the transmission was cut off.

Spock shut his eyes and leaned against the bulkhead for a moment, considering the strange logistics of time. Kirk had inadvertently been sent some 400 years into the past, and had left a message on one of those enduring Roman buildings. In present time, he’d been gone only a few hours. According to what little was known about time travel by the solar-course method, Kirk had—at the moment—spent only a few hours in the past also. In that elapsed continuous-time he done nothing to affect history—but would that continue to hold true? Once the ship was outside of continuous-time, moving in the hyperspace/time of the solar-parabolic course…

He wrestled with conflicting formulae, all of them hypothetical, and eventually gave up. There were simply too many unknowns to the problem. All he could do at this point was return to their original time period and hope that nothing had changed.
Up on the bridge the general atmosphere was gloomy and subdued, to the point where Spock couldn’t help but notice it. For the sake of morale he pointedly asked Scott again, in everyone’s hearing, for the exact amount of time the ship would need to remain in its home time-period. With no further ado, he ordered Yellow Alert sounded. He warned the crew and passengers to prepare for a rough ride, and sent the Enterprise warping out into its time-breaking course around the sun.

The turbulence was heavy. As the ship whipped toward apogee, outer time began to run backwards—and the ride suddenly grew rougher than expected. Surges of power racked the ship like incoming storm waves, each pulse higher and heavier than the last. The ninth wave rattled teeth and threatened to shake the ship apart. Just as Scott shouted warning that they couldn’t take much more of this, the surges stopped. The Enterprise settled down to the comparatively smooth ride of an ordinary time run. They whipped around the sun with no further trouble and began climbing back up the centuries, and Sulu ventured to ask what that unexpected turbulence had been.

“Insufficient data,” Spock replied, carefully ignoring a host of worries. “Commence braking procedure. Take care not to overshoot our own time period.”

Scott watched the engines like a nervous mother hen, Sulu watched the chronometer settings and handled the controls with infinite care, and everyone else watched the pyrotechnic display of crawling stars on the main view-screen. The Enterprise slowed carefully to space-normal speed. With a last faint jolt they slid out of the parabolic course altogether, and cut down to minimum impulse speed. The visible stars went back to shining normally.

Everyone on the bridge, except Spock, relaxed with audible sighs of relief. Chekov dutifully scanned the area for a safe parking orbit between the shipping lanes, and frowned at the information he got: there seemed to be an awful lot of ship traffic out there. Spock ordered Scott to commence timing and monitoring the resting engines, and secured the ship from Yellow Alert. Uhura took in status reports from all decks, noting that there were no serious injuries and only minor damage—some overturned furniture and broken crockery and some grumbles from the research team—and then turned her attention to standard monitoring of outside broadcasts. She puzzled over the reception, checked the translators and slowly turned pale.

“M-Mr. Spock,” she said, very quietly, “There’s…something wrong with the transmissions out there.”

“Specify,” said Spock, ignoring the sudden silence that fell over the bridge. “Precisely what is ‘wrong’?”

“Sir, they’re not in Federation Standard. They’re in some language that seems to be…uh, a hodgepodge of Vulcan, Romulan, Klingonese, Andorian, and- and Latin, sir.”

“Analyze!” Spock snapped. “Tie in Linguistics; determine the exact nature of the language.” He hoped he wasn’t blanching noticeably.

“Sair, ship approachingk!” Chekov gulped, sweating. “It doesn’t resemble any Federation wessel I’ve ever seen, and it’s approachingk at- at Warp Twelve!”

“Put it on the screen.” Spock unconsciously dug his fingers into the arm of the command chair, quietly making himself deal with a growing, terrible suspicion. “Magnification 10…no, 5.”

The screen stepped down magnification, and the approaching image shrank to something manageable. It could only be a ship, but it looked like nothing known in the galaxy: an enormous cube of white- gleaming metal, its forward side a glittering fly’s-eye screen of flickering lights and dark glassy receptors, topped by four tall columns—one at each corner of the upper surface—that
were capped with glowing drums of energy fields. It glowed all over with a ghostly white halo of some unknown force shield. Its speed dropped abruptly to impulse-cruising level, with not sign of inertial effect, and if floated calmly up to the dwarfed Enterprise.

“Quis est?” barked a voice through the loudspeaker. Uhura hastily cut in the translator. “Who’s that?” the voice asked again. “This is the United Imperial Ship, Invictus. Who are you? What ship? What ship?”

“This is the USS Enterprise, First Officer Spock commanding,” Spock replied, his eyes riveted on a horrifying innocent detail of the strange ship’s hull. On one side, above the ship’s name, the registry number was written in antique Roman numerals. Above that lay an alien but well-known insignia: an eagle holding a wrath that encircled the letters ‘SPQR’. There was no longer any room for doubt; history had been changed, and the Enterprise and all aboard her were caught in an alien time line.

So that is what the turbulence was, Spock thought, dully. It was the universe changing.

To Be Continued in Chapter IV: The Gods in Harness
The Romans in Harness

The Roman workday began promptly at dawn, and by noon the new job had worn Kirk down to cramped muscles, complaining joints, sun baked skin and exhausted swearing. He was wet and reeking with sweat from bare head to sandaled foot; even his loincloth was soaked, and it itched. Equarius had warned him against wearing his ‘foreign’ clothes to work lest he be laughed at by the other stable hands, and now Kirk could think of two more reasons: his uniform was way too hot, and he didn’t want to get it full of horse manure.

…24 down, 8 to go… he thought as he trudged into the next stall and began raking out the dirty straw. *This is no job for a Starship Captain!*

A gray horse in the next stall pointed its ears at him and gave polite whinny. He glared at it. “Don’t you dare lift your tail!” he growled. The horse curled its lip at him.

Kirk raked angrily at the straw, his mind shuttling between the unpleasant reality of horseshit and the gloomy speculations on the chances of Spock finding him quickly. …*Or, for that matter, at all…*
“What, 24 done already?” chirped Equarius, trotting up. “Very good indeed! You can stop for now, though; it’s almost lunchtime. Come on out and watch Rufius take the top team around the track.”

Kirk thankfully put down the manure-rake and strolled out of the odorous barn. The Italian sunlight struck him like a mace. He could readily understand why the Romans had developed a taste for daily baths and olive-oil suntan lotion. He glanced nervously at his pale skin as they went over to the big training-track.

Equarius stood near the fence, chewing a straw and intently watching the track. At the far side waited a low racing chariot pulled by four glossy bay horses, and close at hand stood a brass water-clock. Equarius raised his hand high. The distant charioteer saw it and nodded Equarius carefully
pulled out the restraining-pin on the water-clock’s little reservoir and dropped his hand. The charioteer yelled and slapped the horse’s backs with the reins.

The horses leaped forward, lurching a little as their collars caught at their throats. The chariot jerked forward, picked up speed, and began rolling seriously within five yards or so. The spokes of its wheels blurred and it moved smoothly if noisily down the track. The horses seemed to scramble at the ground, as if some factor of weight or balance or inertia were dragging at them, as if they couldn’t go fast enough to suit themselves. The fine, high heads slugged fiercely forward with every stride, spirited and eager and impatient.

That sense of impatience caught Kirk’s attention, and he watched closely as the team and chariot rumbled past. Some design flaw, he guessed. Chariot itself? …No. Well balanced, actually streamlined, mostly light wood. Four horses pulling, shouldn’t drag that much. Check rigging… There! The collars—

Yes. Beyond any doubt, the collars were aligned wrong. There were attached too high on the horses’ necks, like simple dog-collars—pressing on the windpipe.

Kirk waited until the team had pulled to a stop, back at the far side of the track, before he went over to Equarius and pulled his attention away from the water-clock. “They’d make better speed if you changed the collars,” he commented. “Make them bigger and sling them lower.”

“Eh. How do you mean?” Equarius perked up, all interest. “I’ve heard about the fine war-chariots of Britannia… Show me!”

“Glad to. Call the team over here, and…hmmm, do you have any long leather straps lying around?”

Equarius was happy to comply. He was also careful to take notes on a waxed-board tablet. Kirk held straps here and there on the amiable but bewildered horses while Equarius scribbled and sketched. The charioteer, intrigued, stepped down to take a look. Curious drivers and stable hands came over to observe. The harness-maker was sent for. Assorted onlookers, with the invisible label ‘horseplayer’ surrounding them like halos, inched close enough to see and hear everything.

“Let me see if I have it now,” said Equarius, checking his notes. “Main strap across the breast, just under the points of the shoulders. The rest just to hold that in place, eh? Hmm… Main trace-lines low, going all the way back to the chariot-body… No pressure at all on the shaft? Just for steering? Well, it’s worth a try. Harness-maker! Where are—oh, there you are. How soon can you run up four sets like this? And how much?”

“I’ve got to get out of this sun for awhile,” Kirk insisted, getting nervous over his chances of sunburn. He headed back for the welcome shadows of the stable. A puff of breeze wafted the pungent smell of the 8 un-raked stalls toward him, and he decided to head for the pump instead.

He was gratefully splashing cool water on his face when Equarius caught up with him. The little racing-man’s earlier jolly mood had evaporated; he had a clay tablet in his hand, and he was frowning at the message on it. Kirk continued to splash and scrub under the pump until he was fairly sure that the smell of horseshit was gone. Equarius shoved the tablet into his tunic with a resigned sigh.

“Eh, that’s my little wife for you,” he grumbled. “Never mind that it might cost me a good stable hand: she’s found a way to help you and a crony of hers at the same time. It looks as if we’ll be going out for lunch, Démas. Fetch your good clothes and come along.”

Kirk wondered about that, remembering Equarius’s ‘little wife’. She stood three inches taller than her husband, managed the house and the household accounts and the children’s education like a fierce little whirlwind, and ran a profitable cottage industry of embroidered goose-feather pillow-making on
"Just where are we going?"

"Well, you remember how she reacted to hearing your story…"

"Oh, yes. She was very sympathetic, under all the grumbling."

"Heh, yes’ she took one look at your size and expected you’d eat us out of house and home at one sitting. Well, not being one to waste time, and owning a favor to Flaviniana anyway, she took your problem straight to her friend, and she said—"

"Which problem do you mean?"

"Why your difficulty contacting your magician friends, of course. Now Flaviniana runs the cook-shop up her on Carpenter Street, and that lady thinks that it isn’t enough just to leave a message scribbled on the back of a temple. She thinks you should go to one of the priests of Mercurius and arrange for them to send a message to your friends. Of course, her oldest son recently got an appointment to the priesthood of Mercurius, and it wouldn’t hurt the boy to have a good interesting case like this to his credit. You see where this is going?"

"I think so."

Kirk did some fast guessing about where all this family politicking was leading him. Certainly he could use some help in getting a message to Spock, and if this culture had some means of doing that, he couldn’t afford to pass up the chance. On the other hand, he knew virtually nothing of this society’s customs and had no idea of what he might be getting into. "Uh, just one question, Gaius. Do the, er, priests of Mercury expect to be, uh, paid for this?"

"Certainly they do! Their original grant covers only the building and maintenance of the temple. How do you think they earn their keep, eh?"

"I honestly hadn’t thought about it. I, uh, supposed that they…got a share of the taxes, maybe, or took offerings from their worshippers…"

"Is that how it’s done in Hibernia?" Equarius laughed. Here in Rome, the only temples that get public money—aside from their founding grants—are the ones that perform civic services, like the temple of Venus-of-the-Public-Sewers. As for private monies, well, why should people give money to a temple unless they’ve received some service for it, eh? The temple of Asculapius maintains the hospital and school for doctors, the temple of Ceres has a school for farmers and maintains granaries against famines, and any temple that has augurs naturally charges a fee for each augury, and so on."

Public-service temples! What a concept! "In that case, since I’m penniless and in debt to you, how am I supposed to pay for this- this- whatever the priests of Mercury do?"

"That’s what I’m wondering about… Ah, here we are. Nice little place, I must admit. Kirk peered into the cook-shop’s interior and hand to agree with Equarius. It had a clean-swept tiled floor, whitewashed brick walls and a high beamed ceiling. There were simple wooden tables flanked with benches, several high windows that spilled a manageable amount of sunlight inside, one door leading off to what smelled like a clean and busy kitchen, and another door leading to an awning-covered outdoor dining area, where Equarius led him.

There were several tables out there, one of them occupied by a handsome woman whom Equarius introduced as Flaviniana. Kirk replied as politely as he knew how, and put on his best smile as sat down. A meal of bread cheese, cabbage-and-olive salad and a bottle of red wind was already spread and waiting for them. Amenities done with, they sat down and dug into the food. Kirk had to admit that the simple fare was quite good. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d tasted homemade bread. After the second cup he finally recognized the taste of the wine. Chianti! Damn, if the taste hasn’t
changed—won’t change, in 2000 years. Never liked the stuff, but I’m beginning to get used to it. Good thing they cut it with water…

When the meal was done and the dishes cleared, Flaviniana began her pitch. “So you’re from Hibernia,” she beamed, taking Kirk’s hand and running an interested eye over him. Yes, you’re tall enough for a Hibernian. I hope Gaius hasn’t been working you to death in that smelly stable of his.”

“Uh, the work’s heavy, but not too bad,” Kirk admitted. Equarius gave him a pained look. “And it pays well,” he added a little nervously. It was disturbing, the way Flaviniana was leaning toward him and patting his arm, but he couldn’t be certain that it meant anything but friendliness. *Hell, from what little I’ve seen, these Romans are as- as cuddly as puppies. Pile up like kittens at dinner, and tumble three and four in a bed. Lord, all those wiggly kids I had to share a bed with last night! I guess they’re just…generally more- more physical than the people I’m used to… They just like to hug a lot.*

“Well, well. Thalia told me about your little trouble,” Flaviniana continued. “Oh, I wish I’d been there to see Publius’s pushcart smashed! After the way he short-changed me on mullet last month… But to get on: your friends expected you at the temple of Rome Defended, but by the time you got there, there was no sign of them. Correct?”

“Correct,” Kirk sighed. “I’m wondering how to send them a message that can’t possibly be missed.”

“Well, I know exactly who can help you!” She gave Kirk a beatific smile. “My oldest son Nitidus just got an appointment to a minor priesthood of Mercurius, whose business is sending messages, you know, and Nitidus is due here soon, and——”

“Wait, Ma’am,” Kirk cut in. “I think I ought to warn you that I don’t have any money. In fact, I still owe Gaius for paying my fine.”

“No problem,” Flaviniana beamed. “I’ll pay your debt to him, and you can repay me by working in my bakeshop. Oh, did I mention that I own half interest in a bakery? Yes, and I need a fine big strong fellow like you to heave the flour bags around.”

*So that’s it! Kirk bit back a whoop of laughter. Not sex; practicality. She’s feeling my muscles, as if I were a draft horse. Everybody loves me for my size! …Well, tossing flour sacks beats shoveling manure.*

“Besides,” grumbled Equarius. “Nitidus never sees the inside of your bakery, and won’t guess that you’re funding his first assignment.”

“Oh, hush! No Démas, I’m sure you’ll like working in my bakery. In pays—and smells—better than Gaius’s stable.”

“I expected something like this!” Equarius did his best to sound ferocious, and wound up sounding only indignant. “He still owes me one solidus, and I didn’t say I was willing to give up a good stable hand. Why, just today he——”

“On solidus minus his work today,” Flaviniana parried, “But I’ll buy his debt for one solidus exactly.”

As the two of them dickered over his debts, Kirk leaned back and wondered how he could use this odd-shaped piece of luck. What could a priest of Mercury do to attract the attention of the *Enterprise*, even if Spock did figure out that he was lost sideways in time and came looking for him? What did the priests of Mercury do, period?

He asked the question of Flaviniana, later, when the haggling was done and they’d collected Kirk’s
clothes and gear and were on their way to the temple of Mercury.

“Why, I have no idea,” she answered cheerfully. “I’m really too busy to bother with such things, between running the household and the cook-shop, not to mention the new bakery. Luckily, my little Salsia can take care of most of the household business. Such a fine manager she is, too… What a pity she’ll have to marry and leave the house soon, but she’s nearly fourteen, and I’ve kept her at home long enough…”

“Nearly… She’s thirteen?” Kirk gulped, momentarily sidetracked. “Isn’t that, er, a little young to marry?”

“Eh? Why, of course not!” The woman gave him an odd look. “I don’t know how it’s done in Hibernia, friend Démas, but here in Italy a girl of thirteen is quite old enough to have adult hair on her hill-of-Venus and adult itches under it. Why torment the young folk by making them wait for their satisfaction? Best to marry them off at once to spouses of good family, let them get to know what marriage is like while they’re still young enough to have their parent’s support and counsel. Let them grow up together, slide into adulthood easily—and, incidentally, spend some of that youthful passion breeding proper children. Lucinda—she’s my partner in the bakery—she has a fine boy of fourteen or so, and some fat grandchildren would cement our partnership nicely.

“But… You arrange marriages for them?” Kirk had seen this sort of thing in many non-human cultures and few human ones, but it always bothered him. “I mean, if the children have nothing to say about it, they might not like the mates you pick for them—and what then? Why can’t you let them fall in love, marry people they love instead of pushing them into bed with strangers?”

“Tsk! Is that how it’s done in Hibernia?” Flaviniana shook her head. “It sounds risky to me. What does a young thing know about marriage—or love either, for that matter? Why, youngsters can fall in love with a different person every fortnight! No, best to let older and wiser head arrange a first marriage. After that, once the striplings have some experience under their… heh! belts, then if they find that they can’t get along, or truly prefer someone else, they can always divorce and marry elsewhere.

“Div- You mean, there easy divorce here?” That doesn’t jibe with any ancient Earth society I ever heard of… Not that History was my strong point, but… I always had the impression that women weren’t much more than chattels in ancient times…

“Of course there is! Good gods, you don’t think I’d marry off my sweet little girl by the Iron-clad form, do you? No, no, the high priesthood can keep that for itself, thank you! My daughter will have the usual Double-exchange form marriage, if I have anything to say about it. No daughter of mine will give up control of one sestertius of her property, not while I live and breathe! Ah, here’s the temple of Mercurius. Lovely place, isn’t it?”

She led Kirk up the step of a neat little rectangular temple, and into the main room. Kirk quit fiddling with his translator and looked around him. It was his first glimpse inside a real, live, working Roman temple, and he found it curiously unimpressive. There was a large room with a larger-than-life statue of Mercury against the back wall. It was a well-made statue, realistically painted, sporting the tradition winged cap and sandals and snake-twined staff. In front of the statue was a broad stone altar with fire filled bowls at either end but otherwise bare and clean. Along the walls were benches, and on one of them sat a small group of toga-wrapped men of various ages, conferring in low voices and scribbling on waxed-board tablets. It was a quiet, pretty scene, but nothing to write home about. Kirk wondered why he felt disappointed. …Now what I imagined of a pagan temple, he thought. It’s more like a library reading-room. …Hell, what did I expect? Human sacrifices and naked dancing girls, every hour on the hour?
“Oh, for the love of the gods,” said Flaviniana, stopping short. “There’s Nitidus now. I wonder what he’s doing back so early? Ahem. Be well, son. This is a friend of mine, Démas Kirke, come all the way from Hibernia. Démas, my son Nitidus.”

“Be well, Démas,” said the young man, getting up. He was a handsome boy, a bit gawky and fuzzy-chinned, no more than 16 but trying very hard to look older, and wearing a terribly earnest expression. “What brings you here, Mama?”

“I might ask the same of you, child. Didn’t you go home for lunch?”

“Uhm, yes, I did…” Nitidus squirmed a bit. “But I didn’t stay long. I… Well, I had a slight disagreement with Father…”

“Not again?” Oh child, when will you learn to stop calling him an old fogey? Just because you have the benefits of a good education, a real Greek tutor, all the advantages your father never had, that doesn’t give you any license to sneer at his lack of education. You ought to respect the knowledge he’s gained from hard experience in the world, instead of a nice comfortable school room. Why, when I was your age, children of Plebian parents were taught no more than to read and write, and as for rising to Equite status, why, that was impossible. You should thank the gods for the Impetrator’s reforms which changed all that, so that an honest man like your father could get somewhere in this world—but that was before you were born, so of course a young pup like you wouldn’t think of such things, but let me tell you, young man—“

I seem to have heard this kind of tune before, Kirk smiled to himself. In a minute she’ll be nagging about the Ingratitude of Kids Today…

“But Motherrrrrr,” Nitidus wailed, rapidly losing his very grownup composure. “You Don’t Understand! I made a very well-argued point, and he could disprove it, but instead of honestly acknowledging my conclusion, he got all red-faced and started shouting about how the young people today have no respect for their elders. Now what was I supposed to do? Say ‘Yes, Father, of course you’re right because you shout so loudly?’ Would that be honest, or just, or true?”

“No, dear,” Flaviniana sighed, “But it might have been diplomatic. Never play at philosophy with your father.”

Kirk managed to stifle a guffaw, but the motion caught Flaviniana’s notice and drew her attention back to the problem at hand. She hastily changed the subject to Kirk’s situation—as she knew it, anyway—and whether or not the priesthood could help. Nitidus looked very thoughtful, very serious, and very impressed. “Hmmm, contacting another magician whose location is not known… What’s his procedure? If he regularly invokes Mercurius we should be able to… He doesn’t? Dear me, I’ll have to ask my instructor. Just a moment friend Kirke. I’ll be right back.” He got up and padded off around back of the altar, behind the statue, and disappeared. It took Kirk a moment to realize that there had to be a door back there.

“You know, Démas.” Flaviniana murmured, leaning closer and lowering her voice. “If this fails, you can always order some advertising posters and have them slapped up on walls all over the city. It’s a bit expensive, but it might be worth the money.”

“…Posters?” Does that mean what I think it means? “Printing?” This early?!? A very alternate history!

“What, is that so uncommon in Hibernia? It’s a thriving business here in Rome. I have a brother in that trade; he does fine work, and cheap, too… Hmmmm, well, he says that he stretches a sheet of loose-weave linen taut on a frame, coats it with wax, then scrapes off the wax in the shape of the
letters. Then he takes a sheet of tight weave cloth stiffened with starch and presses the linen screen
er over it. Last, he takes a cloth-covered rolling pin, soaks it in octopus ink and rolls it forcefully on the
screen so that the ink is pressed through. A single clerk can turn out 100 posters a day in such
fashion, my brother says. That’s how our two daily newspapers are made. Haven’t you read the Acta
Diurna yet?”

“…daily newspapers…” Kirk mumbled a little dazed. “…silk-screen printing…in Rome!”

Just then Nitidus came back, leading a white-haired and terribly impressive looking old gentleman
whom the boy introduced as “Baculus, my teacher.” As the old man reached out to take his hands in
a formal double handshake Kirk got another shock; Baculus bore an uncanny resemblance to the
tattered old man Kirk had seen in that other Rome, a universe away, howling grief for a dying city on
the steps of a ruined temple. Kirk mumbled polite nothings while his head spun.

“Ah, so you’re the sorcerer’s apprentice who made the unfortunate landing in the pushcart!” the old
priest chortled. Kirk guessed that the story must be all over town by now. “I wish I’d been there to
see it. Tsk! Most clumsy, your sorcerer friend, but as, such ability! If you could arrange for us to
meet, I should be most grateful… Oh, but you can’t do that until you’ve contacted him, eh? Well, we
shall do your best. In fact, I’ll see what I can manage this very afternoon, once the temple’s been
cleared. Fortunately, we’re not very busy just now. Come into my office, won’t you? We can wait
more comfortably there.”

“High time I went back to my cook-shop,” said Flaviniana. “Be sure to come around afterward,
Démas.” She gave him a broad wink and departed in a flourish of white dress ruffles.

Kirk obediently followed Nitidus and his old mentor into the office beyond the door. An office it
obviously was; scroll-laden shelves climbed the walls, waxed boards were stacked in tottering piles
under the windows, and the wide wooden table was littered with more scrolls and tablets and lists
and seals and split-reed pens and inkwells. Old Baculus pushed some of the litter aside to clear space
on the table, waved Kirk into a nearby wooden chair and settled himself into another one. Nitidus
went to a wooden cabinet and came back with an inlaid bronze wine pitcher and three matching
bronze cups. He poured the cups full and handed them out, then sat down on the remaining available
chair and self-importantly picked up a tablet and stylus. Kirk, wondering why the boy should take
notes, tried a mouthful of the wine. It was Chianti again, cut two-thirds with water. He rolled his eyes
in dismay, but drank.

“Now,” grinned the old priest, cracking his knuckles and looking faintly predatory. “About this
sorcerer friend of yours… Do you recall what his procedure was?”

Oho, he’s fishing for technical information! Not that he could begin to understand… “Uhm, he used
a device that I really don’t understand. Anyway, the important thing is to get a message to him.”

Nitidus, scribbling dutifully, looked disappointed.

“I see.” The old man sighed and changed his tack. “Then does your sorcerer friend have some sort of
far-seeing to learn of things that are far off?”

“Er, yes, he has a sort of crystal ball that can, uh, see things from a bird’s-eye view.” –Considering
that the bird’s in orbit. “The problem is that this…crystal ball can’t see things very closely. It can’t
say, pick one person out of a crowd.” Not without a homing signal, or a striking anomaly…neither
of which I’ve got. “A sign would have to be pretty big for him to see it.”

“And do you have any idea at what hours this sorcerer would use his crystal ball, when he would
most likely be searching for you?”
“No, I don’t” I have no idea when, or where, or how, or even If Spock will get to this universe… Hopeless. It was pointless to come here…waste of time… How soon can I leave?

“There now, Démas, don’t be so disheartened. We can at least do a small convocation. It won’t cost very much and it certainly can’t hurt. We could do that this very afternoon.”

“By all means.” ‘Can’t hurt.’ Right. Flaviniana’s paying, and she expects it, and I’m in her debt now…

“A bargain then!” The old man looked please. So did Nitidus. Apparently the temple needed the extra work and money. Nitidus happily scribbled up the contract—brief and to the point—witnessed the signatures and put the scroll away. The two Romans relaxed, poured out some more wine, and settled back for an amiable chat. Kirk shrugged and joined in.

“—Such a joy to have a client who wants some proper work, Nitidus enthused. “This being the slack season, most folk just want auguries or petitions to other gods or protective charms for thieves because Mercurius has a reputation as a trickster—“

“Of course we always refuse requests like that.” Baculus shot a withering glance at the undiplomatic young man. “I say, Nitidus, why don’t you go out and get Perinna? We’ll need him for this work. Also, determine when the main hall will be cleared.”

Nitidus, a bit bewildered but dutiful as always, got up and went out.

“Indeed it is good to get a request for magical communications,” Baculus resumed his point as the door swung shut. “Some of our priests have gotten out of practice. Hmm, it wouldn’t hurt to ask for the god’s usual function, as well—I mean, ask him to take the message to your friend’s tutelary gods, as well as to himself, just in case we have difficulty contacting him directly. Now many Gaulish and Britanian gods correspond nicely to our Roman ones, so there’s no trouble finding a workable similarity, but I’m afraid I don’t know anything about the Hibernian ones. What gods do your people most often invoke, Démas?”

“One is enough for us,” Kirk replied, a little grumpily. All this superstitious waffling was beginning to make him irritable.

“Only one?” Baculus looked shocked. “Have the Druids, then, taken complete power in Hibernia? There have been cases before where one cult drove out all the others, but never in so large a stretch of land. How terrible for you! No wonder you became a ship’s captain and sailed away to foreign lands. Oh, the tyranny must be horrible!”

“Huh?” Kirk stopped with the wine-cup halfway to his mouth. “Wha- what do you mean?”

“I mean, I left Hibernia at an early age. I really don’t understand, uh…"

“Why, think: one god among many must compete for the attention of his people. Should he mistreat his worshippers, they’ll desert him for one who’ll treat them better; but one god without fellows suffers no such restraint, and may mistreat people as much as he pleases. Gods too can be corrupted by too much power, Démas. This has been observed in parts of Syria, Egypt, Judea and Persia, and Julius Caesar noted that there was some danger of it from the Druids in Britannia, but this is the first I’ve heard of it in Hibernia. Dear me, and the Druids’ god is Dis—a cruel death-god, at that. Oh, you were lucky to escape!”

“Power…corrupts…even gods.” Kirk ducked away from that earnest old face, snagged by a long-buried memory that jumped out at him from Baculus’ innocent words. Hell yes, I’ve seen it too!
Gary! Gary Mitchell! He used to be my friend… The growing psychic power turned him into… ‘One jealous god, Elizabeth!’ …‘Absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ I thought that only applied to humans, to dark-bottomed human minds…or other creatures like humans…or a little more advanced than humans…Vulcans have their dark sides too… Damn, even the Metrons and the Melkotians could be meddlesome and high-handed—even the Organians…and then there was Apollo, and Kukulkan… What if it doesn’t stop there? What if…? His mind balked, like a horse at too high a fence, refusing to follow the course any further. There was a flaw, a jarring gap in his thinking, and he knew it, and couldn’t make himself cross it. The possibilities were too horrifying.

“Actually better to believe,” Baculus proceeded, “As the Kynics say, that there are no gods at all, and their power is purely a Human delusion. Hmm, but in that case, one must still consider the effect of worship upon the worshippers, and one-god worship leads to the most wretched bigotry.

“…Bigotry?” Stop that shaking! Stop it!

“Of course. Why, look you: when people believe that many gods exist—even if they think that only their god is good and all the rest are bad, as is the case with the Jews—they must still allow for the existence of other people’s gods and customs. Like them or not. But if only one god exists, then there is only one morality, one code of behavior, one answer for all questions, one right way, only one official opinion on everything. Therefore all other moralities, answers, ideals and so on are automatically wrong—and eventually must be abolished lest they mislead the faithful. From that position it’s only a short step to believing that people who persist in their wrong-headedness are ‘enemies of the god’, and therefore one may commit any viciousness upon them with the god’s encouragement and blessing. Do you see the progression? One god, one rule, one right way—and all the rest are evil. Automatic bigotry.” Baculus leaned back with the satisfied look of a lawyer winning a fat court case.

Kirk remembered, in stark detail, the Easter mob in that other Rome—and what it had done. He squeezed his wine cup until it threatened to break, suddenly furious that he couldn’t think of an answer to this pompous old man and his clever logic. …Logic… Spock could think on an answer, and he would, too! He actually met Jesus. He put this old fool in his place. He’d say… What? …’One jealous god, Elizabeth!’ Gary…Vaal…Landru…all the other I-Am-the-One-And-Only gods, and their pious, murderous servants—Bigots! Bigots all! “But it doesn’t have to be that way!” he burst out. “All those— All the ones I’ve seen were nasty, petty, little phonies passing themselves off to the poor ignorant locals as the lords of all creation. Not one of them was real… I mean, really a… I mean, uh…” Just how the hell do I explain this idea to people whose gods are…departmental public service officers! “Look, haven’t you ever thought that there might be something bigger than all these squabbling little regional gods? Haven’t you ever looked at the stars and thought that there was something bigger, vaster, more than you can see or even imagine, something big enough to take in the whole universe—” Or more than one universe? Please? “—instead of just one little part of it? That’s the kind of ‘god’ I mean.” I’m not explaining this very well…he probably won’t understand. Hell, I’m no preacher! He noticed Nitidus come padding back in and abruptly wished the boy weren’t here to get involved in this.

“Ah yes, I’ve heard that theory,” said Baculus, waving Nititus to a chair. “You mean the ‘transcendent all-being’ that some of the Greek philosophers postulate? Oh, no doubt you would h learned of that from the Greek side of your family… The Greek ‘transcendent all-being’ mixed with the Druid death-god: what a horrifying combination! Well, yes, there’s said to be a divinity—actually a divine-ness, a divine essence or force—that interpenetrates all existence. It’s the sort of a basic material which we call divine because all things—gods, men, beast, plants, stones, stars—are made of it.”

“Kirk abruptly remembered that atomic theory had been an ancient Greek invention. He felt the hair
lift on his head.

“But that’s hardly the same thing,” Baculus continued, “As having a single god. After all, a material has no mind and no opinion. Democrites did not suggest that people worship his ‘atomos,’ the ‘individual parts,’ simple because all things are made of them.”

Kirk groaned quietly—and disguised it by rubbing his arm as if he had a cramp.

“According to every reputable philosopher I’ve ever heard on this subject, such a transcendent ‘principle’ or divine material would most probably have no will or awareness at all and certainly no concern for any one of its countless parts, any more than you, sir, are unduly concerned with a single hair on your head.

“But—” Feeling as if he were sliding on slippery ground, Kirk grabbed for the solidity of a well-known quote. “Un, ‘He sees even the sparrow’s fall’s…””

“Perhaps,” Nitidus added his two-cents worth as he handed that tablet back to his mentor. “But does he do anything to stop the sparrow from falling?”

I ought to punch you teeth in, you snotty kid! Now I know why your father yells at you, you little—Kirk felt the metal of the wine cup cutting painfully into his hand, and was suddenly horrified at himself. Hey, what am I doing? Why am I getting so upset? I shouldn’t be this bothered by a little table-talk philosophy… This isn’t important, remember? Cool off, James T!

“Since not one word or thought or action of ours can have any effect upon such a transcendent divine principle.” Baculus picked up, shrewdly noting Kirk’s reactions, “There is no point in worshipping it, or in praying to it, nor even in paying much attention to it. Certainly nothing could be more senseless than fighting over it.”

“Uh, yeah…” And what was I just about to do? …Damn, could he be right? Am I a bigot too?!

Damn, damn, damn, it is possible! Religious bigotry… —And I’ve heard of something similar in the east,” Baculus cut in, trying to silence his undiplomatic protégé. “Oh, if anything, it’s worse there than anywhere in Britannia or Hibernia.” He gave Kirk a fast, sickly, apologetic smile. “There are all sorts of hysteric cults out there, distorted leftovers from the upheavals cause by the conquests of Alexander the Great. They perform the most amazing intellectual back-bends with fragments of the more speculative Greek philosophies. They each try to identify their own particular cult-god with the transcendent divinity we were speaking of, but the personalities of the gods they believe in are still those of amazing petty, arrogant and vicious little pot-gods. I don’t see how any sane, educated person could take such seriously, but these eastern cults do get furiously involved with them. Worse, they get into rivalries with each other, each claiming that theirs is the only ‘true’ god, and they go fight small pitched battles with each other that the police-forces are obliged to come and break up. Hundred of skulls can get cracked in the course of a single afternoon! It would be laughable if it weren’t such a public health-and-safety problem. Now, Nitidus, what news?” Without waiting for an answer, Baculus picked up the tablet, read it, and thoughtfully tugged his heard. Then he erased the message with the butt of his stylus, scribbled a
brief but emphatic message to Nitidus and handed it back to him with not comment. Nitidus read it, blushed beet red and turned to Kirk with an apology ready.

But Kirk wasn’t looking. He was wandering in his memories again, thinking of a long history of Holy Wars and Holy Persecutions, and an all-too-recently observed pogrom. ‘Kill for God’—so damn often… And here sit two real live pagans telling me that it’s ridiculous! The world—the universe turned upside down. Just a different universe, that’s all…but I’m having trouble dealing with it. Spock, find me! Hurry! This place is doing strange things to my mind! ‘Uh, wait a minute…’

A random memory boiled up, offering him at least a shred of an argument. “I remember… Yes, the Iliad!” They ought to know that one…

The Trojan War: remember, Homer said that it was caused by the gods of Olympus pushing people around like pieces on a game board, just to settle a quarrel of their own. So there! Having lots of gods, instead of just one, doesn’t guarantee anything! A gang of gods can push people into wars just as surely as one god can!” He sat up with a defiant grin. Spock would be proud of me for that one.

But to his surprise, both priests chuckled delightedly. “Oh, yes,” Nitidus caught his breath first. “Homer’s tale ends with the fall of the city—or the wanderings of Ulysses. It took Vergilius to finish the story: Aneas was prince of Troy, favored by Venus, and with her help he escaped the dying city and eventually reached Italy. He founded the first colony at Alba Longa, from whence came the mother of Remus and Romulus who founded Rome. So, some good came of that miserable business after all. Why do you think Venus is so well worshipped here?”

“Uh…I thought…the most popular god here was Mars…” Their war god…

“Well, Mars was the father of Romulus and Remus, but Venus was the mother of Aeneas, so we inherit the virtues of both. And then Jove appeared to Numa on the Capitoline hill can gave us our first laws, so—”

“We’ve collected new gods at every turn of our history, or influx of new emigrants,” old Baculus smiled, pouring himself another cup of wine. “What a pity most such events aren’t as nobly commemorated in art. The Iliad—ah, what a splendid argument against war that is! All of those fine, brave, angry, stupid heroes bashing each other around for ten long wasteful years, all for the sake of pride—and greed for loot. You’ll note that the only two intelligent men in the entire lot of invading Greeks—Ulysses and Agamemnon—didn’t want the war in the first place. Why, Ulysses feigned madness to avoid being drafted! After that, they wanted nothing more than to end the war quickly and go home. It was only the bullying of the other fool kings that kept them fighting. Oh, such fools! No wonder the gods found it easy to push them about!”

“And…you think…a smart man can avoid that?” Kirk blinked at him.

“Oh, one can see how stupid and barbarous they were by looking at their methods of warfare,” Nitidus enthused, eager to show off his knowledge on that point. “Imagine a whole army breaking into little personal duels, with no unity or discipline or strategy whatever! Only fool barbarians fight like that. Why, one legion—no a single cohort of a good Roman army could have ended the whole war in one battle.”

“Since when do military skills have anything to do with religion?” Kirk snapped, feeling a little cornered.

“Why, always!” Nitidus looked utterly astonished at the question. “Consider: people who believe that their gods—or god—run the world on un-guessable, capricious, personal whim, tend to leave everything ‘in the hands of the god.’ They concentrate their attention upon placating the god, not in looking ahead, much less planning ahead; neither do they put much faith in human planning and reasoning at all. That philosophy shows itself in all that they do, including warfare. Such god-crazed
armies tend to attack without order or well-planned strategy, assuming that they’ll carry the day because they’re more ‘righteous’ than their enemies, and the well-bribed god is on their side. They also tend to choose their officers on the grounds of ‘morals’ rather than ability. As a result, such armies may fight fiercely but they rarely fight well—as many good military histories reveal. When such armies lose, they assume it’s because the god was angry with them, or insufficiently bribed, or some similar excuse—which may enrich the priests, I admit, but does nothing to encourage folk to improve their military organization or tactics. By contrast, people who believe in a rational and orderly universe, where the gods themselves must obey the laws of nature, can trust their natural reason—not to mention their educated abilities—and therefore make sensible precautions and workable plans. This applies to warfare, too. Do you see?”

Nitidus folded his hands in his lap, obviously very pleased with his neat little piece of logic. Kirk wanted to slug him.

Baculus, who had been studying the bronze water-clock on one of the shelves, reluctantly broke in on the conversation. “This is a most delightful discussion, friends, but the temple should be cleared by now and the necessary persons and equipment assembled. We’re ready now, friend Démas, if you are.”

“Sure.” Kirk shrugged and stood up. Ah, hell, let them go through with their mumbo-jumbo. I’ll be polite… No sense in making enemies. Need all the friends I can get… He emptied his wine cup, set it down and followed Baculus out into the front of the temple.

_To Be Continued in Chapter V: Galaxy of Eagles_
Galaxy of Eagles

“Enterprise? We have no records of any ship with that name,” said the voice on the loudspeaker. “Who are you, and whence do you come?”

“Quite far from here,” Spock stalled.

“Sir,” Uhura reported, struggling to work two boards at once. “Sensors show that we’re being scanned.” As she spoke, she managed to pick up the visual signal, and a view of the alien ship’s bridge flickered onto the screen. Everyone on the bridge gasped at the sight.

It was enormous, beautiful, and familiar and alien all at once. Among other things, the bridge of the Invictus was at least twice as big as the Enterprise’s. For another, the arrangement was noticeably different. The bulkheads, consoles, seats, doors and solid ceiling were marble-white with gold-bordered edges. The consoles were faced by big armless soft-stuffed chairs with high backs, head rests and thick safety belts. Everyone one of them was occupied, and they were set in two wide U-shapes—one behind the other, on a slightly higher level. On still a third level, between the horns of the U’s, the command chair crouched against the rear bulkhead between two doors, under a high shelf that held a painted statue of a winged woman. The main view screen, as nearly as Spock could tell, filled the entire forward bulkhead of the bridge. The secondary screens filled the side bulkheads almost from consoles to ceiling. The total impression was one of light and space, suggesting the porch of an ancient marble temple of the Classical era.

But far more startling than the bridge itself were the people who manned it. They wore thigh-length red tunics with varying lines of gold braid ringing the borders, tight red leggings under tall thick-strapped sandals that came up beyond the tunic-hems, broad belts with figured bronze buckles, pistol holsters on their right hips and two scabbards—one holding a short-word, the other a dagger—on the left. Bronze-colored helmets with different-sized crests hung from the headrests of their chairs.

The people themselves were of assorted ages, sexes, species and colors. Spock noted a turquoise-skinned woman with blond hair, Andorian antennae, Vulcoid eyebrows and pointed ears. Beside her sat a young male with the hair pattern and minimal fingers of a Tellarite, Klingon double-eyebrows and a humanoid face. There was a four-armed creature resembling a furry Edoan, an apparent Caitian with tentacles for arms and hair, a blue-skinned human with cat’s eyes, and others who resembled no humanoid races that Spock had ever heard of. At the central console of the second rank, apparently the Science Officer’s station, sat a dark woman with a startling resemblance to Uhura—save for her pointed ears, slanted eyebrows and faintly green-toned skin.

But it was the man in the Captain’s chair that held Spock’s attention; he had read-bronze skin, an aquiline nose, spectacular gold earrings with a pattern that Spock recognized as Aztec, a thick mass of curly blue-black hair, ears that pointed and eyebrows that slanted in a subtle fashion which Spock recognized as not Vulcan but Romulan. The Captain was also smoking a stubby black cigar. An ashtray was fastened to one arm of the command-chair.

Every eye on every crewman in that company was fixed forward, studying the main screen and, obviously, the bridge of the Enterprise. The effect was rather like looking through a keyhole and seeing an eye looking back. The crew of the Invictus seemed puzzled by what they saw; the crew of the Enterprise was closer to stunned.

“Specify,” said the alien Captain. “How far away?”

“First answer me,” Spock tested. “Who are you, and what is your authority here?”
“He sounds as cautious as a Vulcan, too,” whispered the dark woman at the Sciences console. Several voices were heard to chuckle, not unkindly. The Captain grinned.

“Very well. I am Praefect Marcus Anicius Eilit Tlaxihuatl Aquila. My authority is the Greater Roman Imperium, which encompasses this galaxy and some sectors of the next. The Invictus is the flagship of the home fleet of Sol, and protector of Earth. Will that satisfy you?”

“Quite well,” Spock answered, mind racing. “I am Commander Spock, temporary Acting-Captain. We are…castaways, come her accidentally from another universe adjacent to yours. Our only intention here is to repair our engines and find a way home.” Like all good excuses, it was true—as far as it went.

For an instant there was silence on the other bridge, and then everyone started talking at once—mostly at the Science Officer. Spock caught revealing fragments of the gabble: “trans-universal travel! It is possible!” “–theories were right”—“—must be differences. We have to find out—”

Aquila silenced the voices with a single gesture and leaned toward the view screen. “‘Temporary Acting-Captain’ you say? Why is that? Where is your proper Captain?”

“He was lost in the accident which brought us here,” Spock dissembled. “He may be dead by now.” ...In one sense, he has been dead for 23 centuries... “Nonetheless, we intend to go back and search for him.”

“My condolences,” said Aquila, formally bowing his head. “What assistance do you require to repair your ship?”

“Most probably, very little.” Can I keep them off the ship? Unlikely… Lock all historical information in the computers… “If we have the necessary materials, repair-time should be no more than two standard days. May we maintain this position for that time?”

“Move out another 10,000 miles and assume a sub-ecliptical orbit,” Aquila replied. “You’re presently too close to the traffic lane.”

Spock obligingly changed the ship’s orbit. The Invictus followed, maintaining a discreetly close distance. Spock sent Scott down to check over the engines personally, then went to the computer and made some quiet adjustment. Then he strolled causally over to Uhura’s console and silently wrote out explicit instructions for her. She studied them, nodded quietly, got up and left the bridge. Spock went back to the con and sat down, carefully displaying no symptoms of tension, hoping that Uhura would be able to get the message to the entire crew within a very short time. He suspected the Invictus would be calling back quite soon.

He was right; it did. This time the screen focused on the Bantu/Vulcan woman at the central console. She smiled sweetly and went straight to business. “Acting Captain Spock, this is the first evidence we have seen that parallel universes indeed exist. Naturally, we wish to know in what ways your universe differs from ours. We are prepared to exchange information with you. Can you engage your ship’s memory to ours by direct transmission?”

“Negative.” So, they cannot…or perhaps do not yet wish to probe our computers directly. Must maintain that, or they may be able to get through the locks… “Our equipment appears to be incompatible with yours, and in any case is somewhat damaged. It would be preferable to exchange tapes.”

“‘Tapes’…?” She looked puzzled. “You mean, you still use magnetic tapes?! Ah… Yes, we can make some tapes for you. Give us some samples and we can match specifics.”
“Agreed. Any particular subjects?” If their interests are primarily military, then no difficulty hiding—
“A general survey preferred: sciences, arts, histories, philosophies—a little of everything.”

“Very well.” Careful! “We shall be happy to exchange information. Please be patient; assembling the tapes will require several minutes. Spock out.”

“In a few minutes, then. Be well.” The screen went blank.

Spock went to his own console and gave the computer detailed and explicit instruction. The machine began to spit out tapes: textbook-digests on physics, chemistry, biological and geological data from hundreds of worlds, all quite dated—but absolutely nothing on the subject of time-travel; arts and crafts and philosophies and histories of every know culture—but nothing about Earth before the fall of Rome except a few references to colossal ruins, fragmentary writings, a handful of myths and some notes about ancient barbarian invasions. He hoped that Uhura had finished briefing the historians, at least; there must be no mention of ancient history, no apparent knowledge of anything before the early Middle Ages, nothing but the vague legends of a misty civilization that had perished at the dawn of time. No doubt these latter-day Romans would look through the scientific data first, but Spock doubted that they’d take long to find the historical differences.

Uhura came back, glanced at him and nodded once, quickly.

Scott came in a moment later with the status report on the engines. It was worse news than expected; the rough ride across time had cracked two of the major dilithium crystals, and there was a workable replacement for only one of them. Spock sat back in the chair and did some fast thinking. At last he sighed, leaned forwards again, and punched out a request for one more tape: ‘General Specifics of Warp Drive Construction.’ He held it for a moment, considering that there was no harm in giving the aliens such knowledge; it would be nothing new to a people who could build a ship like the Invictus. To gain their help I must first gain their confidence, he reminded himself. They must surely know by now that theirs is the more powerful ship… It may be wise at this point to hide our strengths and display our weaknesses. He went back to the con and hailed the Invictus.

“Sub-Praefect Aemilia here,” the alien woman announced from the screen. “Are you ready to Gate over the tapes?”

“…’Gate’? I do not understand.”

“What?! Don’t you have that technique?” Spock asked innocently. Transporter! They don’t know we have— No mention...

Aemilia did a very human looking double take. “Er, just how were you planning to send us the tapes?”

“Standard procedure for physical objects: we shall place the tapes in small drone craft, which will then be aimed toward your ship.”

The bridge crew did their best not to look startled, but they gave Spock covert looks of admiration.

“You…don’t have Gates.” Aemilia stared at him, astonished and almost pitying. “Never mind. Stay where you are; I will Gate over to you. End transmission.” The screen blanked.

In the silence Scott whispered. “‘Tis a bonny good trick, Mr. Spock, but long can we keep ‘em frae catchin’ on ta it?”
“Unknown. Apparently they do not possess transporters, and did not recognize ours from their sensor probes of the ship. I included no data on the tapes that will inform them further. If they do discover our transporters, we may still convince them that such devices are unreliable, unsafe, and used only for moving simple inert material.”

“But why, sair?” Chekov asked. “What does it matter to dem if we heff transporters or not?”

“The less they know of our abilities, the better, Mr. Checkov. Mr. Scott, have you had any success at analyzing their peculiar shielding or their inertia-less drive?”

“Och, not chance yet. But I’ll get on it as soon as—”

The air filled with a sudden, sharp, bell-like tone. A white dot appeared in the air to one side of the con, abruptly stretched to a tall vertical line, then widened to a rectangle that cleared into a view of a ship’s bulkhead and a few feet of floor space. Out of it, as if from a doorway, stepped Sub-Praefect Aemilia. She was alone, and seemed quite calm about it. She was, if anything, even more exotically beautiful that she had appeared on the view screen. She was as sleekly muscular as a tigress, and she stood taller than Spock. For a moment nobody said anything. Then Aemilia smiled.

“Don’t be frightened,” she said, as if calming nervous children. “It’s only a Gate. It makes a tunnel in under-space, and you walk through it. It’s wonderfully handy, and not at all dangerous.”

“N- Not dangerous?” Scott was too fascinated to keep still. “Wha’ happens if the tunnel collapses while ye’re inside it?”

“Then you get thrown out of it, and rather quickly.” She flashed him a brilliant, comforting smile. “That’s happened only once in all the time I’ve been on the Invictus. The poor fellow broke an arm from being thrown against the far bulkhead, but nothing worse. Don’t worry about it. Are those the…tapes?”

Spock obligingly handed her the armful of tape cassettes. She dropped a few, laughed, picked them up, and unselfconsciously stuffed them down the front of her tunic. They made an amazing bulge on tope of the ledge of her generous breasts. Scott gulped audibly.

“If it would not inconvenience you,” Spock added, handing her the ‘War Drive Construction’ tape, “We find that we will require some assistance after all in repairing our engines. Could you possibly provide us with two dilithium crystals. The specifics are mentioned here.”

“Dilithium…crystal?” Aemilia raised an eyebrow as she took the last tape. “Yes, I think we might be able to manage that. Our gratitude for this information, Commander. We shall return the tapes within the hour, I assure you. Be well.” She smiled again, then turned and walked back through the Gate. It closed behind her.

Spock got up and headed for the turbolift, snapping: “Mr. Scott, you have the con. Lt. Uhura, please call Drs. Day, Hawk and McCoy to the briefing room. Inform me at once if there are any changes in our current situation.” The turbolift doors closed on his last word, and he rode down to the briefing room unconsciously clutching his hands behind his back.

Five minutes later, seated at the head of the briefing-room table, Spock studied the two professors and wondered if they could refrain from feuding long enough to do anything constructive. Agnes was pale, but composed. Hawk was as jittery as a racehorse at the starting gate. McCoy covertly watched them both, as if they needed constant supervision, which was probably true.

Spock decided to start with the Historian. “Dr. Day, from what you have observed during the past
half hour and from what you know of ancient Roman society, what can you tell me concerning this empire’s probable culture?”

“Obviously their technology is more advanced than ours, in some directions.” Agnes’ voice was level and calm. “Just as obviously, this is a world where Rome never fell—much like that—place, planet 892-IV, where the SS Beagle was lost.

“Quite different, I’d say,” Hawk cut in. “That culture was stagnant, frozen at a mid-20th century level. These people are way ahead of us, and not just in spaceships. Hell, they say they’ve spread over the entire galaxy and into the next one, and we’ve no reason to think they’re lying about it. That looks to me like a strong, innovative and vigorous culture.”

“We have not proof that they’re not lying,” Agnes retorted, “And their technical advances prove nothing but interest in simple materialism. They could be trying to intimidate us, as part of their normal procedure. Remember, we’re dealing with a warlike, aggressive people, dedicated primarily to military conquest and subjugation, with no deep beliefs in mercy, humility or self-restraint.”

“Bull!” Hawk snapped. “Why didn’t they just shoot us out of the sky, then? Or why didn’t they send over a boarding party, first thing? Why did they send just one person, and her only to pick up some tapes? They haven’t made one hostile move—only asked us to exchange some information and please get out of their shipping-lanes. They’ve acted quiet decently toward us, if you ask me.”

“I was not asking you,” Spock interposed. “Pleas wait your turn, Dr. Hawk. Dr. Day, continue please.”

“Thank you. Since in this timeline Rome obviously never fell, we can only assume that for some reason the great Germanic invasions were turned back, and that afterwards Rome continued its conquests until it eventually ruled the world. To judge from the presence of the idol on the shelf above the command chair, we can assume that Christianity did not remain the official religion of the Empire. That, plus the fact that Rome did not collapse of internal corruption, suggests that a revitalizing force of unknown nature and origin took control of that society shortly after we saw it. I can’t account for this in terms of what we saw and did in 5th century Rome; I’m sure that none of our people did anything to change history so drastically, unless—” She turned a pointed stare on Hawk. “Unless Dr. Hawk did something outrageous while we were searching for the Captain.”

Is it possible? Spock considered the time involved. Unlikely. He was not out of sight of the others for more than a few moments…and he did spend that time finding the message from the Captain. Or did he create that message to disguise his true activities there? Yet, what could he have done, alone, in that short amount of time, which could have wreaked such changes upon subsequent history? …and then, where is Jim?

“I’m afraid it’s more likely that the Captain did it,” said Hawk, looking at Spock with genuine sorrow. “Rome was a helluva lot stronger in the 1st century than when we saw it. Left there for months, or years, who knows what he could have done? Just a few warnings in the right places would be enough. I’m sorry, Spock, but it looks much more likely to me that the changes started 400 years earlier.”

“Nonsense!” snapped Day. “I refuse to believe that a man like Captain Kirk would do anything to change history! He certainly wouldn’t have done anything to change it like this! To perpetuate a cruel, decadent, pagan culture, let it loose on the galaxy—and some of those people are part Klingon! And Andorian! Heavens, you know how aggressive Andorians are—”

“Yes, and they’re part Telarite and Caitian and who know what else.” Hawk grinned toothily.
“Whatever this society’s faults may be, racism isn’t one of them.”

Spock remembered the subtly Romulan features of the Praefect, and brooded.

“That proves nothing!” Day insisted. “For all we know, those could be the descendants of slaves taken on raids and forced to- to submit to their conquerors.” She shuddered eloquently.

“Descendants of slaves, crewing the flagship of the home fleet?” Hawk laughed. “That would only prove that the Imperials don’t hold people’s parentage against them. Truth is, the Romans never were racist, m’dear. At least one ancient emperor was Black, and—”

“If you will refrain from argument,” Spock interrupted them, “I am more concerned with the question of how they are likely to react to this ship and its crew. Under what circumstances are they likely to prevent us from completing repairs, leaving orbit and accomplishing our mission?”

There was a moment’s silence. The Day ventured: “I’d say it’s more a question of under what circumstances they’d consent to let us go. They want to study us, of course… If they think we can show them the way to other universes, they might do anything—anything—to get that knowledge. If they think we’re a threat to their empire, they’ll kill us out of hand. If they think we’re much weaker than they are, the might take us as…slaves.”

“We haven’t seen any evidence that they have slaves,” sneered Hawk. “They just might have outgrown that, you know. Have you forgotten that there was a growing social movement against slavery as early as Julius Caesar’s time? In this timeline, that movement may have succeeded—which could be one reason why this Rome didn’t fall. No, I think Dr. Day is being a wee bit paranoid. Mr. Spock, these people haven’t behaved like slavers or tyrants or conquest hungry war lovers; so far they’ve acted kindly toward us, and taken everything we’ve said at face value. Naturally they’re curious about us, but they haven’t pressed us very hard for information. They seem sincere in their offer to help us. My guess is that they won’t do anything to stop us from going back, unless…” he flicked a sympathetic glance at Spock. “Unless they learn that our Captain really did make their history, and that we intend to go back and unmake it. Oh, they’d fight us then—with everything they’ve got—and for the best of reasons.”

“If they’re not aggressive conquerors,” Day snapped, “What are they doing in ‘all of this galaxy and part of the next,’ pray tell?”

“What is the Federation doing in our universe?” Hawk retorted “Expanding through the galaxy, that’s what.”

“They’re not the same thing!”

“How would you know;”

Spock was about to break in again when a call came through from the bridge. It was Uhura, announcing shakily that the Invictus had delivered the tapes—and several officers as well. Spock acknowledged, called Security, lunged to his feet and bolted out the door. Hawk, seeing that no one had told him otherwise, hopped out of his chair and ran after Spock. The others, not to be outdone, ran after him. They managed to crowd into the turbolift together, along with five bewildered Security men, and they all burst out into the bridge at the same time.

Aquila, Aemilia and three other red-tuniced aliens stood in front of an open Gate beside the command chair. They all turned in mild surprise to watch the little mob-scene at the turbolift doors. “Such an eager welcoming committee,” Aquila chuckled, quietly waving down one of his party who had started to reach of his sidearm. “No need for haste, Acting-Captain. We have come only to give
you your tapes and to invite you and some of your officers to dinner on our ship.” He calmly handed
the armload of tapes to Spock.

“Dinner?” Spock echoed, looking up at Aquila. He did have to look up; the Praefect was
approximately seven feet tall. His other officers weren’t much shorter. ...Hybrid vigor? Spock
wondered. Or better medicine? McCoy's department. An opportunity to find out... “We shall be
pleased to accept, Paefect, but shall need some time to prepare ourselves.

“Oh, certainly,” Aquila smiled. “But don’t dress up on our account; we’ll keep it small and informal,
in respect for your recent loss. Will half an hour be sufficient? Good. We’ll se the Gate for your
garden. Come in whenever you’re ready. Be well.”

With that, the visiting party turned and strolled back through the Gate, into what looked like a small
waiting room. From beyond the Gate, Spock distinctly heard someone laughing: “—never saw a
Vulcan fall over his feet before!” Then a woman’s voice chided: “What do you expect? We must
have frightened the poor little things half to death, and they’re so dreadfully lost—“

The Gate chimed again, closed to a thin line, and reopened on new scene: a vast formal garden,
stretching away to a starlit horizon. The garden seemed to have no roof; only a small artificial ‘sun’
overhead. The readings of McCoy’s tricorder indicated that the transparent ceiling was really there.
As the bridge crew watched, a fat Terrestrial peacock strolled past the Gate, stopped, peered in at the
Enterprise’s bridge and inquired: “onk ooble-ooble?”

“Doctor,” Spock said, studying the enormous garden, “What do you make of that?”

“Looks like a perfectly normal, healthy peacock,” said McCoy staring at the unconcerned bird.

“I mean, Doctor, what do you make of the aliens’ behavior? What do their actions reveal about their
psychology?”

“Wall, for one thing, they’re not afraid of us.” McCoy rewound the tricorder and studied the readings
he’d taken of the aliens. “In everything they’ve done with us, they seem...kindly, curious, congenial
—and utterly fearless. It’s as if they’re not used to being suspicious of people, distrustful...”

“'Doubtful’? Disbelieving’? Hawk slyly offered synonyms.

“Highly unlikely!” Day took the bait. “A people with no true...no real beliefs could hardly have any
faith in the good will of strangers. This might be an elaborate show put on for our benefit, meant to
put us off guard and lure us into a trap. After all, what have we seen of them except what they let us
see?”

“But, look,” McCoy protested, “They left their Gate wide open and unguarded.”

“Like the gate of a trap! ‘Won’t you walk into my parlor,’ as the spider said to the fly.”

“Onk?” said the peacock, poking its head through the Gate.

“But the Gate itself leads right into their ship,” Scott put in, “Right past their shields. Had we a mind
ta, we could use oor hand-phasers right through yons Gate, doon through the deck or up through tha
ceiling’, an’ do a’ manner o’ harm ta them. Nae, ‘tis a gesture o’ trust.”

“But the garden itself might be an illusion, a holographic projection of some sort!” Day wrung her
hands with distress.

“My tricorder readings—” McCoy started.
“Could be faked, too. Their technological advances—”

Just then the peacock strolled through the Gate and onto the bridge. It fanned its gorgeous tail feathers, shook its iridescent neck, and nonchalantly crapped on the carpet. Hawk guffawed.

“No holographic projection could smell like that,” McCoy commented. “No, ma’am; that’s real bird doody and a real live bird.”

“Onganooble,” added the peacock, examining Sulu’s leg.

Spock weighed the facts and considered possibilities. This might be a test of some sort: the aliens might be secretly observing them. Phasers might not able to harm the ceiling or deck of the Invictus; the aliens might or might not know that. In any case, the enormous and obviously cherished garden had been left open, unguarded and vulnerable. It this were a trap, the aliens were offering unduly expensive bait. And of course, there was always the knowledge to be gained… Calculated risk, as Jim would say. “Drs. McCoy, Day and Hawk, and Mr. Scott, you will accompany me through the Gate in exactly 25 minutes. Bring tricorders, communicators…and hand-phasers. You have 20 minutes in which to prepare for dinner. Mr. Sulu, you have the con.”

“Any standing orders, sir?” Sulu asked, relinquishing his usual board to Uhura.

“Maintain an unobtrusive guard on the Gate. Contact us two hours after we pass through it. If you lose contact with us…” Spock gave an almost-inaudible sigh. Use your own judgment, but under no circumstances endanger the ship—or our primary mission.”

Sulu gulped and nodded. He didn’t need to be told what the primary mission was.

The others turned and went off to the turbolift and their various cabins. Spock lagged behind, putting in a brief call to the Archaeology lab. The technician there replied, somewhat bewildered by the request, that yes, Hawk’s tricorder readings of that giveaway graffito on the ruined temple’s wall was indeed authentic, and no, the tricorder had not been tampered with. Spock acknowledged and rang off, the ghost of a frown on his face. Then he went off to his own cabin to dress for dinner.

*To Be Continued in Chapter VI: High Jinx in the Middle Temple*
Kirk rubbed the still-wet curls on the back of his neck and surreptitiously scratched under his fresh ceremonial tunic. The ritual purification hadn’t been too bad—mostly a lot of washing—and it hadn’t lasted long. The invocation—lighting a fire and chanting a summons—was nothing to write home about either; formal introductions to the main event were pretty much alike in most humanoid societies. Kirk itched and fidgeted and wished that’d hurry. *When, he wondered, does the real pagan stuff start?*

The three priests—Baculus, Nitidus and one very old man whom Kirk didn’t know—stood stationed around the altar; all wore quiet, thoughtful expressions and gave a faint impression of sleepwalking. *There getting themselves into the mood,* Kirk guessed. *What happens when they’re all the way into it? …Shaking and twitching? Jerking and jumping? Hollering gibberish and rolling around on the floor? Or something worse?* Sweat collected under his arms and made the itching almost unbearable.

He surreptitiously scratched, bumping his knuckles on the tricorder—one of the ‘magic amulets’ he’d insisted on wearing. He wondered briefly if he should turn it on and make a quick sweep with it, then decided that the noise might be distracting—possibly even taken as sacrilegious. *No, that trouble I don’t need,* he decided, giving his ribs a last scratch. He was beginning to feel a little uneasy, and not only from the itchy heat. The flickering firelight in the otherwise darkened room cast odd moving shadow on the painted statue of Mercury, giving it a disturbing illusion of motion and breath.

Another junior priest walked into the circle, holding a trussed and grumbling chicken. He placed it on the altar and withdrew. The very old priest plodded up to the altar, set the chicken on what was obviously a cutting board and picked up a thick-bladed bronze chopping knife.

*Oho! Sacrifice!* Kirk thought, almost gleefully. *A real pagan sacrifice! …But don’t I rate anything bigger than a chicken?*

“If there be any here who object to this offering,” chanted the old man, in surprisingly firm voice, “Speak now or be silent hereafter.”

*Awak, puck-puck!* protested the chicken.

*I don’t think your voice counts,* thought Kirk.

*Chop!* Went the knife blade, decapitating the chicken neatly and fast. *Quick and painless,* Kirk admitted, watching the old priest lift the chicken over a brass collecting bowl so that not a drop of the blood went anywhere else. Are we supposed to drink that stuff? Kirk wondered, stomach uneasy. An acolyte took the chicken away. The old priest lifted the bowl toward the statue and murmured a medium-length chant that ended in “accept the offering.” Then he poured the blood into the fire.

A column of sputtering fireballs leaped toward the ceiling. Kirk jumped in spite of himself. Fortunately, the priests noticed nothing; they stood perfectly still, watching the flames with rapt expression. *Hypnotizing themselves,* Kirk thought. *Now what?*

For several minutes nothing whatever happened. Kirk waited, itched, scuffled from foot to foot, and silently grumbled about how hot and close the air was getting. Hot and close. Very close…as if the rapt, silent priests were standing shoulder-to-shoulder with him, instead of a few paces away. It took him a moment to realize what was happening, to recognize it as very similar to something he’d often
felt before.

Telepathic! –No, empathic bond! Indistinct, not too strong, but it’s there. They’re slightly telepathic…and that’s what the ritual trappings are for! Psychodrama, ‘skyhooks,’ psychological tricks to get them into the right metal state and then trigger their psychic ability… Damn, it works! … And if it does work, then I can…

Fiercely determined now, Kirk shut his eyes and mentally plunged into that triangle of minds. He reached, clutched, held to their massed but limited power, hoisted himself on top of it and thrust outward, aiming himself toward one well-remembered face and mind, silently shouting his message.

Spock, I’m here! Find me! Follow the signal. Come and get me. Find me! I’m here! Find me! Spock —

He stretched and strained and reached out into the light-sprinkled dark, feeling no connection, no answering mind. He kept on reaching anyway until the wave of power under him sank down, drained. The web of minds sagged, buckled and abruptly broke apart. Kirk found himself sitting on the temple floor, among similarly collapsed priests, with an ache in his head and a hollow feeling in his heart.

The very old priest was wheezing noisily, and his face looked waxy.

“…Perinna?” Baculus panted, pulling himself up. “Are you well?”

Looks like he’s having a heart attack! Kirk thought, scrambling clumsily to his knees. He half crawled to the old man’s side and without thinking, whipped out the tricorder, turned it on and played it over the aged priest. The readings were reassuring. “No damage,” he reported. “Just breathlessness and exhaustion. Heart like a bull…” At that point he realized what he was doing, in fact had just done. –omigod—

“Ooh, is that what your amulet is for?” Nitidus asked eagerly. “Diagnosis?”

“Eh?” panted the old priest. “Do you…worship…the Hibernian…equivalent…of Asculapius, then?”

“Ah, no,” Baculus answered, sliding a supportive arm around old Perinna’s shoulders. In a whisper he added: “His people are, ah, Druids, you know…”

“Uh…” Fool! Now talk your way out of this one, James T?! “N-no, this isn’t…primarily a medical device. It’s sort of a…hmm, it looks at things and tells you what they’re made of. It isn’t very precise with living creatures…” Not enough for detailed medical work, anyway. “It can only tell if the major organs are all right—and any good doctor could tell you that by himself.” I think. I don’t know how good their medicine is…

“Remarkable,” said Baculus. “Ah, there… Getting some color back in your cheeks. Perinna, you know better than to overtax yourself like that!”

“No harm done,” the ancient priest wheezed, looking distinctly better. “I say, Démas, do you know how that useful device is constructed?”

Wouldn’t you like to know! “I’m sorry, but I don’t. I didn’t make it myself, or see it made.” That’s true enough.

“Gods, what a pity,” panted Perinna, capable now of sitting up under his own power. “Ah, Nitidus, it might be wise to fetch some wine. Well-watered, mind you, and not the common cask. Also, fetch my tablet… Oh, never mind. I’ll get up and fetch it myself.”
“You seem quite yourself again,” Baculus approved clambering to his feet. “Whoof! The ritual certainly felt effective. Did you note any particular success, Démas?”

“I don’t know,” Kirk sighed. “I don’t think so. My head hurts.”

“Ah, the pain will pass with a little watered wine. Nitidus, did you feel any definite contact with god or spirit? No? And you, Perinna?”

“Nothing but Démas himself,” said the very old priest. “That, though, was skilled and most forceful. Through him I saw nothing but the message, the image of a faun-like face, and an odd symbol.”

Kirk abruptly realized that most of the psychic force he’d felt in the ceremony had come from this one fragile old man. *A real psychic! ...Hell, no wonder he works for a temple!*

“Just a moment.” Perinna climbed to his feet with Baculus’ and Nitidus’ help, and tottered off through the rear door. Nitidus, hastily remembering his position, hurried out after him.

“Ah, well,” sighed Baculus, leaning gratefully on the nearest corner of the altar, “I promised we would try, but not that we would be completely successful. I can only assume that your friend has gone out of the reach of Mercurius, possibly to some far foreign land where the god has no temples. Hmm, the man must have traveled quickly.”

“Yes.” Kirk rubbed some of the ache out of his head. *Or else he never was here. He’s still a universe away… Maybe. Or else that’s just an excuse for failure… I’m not sure that was real telepathy, anyway. Could been mass hypnosis… No proof.*

“Now, concerning the fee…” Baculus hinted delicately.

Just then old Perinna came shuffling back with a waxed table and stylus in hand, and Nitidus behind him faithfully carrying the wine and cups. Perinna studied the tablet briefly, added a few more details with his stylus, and then handed it to Kirk. “There,” he said. “That is the symbol I saw.”

It was the circle and triangle if IDIC, complete with Focus and textures: a purely Vulcan symbol, unknown anywhere in time or space except post-reform Vulcan.

“Oh, damn…” Kirk whispered, staring at it. *No. No way could he know that, except from my mind. He really is telepathic. That really happened… And nobody was there to answer! “Oh damn, damn! They’ve gone! He—they’ve taken the ship and gone—or they never got here at all… I’m stranded!”*

The priests exchanged alarmed looks. No telepathy was needed to explain that they couldn’t let a customer leave in such a state of mind. Worried, fussing gently, they helped Kirk to his feet and hustled him into the back room. They sat him down on a couch, gave him a cup of wine—sweeter than the usual Chianti—patted his hands and were generally so solicitous that Kirk wanted to scream. Old Perinna studied him keenly, waved the other out and sat down on the couch beside him.

“You know,” he said gently. “That this abandonment may not be permanent. They may return for you on their very next voyage.”

“True, true…” Kirk grimly pushed away despair. “I’m sure they won’t give up the search easily.” *Gone into the future—I mean our home-time, to rest the engines. Knaffbein stress. How long before they come back? How long for them? For me? Can they hit the exact date, or a little later? How much later? How long before they figure out that I’m in an adjacent universe? How long before they can find me? How long—?!*

“How long that will be,” Perinna echoed, making Kirk flinch, “I don’t know. I don’t have an augur’s
skill at reading the future. Hmmm….”

‘Augur’…? Kirk wondered. Is that what they call a- a precognitive psychic? Do they have psionics down to a compartmentalized science here?

“Yes, indeed, you should go to a proper augur. Alas, there are so few reliable ones about these days; most people don’t have any talent for it, even among us of the old Rasenna blood, and the gods know we are very few nowadays.”

“‘Rasenna’?” Kirk didn’t recognize that one.

“Others call us ‘Etruscans’, from the name of one of ourlarges former city-states.” Perinna shrugged. “We had much skill at oracular things, but it did not preserve us. To the contrary…” His gaze wandered to the shadowed ceiling. “At the founding of Etruria, we were given an oracle that our city and people would endure for ten saeculae—”

“Cycles?”

“Eh, the older word means a term of 110 years, the absolute maximum of a human lifespan.”

“Oh.” 110 years?! How long do these people usually live?

“Therefore, as the end of the 110 years approached—and our centuries-long rivalry with Rome ended in our resounding defeat—the survivors scattered, became Roman citizens and abandoned the old ways, or simple prepared for death. Our oracular talents seem to be dying out with us.”

“Talk about self-fulfilling prophecies!” Kirk sat up, indignant. “Your mean your people died out because they expected to die out at the appointed time. If they hadn’t believed it—”

“I suspect we would still have lost monumental battles, not to mention populations, to Rome.” Perinna sighed. “I cannot entirely disapprove, for the old Rasenna ruling caste was exceedingly tyrannical and cruel, but when the Antonian Triumvirate massacred some 90 percent of them at the siege of Perugia, that rather decisively finished us as a separate people.”

“Uh… Yes, I imagine that would do it.”

“That should stand as a warning to priests, augurs and oracles everywhere: do not meddle in politics, for if you rise with tyrants you shall fall with them also—and the cleverest magic in the world is not much help against large and well-trained armies.”

“Wha—?! But…I should think that, uhm, it could give you some…ah, edge…power in society…”

“Some, indeed: but no more than any skilled tradesman has.”

“Huh?”

“Oracular ability has its limits, Démas, just like everything else. It will not do that much to increase fertility of land or crops, beasts or men. Nor will it necessarily win battles, make one’s fortune, or… prevent the decline of a people determined on self-corruption.”

Fascinated, Kirk barely noted the door opening, and Baculus cautiously enter followed by Nitidus, carrying more wine and a covered platter and several dishes on a tray. “So there aren’t any real psychics left?” Kirk asked. “Weren’t there any besides the Etrus- the Rasenna?”

“Oh, certainly, but not nearly so many. Other people did not breed for the ability, as we did. There
are very few talented magic-workers this side of Thrace, or Africa, or far Transalpine Gaul, though there are still a few reliable oracles in Egypt and Greece, and of course there’s still Cumae here in Italy… No, wait; you needn’t go that far for a simple augury. Why didn’t I think of it before? My old mind must be wandering. Look, my sister can manage a good reading when she feels up it. Yes, I’ll refer your case to her. When she’s ready, I assure you, she can wrestle the gods into telling her the most amazing things! Heh…Ah, but there’s dinner. By all means, come and dine with us. Baculus, where are the couches? Must we eat sitting upright so late in the day?"

“Wrestle the gods?” Kirk asked, intrigued by the unsettling vision that the words conjured up. He turned his attention away from the fussing of the priests as they sent for couches and proper napkins and generally set up for dinner. His mind was occupied by disturbing images. …Carolyn Palamas… so pretty. Why did she have to quit Starfleet? …Apollo…carefully forgotten all these months. Why? Guilt, James T? You had to get free of him, yes, but to break him…drive him to death… No. …Pagan god and human woman, rolling in each others’ arms on the grass… I don’t think Perinna means that kind of wrestling! …I hope. “Can she win two falls out of three,” he mused aloud.

Perinna, settled on the first couch, laughed indulgently and took up the thread of conversation exactly where Kirk had dropped it. “I mean,” he said, “That she can compel the truth out of them. She’s a good augur, as I said. Come recline beside me.”

“Compel…?” Kirk sidled over to the couch and settled on it, watching the old man closely to be sure he wasn’t joking. “Your people believe you can…push your gods around?” Now there’s an idea you don’t meet with every day!

“Why, of course.” Baculus gave Kirk an odd look, as if he hadn’t expected an educated man to be so backward. “Don’t you know of that in Hibernia?” he asked, uncovering the main dish.

“Uh, well…” Kirk floundered, momentarily disconcerted at meeting the sacrificial chicken again, this time roasted with olive oil and tarragon. “We, uh, don’t believe in letting gods bully people, of course…” Vaal! Landru! Kukulkan! Gary Mitchell…and Apollo… “But the idea of bullying a god…? That’s a little new to me.”

Perinna sniffed and muttered something about barbarous Druids.

“Not bullying,” Baculus stated firmly. “But a civilized person should know that one need not let the gods abuse one. There are countless references to this in myth and written history. In the Odyssey Homer tells how Ulysses, though hounded by angry gods, manages to get home at last by dint of his excellent wit. In the Aeneid the hero sails and fights his way up and down the Midworld Sea, with nearly every god in the pantheon snapping at his heels, yet manages to reach Italy and founded Alba Longa, whence came Romulus and Remus, who founded Rome. Other myths tell of numerous cases wherein mortals outwit or out fight the gods—I could recite them for hours if not stopped. Ah, indeed, there are always ways to make the gods behave themselves and work for human benefit. Why else are we here?”

“You…control the gods? Make them work for you?” Kirk felt pulled two ways by this fascinating insight into the psychology of his hosts. On the one hand, after his own experiences with ‘superior’ beings, he could sympathize with Baculus’ attitude. On the other hand, the idea of having no gods that couldn’t be pushed around struck him as sacrilegious, even arrogant, and certainly not conductive to a decent sense of humility. And where, he wondered, would humans be without humility.

“Civilized people,” Perinna concurred, “Make their gods behave, much as they make their governments behave. Tyranny in either realm is not good for people. For example, here in Rome Jupiter himself can be overruled by a two-thirds majority vote of the Senate, with both Consuls
Kirk gave a whoop of laughter, trying to imagine people in his own universe doing something like that. “Ho! Ho! –excuse– I- Hee! I mean, it sounds very reasonable—Yuk! –but, uh, how do you, ah, enforce it? How do you make the gods comply?”

“By starving them, of course.” Perinna looked a little impatient. “Think: no god likes to be ignored, to get no worship, no prayers, no sacrifices, and no attention at all. Starve a god long enough and he’ll eventually come around to better behavior.”

“How! Ho! How to Put the Squeeze on a Fractious God, in one easy lesson! Heh! Ah, what do you do if he gets nasty and hits back?” Apollo packed one hell of a wallop…

“Then, it’s war.” Baculus shrugged eloquently and reached for some boiled cabbage. “There was a famous case of that many years ago, when the Imperator got into a fight with Neptune… Are you sure you haven’t heard this one? Well, there was a pirate then who had an agreement with Neptune—boasted of it, even claimed he was Neptune’s bastard son—and he made sea-trade hazardous all up and down the Midworld Sea. The Imperator built two fleets, at considerable expense, just to deal with this pest—but both fleets were destroyed by ferocious storms at sea. The Imperator grew very annoyed with Neptune for that; after all, he’d never done Neptune any harm, and the god had no reason to play favorites so outrageously. So, the Imperator set out to punish the god. He closed up the temples of Neptune, dismissed the priests, banned all sacrifices to him, forbade the carrying of Neptune’s image in parades, and threw little images of Neptune down every public toilet in Rome.”

Kirk bit back a howl of laughter. “D- Did it work?” he managed.

“It certainly did. The pirate’s luck changed drastically after that. His crews mutinied and he wound up in Persia, where some treacherous local king had him killed. As for the imperator, the next sea-battle he fought, he won handily. At Actium, it was; a famous battle. That’s when the eastern corn lands were won for the Commonwealth, and they’ve staved off many a famine since.”

Kirk didn’t hear the last part; he was thinking again of Apollo. Starved out. Scorned, denied…that’s how Apollo died, and all the others who came with him. That’s why they left Earth in the first place! …But that was I another universe, and centuries in the future… Here, are they still here?! Are this Rome’s gods…real? I’ve got to find out! “Tell me, has anyone seen the gods lately? I mean, really seen and spoken with them, face to face?”

“No,” sighed Nitidus, putting down his chicken leg. “Actual face-to-face meetings have grown rare since…hmmmm, about since men began using iron. Perhaps it’s because people with magical abilities prefer to spend their time on prophecies, auguries and other public services rather than communicate often with the gods, face to face. Perhaps it’s because people only summon the gods nowadays to do specific work, which does not usually require a solid personal appearance. Or possibly it’s because the gods too took an interest in other pursuits, and do not bother to manifest themselves voluntarily. No one knows for certain.”

So, they’ve already gone away… Kirk sighed. Too late to see him, too late to make amends…in advance…or warn him how to survive with future man. Maybe in this future they’ll find him, be willing to worship him, give him what he wants… Or maybe he’ll try to tyrannize the, as he did us, and they’ll fight him, as I did, and he’ll die in this universe, too. Poor doomed god! “Maybe they got tired of being worked like mules.”

“Why should they do that?” Perinna asked, genuinely puzzled. “Men rarely abuse their gods’ that’s as stupid as starving a good chariot horse, or trying to beat one’s wife. Why make a powerful enemy out of a useful ally?”
Kirk could only puzzle over that one. He hid his confusion behind a bite of drumstick.

“Besides,” Baculus went on, “extreme measures are rarely necessary. Most of the gods are decent sorts, not really inclined to be tyrants, just as most people are generally good-hearted and would rather get along with their neighbors than be always fighting them.”

Kirk stopped with a mouthful of chicken half chewed, struck by the oddity of that idea. He’d always known, or believed, that humans had a dark and ugly side to their natures. He’d seen it in himself once, cut loose from him and running wild. He didn’t like to think about that. *You fools!* He thought fiercely at all those self-assured faces; *don’t you realize that man is basically a brute, a savage? Don’t you know how thin the layer of civilization is, how much effort it takes to keep the conscience, the intellect, on top and the beast down? That’s why we need rules, regulations, laws… Don’t you know that?! No wonder your civilization is doomed …In my universe, anyway…it couldn’t be that much different here… Could it?

Meanwhile, Perinna had gone off on another tack. “In fact,” he was expounding when Kirk’s attention came back toward him. “Decent gods expect—even desire—human defiance. They often use that as a test of human maturity, you’ll notice.”

Kirk choked on his bite of chicken, and took a fast gulp of wine to ease it down. ‘Test of maturity’?! *What the hell*?!

“Oh, yes, I remember!” Nitidus chirped brightly, eager to show off his learning. “Prometheus tricked Zeus into accepting only the fat and bones of sacrificial animals, so that the worshippers could keep the meat and hide for themselves. Zeus had a good laugh over that, allowed it was a fine joke, and let men continue to sacrifice to him in that fashion.”

“Wait a minute,” Kirk cut in. *If I remember my ancient mythology aright—* “I recall that Zeus did something nasty to Prometheus when he stole fire from Olympus and gave it to men. That doesn’t sound very easygoing to me.”

“Yes, Zeus can be wretchedly bad tempered at times,” Baculus agreed easily. “He’s also a famous philanderer, which annoys his wife to no end—though some Greek philosophers say this only reflects Zeus’ preferred means of taking his place at various local goddess shrines; having mated with a goddess, he may then ask her worshippers to pay him sacrifices at her shrine also.”

“But according to the Greek legend, it was jealousy at such sleeping around that made Hera bother to arrange Prometheus’ rescue,” Nitidus added. “She sent her son Heracles—who was not begotten by Zeus, one may note—to unbind Prometheus.”

“And Zeus, who had calmed down by then, didn’t pursue the matter,” Baculus finished. “Zeus isn’t too bad a fellow, all told, though I prefer our solid Roman Jupiter. Hmmm, I recall a similar tale about Jupiter and King Numa… Ah, yes; Numa asked Jupiter what sacrifice he wanted, and Jupiter said, ‘Bring me a head.’ ‘The head—of an onion! Certainly, sir!’ said Numa. ‘A man’s head,’ said Jupiter. ‘A man’s—hair! Certainly!’ said Numa. ‘Give me a life,’ said Jupiter. ‘A life—of a fish! Agreed!’ said Numa. Jupiter than gave a great thunderclap of laughter and told Numa he was delighted to have so wise a worshipper. Thus, ever since, we’ve sacrificed to Jupiter an onion, a fish and a lock of a man’s hair.”

They like it if you fight them…? Kirk put down the remains of his chicken leg, no longer hungry. He’d known people from scores of strange and different worlds, but he had never felt so utterly alienated before. These people were human, Earthborn; and on the surface they looked happy, healthy, prosperous and practical—much more so than history gave them any right to be—but the deeper he looked, the stranger and more alien they became. *I don’t understand you,* he thought, *and*
you can’t understand me. Our thinking is utterly different…further from me than I am from a Vulcan…

“…and you’ll note,” Perinna added, “that Numa is the only king whom the chroniclers ever refer to as ‘good.’ His successors rapidly became corrupted with ambition, as is all too common with kings.”

“And ‘god-kings’ of the eastern sort,” Nitidus added.

“And king-gods, likewise of the eastern sort,” Baculus capped him. “Ho! Ho! That’s a fine place to see gods and men corrupted by too much power—much worse that the Druid rules sections of Britannia…hmmm. Yes, out in the east they see tyranny as part of the natural order of things, and look on democracy as the work of an evil god! Hee! Hee!”

“Ha, indeed a fine definition.” Old Perinna had put down enough food and sweet wine to be noticeably merry. “It is not good for humans to have kings, on Earth or Olympus. Democracy in the heavens, and the people are the god’s citizens; but when a god rules like a king, what can people be except his slaves?”

“…’and of such is the kingdom of heaven’…” Kirk muttered, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. For some reason the wild events and weird ideas and bitter alienation of the past few days were beginning to get to him, bug the hell out of him, and make his mind drift into odd and disturbing channels.

“To democracy!” Nitidus enthusiastically raised his cup. The boy had had a few cups himself. “Democracy in the heavens and on Earth.”

“Hear, hear,” concurred the two old priests, raising their cups.

Kirk automatically joined the toast, only vaguely noticing the taste of the wine. His mind was snagged on a peculiar old memory. "Haven't thought of it in years...just nine years old...Sunday school class back in Iowa...I was just learning Civics, very excited by it. I asked my teacher why Heaven was a 'Kingdom,' not a democracy. 'We're supposed to believe in Democracy, aren't we?' Teacher tried to explain. 'Because God is so much greater that we are.' I thought that was no excuse, and said so. Teacher sputtered, got red-faced, accused me of 'showing off' and changed the subject. She didn't give me an answer either. I eventually forgot the question—but I never did get an answer. Strange...

Baculus glanced up at a notched candle burning in a niche on the wall, and shook his head. “Eh, look at the time. I hate to end such an excellent dinner party, but I really must leave soon. Really, I have an appointment with Senator Crustatus, and you know what that means.

“It means that we might get that grant for our proposed messenger service,” smiled Perinna. “Do your best.”

‘Mercury Messenger Service’! Kirk thought, rubbing his eyes. ‘Quickest in town; no waiting.’ Sure. Whistle up Mercury to send your telegrams. Get Neptune to send your ships a good wind. Call Jupiter to give you rain. Show you God Almighty, and you’d put him to work in the Weather Bureau! You make your gods work for you, and if they refuse, you kick their holy butts... How can people think that way?! How can you live like that? What kind of people are you?

“Hmmm...” Baculus paused, looking sly. “I’m thinking that the Senator has a touch of gout, and he’d be grateful to anyone who relieved him of it. You don’t suppose, Démas, that your little magic box could...?”
“No, no,” Perinna answered before Kirk could respond. “He already told you his box only diagnoses; it doesn’t cure anything. Besides, the Asculapians have already told the Senator how to avoid the pains of gout; all he need do is stick to his diet. We can’t force him to do that if he’s determined upon rich eating.”

“Well, it was only a thin hope,” Baculus sighed. “No worry, though. I think I can deal with the Senator on my own wit. Be well, friends.” He slid off the couch, adjusted his tunic, reapplied his toga and strolled out. The others dutifully cleaned the last food off their plates and emptied their wine cups. The evening’s dinner party was winding down.

...Self-assured... Kirk brooded, staring at the sinking candle. You’re all so damned self-assured... and that’s the trouble. To you, everything beyond yourselves is a clear, well-lighted road. No mist covers the path...nothing unknowable in life...no veil before the face of God. You’ve pulled away all the veils and found nothing but homely old gents and housewives, a little more powerful than you but not essentially different... And you’re not afraid of the, or your world, or yourselves! You’re not afraid of the unknown!

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Nitidus, a little embarrassed that he’d forgotten. Démas, Mama invited you to our house this evening. It’s growing a bit late, but you can come with me when I leave, which won’t be too much longer. Would you care to stop at the baths first?”

“No thanks. I’ve already had one bath today.”

“Only one?” The boy gave him a slightly reproving look, and turned away to talk with Perinna.

Was that meant to be an insult, or are these people just fussy clean? Kirk wondered. He glanced around the scrubbed stone room and decided that these people were fussy clean. ... And very big on public health, and friendly, and happy, and prosperous, and fearless, and literate... damn well educated, in fact. They look very good on the surface, but there’s got to be something wrong underneath! He struggled to find the flaw, define what it was that unsettled him so much. There has to a- a shallowness about them, a lack of... well, humility... and- and a sense of... What? Awe? Mystery? Damn, no words! Maybe Spock could find the words. Spock... he’d understand. Cold logic isn’t enough, is it? He met the Master, personally—and he believes! That’s it! Logic versus emotion. Reason versus awe. Vulcan versus human... Humans need mysteries, something beyond themselves that they can’t understand, gods that—I mean, God that’s too big for them to comprehend, too big to handle, big enough to scare—I mean, big enough to awe them into acting right... I mean... Hell, if Spock believes, so do I! I don’t care if it’s illogical. So there! He picked up his wine cup to make a silent, private toast with it. It wasn’t until it reached his lips that he realized that the cup was empty.

A bad omen, that... Omen?! What am I saying? Damn! ‘When in Rome do as the Romans do,’ but this is scary...

Kirk shoved the whole problem fiercely out of his mind, and poured himself another cup of wine.

To Be Continued in Chapter VII: Pagan Supper
The Enterprise party tiptoed cautiously through the Gate and into the alien ship’s garden, tricorders at the ready. Stun-set phasers hiding on their belts. The peacock led the way, tail feathers spread like a foppish herald. There appeared to be nobody else in the fabulous garden. Aside from the sound of birds it was entirely silent.

As they paced alone the narrow, neatly kept stone pathways, Spock automatically noted details: the stately and intricate design, the assorted plants recognizable from hundred of worlds, occasional animals—including an Aldebaranian Gem-Ray, which kited won from a Terrestrial apricot tree and startled hell out of McCoy. A Vulcan formal meditation garden couldn’t have been more balanced, harmonious and precise. Indeed, there was a hint of Vulcan esthetic convention in the design…

At that moment a column flanked door in the far wall opened, and their hosts emerged. Spock recognized Aquila and the black Vulcan woman on his arm, but the other three were strangers: A tall creature of indeterminate sex, pointed ears, turquoise skin and Andorian antennae; a middle-sized and apparently middle-aged male with the almond eyes of an Oriental human and the split eyebrows of a Klingon; a tiny, elfin female with Andorian coloring and features and general build of Balok’s people. They wore various insignias of metal and enamel, as shoulder pins and neck pendants, and an assortment of metal bracelets, rings, earrings and antenna-bells. All of them wore simple sandals with gold or silver colored ornamental chains for straps, and garments that were almost identical save for color: absolutely simple tunic-tabards made of two ankle-length rectangles of cloth, joined at the shoulders by pins and at the waist by jeweled leather or chain belts. The tabards were completely open at the sides, revealing the outer legs all the way up to the hip at every stride. Aquila’s garment was deep scarlet, the tall woman’s was an eye-searing flame-green, the half-Klingon’s a soft dove gray that shimmered with subtle colors at every change of light—all in a soft, satiny material that gleamed and rippled and clung. The tall half-Andorian’s tabard was of copper colored metallic cloth, and the little female wore snowy white velvet that perfectly matched her long, braided hair. They looked as if they were wearing spun jewels: ruby and emerald, opal and goldstone and pearl. Apparently the ancient Roman custom of rubbing the skin wit olive oil had survived to the present, for their bodies gleamed like polished metal over the smooth rolling of well-defined muscle and tendon and bone. Spock guessed that their culture had few nudity taboos and little encouragement to personal vanity; they were, he grudgingly admitted, startlingly beautiful people—and marvelously unaware of the fact. None of them carried weapons save for the small ornamental daggers on their belts. Such obvious self-confidence seemed almost insulting.

“Be well, friends!” Aquila greeted them cheerfully with a raised palm. The artificial sunlight rebounded from his heavy gold bracelet and glittered on his neo-Aztec ear-posts. “Come, the table is here by the pool. Let me introduce you to my crew-family. You’ve already met my wife, Aemilia Decima. Here’s Klaveth Gregorius, our Chief Physician—” He indicated the half-Klingon, who saluted politely. McCoy looked pained. “—and Ashriliin Portianus, our Chief Engineer—” The turquoise half-Andorian nodded shyly. Scotty stared at him with unfeigned interest. “—and Bal’Tia Lucreitana, our Chief Anthropologist.” The little blue girl stepped forward, smiling. Hawk returned a silly grin, with a blush.

Spock introduced his own entourage, quietly noting Hawk’s instant infatuation with the diminutive Imperial female, and followed Aquila's lead to a nearby fishpond flanked with statues and rose-trees. At one side of the pool sat a low broad, glossy hardwood table surrounded by equally low, broad couches padded with satiny cushions and white-on-white embroidered linen cover-cloths. The
Imperials stepped out of their sandals, slid gracefully onto the couches and recline on their sides, propped up on their left elbow with some assistance from the cushions. In that position, Aemilia’s tabard gapped loose across her generous breasts, innocently giving Scott and McCoy a clear view of her topography all the way down to her navel. They hurried clumsily onto their couches, jostling for position, directly across from the appealing scenery. Spock and Day followed, settling beside them with less speed but the a little more grace. The only member of the Enterprise party who managed the trick neatly was Hawk, who whispered a quick comment about Classical dining customs not changing much through the ages. He settled at the end, directly opposite Bal’Tia. Day carefully ignored him, hitching closer to Spock.

At the center of the table stood a little silver statue and a small, covered, silver salt-boat. Aquila opened the salt-boat, took a pinch of salt and dropped it into a hollow at the little statue’s feet, intoning a brief prayer in what Spock recognized as Classical Latin. The other Imperials bowed their heads and murmured a short response. Hawk joined in the response, pronouncing the words perfectly. Scott and McCoy hastily added “Amen.” Spock bowed his head in brief acknowledgement. Dr. Day pursed her lips, then bent her head and muttered a short prayer of her own.

These amenities done, Aquila clapped his hands twice, formally, and reached for a small console at the side of the table. “Now to dinner,” he announced. “May I hear your dietary preferences?”

The Enterprise people looked at each other, shrugged and placed their orders. Spock requested a common Vulcan dish. McCoy asked for southern fried chicken. Scott happily applied for roast beef. Hawk thoughtfully inquired into the possibility of an ancient Roman variation on glazed pork, one of the few ancient recipes to survive in toto to the present. Agnes Day stiffly ordered a hamburger and fries.

Aquila, showing no surprise whatever, duly tapped buttons. In a moment, a small Gate opened in the center of the table and steaming dishes emerged through it. Last to appear was a tall decanter of flame-red wine and several wine glasses. Plates and glasses were handed around, and the assembled company dug in. The Enterprise people were slightly disconcerted to find that aside from the plates, cups and napkins, the only table utensils provided were spoons. Apparently the Imperials, like their Roman ancestors, had never quiet gotten around to inventing the fork. They dug in neatly with their fingers and with the eager appetites of healthy animals, pausing to wash their hands in finger bowls before lifting their wine glasses, and somehow managing not to spill or spatter a thing. The Enterprise crew wasn’t able to manage quite as neatly, save for Hawk, but the Imperials were too polite to notice.

The garden’s animals were not discouraged from attending the meal. The Gem-Ray spiraled down to drape it self lovingly over Aemilia’s ankles, from there it cheeped beseechingly and rolled expressive faceted eyes at her. She handed it a bit of salad, gave it a friendly pat, and gently but firmly shoved it off the couch. An enormous golden eagle swooped in for a perfect landing on Aguila’s section of the couch, sidled up to him, leaned affectionately against his shoulder and scrawked hopefully, eyes on his dish. Aquila grinned and handed it bits of meant until it was satisfied and waddled off.

“This is excellent chicken,” McCoy enthused. “It’s been a long time since I tasted real old-fashioned southern-style fried chicken.”

“Ah, it’s a common favorite here.” Aemilia turned her dazzling bronze-and-ivory smile on him. “The recipe is virtually unchanged from the days of the first trade treaty with the Ch’in Empire, some nineteen centuries ago.”

McCoy gulped, grew round-eyed, and surreptitiously counted dates on his fingers. “’The Ch’in Empire’?” he whispered. “China? In 400 AD?!”
“There appear to be vast historical differences between our universes.” Spock commented, turning to Aquila. “We have not yet had time to review the tapes you provided for us. If you could give us a brief account of… Imperial history…?”

“A brief account?” laughed Aquila, showing fine, ivory-white teeth. “That might be difficult.” He tapped buttons on the console, summoning up another carafe of wine. “Written commentaries survive from 4000 years ago, archaeological reconstructions reach back to the Ice Age, and we’re always getting new details from the Window of Time—”

“The what?”

“The Window of Time: a marvelous device that we found on a long-deserted planet off at the edge of the galaxy. We have no idea who built it, or what became of them, or how it survived, or how it works, or even precisely what it is; sometimes it acts more like a living being than a machine. It’s a great, irregular circle of some unknown and un-analyzable material, standing in the middle of a vast, ruined city—”

McCoy groaned quietly. He recognized the description.

“—and the incredible thing can show you the past, as it truly was! Visions of the past form in its center; they move very quickly, but a good recorder can capture the images with great accuracy. It’s a splendid tool for teachers and students of ancient history.”

“Has anyone ever…tried to…jump into it?” McCoy asked, ignoring Spock’s warning glare.

“Oh, gods, no!” Aemilia rolled her eyes. “The dangers are inconceivable. Why, on might be reduced to one’s component atoms and scattered across all time! Brrrr! There are cleaner methods of suicide.” She drained her cup and refilled it.

The Enterprise contingent exchanged significant looks. If the Imperials had never used nor imagined using the Guardian of Forever as a time-travel device, then it was highly probably that they had never discovered time-travel at all. There would be possibilities they had never dreamed of, and wouldn’t suspect.

“So,” Aquila resumed, “Where would you like to begin?”

“With the very beginnings of the Imperium,” Hawk answered promptly. “I think we—”

“In our universe,” Spock cut him off, “Accounts of the period are confused and fragmentary. The civilization of the Rome fell at the dawn of recorded time, followed by a long, er, Dark Age of lost technology. Our current civilization has been struggling upward since that decline, some 2000 years ago. We know very little of what occurred previously.”

Hawk angrily bit his lip. Day studied her hands. Scott hid behind a hastily lifted wine glass and McCoy behind a chicken drumstick. The Imperials stared at them, open-mouthed.

“Oh, you poor things!” Aemilia whispered.

“That would explain the primitive design—” Ashrilin stopped, blushing green. “Uhm, sorry…..” He murmured at Scott’s reddened and indignant face.

Aquila and Klaveth looked at each other, stunned. “All that?” Kaveth murmured, “…lost?”

“2000… That would place it in the early European period,” Bal’Tia spoke up. “Approximately at the height of the northern Germani invasions. I assume that was the cause of the collapse…?”
“As nearly as we can tell,” Spock smoothly agreed. “That appears to have been a strong contributory factor.”

“There was also an airborne viral plague,” Hawk added hotly. “And a severe grain-blight, and depletion of the major gold, silver and iron mines, and constant war with the Persian Empire, and—”

“Political corruption and moral decay,” Day put in, giving Hawk a chilly look.

“ Took a bit ta bring yon civilization doon,” Scott considered.

“Near as we can tell,” McCoy offered, “It just got hit by all sorts of troubles at once.”

“And afterward, society slid all the way down to the bottom of the barrel.” Hawk glanced, slit-eyed, at Day. “It took us centuries to pull ourselves back up even this far.”

“We might never have done it all without the Church,” Day pounced. “The one social organization that remained intact and grew strong during those chaotic early centuries was the organization of religion. It provided a core of morality and purpose in an uncertain world, around which new laws and societies gradually coalesced. It preserved a reservoir of recorded knowledge which eventually became the center of education for all society. You might say that the Church was society until civilization advance far enough for the secular arm to redevelop and resume government and technological activities. In time, the message of the Church spread all across the world, modernizing and unifying all the scattered nations into a planet-wide society dedicated to progress and peace.”

Scott and McCoy stared at her, then at each other. Hawk, face turning an unhealthy shade of purple, said nothing—but the grinding of his teeth was clearly audible. Spock steepled his fingers and watched the reactions of the Imperials.

“Pardon?” asked Aquila, fiddling with a pin at his shoulder that was, Spock belatedly realized, some sort of translator. “Precisely what is ‘church’? Does it mean ‘temple building’ or ‘cult’?”

“Oh, ‘cult’ obviously” Aemilia answered him, “But how long did it take for technological development to resume?”

“More than a 1000 years!” Hawk cut in fast. “The church discouraged such advances for one helluva long time. Remember what happened to Galileo?” If looks could have killed, Agnes Day would have left in a basket.

“The Church restrained unchecked technological growth,” Day admitted, cheeks reddening angrily, “But that was because it insisted that such advances had to serve moral purposes instead of just growing blindly, like a cancer. It wasn’t until secular institutions escaped such moral control that they began developing harmful inventions.—”

“Like anesthetics, antibiotics and birth control—” Hawk growled.

“—such as the weapons that caused World War III! Day snapped back at him.

Whatever Hawk was planning to retort, Spock stopped him. “Let us refrain from haggling over details, Dr. Hawk. In brief, the history of our universe developed from that point onward. We achieved space travel some 350 years ago, and have expanded through the galaxy ever since, forming alliances as we proceed.”

“No thanks to any religion,” Hawk muttered to himself.

“Less than four centuries?!?” Ashriiliin marveled. “Gods! So much time lost…”
“Simply amazing…” Aquila shook his head, took a long drink and cheered up. “Well, it was much otherwise here, thank the gods! The barbarian invasions were successfully turned…hmmm, into Persia, wasn’t it? History never was my strong point.” He scratched his thigh unselfconsciously, not noticing at all that the loose skirts of his tabard fell away, baring his shining sculpted-bronze leg all the way up to the hip. He was obviously not wearing underwear. He looked hopefully toward Bal’Tia, missing the furious blush and shocked look that Dr. Day gave him.

“Oh, yes…” Bal’Tia smile brightly, pleased at the chance to show off her knowledge in company. “The great northeastern colonies held the border strong between the Baltic Sea and Judea, and the invading Gemani were deflected down into Persia and points south. They overturned all the Eastern kingdoms as they went, finally ending in Arabia and India. Thus ended two threats at once: the Germani and Persii. Poor rulers did the invaders prove to be, too; they founded half a hundred squabbling petty kingdoms, none willing to trust or trade with the others, and all wretchedly barbarous. The Imperium handily absorbed them all over the course of the next three centuries.”

“Oh, wait…” McCoy spoke up. “What happened to the great Influenza plague of the…uhm, second century of the Imperium? In our universe, it killed off damn near half the population during the rule of Marcus Aurelius. Er, we do have records of that; I learned about it in Medical school.”

“Oh, that one.” Klaveth scratched his chin. “Yes, it caused a lot of deaths when it first emerged in the eastern provinces, but quick thinking by a far-sighted Imperator prevented a severe epidemic. Marcus Aurelius had the benefit of a good education, and he sent a team of doctors to study the phenomenon; they determined that the plague was indeed airborne, and suggested some public-health measures—including the wearing of veils, constant exposure to sunlight and fumigating all buildings constantly with antiseptic herb vapors. There were many deaths, true, but nowhere near what your people seem to have suffered.”

“Uh…yeah,” was all McCoy could think to say.

“Beautiful,” murmured Hawk, smiling beatifically at Bal’Tia.

Spock said nothing: his attention was elsewhere. ‘Border strong between the Baltic Sea and Judea’? In our history, Rome colonized so far northeast… The change came earlier. When? How? Could it truly be—

“And…Judea?” Day asked intently, leaning forward. “What became of Judea?”

The little Imperial woman scratched her head for a moment. “Why, nothing.” She shrugged. “Without the constant enticement and pressure from Persia, Judea ceased to plot against Rome. The country settled into trade and prosperity, and soon became a stable, reliable partner in the commonwealth. Today, I believe, the major industries are exotic fruit orchards, tourist attractions, the usual science industries, and handicraft luxury items in wool, leather and brass.”

“Were there no…philosophers?” Day insisted. “No exportation of great ideas? Of moral reawakening?” Of- Of religious principles?”

Bal’Tia scratched her head again. “Hmmm, yes…” She dutifully wracked her brain for some minor memory. “I recall that Judea is still the hereditary cultural center of the Jews. That’s a very ancient cult devoted exclusively to a local variant of Jove with added attributes of the Shepherds’ Mars, Hercules Melkarth and remnants of a previous Ishtar-worship. Their great temple in Jerusalem, nearly 3000 years old, is one of the major tourist attractions of the area, along with the Museum of Archeology.” She shrugged apologetically, out of information, and took a sip of wine.

“And that’s all?” Dr. Day looked close to tears. “Only Jews?”
Hawk gave her a brief ugly smile.

“I don’t think Judea was ever much of a country for philosophers,” commented Klaveth. “Greece, now: what a country! For millennia, philosophy has been their chief export. And the great medical college at Epidauros—”

“Hail, the Old School!” Aemilia laughed.

Klaveth made a good-natured face at her.

“Anyway,” Bal’Tia went on, “The Imperium extended to a planet-wide society some 10 centuries ago, and began serious space travel some 150 years thereafter.”

Scott, eyes abulge, was counting on his fingers. “Space travel…in the 1500’s!” he muttered.

“We’ve just kept growing ever since,” Bal’Tia finished. “The Imperium today includes this entire galaxy and a quarter of Andromeda.”

“In…deed,” said Spock.

McCoy, Hawk, Day and Scott only gulped.

“So much for the broad outlines of our history,” said Aemilia. “Details can be mined from the tapes. I assume…” She glanced politely at Spock. “…That in your universe civilization followed a similar pattern after recovering from its early collapse?”

“Oh, well, in fits and starts,” said McCoy.

“We didna get a unified Earth until about three centuries ago,” Scott clarified, “But we’ve been growin’ fairly fast ever since.”

“Just three centuries!” marveled Aquila. “Ah, gods, the waste…”

“Has your… ‘Federation’?…” Aemilia puzzled over the word. “Has it yet allied with the Romulans? Or are you a Vulcan, Acting-Captain?”

Spock blinked over the implications of that. “I am a Vulcan. Earth explorers first contacted my world some 192 years ago.” He decided not to add any details about the Romulan War. “In our universe, Vulcan was the first non-human populated world to join the federation. Was the situation similar here?”

“For some reason, the question made their host burst out laughing.

“Ho! Ho! …Ah, excuse me…” Aquila regained his voice first. “Yes, Vulcan was the first. Ahem. Ah, you must understand the occasion was the source of a famous joke… Hee! Sorry…”

“Joke?” Spock blinked.

“Here, let me tell it,” Klaveth chuckled. “The first landing party sent out three scouts to gather samples. The first was a Ch’in woman named Domitia Kuo-Fan, who was to collect plant samples. She came back within the hour, carrying a bucketful of moist sand, with a carnivorous plant in it that kept trying to bite her fingers.”

Spock looked jarred. He could recognize the plant from even that brief description, and he could help wondering how an unprepared human female had managed to dig it out of the ground without losing both hands, at least. “I beg your pardon,” he interrupted, “But how did the woman manage to obtain
he plant without injury to herself?"

"Oh, she saw that it was carnivorous when it snapped at her, narrowly missing her leg. Seeing that it was a desert plant, designed to conserve water, she guessed that the one thing it could not deal with was too much water—so she emptied her canteen over it. The plant drank until it was too stuffed to move, whereupon she dug it up."

"Oh. Most logical…"

"The Praefect marveled, and gave her a commendation," Klaveth went on. "Next went a stout fellow from the Sioux lands, named Maxentius Crow Feather, who was supposed to fetch a native animal. He came back in two hours, all cut and scratched, dragging an enormous saber-fanged bear by one ear."

Spock raised an eyebrow, trying to imagine a human dragging sehlat anywhere, by any portion of its anatomy. "Excuse me again," he said, "But how did he manage to do that?"

"The bear? Well, when he first saw it, it charged at him and chased him up a rock spire—much like a raccoon treed by hounds. He was reluctant to shoot the animal, preferring to bring it back alive; so he took a sausage out of his ration kit and all the pain pills out of his medical kit, stuffed the pills into the sausage and threw it to the bear. The bear gobbled up the sausage, and soon became too sleepy and dizzy to be any problem."

"I…see. How imaginative."

"The Praefect was very impressed, and recommended the man for a promotion. Then out went an unprepossessing little soldier, one Nidianus Brbzycki from the Polacki country—"

McCoy and Scott both choked over their wine at the same instant. Dr. Day did nothing but roll her eyes heavenward. Hawk snickered explosively. The Imperials either didn’t notice or expected the reactions.

―who just happened to be next on the duty roster. The Praefect looked him over, whispered a prayer or two to Jove and Juno, and said: ‘Just go collect interesting minerals, Brbzycki; don’t get into any trouble.’ So Brbzycki saluted, turned to go, fell over his own feet, got up and marched away over the hill."

"You’re sure this is all true, now?" McCoy asked, grinning.

"Oh, it is," Aquila smiled, tapping the console buttons. The table Gated up three crooked, black, unmistakable cigars and an equally unmistakable cigarette lighter.

"Three hours passed, and no Brbzycki." Dr. Klaveth waved his empty wine glass for emphasis. Aquila nodded knowingly and lit his cigar. Pungent blue smoke began drifting over the table. The hopeful eagle edged away, blinking with distaste. "Four hours and still no Brbzycki." Klaveth gave Aquila a sour look, but kept on with his story. "After five hours the Praefect began to worry. At the sixth hour he was ready to send out a search party—"

"High time, too," Aquila puffed through a blue cloud.

"Let him tell it." Aemilia gave her husband a light cuff on the ear, making him grin.

"And then—" Klaveth waved his hands dramatically, incidentally fanning the smoke away. "Up ran Brbzycki from over the hill, panting and wide eyed, with his tunic all awry and such a tale to tell."
“Nae doot,” Scott commented, grinning despite himself.

“It seems he’d gone over the hill and into the valley beyond, and there he saw a strange circle of tall standing stones, much like the Stonehenge in Britannia, all set about with wind chimes.”

Spock abruptly raised both eyebrows. He knew what such a formation meant on Vulcan.

“And there, walking in the ring of stones, Brbzycki saw the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen or imagined. Her brows were canted and ears were pointed, her hair was midnight black and her skin was perfect gold, her eyes were like deep forest pools, and her lips and nails were leaf-bud green.” Klaveth plainly enjoyed waxing poetic. “Brbzycki didn’t know if she were the daughter of a Faun or the goddess Flora herself, but since he’d fallen madly in love with her at first sight, he decided to take no chances.”

“I think I see where this is goin’,” McCoy chuckled.

“He saluted her and addressed her as the goddess Flora, and asked how she came to dwell so far from the forests of Arcadia. Of course she didn’t understand a word—we didn’t have translators then—but she was impressed by his obvious devotion, so she gestured to him to sit down beside her, and they passed the long afternoon learning—by hand sign and touch—to understand each other.”

“You mean mind-touch?” Hawk ventured to ask.

“Certainly,” Bal’Tia smiled back. “How else could she have learned who and what he was, or explained what she wanted of him?”

“She explained,” Klaveth plugged on, “That she was not the goddess Flora but only a local maiden named T’Parek—”

Spock flinched.

“—and that her family was compelling her to marry against her will. Her bridegroom, she said, was due to arrive at that very spot the next morning and claim her as his bride. ‘How I dread the dawn,’ she said. There’s a famous poem to that effect—”

“Don’t quote it now,” Aquila groaned.

“Anyway,” Klaveth continued, giving Aquila a dirty look, “Brbzycki asked: ‘Can nothing be done to save you?’ and T’Parek replied: ‘There is one way.’”

Spock didn’t say anything. He was, McCoy noted, wearing his Super-Vulcan mask—as if he could guess what was coming. McCoy had a pretty fair idea of that himself.

“So,” Klaveth wound up, “When Brbzycki came back, he went running up to the Praefect, saluted fast, and panted out: ‘Sir, the planet is inhabited, and their women are beautiful, and I’ve got to spend the night training up so that I can defeat one of their men in a duel tomorrow and the marry the woman myself!’”

Spock might have been carved from stone.

“And the Praefect said…” Klaveth indulged in a dramatic pause. The others rolled their eyes; they’d apparently hear the punch line a hundred times. “Brbzycki, you were just supposed to collect stones!”

Hawk cracked up, laughing hugely. So did Scott and McCoy, in spite of themselves. Even the

He’s the first Klingon I’ve ever met, McCoy considered. *Who’d rather tell a good joke than brag and bully. Interesting, to say the least…*

“To summarize a long tale,” Aemilia finished, “Brbzycki won the battle and married the woman, and between them they produced eight surviving children—which mollified the lady’s family considerably.”

Spock raised an expressive eyebrow. “I should think so,” he murmured.

“Oh, yes, indeed,” Klaveth concurred. “Vulcans had a low fertility problem at the time, poor things. Interbreeding with Humans was a great help to them. Hybrid vigor and so forth.”

Spock blinked several times, thinking that over.

“And of course the Vulcans were of help to us when we met the Romulani,” Aquila added, puffing his cigar. “So, contact proved fruitful all around.”

“In the same sense?” Hawk grinned. Day gave him a withering glance, which he ignored.

The Imperials laughed. “Oh, yes,” Aquila chuckled, giving his wife a playful swat on her broad bottom. *Quite fruitful, the gods be praised. The Romulani weren’t as infertile as the Vulcans—something about more meat protein in their diet—but they appreciated the benefits of cross-breeding.*

“And the food animals,” the half-Andorian Engineer spoke up. “Don’t forget that.”

“Trust an Andorian to remember cattle,” Klaveth laughed.

“No small point,” Aemilia agreed. The Romulani, much like our own ancient ancestors, first went exploring out of their own lands in search of better food. Our offer of large breeding herds was the deciding factor in favor of the alliance.”

“Alliance…” Scott murmured, eyes wandering. “We havena gotten thot far yes… Och, the pity.”

“It was just the opposite with us,” Ashriliin noted. “The Worlds of Andor already had food beasts and warriors aplenty, just not enough lands to keep them on. What we got from the alliance was the star drive and—and workable birth control techniques.”

“A pity that Vulcanoids and Andorii can’t interbreed directly,” Aquila considered. “Solve both their problems.”

Spock nodded abstractedly, a faint stunned look on his face.

“Give them time,” said Klaveth. “Sufficient generations of cross breeding with Humans, and they’ll be close enough. Current evidence places successful crossing at one-eighth Vulcanoid, one-eighth Andorian and three-quarters Human, with all the Human genes recessive. With Human genes dominant, it could go as high as one-quarter Vulcanoid, one-quarter Andorian, and—”

“Spare us!” Aemilia groaned. “Get you two talking genetics, and you’ll tyrannize the dinner conversation for hours.”

Klaveth and Ashriliin ducked their heads and grinned sheepishly.
“Yessir, you folks are ahead of us in a lot of ways,” McCoy admitted. “We’ve, ah, don’t even have that many, uhm, Human/Vulcan cross-breedings yet. Mr. Spock here is the only one I’ve met so far.”

“Ahh…” Aemilia’s dark eyes softened in sympathy. The other Imperials gave Spock gently pitying looks. Spock looked as if only iron control kept him from squirming. “Well, don’t let it disquiet you,” Aquila soothed, unselfconsciously giving his wife a hug. She kissed his ear. “I’m sure you’ll catch up in time. We’d be pleased to give you help.”

Day visibly shrank away. Hawk snickered again.

“We’d be honored, sir,” McCoy cut in fast, ahead of Spock. “We need the dilithium crystals, and we’d be grateful for any other help you could give us.”

“So be it.” Aquila slapped his hand on the table. “Ashril, after dinner go make up the dilithium crystals, all they need plus some spares. Take a few of your corps over to their ships and see what other help you can give them. Also, Acting-Captain Spock, we’d be happy to entertain any of your engineers and scientists whom you could spare for a visit.”

Scott perked up, quivering, like a racehorse at the starting gate.

“I thank you.” Spock couldn’t resist the offer either. “Such knowledge would be invaluable to us.”

“Amen!” Scott agreed, eyes shining.

“And the biological and medical knowledge—” McCoy added.

“—and the lessons of history,” Hawk put in, grinning nastily at Dr. Day.

“In-deed,” Day pronounced through still lips. “Did every species in the galaxy join your empire peacefully? Where they all won over by food and sex, or did any of them resist?”

McCoy gave her a sharp look. Spock said nothing. None of the Imperials seemed to feel insulted.

“Oh, there were battles enough,” Bal’Tia replied calmly. “The Romulani insisted on a few engagements to assure themselves that we were honorable warriors, and the Andorii demanded a formal duel for much the same reason. The Klingoni, now…” She rolled sympathetic eyes at Klaveth, who blushed. “Their ruling caste, at least, would settle for nothing less than a full-scale conquest. It took us a good 20 standard years, and the occupation another 50, but all ended well.”

“Most of us were just as well pleased.” Klaveth shrugged. “According to my grandfather, the old lords were utter tyrants who enslaved everyone else to some degree or other. It didn’t take long to see that we were much better off as citizens of the Imperium.”

“That’s how most of the Imperium developed back on Earth,” Bal’Tia noted. “Most of the lands of the original Imperium were added by treaty rather than conquest. It proved a good tradition to continue.”

The Enterprise people only looked at each other.

“What became of the old Klingon lords?” Day asked, elaborately casual. “Where they killed off?”

“Some of them,” said Bal’Tia. “The rest were exiled to a barren factory world, where they had to work for a living, for a change.”

“Slavery, you mean?” Day pressed, just as casually, tossing a triumphant glance at Hawk.
“No. Just exile on a limited world. Their descendants can apply for citizenship and emigrate freely upon receiving it. Slavery is completely local and individual.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Local… Ah, that means one serves one’s sentence within the district where the crime was committed. For crimes committed in open space, the sentence is served on the nearest inhabitable planet. Transportation of slaves is very rarely allowed, and only in cases of great civil emergency, such as…hmm, say forest fires or earthquakes, where vast amounts of labor are needed quickly for rescue work. In such cases the involved slaves are granted at least a year off of their sentences. Needless to add, slaves are always eager to apply for such work.”

The Enterprise contingent only stared.

“Er, that arrangement prevents labor abuses,” Bal’Tia explained, misinterpreting the blank looks. “That way no one can turn the labor of slaves into an economic commodity. We learned about that danger very early in our history, even before the founding of the Imperium.”

Hawk let his breath out in a long, expressive sigh.

“I see…” Spock managed to digest all that. “And what is the average sentence given to…criminals?”

“Five years for robbery,” Bal’Tia ticked off on her fingers, “Ten for piracy, fifteen for murder, and generally five additional years for each count of a compound felony. Time off for good behavior is usually allotted at one year per proven count of service—there’s a long, complex legal definition of approved services—and of course the individual owners can free their slaves whenever they feel it appropriate, but there is a 5-to-10-year period of legal liability afterward to encourage caution. If you’d like copies of the relevant statutes—”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” said Spock, keeping his face properly blank with some effort. “Does this system apply everywhere in the…Imperium?”

“Not uniformly,” Aemilia admitted. “Some worlds haven’t accepted the service-repayment system at all. Vulcan for example, has only direct repayment, exile, and…” she sniffed slightly. “A sort of mental restructuring, as if civil offenses were evidence of some mental disease! Rather barbarous, but they refuse to change it. You know how conservative Vulcans are.” She smiled indulgently at Spock. “Stuffy old dears, but we do love them.”

McCoy almost choked on his drink. Spock blushed pale green. Hawk, Scott and Day managed to look elsewhere.

“And how many people are enslaved every year?” Day came doggedly back to her point, eyebrows pulled together in a frown that a stranger might have mistaken for a sign of concentration.

The Imperials looked blank.

“She means,” Hawk cut in, “What’s the general crime rate?”

Day scowled at him. That wasn’t exactly what she’d meant.

“Not at all bad on the wealthier worlds, as one might expect,” Bal’Tia answered. “About 3-to-5 per 1000. In places where one finds more poverty, understandably, it goes up to 5-to-10 per 1000. We try to prevent the causal conditions, but not even the gods always achieve perfection.”

“Oh, well, you’re not doing too badly,” McCoy gulped.
“Are you trying to say—” Day’s voice dripped sarcasm. “That a whole half-of-one-percent of the people are enslaved every year? As much as that?”

Even Spock gave her a warning look.

Fortunately the irony was lost on the Imperials. “Oh, gods, no!” Bal’Tia laughed charmingly. That’s just the total crime rate: petty theft, cheating at the races, bar brawls and that sort of thing. Serious felonies are much less frequent—about one-tenth as common. If you’re seriously interested in criminal law, we could tape you a copy of the Complete Uniform Statutes. It’s rather large, but…”

“Thank you,” Spock interceded. “But we must observe the limitations of space in our library. A brief summary will be sufficient. I regret greatly that we cannot take with us the entire knowledge of a galactic civilization.”

“Especially,” Hawk added, “One more advanced than ours.”

“We’ll happily give you what knowledge we can.” Aquila gestured magnanimously. “Can you oblige us by explaining this business of ‘alternate universes’ in some detail?”

Everybody looked to Spock. Imperturbable and fast thinking as always, he launched into a nice theoretical description that mentioned nothing of time travel or time changes. Most of the Imperials accepted the theory without question, but Ashrilinn wasn’t easily put off.

“How is it done?” he insisted. “Precisely how does one travel between universes? What is the technique?”

“We are not yet certain ourselves,” Spock fenced carefully. “All such cases known—and those are very few—have occurred within recent years, all accidentally, and all by different means: usually some form of extreme energy disruption. All we can do is try to duplicate the conditions that brought us here, in the hope of returning to our point of origin. This involves, in our case, a ‘slingshot’ orbit around the sun with the apogee through the second envelope of the gravitational field. This puts considerable stain on the engines, which is how we came to be in need of new dilithium crystals.”

Ashriiliin grew round-eyed and solemn-faced. His antennae twitched thoughtful circles around each other, like twiddling thumbs.

Aemilia leaned forward, eyes wide. “You realize the…considerable risks, don’t you?”

“True,” Spock admitted. “But honor requires us to make the attempt.”

The Imperials looked impressed. “We’ll assist you in any way we can,” Aquila promised again. “When you’re ready to make the flight, inform us. We’ll have the trade-lanes cleared for you.’

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“Is it the primary function of this ship,” Spock asked, “To patrol the trade-lanes of the home system?”

“Most of the time, I’m afraid.” Aquila grinned ruefully, lighting another stogie. The pet eagle rolled its eyes, flapped its wings, and sailed off to the other side of the garden. “Officially, this is the flagship of Earth’s home defense fleet. ‘Ever Vigilant’, as they say. In truth, for all the prestige of the post, the work is dull routine. All the real excitement is in the Andromeda galaxy, battling Kelvanti. Ah, if I were 100 years younger, or even 50…”

McCoy dropped his wine glass. “How old did you say you were?”

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“178, next Ides of August. Far from old, that.” Aquila combed his fingers through his glossy black
mane. “Do you see a single gray hair?”

McCoy had to admit that he didn’t.

“And not going to fat, either.” Aquila slapped his belly, which was a flat as a board. “Prime of life, I am! I could serve on a warship as well as any of these young cubs in their 50’s. Why, I— Oof! Stop that, woman!”

Aemilia, grinning, was tickling him unmercifully. “Yes, yes dear. If you were over there, you’d be grumbling about doing all the work and getting none of the glory. I know you!”

He managed to pin her hands. She nipped his ear. They wound up kissing.

“As if he weren’t insufferably proud to be Praefect of the Invictus,” Ashriliin laughed. “I remember the day he got the ship, almost 50 years ago. Oh, Larashkail and Minerva, how we celebrated! It took us five days to recover, and he was so hung-over on the morning of our first flight—”

“Ash, don’t you dare tell that story!” Aquila caught enough breath to insist. “If you do, I’ll tell all the ghastly details of that time you went roaring drunk through the capitol of Argelius and mistook a wayside temple for an outhouse.”

Ashriliin blushed deep turquoise and made a face, but kept quiet.

“The truth, my dear,” Aemilia purred. “Is that you’d pine away and die if you were taken from the Invictus. You know perfectly well that you could have taken promotions a ten of times, and you’ve never done it.”

Spock looked away, suddenly and painfully reminded of Kirk.

“Ah, well,” Aquila conceded, “I couldn’t abide to leave space, or break up the family, and there aren’t many ships the size of Invictus. Where else could we keep all the children with us?”

“…Children?” Spock inquired, his faintly pole-axed look returning.

“Our crew.” Aemilia did a classic double-take. “You mean…none of you are related?”

“Ye mean…” Scott gulped. “Ye all are?”

“Why, certainly.” Aquila blinked. “Aren’t you even familiar with that custom? Good gods, what troubles you must have with dissention! Yes, we’re all one family. Ashriliin here is married to my fifth daughter, Klaveth is my eighth son’s brother-in-law, and Bal’Tia is my eldest great-granddaughter-in-law.”

Spock blinked several times. McCoy hastily pulled his mouth closed; Scott left his hanging open. Day blushed furiously. Hawk stared, nodded, and murmured something about ‘tribal arrangements’.

“Of course, this isn’t the whole family,” Aquila detailed. “The underage children are with our parents until they reach an age when they can join us—provided that they choose to take their service in space, of course—and some of the children and other relatives preferred to go to their spouses’ ships, and some have finished their minimum service time and settled on the family lands or on other planets, but yes, most of the family is here.”

“’The Captain is a father to his crew’!” McCoy quoted, shaking his head.

“Oh, true,” said Aquila, fondly nuzzling the dark-bronze skin of Aemilia’s neck. “Not many crews
are as large as ours, but going into space is an old tradition on both sides of the family, and our offspring are pleased to maintain it. Clearly, we’ve been doing something to please the gods.”

“Probably breeding well,” Aemilia suggested, amiably squeezing her husband’s thigh. He grinned back, gently gripping her nearer buttock.

The Enterprise contingent blushed in assorted shades, save for Hawk, who murmured something about ‘Germancus and Agrippina—without Caligula’. The other Imperials only smiled fondly at the cuddling couple.

“Er, precisely how many children do you have?” Spock ventured to ask.

“Twenty-three,” Aquila replied, sliding an arm around his wife’s waist to give her belly an appreciative pat. “Most of them are on the ship. There are also seventy-eight grandchildren and one-hundred and thirty-four great-grandchildren. Not a bad fertility-record, if I say so myself.”

“And most of them in the fleet, if not on this ship,” Aemilia purred with pride. “The rest of the crew is assorted in-laws and adoptees.”

“Rumor has it,” said Klaveth, “That the Grand Senate plans to give him the next Father of the Year award.”

“Amen,” said Hawk.

“Twenty-three…children…” McCoy repeated, staring at Aemilia. It was hard to tell with Vulcanoids, but she didn’t look a day over 30.

“And nursed them all myself.” Aemilia hitched up on one elbow and pulled her tabard tight across her breasts and board-flat belly. “I think I’ve kept my figure rather well. Have I?”

“Uhm…amen!” said Scott.

“Mostly through exercise,” she preened a little, “And I’ve managed to avoid overeating.” She flicked a gently reproving finger at Aquila’s odorous cigar. “Without resorting to those smelly things, either.”

“Hear, hear,” Grumbled Klaveth. “Aquila, if you don’t cut down on them, you’re going to get lung cancer again.”

“…Again?” McCoy asked faintly.

“The cure for that is faster and easier than the cure for overeating,” Aquila replied, artfully blowing smoke at him while he turned to give Aemilia another squeeze. “If I must have a vice, better this than growing fat and soft.”


“I can keep the fat off you,” Aemilia leered fondly, tickling him under the chin.

“Ah, if you had your way every night, you’d leave me too tired to get up in the morning,” Aquila demurred, while the other Imperials laughed. “I swear, this woman could ride a whole chariot-team of horses to exhaustion. Remember the time you broke the bed?”

“Well, it was an old bed…” Aemilia fluttered her eyelashes innocently.

The Imperials guffawed. Scott, McCoy and Hawk joined it. Spock and Day blushed, in opposite
“I’m sure that was the night we made Lucius,” Aquila reflected. “The boy was born kicking and he hasn’t been still since. And such a troublemaker!”

“Oh, hush.” Aemilia playfully tugged his hair. “You’ll have to let him live down that tribble prank sometime.”

“Tribbles?!” asked Scott, sitting up abruptly.

“I see you’ve met them!” Klaveth laughed.

“They’re not easily forgotten,” Aquila agreed. “Little balls of fur, pretty and harmless, eat nearly anything—and they breed like Andorii.”

“Worse!” Ashriliin rolled his eyes.

“Lovely creatures,” Bal’Tia giggled, “But they do not belong on a starship.”

“There are strict rules—with stiff fines—against exporting them,” Aemilia explained, “But just try saying ‘you can’t’ to Lucius…”

“He’s always had a fondness for animals,” Aquila detailed. “We happened to stop at a planet where the creatures are allowed—one of the Andorian worlds, I recall—and do you know that rotten kid went and did?”

“I can imagine!” McCoy whooped. “Next thing you know: tribbles in the corridors, tribbles in the airshafts—”

“Tribbles all over my nice, clean Sickbay,” added Klaveth, sending McCoy into sympathetic cackles.

“Tribbles in the closets, and the beds, and the laundry,” Bal’Tia laughed.

“It took us ten days to get rid of them,” Aquila finished, “And we had to get new food supplies, and of course Fleet Command wanted to know why, and… Oh, did I have reason to paddle that boy’s bottom!”

“Well, he did take the lion’s share of the work in removing them,” Aemilia reminded, “And he didn’t do anything that silly again.”

“Oh, true. He’s really a good boy…”

“And a fine illustration of the ethics of balance,” Klaveth considered. “Weigh the damage against the boy’s virtue—”

“O Socrates, grace our table,” Aquila laughed. “Teach us the value of tribbles.”

“In point of fact,” Ashriliin cut in, “Applying the principles of Thesshayn the Optimist, one can find virtue in tribbles—two, at least: their meat and fur.”

Day sat up a little straighter, nostrils quivering, like a hound catching the scent of prey.

“From the viewpoint of Andor,” Bal’Tia giggled, “Anything edible has ethical value.”

“There are other moral values!” Day pounced, seeing her chance. Hawk glared at her, adding a quick headshake but she ignored him. “Have you ever considered that there might be more basic,
universal values? Morals that are applicable to everybody?"

*Oh, no she’s gearing up for an evangelistic sermon!* McCoy threw Spock an anguished look. *Stop her before she gets our hosts pissed off with her preaching—*

Spock said nothing, did nothing, only steepled his fingers. Scott looked from him to Day, bewildered. Hawk clenched his fist out of sight, under the table.

But the Imperials only laughed.

“Oh gods, yes!” Bal”Tia whooped. “I could quote you hundreds of cases where some visionary invented a new religion or ethical philosophy, or some new variation on an old one, and promptly assumed that it applied to everyone in existence—often using those very words.”

“Ethnocentrism springs eternally,” Aemilia agreed, “Even in cultures with good communications, transportation and education.”

“But, what if there really are universal mo- ethics?” Day insisted, color rising to her cheeks like a flag of battle. “Aren’t there some things that all people can agree on?”

“Certainly.” Ashriliin wagged an antenna. “But those tend to be facts of nature, or simple practicalities—such as, everyone has to eat.”

“Speaking of eating, it’s time for dessert.” Klaveth reached past Aquila to poke the buttons on the food console. “Some jellied kobba-berries would do nicely…”

Day quivered with impatience, like a hound straining at the leash of courtesy.

“Well, dessert is traditionally the proper portion of the meal for discussing philosophy,” said Aemilia, reaching for the button in turn. “So, what new body of ethics does your particular philosophy propose, visitor…”

Hawk audibly ground his teeth.

“Not just a philosophy.” Day smiled radiantly. “More than 2000 years ago, when the Rome of our universe was falling, a…most extraordinary man appeared on Earth, in the country known as Judea. He preached a new gosp- a new morality for mankind, an ideal of love and peace and forgiveness.”

“What about courage and Intelligence?” Aquila asked, handing dessert dishes around. “And what would you people like for dessert?”

“Ice cream,” Hawk cut in eagerly.

“Same,” said McCoy, unable to think of anything else.

“Same,” echoed Scott, quietly, his attention on Day.

Spock merely shook his head.

“He asked that all people should love one another as themselves,” Day plowed on, ignoring the comments. “That we should love everyone, forgive those who do harm to us, and return good for evil.”

“This was preached when?” Bal”Tia asked. “Can you give me precise dates?”

“Yes, just over 2300 years ago,” Day answered a little impatiently.
“Ah, so it arrived late—or perhaps was only popularized then. In our history, several mystical cults of India, Syria, Judea and Egypt preached such ideas centuries earlier. They were first noted by European historians at about the time of Alexander the Third, of Macedonia, surnamed ‘The Great’.”

Hawk grinned toothily.

Day gaped for a moment, the recovered. “Oh, I don’t doubt that there were similarities, earlier, but those cults didn’t preach—or practice—quite the same thing.”

“Sounds the same,” Bal’Tia insisted. “Love all people equally, forgive those who harm you, return good for evil, practice humility and asceticism, withdraw from the clamor of this world and prepare for life after death. Aren’t those the general outlines?”

“Uh… Y-yes, but—”

“The Indian and Syrian cults also included reference to some transcendent over-god who was supposed to be pleased by such activity and welcome the spirits of its practitioners into his mystical/spiritual kingdom after death. The Indian philosophers maintained that this kingdom was some sort of featureless, unchanging realm of mindless bliss—called ‘nirvana’, I think. The Syrian cults gave it a little more shape: souls of the dead wander in semi-formless zone of light and music, singing praises to the god. I suppose that to people barely surviving from one invasion to the next, eternity in such a state might have seemed pleasant—but it always struck me as horribly boring.”

Day turned pale. “…Syria?” She whispered.

“The chief rewards are supposed to occur after death?” Klaveth cut in. “A rather death oriented idea, that.”

“Oh, yes,” Bal’Tia added. “There’s supposed to be some sort of spiritual purification at death, where one’s ‘evil nature’ is burned away. That’s common to all of them except the Indian cults, who hold that the purification takes place during many lifetimes of reincarnation as higher and ‘purer’ life forms.”

“Uh…” said Day.

Hawk smothered a guffaw behind his hand.

“I can’t say I like that one,” Aquila frowned. “It assumes that people have an ‘evil nature’—instead of just passing flaws and quirks—that deserves to be burned. It implies that people are basically evil, made wrong, stained, defiled in some way—and that without purification they’d deserve nothing but death. And by burning, yet! I can think of less painful ways to die.”

“‘Original Sin’,?” Scott gulped.

Day shot him a quick smile, and rallied. “But surely, you don’t think people are naturally perfect! Just look at all the evils, injustices and cruelties in the universe!”

“Oh, of course there are evils.” Aquila shrugged, reaching for a pieced of candied peach on his plate. “Nobody would deny that. And, of course, people often do cruel or spiteful or stupid things—but those are the results of ignorance, or bad health, or poor education, or poverty, or bad blood, or just plain bad luck. For the most part, people prefer to get along peaceably with their neighbors—and most of the time, they do just that. Look you: crime and cruelty and depravity are oddities; they’re pointed out and complained about because they’re unusual and unwelcome. If people were naturally evil, then evil would seem natural—and nobody would complain! Ha, ‘basically evil nature’—nonsense.” He took a healthy bite of his peach slice.
Scott quietly slapped a hand to his head and stared at Aquila, just stared at him, as if he’d suddenly sprouted wings.

“The why is the concept so common?” Spock spoke up, drawing a startled look from McCoy and a black one from Hawk. “There must be a widespread and readily-observable reason for the belief in an evil factor in human nature.”

“Well, its political basis is certainly evident,” said Bal’Tia.

“Political…?” Spock blinked.

“It serves power-politics of a subtle and dangerous sort,” Bal’Tia explained, between bites of a red fruit resembling a large cherry. “If one can persuade people that they are evil, unclean, shameful, then one can wield incredible power over them simple by offering to relieve their guilt and shame.”

“Wash your sins away—for a price!” Hawk laughed coldly. “I’ve seen that before.”

“Not surprisingly, such cults were used as a common enslavement device, or taught to slaves as a palliative, in the ancient kingdoms of Syria, Judea, Egypt, India and the Persian states. It was used especially by corrupt and clever rulers who wished to keep their subjects obedient without the expense of policing them or buying their acquiescence. It worked particularly well among people too poor to afford educations and therefore too ignorant to refute such arguments, and too miserable to trust their own natural intelligence.”

“The old Snake Oil Cure!” Hawk laughed. “A confidence game, a racket, an extortionist’s trick. Invent a disease—‘female complaint’ or ‘B.O.’ or ‘sin’—convince people that they’ve got it and you’ve got the only cure, and then sell ‘em the cure at whatever price you want—including their freedoms, lives and minds.” He turned a sphinx-like smile on Spock. “You’ve seen that game played, haven’t you?”

Spock stonily ignored him.

“But it isn’t mean to be that way!” Day burst out. “Never mind how vicious people, opportunists, corrupted and misused it; the basic idea—to love everyone—”

“Ah, I can topple that one!” Ashriliin enthused, putting down his half-eaten sweet-sausage roll. “Eshetharn debated that at our school, my graduation year. He won, too. Ah, he said…to ‘love’ all folk equally—not ‘respect’ or ‘be tolerant’ or ‘treat justly’, which are necessary for civilized dealings —this is a very dangerous command.”

“Dangerous?!!?” Day squawked. “Difficult, yes, but dangerous?! How—”

“Not just difficult: impossible. And of course, making people reach for an impossible goal, at which they must inevitably fail, is a fine way to increase the guilt and self-doubt that Bal’Tia spoke of.”

Ashriliin tipped an acknowledging antenna at her. “It is impossible because one cannot love what one doesn’t know, and it’s impossible to know everyone or everything. How can one love people one has never met nor heard of?”

“Well, or course it means to love everyone you do know,” Day backtracked, blushing angrily.

“And, of the people you know, can you say that you love them all equally?”

“Uhm, no, but I didn’t claim that I was perfect…”

Hawk turned a cold smile on her. “Really?” he purred.
“Neither is anyone else.” Ashriliin took another bite of his dessert. “So the command is impossible.”

“Ah, it’s also immoral.” Aemilia added.

All five of the Enterprise contingent snapped their heads around to stare at her.

“What?!” Day squeaked.

“It’s immoral because it denies all judgment, all evaluation of intelligent beings by other intelligent beings. That’s a tricky point, but I can clarify it.” She smiled encouragement at them, inviting them to ride along on her train of thought. “If we love all people equally, then we draw no distinctions between the good citizen and the bad one, between—for example—the conscientious healer and the mass murderer, between the loving mate and vicious rapist, between the honest tradesman and the unrepentant robber: all must be loved equally. This denies judgment.”

“‘Judge not, lest ye be judged!’” Day snapped off.

“Precisely,” Aemilia smiled, not catching the defensiveness in the thrown quote. “And how are we to survive without exercising judgment? One must judge all things, or one cannot deal with them rationally.”

Unnoticed by all but McCoy, Spock turned ever so slightly pale.

“To live, we must judge—even to who may live and who must die. Can any of you say there have never been times when you had to judge someone deserving of death? In your work, or on jury duty, perhaps?”

Scott bit his lip over that one.

“So, if some persons are too dangerous to deserve continued life, how should they deserve love?”

“It can be done!” Day insisted. “You can even order the— the execution of someone, and love them anyway. You can hate the sin, but love the sinner.”

Spock didn’t move, not even to blink.

“‘Sin’?” Aemilia paused, puzzled by the concept. Apparently, it didn’t translate accurately into the Imperials’ aggrandized Latin.

“Malfeasance versus malefactor,” Aquila guessed, “Though just how a strict legal term is supposed to apply to all life, public and private, I’m not sure…”

“It can’t,” Aemilia countered. “Should one ignore love to take action on the malefactor? That’s not expected by any court, which is why friends and relatives of a defendant aren’t allowed on the jury. And in private life, well… Is one asked to divorce love not only from judgment but from action upon that judgment, too? Totally impossible! Why that would make love not only blind, but valueless. It would cheapen love; make it irrelevant to thought and action.”

“Wait,” Spock cut in, eyes narrowed. “Aquila, you are commander of this ship, yet its crew are all members of your family, and I assume that you…love them. How then do you deal with court-martial offenses on your ship?”

“I don’t.” Aquila took a long drink of wine. “In all my years on the Invictus, we’ve had only one court-martial case—and in that one, the man was found innocent—but the law in such cases is plain; I can only report the infraction and secure the individual for trial. I may not sit on the court-martial
board, any more than I could do in a civil case involving a member of my family.”

“I see…” Spock murmured, looking thoughtful.

“…Wow,” McCoy murmured, dropping his eyes to his melting ice cream. \textit{Starfleet doesn’t have the sense to do that. That mess with Christopher Pike and the illegal run to Talos IV… Making Jim sit in judgment on Spock was nothing short of cruel! …Is Spock remembering that?}

“Cheapening love,” Aquila continued, sliding his arm around Aemilia, “To my mind is just as evil as allowing murders to run around loose, slaughtering whomever they please.” He gently rippled his fingers over her nearer nipple. She smiled and returned the gesture.

“But you can at least forgive… forgive those who harm you…” Day plugged on weakly.

Aemilia looked around at the other Imperials. “Anybody want to take that one?”

“I will,” said Aquila, cheering up. “Ah, forgiving those who harm you… That’s related to the one about returning good for evil, isn’t it?”

Day only nodded sharply, her lips pursed.

“Why, then, that’s possible—after a fashion—but socially disastrous.” Aquila arched his neck and shook his thick hair, like a big bay race horse prancing eagerly at the starting gate. “Look you: if someone does you harm, and you respond with forgiveness if not rewards, isn’t he encouraged to harm you again? Haven’t you made the harming of people easy and profitable for him? If a robber steals the cloak off of your back, and you respond by blessing his name and giving him your sandals too, then why shouldn’t he gleefully come back and take your tunic as well? Do it repeatedly and you’ll be stripped naked in short order. How long is one expected to keep on doing this?”

“‘Forgive unto seventy times seven!’” Day retreated behind another quote.

Aquila did the calculation in a blink, and then burst out laughing. “Impossible!” he whooped. “How could one survive being robbed or beaten 490 times? For that matter, how could you forgive your own murderer even once?”

“…From heaven…” Day answered faintly.

“Hmm, the after-death realm. All very well for the dead, I suppose, but not very useful for the living. What effect is it supposed to have on the criminal, who would still be very much alive?”

“I think…” Scott offered, “That forgivin’ yer enemies is supposed to drive ’em crazy.”

Spock and Day gave him odd looks.

Aquila thought that over for less than two seconds. “Very unlikely,” he pronounced. “Vicious folk wouldn’t be upset by such forgiveness for very long, if at all. Soon enough, they’d regain their mental equilibrium and simply assume that you’re a fool fit for plundering, a sheep that obligingly sticks out its throat for the wolves.”

“Lambs of god grow up to be sheep,” Hawk murmured, smiling tightly. “And sheep get fleeced—or eaten.”

“This supposed virtue sounds suspiciously like an idea invented by criminals to be practiced by their victims. What an encouragement to crime it would be! Now, why should a wise or sane person practice it?”
“Because, ‘by so doing ye shall heap coals of fire on their heads’!” Day shot more covering fire.

“Huh?” Aquila looked blank, completely puzzled. “How does that work?”

“Uhm, it means…means…” Day floundered for a moment, and then recovered. “Anyone who abuses your forgiveness is automatically damn— barred from Heaven, from the presence of God, from…uhm…”

“Ah. Again, reward or punishment after death, but nothing effective in the land of the living.” Aquila smiled and shook his mane. “Besides, if your attacker doesn’t believe in this ‘heaven’ or god, much less care for them, that would be no deterrent at all.”

“True,” Hawk concurred. “It only works if the bad guys believe in it too—particularly in Hell.”

Spock turned to frown at him.

“‘Hell’?” Aquila a looked cheerfully puzzled. “What’s that?”

It was Day’s turn to look pleased. Plainly, she’d never imagined that any intelligent being might not have a concept of Hell.

Hawk laughed icily. “That’s the other side of this…philosophy,” he said, “The stick behind the carrot. Along with Heaven, for the virtuous dead, there’s Hell for the not-so-virtuous dead. It’s a mythical place where the Bad Guys go after they die, to be tortured by demons for ever and ever. The chief torture is supposed to be fire; the spirits of the un-virtuous dead burn forever. That’s the threat that’s supposed to scare the Bad Guys into line. Of course, it wouldn’t work on non-believers, as you said; so to be workable, this belief has to be accepted by the whole community. Everybody has to believe in it. No exceptions. No rival philosophies allowed. Right, Agnes?”

Day didn’t answer, only flushed an angry pink.

Hawk turned an unfathomable look upon Spock. “Right, Spock?” he murmured.

Spock didn’t answer either.

“Goodbye, IDIC.” Smiling oddly, Hawk took a leisurely drink of his wine.

“Oho, that’s the revelation!” Aquila laughed, rearing up on his elbows. “Now we see the vicious trap beneath the bait! Very clever, yes—like the old religion of the Klingoni. Ho! Ho!”

Klaveth raised his bifurcated eyebrows and nodded acknowledgment. “Yes, there is a similarity. Slightly different development, but the same old wicked game.”


“Why, think!” Aquila drummed his hands enthusiastically on the couch, galloping hot on the trail of his idea. “If a 15 year sentence is long enough to make even a murderer change his ways, and if 40 or 50 years time is enough to change even a hardened criminal, then what in the name of reason is the point of enslaving people for longer than that? Oh, and that’s not even counting deliberate torture! Good gods, torture people? For years? Forever? Inconceivable! There’d be no mind, no personality left, long before even the first year was out. What’s the point of such deliberate cruelty?”

“For the enjoyment and amusement of the Virtuous,” Hawk purred.

Day turned on him, mouth opening for a stinging retort.
Hawk didn’t give her time to make it. “I forget if it was Saint Paul or Saint Augustine… Anyway, one of the major exponents of this philosophy claimed that one of the chief pleasures of the Saved in Heaven is to look down and watch the sufferings of the Damned in Hell. I don’t recall exactly where, but it’s in the book somewhere…”

“Chapter 34, Verse 97,” Klaveth cut in eagerly, “In the Book of Kahless! I read it in grade school history. Was there contact between your world and the early Klingon Empire, in your universe?”

“No, just parallel development.” Hawk grinned.

McCoy whistled. Unnoticed, Scott bent his head and rubbed his knuckles into his eyes. Day glanced at the Imperials and fumed silently. Spock might as well have been carved from stone.

“Whew!” Aquila tossed his head and rolled his eyes. “What that reveals about the nature of the followers of this cult—and their god: that they should wish their god to be so cruel—worse, that they should deliberately become sheep-like victims to other people, even encouraging other people’s wickedness, solely in order to guarantee them eternal torture—and themselves eternal spectacles of such torture! Great gods, what cruelty and spite! Why, this is not only a death-cult and a slavery-cult, but a cruelty-cult as well. Ave Minerva! Are you certain that Klaveth isn’t right? This does sound amazingly like the first cult of Kahless.”

“You know, it might be remotely possible…” Hawk considered. “Kahless, Kali, Krishna, Christ… ‘Chariots of the Gods’ anyone?”

“Impossible!!!” Day almost exploded.

“No,” Spock agreed woodenly. “This was an entirely local Earth development. There are striking differences—”

“I think I detect an interdepartmental rivalry here,” Ashriliin chuckled. “Conflicting schools of history, conflicting theories—ah, that game seems common in your universe, too. Health!” He raised his wine glass and emptied it.

“True,” Hawk shrugged, grinning. “We have our professional disputes…”

“Striking differences, you say?” Aemilia retrieved the thread of the debate. “Detail them, please?”

“There is the basic assumption of the one transcendent god,” said Spock, “The ultimate principle of divinity, of which all local gods are but small and pale reflection. Monotheism, as some call it.”

“No difference there,” said Klaveth, reaching for the wine carafe. “Kahless started off as a prophet of the war god Kahogoth, claiming that Kahogoth was king of the gods. He ended by claiming that Kahogoth was the only god, and that all the rest were demons or illusions. Kahless, of course, wound up being elevated to demi-god status himself. He also claimed that Klingoni were the only true people, and all the rest were cattle to be enslaved.”

“Ah, the Kzin believed that, too,” Aquila put in, lighting his last cigar. “They took it a step further, and actually ate other people. Disgusting.”

“The political uses of such beliefs are obvious,” Klaveth agreed, “Especially for military use.”

Day looked as if she were about to scream or burst into tears.

“Er, how did you deal with the Kzin?” McCoy diverted attention.
Aquila looked momentarily solemn. “We were obliged to deal with them much as our ancestors did with ancient Carthage,” he said. “And for much the same reason. We did not care to have our children...roasted.”

“I see…” Spock looked noticeably pale.

“And the other differences?” Aemilia asked.

Spock paused, as if searching his memory. The pause stretched longer and longer.

Right then the communicator beeped. It was Sulu’s signal; they’d been aboard the *Invictus* for two hours.

“I regret to inform you hat we cannot stay longer,” Spock announced, with just a shade of relief in his voice, “But we have repairs to attend to.”

“Er, Mr. Spock,” Scott asked, “Can I ha’ permission noo ta stay here awhile an’ tour the ship? Mr. Ashriliin did mention somethin’ aboot showin’ me the engines.”

Ashriliin nodded vigoriously, antennae a-wiggle.

“You may,” Spock conceded. “The rest of us, unfortunately, must leave.”

“What a pity.” Aquila shook his head. That was a good game we had; I should like to debate philosophy again with you some time. Ha, next dinner, it will be my turn to challenge! I can think of some wonderfully convoluted premises… Ah, have you ever heard of E’eiliozal of Tholia?”

“Oh, not that one!” Klaveth groaned. “It takes so long just to outline the environmental background —”

*A game…* McCoy thought, stumbling to his feet. *To them, this is a parlor game! Things that Humans have killed for, they argue politely at the dinner table as part of the entertainment!*

“We’ll bring you the dilithium crystals as soon as they’re ready,” Aquila promised, blowing smoke. “We’ll leave the Gate open for you. Be well, friends.”

The *Enterprise* contingent, save for Scott, murmured assorted politenesses and slipped off through the garden. Day marched stilly, face frozen in tight outrage. Hawk straggled behind, pausing often to cast glances back toward their departing hosts.

“Oh, come on, Hawk,” McCoy finally chided him. “You’ll have other chances to see the girl.”

Hawk blushed, grinned like an idiot, and hastily caught up.

Spock strode resolutely in the lead, looking thoroughly absorbed. McCoy, puzzled, trotted to catch up wit him.

“Something in particular bothering you, Spock?” he asked, low-voiced.

Spock actually frowned. “If you must know, Doctor, I was considering the account of the Imperium’s first contact with Vulcan.”

“Oh, Brbzycki and…what’s-‘er-name. Well, it ended happily.”

“Were you aware that, in our timeline, T’Parek was my great-great-grandmother?”
“No, I wasn’t… Hey! That means that in this timeline, you would have been part Human from ‘way back. Ha, your name might have been Brbzycki! Just think, Spock; you could’ve been born a—”

“Don’t say it,” Spock cut him off. “‘Human jokes’ are annoying enough.”

*To be Continued* in Chapter VIII: Bread and Politics
Kirk had to admit that the work at Flaviniana’s wasn’t too bad: shoveling flour certainly beat shoveling horse manure. Besides, he liked the smell of baking bread. There were worse ways to wait for rescue. The only problem was that Flaviniana herself had been in something of a swivet all morning, running in and out, measuring and remeasuring the contents of the flour bins, swearing pungent oaths reminiscent of a barnyard. Finally, she sat down on a nearby bench, tugged at her hair and burst into tears. Kirk put down his flour scoop, sat down beside the little matron and did his best to comfort her. His charm with the ladies hadn’t failed across universes; after a few moments she subsided into hiccups and sniffles.

“Ohhh, it isn’t fair!” she wailed. “Not now, just when I have to restock, not to mention putting aside for my girl’s dowry. Oh, it couldn’t have come at a worse time!”

“Er, what couldn’t?”

“Grain shortage! The convoy due at Ostia yesterday— Haven’t you heard? It never arrived! Rumor has it that one of the ships went down in a storm, and the rest were forced to turn back to Africa. Now the supplies will run short and the prices will absolutely leap! I’ve even heard talk of prices doubling, and just when I’m short of money! Oh, gods, I’ll have to use the dowry fund and put off the wedding! Ohhh…”

“There, there; it might not be as bad as rumors say.”

“No, it might be worse,” Flaviniana gloomed. “I’ll wager it’s a trick to drive prices up. Those god-cursed Nobles and their North African plantations—I wouldn’t put it beneath them to sink their own ships, if indeed they ever sent the grain at all. It wouldn’t be the first time they’ve tried such tricks! Back in the early days of the new constitution, it was: back when the First Speaker, bless him, had just gotten Egypt for the emergency food supply…” Falviniana sniffled again and bared her little white teeth. “Those vicious would-be kings hoarded almost the whole African harvest, claiming blight, hoping to make the First use up the emergency food-stores so they could bring in their grain afterwards and sell it for 10 times the fair price— The gods know, they’ve done it before! My mother used to tell me about the bad old days, when they did it all the time…” She rummaged around in her sleeves, finally located a handkerchief and used it noisily.

“Well, you came out of it all right,” Kirk mumbled vague comfort. He was getting an unpleasant picture of this Rome’s economy. A near monopoly on the food supply of a whole country?! Scary! Who are these ‘Nobles’ who have that kind of power? He couldn’t recall anything about a monopoly problem in the history of his universe’s Rome. More proof, as if I needed it. Alien universe, lost across time… How the hell can Spock find me?!

“Emerged from it well?” Flaviniana went on, dour anger replacing her earlier upset. “Thanks to the gods for the First Speaker and General Agrrippa, yes we did. The First sent the General down to Africa to see if the story was true; the General had the good sense to take a Consul, some Tribunes, several Lictors and a whole legion with him. Ah, they discovered the truth soon enough! He rounded up a good lot of those vile Nobles and had them put to trial right there. ‘Massive Fraud’ is was, compounded by ‘Conspiracy’ and ‘Causing the death of innocent citizens.’ Found them guilty, too. Off went their head!”

Kirk shuddered and edged away.
“He confiscated their damned plantations and divided up the land among their former slaves and the local poor,” Flaviniana waxed gleeful. “Fine work, that. What a pity he couldn’t go on with it, and finish off every last one of them.”

“Uh…why didn’t he?” Kirk gulped.

“Oh, when the other god-cursed Nobles saw how the wind blew, they sent their grain up to Rome as fast as they could find ships. No crime, no evidence, no case: so, no trials, no executions, no confiscation nor redistribution of land. Neither did they dare try that again while the good General lived. But he’s dead now…” Flaviniana pounded a small angry fist on her thigh. “There’s no one left, not of his kind, save for the First himself—and of course his wife. If the vile slave lords are trying that old trick again, who can the First send to investigate and try them? There’s no one around these days with that old-fashioned sense and daring. Oh, these degenerate times, not like when I was a girl, when men were real men, and—”

“Uuhuh.” Kirk lost interest in Flaviniana’s grumbling. “Well, we’ll survive somehow. What do you want me to do with these empty flour barrels?”

“Just stack them in the shed. Oh, let me think! Where to get decent grain without spending the wedding money? Ah…” She furrowed her normally placid forehead in thought. “Barley,” she murmured. “Spelt. Coarse grain. Livestock feed. Horses… Equarius!” She hopped to her feet and grabbed Kirk by the arm. “Never mind those barrels, Démas; take up that magic box of yours and set it to examining grain for traces of rot. We’re going to pay a call on Equarius and learn his sources for cheap local coarse grains. By the gods, it may cost me for extra milling, and I may sell only barley- and-oat bread for awhile, but my daughter will have her June wedding and her fat dowry despite the damned Republicans!”

“Republicans?” Kirk boggled, half-stumbling after her.

“That’s what the manure eating Nobles like to call themselves. Oh, come on! Hurry, before all the other bakers in town get the same idea and buy up the supply. Move! Move!”

Shaking his head, Kirk grabbed the tricorder and moved—

--But they didn’t make it out the front door. Nitidus was there, looking terribly proud of himself, and behind him stood two lictors wearing oddly carved medallions. “Démas!” the boy chirped. “Just who I wanted to see! The priestess Amuliana herself is waiting to see you. Ooh, do you know what an honor this is?”

The lictors visibly suppressed grins as Flaviniana stamped her foot in exasperation. “Oh, Nitidus, not now! I have to take him—er, I need him to examine some, ah, goods for me, and I simply have to do it now! Can’t the priestess wait?”

“Mother!” Nitidus looked shocked. “One doesn’t keep the Second High Priestess of the Temple of Juno Moneta standing about waiting!”

“Oh Juno, Jove and Minerva!” Flaviniana groaned, clapping a hand to her forehead. “Very well! Take him! I’ll go see to the supplies myself. Lucia, mind the shop while I’m gone! If I find any flour or money missing when I get back I’ll blister your bottom with a switch, I will. Damnation! Where’s my purse?” She swept up her gear, pushed past the openly snickering lectors and hurried away in a fierce swirl of skirts.

“Uhm, well,” Nitidus struggled to regain his composure. “Would you please step this way? We have a litter…”
“Sure.” Kirk shrugged, settling the tricorder around his neck and his other gear—including the little leather bag that contained his minimal current pay—on his belt. Why not? Another day, another temple. Whatever gets me home…

Outside waited a wide chair on two stout parallel poles, beside which sat four muscular men wearing shoulder pads. Nitidus calmly settled into the chair and waved Kirk in beside him. The lictors fell in before and behind, and the four bearers smoothly hiked the litter poles onto their shoulders. Kirk frowned silently at the idea of using people for beast of burden, but he thought of the inevitable sanitary effects of animal drawn carts in these nice clean streets, and reconsidered.

Then he noticed the right-forward bearer doing something odd. Attached to the carrying pole was a small wooden box with a funnel on top, a drawstring bag tied underneath, a little lever on one side with some lettering under it, and a long string hanging from the lever. The right-front man tied the loose end of the string to his right shoe, poured a double-handful of dried peas into the funnel, announced “Ready!” and took the first step. The other bearers fell into step with him, and the little procession started off. Kirk noticed that the little lever pulled with an audible click at every stride. Curiosity itching, Kirk ventured to ask Nitidus what the box was.

“Pedometer,” said the boy. “The sign reads: ‘One sestertius per 100 paces or part.’ Don’t worry about it; the temple will pay the fare.”


“Do they have a union, too?”

“Oh, yes,” Nitidus sighed, “And they’re threatening to raise fares again. It’ll just encourage more people to get private litters, if you ask me, and that’ll make the traffic congestion worse.”

Kirk only shook his head in amazement.

Twenty minutes of jogging brought them to the temple of Juno Moneta, an impressively large gray building on a concrete platform in the middle of a crowded square. The litter bearers stopped at the front steps, set the litter down, and let the passengers out. The right-front bearer untied the drawstring bag from the pedometer, hefted it, and announced the fare as nine sesterii, plus one more for the extra passenger. Nitidus grumbled. The bearer looked offended.

“I counted the steps myself,” he insisted. “Besides, I can judge from the weight of the bag. Do you want me to sit here and count the damned peas for you?”

“Gods, no!” Nitidus surrendered. “We’ll be late. Here, sign the receipt…”

He pulled a waxed tablet out of his robe and held it out. The bearer signed, Nitidus showed it to one of the lictors, the lector paid and took the tablet. The little party turned and marched up the stairs, through a hoard of scroll toting clerks, and into the building.

The interior was cool and semi-dark. Kirk got a brief look at the large main room with its expected marble altar and oversized statue of a stern looking goddess before he was led through a door and into another office. This seemed to be a common pattern for temples hereabouts.

Amuliana, a stout, pert, no-nonsense middle-aged woman in a bordered white dress, pulled some tablets off a wooden chair and waved Kirk into it. “So, you’re Démas the Magician,” she said. “Perinna wrote me about you. Have you brought your marvelous visionary amulet?”
“Uhm, yes Ma’am,” Kirk fingered the tricorder. “It isn’t really that marvelous…”

“Baculus thinks it is,” Nitidus spoke up. “And I was there when Perinna fell over, and we all thought —”

“Yes, he told me. Have a seat, boy. Would you care for some wine?” Amuliana waved over a servant bearing a tray full of cups and the inevitable bottle. “But to return to the matter at hand: good Démas, can your amulet tell say, the purity of an amount of metal?”

“Yes. It can do that.” News travels fast around here… Why is Nitidus getting wide-eyed and biting his lip?

“Let’s put it to the test,” said the priestess, glancing meaningfully at her servant, apparently some sort of secretary, who went to a nearby cupboard and returned with two identical covered bowls. Amuliana uncovered one of them. It was half-filled with what looked like coarse black sand. “What does your amulet tell you of this?” she asked, pointing.

What harm can it do? Kirk obligingly aimed the tricorder at the bowl and fingered the buttons. The machine whistled and displayed. “Hey, this is gold! Why is it black like that? …Ah, assorted compounds, 5.6%. I didn’t know gold tarnished that way.”

“Very good!” Amuliana smiled delightedly. “5-point-6 per 100, you say? Yes, indeed. Now examine
She removed the lid from the second bowl, revealing a small, blank, butter-yellow disc. Kirk set the tricorder at it. “Phew! That’s almost exactly three-fifths of a gram of gold. Impurities less than .2%, mostly silver, and… it’s been handled recently.”

“I should think so,” Amuliana beamed. “I put it in that bowl scarcely an hour ago. Yes, yes, you’ll do very nicely.”

“Do?”

“Young man, how would you like the post of Assayer for the temple?”

“Assayer? I don’t understand. Why would you want someone to test metals in the temple?”

“You don’t know?” She looked surprised. “Why, young man, this is the mint! I thought everyone knew that. We make all the gold and silver coins in Rome. Why, did you think we did nothing but sit around waiting for worshippers to drop in?”

Kirk felt his jaw drop, and hastily pulled it up again.

Nitidus gave him an odd look. “Démas, why did you think the Senate funds these big public temples? Don’t temples perform any public works where you come from?”

“Mint…” Kirk repeated, rubbing his forehead. “‘Juno Moneta’. ‘Monetary.’ Right. I think I’m beginning to catch on.”

Amuliana shoved back her chair. “We keep the records in here. The vaults, furnace, scales, dies and anvils are in the next building. Would you like to see them?” Without waiting for a reply, she rose and took Kirk’s arm and led him and Nitidus through a back door, across a street and into another building, chatting eagerly all the way. “You see, the gold must be as pure as possible, so we need to test each delivery separately. The current method involves water-displacement, which takes hours. I’m sure you can see the advantages of using your marvelous little box instead. Such accuracy, and so swift! We could make the coins as quickly as the gold arrives, and have no problem with prolonged storage to tempt thieves. Now as to your salary, we would certainly be generous…”

Kirk had some trouble keeping his attention on the priestess; the busy temple mint was a fascinating example of pre-Steam Age technology, and he didn’t know where to look first. Men carted bags of blank gold disks in from a small furnace-room and dumped them beside coiner’s anvils—metal blocks heavily bolted to immovable stone platforms—where more men dropped the disks into coin molds, set handheld dies on top, whapped them with heavy hammers and pulled out the finished coins with gum-tipped sticks. More men carted the new coins off to another room and weighed them on balance scales of assorted sizes. Aside from the heavily armed guards at the door and the furnace operators, every man present was stark, bare-ass naked. Kirk gulped, gaped, and interrupted Amuliana’s spiel to delicately ask why.

“Security,” she shrugged. “Not that we don’t trust everyone here, but we mustn’t allow even the slightest possibility of theft. One can’t stuff coins down one’s tunic if one isn’t wearing one, eh?”

“Oh. Yes. Of course.” Makes sense… These people don’t have much in the way of nudity taboos. Hey, if I worked here I’d have to… He blushed. “Uhm, I’m very flattered by your offer, Ma’am, but I really don’t think I could take the job. I mean, I have some debts to my, ah, current and former employers, and I still have that problem of contacting my own people, and—”

“No problem! No problem,” the priestess insisted. “We’ll pay your debt for you.”
“It’s rather a large debt,” Nitidus noted, grinning.

“And a fair compensation to your employer,” Amuliana glared at the clever boy. “As for your search for your friends, we can put up announcements all over the city and offer you—no charge—the services of one of the best augurs in Rome.”

Kirk thought that over. Hell, I need all the help I can get! “Well, provided that my current employers are suitably compensated,” he winked at Nitidus, “And I can get all that help contacting my friends…”

It took only ten minutes to strike the bargain and twenty more to write up the contract. A few minutes later, Kirk and Amuliana were back in the taxi, jogging toward the home of Flamma Regillia the Augur.

“Exactly what does an augur do?” Kirk asked, over the traffic noises.

“Takes omens, reads the future, according to particular time honored methods,” Amuliana explained, fanning herself with her kerchief. “One must have the inborn talent, of course, but the training is necessary also.”

“Uhuh. What’s the difference between an augur and an oracle?”

“An Oracle is place-bound, attached to some provably god blessed inspirational site. Delphi is the most famous, but we have some just as good here in Italy. Cumae, for example: the gateway to the underworld. Even those know-it-all Greeks come here to see that one. The priestesses have an unrivalled reputation. Hmmm, there’s another important difference; oracles take direct formal inspiration from a god, while augurs interpret patterns in the flow of nature.”

“I see.” He didn’t really. “How good is this lady?”

“She’s one of the best in Rome. Ah, here we are. Down please.”

Flamma Regillia’s house was a big old sprawling squarish figure eight, built around a formal front courtyard-garden and a much bigger kitchen-garden in the back. It seemed too large a house for a teeming city. Kirk asked if it had been built when Rome’s population was considerably smaller.

“Quite true,” Amuliana agreed. “Flamma’s family built it during the first civil wars, just after Sulla’s massacres. Sulla cut into the city’s population considerably, I can tell you! After that, any Plebians or Knights who could afford to move out of the city found it prudent to do so. Oh yes, Rome was much less crowded then, to be sure.”

“Whew!” Kirk shivered in the hot Italian sunshine. “Why the hell did he do that?”

“Why, because practically everyone in Rome below the rank of Noble sided with his enemy Marius!” Amuliana sniffed. “Not that old Marius was any exemplar of mercy or justice. When he held the city, he slaughtered Nobles and Patricians by the oxcart-load. Between the two of them, they nearly did to Rome what Socrates’ two wives did to his hair!”

“Er, what’s that?”

“Oh, what? Have never heard Aesop’s story about that? Ah, well, maybe the tale never reached your part of the Hibernia… After the Peloponnesian War, Athens had lost so many men that the survivors were allowed to take two legitimate wives. So, besides his infamous old Xantippe, Socrates had a young wife as well. You can guess how they quarreled! The story says that the young wife didn’t want Socrates to look so much older than herself, so she made a point of pulling out his gray hairs.
Xantippe, not wanting her husband to look younger than herself, pulled out his black hairs. The result, according to the tale, is that between them they plucked him quite bald! Ho! Ho!”

“Why did he sit still for it?” Kirk marveled.

“My guess is that he didn’t,” Amuliana laughed. “Socrates doubtless went bald in the normal way, but his neighbors invented the story to chide him for not disciplining his squabbling wives. He was famous for treating women decently, you know: more like a proper Roman than an Athenian.”

“You mean they don’t treat their wives, ah, decently in Athens?”

“Not at all.” Amuliana wrinkled her long nose in disapproval. “A proper Athenian wife stays locked up in the women’s quarters, doing nothing but spinning, weaving, gossiping and raising children. They don’t even learn to read! Disgusting, I call it. They started this wretched custom of mistreating females, which the Patricians then adopted—though some say that custom originated in the east, where women are treated far worse, the gods know. –Ah, there she is. Flamma, this is that strapping young magician I mentioned…”

The Augur Flamma Regillia was a frail old lady with a bright grandmotherly smile and a thick bun of white hair. She was also a gabby old soul with a taste for political gossip. She took her guests straight into the formal garden, settle them on couches around a table loaded with fruit, salad, bread, cheese and the eternal bottle of Chianti, and proceeded to chatter away a mile a minute on the latest news.

“—Oh, of course, it’s a manufactured grain shortage, my dear,” Flamma stated, leaning forward with an expression like an eager bird spotting a fat bread crumb. “Even if the Republicans hadn’t tried it before, one could guess from the timing. It’s just too, too opportune—what with the new colony-town planned this year. They hope to prevent that by forcing the First to spend the money on emergency grain supplies. You know how they hate that resettlement program!”

Amuliana agreed with a solemn nod. “Resettlement, or the vote, or the new legal rights. Anything that allows Freedmen and Plebeians more independence. I’m sure we can guess why, my dear.”

“Of course,” Flamma leaned closer, voice sinking to a dramatic stage whisper, “I’ve heard it said that a certain highly placed personage—with a heart as treacherous as the river for which he was named—is actually sympathetic to the idea of abolishing the slavery-limitation laws. One can imagine what will happen if he attains the First’s chair before the colony-town plan is completed.”

Amuliana pursed her lips. “One could sorely wish for a better candidate. But whom?”

“Precisely the problem.” Flamma shrugged. “The man is an excellent administrator, as you in the treasury must admit, not to mention being the ablest general in the army. In a field of mules, even a bad horse wins the race.” She cocked her head and gave Kirk a bright, birdlike smile. “You should know that, Démas, after working at the racetrack.” Then she and Amuliana both giggled like girls.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand nay of this,” Kirk admitted. “I’ve heard rumors about the grain shortage being faked to drive up prices, but what’s a colony-town? What’s this resettlement program? What are the slavery-limitation laws and what do they have to do with the legal right of of ‘Plebeians and Freedmen?’ May as well learn the local politics… “And what are the…‘Republicans’ doing in all this?”

The two women gave him a classic double take. Flamma was the first to recover. “Eh, you do come from quite far away, don’t you? Some Druid-held outpost in Hibernia, wasn’t it? Hmm… Well, let me explain.”
As if I could stop you, Kirk grinned, taking another cup of watered Chianti. He was beginning to get used to the stuff.

—Properly, one should begin with the defeat of Carthage—although the gods know there were long centuries before that when Plebeians and Nobles struggled for power, with the Knights caught in between. Now by the usual custom, the captured lands—in this case, the exceedingly rich grain lands of North Africa—should have been divided up equally among the mustered out soldiers, if not also among the poorer citizens of Italy. However, by means too long and diverse to explain here, the Nobles arranged to have most of the land given to themselves—in large plantations which they worked by massive slave labor. The wealth they gained thereby, not to mention the control they now held over Rome’s chief source of grain, gave them immense advantage over the Plebeians and Freedmen and even the lower ranks of Knights. Now they—"

"Excuse me," Kirk cut in. "‘Plebeian’ I think I know, but what’s a ‘Freedman’ and what exactly do you mean by a ‘Knight’?" Not what the later Medieval Age meant, I’ll bet!

Amuliana rolled her eyes, but patiently explained. "A Freedman is a freed slave. A Knight is, technically, one who can prove to the magistrates that he has enough money to support the upkeep of a horse in Italy… Well, in truth, nowadays, it means someone who can contribute a certain fixed sum to the defense or other public needs of his city. It requires a certain level of success in business or farming."

"Uh, an official middle class? …All right, I can see it. Go on."

"The result," Flamma resumed was a long, wretched series of civil wars. The Nobles usually won, and with every victory, they removed more and more rights from the other classes. By the time Sulla had finished with Marius, hardly anyone below the rank of Noble could vote."

Kirk put down his glass, eyebrows climbing. He vaguely remembered something similar in the history of his timeline’s Rome, but he couldn’t recall the details. Starfleet Academy history courses for Command candidates tended to specialize in the military rather than the social aspects. "So…the Republicans were the ones who wanted to restore the vote to everybody?" he guessed.

Both women erupted with laughter. "Oh, dear, no!" Amuliana hiccupped, wiping her eyes. "Quite the contrary. The ‘Republican’ are the Nobles. At the time, the called themselves the ‘Optimates’—the ‘Best Men.’ Such arrogance! They still long for the Good Old Days when they alone could vote and the ‘rabble’ could only serve. That, my dear, is the Republic they want to restore."

"Kirk felt his jaw drop. "Th-that’s a bit different from- from what I’d heard…"

"I can imagine," Flamma sniffed over her wine cup. "To hear them tell it, old Julius Caesar dropped a tyranny on their heads, and Octavianus made it worse. They spread that story everywhere that they can."

"Ah, but don’t they have the vote now?" Very different from the way I heard it, in my universe anyway…

"My dear," said Amuliana, handing him the rolls, "Nowadays everyone above the rank of slave has the vote. Further, it’s very easy for a slave to become a Freedman, and a Freedman’s children automatically become plebeian. That is what the Republicans can’t stand; with so many voters, their power is greatly reduced."

"So they must resort to the power of money," Flamma glowered, twisting a roll in half. "They still have that, since not even Caesar’s best efforts could break up all those North African plantations."
The most that he or his successor could manage was to cut the number of plantation slaves down to one-third, thus obliging the Nobles to pay outright for two-thirds of their farm labor, which drains their purses somewhat.”

“And…” Kirk put fact together, “That’s why it’s so dangerous that this…er, the administrator that you wouldn’t name, is willing to abolish the…slave-limitation laws?”

“Precisely.” Amuliana bit sharply into an olive.

“Wow,” Kirk marveled, reverently wishing that he had access to the Enterprises’ library computer. He surreptitiously turned on the tricorder to get all this down. “So, this administrator is sympathetic to the Nobles, and he’s in a good position to become the next…ah, ‘First’?”

“First Speaker of the Senate,” said Flamma, nibbling the salad.

“The man’s not just a Noble,” Amuliana grumbled darkly, “But a Patrician too—and a Claudian, if you please. You know what that means!”

“Er, no.” Kirk admitted. “What’s the difference?”

Flamma looked bemused. “Nobles are the great landowning class, my dear. Among them are certain ancient families of the hereditary priesthood, descended from the first settlers of Rome; those are Patricians. The Claudians…Well, they are one such family—and a bad one.” She dropped her voice to the fitting tone for a Juicy Item. “There’s insanity in the bloodline. Some even say that…ahem, this ‘riverous’ fellow we mentioned has a touch of it. The Lady Drusilla got well out of that alliance if you ask me, but her son…” She trailed off ominously, shaking her head.

“I think I’ve got it.” Kirk rubbed his forehead. “It’s Patricians and other Nobles against everybody else?”

“Generally true, though there is some crossing of lines…” Amuliana grinned at her companion. “Certain wiser heads among Noble—and even Patrician—families chose to side with the New Men Party in the last civil war. Unfortunately, certain greedy heads among the other classes occasionally side with the Nobles—for enough money.”

“And Freedmen don’t have much choice,” Flamma added. “Slaves freed by their owners must, by ancient custom, vote as their former master wishes—for life.”

“Wha-?! B-but that’s corruption— that’s s—” Kirk sputtered indignantly, looking for an accurate insult.

“Oh, true,” said Flamma. “But it also encourages politically ambitious Nobles to free their slaves in great numbers. Thus, the populace gets some good of it.”

“It’s beginning to make sense.” Kirk frowned. “In this time— uh, in this last civil war, the, the…’New Men Party’? the…’First’, Octavianus, defeated the Nobles, the…’Republican’s? Whew! —and he restored the vote to everyone. Right?” That could be the difference, the point where timelines diverged, universes split off…

“Oh, indeed,” Amuliana chirped happily. “He gave the vote many who had never had it before: Freedmen, provincials, most of the women—”

“And, he restored the power of the Popular Assembly,” Flamma added, “And granted legal recognition to the tradesmen’s guilds and other unions, and granted legal rights to slaves, and formed the new public health and fire safety laws—”
“—And improved the public welfare system,” Amuliana cut in, “With the colony-town projects—which brings us to the current problem.”

“Ah, yes…” Flamma folded her hands. “What the First has been doing with all the lands brought into the Imperium by the old conquests is to counteract the ill effects of the North African land grants. Quite simple, he gives tracts of good framing land to the welfare cases—along with tools, seed, the necessary livestock, basic farm buildings, and even fortifiable trade towns and granaries—and roads, of course. It’s marvelous how such folk work to become independent and prosperous, once given the opportunity. The only problem is raising the money to buy the seed, livestock, tools and building materials in the first place.”

“The First has been planning another such town recently, Amuliana explained. “We suspect that the Nobles have created the grain crisis to divert the money and prevent the founding of the new colony.”

“But why?” Kirk puzzled. “What do the Nobles have to gain from that?”

“Think, Démas!” Flamma urged, leaning intently toward him. “If no town, then the poor remain on the dole, keep draining the public coffers, must take whatever work they can find—at whatever wages, which weakens the power of the unions—and can therefore be bought up, however unwillingly, by the Nobles. If the town is created, the poor cease to be poor; they cease to drain the public moneys and begin paying taxes instead, become independent of the Nobles’ money, and—worst of all—raise enough crops to rival the North African harvest. Now do you understand?”

“Yyyyes…” Kirk rubbed his jaw in amazement—and respect. “So that’s what this…uhm, what Octavianus did here. Quite a man. I’d like to have met him.”

“You may yet,” Flamma purred, smiling to herself. “You may yet meet him.”

“Your chances of that are quiet good, now that you’re a treasury official, no matter how minor,” Amuliana added.

“Wait a minute…” Kirk went cold as a collection of random facts suddenly coalesced. ‘New Constitution’—‘Imperium’—‘Octavianus’ is the ‘First Speaker’—A recent change, not 400 years past! Then…either history moved slower, later here than in my universe, or else… Oh-oh. “Excuse me, but, uh, by your reckoning…what year is this?”

“Seven hundred and forty-six since the founding of the city.” Flamma blinked at him. “Why?”

No help. “Uhm, how many years since Julius Caesar was assassinated?” That one I know…

“Thirty-seven years. Are dates counted differently in Hibernia?”

…44 BC minus 37… This is the year 7 BC!!! Kirk dropped his cup and ground his fists against his eyes. The transporter—Not just sideways in time, but backwards too! Even if Spock realizes I’m in another universe, he’ll be searching for me almost 400 years too late! “Oh, my god, I’ll never get home! Never! There’s no way to tell them…” I’ll be trapped here for the rest of my life!

The two women sat up, surprised and distressed. “Oh, Démas, I’m sorry,” said Amuliana. “I’d completely forgotten the main purpose of our visit. How unpardonably rude of me. We’ll be about it right away, won’t we, Flamma? Ah, there, please don’t cry.”

‘…not crying,” Kirk gulped, hastily rubbing his eyes dry. “You think you can help me?”

“I can take an augury.” Flamma, hands folded, was suddenly all business. “That will at least give us
some estimate of your chances. Patience: I will fetch the equipment and begin presently, but you
must understand that such things take time.” She slid off the couch and hurried away with a
sprightliness that belied her age.

“There, there…” Amuliana insisted on patting Kirk’s arm and hugging him. “Flamma is quiet good
at it, I assure you. You may trust her judgment and skill absolutely. She may not fulfill all the old
requirements—not fasting or arising at dawn on a sheepskin—but she does reliably get results.”

Kirk nodded automatic agreement. He didn’t think the old woman really had precognitive talent, but
then, old Perinna was her brother and he certainly had some sort of telepathic talent, so it wasn’t
completely impossible that Flamma could tell him something. Besides, he had little to lose by letting
the old woman do her best. He was beginning to realize just how much he needed to make friends
here; they might have to last him a long, long time.

To Be Continued in Chapter VIX. De Mendacio
The remaining four members of the Enterprise’s dinner party expeditionary force marched into the second conference room and settled themselves around the table. Spoke poked buttons on the computer console and set the machine to record the proceedings.

“To begin,” he opened. “Dr. McCoy, please give us your impressions of the aliens, to the best of your professional ability.

McCoy quickly checked his tricorder, looked over the readings, pulled out the tape and handed it to Spock. “About all they’ll tell you is that the Imperials are healthy, long-lived, intelligent, and all cross-breeds with the sort of hybrid vigor you could expect. Nothing that we couldn’t pick up from talking with them. Physically, they’re splendid creatures.”

“And mentally?”

“This isn’t a psycho-tricorder; all it’ll tell you that their intelligence is high and they show no neurophysiologic symptoms of emotional stress. As for my personal impressions, well…I find them certainly brave, kindly, curious, sexually quite, er, easy-going—”

Agnes Day gave an audible sniff.

“—and not at all suspicious of strangers. They seem quite happy and self-confidant.”

“Arrogance,” Day corrected. “It’s the self-confidence of colossal arrogance. They assume that there’s nothing in creation that can seriously threaten the, that they’re the lords of the universe. They assume that there’s nothing and no one they can’t conquer, or at least suborn. They believe that the universe is theirs, that—”

“This galaxy certainly is theirs,” Hawk noted, “And part of the next one, too.”

“Let her finish,” Spock silenced him. “Go on, Dr. Day.”

“Well, they have no sense of proportion, of their- their littleness in the cosmic scheme of things, of how easily all their works and plans could be over turned by forces they know nothing about—”

“Such as us,” Hawk murmured, eyes roving toward the ceiling.

“No humility whatever.” Day pursed her lips. “That in itself gives them an enormous blind spot, which—”

“Which you’re ready, willing and able to exploit,” Hawk finished.

“Dr. Hawk, if you will kindly wait your turn—” Spock started.

Agnes Day cut in ahead of him. “And just what do you mean by that last remark, sir?” she bristled.

“Why, only that they don’t suspect what a threat we are,” Hawk replied mildly, but he flashed a fierce and unreadable look at Spock. “No way are we going to let them figure out that we plan to go back to their past and undo whatever the hell we did the first time that created their timeline. It’s
much to our advantage that they don’t begin to suspect that we’re going to change their history, undo everything they’ve done in 2300 years, destroy their Imperium and their civilization before it got more than started. We can proceed easily, thanks to their marvelous innocence. Ain’t that the truth?”

“Not strictly,” Spock hedged. “There is a current theory that temporal change creates parallel universes which are not destroyed but merely rendered inaccessible by restoration of the original event. In effect, then, both timelines will still exist as separate universes.”

“Theory!” Hawk laughed coldly. “Nice conscience salving theory! The fact is we plan to undo whatever made this timeline different from ours. Our timeline will be restored, all right, but there’s no proof whatever that their timeline won’t vanish like smoke—with them in it.”

“Mathematics would indicate—”

“Mathematics is like pudding; the proof’s in the eating, not the recipe.”

“I gotta remember that one,” McCoy chuckled.

“We have encountered alternate universes before,” Spock replied coldly, as if he were exhibiting great patience and restraint in bothering to answer at all. “Admittedly there was no opportunity to discover their sources, but their very existence—”

“Doesn’t prove a goddam thing,” Hawk snapped.

“You could let him finish speaking,” said Day. “He is the Captain, you know.”

“That was,” Day pointed out, “Dr. Hawk’s apparent objection to our not telling these- these New Romans everything. Considering that blabbing would be suicidal, and that the survival of our entire universe is at stake, I wonder what this says about his sanity and loyalty!”

“Ma’am, that’s a pretty hard statement,” McCoy cautioned.

“It’s only what she’s thinking,” Hawk chuckled. “Let her go ahead and be honest, for once.”

“What do you mean, ‘for once’?” Day flared.

“I mean, that you duck into self-serving lies at the drop of a hat.” Hawk leaned forward, eyes blazing. “You weren’t lying just for survival at dinner. Sure, everyone will lie to save their life, much less the lives of uncounted billions of people, a whole civilization, a universe or a timeline or however that adds up. Surprise: I wasn’t sore at anybody on our team for doing that. No, that’s understandable—so understandable, in fact, that long generations of politicians have had careers out of claiming ‘national survival’ or better as an excuse for their self-serving lies, and worse. Some of these old games go ‘way back. But you—you didn’t stop there, did you? First you gave them a hoked-up, deliberately distorted version of our history—for reasons of your own, which had nothing to do with our survival—and then you laid that totally unnecessary religious rap on them. You told those innocent people a whole flock of lies, and then propagandized them, and for what? All you did was risk getting them mad at us, or leading them to believe that we were dangerous religious fanatics, and could have cost us their good will when we desperately need it. So whose sense or loyalty should we really question here?”

“Nonsense!” Day retorted, chin raised. “First, I didn’t lie to them—”
“Oh, like hell! Your version of our history left out big chunks of facts and contradicted others, didn’t mention the historical cruelties and shortcomings of your little ‘philosophy’—though I notice the Imperials were able to extrapolate those for themselves, very nicely. You tried to pretend you religion took over the whole world, when there are still billions of Earthmen who have never even heard of it. You tried to give the impression that the whole Federation believes what you believe, and any who don’t are just ‘unenlightened’. That’s not lying? What do you want to call it then?”

“How complete a picture of anything can you give in less than five minutes? I was merely summarizing the main points! You can’t deny the effect of European history in Earth history, or the role of the Church in Europe.”

“Speaking of the main point—” Spock tried to cut in.

“No, Spock,” McCoy forestalled him. “Let them thrash it out now, when there’s time and privacy and referees enough for it.”

Spock gave him dubious look, but let them go on.

“Point two,” Day went one, “I was testing them, to see just what their attitudes were. You can’t argue with that.”

“You sure found out what their attitudes were,” Hawk grinned, showing teeth. “Not that I suppose their neat put-downs made any real impression on you. Besides, if you wanted to know about their beliefs, you could have just waited until you could read the tapes they generously provided—or just ask them right out.”

“That isn’t always as effective as offering an alternative to see how they react to it.”

“So you offered that alternative, out of all of the philosophies and religions in the known galaxy. And what reaction did you expect? Instant conversion? Greedy shepherd, trying to get just one more sheep into the flock, by any means handy and at any risk!”

“A little Christian morality wouldn’t do them any harm! Why shouldn’t I test them with a— a philosophy that could do them some good?”

“Dr. Hawk,” Spock interjected. “You have just made an ad hominem argument: irrelevant and illogical.”

“Not irrelevant, Spock,” Hawk turned to him with an eerie smile. “It showed me what I wanted to know. Did you or did you not just hear little-Miss-Lamb-of-God defend her distortion of facts and un-requested conversion attempt for—among other excuses—the Imperial’s ‘own good’?”

Spock blinked, considering that.

“It didn’t do any harm…” Day insisted, but weakly.

“And you an historian!” Hawk turned his cold smile back to her. “How many historians before you, do you think, have likewise altered the facts for what they considered the listeners’ ‘own good’?”

“Oh, there he goes again!” Day turned to Spock, appealing for support. “Trying to denigrate the entire History field! As if there weren’t… There are ways of checking. Old records, accounts, diaries, so on…”

“Original sources,” Hawk finished for her. “Go to the original sources. When the society you’re talking about is a couple of thousand years in the past, just finding the original sources is the
archeologist’s job.”

“You see?” Day rallied. “He’s only trying to score professional points. All this complaining, just to win a prestige-point for his profession over—”

“Is there any point to further discussion of this area?” Spock cut in, tiring of the whole argument.

“Just this Mr. Spock.” Hawk turned to him. “We now have a big pile of historical tapes from the *Invictus*, which the history teams are going to search for the exact point where this timeline split off from our own. I wish to formally request that you allow me and my team to examine those records as well as Dr. Day and her people—if only as an accuracy check.”

McCoy turned to look at Spock, jaw falling open. “Spock,” he almost whispered, “You mean, you weren’t going to let him—”

“I had intended to do that in any case,” said Spock, his eyes narrowing fractionally. “Besides checking your conclusions myself. Is that the only point to this whole discussion?”

“No,” said Hawk. “I’d also like to take my team and some of the ship’s regular anthropology staff over to the *Invictus* for some first-hand interviews and observations. It would help immeasurably to know just what the Imperial’ biases are, too.”

“And you think you are qualified for such work?”

“I have as much anthropology under my belt as anyone below the rank of Section Chief. It comes with my specialty. Besides—” Hawk shrugged. “I think you’ll need all the help you can get in understanding our…hosts.”

“Waal, that makes sense…” McCoy offered. He noticed that Spock wasn’t looking at him.

“I don’t think that would be wise,” Day cautioned, glaring at the little archeologist.

“Such research is of secondary importance to our primary objective,” Spock pronounced.

“Spock!” McCoy almost yelled. “How the hell can you turn down such an opportunity for observation?! How can you refuse any scientist such a chance?!?!” –You, who’re usually as curious as a cat, willing to risk your neck for knowledge—How can you treat the man this way?!?

“As I was saying,” Spock continued smoothly, “First your team must examine the tapes. Find the exact point where the timelines diverged. After that I shall considered sending anthropology teams. Will that satisfy you, Dr. Hawk.

Hawk obligingly pushed back his chair, stood up and strolled toward the door. McCoy started to follow. Both of them realized at the same moment that the others weren’t leaving. McCoy paused, wondering if Spock wanted to talk to him. Hawk only gave a rueful grin. “So long,” he chuckled, “Be sure to talk about me behind my back.” With that he walked out, whistling the theme from ‘Funeral March of the Marionettes.’ The door whooshed shut behind him, leaving McCoy blushing angrily.

Day stepped a little closer to Spock. “I don’t think you should trust him on the *Invictus*,” she said, in a low desperately sincere voice, “Or anywhere else, for that matter. His scruples are…questionable.”

“Just how do you mean that?” McCoy asked. I’m getting dam tired of all her goddam innuendoes…

“Why, you know…” Day blushed prettily.
“No, I don’t,” McCoy snapped. “Please explain.”

“Why, the man’s obvious—and deliberate—lack of morals!” Day batted professionally innocent eyes at him. “He has an active hatred of morality, in fact. I’d say that gives him a generally untrustworthy character, wouldn’t you?” She paused meaningfully, and seemed disappointed when she got no sign of agreement. “So,” she finished, “I’d certainly not take any of his reports at face value.” She looked hopefully at Spock.

“Noted and logged,” Spock replied. “I assure you that I intend to check all reports concerning our problem. Please proceed to your work, Dr. Day.”

“Thank you.” Agnes beamed at him, and left.

“Your comments, Dr. McCoy?” Spock asked, turning to him. “I notice that for our last two conferences you have been uncharacteristically quiet.”

“Thanks for the compliment.” McCoy frowned thoughtfully and galloped his fingers on the table top. “I confess I’ve been busier observin’ our two colleagues here than in runnin’ my mouth about the Imperials. Ain’t it amazin’ what effect those folk have on our own people?”

“Specify.”

“Waal…bear in mind that the Imperials are a real, live extension of ancient Roman civilization. Now our ancient history experts can extrapolate all they like about a dead civilization, but here comes the real thing—and it just may knock everybody’s theories into a cocked hat.”

“I do not see the relevance of angled headgear. Why should the proof or disproof of historical theories be important to the behavior of the visiting scientists?”

McCoy gave him a long unsettling look. “There’s more to it that just scientific interest, Spock. You ought to know by now that people sometimes invest an awful lot of their identities and self-esteem in their theories—in which case a challenge to their ideas becomes a threat to their egos.”

“I do not doubt that this is the reason why Drs. Day and Hawk spend more time fighting with each other than dealing with the problem at hand. A lamentable human weakness, displaying itself at a most inopportune time. I do doubt the wisdom of your insistence that I allow the squabble to continue. It costs us time and accomplished nothing of value.”

“Oh, it did accomplish something Spock. It revealed thoroughly just were their biases are, and how they deal with them.”

“Indeed? I noticed nothing but an automatic denunciation of each other’s position.”

“Well, I observed something more. Look closely at their reactions, Spock: Hawk wants to see more of the Imperials, Day tries to preach to them. Hawk accuses Day of unethical conduct, to her face; Day maligns his whole character to us, behind his back—just as he said she would! Don’ you think that’s a significant difference?”

“I think you are misinterpreting the facts, Doctor.” Spock looked at him coldly. “Indeed, I suspect you are displaying symptoms of bias yourself. Are you not speaking privately to me about both of them? You should then have no objection to Dr. Day’s comments out of Dr. Hawk’s hearing. It may be that she merely wished to avoid another loud and fruitless argument.”

“Yeah! Y’know, Spock, if I didn’t know you better, I’d accuse you of displaying bias. Why is it that every time there’s a row between those two, you either back off or side with Agnes? I wouldn’t
accuse you of having a personal liking for her—heaven forbid, or is Vulcan forbid?—but do you have some...hmmm, 'philosophical' reason for lining up with her against Hawk?"

“I have simply found her arguments to be less emotional and more logical that the temperamental Dr. Hawk’s.”

“You mean, because she puts on a sweet, calm exterior, you’re willing to accept her statements more than his? Without checking them? Ha, that’s a Vulcan bias, Spock!”

“Emotional arguments are not trustworthy.”

“Oh, the hell! An argument should stand on its own merits, no matter how emotionally or unemotionally it’s presented. How many times have I tried to tell you, Spock, that emotion and logic are not necessarily opposites?”

“It appears that I must now ask you: is there any point to this discussion?”

“There sure is! Sweet little Agnes just told you a big fat lie—and you swallowed it without a blink. That indicates that you’re biased in her favor Spock—and bias is il-log-i-cal.”

Spock stared at him for several seconds. “Precisely what lie did she tell me, Doctor?”

“She told you that Hawk can’t be trusted because he doesn’t have any ‘morals’.”

“I see nothing notably false or illogical in that statement.”

“Don’t you? That’s interesting, Spock, because I can see two great big errors in that one.”

“Specify.”

“One: just because he doesn’t believe in her particular ethics doesn’t mean that he has none whatever. She assumes that her ‘morality’ is the only game in town; either you’ve got her rules or you’ve got nothing. Anyone calling herself an historian ought to know better than that. What bothers me is that she also assumes that you, Spock, share that idea—and so far, she seems to be right.”

“And the second error?” Spock was as expressionless as a piece of wood.

“She’s conveniently forgotten that everyone who came aboard for this expedition—including herself and Hawk—got a thorough psycho-tricorder reading. Besides, their medical reports include psych profiles. If Hawk were completely unscrupulous, untrustworthy, capable of doing anything at any time—in short, a complete psychopath—don’t you think I would have noticed it.”

Spock continued to stare silently at McCoy, thinking that over.

“Or,” McCoy archly suggested, “Would you rather question my professional competence?”

Spock still said nothing.

“Spock, aren’t you putting an awful lot of faith in Agnes Day?”

At that, Spock stirred. “I have...less reason to doubt her statements than Dr. Hawk’s” he repeated. “However, I fully realize that all humans are capable of bias and error. I will take your comments under advisement.”

“High time. You mind telling me why you haven’t thought of these things before?”
“Your comments are noted and logged, Doctor.” Spock reached over to switch off the computer console. “Now, if you do not mind, I have more important topics to research, such as getting our Captain back. If you will excuse me…” He got up and marched out of the conference room, back ramrod straight.

*This I don’t like,* thought McCoy, watching him go. *Bias, with bells on. But why? What’s Day to him? …I doubt it it’s anything personal. He doesn’t seem to particularly enjoy her presence… Her ideas, then? Why? Nothing Vulcan there. She quotes the Bible, not Surak…*

*Hey, wait a minute! Now that I think about it…Yes! I remember, several times, Day asking him about…about that last time trip, through the Guardian, the one to 1st century Judea—to see if ‘one Jesus of Nazareth’ actually did exist.*

McCoy remembered that one well: the nervous pacing and worrying in the transporter room, Spock’s terse beam-up request after his return, his deliberated stumble on the transporter pad—neatly erasing the tricorder record. …*To prevent credulous Humans from ‘worshipping the image’, he said…McCoy frowned. That always sounded a bit thin to me… And all he would say about the trip was that, yes, the Master truly existed, and was more than just a man. It was after that, ever since then, that he’s been moody and distant and…curiously didactic…like this…*

*I’d give my eyeteeth to know what he saw, what he found out and what was on that tape he erased…*

…*’The Master’?*

*He’s never called Surak that.*

*To Be Continued* in Chapter X: Rasenna Blood
The old woman sat on the sheepskin, holding a white curved bone up to the vault of the deep blue sky. Her face was calm, her expression rapt, and her eyes open and focused on infinity. Kirk watched, bemused, as she swept her arm back and forth, dividing the sky into twelve equal sections with quick, sure strokes.

...Doesn’t look like a typical witchdoctor act, he conceded. No ranting and raving and rolling around. Stately and ceremonious, almost like a Vulcan ritual... He frowned at that, remembering that Vulcans did have psychic talent, and their odd ceremonies did reliably tap it. ...There’ve always been a few humans with some psychic talent, he pondered. Could it be that these Romans have learned to control and use it? ...In my universe there were hints of it... But if so, what happened to it? Where did the human psychics go for all those centuries? ...Maybe the knowledge was lost during the Dark Ages, the practitioners burned for witchcraft...

Flamma slowly raised her other hand and beckoned to him. Kirk sat down beside her, careful not to interrupt her concentration. She rested her hand lightly on his shoulder and continued to look at the sky. A small flock of birds circled overhead. Her eyes followed them.

Let’s suppose, Kirk thought, just for a moment, that the lady has real psychic ability. Suppose she really can see part of the future... How can I help? ...Remember some of the things Spock told me. Relax. Calm. Meditate. Concentrate... He tried, tried steadily, focusing his mind on the ship, on Spock, on the central question: Will he find me?

After awhile the old woman began speaking quietly. “...I see a ship, searching...” she said. “...Sailing through great darkness...seeking you. ...Now another ship...”

Another ship? Kirk wondered. What the hell?

“...A great sea-battle, in darkness.” Flamma grew slightly agitated. “Great bolts of flame, like Greek fire...a duel of magicians...”

What other ship? Kirk wondered. From where in this universe?

“The ship of the innocent eagle...the ship of the cruel lamb...” the old woman continued. “Now I see one of the ships burning, dying, and bursting to pieces...it’s blazing like a star...”

“What ship, Flamma?” Kirk asked aloud. “Whose ship burns?”

“...And a choice.” Her hands dropped to her lap like lead weights. “A great choice. Favorable...unfavorable.” She frowned at the sky. “Everything hangs in the balance. It can swing either way...but the result is very great.”

“‘Favorable’? What?”

Flamma turned to look at him, her eyes still far-focused. “Upon one question the signs are most definite,” she said. “Yes, your magician friend will return for you.”

Kirk let go a breath that he hadn’t realized he was holding.
“But as to what happens thereafter…” Flamma shook her head, puzzled. “There is a choice, among the gods. On the one hand, life and prosperity and increase; on the other, death and misery and ruin. Much of this is strange and obscure to me; I do not know the cause…”

“The ship…?” Kirk pressed.

“Yes. I looked for the ship. I saw two, in battle, and one of them burning with a great fire. The signs were ambiguous, but one thing was clear; the choice, the balance—that centers on you, Démas.”

“My? How?” “Oh, take a good guess, man from the future!”

“Great events depend upon whether you go or stay.” Flamma’s eyes focused tightly on Kirk. “Magician Démas, you are more important than you know.”

Kirk gnawed his lip and thought that over. Me? Go or stay? If the Enterprise comes for me—and she said it would—of course I’ll go… Unless something happens to the ship! He shivered. ‘Burning’? ‘Blazing like a star’? Temporal stress blowing out the engines?! …But then, what was/is/will be the ‘sea battle’? ‘What was the other ship?’ he asked. “Could you tell anything about it?”

Flamma rubbed her forehead. “I observed a laurel-leaf blowing in the wind, among the birds, one of whom seized and carried it… Victory? Or a ship bearing laurels? It could mean either great success or the favor of the gods, or…hmmm, the ‘ship of state’. Perhaps…” She gave him an odd look. “Perhaps it means that the success of all Rome depends on whether you go or stay.”

That made more sense than Kirk cared to admit. Yes, I have a lot of technical knowledge that could help these people I immeasurably…and the longer I stay here, the more of it I’m likely to give them. When I go, that will shoot down—Shoot down! —a lot of their chances! Chances to succeed, survive and avoid— He remembered that other Rome, in another universe and time. Misery, sickness, poverty and dirt; cruelty, tyranny, bigotry and hysteria. Ruin! Fall and ruin… But this Rome has a better chance, especially if I help. And… He thoughtfully fingered his tricorder, translator, even the phaser. Haven’t I started helping people already? A horse collar here, a diagnosis there… For all that they took it so calmly, they took every idea I gave them…

“All that I saw beyond that was the balance,” Flamma recapped. “The decision.”

Decision? Kirk thought. All right, I’ll give you one: while I’m here, I’ll help—as much as I can. I’ll give this alien Rome as good a chance for survival as I can, before I go. “Thank you, Ma’am,” he said, rubbing a small cramp in his leg. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“Oh, but you already had much to think on.” The old woman turned her kindly, birdlike smile on him. “I would not be much of an augur could I not see that you were burdened with more than just the fear of not seeing home again. I hope I have been of help in that matter, also.”

Kirk flinched. Just how much psychic talent does the old lady have, anyway? he wondered. “Hah! With the kind of ‘oracular’ powers you and your folks have, I’m surprised it wasn’t the Etruscans who conquered Rome.” Oh-oh, that may have been rude!

Flamma’s smile turned a bit rueful. “It was attempted,” she said. “The last two kings of Rome were Etruscan. However, politics makes strange bedfellows—”

“I’ve heard that phrase before!”

“I’m not surprised; it’s quite old hereabouts, and quiet accurate—especially in this case. As various Sabine, ex-Greek and ex-Trojan families rose to the position of Nobles, they began marrying into the Patriciate. This altered the bloodlines considerably, and oracular ability is no longer constant or
predictable in any family. One finds it no more readily than among families of the other orders. Why, Cicero came from a Plebian family and rose to prominence through his own wit, yet he was also one of the most reliable augurs in Rome.”

“Uh… I wouldn’t know…” ‘Oracular ability’: psychic talent. To these people it’s as common as any other feature of Nature. In my universe, that won’t happen again for another 2000 years, at least. How was it lost? Why? “I guess… a lot of it depends on… how tolerant or reasonable your society is. If the… ability is encouraged, rewarded, then more people who have it will go ahead and show it. If society doesn’t tolerate it, or even recognize it, then…” I wonder how many talented psychics in my universe wound up in mental hospitals, or burned at the stake, because society wasn’t ready for them?! How long can the effects of a Dark Age last?!? What if— A perfectly horrible thought took hold. What if my own universe— my own society is still… blighted… by hangovers from the Dark Ages? How much did we lose—leally lose— when Rome fell? What horrors came into the world then that we haven’t gotten free of yet?!?

Kirk dug his fingers into the grass, blindly grabbling for the solidity of earth, as his perspective slewed wildly. For an instant he saw, with the length of ages, with the certainty of an oracle, from the viewpoint of a Roman, into his own timeline’s future. It was terrifying. It was like looking over the edge of a volcano, with the hideous certainty that he was about to fall headlong into it. He yanked his mind away from the image, horrified, head whirling.

“Démas?” Flamma gripped his arm, concerned. “What is it? What ails you?”

“I- I- oh, hell! I’m scared!” Kirk gasped. “Everything’s shifting. Things I used to believe in… suddenly they’re at war with each other. Which side am I on?!”

“Why, if you’re the decent man I think you are, you’re on whichever side offers the best future, for the longest time, for the most people. That should be clear enough.”

Pragmatism, Kirk recognized. How very Roman… But there’s a difference, an extension in time… Oh, time! Time and morals… “For the longest time? But time can be so goddam long… How can anybody see far enough to know what’s ultimately right or wrong?” Oh, that’s what religion is, what faith is, the faith that I was raised in; trusting in a god you’ve been told is good, who claims to stand at the beginning and end of time and know it all… ‘Your little minds can’t comprehend it, but Mine does. Trust Me. Trust Me, in spite of everything you see and hear. Trust that I know what I’m doing, and it’s really the best thing for you in the long run…’ But how long a run? After 1000 years? 2000? More? Seeing all the horrors done to people… How long a test-run do you give a god?! “How long? How long to look before you can be sure?!”

“My dear,” said Flamma, “Simply judge, and do your best, for as far as you can see. That’s all that gods or men have any right to ask of you. See as far as you can, and judge by that. After all, no one knows if there ever is an ultimate end to anything, so why worry about it?!”

Kirk turned to stare at her, ideas rolling like runaway wheels through his mind. “No… end?” No end to space… or time? “No final answers—to anything? Then- then how the hell can you know, be sure- sure of anything… without some… some final authority, somewhere up the line of command? How- No, where- Dammit, where’s the center of the universe?” How can you have any reliable standards if there’s no ultimate…

“Where is the center of the surface of a globe?” the old woman smiled with the wisdom of the sibyl she might have been. “The center of the universe, my dear, is wherever you happen to stand. We can only act upon what we know, and what we know begins with whatever is closest of ourselves.”

Kirk was silent a long time thinking that over. Hell of an insight! I can’t punch any holes in it…
except maybe… “Then how do you judge yourself, your own actions? If everything you see and understand is colored by your own quirks and faults… how can you be objective and honest about anything?”

“Good, Démas,” said Flamma, gently patting his arm, “Why do you think that all the wise gods—most particularly Apollo, who is patron of the great oracle at Delphi—advise people: ‘Know thyself’?”

“Oh.” Apollo again. He keeps coming back to haunt me…

Kirk closed his eyes, vividly remembering the bright, proud and passionate face. Good advice. Better sense than he showed to us 2300 years later… Did we just out grow him over the centuries, or did his judgment really get worse? For how many centuries was he completely alone, with no hope but to wait for humans to find him? … Can even a god lose his grip from loneliness? If so, then…

There was an idea there, a concept hanging just outside the reach of words. Kirk stumbled his way toward it, struggling to give it a clear and graspable shape. “If… gods and men and everybody… can be that much alike… If there’s no… end, no final… absolute answer, or… mind… that knows everything and it isn’t telling, but orders us to… serve and die anyway, unknowing, making a virtue of ignorance! Then… If we’re all just children of the universe, fumbling our way around in the dark as best we can, changing and learning and growing as we go…”

It was like a light dawning, a glimmer at first, and then growing brighter, faster. “Then we’re all in this together and… No one’s alien! No one and nothing in- in this or any other universe! Smarter here, stronger there, abilities wildly different, but… nothing really unreachable, beyond understanding. Nobody’s got the last word, the ultimate edge, the final… rule.”

“Congratulations,” the old woman said.

“My god, we’re all equals—all citizens of the universe—and no one is king!” With the understanding, an invisible weight seemed to slide off of him; an ancient shadow in the back of his mind slipped away, taking its fingerprints of doubt, shame and fear away with it. Kirk felt as if he were floating in the warm golden air.

“Ah, yes,” Flamma laughed, “‘King’ is a dirty word among us, too.”

Kirk smiled, feeling it all the way through. “You know, in- in the country I come from, we date our history pretty much from the time we got out from under rule by a king, and founded a republic.”

“It was much the same here.”

Kirk was silent for a long moment more, enjoying the bright feeling without bothering to analyze it or align all of his understanding with it just yet. It was good to feel something besides worry, for a change. Eventually he heard a discreet cough behind him, and remembered that time was still passing. He looked around and saw Amuliana watching, politely bewildered. He tossed her a reassuring smile and clambered to his feet. “It’s been a most enlightening visit, Ma’am,” he said, helping Flamma up. “I learned quite a bit.”

“Splendid,” Amuliana beamed, stepping forward. “Now we really must take our leave; there’s a truly dreadful amount of work waiting to be done back at the temple.”

Old Flamma murmured the usual polite formulas for leave taking and watched thoughtfully as her guests departed. As soon as they were out of earshot, she called to one of the servants for a tablet and a stylus. “Great events,” she muttered, tottering back to the lunch table. “More important than he knows. Perhaps too important to stay buried at the mint. I know Amuliana; stingy old thing, she’ll
have him working like a farmer’s mule. He was meant for better.”

The serving woman brought the tablet and stylus. Flamma snatched them up greedily and began to write: “To the Lady Ocellina Marcella, Chief Vestal. Greetings….”

*To Be Continued* in Chapter XI: Where It Changed
Where It Changed

The *Invictus*’s gate not longer opened on the formal garden but on huge changer full of vast, complex, unrecognizable machinery. Assorted Imperials in gold-brown jumpsuits scurried about checking gauges, studying view screens, taking notes, barely pausing to notice and not politely at Spock as he stepped through the Gate. The area was obviously some sort of engine room, and Mr. Scott had to here somewhere. Spock made various mental notes as he made his way through the busy complex of engineers and machines, looking for a familiar face, voice or uniform. He eventually recognized a pair of boots sticking out of an access hatch, and went up and tapped the nearer ankle for attention.

“Mr. Scott, if I may have a moment of your time…”

Scott slithered reluctantly out of the hatchway, shedding protective gloves and goggles. His eyes were bright with delighted wonder. “Och, Mr. Spock, ye really should see it fer yerself. D’ye know how they power this ship. ‘Tis the Electron Resolution Drive—the unicorn o’ star drive physics! Begod, they use the matter-antimatter reaction just ta start their engines! Ye’ could spend a lifetime just studyin’—”

“If you please, Mr. Scott.” Spock took him firmly by the elbow and drew him off to an unoccupied corner for a reasonable amount of privacy. “Please give me a brief summary of your observations concerning the technological ability of the Imperials in general and this ship in particular.”

Scott pursed his lips in a soundless appreciative whistle. “I scarcely know where ta begin. There’s the Resolution drive, o’ course; we’ve naethin’ like it. Their weaponry’s similar ta oors. There’s also a specialized sort of tactics, near as I can tell, usin’ the Gates for delivery o’ bombs and torpedoes. Yon Gates are the really striking difference; they use those for everythin’ we use transporters for. They don’t seem ta have any knowledge o’ transporters at a’, an’ so they’ve never had some o’ the interestin’ experiences we’ve had with transporter accidents.”

“Which is probably why they have never discovered alternate universes,” Spock considered.

“Aye. Yon Gates are wondrous safe. Either they work right or they dinna work at a’; no middle ground. Also, their shields are different from oors. ‘Tis a variant use o’ their drive, in a shaped field…” He paused, giving Spock an arch look. “Oor phasers would no get through much, if it came ta that.”

Spock nodded slightly, considering that fact. “Could we possibly outrun this ship?”

“Never in hell. They can get Warp 12 wi’ oot breathin’ hard, an’ 13 wi’ some effort.”

“What of sub-light speed maneuvering?”

“Hmmm… In atmosphere, or an asteroid field, we might ha’ the advantage—simply by bein’ smaller. In generally, though, I’d say oor best defense lies in keepin’ their good will. They’ve right good claim to bein’ 1000 years ahead o’ us, an’ I’d no want ‘em for enemies.”

“I see.” Spock filed that away for future reference. “There is another problem. In order to deflect the curiosity of the Imperials away from our true origins, not to mention purpose, I have arranged for various members of our anthropology department to come aboard and discuss comparative social systems with the *Invictus*’s crew.”

“Aye. So?” Scott glanced impatiently back at the engines. “What’s thot to do wi’ me?”
“The problem is that I may be unable to prevent Dr. Hawk from accompanying them. Knowing his tendency toward iconoclasm for its own sake, I suspect that he needs to be watched. We cannot allow his personal proclivities or…favoritism…to endanger our mission.”

Scott took all that in, with rising eyebrows. “Ye mean…ye doubt the mon’s loyalty?! Uh…weel, then, find some excuse ta keep him safe on the Enterprise. I canna see the problem.”

“There is a small problem of legality. I have as yet no proof that Hawk is untrustworthy; only reason for suspicion. Dr. McCoy sees no such tendency, and without his support I would have difficulty justifying undue restraint on a civilian. This could lead to problems once we return to the Federation, if not before.”

“In ither words,” Scott guessed, smiling knowingly, “The mon has powerful friends, so ye canna keep him from his claimed field o’ work wi’ oot ironclad reasons, eh?”

“That is…essentially correct.” Only a close acquaintance could have recognized the fleeting, subtle look of embarrassment that flicked across Spock’s features. “I have arranged for a test, whereby I might be able to justify keeping Dr. Hawk away from the Invictus on grounds of technical incompetence—”

“Incom-?! Him?!? Na, ‘twill no work.”

“If he succeeds—and here is 78.4% probability that he will—thus justifying a prolonged visit to the Invictus, he will require watching, as previously mentioned. To use the colloquial term, Mr. Scott, I wish you to ‘keep an eye’ on him.”

“Me?” Scott blinked in bewilderment. “Why me? I’m no Security guard—nor one o’ his team ither.”

“For reason which should be obvious, we cannot send identifiable Security personnel aboard the Invictus; as you yourself said, we need to retain their goodwill, not rouse suspicions. Personnel on Hawk’s own research team, or anthropologists with whom he has already had dealings, cannot be relied upon because of probable personal bias in his favor.

“But, why me?” Scott persisted. “I’ll be wi’ the engines, when I’m no’ back on the Enterprise replacing’ the crystals and monitorin’ Knaffbein stress levels. I’ve no call ta take time from sich important work ta go play spy. Why can ye no get someone else?”

“Mr. Scott.” Spock answered very quietly and deliberately. “I entrust this task to you because, as I have observed to my complete satisfaction, your moral standards are unshakeable.”

“Huhhh?!” Scott’s jaw dropped. This was the last thing in two universes that he’d expected.

“I mean,” Spock detailed impatiently, “That you are most unlikely to be distracted or lured from duty by the pagan diversions of this society. Social scientists, I have noticed, have a lamentable susceptibility to such things. You recall, not doubt, the unfortunate case of Lieutenant Palomas. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Scott?”

Scott snapped his mouth shut and ground his teeth. Aye, I remember Carolyn Palomas! He thought, turning nearly as red as his shirt. “Ye make yourself perfectly clear, Mr. Spock.”

“Then I am satisfied to leave the problem in your capable hands.” With that, Spock turned away and went back to the Gate and the bridge of the Enterprise beyond.

Behind him, Scott wrestled his astonishment and outrage under control. What the bloody hell?! He wondered. He’s practically accusing our folk of letting themselves be seduced—Carolyn—No. No,
I’ll let that old jealousy lie. Not many men can say they’ve lost a woman to the love of a pagan god! I may call myself fairly beaten…

He wandered over to systems status display screen, idly noting the lovely intricate patterns flickering on it but unable to keep his mind from wandering. ...Pagan gods...and ‘pagan diversions’...? He pondered. What does he mean? Aye, good food and drink they’ve shown us and easy minds toward loving...also much kindness and generosity...especially in such fine knowledge... He smiled at the display screen. What harm in that? These glorified Romans seem decent folk. What is Spock so bloody afraid of? His smile faded as he mulled that over. So prissy he seems, backing away in damn-near paranoia...much like Proper Agnes when yon Captain Aquila innocently flashed his fine thighs... Scott smothered a laugh, remembering that marvelous dinner party. Aye, and he argued well, too. Set her back on her heels a good bit...and Spock...Spock looked as if he’d bitten into and apple and found only part of a worm.

Scott drifted over to the screened off bay that contained the ignition engine housing, automatically noting the position of the magnetic bottle chamber that contained the antimatter stores. His thoughts circled back to his original question. What ails Spock? What game is he playing? ...He isn’t taken with Agnes, surely...but why does he align with her in so many ways? Character judgments, social judgments, even command decisions...as I saw even before we got this lost in time, and worse now...as if they were secret allies in some unspoken game... But what game? What’s going on between them that’s so bloody important and secret as to make Spock act like this? He shook his head, trying to figure that out. What could they have in common, anyway? He’s Science Officer and now Acting-Captain, with far more on his mind that ancient history. Agnes is single-minded, concerned with nothing but ancient history...and, of course, spreading the Word of the Lord every chance...

Three memory images abruptly collided, matching. Agnes’ preaching. Hawk’s warnings. Spock’s ‘unshakeable morality’ valuing...Great bleeding bull-turds in a cyclotron! She tries to convert everyone handy, even total strangers. Spock’s letting her do it, even helping her, when there are more important things to deal with, god knows. Hawk tries to stop it—so Spock wants him muzzled... and he thinks he can rely on me to do it! By all the gods of physics, he’s put Agnes’ conversion games at top priority—right next to the mission itself—and devil take all the rest! Why? Bloody hell, why?! What’s Human religion to him, anyway?

Scott idly pounded one fist against a bulkhead, heavier and heavier, until the noise startled him enough to make him stop. What the bloody hell is going on? And why should he want to convert these folk whom we’ll likely never see again? Especially when the chances are so poor... Aye, their faith looks bloody well unshakeable, too. So why bother? What in hell’s the point? It doesn’t look at all logical to me... He stared, unseeing, at the antimatter bank. Out of his confusion only one certainty coalesced, and that not a pleasant one. Whatever he’s up to, he didn’t see fit to explain it to me. Didn’t trust me. Only... A dark thread of anger shot through the recognition. He played on my grief for losing Carolyn. Played on my feelings. Used me...

Scott looked down at his hands, automatically hiding an expression that might have drawn startled notice from his nearby hosts. I do not like being used, Vulcan, he snarled soundlessly in the confines of his skull. I do not like it at all...

...and damned if I’ll let myself be thus used.

The silent string of oaths that followed the decision would have heated Spock’s ears, had he been listening.

At the moment, though, Spock wasn’t thinking of Scott at all. He was back in his office, working the
computer, plowing through the laborious work of matching the *Invictus’s* historical data with that in the *Enterprise’s* library banks, looking for points of dissimilarity. The problem was that there were so many of them, dating as far back as written records reached. Apparently the Imperials had kept records that had been lost in the proper timeline, records whose information varied wildly from the data available in the *Enterprise’s*. Accounts of the period that coincided with the date of Kirk’s scribbled message were gorgeously contradictory, and the interpretations were incredibly different. There was a wealth of data actually rejoicing in the downfall of the old Republic, praising the ‘new constitution’ and even heralding the first Emperor as the ‘well-omened’, ‘liberator’, and ‘prince’—more exactly, ‘first speaker’—‘of peace’. Spock actually scowled at that. Someone had appropriated a title properly belonging to someone else.

And there was no mention of that someone else.

Spock interrupted his primary search to investigate that oddity. Had all knowledge of the Master been suppressed? How was that possible? Some records must have survived. The Being that Spock had met in 1st century Judea could not have helped but have a tremendous impact on everyone who had met Him.

…Including myself, Spock remembered. Even now, he couldn’t resist taking a few minutes to close his eyes and recall, in detail, that incredible face-to-face meeting.

It had started with a battle: two local thugs attacking a wandering preacher in hopes of reward from some politically directed High Priest. Spock had stopped that, at the cost of a deep and fast bleeding knife wound that could have killed him. Instead, the ‘Rabbi’ had found him…

“Spock!”
A voice? A hand touching him? Had the Captain come through the Guardian to find him? Would he get back to the Enterprise in time?

“Spock! You must not yield. Father! Grant me his life.”
The Vulcan could hear the voice clearly now. It wasn’t Kirk’s; it belonged to a stranger. However, those warm, musical tones seemed to drive away the coldness which surrounded him. He could almost wish the stranger would speak again.
The illusion of the abyss faded, and pain became the only reality. Pain which increased when someone drew the dagger from the wound, then a strong hand pressed against his side. After a moment, a sensation of tingling warmth spread from that hand throughout Spock’s entire body and the pain ebbed to a dull ache. He took a deep breath, and then he opened his eyes and looked up at the man who was bending over him.

“No, lie still,” the stranger warned when Spock tried to sit up. “You are weak. Sleep and regain your strength. I will keep watch.”

“I- I do not need to sleep!” Spock protested as he tried to rise, but the stranger laid his hands on the Vulcan’s shoulders and held him down easily. Once again, Spock felt that strange, tingling warmth; it was almost as if some magnetic or electrical force were passing from this man’s ands into his flesh, easing the tension of pain which knotted the Vulcan’s muscles. The stranger lifted one hand and laid it against Spock’s face—near his jaw—and the Vulcan sank helplessly into a dreamless slumber in response to the warmth which seemed to be radiating from that gentle but strong hand…

*…And when I woke, I was healed. Spock shook his head slightly, still marveling. While I slept, he did amazing things to me… And afterward we talked. I found my translator broken, yet he spoke to me in Vulcan…

“How is this?” Spock demanded. “You say that you are native to this time, but you speak my language fluently! Humans have great difficulty with…” He paused, and then his eyes narrowed.
Yes, the Vulcan tongue was difficult for humans, but perhaps the Rabbi wasn’t a human. After all, until that moment when the Organians had revealed their true forms, they had appeared to be…

“No, Spock. I am not Organian.” Jesus assured him, and for a second time the Vulcan couldn’t conceal his surprise. They weren’t touching, yet this Rabbi was reading his thoughts. If he were not an Organian, he must be a very powerful telepath…

“What are you?” Spock asked softly.

“This fell from your robe during the battle.” The Rabbi held out Spock’s tricorder. “Use it so you may accomplish your mission and determine the answers to your own questions.”

...Spock needed no further urging. A moment later, he looked up, his eyes reflecting the wonder and...yes—the awe which had taken possession of him.

“It seems I must retract a statement which I made to my Captain. You are all that the Organians are—and more!”* 

Indeed... Spock smiled, remembering—then frowned briefly. Strange. I can no longer recall exactly what the tricorder readings were. My memory is usually more reliable... Perhaps it was affected by the subsequent mind-meld. The mind-meld... He leaned back, basking in the memory.

“There is much about your philosophy which I admire,” said Spock. “However, I cannot understand why a religion which speaks so highly of duty and responsibility should consider ‘eternal rest’ so desirable...”

“Yes,” said the Rabbi, “That would present a difficulty to you... Spock, that which you call ‘eternal rest’ is not the same thing which I promise. It is not something which I can describe verbally to your satisfaction. Therefore, will you let me show you?”

He held out His hand.

Spock drew back; instinctively recoiling from a contact with would enable this Man to fathom directly those depths which the Vulcan sought to keep hidden—even from himself.

Aware that he was revealing a lack of trust—an illogical lack of trust-Spock bent his head for a brief moment, considering all the factors of the situation.

At last, he drew himself erect and held out his hand.

Their fingers gripped in the age old gesture of peace and trust, and they looked deeply into each other’s eyes.

“No! Spock gasped, seeking to pull his hand free, still unwilling to share his innermost self—even with this man—but it was too late...

What they were sharing was much more than a mind-meld. Now that he had accepted the mental touch, Spock found that it wasn’t the invasion he’d feared. Somehow, Spock realized that everything he’d ever done, said, or even thought had been no secret to this Man—perhaps even before they’d clasped hands. But, it did not matter; it made not difference... Even though he knew everything about Spock, the Master loved him—not for what he’d done or for what he might do in the future. He loved him because he was Spock. For the first time, the Vulcan knew what it was to be totally at peace within himself. *

A moment to cherish for a lifetime, Spock thought. Overwhelming...filling the mind with a sense of certainty and purpose...promise of the restoration of some lost paradise, when men were happier and better and possessed virtues since lost... He mentioned something of that.

"You- You said that Your hour has not come. You know so much... Do you have the gift of precognition?

“That is one name which men have given this gift which they once possessed.”*

...We might yet regain it, then, Spock considered, So much offered, if we but pursue the Master’s plan, take the path He offered us...

Just then Spock became aware that someone was snapping their fingers under his nose.
He opened his eyes quickly, neither pleased nor surprised to see that the rude guest was Ellison Hawk. “Why have you interrupted me?” he asked, coldly.

“I waited a decent amount of time,” said Hawk, not really apologizing, “But you didn’t wake up.”

“I was not asleep.”

“Really? You looked like you were having a pleasant dream.” Hawk flashed his sardonic satyr’s grin. “Hell, you resembled the Bernini statue of Saint Teresa in Ecstasy.”

“You purpose here, if you please?” Spock decided that Hawk’s very presence was irritating.

“I think I may have pinpointed the source of the divergence.” Hawk held up a tape cassette, but didn’t hand it over at once. Spock supposed that he intended to bargain for privileges, and he could guess what particular goal the little archeologist had in mind. Sure enough, after a brief pause Hawk asked: “Now can I go back to the *Invictus* with the Anthro teams?”

“That depends on the accuracy of your information,” Spock hedged, unwilling to concede easily.

“Oh, it’s pretty solid.” Hawk grinned again. “You’ll see what I mean when you read it.”

“You will forgive my suspicions…” Spock didn’t sound at all contrite. “But I find it difficult to believe that you could find the discrepancy before a trained Historian could.” –Or I could.

“That’s because I thought to look in sources that Little Miss Purity wouldn’t think of. Original sources—such as old gossipy exposés—like Suetonius’ scandalous ‘Lives of the Twelve Caesars’. Hawk’s smile held no humor whatsoever. “I looked there first, and she’d look there last—if at all. The lady’s biases do get in the way of her research, you know.”

Spock felt distinctly uncomfortable with Hawk’s knowing looks and acid comments. “Can you not resist an opportunity to denounce you colleague, even behind her back?”

“Do you reprimand her for doing the same to me?”

Spock didn’t answer. That question was a little too close to McCoy’s accusation. He wondered if the two of them were collaborating.

“Spock,” Hawk sighed, sounding infinitely weary, “I’m not asking you to like me—god knows, I wouldn’t expect that from a Vulcan—but I’d like to know why you distrust me so much. I mean, you’re not only suspicious of everything I say or do or even think; you even suspect my work, for chrissake!”

“I find it ironic that you swear by a Being whom you commonly denounce.”

“Proves nothing.” Hawk half smiled. “I swear by shit, too.”

Spock suppressed a sudden jolt of real anger. “Do you have anything else of importance to say to me?”

“Hmmm, yes…” Hawk tapped the tape cassette against his hand and gave Spock a long, thoughtful look. “I’ve been speculating on something that seems relevant. Agnes told me—several times—about your time-visit to 1st century Judea, where you met Jesus of Nazareth, himself. She said you actually got a tricorder reading of the guy. Right?”

“Essentially correct,” Spock replied, wooden lipped. “What is the relevance?”
“Pity you lost the recording,” Hawk commented, eyes narrowed. “She said you did it so people wouldn’t ‘worship the image’. Right?”

“Correct. I noted that lamentable failing among humans.”

“But you got a good look at the readings yourself, and they obviously impressed you.”

“Quite true. The Master was definitely more than a mere human being.”

“Uh-uh.” Hawk’s sardonic smile returned. “Like the Organians, maybe?”

“Considerably more than an Organian.” Spock allowed himself a faint smile of utter certainty.

“Well, there are a lot of superhuman beings running around in this galaxy, not to mention the next: Metrons, Melkotians, the Goddess of Delta Theta III…”

“I do not think He was one of those!” Spock snapped, surprised at his own outrage.

“How do you know?” Hawk’s eyes momentarily blazed. “Did you ever do the tricorder readings on any of ‘those’?”

“…No,” Spock had to admit. *Logical possibilities, but highly improbable. …I think…*

“And nobody’s ever found out who the preservers are,” Hawk continued. “Or, here’s a spooky idea: what about the Kelvans? In this universe, the descendants of the Romans have the Kelvans on the run, and in their own galaxy. If the Kelvans were to discover time travel—which the Imperials haven’t—it’d make sense for the Kelvans to go back in time and try to nip the danger in the bud. Just poison a few harvests, spread a new disease or two, kill off an enlightened leader here and there, and make sure that bad leaders got into power, spread dissent in the form of a new religion… It wouldn’t be hard, if you had the recourses and knowledge.”

“Impossible!” Spock almost roared at him, surprising them both. In the few seconds resulting silence, Spock hastily assembled a counter argument. “The Kelvans are not telepathic, and the Master was. Besides, he stated that he was a ‘native of this time’.”

“So was Gary Seven—and he never told you who his bosses were.”

“The Mast- Jesus was something more than Gary Seven, and used very different methods.”

“But he didn’t say he was a native of Earth, did he?”

Spock didn’t answer.

“So, that still leaves the Metrons, the Melkotians, the Preservers… *Hmm*, for that matter, did you ever wonder what became of the people who built the Guardian of Forever?”

Spock jerked his head up, unaccountably disturbed. “Those ruins were very old. The Guardian itself said that it had awaited a question since before our sun had burned hot in space…”

“‘A question’ isn’t the same as ‘a request’ or ‘a visit’ or ‘an order’,” Hawk replied, grinning eerily. “I’ve seen the ruins on the Guardian’s world, Spock. They may be old, but they’re certainly not older than Sol. Some of them damn well could have been inhabited 2000 years ago, or less, and you know as well as I do that you can use the Guardian to travel in space as well as time. So how’s that as a possible origin for your Master?”

Spock caught himself tapping his fingers on the console. “An interesting speculation, Dr. Hawk.
May I ask how it applies to the current situation?"

“In a roundabout way.” Hawk briefly chewed his lip. “You see, any of those superhuman beings would have had reasons of their own for diddling with Earth’s historical development—and maybe not friendly reasons, either. I’ve read the available log tapes; the Metrons and the Melkotians certainly didn’t greet us with any great warm welcomes, did they? The Melkotians were downright fanatical in their attitudes—and so were their creations. Remember? The Metrons had no compunctions about meddling with a couple of shiploads of passing strangers, did they? Even the Organians have been known to produce a meddling heretic or two, as you found out on Madworld.”

Spock didn’t say anything. He was certain that Hawk’s suggestions were utterly wrong, and that he could find the necessary facts to disprove them, given time; he just didn’t have the facts handy at the moment.

“So what makes you think that alien politics didn’t exist 2300 years ago?” Hawk insisted. “The super-being you met could have had purposes of his own for monkeying around with Earth’s development, goals of his own, that had nothing to do with humans’ goals for themselves. He could have been—”

“Nonsense!” Appalled, Spock felt his hands clenching into fists. “I personally spoke with the Master, and saw no such sinister intention as you are suggesting. He wished only to present a morality based upon love—”

“Heh! Aemilia deflated that nicely!”

“—And to assure humans that existence does not end with physical death,” Spock grated from between clench teeth. “He offered a path to that enlightenment, something which humans never previously possessed.”

“Oh, bull,” Hawk retorted. “Every human deity from Djamballa to Father Divine assured Humans that death wasn’t final. If we needed more assurance, there’s the discovery of countless energy-beings, discorporate intelligences, cheerfully inhabiting this galaxy. Big deal!”

“He offered the promise of eternal life and love—”

“At what price?” Hawk retorted, his humorless smile showing teeth. “Serving your Master in both worlds? Was he recruiting armies of loyal souls? Oh, there’s a thought: maybe he leases them out to customers, in job lots! Come to Yahweh & Son, lowest prices in Town! Armies of obedient souls for rent, already trained: just give ‘em a jolt of love-juice, rap out the proper commend words, and they’ll serve you anywhere, at anything! Rent ‘em by the hour or by the eon! Hah! No wonder he’s called a ‘Shepherd of Souls’. What happens to sheep, Spock? They get shorn—and then eaten; used in life and then used after death.”

“Stop!” Spock slammed his fist down on the console. “That is the most monstrous lie—”

“How would you know?”

“I mind-melded with the Master, and I saw no such disgusting intent!”

“You mind-melded with him. Right.” Hawk’s eyes blazed back into Spock’s. “And you’ve been following his assignments ever since! You’ve got a hell of a nerve to accuse me of being ‘untrustworthy’, Vulcan!”

“What?” Spock gasped, unable to believe that he’d really heard that.
“No wonder you’ve been going out of your way to side with Agnes, letting her ‘spread the word’ no matter what the situation or risk—like the fun and games at dinner. Oh, that was a real giveaway, Spock! I’ve seen enough of Vulcans to know that they can be just as arrogant and bigoted as anybody else, but it’s always been for emotionless logic and Surak. You’re the fist one I’ve ever seen who was gung-ho for unreasoning devotion and Jesus. So exactly what did he give you during that mind-meld, Spock? Friendship or takeover? Love or rape?”

Spock was out of his chair and halfway across the room before he realized what he was doing.

Hawk had been expecting it. He ducked and danced backward, clutching the cassette in both hands, bending it. The plastic creaked in warning.

Spock heard the sound, recognized the threat, and stopped short.

“‘There’s you proof,’” Hawk commented coolly, easing his grip on the cassette. “‘Just what were you about to do, Vulcan?’”

Spock suddenly remembered McCoy saying something very similar while backed up against a cave wall on long lost Beta Niobe. ‘What are you feeling, Spock? Rage? Jealousy? Have you ever felt these things before?’ “Impossible,” Spock murmured, now as then. But I was not responsible! I had reverted to my savage ancestors. I was not in my right mind then. Now I am… I am… He wrenched his mind away from that train of thought, returned to his chair and dropped into it. “You,” he said, “Have made a fine art of irritating people beyond restraint. I am astonished that you have lived so long.”

“It’s not a habit I usually indulge in; I do it only when I see really gross examples of…prejudice.” Hawk took a cautious step nearer. “I needle prejudiced people to make them reveal themselves. It works, you know.”

“You are mistaken in this case.” Spock settled his impassive Vulcan mask into his features with exquisite care. “Had my control not been weakened by the stress of the last few days, you would not have succeeded. I can reliably assure you that I am not in the least prejudiced in favor of Dr. Day or against you for reasons of rel- philosophical viewpoint.”

“In that case,” said Hawk, sounding quietly weary, “Stop giving her privileges that you won’t give me, especially when I’ve proved—as this tape will show—that I’m at least a little more professionally reliable than she is.”

He held out the tape, but still didn’t hand it over.

Bargaining, Spock thought, growing tired of the whole game. “Very well, Hawk. Just what is it that you want?”

“Only what I asked for the first time. Call off your hounds and let me go visit the Invictus again, as soon as possible.”

“Why?”

“Why?! Christ on a thoroughbred! We find an advanced civilization developed from ancient Rome, and you have to ask an archeologist why?? I want to study the damned thing, that’s why! This is a priceless opportunity! Just the records they’ve preserved, and their customs, and their social structure —”

“Do you have any other reasons?”
Hawk started to answer, stopped and suddenly looked embarrassed. “Well, uh…I’d really like to see Bal’Tia again…” He admitted.

“So.” Spock suppressed an urge to laugh in relief, and contempt. “Now we come to it: all this effort and argument, simply so you may pursue a female shorter than yourself.”

Hawk didn’t say anything, but he blushed furiously.

Incredible, Spock thought, watching him. Humans can make such monstrous efforts for such petty causes. Vanity and lust… Yes, that I can readily believe. How often have I seen Jim made foolish by some female… “Very well.” Spock turned to the console, reached for the intercom and called the bridge. Uhura answered. “Mr. Hawk will come to the bridge shortly,” he informed her. “Allow him to pass freely through the Invictus’s Gate. Spock out.” He thumbed off the intercom and turned back to Hawk. “Will that satisfy you?”

“That will satisfy me.” Hawk handed over the cassette. “The really relevant stuff starts at chapter three, although there are interesting differences in the second section—and even in the title. Happy reading, Mr. Spock.” Hawk tossed him a mock salute, spun on his heel and marched out.

Spock didn’t even wait for the doors to close behind Hawk; he shoved the cassette into the console’s slot and scampered his fingers over the readout buttons. The computer chimed almost instantly. Discrepancy so soon? He punched the button for screen display and peered close.

Sure enough: the title for the work, according to the Enterprise’s library, was “The Lives of the Twelve Caesars”.

…”Eight”…? Spock noted idly that his fingers were shaking. He slowly advanced the tape to the third chapter.

The name at the head of the biographical sketch should have been ‘Tiberius Claudius’. It wasn’t. The title read ‘Démas Tiberius Kirke’. The profile on the accompanying coin-portrait was unmistakable.

“No…” Spock whispered, turning cold. His eyes automatically traced the first sentence.

“The Imperator Démas’ first appearance in Rome was unusual and marvelous as his subsequent career: he appeared in mid-air above the Old Forum, in a shower of blue and golden sparkles. Transporter effect, Spock noted dully. Malfunction. The solar flare. Of course.

“Fortunately for the future of Rome, it being a market day, the Forum was greatly crowded and Démas fell safely into a fish peddler’s pushcart. The marvel is well verified, having been witnessed by over 1000 citizens… “

Spock shuddered.

 “…and also confirmed by the records of small claims court, where Démas was subsequently brought on minor charges of practicing magic without a license and of destruction of property.”

Quite understandable, considering the effect of a 100-kilo mass falling on a pushcart… full of fish. No doubt he ruined the merchant’s wares. No wonder the incident was well remembered. Yes, I would call that a dramatic entrance...

“This and subsequent marvels brought him to the attention of several priesthoods, which took care to bring him favorably before the Emperor Augustus.”
Spock closed his eyes for a moment. Ah, Jim. You never could disguise yourself very well, could you? Not on Earth or Organia… Always that fierce, proud soul displays itself. He resolutely opened his eyes and read on.

It grew worse. The long rambling sentences recounted, in fussy and disorderly detail, ‘Démas’ meteoric rise to fame, power, the favor of the Emperor and Senate, and finally the Curule Chair itself.

Jim, why?

Démas’ first political success had been his appointment by the Emperor to a special committee investigating grain fraud in North Africa. He had not only exposed the massive fraud and arrested several of the most powerful landowners in the empire, but confiscated the lands and redistributed them among the poor, this vastly reducing the welfare rolls. Shortly thereafter he’d been elected Tribune and had launched a spectacular campaign of land tenure reforms, slavery reduction and public works. He had founded schools of scientific agriculture, forestry and sciences. Countless inventions were attributed to him: the improved horse collar, the telescope, the crossbow, the heliograph, the steam engine, gunpowder, the hot-air balloon, crop rotation and the moldboard plow. Within five years his reforms had nearly double the agricultural yield and emptied the welfare rolls of the entire Empire. He had been repeatedly elevated in rank, and was elected Consul.

Oh, Jim, how could you?!

“The Emperor loved him, the commons adored him, and the Nobles hated him more than any man since the time of the radical Gracchus brothers, whose policies many of his resembled. There were numerous plots against his life, all of which he not only foiled but exposed and prosecuted, thus reducing the old aristocracy to an endangered remnant. One of the more famous plots was instigated by the Emperor’s own stepson, Tiberius Claudius, who committed suicide rather than face public trial. To show that he felt no rancor, the Emperor subsequently married his daughter Julia to Démas. The marriage producee four children, but was unhappy. Démas later divorced Julia when she was implicated in a political plot against her own father, and she spent the rest of her life in exile.”

So much for the original succession.

“He then married a recently retired Vestal, who bore him a healthy daughter despite her age, and who aided his educational efforts by founding and administering several schools of science and medicine. At this time the Emperor Augustus retired from office, and Démas was elected unanimously by both Senate and Popular Assembly to take his place. Augustus and his wife retired to Capri, where they spent most of their time at entertainments, but Démas often sought their advice in civil matters. Augustus died peacefully in his sleep at the age of 82. Livia, retaining her post as chief administrator of the Roman fire department, died at the age of 91 of a case of pneumonia, which she contracted while riding on a fire engine during a rainstorm. Démas was inconsolable at the loss of his foster parents, but he drowned his grief in work. Shortly thereafter, he assumed command of the northern armies to repel a German invasion. He defeated the invading tribesmen handily, employing winter tactics which were made possible by cold weather uniforms made by knitting, a technique which Démas also introduced. In pursuing the tribesmen, Démas extended the borders of the empire beyond the German forests and into the rich grain lands of the Ucranian country. The German tribesmen he subsequently resettled in colony-towns along the Rhine, and taught them useful trades; they became successful at farming, leather-working and knitting, and upon becoming well-to-do tradesmen they gave up raiding and became peaceable citizens.”

Yes, and your…descendants did something similar with the Klingons.

“With improved communications, electoral reforms were now possible. Démas altered the Constitution to allow election of the Emperor every eight years by Popular Assemblies in every
province, rather than every ten years by the Senate alone. He compensated the Senate for this loss of power by placing it in charge of the legal administration of the entire Empire, which, as some Senators afterwards complained, gave more work than prestige. He also created more Tribunician offices and created for them a standing committee to investigate and punish corruption in public office anywhere in the Empire. He also assessed taxes by income per year rather than per capita or per acre. He set aside public funds for the education of the poor, appointed the priesthood of Asclepius guardians of the public health, and was credited with the discovery of the healing properties of blue bread-mold and yellow sulphurous mold"

...Primitive antibiotics. McCoy would be honored...

“Among his personal peculiarities were the firm beliefs that Humans could fly by mechanical means and that the stars were but other suns circled by globular worlds similar to the Earth and inhabited by beings similar to Humans. The first belief he confirmed by inventing first the hot-air balloon and then the man-carrying glider, and finally the steam-powered airship. The second belief was not confirmed during his lifetime, but founded a school of natural philosophy which subsequently confirmed the true nature of the stars and planets via improvements upon the telescope. A curious notation found among the Emperor Augustus’s diaries states his belief that Démas himself was a lost inhabitant of one of those distant planets: a charge which Démas himself never denied. Schools of philosophy have debated this note at great length, concluding that it is the ethical duty of true philosophers eventually to explore the heavens, seek out those inhabited worlds, make the acquaintance of the peoples there and duly thank them for their gift—however inadvertent—of so able and progressive a ruler.”

...So they developed an early cultural drive for spaceflight. No wonder. How he must have grieved for his lost life... His descendants caught that yearning and carried it on... Spock advanced the tape, skimming through the history that followed. Kirk had been succeeded by a daughter, Démasia: unusual enough in itself, still more unusual that she had been a brilliant military commander. After that had come a grandson-by-adoption, then an actual great-granddaughter. It was not, Spock realized, a case of automatic inheritance; rather, the former Emperor legitimized promising candidates by adopting or marrying them into the sprawling Imperial family. Any noteworthy freeborn citizen was eligible. One’s record of public service and general elections decided the rest.

...Essentially democratic, though it still calls itself an Empire... ‘The Imperium’? What did they originally mean by that word, anyway?

He hurried on, noting brief facts and dates: exploration, expansion, the turning of the major German invasions, destruction of the Persian Empire, the first railroads, the first crossing of the Atlantic, contact with China, medical advances, and the discovery of electricity...

By the time of the last biography, Kirk’s Romans were barely 100 years short of space travel.

Spock slowly rewound the tape to its earlier setting. Jim, he wondered dully, Why did you do it? Broke—No shattered the Prime Directive, when you've given so much before to keep time intact... Edith Keeler! Not even for her! ...Then why all this? You must have known what you were doing... Didn’t you?

He pondered that for several minutes. What could change you so? What could make you forget your duty… Forget? Amnesia, as on Miramanee’s world… Yes, you made innovations there, too. That must be the answer. Transporter malfunction effect? Or the impact of landing? Spock considered calling McCoy, but thought better of it. How would I phrase the question? ‘Is it possible to suffer amnesia, but no other serious injury, by falling from unspecified height into a pushcart full of fish?’ Imagine his reaction… Sure enough, the tape zipped forward and stopped at the end of a paragraph.
Démas died at the age of 96, of injuries received when he fell from a half-trained cavalry horse. He remained clear of mind almost to the last moment, giving instructions to his family concerning his estate and Rome’s future needs. He specifically requested that all of his magical amulets be cremated and buried with him, for he feared what harm might follow if they were to fall into unscrupulous hands. At length his mind wandered, and he spoke of unknown persons and grieved persistently for some enterprise not reached. His last coherent words, as witnessed, were: ‘Why didn’t you ever come back for me? Spock, why did you leave me behind?’ he did shortly before dawn, on—”

Spock closed his eyes and looked away, automatically struggling to repress the surge of pain. He remembered… the thought trickled loose. He waited for me, all those years, and I never… Enough! It will not happen! He will be saved…

…Saved?

The word cued another thought. Something was missing from that account, something vitally important. There is no mention of the Master, nor of His followers. Yet He would have lived and died during the period when Jim arrived, rose to power and ruled. There must be some reference somewhere… Spock jabbed fiercely at the buttons of the computer, refusing to consider the obvious connection. No. Not that. Jim would not have done anything to discourage the Spread of Christianity. He could not possibly have forgotten that.

The tape zipped backward, stopped and displayed another page. Yes, it was in the section under the biography of the Emperor Démas.

“The effect of his reforms was most subtle and far reaching in Judea, which had long been troublesome. While carefully avoiding the building of temples, statues and even references to the various civil gods, Démas caused there to be build in Judea many good roads, sewers, aqueducts, market pavilion, libraries, public baths, courthouses, hospitals, schools and public housing for the poor. He also empowered the provincial governors, by reason of reforming civil injustices, and gradually removed from the local king and high priesthood the administration of all laws and public services not directly related to religious exercise or use of funds from the king’s own treasury.

“The priesthood and the royal kindred were also subtly encouraged to quarrel with each other, for which they required not great urging, thus distracting their time and attention from public matters so that they neither noted nor cared about the civic reforms. Improvements in education, trade and agriculture, the latter including gifts of seed, livestock, tools and irrigation systems, caused the populace to prosper despite the erratic taxations of the official rulers. Indeed, the Judeans came often to appeal to Rome for redress of grievances caused by their king and priesthood, and increasing numbers of them applied for and received full citizenship.

“Because of the growing prosperity and civil justice, conditions which bred despair and dissension disappeared, and the incidence of religious hysteria and rioting was greatly reduced. While the high priesthood paid little heed to this development, being content so long as the Great Temple’s revenue was not reduced, various renegade sects and wandering holy men were incensed by their loss of local power and revenue, and some of them grew so bold as to enter the larger cities in hopes of finding ready audiences there. Démas, with his usual astonishing foresight, had previously given instruction that all such dissenters found breaching the public peace should not be handed over to the religious authorities but removed from the area and sent directly to Rome, where they were examined by the various priesthoods. Those found to be in good mental health were given teaching positions at various schools of philosophy, posts which they usually accepted with great alacrity but often resigned later upon finding their pupils more willing to question than to accept. Those who resigned, finding no audiences in Rome willing to support them, took up lesser trades within the city and often prospered thereby, not uncommonly abandoning all further attempts at preaching, though a few
continued at their original effort and ended on the welfare rolls. None, in any case, were ever allowed to return to Judea, from which their influence soon passed.

“Once such wandering holy man, Yeshua ben-Yosef of Nasaret, attracted the attention of Démas, who came to hear him teach during the philosopher’s brief employment at a school near the new Augustan Institute of Natural Philosophy at Velletrae. Seeing the philosopher being harassed by the impertinence of university students, Démas took pity upon him and invited him to dinner with his foster parent Livia, who was yet alive and active at this time. Only fragmentary accounts of the dinner conversation have survived, but it is clearly recorded that the philosopher proved no match for Livia’s ready wit; she bested him thoroughly on several points, including the value of life, the value of rationality, the value of worldly happiness, and the social rights of women, the lattermost being especially telling in view of the degraded standing of women in Judea. Démas, by all accounts, was greatly disappointed in the philosopher, yet treated him with great civility and offered him a post in the foreign office. Yeshua refused, but did not return to teaching. He became a carpenter in the suburban district and was never again noted in public life. Démas generosity in making this offer is shown by the fact that although Yesua was provably a magician of some ability, having many medical cures to his credit, yet his personal ethics were suspect due to the tendency of his patients to undergo mental deterioration after being touched by him; indeed, it was common knowledge at the school where he taught that students should carefully avoid allowing the philosopher to touch them in any way. Had not Démas interfered personally, Yeshua would doubtless have lost his teaching position shortly for the aforesaid unethical conduct.

“Now concerning proven magicians, augurs and oracles, Démas set high standards—"

Spock shut off the tape and stared unseeing at the blank screen. ‘...did not return to teaching...’ he repeated to himself. ‘...lost his teaching position...unethical conduct...became a carpenter...never again noted in public life.’ The Master! And you—you were ‘greatly disappointed’ with Him?! Jim, how could you?!? He reactivated the screen, backed up the tape and re-read the beginning of the middle paragraph.

“Because of the growing prosperity and civil justice, conditions which bred despair and dissension disappeared, and the incidence of religious hysteria and rioting was greatly reduced.”

Spock looked at the words until they blurred, quietly knitting the cold facts together. “The Pacifier of Judea,” he murmured. Jim. You changed social conditions. ‘Prosperity and civil justice’. Distracted people with immediate concerns, worldly toys, bread and circuses... Took the audience away from the Master—and then the Master away from any audience that would listen to Him! Harassed by ‘impertinent’ university students! Charged with ‘unethical conduct’! Argued down by an old woman at a dinner party... He shoved the sudden memory of the dinner party on the Invictus out of his mind. Jim, why did you do it? How could you have met Him and not be...not be...

The concept slipped away, leaving only the shining memory of that momentous mind-meld with the Master, that promise of endless, boundless, accepting, unquestioning love...love...

Obviously you did not mind-meld with him, Spock concluded. When I have you back, I will correct that. Once I have you again, I will show you the Master, directly. When I have you...

At least now I know where—and when—you are.

*from “Proof Positive,” by Sharon Emily, SHOWCASE #2, printed 1975, pages 10-16.
To Be Continued in Chapter XII: Mushrooms, Paranoia and the Lady in White
Kirk lifted the wooden shovel, swearing breathlessly at its loaded weight. “Damn that wily old Lady…” he panted, “And her goddam thrift…” He poured the powdered gold into a waiting leather sack. “Should’ve known she was stingy…” He bent down for another shovel load. “…when she sent a taxi…” Sweat trickled in runnels off his bare back. “…instead of the temples own car…” The hand turned fans didn’t have much effect on the heat. “Assayer she said she wanted…” Neither did it help much that, like everyone else here, he worked stark naked. “…but she didn’t mention…” the gold dust seemed to grow heavier by the shovelful. “…that was only part of it…” He could feel the blisters forming on his palms and fingers. “…and the rest of it is shoveling…” there was gold grit under his toenails. It itched. “…Didn’t just hire me for my tricorder…” His arms ached. His legs ached. His back ached. “…but for my muscles…”

“Very nice muscles they are, too,” chirped a feminine voice in the doorway. Kirk spun around, preserving his modesty with the shovel. He saw a young girl standing in the doorway, wearing a simple white tunic with a white sash bearing an obscure symbol in white embroidery. She looked him up and down. She giggled. He blushed. It showed.

“You must be the magician, Démas Kirke,” she said. “You’re certainly the biggest one here, and they said I would recognize you by that.”

“Uhh…” Kirk didn’t know quite how he managed it, but he blushed even redder. “Er, yes Ma’am. I’m James Kirk, but I’m not really a magician. I just know a few tricks…uhm, I mean…”

“Goddam! I’m not used to making small talk while wearing nothing but a shove.”

“Well, I’m here to invite you do dinner at the House of the Vestals,” said the girl. “Come at the 10th hour this evening. Do you know the way?”

“Er, no Ma’am, but I’m sure somebody hereabouts can give me directions.”

“We’ll expect you, then.” She grinned impishly. “And…dress a little more formally than that.”

“Uhhhh…” Kirk could feel the blood burning in all four of his cheeks.

The girl giggled again, turned and trotted out, much to Kirk’s relief. Damn, he thought, setting down the shovel and wiping his forehead. That’s a helluva way to be introduced to a…a Vestal Virgin! … Tenth hour? From what he’d learned so far, that meant about five o’clock in the afternoon, give or take maybe a quarter-hour. This Rome didn’t have much in the way of timepiece technology; only the wealthy could afford water-clocks, which weren’t terribly accurate to begin with, and everyone else made do with sundials and notched candles. Equarius’ water-clock for timing horse races was nearly as big an investment as a whole chariot. If I stay here long enough, Kirk thought, I’ll have to do something about that… Now why do the Vestal Virgins want to see me? Politics again? I seem to be getting tangled in that despite myself… Or maybe a better civil service job? He glowered at the heaped gold, rubbed his sore back, and gloomily wondered what he’d be shoveling next.

He didn’t notice the calculating look on the face of the guard lounging near the doorway. Neither did
he note that when the shift changed for lunch, the same guard quietly sent off a message to someone who lived in the Palatine district.

Kirk’s stint in the mint ended at roughly three in the afternoon, giving him time to go to the nearest public bath and soak gratefully until his muscles stopped complaining. He took his time scraping off the water, finally dressed and strolled out the door, looking for someone who could give him directions to the House of the Vestals.

Before he got down the steps, a stranger in a plain brown tunic came up and politely tugged at his sleeve for attention. “If you please, Sir,” the man said, with the smooth voice and downcast eyes of an experienced servant, “If you are the magician Démas Kirke, I am to show you the way to your supper engagement.

“I doubt if there’s anyone else in town who looks quite like me,” Kirk grinned ruefully at his uniform, which happened to be the dressiest suit he possessed. “I’m Kirk, all right. Lead on.”

The servant obligingly turned and padded away. Kirk shrugged and followed, wondering in passing why the Vestals had sent a manservant this time instead of the girl.

The servant led him down a long, twisty street, through two open intersections where citizens with water jugs lined up at sturdy public fountains, and up a gradually widening boulevard between ever more stately townhouses. Eventually the servant went up to a big old-fashioned rectangular building, similar to the Augur Flamma’s, but with one notable difference: the building had originally been set well back from the street, and in the space between wall and street a later owner had built a row of one-room shops with one-room apartments on top. All of them looked crowded, squalid and over-occupied. The architectural effect was god-awful. Kirk guessed that the house’s owner charged high rents for those mean little shop-apartment units, and made some guesses about the probable stinginess of his hostess. He wasn’t surprised that the main door was a thick bronze-sheathed gate, sufficient to hold out not only thieves but a small army. Could probably withstand light gunpowder artillery, Kirk considered, following the servant inside the reluctant, creaking door.

He didn’t notice that the shopkeeper nearest the door watched him enter, and then strolled inside to emerge a moment later on the roof. The man took a pigeon out of a rooftop coop, tied something to its leg and set it loose. The bird flapped sturdily off toward a circular white building a mile or so distant.

The interior of the main house was cool and dark, and it took Kirk’s eyes a moment to adjust. The servant led him through the formal front hall with its open skylight and rain pool beneath, and Kirk noticed that the pool contained fish: not ornamental goldfish, but plain, practical, ugly carp. He also noticed that the pool was bare of any ornaments. The ladies who lived here were either surprisingly poor, which didn’t jibe with what little Kirk knew about the importance of the Vestals, or else were wretchedly stingy. The servant went through another imposing door, paused to announce Kirk, then stepped back and bowed him through. Maybe ordinary men weren’t allowed beyond this point. Kirk shrugged and stepped through.

But the sole occupant of the room was a man: tall, dark-haired, middle aged, with big hands and prominent features. He would have been handsome but for his complexion, which was marred by a welter of old acne scares, and his expression, which was drawn and sour. When he smiled, as he did now, he looked as if his face begrudged the change.

“Welcome, Magician Démas.” The voice was medium range and sounded over controlled. “I am most happy to receive you for a small, private dinner this evening. Your reputation has preceded you, sir. Do recline and share of this excellent wine with me.”
Kirk slid cautiously onto the indicated couch, wondering what was going on. “Er, thank you, Mr...?” The host didn’t seem to catch the question. Kirk rephrased it. “Beg your pardon, but I was under the impression that I was visiting the House of the Vestals for dinner. Who are you?”

The host blinked twice, rapidly, as though measuring points in some obscure game. He cautiously advanced another pinched smile. “I am styled Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero,” he intoned, “Like several other male members of my family. To avoid confusion, I am generally called Tiberius.”

“Please to meet you.” Kirk thought briefly of mentioning that his own middle name was Tiberius too, but decided against it. There was no telling what effect that would have, family connections being so important here.

“As for the business of the Vestals, well, do allow me my little subterfuges. One can’t be too careful in my position. Some wine?”

“Thank you.” Noncommittal answer. What’s his game? Kirk accepted the cup. The wine wasn’t Chianti. “Why should you have to be so careful?” and just what is your position? “From what I’ve seen, this is a fine, orderly, safe, well mannered city.”

“Ah.” Tiberius scowled into his wine cup. That expression looked natural. “Perhaps it seems so, at least at first to a...an outsider. From Hibernia, as I hear? Druids and all that? Hmm. I assure you, however, that as peaceful and prosperous as our fair city may appear on the surface, beneath appearances lie deep and subtle evils, and I am in a position to know.”

“Oh?” Kirk cut in smoothly. “What position is that?”

Tiberius jerked his head up slightly, as if caught off-balance by the question. He flashed a brief sour smile, as if acknowledging a good sword thrust. “I happen to hold the position of Commander of the Eastern Armies and Overseer of all clerks of the public funds. I also hold a seat in the Senate. That gives me much information on the state of the Imperium, as you might guess.”

Not to mention power, Kirk considered. He’d planned to hold that info for later... Commander of the Eastern Armies? The man’s cautious reserved inspired Kirk to act likewise, particularly after the cheerful openness of everyone else he’d met. It jarred Kirk to realize that Tiberius acted more like the sort of ancient—or even modern—politician one could expect to find in the Federation’s universe.

“Naturally, it eventually came to my attention that the temple of Juno Moneta had cut its assaying time remarkably by hiring a reliable magician.” Tiberius ventured another slight smile; he doled them out like coins to importune beggars. “Of course I am delighted that the mint now operates more efficiently, but knowing the habits of your immediate superior, I suspect that you are being worked hard and insufficiently paid. Am I correct?”

Kirk felt his sore muscles twang in agreement. “She makes me work hard,” he grinned, “But I don’t know if I’m being underpaid.”

“How much?”

“Uhm, eight denarii a month.”

“Oh, outrageous! You should be earning a solidus, at least—and doing more than merely assaying and shoveling gold.”

Tiberius sounded just a trifle too indignant. Kirk recognized the earmarks of a dealer’s pitch. He’s going to offer me a job, betcha anything! ‘Well, I admit I’d prefer easier work. What do you think I should be doing?’” Kirk batted his eyes innocently.
“The opportunities for a good magician are unlimited,” Tiberius purred, launching an oblique approach. “The licensing fee is negligible—or did your mistress at the temple settle that already? I must learn that… Well, one can simply open a shop on the nearest street and wait for customers, or one can find a patron. Many of our wealthier citizens employ a personal magician as an advisor…”

*Right, and here comes the pitch,* Kirk guessed.

“Indeed, I could use a good personal magician myself. Augurs and astrologers are all very well for divining the future, but knotty problems of the present require a different approach. I can certainly see the advantages of having a magician who can pass an amulet over any substance and tell what it is, or know someone’s health at a glance, or discover the location of an unseen object…” A brief glitter shone momentarily in Tiberius’ eyes. “Indeed, you could do worse than myself for a patron.”

Kirk knew better that to accept right away. He frowned and rubbed his jaw. *What would I be getting into? The man does have considerable political clout…*

“One solidus and five denarii per month?” Tiberius offered, closing fast. …*and money.* “That’s very tempting, but I’d have to think it over for a while…”

“Of course, you would live in my household. I imagine you can’t wait to escape from that crowded stable down in the Plebian section.”

*Wait a minute…* “It’s a rather nice house, actually.”

“Oh?” Tiberius backtracked a bit. “Well, no doubt it’s different from you usual surroundings in Hibernia, but I assure you that there are much better places to live. After dinner I’ll be happy to show you the house…hmm, and some of its furnishings. Would you care for some more wine?” He poured quickly, before Kirk could refuse.

“Ah, thank you.” Kirk noticed that this wine wasn’t cut with water. He almost laughed at the transparency of the trick. *Hoping to get me drunk on this fruit juice?* Kirk smiled innocently and drained half the cup in one pull. *You Romans obviously don’t know about distilling… Yes, I think I can teach you a thing or two!* “Concerning your generous offer, I will certainly think it over, but I can’t give you an answer for a few days yet.”

“Oh, of course. Nothing hurried…” Tiberius allowed himself a slight smile, prolonged an extra second as he glanced at the tide-level in Kirk’s wine cup. “Only bear in mind that it may be a long while before you receive a similar offer—long enough that you may grow exceedingly tired of working in the mint.”

“Oh, I won’t wait too long.” Kirk gingerly felt the muscles in his arms. *If rescue doesn’t come in the next few days… How long? Weeks? Months? Years?!—No, don’t think about that. Just make plans…* Kirk slugged down some more wine, barely tasting it. “If I’m going to be here for a while, I might as well earn as much as I can. I’m…quite a stranger here, very ignorant.”

“Ah, you’re lucky I found you. Have some more wine? This is excellent Velletraean…” Tiberius smiled sourly, as if at some dark private joke. “Yes, behind the sunny façade Rome harbors secret evils, of which most men are unaware. I have done what I can to combat them, but I am blocked by the power of the Emperor and those who have gone over to him. My only hope is to keep my head down, pretend acquiescence and hope eventually to gain enough power to begin setting things right. I need all the help I can get, Démas.”

“Including me? I don’t see what I could do.” …*Emperor*?”
Tiberius smiled again, with a little more feeling. “Why, Démas, if that amulet of yours could do no more than examine food for poisons that alone would make you immensely helpful to me.”

“P— you expect to be poisoned?!?”

“It is unlikely, at least at the present, but one should take proper precautions. So many, so very many of the survivors have gone over to this new rule…” Tiberius glanced behind him, nervously enough to be sincere. “I’m suspect, you know, on account of my family’s political views—not to mention those of my own that I’ve indiscreetly let slip to the wrong people. The Emperor’s spies have never been able to prove anything actionable, but then…” He shrugged eloquently. “They’re always trying…something.”

*Professional paranoia?* Kirk wondered. *Or just impressing the yokel? Play along…* he put on a suitably impressed look, salted it with hints of wine-taking-effect, and generally did his best to nudge Tiberius into talking further.

Tiberius was more than willing to be nudged. “You see, I am one of a vanishing breed—a believer in the Old Republic. There are so few of us now who remember what life was like under the old constitution, so many who have been… How shall I say it? Seduced, corrupted and bought off by this new Imperium. How soon people forget their lost glories when their bellies are full! A tragic commentary on the nature and weaknesses of mankind. More wine, Démas?”

“Sure.” Kirk gave a sloppy smile. “Wha’ happened to the Ol’ Republic?” *Ancient political history never was my strong point… I’ve heard one side of this story; now tell me the other.*

“Hardships. Demagoguery. Radicalism. Civil war…and certain aforementioned weaknesses of men.” Tiberius heaved a dramatic sigh, and paused to ring a small bell. A well trained servant entered silently, place a bowl of fruit and a basket of rolls on the table and withdrew as discreetly as a shadow. “The expansion of our lands after the defeat of Carthage brought sudden new wealth, which all too many people were unable to handle. People became softened and corrupted with easy living, forgetting the sober virtues of our hard working ancestors. They thought only of their own comfort and not of the welfare of the State. You’ve heard of such cases before, have you not?”

“Oh, yes. Lots of times.” *Tallies with historical accounts of what happened to Rome in my universe. Familiar ground. Easier to understand than Flamma’s tale…*

“Why, even Plebians these days expect to sleep on goose feather pillows, instead of a good round log under their heads. Ah, these degenerate times!”

“Huh?”

“And the demands they make of government! Totally unreasonable! They want more than simple justice and proper defense; now they expect the State to cure every ill, restore the Golden Age, make every man a king and banish every form of death, save old age. Can you imagine such a thing, people making such demands?”

“Yes, I’ve heard of that.” *That’s what our histories say…*

“They even demanded the total abolition of poverty. Land redistribution. Did you ever hear of the Gracchus brothers? Those radicals wanted to limit the amount of land any one citizen could own to a mere 1000 hectares, if you please, and to confiscate the excess land and divide it up among the poor, as if the average welfare beggar would know what to do with good land if he got it!”

“Uh…”
“Well, the Gracci were killed in street brawls, much to Rome’s good luck. But that didn’t stop the insane demands. People began demanding a grain dole for the poor—not just in times of famine or war, mind you, but all of the time! What could be more likely to encourage laziness and idleness, I ask you?”

“Er, maybe…”

“To shorten a long, sad tale, the next civil crisis that required a bit of belt tightening so incensed these unreasonable fools that riots resulted. The entirely reasonable attempts of the government to restore order caused something on the order of a revolt. Complete civil chaos! Sad, sad…” Tiberius discreetly refilled Kirk’s cup. “Martial law was put into effect, as was clearly necessary, but the commoners stewed for revolt. They sought champions for their fancied rights, men who would promise them the moon in exchange for power, and of course there were all too many unscrupulous men willing to take advantage of that opportunity. Can you understand the danger of the situation?”

“Oh, yes,” Kirk agreed. That much history I remember…

“In a case like that you get demagogues, popular leaders voted into power who then turn around and become tyrants.”

“Precisely,” Tiberius beamed. “In this case, his name was Julius Caesar.”

“Oh!” Kirk sat up straighter, seeing pieces of old stories falling into place. “So that’s why he was assassinated!”

“I see you’ve heard the story even in Hibernia.” Tiberius nodded, pleased.

“There’s a famous play about it, mostly concentrating on Brutus. ‘The noblest Roman of them all…”

Tiberius blinked several times. “Indeed,” he said, dryly. “Quite noble, quite brave—and unfortunately, not very astute, either in politics or in battle.”

“I remember… He lost the battle of Philippi to Caesar’s followers—” What did Shakespeare say? “Ah, Mark Anthony…” Tiberius winced at Kirk’s accent, “—and someone called Lepidus, and I forget who the third one was.”


“Oh. What happened to him?”

Tiberius gave Kirk an unfathomable look. “He won.”

“Oh.”

“He became dictator of the entire Imperium, replaced the old constitution with one of his own design, and now rules a contented and cow-like populace with almost unlimited power. He has bought off the commons with the grain dole and amusements—”

“‘Bread and circuses’, ” Kirk echoed. Yes, this sounds a helluva lot more like the history of my timeline’s Rome!

“Precisely.” This time Tiberius’ smile looked quite genuine. “And the opposition—what little of it survived the Civil War—is kept almost completely powerless.”

How? By keeping your head down?"

Tiberius glanced suspiciously as Kirk’s wine cup, as if he hadn’t expected that sharp a question this far down the bottle. “Hmmm, yes,” he admitted, flashing that wry smile again that grudgingly conceded points, “I have spent much of my life being subdued, polite, efficient and hard working in public service, keeping my true feelings largely unvoiced, playing the part of the dutiful son. Of course, I’m suspected anyway, but nothing—”

“Son?” Kirk interrupted.

“Ah, yes.” Tiberius leaned back with the air of someone about to display a stage magic trick. “You see, shortly after I was born, the emperor took a fancy to my mother.”

“Your—What?”

Hold it. I seem to remember something about…

“Unfortunately, my mother returned his feelings. She left my father and married the then-dictator, now-emperor, and has stayed with him ever since. As he has no sons of his own, only a single daughter, this puts me in something of an advantageous position. I was obliged to add to it by divorcing the woman I loved and marrying the Emperor’s wretched daughter instead. Thus, between family connections and my long record of substantial public service, I am the most likely candidate for the office when the Emperor dies.”

“Uh-uh…” Kirk nodded slowly, seeing where this was going. “And…when you get into office, you’ll try to restore the old republic?”

“Exactly.” Tiberius smiled sincerely, filling his own cup. “Need I add that, as my ally, you yourself will be in an extremely…favorable position?”

“I…see.”

Calm down. Don’t make too many plans yet. Look this over carefully… There are too many bones in this. First off, why should he tell all of this to a stranger? I could just walk out and sell this info to first bidder… Unless he’s having me watched. Or planning to make sure of my…

Kirk felt his scalp prickle. One false move and I might get a knife in my back.

He carefully set an impressed and stupidly greedy look on his face. “That would be niccccce…” He slurred deliberately. “I’m really tired of shoveling stuff.” Look at him; reassured. I’m safe for a while. Think this over… Who is this ‘Emperor’ anyway? So far all I’ve heard of are the ‘Senate’, ‘Popular Assembly’, ‘First Speaker’ and ‘Imperator’. Exactly who is running the country? This Rome’s politics are a lot more complicated that the Rome I remember… “That’s quite an offer,” he continued. “I understand that all this is…uhm, a long range project, but still…”

“Yes, you understand.” Tiberius leaned closer. “One must think of goals years in advance. Do you know how few men have such foresight anymore? Such vision? Such- such—”

“Perspective?”

“Precisely! Ah, yes. That is our one advantage over the corrupted common herd; that excellent forward vision which so few possess anymore in these degenerate times.”

Kirk hid his expression behind his wine cup. Is he talking about the psychic powers the…ruling priesthood used to have? Or does he mean the kind of perspective you get from education? I’ve got a funny feeling about this… What was it I heard Flaviniana saying about schooling for the poor? Or Perinna about the fall of Etruria… “Is this b’cause’ve bad education these days?” he asked innocently, “Or interbreeding?”

“Both.” Tiberius shrugged impatiently. “A proper education requires more wealth than one can
easily acquire these days, what with these wretched new plantation taxes, and the wholesale slaughter of the well-bred during the Civil Wars has left very few of the truly gifted alive to benefit from learning anyway. The low-bred sort cannot more absorb higher education than a mule can learn to talk.”

“Uh-uh.” You’re a real sweet guy, Tiberius. You’d get on fine with the Klingons. “Don’t cast ‘pearls before swine, huh?”

“Bravo! You understand perfectly!” Tiberius’ smile was utterly sincere—and not pretty to see. “What a marvelously apt phrase. Heh! Of course, bearing the same name as the sorceress Circe, no doubt you are well aware that most men are readily turned into swine. Heh! Heh! Yes, Démas, you have that invaluable quality I seek, and I need such men about me.”

“Ah…thank you.” ‘Let me have fat, sleek-headed men about me. Yon Cassius hath a lean and hungry look.’ There are lots of things I don’t understand about local politics, but some things I comprehend all too well. I’ve seen your kind before, sweetie; on Platonius, Stratos, Tellarus—Under different shapes, the colossal arrogance is the same. “I’m not sure what help I could give you…”

“But are you willing to try?

“Well, try. Yes.” How long will I last if I say otherwise?

“Splendid! Let’s drink on it.” Tiberius lifted his cup and swigged.

Wondering what he’d let himself in for, Kirk did likewise.

“To the Old Republic!” Tiberius raised his cup again.

“The Old Republic,” Kirk dutifully followed.

“To the restoration of the Republic!”

“The Resht- Restoration.” Kirk remembered to slur his words a little.

“Indeed.” Tiberius finally put his cup down, looking satisfied.

The noiseless servant tiptoed in, bearing a covered dish. Before he could set it down, Tiberius waved it away. “No, nothing so plain,” he snapped. “Fetch the roast duck.”

The servant hastily bowed and removed the dish.

How did Tiberius know that dish was ‘plain’ while it still had the cover on? Kirk wondered. I’ll bet credits to tribbles it wasn’t something I’d want to eat! …How do I get out of this?

“Yes, the Restoration. Have some more wine?” Tiberius relaxed noticeably as he refilled both cups and began draining his own. “We’ll make great changes, Démas. The Old Constitution, the old rights of citizens, the old stern virtues, all that this slothful generation has forgotten.”

“Right.” Something there. Something… Precisely where did this timeline divide from mine? Julius Caesar seems the same, and the uproar after his death, and Mark Anthony… Who’s ‘Octavianus’? I recall an Emperor Augustus in charge when the dust settled after Mark Anthony’s takeover, but not Octavianus… That must be the difference, the point where timelines diverged.

“—And an end to this government by the unfit,” Tiberius was saying. “Enough of ‘Imperial’ rule. No more of these butchers and bakers and fatherless sons of army camp followers raised up by the
Emperor’s favoritism. We shall go back to the old form, government by the properly trained and qualified, rule by the best. Let us drink to the Best Men!”


“It’s a military term, meaning commander-in-chief of all the armies,” Tiberius flicked off impatiently. “But for my mother’s second husband, that exact position would now be mine. Ah, how much Rome lost! The old constitutional powers of the better class of citizens, unlimited freedom to own land, livestock, slaves—”

“Huh?” Wait a minute—

“Oh, yes! That wretched demagogue has passed laws, if you please, that limit the number of slaves a plantation owner can keep! In these decadent days, only one-third of one’s plantation laborers may be slaves. The rest must be hired freemen, and of course the workmen’s unions—which Octavianus encourages to no end—insist on setting prohibitively high prices for common labor. Why, the cost of free labor is almost enough to put plantation owners out of business! No doubt that’s what he intends, with all this freeing of slaves.”

Kirk felt his jaw drop as all the political gossip he’d heard in this town snapped together in a single image. Civil War. Slave owners lost, but hope for a rematch. New system: new rights, freedom, opportunity for the poor—if they can keep it. Society hanging in the balance—Flamma’s vision! Me! Me in this—

“Oh, quite true.” Tiberius misread his expression. “It’s clear enough where his policies are leading; destroy the Best Men, free all the slaves, give them the vote and let them rule—for which, of course, they bless his name. Yes, destroy quality and rule by quantity: out with the Republic, and in with this wretched democracy. That’s where this reckless enfranchisement leads: rule, not by the best, but by the lowest. Octavianus claims to seriously believe that common laborers, shopkeepers and former slaves have the wit to operate a government! In apparent evidence of this, he makes citizens of slaves, gives full voting privileges to anyone, practically for the asking! Mob rule, Démas. Mob rule!”

“…’Reckless enfranchisement’…” Kirk repeated, head whirling. The excuse of every tyrant who ever put down a democracy—and so many of them did it by taking over, corrupting a free system! Hitler was legally elected. This bigoted bastard really could do it!

“Oh, you cannot imagine how this cheapens citizenship!” Tiberius sailed on, sure of his audience. “Free food, free votes, free land and farming tools, even free schools now! As if freedmen and Plebians and even most Knights had the wit to appreciate what they haven’t earned! In the days of the Old Republic, men knew that such things were not simply given away to any lout fortunate to be born on Roman land; they were high privileges, earned only by proof of service to the State—often over several generations per family—and liable to be revoked for improper behavior. There was a time, just before the Civil Wars, when not only the Plebians but the Knights as well lost their voting privileges—a mild enough punishment, one should think—for rioting. Were they grateful that they did not lose their freedom, their lives or much of their property as well? Not a bit of it. Such an outcry they raised! One would think we had put out the sun!”

“‘We’?” Kirk managed to ask.
“The Nobles, of course. Those who have proven their value to the State by the old traditions. My family proved that ages ago; the Claudians were a Noble—even a Patrician—family as far back as the founding of the Republic. The gods only know how my mother could have thrown all that away to go running off with this- this- upstart Octavianus! Love is said to make fools of women, as well as the weaker minded sort of men, but to think that a Claudian woman could so forget her duties to the State, to tradition, to her family, and to my real father. Ah, there’s no such soft headedness in the Claudian line; it must be the Livian blood. Her father’s family were relatively recent nobility, you know; too little time to breed high virtues solidly into the line.”

“Livian blood…?” Wait, wait, I can almost remember something—

“Her full name is Claudia Livia Drusilla, commonly called Livia. I’m surprised you haven’t heard mention of her already; she meddles outrageously in government affairs, has even made a personal project of the city’s new public Fire Department. Of course, he allows it, takes her advice, even gives her official posts in the civil service. Can you imagine the disgrace of having a woman for Fire Commissioner of Rome?! I don’t doubt she was behind that law of his which gave the vote to women, even of the Noble class… Of course, with the vote also came taxation, so Nobles could no longer save their property by placing it in their wives’ ownership, which—gods know—was bad enough. It encouraged females to think highly of themselves, meddle in politics… No doubt, that error on my father’s part is what encouraged my mother to her rebelliousness. And of course Octavianus can always use the tax money to fund his eternal gifts to the commoners…”

“Livia. Right.” Kirk pressed his hand to his forehead, feeling other fragments of long ago history lessons and recent conversations fall into place. In my timeline there was a first Emperor named Augustus. Married to a woman named Livia. He was succeeded by her son—Tiberius.

“Believe me, when I become Emperor, that will be changed,” Tiberius enthused, flushed with wine and hope. “There still exist certain rare legal conditions whereby persons of proven bad conduct, ‘bad public morals’ I believe the term is, can be barred from public office and even removed from the voting roles. I can use those laws. I can put a stop to all this free land nonsense, all this free education nonsense—”

Tiberius… Kirk felt the hair lift off his scalp as he finally realized just who, and what, he was looking at. Famous for tyranny, terrorism, corruption and an incredibly perverse private life. He built the Praetorian Guard into a private army, reduced the Senate to a rubberstamp, legally-and-otherwise killed off all his political opposition—what was I just thinking about Hitler?! In my timeline, Tiberius did pull it off!

“—But, first,” Tiberius was saying, carried away on his personal vision. “We’ll have to remove all of those New Men that the Emperor has packed into the Senate and the Tribunician offices. That will be difficult, but not impossible. For example, some can be eliminated by placing trustworthy allies in the Censor’s office and passing some stringent new ‘morality’ laws, on the precedent of those existing ones I mentioned. Thereby we can dispose of, say, every Senator who ever held a dinner party that lasted an hour after sundown, or even Tribunes who parents were married by the Common-law or possibly even the Double Exchange form. ‘Morality’ is an excellent weapon, you know; who’d dare oppose it? Who will vote for immorality, eh?”

“Uh…huh…” Kirk nodded blankly. All that build-up… The ‘Old Republic’ – to this! ‘Rule by the best’, the ‘Best Men’, the Nobles. Octavianus beat them, freed slaves and gave everybody the vote, and… This Rome may have started diverging from mine a long time ago, but Octavianus—whoever his is—he’s the high point of the difference, this so-goddam-different Rome with its people strong and healthy and intelligent and free—
"Of course that won’t do for all of them," Tiberius hitched still closer, giving Kirk a smile that bordered on the obscene. “For some, we’ll have to employ more *private* means…”

—And this Tiberius would pull it back, turn this Rome into the living hell that mine became—

“Surely you can guess how valuable a loyal magician could be for such work,” Tiberius purred. “Simply by gathering useful information with that amulet of yours—information which could possibly be construed as proof of ‘sedition’ under certain forgotten old laws…”

*He wants me for that!*

Tiberius smiled expectantly.

Kirk suddenly remembered that he had his phaser, too. *All I have to do is draw and use it. Zap. Disappeared. Nobody will ever know where he went. Safe. And why the hell not? No Prime Directive here; this isn’t my universe and all bets are off!* “You know…” he smiled, showing teeth. “I have other amulets, too. One of them can be even more useful to Rome…” He slid his hand to his belt, reaching for the phaser.

Right then the door crashed open and the servant ran in. Tiberius jumped as if bee stung. The servant bowed, literally gibbering.

“What the hell?” Kirk asked politely, of anyone; his fingers stopped an inch short of his phaser. “Speak up, slave!” roared Tiberius. “And speak clearly, or I’ll have the skin of your back blistered right off!”

“Guest!” the servant managed. “Here! Now! Coming in, right now! The greatest Lady in Rome—”

“Oh, good gods!” Tiberius turned the color of sour milk.

The *Empress herself?* Kirk pulled his hand back in plain sight. *Can’t shoot now. But if she somehow knows what he’s up to—*

The Great Lady swept in like a windjammer under full sail. Kirk realized that she wasn’t really seven feet tall; she just gave that impression, especially in her voluminous all-white dress, cloak, embroidered headdress and long white veil. She looked to be late middle aged, quite shrewd, coolly amused and enormously self-assured. She radiated power like an electric halo.

“Greetings, Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero,” she said, a snap of irony in her voice. “I do hope I have not interrupted your dinner.”

“Uh… Oh, no. I mean, not yet. The- the main course hasn’t been served yet…” Tiberius sounded as terrified as he looked. Kirk wouldn’t have believed it if he hadn’t seen it.

“How fortunate,” the Lady purred. “I believe the magician Démas Kirke had a previous dinner engagement. Did you not, sir?” She turned an arch smile on Kirk.

“Er, I was invited to the House of the Vestals,” Kirk admitted. “My guide brought me here. Has there been some sort of mistake?”

“Indeed,” she said, mimicking Tiberius’ tone perfectly. “*Tsk, tsk.* It isn’t well-mannered, you know, to go about stealing other people’s dinner guests.”

Tiberius mumbled something about not realizing that Kirk had a previous engagement when he sent
his man to fetch him. Kirk had a hard time keeping his face straight.

“How fortunate then that I arrived in time.” The Lady smiled toothily. “I doubt if I could have rescued you, Démas, had you already started on the mushrooms.”

Kirk hadn’t thought it possible, but Tiberius turned two shades paler.

*Mushrooms?* Kirk wondered. *What does that mean? Is she just poking his paranoid streak by showing that she knows the details of his dinner menu? Or… What was in that covered dish?*

“How fortunate then that I arrived in time.” The Lady smiled toothily. “I doubt if I could have rescued you, Démas, had you already started on the mushrooms.”

“Come, Démas.” The Lady extended a hand to Kirk. “The hour grows late, and the sun sets early at this time of year. Shall we go?”

“Er, if you say so, Ma’am.” Kirk slid off the couch, paused to give Tiberius an apologetic shrug, and followed the Lady out of the room. He noted that Tiberius reached for his wine cup with a shaky hand, not even bothering to watch them go. He had the look of a man who was about to indulge in some serious drinking.

*All right. This has got to the Empress, Kirk guessed, almost trotting to keep up with her. Who else could scare him so badly, or wield so much obvious power? And how did she know—* “Beg you pardon, Ma’am, but how did you know where I was?”

“A little bird told me.” She smiled enigmatically.

Kirk decided to leave that one for later. “And where are we going?”

“To the Palace,” she said. “This incident has necessitated a slight change of plans. The Imperator will want to speak with you at once.”

“Uh, I see.” He didn’t, really. *I seem to be falling in over my head with local politics. How the hell did it happen?* “Would you mind telling me what that little scene back there was all about?”

Perhaps I should.” She smiled wryly. “That man’s sympathies and deviousness are well enough known to those of us who are highly placed and deeply involved with affairs of government. When we learned that he had intercepted you for his dinner guest, we surmised that he would move quickly to suborn you into his endless web of schemes. He has a habit of doing that with influential—and locally naive—foreigners. Worse, we feared that if he thought you a political threat, he might arrange for your…hmm, disposal.”

Not mushrooms: toadstools! Kirk turned cold. “It…took me awhile to realize what he wanted. I let him think I was, uh, persuadable. Whew! Has this kind of thing happened very often? What the hell is a man like that doing in a position of power?”

“That,” the Lady sighed, “is a long, dark and complex story.”

They cleared the front door, and she led him to their transport. It wasn’t a litter this time but a white painted and canopied carriage drawn by white oxen. No less than six rod-and-axe-bearing lictors, all dressed in white, stood positioned before and behind the carriage. Impressed, Kirk helped the Lady onto the seat and swung up beside her. The lictors looked a little nonplussed at that, but the Lady quelled them with a glance.

“Lead on,” she rapped out. “To the Imperial Palace.” As two of the lictors took the bridles of the lead oxen and tugged them forward, the Lady drew the curtains. “To ensure privacy,” she said. “You may rest assured that no one will impugn my honor for riding thus concealed with a man, but we’d rather not start rumors as yet of our consulting with the most famous new magician in Rome.”
“Famous?” Kirk laughed. “What for?” I haven’t done much except…well, modify a chariot harness, diagnose an old man’s ailment as fatigue and assay gold at the mint.”

“Your humility is most becoming, sir,” the Lady smiled. “But surely you don’t think you can appear above the Forum in a shower of light, fall into a pushcart in front of 1000 onlookers, appear in court on a charge of sorcery before the First Speaker himself, design a harness which enables the Blue Team to win every race they enter thereafter, commission serious and complicated services from both the temple of Mercurius and the Augur Flamma Regillia, cut down valuable assaying time at the temple of Juno Moneta—and not expect to be noticed!”

Kirk gave a short laugh. “No, I guess not. I was…just misled by the calm way everybody accepted me. I wasn’t mobbed by excited crowds and didn’t cause any panics.”

“You did, however, cause considerable gossip.” The Lady smiled again. “Your acquaintances have done little but talk of you for the past few days. Such talk eventually reached high places.”

“Hmm. Yes, I suppose it would…” Figures. In a world with no source of news except wall poster newspapers, gossip would more than just an amusement. If I could improve their printing, paper…

“Just why does the Imperator want to see me?”

“Curiosity, of course. Tell me Magician Démas, what do you think of the people and the city of Rome?”

Good question. “It’s…impressive. So much more…uhm, civilized than I expected…” Oh, go ahead and be honest! “What amazes me most are the people—not just the few wealthy or powerful ones I’ve met, but everybody. They’re all prosperous, healthy, level-headed, smart and- and basically decent, if you understand what I mean. I’m not sure what I was expecting, but…” Kirk remembered that other Rome, and other cities, a universe a way. “I guess I’ve seen too many places where a handful of people are extravagantly rich and powerful, and everybody else is poor, sickly, illiterate, miserable and vicious. This is such a change…”

“Yes,” the Lady murmured. “I understand perfectly. The contrasting sides of the eternal conflict… There are too many places like that in this world: all over the East, in the Persian Empire, in the wreckage left after Alexander dies, even in the sad ruins of the glory that was Greece. It was once like that here, too.”

“I can’t believe it!”

“Oh, yes. During the bad old days, before Caesar.”

“The last days of the Old Republic?” Kirk Guessed.

“True.” The Lady pursed her lips. “Long ago, when Rome was small and poor, everyone was poor together. There was a closer equality then, if only because no one had the power to oppress his neighbors, and more people had the vote than the Nobles cared for… Hmm, you’ve never heard the tale of Virginia have you?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Well, there was once a time when none but the Nobles could hold public offices. A particularly corrupt Noble lusted after a poor man’s young daughter, called Virginia, and when he could not have her by fair means, he resorted to foul ones. He forged documents, bribed witnesses, brought suit against the poor man for a supposed debt and claimed the daughter as payment—on the grounds that she was the daughter of a slave woman and therefore not a citizen. He also bribed the jury, so that he
won the case handily. The girl was understandably terrified and her poor father was driven to
distraction.”

“Whew! Understandable.”

“Rather than hand over his daughter to the Nobleman’s cruelty, he killed her—and himself.”

“Uh…”

“The entire Plebian population of the city was so incensed by this outrage that it packed up, lock,
stock and barrel, and abandoned the city.”

“Good grief! All of them?”

“Every last one. Needless to add, the economy collapsed and the city fell into total chaos.” The Lady
smiled archly, showing teeth. “It most effectively proved to the Nobles how much Rome needed its
Plebians. You see in those days, Rome had far fewer slaves—”

“Hah! And the Nobles weren’t used to cooking their own dinners, washing their own laundry or
sweeping their own floors!”

“Or cleaning their own toilets. No indeed. Heh! Before two days had passed, the Senate sent out a
special messenger to beg the Plebians to return, promising them new laws, new legal rights, new
political offices—such as Tribunes—for which only Plebians were eligible—veto power in the
Senate, greater power of the Popular Assembly, a thorough overhauling of the legal system and,
incidentally, a law whereby children always take the status of their higher ranking parent. The
Plebians accepted and returned.”

“…Wow. A real, live general strike! Maybe the first in history—”Oops. Can the translator cover
that? “I mean, er, a walkout…”

“What a novel term! Yes, precisely.” The Lady peered ahead, to where a horde of pedestrians and
pushcart peddlers were hastily clearing out of the way. They plainly knew the importance of this
particular oxcart. “That change ushered in the first age of Rome’s greatness, little though the Nobles
like to admit it, but those who were wise learned great statecraft from it.”

“Division of powers, limitations of power and the use of the general strike…” Some of these old
games go ‘way back… Kirk realized that he was whistling the opening bars of “Solidarity Forever”
and stopped.

“Oh, yes.” The Lady gave him an odd, pleased look. “Unfortunately, some of the cleverer Nobles
learned too. For many generations they sought a way around the reforms, around the new power of
the lower ranks, and with the new conquests and land gains they found it.”

“Big plantations and massive slavery!” Kirk sat up sharply. “Hell, my own—er, my people fought a
whole civil war over that!”

“Yes,” said the Lady. “So did we.”

“Uh, in our case, it was a bad war, but it took only four years.”

“In our case, it was a very bad series of wars and it took over a century.”

Lincoln freed the slaves…” Kirk murmured, wiping his forehead. “All of them.”
“With us it was first Julius Caesar and then Octavianus.”

“They’re not all free, though.”

The Lady shrugged. “I suppose there will be some slaves as long as there is crime. Better a five-year slavery sentence, after all, than to execute every thief who cuts a purse.”

“Uh… Don’t you have jail?” Of course no modern rehabilitation techniques, but…slavery for crime?! “Five years?”

“Sentences vary, but that’s a good average. What is ‘jails’?”

“Uh, never mind. You mean the only slaves you have anymore are criminals working off their sentences?”

“Hmm, not all, unfortunately. We have very few prisoners of war these days, since the peace, but the various member states of the Imperium have local options—and in some of the eastern states, that means there is still hereditary slavery.” The Lady wrinkled her delicate nose. “The First hasn’t been able to do much about that yet.”

“And… meanwhile there are still quite a few Nobles with slave worked plantations, keeping a tight grip on Rome’s food supply.”

“Yes. You learn most rapidly, Démas. I think you’ll do very well.”

“Wha— At what?”

“Advisor to the First Speaker, of course. Ah, here we are.”

“Uh…” Tangled in the local politics, did I say?!?

The cart stopped. Kirk looked out. He saw nothing but a small one floor house made of cheap yellow stone. “So where is here?”

“Why, this is the Imperator’s palace, as I told you before.” She gestured impatiently toward the small building.

“Palace? That?!”

“Certainly.” The Lady looked surprised. “It’s on the Palatine Hill, isn’t it?”

Kirk glared suspiciously at his translator. Names sure can change their meaning across space and time, he decided, stepping out of the carriage. “Ah, could you please explain to me the relationship between the Imperator and the First Speaker?”

“Different titles for different offices,” she said, getting out neatly. “’Imperator’ these days means civilian chief of all the armies. ‘First Speaker of the Senate’ means precisely that. At present, they’re the same person—Octavianus Caesar, whom you’ll meet presently. He has other titles also, but most of them are purely ceremonial.”

“I see. And Tiberius is…?”

“He does, unfortunately, do excellent work as Chief General of the Eastern Armies and Overseer of Treasury Clerks. But the Chief Overseer of all Government Clerks is the Lady Livia, so he’s well controlled in that department.”
“Wait a minute!” Kirk caught up with her as she sailed toward the little house. “You said Livia is—then who are you?”

For once, the Lady lost her cool. She gaped at him pure astonishment. “Why, didn’t you know?—Oh, of course! There are no Vestals or anything like them in Hibernia, I hear.”

“You mean, you—” All the obvious power she has, the political knowledge, the way Tiberius panicked—

“I am the Lady Ocellina Marcella, the Chief Vestal.”

“…Oh.”

She grinned girlishly at his pole axed look. “My dear, sir, I don’t know how such things are done in Hibernia, but here in Rome—while we rarely meddle in politics—when we do so, we are the final authority on public matters. We also keep the records of all the laws, wills and court decisions of Rome.”

“You mean… The Vestal Virgins are like the- the Supreme Court?!”

“What a novel term! But accurate. Yes, that is accurate.”

“Good god…”

“Oh? Which one?”

No, don’t get into that now! “My, uh, patron deity back in the old country. It’s not important…” He glanced nostalgically toward the sky. “Oh, no! The sun is going down!”

“That is important?”

“Yes! Yes! I left word at the Temple of Rome Defended that I’d be there every evening at sundown to wait for my friends. If they show up, I won’t be there! How will they find me?”

“There, there, I’ll see to it. I’ll send a messenger there to watch for them, or stop myself on my way home. You just go on in. Hurry now; you don’t want to keep the First Speaker waiting.”

“Oh, certainly not.”

Kirk squared his shoulders and marched through the center arch of the ‘palace’ porch. A doorman there saw him coming and hastily pulled the door open.

“The magician Démas Kirke!” he announced to all inside.

Kirk, seeing only the small crowd around the table in the room beyond, strode boldly through the door—and thwacked his head on the low lintel. His first full view of the interior of the Imperial Palace of Rome was an eyeful of pain-stars, and his first word to the First Speaker of the Senate and Imperator was, “Owww!”

A sympathetic laugh greeted him. “Yes, sir, the rumors of your size were quite true,” said a woman’s voice. “You’re every bit as tall as Agrippa was.”

“True,” added an oddly familiar voice. “I recall Agrippa used to bang his head on that same lintel, almost every time.”

Kirk rubbed his eyes clear and stared at the speaker. It took him two seconds to recognize the man
and remember where he’d seen him before.

“My lord,” he gasped. “Judge Softie!”

To be Continued in Chapter XIII: Flight into Darkness
“To a nightmare of knowledge he opens up the gate.
A blinding revelation is served upon his plate:
That beneath the Greatest Love lies a hurricane of hate,
And God help the critic of the dawn.”

Phil Ochs, “Crucifixion”

Ashriliin, antennae aquiver, peered delightedly through the screens at the Enterprise’s engines. “It really is!” he chortled. “It’s a primitive matter-antimatter drive! What a relic!” Then he caught sight of Scott’s reddening face. “Er, but ingenious. Yes, marvelously ingenious. Did I ever tell you about the V’zmanthans? Incredible people! A whole technology based on steam power, even orbital spaceships. No star drive—that was our winning gift to them—but everything else—”

“Mr. Scott,” a cool Vulcan voice cut in. “A word with you for a moment, please.”

“Ach, sure.” Scott straightened up slowly. Now we’ll see fireworks. “Hey, Suvannaphong, take over showin’ oor guests aboot. Pardon me, Ashril; the Commander calls.”

“I understand.” Ashriliin didn’t look up; his eyes were fixed on the screen and his antennae pointed likewise.

Scott let Spock lead him away to the upper gallery, out of earshot of everyone else. “Whot’s the problem, Mr. Spock?” he asked, impatient to get on with this.

“The problem is Hawk. Where is he, Mr. Scott?”

“Och, in no trouble.” Scott’s face softened into a lecherous grin. “When last seen, he was goin’ into Bal’Tia’s cabin wi’ her. He didna look as if he were aboot ta discuss politics.”

Spock bit down a surge of outrage. “You allowed him to go off with one of the Imperials? Alone?”

“Weel, noo,” Scott continued to grin. “That’s no the sort o’ thing we Humans care ta do in front o’ witnesses.”

“I asked you to keep him under surveillance at all times.”

“I didna think ye meant I should watch him fook.” Something about Scott’s smile had a sharp, angry edge.

“I am not concerned with human mating habits! I am concerned that he may do other things—such as talk. Do you understand me, Mr. Scott?”

“Och, aye, but I got the distinct impression, from whot they were doin’, thot he had in mind ither uses for his mouth.”

Spock blushed green.
Scott saw it and laughed silently. *Chew on that, ye prissy Vulcan bastard.*

“Mr. Scott,” Spock fairly hissed. “I am well aware of the human tendency to abandon all common sense when sexually aroused—”

“Unlike Vulcans?” Scott couldn’t help saying.

The green blush vanished completely. Spock turned as pale as Scott had ever seen him.

*Oops. Better cool him off, Scott thought.* “Ye needna worry aboot him, Mr. Spock. I’ve never seen any sign that he’d do anythin’ sa foolish as ta leave us stranded in the wrong time. I do believe that ye can trust the mon ta know his business and keep ta it.”

“There you’ve seen nothing!” Spock snapped, fiercely enough to draw a look of surprise from Scott. “And you were ordered to keep him under constant surveillance.”

“I did.” Scott stopped smiling. “I could hardly follow him aroon’ by meself—’twould raise suspicions among oor hosts as weel as him—so I managed ta get close enough ta brush against him, an’ I put a wee beacon on the back o’ his shirt. ’Twas nae problem ta set a communicator ta follow it, and’ I kept the channel open for a guid long while—until he waltzed off inta the bedroom, ta be precise.”

“And what did you overhear?” Spock insisted, annoyed at Scott’s ingenious avoidance of direct observation. He had, he realized now, hoped that Scott’s too obvious personal presence would intimidate Hawk into good behavior.

“I heard a’ sort o’ borin’ drivel.” Scott shrugged. “Chatting’ aboot their history o’ philosophy, economics an’ daily life, manners an’ social position an’ a’ like thot. Whot I gather, these Imperials are sa ploddin’ly dutiful an decent that they’re domned dull. Nae an orgy in a carload, for a’ their easy lovin’ ways.” He twitched the ghost of a wry smile. “I keep rememberin’ my auld history lessons, an’ wondering’ if we got slanted information, Mr. Spock. Where’s Nero, where’s Caligula, an a’ thot bluddy lot? These seem ta have avoided such—an’ maybe sic are the grand exceptions, anyway: great oddities among basically guid folk, remembered just because they were the exceptions. From a’ I could tell, these folk have had no tyrants o’ any sort wi’ in livin’ memory, not anywhere—which is more than the Federation can say.”

Spock took a half step backward.

Scott noticed. His eyes narrowed. “From what I’ve seen,” he growled, “Howsoever oor Romans turned wrong, this lot went right.”

“For the wrong reasons,” Spock retorted.

“Captain Kirk, ye mean?”

“Precisely.”

“Och…” Scott sighed. “’Tis a’most a shame ta bring him back, then. He did a fine job wi’ them, did he not?”

“That is not our concern. We have our own timeline, our universe, to protect. This affection for the Imperials might prove treacherous if not controlled—and that is why I asked you to watch Hawk at all times.”

‘*Treachery*’? Scott raised an eyebrow at him. “Aren’t those rather hard words, Mr. Spock? Or do
ye really think sa little o’ Human loyalty thot ye imagine folks would drop a whole universe just for a bit o’ table talk an’ a roll in the hay?"

“It has been known to happen before,” Spock reminded him. “The blandishments of a single alien sufficed to suborn Lt. Palomas, if you will recall.”

Scott smiled un-prettily. “Do ye needle thot scar again, Mr. Spock, and I’ll knock yer bluidy teeth doon yer throat.”

Spock raised both eyebrows at him. “There is no need to become violent. I was merely quoting an example well known to both of us.”

“Oh, were ye, noo?” Scott gave a bitter laugh. “Then ye should remember thot she stuck wi’ us in the end. Do you think less o’ Dr. Hawk?”

“His personality is quite different.”

“Stronger, if anythin’. He’s a fierce-willed little mon; I grant him thot.”

“And entirely too self-willed. Also, he is not a member of the Starfleet, and not subject to the same training and psychological screening. I have seen good reason not to trust him. That should suffice, Mr. Scott. Now resume personal surveillance.”

Scott snorted and held out a communicator that bristled with extra wires. “This little gizmo’s homed in on his beacon, Mr. Spock. Do ye want ta hear whot he’s up ta, just turn it on. Do ye wish ta see him also, just go to any console wi’ a view screen, plug this black lead inta the channel-D outlet an’ turn on reception. If ye’re no satisfied wi’ ma surveillance, go look for yerself.”

Spock hesitated for a moment, then took the communicator and turned it on. All he could hear were distant noises of hard breathing and an indefinable rhythmic creaking. Puzzled, he glanced up—and saw Scott leering knowingly at him. “This is not conclusive proof of Hawk’s innocence,” he retorted.

“Oh?” Scott cocked his head to one side. “I thought ‘twas guilt needed provin’. ‘Presumed innocent’, an’ a’ like thot…”

“This is not a courtroom but an emergency situation.” Spock glanced at the nearest communications view screen. The console was temporarily occupied. He frowned with impatience.

“I see na pressin’ emergency,” said Scott. “The ship’s in na’ danger, oor friends ha’ gi’en us a’ the help an’ replacements we need, the Knaffbein stress effect is aboot gone fra’ the engines, an’ we’ll be ready ta go in anither two hours at the verra most. Hardly a red-alert situation, I’d say. Sa why a’ this attention ta one wee visitin’ scientist?”

“Because he is the weakest link,” Spock snapped, watching the sub-engineer at the console finish up her particular business. “I thought I made that clear to you in our last conversation.”

“Weel, ye didna. I’ve seen nae reason ta suspect the mon sa heavily. Would ye mind tellin’ me yer reasons for sa doin’—an’ fer askin’ me, of a’ people, ta do the spyin’?”

“Direct orders should require no explanations.” Nonetheless, he clearly requires some reinforcement… “Dr. Hawk is an excellent example of an alienated and personally unrestrained human. He has no binding loyalty to anything but his own ego and gratifications, and enjoys verbally abusing those humans who possess what he lacks. I should think you would have seen that for yourself at dinner yesterday.”
Scott gave him a distinctly odd look. “Na, I saw nae such thing. Whot I have seen is thot he’s quite dedicated ta his work—much like meself. Thot I can understand weel, Mr. Spock.”

“Dedication to one’s work is not sufficient for preventing…antisocial behavior. It involves no higher authority that enforces rules of conduct. You recall Dr. Daystrom, do you not?”

“Tisna the same.” Scott stared at him, puzzlement deepening. “Just th’ opposite, if anything’. Daystrom was fair distracted wi’ the need ta prove himself ta ither scientists. Hawk’s perfectly sure o’ himself. Why, hell, Daystrom’s trouble was too much worryin’ aboot ‘higher authority’. Hawk’s got nae need o’ it.”

“Yes, he does,” Spock insisted. “All humans do. Without such a standard, they have nothing to curb their selfish and aggressive impulses. Hawk has no such restraints, and is therefore untrustworthy.”

Scott’s expression altered in a why that Spock couldn’t read. “Ye mean,” he said slowly, “Thot ye think men a’ways need a master ta keep ‘em in line? Thot itherwise they’d do naethin’ but slaughter each ither an ruin a’ they touch?”

“Essentially correct.” When will that engineer finish and leave the console? “Though I would add that such an authority should be above human failings, for obvious reasons.”

So… Scott quietly ground his teeth, seeing the whole pattern laid out before him as clear as a wiring diagram. Ye think we’re beasts that need keepers! I never realized how much you despise Humans, Vulcan! Is this a new thing, or have you always had it—from despising the Human in yourself? “I suppose I should be flattered thot ye think me sa trustworthy, sa ‘restrained’. ” Damn you. “Is it because I’m a proven Starfleet officer, or because I’m a guid Engineer?”

“Neither.” Spock actually tapped his fingers, watching the occupied console and listening to the uninterrupted heavy breathing on the communicator. “Starfleet’s authority is largely a human invention and not infallible. Your engineering skills have nothing to do wit the question. I was referring to your adherence to a rigorous philosophical and ethical code, one not thoroughly shared by other members of this crew.”

Like you, Vulcan? “Oh? An’whot might thot be?”

Spock turned to give him the Vulcan equivalent of a surprised stare. “You are a Christian, are you not?”

Scott felt his jaw drop. Is that it? You think I—You think it means— The last detail fell into the pattern: Day’s proselytizing, Spock’s tacit alliance, Aquila’s easy argument, Hawk’s agreement and subsequent ‘surveillance’, and now this. I never truly stopped to think on it before. Now I do. And it’s wrong. Wrong! “Ye’re mistaken, Mr. Spock.” His voice sounded strange in his own ears.

“I beg your pardon?” Spock gave him a distinctly puzzled look.

“I mean, yon’s no where ma heart is.” Take your Holy Authority and shove it! “I’m an Engineer: first, last an’ a’ways. I believe in the laws o’ nature, which care naethin’ for who pays attention to ‘em—an’ I dinna gi’e a fat rat’s rump where they came from. The fine law o’ physics are religion enou’ for me.”

Spock blinked at him, looking faintly pole axed. “But…you possess ethical standards…”

“O’ bludy course! No frae any domned preacher’s carpin’, ether, but because I know I’ve got ta live wi’ ither people—an’ I just happen to like ‘em.”
“Than’s…all?” Spock asked faintly, feeling as if a trusted deck plate had suddenly given way beneath his feet.

“Aye! Bluidy all!” Scott folded his hands across his chest. “If ye think thot’s not enough, then act like a scientist an’ go check it oot. Yon view screen’s waitin’.”

Spock glanced at the console and saw the sub-engineer vacating it. He turned and stalked over to it, plugged the black lead into the channel-D outlet and pressed buttons.

The screen darkened for an instant, and then homed in on a close-up of the back of Ellison Hawk’s jacket. Hawk wasn’t in it. It was lying on a carpeted floor near other scattered clothes, including part of an Imperial uniform.

Scott chuckled knowingly.

Frowning, Spock adjusted the dials, pulled back the viewing range, noted movement to one side, homed in on it—and snatched back his hands as if the dials burned.

The screen showed a close view of a darkened bed. On it Hawk and Bal’Tia, quite naked, were wrapped in each others straining arms, their faces tight and exalted, their breathing matching perfectly. Their bodies lunged together and parted, lunged and parted, as smoothly as any fine-run machine.

Spock stared at them, stunned. He’d never observed humans mating before.

“Heh! ‘Tisna any political secrets he’s gi’en her!” Scott guffawed.

Spock hastily snapped the viewer off, blushing to the tips of his ears.

“A guid performance, I’d ca’ that,” Scott needled. “An’ who’d ha’ thought thot such a wee mon would be sa big in one particular part?”

“That is enough, Mr. Scott!” Spock yanked the black lead’s plug out of the channel-D socket, snapped the wired communicator closed and shoved it back into Scott’s hands. His face felt as if it were burning.

“Weel, sir, are ye satisfied thot Hawk’s don’ nae mair than I said he was doin’?”

“I am satisfied. I—”

“Ha! Nae sa much as he will be, I wager!”

“Continue-to-monitor-him-with-discretion,” Spock gritted. “When Hawk has finished his- his current activity, resume surveillance.”

“Oh? An’ hoo am I ta know when he’s finished?” Scott asked innocently.

“Use your own discretion.” Spock got up, turned and marched rigidly away.

“Aye, I’ll be discreet,” Scott smiled at the Vulcan’s retreating back. *Ye prissy bastard. Aye, think on it! Yon’s where your bloody distrust leads…*

He tucked the communicator back on his belt, and turned to see what Ashriliiin was up to, smiling as he noted the Roman sandals sticking out of an access chamber. *Now there’s a man after my own heart, he thought fondly. I can recognize him across space and altered time; know how his mind works, and call him a friend. No matter to me what gods he swears by or what fleet he pledges to; I*
know where his heart is. Aye, Ashriliin: the laws of physics are religion enough for me, too; the only difference between me and thee is that you probably have some little departmental god or goddess to represent them. Would it be Athena, now, or Vulcan?

Vulcan... Scott started toward the access hatch, and then stopped again. But you, Vulcan... He shook his head. For long I thought you too believed in the laws of nature...but lately I've seen you show another side. Too much of it. Fear of... Freedom. Love. Of life itself.

Scott glanced back at the way out that Spock had taken. His eyes narrowed. Aye. Narrower and narrower you circle, vulture-like. Where's your IDIC, Vulcan? Traded for a bloody cross! Why and how you've changed I don't know, but it's none for the better. You don't love life, Spock; you only hate the living part of yourself.

He shrugged and went over to the access hatch.

Unheard by the closed communicator, the creaking and heavy breathing stopped.

* * *

Hawk lay quietly in Bal'Tia's sweat slicked arms, drowsily running his fingers through her tangled hair. She purred and snuggled against this neck.

“Good?” She murmured.

“Oh, yes. Very good...” Hawk trailed a slow finger down her cheek. “I wish I could stay.”

“I think we have a few hours...”

“Not enough.” Hawk rolled on his back and stared at the ceiling. “A lifetime wouldn’t be enough.”

“What, have you fallen in love with me already?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Hawk smiled. “Too early to tell. It isn’t just you, though...”

“Oh, I should be jealous,” she giggled.

“It’s you and more. Your people, your universe, you... I like it here. Never mind that there’s so much to study; it’s more than that. It’s so free here. There’s no...” He frowned. “I’m not quite sure how to put this. There’s no great, constant, pervading sense of guilt, of shame, of eternal insufficiency, of always having to apologize for what you are, as if there were some impossible standard you’re supposed to live up to but never can... No self-hatred. That’s it. No unquestioned assumption that you’re born guilty and have to constantly prove yourself innocent...”

“I don’t understand.”

“You—your people—just assume that there’s a basic decency that all people share, and you treat each other accordingly. If people do better than that, they’re applauded for it—not just...forgiven. If people do worse than that, it has to be proved—like a civil crime—and it’s treated like- like an aberration, a temporary failure by a person who should know better. It’s like...you believe in crime, but not in sin. Can you see the difference?”

Bal’Tia frowned, trying to understand. “I think...it’s philosophically similar to some of the early pre-contact post-reform Vulcan ideas. They had this odd belief that all emotions were dangerous, and wrong, and needed constant suppression. Imagine despising one’s own nature like that! The poor things were quite miserable, as I recall. Fortunately they also believed in the value of all life,
appreciation rather than just tolerance, so various philosophers were able to argue that around into an appreciation of their own natures as well. The ‘IDIC Debates’, I think it was called.”

“I wish some of my universe’s Vulcans knew that.” Hawk gnawed at his lower lip. “There’s so much your people could teach us…” But they never will. One way or another, we’ll never see this universe again. Either it’ll go out like a light, or continue its separate way without us, forever out of our reach. I’ll never see this again, or you again, that’s for certain… If I go back…

—And what if I don’t?

He sat up beside her. “Bal’Tia, how does one go about joining the Imperium? How do I become a citizen?”

“You mean—” She sat up too, staring at him, face growing more joyful by the second. “You mean to stay with us?”

“Yes. Stay for the whole game. Live or die.”

“I- I’ll go look up the regulations.” Bal’Tia bounced off the bed and hurried away to her desk.

Hawk leaned back on the bed and grinned up at the darkened ceiling. “‘Alea jacta est’,” he whispered. ‘The die is cast’…

“Here,” said Bal’Tia. “There are several legal methods. The quickest way is simply to join the armed services.”

“Find the recruiting sergeant,” Hawk laughed. “And I’d better send a goodbye note to my old ship.”

…And if this whole universe dissolves in three hours, I’ll go out with it.

...Hell, I could die in worse company!

* * *

The Enterprise was in ‘night’ cycle, and the corridor lights were dimmed. Spock blinked painfully as his eyes readjusted to the brighter illumination of Dr. Day’s cabin. Agnes, intent on her tape viewer, didn’t notice.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Spock,” she said. “I just can’t pinpoint the date and time any closer. The Captain appeared somewhere in the year 7 BC, and that’s all I can gather. Have you had any luck analyzing the transporter malfunction?”

“The lab team is still interpreting the data,” Spock replied. “I will consult them when I leave here. It is imperative that we retrieve the Captain before he takes any effective action in that time period.”

“I understand perfectly, Mr. Spock.” Agnes smiled in boundless sympathy.

“I do not believe you do.” Spock looked away, unnoticed fingers rattling on the desk. “Even minor actions can cause remarkable changes in future history, as we once learned in a painful fashion. Changes this major…” He gestured vaguely toward the tape viewer. “Jim surely knew better. I cannot understand why he would do such a thing. The only possible answer is amnesia—and yet he left that message, which would have required some knowledge of his former position. I cannot imagine what could have happened to make him reverse his former loyalties so completely. Whatever the cause, we must reach him before it takes effect.”

“I do understand.” Agnes smiled again. “You’re worried that they might have discovered him, used
“Yes.” Spock shook his head sharply. “I can not find a more probable explanation. But precisely what pressure could have been brought to bear on him? Not threats to his crew, certainly, since he was alone. As for various methods of torture…” Spock paused, carefully opening his clenched fists. “He is a strong willed man, and the records note that he remained healthy and vigorous throughout his life. With their crude technology, the ancient Romans could not have effectively tortured him into such total acquiescence without…noticeably damaging him.”

“One can’t be too sure.” Day rolled her eyes and absently fluffed her curls. “The pagan civilizations, having no real concept of love or mercy, could often be quite ingenious at such things. There are very details historical records of the persecutions of the early Christian martyrs, recorded by survivors. Many of the accounts are quite…” She shuddered. “Horrid.”

Spock looked away until he was certain that his face didn’t show anything. “Captain Kirk has a… very forceful personality,” he said faintly. “And Starfleet officers are trained to resist such… treatment.”

“But all humans have their limits,” Day insisted. “Only great faith can lift one beyond them. I know Captain Kirk is a very good man, but…” She gave Spock a gently pitying look. “He doesn’t have that, does he?”

“No,” Spock sighed. “He does not. He is chiefly devoted to his ship, crew and military duties—admirable enough in themselves, of course—but nothing beyond them.”

“Haven’t you tried to show him something beyond?”

“I confess that I have not known how to begin. After this experience he may be more amenable, perhaps…”

“Then it could be that this whole horrifying business may turn out to be a blessing in disguise, showing people undeniable proof of the Master’s words, and the importance of faith, and where our universe would be without them.” She gently patted Spock’s hand. “You might save your Captain in more ways than one.”

“Let us hope so,” Spock replied stiffly. “In any case, he cannot be allowed to do that damage to…the proper course of history.”

“I know.” Again, Day gave him that look of utter forgiveness, understanding and sympathy. “If worse comes to worst, he will have to be sacrificed for the good of our whole universe.”

Spock flinched. He hadn’t really thought of that aspect. Of course it was a logical course of action, but he wished—most irrationally—that she hadn’t brought it up. “I will do whatever is necessary,” he hedged. “I would suggest that you now secure all tapes and equipment. The Enterprise will begin its time run in two hours and 38 minutes, and the voyage will be unavoidably difficult.”

“Yes, Mr. Spock.” Day smiled serenely. “And…I’ll pray for you.”

Spock marched out of her cabin and down the corridor, trying to push the disturbing end of that conversation out of his mind. It was surprisingly difficult to do, and that disturbed him. Is my control slipping? …I shall not allow that. He paused to do a brief concentration exercise, focusing on the nearest handy object—which happened to be the number plate on a cabin door.

Much to his dismay, the numbers moved. They wavered, swam, grew as difficult to see as the detail in a grainy photograph.
Lack of sleep, he recognized. *I have not slept since...before Jim was lost. And I have been under stress... Dangerous. Must not continue. I can afford an hour's sleep...*

It took 3.4 minutes to reach his cabin, 1.8 minutes to settle comfortably in his own bed, but an oddly immeasurable time to attain sleep. Although the physical temperature was unchanged, the room seemed peculiarly cold. The flames of the firepot flickered low and sullen. *I, Spock decided, am falling prey to imagination. Sleep is long overdue. Concentrate. Sink down...* Eventually his efforts proved successful, and he sank into welcome silence.

After a measureless time came a dream.

He was walking alone through the streets of ancient Rome, among gaily dressed natives whose faces were eerily familiar. He recognized the human ancestors of Aquila, Ashriliin and the others, even Ellison Hawk and Mr. Scott. They recognized him too, for they turned to look as he passed—and they laughed, cruelly and triumphantly. There was no restraint among them; in the open streets and plazas they fondled each other shamelessly, fought with each other over trifles, ate like wolves, drank until they fell down drunk, laughed and sang without order, danced and capered like mad things, baldly displaying every emotion he’d ever seen or heard of. There was nowhere that was not a perfect horror of riotous liberty to rest his eyes. He picked his way through the profligate streets, untouched by the triumphantly abandoned crowds, utterly alone—for he knew somehow beyond a doubt that the *Enterprise* had flown away and left him there to complete the mission by himself. Complete it he must, he knew; otherwise this libertine city would grow, spread like a flood, filling this world and the entire galaxy and reaching out to the next, as well.

But as he came to the foot of a high hill, he saw that he wasn’t entirely alone after all. His father stood there, silent and aloof from the crowd, face set in a cold pure Vulcan mask of condemnation. Spock looked to him for help, but all Sarek would do was to point silently to the street that led up the hill. His meaning was plain. Spock obediently bowed his head and took the required road.

The hill soon grew very steep, almost a sheer mountain face, and climbing it was difficult. He stretched and strained and struggled, until he came to a broad ledge where he thought he might rest. But no rest was allowed, for Agnes Day stood there—gowned in white, hands clasped upon a prayer book, face set in that sweetly sympathetic and forgiving look that he had come to know so well. Her softly murmuring voice was vague and indistinct. He couldn’t make out a word of what she said, but her general sense was clear: go on, and quickly. He bowed his head and climbed on.

The mountain was perilously steep now, and he inched his way up by the barest hand holds. All around him he heard the cries of angry eagles, and felt the wind from their passing wings. Three times he felt their strong wings strike him, trying to beat him back from their aerie, and once he felt the rake of talons across his back, but he would not stop climbing or even turn to look at them.

Eventually he reached the top of the mountain, where there stood a vast palace of white marble, flanked by tall Roman columns and fronted with wide marble steps. At the foot of the steps stood the Master himself, arms outstretched, smiling gently, radiating waves of that absolute love and acceptance that Spock remembered. He wanted to run to Him, but the Master held up His hands to ward him off.

“First you must do what is necessary, Spock.” The Master’s voice was very clear. “Do not be afraid or weaken, for I will be with you always.”

Once more, Spock bowed his head in acceptance. He went up the marble stairs, into the great palace, feeling the Master watching after him. The interior of the palace was an unlit labyrinth, shadow dark, silent, full of twisting corridors and empty rooms. Several times he thought he might be lost, but always the Master’s voice was with him, urging him onward.
Finally he came out into a vast formal garden full of exotic plants and tame animals, all under deep twilight. In the middle of the garden was a white marble bench, and on it sat a man in a purple bordered toga, writing on a scroll and wearing the laurel wreath of a Roman emperor. As Spock approached, the man lifted his head. Spock saw that it was Kirk.

“Spock!” he cried, casting aside the scroll and leaping to his feet. His face broke into a wide smile, and he reached out both hands. “I always knew you’d come back for me!”

Spock nodded once and stepped forward.

Kirk ran up and threw both arms around him, laughing with joy. “It’s been so long, but I never gave up hope. I always knew you’d come for me, sooner or later. I never lost faith in you. Ah, Spock… Can you take me back to the ship right now?”

“No,” Spock sighed, allowing his hands to settle lightly on Kirk’s shoulders. “The ship is gone. We are stranded here.”

Kirk shuddered, gripped tighter, and pressed his face against Spock’s neck. “Then at least I’m not alone here,” he said. “At least we’re together.”

“Yes,” Spock answered, basking in that contact, that beloved presence.

But in his mind he heard the voice of the Master saying: Do what is necessary, Spock.

Some unseen floodgate broke then. I can’t! He pleaded silently. Not Jim.

You must, said the Master, very sadly, very lovingly.

Not this. Not him… But his hand slipped down and silently pulled out his phaser. Just a minute longer…

Now! The order rode on bright waves of vast love and acceptance.

Please! His hand lifted the phaser, pressed it softly against Kirk’s side. Don’t!

…LOVE…LOVE…LOVE… No longer precisely words or images, only vast heavy waves surging at him from an infinite supply, like a sea of honey, overwhelming, urging him on.

At the last second, Spock turned his face toward Kirk’s and kissed him on the cheek. Then he pulled the trigger.

“NO!!”

His own cry snapped Spock awake, yanked him bolt upright, heart hammering and lungs working like a bellows, back in his waking time and place. Dream, he thought. Nightmare. Effect of stress… Enough of this!

He rolled out of bed, felt for his boots, found them and yanked them on almost viciously. That is quite enough, he decided coldly. I have had enough sleep to last me until this mission is over. No more rebellious dreaming, thank you. Work to do…

He stalked out of his cabin and own the corridor, mentally listing immediate tasks: recall the last of the science tams from the Invictus, shoo out the visiting Imperials, make diplomatic farewells, make one last check of Engineering—and, yes, another inspection of Dr. Hawk.

The first three items subsequently presented no problem; personnel dutifully reported in, the Invictus...
reported all clear, and Spock composed a beautifully non-informative farewell.

The last two caused unexpected problem.

Scott was frowning at the power flux relays when he heard Spock come up behind him. Now I’m in for it, he thought glumly. Not that I don’t trust Hawk myself, but Spock will think the worst of it…and me…

“Engine status, Mr. Scott?”

“Perfect.” Scott didn’t look directly at him. “The dilithium crystals they ga’e us are perfectly balanced an’ unusually pure. Th’ effects of Knaffbein stress are completely gone. The ship could take off at any time noo.”

“And your other assignment, Mr. Scott?”

“Hard ta say.” Scott glanced at him, careful not to look nervous. “He’s pitched his clothes in the laundry.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Here. See fer yerself.” Scott pulled out the communicator, plugged it into the nearest viewing console and activated the screen. The view showed nothing but a close-up of Hawk’s rumpled jacket and the inside of an obvious laundry chute. Hawk himself, of course, was nowhere in sight. Scott turned off the screen.

“How long ago did this occur?” Spock snapped. “And where is Hawk now?”

“As fer the first, aboot an hour ago,” Scott answered glumly. “I canna be quite sure. After Ashriliin left I checked again an’ heard Hawk an’ his lady friend gigglin’ aboot in’laws, of a’ things—and then the lass picked up his clothes an’ bundled ‘em doon the laundry chute. As ta where Hawk is noo, or what he’s wearin’, I’ve no idea.”

“You were ordered to keep Hawk under surveillance!” Spock looked as close to furious as Scott had ever seen him. “Yet you allowed him to escape you. How do you explain such a flagrant disregard for orders?”

“Mr. Spock,” Scott bristled, “In case ye’ve forgotten, I also had orders ta get the Enterprise up ta optimum condition for the time run. That does happen ta be my primary job, if ye’ll recall; I’m the ship’s Chief Engineer no’ Chief o’ Security. I agreed ta watch yer wee friend in ma spare time, but for the past couple hours I’ve had no spare time at a’. Noo whot did ye expect me ta do? Drop the systems check an’ run over ta the Invictus, knock in’ on everra door ‘til I found whot bed Hawk’s sleepin’ in the noo? Och, a pretty picture I’d ha’ made for Captain Aquila ta wonder at!”

Spock was silent for several seconds, seething and chewing over that, and finding the defense annoyingly good. “You should have informed me immediately when you found you had lost contact,” was the best he could come up with.

“Why you?” Scott dared a grin. “I didna’ thinkye’d have sa much leisure as ta worry aboot trifles. I informed the Security Chief, an’ he said he’d look inta it.” What else did you expect me to do? Find some other Good Christian to take over?

“I will indeed speak to Security. You may also be sure that I will report this incident. Carry on with your duties, and be prepared to leave orbit in 47 minutes.” Spock stalked out of Engineering without waiting for a reply.
Scott felt distinctly uncomfortable, watching him leave. It wouldn’t hurt, he decided, to call back the Security Chief himself. Glancing around almost guiltily, Scott pressed the buttons.

Spock called Security from his quarters, feeling an irritated need for privacy. The line was busy. Spock restrained an illogical urge to strike the machinery, and ordered Uhura to break in on the conversation. Before she could comply, the Security Chief hung up on his previous call. Spock jabbed the buttons again and caught the man on the rebound.

“Yes, Mr. Spock,” came the cheery reply to his question. “We know pretty much where Dr. Hawk is. He’s on the *Invictus*, being sworn in.”
“What?” Spock almost shouted.

“Yes, sir. He apparently Gated back here almost an hour ago, picked up some books and clothes, left a tape and some legal papers, and then went back to the **Invictus**. The papers were resignation forms, sir. The tape’s not addressed to anyone in particular.

“Play it for me.”

“Yes, sir.”

The screen shifted to an image of Ellison Hawk, in close-up. He was wearing an Imperial tunic. He looked relaxed and happy. “I don’t care who else reads this,” his image spoke. “But be sure to take it to Spock. To make a long story short, people, I’ve renounced my Federation citizenship and joined the Imperials. Don’t worry…” he flashed his old sardonic grin. “I don’t feel any serious ill-will toward the Federation and I won’t—heh!—do you any harm…”

**You lie,** Spock thought, glaring at the screen. **You cannot be trusted.**

“It’s just that I happen to like these people, and this universe. It’s a better place than ours. Quite frankly, I’d rather be a- a foot soldier here than a professor back home.”

**So you have joined their army.** That is definite evidence of aggressive intent! Spock seethed silently. **Of course you prefer the company of unbridle pagans—and their females! The suborned you in the classic manner…**

“I know what the risks are,” Hawk’s image continued. “I know damn well that this whole timeline might disappear tomorrow—with me in it—but I think it’s a chance worth taking. Send back word to the university that they can find somebody else to fill my chair, and—” He smile again, genuinely sympathetic. “Good luck getting your Captain back, Spock. I hope he’s worth it to you.”

The screen went blank.

Spock stared at it for a full 30 seconds before, with a very Human oath, he switched to the intercom and called Scott. He had a lot to say to his obstructionist Engineer. ‘Insubordination’ was the mildest of it, and phrase ‘tantamount to treason’ was used more than once.

Scot said nothing but his face turned very pale and tight.

“If you presence was not vital for the operation of the time voyage,” Spock finished. “I would have you confined in the brig. Thanks to your behavior, we must depart with all haste. Be prepared to warp out of orbit in 10 minutes. Spock out.” He stabbed off the intercom, stalked out of his office and went directly to the bridge.

Scott stepped back from the dead intercom, teeth grinding and color sweeping back into his face in a hot flood. He began to swear, very quietly in Erse. Passing sub-engineers, overhearing him, found it expedient to busy themselves elsewhere. But Scott didn’t lash out at the first person handy. Instead, very quietly, he took out the altered communicator and placed a single tight-beam long distance call.

Ellison Hawk was shyly examining the folds of his new toga, itching a little under his new red tunic and high sandals, and happily enduring the congratulations of his new family when the call came in. Bal’Tia pulled him reluctantly away from the backslapping and toasts with the news that there was a call for him, urgent, from the Chief Engineer of his former ship.

**Scott?** Hawk wondered, making his way to the nearest intercom-booth. **I was expecting an icy tirade from Spock… What in both universes could an Engineer want with me?** It took him a few seconds to
figure out the operation of the not-too-alien machine. “Hello. Hawk speaking.”

Scott’s voice came through, loud and clear. “Dr. Hawk, I dinna have much time to talk t’ye; Spock’s ordered the Enterprise ta set oot in less’n 10 minutes, sa be still an’ listen.”

What the hell? “Why the sudden rush?”

“He got yer message an’ hit the ceilin’—”

“I’ll bet!”

“—an’ since he couldna reach ye, he’s took it oot on me.”

“You?!? Why the hell you?”

“Y’see, while ye were visitin’ the Invictus, he asked me to spy on ye personally—see that ye dinna betray any grand state secrets or whatever—”

“…What?”

“—An’ I didna do it ta his satisfaction. I only put a wee beacon on the back o’ yer jacket an’ eavesdropped through a communicator set for it.”

“Beacon— My jack- I took it off when I—” Hawk blushed beet red.

“Aye,” Scott drawled. “An’ then ye threw it doon a laundry chute. I’ve no been followin’ ye since, an’ Spock was…upset aboot it. Noo that ye’ve gone over to the Imperials, he’s convinced he was right ta spy on ye in the first place, an’ he’s doon ta callin’ me a damned traitor for no watchin’ ye personally. Mayhap he thinks I should ha’ stood over yer shoulder everra minute, and dragged ye home by main force. In truth, I’ve much preferred mucking aboot in the Invictus’ engine room.”

“That you would…”

“Sa noo he’s bitchin’ at me, threatenin’ ta have me up on charges—”

“Whaaaat!”

“Aye. He used the word ‘treason’ a couple of times. I’m no used ta takin’ such treatment.”

“Uh…” He’s going to court-martial harmless old Scotty? For treason?! Because he didn’t spy harder on me?! “That…bigoted…Vulcan…son of a bitch…”

“Aye.” Scott let out his breath in a long hiss. “He’s a’ways been a prudish, disapprovin’ bastard, arrogant in ways thot dinna show right off… I’ve rarely seen him miss a chance ta censure us Humans when he could, an’ noo I’m wonderin’ if ‘twas a’ just a game. Betimes I’ve wondered why he stays among illogical creatures… Maybe just for the pleasure o’ lookin’ doon on us.”

“This- this doesn’t make sense! Vulcans are supposed to value all life, all intelligence—”

“Weel, it seems that they too can be bigots, as ye said. Spock, noo… In the past few months, I’ve seen ‘im come ta some kinda idea aboot whot’s good fer Humans, an’ I canna say I like it. Only a while ago he told me a great load o’ bull aboot Humans a’ways needin’ somethin’ at rule above ‘em, so’s ta keep their wicked minds in line. Och, I know he hates Human feelin’s but this…”

“Authoritarian personality…” Hawk mumbled. “Always needing somebody to look up to, and down on. Hierarchical…no equality… There’ve been whole civilizations that thought like that. They were
“‘P’raps thot’s anither reason I dragged ma heels on his spyin’ game; he wanted me ta do it because he thought thot I thought the same as he. I took if for a bluddy insult.”

“Yes…” Hawk blinked in stunned recognition. “He thinks we’re all animals that need collaring—and he thinks Agnes’ kind of religion will do that to us! That’s why he sided with her, even though I think he personally can’t stand the woman. And—”

“And ye’r on the ither side, which is why he treats ye like an enemy spy,” Scott finished for him. “Ah, well, I hafta quit noo. Goodbye, lad. Mayhap ‘tis a better universe ye’ve got there after a’.”

The intercom clicked and was silent.

Hawk leaned his forehead against the wall, eyes closed, looking into a landscape of horrors. Authoritarian… his mind whirled. People need keepers, keeping down, keeping in line…because they’re basically evil. That’s where it leads. Damn you, Vulcan, can’t you see what a hideous idea that is?! Anti-Human, hell—anti-life! They don’t believe that here… That’s why you hate them so; they prove that your comfortable arrogance is wrong! You’d be just as well pleased if this whole universe did get blown to hell, wouldn’t you?!

Hawk raised his head and snapped his eyes open, jaw set. Damned if I’ll let you destroy the evidence without a fight, Spock! This is a better universe, and I’m one of its citizens now, and all goddam bets are off!

He turned resolutely back to the party, looking for Aquila.

* * *

Spock sat rigid in the command chair, watching the stars on the screen shift and flow as the Enterprise swung out of orbit and angled sunward. The engineering monitor reported ‘perfect performance’; the new dilithium crystals were indeed of excellent quality. Uhura reported formal farewell messages from the dwindling Invictus, conveyed by Sub-Praefect, Aemilia Decima. Spock wondered briefly why Aquila himself hadn’t sent them. Good only knew what the man was doing. It would be wise to hurry.

“Solar-parabolic course laid in, Sir,” Sulu reported.

“Increase to Warp 5,” said Spock.

Sulu gave him a startled look as he complied. He hadn’t expected to increase speed for several minutes yet.

Down in Engineering, Scott noted the demands being made on his engines, and scowled darkly. The engines were performing beautifully, but Spock was asking much of them and would soon require more. Are ye so frantic then to get back? He wondered, glancing upward as if he could see through all the decks up to the bridge and the con and the Vulcan who sat there. Or is it just that ‘the guilty flee when no man pursueth’?

* * *
On the *Invictus*, in the vestibule of the ship’s shrine, still wearing the toga he’d put on for the citizenship ceremony, Aquila listened to Hawk with expressive eyebrows climbing his forehead. “Explain!” he snapped. “Just why does Spock intend to travel in time? And where—no, when is he going?”

“To 7 BC…ah, 746 since the founding of the City. He means to find Kirk—I mean, the Imperator Démas Kirke—and take him away from there before he ever gets to be Imperator, before he has any effect on history at all.”

“But- But-“ Klaveth crowded in beside him. “Démas was— He had such an effect on history—that will make inconceivable changes in the past, and…and the present.”

“Yes! Yes!” Hawk shouted, clutching handfuls of his hair. “It means the difference between your history and mine, your timeline and ours, your universe and the one Spock came from! If he succeeds, there’s a good chance that this whole timeline will just plain cease to exist—and us with it!”

“But why?!?!” Why should Spock do that to us?” Bal’Tia wailed. “Surely both our universes existed side-by-side before. Why couldn’t they just continue—?”

“No, they didn’t! Don’t you understand? This history, this timeline, is the result of an accident in our common past—an accident caused by the *Enterprise* on its last time visit! Spock is going back to wipe out the effects of that accident and set history back the way it originally was—with Rome collapsing 2300 years ago!”

“…What?” Aquila looked stunned. “But why couldn’t he leave us alone? Why must he change it… back?”

“Can’t you see it?” Hawk was practically dancing up and down. “Démas Kirke was really James Kirk—Captain of the *Enterprise*! He was lost by accident in Rome’s past and Spock is going to fetch him back!”

“I can’t believe this….“ Klaveth whispered.

“I can!” Aquila whipped the toga off his shoulders and bolted to the intercom. “Bridge!” he roared. “Follow and overtake that ship! Maximum speed! This is a triple-X-class emergency!”

Sirens began to shrill. Aquila grabbed Hawk by the arm, hauling the little archeologist almost off his feet, and ran for the nearest intra-ship Gate station.

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“Sair,” Chekov announced from his current post at the Science console, “We’re not alone here; there’s a big ship followink us at…Warp 12! Sair, it’s the *Invictus!*”

“Sir, they’re hailing us,” Uhura added. “They’re ordering us to halt at once.”

*Hawk told. I knew he would.* Spock silently clenched his teeth. *I suppose I should be grateful that he waited this long. Fighting chance… Roman sportsmanship.* “Do not reply. Top speed, Mr. Sulu.”

“Yes, sir.”

The *Enterprise* shot forward, engines shrieking, vibrating heavily as the gravity compensators strained.
Down in Engineering, Scott clutched a stanchion and swore mightily. He could guess what had happened, and what Spock was up to. “…Domned Vulcan’s goin’ ta tear the ship apart!” he predicted bitterly. –And it wouldn’t have happened if you’d kept your mouth shut and ridden with a light hand, you arrogant fool!

On the view screen the Invictus loomed huge and white and glowing, like the vengeful ghost of a looted pagan temple chasing after its defilers through the sea of night. Second by second it was gaining on the Enterprise.

Spock watched it come, making light speed calculations in his head. He didn’t think the Invictus would dare open fire at less than point-blank range, not in the crowded shipping lanes and not so close to an inhabited world. But then again, one couldn’t absolutely guarantee such reticence; her Captain had, after all, a different view of the value of life. Aquila might think nothing of smashing a dozen innocent ships—or even half a planet—to stop an enemy. No, our only safety lies in speed and maneuverability…and in maintaining our lead…

“Passing the sun,” Sulu noted. “Beginning curve…”

The Enterprise began its tight swing, shuddering in every bolt.

* * *

On the bridge of the Invictus, Aquila noted the course change. “Put one across their bow!” he snapped.

A blue-white beam shot out, diagonally crossing the Enterprise’s port side. Ignoring it, she raced on.

“So much for warnings,” Aquila growled. “Aim dead amidships.”

But at that instant the Enterprise began to buck and shake visibly on the screen. The gunnery officer’s next shot missed—a close miss, but a miss. “Sir,” he reported, “I don’t know why, but she’s bouncing around so that I can’t get a clear shot. The gun-comp’s going crazy.”

Aquila turned to Hawk, who was standing silent and pale beside the command chair. “What’s happening, Hawk? How does she do that?”

“It’s the time turbulence,” Hawk replied grimly. “The effect of the sun’s gravitational field at that speed. She’s beginning to slip in time, and you’ll lose her in another sec—”

“Helm!” Aquila shouted. “Follow her course exactly! Gunnery, by bare eyes, fire at will!”

The Invictus veered after the now-shimmering Enterprise, trying to pace her course precisely. The turbulence hit, rattling the ship through. Down on her Engineering deck, Ashriliin scrabbled for handholds and winced at the noise of the screaming engines. “Damned Armenian’s going to get the ship blown up,” he muttered, fighting his way to the main control panel.

* * *

From the Enterprise’s viewpoint, it was the Invictus that shimmered, misted, pulsed, vanished and reappeared on the troughs and crests of energy waves. She was still firing at them, though most of her bolts went wide. Spock wondered what effect the added energy blasts were having on the Enterprise’s course. The helm chronometer was running backwards rapidly now, showing added burst of speed with every blast that came close enough to shake the ship.

Something slammed the Enterprise hard enough to knock half the bridge crew out of their seats.
“Sair, we’fe been hit!” Chekov screeched, clawing his way back up to his console. “Our left shield. It…it’s gone, sair.”

“No aft shield…” Spock firmly cut off that thought. Speculation on the *Invictus*’ firepower was pointless at this stage. He looked at the speeding chronometer, blinked, then stared up at the screen. The pursuing ship was a blinking ghost now, fading, now flickering out…and gone.

“We’ve lost her!” Uhura whooped. “We’re safe!”

The bridge crew broke out in a spontaneous cheer.

...The impact ‘kicked’ us forward, Spock guessed. But if she continues on course... “Correction. We have evaded pursuit only temporarily,” he announced. “Helm, begin braking procedure immediately after apogee.”

Sulu gulped, but complied.

The engines roared. The chronometer danced like a drunken ballerina. Turbulence hit in savage waves. The ship’s hypersteel bones creaked with the pressure.

“Slowing…slowing...” Sulu reported, flicking his eyes back and forth from his board to the chronometer. “We’re coming back up time.”

“Commence long-range sensor scans of Earth,” said Spock. “Divert power from the shields as necessary. Note the exact time and date of any evidence of transporter activity.”

Chekov turned, open mouthed, to stare at him.

“That is the only means available for pinpointing the exact time of the Captain’s arrival,” Spock explained impatiently. “A rough method, but feasible.”

“Yes, sair.” Chekov turned back to his board, set the sensors and linked them in with the computer.

“Slowing…slowing...” Sulu chanted softly, intent on the braking.

“There it is!” Chekov yelped. “Now, sair!”

“Now!” snapped Spock.

Sulu’s hand slapped down the buttons.

The *Enterprise* roared, bucked, jolted and slowed. The back ground stars on the view screen stopped dancing like fireflies and began to crawl across the sky.

“We’fe overshot,” Chekov reported sadly. “We’fe missed him—by…maybe a few days.”

Just then something roared past. It didn’t show on the sensors as anything but a blur of energy, or on the view screen as anything but a square, flickering blob of light. The turbulence of its wake tossed the *Enterprise* about like a cork on the high sea, tumbling the crew onto the deck.

“Full stop,” Sulu panted, holding a bleeding cut on his cheek and scrambling back into his chair. “But what the hell was that last jolt?”

“That,” said Spock, “was undoubtedly the *Invictus*—overshooting the correct date, and ourselves.”

“Then they’ve gone into the future?” Uhura marveled. “I mean the future from where we are… How
“Unknown.” Spock stood up and surreptitiously stretched. “In any event, the quicker we conclude our business here, the better chance we have of avoiding them. Helm, set course for Earth and assume ecliptical orbit when we get there. Mr. Chekov, you have the con. Lt. Uhura, relay complete damage reports to my quarters.

Spock went out via turbo lift and straight to his quarters. The first thing he did when he got there was to call Security and order a detail to accompany Mr. Scott to the brig.

To Be Continued in Chapter XIV: Kirk Among the Lions.
"‘Judge Softie’?” The Imperator laughed. “I haven’t heard that one before.”

“I have.” The lady beside him rolled her eyes in mock dismay. She was a handsome middle-aged woman, slightly taller than her husband, with gray streaked dark blonde hair and gray blue eyes. She resembled a canny business woman more than anything Kirk could imagine as an ‘Empress’. “My husband,” she said, fondly patting the Imperator’s shoulder, “Really doesn’t belong on the bench. He’s much too tender-hearted to be a judge. Why, once he was trying a patricide case, and the first question he asked of the defendant was: ‘You didn’t really kill your father, did you?’ Oof! There was no trouble declaring that a mistrial.”

“Agreed, my dear. If I could, I’d happily excuse myself from the courts for life.”

“Er…why don’t you?” Kirk asked, almost tiptoeing up to the table.

“Constitutional law,” the little man sighed. “All elected representatives above Quaestorial rank are required to serve occasionally as judges. It’s not only traditional; it’s a good method of keeping one in touch with the effect of law upon the populace. I can’t think of a quicker or surer way to let one know if a law’s effect is good or ill.”

“Yeah…” Kirk could see that. “It also lets the people keep an eye on their representatives.”

The Imperator and his wife exchanged glances, and smiled.

“Quite true,” said the lady. “A good means of keeping the courts honest. Although, in my husband’s case, I suspect that they load the dice when they’re choosing dockets, so that he always gets small claims court rather than the gruesome murder cases. Especially after that patricide—”

“Not again, dear,” the Imperator laughed. “I know I’ll never live it down, but meanwhile we’re being poor hosts. Please recline, Magician Démas, and honor our table. I am Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus et cetera, commonly called Octavianus. This is my wife, Livia Drusilla et cetera. The rest of the family is out at a theatre and dinner party, so this will be small and informal. Have you any dietary preferences?”

“None I can think of offhand,” Kirk smiled back, settling himself awkwardly on the low couch.

An elderly woman in a plain servant’s dress trotted in with a tray and unloaded bread, olive salads, the inevitable wine, along with cups and a yellow pitcher of water. Octavianus recited the usual prayer over the little salt bowl, and poured the wine. Kirk noted that he cut his with water twice.

‘When in Rome…’ Kirk shrugged, cutting his own about half-and-half. He recognized the favor.

“Velletraen. Right?”

“Of course.” Octavianus smiled. “I grew up on the farm where these grapes are grown. I suppose that to this day I’m still something of a farm boy, a country bumpkin as many of my opponents claim.” He dug happily into his salad.

Kirk thought that over while nibbling olives. “Hmmm, that would give you some insight into the, er, land problem.”
Octavianus looked up, surprised and pleased. “Just so. You’ve apparently learned much during your half fortnight’s visit here. Just how do you see the ‘land problem’, Démas?”

Kirk paused, realizing he’d just opened a door that could lead anywhere. Take the chance! He thought, elated. Do whatever good I can while I’m here! “The dangers of monopoly,” he said. “Too much of the grain-land controlled by too few people, gives the landowners a dangerously strong grip on the food supply, which translates into political power.”

Octavianus and Livia exchanged looks again. “And the solution?” Livia prompted.

“One of two things, or maybe both at once.” Kirk paused to spit out an olive pit as neatly as he could manage. “Find some way to break up those big estates, or get more land and give it to the poor.”

“Yes, of course.” Octavianus looked both eager and impatient. “But how are these things to be done? I can’t simply assemble the troops and make war on the landowners, or confiscate their land without just cause; I attained this station by promising the people a rule of just and democratic laws, not of personal whim, and I cannot break that promise for any consideration. As for obtaining more grain land, even if I had not promised the populace that there would be no more conquests and wars, where is it to be found?”

“Ah, let me think…” Kirk chewed a lettuce leaf, a wild idea taking shape. “I think I can answer that second question fairly easily. Do you have an extensive map? I mean of the entire known world?”

“I’ll fetch one.” Livia hopped off the couch and strode off through an inner door. She didn’t seem to be the sort of woman who expected servants to do everything for her.

“She knows where all the scrolls are,” Octavianus explained. “No one else can make sense of the chaos in the office.”

“You mean…” Kirk blinked, “This building is your office, too? You do all the paperwork for here?” A little one-floor house, the center of government for the whole Imperium? “Ah… Just how many people do you have on your staff?”

“‘Parchment-work’? What an apt term! Well, there’s myself and my wife, and we have three secretaries apiece, and the Senators have their small armies of secretaries, and the provincial governors and the temple officials have theirs. And I don’t know of any Quaestors or Tribunes who can’t afford at least one clerk.”

“I see.” Elected officials, temple officials, military officers and their private secretaries. And that’s it? Helluva way to keep government bureaucracy down! “Army officers, too?”

“Lower officers can usually afford a clerk; if not, they need must do their own…ah, parchment-work themselves. That’s no great problem, with the literacy requirements, though some of the dispatches I’ve read in my time make bizarre reading… And the higher officers must be elected officials, as we’ve already mentioned.”

“Elected…officers.” Civilian control of the armies? But history says—in my timeline anyway—that the armies got control. Military dictatorships. How did that happen? …This man must have made the difference. “Uhm, so everyone who gets into public office has to be competent at judging a court case or commanding an army unit—besides the usual politics?”

“Of course. Why encourage overspecialization? It’s like training an athlete for the Pentathlon, rather than growing overbalanced toward just running or throwing. The Greek ideal of moderation and our Roman tradition of the competent citizen—”
“Here it is!” Livia said. She reappeared with a rolled parchment map, just ahead of the servant woman bearing plates of broiled fish.

“Thank you.” Kirk pushed his dishes aside and spread out the map. It showed a view of Europe, North Africa, Britain and the Near East, and it was, all things considered, surprisingly accurate. Kirk traced across the northeastern lands above the Black Sea—which they called the Euxine—and planted his finger on the area that would, in his time and universe, be called the Ukraine. “Here,” he said. “Some of the best grain growing lands in the world.” Wouldn’t Chekov be tickled to hear me say it. “I’m not sure of the, ah, names of the people inhabiting it now, but from all I’ve heard, they’d rather be part of Greater Rome than ruled by the Germans.” Just think: if they never endure all those centuries of suffering under Byzantine, Tatar and Teutonic overlords… Maybe there’ll never be a Russian Revolution; it won’t be needed. Lenin will live and die an obscure and bad tempered schoolteacher, Stalin will be just another bank robber, and World War III won’t happen!

“Possible,” murmured Livia, poring over the map. “That land looks most extensive. But how many people live there now? How many would we be displacing? Is there enough empty land? Raising the troops is no problem; eager welfare cases are turned down every day. But how to justify this to the Senate and Assembly? We promised peace; an end to those greedy conquests…”

“We could not justify it unless we were attacked for that quarter,” said Octavianus, peering shortsightedly at the map. He squinted, shook his head, pulled a magnifying-glass out of his tunic and put it to his eye. “With the German tribes being currently quiet, that’s unlikely. Hmmm, also we would need to complete the total campaign during the warm months; the winters there make troop movements impossible.”

“Maybe if the soldiers were dressed warmly enough…” Hey, I haven’t seen any knitted cloth since I got here—these people don’t have knitting! You can’t make thick wool socks on a weaving loom, and soldiers work on foot… Mom once showed me how to crochet, when I was a little kid. If I could remember… And snowshoes aren’t that hard to make. Or skies…

“Let us put that aside for the moment,” said Livia, rolling up the map. “How would you deal with the other half of the problem?”

Octavianus put down his magnifying glass and dug sturdily into the broiled fish, but kept an ear cocked for Kirk’s answer.

“Well…” Kirk grinned, bemused by the idea of being the Imperator’s advisor-for-a-day, or an evening. “I suppose the best thing to do is watch the landowners carefully to see if you can catch them breaking the law, and then punish them by confiscating big chunks of land—and freeing their slaves.”

Octavianus glanced up briefly, smiled like summer, and went back to his fish.

“There are legal precedents for confiscation,” Livia agreed. “But only for severe offenses.”

Keep feeding me lines, lady, Kirk laughed inside, noting how she questioned and her husband listened. He remembered Khan accusing him and Spock of similar teamwork. So she’s your Spock? He studied her strong, intelligent face. Hell, a man could do worse. In my timeline, even the historians who hated her guts had to admit that she was a brilliant woman… En garde, then. Thrust and parry… “Isn’t conspiring to cause the death of citizens a severe offense?” Old Federation Law trick. Should work here, too.

“Conspiracy laws?” Livia gave him a slow blink. “Those are dangerous old laws, in need of much restraint, and I’ve never heard of them being applied to a case like this. Most interesting concept
‘Fascinating’, Spock would have said. Kirk noted Octavianus watching her too, and had no further doubts as to who the Imperator’s most valuable and trusted advisor was.

“It could conceivably apply,” she finally said—directly to her husband. “However, the evidence must be overwhelming and unimpeachable. In every successful case, that has meant the presence of provably dead bodies. Habeas corpus. Citizens would have to die first.”

“In no way!” Octavianus slapped the table decisively. “Not one. I’ll not allow a grain shortage to reach such proportions. No matter how badly the granaries are drained—or even the treasury—I’ll let not innocents die for any policy of mine! Enough of that, more than enough, in the Civil War—” He stopped abruptly.

“Those days are long past, dear,” said Livia, looking distressed for the first time.

“Which Civil War?” Kirk asked. The minute he saw Livia’s hurt look, he wished he could call back the words.

“Ah…the battles…I was obliged…to fight…” Octavianus spoke as though the words hurt. “To put down one tyrant after another…in the years after Caesar’s assassination. They were quite long and miserable. They cost many lives. They ate up many harvests.”

“There are detailed accounts in the history written by my kinsman, Livius,” his wife cut in quickly. “This is no talk for the dinner table.”

The little Imperator managed the ghost of a smile. “Your kinsman? Come, come: let’s allow our guest into the secret. You wrote that delightful history yourself, to rebut the biased accounts of the Noble historians. You yourself are the last of the Livians.”

“Someone had to do it,” she smiled at her husband. Then she turned back to her cup and murmured, almost inaudibly, “Would the gods that my other son was the last of the Claudians.”

Kirk rubbed his eyes, seeing another fact drop into place. Right. The Nobles—‘Optimates’, ‘Republicans’, whatever they called themselves—they wrote biased histories, propaganda, against this man and his reforms. When the only mass printing is coarse silk-screening, most books are copied by hand, who could afford to have lots of copies made and distributed? Only the rich, of course. Snow job. Right. And later historians took their accounts for gospel because so many of them survived… Oh, shit! Some of these old games go ‘way back…

“Indeed. And one thing you wrote of me is that I was elected as the peace candidate, and promised to abide by the laws I made. I must live up to that.” The Imperator rapidly regained his composure.

“That’s a neat legal argument, Démas, but I’m afraid it’s unworkable.”

“Sorry.” What did you do in the Civil War? Kirk wondered. Then he remembered old Perinna’s account of the slaughter of the Etruscan rulers, and he shuddered. A lot of killing, no doubt… He also remembered the ‘image’ of Abraham Lincoln, in the arena of Yaanek’s molten world, bluntly telling him to go ahead and be ruthless, thorough and fast. ‘There is nothing good in war except its ending.’ Right. And…Octavianus freed the slaves, too. Or most them, anyway. Parallels… If I can help…

“Well, what about ‘conspiring to defraud the government’, then? Or ‘conspiring to defraud citizens’? I’m sure the local grain dealers are being hurt by the shortage…” Flaviniana! “Not to mention the bakers! Why, one of my former employers keeps a little bakeshop and— Say, I’ll bet she’d be happy to testify—and all the other bakers, too. Does Roman law provide for group lawsuits?”
“Yes, it does.” Octavianus pulled up on his elbow, grinning from ear to ear. “If one could accurately and provably get evidence of loss of revenue from every baker in Rome—”

“In all Italy,” Livia added, looking thoughtful. “Perhaps the census takers could be pressed into service for gathering the evidence…”

“And the army quartermasters,” Octavianus considered. “They might find evidence for ‘defrauding the government’…which would fall under the category of ‘Bribery and Corruption’. Oh, indeed, you may have an idea there, Démas.”

“I’m glad I could help,” Kirk beamed back.

“If we included losses to the army, the total damages could run into millions. That’s quite enough to justify land confiscation—or, at least, high enough fines to strip those wretched nobles down to their loincloths.” Livia paused and frowned again. “The problem of proving deliberate fraud, though…”

“Any suggestions, Démas?” Octavianus nudged.

“Let me think, let me think…” Kirk pondered hard and fast while he nibbled his broiled fish, trying to see this as a problem in strategy and logistics. I’m enjoying this, he realized. It’s like my old—my usual job, in a way. First time in too many days that I’ve been asked to act like a Starship Captain or anything like it. I still have my skills, and I damn well want to use them! I’m tired of being valued only for my tricorder or my muscles… He turned back to the problem at hand and, as often happened, the answer unfolded itself on the second glance. “You’d need a large and fast-moving legal team,” he answered. “They’d have to be empowered to make arrests and take testimony. They’d have to move quickly to every port on the North Africa coast that has grain loading facilities. They’d have to be able to seal off each port while they questioned everybody from the port master down to the dockhands to find out if those grain ships ever really sailed and, if so, if the grain was really in them.”

Octavianus framed a soundless whistle. “The masters and owners of ships caught in any such sealed-off port wouldn’t care to be held there, especially if the winds were right for sailing.”

“All the more reason for them to speed up the proceedings by telling anything they know.” Kirk grinned toothily. “I’d make a point of asking them if there really were any storms on the days those ships supposedly sank, or if anyone saw those grain ships at sea—and, if so, which way they really were headed.”

“Indeed!” Octavianus looked downright impressed.

“It might not hurt to ask various port masters,” Livia added. “Perhaps through the provincial governors and army outposts, if those ships arrived anywhere outside of Italy. Hmmm, I foresee mountains of ‘parchment-work’.”

“This is one of those cases where it’s useful,” Kirk admitted. “For that matter, are any records kept of small building projects?”

“There are some. Why?”

“That might help us find where the grain really is.” Kirk downed the rest of his wine-and-water and dropped the punch line. “I just can’t see the plantation owners destroying it. Whether it was actually shipped or not, you can bet even money that they have it hidden somewhere, just waiting until the prices rise. See where the granaries and store houses are, and you just might find the missing grain.”

Octavianus and his wife exchanged another long silence. Now they both looked impressed.
“Finding the hoarded grain would not be easy,” Livia considered. “Nor obtaining unquestionable proof of its ownership. Those links in the chain of evidence must be absolutely flawless. But if it could be done…”

“Agrippa managed it once,” Octavianus murmured. “But he’s gone. I do not imagine that the great landowners have grown less clever now than then. Whom do we have who could deal knowingly with them?”

Take a wild guess! Kirk thought, hard put to veil his excitement. Ah, keep cool, James T. They’re not about to offer a sensitive political job to someone they’ve just met. Patience. They’re looking at each other again. “Surely in a - a nation of this size, you could find enough competent people for the job,” he offered.

“In a what?” Livia asked, looking genuinely puzzled. “A what of this size?”


Livia replied with a long string of Latin words. What the translator answered was: “Commonwealth.”

“Oh.” So that’s how they think about it! Maybe that’s what it really is, right now… It’ll change later, if Tiberius and his kind get their way. “Ah, thank you. But please, by all means, set me another riddle I haven’t enjoyed myself so much since I got here.”

“I’ll try to think of one over dessert,” Livia smiled brightly, as the serving woman cleared away the empty dishes and replaced them with bowls of bruit and sliced cheese. “I take it that long, artful, philosophical discussions at dinner are as much a popular art form in Hibernia as here. Unfortunately, to play the game properly requires a long and thorough education. I’ve heard that there are excellent schools in Hibernia, but that is exactly all I’ve heard about them. Can you enlighten me upon the subject?”

“Uhm, maybe…” I think she just handed me the next topic. Danger! I know zero about the school system of ancient Ireland! Steer away. Go for education in general… “I, uh, was educated by my family, who sent me to the, uh, Academy to learn specifically about my trade. Of course, I also learned a lot in my travels.” True!

“Understandable,” murmured Octavianus. “It’s unfortunate that most people spend their whole lives in the villages or neighborhoods where they were born, rarely if ever venturing even as far as the next town.”

“Wow. Yes.” Hey, think about that! In an age with poor mass communication, that would mean god-awful isolation and ignorance—‘provincialism’ with a vengeance! “Well, uh, if you can’t get people to go out and see the world, the next best thing is to bring news of the world to them. You’d need better ways of exchanging news and information between towns. A decent postal service, at the least. You’d need good roads for that… Oh, but you already have those, don’t you?” Hell, yes! Even my timeline’s Romans were famous for those. Highways still in use after 25 centuries and more…

“Not to mention good schools in every last village,” Livia nudged.

“Of course.” Kirk wondered why she’d gone back to that subject. He finished off the last of his fish and reached for the cheese while he recalled an old quote from his schooldays. “‘Rule by consent of the governed implies informed consent’. That requires valid and thorough information, and the
training to understand it.”

The imperial couple exchanged another quick glance, this one full of delight and triumph.

“How quickly he sees to the heart of the matter,” Octavianus smiled, turning back to Kirk. “Yes, one might even say that the success of any republic depends on the quality of the education given to all of its citizens.”

“…All?” Kirk stopped with a piece of an apple halfway to his mouth as the implications sank in. “You mean…some people don’t…?” What am I thinking of? I’m so used to societies where public education is taken for granted…

“Until very recently,” Livia replied, level voiced. “None but Nobles—and a few sufficiently wealthy Knights—could afford to give their children complete educations. The usual method was to send their children to schools founded by philosophers in Greece, or to import a Greek tutor, or pay for an education at one of the larger temples that maintains a school. The poor learned only from their families and associates, and most of them learned little more than basic reading, writing and simple arithmetic. Most of the citizenry remained ignorant of their own cities’ laws, court procedures and the workings of government. When Rome was small and poor and the laws were few, this was not too much of a problem. In the century since the great expansion of the commonwealth, however, the growing complexity of law and economy has allowed for all sorts of abuses. Can you see the nature of this problem?”

“I think I can,” Kirk gulped. “The…simple knowledge that sufficed for the average citizen when Rome was a small city isn’t enough for dealing with a political unit this big and complex. If only the rich can afford the training to understand it… Wow.”

“So, what would you suggest?”

“Hell, more schools for the, uh, poorer citizens.”

“Precisely,” said Octavianus. “We have founded many such schools, in Italy and the provinces, and certainly wish to establish more. Unfortunately, both founding and maintaining them is expensive. Where would you suggest that we obtain the funds?”

They’re asking me how to set up a nationwide public school system—maybe the first one in history. Opportunity with bells on! Kirk rummaged fast through his immediate memories and a beautiful idea bloomed. “Tax all slave owners,” he said, smiling beatifically. “So much per slave.” Kill two birds with one stone!

Octavianus and Livia stared at him for an instant, and then burst out laughing. They clutched each other’s hands like delighted children.

I seem to have scored a hit, Kirk thought, lifting his wine cup.

“Oh, why didn’t I think of that?” Octavianus wheezed, wiping tears from his eyes. “So simple and direct… Yes, my dear, I think he’ll do splendidly. Go ahead and ask him.”

“Ask me what?” Kirk stopped with the cup halfway to the table.

“We wish,” Livia replied sweetly, to offer you the post of Chief Magician, by appointment, to the Imperator.”

Kirk dropped his cup.
To Be Continued in Chapter XIV: Search and Destroy
Bent over the sensor console at the Science Station on the bridge, watching the readouts, Spock was immobile as a statue. He seemed to be equally deaf and indifferent to everything around him, but the bridge crew took no chances. They tiptoed past him, hunched nervously close to their consoles, and spoke in whispers, if at all. Uhura kept the receiver in her ear and her attention on the incoming reports; her eyes were wide open, but she might have been asleep for all her awareness of occurrences on the bridge. The sub-engineer sitting in Scott’s usual chair kept his rapt attention on the ship-status readout screens and didn’t dare so much as look at Spock. Only the irrepressible Helm Twins dared react to each other, or speak at all.

“It doesn’t mek eny sense,” Chekov hissed to Sulu, quietly enough that he though Spock couldn’t hear him. “Mr. Scott in the brig? What in the nem of Linen’s beard could he heff done?”

“As near as I can gather,” Sulu whispered back, “He let Hawk get away and warn the Invictus about our plans. Why Scott was supposed to watch him, I don’t have any idea.”

“End I don’t see why Hawk would do that. He seemed perfectly sane to me.”

Sulu shrugged. “Maybe he liked the imperial universe too much to let it die without a fight.”

Chekov gave him a long look. “Then…you think it rilly will be destroyed?”

“If it won’t, then Spock’s done a lot of raving and bullying for nothing.”

“Unbelievable,” Chekov muttered. “I nefer thought I would liff to see the day Mr. Spock would eet like a weritable Cossack. Why iss he doingk it?”

“That, Chek, is the mystery of the month. He’s been a little funny for the past few months, but he’s turned into a real dragon since the Captain’s been gone. I’ve no proof for anything, but I sure have a handful of theories.”

How typical of human reasoning, Spock thought, not moving a muscle. Let us hear the speculations.

“One,” said Sulu, “He’s gone nuts, and McCoy hasn’t spotted it yet.”

Spock blinked, but showed no other reaction.

“Two, he’s fallen madly in love with Captain Kirk and is going to pieces without him.”

Chekov snorted derisively. Unseen, Spock’s ears flushed green.

“Three, he’s become a fanatic for some ideology or other, which isn’t impossible for Vulcans, you know. And, considering they way he reacts to the Imperials, raves about Hawk and sidles up with Piety Day, I suspect—are you ready for this?—that it’s some form of fundamentalist style Christianity, though why he’d pick something like that to believe in, damned if I know.”

“You’re choking!” Chekov’s Russian soul—and cultural memories—flared. “Our lochical Wulcan, falling for something so irretional? So- so cruel? Impossible! How could he do that?”
“Beats me.” Sulu shook his head. “But he’s a Vulcan after all, so he’s probably got some obscure logical excuse that no Human could understand. In any case, that’s all I can think of that would explain all the changes.”

“‘Lochical’? Hah! We should heff dropped him off for a wik or two in 19th century Russia. Thet would cure him.”

That, Spock decided, is precisely enough. He straightened up and turned around, making the whole bridge crew jump and—

--saw McCoy come out of the turbolift, blue eyes snapping, wearing an expression that reminded Spock poetically of a volcano about to erupt. The doctor glared at him, rocked for a minute on his feet, and gestured fiercely toward the turbolift. Must deal with him. Best in private… Spock gave a remarkably human sigh and strode to the lift with no comment, save to order Sulu to the con.

“Be brief, Doctor,” he said, as the doors slid closed behind him.

“I will,” clipped McCoy. “Kindly give me your reasons for throwing your Chief Engineer in the brig.”

“For deliberate dereliction of duty in a dangerous situation—which is no proper concern of yours, Doctor.”

“‘Dereliction of—’ Scotty?!? You’ve got to be out of your mind! Migod, the way he’s been fretting over the engines—”

“I am referring to another duty to which I assigned him. He failed to execute it for reasons of personal disinclination, thus endangering the ship, crew and mission. That is more than sufficient reason for imprisoning him. Now, if you will excuse me…” Spock made polite, slightly desperate attempt to turn back to the doors.

It didn’t work. McCoy made a grab for Spock’s arm, missed, snagged his shirt and held on like the proverbial bulldog. “‘Another duty’! ’Another duty’?!?” he yelled. “Scotty told me that you wanted him to chase Hawk around, bullying and spying on him, as if the best damn Engineer in the fleet had nothing better to do! You said yourself that we were in a ‘dangerous situation’, and the whole key to escaping it was getting the ship up to top condition and flying the hell out of there as fast as possible. Scotty was damned well needed in Engineering for that! He’s the Chief Engineer, damn it! So why the hell did you try to take him away from that and send him off on a fool’s errand that a last-class Security man could have done better—if it needed to be done at all?”

“I chose him for his unusual dedication and persistence,” Spock snapped. “Unfortunately, he failed on both accounts, resulting in our present situation. Now are you satisfied? Please release my shirt.”

“‘Dedication and persistence’, huh?” McCoy showed teeth. “As if you couldn’t get those out of someone else in a crew of more than 400 people. Are you sure that’s all you picked him for?”

“I…” –should not answer that—“Beg your pardon?”

“He told me that you gave him an earful of moralistic crap, and then called him little short of a mutineer when he didn’t follow Hawk into his girlfriend’s bedroom. Now I’d like to know what the hell—”

This is all he said? Good. Control… “He gave you a highly prejudiced account” said Spock, mentally compelling his ears to stop pulling back. “I assigned him the duty of monitoring Hawk
because I expected him to be least susceptible to seduction by…our hosts. This turned out not to be the case. Those are the facts; be content with them.” He managed to pull his shirt out of McCoy’s grasp.

“‘Seduction’…?” McCoy stared at him. “Let me get this straight. You picked the Chief Engineer for a minor Security job because you thought his ‘morals’ were better than anybody else’s?”

“I would not phrase it—”

“Because you thought he’d be a good religious fanatic—like you?!”

Spock blinked twice, though of a dozen possible answers, decided that none of them would quite do and resorted to loftily staring down at the doctor.

McCoy wasn’t chastened in the least. “Spock,” he snarled. “I don’t know where or why you’ve gotten this particular bee in your bonnet, but go back and read your basic Federation Bill of Rights. You’ll note that it specifically forbids ‘religious adherence as a requirement of promotion standard for public office’—which includes work in Starfleet. You’ve always been a little soft on that point, insofar as Rah-Rah Vulcan is a religion with you, but now you’ve gone downright mushy about it. I’m wondering what the hell has gotten into you.”

Spock bit back a wild urge to answer: The Master! He knew McCoy wouldn’t understand.

“In fact,” McCoy stormed on, “If this weren’t a crisis situation, as you’ve said, I’d order you down to Sickbay this red-hot minute for a thorough psychotricorder reading. Don’t think I won’t do it as soon as this nightmare is over!”

Spock lifted a worried eyebrow, knowing McCoy was quite capable of carrying out that threat. For reasons he didn’t pause to question, he absolutely did not want McCoy to learn about the Master, not yet. Excuse needed. Fast. Anything. Postpone. Distract…

“I assure you, Doctor, there will be no need for that once I have the Captain back.”

For whatever reason, that worked. McCoy did a classic double take, stepped back and looked Spock up and down with widening eyes. “So that’s it,” he murmured. “Yes, it all makes perfect sense! Sublimation. Denial of the forbidden. Re-routing of libidinal energy…”

Spock couldn’t make any sense of that, and decided not to waste time trying. It was sufficient that his ploy had worked. “If you have no further pressing requirements, Doctor, I do. Kindly allow me to return to them.” Before McCoy could interject anything else, Spock turned and headed for the door, He could feel McCoy’s eyes on his back until the turbolift doors closed, and was distinctly unsettled by the sensation. He dropped back into the command seat and glared at the unchanged view on the screen, wasting a few seconds to wonder, just in passing, precisely what McCoy did think his motivations were.

“Lt. Uhura,” he said, making the whole bridge crew flinch in their seats. “Please relay reports from the ground crews.” He steepled his hands and rested his chin on them as the squad chiefs duly reported in.

“Dvorochek here, Commander. The sun’s well down and there’s still no sign of the Captain. I’ve seen nobody behind the temple except for a fat old woman in a white dress. She looks pretty impatient… Maybe she’s waiting for a boyfriend who never showed up. Should I go up to her and ask if she’s seen anyone fitting the Captain’s description?”

“Negative,” said Spock. “Avoid contact with the natives wherever possible.”
"Aye, sir. …Ah, there. She’s leaving anyway. Going around to the street…getting into some kind of cart pulled by white cattle of some sort. Crazy way to travel… There’s nobody behind the temple now. I don’t think the Captain’s coming here tonight, sir. Should we beam up?"

"Negative. Maintain your post until relieved. The temple must be kept under guard at all times. Spock out." He pressed a button for the next report.

"Jackson here. We’ve worked our way through most of the bars and whorehouses in the eastern quarter of the city, and none of the proprietors we’ve talked to have seen anyone matching the Captain’s description. There are a lot of these places, sir. At this rate it’ll take us several days to cover them all.” Jackson’s voice sounded weary. “Trouble is, to get the barkeeps to talk, you’ve gotta buy a drink. All they serve is wine, wine and more wine. They usually cut it with water, too. We’re getting sick of the stuff. And you wouldn’t believe what we have to do to get information from the whorehouses!"

"Continue search until relieved,” said Spock, making a mental note to send additional Security personnel out on that particular duty. He had no desire to lose any more people to the blandishments of this civilization.

"Brothels and bars?” sighed a familiar voice behind him. “Understandable, I suppose. Poor man.”

Spock turned to see Dr. Day standing near the elevator doors. For some reason he found her presence depressing, rather like a reproving conscience—or his father. “Dr. Day, why are you not with your section, analyzing the long-distance sensor scans?”

"We finished that,” she said, padding down to the command chair. “I’m here to ask permission to go down with the next shift of ground survey teams. There’s nothing more we can learn from here.”

As Day passed her console, Uhura briefly wondered why the historian hadn’t just used the intercom like everybody else. She also wondered why Spock allowed her to stay on the bridge, unlike everybody else.

Spock hesitated for a long moment, trying to think of a suitable excuse to keep Day on the ship and finding none. “You may beam down with the next shift,” he acquiesced, not stopping to consider why the thought of letting Day loose on the ground bothered him. Hopefully, we will locate Jim before that time… He tapped for another report.

“Umboka here. No luck yet, sir, and maybe that’s all to the good. There’s only one slave market in town, located close to the only jail in town, and nobody there has seen anyone of the Captain’s description, not in the last month, at least.” Umboka’s black face took on a bemused look. “I don’t know how a city this size manages to get by with only one jail, sir—and that one’s just a drunk-tank and a pre-trial holding area. What the hell do they do with all the criminals?”

“Either execute them or sell them as slaves,” Day sniffed. “Or send them to the arena for the lions to chew on.”

Spock tried to ignore her. “Did you scan the prison personally?”

“Yes, sir. The holding area, anyway. The drunk-tank has been emptied out for repairs. It’s in the basement, and there’s an underground stream that flows close to the surface there, and when the river’s high the stream backs up and floods the cell, which is what’s happening now. I heard the jailers grumbling—”

“Saint Peter’s spring!” gasped Day, looking offended.
“Contact Lt. Dvorchek and mesh your search patterns,” Spock ordered. “Spock out.” He glanced briefly at Day. “The fact that a single historic ‘miracle’ proves to have a perfectly logical explanation in nature does not detract from the validity of the Master’s message.”

“True, true…” she sighed. “I suppose only childish minds really need such constant demonstrations and proofs.”

Spock frowned for a moment, wondering if that was a logical self-contradiction or merely sloppy use of words. He dismissed the thought as inconsequential and punched for the next report.

“Duggins here,” reported a chatty, recently-promoted lieutenant. “We materialized in an unoccupied public toilet near a large park on the Viminal Hill. We have our tricorders and communicators hidden in shopping baskets and have been moving steadily north. So far, we’ve found no tricorder emissions except our own, and no sign of the Captain. This is an amazing place! All full of shops and houses, temple and fountains and— Oh, hey, there’s a big aqueduct, and I don’t believe the volume of water it’s carrying! There are little parks all over the place and statues… Heh! You’ve got to watch out for those statues—they’re all very realistically carved and painted—and they’re often nude. Whee! Jackson bumped into what he thought was a naked lady and spent a whole minute apologizing before he realized—”

“Carry on,” Spock snapped, jabbing off the transmission in midsentence.

“Vanity, vanity,” Day commented. “The seductiveness of the superficialities that conceal the moral bankruptcy underneath. ‘They are as whited sepulchers—’”

“I am aware of human failings in that area,” Spock cut her off, tapping for the next report. Yet another reason why we must locate the Captain and leave quickly…

“Nagak reporting. We’ve finished covering the Circus Maximus and questioning the locals who work here. No sign of the Captain or anyone of his description. No people getting thrown to the lions and no gladiators either. In fact, according to the local workmen—who had a good laugh over it when we asked them—the Imperator banned fights to the death in the arena years ago. Had something to do with penal code reform, encouraging slaves to run away and join the army, or some such thing. Couldn’t make much sense of it, myself. Anyway, most of what goes on here is horse racing. All we could pick up were some hot tips on the Blue Team. They’re supposed to have some special edge that they got from—get this—a visiting magician. It’s a new gimmick about their harnesses—”

“I am not interested in racing tips.” Spock cut him off. “Co-ordinate with Dvorchek and widen you search patterns. Spock out.” He signaled for another report, giving Day no time to make another comment. He decided that he found the woman personally distasteful, for all that they were allies of a sort.

“Papadapoulos here. Sir, we’ve come across what can only be described as an industrial highway. There’s a lot of activity here and one helluva lot of people, but not sign of tricorder emissions. There’s no way to tell if the Captain’s here or not. If he is, he’s not using his tricorder right now.”

“‘Industrial highway’?” Spock raised an eyebrow. This he had to see for himself. “Sensors, lock in on this signal for overhead scan.”

Sure enough, the view faithfully displayed on the screen showed what could only be called an industrial highway. It was a six-lane stone paved road leading, as Papadapoulos explained, from the twelve-mile distant port of Ostia into the market and warehouse district of Rome. Along the road stood tall poles dangling huge oil lamps, which a group of uniformed men were busy lighting. The
wide road was already thick with traffic: close packed farm wagons, mammoth ox carts, and clumsy box-bed wooden vans. All of them were piled high with grain sacks, heaps of vegetables, great squat oil jars, wine amphorae in baskets, loads of cut timber, stacks of unmistakable plumbing-pipes, roped-down piles of sheet metal and fat ingots, bales of hides and wool, bolts of cloth, tar-sealed crates bearing scrawled labels and official wax seals, cages of assorted fowl and small animals, hogtied pigs and apathetic sheep, baskets of eggs carefully packed in straw, stacks of pots and pans, baskets and brooms, and nameless cargoes under canvas wrappings.

Drivers, wearing wide brimmed hats and heavy boots, steered their teams and watched their loads and made rude gestures at each other. Traffic cops, their function obvious despite their misleadingly military looking uniforms, held torches and waved directions and broke up arguments and traffic jams. A small herd of cattle, attended by yapping dogs and stolid cowherds on foot and horseback, spread over three lanes of traffic, to the obvious annoyance of wagon drivers and the dismay of the traffic cops.

“‘Industrial highway’,” Spock agreed, his other eyebrow rising.

“—and you wouldn’t believe the noise,” Papadapoulos finished.

“I would,” said Day, nose wrinkling delicately. “Surviving accounts mention contemporary complaints about the racket. You can see for yourself the obvious traffic congestion problem. That’s why wheeled traffic was banished from the city during the daylight hours, when the crowds were abroad. These wagons will be coming in, unloading and going out again all night long, and nobody in the area will get any sleep.”

Spock studied the screen, but couldn’t see any residential buildings within sight. He wondered briefly if Day were making special efforts to find fault with this admittedly impressive piece of civil engineering. “Logical,” he murmured, taking refuge in analysis. “In a hot climate, before the invention of refrigeration, daily shipments of fresh food would be required. The volume of foodstuffs alone, for a city…hmm, what is the present population of Rome, Dr. Day?”

“About one and a half million, I think. Possibly more than that. I doubt if they included slaves in the census, and the first census in this century was in the year that Our Lord was born.”

It occurred to Spock that he was growing wearied of Dr. Day’s habit of constantly scoring points for the Master and against His dissidents, as if He need such constant defense. Can she imagine no neutral subjects at all? He frowned at the screen. “Maintain position,” he ordered Papadapoulos. “Continue to scan the highway and market for the Captain. Where possible, make discreet inquiries. Spock out.”

The screen changed views to its original bird’s-eye scan of the entire city, showing a vast sprawl of buildings carpeting the cluster of low hills, roughly bisected by the broad gleaming ribbon of the Tiber River. Even in the deepening twilight the city seemed to glow gently with polished stone colors: marble-white, pale blue-gray granite, and pink and yellow sandstone. A fine network of pale streets and water-glimmering aqueducts webbed the pattern of buildings, plazas and parks like a silk net holding a baroque pearl. From this distance, at least, it was a lovely city.

Spock brooded over the impressive image. Where was Jim in all that subtly distracting beauty?

Behind him, Day murmured a defensive compilation of Biblical quotes about Great Whores and Whited Sepulchres.

“Case here. We’re working our way west along the Caelian Hill. There are a lot of public buildings. Temples… More temples… No wait—that’s a public library. The building next to that is a
bathhouse. The one next to that… Heh! Would you believe a drycleaner’s shop? For real! Amazing how far back some of these things go.”

“You are there to search for the Captain. Please, forgo irrelevant observation. Spock out.”

“Schliemann here. We’ve worked our way over to the factory district, and I mean they have real, live factories! We’ve noted several large metalworking shops and there’s a huge weaving mill that must seat over 400 people. Something’s really went off with the technological rating for this society. Why didn’t anyone tell us that these people were so advanced?” The screen obligingly showed the mill’s interior. “Reconsider the rating system; those looms are operated by waterwheels, foot power and animals on treadmills, not by automotive machinery…”

“Please keep your attention on the task at hand. Spock out.”

“Wolchek here. We’re in what appears to be a bakers’ and millers’ district. There are wagons unloading grain… Hah! There’s a woman baker bitching about having to do the heavy work herself because her biggest assistant quit for a better paying job with the mint. Oh, man, Human nature sure hasn’t changed in 2300 years.”

“You are not here to collect gossip or meditate on human intractability. Proceed with the search. Spock out.”

“Brody here. All we’ve seen so far are residential districts, shops and small factories, temples and bathhouses. No sign of the Captain. You know, this doesn’t look like the ancient Rome we expected. It’s so- so hygienic and businesslike and ordinary… It’s downright dull! –I mean, we weren’t exactly expecting orgies and bloodbaths on every corner, but…for an ancient pagan city, this place is so respectable you could die of boredom.”

“You are not here to speculate on comparative sociology, but to search for Ji- the Captain. Proceed. Spock out.”

“Frightening, isn’t it?” Day commented. “How easily humans are distracted by worldly temptations, how constantly they need to be reminded of their moral obligations.”

Spock knew that if he replied he’d have to agree with her. He said nothing.

“That’s another reason,” Day went on. “Besides engine-stress, I mean, that we can’t stay long in this time period. I’ve seen signs that some of the weaker principled personalities are already leaning… Hawk’s way.”

“Indeed,” Spock murmured. “We cannot remain long. I must develop a swifter method of finding the Captain.” I can think of one, but for such concentration I must not be further distracted. “If you wish to accompany the landing parties on the next shift Dr. Day, I strongly recommend that you now retire to your quarters for whatever sleep you can obtain.” Go away.

“I’ll go and pray,” she promised, turning toward the turbolift. “And I’ll pray for you, too, Mr. Spock.” She paused for a moment, giving him a look of boundless pity. “I know how painful the alternative will be if we don’t find the Captain before the ship has to leave… We

Unnoticed, Uhura furiously clenched her fists in her lap. Who does that sanctimonious bitch think she is? she seethed. Where does she get off, coming up here on the bridge as if she belonged here and making sermons out of everybody else’s business? How dare she jab at Spock like that, reminding him of what he’ll have to do if we don’t find the Captain before the ship has to leave… We
can all guess. Not of us would hurt Spock by mentioning it, but, oh yes, she would… Djamballa! Why does he let her get away with that?

Spock didn’t move until the turblift doors whooshed closed. Then he glanced down at his clasped hands, idly noting how white the knuckles were, and deliberately relaxed his fingers. He admitted to himself that he really didn’t want to think about the alternative Day had just suggested. The very concept of taking life is distasteful. Jim… He firmly closed his mental doors on that train of thought. No, there had to be another way, and he would find it. It was merely a question of search technique; sensor to computer interface, or something similar; the selection and filtration of one characteristic that no one but Jim could have in all that dangerous world.

Unconsciously, Spock glowered at the image of the Eternal City gleaming so beautifully and seductively against the background of night. It was most illogical that such a destructive factor in the history of human civilization should appear so advanced, so esthetically appealing, so…virtuous, on so many levels…

Then again, logic had never applied very well to human societies. No wonder that the Master had been obliged to make a directly emotional approach. Spock closed his eyes for a moment and summoned the comfort of that memory and its core, the mind-meld—those vast waves of boundless love, love, unquestioning and all-embracing love… He remembered suddenly that he’d felt something similar on Omicron Ceti III, Leila’s world.

No! He snapped off that thought, indignantly. No comparison. That was merely drug induced euphoria, caused by the spores… They did marvelous healings, too. Totally different! The spores were mindless creatures, no more than practical symbiotes, offering health and happiness for their own purposes, while the Master… ‘Yahweh and So…reasons of their own…armies of obedient souls…’ No!

Spock snapped his eyes open, outraged to find those subversive thoughts creeping into his mind. Hawk had a dangerous ability to sow dissension, even in absentia, even in a properly disciplined mind. For that matter, nearly everyone and everything they’d encountered in this pagan world, or its future, shared that subtly corruptive power. Certainly Jim would not be immune to it, given enough time… and he is alone down there, in the midst of that culture, that city… I must bring him back quickly!

He stared at the view of Rome, as if it were the face of a personal enemy. How to fight that? How to find the one man it could not afford to let go? And how to reach him before he was won over to it, as completely as Merik had been to a similar culture, and turned into an irresistible weapon against the Master and everything that He planned for this world? The Master—

The mind-touch! Spock almost smiled at the elegant simplicity of the idea. Yes. A distinct possibility… He stood up. “Mr. Sulu, you have the con. Maintain present status. I will be in the Captain’s quarters, but I am not to be contacted except in case of emergency—or the confirmed discovery of the Captain’s location—for the next 30 minutes. You are to recall me at that time.” He turned and walked out, leaving the others to covertly stare at his retreating back.

To be continued in Chapter XVI: The Balance and the Star
“Chief…Magician…” Kirk gulped, covering his confusion by batting his napkin futilely at his spilled wine. “Uh, I’m going to have to think that over…”

“There’s no need for haste.” Octavianus shrugged. “Here, don’t worry about the wine. Oh, Mucia —”

The servant woman plodded in, bearing cloths, and began mopping up the spill, casting occasional dirty looks at the messy barbarian who’d caused the problem. Kirk couldn’t help squirming a little.

“Hmm, I wouldn’t recommend that you resume your former position or lodging,” Livia murmured. “The…gentleman who located you this earlier evening might do so again, and he has a vile temper when thwarted.”

The Imperator looked away.

“I…can’t just walk out on the mint,” Kirk considered. “The priestess was relying on me to do the assaying.” —and the shoveling, remember.

“I’ll send her a message and an apology,” said Livia. “Meanwhile, do you have enough to live on for a few days, or can you go back to your previous employer?”

“I suppose Flaviniana would be happy to take me back at the bakery… Look, if Tiberius is such a danger, can’t you do something about him?”

Livia and Octavianus exchanged looks of embarrassment and grim regret. “We have a…currently insoluble problem with him,” Octavianus admitted. “Despite his obvious faults, the man is valuable to the point of being irreplaceable…for the present, anyway.”

“Him?! I can’t believe— You should have heard some of the things I heard him say about restoring ‘rule by the best’, the old aristocracy, the—”

“Yes, we know.” Livia pursed her mouth as if she’d bitten down on an unripe persimmon. “He has always been like that, ever since he was a child. My first husband was a perfectly moss encrusted tortoise of an old Noble. Losing his war and power and wife to Gaius here—” She smiled warmly at Octavianus. “—did nothing to improve his temper. I’m afraid he raised Tiberius with equally sour attitudes.”

Kirk gaped at her. “You mean…Tiberius is your son?!” Oh, right. He said— Those two gossipy old women in the garden said— So this is what they were talking about! …And in my universe Tiberius became the next emperor of Rome. Oh. No…

“My son, to my eternal regret, by a most wretched man.” Livia paused to take another sip of the heavily watered wine. Octavianus looked down at his hands. “I assure you, that marriage—and its subsequent child-breeding—were not of my choice. The match was arranged by my family, for political reasons. The Livians were a small, newly rich family whose only power came from connections with the Claudians. They wished to strengthen those connections, so…” She shrugged. “I had nothing to say in the matter, being barely 15 at the time. I didn’t even know until a few fortinights before the wedding, that my intended husband was more than three times my age. And arrogant.”
“Uh…” Kirk thought that over. “It couldn’t have been very, er, happy for you…” he offered diplomatically.

“Let us say,” she smiled archly, “That I eventually made a match to my own liking.” She cocked an eyebrow at Octavianus, who grinned and blushed like a boy.

“So did I,” he murmured, his smile spreading almost to his ears.

“But- but in that case,” Kirk fumbled, “How could you… I mean, even if he’s your own son, how can you keep that man in a position of power? Even motherly love has to draw the line at—”

Livia made a rude, angry noise. “Motherly love, indeed! Had I my own way, I would have thrown the little beast to his namesake. I would do it yet, did he not have his regrettably valuable abilities.”

“Démas,” Octavianus sighed, “Now that my old friend Agrippa is dead, Tiberius just happens to be the single most able and effective military commander Rome possesses. He is also our most capable treasury administrator, having an unparalleled genius in his understanding of the—”

The translator said two words: “national economy.” Octavianus used several Latin words beyond that. Kirk guessed that to these Romans the very concept was so new and uncommon that it still wore a long and complex explanation instead of a brief, clear name. They got their lands very fast, he realized. They woke up one morning to find that they had a huge empire to deal with and no idea how… They’re not the only ones. Didn’t the same thing happen to America after World War II? America, at least, had the benefit of previous examples. These people don’t. They’re the first. They’re feeling their way blindly in the dark…and not doing that badly!

“Do you know how rare it is,” Octavianus continued gloomily, “For a citizen to even realize that the wealth of every citizen, business and treasury in the commonwealth are linked together? This is one deadly effect of ignorance, of that lack of common education, which we mentioned before.”

“Those who grasp even part of this knowledge,” Livia added, “Are most often among the ranks of the Nobles. You can imagine how they apply such learning.”

“I can imagine,” Kirk agreed.

“It is a logical progression that would have intrigued my old philosophy teachers,” said Octavianus. “Money can be used, in this way, to buy knowledge and power.”

“And power corrupts,” Kirk finished for him.

Livia nodded thoughtfully, eyebrows rising in renewed respect. “You grasp essentials quickly, Démas.”

_Not so much talent as hindsight_, Kirk thought. “So Tiberius is sort of a…tamed wolf, kept on a leash, to keep the other wolves away from your barn?”

“Just so,” Octavianus sighed. “Not an ideal solution. Hopefully, the leash—and the kennel keepers—will be sufficient to the task.”

“Meanwhile, we search for possible replacements.” Livia gave Kirk a brief, hooded glance.

Kirk felt the hair lift on the back of his neck. _Do you want me to help keep your wolf in line? Or to replace him?!_ He took the time to answer very carefully. “I’ll be happy to assist you in any way that I can.”
“Thank you.” Livia smiled sweetly. “Since you’re of a mind to be obliging, why not remain here as our guest until you can obtain suitable lodgings for a…Chief Magician?”

_The lady’s hard to refuse._ “I suppose that’s the best solution all around,” Kirk conceded.

The imperial couple relaxed visibly. Livia turned to the passing servant woman, who was bringing in lighted oil lamps, and gave quiet instructions for fresh linens in the guestroom. Octavianus took the opportunity to peer again at the map, chuckling briefly at various notations on it. He glanced at Kirk and smiled.

“Just reviewing old victories,” he explained. “Look, here’s one of the first: Colonia Agrippina, in lower Germany, named after my old friend…” He pointed.

Kirk looked, and saw not the expected configuration of a battlefield but the name of a city. There was something awfully familiar about its position on the map. _That’s where Cologne stands today… ‘Colonia Agrippina’! You mean that’s one of your welfare resettlement towns?”_

“Yes, indeed, and one of the more successful, too. Here’s another: Caesar Augusta, in Spain.”

_That’s Zaragoza! Still alive and well, after 2300 years…_

“I’m flattered, really. There’s another Spanish one: Nova Cartago.”

_Cartagena…_

“There’s Arelaté, in Gaul—”

_Arles, France_

“—and Lugdunum, also in Gaul.”

_Liege, Belgium._

“Some are more successful than others, of course, but they’re all doing well. All are quite independent of the treasury’s support; usually it takes them only one year’s harvest to start going by themselves.”

_How many of Earth’s longstanding old cities began as part of this little man’s welfare program?! … Or was it different in my universe?_

“There are several other promising sites…” Octavianus squinted at the map, rubbed his eyes and fumbled about on the couch. Livia sighed indulgently and handed him his magnifying glass. He smiled apologetically, too the glass and returned to poring over the map, then stopped to glance up at Kirk. “I have poor eyesight,” he explained, “And this glass enlarges anything put before it and making it easier for my old eyes to grasp. Here. Have you ever seen a glass ground like this?” He handed it to Kirk.

“Er, yes, but not often.” Kirk turned it over and over in his hands, noting that the edges showed the uneven burning that indicated hand grinding. “It must take a long time to grind one of these by hand.” _But they have the beginnings of lens technology…_

“Oh, yes, that’s what makes them so costly. Here, let me show you another trick.” Octavianus took back the lens. “Livia, dearest, could you find me the other one?”

“Easily. I suspected you wished to show him this trick.” Livia got up, went to a wall cabinet, took
out a small box and brought it back to the table.

There was another magnifying glass in the box, almost identical to the first. Octavianus picked it up and held it against the other one. “Look,” he pointed out. “If you place two of them together, like so, and then move them slowly apart, like so, eventually you reach a point where you can see distant objects as if they were near at hand. Thus. See?”

Kirk looked, and nodded dumbly. Primitive telescope!

“It was old Julius Caesar himself who discovered the trick. Naturally, he made use it in warfare. Surely there must be other uses; in studying Natural Science, at the very least…”

“Oh, beyond doubt.” And how far from here to the microscope? Kirk sighed and looked away. So damn much potential! A great civilization hanging in the balance…and I could help, and they want me to help. If I stay here… His eyes roamed to the wide window that opened on the garden. The sky was deep royal blue, twinkling with a diamond-dusting of stars. It occurred to him that part of the Augur’s riddle was answered. Yes, I’m part of the balance. If I stay, I’ll help this civilization survive…not fall into that- that darkness we saw in our own universe. I could do it! Octavianus has already laid the groundwork; all I have to do is help continue it…keep Tiberius from taking over, setting history back on the course it took in my universe.

In the thickening twilight behind him, Octavianus reluctantly rolled up the map, grumbling about his failing eyesight and its annoyances.

“Truly, Gus-Gus,” Livia nagged gently, “You should set aside the time to get that cataract operation. It will take no more than a month of recovery, and that bad eye is becoming troublesome.”

“As soon as I find the month to spare, my dear, I promise.”

...To drive away the Dark... Kirk pondered, watching the stars wink merrily. If I don’t… Face it! Spock may never find me! If I never get home... His throat tightened, hurting unbearably. If those stars stay forever out of my reach... His vision blurred. At least I’ll see to it that my children—or grandchildren, or great-greates to whatever remove—have the stars. Have the stars, far sooner and cleaner than my universe did. No Dark Ages. No, not for these people...who might be my people, in time...a ‘ship of state’ and a crew of millions... If I lose my ship, my world, and gain this one...

“—In any case, dear, you are absolutely not going to give yourself eyestrain reading those interminable census reports! I’ll see to them myself, once they’ve all come in.”

“Take them and welcome, wife. But stay, we’re ignoring our guest…”

...If I have to lose the Enterprise, at least I’ll have Rome! Nothing less, for losing half my life. Bargain.

“I say, Démas, are you looking for the star?”

“Huh?” The question caught Kirk off guard. “What star? I mean, which one?”

“The one that all the astrologers and magicians in the known world have been arguing about for the past few months.” Octavianus held up the two lenses, telescope fashion, and peered through them. “It’s over there, to your right, low down by the horizon.”

Kirk looked. Sure enough, there was a star there—large, dull and hazy, and an off-color somewhere between orange and pink, a sullen shade of dust. “I hadn’t noticed it. Why? What’s all the argument about?”
“The astrologers say it’s a rare conjunction of Jupiter, Mars and Saturn. It’s considered quite a bad omen. Although there’s much disagreement on the details of the application, the general sense is clear. Jupiter is the planet of leadership, rule and law; Mars, the planet of war, slaughter and cruelty; Saturn, the planet of age, plague and evil. Conjoined like that, they bode ill for humanity.”

“Hah! Maybe it’s a warning. Don’t make a leader out of an evil-minded old general! —like Tiberius. Oh, would fit nicely, wouldn’t it.


Octavianus glanced at Kirk and nodded slowly. “Patience,” he whispered. “Matters of such importance can hardly be decided in a single night. Give us time, and let us observe.”

Kirk didn’t notice them; his eye had been caught by the bright sweep of a meteor further up in the sky. Take omens, Magician! He smiled to himself. Tiberius’ star hangs low and dark. That shooting star—is that me? Could it promise a ‘meteoric’ rise to fame? …Or just a fast passage through this place and time?

It occurred to him then that there was a star missing.

No star in the east… Which way’s east again? There… No, nothing there but the star of Tiberius. But there should be… No, this is 7 BC. Seven years too early… if Jesus will be born in this universe at all. Ah, if I’m still here in seven years, that will be something worth trying! I’d watch for him; try to keep this world’s Herod from slaughtering any innocents… What if I could actually meet Jesus? Or keep him from being killed! How much better could this universe be if he lives a long time, spreading the word of peace and love, keeping all those venal hysterics from perverting his message in years to come? I could do it! It wouldn’t be that hard; just get whoever’s in charge in Judea to send any dissident preachers they catch here to Rome instead of killing them… Of course, I could collect dozens, maybe hundreds of assorted preachers, rebels and just plain nuts before I found the right one… Hell, have ’em looked over by the local doctors, and give the sane ones decent jobs here in Rome to keep them happy. Meanwhile keep looking… so much I could see, learn, do…

If I’m stuck here for life, there would be compensations. Big ones.

Yes, I guess I’ve decided, Octavianus. If I stay, I’ll accept your offer. Take the job, use it well, and take it to the limit of my ability… If I stay. How long before I know if I’m really, truly stranded here? How long do I wait before reaching out deliberately to put my hand to the wheel? I can’t straddle the fence much longer…

* * * *

The lift stopped at Officer’s Quarter’s level. Spock moved swiftly into the corridor hoping he wouldn’t meet anyone. The hope died as he rounded the curve and saw McCoy coming toward him like a nagging conscience. Very little, he thought, Goes well for me lately…

“Spock?” McCoy was, in fact, nonplussed. “What on earth are you doing down here?”

“I am proceeding to the Captain’s quarters, Doctor,” Spock replied, drearily knowing that McCoy wouldn’t accept such a simple and direct answer.

“Wha- Why? Migod, Spock, you’re not going to read Jim’s final orders, are you? You can’t be giving up this soon!”

“No, Doctor, I am not ‘giving up’,” Spock sighed, deciding that it would cost less time and argument
to explain in full. “We have had little success discerning the Captain’s whereabouts with sensor readings; therefore, I shall attempt to contact the Captain telepathically. Such effort requires privacy.”

“Oh, I could clear you a place in Sickbay—”

“Insufficient. I will also require the aid of impressions of the Captain’s personality, which will be most vivid in his own quarters. They will help me to focus on him over the considerable distance.” He stood still, waiting for the usual flood of arguments, questions and objections.

“Hope it works,” McCoy agreed. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Surprised, Spock answered with a little less control than usual. “I…regret that I cannot think of anything… Although you might return in 28.3 minutes and determine that I am able to break the trance and return to the bridge.” That probably would not be necessary, Spock guessed, but it would be best to give McCoy something helpful to do.

“Okay. Let’s say 28 minutes even.” McCoy smiled for the first time that day. “I’ll see you then.”

Spock nodded a brief acknowledgement and proceeded down the corridor, bemused at how quickly McCoy could shift from anger to kindness. Typical human unpredictability… He almost smiled.

Watching him go, McCoy mulled over the thought that the only person Spock could, or would, contact telepathically over long distances was Jim Kirk. It’s because he loves him, McCoy concluded. Though he’d never admit it. …In fact, that’s precisely the problem.

A few step into the Captains’ cabin and Spock paused for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the semi-dark, feeling the welcome sense of familiarity sweep over him. He glanced around the cabin almost shyly, as if he were intruding. His choice had been correct; these rooms practically vibrated with the sense of Kirk’s presence, from the carelessly dropped reports on the desk to the slightly rumpled bed. Kirk might have left it only seconds before.

Spock stepped resolutely past the half-screen, went to that faintly mussed bed and lay down on it. He slowed his breathing to the proper pattern, compelled his wearied muscles to relax, and slipped quickly into a light trance state. It was easy to visualize Kirk’s face: the bold cheerful eyes, the smiling resolute mouth, the muscled line of his jaw and that obstinate lock of hair that always fell over his forehead. It was easy to conjure up Kirk’s strong, dedicated and mischievous personality—there were impressions from hundreds of memories, dozens of mind-melds—but Spock knew these were memories only, not true contact. He would find no contact at this level, and it did not really surprise him. Too far away. Deeper trance required…

He slowed his breathing still more, waited for his heartbeat to fall into matching rhythm and reviewed the standard formula of Meditation on the IDIC. By slow degrees he lost awareness of his body and became a single point of consciousness, searching like an errant comet through the varying stars of the mental universe. Somewhere out there was James Kirk, somewhere among those countless points of light far beyond the close and bustling cluster of brilliants that was the Enterprise’s crew. Spock concentrated on the dearly known texture of Kirk’s mind, looking for a similar pattern in that strange immaterial galaxy.

There was a trace, a hint, a faint but definite feel of contact. There! Yes: Jim Kirk, distant but there, radiating loneliness and loss and a strange sense of elation. Jim, alive and almost within reach! Spock stretched and strained the tendrils of his mind, shouting silently across the gulf of physical space. Jim! Show me where you are! Give me a sign so I can find you! Where are you? Give me a sign…
For a split second there was full contact and awareness, as strong as a physical touch. For one instant Kirk felt his mental presence and his message. There was shock of recognition, relief and joy—and an odd ambiguity. There was a visual image of a dinner table. A modest meal was ending, its remnants displayed under yellow oil light. A man and a woman in simple clothing reclined on a nearby couch. With a jolt, Spock recognized the face of the man.

Then contact slipped. Spock reached for it again, but felt his control failing as his exhausted body claimed its due. He fell from deep trance into unconsciousness, like a broken-winged bird spinning out of the sky. *I did well to warn McCoy…* was his last thought. Darkness swallowed him up.

Kirk was looking at the stars when the contact came. It lasted only a second, but it was as strong and definite as the grip of a hand in his own. It was the awareness of Spock, sharp as a physical presence and familiar through unnumbered mind links and years of shared time. *Spock! You’re here!!!*

With the presence came the flash of an image—visual, auditory and tactile. He saw Spock, in his cabin, lying limp on his bed, superimposed on an IDIC symbol that was as bright as flame. With the image was a desperate plea: *Show me where you are!*

Kirk froze, holding his mind and body absolutely still, waiting for more, but the image faded and the presence with them. *Of course,* he guessed. *The distance. He’s on the ship.*


Kirk blinked, shaking himself back to the here-and-now. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just that I’ve had a— a vision, a true sighting, I mean…”

Livia and Octavianus paid polite attention, seeing nothing outré in his comments.

Heartened, Kirk went on. “I’ve been magically contacted. My friend Spock, my First—uhm, the magician—he’s near Rome at this very moment, and he’s trying to find me. He wants me to give him a sign, something that he can find and focus on…” As he remembered the message, an idea came. *The IDIC in fire!* “Sir, I don’t want to impose on your hospitality, but you said you would help me get home if you could…”

“I did and I will.” If Octavianus felt any disappointment, he let none of it show. “Tell me what you need.”

“Torches. Lots of torches.” Words tumbled out as the idea took shape. “Maybe hundreds of torches, arranged in a pattern—and some open space, with no roof, big enough to hold them. It has to be visible from the sky. And soon, as soon as might be. I don’t know how long he’s been searching, or how long he can wait… Could you arrange that for me?”

“Easily,” said the Imperator, sitting up. “I can turn out a centum of the Praetorian Guard, with torches, and have them assembled on Mars Field. They’re used to my religious eccentricities—and my friends’—oh, some of the stunts Virgil used to pull… Well, they won’t ask outrageous questions.” Octavianus looked downright eager, almost boyish, as if he were delighted at the chance to see and participate in real magic.

“The…Praetorian Guard?” Kirk hitched a shoulder uneasily, remembering the reputation of that particular bunch later in history.

“That’s the formal name of the public city police,” Livia explained. “What with the size of the
population, the lictors provided by various temples simple aren’t enough anymore. One of the duties of the city guard is providing the Imperator’s bodyguard. Another is marshalling religious ceremonies and civil parades. This activity might be considered a bit of both.”

* * *

“So they’re just the capitol city police!” Kirk marveled. One day they might take over the capitol… Unless I stay. Damn! I can’t! But if this fails… he stood up and helped the Imperator to his feet. “Sir. Octavianus,” he said, impulsively taking the little Roman’s hands in his own. “If this doesn’t work, if I can’t get home again, then I… I’ll do all you ask. I’ll stay and work with you, be the- the magician you want and hold off the darkness… I’ll do it. I promise.”

Octavianus smiled and clasped both of Kirk’s arms in a surprisingly strong grip. “So be it,” he said. “I am no mean gambler, Démas. Though I know nothing of the dice your unseen friend will toss, I’ll willingly play this game of chance. To Mars Field, then—and leave the future in the lap of the gods.”

* * *

“Spock!” a vaguely familiar voice called from a far country. “Spock, wake up!” He tried to move toward the sound, but fatigue held him in soft chains.

“Spock! Dammit!”

Something cold hissed against his neck. The chains evaporated, leaving sour echoes. Spock opened his eyes and saw McCoy looking down at him with blatant concern giving way to equally blatant relief. On the desk in the outer office, the communications console was beeping insistently.

“I congratulate you on your timing, Doctor,” Spock commented, pulling himself upright. “Your ‘wake-up alarm’ coincides exactly with Mr. Sulu’s”

“Timing be damned!” said McCoy. “We’re both 10 minutes early. Sulu sent me here when he couldn’t raise you himself.”

“Why was this haste necessary?” Spock asked, swinging clumsy legs over the side of the bed.

“Emergency, Spock. We’re running under cloak, flying low, doing our best to hidden in what high clouds we can find, and we’ve got one hell of a problem.”

“What problem?” Spock stood up, silently ordering his shaky knees to behave.

“The Invictus just popped out of subspace, scarcely 2000 miles behind us.”

* * *

To Be Continued in Chapter XVII: The Hour When the Stars Come Right
The Hour When the Stars Come Right

Mars Field was bare beaten earth, and the shuffling feet of the softly grumbling Guardsmen raised low clouds of dust in the unsteady torchlight. Only the noncoms had their torches lit as yet, though all the Guardsmen carried at least one. Kirk glimpsed their faces as they passed: sleepy, puzzled, intrigued, annoyed, bored, amused and tired. Despite their archaic uniforms, they looked like men of any troop of any age of the world. *If this doesn’t work, Kirk thought, in time, they’ll be mine. Not a bad looking bunch of men. In time, I could learn to love them, too…*

He watched Otavianus calmly ordering the Guardsmen into position, checking briefly with a sketch Kirk had made on a tablet, choreographing the uncomprehending troops with the skill of a master. Kirk was struck by the change; the little man seemed taller in the flickering torchlight, his expression calm and impassive, remote and sure. The folds of his long toga resembled marble more than cloth. At this moment, he looked like a moving statue of the Spirit of the Romans. He had stepped into his formal role, and he fit it well.

A little beyond Octavianus, Kirk noted with a grin, stood the Vestal Ocellina, the Augur Flamma, the Priestess Amuliana and old Perinna from the temple of Mercury—all busily taking notes. Kirk could guess how they’d heard about this little event; Livia’s gossip network was nearly as fast and thorough as electronic communications. He didn’t in the least object to their presence, and Octavianus plainly wanted them here. Kirk wondered what kind of historical footnote this would make in later ages.

> For that matter, he thought, watching the imperator orchestrate his little troop, *what will future histories say of this man? How much has he changed this timeline already, just by being who and what he is? Will the gap between timelines close completely if Tiberius becomes the next Imperator, or will something of hope remain? Is this man enough to make a permanent difference, he and Livia, ‘avert the omen’ and hold back the doom that waits for Rome? By whatever good gods there may be, I hope so!*

* * * *

Spock almost ran onto the bridge, ignoring the com that Sulu hastily vacated, and went straight to the Science console and read off the sensor reports at record speed. On the view screen the magnified image of the *Invictus* wavered and faded to reemerge through cloudbanks, like a cruising shark half-veiled by dark seaweed, beautiful and deadly, and hunting for them. Her image glowed and wavered eerily in the mist.

> “They’re using some sort of cloaking screen,” Sulu almost whispered. “Our sensors can get partly through it. It must work differently from ours. I don’t think they can see us, at least, not yet. On the chance that they might pick up our drive emissions, I cut out the drive altogether. We’re coasting now, using power only for life-support, the shields and the cloak, but we can’t keep it up for very long.”

Spock nodded wordlessly without taking his eyes off the console screen, and calculated the length of time that the *Enterprise* could continue coasting before gravity pulled her into thicker atmosphere where air friction would envelope her in a cloud of heat that not even a veiling of cumulus clouds could hide. The time was disagreeably short. He came to decision.

> “Lt. Uhura, call Dr. McCoy and a full Security team to the transporter room. Full battle gear. Mr.
Sulu, prepare to engage engines and take evasive maneuvers the moment we have completed beam-down. The *Invictus* may be able to detect transporter emission and thereby locate the ship.”

“Yes, sir.” Sulu and Uhura responded as one, turning to their boards to carry out their orders. Only Chekov bothered to ask: “Is it necessary to beam down then, Mr. Spock?”

“Yes,” Spock snapped. “This may be our only opportunity to locate and rescue the Captain. Besides, there is a 99.78% probability that the *Invictus* will locate the *Enterprise* within 11.4 minutes in any case.”

“Oh.”

Spock switched the side screen to an overview of the city, matching it with an historical map of the known ancient Rome. *Target?* He considered. *Must arrive in sufficient cover… A park. Where is the park nearest to the Imperial palace?* The nearest park of any size was a good distance away. Too far for Spock’s tastes. *Then again,* he reconsidered; *this map is an historical reconstruction only. Sensor readings have already registered numerous anomalies. The target coordinates may not be accurate… Day could determine the location.* “Lt. Uhura, call Dr. Day to the transporter room, full gear, with instructions to join the landing party.” He ordered Sulu back to the com, sent the coordinates for the Garden of Maecenas to the transporter room, and hurried out.

* * * *

The last guardsman shuffled into place and stood as Otavianus had ordered. The Imperator surveyed the finished pattern, glanced again at the design Kirk had sketched, and grunted with satisfaction. The watching clerics hurried to the focal circle and jostled for position, trying to get close enough to see everything that might happen, but far enough back not to be caught up in it. Kirk briefly wished that Nitidus could have been among them, but he guessed that it was way past the boy’s bedtime—by his mother’s reckoning, at least. Besides, he’d get the story from old Perinna anyway. Eventually, Kirk was sure, every friend he’d made here would hear the tale of how the Irish Magician went home again. …Or didn’t go home, he thought, gnawing his lip. *Will this work? I know Spock is up there somewhere, searching. How can he help but see this?*

Octavianus paused a moment, and stepped closer to Kirk. “Demas,” he asked in a shy half-whisper. “Could I ask you a favor also?”

“Whatever I can do,” Kirk smiled.

“If you prove successful, could you ask your magician friend to…to invoke a blessing upon my hopes for Rome? No doubt, the work so powerful a magician would carry clearly to the gods, and… I need all the help I can obtain.

Kirk gulped, bewildered and honestly touched. “I’ll ask him,” he promised. “I can’t imagine him refusing.” A ‘blessing’? …*Well Spock would certainly add his personal observations to the notes about this incident, especially when I tell him what I’ve seen and heard. Praise from a Vulcan is rarer than snow in May, but he surely won’t stint on it after seeing this place. Who could? I hope that will be ‘blessing’ enough, Octavianus. You and yours deserve that at the very least. You deserve to survive. What kind of future will you make if you succeed? I wish I could see it! Oh, if only I could…*

Octavianus turned back to the Guardsmen. “Arrange your torches, please,” he said.

* * * *
The landing party materialized in a small clearing in the Garden of Maecenas, surrounded by blossoming fruit trees of assorted ages and a few statues gleaming pale in the starlight. Except for themselves, the garden was deserted. The landing party looked around cautiously, all except Spock, who looked upwards as he opened his communicator. “Ship’s status, Mr. Sulu?” he asked, unconsciously keeping his voice down.

“We’re evading, sir,” came the staticky reply. “Oh, they’ve seen us! They’re pursuing— Evade! Evade!” There was a moment’s paused, full of Red Alert background noises. “Sir, they’re trying to maneuver under us, or at least parallel. I think… No, I’m sure; they don’t want to risk firing down at us for fear of missing us and hitting the planet below.”

“Then work as deeply into the atmosphere as possible,” said Spock. “Cease cloaking; it is now a waste of energy. I will contact you when I can; call me only in case of emergency. Spock out.”

“…Emergency,” Sulu muttered, swinging the Enterprise on a wildly slewing course as fast as her inertial compensators would allow. “What does he think this is?!”

A bolt of light blossomed off to port, rattling the ship violently.

Chekov swore in Russian. “Dat was some kindt of torpedo,” he yelped. “But I didn’t see the trachectory! How did it get hir?”

“Gates,” said Sulu. “They use the Gates. If they get a good enough aim, they could drop one of those things right in our laps…” —and I don’t know how to deal with that! Who does? Kirk’s not here, nor Spock. Scott—ah. But Spock said— but I’m in charge. “Uhura, call the brig. Tell them that Scotty’s released, on my orders. Get him up here fast!”

* * * *

“Dr. Day, can you give me the exact location of the Imperial Palace?” Spock asked. “How far from here?”

Agnes paused for a moment to check her notepad.

Right then, everyone heard the distinctive chiming in the air.

“Take cover!” Spock shouted, slapping his aura belt on and diving for a nearby hedge. The Security team promptly followed, two of them dragging McCoy and Day into the bushes with them.

A glowing white dot appeared in the air, lengthened to a line and expanded to a doorway. Out of it boiled a dozen imperials, including Aquila himself. Over their customary uniforms they wore crested helmets and suspiciously glowing body armor. They held recognizable energy pistols and unrecognizable stubby wands. Their deployment from the Gate was fast, grim and businesslike. Spock had no doubts as to their purpose.

“Standard search pattern,” Aquila growled past his half-smoked cigar. “Commence sensor sweep.” He pulled his tall crested helmet lower above his eyes.

The Imperial troopers stepped forward in an even line, swinging their stubby wands before them like a pantomime of sowing wheat. Spock guessed that those wands were sophisticated tricorders, just as half a dozen of them began to buzz.

“People! And energy emissions! Close!” announced a medium crested Imperial. “20 paces, at 42 degrees!”
“Approach with caution!” Aquila snapped. “Under no circumstances may be harm the residents.”

“I’m getting Vulcanoid readings!” yelped the under officer.

“They’re moving away—fast!” cried another trooper, female-voiced this time.

“After them!” roared Aquila.

The *Enterprise* party was already running, Spock in the lead, Security men half-dragging Day and McCoy. Spock considered strategy as he ran. There was no possibility of evading the Imperials; those compact and powerful hand sensors could probably find the proverbial needle in a haystack, and even if the *Enterprise* team turned off their aura-belts and tried to hide in the nearest crowd, Spock’s Vulcanoid readings would identify him anywhere in the city. Neither team could leave the park while the other was free for fear of bringing the battle among the local residents and risking unknown changes in history. Retreat to the ship was possible only if they stopped running long enough to be found, focused on and beamed up—it was anyone’s guess when either ship would have a spare moment to retrieve its people. *We need*, Spock grimly concluded, *reliable cover*. His eyes raked the dark ground ahead seeing only trees, flowers and hedges—transparent as gauze to any sensor and Spock, suspected, to whatever those handguns fired. No promising cover showed itself.

Meanwhile, the humans were tiring and the long-legged Imperials were gaining.

McCoy never afterwards knew precisely how long that wild, blind scramble lasted. He was aware only that two red-shirted security men were hauling him along by an arm apiece, his legs long gone rubbery, his heart stuttering serious warnings, and then—thank whatever gods were rolling the dice that night—through the shrubbery the moon-white flash of polished marble. Spock had clearly seen it first and was leading them straight toward it.

The little pavilion was roofed with red tiles and supported on graceful white marble columns. Inside stood a circular fountain of smooth pink stone, its central spigot in the shape of three bronze sea nymphs pouring water from conch shells.

The *Enterprise* team dashed into the pavilion and took cover behind the columns. “Prepare to fire,” Spock ordered as he personally dragged Day and McCoy to relative safety behind the fountain. Leaving them to regain their wind, he pulled out his communicator and called the ship. Contact came through in bursts of static. *Ionization. Firing in the atmosphere*, he guessed. “Mr. Sulu, please report.”

“—evading—” Sulu’s reply came in fragments. “—can’t keep—up much long—their shields are diff—phasers—”

No possibility of transporter rescue… “Understood. Preserve the ship at all costs. We shall attempt to complete the mission. Spock out.” He flicked the communicator closed, almost idly noting the faint, tiny bursts of light in the evening sky; low to the east. Local natives alert enough to notice them would probably mistake them for a meteor shower. He could also hear the multiple slap of approaching boot soles.

“Spock!” Aquila’s voice cracked through the soft evening dark. “I know you’re in there. Surrender yourself and your people, at once. We’ll spare your lives, upon my honor. Spock?”

Spock didn’t bother replying. He tried to calculate the effectiveness of Imperial armor against phaser fire, and grimly concluded that only the first shot would give sufficient data. He silently signaled the Security men to set phasers for maximum stun.
“Very well,” Aquila muttered, teeth grinding on his stogie. “Advance. Prepare to fire at will.”

The Imperials cautiously edged forward, out of the shadows.

“No, don’t!” hissed a familiar voice from somewhere behind Aquila. “It’s a trap; they’re waiting for you to get into pointblank range!”

Spock recognized the voice. Hawk! He swept his arm down in the signal to fire.

As one, they fired straight at the armored Imperials.

All hell broke loose.

* * * *

Down in Engineering, Scotty scrambled and swore as the Enterprise rocked and lurched and swerved. The gravity compensators were stuttering, limping and assorted tools and engineers were skidding and flying all over the machinery. Dials and screens and warning light flicker madly. The ship couldn’t take much more of this; already one of the aft shields was down and two more were overloaded.

The intercom beeped. “Mr. Scott!” Sulu yelled through the noise of the bridge, “How long to repair that shield?”

Scott lunged for the intercom, anchored himself on a stanchion and howled back: “I canna tell! The damage we’re takin’ an’ the way things’re flying aroon’ doon here, there’s na way to be certain!”

“Can you think of anything that can get through the Invictus’ shields? We’ve scored two clean hits on them and done no damage at all.”

“I’ll try, laddie,” Scott promised.

The intercom cut off as the ship rocked again. Scott clutched the stanchion with both arms and tried to concentrate in the howling chaos. Their shields—Electron resolution drive. Different frequencies, field densities, everything. Opaque to almost everything, almost... Wait! I saw—Because of the Gates—

“Transporter!” Scott bellowed, snapping his head up. “You, you an’ you—” He pointed to the three nearest of his staff. “Come wi’ me!”

He stumbled, clawed and climbed his way to the door, desperately hoping that there was enough time, if he could remember the location and coordinates, and that this would work.

* * * *

The view on the Invictus’ screens slewed wildly, a reeling panorama of earth, clouds, sky and a fleeing white ship like a big-headed bird.

“...And we the hunters,” murmured Aemilia, sitting half-crouched in the command chair. “She dodges well.”

“Commander!” Ashrilliin’s voice wailed from the intercom. “The atmosphere—if we continue like this, our shields will overload in another ten minutes!”

“Divert all available power to the shields,” Aemilia snapped. “Armor the crew and cut life-support. Cut everything but motive power and gunnery.”
“Aye.” Ashriliin signed off.

“Aye,” Aemilia turned to study a side screen. “Take us lower. If we can’t get under them, at least get us to the same level.”

“Aye, aye, commander. I must add, though, that if we go much deeper the air friction on our shields will make us glow like a star; readily visible to the inhabitants.”

“Let us hope they mistake us for a comet or meteor,” said Aemilia.

The helmsman nodded and obliged. The image on the view screen dipped and swung. The bright flower of an explosion bloomed just off the fleeing Enterprise’s port bow, rocking the ship sideways.

_Do better_, Aemilia thought, grinding her teeth. _Strike again. Their primitive shields can’t hold forever, not in atmosphere… But we must take them soon! The gods only know what will happen if this battle becomes too noticeable from the Earth! “Helm, close in. Cut the distance between us as much as possible.”_

“Commander, there’s danger of collision if we do. Some of these maneuvers—”

“It’s the lesser danger,” said Aemilia, considering—with a calmness that vaguely surprised her—that a collision at these speeds would end the problem thoroughly. The Grand Senate, so far away now in time, might wonder for years what had become of its flagship, but at least it would be there to wonder.

—and all the Imperium besides, she thought, with a sharp twinge of homesickness. All the united worlds, the free and happy and peaceful and prosperous galaxy. Not that poor, stumbling vicious, aborted thing your records showed us, Spock.

She slammed her fist on the knee, eyes blurring in sudden grief and fury. _Spock, how could you do this to us?! Curse you, in the name of all the good gods that ever were!_

“Closing in,” reported the helmsman. “Possibility of collision, 41%.”

** * * * **

A hand phaser blast vaporized half the pavilion’s room, letting in a shower of broken tiles, flying dust and a view of the night sky. The oil and ozone stink of overloaded energy-armor clashed with the raw smell of blood that seeped from half-vaporized bodies. Cries, curses, footfalls the crashes filled the smoking air. At the edge of the pool, an Imperial and a Security man wrestled breast-to-breast, clutching each other’s weapon hands, armor and aura-belt straining and shorting out against each other. A dying Imperial aimed roughly at both combatants, fired a last shot that missed and hit the fountain. The statue, its base shot from under it, fell over with a clanging crash. Brief screams erupted from beneath its new resting place. Water from the broken basin flooded the floor, washing over bodies and rubble.

_We must abandon this area_, Spock decided, firing his wide-open phaser steadily at an oncoming Imperial. _If we continue, there will be on one left to rescue the Captain. I must signal to— “Out! Get out!”_

At barely three meters, the Imperials armor gave out. His body disappeared in a blue glow just as Spock’s phaser sputtered and died. Nearby, a weakened pillar trembled; the entire pavilion was about to come down.

_No time!_ Spock grabbed McCoy and Day and dragged them bodily out the other side of the pavilion.
A Security man fired off a few last shots and came bounding after them. Right on his heels, the pavilion tottered, crumbled and collapsed in a clattering roar. A cloud of dust erupted toward the sky.

Under cover of the crash Spock ran, crouching low, leading the others into the sheltering darkness of a cherry tree grove. There was no sign of pursuit yet, but he knew that it would come soon enough. There was no sign that anyone else from the Enterprise team had survived, either. Four of us. How many Imperials? Spock couldn’t be sure; he’d been in no position to stop and count bodies. In any case, must move on quickly before the survivors realize we are not buried in the ruins. “Dr. Day,” he whispered urgently. “What is the quickest way out of the park?”

“Up- uphill.” Day panted. “The Gardens are on the back of the Esquiline Hill. If we can reach the crest, we’ll be among inhabited buildings…”

“Yes.” Spock glanced around him, judging distances, noting where the ground sloped upward. He could indeed see the rise of a long hilltop from here. Unfortunately, there was much open ground before it. He mapped out a zigzag route that would keep them within the cover of hedges, at least. “Come,” he whispered, taking McCoy by the arm. “We must hurry.”

“Tricorder,” McCoy managed to gasp. “Check. See if they’re around.”

“No. No energy emissions. Only belts are safe now. Life-form readings they might mistake but not that.”

They padded hurriedly through the dark, staying in the shadows. The top of the hill drew closer, and still there was no sound of pursuit. Spock began calculating more favorable probabilities that the Imperials had lost track of them completely.

The last stretch of ground was an open lawn, too wide to circle around, broken only by the useless shade of slender apple tree saplings. Beyond that stood a last hedge, and beyond that the unmistakable walls of buildings: safety, or at least the end of the park. They had no choice but to hurry straight across the open space.

“Go quickly,” Spock whispered, and took the first step.

They hadn’t gone three strides when a bolt of white light hit the Security man just above the belt. He screamed, still running, haloed with blue and white fire as his aura-belt overloaded and gave out. The white bolt plunged straight through him, tearing up the ground beyond, and he went down.

Day screamed wildly, throwing herself to the ground. Spock almost threw McCoy at the thin cover of the nearest tree, and whirled to face the source of the ray.

It was Aquila, bursting from a thicket of shrubs not 20 meters to the left. His helmet had a dent in one side, and was white with marble dust. His body armor was smoking and dead and he tore it off as he ran. His teeth were clenched on the butt of his long-dead cigar. He had lost his sensor wand somewhere but he was still holding his energy gun.

“Damn you, Spock! He roared as he closed the distance.

Must draw him off—Spock turned and dashed toward the hedge, zigzag, broken-field running, hoping that Day and McCoy has the sense to keep going. A bolt of white light sputtered over his head and scorched the grown beyond. Spock both guessed and hoped that the energy gun was almost completely drained. The hedge was a scant 10 meters away, but from the pounding of footsteps he could tell that the tall Imperial was gaining on him. Another bolt of white light raked him, making his aura-belt flare and overheat. He ducked and rolled, hearing the sizzle of his belt...
components shorting out, and then he got up and ran. He could hear Aquila thudding close behind him, and guessed that the next shot wouldn’t miss.

“Spock!!!” A despairing yell in McCoy’s voice. “Jesus, save him!” in Day’s. Aquila’s hard breathing was audible.

—I will not reach the hedge in time—

“Stop!” Day shrilled.

Spock turned in time to see her running, incredibly, away from the trees and safety. She darted past him before he could stop her, right into Aquila’s path.

“Stop!” she cried again. “In the name of Almighty G—”

Aquila fired.

Whatever Day had thought she was doing, or being, Aquila saw only another enemy soldier and behaved accordingly. His shot cut her almost in half before the drained charge finally sputtered out.

“Oh, my god…” McCoy groaned from somewhere behind an apple tree.

Aquila swore, threw the useless pistol away, and pulled out his dagger.

Spock whirled to meet him and they clashed head on. Aquila lunged at him with the knife. Spock sidestepped it and thrust Aquila’s arm forward, trying to throw him, but Aquila snagged him with a jabbing knee and they both went down in a thrashing tangle.

How can I help?! McCoy wondered, darting as close as he dared. He’ll slice Spock up like hog-bacon!

Aquila managed to yank his sword-arm free, and slashed at Spock’s throat. Spock ducked quickly enough to save his neck, but not everything; the razor sharp blade raked the side of his head and sliced off the tip of his left ear. Ignoring the spurting wound, he rolled and kicked. The knife went flying. Aquila snarled like a lion and dove for Spock’s throat. They rolled, grappled, kicked and jabbed all over the bloody grass.

McCoy dashed out and grabbed the fallen dagger, determined not to let Aquila get hold of it again. Its weight surprised him. Can I use this if I have to? He wondered. On him?! I’ve never killed anybody before! He ducked back behind the tree, looked around in time to see Spock and Aquila break apart and leap for each other again. He saw Spock try for a neck-pincher and Aquila whip his head sideways, his snapping teeth just missing Spock’s thumb.

Just then, out from the shadows of the trees ran a third figure. A small man, panting heavily, overburdened in Imperial armor, but moving fast for all that. Despite the uniform, McCoy recognized him.

Hawk! Oh, no!

Hawk ran straight toward the combatants, clumsily pulling his short sword as he ran, plainly determined to help Aquila. Spock didn’t see him, but Aquila did. The tall Imperial broke away from Spock with a solid kick that threw the Vulcan backward into Hawk’s path.

Without thinking, McCoy hefted the dagger and threw it, butt-first, at Hawk.
The pommel clipped the side of Hawk’s helmet with a ringing clang, and knocked the little archeologist sprawling on the grass.

Spock whirled to see what the noise was, and Aquila pounced on him.

---

Scott burst into the transporter room and leaped for the controls. *If I remember the diagram, it was on the 12th level down— Omigod, what have we got to throw! I didn’t tell them to bring anything—* He looked wildly around at the three bewildered sub-engineers. They weren’t even carrying tools! *Oh, damnation, I’m the only one with even a monkey wrench!* He threw the spanner on the transporter pad, where it smacked against one of the engineer’s boot. Inspiration struck.

“A’right, everybody,” he bellowed. “Take off yer shoes!”

---

“Too close!” yelled the helmsman, reflexively throwing all three arms across his face.

The *Invictus*’ main screen flared with intolerable brilliance, and the metallic clangs and shrieks of secondary effect sounded form all over the ship as the impact slewed her sideways with a heavy jolt.

“Our shields brushed,” gasped the navigator, catlike eyes narrowed to tiny slits.

“That’s taken a big chunk of our power,” panted the sub-engineer, unnecessarily. Everyone on the bridge could hear Ashrilin’s voice on the intercom, howling the damage report.

“Firepower down nearly 60 per centum,” announced the gunnery officer, unwinding her tentacles from their chair arms. “I don’t know how long it’ll take to recharge…”

“What did that sideswipe do the *Enterprise*?” Aemilia demanded.

“Their speed’s down to almost nothing, and their shields are spotty,” noted the helmsman.

“We could hit them now, but not with enough!” The gunnery officer pounded her fisted tentacle on the chair arm in an agony of frustration.

“Yet there is one thing we can do,” said Aemilia. *Oh, love, I have no choice!* “Helm,” she rapped out. “Aim dead amidships, and fast forward.”

The helmsman turned to gape at her, not quite believing…

“You heard me,” she said. “Ram them!”

---

McCoy ran out, past the two Vulcanoids rolling on the ground in a snarling, kicking, thrashing, clawing tangled. He grabbed Hawk and both weapons, trying to drag them all away from the combat zone. He didn’t think much of Spock’s chances if Aquila got his hands on a blade again. Spock was barely holding his own as it was.

Beneath him, Hawk began to struggle feebly. McCoy swore. Taking no chances, he pushed Hawk face first into the grass and unceremoniously sat on him.

Right then, the sky opened.
Gold-white light, almost as bright as the full blaze of noon, lit up the earth and sky all around them in a silent glare. Spock and Aquila had leaped away from each other to gain an instant’s space. All four combatants looked up.

In the eastern quarter of the sky, blazing like a nova, was a tiny point of intolerably flaming light. McCoy groaned as the recognized it. He’d seen that once before.

It was a star-drive ship, blowing itself to kingdom come.

Aquila gave a cold and terrible laugh. “That was one or both of us, Spock!” he said. “At least one of our ships is gone. Now it all falls on you and me.”

With that, the leaped forward.

* * * *

On Mars field, the explosion lit the ground like dawn. Men’s shadows fell black as cardboard on the suddenly bright earth. Guardsmen swore, cried in alarm, and some of them dropped their torches. Octavianus gasped in astonishment, and then he pulled the end of his toga over his head and made a sign against evil with his free hand.

Kirk whirled and stared at the fierce point of light in the sky, his face turning dead white with cold and certain horror. He knew what that incredible flare was. Nothing could make a blaze like that except exploding star drive engines, and he knew what ship was in this sky.

“No!!” he screamed, clutching blindly at the lighted sky. “Oh, my God, no!!”

“Démas!” Octavianus gripped his shoulder urgently, shouting to be heard above the shocked and astonished cries of the assembled priesthood and soldiery. “You know what that is! Tell me! What does that sign mean?”
“It’s my ship dying!” Kirk cried, staring at the searing point of light that was already beginning to fade. “My people— they came back for me, and- and something went wrong with the ship. It- it burned and them with it. They’re dead. They’re all dead…and I’m stranded here…for life…” He lowered his eyes, dazed, letting the torch fall almost out of his hand.

Octavianus thoughtfully caught it. “What should we do, then?” he asked gently.

Kirk shook his head. “I guess…there’s no point…going on with this. There’s no one to see it…now.” Unnoticed tears spilled over his cheeks.

Octavianus studied him thoughtfully, and then looked up at the swiftly-darkening sky. “If your
“Yes,” Kirk agreed listlessly. “Might as well. Until the torches burn down…”

He took up his torch again, hardly caring, and looked at the converging lines of torch-bearers, noting that Octavianus had taken the position facing him at the point of the wedge. The Imperator smiled gently and raised his torch. All the assembled Guardsmen raggedly followed suit. The witnesses scribbled notes.

*Here’s to all my life that was, and the universe that used to be mine*, Kirk thought. *From now until the fire goes out.*

He held his torch high and waited without hope.

And nothing whatever happened.

Or—

* * * *

They fought now like savage animals, with every weapon available—hands, feet, rocks, branches, claws and teeth. Aquila bigger and stronger, Spock quicker and more agile, lion and leopard, they grappled and thrashed on the bloody lawn. Both were torn and bleeding from a dozen wounds, both were panting like overloaded steam engines, and neither one would stop.

McCoy, determinedly sitting on the struggling, kicking, swearing Ellison Hawk, preferred not to look at either of the main contestants. He wished with all his heart that he’d never seen this.

Aquila swung an uppercut that would have felled an elephant. Spock ducked it and rolled free. Aquila leaped to his feet and reached backward, grabbed an apple sapling and heaved it out of the ground—a ragged mace nearly 20 feet long.

*Spock won’t stand a chance against that!* McCoy froze, foreseeing the end.

If the previous summer had been a little wetter, or if the apple tree’s roots had dug a little less deep, Aquila would have ripped it up in a single half-second pull.

As it was, the grip of deep roots slowed him by a quarter of a second.

Spock lunged up from the ground in a fast high kick that had enough time to land fully. It caught Aquila just below the ribs. He gasped, crumpled and went down. Spock stood over him and hammered him all the way to the ground.

Hawk gave a long scream of fury, grief and despair.

Spock turned and came back to McCoy, visibly staggering. One side of his head and neck were dark and glittery in the moonlight with blood from his cut ear. “C-communicator,” he demanded; his voice barely comprehensible.

McCoy fumbled at his belt, found his communicator and handed it over. For a moment he wondered what had happened to Spock’s; then his eyes caught the mess of broken plastic and metal hanging from the Vulcan’s belt. He also noticed the details of the carnage Aquila had wrought. “You ought to get those wounds seen to,” he mumbled, trying not to meet Spock’s eyes.
Hawk made another frantic attempt to throw McCoy off, punctuated with sharp obscenities in a dozen languages.

“Tie him,” Spock ordered in passing. He opened the communicator with fingers that were noticeably shaking. “…Enterprise?” he almost whispered into the grill.

“Enterprise here,” Sulu’s voice replied at once. “Mr. Spock is that you?”

Spock closed his eyes for just an instant. His knees threatened to buckle, but he managed to hold them straight. “It should be fairly obvious that it is indeed myself,” he said, his voice edging back toward normal. “My congratulations on your survival, Mr. Sulu.”

“I’m afraid the credit goes to Mr. Scott,” Sulu answered, sounding perfectly calm and perfectly polite. “It was his trick with the transporter that brought down the Invictus.”

From the ground, Aquila groaned softly.

“Mr. Scott…? Spock blinked. “He is…not in the brig?”

“No, sir.” Sulu’s voice remained utterly neutral. “He’s in Engineering, where he was needed during the battle. And is currently needed for repairs.”

“You let him—”

“We couldn’t have survived without him, sir. He’s saved our collective asses—and you know how much more. I’ll put you through to him, so you can congratulate him yourself.”

“Wait—”

But before Spock could finish the word there came the click and brief whine of channels switching and then a different voice.

“Scott here.”

Spock blinked rapidly, swallowed, and replied. “Congratulations on your remarkable success, Mr. Scott.”

“Uhm… aye. Thank ye, sir.”

“Precisely what ‘trick’ did you employ?”

“Trick— the Invictus, ye mean? Och, I remembered that the one thing their shields couldn’a’ block was the transporter. I also remembered that they had an antimatter pod, an’ where they kept it. So, I took a few o’ me lads ta the transporter, an’ we pitched a few mathoms into their antimatter supply. Thot blew it weel.”

“What sort of…‘mathoms’?”

“Just what we had wi’ us: four pairs o’ boots an’ a number 12 spanner.

“Indeed. Most ingenious.”

“Aye. Th’ only disadvantage is that we’re runnin’ aroon’ in oor stockin’ feet the noo.”

“I trust there will be sufficient time to repair to your quarters for further footgear. What is the ship’s status?”
“Half the shields are burned oot, an’ we’ll hafta replace a lot o’ components. Dinna worry; we’ve got
the parts. We go a’ oor lockers full from the Invictus… Och, there’s a cruel irony for ye. Weel, we
should be back up ta par wi’in aboot two hours, maybe less.”

“Very good. Now if you will…return me to Mr. Sulu…” I am growing dizzy…

“Aye.” Click

“Sulu here.”

“Have the transporter team standing by. Resume original orbit. Spock out.” Spock tucked the
communicator on his belt and looked around, swaying a little, at the now silent littered lawn. No way
to conceal the damage. We will simply have to remove all traces of our identity and nature… and the
Imperials’… And find Jim! He looked with dismay toward the tumbled and faintly smoking heap that
was Dr. Day’s nearly bisected body. “We must…obtain another guide,” he said, “and quickly. Every
moment of our presence here endangers our timeline.”

There was another quiet groan, and the soft hooting of a medical tricorder. Spock turned to see
Hawk abandoned on the grass, tightly bound and feebly kicking. McCoy, with his tricorder out, was
bending over the massive sprawled form of Aquila. He glanced up as Spock approached.

“No good,” McCoy replied to the unspoken question. “Severe internal damage, massive bleeding
and weird blood type. Even on the Enterprise we couldn’t get sufficient blood in time.”

“…ssssSpock…” Aquila raised his head an inch.

“Shh! Lie still,” McCoy cautioned.

“For what purpose?” Aquila feebly shook his head. “Only minutes remain. We both know it.
Spock…” he drew a deep breath, with visible effort. “You will do it, won’t you? Prevent Démas.
Prevent…” He twitched one hand. “Everything. All my people dead. My ship. My crew. All our
worlds that should be…” He struggled for another breath. “A galaxy full of people, Spock! All the
lives…of those mingled worlds…you’ll leave unborn. Doomed before birth. Never to be…”

“Yes,” said Spock, dropping to one knee. All at once he felt very, very tired.

“All those generations destroyed…” Aquila mourned.

Behind him, Hawk sobbed quietly. The sound blended eerily with the light evening wind and the
distant sounds of the vast city.

“Everything we made, gone…”

“Yes,” said Spock again. Must stay conscious, not fall…

“…Replaced by the pathetic, twisted…dark history…of stupidity and cruelty…holy tyrants of
heaven and worlds…” Aquila raised his head a little higher, weakly shaking blood out of his mouth.
“Why must you do it? Trade good worlds for bad…destroy us…for something far worse…for ages
of tyranny…bigotry, cruelty…” He pulled in enough air for a ragged shout “In the name of all the
good gods that have ever been! WHY?!? Why must you do it?!”

…Stay conscious… Spock shook his head hard, trying to clear it. “I want…Jim…” he heard himself
say.

McCoy snapped his head up, mouth falling open in shock. “What did you just say, Spock?” he
gasped.

“So…finally…we come to the truth…” Aquila smiled bitterly. “Very well, then.” He gasped in as much wind as he could, and raised one hand; his fingers bent and stretched in the ancient sign of the Horns. “Then, by all the powers of Earth may you have him.” The fingers sprang wide. “And may the gods leave you with nothing else!”

Don’t fall! Spock slipped sideways, but caught himself. Don’t—

Aquila coughed wetly. His hand fell back on the grass. McCoy bent over him, tricorder bleeping in alarm. Hawk cried and swore in the names of more gods and obscenities than McCoy had ever heard of. The readings on the tricorder grew weaker and then less.

“He’s gone,” said McCoy. A dying man’s curse, Spock! Every culture known has legends about such things…

Spock hyperventilated until his head cleared and the monstrous fatigue retreated a little. “We must dispose of the evidence,” he said, glancing at the bodies. “And we must learn the most direct route to the Imperial Palace. Since Dr. Day can no longer give that information…” He heaved himself to his feet and took a step toward Ellison Hawk. His eyes reflected the moonlight more than they should have.

“You think you’ll get any help from me?” Hawk raged, thrashing in his improvised bonds. “You can go rot first! I wouldn’t give you the time of day in a watch factory!”

Spock stalked closer and stopped, glaring down at him. “Seeing that you wear the uniform of the enemy, and are clearly fighting on their side, you are obviously guilty of treason, Dr. Hawk. Therefore, you shall be treated accordingly.”

“Go screw yourself with a main drive shaft! I’m a duly sworn citizen of the Imperium of Greater Rome, and you’re the single biggest enemy I and mine have got! I’m defending my own, damn you, as any soldier would do! You can fucking well do what you like, but you won’t justify it through me!”

Spock paused for an instant, thinking that over. Then he shook his head sharply and bent over Hawk, spread hand reaching for his head. Hawk rolled over and yanked his head away. Spock slapped him.

“Spock! What the hell do you think you’re doin’?!” McCoy scrambled to his feet.

“I am attempting a forcible mind-meld, since Dr. Hawk is unwilling to cooperate.” He crouched over Hawk and reached again. Hawk snapped at his fingers.

“Spock, have you gone plumb crazy?!” McCoy grabbed the Vulcan by the shoulders and pulled him right over backwards. They sprawled in an unlovely heap on the ground. “Damn it, you’ve said it yourself, so many times, it’s dangerous to mind-meld with somebody who’s unwilling!”

“In this case the risk is justified.” Spock clambered gracelessly back to his feet. His eyes were definitely gleaming like a cat’s. “Stand aside and let me continue.”

“The hell I will! Dammit, at least let me try to reason with him first!”

Spock paused uncertain. The word ‘reason’ triggered some belated restraining thoughts.

McCoy took advantage of the moment to bend protectively over Hawk. “Ellison! Listen to me!” he
whispered. “I’ve never seen him like this. I don’t know what’s gotten into him, but—”

“I think I do,” Hawk retorted bitterly. “Don’t you know a fanatic when you see one, McCoy? All the
symptoms are there—plain as day!”

“Listen, then.” McCoy ran a distracted hand through his hair. “He wants that information, and I don’t
think he cares what happens so long as he gets it. He’ll squeeze it out of you if it means destroying
your mind in the process! He could do it, man, and I don’t think I can stop him!” Hope that sounds
convincing, because I’m not sure it’s a lie!

Hawk was convinced, but nothing could make him afraid. “Let him try,” the little archeologist
growled between bared teeth. “I’ll fight him all the way down! He doesn’t know where in my head
the information’s hidden, and I’ll make him kill me before he can find it!”

He means it! McCoy glanced around, desperately searching for inspiration. In the distant gleam of
white walls he found it. “Hawk, you can’t stop him. He’ll kill off the conscious centers of your brain
and then search your memory at leisure until he finds what he wants. You’ll be dead, or a vegetable,
for no purpose. And worse…” He leaned closer. “When you’re gone, who’ll be left that knows
anything about the Imperium? It’ll be gone like a dream, nothing surviving but a few tapes, and you
know how easily tapes can be lost or destroyed. Who’ll be left who really knows what those people
were like, how they lived, what they believed in and did? Who’ll be there to tell the galaxy what they
were? Hawk, you’re all the immortality they have! Don’t throw it away on a futile gesture!”

Hawk thought it over. He glanced at Aquila’s stiffening body, then up at the silent sky where the
Invictus and all her crew now drifted as scattered atoms of dust. Hell, the information’s in the ship’s
computer anyway! They’re doomed. Their fate was sealed when the Invictus went up…and Aquila went
down. Tears pooled up in his eyes, spilled over and down his cheeks in long silver streaks. “All
right,” he whispered. “For all that’s left of them.”

Spock leaned over him. “Where is the Imperial Palace?” he demanded.

“It’s on the Palatine Hill. A little one-story building with three arches in front and pepperino stone
columns. I could show you on a map.”

Spock went to Dr. Day’s body. He paused to make a quick surreptitious sign over it before searching
it for the equipment pouch. The case was undamaged, save for one burned away strap. Spock dug
out the map and brought it back. On the way, he came across Hawk’s fallen pistol and picked it up.
“I shall have to dispose of the bodies,” he murmured, examining the semi-familiar Imperial weapon.
He could decipher the charge-indicator without trouble. “There is enough power left…” He glanced
at Aquila’s corpse.

“Wait!” snapped Hawk. “Before you burn up his body, let me do the minimal honors over it. God
damn it! Let me send him off to the heaven he believed in, before you destroy that, too!”

Spock frowned. “We lack time.”

“Not that much time,” growled McCoy. He unfastened the belt around Hawk’s wrists.

“Do not release the prisoner!” Spock almost shouted at him.

“I left his legs tied,” McCoy retorted. “He won’t go anywhere.”

Hawk, ignoring both of them, dragged himself over to Aquila’s side. It took effort for him to turn the
heavy body over on its back, straighten the long legs and clasp the big hands together. He fumbled at
Aquila’s neck until he found the little leather pouch that he knew had to be there. He pulled it open,
extracted the single coin and slipped it under the Imperial’s cold tongue.

“What’s that for?” McCoy asked, touched.

“For the Ferryman,” said Hawk. “It’s to pay his passage across the River Styx, so he can go to the Fields of Elysium. The Romans never believed in any hell, but getting stranded on the wrong side of the river was a miserable way to spend eternity.”

“Oh.”

Hawk scratched at the ground and dug up a handful of earth. He whispered a brief prayer in Latin and strewed it over Aquila’s body. The tiny clots pattered over the stained cloth like the sound of soft rain.

“All right,” said Hawk, hitching clumsily away. “You can burn him now.”

Spock set the weapon for wide beam and fired. Even at low charge, the odd pistol was efficient; in a few seconds there was nothing left but a wisp of smoke and a patch of charred ground. Hawk smothered a sob and turned away. Spock stepped back, made a brief gesture and formula of his own, and repeated the process with Day’s body. Then he stuck the pistol in his belt and unfolded the map.

“Now, Dr. Hawk, locate the palace on this chart.”

Hawk studied the paper listlessly, and finally pointed to a spot on it. “There,” he said. “Damn you.”

“Very good.” Spock committed the location to memory, put away the map and took up McCoy’s communicator. “Spock to Enterprise. Beam up Dr. Hawk and convey him immediately to the brig.”

“Damn you!!” Hawk yelled, grabbing at the bindings on his ankles and frantically trying to untie them. “I’ll get you for this, Spock! I don’t care if it takes the rest of my life! I’ll hunt you down and —”

The transporter cut him off in mid-threat. Spock waited a few seconds and then called back. “Please transport Dr. McCoy and myself to the Imperial Palace, coordinates W-2403-7 by N-7418-4. Spock out. Doctor…?”

McCoy got up clumsily and shuffled to Spock’s side, but he didn’t look at him. The hum and sparkle of the transporter took them. When it cleared again, they were standing in an empty cobblestone street facing a low one-story building. The house front was faced with three round arches supported by squat columns of unpretentious black-flecked stone.

“Pepperino stone,” Spock identified it. “This is indeed the proper place. Use your tricorder.”

McCoy aimed the tricorder at the small building, trying simultaneously to keep his eyes on the readout display and his ears tuned for the sound of approaching natives. He noticed that his hands were shaking.

“I get four life-form readings, all human, and all packed fairly close together. I can’t tell much else at this range. The Captain could be one of them; no way to be sure. Spock, why don’t we send for some more Security people, not that there’s time?”

“Doctor, the fewer people present, the less chance there is of changing time. Hmm, speaking of which…” He flipped open the communicator and called back to the ship. “Recall all search parties,” he said. “There is no longer any need for them.” He flicked the communicator shut, wondering why he hadn’t thought of that much earlier. Perhaps all to the good, he decided. Had the ship been destroyed, there would still have been a considerable number of surviving crewmen on the ground to
eventually complete the mission. ‘God moves in mysterious ways,’ etcetera. “In any case, we must effect entry into the house.” Spock padded silently toward the nearest corner, searching for the unguarded windows. This should not be difficult if we approach from the kitchen garden at the rear of the building…”

“I’m a doctor, not a burglar,” McCoy whispered, tiptoeing after him. “This is the Imperial Palace, Spock—for all that it’s such a plain little place—and there have simply got to be guards around.”

“Very few, in house of this size. Ah, yes: the garden wall. Easily climbed. Your tricorder discovered only four individuals, did it not?”

“Uh, yes… Give me a hand up, will you? Oof! Not as young and spry as I used to be…”

“Here. Assuming that one of the individuals is the Captain and two more are the Emperor and his wife, that leaves only one guard at present for us to deal with.”

“Whuh- wait a minute.” McCoy paused, panting, on top of the garden wall. “Suppose the Emperor and Mrs. Emperor are off at a late party somewhere; that leaves Jim and three guards to get through —”

“Illogical. In pre-industrial Earth societies there is insufficient lighting, and people retire soon after sunset. It is now 1.34 hours since sunset. Now, if you will kindly descend the wall and cease presenting a target—”

“—and neither of us has a phaser.”

“…Oh.” Spock paused to suppress his blood pressure. How could I overlook something so stupidly obvious? he wondered, reaching once more for the communicator.

Two fully charged phasers materialized on the ground 18.3 seconds later. McCoy obligingly slithered down from the wall and, without a word, picked up one of them. Equally wordless, Spock picked up the other and attached it to his belt. They turned and crept toward the house.

It turned out that Roman doors were remarkably thick and solid, and locked with massive crossbars. Windows were small, placed high on the walls, and sealed with heavy casements of small-paned glass or else shuttered with thick wooden screens. There were only two methods of entry that were both swift and silent, and Spock caught himself before he could seriously consider phasering the door. He took out the tricorder and made certain that the next room was unoccupied, then reached for the communicator one more time and whispered a terse order to the transporter room of the Enterprise.

Whoever was on the transporter controls had the pinpoint accuracy of a master craftsman. Spock and McCoy materialized quietly, just inside the door, less than three feet from a kitchen table. The puff of wind from the air displaced by their arrival briefly stirred a row of hanging cook-pans. The kitchen smelled of olive oil, fish and garden herbs. Somewhere far off in the house a cat or a baby squalled once. McCoy made quick use of his tricorder and determined that the noise had come from a cat. The other Human readings were still close-packed and jumbled. The tricorder’s hooting seemed painfully loud. Spock pulled out his phaser and set it for medium stun. They tiptoed across the kitchen, being careful to touch nothing.

The doorway to the next room was blocked by nothing but a light curtain on sliding rings. Spock pushed the curtain a handbreadth open, peered through and saw nothing but darkness. He pushed back the curtain and stepped through with McCoy padding after him. The room was almost pitch black; even Vulcan night vision could make out little but a square central shape: either one of those
Roman lounge-dining tables or an atrium pool with its open roof temporarily covered. The walls were lined with screens or hangings that blocked light and muffled sound, perhaps to give an illusion of privacy. Spock tried to calculate where the sleeping occupants would be. If he could determine their exact positions, he could catch them all in a single sweeping stun, and then pick out Jim at leisure. At the next door, he would have McCoy use the tricorder again.

“Now!” roared a mid-range voice in the darkness.

Spock and McCoy nearly jumped out of their skins. Light flared, blinding. Sharp metal points nudged grimly at their chests and backs. It was unmistakably wise to stand perfectly still.

The household had plainly been expecting them. The sound of human respiration was audible now and Spock guessed that their assailants had been holding their breath while they waited for McCoy and himself to walk into their trap. Spock blinked the dazzle from his eyes and looked around him.

Four humans, true enough: two tight-lipped nervous looking men in matching tunics and hastily thrown on leather breastplates, one equally nervous woman in the plain dress of a servant, and one not-unhandsome imperious looking female who could only be the acting head of the household. *Livia Drusilla*, Spock guessed. *Wife of the Emperor Augustus. She had an unparalleled reputation for ruthless ambition and political brilliance. The situation is serious…*

All four of their captors were holding spears, although the women’s weapons had an ornamental look, as if their normal function was decorating a wall. Nonetheless, all four spear points were serviceably sharp and pressing unpleasantly close. The light—not dazzling, really, but quite sufficient—came from two shuttered, portable oil lamps.

McCoy couldn’t resist saying, “No light after sundown, you said.”

“I appear to have underestimated the efficiency of olive-oil lamps,” Spock admitted.

“Not to mention these folks’ hearing.”

“True…” Spock considered the odds of sweeping everyone with a quick stun, and decided that the odds were hopeless. The four spear holders were too well and widely deployed for him to get in one complete shot.

“If you two are quite finished conversing,” Livia cut in, giving Spock a slight poke with her spear, “I would like to know why you magicians have crept into my house like sneak thieves.”

“Magicians…?” McCoy gulped, seeing visions of being burned at the stake.

“Oh, come now. You did appear in my kitchen in a beam of light,” Livia reminded him. “And there was a similar flare out in the kitchen garden, as the maid noticed, shortly before your appearance.”

“Oh.”

“May I ask,” Spock tried, “if you have ever heard of or seen such a phenomenon before?”

“It has been reported,” Livia replied coolly, looking him over. “So, two more clumsy magicians in my house… And one of them not quite human. Rather faun-like in fact. Did your mother meet a satyr in the woods?”

“Not precisely,” Spock said, blushing up to his hairline.

McCoy smothered a half-hysterical laugh.
“And I observe,” Livia noted, “That you blood is distinctly green. Was your mother the goddess Flora, or a nymph in her train? Or do you come from some far-off country which deals with other gods?”

“Er, the latter is more accurate.”

“You appear to have had some difficulty on your way here: your ear is cut, your face is bruised and your tunic is most woefully torn.”

Wincing, Spock glanced down at his shirt. *I had not realized I presented such a spectacle...* His cut ear throbbed. “We were...set upon by thieves,” he said. “It took considerable effort to subdue them.”

Livia raised a cool eyebrow. “And that remarkable light in the sky? Was that your doing too?”

“Hmm...indirectly, madam. I hope your people were not too upset by it.”

Livia gave him a tight smile. “We were a trifle perturbed. In fact, we were still discussing the phenomenon when we noticed your arrival.”

*Or course that aerial display would keep the locals awake.* Spock mentally kicked himself. *Why didn’t I think of that...? Of course, I am suffering from prolonged fatigue.*

“Fine magician you are,” Livia commented. “You turn the night as bright as noonday and then try to sneak into the Imperator’s house in hopes of not being noticed. You travel in a beam of light, yet are mauled by thieves while walking in the street. Such a combination of skill and ineptitude would be hard to believe, had I not seen it before. Now, kindly tell me your business here.” Her spear jabbed into him again.

Spock decided to come straight to the point. “Madam, we came here searching for a friend, one...’Démas Kirke’. I was in hope of finding him and leaving again as quickly and quietly as possible, but several unforeseen accidents made our arrival more noticeable than intended.”

“Slightly,” said Livia, with a small, cool smile.

McCoy, looking from one to the other, got the disturbing impression that the Roman lady was, at least at the moment, more self-possessed and calm than Spock.

“If you please, Madam...” Spock was, in fact, having a hard time keeping his patience. “Is our friend here?”

“No,” said Livia. “He has gone to Mars field in hopes of signaling to you—with the help of nearly 1000 city guardsmen.”

Spock visibly relaxed. “Thank you. Now, if we may depart—”

*Not enough diplomacy, Spock.* “Ma’am, there aren’t enough words to express our gratitude.” McCoy put on his best Olde Southern Gallantry. “We’ve been searching for him for the longest time, and we were beginnin’ to despair of ever findin’ him. We can’t thank you enough for your help.

Livia looked him up and down, taking in the tattered but familiar dress and the assorted bruises and stains. “You obviously have gone to much trouble in your search, and I am well aware of your friend’s similar eagerness to find you. Very well.”

She lowered her spear. The maid and the two guards, plainly much relieved, did likewise.
“You have leave to go,” she said. “For your own safety, I would advise departure by your preferred magical means. You would not wish to meet with thieves again, I trust.”

_She wants us to use the transporter_, Spock guessed, too tired to think of any artful way to avoid granting her request. _Will it do any more harm than has already been done?_

“Spock, I don’t think it’d hurt to give the folks a little show,” McCoy urged. “Besides, we’re a little pressed for time.”

“As you wish.” Spock gave Livia a polite half-bow, took out his communicator, stepped closer to McCoy and pressed the emergency beam-up signal.

As the signal beep filled the air, the Romans leaned closer, peering at the two strangers and their marvelous device. Transporter hum buzzed and grew. Sparkling blue light covered and filled the two figures; they grew transparent, faded and winked out. The light and sound faded after them, leaving empty air. The Romans stared, fascinated, until the last breath of returning air was still. One of the guards stepped forward and cautiously waved his hand through the space where their two visitors had stood.

“Definitely gone,” he announced, sounding definitely impressed. “I’ve never seen a magic trick that good!”

“They’re wonderfully powerful magicians, those people,” the maid agreed.

“And marvelous strange, tall folk.”

“Yes,” said Livia. “But, oh, so clumsy.”

* * * *

The moment the transporter lock released them, Spock jumped from the pad and hurried to the door. McCoy stumbled a bit, then recovered and ran after him. “Spock, wait!” he yelled, catching up only at the turbolift. “Let me take care of that ear before you bleed to death!”

“No one ever died of a cut ear,” Spock snapped, giving the control handle a fierce twist. “Bridge!”

“Dammit!” McCoy rummaged in his battered medical kit. “At least let me clean you up a little. You look as if your throat’s been cut.”

Spock endured his ministrations only as long as it took to reach the bridge, then strode out the opening doors in mid-swope and went straight to the Science console. Chekov hastily vacated the chair, though Spock didn’t spare him a glance. Sulu half-rose, then sank back into the com-chair and nervously rattled his fingers on the armrest. Nobody said anything.

Spock impatiently listened to the beeps as the computer located the area historically known as ’Mars Field’, checked the coordinates with the sensor readings, snapped the field onto the main view screen and stood up to look at it.

Everybody on the bridge gasped.

Seen from above, Mars Field was inky dark save for one area. There, like a frozen formation of fireflies, flickering torches outlined an unmistakable shape: a form unknown anywhere on this planet, in this age.

_The IDIC_. In flames, Spock noted. Of course. _And where would he stand except…_
A brief turning of dials and the image swooped closer, like the eye view of a striking hawk: down, down to a close-up of the IDIC’s Focus, the last extension of the triangle, the center of the circle.

Sure enough, there stood Kirk. The torch he held high illuminated his face, revealing an expression of utter loss and despair.

Why? Spock wondered ignoring the half-dozen sighs of relief and suppressed cheers from all over the bridge. Why should he feel…? Oh, the flare! The Invictus. He must have thought… Yet he still stands there. Utterly illogical. Yet otherwise I might not have found him. And what other signal could have been so unmistakable.

Found. In this sign…

Spock read off the coordinates, transmitted them to the transporter room, stood up and turned back to the turbolift with McCoy wheeling to follow after him. Halfway there, just as he reached the Engineering console, he happened to see who was sitting there.

Wordlessly, expressionlessly, Scott locked eyes with him.

Spock paused for an instant, remembering that he would have to deal with that problem too. For the first time he wondered what Kirk would say when he learned about it. Later, he decided. Worry about it later. He looked away and went on into the turbolift with McCoy at his heels.

* * * *

The torches were beginning to burn down. Here and there a guardsman’s arms dropped a little, and feet shuffled softly in the dust. Octavianus was quietly reciting a prayer for the dead, oddly familiar save for the names of the deities invoked, of the river to cross, of the after-land itself. Pluto and Proserpine, not St. Peter; Styx, not Jordan; Elysium, not Heaven. The later religion, Kirk noted, had stolen well.

He looked up again at the blue-black sky and the glittering ranks of stars. Forever out of my reach, now, he thought, aching. Earthbound now, for the rest of my life. If I ever again see a moving star, it will be only a meteor. Not a starship, ever. Never again. That life is gone. All I ever loved is dead and gone, or else a universe away and 2000 years downstream in the river of time. It’s all gone, and I’m alone down here. Oh, god…

—But what god? Who rules here, except those plodding, dutiful, working gods of the Romans? Where in this universe is the god I grew up with, and used to worship? How far away that belief seems, surrounded by people who never heard of one god, or Jesus or… Even if he’s born in this universe that won’t be for a few years, or…

Wait a minute. I heard once that the calendar was revised several times, and—

A perfectly horrible idea blossomed and made him shake. He remembered again the unmistakable flare in the sky—to the east.

A star in the east?!

…Oh, no. Please. Not that… Kirk stared blindly towards the now empty horizon, unnoticed tears washing down his face. Is that the star he’s to be born under? My ship, burning?

What the hell kind of religion is that going to be?!!

Memories whirled through him in wild montage of images: kindly old gabbers swapping real live
horror stories in a steam bath, mad-eyed filthy ‘holy men’, a kill-crazed mob of disease ridden fanatics slaughtering an unarmed old woman, a kindly old lady chatting over lunch about gods and psychic powers in calmly familiar and rational terms, a vision of a burning ship, ‘Judge Softie’ and his wife discussing the politics of education and the need to abolish slaveholding, the power addicted face of Tiberius and sly comments about the uses of public religion and ‘morality’. This shining city here and now; that rotting corpse of a city there and then.

Oh, no, not here! I won’t let it happen here! If I have to live out my life in this universe’s Rome, I won’t let it fall like that one! I so pledge! …and if Jesus lives in the universe, somehow I’ll find him and talk to him. I won’t let his word or his following get twisted into…that. Kirk silently ground his teeth. And I won’t let Tiberius have his way, either. I’ll be what Octavianus wants and serve this Rome for the rest of my life… A purpose for living, as sure as the old one…

With that decision, like the taking the first step of a long journey and then turning to look back on all that was left behind, came a last sharp image of all he’d lost: all the bright worlds of the Federation, all the open galaxy of stars, the Enterprise and all aboard her, the bridge crew, McCoy, Spock…

And the grief was too much. The pain rose up like a black wave, Cresting in a blind, unreasoning, silent howl at the untouchable stars.

Give them back to me! Give them back! Whatever gods of this world can hear me, give them back! Give them—

A familiar, impossible hum rattled the air around him. Well-known blue light flashed and sparkled before his eyes. Kirk gasped in shock and his heart threatened to jump right out through his ribs as he realized what was happening. Through the growing light and buzzing he could dimly make out the guardsmen’s astonished faces and Octavianus, half-smiling and half-regretful, calling goodbye—and then everything faded into light—

* * * *

Soft wind puffed gently into the space where Démas the Magician had stood a moment before. The guardsmen stood slack-mouthed, staring, a few dropping their torches, not a few hastily making religious signs of respect. The little clerical company tiptoed forward, Ocellina nervously waving her had in the emptied space to make certain that their visitor was truly gone and not just rendered invisible.

“An intriguing method of travel, I must say!” Alumina laughed, a little shakily, “Though I believe there are precedents. Didn’t Jupiter appear to Dana of Greece in a ‘shower of gold’? Could that be a misapprehension of a ‘shower of golden light’?”

“This was a blue light,” Flame objected. “Though of course, the chief of the gods might be expected to have the superior technique.”

“A great magician,” old Perini announced. “Decidedly a great and skilled magician.”

“And a most loyal friend,” murmured Octavianus, slipping the end of his toga over his head. He briefly rubbed on hand across his eyes. “Come there is no more to be seen, and the guardsmen want sleep. Let us go home.”

He turned and walked back down the lines of bewildered guardsmen, pausing only to bid the officers dismiss the men, then out across the field to this waiting litter, away to the small house on the Palatine Hill, and back to the unaltered pattern of his life.
—And the light cleared away and Kirk was standing on the transporter pad, still holding the flaming torch, and Spock was standing there waiting for him.

Home! I’m home!

His heart gave another couple of good solid slams, and then quieted, leaving him dizzy and a little loose in the joints. He dropped the torch, barely noticing that one of the transporter techs swore and dove for it, and took a shaky step forward.

“—Spock?” he almost whispered, reaching out to him.

He suddenly noticed that Spock looked as worn and haggard as he’d ever seen him, and that his uniform was torn and bloody, and there was a long smear of dried green blood down his jaw and neck—

--and then there was a blur of motion and Spock was up on the pad with him, wrapping him in wire-thin, hotter-than-human arms, holding him up, holding him so tightly that he could hardly breathe.

Yes! Yes... Home. Ah, Spock...

Somewhere off to one side he could hear McCoy’s medical tricorder hooting as it played over him, and beyond that he could hear cheers from surrounding technicians and still more coming through the intercom. Under his feet the floor thrummed faintly as the engines picked up, doubtless taking the ship out of orbit. All the sounds of welcome, of rescue, of everything turning right after all, one more time. Kirk took a deep, steadying breath as Spock’s grip slackened slightly, then stepped back to look at him.

“Spock, how did you find me? Is the ship all right? What the hell was that flash of light in the sky, and what happened to you? Migod, your ear! What—”

“Later, Captain.” Spock slipped back into his Vulcan formality. “At the moment we are needed on the bridge. We have what you would call a ‘roller-coaster ride’ ahead of us. Our shields were repaired faster than expected, and we should leave here as quickly as possible.”

“Right,” Kirk grinned, grateful for the promised action. “Bones, am I okay? Any reason I can’t go back to my regular job?”

“Nah. Best thing for you.” McCoy’s grin was as wide as a Halloween pumpkin’s. “Let’s get the hell out of this place—uh, time... Ah, hell, explanations later. Welcome home, Jim.”

Kirk paused to give him a quick, back-pounding bear-hug, and then sprinted for the door. Spock followed, not precisely running, but certainly walking faster than most humans could have managed.

In the turbolift Kirk got a closer look at the damage. “Spock,” he worried, “Do you know how badly your ear’s cut up? The whole point is missing?”

“I am aware of it,” Spock answered stonily. “I am certain that Dr. McCoy’s skills can repair it, once we have time for the surgical procedure.

“How did it happen? What’s been going on all this time?”

What hasn’t? “That, I fear, is too long and complicated a tale to relate now. There will be time enough after—ah, we’ve arrived.”
The doors opened and they hurried out onto the bridge. Uhura, the first to see them, jumped to her feet with a screech of incredulous joy. Sulu spun around, gasped, and scrambled out of the chair so fast he nearly fell over his own feet. Impromptu cheers broke out, a gorgeous pandemonium of whoops and shouted welcomes. Kirk grinned in acknowledgement, waved everybody back to their seats and took the com.

“When this is over, people, we’re going to have the biggest, loudest and wildest party in all known space—but right now, let’s concentrated on getting home. Mr. Spock, I trust you’ve made the necessary calculations for the trip?”

“I have indeed, Captain.” Spock was back in his old place at the Science console, seemingly as imperturbable as ever under the tatters, bruises and blood. “Helm, switch to automatic control.”

“Ready, sir.” Sulu was all too happy to be back at his old job.

“Execute.”

The engines growled with growing power. On the view screen the sun hurtled toward them as the ship leaped forward. Kirk thought to signal a Yellow Alert and the jolting time-ride began.

* * * *

With the morning light a squad of Praetorian Guard, still gossiping about last night’s magical display, came plodding through the Garden of Maecenas in response to several hysterical complaints. What they found in the Garden was disturbing in the extreme, enough to make the officiating Decurion send post-haste for an augur.

“See here, Columbianus,” the Decurion complained pointing out the clues to the augur’s startled eyes. “Here’s a young apple tree ripped up by the roots, here the ground is all scorched up as if by lightning, but there was no thunderstorm last night. There’re more scorched marks going back to where the Pavilion of the Naiads used to be, and a few more beyond it, plus a lotta deep, big footprints, and —”

“Used to be?” the augur asked, raking distracted fingers through his unruly hair. “What happened to it?”

“It’s wrecked, sir. It’s been pulled down, most of it smashed to powder, and the rest of it all chewed up with scorched marks. The fountain under it is wrecked too: basin’s broke, water spilling everywhere, and the statue’s all overturned and smashed.” The Decurion’s tough city-cop’s face crumpled up as he described the damage. He’d always loved that statue; the three pretty nymphs had looked so cheerful.

“Amazing…” The augur shook his head in bewilderment, his eyes crossing slightly. “Was there anything else?”

“Uh…yes, sir.” The Decurion held up to small items: a bit of bloody flesh and wet brown object that his descendents 20 centuries hence would recognize as a cigar butt. “This looks like the tip of somebody’s ear, but nobody’s ear that’s from around here.”

“Pointed!” Columbianus marveled. “And the blood is green…?”

“There’s more green blood spattered around near the pavilion and the big scorched mark. This thing…” He held out the cigar butt. “I’ve got no idea what this is, but the end looks burned.”

“Do you think that might be the handle of a thunderbolt?” the augur considered. “Green blood?
Pointed ear tip? Hmm…” He studied the clues for a long time. “All I can figure,” he announced, “Is that Jupiter, for some reason, was really upset with Faunus—you know, he’s the one the Greeks call Pan, portray him with pointed ears—and chased him with thunderbolts all night. Now this is only a guess, and I’ve no idea how to confirm it, but for supporting evidence remember that there’ve been some remarkable omens and magical displays in the city lately. Maybe it’s a result of the current position of the stars, or some such thing…”

“Ah, Hades!” The Decurion turned away. “I got nothing, but nothing, to do with magic and that sort of stuff. Let the Park Commission deal with the damages, and think whatever they like about my report.”

“I’ll send them a copy of my conclusions if you like,” Columbianus offered. “But I have a feeling it’ll take a long time to crack this case. You mind if I keep these…items?” He stuffed them into his rumpled toga.

“Sure, sure. Just get ‘em out of my sight. I don’t even want to think about it. Gods, as if it wasn’t hard enough maintaining law and order without magicians and gods and what-not running around…”

He stomped off, muttering age-old sentiments about a policeman’s lot not being a happy one.

* * * *

*Kirk raised a shaky hand to the row of buttons and signaled to stand down from Yellow Alert. The ship was riding safely on impulse-power, and the familiar view of good old Federation-center 23rd century Earth swam bright and reassuring on the view screen.*

*Home safe,* he thought, sagging gratefully in the chair. Fatigue fell on him like a silent ton of feathers. “People,” he announced, smothering a most undignified yawn, “would you mind postponing the welcome home party until tomorrow? I don’t know about you, but for me it’s been one helluva long day.”

“Hear, hear,” Uhura agreed.

“Mr. Scott,” Kirk went on, “You have the com. Mr. Spock, pull the log tapes and come along with me. I want to know what’s been happening since I’ve been gone.”

Scott turned around and looked thoughtfully at Spock. For a moment there was a tense, embarrassed silence. Kirk getting out of the chair, barely had time to notice it before Scott gave a mild, “Aye, Captain,” and stood up.

Spock turned back to his console and fiddled with the computer’s keys and, in a few seconds the computer spat out a tape. Kirk stepped over and reached for it, his mind already on a nice long shower and several hours of sleep. But then the computer emitted another tape, and another, and still more. Spock calmly handed them over, methodical as the machine itself.

“Spock—” Kirk gaped, having some trouble holding onto the growing stack of tapes. “What the hell has been going on here?!”

“A considerable amount of activity,” said Spock, handing over the last tape. Kirk dropped it. Spock politely picked it up and handed it back. “I believe I should report to Sickbay, as per your earlier orders.” He turned off the console and stood up. “May I have your permission to go there?”

“Uh, yes…” Kirk stared at the tapes, then at the Vulcan’s retreating back, and then at the tape bag
Uhura thoughtfully held out to him. He tumbled the tapes into it, suspecting that he wouldn’t get to sleep soon after all, and wondering what the hell had happened here while he’d been in that other universe.

Then it hit him.

“Scotty!” he bellowed, spinning around and startling the bridge crew. “That was an ordinary time-run we just did! No change, no breakthrough, no— how did you get the Enterprise into that universe, anyway? And how did we get back to our own just by doing a time-run?!”

“Own…universe?” Uhura asked blankly.

Chekov and Sulu stared at each other. “Doesn’t he know?” Chekov whispered.

Scott looked around the bridge. Everybody was looking at him, waiting. Oh, but this is my chance to tell tales, he thought. But nay. ‘Twill be shock enough to learn from the tapes. Let it strike him in private, and not grieve or shame him before his friends. “’Tis a’ in there, sir,” he said, waving toward the tape-bag. “An’ a bonny strange tale it is, too.”

“Scotty…” Kirk’s eyes narrowed. Why so evasive? …And why that tension between him and Spock? “Is everything in here?”

“Weel…” Scott squirmed. “There may be some wee details missed. If ye’ll be wantin’ more data after readin’ these, ye can always ask Mr. Spock.”

The whole bridge crew gave him outright stares. Kirk noticed that.

“Or Dr. McCoy,” Scott added hastily. “Or me, I suppose. Or Sulu.”

There’s a couple you missed. What about Dr. Day or Dr. Hawk?

Scott shook his head, a hard look tightening his face. “Dr. Day is dead, sir. McCoy saw it happen.”

“Dead? What about Hawk?”

“Uhm… He’s in the brig.”

“What?! On what charges?”

“Eh, I’m not sure, sir. Ye’ll have ta ask Mr. Spock, who put him there, or Dr. McCoy.”

“Scotty!!” Kirk roared. “Will you give me a straight answer?!”

“Ach, dinna ask me yet!” Scott clutched at his hair. “Read yon tapes first. Then ask McCoy, no’ me. I’m too much involved in it ta be a fair witness.”

Kirk let his breath out slowly. “All right,” he said. “Just carry on, then. I’ll get back to you later.” He turned and stepped to the turbolift.

“Aye,” Scott muttered glumly. “Nae doot ye will. We’ve a’ the time in the world for it, noo.” He leaned back in the chair and set his eyes on the view screen. Almost delicately, he settled his hands on his thighs, just above the knees. Some engineer’s instinct warned him not to rest those big, powerful hands on delicate machinery just now, not the way his thoughts were turning.

Find out for yourself, Jim…and some things I hope you never do learn… The image on the view screen showed a small fleet of incoming trade ships of the fascinating Vendikarian design, but he
didn’t notice. …Like the plan my Black Gang had—and an intricate marvel of quick planning it was, too—to leave yon Vulcan stranded in the past and go away without him. Such a time I had persuading them otherwise! Please never ask me why a supposed two-hour repair job to the shields was finished in less than a quarter the time; it wasn’t the engines that I thought would need all that work… They were ready to mutiny, for my sake, because I was unfairly pitched in the brig. ‘Twas mainly getting you back safe again that decided them against it; they weren’t about to put up with Spock for another minute…

I used to think he was my friend!

…We’ll, he’s yours, still. See if you can deal with him. I’ll not be the one to tell you how wretchedly he’s been doing here… Commander, is he? I wouldn’t trust him now to command a dog-catching detail! But for his heavy-handed riding, we might have stolen away peacefully and left the Invictus circling in its appointed course in all innocence, in a universe that might yet exist somewhere….

Had you been wiser in Human feelings, Vulcan, the Invictus might not have died. I’d not have had to destroy that beautiful ship and all aboard her…Ashriliin… Goddam! Goddam! Shipkiller!

The long muscles of the thighs are some of the strongest in the Human body, but Scott’s unconscious grip was tight enough that his legs went numb from the knees on down.

* * * *

McCoy was laying out instruments when the call came. He’d been expecting it for nearly half an hour, but the vehemence of the buzzer still made him jump. He could practically feel the outrage steaming through the intercom. He glumly handed his chore over to Nurse Chapel and went into this office to take the call in private.

“Yes, Jim?” he said, even before the speaker’s flushed face appeared on the screen.

“Bones, I just read the log-tape—one log-tape; all the rest were information about the- the Imperial universe—and I’m having trouble believing the damn thing, and I know it doesn’t tell half the story. What the hell has been going on here?”

“Quite a bit. I don’t know exactly where to start…” Obviously, neither does Spock—or he wouldn’t be hiding from you. In Sickbay, of all places! Shows how desperate he is, I guess…

“Start anywhere: it’s all equally insane. I’m supposed to have changed our history! And Scotty in the brig, accused of insubordination, for chrissake, and Dr. Hawk in the brig accused of treason, and—”

“Well, Scotty’s back on the bridge, so I don’t think there’ll be any real problem with that. I think you’d better let Hawk out too, but keep him confined to quarters or his lab, and under guard. Technically, he’s a foreign POW now. Also, he’s sworn to kill Spock and I believe that the earnest little hothead means it.”

“—And Spock! Spock, of all people, pulling these crazy stunts! What the hell kind of logical explanation—”

“I don’t think logic has that much to do with it,” McCoy cut him off. Shit, there’s got to be a gentler way to tell him this! “Not unless… I suppose you could say that the tactics proceeded logically from the basic strategy, but I don’t know quite how logical that is.”

“Bones, will you tell me what the fuck has happened to Spock?!”

“T’ll try.” McCoy ran a hand through his still sweat-matted hair. “Spock has been…following some
internal plan of his own for some time. It’s made his... standards different, both for people and for actions. I’m not sure exactly what he’s had in mind, but I can make some guesses from the way he reacted to the... Roman universe.”

“The log-tape is remarkably scanty about his reactions.” Kirk’s anger shifted into suspicious curiosity. “It doesn’t say much more than ‘We came, we saw, we got the hell out’, and ‘They followed, we fought, we won’. I can’t tell how Spock reacted to any of it. What really happened there, Bones?”

“Not that much by itself. The people were... kind, very advanced and friendly. They gave us all the supplies and information we asked for, and treated us well—right down to the moment when they found out where we really came from and what we intended to do.”

“The tape says Hawk told them. Why?”

“Jim... I don’t want to say this, but Spock pushed him to it.”

“What?!”

“He pushed Scotty, too. Drove them both to their respective insubordinations.”

“...How?”

“With his damned paranoia, fanaticism, intolerance... and fear, I think. Jim, he was deeply afraid of those... extended Romans. Somehow they threatened him, just by being the way they were. They threatened some basic premise of his that he doesn’t dare question, because it’s his defense against something he can’t face.”

“Bones, are you trying to tell me that Spock’s become... mentally unstable?”

“No, Jim. I think he’s built an elaborate defense against something that flies in the face of all his Vulcan logic and emotional suppression; he did all of those dumb things in defense of his personal defenses. The solution is to get inside that fortress and free the- whatever it is that he’s keeping prisoner. Simple enough, but not necessarily easy.

“Oh, terrific. I’m the Captain, not a psychiatrist.”

McCoy winced. “Still, I think you’re the person to do it, Jim. He... trusts you, more than anyone in this or any other universe.”

“All right. Where do I start?”

“Hmm, I’d strongly recommend that you read the tapes on our dealings with that other universe.”

“That in any case. Can you be more specific?”

“I think so.” Spock wasn’t the only one keeping a log! “Call in all the tapes from everybody who was on the Invictus at any time. Especially, look over the ones we got of a certain dinner party with her senior officers; the way Spock reacted to that was pretty revealing.

“I didn’t see anything about it in the log-tape.”

“It was on Dr. Day’s tricorder, coded for the History Department’s records. I put it into the data banks, but it was listed under ‘History’, not ‘Log Entries’. Hawk’s records would be listed under ‘Archeology’. I’d suggest reading his notes, too.”
“Then the stuff Spock gave me is—”

“His own official log plus the information we got directly from the *Invictus*’ library, and—I suspect—nothing more. Check it out. You know the old trick of giving what you’re asked for, reams and reams of it, but not volunteering information that *isn’t* asked for.”

“Uh-uh. Is Spock there? I want to talk to him?”

“He’s still under the healing lamp. It’ll take several extended treatments to restore that ear-tip; you know how complicated organ reconstruction is, even for a simple cartilage structure. He’ll be down here for a while yet. That being the case, I want to ask for your permission to override his refusal and give him a thorough psychotricorder reading. I want to map out this defensive complex of his; get a good picture of it.”

“Bones, if he resists it…”

“It’ll hurt like hell and can do damage. Also, give a muddied and confusing picture. He knows the risks as well as I do, but if you order it, I think he’ll go along with it.”

There was a long moment’s silence as Kirk thought that over. “Not yet,” he decided. “Send him to talk to me first, as soon as he gets out of there. Tell him that’s a direct order.”

“It’ll be pretty late by then.”

“I don’t care. Send him up here.”

“Okay. Meanwhile…”

“I’ll make good use of the time. Kirk out.”

*Right*, McCoy thought, hanging up the intercom. *I guess the quicker they deal with this the better… even if Spock’s going to be pretty thoroughly exhausted by then, after all this time without rest… Hell, maybe so much the better: less energy for tricks, evasions, resistance. Tell it to him, Spock. Tell him the whole thing…*

*Tell him how far you’ve gone to avoid admitting that you love him.*

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*To Be Continued* in Chapter XVIII: Because I Do Not Hope To Turn Again
Because I Do Not Hope to Turn Again

“Is it like this
In death’s other kingdom
Waking alone
At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness
Lips that would kiss
Form prayers to broken stone.”

T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*

The chronometer read 0516, but Kirk didn’t notice. He sat immobile in his darkened cabin, staring at the relentless progress of words and images across the console screen, and his expression could only be called stunned.

The sound of the cabin door opening startled him. He remembered that he’d set it to autolock, and there were only two handprints that could open it. One was his own, and the other… He turned to look.

*Spock. Of course.*

Spock, washed and bandaged and wearing a clean uniform, his face absolutely expressionless but looking haggard nonetheless. He took three steps forward and paused, the door closing behind him. He moved like a marionette.

“You requested that I come speak with you as soon as I left Sickbay,” he said.

*Oh, yes; I did, didn’t I? …I’d rather have had more time, think all this over, understand…* Kirk nodded once and waved vaguely toward a chair. *But I suppose it’s best to deal with this now.*

Spock dutifully sat, resting his hands primly on his knees. “I assume,” he said, “that you are reading the complete account of this incident.”

“Yes.” Kirk switched off the console and put on the small desk light. He didn’t want much more illumination right now. “All the accounts. Hawk’s, Day’s, McCoy’s—everybody’s.”

“I see.” Spock’s voice revealed nothing.

“How’s the ear?”

“Satisfactory. Complete reconstruction will require a few days.”

“Spock,” Kirk sighed, rubbing his eyes. “I’m having trouble believing all this. The timeline, those people, that history that could have been…that was…” He looked up, unable to restrain the pleading hope. “You’re the Science Officer. Tell me: is there any chance that somewhere, in some parallel universe, they still survive?”

“It is possible.” Spock interlaced his fingers and studied them. “There are conflicting theories but no conclusive evidence; no definite proof. The best documented hypothesis does hold that alternate
“I hope so. By whatever gods there may be, they deserved to live.” Kirk looked back at the empty screen. Go on. Say it. Throw down the gauntlet, knowing he’ll pick it up. “Aquila, his people, his universe… Damn it, Spock, by every objective standard I can think of, it was a better universe than ours.”

Spock said nothing, but his hands tightened into fists.

“1000 years ahead of us. No Dark Ages, no racial or religious bigotry, all the terrible losses that never happened…” Despite himself, Kirk’s eyes grew wide with something close to awe. “And I did that? That’s the universe I made? All that difference—because of me?!?”

“The impact of your advance social and technical knowledge was indeed profound,” Spock murmured, hiding his hands in his lap.

“Technical, maybe. Social? Hell, I’m no social scientist, and you know it! All I could have done from that angle was hold things together—keep on fighting the nobles, make certain that Tiberius never got power, never undid everything Octavianus built. All the rest of it was already there! The civilization, the ideas of justice, of progress, of people’s rights, of- of- Human worth….” Kirk looked wildly around the room, as if seeking answers from the shadows in the corners. “Spock, I couldn’t- I still can’t believe that was our Rome! All the history books couldn’t be that far off, could they?! It’s got to be a mistake. Look, their leader—they called him ‘Imperator’, not ‘Emperor’, and he wasn’t that all-powerful…”

“‘Emperor’ is the modern translation of the word,” Spock pointed out. “Its original meaning changed through the ages, with changes in political climates and societies. The word ‘Dictator’, if you recall, originally meant nothing more than ‘emergency commander of the armed forces’. Its later meaning was created by generals who abused their wartime powers. …Also, the surviving records do indeed seem to have downplayed the very real power of the Senate and the Popular Assembly.

“Yes. Surviving accounts—it depended on who could best pay for mass printing, blanket the world —Spock, the state of their science, their technology: they had lenses, even printing!”

“We might have deduced that fact from the discovery of ancient Roman daily newspapers, such as the ‘Acta Diurna’. Mass publication does require a more effective form of copying than mere hosts of scribes.”

“The Imper- Emperor’s name was Octavianus! Where in our history do you find that name?”

“That was the actual name of the first Emperor of Rome. ‘Augustus’ was only a title, bestowed by the Senate in his age.”

“But the date was wrong! The Census—it was 7 BC—”

“That was the actual date of the- of Jesus’ birth. The discrepancy is due to later adjustments of the calendar.”

“But, dammit, those people weren’t cruel or superstitious or sex-crazed or- or anything like what the standard history texts say. They were so damned decent and respectable and civilized that they were downright dull! For all the orgies I saw or heard of, I might as well have been back in Iowa. The famous Games were mostly horse races and military displays; their gladiators were condemned felons, fighting for a chance at parole, and damned few of the losers died—Octav-Augustus passed a law against fights to the death in the arena. Their slaves were prisoners of war or
condemned criminals, working off their sentences instead of rotting in prisons. Even their welfare system was better than ours! Where the hell’s the famous decadence, Spock? Where’s the corruption and tyranny I was taught to expect? It isn’t as if they didn’t leave enough records, dammit; everybody was literate and even people who didn’t write histories could leave diaries, notes, business records at the least. How the hell could the history books have been that far off?”

Spock deliberately relaxed his hands and stared at them for a long moment. “It would appear that… ‘slanting’ the news is not necessarily a contemporary phenomenon, and that propaganda is an ancient political weapon. All leaders have enemies willing to slander them, both during and after their lifetimes, and subsequent researchers can pick up their bias and continue it.”

“Right.” Kirk looked away. “And surviving accounts of any war are usually written by the winners, who have a vested interest in making the losers look bad. Everyone knows about Andersonville; who ever heard of Stoney Island? Oct- Augustus believed in freedom of the press; he let his enemies write what they liked, as long as counter-arguments were written, too. He’d censor his own library, but nobody else’s. Later rulers were a little less generous with him; they published his enemies’ accounts and censored his. They slandered him and his people, and whitewashed themselves. Sure, make Rome look bad and themselves good by contrast! Who profited? Hah! There are different ways to make a ‘prophet’!”

Spock’s shoulders tensed. “Bear in mind that the failings of that society may not have apparent at a brief study. Some features that may have appeared harmless at first glance could have had debilitating effects over a long course of time. For example, their sexual customs were far less disciplined—”

“Oh, come on!” Kirk almost roared at him. Of all the stupid things to pick on—

“How can you sit there and try to tell me that an easy-going attitude towards sex is somehow evil enough to poison a whole society, outweigh all their virtues, justify such losses?! Just because Vulcans are scared of it doesn’t mean that we have to be!”

Spock blanched, visible even in the semi-dark. The instant Kirk saw that he wished to all the gods that ever were that he could call back the words, but before he could even begin to frame an apology Spock snapped a comeback at him.

“Is that how Augustus bought your loyalty? With a woman?”

“I guess I deserved that…” Kirk offered a faint smile. “No. Nobody waved any women at me. In fact, I didn’t get laid once in the all the time I was there. Heh! You know, I was so busy marveling at the city and worrying about how to get home—not to mention tiring myself out with shoveling things—that I didn’t even have time to miss it.”

“Remarkable.” Spock commented dryly.

“Unusual, I’ll admit.” Kirk offered a faint smile.

“Then why did you agree to become the next Emperor of Rome?” Spock demanded, unrelenting. “What did he offer you to make you shatter the Prime Directive and change the history of your world?”

“I didn’t know it was my world, Spock. I thought it was a different universe, and I didn’t see that the Prime Directive applied there. Besides, it isn’t as if I agreed right away. I think that what did it was…” Kirk frowned, remembering. “When I saw the explosion light up the sky and knew it was a starship dying, I thought it was the Enterprise…and I gave up. I was sure I’d never get home. That I’d have to spend the rest of my life there. Octa- Augustus had offered me a purpose, a worthwhile
use for my life, a good reason to...stay alive when all I’d known and loved was gone.” In fact, it was his idea to continue the IDIC formation, to- to honor the dead, even after I gave up. He got me home!

“Despair is illogical.” ‘Oh, ye of little faith!’ Spock relaxed slightly. Yes, he is innocent; did not realize what he was doing, sinned only through ignorance and forgivable weakness. He does have need of some non-ephemeral life-purpose... It is possible to win him. “There are better uses for your life than mere political power, I assure you.”

“Hell, it wasn’t the power!” Kirk stared at him in surprise. “I’ve been offered that before, and turned it down without thinking twice. I’d rather have had the Enterprise any day. But failing that...” He looked off into the shadows for a moment, trying to organize his thoughts. “What Octavianus wanted was a successor who wouldn’t get drunk on power, someone who could see the Imperium as a whole, not just one particular part of it: someone who could understand all the new problems, political and military and economic, all together; not just one peninsula, but a whole continent. There were so few people who had the training to do that, and most of them were the wrong kind: the ‘Best Men’, the Nobles, and the old aristocracy—hell, the Republicans! They knew the game, all right; they were using that knowledge to grab power. Spock, they had an almost total monopoly on the food supply! Octavianus wanted that broken and I could have done it. He wanted national education so that everybody, not just the already rich and powerful, could understand the ins and outs of politics and keep control of it. I could have done that, too. They had the beginnings of modern technology, and I could have improved on it—created new industries that would have given more power to the non-Nobles. I guess I eventually did—or would have—will have— Ah, shit! There’s no FedStandard tense for definite-future/past-according-to-time-travel!”

How strange, Spock thought. There is a definite-future/past in Latin... “Did the Romans have an historical memory of accurate precognition?”

“Huh? ...Oh. Yes. In fact, they had plenty of accurate precognitive psychics running around when I was there. Other reliable psychics, too. I had personal acquaintances with some of them. They encouraged psychics in Rome, trained them and gave them good jobs in the priesthood or the civil service. Really incredible...”

Just as you will/did give Jesus of Nazareth a civil service job! Spock silently ground his teeth. ‘This ability they (humans) once had,’ the master said... Find out. “Then did you gain any insight on the question of why psychic ability subsequently diminished in the human species?”

“Hmm. Yes. The Augur Flamma mentioned...and Perinna... I think it was political battles. The rich and powerful trying to get all the psychics on their side, buying or killing off all the psychics on the other side—like Socrates’ wives, who wound up plucking him bald! Something similar happened with scientists, during and after Earth’s Third World War.” Kirk shook his head in horrified amazement. “Good god...”

Which one? Spock wondered, watching him intently.

“The Romans...the Greeks too, she said...” Kirk murmured, marveling as the thought took form. “They had these old, old traditions about keeping their precognitive people—their oracles, augurs and whatnots—politically neutral. That’s probably what kept them alive so long! No exactly ‘separation of church and state’, since they gave even their gods civil service jobs—Hah! ‘Venus of the Public Sewers’! ‘Jupiter of the Law Courts’! ‘Mercury Messenger Service’! –but still...they had these traditions of fairness and neutrality of religion. Also, ideas of...democracy and basic rights and- and a kind of a...basic standard of decency for everybody, equally, rich and poor, gods and men...”

Spock frowned slightly, not liking this tack.
“And who else on Earth had that? Everywhere else in the world, then—conquering kings and bloody tyrants, politicking priests and witchdoctors—even in the Bible! I remember that from my old Sunday School days: priests and prophets of rival kingdoms cursing each other in the name of the Lord—oh, no wonder the psychics got killed off everywhere else! Playing with politics, hobnobbing with tyrant-kings… You like down with pigs, you get up with the smell; and sooner or later the hog-butchers catch up to you. No wonder the psychics lasted longer in Rome, lasted until it fell…” Kirk shuddered, remembering. “That old priestess we saw murdered by that howling mob in 5th century Rome, do you think she was one of the last real psychics? Did she know what was going to happen to her? Then why did she— But there weren’t any other bodies in that temple, and she did mention others! Maybe she was fighting a delaying action, holding off the mob while everyone else beat it out the back door. Hell, I hope so…”

Let him talk, Spock thought. Let him talk it out, wring himself dry. ‘Confession is good for the soul’ …at least for Humans. “I think that may be an overly simplistic theory,” he hedged.

“Yeah? Then try this one on for size.” Kirk rested his elbows on the desk and leaned his head on his hand. “In the Dark Ages, in Europe, people with psychic ability would have had three choices: keep it hidden, be burned alive for witchcraft, or join the church itself—which was celibate, so they weren’t very goddam likely to pass it on. The Dark Ages lasted a long, long time, Spock. What does that mean in terms of evolutionary change?”

Spock couldn’t think of a suitable answer to that, except one that he couldn’t explain—at least, not yet. The Master said that humans ‘used to have’ psychic ability, and that was (QED) in the 1st century AD (‘Anno Domini’: ‘Year of Our Lord’. Fitting), therefore, psychic ability largely died out among humans before ever His church gained any such power…in Roman territory, anyway… But how long had religious/political squabbling been going on in the Middle East? –But of course he meant the entire planet, and he certainly had universal knowledge of the entire human condition. … Didn’t he?”

“I’ll say this for the Roman gods; they allowed—in fact encouraged—their priests and priestesses to breed.” Kirk grinned wryly. “Even the Vestal Virgins, I heard, were allowed to quit and marry, if they liked, after they’d served a minimum term. If those were Human-sized gods, they at least respected Human needs. They even shared Human feelings and failings. How did in go? Jupiter cheats on his wife, and she resents it. Venus cheats on her husband…Hah! Whose name was ‘Vulcan’! There’s a thought… And Mars is a dumb brute, Diana’s a prude, Apollo is—” His teeth clicked on abrupt silence.

Spock looked at him, bewildered, and then alarmed. Kirk’s eyes had gone very wide, thought here was nothing untoward for them to fix upon. He looked horrorstricken. “Jim, what is the matter.”

“Apollo,” Kirk whispered. “He was real. We met him. And he said there were others: Hera, Pan— The Romans shared a lot of gods with the Greeks, talked about them so- so matter-of-fact… Spock, what if all their gods were real? What if…what if the later church didn’t just drive off or kill off the worshippers but drove real gods—real entities, intelligent beings—drove them away from Earth, off into deep space, to die of loneliness, like Apollo and his company…”

Stop that! “This is pointless speculation. We do not know precisely when or why Apollo and his friends left Earth. In fact, it may have been your practical, unimaginative Romans who encouraged them to leave. We cannot even be certain that Apollo told the truth on the matter. There may not have been any others.” Except for—

“Quetzalcoatl! We met him, too. Remember?” Kirk clenched his hand in his hair. “What if all the gods are real, Spock? All of them…either glorified ancestors or half-remembered super powered
beings. In that case… Not one of them can claim to be the biggest, strongest, smartest or best; they’re all just bragging, advertising for themselves…and all their missionaries are nothing but salesmen, selling new gods the way you’d sell a new model ground-car. We’d have to judge them the same way—on performance and price. Buyer beware—’Caveat emptor’! Oh, they knew that, those practical Romans! They had an open market on gods!

Stop! How dare you include the Master in such company? Spock wrestled down a surprisingly strong surge of emotion. He was nothing like those petty beings. He was…overwhelming…

“Spock, I think we have to…accept the idea…” Kirk stared into his dark and widening vision, seeing nothing else. “…That our world…that Earth has been a- a feeding ground, a game preserve for discorporate super-powered beings…maybe ever since Humans became capable of worshipping such things. Assorted gods have been feeding off Human worship for ages, encouraging it, hunting for it…” His hands clenched suddenly on the chair arms. “Maybe even breeding us for it! Like a milking herd— Omigod, how many religions have meddled in Human breeding?! Not just locking up the psychics or the ones intelligent enough to like scholarly pursuits, keeping them celibate or killing them off for- for witchcraft or heresy… More than that: setting up rules for how and when and where and with whom people could breed, cutting out chances for personal choice, enslaving women so they couldn’t choose their mates, allowing official or unofficial harems for approved rulers—and what’s that but a breeding herd of cows with one prize bull?!”

“Jim—”

“—Breeding us for obedience and worshipfulness, the better to be milked—or shorn! How many ‘gods’ have done that, or tried to?! How many gods have looted humanity, and for how long?”

“In that case,” Spock commented with a coolness that surprised him, “We should be grateful that we eventually obtained a protective Being who drove out the others.”

“…What?” …got a monopoly on the food supply…

“You will agree that humanity eventually did obtain the superior…product from that marketplace.”

Kirk didn’t answer. His eyes wondered to the shadowed bulkhead and beyond.

“Jim?” He must not—cannot believe—

“I’m not so sure…” Kirk answered slowly. “Judging by what came after, by what we saw…”

“Jim, you cannot blame the Master for the misbehavior of his later worshippers!”

...’the Master’? “Can’t I?” Kirk sat up straighter, eyes narrowing. “Look at me Spock. I’m a ship’s captain and just a Human. I’m no god and never claimed any divine powers—not even to Miramanee’s people, who thought I was a god, and I didn’t have any memories to refute them…”

“Jim—”

“Yet, I swear, I’ve done better than that with my own command! If I ever caught any of my crew behaving like those fanatical, murdering bigots we saw, I’d court-martial him right there—and throw him the hell off my ship besides. I wouldn’t leave him running around loose on my ship, much less in charge of people. Why couldn’t—”

“Jim!”

“—Jesus Christ Almighty do as much?”
...I'm losing him, Spock though in the ringing silence. If I am to win him for the Master, it must be soon. This very night.

“If he was what he claimed,” Kirk drove on relentlessly, “then why couldn’t he look down the future and see what would be done by his followers, his disciples, in his name? Why couldn’t he stop them and prevent it? Why did he let all those horrors happen? And if he didn’t know, if he couldn’t see that far ahead, then—then what bloody right did he have to demand that people worship him?”

In fact, it must be now.

“If you’re going to claim godlike powers—and god-vast rule—then you damn-well have to live up to it! And if not, then…why should people worship something crueler and more hypocritical than they are?”

“Jim, I am assured that the Master had his reasons…”

“Spock, I’m seriously beginning to wonder if the gods I’ve killed weren’t better for Humanity—and everybody else, I might add—than—the one I used to believe in, and serve.”

Stop this, now! Must stop him—“Jim, if you had met the Master personally, you would understand. The experience is difficult to put into words—”

“Even for a Vulcan?” Kirk gave him a wry smile.

“Yes, even for a Vulcan,” Spock admitted. “For some phenomena there are no clear concepts, no symbols. They must be experienced directly to be comprehended.”

“As you did?” Kirk asked, giving Spock a sidelong look. What was it McCoy said…?

“Yes.” Spock almost smiled. “I met the Master, conversed with Him, and even mind-melded with Him.”

Kirk stared at him. “You didn’t mention that in your report.”

“For much the same reason that I destroyed the tricorder readings.”

Kirk nodded agreement to that; he could see the Vulcan’s point. Hell, if that knowledge was made public, credulous religious nuts might make an icon out of you! Yes, a fate well worth avoiding. …But there’s something here that doesn’t quite add up…

“What I experienced, Jim, was an overwhelming— a total sense of benevolence. There was a vast…love, boundless and all-encompassing, which is quite beyond my capacity describe.”

Love? Kirk considered. Of course, Vulcans aren’t famous for being good at describing love…or any emotion, for that matter… hell, how much experience have you had at it? Even for you to use the word implies something heavy… This has to tie in with what McCoy warned me about…but is this the secret, or the fortress protecting it? …I don’t know, but there has to be a way to find out… Try going along with it.

“From direct evidence,” Spock continued, “I was thoroughly convinced.”

Convinced…

“If you truly wish answers to those questions you raised, I can make it possible for you to share the experience.” Spock raised both hands into the position for the mind-meld and held them a short
distance from Kirk’s head. All you need to do is lean forward, Jim. Lean forward and you are mine. Do it…

Kirk gave him a long thoughtful look. Well, this is one sure way to find out, isn’t it? Careful, Spock; I may learn more than you want me to. Doing this, you can’t hide as well as you’d like. I know that from experience. Yes, I want to see what you’ve got to show me…and some other things as well. He took a deep breath and leaned forward into Spock’s waiting hands. He clasped his own hands over them for good measure. “Go,” he said.

Yes. Now.

The first order of business was closing and tightening the meld. Spock settled in with meticulous care, causing no disruptive flicker of unease, sinking smoothly into the surface and sub-surface levels. Kirk patiently held his mind open and receptive as still water, and the impression of the contact was not unlike sliding through layers of cool satin. The tone of the emotional background was slightly changed in color, deep and thoughtful and sad-tinged. The difference startled Spock enough to jar a corner of his control, and he noticed for the first time something long accepted; he liked the way it felt, this joining with Kirk’s mind. The mind-meld was not normally something he enjoyed. There were implications lurking below that knowledge, but Spock preferred to ignore them. He finished securing the mental link, lowered sensory input to almost nil, and reached for the memory of his encounter with the Master. It was ready and waiting.

Now you will know… He couldn’t entirely suppress a flicker of smugness. …And you will be saved with us.

Kirk caught a glimmer of that. …Saved? He inquired.

In reply, Spock unveiled the memory.

Blue-white sunlight. Waking out of a stab-wound’s coma to unexpected life, and the gentle, radiant face of the Master. Elegant marble work of sun-white robes. Soft halo of gold-brown hair. Utterly kind eyes. Sweet bell-chime voice, speaking Vulcan, FedStandard, or any other tongue. A strange tingling warmth like an electromagnetic current passing from the firm, gentle hands, bringing sleep or healing or perfect knowledge…

Telepath/empathy that good? Kirk’s thoughts cut in. Not Human, for certain. What?

Not Organian, as the tricorder proved, but all that they are and more.

What did the readings say, exactly?

…

There was a brief, fumbling silence: an embarrassing blank spot, a quick dive into a pre-arranged mental foxhole—so quick that Kirk couldn’t be sure it was deliberate.

It is best that I not divulge that information.

Kirk was puzzled by the reply, and a little hurt. …Not even to me, Spock?

There was an automatic “yes” hovering, but something in Spock’s nature rebelled against it. Kirk caught the outlines of the hastily veiled though. (…I owe him a better answer than that…) There was a swift reshuffling. Puzzled searching. An embarrassed pause. An almost-frightened recognition. Finally a proper conclusion with all emotion properly strained out of it. I have forgotten… It is better so, I assure you; there were excellent reasons for thus censoring my memory.
What reasons, Spock?

Another quick search. Another embarrassed pause. Another cool reply. Too complex to go into now. I shall explain later, but let us proceed with the question at hand...

Spock, did you make yourself forget? Deliberately?

Yes. Of course.

Kirk was experienced in telepathic contact, as well as poker playing, not to mention the technique of the colossal bluff. He held his contacted mind perfectly still, did not react with any fully-thought words or emotional flares.

But he knew Spock was lying.

Spock must have caught some trace of suspicion anyway, for he plunged ahead with surprisingly un-Vulcan haste. Certainly I challenged Him, questioning the deathward eagerness His words instilled in His followers. He replied that he promised not eternal rest, but another thing which could only be shown, not told. For that purpose he offered his hand and gaze of his eye...

And you took it.

Yes. (Now.)

An almost subliminal sense of pouncing.

Flash-warned, Kirk slammed up his mental barriers reflexively, not stopping to ask himself why the hell Spock, of all people, would aim a slam-bang telepathic assault at him.

—love/brightness/love/peace/love—

Even forewarned, his resistance served only to filter down the intensity of the mental and emotional images. It was like taking the full weight of a leaping leopard on his shielded arm. He staggered and half-fell under the impact, barely able to hold himself steady against the onslaught, obliged to let the images reel through him.

A brief, last-instant flinch of fear—too late. Then the bright wave; much more than a mind-meld. No much-feared invasion, but total knowledge of self: all I had ever done, said or thought...

Direct access to the total record of the mental universe.

Overwhelming, Kirk agreed dizzily, struggling to regain his mental footing. But why...so...loud? Strong? Heavy? ...Crushing!

Spock didn’t seem to be listening to him. ...And upon knowing all that is myself—love. On the word, the experience of it: pulsing brighter every second, like a pulsar approaching at warp-speed. Bright. Blinding. Awareness behind it, pushing. Radiating deliberately, aimed at him, through Spock.

...So much...too much...intense as pain in torture...what the hell? ...Spock!

Spock’s words, thoughts, identity white out, thinning like a shadow in the sun/Son of Righteousness/nova blaze beyond him, only the shape of obedience, acceptance, remaining, Love/for me/love/all that vast mind/love/hot for what I have done/love/or might do/lover/no matter what I might be/love/might do/lover/because I am myself/love/only for being Spock/love/accepted/love...

--too much too much of anything not wise not right too damn much of this—
...Love for you too, Jim... Focus tightening. Sunlight through a burning glass. ...Accept...

--no I don’t want this it’s too much it’s wrong to overwhelm like this it’s wrong—

...love...love...love... There was hardly any impression of Spock left; it was all the immense, bright, blinding flood of feeling, emanating from and bearing the identity/feel/imprint of the Master. ...Love...Love...

No, dammit! No! Kirk struggled against the whiteout/blaze/avalanche with all the fierce survival-will of his tough, life-hungry mind.

The pressure rose, like heat in a wire that resisted the current.

...LOVE...LOVE...LOVE...

Kirk raised a mental fist of gut-deep outrage, and punched.

GET OFF ME, DAMN YOU!!! BACK THE FUCK OFF!!!

The blinding waves quivered, crested, rolled and broke. Flashes of surprise and annoyance. Darts of subtlety, crosscurrents pulling and slapping. Confusion of approach.

...BACK...OFF... Kirk held fast, gasping like a half-drowned man clinging to a rock in the sea, clamping a death grip on the bedrock of himself, his own mind. In turn, something clung limply to him like a rag of seaweed. He didn’t shake it off, concentrating his strength on resisting the flood that swirled, plucked at him, withdrew sullenly and reshaped itself into intricate images of appeal.

Peace... Image of a wide, sweet landscape of stately habitations. People, all kindly, gentle and serene. No conflict anywhere, anytime...

--Until the Red Hour strikes! Kirk warded it off. I've seen that—on Llandru’s world. No thanks!

Innocence... A slightly different landscape, lush and tropical. Laughing, gently-eyed half-draped people, strolling among the trees and fearing nothing, picking utterly harmless fruit.

--And never breeding or growing or evolving! I remember Vaal’s world. His innocents were, in fact slaves. And Vaal, unprovoked, was a killer. Take your ‘innocence’ and shove it!

The dark waves rolled for an instant and then changed direction. A new image revealed: a classic crucifixion; a composite of every painting ever seen and drawing on fine art’s skill at mood casting. Massive tones of sorrow/grief/loss/tragedy/guilt. Blood drops like rubies, stricken doe eyes and intricate crown of thorns. Wordless radiation of guilt/duty/you-owe-me. Died for your sins...

So did the old priestess at the temple of Rome Defended! Kirk raised the stark etched memory like an icon of his own. And whose sins, precisely, did she die for?

The heavy tide swirled darkly a moment more, then slowly, reluctantly, began to withdraw.

How many Humans have died for the sake of others? Kirk continued. Most of them with no guarantees of any future life at all...not like an energy-being who could— abruptly, he remembered Organia. 300 supposed humanoids line up before a scowling Kingon firing squad, all smiling with a sweetly superior knowledge. ‘Nobody has died here’... Kirk threw a bitter laugh into that sullen sea. ‘All the Organians are, and more’?! Then nothing for him to fear from a few nails and a spear point —any more than those smug Organians from the Klingons’ disrupters. No wonder they never found the body, Spock; he just became discorporate when everyone’s back was turned. Like the Organians
when the Klingons fired. You think I’d be won over by that trick?

The flood withdrew faster now, changing color as it retreated: dropping sorrow, salt tang of reproach, solemn indigo promises of infinite regret, tantalizing starry flickers of possible joy in the future, if he should ever change his mind and come around.

*Fat chance. Go away.*

Sharp crackle of breaking contact. Rebound-crash of pain and a raw, agonized scream.

--*Spock!*

The familiar presence erupted under him, howling in mindless anguish like a great black panther with its pelt on fire, running blindly from the inescapable pain. Kirk clung tight, trying to beat the flames out, trying to conjure healing water. *Spock, I’m still here! Hold on, hold on to yourself! Hold on—*
There was a faint, feeble stirring. The tangible mind was drained, utterly exhausted. Broken open. Gutted.

Spock, what the hell did he do to you?

Still no solid response, or any sign of enough strength for it.

Spock... Oh, my friend, my friend... Desperate, not thinking about how he did it, Kirk jumped/reached/clasped tight with mental arms and plunged headlong into a deeper level.

Spock was there, yes: the wordless, surviving, feeling core of him. Stunned.
There was an instant’s pause, and then the silent awareness moved. Contact was instantaneous and total. It felt astonishingly like a kiss.

*Yes! Yes, it’s me. Come back. Come back with me, my friend…*

That registered. Sluggishly, Spock reached out and took the mental lifeline, suffering himself to be dragged to safety. Holding him tight, Kirk pulled them both back up to the surface of speech and thought and coherence, rising degree by slow degree, like bubbles through murky water, back up to the shallows. Toneless light of twilight consciousness grew clearer: pre-dawn over the after-storm muddy water, dull and current-less, swirling on the dim-lit beach of the world.

*...I think we’re safe now…*

Kirk turned/pulled back enough to see Spock clearly, and found him floating listlessly. Half-open eyes made no effort to see anything. Spock! Kirk took him and lifted his head out of the water. Spock, what did he do to you?! What the hell did he do? Tell me!

A flicker of thought, consideration. Then, with a sob of hopeless regret, Spock turned like a windblown cape, rolled over like a wounded sea-beast revealing its scars. For one timeless, burning instant Kirk saw it all, the whole constellation of love and guilt and Spock’s single, monumental weakness—and what the Master had done with it. The vision was staggering.

*Need to love and be loved. Human: UnVulcan—forbidden, repressed… Ashamed! So never allowed enough, eternally hungry for it, and… No experience with overload! You…weren’t immunized. But, Human, I could hold it off with—* Solid impact of connecting memory. Like the damned spores of Leila’s world! I found a way out, but you didn’t have my experience with unrestrained feeling, dangers of love…

How many millions of starved, desperate, lonely people has he bowled over that way?!

Spock didn’t answer, except to groan softly and curl himself into a tight knot of misery.

*That- that monster!* Kirk reeled as the outlines of the suspected image solidified, all the random facts falling heavily into place. All gods want the same thing from us: adulation, worship, mental energy—*their* food. What won’t they do to get it? Some gods work for it, some wheedle and charm, some threaten and command, and some…like this one…

Entrap for it!

In the gathering darkness, Spock gave a small sound of infinite pain, shame and admission of betrayal.

*Entice the prey; draw them in like flies to the pitcher-plant, with psychic bait. With love! Kirk stared, horrified, at the finished picture. Lure and overwhelm, entrap and enslave—with love. …And he did that to you. To you?!*

Spock’s only reply was to pull a patch of shadow over him like a blanket. The surrounding ocean changed to dark desert, the sky to cold blackness glittering dimly with a few unreachable stars.

Kirk recognized one of them. It had four right-angled points and a halo, and it hung in a quarter of the sky that could only be east.

*That isn’t the way it really was…*
A last memory clicked into place.

It was the star of Tiberius—

—and Aquila’s ship, burning.

He remembered, too, what kind of age and civilization that star had promised, ushered in, delivered and ruled. Twinkling promises. The horror underneath. Under the blanketing of love as thick and sweet and sticky as honey, the flytrap: tyranny, the sheep-shearing, all the horrors of the Dark Ages.

Oh, you damned liar! Hypocrite!! Enslaver!!!

Bone deep fury erupted, and he let it. Raging half-coherent abuse at the symbolic sky, Kirk pulled Spock up from the dark sand and held him close, protecting and supporting—while he turned his outrage loose. He seized the imaged environment and used the earth’s raw weapons. Boulders burst skyward as great jagged missiles. Howling storm winds shook the stars. Spears of lightning raked the sky. Sand spiraled up in the cones of cyclones, seas in vast waterspouts, to claw down that lying picture-postcard illusion and reveal the ugly truth behind it.

Show your true face! You shearer, you milker, you eater of souls.

Under that assault the glowing light-cross pulsed, shriveled, abruptly burst into the nova-light that marked the death of Aquila’s ship—and universe. Then that too faded, revealing at last the ominous dust-colored star that boded no good and held no goodwill for Humanity.

Spock groaned as he looked.

Yes, you understand. You saw them all, didn’t you? Rome that was, Rome that followed, Rome that might have been—and what made the difference.

Spock stirred feebly, turned his face toward Kirk and made the deliberate effort to open his memory completely. Kirk looked at the displayed record and saw corroborating details, things Spock had known but refused to connect before. Kirk saw, and made the connections for him. He shuddered as he looked at them.

Item: Augustus groomed and trained dozens of successors, adopted or married several of them into his family as proof of intentions, but all of them died or were disgraced. The incidence was suspiciously high for mere coincidence. Historians had blamed Livia’s ambitions for her son.

No way. She hated him. I saw it.

Item: Tiberius himself could not have managed so many assassinations; many of the deaths had occurred while he was in exile, far outside Italy, on Augustus’ orders.

But then, who could have— who benefited? ...Who else? ...oh, no...

Item: the North African plantations remained Rome’s primary source of grain down to the late 3rd century, when there were ravaged with a grain blight that destroyed several years’ harvests in a row. The land never recovered and the population was decimated repeatedly.

Grain-blight! A real one! ...As if they cried wolf until...something took them up on it.

Item: one of the 3rd century Emperors was unusually competent and honest. He overhauled the Imperial bureaucracy, cut corruption, instituted reforms and led a successful campaign against the encroachments of the Persian Empire. As he was about to lead a successful battle against the Persians
he was killed by a bolt of lightning. This so demoralized his troops that they fled the field, leaving Persia strong and intact.

Struck by lightning! Stuck by lightning!

Item: late in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, airborne influenza made its first incursion into Europe with disastrous results. Lacking all immunity, half the population of the Roman Empire died. The Romans had a rudimentary germ theory which applied to filth-borne diseases, but having no previous experience with airborne plagues they could not comprehend the nature of the disease that was destroying them. Besides the loss of population, Rome suffered a loss of trust in the rationality of natural law; this led to a growing mysticism which created a favorable climate for the spread of Christianity. The first recorded instance of this disease is its role in the early death of Alexander the Great.

Alexander—of course! Let him live long enough to chop up all the eastern kingdoms, but kill him off before he could set up a rational neo-Greek culture there—And it worked so well that it was used again, later, to tear up Rome. ‘Growing mysticism’?! That’s a common Human reaction to things that kill mysteriously, from nowhere, unpredictably...

Too damn well planned! Too damn many coincidences! Once is an accident, twice is a coincidence, but three times is enemy action—and who profited?! A creature that powerful and clever wouldn’t leave definite tracks, but this is too obvious. Somebody or something had it in for that civilization, those people, their tolerance and literacy and rationality—and who profited from that collapse, and what came after? Who benefited?

He tore down a whole civilization to get a Human milking herd!

Under that thought, Spock stirred under a flare of white-hot shame that cut like a wire lash. He writhed and thrashed on the black sand while Kirk, tense with concern, strained to hold him. One coherent thought erupted and burst to the surface.

—That is the nature of the thing I served—

Kirk held tight, riding through the pain, keeping that desperate mind from closing in on itself in self-condemnation that was all too easy, always. Not alone, Spock! You, yes, and nobody knows how many millions of innocent people...

The struggling slacked, but the burning guilt/shame/accusation remained, as sharp edged and definite as a hot coal.

—Traitor—

No. Kirk pinned him with a bar of cold denial. Victim. Just like all the plague victims. Hit in a weak spot. No blame. Just try to tell me that Vulcans have no weaknesses! All living creatures have weak points, and that- that damned looter found an effective one... More than one: we all have to breathe, don’t we? Cut down by an airborne plague or a love-baited trap: what’s the difference, in the end?

Spock lay quiet, considering that. It occurred to him, clearly enough for Kirk to see, that all creatures who eat are likewise susceptible to deliberate poisoning. More than one of Augustus’ candidates had died under circumstances that suggested poisoning. Blame was not to the victim.

Right. Kirk raised his head and bared his teeth at the sullen sky. Nobody—Human or not—has the right to treat people that way! Damn them all, looting gods—living and dead—a chill thought went through him. Apollo and his company are dead, but how do I know this one is?
Spock quivered and glanced once around the shadowy landscape.

If he’s still here, still slinking around on Earth, if ever I meet him again, Kirk flared at the darkness like an angry gold star. Tell him to beware of me! I’ve killed better gods—Apollo, Vaal, Llandru, others—for trying to enslave people; why should I spare him for worse? ...Or for what he did to you? Whatever he is—renegade Organian, Melkotian, Metron or anything else—if I catch him I’ll treat him like the others. The harm he did to us can’t be forgiven. If I don’t get him...

Somebody will, someday or somehow. I’ll declassify—hell, publish!—all the tapes we’ve got. They won’t tell the whole story, but they’ll damn-well help. Apollo told us! People wise up, little by little. A little less gullible, a little less susceptible, generation by generation, year by year—the same way we gradually got immunities to the flu. Hell, it’s only a minor annoyance now, and it once killed half a continent’s people! Slowly we grow smarter, tougher, not such easy prey. Progress!

...And someday that cosmic slave-maker will starve to death.

Slowly and heavily, Spock rolled toward him to reach up and wrap fatigue-heavy arms around him and hold tight.

--Immunity.

The thought was brief, but very clear.

Not quite believing he heard/received that right, Kirk bent closer. Spock, do you mean...what I think?

A flicker of thought and consideration; a weary casting off of now-useless reticence. Then, abruptly, images as vivid as flames: a remembered dream-landscape symbolizing that pagan city in all its dimension of space and time and meaning. Spock plodding up the rising mountain, the Master’s clear and endlessly-loving voice urging him on to the ultimate peak, the final test/order/commandment—and the last-minute desperate denial. The one point of rebellion: unVulcan, Father would disapprove, shameful, to be hidden, denied...to the Master’s advantage. Feeble, but there: sneaking into proper thoughts at odd moments, chipping flakes off the monolith of the Master’s imprint/control. Not enough to free him completely, but enough to make him slightly inefficient at obeying his marching orders. The one point on which he could, and would, resist.

It’s me! Kirk realized, astonished...and shaken. In the end, you...love...me.

--Jim— it was like a sob of hopeless regret.

The one thing you wouldn’t give up, for god or Vulcan or the whole universe...is me!

The words echoed endlessly in silent depths, with no answer. No presence anywhere. Fade to black.

Hey, where are you?!

With a wrenching sense of dislocation, Kirk pulled himself up from the mental universe, back to physical reality. His eyes snapped open. Sound and feeling returned with a rush. There was an instant’s bleary dizziness as his senses readjusted, and then he found that the situation wasn’t quite as he had left it.

They were both lying sprawled on the floor beside the desk, near an overturned chair, arms tangled. I didn’t even feel the impact, Kirk marveled. He noticed that Spock’s hands had fallen away from his head and were draped loosely around his neck. Broke the meld, finally... When did we fall? Spock was limp, but awake; his eyes were half-open, studying the carpet, bleeding slow tears. Shaken, Kirk
pulled himself up on one elbow and reached out for Spock’s thin shoulder.

“Spock…” His voice felt rusty with disuse. “Are you all right?”

Spock gazed up at him, looking painfully old and tired. “Jim, that’s a stupid question.”

“Uh… Yes, I guess it is.” Spock?! …Sounds all human now. Hurting… Kirk sat up clumsily, and pulled Spock up with him. “Ah, Spock, let me help. I know it hurts, being betrayed like that. I know. I know. Let me…”

Limp as a rag doll, Spock let himself be pulled close, let himself sag on Kirk’s shoulder, as if there were no longer any reason to resist Human comfort. “Oh, fool…” he sighed warily. “Fooled again. Why do I even try? Hopeless. ‘Please all and you please none’. Old Human saying…”

“Shh, shhh, you’ll be all right…” Despite the soothing words, Kirk was seriously worried. “Do you want me to call McCoy? It’s late but—”

“No.” Spock squeezed his eyes shut. “I’ll have to face him soon enough. But, please, not like this…”

“All right. All right…” Not knowing what else to do, Kirk held on to him and rocked gently.

“Oh, I’ll have to explain to him,” Spock groaned, “Everything. Whole shameful story…”

“It’s all right. I think he already guessed most of it.”

“And Scott. Must apologize to him…treated him abominably. What shall I do about those- those charges I made against him? Put him in the brig…in the records…insubordination… How can I ever repay—”

“Don’t worry about the records,” Kirk reassured him. “All they’ll ever show is that you locked him up for a couple hours for ‘insubordination’—which can mean as little as mouthing off. Scotty’s taken worse for sprees on shore leave. No official action will be taken, I can guarantee.”

“Must apologize personally,” Spock insisted. “I owe him that… But how can I explain? How does one say to a Human: please forgive me, but I was not myself? I was mentally controlled by an alien power—” With a choked sound, he buried his face against Kirk’s shoulder.

“Spock, if you try pressing charges against yourself, I’ll—”

“No.” Spock shook his head listlessly. “If you will forgive one more failing, I would rather not have my weaknesses made public.”

“Quite understandable, Spock, and I don’t think there’s any need for it.”

“But I did do all those vicious and stupid things.”

“Shh…” Kirk pressed him closer, holding him still. “You did complete the mission, as the log-tapes show. If you were clumsy and rough-handed about it, you were still successful. You did it badly, but you did it. That’s all Starfleet’s interested in. You’ve got enough commendations, the gods know, to more than make up for one job poorly done.”

Spock gave a sigh that seemed to deflate him. “So much for ‘treasures in heaven’.”

“What?”

“I was thinking that I have not done badly at storing up ‘idiosyncratic credit’ in Starfleet. I hope it
stands me in good stead.” His voice sounded a little closer to normal.

“That it will.” Kirk ventured a smile. “Starfleet Command isn’t made up entirely of ingrates, you know; and you are the best First Officer in the fleet.”

“But, I feel like such a fool!” Spock gripped his shoulders and clung shamelessly. “I should have been more careful of my weaknesses, should have known—”

“Spock, that- that- He made a career of hitting people where they never expected to be hit!”

“True. Using love. Indeed, no Vulcan would expect that…” Spock blinked slowly, making the effort to review the facts in detail. “Mental invasion it was, though of a subtle sort… He also tailored my memories, made me forget the exact tricorder readings…and he implanted the command that I erase the tape…and more.” His hands tightened on Kirk’s shoulders, and a rough edge of honest anger grew in his voice. “He altered my judgment, my value system…even my loyalties! I was to have served his ends, not my own for Vulcan’s or Starfleet’s—though he made me believe that all those ends were the same as his. I…conducted the search and rescue mission on his terms. I evaluated the crew, the visiting scientists, the Imperials, everyone, not by efficiency or any other value but only their—I thought—loyalty to him!”

“Like Scotty!”

“Yes. And Dr. Day and Dr. Hawk. I became… It is not surprising that I behaved much like a bigot, a tyrant and something of a paranoid. I was, after all, a committed agent of an alien power…”

“Shhh. No…” Kirk winced under the pressure of those hands clamping down on his shoulders. “Shhh…”

“Jim, do you realized that I violated the Federation Bill of Right? McCoy told me—”

“Shhh. Not of your own free will.”

“True…” Spock relaxed his grip. “But I…must come to terms with my major weakness. No choice now.” He tensed slightly, as if about to plunge into cold water. “Jim, I was susceptible to the- the Master’s bait because…I have long despised my emotions as Human weaknesses, believed that they must be eternally controlled and repressed…and thereby came to believe that not only myself but all Humans need such control. Oh, misery does indeed love company!”

“You were lonely.” Kept there by your Vulcan reticence, even though plenty of people could love you… “Poor Spock…you don’t have to suffer like that. It’s no capital crime.”

“I already saw much to…admire…in his recorded philosophy—specifically its ‘moral’ controls and repression of emotions. Control ultimately requires a controller.”

“Like an unreachable god?”

“Precisely. The ‘Father’ he spoke of… I once mentioned to you, did I not, that the father image is of great importance to Vulcans?”

“Yes. Yes, you did.” –And your father… Oh, Sarek has got a lot to answer for!

“‘Yahweh and Son’!” Spock pulled his head up, struck by another thought. “What if Hawk was right?—Oh, I must make reparations to him, too—and that will not be easy…or safe. Yet, he may well have been right, and I must tell him that, at least.”
“Tell him what? Right about what, Spock?”

“Jim, it is quite possible—in fact probable—that the ‘Master’ did not act alone.” Spock frowned, chewing over the idea. “All the groundwork required, across centuries of time and a whole continent, was too much for a single being, even of such power. It would have required a committee. The being known as Jesus may simply have been the…I believe the term is ‘front man’—for a company. Or perhaps several of them took turns appearing visible to the natives as the ‘Jesus’ figure—and others.”

“All the saints! And angels!”

“And demons. ‘Evil’ figures to frighten the natives, ‘holy’ ones to attract them…”

“The famous ‘Mutt ‘n’ Jeff’ routine!”

“More accurately, the sheepdog and the bellwether, leading and driving the flock in the right direction.”

“To the shearing pen…and then the slaughterhouse.” Kirk shuddered.

“It is possible that the advent of Christianity marks the arrival of the first large-scale exploitative cartel into what had previously been a small business market. The new corporation could capture, train and utilize the livestock more efficiently that the independent dealers; being unable to complete, the independents were eventually forced out of the market.”

“More efficiently…” Kirk rubbed his eyes. “A lot of those ‘independents’ had a—a smaller profit margin. They paid more for what worship they got.”

“Also, not many of them utilized the souls of the dead.”

“No.” Kirk whispered, eyes widening. “Oh, no!”

“Discorporate beings would certainly know whether or not corporeal beings possess minds capable of remaining coherent when removed from the body. The insistence of the ‘Master’ and his associates that Humans do indeed possess immortal ‘souls’—and their constantly stated desire that such souls should be committee to the ‘Father’s’ kingdom’ after death—reveals a certainty and greed which is highly suspect.”

“What a way to find out that we’ve got immortal souls!” Kirk wrapped his arms tight around Spock and clenched his eyes tight. “What a hell of a way to find out!”

“Hawk may indeed have been right,” Spock murmured. “Come to Yahweh & Son, cheapest prices in town…armies of loyal souls’. How ironic that we often don’t realize what treasures we possess until someone steals them.”

“Oh, damn…” Kirk groaned. “Damn, damn! Then the religious wars and religious persecutions were—were harvestings! Culling big chunks of the herd for large orders! ‘Rush order for a big customer, Mr. J., they want it by the end of the year. Can you come up with a quick crusade?’ Oh, damn!”

“Or those may also have been competitions for territory, waged against similar cartels. The harvested souls could be utilized in any case…” Spock shivered in turn. “Jim, do you realize that such cartels, once established, had a vested interest in religious wars? Or any war to which they could apply a religious component so as to put the brand of ownership upon the souls of the combatants?”

“’Kill for God’. Right.” Kirk whispered. “But then… World War II or III… Religion on one side,
but what about the others?”

“It would not be that difficult for such experience and powerful beings to turn adulation for a political leader into a form of worship. Have you never seen photographs of public celebrations in the old Communist countries, wherein enormous images of Lenin or Mao were displayed and reverenced like earlier church icons?”

“Shit!!!”

“Soul collecting and soul fleecing beings of such long experience could learn to adapt to changing conditions among their flocks, learn subtlety in their fleecing techniques.”

“How much of our history has been the result of these- these leech-gods jockeying for bigger herds, higher production and less competition?!”

“Unknown, Jim. I merely speculate.”

“How the hell did we ever get out from under them? ...Or did we?!?”

“There is no reason to assume that they have all departed. You managed to...pry the ‘Master’s’ imprint of my mind, but I saw some evidence during the combat to indicate that he is very much present on Earth today...and perhaps on every world where his worshippers reside.”

“’Wherever two or three of you are gathered in my name’...” Kirk quoted, horrified. “Then what the hell can we do about such- such things? How do we get them of Humanity’s back? How did we ever manage to progress far enough to get out into space, where we could meet other discorporate beings, learn things, figure out what they’ve been doing to us for all these centuries?”

“They are obviously neither all-powerful, nor all-wise.” Spock said. “It is not impossible that they have often underestimated Human intelligence, adaptability, and...stubbornness.” He ventured a shy smile at Kirk. “Not even this...being was able to compel worship from an unwilling mind. Individuals and even groups of Humans can grow tired or resentful or even bored with the same form of fleecing, and simply choose to withhold their worship. They may even use their natural rationality to conclude that worship costs them much and returns nothing... Jim! For that very reason the god-cartels would discourage its use!” He pulled back to stare at Kirk, eyes bright with astonishment. “Could it be that the famed irrationality of Humans is not necessarily of their own choosing?”

“It’s possible,” Kirk agreed. “I remember that the big-time religions of Earth are gung-ho on whipping up certain feelings, putting down others, and reason take the hind-most.”

“And I recall that the historical periods of progress in education, social enlightenment and humanitarian progress have always been followed by reactive periods of religious opposition. The Renaissance in Europe was closely followed by centuries of religious persecution and wars.”

“Yeah,” Kirk agreed bitterly. “Human reason and independence broke up the god-business corporations, and they had to scramble to reassert their positions. Nice to know that we can make them scramble, at least!”

“There may have been other factors,” Spock went on. “The crusades may have harvested armies of loyal souls, but they also increased trade among Humans of Europe and the Mediterranean area, which contributed to the development of the Renaissance. The Black Plague may have been attempt to cull souls, increase mysticism and retard social development, but if so, it backfired; the inability of the visible church to control or explain the Plague satisfactorily increased distrust for the church
rather than the reverse. Also, the sudden population drop broke up the feudal systems of inherited caste and land tenure, which allowed for the rise of a new social system. The expansion of European civilization into the Americas broke up the Aztec and Incan systems—and their official religions, I might add—it exterminated millions of innocent Indians, but it also allowed a culture that believed strongly in the value of the individual mind and Human competence.”

“In other words, without even realizing it, we took advantage of their mistakes.”

“Yes.” Spock rattled his fingers thoughtfully on Kirk’s shoulder. “Humans do possess considerable adaptability, vitality and…that indefinable quality known as ‘luck’."

“Nice to know.” Kirk’s eyes wandered to the ceiling. “Aren’t there any gods who fight on our side?”

“If there are,” Spock replied glumly, “considering what Apollo said about their diet, such activities could be considered little more than kindness to animals—farm animals, to be precise.”

“Oh, just small businessmen offering a better deal that the big corporations. It only works in an ‘open’ economy. Oh, let’s hear it for cottage industry! …Ah, hell! What an ugly business it all turns out to be.”

“I assure you, Jim, it looks uglier from my side.” Spock breathed harshly through his teeth. “Do you realize that when the…’Master’ healed me, he probably took advantage of my mind even as I slept? Implanted trust and then when I was awake—”

“Shit! He mind-raped you!” Kirk griped him hard, outrage flaring anew.

“Because I was a fool—”

“No.”

“—An arrogant fool, accustomed to denigrating the Human part of myself, and therefore all things Human. It did not occur to me that McCoy could have healed me just as well, using nothing more that his hear-earned skills, and requiring no other payment that his usual salary and a bit of occasional teasing. You would have rescued me from my attackers, had you been there, and without demanding entry to my mind. I knew these things! Yet, because I saw from the first waking moment that he was not entirely Human, I trusted—expected better of him—and left myself vulnerable to him. Oh, Jim, can you forgive me for that?”

“Yes.” Not bothering to question this rare openness, Kirk hugged him shamelessly. “I’ve always known and forgave you a long time ago.”

“Why?” Spock turned to look full at him. “I know the reasons for his generosity; one for gives the reticence of a cow one intends to butcher. But your motives are not his. Why do you forgive me, Jim?”

Kirk took a deep breath and met his gaze levelly. No evasions. Hold nothing back. Not now. “Because you’ve earned it a hundred times over,” he said. “You’ve more than made up for it. Offend a Human and he’ll ask for reparations: no more, no less. You’ve paid, and more. There.”

Spock studied him for a long moment, nodded once in acceptance, and relaxed. “That,” he said, smiling slightly, “is a remarkably logical procedure.”

Kirk grinned back. “There. See? There’s a lot of ‘natural rationality’ in us Humans after all.”

“Yes.” Spock slumped wearily against Kirk’s shoulder. “The question is…what do I do now?”
“Huh?”

“I have spent most of my life blundering off down false trails, trying to be Vulcan and be myself, please my father and not be utterly ruled by him. This latest blunder proves my position untenable. I can no longer pose as completely Vulcan, or warm myself on any imagined superiority to Humans. I have nothing left to believe in. Jim, what am I going to do with the rest of my life? How should I live now?”

“I- I don’t have any hard and fast answers, Spock. I…don’t think you’ve done that badly with your life, outside this one problem. You do happen to be the best First Officer in Starfleet, as I mentioned before, and… I couldn’t imagine being- running the ship without you.”

One long eyebrow lifted slowly. Spock looked at him, and then looked down, as if noticing their physical position for the first time. He didn’t pull away. “Indeed…” he said, very quietly.

In a sudden blaze of insight, Kirk realized how much he’d just admitted about himself. He froze for a moment, caught on the razor-edge of a dilemma. *If I pull back, try to deny it and evade it, I’ll look dishonest, cowardly… If I admit it, I’ll look and sound as if I were…trying the ‘Master’s’ trick! “S-* Spock, do I have to put this into words?”*

Spock looked at him for a long-stretched handful of seconds before speaking. “No. I understand perfectly.”

With no hesitation, then, he wrapped both arms around Kirk, pulled him as close as skin, and rested his head on Kirks’ shoulder. “My gratitude to whomever—or whatever—gave you back to me, alive.”

Kirk hugged back, but kept otherwise motionless. His heart slammed against his ribs like a prisoner beating on the bars of his cell. He didn’t dare say a word, or make a move, that might be even slightly mistaken. *But surely he can feel my heart hammering. What will he think of—*

“No,” Spock repeated calmly, “your…feelings I know well. You are my friend. T’Hyla, even among Vulcans. I know what the term means among Humans.”

Kirk shut his eyes tight. A single uncaught tear escaped.

“What Humans call love,” Spock went on, “is not only for the protection of mates and children. It is extended to all those whom you would protect: ‘in-group’, pack, community.”

“‘Us’ versus ‘them’?” Kirk considered, turning to look at him. “That can be misused.”

“What cannot? Yet even the dislike of outsiders in balanced by curiosity…and, hm, exogamous tendencies. Otherwise I would not be here.”

Kirk felt Spock smiling slightly against his neck. He smiled back. “Vulcans must have a little of that too, or you still would not be here. Takes two, you know.”

“Indeed.” Spock raised an eyebrow, feeling it rub against Kirk’s cheek. “We are…compatible, in more ways than one. Yet it is Humans who managed to survive by balancing emotions against each other, as well as by employing reason, rather than repressing emotion completely. Vulcans have no right to scorn Humans, now or ever. You have done better than we, in many ways. In proof of this, look: you accept me as one of your crew, your pack, your community…and more. There are… circles within circles. I know that you…value me in a…wider and- and deeper fashion than your average crewman. I am…more in a position of…close family: like a child, a mate, a sibling…”
“Not like a child, I think.” Kirk bit his lip. —And I never loved my own brother as I love you! “…But definitely inner circle, yes.”

“I know that there is very little of Human capability which has not, at one time or another, been used as a weapon.” Spock gave another faint smile, somewhat grim, ironic. “But one thing in this shifting universe of which I am certain, Jim, is that you cannot use love that way.”

Kirk closed his eyes again. “No,” he whispered, “I guess I can’t”

“And…I believe that I finally comprehend the statement by your ancient Earth philosopher Socrates, as Plato records, concerning the Human emotion called love.”

“What’s that?”

“That true love can exist only between equals.”

“True…” Kirk could hardly speak past the sudden lump in his throat.

“All else—as I have seen—is predatory.”

“Spock…” Those monsters! Bait, waved in front of starving people who couldn’t find equals to love—like Spock. My poor hybrid Vulcan, caught between worlds, so lonely…

“Therefore I can only conclude that the love…love…already offered to me is much superior to…the love of the gods themselves.”

“Spock—the one thing you needed and couldn’t ask for—“

“But which you gave me, nonetheless. Friend. T’Hyla. The Vulcan term is…a remarkable exact match for the ancient Latin word, ‘Amicus’.

...And that, Kirk understood, Can mean anything from ‘friend’ to ‘lover’…anyone you love, anyone who loves you. A final insight lit his mind in bitter colors. So that’s why the ‘Master’ and his cronies—and followers—made such a point of denigrating any love for fellow-humans that wasn’t part of his- his mental bait…especially any love that had even the possibility of sexual feeling in it. Too exclusive, too private, anarchistic, individual—outside the ‘Master’s bloody control! It could give another source, arrival feeling, immunizing—source of potential rebellion. So all those centuries making Humans hate/fear their own bodies, feelings judgment… Oh, damn them all! In true love’s name— “Ah, Spock, it’s all right. I…love you, too.”


There were no further words for a long time. They only sat half-sprawled on the floor, holding solid, breathing together, and letting the timeless moment take them.

Eventually sound intruded: the quiet beeping of the desk chronometer, announcing the hour.

Late, Kirk noted reluctantly. Very late. We should sleep… He loosened his hold, slightly, allowing for an easy withdrawal if wanted. Spock did likewise. Neither of them finished the gesture by pulling away completely. It took Kirk a few seconds to come up with an alternative.

“Spock,” he offered. “Don’t go off alone for tonight. You can stay here…” Don’t worry; I won’t—You don’t have to—How the hell do I put this? “It’ll be all right…”

Spock shifted and paused, as if reading the unspoken intimations, thinking them over, and coming to
a decision. “Yes,” was all he said. Then he pulled out of Kirk’s arms, climbed somewhat unsteadily to his feet and led the way to the sleeping area behind the screen. He sat down on the bed and began pulling off his boots.

Kirk followed without comment. They took off their outer shirts and belts, and by tacit agreement stopped there. Spock stretched out thoughtfully on the outer bedspread. He shivered a little, but his expression remained calm. Kirk smiled understanding, turned up the thermostat a dozen degrees, lay down beside Spock and pulled a decorative afghan up over both of them. Spock reached up to dim the lights. As he lowered his hand he paused for a moment, and then almost shyly rested it on Kirk’s shoulder. Kirk reached up and took it, squeezed briefly, then relaxed into a lighter touch.

He felt as if his heart had swelled to three times its normal size, but there was no pain.

“T’Hyla…” Spock whispered, smiling drowsily. Then he closed his eyes and dropped into sleep with the disconcerting speed of Vulcans.

Kirk lay awake for a while, letting sleep drift over him as slowly and gently as mist, pondering the last word. Wherever this leads, let it be, he decided, sliding his hand up to Spock’s sleeping arm. Our gods are gone…or worse, not good and not gone…but we’re still here. You and me, my Vulcan friend, against all the gods that prey on innocent people. Against the gods, and the odds, together…

Always together. I so pledge.

He turned his head slowly to look at Spock. The sleeping Vulcan looked much younger now, relaxed, all tension one. …And beautiful. My friend…and possibly more, but let that rest for now. Love… Equals.

We have each other to love, and that can be enough for life.

With that thought he let himself drop after Spock into the soft darkness of dream country, no longer caring that the universe through which his small ship sailed was very dark and vast, cold and nearly empty, without even the illusion of some benevolent all-filling mind in it, and the knowledge of very real dangers lurking in its depths. He knew also, now, that the vastness of the gulf of darkness didn’t really matter; it was not, after all, a complete void.

There were, now and always, countless multicolored stars in it.

FINIS

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