

TIMES CHANGE

A STAR TREK – LOST IN SPACE CROSSOVER NOVEL

By

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Prologue

You will note from the carefully chosen Star Dates, that this novel takes place immediately after the end of the third season of "Star Trek," and well before any of the "Star Trek" movies. While modern history has, fortunately, omitted the Eugenics Wars, I am suspending that reality in this novel, in order to validate the Star Trek version of history instead.

Chapter One

"Captain's log, Star Date 6030.1. Using the light-speed-breakaway factor, the Enterprise has regressed to the Earth-year 1999. Our assignment is to record the events of the mysterious segment of Earth history known as the Eugenics Wars."

"What is it, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked, rising from his chair and approaching his first officer's station.

"Sensors picking up an object, Captain. A small space vessel of some kind."

"An Earth ship?" Kirk was skeptical.

"Possibly, Captain. The readings do not correlate with those of any type of vessel with which I am acquainted. However, since clear records were not always kept in this time period, there might well be types of ships with which I am unfamiliar."

"But this far out? That's impossible. We're barely within Pluto's orbit. In these days, Earth vessels didn't venture out.... Wait a moment! Spock, could it be the Botany Bay, the ship bearing Khan and the other escaped products of the eugenics experiments?"

"Negative. That ship was not launched until near the end of the war. In 1999, they had not yet left Earth. Also, if it were the Botany Bay, sensors would identify it as such. Instead, this elusive ship is much smaller than Khan's ship; it reads only slightly larger than a Class F Shuttlecraft."

"Then what is it?" Kirk demanded irritably.

"We shall know in a moment, Captain, as soon as it comes within visual range. However, I am constrained to remind the captain that we still are not certain that it is an Earth ship," Spock added.

"Coming into visual range." Chekov announced.

"What in the name of...." McCoy sputtered.

"Oh my,..." Kirk began. "Spock! Our Twentieth-Century ancestors may have been right! That thing does look like a flying saucer!"

"Captain," Uhura broke in, "I'm receiving a signal from the other ship. Sir!"

Kirk wheeled at the sudden shock in her voice.

"Sir, it's in English!"

"Put it on, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir."

"...From Earth. Please come in if you read me, and identify yourselves. Repeat, alien ship, please identify yourself and your planet of origin."

"From Earth!" Kirk blurted, and turned, half-grinning, to his science officer. "Well, Mr. Spock?"

Spock's eyebrows rose. "If you will recall, Captain, I made no definite statement either way."

"Of course," Kirk amended, still grinning. "Response frequency, Lieutenant."

"Calculated. Channel open, sir."

"This is Captain James T. Kirk, aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise. Our origin is the planet Earth."

"Earth?! Why, that's impossible! We have nothing that...that huge!"

"No, not in this time period." With a quick glance at Spock, he added, "We're from your future."

"You're from...! I don't...! How did...?"

"I'll explain in more detail later, Commander. But first, may I request your ship's identification?"

"Oh certainly, Captain. This is Professor John Robinson on board the Jupiter II."

Kirk stared across the briefing room table at his unexpected visitors. "I fully realize, Professor Robinson, that our appearance here is a mystery to you. In fact, you've rather surprised us, yourselves. However, I am pleased that you were willing to trust us enough to allow us to beam you aboard the Enterprise."

"Well, Captain," Robinson said, smiling, "my curiosity got the better of me, so I decided to risk it. But I was somewhat cautious. After all, I only permitted you to beam two of us aboard your ship."

"And that certainly was a strange way to come aboard," his companion added.

Kirk turned to him, his eyebrows raised.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Captain," Robinson put in promptly. "This is Major Don West, our pilot."

"Major."

"Captain."

"Wait a moment. If you're the pilot, who has the con in your ship right now?"

"My wife," Robinson replied, "Dr. Maureen Robinson. She's quite capable, Captain. You see, we don't have the large crew that your starship seems to have. There are only eight of us, counting the Robot. Everyone on board has had to learn most of the major tasks of running the spaceship as a safety precaution."

"Quite understandable."

"Speaking of numbers," Major West asked, "how many are there in the crew of a starship?"

"A starship requires 430 trained individuals to maintain it."

"What powers a ship this large?"

"A matter-antimatter reactor."

"And just what was the device that brought us aboard?" Professor Robinson inquired.

"A matter-energy scrambler."

"Oh, yes, there used to be a wild theory that matter could be converted into energy, and then re-materialized at another location."

Major West turned to him and pointed out, "Not so wild, I guess, John."

"No. I suppose not."

"Just what time period is your origin?" West asked.

"Our time is about two and a half centuries in your future."

"Wow." West whistled softly.

"Incredible!" Robinson remarked.

"If you'll permit me, sir," Spock broke in, "I would be most curious to learn precisely what your mission was in leaving Earth, and the exact date of your launch."

Robinson smiled ruefully. "Our launch was at eight o'clock, on the evening of October 16, 1997. Our mission was the colonization of the inhabitable planet in orbit around Alpha Centauri. We never made it. We've been lost in space for almost three years."

"What went wrong?" Kirk prompted him.

"We're not sure," Robinson answered. "Somehow there was a malfunction in our inertial guidance system."

"I'm sure!" West spoke up abruptly. "And you know as well as I do. Smith sabotaged it."

"We have no proof of that," Robinson insisted, and then his tone mellowed. "What I don't understand, Captain Kirk, is why you people have no record of our flight. Ours was to be the first of a series of 'Jupiter' voyages to colonize in other solar systems."

Kirk looked at Spock regretfully. "I'm sorry. But there was no series of 'Jupiter' voyages. Because here in 1999, only two years after you launched, World War Three began."

"What?" Robinson paled.

"But wait a minute." West recovered faster. "Earth must have survived, or else you wouldn't be here."

"Oh yes, Earth survived," Kirk hastily assured him. "And our mission here, in fact, is to record those events to obtain a clear idea of the facts regarding the war. Our information about this era is vague at best."

"Captain," Spock requested, "a logical question if I may. Professor Robinson, are you not aware that we are at present just within the orbit of Pluto?"

"Why yes, of course I'm aware of it."

"And yet you consider yourselves lost? Surely you are capable of navigating back to Earth from here."

"Indeed we are. In fact, we just came from there."

"Then I fail to discern your problem."

"Perhaps I'd better explain. Several hours ago, our ship went out of control, traveling at speeds that we would never have thought possible. When we finally regained control of the Jupiter II, it had come to rest here in our Solar System. We thought," he said with a mournful sigh, "that we had finally made it home. But it wasn't true. You see, our mad race that brought us here had also transported us backward in time. We landed on Earth in 1947; we were sighted as a 'flying saucer' by the local populace of a small Midwest town called Manatoo Junction; and we were referred to as 'Vultones' and 'electric shadows' by an ignorant people who thought that we were alien beings right out of their Flash Gordon comic books, and who shot at us. We barely escaped with our lives. We couldn't stay there; even if it was Earth, it just wasn't our world."

"I would say that it is safe to assume," Spock said, "that it was your ship, then, back in 1947, which probably originally inspired the expression 'flying saucer.' As I recall, Captain Kirk, that was precisely the term that you employed when we first sighted the Jupiter II."

Kirk laughed self-consciously. "Yes." He then changed the subject. "In any case, Professor Robinson, I quite understand how you must have felt to have your ship sighted as a UFO on your own planet. We had a similar experience some time ago. Like you, we went out of control, and ended up partway down into the Earth's atmosphere. We were nearly shot down as a UFO by an Air Force pilot before we could get back out of there. In our case, though, we happen to have fallen into the late 1960s."

Professor Robinson observed, "That just shows you how little people really change. Primitive, ignorant people of 1947, or of the late 1960s, can all still be alarmed by 'flying saucers.'"

"Or of the Twenty-Third Century," McCoy quipped.

Kirk shot him an annoyed glance.

"Like I said back in 1947," Major West chuckled, "'I never did trust those old-fashioned boys.' I guess that you never can."

"I guest not," Kirk agreed.

With the exception of Mr. Spock, all laughed pleasantly.

"One thing, Jim." McCoy asked when the laughter died down, "How do you explain the fact that these people just left the Earth of 1947, but according to Spock's chronometers, it's 1999?"

Major West sat forward suddenly in his chair. "Yes! How indeed?"

Kirk answered, "They undoubtedly, unknowingly, used the light-speed-breakaway factor; the same one which we inadvertently used the time that we wound up with that Air Force plane pursuing us in the late 1960s, and the same one which we've used ever since, deliberately, in all of our time travel expeditions, since that original accidental discovery."

"What is this light-speed-breakaway factor, exactly?" Robinson inquired.

Spock replied, "As a vessel, traveling at a sufficiently high velocity, approaches any object with a high gravitational field, such as a star, the vessel travels backward in time. As the vessel proceeds, at that high velocity, away from the star, it travels forward in time. Originally, your great velocity carried you toward Earth's Sun, and therefore, backward to 1947. When you left Earth, and traveled outward toward Pluto's orbit, you came forward in time, and returned to 1999."

"In time to meet you here," West acknowledged. "But you were coming backward in time, so you must have been approaching the Sun. Why are you out here near Pluto's orbit?"

"Because we didn't use Earth's Sun this time," Kirk responded. "We used another star. We wanted to be certain to approach Earth undetected."

"Hey!" Robinson suddenly straightened. "If we're back to 1999 again, perhaps we can at last go home! Can you imagine how happy the girls would...." His face fell. "Oh no. The war."

"Yes," Kirk agreed, "the war. I'm sorry, but it looks as if you're still exiled. But one thing you might consider: in a way, you're fortunate. If you had remained on Earth in 1997, instead of launching on your mission...."

"We'd be right in the middle of that war at this very moment," Robinson finished.

"Yeah," West agreed, resignedly. "You know, John, space may be hostile at times, but more often than not, it's a lot safer than Earth."

"However," Kirk added, "while you may still be exiled, you're no longer lost in space. After we complete our historical recording mission, we'll take you to Alpha Centauri."

After a moment of stunned silence, Professor Robinson found his voice. "Captain Kirk, we'd be eternally in your debt."

"Captain," Major West began reluctantly, "please don't think that I'm ungrateful...."

Robinson looked at him sharply.

"But our guidance system is still way out of alignment. I'm not sure that we could successfully follow you to Alpha Centauri."

"Oh that." Robinson sighed. "In my moment of joy, I'd forgotten about that, Don. Sorry." He smiled ruefully. "That's why you're the pilot, and I'm the geologist. He's right, Captain; we'd never manage to follow you that far."

"I didn't mean that you should," Kirk explained. "I had in mind all along that you'd be our guests here on this ship."

"Well, that's a generous offer, Captain." Robinson hesitated. "But we'll need our ship to live in when we reach Alpha Centauri. If we abandon it here...."

"Not necessary, Professor," Kirk replied. "We'll bring it aboard the Enterprise."

"But you couldn't possibly beam it into that small transporter chamber."

"Oh no," Kirk assured him. "We'll bring it into the hangar deck."

"The what?" West asked.

"The shuttlecraft bay. We'll have no trouble at all storing it in there. The compartment is more than large enough."

Overwhelmed again at the sheer size of this Twenty-Third Century vessel, the two visitors exchanged glances.

"Well!" Robinson declared. "Let's get started!"

"Right!" West agreed. "Captain, if you'll just...beam?...beam us back to the Jupiter, we'll prepare to dock."

"Why not just let the Professor's wife navigate your ship?"

"You're forgetting something, Captain," Robinson told him respectfully. "The rest of our group isn't sure yet that you're not hostile aliens. They're undoubtedly still as apprehensive now as we were at first. So, I really think that we owe it to them to return and explain all of this in person."

"Of course, Professor. I should have realized that."

Spock rose. "Gentlemen, I shall see you back to the transporter room. If you'll accompany me, please?"

They stood. In the doorway, Robinson turned, and said, "Again, many thanks, Captain."

Kirk smiled. "Until later, Professor."

Chapter Two

Captain Kirk entered the hangar deck as the Jupiter II personnel disembarked.

"Welcome to the United Starship Enterprise. I'm Captain James Kirk."

Professor Robinson introduced, "Allow me to present my family, Captain. My wife, Maureen...."

Kirk took her hand. "Ma'am."

"How do you do, Captain." She smiled warmly. "Your kind rescue means the world to us."

"Our pleasure, Mrs. Robinson."

The Professor continued, "Our daughters, Judy and Penny...." He indicated the young, long-haired lovelies.

"Hello, Captain Kirk."

"Ladies." He smiled.

"And our son, Will."

They shook hands.

"Hi."

"Will."

"You've met Don West, and that's our Robot beside him."

Spock stepped forward. "What a fascinating machine. May I examine him?"

"By all means." Don West stepped aside for him.

The man behind John Robinson cleared his throat noisily.

"Oh yes," John added. "That's Dr. Zachary Smith. He's our...stowaway."

"Doctor." Kirk nodded.

"Captain."

McCoy asked, interestedly, "Doctor, eh? Are you a medic?"

"Not precisely, Sir. I'm a doctor of intergalactic environmental psychology."

Don laughed. "Which is just a long way of saying that he's a quack."

"Indeed, Major!"

Kirk suggested, "Professor Robinson, Major West, perhaps you'd care to tour our engineering section."

"Yes indeed. We'd be most interested."

"Dad, can I go with you?" Will asked.

John hesitated. "Well, I don't know if...." He regarded the captain inquiringly.

"Oh certainly. Of course he's welcome."

"Thank you, sir!" Will beamed.

Kirk patted the boy's shoulder. "Perhaps you ladies would care to accompany a yeoman to deck five, where we've prepared guest quarters."

"Why thank you, Captain."

A voice behind Kirk spoke. "Reporting as ordered, Captain."

"Ah yes. Mrs. Robinson, this is Yeoman Janice Rand; she'll escort you to your quarters."

Dr. Smith started to follow the ladies.

Don called, "Smith! You're with us."

"But I'm tired, Major!"

John said sternly, "Smith. You're going with us."

"Oh very well, if you need me."

"Don't flatter yourself, Smith," Don retorted. "We just want to keep an eye on you."

Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott was explaining, "Therefore, controlled small quantities of matter and antimatter annihilate each other constantly, to produce the power which drives a starship."

John Robinson shook his head. "All of this makes our propulsion system look mighty archaic."

Don West added, "And after that trick in the hangar deck, I'll never again be impressed by the size of our Jupiter."

Will spoke up, "But to keep antimatter right here in the ship, you'd need some way to safely contain it. Like, well, maybe a magnetic field of some kind?"

Scott tousled the boy's hair. "That's exactly it, Will! It's called a magnetic bottle. Professor, if you don't mind my sayin', you've really got a smart lad here, especially considerin' the era you come from."

"Thank you, Mr. Scott. We're proud of him," he said, slipping an arm around his youngest.

"A good candidate for Starfleet Academy, wouldn't you say, Scotty?" Kirk winked.

"I think that he's a bit young." John smiled.

"Of course," Kirk agreed. "Besides, he could probably learn more right here with Scotty, the best engineer in the Fleet."

"Oh, Dad, could I?!" Will demanded excitedly.

"I'm afraid not, son. This man has work to do, and we mustn't get in his way."

"Ach, no, Professor," Scott reassured him. "The lad'd be a joy to have around; he'll not be gettin' in the way; and I'd love a young apprentice."

"Well." John hesitated, then smiled, and shrugged. "Why not?"

"Here's what you were asking about, Penny," Janice Rand pointed.

"But I don't see any records, or tapes. Just a lot of small yellow squares."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Honey, I should have realized that you wouldn't have had these back in the 1990s. You see, in our time, we store all music, poetry, novels, whatever, on these cards. They fit into the computer like this." She inserted one into the slot and pressed the activator switch. The strains of Bach filled the room.

"Oh how wonderful!"

"We have many others here that I'm sure that you'd like."

"Really!?" Penny asked excitedly, "Do you have Beethoven and Mozart?!"

"Of course." Janice smiled at her enthusiasm. "And many more, including some that I'm sure that you've never heard of, that were either after your time or from other planets."

"How exciting! And did you say that you have poetry, too?"

"Sure."

"Shakespeare?"

In reply, Janice removed the Bach card, and inserted another one.

A voice recited: "The play's the thing, wherein we'll catch the conscience of the king."

"It's incredible!" Penny's eyes shone.

"Wait, here's one that'll be new to you."

"My love has wings, slender, feathered things with grace and upswept curve and tapered tip."

"It's lovely! What is it?"

"It's called 'Nightingale Woman.' It's a sonnet, written by a poet named Tarbold on the Canopus planet in 1996."

"1996?"

"Yes, but unfortunately, Earth didn't learn about him until at least a century later."

"Oh. You know, Miss Rand, this is all so marvelous, but I think that I should get back to our quarters. Mom might worry about me."

"I understand. But please, Penny, call me Janice, and you're welcome back here anytime."

"Oh thank you, Miss,...I mean Janice, I'd love to."

"In fact, next time I'll show you some of my own paintings."

"You're an artist?"

"An amateur one."

"I can hardly wait until next time! Would tomorrow be all right?"

"That'll be fine. I'll come to your quarters and get you; I wouldn't want you to get lost. I'll take you back now."

"I appreciate it. The Enterprise is a huge ship."

"And you can determine all of those details about a person's state of health just by looking at the indicators on the panel above the bed?" Judy Robinson asked incredulously.

"That's right." Christine Chapel smiled.

"It must be terribly exciting being a nurse in your century. Or even just being on a starship at all, in any capacity. Can you really go anywhere in the galaxy...without getting lost?"

Nurse Chapel laughed sympathetically. "I can easily understand why you find it difficult to imagine traveling in space without becoming lost. Was it...very unpleasant?"

"Not really, Christine. No, in fact, just the opposite, I think," she replied thoughtfully. "I think that being confined together in our little ship with only each other to depend on has created love and harmony among our group that is unique; and it has brought our family together and kept it together in a way that life on Earth could not possibly have done. No, life on Earth, amid society and its 'normal patterns' of lifestyle, tends to rend families apart from each other, and destroy relationships between parents and children. Penny and Will and I will remain with Mom and Dad in space, and I think that we'll all be infinitely better off for it."

"But the young pilot with you loves you, Judy."

"I know. But that's different. Don's already one of the family. We all accepted him from the first day of our journey. He's been like a second father to Penny and Will. And he's best friend, brother, and son to Dad. And if we marry, he won't take me away from the family, any more than he'd leave it himself. He's part of it. We all love each other." She laughed gently. "Even Dr. Smith. You know, he may be a little annoying now and then, but he's really basically harmless. And he loves us, you know; he's proven that a number of times. He saved Penny's life once, and even Don's once. So, you see, he's not nearly as bad as Dad and Don say that he is. And they're usually only teasing anyway. I wouldn't want him to leave us for all the world."

"And now you can finally settle down and colonize, just the seven of you, as you had always meant to do."

"Correction." Judy smiled. "There are eight of us. You're forgetting the Robot; he's one of the family, too!"

Smiling in return, Christine shook her head. "I'm really impressed, and almost envious. It must really be special to be part of your wonderful family."

"Well, that has been the important thing, to us. You know, I don't think that it matters where we might be: on Alpha Centauri, on an unknown planet, or in space. We're always happy."

"Alpha Centauri: is that where you're headed?"

"Yes, why?"

"Now isn't that a coincidence. My family comes from there."

"Really?"

"Yes. My great, great, great, great, great, great grandmother was one of the original colonists." She grinned. "We're rather obsessed with family history."

"Well, it is something of which to be very proud."

"In fact, you know, she even had the same first name as you."

Noticing Judy's expression, she hastened to add, "Oh, but not the same last name."

"Oh." Judy relaxed. "For a moment, there...!"

"Yes." Christine sighed. "That was a close one. But my ancestor's last name was West."

Judy leapt to her feet. "But our pilot's last name is West!"

Christine Chapel, age thirty-two, stared in shock and disbelief at her twenty-year-old great, great, great, great, great grandmother.

"There are so many things that you can do that we can't." Will regarded Scott in awe. "To imagine that you've learned all of this in just two and a half more centuries. Compared to our century, this makes you seem like, well, sort of like gods."

"But that's what gods are, lad." Scott smiled. "Beings with a higher technology than we have. Beings who've developed a science so superior, that it seems to us like magic. We have learned, in our time, that the gods worshipped by our ancestors were highly advanced alien visitors. We met Apollo on his home world."

"But we discovered the same thing!" Will insisted excitedly. "Only we met Thor on his home planet!"

"Now imagine that."

"You know, Captain Kirk," John Robinson remarked. "All of this discussion of matter-antimatter propulsion reminds me of something that happened to us not long ago. We accidentally discovered that there is a parallel universe, an antimatter universe, which is the opposite of ours."

"Yes." Kirk's eyebrows rose in amazement. "We know. We discovered that, too."

"Really!" John Robinson shared his surprise at the coincidence. "I accidentally transposed with my counterpart from the other universe; he was quite evil."

Kirk stared at him. "I inadvertently transposed with my counterpart; and yes he was!"

"Interesting," Spock commented.

But Robinson wasn't finished. "In addition to me, three other members of my crew: Will, the Robot, and Dr. Smith were also transferred into the antimatter world."

Kirk's eyebrows climbed nearly into his hair. "Three other members of my crew were transferred: McCoy, Scott, and Uhura."

Hardly believing what he'd heard, Robinson pursued the topic further. "And in the parallel universe, my second-in-command, Don West, had a beard."

Don was amused. "You didn't tell me that part, John."

But Kirk wasn't listening to Don. Shock in his voice, he replied, "In the parallel universe, my second-in-command, Mr. Spock, had a beard."

Robinson and Kirk stared wordlessly at each other.

The only break in the silence was Spock's "Fascinating."

Chapter Three

"Captain's log, Star Date 6030.5. I am holding the Enterprise in Earth orbit, while Mr. Spock records historical data using ship's sensors."

"Mr. Chekov, be sure to keep up our deflector screens. I wouldn't want any Earth radar picking us up as a...."

"...Flying saucer, Captain?" Scott asked, keeping a straight face.

Kirk looked sour. "I see that you've heard that joke, too. When I get my hands on McCoy...." He broke off as the door of the turbolift whispered open softly. Kirk turned casually in his chair and saw one of the Jupiter II personnel before him.

"Dr...Smith, isn't it?"

"At your service, sir. My, this is an interesting place, Captain. I simply couldn't resist looking around a bit." He added off-handedly, "You don't mind, do you?"

Kirk replied formally, "Not at all, Doctor; don't touch anything, of course...."

"Not to worry, sir, I shan't. Never fear; Smith is here; I always say."

Kirk nodded briefly, and again faced the viewscreen. There's something about that man, he thought, something...devious.

After a brief tour around the bridge, during which he peered over everyone's shoulder at least once, Smith approached the Captain's chair. "Earth looks so lovely there on the viewscreen, don't you think, Captain?"

"All planets look beautiful from orbit, Doctor," Kirk agreed.

"Yes, but none so superb as our own sweet Mother Earth!"

"That is a rather ethnocentric viewpoint, Dr. Smith," Spock stated.

"Perhaps, sir." Smith sniffed. "But it is mine, nevertheless."

"Dr. Smith." Kirk was becoming annoyed. "If you have a specific question that you'd like to ask, I would be more than happy to answer it. Otherwise...."

"I do indeed, sir," Smith interrupted, before he could be invited to leave. "I was wondering if you're capable of beaming a person down from this altitude."

"We are," Kirk answered. "Why do you ask?"

"You are." Smith grinned broadly. "Good. Perhaps you would consider beaming me down at once."

"Out of the question, Doctor. We're here to observe and record, not to visit."

"Oh, but I wasn't requesting a visit; I'd like to stay. To return to my homeland; oh joy, oh bliss!"

"But I thought that your group's desire was to reach Alpha Centauri to begin colonization?"

"Oh my dear Captain Kirk, nothing could be farther from my mind. You see, I was never truly a member of that ill-fated expedition."

"Yes, Professor Robinson mentioned that you were a stowaway."

"I was trapped aboard, sir. I was literally hijacked!"

"Well, that is most unfortunate, Doctor, however, I cannot risk interfering with the course of history by beaming you down to Earth. Now I suggest...."

"But, Captain!" His voice was becoming desperate. "You simply must send me back to Earth! I don't belong up here; I don't belong on Alpha Centauri!"

"Dr. Smith, I must ask you to remove yourself from the bridge."

"Oh please, Captain!"

Kirk punched a button on the arm of his command chair. "Kirk to Professor Robinson."

"Robinson here."

"Professor, would you please come up to the bridge and remove one of your people?"

"Certainly, Captain. Who is it? Is there trouble?"

"Nothing serious. He's just creating a...minor disturbance."

"That's Smith!" Don West's voice was heard from the background.

"We'll be right up, Captain," John Robinson assured him.

In short order, John Robinson and Don West appeared in the doorway of the turbolift. In three quick strides, Don was behind Dr. Smith, grabbing him by the back of the neck.

"Okay, Buster, let's go!"

As Don led the shrieking Dr. Smith to the turbolift, Captain Kirk regarded John Robinson in mild surprise.

"Isn't he being a bit rough?"

The Professor grinned. "No, he never really hurts Smith; it isn't necessary. All we ever have to do is scare him a little."

"Indeed, Professor!" Smith squirmed in the major's firm grip.

Kirk grinned back, and then on sudden impulse called after them, "You know, Dr. Smith, you remind me of someone."

"Indeed, sir? Whom, may I ask?"

Kirk's eyes twinkled playfully at him. "Harry Mudd."

A short time later, as Dr. Smith sat moodily in his guest quarters, John and Don entered, laughing heartily.

"I fail to see anything amusing in this, my darkest hour," Smith moaned.

Don approached him. "Smith, John and I have had some very illuminating conversations with a few members of the Enterprise crew. We've been asking them about this Harry Mudd to whom Captain Kirk compared you."

"Oh? And of what possible interest could that be to me?"

Don went on, ignoring his disparagement. "And without exception, they described Harry Mudd as a pompous, egotistical, sneaky, grouchy, mean, selfish, surly, lawless, lazy con man! And you know what? I've never heard a better description of you in my life!"

With wild indignation, Smith leaped to his feet. "How dare you, Major!!"

Don continued to laugh.

Smith turned to John Robinson. "Professor! Say something! Defend me!"

John said nothing. He couldn't reply. He was laughing too hard.

With visible effort, Smith gathered his ruffled dignity and marched to the door. It slid aside for him. Smith paused in the doorway, and turned to fling one final almost pitiful "Indeed!!" before stalking stiffly out of the door.

"You're not supposed to be in here, sir," the transporter room officer told Dr. Smith.

"But is this not the transporter room?" he inquired innocently.

"Yes it is, but..."

"Well, I'm here to beam down, as ordered."

"You have orders from the captain?" the duty officer asked doubtfully.

"Oh yes! Yes, I have."

"I'll have to check with the bridge, sir."

"Oh..." Smith hesitated, swallowing nervously. "Never mind." He turned toward the door. "I'll have to ask you not to leave, sir, while I call the captain."

Terrified, Smith started to run.

The officer drew his phaser. "Hold it!"

Smith halted in midstride, whirled, and screamed, "Don't shoot! Oh, don't shoot!"

"Just don't move. Kyle to Captain Kirk."

Dr. Smith was waiting, trembling, in his guest quarters, with a guard outside of his door, when John Robinson and Don West grimly entered. They didn't stop by the door. They kept coming at him, and their horrified victim began to back away slowly, shaking his head, trying to speak, but no sound would come. West increased his pace, overtaking him. With determination, he drew back his fist and struck Smith squarely in the nose.

Quietly sobbing and holding his bleeding nose, Smith remained on the floor, correctly judging it the safest place to be. When finally his voice returned, he demanded shakily, "Professor! Will you permit this outrage??"

"Permit it? I encourage it! Smith, it's one thing that you caused trouble on the Jupiter. We're used to putting up with you. But these generous people are doing us a priceless favor. And you are not going to jeopardize our friendly relations with them by causing trouble aboard the Enterprise!" Robinson replied decisively.

Smith wailed, "But I only wanted to go back to Earth!"

Teeth clenched, Don muttered furiously, "Oh, I'm so tired of hearing that same old song, Smith!"

John continued, "Well you try one more thing, you try anything at all, and so help me Smith, I'll not only *let* Don beat the daylights out of you, I'll *help* him do it!!"

These last words were too much for Dr. Smith, and he began to cry in earnest. But his sobbing broke off abruptly as he looked up and saw the professor approaching him.

John walked to his side and bent down to him.

In a panic, Smith raised his arms in front of his face. "No! Don't!" he whimpered.

"I'm not going to hurt you," John said gently. "Lower your arms; I won't hurt you. Here, hold still." He reached out and felt carefully along Smith's nose.

"It hurts!" he complained.

"It's not even broken." The professor smiled reassuringly, and handed him a tissue.

"It hurts!!" he insisted.

"You'll live, believe me." John grinned.

Smith indicated Don West with his eyes. "He's cruel!"

Robinson was quick to correct him. "On the contrary, he was more than merciful, and more merciful than we'll be next time."

"Next time?!" he cried in horror.

"If there has to be a next time. It's up to you."

"Captain," Mr. Spock asked, "I fail to understand why you did not choose to place Dr. Smith in the brig after his escape attempt."

"That occurred to me. But I felt that the professor and the major had the right to deal with their own companion, especially since Dr. Smith caused us no serious hardship. Besides, I was quite sure that they were more than capable of handling him, and from what the professor has told me, they were very thorough in getting their message across to him."

"They must have been," Dr. McCoy agreed. "We haven't heard a peep out of him since they 'talked' to him."

"By the way," Kirk wondered, "where *are* Professor Robinson and Major West?"

"They are in the hangar deck, Captain," Spock replied. "They told me that they intended to make further repairs on their spaceship."

"I hope that they'll do something to make it look less like a flying saucer," McCoy quipped.

But when Kirk turned to glare furiously at him, McCoy was carefully looking in the opposite direction.

Chapter Four

"I've called this briefing, gentlemen," Kirk was saying, "because an interesting discrepancy has been discovered. Professor Robinson, has your daughter Judy told you that Nurse Christine Chapel is her...descendant?"

"She has. It's startling, to say the least."

"And while we have no official records at all about your voyage or your mission, Nurse Chapel has a family album, and she has discovered certain references to your colony on Alpha Centauri. There's nothing very strange about this, incidentally, because after all how would a family album necessarily come to the attention of the authorities? In any case, she has learned the exact date on which your group finally reached Alpha Centauri and began your colony: June 9, 2001."

"What?!" Don straightened abruptly. "But that's over a year from now!"

"Exactly."

"Well, what did we do during that year?" John asked carefully.

"I don't know. There's no record of that."

"Then, what should we do?"

"I believe, sir," Spock offered, "that since we cannot know the answer to that question, the logical way to proceed would be to follow your own inclinations, because it is most probable that that was what you did originally. That is, whatever you are inclined to do this time should be precisely what you were inclined to do the other time."

Kirk asked softly, "What would you like to do?"

"Stay here," Robinson replied without hesitation. "Explore with you for a time."

"I am confident," Mr. Spock agreed, "that that was what you must have done originally."

"Yes." Captain Kirk nodded. "You were probably intended to go with us all along."

"Which supports the theory," added Spock, "that we, from our time period, are vital to the smooth operation of other time periods. We can actually be part of what must happen in another time."

Kirk continued, "Such as the time that we visited Earth in 1968, and accidentally interfered with Gary Seven and his mission to frighten Earth out of its arms race by detonating a nuclear warhead barely one hundred miles above the Earth. But it was our presence there that delayed Mr. Seven long enough so that it *was* detonated only 104 miles above the Earth, the exact figure given in our history files in the computer banks. So, unknown to Gary Seven and us at the time, we were a necessary element in the proceedings."

John and Don were noticeably impressed. They exchanged glances, and then Don nodded.

John spoke for them. "Captain Kirk, I have no doubt that you are correct in your theory that we should accompany you. Our entire group has been discussing this. We're not yet ready to settle down and colonize. You've opened our eyes to a whole new world out there. Penny senses that there are more beautiful life forms, cities, music, and poetry than our century could ever bring her.

Will is overwhelmed by your vast achievements in science and technology. But beyond those specifics is the general awareness among all of us of the challenge and inspiration of the future. There is nothing greater in the universe."

"Fine." Kirk was pleased. "We'll be delighted to take you along on our next several missions. But since we're going to be traveling companions, I think that it's high time that you called me Jim."

Chapter Five

The doors of the turbolift parted, and Professor Robinson and Major West appeared on the bridge.

"We've received our next assignment, gentlemen." The captain smiled at them. "And this one should especially interest you."

"Oh? What is it, Jim?"

"It involves the theory that we discussed earlier, that people capable of time travel can actually be a necessary element in the smooth operation of other time periods. It also involves a new device just recently developed on Star Base 10, a more complex version of the tricorder. It is capable of recording impulses originating in other time periods. In other words, this device can actually sense major events in the past and future, events that we may wish to investigate further through time travel. The device has located a discrepancy in time, and our mission is to try to resolve it."

"What kind of discrepancy?" John asked.

"A paradox, a split timeline in Earth's distant future. It must be corrected."

"Well, perhaps so," John acknowledged. "But how can you be certain that it is *we* who must correct it?"

"The fact, sir," Spock explained, "that we find it thus, uncorrected, proves that no one else from the past or future has done so."

"Therefore, the job is ours," Jim concluded succinctly. "And evidence indicates that it's quite an important focal point in time. Earth's entire future after the event seems to depend on it."

"I'd say that that sounds important," Don agreed.

"What time period are we traveling to, Jim?" John inquired.

"Using your old style calendar, the Earth-year 3955."

John whistled. "That's almost exactly two thousand years after I was born."

Kirk laughed. "Well, for us it's a little closer to home; but not much." He sobered. "What concerns me is what we'll find in the future. What kind of world Earth will be. My superiors anticipated this, and cautioned me not to be swayed by any preconceived notions. But still...."

"Things could be very different," John acknowledged.

"Yes," Jim concurred. "The Federation might not even exist. But that's just something for which we'll have to be prepared. Our orders say 'Complete the mission and get out', so that's exactly what we'll do. All right, Mr. Spock, let's get on with it."

"Captain," Sulu informed him, "our chronometers read the year 3955."

"Very well. Mr. Chekov, head directly for Earth, warp factor six."

"Aye, Captain."

"Jim," Dr. McCoy asked, "did Starfleet give you any beam down coordinates?"

"The location in spatial dimensions was pinpointed right along with the location in time. We'll simply beam down to the exact point where the time disturbance occurs, the point at which the course of history can go in either of two possible directions."

"Approaching Earth, Captain," Sulu said.

"Mr. Sulu, prepare to raise deflector screens at a moment's notice; Spock, are they scanning us?"

"Negative, Captain."

"Keep monitoring. If they start to scan us, I want those deflector screens raised."

"No scanning beams, Captain. But high radiation levels detected."

"Radiation? Are you sure?"

"Yes, Captain. Although evidence indicates that the level was once much higher than it is now."

"Is it safe to beam down there?"

"Yes, sir. Radiation is primarily concentrated in a small area thirty miles to the east of the point to which we must transport."

"We're close enough for standard orbit, Captain," Sulu told him.

"Very well, Lieutenant, assume standard orbit. Let's go Spock. Care to join us, John, Don?"

"Yes indeed."

"Let's find out what's going on down there. Mr. Scott, you have the con."

The landing party stared at the unexpected surroundings. To the north and to the west, was a thick, beautiful forest. To the south and to the east, stretched a desert, with sparse vegetation and a rocky uneven terrain.

"That's odd," John commented.

"Where is everybody?" Don wondered.

"Shhh!" Kirk held up his hand for quiet. "I thought that I heard something."

"Yes indeed, Jim," Spock agreed. "Behind that hill."

They crept slowly and carefully around the side of the hill, and then stopped abruptly, unable to move or utter a sound. Even Spock was struck speechless, but it was a credit to his Vulcan heritage and upbringing that he was the first to recover. "Apes."

Upon hearing his voice, the three apes whirled in shock and fright, turning their backs on the object on which they had been working, an object which, had the apes not been present, would in itself have been quite startling.

"What is that thing?" Don voiced the question in all of their minds. "Some sort of wrecked spaceship?"

Two of the apes exchanged glances.

"They talk!" said the male.

"Just like Taylor! And Brent!" agreed the female.

It was the humans' turn to exchange glances.

"Who are you?" Kirk advanced slowly.

The female started toward him excitedly, but the male grabbed her and restrained her. "Don't!" he insisted. "They might be dangerous!"

Flashing him a look of impatience, she struggled out of his grasp. "Nonsense! Can't you see that they're like Taylor? Maybe they know him! Perhaps they can help us find him!" She approached the humans slowly. "I am Zira," she pronounced carefully, "and this is my husband Cornelius. The one over there by the spaceship is Dr. Milo."

"I'm James Kirk; this is Mr. Spock. John Robinson and Don West." He indicated the others.
"Do you know Taylor?" she demanded excitedly.
"Who is Taylor?"
"A human! Like you! He talks!"
"Is that unusual?" Spock inquired.
"Oh yes! I've only ever seen two that could talk in my life! Taylor and Brent. And they said that they came from the past."
"From the past?" Kirk demanded.
"Yes. From 1973, they said. In this," she pointed. "This is Taylor's spaceship. We couldn't find Brent's."
"1973!" Kirk was bewildered.
"Well." Don grinned. "At least we've finally encountered a date that John and I can also think of as history."
"What?" Zira was confused.
"Never mind." Kirk shrugged it off, and addressed his first officer. "Spock, if two humans left Earth in 1973, and traveled at a great velocity out away from the Sun, they could conceivably have traveled into the future."
"The light-speed-breakaway factor, Captain," he agreed.
"But what happened here?" Kirk insisted. "Humans that can't talk, radiation to the east...."
"All that is because of the Great War," Zira answered mournfully.
"World War Four?!" Kirk turned to Spock.
"Oh no," Don said with a groan. "Not another one."
She nodded. "The war that destroyed the human civilization."
"Reverse evolution?" John speculated.
"That would not be a logical assumption," Spock replied.
"Oh, no, no, no!" Zira stressed. "The humans had kept apes as slaves. When the apes revolted, the humans panicked, and the various countries couldn't agree on how to handle the crisis, so they declared war on each other. They destroyed themselves." She shrugged, "Then, we were there to pick up the pieces and start over again, and so we did. But there is more trouble now." She shook her head sadly. "We are not under wise leadership."
"Zira!" Cornelius cautioned.
"I'm going to tell them the truth!" She stamped her foot. "Perhaps they can help! Anyway," she confided, "we chimpanzees are benevolent and peaceful, but we don't hold the power. Gorillas do, and they're warriors and brutes...."
"Like the Klingons," Kirk muttered.
"Like the Communists," Robinson murmured.
Zira went on, "And this morning, their entire army went off to the east to attack and destroy the mutant humans living under the Hot City about thirty miles from here."
"Radioactive," Spock reminded them.
Kirk nodded.
"And I just know that it's going to end in disaster!" Zira cried in despair. "There are rumors of some kind of ultimate bomb under the city. And knowing gorilla stupidity...!"
"Zira!" Cornelius warned.
She ignored him. "We tried to prevent them from leaving, but we're no match for their entire army." She shrugged helplessly. "And Taylor and Brent are somewhere in that horrible city trying to stop it. But it's impossible."

"So." Cornelius put an arm around her. "We're doing the only thing left for us to do. We're trying to get out."

"But Taylor's ship is so complicated." Zira leaned against him miserably. "Cornelius is an archeologist, and I am a biologist and psychologist. Even though Dr. Milo is a genius about rockets, I don't see how we'll ever get this thing repaired."

"Excuse us, please." Kirk motioned to the others, and walked a short distance away from the apes. "Spock, where is the paradox that we were supposed to find?"

"It is right here, Captain. I've been taking tricorder readings while she spoke, in order to determine the two possible courses of history."

"Yes, of course! Just as you did when we were back on Earth in 1930, so that you could learn whether Edith Keeler had to live or die."

"Precisely. And I believe that I have an answer. The 'ultimate bomb' to which she referred, beneath the radioactive city, is an Alpha-Omega Nuclear Device."

"Powerful enough to destroy all of Earth, if launched."

"Yes. And it will be set off, Jim. But that need not be the end, and therein lies the split timeline. If these three apes do not escape, it will indeed be the end. But if they do, and if they return to a point in time just before ape slavery, the son of Zira and Cornelius will lead the ape revolt which precedes World War Four, thus insuring that chimpanzee, rather than gorilla, leadership will prevail. In that event, the result will be a benevolent society of apes and humans working together."

"And humans won't return to a primitive, speechless state," Jim concluded. "What is the name of this great chimpanzee leader, Spock?"

Spock raised one eyebrow. "His name, quite appropriately, will be Caesar."

"The King," Jim finished, awed. "We must help them."

"I can adjust the guidance system to carry them to the correct time period," Spock offered.

"And I'll get Scotty down here with tools and replacement parts. Kirk to Enterprise."

"I see the spaceship, Jim." McCoy pointed to the viewscreen.

"Yes," he agreed. "Lieutenant Uhura, open a channel to Zira's ship."

"Channel open, sir."

"Come in, Zira. This is the Enterprise. Do you read me?"

"Oh yes, Captain! It's a relief to hear your voice again."

"Are all of you all right?"

"Yes. Our...takeoff?...takeoff was perfect. Now what?"

Just then, there rose from Earth a blinding white light, and the entire planet was engulfed in flames.

"Good heavens!" Zira's voice cried over the speaker.

Kirk's face fell in dismay. Spock laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You must remember, Jim, that it is not permanent," he said gently.

The captain smiled weakly at him, and then asked, "Zira? Are you still there?"

"I...I think so!"

"Good girl. Now, leave all of the instruments exactly as Mr. Spock set them, and press the activator switch as he showed you."

"All right.... Here goes.... Oh, Captain!"

He sat forward in alarm. "Yes, what is it?!"

"Our ship just drifted around into a position where we can see your ship out of the window. My word! The front end of the thing looks rather like some sort of flying...uh...saucer!"

James Kirk leaned his elbow on the arm of his command chair and his face in his hand, and tried in vain not to hear the howling laughter of Dr. McCoy, Mr. Scott, Professor John Robinson, and Major Don West.

But perhaps it was a needed tension-breaker.

"You seem quite reticent, Captain," Spock said sometime later.

Kirk answered without turning toward him. "Seeing Earth die...wasn't easy. Even if it wasn't permanent."

"Understandable. However, there is another theory, Jim, which you might find encouraging. The multiverse contains an infinite number of possible timelines. We just repaired a discontinuity between two specific ones. But there is no particular reason to believe that either one of them is *our* timeline."

Kirk brightened hopefully. "Do you mean what I think that you mean?"

"I am saying that our own timeline may or may not include intelligent apes at all."

The captain pondered that for a moment, and then expressed a heartfelt, "Thank you, Mr. Spock."

Chapter Six

Judy and Penny Robinson were giggling together in their guest quarters on the Enterprise.

"I still just can't believe it," Penny was saying. "Christine Chapel is your great, great, great, great, great, great granddaughter!"

"Yes." Judy's eyes twinkled mischievously. "*Great*, isn't it?" she punned shamelessly.

That renewed the gales of laughter.

Penny's eyes sparkled back at her. "It is. As long as it doesn't...grate...on your nerves!"

Judy groaned. "Like this conversation is beginning to do."

They calmed.

Penny continued more soberly, "You realize what this means, though, Judy. You now have absolute proof that you and Don will get married. How do you feel about that?"

"Wonderful, I guess. I love him." Judy hesitated. "I just wish that I knew how Don felt about it. Having the fact suddenly thrown at us like that, I mean."

"Well, are you sure that he knows?"

"Why, he must! Dad said that the subject of Christine and me came up during the briefing that the men had, the one when they decided that we wouldn't colonize right away after all."

"So then, what was Don's reaction? Did Dad notice?"

"Yes, that's just it; Dad was looking right at him. And there was no reaction."

"None?"

"None."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about it, Judy. He probably just didn't want to react right there. In front of the other men, I mean."

"I suppose that you're probably right."

"And anyway, at least you know that you've got him."

Judy studied her younger sister carefully for a moment. Then, she cautiously probed, "It...bothers you sometimes...doesn't it?"

Penny looked away evasively. "I don't know what you mean."

"I think that you do. It bothers you that I have someone, someone right here with us all of the time, and you...don't."

Penny tried to shrug it off carelessly. "It's not worth thinking about anyway."

"Oh, but it is! Don't give up, Penny! Maybe some of the nice young men here on this ship...."

"They're too old for me, Judy."

She sighed. "I suppose that they are. You're fourteen and they're...."

"Too old," Penny repeated conclusively.

They sat quietly for a moment.

At length, Judy said contritely, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. It's just that...I worry about you a lot...about this."

"I know."

"I worry about Will, too."

"So do I."

The two sisters embraced for long moments.

Chapter Seven

"You said that this would be an easier mission than the last one, Jim?" John asked him.

"Less wrenching emotionally anyway." Kirk smiled. "We have more historical recording to do."

"Oh?" Don joined in the conversation. "What year are we visiting now?"

"We're not," Jim replied. "We're employing a different method this time. The light-speed-breakaway factor is not the only means of time research available to us. We must use it when it is necessary to have the ship with us when we get where we're going. Otherwise, we can use a simpler approach. It's called the Guardian of Forever, and we're in orbit above it right now."

"How does it work?" Don prompted.

Spock explained, "The Guardian presents images of history, of any planet, any era. It is possible to record those images on the tricorder. Later, the tricorder is tied into the ship's computers for analysis."

"Sounds like an interesting process," John observed.

"Oh it is," Jim acknowledged. "And the planet is perfectly safe. So perhaps your entire group would like to beam down with us and see for yourselves."

The Robinson party was awed. The compelling sight of the fluid, misty time images in the Guardian was stunning. Everyone watched in wordless awe for some time.

Then, Kirk suggested, "This will take a while. Perhaps you'd like to stretch your legs, explore a bit. I realize that most of you have been cooped up for entirely too long."

The children were immediately enthusiastic.

John asked, "How much monitoring do your tricorders require?"

Jim shrugged. "None." With a sidelong glance at Spock, he deduced, "Do I take it that you and Don would like to wander a bit, too?"

"Was I that obvious?" John was sheepish.

Jim chuckled. "I could do with a hike, myself. Come on, Spock. It will give you a chance, too, to see other areas of this planet besides the immediate surroundings of the Guardian, for a change."

Will and the Robot wandered west. At the Robot's suggestion, Will was collecting rock samples, one of his favorite hobbies. Or at least, he was going through the motions of collecting rock samples. But his mind was elsewhere. The Robot noticed Will's moodiness, and encouraged him to talk about what was troubling him, but Will was nonresponsive.

Presently, the pair came upon a small lake. Absent-mindedly, Will reached into his carrying-pouch and withdrew one of the smallest rocks. He gently pitched it toward the water. As he watched, the stone skipped five times along the surface before it sank. As Will stood staring vacantly at the spot where the stone had disappeared, the dull expression suddenly left his eyes. An old memory stirred within him. He saw again her face, now reflected back at him from the cool surface of the water. The princess. The laws of her people had decreed that he, Will Robinson, should marry her, because he had, at the Robot's insistence, awakened her from a long sleep with a kiss. But he had only been ten years old. She had only been eight. Will had refused, saying that he only wanted to be a kid and have fun. His mind went back and saw her face, and heard her voice....

"You may enter, my consort."

"You called me your consort. Now what's that?"

"The husband of a princess, of course."

"Will you stop that! I'm not your husband and I don't want to be."

"Yes. I heard you say that. Now you can explain something to me, Will Robinson: what is... 'fun'?"

"You mean you don't know about having fun? Boy, I wouldn't want to be you, not for anything in the world!"

"But what is it?"

"I don't know, it's just messing around, doing things because you want to. Have you ever skipped stones?"

"No. I don't think so. What is it?"

"Well, you find some flat stones, and you go to a lake, and you throw 'em, sort of underhand, like this."

"Why?"

"To make 'em skip on the water! Once I got one to skip ten times, and that's not easy."

"No. I guess not. Is that how you have... 'fun'?"

"That's just one of the ways. There are millions more. But when you get married you can't do things like that anymore."

"Why not?"

"I don't know; you just can't, that's all. You have to worry about money, and important junk, and stuff like that."

"I see."

"That's why I don't want to get married and miss all the fun. It's nothing against you, though; you're okay."

"I understand."

"No hard feelings?"

"No, Will Robinson, no hard feelings."

Will stood motionless, staring at her face in his mind for a moment longer, and then he turned without a word and strode purposefully back the way they'd come, the Robot following frantically after him. The boy did not stop until he stood next to the Guardian of Forever.

"Guardian," he called to it as he'd heard Captain Kirk do. "Can you interrupt what is being recorded and show me another place for just a moment, and then recommence your work for them without doing their data any harm?"

"I can."

"I would like to visit the planet of Priplanus, at the site of the underground civilization, at the onset of the earthquake which ultimately sealed the cave above it."

"Will Robinson," the Robot protested. "Stop."

The image coalesced in the Guardian.

Without hesitation, Will stepped through....

And immediately ducked down behind a bush to hide; he was only a few feet away from his younger self. The twelve-year-old Will Robinson watched the ten-year-old Will Robinson standing next to the princess; and he watched his father and Don West and the Robot a few feet farther down the path, urging the two youngsters to hurry.

His father called, "Come on, Princess; we'll take you with us."

Ten-year-old Will added, "We're getting away; come on!"

"No. I can't go," the princess refused.

"But the quake'll bring this whole place down on your head!" Will argued.

"Will!" Professor Robinson yelled.

The princess urged, "Go now, while you can."

"What about you?"

"I will go back into my sleep, and wait for another day."

"Come on, Will," the professor insisted.

"Right away, Dad. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay. So long, and...and thanks."

"Let's go, Son."

Twelve-year-old Will watched ten-year-old Will, his father, Don, and the Robot, as they disappeared into the foliage.

Only then did the princess say softly, "Goodbye Will Robinson. Have fun."

A gasp caught in Will's throat where he hid in the brush. He hadn't heard her say that the first time. As Will fought back the tears, the princess retreated into her chamber to return to her long sleep.

Penny and Dr. Smith came back early from their hike, Dr. Smith complaining as usual about his sore feet and his delicate back. Then they saw that they were not alone.

"Robot," Penny asked, "what are you doing here?"

"Oh, it is all my fault!" the Robot mourned.

"I thought that you went hiking with Will?"

"I did...I...."

"What is all your fault?" Dr. Smith demanded. "Have you let anything happen to that boy, you ungrateful wretch?"

"Dr. Smith, please!" Penny admonished. "Where's Will, Robot?"

"He used the Guardian to retreat into the past. I am sorry, Penny Robinson. I have failed in my duty to protect him."

"The past? That doesn't necessarily mean that he's in any danger. But he must have had some reason for going. Where did he go? And when?"

"He returned to the first planet on which we were marooned. Judging from the time that he pinpointed, I can only assume that he went back to rescue the princess."

"Rescue the princess?" Penny whispered. A shiver went through her, and she turned away, not wanting Dr. Smith to see her reaction.

A tremor passed through Dr. Smith just then. He was glad that Penny had chosen that moment to look away; he would not have wanted her to see his reaction.

A faint smile played across Penny's lips. If Will could rescue the princess, then she could....

A devious grin crossed Smith's face. If Will could rescue the princess, then he could....

"Would you excuse me for a moment, my dear?" Smith requested of Penny. "I shall return shortly."

"What?" Penny was distracted. "Oh. Oh yes. Of course."

Smith slipped stealthily away, to plot carefully just what he would do.

"Now let's see," he muttered to himself. "I'll want to go back to Earth of course, but I shouldn't go back empty-handed, now should I? Money talks, after all. If I go back a rich man, I can not only live on Earth, but in the style that I need and deserve. Now of all of the past indignities that I've suffered with this troublesome family, on which occasion did I witness great wealth that would be easy for me to go back and retrieve now? Think, Zachary. Apply your magnificent brain to the problem. It will have to be something small enough for me to gather in great quantity, but each piece must be worth a veritable fortune, if it is to last. And it must be unguarded. No sneaky alien must be lurking nearby, to do me out of my rightful treasure. And I do deserve it, after all that I've suffered! Especially recently," he added ruefully, carefully feeling his still-sore nose. "And that will be the best part," Smith concluded savagely. "Getting away from the major and the professor once and for all!"

"Guardian," Penny requested tremulously. "Can you send me into another dimension?"

"I can."

"Then I would like to visit the dimension which lies behind all of the mirrors of the universe. I would like to arrive moments before I left, the other time that I was there." She just had to know why he wouldn't follow her out through the mirror.

The image shimmered and then steadied, and Penny Robinson stepped through....

And instantly leaned behind a statue, not wishing to be noticed by her younger self, nor by the nameless boy. Fourteen-year-old Penny Robinson watched twelve-year-old Penny Robinson struggling to escape from the mirror dimension, as she had just seen Dr. Smith do by shooting the "cannon" - a shiny gold rod which emitted cosmic particles - into his reflection in the pool.

"The cannon!" Penny snatched it up from the floor.

"No." The boy tried to pull it from her grasp.

"No! Please give it to me!"

"No. Stay here. Forever isn't such a long time. You'll like it, and you'll never have to grow old."

"But don't you understand; I don't want to stay here; I don't want to stay young forever."

"Everybody does. I watch 'em through the mirrors."

"They just say that because they know they have to grow older. Please come with me and you'll see how nice it is. Please give me the cannon."

He mournfully complied.

"I'll go first. And...then you follow."

"Penny...."

"Do just what I do. Shoot into your reflection." Twelve-year-old Penny fired into her reflection and vanished.

The boy stood silently for a moment, and then, staring into the pool, he said sadly, "I can't. I don't have any reflection."

Fourteen-year-old Penny uttered not a sound as the tears ran freely down her face.

"I have it," Smith muttered fiendishly to himself. "Just the thing." He approached the Guardian, and loudly announced, "Guardian. I should like to visit the world of Priplanus, in Silver Valley, to be exact. And I should like to arrive there shortly after everything there was transformed into that lovely shade of silver. Turned to platinum, to be precise," Smith finished with a self-satisfied smile. The metallic dazzle danced before him, and Smith stepped through....

And halted abruptly. He was indeed presented with the glowing beauty of multitudes of flowers and rocks that his earlier self had turned to platinum by mere touch. But he was also faced with the still form of Penny, standing like a golden statue, whom he had also turned to platinum unintentionally, with the unkind assistance of the metal ring around his neck which had behaved as the "philosopher's stone," turning all that he touched into platinum.

"Oh no!" he cried. "I've arrived too early! I did not wish to relive this!"

At that moment, Smith heard footsteps approaching and dove for cover, just in time to see his earlier self come to Penny, kiss her gently on the cheek, and say, "Oh, Penny. Forgive me for what I've done. Forgive me. Oh, death. Where is thy sting?"

The voice that had previously warned him against the use of the metal ring replied, "Foolish, foolish man. You had everything necessary for happiness, and you gave it all up for what? A cold unfeeling metal."

"I know I deserve to be punished. But not Penny. The child is innocent. She shouldn't have to suffer because of my folly."

"You should have thought of that earlier."

"I know. And now it's too late. What a miserable wretch I am!"

"Perhaps you have learned a lesson, Dr. Smith?"

"Oh I have! I have!"

"Then for once I will make an exception. I will spare you."

"I don't care about myself. It's only Penny I want saved. Where are you? Where are you?! Don't leave! You've got to make Penny normal again! Oh!" He sank back miserably onto a rock.

A dainty hand placed itself on his shoulder. "I'm fine, Dr. Smith."

"Yes, dear.... Penny...? You're alive! Oh thank heaven!"

"I'm perfectly fine."

"Oh my dear child, I've learned my lesson! From now on I'm going to be a changed man! The old Dr. Smith is gone and I hope soon forgotten! I'm going to try to be the kind of man all of you want me to be!"

"Dr. Smith! The ring! It's gone out!"

"What? What?! Oh! And it has a catch! It will come off! I'm free, saved, alive!!"

Maureen and Judy ran up behind them.

"Penny?!" Maureen called. "Penny, oh! Oh, Penny! Oh, I'm so glad you're all right!"

"Penny!" Judy hugged her sister.

Both of the ladies had been spared the knowledge of what had just happened to Penny. They'd merely been worried that she was missing.

Smith's earlier self reassured them, "She's perfectly fine."

Penny happily announced, "And Dr. Smith has turned over a new leaf. He's gonna be a model citizen from now on."

"Yes I am."

Judy was thrilled. "Oh that's wonderful, Dr. Smith!"

Maureen was skeptical. "Well, I think so, too, but, it's going to take a little effort."

Penny asked, "But what about the ring?"

The earlier Smith hurled it to the ground. "There!"

Judy was astonished. "Don't you want it anymore?"

"I've turned over a new leaf, my dear. And I've learned that all that glitters is not gold. And the same may be said for platinum."

They started back to the Jupiter II, but then Smith hesitated near one of the platinum flowers. "Well! What have we here? Someone might as well have it. And it might as well be...me."

The three ladies shook their heads and smiled knowingly, in awareness that the old Dr. Smith was back, and in record time. Then they all departed for the ship.

The time-traveling Dr. Smith raised himself stiffly from his concealment. He paused for just a moment, fighting off the shock of just having seen Penny in her galvanized state once again. But he shook his head to clear it, and forced himself to think of his purpose in coming here. Without further delay, he set about plucking a bouquet. But only of the platinum flowers, of course. He chuckled to himself, thinking that he'd heard of casting baby shoes in bronze, but that this put a whole new shine on things....

Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, John Robinson, and Don West returned from their walk refreshed.

"Ohhh...!"

"What was that?" Kirk was instantly alert.

"Sounded like our Robot," John answered. "Come on!" He led the way back to the Guardian, where the Robot stood in misery.

"I tried to stop them! No one would listen!"

"Stop whom?" Spock demanded.

"Oh, it is all my fault!"

"Robot!" John commanded, "Give us your report!"

The Robot gathered himself noticeably, and proceeded. "Will Robinson. Penny Robinson. And Dr. Smith. They have used the Guardian and retreated into the past."

"Oh no!" Don was furious. "And Smith was at the bottom of it; I'm sure of it!"

"Negative," the Robot corrected. "The three went separately, to three different destinations. And Dr. Smith left last."

"Three different..." John shrugged helplessly. "Well now what?! Whom do we go after first?"

"We split up." Jim shrugged back at him. "It's all that we can do. No, wait. One of us should stay here, in case one of them comes back on his own."

"Robot." Spock ordered, "Request the Guardian to replay each of the three destinations again, one by one, giving the details as you heard them stated by your three shipmates, so that three of us can pursue them."

Will Robinson came out of hiding and approached the sleeping princess, admiring her cherubic face and her waist-length light brown hair. "The Robot was right about you," he whispered

to her, with new-found maturity. "You are a beauty." He regretted the remark that he had made at age ten, when the Robot had compared her situation to that of Sleeping Beauty. The younger Will had replied, "She doesn't look like any beauty to me. But she sure is sleeping." Will reached and lifted her into his arms. "This time," he said softly, "I'll be pleased to kiss you. To awaken you."

A tremendous thundering came to Will's ears, and he fought for balance. He instantly recognized it as the cave above being sealed with finality by the earthquake. He knew that it didn't matter, because he wouldn't be exiting that way this time....

Penny Robinson left her hiding place. "Boy?" she called to him.

"Penny!" He turned, not daring to hope, but wishing to embrace any thread of possibility just the same. But when he saw her he stopped short. "Penny? You look different." She seemed taller, and somehow wiser. And her braided pigtails had been released into a long black flowing straight mane to her waist.

"Older," she corrected. "I am two years older now. But I haven't forgotten you. And I have found a way to come back for you, if you want."

"Penny...." He hesitated.

"No, listen. I heard what you just said. I heard what I couldn't hear the first time. That you couldn't follow me out through the mirror, because you didn't have any reflection. Does that mean that you wanted to, that you would have gone with me if you could have? Is that what it means, Boy?" she insisted.

He watched her face for a moment. Then he decided to risk telling her the truth. "I love you. I loved you from the moment that I first saw you and your sister Judy quarreling in front of the mirror. And I'm bored in here. Just as you were when you stayed in here for a while. But I can't get out, Penny! I've refused to admit the truth even to myself up until now, because once I admit it, then what have I got? A lonely bitterness to face forever! At least when I pretended that I didn't mind, told myself that I was having fun, I could almost believe it! But now what'll I believe in?!"

Penny walked solemnly toward him and extended her hand to him. "Us," she told him. "You will believe in us. I can get you out. I didn't come in the same way this time. I can get us out."

"Penny...." The boy took her hand. "If you really can.... But I don't see how...."

"Just be sure," Penny cautioned him, "because once you enter the real world, you will begin to age like everyone else. You will lose your immortality. You will eventually die. You must decide."

The boy brushed at his eyes with his free hand. "If you can save me from immortality, from immortal boredom, you will have saved my life."

"Follow me," Penny said....

"Will!" John Robinson called from behind him.

"Dad?" Will turned, stunned. He thought furiously: two years ago, after they had all left this place, none of them had ever returned, including his father. This must be the present day John Robinson, from the other side of the Guardian.

"Will." John rushed over to him. "I'm not sure that we can take her, Son."

"But you were willing to take her before, two years ago! Besides, if we leave her here, you know what'll happen. Someday some other young man will awaken her; her army will awaken with her; and their attack will be unleashed on the universe. We barely prevented that the other time."

"That's true." His father hesitated.

"But if we take her," Will pressed on, "her army will sleep forever. It'll be harmless. Besides," he added as he visibly gathered his courage, "I...I care for her, Dad. You made me leave without her before. But not this time. If she stays, I stay. I'm sorry, Dad."

John's eyebrows rose, and he studied his son with a new growing respect.

The corner of Will's mouth twitched once, but he stood firm in his resolve.

At last, John thoughtfully replied, "We'll try it, Will. I can't promise how the Enterprise people will react, though."

"I have to try, Dad. Please. Stand by me."

John nodded once briefly. "Let's go."

"Penny!" Don West called out to her.

"Don?" Penny spun and stared at him.

"Holy...!" Don looked around in amazement. "Is this that mirror dimension that you claimed that you visited two years ago? That's where the Robot said that the Guardian sent you."

"And none of you believed me, two years ago." She nodded.

Don shrugged. "I stand corrected. Whew! This place is weird! And you must be the boy that she claimed...uh, I mean...that she met."

The boy nodded warily.

"He's going with us, Don," Penny assured him.

Don frowned. "I don't know."

"Don. He's going with us. He's going with *me*."

Don raised his eyebrows, and then shrugged fatalistically. "Why not? Come on, let's get out of here."

Dr. Smith chortled happily to himself despite his burden. His arms were so laden with polished pewter petals that he could scarcely see over the pile. Which is why it wasn't until the last moment that Smith saw Satan's face rising before him. He shrieked and dropped his bundle. No, not Satan. He recognized Spock looming over him.

"No!!" Smith cried, spun on his heel, and began to flee.

Spock coolly reached out to Smith's shoulder, and deftly squeezed.

Smith groaned and slumped into Spock's arms.

James Kirk, John Robinson, and Don West stood staring at Will, Penny, and their two guests.

Jim Kirk looked perplexed; John looked apologetic; Don looked sheepish. Penny clung nervously and defiantly to the boy's hand. Will deliberately ignored all of them, bending and gently laying his princess on the ground. Without hesitation, he tenderly kissed her.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she regarded him in amazement, "Will!"

"Princess," he said. "You told me that you would wait for another day. That day has come."

She sat up quickly. "But, Will...."

"Hear me out." He took her hand. "We're still too young. Even if I am two years older now. But I went back for you. And if you'll be willing to wait for a few more years, I will marry you someday. If you still want me."

"I will wait, Will Robinson," she responded formally.

"Penny?" The boy squeezed her hand. "We're too young, too. But in a few years...."

Penny's beautiful smile lit her face. It was answer enough.

"I can't keep calling you Princess, though," Will commented.

"And I can't keep calling you Boy," Penny echoed.

"Well...." The boy grinned. "If you remember, when we first met, you asked me my name, and I said, 'What name would you like?' I'm asking again, Penny."

"In mythology," she responded, "there was someone who lost his immortality because of the woman that he loved. But he found a new immortality in the stars. His name was Orion."

The boy nodded in appreciation.

"And in a fairy tale," Will proceeded, "there was a sleeping princess who was awakened by a kiss. And her name was Aurora."

The princess beamed at him.

Don West was skeptical. "Unusual names, though. Orion? Aurora? Can't you think of something more normal than that?"

"Yes," Penny decided. "A more normal name that sounds like Orion, is Aaron."

"I like it," the boy agreed.

"And," Will put in, "Aurora's three fairy godmothers called her Rose."

"That's lovely." The princess smiled.

At that moment, Mr. Spock returned through the Guardian with an unconscious Dr. Smith in his arms.

Everyone turned to stare: Major Don West with fury in his face, and Professor John Robinson with his jaw set in a firm resolve.

"When he wakes up...." Don began.

"Yes," John finished for him.

"In the meantime," Jim said, "we have to know what to do about these two." He indicated Aaron and Rose. "How can we let them stay? We'll be changing the course of history."

"Undoubtedly." Spock nodded. "But what we need to determine is whether we would be making an inappropriate alteration, or whether we would simply be part once again of what is supposed to happen."

"Yes." The captain pulled out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Beam down Nurse Chapel. Tell her to bring her family album with her. Kirk out."

Dr. Zachary Smith moaned and stirred in Spock's arms. He opened his eyes, saw where he was, and groaned in dismay. Spock set him on his feet and steadied him. Smith rubbed his aching shoulder.

"Well, Doctor?" John Robinson demanded. "Do you want to tell us where you've just been?"

"And what you've just been doing?" Don West prompted.

"Uh...." He eyed them apprehensively. "Not really."

"He was gathering flowers," Spock stated matter-of-factly. "Platinum flowers."

"Platinum," John repeated. "Of course. The old 'get rich' scheme again, eh Smith?"

"And let me guess what was next," Don speculated. "Back to Earth with those riches, right Smith?"

Smith was aghast. "How did you guess, Major?"

His voice dripping with sarcasm, Don said, "Now I just wonder. How indeed."

Smith looked away uncomfortably.

"Smith." John's voice commanded attention, and Smith's eyes rose against his will to meet the professor's. "I think that you know what's going to happen to you when we get back to the Enterprise."

Smith's eyes grew wide, and traveled from John's face to Don's, where the major stood rocking on his heels and smiling his satisfaction. Then Smith's eyes returned to the professor and took in his relentless, no-nonsense stance.

"No," Smith whimpered. He shivered and backed into Mr. Spock for cover and comfort.

Spock raised his eyebrows in mild perplexity and withdrew.

The ship's transporter whined and Christine Chapel stood before them, album in hand.

"Nurse," Captain Kirk directed, "please look up something for me. Judy Robinson's brother and sister. Did they marry? And what were the names of their spouses?"

After a moment of searching, she declared, "Yes. Rose and Aaron."

Chapter Eight

Captain James T. Kirk detained Professor John Robinson and Major Don West momentarily outside of the guest quarters currently occupied by one Dr. Zachary Smith.

"You know," Jim said hesitantly, "he is rather old...and cowardly...and pathetic. You won't really..." He shrugged helplessly.

John and Don exchanged knowing looks.

Don smiled. "Don't worry, Jim; we're used to dealing with Smith. We know how."

John nodded, smiling also. "We'll get maximum mileage out of scaring him, so that we'll only have to do minimum damage."

"All right." Jim was mostly reassured. "Shall I send in Dr. McCoy afterward?"

"Sure," John agreed.

"For effect," Don clarified.

Jim nodded and stepped aside. John and Don exchanged glances once more, banished the smiles from their faces, drew themselves up harshly, and stormed ahead through the door, which whooshed open for them at their approach.

Smith was hovering on the floor, in the corner farthest from the door, crying piteously. At the sound of the door and the footsteps, he gasped and cowered still deeper into the corner, but without looking up to confirm the identify of the new arrivals. John and Don walked straight to Smith and towered menacingly over him. Smith sensed their proximity and looked up into their faces in spite of himself. John's eyes glowed with the savage hostility of smoldering embers. Don's eyes flashed with the ferocity of a blast furnace. Smith gasped and sobbed and shuddered, and his eyes melted into tears that flowed freely down his cheeks. John permitted himself a cruel smile and planted his fists firmly on his hips. Don grinned openly and sadistically, and cracked his knuckles one by one.

This last was too much, and Smith broke. "No, please!!" he begged. "I'm afraid!!"

"That's the idea," John offered ominously.

"Don't!!" Smith pleaded. "It'll hurt!!"

"That's the idea," Don declared darkly.

Smith wailed and buried his face in his hands.

John and Don looked at each other, nodded, and reached down to raise Smith up, one on each side.

"No!!!" Smith shrielled as he was lifted to his feet. He pressed his back flatly against the wall, shaking his head slowly back and forth, and watching them with huge blue horrified eyes.

John and Don took full advantage of that, torturing him with vicious stares in return from their cold angry brown eyes.

Smith could only bear that treatment for a moment, and then he dissolved once more into a flood of tears. He tried to cover his face with his hands as before, but John and Don grasped his wrists and turned them aside. Then they each made a fist. Smith blubbered, his knees buckled, and he began to sink slowly down the wall. John and Don each gripped a shoulder and drew him back upright, steadying him.

"Please," Smith implored them. "I'm frightened!"

The two men exchanged a brief look of silent communication, in which they telegraphed to each other that the moment had come. Don made a fist and drew it back slowly. Smith screamed and put out a feeble hand to block it. John grabbed Smith's wrist and pulled it out of the way. Smith shrieked. Don punched Smith in the stomach. Smith cried out and doubled over, hugging himself in anguish. John brought his fist up into Smith's jaw. Smith responded with an abbreviated grunt and collapsed.

John and Don stood watching for a moment as the still-conscious Smith covered his head with his arms and drew his legs up to protect his body. Then they looked to each other, nodded, and left the room.

Dr. Leonard McCoy was waiting just outside of the door. He raised his eyebrows questioningly at them.

"He's all yours," John replied to the unasked question.

The two proceeded down the hall to their own quarters.

Upon arrival, John said, "Oh, uh, Don?"

"Yeah?"

"You almost made me lose it back there."

"How'd I do that?"

"When you cracked your knuckles. I almost broke up laughing."

"Oh. Sorry."

"That's all right. It was very effective with Smith, obviously. But next time," he said as he looked pained, "warn me before you do something that funny, uh?"

Don chuckled. "Sure thing, John," he agreed and cracked his knuckles.

Both men leaned into the wall and howled with laughter.

Chapter Nine

"I've called you all together," Kirk said as he looked around the briefing room at the entire complement of Jupiter II personnel, "because I have an announcement to make which you'll no doubt find very pleasing. We have received permission from Starfleet Command to go on shore leave, effective immediately. After everything that this ship has been through lately, I think that we're about due. In any case, we are not far from what has come to be called the 'Shore Leave Planet,' the most sought-after rest and relaxation spot in the galaxy. Its pleasures are well-known to this crew, and I have no doubt that your people will delight in sharing its joys with us. Mr. Spock?"

"In addition to the planet's idyllic setting, it offers a rather unique form of...entertainment. Beneath the surface lies a vast complex capable of manufacturing anything on very short notice. It can produce not only objects, but also androids, resembling any person that you have ever met, or have ever desired to meet. What is even more unusual is that this underground factory can somehow monitor your thoughts and create the things and persons that you happen to be thinking about at that time. These products will appear to be indistinguishable from the genuine persons or things."

"So be careful what you think about at any one moment," Kirk urged. "But other than that, have a good time."

"Unbelievable!" John Robinson commented.

"It sounds too good to be true!" Judy Robinson observed.

"It sounds," Penny Robinson clarified, "like a dream come true!"

"Oh, uh, Smith!" Don West teased, "This'll be one time that you'll have our permission to go back to Earth. Just conjure it up and pretend that you're there!" He laughed at his own joke.

John Robinson grinned in spite of himself and shook his head in amused tolerance of his friend's insensitivity.

Smith, whose gaze had up until now been confined to his lap, flicked his eyes briefly to their faces and back down again, making no reply. He had been carefully avoiding the professor and the major ever since they had hurt him; he had spoken to no one from his group or from the Enterprise crew; and everyone aboard was frankly concerned about him.

"Anyway," Kirk plunged ahead to cover the abrupt awkwardness, "I think that you'll find this a very special kind of experience. And as an unusual, uh...friend...of ours," he glanced meaningfully at Spock as he continued, "once said to me: 'Captain Kirk: Captain Pike has an illusion, and you have reality. May you find your way as pleasant.' Our...friend...The Keeper was right. There's a lot to be said for illusion."

Spock regarded Kirk appreciatively. The Jupiter II personnel looked puzzled, but no one troubled to explain further.

"Well!" Kirk rose in formal dismissal. "Let's get started! Your people are free to accompany the first shore leave group of our personnel."

Will Robinson wandered alone through a lovely meadow, and then he sat, enjoying the warm sunshine and the balmy breeze. Don shouldn't have said that to Dr. Smith about going back to Earth, he thought. He just did it to be mean. After all, I can't really blame Dr. Smith for wanting to get back home. None of us can ever go home now, because of the war, but it's nice to think about sometimes. I remember the time that I got back to Earth, even if I was only there for a few hours. I used the matter transfer unit that the Taurons had left behind on Priplanus when they'd gone home. It was similar to the transporter of the Enterprise, but with a much greater range. I had myself transferred back to Earth for three hours, so that I could try to get Alpha Control to send out a rescue ship for us. But it didn't work out, because no one in Hatfield-Four Corners, Vermont believed me when I told them who I was or where I'd come from so suddenly. After all, I was just a kid, and they thought that I was some kind of a nut. That older boy, Davy, took me to his Aunt Clara, and they imprisoned me in Davy's room. I was afraid that I wouldn't even be able to get back to Priplanus. They only did what they thought was right; they were trying to take care of me. I wish that I could have been nicer to them, but I was desperate. I do feel guilty about it, though, every time that I remember....

"The least they can do is let me go back with my family!"

Aunt Clara invited gently, "Will, dear, how would you like to stay here with Davy and me and be a part of my family? Oh, Hatfield-Four Corners isn't very big, but it's quiet and beautiful and people are real friendly once they get to know you. I'd do everything I could to make you happy, and I know Davy would like to have you as kind of a brother."

"I don't want a brother! And I don't want to be one of your family! I've got a family! And all I want to do right now is get back with them!"

"Oh, it doesn't really matter to me whether you've imagined those things or not. I wish they were true! All that really matters is that you're a fine boy and we love you."

"That's no good. That's no good. No one understands."

Later, Davy said, "Uh, Aunt Clara, she was talkin' about having you staying with us...like ...like permanent."

"Well, whatever she said, she's wrong. When Alpha Control finds out how you kept me here...I wouldn't be surprised if they put you away...for life."

"Well, it was pretty hard to believe. Those things you told us."

"Then you'd better get with it."

"Well, I am, now, sort of.... What's it like in space?"

"How should I know? Whatever I told you, you'd be sure I was makin' it up."

"No, I wouldn't! Honest! I really want to know!"

"I don't think you mean it."

"Well, I do. Like...well I've been thinkin'...for instance, when I was in the square loading the cart, I did see a flash, and I thought it was lightning, but instead I saw you."

"What you saw was the maser beam that transferred me to Earth."

"All the way from space?"

"You don't believe me."

"Well, I don't disbelieve you. I read about things like that. In fact, I might major in physics when I go to college. Will you tell me about space?"

"Well.... It's not so different once you find a place you can live on."

"Do you mean it's just like here on Earth?"

"Well, a person from Earth isn't so different. I mean his feelings and all. And the forms of life you meet there, well, they're different to look at. And you have to watch out that they don't misunderstand your reason for being there. But they're not so different, either."

"Do you mean their feelings are just like ours?"

"Well I don't know about that. But I do know that everything in the whole universe is made up of the same kind of molecules we are. They're just rearranged differently, that's all. And what you have to learn is to translate what they are into what you are. Like I did with the Taurons' matter-transfer unit. But it didn't do me much good."

"Do you really want to go back?"

"What do you think? But it's too late now."

"Well, it's eight minutes 'til twelve. And I've run to the square in five minutes."

"What about your Aunt Clara?"

"Aw, I'll square it for you! Come on!"

At the square, Davy even said, "Will, I was just thinkin'. Do you think it would be okay with that matter-transfer unit if I hitched a ride with you?"

"I don't know, Davy. The Robot's only programmed for me."

"Well, it was a crazy idea, anyway."

"It wasn't crazy at all. I'll tell them all about you, and how you helped me."

"Maybe I'll get up there someday and see you."

"You can thank your Aunt Clara. She was nice, really. And if you ever get that sheriff or anybody to contact Alpha Control, tell 'em how I got here and how I had to get back. Maybe they'll send out a rescue ship."

"Well, I'll do the best I can, Will."

"Bye, Davy. Merry Christmas."

"Sure! And a Happy New Year!"

...At least I was nice in the end, Will thought, but I wish that I could have been nicer right from the start. I wish that I had a way to make it up to them.

"Will!"

Will turned in astonishment at the all-too-familiar voice.

Davy grinned. "I told you I'd get up here someday and see you."

"Davy! It's really you!"

"Will, dear!" Aunt Clara came hurrying toward him.

"Aunt Clara!" Will leapt up and bolted toward her.

She embraced him warmly, just as she had done before, and Davy tousled his hair.

Will leaned back and looked up into her face. "Aunt Clara?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I love you, too. And I'd like to be part of your family. And have Davy for a brother. At least, for a little while."

Penny Robinson stood in the lush forest thinking about what Aaron had told her. He had loved her since the moment he first saw her through the mirror, quarreling with Judy. That was some quarrel, too. And she, Penny, had been very wrong....

"I told you!" Penny announced gleefully.

Judy marveled, "Oh, it's wonderful! A full-length mirror, just what we needed. Which reminds me. You promised you'd help me fix my hair."

"Oh, no, not again."

"I thought I'd try it a little bit higher on top, with perhaps a softer curl." She lifted her waist-length blonde tresses.

"You and your hairdos. I'm gonna cut all my hair off, just like Will." She grabbed both braids right at the tops, in demonstration.

"Go ahead, be ugly, who cares? Oh, I'm sorry! It's just that...I wish you'd fix yourself up once in a while. I don't like to see you going around, well...acting like a boy; you know what I mean."

"What's wrong with boys?"

Judy laughed. "Nothing! But you could be so beautiful! Look! You *are* so beautiful! It's time you started realizing it."

"Why? Why is all that goop so important anyway?"

"Well, you are growing up, and...."

"So what?! Why can't I be the way I am?! Maybe I like the way I am! Maybe I'll stay this way forever!" Penny ran from her.

"Penny?" Judy called after her, to no avail.

...I was so silly, Penny thought, so childish. I guess a child can't properly appreciate what her long hair does for her, how it enhances her femininity. To a child, long lovely hair is just something to be trapped into tightly wound braids, or worse yet, cut off altogether. Whew! Penny shook her head. I'm glad I didn't do anything that stupid, anyway. But I should have listened to Judy. Let's see now, I saw which way Judy went. Maybe I can catch up to her.

Penny followed the trail upon which Judy had set out, and sure enough, she soon saw her older sister idly strolling just ahead of her.

I'll surprise her, Penny thought delightedly. If only what Mr. Spock told us about this place really works! Penny wished as hard as she could, and sure enough, a few feet away, there was the mirror. The full-length mirror that they had found on Priplanus. Or one exactly like it.

"Judy!" Penny called excitedly, "Come see!"

Judy turned, startled, from her own reverie.

"Come on!" Penny urged, running to the mirror. "I'll help you fix your hair. And then, you can help me fix mine."

Judy, of course, instantly recognized the reference, and hurried to join Penny in front of the mirror.

"I'll do even better than that!" Judy wished as hard as Penny had, and there, hanging elegantly in the bushes, was a floor-length prom gown.

Penny gasped. "It's gorgeous!"

"And so will you be, in it." Judy lifted it gently from the branches and took it to her. "For a little while, Penny," Judy suggested, "we're back on Earth, and you're going to the high school prom. With Aaron. And I'm helping you dress, and giving you last minute advice. Just like a big sister should. All of these little things that we haven't been able to share, we'll share now. At least, for a little while...."

"You know, Don," John was saying, "I don't really blame Smith all that much."

"You mean about wanting to go back to Earth?"

"Yeah. Not for myself, I don't care. But for Maureen and the children. I often think about what they're missing. What I haven't been able to provide."

"Yeah." Don nodded. "I know what you mean. What I'd like to be able to give to Judy someday. And can't."

John touched his arm. Both men stopped walking. Don turned toward him.

John hesitated. "You...don't talk much about that. I've often wondered...."

"Well, it's awkward." Don eyed him. "You're her father." But bravely, Don ventured, "Trouble is, though, John, you also happen to be my friend. My only friend. I mean...well, I'm... 'friends'...with your whole family, I guess. But, you're the only...you know what I mean."

"Sure. The only peer. The only man."

"Right. Not that I haven't wanted to talk to you about Judy. Many times. Pretend that you're not her father...."

"I wish that you would, Don." John said hesitantly, "The whole family wonders about you two. Even Judy," he admitted.

Don's eyebrows lifted inquiringly.

John plunged onward, "When we first left Earth, it seemed for quite a while as if you two had quite some budding romance. But then, things just sort of...."

"Fell off. Yeah, I know. I was afraid that it was unfair to her, John. For the same reasons that you expressed a moment ago. Because of what I can't provide."

John nodded slowly. "I understand. But do you really think that no life together at all is better than what you two *could* share?"

"No," Don confessed. "No, you're right. I guess that I was wrong. But I cooled it because I didn't want to cheat her. And because I didn't want her to feel trapped into accepting me simply because I was the only man available to her."

"Now, Don." John asked gently, "Do you really believe that Judy would feel that way?"

Don studied him for a long moment. Then, he said, "No. No, I guess I don't."

"Give her a chance," John encouraged. "Give her a chance to tell you how she feels. She's been afraid to, so far."

"Afraid to, why?"

"For the same reason. Afraid of making you feel trapped."

"Oh my." Don shoved his hand through his hair. "I never meant to put her through that."

"No, of course you didn't."

"I'll talk to her. First opportunity. I promise."

John clapped him on the back.

"But I won't stop wishing that I could give Judy 'the good life'."

"No, neither will I! For Maureen."

Just then, both men stood stock still and blinked. Just ahead of them were two lovely suburban homes. Both doors opened. Out of one came Maureen, and out of the other, Judy, all smiles.

John and Don stared at each other.

"Of course, they're androids," John stated in an almost-certain tone.

"Of course," Don echoed.

By this time, the android women had reached them. The android Maureen went immediately into John's arms for a kiss, and he automatically obliged, with almost no hesitation.

Don looked at John questioningly, wide-eyed.

John put on his best brave smile, and said, "Go ahead, Don."

Don gulped, took the android Judy into his arms, and practiced for the real event that he knew was to come.

John and Don hiked deeply into the forest.

"I'm sure that this is the way that the girls went," John said. "Now, are you sure, Don?"

"I'm sure."

They walked for a while in silence. Then, unmistakably, feminine giggles sounded just ahead of them.

"Last chance to back out, Don," John warned, hoping not to be taken up on the offer.

"No," Don reassured him with finality.

John nodded, satisfied.

But they weren't quite prepared for the glorious sight of Judy and Penny in long stunning gowns, Penny in blue, and Judy in pink.

Upon hearing their footsteps, Judy turned and exclaimed, "Dad. Don!" She blushed.

Penny smiled glowingly at them. "Daddy! Look at us!"

"Darlings! You look simply enchanting!" John hugged them both, looked at Don, and held his arm formally for Penny. "May I escort you, Sweetheart?"

Penny giggled, and looped her arm through his. John purposefully led his younger daughter away, out of earshot, but not quite out of sight.

Don nervously watched them go, and then held out both hands to Judy, palms up invitingly. Wonderingly, Judy slipped both hands into his, and watched him with wide liquid blue eyes.

"Judy, I...I love you. I always have."

"Don!" Judy almost lost her composure, and then regained it quickly, saying, "I love you, too."

"Judy. Will you marry me?"

"Oh, Don! Yes!"

They shared their first real kiss.

From a little distance away, John hugged Penny more tightly to him as they watched.

"Daddy?" She questioned him, "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes, Darling."

"Oh, Daddy!" She hugged him happily.

When it seemed appropriate, John and Penny returned to Don and Judy.

Don slipped his arm around Judy's shoulders. "We have an announcement. We're engaged."

"Oh, Judy!" Penny embraced her.

John moved to shake hands with Don.

"Uh, thanks...for everything," Don said, just a trifle self-consciously.

"We should celebrate!" Penny suggested.

"Yes." John prompted, "Don, I think that it's time for your third kiss."

"Third?" Judy was puzzled.

John and Don winked at each other and chuckled.

Don silenced Judy's questions with a kiss.

Dr. Zachary Smith wandered aimlessly, more hurt emotionally than physically. He found that he had no desire to pursue Major West's rude suggestion of conjuring up Earth. The mere thought now left a bitter, empty feeling in his heart.

"Besides," he justified out loud, "who wants to be back there in the middle of a war?" He knew that he was only making excuses, however. What preyed upon his mind was that he had just been through his own private war, and the psychological bruises were still very painful. Trying to get back to Earth had gotten him hurt, terribly personally hurt, and the mental association between Earth and his suffering was irrevocable. His desire for Earth had died at the sight of the sadism in their eyes.

For nearly three years now, Dr. Smith had lived with these people. He had lived with them, talked with them, suffered with them, joked with them, and argued with them day in and day out in the close quarters of a relatively small ship. Granted that his prior relationship with Professor Robinson and Major West had hardly been ideal. On many occasions, they had alarmed him, albeit briefly, with threats of bodily harm. On rare occasions, they had come perilously close to carrying out such threats. But on no occasion, up until the Enterprise affair, had they actually gone through with it. And Smith had genuinely believed that they never would. When the impossible, the unthinkable, had at last happened, it had broken his heart. It had broken his spirit.

When Smith tried to force himself to be objective about it, he supposed that he understood, intellectually at least, why the professor and the major had felt that this situation was so very different. The Robinson party at long last had its first real hope of rescue from the dismal prospect of spending the rest of life lost in space. And this bold hope solely stemmed from the remarkable generosity of the Enterprise personnel. No one in the Jupiter II group could know, with any certainty, how precarious was the balance of this benefactor's goodwill. And no one in the Jupiter II group could be allowed to tilt the odds in the wrong direction. Professor Robinson and Major West, as commanders of their expedition, must be brutally aware at every moment of their responsibility in this crucial issue. There must truly be, as they had told him earlier, a fundamental difference between their putting up with his escapades, and expecting the Enterprise to put up with them. When looked at in this way, it all made perfect sense...intellectually. But Dr. Smith's problem was not rooted in the intellect. He was hurt; he was frightened; and three years' worth of trust and faith

had been torn to tatters. He no longer had any idea of what to expect from the professor and the major: they were now like strangers. He had not truly thought them capable of the extreme cruelty to which he'd fallen victim. He now found that the mere sight of them terrified him. Smith was not used to being genuinely afraid of them, and he didn't know how to deal with it. His mind had been turning the issue over endlessly, worrying at his fear like a repetitious tape-loop, and trying to put it behind him, ever since his personal holocaust had occurred. The only results had been negative. If there was any solace to be found here on the Shore Leave Planet, it lay not in thoughts of Earth, which only reopened the wound, but in finding some way out of his emotional trap, some way of transporting his mind back to a time when the sight of the professor and the major had represented something other than fear. In fact, there had even been a time when they had offered the potential for friendship....

Dr. Smith and Don West had been trapped in a cave; Smith had just saved West's life by pulling him out of a deep hole into which he'd fallen. But they were still in the cave, suffering from lack of oxygen, and close to dying.

Suddenly, now, Smith saw the cave again before him. He was almost mortally terrified, until he remembered that this planet was capable of producing reality out of a person's thoughts. Then he looked more closely. Major Don West lay inside the cave! No, it must be an android. Smith hesitated, his heart thumping wildly, but the android made no move toward him. It just lay there, watching him and pretending to be dying of oxygen depletion. As Smith watched the apparition, it remained harmlessly immobile, and the older man began to consider the possibility that it might actually help to relive this event from his past.

Smith walked gingerly into the cave, and lay down beside his "suffering" companion.

"Doctor Smith?" the image of West said.

"Yes...? Did...did you call me... 'Doctor' Smith?" He said what he had said to the real West years ago.

"Yeah." West nodded meaningfully.

"Thank you."

"You saved my life. And, well, I've been thinking."

"I've been doing a little thinking myself, Major...Don."

Don smiled at him, and then said, "I don't know how much longer we can last, Doctor Smith...."

"Please. Call me Zachary."

"Yeah, well, I...I haven't been...exactly friendly to you in the past. Sure, you've been lazy, incompetent, mean, selfish, cowardly...."

"Go no further, Major!"

"No, no, no don't get me wrong. No, that's all changed now. The only thing that matters, whether we...get out of this alive or not, is...that we'll always be friends."

"Thank you, Don. I must confess that my opinion of you in the past was...hardly flattering. But now, ...despite your bullying, your evil temper, your childish wit, and your snide comments on my character...now, I can only think of you with great, great affection. Could we...could we shake hands?"

They did so.

"Thank you," Smith repeated.

Don chuckled and nodded.

"May I borrow your pocket knife?"

"Yeah. Sure, Zach."

"Please! Zachary! Not Zach!"

"Zachary."

"Yes. We must leave a legend." Smith began to carve into the rock as he spoke. "On this day, my dear friend West and I... No. My dear friend Don West and I... No! My dear friend Major Don West and I...swore eternal friendship."

Tears stung Smith's eyes, because he remembered what was to come shortly after that. Professor Robinson was to rescue them from the cave; Smith and the major were to have a petty quarrel; and their vows were to be forever broken and forgotten.

Pondering the android, Smith began to wonder if he could change the outcome this time. He wondered how they would react.

He did not have long to wait. An android Professor Robinson arrived, unsealed the cave, and put down a hand to help them up from the pit. Smith watched this android warily as he'd watched the other, knowing that no harm should come to him in the reliving of this scene, but his apprehension remaining all the same.

Dr. Smith carefully spoke all of his insignificant lines as he'd remembered them, but when he followed the two younger men on their way back to the chariot as he had in reality, and when the time came for Smith to initiate his quarrel with the major, he refrained from speaking a word of it, and just meekly, silently continued to follow them. If the androids were taken aback at the deviation, they showed no sign of it. As the professor and the major helped Smith to climb up into the chariot, Smith found that he was trembling violently. He watched them swing themselves easily into their seats directly in front of him. Smith put out a shaking hand to lightly touch the major's shoulder. West turned and offered him a casual smile.

Smith searched frantically for his voice, and then hesitantly ad-libbed, "Don? Can we...tell him?"

"Sure thing. Go ahead, Zachary."

The professor turned in surprise. "You called him Don? What goes on here? Tell me what?"

Both men looked at Smith expectantly. Smith felt like a novice actor on stage for the first time, who'd completely forgotten his lines. His fear squeezed his throat shut. He fought once again to find his voice. "Professor, ...uh...Don and I have made friends." What a childish way of wording it, he chastised himself inwardly. But they seemed satisfied.

"That's right, John," Don told him confidently.

"That's wonderful." Professor Robinson seemed genuinely pleased.

Smith forged ahead, "Uh, ...Professor...uh...could we...could you and I...that is...?"

Professor Robinson laughed good-naturedly. "Are you trying to ask me if you and I can give it a try also?"

Smith nodded wordlessly.

Robinson smiled at him tolerantly. "Of course, Zachary."

Smith's face flushed with joy. "Thank you, sir. Is it allowed to...? Have I your permission...? I mean, may I call you...?"

"Yes." He grinned. "You may."

"Thank you, ...John." Smith blushed.

As both men smiled reassuringly at him, Smith was flooded with all of the joy of a child at Christmas. But then, all of the holiday lights seemed to go out at once as the agony of truth hit him unmercifully.

"But...," he sputtered, "this can't last! In the future...you're going to hurt me! I'm afraid! Don't! It hurts too much! Don't do it this time! Don't beat me! Please! Don't hurt me!!" In his distraught state, he actually forgot momentarily that he wasn't really back in time.

The two androids stared in stunned amazement as Dr. Smith pitched forward, unconscious, into their arms.

Fortunately, the Caretakers of the Shore Leave Planet were concerned for the well-being of their visitors. When it became obvious that the two androids sent to entertain one Dr. Zachary Smith had a problem with their charge, the pertinent data was analyzed and a solution reached.

That is how it happened that Professor John Robinson and Major Don West, having just taken leave of Miss Judy Robinson and Miss Penny Robinson, were suddenly confronted with their own duplicates bearing one unconscious Zachary Smith.

The two androids gave the two startled humans a rapid and thorough account of everything that had just transpired, laid the victim gently on the ground at their feet, and efficiently departed.

John and Don looked at each other, massive guilt written in their faces, and bent down to await Smith's awakening.

Smith opened his eyes and struggled to focus on the two faces hovering above him. Memory came to him of the events preceding his faint.

"Oh," he moaned. "I'm sorry! Forgive me! I feel so foolish! You were being so kind! It's just that, I forgot for a moment that you're not real! I was treating you like the real professor and major. As if you might really harm me. But of course androids wouldn't. But please, let me talk to you about the real ones. I want you to understand. I'm trying to understand, too! I wish that I could make them understand! I want them to realize how badly they've frightened me! How terrified I am to face them! How I can't bear to go near them! They hit me, and it hurt, but the damage they've done goes way beyond that! There was a trust...they've destroyed it! I never believed that they would ever really hurt me! Now I don't know what to expect from them! I don't know how to deal with my fear! I don't know how...!" Smith wailed and turned his face away, and the tears ran down his cheeks, into his ears, and into the grass.

John and Don exchanged helpless, worried looks. They did not know what to say. They didn't even know if they should tell him who they really were.

John found Smith's left hand and held it. "Uh...Smith?"

Smith faced them again, and reached and slipped his other hand into Don's. "Tell them?" he begged. "Tell them for me? Will you? I can't."

The two men looked at each other questioningly. Then, John carefully said, "You just did."

When realization of the meaning hit, they were again faced with an unconscious Smith.

Moments later, Smith's reawakening came with a scream, and a reflexive spasm upward from the ground.

John Robinson took hold of Smith's shoulders and eased him gently back down onto the grass. Then he took the older man's face between his hands, forcing him to pay attention.

"Smith! Listen to me! We only did what we felt that we had to do! We were only trying to instill some discipline in you! We had no idea of the way that you were taking it! You must realize that we don't enjoy hurting you!"

"You...," he fumbled, "you acted as if you enjoyed it."

"And that's exactly what we were doing," Don West explained earnestly, "acting."

"We needed your obedience, your cooperation, and your respect." Robinson went on, "We didn't know how else to get it. You gave us no choice."

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir. I didn't, I guess," Smith acknowledged tearfully.

"We told you what we'd do if you did it again," West continued. "And then you did it again! So what were we supposed to do?"

"We had no idea that you'd be so foolish," Robinson emphasized. "We were sure that you'd behave yourself after that first punch in the nose. Did you really expect us to let you off after that?"

"I don't know," Smith mumbled lamely. "It's just that, you'd never hit me before: before the Enterprise, I mean. I guess that I just never expected you to do it."

The professor looked at the major. "Well, I guess that that part is our fault, Don. We bluffed a few times in the past, and I guess that we led him to believe that we wouldn't go through with it."

"Yeah." The major nodded ruefully. "Maybe so."

"But," Robinson stressed, "this Enterprise situation is entirely different. It has to be. We have to be strict with you. There can be no mistakes."

"I understand that. I think." He sniffed.

"But you said a few minutes ago," West took over, "that now you don't know what to expect from us. Well that's a fair question. So I'll tell you. If you make any more trouble of any kind, on the Enterprise, you can expect more of the same, and a bit worse each time. And you'll get it."

Robinson nodded firmly.

Smith shivered and whimpered.

"However," West finished succinctly, "if you don't, you won't."

Smith hesitated. "Do you mean that, if I behave, I'm safe with you?"

Both men chuckled at his choice of words, but nodded confirmation.

"Thank you," he whispered weakly.

"Now," Robinson said, brightening, "about this other matter. Our two androids told us what scene you lived with them. What you really wanted."

"And we're flattered." West smiled.

Robinson continued, "If you seriously want to give it a try, we're willing."

"We can try again," West added significantly, as it would be his second effort to befriend Smith, but Robinson's first.

"Please." Smith nodded hopefully. "I do."

"All right, then. Zachary." Robinson smiled his encouragement.

"Thank you.... John." Smith smiled shyly.

"Let's make it work this time, Zachary." West grinned at him.

Smith's own smile grew. "Yes, Don. Thank you."

After an awkward moment of silence, Zachary added, "You two'll never have to beat me again. I hope that you won't be too disappointed." His eyes twinkled teasingly.

John and Don grinned at each other, and then at him.

"We'll get over it."

The ironies of life are many. Dr. Zachary Smith was the only one of the Robinson party who did not spend his shore leave dreaming of Earth.

Chapter Ten

"Captain's log, Star Date 6035.0. In only a few moments we will once again attempt to cross the mysterious barrier that surrounds our galaxy and effectively isolates it from the rest of the universe. In remembering the difficulties that we encountered upon crossing the barrier on three separate previous occasions, I am apprehensive. Once on the other side, however, our mission is a fairly simple one. We are to attempt to establish communications with whatever civilizations may

exist in the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds. Since subspace radio cannot penetrate the barrier, we must exit our galaxy before we can make the effort."

Upon completing his log entry, Captain James T. Kirk of the United Starship Enterprise handed several now-signed documents to the yeoman at his side. The busy, alert captain thought nothing of performing a multitude of tasks simultaneously. He was a man of perpetual activity, his mental and physical alacrity never slowing, never distracted from its course.

"How long until we reach the barrier, Mr. Chekov?"

"Thirty seconds, sir."

"Sensor readings, Mr. Spock?"

"Density: negative, energy: negative, radiation: negative. The same readings that we received in our former encounters with the barrier, Captain," his stoic, half-Vulcan first officer replied.

"Very well. Maintain present course and speed, Mr. Sulu."

"Maintaining, sir."

"Ten seconds to contact," Spock announced. His computer-like mind bent on precision, he proceeded with his countdown, "...Five, four, three...."

"All right, Mr. Spock." Kirk grinned inwardly with admiration for his second-in-command.

Spock's eyebrows shot upward in momentary surprise at being cut off in mid count; then he returned to his business, taking it into his stride as he took all things unexpected.

The incredible redness of the barrier loomed in their path. The Enterprise forced its way into the maelstrom amid a barrage of crackling circuits and shorted panels.

"We made it," Chekov announced unnecessarily on the other side of the barrier, just as he'd done on at least one previous occasion.

"An excellent observation, Mr. Chekov," answered Kirk. "Readings, Mr. Spock?"

"All levels are normal, Captain. We have crossed the barrier with no severe effects. However...."

"What is it?"

"Strange sensor readings from ahead, Captain."

Spock was abruptly cut off as the entire crew of the U.S.S. Enterprise was thrown to the deck. The Enterprise had stopped dead in space.

Kirk picked himself up and punched a button on the arm of his chair. "Kirk to engineering. Scotty, where's our power?"

"I don't know, Captain. Everything reads normal. We're just not moving."

"No damage?"

"None, sir."

"Then why are we just sitting here?" Kirk demanded testily.

"All of your questions will be answered, Captain Kirk," an alien voice boomed.

There was a long pause, during which everyone on the bridge exchanged glances with everyone else.

"Who are you?" Kirk was the first to speak.

"We are the Overmind."

"Are you from our galaxy?"

"No, we are from no galaxy."

"But that's impossible. Everything must have an origin."

"That is true. And our origin is the center of the universe."

"I don't understand. What 'center' can there be?"

"When the universe was born, all matter and antimatter were in a contracted mass. That which you call the Big Bang was caused by violent reactions between the two. We arbitrarily define that random location as the center. This colossal explosion flung off the outermost masses, which later evolved into the galaxies and antigalaxies that exist now. The innermost quantities of matter and antimatter, however, annihilated each other, but not quite completely. Such annihilations leave a residue of particles known as neutrinos, which are neither matter nor antimatter. For every atom and antiatom that cancel each other, one neutrino is formed. Since vast quantities of both substances were destroyed, an enormous quantity of neutrinos formed. The earliest of us were born of this substance. Later members developed within localized concentrations of neutrinos within galaxies, and have joined us more gradually. For us, no evolution was necessary; unlike all other life in the universe, we did not arise from meager beginnings on hostile, primitive planets. We were instantly all-powerful and all-knowing. And we have taken it upon ourselves to care for all other life forms, on whatever worlds and antiworlds they may arise."

"Care for us?" Kirk broke in dubiously. "But war and hardship go on everywhere, and always have, in our galaxy, and I presume in others as well."

"They are a part of the natural course of things. Individuals and groups of individuals are not the issue. We determine only that whole worlds and whole galaxies are not destroyed or interfered with. That is why we have stopped you."

"Explain."

"Had we allowed you to contact your small irregular sister galaxies that you refer to as the Magellanic Clouds, you would have interfered with the normal course of things there. Their civilizations, in general, are even more primitive than yours, and are not yet ready for outside contact. It is not yet time for you and them to encounter one another."

"The entirety of both small galaxies is primitive?" Spock inquired. "It is difficult to believe that there are no areas of advanced civilizations in either one."

"Nevertheless, it is true. Your galaxy is somewhat older, and has had more time for advancement. Larger galaxies condensed more rapidly than smaller ones, as a result of their greater gravitation."

Kirk broke in to say, "You said that, had you allowed us to contact the smaller galaxies, we would have interfered with the normal course of events there. But surely you realize that our non-interference directive would prevent this."

"Not at all. Your interference would have been unintentional and damaging in far-reaching ways that you would not have understood."

"How do you know?"

"We saw it in the future, Captain Kirk. We move through time as you move through space."

Kirk turned a stunned expression toward Spock. To Kirk's surprise and amusement, his unemotional science officer was returning the all-too-emotional expression.

To the aliens, Kirk proceeded, "Very well, we'll return to our own galaxy, then. Mr. Sulu, one hundred eighty degrees about; take us back the way that we came."

Power had not returned to the ship's engines.

"We cannot permit you to return, Captain Kirk. If your galaxy, or any galaxy, were to learn of our existence at this time, that would constitute an even greater interference. Therefore, you must be destroyed in order to prevent that contamination and preserve your own galaxy's innocence."

"What gives you the right...?"

"It is necessary in order to safeguard the stability of your entire galaxy. Surely that is more important than the lives of the crew of one ship. You will be given forty-eight of your hours to prepare. This communication has ended."

Captain Kirk stared sourly at the faces of his senior officers, seated around the table in the briefing room.

"The entire crew of our ship and our friends from the Jupiter II are all pretty shook up about this, Jim," Dr. McCoy told him. "That unearthly voice came in loud and clear all over the ship."

"Well, I wish that I had some good news for them, for us all. Maybe you gentlemen can supply me with some. Mr. Spock?"

"I ran a full sensor scan on the Overmind, Captain. They are precisely what they claim. They are composed of pure neutrinos, a substance that arises from the mutual destruction of matter and antimatter. Therefore, no known weapon will affect them, since all of our weapons involve matter, antimatter, or energy. Those three substances created the Overmind. I doubt, therefore, that they could harm them. It is conceivable, in fact, that such weapons might actually strengthen the entities."

"I asked for good news, Mr. Spock."

"Captain, I endeavor to be factual, not cheerful."

"That's an understatement if ever I've heard one," quipped Dr. McCoy.

"They have completely immobilized us," continued Spock, ignoring him. "They have rendered our warp drive and impulse drive totally useless, and without damaging either system. They are indeed quite formidable."

"Yes they are. They...always they." Kirk looked contemplative. "Did you notice that they always said 'we,' and never 'I.' Always in the plural. How about it, Spock?"

"It is logical to assume that beings as sophisticated as they obviously are would have advanced telepathic capabilities. Since their life form has no definite shape, and since it is nearly impossible to distinguish at what point one being ends and the next begins, it is logical to conclude that their thoughts would tend to merge. They would cease to regard themselves as individuals. They would, in effect, function as a single entity."

"Yes," Kirk replied, "that would explain their use of the term 'Overmind.' Their being telepathic would also explain the fact that their words were heard all over the ship, even though Lieutenant Uhura reports that the communications system was not operating."

"Do you mean to tell me," McCoy interrupted, "that we read their minds?"

"That is essentially correct, Doctor," Spock responded.

"Poppycock! We're not telepathic."

"Mr. Scott, are the ship's phasers operational?" Kirk resumed a more businesslike attitude; then, as he noticed Spock's look of surprise, added, "I haven't forgotten what you said about our weapons being most likely ineffective, but we cannot just sit here and do nothing. What about it, Scotty?"

"Aye, sir. Whatever those whatcha-call-'ems did to my engines, it didn't affect the phasers."

"Good. Gentlemen, we are about to show the Overmind what a starship can do."

"Mr. Sulu, lock all phasers onto what appears to be the center of the Overmind."

"All phasers locked, sir."

"Fire."

Sulu turned a mournful face toward his captain. "The Overmind absorbed the energy of our phasers, sir."

"You now have forty-six hours left to you."

Chapter Eleven

The now quite discouraged Captain Kirk launched himself onto his bed and stared furiously up at the ceiling of his cabin. I can't just give up, he thought savagely, but what is there to do? Weapons: useless, engines: useless, communications: useless: blocked by the barrier. Everything useless. We can't kill them, can't run from them, and can't get a message back to Starfleet. Even if we could, help couldn't possibly arrive in time. And yet there must be something that I can do. I can't let my crew die, and my ship...my SHIP! It's said by many that I have the best ship and the best crew in Starfleet. I have the best first officer, certainly. I have a chief surgeon who's more than just a doctor, who instinctively cares about everyone and everything, who routinely performs miracles on the operating table. And I have a chief engineer who understands and loves the Enterprise as though it were a living thing. I must and will do anything at all to save them. Anything.

Alone in his cabin, Mr. Spock stared fixedly at his fingertips, contemplating their situation. There is no means of escape, he thought, no way of fighting the aliens, and there is no way that Starfleet could possibly know of our difficulties and send assistance. Even if it could, there would be nothing that anyone could do to alter the situation. Logically, therefore, we must be destroyed. There was no emotion whatsoever in his conclusion; he merely accepted it. His acceptance was that of a computer about to be deactivated. Almost. He did experience a slight, annoying reaction from his human half. But as always, his Vulcan half would control his human half. Well, almost always. There were a few occasions in the past when unusual circumstances had caused his human half quite unexpectedly and regrettably to emerge, disgracing him. But he was determined that this would not be one of those occasions. We are presently in a situation that cannot be resolved, he mentally told himself. Logically, therefore, our destruction must surely be the result. I have this time now to prepare. When the crisis comes, I will have complete control of my human half. I shall die honorably. I shall die as a Vulcan. Mr. Spock sat very still and concentrated on being emotionless.

"I checked on the Captain, Doctor, as you requested. He's asleep at last."

"Oh good. Thank you, Christine. Why don't you go get some rest now, yourself?"

"Thank you; I am tired. Good night."

"Good night."

Dr. McCoy thought privately, this whole business is a tremendous strain on the crew, just waiting around like this. But it's hardest on the captain, because he's responsible for all of our lives. He'll come through, though; he always does. He's quite a man, that captain of ours. I wonder how Spock's taking all of this. Easily, I'm sure. Nothing jars those perfect brain waves of his. Well, almost nothing. Seems to me that I remember jarring him a little once or twice. Like the time in jail that I "thanked" him for saving my life by analyzing his guts, and accusing him of being afraid of living. Or the time that, out of petty jealousy, I refused to wish him luck, and after he'd made himself "human" enough to request that I do so. There *he* was willing to compromise, and then *I* refused. Oh, I said it, but I waited until he was out of earshot before I would say it, and then it was too late. Later, nearly dying, he told me that I should've wished him luck. He was obviously hurt,

and it was too late again. And now we will soon all die, and I never will have made those things right between us. It will be too late once more. But this time, it will be too late forever.

Instantly, Dr. McCoy was out of his chair and down the corridor. He was at Spock's door before he could even catch his breath. After only a moment's hesitation, without even buzzing for entry, so fearful was he of losing his nerve, he plunged into the room to find Spock sitting and staring intently at nothing.

"Mr. Spock," he blurted. "I'm so sorry!"

The science officer's eyebrows shot upward. "I beg your pardon, Doctor?"

"No. I beg your pardon."

Spock rose in concern. "Are you quite all right, Doctor?"

"Yes. Perhaps for the first time." He swallowed hard and continued, "I've been doing a lot of thinking just now, Mr. Spock. I was so wrong about you. In your own way, you're the kindest man that I've ever met. A lot kinder than we are." He lowered his eyes. "Than I am. How cruel I've been to you at times. How thoughtless. So many times, in your own way, you genuinely offered me friendship, and each time, it was I who unforgivably rejected you. How I must have hurt you, again and again!" He was shaking.

Spock, sensing the doctor's extreme emotional stress, said, "It is quite all right, Dr. McCoy. I understand."

"No it's not all right." He began to enumerate the instances that had been troubling him, and then finished by admitting to Spock that he really *had* wished Spock luck the time that the Vulcan had requested it. "I waited until you were out of earshot, and *then* I whispered, 'Good luck, Spock.' I don't know why I waited."

In a rare display of sentiment, Spock said, "I'm sure that it was your wish that brought me back safely."

McCoy barely suppressed an expression of incredulity. "Then you forgive me?"

"I do."

"Are we...friends, Spock?"

"Affirmative."

McCoy gave him a joyous smile. Spock almost returned it. Not quite, but almost.

"Now I only wish that we had more time, now that we're truly friends," McCoy said, still a bit shakily. "How much time is left?"

"Thirty-six hours, twenty-four minutes."

"How many seconds?" McCoy asked, grinning broadly.

"Seven," he replied, without once consulting a chronometer.

"You know, Mr. Spock," McCoy began, sobering, "I've always secretly admired your deep friendship with Jim. You two never seem to fall out or misunderstand each other. How do you do it?"

"We have a deep mutual respect."

"But how did it happen?"

"Perhaps," Spock said slowly, "as a result of our working so closely together, and...."

"And what?"

"And, I know the captain's deepest thoughts, and he knows mine."

"You mean...telepathically?"

"Yes, Doctor. Via the Vulcan mind meld."

McCoy lowered his eyes. "I wish that you and I could have had that kind of rapport."

The Vulcan raised one eyebrow, and then simply started toward him. McCoy looked up, was startled at first, and then became calm. Spock reached up and delicately applied long alien fingers to the human's forehead. "Our minds are merging, Doctor."

"So we come to the end," said Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott, affectionately patting a control panel. "I've known you like a friend, old Enterprise. We've been through so much together. Our engines have pulled this crew out of more messes than even Mr. Spock could count!" His voice echoed among the walls of the dimly-lit and otherwise deserted engineering section. With the ship dead in space with no damage, there was nothing to be done. There was no reason for anyone to be down there.

The despondent yet proud chief engineer raised his glass of scotch in a toast. "Here's to you, Enterprise. The only woman that I ever truly loved."

It had been lonely now and then. But it'd been a good life, and one that he was proud to have lived. His friends here on the Enterprise had been more special than anyone could ever hope. He felt proud just to have known them. And if he'd had it all to do over again, he'd still do everything exactly the same way.

Thinking about lonely people, though, made him think of Nurse Chapel. She had been engaged to marry Roger Corby. When he had turned up missing on an alien planet, she had signed aboard the Enterprise to search for him. After discovering that he was dead, she had stayed onboard. Soon after, she had fallen in love with Spock. Scott couldn't imagine being in love with someone who had no feelings. As proudly logical as he was, he'd had no choice but to reject her. Scott pondered the terrible torment that she must've suffered ever since then. How lonely she must have been all of these years!

Scott started out into the corridor and almost collided with Christine Chapel.

"Oh, Mr. Scott." She smiled. "Have you seen Dr. McCoy? He's not in sickbay where I left him a few hours ago."

"I don't know where he is, lass," he replied, taking her arm, "but I think that the two of us can find him."

Kirk was not able to sleep for very long. He pitched about restlessly for a while, and then bolted out of his bunk, in resigned surrender to wakefulness. He wandered into the corridor. Without really knowing why, he found himself in front of Spock's door. "Oh well," he muttered, "maybe Spock has some ideas. And if I know him, he won't be sleeping either." Kirk rang for entry.

"Come."

Upon entering, Kirk was stunned to see Dr. McCoy, Mr. Scott, and Nurse Chapel seated informally around the room. "Well! You're having a party and you didn't invite me."

"No party, Jim." Something about McCoy looked strangely peaceful and trancelike.

"Well then, what's the occasion?"

Scott answered, "Christine and I were looking for Dr. McCoy and we found him here."

Christine and I? Kirk thought inwardly. Aloud, he said, "That explains you two. What are you here for, Bones?"

"Spock and I had a long talk. We reached a new depth of understanding."

"Really?"

"Yes, Jim. We're friends now in every sense of the word."

"Wonderful."

"That it is," Scott agreed, "but when Christine and I came in here, we were scared nearly to death. For a moment, we thought that Spock was attacking Dr. McCoy."

"Attacking him?"

"Aye, Captain. But it just turned out to be the Vulcan mind link."

"Ah yes, of course!" Kirk grinned knowingly at McCoy. "It kind of drains you, doesn't it?"

"Indeed it does." McCoy chuckled.

That explained the doctor's vacant expression. "Well," Kirk continued, "I'm glad to see you all in such good spirits, if a bit surprised at it."

McCoy smiled at Spock, and then back up at Kirk. "Whatever fate we have to face, Jim, the only thing that matters is that we'll be facing it together."

Chapter Twelve

"I had a feeling that I would find you two here," Dr. Smith said hesitantly. "Am I intruding?"

"No." Professor Robinson smiled faintly from where he was tinkering with some Jupiter II equipment. "We're just cleaning up a bit. Silly, I suppose, in view of...." He did not need to finish his sentence.

"I guess that we just needed to be doing something," Major West explained glumly. "We sure couldn't sleep."

"Neither could I." Smith took a shy step closer. "Need any help?"

The other two exchanged raised eyebrows.

"You *have* changed!" West grinned almost as broadly as normal.

Smith smiled faintly, self-consciously, and lowered his eyes.

"Seriously, though, no. It's not as if we're doing anything that matters." West did not say the word "anymore," but it hung in the air more loudly than if he *had* said it.

"Is there something that we can do for *you*, though?" Robinson offered, clearing the air of its sudden awkwardness.

"No." Smith avoided their eyes for a moment, and then faced them squarely. "I just wanted to say that...I'm very pleased that we have spent these last few weeks together in a much better way than we ever had before, the three of us. And I wanted to tell you that it has meant a great deal to me to be accepted as your friend. More than you can know."

"Well," West said, shifting his footing in embarrassment, "thanks, Zachary."

"Yes." Robinson handled it more smoothly; being just a bit older than the major, he was more comfortable with expressing sentiment. "Thank you, Zachary; and we have been very pleased, too, with the recent outcome." He offered his hand to Smith.

The latter grasped it gratefully. "And thank you, John, Don." His face clouded. "But I must admit something to you. There's one way in which I haven't changed. I'm still a coward. And I'm scared. I'm *so* scared! I'm even more afraid now, than when I knew that you were going to beat me! I'd even endure your beating again if it would get us all out of this alive! Oh, I'm sorry, but I can't help it!"

John and Don each put a sympathetic hand on one of Smith's shoulders and let him cry.

The bride walked down the aisle and smiled radiantly at the groom who turned to appreciatively watch her. The long white gown created for Judy Robinson by the Enterprise's synthesizers even exceeded the loveliness of the two gowns that she had wished for, for her and Penny, on the Shore Leave Planet. The enchantment on her face as she walked toward Don West on

the arm of John Robinson dimmed for a time the sorrow in the hearts of all who knew how brief would be the young couple's joy. Judy paused briefly to kiss Maureen Robinson. Bridesmaid Penny Robinson smiled her encouragement as she reached for Judy's bouquet. Best man Will Robinson nervously handed Don the ring. Happily they stood before James T. Kirk, who performed the last pleasant task that he expected ever to be granted.

After the ceremony, Aaron made his way to Penny. "I'm really sorry, Penny, that our wedding day can never come now. But I want you to know what these last weeks have meant to me. Just the fact that you cared enough to come back for me at all. I've lived more in these weeks than I did in all of that forever-time in the mirror dimension."

Penny smiled through her tears and embraced him.

Will found Rose, and took her hand. "I really would have married you in a few years, you know."

"That's all right, Will." She smiled bravely. "I have been married to you all along, in my heart." Forever the princess, always the regal lady.

Maureen sought out her three children, the centers of her life. "My darlings! I am so proud of you! All of you!" She pulled Will and Penny to her in an urgent embrace. Then she held out her arms to her beautiful daughter-bride. Maureen held Judy, kissed her, whispered her love, and hurried her out of the door with her beloved Don.

The couple had twenty-four hours of marriage left to them.

Chapter Thirteen

"Captain's log, Star Date 6035.5. Now, only a few more hours remain until the Overmind carries out its threat to destroy us, as I am sure that it will do, because beings as powerful as these would have nothing to gain by making empty threats, and would not need to resort to such tactics. I have never before felt so helpless, so utterly useless, just sitting here waiting for the end to come. I owe it to my crew to get them out of this somehow. If I can't, I don't deserve to be their captain." But how? His thoughts ran on silently. Even the "corbomite" maneuver wouldn't work against beings as fantastically advanced as these. And somehow, he doubted that they could be swayed by an emotional approach.

Captain James T. Kirk stood on the bridge of the starship of which he was so proud, and addressed the Overmind. "I perceived from my earlier communication with you that you have extremely logical minds. You obviously believe that you are taking the logical course of action with us: destroying us to protect the innocence of our galaxy. But I propose that you are instead being quite illogical. The illogic of waste: waste of our lives and of this starship."

"It is but an infinitesimal loss."

"But a loss, nevertheless."

"There is no alternative."

"I have one. With your telepathic powers, you should be able to erase our knowledge of you from our memories. We could then return, and be able to report nothing."

"That is true. But then your Starfleet Command would send you or another starship to complete the mission. Eventually, we would still have to destroy you."

"There is yet another alternative. You said that you move through time as we move through space. You could regress yourselves through time, and then prevent us from leaving our galaxy in the first place."

"Captain Kirk." The voice sounded almost sympathetic. "Your people would still send you or another ship again at a later date. This way, with your fate forever unknown to them, perhaps they will be discouraged from trying."

"So," Kirk said bitterly, "we must be sacrificed."

"We regret this necessity, as well. In your arguments, Captain Kirk, you have displayed a very logical thinking pattern, something that we scarcely expected. We also perceive that your motives are entirely selfless; you seek to preserve the lives of your comrades, for whom you have a deep respect and affection."

Behind Kirk, the turbolift doors slide aside to admit the entire complement of the Jupiter II onto the bridge to join their friends Kirk, Spock, McCoy, and Scott in these last few moments.

Kirk's eyes sent to them his wordless apology, his sorrow for the promise that he now could never keep. The eyes of Robinson and West returned their understanding, and their commiseration. Each of them was losing a ship. And each of them was losing a family, whether a biological family, or a family of friends.

"Captain," Spock informed him quietly, "the forty-eight hours accorded to us have just terminated."

Penny Robinson lunged forward desperately. "It's not fair!" she yelled. "We've done nothing to you!"

Her father put up a cautioning hand, and reached to pull her back closer to him.

A different voice, a different part of the Overmind, spoke for the very first time. It spoke a single word. "Penny?"

An old familiar wave of emotions hit the girl. "I know that voice," she whispered. One more precious memory of Priplanus came flooding back to Penny. A memory of an old friend, invisible, but all too real, with a powerful, commanding voice. A memory of the dirty, bedraggled little girl that she had been then, running to witness the chaos of an angry, overpowering storm. A memory of pure cosmic force with an antimatter core, comprising a being suddenly furious with her family for inadvertently hurting her....

Penny had fled through the tumult, back toward the Jupiter II, only to see her omnipotent friend wreaking havoc on her beloved family, where they'd taken inadequate refuge inside of the Jupiter II. "The spaceship! Oh no!" she had cried. She'd stopped running and called beseechingly to her well-meaning, all-too-protective friend, "Please don't hurt them! Don't hurt anyone! I love them! I love them just like I love you!"

"Love," the being had echoed, toying contemplatively with the new but marvelous concept. "Love. Love, you. I love you, too, Penny." Silence had instantly replaced the storm.

"Thank you!" she'd said. "Thank you, Mr. Nobody! But where are you? Mr. Nobody? Where are you?!" Her voice had rung with concern.

Heedless of her worry, her parents had rushed to her, grateful for her safety.

"He's gone," she'd told them sorrowfully.

Prioritizing differently, her parents clearly didn't mind the disappearance. But then the sky brightened unnaturally and all looked up at the incomparable sight of a galaxy being born.

"Don?" Judy had asked in a hushed voice, "Don, what is pure cosmic force? What does it turn into?"

"I don't know," he'd admitted. "There are a lot of things...I don't know."

"It's like a new Milky Way," John had commented admiringly.

Penny'd suggested charmingly, "Well, caterpillars can turn into butterflies, can't they?"

Maureen had laughed lovingly and kissed her younger daughter's forehead. Then she'd looked up once again, and spoken, awestruck, to her husband, "Oh, John, look! Just *look!*"

"Goodbye, Penny," Mr. Nobody had called down to her. "Goodbye, Penny."

Still slightly regretfully, but with new-found maturity and acceptance of her loss of him, Penny had replied, "Goodbye, Mr. Nobody."

"Goodbye. Goodbye...."

The tears that Penny had not shed that day now flowed freely down her cheeks. "Mr. Nobody!" she cried. "You've joined the Overmind? Help us!"

"Penny," Mr. Nobody replied. "I love you, Penny. We cannot destroy Penny."

"If you destroy this ship," Kirk gambled, "there'll be no way to save her."

"Mr. Nobody!" Penny pleaded, "Listen to me! There's a way! We won't report your existence. We'll just report that there was no contact with the Magellanic Clouds. And it'll be true; there wasn't any. So our people won't be interested in trying again. We won't mention you. We want to protect our galaxy's innocence, too. We agree with you. No one'll say anything. I'll vouch for them. I give you my word. Please, Mr. Nobody!" A spasm of sobs shook Penny, and Maureen and Judy each slipped an arm around her.

"I believe you, Penny," Mr. Nobody agreed.

Then, the original voice cut in once more. "We must confer."

Absolute silence ruled the bridge. No one uttered a sound, although eyes spoke loudly to each other as everyone looked at everyone else.

Incredible, Kirk thought. And I dismissed the emotional approach as useless. But, I never could have anticipated this!

Minutes passed like eons.

At last, the original voice said, "We accept your word. We have restored power to your ship's engines. Return to your galaxy."

Kirk found his voice. "Hard about, helmsman. Warp eight."

"Goodbye, Penny."

"Goodbye, Mr. Nobody."

Chapter Fourteen

"Jim," John Robinson began, "this has been the most extraordinary time of our lives. We'll never forget it, and we'll never forget any of you. But perhaps, now that we have reentered our galaxy, we should go back to 2001."

Kirk's eyes searched his face. "Are you sure, John?"

"Yes. I'm sure. We've seen the beautiful galaxy that is your world, and the high ideals that you stand for and protect. We've even seen...*your* future, and the ways in which time, with all of its infinite mysteries, maintains its own balance, and insures the continuation of the universe's pattern. I am now more unshakably convinced than ever that, the small part of the universal tapestry that is the human species, will survive, perhaps forever, though in an ever-changing form. And now, our small part of that species must take our rightful place, in our own time, on our own world of Alpha Centauri, to do the work that we must do and to live the lives that we must live. The future cannot exist without the past. Christine Chapel cannot exist without us, any more than Zira could exist without you, Jim."

"And beyond that," Kirk added gratefully, "the Enterprise would have been destroyed by the Overmind, if not for your precious daughter, Penny. You-all of the Jupiter II were a vital part of what had to happen in *our* timeline."

John nodded solemnly. "I see now that our mission is much nobler than the mere colonization of one more world to relieve the overpopulation of our native planet. Our true mission is to live in our own timeline, erecting our own special part of the framework of time. We'll be performing the most glorious mission of all. In that knowledge, we will be fulfilled; and with each other, we'll be happy."

After a pause, Spock said, "It is appropriate, sir, that you draw this conclusion now. According to the chronometers measuring elapsed time in your century, it is June 9, 2001 in your timeline."

"The exact date of the establishment of our colony on Alpha Centauri," Don realized.

"So," Kirk concluded, "everything has once again happened exactly as it was supposed to happen."

With new insight, John said, "How could it possibly do otherwise?"

James Kirk rose solemnly from his command chair and extended his hand. John Robinson took it.

"There will be," Jim said, "an empty place in our ship after you've left."

"And," John answered, "there will be an empty place in our hearts after you've gone."