

Captive Audience

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Summary

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Janice Rand quickly relinquished her chair at the helm when she saw Sulu's smiling face. He was grinning ear-to-ear when he stepped out of the turbolift, and she couldn't for the life of her see what there was to smile about. The ship was spiraling down out of control, toward the planet Psi-2000, half of the crew seemed to be having a collective nervous breakdown all over the ship, strains of "I'll take you home, Kathleen" had wafted over the intercom most of the day (she had absently counted at least fourteen full renditions) and she was at the helm. She managed a shaky, grateful smile for Sulu, and vowed to brush up on her "Ship Operations Manual" at the first opportunity. All crewmembers were supposed to have a good working knowledge of all major ship posts, but Rand had never even sat at the helm of the Enterprise before she was shoved, literally, into the chair and told to "take the helm". And, nothing worked, and warning lights flashed, and Uhura swore constantly behind her, and... Rand gasped a deep breath and turned away from the viewscreen, feeling herself suddenly spiraling, even faster than the ship, into an abyss of helplessness.

Like Sulu, and Riley, and Tormolen she was falling into herself. She was alone. She was abandoned. She was afraid. She looked around at the people on the bridge, but their faces were a blur. It didn't matter; she knew what they were thinking. She was useless. Nobody cared now how carefully she had weaved her hair, or how stringently she dieted to maintain her perfect figure. They didn't even want her to get them a cup of coffee or call the Captain's attention to some report or other, or run an errand. She smiled bitterly. That was her nickname on the ship-'Janice Errand.' Kirk hadn't teased her with it, but the most he ever said to her was 'Rand, do this' or 'Rand, do that', so he must think she wasn't good for anything else, either. He didn't treat Uhura that way. Minutes ago, he had told Uhura to cut off Riley's eternal singing, and when the communications officer spun around screaming 'Sir, don't you think I'd cut him off if I could!', he had demurely apologized. Rand grimaced. Kirk hadn't apologized to *her* for throwing her bodily into the chair and snapping 'take the helm'. Janice Errand.

Of course, she was only a lowly yeoman, but she had signed on to 'explore brave new worlds' and 'be the elite-Join Starfleet', and to raise her consciousness, too. And, of course, to find a Man to marry. The thought brought Kirk to her mind again. Oh, he was beautiful! She could see every detail of his face in her mind's eye. He was so wonderful; she would marry him even if he wasn't so wonderful. But she knew he was, despite the stern air he affected toward most of the women on the ship, including herself. The crewwomen had a nickname for him, too -- Lord Jim--, but they all envied her for her proximity to the ship hunk. Not that it had done her much good. She'd have to appear stark naked in his doorway for him to notice her. Now, that was an idea...

Someone touched Rand's elbow, and she looked up to see McCoy bending over her. He had a hypo in his hand, and he patted her shoulder reassuringly with his other hand. "Now, Janice," he said, "Everything's going to be fine. I'm going to give you the antidote now. It'll be a little unpleasant, but I've got the dosage adjusted so it doesn't hurt like hell and wipe your memory," he confided chattily.

She looked up at him wide-eyed, but his kindly features reminded her of her father, and she trusted her father. "O.K." she said.

McCoy pressed the hypo to her skin, and she felt a moment of vertigo, then the urgency of her feelings receded. She grabbed the rail instinctively, aware once more that the ship was plummeting towards an imminent confrontation with the planet. "If anyone needs me, I'm back," she said to no one in particular.

Sulu turned and grinned broadly at her. "At least you didn't make an ass of yourself like I did, Janice."

She remembered her idea of dazzling Kirk with her nudity. "Only because I didn't have time," she said wryly. She shuddered and thanked the stars for McCoy.

"Time is something we don't have much of," Uhura said behind her, in a voice laced with irritation. Riley started another chorus of 'Kathleen' and she hit the console with her fist.

"Where the hell are Kirk and Spock and Scotty, anyway?" McCoy said brusquely. "Who's in charge on the bridge?"

Sulu turned still grinning broadly. "I guess I am," he said.

"Like hell," McCoy said, waving his tricorder over the man. He clicked the machine off with a quick move. "You can do that," he said, indicating the console, "but not this," he gestured around the bridge, and looked pointedly at Uhura.

"I can't do everything, doctor," she said, trying again to cut off Riley as she finally met with success in her search for an open channel, and locked into it.

"Mr. Spock, Captain is enroute to Engineering -- can you take the bridge? - acknowledge."

She paused, and everyone on the bridge listened to the silence. She tried again. "Bridge to Sickbay -- Is Mr. Spock there?" She waited again. "Mr. Spock, would you please acknowledge?" Silence.

"I'll take-" Riley abruptly stopped singing. "No dance tonight," he appended glumly to his aborted song, then there was a sound of scuffle and voices. The bridge crew exchanged relieved glances -- finally it was over. Uhura sighed and looked at her console with a little less contempt.

Rand watched the planet on the screen. "It'll be just like playing 'chicken'," Sulu commented.

"Chicken?" queried McCoy, looking warily at the unaccustomed view.

"You know, you fly right up to something big and pull away at the last minute."

"Oh."

"Just so we pull up in time," Rand commented, with the tingle of danger still at the back of her neck.

"Bridge to Captain," Uhura said, on the now unoccupied intercom.

"Kirk here."

"Entering planet's outer atmosphere, sir" she prompted politely.

Kirk hadn't turned off the intercom, so Scotty's voice came through the background noise with ominous clarity. "Captain..."

"What is it?"

"He's turned the engines off. Completely cold. It'll take thirty minutes to regenerate!"

Uhura sighed, as though she too had suspected it was too good to be true. "Ship's outer skin beginning to heat, Captain. Orbit plot shows we have about eight minutes left."

"Scotty!"

"I can't change the laws of physics! I've got to have thirty minutes!"

Kirk shut the intercom off without replying to Uhura. They waited, looking at each other and the spinning planet that filled the screen.

"Scott to bridge."

"Bridge here," Uhura replied quickly.

"The engines are off. We've got to risk a full power start. The Captain has gone to look for Mr. Spock. Would you see if he has found him?"

"Yes, sir..." She cut the channel and opened another one. "Bridge to Captain. Engineer asks, did you find..."

Rand blinked as Kirk suddenly shouted into the intercom. "...Yes! I found Mr. Spock, I'm talking to Mr. Spock, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!" Uhura said, taken aback. "Three and a half minutes left, Captain."

His voice continued, drifting through the bridge over the forgotten channel. "I've got it -- the disease..." Uhura tried to cut off the intercom, but it was jammed open. She looked around and caught Rand's eye, but everyone else was politely concentrating on the viewscreen.

"Love...you're better off without it, and I'm better off without mine. This vessel... I give, she takes. She won't let me live my life, I have to live hers." His voice had an unaccustomed hoarseness to it. Rand found herself aching with sympathy for him.

"I have a beautiful yeoman, Mr. Spock. Have you noticed her, Mr. Spock? You're allowed to notice her. Captain's not permitted..."

Rand's cheeks burned flaming red, and Uhura swore once again at the console, mashing buttons frantically trying to cut it off. Rand looked at McCoy, but he looked at the ceiling. McCoy knows, she thought. Kirk does care. She looked around at the others. They all know. All but me. Pride mingled with her embarrassment...

"...Now I know why it's called she...." Spock's words blurred. She only had ears for Kirk's voice. " ... A flesh woman, to touch, to hold...a beach to walk on ...a few days, no braid on my shoulder... Scotty, help..."

Uhura leaned over her console, as if to block the sound of Kirk at his weakest, and glared at Rand, daring anyone else to be listening. Rand felt a twinge of jealousy. Uhura loved Kirk, too. Uhura sat up, a determined look on her face. She touched her microphone. "Entering upper stratosphere, Captain," she said in a business-like tone, "Skin temperature now twenty-one hundred seventy degrees."

Kirk ignored her and the intercom. "Tell them ... clear the corridors...the turbolift."

"Too late for that now," McCoy commented softly. Yes, Rand thought, too late now. I know how he really feels. And she smiled.

Silence. Then Kirk's voice drifted once more over the intercom, a whisper. "I'll never lose you. Never."

Rand's heart skipped a beat. The ship. He was talking about the ship. Not her. She was just a 'flesh' woman to him like all the others. Hopes raised only a few seconds before, and plummeted again, left her too stunned to react. She realized that the knowing looks directed at her were pity, not envy, and she knew the first true humiliation of her life. A flash of anger towards Kirk surged through her. I'll never let any of my feelings show again. Never.

But despite her resolution her heart still beat as fast as the continuing alarm marking their spiral toward the planet when Kirk walked onto the bridge. Everyone else turned to look at Kirk, but he looked straight ahead.

As Kirk gave the order to lay in a course, Rand stood beside his chair, thinking herself foolish forever believing he would give it all up for her.

"....no beach to walk on... "

Startled, Rand turned to him. "Sir?" His eyes touched hers, and her heart raced breath caught in her throat. Maybe....

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