
A PARTNERSHIP OF LIONS
LYNDA CARRAHER

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Sulu was trying to stay calm and reasonable. It wasn't easy when Uhura was so angry, but he tried.

“Look, the Articles say--"

"I don't care what the Articles say!” She slammed her palm against the tabletop, making the empty glasses dance. "It's a bloody farce, and you know it." Her voice took on a mimicking tone. "No restrictions on members of either sex to participate in any capacity." She added another comment, but it was in Swahili, and Sulu was rather glad he didn't understand it precisely. The meaning was clear anyway.

Uhura was going on, giving the tabletop an extremely rough time. "There has never been a woman in Starfleet with a line command. Desk jobs, yes. But never out there." She gestured toward the viewport, at the stars that hung silently over the refitting base. "Nobody's ever had the guts to push it until now. What headquarters is asking is unfair and downright degrading. Those Lyran women are space veterans, every one of them, and they shouldn't have to prove anything in order to qualify for line duty as Starfleet officers."

"It's not an entrance exam, Uhura. It's a study--"

"I know. 'A study in compatibility of training criteria'." She used the Swahili word again. "So how come there aren't any women on the Federation team?"

"You sound like you're sore about not going. Just be glad you didn't get your shore leave busted up like I did."

Uhura blew out an exasperated breath. "What's one shore leave more or less, when the career of every woman in Starfleet is on the line? It *is* a test, or a crazy game, which is even worse. Let's choose up

sides, men against the women, like it was a chess tournament or something."

Sulu was glad the place was nearly empty; Uhura was getting loud. The bartender, in fact, was eyeing them suspiciously. Sulu decided to make a tactical withdrawal

"Okay, you win. It's unfair, and probably illegal, if anybody wanted to challenge it. But it's a little late for that -- we launch tomorrow. Which, if you'll remember, is why I promised you a steak dinner tonight, before we got sidetracked. Let's go get it."

Uhura's chair protested the suddenness of her rising. "*You* go get it!" she snapped. "I'm going back to quarters and start writing a formal grievance."

He watched her stalk off, puzzled still at how a simple talk over pre-dinner drinks could have led to this.

Oh, well, he decided as he paid the tab, *at least she didn't blow up where the captain could hear her.*

He was only partially right in that. Kirk, sitting alone in a rear booth and waiting for a lady who had apparently changed her mind, had been unaware of their presence until the sound level rose to an unignorable pitch. And he'd heard enough to give him a case of the galloping doubts.

He'd had more than a few to begin with.

The Lyran planetary system wanted into the Federation; had wanted into the Federation since before the Romulan war. But there was a kicker -- they wanted guarantees that the qualified women in their spaceforce would be eligible for all line positions, including command. And they were well aware that such commands had never been granted, despite provisions for them within the Articles of Federation.

So some clever young bureaucrat somewhere had come up with a proposition. Two planetary survey parties, one Lyran, one Federation, would fly identical ships on a mock-up run to Ariran. On that uninhabited planet, maintained by Starfleet for training purposes,

several routine exercises would be carried out. And despite the official jargon about compatibility of training criteria, it was precisely what it appeared to be -- an entrance exam.

The Lyrans didn't like it, but they bought it, for reasons best known only to themselves. Their team was already on hand and was ready to go. All that was needed was a fifteen-member crew from a Federation ship. Like, maybe, *Enterprise*, currently laid up for refitting and shore leave.

He could have grabbed that shore leave technicality and run like a thief. And probably would have, if Commodore Hayden hadn't grabbed a particularly tender chunk of Kirk's conscience and pinched it till it yelped.

Without coming right out and saying so, Hayden had hinted that somebody somewhere up the line felt Kirk's evaluation of women in command might be somewhat tinged by the Janice Lester affair of six months ago, and that he -- Hayden -- had countered by laying his own reputation on Kirk's capacity for objectivity.

The intimation had put Kirk in a double bind. Turning the mission down, as he had every right to do, would reflect back on Hayden's judgment. And it might also be interpreted to mean that Kirk had been permanently traumatized by the body exchange. That wasn't a chance he was willing to take. The incident had cost him too much pain at the time, and the mental scars were still tender. He didn't especially want anyone poking at them.

His musing was interrupted by the arrival of a young engineering technician.

"Captain Kirk?"

"Yes."

"Lieutenant Shannon sends her regrets, sir. She asked me to tell you she can't make it after all."

Kirk tried to keep the annoyance out of his voice as he thanked the tech. He told himself it was probably just as well; tomorrow was going to start very early.

He finished the drink he'd been nursing for half an hour and was just starting to get up when a woman entered the room.

Very nice, he thought. She was a tall, leggy redhead. The short kilt-like skirt she wore definitely improved the picture. There was a certain something about leggy redheads. He decided to stay a little longer. Tomorrow wasn't going to start *that* early.

Her glance flickered over him briefly, without interest, and he watched her as she stepped to the bar and received a wine glass of amber liquid from the bartender. She took it to a corner table and sat down, looking out at the starfield.

The engineering tech, who had made himself comfortable at one end of the bar, was definitely more interested in the woman than in the stars. He gestured to the bartender, who relayed a message to the redhead. She shook her head, not even looking up, and the bartender turned toward the tech, shrugged eloquently, and returned to morosely polishing the glasses.

The young engineer didn't seem to recognize the brush-off. He got up and sauntered to the table. This time, she at least looked up before shaking her head again. He persisted, leaned over the table, and tapped her shoulder. Annoyed, she got up and turned to leave, but he caught her by the elbow.

Enough was enough, Kirk decided. He slid out of the booth, turning to clear the table, and when he turned around to face the room again, the young technician was flying through the air in a graceful arc, headed in Kirk's general direction. His face wore an expression of utter astonishment right up until the instant he hit the floor.

Kirk stepped carefully around him and grinned at the woman. By this time, she was only inches away from him and making a determined march toward the door. She stopped, glared at him as if to ask if he wanted to be next, and then continued out.

He stood watching her, still grinning. *Well, Kirk,* he thought, *put away your shining armor. The lady doesn't want to be rescued.*

* * *

Kirk was enjoying himself. They were three hours into the fifteen hour flight to Ariran, and thus far the general attitude on the small bridge of the *Cairo* was that of a busman's holiday. Running a mock-up planetary survey was almost like turning the clock back to Academy days. The face that the Lyran team had the same assignment made it seem even more like a training jaunt. So did the silver, mushroom-shaped simulated-situations computer between the communication and science stations.

What nature didn't supply, Simucom would. Damage from mock attacks, systems malfunctions, whatever the programmer had entered, Simucom would create, and with such realism that more than one young officer had washed himself right out of the program in trying to outguess it.

Kirk had put the deceptively benign machine out of his mind and had taken the helm from Sulu. He was enjoying the responsiveness of the ship. It was a CZ-20, like the *Brasilia* being flown by the Lyrans, and it handled like a skimmer. He was just becoming comfortable with it when Spock's voice interrupted his concentration.

"Sensors indicate three small vessels on a course of 129 mark 12." As he said it, Simucom hummed into life. *Here we go*, Kirk thought. Somewhere beyond the CZ's limited sensor range, USS *Yorktown* cruised with its official observers. It was time to get back to business.

"Mr. Sulu, take the helm." He moved back to the command chair. "Are they on an intercept course with us, Spock?"

"Negative, Captain. But they are on an intercept vector with the *Brasilia*." He continued scanning. "Rigellean TK-180s, sir." He looked up from the hooded viewer. "I believe they are also known as Wasps."

Kirk nodded briefly. He ordered yellow alert status and instructed Spock to watch for any additional craft. The tiny, two-man fighters were aptly named. Carried in the belly of a mother ship, they were

extremely effective attack mechanisms. Virtually unarmored, they depended on their supreme maneuverability and deadly short-range phasers for their punch, which was considerable.

“Get me a scan on the *Brasilia*.”

“*Brasilia* definitely under attack, Captain,” Spock said. “They had taken a hit. Their phaser banks show a loss of power, and they are attempting to take evasive action.”

"They can't out maneuver those Wasps.” He keyed open an intercom switch. "Red alert. This is a simulated battle action. Phasers operational on one one-hundredth. We're going in after them. Course 129 mark 12, Mr. Sulu."

Cairo banked gently and *Brasilia* came into the forward scanner's view. One of the Wasps dived in low, and the red glow of phaser fire tinted the screen. Kirk reminded his adrenal glands that it was just a simulation. They ignored him.

"Another hit, Captain," Spock reported. "Life support systems switching to battery."

"Mr. Chekov, lock phasers on Wasp at four o'clock.

"They're moving too fast to get a lock, Captain."

"Widest range then, Ensign. Fire on sighting."

"Widest range, sir." Chekov was intent on his grid, firing twice with no hit, and then turning in his chair with a grin as his third shot was successful.

"Very good, Ensign. Continue to fire on sighting."

"Yes, sir."

"Forward phasers on the *Brasilia* operational., Captain," Spock announced. "They are firing."

Simucom beeped suddenly, then Scott's voice broke over the speaker. "We've taken a direct hit in engineering, Captain. Simucom reports two casualties."

"Damage, Scotty?"

"We're dead in space, sir. Everythin's out."

"Well, that's it, then. Pick out your casualties and send them to the transporter."

"But, Captain--"

"*Brasilia* firing again. Attacker disabled," Spock interrupted. "Remaining craft breaking off contact. Life support functions on the *Brasilia* returning to normal."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock." Kirk killed the alert status, and the sirens cut out. "Now, Scotty, what about your casualties?"

"Captain, if I give up both my men, we'll be here forever. Every circuit breaker in the engine room is thrown, and Simucom says I have damage in the intermix chamber. I canna run that down wi'out my crew. Can't we trade them someone from another section?"

"You know better than that, Scotty. If Simucom says you have two casualties in engineering, we have to deliver."

"Aye, sir," he grumbled.

"Message coming through from the *Brasilia*, Captain," Ryder announced.

"Put it on the screen."

The image was distorted and fuzzy as a woman's voice identified itself as Captain Prentiss of the *Brasilia*.

"Get me some clarification on that screen, Ensign!"

"Yes, sir."

"This is Captain Kirk of the *Cairo*," he said as the image resolved itself into a surprisingly familiar face. Captain Prentiss of the *Brasilia*, it seemed, was the leggy redhead of last night's bar incident, and she seemed to be even angrier than she'd been the night before. If she recognized Kirk, she gave no indication of it.

"Captain Kirk, I wish to lodge an official complaint regarding your

actions.”

Kirk was thunderstruck. "You *what*?"

"You seem to have a compulsion to go around rescuing people who don't need rescuing, Captain." So she did remember after all. "My crew was effecting repairs when you barged in. We are quite capable of defending ourselves.”

Kirk heard a sound from behind him that was suspiciously like a snicker. It did not improve his mood. "Captain Prentiss," he said carefully, "I realize that your people are not Starfleet-trained. You may therefore be unaware of General Order Five, which states that the commander of an armed vessel is obligated to--"

"Sir," Tony Ryder's voice broke in from the communications console, "I have another communication coming in."

"In a minute, Ensign." He turned back to the viewscreen. "--is obligated to go to the aid of any sister ship which, in the commander's opinion--"

"It's from the *Yorktown*,” Ryder continued. "They're within transporter range now, sir, and they request we beam up our assigned casualties--"

"Ensign Ryder--"

"Immediately, sir."

Kirk restrained the urge to throttle his communications officer. He should have either informed Kirk immediately that the message was from the *Yorktown*, or acknowledged it himself and relayed it when Kirk was finished. "Mister Ryder," he said carefully, "you may inform the *Yorktown* that we will comply with their request. Immediately. And then you may summon Ensign Mitra to take your place on the board. You're relieved of your post. Have you got that?"

"Yes, sir."

Ryder was cowed, at least momentarily, and Kirk could feel a beauty of a headache building up in the back of his skull. He wished he'd

picked Uhura for this mission, regardless of the fact that she was a woman. He turned around once more to Captain Prentiss, whose face was now wearing an expression of undeniable smugness.

"Casualties, Captain?" she said with an elegantly arched eyebrow. "Nothing serious, I trust. It would be a shame if you had to abort your mission at this early stage."

Yes, Kirk thought. *You'd cry big tears*. The woman was almost purring, but her next words lit a gleam in a dark corner of his mind.

"If we can render any assistance, Captain, just say so. General Order Five, you know."

Kirk smiled at the image on the viewscreen, and if Davra Prentiss had known her opponent better, the smile would have set red-alert klaxons blaring in her head.

"As a matter of fact, Captain--" Was it the crew's imagination, or did Kirk's voice on that particular word have just a shade more emphasis than was warranted? "--there is one small service your crew might perform."

The woman's face, watching, was wary.

"We could use two extra pairs of hands in engineering. Of course, if it would cause you any difficulty..."

The bait was taken; the woman's chin came up in a gesture of challenge as blatant as a fighting cock's hackles. "Not at all, Captain. Have your transport tech contact mine with the coordinates. Prentiss out."

The screen went dark, and Kirk hit the intercom button with a grin. "Scotty? Get over to the transporter. I've got you two engineers."

* * *

Tony Ryder swung his chair from side to side and stifled a yawn. He'd be glad when they made planetfall. Orbiting would

begin momentarily, and when the aerial mapping was through, they could set this bird down and close up shop for the night. And long overdue, too.

Kirk had pulled him off the board after that phony attack and chewed him out royally in his quarters. He didn't think Kirk was such a hot commander, despite the fact that Uhura thought the galaxy turned around him. Ryder didn't like having his shore leave cancelled to go gallivanting around on a fool's errand, and he liked working split watches even less. If Kirk hadn't gotten his tail in a knot over that message from the *Yorktown*, he'd have finished his watch long ago, and it would be Mitra sitting up here trying to keep awake.

And as for that metal mushroom squatting at his left elbow ... he liked that least of all. Games, that's all they were. The attack was a game, the navigation malfunction shortly after he'd returned to the board had been a game, and the glitch in the computer display had been a game, too, the most miserable one of all. It meant he'd spent forty-five minutes hunkered down on his haunches handing tools to Spock while his thigh muscles cramped and the sweat rolled down his back and any movement to relieve either condition brought forth a terse reprimand to pay attention to what he was supposed to be doing.

That had been some time ago, however, and now he wasn't cramped. He was just bored. He yawned widely, not bothering to try to hide it this time. He'd had it up to here with Kirk and Spock and Simucom, and decided to ask for a transfer as soon as they got back to the starbase.

A red telltale winked into life on his panel and he ignored it. The hell with Simucom and its games. He turned to watch the main viewscreen, where Ariran turned in its lonely orbit.

"Standard orbit achieved, sir," Sulu was saying, as Spock signaled the cartographic section to begin its mapping activities.

Ryder stretched and clasped his hands behind his head, daydreaming about what assignment he should ask for in his transfer. He was pulled rudely out of. his reverie by Spock's voice.

"Mr. Ryder, you have an overload indicator activated."

He made a noncommittal noise. "More games from Simucom," he muttered, swinging around lazily.

"Simucom is a remarkable instrument, Ensign, but it cannot reproduce the odor of burning relays."

Ryder was suddenly all attention as the acrid smell hit his nose. He reached for the cutoff, his sudden acknowledgement of the reality of the situation scrambling his very recent checkout on the CZ board. What he hit was not the cutoff but the override, and as he did so, he countermanded the failsafe backup in the overload system. With a whoomp like an abused bass drum, the whole board shorted out, sending its electrical load through every conductive surface at the station, including Ryder.

The scream that came from his throat was cut off as a meter-high pillar of flame erupted from the surface of the now-dead board, and Ryder fell away as Spock yanked the chemical extinguisher from its brackets and played the foam over the fire.

It was over in seconds; all that remained were the odors and the wisps of smoke which the ventilators began to suck away. Somebody said "Jesus!" in an awe-stricken voice as Kirk summoned McCoy from the infirmary.

The medic's face was grim as he followed the litter from the bridge. He turned briefly at Kirk's querying, “Bones?"

"It looks bad, Jim. I'll call you when I've had a closer look."

* * *

It was not until after they had completed the somewhat ticklish maneuver of setting the *Cairo* down on Ariran's surface that Kirk had the opportunity to make his way to the infirmary. CZ craft were the largest Federation-designed vessels capable of making planetfall, and there were plenty of helmsmen who were willing to swear that the CZ designers had been far too optimistic when they labeled the ship

landable. CZs were not forgiving ships, and making planetfall in them was always a rather touch-and-go affair.

As soon as they were settled in the soft blow-sand of their chosen landing site, Kirk put his first officer to work getting everyone settled in for the night, and left the bridge.

McCoy was giving instructions to a technician, and when he saw Kirk, his expression did little to lighten the captain's mood.

"How's Ryder?"

"Not good, Jim. Electric shock is a damn nasty thing to play with any way you look at it, and his hands are badly burned. I'd advise getting him back to a Starbase as soon as possible, so they can start reconstruction work. Otherwise, he's going to lose function in both of them."

"Can't you do anything for him here?"

"I can keep him sedated against the pain and keep his other body functions on an even keel. That's it. I have no facilities here for anything as delicate and demanding as reconstructive surgery. Are you going to be able to patch our communications board back together?"

Kirk shook his head, and the line of his mouth tightened. "Spock and Scotty have both taken a look at it, and they both say that board is one big lump of fused components." He sat down across from McCoy and rubbed a hand across his face.

McCoy could see the fatigue in the line of his friend's shoulders; knew it came as much from his concern for Ryder as from the long day they had all put in. He hated to add to that concern, but it had to be said.

"Jim, if that boy doesn't get proper medical care -- and soon -- he's going to be crippled for the rest of his life."

"How long?" he asked without moving his hand.

"Three days. Maybe four. I can retard the healing process that long without risking permanent degeneration. After that..." He let his

voice trail off.

"All right. I'll contact the Lyrans and have them radio Starfleet to have him picked up." He pushed himself up out of the chair. "Do what you can for him, Bones. I'll get back to you."

He thought about Ryder as he started down the corridor. It had been such a needless accident, such a total waste. That was the part which was hard for him to accept. He had no great fondness for cocky youngsters like Ryder, but he felt there might be a Starfleet officer lurking somewhere under that brash exterior. Uhura thought there was, and she had even less patience with incompetence than Kirk had. Ryder had the technical skill; it was just a matter of judgment. It was totally unthinkable that a lapse in judgment, committed under the weight of stress and fatigue, be allowed to destroy his career before it was hardly begun.

He caught sight of Spock ahead of him and quickened his pace. "Mr. Spock, may I see you for a moment in my quarters?"

Spock's usually immaculate uniform was now stained by the extinguisher foam and Kirk noticed several blisters on the back of the Vulcan's hands.

"When we're done, I want you to have McCoy take a look at those."

"Very well." Spock lapsed into his customary silence, and Kirk found himself staring at the science officer's hands. Marvelous instruments, really. He'd never thought about them before; hands were just … there. Except that for Ryder, they wouldn't be. Unless...

The door to his quarters hissed open for them and he waved Spock to a chair. "Can you locate the Lyran encampment with the ship's sensors?"

"I can if they are in this general area. To do a planetary sweep, however, we would have to reassume orbit."

"I want you to give it a try first thing in the morning. Then Bones and I are going to pay them a little visit. He says Ryder's got to be evacuated, and with our communications dead..." He let his voice trail off.

Spock nodded. "May I point out, however, that the Lyrans may not be too eager to help us."

"I think this goes beyond a little petty rivalry, Spock."

"Did you speak to the Lyran women when they were on board?"

"No. Didn't even see them. How did they do?"

"They performed very well. I am referring, however, to their attitude. I gather they felt they had been tricked into rendering assistance."

"It was offered."

Spock raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"We're talking about a man's career, Spock. About his continuing to function as a human being."

"They have no loyalty to the Federation, nor any affection for Starfleet."

"Surely they wouldn't turn us down."

"You are speaking of one man, Captain. The Lyrans have memories of forty thousand men, women, and children killed, and of uncounted thousands more hopelessly disfigured."

Kirk edged forward in his chair. "What are you getting at?"

"While on Starbase Twenty-three, I had an opportunity to take a look at certain aspects of Lyran history, from the Lyran viewpoint. It is not a record of the Federation's finest hour. And the Lyrans appear to have a long memory."

"Specify."

"The initial colonization of Lyra IV was undertaken against the strongest possible objections of the Federation Security Council, because of its location. They are still not Federation members, you know. During the Romulan war of a century ago, the planet was in disputed territory, hundreds of parsecs from the nearest source of aid. They suffered devastating losses, largely because the Federation

refused to assist in their defense. Forty thousand colonists were slaughtered during the war, and the record of subsequent death and disfigurement after the cessation of active hostility has never been fully compiled. The historians arbitrarily chose sixty thousand -- nearly half the remaining population --- as an approximation. The Lyrans have never forgotten that, Captain, and I would not look to them for forgiveness."

Kirk swallowed hard, tasting bitterness, as if someone had just told him his grandfather practiced some secret and particularly distasteful depravity.

"That's not the way they tell it at the Academy," he said softly.

"No," Spock agreed. "Because if they did, and the decision should have to be made again, it might be made differently."

"Shouldn't it?" The bitterness in his mouth was clear now in his voice.

"Should it? Would you sacrifice billions of lives and a nascent Federation, with all its potential for unification -- for what we perceive as good -- in a fore-doomed attempt to save a comparatively small number of colonists whose greed led them to settle an indefensible planet?"

Spock was totally unperturbed, Kirk realized suddenly, by the fact that he had just championed both sides of a morally insoluble dilemma.

"Whose side are you on, anyway?" he snapped, wishing the Vulcan would stop playing chameleon.

Spock's answer was prompt, as if it were a foregone conclusion. "Yours," he said simply.

* * *

Kirk was still chewing on that one as he and McCoy came within sight of the Lyran encampment the next morning. It had taken nearly an hour's hard hiking under Ariran's metallic sky to bring them to this

point, and he was in no mood for the ticklish maneuver he knew to be ahead of them:

He was perversely pleased to see that the Lyran's landing had not been without mishap. *Brasilia* had plowed a wide swath through the undergrowth for nearly half a kilometer, ripping through a grove of saplings before it had come to an ignominious and probably bone-shaking stop at the base of a rocky slope.

The nose of the CZ was crumpled against the stone face, and Kirk hoped no one had been in the forward compartments during that landing. Two of the retractable atmospheric flight fins had been ripped off, apparently in the demolished grove, for a work party was laboriously hauling them back toward the crippled vessel. Since they had only one antigrav unit, and since it was obviously inadequate to the task, considerable Lyran-power was being applied. Female Lyran-power, he noted.

For all of that, an orderly and neat base camp was shaping up on the lake shore below them, and *Captain* Prentiss -- he still italicized that title in his mind -- had posted sentries, just like the book said you should ... though the petite blonde who hailed them looked incapable of stopping anything more determined than a butterfly.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught McCoy trying out his best Southern Gentleman charm, which hit the blonde's icy reserve with an almost audible *ping!* and then just sort of slithered away into limbo. He restrained an urge to grin at McCoy's chagrin; this was really no joking matter.

Bones had dismissed Spock's notion that the Lyrans might not render aid. He had shot General Order Five back at Kirk, reminding him that sister ships were required to aid one another. Kirk was ashamed to admit he hadn't thought about that the night before. Privately, he laid it to Spock's chameleon act, even though a little voice inside said it wasn't the Vulcan's fault if the Lyran history lesson had rattled him so badly he'd forgotten the obvious.

The sentry led them down the hillside and through the Lyran base camp. Though work did not exactly stop, they were the objects of

several sharp glances. None of them friendly.

"A little nippy down here by the lake, isn't it?" McCoy observed casually. "Maybe we should've brought our sweaters."

"Very funny, Bones," he snapped. The attitude of the Lyrans had done nothing for either his confidence or his humor, and McCoy wasn't helping by belaboring the obvious.

The sentry left them unceremoniously at the foot of the *Brasilia* boarding ramp and disappeared inside. Kirk fumed impotently at this less-than-veiled insult and tried to remind himself that there was nothing to gain and everything to lose by letting his temper get the better of him. She reappeared barely before Kirk reached his boiling point, and he thought he had himself under control .until he started up the ramp. He was already committed to the movement when he heard her crisply announce, "Permission to come aboard, sir."

"You're damn right," he muttered under his breath, and this time it was McCoy who chastised him.

"Take it easy, Jim."

Kirk kept reciting the four words in his mind, hike a mantra, as they entered the ship, which lay canted at an angle that made walking difficult and charging impossible.

Davra Prentiss' cabin was aft in the upper deck and she was sitting behind her desk when the sentry escorted them in. Kirk had the feeling she hadn't been there long, though, because her face glowed with the dampness of exertion and there was a long smudge of either soot or grease along her jawline. She clenched her hands together on the desktop and surveyed them coolly. She didn't invite them to sit.

"Captain Kirk."

"Captain Prentiss." He kept the italics out of his voice, he noted with satisfaction. And most of the temper. "This is Dr. McCoy, my chief medical officer." He decided to kick the ante up just a little, hoping to open from a more advantageous position. "I hope you didn't have any casualties in your ... landing."

The tightening of Prentiss' jaw told him he'd touched a nerve.

"None, Captain," she said levelly. "Your ... concern ... is touching. Almost as touching as the mentality which programmed Simucom to disable our stabilizers after we were committed for landing."

Kirk felt an unpleasant tightening in his belly. That was a bit much, he thought. Somebody -- a lot of somebodies -- could have bought the farm with that little caper. To bring the *Brasilia* down in one piece with no stabilizers…

"My compliments to your helmsman," he said. Helmswoman? "Under the circumstances, that was a very respectable piece of flying."

"Thank you, Captain," came a voice from behind him.

Kirk turned as a diminutive brunette came into the cabin, sidling between him and McCoy in the cramped quarters, just close enough for both men to be able to, fully appreciate certain other talents with which she was undeniably endowed.

Davra allowed herself a slight smile at the effect, since neither man was apt to notice it at that particular moment. Rachel Baumann came around the desk and stood at her shoulder, quite well aware of the reaction she had caused. *Count on Rachel*, Davra thought. She knew this wasn't a social call and whatever means she could use to throw these two off balance gave her just that much more leverage.

"Gentlemen, this is Commander Baumann, my first officer and helmsman." Davra Prentiss did not play poker, but she was an ardent fencer, and she certainly knew enough to press when her opponent's guard was down and he had his weight on the front foot. "I assume you have a purpose for your call -- other than ogling my crew, that is." She was rewarded by the angry tightening of Kirk's expression and gave herself a mental point for that thrust.

Kirk bit back the first thing that came to mind, which was not only insulting, but obscene as well. The words he knew he had to say were like stones in his throat, and he forced himself to think of Ryder

as he said them. "Our purpose, Captain, is ... to seek your aid. Our communications are out, and we need to contact the *Yorktown* to evacuate one of my crewmen."

The incident of the engineers still rankled Davra. She had not forgotten how smoothly she had been suckered into that one, and she was still kicking herself for it. She had been enjoying Kirk's current discomfort. It was part of a game she could have played indefinitely under other circumstances. But she was also .aware of the importance of completing this assignment successfully... There was no time to waste with gamesmanship.

"Regretfully, Captain Kirk, I must refuse your request."

"It is not precisely a request, Captain. Under the provisions of General Order Five, you are obligated to render aid to a sister ship. That includes planetary missions as well as spaceflight."

"I am required to do so, Captain, only when, in my estimation, it will not jeopardize my primary duty." She did not add that she had looked up that particular order after the incident of the engineers, but now she was glad she-had. "According to the terms of the agreement Starfleet drew up, each of our parties is expected to operate as though it was alone on the planet. You are in violation of that agreement now, sir, and I will not willingly become a party to that violation."

Kirk could almost feel McCoy's shock and outrage at he woman's cold denial, and he forced his tone into a syrupy charm that sounded as phony as it felt. "Captain Prentiss, it was never Starfleet's intention to endanger anyone's life on this mission." He thought, too late, of the Simucom order that had disabled the *Brasilia* at a crucial moment, but went on with his statement anyway. "I have a very seriously wounded man at our camp. If you require substantiation, I'm sure Dr. McCoy would be happy to explain--"

"I'm not interested in Dr. McCoy's explanations, Captain. I am interested only in completing this mission and getting my ship flightworthy. Your presence here is interfering with both those endeavors. Good day, gentlemen."

She watched them as they left and tasted the remnants of their anger hanging in the air after they were gone. She hadn't liked that. Nor had she liked denying their request. If the roles had been reversed, she'd have been every bit as furious as they were.

"Davra, was that wise?" The voice was Rachel's, but it might have been her own. Part of Baumann's job, and they both knew it, was to voice those questions Davra had to ask herself, to provide a sounding board for their justification. Her ability to do it not only out of duty, but out of affection as well, was one of the things that made them such a good team.

"Probably not, Rachel. But it was necessary."

"But if the man is really in danger--"

"I expect he is. Kirk may be devious, but I don't think he's dishonest. None of our intelligence reports indicate that. If his man really has to be evacuated, I think Kirk will take him off-planet; even if it means scrubbing the mission. And we win, hands down."

"If we can get the *Brasilia* to fly again."

"She'll fly. If I have to pick her up and carry her, she'll fly."

"And is it worth it?"

"*Yes, dammit!* It's worth it. Any time you think it isn't, just think about how many Lyrans died when the Federation turned its back on us. And it will happen again, sooner or later, if we don't force them to admit us." Her hands tightened on the edge of the desk, the knuckles whitening under the strain. "We've finally got something they want, and we have to move now, before their settlement council changes its mind about wanting us to open the inner planets for colonization. The life of one man, one woman -- Lyran or Federation -- can't keep us from doing what we have to do."

"They'd have admitted us long ago it we hadn't pushed the issue of women in line command."

"It had to be pushed. If they'll only give lip-service to that idea, how many other articles will they feel they can ignore?"

Rachel looked down at Davra's shoulders, taut with tension, and knew the woman had convinced herself now, beyond the very real temptation to reverse her decision; knew she had fulfilled her primary function and now could voice the other thought.

"That doesn't make it easy to turn them down, though, does it?:

The tension went out of the shoulders as Davra unlocked her hands and sighed.

"No, Rachel. It doesn't."

* * *

Kirk's temper was not improved as they entered their own base camp without being challenged by a sentry. They had certainly been making enough noise to attract one's attention, and he specifically remembered telling Spock to see that sentries were posted. If, on top of everything else, the Vulcan was slipping—

Before he could complete the thought, the ground pitched under him, and a billow of blue flame erupted from the *Cairo's* midsection.

He hit the ground in a tight ball, with his arms instinctively curled around his head. He could feel the patter of small stones raining down on his back. As the explosion died away, he rolled to his feet and saw, in the periphery of his vision, McCoy pushing to his knees, shaking his head as if to clear it.

Cairo was split open amidships, electronic entrails spilling out, cables writhing as they shorted themselves out. He saw men picking themselves up, running; saw Spock directing efforts to get the fire out; saw one or two men who didn't move at all. But he was moving, and McCoy was, each to his own area of concern.

He was moving on a trained-in level so deep it was nearly instinctive seeing men fight with ridiculously inadequate fire extinguisher's, with blankets, with shovels, and thinking they might as well have been spitting on the flames.

He was wrong in that thought. Whether their combined efforts added

up to sufficient force, or whether the flames had simply run out of easily burnable materials, he couldn't say. But they were gaining on it, smothering it, stamping it into oblivion, until nothing remained but the smell of fused circuits and something else he didn't want to identify, and the thick, choking smoke that made his eyes water and his throat ache.

He caught sight of McCoy and hailed him asking about casualties.

"One dead out here -- Sandor Bernardo. Piece of metal in his chest. And, Jim... Ryder was still in the ship. In the infirmary."

Kirk identified that other smell now, acknowledged it for what he had refused to accept before. Breathed a soft curse that said a number of things, on a number of levels. Looked up to see Spock coming toward them as McCoy left to respond to someone else's need.

"What happened?"

Spock's uniform was scorched, his face smudged, but his voice and demeanor were as calm as if he had watched the last half hour's activities from a reviewing stand somewhere. "At the moment, Captain, I can offer only speculation."

"Spock, I'd rather have your speculation than half a dozen other men's certainties."

Spock started to point out the illogic of that statement, then thought the better of it. "It was an explosion which simply should not have occurred. Mr. Chekov and I secured the ship this morning, and there were no malfunctions or anomalies anywhere except within the communications system. I can postulate only one thing, as unattractive as it is."

Kirk's mind, unfettered by Spock's circuitous but undeniably thorough logic, was already locked on the same conclusion.

"Sabotage?" He was unable to fully accept it, but Spock's nod said his guess was right.

"I cannot confirm that until the wreckage cools, but in view of the

fact that someone did indeed sabotage the communica--"

"What?"

"Mr. Scott and I examined the board again this morning. There is no question in his mind or in mine. Certain modules had been tampered with, and the cutoff had been disabled, doubtless before we ever left the starbase. Even if Mr. Ryder had not inadvertently thrown the override, the result would have been the same."

Kirk considered several possibilities, none of them pleasant. Finally he turned away from the wreckage and stretched, rubbing at the knotted muscles at the nape of his neck. "All right. I want to see Scotty -- where is he?" He was counting the forms he could see, and he kept coming up two short.

"Mr. Scott and Ensign Mitra were assigned sentry duty," Spock said, and a most unpleasant possibility crossed his mind. "They both should have responded to the noise of the explosion."

Again, Kirk was ahead of him, and he didn't like the thought. Not one little bit. "We weren't challenged coming in," he said.

Spock raised one eyebrow.

"Get a search party together, and--" He broke off as he spotted the burly, red-clad form of Scott pushing through the underbrush. His relief at seeing the engineer apparently unharmed was cut short as he realized Scotty was carrying a slight form whose dangling arms swayed with each step.

He didn't remember yelling for McCoy, but he must have done so, for the doctor was there even as Scotty reached the perimeter of the camp and deposited his burden.

Mitra was ashen under his swarthy complexion, and the gaping rip in his shirt an even more brilliant scarlet. He coughed weakly and a pinkish froth bloomed at the corners of his mouth like some obscene flower. He moved his hand, like a blind man in an unfamiliar room, and Kirk reached out to give him an anchor. The gesture was never completed; Mitra's dark eyes lost their focus and the hand fell palm up, fingers curling inward. Kirk's gaze met McCoy's which

confirmed what he already knew.

McCoy shook his head in warning and moved to block the view from Scotty, moving smoothly through the examination as if nothing was wrong. The engineer had taken the shy young Mitra under his wing, and McCoy didn't want Scott to know just yet.

"You'd better be glad you're thick-headed," he pronounced, forcing a casualness he didn't feel into his voice. "Anybody else would have had a broken skull. What hit you?"

Apparently the ploy worked, for Scotty managed a faint grin. "Ye canna hurt a Scotsman by hittin' him in the head, Doctor. As to what it was, I dinna ken. But I know who. The gentleman and I had a bit o' a tussle, ye see.." He pulled something from the waistband of his pants and held it out for all to see. It was a piece of fabric, ripped and grimy, but clearly recognizable as the same distinctive print Kirk had so appreciated the first time he'd seen it ... in the uniform skirt Davra Prentiss wore.

Kirk got up slowly, fighting down the white heat of anger that threatened to explode the control he needed so desperately now. He spoke, finally, with a cold, flat tone that chilled McCoy to the bone.

"Mr. Spock," he said slowly, "I want four men. With phasers. They will accompany you and me when we pay a little call on Captain Davra Prentiss."

* * *

He was never precisely able to remember their second trek to the Lyran camp; whether it was faster or easier than the trail-breaking one he and McCoy had made earlier that morning was something he simply couldn't recall. All he knew was that anger had burned in him every step of the way, an anger so obvious that no one had dared intrude on it. Not even Spock.

He could still smell that ineradicable stench of burning flesh as they drew near the camp and he stumbled over something on the ground. The realization of what it was brought him down with a

sickening suddenness. The petite blonde sentry was staring sightlessly at him, her throat laid open like a second mouth in some hideous travesty of a smile, and he realized suddenly that the odor he smelled was real, too, and present here, not just in his memory.

"Spread out," he said, "and go in slow. I don't know what's happening down there, but it can't be pretty."

It wasn't.

Brasilia's metal hide wasn't ruptured, but it was nonetheless obvious that the Lyran craft, too, had been attacked. Oily smoke rolled out of the open hatches, and as they watched, two women stumbled out, one supporting the other. As they cleared the entry, two more women stepped into the dense cloud, apparently to take their place in what must be a pocket inferno.

Kirk remembered their own recent battle and thought how much worse it must be inside the cramped, superheated confines of the CZ. He broke into a run toward the *Brasilia*, forgetting that his original intention had not been to render assistance.

The woman who had helped her injured crewmate from the craft was stripping off a fire mask, and Kirk realized it was Davra Prentiss. Motioning his men to go on, to help wherever they could, he veered off to approach her.

"Prentiss!" he yelled. "What--" He got no further.

The woman looked up at him, sharply, an incongruous ring of white on her face where the mask had covered it. He saw a flicker of surprise, quickly drowned in murderous fury. She came up out of her crouch, a metal prybar in one hared.

"You sonofabitch," she said coldly and swung at him with all her weight behind the bar.

He hit the ground, rolling at her as the murderous weapon whistled past where his head had been an instant before. Some centuries-old pattern in his brain was saying you just don't go after a woman with your fists, even as another pattern insisted this one was very surely going to kill him if he didn't:

Survival won out and he came to his feet in a tight fighter's crouch as. Davra dropped the bar and slipped a much more efficient infighting weapon from its sheath in her boot. The sun glinted off the knife's blade as she closed on him with it held low and unwavering. The cold fury on her face told him she wouldn't hear anything he might say.

Neither did she hear Spock as he came up behind her, as quietly efficient as her own weapon.

Kirk had always thought there was something remarkably gentle in the Vulcan nerve-pinch, and the contradiction struck him particularly hard this time as Spock touched the woman and she slumped nearly to the ground before the Vulcan caught her.

* * *

Davra was aware first of a dull throbbing at the junction of shoulder and neck, like the aftermath of sleeping in an awkward position. Then she heard the rumble of voices, the words indistinguishable but the tone undeniably male, and she pushed away the last clinging shreds of unconsciousness, surprised to find herself not only alive but unrestrained.

Nearly unrestrained, she corrected as she registered the fact that she had been lying on a cot in a tent and that Kirk and two other men -- McCoy and a Vulcan -- sat at a camp table two meters away, deep in conversation. She was calculating the odds on being able to get past all three of them before they realized she was awake when the Vulcan looked over at her, wearing the typically aloof expression of his race.

"Captain," he said, and the other two also turned to face her, McCoy rising and starting toward her.

She sat up, stiffening her spine and forcing into her voice a calmness which she didn't feel. "I suppose you've come to finish the job, Kirk."

"Hold it, Bones," he said to McCoy and then looked directly at

her. "Let's get one thing straight right now, Captain Prentiss. No one from my party was responsible for the attack on your camp."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Yes." There was something in his tone that chipped away at her convictions, but she wasn't yet ready to accept him fully.

"Then who was?"

"The same people who tried to destroy the *Cairo*, I'd say. The same people responsible for that Simucom order to your stabilizer banks." He waited patiently for the information to sink in.

She felt a squirming in her stomach as an unpleasant possibility stirred into life, but she wasn't ready to take a good look at it yet. Things had happened too quickly, and she needed to think about them. To kick them around with Rachel.

Rachel. The memory was on her too quickly to defend herself against it and it went for her chest, balling there in a tight knot that wouldn't allow anything past it not even breath.

Kirk saw the change in her face, though he didn't know what brought it on. McCoy saw it too, and came forward at Kirk's nod.

Davra pulled away from the spray hypo. "What's that?"

"Just a sedative."

She kept herself drawn into a tight knot. "I don't want a sedative," she choked out. "I've got things to do"

"Most of them are already being done," Kirk said. "You've got a good crew." McCoy looked up from the medical scan she couldn't prevent him from making.

"Marginal," he said, almost to himself. "Okay, no sedative. Not right now, anyway. But if you get hysterical on me, young woman--"

She started an angry retort, but Kirk beat her to it.

"Bones," he said softly, "you're talking to a captain."

The rebuke rankled in her throat, unspoken. The other words, the

ones she knew common courtesy demanded, also stuck there. She forced them out. "Thank you, Captain."

He motioned the other two out of the tent before he answered. "That's not what you called me a while ago."

She knew what he was referring to. "I'm sorry about that," she said. "I was..."

"You were madder than hell. Just like I was when I thought your people were responsible for the attack on my camp. What made you think we did it?"

"What made you think *we* did it?" she shot back at him.

He pulled something out of his belt and handed it to her solemnly. She recognized it immediately and the slow squirming inside turned into a spinning certainty.

"Where did you get that?"

"One of my sentries tore it off the man who attacked him. But you don't have any men in your party, do you?"

"I chose as many men as you did women. And for precisely the same reason." She was rewarded by his slow burn, but he refused to be thrown off the scent again.

"Where did it come from then? It is from a Lyran uniform, isn't it?"

She gave up then, backed into a corner, still reeling from the morning's violence, still torn by the grief she hadn't given herself time to feel. Anything to get rid of him, to let her get back to the business of command, because she knew she wouldn't have it much longer.

"Yes."

"And you've got a damned good idea whose uniform, don't you?

She pushed off the cot. "Look, I've got--"

He was faster, catching her arms and her gaze with restrained anger. "What the hell is going on here? I've got three dead men in

my camp, I've got a ship with her guts strung over half the landing site, and I've got no more patience with this cat and mouse game you seem to be playing. I want some answers, Prentiss, and I want them now!" He slammed her back onto the cot with a force that threatened to dump it over. "Who else is on Ariran, and why did they hit both camps? What's your game, and why was *Cairo* damaged so much more than *Brasilia*?"

"It's no game, Kirk. As for the other..." She worked hard at keeping her voice level, threading it around the broken glass in her throat. "My first officer discovered the device and rigged a force field around it -- and her -- while she was trying to disarm it. She didn't make it. But the force-field took most of the kick out of the explosion."

Kirk thought fleetingly of the vitally alive woman he'd met scant hours ago and of what the destructive energies of any explosive would do to a human body trapped inside a force field with it at the moment of detonation. It was not a particularly pleasant vision.

"I'm sorry, he said, stepping back. "We didn't know."

He's waiting for me to say 'That's all right', she thought. *I'll be damned if I will. It's NOT all right.*

He studied the carefully impassive face, and something in the silent working of the woman's throat told him Rachel Baumann had been more than just another crewmate to the Lyran captain. He could imagine Spock taking the same kind of risk Rachel had taken, could imagine himself trying to deal with the horror of it, and suddenly he wasn't angry any more. He was just very tired.

"We didn't know you didn't have any medical personnel on board. By the time we found out and got Dr. McCoy here, your science officer was dead, too. Why didn't you abort after you lost your medics in the mock attack?"

She answered slowly, still absorbing the news of yet another death in her crew. "The success of this mission is – was -- very important to us. Starfleet can call it anything they want, but we both know what it

really is-- Can women cut it on the line? That's why we can't back off."

"Apparently somebody wants you to. Who? What are we up against?"

"Stupidity. Planetary race-hatred. Pride. How's that for starters?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "Not everybody on Lyra is thrilled at the prospect of becoming part of the Federation. They feel it's too little, too late. There are other … associations ... in the galaxy that appear to offer more. Including command opportunities for all members of our spaceforce, no strings attached, no fun and games on a training planet."

"If you're talking about the Romulan Empire, there are plenty of strings attached."

"Your opinion, Captain Kirk. And mine. But opinions only, and not unanimous on my planet." She fingered the scrap of cloth thoughtfully. "You know, this could be from any Lyran uniform. But if I were a betting woman, I'd bet you'd find a man named Jared Landau somewhere on this planet."

"You seem to have come up with the name pretty easily." He couldn't keep the suspicion out of his voice.

"He's never bothered to keep his political leanings to himself, Captain. And he'd be a good choice -- the very epitome of the soldier-statesman, and totally ruthless when he's convinced he's right."

"But to attack his own people..." He couldn't quite handle that one.

"We're his own people only so long as we do what he thinks is right. One man's patriot is another man's terrorist, Captain."

Kirk had a hunch he couldn't help playing. "Sounds like you know the gentleman."

She broke eye contact with him abruptly, studying the far wall of the tent. "I used to."

"Do you think he'll be back?"

"I know he will. You win, Kirk. The mission is shot to hell anyway. I'll contact Starfleet for you now."

"With what? You haven't got enough power in the *Brasilia* is to light up a hand torch. We've got maybe ten days before they send a recon flight out to see why we haven't shown up." For the first time, he saw something very like fear on the woman's face.

"Ten *days?* Captain, I wouldn't even count on ten *hours*. Jared will cut us to pieces and make it look like we did-it to each other. There won't be any question of Lyra joining the Federation, with or without women on the line." She started out of the tent, talking almost to herself.. "I've got to get sentries out, take a look at defensive positions, see about--"

"Prentiss--"

She turned, impatiently.

"If I might offer a suggestion..."

* * *

As the deep, moonless darkness closed over the camp, Kirk was having second thoughts about the wisdom of that suggestion. The idea of one camp for both groups had seemed flawlessly logical at the time. In the joint meeting they had held with Prentiss and two of her lieutenants, even Spock could find no flaw in it. One camp was easier to defend than two and the Lyran base, with its protecting lake on the west and rugged cliff face to the north was obviously the more defensible. Not to mention that the Lyrans, with the *Brasilia* unusable as a base of operations after its landing, had salvaged much more equipment before the attack than the *Cairo* party had. Tactically, it had been the correct move.

Still, he felt ill at ease. He had a sense of being regarded as an interloper, and worse yet, of being ... unnecessary. The remnants of his own crew had neatly filled the gaps in the Lyran force with a minimum of overlapping skills and no major areas left empty. But there were, undeniably, two captains, which was one too many. That

was a new situation for him, and an uncomfortable one.

The discomfort was intensified by the psychological advantage Davra held by being on her own territory. No matter how recent her claim to that particular patch of Ariran, it was still hers and she knew it. Not that she did or said anything to back up her claim. She didn't have to.

He wished he'd stayed with Scotty, Sulu, and Chekov at the *Cairo* site. That decision was giving him second thoughts, too. If the crippled ship was attacked again, those three men would be sitting ducks. Davra had shot down that likelihood, and Spock, surprisingly, had backed her up. As far as any observers would be able to tell, she had pointed out, *Cairo* would be abandoned. Why attack her? Any approach to the wreckage would likely be made in the daylight, without stealth or expectation of resistance. And by morning they should have the answer to Scott's proposal.

Scott's *crazy* proposal, he amended. How had he ever been backed into that one? Any fool could see that neither craft would ever fly again. Two times zero is still zero.

But Scotty wasn't a fool and he wasn't crazy, either. And maybe ... just maybe ... he and Spock could bend the laws of mathematics enough to make two times zero equal one. They'd done it often enough before. And that, Kirk reflected, was how he'd been backed into that one.

The simple fact of the matter was that James T. Kirk, starship captain turned CZ commander turned fifth wheel, was bored. McCoy and his med tech were puttering in the infirmary tent, McCoy with his medical dudgeon up over moving the injured from the *Cairo* site to this one. Spock and the two Lyran engineers were crawling through *Brasilia's* scorched innards, making a running inventory with Scotty's team via communicator. There was simply nobody to talk to, and nothing to do until morning.

He was also hungry. With most of the *Cairo's* provisions gone up in smoke, they had fed off the *Brasilia's* stores, and had done so with the feeling they were there on sufferance, like poor relations who had

arrived at mealtime and therefore had to be fed. But not necessarily with grace, or in abundance.

Ariran would be a hard place for anyone to starve on, as there was an abundance of edible plant life and small animals. But foraging had been one of the things they'd put off until tomorrow except for setting some improvised fish traps in the lake.. At least, he assumed they had been set. It might be worth checking out. If nothing else, the walk might lift his mood and unwind him enough so that he could sleep.

He didn't make it to the lake. His attention was diverted by the silhouette of a lone figure sitting at a low-burning fire, and as he approached it, he recognized Davra Prentiss.

She sat with her knees drawn up against her chest and as he approached, she laid her forehead on her crossed arms in a gesture of infinity weariness. On an impulse, he dropped to the ground next to her. She looked up as he settled him self, but didn't speak.

"Rough day," he offered.

"Yeah." She picked up a twig, peeled it carefully, and tossed it into the fire.

Kirk studied the planes of her face in the flickering light. It was a good face, he decided, strong but definitely feminine. Under different circumstances, he'd have enjoyed watching it. Hell, he was enjoying it now. Even though it was marked with a distant, distinctly grieving expression. She seemed to be in no mood for clever conversation.

"Am I intruding?" he asked finally.

She breathed a short sigh, and he got the impression she was mentally closing doors. "Just laying a few ghosts, Captain." She looked at him, curious, and for the first time without her air of sharp defiance. "You had a burial detail today, too, didn't you?" At his nod, she turned to look back at the fire. "Does it ever get easier?"

"If it does, you'd better turn in your stripes."

She murmured something, but it was lost in the pop of the fire.

"What?"

"I said, I may just do that anyway."

He tried to make light of it, gesturing at the pathetically brave huddle of tents under the Ariran sky. "And give up all this?"

She wasn't ready yet to let go of the pensiveness. "If it meant not burying any more friends ... yes."

"Do you really think that somebody else in command would have changed what that bomb did?"

"No. But it wouldn't have been Rachel. I talked her into this mission. She was going to leave the service, and I asked her to make one more run. Just one ... more ... run." She pounded her knee with her fist to emphasize the words. "Dammit. It's just not fair! Why her? Why--?"

"Can I give you a piece of advice? Don't ask questions like that. There aren't any answers that fit, and if you try to cut them so they will, the only thing that ends up bleeding is you."

"You know it all, don't you?" She couldn't keep the bitterness-out of her voice.

"No. Just what I've learned, and most of that the hard way. One thing I do know is that running doesn't help. It won't bring back what you've lost; it only makes the losing pointless." He reached out and touched her arm. "If you really believe Lyra belongs in the Federation, you've got to do everything you can to make it happen."

She looked him full in the face, and he wondered if the flames in her topaz eyes were reflections of the outer or inner fire.

"I thought you were on the other side of the fence," she said.

"Captain Prentiss, if there ever was a fence, it went up in smoke this afternoon. Like it or not, your people and mine are in this together. And that's the way we're going to have to get out of it -- together, or not at all."

"And the lion shall lie down with the lamb -- is that it?"

He grinned at her and this time it wasn't forced. "Not exactly. I think a couple of lions are going to join forces and knock the hell out of a pack of hyenas."

The sound she made was less laughter than it was the total and abrupt release of tension.

"You may not be a poet, Kirk, but you'll do." She got up and extended a hand to pull him to his feet. "I have in my tent what may very well be the only bottle; of Lyran wine on this planet. Also a loaf of challah and some very good, very ripe, very old cheese. Shall we celebrate the partnership of lions?"

"Lady, I thought you'd never ask."

* * *

It was a good thing, Kirk decided, that the bread and cheese had been too abundant for even the appetite of lions. The remnants, stowed in his pack along with some native fruit, made a comforting cushion against the foraging that might lie ahead of him. And it was his only comfort at the moment.

He was well aware that failure on his part would spell death for the seventeen others who would remain behind. And if Landau's force attacked again before he returned, it might not matter if he succeeded.

The Lyrans had appeared out of nowhere that morning; if it hadn't been for the quick response of the sentries, it would have been all over in minutes. But they had been lucky, or Landau's men had been unprepared for their determination, or both. But what had been planned as a deathblow had turned into a rout with the only casualty on their side Davra Prentiss herself -- and then only when the fighting was over.

Landau wouldn't try again, she promised Kirk, until he had time to re-evaluate the situation and mount a decisive attack. He had neither

the temperament nor the manpower for a series of expensive skirmishes. And the sight of his own captured field phaser, anchored on the rocky ridge behind the camp, would make him think twice.

She had been leading a mixed squad up the face of the ridge to mount the weapon when she took a bone-jarring fall. She turned down McCoy's demands that she report for treatment, holding him off with blistering invective, until the piece was set up to her satisfaction. She probably would have held him off even longer, had Bones not taken matters into his own hands with a quick and unasked for hypo. Kirk would have liked to be on hand when she came out of it. He had a fondness for fireworks.

He also had a fondness for knowing exactly where he was going and what he was likely to get into, preferably before he set out. He had neither at the moment. All he had was the knowledge that he had to locate Landau's camp, get in, and get out again with the dilithium. The rest was up to Scotty's team.

The patchwork ship with *Brasilia's* hull, *Cairo's* nose, and innards gleaned from both carcasses, would fly, Scott promised. She couldn't talk and she couldn't shoot, but she could get them spaceborne. If -- and Kirk refused to let himself think just how big an "if" that was -- they had dilithium to power her. And the only source of dilithium, with both CZs' power units destroyed in the explosions, lay within the camp of the hostile Lyrans.

He settled the pack more comfortably, nodded an acknowledgement to the sentry, and was about to leave when a shrill whistle yanked his attention back to the camp. And to a slim form, running toward him awkwardly, left arm bound tightly across strapped ribs. He could see the scowl while she was still ten paces off.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" she demanded.

"Where do I think I'm going? I'm not the one with a dislocated shoulder and three cracked ribs."

"Come on, Jim. McCoy was so cadgey that I knew something was up. Where are you going?"

He stared at a patch of sky somewhere over her right shoulder. "Oh, just down to the corner for a beer."

"Yeah, and pick up a spare dilithium pack on the way home?"

“Well, if I see one lying around somewhere--”

"You won't, and you know it. We're going to have to take it away from Jared, preferably without his knowing about it. This is a joint operation, Kirk. We decided that before the attack."

"And before you did a swan dive off the mountain.”

"Also before you'd ever seen the inside of a Lyran ship. As I recall, you were for stealing the whole thing until you found out it takes people at eight stations to get one off the ground. I suppose you've had a whole course on Lyran spacecraft since then."

"As a matter of fact, one of your engineers--"

She made a rude comment. "Drew you a picture, did she? Showed you just how to get a restraining cage off in the dark, in ten seconds, without setting off the klaxon, and how to watch your back at the same time? You may be one helluva captain, Captain, but try this by yourself, and you'll fall flat on your little round tokus. Now let's go." She propelled him past the grinning Lyran sentry.

"On my *what*?"

She was scanning the underbrush, pointing out the trail broken by Landau's force.

"A Lyran vulgarity, friend. I'll explain it when we get back." She gave him a sidelong glance that danced with ribald deviltry. "In fact, I'll be happy to point it out to you."

Her sudden, teasing intimacy, her switch from tough commander to flirtatious woman, threw him off balance and left him mentally stammering for a comeback as she led the way out of the camp. She had pulled a similar about-face on him the previous night, but the appropriate response then had not been verbal, and had come much more quickly.

He had been ill at ease the first few moments inside Davra's tent while she made hostess noises and motions to cover her own uncertainty.. The wine had helped, and they talked about Landau and the options open to them, slipping from that to descriptions of Earth, of Lyra. They told each other outrageous stories, each positive that the other was lying through his/her teeth, yet with the certain knowledge that the truest ones told by himself/herself were the ones most bizarre.

He recognized a similarity in their stories, a kinship of command and responsibility and self-reliance, and had almost forgotten she was a woman when she reached out and took his hand to make some point, and the atmosphere changed abruptly. A klaxon had gone off inside his head, telling him this was not the right time, not the right place, maybe not even the right person, and he had gotten up to leave. But she had moved to the entry with him, reached up without preamble to catch his face between her palms and draw it down into a kiss that tasted of wine and warmth and the never-banished loneliness of one who lived daily with the weight of command.

"Don't go," she had said when she released him, and it had not, been a request.

They never had settled the issue of who commanded whom, he realized. Hadn't settled it by the time he left the tent, hadn't settled it by the time they left the camp, and still hadn't settled it when they lost the trail in a broad, grassy meadow two hours later.

He wondered if it would have made a difference in the way he accepted her suggestion that they split up to look for it, or in the way she accepted his compliment when she found the faint tracings through the marshy ground that bordered the clearing.

"He wasn't trying to hide it," she said with a shrug. "If he had been, we could look all day and never know he'd been through here."

The remark rekindled a spark of curiosity in Kirk. "You're very fast with your assumptions," he said as they moved on through the rolling landscape. "Do you really know him that well?"

"I should. I shared with him for two years."

"Does that mean what I think it does?"

She spared him a quick look before she pressed on toward a, range of brushy hills. "I wouldn't have expected the idea of term marriage to bother you."

"It doesn't. What bothers me is that now you're trying to kill each other."

"I'm not. He is. Jared never lets anything get in the way of his career."

"Is that what broke it up?"

"I don't think that's any of your business.

"Anything that threatens this little expedition is my business. If you've got a personal axe to grind, I think I'd better know about it."

She blew an exasperated breath and tugged at the binding around her arm. "Look, Jim, it's over. It was over six months before our term was up. Part of it was this Federation thing, and his willingness to use violence to get his own way. Part of it was that he couldn't handle the idea of sharing the limelight with anybody. Maybe this is personal with him, but I doubt it. He figures on riding his stripes all the way to the top of the planetary council, and if he pulls this off: he could just do it. Satisfied?"

He wasn't, but he looked at the white lines around her mouth, born of pain or fatigue or both, and decided to let it go. "Do you want to pull up before we tackle those hills?"

She shook her head, pulling a thermoflask from her pack. Awkward with one arm bound, she fumbled it, and the cap came off as it hit the ground, spilling half a dozen red-striped capsules on the ground. She made a dive for then, but he was faster.

"Where'd you get the boosters, Davra?"

"McCoy."

"Try again. He hands them out one at a time, and then only after a

lecture on. what happens when they catch up with you. So where'd you get them?"

"From his tech. McCoy really ought to watch that man. He's a pushover."

"You sweet-talked Pete Crandall out of these?" He clucked his tongue at her. "That's not ethical, Davra."

"Was it ethical of McCoy to sneak up on me with that hypo? And don't tell me you've never sweet-talked your way around a hassle. Now give them back and let's go. We're losing the light."

"If you think I'm going to let you--"

"*Let me?* Get off my case, Jim! You're not my mother and you're not my C.O. and you're not my lifemate."

"No. I'm just somebody who cares about you."

"Who asked you to? I can take care of myself."

"Last night--"

"Last night I was hurting and you were there. That's all."

Her sharp words stung and he suddenly felt he had been used by this woman, used as casually and as callously as she was now lasing the boosters. Just something to mask the pain, something to enable her to reach another goal which had nothing to do with him as a person. He dropped the capsules in her palm and watched remotely as she washed one down with a drink from the flask.

Wordlessly, she started up the first hill and he followed. The ground rose steeply, and twice she stumbled and fell, hampered by the bound arm. After the second fall, she sat cursing softly as she found the clamps and unrolled the bandage.

She moved the shoulder experimentally, wincing slightly, and flexed her hand, looking up at Kirk, daring him to say something. He bit down on the warning in his throat. If Davra Prentiss wanted to cripple herself permanently, that was her business.

They made better time after that, cresting the last of the hills

cautiously as the twilight gathered around them. Kirk was in the lead, and he motioned Davra., down as she approached the skyline.

The camp lay in the flat, open country below them.. Kirk counted sixteen shelters fanning out from the sleek Lyran ship. It was bigger than the CZ-20s, and he wondered how they'd managed to set it down.

Davra poked him and pointed soundlessly to the small reconnaissance skimmer beyond the larger craft.

"Transportation home," she whispered with a grin. She seemed to have forgotten about their argument.

"Dilithium?"

"No. Solar batteries. But we'll have to either take it or disable it. I'm for taking it."

"You can fly one?"

"Blindfolded." She pointed again as a tall, squarely-built man emerged from the tent nearest the ship.

"Jared," she whispered.

Kirk pulled the televiewer from his pack and studied the man, impelled by curiosity. He had a strong, dark face, and he was vigorously chewing out three junior officers.

Davra was watching with her own viewer. "Madder than hell, as usual," she mused.

Kirk lowered his instrument and watched Davra instead. She seemed smugly satisfied with the man's appearance. He couldn't help wondering just how much truth was in her statement that the mission held no personal score-settling for her.

They settled down to wait for full darkness. There was very little cover around the camp. Getting in was going to be ticklish. Getting out was something Kirk didn't even want to think about.

Smells from the cooking fires drifted up to them, and they slid below the crest of the hill to share the food in Kirk's pack while planning

their approach to the ship.

"Scotty said it would be almost sunrise before they could finish up their work," he pointed out. "There's no sense going in yet. Why don't you grab some sleep?"

She shook her head, still flying on the powerful mix of stimulants in the boosters. "I'm fine. Go ahead if you're tired."

He was, but he couldn't bring himself to admit that to her. Despite their promise of partnership, there was still that issue of command to be settled. He wondered if leaving it in doubt, in accepting her straightforwardness of the previous night, he had given her the impression that it was settled wondered if she had been declaring independence or supremacy with her frank aggression.

Women were incomprehensible, he decided. It never dawned on him that she had merely been repeating a dominance pattern he had followed more than once in the past.

He lay back and watched the star patterns, his thoughts moving more and more slowly. He wasn't even aware that he had dozed off until Davra touched his shoulder. He jerked awake with embarrassment, wondering if it was time to go, but she was pointing at a meteor shower in the southern sky.

"Looks like home," she said. "I used to sneak out at night to watch them. And wonder what it would be like to be in the middle of one." The tone of her voice held an intimate, sharing tone, and he wondered briefly if she was looking for a way to apologize for her earlier harsh words to him.

"You wouldn't like it," he said gruffly, still annoyed at himself for dozing, and not yet ready to accept an apology that wasn't clearly voiced.

"I know that now. But you have to find some things out for yourself. You have to keep reaching, or you never know what you can have and what you can't."

"What are you reaching for now, Davra? A starship command?"

She took her eyes off the fiery display and looked at him; her expression serene and yet somehow sad. "No, Jim. Not for me." There was regret in her voice, but no bitterness.

"Why not? If the Council decides--"

"Jim, I'm twenty-eight years old. I've had my own command for two years. There's no way I could commit myself to six years at the Academy and God knows how long serving under somebody else on a ship that wasn't mine."

"Then would you mind telling me what you're doing out here, crawling around in the rocks and very likely to get your head blown off before morning?"

"Reaching," she said simply. "Not for me, maybe, but for some girl sitting on a Lyran rooftop right now, wondering." Her mood changed abruptly, as if she had let him see more of herself than she intended. "Come on It's time to earn our pay."

She slithered away, over the crest of the hill, and he followed inching painfully down the exposed slope, holding his breath for fear a sliding stone or breaking bush would reveal them to Landau's sentries.

They made a wide circle around the camp to approach from the rear, seeking the slightest depression or scrawniest shrub for cover, hearing the pounding of their own hearts, each wondering if it was audible to the other.

It took over an hour to make the full circuit, coming up at last on the bulk of the ship. Twenty meters away, a lone sentry sat disconsolately with his back against the hull, pulling at the grass beside him and weaving it into short chains which he broke and tossed away.

Kirk pulled the stunner from his belt noiselessly; hoping McCoy's and Scotty's hastily built gadget would work as promised. Davra caught at his arm and shook her head violently.

The sentry scrambled to his feet, brushing away the grass, and Kirk hugged the ground, feeling naked, sure their presence had been

spotted. But the youngster walked to the stern of the ship, calling out a smart challenge.

"It's only me," a voice said.

"I thought Levine was going to relieve me."

"Nah, he's got a bellyache or somethin'. I dunno. Beat it, kid."

"Okay." The young sentry swung his weapon over his shoulder. "Thanks." The older man waved a weary hand at him and stood for a moment, looking out over the ground with his hands on his hips.

Kirk realized that Davra had eased away from him during the exchange, and thought of double-cross, of ambush, jumped into his mind. Then he made out her vague outline several feet behind him and off to one side. To Kirk, she looked like just another hummock of grass, but apparently the new sentry thought it was a hummock that had no business being there. He moved out cautiously, swinging his weapon into place.

Kirk gathered his feet under him, springing up silently as the sentry passed, slapping the stunner against the man's neck. He went down so fast that Kirk nearly lost him, his left hand grabbing at the thick collar while his right, caught the falling weapon. The stunner in his palm clanked against the metallic casing with what sounded to him like the tolling of some giant bell, and he froze, with the guard's limp form hanging from one hand.

Davra wriggled toward him on her stomach, coming half upright with a questioning frown. He nodded toward the weapon and she shook her head with a look of exasperation that told him the noise had been mostly in his overwound imagination. He lowered the sentry to the grass then and looked at the stunner in his palm. It was almost as good as having Spock along, he decided.

Davra touched his sleeve and they moved like shadows to the bulk of the ship, sidling along its length to the stern, Kirk ventured a quick look around the ship's beam, then motioned Davra forward.

The boarding ramp was gained in two quick bounds, and at Davra's

light touch on a panel Kirk suddenly realized he could never have found, the doors sighed open with less noise than his own thundering heart. Inside with the doors shut behind them, he allowed himself to expel a long-held breath.

They moved down the corridor under the glow of the dimlights, both still wary of finding someone else in the ship. Their luck was holding out and they gained the open hatchway to the engine room in the longest twenty seconds of Kirk's life.

He spotted the restraining cage with its precious cargo, and was moving toward it when the dimlights went out, leaving him in a blackness so complete that it struck a deep and instinctive note of panic in his belly.

He dared a quick whisper. "Davra?"

"The alarm is wired through the dimlights."

So. That was what she had meant by working in the dark. He nodded automatically, then realized she couldn't see his acknowledgement, and his hand crept through his pack, looking for the tools he needed.

One outstretched hand found the side of the dilithium pedestal, and he dropped to his knees, turning the ratchets by feel. His hands were slick with sweat, and the wrench slipped from his fingers, falling with a clatter that rang in his ears like thunder.

"Damn!" His left hand had to support the half-released restraining bar, and his right hand groped without success in the inky blackness. "Davra?"

"What is it?"

"Do you have a belt light?"

“A what?”

He fumbled with his belt, hauled it off, and swung out with it in his right hand, away from the pedestal. "Take this," he said as her hand found the leather. "Near the clasp there's a button. It's a light. Shine it around on the floor I've lost the wrench."

She bit back a rebuke, searching in the darkness with the unfamiliar piece of equipment until she found the stud. The pencil-thin beam scurried across the floor like a rat, casting odd shadows that seemed to move of their own volition.

It picked up the gleam of the wrench and he reached for it as she killed the light abruptly. He sucked in a sharp breath; biting down on what he had been about to say as he realized why she had done it. Someone else was swinging through the hatch, silhouetted by the dimlights in the corridor.

Davra swung the belt in a wide arc, catching the man full in the face. His sudden shout was cut off abruptly as Davra's boot-knife slipped home. Kirk stripped the last bolt out of the restraining cage, letting the bar fall, heedless of the noise now. There was no way that shout could have gone unheard.

He yanked the crystal off its delicate moorings, feeling the solidness of it reassuring in his hand, and they pushed out the hatch together, running down the corridor, bursting out of the ship into a camp that was beginning to stir groggily, like an anthill broken open in winter.

The skimmer was meters away and he had only a confused sense of bodies moving, of men shouting, and the flare of something bluegreen and startling that cut his legs out from under him and sent a fiery numbness up his body.

He hit the ground, rolling over the dilithium crystal hugged against his chest, and Davra stepped over him, firing her own weapon with a marksman's two-handed stance.

He tried to get up, but his legs wouldn't support him, and she caught him under one arm, pulling him toward the skimmer and laying down a blistering fire with one hand. It wasn't accurate, but it was good enough to hold back the few Lyrans still trying to gather their wits and weapons.

"Go on!" he yelled, fumbling for the dilithium, trying to shove it into her hands. "Get out!"

"Hang on to that crystal, dammit! I can't carry it and you both!”

"I said, go on! You can't--"

"Shut up, Kirk. If you think I'm leaving without you, you're nuts." She broke off with a grunt, stepping backwards into the skimmer and yanking his torso across the threshold with a final heave that ripped her shoulder out of joint again and sent a cold flame of pain across her side. She dropped him there, unceremoniously, leaving him to haul himself the rest of the way in while she engaged the skimmer's engines, stopping only to take a one-handed potshot over his head out the open door.

"Are you in?"

His shouted "Yes!" came as the skimmer lurched into motion, spraying sand and flame from its suddenly activated jets, sending bodies tumbling or diving for cover.

The skimmer lifted off like some great bird, carrying them and their priceless cargo into the night and toward the crest of the hills.

Lying on the floor, cramped and hurting, with the dilithium poking him in the belly and his chest aching with the ragged force of his breath, Kirk began to laugh.

She couldn't take her eyes or hands off the controls, but the caring was clear in her voice. "Jim? Are you all right?"

He rolled over on his back, exhaling the last of the laughter in one great huff. "I'll say one thing for you, Davra Prentiss. You sure do know how to liven up an evening."

* * *

They called her the *Griffin*, because Scotty said she had more diverse parts than that legendary beast, and she wallowed like a garbage scow as she escaped Ariran's atmosphere. But Kirk couldn't have been happier with her if she'd been the private cruiser of Admiral Nogura himself.

He was also quite pleased with the knowledge that Jared Landau and his merry band of terrorists were now effectively stranded on Ariran,

where they had no choice but to await the arrival of a peaceforce ship.

Lyra's own government would have to deal with the anti-Federation feelings of some of its citizens; but the Federation courts were going to have a few things to say about overt acts of sabotage.

All in all, he mused, things had worked out rather neatly. He looked up at the scorched bulkhead over the infirmary, and wriggled his left leg experimentally.

"Stop that!" McCoy snapped at him. "I'm still trying to figure out just what hit you, and you're lousing up the instruments."

"Davra can tell you," he grinned, looking across the narrow space that separated the two beds.

She winked at him and went back to worrying the new binding across her ribcage.

"And *you* stop *that*!" McCoy howled.

"It's too tight."

"Pipe down, or I'll put one around your mouth." He turned back to the monitor at Kirk's bed, grumbling. "Damndest fool stunt I ever heard of. Taking off like that behind my back, running on nerve and boosters, breaking those ribs loose. Ought to be spanked."

"Bones," Kirk chided him, "watch it." He grinned at Davra again; repeating the words he'd said before, but meaning them in a different way this time, knowing Davra would understand what he meant, how his report, to the Council was going to read.

"You're talking to a captain."

THE END