

## The Face of the Smiling Vulcan

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## The Face of the Smiling Vulcan

by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

### Summary

Vance Carmichael and the small crew of the courier runabout *Yosemite* answer a distress call from the Excelsior-class starship USS *Cairo*. When they arrive at the drifting ship, there are more questions than answers as to what happened and why. (WNOHGB timeline/Alternate Universe Trek)

### Notes

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Alternate Historian's Note: The events of this story take place 15 years after "The Misadventures of January McKenna."

Ensign Vance Carmichael sighed as Starbase 902 loomed before him within the viewports. He finished positioning the runabout USS *Yosemite* to begin the final approach for docking. As the junior helmsman assigned to the runabout, he was charged with the mundane duties, which were beginning to become monotonous. When he graduated from the Academy, he had hoped for an assignment with more excitement or adventure. The recruitment officer he had spoken to promised him both after spending four years training for everything he might encounter between the stars. No one told him there would be a chance he might be stuck ferrying personnel between member worlds and starbases for his first assignment. There was no mention of the courier service even existing until he got the assignment in the first place. He had to look it up when he read his orders.

"Starbase Control, this is the *Yosemite* on final approach," he spoke to the air, just as he had done many times before. "We are requesting docking clearance upon arrival." Runabouts, unlike shuttlecraft and shuttlepods, had the ability to connect to a docking port. Docking the runabout made it easier to arrive and depart, as he had learned from the commanding officer.

"*Yosemite*," said the officer from the starbase's operation center, "approach confirmed. Please maintain a holding pattern five klicks from dock while we coordinate traffic."

In spite of the size of the runabout, naval tradition and Starfleet regulations required that an officer be placed in command. While Ensign Carmichael believed that duty to be his when he learned of his assignment, he was astonished to find a lieutenant in command of such a small ship.

Lieutenant (jg) Daniel Valencia listened to the reply from the starbase from his position at the starboard side forward console, and issued orders, "Put us in a position as they direct, Vance."

"Aye, Captain," replied Carmichael. He entered in the proper commands and brought the runabout to the position indicated by the starbase.

As the commanding officer of the *Yosemite*, Lieutenant Valencia was traditionally referred to as "Captain," as would any officer appointed in command of any craft, regardless of their rank or the size of the craft. It was a tradition that the ensign learned of shortly after his arrival, along with many other aspects of Starfleet he was largely unaware of.

Over the course of six months since his arrival, he came to know more about the lieutenant to whom he reported. The two of them worked together as a team and had ample opportunity during the long voyages to exchange information and stories. Though he found the lieutenant to be somewhat stiff and regimented, after about a month, he finally cracked a smile and seemed to feel more at ease with Ensign Vance Carmichael.

He had discovered that the lieutenant had actually been in the courier service for most of his career, which was all of twenty-seven months. Straight out of the Academy, he was assigned in a position similar to Carmichael's; helming a shuttle on what was known as the "Bajor Express." He flew passengers back and forth between Spacedock and Starbase 902. Carmichael thought he found the route of the fifteen starbases and planets to be tedious, the idea of only having two destinations made him shudder. However, it was the notion of spending the rest of his career in the courier service that made him cringe. He wondered how Valencia ended up extending his service in this department of Starfleet.

"When I received my promotion from Ensign," Valencia had explained, "they offered me my own command, based on the recommendation from the lieutenant who supervised my shuttle trips. They said I had a knack for piloting. They thought I could pass that information on to up and coming officers such as yourself." And it was true. Carmichael realized that by teaming with Valencia, he had learned a great deal about flight operations, Starfleet procedure, and boarding protocols. Perhaps because of the concentration of those areas needed to perform his duties, he could apply for various certifications with the training command. Maybe being assigned to the courier service was not so bad after all. However, he wondered why Valencia did not apply for a better position. "I'm here to serve," was Valencia's simple reply. The lieutenant seemed happy with that.

Carmichael was the opposite. As soon as he got his promotion to lieutenant, he was going to apply to the first starship that had an open berth for a helmsman. He cared not if it was a mere corvette; it had to be larger than a runabout, and it had to not be a part of the courier service. Vance hoped and prayed that Captain Valencia would make his recommendation soon. Six months was the standard period most ensigns waited before their first promotion. In fact, many of his classmates had already been selected for promotion, he had heard.

"*Yosemite*," called the starbase, "thank you for waiting. You are cleared to dock at Outer Dock Alpha."

Carmichael replied, "Acknowledged, Control. We're proceeding to dock, now." He skillfully angled the nose of the runabout back toward the dock and accelerated the impulse engines and watched as the station's outer dock grew larger. He slid the runabout with the thrusters and pulled the airlock against the docking latch with an expert's touch. The gentle docking was another skill he had Valencia to thank for. The latch secured itself against the runabout's hatch, and the atmospheric equalization indicator switched from red to green. "Docking complete, sir."

Valencia smiled, "Excellent job, Vance. I think you have improved tremendously since you got here."

Vance returned the smile, and hope the next words out of the captain's mouth would be the announcement of his promotion.

"I was talking with Commander Atkinson about you, and the result of that discussion was that as soon as we return to Spacedock, you will take a meeting with him to discuss your options in Starfleet," said Valencia. "He will try to talk you into taking a runabout of your own, believe me. But all I can say is, do what you think is best for you. I'm content to do this, but I think you have larger dreams in mind than the courier service. I just hope that I've been a decent enough guide for you."

"You have, sir!" said Vance immediately. "You have. I've learned a great deal from you, and even though you might be right about my goals, I don't think I'd have wanted a better teacher."

Valencia blushed, his modesty taking over. "I appreciate that, Vance." He cleared his throat, "For now, why don't you go stretch your legs for a few hours while I report in to Captain Jonar. You should definitely take the opportunity to shop for your lieutenant's pips." He offered the young man a wink as he talked about the promotion. "However, when we get to Spacedock, I shall give you a set of my old pips. It's another one of those ancient naval traditions I keep telling you about."

Vance rose from the console, extending his hand toward his captain, "Sir, thank you for your support."

Lieutenant Valencia smiled, accepting the hand and shaking it firmly, "It's well-deserved."

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Starbase 902 was a recent construction. Following the destruction of the old Cardassian mining station Terok Nor during the Borg War, Bajor was left without any kind of spaceport facility for several years until the Galaxy Alliance ordered a new base. The offensive potential of the wormhole to the Gamma Quadrant was too great to be ignored. The new starbase would outclass Terok Nor in defensive and offensive systems, with enough shielding to outlast a fleet, and weaponry to put even the deadliest battleships to shame.

The Promenade was the section of the starbase most often visited by people coming and going. The starbase's proximity to Bajor made it easy to import Bajoran goods, and most of the shop owners were Bajoran. There was a Bajoran temple in the primary section of the Promenade, to allow the residents aboard who practiced the Bajoran faith a center from which to worship. Though the starbase was run by Starfleet, the influence of the closest member world was apparent. Earrings and ridged noses were intermixed with Starfleet uniforms, and in many cases, there were quite a few Bajorans who possessed all three. Since the admission of Bajor into the Galaxy Alliance during the Borg War, the Bajoran militia had been absorbed into Starfleet. There was even a Bajoran rear admiral by the name of Ruao Sarjanna whose flag flew over the Third Tactical Fleet.

Vance walked along the Promenade, looking at what each shop had to offer. He had not visited the starbase in nearly four months, and some of the storefronts had changed since then. There was now a freighting office where a jeweler had once been. The recent dip in the economy had probably forced the shopkeeper to close up shop. Freighting was now in high demand, and quite a few new freight companies sprung into existence to field the industry and respond to that demand. Money was to be made, and it was being made hand over fist by those freighter captains and their crews. He pondered the life of a freighter pilot as he stood outside the office of the November 17 Corporation, reading the sign posted that boasted career opportunities for those interested.

He smiled as he considered switching careers, but he knew he would have to wait four years before he could even consider it. According to the terms of his commission, he had to serve a minimum of four years before he could think about retiring. At least with four years of service, he could use that experience and time in making a more lucrative life for himself. With the opportunities opening up in the quadrant, Starfleet's pay scale would not be much in the long run, even with the prospect of a pension. Of course, it could have been argued that most people do not

sign up for Starfleet with the intention of making a fortune from the service, unless they were a part of the merchant service, but then if he thought courier service was dull, trading on Starfleet's dime would be even worse. Sure, the pay was better, but he would not see any profit from his labors.

Beyond that, the final and ultimately deciding factor in his decision to join Starfleet was his family. Like many others who were in Starfleet, Vance Carmichael was part of a legacy; his father was a retired Commander, his sister was a serving Petty Officer. His grandfather was Captain Carmichael, and before that, his great-grandfather was Rear Admiral Ronald Carmichael, who once served with Captain Christopher Pike aboard the USS Enterprise. Vance felt the pressure to join Starfleet at an early age, but he never looked at that pressure as misplaced, for his ambition precluded the opportunities held within such a career in the service. His only wish was to have similar adventures, and he knew it was not going to happen while serving as an officer who shuttled people back and forth for a living.

Vance envisioned his career beginning at the helm of a Sovereign-class starship, exploring the vast unknown under the banner of the Galaxy Alliance. He would advance in rank quickly, and maybe convince the ship's executive officer he could make a major contribution as a command officer. Perhaps within a couple of years, he would be in the operations division, and in less than a decade, make Commander and be given a light cruiser on a mission of exploration. From there, he figured he could spend two or three years before he would see his fourth pip and then command of a heavy cruiser. He would retire as a Captain like his grandfather, before the burden of the admiralty could break his spirit.

"May I help you, Ensign?" asked a cold feminine voice.

Snapping out of his train of thought, Vance looked up to see another Starfleet ensign standing very close to him. She was a Vulcan, with her dark hair long and tamed by a silver headband across the top of her head. It was unusual to see a Vulcan woman wear her hair long, rather than in the typical bowl cut style he had seen so many times before. She wore the same uniform as he did, though her division color was gold, rather than his red. She was probably an engineer or a member of the station's security department. He never quite understood what it was about Vulcan women he found so alluring. Perhaps it was the seemingly incorruptible nature of their personalities; the lack of emotion precluded the possibility of falling in love. The logic of seeking a mate seemed to begin and end with simple procreation rather than compatibility. This ensign before was no exception to that rule. "I'm sorry," he fumbled his words, his tone stammering somewhat. "Help me with what?"

She barely expressed her annoyance, "You appeared to be distracted while walking. You interrupted my shopping."

Vance blushed immediately, "I'm terribly sorry, Ensign. I was just killing time before my ship departed dock." He chided himself for lying to her. Saying "ship" to try and impress her with his status.

"I see," she replied coolly. "Which ship would that be?"

"The *Yosemite*. It's a runabout," he admitted, feeling foolish for trying to impress her earlier.

"I am familiar with the *Yosemite*, Ensign. Are you the runabout's pilot?" she asked.

"Yes, I am."

"Then I will see you later, Ensign. I am to join you aboard."

Vance brightened. "Oh?" Suddenly, being in the courier service was not so bad. "I'm sorry for not introducing myself earlier. I'm Vance Carmichael," he realized he did not know her name. He did not try to shake her hand, knowing very well that Vulcans did not like to make physical contact as much as Terrans did.

She nodded, "A pleasure to meet you. I am T'Kessa."

"May I escort you to the runabout, Ensign T'Kessa?" he offered.

"Not at this time. I must complete my shopping list before I depart. I will meet you aboard later," she replied, using that statement to part from him. T'Kessa entered a store and the conversation was unceremoniously over.

Vance frowned for a brief moment before moving on, himself. He glanced behind him to see if she were still in view before returning his attention ahead of him, before proceeding to the next section of the Promenade.

It was nearly two hours later when the communications implant behind his left ear made a short tone to indicate an incoming communication. When he answered the call, it was Valencia ordering him to return to the runabout so they could depart. He mentioned having passengers waiting to get underway. He smiled and looked forward to meeting at least one of them.

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The runabout *Yosemite* was divided into three compartments. The forward section of the runabout was the cockpit, where Valencia and Carmichael piloted the ship. The middle section was the very modest single-person accommodations that the both of them shared. A bunk and a hammock had been set up there for their use, and Valencia swore by the comfort of the hammock. Carmichael appreciated the comfort of the bunks, and managed to double the mattresses up to provide him with even more comfort as his commanding officer swung from the upper bulkhead, as peaceful as can be. Though due to their shift rotation they often switched off to allow at least one person on shift during those times when they had passengers in the rearmost compartment, when they flew alone, the autopilot was set and they enjoyed the ability to relax.

The passenger compartment was mostly couches and viewscreens, with access to the runabout's modest library computer for research or other diversion during the long trips. During those voyages where they ferried no one, Vance liked to use the compartment as his own personal listening studio, where he could turn his music up as loud as he pleased, while Valencia maintained a watch over the controls. Valencia, when it was his turn to relax, would use the empty compartment for quiet meditation. Vance made the mistake of unnecessarily interrupting him during those hours, and suffered a severe tongue-lashing. He never made that mistake again.

Most of the times they ferried passengers, it was Valencia who did the introductions and took care of the in-flight instructions; Valencia preferred the interaction, he had said. Vance, on the other hand, completed the pre-flight checklist and communicated the flight plan with the local traffic control center. When he stepped aboard the *Yosemite* from Starbase 902, he saw one of their passengers in the cockpit, conversing with Valencia.

"Permission to come aboard, sir," Vance said with a smile.

Valencia turned around, "Permission granted. Allow me to make some introductions."

Vance raised his hand, "No need, sir. Ensign T'Kessa and I met on the station. Giving her a tour of the cockpit?"

"Yes," replied Valencia. "Well, I guess if you've already met, we can get underway. Vance, run pre-flight, while I lay aft." Without waiting for Vance's reply, he disappeared behind them.

T'Kessa did not move, instead slipping into the console normally occupied by Valencia.

Vance looked at her, "Uh, Ensign? I think you might want to listen to the Captain's instructions. They're important to all our passengers."

"I'm certain they are, Ensign," replied T'Kessa, immediately accessing the console and calling up monitoring information. "However, I am not a passenger. I am a member of the crew."

Vance blinked in surprise, turning his attention away from the pre-flight checklist to stare at the Vulcan woman. "As what, may I ask?"

T'Kessa did not look at him as she replied, "Captain Valencia has placed me here as your co-pilot."

"My co-pilot?" asked Vance, his tone rising in pitch slightly.

"To assist in piloting the runabout."

"To assist?"

The look of barely-held annoyance crossed T'Kessa's features as it did before on the Promenade. "Ensign, if you are oft in the habit of repeating parts of my statements, then our work will be most inefficient."

Vance chuckled, shaking his head, "My apologies. It's just that this means I'm going to be transferred soon." He felt a little giddy. The assignment of an additional officer to the runabout inferred that he would be expected to assist in training the ensign for her new assignment before receiving orders to report to his new assignment. Suddenly, life on the *Yosemite* got a little brighter for him with the prospect of transfer in his immediate future. "Listen, since we're going to be working together, I would prefer that you call me 'Vance.' Most everyone else does."

"Very well, Vance," replied T'Kessa. As Vance had not yet entered in any commands, she began checking off the list by herself.

Valencia returned from the aft compartment, settling into the portside console behind Vance. "Where are we with pre-flight, Vance?"

T'Kessa responded, "We were just about to signal control for departure clearance, Captain."

Vance blushed, realizing she had done his job already, "Uh, yes, sir." He opened a channel, "*Yosemite* to Starbase Control, we are requesting departure clearance." His eyes drifted down to the information display as the flight plan scrolled by. They were scheduled to drop three of their passengers at Ferasa, and the other two at Betazed before returning to Spacedock in orbit of Earth. He activated the runabout public address system and announced, "This is the lead pilot, Ensign Carmichael, speaking. We have signaled the starbase for departure clearance and will be getting underway shortly."

T'Kessa reported, "Control signals departure clearance granted."

Vance smiled, "Ensign, why don't you do the honors?"

"Aye, sir," T'Kessa responded immediately. "Disconnecting umbilicals. Releasing docking latches. Maneuvering thrusters to quarter-power." The scene began to shift outside of the forward viewports as the docking sections of the starbase drifted to port. The runabouts thrusters sounded through the hull as they pushed the tiny ship away from the starbase. "We are now under our own power."

"Excellent," said Vance. "Engage impulse engines and take us out of the system toward Ferasa."

"Aye, sir. Increasing speed to full impulse power."

Though they couldn't feel the runabout speeding up, Vance always swore he could sense the movement of the ship. The docking section moved out of view as T'Kessa piloted the runabout away from the starbase's approach and departure lanes.

Valencia looked up from his console and pushed himself up to look outside the cockpit's viewports. Pointing with his right hand, he announced with some pride at a tiny shuttlecraft on an inbound course, "There's my old ship. Shuttle *Atlantis*." The shuttle quickly moved out of view as the runabout accelerated. "Two weeks from my order to assume command of *Yosemite*, there was an ensign by the name of Spenser I had to train to take over for me." He sighed wistfully, "She and I did so many trips together, I almost miss being at her helm."

Carmichael grinned, "Almost miss her, sir?"

"When you spend nearly a year doing nothing but running back and forth between Earth and Bajor, you get used to it," replied Valencia. "Make no mistake, Ensigns, the *Atlantis* is a fast ship. She could outrun *Yosemite* in a heartbeat, and run rings around one of those new fighters you read about in the technical journals. I wish they would let us have one for runs like these, but the admirals like to ride around in style."

T'Kessa did not say anything except to announce, "We will be clearing the system in one minute, Captain."

"Very good, Ensign," answered the captain. "As soon as you're clear, increase speed to warp six." He settled back into the console behind Vance and sighed once more as he watched the shuttle land in the starbase's public landing bay with the runabout's sensors. Not long after the shuttlecraft disappeared from the sensor readout, the distortion interference prevented him from seeing anything around the runabout, as T'Kessa took the *Yosemite* to warp speed.

The run to Ferasa was uneventful, and Vance learned very little about T'Kessa in the fourteen hours it took for *Yosemite* to reach the Ferasan spaceport and offload three officers. She did not offer any information about herself, and Vance felt that T'Kessa might have been deliberately cold in her demeanor, although he knew Vulcans to be somewhat isolated in their personalities. He tried several times to engage her in polite conversation and learned that she graduated from the fall semester ahead of her class. Her major was operations; hence the uniform's divisional color. Other than that basic information, he knew nothing else about her.

Six hours later, the other two passengers left the aft compartment empty, and all that was left for the runabout to do was to return to Earth.

"Estimated time of arrival to Spacedock is forty-seven hours, Captain," reported Vance over the intercom. Valencia had retired to the aft compartment after the last passengers departed. Vance was beginning to feel the fatigue close in on him, and prepared to lock down his station before retiring to the sleeping compartment.

"Understood," said the captain. "Why don't you leave the conn to Ensign T'Kessa and join me in the aft compartment for a moment."

"Aye, sir. I'll be back there directly," replied Vance as he closed the channel. Turning to T'Kessa as he rose from the console, he asked her to take command. After she accepted, he found the captain in the aft compartment, waiting for him. On the small table lay a single open pip, used in Starfleet rank insignia, along with a couple of glasses of champagne.

Vance was beginning to feel the excitement bubble up within him. "What can I do for you, sir?" he asked.

Captain Valencia smiled, picked up the rank pip and ceremoniously placing it upon Vance's uniform lapel. "By the order of Admiral Jorgensen, I'm pleased to be the one to promote you to the rank of Lieutenant, junior grade." He stepped back to take a look at him. "This was one of my old pips, and I'm just damned glad to give it to you like this. Congratulations, Vance," he said as he thrust his hand out.

The promotion came through and now it was certain; he knew it was a transfer for him when he spoke to Commander Atkinson. "Thank you, Captain," he replied with a large smile, shaking the captain's hand. "Thank you very much!"

"You earned it, Vance. Now, why don't you drink your juice and turn in?"

Lieutenant (jg) Vance Carmichael took in half the glass before smiling and accepting the suggestion, "Aye, sir. I'll do that." He moved toward the compartment door, only to stop to ask, "Sir, would you mind waking me before we reach the nebula?"

"Of course, Lieutenant. I wouldn't deprive you of one last run," smiled Valencia.

Carmichael grinned, "Thank you, sir." He slipped past the compartment's partition to nap on his bunk, but suddenly the fatigue he felt earlier had disappeared. He felt as though he had been revitalized when Valencia placed the new pip on his uniform. Vance raised a hand to feel the new pip in its place, even taking a moment to look at Lieutenant Carmichael in the mirror within the compartment. His reflection smiled back at him.

Satisfied with his appearance, Vance settled down on his bunk and stretched out. The fatigue staved off by the excitement began to creep over him once again, and within minutes, his steady and rhythmic breathing sounded against the partition. It was not long before his nap was interrupted.

"T'Kessa to Carmichael," sounded the runabout's intercom from within the sleeping compartment.

Vance snapped out of his nap and immediately reached over to touch the panel next to the bunk, "What's up, Ensign?" His tone sounded thick to him; he cleared his throat.

"I am picking up a distress beacon on long range sensors. It's from an Alliance starship," replied the ensign from the cockpit.

Raising his eyebrows up in surprise, Vance pushed himself out of bed and tried desperately to shake off the grogginess he still felt from only sleeping a short time. He checked the chronometer and saw that it had only been three hours since he retired to the bunk. "Very well, I'll be right up." He zipped up his uniform jacket and joined T'Kessa in the cockpit to the left of her.

T'Kessa did not look up, "Shall I alter course, Ensign?"

Vance smiled, "Yes, let's go pick it up. Make your speed warp nine." He activated the pilot's console and corrected her, "It's 'Lieutenant', by the way."

T'Kessa turned her head to look at Vance's lapels and nodded, "My apologies, Lieutenant Carmichael. I did not know you had been promoted, sir."

"Apologies are unnecessary, Ensign," Vance said, feeling a little bit taller as she recognized his seniority. "You didn't know." He checked behind him and asked, "I assume the captain is meditating?"

"Your assumption would be correct," replied T'Kessa. "Altering course to intercept the beacon and making my speed warp nine. Estimated time to intercept is twenty-three minutes."

"How close to the Betreka Nebula are we?" asked Vance aloud, though his fingers called the information up.

T'Kessa already knew the answer, "At this speed, we would enter the nebula in less than an hour."

The nebula had been his favorite to pilot through, and one of the more dangerous detours that the captain allowed him to indulge in. Its proximity to the Alliance border made it an often used place for pirates or other criminals, due to the heavy interference the nebula wreaked upon sensors, shields, and weapons. Within the nebula, any ship's sensor resolution would only allow them to see up to five hundred kilometers in any direction, while without the ability to raise their shields. However, the interference also prevented the use of beam-based weaponry, and torpedo guidance systems would be rendered useless by the limited sensor range.

Vance appreciated the skill it took to pilot within the nebula and used it to get a feel for the runabout's systems. If the runabout had been devoid of passengers and the captain had been in a pleasant disposition, the pair of officers would take the opportunity to explore while on course for their destination. This was not one of those times, "Can we hear the beacon's message?"

"On speakers, sir," replied T'Kessa.

The runabout cockpit's speakers began to sound with the soft alto feminine voice of the computer, "This is a Starfleet distress beacon from the starship USS *Cairo*, Captain Edward Jellico, commanding."

Lieutenant Carmichael turned his head toward the aft compartment and ordered, "Get the captain, now."

She rose from her console after acknowledging the order, and after only a few minutes, T'Kessa returned with the captain behind her. Valencia did not seem to be upset at being pulled away from his personal time. "Report," he said in a concerned tone.

Vance replied, "It's a distress beacon from the starship *Cairo*, Captain. We're closing in on the beacon and making ready to download the data it has."

T'Kessa began running sensor sweeps of the local space, "Captain, I believe I can use the beacon as the center for a search pattern and determine the location of the *Cairo*."

"If the *Cairo* is still in one piece," muttered Vance.

Valencia winced, "Have a heart, Vance."

"Sorry, sir," Vance blushed under the reproach. "I recommend we contact Starfleet Command and ask them to dispatch a better-equipped starship."

"I concur with that recommendation, Captain," added T'Kessa.

"Very good. Send a subspace message to the nearest starbase or outpost and apprise them of our find," replied Valencia. "Inform them that we will remain on station to begin the search for the *Cairo* and await their response. T'Kessa, how long before they get the message?"

T'Kessa answered, "Approximately six hours, Captain."

Valencia thought out loud, "Six hours in, six hours for a reply if we stay here. It'll be twelve hours before we get any kind of response, and at least that much time before a starship can reach this location."

Vance smiled, "Admittedly, sir, it's not every day we happen upon something like this."

"True. Let's investigate a little bit more," said Valencia. "As soon as we can within range of the beacon, download the logs and then start your search pattern, Ensign."

"Aye, sir," replied T'Kessa.

Three hours into the search, Vance listened as his captain made puzzled noises as he looked through the logs from the beacon. The runabout had already located traces of an ion trail and T'Kessa kept her eye on the sensors to look for the Excelsior-class cruiser as it sped along the trail. The captain, it seemed, was trying to make sense of the information. Instead of visual or audio logs that one would expect to find on the beacon, it held nothing more than science reports and engineering readouts. Something had shut down the ship's power grid, and according to the logs, the ship's crew had been subjected to a complete systems' failure. "It makes no sense," decided Valencia, after going over the information with Vance and T'Kessa.

T'Kessa reviewed the science reports included within the beacon. "According to this information, Captain, the *Cairo* picked up several plant specimens. However, the report neglects to mention the planet of origin."

"Can you elaborate?" asked Valencia.

"The report was altered before it was uploaded to the beacon, sir," reported T'Kessa.

Vance pondered, "It is possible that the ship might have been under siege?"

"Not from what I'm seeing here," replied Valencia. "I guess that whatever we need to know is going to be aboard the *Cairo*."

"I believe you will be able to find out, sir. I hold an Excelsior-class vessel on sensors," announced T'Kessa as she transferred the sensor information to the captain's console. "She is adrift."

Valencia rose to look out of the viewports, "Can you signal the ship?"

Carmichael used the automatic hailing system and after a minute, he shook his head, "No response to our hails, so far."

"Maintain approach, Ensign," ordered Valencia. "Vance, start running detailed scans of the ship and see if you can get some sort of identification."

Vance ran the ordered scans as T'Kessa brought the *Yosemite* closer to the ship. When the runabout flew close enough to get a clear visual scan, Vance positively identified the hull markings as the *Cairo*. He placed the confirmation of the scan on the viewscreen for Valencia to read personally. "No signs of any exterior damage," Vance reported, "but I am reading several hull breaches along the saucer section. Looks like it might have been an internal explosion, based on the damage pattern analysis by the computer."

The captain nodded, "I concur with the computer's analysis."

"No lifesigns, no power. If it hadn't been for the silhouette, she might have been read as a big piece of metal floating around in space," Vance said.

T'Kessa remarked, "The ship is some distance from the ion trail we picked up, sirs. That would suggest that she was adrift for some time. What I do not understand is how the ion trail existed in the first place. Without power, they would not be able to generate a trail following the beacon's launch." The beacon itself was simply a small pod discharged from the ship's launchers, and had no propulsion of its own.

"Bring us to within a thousand kilometers of the *Cairo* and hold position," ordered Valencia. "Vance, update Starfleet and let them know what we found, and then lay aft so we can suit up and beam over."

Vance did as the captain asked with regard to the communication, but he raised his concern, "Sir, we're not really equipped for away missions."

"I'm aware of what we can and cannot do, Vance," Valencia said with a smile. "I think the best thing we can do is gather as much information as we can while we can do it. In about twelve hours, we're going to be relieved by another starship and then we don't have any opportunity to investigate. I'm surprised at you. I thought you were looking for a little excitement."

Vance chuckled nervously, "I was hoping for that excitement while serving aboard a Sovereign-class starship, sir."

Valencia grinned, "Come on, Vance. Where's your sense of adventure?"

Vance knew his captain could order him to go, instead of trying to be nice about it and use moderate pressure as his friend. They might be of the same rank, but Daniel Valencia was the commanding officer. "Still here, sir. I'll go get our suits ready."

---

*Yosemite's* transporter beam completed its cycle, and Captain Valencia and Lieutenant Carmichael materialized within the main engineering section of the *Cairo*. The illumination from the helmets of their suits gave a dismal picture of the scene that appeared before them. A complete lack of gravity forced them to activate their magnetic boots to allow them to walk with ease, though it did not make such a task any more appealing.

Vance stepped toward the master systems display and attempted to enter in some command without any kind of a response. "Captain," he said over his commplant, "I'm going to try and power this station with my phaser."

"Very well," replied Valencia as he made his way toward the nearest turboshaft, shining his palm light around him.

Removing the firing assembly from the phaser and adjusting the power settings, Vance opened the console's power access panel and inserted the phaser, nozzle first. The station immediately powered on, drawing energy from the phaser. Vance began to enter in commands and waited patiently for the response. He opened his mouth to get the captain's attention when a scream erupted from within his helmet.

Valencia's arms flailed upward, causing him to release his palm beacon. Vance turned his head to see the scene, and with another couple of commands, used the phaser's energy to bring the compartment's illumination up enough to see without the portable palm beacons. Vance nearly screamed, himself, and the creepiness of the ship finally chilled him to his bones.

Asphyxiated bodies floated across the deck, and appeared to be floating up and down the shaft of the warp core. As if on cue, the bodies seemed to choose that time to float down the shaft and into the area where Vance and Valencia stood, looking as though they wished to swarm the two of them.

T'Kessa's raised voice called over their helmets, "*Yosemite* to Captain Valencia. Sir, the away team's vital signs are fluctuating. Please report your status."

Allowing Valencia to catch his breath, Vance replied, "Carmichael, here. We're fine, Ensign. Things just got a little spooky over here, that's all."

"Can you elaborate, sir?" asked T'Kessa.

"We discovered a fair number of bodies here in main engineering, and it startled us," explained Carmichael. By this time, Vance had already made his approach to Valencia, touching the man on his shoulder. "Sir?"

Valencia quickly composed himself, "Uh, yes. Ensign, we're going to need your assistance. Can you land in the main shuttle bay?"

T'Kessa took a moment to scan the status of the shuttle bay and replied, "Yes, sir, I believe I can. The main shuttle bay doors appear to have been destroyed. There do not appear to be any shuttles or other auxiliary craft located within."

"Land the ship, and we'll meet you there," ordered Valencia. "Vance, that turboshaft back there was empty. Grab your phaser and let's do a little climbing."

---

With T'Kessa's assistance, the three officers managed to use the power interconnects from the *Yosemite* to provide power to the *Cairo*'s secondary power grid. *Cairo*'s main computer and life support were restored to a limited number of decks while the runabout's onboard micro-fusion generators did all the work. With life support restored, use of the extravehicular activity suits was no longer necessary. It allowed the three of them access to the crippled ship's main bridge, where a clearer picture of the events that led to the deaths of the ship's crew.

Captain Valencia stepped off the turbolift first, moving toward the bridge's engineering console, while Vance led T'Kessa to damage control. Unlike the other sections of the ship that had no breaches of the hull, the bridge did not contain any floating corpses. The crimson glow of the bridge's emergency lighting allowed for minimal visibility, but enough to get around.

"Sir," called Vance, "I'm showing extensive internal damage across most decks. Looks like a massive running firefight on decks seven through thirteen; multiple photon grenades must have went off to do most of the damage I've seeing here. There is phaser scoring all over the place, according to what I seeing here."

Valencia replied, "Find me the captain's log. Let's see if they were boarded. It's possible that Captain Jellico might have rendered the ship useless to prevent it from falling into enemy hands."

T'Kessa suggested, "Would not the autodestruct system have a better result?"

Vance answered, "If the main computer were offline, the autodestruct would not be functioning. You'd have to resort to other means."

"I agree." Calling up a power grid analysis in more detail, T'Kessa pointed out, "However, the damage here suggests that the primary power grid suffered catastrophic failure due to sabotage while the secondary grid was left intact. Your theory is not logical under these circumstances."

"The only way we're going to piece together what happened here, is to locate either the captain's log or the ship's log," explained Valencia in an annoyed tone. "If we can't find it, then we can try and solve the puzzle ourselves." He pushed himself away from the engineering station, unable to access any of the command functions. "Computer," he said, waiting for the computer's acknowledgement signal. "Recognize Valencia, Daniel A. Lieutenant, USS *Yosemite*."

"Voiceprint recognized."

"I require access to all command functions. Alpha two clearance."

"Alpha two clearance recognized. Command functions are offline."

Valencia sighed. Without command functions, they would be unable to effect any repairs or bring the ship's navigational systems online. They could use the runabout's warp core and fusion generators to power the systems, but they could not access them to issue commands. In spite of Captain Valencia's status as a commanding officer, his clearance did not allow him to override the order of a ranked captain like Edward Jellico. At least, he assumed the order had been given by *Cairo*'s commanding officer. "Computer," he tried a different tactic, "may I see either the captain's log or the ship's log?"

"Affirmative."

"Excellent," Valencia smiled. Why did he not just try this in the first place? "Display log entries to the operations console on the main bridge." He scanned through the entries index and noticed that quite a few had been deleted, including the most recent log entries. "Computer, reply log entry for Stardate 55086.12."

The bridge's large viewscreen powered on and the face of Captain Edward Jellico appeared before the three officers. His expression seemed positive as he spoke, "Captain's Log, Stardate 55086.12. We've made an unscheduled detour to the Alpha Laramie star system within this sector. Ensign Hickerson made the determination that a low-level radio signal was emanating from the fifth planet in the system. Alpha Laramie V is an uninhabited planet, according to the charts, so it is a little unusual to be reading such a signal. We will be delaying our survey of Proxima Laramie III to investigate. Jellico, out."

T'Kessa offered, "Sir, it is possible that the science report we received from the distress beacon is related to the log entry. The science report's planet of origin was not included. It could have been from Alpha Laramie V."

"Head down to the science lab, Ensign, and check it out," commanded Valencia as he turned to look at his officers. "Vance, start walking the decks and see if you can begin making some identifications. I'd like to start matching names to bodies." When Vance winced at the order, Valencia empathized, "I know it's not what you had in mind, but it would be nice to find out if everyone is still here or if some managed to escape somehow. We might have to mount a mission to rescue stray escape pods."

Vance still did not like the order, but he nodded his acquiescence, "Understood, sir."

"I'll be up here on the bridge, trying to find out some more information," said Valencia, turning back to the operations console. "Carry on."

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They say that once you perform a task a certain number of times, you get used to it. Lieutenant Carmichael's duty of identifying nearly eight hundred corpses required use of his tricorder and moving those corpses out of the way in order to get a clear reading. With the gravity systems online, everything that had been suspended above the deck came crashing down. Vance had already seen some of the poses he found the corpses in, and was not looking forward to returning to main engineering, where some had been floating up as high as ten decks. A ten deck fall, even for a corpse, was not going to be a sight he wanted to take with him when he departed the *Cairo*.

With every identification he logged the corpse's location by deck and section, along with any unique markings on the uniform he could use to provide the incoming starship with. He could not expect Captain Valencia to try and transfer all the bodies from the *Cairo* to the *Yosemite*.



Vance mused that they could probably stack the bodies in the aft compartment and seal it, but the sleeping compartment would be unusable for a long while. In fact, he would tell the captain to have the compartment module replaced entirely, were the captain to transport the bodies using the runabout. The thought of sleeping in the same place as dead people gave him the shivers. Vance forced himself to return all of his attention to his task, to try and move his mind off the idea.

Vance's commplant sounded within his ear, and T'Kessa's voice sounded within his head without further warning, "T'Kessa to Carmichael."

"Carmichael, here," replied Vance. "Go ahead."

"Sir, I've found something in the primary science lab. The reports we received from the beacon indicated several botanic specimens. There are several specimen containers located here in the lab," said T'Kessa. "However, the readings reported by the science officer whom catalogued these specimens cited a possibility of sentience."

"If those plants are sentient, then they should not be held against their will," replied Vance. "Listen, I'm coming to you. What deck is the science lab on?"

T'Kessa took a long moment before answering; so long that Vance had opened his mouth to ask again. She replied, "Deck fifteen."

Vance decided to ignore the delay in her response, though it was rather curious. "I'm on my way down to you, Ensign. Carmichael, out." He closed his tricorder and walked toward the nearest turbolift. As he walked, he contacted Valencia to let him know that he had been pulled from his current assignment to meet with T'Kessa. The captain remained on the bridge, continuing to study the logs to try and determine the cause.

Traversing the deck had become easier with the turbolift system drawing power from the runabout; walking to the science lab would have required accessing five different Jeffries tubes and multiple service crawlways. The turbolift simplified things tremendously for Vance, and instead of the journey taking a half-hour, it was barely two minutes when the turbolift doors parted to allow him to exit onto deck fifteen. The number of corpses before him vastly outnumbered those on deck four.

Signs of battle appeared on the bulkheads in every direction; phaser scoring interspersed with photon explosions burned away the carpet on the deck and the paint on the bulkheads. The overhead illumination suffered from the damage it sustained with flickering light or destroyed fixtures. Vance tried his best to make his way to the science lab while avoiding making direct contact with any more corpses. The doors to the science lab greeted him with similar damage; the left door failed to open and the right one did not open completely. He reached in and pushed the right door to the frame, and stepped in.

Within the dimly lit laboratory, T'Kessa appeared lost in reading the computer terminal before her and did not acknowledge Vance's arrival in the laboratory. From his vantage, Vance could only see that the screen moved quickly before the Vulcan officer. He walked up to her and put his hand on her shoulder, "T'Kessa?"

She did not react to his touch or words, keeping her eyes on the screen. Though the speed of the screen did not allow for Vance to be able to read it in whole, he could tell that the information had more to do with the tactical strength of the Excelsior-class vessel, as well as engineering specifications. Weapons, engines, shields, deflectors, armor plating, power grids... all of those sections flashed before her in a matter of seconds.

He tried once more to get her attention, this time shaking her slightly, "T'Kessa?"

T'Kessa snapped out of her apparent trance, looking fatigued and haggard. "I beg your pardon, Lieutenant. I seem to be having difficulty concentrating on my task."

"It looked like it," agreed Vance. "Why don't you head back to the runabout, and I'll report in to the captain?"

She replied, "Perhaps you are correct. I will return to the runabout, sir. I apologize."

Vance shook his head, "It's all right. I know that Vulcans can go without sleep for long periods of time, but I think all the excitement of this mission might have taken the wind out of your sails. Go and rest. I can finish up here."

"Aye, sir," said T'Kessa. She shut down the terminal and left the laboratory.

He sat down in her place, activating the terminal and seeing that nothing more than the computer's welcome screen. He called out, "Computer, can you tell me what Ensign T'Kessa was researching?"

"Ensign T'Kessa's research included the botanical specimens retrieved from Alpha Laramie V, the chief science officer's log, and a tactical analysis of the USS *Cairo*," replied the computer.

Vance wrinkled his brow, unable to draw a line between the science logs and the specimen to the tactical analysis. He requested the computer to present each screen that she looked through, to try and follow in her footsteps. He did not believe his sense of logic to be as advanced as a Vulcan's, but he prided himself on his skills of deduction. However, after twenty minutes of paging through information, he sighed as he realized he could not see any connection. The science data insinuated some sort of previously unseen sentience, but the classification had yet to be determined. The logs of the chief science officer indicated that the reporting officer suddenly fell ill without warning and was remanded to sickbay.

In accessing the medical logs, there appeared to be very little information there. A systematic deletion of log entries had not only occurred with the captain's log, but every other official log kept aboard a starship. The chief engineer's log, the chief medical officer's log, the security log... every single log Vance called for had been altered in some form or another. It was as if the senior staff of the *Cairo* had been trying to hide something from Starfleet, or perhaps the rest of the crew.

"Computer, did the deletions from the ship's official logs occur at the same time?" asked Vance.

"Unknown," replied the computer quickly.

"Do you detect any deletions from the logs?"

"Affirmative."

"Okay," Vance thought aloud, tapping his fingers along the side of the terminal. "Do you have a record of who ordered the deletions?"

"Negative."

"Were the log files damaged?"

"Unknown."

Vance smirked, "Run a level three diagnostic on the files in question."

"Unable to comply. Command functions currently offline."

He sighed, feeling the frustration beginning to well up inside of him. Instead of dealing with a computer that would not give him the time of day, he decided to contact a more cooperative computer. "Carmichael to *Yosemite*."

Over his commplant's tiny speaker, he heard the computer's voice reply, "Computer, online."

"Interface with the *Cairo*'s secondary computer core and initiate a datalink to the official logs," ordered Vance, pushing himself up from the terminal and turning around to face the rest of the lab.

It was then that he saw the specimen containers. Six of them stood upon diagnostic pedestals, while three appeared broken or upon the deck. They were empty, while the others still contained their occupants. The intact container looked as though it had just completed rolling on its side.

"Datalink established," replied the computer.

Vance said nothing, moving slowly toward the exit. If the report had been accurate, then whatever was being contained was now free to roam the room. Fear replaced the frustration instantly, and his hand shook as it reached for the phaser from his holster and checked the settings to make certain it was on a stun level. His eyes scanned the room's corners, but without full illumination, there were darkened areas he could not see clearly in. "*Yosemite*, stand by," he told the runabout's computer. He immediately tried to open a channel to his captain, "Carmichael to Valencia."

A lack of response did not assuage his fears.

He tried once more, "Captain Valencia, sir, this is Lieutenant Carmichael in the science lab. Are you there?"

Again, the captain did not reply.

"Computer," he said, continuing to point his phaser out at the room, "what is the location of Lieutenant Valencia?"

"Lieutenant Valencia is not aboard USS *Cairo*."

"When did he depart?"

"Unknown."

Carmichael's fear began to take hold of his chest. His breathing became shallow, and he was uncertain of how much danger he was in. He did the only thing he could under the circumstances; he left the lab and ran down to the turbolift. He returned to the runabout's computer, "Carmichael to *Yosemite*!"

"Computer, standing by."

"Locate Lieutenant Valencia."

"Lieutenant Valencia is not aboard USS *Yosemite*."

He reached the turbolift and entered. "Scan local space for his signal," he ordered. "Bridge."

"Scanning. Please stand by."

The *Cairo*'s computer replied to Vance, "Unable to comply. Specified destination no longer reachable."

"*Yosemite*, locate Ensign T'Kessa."

"Ensign T'Kessa is located in aft compartment."

"Initiate emergency beamout procedure."

"Energizing."

The shimmering blue and white effect of the transporter clouded his vision as the *Cairo* turbolift disappeared. The interior of the runabout

cockpit replaced the scene before him, and the pilot's console appeared to be warning the formerly empty compartment of something. Once the dematerialization sequence completed, Vance moved forward and secured his phaser, sitting down at the console and noticed the form of a man outside the runabout on the deck of the shuttle bay.

It was Lieutenant Valencia, and it looked as though he had propped himself up against the bulkhead in a seated position. He looked as if he were simply taking a quick nap or rest, rather than working to discover the mystery of the *Cairo*. He called out, using the commplant, "Carmichael to Valencia. Sir, I can see you from the runabout. Are you all right?"

He did not move to respond. He did not move at all.

Vance returned his attention to the warning. Onboard sensors detected a power buildup in the main engineering section of the starship. After disconnecting the power links to the *Cairo*, he quickly began using the runabout's transporters to beam the captain aboard. He could not get a lock on the officer, because the computer refused to acknowledge that the captain existed in spite of what Vance could see. "Computer, there is a lifeform approximately ten meters fore of the ship. Identify lifeform."

"Unable to comply. No lifeforms detected within specified range."

"Is Lieutenant Valencia's transponder within range?"

"Lieutenant Valencia's transponder not detected within sensor range."

"Oh, my God," was Vance's response. He had called up a close visual inspection of the captain's corpse and realized that there were lacerations along the right ear. His commplant had been forcibly removed, and whatever cut him open had continued along his neck. Dark patches and circles could be seen on his uniform, indicating the pattern in which the blood had flowed from his arteries. Vance launched the runabout, while whispering apologies to his fallen captain.

The buildup was evident now. Multiple explosions appeared along the underside of the ship's stardrive section. Each one looked as if they were timed to fatigue the hull until the last explosion caught hold of the *Cairo*'s antimatter storage unit. Within moments, the combined power of the antimatter stored within the ship and its contact against the hull was enough to rip through the belly of the ship and set off the explosive bolts located throughout the ship's superstructure.

Vance plotted a course to put them back on course for Spacedock and executed the course at high warp. As the detonation shockwave threatened to reach the *Yosemite* and tear the tiny ship apart, the warp engines flashed a bright whitish-blue before powering the runabout into subspace.

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"This is the runabout *Yosemite* to Starfleet Command," tried Vance, calling out to the Alliance-monitored subspace band. "Come in, Starfleet." Two hours had passed since the *Cairo* exploded and the runabout barely avoided destruction. The range between the runabout and Spacedock had lessened enough to attempt a long-range subspace communication with the admiralty. There did not appear to be any starships coming to their rescue nor even a response to their earlier inquiry regarding the distress beacon. His continued calls went unanswered, and after undergoing one of the worst experiences of his life, he had begun to feel as though he were the last being in the universe.

He shook his head at the console, nearly slamming his fist into it. "Computer, run a level-three diagnostic on the communications subsystems." Vance turned around to look at the replicator and ordered a glass of water while he waited for the results.

The computer responded, "Diagnostic complete. Subspace transceiver assembly unit requires replacement."

"Is there damage to the unit?"

"The unit is not present within the communication array."

"What?" he asked in an incredulous tone.

Ensign T'Kessa appeared from the aft compartment, hearing the end of the conversation between the computer and the lieutenant. "May I be of some assistance, sir?"

Vance sighed, "Perhaps. Are you all right?"

"I feel very refreshed, sir, thank you for asking. What seems to be the problem?" she asked in a helpful tone.

"The STA has been removed from the communications array. That's probably why there has not been any response from Starfleet with regard to our investigation," noted Lieutenant Carmichael. "My question is how did it get removed in the first place?" He stood near the replicator, drinking his glass.

T'Kessa settled into the runabout's pilot console without asking, and began to enter in commands. She remarked, "I will attempt to answer that for you, sir."

"Thank you, Ensign," replied Vance. He moved back to the piloting area and settled in next to her, looking at the helm controls and watching her hands work the runabout. He looked up at her and noticed what a beautiful smile she had.

Her smile.

A Vulcan. Smiling.

The nose of the runabout turned noticeably as T'Kessa executed a series of course corrections, and increased the runabout's speed. She said, "The reason why the runabout's subspace transceiver is missing is because I removed it."

Vance nearly dropped his glass onto the console; his questioning of her course changes dying before they could be voiced. "You removed it? Why?"

"I did not wish for you to contact Starfleet Command," T'Kessa replied in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

"Ensign..." he said in a warning tone.

"Oh, I'm no longer under your command, as you probably surmised," said the smiling T'Kessa. "The reason I do not wish you to contact Starfleet is because it is too soon for more ships to arrive."

His eyes drifted to the helm readouts and realized they were returning to Alpha Laramie V. "What are you?" Vance asked.

"The crew of the *Cairo* tried desperately to determine that. You could say that they did not truly realize what they had brought aboard," the being inside of T'Kessa replied. "Looks can be deceiving." She reached over to slap his hand away from his phaser, catching the butt of it and pulling it out of the holster before he could wield it. "Oh no, you don't, Lieutenant. Let's not start that up again."

Vance grabbed at his right hand as it throbbed from the pain. "Again?"

T'Kessa nodded, "Captain Jellico's heroics prevented us from attaining total control of the ship. That's all we really wanted. We wished to join with the crew to escape the hell that is our world. Your bodies are nearly tailor-made for our purposes, and we could be such a tremendous advantage to you. Instead, you all seem to have a rather illogical attitude toward immortality."

"Immortality? It's too high a price."

"Nonsense," said T'Kessa in a chastising tone. "It's a perfect match, Lieutenant. You will see."

"No, I won't," said Vance, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

"It doesn't matter to me right now. We will return to the planet, where I will beam you down and wait for one of my kind to take you and I have taken T'Kessa," she explained.

"Is T'Kessa...?" his voice caught as he could not even ask the question.

She understood what he was asking, "Oh, she is gone. She resisted, instead of giving herself over to me. For such an intelligent creature devoted to logic, she held the same illogical grasp on herself that most of you do. Besides, it is a true pity that she chose to suppress her emotions. I would have liked to have helped her explore them." T'Kessa ran a hand against Vance's face, gently. "I know how much you're attracted to her."

Vance flinched, "Don't touch me!" Even under the circumstance, he was unable to hide his attraction to her.

T'Kessa reveled in his mixed reaction. "Your body betrays you, Vance, my darling. She knew you wanted her. All I'm doing is offering you the chance."

The realization of T'Kessa's death dawned upon him and tears wells up in his eyes. "Damn you," he whispered.

"If you were to give yourself freely, I can promise you several lifetimes of bliss and happiness," offered the being. She smiled, "All you have to do is say yes."

"Go to hell."

She sighed, "I had so hoped you would reconsider. As I said before, it does not matter if you join me or not. You will have little choice in the matter, but it would be different if you made the choice yourself. You could live on, just out of control."

"I would rather die than live like that. I will destroy this ship before I allowed you to lure more people to their deaths," vowed Vance. He looked up, "Computer, initiate autodestruct. Authorization..."

Before he could give his authorization, T'Kessa managed to produce a hidden blade and drew it up and across his throat. Blood splattered out over the consoles, the deck, the bulkheads, and her face.

With his throat now exposed to the air, he was unable to speak any further. She smiled sweetly at him, explaining her actions, "I can't let you do that, my darling. You see, I have to set up a radio signal using the transceiver to attract more people to my planet. We need more people so we can finally be free. This is the best chance we ever had to accomplish our goals."

Vance gurgled, grasping at his throat and feeling his warm blood flow over his hands and down the front of his uniform.

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek as the life slowly drifted from his body. "Oh, my poor darling. We could have had a wonderful eternity together. You had to go and be heroic. Now, you see why I had to kill your captain?"

He could not respond or lash out at her; his energy failing him as his blood pooled below his seat in the cockpit. With the last bit of tension in his neck and darkness tingeing at the edges of his vision, the last thing Lieutenant (jg) Vance Carmichael saw in his life was the face of the smiling Vulcan.