

“FALLEN HEROES”

by Alex Lampe

PART I – CHAPTER VI

Captain Stephan Rinckes had to close his narrow eyes briefly to protect them from the bright light coming from the *Sundance*'s destruction. Moments ago, a final explosion ripped apart the saucer section of the *USS Sundance* and forever silenced everyone onboard. The *Sundance*, his own command, that strong *Prometheus*-class starship he was so proud of, is gone. Blown to dust in a hopeless battle...

He moves closer to the window and takes a look at his own reflection. Running around on this station looking for his First Officer has taken its toll on his appearance. Now that he can see the marks on his face and the cuts on his uniform he notices the stinging and droning pain all over his body.

What he sees when he looks to the left quickly makes him forget his own pain; a huge prototype Altonoid vessel is fighting the severely damaged *USS Kennedy* and *USS Wolf*. From what he can see, the Altonoids have gained the upper hand. Are there really *four* phaser beams pounding on the weakened shields of the *Kennedy*? He looks back into the room again and realizes, “We’ll never win this battle.” He stares ahead for a moment, thinking. Then he remembers his most important goal. “Melanie.”

Just when he’s about to leave, he hears footsteps coming from behind the door he used to enter this room. He can hear approaching voices, largely muted by the bulkheads and the door itself. “He’s in here! We’ve got him.”

Captain Rinckes sets his phaser rifle on the highest power setting, making the setting indicators on top of the rifle turn red, and points the rifle at the door. As the footsteps close in rapidly, he notices there’s another door to his right. He doesn’t hesitate for a second and makes a run for it as the first door opens to reveal a group of armed Altonoids. Captain Rinckes tries to run as fast as he can, even though he’s very tired. The look on his face hardens, however, because reaching that door will provide him his only chance of survival.

The Altonoids close in on the Captain of the late *USS Sundance* and try to get a target lock on him, while the double sliding door starts to open in front of Captain Rinckes. But with his current speed, the door won’t be fully opened in time. Captain Rinckes therefore turns his torso to the right to make himself as narrow as possible. This enables him to aim his rifle at the Altonoids with his outstretched right arm. Well, he tries to aim at the Altonoids, but because he’s still running he inadvertently aims at the window! He’ll never break off the attack like this...

Some Altonoids have started firing their weapons at the Captain. Fortunately for him, they can’t get a clear shot at the running target. Captain Rinckes fires three phaser bursts, but they head straight for the window... and smash right through it! The phaser rifle is set on the highest setting and that is too much to handle even for the strong exterior window. It vaporizes for a considerable part, and the rest shatters and gets blown out in an instant.

Just when Captain Rinckes has raced out and enters the nearest corridor, all the air gets shoved out of the room through the gaping hole. Every single Altonoid is taken completely by surprise and gets dragged off their feet, flung through the broken window, and propelled into space by the sudden air displacement.

Captain Rinckes can feel the rushing air trying to pull him back into the room. With a great deal of effort, he is able to reach the bulkhead opposite the door, only to find that there’s nothing to hold on to! As if he gets scooped up by a giant invisible hand, the Captain flies back to where he came from, waving his arms around, desperately trying to prevent certain death. With a bit of luck, he manages to clasp the right side of the doorway with his left hand. While the air around him rushes into space with a thunderous roar, he tries to gasp for air,

with little success. His left arm gets stretched to the max as the air displacement forces his feet to point at the window...

Then, suddenly (and finally!), the emergency force fields kick in and seal off the window. Rinckes falls to the floor face-first. He deeply breathes in and out for a while, savoring the new supply of fresh oxygen that gets pumped back into the room. It's getting progressively easier to breathe.

After a few seconds, he carefully stands up again and notices that he has somehow managed to hold on to his phaser rifle. A bit too tightly, because his right hand is practically glued to the chrome of the rifle. He looks through the invisible force field that has replaced the window and sees the sprawling Altonoids flying away in the distance. Then he looks around in the empty room he's in once again. For a moment, it looks as if he wants to smile in relief. But that hint of egoistical joy immediately gets suppressed by the thought that Melanie is still missing and could very well be in danger.

He changes the power setting of the phaser rifle to medium, wipes the dust from his uniform jacket, and exits the room once again.

"This is all I can do for you right now," Doctor Rose Van Oers says while she closes her med-kit. Marc Lucas, the handsome, young Latin American Ensign, has suffered a phaser wound to his left leg and is lying on his back. His damaged left pant leg reveals the location of the wound, but the skin underneath it appears to be healthy now. Despite that, the unfortunate Ensign still seems to be in a bit of pain. Dr. Van Oers notices this and says in a reassuring tone, "Your injuries will heal. You were relatively lucky."

The short, muscular Lieutenant Steven Appels looks around the corner to check if there are any Altonoids inbound. He sees nobody, but that does nothing to calm him down. "We should move on," he says impatiently.

Ensign Lucas attempts to stand up, and he succeeds with a little help from Dr. Van Oers. But the young Ensign can't shift his weight to the injured leg and has no choice but to lie down again. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. That might be more difficult than you'd hope."

"We can't leave you behind in the middle of a corridor. Then we might as well shoot you right away," Lt. Appels says, with a trace of seriousness in his voice that makes Ensign Lucas give the Lieutenant a slightly unsettled look and causes the Doctor to take a protective stance over her patient. Steven Appels notices that, but he continues in the same tone anyway. "Maybe if you'd act dead, the Altonoids won't shoot you."

Ensign Lucas doesn't like that idea at all.

"Now that's a comforting thought!" Dr. Van Oers says. "I think I have a better idea. When I served as a nurse onboard the *USS Righteous* some years ago, at one time a group of Orion pirates came out of nowhere and boarded our ship. They were looking for women to sell on one of their slave markets. Not every Starfleet officer's dream..."

"Please get to the point," Lt. Appels sighs, while watching out for Altonoids again.

"When the pirates boarded the ship and their intentions became clear, I came up with the idea to have every woman in sickbay hide in the empty morgue. We each entered a separate cryo-chamber and used a medical tricorder to mask our life signs. It never even occurred to the pirates that we could be hiding there... We were the only female officers on that ship who weren't kidnapped by the Orion Syndicate that day."

"I don't believe the Altonoids want to kidnap me to paint me green and sell me as a slave," Ensign Lucas quips as he carefully sits up.

"The point is," she continues with a smile, "we should hide you somewhere the Altonoids will never expect you."

"You mean we should hide him in the ladies room?" Lt. Appels remarks dryly.

Dr. Van Oers gives him the evil eye.

A little while later, the Doctor and the Chief Security Officer of the *Kennedy* lift Ensign Marc Lucas headfirst into a Jefferies tube very close to where they devised this plan. Dr. Van Oers practically has to crawl into the maintenance tube herself to hand the young Ensign her medical tricorder, and says, "It's set to mask your life signs."

Lt. Appels has remained standing in the corridor, and he doesn't even bother to look at the Ensign when he says, "All you have to do is wait here. If we're not back in six hours, make your way to the nearest escape pod and get out of here."

"Sir, yes sir," Ensign Lucas replies.

"Try to relax a bit," the Doctor says with a reassuring smile on her face. "You're perfectly safe here." She exits the maintenance tube, where an impatient Lt. Appels is waiting for her.

"Good luck... to both of you," Ensign Lucas says.

"Thanks," Doctor Van Oers replies, once again displaying her impeccable bedside manner. She closes the hatch, and with that, the only way of getting in or out of this particular Jefferies tube.

Lying there on his back, with a phaser wound on his leg and a medical tricorder next to it, Ensign Lucas tries to relax a bit, and he begins humming to himself. The humming stops immediately when he makes a somewhat inconvenient realization. "But what if I've got to go to the bathroom?"

Commander Tony Q and Ensign Emily Murphy travel through the corridors of Station A-12. Tony Q can barely walk because of the phaser wound he has suffered just above his right hip, and a large portion of his weight is being carried by the attractive young Ensign. Despite the direness of the situation, they talk in reasonably lighthearted fashion.

"So aren't you a bit too young to be a Commander?" Ensign Murphy asks.

Tony takes a wrong step, groans in pain, and shifts a bit more of his weight onto her shoulder. "Well... Q certainly had some influence there." He sets up his most winning smile through the pain. "From Cadet to Commander in roughly one year. Even someone as charming as you can't do that."

Ensign Murphy smiles politely but doesn't respond to Tony's sudden outbreak of testosterone...

"And now that every member of the Q Continuum has abandoned me, I'm a vulnerable, fragile human once again." Tony can't disguise the sudden bitterness in his voice.

To keep the conversation from going sour, Ensign Murphy quickly decides to change subjects. "I haven't seen any other living Starfleet officers yet. Where are they?"

"I have no idea. I'm honestly more concerned about any Altonoid officers..." Tony smirks and he looks into the deep brown eyes of Emily Murphy long enough for her to look away shyly. Tony coughs apologetically and looks ahead again. Somehow, they look back at each other at the exact same moment, making them smile.

"So, what class---" Tony says, but he can't finish his sentence because Ensign Murphy sees a shadow moving across the corridor and pushes Tony Q away to grab her phaser rifle. With his current injuries, Cmdr. Tony Q can't stand on his own feet and he smashes against the bulkhead next to him. After bouncing off the bulkhead, Tony slowly collapses on the floor while emitting a long moan.

Ensign Murphy sees that the shadow belongs to a broken conduit and she lowers her rifle. When she sees Tony lying on the ground clutching his head, she realizes what she has done and quickly tries to get him back on his feet, without much success. "Oh. I'm terribly sorry! But you see, I had to knock you away. Because I thought... I'm so sorry, Commander."

"Show's over. Moving on," Tony says as he tries to decide which of the six apologetic Ensigns he should address. The whole corridor seems to be part of a frenzied merry-go-round.

“I’m really sorry!” Ensign Murphy keeps apologizing while she places her arms under Tony Q’s armpits in an attempt to get Tony standing again, a rather awkward sight...

Emily manages to put Tony’s arm around her neck. As he gradually comes back to his senses, he sighs, “Suddenly I’m beginning to understand why you’re still an Ensign.”

In spite of Tony’s sarcasm, Emily replies with a sweet smile instead of the expected scowl. Tony returns the smile. He wishes he could just stay mad at her for a little while longer, but he realizes that’s not going to happen. Carefully, they continue their journey through the corridors.

Captain Rinckes has obviously had to face a few more Altonoids. His uniform is torn in places, there are marks on his face and hands, and his knuckles are red from all of the fighting. The ongoing rush of adrenaline that’s on the verge of wearing out prevents him from feeling any pain at the moment. Silently, he reaches a wall panel and accesses it. The upper right corner of the LCARS panel catches his eye. It’s a simple display of the day and time, and it reads:

THURSDAY - 2045 HOURS.

“Has it only been that long?” Captain Rinckes whispers to himself. “It seems decades ago the Altonoids took over the station. It seems decades ago I was with Melanie...”

His pondering look changes into the hardened, determined look again as he focuses on the wall panel. He taps in several commands and the panel shows him the schematics of the section he’s in. His index finger scrolls across the cold tripolymer interface, from his current whereabouts to a square chamber that has “OBSERVATION LOUNGE” written inside of it. His fingers tap the display a few times, because he has found what he was looking for. He remembers what the Altonoid had said to him, and he softly echoes his words. “She was last seen in the observation lounge of this deck. But you’re too late anyway. I already called for back-up.”

The wall panels in the immediate area light up and show him which route to take to get to his destination. Rinckes doesn’t hesitate for one second and walks off while his eyes narrow and his grip around the phaser rifle tightens.

Commander Tony Q and Ensign Emily Murphy are still traveling through the corridors while making casual small talk. After some time has passed, Emily says, “We’re sure lucky not to have encountered any Altonoids yet.”

At that precise moment, a shadow moves across the corridor once again. Definitely humanoid-shaped this time!

“You just had to say it, didn’t you?” Tony Q remarks sullenly as Emily sets him down on the ground – a lot gentler than the last time. She points her rifle at the end of the corridor and is greeted by the barrel of a similar rifle. It’s being held by a Starfleet security officer! He seems to be in the same bad shape as everyone does after they’ve spent some time on this station; his hair is a sweaty mess, his uniform is battle-worn, and his brown, weary eyes convey tiredness.

Ensign Murphy puts down her rifle and sighs in relief as the friendly contact approaches. “You spooked me there, Lieutenant...?”

“Lieutenant First Class Jarod Moore. *USS Sundance*.” The rugged-looking Lieutenant speaks swiftly, as if he has said these words too many times already.

“And I am Ensign Emily C. Murphy. *USS Kennedy*.”

Lt. Moore points at Cmdr. Tony Q, who lies there tucked away in the corner. “Is that kid in need of medical attention?”

“Kid? You’re calling me a kid?” Tony snaps.

“Wow. Cranky,” Lt. Moore says to Ensign Murphy.
Murphy rolls her eyes and smiles. “You have no idea.”
Tony shakes his head.

“This is a dangerous section of the station. In your condition, I suggest you leave,” Lt. Moore says while he crouches down next to Tony Q and starts examining his wound superficially.

“Lieutenant, don’t worry about us. We were already heading for the shuttle bay,” Tony Q replies.

“Good. That phaser wound appears to be stable for now, but it will require surgery sooner or later,” Jarod says, without looking the Commander in the eyes, and he stands up. “At the moment, however, transporting the wounded isn’t our ships’ main priority.”

“Yep. They’re still fighting those Altonoids, no doubt,” Tony Q says. “Well, we’ve got some good ships. You’re from the *Sundance*, you said? I bet your ship is packing quite a wallop out there.” Tony forces a smile.

Lt. Moore doesn’t smile at all, for obvious reasons. “Didn’t you know? The *USS Sundance* has been lost with all hands.”

That unexpected bit of news stuns Tony and Ensign Murphy for a moment.

“We’ve lost the *Satellite* too,” Lt. Moore continues.

Tony hesitates briefly before asking, “And the *Kennedy*?”

“She’s been crippled. Severely damaged. Though from the *Sundance*’s last report, I heard that she’s still fighting. So is the *USS Wolf*.”

Emily and especially Tony need some time to absorb this information. “What about the Altonoids?” Ensign Murphy asks.

“The way things stand now, the Altonoids have a good chance of winning the space battle. And I don’t have exact numbers, but this station is swarming with Altonoids.”

“I had hoped we were on the winning side...” Tony says after a short silence.

“We won’t give up, that’s for sure. These Altonoids killed many men and women today, and who knows what they’ll do after this. They must be stopped.” Lt. Moore looks away for a brief moment before saying, “I was the leader of squad 8-Beta, with the emphasis on *was*. I was responsible for them, but I couldn’t help but watch them perish one by one while we fought alongside.” He chuckles joylessly. “They relied on my guidance... I tried to be as strategic as possible, but there were too many Altonoids.” He shakes his head.

“I’m sure you did the best you could,” Emily says comfortingly.

“Alright. I won’t lie to you,” Jarod says with determination flooding back into his speech. “The situation is bad. Both here on the station and outside the station. But I swear to you that we won’t give up! We will have to end all of this, or many other innocent people will die too.”

A short silence.

“I’m afraid I won’t be much of help,” Tony sighs as he points at his phaser wound. He’s still sitting on the floor.

Lt. Moore gives the young, wounded Commander a long look, and suddenly recognizes him. “Wait a minute. You’re Commander Tony Q, right?”

“The one and only,” Tony replies without any trace of enthusiasm. Being such a young high-ranking officer and becoming a Q doesn’t occur without anyone noticing. However, right now he couldn’t care less about being ‘famous’.

“I don’t understand. You’re a Q, so you have the power to make things right.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t,” Tony sighs. “I wanted to help the Federation, but I had to give up my powers and immortality in the process.” He points at his phaser wound. “That is what happened.”

“Then I’d say you’ve already helped us more than we could’ve asked of you,” Lt. Moore says. He ponders his next words for a moment. “Go. Get out of this place. Your battle is over for now.”

The silent Ensign Emily Murphy lifts Tony back on his feet again. Lt. Moore can see the pain in Tony’s eyes. Not only the pain of the wound, but the fact that Tony *is* wounded. Tony moves his arm around Emily’s shoulder and she supports most of his weight again.

“What about you, Lieutenant?” Ensign Murphy asks.

“Don’t worry about me,” he replies with a polite smile. And with that, he readies his rifle and walks the other way without looking back.

Ensign Emily Murphy and Commander Tony Q silently continue their journey to the shuttle bay.

A few decks away, Captain Rinckes walks through the corridors, past the wall panels that point him to his destination. There it is: the door that leads to the observation lounge of this deck. Captain Rinckes rushes towards it, forgetting all the combat tactics he has learned over the years. He’s so tired, but his hopes of finding Commander Melanie Simons are increasing every step of the way.

The door opens and he runs into the large room that is only slightly smaller than Station A-12’s conference room and provides a similar view of the space battle. His eyes search the room for a brief moment. There’s been a battle in here, no doubt about it. Tables and chairs have been overturned, phaser marks stain the walls and furniture, and he spots at least five dead Altonoids with various fatal injuries.

Then he sees her... She lies there in the shattered glass of a cupboard that held many golden starship models. Now most golden models lie scattered on the floor. Silent and still, she faces the window, which displays the space battle raging on in cold space. Captain Rinckes couldn’t care less about the battle right now; he rushes over to the motionless Commander. Before he reaches her, he notices there’s a huge phaser wound covering most of her upper body. The mere sight of that wound stops him dead in his tracks. The wound looks so extensive it just has to be fatal.

“No...” Rinckes whispers. He drops his rifle, rushes towards her again, and crouches down beside her. His hands and legs get stabbed by shards of glass, but he couldn’t give a damn. He touches her blonde hair gently and when he pushes it aside, multiple marks and wounds are revealed. The touch causes Melanie Simons to open her eyes a little. “Melanie!” Rinckes exclaims in a strange mixture of despair and relief.

“Captain...” she whispers.

“My God. What happened?” Captain Rinckes asks, but he doesn’t wait for a response. “I’ll get you to sickbay. Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.” But when he looks into the eyes of the woman he loves, he sees his own lies reflected back at him.

Melanie slowly shakes her head, while looking her Captain in the eyes vaguely. “No, Captain,” she says softly.

Momentarily at a loss for words and actions, Stephan Rinckes lifts her up slightly and holds her in his arms. “Melanie. Please... don’t give up. We’ll get you back to the *Su...* to the ship,” he says with growing desperation in his voice, realizing midway that he has lost his ship already.

“Take good care of the *Sundance* for me, will you?” Melanie whispers. She’s struggling to keep her eyes open.

Though giving up is the last thing he wants to do, Rinckes is forced to draw the bitter conclusion that he’s losing her. Time is running out. This will be his last chance to talk to her. He *has* to tell her he loves her. He summons all his inner strength and whispers in a broken voice, “Melanie, I...” He can’t say it. Every fiber of his being compels him to say it, but he

simply can't tell her that he loves her. He forces a weak smile on his trembling face. "I will..." A false promise already broken instead of those three simple words that are now destined to remain unspoken.

He watches the life drain from Melanie's blue eyes until they're reduced to an empty stare. Her head tilts back and, gently, her Captain releases his grip and places her on the floor.

Stephan Rinckes is shattered. There's nothing he can do. He can't even tell her he loves her anymore; that time has come and gone. The only person in this universe that he really cared about has been taken from him... He wants to cry so hard. He wants to lay himself down next to her and die here, with her. Already, tears are forming in his eyes, and feelings of loss and hopelessness distort the sharp features of his face.

Suddenly, the tears stop flowing and his expression goes blank, just completely blank. Captain Rinckes takes off his uniform jacket, revealing his red Captain's shirt, and uses it to gently cover Melanie's face and torso. He stands up, walks over to his phaser rifle, and picks it up. Without looking back, he walks out of the room and away from the woman he once loved. No expression at all on his face.

The once so sterile bridge of the *Akira*-class *USS Wolf* is dark and damaged almost beyond any hope of repair. Multiple workstations are no longer functioning, and some bridge crew members are unconscious or dead. Someone should move them off the bridge, but staying focused on the current battle is of higher importance.

The entire weapon pod exploded a while back, which had quite a significant impact on the structural integrity. Now, the entire ship shudders and shakes with every maneuver. Relentlessly, the Altonoids' phaser beams keep scorching the *Wolf*'s hull in an effort to exploit any catastrophic weaknesses. Luckily, the *Kennedy* is still around. Every once in a while, she manages to draw away fire, but she's weakening just like the *Wolf*.

Captain Suzan Reynolds tries to walk over the continuously shaking floor to stand near the Swedish Lt. Cmdr. Leif Anderson at his tactical station. This way she can actually hear what he's saying with all that rumbling of ship components going on. And that hissing EPS conduit next to her Captain's chair isn't helping either... Lt. Cmdr. Anderson's tactical station isn't exactly working at prime efficiency anymore, but he has rerouted most functions to one of the few panels that are still working. He has also rerouted his station to receive any incoming engineering reports, because the remains of the engineering workstation on the other side of the bridge lie scattered over the floor...

The tall Captain Reynolds gives Lt. Cmdr. Anderson an inquiring look. As if telepathically linked, Anderson has his report ready. "Our engines are back to twenty-two percent efficiency. Whenever we restore a part of the shields, an attack from those Altonoids depletes them immediately. Hull integrity is down to eleven percent, but I've rerouted power from the empty torpedo bays to the structural integrity field. Phasers are operational, though I---" He can't finish his elaborate damage report, because the four Altonoid phaser beams hit a weak spot (one of many by now) and the bridge shudders violently.

Chief Helmsman Lieutenant Stephanie Grant tries every evasive maneuver in the book, and some extra she makes up on the spot. Despite her brilliant evasive actions (which are currently even more difficult to perform due to the weakened engines), the phaser beams just keep pounding the hull of the *USS Wolf*.

For a moment, the *USS Kennedy* becomes visible on the viewscreen. The battle has clearly taken its toll on the large *Sovereign*-class ship. Captain Reynolds moves to the front of the shaking, dark bridge again and sees that the proud but wounded *Kennedy* has suffered hull breaches that are clearly visible even from this distance. "Divert more power to the phaser arrays and keep firing at the *Massal* with everything we've got!" she orders Commander

Anderson. “We might buy the *Kennedy* a bit more repair time.” She realizes this may not make much of a difference, but she sure as hell won’t give up!

“We can’t keep them off their backs forever!” Lt. Cmdr. Anderson shouts.

Captain Reynolds acknowledges him with a quick nod.

The four phaser beams hammer the impulse engines of the *USS Wolf*, right until Lt. Grant moves the engines out of their devastating reach. The *Massal* immediately directs its attention to the *USS Kennedy*, which is basically hanging motionlessly in space now that its engines have suffered major damage.

The bridge of the *USS Kennedy* would be darker than it ever was, if its starboard side wasn’t partially on fire. The few engineers who were busy repairing the bridge earlier are now busy trying to extinguish the flames! The other four bridge crew members (the Vulcan Lt. Sivar on the Captain’s chair, Ensign Parkin behind the tactical station, which almost topples over when a part of the ceiling decides to come down, and Lieutenants Malin and Muntenaar in front of the bridge) all have suffered scratches and bruises.

The *Massal* has directed its phaser beams at the *Kennedy*, and with the absence of shielding, the phaser beams inflict serious damage in little time, causing the bridge to rumble and shake excessively. Without warning, the OPS console blows up in Lieutenant Muntenaar’s face! Lieutenant Muntenaar is tossed backwards and lands in the nearby fire!

The blonde Trill Lt. Malin has managed to hold on to her station despite the close proximity blast. “Are you alright?!” she screams while she looks back.

Lieutenant Muntenaar finds himself surrounded by searing hot flames. Quickly, he gathers all his strength, stands up, and throws himself away from the fire. After a few frantic rolls on the floor, he gets rid of any residual flames. There are burn marks on his face and hands, but he realizes it could’ve been much worse.

Suddenly, the *Massal* stops firing. The bridge is still shaking mildly, but the awful noise of phasers versus hull plating is gone. Now, more ominous sounds caused by the failing structural integrity become audible.

“Miss Malin, are the engines still inoperable?” Lt. Sivar asks, while Lieutenant Muntenaar stands up carefully with the help of a nearby engineer.

“Yes, sir,” Malin replies. “Engines and thrusters are down.”

“What is the status of our weaponry, Ensign?” Sivar asks Ensign Parkin.

“That last hit took out our phasers, and from our current angle we can’t fire torpedoes,” the young Ensign replies.

Lieutenant Sivar turns to ask the engineers about the status of repairs, but he decides not to ask them anything, because they’re still struggling with the fire that seems to be the only light source on the bridge, apart from the few LCARS displays that still work. Besides, his dark Vulcan eyes are drawn to the viewscreen.

The *Massal*’s phaser wires start flickering on and off again, which signifies that they’re about to launch another massive phaser strike. Everyone drops what they’re doing and looks at the viewscreen. Not with amazement or fear. No, with acknowledgement...

The bridge crew of the *Wolf* can see it too. There just seems to be no stopping that *Massal*. Captain Reynolds has seated herself in the Captain’s chair once again, and she wants to say something, but nobody can hear her due to the broken, hissing EPS conduit next to her. She gets fed up with it, stands up, rips out the remains of the conduit, crushes it, stuffs it back to where it came from (effectively stopping the hissing), and sits down with a thud. “Right,” she says as she pushes some hair from her face. Lit by the flickering light of the Altonoid phaser wires that shines on their faces via the viewscreen, most of the bridge crew members have to smile, if just for a moment. “Who’s being targeted this time?” Reynolds asks.

“The *Kennedy*, ma’am,” Ensign Mick Daniels replies.

“She ain’t going anywhere?”

“Her engines are still down.”

A short silence. Captain Reynolds thinks, while everyone on the bridge holds their breath. A determined grimace appears on her face, and she orders, “Lieutenant Grant, position our ship between the *Massal* and the *Kennedy*.”

Lt. Cmdr. Anderson shakes his head and says firmly, “We will not survive another phaser hit like that.”

“Neither will they,” Lt. Stephanie Grant says in a gentle voice as she looks at the viewscreen, which shows the severely damaged *USS Kennedy*. “I understand, Captain. We might buy the *Kennedy* some time. It’s our only hope.”

Reynolds gives Lt. Grant an appreciative smile before ordering, “Divert more power to the engines. Move us into position.” As the weakened engines push the ship into forward motion, Captain Reynolds sighs deeply and says to herself, “I never thought I’d be doing this more than once a day...”

On the bridge of the *USS Kennedy*, the *Wolf* eclipses the sight of the *Massal* in much the same way that the *Satellite* did right before she was destroyed.

“The *USS Wolf* is forming a buffer between us and the Altonoid vessel,” Lt. Malin says with a touch of pride in her voice.

“That is exceptionally courageous of Captain Reynolds,” Lt. Sivar says. “I see what she is attempting to accomplish by performing this maneuver. She is buying us some time.”

“We must prioritize repairs,” Lt. Muntenaar says. Despite having suffered painful second-degree burns on his face and hands, he has suppressed the urge to just give up on the situation and report to sickbay. In fact, he has taken over and rerouted the engineering station, now that his OPS console is gone. “We need to get the engines back on-line, or the *Wolf*’s sacrifice will be in vain.”

“Exactly,” Sivar says. He opens a comm channel. “This is acting Captain Sivar to Commander Soete---”

“The *Massal* is engaging tractor beam!” Lt. Muntenaar shouts.

Lt. Sivar lifts an eyebrow.

The *Massal* stops powering up its phaser array and sends out a tractor beam instead. It sears through space and locks on to the saucer of the *USS Wolf*. Without showing any mercy, the tractor beam starts moving the *Wolf* to starboard with tremendous force, causing the bridge to shake even more violently. To the bridge crew, it feels like they’re in the middle of a city-shattering earthquake. Several consoles and wall panels explode, and parts of the bridge simply rupture. “All power to the structural integrity field!” Captain Reynolds shouts as she stands up on the shaking bridge.

The *Wolf* spins out of control, and simply gets shoved away from the *Kennedy*. Because of the missing weapon pod, the warp engine pylons bend dangerously. By some miracle, what remains of the structural integrity field keeps them from breaking off altogether.

After the powerful tractor beam has done its job, it releases the *Akira*-class vessel.

“Compensate! All power to the engines!” Captain Reynolds shouts.

Lt. Cmdr. Anderson interprets the jumble of data coming from his damaged workstation and shouts, “The ship is moving too fast. The engines aren’t in the condition to counteract!”

“Reroute power from wherever you can find it and fix those cursed engines!” Reynolds shouts. The *Wolf* keeps spinning away from the *Kennedy* and the *Massal*, while the phaser system of the Altonoids starts powering up again. Captain Reynolds looks at the *Kennedy* and sighs a well-meant, “Good luck, Sivar.”

Once again, the bridge of the *Kennedy* is being lit by the ominous, erratic light coming from the phaser wires. The ongoing fire near the starboard consoles provides the finishing touch to the bridge's undeniably hellish appearance.

"The *Wolf* messages us that they're sorry..." Lt. Muntenaar reports. Now that his hopes of survival have been crushed, the agony caused by his second-degree burns are beginning to slip into his conscious mind. *So be it*, he thinks. *I'm not leaving my post. No matter what.*

"Helm is still not responding," Lt. Malin says with growing agitation in her voice.

Like moths being drawn towards a flame, everyone watches the light coming from the *Massal*'s phaser system as it increases in intensity.

"Ensign Parkin," Lt. Sivar asks. "Is there any way we can break off their attack?"

The tall Ensign Parkin shakes his head sadly. "I'm sorry, sir. Phasers are still out."

"Noted, Ensign." Lieutenant Sivar presses the comm button on his chair. "This is acting Captain Sivar to engineering."

No response. The streaks of light emanating from the phaser wires keep moving faster and faster.

"How long do we have left?" Lt. Sivar asks the wounded Lt. Muntenaar.

"I can't tell. Sensor readings are garbled. I just don't know. Seconds, maybe."

Sivar presses the comm button again. "Sivar to Soeteman. It is imperative that we get our engines operational again." There's no reply. "Engineering, report." Sivar's voice is starting to sound urgent, but there's still no response.

The lights coming from the phaser wires start connecting with each other. They'll be ready to unleash their most powerful phaser strike mere seconds from now.

"Engineering?" Sivar looks up at the viewscreen and sees all the streaks of light bundling together to form one huge phaser beam. Then, Sivar sighs deeply and, for the first time in his life, says, "Damn."

The massive phaser beam races towards the *Kennedy* and hits her engineering section dead-on. That part of the ship is already severely damaged, and the phaser beam slices right through it, rams its way through several decks, and comes out on the other side!

The devastation it leaves behind is immeasurable. The sheer power of the phaser beam and the resulting explosions, combined with the failing hull integrity, is too much to handle for the dying *Kennedy*. As if being ripped in two by an unseen force, the saucer tears free off the stardrive section. All lights on both parts of the ship dim as the two parts (each still several hundred meters in length) start rotating away from each other.

The stardrive section, which still contains enough structural integrity to hold both warp engines together, ventures away from the saucer of the *Kennedy* while rotating backwards. One look at that stardrive section makes it clear that nobody in there could've survived... Hundreds of broken corridors, Jefferies tubes, and conduits suddenly become exposed to open space, and many sections shed whatever is left of their hull plating. A turbolift that was moving through the ship gets sucked right into space and gets added to the large field of debris and dead crew members that is forming between the two parts of the ship. Many corridors and crawlways that are suddenly exposed to deep space look as if they already had a lot to endure, which reveals how damaged the ship already was before it got cracked in two.

The saucer section looks just as bad, if not worse. With all its lights dimmed, the saucer looks very macabre as it rotates forward in dramatic silence. All its decks are either collapsing or on fire. Essentially, it's become a death trap for all those who are unlucky enough to be caught inside.

The conference room's large window provides a painful panorama of the *Kennedy*'s destruction. Admiral Van Aken, Commander Levine, and especially Captain Duvivier and

Commander Jansen find it almost unbearable having to watch this horrendous spectacle unfold before them. Despite a warning from an Altonoid guard, Captain Mathieu Duvivier stands up to have a better look at the last thing he ever wanted to see: the *USS Kennedy* defeated, destroyed.

The dark, scorched saucer keeps rotating away in silence. Suddenly, explosions occur all over the entire saucer and fight their way out of its remains, taking the outer hull along with them. Within moments, the saucer of the *Kennedy* blows up in one final, gigantic explosion, causing all debris to scatter away in one big shockwave.

The *USS Kennedy* is no more.

It's very silent in the conference room of Station A-12.

Captain Duvivier looks at the remains of what used to be one of the Federation's finest starships, one of the most beautiful and most powerful ships Starfleet has ever constructed. A ship that held over seven hundred crew members. "My ship," he gasps incredulously, while he stumbles towards the large window. "My crew."

Letor Fune smiles. "Oh, the pain of losing one's vessel," he sneers melodramatically.

Captain Duvivier feels his face flush with anger, but somehow he manages to stay calm.

"It always relaxes me to see a Federation starship destroyed. A lot less Starfleet officers to worry about," Fune continues.

That last remark hits hard, and Duvivier can't keep his feelings of hatred back anymore. "You loathsome bastard!" he shouts and he turns to face the man who's responsible for the *Kennedy*'s demise. "You sickening piece of lowlife!" Threateningly, he moves towards the smirking Fune.

Admiral Van Aken shakes his head at Captain Duvivier, worried that the Captain might do something that could aggravate the situation even further. After all, tragic as the *Kennedy*'s loss may be, it's the Altonoids who are holding all the guns at the moment.

Captain Duvivier hesitates. He looks from Admiral Van Aken to the proud, tall Altonoid in front of him. When Duvivier looks to his left and right, he sees that several armed guards have closed in on him.

"Perhaps it would be better if you'd sit down," Letor Fune says. "The battle will soon be over anyway, so we'll be able to continue our work."

"Your work? You call taking innocent lives your work?!" Captain Duvivier is still standing in an aggressive stance, ready to take the Altonoid leader down, despite the fact that he's surrounded by guards.

Letor Fune laughs a short, fake laugh, and quickly turns serious again. "Sit down."

After summoning all the self-control he has left, Duvivier slowly walks over to the other three Starfleet officers and sits down next to his First Officer Commander Jansen, who gives his Captain a worried glance. The Captain ignores him and stares dejectedly at the floor.

"We are reading no life signs on the wreckages. No escape pods have been launched," the Altonoid near the wall display says. "They're all dead."

"Our colleagues. Our friends," the timid Captain Duvivier whispers to himself.

"The *USS Wolf* is not moving to intercept our warship. Nor is she fleeing the scene."

"They can't escape anyway," Letor Fune says. "Nor can any of you." He addresses the four officers directly.

"How about Commander Simons and Captain Rinckes? You still can't find them," the blonde Texan Cmdr. Levine says defiantly.

"All those officers and families living on this station couldn't find us either," Letor Fune says. "But we've certainly found them!" He laughs, making him the only one laughing in the large room.

After a beat of awkward silence, the red-haired Admiral Van Aken uses a subtle cough to indicate he's about to speak up. "Fune," he says calmly. "Since we aren't going anywhere,

why don't you tell us what you've done to the station's crew? Have you killed them too? Are they being imprisoned somewhere?"

"Why should I tell you? You're not in the position to ask any questions, Admiral," Fune replies. "I can tell you, however, that it took some great planning, but everything turned out alright –for us." He lets his word linger in the room for a while before continuing in an unpleasantly playful tone. "You really fell flat on your faces, didn't you?" He walks closer to the four.

Admiral Van Aken says nothing, prompting the arrogant Letor Fune to continue his mocking speech. "'The Altonoids want another diplomatic meeting with us. Sure, let's give them another chance'." The irony drips from Fune's voice. "You are so predictable!" He pauses to think, all the while regaining his seriousness. "For the Federation this will be the first major defeat of many. For us it's just a way to test *two* different kinds of prototypes during this small battle here and the battle against your so-called mighty fleet you've tried to keep hidden just outside of sensor range."

He sees four inquiring looks in front of him.

"Yes, that's right. The back-up fleet," Fune says. "Another display of your mistrust and deviousness."

"I'm not even inclined to talk about that," Admiral Van Aken says not quite as convincingly as he had intended.

"Then you wouldn't be interested in hearing what's holding them up, right? Well, to put it simply: *we* are." Letor Fune turns to face the window again to give the stars and the two remaining starships a pondering look. "You invaded our space several years ago." He raises his eyebrows as if what he's about to say is so simple that it speaks for itself. "Now... you will have to pay the price. The Alto Empire won't be treaded on again."

"We didn't invade your space," Admiral Van Aken says. He's having a fair bit of trouble speaking calmly, but he succeeds nonetheless. "We are explorers. We were hoping to meet a new race and learn from them. Learn from you. That's our primary goal: to explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations."

"We've heard that many times before," Fune replies. After a deep sigh, he turns to face the four officers and speaks his mind. "Forty years ago, the Romulans pretended to be just like you."

"Letor Fune, we are not allowed to discuss this with outsiders," one of his subordinates says.

"I determine what's allowed and what's not!" Fune snaps at him. "It's time we confront them with the truth!"

The embarrassed Altonoid swallows his words and looks away.

"The Romulans," Fune continues. "'We come in peace'. Sure... We welcomed them with our open arms. Quickly enough, their real intentions became clear. They harvested our planet's rich resources, enslaved many Altonoids..."

"But we learned our lesson well. We fought back so hard that they offered technology in trade of a treaty that made us never interfere with each other again. However, the damage was done. We, as a people, were devastated. So was our home planet. You can still see the scars on her surface. You didn't know about all this, did you, Admiral?"

Admiral Van Aken remains silent, but he doesn't break off his stare.

Commander Jansen leans closer to Captain Duvivier and whispers, "Even Commander Soeteman never told us this, and he must've known." He tried to whisper as softly as possible, but it was said loud enough to be overheard by Cmdr. Levine.

"It explains why the Romulans never wanted to have anything to do with our negotiations with the Altonoids," Dennis Levine whispers back.

Letor Fune is too absorbed in his monologue to hear them. “We won’t allow this to happen again. We know the likes of you. You’re not explorers. You’re just like the Romulans,” Fune scoffs. With a challenging glance, he awaits the Admiral’s response.

The Admiral doesn’t keep him waiting. “We welcomed you with our open arms. We arranged many diplomatic meetings, many leaps of faith. And every single time you attacked us. If you had taken the time to do more research you would know that the Federation is very different from the Romulans. I admit, our efforts to reach out to new civilizations and gain more knowledge have enabled us to make a few regrettable mistakes. And, yes, in order to protect ourselves we have had to make some very tough decisions. Also, these past few decades have been filled with wars we did not start, did not want, but happened anyway.”

Admiral Van Aken stands up to look Fune directly in the eye. “But these mistakes, and these tragedies have always given us the opportunity to improve ourselves. To become better persons, and to grow as a group of humans, Vulcans, Andorians, all sentient beings alike. If you’d really know us, like you claim you do, you’d be convinced that our intentions are benign.”

For a moment, Fune ponders the Admiral’s words, and he almost gives Van Aken the impression that he’s dealing with a reasonable, if not a bit misguided, fellow army man. The bubble of hope bursts quickly, though. “No. We know better!” Fune shouts, smiling broadly. “All those diplomatic meetings were just desperate attempts to make us believe in your ‘peaceful United Federation of Planets’.” The broad smile disappears quickly and his words, though still spoken in a booming voice, turn ice-cold. “We know better. We won’t let *anyone* take advantage of us *again!*” The loud words echo through the room for a few seconds. “We’ve turned the tables.”

“Yes, you have,” Admiral van Aken says matter-of-factly. “Now *you* are the Romulans.”

A brief, painful silence.

Fune does not accept defeat. “You’re just too stubborn to accept the fact that we know exactly how you’re thinking! The ‘righteous’ Federation. Please... I’m on to you. We all are. You’re just as stubborn as your troops. I mean... This battle being fought today. Hopeless... Your men are seriously outnumbered and every report we hear gives us more and more reason to believe we will win this battle. And yet you persist in fighting us. What’s the point?”

“Tell me. How did you drive away the Romulans from your home planet?” Admiral Van Aken asks fiercely. “By giving up at the first sign of trouble?”

Fune ignores him. “First we’ll take this station and every other starbase, station and outpost we come across. We will exterminate all life on your planets. We’ll make sure you’ll never unleash your evil plans upon us. The Alto Empire will never be messed with again!” This time, the Altonoids that surround him do not miss their cue and they all start cheering in a moment of chauvinistic pride.

While sporting a self-righteous smile, Fune walks over to Admiral Van Aken and halts mere inches away from him. “So now *you* tell me, Admiral. How does it feel? How does it feel to see everything you stand for, everything you believe in, crashing down upon you?”

Admiral Van Aken doesn’t respond.