

“FALLEN HEROES”

by Alex Lampe

PART I – CHAPTER VII

A seemingly ever-growing horde of Altonoids chase after Lieutenant Steven Appels and Doctor Rose Van Oers as they run through the corridors of Station A-12. In a desperate effort to lose them, the two officers rush into the nearest turbolift. Lt. Appels immediately concentrates on getting the turbolift to the right section of the station, although he’s not sure where that ‘right section’ may be exactly. Dr. Van Oers watches the turbolift doors close in front of her and the Lieutenant. They’re leaving behind a lot of very disappointed Altonoids.

“All right,” the short, muscular Lt. Appels says, while he studies the turbolift LCARS display in front of him. “According to the specifications of this type of station, another possible hiding place for the shield array might be located on the lower decks. And it’s likely to be the only place safe enough for us to continue our search.”

Even though Appels speaks to himself rather than the Doctor, she listens carefully.

“It’s also likely that most surviving crewmembers and troops would have headed there to regroup. That would mean that going to deck...” He quickly types in a few queries and watches the results appear on the little LCARS panel. “. . .97 would be a tactically sound idea. Don’t you agree?” Finally, he faces Doctor Van Oers. However, before she can formulate a reply, he turns to the LCARS panel again. “But what section holds the least Altonoids? If we’d take into account that---”

“Steven?” Rose Van Oers interjects in the most polite voice she can think of.

“What?”

“I’m not saying we should give up. But, didn’t we just see a display showing the space battle?”

Lt. Appels nods. He forgets about the schematics for a moment and lets out a deep sigh. “Shame about our ship...”

“If we’d somehow disable the shield array, which would be unlikely because the entire station is completely swarming with Altonoids, will the *Wolf* still be there to beam up the flag officers? And assuming the *Wolf* still exists by then, can the flag officers really make a difference?”

“You think I haven’t considered those possibilities yet?” Lt. Appels asks.

Before Appels can continue his speech, the Doctor interrupts him. “I understand completely,” she reassures him. “Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere without you.”

Lt. Appels smiles. “After all, I *am* your last remaining patient.”

Dr. Van Oers returns a faint smile, and she looks around in the turbolift. This is all that’s left of their security squad. And most other squads probably didn’t fare any better... She feels bad about abandoning Commander Tony Q and Ensign Marc Lucas, but she didn’t have a choice; they were too wounded to continue.

The turbolift has reached its destination, and she realizes that her somber thoughts will have to wait until after all of this is over. The doors open and reveal a completely empty corridor, which appears to be darker than most other areas on this station. It’s clear to see that these corridors are mainly designated for maintenance and engineering, which has resulted in a less comfortable look. To name a few differences: the bulkhead plating is darker grey and the corridors are a bit narrower. All in all, it doesn’t look very welcoming.

Lt. Appels readies his rifle, even though the corridor is empty. It may look safe, but you can never be too sure of anything on this station. He and Dr. Van Oers slowly exit the turbolift.

Suddenly, from the left, an Altonoid appears in front of the Doctor and knocks her phaser rifle out of her hands! She raises her arms in a reflex to protect herself. Before she can be

harméd, though, Lt. Appels shoots the Altonoid from close to point-blank range. The Altonoid gets blown back and lands on the floor. Now that the assailant has been silenced, the sound of approaching footsteps becomes alarmingly obvious.

Lt. Appels runs off immediately and drags Dr. Van Oers along with him. The Doctor tries to pick up her phaser rifle, but Appels doesn't give her a chance. With his fist tightly clenched around her arm, they make a run for the door at the end of the corridor.

They don't get very far before they hear voices say, "Kuret's been shot!"
"Then there are still some Starfleet officers left!"

Now that he's sure the Doctor is just as focused on reaching that door as he is, Lt. Appels lets go of her arm. They'll need to run faster than ever before if they want to make it out of here alive.

Three Altonoids appear near the turbolift and notice the two fleeing officers who have already traveled half the corridor. The two outer Altonoids crouch down, while the center Altonoid remains standing. In silent efficiency, they aim their battle-worn rifles at the fleeing officers' backs. This corridor contains no bends, intersections, or corners. There's no hiding, no turning back, no looking back.

Lt. Appels shoots the LCARS display next to the door and a series of sparks confirms that he has hit his target dead-on. Quite some precision shooting, considering he's running like hell... It does slow him down a bit, but the door in front of them opens.

They're only thirty feet away from the open door.

Twenty... The Altonoids open fire.

Ten feet... Phaser blasts light the dark corridor and tear off pieces of bulkhead plating and LCARS wall panels around them.

There! They've made it.

Dr. Van Oers immediately hides behind the slab of bulkhead to the left of the doorway. She knows the door has to be closed as soon as possible. The Altonoids are closing in. They're coming to get them. But it's all right; they'll have to get past Lt. Appels first, and he'll probably have the door closed soon or he'll come up with some other 'tactically sound idea'. She looks at the other side of the doorway, where Appels should be hiding. Instead, she sees him lying on the floor with a smoking phaser wound on his back!

"Steven!" she shouts. Lt. Appels doesn't respond, but he is still breathing. Frustratingly enough, he's lying there in plain view for the Altonoids and there is nothing the Doctor can do for him right now.

A startlingly nearby voice breaks the silence. "Good. One down. We've got to find that female."

For a terrifying few moments she doesn't know what to do. Then she spots Steven's phaser rifle lying right next to him. After summoning all her courage and collecting her strength, she makes a wild dash for the rifle. Moving into plain view of the Altonoids, she picks up the rifle, jumps over Lt. Appels, and crashes into the bulkhead on the other side. Immediately, she scrambles to her feet. She's managed to grab the rifle, and she's moved out of view again.

"There she is!" she hears another voice say, even closer this time. She can hear the Altonoids have started running. She'll have to act *now*. After taking a deep breath, she stands up straight and lifts her rifle. She waits for just a few moments, then she moves around the corner and away from her only protection against phaser fire...

She opens fire at the three Altonoids, employing the time-honored spray and pray tactic. The three running Altonoids literally get blown away by the many phaser shots and fall to the floor one by one. Well, if you shoot often enough, you're bound to hit something eventually... especially in such close quarters. The fact that she almost enjoyed shooting those Altonoids startles her a bit, even though she knows that the adrenaline rush associated with surviving a near-death encounter is the probable cause of her short-lived euphoria.

She directs her attention to Lt. Appels and crouches down beside the wounded officer. With shaking hands, she opens her med-kit. However, try as she might, she can't find her medical tricorder. After a brief, frantic search, she remembers that she had given the tricorder to Ensign Lucas so he could mask his life signs. She'll have to try to treat the Lieutenant's wound without it... "Steven, can you hear me?"

"Yes," Appels replies softly. "Some nice shooting, Doctor." Somehow, he manages to smile.

"So this is supposed to be the safest place on the station?" Dr. Van Oers asks, gesturing at the slain Altonoids.

"I don't think there are any safe places left." The fake smile is still on his face, but he speaks with an uncharacteristic and unsettling amount of gloom.

Across the corridor, another door opens and reveals several Altonoids. "They're still here!" one of them shouts.

Dr. Van Oers doesn't waste any more time. She quickly packs her med-kit and straps it around her shoulder. Without any hesitation, she picks up the rifle and starts shooting at the Altonoids, who quickly find cover in several corners and doorways. "Plenty of hiding places in *this* corridor," she softly mutters, while she seizes the small window of opportunity to start carrying Lt. Appels away.

"No, no," Appels says, though he can't put up much of a resistance with his current injuries.

Dr. Van Oers is planning to take Appels with her anyway. She tries to move him as carefully as the surrounding Altonoids allow and fires some more shots at their possible whereabouts to clear a path.

"No, Doctor. I'll only slow you down," Appels protests. "Go on without---"

"Oh shut up," Dr. Van Oers says as she carries him away from the enemy.

An explosion on the bridge of the *USS Wolf* knocks out the science station in a violent blast. Science officer Ensign Daniels doesn't even try to evade the explosion, because a previous enemy phaser hit has already rendered him wounded and unconscious.

"Structural integrity down to---" Lt. Cmdr. Leif Anderson shouts, but the ongoing battle doesn't allow him to complete his report. The four Altonoid phaser beams strike one of the many weak spots on the hull of the *Wolf*, and the poor Chief Tactical Officer almost gets knocked off his feet. As if that's not enough, a nearby large wall panel gives up, darkening the bridge even further.

"Keep performing evasive maneuvers!" Captain Suzan Reynolds shouts, while she holds on tightly to the Captain's chair in a continuing effort to remain seated.

Lt. Stephanie Grant's helm station is burning partially, but the wounded Lieutenant keeps performing her duty and keeps trying to make the ship dodge the incoming phaser fire.

"Practically all systems are failing, Captain!" Lt. Cmdr. Anderson shouts. A part of the ceiling comes down in front of him. He doesn't seem to care. He wasn't hit, so he continues with his work. It's like he's getting used to the bridge falling apart around him.

Captain Reynolds can't help but notice that the viewscreen's image quality is starting to deteriorate rapidly. If there's one thing she has learned over the years, it's that it's never a good sign when your viewscreen starts breaking down on you... However, there are more pressing matters to attend to. "Status of the *Massal*!"

Lt. Commander Anderson tries his best to provide his Captain with the necessary info, but his console is working against him rather than for him.

"Status of the *Massal*!" she shouts again.

Anderson manages to get one of the few remaining phaser arrays to fire a phaser beam at the *Massal*. It's a direct hit, but it doesn't do much damage. "I haven't got a clue, Captain," he says. "But I'd say their paintwork is down to about... 90 percent?"

Captain Reynolds smiles. That smile disappears quickly when another phaser strike rocks the bridge.

Dr. Rose van Oers has dragged Lt. Appels into an empty maintenance corridor to take care of his serious phaser wound. Unfortunately, without a medical tricorder, there isn't a whole lot she can do for him. After sterilizing and superficially healing the wound with a dermal regenerator, she presses a pre-programmed hypospray against his neck. "This should take away some of the pain. It's all I can do for now."

Lt. Appels slowly and carefully sits up. He grimaces in pain, in spite of the heavy painkillers that have entered his bloodstream. "I have to say our security squad isn't quite as successful as I had hoped..."

"So, are you thinking up a new tactical plan?" Dr. Van Oers asks after a brief pause.

"It's quite a lost cause, isn't it?" Lt. Appels replies. "There's one tactical plan I can come up with." He looks the Doctor straight in her eyes. "Get the hell out of here."

Dr. Van Oers shakes her head. "Naah. I've already abandoned every one of my patients today. You're the last one left. Won't look good on my record."

"No, seriously," Lt. Appels says. "I want you to get out of here. I know when a battle is lost. It's only a matter of time. Get to the escape pods while you still can. It's your only shot."

"I think I'll take my chances here."

"Dammit, Rose. The Altonoids can barge in any second now. They were hot on our trail."

"You're in no condition to be left behind without medical attention," Dr. Van Oers states.

"That's bull. There's nothing you can do for me anymore. You said so yourself."

Dr. Van Oers remains undeterred. "I'm not leaving you behind."

"I'm the Chief Security Officer of a *Sovereign*-class starship, or at least I used to be. I'm sure I'll do fine on my own."

"I still think you're better off with me by your side."

"Yes. Until we both get shot by the first Altonoid who happens to find us. There's no hiding anymore." He considers his words for a moment, before saying, "I really thought we would be safe on these lower decks. Well I was wrong."

A brief pause. Dr. Van Oers isn't going anywhere.

"Rose. I'm ordering you to get the hell out of here."

The Doctor evades his stare.

Unable to keep back his anger and frustration, Lt. Appels raises his voice. "It's not safe here or anywhere else on this damned station. Why won't you leave? For me? Don't! I'll manage fine without you or anyone else! I'm just as much a lost cause as this entire damned war!" Through the pain of his wound he grabs the Doctor by the arm. There's a pleading look in his eyes, a sympathetic side of the Lieutenant's personality that Dr. Van Oers has never seen before. "Get off this doomed station. Please. We've lost so much today. Don't you see? It's over. You can't save any more lives. You can only save your own."

A beat of silence.

Appels shakes his head in disbelief. He finds the Doctor's unwillingness to respond to his rare display of emotion almost amusing. "Why won't you leave?" he asks softly.

"I've got nowhere to go, okay?" Dr. Van Oers replies as tears well up in her eyes. "Not by myself."

Appels doesn't know exactly how to respond. He's a security officer, not a counselor.

"You're right," Dr. Van Oers says. "The Altonoids are everywhere. I could try and make a run for an escape pod. I could do it... But I'm scared."

“Well I’m scared too,” Lt. Appels dares to admit. “This whole situations scares the hell out of me. Losing an entire squad. Losing the *Kennedy*. Altonoids lurking around every corner. Yes, I’m scared.”

“The great Lieutenant Appels... Scared?” Dr. Van Oers smiles through the tears.

“Yes.”

“Man, we must be in trouble for you to admit *that*.”

“You bet...”

“Listen.” Dr. Van Oers wipes the tears from her eyes. “The Altonoids will eventually find you here. You’re not going anywhere. They will shoot you on sight.”

“No doubt...” Appels sighs.

“If I ran around in search of an escape pod, the chances of me actually reaching one would be slim at best.”

“Yes,” Appels says. His voice gains some strength, despite his worsening injury. “But you’ll have a chance of making it.”

“I know. But it’s very likely that the *Wolf* will be gone by then.”

“Still, you’ll have a chance!”

“No, Steven,” Dr. Van Oers says. A defiant twinkle in her eyes makes it absolutely clear that she’s made up her mind. “And take your last chance with me? No way.”

“Doctor.” He looks her deeply in the eyes with the look of a man who knows he’s going to die soon. “Rose... They’ll kill me anyway.”

“They might. But they’ll have to get past me first,” Dr. Van Oers says and she lifts her rifle. “I’m not leaving you.”

Lt. Appels wants to protest once more, but he smiles instead. “You’d make a damn fine security officer, you know that?”

Though she does her best to retain her defiant expression, she returns the smile and says, “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Alongside their Altonoid captors, the four flag officers Admiral Van Aken, Commander Dennis Levine, Captain Duvivier, and Commander Jansen watch the space battle unfold from the protected confines of the conference room. With each enemy phaser strike that gnaws at the *Wolf*, their hope disintegrates even further...

When the *USS Wolf* is critically hit and the starboard warp nacelle breaks off in a fiery display of destruction, the flag officers can’t help but gasp and murmur.

“So, do you still believe in winning this battle?” Letor Fune asks rhetorically. The tall, proud Altonoid leader is most pleased with himself and the way this whole operation is going. After this glorious victory his superiors will have no choice but to elevate him to a whole different status. If he can keep this up, he may one day become the supreme ruler of the Alto Empire. With an arrogant smile, he faces the Altonoid nearest to the wall panel and barks, “Operation report!”

That Altonoid has his report ready immediately. “We’ve taken almost every deck by now. All critical systems are in our hands. We don’t know exactly how many Starfleet troops are still at large, but reports indicate there are not many left.”

“You see,” Letor Fune says, as he faces the flag officers after a brief glance at the practically crippled *Wolf*. “I wouldn’t exactly call this fighting anymore.”

“No. I believe this is called slaughtering innocent people,” Commander Dennis Levine says sharply. The blond Texan has given up diplomacy altogether when it comes to dealing with this hardheaded Altonoid.

Letor Fune is eager to continue this discussion, but he gets interrupted by one of his younger subordinates. “Sir. We’ve found and identified Commander Melanie Simons. Observation Lounge 54-6. She’s dead, sir.”

This bit of news shocks the flag officers and understandably causes more murmuring, though Captain Duvivier doesn't react at all. Ever since the *Kennedy's* destruction he's been silent and contemplative. Therefore it's somewhat unexpected that Captain Duvivier decides to use this moment to speak up again. "And what about Captain Rinckes?" he asks with surprising calmness.

The junior Altonoid looks at Letor Fune as if asking permission to answer the question. After a nod from Fune, the Altonoid says, "We haven't captured him yet. He's still out there."

"Then there still is hope," Captain Duvivier almost whispers. Commander Jansen frowns and looks at his Captain, who continues in a soft voice, "If there's one officer capable of stopping all of this, it's him..."

"You actually mean that?" Cmdr. Jansen asks. Captain Duvivier stares into the distance and nods. Letor Fune is just as surprised as Commander Jansen.

"Sir," the junior Altonoid says. "Commander Simons' body was found covered with a Starfleet uniform jacket."

Duvivier smiles subtly. "That's what I mean."

Doctor Van Oers hears footsteps closing in on her and Lieutenant Appels, who leans against a bulkhead. He can barely move nor react, as his back wound has taken its toll on his energy.

"Do you actually think that one officer can make a difference?" Fune asks Captain Duvivier in the conference room.

Doctor Rose Van Oers' breathing accelerates as her body prepares her for a fight-or-flight reaction. There's nowhere to flee to, so she's got no choice but to stay and fight. She casts one last look at the fading Lieutenant Appels, who gives her a tired but reassuring smile, and she points her rifle into the direction of the footsteps: the end of the maintenance corridor.

"You know, there comes a time... when you realize you've run out of every viable option," Fune says.

Multiple shadows rise on the bulkhead across the corridor, and Dr. Van Oers' finger tenses around the trigger. She can feel her heart beating faster with each passing moment.

"There comes a time when motivation and dedication make way for recognition."

Countless Altonoids replace the shadows and march in, weapons firing. An inferno of phaser fire lights the dark corridor. Quickly, Doctor Van Oers squeezes the trigger with all her might and returns fire.

"A time when you have to give in to the powers that outnumber you."

A few Altonoids get hit and slump to the floor, while the rest ignores them and continues their deathly march towards Dr. Van Oers and the defenseless Lt. Appels.

"A time... when the curtain falls."

The scent of smoke and burning flesh, the flashes of light coming from her phaser rifle, the shouts of the few Altonoids she kills. These are the final sensations the Doctor feels before the enemy silences her and Lt. Appels forever.

Ensign Emily Murphy is exhausted. The wounded Tony Q seems to be getting heavier every step of the way, as they travel the corridors of Station A-12 in search of some means of escape. Tony's got his arm wrapped around her shoulder, and now that he can barely walk along anymore, Ensign Murphy has to carry almost his entire weight. She wants to say something about it, but then she notices his pale face. He's still breathing and all, but his skin feels damp and cold. He's obviously in need of medical attention, or at the very least some rest. Fortunately, they haven't encountered any Altonoids in a while. No conscious ones, that is.

Emily sighs in relief when she locates the doors leading to the shuttle bay. The entrance is guarded by several dead or unconscious Altonoids. No problem to pass them.

"Commander. Look," Ensign Murphy says, as soon as they've entered the shuttle bay.

Tony does what she says. He sees the shuttle bay, with four Type 11 shuttles stored in direct sight and enough headspace to park an extra set of shuttles on top of them. That means this shuttle bay must be about four decks tall, and there are probably a few more shuttles stored underneath it. An elevated plateau with the shuttle bay controls is located on the right. On the far side of the shuttle bay, there are two large shuttle bay doors. Right above those doors, two large windows provide an excellent view of the stars.

"Finally," Tony whispers. "Let's get out of here. That's an order." The mere thought of escaping this infernal station gains him a bit more strength.

They come down the stairs near the shuttlecraft on the right. "Let me see," Murphy says and she points at the platform. "Shuttle bay controls are over there."

"You go ahead and commence pre-launch procedures. I'll go start up the shuttle."

Ensign Murphy looks at his pale face. "You sure?" she says in a worried tone.

"Yeah. Believe me, it contains a comfy shuttle seat with my name on it."

"I suppose you're right," Emily replies sympathetically. "Besides, the sooner we get out of here, the better." She carefully lets Tony stand on his own feet.

It costs him a great deal of effort, and it looks as though he's about to fall over, but somehow he manages to walk to the shuttle door. "Open Sesame!" Tony declares and he spreads his arms, which almost causes him to fall over. Though that action causes him some pain, he notices that he's made Ensign Murphy smile. "Worth it," he mumbles beneath his breath.

He accesses a small access panel between the aft shuttle door and the left warp nacelle. He types in his identification codes and practically the whole aft of the shuttle opens to form a ramp.

"*Welcome, Commander Tony 'Q' Blue,*" the shuttle computer says as the wounded Tony limps up the ramp. *Blue*. His real last name. A painful reminder of his regained humanity and mortality.

He enters the shuttle's command centre, which is about the size of a large shed. It contains two wall panels on each side, a total of four seats, a U-shaped console layout in front, and a set of modern-looking windows. And of course there's the small transporter located in the back. Tony slowly moves to the right-front seat, while clasp on to his phaser wound. He halts in front of the shuttle controls, and then, with a deep sigh of relief, sits down in that great, soft chair...

Captain Suzan Reynolds gets tossed off her chair and into the darkness, thanks to the Altonoids scoring another direct hit on the *USS Wolf*. She lands on the floor right next to the unconscious Lt. Stephanie Grant, who was tossed away from her helm station a few minutes ago during the phaser strike that broke off one of the warp nacelles. The burn marks on the young Lieutenant's face look quite severe, but, even though it pains Reynolds to see her chief helmsman wounded like this, there's simply no time for providing medical assistance.

To call the *Wolf's* bridge a bridge would be a compliment. What once was a pristine, modern work environment, now looks like a cavern made out of plastic and metal. A flicker of light coming from one of the workstations that hasn't been fatally damaged yet momentarily illuminates the bridge. Even the emergency lights are failing and cast intermittent light onto the damaged bridge... Lt. Cmdr. Anderson and Captain Reynolds are the last bridge officers who can still perform their duties –more or less. Of course, it's likely that there are quite a few other crewmembers still conscious throughout the large starship, but every room on the ship must be in very bad condition, judging by the way the bridge looks.

Anderson has rerouted control over every possible type of ship system to his damaged console: OPS, Helm, Science, Engineering, and of course Tactical. The trickle of blood emanating from a concealed bruise beneath his hair normally would have him sent to sickbay, but now it's nothing more than a minor nuisance.

Captain Reynolds sits down on the Captain's chair again. It's amazing how she manages to keep her command presence, even though she's in almost the same bad shape as the ship. "Status report!" With all the racket going on around them, she has to scream in order to make her orders audible.

"Um..." Lt. Cmdr. Anderson looks at the last, flickering display he's left to work with. "Every primary, secondary and tertiary system on the ship is either fried, smashed, or damaged! Many crewmembers are dead, missing, or wounded!"

"I know our condition! What about them?!" Captain Reynolds shouts.

Lt. Cmdr. Anderson reroutes his console to display sensor information. Even an untrained eye can see that the sensor system is failing, as the information it provides is garbled at best. "I can only see that we've managed to knock their tractor beam system off-line!"

"Well, it's something," Captain Reynolds says, unwilling to give in to the hopelessness of this whole situation.

"I'm reading something that looks like an increase in power output around their phaser array. They've boosted power to---" Leif Anderson can't even finish his sentence.

"Return fire! Everything we've got!" Captain Reynolds shouts immediately.

Anderson attempts to reconfigure his console back to Tactical. To no avail...

"Commander?!" Captain Reynolds shouts as she turns around to face Anderson. That air of perseverance that is so typical of the tall Captain is starting to make way for anxiety. The *Massal's* weapons are powering up behind her on the damaged viewscreen. It doesn't seem like they'll launch another massive single phaser strike like the one that carved the *Kennedy* in two. No, they're complacent enough to simply boost power to their phaser system, knowing full well that that will do the trick. The Captain looks back at the viewscreen. "Evasive maneuvers!" she shouts while yet another part of the ceiling crashes down next to her.

Lt. Cmdr. Anderson frantically tries to reroute his console back to Helm. It's too late; the *Massal* fires four phaser beams at the *Wolf* and scores a direct hit...

The *Wolf's* saucer buckles and her structural integrity fails. The phaser beams smash right through multiple decks, only to come out on the other side, vaporizing everything in its path, whether it be corridors, ship systems, or crewmembers. The entire ship gets knocked off its course and now faces Station A-12, as if signaling defeat to the victorious Altonoids.

The Altonoids in the conference room start cheering. All but Letor Fune, who looks at his men in proud silence. This was an inevitable victory they have all worked very hard for.

But his men stop cheering unexpectedly early. He can see why. The crippled *USS Wolf* has tilted to face them and is slowly moving towards the station! It's practically heading straight for the conference room! Letor Fune gives the Altonoid nearest to the wall panel an inquiring look.

“Scanners indicate that the *Wolf*’s propulsion system is off-line. They can’t change their current trajectory,” the junior Altonoid officer explains. “Our ship reports that they can’t stop the *Wolf*, because their tractor beam system is off-line.”

“What?!” Letor Fune shouts. “Raise shields!” Then he realizes that this station has no shields, and the shield around the hostage room only prevents people from beaming in or out. It won’t stop a starship of nearly 500 meters in length from crashing into it! “Order our ship to target all phasers and blow them out of the stars!”

“It’s no use, sir. That won’t stop the wreckage from hitting the station.” Despite his best efforts to sound calm and collected, the young Altonoid’s eyes betray his fear. “In fact, it would only accelerate the debris and make the collision even worse.”

Letor Fune can’t believe what is happening. Moments ago, the *Wolf* resembled a helpless prey signaling defeat. Now it’s heading straight for him like a predator bent on only one thing: his blood.

“Captain!” Lt. Cmdr. Leif Anderson shouts as he frantically tries to regain control over the ship with that one console he’s left to work with. “I can’t bring thruster control back on-line. All the circuits are fried. I need to---”

“*Warning. Collision is imminent,*” the crackling computer voice says.

Leif Anderson waits for the computer to finish her sentence. The massive beating that knocked the ship off course caused him to bang his already injured head against the bulkhead behind him. The trickle of blood coming from his black hair now feels as though it’s forming a small river. His legs are weakening, and he’s having difficulty staying focused. That won’t stop him from trying to save the ship, though. “Captain, I need you to open the OPS/Helm console and manually work your way through the standard rerouting procedures while I attempt to input new commands. I can’t do it all from here.”

Captain Reynolds doesn’t respond.

“Captain? Captain?!” Lt. Cmdr. Anderson shouts with growing desperation.

The Captain doesn’t respond.

Lt. Cmdr. Anderson sighs. She must be unconscious... Or worse... She’s just sitting there, staring at the viewscreen that displays the scrambled image of Station A-12 getting closer and closer. The *Wolf* is headed straight for the station they were sent to protect, and there’s nothing they can do about it. Despite the shoddy quality of the broken viewscreen, Anderson can clearly make out the conference room’s large window and the shuttle bay a number of decks below it.

Commander Tony Q –who’s still seated in the Type 11 shuttle he confiscated a few moments ago– can see the *USS Wolf* through the large shuttle bay windows. No doubt about it: it’s on collision course... He saw what a blow she was left to deal with by the giant *Massal*-class prototype.

The sight of the dying starship closing in has a hypnotizing effect. Automatically, his mind goes over some relevant statistics: the *Wolf* is an *Akira*-class starship. That means it’s 19 decks tall and has a total mass of over three million metric tons! This shuttle bay alone is only four decks tall...

Tony knows it’s time for action. They’ve got to get out of here, and fast! He looks around, deciding what to do. When he looks to the right, he sees Ensign Murphy operating the controls on the platform, unaware of the impending collision. When he looks to the left, he sees the vague outlines of a man sitting in the cockpit of the far left shuttle. There’s no time for Tony to react, though... The left shuttle bay door starts to open! Air rushes out of the shuttle bay and into open space with a deafening roar.

“What the hell?!” Tony shouts. His wound punishes him immediately by sending up a bout

of agony. The heavy shuttlecraft he's in slides a foot or so towards the open bay door due to the rushing air, resulting in an awful scraping noise.

Ensign Murphy—who weighs considerably less than a shuttlecraft, lucky her—is taken completely by surprise as the sudden air displacement knocks her off the plateau. She can barely hold on to the nearest platform railing. Unable to hold on to her phaser rifle, it slips from her hands and flies towards the open bay door.

Tony Q's fingers race over his console as he accesses transporter control as quickly as possible. A moment later Ensign Murphy materializes behind him in a bright transporter beam. Her hair is a total mess. Every muscle in her body is tensed up, until she realizes she is safe. Naturally, her first instinct is to thank Tony for saving her life.

“What on earth were you thinking?!” Ensign Murphy screams. “Opening the shuttle bay door like that! I could've been killed!”

“I didn't do anything!” Tony replies as he lifts up the palms of his hands to signal sincere innocence. “Honestly.” Before he can explain the situation, it's already explained by the fact that the far left shuttle is currently leaving through the opened bay door.

“How did he open the door like that?” asks Ensign Murphy, who's still fuming. However, her anger quickly gets replaced by a shocked gasp when she finally notices the large *Wolf* closing in rapidly.

“Diverting power to inertial dampeners.” Lt. Cmdr. Anderson tries his very best to somehow improve their situation, but he's only got that small LCARS panel to work with—seemingly the only working panel on the entire bridge. He knows there's little point in trying to stop the ship; however, it's his duty to try at the very least. He glances at the motionless Captain Reynolds, who is still staring at the viewscreen, though he's uncertain whether she's still conscious or not.

The bridge shudders. Leif Anderson takes another look at his console, only to see it flooding with alerts. Its system is crashing. After some indistinct error messages, the panel dims and leaves him with a completely dark workstation. The viewscreen has now become the only light source, and the garbled image of Station A-12 shines erratic bright light onto the bridge.

There's nothing left to do. Only now does Leif Anderson realize how little is left of his energy. The warm stream of blood running down his face feels as if it's inviting him to lose consciousness. Moments before he gives in to this overwhelming (and potentially fatal) desire to rest, he gives the Captain one last look. Then, his legs give way and he lands on some of the shattered remains of a nearby workstation. The landing is pleasantly painless, and the last thing going through his mind is a question whose answer is soon to become irrelevant: *Is my mind playing tricks on me, or did I really see Captain Reynolds bracing herself for impact?*

The sight of the approaching *Wolf* is about to fill the entire conference room window. Watching the space battle from a safe distance has been comfortable for the Altonoids, but now the battle is about to become tangible. Literally...

All Altonoid officers except Letor Fune run out of the room in a desperate and instinctive reaction. They know it's a pointless exercise. You can't escape a huge starship on collision course just by exiting the room you're in... At the same time, they realize running away is probably their best bet to stand a chance of surviving. A very small chance, that is...

Only Letor Fune and the four Starfleet flag officers remain in the conference room. Half-heartedly, Admiral Van Aken gets up and prepares to make a run for it too.

“You stay here!” Letor Fune shouts as he draws his weapon and aims it at the four officers. Admiral Van Aken, Commander Levine, Captain Duvivier and Commander Jansen understand it is pointless to run anyway, so they don't resist.

Fune is not half as self-confident as he was a minute ago. He thought he had won the battle, and he did. But he didn't expect it to happen this way, at the cost of his own life... The only thing left for him to do is to make absolutely sure that the flag officers die with him.

Ensign Murphy has seated herself to the left of Tony Q and is working the controls to try to open the shuttle bay door in front of them. Sure, the left bay door is wide open, but because of the nearby parked shuttles, it would require some time-consuming maneuvering to get the shuttle there. Right now, time is something they simply cannot afford to lose.

The *Wolf* is so close that it looks absolutely colossal. Emily can almost point out every phaser burn mark on its hull. At this range it's painfully obvious how much damage this ship has had to endure. Its weapon pod and starboard warp nacelle are missing, and its hull is scorched and torn... practically everywhere.

Emily still can't get the door to open. "It seems that without the proper access codes, only Starfleet personnel with the rank of Captain or Admiral are cleared to open these bay doors from within the shuttle."

"Wanna bet?" Cmdr. Tony Q is spurred to action by the realization that there's no more time to do things by the book. Tony accesses helm control and initializes a short burst of the ventral thrusters, making the shuttle lift up a bit. He commands the impulse engines to fire and the shuttle dashes forward. In a few seconds, the shuttle covers the distance to the other side of the bay. Just when they're about to smash into the bay door, Tony Q unleashes the shuttle's firepower (i.e. one phaser beam that does the trick) and blows it up. As they move through the field of smoke and darkness, they can only hope for the best.

The shuttle breaks free of the station, along with the scorched remains of the bay door. The dispersing debris and dust reveals the crippled *Akira*-class starship, which is about to crush the two young officers! The top of the saucer passes over them, and they're heading straight for the sparking remains of its deflector shield. With sweaty hands and a heartbeat to match, Tony orders the shuttle to roll down as fast as it can. Despite the fact that the inertial dampeners cancel out all g-forces, Tony can't help but feel queasy as the devastated *USS Wolf* rolls from view to continue her path of imminent destruction.

Now that they're relatively safe at last, Tony and Emily simultaneously let out a long sigh of relief.

The *Wolf* obscures all the stars from view for the few people remaining in the deserted conference room. Amidst the abandoned seats, tables, and half-empty buffet carts, Letor Fune holds the four captured officers at gunpoint. The atmosphere is tense to say the least, and for good reason too. The Starfleet officers will get shot if they attempt to leave, even though by now it's become completely pointless to try to make a run for it. Their impending doom thickens the air. Sweat drips down Letor Fune's face. Nobody dares to move a muscle.

Suddenly, Admiral Van Aken walks over to the window. This certainly attracts everyone's attention, but Letor Fune refrains from firing his weapon. The Admiral turns around to face Letor Fune, points at the large starship that's barreling down on all of them, and says, "This! This is how it feels to have everything you stand for, everything you believe in, crashing down upon you!"

Letor Fune doesn't know how to react to this, so he just stares at the Admiral in baffled silence...

Parts of the saucer of the *Wolf* move out of view because of the lack of a big enough window. It's *that* close. The front of the saucer simply moves out of view, and it becomes clear that the *Wolf* will hit the area three, four decks below the conference room first.

It was inevitable. It had to happen. The *Wolf* smashes into the station in an astonishing display of catastrophic violence. The conference room (and no doubt the entire station)

quakes excessively, knocking Admiral Van Aken and the four others over. The lights flicker once and then go dark as the floor and bulkheads are beginning to lose their structure. While the floor and bulkheads are made out of a dense Duranium/Tritanium alloy, it feels as though they were made out of cardboard...

The impacting *Wolf* keeps moving forward, accompanied by the awful noise of metal scraping against metal, of ship and station systems exploding, of decks crumbling, of havoc...

Admiral Van Aken has landed on his back and watches helplessly as the higher decks of the *Wolf* head straight for the conference room... But well before those decks can hit the room, the floor starts to rise, crushing the window along with it! Yard by yard, the floor is crushed against the ceiling by the hulk of the *USS Wolf* moving underneath it. The entire floor rises at a steep angle, causing destruction to move through the conference room, unstoppable like a tidal wave.

Admiral van Aken tumbles backward into the room, towards the falling Letor Fune, Duvivier, Jansen, and Levine. Tables, chairs, and buffet carts are crushed, mingled with the rest of the debris, or tossed to the back of the room by the moving floor. The Altonoid and Federation flag –which were mounted on the wall– fall down together and cover the five humanoids, binding them in their inescapable demise.

Only the feeling of debris hitting the canvas that covers them, the floor beneath them moving towards the ceiling, the muffled sounds of crushing metal everywhere...

...until suddenly, they can't feel the canvas and movement anymore. Until suddenly, they can't hear the sounds of destruction anymore. Until suddenly, everything is gone.

The impacting *Wolf* causes extreme damage to the station and crushes many of its decks, while the ship's already weakened structural integrity causes its own brittle hull to crumble like tinfoil. Its speed decreases quickly, as the sheer mass of the much and much heavier station tears the hulk of the *Wolf* apart, mutilating the saucer of the starship beyond recognition. Debris and explosions obscure most of the damage for a while, until the station's structure finally forces the remains of the starship to come to a complete stop.

The destruction isn't over just yet.

The missing weapon pod, combined with the extensive damage on practically every single piece of hull, causes the two weakened warp nacelle pylons to bend forward. Like giant arms clutching on to the station, the crumbling pylons move forward and away from each other. The left pylon still contains a dimmed warp nacelle, which is launched into the side of the station by the bending pylon and causes a final scene of destruction as it completely disintegrates, etching away a decent portion of the station's exterior plating and opening up dozens of corridors and chambers.

The dead, unrecognizable *Wolf* clasps on to the station with its empty nacelle pylons. Not a single light is left shining on the scorched ship. On the other hand, Station A-12 is also severely damaged, but it still holds its ground. Although everyone on the station must be quite shaken, many areas were not that badly hit. Station A-12 has withstood the immense crash, suffered a considerable amount of damage that probably won't be repaired again any time soon, not to mention the inevitable casualties including Letor Fune and the Starfleet delegation, but it's still largely operational. There's no way around it: the Altonoids have won this battle...

Ensign Emily Murphy can barely stand to watch the horrible image of the crashed *Wolf*. On the little screen in front of her, she could see the whole collision occurring, and it's left her at a complete loss for words. Tony Q doesn't look at the display; he's just sitting there in morose silence, staring out the starboard window.

Ensign Murphy concentrates on shuttle operations again. There is nothing she can do about the current situation the Federation is in. Situation... A euphemism for loss... "The Altonoid vessel doesn't seem to mind us. It's heading for Station A-12. To offer assistance, no doubt. Station A-12 is severely damaged, but it's powering up again. I suggest we head out of here and--"

She notices that Tony is still staring out of the window. Confused for a second, she tries to see what has captured his attention. It's impossible to miss. What remains of the stardrive section of the *USS Kennedy* slowly rotates away from the battle site. The inertia keeps the dark ship hulk in motion indefinitely as it spews out its remnant debris. The two sleek warp nacelles make it clear, this is what's left of a *Sovereign*-class vessel, the *Kennedy*, the ship Tony Q once served on –albeit for a short period of time. With the destruction of the *Kennedy*, and the deaths of its officers, the only people who really cared for him have now perished.

"Scan for escape pods," Tony calmly orders as his eyes search the debris.

"None that I can detect."

"No life signs?"

A short silence. "None. I'm sorry..."

He wants to say something comforting for Ensign Murphy, but he can't make himself say anything at all. He gives the remains of the *USS Kennedy* one last look, then looks at the display showing Station A-12 and the crashed *USS Wolf*. He takes a deep breath. "Let's get the hell out of here," he speaks in a very tired voice that sounds too mature for someone so young.

Piloted by Ensign Murphy, the shuttlecraft warps out, and leaves behind Station A-12, the *Massal* prototype, and the remains of the four Federation starships.

Stardust streaks across the windows of the shuttlecraft as the Ensign and the Commander travel at almost 300 times the speed of light. Each passing moment takes them further away from that Altonoid-ridden space station and brings them closer to safety.

"Holding steady at warp 5.5," Ensign Murphy declares.

"Current heading?" Tony softly asks.

"We're headed straight for Starbase 9."

"Alter course to the Nedron system and increase velocity to warp 6."

"T... Sir?" Ensign Murphy asks, almost calling her commanding officer by his first name.

"You don't know this, but there should've been a large fleet standing by in the Nedron system to assist us if things went awry at the station. As a backup," Tony explains.

"So where were they then?"

"Something must've kept them busy. I fear for the worst..." Tony sighs. "However, if they're still there, they're much closer to us than Starbase 9. They can bring us to Starbase 9 faster than this shuttlecraft. And we must inform the fleet of what's happened at Station A-12."

A brief silence.

"And you want someone to take a look at your phaser wound as soon as possible," Ensign Murphy says without looking up from the controls.

"Yeah," Cmdr. Tony Q admits, and he smiles subtly.

After an uncertain amount of time, Commander Tony Q awakens thanks to a bleeping sound emanating from the shuttle controls. His injuries must've caused him to fall asleep at some point during the journey. It takes him a few seconds to adjust to the bright lights of the comfortable shuttle cockpit.

“Sensors are picking up a shuttle ahead of us. It’s headed for the Nedron system, just like us,” Ensign Murphy reports. “Its hull has a Starfleet signature. Confirming... Yes, it’s another Type 11 shuttlecraft.”

Tony is still a bit drowsy, and the pain of his wound floods back into his body as the sleep dissipates. “Great...” he mumbles.

“That shuttle’s traveling a bit slower than we are. Cross-referencing current trajectory, speed and shuttlecraft data...” Ensign Murphy continues. “Yep. That shuttle’s from Station A-12. Its pilot must be the one who almost got me killed in the shuttle bay!” Emily Murphy starts to sound angry again. She presses a few buttons, and says, “Hailing frequencies open.” The look she gives Tony makes it crystal clear she expects him to handle this situation.

Tony is not too eager to actually have to do something in his current condition. He’s even less eager to argue with Ensign Murphy, so what the heck... He sighs and tries to sound a bit more intact than he actually is. “This is Commander Tony Q of the shuttlecraft... whatever this bloody thing is called. What’s your status?”

A moment of silence passes. Just when Tony Q wants to repeat his message, they hear the other shuttlecraft responding, audio only. “*Hello Tony,*” a raspy, tired voice slowly says. “*This is Captain Stephan Rinckes.*” His tone of voice makes it difficult for Tony to distinguish any emotions.

“Captain Rinckes? So you made it out in one piece. I suppose you’re also headed for the back-up fleet?”

“Yes,” Captain Rinckes practically whispers.

“I regret the loss of your ship. The *Kennedy* was also lost with all hands.”

“*I know.*”

Silence. Tony gives Ensign Murphy a somewhat quizzical look. With a brief nod, she prompts him to continue. “I’m here with an Ensign called Emily Murphy. She served on the *Kennedy*. It appears we are the only ones who got away... We lost a lot of good people back there.”

Too much time (though it can’t be more than a few seconds) passes. “Yes.”

Tony hesitates. This is getting a bit awkward. “We almost lost Ensign Murphy too,” he continues, “when you opened the shuttle bay door, decompressing the shuttle bay with her in it. I could barely save her.”

Ensign Murphy eagerly awaits Captain Rinckes’ response.

“*I’m sorry. I didn’t know she was there.*”

“All right. But a standard sweep of the immediate area before decompressing a shuttle bay would’ve been advisable. Also, a simple force-field would’ve prev---”

“*I’m sorry. Please follow me to the Nedron system.*” With that, the Captain closes the channel.

“Is Captain Rinckes always like this?” Ensign Murphy asks.

“Yeah,” Cmdr. Tony Q says. “A capable officer, but a bit on the cranky side.” Still, Captain Rinckes seemed preoccupied rather than cranky. And the way he spoke... Tony had never heard him speak like that before. He sounded... empty.

“I’m relieved to hear the shuttle bay incident was just a mistake,” Ensign Murphy says, though she’s not entirely convinced.

Cmdr. Tony Q shakes his thoughts. “Yes. Even Captains make mistakes. That’s why we have Commanders.” He gives the pretty Ensign one of his best smiles.

“And then there are the Ensigns who save the infallible Commanders,” Ensign Murphy deadpans.

After an uncertain amount of time, Tony sees the streaks of space dust fading into a normal view of the stars. They’ve dropped out of warp. The shuttle of Captain Rinckes is slightly

ahead of them, as it has been for most of the journey. The view of the Garcon Nebula in front of them –a giant dust cloud that combines the colors lilac and blue in a most stunning way– is an enthralling sight. And so is the graveyard of ships in front of it...

"I was afraid of this," Tony sighs. "Man, what a day..."

"They could be Altonoid ships," Emily Murphy says, trying to sound a bit hopeful. Her console starts bleeping. "We've received a text message from Captain Rinckes. He orders us to investigate the nebula and its surroundings and come back with a report once we're done."

"All right. Captain's orders," Tony Q says. "Take us in closer, Ensign." As the shuttle starts moving again, Tony and Emily overtake Captain Rinckes and leave him behind. Steadily, they approach the nebula and the ominous graveyard of starships.

Soon enough, a few Altonoid ship hulks become recognizable, but they are largely outnumbered by the remains of Federation starships.

"Sensors are picking up 39 destroyed vessels," Ensign Murphy says, trying hard not to show any emotion in her voice. "31 Starfleet vessels, and eight Altonoid vessels."

Tony doesn't reply. In his head, he makes a bleak estimation of how many thousands of deaths the destruction of thirty-one vessels must have caused.

"Commander," Ensign Murphy breaks the silence. "There's no way eight Altonoid vessels could've done that. There must've been more."

Tony Q nods, without looking away from the graveyard that surrounds them.

"What if they're still here?" Emily asks with a twinge of fear in her voice.

"Boost power to sensors. Scan for Altonoid vessels," Tony says softly.

A few uneasy seconds pass. "None within sensor range," Ensign Murphy says. "But they could be cloaked."

"We'll scout the area for any survivors and additional information, and then we'll head straight back, all right?" Tony Q says, and he looks at Emily for the first time in this conversation.

"Agreed."

Slowly but steadily, they enter the graveyard of starships. Despite being the size of a 21st century truck, the shuttle is absolutely dwarfed in comparison with the ship hulks as it flies through the maze of debris. An almost immeasurable amount of torn hull bears silent witness to the tragedy that has taken place here. An old *Miranda*-class ship hangs in space in full view, its saucer cut in half, showing many decks that have been eaten away. The *USS Yeager* has also been destroyed by Altonoid forces, and has crashed into the remains of an *Excelsior*-class vessel.

Practically every ship class, new or old, has a few dead ships representing them here in this collection of derelict ship hulks reminiscent of the graveyard left by the battle of Wolf 359 over thirteen years ago. The wreck of the *Galaxy*-class *USS Trinculo* becomes visible through the hull breaches of an *Akira*-class ship lost today. That *Galaxy*-class ship alone must've held over one thousand crewmembers and civilians. Now it's hanging in space, dark and silent, with its saucer section bent downwards on its crushed neck supports.

The cloud of defeated starships is getting less dense, which means that they've passed through the biggest part of the graveyard. The shuttle's sensors are scanning non-stop.

"I'm picking up no life signs," Ensign Murphy says.

"Well..." Tony sighs. He halts his speech for a moment as they pass the crippled *Ambassador*-class *USS Sylvester*. "It's time we start back."

Tony can't even gasp for air to say the next sentence, because suddenly the view of the Garcon Nebula gets severely blurred, as if they're breaking through the iridescent surface of an enormous soap bubble. Various warnings go off in the shuttle. Ensign Murphy immediately starts studying the abundance of incoming data to find out what the hell is going on.

Just as suddenly, the view outside the shuttle's windows stabilizes, the warning sounds are silenced, and the same beautiful Garcon Nebula becomes clear to see. Although... The graveyard of ships seems to have disappeared around them, and instead, there are dozens of Altonoid warships, mere miles away!

Ensign Murphy interprets the data displayed on her console. "We seem to have passed through a subspace rupture. We've entered some sort of subspace well."

"Yeah... Well... Look!" Tony says while gesturing at the dozens of Altonoid ships in front of them. They're all facing the nebula in eerie stillness.

"Sensors are reading 70 Altonoid vessels scattered around the area," Ensign Murphy calmly says. "Total power output is zero. No life signs."

Tony stares at the sight. Altonoid vessels are generally even larger than Federation starships. To see them all motionless and devoid of life is a somewhat chilling sight, though a welcome change from all the destroyed Federation vessels. "How did this happen?"

Ensign Murphy needs a few seconds to figure that out. "It appears that all power sources aboard their ships have been neutralized by this subspace well."

Tony opens his mouth but doesn't get the chance to actually say something.

"The sensors say this subspace well contained a serious amount of a specific type of boson particles that's supposed to be purely hypothetical. Given these conditions, they are believed to instantaneously drain power from all ship systems. That's what must have happened here."

"Yes. So why aren't we affected?" Tony asks, and at the same time he's impressed with the many things they teach the Cadets at the Academy these days.

"Like I said. It *contained* the particles. Once again, the theory is that, once deployed, these particles linger for a while. Because of the properties of this subspace well, it probably leaked into normal space in a rather harmless fashion after some time. At least that's what I think. Right now the well's safe enough for us. We probably shouldn't have come here say... five minutes ago, or we would've been in serious trouble."

"If I hadn't brought you along I would've been in trouble too," Tony says with a smile. "You know an awful lot about science for a---"

"Security Ensign, yes," Ensign Murphy agrees. "Well, I can do a lot more than wield a phaser and look dangerous."

They both laugh. For a moment, Cmdr. Tony Q forgets all about his phaser wound, even though he is looking unhealthier by degrees. He looks out of the windows, at the seventy dead Altonoid ships hanging in front of one of the most beautiful nebulae in the Milky Way. Then, he looks Ensign Murphy in the eyes a bit too long to mistake it for a short glance. "A stunning sight, don't you agree?"

Ensign Murphy quickly shifts her look to the nebula and says, "It's like an oasis after what's happened earlier today."

Silently, the shuttle keeps moving forward. After some time they pass the 70 huge, Altonoid vessels that are all facing the nebula in silence, their dark hulls glowing in the shimmering light coming from the eye-catching nebula.

"Well. Let's head back..." Tony sighs after they've come to a full stop approximately five kilometers from the nebula. "We've seen enough here. Odd place, this. I mean... of all the places, this subspace well forms near a battle, destroying only the Altonoid vessels. And dozens of them!"

"Well, I can't help it. It's what the sensors say. Besides, I have reason to believe this well was created artificially."

"This just can't get any vaguer," the puzzled Commander says. "What are we supposed to report to Captain Rinckes once we get back?" He starts talking to thin air. "Yes, hello. First we saw what was left of the Federation back-up fleet. Then we entered a subspace well. Yes, a subspace well, which *contained* not contains some exotic new type of boson particles, which

happened to destroy *seventy* Altonoid vessels inside that –by the way artificially created– subspace well. And then---”

An alert goes off, and Tony stops his theatrical performance for a moment.

Ensign Murphy leans forward to access her console, and says dryly, “We’re being hailed by the nebula.”

Tony stares at her for a brief moment, and then continues his theatrical rant. “Of course we’re being hailed by the nebula! What else did you expect?!” He presses a button on the console in front of him and replies the hail. “Hello, nebula. How are we feeling today?”

“Relaying communications to the screen,” Ensign Murphy says with a hint of a smile on her face.

Cmdr. Tony Q wants to look at the window in front of him, remembers that this is just a shuttle with no viewscreen, and looks at the built-in monitor instead. A slender man in his early fifties appears on the monitor. He’s clearly a Starfleet Captain and the bridge around him looks state of the art. In fact, it looks like nothing Cmdr. Tony Q nor Ensign Murphy have ever seen before.

“This is Captain Keith Harriman of the *USS Achilles*,” the Captain says. “I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Well... I can’t say I expected you here either. I am Commander Tony Q.”

“I know, your reputation precedes you,” Captain Harriman says with a brief, charming smile on his lean face. “And who’s the Ensign next to you?”

“Ensign Emily Murphy, sir,” she replies. “Of the *USS Kennedy*.”

Tony can’t wait to get some answers. “I take it you are part of what remains of the back-up fleet?”

Captain Harriman sighs. “Yes, the *Achilles* and ten other ships. We’re all hiding inside this nebula.”

“Ah... Why?” Tony asks.

“Until a few minutes ago, the volatile particles inside the subspace well were still too powerful for our ships to handle. You can see what it did to the Altonoid ships.”

“Yes. That’s still a bit puzzling, to be honest. In fact, practically everything here is a bit puzzling.”

Captain Harriman explains, “Moments after we heard the message from Letor Fune about Station A-12 being taken over by Altonoids, we were attacked by a fleet of seventy-eight Altonoid vessels. I don’t know how they found us, but they did. We barely had the time to go to red alert. We lost thirty-one of our ships in the subsequent battle, and things were definitely looking bad for us. But then, suddenly, a mysterious message sent to the remaining ships in our fleet told us to fly into the nebula and stand by.”

Cmdr. Tony Q and Ensign Murphy are listening carefully.

“Normally we wouldn’t simply follow random orders from unknown origin... But this was not the kind of situation that encouraged holding conferences about possible alien influences... So we complied. As soon as our last ship entered the nebula, the mysterious subspace well formed and immediately disabled all Altonoid vessels. The nebula’s composition shielded us from the particles’ harmful effects. We’ve been in here for hours now, waiting for the right moment to leave the nebula.”

“Well, consider it safe,” Tony Q remarks.

“Well, consider us lucky,” Ensign Murphy adds wittily.

The slender Captain smiles briefly before asking in a serious tone, “What happened at Station A-12?”

Tony’s face hardens. “I’m afraid that I, Ensign Murphy here, and Captain Rinckes are the only ones who got away. Rinckes is waiting for us in a shuttle outside the well.”

“So few made it out?” Captain Harriman sighs. “But aren’t you a Q? How come you are injured?”

“It’s all a very, very long story, Captain. We request permission to dock.”

Captain Harriman nods. “Yes. Proceed to shuttle bay 3 as soon as we’ve cleared the nebula. We’ll pick up Captain Rinckes and head back to Starbase 9 for repairs. I’ll have sickbay ready to take care of your wounds.”

“Thank you,” Tony says.

Captain Harriman nods at what should be the OPS officer, in front of the bridge, out of view for Tony and Emily. “This is Captain Keith Harriman to all ships: take us out.”

A faint shadow forms and grows within the nebula. The outlines of the shadow gradually become clear through the clouds of blue and lilac shapes. Two distinct red lights begin to grow visible through the mist, the lights of what have to be two, modernly designed warp nacelles. And between those two lights is a very wide, yet flat red light. The ship’s design gradually become perceptible as the ship approaches the perimeter of the nebula.

And then the *Achilles* breaks through, stirring pockets of colorful dust in its wake. Commander Tony Q and Ensign Murphy have never seen this type of ship in action before, mostly because the *Achilles* is of a relatively new design. A modern-looking, state-of-the-art starship almost the size of a *Sovereign*-class vessel, but even sleeker. The ship appears to be a mere eleven, twelve decks tall, but it looks muscular, as if it’s constantly ready to pick a fight.

From the shuttle, Cmdr. Tony Q and Ensign Murphy have a clear view of the newest deflector technology and scientific research combined to form a wide, flat deflector dish glowing with red light. Its saucer follows the latest design trend of triangular shaped saucers perfectly, with the front edge seemingly cut off. The two distinctively short warp nacelles run parallel to the ship’s long secondary hull. It is definitely an awe-inspiring ship. Despite having suffered minor battle damage, it still looks as if it can move moons with a single sigh.

The ship moves past their line of sight, and the two young officers direct their attention to the Garcon nebula again. Multiple shadows start forming inside the nebula. Five, six, seven, more than that. Each shadow grows in detail independently until it becomes possible to recognize its shape. As if looking at the ships through blue and lilac stained glass, the shapes grow inevitably larger and more detailed. Yet, somehow, when they break through the walls of the nebula it seems completely unanticipated. As if a distant dream suddenly turns out to be a tangible truth.

Ten Federation starships appear from the nebula. From a small yet powerful *Defiant*-class vessel to two of the immensely majestic *Galaxy*-class starships. They’re all creating different fountains of bright dust destined to flounder into open space, only to dissipate shortly after its creation.

The seventy empty Altonoid vessels with its killed occupants silently witness the surviving Federation starships exiting the nebula. All that the remains of this mighty Altonoid fleet can do is watch helplessly.

The view provided by the windows of the shuttle is filled with combat-ready Federation starships. Commander Tony Q watches it all with mixed feelings. He’s glad to see that his great sacrifices may not have been in vain. Yet he is disappointed by the harsh fact that those sacrifices haven’t made much of a difference yet. The Federation has lost so much today. *He* has lost so much today... No more life as a higher being. No more living outside the confines of the space-time continuum. Now he’s back to being the life form he used to be, and in pretty bad shape too. He remembers the time before he was chosen to become a member of the Q Continuum. Having served on the *USS Kennedy*, having been a part of that fine crew, will always rank very high in his memories. But the *Kennedy* is no more...

He notices that Ensign Emily Murphy has been looking at him expectantly. He meets her eyes and says with a smile, “It’s time to go home.”

END OF PART I