

## “FALLEN HEROES”

by Alex Lampe

### PART I - CHAPTER IV

Only moments ago, a second heavily upgraded *Massal*-class warship uncloaked in front of the *USS Wolf*, just when the *Wolf* attempted to make a run for the first *Massal*. This second *Massal* is on a direct collision course with the *Wolf* and the enormous Altonoid warship looks like it will not even flinch at the prospect of a head-on collision. The truth is that, though the impact may damage the *Massal*, the *Wolf* cannot possibly survive such a crash.

Without waiting for the order, Lieutenant Stephanie Grant makes the *Wolf* perform an extremely tight evasive maneuver in a desperate attempt to avoid the *Massal*. The *Wolf* pulls up, makes a vertical U-turn, barely misses the oncoming *Massal*, and flies back to the Federation fleet with the *Massal* hot on its trail.

Lt. Cmdr. Leif Anderson stands in the center of the bridge. Normally he's the ship's Chief Tactical Officer, but now that Admiral Van Aken and Commander Levine are being held hostage on the station, Anderson is in command of the *Wolf*. Luckily for its crew, Anderson is a capable leader who exudes confidence. “Aft view on,” he says while he quickly runs a hand through his short, black hair. The entire viewscreen gets filled with the image of the immense Altonoid ship closing in.

“They're very close, sir,” the Chief Science Officer Ensign Mick Daniels says.

“Thanks, Ensign. I've noticed...”

“The *Massal* is powering up their phaser array!” Ensign Daniels shouts.

“And our weapons are still off-line, sir,” Lt. Grant adds.

“We'll just have to take the brunt of it then,” Lt. Cmdr. Anderson says firmly, and he sits down in his Captain's chair and holds on tight.

The front phaser wires on the *Massal* flood the bridge with bright light. Four strong phaser beams impact on the aft shields of the *USS Wolf* in a short but powerful burst. That seems to be the end of the attack for now, because the *Massal* stops firing and comes to a complete halt. The first *Massal* has already fallen back and is no doubt busy with repairs.

“I'm reducing speed,” Lt. Grant says after having wiped some sweat from her forehead.

“That wasn't so bad. Return to normal view,” Anderson says. He leans back in his chair and looks at the viewscreen that now displays the rest of the Federation fleet. Something's off, though. It's like his ship is slightly tilting down, into the direction of the *USS Kennedy*. Leif Anderson can't help but move his head up a bit, as if that would help to correct the tilting. Finally, he says something. “Is it just me or are we tilting down a bit?”

“I'll correct it, sir,” Lt. Grant says. She taps in a few commands. Nothing happens. “Helm control is not responding!” She turns around to face her commanding officer with her eyes wide open. “Something must've snapped!”

Despite the fact that the *Sovereign*-class *USS Kennedy* is one of Starfleet's toughest ships, it has taken a lot of damage trying to deal with the first *Massal*. The arrival of a second upgraded Altonoid ship doesn't bode well for the crew of the *Kennedy*. The bridge is already severely damaged and the ship's structural integrity is dangling by a thread. They'll have to rely on the *Sundance* and the *Wolf* to keep them safe for now.

The *Wolf* is heading straight for them, but it doesn't worry the bridge crew yet. Chief of Operations Lt. Sven Muntenaar reports, “The *USS Wolf* seems to be drifting towards us at moderate speed.”

Lt. Sivar nods. The Vulcan science officer was left in charge of the *Kennedy* when Captain Duvivier and Commander Jansen boarded Station A-12. “Relay a message to them. They

should alter their course in order to avoid a collision because we are unable to maneuver at this time.”

On the bridge of the *USS Wolf*:

Lt. Grant’s console emits a series of bleeps. “We’ve received a message from the *Kennedy*. We are to adjust our course... No kidding...” She faces her commanding officer again. “That last hit from the Altonoids must’ve knocked helm control off-line. That’s why they’ve stopped firing. They’re going to sit back and watch us crash. Well not on my watch! I’m getting control back one way or the other!” And with that, she crouches down and tears off a panel on the front of the helm console.

Anderson has managed to stay relatively calm until now, but smashing into a friendly starship will not be very helpful in this already lopsided battle.

“I could use some help,” Lt. Grant says. Lt. Cmdr. Anderson immediately bounces up from his chair and hurries over to the console. He pushes Lt. Grant aside and starts fiddling with the console’s internals. Grant wants to comment on being pushed away like this, but frankly, all that matters right now is getting helm control back.

On the *Kennedy*:

The bridge crew watch the *USS Wolf* tilting towards them. Chief Helmsman Lt. Malin gives Lt. Muntenaar a worried glance. “Why aren’t they listening to us?”

Lt. Muntenaar replies with a quick, nervous shrug and concentrates on his OPS console. “Eight kilometers and closing.”

Lt. Sivar presses a button on his armrest and says, “Acting Captain Sivar to Engineering. We need our impulse engines back on-line as soon as possible, Commander.”

“That won’t be possible just yet. I might be able to fix them within a few minutes,” they hear Lt. Cmdr. Soeteman reply. “I did manage to bring the photon tubes back on-line.”

Lt. Sivar sees the *USS Wolf* growing larger and larger on the viewscreen. “Thank you, Commander. That is of great help to our current situation.” His voice contains an unusual amount of sarcasm for a Vulcan.

“Six kilometers and closing,” Lt. Muntenaar reports.

“Take evasive actions, Ms. Malin. Z minus 1000 meters,” Lt. Sivar orders.

The thrusters on the dorsal sections of the *Kennedy* fire, pushing the ship down slowly.

On the bridge of the *USS Wolf*:

Lt. Cmdr. Anderson is still struggling to get helm control back on-line, as they’re approaching the *Kennedy* quickly. The rest of the bridge crew can only sit by and watch with an understandable degree of anxiety.

“Fixed!” Cmdr. Anderson shouts and he jumps up to look at the result. “I think...” The *Wolf* is still maneuvering towards the *USS Kennedy*. The *Kennedy* has started a slow descent, but they’re not moving quickly enough. Lt. Cmdr. Anderson presses several buttons on the helm console he believes to have fixed while the crew witness it all in concern.

A brief pause.

“Not fixed yet!” Lt. Cmdr. Anderson shouts, while the image of the *USS Kennedy* is about to fill up the entire viewscreen. He opens the panel and tries again.

Onboard the *Kennedy*:

The young, tall Ensign Parkin has never felt this helpless in his life, even though he’s standing behind the tactical station of one of the most powerful ships of the fleet. He has waited anxiously for the weapons to be repaired and finally he has a good number of photon torpedoes at his disposal. He’s ready to fight the Altonoids again, but there’s no defense

against a friendly ship that's on a deadly collision course.

"Seventeen seconds to impact!" Lt. Muntenaar shouts. The little wrinkles around his eyes that normally add to his smile now only accentuate his nervousness. "Their current trajectory sends them straight at our warp nacelles!"

"Increase power to thrusters," Lt. Sivar says, calm as ever.

The *Kennedy* is still moving down on thrusters only, but the *USS Wolf* will collide with their nacelles within seconds nevertheless. The *Wolf* is already about to fly over the *Kennedy*'s saucer section!

"All hands, brace for impact!" Lt. Muntenaar shouts over the comm system.

"Perhaps that will not be necessary," Lt. Sivar says. "Decompress all shuttle bays."

"What?" Lt. Muntenaar replies.

"Now, Lieutenant," Lt. Sivar says with urgency in his voice. After a brief moment, Muntenaar understands what Sivar is trying to accomplish and he complies with a subtle grimace.

The doors of the severely damaged shuttle bays open right when the *USS Wolf* is about to fly over them. Air and debris get shoved out of the smashed shuttle bays located in the neck and tail of the *Kennedy*. The debris causes the shields of the *Wolf* to emit a blue glow, while the air displacement pushes the *Wolf* away from the *Kennedy*. The effect is marginal, but enough to make it barely miss the *Kennedy*...

"That was close..." Lt. Grant says to Lt. Cmdr. Anderson, who's still attempting to fix the helm. She'd really like to get helm control back. What good is it being an accomplished pilot when you can't even get to steer the damn ship?

"Fixed it!" Anderson says as he jumps up.

Stephanie Grant raises an eyebrow. "You sure this time?"

Cmdr. Anderson nods and hurries back to the Captain's chair. Lieutenant Grant quickly seats herself at the helm and presses a few buttons on the fixed console. Then she sees that the previous command of pulling up drastically is still imprinted in the console's computer, and the ship is about to obey that command!

So the *USS Wolf* pulls up extremely and makes a vertical U-turn, just like when they tried to outmaneuver the *Massal* moments before. After some dire effort, Lt. Grant manages to command the ship to cease pulling up, and the ship moves into one direction again. Into the direction of the *USS Kennedy*...

The bridge crew of the *USS Kennedy* watch the *USS Wolf* closing in once again. "This is getting tedious..." Lt. Malin deadpans.

Lt. Muntenaar is at a loss for words. All he can do is watch the *Wolf* moving relentlessly towards the helpless *Kennedy*.

The *USS Wolf* rolls 90 degrees to the left in a last attempt to avoid a seemingly unavoidable collision. Malin and Muntenaar instinctively close their eyes and cower down in an instinctive but futile reaction. Everybody holds on tight and waits for the imminent crash, but nothing happens. Lt. Grant's last minute maneuver is successful and the *Wolf* misses the *Kennedy* with inches to spare.

Everyone in the conference room of Station A-12 witnessed the whole ordeal and Captain Duvivier looks quite flabbergasted. Admiral Van Aken sees Captain Duvivier's reaction and says dryly, "Woman at the helm..."

Duvivier shakes his head.

"You know," Letor Fune says, standing only a few feet away from the four captured flag officers. "I must admit that I find your subordinates highly amusing."

The Altonoid with the bandage on his hand enters the conference room and reports to Letor Fune. “We are taking section by section of this petty station.” Letor Fune replies with a mischievous smirk and keeps listening. “We’ve killed or wounded many Starfleet officers, but they are still fighting with great motivation.”

“Spirit will get them nowhere...” Letor Fune says. “And that starship battle will not be won by them either.” Fune turns to the captured officers. “Did you realize that the first four Altonoid vessels you fought and destroyed so easily were automated vessels? Those four vessels carried me and my troops to this station and were in fact completely empty when the battle commenced. They were merely running on a rudimentary AI program, assessed your defenses, and paved the way for the two prototype vessels to enable them to inflict some serious damage.”

The four Starfleet officers are shocked to hear this and they make no effort to hide their astonishment. Letor Fune notices their mouths hanging open. He addresses the other Altonoids in the room when he says, mockingly, “Look at those ‘officers’.” Fune points at the four, shocked flag officers. “They actually think they can win this station back. Oh, how they underestimate us... They would give up all hope if they knew what was coming... So that leaves them with what? False hope.”

“I’d take false hope over despair any day,” Cmdr. Levine replies as he sticks his chin up. “If there’s anything you should know about us, it’s that we don’t give up easily.” Admiral Van Aken supports his First Officer’s words with a daring smile directed at Letor Fune, who doesn’t respond to this subtle provocation.

Crawling through the Jefferies tubes is a good way of travelling undetected on a station that’s swarming with hostile forces. That’s exactly why Captain Rinckes is making his way through one of Station A-12’s many Jefferies tubes. He should be helping the many Starfleet troops in their efforts to release the hostages and retake the station, but that will have to wait until he has found his First Officer Commander Melanie Simons. It’s been a while since he has last seen her. In fact, it’s been a while since he has last seen any living Starfleet officer.

He has reached the end of this Jefferies tube and emerges in what appears to be a small maintenance chamber. A nearby console displays the schematics of the immediate surroundings. When Captain Rinckes checks it out, he quickly learns two things: this area contains an important central intersection where seven corridors meet, and it is absolutely swarming with Altonoids. There’s no quick way around it, he’ll have to cross the hub of intersecting corridors somehow.

When he looks over his shoulder, he sees the one door leading to the nearest corridor. If he’d go through it and take a right, he’d have to travel over 100 feet to cross the intersection and get to a quieter area of the station. Even if he’d step out with guns blazing and make a desperate dash for the other side, he’d be killed within five seconds tops. He’ll have to come up with a plan because he’s simply come too far to give up now. He thinks for a brief moment while he looks at the console. Then it hits him. The plan is risky, but it’ll have to do.

With a few commands, he shuts down the entire lighting system for this area. Within a few seconds he can hear the nearby Altonoids raising their voices and walking by faster. Quickly, Rinckes kills the lights in the maintenance room too. He literally can’t see anything while he stumbles for the door with his phaser rifle pressed firmly against his torso. He takes a deep breath and walks through the opening door...

...and enters a pitch-dark corridor that’s filled with armed Altonoids that rush by in both directions. It’s not as if he has any choice, but Rinckes follows the line of Altonoids that’s headed for the intersection. There’s a lot of tugging and pushing and at any moment one of the Altonoids could notice that there’s an imposter among them, that there’s someone wearing a Starfleet uniform and carrying a Starfleet issue weapon. They can’t possibly see him,

Rinckes made sure that even the emergency lights, wall displays, and blinking red-alert panels in this area went off-line, but all it takes is one very perceptive Altonoid and Rinckes is a dead man. It's as simple as that.

As he nears the intersection, the line he's in slows down and comes to a halt. Rinckes is glad that most Altonoids are shouting and speaking loudly, otherwise someone might notice his rapidly increasing heartbeat. The many Altonoids in the crowded corridors make the air heavy and Rinckes is starting to feel a bit dizzy. His palms are getting sweaty and that decreases the grip he has on his weapon. If he'd accidentally drop his rifle... He doesn't want to think about what would happen.

Suddenly, the lights start to come back on! Rinckes' throat goes dry and his stomach churns violently. Only a split-second later, the lights go down again. The failsafe program he embedded in that console appears to have worked. Rinckes holds perfectly still, expecting to be revealed and killed at any moment... but a few more seconds pass and the queue starts moving again. Nobody noticed... Dazed with anxiety, he follows the Altonoids in what can only be described as the most unpleasant conga-line he's ever been part of...

When he's about to cross the intersection, he notices that some of the Altonoids have found and activated a few flashlights. Random beams of light shine through the many corridors, grazing the shadows and illuminating bits and pieces of the intersection. Rinckes makes himself as small as possible. He'll have to rely on the tall Altonoids around him to keep him from being noticed. Slowly, he crosses the intersection and passes the random beams of light undetected.

Just when he wants to sigh in relief, he accidentally activates the flashlight on his phaser rifle... A fountain of light shines in his face. Immediately, Rinckes rips off the flashlight and points it at the ceiling. Its independent battery kicks in and enables the flashlight to shine a bright spot of light at the ceiling. There's no doubt about it, he has attracted the attention of the Altonoids around him. They all stop and stare at the shadowy figure who's pointing a flashlight in the air.

Sweat streams down Rinckes' face and he has to swallow an enormous lump in his throat before exclaiming, "Look guys! I've found a flashlight!" He turns around and throws the flashlight at the intersection. Once again, he makes himself as small as possible and follows the queue in the darkness. If anyone recognized him, he's dead. His fate will be decided within the few next seconds. All it takes is for one Altonoid to speak up...

A few excruciating seconds pass.

The inevitable happens. An Altonoid from near the intersection shouts, "Hey!"

Rinckes' heartbeat flies past the 200 beats per minute mark and an overwhelming wave of nausea almost knocks him over. This is it. He's done for...

"Thanks for the flashlight!" the Altonoid shouts and he moves on.

Rinckes wants to vomit in relief, but he keeps his dinner inside. His legs are shaking, but he'll have to keep walking. He follows the queue as they round a corner, and the group of Altonoids slowly disperses into different directions. Rinckes stumbles along on auto-pilot until he rounds another corner. According to the schematics, there should be another maintenance room just after the bend and he searches for its door with his right hand while clasp on to his phaser rifle with his left hand. He glides his hand across the bulkhead, but there's no door. He retraces his steps and collides with an Altonoid, who apologizes and walks on. Once again, Rinckes' heart feels like it's about to burst out of his chest. If he doesn't find that door before the lights get switched on again... He keeps searching for the one door that will lead him to safety, but he simply can't find it. He must've misread the schematics somehow...

Just when Rinckes is about to give up and collapse on the floor, the door to the maintenance room opens right in front of him. Rinckes is stunned for a moment, then he enters the maintenance chamber. As the door closes behind him, he knows he's safe at last.

Suddenly, the lights come on and reveal an Altonoid who's standing right in front of him. The Altonoid is occupied with the maintenance room's console and has his back turned away from Rinckes. In a reflex, he aims his rifle at the Altonoid.

"Relax," the Altonoid grumbles, without looking up. "I finally got the lights working again."

Rinckes keeps the phaser rifle pointed at the Altonoid, ready to shoot him down at the slightest provocation.

"I haven't yet been able to get all the lights in this area on-line, but I'm working on it." The Altonoid reaches for his pocket. Rinckes' finger tightens around the trigger, but the Altonoid simply pulls out a flashlight and tosses it over his shoulder. "Here, take the flashlight. I yanked it off a Starfleet phaser rifle. We can't attach them to our weapons, but they're still useful."

Rinckes attaches the flashlight to his phaser rifle with one simple click. "Thanks."

Shocked, the Altonoid turns around slowly. "H-h-how did *you* get here?"

Rinckes shrugs. "On foot."

The Altonoid tilts his head a little to the side. "It was you. You sabotaged the lights."

Rinckes takes an unsteady step closer, making the Altonoid cringe back against the console. He presses the muzzle of the rifle against the Altonoid's forehead and makes no effort to hide the tiredness in his voice when he says, "Have you seen a blonde, female officer in a command uniform around here?"

"No. I don't know what you're talking about. Please, don't hurt me. I'll tell you everything I know. But I don't know anything about a female officer. You've got to believe me."

Rinckes is about to back off, but then he notices that the Altonoid is reaching for a weapon. Just when the Altonoid grabs the phaser from his belt, Captain Rinckes shoots him from point-blank range. The dead Altonoid slumps back against the console like a ragdoll.

After pushing the dead Altonoid aside, Rinckes quickly seals off the door to this room and restores power to the lighting system. He has made it this far, but he's not ready for celebrations just yet. Only now does he notice the toll all this stress is taking on him. His hands are sweaty and shaking, his stomach and chest hurt like crazy and the sudden increase in dizziness is debilitating. He removes the droplets of sweat that sting his narrow eyes and sits down for a moment, next to the Altonoid's motionless corpse. After a deep sigh, Rinckes collects his strength, crawls into the nearby Jefferies tube, and continues his search for Commander Simons.

Lieutenant Norbert Hoper, Chief of Security of the *USS Wolf*, leans back against a bulkhead in a quiet corridor on Station A-12. He, Commander Tony Q, Doctor Rose van Oers, Lieutenant Steven Appels, and six accompanying security officers have found a relatively quiet area where they can catch their breath. However, the strong, black, narrow-faced Lieutenant Hoper doesn't like to just stand there and wait, so he decides to check in on the other security squads. "Lieutenant Hoper to squad 4-A. Report in."

"*Odell checking in. Still no luck,*" they hear. "*We'll inform you once the situation changes.*"

"Lieutenant Hoper to squad 4-B. Report in."

"*Lohmann checking in. This is not a good time. We're pinned down in computer room 4.*"

"Lieutenant Hoper to squad 4-C. Report in."

"*Hasder checking in. We're... Oh damn! More of them!*" followed by a lot of phaser fire and screaming...

“This is Lt. Hoper to squad 4-D. Report in?”

Silence.

“This is Lt. Hoper to squad 4-Delta. Please respond!”

Nothing.

“This is Lt. Hoper to sq---”

“Perhaps it would be better if you’d stop asking your squads for a report,” the young Commander Tony Q says. Hoper responds with a scowl, but Tony continues nevertheless. “It doesn’t seem to be very helpful nor morale boosting.”

Lt. Hoper’s scowl fades. Tony has a point there. They have been running around for a while now, trying to find the hostage room shield array, but all they’ve found so far are trigger-happy Altonoids and dead Starfleet officers...

“Lieutenant Appels,” one of the security officers says. He’s holding a tricorder that’s pointed at the nearest door.

“What is it, Ensign Lucas?” the short, muscular Steven Appels asks.

“The next room is perfectly suitable for housing a small shield array. I think we should investigate it, sir.” The tall, Latino Ensign rarely speaks up, but when he does, he usually has something useful to say.

Dr. Van Oers points her medical tricorder at the door. “I’m reading no life signs in that room.”

“Alright. Lead the way, Mr. Lucas,” Lt. Appels says.

Ensign Lucas opens the door to a rectangular storage room that’s about as big as the conference room, albeit with a much higher ceiling. Several kinds of engineering equipment lie stacked in many crates. The room –which is surprisingly dark by Federation standards– contains lots of places to hide a small shield array...

The group enters the room and they start searching the place. “This is nice,” Commander Tony Q says as he looks around. “So where do you suppose they’re hiding that shield generator?”

They all wander through the room carefully, in search for anything that might lead them to the shield array. Lieutenant Clayton –with forty-one years of age the oldest security officer in this group– takes a closer look at the door they all just passed through. “The lock on this door is malfunctioning. We won’t be going back this way,” he says, slightly alarmed.

“And it’s a bit too quiet here for my taste...” Lt. Appels says.

“Relax. My tricorder reads nothing,” Dr. Van Oers says. She frowns. “Absolutely nothing at all. It’s not even registering the nearby crates.”

“Then there must be a dampening field in place,” Tony Q says calmly. Suddenly, he realizes what he has just said...

The gruff, seasoned Lieutenant Hoper charges his rifle. “I knew it... It’s a trap!”

All officers ready their phaser rifles. All but the unarmed Doctor. “The tricorder still reads nothing,” she says, while Tony Q spots an Altonoid who’s partially hidden by a crate behind the Doctor. The Altonoid is aiming his phaser rifle at her!

“Look out!” Tony Q shouts and he quickly aims his rifle and shoots the Altonoid. Before that Altonoid hits the ground, several more Altonoids jump out from nowhere and start attacking the Starfleet officers.

One unlucky Ensign gets hit in the chest by a phaser beam and gets thrown into the air, only to land on the ground with a gaping hole in his chest. Lt. Hoper and Lt. Appels skillfully mow down a good number of Altonoids. The two are very experienced and capable security officers, and an ambush like this gives them the chance to put their skills to the test. However, they can’t prevent the death of another member of their security force.

Another Altonoid emerges from behind a crate and knocks dead an unsuspecting security officer with a mighty swing of his rifle. The Altonoid has no time to gloat because the nearby Lt. Clayton shoots him immediately.

Another Altonoid and Ensign Lucas have been fighting hand to hand for a while, with their fallen phaser rifles lying out of reach. Ensign Lucas manages to give the Altonoid some good punches and finishes the job with one great strike to the jaw. The Altonoid lands on his back and goes silent...

One of the remaining two Altonoids aims for Lt. Hoper, but Hoper is quicker on the trigger. The last Altonoid is shot by the young, brown-haired Ensign Emily Murphy, who hits the Altonoid with her rifle first, only to shoot him down moments later while the Altonoid is still disorientated by the blow.

Doctor Van Oers rushes over to the nearest hit Ensign and reaches for his neck as she crouches down. Lt. Appels gives her an inquiring look. Just when the Doctor wants to shake her head and pronounce the Ensign's death, practically the entire bulkhead across the room starts to open slowly. It's basically one massive door that leads to another similar room; a room that's crowded with armed Altonoids who eagerly point their rifles at the remaining Starfleet officers. Luckily, there's a significant number of crates lined up in the room the Starfleet officers are standing in. It's not an ideal buffer, but it will have to do because the Altonoids open fire immediately.

"Get to cover!" Lt. Appels shouts while he lunges for one of the crates.

They take cover, but Lt. Clayton doesn't make it in time and gets shot by a barrage of enemy phaser fire...

The six remaining officers hide behind four groups of two crates. There are many, many Altonoids standing on different levels in the other large room. They aim carefully and attempt to snipe all Starfleet officers with their Altonoid phaser rifles.

Ensign Murphy hides with her back to one of the crates, ready to take down an Altonoid whenever she can. She collects all her courage and turns around to face the Altonoids, utilizing a gap between the two crates to shoot back.

Lt. Appels and Lt. Hoper are hiding behind the next pair of crates. They return fire now and then, but there is just too much enemy fire.

The third pair of crates protect Tony Q and Dr. Van Oers. Tony Q returns fire frequently, but Dr. Van Oers is unarmed and attempts to make herself as small as possible while she can hear the deafening sounds of buckling metal and phaser fire around her.

Ensign Lucas is hiding behind the last group of crates.

There are so many Altonoids that it's difficult for the officers to find a relatively safe moment to return fire. The noise of continuous phaser fire is incredible but pales in comparison with the utter direness of the situation. There seems to be no way out.

Lt. Hoper quickly looks around the corner. He turns to face Lt. Appels, who's checking the settings on his phaser rifle. "I can't even count them," Lt. Hoper says.

"Isn't that the definition of being outnumbered?" Lt. Appels responds.

One of the crates Ensign Murphy is hiding behind can't take the beating anymore and blows up. Debris gets hurled away and some of it hits Ensign Murphy in the head, knocking her over. The remains of the crate and its contents bury her immediately. With her out of the way, the Altonoids focus their efforts on the other five Starfleet officers.

"We ought to surrender," Lt. Appels sighs. Lt. Hoper gazes back at him, and Appels can see that Hoper is thinking about possible solutions. However, the noise of a nearby buckling crate distracts Hoper. When he gauges where the noise is coming from, he sees that Dr. Van Oers is in serious danger.

Tony Q notices the crate next to him is about to explode in the Doctor's face! A group of Altonoids notice it too and concentrate their fire on that crate. Rose Van Oers' situation has

become pretty dire! Tony thinks for a split-second and then pulls Dr. Van Oers behind his own crate. Now the only hiding place left for him is the buckling crate. He crouches down behind it and makes himself as small as possible.

The crate can't take all the phaser fire anymore and gets torn apart in a final explosion. Tony manages to evade most of the debris and gets up. He aims his rifle carefully and shoots down a couple of Altonoids.

"Get down!" Lt. Hoper shouts at the top of his lungs.

"Don't worry!" Tony Q shouts back while he dodges the incoming phaser fire. "The Continuum won't let anything h---" Tony can't finish his sentence... A phaser beam hits him right above his right hip. Tony lets go of his rifle and literally gets knocked sideways. His hands grasp nothing but air as he twists a full circle while descending to the ground, only to land on his back and be silent... There's a look of incomprehension on his face and his uniform is scorched above his right hip, revealing a smoldering phaser wound.

"Tony!" Dr. Van Oers shouts. She tries to reach him, he's only a meter away, but the Altonoids block her with phaser fire. Luckily, the other Starfleet officers open fire simultaneously. This diverts the Altonoids' attention, enabling Rose to pull Tony to safety. But for how long? The crate hardly provides enough cover for the two of them and it isn't going to hold forever...

"Tony! Can you hear me?!" Dr. Van Oers shouts. There's no response....

The Altonoids show no intention of ceasing their onslaught and Ensign Lucas, Lt. Hoper, and Lt. Appels are the only Starfleet officers who can return fire at the moment. The situation looks very, very dim...

Lt. Hoper and Lt. Appels appear to be attracting the heaviest fire at the moment. A phaser beam flies through the gap between the two crates they hide behind. Lieutenant Appels can barely avoid it by ducking away. Norbert Hoper looks back at Appels and says, "We won't make it like this..." His voice forms a great contrast with the enormous sounds of phaser fire and destruction. Appels replies with a quick nod. "The Altonoids had trouble opening that big door," Hoper continues. "Or they would've opened it sooner. Anyhow, it must be closed again."

Appels frowns. "Too risky. We better stay put, or find a way out."

"Wake up, Lieutenant. There is no quick way out. If we don't get that door closed... we'll all die here."

Appels remains silent and stares at the buckling crate in front of him.

Hoper presses his combadge. "Lieutenant Hoper to Ensign Lucas. We need a diversion. Understood?" A few crates away, past the Doctor and the fallen Tony Q, they see Ensign Lucas replying with a nod. Lucas moves up and opens fire at the Altonoids.

The Altonoids concentrate their fire on Ensign Lucas, forcing him into hiding again. But as soon as the firing mellows a bit, the valiant Ensign reappears and shoots back.

Hoper suddenly moves to the side of his crate and mouths, "Cover me!" He leaves cover and runs towards the left side of the room. Lt. Appels leaves his cover too and starts shooting the Altonoids before they can start shooting back.

Lt. Hoper and Lt. Appels reach a small LCARS display to the left of the large doorway. The two security officers are protected by the narrow left bulkhead that keeps both officers out of visual range. At least until armed Altonoids start peeking around the doorway. Then they'll have no place to hide...

Lt. Hoper tries to close the big door, but to no avail... "I'm locked out, dammit!" When he turns to face Lt. Appels, he sees Ensign Lucas' crate getting blown up by Altonoid phaser fire. This leaves Ensign Lucas very vulnerable.

"There's another door control on the other side of this bulkhead," Hoper says.

"But that room is swarming with Altonoids," Appels replies.

With a determined look on his face, Lt. Hoper raises his phaser rifle and walks past his colleague. He calmly enters the enormous doorway, lifts his rifle, and kills several Altonoids in cold blood. Lt. Appels understands the plan and follows the other brave Lieutenant into the Altonoid room. Ensign Lucas has hidden behind the crate Lt. Hoper used to hide behind and provides much-needed distraction.

Lt. Hoper and Lt. Appels dodge incoming fire and are happy to return the favor. The two officers manage to reach the LCARS display and Hoper accesses it. Luckily, a nearby stack of equipment blocks most of the Altonoids from getting a clear shot at them. Hoper smiles when he sees that this door control is functioning as it should. He types in an encryption code and presses a big red button on the LCARS display.

The big door starts coming down. Hoper quickly moves towards the slowly closing door and gestures Lt. Appels to do the same. They don't even notice that the Altonoids have stopped firing, as they exit the Altonoid room and re-enter the room where Ensign Lucas, Dr. Van Oers and the wounded Tony Q are in.

"That was a close call," Lt. Appels says while he smiles in relief. Lt. Hoper gives Appels a friendly pat on the shoulder. At that exact moment, the door halts, and moves up again...

Dr. Van Oers looks up for a moment and sees the door opening again. "That can't be good," she remarks.

"It seems the Altonoids are smarter than we thought," Lt. Appels says wryly. "We must really lock them in this time."

Lt. Hoper nods briefly. "We must seal all doors to their room and get a better encryption code on the door control and close off communication systems in that chamber."

"Agreed," Appels says. The two officers ready their rifles and re-enter the Altonoid room, only to meet with heavy resistance. They return fire and run for the LCARS display once again. Lt. Hoper accesses the LCARS display, while Appels tries to keep the Altonoids at bay. Ensign Lucas' back-up is also much appreciated. It draws away a great portion of enemy fire. A good number of Altonoids have already perished, but clunking footsteps betray that more Altonoids are on the way. The two valiant Starfleet officers are living on borrowed time.

"First the door must be closed. Only then can the Altonoids be permanently locked in," Hoper says.

Lt. Appels remains silent for a short while and then says with a sigh, "I did assume this was a one way trip."

"What do you mean?" Hoper responds. "I'll do it. I'll stay here. You get back to the others." The clunking footsteps in the background are getting louder and louder.

"No way. Our success is very important," Appels responds. An Altonoid appears from behind the stack of equipment. Appels shoots him immediately. "If we fail, we're all done for."

Lt. Hoper presses the big red button and the door starts to close again. "Go! That's an order! The others need you. We can't let an Ensign lead the security team."

"I'm staying here to provide back-up. Ensign Marc Lucas is a very capable officer. And you can't order me around. We have the same rank, Lieutenant!" With that, Lt. Appels turns to face Lt. Hoper.

Getting punched in the face is the last thing Appels expected. He can barely remain standing after that mighty blow, while Lt. Hoper shakes off the pain in his right fist and pushes the unsteady Appels towards the closing door. Before the dazed Lieutenant Appels can even think about resisting, Hoper has already pushed him into the other room.

Once Lt. Hoper's grasps releases him, Lt. Appels immediately turns around. The eyes of both security officers meet one last time before the door prohibits their view of each other. Appels won't soon forget that determined though saddened look on Hoper's face. Before the door has closed completely, Hoper turns around and runs for the LCARS display.

The large door closes with a final loud thump... Lt. Appels stares at the closed door and doesn't move a muscle. He frankly doesn't know what to do or say... Then, he hears a large clunk, as if the door is being locked. He can hear muffled shouting and increasing phaser fire.

After a handful of seconds that seem like an eternity, the phaser fire stops...

The big door doesn't open...

Ensign Lucas walks over to Lieutenant Appels, who's still staring at the door. "What the hell happened?"

"Bravery," Lt. Appels says. Then he awakes from his 'trance' and faces Ensign Lucas. "Or stupidity. That doesn't matter in the end. The outcome remains: he saved our lives at the cost of his own."

A couple of feet away, Tony Q is still lying on the ground near the crate he used for cover with Dr. Rose Van Oers by his side to take care of his phaser wound. Tony moans and whines in agony.

"What's his status?" Lt. Appels asks as he joins the little 'party'.

"They didn't hit any vital organs. He was lucky," Dr. Van Oers says as she picks up some more equipment from her medkit.

"Lucky?!" Tony Q exclaims, which causes him even more pain.

"He has suffered severe phaser burns and some bruises, but I've managed to stabilize him," Rose says. "It could've been worse. Perhaps you're still immortal, Tony."

"I don't think so. If I were immortal I shouldn't have been injured by a phaser beam. If that Altonoid had aimed any higher, I would've been dead."

"If that Altonoid had aimed any lower, you would've had a high voice," Lt. Appels replies dryly.

Tony gives him the evil eye. Once again, a bout of pain reminds him of his injury. "I think we know now that I'm no longer immortal..."

"I thought the Altonoids wouldn't shoot at Commanders," Ensign Lucas says, trying to change the subject a little.

"Great. I just encountered the one near-sighted Altonoid on the entire station."

"I don't think they mind anymore," Lt. Appels says. "They just shoot at whatever wears a Starfleet uniform. I can't help but wonder what drives the Altonoids to behave like they do. Their motivations seem so unclear..."

"As happens too often in war," Ensign Lucas says. "Or is it just that war happens too often?"

"Was it your idea to take oracle Lucas with us, Lieutenant Appels?" Tony says, sarcasm mode still functioning. "If so, I thank you. Where would we be without his insights... Ouch!"

"Hold still," Dr. Van Oers says. She takes the dermal regenerator and hovers it over Tony's phaser wound. The wound gets healed considerably, displaying the hole of at least 3 inches in diameter in Tony's shirt profoundly, and showing Tony's semi-healed skin underneath it.

Tony lifts his head to see the tear in his uniform and says, "Oh great... One minute of battle and I've already managed to tear my shirt. Captain Kirk would've been proud of me..."

Lt. Appels disregards that remark and asks the Doctor, "Can he walk?"

"Well, he is out of immediate danger, but walking will be extremely difficult for now. I'll need to perform surgery."

"I'm feeling better already," Tony says timidly.

"So he'll only hold us up if we're to take him with us?" Lt. Appels asks.

Dr. Van Oers gives him a reluctant nod.

"This room is the most secure location right now, in my opinion," Appels continues. "So he can stay here until help arrives."

After having witnessed that last piece of dialogue, Tony lifts a feeble index finger and says, “Uhm... Isn’t this the part where *I* beg you to go on without me?”

“Sorry, Commander. But time is of the essence right now,” Lt. Appels says.

“Alright,” Dr. Van Oers says while she leans over to Tony. “You’ll have to stay here. We’ll come back for you.”

“Please do,” Tony says with a slight tremble in his voice.

“We must be on our way again,” Lt. Appels says. His impatience has reached critical levels. “We’re searching for the hostage room shield emitter, remember? Ensign Lucas, start finding a way out of here. Doctor, please pick up a weapon and follow us.”

Lucas complies, but Dr. Van Oers looks hesitant.

“What? Got a problem with that?” Lt. Appels asks.

“I’m a doctor, not a mercenary,” Dr. Van Oers says. “I’d rather not use weaponry.”

“Dammit, Rose. We need your help.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to help you. I said I’d prefer not to use weaponry,” Dr. Van Oers says as she raises her voice slightly.

“Preferences work nicely when you’re safe on board your own ship, when the worst thing that can happen is that some Ensign gets the flu. But that doesn’t work when you’re out here. We’re in a war! You’re a Starfleet officer, for crying out loud!”

“Hey, don’t make me come over to you two,” the wounded Tony Q softly says.

Lt. Appels continues his speech directed at the Doctor. “You may have the rank of Commander, but I’m the leader of this away team. And I’m ordering you to pick up a weapon and assist us.”

Dr. Van Oers looks around and sees the still bodies that belonged to Altonoids and Starfleet officers. “Look! Look at what fighting has brought us! And for what? We kill them, they kill us and vice versa.” She sighs deeply before continuing. “Let me help you by doing what I’m best at. Let me help you *save* lives.”

A moment of silence passes.

“But you *can* save lives! Billions of lives depend on our actions today, and the same goes for the future of the Federation. The Altonoids have invaded our space with violence. The only way to repel them is with violence... We have no choice. We have fought for our ideals so many times before. Against Romulans, the Dominion, the Borg... We will fight for the ideals we have cherished all of our lives. We will fight for the ideals of the Federation. And whether we succeed or not, at least we can say: we’ve fought!”

Another moment of silence...

“That’s what’s frightening me,” Dr. Van Oers says as she sticks her chin up. “The Altonoids also think that they’re fighting for the right cause, whatever it may be. That’s what always happens in war. There are never real ‘bad guys’.”

Appels lets the words seep in for a moment. “You are right, Doctor. However, the fact remains that the Altonoids are the aggressors, and they’ve invaded our peace and safety, and they are going to do a lot more killing if we’d let them have their way. Do you think they’ll stop after they’ve taken over this station?”

“No...” the Doctor admits.

“They will no doubt try to undermine the entire Federation and conquer it. They will enslave the few survivors and send them to the dilithium mines, if they’re lucky... So, you have vowed to serve Starfleet and to protect its citizens. This is your chance. No, this is your duty!” He points at the nearest phaser rifle. “You know what to do.”

Silently, Dr. Van Oers walks over to the motionless Lt. Clayton. His dead, wide eyes stare at the ceiling, and his hands are still clamped around his phaser rifle –the same weapon that couldn’t prevent his death. She grabs hold of the rifle and carefully pulls it out of the dead

officer's hands. A quick check of the rifle proves that it's still completely intact. When she glances over the rifle's scope, she can see Lt. Appels nodding in approval.

Tony looks at the armed Doctor. "Good luck, G.I. Jane," he says with a smile.

"Thanks," the Doctor replies. "Don't go anywhere. You're relatively safe here."

"Relatively..." Tony replies as his smile dissipates.

Dr. Van Oers turns around and sees that Ensign Lucas has managed to open the door they used to enter the room. The three Starfleet officers leave the room, leaving Tony Q and a lot of still Altonoids and Starfleet officers behind...

The *USS Kennedy*, the *Wolf* and the two remaining parts of the *Sundance* have been fighting the second *Massal* for a while now. The other *Massal* hasn't participated in the fight since the arrival of its sister ship. Any repairs must be complete by now, so having the vessel watch from the sidelines probably stems from the Altonoids' sheer confidence in their powerful position.

Letor Fune witnesses the battle from the safe confines of the conference room. Everything is going according to plan, and by now the four captured officers have grown sick and tired of that constant self-righteous grin on his face.

The Altonoid with the bandage on his hand accesses an LCARS display on the wall and says, "Fune! We've received a message from Admiral Owen Paris. He says the Federation is willing to negotiate."

Letor Fune keeps his eyes fixed on the space battle and says, "Tell them we're having problems with our communications array. We cannot read their messages properly. We'll get back to them."

"Yes, sir." The Altonoid quickly types the message. "Message sent."

Fune looks at the flag officers and says with a wry grin, "We'll get back to them once we've purged the station of every bit of resistance."

The engines of the *USS Kennedy* seem to be working again and the ship is trying to be an active participant in this battle, despite all the damage it has already suffered. OPS Officer Sven Muntenaar reports, "The Altonoids are sending a message to Starbase 9."

"What are they saying?" Lt. Sivar asks.

"They say they're having problems with their communications array."

"Right..." Lt. Malin adds, even though she's busy trying to prevent the ship from being hit by those strong Altonoid phaser beams.

Lt. Muntenaar shakes his head. "It appears they want to fight this out before they'll even open negotiations. And I wonder if they are willing to commence negotiations in the first place..."

"Speculation will not help us at this time. Keep evading incoming fire," Lt. Sivar says coolly.

"What do you think I'm doing?!" Lt. Malin replies. An enemy phaser strike hits target and the bridge rocks violently. One of the few consoles that have remained operative sends out a series of sparks.

"*Engineering to bridge,*" they hear Chief Engineer Lt. Cmdr. Soeteman say over the comm system. "*Structural integrity is down to 16%. I've managed to divert a bit more power to the structural integrity field. I don't know how long it will hold, but it's better than nothing,*"

"Thank you, Commander," Lt. Sivar says. "It is imperative that we keep the ship together. However, it is also of vital importance to fire at the upgraded *Massal*-class Altonoid ship as frequently as possible."

“I’ll take that as an order,” Ensign Parkin says with a faint smile. The *USS Kennedy* flies past the large *Massal*, rolls to the left to evade four Altonoid phaser beams targeting the tertiary section of the *USS Sundance*, and fires its ventral phasers.

On the bridge of the *USS Sundance*:

“The hull of our tertiary section is buckling, sir,” the science officer of the *Prometheus*-class *USS Sundance* says.

The Bolian Lieutenant Broitz doesn’t react and stares at the viewscreen, which displays the tertiary section getting pounded on by four strong Altonoid phaser beams. They’ve already lost the middle section of their ship right at the start of this battle, immediately after ordering the ship to separate into three battle-worthy sections. Now he’s about to lose the lower section as well... There must be a way to save it, some order that will save the day, but his mind has gone completely blank.

“Its shields are failing!” the science officer shouts.

Broitz continues to stare at the viewscreen and witnesses the phaser beams slowly cutting its way through the hull plating of the tertiary section...

It is obvious that the *USS Wolf* has also sustained damage, because the bridge isn’t in shipshape condition anymore. The bridge crew witness the imminent destruction of the tertiary part of the *Sundance*. If that section blows up, the separated saucer of the *Sundance* will be all that remains of Captain Rinckes’ vessel.

“Dammit, we’ve got to do something!” Cmdr. Anderson swears.

“I’ve heard those words before,” the Commander hears. He looks to his left and sees the tall Captain Suzan Reynolds standing next to him. Almost getting blown off her ship has certainly left some impact on her otherwise pristine appearance, but the fire in her eyes burns so strongly that she looks nothing short of invincible.

“Captain?” Lt. Cmdr. Anderson asks, unable to hide his amazement. It would seem that the Captain of the late *Satellite* didn’t like the idea of waiting out the battle from sickbay.

“Thanks for warming up the chair for me,” Captain Reynolds says.

Leif Anderson understands. He stands up and makes way for the new temporary Captain.

Lt. Stephanie Grant can’t suppress a proud smile as Captain Suzan Reynolds sits down in the Captain’s chair of the *USS Wolf*. The Captain presses a button on the side of her new chair and says, “All hands, this is Captain Reynolds. As of this moment, I’m taking command of the fleet.” Lt. Grant makes sure that the message also gets transmitted to the *Sundance* and *Kennedy*. “I can’t guarantee we’ll be victorious, but I’m sure we *can* and *will* give the Altonoids hell!”