

He could see them, many kilometers below him, through the clouds and thick wispy fog which blanketed the vast marshes, the thousands of imperial soldiers, down there fighting a war. A traitor duke who forsook his liege. Down there violence was fierce, death close, and life fragile. He couldn't be further away. In the lower gallery of the Armored Cruiser *Malthaeor*, hanging up in orbit he was far removed from the world below. Save for the occasional close support barrage. When piercing lights would range from the aged warship down onto the enemy below. There was little to do up here, but watch the planet slowly spin below, boredom was the order of the day. The traitor-duke had no fleet left, and *Malthaeor* had few recreational facilities.

The Marine joined only a few months back, when the *Malthaeor* and her fleet set out for their third campaign. He hadn't had much to do since, but wander the halls of the aged ship. Like himself, the *Malthaeor* had risen to answer the emperor's call. She was three hundred and fifty-six years old, launched during the Age of Wealth, during Emperor Hennessy's rein. She served for many years but was consigned to the mothball fleets after just over a hundred years of service. She rose again from the dead seven years ago to answer that call. Found somewhere in Visp Sector, her long angular corpse orbited a dead pulsar with a number of other derelicts. From that graveyard she came to lead the 9th Reserve Fleet.

Up across her bow two red stripes run at an angle from the upper forward portion down to the lower stern area of the frontal section, denoting her as a cruiser, a third thin line running horizontally through those two denotes the "Armored" prefix. Besides those markings much of her was still covered in the original paint, and she was a bit weathered. Though the non-atmosphere of space does not particularly wear ships, battle and shock heating does. Naked metal visible along much of her hull. The Marine had seen her externally on a few occasions, usually during vacuum combat training, one of the few interesting activities to break up the monotony of war. It was then, when running along the smooth, flanks of *Malthaeor*, that he felt a sense of wonder never known to him.

At times he would switch his noisy comms systems off, and let the total silence of space engulf him. Whichever way he looked he saw spectacular beauty. Below the planet slowly turned, waves of clouds sliding along its sphere, endless hazy blue of its massive polar oceans and the sharp contrast of darkness running down the world's side as night swallows the land below. In the direction of night, but off to the side of the world lights blinked and shone in the black, twinkling reminders of the rest of the fleet. Nearer, several ships were within view, sides lit by the local star, itself a thing of silent power. When he turned around he could see one of the local moons, at an odd angle the bronze rock slowly made its way around the planet.

He accepted his normal redress from the officer for his break in protocol, and went about the cycle still. Down to the galleries he watched the wet world slowly turn, under the long guns of *Malthaeor*. He was here when the alert was issued. Ratings and technicians sprinted to their stations. He simply walked, the marines knew they had time to spare. Space is infinitely wide and scanning range is long, any threat would be awhile till it arrived in range. *Malthaeor* carries no assault ships, so the marines wouldn't be boarding, therefore they gathered at their defense stations, around strategic points on the ship, Bridge, bays, airlocks, engines. He was one of the outsiders, marines waiting within an airlock for the enemy to come to them, and then to defend the ship however they saw fit, along the hull or in the corridors.

The squad officer was prepared, ready for action, and serious. Carbines floated around their shoulders, safety tethers clipped to wall sockets and each other. Minutes passed. The Captain issued orders, as did the admiral. The fleet was going into action. From within their ready zones they could see nothing of the battle. They could only here the shuddering of their own ship's guns, firing volleys into the infinite night. An occasional shock would hit the hull, and bounce along the metal, sending strange thumping sounds reverberating through the inside of the ship.

The minutes dragged by, the battle continued. The room was filled with an unflinching tense feeling, as the weight of the action around them stressed their nerves. They would not be broken. *Malthaeor* took a hit somewhere along her hull, and some forward section of the ship decompressed explosively with a loud pop. The Marines felt the ship shake under the strain of escaping gases. In his head he wondered on the fate of those now thrown out into space, likely pierced by a hundred tiny flechetes, bits of paint ripped off the walls, pens, toothpicks, anything caught by the explosion sent hurtling out into space at obscene speeds, enough to easily cut a vacuum suit. He could not wonder on them for long though, the officer shouted an order through the comms, and they prepared to head out onto the ship's hull.

The Marine was surprised, he had expected nothing to happen, and if it did, he would have thought they would repel boarders within the ship's corridors, rather than outside. The airlock hissed open, and the nine marines stepped in. The door behind them closed as the one in front opened. One by one they swung themselves out onto the hull, planting their boots on the metal surface and quickly moving into cover around the hatch. The Marine took a quick look up, he could see flashes out in the darkness, but nothing clear. Pulsing lights in groups slowly moved across his view. The Marine moved behind a fold in the hull. The squad, now all on the hull, began to advance towards the ship's fore.

Sprinting forwards, they found cover along the starboard hanger entry. From this vantage they could see down onto the forward section of the ship. Bits of flotsam floated past, chunks of metal, bits of uniform. The ship had taken several hits, and several new scorch marks graced its hull. This side was the enemy's target, therefore the opposition was firing from positions above the marine's heads. The fore seemed clear of attackers. They kept their positions and looked up. With their helmets adjusting to the brightness displays they finally got a view of the battle. The Marine saw dots of light, and a few well lit hulls far above him, they seemed to all be moving fairly quickly, as was the *Malthaeor*, and her ships. With both fleets keeping pace, they were each trading fire from a distance, hoping to wear the other side down, meaning the fight must be fairly well balanced. Fighters dispatched from the escort carrier *Cleon IV* blasted quietly overhead, heading out to intercept a target unknown to the Marine.

Spherical explosions lit the darkness, and blue electrical arcs along stricken ship's hulls bounced in the void. To the Marine, it looked like a mess, neither side seemed to be winning, and the losses looked grim. Staring up he could see a group of lights get progressively larger. They were coming towards *Malthaeor's* side. If they were missiles, they would all be dead. The ship's point-defense may blast the missiles to pieces, and save *Malthaeor* from damage, but the armored marines would be showered with shards of metal. Luckily for them, the lights turned into rough rectangular shapes, indicating boarding craft. They slowed to meet *Malthaeor*, and rather than burrow into the hull to dispatch their troops within, they aligned themselves to the deck and landed gently. Throughout the marines were throwing a heavy rain of fire down onto the three attack craft. Disgoring their armored soldiers, the craft broke off the hull and drifted past. The invisible laser beams of the marines danced along the fore section of the hull, taking an armored opponent here or there, from their superior vantage, they could keep the attackers pinned indefinitely, unless they risked a frontal attack. The Marine set his laser carbine to tightband, maximum stream, and fired at a pair of attackers getting into cover behind one of *Malthaeor's* light turrets.

The attackers wore heavy armor, made of slated interweaving alloy plates, with ablative blocks to protect against laser fire. They sported a third metal limb from their backpack, ending in a three fingered hand, for gaining extra purchase in zero-gravity situations. Their helmets were slicked back sported a small communications antennae, they carried large laser rifle, along with grenades and older slug pistols. The nine marines were only just managing to hold the twenty-six remaining attackers. Right up until the attackers, as one, left their cover and advanced towards the marines. One of the nine fell, his helmet exploding outwards in a shower of plastic, metal, and blood. The eight fell back, out of the attacker's line of sight. Back to their second line of defense around the airlock. The attackers could

wreck havoc on the outside of the ship, mining the bridge, the guns, or the engines. On the inside they could go for the reactor, or try and take the ship from the inside. Getting into cover in a loose semi-circle around the airlock, they waited for the attackers to advance beyond the cusp of the closed hanger bay. The obliged moments later, with a flurry of grenades, traveling straight at the marine's remaining cover, the grenades detonated on contact with the hull or external elements. One contacted one of the eight, making them seven. The Marine stood his ground on the right of their tiny formation. The attackers rushed forwards, and several were blasted out into space, as their suits were melted through by well placed lasers. Their third hand automatically swinging for purchase, in an attempt to save their occupant's life. The Marines began to fall back into the airlock. In groups of two they went, the Marine would be last, and would enter alone. He realized his chances of survival were beyond slim. As the first group escaped through the open hole in the floor, the Marine continued to trade shots with the advancing attackers. The attackers slowed their advance, and found themselves cover among a cluster of rotation control thrusters.

The Marine saw his chances grow just a little bit.

The attackers increased their weight of fire when only three marines stood around the airlock. As the last group of two swung themselves down back into the ship the attackers began their second rush. The Marine had nowhere to go but down. Yet he had to wait for the airlock to open again. Five seconds was all he needed, and he didn't have it. Throwing himself to the floor he reduced his target size relative to the attackers. Firing at them and doing nothing he then rolled to his left, towards the still closed airlock. An attacking round busted through his right shoulder pad, missing his internal lining by a hair. Looking at his assailants, at this distance he could see past their visors and at their faces, they were surprisingly varied, men and women. That is exactly when his eyes met hers, one of the attackers, she was beautiful. Thankfully he was not so taken by the millisecond of connection. Instead he rolled again, directly on top of the closed airlock door, which slid open, he pushed himself in with a quick leg thrust. The door closed behind him. He had to wait a tense ten seconds as the room re-pressurized. He re-orientated himself with the floor and looked at the airlock door, it was beginning to show a red hue, as the lasers being fired at it heated the door up beyond its melting point. The second door opened and the Marine hopped through.

The fight was on, the six already within had blockaded the corridor, and he turned to cover the nearest corner. The attackers would be through in only a few seconds. At the corner he readied his carbine and fixed its bayonet. He attached his tether to the ceiling, just in case. Then they were through. Bursting in two abreast they came in firing, and tossing grenades down the corridor. Somehow they both stood up to the withering hail of fire from the marines. The attackers came on, and began to fight the six in melee. By a chance which defied logic, the Marine found himself grappling with the woman he saw on the outside. Both his arms were occupied, holding back the woman's knives, one in each hand, cruel things, with a serrated edge.

More marines poured in down the main corridor, reinforcing the remaining five. The Marine and his foe were off to the side, in an offshoot hall, and hadn't been interrupted. The attacker's third limb swung around and punched the Marine square in the gut. Buckling from the blow, his arms showed a split second of weakness, and the attacker capitalized, shoving down with her knives, at the Marine's neck. In her suit she was a good 10 centimeters taller than the Marine, and she was making it useful.

He dodged right, and blocked her left knife with his carbine. He was losing and he knew it though. He went for a kick to the attacker's legs, and missed poorly. There was an enormous light, and the corridor spun. His tether began unraveling at frightening speed. The Marine did not know what was happening, metal off the wall zipped past, as did floor panels and electrical cables. Then he realized the corridor must have taken a direct hit, and decompressed. Somehow he hadn't been punctured. Twisting around he could see the marines tethers unraveling and catching fast on their purchases. The attackers

had no such luck, their armor protected from shrapnel, but the third limb didn't have time to grab something still connected to *Malthaeor*. He saw her then, her knives floating out of her hands, spinning slowly away from the ship. Throwing his Carbine out by its shoulder strap, and then realized the stupidity of this action. Way too late, she caught the gun, and he still held the strap. "Damn," Was all that he thought.

Switching to all channels he asked for her surrender. No response. Over the channel he could here the other members of her force screaming as they floated out into the vastness of space. A pit opened in his stomach then, and he felt sick. His suit had no directional thrusters, and he had no chance of catching any of them. Hers did though, and holding onto his carbine, she fired her thrusters at the nearest flailing figure. His tether had more play and continued to reel out. He felt incredibly stupid, and somewhat proud, at the same time. Still no response from her on the open channel.

She caught two, and with light arm thrusts, tossed them back towards the marines aboard *Malthaeor*, who caught each in turn. The Marine's officer was yelling questions in his ear, he didn't have any good responses past "they're out of the fight". She went further out, and grabbed another three, before swinging back towards the ship to corral the remaining four. The tether ran stiff right about then, and she turned and looked quizzically at the Marine, who mimed tugging on the cord. She understood and swung them towards the remaining stricken suits. Two were wounded and two had lost their packs. Each was clotheslined by the taught tether and shoved back towards *Malthaeor*.

At that point, her fuel ran dry, and she turned to the Marine, and pointed at the ship, and motioned at her thrust-pack. He understood, and pressing his wrist tether control, began to reel them back in. She looked at him, and she smiled back. She pulled herself to the Marine, smiled, let go of the carbine, and pushed herself backwards, away from the ship. In his surprise the Marine desperately grabbed at her, but she eluded his grasp. He ceased the tether pull. Muted his comms and switched to open channel, and tried her again.

"why," he asked.

She replied, "I could never be anyone's prisoner, even yours"

"We could repatriate you, I swear," he retorted.

"what sort of sway do you hold?" she said.

"Not much, really, but it's better than this," he replied.

"In your view maybe, but not mine," she responded.

He restarted the tether, and slid back towards *Malthaeor*, when he reached the tether's end, his comrades waited for him, he smiled at them, disconnected the tether's end, and kicked with all his strength, out towards her. It took under a minute to catch up. She embraced him, and they found themselves alone, lost among the vastness of space. Over the marshy world, upon which men were fighting as they floated so serenely up above.