

Amerigo

Captain Jacob Olsen peered out through through the open view port of the *Maltese Falcon's* bridge. Before his mighty battle cruiser the Science Vessel *Amerigo* drifted weightless in high orbit above the colony world of Praxima like a miniature moon. Her sphere shaped hull lay un-scared, her navigation beacons flashing and her sensor arrays pivoted on their bases, and yet she looked much like the ghost ship that she was. Glancing down at the display panel on the arm of his chair he found the data he expected to see. The *Amerigo's* engine signatures and energy projectors were cold on all levels of their spectral scans, a state that no captain would leave his ship in a sector where the Zerg had been encountered. Jacob, like his crew, were beginning to put the pieces together and there could be only two reason the over due science vessel was hanging weightless before them.

“Helm, bring us within 500 meters and hold.” Jacob called out to the station directly in front and below him on the bridges lower level.

“500 meters, aye!” Snapped the crystal voice of his helmswoman, Lieutenant Niles.

From the corner of his eye he saw his “passenger” rise from his station on the bridge and make his way toward the Captain’s chair. He pretended not to notice his approach until he was almost within reaching distance.

“Something I can do for you, Commander Boyd?” Jacob said, turning and facing the Marine.

All United Earth Directorate Fleet Ships had been assigned a contingency of Marines in order to deploy a more even amount military power throughout the sector. In theory the idea was sound, but the power struggle and animosity that existed between Fleet and the Corps at the most upper levels of the UED played out daily aboard ship. Despite integrating the two branches on many levels of the ships duties, the two remained polarize, neither associating outside their own branch, both living with contempt for each other.

Boyd, trim and muscular, was the commanding Marine officer aboard the *Maltese Falcon*. His position gave him command staff status without actually having any authority over direct ships operations. Instead he was, in effect, third in line of command should Jacob and the first officer, Commander Lloyd, be killed or unable to perform their duties. He was, however, in charge of all away missions, giving him authority to lead and command them as he saw fit. Both he and Jacob had locked horns on many issues and

missions, but with the Zerg and rebel activity on the rise in their sector, their roles had become more defined, their positions more cooperative.

“Captain,” Boyd began in his deadly serious manner. “I recommend we launch an immediate search and destroy and reclaim the *Amerigo* from the rebel forces.”

“Rebel forces?” Jacob said, wide eyed and turning his full attention toward Boyd. “Rebels don’t leave fully functional Science grade vessels floating around, they hijack them and press them into service in the rebel fleet. No, this has Zerg written all over it. Right now they are probably crawling all over that ship, nesting right in. ”

“With all due respect Captain, there is no indication of Zerg activity here. Perhaps her drive was damaged in the assault, forcing the rebels to leave her with a skeleton crew to effect repairs.”

“She hasn’t got a mark on her, there’s no trace of residual energy signatures, hell even her projector reactors are cold. They’d be defenseless.”

“And hard to spot by passers by. Or perhaps her UED crew was forced to abandon ship due to a reactor leak, either way I think my men should go over and take a look.”

“Mark, if you send them over there and there are Zerg aboard, you’d be sending them into a slaughter. Right now I’m thinking more along the lines of charging the Yamamoto cannon and blasting her and her bug crew from existence.”

“Captain,” Boyd began, his calm demeanor unscathed but his voice lowering so only Jacob could hear him. “We both know that UED forces in this sector are losing the struggle against the multiple foes. Our resources here are limited and Earth is a long way off. We can’t afford to lose the *Amerigo*. If there’s any chance we can recover her I believe we need to explore that option.”

Jacob turned back to the view port and stared at the floating metal sphere, contemplating Boyd’s speech. The Marine was right about their situation in this sector. There were even rumors that Admiral Stokov himself was monitoring the action in this sector carefully and with great displeasure. Reclaiming the *Amerigo* would help the UED effort in this sector as well as allow him the advantage of adding the science vessel to his immediate resources and command.

“Alright, send over a small detachment with a cold-nuke. First sign of the Zerg they are to set the timer and get the hell out.” Jacob ordered.

“Agreed.” Boyd said as he saluted, turned and left the bridge to assign mission personnel.

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The small shuttle crossed the distance of space between the *Maltese Falcon* and the *Amerigo* slowly, its navigation lights blinking green and red as it closed on the *Amerigo*'s docking port. The shuttle was auto piloted using the transponder data from the *Amerigo* and the docking procedure was automatic, leaving the shuttle's crew of three infantry men and one “ghost” plenty of time to prepare for the task ahead. Jack Thornton hooked up his cloaking generator and optical targeting head piece while the three infantry men powered up their armor and armed their heavy .68 caliber auto-rifles. The four of them were a small force by anyone's standards, but Jack knew their small number gave them a better chance of not being detected by the enemy until it was too late.

There was a deep vibration as the shuttle clamped into the *Amerigo*'s docking clamps. The four of them moved toward the airlock hatch, Jack on point, his heavy sniper rifle slung over his shoulder as he worked the airlock controls. Two of the marines carried the cold nuke between them while the third raised his rifle and pointed it toward the hatch. The inner door opened to reveal the solid door on the science vessel's outer hull. Working the controls, Jack could tell that the door was not going to open. Getting no response he keyed in the code Commander Boyd had given him. The control pad began to flash a 10 second count down and Jack stepped back, raising his own rifle toward the door in anticipation of trouble.

As the counter reached zero the center of the door sparked violently at the seams as the emergency hatch release burned away the locking mechanism within the thick armor plated door. As soon as the sparks faded, the center of the door spun and the door split, raising into the ceiling and lowering into the floor simultaneously. The ship beyond lay darkened, the corridor beyond lit only by the flood lights mounted on the infantry battle armor of the three marines. Jack switched over to night vision mode and proceeded into the ship, his adrenaline causing his heart to pound harder. The three armor incased marines followed after him, the heavy foot falls or their power armor thumping loudly against the metal deck of the science vessel. The four of them moved slowly into the cargo bay at the end of the corridor and checking

for targets carefully. The large ventilation fan in the ceiling stirred the air around them as they stopped, filling the ship room with an almost silent whisper and nothing more.

The two marines carrying the transport case for the nuke set it down on the deck and one of them, Fred Johnston, began opening it. Jack switched off his night vision and watched as the wisps of frigid vapors escaped the opening case. There among the icy contents of the case lay the shiny cylinder with its attached detonator and several cans of beer. The visor on Fred's his suit opened slowly as he picked up one of the beers.

"Thank God for cold fusion!" Fred's gravely voice laughed as he cracked open the can and took a long swig.

The two other armored marines visors slid up smoothly, smoke pouring out of one of them as the marine within took another toke on the cigar between his lips.

"We really gonna blow this place?" He croaked, blowing out more smoke.

"Only if we see a Zerg." Jack chimed in.

"I've got your Zerg right here!" Fred said laughing. He raised the can to his mouth to exclaimate his point and his face exploded, spraying warm blood across the right side of Jack's body.

Jack turned just in time to see Fred's limp, armored body hauled rapidly up toward the ceiling by his unseen attacker. He tracked after him with his rifle, but marine's lifeless body disappeared into the darkness of the high ceiling. The silence returned as the three of them scanned the darkness above them nervously. Then like tendrils of fog creeping into a bay, the distant hissing began, inhuman, guttural and growing steadily louder. The marine's scanned the halls that lead into the cargo area. Jack's adrenaline charged heart began pounding in his chest as the hissing grew closer still. Reaching into the case he armed the nuke quickly and gave the cigar smoking marine a nod.

The three men began making their way toward the hall leading back toward the shuttle they had come in. But they quickly stopped as several silhouettes appeared at the other end of the hall way. Turning

quickly back toward an alternate escape they found only more of the inhuman forms in every direction, slowly advancing toward them.

The Marine's heavy rifles began roaring with automatic fire almost simultaneously. Flashes of fire lit the advancing figures like a strobe light, making the grotesque Zerglings even more terrifying, their large dog like forms closing, bullets ricocheting off their heads. Their screeching began, the larger forms of the Zerg Hydralisk's, hissing deeper than their smaller brood mates had been. Their snake like lower bodies propelled them closer, the automatic fire only seeming to slow them as well as enrage them. Jack stood frozen, his own sniper rifle little use against the on coming slaughter, his mind coming to grips with the horror of facing the Zerg warriors for the first time.

"Blow it! We're all dead, blow it!" One of the marines screamed at him as he launched a grenade into one of the on coming walls of death.

The weapon went off like thunder, killing many of the on coming attackers, but the space left by their absence was quickly filled by others. Turning back toward the nuke Jack's came face to face with a Hydralisk. The creatures tooth filled exoskeleton dripped with blood as it raised itself up to full height. Jack looked up stunned as the beast towered over him, its arms raised over him, the spikes on the end of them covered in blood as well. It opened its mouth and hissed, black shark like eyes staring into Jack's own. There was another sound as well, a human sound, but like none he had ever heard before. As Jack's hand came down on the "detonate" button on the nuke, he thought about how he had never heard such a sound of pure terror and desperation. Less than a second later the world flashed white and the cry emanating from Jack's throat was silenced forever.

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Jacob squinted as the Amerigo exploded in a blinding flash. The Battle Cruiser shook, causing Boyd to grab onto the captain's chair to keep himself from being knocked to the deck. The violent shaking subsided and the Maltese Falcon settled. The klaxon continued to cry out even after the shock wave subsided.

“Turn that damn thing off!” Jacob ordered, the alarm going silent almost instantly there after.
“Helm, damage report.”

“Sir, minor decrease in forward armor integrity, but radiation levels are close to exceeding acceptable levels!” The helms woman snapped.

“Back us off, full.” He ordered, checking the screen on the arm of his command chair.

“Aft full, aye Captain!”

The heavy battle cruiser pulled away from the scattering debris that had once been the *Amerigo*, the debris fading rapidly away.

“Any sign of the shuttle?” Jacob asked.

“Negative.” Came a voice from the bridge’s sensor station.

“I think it’s safe to say my men were forced to manually detonate the nuke, Captain.” Boyd chimed in. “It seems you were right about the Zerg, Captain.”

“Guess we’ll never know seeing how we just order four men in to die for nothing.” Jacob said angrily, holding his gaze on Boyd longer than he needed to further his point.

“It was their duty to die, sir. And duty is not tantamount to ‘nothing’.” Boyd, said proudly, his eyes forward, no expression.

“Crazy, God damned ground pounders” Jacob mumbles under his breath. “Helm, set course for Char. Comm, send word to the fleet that we will be joining them their. Add that the *Amerigo* has been destroyed and that I will be filing a formal report by the time we reach the rendezvous.”

Both officers acknowledged his orders and the *Maltese Falcon* broke orbit and to her captain’s dismay, left four more casualties of war behind.