Where All Paths Lead

by Jaili

Summary

With the Xel'Naga artifact destroyed and Raynor's Raiders defeated on Char, Kerrigan shows Jim and his friends the mercy of the swarm: by twisting them into zerg monsters. Join Jim Raynor, Tychus Findlay, Matt Horner, Egon Stetmann, Rory Swann and General Warfield on their quest to become human again. This fic draws from the games/books/comics/everything and diverges further from the Starcraft story as it progresses.
The Beginning of the End

Ash falling from the sky was tranquil in comparison to the chaos and horror on the ground below. On Char, home world of the Zerg Swarm, the Terrans were losing their final battle against The Queen of Blades, Kerrigan. Jim Raynor, leader of the final assault, paused to look grimly on the scene around him. The assembled Xel'Naga artifact fell to pieces as a truly massive Ultralisk tore through it with one long kaiser blade, it was the death knell of their mission. "Shit! The Artifact has been destroyed. Men, this is it- kill every one of them sons a bitches, its the least we can do before we die!" Jim's white skull visor clapped shut and he returned to firing HEV rounds into the oncoming endless waves of Zerg, big and small.

Beside Jim, an ally to the end, Tychus was cursing something fierce. "Get thawed out just to join you in getting eaten by god damned aliens, Jimmy. You're a son of a bitch!" Tychus' roaring in his comm was almost as bad as the disjointed screams of his men and the aliens as they ripped and blasted each other apart. By the time they had fallen back to a high rise, shoulder to shoulder and back to back, a mountain of Zerg either in the throws of death or twitching corpses around them, the Adjutant's cold voice overrode all other transmissions eerily.

"Alert. Class twelve psionic waveform approaching. The Queen of Blades is coming." The computer was refreshingly indifferent to their demise, although once its alert had finished Jim realized that the comm had fallen almost silent but for him and the men in his immediate vicinity. Warfield, who had remained behind to secure their foothold on Char in a fortress overlooking a body-riddled trench, had announced that Nidus Worms were breaking through their defenses over an hour ago, and it was his last transmission. Matt Horner, commander of the Hyperion, the flagship of Raynor's Raiders, had also announced massive bombardment in space and gone silent some time ago.

The Adjutant was correct- Kerrigan was coming. Below them and their mountain of kills, a sea of Zerg roared, stomped and hissed in triumph, no longer attempting to advance into range of gun fire. "Jimmy," Tychus growled as he puffed on his worn stump of a cigar. "She's coming. We could end this here." Jim had the good grace to snort a ragged, tired laugh.

"You don't have a clue, Tychus. If we shoot anyone, we should shoot ourselves. There are worse things than dying, you've seen as much." Jim's words were chilling as the implications set in for Tychus, he had indeed seen the infested.

"Got some shredder grenades left, could go out with a bang." Tychus grumbled, holding one up for approval.

"Yeah. That'll do, best do it quick. I can see her."

Standing at the base of their man-made mountain of death, Kerrigan smiled and planted a foot on the flat of a large dismembered kaiser blade. When she spoke, her voice pierced into their minds like a hot knife. Some of the lesser men left in their small number let out startled shouts of pain while others hissed their discomfort, but Jim knew it like a taunting caress. It wasn't his first rodeo against the Queen of Blades, after all.

"You've lost, Jim. Your forces have been crushed on every front: land, air, space. The Xel'Naga artifact has been destroyed, and you had completely relied on it. I thought you were smarter than that." They didn't have to see her face to know she was smiling.
"You were the love of my life, and I would fight through hell and back to save you. Nobody will ever be able to say I didn't try." Jim struggled to voice his words past the tightness in his throat, but he spat them out all the same. "My only regret is taking so many good men to hell with me." From the corner of his eye he saw Tychus' grip on the frag grenade shift, thumb ready to activate it.

"Ah ah." Kerrigan raised her hand sharply, wagging a clawed finger at them and grinning. "You haven't entered hell yet, Jim. I plan on taking you and your friends there. Personally." Chuckling softly, she tilted her head and started striding up the hill of corpses to them. "Can't have you blowing yourselves up."

"Jimmy." Tychus' voice picked up immediately, sounding strained. "I can't move. I can't use the grenade." The panic in his old friend's voice was raw, identical to the time when he had discovered the name of the bounty hunter that was about to kill them over seven years ago.

"Sarah, you bitch!" Jim growled, straining to move immediately after Tychus alerted him to the fact that he could not. Sweat beaded down his face as Kerrigan crested the hill mere feet away, the dismayed cries of his last few good men rang clearly in his ears as they clued in to their fates. "Just kill them, take me. I'm the one who lead them here, and they were just following orders. You know damn well what that is like!"

Smirking, Kerrigan plucked the grenade from Tychus' armored fist casually, looking over the assembled men, less than ten in total. Locking eyes with Jim, she telekinetically pulled apart the grenade and let its pieces and powder tumble from her hand uselessly. "Wish granted, Jim." The sound behind him and Tychus was sickening, and Jim could only guess what she had just done to his last few good men. It sounded like their suits had been crumpled like a can in a fist, but there was mercifully no cries of pain. Tychus, however, remained solid beside him. "Your friend gets to stay." She teased.

"Damn you to hell, Jim!" Tychus snapped as Kerrigan raised a finger to her lips in a shushing gesture, all light fell away as both men were rendered unconscious with a mere thought.

Getting Jim, Tychus and Warfield into space via Zerg methods would have been completely futile had she not made sure their suits were undamaged. As it was, once the remaining Terrans on Char who were of no use to Kerrigan were annihilated, she brought her little projects to the Leviathan orbiting Char. While the final ground battle was in full swing, Kerrigan directed her Leviathan to capture the Hyperion with as little damage done to it as possible. The Hyperion was currently stuck to the Leviathan's side with creep. The grand ship would have been hard to spot if it had not been still firing into the flesh of the Leviathan with its cannons in a futile effort to do some damage before destruction.

Jim, Tychus and Warfield were taken to an evolution chamber where they would be imprisoned. Kerrigan couldn't help but smile to herself more, winning felt good after all. Through the eyes of the swarm, she observed the Hyperion and its condition as she made her own way to it. "You have a few more friends I am interested in, Jim." She commented to herself, entertained.

"Alert. Class twelve psionic waveform detected. The Queen of Blades is-"

"Shut up! As if this wasn't bad enough!" Stressed to the point of frantic, Matt Horner slammed his fist on the corner of the console he was giving commands from. As if he couldn't see her tearing a hole in the ship to get in. The ship itself wasn't going anywhere- as soon as the Leviathan caught the Hyperion in its tentacles, it had forced the ship to press against its flesh. From there, creep stuck to and seeped into the very foundations of the ship, rooting it to the Leviathan. Matt and his men aboard the ship had been firing at any organism in reach since then, although no mass of Zerg had tried to board them until now.
Kerrigan had taken her time looking for the best point of entry, it would not do to accidentally kill any of the people she wanted to keep, after all. Eventually she settled on telekinetically prying the doors of a small ship hangar bay open and sealing them shut immediately after entering by herself. Nobody even died. Yet.

"Greetings, denizens of the Hyperion." Kerrigan's voice pierced the minds of each and every man and woman aboard simultaneously. With her mind twisted by the Zerg, it was actually difficult to come down to the level of Terrans to do this kind of communication with them, they were in a way alien to her now. "You might have noticed that your ship is currently stuck to mine. I may yet let you live if you supply me with the following people: Matt Horner, Egon Stetmann and Rory Swann. Or you could spare your fellow Terrans lives by simply coming to me quietly. Your choice." It was a lie of course, not a single man or woman on this ship was going to be alive, or a Terran anymore, by the time Kerrigan was done. She had better things to do than chase a bunch of people around though.

"W-what?" Egon Stetmann, brows furrowed in pain, was writing notes as fast and furious as he could about the Zerg intrusion in his mind when his name was spoken. It was like a bucket of icy water on his head. As silence settled over the ship, minus the continually blaring alarm system, he understood what he had to do. Placing his notepad down, Egon Stetmann strode from the lab with a determination and bravery he did not feel.

Bang "OW-What in the hell?" Rory Swann, Chief Engineer of the Hyperion, was sweating bullets as he heard- no, felt the Queen of Blades talking, and saying his name! He held his head with his remaining hand, the intrusion in his mind hurt: but so did banging his head on a pipe. The Firebats he had been directing to carefully sear away the creep as it worked its way into the ship had stopped burning, standing and looking at him expectantly. Glaring, he snapped "Don't do nothin' your gonna regret boys, get back to work!" Snapping his steel claw at them, they turned away from him and got back to work as ordered. His heart was heavy though, there was no way Rory Swann was going to run away from some Zerg queen bitch if there was a chance he could save lives. Placing his hand-held torch in a safe spot, Swann strode with purpose into the ship.

Matt Horner, now he had already been running towards where Kerrigan had made her entry point in the ship, Gauss rifle clumsily held aloft. He was the last person who should be wielding a gun, but he wasn't going to let Kerrigan kill everyone lying down. "Adjutant," Huffing and running through a dim hallway, Horner raced to his destination and doom.

"Yes Commander?"

"Send out a message to anyone who'll hear it: The Queen of Blades has won, everyone needs to know what happened here and react accordingly." Slamming his hand onto an identification pad, Horner charged into the small hangar bay before the door was half way open, rifle in hand, and froze.

"Message sent, Commander."

"Hello, Matt. Glad to finally meet the brains behind Jim's operations." Sarah Kerrigan was so much more terrible in person, in Horners opinion.

"That's rude." Kerrigan chided, beckoning Horner over with a casual wave. Dropping the rifle to the ground, Horner scowled.

"You're not letting anyone go, are you?" The looks on Swann and Stetmann's faces, standing behind and on either side of Kerrigan- giving her ghastly wing blades plenty of room, said it all before she could.
"At least they'll just be dead. You noble types can be thankful for that, I'm sure." Snide and smirking, Kerrigan turned away from Horner and brushed past the two pale-faced men. Resigned to their fates, all three followed to the doorway into space. When Kerrigan pulled apart the doors their startled cries fell off quickly- the Leviathan had an atmosphere of its own, apparently, and no one was sucked into the vacuum of space or robbed of oxygen. *Although, Stetmann's ever scientific mind whirred, the atmosphere is much harder to breath in.*

"You came so much quieter than I thought you would, Jim and his friends fought much harder." Kerrigan critiqued as they stepped onto the fleshy ground and started their grim walk into what might have literally been the belly of the beast.

"What did you do to Jim?" Horner snapped, although all three of them jumped fearfully when a pack of Zerglings thundered past them, chittering and snapping, and leaped into the open bay doorway.

"Nothing that I'm not going to do to you." A weathered looking Zergling with a broken tusk sidled up beside Kerrigan, placing its head directly under her hand for pets much like a domesticated animal would.

A muttered *fascinating* earned Stetmann a solid elbow in the ribs by Swann, who was looking in disgust around them until he couldn't handle it anymore and focused on Kerrigan's back, not that it was much better. What they did not see were the Defilers and Infestors slipping into the open ship once they were out of sight. Wouldn't due to make them decide to fight, Kerrigan wanted the three in tact after all.

Smoke rose from Tychus' open helmet. When you're glued to a wall by alien goo beside your friends, wasn't much else you could do but take a drag. They were there, strung up like puppets beside him, in a chamber filled with green pools and cocoons. Groggy, Tychus rumbled "Any of you awake, or alive?" He had been the first to rise to consciousness and attempting to contact Raynor and Warfield since, he knew they were there on either side of him though, he could turn his head enough to see that much. He had also seen a few Zerg, ones that he had never seen before, but they were being left alone.

"Findlay? I'll be damned. You're not here to rescue me again, are you? Because that'd be mighty nice right about now." Warfield, he sounded groggy and out of sorts too. Whatever Kerrigan did to put them under sure was powerful. A noncommittal grunt to Tychus' left also alerted him of Jim's returning consciousness.

"No such luck, Warfield. Not that I'd go charging into some alien mother ship to save your sorry ass, either." Tychus snorted, earning a weak chuckle from Warfield in return.

"End of the road. I had hoped the Zerg were just going to kill me, no luck there either it seems."

"No. Queen bitch has some sorta plan for us. All too happy to gloat over a win. It's bad sportsmanship, that is."

"Tychus, the last thing I need you doin' is remindin' me about what is gonna happen to us right now." Raynor finally piped up, gravelly but coherent.

"Too bad, Jimmy. Not unless you got a plan to get us out of this mess that you got us in."

"Sir!"

"Matt?" Raynor sounded genuinely confused.

"Yes sir, all of us sir."
"St-stetmann? The hell's goin' on?" The three men stuck to the wall saw Horner, Stetmann and Swann walk into view, each as pale and spooked looking as the next, but none the worse for wear. Kerrigan striding behind them wearing a shit eating grin set Jim to raging in a second.

"Frigid bitch! What have you done?"

"Nothing yet, Jim. Maybe I just want you to see your friends one last time before I dismember you piece by piece?"

"I know you, you aren't even capable of a kindness like that!" Jim's suit groaned as he strained at the creep holding him furiously. Kerrigan's grin could only broaden.

"Now now. As guests of honor, you can choose your place on the wall. I promise." Tychus took a long drag from his cigar and spat it out over the rim of his suit, and Warfield had gone silent, brooding. Soon they were all in a row, stuck to the wall in a macabre display as the creep grasped, clung and coiled around them.

"I'll leave you boys to think about things for a while. I have some more... clean up to do." Smiling the entire time, Kerrigan left them.

Later, in the central nervous system of the Leviathan...

"Their essence brings nothing to Swarm. Useless." Abathur complained, clawed hands grasped together. He did not understand, and that was fine.

"Abathur." Kerrigan stood in the center of the room, overlooking char through the eye of the Leviathan. "Who leads the swarm?"

"Queen of Blades."

"Yes, and this is why I lead the swarm and you do not. You will not touch them, they are mine. Leave them be."

"As Queen commands." Kerrigan didn't need to be the most powerful psychic in the galaxy to know Abathur was frustrated, she was taking his passion from him after all. But she would not let him break bones and twist genes with this particular group, they were hers- and Kerrigan had a plan.

"My Queen." Izsha, the depository of Kerrigan's memories and plans, what was essentially the Zergs version of the Terran Adjutant, patiently waited for her Queen's attention.

"What, Izsha?"

"All of your Brood Mothers and their charges are now in space and en route to Char, as you instructed."

"Good. Everything is going as planned. Alert me if anything changes, Izsha. I have business to attend to."

"As her Majesty wishes." Kerrigan did not bother waiting for Izsha's response, already striding out of the chamber.

Back in a certain spawning chamber...

"You just gave up?" Tychus was incredulous.

"You wouldn't understand sacrificing for the greater good, convict." Matt Horner and Tychus had
been going at it for a while now, and everyone else remained silent but agitated.

"I'm here with the rest of you, aren't I? And if I get out of this, I'm gonna beat your egg head in!"
The sounds of Tychus' suit straining against the creep, whirring and groaning, entertained everyone briefly before Horner came back more heated than ever.

"Oh yeah? So why is your suit rigged, convict? If you really understood taking the fall for someone, you'd still be on ice. Who's your puppet master, huh?"

Tychus' voice was almost a growl at that point. "Kill Kerrigan, the damn mistress of genocide, and be free? Who wouldn't take that deal? Was worth a shot, and it was Mengsk, by the way."

"Seriously?" Raynor piped up, not believing his ears. "I knew you'd gotten yourself into some shit Tychus, but going with Mengsk behind my back?"

"Open your damned ears Jimmy. You can't tell me you wouldn't have done the same in my shoes."
The bickering returned immediately, each man throwing in their two cents and frustrating the other even more. Warfield had remained silent up until then.

"Shut it! Just shut it! You damned fools. All of my men are dead and so are yours. All we got now is each other until this is over. Bickering ain't gonna do anything for anyone. Wont bring them back from the dead and wont keep us from being dead! So if you don't got either of those, you can can it!" Silence fell over them once again, and Raynor had to quietly admire the man's way with words.

"He's right. Stetmann." Refocused, Jim looked to his left- where Stetmann chose to be, and drew his attention.

"Yes, sir?"

"Now you've been quiet this whole time, but I can hear your mind racing. Tell me what you got."

Even though he was covered damn near head to toe in Zerg creep, Stetmann sounded excited. "Sir, I wish I had my tools with me to examine it but I think this living ship, Leviathan, could be very easily killed if we found it's central nervous system. It has to have one. It's just a matter of-"

"Yeah that's great, egghead. Too bad this entire ship is packed with Zerg, the Queen of Blades herself and oh yeah- we're glued to the god damned walls." Tychus snapped, silencing Stetmann who apparently didn't have a follow up. Raynor sighed tiredly.

"Swann."

"I ain't got no plans Jim. I'm a miner and engineer, not some alien exterminator."

"Right."

When Kerrigan emerged from a fleshy mound in the floor, Stetmann let out a decidedly girly scream. Wing blades rising up and planting into the floor with decisive *shh*k sounds, Kerrigan raised herself up and landed on her feet as if coming out of fleshy holes in the ground were the most natural thing. "So." Her voice was biting, red glowing eyes immediately locking with Tychus' warm amber ones. "Mengsk took you out of prison to kill me?" Her tone was angry and maybe a little confused. "And he rigged your suit too, just to make sure you would do it if you had the chance, hm?" Huffing, she stepped up to Tychus' and glanced over his suit, remarking in a thoughtful tone as her hatred of Mengsk lowered to a simmer- he'd get his after all, now was a time for celebration. "Well Mengsk
has always been a fool, doesn't surprise me."

"Well at least we agree on something." Tychus muttered, staring into her eyes, challenging.

"Tychus..." Raynor's tone was low and warning, but unheeded.

"You look like a stereotypical brute, but you're rather clever aren't you?" Kerrigan hissed, picking at threads of his thoughts, her altered mind stringing them together in different ways until they came to make sense. Tychus was grimacing from the pain of the intrusion, but held her gaze- to his credit. "I see how Jim came to rely on you. He's done worse, believe me." Grinning wickedly, Kerrigan's bladed fingertips struck once, twice, three times in quick succession and she stepped back as Tychus stumbled forwards, freed from the creep.

"Tychus, don't!" Jim shouted, as if it would make a difference in his friends next action. Tychus' mechanized fists clenched and he lashed out with a bellow. Kerrigan casually stepped to the side and with a slight gesture the entire arm and shoulder of Tychus' suit disassembled and fell to the living floor. Committed to the punch but now suddenly lacking several hundred pounds of weight, Tychus flew forwards and barely caught his balance before stumbling back in confusion. He only had a moment to look at and remember what his bare arm and hand actually looked like before Kerrigan lashed out with a savage laugh.

The blades Kerrigan was so well known for struck, and Tychus would have been impaled through the chest had he not reacted quickly to turn and raise his armored shoulder for protection and to deflect the full power of the blow. As a sharp screech rang out, a chunk of the metal giving way to the deadly blades, Kerrigan made a more aggressive gesture with her fist and the entire suit arm and shoulder fell to pieces just as the first had. "Fight Terran! You win your freedom if you kill me, after all!" Laughing viciously, Kerrigan pressed her offensive and Tychus could only be pressed back and away from his friends on the wall as he used his remaining steel-clad body parts to defend from the onslaught. Egon was watching in panicked horror, completely unused to combat, while Warfield, Matt and Jim were observing with more critical eyes. Swanns eyes were glazed as he remembered the struggle against a superior, unstoppable force, and though the scoundrel had roughed him up in the Cantina, Tychus had Swanns sympathy just then.

"What's your damn game Kerrigan?!" Jim shouted, watching as Tychus' defenses were being sliced and pried off piece by piece, although his big friend was holding his own to everyone- including Kerrigans- surprise.

When one full wing of blades pierced the flesh beneath his feet and between his still mechanized legs, Tychus struck with a throaty roar. Stepping forwards and trapping the delicate-looking instrument of death in place with his legs, pinching it in place with mechanical thighs the size of tree trunks, Tychus brought both fists up and down in a heavy overhead blow to Kerrigan's shoulders. She crumpled heavily to the ground with a grunt.

"YEAH!" Egon screamed excitedly, practically vibrating in his confines, while color drained from the other men who knew much better.

"Maybe" Lashing out, Tychus let go of Kerrigan's wing blade and kicked her in the side, chasing after her as her body flew. "I" Another kick sending her tumbling in a twisted heap "WILL KILL YOU!" Tychus snarled, the two of them were in the center of the room, green bubbling pools of slime all around made the footing less sure and Tychus had slowed down. That was the end. As he raised his foot to crush her rib cage beneath it, Kerrigan shot to her feet in a flurry, eyes all aflame. A collective "Noo!" of dismay was cried by everyone as Tychus teetered back on one foot and, with a gesture from Kerrigan, launched back and upwards over a spawning pool.
"You have tried and failed, like many before you. But you will pay more dearly than most."
Seething, Kerrigan snapped her arms in a violent pulling apart gesture and the remains of Tychus' entire suit all but exploded off of him, shrapnel flying through the room and nicking their unwilling onlookers. Floating above the pool Tychus looked almost serene for a moment, wearing nothing but his prison-assigned ragged orange pants, before gravity returned. Tychus' ragged cry of horror cut off with a sick noise, not quite a splash as the pool was much thicker than water. Turning sharply on her heel to face Raynor and his friends, Kerrigan glowered, looking well and truly like the monster she had become just then. Raynor could only make a choked noise as blood trickled down a shrapnel wound on his cheek, unable to find words.

"Whatever happens to us, Kerrigan, trust that we'll see you in hell when it's all over." Warfield, rigid in his suit and full of fierce pride for Tychus and his last moments, announced gravely. The spawning pool was bubbling fiercely, but there was no sign of Tychus inside. Gesturing at the pool behind her, Kerrigan's voice was still heated with rage. "You'll be there with me. All of you." With a decisive step, she slipped into the fleshy tunnel in the floor and out of sight.

Egon's voice was just a whisper, his spirit crushed. "He didn't deserve that."

"He fought as hard as he could until his last breath, you all saw it with your own two eyes. I'm proud to have fought alongside him." Warfield's attempt at cheering Egon was a true failure, the young man struggled to keep from sobbing and it was obvious.

With a resigned sigh, Horner mumbled "He was a self-serving convict, but no, he did not deserve that. Not by a long shot."

"Yeah, he was an asshole. I wouldn't wish that fate on any asshole, though." Swann mumbled, staring at the bubbling pool in shock.

Directly beneath them and listening to their conversation, Kerrigan was gazing at Tychus through the thick membrane of the spawning pool. The big mans struggle to swim upwards through liquid that would not give way had quickly devolved into the throws of drowning, he had only noticed Kerrigan staring at him through the membrane shortly before going unconscious, but he threw a swing that slid down the membrane wall just before going limp. Impatient to begin, Kerrigan chided herself. Letting the enzymes in the pool fully soak into the body was the first step- the most important even, she would not ruin her work simply because of impatience. As she was the Queen of the Swarm, she had full access to Abathurs thoughts and experiences. She remembered how careful Abathur had to be when he molded her form into what it was now, the same care- perhaps more- had to be given to her current projects. Kerrigan did have the benefit of having been human once to draw off of that Abathur did not, after all.

After the sleep of the exhausted, Jim was looking up at the ceiling watching a vein throb grotesquely through the pulsing flesh of the Leviathan. He knew Horner was at least conscious, and so he questioned curiously. "Matt. What happened to Valerian and the Bucephalus?"

"I believe they escaped, sir. The Bucephalus never fully committed to the battle and remained on the outskirts. When we lost contact with you on the ground I instructed him to escape, as the Bucephalus was the only ship left capable of a clean warp escape. Someone had to warn everyone, we also sent an open signal into space warning of what happened on Char, just in case."

"Good. Good thinking. You always were the brains of the operation, Matt." Raynor smiled halfheartedly.

"Thank you sir. It may have had its ups and downs, but I will never regret serving you and your cause."
"Sir?" Reserved, if not broken sounding, Stetmann leaned on formalities if only for a semblance of sanity.

"Just call me Jim, kid. What?"

"The pools and the eggs in this chamber, well we know what they do obviously. But I think the pools turn into the eggs, in time. There's one at the back of the chamber there, half in a pool that is almost gone."

"Alright, and the point is?" Jim was only half paying attention, doubting Stetmann was really saying anything interesting.

"That means Tychus is in that pool, and it will..." A brief pause to gather saliva for a dry mouth and chapped lips. "It will invert and turn into an egg in time, with Tychus in it. He is being infested, right now." There was a delirious note to his tone, a hopeless panic that couldn't be calmed- and why would Jim try? They were screwed, he'd be the first to admit it.

Sighing heavily, Jim hated being right. "Well, always good to know exactly how you're gonna die, I guess."

"What if she makes him kill us?" Stetmann had worked himself into near hyperventilation at the thought of looking up at Tychus- by all rights already a scary man- but infested, and him following through on all the violence he so loved doing, but to Stetmann instead of Zerg.

"You'd thank whatever god was out there and accept your death with thanks, kid." Warfield cut in. Hell, if Tychus was going to kill them then it was surely a blessing, not having to be infested like he was.

"I-I suppose." Stetmann went quiet once more.
"No! Please no, I'll do anything just please NO!" Nobody knew Kerrigan had been among them while they were sleeping, but Stetmann's cries roused them immediately. Seeing the young man being dragged across the room by his lab coat to a spawning pool, adjacent to the one Tychus fell into, while he cried was chilling.

"Not the kid, don't do it Sarah!" Jim pleaded weakly, feeling a terrible helplessness just like his companions as they watched. Sarah was no more and the Queen of Blades had no remorse for pleading, however. Stetmanns last shrieks were swallowed by the pool.

"Maybe you shouldn't have brought all your friends here, Jim. Maybe you should have listened to my warnings." Snapped Kerrigan, closing the distance between herself and her prisoners on the wall in a few quick steps. Her hair tendrils were raised and bristling with agitation as she grasped the rim of his suit, squeezing it firmly and giving Jim a quick jostling. "You're going to watch every single one of them go into those pools, and then it'll be your turn." Raynor was grimacing, disgusted.

"How'd you ever end up falling in love with that cold bitch, Jim?" Warfield piped up, but his voice was softer and weaker than anyone had recalled hearing it before.

"Warfield, I almost forgot you were here with us." Letting the silent and fuming Jim go, Kerrigan stepped in front of Warfield, observing him with a critical eye. Color had drained from his face and he looked sickly, leaving Kerrigan quirking a brow. "Run in to some trouble, General?"

A bead of sweat trailed a line down Warfield's face as he huffed a breath, glaring at her. "Nothing I can't handle."

"How brave." Kerrigan rolled her eyes, something was wrong with him but she couldn't quite put her finger on it, to figure out what the mind was yelling clearly. Concerned, she did not attempt to delve further- Warfield was clearly hurt to some degree and prying at his mind might just break him, she wouldn't give him that quick out.

When she grasped his creep-covered shoulder and he winced, that was the tell she needed. "Ahhh, General. Did you receive a wound in battle? Are you trying to bleed out and skip all the fun?" Teasing, Kerrigan carefully pulled away the creep and the armor of the suit, from his arm and saw the punctures the Hydralisk had made.

"You really are one evil monster." Closing his eyes in defeat, Warfield didn't even attempt to attack her with his injured arm when it was freed.

"That's Queen Bitch of the Universe, to you." The rest of the armored arm of his suit was quickly disassembled so Kerrigan could assess the damage. Hydralisk venom was debilitating and would shut down all of a Terrans bodily functions in time, and Warfield was close to that point. He had *almost* won. Letting out an angry hiss, Warfield was quickly pried out of the creep and fully divested of his suit which crumbled to the fleshy floor.

"General. It's been an honor." Matt piped up, watching as Warfield was grasped by his ankle and dragged towards another sickly green pool.

"General." Swann grunted, acknowledging the man.

"General." Raynor bit out, understanding the weight a gesture can hold for a proud man like Warfield.
Grunting and gasping in pain, Warfield was partially tossed into the pool but clung to its slippery, fleshy sides with the last of his strength. Looking up at them, he nodded and managed his last words carefully, despite the pool itself burning like acid on his flesh and acrid smoke rising off his clothing. "See you in hell boys."

"Enough!" Kerrigan planted her foot on top of the man's head and shoved him fully into the pool where he sank without further resistance. "I hadn't intended for him to go so soon- but we can't be letting the good General miss out on all the fun, can we?" Kerrigan looked up at the hating eyes of her remaining prisoners, unrepentant.

That was how it would be for the next three days. Each day, they could only guess that it was day, their dwindling group would be awakened when Kerrigan sliced one off the wall and dragged him with varying degrees of resistance, all futile, to be thrown into a pool. The night before it was Swann's turn, they had allowed themselves a respite, recalling old times- the good ones, and sharing entertaining personal stories with one another. It didn't stop Swann from being pulled off the wall the next day, leaving Raynor alone with his personal demons when Swann's yelling stopped and Kerrigan finished gloating.

You don't ever get used to waking up seeing glowing red eyes close to yours, and Jim jumped before remembering his situation.

"There you are Jim. How does it feel?"

"Bit stiff. Your hospitality is lacking."

"Ohh the brave routine, well we saw how well that worked for Warfield." In truth, Jim was torn on the inside. Neither needed to point it out to know it. When Kerrigan pulled away the creep and removed his suit, Jim didn't fight it. Stepping subdued through the mechanical rubble that had gathered on the floor towards his personal pool, they paused in front of it.

"Sarah."

"What, Jim?"

"Just kill them. You've won. I've seen everyone infested personally with my own eyes, and I'll have to live with it after you're done twisting me in to some freak of nature. You don't need them anymore." Jim was haggard looking, his facial hair having grown out from being unable to tend it, and so very tired- if the dark rims under his eyes were any indication.

"No." Smug, Kerrigan leveled a calculating gaze at him.

"Then just shove me into the damn pool and go fuck yourself after- Agh!" Jim had barely finished his sentence before she stepped behind him and shoved with a little more force than necessary.

Left with her thoughts, and the grumbling of the Leviathan's insides continually working, Kerrigan climbed below the chamber and looked over her collection, eyes briefly drawn to Jim's struggle. Every last one of them acted tough, but they all drowned the same. *Minus Stetmann*, she smirked, *coward all the way through*. Today was the day she could begin her work, and so Kerrigan was in good spirits when she stood in front of the pool that housed Tychus. Warfield and Stetmann being on the same day was an unfortunate circumstance, but she'd manage. She could direct the Swarm at her leisure from wherever she was on her Leviathan, it did not matter much. That and there was still a good amount of time until the entire Swarm was mobilized and ready, no rush.

Tychus was suspended in the pool in much the same position he landed in, but his clothing had
completely disintegrated in the acidic enzymes. What the nature of the pools did to flesh, however, was different. Kerrigan had practiced manipulating and infecting the flesh of many hundreds of Terrans by now, and still felt a rush of power each time she began her work— it had become her main source of entertainment in her downtime, as a matter of fact. Caressing the fleshy membrane of the pool, she smiled. "I know just what to do with you." Bracing her hands against the living wall, small threads formed and connected from the wall to Tychus' discolored, malleable flesh. In time, Tychus' body was covered in fleshy spokes of varying thicknesses that linked from him to the wall of the pool.

Stetmann was only partially correct about how the pools worked. Yes, the pool itself did disappear as the cocoon and what was inside of it matured, but it was a matter of energy being shifted from one place to another. As the contents of the spawning pool was the very fabric of creation, so too was there a limited amount to work with. Kerrigan had been generous and reserved one of the largest spawning pool chambers just for Jim and his friends, and as such had a lot to work with. By the time she was finished with Tychus, and everyone else, the pools were gone and all that remained where grotesquely throbbing cocoons and the twitching bodies inside them. Their cocoons also did not raise up from the pools, but hung down in the chamber below.

It was a labor of perverse love, and Kerrigan spent days twisting and adjusting their bodies without pause. With a jolt their minds would come back to them as they were transformed, and they screamed in agony. Kerrigan could only smile when, in time, their screams became less foreign and easier to understand— thoughts more Zerg than Terran. It was a mark of progress, every creature came to and was assimilated into the hive mind the same.

"Broodmother Shlassa." Kerrigan was watching the Hyperion as it was carefully righted from its angular stuck position and made to rest flat against the Leviathan, propped up on fleshy pillars. The entire crew had been either killed or infested, those that fought too hard had been put down efficiently. There was more than enough remaining to operate the ship though, that was all that mattered.

"Yes, my Queen?" A nondescript broodmother, visually the same as any other one, strode into view on its many legs, clawed hands clasped in front of it. Shlassa was one of the many broodmothers who had arrived over the next few days, but she was a special one.

"I have a very specific task in mind for you, Shlassa. See this Terran ship?" Kerrigan didn't bother gesturing, if she needed to point out the Hyperion to her then Abathur needed to do some work on the overall intelligence of the broodmothers.

"Whatever you command, my Queen. What about the Terran ship? Do you wish it destroyed?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"You are going to be living there and watching over a special project of mine."

"As my Queen wishes." Infesting a ship was hardly difficult work, but even as Shlassas thoughts considered such things, the Queen of Blades interjected.

"No, Shlassa. Not like that." Shlassa had actually been under Kerrigans scrutiny for some time, she was a weak broodmother. The world she had been tasked with infesting offered no challenges and the broodmother suffered for it, she was passive in comparison to her more savage counterparts. In light of recent acquisitions, a new purpose had been devised for the less aggressive creature, instead of destruction. "You will leave your brood behind with me and you will live in the Terran ship,
watching and relaying orders from me."

Shlassa rocked back and forth on her legs, confused but obedient. "Your will be done, my Queen."

"Good. Come with me." Together they boarded the Hyperion, lifted aboard via elevator properly instead of breaking in. Alarms were still going off inside, red lights flashing and the Adjutants voice announcing Kerrigans arrival over the intercom. That would just have to be sorted out later. The creep had been pulled back from the ship almost completely, only keeping it in place and ready for take off, and the mostly untouched cold steel around them was agitating Shlassa. Overall Kerrigan was pleased with the condition of the ship, it sustained minimal damage from resistance on the inside and no large explosions had gone off.

When they entered Stetmanns lab, Kerrigan made a grand gesture. "This is your new home, for the time being. You will need to keep hidden as much as possible, Shlassa." The old Adjutant that Raynor's Raiders had dug up had been moved elsewhere and Shlassa gingerly entered the science lab, thick clawed feet clacking on the floor loudly until she took her place in the open space along the wall.

"You fit right in." Sarcasm was lost on the Zerg, but Kerrigan did it more out of habit than anything.

"How long must I stay, my Queen?"

"As long as I wish it, Shlassa. Get comfortable." Kerrigan was already turning on her heel and out the door. Shlassa was left in the dark, eyes reflecting the red flashing lights in the room, all she could do was hiss in displeasure.

Not much longer now. Kerrigan was electric with what could be misconstrued for excitement, but most of all she just couldn't wait to see the looks on the face of Jim and his men, it was the culmination of a vengeance that was a long time in the coming. The Mistress of the Swarm was going to savor every moment of their horror and wield her new weapons of destruction with precision. Once stable, their cocoons had been taken from the spawning chamber and relocated aboard the Hyperion to be placed in their respective rooms. A lot of thought had gone in to how Jim and his companions would awaken in their new world.

As the Swarm gathered all around her Leviathan, mobilizing for a grand finale, Kerrigan sat in the center of a quiet room- perched atop a chitinous outcropping. Clawed fingertips were stroking through the spines and hardened flesh of the old Zergling that had taken to following her around, while she pressed a palm to her temple and tapped her nails against the tendrils of her hair in a rhythmic motion. Her eyes, half closed as they were, snapped open when she felt what could only be a void of some sort approaching rapidly. Familiar.

"Kerrigan."

"Zeratul." Zergling sent tumbling away, immediately the two were facing one another, eyes locked and bodies combat ready. The old Dark Protoss had not drawn his psi blade, however. His mistake.

Aboard the Hyperion, a body jerked to life in its cocoon in a macabre display. The once fleshy, now hardened and dried, spokes of the structure crumbled away from discolored flesh they had been attached to, broken with wild swinging fists.

"What you have done to James Raynor and his men... In time, you may find it to be your biggest regret." Zeratul reeled in disgust as he sensed the twisted souls and bodies of Jim, Matt, all of them.

"I don't feel shame from winning, Zeratul. I won't feel anything from this either." A closed fist,
charged with energy, struck true to his chest and sent him flying into the wall with a crash.

Though his heart bled for his friend, Zeratul focused on the matter that brought him into the heart of the pit. "You will not win against Amon such as you are! Not even against Mengsk."

The Dark Templars words were jarring, enough to stop the long bone blade that was about to pierce his skull a hairs width from impact. Frozen, Kerrigan glared and opened her mouth to answer. The distraction was enough for him to grab her face in his fist and impress upon her the psychic vision he needed to share.

As Kerrigan was being forcefully treated to a vision of Zerus, the true home world of the Zerg, the hardened carapace of a cocoon pressed outwards once, twice and a final time before giving way to the all new Tychus and his fists. Erupting from his prison with loud snap and a throaty bellow, he immediately fell to his hands and knees on the cold steel floor, vomiting out chunky green goo and rapidly swiping at his face to get it away and off! Trembling and heaving in huge breaths of air, once his stomach was clear and his tongue keenly noting the taste of death and decay, Tychus stared down at his hands and arms. They were not his own, couldn't be. Just a bad dream, all of it. But his eyes were not lying and the animal callings in his mind, millions of them mercifully dull as though far away, left Tychus coming to grips with a new savage reality.

"Go. Seek the power you desire for vengeance on Zerus, Kerrigan." Shoving Kerrigan away, Zeratul was lost from sight and gone before she recovered, snarling but letting him go all the same. The void of his cloaked presence was already rapidly fading away, tracking him down would be more effort than the pathetic Protoss deserved. Zerus, though. Zerus changed things. Wing blades clacking together sharply, Tychus having emerged from his cocoon returned to the forefront of her thoughts and Kerrigan let out an angry growl, she had missed his emergence and now had greater things to attend to. The Hyperion and her toys would just have to wait now, Shlassa would keep them in line.

Tychus had slowly risen to a stand, staring at his hands as he held them up for inspection. His hands had been like dinner plates before, and great at breaking just about anything. But now? These are hands for maiming and tearing. Where thick, stumpy nails used to be there was now short and thick black claws. His flesh was pale and discolored with black speckles that clustered into solid black where his flesh had been hardened and layered like plates. "I'm a god damned lizard, Jimmy." He muttered in a dark tone. Stumbling out of his room on bare feet, which had been reinforced similarly to his hands, he stalked through the ship bare ass naked at a fast pace. No one was alive, not any more. He could feel everyone on board, nothing but shells- thought slaves. Even the Zerg were into resocialization.

A few half-eaten bodies, rotting corpses, shambling thought-slaves and blood spattered hallways later, Tychus arrived at the communal showers- a full body mirror was what he was seeking. Might as well get it over with. He had not dared to look or feel anywhere past his hands and feet, but he was different. The red flashing emergency lights of the ship and sirens blaring through the halls faded away, everything did, when he saw himself.

He was still decidedly Tychus in shape and sound, but that was where all similarities to his old self stopped. His eyes, keeping their warm amber color, had multiple smaller pupils around the natural one now and all reflected the flashing red light in the room much like a cats would. What used to be his military cut hair, well, it wasn't hair any more. With a sensation similar to the hair on the back of his neck raising, Tychus watched as the small spines that covered his scalp, arranged similar to his previous haircut, lifted and shifted around, bristling and flattening on command.

His arms and vitals were covered in flesh that had increased density and was layered to be incredibly
strong, but flexible. Turning to look at his side, Tychus held his arm up for closer scrutiny - there was an anomaly at his elbow and along the side of his upper arm, as if there was an indent and something sat inside. Lips pressed tightly into a frown, he jammed the tip of a claw into the edge and pried, eyebrows raising as a thick blade was lifted partially out of his flesh. Squicked out, he let the new accessory drop back into its place and continued the slow inspection of his front in the mirror.

Closing his eyes and giving his head a quick shake, he opened his eyes and looked down farther, panic rushed through Tychus. "Wh-what?! Auuuuughhh JIMMY!" Tychus distressed bellow promised hell to pay, unfortunately it was ignored by anyone capable of hearing it just then.

Kerrigan paused, perking up and looking towards the Hyperion - though it was not in view at that moment, before smirking and laughing.
First Encounters

When Tychus had calmed down, which could be compared to putting a plug on a live volcano, he started to assess the situation more critically. Sitting at a table in the cantina, he had helped himself to a cigar and a drink on the house. The alarm system was still going off and the Adjutant kept blathering at him about infestation and not allowing him to turn anything off himself. Not that he knew his way around a ship as big as the Hyperion, but he had tried. He had also taken the time to find a pair of gray sweatpants. Not that I need them anymore. The thought made him almost erupt in fury all over again.

A stench had been burning at his nostrils for some time now, and as he took a long pull of his drink Tychus' saw the corpse of an engineer in a corner, pistol on the ground and innards chewed on. **Corpses.** A ferocious hunger hit him then, but it was not his own and he tamped it down with a snarl, looking away from the body and into his drink pointedly. Well, *not like anyone else is around to clean these poor saps up.* Sighing heavily, he took another long pull to finish the watered down beverage off and stood up. *Tastes funny anyway.*

Taking drags of his cigar as he worked, Tychus started by grabbing the corpse in the cantina by the ankle and dragging it through the ship to the lift. To his surprise, one of them creepy thought-slaves was there, ready to lower it for him. Revulsion filled him as he watched what had been a woman twitching spasmodically as she hit the button to lower the lift, fleshy tendrils throbbing and writhing all over her body. Tychus chucked the body to the ground below as soon as there was enough clearance, he didn't need to look to know there were Zerglings down there waiting. Over the course of the day he'd throw a good thirty men and woman in varying states of decay and dismemberment, along with a few Zerg, to the ground beneath the ship. He could not help but feel as though something else was directing the infested humans, and had avoided going deeper into the ship on the count of feeling something, something he wasn't willing to confront just yet.

There was a persistent pressing on his mind, Tychus failed to grasp the words to describe it to himself but it was tiring. As though millions of different thoughts and inputs were zipping by just overhead, not close enough for him to understand. What Tychus did understand though were the feelings; There were only a few, but the swarm was truly united when it came to them: aggression, hunger and a kind of joy that could only be associated with the thrill of the hunt, or a kill. Several times he caught himself lifting his rotting gore covered hand, poised to take a taste before he flung it back down to his side with as much force as he could muster, horrified.

When dawn rose over Char, Tychus was sitting in the cantina again, drinking booze that tasted like ash on his tongue and sucking on cigars that gave him no pleasure. His eyes popped open wide when a jarring sensation struck him, the sound of a cocoon being hammered on as though he was directly beside it. Grimly, he stood up and made his way through the ship, drawn like a shark to bloody water. When he came to stand in front of the door he heard the telltale sound of retching and liquid splashing the ground, deciding then to just lean against the wall outside and wait it out. Not like he had somewhere to be.

Tychus waited silently, thinking about his own progression when he stumbled out of the cocoon. *Aught to come out soon, I reckon.* In a flourish, Stetmann strode out of his room fully clothed. Glasses, canisters of strapped on drinks, egghead outfit, the works. As if nothing was wrong, and as far as Tychus could see in a glance, there really was nothing wrong with Stetmann. No Zerg hair, crazy extra appendages, tentacles, nothing. Maybe a little pale. It was a lot of take in with a quick glance though, and Tychus grunted at Stetmann to get his attention before the kid could walk off like he had somewhere to be. Stetmann froze.
Tychus gave him a minute, but when it was clear the kid was damned paralyzed or something, he straightened up and planted his hand on Stetmann's shoulder, turning him around to face him with a little more force than necessary. No stranger to making people give him looks of terror, the way Stetmann's eyes widened to saucers behind his glasses and his mouth opened just slightly, when at worst he had called the kid names, was disconcerting for Tychus. Fed up, Tychus let go of his shoulder and grumbled "Egghead. Wake up." Snapping his clawed fingertips in front of Stetmann's face repeatedly until his eyes blinked rapidly and he seemed to come out of whatever pant pissing paralysis he had induced upon himself, Tychus was relieved.

"Tuh-tychus!" He squeaked, drawing his hands up to his chest, palms outwards in a placating gesture. "I-I'm sure we can fix this!" Unfortunately for Stetmann, that was very much so the wrong choice of words.

"What?" Tychus growled, the cherry of his cigar burning bright and casting his face into ghoulish relief in the red-flashing and otherwise dark hallway.

"The infestation, the changes, we can fix it! We-

"We could have fixed it, Stetmann." Ire rising rapidly by the second, Tychus took one threatening step forwards and Stetmann took one terrorized step back. "We had the tools to fix this. You want to know what happened to them, kid?" Tychus' teeth were grinding audibly when Stetmann whispered a response.

"What happened?"

Not missing a beat, Tychus grabbed Stetmann by the front of his shirt, slammed him bodily into the wall and bellowed so hard veins throbbed on his temples "An Ultralisk BROKE IT TO PIECES."

The volume of his voice rising exponentially as he shook Stetmann in his fists like a dog with a toy. What happened next was beyond the speed a normal eye, maybe even special equipment, could track. A sharp noise, like a gunshot, and an intense light erupted between the two men- and Tychus was flung several feet back and onto the flat of his back.

Stetmann was rooted to the spot, steam was rising off his half cupped and trembling hands. His lab suit, namely the sleeves and chest, had been charred to nothing. Taking a shaky breath, he whispered in Tychus' direction- afraid to rouse him. "Tychus?"

There was a literal smoking crater of burnt flesh where Tychus' solid armored chest was not but a few seconds ago, Stetmann could even see the white of bone. When his chest heaved in a sudden breath, short lived relief flooded Stetmann. Sitting up slowly, Tychus held a hand to his chest and looked down at it, blinking before looking directly at Stetmann, seething as his flesh had begun to re-knit and fill in the hole in his chest.

"Tychus. Please. Calm down, I didn't mean to-" Stetmann had taken his back from the wall and started gingerly stepping backwards, hands raised defensively still.

Kerrigan, who had been giving the directions to Zerus for Iszha to remember, paused with narrowed eyes.

"So." Tychus voice had lowered like distant rolling thunder, and Stetmann had never seen such a murderous look directed at anyone- let alone his own person. "Got yourself some fireworks now, do you?" Teeth bared as he stood up, Tychus raised his arm up and instincts he had not possessed but a few days ago took over. The blade that was imbedded in his upper arm shifted and in one smooth motion lifted and swiveled to face inwards, snapping into place alongside his forearm.
Swallowing the lump in his throat, Stetmann launched into his room and was behind the sliding door at speeds only terror can fuel. His fingers stumbled all over his key pad as he heard Tychus running, no, thundering to the door. He initiated the locking code not a second too soon, but when the Adjutants voice spoke up his spirits fell.

"Egon Stetmann. Infestation detected. Access denied."

"No!" He cried, but he hadn't counted on Tychus not giving a shit about whether the door opened or not. When the blade on Tychus arm was shoved through the several inch thick steel, Stetmann jumped away from the door and stood cornered like a rat: positive he was about to experience a visceral death like he had imagined when Tychus was first thrown into that god-forsaken pit. Letting out angry bellows, Tychus slammed his fist into the door repeatedly and stabbed through it as many times, venting violently. When the poor door slid open jerkily, he had unfortunately not been sated. As he stalked into the room, intent on some real violence to Stetmanns person, both men became locked in place.

"You will not destroy one another. You will heed my will." Kerrigans voice, decidedly annoyed, announced to each man. Abruptly released, Tychus and Stetmann remained frozen for a few minutes longer before Tychus slowly lowered his weaponized arm. Stetmann watched with grim fascination, he dare not voice it, as the blade folded back into Tychus arm with a click.

"Well. Your heard her highness." Tychus hissed, turning away and pulling another cigar out of his pant pocket. Lighting up and taking a slow drag, he focused. He had lost control, the instincts of millions of aggressive aliens had almost lead him to dismembering the kid. Hot shame filled him, but he wasn't ready to speak of it.

Lowering his hands slowly, Stetmann closed his eyes and almost thanked god before he realized Kerrigan was his savior in that instance, leaving him frowning. Tychus had walked out of the room and Stetmann followed meekly. He had no desire to be left alone in his room with a broken cocoon and vomit on the floor, he had so many questions and Tychus was apparently the only one around. They arrived in the cantina in short order, and Stetmann tentatively sat across from Tychus. He couldn't disguise his surprise when the dour man shoved a beer at him. That was probably the biggest apology he was going to get, and he'd take it as a sign of peace.

Feeling a bit braver now that he understood Kerrigan wasn't going to let them rip each other to pieces, Stetmann took a drink of beer and grimaced. Taste buds have been changed, no doubt. "Sorry about reacting like that Tychus. You just- I just-" Tychus was staring at him silently, waiting for him to spit it out. "I literally just crawled out of an egg. And you, you have blood and gore on you..." Furrowing his brows, Tychus looked down at himself. Sure enough, he had old blood spattered on his chest and pants, and it looked like he had dipped his hands in gore. Shrugging slightly, he nodded for Stetmann to continue.

"And you look like..."

"A god damned infested monster?"

"W-well.."

Tychus was staring into his drink, Stetmann swore he heard him mutter "Don't even have a dick anymore." dejectedly.

"Er." Tychus glanced at him sharply and he wisely let it be.

When a foot kicked at the rigid material of yet another cocoon, Tychus quirked a brow and Stetmann
nearly jumped out of his seat. "What? Oh... Oh we must be... Connected via the hive mind, I suppose." Stetmann stood up, rubbing his arms in a creeped out gesture.

"Didn't think anyone else would come around yet." Tychus slowly stood up, thinking. "Figured Queeny would spread us out more, you woke up almost exactly a day after me."

"Why would she do that?"

"Known a lot of psychos in my lifetime, kid. It is just something they get off on doing."

The banging persisted, thumping in their ears and cracking loudly as the cocoon gave way. Grabbing what remained of the beer pitcher, Tychus poured the contents over his hands one at a time and scrubbed the blood and gore off his hands and chest onto his pants.

"Uh, Tychus? What are you doing?"

"I'm gonna go see who woke up, and with any luck they aren't going to spray me with acid or blow a crater in my chest or some shit. You, egghead, are going to go and turn off this god damned alarm system. Are we clear?"

"I think I can do that, yeah." Thankful to focus on a decent challenge, Stetmann was ready to go.

About to walk away, Tychus paused for a moment before changing course and grabbing the pistol he recovered from the corpse laying in the room earlier, handing it to Stetmann. By the way he took the weapon, he really didn't need to say he'd be useless even if he had to use it.

"I've never-"

"Shut up, take it and try not to shoot yourself. Go." Waving him off with a meaty fist, Tychus watched Stetmann leave the cantina. For a second he saw something strange at the back of the kids neck.

Not so unchanged after all.

Satisfied for the time being, he walked towards the living quarters, collecting a Gauss rifle and slinging it over his back along the way.

Warfield had kicked and punched his way out of the cocoon as fast as he could, mastering the upset in his stomach as he took in a breath of fresh air. Need a weapon. His first thought drew his eyes to his locker. From there he dressed himself, pointedly ignoring his changed flesh and the claws on his hands. Only when he straightened up, rifle in hand and fully clothed- though his old clothes were a damned tight fit, he scrutinized himself.

"What you've done just ain't right, girl." Grumbling as he flexed a fist, watching talons extend and retract, before running a hand over his head in frustration and discovering spines there. Dropping his hand back to his Gauss rifle, Warfield scowled. Straightening up and facing the door, he held his rifle aloft and approached, wary of what waited for him in the Hyperion. When the door slid open and revealed a monster, he pressed his finger to the trigger without a second thought.

Tychus was standing there, smoke drifting upwards from his cigar while his hands rested casually on the butt of his rifle. Multiple pupils constricted to pinpricks and focused on Warfield while he smirked. "Hello, General." Warfield had sworn he pulled the trigger.

"She ain't gonna let us kill each other, Warfield. Trust me, tried already. Now I see why the kid damn near soiled himself when he saw me though." He scrutinized Warfields appearance, seeing the recurring theme of layered plated flesh, discoloration and the freaky alien hair.

Lowering the rifle, painfully aware of a physical force preventing him from firing at Tychus, Warfield looked subdued. "So this is how its going to be then? How come we aren't shambling
zombies like the usual? Seen my fair share to know what happens to Terrans when they get infested."

"Don't know. Maybe egghead can figure it out. Got em workin' on turning off the alarms right now."

"Stetmann is out too? Right, he did go in before me. Can't remember what happened so good, fuzzy" Warfield made a swirling gesture beside his temple. "you know?"

"Yeah. Ah know." Tychus grumbled darkly, stepping away from the door and letting the General out of his room. "Egghead might need a hand. Kid looks perfectly normal- you wouldn't believe it. Lets go find him."

"Sounds good. Got questions, figure a sciencey-type might have answers."

"Probably need to go to the lab. Somethin' is down there. Don't know what though." Tychus' hand tapped Warfields rifle down when he took aim at an infested mechanic that had been standing behind a door, a tumorous mass on his deformed fist clenching and unclenching around a wrench. "They are empty. Can't kill em either, don't bother." It was true. Tychus had taken a minute to try and fire a round into a man who had been infested, wanting to put him down out of pity. He had even apologized when he wasn't able to.

"Poor sons o' bitches." Repulsed, Warfield looked away and kept pace with Tychus as they made their way.

Warfields mind was a mess. Like someone poured a bowl of bugs into his brain pan and just mixed it all up. Glancing at Tychus occasionally, he figured the other man was feeling much the same.

The Adjutant was proving to be very good at keeping Zerg from messing with it. Normally that would be pleasing, but now not so much. Stetmann had tried every override combination, every code, keyword and unobtrusive means of turning off the alarm and disabling the infestation alerts he could think of. Each attempt had been rebuffed, again and again. As it was, he was attempting to unscrew the rusted tight bolts on an old electrical box and failing. Huffing and twisting with all his might, Stetmann was pressing his entire body weight on the bolt and it remained unmoving.

"Thought Swann took better care of this stuff." Wiping sweat off his brow, he popped one of the few energy drinks he hadn't accidentally incinerated off of his belt and drank generously.

The two men walking together made plenty of noise, Stetmann was able to mentally prepare himself to accept what he saw without outward reaction. When Warfield called out "There he is. Stetmann! Good to see you son." he managed to look up from the stuck tight bolts and smile, pretending everything was normal.

"General Warfield, glad to see you alive sir. Sorry I haven't gotten the alarm off yet, the Adjutant has been giving me trouble and well" He gestured lamely to the rusted panel "so is this."

Clapping a broad hand on Stetmanns shoulder, he moved the younger man aside and took a look while taking the wrench from him. "No sweat. Used to be real handy in my youth, you know. Anything to shut this damned alarm off anyway." Tychus just rolled his eyes and kept an eye out silently while Warfield undid the bolts with some ungodly screeching on their part.

"Stuck damned good too, probably would've just needed a laser cutter in other circumstances."

"You mean the circumstances where we aren't roid raging aliens?" Snapped Tychus.

"You could say that. All yours son, we'll keep a look out." Having pulled the panel off and revealed the old wiring beneath, Warfield stepped back and gestured for Stetmann to continue.
"Yes sir! Normally I am into the less physical side of computers, but this is simple enough that I can manage. We will need Swann if we want to do anything more complicated, so here's hoping he will be intact." Pulling smaller drivers from the toolbox he had gathered, Stetmann loosened screws and switched wires around. Tychus watched for a minute, trying to keep track of the kids rapid changes to the panel before giving up. Some things he just didn't care to learn.

"We should probably figure out where everyone's damned egg things are and get some shit set up for them." Warfield thought out loud as he looked down his side of the hall. "Least let them know the ship isn't full of bugs. I didn't have any idea what to expect."

"Already cleaned out all the bodies by myself, someone else can make the damn care packages for all I care." Tychus grumbled, vexed the more and more he thought about their situation. When the alarm and flashing lights were disabled and emergency power booted up, they let out a collective sigh of relief.

"Muuuuch better." Stetmann whirled a screwdriver around his fingers and dunked it into its container, grinning slyly to himself. "I'm good." When he noticed the other two men staring at him, he wavered. "Err. Sorry."

"So this is hell." Warfield muttered, to which Tychus snorted. "I'll meet you boys on the bridge, we got some planning to do."

"Yes sir!"

"Riiight." Lighting a new cigar, Tychus stalked off leaving Warfield and Stetmann to make their way together.

"I need to go see the lab soon. Hopefully it's still in tact, I need to run tests and-"

"Tychus said there was somethin' down there. We'll check it out together later, Stetmann. I'm inclined to agree with him. I... Feel something. It ain't right."

"Alright sir." Stetmann rung his hands anxiously as they entered the bridge, Tychus already waiting and staring out at their surroundings- the Leviathan was all around them still.

"Ain't that some shit?" Tychus had seen it already of course, but he checked their reactions.

"Hell, we're on the Leviathan? Just great." Warfield sighed, about to run a hand through his hair before catching himself.

"Yes, I saw it when we first left the ship.. Just amazing that its an animal of some kind, isn't it?"

"Bein' a bug is gonna suit you at this rate, egghead."

"Speakin' of bugs. Why is the creep not getting into the ship? Why isn't the ship just full of Zerg roamin' around? It's us, the infested and whatever the hell that thing we feel is."

"I only have guesses sir, no real answers. But the Zerg are efficient, continually evolving at rapid rates to be even better and better at what they do. They are tools. Now we are Zerg: we have a purpose, I just don't know what it is," Stetmann had sat down on a chair, palming where his pen and paper would be had they not been incinerated earlier.

"A sleeper cell?" Tychus volunteered, drawing the surprised eye of both his companions.

Warfield thought about it for a moment, brows furrowing. "Could be, good thinking. Doesn't bode
well for the rest of the Terrans though."

"No." Tychus glared at the floor. "It doesn't."

"I don't think so. I mean, this entire ship and everyone on it would immediately fail any scans or basic checks. The whole place would have to- oh." Stetmanns face fell as the other two men scrutinized him.

"I read your file." Warfield grumbled, puzzle pieces clicking together. "Isn't that basically what your field of expertise was, before you went on the run from the Dominion?"

On her Leviathan, Kerrigan was smiling slyly into the stars.
"My partner and I created a portable force field of sorts, similar to what Protoss have with plasma shields, but they used it for unwilling human experimentation and yes- that is when I left the Dominion." Egon frowned, remembering the whole ordeal as though it was yesterday. "I guess the shield part could be used for cloaking, concealment or manipulation." He looked sick.

"Relax kid, no tellin' what the Queen of Blades wants with us. No use workin' ourselves up over nothing until she comes out and tells us." Warfield made a dismissive gesture, but they all knew damn well it was more to make Egon feel better than anything. Jim and Tychus were damn near famous for the heists they used to pull, getting into places they were not meant to be fit too good.

Tychus placed a standard transmission device on the corner of the central table with a thunk.

"Found a few stored in here, we can leave messages for everyone once they wake up. Reckon it'd be best if egghead does it, most normal lookin' out of the three of us." Stetmann grabbed the device and stuck it in one of his lab coat pockets distractedly.

"Alright, I'll do that. Seems like Kerrigan put us all in our own living quarters, should be pretty easy to find everyone."

"Right, good. Only one thing left." Warfield looked at Tychus, somber.

On point, Tychus patted his Gauss rifle and nodded. "We go pay that thing a visit."

"Oh! Oh, sir."

"What, son?"

"If you have to blow something to pieces, please save me some samples!"

"Kid, you are a sample." Shaking his head, Tychus walked out.

"Will do." Warfield eyed Tychus' back as he followed him.

When the bridge door slid shut, Stetmann looked at his hands thoughtfully. "I guess I am."

"Why are you so hard on that kid, Tychus?" Warfield asked, genuinely curious.

"Kids fighting a damn revolution and he can't even hold a pistol, nothin' but a liability far as I'm concerned." They were working their way into the bowels of the ship towards Stetmanns lab, securing rooms along the way- wouldn't due to get ambushed. It was cathartic to just go through a routine that both of them knew by heart, as simple as breathing.

"He's got quite a record, done some amazing things for his age. I wouldn't write him off, even if he could stand to use some combat training. Just a thought."

"Maybe I will teach him. Run 'em through the ol' Tychus training program."

"So long as I get to watch and laugh." Both men chuckled.

It seemed that the amount of infested crew members had become much denser the closer they got to the lab. Both men had taken to treating them like furniture, seeing as they couldn't do anything to them.
"Awful lot of them infested down here."

"Wish I could help 'em."

"Wish I could help my damn self."

"Amen to that."

Their banter fell off as they rounded a corner, stepping around infested that were mulling around, and faced the entrance of the lab. Their eyes were drawn to the base of the door, invoking a frown from both men.

"See it?"

"Yeah. That living wall stuff, creep or whatever the kids are callin' it these days." Guns raised and on alert, they approached slowly, listening for anything strange between their footsteps. They heard nothing beyond their strides across the grated steel and their own breathing mixed with the gasps and gurgles of the infested.

"Ladies first." Tychus mumbled, catching a look from Warfield. Being the professional he was, however, Warfield stepped forwards and hit the pad to open the door quickly, both men raising their rifles and aiming into the dim room.

Whatever they had been expecting, the looming figure of a broodmother standing in the back of the lab was decidedly not it.

"Ah hell." Tychus intoned before taking a quick step past Warfield and slamming the door button to close it promptly in the broodmother's face. Lowering their weapons the two men glared at each other.

"Now what?"

"Do I look like some kind of Zerg expert, Findlay? How the hell should I know?"

*What do you want, Terrans?* In their minds the broodmother spoke. A feminine voice but, echoing and hissing, it was not a pleasant one. This particular one sounded rather mad.

"Yeah, no. Egghead can do his science experiments somewhere else, I don't give a damn anymore." Tychus had raised one of his hands to the side of his head, as if he could just grab the broodmother out of it.

Warfield gave him a long-suffering sigh. "There's a reason it's here, Findlay. We're gonna find out." Pressing the door button again, Warfield stepped inside and Tychus reluctantly followed.

*Speak.* The creatures tail spikes were clicking together in annoyance.

Giving a shrug to himself, Warfield piped up. "Why are you here, bug?"

*I am not a bug. I am broodmother Shlassa, you are my charges.* There was an unmistakable bitterness in the psychic words.

"Charges? So you're Kerrigans watchdog?"

*I do not know what a watchdog is. I am here to watch over you and relay messages from our Queen.*
"Whoa now. She ain't my damn Queen, and I sure as hell don't take orders from bugs!"

Shlassa's eyes glowed an angry green, and Tychus stumbled back as though physically shoved. *Begone Terran. I don't have to explain myself to you.*

Tychus gripped his Gauss rifle and tried to force himself to point it at Shlassa, but felt that frustrating immovable force blocking him. Warfield was keeping his voice even and attempting to be the voice of reason, as he often was. "Alright. Broodmother Shlassa, you said?"

Yes.

"This is Stetman's lab, and he's gonna be using it. We will also be in here often. You may want to move somewhere else if you got a problem with us."

Hissing, Shlassa shifted on her feet and to their revulsion they saw that the creature was the source of the creep in the room, the stuff literally dripped off of its body. Tychus made a retching noise before he caught himself. *I know the scientist. I will be staying here. You will be tolerated if you do not bother me.*

"That's that then. We will be back later." The broodmother inclined her head in response, glaring at them right up until the door closed.

"Being babysat by some alien mother bug don't sit right with me, not one bit." Tychus was growling, bumping past the infested and all but running them over if they were in the way.

"As if I like it. Listen, the Zerg aren't gonna attack us, we are the Zerg now. You know damn well the best thing we can do is learn about our enemy until an opportunity presents itself." All Warfield received was a grunt in response. Frustrated, he snapped. "Look Tychus, I'll see you in the mess hall. You see that nerd you tell him to get there too."

"Right."

*General Warfield?*

Warfield jumped, nearly dropping the package of rations he had picked out. Looking around sharply, he deduced that Stetmann's voice was indeed in his head. Resting his hands on the counter top, Warfield closed his eyes and mumbled. "Give me strength." Jerking his shoulder in a shrug, he thought about the kid and gave it a shot. *Stetmann. What's so damned important you gotta barge into my head with alien nonsense?*

No reply.

"Eh." Warfield wasn't too disconcerted about it not working, maybe even a bit thankful. It was clear Stetmann wanted his attention though, so he tossed the ration packet on to the table and went to find him.

Unbeknownst to either of them, Tychus had heard Stetmann too. Slamming a fist into the cantina table, he struggled to cool his temper.

A few things became quickly apparent to Warfield when he entered the bridge, where Stetmann had remained. Both his lab coat and glasses were off and he was scrutinizing one hand intensely while writing notes with the other. But what really caught the old Generals attention was Stetmann's eyes. "Son, what the hell is so important you gotta go barging into my head and not finding me like a normal person?" As he spoke, Warfield approached to get a better look- trying to figure out what his own eyes were seeing.
Stetmann looked up from his hand quickly and blinked. It looked as though, for lack of better words, his eyes had peeled away to reveal, well, other eyes. His normal human eye had folded over a rainbow-colored kaleidoscope looking eye, while his right was a solid dark red with multiple facets. "I am sorry, General. That was just a test. I tried it thinking that maybe I was capable, but you didn't respond so I thought I was not."

"Alright. So what the hell is going on with your eyes and what do you want?"

"Ah, yes it must look a bit strange. I found out that I have multiple layers of vision, its incredible! But what I called you for was this: it's time we find out what has really changed about us, and run some tests down in the lab and maybe the athletic field."

Looking into the kids eyes was disturbing, and Warfield fixed his gaze on a point past Egons head. "Right. You are right, it is need to know information. I'll go get Tychus and we'll meet you down in the lab. Oh. There's a broodmother down there, by the way."

"Yeah, I heard it talking to you and Tychus. Maybe there isn't a "filter" or we're connected to the broodmother somehow, I'll have to ask it!" Warfield frowned slightly, scrutinizing Stetmann. Maybe Tychus wasn't so far off from accusing the kid of suiting the bug life.

"Just.. Be careful, alright son?" Warfield had turned and walked out before Stetmann, confused by the statement, could ask just what he needed to be careful about.

It was an easy guess on where to find Tychus, Warfield was a little surprised to see the big man holding his face in his hands though. Unsure if he was interrupting a personal moment or a mental breakdown, he stepped in and spoke cautiously to his back. "Tychus? Stetmann needs us in the lab to run some tests. Might be some stuff to do in the athletic room too."

"Can't you feel it old man?" Tychus grumbled, his voice strained. "The bugs don't talk, but they feel. I almost killed the kid the other day, don't want to tell you what else I've almost done either." He had slowly turned on his stool, eyeing Warfield and hoping that he understood.

"Tychus, my head has been buzzing since I kicked my way out of that damned cocoon. I've felt weird compulsions too, but I'll be damned if Kerrigan is gonna break my mind. So hold it together and get your ass to the lab. Maybe Stetmann can help, I don't know."

"Hm." Standing up, it seemed Tychus was satisfied with the answer for now. The two men went to the lab without further preamble and found the way was completely clear of the infested. The broodmother however, was still in the lab and glared at them when the door opened. Stetmann was already there and ignoring it resolutely, to his credit.

"Right. We're here, lets get this thing done with kid." Tychus rumbled, shouldering off his rifle and resting it beside the door.

"Yeah. What do you have for us, Stetmann?" Warfield followed suit, leaving his rifle on the opposite side.

"Thanks for coming! I've prepared some basic tests- the Adjutant not interacting with Zerg means that I can't do anything with tools that are connected to the ships database. Not until Swann can fix that, anyway." Stetmann launched into full-on scientist mode, it was rather interesting to see how hard he focused on his tasks. "I'll check you head to toe and we'll figure out what's different." Both men allowed themselves to be herded around the room as Stetmann spoke.

"I have some some scrapers for tissue and clippers for keratin. The design of our skin is very
interesting, most Zerg just have tough chitinous exoskeletons. Sit there please, thanks." Tychus and Warfield sat down as instructed. Frowning, Tychus suspected the *clippers* the egghead was about to use were actually for cutting through bones.

The continued, albeit silent, scrutiny of the broodmother across from them was disconcerting, but if Stetmann could pretend like it was normal so could Warfield and Tychus. When Stetmann gestured for Tychus to hold a hand on the table palm-down, he followed suit and watched as the kid tried to clip a piece off the thick claw of his index finger, quirking a brow. He was not succeeding, the tendons in his wrists visibly straining as he tried to put on enough pressure to clip.

"You're gonna break my damn nail, let me." Waving Stetmann off, Tychus liberated the clippers and promptly cut out a small V shape, which the red faced Stetmann gathered. Warfield grabbed the clippers next and mimicked the action, sparing him the time.

"Thanks. It is kind of surprising that I did not inherit some considerable physical strength too." He sounded almost disappointed, leaving Tychus and Warfield smirking slightly.

"Gotta work for these kinda muscles, kid."

Gathering the clippings into test tubes and holding them aloft, Stetmann nodded thoughtfully after taking a hard look at each.

"Sweet mother mercy. The hell is goin' on with your eyes kid?" Tychus had not yet seen Stetmanns newly found attribute and was suitably distressed when the kids eyes folded away into different layers of other freaky eyes.

"Yes, well, I did develop some new attributes. There's something coating your nail by the way, General."

"Just great."

Unbeknownst to the group, the gathered swarm had begun to turn away from Char, speeding out into the stars towards their new destination: Zerus. Following discreetly, nearly touching with the Hyperion, was also Zeratuls small ship.

"I'm not going to just let you cut on my damn skin!" Stetmann had tried to convince the two men to let him take some tissue samples, but they were both surly and stubborn.

"That can wait until you have access to your better equipment, Stetmann." Warfield had shut the argument down quickly.

"Yes General. Can I see your arm?" Stetmann had caught sight of something and almost didn't wait for Warfield's go ahead before holding up his armored arm under closer scrutiny.

"That's just creepy as all hell." Tychus was still disturbed by the kids eyes.

"You know you have multiple pupils in your eyes and a tapetum lucidum, a layer in the eye humans don't even have, right?"

"And?"

"Nothing." Stetmann mumbled, ignoring him and tilting Warfield's arm this way and that after rolling back his sleeve. "Veeeery interesting! General, you have these really small holes in your skin and there is some kind of debris around them- I'll need my equipment for it but I think you excrete something from both your nails *and* these little holes."
"I'm not sure I want to know." Exasperated, Warfield was watching what Stetmann was doing and frowning.

"It's for the best, General."

Yes. She wants you to know exactly what you can do. All eyes turned to look at the broodmother, Shlassa, when she spoke.

"Stay out of my head, bug." Tychus grated, fists clenched.

Or else? Your body is not your own, Terran. You'll do well to remember that.

"Let it be, Tychus." Warfield warned.

"When my body is my own again, you're first on the list."

I care not about your lists. Your body never will be your own, foolish Terran.

"I think that's enough of the lab for a bit." Stetmann interjected quickly, more fearful of his lab being smashed than their altercation, seeing as they couldn't physically hurt each other. "Let's go to the athletic field." He placed his collected samples next to the writhing Zerg specimen container quickly and picked up his clipboard and pen.

Both men stood up and retrieved their guns in unison, flanking Stetmann as they exited the lab quickly. "Good thinking, son," Warfield muttered.

"Where'd the infested go, by the way?" Tychus looked sharply at Stetmann, questioning.

"I asked Shlassa to err, put them somewhere else. They freak me out."

"How you can just have a conversation with that bug, I've no idea."

Easier than having a conversation with you. Stetmann thought to himself, annoyed.

"What?" Tychus looked confused, a backbone was the last thing he expected coming out of Stetmann.

"What?" Stetmann parroted, having not thought about what he did.

"The hell are you two on about? Bust a move!" Warfield realized what had happened though, he couldn't blame the kid for the thought, not by a long shot. Wasn't his fault that the privacy of his mind wasn't quite so private anymore either.

Tychus let it slide, thinking he may have been hearing things if Warfield hadn't reacted to what the kid said.

"Um, gentlemen?"

"What, kid?"

"Where's the athletic field?"

"This is why your waist is as thick as my wrist, just so you know."

"Gonna have to agree with Tychus on this one."
The so-called athletic field had been repurposed from an extravagant opera house that Mengsk had installed on the Hyperion when it had been his flagship. As such it had a high vaulted ceiling, a few one to two person balconies on either side of the walls and decidedly poor lighting as relics of that time. Fake turf had been installed on the floor, a small obstacle course and a more impressive gym set had their own quarters of the field. As the primary source of entertainment and exercise for everyone on the ship, it was all well loved.

Standing at the edge of the turf, each man had his own little reaction and ritual. Egon stood on the grass stiffly, looking generally uncomfortable and out of his element. Warfield strode onto it like he owned it, quietly reminiscing to himself of old days and games played on real grass. Tychus, still in bare feet seeing as no boots would stand against the thick claws on his toes, seemed physically relieved when he let his feet sink into the green mass.

"You know I haven't set my feet on dirt, never mind grass, in well over seven years." And it was the truth, he had been stuck in that damn death trap suit when he got off ice. He decided this was a small thing that he didn't even know he missed.

"I'd comment about your conduct before imprisonment, but hell with it." Warfield and Tychus walked out into the field, Tychus stretching and enjoying himself, it was a good distraction.

"Last time I was on a field, I was knocked out by a football." Stetmann mumbled inaudibly before piping up. "I can't bring up your files, but we're just going to do some simple tests and I'll write the information down for later." Tychus and Warfield spread out, giving one another space while Stetmann stood in front and scribbled on his clipboard quickly. "Firstly: Jumping with pure leg power." Gesturing for the men to start, Stetmann watched as they each bent at the knee and launched themselves upwards. Scribbling while they repeatedly jumped and nodding to himself, he spoke out loud for their benefit. "You're jumping like Olympians! I don't know what you could do before this mind you, but men of your build do not normally jump like that." He gestured for them to stop.

"You stereotypin' me, egghead?" Tychus sniped as they followed the younger man to the gym equipment.

"If anyone is a stereotype, it's you Tychus." Warfield smirked, making Tychus smile easily.

"Alright." Stetmann planted a hand on a rack of very large weights, some of which probably individually weighed more than he did. "Load up, stress test!"

"That's what I'm talkin' about!" With a practiced ease, the two big men found bars for themselves and began putting on weights.

"Start with your old best weight, if you remember it." Stetmann observed and noted their starts, noticing an opportunity and taking it. With complete nonchalance, he commented. "I'm surprised, Tychus. The Generals best is higher than yours."

"There's a reason why I'm the General." Warfield went along with it, if only because he knew Tychus could use the distraction. He secretly admitted to himself that he loved the competition too.

"Oh yeah?" Tychus snipped, falling for the bait- and gladly. "Won't be when we're done here."

The bars gave out before they did.

Leaving the bent bars behind, Stetmann guided them out to the field once again. "Well that was informative. Go to the very back of the field and run to me when I wave." As fast as you can need not be said, the two men were damn near bonding and only paying half attention to poor Egon.
When they were in position, half crouched and ready to propel themselves forwards, Stetmann checked his watch and waved for the first man to run at the start of the minute. Warfield launched into a run at a frightening pace. Stetmann had to fight the urge to recoil away when the General got close, checking the time on his watch and scribbling it down quickly.

Warfield stood aside as Egon counted the seconds, waiting for the top of the minute once more before waving at Tychus. Chunks of the fake turf flew as his thick toe claws dug in and ripped it up while he sprinted at Stetmann full tilt. Clenching his teeth and half closing his eyes, Stetmann forced himself to hold still, eyeing the time and quickly writing it down when Tychus ran by so close as to have nearly bowled him over. "Well that was terrifying, thank you. No men your size have a right to run that fast, if you ask me." For a second he wasn't sure what he read on his watch, doing a quick double-take. "Hm."

"So, how are you feeling? Fatigue? Anything?" Circling the two men, Stetmann observed their states. Neither had broken a sweat and were breathing evenly. He took Tichus' wrist and attempted to measure his heart rate, but that was futile with the fleshy armor.

"Honestly? I haven't been tired since I broke outta that egg thing. Don't feel strained any from all that lifting either."

"Same, seems we'll have to work a lot harder if we're gonna find the limit." Warfield remarked thoughtfully.

"Alright, now for the news."

"News? You've been with us the whole time, what have you seen that we haven't?" Tychus scrutinized him, frowning.

"The time!" Tapping his wristwatch for good measure, he tucked his clipboard under his arm. "You said it was almost an exact twenty-four hours that I was awakened after you, Tychus. It has been about twenty since Warfield woke and I suspect something happened that made Kerrigan put him in sooner than she wanted. The next person may be coming very soon!" All three of them looked grim, it was a reminder of their current reality.

"You got all those transmitters set up in everyone's rooms? I don't recall you having left the bridge." Warfield questioned, crossing his arms.

"Oh! No! I'll do it right now, the testing can wait- especially if its Swann!" Egon all but ran away, leaving the two men alone. Warfield hadn't watched him leave, but was looking at the gym setup offhandedly. Grinding teeth drew his attention and he was surprised to see Tychus with fists clenched and veins bulging at his temples as if completely furious.

"Tychus?" Narrowing his eyes, he faced the man cautiously, attempting to discern what had happened in those few seconds that could have done this to him. His words seemed to have an effect, though. Tychus jerked and blinked rapidly, looking at Warfield completely spooked.

"Gonna have to make sure people don't run around... Took everything I had to not chase that kid down, don't know what it is."

"Huh. You should really tell him. If anyone can figure out the issue, it's the kid. Nothing happened when we were sprinting and I was ahead of you though?" Tychus shook his head definitively. "No." Frustrated, he went to run his hand through his hair and made a disgruntled noise when his thick fingers touched the spines where his hair used to be. Fully committed to the motion, he gave a mental fuck it and finished swiping his hand through anyway.
"Don't think I'll be getting used to those any time soon either." Warfield sympathized.
Lessons

"I believe I've figured it out, Izsha." Kerrigan was staring into the stars, beyond the millions of Zerg collected around her Leviathan and the other Leviathans in its company.

"My Queen?" Izsha tilted her head, curious of what her Queen could be speaking about.

"When the Overmind created me, why do you think I didn't turn out like the other Terrans it infested? I was not special."

"You are powerful, my Queen. So strong."

"Not at the start." Kerrigan held a clawed finger aloft, her eyes focused on a star out in space as she thought. Izsha was some of the only conversation the Zerg Queen could get, and these kinds of conversations were not abnormal. "I was weak, my mind was soft from the changes, I even needed to raid a Ghost training facility to undo what had been done to my mind by my fellow Terrans."

"How did you become strong?"

"Time. Gradual integration into the Swarm. There was the Overmind who controlled the cerebrates, and the cerebrates controlled their broods. I was given a small brood and had little control." Curling her hand into a fist and resting it at her side, Kerrigan grinned in remembrance. "But Zeratul began killing the cerebrates, and more of the swarm fell under my sway. I evolved to be able to handle more. That was the key, Izsha."

"Terrans require time to become accustomed to the mind of the swarm?"

"Yes. It requires a stronger mind than an average person, perhaps. But it is working on Jims little friends."

"You are truly the strongest leader the swarm could hope to have, my Queen." Kerrigan smirked, pleased with herself. On the Hyperion, Matt was waking from his long nightmare.

Every man awake on the Hyperion heard Matts yell as he jerked into consciousness, and they all reacted differently. Egon resolutely ignored it as the door to his darkened lab opened in front of him, the glowing eyes of Shlassa regarded him silently. This was an opportunity to speak with the broodmother without being hassled by the other men, it would not be lost.

"You have questions. I am to answer them." Egon was immediately surprised by the verbal approach the broodmother took. "I am unable to communicate with only you, and so we shall speak." In truth, it was an anomaly that Shlassa did not like. The Terrans really were weak. Stetmann wasn't sure where to begin.

Tychus was still on the athletic field, unbending the steel weightlifting bars they had inadvertently ruined. Pausing and frowning down at the metal in his hands while his hair spines straightened stiffly, Tychus put the mostly fixed bar on the rack and set off towards the armory- still on lockdown by the Adjutant. He'd find the limit, someone else could deal with Horner.

Warfield was in the bridge cleaning his Gauss rifle attentively, difficult even if he had been working to develop better control over his retractable talons. Pausing and looking at the wall, he listened to the snapping of dried material and the ragged gasps for air of Matt Horner. As if he was looking at him, he inclined his head and muttered. "Welcome to hell." He continued working on his weapon, whoever it was could wait a few minutes for him to get it all back together proper.
When he had finished breaking free of his prison and heaving the foul substance that had filled his stomach onto the floor with sick splashes, Matt sucked in air and looked around. Wiping the nasty filth from his mouth and, spotting the transmitter device, stumbling to it quickly. When Stetmann appeared he felt a measure of relief, the man looked unchanged somehow. A pair of his clothes was thoughtfully folded on his bed next to the stand and he dressed himself out of habit while listening.

"Hello Matt! Um, so you're a Zerg now- and so are we. We decided to make recordings for everyone who hadn't woke up yet, just to let you know what's going on, you know?" Egon's recording stumbled along awkwardly as Matt touched his fingertips to what felt like bone raised out of his back slightly, horrified.

"Others may have wakened since I recorded this for you, but as of right now it is General Warfield, Tychus Findlay and myself. Kerrigan has not shown herself or spoken to us, aside from one brief thing." The image of Stetmann looked uncomfortable at the thought. "But she has not made us do anything yet, and there is a broodmother in the laboratory named Shlassa. She is here to watch us. If Swann hasn't woke up yet then the Adjutant is still blocking us from the armory and most of the ships functions."

In the process of putting on his gloves, Horner paused at a queer feeling on his palm and in his arm, slowly turning his hand palm-up.

"I don't know what changed about you, seems we're all pretty different right now, but try not to panic when you see anyone else. They haven't made out quite so good in the visual department..."

Sucking in a breath, Horner dropped his glove and held his hand farther away in revulsion. From the center of his palm a cluster of fleshy tendrils was writhing, stretching outwards as though seeking something. Closing his eyes tightly he whispered rapidly to himself, completely blocking out whatever else the Stetmann message was saying. "Not happening not happening not happening."

Warfield took aim with his rifle, checking the sight with a practiced eye. Letting out a satisfied grunt, he slung the weapon strap over his shoulder and made his way towards the living quarters. Whoever it was should have been finished listening to Stetmann's message by now, at the very least.

"Alright. First question. Why are you watching us? Doesn't Kerrigan know what we're doing at all times?" Back in Stetmann's lab, he had sat down on a stool, pen and clipboard in hand, ready to get answers from Shlassa.

"My brood has been given to another and the Queen has entrusted me with keeping you and the other Terrans safe.

"So, we're your brood?"

"I did not make you, but yes."

"So broodmothers take care of pieces of the swarm and Kerrigan directs the broodmothers? I suppose that is efficient."

"Yes."

"Do you know what our purpose is? What Kerrigan wants us to do?"

"I am not to speak of it. You will know in due time."

Scribbling notes rapidly, Stetmann thought hard- asking the right questions was often the biggest challenge of research. "Are we capable of talking to one another in our minds?"
Shlassa paused, chitinous fingertips clicking together. "Yes. Terrans do not speak with their minds, you must practice. Perhaps if you can talk specifically to one another in time, I will be able to do the same."

"So it's like a muscle that we haven't used, we need to work it." Muttering, he jotted quickly and looked back up at the creature. "I know there is a kind of hierarchy in the swarm. Kerrigan is at the top, broodmothers are next, are there any other strong Zerg that control lesser Zerg?"

"You and the others. They are capable of controlling other Zerg, should they prove strong enough." Shlassa sounded very much doubtful. "Zerg lead by force of will and strength. We follow the strongest."

Blinking in surprise, Egon tilted his head. "Wait, you follow the strongest? Willingly?"

"Yes. We broodmothers are capable of choosing."

"Amazing! Why do you follow Kerrigan?"

"She is the strongest." The tone of Shlassas voice shifted, as though she thought he was rather dense.

"So if I was to prove I was stronger, you'd follow me?"

"Our Queen defeated you and remade you. You've already proven yourselves weak."

"Oh. Well, uh, thanks. I think that's good enough for now." Egon placed his notes down on a counter top and mumbled thoughtfully "Should go see who woke up."

"You know who did." Shlassa implied impatiently. "Flex your muscle."

Cringing, Egon glanced at the broodmother and nodded slightly. "I guess." Taking a breath, Stetmann walked out of the lab and concentrated. He'd try to find out who it was and where they went through the link, to flex the mental muscle.

Horner had managed to retract the whatever-the-hell-it-was that had been sticking out of his hand after a round of denial, panic and fury. Forgoing his gloves, he cautiously stepped out into the emergency-lit halls of the Hyperion and started looking for the others, all while in a mental haze.

"Don't turn around, Horner." General Warfield called out a generous distance away, and Horner stood still.

"General Warfield, sir..?"

"Just wanted to let you know I'm here. Don't need you yelling or trying to shoot me cause I look like a damn bug, son. Feels bad enough as it is." Warfields words were bitter.

"Ah. I understand, trust me." Shivering in revulsion, he was keenly aware of the writhing inside his arms when he slowly turned around and took a look at the General. "Oh, hell."

Raising a finger to point at him in warning, Warfield tilted his head and gave him an I-told-you-don't look. Raising his hands in a gesture of surrender, Matt cleared his throat. "Alright. I'm good. You're good. We're good."

"We aren't son. Not by a long shot. But we'll figure somethin' out, alright?"

"Right. How recent was that message Stetmann left?"
"Few hours maybe, nobody else awake yet if that's what you're asking."

"Alright." Warfield had started walking and Horner fell in step with him, it was not so bad- the most shocking part is the hair and claws, he thought.

"Not much we can do right now, with the Adjutant keeping us out of damn near everything. Probably for the best, don't want to know why Kerrigan wants the Hyperion in tact. Can't be good for anyone."

"No, definitely not." His stomach soured thinking about Kerrigan, about the battle and the whole damn mess Jim led them into. "What happened to the crew?" Warfield's silence spoke volumes on the subject, and he felt further sick. "We took all these people to their deaths." Still, Warfield refrain from answering. It seemed prudent to not tell Horner what had really happened to them, for now at least.

The pair almost bumped right into Stetmann when he whisked through a door. "Oh! Hello General, hello Matt-sir!" They stood there looking at one another, Stetmann curious about what had changed about Horner, and Horner trying to politely spot any freaky alien mutations on Stetmann. "Seems you made out a lot better than Tychus and the General, visually anyway."

"Thanks kid."

"Sorry sir." Warfield waved him off and set the three of them to walking together slowly, no destination in mind.

"Ah, yeah about that- well, we can check it out later. Where's the convict?" There was venom in his tone when he mentioned Tychus. Warfield supposed they had been exchanging heated words not long before the shit hit the proverbial fan.

"Listen boys, now's as good a time to get it out as any." Warfield glanced around quickly, making sure Tychus was not in earshot. "Tychus ain't handling this very well, don't go riling him up. We need him just as much as we need each other, you got that?"

Horner huffed, annoyed. "If you say so, General."

"I do."

"What has been going on with Tychus? He didn't tell me anything." Stetmann almost sounded hurt.

"Been hearing and feeling weird bug stuff. I know you probably have too but it seems to be a lot worse for him."

"There is some weird... Buzzing in my mind." Horner admitted.

"Very interesting." Stetmann hadn't been having any sort of mental issues, but he was not going to volunteer that particular bit of information until he knew more. Theories started to whirl through his mind though, as they always did.

"Right. Well, just try not to poke the bear alright? And Stetmann. Don't run away from him."

"Huh?"

"He almost hunted you down when you ran off the field earlier. Don't know why, but probably best to avoid that."
"Wow, that sounds almost like a prey drive!" Hands reaching for his pen and paper, Stetmann's face fell when he remembered he left it in the lab.

"So, how much worse off is Tychus?" Visually need not be spoken. Matt was morbidly curious.

"You'll see him soon. He's..." Stetmann paused, halting the groups progression and closing his eyes for a second, frowning. "At the armory doors?"

"And how do you know that, kid?" Warfield questioned, suspicious. Stetmann had already taken off walking at a brisk pace though, muttering something about "flexing muscle." Warfield and Horner followed, confused.

They did not have to walk far before the distant banging became audible, hastening their pace. What they found was Tychus, cursing vehemently and partially stuck under the massive reinforced armory door. He was on one knee that had become trapped under the door when he lost the strength to lift the door any further.

Matt whispered a tense holy shit at the sight. It meant that one man had lifted that door in the first place, and since Tychus had not put a shirt on, his layered flesh was clearly visible.

"A little help here?" Tychus all but snarled, taking a breath and resting his forehead against the cool steel.

"What in the hell are you doing, Tychus? Not that I'm not impressed, mind you."

"What does it look like I'm doin', chief? Getting the door to the weapons open! Grab that container I brought over and help me get it under." Thankfully his leg was holding out fine, he was just completely stuck.

The three men looked to the large cargo box Tychus had also apparently hauled over, pausing only a moment before springing to action.

"Put some muscle into it! You two nerds gotta move that box under here while Tychus and I lift!" Warfield snapped at Matt and Egon, each picking a corner of the box and shoving it towards the door. Gritting their teeth and grunting, the two were huffing when it finally bumped into the armory door.

"In place, sir." Stetmann huffed, resting his hands on his knees.

"Alright, get ready. Three... Two... One!" Warfield and Tychus tossed their heads back and bared their teeth, snarling as the door lifted off of Tychus' knee and screamed in protest as it went up farther.

"C'mon... Hurry." Tychus grated, both his and Warfield's arms were trembling as they waited for the container to be slid into place. Stetmann and Horner threw their weight into it and the container screeched against the steel beneath it as it moved into place, not a moment too soon either.

Both Warfield and Tychus collapsed to their knees in unison, the cargo container dented inwards slightly when all of the weight of the armory door rested on it, but held firm.

Panting and rubbing at his knee, Tychus nodded at the three other men around him. "Thanks for the assist. Nice job."

Horner and Stetmann were resting against the cargo container, huffing for breath. "Hello Tychus." Horner mumbled, a half-assed greeting but it would do.
"Captain." Tychus snarked in return, pulling a cigar and lighter out of his pants pockets, lighting up.

"Not this shit. Listen, you two jackals can go duke it out somewhere else. Just remember that we're still in this together. We might not be stuck to a wall but we're still in deep shit, just in case you needed a reminder."

"No. Don't reckon it would do us any good." Tychus straightened up, everyone else following suit at their own pace. "Only difference between now and a few days ago is a bit of beauty sleep."

"Speaking of beauty sleep," Horner muttered, nudging Stetmann with his elbow and drawing his attention to his hand. "Any ideas?" He would have vomited, had there been anything left in his stomach, when he held his hand up and exposed his palm. It was a bit tricky, now that he wasn't so tense, but tilting his hand back and stiffening his fingers into a curled position drew the tendrils out from their hiding place in his skin. Stetmann made a retching sound, barely catching himself.

"N-no. Whew. Sorry. Never seen anything like this." Taking hold of Matt's wrist, very careful to not touch any of the protrusions, Stetmanns eyes split away so he could look at it with other, stronger eyes.

"What-" Horner made to jump away but Stetmann held fast.

"Relax. Every one of us has been mutated, best get used to it. Something coating the tendrils. Will need my lab equipment operational to know anything further, sorry sir."

Tychus, ever the opportunist, grinned and chuckled. Successfully drawing Horner's attention, he piped up. "That lil' doll, Mira Han, will love you now."

Even Warfield snorted laughter.

"Not even slightly funny."

Taking a drag of his cigar, Tychus grinned like a jackal. "We'll just have to agree to disagree now won't we?"

Matt was about to put his hand to his forehead in frustration but caught himself at the last second, slapping his hand back down to his side. "Look, I better go see what I can do about the Adjutant, if anything. Need to think."

"Fair enough, not much we can really do right now. Got some logs I want to look over, myself." Warfield gave everyone a quick nod, him and Horner leaving together. Tychus and Stetmann looked at one another.

"Well egghead, I'm gonna go see what toys I can play with in the armory. Can come if you want, don't matter to me none."

"I'll go back to the lab Tychus, thanks." Stetmann rubbed his temples as he parted ways with Tychus, his brain hurt.

"More for me." He had to duck to enter, but seeing a hangar full of machines, guns and explosives was similar to entering Valhalla for someone like Tychus. "Hell yes." Puffing his cigar and rubbing his hands together, he started looking around.

Warfield returned to his living quarters, resolutely ignoring the cocoon he had broken out of and sitting down at his nondescript desk. He had a small stack of records not connected to the Hyperions network, as he was a barely tolerated guest at the start of all this, each one contained information
about his men. Dutifully he began filling out their time of death, how it came to be and any exemplary behavior before it happened. **You're right Raynor. Sending all those good men to hell was the worst part.**

Tychus was staring up at the much less impressive looking Thor that Swann had designed, fondly remembering the pure chaos he unleashed when he was piloting the Odin, when the spines at the base of his neck pricked upwards. Remaining still but focusing, he decided that there was a distinct watched feeling. Taking a slow breath, he held his cigar up as if to toss it and used the nondescript motion to look farther off to his right out of the corner of his eye. Sure enough, a flicker of motion behind the spider mine containers caught his attention. Dropping the cigar to the cold cement floor, he put it out with his bare foot and casually walked further into the storage container area of the armory for better cover. He'd find out what was in there with him.

The Zerg had taken the ship long ago, it felt like forever. Jayce, a Junior Mechanical Engineer, had taken as many containers of rations that she could carry from the mess hall and holed up in the armory when the Queen of Blades herself entered the Hyperion and took all of their leaders. Those few who had combat experience had already suited up and left the armory long before she got there, and that was how she ended up sealed inside, alone and waiting to die. But the Zerg never broke down that armory door, and though she had seen some of her wiser co-workers and friends banging on it, begging for saving, she saw too the fast scorpion-looking monsters that were already on them through the security cameras. They were as good as dead.

When the fighting had died down, what pitiful little the shipmates could do, the entire ship went dark. Jayce had been keeping an eye of the state of the ship through the control terminal in Swanns head offices, and fear coiled in her guts when the Adjutant had alerted her that the cocoons the Zerg had placed on the ship had begun to hatch. Each day a new monster emerged she had cried for another great man who had been twisted. Since then, the Adjutant had alerted her to any and all attempts to access anything on the ship and Jayce used her technical skills and higher level access to block them from overriding any of the Adjutants protocols.

Now, she was dressed in a Ghost outfit and hiding for her life behind a box of spider mines. **Ain't this just a bitch.** It was truly a blessing that the Commander had invested in advanced Ghost suits that could cloak forever, she had practiced with it the second she found one and was able to remain hidden if perfectly still, else flaws appeared. When she peeked over the box and saw that Tychus Findlay, now a clawed and spined monster, was nowhere to be seen, her insides went cold. **If I can get to Swanns office, I can turn on the auto turrets and maybe take him out.** Problem was, Swanns office was at the opposite end of the bay and she could either make her way through the storage containers or across the open space.

Unable to cloak properly while moving, Jayce opted for the storage container route. If she spotted him, she'd hold still and he wouldn't notice her. That was just how it was going to have to be. Barely breathing, Jayce began her painfully slow crouched walk to the containers, eye on the prize at the top of the stairs.

Tychus had made a beeline for the industrial sized light switch he caught sight of along the wall, clenching his teeth at the loud CLACK the lights overhead made when he pulled the lever. **There.** A sharp intake of breath, barely audible, announced his quarry didn't like the change of surroundings. Lips curling into a grin, Tychus only had to blink a few times before the darkened room looked as clear as day. Then he started hunting.

Swallowing tightly, Jayce had not thought to put on the high-tech goggles that Ghosts wore for situations like this and she cursed inwardly. Nearly crawling, all she had was her ears and the dim light cast by the partially opened armory door. When she reached the bulk of the containers, she
straightened up and started moving at a faster pace, trying to control her breathing. When a black mass leaped over her head from one container to another, she audibly clapped her hands to her mouth to keep from shrieking. He had been so silent, and now she had given her position freely. Nobody ever trained engineers how to run and hide from monsters properly.

Tychus' eyes widened when he heard the clap of hands, entirely surprised. Professionals, hell, *rookies* don't make those kind of mistakes. Brows furrowing as he straightened up and leaned forwards slightly, looking over the edge of the box and trying to spot what had made the noise. There was only cement floor, but he knew what he heard. Determined, he braced a hand on the edge of the container and lowered himself down slowly, annoyed at the sound of his claws clicking on the cement.

Jayce was facing Tychus and what felt like nearly touching bodies, face to face. *He's going to hear my heart racing, my breathing, something.* She wasn't sure if she was breathing at all when a dinner plate sized hand stretched forwards and slowly closed around air behind her head. Jayce had leaned forwards ever so slightly, shrugging her shoulders into her body as tight as she could, eyes bugging as those mutated razors for nails nearly touched her hair and her nose nearly touched his collar bone.

Elsewhere...

When Stetmann entered the lab, he nearly yelled his surprise but managed to keep it to a sharp jerk backwards. Standing beside the Zerg specimen tank was a single infested Terran. Before he could speak, Shlassa hissed. "Control it. *Flex the muscle.*"
Humanity

Tychus saw her. When he raised his arm partially and closed his fist around air, the imperfections of the cloaking suit became obvious against his skin. All at once he discerned her face nearly pressed to his chest and her body scrunched together as hard as she could get it, attempting to be as small as possible. The faint brush of air against his skin when she couldn't hold her breath anymore brought him back to the present from his observations.

"Got yourself in a bit of a bind now, don't you?" Looking into her eyes sharply, he saw the tenseness and will to run being fought. "Don't run." He warned, all too aware of the rush he was getting as it was.

"Just kill me." Jayce whispered. There was a pistol holstered on her hip, but she didn't have to be a damn combat veteran to know it wouldn't do anything worth mentioning even if she drew and fired fast enough.

Tychus paused, unmoving as he entered a moral struggle. Killing her would be a kindness, but she was also not infested. They could use her to work around the Adjutant and with some luck save her too, he decided. Lowering his hand back to his side, he took a slow step backwards: every movement slow so as not to spook her into a run. "Not going to kill you. We have control of ourselves. Gonna try to get you outta here in one piece, doll." Jayce nearly passed out, but she wasn't sure if it was from holding her breath or relief.

In the laboratory, Stetmann was learning to feel out and manipulate the simple infested Terran.

"It is empty. Fill it and control it." Shlassa intoned, eyes glittering.

Stetmann felt revulsion, both at himself and what he found inside the Terran- or lack thereof, the thought of what he was doing and how this had been a man once left his control flagging quickly. He had directed the infested to hand him his notepad, but it dropped to the floor as his thoughts wavered, the infested becoming immobile- like a puppet without strings.

Sitting down, he rubbed his temples and took a breath while Shlassa chittered in annoyance before pausing, dead still.

Jayce clumsily disabled the cloaking suit, almost in tears from relief and disbelief as she became solid. "I saw you and the others come out of those egg-things. I couldn't believe that there would be any humanity left in you, I am sorry." The suit fit the woman ill and she looked bedraggled with disheveled hair, dark rings under her eyes and grease stains smeared on her cheeks. Tychus recognized her immediately, he had pinched her butt once when he was still stuck in the suit.

"Shh. Don't know how watched I am." In truth, Tychus was trying his best to school his thoughts and not draw attention. There was no way Shlassa wasn't watching, maybe even Kerrigan too. He might not kill the woman with his own hands, but there was no saying someone else wouldn't.

Nodding, Jayce looked around nervously and whispered. "What now then?"

Rubbing his mouth in thought, Tychus looked over her suit and then the room around them. "Gonna have to hide you again. I'll get the lights." Brushing past her, he was aware of the gun she had on her hip, but not concerned. If he survived Stetmann blasting a hole in his chest, no normal gun was ever going to take him down.

As the lights were switched back on, Jayce became aware of an Adjutant alert blaring in Swanns
office—she could vaguely see the red light flashing through the window. Feeling a chill inside her guts, she pulled out the small data pad in her utility belt and accessed the message. Her eyes widened. "Tychus..." The infested on the ship were moving en masse towards the armory—and the door was jammed open with a damned cargo box.

"What?" He had come over quickly, a prickling sensation rippling through his mind.

"The infested are coming! I can't close the armory door either!" Her panic that had subsided such a short while ago had returned full force—she stuck the data pad back into her belt and turned to look at Tychus, nearly getting bowled over by him as he grunted and stumbled.

A force had entered Tychus, knocking him to his knees and taking his breath away. When his body started to rise without his permission he realized what was happening and tried to lock his muscles, his body, in place. "Run." Was all he could growl out as his hands took a clumsy swipe at her.

Leaping backwards as though he was on fire, Jayce wasn't going to question what was going on, not with an order like that. She ran towards Swann's office full tilt, all but falling up the stairs in her haste.

When Jayce turned and ran, Tychus felt the instinct to chase and catch surging through his burning muscles, all he could do was let out a primal yell as he shambled after her. Jayce punched in her key code to lock the door with shaking hands, watching through the industrial window as Tychus looked to be fighting literal possession. She also saw the shambling bodies of her former co-workers passing under the armory door, her mouth open in sick horror while her hands sought out the buttons for the auto-turrets on the command console.

Desperate, Tychus cried out in his mind as the blades embedded in his arms flipped out with a practiced ease—Shlassa was at the wheel. *Stop! She is useful! We can use her!* Heaving for breath, he stood at the base of the stairs and turned rigidly to face an auto-turret as it popped up out of the floor.

*She is weak, and you will destroy her. Do not fight me, Terran. I will break your mind.*

As one, each man aboard was pulled into their mental conflict the second Tychus addressed Shlassa. Guns, booze and papers fell from hands as they reached up to press at temples and cradle faces.

Tychus had leaped forwards and severed the first auto-turret at its base the moment it began firing at him, thick bullets that had only partially embedded into his flesh were already being pushed outwards by his unnatural healing. The other auto-turret was firing at the infested who were stumble-running towards it, and it was quickly broken by the pounding of inhumanly strong limbs. When Tychus' eyes settled on the window where Jayce stared at him, Horner, Stetmann and Warfield all saw it.

Slamming his fist into the floor beneath him, Warfield snarled. *NO! Don't you dare kill that girl! Don't you dare!* Tychus was climbing the stairs towards the door and the infested were coming with him.

*S-stop!* Horner cried in his mind, not sure if he was telling Tychus to not kill the girl or for his mind to stop being ripped to pieces.

"Shlassa! We can use her! She can help us use the ship because she is not infested! Stop, please!" Stetmann was in the lab with the broodmother and on his knees on the creep-covered floor, using his voice as he struggled to help Tychus fight the broodmothers physical control.

"She will die. Stop struggling." Shlassa responded cool and collected, killing was second nature and weakness would never be tolerated.
Blood began to ooze out of their noses and ears as Horner, Warfield and Stetmann were fighting in Tychus' mind.

When he reached the door, Tychus jammed his claws straight into the steel on one side and began to peel it open like a tuna can while the infested banged on the window.

My Queen.

What, Shlassa?

The Terrans have found a survivor and their minds are about to break trying to save it.

What?

Kerrigan immediately focused on the Hyperion and what was happening inside it, her fist clenching at the Zergling that had been coiled under it and making it hiss with pain.

We failed everyone else, but we can save her! Fight it Tychus you son of a bitch! Warfield was on his side on the floor, nearly reduced to twitching and flailing.

All of them were throwing themselves against Shlassa's control and being batted aside like toddlers.

Tychus was looking Jayce in the eyes as the door screamed in protest and bent, nearly wide open enough for him to squeeze through. Jayce had taken her gun out of its holster and had it pointed at her head, attempting to gather enough bravery to pull the trigger and spare herself.

ENOUGH! Kerrigan's will was to Shlassa as Shlassa's will was to the four men, and they were all immediately freed. Blood leaking out of his ears, Tychus flung himself forwards with far more vigor, breaking through the door and throwing himself at Jayce. The gun went off, but into the wall when Tychus slammed Jayce's arm roughly to the side with a snap and a startled cry from her.

Practically laying on the woman, Tychus rested one arm over the top of her chair and rested his forehead on that, still holding her arm aloft with his right hand as he struggled to collect himself.

"It's alright. It's alright. They won't kill you." He mumbled, trying to be reassuring but for the most part just squeezing the woman's possibly broken arm and breathing all over her face as she lay there stunned. The infested were already dispersing, being sent to idle elsewhere. Stetmann, Warfield and Horner were recovering similarly to Tychus- laying wherever they happened to be at the start of the ordeal and breathing heavily.

Shlassa. Kerrigan's ire burned the broodmother, who recoiled where she stood in Stetmann's lab.

My Queen!

You were chosen to safeguard my charges, and you nearly turned them into vegetables just now.

They fight me! I was simply eradicating a survivor, and they chose to die over it.

Gritting her teeth, Kerrigan debated smiting the broodmother right then and there.

Then you let the survivor live and inform me. Right now it is useful, you will leave it be. But if this happens again, Shlassa... You will wish that I had killed you.

Yes, my Queen! Shlassa bowed to nobody, so distressed she was to have upset her Queen in such a way.
Tychus nearly fell asleep right there, half laying on Jayce as he was, until she hissed in pain and reached for her injured arm. "Shit." He mumbled, letting go of her arm which was already developing a dark hand-shaped bruise, the gun dangled from her fingertips and fell to the floor with a clatter.

"Tychus." Jayce's voice was soft, oddly calm as she stared at the chest nearly smushing her face. "It was a zombie apocalypse in here no less than two minutes ago. What the hell is going on?" Maybe she was in shock. He'd have to get Stetmann to look at her arm at the very least, but he was so tired.

"Had a chat with the higher-ups and managed to get you a free pass." How he kept his humor, even when the last of the bullets shot into his chest from the auto-turret popped out of his skin and landed in Jayce's lap, no one would know.

Stetmann, Warfield and Horner had all curled up where they were and entered a deep sleep of recovery. Even with each man having intense regenerative abilities, the damage their minds had taken nearly sent them into hibernation.

Forcing himself to his knees beside the chair Jayce was sitting in, instead of on it and her, Tychus laid heavily on his side against the cold plated steel- unable to stop from closing his eyes. "We'll get you fixed up. Just need some shut-eye. Don't shoot yourself, sweet thing." He mumbled before falling asleep. Jayce was cradling her broken arm as it throbbed, sincerely considering trying to kill him with the pistol while he was apparently vulnerable. Standing up, she leaned over to pick the gun up with her good hand, wincing and gritting her teeth.

Swallowing thickly, she pointed the gun at his head and blinked away tears angrily- This is a kindness! He would have killed an infested without a second thought too. Jayce was trying to convince herself as her hand shook and more angry tears tracked through the grime on her face.

The lights flickered harshly, making Jayce falter and look around- fearful of another Zerg assault. When she saw the stooped shape of what had to be a Protoss standing on the opposite side of the window, though she had never actually seen one, she was stunned.

Zeratul had entered the ship as fast as safely possible when he sensed the confrontation, how the Terrans had rallied together in an attempt to save the lone survivor had sparked hope inside him. Though their battle was over, a small victory for them, he sensed the inner conflict of the woman. Stop. He implored, planting a large four-fingered hand up against the glass with a clack. There is not much time. You must not kill them, you are of great importance to the humanity of these men. You can save them, there is always hope! In truth, he was not entirely certain about his statement, but nothing in the future was certain right now. He had appeared, taking advantage of the broodmother and Kerrigans relaxed mental grip on the crew to deliver his message, and disappeared in a flicker of the lights as soon as he was done speaking.

Am I going insane? Jayce questioned what she had just saw and heard, staring hard at the window. Why would a Protoss even be here? The angry throbbing of her arm as it swelled up around the break brought her back to the present. The arm of her ghost suit was going to require cutting, it had become too tight for anything else. Slamming her gun back into its holster, she wiped the back of her sleeve across her face and stepped over the sleeping Tychus gingerly. The Adjutant could help her find some pain killers in the med bay. We'll see about that free pass.

Jayce walked past the corpses of the few infested one auto-turret had taken out quickly, trying not to think about them. Pulling the data pad from her belt, she placed it on a box and clumsily brought up a floor plan, charting a route to the med bay one-handed before picking it back up. The path was a bit roundabout, but she would give all infested and Zerg-related matter a very wide berth, which was preferable even though her arm throbbed with her heartbeat painfully. Walking under the jammed
open armory door, Jayce gathered her courage and went forth. The ghosts of the people she had spent so much time with were her companions in the dimly lit halls, reminding her of what she originally joined Raynor's Raiders for in the first place, and how it all went so wrong in the end. With the Adjutant's guidance, she would make it to the med bay within a few hours and give herself basic medical treatment, following the computers guidelines.

Rory Swann woke to piercing silence, listened to Stetmann's message somberly and dressed without a word. When he looked at himself in the small mirror he would normally use to shave, he beheld a body covered in chitinous armor of a pale brown color and strange spiny hair, similar to Kerrigan herself but short. He almost laughed when his face seemed human, so out of place it was, complete with beard and all. The real kicker, he thought, was his all new arm. *How many times did I dream about having it back? At what cost did I get it?* Bitter, he walked into the quiet halls of the Hyperion and thought about Stetmann and his message. *They still need me. I can still help people.* So he set out to do just that: the first order would be to deal with the Adjutant and then getting this tub up and running.

Stetmann, Tychus, Warfield and Horner all woke up roughly at once. Warfield looked blearily at the legs of his chair, pressing a hand to the side of his temple as he forced himself up with the other. Stetmann felt warm, as if he was laying on a soft blanket. When he opened his eyes the illusion shattered, the creep on the floor throbbing in its disturbing fleshy way, he would have gotten up faster had the motion not hurt his head so much. Horner woke up on the unforgiving cantina floor, the drink he had in his hand when he had been pulled into a mental struggle had long dried, but there were shards of glass pressing against his thickened skin annoyingly. Tychus groaned, having been shoved against the back wall of Swann's control room, but otherwise left untouched.

Tychus' eyes focused slowly, brows furrowing in confusion at the foreign shape of the person at the control panel. Only when Swann turned around to look at him after hearing his second rasping groan did he register who it was.

"The dead awaken, apparently; Not the best place for a nap though. Why the hell did you go and trash my control room?" Swann sounded rather cross. Tychus supposed they had not been on the best of terms after roughing him up in the cantina, but he couldn't find the strength to give a damn about being combative. All at once he recalled why he was, indeed, laying on the floor in Swann's control room. Sitting up fast, his eyes focused on where the gun had been on the floor. "Where'd the girl go?"

"Girl? You on the sauce or what? Why don't you get outta here, I'm trying to get this place running." Swann clearly had the Zerg hair thing going on, but he was also wearing his thick mechanic outfit which obscured everything else, so Tychus didn't pay it much mind.

Wetting his parched lips, Tychus stood up and slowly walked out of the room, leaving Swann eyeing him. He had already done his double-takes and staring while Tychus was down for the count, he was done being surprised.

"You just keep doin' what you're doin'. Got some business to attend to." Absently he swiped at the crusted blood on his upper lip and ears. He was recalling bits of what happened quicker by the second, the destroyed auto-turrets and corpses of the infested helping jar the memory when he saw it. By the time he was ducking under the armory door he was making a bee-line for the med bay.

*Tychus?* Stetmann's voice was clear as a bell in his head, raising his ire immediately.

*Get the hell out of my head.* He wasn't sure if the message was sent, but if Stetmann didn't want to have to pray for some queen bug bitch to save his ass from evisceration, he wouldn't do it again.
Stetmann gathered up papers and affixed them to his clipboard, keeping his eyes down and avoiding Shlassa, who thankfully was silent and ignoring him. He had felt Tychus seething, but it was so clear and easy- and he had so many theories why it could be. He needed to get everyone together. Talking to them in their minds would have been the easiest, what with the comm system still down, but he decided against it after Tychus' reaction. He would just have to find everyone more manually, maybe with a little cheating.

Horner was piecing together what had happened, sitting on a stool in the cantina and sorting through his mind. He felt like he actually was Tychus for a time, and he had been fighting so hard to just control himself. It was too surreal, distressing, and he needed another drink.

Warfield was walking through the halls of the Hyperion, thinking on what had happened, like everyone else. He remembered the woman clearly, but couldn't recall if Tychus had managed to not tear her to shreds, the imagery in his mind was so vivid. He was looking the woman in the eyes, she had the gun to her head, and he was about to get in. That was when it went dark and he couldn't find any memories beyond that. His feet guided him to the armory, where he'd find out for sure if she lived or not.

"Raptor strain Zergling. Capable of scaling cliffs and more aggressive than lesser Zergling." Abathur droned while Kerrigan listened, watching the Raptor strain tear through Terrans with their own eyes and tasting the spoils with their hungry mouths. She was the Swarm.

"Can only choose one. Your choice?" The Swarm had stopped its interstellar travel for this, Abathur had found several useful bio signatures that the Swarm could make their own and brought it to his Queen's attention. Kerrigan was always eager to guide the evolution of the Swarm.

"The Raptor strain will serve us best." Crippling the high ground advantage of some of their enemies most powerful weapons against the Zerg- Siege tanks and Colossus in particular, was a game changer and a no-brainer as far as Kerrigan was concerned.

"Swarmling strain discarded. Raptor strain integrated."

"Good." With but a thought, the mass of Zerg resumed their journey through space.

Tychus was standing in front of a medical table with tools laid out on it, telling Jayces story clearly though she was long gone. How long had they been asleep? He was still unsure, time meant a lot less to you when you had such a surplus of it. Looking at a strip of dried up bloodstained cloth and a container of half-spilled antiseptic fluid, he frowned. Arm was definitely broken. Grabbing the edge of the cloth he picked it up and held it in his hand, debating. On one hand, it was damn gross, but on the other he had no other means of finding someone who could be anywhere on the ship and cloaked to boot. Sighing, he gave in to the urge that had been pressing at the back of his mind the second he saw the blood. Sniffing the dried blood on the bandage deeply, his mouth watered in hunger; Not his hunger, the Swarms.

Jayce had tried so hard to follow the directions the Adjutant gave for checking the break and setting it, but she just couldn't do it with her left hand and the mind-boggling pain. She had given up after trying to check the type of break it was with a long needle that she had to jam into her skin, nearly dumping the whole container of antiseptic on herself afterwards with how bad her left hand was shaking. Frustrated, Jayce had resorted to digging up some heavy pain killers and anti-inflammatories, stealing some more rations from the mess and holing up in her room in the living quarters. The Adjutant had guided her around the infested the whole way, but she had almost given up on going for her room when the machine showed her footage of General Warfield laying in his room. Even the idea of being near one of those higher functioning infested sent her into a shaking fit.
She hadn't killed Tychus—the Protoss had ensured that, but she regretted it. Now she couldn't block the infested from taking over the ship and getting it operational, only armed with her simple tools and data pad. It was just a matter of time before they found her now, and she would be ready to use the gun without hesitation this time. But first: sleep.

Swann and Warfield caught sight of one another at roughly the same time. Warfield had walked into the armory and towards the control room, wanting to have his question answered. Swann had stepped out of the control room after having the urge to smash things when the Adjutant was giving him trouble. The two paused mid-stride, making eye contact.

Attracted to his distress, Stetmann made his way to the cantina when he felt Horner there. Not entirely sure what he was about to find, he peered around the door cautiously as it slid open with a gasp. Horner was sitting at the table in the center of the cantina below the banged up jukebox, and had what was possibly all the booze in the whole room arrayed in front of him.

"Stetmann." Tilting his head slightly towards the younger man, Horner proceeded to pour the remaining liquid of the bottle in his hand down his throat, slapping his lips before smirking. "Zerg can't get drunk."

"Ah, well no... Our metabolisms are far too strong for intoxication anymore, sir."

Horner sighed. "What do you want, Stetmann?"

"We need to talk sir, I have important information to share and I believe everyone should be present. It is relevant to all of us and our situation."

"How does it even matter? We've lost. The artifact is destroyed, can't even remove our own Zerg taint now. Not to mention Kerrigan is going to use us to kill the people we were trying to save in the first damn place." It was rather sad, Stetmann thought, to see the unflappable and ever-optimistic captain of the ship be so somber.
Recovery

"I am going to assume there is no dead girl in that room."

"You're not the first Zerged up person to ask me about a girl today, actually." Swann quirked a brow, looking Warfield over. "So is there really some girl running around, or is your brain fried too?"

Shaking his head and chuckling, Warfield cracked a smile. "Yeah, Tychus found a survivor and some shit went down. Wasn't sure if she made it, so I came to check. If Tychus was here then he's lookin' for her and we'll hear about it soon enough. You need a hand with anything?"

Nodding his head slightly, Swann gestured for Warfield to follow. "Yeah. We're gonna have to get to the Adjutants room down in lower sector T, I'm sure I can make use of you. Let me grab some tools and we'll go."

When no fancy bloodhound instinct kicked in after he sniffed the bloody cloth, Tychus grimaced. Can't win 'em all. A bit grossed out with himself, he tossed the cloth back to the table and took a good look around. It would be prudent to get some anesthetic, he figured. He was poking through containers and breaking into any cupboards that had remained sealed, the girl having broken into just about everything already, when he found what he was looking for: surgical anesthetic. Bingo. He grabbed enough to possibly knock out even himself and returned to searching.

She couldn't have left the ship and she'd be avoiding all the infested-intelligent ones and otherwise. Food and water would be important for a person looking to hole up somewhere, so he stalked off to the mess hall.

"Captain. I know this situation seems very bleak, but we have to fight just like we always have, don't you see?" Stetmann stood across the table from Horner, clenching and unclenching his fingers around his clipboard while looking at him in concern.

Staring at the younger man dully, Horner rested his hands on the tabletop. "I fought to help free our sector from a tyrant, so did you. But we let Jim pull us into a mad bid to free his past and got killed for it. As far as I am concerned we're dead and this is our hell, Stetmann."

Frustrated, Stetmann wished for the power to just make Horner see what needed to be seen. "You only woke up recently, so maybe you don't really know or remember what happened with Tychus and that survivor. We have something-someone to fight for right now, and that mental struggle against Shlassa is proof we have the strength to fight this!" It was clear he wasn't getting anywhere with the Captain. Horner was staring off at a point on the ceiling and resolutely ignoring him.

Stetmann. Tychus grumbled in everyone's mind.

Horner's eyebrows drew together tightly as he brought two fingertips to his temple and pressed, discomfort clear.

Stetmann perked up, eyes widening in surprise.

"What?" Swann dropped the small wrench he had been using on the door panel that separated him and Warfield from the Adjutants room, pressing his palm to his forehead. Warfield grunted, uncomfortable but not in the kind of discomfort he had felt before when receiving bug messages, as he liked to think of them.
Tychus found her a lot faster than he thought he would, but he supposed it was habit to hide in a place that felt safe and familiar to yourself, even if it was a bad one. Checking the mess had gone fast—clearly raided, and since he had not felt any normal hunger pangs, he deduced nobody else had either. From there he took a guess and made his way to the sector containing all the floors with rooms for the crew, figuring she may have gone for "home". He dredged up the memory of when he pinched her butt and tried to remember anything distinct, other than almost being brained by a wrench. Orange outfit. One of Swann’s engineer types.

He was glad he had taken the time to get to know the floors of the ship, and subsequently where the different cliques had been housed. From there it was just silently creeping through the halls until the renewed smell of anesthetic burned his nose. While he was hesitant, especially after the hostility he threw at Stetmann over it earlier, he called out to him mentally all the same.

Stetmann. Found the girl, door is locked though. Don’t want to break it down, she took her gun. I know her arm is broken and I brought some knock-out drugs, gonna need your help.

He was not confident that he had successfully sent his message at all, but he felt in his gut that it had gotten through—and Tychus often trusted his gut, so he waited.

Swann sighed, feeling an unnatural fatigue as he wiped his forehead on the back of his sleeve and turned to face Warfield. "So we got some kind of bug radio now?"

"Yeah, not fond of it either." Warfield was resting his hands on top of the Gauss rifle he had taken to carrying around, just in case.

"Well. I got a skeleton key card we can use on the door, guess we should go give em a hand. If whoever this person is, isn’t infested, we won’t have to fight with the Adjutant to override a bunch of the infested protocols."

The Generals brows furrowed, but he turned to follow Swann as he started walking all the same. "If you have some skeleton key, how come you aren’t using it on that door?"

"It would be pretty disastrous for some infiltrator or unsavory sort to get a hold of a key to the castle, don’t you think?" Swann snipped. "Its only for the living quarters, specifically for room maintenance and medical emergencies."

"Alright, fair enough."

Stetmann recovered from his surprise quickly after receiving the message. Depending on how severe the break was, the woman could need immediate medical attention. With time being of the essence, he looked sharply at his despondent Captain. "If you won’t help, then it is most likely we will fail." Focusing briefly, the ability to pinpoint where people were was becoming easier every time he tried. "I will be with Tychus in the Engineer section of housing, should you choose to pull your head out of your ass."

Walking away briskly, he paused at the door as it hissed open and added thoughtfully. "If anyone could recognize who this person is, it would be you Captain." Horners gaze was heavy on his back as he left.

Be there soon, Tychus.

The lack of response to him being outside of her door, and noise in general, was grating on Tychus. With nothing better to do while he was waiting, he thought about Stetmann. That kid was handling this situation better than anyone, and he supposed giving him more credit was in order, like Warfield had said. Rubbing his face with a hand, his thoughts of the squirrely scientist gave him a queer
feeling in his head: As though he could picture the other man's surroundings as he was walking, snippets of thoughts and where he was in relation to Tychus. At best, he could relate it to some kind of radar. A very annoying radar.

When Stetmann came walking around a corner, Tychus swore he saw himself through his eyes for a second and blinked hard, shaking his head.

"Something wrong?"

"Aside from there being a girl who's probably going to shoot herself the second that door opens behind said door? No."

Stetmann took a breath, looking at the door and thinking like always. "Alright. Swann and Warfield are coming. I can't do anything about the door but maybe they can. It is entirely possible that the woman is unconscious, which would make things easier but also means she may need serious medical attention."

Sighing, Tychus looked at the door and considered smashing it. Stetmann followed his train of thought with his eyes and shook his head sharply, but Tychus did not follow through thanks to Swann and Warfield.

"Hey. Heard you were having some trouble and came to give a hand." Swann piped up, they had come from the opposite direction of Stetmann and approached from behind Tychus, who turned to look at them casually.

"Yeah. Figured the doll might want to keep her door." Smirking, he stepped aside as Swann swooped in, all business as he pulled a key card off his belt and went for the door.

"Came as quick as we could. Any idea who this person is?" Warfield intoned, standing back and out of the way to watch.

"No. The Captain would probably know - he was very good at keeping up with faces, but he decided to not come." Stetmann could not mask the disappointment in his tone while he watched Swann swipe the card and punch a short code into the door pad.

"Was some kind of techie, one of Swann's folk. He might know." Tychus offered as the door hissed open, four pairs of eyes peering into the lit room cautiously.

Jayce was splayed out on top of her bed covers, gun held loosely in her good hand, sound asleep. Her data pad was resting on her stomach, below her broken arm, and flashing a red warning continually. The room itself was furnished sparsely, and if it wasn't for there being a simple comb resting on the greasy machine part covered tabletop, there would be no indication of a female living there.

"Yeah, that's one of mine." Swann piped up, stepping aside for Stetmann as he squeezed in quickly and took stock of the situation. Jayce's gun was relieved from her feverish fingertips and passed off to Tychus to hold, who traded a handful of anesthetic shots off to Stetmann.

"Don't think we need that much, but thanks Tychus." Stetmann quickly and expertly measured and administered the shot, to which there was no visible reaction.

"Never know." The big man shrugged and stepped out, it was too cramped in the small room for his tastes.

Free to touch her arm without any adverse reactions, Stetmann pulled back the strips of loosely cut
sleeve and gave her arm a good feel, frowning. "You didn't break her arm, Tychus, you pulverized it. We need to get her to the med bay operating room immediately." Stetmann sounded dire as he stepped back from the unconscious woman. Tychus felt a pang of guilt, enough to keep him from trying to defend his actions and arguing.

"I'm going ahead to prep the room, bring her please." All business, Stetmann swooped off to the med bay at a hurried pace. Swann had stepped into the room around him and took a good look at the woman.

"Oh wow, that's Jayce!" Swann was both surprised and impressed, he gathered her up into his arms and left the room with Warfield and Tychus in tow. "She's a tough cookie, can't say I'm surprised to see her still kicking. One of my Junior Mechanical Engineers, she'll be real useful."

"How does a woman end up in space working as a mechanic on a floating rebel palace, anyway?" Tychus shouldn't have been so surprised, but he was looking for reasons to disparage her for getting herself into this mess if he had to be honest with himself.

Offended on her behalf, Swann stepped through a door and mumbled at Tychus. "This woman was a refugee from Summerset-P35. One of those real small colonies you don't hear about. Dominion was oppressing them heavily and all but robbing them of their ability to survive. Turned out bloody like it usually does. Picked her up in an escape pod that was launched from a small ship- she's no stranger to surviving, let me tell you. Lucky worse didn't find her."

"You know everyone's life story, chief?" Tychus and Warfield fell in on either side of Swann as they walked into the med bay, looking for Stetmann.

"The people who work for me? You bet. Everyone in a damn rebellion has one, and they all deserve to be heard." Swann was adamant. His people meant everything to him.

"Strong words, I can get behind them." Warfield chipped in, liking what he heard. He didn't really know Swann, and it was good to see his character on display.

"Ah good, bring her over here quick!" Stetmann was in an operating room with glass walls, prepped and ready. Swann quickly laid Jayce out on the operating table and everyone stood there, unsure.

Already moving her broken arm off to the side and prepping to cut into it, Stetmann paused and looked up at all the uncertain men staring at him, uncomfortable. "Er. I got this, you can leave and check up on her later if you like. I'll put her in one of the containment chambers when I'm done operating." There was a collective sigh of relief- no one was a medic, and doing surgery was well beyond their level of medical expertise.

"Right. I'll come to check up on her later then, sooner she gets up and running the better." Warfield made to leave with Swann and Tychus in tow, but Stetmann spoke before they could.

"If all of you could come back here later together, that would be great. I wanted to talk about what happened with the broodmother and some theories I have, you should all be present." Swabbing Jayces arm with an antiseptic-soaked cotton swab, Stetmann had already started making his surgical incision as he spoke.

Warfield nodded, curious what the younger man had managed to cook up in that egg head of his. "Alright, we'll meet back up in oh-three-hundred. See you then." They left Stetmann to fix Jayce up. Tychus sat down on a small, uncomfortable waiting seat towards the entrance of the med bay, figuring that there really wasn't anything else to do but wait anyway.
Warfield and Swann left together to continue working on the door to the Adjutants room. Swann reasoned to himself that Jayce was not going to be operational in a decent amount of time and he could deal with the Adjutant before then anyway.

If this was what being dead felt like, Jayce was not impressed with how painful it felt. When consciousness came back, she couldn't quite clear the haze from her mind and could barely open her eyes. Moving her limbs was out of the question. There were voices not far away though, low and grumbling, so she stopped trying to open her eyes immediately and focused on hearing and feeling.

She was still on a bed and she couldn't determine if it was her own or not by feel, but going by the clean smell and heavy sedation feeling, she was in the med bay. The men speaking sounded like they were being filtered through a pillow, lacking enough clarity to be understood.

"Why are we having this conversation right beside her, anyway?" Horner had come to the med bay, only to sate his curiosity of who it was that had survived, but hadn't left before everyone else had come back for Stetmanns meeting and was included whether he wanted to be or not.

"Well she's unconscious for starters, but she is also the only other person with a mind on the ship and I believe she should be privy to what is going on too." Stetmann was standing closest to Jayce, clipboard in hand and looking over her post-op information.

"She's in this with us, and she has a damn sight more to lose than us right now too." Warfield agreed, Swann and Tychus grunting their own agreements.

"Yes, well." Stetmann fidgeted with his hands, speaking in front of others was never his strong point. "As you know, we are able to communicate with each other mentally. What you may not know is that we can also control the infested in the ship, too." He kept his eyes down, purposefully avoiding knowing glares so he wouldn't lose his courage. "We've each been getting stronger since we woke up, using our mental abilities just a little bit easier each time we use them. But that struggle with Shlassa? I theorize that she inadvertently forced evolution on us, that we're much stronger than we were before we were forced into a deep sleep."

"You also saw how that little mental battle with the broodmother turned out. We lost, badly." Tychus crossed his arms, frowning. "Just what are you getting at, kid?"

"Gonna have to agree with Tychus, son. I don't much care about the path you're taking to get to the point, just get to the point and quick." Horner was silent and listening, as was Swann who hadn't been a part of their battle with the broodmother in the first place.

"Alright. We need to train ourselves more: harder and faster than this idle discovery we've been going through these past few days. Actually figuring out what we can do physically and pushing ourselves mentally. We need to fight to force ourselves to become stronger, or we won't be able to get out of this."

Tychus was skeptical. "Say we do. Aren't we just giving queeny what she wants? I don't think any of us are capable of comprehending the power of that monsters mind. We could become strong and then she uses us for whatever she has planned, unable to fight her."

"She does want us for something. It bugs me that we don't know what, and Tychus does have a very valid point." Warfield crossed his arms, much like Tychus, and looked thoughtful.

"Kerrigan is not infallible! We just need to make the best of our situation and wait for her to make a mistake." Stetmann was frustrated that they were giving him a hard time, honestly thinking they would be all aboard with the idea of returning to fighting.
"Can't they basically hear everything we're saying and thinking right now, anyway? Kind of hard to fight with no element of surprise." Swann looked discouraged.

"The broodmother, Shlassa is probably listening to us. But I don't think Kerrigan listens all the time, she would have stopped Shlassa from controlling Tychus well before that situation got to the point it did. Just because they know what we're doing does not mean they will interfere, they do want to use us for something, as you said."

Horner rubbed his forearm slightly, squeezing tight when he felt the tendrils inside flexing and writhing. Agitated, he looked up from the floor at Stetmann. "That's the plan? Get stronger, try to fight Kerrigan when we think the time is right? Then what? What happens if we do win, Stetmann? You think our fellow Terrans are going to just welcome us back for help kicking Mengsk's ass? We are Zerg."

"I don't know, Captain. But I do know we need to get this ship operational, grow stronger and move forwards. I do know we need to be a team for anything to work at all."

Taking a long, slow breath, Warfield tilted his head back slightly and breathed out before looking back down at Stetmann. "Kids right. No matter what we do, sitting here don't sit right with me. We can at the very least try to help the civilian get out of here, can we agree on that much?"

Each man looked at Jayce, who's eyes had opened far enough to look at them and mind had cleared enough to get the gist of their conversation.

"Oh, you're awake already? Hello!" Stetmann walked around her bed and flashed a light in her eyes, to which she made an annoyed grunt.

Horner looked at Jayce with sympathy, sighing. "I'll help her get out of here, but that's it." No matter how low he got dragged down, Horners morals would always rise up to bother him at the worst times.

"Look, you got my vote kid. You just tell me what I need to do and I'll do what I can, alright?" Swann piped up, casting the first vote.

"I'm in." Tychus mumbled, looking at Jayce as she struggled to get away from Stetmann's prodding of her temporary cast.

Warfield nodded. "It's decided. Need to get this ship running though."

Voice gravelly, Jayce whispered. "Ain't that sweet. I'll help you. God knows I want to get the hell outta here."

"You get rested first, girl. That's an order" Swann came to stand at her bed side and smiled cheeringly.

"Don't have to tell me twice, sir." Smiling, Jayce fell back into an exhausted sleep immediately. She had no strength to fight being infested or murdered, might as well get some shut-eye.

Pleased at the results of the meeting, even if the only thing they could agree on was helping Jayce, Stetmann smiled. "Well, I'm glad that is decided. Jayce here is very lucky that we had gotten to her in time, marrow from the crushed Ulna had already gotten into her bloodstream and bacteria was building up rapidly. Could have easily suffered from blood clots from the marrow particles, too." Stetmann only realized then the glazed looks directed at him, clearing his throat to change the subject. "Yes, well. I think we should get started right away on mental training. We can do that any time and anywhere aboard the ship. It may be distasteful, but try to work on controlling the Infested
crew members too. They can't feel or think for themselves, they really aren't the people you once
knew them to be, don't let it get to you. We need them if we're going to run this ship with seven
people."

"Eh. I don't know about controlling those creepy infested, but I'll try. We will have to wait for Jayce
to make any headway on the Adjutant, however. I tripped the security measure on the mainframe
door and there is now a several thousand volt electrical field blocking it." Swann and Warfield had
also learned very fast that it indeed did hurt badly when touched, Zerg improvements or otherwise.

*I'll see you nerds around then.* Tychus thought towards them, smirking as he walked out and left
them all frowning.

Rigid, Horner turned to leave. "That's that, then."

"Son. I know you are dealing with this in your own way, just remember we all are, alright?"
Warfield called out to him cautiously.

"Don't know if this can really be dealt with, General." Matt stalked out, making for the bridge to do
some thinking.

"Not taking it so well, I guess?" Swann looked at the other two men with a quirked brow.

"No. I think it'll blow over when the Commander ecloses though. Not really looking forward to
then." Stetmann stared down at Jayce uncomfortably.

All three of them nodded tensely, there was definitely different camps of opinions on how much
blame Jim really deserved for their situation, although no one had directly addressed the matter yet.

"Well, enough of that. Findlay has the right idea." *I'll go practice.* Warfield squinted as he thought
towards them, feeling the touch of a headache coming on already.
Adjutant Agitation

Being given orders to get lots of rest and take the antibiotics as prescribed felt strange when it was being done on a ship full of mind slaves that was docked on a Leviathan covered in slavering alien animals. Looking down at the small containers in her left hand, Jayce smirked slightly. "I've had my rest Doctor, and now it's time to get back to work. I'll take it easy- there is plenty of muscle available, I'm just here to bypass the Adjutant." Stetmann looked uneasy, but couldn't argue either. Time was ticking down before Jim woke and he felt it was imperative the ship was as close to ready to leave as possible when that happened.

"Alright Jayce." Stetmann tilted his head slightly, rolling his shoulders as he received a message from Swann, who had been hard at practice- if only because he was a practical man. We're ready to deal with the Adjutant, get Jayce down here.

"Swann wants you down at the Adjutants mainframe. Finally time to get everything up and running!" He couldn't hide his excitement, Stetmann had been all but burning to take a closer look at the samples he gathered and do much more thorough testing on everyone. As soon as Jayce and Tychus were walking away, he made a beeline for the lab in preparation.

"Let's go get this tub running." Jayce began the long walk with a sigh, she was still very easily fatigued and had to take breaks, having not allowed herself more than a couple hours more to rest, but she'd get wherever she needed to be.

Tychus smirked at the little woman ordering him around. Warfield and him had been taking turns guarding Jayce since they lacked the technical expertise to fix most things on the ship, and it was his turn. The two hit it off pretty good during their time together, Jayce was enjoyably sassy and Tychus loved himself some banter. There were times though when she'd recoil away if he got too close when reaching for a tool or helping with an object out of easy reach, but he couldn't blame her.

"So, once you get outta this mess what are you going to do? Find yourself a Mr. Jayce and settle down on some dirt farm?" Resting his hands atop his Gauss rifle, Tychus was smirking easily.

"Burrough is my last name, Tychus. But no, last time I checked the whole sector is either on fire or covered in aliens anyway."

"Burrow as in digging?"

"No. It just sounds the same." Rolling her eyes, she leaned heavily on the guardrail of the stairs as they went down a few floors. Tychus kept an easy stance, ready to catch her if she slipped.

Jayce was puffing and sweat was beading down her forehead when they were done going down the six flights of stairs to the lowest level of the ship, they took a pause for her to catch her breath. "So, what about you? Got a Mrs. Findlay waiting for you somewhere?" Jayce couldn't help but smirk at the thought of a man like Tychus actually being tied down anywhere.

"Oh no. I am a strictly free man, to deny other women my raw sex appeal would be a crime."

Leaning on the wall opposite of her, the humor visibly died in his eyes as his smile melted away.

"Don't really think we're getting out of this anyway, doll."

"Don't go all Captain on me, please. One of him is enough right now." Taking a deep breath, Jayce righted herself and started walking.

Tychus. What is taking so long?
Tychus grunted when Swann barged into his head. *Unless you want me carrying her everywhere, the girl is slow.* When no response came, he nodded to himself and caught up to Jayce quickly.

"Some news?"

"No." Their conversation was officially dead, but it was only a few minutes of listening to their footsteps and the ship humming before they arrived at the electrically charged door.

"Hello beautiful, how you feelin'?" Swann piped up as soon as they were in sight. Jayce took a breath to respond but Tychus barged in.

"Just swell, sugar." Jayce laughed in good humor while Swann made a face and shook his head.

"Been better sir. We better be able to get things running from here, because I don't think I'm going up that many stairs like this."

"You'll get it, I got all the access codes- you have the uninfested genes. Together we make one regular person." They huddled up to the control panel of the door, which Swann had hooked back up after realizing he wasn't getting any farther trying to force the door open, and began the long process of turning off the electrical field and opening the door. Tychus turned away and stood at rest, rifle in hand. Eyes half-closed, he felt the empty husks of the infested and began to slowly shuffle them around on the athletic field; He had moved them there one by one and had been working on controlling multiple at the same time. Stetmann had noticed what he was doing and helped, too. Together they were moving husks of their former shipmates around the turf like chess pieces, and Tychus had to admit it had become frighteningly easy to command them, as Stetmann had observed.

The hiss of the door opening and happy wooping from Swann and Jayce only vaguely registered to Tychus, who remained in place.

"Alright girl, this is all you now. I ain't going in there- don't want to trip any other defenses, but I'll talk you through it."

"Yes sir. Oh, and sir?"

"Yeah hot stuff?"

"I better not be a Junior Mechanical Engineer anymore when this is over."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Warfield was sharpening the bayonet attached to the tip of his Gauss rifle, watching an infested man he brought to the mess hall to "operate". The worst was the gasping, gurgling and random spasms they seemed wracked by. Once he had set aside his moral hookups, he found it increasingly easier to manipulate the infested, as Stetmann had pointed out.

Stetmann was sitting in the lab, but his mind was elsewhere. He had noticed Tychus slowly but surely lining up two rows of infested on the field, and when he began to line up another row on the opposite side of the field it clicked for Stetmann, who was morbidly entertained. Unbeknownst to the others, and neither would ever mention it, the two engaged in a completely silly game of infested chess. Shlassa watched what everyone was doing, a silent third party. She had taken a very hands off approach after displeasing her Queen, and was content with not having received any further criticism on the matter.

Horner was on the bridge, looking across the room at an empty alcohol bottle and frowning. Flexing his hand slowly for a moment, he snapped his whole arm forwards in a quick gesture, eye on the
bottle. From his hand erupted the bundle of thin tendrils that had been tucked away, stretching out morbidly and lashing around the bottle. Pausing, he felt the strange twisting of muscles he never had in his arm before flexing them hard and pulling the bottle to him in a lightning fast whipping motion. The bottle landed in his hand with a dull clunk. You are doing this for Jayce. He reminded himself, staring in disgust as his extra appendages unwraped from the bottle and hid back in his arm.

His shambling "Queen" had put the "King" into a checkmate and Stetmann was victorious, but Tychus had given him a good run for his money- which he didn't think he would.

Tychus rolled his shoulders, having been standing rigid for a lengthy time. Next time, egghead.

Stetmann was about to reply, but he was pulled back to the lab with the mental equivalent of a hard jerk when the voice of the Adjutant startled him. "Egon Stetmann, Chief Science Adviser. Your equipment is ready."

"Adjutant! You have NO idea how much I missed you!" The Adjutant did not respond. Stetmann had already begun putting the samples he gathered from Warfield, Tychus and himself into analysis equipment and copying his notes into the digital logs for further study.

Swann and Jayce shared a high-five that jarred Jayces arm so hard she yelped and quickly dampened the celebration, but she recovered and they walked together, Swann swung an arm over her shoulders and remained in good spirits. "Good job girl. Hey meathead! Wake up, we're done here!" Tychus grunted and fell in step beside the two, looking down at them. "This mean I can finally use the sonics?"

"Oh yes. I almost forgot what it's like to be clean!" Touching her good hand to her grimy face, Jayce grimaced.

"Yeah that'll be nice." Swann muttered, a bit subdued. Nobody had seen the thick chitin that covered his body since he had covered it up with his suit, except for his hands. Being honest with himself, he didn't want to see it either. They took a lift up through the floors in celebration, much to Jayces relief.

Horner stood up quickly as the bridge sprang to life around him, he almost missed the star chart showing their current location- very, very far away from Char. Resting his hands on the main command console, he sighed in relief at the familiar feeling. "Adjutant. Put me on comms."

"Yes, Captain."

Taking a breath, Horner switched into captain mode, as natural as breathing for him. "Good work team. The Hyperion has some structural damage from the battle of Char, but I believe it is all repairable with what we have available. I am sending the information of each location to your data pads right now." He paused to tap a few keys, routing the data to all Engineer and Mechanic data pads on the ship. "Once the repairs are done, we will be able to leave- Kerrigan willing anyway."

Disabling the comms, Horner pulled the star chart back up and tried to figure out just where they were and maybe where the Swarm was bound.

Warfield smiled in relief, listening to the Captains voice over the comm and echoing through the ship. He took the data pad off of the infested mechanic he had been manipulating in preparation, though he paused when he was about to open a comm line to Swann, thinking twice about it.

Good job Swann, tell Jayce I said so too. You just tell me where you need me to go and I'll get working. They still needed to keep working on their psychic strength, comms or no comms, and nobody responded to argue about it.
Jayce thumbed her data pad and opened up a channel with Warfield, Horner and Stetmann. "Gentlemen. I know you want to get the ship up and running as soon as possible- so do I. However, I just thought you should know that the sonics are operational and that you smell. Badly."

"Thanks for that, Jayce." Horner was torn between being annoyed at the way he was being casually addressed and the desire to be clean, so he let it be.

"Good plan. Some normality wouldn't hurt." Warfield digressed, the idea of removing all the dried up bug junk on his body was awfully tempting.

"I'm not even sure if hygiene is a necessity for us anymore, Jayce." Stetmann commented offhandedly as he rifled through blood work he had done on himself.

"Stetmann." Jayce snapped at the younger man as she separated from Tychus and Swann, entering the woman's facilities.

"Alright! Yes, fine." Satisfied with Stetmann's surrender, Jayce closed the comm with him and began the adventure to get clean without messing up her cast. Tychus and Swann were similarly attempting to get clean without destroying everything.

Jim was floating in blissful nothingness, that all too rare dreamless sleep, when the voice that had haunted him for years whispered. Jim. This was not the usual start of his recurring nightmares, and he twitched at the thought of a new torment being unveiled.

*How does it feel, Jim?* Sweet poison, that's what Sarahs voice had come to sound like tainted by the Zerg. *It's time to wake up and play your part. You are mine, now and forever, until this galaxy is consumed in the coming storm.*

When Jim Raynor's eyes opened, as solid black as the void with golden chips for pupils, all actions on the ship came to a halt. All except for Jayce, who looked in confusion at Swann when he wouldn't move his hand away from the ion torch she was using to weld a thick steel plate to a small hull breach.

The veil of sleep had been protecting him from the awful truth, but as he hung suspended inside his chrysalis and stared at the sickly green wall that contained him, he understood what had really happened. Bile rising, Raynor snapped the dried gray matter that was connected to his body and struck the transparent wall with his fists in a fury. When he spilled out of the chrysalis and into his room in a small shower of shards, he fell to his knees and vomited.

As Raynor was going through what each man already had, they all collectively snapped out of it when they could no longer hear him breaking out.

"Swann? What is going on?" Jayce had turned off the ion torch and was staring at him in concern. The last time someone lost control of their body around her she had almost been killed, and she just wasn't ready for the trauma of going through that again.

Blinking and swiping the back of his hand across his eyes, feigning tiredness, Swann croaked. "Commander is out, we better keep goin'." Resolutely, he returned to holding and adjusting the steel plate for Jayce, and with that reassurance she returned to welding it.

Tychus had been following guidelines Swann had written out for him on his data pad, using the infested to hold plates in place for him as he welded hull breaches and made minor repairs. When Jim woke, he only paused briefly. Better to get as far away from the Queen of Blades as possible before Jim got any new fool ideas.
Stetmann was in the lab with Warfield, analyzing the particles he had found being excreted by the Generals arm when the two of them and Shlassa shifted slightly, going rigid as they listened to Raynor.

Swallowing weakly, Stetmann muttered "This won't be good, General. Kerrigan was Jim's purpose." His concern could not be masked even if he cared to try.

Taking a breath, Warfield refocused on the younger man and shook his head. "He's a tough son of a bitch. Lets not second guess him before he is up and moving, he needs to see we're managing this." Shlassa chuckled softly, but was ignored.

Horner was staring at the world arrayed in brilliant orange and green before him, and the swarm spread out into space as far as his eyes could see. The planet was not known to him, and the star chart indicated they were well out of the Koprulu sector. What Kerrigan could be doing here he had no idea. He was running a scan on the planets surface when he jerked slightly, treated to Jim's awakening. Shortly afterwards he stared down at the comm system thoughtfully, trying to find the right words.

Swiping his mouth with the back of his forearm, Jim paused and gulped a few ragged breaths. A set of clothes folded on his bed and the blinking light of a recorded message drew his eye. When he enabled the message with the swipe of a pale gray hand, fingers elongated by thick claws, he snorted in disbelief. "Shoulda guessed it'd be you, Stetmann. Lookin' pretty good, aren't you?" He questioned the babbling image of the scientist before shuffling to his arrayed clothing.

It took some work and no small amount of fabric ripping to fit into his old outfit, but he managed. Jim walked to the door of his room and paused, resting his hands on either side of the door frame and leaning forwards, pressing his face against the cold steel as he tried to sort his thoughts out. A numb disbelief had settled over him at a frightful pace.

"Jimmy. Raynor hissed and partially stumbled out of his room. Pressing the palm of his hand to his forehead firmly, aware of small spines digging at the skin, as Tychus' voice struck his mind with the subtlety of a sledgehammer. Go to the bridge. It wasn't a request, but Jim was ready to say yes to anything to make the ache in his head stop just then.

"Jayce, listen. I need you to go to your room and just hang tight for a while, best not ask why." Swann had called a stop as soon as the plate they had been welding was properly bonded to the ship.

"Alright, sir. Be safe." Wary, Jayce didn't waste time making a bee-line for her room while Swann made his way to the bridge. Warfield and Stetmann had taken Tychus' announcement as their cue to head there as well.

Tychus was forcing this gathering sooner than Horner wanted, and as soon as the big man strode into the bridge he was snapping at him angrily. "Why are you doing this? What the hell could any one of us possibly say to make this any less screwed up?" Tychus regarded him evenly, taking a slow pull of a cigar he had managed to scavenge.

"Better to get the shock over with fast, kiddo." He gave Horner a half-cocked smirk when he was visibly riled by the jab. "Get the fist fights and accusations over with, then we can work on getting the hell outta here." Biting back a scathing reply, Horner had to privately admit it was not that bad an idea. They ruminated in the silence, surely the calm before the storm, waiting for the rest of their unique crew to arrive.

As the bridge filled with uncomfortable fidgeting people, Jim took his time making his way. The Hyperion looked and sounded almost post-apocalyptic. There was no undertone of the crew at work
or play under the humming and creaking of the ship, and it seemed at every other doorway or intersection there was signs of a fight or flight. Papers, spent bullets, clawed-at steel and dark blood stains were everywhere. When the doors of the bridge hissed open to reveal his old friends, most looking his way couldn't hold back visible winces. He wasn't sure what his own reaction to their varied appearances looked like, but it was not kind either.

Tychus whistled low. "Wow, Jimmy. Looks like your little girlfriend didn't like you so much after all." Nobody could argue with his statement. Jim had put his clothes on and looked like his old self in shape and stance, but that was about it. From his thighs, large spikes that went from the pale gray of his skin to a dark golden brown in color at the tips had torn through his pants and jutted outwards in a dense cluster. They couldn't see his back, but it was clear there was some long spikes jutting outwards from his shirt too. While his head retained its old familiar facial hair and haircut, ridges of small spines started just above his eyebrows and traveled into his hair where slightly longer spines stuck out in irregular intervals.

Jim felt sick all over again looking at the faces of his friends. Tychus' jab already forgotten, Jim swallowed hard at the lump in his throat and mumbled weakly. "I am so sorry."

"We're not done fighting, Commander, and we need you." Stetmann piped up, looking uncharacteristically determined.

"My boys didn't die on that molten rock for nothing, Raynor. This is not over yet, Kerrigan still has much to answer for." Warfield had adopted a stern look, arms crossed.

"We've hit rock bottom. Ain't nowhere to go but up now, Commander. Good people still need our help." Swann joined in, letting his misgivings rest for the time being like the others.

Horner had looked away, hands clasped behind his back and frowning as Tychus piped up. Flicking ash from his cigar off the leathery hide of his forearm, Tychus shook his head. "I told you my niche was here with you, brother, right to the end. Thought the end had come a while ago, but it seems we got something to fight for still, Jimmy. I ain't gone yet."

Jim was taken aback by the sincerity and conviction he found in the words of his men. As one, they all looked at Horner expectantly. Clearing his throat, Jim willed himself to sound stronger. "Matt?"

Sharply, Horner looked up from the floor and directly at Raynor. "You got us all killed, Jim." His features softened slightly then, and he took a breath. "But you were right. Kerrigan was the biggest threat to the galaxy before she beat us, and maybe even moreso now that no one is standing in her way. I'm with you."

Raynor's black eyes, with their flinty chips of gold, regarded everyone evenly then. After a long thoughtful pause, it seemed as though a visible breath of life entered their Commander. "Captain."

Snapping to attention, Horner responded. "Yes Commander?"

"What is the status of my ship?"

"Few small repairs and she'll be ready to get off the Leviathan. Fuel is a concern, however."

"Swann."

"Commander?"

"Why are you in here when my ship needs repairs?"
"Alright hotshot, I'll go get to work. She'll be ready before the day is over." Swann was already moving out and Horner had returned to his console.

"Stetmann!"

"Sir?"

"Tell me you've been working on some way to reverse this?"

"Well, no. We only recently regained full power over the ship, the Adjutants protocols had to be undermined in order to-"

Raising his hand in a stopping gesture, Raynor looked decidedly bored. "Get to work."

"Yes sir!" Stetmann was about to step through the door as it hissed open, but paused beside Raynor when he remembered Jayce. "Oh, sir. You should know there is one uninfested survivor, named Jayce." He proceeded to leave before Raynor could formulate a response. Only Warfield, Tychus and Horner remained on the bridge with him. Looking at the two good fighting men, Raynor was thoughtful.

"We've been taking turns keeping watch on the survivor, and assisting with what repairs we can." Warfield offered. "Speaking of which, my turn for watch I believe. You should meet the girl sometime, Raynor. Remind yourself what you were fighting for in the first place." Jim stepped aside further for Warfield to walk out, giving a noncommittal grunt in response.

"Let's go for a walk, Jimmy. Got some catchin' up to do, I reckon." Tychus straightened up from the wall he had been leaning on and started walking. Jim certainly had questions, and he knew Tychus had been the first to get out of his chrysalis if him being first into the pool meant anything, so he followed along.

"Not quite like old times."

Tychus snorted. "No."
Raynor and Tychus walked out of the bridge quietly, refraining from talking until they had split off from Warfield who went to guard Jayce.

Raynor immediately thought about the survivor, not familiar with the name. "So, this survivor." Glancing at Tychus, he tried to get a bead on his old friends emotion. Tychus was inscrutable, snuffing the stump of his cigar between his fingertips and tossing it aside.

"Found her holed up in the armory, trying to use some Ghost suit to hide." He smirked in remembrance before sobering just as quick.

"Why didn't you kill her?" It sounded so wrong to say it, but Raynor knew his friend understood his train of thought. Better dead than Zerg.

"Thought about it, but since she wasn't infested she was useful. Needed her to get the Adjutant to stop blocking us from every little thing." Crossing his arms over his Gauss rifle, Tychus kept his eyes ahead.

"You know she's probably a puppet, right? There is no way Kerrigan would let someone conveniently survive without being under her thumb." Jims thoughts were immediately so much more grim when Kerrigan entered them, Tychus easily picked up on the shift in his friends demeanor though.

"Maybe she is, maybe she isn't. Adjutant didn't detect any Zerg infestation on her, good enough for me. Not like the Queen of Blades is going to kill us now anyway, Jimmy." Still, Tychus thought about his interactions with Jayce. A seed of doubt was planted. Up ahead the path had curved enough to obscure what lay beyond, but Tychus felt the idling infested crew member standing there and stopped walking.

"What is it?" Jim stopped with Tychus and looked wary, a spine on his thigh twitching until he firmly planted a hand on it without thinking.

"Listen Jim. Kerrigan didn't just kill everyone." Looking over and down at his friend, realization was clearly dawning on his face. "Most of the crew was infested. There's one ahead, just thought I'd let you know- wait Jimmy!" Raynor had already started striding forwards quickly and with purpose, even though he wasn't currently armed.

Breaking into a run as he rounded the bend, Tychus kept up behind him and decided to let it play out. When the hunched husk of a former crew member came into his line of sight, Jim charged. He had every intention of using his fists to put the man out of his misery, but without thought his right hand wrapped around a thick spine sticking out of his thigh and yanked hard- the spine jerked free of his skin with a snap.

Realizing what he had done only while he was in the process of doing it, Jim let out an angry shout as he made to throw the weighted spine. "Why didn't you kill them Tychus!" When the spine jammed into the steel wall a good foot away from the infested and he was completely certain it should have gone straight through an eye, he faltered.

*Cease your attempts, Terran. The infested are not to be harmed.* Shlassa addressed Jim, and everyone else by proxy, and he planted a palm to his forehead to try and quell the discomfort immediately.
"There's a damn broodmother on the ship, Jim. Can't kill the infested. Can't kill each other. You really think I wouldn't try?" Tychus stood beside Jim, watching his friend stare at the oblivious infested.

Hit by a surge of emotion, Jim smacked his fist into his thigh with a clack, the helplessness was maddening. "Why would she keep us, Tychus? What's her damn game?" Turning his head to look up at his friend, Tychus was regarding him evenly with his multiple pupil eyes.

"Do you remember Ezekiel Daun, Jimmy?"

"There are Zerg I fear less than that name, Tychus." Brows furrowing, Raynor focused on what his friend was saying, uncertain of the point.

"Some people are just the sickest sons of bitches and get their rocks off on tormenting the weak. Queeny is just miles and magnitudes more powerful than Ezekiel Daun could have ever dreamed of being."

Shoving past the infested angrily, the comparison stung him hard but it fit too. They resumed walking. "She wasn't like that, Tychus. Before all of this alien horseshit she was as good a person as you or me." Swallowing hard, his hand reflexively went to his pocket where he had kept her picture, now gone. "I put all my belief in her coming back."

Somber, Tychus focused on moving any infested that would be in their way out of sight. "Don't tear yourself up Jimmy." Tychus chuckled and elbowed his shoulder suddenly. "We aren't model citizens ourselves."

Horner had been pouring over all the data the ships limited scans could give on the planet adjacent to them before everyone had even left the bridge. What he found left him concerned, but confused. What could Kerrigan want with a planet that had what appeared to be uninfested Zerg? It's not like she didn't have an army big enough to crush any planet, or the whole damn sector, under her heel already.

"Adjutant, open the comms and forward this data to all Engineer and Mechanic data pads."

"Yes Captain."

"Gentlemen, and lady, I have forwarded you all the information I could get on the planet that the Swarm is currently in orbit over. I don't know what to make of it, maybe you can find something I missed." Closing the comms, Horner felt a small measure better. Someone will have an idea of whats going on, most likely Stetmann, and he can focus on ship diagnostics and prepping to get off the Leviathan. Even getting off the monstrous living ship was going to be difficult to maneuver, never mind the minefield of Zerg spread out around it, and the captain had every intention of being prepared.

Eager to depart for Zerus below, Kerrigan had been impatiently listening to the activities of Jim and his men since he woke. The moment Swann felt the satisfaction of a job well done, the ship being able to fly again, she struck.

An ominous pause happened on the Hyperion. Everyone, even Jayce, felt the approach of Kerrigan's mind, poised to touch them. It was like standing helpless in a desert as a wall of sand rushed towards you, relentless. When they connected, Jayce yelled out in pain- much like she had when the Queen of Blades first boarded the ship. To everyone else, it was mentally taxing but the foreign thoughts of the Swarm no longer felt so strange, there was no more real pain.
I see you have finished repairing the Hyperion. Good. You are to leave for a planet named Kaldir, in the Koprul sector. There you will discover what happened to my broodmother, Nafash, and do whatever you have to in order to bring her brood back into the Swarm.

They were unable to respond, as if held in rapt attention, until Kerrigan broke their link with a sharp tug. She remained in contact with Shlassa, however.

_Shlassa. There is more I would tell you._

_Yes, my Queen?_

_Nafash was sent to Kaldir to force her brood to acclimate to the extreme temperatures there. It is vital we bring this strength to the Swarm, you will take whatever measures necessary to do this._

_And if the Terrans fight me, my Queen?_

_See that they don't. You are to safeguard them, do not fail me._

As you say. Shlassa was left to plan, and Kerrigan was already leading a small portion of her forces to the surface of Zerus, eager to uncover its power. In tow was Zeratul subtly following in his Void Seeker, ready to impart advice to the Queen of Blades. Izsha would bring the Leviathan down to the planet's surface after the Hyperion departed from it.

Matt Horner jerked slightly as Kerrigan withdrew, taking a slow breath and gathering his thoughts. "Adjutant, set coordinates for the planet Kaldir. I want all information about the planet displayed, and the locations of all refueling stations along the way."

"Yes Captain."

With no small degree of distaste, Horner reached out to the others mentally. _Swann, Stetmann, Tychus, Warfield. Ready the infested, we're leaving this Leviathan._

_I didn't even tell anyone that she was ready to go!_ Swann was disgruntled. First he gets the job done like he said he would, then the Queen of Blades is barging into his head and pushing him around, nothing was right about it.

_Kerrigan seems to think we are, and I for one will be glad to see the ass-end of this Leviathan._

_I don't know much of anything about flying a ship this size, but I'll do what I can._ Tychus piped up, already guiding infested to their work stations. He and Stetmann were by far the most skilled with controlling them, if not by virtue of practice than by simply being awakened longer than the rest.

_Warfield and I are working together in the engine compartments._ Stetmann finally chimed in.

When the Hyperions vertical thrusters roared to life, any unfortunate Zerg below them were seared to death instantly. The ship groaned and trembled briefly before snapping free of the dried creep that had stabilized it on the Leviathan, and guiding it off of and away from the living ship and the millions of Zerg arrayed around it fell into Horners hands.

Jim had come back to the bridge alone to watch Matt work, his head throbbing from their mental communications. It disturbed him to _feel_ and know that the infested crew members were being ridden like meat suits by his friends, leaving him wondering why they were not fighting against it all. He privately questioned if Kerrigan wasn't in direct control of all of them, even if his conversation with Tychus had felt so sincere. What part of his mind _hadn't_ become privy to Kerrigan, if she wanted it?
Tensely, Horner called out. "Jim, get on that dash and keep an eye on the port side. Keep me posted on any obstacles you see."

"Uh." Roused from his thoughts, Jim complied absently. "Right. Try not to crash my ship, Captain."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Commander." Horner was maneuvering past clusters of Overlords and at one point a giant Leviathan tentacle nearly brushed into the ship, but when he realized he could bump Overlords out of the way without any adverse reactions their exodus from the Swarm became that much easier. Only when the Swarm was a cluster in the distance did they relax slightly. From here the Adjutant could steer towards their goal and all they had to do was keep the ship up and running with their limited resources.

We are in the clear and en route to the planet Kaldir. Keep the infested at their posts though, we will want easy access to them should something go wrong. Horner had closed his eyes and scrunched his eyebrows in concentration as he delivered his message, but Jims uncomfortable grunt brought his attention back quickly.

Jayce was in an Engineering hub, a small square room with walls of spare parts and cases upon cases of tools. In the center of the room a square table was arrayed for setting up smaller projects, which was where she sat on a simple stool. Tychus and Warfield were both present, Warfield keeping off to the side and looking at the datapad in his hands.

Tychus had laid his datapad flat on the table and was watching the small image of his infested self rotate while information rolled by. Stetmann had sent his test results to both Tychus and Warfield, and they were looking over it with morbid curiosity while Jayce was attempting to repair a fried coil with her left hand and watch the data Horner had sent to everyone about the planet they had just departed from.

Glancing from the small part she had been soldering to a recorded feed of what looked suspiciously like a Zergling feasting on another one, her voice came like a shout in the quiet. "Pause!"

Immediately afterwards she hissed and dropped the soldering iron, aware her hand had moved awkwardly and ruined the job she had been so meticulously doing on the tiny circuits. "Damn it."

"What're you on about?" Tychus mumbled, not looking up from his little infested 3D model. Jayce had proven very stubborn about doing things herself, despite her arm, and had learned early to not intervene unless absolutely necessary.

Scrubbing the back of her hand across her eyes, Jayce gestured towards the video. "Look at that thing." Warfield was getting drawn to the conversation, looking up from his datapad with a stern expression.

"Looks like a Zerg eatin' another Zerg. What about it?" Tychus tilted his head, looking from the image to Jayce with a quirked brow.

Sighing as though he was truly dense, Jayce reached over and started to move the image frame by frame. Twisting to the side on her stool so her broken arm wouldn't be touched, she focused intensely on the image, certain of what she had seen. "There." Pausing the image of the Zergling just after it had consumed a chunk of flesh, she raised a long, calloused finger and pointed at its eyes.

"It has eyes, nice job."

"All those extra pupils in your dumb head and you still don't see what just happened there, Tychus?" He narrowed his eyes at the insult, looking hard at the image and trying to figure out what the hell the woman was getting at. Only then did he notice that her fingertip was actually pointing beside the
creatures eye, where a new eye had literally sprouted within the seconds it took to consume the other animal.

"It changed!" Jayce exclaimed, seeing the look of understanding pass Tychus' features.

"Changed? Care to explain?" Warfield had been watching, but drew no closer.

Jayce was already selecting the small section of the recording and forwarding it to Stetmann with a few notes, excited to have figured something out. "It took a bite out of that other Zergling and grew a new pair of eyes, General. If consuming and growing stronger isn't of interest to the Swarm, I don't know what is."

"That does sound right up Kerrigan's alley, doesn't it. Good job." Warfield remained in place, looking down at his datapad with a sour expression.

"Yeah. Nice job detective." Jayce was already trying to fix the mess she made with her soldering iron again, and missed the particularly intense stare she was receiving from Tychus just then.

"Just want to help. I'm personally very happy to be away from the Swarm. I hope I can-"

"Escape soon?" Tychus had tilted his head, hands resting around the datapad that reminded him just how much he wasn't human anymore.

"W-well..." Startled, Jayce looked up at the two men then and felt fearful and ashamed. Both were looking at her in what she thought was bitterness. "I am sorry. It was unkind, but we all know I'm not safe by a long shot either."

"She's right Tychus. Can't go blaming her for our own situations." Warfield mumbled, trying to steer his thoughts to more positive grounds. It was difficult when a little datapad was telling you that you secreted paralytic venom from your brand new claws and could possibly fire off clouds of extreme hallucinogenic dust from porous locations on your skin.

"No." Tychus eyes gleamed in the dull overhead light, recalling his conversation with Jim. "Suppose I can't."

Over the planet Haven, where the former colonists of Agria who had declared themselves independent from the Dominion were now shaping their new home, the Dominion ship Bucephalus hung in low orbit. Prince Valerian Mengsk was listening intently to Dr. Ariel Hansen, who was at a communication tower below on the planets surface.

"While the people of Haven are sympathetic to the plight of the Terrans of the Koprulu sector, we are a free people and are not a part of the Dominion or any other unsavory faction, Prince Valerian. We can't house your refugees, not with the threat of Zerg infestation, and we won't house your fleet-the Protoss are our neighbors and we have no desire to start any fires between them and us."

"I appreciate you taking the time to have this conversation with me, Dr. Hansen. Before you dismiss us completely however, please let me tell you of our situation." The loss at Char had burned the young man, but tempered him with new skills. He had been very careful to approach the people of Haven with as nonthreatening and diplomatic a stance as possible, given the reputation his last name automatically earned him. Finding them based off of offhand comments Jim, Tychus and Stetmann had made was hard enough as it was.

"I am listening."

"I know that Jim Raynor and his men helped your people in their time of need. But I don't know
how much information you have about what happened to them after they left. Do your people know
what is happening, and what has happened, in the Koprulu sector?"

"We do not currently have the faculties to be up to date on what has happened in the Koprulu sector
since we left... But what happened to Jim?" Valerian saw the concern painted easily on the Doctors
face as soon as Jim was mentioned. She was an open book as far as he was concerned.

"Jim Raynor and his Raiders were destroyed in the battle of Char, where he had attempted to use an
alien device to neutralize the Queen of Blades and save the Koprulu sector from her and her
Swarm."

Ariel took off her glasses and immediately dabbed at her eyes, stricken, while Valerian pushed on.

"I had taken command of my fathers entire Dominion Fleet in order to ensure Jim Raynors success
against the Queen of Blades, in an attempt to save humanity. We failed. The Dominion Fleet has
been crushed and my father, Arcturus Mengsk, has publicly denounced me as a traitor to humanity
for weakening his precious core worlds." Watching his father put a bounty on his head hadn't hurt
him as much as he thought it should, but Valerian wasn't sure it mattered anymore.

"And now you're what?" Sniffing and attempting to retain her composure, Ariel righted her glasses
and focused on the Prince intensely. "Rebels, and bringing the Dominion down on helpless
colonists?"

"No. I only sought you out recently. Precisely three days ago, the Hyperion's Adjutant came online.
The ship had not been destroyed as I initially thought." A chill curled in his stomach at the thought,
much like it had when the initial alert came in. Ariel looked to be experiencing similar.

"I sent drones to collect as much information as possible as soon as I found out. The time frame from
there is fuzzy still, as the Swarm had moved from the Koprulu sector to an unknown planet. But
what I do know is that the Hyperion is on the move and back in the Koprulu sector."

"The Zerg have infested the ship. There is no other explanation if it flew freely out of the center of
the Swarm." Ariel stated pointedly.

"No. The ship has no outward signs of infestation and though there are infested signatures on the
ship, there are also multiple strong psionic waveforms. Seven, in fact."

"What are you saying? Is the ship being used to deliver infested safely behind enemy lines?"

"I am saying I believe Jim Raynor and his close friends are alive, Ms. Hansen. If anyone has earned
an attempt to be saved it is that man and his men."

"How?" Valerian had to carefully control his reaction, smiling would be rude in this case.

"I read your file and what bits of information I could get about what happened to your people in the
transition from Agria to Meinhoff and finally, Haven. You are a very gifted scientist, particularly
when it comes to Zerg infestation. You may have also come into contact with the Xel'Naga artifact
that the Raiders had pinned their hopes on."

While she privately questioned the resources of the Prince that he had this kind of information, given
the Dominion completely abandoned her people, Ariel owed everything to Jim and his men. "You
think what has been done to them can be reversed? Prince Valerian, I would actually need to be in
the presence of an infested Jim Raynor and his men to even begin to understand what has been done
to them, and if it could be undone. While we do have very extensive anti-infestation protocols and
containment measures here on Haven, the people of Haven can't hope to stage an assault on a
battleship manned by some of the most clever, and now infested, Terrans in the galaxy and capture them alive."

"Doctor Hansen, all I ask is your cooperation should I be successful in containing the threat and delivering it to you safely. The Bucephalus does however have refugees and refuel needs. If you are willing to consider saving Jim, I ask that you accept these displaced people and refuel the ship, nothing more. I do not wish to deliver more innocents into harms way, and that is where this ship is heading."

A brief pause was all Ariel needed to consider. "We owe everything to Raynor's Raiders. Our lives. Our home. Everything. You will have our full cooperation, Prince Valerian."
Domination, Lies, Plots

The fleshy drop pods that contained Kerrigan and her entourage of Hunter Killers, advanced Hydralisks, came crashing through the canopy of Zerus and connected with the ground hard. The drop pods from the Leviathan took all the force of the fall and broke to pieces upon hitting the ground, delivering their cargo safely. Each rose from their small craters without pause, searching for any immediate threats to their Queen while emitting their low-pitched gurgling sighs.

Standing atop the small ridge created by her own drop pod, Kerrigan sent drones down to their same spot. Best to establish a foothold right away. The Queen of Blades listened then; What would normally be the sound of a lush rain forest filled with chirping birds, sighing winds and animal calls had an entirely different tune. There was roaring in the distance, crashing trees and trembling earth in every direction, even the plant life had a distinct and deadly Zerg tone. What didn't fit was the void of space nearby.

"Where's the welcoming committee?" Glancing off to her left, towards the void, she saw clearly the Dark Templars green eyes staring at her. "I can hear them all around. They will belong to me soon enough, but I also feel something." Truly, there was a massive presence slumbering in the distance, like an inactive volcano in its size.

"What you feel is the Ancient One, Kerrigan." Zeratul offered, drawing no closer and keeping a good eye on the Hunter Killers that had formed a defensive perimeter around the Drone that had landed and immediately began morphing into a Lair. The rapidly growing structure was obscene, an abomination in his eyes, but there was nothing for it. The Zerg of Zerus would suffer for the sake of the prophecy.

"You must seek it out if you wish the true power of Zerus. The Primal Zerg here will fight you every step of the way, and you will be tested on your journey."

Planting her hands on her hips and tilting her head slightly, Kerrigans lips curled into a small smile. "I will visit the Ancient One. But first, there are a few loose ends here to take care of." Without warning, the long spine of a plant she had pulled out as Zeratul was speaking was hurled telekinetically at him. Had the Dark Templar not been fully suspicious of the Queen of Blades being treacherous, it would have pierced through his rib cage like butter. Zeratul knew better however, and though he delivered himself backwards towards his Void Seeker in a cloud of smoke, the plant spine had cut through the meat of his thigh in the process.

Injured, he could feel the venom of the plant seeping into the damaged tissue- threatening to weaken him further. Kerrigan had immediately charged after him and was searching, slicing through plant matter with her blades and claws angrily. Overlords were on their way, but too slow to reveal Zeratul and his ship to her.

"You'll not see me again, Kerrigan!" Zeratul called out to her, nimbly avoiding the swing of a blade with a quick duck and blinking himself to the safety of his ship with one final step through the shadows.

Trust me. If I see you again, there will be no talking and you will accept your fate. Unsure of where he was, Kerrigan called out psychically to him, making sure the message was delivered as his Void Seeker brushed through the trees and slipped into the sky silently. With any luck the venom from the plant would kill him, and the thought of such a small thing being the end of the old Protoss made her smile.
"HERE ME INTRUDERS! I AM BRAKK! THIS IS BRAKK'S TERRITORY! I CLAIM YOUR ESSENCE!"

"Well, there's the natives." Time officially being of the essence, Kerrigan returned to her blooming base and set to work. They would have to expand and defend until the Leviathan landed and all the Zerg aboard it became available.

The Hyperion was filled with a nervous energy. Leaving the swarm behind brought some comfort, but for how long? They were going to have to interact with other Terrans soon, there was no way to avoid it, and the idea collectively filled them with dread. Jayce wanted to leave and be safe again, but where really was safe for an injured wanted criminal?

The idea that any one of them could be taken over by the broodmother, maybe even Kerrigan still, at any time while they interacted with people was a dark cloud over the collective mood.

"Hey, nerd girl! Get up, we're going to the cantina." Twitching slightly in surprise at the boom in Tychus' voice when her door hissed open, Jayce set the nuts and bolts she had in her hand down on the table and turned in her seat to look at him with a quirked brow.

"We?"

"Yes, get moving. We're back in the Koprulu sector and Swann got the news feed hooked back up." News, now that was a troubling thought. Rising from her seat and resisting the fierce urge to itch at her cast, Jayce fell into step behind the armored behemoth of a man.

Struggling to keep up with his long strides without jostling the hell out of her arm, Jayce grit her teeth and mumbled. "Probably just gonna be the same old crap."

"We'll find out." Tychus rumbled. He wasn't convinced it wouldn't be a bunch of pro-Mengsk nonsense either, after all the slippery Emperor had plenty of time to repair his damaged public image and quell the rioting during the Raider's forced hiatus.

Inside the cantina, Horner, Raynor, Swann, Warfield and even Stetmann were congregating. They had spread out around the tables and were looking up at the news feed silently. The first thing both Jayce and Tychus noticed when entering the room was the different expressions each man wore. Disgust, confusion and disbelief were all very clear emotions on their faces. Tychus didn't bother asking, clearly the news was the source of all this discontent so he promptly sat down and looked.

Jayce came to sit beside Tychus after briefly staring at Commander Raynor in shock, having not seen him yet.

"This is Donny Vermillion, back from my brief stint in the hospital. Thank you for all your well wishes, but today I have something important to tell you! Earlier today, Emperor Mengsk announced that the Zerg threat was over! Let's roll that clip!" Donny Vermillion was a news puppet for Mengsk, and it did not sit well that he was back on the show after Kate Lockwell had seemingly took over and attempted to pull the wool from the networks eyes.

"This has been broadcasting on repeat since I got it up and running." Swann muttered darkly. They had already seen the video, that only left Tychus and Jayce to catch up.

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"People of Korhal, of the Koprulu sector! We have been struggling through hard times, all of us, and though there has been much speculation and fear mongering about whether I truly care about the people or not, today I bring you the best of news. You may sleep easy knowing that the Zerg threat has been ended. The Queen of Blades has been destroyed and the Zerg have fled from the Koprulu sector en masse!
General Warfield was sent to lead a daring assault on the Zerg home world of Char with the awe-inspiring might of the Dominion fleet at his command. Though the battle cost us dearly, they succeeded on that desolate ash world and freed us all from the looming threat of annihilation. I want you to look to the skies now and remember those that gave their lives to secure our future and know that I, your Emperor, truly care." Rolling by in small print on the TV, beneath the ever-smug face of Mengsk, was the words "Valerian Mengsk, disowned and wanted fugitive, where did he go?"

Tychus' mouth hung open ever so slightly, and Jayce was wide eyed and dumbfounded.

"Don't shoot the TV." Swann snapped, catching sight of Raynor half standing and ready to hurl a spine at the image of Mengsk. Thankfully, the TV was spared and he slowly lowered himself back down, attempting to calm his temper.

"I can't believe that Mengsk would sweep the entire failed invasion under the rug... Is that even possible? I thought we sent out waves, and the Bucephalus.." Stetmann was still staring up at the TV, which had been muted, in a kind of disgruntled awe.

"Wasn't long ago I thought Mengsk could do no wrong." Warfield was glaring down at his table, seething. "That rotten bastard has some serious connections, to be able to blind so many people so thoroughly."

"He's a damn snake, and he's going to get the entire human race exterminated if he honestly thinks Kerrigan ain't coming back to the Koprulu sector!" Raynor snapped, slamming his fist on the table angrily.

"I sure wish all those people who think the Zerg are gone could see my face." Tychus rumbled. He had a different kind of grudge against the Emperor, a very personal one after being locked in that suit.

"Who knows what happened to Valerian and the Bucephalus. News says he's an outlaw now, but who really knows? I find it hard to believe that he couldn't get word to anyone that the invasion had actually failed, that Kerrigan is still out there." Horner was standing, his arms crossed as he stared at the repeating message on the television thoughtfully.

Jayce kept her thoughts to herself, everyone was voicing what had already gone through her head anyway. Resting her left elbow on the table, she placed her head in her hand and closed her eyes, trying to fathom the situation- and wondering where it left her in the grand scheme of things.

"Whole damn thing stinks. Not like we can go fight Mengsk like this though. Hell, we are the threat the to the human race right now." Swann was staring at his hands and their chitinous segments hatefully.

"Oh, ah, sir?" Stetmann was fidgeting, staring at Raynor and hoping to not get snapped at.

"What Stetmann?" Turning his gaze from the television to the young scientist, Raynor calmed down marginally. Stetmann didn't deserve his ire, and Raynor was more than willing to admit to himself that this situation was ultimately his own fault anyway.

"I brought a few tools and a scanner to run some tests on you. I know it's the last thing anyone wants to hear about, but we need to be ready for Kaldir and Swann and I have a few things in the works to help out." Stetmann had started pulling scanners and scrapers and clippers out of his lab coat pockets, placing them on the table in front of Raynor who sighed heavily.

"You're right, do whatever you gotta do."
Tychus' meaty hand planted on Jayce's shoulder, mindful of his nails, and gave her a cautious squeeze in reassurance as Stetmann started running tests on Raynor.

"I've been reading up on Kaldir. It is possibly the most inhospitable ice planet in the entire Koprulu sector. I'm not really sure what Kerrigan expects us to do there, our equipment isn't even capable of handling the kind of temperature drops that happen on the planets surface." Horner remarked, thinking about the task ahead.

"I suspect we're fully capable of adapting to the cold without our suits now, though it won't be pleasant." Stetmann remarked offhandedly as he withdrew blood from Raynor.

"I just got done bein' an ice cube. Don't fancy the idea of bein' one again." Tychus muttered darkly, staring at Stetmann as he worked.

"You'll live." It was all Raynor could offer, he was still trying to digest everything that was going on and had happened before he woke back up.

"Stetmann and I have been workin' on some stuff, like he said." Swann piped up, looking over everyone evenly. "He's workin' on a small scrambler that we can use to hide infested signatures. It'll be ready before we have to dock at a refueling station. Should be able to hide it on your person, and alternatively place them around rooms of the Hyperion to conceal what is inside them. Such as the Zerg monster in the laboratory, for example."

"That'll come in handy." Raynor remarked, impressed as always by the ingenuity of his team.

"That ain't all of it, but that's the big one hot shot." Swann drummed his fingertips against the tabletop slowly as his mind returned to more technical thought.

"I think the cantina will be a good place for us to gather." Stetmann was observing Raynor's off-colored blood in its little vial. "Shlassa is an unwelcome distraction in the lab, and now we have the news feed up and working. It will be a good base of operations for our small group." Nobody voiced any argument, most were quietly seething or already deep in thought.

"There is one other thing, Commander." Stetmann had already put the vial down and was running a hand-held scanner over Raynor's pale gray arm.

"What?"

"I can't work on reversing the infestation. Every time I start to think about undoing what has been done to us, it's like my thoughts enter a scrambler. Shlassa is actively making sure we can't make any headway on it."

"Shlassa?"

"That is the broodmother's name."

"First name basis, huh?"

Stetmann shrugged, he already got flack for it every time the broodmother became the topic of conversation, he was over it. "I think we should attempt to go to Haven when we've finished our task on Kaldir." Raynor had straightened slightly, his brows drawing together as he took in a breath to object, but Stetmann quickly interjected.

"Or. We try to send a message to Doctor Hansen at least, explaining the situation. I know it is not safe to interact with anyone, but we have to try. Figure out what we aren't restricted from." Visibly
calming as he lowered back onto his stool, Raynor nodded.

"We are not going there, but a message is not out of the question."

"Great. I'll write one up later and-"

"No." Raynor raised his hand, so foreign in shape now with its natural thick armor, long claws and pale color. "I'll take care of it myself."

"Yes sir."

Now all you need to do is practice, Jimmy. Tychus was looking at Jim, speaking into his mind. His voice echoed and burned, all too similar to Kerrigan's intrusions, if moderately weaker in strength.

Raynor reached up quickly and planted the palm of his hand up against his temple and grit his teeth. "The hell are you on about, and why are you talkin' in my damn head Tychus?"

"No, he's right Jim. You need to get stronger with your mind." Stetmann quickly cut in before the two big men could get aggressive. "We have been trying to strengthen ourselves to be able to break free of the broodmother, and Kerrigan. We discovered that it was possible to fight when Shlassa took over Tychus" Stetmann nodded towards the big glowering figure of Tychus and Jayce, who was still sealed in place under his hand and arm. "and tried to kill Jayce through him."

Raynor looked at the pair and thought it odd she would get anywhere near Tychus after such a thing, but he snorted softly at the thought. Tychus had always had a way with the ladies. "I ain't so sure I want to strengthen any part of me that has to do with the Zerg."

"Most of us feel the same." Warfield, who had been content to observe and keep his own council, finally looked up from his table and spoke. "In fact, only thing we can really agree on is helping Jayce get out of here in one piece. I suspect you feel the same."

In truth, Raynor did not feel this need to save Jayce as they did, and he held her gaze with his now completely alien one as he spoke- communicating just how opposite he felt about it with his look. "Whatever it takes to keep us going, General."

Swann thumped the table with his hand abruptly, dispelling some of the tension. "Here here! Now you knuckleheads might not have anything to do, but I gotta get back to work." Straightening up and stretching slightly, Swann pulled a face as his armored body let off a series of clicks, chitin tapping against chitin, and made his way out of the cantina.

Taking in a slow breath, Horner nodded. "Yeah, best get back to work. Don't have too much fun, sir." Stetmann had just happened to glance up at Horner from Raynor, who was tolerating him pulling out one of the many fast-growing spines on his person, and froze. From the back of the good captain protruded the wing blades that belonged to Kerrigan, not him, and her burning eyes met his for a fraction of a second before it was over. Horner had turned away and walked out of the room without a second thought, and Stetmann did his best to recover from the brief shock without looking conspicuous. He wasn't sure what he really saw, or what could have caused it.

"Stetmann are you gonna pull this thing out or do you need a hand?" Raynor looked confused and somewhat uncomfortable with Stetmann standing there holding and only half pulling on a spine protruding from his thigh.

"Err no. Sorry sir." Blinking rapidly, Stetmann yanked the spine out quickly with a crunchy snap and started to hastily pack away all the samples he had gathered. "All done, thanks sir."
“Yeah, sure thing.” Raynor mumbled, staring up at the muted television and resuming glaring at Mengsk. The spine was already growing back.

“Guess I better get back to work too.” Jayce spoke to Tychus quietly, wishing she could just disappear behind him after the look the Commander had given her earlier. It was like looking into the dark abyss of space between the stars, but the abyss was her former leaders eyes and they were cold and unfriendly.

Taking the hint, Tychus removed his hand from her shoulder and gave her some space to get up. "Mastered being a lefty yet? All I've seen you doin' is makin' a bunch of messes so far, not workin'." He teased, sensing her unease and thinking the whole situation had been overwhelming. They had been taking pains to not talk about their more eccentric abilities, and manipulation of the infested in particular, in front of her until then.

"Not quite. Hopefully arm will heal up before then though." Grasping onto his friendly banter like a life raft, Jayce and Tychus made their way from the cantina. Warfield quietly stood up, nodding to those who remained, and followed after them.

As soon as the door of the cantina hissed shut behind the three of them, Warfield called out. "Jayce, you good to walk to your room alone for a minute?"

Not in the habit of saying no to people of higher rank, Jayce automatically responded with a quick "Yes sir." and kept walking as Tychus slowed to a stop, understanding the General wanted something.

As soon as Jayce was out of sight, Warfield addressed the issue immediately. "Tychus, I can't guard Jayce anymore. After those test results from the egghead came back, it's amazing something terrible hasn't happened to her already." The usually unflappable General looked drained, leaving Tychus frowning.

"I hardly think leaving her to be watched by someone who frequently has the desire to chase down and kill her is a good idea either. C'mon General, we are the danger to her on this ship."

"Doesn't matter Tychus, she needs a damn guard and it's not like we sleep. You're gonna watch her yourself, because I ain't anymore." Warfield's voice had gone hard, done with Tychus attempting to subvert his decision. Without another word on it, he turned and left Tychus glowering by the cantina door.

When Warfield was well out of earshot, Tychus grumbled to himself. "Buncha pansies in here." Turning around he walked right back into the cantina and faced the curious look of Raynor, who had not moved from his seat. Stetmann had been just about to step through the door himself and deftly maneuvered around Tychus, heading back to his lab without a word.

"Problem, Tychus?"

"You could say that, partner." Tychus looked at him thoughtfully, making up his mind almost as fast as he had questioned himself. "The good General can't handle being around a little girl anymore, and you are gonna take up his shift. Think you can handle a double-team on the little lady, or is that too much for you?"

Raynor pulled a face at the innuendo. "Do you ever think about anything else, Tychus?"

"A good meal, on occasion. You know my motto. You got four hours before it's your turn to watch her, Jimmy." Tychus was smirking heavily as he left Jim staring at the cantina door, heading back to
Horner was back on the bridge, looking through the information the Adjutant had put up on display for him. He'd have to choose a station for the Hyperion to refuel at before they arrived at Kaldir, there was no choice. One by one he withdrew stations that were too large or well used for his tastes, until all that remained were three hubs that could barely be called that.

From the remaining choices he selected the only one capable of hosting the Hyperion, and it would have been out of the question for a less skilled captain to pilot a ship the size of the Hyperion into such a small docking space; but if there was anything Matt Horner excelled at, it was piloting his ship. The Hyperion would dock at Station 837, a ramshackle space hut orbiting a dead moon, within 24 hours.

On the Bucephalus, no longer in orbit around the planet Haven but traveling back into the Koprulu sector, Prince Valerian was looking at the visual display of Dr. Narud.

"It is a shame that the Xel'Naga artifact was destroyed, Prince Valerian. It was a true work of art, older than the Protoss race even, I do not know if we are capable of replicating such a thing." The older scientists heavy accent forced the younger man to focus harder on what he was saying.

"All I request is that you devote your resources to trying, Dr. Narud. I have more agents working on other angles, it is my hope that someone will be able to come up with a solution to spare Jim Raynor and his men from their fate." Valerian had clasped his hands behind his back, sure to keep his appearance regal and most importantly, authoritative.

"Pardon my questioning, but what about the Queen of Blades? Surely, she is much more important than a few men who were unfortunately converted to her side?"

"There is no man in this galaxy who knows more about Kerrigan and her methods than Jim Raynor, and no men more experienced at fighting Zerg than those who were under his command. I do not believe we stand a chance against Kerrigan and her forces if Jim Raynor and his men remain on her side. There are other plans in motion however, Dr. Narud. I would not put all my hopes on one plan like that, not again."

"Well, that is good to know. Thank you for humoring me, Prince Valerian. I will return to work immediately, if that is all?"

"Yes, that is all." When the image of Dr. Narud dispersed, Valerian turned to look out into the stars. Where are you, Kerrigan?
Crouching low in the thick underbrush beneath a massive tree, reaching towards the sky and fighting for canopy space with all the rest, Kerrigan was watching a curious exchange.

"You tell the other pack leaders Brakk calls them! Corrupt Zerg are heading for the Ancient One! He must not be wakened!" The massive primal zerg who was speaking, clearly Brakk, was bellowing at a winged creature similar to the Mutilisks of her Swarm. Brakk himself looked nothing like the Zerg under her command, he had evolved beyond the size of an Ultralisk and was all thick armor and massive horns, spines and claws.

Smirking, Kerrigan watched the Mutalisk fly off with a chittering shriek and Brakk immediately charging off through the lush volcanic jungle towards his main base.

*My Queen, why did you not destroy Brakk and his messenger? They were alone and vulnerable.* Izsha had been watching through the eyes of the Hunter Killers that flanked Kerrigan and was clearly confused.

*They will come to us, and they will die. The combined might of the swarm is in orbit over this planet, Izsha. It was neat, tidy and brutal. Kerrigan would take down all the strongest Zerg on the planet in one fell swoop.*

*You will bring the Swarm down upon them when the are fully committed and unable to retreat. I understand now.* As soon as she understood, Izsha returned to managing and defending the bases that Kerrigan had established.

Hives, Lairs and the creep that was generated by them and their Queen guardians had already spread far, a cancer on the landscape. Kerrigan was left wondering where the resistance was until she took it upon herself to find out. Between Brakk's message and what information her tunneling Roaches had managed to gather, Zerus was firmly divided by pack leaders continually warring and devouring the weaker. How Zeratul thought these creatures would give her any trouble, she did not know.

Abathur had already begun collecting living and dead specimens of the primals and expressing his distaste for their chaotic natures. "Their evolution is wild. Chaotic. Swarm is methodical, with purpose. Perfect." Kerrigan shook her head slightly at the thought. Abathur was a curious relic of the Overmind's swarm, and far too useful to discard even if his methods were rigid.

The Ancient One was so close now. Kerrigan had been guided to its location like a moth to a flame, attracted by power. When one of her Mutalisks flew into an open and clearly well traveled area and she saw through its eyes a gaping chasm of a mouth in the ground, she frowned. Brakk was drawn to the Hives she had already established to the west, and had not gathered his pack close to the slumbering ancient to defend it like she thought he might.

As the Mutalisk flew over the mouth and surveyed the area, it became clear that the ridge above the ancient itself was an easily defendable foothold. It was just a matter of passing herself and a small force with a drone past Brakk's intensifying attacks. The strength of the primal zerg was not to be trifled with, and her front line had to be continually resupplied with heavier units- any one of the primals could take out several of her own zerg before being taken down.

Zagara.

*Yes my Queen?* Zagara, a Queen who had distinguished herself with her clever Nidus Worm trap
against General Warfield on Char, had been charged with growing and defending every forward base Kerrigan started.

Gather your troops and siege the choke point Brakk is defending to the east. I will be there. Brakk had established a base of his own at a three-way intersection, well worn through the ages from the trampling of feet, and was continually bolstering it. Patrols of flying zerg over the nearly impenetrable forest made slipping an Overlord with a drone past not a viable option, the Mutalisk Kerrigan had managed to direct past them had already been ripped apart by glaive worms in the time it took her to address Zagara.

For the swarm! Eager to conquer and consume, Zagara bolstered her forces for an assault while Kerrigan maneuvered through the jungle foliage with her Hunter Killers, yearning to join in the slaughter. Eggs with Mutalisks, Ultralisks and all other manner of Zerg were forming and erupting with their cargo at Zagara's coaxing, still dripping with ooze as they flew, charged and trampled towards their destination.

In Brakk's choke point base his pack was shrieking and roaring, ready to fight and feed. The coming of an assault could be felt and seen- the thick leaves and spines of the local foliage were shaking and swaying as the ground was pounded by hundreds of taloned feet, even the air was vibrating. Already they had learned that these new zerg, corrupted ones, did not have consumable essence; and though fear of Brakk himself consuming them kept them in line, it was the thought of the sleeping one rising that truly united them. Not even Brakk could stand against that ancient hungerer.

"They come. They come!" Slavering and digging at the ground with its feet, a massive primal zerg with four legs lead the charge as soon as the kaiser blades of an Ultralisk sliced through a tree in its sharp turn around a bend. Followed by their smaller peers, each creature entered a collision course for one another, eager to express dominance. The screaming, roaring and hissing coming from both sides was dampened momentarily by the loud fleshy crashing of bodies, immediately proceeded by death cries.

Supported by their base and its living defenses, combined with their naturally greater individual might, the tide of battle was quickly turning in the primal zergs favor and Zagara's forces were being forced backwards, despite the broodmother herself being there and mending the larger and more durable of her forces.

My Queen, our forces are being overwhelmed! Zagara called to Kerrigan as she personally dashed a heavily armored primal Mutalisk from the sky.

Hold your position! We are here. The primal zerg had pushed the invading force back around the bend towards the hive they came from, exposing their flank to the northeast. It was from there, erupting from the forest, Kerrigan leaped forth with her Hunter Killers providing cover and a small cluster of Banelings the Queen of Blades herself spawned.

The leader of the primal zerg forces reeled at the surprise attack, turning on all fours to face Kerrigan and snarling. Though heavily injured- a severed kaiser blade was sticking out of its side and its armored flesh had been peppered with Hydralisk spines, it moved no slower. "You! Corrupt zerg! You die!" Snapping its jaws around a zergling that had been clawing at its foot, the zergling was dismembered in a clean bite right before three Banelings splashed into the great beast's side. The collective force of the primal zerg was being shredded from the side by the greatly evolved Hunter Killer spines and as their leader screamed in agony, his fleshy armor being melted off in a grotesque display, Kerrigan herself leaped forwards and sunk her blades deep into his sides.

"Push forwards, for the swarm! Feast in my name!" Rapidly punching through the reptile-like beast, Kerrigan made especially sure it was dead before joining in the push back to the primal base and
crushing it.

Thank you, my Queen. These Primal Zerg are not to be taken lightly. Zagara was thoughtful, standing beside Kerrigan over the bloody weeping ruins of a primal zerg hive as their own drones laid the foundations of a swarm hive over it.

"You are one of my most clever broodmothers. You will learn from your experience and become stronger." Content that their current forces, bolstered by her Hunter Killers, could hold the point against further assaults from Brakk, Kerrigan looked to the north once more. "Secure this base, do not fall and do not give ground. Make sure the air is clear over the northeast forest as well, I have some cargo passing through." Smirking, Kerrigan personally directed the Overlord full of drones over the wild jungle towards the Ancient Ones resting place, and the ideal base location above it.

As my Queen wishes. We will not fail you.

By herself, Kerrigan ran down the beaten path towards the clearing with the gaping maw of the ancient one and her soon-to-be blooming base above it. Everything was falling into place nicely, it was just a matter of wakening the beast and getting the information she needed now, and dealing with whatever the splintered pack leaders were going to throw at her.

Leaping over an incline and landing on her heeled foot, Kerrigan almost ran straight into a Quillgore pack. Going still, she silently observed the beasts cautiously passing a green pool that looked familiar to her. A Quillgore foal, unaware of the danger the adults were avoiding, ventured too close to the bubbling viscous fluid and was immediately grabbed and pulled under by a small primal zerg, disappearing in a splash and spooking the rest of the herd into a run deeper into the forest.

Creeping forwards, Kerrigan used the cover of sturdy bushes that had resisted trampling over the years, seeking to get a better look at the pool and its contents. Though the blood of the young Quillgore was seeping through the almost luminescent green fluid, it was clear there was only a small primal zergling hiding in it.

Abathur. Once she had drawn close enough, Kerrigan leaped forwards and brought her wing blades down with terrible efficiency upon the zergling, landing in the pool on her feet and with the lesser creature pinned under the liquid with her blades.

Yes? Abathur was immediately there, looking through his queens eyes and taking in information.

What is this pool? I feel... Stronger. Kerrigan looked in wonder around her, she could feel the change in her flesh and bones.

Primal spawning pool. Useful essence. Absorb and become stronger. As if it was obvious, Abathur was gone as quick as he came.

"Hm." Leaving the corpse of the zergling and its prey to lay in the pool, Kerrigan turned back to the maw and walked towards it, thinking.

My Queen. It will take much to awaken the sleeping ancient one, it must be fed. Izsha had been observing the situation, keen to point out the obvious.

I know. The Quillgore and fallen primal zerg we have killed will make fine food. My hive is ready above the ancient, Izsha. Take my drones and start feeding it.

As my Queen wishes. The drones will be easy prey as they gather and bring meat to the ancient one, they must be protected.
You leave that to me. Standing on the jutting tip of earth that reached out above the maw, Kerrigan looked down into its depths thoughtfully. Nothing but teeth and death, the Primal Zerg could bring some very interesting variations into the swarm, but if this beast could be put to heel and made a part of it... It was unlikely, but the thought made her grin wickedly all the same.

A familiar bellow brought Kerrigan out of her reverie, along with the sound of trees being snapped like twigs. Slowly turning to look over her shoulder to the southeast, Kerrigan saw the fast-paced approach of what could only be Brakk.

"CORRUPTED ONE! YOU WILL NOT WAKE THE ANCIENT! YOU FACE BRAKK NOW! I WILL CONSUME YOUR ESSENCE!" It was only a few seconds before the bristling pack leader charged into sight, earth and plants flying from around his feet and off his horns as his many red eyes focused on Kerrigan. Curiously, he was devoid of reinforcements. A quick thought revealed Zagara was under heavy assault, but the broodmother was entrenched and not going anywhere. Seems Brakk thought to bring the invasion to a quick end.

"I'm glad we could have this... Meeting of leaders, Brakk." Smirking, Kerrigan sauntered off of the precipice and onto the field, readying for the inevitable assault as Brakk worked himself into a slathering rage.

If Brakk had attempted to respond, it was lost under the frothy snarl that sprayed saliva on the ground beneath him right before he charged.

Izsha. Leaping forwards in sync with Brakk, Kerrigan nimbly evaded the first SCV sized fist that carved trenches into the ground where she had stood.

*My Queen, do you want reinforcements?*

*No. Collect the corpses of the primal zerg and forget about the Quillgore.* The second fist swiped closer to Brakks body to protect his well armored belly and Kerrigan danced backwards to avoid it, landing on the back of his first fist with a clatter.

*As my Queen wishes. Be careful.*

The agility of his prey was clear, and Brakk lunged his head forwards seeking to clamp his jaws around her armored torso. Kerrigan braced herself, crouching and grabbing hold of a spine jutting out of his forearm as she directed her wing blades with pinpoint accuracy. Brakk's momentum came to a jerking halt as blood sprayed out around the boney appendages that were embedded deeply into two of his many eyes.

"AHHHHH!" Reeling back in pain, the giant flew to his back feet and brought his hands to his face, Kerrigan momentarily forgotten as she dislodged her blades from his eyes and leaped away nimbly.

"YOU PAY! YOU PAY!" His screams were so loud Kerrigan could feel the air trembling at his anger. She was already poised to strike at his belly, but paused briefly to observe a curious change in her opponent. He seemed to *swell* in his fury, both his armor and spines shifting to a darker color as some sort of unholy adrenaline coursed through him.

Wary of the change in her foe, Kerrigan ran back out of range of his grasp so as to attempt to discern what Brakk had in store for her. Black blood oozed from his eye sockets, but Brakk still had four more eyes to see with. Focusing on Kerrigan, he landed on his fours once more and made to charge at her again- his movement perceptibly faster. It seemed he did not learn from his mistakes, Kerrigan wondered how he managed to get to the top of the food chain to begin with.
Crouching low, Kerrigan prepared to leap and blind Brakk further. A moment before connection however, Brakk's entire body twisted and Kerrigan was faced with being rolled over and impaled on hundreds of spines. Without a choice, she leaped into the air and focused a quick blast of energy from her clawed fingertips into Brakk's underbelly as he tore up the ground where she was standing and rolled to his feet to give chase.

Caught on the run against a foe who was rapidly becoming stronger and faster by the second, Kerrigan observed Brakk swelling in rage once again. In a moment, she had caught sight of one flaw- his armor was not growing, only the fleshy muscles beneath were swelling and so the plates were separating to reveal gaps. Narrowly avoiding having her own wings cut off by a massive blade that made a new furrow in the ground, Kerrigan lead him towards the maw of the beast in rising desperation.

"Yes. I will feed you to him. Your weakness is poison." Brakk hissed in pleasure as he thundered after her, ready to make the kill as she ran up the jutting outcropping of stone that overlooked the ancient ones maw.

Brakk was already a very heavy creature, and his new increase in volume only exacerbated it. Kerrigan looked down into the maw of the sleeping beast and at the rock under her feet and sincerely hoped for the best. Brakk was already charging up the small incline, his head forwards in an attempt to shove her off with his massive tri horns.

Poised to leap once more, Kerrigan grinned at her attacker. "I did not come to lead the swarm through weakness, Brakk." She yearned to monologue further, to taunt him, but he was already well within striking range and it was time for her to make her own counterattack. Putting all her strength into the thrust, she leaped outwards and over the gaping maw leaving Brakk grasping at the stone beneath his feet to recover and not fall in himself. He was too busy watching Kerrigan, hoping dearly she would fall in, that he did not notice the stone beneath him giving way to his girth.

Arms flailing out in alarm as she realized she was not going to land at the edge of the mouth like she had planned, Kerrigan slammed against the sheer earthen wall with a grunt and immediately began scrabbling for purchase with her claws.

"Hah. Hah. Hah." Brakk gave off a raspy laugh as he watched her struggling, grinning as best he could. His merriment was short lived the moment he realized he had begun falling himself.

"No! NO! Brakk will not die like this!" Backpedaling across the crumbling stone, Brakk turned around and made a reach for the solid edge but missed it horribly. Kerrigan was scaling the stone with her wing blades and claws, digging in with her claws and then pulling herself up farther with the blades, watching over her shoulder as Brakk began his descent- he could not climb.

Squealing in terror, Brakk was furiously digging at the fleshy and toothy walls he was sliding down but only damaging himself on the massive razor teeth. As soon as his black blood began to drip down into the gullet below, it came to life. Kerrigan drew herself up onto the ledge and watched in grim fascination as the inside of the maw spasmed, tendrils erupting from the flesh and seeking out Brakk as he writhed. As soon as Brakk's flailing hind legs had been thoroughly wrapped up, he was ripped from his position and pulled into the dark below with one final scream. A sick crunch and eruption of blood sprayed upwards and coated the massive needle-like teeth at the base of the maw.

Kerrigan was poised to watch more- to make sure Brakk was truly dead, but the ground rocking beneath her feet and a tremendous groan reverberating through the earth had her leaping to further safety and far enough away that she could avoid any immediate threats the waking ancient may offer.

From afar, Kerrigan watched a head and what appeared to be its hands erupt from the ground,
spraying earth and rock in all directions. Many eyes, each the size of the Queen of Blades herself, blinked into focus and looked towards her as the creature settled into wakefulness.

"I am awake." Its voice, clearly male, reverberated through the area although it was low-pitched enough that it was perhaps just a whisper. "You are the one who has roused me? You seek something." It was not a question. No one would awaken him for nothing less than the pursuit of power.

"I am Kerrigan, Queen of the Swarm, and I have awakened you to help me seek the power of this planet. What is your name?" Standing tall, although no higher than one of the creatures nails, Kerrigan focused her psionic might until it trailed off her body in a visual display of personal power. A classic tactic, Kerrigan sought to deter him from attacking early, there would be no weakness detected.

"Zurvan. As old as the race of primal zerg themselves. I can lead you to the power of Zerus, but can you grasp it?" Questioning, Zurvans many eyes scrutinized the Queen of Blades, curious. "You come from the stars. Corrupted zerg return to their birthplace, full circle."

Baring her teeth at the challenge, Kerrigan visibly bristled and snapped. "I have dominated every life form in this galaxy. Zerus will kneel before me or it will lay broken at my feet!"

A soft chuckle, deep enough to shake the ground she stood on, reverberated from Zurvan. "So be it."

_Izsha. Direct the drones to other activities. Zurvan is awake._ She hardly needed to say it, it was doubtful a soul on or above Zerus did not sense Zurvan waking.

Aboard the Hyperion, Stetmann was frantically rushing through the halls above the Laboratory and staring at the diagram on his data pad with the overlay he had put over it, attempting to discern where he needed to place the scrambler to complete the cube-like field that would hide the broodmother sitting in his Laboratory from scanners.

_You can do quantum equations in your sleep but you can't read a map, kid?_ Swann's voice was scathing and the young scientists shoulders drooped. Stetmann and Swann had spent the lions share of their time together coordinating mentally and the fruit of their labor had been the realization they could operate through one another with a mere thought, making sharing ideas and helping one another a much easier process. Swann was looking through his eyes now, and a strange surreal feeling came over Stetmann as the mechanic deftly took over his body functions- leaving him an observer in his own body.

"Eh. Alright now. Watch closely cause I hate repeatin' myself kid." It would look extremely odd seeing Stetmann standing there talking to himself, thankfully he was physically alone but more than a few times Jayce had been the confused observer of some of their interactions. Orienting himself, Stetmann was turned left to right while looking down at the map.

"You almost had it. Needed to go around this corner and you were right there kid." Walking quickly, Swann brought Stetmann to where he needed to be and stuck the scrambler to the wall, activating it with precision and promptly leaving Stetmann's body with a jolt. Reeling and almost dropping his data pad, Stetmann caught it and shook his head as the haze wore off quickly.

_Captain, all scramblers are in place and the Hyperion is ready to approach Station 837._ Briskly walking towards the bridge where everyone would be congregating to watch events unfold, Stetmann felt his nerves buzzing. So many what-ifs were running through his mind; what if the scrambler didn't work as they thought it would and the ship was attacked? They could be captured and would surely become test subjects in some hidden lab, subjected to horrendous experiments for
the rest of their existence- and as far as he could tell they would never die of old age, just like all zerg. Stetmann struggled to keep a grip on himself all the way there.

"Are you sure you're good to do this?" Horner was scrutinizing Jayce, who looked harried and unwell. They had gone over what she needed to do many times already, and if the tick at the corner of her eye was any indication- she was getting tired of the second guessing of her abilities.

"Captain. I've been good to do this since the first time you asked me that question sixteen times ago. I am capable." Everyone was watching their exchange with a mix of quiet amusement and concern, but there was no choice. Jayce would have to be their voice, it was too dangerous to go in there themselves. No one was confident that they could defeat Shlassa in a mental battle yet, so they put their hopes on someone who could just as easily point out the ship is full of zerg and try to get them killed.

Raising his hands in a gesture of surrender, Horner looked away from Jayce. "Fine, you're right."
Looking at Raynor, Warfield, Tychus and the just arriving Stetmann, Horner snapped. "Stay and watch as much as you want, but for god sakes get out of sight." They barely had time to jump away from the command console when Horner hailed the station and its controller, an angry looking older man with beady eyes, popped up.

"This is Station 837. Hello, Hyperion. Never thought Raynor's Raiders would pass through here." A palpable tension rose through the bridge. The station knowing the name of the ship and its contents was not a surprise, but what the controller chose to do with that information next is what raised concern. For their part, Horner and Jayce were standing beside one another calm and collected.

"Hello Station 837. Don't suppose you care much for Mengsk, do you? Our credits are as good as anyone elses either way." Horner smiled easy, negotiations were a familiar drill for the captain.

"Only thing old Mengsk did for us was send us to the ass-end of the sector. You and your boys are welcome here, 'n so are your credits." The wily old man gave them a crooked smile, all yellow teeth. "If you can fit that ship in here I'll be surprised though." He added in afterthought.

"You leave that to me. My companion will be coming aboard the station for the transaction after we dock." Horner tilted his head to indicate Jayce, who smiled and nodded politely.

The controller couldn't hide his disappointment, his lips curling downwards slightly. "Alright. Sure would be great to meet Jim Raynor though, man's a legend."

"He's preoccupied at the moment sir, else he would be glad to meet you." Jim quietly rolled his eyes while standing between Warfield and Tychus, all three looked bored.

"As you say. See you folks on the station then." With a click, the comms were closed and everyone breathed easier.

"Man's a legend, hah. If only they knew you back when, Jimmy." Tychus grinned.
Warfield was more focused on business, eager to depart before they had even arrived. "You be careful on that rig girl," pointing towards Jayce with a clawed fingertip, he looked especially severe. "Doubt those poor bastards have even seen a woman in months."

"He's right." Tychus conceded, crossing his arms and nodding slightly.

"Quit second guessing her and lets get this over with!" Raynor snapped, pushing himself off the wall he had been leaning on and beginning to pace around like a caged beast.
Jayce gave the firearm she had strapped to her left leg, hoping to give the illusion of her being a lefty, a firm pat as she stepped away from the command console to let Horner do his work in peace. "I've survived fine so far, gentlemen. I think I can deal with a bunch of horny men in space, thank you." Tychus had a feeling he was being pointedly looked at, frowning slightly.

"Be quiet, all of you, or I will personally boot your asses off my bridge." Horner was guiding the ship to the docking station and he was getting swiftly agitated by their talk. "Unless you can steer this ship yourselves, of course." The silence that greeted him was pleasing.
Station 837, due to its remote location, had a much more defense-minded platform design. Ships were to land inside large square docking bays that opened from the top and could be sealed shut to defend their cargo, or to trap it. The entire station was a floating safe.

Matt lowered the Hyperion into the largest bay as delicate as a butterfly, with only feet of wiggle room to spare. With the expressions on their faces in clear view as they watched him work, Matt could all but feel his companions insides clenching when the Hyperion swayed dangerously towards a wall before he made the slight adjustment necessary to avoid collision. It was the work of a few minutes but it felt like an hour before they felt the ship groan and shift as it settled on its landing gear.

"I was happier when I didn't get to see the spaces we landed in!" Jayce exclaimed nervously as she strode towards the exit, followed closely by Stetmann.

"That's why I'm the captain." Horner smirked at the remaining men in his company, smug.

"Don't I know it." Raynor smiled slightly, appreciating the mood lightener.

Walking down the hall together towards the lift that had been connected to the station, Jayce glanced at Stetmann before questioning thoughtfully. "Doc. Where'd Swann go?" Indeed, Swann was not present during their little gathering and it left Jayce curious.

"Swann? Oh, ah." Stetmann fell behind slightly as they passed through a hissing door, letting her go first. "He's fine, but he's in the Lab until we leave the station. We couldn't find enough flow intensifiers for the last scrambler, so he isn't wearing one for now."

"Oh." Perking up visibly, Jayce shifted her data pad to be pinched between her cast and chest so her good arm was free, they were almost at the lift. "Should have asked me! Small parts inventory was one of my duties, I'm sure I can find a pile of them once we're done here."

"Yeah, about that actually." Stetmann wavered as they walked up to the lift, Jayce took her place at the center and leveled a questioning look at him.

"What about it?"

Quickly, Stetmann held up an innocuous badge that showed the Hyperion's logo on it, offering it. "Look, the commander wants you to wear this so we can keep track of you while you are down there. I don't think you'll do anything, personally!" It became clear that he was simply nervous and Jayce smiled, Stetmanns manner had always been endearing to his female co-workers.

"Clip it on quick, I can't do it with one hand." Smirking, she enjoyed the poor mans stammering as he clumsily pinned it to the side of her arm after her hand quickly redirected his path from her chest.

Collecting himself, Stetmann stepped back to stand by the lift console and focused his gaze on Jayce as he gripped the lever firmly. "You could stay there, you know. Doesn't seem like there's anything stopping you. Just a thought." His voice had lowered slightly, conspiratorial. Jayce gave him a noncommittal shrug.

"We'll see doc. In the meantime, pull the lever. I got a date and don't want to be late." Smiling and winking, Jayce thoughtfully watched the scientist as he pulled the lever and the platform she was on lurched downwards through the long shaft that linked the ship to the station and kept the atmosphere of space at bay. It was a long way down through the dark.
As soon as she felt the lift touch ground the doors in front of her snapped open, the bright light of the bay leaving her blinking owlishly and stepping off the lift into unfamiliar territory. With a note of finality the door closed behind her immediately and the subtle hiss of the lift leaving came shortly after. Adjusting the data pad resting on her arm, Jayce took in the sights. Three men were there in front of her, dressed in the Station 837 standard brown work suit, and each looking up from their given tasks with mild curiosity.

The bay that the Hyperion was resting atop of was mostly empty, wide open with tidy rows of racks for cargo to be placed. While there was generous amounts of rust and signs of wear and tear, it seemed at a glance that the controller for the station ran a tight ship, which was nice.

Focusing on her silent hosts, Jayce tilted her head slightly. "Are you the welcoming committee?" Before anyone could answer, she barged on. "I'll need to see the controller about our transaction. Ship needs refueling and a round of rations, so two of you get on that and one of you bring me to your boss." Jayce's attempt at being authoritative seemed to fall short, as she was rewarded with a few smirks and chuckles in response.

"Right." A thickly muscled man with a clean shaven face and head spoke up, stepping away from the console that he had used to raise the shaft that connected to the Hyperion and towards her. "Boss said we were going to have a little lady visiting us, allow me to give you our hospitality." He was grinning and the other men were smirking and smiling, all mirthful. Jayce did not feel overly threatened, it was a display she was well accustomed to, and so took a step forward of her own accord towards the man who had spoken.

"Right, let's go cowboy." His eyebrows quirked up in surprise for a moment before he made an expansive gesture for her to follow. The other two men, sensing the fun was over before it began, turned away to get on the tasks assigned to them, Jayce assumed.

Aboard the Hyperion, all four men were watching the display playing out on the console, and hearing every word of it. Going rigid and leaning forwards slightly, four pairs of hands rested on all the decorative sides of the machine as each man looked at one another and to the three who were posturing towards their chosen ambassador.

"If we go down there to save her from whatever trouble she gets into, this station will go on lock down faster than you can skewer them." Horner's tone was dire as he straightened and crossed his arms, but before they could discuss any action to be taken Jayce had already taken the situation by the horns.

"Girls got spunk, gotta hand that to her." Warfield remarked, expressing the impressed feeling that each man was displaying.

"Not out of the woods yet, General." Raynor had quickly returned to a neutral expression, privately scrutinizing every move Jayce made and word she spoke like he had been the moment he first saw her. If anyone would recognize Kerrigan acting through a puppet, it would be him.

"Looks like they got the fuel truck going." Horner remarked, looking at a small diagnostic he had kept running on the corner of the console. "I need to go make sure we get hooked up with it properly. Don't do anything rash, please." Giving each man a pointed look before he left, Horner set off.

"How many of you boys do they have working this joint? Can't be more than a skeleton crew in a place this remote." Jayce remarked offhandedly, walking beside her quiet escort. He had taken on a grim countenance, the poor lighting casting deep shadows on his face.
"Hundred tops. Not my job to count, though." His lip quirked up slightly, Jayce missing the gesture.

"Right. Names Jayce, by the way." Content to make some small talk, Jayce felt more secure now than she had since this entire zerg misadventure began, even with the questionable company. At least shooting them would work.

"Markus." He seemed content to let the conversation land on its face, leaving Jayce trying desperately to think of something else to say. The longer they walked in silence though, the more wrong everything felt.

On the bridge, everyone was watching with rising concern. Raynor pulled up a small schematic of the station out of curiosity and checked to see where Jayce and her escort were, lips pulling into a tight frown.

"They aren't heading to the controllers office. He's takin' her to the ass end of the station." Warfield and Tychus were looking at Raynor then, features tight.

"Before you say anything." Jim interjected quickly, heading off any arguments. "I'm not just going to leave her there if shit hits the fan, which is looking like it's about to. But we're not going down there unless we absolutely have to. Understood?"

"You're right. No need for the cavalry unless absolutely necessary, given the current situation." Warfield nodded slightly, grimly watching the 3d image of Jayce and this Markus.

"Oh I sure hope the cavalry does get to go, partner." Tychus was watching the image too, looking all too hungry for a fight.

Huffing slightly, Raynor waved them off. "Move to the side, we're makin' a call." Quickly, he tapped a few keys and sent a wave to the controller, stepping out of view just before the man's severe face popped up.

"Yes, Hyperion?" He seemed confused, no image of the person who called him appearing.

"Yeah, 837, we got a problem." Jim spoke smoothly and with authority.

"Jim Raynor? Pleasure to speak with you, though I can't help but wonder why you aren't actually there?"

"Preoccupied right now, but you've got a situation that needs attention. One of your boys is leading my girl into the ass-end of your station instead of to your place to make our transaction. You need to get a leash on him and get this under control before it goes bad." Even as Raynor was speaking, Jayce had gleaned that the man beside her really wasn't some maintenance worker. He was walking with the stride of a man who was used to killing, predatory. It was something she had become used to seeing as of late.

"Sorry Raynor, can't do that. These men are at the edge as it is, if I go taking away their fun- they are gonna take away my life." He both looked and sounded bitter, as if Jayce being fed to his wolves was some unfortunate, distasteful circumstance.

"Are you for real?" Jim was stunned at the mans incompetence. "So you can't even control what few men you have, and you are also so cowardly you don't even warn us to send someone more physically capable than a half-disabled woman?" Struggling to keep from yelling, Raynor clenched his fists and forced himself to breath before continuing. The controller was silent, lips pursed in anger.
Horner had arrived at the section of the massive ship that contained the lion share of the fuel tanks, where the fuel truck should have connected already. His eyes narrowed in suspicion when no such thing had happened, and the fuel truck had not moved from where it's driver had initially placed it. Keeping abreast of what was going on with Jayce, Horner made a quick decision.

"Listen. We're not going to let one of our own get messed up by your rabid dogs, and if we have to come down there to fix this ourselves you're gonna have a few less men and a few more bodies to take care of. Your choice." There it was, Raynor had laid down the ultimatum. The controller had other ideas though, as far as he could see he held all the cards.

"Actually, Mr. Raynor, you will remain on your ship. When my boys are finished your girl will complete the transaction, all of your credits by the way, and then you may take your ship and limp out of here like the sack of sorry shit you and your Raiders are. You might want to thank me for not just locking you in here until Mengsk can come get his hands on you personally, in fact." Bristling, the controllers angry look mutated into smug pleasure: the Hyperion and it's crew were at his mercy, and so easily. "Oh. And she stays with us."

"Listen here you piece of-" Raynor was promptly cut off, the image of the controller disappearing and Jayces transmission resuming. "Son of a bitch!" Looking sharply at Warfield and Tychus, one who was poised and grimly ready while the other was almost grinning savagely. "Get moving!" There was a flurry of motion- guns being readied and feet hitting the ground running, as the three ran towards the lift.

"How much longer until we get there?" Jayce questioned, trying to keep the suspicion out of her voice.

"Almost there." Markus looked increasingly agitated, and Jayce subtly made distance between herself and him as they walked, thinking hard. Her hand had drifted towards her gun before she thought better of the action, it would be a very easy disarm- even she knew that. When a small bathroom hub came into view on her side of the hall, she swallowed hard and tried not to look relieved- it was a plan at least.

Warfield had brought his data pad with him so they could track Jayce and continue to watch and hear the feed. They were going down the lift, pale light of the hologram illuminating them as they watched it, when Warfield murmured. "No no, don't do that girl." Tensing as he saw the subtle shift towards her gun, Warfield relaxed just as quick when she clearly thought better of it. "Good."

As the woman's bathroom came up on her right, Jayce had drifted just far enough away from Markus so that her movement would set the door to open. Though he had been paying attention to her drifting, he hadn't thought much of it- at best she could try to run or pull her gun and neither would work well for her. When the woman's bathroom door hissed open and she leaped into it, realization struck him hard and fast- he dove after her but collided with the door hard as it closed in his face. It would not open for a man.

Leaping into the bathroom so the door wouldn't automatically open at her proximity, Jayce jumped fearfully when Markus pounded on the door and cursed loudly. Stressed beyond belief, Jayce yelled and gave a stall door a halfhearted kick with each word. "Kiss. My. Ass!" Taking a breath and closing her eyes, she leaned against the stall and cradled her throbbing arm, speaking softly into the one-way pin on her sleeve. "I know staying here and taking whatever shit comes at me might very well be the best thing, but I'll tell you right now- I'm a Raider, always have been and always will be, even if you don't trust me Commander."

Sullen, she faced away from the banging door and thought about what that Protoss said with new clarity. "You helped me when I had nothing, saved me, and I believed in your cause. I'm not gonna
leave you to rot if I can help it, not a chance. So, please, lets get the hell outta here."

"Just gotta save you again, of course." Raynor grumbled as the lift hit the ground.

"Thought that was your thing, Jimmy." Tychus mocked as the three of them strode through the door, weapons raised.

"Who knows how long we got, better make this real fast. You go find the girl, I'll guard the lift." Tossing his datapad to Tychus, Warfield took up a defensive position near the door and its console - he wasn't about to let them lose the only link they had to the Hyperion.

As they ran through the empty halls towards where Jayce was trapped, Raynor concentrated his thoughts. It was distasteful, but he could not argue against the usefulness of mental communication especially when they were liable to be listened in on.

**Stetmann.**

**Commander?**

*I'm sure you've been watching the feed. We're on the Station and I need you to get on that fuel truck and have us ready to go by the time we're back.*

Sir, I've never operated a fuel truck!

Swann, who had been alternating between looking at the holding container for the sparking Protoss crystal formation, watching the feed of Jayce, and very pointedly ignoring Shlassa on the other end of the room, made himself known.

*I'll help with it, just get your ass down there pronto.*

**Good man.** Raynor jerked slightly as he brought the mental conversation to a close, leaving Stetmann to scramble for the lift as Tychus and Raynor closed in on Jayce and her attacker.

Elsewhere on the station, the controller was sitting back in a comfortable chair - waiting for his call to Emperor Mengsk to go through. Anyone who had a grip on the Hyperion and its contents was privy to a direct line to their greatest antagonist. His communication room was dingy and full of cigar smoke, one of which he had lit up in celebration. An old plaque, which had been repurposed as a paperweight, read "Lark" in worn white lettering on a black background, and he smirked at it. "You clever son of a bitch." When the door to his room hissed open, he straightened up and turned to look towards the intrusion angrily. "What the hell do you want?" His voice died off as he saw the ever crisp looking captain of the Hyperion looking at him direly, one hand casually pulling off a glove.

"Never cared much for men with no integrity." Horner sounded calm, even looked it, but there was something sinister behind the simple gesture of removing his gloves and pocketing them. Before he could take a step further however, the familiar face of Mengsk appeared on the large screen in front of Lark.

"You said you are in possession of the Hyperion and its - ah. Hello captain." Ever superior and smug, Mengsk gave Horner a very pointed look over. "I see Kerrigan has treated you well."

"Kerrigan?" Lark, the poor bastard, whispered in confusion. He had been reaching for his firearm but held still then.

Shlassa, who had for the most part remained completely unobtrusive until now, bristled and went rigid. Swann heard the chitinous clacking and turned sharply, feeling a chill run up his spine looking
at the broodmother. Something was terribly wrong.

"You have no idea what is going on, do you Terran?" Though busy, Shlassa took the time to verbally mock Swann, confirming his feelings of wrongness.

In the time it took to blink, Horners entire demeanor changed. When his eyes opened they held a dull orange glow, which Lark had failed to notice as he was staring at his Emperor. Stepping forwards and smiling a fraction too widely, Horner firmly planted his hand on the back of Larks neck. Alarmed and offended, the man made to stand up but found himself unable to move, such was the strength behind the hand.

"Oh Kerrigan treated us all very well, Mengsk." The Emperor glanced at Lark with feigned sympathy before focusing on Horner.

"Kerrigan? You'd do well to keep away from me and the Koprulu sector. That includes your new pets." Mengsk's suspicion was confirmed when Horner let out a light laugh- one that did not belong to him in the slightest.

"Remember when I told you I'd let you live just so I could watch your Empire burn down around you, Mengsk?" Horners grip on the mans neck perceptibly tightened, Lark letting out a pained groan. "I have decided I want a front row seat." Without further warning, Kerrigan flexed the new muscle inside of Horners arm with deadly efficiency. Lark could only gasp in a horrified breath as tendrils ripped through the back of his neck, through his spine and vitals and punched out of his chest, writhing obscenely as gore sprayed onto the image of Mengsk.

Mengsk's face turned away sharply in disgust, unable to hide it. "Always knew you were a monster, Kerrigan. Not surprised you made more. Your new pets wont get off that backwater station alive."

Withdrawning from the mans thoroughly shredded insides, Horner flicked the blood from his tendrils before pulling them back inside his arm. Smirking through him, Kerrigan chuckled. "See you soon, Mengsk." Casually closing the comm with the disgruntled emperor, Horner walked out of the room as though nothing was amiss and Lark was left to cool in his juices.

The feeling of wrongness had come and gone so quickly, Raynor had no time to focus on it when him and Tychus rounded a corner and came into view of the three men who had first saw Jayce banging on the bathroom door angrily.

"Could just shoot it."

"We'd wake everyone up, no."

"Go get one of those gas cutters, it ain't hard." Their conversation died off when, as one, the three men turned to look at Tychus and Raynor and gaped in horror. They might as well have been demons.

"The zerg- the zerg are here!" Markus' voice raised an octave, his eyes bugging as the giant Findlay strode with purpose towards them, flanked by the spiky Raynor. If these cretins didn't want to fire off a gun, they sure as hell didn't either. As one, Markus' partners turned and made to flee, but he grabbed a wiry dark haired man by his shoulder and yanked him back violently- reaching for the only gun between the three of them that was fastened to the man's leg.

"Hell with this and hell with you Markus!" The man he had grabbed all but threw his gun at Markus and shoved himself away, breaking into a run. Two quick crunching sounds echoed through the hall beneath the pounding of their retreating feet- followed by the sharp whistle of projectiles flying and
bodies falling. Markus' two friends had not gotten far- and Raynor had no intention of aiming for anything but the kill. His spikes had found their home buried neatly into their now ruptured hearts with dull thuds.

"The Raiders are here." Raynor corrected Markus, staring grimly at him.

As soon as Markus raised the gun to take aim at Findlay, the big man launched forwards in a flurry of motion- the thick claws tipping his toes clattering against the cold floor. Tychus caught the man's right forearm with his left hand and squeezed so hard his muscles couldn't even tighten to pull the trigger. In immediate and immense amounts of pain, Markus attempted to fall to his knees but was held up as Tychus wagged a clawed finger at him. "Ah ah. You wait there." Leaning towards the woman's bathroom door, Tychus knocked three times casually.

Knock knock knock

Jayce had heard the struggle outside, muffled by the heavy door, but still jumped slightly when the door was knocked on.

"Occupied?" Tychus' playful drawl came as an immense relief and she almost ran at the door, all too eager to leave. When she saw Markus being held at Tychus' mercy as soon as the door had slid open, her eyes were icy chips.

"All done, actually." Keeping her tone even, she glanced from Tychus to Markus, morbidly curious about what was going to unfold. She had seen the still warm corpses of the other two men in her peripheral vision already, and had no illusions about what was going to happen to this sniveling man. She couldn't find it in herself to feel pity. Raynor watched the exchange, coughing slightly to remind Tychus of their time constraints.

"I didn't mean any harm, please!" Markus blubered, the gun dangling from his deadened fingertips as he frantically grasped at Findlay's armored arm. Looking directly at Jayce when it was clear Tychus had no intention of believing him, he pleaded. "Jayce, please, I don't want to die! I wasn't going to kill you! I swear!"

"No." Jayce cut in coldly, Tychus and Raynor curious to see what her verdict would be- not that it would change their own choice about the mans life. "You were just going to oh, I don't know, beat me, probably rape me and most likely keep me chained up in some room for however long I may live. Better than being killed though, right?" She bared her teeth slightly, glaring.

"Ladies spoken." Aware of their time ticking away, Tychus decided to cut the play short, much to his regret. Pulling back his right arm and closing his fist tight, Jayce took a long step backwards- she knew what was coming. Popping out of the indent in his arm, the long blade swiveled and snapped into position. Raynor did a double-take, arms loosening from their crossed position on his chest, he had yet to see this particular new feature of his old friend.

Genuine tears leaked out of Markus eyes and he redoubled his struggling, whispering frantic and repeated "No!" and "Please!" right up until Tychus swung his arm down and upwards, driving the blade through the man's guts and up into chest, lifting him as his flesh hit the base of the blade violently. Jayce watched the whole thing with a grim determination- as if she was delivering the killing blow herself. Markus hung gasping and twitching for a moment before Tychus quickly jerked free and dropped him like the sad sack he was.

The smell of fresh blood hit his nose, harsh and coppery, and Tychus froze looking at the dripping blade he was holding aloft. Before either Jayce or Raynor had realized what happened, and Raynor had honestly been transfixed himself, Tychus ran his tongue up the side of the blade and took a taste.
Jayce quickly clapped a hand to her mouth and attempted to stifle a gag, breaking the moment.  

Tychus knew now nothing would ever taste sweeter than blood and flesh, it had tasted like what a high-class meal had when he was still human. It was no wonder everything else tasted like ash now.

"Tychus. What the hell!" Broken out of his own reverie, Raynor exclaimed in disgust.

Shaking his head quickly, Tychus didn’t allow himself or them time to think about what he had just done, flipping the blade back into its sheath and turning away from Jayce and Raynor- hiding his shame.

"Get your asses moving." Tychus rumbled, glaring down the hallway at nothing.

As if on cue, a bored security guard who had been sleeping through his shift slammed the emergency button on the console in front of him when he saw three corpses laying in a hall and the grainy images of three people- no, zerg- leaving them. Fearful, the man turned on the intercom and yelled "We're under attack by zerg! Sector 4 and 3! Battle stations!"

"Ah hell!" Raynor didn’t need any further encouragement, he was off running with Tychus and Jayce at full tilt. Unfortunately it was quickly apparent Jayce’s full tilt was well behind theirs. Tychus swung back and ignored any cries of protest she uttered as he scooped her bodily into the crook of his left arm and ran hard to catch up with Jim. "Didn't risk everyone's ass just to leave you in the dust on the getaway, sweet thing!" Tychus laughed.

Stetmann was currently under Swanns control. As soon as the station alarm went off he frowned tightly, staring hard at the fuel levels and hoping he could squeeze a lot more out before the crew got back. Warfield had dragged a few cargo containers near the lift door for cover purposes and was waiting, hoping it would be three familiar faces running at him instead of marines in full gear.

"Don't like this one bit." Swann muttered to himself, through Stetmann. When the tip of a Ghost rifle materialized right beside his temple, he froze.

"Me neither. Stand up and step away from the vehicle."

Taking a quick breath, he followed the Ghost's directions as closely as he could while Stetmann practically buzzed inside his head. He was standing beside the truck and staring down the barrel of the Ghosts gun when Stetmann forcefully ejected him from his body. Fighting to stop himself from jerking and getting prematurely shot, Stetmann whispered. "Please go. I don't want to hurt you."

Frowning from behind his suit mask, the Ghost wasn't quite convinced. "I think you are confused. Keep your hands where I can see them."

Warfield had obscured his view of the fuel truck and only had eyes for the entrances of the bay- which would make sense, but left Stetmann vulnerable to the hidden enemy. He would not be getting help from Warfield until it was too late, and the thought filled the young scientist with grim purpose.

"Okay. Okay. Hands where you can see them, got it." Stetmann brought his hands together, palms outwards, in the classic gesture of surrender. The Ghost didn't think anything of it, and it spelled his quick and brutal end. Warfield leaped into view immediately after the immensely loud clap sound- misconstrued as a gunshot- and a flash of white-hot light.

The Ghost, what was left of him, fell to his knees. His entire body from the rib cage up and between his shoulders had been incinerated, only some gory chunks of cooked flesh and smoking bone remained. It was so much worse against humans.
"What in the hell?" Warfield was flabbergasted, unable to articulate anything greater. Stetmann almost vomited on the spot, but quickly relinquished control to Swann who took a quick step back in shock but recovered quickly. Leaping back into the vehicle and looking over his shoulder, Swann was filled with relief when he saw Tychus, the woman in his arm and Raynor tearing through the bay doors. The gunfire chasing them was less welcome, and sensing time was officially up he severed the fuel vehicles connection with the Hyperion and ran for the lift with Warfield in tow.

"Time to go boys!" Raynor yelled as a squadron of Marines spilled into the bay after them, firing continually. Jayce was quietly thankful that Tychus' armored body was between herself and that gunfire- knowing full well he had taken some hits already, and held on for dear life.

As the door to the lift opened and they spilled into it, Warfield caught sight of something. "Hold! Holy shit, that's Horner!" Warfield returned fire at the Marine squad and forced them to take cover, Raynor joined in and Tychus put Jayce down behind the three of them before hefting his gun and doing the same.

Matt was running full tilt at them through the large bay doors, and nothing short of a Goliath was chasing him. Waving an arm frantically as he ducked under a spray of bullets and weaved past empty containers, Matt yelled as loud as he could over the gunfire "Wait for me! Hold that lift!" The Marines were in communication with the Goliath and turned to face the easier target, Horner was about to be filled to the brim with Gauss spikes if they didn't do something real fast.

"Ah hell!" Warfield threw his gun down- receiving are you crazy? Looks from every person in the lift with him before he charged out of the small area and head first into the entrenched Marines. They were caught surprised when an entire cargo container lifted and bowled over three of their six members, temporarily trapping them face down. Reeling to fire on Warfield, he closed in on a combat suit with frightening speed, slamming a fist into and through the visor of the man's suit and scraping his talons across his face.

The maimed marine cried out in pain as blood filled his vision, but he would have lived had the other members of his unit not fired on his back to try and kill Warfield. Tychus and Jim had slipped around the cargo container behind them and brought their small fight to a decisive end- tearing out chunks of machine with their fists and rendering the marines unable to move in their combat suits, but alive.

Horner had made it up to them running at full speed. Without another word they all piled into the completely packed lift and watched as the Goliath opened fire just as the heavy door slammed shut. A collective breath of relief went through them as Swann raised their lift from above.

"Did even a single part of this misadventure go as planned?" Jayce panted, more exhausted emotionally than physically, and rested her head against Tychus' bloody back with a dull thunk.

"We got the fuel, maybe even more than we were going to pay for." Stetmann added perkily.

"Still gotta get the Hyperion out of here before this whole place goes on lock down- surprised it hasn't already, actually." Raynor muttered, checking the ammo of his rifle reflexively.

"Shouldn't be a problem." Horner piped up in a cool tone, swiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his sleeve. "When I saw the fuel truck hadn't moved I suspected we were being played and went right for the controller, Lark."

"I thought we weren't supposed to do anything rash?" Raynor smirked, not entirely blaming Horner for the situation- everyone had acted rashly after all.

"Boys!" Jayce had been listening to the cannons of the Goliath firing into the door below them with
"If that Goliath gets through the door it's gonna put holes in the chute, and I don't need to tell you what is going to happen when the atmosphere of space gets into this little death tunnel!" They all went silent, listening to the muffled firing for a second before lurching into action.

"Alright, look." Raynor was looking at the walls. There were horizontal ridges spaced every few feet to give the otherwise fabric-like chute a form and it was the best plan he could think of. "Jayce, you're gonna hold onto my back and we're all gonna climb up!" Raising his voice to cut off any kind of protest Jayce was about to raise about piggybacking off of her Commander. "That's an order!"

Warfield, Tychus, Stetmann and Horner had already sprung upwards, leaping as high as they could before grasping at the solid steel edges. That left Raynor kneeling for Jayce and exposing his spiny back to her. They were angled downwards at least, she wouldn't be impaled if he happened to jerk around. Steeling herself, Jayce leaned over him and gingerly curled both her broken and good arm around Jim's thick neck and only had a second to adjust her grip before he had leaped up and began scrabbling up the makeshift wall, outpacing the lift easily.

With nothing left to do but look down, Jayce was filled with rising alarm as small beams of light were shining up around the lift beneath them and the sound of gunfire became audibly louder. "It's getting through."

Huffing and looking upwards, Raynor could see Tychus and Warfield leaping into the safety of the Hyperion and helping Horner and Stetmann, both who didn't have claws, get in. "Almost there darlin', just hang on." Worry coiled in his guts when he keenly heard the hissing of air being sucked out of holes that were being made down below. With luck the Hyperion would be sealed before the shaft was ripped to shreds.

Swann had stepped back in surprise when Tychus and Warfield all but leaped up out of the hole in the ship and pulled Horner and Stetmann up with them. "What the hell is going on? Why aren't you on the lift?"

Gulping in a breath, Warfield waved Swann off. "Atmosphere is going to collapse any second, can you speed this damn thing up?!"

"She ain't designed to do that, it's a slow ass hydraulic system, champ!" Swann was defensive, scowling.

"Won't matter soon. Can you feel it?" There was a notable breeze, but it was really air being sucked away in increasingly large volumes. Horner looked dire as he peered down at Jim and his cargo. "They are too far down."

Tychus leaned forwards and called down, voice echoing through the shaft. "Jimmy hurry your ass up! You're runnin' outta time!"

"Gonna get the ship ready to go!" Horner announced before running off, his shoe-clad feet pounding against the grated steel as he made for the bridge.

Raynor was acutely aware of Jayce gulping air in his ear and holding tighter as the vacuum of space began to howl and pull. The chute rocked unsteadily, slowing him down until he was giving away precious seconds, but the opening in the ship was right there. "Hang tight!" Warfield and Tychus were yelling at him, the words being pulled away. Steeling himself and hoping she was secure.
enough, Jim began leaping upwards, redoubling his pace and closing the gap between them and their
goal.

When Raynor and his cargo leaped into the Hyperion, Jayce was plucked from his back and yelped as Warfield went hurtling down the hall with her in his arms at max speed. He threw her bodily into a small maintenance locker, not having time to see what exactly she crashed into before he locked the door and sealed her in- temporarily safe from space and not a moment too soon.

Everyone braced themselves as the shaft crumbled away, space stealing their oxygen. The Hyperion's emergency lights enabled and their hall was sealed tight, protecting the atmosphere of the rest of the ship. What was seconds felt like minutes before the lift finally ground to a halt and sealed the ship tight against space. A loud hiss went off immediately as the adjutant opened vents and flooded oxygen back into the halls while everyone lay on the floor grasping at it and gratefully gulping air.

No sooner had the door closed than the ships thrusters roared to life, Matt focusing on getting the Hyperion out of the death trap.

As the ship trembled and all four of them laid there recovering, Jim croaked. "Where's Jayce?"

"Down here! Got her in the maintenance locker." Shouting, Warfield gave them a halfhearted wave. Tychus began chuckling; Jim paid it no mind but Swann and Stetmann were staring at the man like he'd gone insane, especially as his voice rose into boisterous laughter.
An Uncertain Future

Kerrigan sat inside her Leviathan, which had landed near Zurvan, and had her eyes closed against the dull light that shone through the clouds and translucent membrane of the Leviathan's eye. The Swarm was thoroughly entrenched on the planet and the pack leaders had scattered shortly after Brakk had been killed- not a part of the plan, but there was pleasure to be taken from the hunt. They would die.

Aside from fighting arising over the remains of Brakk's pack, there was little standing in the way of expanding further into the volcanic jungles and towards the source of the planet's power. Kerrigan had let her broodmothers and Izsha take full control of base expansion while allowing herself to take a break and observe Jim and his men from afar.

When she discovered they had arrived at the station to refuel, she had considered her options. Turning the station into a Zerg hub that Shlassa was left to command was a perfectly viable alternative, but she wanted to see what the men themselves did and was well rewarded for her patience. The image of Arcturus Mengsk appearing before Matt Horners eyes had been too good to resist- she took control of the man and made sure that little retch of an emperor knew exactly what was coming. Her lips were bowed into a smile just at the thought.

Izsha's voice brought Kerrigan out of her lull. "My Queen. The Terran woman yet lives. Why do they tolerate her presence?" She had lowered down from the fleshy ceiling nearby and tilted her head inquisitively. Izshas entire design was to store thoughts and provide input, it was no surprise that her curiosity- which she had in abundance- would be raised at such a thing.

Glowing eyes snapping open, Kerrigan glanced at the creature before looking out over the at-rest form of Zurvan. "She is a test, Izsha. I had not planned on there being any survivors on the Hyperion, of course, but when I saw them fighting to save her- an idea formed."

"Please explain, my Queen."

Resting her hands atop a knee, her leg having folded over the other in a profane demureness- Kerrigan smirked. "They are going to slowly be brought into the swarm so that their minds remain in tact, remember?" Without waiting for confirmation, of course Izsha remembered, she continued. "Their Terran thoughts and ideals continually rebel against the consuming nature of the swarm, to devour the weak. Jayce, the Terran girl, is temptation." Indeed, that Jayce gravitated towards Tychus- who was perhaps the weakest against such instincts, was like watching a moth fluttering in front of a bug zapper.

"She will tempt them?" Izsha was confused. Temptation was not something the zerg ever resisted, and therefor not a subject to be identified and labeled.

"Yes, Izsha, tempt. It is only a matter of time before the girl triggers an instinct that comes fighting to the surface from any one of those men and she will be consumed. When they look upon her corpse they will know just how completely they have fallen."

"I see. You truly know what is best, my Queen." The cold hard truth was the Queen of Blades had not and would not touch Jayce, or force them to kill her, they would do it themselves.

In his chambers on the Bucephalus, truly as opulent and expansive as they came, Prince Valerian was scouring through the information his drones had extracted from Station 837 and the short amount of time the Hyperion had docked there. The ship itself was not far behind Jim and his men
now, thanks to a few calculated warp jumps, but Valerian had chosen to remain well beyond detection for the time being- letting the captain and his very experienced crew take care of the rest.

The video footage he was watching and the audio between the Hyperion and the station's controller painted a very clear picture of what had happened, and it gave Valerian a measure of relief. Jim and his men had not been changed into mindless killers and, if their visit to the station was any indication, there was no goal to infest every Terran settlement they touched. All in all, it gave Valerian strong hope for the return of Raynor's Raiders.

There were two pieces of information he was puzzling over, however. The woman they had with them was clearly not a zerg herself, she wouldn't have needed to be rescued and she certainly wouldn't have a cast either. Who is she? Is she a captive? It seemed she was helping them interact with other Terrans, or at least tried to. Valerian couldn't imagine it being a willing service, but her being mostly in tact was a good sign.

Secondly; when Matt Horner, the captain of the Hyperion, entered the control room all camera and voice footage had been very clearly removed. It seemed as though Arcturus had already been there, one step ahead as he had been through this entire venture. The thought of his father brought his blood to an angry simmer and he forced himself to breath, calming down.

Arcturus Mengsk had been following every step Valerian and the Raiders took even before they came together to fight against Kerrigan. From the artifacts to the assault on Char itself, Valerian's father had been there watching and waiting to take the credit for success and condemn the mission if it failed. When the Bucephalus retreated from the failed battle- the White Star, Arcturus' flag ship, and an entourage of battlecruisers had given chase and Valerian was told all by his father personally. Truly, with the extra support from Arcturus and his fleet the mission itself may not have failed- and Valerian would not forgive his father for that tremendous loss of life.

The Bucephalus had spent days just fleeing from the remaining fleet- the discussion between son and father had come to ultimatums and finally, blows. There was no time to warn the sector of what had happened on Char, and the Bucephalus was limping heavily by the time the engineers aboard managed to remove all the bugs they had found planted across the ship. From there, officially a terrorist traitor, Valerian had to seek less reputable channels to try and spread the news- but it did not work. Arcturus had already swept the entire Char invasion under the rug while his fleet was chasing his son around the sector. It was a wonder the Moebius Foundation would still associate with him at all.

The most he had been able to do with his grand ship was give aid to the less fortunate, helping the real victims of the zerg invasion, and become a lot better at dodging the authorities in the process.

Valerian was interrupted from his deep, depressive thoughts by the red blinking of a transmission. "Patch him through, adjutant."

"Sir." It was Everett Vaughn, captain of the ship. "Our technicians have calculated the trajectory of the Hyperion."

"Go on, captain." Valerian was all ears, where the Hyperion was going now was anyone's guess.

"The ice planet of Kaldir. The Hyperion is not aiming directly for it, but we believe it is just a tactic to throw off pursuers and that they can warp jump there."

"Well, you and your team are the best at what you do. A confusing turn of events, but I trust your judgment. Continue following the Hyperion and do not let them know of our presence just yet." Valerian was already pulling out information about Kaldir before the captain had even ended the call.
After Horner guided the Hyperion to a clean getaway and announced they were officially in the
clear, everyone made their way to the cantina together. Jayce had excused herself to take a few
painkillers before rejoining them, having jarred her elbow hard enough to coax some reluctant tears
of agony when Warfield had hurled her to safety. By the time she got to the cantina she could almost
forget the entire horrible situation they were all in and was smiling in her drug-induced haze.

Scattering through the room all six men found their seats and finally began decompressing. Jayce sat
heavily at the bar and leaned against it, mumbling softly. "Wonder where Cooper went." Unaware of
the pained looks directed at her from the men who knew the name of the bartender.

"Jayce. How many of those painkillers did you take exactly?" Stetmann was clearly concerned,
ready to get up and take a closer look at her.

"Three." Furrowing her brows and frowning at the younger man, she held up three fingers before
smiling and leaning back.

"Eh, she'll be fine." He settled back down, and his assurance was enough to allow other topics to
arise.

"Right. Gentlemen, I want a recap. A lot went on back there and I want all the details." Raynor
rested his hands on the table in front of himself and folded his fingers together.

"Well I was stuck in the Lab with that damn bug monster until you told the kid to operate the fuel
truck. Don't know how you tolerate that thing, by the way." Swann, gruff as always, pointedly
looked at Stetmann who shrugged slightly. "Something also happened in there and Shlassy or
whatever its name is, said "You have no idea what is going on, do you Terran?" Warfield, Raynor,
Tychus and Stetmann all looked wary at the reminder, though Horner seemed visually unphased.

"Oh yeah, and you blew a Ghost to chunks with your hands." Thinking about what had happened
brought that little detail back with high definition clarity. When Stetmann relinquished control and let
Swanns mind back in only to see the body of what was going to be Stetmann's killer falling to the
ground in a cooked heap, he still didn't know what to think about it.

"What?" Raynor tilted his head, dark eyes scrutinizing the young man critically. Horner and Warfield
were giving him similar looks while it was Tychus' turn to look not surprised.

"He did that to me when he first woke up." Snorting and shaking his head, Tychus gave a shrug at
some of the alarmed looks he received- he was obviously in tact. "What? I'm sure as hell tougher
than some pansy ass Ghost."

"Ah. I have some theories about how it works, I just haven't had time to test it. But yes, I seem to be
able to generate a singularity of some magnitude- at least when under duress." It was Stetmann's turn
to look pointedly at Tychus then, who had the good grace to look sheepish.

"Right. Well you be sure to let me know how that works when you do get some time." Giving his
stubble a careful scratch, Jim came back to the more concerning topic. "Where was everyone when
that creepy feeling happened? I felt it too, Swann. Tychus and I were just around the corner from
Jayce at the time." The more he thought about it, the more it worried him.

"I remember it now." Warfield stared at the ceiling as he recalled, flexing his fingertips and extending
his black talons. "I was getting the containers set up around the lift for cover. Didn't last long though,
but it felt- it felt like her." His jaw muscles clenched in anger at the thought of Kerrigan.

"It did." Jim confirmed, receiving quiet nods from the others- except for Horner who was staring
hard at the floor. "Matt. Where were you? You said you went to Lark soon as you thought we were being played- good call by the way."

Looking up from the floor Matt nodded in thanks, but his voice betrayed how troubled he was. "It doesn't make sense, Jim." Uncomfortable under the collective gaze of their group, Horner crossed his arms and couldn't find it in himself to look back. "I went into that room and I know I killed him- that bastard deserved it. But I don't know any details. It was a damn communication room, anything could have happened in there!" Unfurling his arms, Matt slammed his fist into the table with frustration.

"This doesn't bode well, but I'm more concerned about Kerrigan being able to be so subtle. At best, we were able to discern something happened. I'm starting to think that fighting her- even together-mentally is becoming less of an option, Commander." Stetmann was frowning, a look shared by everyone at that point.

"Whatever happened in there, Matt, it wasn't your fault." Jim pointed at Matt, wanting it made clear there was no ill feelings on this front. His look softened slightly when he looked away from the seething Matt and at Jayce, who was staring at the television blankly. "I should probably apologize. She isn't the damn puppet- we are."

"Might want to try when she isn't as high as a space station." Tychus looked at her as well and shook his head.

Raynor nodded, running a hand through his hair in a stressed gesture. His voice was tired and worn. "I am sorry, all of you. If I knew how to get us out of this mess, you know I'd make whatever sacrifice I had to in order to make it happen."

"We know, son. Right now all we can do is go to this Kaldir place and follow orders. When we first decided to fight Kerrigan we knew damn well that was going to be the long haul, lets not forget that." Warfield looked each of them over, clicking his talons against the cool steel of the tabletop idly.

"What about Shlassy?" Brows furrowed, Swann looked up from his chitinous hands with an especially severe expression.

"What about the broodmother?" Jim tilted his head, looking sharply at the chief engineer.

Catching on to Swann's line of thinking, Stetmann nodded enthusiastically and smiled. "A much lower goal."

"Critters also got some sorta connection with the Queen of Blades- went all rigid and at attention when that feeling came. I wager we weaken Queenies hold on us just by taking out that thing."

Shlassa's voice, deadly soft, echoed through their minds. *You can try, Terrans.*

A pin could be dropped audibly in the silence that came after the message, everyone still as stone and exchanging glances.

Jayce straightened up and scrunched her face in disgust suddenly, looking at Tychus. "You *licked* your blade after you impaled that guy." That immediately got Tychus some looks, to which he just blinked and glared at Jayce- who was apparently missing some very important filters under the influence.

Taking a steadying breath, Raynor snapped his fingers and pointed a claw at Tychus, pointedly glossing over that uncomfortable moment where he did indeed lick a blade covered in gore. "That
reminds me. Arm blades. Any other surprises?” Looking over each man with a quirked brow, Jim thought the question was clear: what exactly can you all do?

“Oh, I never did give you that synopsis commander, sorry. So much has gone on these past few days, even without the need to sleep there just isn't enough hours in a day to do everything.” Catching Raynor's pointed throat clear, Stetmann refocused. "Tychus: Arm blades, incredible strength- he lifted the armory door, greatly improved senses- that goes for all of us. Ah what else. Claws. Predatory instincts observed. A lot of these overlap- we all have some common changes between us." Tychus wasn't sure he liked having his attributes read off like some lab rat.

"General Warfield:" Stetmann shifted uncomfortably as everyone focused on him. No one really wanted to hear just how messed up they were, after all. "very similar to Tychus in skin density and strength. There are patches of porous skin that can expel an extremely hallucinogenic compound and his talons, retractable, excrete a paralytic venom. This venom can most likely kill a smaller sized Terran, shutting down the ability to breath, but it's hard to say.” Warfield looked down at his hands quietly, morose.

"Ah. Captain Horner and I are similar in that we retain our normal head of hair, but we both have long rod-like sections down the sides of our spines. I suspect the hair and the rods give us a greater connection to the swarm- these tendrils and spines are notable features in both broodmothers and Kerrigan herself." The light of interest was dimming in everyone's eyes as Stetmann began to veer off course and Raynor butted in quickly.

"What you know we can do, doc, not theories."

"Yes. Sorry sir. Focusing." Pinching the bridge of his nose for a moment, Stetmann continued. "The captain has an extendable cluster of fleshy tentacle-like tendrils stored in his arms. I haven't gotten to know much more than that yet, need to sit down and run some tests with him. I have multiple layers of eyes that allow me to see in different spectrums, truly remarkable by the way, and the singularity generation as we already discussed." Stetmann paused pointedly then, looking at Jim.

"You, commander, have detachable spines that you can throw. It seems the muscles of your arms and shoulders have been modified to allow you some incredible aim and force- comparable to or greater than the force behind a standard Gauss rifle. You also lack the distinctive "zerg" hair, but have no rods along your spine, which punches a bit of a hole in my theory about having a deeper connection with the swarm. Your detachable spines could have replaced that, though. Just a guess.” Stetmann shrugged.

"Oh! And Swann, he can-"

"Listen, what I can do doesn't matter so lets cut the crap." Swann butted in pointedly, catching some looks of disapproval but he'd be damned if he cared. "What you kids need to do is figure out how you're gonna not get turned into popsicles over on Kaldir." Swann was already standing up, ready to leave. "And no, I ain't goin' down there. We're running a ship that should be crewed with over a thousand with two people who know what they are doing, three meatheads, a pilot, a scientist and a bunch of zombies- someone has to stay up here."

"You think I know what I'm doing?" Jayce smiled widely.

Swann was about to brisk past her but thought better of it and carefully pulled Jayce along by her good arm. "I'll get her back to her room."

As soon as Swann and Jayce had left, Tychus frowned heavily and gave a quick gesture with his head in the direction they had gone. "What's his problem?"
"Other than being turned into a beetle?" Horner scowled, glaring at Tychus.

"It's more than that. Swann knew everyone on this ship, you know? I mean, we did too in our own way but they were all like his kids." Stetmann sat down slowly and sighed. He didn't know people like that, but seeing some familiar faces among the infested had cut deep- he couldn't imagine what it was like for people such as Swann and Horner.

As soon as the cantina door slid shut with a definitive **snick**, Swann began guiding the hazy Jayce back to her quarters. Below the thrumming and humming of his baby, the Hyperion, something disturbing was becoming very clear. Swann's face fell the moment he realized he was listening to the calm thumping of Jayce's heart, the steady flow of blood rushing through her body, and felt a rising excitement that he very firmly labeled not his own. He was almost sweating bullets by the time the doors to her room slid open.

Having walked with her boss, and she honestly felt Swann was more her boss than the Commander or Captain, Jayce had been subdued and quiet- lost in foggy thoughts. Looking into her room and its rundown appearance- bloodstained and grease smeared rags were in piles around her unmade bed and part-covered table. Everything became so jarringly clear, she couldn't help the hot tears that immediately poured out of her eyes unbidden.

"Swann."

Swallowing hard, he registered all too keenly the salt of tears and heard the hitch in breathing. Swann let Jayce go carefully and quickly, as if she was made of snakes. The stout man filled up her door frame and lingered there until the pause between her statement became awkward. "Yeah?"

Managing to mumble a response, he looked down at the floor and started running through mundane tasks in his head in an attempt to distract himself.

"They are all dead. Cooper, our co-workers. Everyone." Slowly, she turned to face him while clutching her broken arm to her chest, eyes already red from the tears dripping out of them steadily. It hit Swann right in his heart.

Looking at Jayce sharply, Swann stepped back to her and circled his arms around her firmly- but ever so carefully. Grateful, Jayce buried her face into the shoulder of his work suit and heaved a sob as he swallowed hard again and thought about the souls lost on the ship too.

"Hey, hey. I'm alive, you're alive, captain and some other meatheads are alive. It ain't over yet." Patting her back cautiously, Swann struggled to think of something comforting to say. He was the gruff engineer, not the social worker, but what could you really say about a situation like this? Swann supposed despair wasn't misplaced.

"Look at me." Reaching up he carefully tugged her hair back until she was looking at him, red eyed and bleary. She needed to see his sincerity. "They really are dead and gone, you are right, but when this is over I'm gonna make personally sure all those infested are put down. They will be at peace, you hear me girl?" He focused hard, keeping her gaze and ignoring that irregular heartbeat thumping temptingly in her ribcage.

"Yes." Sniffling hard, Jayce swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded, believing for all it was worth that this could have a happy ending if her boss said it would.

Separating from her slowly, Swann patted her shoulder with his chitinous bear paw sized hand and forced the lump that had formed in his throat down. "But until then, I want you to be careful." Withdrawing his hands back to his sides and taking a slow step back, Swann felt worried- and why wouldn't he? Who else was looking at Jayce like a burger if he had been? "You aren't safe around
us. There is something... Something going on in our heads that we don't understand yet, and until that broodmother in the Lab is dead and gone we're not going to have as much control over ourselves as we want. You get it?" The door thunked open behind him and he took a long step out, keeping his eyes locked with hers, wanting that answer before he was going to leave.

It was chilling to hear such a thing from the man who had in his own way become her father throughout the years, but Jayce nodded slowly and scrubbed the back of her blood-spattered shirt against her sore eyes. "Yes sir."

Letting out a small sigh of relief, Swann looked to lighter topics. "Good. I want you to get Stetmann to look at that arm later. Need to get you up and running soon or this ship is just going to fall to pieces. Can't take care of it all myself, even if I am awesome."

Smiling slightly, Jayce patted her cast gingerly. "I will."

"Good. Get some rest." Swann took a final step back and the door shut tight, leaving Jayce to stumble to and pass out on top of her bed in exhaustion- still garbed in the blood stained suit from the mission.

As the displayed image of Jayce slumped into bed, Tychus' thumbed the datapad off with a definitive thump.

"I feel like this was a breech of privacy." Stetmann's voice was high with discomfort, but he had watched the exchange between Swann and Jayce all the same. Tychus had pulled out the datapad almost immediately after the two had left, already having noted Jayce never took the pin off her sleeve.

If Jim had any doubts about Jayce left, they were burned away and left him feeling wretched. He stared at the empty space where the woman and his surly chief engineer had been hugging quietly before lowering his gaze to his hands.

"Something was going on with Swann there, before they had their conversation." Warfield had kept his expression neutral but he felt a deep pang for the men and women lost under his command when Jayce had broke down, there was nothing for it. He did his best to be an impartial viewer.

"He did look very uncomfortable." Matt decided to pitch in his two cents, he had plenty of interactions with the chief engineer and seeing him repeatedly focusing intensely on Jayce and snapping himself out of it just as many times did not sit well. The man was unflappable.

Tychus was perhaps the least affected emotionally. Everyone he had an attachment to was still alive-though he couldn't call what they were now okay by any stretch. He, too, identified Swanns apparent struggle- had been tempted to run off and intervene just in case, even. But he decided to extend some faith, Swann was as stubborn as any mule. "You can't tell me none of you haven't felt the same yet."

It did seem odd that everyone else was so rattled to see what was happening. Just how much more deeply was he affected than them?

Raynor raised his eyes to Tychus, quirking a spiny brow. "Felt the same?" The image of his old friend licking gore off an arm blade came back to him, a grim reminder. Maybe Jim did know what Tychus was referring to, there had been an almost hypnotic allure to that thick red paste.

"There's a reason why I stopped watching her." Warfield mumbled grimly. Yes, he did not want any unfortunate accidents involving his new attributes, but the hunger and intense feelings that he was struck with in Jayces presence had been increasingly alarming. "Somethin' gnawing at our minds. Swann has the right of it." He nodded towards the datapad.
"If she just keeps the pin on we can keep tabs on her without having to be near. Probably the safest choice right now." Horner offered, scrutinizing his own feelings. He had not been around Jayce nearly as much as the others and though there was a steady pressure of sorts on his thoughts- as though millions more were trying to crowd into his head but were held back by the finest membrane, he had not felt such strong urges.

Jim was nodding in agreement with Horner, though Tychus looked displeased and Stetmann had stood up and began pacing around as his mind whirred.

"Maybe that would be best. I'll let her know myself when she wakes up." Jim offered. Wasn't much else to do until they got to Kaldir anyway; Other than to send a transmission to Ariel, which he had been avoiding.

Tychus felt unsure, and more than a little displeased at the idea of losing some of his only entertainment. Not like Jim had been much for talking these past days. The often quiet companionship with Jayce had been a balm on his mood, if he had to be truthful to himself. "I don't know about just leavin' her alone. Hell, she's the only good conversation on this heap right now."

Jim's gaze sharpened perceptibly. "I think you might be the least trustworthy around her, Tychus." Tychus returned the glare, challenging but silent. "And you know damn well why, too. No. We're gonna keep our distance from here on out until we can get a handle on what's happening."

"Sure thing, Jimmy." Tychus knew what Jim was on about, and though he couldn't blame him he had already decided it was an order he wasn't following.

Itching to get back to his lab and feeling terribly guilty about spying on Jayce and Swann, Stetmann stopped his pacing and spoke up. "I'm going to go back to the lab." He let himself out when he was waved off by the three remaining men. It was Stetmann's job to think and find solutions, so far he'd done pretty badly in his opinion. Maybe finding a way to keep the more savage zerg instincts at bay for those who struggled would be a less lofty goal.

Stetmann. Swann's voice pierced into the young man's mind and he immediately felt guilty.

Oh. Hello Swann. What can I do for you? Trying to avert his guilty thoughts, Stetmann paused in a long hallway and waited to see what the engineer needed.

Relax kid. Being that they were so connected, Swann felt Stetmann's nervous and guilty feelings practically seeping into his head and tried to alleviate it as fast as possible. I got something for you- come down to floor 5 sector G.

Forcing himself to take a breath, Stetmann's curiosity quickly overpowered his guilt. On my way.

Raynor, Warfield, Horner and Tychus were all getting up and ready to leave the cantina to their own personal haunts, nothing left to talk about until they got to that ice ball of a planet. When Horner's gloved hand clapped on to Tychus' massive bicep, he paused and slowly turned to look at the much smaller man with a quirked brow.

Smirking, Horner held up a stogie that he had pilfered from Lark- Tychus grinned wide and plucked it out of his hand. "Got a light?"

"Uh huh." They stood off to the side of the door as the other two men sauntered out. Fishing a lighter out of his suit pocket, he lit up the stogie for the bigger man.

Taking a slow pull of the cigar, its cherry glowing bright, Tychus let out a quick laugh that had Horner looking concerned. "Bucolic."
"What?"

"Nothin'. Don't worry about it." Despite his misgivings of the cigars brand, Tychus kept it. He knew a peace offering when he saw one. "You're not so bad, captain."

"Just tired of fighting, Tychus. We're on the same team." Exchanging nods between one another, they resumed their exit and went their separate ways.

On Korhal and inside the Imperial Palace, Arcturus Mengsk was seated in a leathery swivel chair and gazing up at the wall of monitoring screens he had arrayed in front of him. A glass of fine wine sat untouched on its perch before him. His attention was on one monitor in particular, where a call was waiting to be accepted. Even the staggering view of his kingdom through the massive windows on either side of him, smoke plumes reaching into the cold gray sky from continued riots and all, did not stir his attention.

The face of Dr. Emil Narud appeared after a few more moments of impatient waiting. Narud's snowy white hair and clothing were all perfectly manicured and cared for, as they always appeared to be. "Ah. Emperor Mengsk. I am pleased to see you. What can I do for you today?"

Tipping his head slightly at the scientist, Mengsk rested his hands on the arms of his chair and gripped it firmly- focused on keeping his cool demeanor. "Dr. Narud. I am sure you are aware of the situation on Korhal and the core worlds. In light of recent findings, I believe it is time to step up our security."

"Yes. I had heard that the hearts and minds of the people had not been swayed by your latest speech. Most unfortunate. Are you suggesting that you'd like the Project to be activated?"

A graying eyebrow twitched slightly at the man's nerve. It was no secret Dr. Narud was in love with his own brain and often looked down on just about everyone. He was lucky his brain was so useful, or Arcturus would have been all too happy to get rid of him. "Yes. I want the specimens on Korhal to be introduced into the squads that have been trained to receive them immediately and with all safety precautions at the ready."

Dr. Narud looked almost offended. "They will follow your every command. I assure you."

Leaning forwards slightly as though to glare down at the older man, Mengsk mustered all the warning he could put into his calm tone. "You will also follow my every command, Narud. I own you and every piece of science shit you covet. Do not fail me." Mengsk nearly slammed the comm off before leaning back in his chair and letting out an angry huff. Too much failure had happened already.

With their defeat, Raynor and his men becoming zerg creatures had been expected- but nothing more than simple infested or, and Arcturus had truly hoped, built into living walls to anguish for eternity. That they were out there in the Koprulu sector and possibly only second to Kerrigan herself in deadliness did not sit well with him. Not well at all.

Standing up and clasping his hands behind his back, Mengsk looked over his kingdom in ruin. "This needs to be brought under control. Now. Adjutant!"

"Yes, Emperor Mengsk?"

"Schedule a press conference at 0800 in three days time. Only press allowed and no weapons other than my own escort."

"Yes, Emperor Mengsk. The press will be informed." The people will kneel before their emperor
and order would be restored, one way or another.
Kerrigan crested the earthy incline and came to a halt. Her armored feet, given the curious shape of living heels, dug into the well-packed dirt firmly. She frowned at what lay before her. Spread across a field was an ancient pool, similar to the smaller ones she had taken to siphoning essence from when she found them, but it was beyond massive in scale.

"It's a pool." Her lips were bowed into a frown, and she felt her ire rising at the thought of being played by an ancient lizard.

No. Zurvan had remained behind with the Leviathan, and so an Overlord was left drifting near him for communication purposes. It took his voice and brought it to Kerrigan through the hive mind.

This primordial place, the very first spawning pool, is the power of Zerus. The Zerg first crawled from it in a time before names. Here you will be remade or consumed if proven wanting. What will you sacrifice for power?

Her anger quelled momentarily, Kerrigan looked across the expanse of bubbling ooze with a returned sense of determination. Nothing was stronger than the Queen of Blades.

"Anything."

Abathur manifested in her thoughts as soon as her feet sank into the warm liquid. Recommendation: avoid pool. Catalytic fluid will overwhelm queen's body. Not strong enough.

When I emerge, Abathur, you will once again remember why I lead the swarm. No one is stronger than me. Striding past the toothy spikes that were jutting out of the pool, Kerrigan noted it seemed awfully like a mouth when she stood at the center and looked around. Already she could feel the primal essence of the pool seeping through the flesh that it touched, offering change. Zagara. Izsha. Abathur. You three will defend me. Go now and prepare.

Yes my queen. All three echoed eerily, immediately beginning preparation for the defense of their soon to be defenseless leader.

Transform. Transcend. Zurvan's whisper was the last sound Kerrigan heard before erecting the fleshy walls of a chrysalis around herself and becoming immersed in the catalytic fluids of the pool.

Something was flashing in front of Jayce's closed eyes, making her brows furrow in discomfort for a moment before coming to a groggy wakefulness. Blinking away the sleep, her hand flailed at the datapad with the incoming call light but missed.

"Accept the call." Grumbling, she kept one eye open and watched the flow of information on screen as Jim spoke up.

"Wake up darlin'. We're gonna be at Kaldir soon and I needed to talk to you real quick-like."

"Yes sir." Noting that there was no visual component to their call, she scrubbed at her face and slowly sat up.

"You still got that pin on you from 837. I want you to keep that on so we can keep an eye on you, but you've got free run of the ship from here on out. No more Tychus and me over your shoulder." Jim did not want to elaborate, suspecting fear would not help their particular situation at all.
"Oh yeah." Jayce's hand reached for the button reflexively before the realization that her exchange between Swann had most likely been monitored sunk in. Embarrassed silence followed.

Jayce was no fool. Raynor suspected she caught on to that little bit as soon as the silence wore on, and quickly attempted to gloss over it. "You're gonna stay on the ship with Stetmann, Swann and Horner, of course. I want this ship spit shined when I get back on it, alright?"

"Does this mean you want me to avoid everyone, sir?" Standing up, Jayce began to gather the dirty rags and laundry laying around her room. The place was well overdue for a cleaning, although her mind was elsewhere.

"Don't beat around the bush, do you?" Raynor frowned, glancing at an only partially finished recording of his message to a certain very stubborn, pretty doctor.

"No sir." Jayce smirked slightly while dumping her clothes down a chute built into the back of her tiny closet.

"Yes. Everyone has been told to keep their distance from you, Jayce. You can interact with Stetmann when you need your arm looked at, but that's it. Everything else is going to be over comms. I know you liked hangin' out with Tychus, but you also know the situation you're in. It ain't safe." Jim felt like an ass, but it was the truth. He'd rather her have nobody to talk to or be companionable with than risk an accident.

Jayce felt blood rushing to her head as her anger rose, leaving her stuffing the last of her linens into the chute a little forcefully before stepping back from the closet and glaring down at the comm. Catching herself before any biting response could escape, she regulated her thoughts and feelings for a few moments until it was safe to speak. "You have the right of it, sir. Just don't like the idea of walkin' around this ghost ship alone, but I'll manage."

"I hear you. Don't know where we'll be goin' after Kaldir, but I'm hoping we can get you somewhere safe soon." Giving his face a rub, Jim sat down heavily in his chair. It used to be extremely comfortable- one of Mengsk's many luxuries in his private quarters, but it had seen better days by now- especially after his back spines had perforated it repeatedly.

Frowning, Jayce placed the datapad on the bedside counter and started ripping away her blankets and pillows. Now that the stale air was moving around, she realized it stunk like an old gym locker in here. "There's nowhere for me to go, sir. I am a part of a terrorist organization, an escapee criminal and I can't even defend myself properly right now." Unable to keep from smirking, Jayce thought about the irony of being labeled a criminal when Mengsk was still the Emperor, of all people. "I wasn't just bullshitting when I said my place was with the Raiders and that I wanted to help, you know?"

"Don't you get it?" Jim snapped, irritable at her naivety. "You could end up a damn infested! That is worse than anything Mengsk and his Dominion justice could ever throw at you!"

"Then I suppose it shows just how terrible our own race really is when I'd prefer to side with the zerg!" It couldn't be helped, once Jim started snapping, Jayce snapped back.

"You are not staying on this damn ship!"

"You need me."

"We'll see about that." Frustrated, Jim ended the call abruptly before they really got into it. Even his
spines were twitching in agitation. *I need a drink.*

Horner's voice scratching to life over the comm system was a welcome distraction. "We are arriving at Kaldir shortly. Brace for warp jump in 5.. 4..." Everyone was reaching for something stable to grab a hold of or attempting to preemptively save things that weren't stable. "2..1..." The Hyperion and its contents blurred momentarily before ripping through space and reappearing whole once more. Instead of the vast starry expanse of space before them it was the icy white and blue colored moon, Kaldir, dwarfed by the massive gray gas giant, Midr IV, which it belonged to.

Finally faced with their destination, Jim grudgingly let his thoughts be known. *So we're here now. We just need to find this broodmother and what, bring it back to team Zerg?* As he expected, Shlassa was always listening.

*Nafash is surely dead. I can not sense her anywhere, nor can I sense what killed her. You will go down to the moon and find her body. We will decide what is next from there.*

"Sir, the scanners aren't picking up anything either." Horner piped up, concerned. No one liked the sound of that. Regardless, Jim was met by Warfield, Tychus and Swann at the drop pods the chief engineer and his people had designed alongside Stetmann.

"It's a one-way trip hot shot. I can pilot a medivac when it's time to get outta there though, just need to give me the word." Swann patted the side of one of the large containers fondly while everyone else, excluding Raynor, eyed them skeptically.

"I didn't like being launched in one of these out of a ship, hurled through the atmosphere and landing on rocks at Char, and I still don't like it. What about our skin anyway? Isn't this moon the coldest place in the whole damn sector, Jimmy?" Tychus jerked slightly when Swann pointedly threw a pair of too-small mittens at his bare chest.

"Knew you'd be the one to ask."

Warfield and Raynor could barely contain snorts of laughter, entering their drop pods before Tychus could retaliate. "That ain't funny!" Stepping into his own drop pod quietly, Tychus shifted his rifle aside and stared down at the mittens in his hand and mumbled. "Who on this rig was wearing mittens anyway?"

Strapping himself in, Jim sat back and got ready for the ride. *Matt. Bring 'er into low orbit. We're ready.*

In his laboratory, Stetmann was observing the results of his most recent tests critically. What Swann had given him was an interesting gift: access to a small firing range that had never been used. *Ammo is too precious to waste firing at a concrete slab.* Swann had said. It was just another relic of Arcturus' many over-indulgences. Stetmann wondered how many more little jewels were scattered around the ship, he had never been interested in looking. What the firing range offered him was a safe space to recreate and figure out just exactly what was going on with his curious singularity attack.

"You Terrans are all so lost inside. Chaotic." Shlassa uttered from her space on the other side of the room. To monitor their thoughts continually had become confusing and taxing in its own way. So many of their thoughts seemed purely wasteful, it was a trying task to sort through them and keep everything under control. Keeping track of what they were thinking at all times was even more important with the constant reminders of all of them wanting her dead: she would not be taken by surprise.
Used to her little comments by now, Stetmann didn't even flinch at her echoing hissing voice. "Free will has upsides and downsides. We each have to find our own purpose: a lifelong pursuit for some."

"There is nothing greater than the unity of purpose of the swarm. As one we are unstoppable."
Tilting her head slightly, Shlassa monitored the decent of the three warriors to the moons surface while awaiting Stetmann's rebuttal. Despite the hostile situation around her, Stetmann could generate interesting conversation at times: a welcome respite.

"The swarm is, undoubtedly, unified and powerful. But how many times and on how many fronts have we defeated them just because they weren't capable of thinking beyond the hive mind, or were all tied to the choices of one leader? There are downsides, Shlassa." Scribbling down notes and compiling data, Stetmann remained focused on his task.

"You do not understand what it means to be as one, tell me what you think when you do." Stetmann glanced at Shlassa then, catching her glowing gaze for a second before looking back down at his work.

"I feel it at all times: a pressure on my brain. Why haven't we been immersed in the hive mind? Or have we? Are Terrans not capable of it?" Shlassa's comment had many implications and Stetmann didn't like any that came to mind.

An idea came to Shlassa then, she visibly perked up spines and all. Schooling herself back to a neutral position, she kept her tone even. "I am all that is keeping you and the others from being overwhelmed. Your minds, still too Terran in nature, would be destroyed. That is part of my purpose here." There was no longer any doubt that each would become stronger than her in time, she knew it now.

Taking control of them would soon cease to be an option if they tried to physically or mentally harm her. They didn't need to know that there would be a point when the full force of the interconnected minds of the zerg would not destroy their own. She'd keep that part to herself.

"Oh. Well that explains some things." Stetmann couldn't hide his disappointment. Shlassa had suddenly gone from an enemy to a lifeline in the span of a few moments time.

"Indeed." Pleased, Shlassa clasped her spindly fingers together and leaned back slightly. The little scientist would tell the others, and she would be safe once again.

"Hey Jayce. Yeah, I gave him the mittens. It was great. Shoulda seen the look on his ugly mug." Swann was smirking; he had kept an open comm with Jayce as soon as the drop pods launched and their cargo was taken to ground.

"That's good. Say: I found more of those flow intensifiers, do you still need them?" Jayce had begun her morning routine, a simple maintenance and diagnostic run, but with the addition of several other co-workers' duties. Usually the ship was split off into sections and individuals were to take care of their own, but she took on as many as she reasonably could in this case.

"Oh yeah! I honestly thought we were out of 'em. Could always use more and some spares, just put 'em over at my office in the armory and I'll make use of 'em later."

"Yes sir." While the routine and ability to talk with Swann continually eased her mind, Jayce was thinking hard on several fronts. Worrying about the strange mission on the icy moon was first and foremost, and she sincerely wished for the small groups safety; Jayce was alternately thinking over what Swann had said the previous night. *Until that broodmother is dead and gone* was a particular point of interest. They could not physically go after the broodmother, or actually formulate a plan
against it apparently. Their hands were tied.

There was nothing stopping Jayce from taking their problem into her own hands, however. To kill a broodmother though, that would take some planning. Jayce had never even seen a zerg of any type up close before, she wasn't positive if she could keep her cool if she did see this thing. But I could free them. "Sixth floor, northeast quadrant looks like it's got some kind of power leak. Adjutant will be patching the details through to you momentarily..."

The three drop pods shot through the atmosphere of Kaldir like meteors, piercing into the ice that covered their landing zone with a thunderous crash that echoed off the surrounding ice cliffs. Unbuckling from his seat, Warfield observed ice visibly seeping through the door, along with the temperature dropping at a tremendous rate. Worried that the door would get stuck from the building ice, he shouldered and kicked it open roughly. Tychus and Raynor had the same idea.

All three gasped in pain when the doors crashed down, feeling the warm air in their lungs being sucked away and replaced by painfully cold air was not a pleasant feeling.

"Sweet mother mercy..." Tychus had stumbled forwards and hunched, curling his arms to his bare chest in an attempt to preserve heat.

It hurt to speak, and Jim was reduced to a croaking whisper. "Remind me to kill Stetmann when we get back. Get used to it?" Shivering and angry, Jim reached up and touched the ear bud he had in place to speak with Horner. "Matt. We've touched down. Where to now?"

Warfield looked up and around, taking in the surroundings. The sky boasted a perpetual bleak dark gray color and thick snowflakes were beginning to settle on his clothing. All around they were surrounded by steep icy cliffs that jutted sharply into the sky. Their entrance may have made lots of noise within the canyon but none of that sound would have gotten out of it at least, odds of being detected were low so far.

Aboard the Hyperion, Matt was frowning as he listened to Jim. He had not anticipated so much interference to the comm system from the moon's continual bad weather. "Sir. Comms are not looking so good right now. There's only one path out of there, to the north of you, and it leads to a mess of ice valleys. You need to be careful- the ground is not safe and there are a lot of cave-ins apparent."

Pressing the ear bud further into his surely frozen solid ear, Jim scowled at the crackling and disjointed voice of Matt. "Getting a lot of interference, probably the weather. Sounds like we need to head north boys." Clenching his jaw to stop his teeth from clattering, Jim did note that his body temperature was adjusting- if he was a normal Terran he'd be deep into hypothermia by now. It was clear at a glance Warfield and Tychus were experiencing similar- though he did a quick double-take when Tychus hefted his rifle; he had forced his hands into the mittens which were stretched beyond belief and well over half the length his fingers went through the fabric with his claws. "I can't believe you put those on."

"I can't believe I'm down here half naked." Tychus snipped, stiffly trailing after Warfield and hissing as the thick skin at the bottom of his feet simultaneously melted snow and froze against it with every step.

"North is this way, lets get moving. Think I can see the trail Horner was talking about, too. Sooner we get this mission over with the sooner we can get the hell off this ice ball." Warfield pointed for a moment before firmly gripping his rifle and crunching through the snow and ice.

"S-smartest damn thing you've ever said, General." Tychus fell silent with the rest- the mission
returning to the forefront of their minds. Something out there had killed Nafash, and they had no idea if it remained.

Falling into step, the three marched towards the twisting passage that was emerging ahead. It would lead them through the mountains, or so they hoped.

Grumbling to himself, Matt had tried to strengthen the signal to the ground team as much as he could, and with little success. "These aren't going to last." Regretful, he sat down in his captain's chair and closed his eyes, focusing.

Jim.

A long pause and no answer.

Jim? Uncertain, Horner opened his eyes and furrowed his brows in confusion. Their mental communication had yet to fail them.

You are too weak to speak to them so far away, for now. Shlassa gave Matt his answer, much to his agitation. I can relay information to them, you need only think it.

Firmly gripping the arms of his chair, Horner stared at the poor footage of the three men that his scanners could pick up, just three small red dots making their way north. How could he trust Shlassa to not skew any information he wanted to relay? His thoughts were perhaps too vocal, and he quickly found himself listening to Shlassa's clearly agitated voice.

I am to safeguard all of you. Getting them killed would be contrary to that. Besides. She paused. Your Terran equipment is about to fail you.

Alright. Matt relented. He supposed the broodmother was right: there was no reason to distrust her when it came to the safety of the crew, minus Jayce. About to continue speaking, the voice of the adjutant brought him back to reality with a snap.

"Captain. A flash freeze is approaching."

"A what?" Horner mumbled dumbly, standing up and leaning over the console to look at the weather pattern arrayed. The temperature of the region was diving and approaching the three unknowing dots at an alarming rate. "Oh shit!"

Shlassa! You need to tell them to seek shelter immediately! They need to preserve body heat or they are going to die!

No. The broodmothers reply was as calm as it could be, completely unconcerned. In the lab she was holding Stetmann's concerned gaze evenly.

You just said that their safety mattered to you!

They will not die. Zerg adapt.

Slamming his hand on the side of the console in anger, Matt opened the comm with his friends on the ground and prayed his message would get through.

The crunching of their feet and boots in the snow stopped. Raynor, Tychus and Warfield simultaneously pausing to listen to Horner's voice. All they could make out over the static was that he sounded close to frantic.
"That don't sound good. Whatever it is." Wary, Tychus brought his rifle at the ready and started looking around for any visible signs of danger.

Warfield and Raynor acted similarly, facing opposite directions at Tychus' left and right. "Somethin' got him spooked real good, keep your eyes peeled." Muttering, Raynor was almost thankful for the new extra keen eyesight he had been graced with, but all he could see was vast expanses of white and gray in all directions.

"Clear." Warfield lowered his rifle slightly, still looking regardless.

"Wait. You see that?" A movement to the north caught Jim's eye, and all of them looked in the direction he had.

"Hear somethin' too." Tychus mumbled. It was mixed up in the howling of wind flying through the spires of ice all around and above them, but there was a very distinct cracking sound that was not there moments ago.

"Oh hell." Warfield whispered hoarsely. All three staring at what could only be described as a literal visual wall of cold rolled down from the icy spires in the north, coming at them at a terrifying pace.

*Brace yourselves.* Shlassa's whisper in their minds was almost unheard over Jim's yell. "Take cover!" As one, they ran towards a nearby crag- piling into one another behind it. There would be no escape from the flash freeze, however.

In a moments time after they reached their so-called cover, a howling abyss of ice and cold blasted over them, freezing the three men instantly. They were nothing but icy statues.

Horner had stared at the wall of snow and the fleeing dots of Jim, Tychus and Warfield. When their lights were snuffed out instantly, he felt as though his heart had been cut out.

*They are gone.*

Though she was speaking to Horner in particular, Shlassa's superior tone was heard by all of her charges. *Adapt or die.*

The intense storm left almost as fast as it had arrived, ravaging everything in its path as it always had and would continue to. Within a minutes time, snowflakes were beginning to cover the icy statues of Raynor, Tychus and Warfield. Ice beginning to crack and crumble disrupted the peaceful silence, and in a few more moments the spines jutting out of Raynor's back began to twitch, followed by the trembling and groaning of Warfield and Tychus.

Horner was staring at the map before him, completely lost. He was so focused on staring at nothing, he almost missed when each dot representing the men he thought dead flickered back to life. Eyes honing in on the oddity, Horner stared in disbelief.

*As I said, they adapt.* Shlassa sounded completely smug.

A throaty snarl erupted from Tychus as he lurched back to life, spraying shards of ice this way and that. He almost fell into Jim who was similarly breaking free and gasping for air, while Warfield did stumble into him and corrected himself as quick as he was able.

*I hate being cold Jimmy.* The many pupils in his eyes were constricted into tiny dots, and he looked especially crazed. It felt like a fire had lit up inside himself, and he wasn't sure if it was his overwhelming anger or his body adapting to save itself. Tychus decided he didn't care. All three leaned against the icy crag they had hid behind, recovering for a minute before regaining their
The cold will come again, you should move quickly. Shlassa’s voice coaxed them to action, despite their misgivings about having just been living statues for a good minute.

"You heard the bug. Lets go." Jim straightened up and moved to adjust his gun, when it fell to pieces with a loud crack. "Ah what the hell..." One by one, they each noted their equipment simply crumbling into icy shards in their hands, disbelief written clearly on their faces.

"Well here's hopin' there ain't anything out there that can shoot us, 'cause we sure as hell ain't shootin' back!" Warfield griped, throwing his gear down in disgust. Their ear buds and microphones were discarded as well, dead as could be. It was probably the most distressing when their clothing shattered though. Tychus had curled his hands into fists and his already severely overtaxed mittens literally exploded into little icy fabric shards, and every article of clothing they had followed suit right after.

"There's... There's just nothin' for it I guess." Jim tried to grasp hold of some sort of reason to not have an outright shit fit, attempting to keep his cool more for Tychus and Warfield's sake. "Not the first time we've had to run somewhere naked, right Tychus?" His attempt at humor was met with a solid wall of seething silence, both from Tychus and the also newly exposed Warfield.

"Yeah. Lets get going." Uncomfortable, Jim took the lead and tried not to think about it. How did Sarah manage that? He wondered, even though it hurt to.

"The last thing I want to do." Tychus began stomping after Jim, quickly matching his pace and ending up beside him. "Is walk behind you when you are bare ass naked." Though Warfield didn't comment, he took up the space at Jim's left side, clearly echoing the sentiment. Their trek to the ice valleys beyond resumed.

Lassara enjoyed Kaldir, it was not a sentiment the majority of her fellow scientists echoed. The sun never shone, the flash freezes were intense and the Ursadons, ever hungry, were always pushing at the edges of their bases. Ursadon were a favorite species of hers, and though their mission was an attempt to see if they could turn Kaldir into a more hospitable place she often found herself wandering the ice tunnels and studying the great bear-like creatures. This was just such a time.

A Warp Prism, her transport, was hovering silently outside of a previously collapsed ice cave. The high tech machine was covered in a layer of snow and, excluding its softly glowing blue core, was almost impossible to detect visually. Lassara had removed the debris from the collapsed tunnel herself and turned it into a small camp over her many visits to it. The Ursadons almost never came her way after the path had been gone for so long. It was in this camp she now resided, staring in concern at a seismic disturbance that had caused several small cave-ins and subsequently riled up the local Ursadon population.

Lassara. How much longer must we tarry here? Arut, a Zealot who she considered a good friend and noble warrior, was her escort for this foray and he had no love for the Ursadons or the cold.

Blue glowing eyes smiling in merriment, she shook her head and continued watching the data being fed to her by one of many Observers. Arut, you know I stay out here as long as the Judicator allows. There has been a disturbance, however. Gesturing the sour warrior over to her side, Arut grudgingly followed along and looked.

Cave-ins, Lassara. This icy moon is fraught with them, why is this disturbance any different than the many others?
Three tremors in quick succession. What kind of seismic disturbance do you think that is, Arut? That is not a normal pattern for ice shelves shifting, or even spires fracturing and falling. I think we should relay this information to the command center, just in case. It was concerning, and if anyone knew about the chaotic nature of Kaldir's icy landscape it was the one protoss who loved exploring it.

*Judicator Holrim will not appreciate any false alarms. Let us simply monitor for the time being, Lassara.* Withdrawing from her side, Arut resumed his quiet vigil. His presence was almost decorative—never had they needed to harm a stray Ursadon lumbering their way. The beasts were easily soothed psychically and redirected elsewhere when not enraged. Lassara enjoyed his company anyway.

*As you wish, Arut.* Still, Lassara gazed at the information available to her with concern. She would equate it closer to impacts than actual seismic activity, maybe the weather observer would have something. Shifting gears, she discarded the tunnel observer with a quick swipe of her clawed fingertip across the translucent material of her datapad, rerouting to observer 23—a stationary unit that sat at the very top of the ice spires on the southern edge of the ice valleys.

The observer was recovering from a recent flash freeze and it would take time before it could send the technical and visual weather data Lasarra requested. Nothing for it but to wait.

On Korhal, Augustgrad, Nova Terra was cloaked and perched atop the rubble of a recently bombed out apartment complex, looking through the scope of her C-20A rifle. In her sights was a particularly ratty child scavenging through garbage, she could feel his hunger from afar. She could also feel the thoughts of a marauder destroyer squad marching ever closer. It was marshal law—anyone out after curfew was shot without mercy. Whispering softly, her finger got cozy with the trigger of her rifle. "Go back inside."

Unable to outright mind control the boy from such a distance, Nova contented herself with offering a much quicker violent end than the alternative that was coming his way—if he didn't leave fast enough that was. Marauder weaponry had a bad habit of maiming just as much as it did killing. It was with a measure of personal relief that an equally ragged, mud-stained woman grabbed up her son and ran into the ruins of their former home, no doubt squatting with many other displaced civilians. It had become too hard to tell who was innocent with the mass rebelling, and everyone was suffering for it.

Relaxing her stance, Nova returned to searching out as far as she could reach with her mind, filtering past the terror and malice that was radiating off of Mengsk's disgruntled subjects. Nova Terra had a mission here, and while she had certainly dispatched a few leading agitators herself, it was not to quell the more mundane civilian rebels. The Spectres, under Tosh's command after Jim Raynor—the fool, freed them, had come to the throne world with one goal: burning it to the ground around Mengsk. Nova was continuing her mission to hunt them down and stop them.

Returning to her home world had never been a problem before, not until the terrazine exposure. All the memories that had been gratefully scoured away had been coming back, the gas repairing the damage of the mind wipes. Even now the memories of being a ratty little child in the gutters were distracting, never mind the voices of all those who'd tasted death purposefully and inadvertently during those times. The general disenchantment of the majority of Dominion military, those who weren't resocs anyway, was also frustrating.

As soon as word came from on high about the upcoming press conference, a strong sense of foreboding had been seeping through the ranks, it had even begun to affect Nova herself. It was easier to remain loyal to the Dominion when your goal was to fight people who were so clearly hurting innocents, however. The Spectres had been responsible for the very rubble she was standing
on, and though the trail was cold right now, she resolved to pick it up.

"See you boys real soon." Nova muttered, leaping and springing through the rubble towards the estimated area of detonation. Tosh himself was out there too, and that one was personal.
Kaldir - Ursadon tunnel camp

Lassara held the datapad firmly, a rising sense of urgency ticking away while watching the progress of the weather observers recovery. When all its systems finally came online and information streamed once more, the realization of what those three impacts were hit hard.

*Arut! The three quakes, they were from Terran machines!* Arut had strode back to Lasarra quickly, watching the video footage in silence beside her.

*Only three? That is not typical Terran, they lack the technology to even survive on this moon.* Critical, Arut watched the three distant forms emerge from their drop pods. The observer had not zoomed in on the Terrans, as that was not its purpose; It did scan them from afar however, and quickly revealed each Terran to be thoroughly infested.

Feeling sick, Lasarra's voice was just a whisper in Arut's mind. *Infested Terrans! How terrible... We must inform the Judicator at once.* The information was already being routed to the main Nexus, where their warriors would be roused immediately.

*You have done well, Lassara. Lives may be saved because of your caution. Know that I will tell the Judicator myself of your role in this.* Arut was proud, any action that could save the lives of his fellow protoss was to be held in high regard.

*My thanks, Arut. I can't help but wonder at their motives however; what could the swarm desire on Kaldir? Did we miss something when the last of the hives were purged?* Brows furrowed in concern, Lasarra gazed out of the mouth of their cavern base and watched the never ending snows swirling violently.

*What reason do zerg do anything? They devour life, be it on some small icy moon or the mighty Aiur, and that is their only purpose Lasarra. To know more would be to tempt madness; only the foul corruptor, their Queen of Blades, truly knows of any other goals.* Arut was firm, rigid even, in his beliefs about the zerg; a sentiment echoed by most, if not all, protoss. Lasarra could not blame him and her own more malleable points of view had been the cause of disruptions before.

*As you say, noble warrior. This canyon that they landed in only has one exit, they may already be at the dead hive.* Deftly, Lasarra brought up a map of the region and charted the course she believed the infested to be taking, showing it to her companion. *We are the closest to this location by far. Would you like to meet the enemy in glorious combat?* Her eyes smiled, but Lasarra felt the strong desire to see zerg rent asunder by the superior protoss warrior.

*The warp prism is at the ready should I be summoned to battle, but do not so easily forget your place.* Arut chided, though he yearned for the glory of combat as much as any Zealot. *As a researcher you are precious, not to be thrown into the midst of combat.*

*You are right, of course.* Lasarra tilted her head in acceptance. *Truthfully, the scouts the Judicator will send should be more than enough for three simple infested Terrans. They must not have detected our bases, else there would surely be a larger force.* While they spoke, the old footage of the infested played right until the observer became frozen by the flash freeze. They were long gone by the time it had recovered.

Kaldir – Hive of Nafash
Warfield was bringing up the rear of the small group. When they had finally acclimated to the brutal cold the old General privately admitted to himself that he had never felt so youthful and energetic, doubtless a zerg trait. The so-called path out of the canyon they landed in was closer to a series of shelves, layered close enough to one another that they could be climbed with little trouble.

They were scaling one such shelf right now. A chunk of rotten ice crunched loose under Tychus' foot when he put his weight on it, leaving him scrambling for purchase with his shorter nails.

"Watch it, watch it!" Raynor called from above, swiping at Tychus' arm and attempting to stabilize his position while digging his nails into the ice he was clinging to.

Warfield was swinging across the face of the ice cliff to avoid being pummeled down by the falling debris Tychus was making with his feet, talons clattering and cutting chips out of the ice. One such piece hit his shoulder hard and nearly sent him tumbling, leaving him sending a blistering wave of curses up at Tychus. "Either get a grip or just fall damn you! You aren't going to die!"

Tychus grunted in pain when Raynor caught the meat of his forearm and dug his claws right in, holding fast. Secure in place, he tentatively sought out new footholds and sunk his nails as deep in as he could, glaring up at Jim while muttering clearly at Warfield. "See if I don't kick you off when I get to the top, armchair general." Blood was welling up past Jim's claws and all he could do was look apologetic when he tugged his hand free of Tychus' arm and resumed climbing.

"Sorry Tychus. Nafash's hive can't be far now."

"Armchair general? Son, I've been on more forays than you can-" Warfield was clearly getting worked up, Tychus no doubt having hit a nerve.

"Not the time gentlemen!" Raynor interrupted sharply before swinging his arm over the snowy ledge and pulling himself to safety. Quickly, he offered Tychus a hand up and together they helped Warfield. Straightening up, they looked down the gentle slope that lead to the dead and frozen zerg base before them. The snow was coming down in thick, endless waves and obscuring the full view; but they could vaguely see one of the claw-like spires of a hive looming above in the distance.

"Hm. Time to check in at hotel zerg." Tychus mumbled and started walking, gingerly palming the deep holes Jim had punched into the meat of his forearm. The blood flow had slowed and no longer dripped sluggishly down his armored skin, steaming against the bitter cold air until it froze. Wouldn't be long before it had healed up completely.

"Don't think we're gonna find a Wicked Wayne's in there." Jim chuckled, shaking his head.

"I feel like you boys got some stories to tell. Maybe when we get outta this mess you'll fill me in." Warfield had to admit to himself he wanted to be able to join in on Jim and Tychus' humor more, or at least know what the hell they were referring to half the time.

"General, when we're off this ice rock I'll tell you all the stories you like. But for now," They had come down the hill at a quick pace and were walking over frozen creep, revealed by wind continually blowing the snow away. An entrance to the hive loomed ahead of them, frozen over completely. "lets get this done. You wanna handle that Tychus?" Gesturing at the iced over door vaguely, Jim and Warfield looked at the big man questioningly.

"How come whenever somethin' needs liftin' or breakin', everyone comes cryin' to old Tychus?" Regardless of his griping, Tychus stepped up to the frozen maw.

"Because you're built like an SCV? Might as well play the part, partner." Raynor winced slightly
when Tychus brought his fists down in an overhead smash against the wall of ice. Though his fists left an impression and a great amount of cracks had become visible, the ice had not given in.

"Put your back into it son." Warfield chuckled with good humor at Tychus' struggle, keeping an eye on their surroundings.

"If you ever think I'm goin' to another planet, moon, whatever, with snow again Jimmy..." Tychus threw his fists against the ice with renewed vigor, so hard that chunks sprayed out and the ice groaned in warning. "You're damn wrong!" Jerking back, he slammed his shoulder into the ice-feeling it beginning to give. One final violent heave sent him tumbling into the hive as the false door shattered inwards and a surge of air entering the sealed structure helped keep him off balance.

Stepping up to the open door, Warfield and Raynor looked into the dark at Tychus. "You alright?" Raynor called cautiously. It was a steep decline into the living structure and everything had a thick layer of ice. Warfield sunk his talons into the wall and began to lower himself down while Tychus groaned and struggled to his feet.

"Just freakin' peachy, partner."

While Jim cautiously followed Warfield, giving him plenty of room to maneuver, he focused on Shlassa. Any idea where Nafash might be in here?

Shlassa was listening, as Jim and co. were not capable of communicating over such long distances yet either. If Nafash was pursued into the hive, she would lead them as deep as possible. She could have been killed anywhere inside, however.

Huffing in annoyance, Jim muttered. "So the answer is no, just great."

"Not going to find this thing just standing around. Maybe we can find the path it took? The hive may have been damaged by whatever was chasing it and it's more than cold enough here to freeze the structure like that." Warfield offered, looking down the narrow corridors that stretched in all directions from the crossroads they stood at. It was the truest form of darkness inside the hive, the only light was dim and spilling in behind them from the doorway they had opened.

Nodding agreeably, Jim gestured down a corridor of his choice. "Sounds like a plan. We can split up and make this go faster, speak up if you find anything boys." They each started cautiously walking down their own halls, their nails tapping and sliding against ice and frozen chitin making an eerie skittering noises echo around them.

"At least it ain't all wet 'n nasty in here." Tychus lamented as he ducked through a partially frozen shut fleshy doorway.

Traveling through the insides of a dead hive was a macabre experience. All around, Warfield imagined the walls pulsing and flexing while the structure gurgled and hissed. None of the three men had ever been inside a hive like this; the way it had stilled in death and frozen over was unnerving, never mind the pitch black they could only see in by the good grace of their new forms.

Uneasy, Warfield reached out with his thoughts as he carefully climbed down a dark, thin tunnel that angled downwards steeply. He could just imagine smaller zerg sliding up and down the slime-coated muscles while it was still alive, and it left him grimacing.

You know, I haven't seen a single dead zerg here. Where did they go? Not a single dead body or even signs of a battle had come up yet.

Tychus had come to a stop, glaring at a sealed shut doorway. Grimacing, he couldn't help but think
the door looked a lot like an orifice. He supposed it was. "I ain't touchin' that..." Muttering and turning around, he paused and listened to Warfield before nodding slightly himself.

General has the right of it, this place is a graveyard but no ones home. I'm at a dead end here, gonna double back.

Jim had an ill feeling the deeper into the hive he went and it came to a head when he found another iced shut doorway where he figured there should have been no connection to the outside. Tugging a spine free from his thigh, its familiar crunch sound amplified by the fact it had become coated in ice, Jim gripped it tight before smashing it deeply into the ice. As suspected, a new flow of cold air erupted from the hole he had made when he pulled the spine free. Continuing the assault, Jim hacked away at the ice to weaken it while focusing on Tychus and Warfield.

Think I mighta found somethin', hang on a minute. After several more holes were punched through the ice, Jim shouldered it roughly and almost fell through before catching his footing. Blackened eyes widening, he surveyed the scene before him with dread. Figured out what got rid of the zerg.

Protoss! Shlassa hissed angrily into their minds.

The north face of the hive had been obscured to them when they came down from the hills, so they couldn't have seen what had surely been the killing blow to the hive; its flesh and chitin had been melted away straight to the core. Normally, a hive would collapse at the kind of damage Raynor was surveying, but a flash freeze must have hit and froze it in its final moments. "Bet I know who's down there." With a new sense of urgency, Jim began the descent down the literal guts of the structure to the center of the hive where he could see an opening.

Both Warfield and Tychus had wordlessly doubled back and came running down the path Jim had taken, moving as though the protoss themselves had arrived and given chase.

Stumbling down the steep V shaped slope, Jim barely caught himself from sliding and falling directly into the cavern below. Grasping on to a frozen ridge of flesh, Jim cautiously leaned over the mouth of the hole and looked down. There, coated in snow and frozen in death, was Nafash's corpse in the center of what appeared to have been some sort of birthing chamber, maybe where the hive generated its larvae in life.

Found Nafash. When you boys get to the open door, come down into the pit below. It was a long fall, but Jim felt confident in his new form- he wouldn't be broken upon landing. With that thought, he let go and swung down into the dark.

Nafash had been butchered. Jim landed nimbly and approached the dead creature with no small amount of revulsion. Several of her legs had been severed neatly by energy weapons- most likely the psi blades of zealots, and from the base of the dead broodmother's neck all the way to its lower body had been eviscerated. Warfield and Tychus were leaping down and landing heavily nearby while Jim was observing the carcass.

"So this is Nafash, huh? Can't say I'm sorry to see it dead." Tychus straightened up from the crouch he had landed in and sauntered over to look at the killing blow curiously. "Them Protoss sure don't mess around."

Shaking off some snow that was melting into slush, Warfield came up to the corpses side opposite of Jim and frowned. Nafash's abdomen, filled with that familiar almost glowing green goo, was drawing both his and Jim's attention.

Hyperion – Kaldir low orbit
Matt could feel Shlassa seething about something and was trying to ignore it. He was watching the adjutant continually adjusting the ships sensors in an attempt to pierce the weather of Kaldir and start providing essential surveillance for the ground team. It was severely grating to be both blind and reliant on Shlassa for any news regarding Jim, Warfield and Tychus.

As if on cue, the angry broodmother invaded Horner's thoughts. They have discovered Nafash's body. It was protoss that killed her.

"Protoss..." Horner muttered, a sense of dread building up inside as the intense weather pattern of the flash freeze came on to the screen and howled towards the three men once again. Shlassa, a flash freeze is approaching. Let them know.

Chittering angrily in Stetmann's lab, Shlassa felt the stirrings of psionic energy the protoss were known for. Though the broodmother herself had never entered combat against the great enemy, the memories of millions who had were at her fingertips. Much worse than a flash freeze is coming, Terran. The protoss are still here on Kaldir!

Sitting heavily in his chair, Matt combed his fingers through his hair in frustration. We need to get them and get out of here Shlassa.

They have killed Nafash! Destroyed her brood! This cannot go unpunished!

Listen here Shlassy. Swann entered their conversation, rough and to the point like always. The Hyperion does not stand a chance against even a small amount of Protoss ships right now. So unless you want us all getting blown to hell, we need to get those three jokers back on this ship and get the hell outta here.

Stubborn and mad, Shlassa clenched her spidery fists and bristled. I don't have to answer to you! Our Queen has given us a mission and one of ours has been killed. This is the way of the zerg, of the swarm!

Their bickering continued, even while several protoss Scouts slid through the sky towards the decimated zerg base.

Kaldir - Hive of Nafash

"Doesn't really look frozen, does it?" Jim's question hung in the frigid air as he tentatively reached out to touch the bright green flesh of Nafash's abdomen. Before his hand reached its destination, a clearly agitated Shlassa spoke.

Terrans! A flash freeze approaches, but we have discovered a Protoss base that has wakened nearby. They know you are here. It is time! Rouse the hive and bring the might of the zerg down on these Protoss who dare kill our own!

Uh, hate to break it to you but this here hive is dead. Tychus stated simply, glancing at Warfield and Raynor with a quirked brow.

No, fool. Life and death do not matter, only essence. You will assimilate Nafash's essence and gain what immunity she and her brood had to the flash freeze. Hurry!

Jim felt control of his body leave him as Shlassa took over. The urgency of the situation called for haste and she wasn't willing to watch them fool around.

"Wait, Jimmy you ain't gonna-" Both Tychus and Warfield reeled in disgust and Jim's clawed hand plunged through the flesh of the dead broodmother, green goo spilling out around it as he sunk his arm into her body to the elbow.
"That ain't right!" Warfield only had a second before he too was taken over, leaving Jim stumbling backwards and looking at his gooey limb in shock. The sound of Warfield digging into the other side of the corpse was disturbing, crunching mixed with the wet sloshing of thick liquid.

"Oh no, you're not doin' that to me no w-" Tychus had tried to step away, to raise some kind of mental defense against the grip of the broodmother, but she was having none of it. Warfield stumbled away from the corpse and Tychus shambled into place where he had stood, forced to plunge both his arms up to the elbow into the body.

The smell from the goo, thankfully never capable of rotting in the arctic temperatures, was extremely vile and was stinging their eyes and noses. Tychus ripped his arms out of the body and stumbled away much like Warfield and Raynor had, attempting to come to grips with what just happened.

Shllassa was merciless. Her essence is now yours. It is time for you to fight.

With the initial shock wearing off quickly, Jim shook his arm, flinging goo away and trying not to retch. He was about to lay into Shllassa when he really felt what the broodmother was saying- the green corpse goo had begun to seep through his flesh and he could feel his core temperature rising. Stifling his anger, Jim attempted to reason instead. Shllassa, if our mission was to find out what happened to Nafash and assimilate this essence, then it is complete and we need to leave. Fast.

Attempting to ignore the sound of Tychus retching on the other side of the corpse, there was a different sound that caught Jim's attention.

"I hear it too." Following Jim's train of thought, Warfield looked upwards. It was a humming sound, familiar.

Leaping to action, Jim ran around Nafash to Tychus and grabbed his slippery slime-coated arm and started hauling his big friend away from the opening in the top of the cavern. "Ships! Hide, fast!" Warfield ran over and attempted to help get Tychus moved, but the big man shook them both off angrily and ran for the wall with them in tow. They settled behind the caved in shells of eggs and watched the dark sky above warily.

Shllassa, listen. There is a time to fight and a time for flight, this is the latter. I know the Protoss and I know the status of the Hyperion- we will not survive a confrontation right now. Jim wasn't too proud to plead; it was as much about saving protoss lives as it was their own. The sleek golden hull of a single protoss Scout obscured what little light the pale gray sky offered, hovering above the hive.

This is not the time to argue. We're the ones down here risking our asses- let us make the damn decisions, Shllassa! If we're good at anything, it's dealing with these situations. Warfield chimed in, hoping to help sway the broodmother so they could focus on their current predicament faster.

There was a long pause between the three men, waiting for either the broodmother or the protoss ship to act first. It was a relief when Shllassa spoke. As you say. The flash freeze is almost upon you, the Protoss ship will be rendered helpless until it is over. You can safely leave in a moment. Shllassa reasoned to herself that, indeed, the Queen of Blades had chosen these Terrans for good reasons; letting them have free reign had been going well so far and she could bring the hive to life herself if the situation became worse.

"Jimmy." Tychus whispered, trying to keep quiet. "There ain't no doors outta this room! We gotta get back up through that hole somehow." It was true, all paths out had collapsed in on themselves long ago.

"Quiet you moron, who knows if that ship has sensors that can hear you or not." Warfield whispered
harshly and the two exchanged a glare while Jim stared hard at the ship, willing it to go away. They would have no such luck, however. As the Scout slowly rotated around the pit above the center of the hive, the three men saw the blue energy pattern of a scan moving across the inside of the cavern; There was no time to move away from it before they had been detected.

"Run!" Jim shouted as the Scout spun to face them, its twin cannons glowing to life before firing rapidly. Scattering from behind the broken eggs, the three barely avoided the first barrage that left their cover in shattered smoking ruins.

"When's that damn freeze coming?!" Tychus yelled over the sudden loud noise. The Scout had honed in on him and he was barely avoiding its shots by forcing the ship to twist at odd angles to keep its aim.

Reverting to mental communication, although he was not sure if the protoss could hear it or not, Jim could hear the raging storm coming and made a quick decision. Warfield get to the center on top of that broodmothers corpse! Tychus, when the freeze hits you're gonna use us to jump up! Sure enough, the Scout did not switch off from Tychus when Warfield leaped onto the back of Nafash's corpse and braced himself. The protoss could not hear their communication.

As the flash freeze hit and poured into the chamber, howling and raging, the Scout was rendered frozen instantly. The ship freely dropped several feet before its emergency super-heated thrusters roared to life- specifically designed to counter the flash freezes. The pilot and the rest of the ships systems, however, remained frozen. It had fallen so far that the golden nose of the Scout was resting inside the cavern, the ship at a 90 degree angle from the ground.

Tychus broke away from the outer rim of the cavern and charged towards Warfield and Jim who was balancing on top of his shoulders, it was a little worrying to think about the mechanics of hurling someone as heavy as Tychus upwards, but Jim decided to let the zerg DNA do the talking and braced himself as the flash freeze washed over them.

As he leaped ontop of Nafash's body and planted his bare foot on Warfield's knee, it was like time slowed to a crawl for Tychus. The flash freeze had hit and he felt the heat of his body being sucked away, only to be rapidly replaced by even more intense heat as their newly adapted bodies struggled to generate more than what was being taken. He almost missed his second step upwards to Jim's bent knee as his functions slowed dramatically but his momentum did not.

A split second later, time resumed almost as normal when their bodies had fully acclimated. Letting out a gutteral roar, Tychus all but flew up Raynor and sprung off his shoulders into the air. Warfield and Jim were left tumbling like dominos from the force of the jump, but Tychus was not going to make it all the way.

Seeing what was happening, he began flailing outwards in panic until he collided with the nose of the Scout with a metallic clang, his claws generating a screeching sound as they dug into the metal like flesh and he slid a few feet downwards before coming to a jarring stop.

"Haha! WOO!" Jim yelled from below, pumping his fist in triumph as he lay on the frozen ground. Warfield gave a sharp clap and laughed as he stood back up, but they quickly sobered and climbed back on to the dead broodmother.

"Hang in there Tychus, we gotta climb up you!" Jim yelled, getting situated on Warfield's shoulders and ready to spring.

"Hurry the hell up! This freeze ain't gonna last forever!" Tychus worriedly stared down the nose of the ship into the blue glowing eyes of the Scout's pilot.
"You gonna be able to jump high enough by yourself, General?" Jim quirked a brow, looking down at Warfield who had the good grace to look offended.

"If he could make it, I damn sure can with nearly twelve less feet to jump." He had a point and so Jim shrugged and pumped his legs hard, throwing his arms up at the height of the jump for extra momentum. The result was Tychus' nails screeching down a few more inches of the ship and his panicked readjustment while Jim dangled off his ankle.

"Alright old boy, you can do this..." Warfield muttered to himself, eyeing Jim's legs and getting ready to jump.

"Time is tickin', General!" Jim called in warning, looking down at Warfield sharply. Without need of further prodding, Warfield leaped upwards- a great gust of air from the storm howling around them actually allowing him to overshoot his mark moderately and end up half way up Jims back.

"Agh, just go!" Jim tossed his head back in pain when Warfield's talons dug straight into his back, but there was nothing for it. Warfield scrambled up Jim, Tychus and part of the protoss ship before landing at the edge of the icy maw and offering help to his two teammates. It felt like forever but was only the work of a few moments for all three of them to be on their feet and running- the coating of ice on the Scout had already began to slough off and the ship was struggling to life as the storm raged past.

Tychus looked over his shoulder and cursed as the Scout began to right itself and piece together where they went. "Hope you ain't tired, cause we're about to be runnin' for our lives in a second here!"

Shlassa! Jim called with some urgency as he quickly helped Warfield and Tychus clear the ruins of the hive and start running hard to the west- the closest collection of icy spires and crags where they could take cover and maybe lose their pursuers.

You are the one who chose to not kill that ship, Terran! Your job is not yet done. You must find an Ursadon Matriarch and consume its essence to finish the acclimation process, Nafash had not collected enough to be completely immune before she was killed.

"Shoulda just killed that damn ship Jimmy!" Tychus snarled and though Warfield kept quiet he privately agreed. Neither had any particular love for the aliens.

"Not if I can help it, damn it!" Jim snapped, focusing on keeping one foot ahead of the other and not getting fouled up on deceptively uneven ground. The Scout had picked up their trail and was in pursuit, it would be able to fire on them awfully soon. Where the hell is a damn Ursadon Matriarch then? We need to get some cover or this Scout is gonna be shootin' fish in a barrel real soon!

Shlassa was not very caring of their plight- it was their own fault after all; but letting them die was not an option either. Using their current position and her own considerable ability to feel the landscape and other lifeforms around them, Shlassa nodded slightly to herself before offering up their escape plan.

The Ursadons live in ice tunnels all around and below you. Ahead you will find at least one cavern opening, choose any and the ships will not be able to pursue you.

Ships? Tychus asserted, wanting to make sure he had not misheard the plural- but it quickly became clear he hadn't as two more Scouts came into view, golden and menacing against the gray sky, approaching from their left and right. The curses that came from the three could scour paint off walls.

"Raynor, you start shooting at them or I'm going to shoot you at them!" Warfield yelled tensely as he leaped over a deep hole in the ice. Their pace had slowed considerably because of how broken up
and uneven the ground had become and before Jim had time to consider their options, or lack thereof, the sound of three cannons firing simultaneously filled the air.

The Scouts had surrounded them, attempting to cover as much ground with their cannons as possible. As Jim, Tychus and Warfield tumbled, leaped and ran in multiple directions to spread the fire out, the ground began to groan and shake. Jim pulled a spike from his back and hurled it at the nearest Scout just as he fell into a freshly opened crevasse with a startled yell, only delivering a glancing blow to the machines shield.

"Jimmy?! Warfield, over here!" Tychus yelled while slipping between two close shelves of ice that were shifting of their own accord, snow and ice chips showering this way and that from the cannon fire. Without hesitation, he charged towards the hole Jim had fallen into and entered feet first- jagged shards of ice scraping against his shoulders and legs as he passed through the tight space.

As the three Scouts lost two of their targets, they all turned to focus on Warfield as he zigzagged and ran as hard as he could towards the spot where he last saw Tychus. Unfortunately evading the fire of three ships was damn near impossible and searing pain exploded from his right shoulder, along with a spray of blood and hallucinogenic paste, when an energy cannon hit true. Off balance from the blow, he fell into the dark head first and barely managed to twist his body enough to hopefully land on his uninjured side against whatever was waiting below.

Jim's forehead dashed off the sheer wall of ice hard, having tried to tuck it into his chest for protection, right before crashing through to his new unknown position. The result of the jarring action was Jim ending up tossing his head backwards in pain and throwing his whole body out of position for the landing. When Jim's back hit the ground, followed by the rest of his body weight, the sound of all the air being forced out of his lungs echoed off in multiple directions around him.

Breathing heavily and staring up through the crack in the ceiling of the ice tunnel he had fallen into, Jim's eyes widened in panic when he heard the telltale sound of Tychus yelling above. Attempting to roll to the side proved useless, his spines had jammed into the ground and were effectively pinning him in place.

Trying to slow his fall by fanning his hands out and dragging his fingertips down the wall had proven very painful and Tychus quickly settled for keeping his balance. Gaze focusing downwards, it became apparent almost too late that Jim was flat on his back and not moving. Clenching his jaw and focusing, Tychus came spilling out of the frozen fissure with a rain of knife-like shards and a bellow. Spreading his legs just wide enough for his feet to plant on either side of Jim's body, gravity slammed him down to his hands and knees directly after. Sucking in a ragged breath, Tychus looked down at Jim and noted his eyes were clenched shut. "Not dead yet, I hope?"

Eyes snapping open in disbelief at not being crushed, Jim stared at Tychus' collar bone and let out a weak chuckle. "I'm stuck, but alive."

"Stuck?" Eyes narrowing, Tychus looked over Jim with a critical eye, thankfully still able to see in the pitch black.

"The spikes, Tychus." Sighing in annoyance and raising his arm in an attempt to shove the several hundred pound man child off, neither men were prepared for Warfield to come crashing in silently. Tychus' body slammed flat against Jim's without mercy as he took the full brunt of the collision and both let out pained shouts. Warfield's body bounced off of Tychus' back and landed nearby with a dull thud.

Making a weak distressed noise that caused his voice to crack, Tychus' rolled off Jim and lay on his side. "My back." Unable to say anything more colorful, he focused on sucking in air and recovering,
much like Jim.

Blackness had taken Warfield's vision during his fall, the painful burning of the Scout's energy weapon wasn't comparable to any pain he had experienced in his lifetime. Crashing into Tychus and landing directly on his charred shoulder wound had jarred the General back to a painful wakefulness, however. Sluggishly rolling to his back, Warfield muttered. "You boys alive? Took a hit up there, good thing I fell into the hole."

Certain that he could feel bones returning to their rightful positions and re-knitting, Jim remained silent except for his forceful breathing.

A snort and a wave of rancid, hot air hit Tychus' in the face. Gritting his teeth, he opened his eyes and saw a great white beast with beady eyes and some of the biggest teeth he'd ever seen glaring down at him only a few feet away. "Shit." Tychus whispered and started to rise with his elbow but froze when the Ursadon stamped a clawed foot in warning. Warfield wasn't back among the living yet but Jim began to stir in alarm, sensing something was wrong.

There's a damn Ursadon right here, Jimmy. Erring on the side of caution, Tychus reverted to mental communication while staring the Ursadon down.

Instead of Jim responding, however, Shlassa intervened. Stetmann says that Ursadon will most likely attack you if you appear weak or are in its territory. Be cautious.

Careful, Tychus. Jim warned. Warfield is out and I'm still stuck.

"Always up to ol' Tychus to save the day." Muttering and cautiously raising himself to a crouch despite the warning growling and stomping of the Ursadon, Tychus faced off with the creature.

**Kaldir – Ursadon tunnel camp**

Urut and Lassara stood watching the infested Terrans through the recording sensors on the first Scout that had arrived to cleanse them. When the flash freeze hit- thankfully their camp was far enough away to not experience it, Lassara began to feel concern.

Why are the infested not attacking back?

Urut's brow furrowed slightly, waiting for the footage to resume. They must not have any weapons or projectiles. All the better, the Scout is safe.

Eyeing the spine-covered Terran, Lassara couldn't help but feel differently... A strange feeling of déjà vu tickled at the back of her mind every time she looked towards him, though it was certain they had never met. Lasarra had never met a Terran, or an infested. When the sensors were restored and the Scout was left reeling into the air to look for its targets, even Arut shifted slightly in discontent at the turn of events.

Two more Scouts coming across the icy plains towards the small group of infested put both Protoss at ease. There was nowhere for the three to run, all directions were covered and there was nowhere to hide.

As the three Scouts began firing down upon the infested, Arut's voice was low. For Aiur.

For Aiur. Lassara echoed, but with much less fervor. Lasarra almost reached to turn the feed off when the ice began to shift visually, followed by a much more real rumbling and trembling of the earth around herself and Arut.
Out of the cave! Realizing what was happening, Arut nearly dragged Lassara out of the cave by her arm before she fully committed to running. Hiding beneath the Warp Prism, ready to escape should the ground around them become unstable, they watched the feed Lassara was clenching firmly in her hands.

They have fallen into the Ursadon tunnels! The three infested had fallen through the unstable ground in the time it took for Arut and Lassara to run to safety, and the Protoss researcher was clearly distressed at the thought. *Arut, we can't let them infest the Ursadons- no creature deserves such a fate!*

Though he did not physically sigh, the slight dip of the Zealots shoulders was telling. *Lassara. Surely you don't expect the two of us to go into the very heart of Ursadon territory and hunt down three infested Terrans who may or may not have survived falling into the tunnels?*

*We are the closest by far!* Protesting, Lassara glared at her partner then. *If the thought of meeting the enemy galls you so- I shall do it by myself!* Shoudering past Arut without another word, Lassara briskly strode through the snow back into the base camp- which had thankfully not collapsed. She was already stepping past the camp and deeper into the cave when Arut physically halted her with a strong hand on her shoulder.

*Sister, it does not gall me to meet the enemy; it does to think that you can be so rash about simple creatures.* Letting his hand fall from her shoulder, as he now had her attention, Arut peered past her into the dark. *To possibly throw your life away in an attempt to save some beasts? Lunacy. Lassara's shoulders dipped and her long nerve cords followed suit. Arut would surely put an end to this and the Ursadons would suffer. But brave. He continued. Braver than a researcher has any right to be. You are my charge and I would not be so negligent as to let you meet the enemy alone, but know this: You will listen to my commands. If I tell you to run, you will. Understand?* Arut's gaze pinned her, waiting for an answer.

Not sure she heard correctly, Lassara tilted her head slightly before determination bloomed across her smooth features and through their connection. *Understood. Let us bring peace to these infested and save the Ursadon, together.*

Without need of further confirmation, the two ran into the dark together- lead by the datapad in Lassara's hands and their combined psionic might feeling out far ahead for signs of life.
An Unfortunate Meeting

Zerus – first spawning pool

It did not take long for the remainder of Brakk's pack, fighting with Yagdra's for survival, to shift focus and begin assaulting the aliens who killed their leader. Yagdra, sensing an opportunity, directed her own pack to attack from the east and southeast. If anything could unite the primal zerg, it was the chance of killing the Queen of Blades while she was vulnerable and shoving the swarm zerg off their planet.

Izsha!

Zagara, currently leading a roaming pack of mutalisks and hydralisks to support the front lines, was feeling a fatigue she didn't know was possible. The enemy has broken through the boulders to the south of the Chrysalis! Even now, a stream of ground forces were tearing up the mountain pass straight for the swarm's vulnerable leader. Left with no choice, Zagara withdrew her forces from the western front- which was still under heavy attack by Brakk's pack, and made to intercept.

Overseeing unit production and resource collection of four hives was Izsha, physically injecting essence into larvae eggs to make them spawn faster. It just wasn't enough. We cannot withstand such attacks for much longer! Our hives can only bring forth new zerg so fast.

Where is Abathur? Zagara snapped, impaling a primal zergling on a long spine with prejudice. The evolution master had been conveniently missing since their duty to defend the Queen began.

He was here, studying the spawning pool. I do not know where he went. Izsha admitted, pausing before speaking again with heightened urgency. Our western defense has fallen. An enraged mass of mixed primal zerg were entering the first spawning pool and approaching the Chrysalis, Zagara responded by splitting her remaining force in two and attempting to hold the enemy at bay across the bubbling battlefield.

The shrieking, bellowing and roaring coming from all the combatants was deafening and all-consuming. No one detected the rising bubbling of the pool or the telltale buzzing, but who would pay attention to that when fighting for their lives?

Desperate, Zagara looked around at her brood being torn apart and feasted upon, like a dam caving in on itself. My Queen... We have failed. Though secure in believing herself defeated, Zagara continued to mend what few of her brood remained and kept fighting. When a lumbering beast, similar to an ultralisk without its signature kaiser blades, bore down on the broodmother, she stood her ground.

It was no small surprise when the green bubbling fluid they were fighting in erupted upwards into the sky explosively- billions of flying insects unleashed in a focused tidal wave of consumption.

Study of catalytic fluid of pool proved useful. Locusts will devour primal zerg. Abathur spoke in his usual matter-of-fact tone as a symbiote of his creation manifested itself on Zagara's back and began rapid reparation of her damaged flesh while the primal ultralisk that was a step away from impaling her was covered, screaming, head to toe in locusts and devoured- along with the entire invading force on the plateau.

Zagara stared around in wonder as the plateau was cleared off in a matter of moments and the locusts fell dead to the ground as their lifespans ran out, covering it in their corpses. Izsha, not having witnessed the event, spoke calmly.
Abathur, your intervention was most timely. I can replenish our forces before more primal zerg arrive, I only hope it will be enough to last.

Essence required to create locust swarm regenerates quickly. Can use again. Burrowed safely beneath the battlefield, Abathur left to inspect the outcropping he had been looking at creating another base at before their defenses had begun crumbling. His long, slug-like body squeezed through a thin fissure in the earth as he cautiously peered around. "Outpost too far. Further points of defense necessary. Not enough resources to be worthwhile."

Muttering to himself, Abathur paused when a shape in the east caught his sight. A creature, not like any he had yet encountered, stood atop a cliff and was clearly returning the observing gaze. Abathur yearned to feast on it, to analyze strands and take what was useful, discarding the useless.

Inside her Chrysalis, Kerrigan dreamed. So much had been stripped away and built anew, but the Primal Queen of Blades was almost ready to be reborn- and all of Zerus was beginning to feel it.

**Bucephalus – Kaldir Low Orbit**

Valerian's ship had warped in some distance from Kaldir and was carefully maneuvered to orbit the moon far enough away from the Hyperion to avoid detection, for the time being. The protoss presence had been noted early on, the Bucephalus' superior scanners and full staff far outstripping the older Hyperion facilities. The fugitive prince now stood with his back to the view of the moon, preparing to make contact with the protoss and hopefully peaceful negotiations.

"Sir! Activity has been detected. The protoss bases are becoming combat active." Captain Vaughn announced, stressing the situation further.

"Hail the protoss base and put the transmission on screen." Clenching his fine jaw for a moment before relaxing it, Valerian wished that Jim himself was there- no man knew more about the protoss and their customs than he did; But his own knowledge and skill at diplomacy would have to do. When the alien face of a stern-looking Judicator, looking decorative in his smooth golden armor, appeared- Valerian could feel the suspicion radiate through the psionic words sent.

Terrans. You are not familiar to us, and you appear in a battle ship. Is it war you seek?

"No!" Raising his hands in a placating gesture, Valerian quickly plead his case. "We have been tracking the Hyperion, a Terran vessel, and are strictly following it until otherwise noted. There is no need for us to fight, perhaps we can be of assistance?"

Glowing blue eyes narrowed to slits, the Judicator raised a screen displaying the Hyperion in orbit. This ship?

Wary, Valerian nodded slightly. "The very same. Jim Raynor is aboard that ship, and-"

Jim Raynor, his ship and his people, are infested to the core. They have landed on Kaldir and are unleashing havoc as we speak. They will be purged. The Judicator paused, skeptically eyeing the young prince. You may assist us in the Hyperion's destruction, if you wish to express your good will.

Suppressing a wince, Valerian's mind raced. "We believe they can be saved, and with your assistance we could capture them safely- your technology far outstrips ours. From what we've observed, they are not aggressive and possibly have full control of themselves."

Infestation cannot be reversed. If the firstborn are unable to undo it, you terrans absolutely cannot. Jim Raynor is an honorable warrior, he does not deserve the fate of becoming a test subject- or left to be a puppet of Kerrigan. Hatred and a deep pain seethed through the Judicator's words, the loss of
Jim Raynor was just another great tragedy to be laid at Kerrigan's feet. *If you do not wish you assist us in their destruction, then stand aside. Or would you defend such abominations?*

Men and women both looked at Valerian, his crew, and awaited his response just as expectantly as the Judicator.

**Hyperion – Kaldir Low Orbit**

A flurry of activity had erupted on the Hyperion. Horner and Swann had begun moving infested through the ship to battle stations as fast as possible, and Shlassa had set aside the argument to assist them.

"Damnit!" Swann cursed. He was attempting to make some final reparations to the on-display Medivac in the armory so that he could pick up the ground team as fast as possible and it was proving very hard to concentrate on physically taking action while directing so many infested and doing manual tasks on them to boot. Resting his head on the pilot seat and closing his eyes, Swann sighed.

*Captain, I don't think any of our ships can handle going down to that moon.*

Horner replied waspishly, experiencing similar difficulties. *What? How the hell are we going to get them back up here, Swann?!*

*I don't know.* Tensing up in frustration, Swann hated not having the answer.

*I will wake the hive and create an overlord for them to ride.* Shlassa stated simply.

Frowning and clenching the arms of his chair, Horner thought about it. *I absolutely do not want to bring that hive to life, but if we have to in order for them to get out then we will.*

*What other choice do you have, Terran? Your machines fail you once again.*

*Talk to the damn protoss, Horner!* Swann insisted. *Hail them and see if we can work somethin' out.*

*There's more chance of the protoss agreeing to join the swarm than letting us go without a fight, Swann.* Tilting his head back and looking at the ceiling, Horner frowned. Without another thought, he stood up and walked to the comm array and attempted to hail the protoss base. Swann was right, every attempt should be made to get out of this peacefully- even if the protoss had already gone on the offensive against the ground team.

As soon as Jayce had caught wind of the protoss readying to attack, she began rifling through the living quarters of every medical personnel she could recall. It was jarring to see memorabilia showing now infested or dead people alive and happy, but nothing could make you more focused than threat of death at times.

Slamming a small dresser drawer shut and panting from all the running, Jayce slapped the datapad on her belt and scribbled her way to an open comm with Stetmann. "Egon!"

Stetmann had been strictly focused on moving and forcing infested to function, and frowned as he lost his grip on a handful of them when Jayce's voice blared into the Laboratory. "Jayce. Now isn't really the best time-"

*I need my arm back Stetmann! I can't help like this!"* Lifting her arm for emphasis, though the scientist couldn't see it, Jayce scowled.
"We don’t have any medical supplies Jayce, we’ve been over this. If it wasn't bolted down it went to Char." Frustrated, Stetmann hovered his finger over the button that would end the call, tempted.

An epiphany struck Jayce then, and she felt truly foolish for not having thought about it until now. "I know you have that tricked out, wacky looking medic suit. You had it fully stocked and ready to deploy for Char when the commander was deciding whether to attack the infested space station or to blow up the tunnels. Where is it now?"

Stetmann froze, utterly embarrassed as his eyes glanced to the floor panel that would lift up and reveal the Selfix armor he had designed, ready to go. "I-uh." Stuttering and frustrated, Stetmann forced himself to just get it out in a jumbled blurt. "It'shereinthelab!"

Having stood up while Stetmann was silent and then stuttering, Jayce's eyes half closed as she attempted to stifle the annoyance she felt at the kind of blunder he had made. How do you forget something that's right there? Taking a steadying breath, she replied calmly. "I'm coming to the Lab. Be ready."

"But Jayce the broodmo-" Jayce had already ended the call and was running for the Lab, Stetmann glanced at Shlassa worriedly and she glared back.

Horner couldn't hide his surprised expression when his hail was responded to and not only did the image of a stern-looking protoss Judicator appear, but the fine features of a very uncomfortable looking Valerian Mengsk did as well.

Jerking his head back slightly in surprise, Horner couldn't keep from sounding flabbergasted. "Valerian?"

"Captain Horner." Valerian inclined his head slightly. "This is... Not exactly how I wanted us to meet again." The corner of his lip twitched of its own accord. This was not going as planned, not at all.

_I have only accepted this transmission as a courtesy, more than you deserve as a zerg._ Judicator Holrim intoned icily. He had intended for Valerian to see the full extent of their zerg corruption, but the captain of the Hyperion showed the opposite. Unfortunate.

Frowning and ignoring Valerian for the time being, that could be addressed later, Horner focused on the Judicator. "We are not here to fight with protoss, and we are in full control of ourselves. We simply want to pick up our crew from the moon and leave, nothing more." Horner went through the rhetoric, knowing full well in his heart that the protoss were already set on their destruction, even if he lied a bit about being in full control.

"Judicator, please. What has happened to Jim and his men is horrible, but reversible! I have seen with my own two eyes the reversal of infestation." Valerian seized on Horner's words and hoped to drive a crack in the Judicators resolve. All he managed to do was get a curious look from Horner.

_No. I see now where your loyalties lie, young Terran. Leave now or prepare for battle, we await your decision._ And like that, their talk had ended. Judicator Holrim had ended the three way communication abruptly, and Horner quickly found out why.

A flash freeze had taken the protoss' main base during their talk and the Judicator had ended their negotiations as soon as it had passed. Horner's eyes widened when the massive signature of a Carrier and an escort of Void Rays lifted off and began a steady approach.

_Protoss air ships are on their way. Raise our shields and prepare for combat._ Horner glared at the
display. Nothing could ever go smoothly.

Kaldir – Ice Caves

Arm blades extended, Tychus snarled at the Ursadon and took a long step forwards, taking a stab at the creature. To his surprise, the Ursadon opened its mouth and stumbled backwards, snarling in confusion. "Rah!" Snarling back and following his momentum, Tychus took a second swipe with his next stride and paused, dumbfounded. The Ursadon jerked backwards once more, turning and running into the dark without looking back. "Uh. Well, it's gone."

Eyeing the white creature until it left his sight, Tychus turned around to see Jim struggling to unpin himself from the ice and Warfield sitting up to tentatively touch his sensitive, freshly healed over shoulder.

Snapping one arm free, Jim held his hand up for assistance and Tychus gave him a hard tug upwards. The majority of the spines on his back and thighs being separated from his body made a queer crackling sound, and Jim clenched his teeth at the discomfort of it.

"Need to get movin'. Who knows when them protoss are gonna come pourin' down one of these tunnels for us." Glancing upwards at the hole they fell through, Tychus eyed the dark sky warily.

"Don't care to be hit by one of those cannons again, that's for sure. In all my years, never felt a pain quite like that." Warfield agreed heartily, the horrible burning sensation still fresh on his mind as he looked at their two directional options. "But which way?"

Rolling his shoulders and taking a slow breath, Jim surveyed both directions quickly before nodding in the direction the Ursadon ran. "That Ursadon must've been young. I've seen these things full grown before and they are massive. We need to find ourselves the Matriarch before we can get outta here, so lets follow."

"That was a small one?" Tychus muttered as they began their quick-paced march down the tunnel. That things head was almost level with his, he wasn't sure he wanted to see what a full grown one was like.

The ambiance of the claustrophobic ice tunnels that spanned outwards like a spider webs was enough to set their nerves alight and keep the three on high alert. From the clicking and scraping of claws, not always their own, to the shifting of ice and sharp sighs of wind that managed to find its way down to them, it was hard to focus on the distant heartbeat of the one beast they were tracking. Smells bombarded them at times too, when the wind pulled air up from some deep pit where refuse had piled up and no amount of freezing could kill the stench.

In time, their pace slowed; something was up ahead and all three quietly acknowledged it with their shifts of posture and quieting of footsteps. One rapid heartbeat merged into many slower ones and quick, panting breaths split into so many it became one again.

This whole place is... Breathing. Warfield noted warily. The air had warmed a few notable degrees, pushing and pulling as though the tunnel itself had become some living, breathing thing.

Stink ain't getting any better either. Where are all the Ursadons? Tychus glared ahead, trying to get a bead on anything at all.

Raynor cautiously ran his hand across the icy wall next to him, frowning when he withdrew it and it was covered in thick white hairs. A den. Why wouldn't it be?

With caution, the three scaled a gentle incline that was obscuring their view. Their tunnel opened up
into a dark, grand cavern and they were on a shelf of ice overlooking it. Scattered and heaped throughout the whole cave was possibly an entire herd of sleeping Ursadon, the one they had pursued no doubt hiding somewhere in there. In the center of the snoring pit was the biggest, grandest Ursadon any of the three had ever seen or wanted to see.

Ducking down to all fours, eyes wide, they each exchanged nervous glances.

*And how do you propose us three kill that thing with its entire pack right there, Jimmy?* Tychus was bitter, this mission had done nothing but suck from the get-go.

*I have no idea.* Jim admitted, looking at their latest hopeless obstacle with rising ire.

Warfield leaned forwards, gazing around thoughtfully. *Lure them away from the Matriarch, kill it while it's alone? Or at least with fewer around it.*

Jim did a quick double-take when, looking at other tunnel entrances and considering Warfield's idea, he saw two pairs of soft glowing eyes glaring at them. Those eyes were unmistakably Protoss. *Ah hell.*

Calling Tychus and Warfield's attention, all three were soon glaring back at the protoss across the cavern, a small army of Ursadon between the two groups.

Tychus smirked broadly, stifling a chuckle. *Looks like the ol' protoss are just as stuck as us.* His mirth quickly faded when one, clearly a Zealot of some sort, extended its psi blades and stepped forwards purposefully.

*You don't think they'll...?* Warfield's eyes widened in alarm before looking at Jim for some sort of confirmation.

Jim kept his eyes on the two protoss, thinking hard. *I don't know. Ursadon will attack them just as sure as they'll attack us.*

Across the room, Arut and Lassara were taking stock of the situation.

*I see them, Lassara.* Arut was ready, ready to fight and die for Aiur and all that the zerg had befouled with their touch. But the Ursadon were in the way.

Lassara was looking at the cave in wonder. She knew where their sleeping dens were and had studied them thoroughly of course, but seeing it in person- even if the smell was awful- was a whole new experience. *They must be after the Matriarch, Arut. Why else would they come? A powerful creature like that could be a true terror if corrupted.* Eyes hardening as she pinpointed the three figures crouched across from them, lumbering and terrifying in their own way, she knew what must be done.

*I will charm the Ursadon to assist you. Mind the Matriarch- it is well beyond my ability to control, but she should assist her children.*

The Ursadon were already stirring, unfamiliar smells and sounds bringing the sleepy creatures to wakefulness. Arut stood tall and readied himself. *Should I fall, you will escape and direct reinforcements to this location. Under no circumstances will you remain fighting.* Lassara acknowledged her brother wordlessly, straightening and focusing on the Ursadon.

*Go now, brother. En taro Tassadar!* *En taro Tassadar!* Arut roared, simultaneously disbursing into pure energy and appearing on the low ledge the three infested were perched, already swinging his psi blades with lethal accuracy. Within the moment her brother engaged, energy surrounded Lassara as she expanded her conscious to
influence the majority of the Ursadon in the cave, leaving her glowing like a beacon and vulnerable as she concentrated. The soft glowing of a received message on her datapad, secure in her armor, went unnoticed.

"HELL!" Tychus bellowed, ensuring every Ursadon within hearing range was now awake. When the Zealot appeared between the three, whirling like some kind of devil, the only thing that saved Tychus' head from being neatly severed was his surprised jerk backwards. As it was, the psi blade had burned a path straight across his collar bone and part of his shoulder, and a few of Jim's spines tumbled to the floor when he had ducked to also avoid a quick beheading.

Stumbling back from the armored alien warrior, the three were immediately locked in a battle to the death while Warfield distanced himself. Though the Zealot was a concern, the remaining protoss across the way and the now roused and snarling Ursadon- including the massive Matriarch, were also a threat. Using the advantage of the high ground, Warfield busied himself slicing and snarling at any Ursadon trying to climb up to them- rendering them sluggish from the paralytic venom on his claws. The glowing protoss would have to wait a moment.

There was no time for reluctance, Jim was at peace with ending this warriors life. He knew the protoss too well to believe there was a peaceful resolution to this altercation. Already he had flung several spines at his foe, watching them ricochet off the standard protoss shielding. The plasma shield would not hold out forever though, so long as Tychus and him could avoid being cut to ribbons before it gave out.

For his part, Tychus had done well in recovering. Inserting himself against Arut's flank and forcing him to focus on his very real melee threat while Jim could fire upon the Zealot unimpeded was working. He had not brought his blades to bear though and Jim couldn't fathom why, especially since he was barely avoiding evisceration and receiving more than a fair share of wounds that steamed in the cold air.

_Tychus, use your blades!_ Jim leaped away from the Zealot's quick dash towards him, dancing along the edge of the ledge and slicing into the muzzle of a massive Ursadon in alarm with his toe claws when it took a snap at his feet.

_Not yet Jimmy, get that damn shield down!_ Snarling, Tychus was swiping furiously at the shield and forcing Jim's attacker away once again. Not normally visible to the eye, Jim could see the plasma shield becoming threadbare, weakening rapidly from the attacks received.

_Arut danced along the edge of the ledge, simultaneously defending against Tychus' blows and repaying them in kind with his psi blades. The agony on the mutated Terran's features bolstered his resolve- he was winning, and when the biggest fell the rest would follow. The Ursadon were also climbing, grasping and snarling at Tychus and Jim, forcing Tychus to defend himself on two fronts and Jim to repel them._

_Push him towards me Tychus!_ Warfield cried, spraying an Ursadon in the face with yellowy hallucinogenic paste that erupted from his forearms. The protoss was being drawn towards him and the General had a plan.

_Yes sir!_ Tychus grinned savagely, redoubling his effort and driving the protoss warrior backwards. Though the Ursadon were biting at his ankles and had gotten a few swipes at his leathery hide, Tychus was none the worse for wear from their assault and the protoss was making the mistake of giving the creatures more credit than they were worth. Many had already fallen down, impaled by spines and wailing death cries.

It happened so fast. One second Tychus had made a quick ram against the protoss' plasma shield,
officially shattering it, forcing the protoss to stumble backwards slightly. Warfield shifted from defending against the Ursadon to springing at Arut's back and grabbing his power armor in his talons- taking the backwards momentum of the protoss and redirecting it. Arut was unceremoniously hurled into the bodies of the Ursadon below, disappearing.

Breathing hard, the three stood on the ledge and gazed downwards as the Ursadon backed off momentarily to see what had fallen in their midst. To the group's surprise, the Zealot was glaring up at them from the ground, untouched by the beasts around him. Standing up, Arut rolled his shoulders and made to leap back up to them, eager to rejoin the battle. It was his final mistake.

Through minor precognition, Arut saw his demise coming when he was airborne and unable to change course, the huge brute he was about to careen into had arm blades that were flipping into place and the spiny one that had been hurling spikes at him the entire time already had one in hand. The third, who had been defending them from the Ursadon, had his eyes set on a point above the beasts below them- no doubt on Lassara. Without hesitation, Arut urgently called to his sister. *Lassara, run!*

Tychus' blades snapped into place as he swung his arms together, bringing them down on the Zealot's thin midsection like a giant pincer. Arut's eyes widened as he was neatly severed above the waist, his psi blades disbursing as his torso tumbled over Tychus and was tossed by the upward thrust of his shoulders- his waist and legs falling back downwards, still twitching. The emergency teleportation device in the chest of his power armor began to glow, a final attempt to save him from being completely destroyed. As he reached up to touch it, falling limply to the ice behind Tychus, a long spine impaled his skull from the side and the light of the warrior's eyes died as his torso was teleported away. There would be no chance at serving again.

An anguished, uncontrolled scream burst from Lassara and both Jim and Tychus spun around to look at the last protoss remaining. Warfield hadn't wasted any time making his way towards it and was leaping over, on and around stumbling Ursadons that seemed disoriented. The Matriarch, however, was pissed. The massive Ursadon hadn't joined the fray while they were fighting the protoss, thankfully, but now that the scent of blood was in the air and hallucination-wrecked ursadon were beginning to attack their own, who were confused by the sudden loss of guidance from Lassara; the Matriarch had caught sight of Warfield and was seeing red, charging after him and even trampling some of it's own in the process.

*Watch it Warfield, Momma's angry!* Jim called urgently, looking at Tychus and trying to get a bead on what his crazy friend might be thinking.

*I'm aware, get this thing off of me Raynor! Can't let that protoss escape!* Warfield had leaped onto a low, sloping shelf of ice and tumbled away as a paw bigger than him swung and carved through the entire mass- an explosion of ice and sound mixing with the cacophony of noises that were filling the cavern deafeningly.

"Shit. Let's go partner!" Jim shouted, gesturing for Tychus to follow when he seemed to be waiting for Jim to decide what to do. Together the two charged and leaped down into the newly bloomed battlefield, Tychus acting like a battering ram while Jim hurled spines at anything that looked their way. There would be no better opportunity to bring the Matriarch down than now.

Lassara, stunned by the violent severing of her connection with Arut, stumbled backwards. Her control of the Ursadon had slipped and they were running amok, killing one another in their confusion and pain. Grasping at her face, it only dimly registered that one of the infested was coming- and fast. Turning away, she made to run like ordered, but only managed a numb walk. Arut was gone. There wouldn't even be any glorious service as an Immortal, should he have chosen- she
knew he would have.

Warfield kept running. The tunnel that protoss had walked down was far too small for the bulk of this thing chasing him, or at least that's what he was counting on. A massive bellow from behind sprayed thick strips of saliva all over his back, along with a wave of scalding hot breath; his legs pumped for all they were worth, carrying him towards the ledge the two protoss had been standing on. He was going to have to jump and he'd either make it or become a chew toy, it was up in the air which it'd be.

Jim and Tychus erupted into a semi clear area, corpses and beasts too maimed to be a threat were laying all around. "Look out!" Knocking into Tychus' side and shoving him away, Jim ripped a spine off his thigh and took aim as Warfield approached his final jump. The Matriarch was going to catch him, that much was clear from where Jim was standing. At the last second he let fly the spine with as much force as he could muster, letting out a sharp oomph of effort.

Leaping upwards, Warfield focused intensely on the ledge and let fate deal with the rest. Thankfully, one of the Matriarch's eyes erupted in a gory display as Jim's well-aimed spine hit home and rooted deep. Letting out an awful roar, it changed course from Warfield and stumbled backwards on all fours to spin around and face Jim and Tychus, blood oozing out of its eye socket and steaming.

"Well I surely hope you planned a bit farther ahead than just shooting it, Jimmy." Tychus tensed with his blades at the ready, stricken with a feeling of being awfully small- not something the big man could say very often, and not something he was ever comfortable with.

"No." Jim admitted, shrugging and admiring his handy work nonchalantly. The Matriarch charged them with renewed fury while Warfield scrabbled on to the ledge and continued to charge off after the protoss.
Improvisation

Hyperion – Kaldir low orbit

Holding her cast-covered arm firmly against her chest as she ran, Jayce was huffing and puffing by the time she reached the Lab. The ship had yet to come under attack, or at least there was no discernible physical impacts happening, that gave her the illusion of time. Stepping up to the door, eyes immediately locking on the fleshy substance that had partially leaked out into the hall. Creep.

Swallowing a lump in her throat, Jayce pressed the keys that would open the door for her and braced herself. This was the moment she'd know if she could look a zerg in the eye and attempt to kill it. Or she'd be killed horribly before that plan was ever realized. The door hissed open.

"Egon?" Nervous, Jayce looked inside and immediately saw the massive form of the broodmother on the other side of the room, its glowing eyes locking on her in return.

Shlassa held the terran's gaze quietly, considering. This was the one they would all throw their lives on the line for, for no reason. Having known Jayce was coming, Shlassa subtly forced Stetmann deeper into his control of the infested until he would be unable to absorb what was going on around him, leaving her and the terran woman to their own devices. Stetmann had, however, raised the floor panel that held his medic suit and left it up.

Another lump had formed in her throat and Jayce swallowed at it hard, breaking eye contact with Shlassa and forcing herself to look at Egon, now that it was clear she was not about to be eviscerated- yet anyway. Stetmann was sitting in his chair, rigid and staring into nothing, unresponsive. The Selfix armor was near him and Jayce took her first tentative step on to the fleshy floor, grimacing at the squishy feel of it through her shoes.

"You can do this." Muttering a little mantra to herself, Jayce strode towards the Selfix armor purposefully and considered her options when standing in front of it. It was very different than a medic suit, and ass ugly to boot, but Stetmann had raved about its advanced features and capabilities more than enough times within earshot that Jayce figured she could work with it.

Rolling her sleeves up above her elbows, Jayce made to step in to the armor and begin hooking herself up to it, but quickly realized her cast was too large and wouldn't fit through several of the loops that would connect to her body and inject healing nanites.

Frustration rising, Jayce whispered heatedly at the seemingly entranced scientist. "Stetmann! I need your help..." Gritting her teeth when there was no response, she fought back angry tears. "If we make it through this I swear I'm gonna get someone to kick your ass." Defeated, Jayce stumbled out of the suit and began walking for the door when the echoing, hissing voice of Shlassa stopped her in her tracks.

"Hold, Terran." Pausing to enjoy the palpable spike of fear coming from the woman, Shlassa chuckled softly. It was a purely malevolent sound to Jayce.

"Yes?" Voice small, Jayce glanced towards the spidery monster and wondered if she could get to and through the door in time. Probably not.

"Why did you not use the machine?"

Confused, Jayce looked at the Selfix armor and back to Shlassa, quirking a brow. "I can't do it by
myself and with this cast on. I need to help us defend against the Protoss...” It was a preposterous
notion, but Jayce considered asking the monster for help just then. Did it care if it died?

"Come to me." Shlassa intoned, straightening to her full height imperiously. When Jayce remained
frozen, she prompted impatiently. "My Queen wishes you alive, so you shall remain. We share an
enemy today, and so I will help you. Come."

Glancing nervously at Stetmann, who remained immobile, Jayce forced her legs to work and carry
her over to the broodmother. Its sheer size was unnerving, even if it was not the biggest of zerg
creatures by a long shot, probably over eight feet. Taking a deep breath, Jayce forced herself to
reason. She had been about to ask for assistance anyways, and Shlassa was right. If she was not
welcome on this ship she would have been dead and gone many times over. A temporary truce for
survival it was.

Looking down at Jayce and all but hovering over her head, Shlassa eyed the Terran's arm and held
out a spidery hand. Pleased when she complied much quicker, it was a moment's work to shear the
weak wrapping away with a claw. It was also entertaining to watch Jayce recoil in terror as though
her arm was being cleaved off.

Reduced to sweating in a second, Jayce stared at her exposed pale arm in the hand of the
broodmother, miraculously uncut. "Thank you." Her voice was weak, but it was all she could
manage. At least she could get plugged into the Selfix armor now.

"Time is of the essence." Shlassa curved a long, spidery finger around Jayce's arm when she
attempted to withdraw, holding her firmly in place. With her free hand she spawned a slimy-looking
green orb.

Eyes widening, Jayce knew full well that broodmothers were capable of mending other Zerg, but this
seemed awfully dangerous to her own well being. "Uh! I think it'd be safer if I just-"

Shlassa plunged the glowing green goo orb on to Jayce's arm without hesitation, speaking briskly over
the woman's surprised and dismayed cry. "Zerg, Terran. It makes no difference. Essence is essence!"
Though her low opinion of Terran essence would remain kept to herself, for the time being. Jayce
was all but having a panic attack as the stuff soaked into her arm alarmingly fast and the broodmother
wouldn't let her slip away.

Gasping and jumping up and down, since away wasn't an option, Jayce stared in open mouthed
horror as the zerg goo was fully absorbed into her flesh. Sucking in a huge breath, having worked
herself into a breathless frenzy, she waited to be turned into some kind of mutated abomination.
Whether it was luck or the broodmother really knew, the temperature of her injured arm rose
dramatically and there was a pins and needles sensation as her flesh and bones were knit together
rapidly. When it was finished, Shlassa let go and Jayce stumbled back a half step before stuttering.

"T-thank-"

"Do not thank me. I was the one that broke it." Folding her spindly fingers back together, Shlassa
leaned back slightly. "Go. See that the Protoss do not destroy us." Right on time, the ship came
under fire and shuddered around them violently. Without a choice, Jayce nodded and ran out of the
Lab full tilt.

**Kaldir – Ursadon Tunnels**

Jim had begun peppering the Ursadon Matriarch with spines a moment after it charged them, while
Tychus slipped between a massive leg and slavering jaw to the relative safety of the beast's
underbelly, where he began to carve a bloody home with his blades.

"Careful, careful!" Jim warned, backing off and waiting for some spines to grow back. Aside from its eyes, the Matriarch seemed mostly unhindered by his spines. "That hide is real thick!"

With Jim's warning, Tychus glanced a monstrous hand folding inwards to grasp at him and avoided it just in time, leaping around the front leg it was leaning on and stabbing at it with all his might. The angry and pained bellows of the Matriarch were deafening in the cavern and threatened the stability of smaller tunnels in the distance.

Vulnerable as she stumbled through the tunnel towards her escape, Lasarra was attempting to shut away the mental agony of Arut's death. Warriors were able to block such emotions, but Lasarra was very far from a warrior and had no such training. Distant bellowing and the clattering of claws on ice much closer went unheard as she coiled one arm at her midssection and held her face in a hand.

Warfield had caught sight of the tall, willowy protoss and made a wild dash at it. It was a surprise to not meet any resistance when he slammed his hands down on each thin upper arm and sunk his talons in deep. No shield. No defense. Nothing.

Lasarra's eyes widened at the pain of talons piercing her flesh, head tilting back. Shocked back to reality, she was alarmed to be unable to move as a numbness spread through her limbs and rendered her body limp and unresponsive.

Warfield quickly pulled his talons out of his victim as she fell to the ground. The steady thumping of four hearts, which was very odd to his ears, was enough to let him know she was alive. Sliding his hand underneath Lasarra's long nerve cords, Warfield grasped the back of her decorative armor and began a brisk walk back to where Jim and Tychus were taking down the Matriarch. Despite its height, the protoss weighed next to nothing and did not hinder him anywhere near as much as he thought it would. "C'mon ugly."

The rage of the Matriarch had sent the remainders of its pack running away, having trampled several smaller Ursadon in its fight with Jim and Tychus. Her blood rage was making it much easier to attack freely, if one could avoid the rapid bites and claws.

Tychus, in a battle rage of his own, was snarling and laughing as he cut into the lower hind legs of the Matriarch, reveling in a shower of hot blood- it tasted so good. Jim remained cool and calculated, focused on the task, especially so since he was currently holding the ire of the creature. Tychus' position worried him, though.

Tychus, mind those back feet! No sooner had he warned Tychus than the Matriarch leaned forwards on its hands and kicked Tychus with a foot bigger than the man himself. Hard. Launching him clean across the room and through a pillar of ice to land in a heap.

Tychus! Alarmed but unable to check on him, Raynor grit his teeth and stood his ground. The Matriarch was mortally wounded, it would not survive this fight even if it won, and it was fighting as though it knew it. Snarling, it charged at Jim open mouthed, ready to end his life with a snap. Gazing at the soft skin of its mouth, Jim knew what he had to do. Taking a page from his fallen friend, Jim bellowed loud and hard as he hurled spines rapidly into the Matriarch's mouth and prayed.

A long, thin spine won through at the very last second, penetrating the raging beast's brain and bringing it to a sudden halt. Jim took a step back as it landed heavily in front of him and breathed one final sigh.

Pulse racing wildly from the rush, Raynor ran around the cooling corpse and towards where Tychus
had landed. "Tychus!" It was a great relief when he found his old friend hunched over and rising up slowly.

Tychus' voice was rough. "You know, partner. I think we've both died several times these past few days. Do you think zerg have nine lives, should we be more careful?" Slapping Tychus on the shoulder Jim let out a relieved laugh, Tychus joining in when he could finally stand straight. The two were walking over to their kill, jovial, when Warfield came back into view dragging a damned protoss.

"Looks like I missed the fun! You boys in one piece?" Warfield tossed the limp body off the ledge and Jim cringed slightly as it landed in an awful heap.

"We're fine General. What's with the protoss?" Jim gestured at Lasarra as she lay there while Warfield hopped down and approached them, dusting his hands off briskly.

"Caught up with it. Didn't put up any fight at all, managed to get it paralyzed. Might come in handy." The three left her laying here while they walked towards the Matriarch.

"Maybe. Looks like a female. Wonder what she was doin' down here with a Zealot?" Jim was curious, he'd only ever met a few female protoss. Digging around in tunnels full of Ursadon was possibly the last place he'd expect to see another one.

"Don't know, don't care." Tychus slapped the thick white hide of the Matriarch, rapidly staining red, with a thump as they came to stand beside it. "We've killed it. What now?"

"And what is that smell?" Warfield added. Coming to stand beside Tychus, he sniffed the air in confusion. "By all rights, this place should reek of nothing but wet fur and Ursadon shit." The General looked rather alarmed when he looked at Tychus, bloody from head to toe, and realized. Jim looked grim and Tychus seemed disturbingly excited, eyes alight as he stared at the bloody Matriarch corpse.

Absorb its essence. Feast. Time is short, and Swann has said the Terran ships are unable to retrieve you. Shlassa called to them with a note of urgency that did not go unnoticed.

"Eat it?" Jim muttered, disgusted. "Figured we'd just have to dip our hands in it or somethin'..."

Tychus stood flush with the corpse and gripped two wide gashes in its flesh that he had carved himself, looking over his shoulder with a gleam in his eye. "Trust me on this one. Best thing you'll ever taste." With a rip, he pulled a huge strip of flesh and fur clean off, exposing the steaming insides to them. Tychus didn't waste any time, he could feel his mouth filling with saliva at the thought of getting another taste of meat, he tore out a chunk with his claws and shoveled it in his mouth. He couldn't help but groan in ecstasy.

Warfield clenched his teeth, equally disturbed by the image of Tychus stuffing chunks of raw bloody meat into his mouth like some kind of wild animal, and entranced by the heavenly smell. Reluctantly, he shouldered Tychus to the side and carved himself off a less greedy slice. The moment the bloody slab touched his tongue, he understood. "My god." He muttered around his mouthful, chewing away.

Resigned, Jim cut himself a slice and joined in. It wasn't long before they had let slip the thin threads of control they had and were gorging heartily. Soon, their body temperatures had risen such that the atmosphere around them might as well have been T-shirt weather.

Lasarra, having landed facing away from the corpse of the Matriarch but also having seen it as she
fell, could only listen and attempt to discern what was going on around her. It was strange to hear one of them protest about eating it, not something she would expect from a zerg, but all too soon there was nothing but sickening crunching and slurping to indicate what was happening. She had utterly failed in every way, it tore at her heart. Arut truly died for nothing.

They had feasted long enough that Lasarra felt the paralytic venom she had been injected with wearing off. Slowly, she drew herself to her feet and steeled herself to look behind. Teetering slightly, she mustered her courage and turned. Covered in gore, the three monsters were still shoveling flesh from all manner of holes they had torn into the noble Matriarch, grunting and munching. A righteous anger filled her then, and all three froze when they felt the emotion behind the words projected at them.

Monsters.

Eyes opening wide, the proclamation jolted Jim out of his frenzied consumption, dropping a chunk of meat he had been about to stuff into his mouth. Warfield had reacted the same, although Tychus was much more reluctant to let his meal go, glaring a promise of death towards the protoss for interrupting.

"Uh. This... Isn't exactly what it looks like." Jim mumbled, stepping away from the corpse and towards the protoss slowly. He went to extend his hand in a friendly gesture, but realized it was red and covered in meat chunks so quickly brought it back to his side. How long had they been eating? Time had lost its meaning. This was not good. "Look, sorry about the whole paralysis thing..."

You killed my brother and one of the last Ursadon Matriarchs on Kaldir. Your sins are beyond count, monster. Jim winced at the accusation.

Growling like a savage and extending his arm blades, Tychus stalked towards the wobbly protoss and rumbled. "Just kill it and get movin'. Talkin' ain't gonna get us off this ice ball."

Warfield shrugged, indifferent. Protoss weren't his friends. "We do need to get going. Don't know how long we were at that, but we've definitely acclimated." Looking at Jim, Warfield waited expectantly while Lasarra cringed away from Tychus, too weak to make any kind of defense.

"Wait Tychus. We ain't got any way off this rock." Jim waved the murder-minded Tychus off, catching up with a quick jog until he and Tychus were both standing in front of the willowy and ruffled protoss. "We didn't come here to kill protoss. Your brother attacked us and we defended ourselves. He died a warrior's death." Jim held Lasarra's gaze while Tychus made a quick snatch at a blinking panel that had been resting against Lasarra's side armor.

"Got a message, lady?" Tychus wiggled the panel at Lasarra, eyeing her for a reaction.

Lasarra's eyes widened notably when the urgent message became visible and so many pieces of the puzzle fell neatly together. James Raynor and his men. Infested. Arut never stood a chance. Had they only received the message sooner, so much could have been different.

"Well it clearly said somethin'." Tychus smirked and simultaneously crushed the datapad in his fist, letting the pieces fall to the ground.

Frowning at his friend's sledgehammer-like approach to diplomacy, Jim wondered if it was perhaps time to take that stance as well, given the lack of response so far. "Look. We got two options: We awaken a Hive and kill everyone on this moon while trying to leave, or you take us to whatever ship got you to these ice caves and help us get outta here. No one else dies. You read me?" Jim did not like how the protoss' eyes narrowed to slits, greeting him with a stubborn silence. Warfield had since
sauntered up and was observing the exchange.

Jim grit his teeth and snarled, reaching around the lithe protoss and grabbing a fist full of nerve cords. Lasarra's eyes widening in alarm was the response he was looking for. "I know what these are." He gave the nerve cords a sharp squeeze and her head tilted in alarm, trying to undo the pressure. "Agree to take us outta here or the Khala is going to be one shy in a few seconds." Keeping his grip firm, Jim stared into the protoss' eyes and hoped beyond hope it would work. He did not know if he was capable of causing that much anguish in someone, alien or not. Tychus was giving Jim a look of surprised approval. The Jim he knew did not normally resort to such threats, though Tychus had no idea what the Khala was, not that he cared.

Stop. Lasarra had raised a hand slightly with her words. If she could survive this altercation, there was a chance she could help bring them down. It was a deep relief when James Raynor removed his clawed, blood-smeared hand from her nerve cords. I will bring you to my ship and it shall bare you to yours. Let us be off.

As Lasarra turned around to climb up the wall of ice to the tunnels she and Arut came from, Jim allowed himself to feel relieved. "Lets go boys." Soon, all three of them were following Lasarra towards her base camp warily.

What if she's got a whole army of them Protoss waiting for us at this "ship", Jimmy? Tychus was wary. That was too easy, partner.

It's possible. Protoss are real keen on honesty, though. Jim admitted. It would certainly put a kink in the plan.

You plan on risking all our necks on the fact that Protoss like honesty? Warfield was none too pleased. We should kill her and wake up that hive. Hell with the Protoss, I'd rather live to see another day, Raynor.

Tychus was eyeing Lasarra's back, slowly clenching and unclenching his fists. Jim frowned. The Protoss aren't Terrans, Warfield. I've had plenty of dealings with them, especially this type. They don't do backstabbing. You can count on her alerting the other protoss as soon as we're on our ship though. Just cool it and see how it plays out. There were no further objections.

Hyperion – Kaldir low orbit

Matt's countenance was grim. The Hyperion was already under attack by the small fighters the Carrier launched and both Stetmann, Swann and himself were using infested to return fire and keep the ship's defenses up. Void Rays were gliding sleekly ahead of the Carrier, almost in range. "If they get to us, we're dead." Horner muttered to himself, feeling rather accepting of his fate.

"Well, we'll just have to stop that won't we?" He jerked in surprise when Jayce's overconfident voice filled the bridge. She had walked in while he was mumbling to himself and heard.

"What are you doing, Jayce?" Horner frowned tightly, watching a small protoss ship exploding through several pairs of eyes, he was struggling to keep focused.

"Come to make myself useful, Captain." Immediately, she had taken up a place at the console dedicated to the overview of the ship and more importantly, the Yamato cannon.

"I'm not sure when you learned how to do more than just be an engineer, but be my guest." Horner directed himself to his chair and sat down heavily. It would be a relief that Jayce could look after things in here, his head was pounding. "Keep me informed."
Jayce's eyes were wide at the image of the Void Rays, they were the real threat. "Sir, those Void Rays are going to rip us apart, and they are almost here!"

"I know." Horner sighed irritably.

"What are we- wait." Confusion bloomed on her features as the space to the right of the ship visibly blurred, and a moment later the Bucephalus exploded spectacularly into view. "Captain, it's the Bucephalus!" It had already begun assisting in returning fire and the Carrier fighters were being decimated, exploding like fireworks.

"Incoming transmission." The Adjutant spoke briskly, patching the Bucephalus through.

Horner could barely believe it, but now was not the time to air his suspicions, and forced himself to look at the display of Valerian.

"Captain Horner. My apologies for keeping you waiting; we are here to assist." Valerian looked between Horner and Jayce, noting the particularly vacant expression on the Captain's face with curiosity.

Jayce didn't waste a second. "The Void Rays are coming! We need to focus fire and take them down before they get charged up!" They had moved into firing position and already their long needle-like protrusions were beginning to peel back and bring the large crystal that would focus a destructive beam to the forefront.

"I'm sending you your target. Fire on my mark." Valerian was cool and calm. The protoss should have sent more if they wanted to succeed in interfering with his plans.

Clumsily forwarding the information to what would normally be a full crew of trained personnel that specifically looked after the ship's firepower, Jayce hoped someone was watching down there. It was hard enough to take over a job she had only a basic working knowledge of, but she thanked her lucky stars she liked learning about more than just her own job. Relief flooded through her as the target was acknowledged, she waited for the moment the exiled prince would give the word.

"Mark." A quick flick of a button and the word was out. All available cannons on both battlecruisers that could be pointed at the Void Ray simultaneously turned from the Carrier fighters to their target. A thin beam had erupted from the sleek protoss vessel and connected to the Hyperion, a precursor to much more severe damage, but under the combined firepower of the two terran ships its shields quickly succumbed and the ship exploded spectacularly.

The Hyperion rocked hard, Jayce nearly being jostled off her console, when the second Void Ray continued channeling despite losing its partner. Green and wide, the beam that connected the two ships was rapidly increasing in intensity and would soon be burning a hole through the hull of the Hyperion. "Activate the shield matrix!" Jayce nearly shouted at herself as she tried to figure out where its activation was while Valerian fed new target information to the Hyperion. Not a moment too soon, the shield matrix surrounded the Hyperion and encased it in a temporary cushion of safety.

"Open fire on the final Void Ray as soon as you can." Valerian instructed as the Bucephalus turned its cannons on the fully charged Void Ray, peppering its plasma shield hard.

With the matrix being melted through like butter, Jayce fed the coords to the team and watched with a huge amount of relief as the Void Ray was taken down almost in sync with the shield matrix falling. Debris of protoss ships were floating around on screen, a golden, shimmering graveyard blooming in Kaldir's low orbit.
Seeing Jayce's relieved face, Valerian gave her a stern reminder. "The battle is not over, miss. Focus on the Carrier and prepare your Yamato cannon."

Swallowing hard, Jayce accepted the aiming coords and looked at the Carrier. All its fighters lost, the ship was vulnerable and without any offensive ability. It felt wrong. "Valerian... The Carrier has lost all its fighters, I don't think we need to do this."

"The protoss will not let this transgression go unpunished. We need to be able to get away without the Carrier following us. There is no choice." Valerian was grim. "Fire your cannon."

Upset, but well above her head in inexperience, Jayce accepted Valerian's word. Not like her own Captain was saying anything. Swallowing a lump in her throat, Jayce recalled what her good friend had said when he was giving her a brisk run through of the console he was in control of. It had taken quite some bribery to get him to come to the bridge and show her this on his off time.

"The Yamato cannon is the most powerful weapon on this ship, and I'm in control of it. You set your target here." He had noted, finger brushing just over the controls to show how it worked, but not touching. "And fire it here. Anything this baby hits is gonna explode, better cover your eyes!"

Breathing deep, Jayce hit the button and squinted.

When the Hyperion charged its Yamato cannon, you could feel it throughout the whole ship. Jayce had felt it many times, but never saw. The blinding flash, a concentrated nuclear strike, erupting across the screen and crashing into the Carrier was something else entirely. The protoss ship visibly rocked and was riddled with explosions as its plasma shield was cut through instantly. A quick glance at the Bucephalus showed its own Yamato cannon charging.

"Incoming transmission." The adjutant warned. Valerian's image was pushed aside and a golden armored protoss, resplendent in alien beauty, looked down on Jayce. Horner remained silent and staring hard into thin air. The second Yamato cannon fired, cutting a huge chunk clean off of the massive protoss vessel. Sparks and warning lights flared behind the protoss on the comm, the ship was a small round of cannon fire shy of exploding.

"Our ship is crippled. Nothing remains of our fighters. To kill us now would be the height of cowardice, Terran."

Turning away from the console to face the protoss, straightening her posture and attempting to look authoritative, Jayce had never felt so small in her oil stained orange jumpsuit. "I can't let you hunt us down."

More will come. Many more.

The protoss warned, eyes narrowed to slits.

Frowning, her features twisting as her emotions warred. Jayce was not cut out for this job. "But you won't." Turning away sharply, it was a brisk command to fire the auto cannons. She couldn't force herself to look backwards and see the protoss engulfed in flames before the transmission was lost. The Carrier was crumbling, succumbing to Kaldir's gravity and plummeting downwards in a fiery ball.

Valerian sounded subdued, but as she clasped her hands in front of herself and watched the Carrier fall, fighting back tears, Jayce couldn't look at him either. "I've sent you warp coords. The protoss have more than enough firepower left on Kaldir to destroy us if we don't leave soon."

Kaldir – Ursadon tunnel camp

They barely realized they had entered a protoss camp, so sparse it was. With the threat of a flash
freeze looming, it was only a matter of time, they had quickly set a hard pace. Raynor, the most knowledgeable of the three about protoss, had picked up on Lasarra's distress fairly easy. The willowy protoss stumbled here and there and occasionally touched her face or head, as if confused or disoriented. Fairly sure the three of them were the cause of her distress Jim couldn't help but feel bad, but they would have to continue regardless.

"Where's the ship?" Tychus muttered at Lasarra in warning. They had come to the mouth of the cave and all around them was thickly blanketed snow, with more falling.

Lasarra gestured towards the Warp Prism with her hand serenely. Tychus was dangerous, she did not need to read minds to know that her life was on a fine edge with him, it would not due to keep him waiting.

"Blends in real good, doesn't it?" Warfield had to look over the area she indicated twice before seeing the tell-tale blue glow, finally making out the figure.

Yes. It is a subtle technology. Lasarra was about to say more, when the sky erupted.

"Oh, no." Jim recoiled in alarm- the Hyperion was under attack. All four watched as another bright flare bloomed above the atmosphere, a piece of molten hull falling through the sky shortly afterwards. Jim was furious, fists clenched and blood surging. He wanted to rage and blame someone, Lasarra perhaps. But as a final and more substantial explosion lit the gray sky red and the remains of what was clearly a Carrier came crashing down through the atmosphere, he could not find it in himself. Wasn't her fault, not by a long shot. Blame could be laid solely at the feet of his former love, who was currently ravaging a planet outside of the Koprulu sector without remorse.

"Get us in the transport and lets go." Warfield muttered, stalking past Lasarra who seemed stunned. Jim followed suit.

My people will be avenged. She stated simply, activating the Warp Prism and watching as Jim and Warfield burst into their basic matter and were stored inside the ship with a blue glow. All that remained was Tychus and he grasped her thin upper arm, still sporting wounds from Warfield's talons, firmly. "You're comin' with us." Lasarra made to protest, recoiling from the scalding hot touch, but received a firm clench in warning. It would not be any effort on his part to break her bones, and she was certain he'd enjoy it. "If you double-cross us and your Protoss pals blast us outta the sky? They are taking you too."

A quick shove sent her stumbling to stand beneath the prism, and she felt resigned. There would be no convincing this one of her lack of treachery, her fate was in the gods hands. Stand with me.

Reluctant but compliant, Tychus took his place beside the protoss, a staggering contrast between the two, and they disbursed into particles to be stored in the ship. Directed by Lasarra's will, the vessel began a smooth ascent towards the Hyperion.

Hyperion – Kaldir low orbit

Withdrawing his conscious from the many infested he had been controlling, certain of the current battle being over, Horner blinked back into awareness and took in the current situation around him. Jayce was staring out into space where nothing was left of the protoss but wreckage, and Valerian was looking somewhat uncomfortable at the silence.

Standing up, Horner hooked his hands behind his back and approached the comm with the prince. "Valerian. Thanks for the assist- but if you want to stick with us and talk you'll wait for me to give you warp coords of my own. You'll have to pardon me for not quite trusting you right now." He had
heard their exchange of course, but wasn't able to respond at the time.

"There is a lot to discuss, Captain. I assure you the coords I have sent you are not a trap, but I understand. We will wait for you, but a little haste wouldn't be undue. The protoss are mustering more ships as we speak."

"Jim and his men are down there, we're waiting for them. If it gets too hot you can leave-"

"Captain!" Jayce butted in and ran over to a second console, getting a better look at what she was seeing. "A protoss ship is inbound but-" Jayce's voice faded out and Shlassa's overrode what the terran girl was saying.

*It is them. Let the protoss vessel pass.*

"Don't shoot that ship!" Horner blurted, spinning to face Valerian. "It's a transport- that is Jim!"

Valerian gave a calculating look, glancing at his own display of the Warp Prism. It would be awfully easy to capture the three like that, but not very good for relations either.

"Valerian..." Horner warned, understanding full well his commander's vulnerability at this time.

Valerian's eyes snapped back to Horner, a slight frown creasing his handsome features. "I understand your concern, Captain. However, my thoughts are strictly on the speed of that transport and how fast we need to get out of here when it's done offloading its cargo. I have risked many lives and damaged our relations with protoss considerably to protect you."

"Well, don't count on having much luck with protoss relations for a good long while after this." Horner eyed his console and transmitted the warp coords with a practiced hand. "There. Soon as the transport has boarded, we're leaving."

"Very well. We will speak again soon, Captain." Valerian's overly perfect visage disappeared as he closed the comm. Horner let out a stressed breath, glancing at Jayce. She had returned to staring out into space. He never realized just how ragged she looked up until then. Her hair was in a poorly done pony tail, no doubt because she could only use her off-hand, bits and pieces sticking out here and there. Her shoulders were slumped in exhaustion, and he could just imagine the bags under her eyes. Pride swelled in his chest when he thought about how she handled the situation, and despite the tell-tale beating of her heart having a dangerous allure, the dour captain found himself standing beside her staring out into space. Wasn't much else to do until Jim arrived, they would be docking shortly.

"You did well. I didn't know you were qualified to work on my bridge, though." Smiling slightly, Horner attempted to keep it light.

Sniffing, Jayce smiled slightly and spoke, voice weak with an overwhelming sadness. "Always good to make yourself indispensable, Captain."

"You are." He admitted, hoping the honesty he felt could be heard. "Wasn't an easy call you made, but it was the right one. Try not to let it bring you down." Tentatively, he gave her a gentle pat on the shoulder and forced away thoughts of what happened the last time he put his hand on someone, although he had only managed to recall snippets over time.

"I can't help but feel like... We shouldn't even be here, you know? And every life that we take after what happened to us, where we should've died, is something that should never have happened." Jayce turned and stared at him, somehow managing to keep tears from pouring. It would all come out in private later.
"I know exactly what you're saying," Jayce had summed up his own feelings into words rather well, Horner admitted to himself. Lowering his hand from her shoulder, he sighed. "But we're going to keep fighting and try to undo what has been done to us. I heard Valerian say something earlier about reversing infestation, you can bet that's part of why he's here saving our asses."

"I don't trust him." Jayce bit out, venomous.

"Good. He hasn't earned it. I can take it from here, go see if Swann has something for you to take care of, alright?" Getting her out of the bridge so he could think clearly was becoming more necessary by the second, and thankfully she took the initiative.

"Yeah. We took lots of hits, no doubt he's swamped. I'm on it." Nodding politely to her Captain, Jayce began walking out. Horner happened to glance at her as she was leaving and did a quick double-take, why was her broken arm out of its cast? He'd have to ask later, the opportunity was gone as the door hissed shut behind her.

*I know you want to warp outta here cowboy, but with the ship in the condition she is right now? We're gonna be dead in the water on arrival. Swann was taking care of the Warp Prism, getting it docked inside, and knew full well his Captain would want to warp out of the hot zone. The damage the Hyperion had taken almost brought a tear to his eye as it was.*

*We just need to lose the protoss, Swann. We can take however much time we need to make repairs after that, and if we have to we can accept help from Valerian too. The prince would be all too happy to offer it, Horner was sure.*

*I don't trust that brat. I'll fix this damn place by myself before accepting his help. We're ready to warp.*

Jim, Tychus, Warfield and Lasarra were being scrambled back into their physical forms beneath the Warp Prism when warp drive was initiated. All four of them tumbled over one another into a heap.
"Found you." Whispering to herself triumphantly, Nova's cloaked form cautiously strode down a run-down concrete path between buildings that had managed to avoid destruction, a feat of its own on the poor side of Augustgrad's outskirts. She had caught wind of the Spectre's psionic pattern not far from the rubble of the building he had demolished. It was sporadic and varied, as though he had little to no control. *No surprise there.* Nova thought, Spectres were all out of control. Just waiting to crack.

Sensing the climax of her hunt, Nova raised her rifle and placed her finger on the trigger. Her prey was just around the corner, in a narrow alley. The signature was weak, but steady and unmoving.

Rounding the corner and taking aim, Nova froze. Her sights were set on a naked corpse, laying face down. Alarmed, she raised her gaze from the scope of her rifle and looked around, feeling with her mind simultaneously.

Arrayed before her was a gruesome scene. Stepping closer once the coast was clear, Nova observed grimly. On the crumbling wall was scrawled a pictographic figure with many tentacles and claws, and a crude head that reminded her of a Hydralisk. It was only half finished, and a smeared hand print denoted when he had likely been killed. A knife wound on his back indicated as much, his heart had been pierced in one clean thrust.

It hadn't dawned on her at first, but as her eyes surveyed the cut open chest cavity of a little girl it was clear the drawing was in blood. The whole alley smelled coppery, with a strong hint of decay, and the dead Spectre had blood up to his elbows.

Disgusted, Nova kicked the heavy body over with her boot and scanned his surprised-looking face, getting his identity for the record. Shifting her eyes downwards slightly, it was noted that beneath him lay a small, blinking recording device. Lifting her goggles upwards, Nova placed them on top of her head and reached down to pick it up. The kill, the stripped gear, it was all pointing towards one thing. When she activated the recording and saw Tosh's grim face staring, it was clear.

"Killed one of my own today, little girl." He was grim, determined. "He broke. Others have, too. Not just us. Spectre, military, civilian. Everyone goin' mad on this planet." Leaning forwards for emphasis, Tosh's gaze became feverish, intense. "There's somethin' rotten at the core of this place, and somethin' even worse comin' for all of us. Can't you feel it girl? Most powerful psi in the Dominion, and all you're focused on is killin' us Spectres. They scrub your brain too hard? Can't think for yourself anymore?" An accusation he had leveled at her before, Nova remained unphased.

"Jim Raynor is out there." That peaked her interest. She had heard nothing about the Hyperion and its crew since she lured Tosh away from them, beginning the first in a series of assaults on his Spectre facilities and putting Tosh and his men on the run. All the way to Korhal. "I seen em. Eyes as black as the void..."

Frowning, Nova chuckled and shook her head. "You really are crazy." Pausing the recording, she checked the length of it to see if she had enough patience to make it through all the way. It was almost done. "Alright, you got me." Flicking the play button, she resumed listening.

"Well. You'll see him soon enough, I think." Tosh smirked, but there was a flicker of an expression she was not used to seeing on his face. Fear. "Open your eyes. Mengsk is mad! I wager we'll all be
seein' that madness real soon. If you manage to pull your head out of his ass before it's too late, little
girl, I'll be waitin'." Nova stared at the small device in her hand for a long time after Tosh faded
away, thinking. Pocketing the device, she'd scrub it for any possible location information herself, the
moment was over. Flipping her goggles back on, Nova opened a comm with the local military outfit.

"Nova here. Two corpses for collection at my mark, I'm out." Robots would collect the corpses and
burn them on the go, rolling morgues. It was a far cry from a decent funeral the little girl deserved,
but there was no alternative. The outbreak of disease that could happen with corpses laying around
en masse would have terrible consequences, if unchecked. Nova made her way back to base, tired
beyond belief. There was that announcement Mengsk had planned the next day at the ass crack of
dawn that she would have to watch, never mind the paperwork she needed to file before whatever
few hours of sleep would grace her.

Zerus – First spawning pool

In her dreams, Kerrigan walked through every moment she had been the Queen of Blades. From the
pain and terror of being twisted into a monster at the skilled hands of Abathur, serving the Overmind
all the way to the invasion of Zerus and the burning desire to destroy Mengsk and any power willing
to rise up and give challenge.

She had revisited her entire history repeatedly, and little by little more details became clear; scenes
the Queen of Blades never would have trifled over, a layer of destructive rage being peeled away. A
little girl and her mother attempting to escape her claws, and she was billions of claws and teeth, then
being slaughtered together like sheep along with their so-called rescuers. The infestation of Raszagal.
The murder of Fenix.

A red haze was being peeled away and exposing the deeper horror of all her accomplishments under
the banner of the Swarm. Jim. The very thought of him threatened to unravel all she was attempting
to achieve, for her hatred to weaken until the primal spawning pool devoured her- unfit to live.

And yet, through her own devices he was out there doing her bidding whether he wanted to or not.
He needed her now more than ever. It was the joint thought of ramming a blade through Mengsk's
black heart, a culmination of the purest vengeance and the love she bore for Jim, the will to right a
horrible wrong, that delivered her from failure.

With the locust swarm added to their considerable arsenal of defenses, Abathur, Izsha and Zagara
had held the primal zerg assaults firmly at bay, resolutely protecting their Queen. In the last hours
before her rebirth, the rapidly rising danger of a powerful enemy became a magnet to the primal zerg.
With their resources running low, the prospects of continuing their defense began to look grim.

When the Primal Queen of Blades tore through her chrysalis and erupted with such power it took on
a physical form and drove into the sky like a pillar, the swarm shrieked, chittered and bellowed
triumphantly over their primal lessors. Their mission had succeeded, and Zerus would fall.

The primal zerg had immediately began to run, scattering into the volcanic jungles for refuge or back
to their leaders. Kerrigan strode towards the Hives Izsha had erected with purpose. The connection to
the zerg felt different, purer, but having billions of minds connected to your own and all feeling their
own emotions brought a strange balance to Kerrigan's own mind, offering a counterbalance to the
terran emotions that had boiled to the surface.

Izsha, Zagara, Abathur. You have done well. Straight and to the point, Kerrigan began to direct the
millions of zerg hovering in the upper atmosphere to begin their descent to the planet's surface. The
invasion would begin in full force, she would no longer toy with her prey.
New Primal Queen of Blades... Unquestionably stronger. Abathur commented, impressed.

Yes, our Queen glows bright like a star! Izsha beamed.

I am glad to have been of service. Zagara uttered, awed in her own way.

Entering the dark sanctuary of a Hive, seeking a temporary safe place before she would lead her invasion, Kerrigan steeled her nerves. There is something I must do before the primal pack leaders fall. Bring the entire swarm down here Izsha, there is no time to waste. As soon as she had found solace inside the Hive, a small dark room void of interruptions, she focused her mental might and felt across the stars for Shlassa and the Hyperion. Never had it been so easy to touch minds so far away, the new rush of power was exhilarating.

Shlassa.

My Queen! Shlassa was surprised, feeling an intensity of power and emotion that threatened to overwhelm, but was altogether glad to be able to report. You have grown stronger since we last spoke, and many things have happened.

I am going to free them, Shlassa. Kerrigan paused, considering. You still have an important role to play, and they will not kill you.

The broodmother's concern addressed before she spoke it, Shlassa reported diligently. What her Queen chose to allow or disallow with her little projects was no concern of her own. We have retrieved the essence of Nafash and escaped the Protoss. The Terrans refused to destroy them, though we did kill many in defense. We are now dead in space, the Terran ship is being repaired, and there is another ship with us.

Another ship? Kerrigan interjected harshly. Who?

A Terran named Valerian Mengsk, aboard a ship named Bucephalus. He has offered them help.

Mengsk. The name burned through her nerves like a hot knife. Not Arcturus, but Kerrigan was not about to get into the habit of trusting anyone with that last name. I will speak with them now. Continue as you have, but no longer physically control them. What they do is no longer our business.

Letting go of Shlassa's mind, Kerrigan steeled herself both for the conflict and having to look these men in the eye after what she had done to them. In a blink, all six infested men were pulled from what they were doing, bodies left frozen as their minds were pulled away.

They stood together, side by side, looking confused and disoriented while Kerrigan stood across from them. Their surroundings were a plain white, drawing sharp attention to their alien features. Kerrigan observed them with a sad expression, and soon their gazes landed on her- she felt their hatred.

"Sarah?" Jim tilted his head, brows furrowed as he took in her new look. Sarah looked like she was ready to burst at the seams, cracks in her flesh and armor revealing a purple glow.

"She's pulled us into a dimension of her own making within our minds, I think." Stetmann had crossed his arms in discomfort, unsure what to do.

"Got all juiced up and ready to kill us? That it?" Warfield hissed, gritting his teeth in anger. He was still attempting to come to grips with chewing on an animals corpse.
"Oh no. Why would she kill us?" Tychus piped up, fists clenching tight as he glared. "Wouldn't waste all that time breaking our bones and tearing our skin off just to not use us. So what's the orders, your fuckin' majesty?"

Swann was silent and seething, he had nothing to say, not yet. Horner likewise remained silent, keeping his own council and letting others voice what he felt.

"Quiet." Soft. Warm. But a command all the same. Sarah waited a moment, seeing if anyone would interrupt- even though they couldn't. "Much has changed since we last met. I want you to know that I am sorry, and you are free from here on out. I will never command you again." Taking a slow breath, she registered the disbelief and suspicion on their faces for a few moments before continuing.

"I went to Zerus to acquire power, I found it and I'm not done yet. But something happened, all the wrongs I've done are so much clearer now. I found remorse, guilt and sorrow. The taint of the Fallen One, Amon, is gone." Pursing her lips and furrowing her brows as tears, not felt in so long, threatened.

Hardening her resolve as all six continued to glare at her, she took another breath. "I also remember who started all of this, who brought the Queen of Blades to life. Arcturus Mengsk will answer to the swarm, we are coming. Do not forget the name that started all of this, Jim. Do not trust Valerian Mengsk." Done getting her say in, Kerrigan released them and at once there was a storm of voices and emotion.

"You just- you just turned us into monsters and now you're saying sorry?" Jim was incredulous, he wasn't sure if he could find the words to explain just how weak the word was for this situation.

"I just ate an Ursadon with my bare hands like an animal, and now I'm free?" Warfield was wondering if attacking in this place would do anything.

"Oh but she said she's sorry, that'll fix us right up. How about you give me my damn body back?" Tychus growled, thumbing his chest for emphasis.

"And all those Protoss we blew up, suppose they'll have to accept sorry too. Good thing we can tell them we're free now." Swann muttered, crossing his arms and looking down, not sure what to make of the load of shit he'd been handed.

"Can we undo our infestation?" Stetmann focused, attempting to hold Kerrigan's gaze.

"I doubt it." Unable to hold Stetmann's searching gaze, Kerrigan looked downwards and closed her eyes, thinking.

"Forget about us." Jim muttered, resigned. "What about Korhal? All those people you're going to bring the swarm to? You'd kill them all to get at Mengsk, even though you said you have found remorse and guilt and sorrow? You haven't found a damn thing, Sarah!"

Demeanor darkening, Kerrigan glared at Jim and clenched her jaw. "You're welcome to join me in killing him, all of you. So many lives can be laid at his feet."

"Only one person turned us into monsters, Kerrigan, and that's you." Jim pointed a finger firmly in her direction, accusing.

"The swarm will land on Korhal and Mengsk will die: these two things are inevitable." Smirking slightly, Kerrigan tilted her head. "You could of course evacuate the planet to save lives, Jim. See how everyone treats you." It was wrong to say, and his injured look confirmed it, but if there was one thing that would never change- it was what she was going to do to Arcturus Mengsk.
Clenching her fists at her sides, Kerrigan looked at her creations- killers, each one. "Don't kill Shlassa. She is protecting you from the swarm's hive mind. If she dies, it will either turn you into mindless beasts or drive you mad if your minds aren't strong enough. I don't know which." Looking at Stetmann specifically, she muttered. "If you choose to pursue removing your infestation... Don't let someone turn you into a lab rat."

"Sarah, wait!" Jim shouted, but the realm she had pulled everyone into was gone and reality came back with a hard jerk.

Blowing out a breath, Kerrigan tilted her head back and muttered to herself softly. "Nothing would have made that conversation easier." There was one message left to send, and she had to be careful, oh so careful.

Jayce was throwing her weight into an industrial sized wrench, gritting her teeth and grunting as the rusty bolt she was trying to tighten screeched in indignation. It was exhilarating to just have her arm back and to be able to get back to this kind of work, she was happy in her own way- even if the red emergency lights were on and the ship was one step from exploding. Without warning, a pressure built inside her mind, threatening the worst headache she had ever imagined- or maybe her brain was about to explode, she wasn't sure. Either way, she stumbled backwards from her chore and hollered without inhibition. "Ah! AHH!" Her face planted into the grated steel floor shortly after her body went limp.

Gasping and stumbling over nothing, Jayce opened her eyes and was greeted with the disorienting visage of the Queen of Blades and a perfect white space. Looking similar to a fish out of water, Jayce glanced around before looking back at Kerrigan, who was waiting patiently, and whispered. "You."

"Me." Kerrigan inclined her head slightly.

"Am I... Dead?"

"No. But you will have a hell of a headache." Too-wide lips smiling slightly, Kerrigan took a good look at Jayce. She had yet to see the terran with her own eyes. Stained orange jumpsuit, average height, scraggly dirty blond hair, a half-assed pony tail and an overall tomboyish look; Kerrigan found herself amused. "You don't look like I thought you would."

Placing a palm to her forehead and pressing firmly for a few seconds, Jayce lowered her hand and saw that nothing had changed. Guess that was that. "Well I don't get by on my looks, I guess."

Swallowing, she tentatively looked over the Queen of Blades in turn, noting some differences from when she last saw video footage of the biggest force of destruction in the Koprulu sector. "You're different too... But I'm guessing we're not here to discuss anatomy." There were quite a few questions coming to mind, but Jayce wasn't sure she wanted the answers yet.

"No, we aren't." Locking eyes, violet to green, Kerrigan sauntered up to the smaller terran and considered her next words. "I let you live before because I thought they would kill you themselves, they haven't and the situation has changed." The worn down terran looked resolute. "I have set them free, they are truly in control of themselves once again; but the danger to you remains. I would not stay if I was you, especially if they decide to kill Shlassa." At Jayce's confused expression, she corrected herself. "The broodmother, that's its name."

"Thanks but... Why are you warning me?" Brows furrowed, Jayce looked Kerrigan in the eye, although it was a struggle to keep locked with the predatory gaze. Perhaps it was the exhaustion that kept her so calm, or the unreal location, she wasn't sure.
"I used you as an experiment and for the first time since I became the Queen of Blades, I regret it and find myself in the position to rectify that... Among other things." Pursing her lips, Kerrigan thought once again on the reaction of Jim and his men. Maybe the truth was she just wanted to have a calmer interaction. "You deserve the chance to live."

"I trust them, I will stay." It was a definitive answer, Jayce was nothing if she wasn't stubborn.

Raising her hands slightly, Kerrigan shrugged. "Your choice. I felt I owed it to you to let you know what is happening myself, beyond this point you are on your own."

"Why did you infest them? Why not just kill them?" Feeling the end of their conversation nearing, Jayce tried to squeeze in at least one question she felt pertinent.

Kerrigan paused, searching herself for the truest answer. She did not like what came out of the darkness. "To torture them, make them demoralize the entire Terran race. They were heroes and I turned them into the enemy."

Jayce grit her teeth. That was a lot of effort for pure malicious pleasure, but who was she to judge? "Can it be undone? What about the crew?"

"I don't know. I had the Xel'naga artifact utterly destroyed, and if they go to their fellow Terrans for help with that... They will end up as lab subjects, nothing more. The crew? They are husks, there is nothing to restore." Bitterness seeped into her words, Sarah had more than enough experience with Labs for a number of lifetimes- none of it good.

Sighing and palming her forehead once again, Jayce felt overwhelmed. Her head hurt and the lines between good and evil had become a mucked up gray as of late, this did not help. "I will do everything I can to help them, I owe them as much."

Nodding slowly, Kerrigan placed a hand on Jayce's shoulder and sent her back to her mind with care. Jayce would end up sleeping on the floor where she lay, succumbing to exhaustion. Probably for the best, it really would have been a terrible headache.

Back on Zerus, Kerrigan opened her eyes. Both interactions had only been a few minutes tops, but she hadn't felt more emotionally drained than what seemed like a lifetime ago. But there was no time for rumination, not yet; The hunt for the primal pack leaders needed to begin- regardless of resurfaced feelings.

The mark of Amon is no longer upon you. You are pure, and ready to consume the primal pack leaders. Take their power for your own, Primal Queen. Zurvan whispered in her ear.

"Amon." Kerrigan murmured to herself, staring resolutely into the ash clouds overhead as she stepped out of the Hive. Thousands of drop pods were crashing through the atmosphere within her sight, and millions more beyond it.

Hyperion – Deep Space

Prior to Kerrigan's surprise visitation, a massive wave of activity happened immediately after the Hyperion's warp jump to safety.

The Bucephalus followed and was now idling nearby, those who were gazing at the Hyperion saw the engines and white lights of the ship flicker and die out. Emergency power booting up gave the ship an ominous look, the red glow replacing the normal white lights as seen in space. Valerian hailed the captain immediately.
"Captain Horner, what is the status of your ship?" The image of Matt Horner appeared, red lights illuminating him, shadows deepening his frown.

"We were functioning at 40% capacity before warp, at best. Our engines and power have kicked out and we'll need time to repair. Nothing to be done about it, Valerian."

Eager to seize on the opportunity to further prove his goodwill, Valerian inclined his head briefly. "I can have a team of engineers on your ship and helping to repair it within the hour."

Lips tightening, Horner shook his head sharply. "Not right now. I need to go check up on Jim and them, and we need time to sort some things out. No offense, but you've got a lot of questions to answer and we don't trust you right now." There it was. Horner waited, fingers curling tight behind his back. The Hyperion and the remainder of her living crew were vulnerable and Valerian was fully capable of invading the ship.

Without pause, the prince nodded thoughtfully. "As you wish. Consider my offer still on the table, we will wait in the meantime."

Pleasantly surprised, Horner smiled. "Thanks junior. We'll be in touch." Closing the comm, Matt half closed his eyes and felt out towards Jim. The confrontation going on cut his high short.

Once everyone had righted themselves, Lasarra took a step back and watched in alarm as Jim caught sight of her and realization bloomed on his features.

"What the hell is the Protoss doing here?!" Jim's eyes focused on Tychus immediately, no doubt in his mind. Especially when Tychus squared his big shoulders and looked down at him stubbornly.

"I ain't gonna let myself get blown up because you're sentimental, Jimmy. Took it with us for extra security purposes." Thumbing over his shoulder at Lasarra, her eyes tightened in anger.

Warfield had positioned himself closer to the alien, ready to strike if necessary. "Looks like the ship took a beating. Doesn't matter how or why the Protoss got here right now, we need to get her locked up and find out what's going on." Making to curl a hand around Lasarra's arm, she recoiled to avoid it, disgusted.

I will walk where you choose to lead me, you need not touch me. The smell coming off the three infested was absolutely foul, they were even steaming as the blood, ice and stringy meat chunks that had gotten on their bodies thawed.

Yielding to Warfield's sense of reason, Jim snapped irritably and pointed at Tychus. "Don't think you're off the hook Tychus, you and me are coming back to this later."

Hate to interrupt but we've got a situation here, Jim. Horner finally spoke up as they began to herd Lasarra deeper into the ship, noting the emergency lights.

"We can put it in the med bay quarantine, lets go." Tychus all but growled, relief at being back in a warm, dry ship all but smothered out.

Talk to me Matt, what's goin on? Jim trailed behind the group, focused more on listening. The captured protoss was still no danger, as far as he was concerned. The protoss who'd want her back, on the other hand...

It's Valerian, sir. He is here on the Bucephalus and they are idling nearby. He saved our asses back there. He also offered to send engineers over to help but... Horner let it hang, there were a few very good and obvious reasons to not let any uninfested people on the ship. Namely Shlassa.
Yeah well maybe we should talk to Shlassy about it because me and Jayce ain't fixing this tub by ourselves and you kids aren't gonna be any use at all. Swann had been listening, of course. Currently in one of the engine rooms trying to isolate what wire blew where, the amount of work ahead of him felt staggering- he was no longer so adverse to getting help from the exiled prince.

Invaders will not be tolerated. Shlassa spoke, a note of finality in her tone. Any newcomers would be killed, maybe worse. What of this Protoss scum you have brought? Surely there is no use in keeping it. The broodmother's tone had shifted to one of deep loathing, there was no love for the great enemy of the zerg. Warfield, Tychus and Jim already felt a sharp tug at their insides, as though the broodmother was about to puppeteer them.

Hold it. Jim was hasty, scrambling to think of a reason to keep their new prisoner alive. She's a bargaining chip! If the Protoss come they ain't gonna blast this ship so long as she's here.

Hissing verbally, Shlassa glared at Stetmann who was nervously playing with a pen between his fingers, listening to the whole exchange and simultaneously worrying about what might have happened when Jayce came to the room. The Selfix armor had been moved slightly, it was clear she had been there even though he did not remember.

I fear not the protoss! We will crush them!

I don't know that much about zerg, or being one, but I doubt we're capable of surviving in space after our ship has been blown up. Pull your head out of your ass, Shlassy! Swann was all too ready to butt heads with the broodmother, and it seemed possible the two had been bickering for the entire time Jim, Tychus and Warfield had been on the ground.

My name is not Shlassy. Shlassa was immediately pissed and Jim cut in, trying to stop the escalation of the argument.

We need all the cards to play that we can get our hands on right now, period. Jim watched as Lasarra was shoved into the quarantine room, slowly turning around to look at them through the clear walls with venom in her eyes. Jim's jaw tightened as he set the door to locked mode and turned to face Tychus and Warfield, each looking at him in turn.

The Protoss may live, for now. Shlassa relented. Bickering with the one short Terran had worked her nerves raw and murdering them all wasn't an option. She wanted to be done with them.

Jim glared at Tychus then, motioning with a jerk of his head for him to follow. Warfield wisely chose to leave through a different exit.

Completely oblivious to what was going on in regards to the crew at the moment, Jayce was suited up and ready to fix anything that got in her way. A standard issue snake light was coiled around her shoulders on top of the usual tools and her datapad was hooked up to her belt. Climbing up a service ladder into the dark walkway above, she found herself walking one of the many little used paths between the walls and above the ships corridors, hunting for the bolt that would cut the flow of searing hot hydraulic fluids up ahead so she could make reparations safely. Twirling the large wrench in her hand casually, she whistled a little tune- this is what she was good at. Murdering aliens and directing a battlecruiser in combat were not her thing.

Tapping her datapad and opening a comm with Swann, Jayce sounded entirely too happy for his liking. "Almost at the hydraulic leak in this sector, boss. Shouldn't take long to fix, where to next?"

"Ugh. Quit being so happy." Clanking and scraping muffled his voice and Jayce smirked, shining her light ahead and spying the bolt that would need turning, eyeing the rust all over it. "Once you're
done there just pick an engine, any engine, and get there. I'll make sure there's no infested in the way."

"Yes sir." Ending the comm, Jayce stepped up to the bolt and fit her wrench on it, rolling her shoulders in anticipation of the fight.

Tychus stalked after Jim, all the grievances he'd been keeping down for the sake of possibly getting out of this mess were coming boiling to the surface. Likewise, Jim was clearly seething. When they had entered a long nondescript corridor, he slammed a hand into the wall beside him and rounded on Tychus.

"You need to start listening, Tychus, this is my ship and I'm the commander here. This ain't Heaven's Devils and it sure as hell ain't us robbing trains." Tychus glowered.

"Newsflash, Jimmy. We're stuck together right now, both of us takin' orders from your old girlfriend." Jim looked fit to burst at the mention of Kerrigan, widening his stance and clenching his fists while baring his teeth.

Widening his own stance, Tychus smirked. "You've been riding on my last nerves since this entire shit show began, with your mopin' and bein' damn near useless. You think you're gonna have another go at me, partner? I ain't stuck in some suit this time, see how well it goes." Shlassa was watching the two with quiet alarm, questioning if she would be able to control them if they started fighting one another. It was with relief she received Kerrigan's message, watching afterwards as all six infested men jerked and went stiff, held frozen.

When Jim and Tychus were shoved back into their bodies they stumbled towards one another, disoriented.

"Holy- ugh." Tychus grunted and slapped a meaty hand onto Jim's shoulder, giving him a little shake.

"I can hardly believe that just happened." Jim had a dazed look on his face, looking up at his old friend.

"Listen, Jimmy." Tychus took a breath, squeezing Jim's shoulder fiercely, like the action could ground him in reality. "I didn't mean any of that. But before we go dealin' with our new found freedom, I want you to know that it took a real long time for me to agree to betray you to Mengsk, you readin' me?"

Sarah. Born again, stronger and more zerg than ever before. It was the exact opposite Jim could've ever hoped for, but still. Her claims of recovered emotions and feelings, tossed in with a new genocidal threat. All the feelings he had begun to let unravel for her came back, jumbled up so fiercely he didn't know if he'd ever recover. Tychus. He was talking and it was important. Jim felt the anger leave his body in one great wave, he had been tortured- there could be no other explanation for a sentence like that.

The golden chips he had for pupils focused on Tychus, staring at him hard for a moment before he reached up and slapped his friend on the shoulder in turn. "I read you, and I know I've sworn it a thousand times before, but Mengsk will pay for everything he's done and all the folks he's hurt." Squeezing hard, he let go the same time Tychus did, sighing. "Wonder how everyone else is taking this. Hell, I wonder what we can even do now. We were all workin' towards this big fight for our own freedom and here it is, dumped in our laps."

"I wager everyone else is feelin' about the same." Tychus grumbled, looking around and thinking.
"Seein' as well got all this free time all the sudden, I think I'll start with some pants. Maybe a shower."

Jim nodded. One look at Tychus and he knew he couldn't look much better himself, all crusted up with blood and goo- never mind naked. Even if it was an armored kind of naked, it didn't sit right with his very terran sensibilities. "Right. One thing at a time I suppose."

Horner slumped in his chair, disbelief written across his face. Free. Where to even start? Was there a point to continuing? He thought about Valerian, and becoming a lab rat like Kerrigan had ominously warned. He also thought about Korhal and all those people who didn't even know the swarm was coming. Getting Jayce to safety, well she'd made it clear she wanted to stay and help anyway, wasn't really a thought anymore, but the people of the core and fringe worlds were already suffering. Humanity couldn't take another hit from the zerg like this, they had to do something. Had to.

Anyone out there? He thought, idly wondering what was going through their minds.

Yeah. Wow! Can't believe we're free! I can start working on trying to reverse our infestation right away, maybe even get some of my research projects started up again. This is great! Horner almost rolled his eyes at Stetmann and his misguided enthusiasm.

Not feelin' too damn free right now. Swann grumped, no doubt working on the ship somewhere. What, we're just gonna cruise around in this ship forever, us against the universe? Questing for some reversal of our infestation that may or may not exist? Call me a skeptic.

Jim was right, doesn't even matter that we're infested right now. We've got to warn Korhal, hell, the core worlds, somehow. Warfield was well ahead of Jim and Tychus, already cleaning the filth of Kaldir away in the sonic showers. Next stop would be another set of clothing. You said Prince Valerian is here? We need to talk to him immediately.

After I'm done finding some pants. Tychus intruded.

Pants? Horner quirked a brow, not entirely sure if he wanted to know.

Eh, long story Matt. Lets just say the clothing didn't take to Kaldir very well and leave it at that. Jim chimed in, embracing the conversation since his alternative was Sarah's face staring at him in a white room.

In the Lab, Stetmann had already started preparing blood samples to test and begin work on undoing their infestation- or learning about its workings at the cellular level, at least. Shlassa was no longer stifling his thought process, it was like a great veil had been lifted away, the freedom was incredible. The thought of the broodmother gave him pause; she was still standing silently across the room, like some kind of spidery sentinel. "What are you going to do now, Shlassa? I mean... The Queen of Blades told you we're free now, right?"

Tapping her fingertips together, a subdued expression of her personal glee, Shlassa was feeling very forthright with the advent of not having to thought-police the ridiculous Terrans anymore. "I must remain to safeguard your minds from the swarm still, unless you decide you wish to join with the hive mind." She chuckled softly, the thought of them losing their minds was pleasing.

"Ah. Yeah. Probably don't want that. I sure do wish I could study it though!" Shlassa sighed slightly, the thought of spending eternity stuck with Stetmann did not enthuse.

"Oh, uh! Say... When we were defending ourselves from the Protoss, did Jayce come in here?" Swallowing, Stetmann watched the broodmother for a visible reaction, although she gave none.
"Yes. The Terran woman entered the lab and attempted to use the machine you left out for her." A long fingertip pointed towards the Selfix armor casually.

"But she didn't, what happened?" Worry spiked at his insides. It would be on him if something happened to Jayce in the lab while he was there. He still wasn't over the trauma of pissing off Tychus the once.

"She was unable to use the machine." Leaning forwards slightly, Shlassa was looking forwards to his reaction at this next part. "I mended her arm myself." The way the little fool gaped was food for her soul.

"But she's a Terran! She could be infested, she coul-"

Shlassa interrupted him before he could enter one of his strange rants. The Terran's ability to do run on sentences was legendary, as far as she was concerned. "She is not infested, she is in tact. Check her yourself." Casually, she felt through the ship with her mind, seeking the one that was not connected. With a hiss she felt the bright energy of the Protoss, smothering it down before continuing. Tilting her head slightly, she found Jayce laying on the ground. "Hm. Well, she was intact."

"What?!" Running a hand through his hair, Stetmann whipped out his datapad and brought up the display of Jayce, thanks to the tracking pin, and his face fell.
Strange Allies

Uh, gentlemen! Stetmann called out with alarm, staring at Jayce's unmoving form with a fresh rush of panic. Jayce is unconscious somewhere.

Jim physically heaved a sigh, having only just gotten out of the sonic showers. That woman was far more trouble than any amount of effort she had pitched in so far, in his opinion. The hell happened?

I don't know, I was just checking up on her and I saw her laying there! See for yourself commander! Her life signs are stable, though. Stetmann added as an afterthought.

Eh. I'll go dig her up. Can't find any pants and I'm sure you all want to talk to Junior real soon. Tychus had finished his shower fast and hadn't had any luck finding clothing, nothing that didn't immediately tear at the seams anyway. He didn't care to attend some important meeting without pants. Hell, he didn't much care about attending at all, except that it may lead towards getting his body back.

Right. I'll see all of you up here on the bridge. Swann, I know you are busy but you should be present. You know what kind of help the ship needs. Horner was pacing around the bridge, thrumming with nervous energy as he eyed the Bucephalus in the viewport.

You're damn right I'm busy! Scowling to himself, Swann regretfully yielded. It would be best if they knew what to send over. I'll be up there once I finish this wiring. And you, Tychus, make sure Jayce is alright. He added, not sure if he was more stressed about the doofus apparently knocking herself out somehow or Tychus getting up close to her again.

I'm always a gentleman with the ladies. Tychus smirked to himself, picking up a datapad and flicking it on. It was only a few seconds to get Jayce's tracking pin routed over and showing her location. He was on his way, setting a quick pace with his long strides. Privately, he was concerned too.

Jayce was laying on her side, face pressing hard against the grated flooring and blood oozing sluggishly from her nose. Twitching slightly in her sleep, the day the Hyperion fell to the zerg was rushing through her mind.

Jogging down a corridor and looking at the datapad in his hand, Tychus came to a stop when Jayce's radar dot was in the exact spot he was standing. Confused, he turned his head this way and that, frowning. He was adjusting the view from radar to the visual display when a thick droplet landed on the screen, splattering hypnotically. All the pupils in his eyes constricted into pinpricks as he took in the sight and smell of blood, his gaze slowly going upwards to see where it leaked down. A small gap in the ceiling overhead where more had been congealing. Saliva flooded his mouth and he had to slurp it back down, shaking his head.

Swann, she's up in the damn ceiling. Where's an access point? Stepping away from the dripping spot, he drug his thumb across the surface of the screen and collected the red substance.

Ah, hold on. Already en route to the bridge, Swann flicked through a wireframe display and looked over the area Tychus was in, pinpointing the service ladder and sending him the coords quickly. There, sent.

Licking his thumb and grinning at the heavenly taste, Tychus chuckled softly and started walking towards the ladders location. Thanks, Chief.
As usual, nothing was built to accommodate his size. Tychus glared at the ladder, located inside what amounted to a closet, and the small open hatch at the top. Angling himself awkwardly to the side and climbing, he threw one arm up through the hatch and started shimmying himself into the walkway one limb at a time. The smell of blood was thicker up here, mixed with oil, hydraulics and other ship smells, urging him to move faster and find the source.

Zerglings were tackling down firebats, pulling apart their armor and getting at the men inside, eating them alive. Others, fleeing crew members, were being grabbed and dragged away by scorpion-like creatures or pinned where they were by Infestors. Every camera she checked either had people dying and being captured, or telltale signs of either. Safe in the armory, Jayce surrendered to despair.

Forced to walk at an angle down the walkway, Tychus' mind was buzzing. The stench of fear had begun to burn in his nose and were it not for the tight quarters he'd be running hard. A light dully illuminated the corner of an X shaped intersection ahead and he took as long of strides as he was able to.

The armory door was being banged on. Dully thudding, skittering. That never happened when the Hyperion was being attacked. Jayce raised her gaze, eyes bright with alarm, when the armory door began to lift. They were coming in, she was dead meat. THNK. Jayce jerked awake with a sharp gasp, both at the shock of the nightmare and the pain that greeted her.

A siege tank was firing rounds off in her brain, she was sure of it, and her face had been pressed into the grated steel so long that she felt the grid-like imprint of it deep in her skin when she slowly lifted her head. Dried blood from her nose crunched and stung, making her eyes water as she squinted hard and reached to wipe the dried and fresh liquid away. Lifting her shoulder had raised the snake light up from the floor enough to illuminate Tychus hunched in the wider walkway, his pupils reflecting the dull light.

Gasping and half lifting herself into a crouch, although it burned her muscles to move after being in that heap for so long, Jayce caught herself and forced her body to relax when she recognized him. He jerked slightly too, and she had not yet registered what was going on.

"You're a sight for sore eyes Tychus!" Her voice was raspy, how long had she been out for? Closing her eyes, she swallowed and cleared her throat.

Ynrr ssqt rrr ssorrre yess tchss. Tychus blinked slowly, Jayce's lips moved and sounds happened, but his brain was hazy. Resting his hands on hot pipes and thick wires on either side of himself, he squeezed slowly and focused on the blood that she was wiping away, lips parting slightly.

Tchs? Tnychus! Tychus. Stetmann, bless him, had been paying attention and it felt as though he had been bodily shoved. Blinking out of it and grunting slightly, Tychus cleared his throat. Jayce opened her eyes and smiled up at him, unaware.

"You gonna give me a hand, or did you come here to stare at me?" Tilting her head, Jayce twisted to her hands and knees stiffly, resting a hand on one knee and holding the other up for help.

Rolling his shoulders, which he still had to hunch in the wider pathway, Tychus reached down and plucked Jayce up, pulling her right into his body and kissing her firmly. Her surprised squeak was enjoyable, but more so was the taste of blood on her lips. "Mmm."

The headache, the stiff joints, any immediate thoughts and concerns, all were forgotten when her lips connected with his. Jayce's eyes widened in surprise, hands resting on his chest and fingertips curling at his collar bone. When he regretfully ended the kiss, she had a thoroughly dazed look. Voice wavering, she whispered. "Where're your pants?"
Resting his hands against her back, Tychus smiled smugly - he hadn't lost the touch. The second he had pulled Jayce in for a kiss, a rather chaste one as far as he was concerned, Stetmann had retreated from his mind as though he had just spontaneously combusted. "Forget the pants, sugar. I don't know about you, but I just survived icy Protoss hell and you managed to not get blown up too." Looking around at their surroundings pointedly, Tychus grinned lecherously. "Hows about you and me just stay here and celebrate life for a while?"

Infested or no, when Jayce rested her forehead against his chest and sighed, it was awfully tempting. He was nice and warm and everywhere. Tilting her head back and giving it a quick shake, she swatted his chest with her hand and half smiled. "You and your timing are terrible." Sobering quicker by the second, she reached up and aimed her snake light away from his face when she realized he was squinting. "Celebrating is going to have to wait. Did a certain, oh, genocidal world devourer visit you a few minutes ago?"

"More like an hour ago, doll." Tilting his head, Tychus quirked a brow and slowly lowered his hands from her back to his sides.

"An hour? No wonder why I'm so stiff, been laying there forever." Rubbing her face, she was dismayed to still feel the impression of the grate there.

"Does that mean we still get to celebrate sometime?" Grinning broadly, Tychus couldn't help it.

Rolling her eyes and looking away with a smile, Jayce shook her head. "Focus, Findlay."

"Oh I am very much so focused."

"She told me you and the others were free now," Looking back up at him, she wondered what they were told and she wasn't. "That the truth of it?"

"Yeah sugar, as free as a group of infested Terrans can be." He shrugged slightly.

"That's great, that means we can start to look for a cure and- and put down the infested crew too."

The idea of bringing an end to the suffering of the old crew was sobering, and Jayce's lips curled into a frown.

"We're gonna go talk to Valerian and see what can be done." Tychus mumbled, watching the play of emotions on her face. "Man, you look like hell. No doubt they are already talkin' with Junior, we can probably make it there pretty quick- if I can fit back down that hatch."

"Feel about as good as I look right now." Jayce acknowledged, then laughed lightly at the thought of Tychus squeezing through that service hatch. "Alright. I better stay and get this pipe fixed though. Doubt I have anything to contribute." Gesturing towards the rusty bolt behind her with a dip of her head.

"Nah sugar, you're comin'. Gonna get some people from Prince Charming's ship to help fix this place up, don't worry about that none." Leaning forwards, Tychus stretched his arm past her and grasped the wrench. "Tighter or looser?"

Leaning backwards and staring into the leathery hide that was layered over his chest, Jayce mumbled. "Tighter, half a rotation only or you'll strip it." Cheeks flushing a bright red that she hoped he didn't notice. The bolt screeched in indignation and a moment later he leaned back, job done. "I made it easier for you."

"Of course you did sweet thing. Lets go, and tell me how your arm got fixed while we're walkin'." The fact she didn't have a cast anymore was not lost on him, and he was curious. Turning around, he
lead the way back to the hatch which was going to take some effort for him to get down.

"Oh, hah, yeah." Smiling nervously at his broad back, Jayce opted to not tell the truth. She wasn't sure why exactly, probably to protect Stetmann more than anything. The young scientist didn't deserve a beating for what happened, in her opinion. "Stetmann, lovable idiot that he is, forgot he had that Selfix armor of his in the lab. Managed to get hooked up to it and all fixed up shortly before the Protoss attacked."

"Leave it to the egghead to forget somethin' that's right in his face." Tychus muttered, sliding down the much narrower walkway at an angle and slowing their progress considerably. He didn't miss the hitch in her tone when she lied and tried to figure out something else to say, but he wondered why she would. He'd keep it to himself for the time being, there were bigger fish to fry.

Raynor, Horner, Warfield, Swann and Stetmann were all on the bridge, finishing up discussing what needed to be brought up to Valerian.

"Warning Korhal about Kerrigan, getting some people over to help repair the Hyperion and maybe enough warm bodies to replace the infested so we can pilot the ship without them." Stetmann ticked the items off on his fingertips, looking at the assembled men for corrections.

"Junior also needs to explain why the hell the whole damn sector doesn't know about what happened on Char, too." Jim grumbled, frowning.

"Sounds good." Warfield nodded, ready to see his prince.

"Yep. Well, lets do this gentlemen." Horner was reaching forwards to call the Bucephalus on the console when Tychus and Jayce came strolling through the doorway as it hissed open. Tychus was behind Jayce but it was clear he hadn't managed to find pants.

"Took you two long enough, what the hell happened?" Horner was frowning, retracting his finger from the button. His question was clearly pointed at Jayce.

"Had a little visit with a certain Queen, sorry?" Jayce shrugged. She had taken a minute to scrub the blood off her face but there was still a coppery stain above her lips and dark stains on her sleeves, which a few of the men eyed.

"Oh, so you're up to speed at least. Guess that's good. We're about to call up Valerian, if you want to join us."

"Of course we do." Tychus grumbled, walking up with Jayce and pointedly keeping her in front of himself.

"What's the deal, Tychus?" Jim quirked a brow and gestured at their positioning.

"She's protectin' my modesty, obviously." Tychus was smirking at Jim while Jayce flushed a bright red, keeping her eyes resolutely on the air where Valerian would appear. Stetmann had likewise been lobster red since seeing the two enter the room.

"Eh, whatever. Lets say hello." Shaking his head, Horner discarded the strange awkwardness that was settling over everyone and opened the comm.

Valerian appeared immediately, eyes widening as he looked at the whole group assembled before him. He had seen them already through the station cameras, but this was very different. Recalling his courtesies, Valerian recovered smoothly. "Gentlemen, and lady, I am very glad you have contacted me."
"Yeah. Thanks for the save back on Kaldir, Junior, but you've got a heck of a lotta explainin' to do."
Jim stepped forwards, taking the lead.

"Yes, I do. Much has happened and I will do my utmost to bring you up to speed, Jim."

"First off. Why does nobody know about what happened on Char?" Eyes narrowing, this was perhaps the most burning question he had. How could Junior have failed so spectacularly, if he really was on their side at all?

"Well, you need to know that my father was actually at Char during the invasion, hiding with the rest of the fleet." Valerian paused, gauging their reactions, most were startled anger. "He chased after my ship when the battle had clearly failed. He knew everything we were doing, Jim. The artifact collecting, the fight to get Kerrigan back, everything. I still don't know how." Sighing slightly, the prince shook his head. His father's folly still cut deep. "His orders were clear: Rejoin him and he'd let my little transgression slide. Or, continue rebelling and be destroyed."

Jim's mind reeled. Arcturus was within arms reach, could've even saved his own men's lives and secured victory on Char, but chose not to.

"He could have helped us succeed, but thousands had to die for nothing instead." Valerian frowned, his fine eyebrows furrowing in anger. "I refused to rejoin him on principle. It soon became apparent that the Bucephalus had tracking devices on it, my father's fleet would appear everywhere we warped. It took a long time to find all of them, but by the time we did and managed to get away- it was too late."

It was a task to keep his eyes locked with theirs, especially when the true price of failure was written in them and on their bodies. Valerian settled for locking gazes with Jayce for a respite.

"My father wrapped his iron fist around every source of news and fed them exactly what he wanted them to hear, and anyone who might have known otherwise was smothered out: imprisoned or killed. We've been on the run since, helping the outer worlds recover from the zerg and spreading the word as best we can."

Jim tasted bile on his tongue, when would the madness end? "Good answer, Junior."

"Prince Valerian." Warfield inclined his head, acknowledging the others higher station.

"General Warfield. I am glad to see that you've survived, although I am sorry about what has happened to you. All of you."

"I'll be glad to have survived when I'm done being an infested, sir." Warfield raised his hand and showed his talons pointedly.

"Yes, well. Some of the brightest minds in the Koprulu sector have been searching for a cure to infestation since I found out about your plight, I assure you."

"Good to know." Pulling his hands behind his back, Warfield frowned. "There has been a new development since we left Kaldir. The Queen of Blades contacted us and informed us that we are free."

Valerian couldn't hide his surprise. "Free? Why?"

"Something happened. She's changed, Valerian. Stronger, so much stronger." Jim looked angry, spines twitching. "Said she'd found power or somethin'. But the big part that matters is this: She's coming for Arcturus. She's coming to Korhal, and so's the swarm."
"This is terrible." Valerian's mind raced, overwhelmed. "I don't know if anyone will listen to me, Jim. I also don't know if Arcturus would let anyone leave, even if they did."

"We gotta stop him." Jayce mumbled, low enough not to interrupt their conversation, but Tychus heard. Giving her shoulders, which his hands had engulfed, a gentle squeeze, he grumbled.

"Speak up."

Swallowing nervously as every set of eyes was suddenly on her, Jayce steeled herself. "I said, we gotta stop him. Arcturus. It all comes back to him. We take him out, Kerrigan might not come to Korhal. Hell, she might just leave Terrans alone." Glancing around at everyone as she spoke, her eyes finally settled on a point below Valerian's face on the console.

"That's all well and good sugar, but we're a little bit infested right now." Tychus smirked. Not that he wanted to get in Kerrigan's way twice. She could take Korhal and eat it for all he cared.

"We can't do nothin' for them while we're infested, it's true. Gotta look after ourselves first. But you, Junior, can actually try." Swann finally spoke, gesturing towards Valerian.

"I have some contacts on Korhal still, it's true. I will do my best to see that the planet and its people are warned, but I am skeptical I will have an impact. If the Queen of Blades really does come to Korhal in the state it's in... Well, the core worlds have been one step below open revolt since Raynor's Raiders exposed my fathers lies to the whole sector. It's not pretty down there." Valerian crossed his arms, thinking.

"Alright, we're getting a bit off track." Horner cut in. No point going further down that road, yet. "We need to get the Hyperion repaired, Valerian. But the crew of the ship, most of it, has been infested. If we bring your men aboard to begin repairs we need to get rid of the infested."

"Yes, of course. It is very dangerous." Valerian pointedly glanced at Jayce then, and she stared back with hard eyes.

"Problem is, we pilot the Hyperion with the infested. They are shells, we can control them." Looking uncomfortable just saying it, Horner fidgeted. "We can't get rid of them unless we get a crew in here."

Valerian seemed more at ease, negotiations were well within his comfort zone. "Yes, I understand the dilemma. The Bucephalus is fully staffed and we can handle sending a skeleton crew to help operate the Hyperion, if that is what it takes. However," He paused, looking them over. "We also have some of the finest medical personnel in the Koprulu sector on this very ship, and I would like to begin studying your infestation immediately. Perhaps, instead of destroying all of the infested, you would agree to give some over for testing?"

Tychus felt Jayce go rigid with anger under his hands, looking down at the back of her head with a quirked brow.

"They are people, and they have suffered enough!" Valerian quirked a brow at the outburst.

Sighing, Jim kept his eyes on Valerian. "We'll give you some, Valerian. But you promise to destroy them when you've learned all you can. They were good people, my people."

"You can't be serious, Commander?" Jayce looked at Raynor, bewildered.

"I can. They are dead and unlike you we're still infested, we would like to change that." Gritting his teeth, Jim glanced her way.
"They will be handled with utmost care, and destroyed when we have learned all we can." Valerian nodded, hoping to set Jayce at ease. Such was not the case.

"Right. Well I got a ship to fix and you got some ass to kiss, don't let me stop you." Jerking her shoulders out from under Tychus' hands, who regretfully let her go and stood there feeling exposed, Jayce stormed out of the bridge like a hurricane. Swann's shoulders sunk slightly, but he was with the commander on this one. Jayce couldn't and wouldn't understand.

"I was meaning to ask, how did she come about being on the Hyperion?" Valerian questioned as soon as the door snapped shut, curious.

Staring at the closed door angrily for an extra second, Jim slowly looked towards Valerian and settled for frowning. Junior was doing right by them so far, no need to go rocking the boat. "Original crew member. She was there at Char and managed to lay low when everyone else got caught, the rest is history."

"I see. Quite remarkable she managed that."

"She is resourceful." Swann piped up, proud and defensive.

"Little fireball." Tychus tilt his head and acknowledged, crossing his thick arms.

"Very. Tell me Captain, were you aware that she was capable of operating your ships weapons like that? She seemed a bit out of her depth, I am surprised you let her do that." Valerian judged her to be some kind of mechanic, if the suit was anything to go by, and she all but confirmed it. Everyone else seemed rather surprised by the statement, excluding Horner.

"Didn't have any option, I wasn't able to control all those infested and operate the weapons at the same time. You did right, giving her the information she needed to get the job done, so thanks for that." Horner admitted, nodding in approval.

"Anyway." Jim piped up, eager to get the ball rolling. "You let me know what you need in regards to our little infestation issue and we'll do our best to comply, Valerian. If you can't convince Korhal to prepare for the swarm or evacuate, it's just gonna have to wait."

"I've gathered a lot of data about our individual infestations already, I can have it compiled and sent over in no time." Stetmann offered.

"That would be excellent. We can have channels between you and my ships scientists established for free information exchange immediately."

Swann tugged his datapad off his belt and scrolled through his own information, thinking. "I got a list of all the different kinds of personnel I'm gonna need over here, not to mention some parts I know need changing and we have no spares of, if you got any."

"Send it over any time. Our first order of business should be the exchange of infested and then you putting the rest of them to, ah, rest, I suppose."

"I'll have a few ready and bring them over myself." Warfield nodded and excused himself.

It was just a matter of hammering out the little details from there, Jim and Matt remained to discuss them with Valerian while everyone else set off, eager to do their own part.

Jayce was scrubbing her teary eyes with the back of her hands angrily as she stomped down hall after hall, paced on lifts and tried to remember where she had been to try and just get back to work.
Her wanderings took her close to Lasarra's prison inadvertently, still unaware of the protoss being on
the ship at all.

Lasarra had resorted to meditating, attempting to calm her mind and go through her options. There
was a horrible broodmother on the ship that had stopped her from feeling out with her mind, all but
smothering her until she could do no more than be aware of the surrounding area and a few corridors
of the ship. Unless her protoss brethren came close enough in space to detect her suit, or her ship,
they would have no idea where she went.

A bright, untainted terran mind, albeit in turmoil, was a surprise to feel nearby. Without hesitation,
Lasarra called out. Terran, wait!

Alarmed, Jayce froze and looked around. That was no voice she'd ever heard before.

_I am in the med bay, help me please._ The voice was both soothing and feminine, and Jayce found
herself wandering into the med bay out of curiosity. When she strode in front of the see-through
walls of the quarantine room her wide, shocked eyes locked with Lasarra. The second protoss she'd
ever seen in the flesh, Jayce noted the many differences between this one and the other. Where
Zeratul left her feeling afraid and confused, wondering if he had been there or not, Lasarra radiated
the alien and otherworldly beauty that the protoss were largely known for.

"Uh." Was all she managed to say, trying to piece together something intelligent.

This close, Lasarra could read the flow of the terran woman's thoughts easily, but it was creating
more questions by the second.

Taking a breath, Jayce felt relieved that the protoss was apparently letting her gather her thoughts.
"Okay. Okay." Waving her hand slightly, she looked Lasarra in her glowing eyes. "First. Why are
you on the ship? You're from Kaldir?"

Unable to puzzle out any of the strange interactions this terran has had with the infested on the ship,
Lasarra decided to follow the line of questioning the woman seemed to be preparing. _I am Lassara, a
captive from Kaldir. James Raynor and his companions brought me here, though my ship bore them
to safety as I promised it would._ Her eyes narrowed at the thought.

Understanding the idea of taking a hostage for defensive purposes, Jayce frowned slightly. "Did they
say what they planned on doing with you?"

Quirking a brow, Lasarra found it odd the woman seemed to think she'd be allowed to leave.
_No. I
was put here and they have not returned. I pray they do not._

"I'll talk to them. They aren't monsters, I swear my life on it." Lasarra found the sincerity burning in
the woman's mind at odds with her own interactions with the infested so far, and she wondered if
they were manipulating her for some purpose.

"Look, it's hard to explain just what's been goin' on. I don't even know where to start. Protoss can
read minds, right? Can you read mine?" Jayce felt desperate, to give someone a window into her
head and perhaps a sane opinion on what had gone on so far would be a blessing. At this point,
interacting with an alien wasn't even a thought.

Maybe the terran did not understand just how complete letting ones mind be viewed is, but Lasarra
would not let the opportunity slide if the woman was going to be so forthright. Placing her hand up
against the glass, clawed fingertips tapping against it lightly, Lasarra nodded towards it. _I can.
Perhaps we can both reach a better understanding of what has transpired._
Glancing around quickly, Jayce was convinced Raynor and them would either be talking to Valerian still or starting to set their plans in motion, none of which the med bay would be a part of. This was safe. Without a second thought, she put her hand up against the glass and thought back to the start of it all.

The Terran invasion of Char and Jayces part in it. Raynor's Raiders mad bid to either bring the Queen of Blades back, or kill her trying, and the failure of the mission was just the start. Lasarra almost broke contact in surprise when Zeratul, of all protoss, appeared to Jayce; in the middle of the heart of the swarm no less.

Zeratul's words held more weight than any experience this Jayce girl would have had, he was a legend. Pressing her hand back to the glass firmer than before, Lassara pressed on.

Jayce's heart felt lighter by the second. The sensation of the protoss reading her mind was warm and fuzzy, relaxing, and although she didn't much care of the feeling of pity being projected to her, she accepted it all the same.

Her interactions between the infested men were confusing, and though they did lend weight to what James Raynor had said about being in control of themselves, Lasarra saw the struggle to retain their humanity very clearly through Jayces eyes. How many times had this terran woman dangled on the edge of death and never noticed? She was fooling herself, the infested need not try.

The broodmother fixing Jayces arm was perhaps the most out of character action Lasarra could imagine from such a creature. If she wasn't privy to all Jayces secrets and interactions, she would have believed the woman to be either infested herself or under someones control. Was this some new brood in the making? What could Kerrigan even gain from such a thing, mixing regular terrans with infested? There was much to think about.

It was harder than she expected to revisit all these memories, especially when the fight over Kaldir was quickly approaching. How this protoss would react was anyone's guess, and Jayce's was that it would not be good. Tears brimmed in her eyes anew when she saw Lassara's eyes widen and felt the shock.

The Void Rays and Carrier attacking, the terran named Valerian guiding Jayce in the counterattack, and finally the woman making the choice to end thousands of lives with the push of a button, Judicator Holrim himself died on that ship.

We were colonists. Not warriors. Lasarra steeled herself, holding her emotions tight, she was not yet done reading Jayce's mind and her mourning could wait.

Contentment and peace that had bloomed from being able to share her experience so thoroughly with someone, even if it was a strange alien prisoner, had quickly wilted at Lassaras pained words. "I knew it was wrong." They could have left and that would have been that, Jayce's face contorted in anger and sadness, both warring.

Focus. Show me everything. Lasarra interjected, cutting through the terrans feelings like a hot knife. Her journey through Jayce's mind continued when the woman got a hold of herself. When Jayce tumbled to the ground and was pulled into a one on one meeting with the Queen of Blades herself, Lassara met Kerrigan's violet glowing gaze in awe. The mother of the swarm had become something more, psionic energy literally leaked out of her eyes and the cracks in her flesh, Lasara almost missed what was being said to Jayce while she was making her observations.

She has become a force so strong, I know not if my brethren can stand against her anymore. You are lucky the mere meeting did not break your mind.
"I think it almost did." Jayce frowned, thinking about the pain, the nosebleed and the awful headache that had thankfully withdrawn. "But that wasn't all." Staring at Lassara's hand against the glass, Jayce continued. She sincerely wanted to gloss over her little meeting with Tychus in the walkway, but when the protoss' eyes narrowed and her head twitched, giving what she thought to be a look of disgust, she knew that cat was out of the bag. Oh well.

When Jayce stormed out of the meeting with Valerian and the infested, Lassara could tell it was over. Pulling her hand back and letting it fall to her side, she thought about all she had learned. So they have begun to search for the cure to their infestation, truly.

Forced to ruminate on all that had happened, Jayce's hand slid down the glass and fell limp at her side when Lassara indicated they were done. "Yes. You're as up to date on what's going on as I am." She felt tired, how long had this taken? Losing her grip on time had been happening an awful lot lately. Glancing around, Jayce frowned. "You know, I could just help you get outta here and to hell with the consequences." Grumbling, she looked up at the regal alien and knew full well her sincerity was known. They had no need for this protoss and she'd be damned if she let that Dominion brat, Valerian, get his hands on her.

No. I fear the consequences for such actions would be dire for you. I am also uncertain of what my fate would be, should I return to my own people. I must remain here for now.

Making a small placating gesture towards Jayce with her hand, Lassara looked around her room.

"If you're sure, you just let me know when you want to leave and they'll have to fight me over it if they feel otherwise," Jayce smiled slightly, acting tough made her feel just a little bit better.

You need not feign strength. You have been in contact with some of the most dangerous and powerful beings in this galaxy, you are strong in your own way. Inclining her head towards the terran, Lassara admitted to herself this woman was a lot like James Raynor himself; Not a warrior, but a much better example of the average terran female than the treacherous Sarah Kerrigan. There is much that I have to think on. You may wish to leave, I know not if your absence has been noted.

Now that was a compliment she was going to keep close to her heart, the protoss were not known for handing out those lightly. Jayce curled a thumb into her belt and nodded, it was time to be getting on.

"You need any food or somethin', before I go?" Glancing into the white room, it was clear the protoss had been left with nothing. "You need any food or somethin', before I go?" Glancing into the white room, it was clear the protoss had been left with nothing.

My people live off the light of the sun and stars. Looking upwards at the synthetic lighting, Lassara gave the mental equivalent of a shrug. These Terran lights are a poor substitute, but I will not starve. I only require water.

Nodding, Jayce thought about the mess hall and what was available. "Impressive. You Protoss are very economical." Lips bowed into a smile, she shook her head. "Yeah, I can get you water no problem. Be back later." Giving Lassara a wave, Jayce turned and made to leave.

Thank you, Jayce. Lassara called out after her, turning away from the glass. It was tempting to call the girl out on her foolishness, reaffirming what others have said about the infested and the danger, but Zeratul's words held her at bay. And truly, her own fate if she was to return to her people on Kaldir or elsewhere was uncertain.

Would she be viewed as a traitor for not calling attention to her Warp Prism, an easy target, when they were traveling to the Hyperion? Any protoss would give his or her life to end a great threat so easily, but her thoughts had been clouded, and she thought she could do better. Even better, she could have simply steered it right to a base and delivered them to her people.
Now the Judicator and many more were dead, possibly because of her own actions. Never mind her brother, Arut, who's death was absolutely on her and no one else. But if Zeratul believed these infested men could be redeemed, just what had he seen? What if she had a part to play now? Could she forgive the transgressions of these men and possibly lend her aid? Closing her eyes, Lassara searched herself for the answers.
Swann closed his eyes as the Firebat suit was sealed, steeling his nerves for what lay ahead. Stetmann, Raynor and Horner were herding all but a small handful of the ship's infested into a cargo bay that he had prepared beforehand. "You got this hot shot." Muttering and opening his eyes, it felt strange to use a suit that wasn't repurposed for one arm, still hardly believing he had a new one. He took his time walking to that cargo bay.

*You don't have to go doing this yourself, you know.* Jim was sympathetic, worried for his friend.

_Cowboy, you can't even fit in a suit right now. We need to make sure there's nothin' left of these things, I'll be fine._ Clearing through the doorway into the cargo bay, Swann immediately questioned whether he would. There were so many. Infested were neatly lumped together inside and near the entrances of several battered old transports that would carry their remains into a nearby star, and more were streaming into the bay still. Hundreds.

Curling his hands at the controls of the suit, Swann swallowed hard and approached the first group, raising his arms and preparing to fire. Just one of the many horrors Kerrigan had inflicted that couldn't be undone. Well, undone in a way that didn't end like this.

Liquid fire spewed forth from the suit's flamethrowers as he pulled the trigger, bathing the infested thoroughly. The stench of burning flesh and the sound of sizzling meat bombarded his nostrils, leaving him grimacing and his eyes burning. Killing zerg wasn't something he would ever shy from, but these infested weren't fighting or even responding as they melted and burned away. It helped to think about how they were really just shells, and he knew full well it to be true.

When he had to stare Kachinsky in the eye as his burning mutated flesh sloughed away, tears finally came unbidden.

General Warfield was waiting patiently by an airlock, listening as the Bucephalus was physically connected to the Hyperion. Beside him stood six infested, the rest were being dispatched by Swann. Eager to get their relations with Prince Valerian's men off to a good start, he had garbed himself in his finest and made the easy persona slip back into the commander of men he had been.

Seal complete, there was a hiss of air as the doors opened and revealed people in hazard suits waiting to receive the deadly cargo. An armed escort of suited up Marines stood a few paces back, ill at ease.

"Gentlemen." Warfield nodded, hands clasped behind his back and attempting to make himself as non threatening as possible. The thunder of many nervous heartbeats immediately wore at his nerves.

"General Warfield? Sir!" A marine, unidentifiable within his suit, saluted sharply. A tug of pride pulled at his heart and he saluted back crisply.

"At ease soldier. I will remain on the Hyperion, but these infested won't give you boys any trouble."

"Yes sir." Already the hazard suit workers were clapping bands on the limbs of the infested, holding them at length with poles that packed enough of an electric discharge to, in theory, immediately fry what they were attached to, and guiding them through the Marines who parted to make way. The whole outfit moved away, back to the Bucephalus together, but the one Marine remained.

"What is it, son?" Furrowing a brow, Warfield waited.
"I just wanted to say, I am sorry for what happened on Char. My brother was down there, along with many other good men and women. I am glad you are still alive." Though he was speaking through the suits grainy speakers, likely ordered to keep his visor lowered, emotion was thick in the man's voice.

It was all too likely those men and women under his command had been infested en masse when the invasion failed, but Warfield bit back those harsh words and filtered them. "That old bitch Queen of Blades can't kill me that easy, just caught a bad case of zerg hair is all." Exchanging a soft chuckle with the unnamed man, Warfield gestured for him to leave. "Best get back to your ship."

"Yes sir!" Saluting once more, the Marine retreated back to the Bucephalus. When the airlock sealed behind him, Warfield let out a slow breath. It wasn't going to get any easier.

Jim sat heavily in a chair while Matt stared down at the star chart, idly tapping at bits of information that caught his eye. Already a crew of engineers were being sent aboard, though the infested were not all dealt with yet. Jim could barely register anything that was going on, now that recent events had begun settling in his mind.

"This has gone so far beyond us, Matt. I'm not sure I can deal with it."

Matt continued to stare down at the chart, speaking in a carefully measured tone. Jim's turmoil was clear, more so than usual with their infested connection. "Just need to deal with one thing at a time sir. I've said it before: we can't be everywhere and save everyone at once. Hell, we're the ones that need saving this time. It's a damn miracle Valerian is here." It was heartening to know someone had their backs for a change, although Junior had not yet completely proven himself.

"I ain't even talkin' about Kerrigan moving on Korhal and us being infested, Matt."

"Oh?"

"That's the second time I've heard about Amon now, and it coming from Kerrigan made it so much more real than the visions in Zeratul's Ihan crystal. What if she really was being driven by some dead god?" Just the thought of it all made Jim plant his fingers to his forehead and press hard.

Matt frowned, swiping away a piece of info for later and setting up a comm between Stetmann and the scientists on the Bucephalus. "A dead god is a pretty distant and intangible threat than what's going on right now, and who cares if something made Kerrigan kill all those people? She's still the Queen of Blades, Jim, and she clearly doesn't think overmuch about killing another planet." Also says something about your taste in women, Matt wisely did not add the last part.

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Clenching his jaw, Jim heard the thought clearly but let it slide. What went on in a man's head was his own business, even if it was a dick move. "It also means the hybrid could be real, Matt. And those things are a very immediate threat if there are any here in the sector somewhere."

"I don't know sir." Planting his hand firmly on the edge of the star chart console, Horner squeezed and grimaced at the feel inside his arm. It had begun to almost feel natural. "Maybe you should talk to Valerian about it. He still owns the Moebius Foundation and they were digging up the Xel'naga artifacts to begin with, perhaps he'll have some input?"

Taking a deep breath, Jim folded his fingers together and blew it out slowly. Valerian. It was a good suggestion, but he ended up shaking his head. "Junior ain't earned my trust yet, but you are right. If anyone has somethin' to say about alien hocus pocus it is probably that kid. Thanks Matt." There was one other who might know, of course. But Jim had been avoiding thinking about her since leaving her in quarantine.
"You're welcome sir."

**Bucephalus – Valerian's Quarters**

"Jim, I am sending the first team of engineers to the Hyperion for repairs. Every last one of these men and women are brave and very good at what they do, but they are also afraid." Valerian was recalling his conversation with Jim and Horner after the others had left the Hyperion bridge.

"I know Junior, that's what we got rules in place for."

"Yes, these rules will help ensure everyone's safety. However, I fear making a good impression and easing their fears is now in your hands. Treat them like your own, please."

"Shouldn't be too hard." Matt supplied cheerily. "Long as we keep Tychus away from everybody."

Valerian could see Jim frowning thoughtfully. "Easier said than done, but even Tychus doesn't want to be a zerg any more than we do. We'll manage, Valerian."

Triumphant music flowed through Valerian's quarters, and the young prince was now staring through the massive viewport at the Hyperion idling beside his ship. Given the surprise of being forced to meet with Jim and the other infested sooner than he wanted to back on Kaldir, it couldn't have gone better unless the protoss themselves had stepped aside.

Recovering Raynor's Raiders, what was left of it, was a big step back in the right direction after the failed invasion. Valerian Mengsk would be a leader that the people could rally to without fear when the time came, and Jim Raynor supporting his cause meant so much towards the success of his mission. And their infestation? There was so much to learn, especially if they were willing.

The exiled prince frowned, looking at his reflection in the glass. *I will be better than you, father. How could you be so blind?*

Then there was the matter of Kerrigan. Valerian turned away from the Hyperion sharply. They didn't even get to see if the artifact worked on her, and the Moebius Foundation had no leads on whether there were more of them in existence, never mind attempting to replicate one. Millions were going to die if he couldn't find a way to either neutralize the rampaging Queen, or get them off the planet and out of her way. Behind all those people stood her goal: his father. *Oh father, I dearly wish I could be there to watch the kind of justice she is going to unleash on you.* There was no doubt in his mind that if anyone killed Arcturus Mengsk, aside from time, it would be the one he had betrayed most deeply— the monster of his own creation.

Already his skeleton crew was transferring over to the Hyperion, each volunteer as brave as the next. There had been some interesting rules put in place, safety precautions; he had to agree, the lab being off limits was perhaps the most important one. A broodmother watching over them, what had Kerrigan been thinking?

**Hyperion**

*Uh! Tychus? I thought we were supposed to have absolute minimal contact with the new crew? We don't want to scare them or have an incident with these zerg instincts and well, you...*

*I ain't gonna creep around and hide just because we got some new faces in here, kid.* Tychus interrupted Stetmann sharply. The annoying scientist had begun to keep a much keener eye on him after that incident in the walkway, and though it galled him to have a leash he did privately admit there was some sense in a buddy system. It also seemed the egghead had managed to perfect
speaking to one another individually, which was advantageous.

Currently he was admiring some of the new ladies aboard as they filed by like spooked sheep, their crisp cardboard cutout suits really showed off their assets. They hadn't noticed him just yet, leaning on a wall just around the corner at the intersection, he blended neatly into the dark that the emergency lights couldn't reveal.

"It's so empty in here, I remember seeing the ship being grabbed by that massive leviathan. Hard to believe it's still in one piece." One girl, mousy and scared looking but tall and graced with legs that surely lead up to heaven, muttered to her companions. Tychus busied himself imagining what her heaven looked like.

"Dark, too. I've been looking at the initial analysis and it's going to take some real work to get everything up and running. Some long shifts ahead..." Their chatter continued as they walked by, leaving Tychus frowning in their wake. No heaven for him anymore.

Stepping out into the intersection of halls, intent on continuing the way he had- straight ahead and leaving the new crew members alone, it came as a surprise to him when someone bumped into his side and stumbled back.

"Oh pardon me!" Brows furrowed, Tychus looked down and saw a terribly average, bookish man reaching down to collect his fallen datapad. The device rested right beside Tychus' bare, armored and clawed, foot. The man froze with his hand half on the device, leaving Tychus smirking at the rapid acceleration of his heart beat.

"No problem. Need a hand?" The tone of his voice was friendly, exaggeratedly so, and it took some effort to stifle a laugh at how the egghead seemed to come back to life and grab up his datapad with haste.

"Oh no! No no no... I'm quite fine thank you!" Straightening up, the man clutched the datapad to his chest and inched around Tychus, very pointedly not looking at him. He made a little choked noise as Tychus' meaty, and clawed, hand planted on and engulfed his shoulder.

"If you're sure." In his pocket, Tychus had spied the telltale colors and shape of a cigarette pack. With his one hand keeping the terrified man in place, he casually plucked the box out of his victim's breast pocket and waggled it. "Much appreciated."

"All yours." Quavering, the man's voice was just a whisper. He damn near ran away as soon as Tychus had let go of him, and the large man made especially sure to not look in his direction when he did. Normally, such cowardice was something he'd enjoy ridiculing and no doubt taking advantage of, but toying with instincts and new crew members was ill advised right now.

With a shrug, Tychus popped a cigarette between his lips and frowned when he realized he had no lighter.

One day later - Cantina

A solid night of sleep had worked wonders for her temperament and energy. Jayce stood behind the cantina bar, which had been restocked with the addition of their new crew members, attempting to recreate Cooper's famous mai tai by memory. Staring down at the freshly mixed drink and dipping a finger into it for a taste test, she grimaced. "Not right."

A small group of new crew members, all looking crisp and professional in their matching Bucephalus outfits, came milling in through the doorway and startled Jayce out of her mixing frenzy.
Bewildered, she watched them settle down around a table and chat quietly to one another. It felt like forever since there were fresh faces and the pleasant hum of conversation filling a room.

Smiling to herself, Jayce took another taste and grimaced anew. What did Cooper do to these things? The sound of a throat clearing brought her out of mulling, eyes snapping upwards to lock with the handsome features of a clean-shaven, smiling man who had walked over from his friends.

"You the barkeep?"

"Me? Oh no he's... Well, he's gone." Frowning slightly, Jayce resolved not to sound pathetically depressing. They knew damn well what happened. "But I can get you whatever you need out of the back, just don't ask for a mai tai, hah." Forcing herself to smile brightly and gesturing at her failed experiments, he chuckled softly and nodded.

"Just some of the usual grog, you know the type, for the lot of us. I'm Niel, what's your name?" Extending his hand over the bar top, Niel seemed a nice down to earth kind of guy. Jayce took a liking to him immediately as she clasped his hand in her own calloused one and gave it a firm shake, best to let him know she wasn't some limp wrist doll.

"Good to meet you Niel, I'm Jayce. I'm sure I can get you some of the usual." Letting his soft and warm hand go, she tamped down a chuckle at the thought of him being some kind of chair jockey. Ah well. Two rounds of drinks, six in all, were set up in quick order and he left with them on a tray.

With the poor jukebox, damn Tychus' eyes for breaking it, playing the few songs it had left and the combined friendly chatter of her new crew mates filling the cantina, Jayce returned to her mai tai mixing with a warm feeling inside.

As the flow of drink increased, Jayce steadily supplying them and thinking nothing of it, the conversation had steered towards more current events. It was not altogether surprising when she heard clearly "Haven't seen a one of them damn infested yet, wonder where they are?" It left her frowning slightly, thinking about the six men. No doubt they were having or would have difficulties of their own, with the new influx of crew members.

When she could feel stares on her, it was clear that the time to go was nearing. Confrontation wouldn't help anyone, and she didn't think she could hold up against any lines of questioning right now. It was a pleasant surprise when two of the three men cleared out of their own accord when she had begun cleaning and putting away glasses. Niel remained though, and his stares had been the hardest. She had almost made it out, glasses finished and arm extending with the intent of lifting herself over the bar top, when Niel sidled up with his drink and stood across from her.

"I just got a question." Looking down at his drink, a haze of inebriation was clouding his thoughts.

"Go ahead?" Tilting her head slightly, wary, Jayce pulled her arm back to her side and waited.

"What was it like?"

"What part?" Lips firmly sealed in a frown, she was not sure if she cared to answer either way.

"The part where you let everyone else die." Raising his gaze from his drink, Niel glared coldly with dull green eyes.

"Let them die?" Jayce blinked, giving him a double-take, unsure she just heard him right.

"There's no way you couldn't have holed up with more people than just yourself. So, Jayce, what was it like?" Leaning forwards, his tone had settled for accusatory, aggressive.
Recalling that day, Jayce stared over his shoulder in a daze and murmured. "I tried to take anyone I found on my way; but they were all trying to leave the ship, to get on transports and flee. Nobody wanted to dig in and defend, ship was as good as gone- stuck to a damn Leviathan."

_Lacy! I'm headin' to the armory, come with me!_

_Girl, bunch of us are gettin' to ships and ridin' outta here! Y'all gon' be dead if you stay on this rig!_

That was just one of a few encounters she had, running to the armory with arms overflowing with food supplies. Not a one listened. Lacy ended up jawless and making gurgling noises around a tentacle somewhere, Jayce remembered catching a glimpse of her. But she was just charred slag now, like everyone else. _Almost everyone._

"I am not buying it." Niel smirked slyly, the _shrk_ of doors sliding open behind him going unheard. Jayce had gone rigid with anger, lips in a tight line, but her eyes widened a notch when Tychus lumbered in quietly, clearly gauging the situation. He made a _continue_ gesture, sucking on a lit cigarette he must have liberated from someone.

"Well, you don't have to buy it. Bar's closed, you should go sober up or something." Her tone was clipped, trying to downplay her anger. The situation had just become delicate, but Niel was barreling on with drunken determination.

"I ain't done my drink yet. Or my questions." Niel waggled his drink belligerently, scowling.

"Lady said the bar's closed, you should probably listen." Tychus murmured softly, taking a slow step forwards. Niel didn't even look behind.

"Not yet. One more question." He smirked malevolently and Jayce clenched her jaw in worry at what might be coming next, eyeing Tychus over his shoulder.

"Only woman on this ship. Six men, infested or not. Who'd you have to fuck to stay alive, huh? Or did they pass you around?" Grinning at his own cleverness, white teeth shining, Jayce looked suitably horrified so he continued. "You got tentacles down there now or what?" Tychus' hand closed over Niel's shoulder and turned him around so fast and violent Jayce feared his arm was about to be ripped off. Niel's glass shattered on the ground, forgotten, and he gaped upwards.

Squeezing fiercely, claws threatening to pierce the nice tidy fabric of Niel's suit, Tychus bared his teeth around the cigarette and snarled. The sound of pained and panicked stuttering, bones threatening to crumple and two rapidly thundering hearts was music to his ears as he lowered his face closer to Niel's.

"Bar's closed. Get out." Through herculean effort, Tychus guided the squealing drunkard towards the door and all but threw him through it- remarkably in one piece. When the door hissed shut and he turned to look at Jayce, his enraged expression morphed into a smirk. "He's lucky it's so damned important to not screw with _relations_ right now, or he'd be dead even if I weren't all zerged up." Jayce had a hand over her heart and was letting out a heavy sigh of relief.

Eyes half closed as she tried to force her heart to come back to her body from outer space, Jayce laughed breathlessly. "Thank you for not killing him, seriously. Just a drunk fool."

"He had a good question though." Tychus drawled, sauntering over and leaning on the bar casually. Smirking when Jayce immediately looked confused and offended.

"What?"
"Do you got tentacles down there? Not sure if I'm down with that." Immediately she laughed, eyes shining with mirth, and leaned against the bar opposite of him.

"Hell no." Shaking her head, she gestured at the bar around them. "Bar's open for you, what can I get you?"

Casually, Tychus coiled his hand around her wrist, sliding his thumb into the palm of her hand to fill it completely and then some, rubbing slightly. "Nah sugar, alcohol don't do much of anythin' for me right now." Looking up from his hand engulfing hers to meet her calm gaze, his friendly demeanor shifted to sober instantly. "You can tell me why you lied about your arm, though." Thump-THUMP, her heart immediately picked up its pace and he felt the rush of blood through her skin.

"I-I didn't." Her expression was surprised, and she leaned away as if to flee. His hand, warm and rough, had immediately become closer to a cage than a comfort.

"Girl, you got the worst poker face I ever seen." His bass voice teased, "don't even need to hear that little heart beating to know you're lyin' to me. I just can't figure out why you are." Perplexed, Tychus held her there and waited.

Caught, Jayce looked from the leathery fist holding hers to the extra pupil-filled eyes pinning her in place, she sighed. "It isn't even anything big, really."

"Well if it ain't so big, you'll not mind sharin' it with ol' Tychus." Smirking he tilted his head, the chitinous segments he now had for hair clicking together of their own accord.

"I will. But you gotta promise me that you ain't gonna hurt anyone over it." Poking her fingertip into the thick flesh of his forearm for emphasis, she frowned.

"Heh. You know, I saw you have a little meeting with the egghead this mornin'." THUMP THUMP. "Why you two talked forever, I figure he might know somethin' about it." His eyes narrowed a degree when she squared her shoulders, clearly preparing to be stubborn.

Indeed. Aside from getting the stuttering scientist to take some blood samples just in case, and summarily telling him to mind his own business about her relationship choices unless she started spouting extra limbs, Jayce had interacted with Stetmann that morning about Shlassa healing her arm. Stupid pin. Jayce contemplated breaking it right then and there.

"So he does then." Smiling, Tychus took a drag of his cigarette. "You look real cute when you're all angry like that." Jayce was baring her teeth slightly, eyes narrowed. "But you know I'd never hurt you sugar." Patting her hand with his thumb. "The egghead, though." His eyes darkened with threat. "He's just as infested as me. Why, I wager I can be real rough with him if I need to."

"Stop. Just, stop being an ass." Annoyed, Jayce thumped his forearm with the palm of her hand, fidgeting. "I didn't use the Selfix armor to fix my arm. I couldn't do it by myself and Stetmann was in some kinda trance or somethin'"

"Soo?" Tilting his head, Tychus quirked a brow.

"The broodmother helped me get my cast off, and fixed my arm itself." There it was, she had said it. But if Tychus was going to beat up Stetmann just to figure this out then it was worth the risk to try and head it off.

"Oh. Well you look fine." Frowning, Tychus surveyed her arm with a critical eye- lifting it this way and that.
Flabbergasted, Jayce stared at him.

Looking up from her arm Tychus chuckled, amused. "All that, just to protect the egghead? Girl, you got some weird priorities." Privately, he thought that skinny nerd might just be the strongest of them all.

Rubbing her face with her free hand, Tychus was still holding her other one, Jayce sighed. "I didn't want him to get in trouble for somethin' he had no control over. Just, don't tell anyone else."

"Your secret is safe with ol' Tychus. But," He paused, sober. "I don't want you lyin' to me again. No tussle me 'n the others could get into over somethin' is worth losin' your credibility with us, sugar."

Frowning, his gaze traced the dark purple rings under her eyes, wondering if she'd actually been punched. "Especially now with prince charming and all his little minions over here. Need to be able to trust one another. Did someone hit you?"

Curling her free hand around his wrist, or part of it anyway, she fingered the strange ridges of his armor curiously. "No. Been sleepin' like shit is all, don't worry about it. Due for some good rest now that other people are here. As for not lyin' anymore? Alright, fine. You're right and I sure don't trust these new guys, especially now."

Letting go of her arm and straightening up, Tychus rolled his shoulders and plucked the low burning cigarette from his lips, discarding it. "I got your back." Helping her over the bar top, he was pleased when she glued to his side of her own accord.

"Much as I enjoy your fine alien form, I believe I have an idea in regards to clothing for you."

Jayce's lips bowed into a sly smile at the thought.

"As long as it ain't knitted, I'm all ears."

**Med Bay**

Jim stood outside the med bay doors, schooling his thoughts. Unbidden, the thought of doing the same thing back on Char when he first met the two protoss who would further shape his future came to mind, and he sighed. He settled for his thoughts being less tumultuous and stepped through the door, walking towards the bright white quarantine room with purpose. Lasarra was waiting.

She had thought that zerg thoughts would be closed off, but Jim Raynor's thoughts twisted and whirled just as Jayce's had, albeit with a dark whispering undertone that was strictly not his own. Lasarra caught a flicker of imagery before he had entered the vicinity: Dark and High Templars, arrayed in a line behind their leaders who were facing off silently, all while ash swirled heavily through the air around them. James Raynor had truly been privy to some of the more recent pivotal moments in their history.

Blue glowing eyes met and regarded black, noting the fine golden chips inside and how they quickly passed by her. Raynor immediately looked at the water cooler beside Lasarra, a cup that had only been left by virtue of embarrassment sitting atop it, and felt his shoulder spines tick in annoyance; But not surprise.

"Jayce." He stated simply, looking up at the smooth features of Lasarra's face.

*Be at peace, James Raynor. Jim had spoken to many protoss in his time, they all had a distinct voice unique to themselves and radiated a feeling with them. Lasarra felt like a comforting mother, a warm blanket, a soft word. His eyes widened in surprise at the lack of hostility.*

*Yes. Jayce has spoken with me, and through my interactions with her and time enough to recover*
from what happened on Kaldir, She paused, noting the guilty shift of his features. *I feel that fate has brought us together in these uncertain times.*

"Well." Jim crossed his arms and leaned on his left leg slightly, thoughtful. "That's already a lot more talking than I thought we'd be doing. I am sorry for what happened on Kaldir." Lips pursing tightly, thinking about the whole rotten situation. "And I wanted you to know that I never meant for you to get dragged up here with us." It was a relief that he knew the protoss would know his sincerity.

"I wanted to talk to you about getting you outta here. There's been a, well, a development." Speaking about it brought back the memory of Kerrigan, radiating power and setting them free. He didn't doubt this protoss caught onto it.

Steeling herself, feeling the warmth of the khala strengthening her resolve, Lasarra spoke. *I know of your freedom and I wish to remain.* Jim seemed taken aback, confused but quiet. He wanted answers, and he'd have them. As I said, I believe fate has guided me to you, to help you and yours. *My brother and my brethren are with the khala now, and though their deaths will never be forgotten I no longer lay them at your feet.* Thinking about Arut brought a fresh wash of pain, but knowing he was out there, embraced by their ancestors, was enough.

*What aid I am able to lend you, James Raynor, is now yours. I am Lasarra, a researcher and scholar of the first born.*

Jim felt her pain, sullying the soft blanket of her voice and the motherly tone, and felt awful. He almost didn't register the offer of help, but when it soaked in during the silence after her words, he couldn't believe the luck of it all.

Lasarra took a half step back when he reached out and tapped out the command to open up the quarantine door, confused.

"Well, it sure ain't proper to keep a guest in a cage. I don't really know how people are gonna react to you, but I wager you'll be a damn sight more welcome than us infested." Shrugging, he stepped back and gave Lasarra a goodly amount of space when she cautiously exited the room. Even if her armor was purely decorative, fabric flowing down her sides and off her arms, she looked so out of place against the cold hard steel of terran technology.

*My thanks. This room will be a fine dwelling, I receive what I need to survive from it. You take a risk letting me free aboard your ship, I will not abuse it.* Protoss Zealots sitting like statues across ashy terrain flickered through his mind. Yes, he supposed the protoss would be fine with any room. A space was a space.

"Now I ain't gonna say no to your help, and it sure is an honor to receive it, but I'm pretty sure your people wouldn't approve." They stood facing one another now and a feeling came unbidden to him, surging from some deep well that wasn't his own; A burning hatred that left his brows furrowing and eyes averting from the protoss. Of course the zerg would not be pleased to see a protoss so close, not without killing it.

The will of the swarm, although not perverting the terran man completely, was almost a physical coil wrapping around him then. Unsure of what she could accomplish, Lasarra reached out with her mind and touched his own. A gentle caress to drive away the baser emotions of animals. While she was not in possession of any grand power like a High Templar, taming beasts was a particular specialty. The effect was immediate.

In one breath Jim had been attempting to tamp down the raw urge to surge forwards and deliver violence to the unarmed protoss and in the next a sense of pure peace had descended, driving the
darkness away. His eyes widened, awed. He hadn't been aware of just how much he was struggling, the pressure on his mind relieved nearly brought tears of joy to his eyes.

Pleased, for she could both see and feel the results of her work, Lasarra beamed. Yes, I can help. Worry not about my fate, James Raynor. Perhaps there was some celestial motive for making her such an oddity among her kind, the thought kindling a passion inside her.

Armory Storage

Large doors gasped open, the silhouette of Jayce and Tychus beside one another stretching out into the darkness. Red lights along the floor throughout the storage room offered nothing more than a sinister splash of color against boxes here and there. Flicking on the snake light that she had picked up along the way, Jayce walked in cautiously. Darkness had an unsettling quality, even before the zerg had begun haunting it in her nightmares.

"You're not luring me into some kind of trap to kill me horribly, are you?" Tychus joked, it was clear that he was smiling though she didn't look back at him.

Smirking and weaving through stacked boxes, recalling the location of their quarry by memory as she muttered back at the big shadow. "You can see plain as day in here, can't you?" She appreciated the tension break, suspecting that if he and the others had really become walking lie detectors that her increased heart rate was noted.

"Maybe." Noncommittal, he looked over her head and around. There was some deep shadows, but everything had a crystal clear quality to it that he couldn't hope to have with human eyes. The answer was yes, as clear as day. "What are we lookin' for?"

"A big box." Jayces smirk widened.

"Nobody likes a smart ass."

"I know where it is, don't worry." Making a dismissive gesture as she lead the way, guiding them down another dark row, her head dipping forwards to bring attention to one box that was just slightly out of order. The deactivated hover dolly next to it was another good tell, Tychus caught her shoulder in his hand when she was about to kick her ankle right into it.

"Mind your feet, I'm guessin' this is the spot."

"Ah." Sheepish, noticing the dolly with her light a moment after she would have had a seriously smarting ankle, she shoed off his hand and patted the large box affectionately. "Thanks. This is the box, give me a hand would y-" Awkwardly shuffling aside as his forearm pushed her out of the way, she watched with a muted jealousy as he picked up the large crate and made to put it on the floor.

"Get the dolly outta the way." Of course he'd want it out of the way, she rolled her eyes and fumbled her hands over the tool, bringing it hovering to life and sliding it aside. Once the dolly was clear, Tychus lowered the large box down with a thump. "Sure don't weigh much."

"It's clothing, I hope not. Still, it's over two hundred pounds, it ain't that light either." It was special clothing of course, a big box that could take a beating was a good idea. Brushing up beside the big lug and tapping her fingertips across the faintly red glowing keypad, the box unlocked with four satisfying clicks and hissed as the top popped up an inch.

Tychus observed Jayces giddy look with suspicion, lifting the lid of the box and muttering. "The hell you tryin' to get me to wear that it needs to be in some couple hundred pound box with a keypad?" The answer was revealed in short order as the suit and its components inside lifted up for display.
"Aw hell no!"

"No?" Jayce looked surprised, quirking a brow and casually fingerling the cool material. "I think it'll look great." Lips splitting into a broad grin, she looked up at his dismayed face. Grabbing at the shoulder of the suit, she lifted it slightly and taunted him with it. A Spectre outfit.

"For starters, that ain't never gonna fit me and thank god for that. Secondly, those Spectre freaks are creepy as all get-out." Tychus was staring down at the suit, thinking about that wacko Tosh and his... Dolls.

"First: Yes, it will fit you and I'll explain why." Letting the suit fall back into its neatly folded pile, Jayce grabbed up a scanner of some sort and quickly closed the lid of the box, deftly starting up the small square device. It fit easily in the palm of her hand as it chirped to life. "Second: Tosh was creepy, I'll give you that, and I only saw him once. But really? You calling someone a creepy freak right now? Gimme a break."

"That ain't nice."

Shaking her head at the silliness of it all, Jayce affectionately swatted his overlarge arm and started running the scanner over him. Widest points of his arms, shoulders, waist... Tychus blinked in recognition.

"You're takin' my damn measurements?"

"Yep, get your dimensions in this little sucker and pop it back into the box, then this whole thing tailors the suit to you right off the hop. I read the manual the other night, no wonder why them Ghosts and Spectres always look so sharp!" Her love of technology was clear in the affection in her tone.

"Can't say as I've ever seen a Spectre or a Ghost my size, you sure that'll work?" Quirking his brows, impressed, Tychus decided he'd at least enjoy the process of her getting his measurements.

"Positive. Commander spent a god awful amount of credits on these things, you bet your ass it'll work. That's the main reason for the big heavy box too, it's got more equipment in it than just the suit."

"Fancy. Say," Eyes lighting up excitedly, Tychus grinned, forgetting all about disliking being associated with Spectres. "Can I cloak in it?"

Placing the measurement tool back in the box, closing it up and starting the tailoring sequence, Jayce listened to the machinery hum to life for a moment before chuckling. "Yes. It has a battery, a very good one, kind of like Banshees. A real Spectre can use its psionic abilities to augment it and make it last damn near forever, but thankfully not you."

"Thankfully?"

"The thought of you sneaking around cloaked almost made me discard the idea." Both of them chuckled together in good nature.

Korhal – Augustgrad unveiling ceremony

The Emperor had chosen a large interview room, often used for unveiling new technology and making small-scale demonstrations, that was built off of the palace; It was also completely enclosed and, excluding the palace itself, one of the safest places to be. Nova wasn't surprised it had been chosen, although something was itching at the back of her brain- had been since she woke up that
morning, tired and attending ceremonies the last thing on her mind.

Nova was a great ghost, probably the best, and this feeling was too much to ignore. So, with chagrin, she had suited up and gone over the entire building before anyone had entered it that morning and found herself a good birds-eye view. It was from there she was now watching the ceremony, or more specifically everything and everyone around it.

Comm chatter was normal. Checks were going on, units were reporting in, patrols were roaming, all was well on that front. Reporters, nowhere near as many as there normally would be, were ushered in and stood quiet before the podium their Emperor was due to stand at and make his announcement any minute.

Normally very crisp and proper looking, Nova couldn't help but see the downtrodden and bedraggled look the representatives of the press had begun to adapt. Perhaps it was the pall of gloom that hung over them like a physical cloud that made it seem more obvious, their thoughts ringing clear like bells. Fear. Hunger. Various mundane worries and concerns popping up sporadically.

But above all of it was a clear and tangible fear of what the future held for themselves and others. It was shocking, and Nova's lips pressed into a tight line of anger. What was the Dominion doing in all of this? Despite Tosh's accusations, she had very much been aware of the state of the Koprulu sector, especially Dominion Space, and didn't like what she was seeing.

"Hope you have something good to say today." Whispering to herself, she watched as Arcturus Mengsk stepped through a heavy curtain and up to his podium, resting gloved hands on either side of it and looking decidedly smug.

"Ladies and gentlemen, today I bring you news that will change the face of Korhal, of the Dominion, forever." A ripple of communication had begun in her earpiece as the Emperor began one of his long winded speeches. No doubt about the state of the planet and all the insurgents bent on disrupting the order or some nonsense like that. Nova tuned him out and gently pressed the ear piece in deeper.

Voices that had been calm and professional not more than five minutes ago were now whispering in spooked tones, leaving Nova furrowing her brows in confusion and annoyance. It seemed that the disturbance was coming out of the palace and entering the building, generally scaring the shit out of everyone who was seeing it. Lack of gunfire kept her rooted to the spot, waiting to see or feel what was going on.

"No more shall innocent civilian lives be taken by raging insurgents bent on the destruction of all we've worked for..." A large ripple spread through the curtain behind the Emperor, and Nova gripped her gun tightly. There was something behind there. Something wrong. Writhing and coiling like a snake at the edge of her mind.

"I am very proud to bring you the apex of Terran ingenuity and science. Teams of men and women who have been specially trained are being put into active duty all over Korhal as I speak to you now, prepared to bring you peace at last..." Nova's eyes widened, mind focusing on what was behind that curtain. "Behold!" The curtain had begun falling. "Shadow Corp. and the hybrid." Someone screamed when the curtain pooled on the floor, Nova barely heard it.

Surrounded by a team of marines in pure black hardskins was a creature of nightmares, and recognition flickered through her stunned mind: this was what that Spectre had been drawing. The creature was glowing radiantly with psionic energy, the twisted horror of its body floating inside. Its head, like the crown of a Hydralisk, was translucent and had a large brain throbbing within. Two sets of arms, chitinous and tipped with razor sharp clawed zerg hands, were extended outwards as if to show off the glory of its form; from its back were protruding massive tentacles that wavered through
Emperor Mengsk didn't even look, he knew exactly what he had unveiled to his people: an ultimatum. When the woman who had screamed was quickly removed from the room, he regarded the trembling group of reporters before him with a smile teasing the corner of his lips. "I assure you, no harm will come to the loyal subjects of the Dominion by the hybrid. You have questions and I will answer them." Many arms were immediately stuck into the air, oh yes, there were many pressing questions.

While the Emperor continued to attempt to assuage fears and reason away doubts, Nova stared. The soldiers around the Hybrid itself were so deadened to emotion they made the empty, happy minds of resocs look good. It was like all that made them care had been sucked away, and when she felt-knew-its gaze had landed on hers, despite her cloak, she felt the tug at her very being to confirm it.

The unveiling wasn't going as well as the Emperor had thought it would and it was clear he was failing to address issues of importance, such as how these creatures will be used to judge who is good and who is bad. When Donny Vermillion, having come down from the news station to report live himself since Kate Lockwell had been imprisoned, cracked and threw his recorder at Mengsk, the gates of hell were opened. "You're a lying son of a bitch and I won't take it anymore!" Donny's eyes erupted in a gory mess spectacularly, rendering him dead before he had even finished taking the breath he had meant to use to further call down Mengsk.

My family isn't even alive. He's nothing but lies. Nova heard Donny's last thoughts before his life had been snuffed out. Had he been coerced to continue Dominion propaganda?

Arcturus had instantly been pulled away, running to safety with his guards, when the hybrid and its Shadow Corp handlers turned on the reporters and began hunting down anyone with a stray rebellious thought. That was everyone.

Snapping out of the trance of hopelessness the hybrid had rendered upon her, Nova made her decision. From the balcony above she took aim and fired.

Bullets connected and rattled off of the deceptively thick chitinous covering of the hybrids brain. Her C-20A rifle rounds, fully capable of puncturing through combat suits like butter, were worthless.

"Nova Terra. Cease fire or you will be terminated." An unfamiliar voice, which she immediately recognized to be from one of the Shadow Corp men, grated in her ear in warning. Several of the Dominion marines on the ground floor had forced the doors of the room open and were covering for the civilians they were attempting to save. Those were the real Dominion, not this mind police bastardization Nova was witnessing. As a well-aimed bullet from her rifle pierced into the skull of one of the hybrid's escorting marines, Nova whispered into the radio. "Consider this my resignation."

Pain seared through her mind- the hybrid was attacking her while the Shadow Corp returned fire on the Dominion marines, who were retreating and covering the civilians escape into the city. They stood no chance against the hybrid, it was for the best that it had become entangled with her.

There is no hope. Surrender to despair. Inside her mind the hybrid whispered of her doom, battering against the carefully constructed mental defenses within. A ghosts mind is its greatest weapon. Clenching her jaw hard, Nova ran through the mantra as she focused her eyes on the horrible abomination and brought her mental might forwards. Leveling city blocks was one thing, so was crunching a human mind, but this was a level of focus fire that barriers were being lowered to accomplish.

Physically writhing at the counterattack, the hybrid was not prepared for the doors it had opened in
Nova. As if aiming through a scope, she focused her will into a tangible force and together they screamed viscerally at the pressure building inside their minds. There was little pleasure felt in seeing the creature's brain explode within its shell, her vision darkening and winking out when she slumped to the floor unconscious.
Augustgrad – Unknown location

Waking up on a tiny cot in a small dirty room about as big as a shoebox, was the last thing Nova Terra expected to open her eyes to. It was a surprise that her eyes ever opened again, for that matter. An old light bulb flickered as it dangled by a wire from the plascrete ceiling.

Flicking her eyes back shut, a quick inventory was taken. Rifle was gone. Knives gone. Everything but her suit had been stripped off, including the ear comm and goggles. Extending the search beyond her person and the room she was in proved futile. Not only was she the proud owner of what could be contending for the worst headache in the galaxy, there was something wrapped over this place like a veil - dampening such psionic activity.

Furrowing her brows, Nova sat up slowly and stared at the slightly ajar door. Dim light streamed through it and the sound of muffled, hushed activity echoed beyond. Well, I'm not tied up and the suit is still on. Might not be captive. Nova rose to her feet stiffly and made to see where she had landed after blacking out.

Just beyond the door was a wide open circular room with thick plascrete pillars connecting the floor to a low ceiling, four in all. All around were doors, no doubt leading to simple rooms such as the one she had just walked out of, and on opposite sides of one another were two cold halls leading elsewhere. In the center of that room was the unmistakable form of Gabriel Tosh, hunched over a collapsible table with a small pile of devices relaying information and communications, thick ropes of hair resting on his back like snakes. Behind him and to his right, her rifle rested against one of the plascrete pillars.

Glancing between the object of her desire and the target of assassination, Nova felt her cloaking device wash over her and made for the gun.

"Still plannin' on shootin' me, even after I saved your ass back there?" Tosh muttered in a casual tone, straightening up and picking up her rifle, caressing its long barrel as he turned around to face her where she was hiding. He made no move to fire, waiting.

Letting out a slow breath, Nova dropped the cloak and eyed him warily. "You were there at the ceremony? Why would you save me?" And he certainly did save her, she'd committed treason. If she woke up under Dominion care...

Smirking slightly, Tosh looked down at the gun and back up to her, dead sober. "I felt that thing coming, girl. Had to be there to see it, to see what you'd do when your precious Emperors evil stood before you." Gripping her rifle, he slowly raised his arms and held it out to her. "You did good. Real good."

Reaching up and wrapping her hands around the familiar weight and curves of the gun felt good, and Nova immediately relaxed up receiving it. Lips sealing into a tight line of anger, she murmured. "I couldn't just let that-that thing kill those people. They were innocent. Mengsk is killing innocents with monsters."

"There be more of them girl. Many more." Tosh retreated to the table, gesturing at it. Following curiously, she looked down at the information before her and beheld chaos. Augustgrad was a warzone. Dominion forces and Shadow corp. forces with their hybrids were marked clearly all over.
"Many of them Dominion boys left Mengsk real fast when they saw what those hybrids were doin' to people. Guess food and shelter only be goin' so far, eh?" Tosh chuckled without humor.

"How long have I been out?" Nova's tone sharpened as her mind assimilated the information it was gathering and turning into strategies and plans. Defenses had to be mounted. Counter offensives. As many lives saved as possible, as many hybrid dead as possible.

"Solid twenty four hours." Nova grimaced at the news, so much can happen in such a large amount of time. "You used up a lot of juice killin' that thing. Should see the kind of firepower it takes."

This was madness, and Nova's eyes focused on Tosh in anger. "Why do you even care? You and your Spectres have been killing innocents since you hit the turf here, before that even."

"Each of us wants Mengsk as dead as the next, and you can bet some innocents are gonna die if they get in the way of that. But this... This be something beyond Mengsk, beyond us simple beings girl. Jim Raynor saw these creatures, dark harbingers." Tosh's hand connected with the edge of the table hard for emphasis. "You really think Mengsk be controllin' them?"

"I'm not sure what I believe right now, Tosh." Fingertips caressed her weapon, soothing her sore mind with repetition. "You and your lot are all a bunch of mad dogs."

"We all got a little madness inside of us. Man, woman, child. All of us." Tosh glared with his glazed eyes, and Nova wondered then if he knew about the voices tickling inside her mind, voices that the terrazine freed.

Composure rumpled, she shook her head slightly. "I remember the recording you sent me. What was this talk about Jim Raynor? What's his part in all this?" Gesturing her hand at the madness arrayed between them, this was a question that had been tumbling around in her mind since he mentioned him.

"I told you girl..." Tosh was disturbed at the thought, that much was clear. His whole demeanor flickered with fear. "That mission of his... Goin' to Char and stoppin' the Queen of Blades. It didn't go so good for him."

"So the Char invasion failed and he's dead." Nova supplied, blunt. It hadn't taken much digging on her part to find out about the Char invasion, though details had been scrubbed away. Sometimes there was just too much blood, and streaks remained.

"No little girl, much worse." Tosh sighed heavily, staring down at a holomap. "Sometimes I think my boys 'n I coulda saved him, helped his mission succeed, if you hadn't chased us halfway across the damn galaxy." Nova bit back the words that threatened, they wouldn't help now. "Course, coulda failed anyway and been infested to the core like him and his are now." Their gazes met, even and dire.

"Infested." She murmured. A sad fate for a man like Jim, even if he was a stubborn terrorist. He did help people and had an oddly large amount of moral fiber, Nova knew that much about him and more.

"Aye, infested. And that Queen of Blades still be out there, as strong and terrible as ever. But we Terrans be having own problems now, don't we?" Nodding his head downwards, Nova nodded in return.

"We need to take these things out, get the Dominion forces that have abandoned Mengsk rallied and start fighting back." Nova said.
"Aye, but it be difficult now. I told you that people was goin' insane everywhere, it was the hybrid back then and it is much worse now. They are psychic vampires girl, suckin' anyone with a thimble of psionic ability dry." It made so much sense, it hurt.

"I was tryin' to train as many as I could find, enough that they could put up the walls and protect themselves. But sadly, it ain't easy smugglin' terrazine and jorium onto the planet." His gaze hardened. "Why, I do believe you just recently liberated a stockpile warehouse we had."

"You are using the drugs to enhance the psionic ability of weaker people, civilians?" Nova quirked a brow, it seemed very unlikely. Tosh had moved away from being for the people a long time ago, she suspected this had a lot more to do with trying to find more brothers and sisters. The addictive nature of the terrazine was cause for concern, not to mention the eccentricities of those who imbibed too much. She eyed him pointedly, knowing full well he could read her.

"Aye. Picked up some new Spectres along the way too. Was a good deal for them, but we ain't got enough to protect everybody. Gotta start usin' tools too." Gesturing around them, Tosh was no doubt talking about the dampening field Nova had noticed.

"I know where the jorium and terrazine went, it isn't something we can't get back if we have to. But right now I want to get out there and start this rebellion, Tosh. Civilian lives and hybrid deaths are my topmost concern." It went without saying that she strongly disagreed with the use of terrazine, given that she still felt a sharp coiling of need at the very thought of it.

For his part, Tosh seemed to be ignoring her thoughts. It was enough that Nova would join the fight. "Well, I share at least one of your concerns. So let's work together, shall we? Like old times."
Extending his hand, gloved in the signature dark red and black of the Spectres, Nova clasped it in her own, gray and blue, and they shook on it.

"Got some people for you to meet, too." He added.

**Zerus – High orbit**

The primal pack leaders lay dead, chewed-on corpses, and Zurvan had fallen in a similar manner after his not very surprising betrayal. Kerrigan surveyed the exodus of the swarm in high orbit, violet eyes gleaming in the low light. Power flooded through her entire being, she had thought for a second that her new form wouldn't be able to contain such might after consuming Zurvan, that millennia old monster, but it held.

Now the Primal Queen of Blades and her children were poised to move once more, back to the Koprulu sector. Power wasn't the only thing that came back from Zerus, though; New allies, chief of which was sloshing through viscous liquids and stomping over to her as she thought, and primal zerg who followed her of their own volition- a new primal pack leader that would take them to the stars.

It was strange, considering creatures that were not connected to the swarm to be allies. Kerrigan was still mulling over it, but there was an unquestionable advantage behind having zerg who were immune to creations that abuse the hive mind and that the enemy has no data on. Scales shifting against one another announced the arrival of Izsha, sliding into view just as Dahaka came to a stop with a thump.

"My Queen, the swarm is ready to go where you will it."

"You go to Essence. I follow. My pack follows." Dahaka's peculiar way of speaking would take some getting used to.
"We go to Korhal, to bring the swarm down upon Mengsk. There will be much essence for you and your pack, Dahaka." Kerrigan turned on her heel to face Izsha and faltered, struck by a sight.

Subject incompatible, zerg hyper-evolutionary virus overwhelming nervous system. A cerebrate was droning. Test failed. A terran woman was writhing on the cold floor tiles of a science platform that the zerg had taken over for their own testing purposes. Those experiments and tests were infesting terrans, and Kerrigan was overseeing them.

Frothing and hissing, the woman who would end up being Izsha had begun to change and shriek in agony.

"My Queen?"

Jerking out of the vivid recalling of Izsha's infestation, Kerrigan refocused on the creature now. Massive and snake-like, human hands had sealed to her flesh and become a part of her, folded demurely together forever. A wave of compassion flooded her senses and it was a struggle to tamp it down. "What, Izsha?"

Dahaka had already left, eager to be under way, but Izsha was staring at her Queen with concern. "We leave as soon as your word is given. Is everything alright, my Queen?"

No, everything was not alright. Kerrigan had been bombarded by human emotions and moral struggles ever since breaking free of that Chrysalis, and it was causing her some great deal of mental strife. "We leave now. And Izsha? I am sorry." Izsha was clearly confused at the sentiment, but just voicing it made Kerrigan feel better, the spark of humanity inside fading to a dull glow, satisfied with the attempt.

"There is nothing to be sorry for, my Queen. The swarm has never been so strong before you, you lead us to glory. To Korhal."

"To Korhal." Kerrigan confirmed, jaw clenching tight, images of settlements and people being overrun rushing through her mind with intensity.

It took some time to wrangle her emotions into a more manageable state, god-like psionic leader of the swarm or no, but there was one other pressing engagement the Primal Queen of Blades had to attend before rest and planning; though Zerus was already a rapidly disappearing orb in the distance.

"Zagara."

The broodmother was settled in a chamber where hundreds of other zerg were waiting, dormant until it was time to cover another world. "My Queen?" Zagara was already battle hardened from Char, but after Zerus and her near defeats there were chips and slices in the creatures chitinous crown and scars crisscrossing her leathery hide.

"You were nearly defeated on Zerus, repeatedly." Coming to a stop, Kerrigan considered her next words a moment before speaking again, the broodmother clearly displeased with her failures made glaring. "I want you to go to Abathur, and he will make you stronger. A kind of strength that you and other broodmothers are not aware of." Abathur had warned that higher intelligence in her broodmothers may endanger her leadership, but Kerrigan had her reasons.

"As my Queen wishes." Zagara made for the evolution master, wondering what he had to give that could make her stronger. No matter what Abathur would give, it would hurt.

No sooner had the spidery creature clicked and clacked out of sight did Izsha intrude. My Queen. We are receiving a broad psionic frequency. It is zerg in nature, but not of the swarm.
An event that she had never experienced before was more than enough to draw her attention, and Kerrigan half closed her dully glowing eyes. *Show me.*

There was something about the messengers voice and accent that was ringing warning bells in Kerrigan's mind... Izsha was right however, the hybrid would be the doom of her mission on Korhal should Mengsk employ them. Already, adjustments to the plan were being made.

Several leviathans were breaking off from the swarm's mass, broodmothers with their own orders to cripple Dominion supply planets, while the rest of the swarm's might shifted course and ventured into space towards the coordinates their mystery supplier gave.

"Lets find out who you are." Wings shifting in agitation, Kerrigan would spend many of the next hours dedicated to tamping down the deep horror she felt at setting more worlds to the swarm's flame. Such wild emotions were affecting the swarm at large, and it was imperative to maintain control.

**Hyperion – Deep space**

A tentative peace had settled over the Hyperion seemingly overnight. Lasarra had initially been met with fear by the ships new and very much human crew, but the protoss' uncanny peaceful presence had an immediate and helpful effect.

Shlassa, all too aware of the protoss now wandering the ship, had raged silently and not so silently over it. First they get rid of all the infested and send some to be experimented on, effectively stripping away all their defenses, and then they let loose one of the great enemy! But, keeping the Queens directive in mind at all times, the broodmother determined to adapt to the situation.

"Incoming transmission." The Hyperion adjutant, indifferent sounding as always, chimed to Raynor as he sat and brooded in his luxurious quarters.

"Put him through." Though Raynor had a long list of troubled thoughts and problems to dwell on, whatever Lasarra had done alleviated a great deal of stress for the time being and he was feeling much more receptive to talking. Especially with Valerian, who's display appeared over his desk with a distinctly scared look on his usually too damn perfect face. "What's the matter, junior?"

"Jim. We've picked up a broad wave frequency from Korhal, and everyone needs to see it. Our situation has become much more dire, I'm afraid." There was no trace of jest or teasing in the young man's voice, and Raynor heaved a sigh at the thought of some new terrible problem to deal with.

"I'm not sure my team and I are in the position to help anyone, on Korhal of all places, but lets see it." Beckoning with his gray and clawed hand, Raynor waited for the transmission to be patched through to him and subsequently everyone else on the ship.

Through Raynor, the other infested heard and gravitated to the cantina. Jayce was tipped off by Swann and the new comm techies spread the news like wildfire to their friends aboard the ship. All work stopped and every able-bodied individual glued themselves to a nearby terminal, datapad, anything that could display what was going on.

Curiously the broodmother had stopped all but smothering her psionic presence, and Lasarra became aware of something awful happening through the minds of the crew. Focusing on Jayce, as she knew the woman better than anyone there, Lasarra also emerged ducking through the cantina doorway.

In the cantina was a very odd sight. Swann, Warfield, Tychus and Stetmann occupied one half of the room, several of the braver new crew members were standing on the other half and Jayce sat numbly
in the middle, some sort of middle ground. Lasarra, feet clicking softly against the grimy floor, came
to stand beside Jayce and looked up at the grainy display that was drawing all eyes.

"Comm guy said that this frequency isn't being broadcast by any news network. Guess the people
really wanted everyone to see what happened." It felt like a lump of ice was in her stomach, a terrible
sense of dejavu keeping Jayce's eyes glued to the screen.

"Sweet mother of mercy." Tychus uttered. They were watching the unveiling of the hybrid and the
chaos that ensued shortly after. Whoever had sent the broadcast out apparently didn't have the time or
inclination to sensor Donny Vermillion painting everyone around him with his blood and eye matter.

Lasarra was rigid with shock, rocked to the very core of her being, and her voice flowed over
everyone nearby. This cannot be. Such an unholy merger of zerg and protoss cannot exist!

"But it does, and there it is." Warfield exhaled, watching the camera man running away from the
hybrid and into a corner to get the best view of the firefight. It boggled his mind now that he used to
hold Arcturus in the highest regard.

"Look, the Dominion are firing at it! Does this mean that all the emperor has now are those things?"
One man, head to toe in grease and grime that covered his practical overalls, muttered hopefully.

"I think anyone would fire at somethin' like that comin' at 'em, sparky." Swann grumbled, there was
a great hopelessness that threatened to swallow him up from inside, and he wasn't sure if he didn't
want to welcome it with open arms.

"This creature, hybrid, Jim talked about them before!" Stetmann perked up, gesturing at the screen
where the so-called Shadow Corp marines ran off and the glowing hybrid writhed against some
unseen foe. "And it looks like someone is fighting it?"

When the hybrid collapsed and its light died out, the cameraman was seized immediately and the
picture became static.

"Someone killed it." Jayced stared, wide-eyed. It was hard to believe a creature made out of the two
most powerful races could even be taken down at all. Absently, she touched the space between lip
and nose where blood had been just the other day, and wondered how close she had been to being a
Donny Vermillion.

A pregnant silence filled the ship, threatening to burst at any second, while Raynor opened a private
comm with Horner. Raynor had paled considerably, already a sickly gray, he looked corpse-like to
Horner- who didn't look much better himself.

"Sir."

"Matt. This changes everything."

"I know sir, I remember what you told me about the hybrid... I wanted to not believe you, but there it
is. What do you want me to do?" Horner craved orders and above all, to get his ship moving.

Smacking his fist on the arm of his chair which gave way and sat at an awkward angle, making
Raynor scowl even harder, his tone was purely frustrated. "We gotta stop the hybrid. Arcturus is just
a pawn to something far more dangerous now, he can wait- if he ain't dead already. Get me on the
ship intercom."

"Yes sir!" Thankful to do something, anything at all, Horner only took a moment to get Raynor on
the intercom where his voice scratched to life.
Everyone paused in their despair and apocalyptic mind frames, heads tilting and eyes raising to listen.

"Alright boys and girls. I know all of you just saw that broadcast, and I know what you are thinking: What can we do? Focus on the here and now. I want everyone to resume fixing the Hyperion double-time and I expect hourly status reports. Our situation has become very time-sensitive, these hybrid ain't to be taken lightly and a whole lot of folks are in danger right now." There was a scraping sound as Raynor scrubbed at his stubble. "I'll get talkin' with Valerian and we'll get a plan in motion."

"Is he fucking insane?" Tychus, voice grating like an old diesel engine, snapped. His arms remained crossed and his eyes stared up at the television. "Why would anyone accept our help? Hell, why would we give it?"

Lasarra's presence ensured they were in control of themselves, which left Warfield wary. Tychus had a temper and it wouldn't do for him to go scaring the shit out of the few people who were already willing to be in a room with them. Their intrinsic connection, no longer so violently intrusive, did let him know how upset the man was. "Take it easy, Tychus. We don't have the full picture yet, let the people in charge do the thinking, alright?"

Nobody was in charge of Tychus but Tychus himself, and the muscles of his jaw jumped as he fought the urge to say as much back down. Fighting with the old General wasn't going to do any good. Forcing a breath through his nose, he kept his tone even. "They'll gun us down just as surely as they shot at that thing, if we come charging in like some kinda white knight heroes." Letting out a huff of disdain, he gestured towards the men across the room from them. "Hell, they'd shoot at us too if they weren't getting paid an awful lot." Stetmann, Swann and Warfield followed his gesture, thoughtful.

Another man, older and no less greasy and work-worn than the first who had spoken, frowned heavily and shook his head. "If you spent half as much time helping us get this crate up and running as you did sneaking around and scaring people, I'd take a bullet for you myself."

"When the bullets start coming my way, I'll remember that." Keenly, he registered their calm heartbeats and steady expressions. He wasn't sure how he felt about knowing the truth, but he knew how he was going to act on it. "When the bullets start coming my way, I'll remember that." Lurching forwards, he made a point to walk by very closely to the man who had spoken. Without any reactions forthcoming however, he was forced to continue his path out of the room and there was an audible group-wide exhale when he disappeared.

Eyebrows raised, Warfield walked through the room to the tired and worn looking men. "I didn't know it was Dominion policy to hire people who had connections with known terrorists, but nicely done either way."

"Prince Valerian is a smart man," the older man who had confronted Tychus spoke, holding his thick gloved hand out for a shake. "Wouldn't surprise me none if he had been getting ready to side with the Raiders for a very long time, but I meant what I said."

Warfield had no choice but to reciprocate the gesture and clasped his hand, aware of the feeling of a pulse beneath but thankful there was no dark voices whispering in his ear about it. "Well, if everyone else who came over here feels the same as you, then maybe we can get this ship running sooner than later—Got a lot of man power just sitting around."
With conversation budding between Warfield and the uninfested men, Swann looked up at Stetmann and shook his head. "I'm not sure which I don't believe more: hybrid aliens invading Korhal, or Tychus walking away from that." Stetmann chuckled weakly, he was keeping a keen eye on Tychus and wondered if anyone else was too.

"Maybe there is hope for us? Too soon to say that I think, but the scientists on the Bucephalus have all the data and samples I could send them. We should see some results soon, so that's good. I better get back to the lab." The hybrid dominated his thoughts of course, how couldn't it? But the idea of getting back to working on projects he could actually see results from was calming, not to mention Lasarra's presence. It was amazing! Every little thought that wasn't his own, that had been guiding him in strange ways, became visible and dismiss-able. The protoss really were an incredible race. He didn't even hear if anyone else addressed him on his way out.

"Stetmann?" Jayce blinked, watching the scientist go. It wasn't surprising that he was already in his own little world though, he was known for that. She really did want to see the results of the tests though, her own anyway.

"Eh, don't worry about him." Swann rumbled, walking over to the table Jayce was sitting at and Lasarra stood beside. If he knew about her little indiscretion with Tychus, he gave no indication. "When are you getting back to work?"

Lips curling into a smile, Jayce shook her head. "You're a slave driver. No, really, I ain't even getting paid nowadays."

"Hah, well I'm sure prince charming will keep the basics covered for now at least. I expect to see you reporting in later!"

"Yes sir."

Before he turned to go Swann hesitated, then looked up at Lasarra. "And uh, Lasarra was it? Thank you." Jayces eyebrows shot up in surprise, coaxing anything other than grumbling and swearing out of Swann was difficult even if he knew you well. Lasarra accepted it gracefully.

The longer I remain here, the more certain I am that this was the correct course of action. You are welcome, Rory Swann.

A grunt in response and the dour man left. Jayce could feel worry radiating off of Lasarra and wondered if she meant to broadcast her emotions like that, or if that mind reading business had made a connection of sorts. A flicker of amusement tickled her mind and Lasarra looked back down at the scruffy terran woman.

As we communicate in different ways, any feeling you perceive from me is voluntary on my part, Jayce.

"Ah." Sheepish, it was the water cup all over again, she nodded and glanced back up at the screen, knowing full well what caused that worry.

It is likely my people already know of these creatures, but I must warn them regardless. I will go speak with your commander, James Raynor. Bidding Jayce farewell, Lasarra too made her way out of the cantina.

A glance at Warfield and the group of three men who had come in showed him getting introduced to the standard carry-on equipment that the mechanics and engineers wore. Next he'll be in overalls and covered in grease. The thought made her smirk in amusement, which lead to a new thought. Where
did Tychus go? Maybe it would be best to just leave him be and go get some rest before she had to get back to work. Nodding to herself and standing into a stretch, that seemed to be the right order of business. Tychus was clearly not in a sociable mood and though the dark bags under her eyes had lessened, they could use some more work.

As the door to her single room hissed open, it was a surprise when a cloud of cigarette smoke wafted out to greet her. Quirking a brow, Jayce saw Tychus sitting on her small metal stool, which would have been comical by itself were it not for a little manual, a glance couldn't show for what, pressed flat before him and small shredded bits of paper showing how he had to work at not ripping it up. He didn't even have the damn lights on.

"You studying for the finals or something?" Flicking the light on and stepping in, Jayce eyed him and the Spectre outfit that fit him more like paint than a suit. Red beams zipped across power strips rhythmically, indicating the powered up status of the suit, and she wondered how often he'd put it to use already.

Tugging her datapad free from her belt, she placed it on the bed stand and wondered if he'd even respond, considering the silence she had been greeted with so far. She was in the process of laying in bed, ready to sleep whether he was there or not, when he finally spoke.

"I'm leaving."

Jerking back up into a sitting position, Jayce stared at his broad back. "Leaving? But what about your," refraining from waving her hand in his direction, his condition need not be pointed out.

Straightening up, he was keeping everything under careful control. The other infested men were all busy, and he'd very pointedly shoved Stetmann out of his mind the second he felt the man's presence. They were alone. Turning on the stool to face Jayce, he took a long drag from his smoke before responding. "Jimmy 'n them want to go running from one apocalypse to the next, that's their prerogative. It isn't mine and if I have to stay like this to not die, then fine."

"Wait, one sec." Standing up, Jayce fiddled with the pin that she had kept on at just about all times. Once removed, it was a simple matter to disable it and toss it on the bedside desk with a minor clatter. "Now we're alone." Turning her eyes back to him, she frowned. "Where would you go then?"

"Don't know, come with me." Jerking his head in the direction of the door, he observed her reaction carefully. Heart rate increasing, expressions flitting across her face, there was clearly some kind of inner struggle going on. "A few little system runners left, not hard to get in one and go." He coaxed, but the blank expression she schooled onto her face didn't look promising.

Trying to generate some saliva for her suddenly dry mouth, Jayce swallowed and shook her head, taking a step towards Tychus. "You're a big man, Tychus. I just didn't realize you were an equal-sized coward." It hurt to say it, and the anger flickering across his face was not helping to steel her resolve.

Tychus was raising himself to a stand, teeth clenched, and Jayces words reaffirmed themselves; yes, Tychus was a very big man indeed, and she'd be damned if he wasn't scary looking when he was angry. Wavering and taking a half step back, sheer belligerence allowed her to keep talking. "Things are just finally starting to look up for you and them and you're gonna cut loose and run because what, some more aliens show up?"

Pinching the hot tip off the remains of his smoke between the claws of his index and thumb, it fell to the ground like a little meteor as he regarded her. Armor was slamming down around his soul, and
his inner cynic was giving him a round of I-told-you-so. Still, he held off from walking out just yet. "What do you owe them, huh? Nothing, I bet. Maybe I was wrong about you, Jayce." Dropping the butt of his cigarette, he seethed. Jayce winced at the malice he managed to put behind her name. "Thought you were a little higher than the common rabble, looks like you're just a dirt-pushing fool like the rest. You can let them herd you around all you want, least I offered." Done with the conversation, he made to leave but only got a half step before he noticed her hand slapping against the pistol she kept strapped to her leg. It would have been an amusing gesture, were he not already pissed. "Don't." He warned.

She wasn't going to draw the weapon, not really, but it got his attention and that is what she wanted. Angry in her own right, Jayce all but hissed. "You are barely in control of yourself, even here, Tychus! You get on a ship and get out of range of that Protoss and Broodmother, and you're gonna be nothin' but a real animal: zerg through an through." Tychus wasn't moving, so at least he was listening. "You get on a ship and I swear to you, I'll get on this ships guns and shoot your ass down myself—and that'd be mercy."

Tychus eyed her for a time, weighing options. A little voice, like a devil on his shoulder, whispered. You could just kill her and go. But he knew that wasn't his own, and if he really was his own master, he knew he'd need to ignore it. Finally, he muttered. "Wasted 9 years of my life for being altruistic and saving Jimmy's ass the one time. Threw myself, body and soul, to the Queen of Blades a second. Ain't doin' it a third time, girl." With a step, he was across the small room and in her own space, hand clasped around hers and her gun firmly. There was no sting of fear in his nose and when he looked down at her, Jayce seemed wholly at peace with whatever he was about to choose to do. "They cure me and I'm gone. I don't owe anyone anything, and I'm no coward."

A metallic click followed by two and a half steps and Tychus was gone, leaving Jayce alone. It felt as though his large, and what had become comforting, presence had been replaced by an equal-sized sense of loss. Even as she sank into her too-hard bed and sobbed with renewed misery, she was tugging her datapad off the counter and connecting to surveillance of all the smaller ships that were operable. Later, she would realize he had clicked the gun's safety back on.

"You get that, Matt?" Raynor blew a cloud of smoke towards the holo of Jayce sitting on her bed and sobbing, but dutifully following through with her threat. The moment she had turned off the pin he figured the two would be running for a ship together, and he found himself pleasantly surprised when he took over the security camera.

"Yes, sir. Want me to lock down all ships Tychus is capable of piloting?"

"No." Resting his head against the soft and worn headrest of his chair, he smiled slightly. "Tychus ain't goin' anywhere, and if I'm wrong? She's waiting."

"You think he won't try? But why?"

"He realized his plan was shit." Smirking, he knew how his old friend operated. He was just desperate is all. "I ain't holdin' him here when he's cured though, he was right about all he gave up."

"If you're sure, Jim."

Raynor's hand fell on air when he tried to rest it on his broken arm rest and he sighed, tossing the offending limb to his thigh instead. "I am."

Stetmann didn't even look at Shlassa when he entered the lab and immediately approached his desk, checking to see if the Bucephalus lab had finished the first round of tests. He had paused a few minutes earlier to check up on Tychus, but what he found was the equivalent of a pack of rabid
guard dogs coming at him and he had withdrawn immediately.

"Stetmann."

"Hm? What, Shlassa?" Unfortunately they hadn't, and he found himself turning to face Shlassa.

"Something has happened. Show me." The broodmother was oddly subdued sounding, and the tone struck him as ominous.

"Okay well, we received a transmission and it was from Korhal and-"

"Show me, Stetmann." Stressing the words, Shlassa grasped at the straws of patience she barely had.

"Ah. I guess that would be easier." Catching on, Stetmann half closed his eyes and focused. It seemed as though he was watching what happened on the TV through a cloud, and he furrowed his brows.

"The Protoss weakens you." Shlassa muttered scornfully, watching the video through Stetmann's eyes all the same.

"Lasarra helps us think, clears our heads. It is a small price to pay for clarity, Shlassa." Stetmann vaguely registered the sharp clacking of Shlassa's front mandibles colliding with one another, a sound he'd come to know as a very upset gesture.

"Hybrid."

"Do the zerg, and Kerrigan, know about hybrid?" Stetmann was surprised, eager to start asking questions and writing notes already.

"Our Queen has been preparing us for a great war, an end of all things, for years. The hybrid are the beginning, all zerg know this." Glowing eyes stared at Stetmann, calculating, as the shared vision ended. "We must fight, Stetmann."

Blinking rapidly as if to clear the fuzzy vision from his eyes, Stetmann shook his head slightly and refocused on Shlassa with worry. If the broodmother was just as riled about the hybrid as the protoss, this was maybe as serious as Jim indicated and more. "The message was from the Terran capital world, Korhal. We are going there and we are going to fight them."

Overlong fingertips clicking together, Shlassa muttered. "My Queen has charged me with your protection and to follow you, my charges, wherever you may go. I will help you fight the hybrid." It was a simple statement, but it took all she had to say it. *Adapt or die*, Shlassa reminded herself.

"I'm not really sure how you can help, Shlassa." Stetmann muttered uncomfortably. It was strange to feel a connection to the creature, and acknowledging that he'd feel something other than pleased if she was to die made him feel like a traitor. "There will be millions of terrans on that planet. We don't even know how we're going to get down there yet."

"When the time comes, I will be ready to assist you." Dipping her head, Shlassa indicated the end of their conversation. Already the broodmother had some ideas forming, and she partly blamed her connection with their terran minds for it.
Hoodwinks and Storytelling

Korhal, Augustgrad – Mengsk Palace

Arcturus greeted the day with vigor, helping himself to a particularly fine brandy to celebrate his good spirits and more importantly, complete and utter victory. The Emperor was soon assimilating information his lessers, and they were very much lesser, had gathered for him overnight. It had initially severely galled him that so many of his so-called loyal Dominion soldiers had outright run from the hybrid, forsaking him without a second glance, but he reasoned that it would serve him well in the end.

There was no room in his great empire for those who were not completely and wholly loyal, although Mengsk wasn't going to kid himself and assume perfection could be captured on that front. The way the hybrid and their squads had been routing the traitors and deserters completely out of Augustgrad since introducing them did give him a small spark of hope, however.

Eager to participate in viewing the route and destruction of said traitors, Arcturus Mengsk made his way to his favorite and very private comm room. The familiar V shape room, its two walls open for full view of the empire that lay beneath him, would normally give him a sense of power that he could almost drink in, were it not for a familiar man standing at one of them and admiring the view himself.

Dr. Narud had his hands clasped behind his back and his cheeks were raised in a smile that Arcturus couldn't see, not that he cared. Arcturus Mengsk was immediately angry at his sanctuary's defilement.

"Narud! Just what the hell do you think you're doing here? There had better be a damned good reason, else you'll be spending the rest of your days in a box. Genius or not." He had, as always, carefully regulated his expression, but his anger bled into his words like poison.

"Oh, Arcturus," the snowy white older man replied chidingly. The nerve. "There is, indeed, a very good reason why I am here." He continued to stare out, admiring the destruction of his creations from a nice safe distance. "Do the hybrid please you?"

"I don't give a rats ass about your mad scientist tinker toys. How did you get in here? I'm contacting security." Mengsk had immediately become guarded. How did Narud get in here? There were guards and security checks and any number of measures in place to keep the most important person in the sector, himself, secure. Security had also not burst through the door behind him, ready to take Narud into custody, as they were expected to.

"That is a shame. You really did help a lot in their creation, you know." Condescending on his best day, Narud's tone was the kind you use on a naughty toddler who didn't understand the gravity of what he had done. Mengsk bristled. "How did I get in here? Why, Emperor Mengsk." Narud chuckled. Something strange was happening and Mengsk took a half step back, a trickle of apprehension running down his spine. As Narud spoke, the pitch of his voice lowered and everything that made it Narud became something else. Intimately familiar.

"I got in here, because I am you." Slowly turning to face the now shocked Emperor, it looked as though Narud's entire form rippled through water and changed completely. He had become Emperor Arcturus Mengsk.

"As they say: your people are now my people, Arcturus." As the doppelganger smiled, its eyes gleamed a dull red. "I hope you enjoy the tender ministrations you usually save for those who
displease you, they are all yours to appreciate now." In shock, the real Arcturus barely registered the doors behind him opening and the heavy gate of men in power armor approaching. "You were one of my best pawns, and that is a real compliment." His doppelganger was smiling that victory smile he had worn when he woke up that morning. "Take this impostor away."

All at once, as the heavy armored hand of a hardskin clasped around his shoulder, the real Arcturus seemed to spring to life. "No! That man is the real impostor! Get your hand off of me, I am your Emperor! Take him away for interrogation immediately!" He was barking out orders in his most official tone, the tone that nobody ignored under pain of death or worse, and he was being utterly ignored. Howling in animal rage, he struggled every step of the way against the marines in pure black armor, a futile gesture, and caught one last glimpse of himself grinning before the doors shut.

**Hyperion – Deep Space**

Lasarra stood beside Raynor, watching her vessel glide smoothly into space without her in it. The AI, more like a living being than a simple machine, had its directions and message to deliver: A warning to any protoss of the hybrid and their location.

"Really appreciate you staying on with us, Lasarra. If we're not all dead by the end of this, I promise I'll help you get back to your people." Raynor was enjoying the calming effect she had, allowing him to focus on planning for the challenges ahead. The warp prism, Lasarra having told him the name of the transport vessel, seemed like a delicate insect as it slipped beyond his sight - but he knew better. Protoss could mix efficiency and beauty better than anyone.

*My path is laid before me, and I shall not falter. Although I am not of our fearless warrior caste or a mighty leader, when fate had our paths collide on Kaldir I chose to bend and not break. I will continue to bend as necessary, James Raynor.* Thoughtfully, Lasarra caressed the gem embedded in the center of her suit. The gem, a deep blue, gleamed but was otherwise without power. Her suit simply allowed for survival in the environment of Kaldir, and without the killer cold grasping for her life it lay dormant.

"Yeah. Well, thanks." Raynor sighed quietly, lifting up his datapad and observing the various reports sent to him hourly. Fate, if it was a real force, was a bitch. "Got a message from Swann here, looks like he'll be ready to give us a full report soon. Don't think he'll have anything good to say, though."

*All will be well. This Prince Valerian, his people think well of him. I believe he will be a strong ally to you, although his personal thoughts are closed to me.* They had begun walking together, if only for the sake of it. There was nowhere either being needed to be physically at the moment.

"Been keeping an ear out, have you? That's good, I've been leery of having so many of Valerian's people on my ship. No one giving you any trouble?"

Ducking her head carefully as they passed through a doorway, Lasarra gave her head the slightest shake - any physical gestures at all were odd for protoss, and Raynor made note of it. *Your thoughts, as with the other infested, are like a deep ocean - I can only see its glimmering surface. But the other terrans, their thoughts are often so loud as to overwhelm when they are in groups. I have taken to being with Jayce and helping as I can, this brings me close to the other terrans and also, I suspect, protects the both of us from any physical ill will.* A trickle of amusement laced her soft-spoken mental communication.

"You got that right, after Tychus almost sheared that one morons head off." Raynor chuckled in mirth at the thought as he lit up a cigarette, having caught wind of the situation from Valerian. The prince had, oddly enough, been on Jayce and Tychus' side right away, and they sorted the situation out quietly. The after effect, no doubt due to that one fools mouth, was that Jayce was treated quite a
It is as you say, Tychus' actions have sewn a strange peace. A ripple of discontent flowed around Tychus' name, disappearing as quick as it had been hinted. Without guidance, their feet had lead them to a small walkway that overlooked a rather busy work bay. Having been ready to question her feelings towards Tychus, Raynor completely forgot the question when the subject of their thoughts was seen below lifting a large part on to a hover dolly for one of Valerian's men.

"Well I'll be." Furrowing his brows, it was an effortless mental motion to give Tychus the equivalent of a friendly shove. The big man visibly jerked and looked sharply up at Raynor and Lasarra, a couple people near him scattering like ants at the snap movement, making a big shrugging gesture at them. Several others followed his gaze and both Lasarra and Raynor were the subject of some friendly, if a bit nervous, waves.

What, Jimmy?

Mingling with the locals all the sudden, Tychus?

Gettin' mighty tired of sitting out here in space doing nothing, why don't you get off your ass and help too?

Closed from their mental communication, Lasarra came to an odd realization- this is what it felt like to be a terran, in a way. Resting a hand on the railing, she leaned forwards and perused the thoughts of the terrans around Tychus, curious. There was a palpable buzzing of nervousness, but without a doubt Tychus had sewn a seed of respect among a few with his effort to help. Coming back to the present, it seemed the two men had finished their silent exchange- at least that is what she gathered when Tychus held up a middle finger to Raynor and resumed his heavy lifting without a look back.

That gesture is rude, is it not? Jim was chuckling and shaking his head, but seemed pleased from what she could tell.

"Yeah, but it was a friendly kind of rude."

I shall simply take your word for it. Jayce has been teaching me terran mannerisms and they are very strange.

"We're all different, it makes for some interesting exchanges." About to ask after Lasarra's discontent regarding Tychus, Raynor's thoughts were once again interrupted. A priority transmission was being fed through his datapad and he accepted it quickly, holding the small tool aloft so Lasarra could watch as well. Might as well introduce her to Valerian, since he was calling.

"Jim!" Valerian's eyebrows raised in surprised as he pointedly looked at Lasarra. "I am glad to see you, and this is the protoss I've heard much about."

"Hello Junior, her name is Lasarra." Thumbing in Lasarra's direction, she inclined her head in quiet greetings. "What's this about? I know you didn't call just to get a look at her."

"No." Valerian's handsome features sobered into a frown. "I have here the current results of the testing we've been able to do with regards to your infestation, is everyone patched through?"

Swann's voice crackled through the small comm. "Yeah spanky, got all the kids hooked up and we're listening. Only us three can talk though, no need to turn this call into a circus."

"Heh, good thinking." Raynor smirked, he could feel the displeasure rippling through the unfortunate link he had with each infested man.
"Right, anyways." Valerian, looking bemused, read through the report one more time and picked out the choice parts. "The zerg hyper-evolutionary virus is extremely resistant to treatments, mutating faster than any conventional cure can break it down- yours is proving no different. Not only that but full body scans reveal that very little about you remains human, despite looking otherwise. It is unclear if, should we find a way to reverse the infestation, that your organs or body parts would be restored at all." By this time Valerian was grimacing, feeling as though he was delivering a death sentence. "That would, of course, prove extremely fatal."

Raynor felt like he had been punched in the gut, and the five other infested men were feeling similar. Still, he tried his best to cover it up and remain strong for them. "I remember Doc Hansen saying something similar, at least about the rate of mutation anyway. What's the odds your boys can come up with somethin' better than maybes if we can get to one of your Moebius labs?"

Valerian seemed to light up, and the tone of his voice sounded hopeful. Or maybe it was just Raynor's imagination, he couldn't be sure at this point. "Oh Jim. If we could get to one of my labs, the possibilities are endless. I did not think you'd be so willing to go to one, however."

Shrugging and frowning, Raynor grumbled. "Remain infested and face eventual loss of self and insanity or be poked at in some lab, neither are appealing. But I do know which option has no chance of seeing us get fixed up, too."

"Very true. The current state of your ship and the matter of the hybrid on Korhal, however, means that we cannot go to one of my facilities until these issues are addressed, Jim."

"Valerian, I just don't see what we can do down there. I don't think you understand how hard it is to be around even a few normal people right now, either." The sensory overload would be terrible, and there was no doubt in his mind that there would be repercussions. Bad ones.

"You are possessed of strength and abilities that no terran could ever dream of right now, Jim. My father has brought his ultimate weapons to bear, and I believe wholeheartedly that we need that strength to defeat him. If we can at all." Valerian's gray eyes gleamed, his hands tightened behind his back in anticipation- he'd made the pitch and the ball was in Jim's court now.

I can help you not be overwhelmed, Jim. Lasarra, speaking to both men, reasoned. Raynor would have given anything for her to take it back just then, but kept his expression neutral. Too late now, Valerian grabbed the opportunity.

"With Lasarra's aid, you can rest assured you'll be in full control of yourselves. We may be able to use technology to help on that end, as well." That was as far as Valerian was willing to press, and he held his breath quietly.

"Give us a sec, Junior." At Valerian's nod, Raynor fell back on the mental link, which had been ominously silent, and waited for feedback. He vaguely registered Lasarra's quiet sorry that was just for him to hear.

If we're gonna be stuck like this forever, Jimmy, then maybe it's time to dig in and do some damage. Tychus, spoiling for a fight, spoke first. But there was that deeper side of Tychus, spinning plans upon plans and looking from a different angle, that let Jim know a fight wasn't all he was thinking about.

I'll do what Prince Valerian asks, but it don't mean I gotta like it. Warfield. Touching with his mind was like being water crashing into stone, the man's loyalty was a touch on the insane side- especially given how he'd been burned by daddy Mengsk. I just want to be me again.
Valerian holds all the cards right now, Jim. We don't have a crew anymore and he's got more than enough firepower to take us out if he doesn't like how this conversation goes. Horner, reliable and always looking at the facts. Raynor always felt a twinge of guilt when he touched Matt's mind, knowing how he loathed what had become of himself and how he struggled with his strong morals now.

I'd very much like to see Valerian's lab! I am sure we can make this work Jim, like we always do. Stetmann... Well, his mind was like being hit with a strong shot of coffee, maybe something a bit stronger. Kid was brilliant, and being connected with him only confirmed it, but his rapid thought process would give Jim a killer headache if he focused on him for too long.

He's actin' like we got a choice, Jim. We don't. Swann, as surly in his mind as he was in person, all but growled his displeasure. It wasn't on purpose, but Raynor felt an alarming undercurrent of anguish from his old friend whenever they spoke like this, and he did his best to stay out of that private place in his mind. He had his own pain, and knew full well he wouldn't appreciate his friends observing it.

Nodding thoughtfully, Jim refocused on the green holographic display of Valerian's face. It had only been a few moments time. "Don't got much of a choice now do we, Valerian?" Before the handsome prince could respond, Jim waved him off sharply. "Doesn't matter. You are right about one thing: those hybrid are hell on wheels and you're gonna need all the firepower you can get to take them out. We're with you."

Nodding, if a bit stiffly, Valerian smoothly reassured his audience. "Once the situation on Korhal has been brought under control, you will have immediate access to the best care this sector has to offer. Now, on to more immediate concerns. I believe you have a report on the status of the Hyperion, Swann?"

The comm crackled with static as Swann shuffled something around and muttered to himself before becoming clear again. "Yeah, yeah I do. We need parts that we don't got and this thing is one step shy of needing a real shipyard to repair it." There was a scraping noise that left Jim quirking a brow, and he inadvertently felt Swann's affection for the ship, as though it was a real person, and realized he was giving it a fond pat. "You got two choices: we limp straight to Korhal and probably get blown to pieces once they realize how damaged we are, or we find a quiet place to hunker down and make our own replacements with local minerals and vespene."

"That is very unfortunate. Our scanners have shown that there are no inhabitable planets in this particular corner of space, never mind ones with resources we can freely gather. I fear Korhal might be our only option." Valerian looked concerned, and he had every right to be. Losing the Hyperion in an attempt to land on Korhal would be devastating, and though the planet was in a state of disarray there was doubtless planetary defenses still online.

Deadman's Port. Horner, his mental connection all but writhing in displeasure at the thought of the place, suggested quietly.

"Matt thinks we can hide out in Deadman's Port. That ain't so far away, and he's in good with Mira Han." The idea wasn't appealing, but Raynor was quickly growing to appreciate it by the second. Hell of a lot better than being blown up for sure.

"Ah. I suppose it is an option, yes... I've had some dealings with miss Han since the battle of Char. Quite the character." Now that was a surprise! Jim smirked at the thought of the prince trying to deal with that crazy pink sprite of a merc.

"We have the tools to hide our infestation to scanners. Yeah, I'm likin' it more by the second. Lets
see if we can get Mira on the horn, shall we?"

Fifty credits says I can find a few ladies there willing to **experiment** on me.

*You are terrible, Tychus.* Jim cringed, trying very hard to not get any mental imagery that his roguish friend might be conjuring up.

Unaware of their unique conversation, Valerian nodded and kept his skepticism to himself. Their options were limited and being picky was not going to get them anywhere. Mira did good business and if he had to throw some credits down to make this work, then he'd do it. "Very well. Let's get some coordinates laid out and begin limping the Hyperion to Deadman's Port, and I'll see about contacting Mira Han."

As the comm closed, Jim hooked it back to his belt tiredly. He almost forgot Lasarra was standing right there. "You get all that, Lasarra?"

*Yes, Jim. As before, Valerian Mengsk's thoughts are well guarded. I do not believe I can discern any deeper plans or motives from him without force, which is not recommended.*

"No, we'll just have to do this the old terran way."

*What way is that?*

"With a bit of blind luck and uncertainty." Jim smirked.

*I am not certain that I will ever grow to appreciate this way.* Privately, Lasarra was relieved that Jim forgot to question her momentary slip regarding Tychus. She would not tell him of course, but she would not lie either and the man would seek out answers for himself. Lasarra would respect Jayce's privacy and keep her own feelings about Tychus and his appetite for destruction to herself.

The occupants of the two battlecruisers practically vibrated with excitement and nerves when the final reparations had been made. More than a few prayers were uttered over on the Hyperion, too. The Bucephalus was a very grand vessel and the Hyperion, while legendary, had seen better days- its temporary crew were altogether unsure of themselves in the new environment.

Swann and Jayce, at their respective stations, were both muttering encouragement to the ship and patting it fondly; the latter having learned from the former. Horner's calm voice counted down over the intercom, and the core of the ship roared to life- launching them into warp. After the initial fear wore off, work recommenced- though at a slower pace, as the human body did not appreciate the rigors of warp travel.

Jayce was getting more annoyed by the hour. It seemed Tychus would pop up everywhere now, helping move this or hold that, all while pointedly ignoring her- not that she tried to make contact, mind you. It all started to feel like he was engineering it that way, and the immaturity of it was grating on her nerves, though she had no real proof that was the case. It did not help at all that everyone thought the two were thick as thieves.

As soon as Tychus had left her room the other night, Jayce forced herself to take a long step back from their strange relationship and examine it critically. Was it just two people brought together by a shared trauma, or more? Under control of the broodmother he had almost killed her, certainly. But Tychus also kept her from shooting herself, that was him. The whole group of infested men had charged into that damned station to save her, despite threat of death or worse for themselves, not to mention the way Tychus killed the sniveling Markus and then- Jayce turned a little green at the thought.
A sharp stab of realization struck then, at the vivid recalling of Tychus running his tongue across the organic blade and tasting blood. Unable to concentrate on greasing the gears she had been working on, Jayce froze. Blood. Tychus in the claustrophobic walkway, transfixed, and the kiss that followed- just for a taste. The spray can that had been firmly in her grip a moment before slipped through dead fingertips and clattered to the floor. How close to death have I been, how many times have I not even noticed? Were it not for the draining pull of warp travel, Jayce surely would have launched into a full-blown panic attack.

Lasarra, already walking towards Jayce, became keenly aware of the woman's sharp spike of terror and paused. The cause was quickly discerned and Lasarra felt a stirring of sadness for the terran woman, that it took her so long to see. Carefully, she eased Jayces fears and calmed her a small amount- this was an important realization, and Lasarra wanted to make sure that Jayce did not feel intruded upon, so she did not make her presence known. Content with what she had done, Lasarra changed course and went to busy herself elsewhere.

Panic dulled into a hazy glow of fear, leaving Jayce shaking her head slowly. Kneeling down, she clasped her trembling hand around the canister and resolved to continue working while thinking. Yes, death was her companion throughout this entire affair, but as reason took root and tamped down the animal fear that all humans felt at the thought of their own mortality, she resumed her thoughtful critique.

"Get a damn grip." Muttering, Jayce straightened up and leaned into the open panel until her feet left the floor and she was back to greasing joints and poking at parts to make sure nothing was loose while she was in the area. When her heart spoke, insistent, she listened to it as well. Their personalities meshed well, you couldn't fake that, and if the pull to kill was really as strong as she was realizing- Tychus was doing damn well for himself in keeping it under control. He'd stuck up for her and their partnership felt as real as anything, rivaled only by her relationship with Swann- which was altogether different.

He'd also offered to take her away with him, misguided as the idea was. This was perhaps the biggest tell that there was something real, she figured. But what do I really know about him? The thought tickled at her mind, and she decided to take a look at his record- as told by the Dominion. It was no doubt a glowing recount of his life exploits before prison, she chuckled to herself, but maybe some grains of truth could be discerned from it. Yes, that was the plan. Hopping out of the panel and using her sonic wrench to seal it in place firmly, the clattering of the machine louder than usual due to the ship vibrating, she had to clench her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering.

Tychus watched Jayce retreat through a door and quirked a brow, that was an interesting show. When she unconsciously touched her fingertips to her lips, he thought he had an inkling of what was going on in that odd head of hers. A warning vibration alerted him of the low battery on his suits cloaking unit, and he turned it off. Sneaking wouldn't be necessary for the next part of this, he was certain.

"Captain," The adjutant droned at Horner, who took immediate interest in what the AI had to say. "Restricted database access by unauthorized personnel detected."

"Oh yeah?" Scowling, Horner dropped his spoon into the unappealing goo of his rations and straightened immediately. If Valerian was betraying them, things were about to get real messy. "Who and where?"

"Junior Mechanical Engineer, Burrough, Jayce. Location: Storage sector B, worker access terminal."

Access to the database shouldn't even be possible from that low level a terminal, but this was Jayce and Horner bit back the verbal objection he had. "What is she attempting to access?"
Subject Jayce has circumvented access restrictions already and is looking through personnel records." Frowning, Matt kept his seat and considered. It was unlikely Jayce had thrown in her lot with Valerian as some kind of mole, and there was certainly more sensitive files on the Hyperion than what she was accessing right now. "Who is she looking at?"

"Subject: Findlay, Tychus. His criminal record is open."

"Hah," Matt grinned broadly and grabbed his spoon back up, shaking his head. "Leave Jayce be, but alert me if she accesses anything else in the database, adjutant." If Jayce wanted to educate herself about Tychus, then he wasn't about to stop her. Maybe pulling the wool from her own eyes would be a wake up call, and all the infested men wouldn't have to be subjected to her and Tychus macking on each other in every damn nook and cranny of the ship.

"Yes, Captain."

*Wow, this list could be a book.* Jayce thought to herself with some alarm. Accessing Tychus' criminal record was a restricted action, but if you wanted to hide files from Jayce you best not do it on her ship. Smirking, she patted the console fondly, having dug into the physical guts of the terminal and routed it to higher access levels- adjutant couldn't do anything about that. Storage sector B was a quiet place, full of parts and machinery dedicated to setting up bases- nobody would be here.

She didn't even bother turning the lights on, which were connected to a heavy switch- like the armory, instead of automated to turn on at movement like the majority of smaller spaces on the ship. Letting out a slow breath, Jayce absorbed the information. The only part she didn't read was his record during his imprisonment before cryo, that didn't matter much.

Tychus looked at the storage sector door and decided he'd waited long enough, time to see what she was up to. One thing was for sure, she better not try to lie. Heavy steel doors parted with a hiss and a clank as he walked into the dark room.

The definitive *shunk* of doors opening and closing, along with a line of light, startled Jayce. Looking up from the console, fingers poised to close everything down quickly, she thought better of herself and took a half step away from the console instead. The figure that filled the doorway, albeit briefly, was pretty much unmistakable for any other person than the subject of her reading. Tychus' eyes gleamed from the dark when the weak light of the console touched them.

"Reading in the dark like that is gonna strain your eyes, sugar." His tone was amused, and his eyes shifted from the side of the console to the woman. She had gone rigid and her hands were clenched into fists, all puffed up and ready for a confrontation. Taking another long step forwards, he glanced at the screen and smirked at what he saw. "Who's that handsome individual?"

"Maybe a little hard to recognize now, but it is you." Jayce almost stepped backwards but decided to keep still instead, and so she was left looking up at him. "You have been following me around, haven't you?"

Snorting, Tychus rolled his eyes. "Believe it or not, I'm just makin' sure nobody else gets any bright ideas about takin' liberties with you." Jayce wasn't so sure she believed that, and gave him a small shrug. Curious, having not looked at his own criminal record in quite some time, Tychus looked away from her and casually scrolled through the list, chuckling as some brought back memories.

"You've already read mine, I'm sure."

"Yours doesn't even have a picture. Makes me wonder how you got into this whole outfit to begin with." All the Dominion had on Jayce was that she was an associate of Raynor's Raiders, Tychus
had been looking forward to an exciting read and came out sadly disappointed.

Relaxing slightly, Jayce smiled and shook her head. "Maybe I'm better at hiding my crimes?"

"You were one step shy of shooting your foot off the other night, girl. Why, I'm willing to bet you haven't even killed anyone." He had been angry that night, of course, but putting the safety back on before she shot herself by accident was the least he could do.

"I wouldn't really consider that an accomplishment, Tychus." Jayce frowned, demeanor darkening considerably as memories were dredged up. "That's a bet you'd lose, though."

Genuinely surprised, Tychus looked her over again. Usually he was great at reading people, even took pride in that keen observational skill, and reassessing Jayce physically came back with what he had initially thought: pure civvy. "Well, do tell. We've got plenty of time before we get to the charming vacation spot of Deadman's Rock." In a sweeping gesture, he indicated for Jayce to sit on a nearby box.

Looking towards the box in the low light she paused briefly before following through without complaint, settling down on it and letting out a tired sigh. What she wouldn't give for a nap right now. "Fine. Not much to tell, though."

Tychus settled down beside her and rested his hands on his knees. "Tell me how you, a civvy, are a murderer." He seemed genuinely curious, and he certainly was.

Adjusting her position and shuffling until she was more comfortable, Jayce frowned to herself. No one had ever been told exactly what happened before they found her in that escape pod, and she was already having misgivings. It did not help that a little voice at the back of her mind was mocking, how she so willingly bent to Tychus and spilled her guts for him. A more reasonable force inside her simply allowed that it was a confirmation of their relationship. Dragging a boot up on to the box, she curled her arms around her knee and rested her chin atop it, then the story began.

"First, you gotta know that my home planet, Summerset, was originally a Confederacy colony."

"Lots of colonies were Confed colonies." Tychus butted in and caught a sharp glare.

"You want the damn story, you're listening to all of it, now shut up." Raising his hands in a gesture of surrender, Tychus crossed his arms and settled in for what was no doubt going to be a boring tale.

Letting out an annoyed huff, Jayce continued. "This was just a small fringe colony, nothing really special about it. Had good resources but not enough to attract any big industry, just enough to live happily and comfortably."

Smiling, Jayce closed her eyes and remembered the bright pink sky of the evening and the vast cluster of space dust between the planet and its sun that gave it a beautiful, colorful sky. "But every year, Confederacy shuttles would arrive and collect of-age women and men, never to be seen again. There wasn't anything the colony could do, of course, they didn't have weapons and any petitions or attempts to contact officials over this were quite ignored."

"This went on for years, from the very start of the colony, until Mengsk and his Sons of Korhal toppled the Confederacy and founded the Dominion." Tychus was tilting his head left to right, wishing for a fast forward. Jayce continued stoically.

"The yearly harvesting of people stopped all the sudden, and it seemed that the colonists were free to recover and move past this dark history of abduction. We had no idea about the Dominion, the aliens, anything like that. Completely earthbound."
"One year of peace while the Dominion was forming up, that was all we were allowed. I was of age and my parents had spoken to me already of probably being taken next, but my year came and went and I was safe at home and that was all that mattered. The next year, however, the exact same men arrived- now flying Dominion colors." Tychus had started to refocus, sensing the culmination of the story approaching.

"The colonists wouldn't have it any more, they had shed their fear and were attempting to move past what had happened to them. That day, I was abducted with my mother. I knew my father died, he was shot in the chest after he jumped one man with a kitchen knife and cut his throat. I saw the colony burning as I was loaded on a shuttle with a group of other women. When we were in space, flying away from home, we found out what really happened to all those people who were taken."

Jayce clenched her jaw, remembering the cruel voices, sobs and fear. Remembering mother, being strong for her and the other girls.

Shaking her head and taking a deep breath she continued, ready to set the secret free. "Slavers. They murdered Confederacy and Dominion people for their outfits, and painted up their shitty shuttles to complete the ruse. Fear of the government was a good cover, I guess. I heard all this from an ugly son of a bitch named Dago, their leader. We were all bound to be whored out for cash and fed drugs to be kept docile."

"Bunch of sheep." Tychus muttered, his pessimism towards the masses shining through.

"Yeah, they were. But I can't speak for them or their reasoning, all I know is my parents fought to keep me at least." Jayce shrugged, she'd gone through the gamut of emotions over the entire situation many times over, and had settled for apathy.

"Anyway. Shortly after being informed of our future, Dago and his crew decided to give us a preview. Guess if you're the boss you don't get a pay cut for soiling the goods, eh?" Smirking, Jayce shook her head and stared into the glow of the monitor, remembering vividly. "I bit off a guys ear when he tried to get me, and thankfully I was just beaten senseless instead." Arms curling tight around her knee, she closed her eyes. "When I woke up, I guess they all had their fill and were tired out." Snort. "Auto pilot was taking us to Deadman's Port."

"I slipped my bonds," raising a hand and waggling it, she smirked. "Double jointed, and I guess they don't really expect a bunch of little girls to put up much of a fight. I loved machinery, tools, ships and so on when I was young too. That particular ship, the simple shuttle, was my favorite!"

Laughing darkly, she shook her head. "I knew more about that ship than they did, I bet you. So I snuck around and figured out a plan, but those assholes, they only had one escape pod. Room for one." Tychus had begun to see where this was going, and quirked a brow.

"I ripped out all but one piece for life support, hid the parts in the escape pod and went to my mother. I told her: Mom. I can escape, but there's only room for one. What do I do?" Sighing, Jayce thought about her mother and smiled. She was a good woman, couldn't ask for a better mother. "She said, you get out of here Jayce." She also said I love you, but Jayce omitted it- Tychus probably didn't care for the sappy stuff.

"Damn good thing I pulled all those parts out first, too. One girl who was awake and wasn't completely vacant after her trauma, realized that I was going to escape and leave them. She became hysterical. They were waking up and I made a run for it, grabbed the last part for life support- which turned the alarms on and really woke everyone up. I made it into the escape pod and had to kick Dago in the face before he piled in there with me." Smirking and chuckling, her tone reflected a savage pleasure. No tears were shed over that man, that's for sure. "He shot the outside of the pod, but that did nothing of course. I escaped and there was no way in hell they were making it to their
destination before the oxygen ran out."

Kicking her legs out quickly, Jayce dared to look over and up at Tychus, face dead serious. "That is how I murdered an entire vessel full of pirates, innocent kids and my mother. Raynor's Raiders found my escape pod." His face was a mask, and each extra pupil in his eye reflected the light from the monitor strangely.

"Quite the tale." He almost felt guilty bringing it up. Almost. Everyone had their shitty story to tell, Jayce was no exception. Rolling his shoulders, suit leather creaking, he stared thoughtfully at the monitor, quiet.

"Indeed." Eyes narrowing, Jayce focused on him then. "And your story is rather interesting too."

Amused that she'd come to assume so much just by reading a list of ill deeds, Tychus chuckled. "Oh yeah? Tell me what you know about my story."

"You were in the Confederate military with the commander during the Guild Wars," Jayce watched his face carefully, but she wasn't good at reading expressions and Tychus wasn't volunteering anything either. "Saw you in that picture of the Heaven's Devils that's kicking around. You're a bit easy to spot."

"Uhuh. Tell me somethin' I don't know."

Smirking, she gestured towards the monitor. "Went AWOL- and I'm betting that is where the commander's less-than-legit stretch of time began. It sure was yours!" Chuckling, Jayce tucked her knee back up to her chest and continued watching his blank expression. "From there, you become some infamous train robber for a few years. During this time you never actually murder anyone, considering your apparent love of it."

"But then you suddenly show up on the famous Baccus Moon, botch a bank robbery, have a building full of bodies and get caught- killing quite a few police officers in the process- incarcerated by Marshal Wilkes Butler. Doesn't exactly fit the profile you made for yourself." There. The muscles of his jaw clenched.

"So, Tychus, here's what I think: You have no love of authority, it has screwed you over plenty, and a love of credits. You are a loyal man, and although your moral compass probably points towards wealth more than healthy choices, you are not some unhinged murderer." Nodding, more to herself than him, Jayce was content with her summary. That did sound like Tychus.

"Heh. Butler." Tychus shook his head and sighed, reaching over and wrapping his arm around Jayce and dragging her up against his side, ignoring her surprised jump. "Well that's all very astute of you, Jayce. Since you shared with me, I'll give you a little something nobody else knows too." Craning her neck to look up at him while trying to ignore the rather absurd weight of his arm draped over her shoulder, Jayce quirked a brow and waited.

"Yeah, Jimmy and I were partners through all that, but one man was responsible for us going AWOL and later, my unfortunate incarceration. Colonel Vanderspool." Tychus almost spat, the name tasted like poison and sounded like a curse when he spoke it. "He was gonna have the Heaven's Devils turned into drooling resocs when we wasn't useful anymore, and tried to install kill switches in our suits later. Jimmy shot that asshole in the chest and we thought he was dead."

Jayce made a pained sound and he realized he was on the verge of squeezing her too hard, relaxing his arm immediately. "Years later, during our train robbing fun, we ended up being hunted by this bounty hunter. You're right- I ain't some unhinged murderer. That guy, Ezekiel Daun, was exactly
that. Sick son of a bitch." Tychus wasn't ashamed to admit he was deathly afraid of the man back then, but he'd omit that detail in this retelling.

"He caught and tortured all the other members of the Heaven's Devils, then came for us. We tried to get protection from the guy who ran Deadman's Port at the time, one named Scutter O'Banon, and that is how we came to be on that gambling moon. Big bank heist during the Marshal Convention, what were the odds that the Marshal who'd chased us around all those years, Butler, would be there and spot me purely by chance?"

"You stick out like a sore thumb-" Jayce quieted, treated to a similar glare she had given him for interrupting.

"We got away, but Butler was on our trail at that point. Then, when we were doing a dry run through the bank, this little weasel of a guy who tried to keep us from the creds we were stealing on a train once before spotted us, name was Woodcock or somethin'." Shaking his head, it was silly to think of the kind of bad luck they had in just those few days. "Why, we had to rob the bank then and there. Was going smooth as could be, but Jimmy- that damned bleeding heart- realized the creds we was liberating were from Farm Aid and refused to steal 'em."

His voice had lowered into a growl, remembering the entire affair leading to his long imprisonment with detail. "Damn fool who we were doing the heist with activated the spider bots and killed everyone in the bank, trying to force Jimmy to stay and finish the job. Stubborn as Jim is, he still refused, and then the guy shot him." Giving her arm a pat, he smirked, recalling the hot rage he had been filled with then- it made him wonder the kind of damage he could do now. He might find out soon. "I killed all three of em, filled up a sack of creds and made for the escape point with Jimmy. Had to carry him up the damn ladder and leave my creds behind."

Jayce shifted under his arm, listening in rapt attention. Either she was a much more attentive listener or Tychus was a better storyteller. He was certainly a better storyteller, in his opinion. "Got up to the apartment and, wouldn't you know it, that sonuvabitch Ezekiel Daun is there. Whole place was full of recordings of him torturing the Heaven's Devils, and he's having fun toying with us." Jayce felt her lip curl in disgust, recordings of his murders? She had to agree with Tychus, the man was clearly sick. "Well Jimmy found him and, before he shot him, managed to find out who hired him. Vanderspool. The good Colonel lived somehow, and had been paying Daun to kill our friends all those years... That's when we found out there was only one suit to escape in, and I shoved Jimmy in the damn thing and made my last stand while he escaped."

"Wow. Hell of a story." Jayce allowed herself a moment to wonder what would have happened to the sector if Jim Raynor had been the one to take the fall that day. Given that Tychus was not an altruistic sort, nothing good came from the thought.

"Heh, yeah." Tychus looked down at her, thoughtful. He had never spoken of the whole ordeal to anyone, it was simply a part of his life, but it wasn't so bad getting it off his chest- even if Jim knew it all.

"Only problem is," Jayce smirked, patting his leg. "Jim knows that story too, so that isn't actually something nobody else knows, is it? What I really wanna know is, how you got outta cryo prison and ended up here with us."

"Hah. Jimmy knows the story because he was part of it, nice try though." Tychus wasn't about to let that story go, not yet anyway. Unfurling his arm from around Jayce, he stood up and offered her a hand like a gentleman. Chuckling softly she took his hand and followed along.

"Alright, fair enough. Maybe another time."
“Maybe.” With a flick, he switched the monitor off and hunted down her smiling lips in the dark. Elsewhere, Matt Horner swore.
Messages

Bucephalus

The green wire-frame holographic face of Dr. Narud stared dispassionately at his viewer. "Forgive my lack of formalities, but it took a great deal of effort and risk to my person to send this message." Listening in rapt attention, Valerian took a brief sip of his drink.

"Arcturus Mengsk has taken the plunge into madness, releasing these hybrids upon his own populace. He sees an enemy in everyone, and soon there will be no empire for him to rule; he will see it burned to ashes around him, as he said those many years ago." The hologram paused, glancing around nervously. "Now is the time to strike, Valerian! While there are still rebels left on the planet to help you."

"Easier said than done, doctor." The heir apparent muttered quietly.

"Should you find yourself ready to strike and looking for a safe landing on the planet's surface, you need only reconstruct the encryption code for this transmission and send it back. It is a one-time code that will deactivate planetary defenses long enough for you to establish a foothold." A clatter sounded in the background of the holo, and Narud jumped slightly.

"I must go. I hope that this information will help you, be safe and good luck." Narud's face disappeared as the transmission ended. It was the third-no-fourth time Valerian watched.

The code had already been rebuilt and readied, and Valerian had to marvel at both the technical savvy and bravery of the good doctor. A completely safe point of entry to the planet's surface was beyond anything he could have asked or hoped for. But they still needed to affect repairs to the Hyperion on Deadman's Rock, and negotiate with Mira Han while hopefully concealing the true nature of Jim and his men from her. Knowing the mercenary, even vaguely, Valerian doubted it would be so easy.

"Incoming transmission." The Bucephalus adjutant droned.

Fine brows furrowing a degree, Valerian straightened up and placed his half-finished drink down. "Patch it through."

"Valerian." Matt Horner spoke immediately, voice crackling over the comm. "You'll want a secure line with Mira Han, I'm routing you one right now." He paused briefly. "And no, don't ask how."

"Perhaps you could humor me with the story later, Captain Horner." Valerian's mouth twitched in amusement, having already discerned some sort of strange relationship between Horner and Mira by how the captain acted whenever she or Deadman's Port was mentioned. "Regardless, thank you for that. We are in contact range right now—I will get a hold of Miss Han immediately."

"Right. Well, I'll leave you to that!" Horner disappeared faster than Valerian could even try to invite him to join the conversation. Such a shame.

The young prince looked wistfully at the tasteful display of weaponry in his quarters, wishing for time to practice. Shaking his head, he scooped up his drink and finished it off in a quick gulp—enjoying the rich taste and slow burn for a few moments before brushing his fingers over the console.

"Captain Vaughn."
"Yes sir?"

"Use the line we've been sent by the Hyperion to set up a transmission with Mira Han."

"Immediately." Vaughn's voice cut off and Valerian watched the console intently, waiting for a familiar face to appear.

When Mira Han's face appeared, relaxed and happy looking before quickly morphing into surprise, Valerian couldn't help but look surprised himself. Usually, Mira Han had an outgoing demeanor, but her smile and remaining eye were undoubtedly playful-looking for just a moment.

"Princess? Where's Matthew?" Her voice sharpened in warning, and Valerian held a hand up in a placating gesture. Apparently that was how she looked for Matthew and he had caught her off guard.

"Hello Mira. Yes, Matt Horner gave me this channel to get into contact with you easier, and yes he is also alright."

"I would very much like to speak with him." Guarded.

"Matt Horner is on the Hyperion and not yet within transmission range; I am speaking to you from the Bucephalus, my ship. You will have the opportunity to speak with him at length however, should our conversation go the way I'm hoping." Valerian reassured her with confidence, although he now had misgivings about not just trying to contact her normally.

Finally, her shoulders relaxed a notch and she gave a small nod. That would do. "I am surprised you are here Princess, especially with Matthew and James. I assume you've seen the transmission from Korhal?" Her demeanor darkened, amplified by her cybernetic eye jutting from the puckered flesh of the former natural one.

Valerian nodded, grim. "The Hyperion needs repairs that require docking and materials we do not have on hand. I wanted to discuss safe passage and the acquisition of such parts that we require with you."

"Deadman's Rock is home to many, many refugees right now." Her tone had shifted to business, which was a relief—but also meant he was about to be parting with credits. "Food is scarce, credits to buy it even more so. As much as I love seeing Matthew, and I'm thankful you're delivering him to me, I will require payment."

"Name your price, Mira. We both know I don't have any other options if I've come out here, and that you're going to rip me off." Valerian smiled easy, and it was returned.

"I will have the numbers wired to you, Mr. V." Mira smirked, and the way she said the abbreviation of his name sounded more degrading than Princess ever could. "As I'm feeling generous, you will also be sent your landing coordinates— you will find them much more to your liking than last time, I am sure. Be prepared to talk with me once you and your people have landed."

"Always a pleasure, Miss Han." Mira's face winked out and Valerian allowed himself a small chuckle. There was a kind of brutal honesty about the rim worlds and the dark underbelly of humanity that he'd grown to appreciate. Short and to the point—the exact opposite of Dominion politics.

It was pure luck that Matt Horner was one of the more blessed-looking infested men, but Valerian held no illusions about keeping the physical state of Jim and his men quiet anymore; not if they were going to Korhal like that. And what about after Korhal, when no cure is found? Valerian poured himself another strong drink. I mustn't consider them doomed yet, it would be a disservice to them.
and the intelligence of all the men and women under my employ, after all. Licking a stray drop from his lip, he nodded to himself definitively. Yes. There will be redemption for them, in time.

Leviathan – Skygeirr Station

The one who sent the signal awaits you, my Queen. Izsha intoned.

Kerrigan strode through the living door briskly, coming to an abrupt halt when the clear shape of an infested man stood with his back to her, staring into space.

"We meet again, Kerrigan. Fate has us on the same side, this time." Alexei Stukov spoke, a distinctly amused note to his voice.

"Stukov. You died." Blinking, she approached with caution and took in the details as he slowly turned to face her. He was very clearly zerg, but he was also not connected to the swarm. As their gazes met, and his was a burning orange glow from the sockets remaining in his half-ravaged face, Kerrigan had to respect the strength she found there.

"I did die, only to be brought back and killed again many times over." And he thumbed over his shoulder with his one remaining human hand then. "In that station." Hand falling back to his side, he chuckled. "I couldn't think of anyone else out there who had the strength to face what lay within, and here you are now."

Kerrigan's mind was spinning. Stukov was not connected to the swarm and clearly retained his mind in the process, albeit stuck with his infested body. It immediately made her think of Jim and his men, and bore looking into when the time was right. "You said the hybrid are in there." She nodded at the station behind him. "It's a fortress."

"Not just a fortress, Queen of Blades." His voice gained a deeper inflection as they shifted to the matter at hand. "Beneath that mess of terran bases are several floors dedicated to the creation of hybrids, and even further below are fanatical protoss guarding the Xel'naga temple that this station's leader prizes."

"And who is this leader?" Eyes narrowing, she had a suspicion she already knew.

"Dr. Narud." She let out a small noise of annoyance then. "An ancient shapeshifter, hell-bent on resurrecting his dead master and bringing about the end times. He was very talkative." Alexei's tone darkened, the extra appendages on his shoulder trembling in anger. "I can help you destroy the terran bases, and would gladly face the horrors below to see this place burning. Will you lend your aid?"

"Yes. We'll tear this facility down." Kerrigan replied without pause, if Stukov wanted to help kill hybrid then he was more than welcome to prove himself. She really wanted to see what he was capable of, and was already planning on getting input from Abathur in regards to his unique properties.

"Then lets kill these Dominion bastards." Stukov grinned.

Even during the initial assault on the Dominion level of the platform, both Kerrigan and Stukov felt something was amiss. The base guarding the top was large, and though the defenders had put up a fight with their pathetic gas it seemed that there was a distinct lack of people. Only when the zerg and infested terrans spilled into the lower levels did it become clear: the hybrid, bar some half-grown failures, were gone.

"Stukov." Kerrigan snapped, glaring into the cavernous facility as she walked towards the lift that would deliver her to the Xel'naga temple below.
"Kerrigan, I don't know where they went." Stukov was upset, clearly. But before he could continue she cut him off sharply.

"How long ago did you escape?"

"Weeks ago, I have been trying to seek help for some time now." He muttered.

Where could the hybrid have been moved within weeks? She thought to herself pensively, stepping onto the lift with Stukov in tow. Hands clenched around and bent the metal of the guard rail as she came to her conclusion. "Our dear Emperor has brought the hybrid to his home."

And why wouldn't he? She chided herself. Informing Arcturus Mengsk, the biggest scheming slug in the galaxy, that the swarm was on its way through Matt Horner was one of her poorer choices. The lift passed below the floor of the man made facility and revealed the cavernous vistas that housed the Xel'naga temple and, unsurprisingly, a host of Tal'darim fanatics.

"So this Mengsk character knew you were coming," Stukov provided. "And now you have no choice but to confront him when he not only has his greatest weapons, but is fully prepared."

"Yes." Kerrigan confirmed resolutely, stepping off the platform and onto the gray rocky soil. "That will come in time. Right now?" Her wings spread wide, flexing and waving as if excited. "There's protoss to kill."

The fact that Stukov used infested terrans, while normally not a bother, was irking the Queen. Not once did the small spark of humanity inside her flare when killing the people of this facility, not even her terran self could feel compassion for them. Everything that went on inside the facility was abhorrent, not that the Queen of Blades had room for calling anything abhorrent; but not a one of the three races would be happy to see what was going on in there. This was practically humanitarian. She had settled for simply sending the infested man to the west side of the temple to deal with the Tal'darim entrenched over there. Distancing herself helped. This budding duality, as she'd come to think of it, was maddening. I can't let control of the swarm slip, if my emotions are wild- so too is the swarm. Such is the price of obedience or oblivion, the hive-mind. Hopefully, that rekindled spark would take the hint.

When their forces rejoined at the massive gateway into the Xel'naga temple, the Tal'darim utterly destroyed, Stukov regarded Kerrigan somberly. "Narud is no longer here, but that does not mean this place is safe. I would tread carefully, Kerrigan."

Sarah was debating simply burying this place under the burning ruins of the station, but giving the temple a once-over before doing such would not be undue. She shifted in agitation and the long, chitinous segments that made up her ghoulish hair clattered together. As the massive slab that made up the door slowly rose up with a shuddering groan, she spoke. "I have been in some Xel'naga temples, I know what to watch out for. Remain here."

Striding into the massive temple without waiting for a response, Kerrigan immediately took in the surroundings and noted the differences between this particular temple and the others she had seen through the eyes of her minions and with her own. Wide open, pillars stretching to the ceiling above and with a massive crystal formation in the center, this one was decidedly unique. Can I save Jim? Could Stukov hold the key to reversing infestation inside himself?

Though she did mind her footing and remain aware of her surroundings as she approached the massive decorative-looking crystal, Kerrigan's thoughts carried her far away. Immediately, she became disgusted with herself. You'd throw Stukov into a lab just to find out without a second
thought, just for Jim. Gritting her teeth, she came to a halt and felt outwards with other senses. Jim is the only one who ever believed you could come back from this. He is the only one deserving of our compassion.

Stukov deserves his freedom no less than Jim, his friends, even you. Compassion is irrelevant, you've become so detached from what made you a human that you don't understand what you'd lose to get your vengeance or even what you think is your redemption! She was about to launch into a full-blown argument with herself when she felt it. A shifting, slithering mass of darkness at the blade-edge of her senses.

It seemed that touching her mind to the darkness made it come alive, a force that simply could not be attacked. Every shadow came crashing down like a tidal wave and Kerrigan struck outwards with her blades the moment it entered range, but nothing happened. As fast as the darkness engulfed her, it disappeared. Staggering, Sarah looked around wildly and froze upon seeing the figure mere feet away.

Dr. Narud stood with his hands clasped behind his back, a smug smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Hello, Kerrigan."

The wing blade that would have neatly sliced his head off his shoulders passed through without effect, and Kerrigan snarled. "Where are you, snake? You and I have a lot to catch up on, namely your death- it's long overdue."

But if Narud could hear what she said, he gave no indication. "I trust that if you're listening to this then you've discovered the hybrid are gone and have removed those pesky, fanatical pawns I left guarding the temple." He smiled then. "Why, when my benefactor informed me that the swarm was coming to Korhal and that it was time to bring forth the hybrid? Imagine my surprise."

Letting out a slow breath, Kerrigan stood listening as her anger simmered. "It is there on Korhal that you will find me, the hybrid and Arcturus Mengsk. We are waiting for you." The whole situation was a trap. Kerrigan resolved that since there was no choice in the matter, she'd come after Korhal with all the wrath of a scorned goddess.

"Oh... One more thing." The smile mutated into a grin, and it communicated the creatures madness all too well. "I do believe your friend, James Raynor, is on his way here as well. You'd best hurry." A psionic blast of energy tore through the ground where the ethereal messenger stood.

Kerrigan stood there panting in rage as the dust cleared, Narud was gone. I'm coming Jim.

Hyperion

I'm coming Jim.

Jim nearly dropped his cards, furrowing his brows at the intensity of the message. Beside him, Tychus grumbled sarcastically. "Hear that? She's comin', Jimmy boy." He received a sharp elbow to the ribs for his effort and grunted.

Standing up from the table stiffly, Jim folded and left. Paired together were Warfield and Horner, Swann and Jayce, leaving Tychus by himself. With a shrug, Tychus scooped Jim's moderate credit pile into his own. "Come to papa."

Korhal - Augustgrad

The rumble of five siege tanks moving across a park, grass or no, was deafening to Nova's ears. With
the help of her suit she was perched atop the frontmost tank with her rifle at the ready, taking point. They had been moving painfully slowly, hiding beneath bridges and passing between large buildings, doing everything they could to not be spotted during the night.

Nova's was but one of several groups sneaking ordnance away from the Dominion, trying to reach the rally point where they could establish a physical base and be able to repel hybrid attacks. Problem was, as Tosh had eloquently put it, "Daddy Mengsk owns the sky and the land, we be fucked if we fight in the open." Given that Mengsk did own Augustgrad and the air above it, this was proving to be far too easy.

Nova had been adamant about establishing a real foothold, though. There was no way they could win with pure guerilla tactics and if they wanted heavy ordnance to fight hybrid and last, they needed that base. Tosh had argued for going straight for Mengsk together, cutting the head off the snake, but Nova also knew how much more security had been put in place since Tosh last tried that with his Spectre buddies- it was not an option.

And where is everyone? Billions of people lived in Augustgrad, never mind any settlements beyond it, and it both looked and felt like a graveyard. Given the threat of hybrid sucking her mind dry, she was wearing a psi-screen and expending a great deal of effort in keeping her psionic presence as low-key as possible, and it was keeping her from hearing the thoughts of people. As a result, and she thought about what Tosh said many years ago, it felt like a bucket was on her head.

People hide when their lives are in danger. She reassured herself as her convoy rolled down a narrow street, barely wide enough to avoid crushing street lights. Augustgrad's congestion problems were both a blessing and a curse. Communications were limited to short-range or verbal, Nova had no idea how the other teams were doing or if they were alive, but her convoy would be the last to arrive and they were almost there.

The distant roar of aircraft made her drop to a knee and rap the butt of her rifle against the tank sharply, indicating a halt. If it was in the air, it was not friendly. Their deafening clatter ground to a stop, the void filled with the low rumble of idling engines. Nova was the only defense these tank drivers had, there was just not enough fighting people to spare yet, and she resolved to avoid contact at all costs. It was a tense few minutes before the threat passed beyond hearing range, and they resumed.

Adjusting her balance as the tank crumpled a vehicle, Nova felt a wash of relief when their base-to-be came into sight. A field dedicated to public recreational activities with a statue of the Emperor holding his hands out in a benevolent gesture at its head was where they chose to set the base up. It no longer resembled the peaceful place for a stroll and a game of catch it had been the day before. The statue of Mengsk had been promptly toppled and torn up for barricade materials, and the mechanical feet of SCVs- along with their thrusters- had torn up the turf until it was a mud field.

Hopping off the tank, Nova turned off her psi-screen and let out a sigh at the bombardment of thoughts assailing her, it was reassuring. Immediately, she honed in on the formidable shape of Tosh, rifle at rest in his hands as he exchanged words with a foreman. Approaching slowly, she looked at the buildings and barricades already created and began taking a tally of vehicles that they should now have- if all the teams returned safely.

"Team three never came back. Heard their screams." Tosh turned away from the foreman, who walked away quickly- happy to be done with the interaction. Nova felt goosebumps on her arms, rubbing at her suit on the inside. That was the Goliath team. Indeed, there was not a single Goliath on guard. They were counting on them for anti-air, but there was already two missile turrets looming on the field- immobile air defense would have to do.
"I don't like this." He asserted, face stern as he looked towards the sky around them. "No way Daddy Mengsk don't know where we be now. Where's the cavalry?" Siege tanks were rolling past them, spreading out behind the barricades to give a full range of ground defense in siege mode.

Nova stood there with pursed lips, looking him over. Tosh had made contact with several mixed teams of ground troops that had defected and were hiding out, though at first she had insisted that she deal with them instead of him, he won out. He had delivered them safely and the suited up marines were digging trenches and helping erect more barricades while SCVs rapidly piled and welded everything together. Finally, she said "I don't know Tosh, but if they want to let us dig in they can be my guest."

In truth, beyond losing team three there had been no sightings of hybrid or air attacks for a solid day now. "Any eyes on where they might be?" She queried. Tosh did have Spectres left, and they were always operational.

"No." He frowned. With his ability to fully shield himself from others, Tosh used it to its full advantage in scouting. If he hadn't found a hint of where the hybrid or their puppets were hiding, it did not bode well.

"Chow up and get ready to go then." Nova snapped, striding towards their hastily erected barracks with purpose. She had wanted to kill all of them, but so far had yet to see a single hybrid since the one she fought individually. Watching holos of them being slowly killed under massive hails of gunfire and grenades was not enough.

**Hyperion**

Having left the impromptu card game, Tychus insisted on some R&R before whatever happened on Deadman's Rock happened, Jim stormed through the ship to the lab. He'd slipped through the door before it was half way opened and walked up to Shlassa, expression dire. Stetmann, oddly enough, was not present. Maybe he felt Raynor coming.

"I need to speak to Sarah." He said, staring up at the creature. Distantly, he thought about the absurdity of his relationship to the zerg now, given how hard he'd fought them.

Shlassa glared down at him, green eyes baleful. "We are too far away. We can only hear."

"That's not good enough!" Jim snapped, bristling literally and figuratively. Jabbing a clawed finger at her, he snarled. "Your Queen is flying the swarm right into a trap that is going to get her and everyone else on that damn planet killed! So start thinking up a way to get in touch!" Shlassa simply stared at him, silent. He had his answer, and he wasn't getting a word more. After a few more seconds of tense waiting, Jim spun around and left.

**Jim.** Stetmann tentatively called from wherever he was.

Raynor paused in the hall outside the lab, scowling. Taking a moment to school himself into a more reasonable mental state, he replied. *Kind of busy, Stetmann. Can this wait?*

*I'm sorry sir, but I overheard your conversation with Shlassa.* Apologetic, Stetmann continued before Jim could head him off. *I think I might be able to help contact Kerrigan.*

Now that perked Jim's interest, what did Stetmann think he had that an actual broodmother didn't, in regards to contacting Sarah? *You can stop hiding, Egon. Not going to eat you or somethin'.* He'd much prefer to have this conversation verbally, still strongly disliking this whole alien mind link business.
"Sorry sir." Immediately, Egon popped up from around a corner. Apparently hiding had been the operative word. "Would you like to discuss this in a more private setting?" The young scientist looked about nervously, as if someone was just waiting to overhear and judge them.

"Stetmann, if you can get me in touch with Kerrigan, there's no time to waste trying to be sneaky. It's not like we're hiding somethin' here." Jim smirked. But really, his insides were clenching, impatience rising.

"I-ah suppose you're right, sir." Stetmann stood nearby, fidgeting with his pockets and looking around nervously. "I think- I think we're stronger than Shlassa now, sir. She might not be able to contact Kerrigan, but I propose that we can." He held his breath, watching Jim's reaction.

Spiny brows furrowing, Jim crossed his arms. "How do you figure? I know we're not your average infested, but I don't think Sarah would want for us to get that strong, would she?"

"With all the, ah, material we have at our fingertips now, sir; I have been doing as much research as I can fit into a day and what I've found has lead me to the conclusion that the Queen of Blades may have created us to be second only to herself, in time." Warming to the topic, Stetmann took a deep breath and continued. "Perhaps it is hubris on her part, but I don't honestly believe Kerrigan perceives us as a threat, not even all together." Tilting his head slightly, Stetmann perked his brows and nodded to himself. "Yes. Given the kind of power she seemed to be sporting the last time we, ah, spoke with her, I can't fault her confidence."

Blowing out a slow breath, Jim frowned. "Alright Stetmann. Say you're right about this, what does that mean for us?"

"Well," raising his hand up, index finger extended, Stetmann punctuated his words with an energetic thrust. "We would be able to control all other zerg, excluding Kerrigan, and the range for that could possibly extend across worlds. You know how Kerrigan controls every movement of every member of the swarm, everywhere? Possibly no less strong, in time." Egon's voice lowered, excited. "I've found my personal ability to be continually farther reaching. I can touch minds so far away now, Jim. It is incredible."

Raynor held his hand up, ready to bring the scientists ramblings to a halt- even if they were interesting. He had a deadline and dancing around the topic of contacting Kerrigan wasn't helping. "Okay, you can school me more on this later. What I want right now, Egon, is to contact Sarah. Can you help me do that?" It was worrying, to think about the kind of power they were possibly being handed. Horner, Warfield, Swann, those three wouldn't think twice about dropping it, including Jim himself... But Stetmann and Tychus, he wasn't so sure.

Hands going right back into his pockets, Stetmann nodded. "Lets go back into the lab at least, sir." Gesturing with his head, Stetmann didn't wait for an answer and walked right back into the creep covered lab.

Eyeing the creep with a disgusted look, Jim followed reluctantly. Were it not for the fact they were zerg themselves these days, he'd worry that the fleshy mass under his feet was affecting Stetmann. Maybe it still was. Ignoring Shlassa, he looked over the purple that carpeted the floor thoughtfully. From memory, he recalled it used to smell like rotting flesh and any number of other sordid scents all blended into a disgusting potpourri. Now? Hesitantly, he took a breath through his nose. Like candy, palatable.

Lip curling, he came to a halt in front of Stetmann and nodded. "Lets do this."

"Okay." Stetmann swallowed nervously, focusing on Jim. "Not really sure how to go about this, so
just bear with me." He quickly realized Jim's gaze was unnerving so focused on a point beside his head instead. As he had practiced, he half closed his eyes and felt out with his mind.

Jim's eyes narrowed. He could feel that Stetmann was doing *something*, but it was altogether different than the way they were communicating to one another across the ship. Curious, he waited.

It felt like he was stretching his brain, Egon couldn't think of a better way to describe it. Taking over an infested was like filling a cup, *becoming* Swann was like leaping out of his skin and into a new suit, communicating with the men on the ship was like connecting wires on a switchboard. Every zerg related action had a unique feel to it, and this was no different. He had tried to find the limit of how far he could stretch his brain out before, and it had left him trembling and weak from the effort, but he understood the direness of the situation and resolved to help Jim.

Stetmann was staring into nothing, and the weird layers of eyes that he now sported seemed to be peeling back of their own accord as his concentration went elsewhere. Jim was unnerved further as the seconds ticked by, beads of sweat beginning to form and trickle down Stetmann's temples; he considered intervening when he could see twitching fingers and trembling limbs.

The limit was rapidly approaching and he clenched his teeth hard, trying to fight for that last extra stretch. He was no longer Stetmann. He had become every zerg lurking in the dark beyond that he could reach, and there were so many. In that last heave he formed the name of his desired target and, using all the zerg he'd managed to link to, let out a tremendous shout through each and every one. **KERRIGAN!**

Cards went flying out of hands, credit chips clattered to the floor and Jim was literally knocked on his ass. So close and lacking precision, it was like a sonic boom in the ears of all the infested. Even Shlassa made a distressed clatter.

Aboard her Leviathan, the Queen of Blades perked and tilted her head, listening.
"I don't normally make house calls, Jim." Stetmann spoke in an amused tone, but his voice was without his normal inflection- it had shifted from one kind of familiar to another. Kerrigan looked down at Raynor as he scrambled to his feet, shaking his head and getting his bearings.

"Sarah? Sarah, listen-" Jim spoke quickly, one hand stretching towards Stetmann before he caught himself. He felt his emotions flying everywhere and a hand had clenched around his heart, the renewed pain was immense.

Raising Stetmann's hand in a shushing gesture, Kerrigan cut him off briskly. Inside, she was pounding at the walls and howling in anger to see what she had done to Jim once again. "I needed to talk to you regardless." Taking control of Egon had been a tactful choice, it all but eliminated the intimacy between herself and Jim. Given the look on Jim's face and the torrent of emotion that was flooding through him, it had been a wise choice indeed.

"Korhal is a trap." Kerrigan stated simply.

"Korhal is a trap!" Jim blurted sharply.

Stetmann's features perked in surprise, his head tilting. "How do you know?" She queried, flitting through the young man's extra layers of vision both out of idle curiosity and to further distance herself from the mans suffering.

Brows furrowing together, Jim muttered. "Could say the same to you, darlin'."

Sarah frowned through Stetmann, cutting to the chase brusquely. "I found a lab where hybrid, creatures that are a mix of protoss and zerg, were being created. It was nearly empty." Letting out a snort, she shook the scientists head. "Mengsk already knew I was coming, and it was his lab. Easy guess he's ready for me, Jim."

It wasn't so surprising that Kerrigan knew about the hybrid, Jim supposed. She did have a lot more... Resources at hand, than him. "There was a news clip for some big reveal that managed to get off Korhal and into space- Mengsk set the hybrid on his own people." His tone darkened as he stared at Stetmann-turned-Kerrigan. "Folks there are already being killed by the people who're supposed to protect them, Sarah. You've got to hold off, let us get people out of there."

Stetmann's eyes narrowed. "This isn't up for discussion, Jim. You can get as many people out of my way as you want, but you only have until I get there." Shoulders shifting in annoyance, she continued. "There was something else I needed to tell you, as well."

She was lost. Truly, Sarah Kerrigan would never have taken this route- she was still as much the Queen of Blades as she had ever been. Jim felt liquid burning in his eyes as he clenched his fists hard, unable to form a reply. How many people died for me to finally see this?

Faltering briefly, Kerrigan swore she could hear the final nail in the coffin of Jim's dogged and hopeless love. Fighting back a lip quiver of her own, her voice pitched lower in emotion. "I found Alexei Stukov; you might remember him from the UED invasion." Steeling her resolve, she held her head-Stetmann's head- high. "He is infested as well, but is not connected to the swarm in any way. No hive-mind, full mental functions."
Jim was staring, and purplish blood had begun to ooze around his claws where he punctured his own hands. Given his lack of response, Kerrigan continued stoically. "I won't make him help you, but I suspect we're going to be seeing one another soon; you may ask him yourself, when that time comes." Brows furrowing, she finally felt outwards and quirked a brow. "Deadman's Rock?"

**Focus.** Jim reminded himself, this wasn't some personal call. Uncoiling his fists, the roller coaster ride his emotions just went through landed firmly on simmering anger, and it would just have to do. "Ship needs repairs before we get to Korhal. Can hardly believe old Stukov wound up infested," and it galled him to say it, but manners won through in the end. "Thanks for that."

"You shouldn't come to Korhal." Sarah said it, even though she already knew the response.

"Like hell we shouldn't!" Jim snapped, lip curling. "Mengsk was bad enough, but hybrid there too? Those nightmares need to be put down. How? Hell if I know, but we ain't just gonna let them kill all those innocents!"

"Well," Kerrigan muttered, glancing at Shlassa over Jim's shoulder before fixing her gaze back on him. "Thanks for the heads up about Korhal, Jim; But the hybrid aren't going to stop me, I *can* kill them." Her tone had become a touch condescending, but if anyone could get away with it, it was her. "Don't try to stop me."

"There might be only two things in this universe you and me agree on right now Kerrigan, and they are that Mengsk needs to go down and that them hybrid need to be killed. Pronto." Jim both watched and felt as Sarah withdrew from Stetmann, leaving him gasping and falling to his knees. Quickly, Jim knelt down beside him and placed a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Egon! You alright son?"

Stetmann felt ill and weak, limbs trembling as he fought to even out his breathing. Still, he waved off Jim with a shaky hand. "I'm okay Jim, just need to recover." Panting and getting to his feet slowly, he placed a hand to his forehead and pressed. "I'm sorry."

Quirking a brow in amusement, Jim stood back up and gave the man his space. "Sorry for what? You got a hold of her, you did good."

"Char wasn't your fault, sir." Stetmann said bluntly. "You might not have been doing it for the same reason the rest of us were, but the result would have been the same. Alright? It was statistically nearly impossible." He met Jim's gaze evenly then, and knew the commander would get his honesty-linked minds or no.

The younger man hit a bit close to home, and it was clear he'd been able to keep track of the conversation while he was being controlled. Raynor rubbed his eyes quickly, eager to dispel any hint of his distress, and swiped his bloody hands over his pants while speaking. "What's done is done, Egon. I can't change how I feel about what happened no more than I can change what happened itself."

Watching Stetmann regain his composure and get steadier on his feet, Jim decided to approach the Stukov subject, since Egon was doubtless the person to talk to for it. "You were clearly in on the conversation, what do you think about Stukov?"

"Not knowing anything more than that he exists, it is difficult to say if his condition could reveal any clues to unraveling our own infestation." Stuffing his hands in his lab coat pockets, Stetmann looked thoughtful as he considered what he heard. "At best, we now know it is possible to exist completely separate of the hive-mind with our own minds intact. I would very much like to meet this man."
"Alright, good enough for me." Jim was about to speak further when the ships comm crackled to life.

"Attention. We have arrived at Deadman's Rock and will be landing shortly, enjoy your stay!" An overly bubbly-sounding woman chirped.

"Time to get this party started." Raynor snorted; he hated this place. Clapping a hand to Stetmann's arm quickly, he spoke while walking away. "You rest up."

"Yes sir." Egon watched the commander leave, thoughtful. It came as a surprise when Shlassa, immobile for as long as he could remember, creaked into motion.

"Stetmann." The massive creature seemed to stretch outwards and fill much more space when mobile, easily striding past him and coming to a halt in front of the zerg specimen tank, watching it writhe.

"Uh! Shlassa?" Stetmann cleared the way real fast, watching with alarm as the broodmother placed the tip of a clawed finger against the glass and held it there, more than capable of breaking it.

"You have... Exceeded my expectations of you." She muttered, contemplative. Before Shlassa was not just a collection of specimens lumped together into a mass, but a resource. Egon could feel a pang of hunger from the creature and cringed at the thought. "There is more to learn." She whispered, luminous gaze shifting to the small man.

**Hyperion Cantina**

Having recovered from Stetmann's shout in short order, the other infested men had listened intently to the exchange between Raynor and Kerrigan; like hell they wouldn't. Horner received a call to the bridge, collected his credits and left, leaving Warfield, Swann and Tychus alone. Jayce had ran out of the room faster than a bullet the second they all reacted to an unknown force.

"You think Raynor's really giving up on the girl, finally?" Swann questioned no one in particular as he tried to gather the credits he and Jayce had amassed- they didn't do too bad, considering Jim and Tychus were a nasty team. Warfield had also proven competent at the game, which was a bit of a surprise to everyone until he reminded them that he was a marine at some point; cards came with the territory.

Tychus was scooping up cards and tossing them back on the tabletop, chuckling without humor at Swann. "I know Jimmy better 'n any man alive, hell, better than I ever wanted to now with all this bug crap in our heads; those two ain't done." He frowned tightly, leaning over the table and shuffling the cards back together. What Jim was willing to do for that creature was the subject of some contention in his mind.

"We'll worry about the Queen of Blades when the time comes. Right now? Best we be ready to deal with whatever this cesspool has in store for us." Warfield muttered, neatly stacking his credits together with the tips of his talons and listening to the *click click click* noise.

"You're right." Rory finished pocketing his and Jayces credits and let out a huff as the ship gently rocked; they were officially on the ground. "Lets go get some hardskins sorted out for you the two of you- can't see any reason why you couldn't wear one." Thumbing over his shoulder, Swann turned and began his way to the armory.

"You ladies go ahead, I'll catch up." Tychus smirked as he placed the stacked deck neatly in the middle of the table.

"Don't keep us waiting, Findlay." Warfield called back, following Swann.
"Wouldn't dream of it." He muttered darkly, gaze shifting from Warfield's back as the door snapped shut behind him to his own hands as he pressed them flat on the tabletop, glaring at the unnatural discolored flesh and black nails. The last place Tychus Findlay wanted to be, was back in a god damned hardskin. Pushing off from the table after a minute of waiting, he made a beeline for Stetmann and his little lab.

The younger man had taken to watching his back, or more likely just spying on him, and Tychus had begun to do so in turn. It surprised him, had nobody thought to watch the kid before? Sitting in that lab of his all full of creep and with that stupid broodmother, Tychus was not surprised he was witnessing what was going on right now.

Hyperion Armory

"What?" Swann sounded incredulous, eyeing the error Warfield's suit had begun to spit out as soon as he set his feet onto the stabilizers in the boots. "That isn't possible." Glaring at the error wasn't making it go away, and Warfield quirked a brow as he waited for some clarification.

Looking up from the console, Rory eyed Warfield critically. "You're too fat."

"Sorry me?" It was Horus' turn to sound incredulous.

"You heard me, you ate too many zerg wheaties, General." Swann shrugged, still in disbelief. "The CMC-400 is capable of carrying men who weigh over 450 pounds. In order to completely bug out the stabilizers, like you are, you'd have to weigh at least 500." Making a disgusted sound, all Rory could do was shrug. "You can't wear it."

Brows pinching together, Warfield thought about it as he stepped out of the boots and off the small platform. "I think the egghead actually said something about that before." He followed Swann to the lift that would bring them to the well-used storage rooms above. "Increased muscle and bone density, if I remember right." It did make sense that he weighed more, given his clothing was a tight fit now and chairs had a tendency to squeal when he sat on them, unlike prior to his infestation.

"Well I don't know nothin' about that." Swann grumbled. "So here's what we're gonna do: you either get some heavier strap-on armor or you can get one of them creepy spectre suits, like Findlay." The lift threw off sparks and jerked hard as they almost reached the top, to which Swann responded with a swear. "Told them to fix this damn thing!"

Grimacing, Warfield held off on criticizing the state of the ship. It certainly wasn't because Swann didn't try to keep the thing in tip-top shape, the man was excellent at his job from everything Horus had seen so far. He refrained from answering until Swann had gotten the lift working again and it had reached its destination.

Stifling a sigh of relief as he stepped off the lift, Warfield considered the merits of the suit Tychus had taken to wearing and the strap-on body armor. "Think I'd rather have some extra protection, Swann. Findlay wants to sneak around, that's his prerogative."

"Alright cowboy, this way." Swann expertly made his way towards the containers that held what they were looking for, confirming what Warfield already knew: the man did indeed know his stuff.

Hyperion Bridge

Horner checked the small scrambling device on his belt for the 80th time, trying to keep his outward demeanor more calm—if only for the benefit of everyone else. The bridge had several new personnel who were doing a very good job pretending he was just a normal terran. He almost wished they had
made more strict no-contact rules, but it just wasn't possible—especially as the captain of the damn ship.

"Incoming transmission." The adjutant finally informed him of the dreaded conversation he could no longer avoid, and he accepted the transmission with as much enthusiasm as a death sentence.

Mira Han's pixie face, red cyborg eye and shock of pink hair erupted above the console in full color, and she smiled brightly for him. "Oh Matthew! It is so good to see you. You can imagine my surprise and disappointment when Mr. V appeared to me earlier and not your handsome face."

"Hello Mira." Matt spoke in an even, flat tone. "The Hyperion wasn't in range yet and we needed to contact you as soon as possible, sorry about that."

"It's alright dear, but I insist you come for a ride in the charming groundcar with me. We have much to talk about and so very much lost time to catch up on." Her smile and tone was teasing, but Matt felt certain that it was less an invitation and more of a demand. He fidgeted uncomfortably.

"Mira, I'd like to but I think it would be best if we just—"

"Matthew Horner, you are going to get out of that ship and in this car with me right this instant; I am already waiting!" Mira grinned wide and, with a shift of her arm, honked the car horn. Keenly, he heard at least one stifled snicker in the room and felt a blush forming.

"Fine! I'll be right down." Closing the comm and looking around sharply, all sound, except for people hard at work, died until the good Captain left his bridge.

Jim Horner called out, I am going on a car ride with Mira. Maybe I can convince her to help on Korhal. He doubted that very much, but there was no reason to not try.

You two lovebirds try not to have too much fun. Jim mocked playfully; he'd never get enough of that entertaining farce of a relationship.

The Hyperion and Bucephalus had fully bypassed Deadman's Port in favor of the massive sprawling complex that once was Scutter O'Banon's abode and later belonged to the late Ethan Stewart. Only one of the battlecruisers could comfortably fit on the landing pad, and the Hyperion was chosen for ease of reparations. The Bucephalus was a comfortable distance away, having seared large quantities of overgrown garden to char in its wake.

Mira had reasoned that it was too difficult to guarantee any measure of safety beyond the complex itself; the situation of refugees, people preying on them and mercenaries thrown into the mix was a powder keg. As he was lowered to the ground on a lift, he breathed in the unpleasant atmosphere and wondered at the apparent power Mira had amassed for herself. Was she the new crime lord?

The beep beep of the sleek, old fashioned groundcar jarred him from his thoughts, Mira spotted the lift coming down and was driving over the smooth plascrete of the private landing field—a truly massive thing, to be able to house a damn battlecruiser. By the time he stepped off the lift she had pulled up and was waiting inside.

He tried at first to get into the backseat, but she laughed and locked the back door until he took the hint and sheepishly sank into the plush seating in the front, right beside the bubbly pink merc. "Oh Matthew, you can always make me laugh." As soon as he was seated, she began driving them away at a leisurely pace. "You'll pardon my bluntness—but you don't look so good."

"No?" Matt muttered, catching himself from touching the scrambler on his belt and managing to reign his urge to cringe away from the fond pat she gave his leg. "Well, haven't been getting much
sun with the whole rebellion thing, you know?" He was doing his best to look off into the distance, anywhere but Mira and her thoughtful cybernetic gaze.

That was how he found a gun steadily leveled at his face, Mira holding it across her chest with her left while she casually brought the vehicle to a stop with her right. "I think it's a bit more than a lack of sunshine, Matthew." Her tone had darkened and as soon as the vehicle was in park, she shifted to face him further, looking dire.

"Uh? Mira?" Matt held his hands up slightly, alarmed at the turn of events. "What are you talking about, and is the gun really necessary?"

"You went to Char." She stated bluntly, seething. "James and his Raiders lost the battle and your ship, the Hyperion, was stuck to some zerg creature." The gun never wavered. "You died."

Half-closing his eyes, Horner pressed his head back into the headrest and couldn't help but let out a chuckle at his luck. Apparently either Arcturus Mengsk hadn't done a very good job of cutting off all the warnings he sent out with the adjutant, or Mira was just good at putting two and two together after having already dealt with Valerian. "How'd you know?"

"You'll remember a particularly resourceful man named Graven Hill." Mira supplied smoothly. "He escaped from your ship before it was too late, and he was the first to bring this news to us here."

Casually, she flicked the safety off—Matt hadn't even noticed it was on. "You are zerg, Matthew, and you've come to a place filled with people who've done nothing but suffer under those monsters. Why shouldn't I kill you for this deception and put you out of your misery?"

He almost wished she would pull that trigger, releasing him from his responsibilities and, to a degree, his own suffering; instead, he shook his head. "I am glad that Hill survived; there was only one other person who didn't end up infested, you know." Eyeing the gun, still aimed firmly at him, he sighed.

"It's a bit of a complicated story, Mira. I am willing to tell you it, but let me preface it by saying this: we are in control of ourselves and we are not here to hurt people. We are here to affect repairs to the Hyperion just like we said, and then we're going to try and save Korhal. What we did not tell you is that we're infested and also attempting to find a cure in the midst of all this."

"Show me." She insisted firmly and he quirked a brow.

"I'd really prefer not-" Matt pursed his lips tightly when the gun jerked, indicating that it was most definitely not a request. "Fine, you want to see? Just fine." Testy, he slowly pulled his glove off and held his hand palm-up for her to watch. It was no surprise to see her lip curl in revulsion when he flexed that now-familiar bundle of muscle in his arm and the slippery-looking tendrils pressed upwards and into view.

"Enough." With a flick, the safety of her gun was back on and she withdrew it. Horner couldn't hide his surprise, he honestly thought he was about to eat a bullet. Still, he gladly pulled the disgusting mass back into his arm and slipped the glove back on.

"You asked for it. Look, Mira, I appreciate you giving us shelter and material to repair with, but we wanted to keep the whole infested situation quiet for your safety as much as our own. We're not dumb, we know how people are going to react the second they realize what we are." Horner frowned. How they were going to do anything on Korhal was still anyone's guess. Maybe people would just accept zerg as a lesser evil than the hybrid?

Mira didn't look at him as she took the car out of park and began driving again, still away from the Hyperion. She looked troubled, but considering she did not shoot him, Matt figured he was in the
clear in that department. "I want to see James and the others, and I especially want to talk to Princess about the amount of danger he is putting you in." Her tone still brooked no arguments.

Resigned to still having this car ride with her, Matt looked at the overgrown gardens and filled-in pools all around. "Sure, you can see the others. We've been working with Valerian's people for a while now, nothing bad has happened." Yet, he thought to himself. "I can't speak for Valerian, but I'm sure he'll talk to you too."

Jim, Mira already knew about us and she wants to see everyone. Horner called to Jim and the rest, a heads up never hurt.

You suck at keeping secrets. Jim responded quickly. Valerian is coming over here right now, might be best to cut your little tour short if she wants to get in on this.

Mira had been quiet and contemplative during this time. "If you want to see everyone, Valerian included, you might want to turn us back here, Mira. He's on his way over to the Hyperion, probably to talk some strategy about Korhal." Matt smirked then. "First time he'll be on the same ship as us."

Immediately, she redirected them smoothly back towards the Hyperion and sped up a bit. After another minute of silence, she finally spoke up. "I mourned you and James, you know. You are good men and there are precious few of you out there."

That caught Matt off guard and he faltered with his words. He never did think about who would mourn them if they failed, he supposed he would have thought the answer was no one. "I... Thanks, Mira." It was from his heart and he couldn't deny that he felt a deep, warm feeling budding inside him where more guarded emotions had been in regards to the mean mercenary woman. They drove the rest of the way in a comfortable silence.

Hyperion Lab

Tychus had been practicing in earnest ever since they decided that was a good plan, and he was pretty sure Stetmann was the only other man keeping up with that. Closing off his mind was priority number one as far as he was concerned, and now he was putting what he'd learned into action. It felt like withdrawing in on himself, slipping into the dark and going off the grid as surely as he could disappear with the spectre suit on.

Arriving at the lab, he was not surprised to find the door locked. Scowling, he dropped the cover and all but mentally tackled Stetmann; he could hear the man's yelp through the door. Tychus meant to simply take control of Egon and force him to open the door that way, but was surprised when it clearly was not an option: Stetmann was indeed keeping up and more in the mental department.

Changing tactics quickly while Egon was still off-guard, Tychus opted for another blunt approach. Open the door.

Stetmann considered not opening the door and running in the opposite direction, but quickly mastered his unreasonable fear of the big man. Tychus had never really done him harm, after all; and he did not seem to be angry. How much did he know? Egon figured the answers were looming behind the locked door, and so he opened it with some trepidation. "Tychus I-" He was almost bowled over when Findlay stomped in.

"Lock it."

Grimacing, Egon complied. "Why couldn't I feel you coming here?" Sneaking a look over his shoulder as the door shut, he swallowed hard when Findlay was standing exactly where he had been
before being interrupted.

Shaking his head in disgust, Tychus looked up from the slimy substance under his feet. Tapping his temple with the pad of a finger tauntingly, he smirked. "You ain't the only one been practicing, egghead..." Lowering his arm, he eyed Stetmann. "But I do think you been the only one cheating."

"Ch-cheating?" Stetmann cautiously approached Findlay, hands hiding in his pockets. If Tychus could hide himself, shield his mind, from the other infested- he could know everything. Egon tried to remember the last time he could really read Tychus, or keep track of him.

"Everyone was so busy keeping an eye on old Tychus; nobody thought to keep an eye on you, did they Egon?" Eyes narrowed to beady little slits, Findlay made his move before Stetmann could react and before he himself could have second doubts. Dropping to a knee, he planted a hand firmly into the creep.

Sucking in a sharp gasp, Egon nearly shouted. "No-wait!" Frozen in place as Tychus dug his hand into the viscous fluids of the creep, Stetmann watched as it immediately clung to his flesh and began crawling up it. Findlay's expression quickly shifted from suspicion to surprise.

"Sweet mother..." Tychus muttered. The effect the creep had was nearly immediate; he had been starving this entire time, there was no other way to explain it. Pure rejuvenating energy was flooding into his hand, up his arm and spreading through him at a rapid rate, his body literally drinking up the sustenance provided. Even gorging on the ursadon matriarch couldn't compare, it was a completely different feeling—visceral pleasure versus revitalization.

They had all been running on empty since waking up on the ship, he realized. All except Stetmann, who was almost exclusively in the lab with the creep. As what felt like literal power filled him to the brim, Tychus glared, pinning Stetmann to the spot. "How long have you been doing this?" The kid had been living off the room like some kind of twisted plant.

This was bad. Egon watched as Tychus, a man who was already in command of a frightening amount of raw power, seemed to surge to a new level of life and vitality. He barely registered the question as possible consequences for this new revelation flitted through his mind. "Almost the whole time, Tychus."

Pulling a hand out of his pocket, he made a placating gesture as Findlay's lip curled. "But I'm a scientist. Asking questions, researching, testing... These are things scientists do." Swallowing hard, he kept his position as Tychus shook off the creep with a wet slap and rose back to his feet. "I've been studying it, nothing more. It isn't about power, Tychus, it is about knowledge."

Tychus didn't bother asking why the kid wouldn't share this particular bit of so-called knowledge. Jimmy would lock the lab up faster than Stetmann could say science. Taking a slow breath, he considered the situation. "Well kid, you've kept it to yourself well enough this whole time; you might want to continue that practice." He smirked then, striding past Stetmann and opening the door back up.

Shlassa locked gazes with Tychus momentarily and he immediately bristled, muttering in a dark tone. "You're almost obsolete, bug. Don't think I've forgotten what I said." The broodmother didn't answer, looking back at Stetmann as the door hissed shut.

**Hyperion Bridge**

Valerian arrived, unsurprisingly, with a fully-armed escort of marines. Given that he was willing to even be in the same room as the infested men, this was a tolerable precaution on his part. Raynor,
Warfield and Findlay were already waiting for the heir apparent on the bridge, loosely surrounding the star map and looking over a large display of Korhal.

All eyes shifted from the floating image to the large doors when they hissed open and Valerian strode in, cape billowing behind him in his haste. Immediately, he raised a hand in a placating gesture when his men filed into the room after him. "Pardon the escort, gentlemen. I would forgo it but, I am often not in charge of my own security measures, you understand."

Jim shrugged nonchalantly and turned back to the map as the suited up marines lined his bridge. "I figure if you wanted to kill us, it would be a bit more impersonal and probably with your person in a much safer position, Junior." He smirked.

With Raynor's blessing, Valerian smoothly strode up to the star map alongside him. It took a great deal of effort to mask his own excitement, and no small amount of fear, at being so close to the infested men. He made a special effort to focus on the image of Korhal, even though Tychus and Warfield were pointedly staring at him.

"I still don't think it's a good idea that you're here, Prince Valerian. Kerrigan is nursing one hell of a grudge for your father, and the only thing stopping her from taking control of us whenever she pleases is her word that she wouldn't." Warfield spoke up, looking over the assembled group pointedly.

Reaching upwards, Valerian pulled a piece of the planet off and placed it aside; as it was zoomed in on, it was clearly the Sky Shield platform. "My advisors heartily agree with you, General. However, if Kerrigan is watching, she needs to see that I am not an aloof and ruthless dictator that my father has proven to be just as much as you men do."

"Alright Valerian," Raynor nodded approvingly and looked at the space platform the kid had pulled up. "We haven't been to Korhal in a while, I imagine Arcturus has since upped security a bit after our little caper with the UNN." Gesturing up at the image of Korhal, Jim chuckled at the memory; it had been such a great victory. "Tell us what you got."

"The Dominion military is at the weakest point it has ever been, gentlemen." Valerian stared at Korhal determinedly. "Excluding the hybrid, of course." He amended quickly. "Between me commandeering half the fleet for the disaster at Char and then my father losing a few battlecruisers chasing after us in the aftermath, it is safe to say the Dominion has little power in space."

"That don't mean Arcturus left Korhal undefended." Jim muttered.

"Correct. However," Valerian allowed himself a small, triumphant smile. "I have a man on the inside who has done us a tremendous favor, at great risk to his person." He gestured at Sky Shield and Korhal once more. "We will be able to land on Korhal uncontested—no Drakken defense network after us in the aftermath, it is safe to say the Dominion has little power in space."

"That is a hell of a blessing." Warfield clasped his hands behind his back. "But Korhal is not short-staffed on military personnel, by any margin."

"We know that with the unveiling of the hybrid, my father lost many men to desertion and that there is a strong rebel force fighting for their lives on Korhal as we speak." Valerian said.

"If we can get in touch with the rebels, assuming they aren't wiped out by the time we get there, we could have a secure area to land in right off the hop." Jim mumbled, scratching his stubble thoughtfully.
"None of you think that this mole of his might not be on our side?" Tychus rumbled, looking at the three men with a quirked a brow, as if this was a glaring problem. "Guy's able to shut down the entire defense network whenever we show up? That don't sit right with me."

"I have the utmost respect for Dr. Narud." Valerian reasoned, holding Tychus' gaze evenly. "He has walked a very fine line, keeping my father believing that the Moebius Foundation remains under his thumb and loyal to him, all throughout this ordeal. His loyalty is proven."

"Not to me." Findlay frowned, and it was clear the response was double-edged.

Valerian caught on immediately and decided to head off Tychus' suspicions as best he could, before it became a bigger problem. "I understand the circumstances surrounding your imprisonment in that suit are related to the Moebius Foundation, Mr. Findlay. Trust that I wouldn't have needed to use such subversive measures to see to my meeting with Mr. Raynor. Strong-arm tactics are very much in my fathers sphere of thinking."

"You have more reason than most here to distrust me in particular, as a result. I'd like to think that this meeting is a step towards a building of mutual trust, however."

Jim hadn't even thought about that. Tychus' release from prison, association with the Moebius Foundation and even leading them to the artifacts... How much of that was Junior and how much was Senior? Sighing in agitation, he planted a hand firmly on the corner of the star map to draw attention back. "Plenty of opportunity ahead to go building trust, Junior, lets leave that be for now. We-" The doors hissed open.

"Sorry we're late." Horner immediately apologized, briskly sweeping into the room with Mira Han in tow.

"James Raynor!" Matt had prepared Mira as best he could, in regards to how everyone else looked, but her expression made it clear that words just couldn't cut it. Her green eye was wide as she looked over the more visually impaired men, lips parted in surprise.

"Hello Mira." Jim gathered his patience and turned to face the pink pixie terror, he even managed a smirk at her reaction. "Staring ain't polite, darlin'."

Tychus chuckled and made a not-very-subtle gesture, wiggling his open palm at Horner. You did the hand trick, didn't you? Matt's face darkened and he did not reply.

"Miss Han, to what do we owe the pleasure?" Valerian had smoothly turned around and watched Mira's composure become rumpled for a second time that day, not that he could blame her.

In a breath, Mira schooled her features and spoke evenly. "I'm so sorry James." Both her cybernetic and real eyes shifted to Valerian then, a spark of anger in them. "Princess. I have been told that you are going to try and take these men to Korhal, you did not strike me as that foolish."

"Someone finally seein' things my way." Tychus spoke approvingly.

"Can it, Findlay." Warfield grumbled, watching the exchange curiously.

"The situation is complex, Miss Han." Valerian reasoned. "My father has made a disastrous move and is killing his own people, he must be stopped at all costs."

"You must replace him at all costs, before someone else does." Mira interjected.

"I make no allusions about wanting the throne, Mira. I will replace my father and I will be a better Emperor than he could ever hope to be." Valerian stated firmly.
"You don't need these men to secure your throne, Princess. They are ill and need medical treatment."

"They are quite possibly the only force left strong enough to put down these monsters my father has created."

"The hybrid..." Mira muttered, walking up beside Valerian and staring at the image of Korhal. Her cybernetic eye looked up at Tychus, and she smirked a touch. "Nice to see you out of your suit."

"In the flesh." Tychus responded jovially. He liked Mira, she was his kind of gal; death sentences in 12 systems and all.

"I know you've been helping the refugees here, Mira." Valerian quickly inserted himself back into the conversation. "You care about people too, our goals are the same in this regard. Perhaps you would consider assisting us on Korhal? You must know the hybrid are bad for everyone."

"You have two battlecruisers, one is an old piece of crap, and a handful of infested men." Mira picked at their situation with brutal efficiency. "I won't fight the Dominion for you, Princess. We've been over this."

"Then we have nothing further to discuss, Miss Han." Valerian folded his well-manicured hands together. "You will be paid for assisting us with reparations and providing safe haven, as discussed previously, and we will be on our way."

Frowning tightly, Mira nodded. "Very well." She shifted her attention to Jim sharply. "My people are already talking with your Chief Engineer, James. I wish you all the best." Without pause, she turned and left.

"Well, that was something." Raynor muttered, exchanging glances with everyone else.

"Let's continue, shall we?" Warfield gestured to the glowing orb, bringing the insurmountable challenge back to the forefront of their minds.
Mira's Marauders Base

In a room full to the brim with sophisticated comm and observation equipment, Mira Han stood like a sentinel. One arm rested over the gauss rifle slung across her front by a strap that went over her shoulder, while her free hand was poised over a button. She had left the Hyperion hours ago, angry and plotting.

Matthew had made no attempt to contact her since then, but that was not out of the ordinary - their marriage was a farce that she just enjoyed rubbing in his face for entertainment; her feelings for the man were much more real than that though, even if not mutual. Every practical business sense she had was ringing warning bells about the situation between James' men and Valerian.

Squaring her shoulders, she nodded to herself and punched the key. Almost without pause, a familiar smooth and low voice crackled into the room. "Mira Han? Normally I'm the one calling, what's the occasion?" Graven Hill questioned.

"Business, Mr. Hill." Her lip quirked into a half-smile at the thought.

Hyperion engineering hub

Lasarra was leaning over Jayce and watching the terran's work out of curiosity. Without prompting, she reached into a box of neatly organized tools and passed Jayce the one she thought she needed next.

"I could get used to this." Jayce took up the tool and adjusted the position of the small, high powered fan case. Slipping the needle-thin nozzle into a tiny niche, she started looking for the one ball bearing that was causing the fan to jam up.

While it is true that terran technology is very far behind that of the first born, it is still interesting to learn about it. Lasarra intoned, both watching the action physically and observing the method, goal and finer points of the reparation in Jayce's mind. This kind of work is also very far from my normal scholarly pursuits.

"More of a bookish type, eh?" Jayce smiled, adjusting the fan to another angle and resuming the poke-and-prod process.

The negative aspect of being considered bookish was not lost on Lasarra, and her voice tingled with amusement. All forms of learning are celebrated among the firstborn, Jayce. Tilting her head a degree, she grabbed a sealed package of ball bearings and placed it on the tabletop. But yes, a part of my duties were to collect data and help discern if we could change weather patterns to foster a less intolerant climate.

"Don't get me wrong, I read plenty." Lasarra had correctly anticipated that she found the faulty bearing, and with the press of a button on the small tool an impressive magnet grabbed the offending part; a quick expert jerk backwards and she deposited the heavily pitted bearing to the side and retrieved a new one from the packaging. "Just more slang, you understand. Though yes, there are plenty who look down on the people who keep everything running, for whatever reason."

Lasarra was about to respond when Swann's voice grumbled into Jayce's earbud. "Hey ace. I caught wind of a group of people heading out to Paradise for some R&R, if you wanted to get in on that."
One of Mira's goons and some off-duty marines from the Bucephalus are going with them, should be pretty safe."

Pancakes, was the first thought that came to Jayce's mind, and Lasarra gave her confused silence in return. Quickly, Jayce pressed a finger to her ear. "You're a saint, boss."

"No." Swann chuckled in her ear. "I'm just going to fire you out of an airlock if I have to hear you complain about rations one more time."

"Fair enough." Jayce smirked and closed the comm, tossing the earbud down beside her project and standing up hastily. "You're on your own for a bit, Lasarra. I'm off to Paradise." The mental image Jayce was conjuring up of the place gave Lasarra pause. Nothing was going to stop her from getting a real meal and Jayce had developed a worrying lack of respect towards the dangers of her fellow terrans, given her situation.

Such a terrible place. Lasarra almost recoiled from the suffering and filth showcased. I understand there is no way to convince you to not go... She paused, thoughtful. Should you require aid, you need only call out to me. I will be listening. It was the best she could do.

"Noted, thanks!" With a smile, Jayce was off. It wasn't the first time she'd gone to Paradise, the Hyperion had come to Deadman's Rock to resupply plenty. With an armed group of people, even if they were Valerian's toadies, she was not worried.

Paradise

Gary Crane was used to getting shit details, but this took the cake; the tall, gangly mercenary was running point in front of a considerable sized group of far too well-dressed men and women from the Bucephalus. He kept his gauss rifle just a hair shy of full combat readiness, keenly returning the many hungry glares aimed towards himself and his charges. So long as they didn't do anything more than glare, this was acceptable.

The three off-duty marines from Valerian's ship had also brought their rifles, caging their less physically capable shipmates in on all sides and providing plenty more deterrent than the merc leading them. Jayce had slipped into an old, thick white t-shirt, kept her grease-stained work pants on and tossed a well-loved jacket on top of it; topping it all off with her Hyperion work hat, with its rodent-like emblem. Her gun was strapped on and featured prominently on her right thigh; in fact, every single person in this group was armed, whether they were proficient or not.

Having secured her portion of credits from Swann, who also apologized for scaring the hell out of her at the table, Jayce was going to get those pancakes. When she broke off from the group, who were headed to a bar instead, she slipped into a seedy diner; but what place wasn't seedy in Paradise?

Mindful of the time, she would have to get back to the system runner that bore them here before she was left behind, Jayce ordered herself a stack of pancakes and a mug of coffee so strong the spoon might get stuck in it; it was the best thing she'd ever tasted.

While her stomach attempted to recover from the attack, Jayce did some people watching. There was oddly few beggars, considering the amount of ragged and skeletal-looking people filling up seemingly every nook and cranny outside; she attributed this to the armed guards positioned throughout the room. Can't pay for your food? Eat a bullet. Traditional Paradise law practice.

Finishing off a final slosh of coffee, she ambled back outside. Determined not to idle, Jayce started on a beeline towards the meeting point, keeping a hand firmly on her gun. When a horde of kids flooded into the ramshackle path she was going down and pressed in on her, she flailed out with her
left hand and snapped "Whoa! Back off! Back the hell off!"

The ratty children were begging for food and pleading, and it was all she could do to make sure her gun wasn't removed from her person. That was how she found herself expertly shoved into an alley and staring down a frighteningly familiar form; the realization of who it was hit like a bucket of ice water.

"Well now, it's been far too long." The man sounded smug and superior with his scratchy smoker voice.

From behind, a person much bigger than a kid swooped in and drove his fist into Jayce's guts; immediately she fell to her knees and violently ejected her coffee and pancakes to the ground in a wet chunky heap. Gasping for air as her hair was grabbed and head forcefully tilted upwards, Jayce cried in a brittle voice. "How?"

Yanked to her feet by her hair, Jayce was treated to another gut shot; if he answered, she couldn't hear it past the blood rushing to her head. Wild anger surged through her then, and she cried out in her mind. Lasarra! By instinct, she had begun to say the name verbally too, but a sharp slap cut her words short and her lip bloody.

The warm blanket of Lasarra's worried voice gave her comfort as she was shoved, dragged and kicked to whatever awaited her ahead. Jayce! You need assistance, I will inform the others.

No! Jayce thought sharply. If I don't get back before it's time for the Hyperion to leave- her thoughts were interrupted briefly as she dipped unconscious before coming back, determined to finish the message. You tell them to go without me. You hear me? No help.

I- Lasarra paused, digging into the woman's mind to try and determine the reasoning for this reaction. It was an easy discovery, and Lasarra reluctantly yielded. As you wish, Jayce. Be safe.

Jerked to a stop, Jayce returned Dago's glare as he crouched to eye level. "You've come here a few times, always kept an eye out for you after that shit you pulled." He smiled without kindness. "Was a real nice surprise when my boy, Crane, told me who was comin' to town."

Jayce growled hoarsely, "you shoulda stayed dead." Blood dripped from her torn lip as she let out a high, unhinged laugh. "Now you're gonna die screaming." The last thing she saw was a closed fist.

**Hyperion**

Swann was sitting in his control room, alternating between directing Mira's repair crew from afar and looking at the heavily dented door. He'd done his best to straighten it and bang the dents out, but it still didn't close smoothly and looked like hell; it even had Tychus' hand imprinted in it. Not being able to physically approach any of Mira's men to make sure they were doing their jobs correctly was also irksome.

Letting out a long-suffering sigh, Rory took a swig of completely unappealing coffee and eyed the time. *Paradise group should be back soon, almost time for their shifts to start.* Hopefully none of them were foolish enough to get plastered, or they were in for a bad night.

"Swann, how are those repairs coming along?" Jim's voice in his ear interrupted his mulling, crackling over the other channels he had been listening to.

"Going great cowboy, all things considered." An alert chimed as he was speaking, the Paradise group was checking back in. Pleased and relieved, Swann would not admit that he was worried for Jayce- she was a grown-ass adult after all; but privately, it was a load off his shoulders. "With groups
running around the clock, the Hyperion should be fixed up early tomorrow.”

"Best news I've heard in forever." Raynor sounded relieved, and Rory chuckled.

"You're telling me. Say, how did that meeting with prince charming go anyway?"

"Pretty good, we've got a solid plan laid out." Jim paused, thoughtful. "Few other things I want to talk to the others about, but later."

"Alright, get out of my hair Jim, I got work to do." Swann's voice was both teasing and serious, and Jim knew well enough to let the conversation end.

**Hyperion engineering hub**

Lasarra had remained in the small, part-filled room for lack of other places she needed to be; she'd become adept at touching the minds of all the infested on the ship wherever she was. Given that she learned as much as she could about the fan Jayce had been working on, she felt confident enough to finish the task. After some personal deliberation she took up the thin tool, which fit strangely in hand given her different digits and long claws, and began to fit the new ball bearing into place.

She was having severe misgivings about not simply alerting the infested men to Jayce's situation in Paradise, and as she fiddled with the primitive piece of equipment Lasarra wondered what the consequences of Jayce not returning would be; Rory Swann was especially attached, and it could be said Tychus Findlay was in a similar camp. Her fingers faltered after the little sphere popped into place, the only door into the room hissing open and the chief engineer himself stomping in.

"Lasarra?" Genuinely confused, Rory looked at the queer sight of the protoss in the process of fixing a part and then at the earbud he'd been trying to get a hold of Jayce in for some time. "Where's Jayce?"

With a thought, Lasarra looked in on Jayce and her situation and gave the equivalent of a grimace with her limited facial features before refocusing on Swann. *Jayce remained in Paradise.*

"What?!" He blurted, stomping over and scooping the earbud off the table between his thick, chitinous fingers. "Why the hell didn't you say so sooner?"

Making a placating gesture with a hand, Lasarra put the small tool down and continued. *She wished for you to go without her if she was not back in time for the Hyperion to leave.* Softening, her voice seemed to mutter in his mind. *I did not advise this choice, Rory Swann, but I respect her decision.*

"Like hell we're leavin' without her!" Stuffing the earbud into a pocket, Swann did an about-face and stormed out of the room. He was livid, snarling about air-headed protoss nonsense.

Given the wild nature of terrans, Lasarra considered the conversation a success. Stepping away from the table, she settled into a meditative stance and reached out to the khala for reassurance; its warm glow was like an anchor, and she felt sorry for the lesser races that had to struggle through life without such a thing.

**Hyperion armory**

Swann was pacing anxiously, mentally berating himself for his negligence. The conversation with Jim had not gone the way he expected it to.

*If Lasarra says Jayce didn't want to be chased after, then I believe her.* Raynor had responded to Swann's call to arms without enthusiasm. *We can't just charge into Paradise looking for her Swann,*
you know that; it would be catastrophic.

Running a hand through his pseudo-hair in frustration and grimacing at the feel, he looked at the gauss rifle he'd set up for himself with trepidation. Jim was right: they couldn't just go charging after Jayce, not this time. I'll give Mira a heads up to watch out for her if she doesn't come back in time, Swann, but that's the best we can do. Jim had spoken with finality.

Tychus' made no attempt to be subtle about his arrival, heavy footfalls approaching Swann as he stood there. The big mans anger had all but radiated like a warning light through the ship when he made his way over.

"How are you so fucking stupid?" Findlay snapped the moment he appeared, coming to a stop a few feet away; he'd picked up his own rifle and had it slung across his back already. "That girl gets into more trouble than anyone I ever saw and you let her go tromping off to Paradise, with Val's little goons?"

"Watch it, Findlay!" Swann snarled, rounding on him and pointing accusingly. His thoughts were a jumble—he'd thought more about Jayce's comfort than safety, trusting in her to not be foolish. "I was thinkin' about someone else for a change; not that you'd know what that's like!"

Lip curling, Tychus hefted a clenched fist in warning. "Careful now, people lose teeth talkin' to me like that, old man."

Raynor, your boys are about to get into it. Warfield cautioned, having been quietly observing.

What? Oh hell. Raynor focused on the two just as Swann snapped forwards and caught Findlay's clenched fist with his own.

Pain exploded from his fist as it was clenched in a crushing vice, Tychus let out a surprised grunt before slamming his free hand into the diminutive man's chest, gathering up his thick jacket and preparing to shake Swann like a bulldog. He had not been expecting that kind of strength from the engineer, and attributed it to thinking he was a weaker man when he threw him while in the hardskin forever ago.

Grabbed by his front and lifted, Swann clenched his other hand around Tychus' wrist and squeezed mercilessly. It was very satisfying to see surprise flit across Findlay's brutish features at the start, but the situation was quickly escalating. "Why don't you use that damn suit for somethin' useful and go find her!"

"I ain't getting myself, or all of us, killed just because she might be holed up somewhere!" Shaking Swann vigorously by his front, Tychus was privately concerned about the painful grip—Rory could crush his bones if he continued, he had no doubt. "This is your mess!"

No one's goin' after her. Jim spoke levelly, attempting to diffuse the situation as Rory dangled by Tychus' fist. Not by yourself. Not with your stupid suit. Not at all.

Since when do we leave people behind? Swann was clenching his teeth, taking his frustration out on the bones in his hands that creaked in warning. I didn't sign up for this!

None of us signed up for this and we leave 'em behind when they tell us they want to be! Rory's frustration was echoed by Raynor, and he continued to speak but it was cut off by the deafening crack of a gunshot.

Swann let out a surprised shout as a bullet connected with his shoulder and ricocheted off the heavy chitinous plating beneath its thick jacket covering; the cloth was sheared clean off. Tychus
immediately dropped Rory and the two spun to look at the perpetrator, his own gauss rifle appearing in his hand.

A startled looking mercenary with the familiar bright pink emblem of Mira's Marauders was staring at them, gun still raised and barrel smoking. Several others stood beside him in the doorway while even more streamed past.

Jim! We're under attack! Swann's fury was smoothly redirected at the invaders, and as Tychus took on a bright red tinge and disappeared into thin air, Rory growled. "Crane? You got a lot to answer for." Indeed, the man who looked startled was, on further inspection, Gary Crane.

Shaken out of his reverie when the huge alien literally disappeared into thin air, Crane took aim and began to fire. "There's zerg on the ship!" He cried into his comm, backing out of the door as fast as he could—bullets were connecting with and bouncing off of the short monster, and he was approaching at a quick walk with his forearm protecting his face.

Jim, Warfield and Horner sprang to action immediately and warning klaxons began to howl all over the ship.

How many? Jim questioned as he darted down hallways, a spine in hand. He ran into a group of Valerian's men and, ignoring some scared shouts, jerked a thumb over his shoulder and spoke in a commanding tone. "Hole up in the bridge, go!"

Don't know, taking care of this group. Tychus muttered, slipping through the door as Swann drew the fire from three gauss rifles and seemed none the worse for wear for it. It was clear Rory knew the lanky merc who fired first, so he refrained from touching that one. The other two on either side of him were not so lucky, however.

Horner was on the bridge and attempting to establish contact with the Bucephalus and Mira, both to no avail. All our comms are down, can't contact the Bucephalus or Mira.

Warfield chimed in as he began to scout through his level of the ship; fully-armed and armored, he looked like a patchwork turtle. Get a hold of Lasarra, that protoss mind-nonsense might be able to reach Valerian at least.

Swann watched from under his newly-exposed forearm as the air rippled behind one of the invaders, followed by a spray of blood and the man falling heavily. Tychus swung a clenched fist down against the back of the man's neck and, with some satisfaction, knew he crumpled the man's spine like a beer can.

"It's here! It got Kepler!" Seeing his friend be mauled by an invisible monster, now painted with blood, sent the third lackey into an unhinged panic as he abandoned all pretense of professionalism and made to run.

This was supposed to be easy. Gary Crane lamented as he dashed over Kepler's cooling corpse and ran in the opposite direction of Lars. The Hyperion and the Bucephalus, both understaffed and war-weary? Emperor Mengsk would have paid vast fortunes just for Jim Raynor's corpse, never mind Valerian and a few of the other notable traitors. But there were monsters here, real ones, not men.

Vaguely, Crane registered the sound of Lars being bodily smashed into a wall and having his shattered bones blended neatly into his insides like a meat slushie. The invisible monster had gone for his subordinate, which was fortunate for him.

Swann was in pursuit of the merc but realized he would lose him in short order. I'm chasin' Crane
right now, he's Mira's pet. Don't kill 'em if you see 'em!

Tychus ran ahead to swing down another corridor and head Crane off, but both he and Rory realized who the merc was about to run into. He quickened his pace just so he could see what was about to happen.

Jim neatly planted a spine between the shoulder blades of an armed merc who had been in the process of squeezing the trigger to fire at one of Valerian's crew members, which Jim considered just as much his own at this point. There was no time to register the grateful expression or hearty thank-yous, Raynor was one part angry and one part reveling in hunting down a tangible enemy; his own personal demons were ephemeral and infuriating in comparison. *Did Mira betray us, Matt?*

No. Matt responded firmly, in fact he was almost positive Mira had to be fighting for her own life just then as well. He had taken up a defensive position at the bridge door, alert for friends and foes.

Lasarra stood at the crossroads, serene amidst the chaos of red flashing lights and blaring klaxons. The thoughts of the invaders were clear as bells: thoughts of greed, power lust, self gratification... None shouted these louder than the man who was running towards her now.

Gary Crane. A greedy man by nature, who both submerged himself in the criminal underworld at a young age and began climbing to the top of its heap, stepping on and backstabbing anyone in his way. There were no redeeming qualities in this creature, and to compare his avarice and evil to an animal was an insult to the animal. All this and more Lasarra discerned before Crane had rounded the bend and came to see her.

Thundering down the steel hall, Crane stumbled and faltered to a stop at the sight of a protoss. He'd never seen one in person before, and it was both glorious and terrible. The creature was radiating a blue glow, covered in alien and beautiful armor that made the dark terran steel all around it seem cheap and dirty.

Confused, he raised his gun all the same. Why there was a protoss here, in his way, would just have to remain a mystery—he knew exactly what was behind him, after all. As his finger found the trigger, a terrible, piercing shriek of a voice knifed into his brain and made him cry out, nearly dropping the rifle.

*You are antithesis of all that is good and right, Gary Crane.* Lasarra had pitched her voice into a barely controlled shout, knowing full well protoss mental communications could be very painful if not properly modulated for the lesser mind. *The justice that awaits you will not be kind, but you have worked hard to reach this end!*

Swann and Tychus both ran into view as Crane collapsed to the ground, unconscious from the agony of Lasarra's mental bombardment. "Nice job." Findlay quirked a brow in approval as the bright blue fury that had encompassed the protoss died off, replaced by the familiar feeling of peace washing over the area.

*There are more.* Lasarra warned as Swann stripped Crane of his weapon, tossing it over his own shoulder and trussing the merc up.

"Jeeze, what'd you do to 'em?" Rory muttered, registering Crane's unconscious heartbeat as he slung the wiry man over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. His own jacket and shirt was in tatters from all the gauss fire and he keenly felt the exposure.

*He is simply unconscious, Rory Swann.* Lasarra fell into a quick step with the two men, guiding them towards more of their attackers. *This Gary Crane was coordinating an attack on the Hyperion in*
order to kill Jim Raynor and collect currency for it; he has another group attacking the Bucephalus and Mira Han's base as we speak.

Recalling what Warfield said, Tychus muttered while keeping his rifle at the ready. "All our comms are down. If you can contact Val or Mira and warn them, do it."

Hyperion lab

Stetmann had immediately left the lab as soon as the klaxon sounded, seeking a safer place to be. Shlassa couldn't imagine why, the terrans who were creeping through the ship now would be nothing but corpses very soon; one of them was outside the lab right now, in fact. The broodmother let out a dark, echoing chuckle.

When the door to the lab slid open, Octavia was hoping to find some expensive lab equipment to steal and sell for some extra side profit—especially considering it sounded like everyone else was being murdered over the comm and they weren't going to get paid; instead, what she found was a nightmare. Creep coating the floor, seeping up the walls and equipment, and an overpowering stench that made her take a half-step back by itself. *Zerg on the ship!* She vaguely registered the cry of Crane, that foolish sonofabitch. "Oh hell," she whispered, taking another long step back and reaching to close the door.

With an unnatural chittering snarl, Shlassa exploded from her hiding place and impaled the surprised terran clean through the torso with a long, spear-like limb. The merc's finger was on the trigger of her rifle and squeezed hard even as she was attempting to take another blood-filled breath, Shlassa ripped the squirming vermin's arm off and threw the body one way and the arm another; finally free of the lab, she clattered down a hallway to hunt more of the intruders.

Bucephalus

Valerian prowled, sword in hand, against the imaginary foes in his room. Ducking, slicing, impaling, parrying, all practiced moves a part of an equally practiced dance. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he imagined the scenario and how he'd deal with those who'd do him harm, all the pent up stress of the past days being worked out of his system with every precise, violent strike and motion.

*Valerian Mengsk.* He stopped abruptly, caught in the middle of what would have been a neat throat slice. The voice in his mind, only heard once before, was still familiar—Lasarra, the protoss. It had been fascinating to feel the alien's voice in his mind during the course of normal conversation, but he was immediately on guard by the sudden and unannounced nature of her mental visit.

*The Hyperion has come under attack by rogue mercenaries, betrayers.* Lasarra's message was delivered with clinical precision, lacking the kindness and warmth she conveyed normally. Warn your men, you may already be boarded.

Lasarra's words proved prophetic, as Valerian immediately sheathed his sword—forsaking the traditional bow in lieu of the potentially urgent nature of the situation. "Captain Vaughn," he called the captain as he calmly checked his pistol and adjusted the sword sheathed at his hip, ready for combat. "I have received word that we may be under attack, please alert your men and-" he paused. There was no familiar crackle of an established connection, shifting of cloth as the listener fidgeted, nothing.

"Very well," he muttered. Comms were down on the Bucephalus as well, which meant the wolves were already among the sheep. His men were not poorly trained however, and he expected a full
resistance to be mounted as soon as word got out. Pistol appearing in his hand, Valerian left the
security of his room and began making his way to the bridge; keeping control of the ship would be
paramount, and it was very defensible.

"Sir?" A resocialized marine stationed outside his door called, immediately following.

A glance revealed the soldier's face and he was recognized, Valerian picked up his pace into a
smooth run. "We're under attack, private Mornu. Alert your superiors immediately while I get to the
bridge!"

Being that he was resocialized and Valerian was the utmost highest in command, private Mornu had
no choice but to follow his orders. "Yes sir!" The sound of his powered armor clanking down
another hallway reassured Valerian—his men had some of the best equipment known to the
Dominion, these mercenaries wouldn't stand a chance.

Soon, the distant popping of gunfire could be heard. Every member of staff Valerian caught on his
way to the bridge was informed of the situation and from there, they would spread the word further
until the mercenaries offensive would be shut down cold. A warning klaxon sounded just as the
prince rounded a corner and narrowly avoided being shot in the face, swinging backwards and
watching in surprise as the neosteel where his head had been sparked—a gauss spike bouncing off it.

Pulled into combat, Valerian took a shot around the corner with his pistol and attempted to catch a
glimpse of his assailant. His shot went wild, but apparently the gunman had been retreating and,
having focused on the wily prince, was cut down in a hale of gunfire from behind. "Hold your fire!"
He called, hiding around the corner to avoid stray spikes.

"State your rank!" A gruff voice barked in warning.

"Prince Valerian!" He almost rolled his eyes in annoyance, lack of communication equipment made
everything difficult.

"Sir!" The rapid stomping of men in combat suits made a clatter as the unit approached, rounding the
corner and saluting sharply. "Glad to see you're safe, Prince Valerian! We've established a perimeter
and are already hunting down the attackers. Please come with me." The man beckoned, two
chevrons on his suit shoulder indicating his status as a Corporal.

Relieved to hear the good news, Valerian complied and followed. The remaining men took up their
defensive positions once again as the Corporal delivered his Prince to safety. "Do we have any idea
how many there are, Corporal?" The fair haired prince questioned smoothly, keeping his pistol at the
ready.

"No. We only realized something was amiss when our comms weren't working and gunfire started
up." The man was reluctant to admit it, his tone made that clear.

"It seems we grew complacent." Valerian muttered, voice cold, but didn't blame the Corporal directly
—his higher-ups would have to answer for such a bungle at a later date.

A single well-aimed gauss spike took the Corporal in the face, cutting off his reply forever. The
ponderous hardskin and its deceased cargo crashed forwards heavily as Valerian darted behind it and
made to fire at the new assailant; apparently the line broke somewhere. When six gauss rifles aimed
at him as one, however, he grudgingly lowered his own gun and called out in a scared tone. "Wait!
Don't shoot! I'm Prince Valerian, I'm valuable!"

One of the men snorted in disgust at his apparent cowardice, but no one fired. They were all dressed
in the standard Mira's Marauder attire, with the usual mercenary unique additives to each suit. "Awesome. You think daddy will pay more for you alive or dead, kiddo?" Together, the group moved as one to cage their prey in.

As soon as one made to reach for Valerian's gun, the scared child demeanor melted away. Stormy gray eyes identified the moment to strike with precision—and he did. From its hilt his sword flew into his hand and neatly severed the offending limb reaching towards him, sweet chaos blooming instantly.

The combination of violence and speed to which Valerian attacked his foes was the making of years of intense practice being put to use. Behind one man he darted—letting his own allies cut him down with gunfire as he slipped to the next target and neatly impaled his heart from behind; shoving the offending body into his still-living cohorts, the prince exploded from one target to the next until it was just him standing in a hall of corpses and breathing raggedly.

"He would have preferred me dead." Valerian snarled.
Harsh Lessons

Matt Horner and a small force were attempting to provide cover fire for one of Mira's repairmen who was late to the party at the bridge and running from a group of mercenaries; it galled him deeply to see the man cut down from behind, left to lay in a heap on the floor merely a few feet away.

Bridge is under attack right now, what is your status? Horner called to the others tensely as he ducked away from return fire. The bridge was very full now, and the vast majority of people in it were unarmed; precious few people on the ship were trained to fight—it was almost exclusively up to the infested men, Lasarra and apparently Shlassa to fight off the invading force.

Worse yet, it seemed that fighting was going on in the air and through Mira's sprawling compound, from what his subordinates had seen through the viewport and with scanners. The Hyperion could easily add its firepower to help Mira, but without comms there was no discerning who was with who.

Lasarra says there's not that many left, hang in there Matt. Raynor replied easily; having teamed up with Warfield, the two were encountering very little that could give them a challenge. The real difficulty was attempting to keep Shlassa from killing friendlies—she was not discerning friend from foe, at all.

A loud clank, followed by a distinct rolling sound, brought Matt's attention sharply back to the present. "Get down!" He yelled as a flashbang rolled into view, exploding in a blinding flash that caught most off guard. Matt had managed to cover his face and close his eyes, but he was still left rapidly blinking away white spots in a desperate bid to see the oncoming attackers.

Lasarra watched the scene play out before her through the eyes of everyone around Matt Horner, both attackers and blinded defenders. As the infested man's gun was kicked out of his hand by one of four armed mercenaries, she made a decision.

I am sorry, Matt Horner.

Stumbling from a rifle butt to the face, Matt heard more than saw the other armed men and women he had with him being disarmed and, in a few cases, shot if they put up a struggle. When Lasarra's voice, cool with displeasure, spoke to him, he whispered frantically. "No!" The protoss had made up her mind however, and Matt could do nothing to stop her from pulling away the calming veil.

Hot alien rage washed over him, overwhelming and horrible; without the constant battle to maintain control, he'd lost what little defense he had against it. Triumphant, Shlassa's voice seethed through his mind, like a slimy caress on his brain.

Kill them all. Shlassa's command, combined with the intensity of emotion crashing into his mind, swept Horner away.

Jim stumbled, shocked at the sheer violence erupting from Matt, and would have caught a few bullets were it not for Warfield's fast reaction; the General catching Raynor by the shoulder and sharply pulling him back around their corner. A sense of shocked awe emanated from all the infested men, safe within Lasarra's veil.

Warfield muttered harshly in his ear after firing a few rounds of suppressing fire over Jim's shoulder. "What in God's name did Lasarra do to him?"

Raynor shook his head, providing cover fire with a borrowed gauss rifle for Warfield as he pressed
around the corner- he was wearing armor and acting as Jim's shield. It felt like there was a pure blot of evil in the link they shared, an oily malevolence that threatened their sanctuary. Was this what they were like before Lasarra had come? It chilled him to think what would happen if Lasarra left, or worse, perished.

"It ain't what she did to him, General—it's us without her."

Swann, Tychus and Lasarra had collected a small group of workers, both Valerian's and Mira's, following them at a safe distance. The protoss proved invaluable in identifying allies and enemies before they came upon them; the two men also suspected whatever the alien said in the minds of those they were rescuing helped alleviate whatever fears one might have at being rescued by very inhuman looking people.

Findlay was watching Horner like a hawk during his violent entanglement and, calling an abrupt halt to their group, stiffened as he caught Matt from ripping one of their own to shreds. Tightly, he muttered. "Lasarra, he's done. Put the leash back on." Physically holding the raging infested man in place was easy, but he wouldn't admit it; behind the scenes he and Stetmann, holed up somewhere when he couldn't get to the bridge, were also keeping Shlassa from killing their own.

Matt came to with his hands fisted in the shirt of one of the navigators, who was staring in abject horror, and dropped him as if burned. The four mercs who had stomped in were in various states of dismemberment, all dead; he had been reduced to a passenger in his own body, watching events unfold and trying desperately to alter them to no avail. When he found himself holding the man's shirt and preparing to shove his extra appendages through his chest, his own body was seized in a vice-like hold—and he knew full well it had been Findlay to save the day.

Horner couldn't stand the silence that had settled over the bridge, nor look at the people who were no doubt staring. With shaking, blood-coated hands, he slowly pulled a gauss rifle from a pair of dead hands and took up his position at the door once again. "Keep trying to get comms working," he muttered.

Egon Stetmann, a proud scientist of great skill, was hiding in the equivalent of a broom closet; cut off from the bridge, it seemed the best course of action. From there he watched all the infested men and lent aid if he could, which was very little, given the situation. When Shlassa flew out of the lab like a violent hurricane, it was all he could do to direct her at enemies.

Stetmann flooded with relief when Findlay caught Matt from killing one of their own, he wasn't capable of holding the broodmother and the other man at the same time. It was of special interest to see how well Tychus' brute force method worked so well on the mental side of things—Shlassa did say the swarm was ruled by force of will and strength, perhaps it was more true than he thought.

"Kid, get out of my head and do something useful." Findlay all but growled.

Ah-yes-well! Surprised, Stetmann stuttered. *Shlassa doesn't sense any more invading mercenaries, perhaps we should help the Bucephalus once the Hyperion is secured?*

*We can take a shuttle over, but who's going to stay?* Swann piped up. Their group was walking and he had to physically refrain from fiddling with his shredded bits of shirt to try and to cover himself again.

Warfield, moving at a quick pace towards Lasarra's group with Jim at his side, considered their options. *Securing the Bucephalus and getting the hell outta here are top priorities.*

*Swann, Horner and Stetmann can stay.* Jim grumbled, darting through a doorway and coming to a
quick stop at the back of the rescued group of people. Grudgingly, he added, *Shlassa can guard the lifts with Stetmann watching her.*

"You're gonna leave that thing guarding the ship, Jim? You should get it back in the damn lab!" Swann spun to face Jim, glaring through the people in their way—said people clearing the way very fast.

Frowning, Jim held up a hand. "Not up for discussion, Swann." Redirecting his attention to the men and women clumped between their two groups of infested and Lasarra, he jerked a thumb over his shoulder sharply. "Ship is clear. I want any of you capable of continuing repairs to do so and the rest to get the ship ready to leave, pronto." When the group filtered away at a quick pace, he was pleased to see a few thank-yous being given to Tychus, Swann and Lasarra. It was sure to do them some good.

"Eh, whatever. You're the boss, cowboy." Swann muttered, letting the argument go and turning to leave. It was clear the short man had a long list of grievances however, and Jim promised to himself to get a real talk in with him at a more appropriate time, if such a thing existed.

"Right, lets get on a shuttle and go save the day." Findlay all but rolled his eyes and refrained from pinching the ass of one woman who thanked him when she walked away.

*I will accompany you.* Lasarra walked with them as their two groups quietly merged and started a brisk pace for the nearest ship bay.

"You aren't going to... Get out of range of the boys on this ship, are you?" Warfield questioned, concerned.

*No, Horus Warfield. The Bucephalus is close enough, and I am continually bettering my ability to protect you and the other men.* Lasarra reassured them all, and a collective sigh of relief was let loose.

On the way, Tychus saw a familiar form laying in a heap; the man who had confronted him in the Cantina was still in his greasy overalls and had been riddled with bullets. It should have been just another dead body, Findlay saw more than his fair share, but this one sent a wash of anger through him. Good thing there were more mercs to kill.

**Hyperion Bridge**

The atmosphere on the bridge was tense with discomfort, but when Horner announced the ship was clear it seemed to ease somewhat. Now as Warfield, Raynor, Tychus and Lasarra were getting into the Fanfare, a well-loved shuttle, Matt was helping move bodies out of the immediate area with a few of the stronger stomachs.

"Sir," Ashdale, a very competent and attentive member of the bridge crew who Horner liked, caught his attention after dragging aside one of the limp bodies of her coworkers. "I just want to say thank you, even if that was..." She paused, trying to think of a better way to put it but coming up short. "Scary. You saved everyone here."

"Thanks, Ash." His reply was carefully measured, sure to hide how little that made him feel better. It scared the hell out of him, never mind them. Matt almost ran a hand through his hair before remembering it was bloody, making a small disgusted noise instead as he strode back into the bridge.

"Captain! Mira Han has been trying to hail us, but the signal is still too jammed up. I think she's working on it." Jeremy Hughes exclaimed as soon as Horner came into eyesight.
"That's a relief. Our shuttle out there yet?" Matt took up his position at the star map and brought up a visual of the immediate area, noting the fierce dog fights between Wraiths still going strong. It would be dangerous even flying a shuttle the short way to the Bucephalus, and Horner had every intention of providing cover.

"Just launched, Captain. They are in the Fanfare."

"I want you to keep an eye on the Fanfare, all guns ready. If any of those fighters out there attack our ship, you blow them to hell." Horner's tone was fierce.

**Bucephalus**

"Captain Vaughn! A shuttle just launched from the Hyperion and is heading towards us, sir!" A crew member called in an excited tone.

"Could be reinforcements for the mercenaries, we have no idea if the Hyperion withstood the attack." Vaughn thought out loud, frowning over the star map and watching the little ship approach.

"Run scanners over that shuttle, Captain." Valerian snapped, whirling and coming to stand at the star map with Vaughn. It had been a hell of an adventure getting to the bridge, but it was secure for now. The mercenaries had something more than just men attacking his ship, and they were using their comm advantage to full effect—the battle was not going in Valerian's favor, as far as they could tell.

"Yes sir." There was a pause as the man attempted to figure out what he was seeing. "Scanners can't seem to figure out what's in there, other than one protoss signature, sir." He sounded baffled, but Valerian smiled.

"Excellent, make sure that ship gets through to ours Captain. Those reinforcements are for us." The prince was looking forward to getting camera footage of the infested men, and the protoss, in action.

"The Hyperion's weapons are online and aiming at the shuttle, sir." More bafflement.

"Do the same." Vaughn barked, understanding the situation quickly. "They are providing cover fire for the Fanfare." With his word, the Bucephalus' weapons came alive and trained on the Fanfare, waiting to strike anyone who struck first.

The Fanfare, being the easy target it was, came under fire shortly after Vaughn caught on. A cheer lit up the bridge as the Wraith, having only gotten one shot in, was blown to bits in a neat and tidy crossfire between the two massive ships.

"We don't have any docking bays secured, sir." Vaughn worried, looking through the areas they determined had been compromised on the Bucephalus; there were an awful lot. "There's no telling what they are going to fly into."

"We'll just have to trust that they are prepared." Valerian frowned a degree, watching the small ship disappear into a docking bay. He hoped that Lasarra would contact him soon.

**Bucephalus docking bay**

The Fanfare docked without issue and, bristling with weaponry, the group of infested men piled out in a hurry to take the measure of their location; Lasarra walked down the ramp after them, already knowing.

*The enemy has control of the majority of the ship.* She noted, feeling outwards and following as they made to leave the bay. *There are groups of resistance, and the largest force of Valerian Mengsk's*
men are keeping the bridge floor secured.

"So they're all a bunch of pansies, is what you're saying." Tychus' tone was condescending at best.

No, I said that the enemy has control of the majority of th-

"That's alright Lasarra, we know." Warfield cut in, it was funny how the supposedly superior race could read minds and be so lost with sarcasm.

"Awful quiet." Raynor noted, running point for the group and keeping the pace brisk—he expected Lasarra to let them know if anyone was around; and she did.

There is something else on this ship. The demure protoss, having kept her composure perfectly for so long, sounded strange with her concerned tone. I do not understand it's nature, but it is clearly under the mercenaries' sway.

"Wonderful, I love surprises. You let me know if that thing gets near." Jim grumbled.

You will know, James Raynor.

On the Bucephalus bridge, Vaughn was preparing to give fresh orders to a runner who would bring them to the front the old fashioned way. "Prince Valerian, I'd like to send a force to meet with our support." He didn't expect any opposition, but the infested were a special bunch.

"No, Captain. We're going to let them do what they do best, and I want as much footage of them doing that as possible." Valerian was calm and confident now, there was no chance of losing; this wasn't Char.

Without pause, Vaughn dismissed the runner and got back to work. "As you wish, Prince Valerian." It was a pleasant surprise to hear the adjutant announcing an incoming transmission a few moments later.

It wasn't long before the infested men were falling on the invading force from behind, cutting them down efficiently and making a beeline for the next group. Raynor had shifted from point to support, letting the armored Warfield and Findlay bring up the front. From his position, he was able to watch the two men work well together—which wasn't altogether surprising, given how long they had been around one another now.

Warfield had a cool, calculated method for approaching the enemy and it could be said that Tychus had the direct opposite. The General worked around Findlay's shock tactics well, perhaps in part because they knew what one another was going to do before doing it, and it showed. Findlay had abandoned all pretense of stealthiness, no longer using his suit and falling back to the comfortable reliability of his gauss rifle—all three men had.

Several times Jim swore he could hear a distant mechanical clanking, and at one point what he thought might have been a roar. Tychus had just finished tackling down a man and crushing his skull with the butt of his rifle when Jim finally spoke up about it. "Either of you been hearing that?"

Lasarra was already directing them to their next targets.

"Heard somethin', that's for sure." Horus confirmed, and Tychus gave a noncommittal grunt.

"Think the mercs got a hold of some of the weaponry on the ship?" Jim wondered out loud, his suspicions of what the sounds could belong to bringing back a memory of choosing what upgrade paths to follow, with Stetmann eagerly looking over his shoulder. No regular mercs would have that kind of machinery.
"Wont save them." Findlay muttered, he was focused more intensely than Raynor had seen in an age, and he wondered what was wrong with his old friend... Well, aside from the obvious. Just like Swann, however, he put the questions on the back burner for a better time and couldn't see anything wrong with Tychus Findlay dispensing some righteous fury in a good direction.

"You got that right." Jim agreed amicably.

Lasarra wondered at the thought process of Prince Valerian Mengsk. Mira Han had established a connection with him, but he had specifically forbade attempting to get in touch with the infested men and had only used it to pull his own forces back and give both the mercenaries and Jim's men full run of the ship.

It was difficult at the best of times to decide what to reveal and what not to, but she was here to help the infested men on their path to redemption—and to fulfill whatever role the universe has decided for them. Entangling herself in the web of an arrogant princeling was not going to happen if she had a say in the matter; besides, the radiant alien suspected what this was about, and so kept her silence.

They wandered into a section of the ship where all but the red emergency lights were gone, casting dead bodies in an even grimmer light. Warfield glanced over them critically, hoping to not see any familiar faces, and noted the nature of their deaths. "Predators, Raynor, they have predators." These people were shredded and torn, clearly not from bullets.

*The predator is attacking a group of defenders!* Lasarra warned, feeling the fear pounding through several people hiding behind a sealed door. The door wouldn't last long with that metal monster bashing it in—and as they ran, they heard it's mechanical snarling and smashing themselves.

Well one predator wouldn't be too much trouble for them, Jim reasoned as he pounded down hall after hall with them; he reckoned that Ursadon Matriarch was tougher. As one, all three poured through the last door separating them from their prey, guns raised and firing in tandem. Snarling, the predator immediately rounded from the half-broken door and charged, even as it was peppered heavily with gauss spikes.

The metal creature, shaped after a large panther from old earth, shrieked and bellowed as sparks crackled out of the holes their concentrated fire carved into it; still, it managed to take a swipe at Warfield as it collapsed in a heap of sparking debris, the stench of melting plastic wafting up through the crater in its skull.

Warfield let out a pained groan and grasped the heavy neosteel paw, tearing it off his arm roughly. Purplish ooze pulsed sluggishly through the thick cuts the predator's titanium claws tore through his meager protective armor; it would have been much worse without. "Hell! That smarts."

"You alright General?" Raynor queried as he came to stand beside the stinking heap of metal, giving it a nudge with his boot.

"Yeah, it'll clear up. Lets get moving." Lassara would let the people inside the room know what was going on and they would move on. Better they didn't see who exactly their rescuers were, just in case.

Hyperion bridge

"Incoming transmission." The adjutant announced, Mira Han immediately appearing over the star map—she looked especially haggard and angry.

"Matthew! Tell me that is the blood of these traitors on you!" She barked as an explosion sounded
off somewhere behind her. "We have secured the base and are hunting them down as we speak."

"Yes Mira, I'm fine and they are dead. The Hyperion is secure and we're helping out the Bucephalus right now." Horner reassured her and he felt a wash of relief that she was alright; there was no way Mira would come to the ship and fight for the infested men if she was a traitor. "Glad you're alright." he tentatively added.

Gracing him with a broad, impish grin, the mercenary nodded at him. "Sadly Matthew I think it is time for you and Mr. V to take your leave. I hope that your repairs have been completed." Her countenance became grim then, Horner knew it was coming anyway.

"Understood. We have a package for you, I believe he will be of great interest." Matt smirked, pitiless. Mira would take Crane through every layer of hell for his betrayal.

"Oh? I will collect him personally, ten minutes. Have him ready Matthew." Mira was all hardened mercenary then, and her entire demeanor promised punishment right before she closed the comm and disappeared.

"Get a hold of the Bucephalus and tell them it's time to get going." Matt was already focusing on the infested men, even as he barked orders at his bridge workers.

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**Bucephalus**

Jim, we've reestablished contact with Mira and Valerian. I know you aren't done clearing the ship out yet but we're prepping to launch right now, we can transfer you back later. Horner intruded on the comfortable silence that had fallen over the group.

*Good news, I like that.* Jim allowed himself a smile for something going right for a change.

*If Prince Charming has control of the ship again, why are all the lights still out?* Tychus questioned warily.

*Might be doing that for our sake, I'm sure he knows we can see in the dark.* Warfield came to Valerian's defense quickly, leaving both Tychus and Jim rolling their eyes.

They were creeping through a cargo hold, boxes piled high and neat all around, when a hair-raising sensation fell over all of them. Lasarra, her glowing eyes widening in visual alarm, looked around quickly—not being able to feel what was there was frightening.

Warfield held up a hand, signaling a halt; looking over his shoulder at Jim and Tychus, he gave a quick gesture for spreading out and received nods of agreement. Lasarra stuck with Jim as they fanned out into the cavernous hold.

With a leap, Tychus launched himself atop his row of boxes and landed quietly; the crates were magnetically sealed in place, they wouldn't be getting jostled easily. From his new vantage, he activated the cloak and held his rifle at the ready; the extra height and line of sight did not protect him from the assault from above, though.

From large overhead chutes, already having locked on to his heat signature, two predators came crashing down on Tychus in a snarling clatter. *More kitties from on high!* His gun was immediately discarded and the cloak fell off as he sent one of the big cats flying further into the room, left to try and wrangle the one off his back.

Findlay's outraged bellow was just a precursor to the larger force, from all around heavy clattering was heard as more and more predators came crashing down from their hiding places. *Must be how
they got around in the ship so easy. Jim thought to himself. Lasarra let out a startled mental shout that
hurt his brain, but not enough to keep him from spinning around when he heard the willowy protoss
crash into crates behind him.

The predator that Tychus threw crashed cleanly into Lasarra with it's side, and she landed in a heap
with it; dazedly, she stared down at the mechanical beast as it turned it's head and identified the threat
it was sitting on. It's massive jaws parted, titanium teeth stinking of blood, and were about to deliver
her to the khala when clawed, alien hands grasped it's snout and jaw—halting the deadly lunge.

Jim dug his clawed fingertips into the neosteel of the machine and keenly felt all his muscles
bunching and straining as he let out a guttural roar of his own. The cybercat was jerking and clawing
at the protoss, but her armor was protecting her from most of the damage as Raynor wrestled it on
top of her. Finally, with a metallic scream and sparks of freed electricity, the jaw gave way and was
ripped clean off—the bright orange of the predator's eyes blinking out as it slumped.

Frantic, Jim all but threw the heavy machine off and took stock of Lasarra—thoughts of her own
light blinking out and the all-encompassing darkness of the swarm crashing in on them fueling terror
inside of him.

I am well, James Raynor, thanks to your quick work. Lasarra raised herself to a stand, dazed and
bleeding from small slices between her armor but otherwise in tact.

"Thank God!" He exclaimed, and were it not for the situation he'd have taken more time to consider
how foolish it was bringing Lasarra into harm's way. Gunfire popping from Warfield's gauss rifle
and Tychus' very noisy physical struggle drew his attention further, however. A loud growl from
behind let Jim know that his friends were still on their own, and Jim picked his own rifle back up.

The big cybercat was taking bites at his shoulders and the back of his neck, and Tychus was getting
pissed; his spectre outfit wasn't doing him any favors against the titanium teeth and claws of the
machine, and he could feel his own blood running thick down his back. Tired of trying to swipe it
off, he stood up straight and stretched one arm over his shoulder and the other around his low back,
catching a front leg and a back leg in a steely grip.

Titanium teeth clamped down over the meat of his neck, piercing into his shoulder blade and
scraping grooves into his collar bone as he let out a pained howl and pulled the mechanical cat in two
different directions with all the force he could muster. The predator was torn asunder, Tychus hurling
it's pieces in different directions before hunching over and prying it's stupid head off his neck.
Whoever is driving these things is going to die. He promised.

Got three of these damn things over here, if either of you ladies get some free time! Warfield's tone
was light, but the situation was getting desperate. Backed into a corner, the cats were taking turns
getting strikes in and he was running low on ammo—and armor, they were prying pieces of it off
with each attack.

As Tychus leaped from one group of boxes to another, he saw Jim killing the last predator that came
after him, and finally Warfield holed up in his corner. Raynor saw his old friend on the move, briefly
noting the torn apart back of his suit, and made to intercept at the General.

Warfield, finally out of ammo, hunched over and was brandishing his own talons. Whatever
sophisticated technology controlled the predators seemed to have decided that this was the final
moment, and all three struck at once. Simultaneously, Jim and Tychus both leaped and grasped a
handful of mechanical tail, pulling two of the three back.

In sync with Raynor and Findlay, the General struck at the one unrestrained predator. Tackling it
down with his superior weight advantage, he tore through the neosteel underbelly of the beast and disemboweled it's mechanical guts while Jim and Tychus beat, maimed and smashed their own targets into nonfunctional heaps.

Heavy breathing, along with a few stray zaps of electricity, filled the deafening silence that came over them as the fighting ended. Resting his hands on his knees and huffing, Jim let out a weak laugh. Tychus' basso chuckle followed shortly after and Warfield couldn't help but join in the giddy mirth.

Confused and a little worried, Lasarra observed from a respectable distance away while checking her own wounds and the status of the ship. Surprised, she all but blurted at them, "The Bucephalus and Hyperion are in space. We must have taken off during the fighting."

"Good." Jim straightened up and gave both Warfield and Tychus a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Never liked Dead Man's Rock anyway. Lets finish up here, boys."

**Bucephalus bridge**

Valerian was ecstatic, although he kept his excitement firmly to himself. Watching the infested men fight through his ship in a danse macabre was going to yield so much more information to his research teams, he allowed himself a sip of fine port in celebration. If they could find a way to recreate the hivemind link in small groups of trained fighting men, it would herald a new age in combat.

*Even research and development could use such a thing!* He exclaimed to himself while watching his competent crew do their work. *How great would it be to just be on the exact same page as one another?* Valerian smiled into his drink.

And their strength! Ripping machines, designed to kill small groups with efficiency, to pieces with their bare hands. Incredible. There was no doubt in the mind of the heir apparent that bringing them to Korhal to help kill the hybrid and firmly secure his throne was the correct course of action.

He almost wanted to go so far as to thank the mercenaries for their duplicity and attempt to kill him, just for this opportunity, but the fact remained they did kill quite a few of his good men—both armed and unarmed. Sobering quickly, he looked into the golden liquid slowly swirling in his glass, thoroughly chastised. Many good men and women had given their lives for him already, and he had allowed himself to take that for granted.

*I am not my father.* Valerian reminded himself firmly. Yes, people would fight and die for him in droves, and they would do it gladly. *But they will do it because they believe in me, not because they have been forced or fear me.*

With a small sigh, he registered that the infested had finished killing all the opposition on the ship. "Put me on the intercom, Captain Vaughn."

"Yes sir."

A brief crackle let him know that he was live, and Prince Valerian Mengsk's voice calmly flooded through the ship. "Attention. The intruders have been dealt with, you may also have noticed that the Bucephalus is no longer grounded—we are now in space and on our way to Korhal as originally intended. Please return to your posts and use our restored comms to get anyone who needs medical attention to the appropriate facility. The bodies of our fallen will be taken care of, as well."

He paused, letting his message sink in for a few moments before continuing. "And Jim Raynor,
Tychus was sore about his suit being mauled, more than his body; the power strips no longer had their red lines zipping along them, and he knew the battery pack had either been severed completely or heavily damaged. He wondered if Valerian's boys could fix it.

*Your back was ripped open by mechanical panthers and you're upset about the suit?* Warfield prodded, amused. Tychus was not keeping his thoughts closed off from Jim and the General, it would be too obvious, and so it was easy to pick up.

*It's a good suit.* He grumbled, smirking slightly before his face went serious again. *If Valerian had control of the ship before we ended up fighting those cats, why didn't he send us help?* Tychus didn't trust that kid as far as he could throw him. No, he reconsidered, he could throw Valerian pretty far.

*You know he's got us by the short and curlies right now, Tychus.* Jim reasoned. They were making their way to the bridge and perhaps it was best to cut the edge off Tychus' suspicions, or at least get him to give it a break, before the meeting. *But the kid ain't done anything untoward, either. We're gonna talk about this when we get back to the Hyperion, alright?*

*Alright partner, but this trust him until he screws us thing don't sit right with me and you know it.* Findlay asserted, but let it drop.
Sickness

Korhal - Augustgrad

Tosh's insides were curling with the need for terrazine and he was mentally counting down the seconds when his mask, now designed to administer a proper dose of terrazine and jorium at lengthy intervals, would give him relief. Nova was across the street, he could sense her there, obscured both by her cloaking suit and an unnatural cold, thick fog. This fog was an ill omen, Tosh insisted, and they both had yet to feel any life around them as they continued their recon deeper towards the heart of Augustgrad.

It had gotten to the point where Nova disabled her psi-screen and let her mind wander. Tosh was right about the fog in that it felt unnatural, even made her skin crawl; it should have burned off under the Korhal sun long ago. It is radiating from the palace itself. Her thoughts, easily read by the spectre across the street, were agreed upon. They had traveled on foot at a hard pace, their path a lazy arc towards the palace that now loomed above all.

Now as night crept up once more, Tosh's voice grated in her head. We be stoppin' here, the night favors the hybrid more than us. Nova wanted to object, but also saw the wisdom in the choice—they had been eating their rations on the go and not stopping, it wouldn't do to be caught in a state even approaching tired. Across the street, where she had paused next to a deactivated advertisement droid, Nova heard a door swinging shut; she followed after him reluctantly.

As the jorium and terrazine hissed into his mask, Tosh breathed deeply in relief. He had stepped into a middle class apartment building, as nondescript as a building could get, and stopped cold; for the briefest moment, as the terrazine refreshed his psionic strength, he felt his mind touch against something so dark, he thought he was about to die. Nova. He whispered.

Nova burst through the door with rifle aimed and ready, Tosh's brittle whisper in her mind urging her on. For a split second she thought the icy mist had spilled in with the entrance of Tosh, before it became clear that the mist was inside the building with them—just as thick as it had been outside. Stepping beside Tosh, who hadn't even raised his weapon, she barely heard his stricken whisper through his mask. "Was Haji not enough?"

"Clear your head, Tosh!" Nova whispered fiercely, agitated by his lapse—what good would this man be if he was unnerved by some weird fog? He'd get her killed.

A tinkle of laughter drew their attention and Nova held her gun at the ready, wary. Her HUD registered one target slowly moving towards them, but the mist was so thick she couldn't see a figure—the wall of cold was shrouding heat signatures and, more disturbingly, she couldn't feel a mind. "Whoever you are," she called evenly, "don't move and tell me what the hell is going on here."

Tosh had recovered somewhat and was also holding his rifle at the ready, albeit with a tremble in his fingertips that he fought to still.

"There is only one God, Gabriel Tosh—and I am coming." That tinkling voice called, made disembodied by the mist. Fingertips quickly rested against their triggers when the silhouette of a ragged teenage-looking female shuffled into view. Her hair was cropped short, head hanging downwards as if dejected, and her plain clothing was dirt smeared and worn.

"Don't move," Nova asserted in a cool tone. "Who are you and what is going on?" The girl, lips curled into a toothy smile, chuckle softly; the sound chilled her blood, this whole situation did.
When she lifted her head and grinned, Tosh and Nova both squeezed their triggers as one; the gunfire from their rifles in the small entry room deafening. Her eyes were a solid, complete black and as her corpse fell to the ground Nova whispered. "No last thoughts, nothing." The girl's mind was a void—and that alone would have been enough to pull the trigger if she took one step further, but the eyes solidified her decision.

Tosh, shocked out of his own reverie by Nova stepping towards the corpse, shot out a hand and caught her shoulder firmly. "Don't get near that thing, girl. Whatever was human in there was long gone." Only one God, Gabriel Tosh. The words seared a path through his terrazine-altered brain, he'd never forget them.

Shrugging off his shoulder firmly, Nova slipped ahead and made to inspect the corpse regardless. "If this is what is happening to all the people of Korhal..." She paused, thinking about the kind of implications such a, what, plague? Disease of the mind? Alien attack? Could have on all terrans. "We need as much information as possible, Tosh." Swallowing a knot in her throat, Nova knelt down and made to touch the girl's face.

Every detail Nova memorized could help doctors or scientists identify this new threat, and so she made note of the sickly pale flesh, lank greasy hair, and the half-closed pure black eyes. As her gloved fingertip touched an eyelid, meant to pull it back and get a better look at the biggest anomaly, both shot open and the corpse—and surely it had to be a corpse, with four rounds to the chest—made to spring upwards with an inhuman shriek.

Startled, Nova's reaction was purely instinct—training that had been drilled into her being; leaping backwards from her crouching position, an impossibly fast hand grabbed her wrist and tugged her back down. Such an action shouldn't have been possible, not with Nova's personal strength further modified by the ghost suit fibromuscles. Knife appearing in hand, Nova made a hard slash at the offending wrist and neatly severed it just as the girl, laughing in a rasp as blood spattered out of her lips, fell backwards with a neat hole in her forehead; brain and bone splattering to the floor behind her.

Stumbling to her feet and forcefully wrenching the severed hand off her wrist, Nova took a long step back towards Tosh before her eyes widened further. The big spectre muttered something, but Nova uncharacteristically missed it—too busy watching as the motion radar of her HUD suddenly erupted with life. Little red dots, people, lit up the whole screen; it seemed as though every floor within range of her sensors had suddenly filled with life—life that was rapidly rushing downwards to herself and Tosh.

"Nova!" Tosh snapped in a brittle tone, he was already at the door and didn't plan on waiting for whatever the hell was possessing those people to get a hold of himself—he'd leave her to rot if she didn't hurry.

Milky eyes widened in surprise when the smaller woman darted out into the night ahead of him, but he didn't hesitate to give chase. Both were cloaked and running hard away from the building, but it was easy to hear the door they had run through crashing open violently, even with the thick mist. Cautiously, he spoke into her mind. I don't know what to do next, he admitted, but I'm startin' to think it be a good idea to get the hell off this planet.

What about Mengsk? Nova questioned, more worried than surprised that Tosh would consider dropping his considerable vendetta against the emperor.

I starting to think Mengsk be the smallest of our problems right now. HUD sensors were going crazy, every building around them was coming to life—and both of the assassins were dearly wishing for the deathly stillness that had bothered them not long ago.
I am not going to leave these people to whatever fate this is, Tosh! Nova asserted, frustrated. She had doubts as to whether there were any people not afflicted left at all, but the idea of failing so many because the hybrid were left unchecked was not acceptable. Pausing in a thin alleyway to catch a quick breath, she considered the options.

*You don't even know what be wrong with dem!* Accent thickening as he grew angry, Tosh came to a stop a few feet shy of the smaller, vaguely shimmering outline of Nova. *I ain't here ta save people, dey be sealin' their own fates, supportin' Mengsk like dey do!*

Making a small noise of disgust, Nova lamented the good, patriotic man Tosh used to be. Still, she needed him—and so did Korhal. Eyeing her HUD warily, cautious of anyone who might creep up on them—who knew if they could see through cloaks? Death didn't seem to bother them much. *I want you to go back to the camp and make sure everyone there is safe and ready to deal with this, Tosh.*

*And what you be doing then?* He frowned deeply behind his mask.

*I'm going to continue, find the hybrid and see if I can stop whatever they are doing.*

*No.*

*Arguing with me every step of the way is completely counterproductive to what we originally set out to do,* you know. Nova snipped.

*Your mind is open for attack, it be a wonder that they haven't already done so. I will go and see myself, you go to the camp.* He added quickly, before she could argue further. *There be no way off-world with the sky belonging to the enemy right now, we be in this together—whether I like it or not. They can't see my mind, I will do it.*

Nova stared at the dim aura outlining Tosh, another lingering effect of the terrazine that didn't seem to go away, frowning slightly. *Awful altruistic of you.*

*Now who be the one arguing?* Tosh smirked, eyeing his HUD just as much as she was. *Your thoughts be clear—you need me, but I need you too; and the last thing I need happening is you being sucked dry by a hybrid or, He paused, uncertain. Turning into one of them empty things.*

*Fine,* she acquiesced bluntly. Already, Nova was plotting the fastest track back to the base and how best to avoid the new ground threat, feet carrying her away from Tosh. *Be safe out there, Tosh.* For what it was worth, her thoughts were sincere—regardless of her low opinion of how he operated, she wouldn't wish a fate like that girl in the apartment on anyone.

*I always be careful.* Tosh replied lightly, but his face was grim behind the mask as he turned in the opposite direction—heaved for the palace. Beside him walked a familiar figure, who whispered in his ear. *Dis be the consequences of others who anger de spirits Gabriel, but we all must weather dem.* Grandma Tosh would always be there.

**Deep Space – Leviathan**

"You seem troubled, Kerrigan." Alexei commented perceptively; his old enemy, now ally, was alternating staring into space intensely and pacing in irritation.

Stopping abruptly, violet eyes snapped to the infested man sharply. It was a strange adjustment to have anyone not of the hive-mind so close, Alexei and the primal zerg, their observations and comments tended to be a surprise. "You know, maybe better than I do, that if Amon is brought back—all life might end, Stukov. I command an entire race of billions with my mind, there is no force out..."
there that can stop me, but I can't fathom the kind of power Amon might wield."

Kerrigan didn't need to elaborate further—she was certain to lose if Amon came back, Alexei felt similar. "But here you are, chasing after old vendettas on Korhal. What threat does this Mengsk pose, when a threat like Amon hangs over you?" Alexei wondered out loud, watching as the formidable former terran's features twisted in rage briefly at the mention of Mengsk.

"It isn't just Mengsk!" She hissed, seething; the only good that could come of this conversation was that she could avoid being inundated with humane babbling in her brain while it went on. "Narud is there, Stukov—playing Mengsk for the fool he is while he gets to make an army of hybrid for his dead master as free as he can please."

"And these planets you're putting to the torch on the way?" How Alexei knew that she sent broodmothers out to lock down core Dominion military supply worlds was curious, and Kerrigan's eyes narrowed slightly at the thought of him eavesdropping freely without her say. "It seems to me that the Dominion, and I have no love of them you know, is already broken." Innocents are there, and on Korhal too. Sarah, a far more compassionate Sarah than who she was now, muttered in her mind accusingly and in tandem with Stukov.

"Our numbers are limitless, but I am not incapable of tactics." She muttered defensively, turning to face Stukov fully and observing him keenly. "I don't win because I simply throw numbers at everything, you know." Before becoming the Primal Queen, she had many more insidious plans laid out to ensure the destruction and conversion of terrans as a whole; they had come to an immediate, grinding halt after the change.

"Oh I know, Kerrigan." Stukov chuckled, half ruined face smiling in good humor. "I remember well being on the opposing end of the swarm."

"Good." She murmured, it wouldn't do for him to forget how he'd be crushed if he turned on her. "Killing Narud, destroying the hybrid and stopping Amon from rising at all costs are the current goals of the swarm—they will remain so until we either fail or succeed. If more terrans die standing between those goals and now..." She paused, lip twitching downwards at the thought of how a certain former lawman would feel about her tactics. "Then so be it."

"As you say, Queen of Blades." Alexei shrugged slightly, although she suspected a deeper meaning in using her former title, before staring out into space himself. "I am with you until the end, as we've already discussed." His thoughts wandered, as they often did, to Earth and its green hills—and a family he'd never see again. "Quite an adventure."

Warming to conversation, especially a change in topic, Kerrigan too returned to looking through the clear membrane of the leviathan's eye. "I mentioned you to Jim."

"Oh? Did he remember me?" Stukov smiled lopsidedly, he certainly remembered Jim Raynor.

"Yes, he did." Kerrigan smirked at a stray thought; in some other life, the older Stukov and Raynor may very well have gotten along together. "He and a few of his friends are a part of the swarm now." She added without inflection.

"Well, time does bring all things together, doesn't it?" He remarked in an amused tone.

Snorting while her wings flexed and adjusted themselves of their own volition, like a second independent being attached to her back. "You could say that. I mentioned you because he and his friends are currently chasing after a cure to infestation. I am certain they would like to meet you." She ventured cautiously.
"And prod me with some more knives and needles, I am sure." His tone quickly shifted to sardonic, clearly he wouldn't trust that easily. "You converted them and then let them go? Not very like you, I must say."

"I have... Regrets on the matter." She admitted with a frown. "They won't find a cure, even the protoss can't, but they are free to do as they please. Your lack of connection to the swarm could perhaps be replicated, however."

"Perhaps," he allowed, eyeing her. "But Narud uses methods well beyond anything terrans, even earth humans, have the ability to replicate. I fear looking at what has been done to me will yield nothing for them." He shrugged then, the appendage on his shoulder, tipped with a massive claw, twitching repeatedly.

"It is up to you." Kerrigan would not command him, not for something like that; not even for Jim. "I don't trust the whelp they're putting their trust in, that's for sure." She muttered darkly. It would take some tremendous mountain moving to make her believe the Mengsk line wasn't entirely tainted.

"Much easier to trust those who do not move or think without your say, yes?"

He pointed out the obvious, but Kerrigan frowned at it all the same. *Have I become afraid of independent thoughts? To be betrayed?* Just another doubt that would rattle around in her mind now, this conversation wasn't as relaxing as she had hoped it would be. *Enough of this,* she thought decisively, already turning to leave the damp chamber. His question would not be dignified by an answer.

Abathur was in the evolution chambers, muttering to himself as he worked—the familiar sound of a failed experiment in its death throes rattling through the expansive area. "Dislike space. Too little biomass." He muttered clearly, causing Kerrigan to smirk. Truly, Abathur could be considered the definition of alien evil by terran standards. The evolution master was cold, calculated and his sole concern was for the survival and continual forward progression of the swarm—chasing perfection, he called it.

"Abathur." She called out, stopping short of the unique creature's bloated and slug-like body.

All of Abathur's needle-sharp appendages paused for a microsecond before returning to whatever they were working on. "Queen has come to review work? Can see throughout chambers. Ask if want demonstration." This was as close to being brushed off by a swarm member she could get, and she almost laughed.

"No, I want to ask you about Stukov. What do you make of him?" She tilted her head with a clatter, chitinous hair slithering against gravity of its own accord.

Immediately the gelatinous strands of gooey biomass he was working on were discarded; the experiment was time sensitive and this conversation drew too much attention from it, it was a failure. Stukov was an interesting subject, however. "Organism Stukov... Very interesting." He admitted, shifting his mass to face his Queen. "Terran and zerg strands woven together on microscale. Impressive. Beyond my capabilities."

"Do you understand how he has been severed from the swarm?" She ventured curiously.

"No. Too complex. Would have to disassemble to further analyze. Failure to gain information probable." She need only say the word and Stukov would be on another cutting table; odds were Abathur wouldn't be anywhere near as nice as Narud.
"No," she muttered in annoyance. "We wont be carving up Stukov, that is all I wanted to know."

"Will return to work." Abathur ended the conversation with surgical precision—his actions and words were always measured in that way; Kerrigan had gotten used to it, and was already on her way out as he returned to shaping and adjusting patterns in genetics.

Whatever was going to happen on Korhal, Kerrigan found her hardened shell softened on the matter. Conversing with Stukov and Abathur really shone a light on just how alien she had become, and while she did not regret her position of power, she wondered at the now strange concept of humanity. It seemed Stukov, for all the torture he received, still thought about humans and family—he wasn't the weaker for it, as far as she could tell.

Staring out into the stars, Kerrigan ran a clawed fingertip along the shifting flexible armor of her arm thoughtfully. *Humanity is making choices that can get you hurt.* Moments where she agreed with her new inner monologue were few and far between.

**Bucephalus – Private Quarters**

While the various rooms assigned to leisure and socializing just for Valerian were grand, his room could be said to be the opposite. Sparsely furnished and only twice the size of an average crew members room, the prince rarely took time in it for more than sleep, but now was a special circumstance. Sitting at an exquisitely carved wooden desk, the top of which was an all-purpose monitor, he was slowly scrolling through several requests from his Hyperion crewmen to be transferred back to the Bucephalus.

None of his men aboard the Bucephalus had fought with the infested men, and Valerian had keenly watched and listened to all channels and video footage he could to see the reactions they would garner from his well trained men and women. The results had been less than pleasing, and especially troublesome was the fact all the resocialized men needed to be redirected elsewhere when it was clear they were in distress—their programming struggling to deal with an order to not attack zerg. Raynor and his men arrived on the bridge,bloody and bloodied, with a thoroughly spooked crew behind and around them.

Their conversation was short and fierce, but Valerian came out satisfied—if what he knew about the hive-mind was true, there had to be some kind of mental struggle going on at all hours, and so he forgave the more aggressive than usual nature of Raynor.

"What the hell was this about, kid!!" Raynor blurted the second Valerian entered his sights, all but piling in the bridge with the other infested men and Lasarra.

"We were attacked by rogue mercenaries, Jim. You and your men," Valerian had nodded towards the rest. "Did a valiant job fighting them off, I suspect our casualties would have been much higher without your timely intervention—for that I thank you."

"You pulled all your men back and didn't send anyone to help us," Raynor grated, anger clear on his alien features. He had not been so angry until he saw the sheer number of people holed up on this level near the bridge, Valerian could have handled this shit himself! "A lot easier to let some dead zerg go, I reckon."

"No Jim," Valerian shook his head, frowning slightly. "You already know how important you are to helping win back Korhal from the hybrid and my mad father, why would I put you in such a situation before we even get there? I am not in charge of where my troops are stationed during an attack, that is the job of my tacticians and military personnel." He nodded towards Warfield then, knowing the old general would confirm.
"It's true, Raynor." Warfield noted, standing at attention while the others loomed or glowered in comparison. "Prince Valerian is not in control of troop movements in war time, that is not how it works."

With the situation stabilized, it was a short conversation to arrange transport back to the Hyperion for them and to confirm their next destination: Korhal as planned. But now, with further information at his fingertips, Valerian could see great difficulties ahead involving the infested men. From what he could ascertain in the writing of the men and women who wanted to be transferred, they were present on the bridge when Matt Horner fought off a group of mercs by himself—what he wouldn't give for some video footage of that, what Horner was capable of was mostly a mystery.

Whatever he did with those appendages inside his arms, it thoroughly scarred more than a few people. Thoughtfully, Valerian eyed one crew member photo. Lu Wen was an unflappable man and skilled in communication technology, but here was his request to leave too. With a quick decision, he tapped the image of Lu to start the call.

"Prince Valerian?" Lu seemed surprised, eyes widening as he fixed his relaxed posture into something more presentable. "How can I help you, sir?"

"At ease, Mr. Wen." Valerian smiled reassuringly. "I would prefer to have this conversation in person but circumstances dictate otherwise, you understand."

"Of course sir." Lu waited then, unable to hide his curious expression. Only one thing happened that could have attracted the attention of his Prince.

"You, and several others, have requested to be returned to duty on the Bucephalus; it is of interest to me why this has happened." Valerian watched Lu's expression melt from curious to cautious in a second, face pale and eyes glancing around as though afraid of being overheard in his own quarters. Before he could respond, Valerian added "you are one of the best men I have on the Hyperion and have nothing but a spotless record of service, I'd like your recount of the incident."

Lu paused, clearly gathering resolve and recalling the event, before launching into the story with a haunted tone. "The Raiders were good people sir, I came here to help what was left of them to try and get cured, but this... Well, I don't have much experience with the zerg," Lu admitted, frowning. "But when I could see again after that flash grenade went off, what I saw was a zerg ripping people apart."

As Lu described his experience with a shaking voice, the mystery of a group of well trained men and women suddenly being scared for their lives simply solved itself. None of them were used to the high intensity of close quarters combat and the zerg, while a very real and terrifying threat, were distant boogeymen—seen only on a screen and never in person.

"That's when he rounded on me and grabbed my shirt sir, and I have never been so certain that I was about to die than I was then." Lu was nearing the end of his retelling and as Valerian refocused on him from his own thoughts, he could see the man was having a hard time keeping it together. "His eyes were dead, like no one was home anymore." He hunched forwards slightly, wringing his fists off screen. "If we're going to help them, they need to be in cages in labs—they clearly are not in control sir."

Valerian held Lu Wen's scared gaze evenly, considering. What caused Matt Horner to fly off the handle? Was it purposeful and did Lu Wen's fear of the unknown affect his perception of the event? The other infested were in control of themselves on the Bucephalus, there was more than enough documentation of that. "We will be arriving at Korhal soon, Mr. Wen." Lu did well to mask his disappointment; with a statement like that, he knew what was coming.
"While your safety, and the safety of those others who volunteered to staff the Hyperion, is of utmost concern to me—I believe you have witnessed an anomaly." Folding his hands together on the edge of the fine desk, Valerian kept a calm and professional air for Lu's sake. "I will not deny your request to be transferred back to the Bucephalus," that caught Lu by surprise, the mans brows raising slightly before he schooled his features again. "I do ask that you reconsider and remain on the Hyperion until we have landed on Korhal; the success of our mission there is critical and the Hyperion needs a competent crew."

As Lu Wen's features flickered through a series of emotions, each one stunted as he continually policed himself, Valerian wondered at how easy it was to manipulate people. Lu Wen understood that while the option was there, it would certainly look bad to go ahead with the transfer back to the Bucephalus—he'd be viewed as a coward and worse yet, his Prince was the one who asked him to remain! While there would absolutely be no repercussions for the action, Valerian knew full well that these thoughts and more were rushing through the mans mind.

After a few moments pause, Lu Wen answered in an even tone. "I will remain on the Hyperion at your request, sir."

With no other words forthcoming, Valerian offered a charming smile of encouragement. "Excellent! I am very glad to hear that, Mr. Wen. While we are investing a large amount of trust in Jim Raynor and the ability of his men to retain control of themselves, and thus remaining autonomous during this process, they are also trusting us in equal measure. I firmly believe that Mr. Horner acted in the best interest of those he was protecting and that you are safe."

As their conversation drew to a close, the heir apparent thought about the mercenary situation—the Hyperion and Bucephalus were like two different control groups of an experiment. Each infested man was essentially the same, but there were other anomalies that could affect how they acted. He let out a small sigh of annoyance, knowing he'd have to contact each individual who wanted to leave the Hyperion individually in order to get them to remain on the ship; he would entrust the task to no one less than himself.

The protoss and broodmother were the two big unknown factors. While Lasarra's seemingly inadvertent blurt about her ability to help the infested retain themselves hinted strongly at her purpose, the broodmother was a complete unknown; other than what has been researched about the mysterious creatures as a whole. Jim, Tychus and Warfield had Lasarra while Matt, Stetmann and Rory remained on the Hyperion with the broodmother; that was the only glaring difference that Valerian could see.

Rubbing a temple with a well manicured fingertip, Valerian frowned a degree. If the broodmother affected them negatively, why would they keep it at all? Jim Raynor was no zerg sympathizer, that thing was doing something for them, but only the infested knew what. Without any data on the other two, Stetmann and Swann, Valerian could not in good conscience form any further suspicions or ideas on the matter—and that was annoying.

Perhaps I'll simply ask Jim. He thought, a wry smile curling on his lips. I doubt a more honest man exists. Indeed, what little of Raynor's real story Valerian knew, it seemed that some real cosmic forces were involved in leading up to him becoming the leader of a rebel army. "Well Jim, everyone has their story." He reasoned, schooling his features as he began the next call with the flick of a fingertip.

Hyperion – Deep Space

As soon as Swann and Findlay realized Jayce had not made it back to the Hyperion during their escape, a literal pall of displeasure radiated from the two. Raynor thought over how the feelings and
moods of the others in their unfortunate link affected him—it was easy to feed off of Tychus’ anger, Rory's sadness, even more positive emotions like Egon's excitement. They needed to be restored soon, because even Lasarra's calming presence didn't do much for their more human emotions—and they were all in their own personal turmoil.

When he realized that Swann and Findlay were both in the cantina together, Jim thought he was about to have a hell of a fight on his hands. All brooding was discarded immediately as he made for the cantina at a hasty pace—maybe talking to the two of them at once would be best anyways, with none of the zerg mind nonsense. The rest of the crew, those that remained alive after the dust settled, would be hard at work preparing for Korhal, leaving the cantina to the infested.

Tychus' eyes narrowed immediately as the cantina door hissed open to reveal Rory, looking similarly dour. The big man was hunched over a table, as he had been many times before Char, but without a drink in hand. Blowing out a breath, Swann shook his head and made for the bar quietly.

"Not helping clean up?" Findlay questioned, not quite mocking, while frowning.

Reaching over the counter and grabbing a whole bottle in his fist, Swann glared at his hand as he pinched two cups between his fingers. "No." Plunking the bottle down in the middle of Tychus' table, he slid a glass to Tychus and sat across from him heavily. Findlay caught his glass with the tip of a claw, looking down as it clinked. "They might be staffing this tub, but they aren't my crew or my people." Swann muttered gruffly, looking grim as he grabbed the bottle and began pouring.

Tychus grunted, eyeing the dark liquid filling his glass. "What's the point? Can't get drunk, don't even taste good."

"Just pretend to be normal for a minute." Swann scowled, thick facial hair twisting as he held up his drink.

Letting out a mirthless chuckle, Findlay scooped the drink up in a huge fist and gave it a swirl. "Gonna take a lot more than just this, then."

"Hmph." Swann smirked back at him slightly, their clipped conversation pausing as they both drained their glass. Pulling a disgusted face as he put his glass back down with a thunk, Swann eyed Findlay evenly. "She will be back."

Quirking a brow, Findlay sneered then; so that was what this was about, he was not surprised. "She left, what do you care?"

"She's family, and Jayce don't just run off for nothing—she never has before. That protoss isn't saying anything about it, but I know that girl and she will find a way back whenever she's done what she had to do." Swann frowned up at the sneering giant, wondering at the attitude. "You two were an item, why don't you care?"

"I ain't attached." Findlay stated bluffly. "If you want to hold out for her coming back, you do that—I ain't." Grabbing the bottle, he quickly poured himself and Swann another round. Admitting the shorter man was pretty on point about his assessment of the relationship he had with Jayce was not about to happen—hell, he was reluctant to admit it to himself.

Swann was opening his mouth to respond when a stray spark flew out of the jukebox above them, the song skipping. Slowly, his lips closed together and he exchanged a mutual glare with Findlay.

"He wouldn't even have that thing if it weren't for me." Tychus grumbled, breaking eye contact as he tossed back another drink. He was pretty sure this swill would taste terrible even if he couldn't taste it
right down to the molecules; not that he'd ever been a picky drinker.

"Right. Well I got fifty credits that says she'll be back, and you'll be all too happy to have her again, won't you Tychus?" Rory was smirking up at him, challenging.

"Careful now," Findlay warned, frowning. "Time frame?" He rumbled; the sappy old man would be an easy 50 creds—Jayce wasn't coming back.

"Korhal," Swann snapped quickly, drumming his fingers against the top of the table idly while Tychus did similar with his claws against his own glass. "While we're in the thick of it, too. The woman has timing."

"Done. Easy money, old man." Findlay chuckled as Swann maintained a sly smirk.

"We'll see." When the door snapped open and Raynor came to a full stop from a brisk jog, Findlay gave him a confused look and Swann twisted on his stool, looking over his shoulder to mirror the action.

"What's the rush for, Jimmy?"

"Yeah. What's goin on, hot shot?"

"Uh." Jim muttered sheepishly, scratching the back of his neck at the scene. He expected flying chairs and tables, not the two polar opposites having a drink. Shrugging then, he smiled ruefully.

"Thought you two were about to kill each other, guess not." Findlay snorted and Swann shrugged while Jim grabbed himself a glass and made to sit with them.

"Nah," Tychus rumbled, refilling all three glasses and firmly planting the nearly empty bottle in the middle of the table. "Plenty of folks need killing on Korhal, I figure." He grinned then.

"Right." Swann muttered, eyeing Jim. "You said we were going to talk about some contingency plan if things go south on Korhal; care to enlighten us, fearless leader?" Genuinely curious, Rory did not care to be under Valerian's thumb any more than the others—guise of helpfulness or not.

Wrapping a hand around his drink carefully, Jim was easily the most clawed of the men, he nodded with a renewed frown. "I trust Warfield, but maybe it is best if he ain't in on this just yet."

"Probably off having tea and crumpets with baby Mengsk." Tychus muttered spitefully, even though they all knew he was in his room.

"He's loyal to Valerian." Swann nodded in understanding, waiting.

Nodding, Raynor took a drink and poorly masked a twist of disgust on his face. "This swill wasn't even good before being infested; tastes like viking fuel now. Let's discuss this in our heads, then. Too much chance of being overheard otherwise. Tychus and Swann nodded in silent agreement.

The three drank in silence as their conversation went private. Ariel managed to cure the infested before, we know for sure there is a chance that she could succeed in helping us. Don't much like the idea of putting Haven in danger, but she's about the only person who's motto isn't For The Swarm that I trust right now. Jim reasoned, watching their facial expressions and attempting to get a bead on what they thought about it. Swann was transparent—Haven owed them big time and Ariel was infinitely more trustworthy. Tychus was oddly shrouded, as unreadable in his head as he tended to be visually; that caught Jim's attention.
"Heh, Valerian sure didn't send over the good stuff." That sweet thing never did give me a physical.

Swann cringed. She'd love to give you one now... With a scalpel.

Tychus made a show of sighing sadly and Jim rolled his eyes. If things do go south, I figure Ariel is our next best shot; trouble would be getting Shlassa and Lasarra out of there with us.

I'd rather send that broodmother to the grave. Tychus scowled, running a nail down the side of his glass and seemingly watching with interest as a fine line was carved into it.

That might be the only thing I'll ever agree with him on. Swann hmphed and crossed his arms.

A cold chill settled in Jim's bones as he and present company recalled what happened to Horner. Do you really want to risk not having it there?

No. You're right, I just don't like it. Swann shrugged, taking a big swig of his drink. Depends on what we'd have to escape with; we'll make it work, Jim.

Staring into his drink, Tychus considered his words cautiously. Bug won't be a problem, we can control it; she ain't no threat to the protoss if they gotta be stuck together.

"Do you know that for sure?" Jim blurted in surprise, eyeing his old friend. How much was Findlay immersing himself in this zerg madness? The more he thought about it, and his mind was racing, the more he realized Tychus gave off a feeling of... what? Strength? Vitality? He wasn't suffering like the rest, that was for certain. 

Holding up a hand, Tychus kept his face and mind neutral. Keep your shirt on, son. Kid an' me controlled her together while that merc shit was goin' on. That was about all he was willing to say on the matter, so he shrugged.

Knowing Tychus for as long as he had, Jim didn't need to read minds to know his friend was closing himself off to the conversation. Frustrated, he pressed a hand flat on the tabletop and sighed in displeasure when he could hear smooth furrows being dug into it inadvertently. I just worry, Tychus. Haven't even kept as good an eye on the kid as I shoulda been.

Observing the two men interacting, Swann didn't think he'd ever be able to wrap his head around how they became such steadfast friends—even in a universe as crazy as theirs. Kid's doin' fine, Jim. Keeps me up to date on what he's doin'. Don't like him in that nasty lab, but still. He didn't see a need for Jim to have undue worries about Egon; awkward he might be but the kid might just be doing better than all of them, given his nature.

So all we got is one plan? Findlay frowned. We ain't never ran around with only one plan before Jimmy, not until Char. I don't need to remind you how well that turned out. Given an annoyed look and no forthcoming response, Tychus plowed on. What about them creepy protoss?

That got Jim's eyebrows up. The 'toss? Remind me why I ever listen to your ideas at all.

"Well I'm the smartest, most handsome monster on this ship." Tychus puffed his chest dramatically. Don't like the idea of them freaky protoss one bit, but you do have a history—and there is no argument, they are better equipped than terrans. He reasoned, then added in a lighter tone. 'sides Jimmy, it's just a second plan.

Lasarra helping us is some kind of cosmic blessing, Tychus. Jim sighed, taking another drink. You saw what the protoss wanted to do to Haven. You also saw the reaction most protoss will have to us: that Zealot in the caves, and the small fleet attacking the Hyperion over our heads. Watching
Tychus' eyes harden to flinty chips of agitation, Jim raised a placating hand. *I also know what you're sayin', partner. Lasarra doesn't even know if they will take her back, but it is an option where we don't have many.*

*Eh, Rory muttered, I'll let you know if I think of something smarter. You might want to at least let Egon and Matt know the plan though, cowboy.* Under the impression their conversation was over, he slid to his feet and adjusted his thick jacket, ready to leave.

Jim felt a touch of guilt about leaving Warfield in the dark—the man was in the same hole as they were after all. Giving Swann a quick nod, he watched him leave, thoughtful all the while.

Tychus followed Jim's line of thought, smirking. *He's the brass, Jimmy. Don't matter if he's a bug or not, man's got his loyalties.* With a big paw he slid his glass to the side and grabbed up the bottle in the center of the table, giving it a test shake before swigging from it directly. *When I get my body back Jimmy, I'm gonna pick up as many whores as I can carry and lock myself away with them.* Chuckling, smirk morphing into a grin as Jim's mind briefly entertained the idea of something similar. *Booze on tap, of course: paid for by our new benevolent emperor.*

Smiling slyly, Jim raised his drink and eyed Tychus. "Not just gonna hole up with Jayce?"

"Hmph, you are funny, ain't you? That girl ain't comin' back." Jim's remorse towards Findlay's traditional bad luck with relationships was annoying, but he firmly ignored it. Jimmy was always a bit of a sap. So long as women existed, Tychus would never be left wanting; why chain yourself to one?

"She'll be back." Raynor shrugged, confident.

"Unbelievable. Care to bet on that?" At least he'd make some creds off the raw deal.

**Laboratory**

Stetmann grimaced at Shlassa's close proximity, even in the same room was too close as far as he was concerned; the broodmother was literally over his shoulder as they stared into the zerg specimen tank together.

"Biomass fuels the Swarm." The glass clinked as Shlassa tapped a claw against it pointedly. Stetmann was an apt pupil, for which she was thankful. Unlike the others, he was intelligent enough to use her as a resource rather than waste time wanting one of their own dead. "The biomass you have collected can be used as we see fit, it is very strong."

Enraptured, Stetmann watched with a multifaceted, rainbow-colored eye layer and his mind in tandem. Threads of essence, every potential horror the specimen could turn into, were displayed before him. To assume the zerg were below terrans, even protoss, in technology would be a serious mistake—he knew it before and it was only reaffirmed every time he learned from Shlassa and his own investigations.

"If I had any idea how potentially dangerous this specimen was... I think I really would have thrown it out the airlock." Egon muttered.

"To not use the resources at hand when we reach Korhal would be a mistake." The broodmother murmured ominously over his head. "The closer to our destination we get, the more I believe we should stop."

It gave him the willies knowing Shlassa was disquieted by the idea of Korhal. With a little luck the creatures sense of unease would be based more off of the proximity of millions of what she
considered to be enemies, not the hybrid and whatever else might be there. "We can't just let the
emperor hurt all those people. I know you don't care about terrans Shlassa, but we do."

Shlassa clicked her mandibles in annoyance—morality, kindness, even the capacity to care were lost
on the alien. It was a wonder that she attempted to even remotely relate, and a testament to how
much she wanted to survive, Stetmann thought.

"The time to choose what to create draws near. Be ready Stetmann, the other infested are foolish to
not prepare themselves as you have." Egon's brows lifted in surprise and he glanced up at the
creatures frightening glowing eyes. Receiving a compliment from the alien stirred pride and fear
—maybe I should get out of the lab for a while, he thought to himself.

Private Quarters

Warfield stared at his latest list with a deep sense of melancholy. Some familiar names stood out to
him on the short, but still far too long, list of the Hyperion's casualties. "Just a bunch of civilians.
Damn merc bastards." Muttering venomously, he fired off the list to the Bucephalus for review,
along with his personal recounting of the event.

His small room, long since cleared of the reminder of his transformation, had become a safe haven.
Being around terrans was an exhaustive process now, even with Lasarra's ever-present assistance.
Most of his necessary communication could be done from here and that suited him just fine.

A quiet warning from his datapad blinked repeatedly. *Incoming transmission.*

Accepting the call with a curious look on his face, Warfield was surprised to see his prince appear.
"Prince Valerian, always an honor." He formalized his tone and immediately wondered at what the
heir apparent might want—he had his own, ah, less altered advisers to seek council from right now,
after all.

"At ease, General. There is no need for formalities right now." Valerian reassured, his own
expression relaxed.

Nodding a tad, Warfield ran the pad of his thumb up and down a long black talon thoughtfully. "As
you wish. What do you want to talk about?"

Valerian's smooth lip curled upwards at the corner. At best the general would talk less formally, but it
would never leave his bearing. "You saw how people reacted to you and the other infested men on
the Bucephalus, General. I have concerns." His features smoothed back to neutral as he watched
Warfield's expression darken.

Fear, revulsion, outright hate and eyes darting everywhere but on himself or the others. Warfield
would never forget it, he'd never felt so awkward in his life; it even overshadowed the drumming of
their fearful hearts. "Yes. There is no reason to not be concerned, your men are well trained and well
paid." Flexing a talon, well out of view of the camera, Warfield frowned tightly. "Korhal won't go
well, even if we do save people."

"I have some of my best dedicated to a workaround on that, they should have it ready by the time we
reach Korhal. I think you will appreciate it."

"Then why the concern?" Horus quirked a brow. If people couldn't see what they were, assuming
that was what Valerian was suggesting, then what was the problem?

"After the battle, a worrying amount of my men and women on the Hyperion suddenly wanted off of
the ship." Cutting to the chase, Valerian noted the tick of a jaw muscle on Warfield's face as he
clenched his teeth. "It seems that something happened with Matt Horner that created a concern as to whether the infested men are really in control or not. I'd like your input, General."

An internal debate raged inside Warfield immediately. Jim Raynor's aversion to telling Valerian everything about their condition, and how they were managing it in particular, was something the general understood full well; but he also took his vows of loyalty to the prince seriously. Valerian Mengsk was a very crafty individual with a lot of power however, and with no small amount of self-hate, Warfield replied.

"Matt Horner responded to a threat that would have otherwise overwhelmed the bridge and possibly lost us the Hyperion." Horner's scream through their link rushed vividly through his mind. "He is in control of himself. I give you my word: we all are."

The generals thoughtful pause stirred a flicker of wariness in Valerian, but it could easily be attributed to recalling the event itself; Warfield was too loyal to lie. Nodding a degree, the prince agreed. "I thought as much myself. I took the liberty of speaking to each man and woman and convinced them to remain on the Hyperion, at least until Korhal, for the time being." He smiled then, charming as always.

"I will see if I can further reassure them, in the meantime." Warfield embraced the shift of conversation briskly. "Has there been any further contact or word from Korhal?"

Valerian's expression darkened. "No. We have received no further word from my contact or any broad frequencies, like the news clip; Korhal is dark." It didn't bode well for anyone, but the best they could do now was be prepared to fight—and there was no question that there would be fighting.

Shifting his gaze from Valerian to a small display unit, Warfield brought up a diagram of their assault plan, frowning thoughtfully. "I'd like to go over the landing zones and squad assignments again. Casualties on the Bucephalus may necessitate some changes in groups."

With a flick of a wrist and brush of nimble fingertips, Valerian summoned up his own battle plan in response. Yes, some of the squads did have men and women who were killed in action. "Always thinking ahead, General." Smiling genuinely, Valerian chuckled. "While my current host of advisers are excellent and well educated, I sincerely miss your strategic council more often than not."

"Thank you." An odd, uncharacteristic chord of melancholy thrummed in Warfield then. "I'll never regret serving with so many brave men and women, but I am looking forward to returning to retirement when this is all said and done." I just wanted to get some fishing done, he thought to himself.

The sadness in Warfield's eyes, even though he was staring at data off screen, was more insightful than any speech. Folding his fingers together, Valerian nodded. "When the threat is dealt with and my position as the new emperor is secured, your rewards will be rich and well-earned, General."

Smiling slightly, he added. "Everyone deserves some peace."

I wish that I could believe you. Warfield thought bitterly.

Mess Hall

Matt sat quietly at a two-seated table at the far end of the mess, staring out a small port window. While people came and went, he was left alone—it had become his refuge, more open than the holes the others hid themselves in. A captain couldn't make himself completely unreachable, regardless of how he felt, it just wasn't professional.
Quiet conversation, shuffling footsteps and the scraping of utensils played out like a background noise in his brain, overshadowed by continually drumming hearts. Gloved hands clasped together firmly, he tried to bring order to his mind and emotions—failing repeatedly each attempt. Clenching his jaw, his stare shifted into a glare at the passing blur of stars and planets.

*I can't handle it Jim.* He thought to himself, a small part grateful that they had collectively developed enough control to not bombard one another with private thoughts. At least when Kerrigan took over his body, it was easy to create a buffer of excuses for what happened—her influence couldn't be fought, it really wasn't *me,* and a number of other small details that reduced the horror of it all.

There was no buffer, no reasonable explanation and no excuses for what happened on the Hyperion—*that was all me.* Emotions, instincts, there was no way to explain how he couldn't control himself when Lasarra withdrew her protection from his mind. He had all but tamed these things before she came along, but now he was just a live wire and all that kept him from killing, and it shamed him to admit to himself he enjoyed it, was the delicate insulation of an alien who could withdraw it at a whim.

Protoss are honorable and Lasarra has committed herself to helping us, she would not withdraw like that. Pinching a brow with his fingertips firmly, he sighed. *She did withdraw, that's what this whole damn problem is about. She took away my choice and I'm pissed.* Horner was slipping ever further in to his dark mindset by the second, until he was so full of pent up anger and loathing he lost focus on everything around him.

"Ehem." A polite throat clear made him jerk so violently out of his self-imposed stupor that Ashdale jumped and barely recovered fast enough to catch her meal.

"Ashdale. Sorry." He muttered in a clipped tone, ashamed but still not desiring this interaction. Still, he made himself available for a reason. "Something wrong?"

"No, nothing is wrong sir. May I?" Ashdale gestured to the free seat with a head dip.

"No. "Yes." Horner gestured for her to help herself, carefully measuring his movements and redirecting his focus to the present. The first thing he noticed was her pale complexion and slower than normal heartbeat, it annoyed him to be so familiar with it.

"You don't look so good, if you don't mind my saying." Matt watched the tidy dressed woman place her tray and sit smoothly before she responded. He wondered if they were trained in dinner etiquette and other silly things, on top of their profession of choice.

"Oh it is just the warp travel," she gestured at the stars streaking by the window in a blur. "You know how it is." Fine brows furrowing a degree, she seemed to immediately think over what she said before hastily adding. "Sorry, that was rude of me."

Matt couldn't help but chuckle over the absurdity of being worried about forgetting that he was technically not even the same species anymore. "Don't worry about it." His brows came together firmly. "Forgot about how much it wears you down, myself." Looking up from his hands, he studied her face intently. Clean, well groomed and well guarded—a picture perfect Valerian crony of the female variety, really.

Picking up her fork and skewering a synthetic carrot, Valerian's people brought their own higher quality rations with them, Ashdale studied him right back. "I am sorry to intrude on you like this; I know you have been keeping separate, probably for good reasons, but you seemed so upset when I came in, I wanted to offer some company."
For what it was worth, Matt couldn't detect any trace of lacking sincerity from Ashdale, and that surprised him. Still, he wasn't about to go spilling his guts to someone who operated on Valerian's schedule. Hell, he wouldn't even to Jim right now. Before the pause between conversation became awkward, he responded with a small shrug. "Got a lot on my mind, to say the least."

"I understand, well, kind of." Ashdale looked down at her food, poking at it and clearly feeling awkward at some social blunder Matt couldn't care less about. "Maybe not. But I just want you to know that of all the things you need to worry about, don't worry about what happened earlier."

Looking up from her carrot, more an orange paste than anything now, she caught his eye and held it. _That is foremost of my worries, if you only knew._ Was what he wanted to say, instead he blurted "No offense Ashdale, but I am a pretty private person, even before all this." He paused, watching as her fine Asian features were tempted to fall in disappointment before being schooled smoothly. Her candid talk had sparked a small epiphany, however.

Holding up a fingertip to catch her before she could give some sort of silly apologetic response, Horner smiled. _Why didn't I just do this already?_ He chalked it up to the tumultuous emotions, not normally his forte. "Thank you though, you did remind me that I need to talk to someone. Enjoy your dinner." Standing up quickly, he heard her quiet _Thanks_ as he left the mess at a hasty pace.

Lasarra was not unreasonable, she just didn't understand that it was not okay, that was all; he would talk to her like he should have right away. This dilemma would be cleared up soon and it gave him a bright rush of relief at the thought. _I can't be worried about this, not with Korhal so close now._
Absolutely not, Matt Horner.

What Matt was hearing was not possible. Finding Lasarra had been more difficult than expected to begin with and in retrospect, he should have suspected the conversation was not going to go the way he wanted; the protoss had a knack for showing up at the right time and place when they were needed, Lasarra not approaching him about the problem should have been the first tell. As it was, his insides twisted with a potpourri of emotions and anger was rising to the top rapidly. "You can't just-

Lasarra, standing in the doorway of her chosen room in the med bay, narrowed her glowing eyes as she cut Matt off quickly. Your mind is compromised, Matt Horner. I promised to help you and the other infested seek your cure, I will not let you die if I have the power to stop it. It was saddening to both watch and feel the confusion and upset of Matt Horner. Others died while I made my decision to let you loose before, I will not hesitate again.

Thankful for the privacy of the med bay, there were no medics loitering around, Matt hissed venomously. "You can't just hold us hostage like that! What kind of help do you think that is?"

Lasarra stood unmoved. The mercenaries would have killed you and everyone in the bridge. She read their minds, it was a fact and not a guess.

"Then I, as a grown ass man, would have chosen to die! That is a choice that I should have, and you are taking it from me." With the protoss staring down at him so silently, Matt felt distinctly childish; Lasarra needed to understand though, he was done with aliens jerking him around like a puppet or an animal on a leash—she had to be able to know how he felt about this.

Following his surface thoughts easily, Lasarra chided him. You are young, all terrans are. The value of life escapes you. She paused, a pang of heartsickness for her lost brother worming to the surface. It is most precious, not to be thrown away.

Sucking in a deep breath, Matt was about to unleash verbal hell—for all the good it would do, when the comm system crackled to life and Raynor's voice warily called out. "Saddle up boys and girls, we're almost there. ETA 2 hours."

Scowling bitterly, Horner exchanged a look with Lasarra and turned to storm off. Your mind will be your own again in time, Matt Horner. Have faith. Her voice tinkled reassuringly in his mind, he hated it.

Cowboy, meathead, General, get to the armory. Kid and I got some hardware for ya before we get down there. Rory's voice interrupted Matt's seething and he tuned the chief engineer and all the other infested out rather forcefully as he stormed to the bridge.

Some solace could be taken in his duties.

Armory

Raynor was making his way to the armory, bound to be the last one there, when he registered the pleasantly surprised responses of both Tychus and Warfield. Not wanting to spoil a good surprise for himself, rarely were surprises actually good, he made sure to not think too hard on it—lest something
slip. Lighting a cigarette as he walked, he looked at his clawed hands and their dark, gnarled flesh, trying to summon up the memory of what the real Jim Raynor's hands looked like; to his alarm, it was getting harder to remember.

Brother, you are gonna enjoy this. Tychus teased.

Don't tell me Tychus, I'll be there soon. Wanna see it for myself. Jim warned, already aware Tychus was not telling—he would have blurted it immediately if he wanted him to know.

Despite the looming uncertainty of the near future, a tingle of excitement ran through his skin as he stood next to the armory door, pausing a moment to savor it before tapping the identification pad and opening it; what was inside couldn't be real, too good to be true.

"Heh. What're you lookin' at, cowboy?" The real Swann, mechanical arm and all, was standing over a terminal and looking at him with a sly smile half hidden under his facial hair.

"Swann?" As if in a dream, Raynor slowly walked in and pried his eyes from the engineer to the other familiar figures positioned around the armory. Tychus, in a fresh Spectre suit and checking over his gauss rifle, was grinning wickedly around a cigar and distinctly lacking alien features.

Warfield looked up from the open container he was sifting through, normal human hands half done strapping on a heavy vest. It wasn't real though, Raynor's brows furrowed slightly as his hopeful thoughts rerouted back to reality; they were all still connected, still zerg. This was an illusion, albeit a damned good one.

"Yeah." Rory shrugged, mechanical arm flickering as it collided with the console in front of him—not agreeing with the thick-fingered hand that was actually there. "It isn't real, the kid and nerds from the Bucephalus cooked it up. Gonna help a lot down there on Korhal, we figure." With his right hand he pulled a fistful of small, flat disk-shaped diodes from a pocket and held them out for Jim's inspection.

Nodding grimly, Jim held his hand out and caught the small parts as Rory poured them in to his palm.

"Sure is nice to look like my old self though." Tychus remarked, rubbing his thumb against the phantom stubble on his chin with a smirk; he never did get to see more than a glance of his real body after being ripped out of that damned suit.

"You ain't much prettier either way, Tychus." Jim chuckled.

"Each of these diodes has a profile uploaded to it—an image of your original body gathered from various sources." The short man chuckled, "was pretty easy to make yours, what with your face plastered across the entire sector." Plucking one tiny disk from Jim's hand, Swann held it up for closer inspection. "We're gonna fit these all over you and they will cover your current appearance up. Not sure how well it's gonna work for you though, cowboy." Swann shrugged and held up his false mechanical arm. "Having enough trouble adjusting for this, don't know what errors a bunch of spikes stickin' out is gonna generate."

"Well if anyone can figure it out it's you and Egon, Swann." Jim gave a weak smile and rolled a little disk between his fingers, voice lowering as he eyed it. "Time to get this done boys."

"Zippers in the front, ladies!" Tychus boomed, grinning and all too eager to get out of the ship again.

"We'll be hooking up with a few teams from the Bucephalus once we land, Raynor." Warfield spoke in a placid tone, intent on his gear inspection and thinking deeply on what he knew was waiting on
the planet surface, but also what he didn’t.

"Egon is in the back Jim, go get him to give you a hand with those things.” Swann waved him off and returned to his console before he had even finished his sentence, leaving Jim smirking. *Glorious leader indeed.*

*Those who have seen the other infested men are greatly eased by their more... Natural appearance.* Lasarra’s voice spoke smoothly into Raynor’s mind. *This should help your mission on the terran home world greatly.* She sounded pleased, but he could not bring himself to feel more than cautiously reserved on the matter, now that the high of seeing his friends restored had faded.

Being acutely in-tune with minds and emotions, Lasarra naturally caught on to Jim’s reservation and followed through with questioning. *You do not believe this is a wise course of action, why?*

The 20 questions was annoying, but the idea of deception and betrayal were such foreign concepts to the alien race that he tolerated it with ease. His feet were leading him to Stetmann and there wasn’t much else to do but dwell on uncertainties anyways. *Junior has done a good job sticking to the plan so far Lasarra, but that don’t mean he can’t change his mind. I believe we’re putting ourselves in a bad spot not being honest with folks right off the bat.*

Rather than words, Jim visualized what could happen. People would not respond well to their careful disguises being turned off by Valerian, it would be as easy as taking out the trash for him. Lasarra balked at the thought of such deception, the kind of horror and violence that would immediately come down on the people who essentially saved them. In a moment of rashness, she considered how monstrous the terrans could truly be.

Shrugging his shoulders as he turned a corner and came face to face with Stetmann, Raynor figured it would be best to let the conversation go before things got confusing. *Most people are good, but the people in charge often ain’t there for anyone but themselves.*

"Ready to pretty me up, Stetmann?” Jim queried, watching Egon jump slightly and spin around to face him with a smile. It was coming to his realization that perhaps the kid was more excitable than some scared rabbit—he knew full well Jim was coming.

"Yes, of course! This will prove to be challenging, I think." Stetmann quickly scooped the handful of diodes out of Jim's hand and without any ceremony, began to stick them to points on his body. "Disguising what is there is the easy part; it’s when you start bumping into things and have to fit in spaces smaller than the space you take up that it becomes much more difficult."

"I read you." Raynor quirked a brow when a little trail of smoke hissed up from around one of the diodes that touched his skin. "Did that thing just melt on?"

"Ah- Wellll..." Stetmann paused, looking guilty. "We had to upgrade the adhesive considerably to deal with zerg skin... Let's just say it wouldn't be very good to put it on a human."

"Wonderful." Jim muttered.

"I know you are concerned about Valerian having control over these devices—so was I." Egon ventured cautiously as he fixed a diode to Raynor's torn vest, eyeing his leaders expression as he continued. Jim looked like he just ate something especially sour. "Anything Valerian wants to do to these remotely has to go through us first, we're in full control of them."

"That is actually a relief." Jim visibly relaxed, letting the issue drop instantly. If he didn't have to worry about it he wouldn't, even though having his mind read all the time was irksome.
"Captain, we have arrived just outside the Korhal orbital defense network." The adjutant droned at Horner, who glared dispassionately at the industrialized planet filling the view port.

"Contact Valerian." Jim, looking for all the world like he'd never been touched by zerg infestation in his life, rested his hands on the edge of the star map. The Hyperion and Bucephalus were resting side by side, tiny dots in comparison to the industrial terran home world. Tychus and Warfield were also present, but silent.

"Transmission secured."

Valerian's voice filled the room, void of his face appearing on any screens for a change. "Jim. It's time to finish this, are you and your men ready?"

"Any contact from the locals?" Raynor pressed, it was still a hope that they weren't too late to gather the rebels.

"None, but there is significant comm interference going on, Augustgrad is a communication void. Our ships should be able to pierce through, but only when we have made our descent." Valerian supplied smoothly.

"Then let's go say hi, just be ready for Senior and the hybrid to say hello back."

"I will leave this transmission open for ease of communication." The heir apparent fell silent and the dynamic of the bridge immediately shifted as Horner asserted control.

"Take 'er down Matt." Jim nodded and stood back, watching as his dour captain barked orders and began directing the giant ship forwards. Timing was key and they were relying on Valerian to input the code that would shut down the drakken defense network long enough for them to pass below its deadly range. Assuming that the key worked at all made Jim's guts clench in distaste, but Valerian was wagering his own life on it as well.

"Input the code now Valerian, we're almost in range." Horner barked as the adjutant warned.

"It is done Captain Horner, see you on the ground."

Tychus muttered in the tense moment following the two battlecruisers flying into the kill zone to no ill effect. "Just don't feel right, walkin' in without a fight."

"Incoming transmission." The big con looked decidedly guilty when several glares cut his way.

"You have made a mistake coming here." A hollow voice snaked through the bridge, raising some eyebrows in turn. "Welcome to the end."

"Don't know who you are, but I suggest not getting in our way." Jim said simply.

"Alpha Squadron." The voice murmured in a feverish tone, "Kill them."

The Hyperion and Bucephalus were cutting through the atmosphere and approaching Augustgrad at a fast pace; if Alpha Squad wanted to get chopped to pieces in the crossfire of two absurdly powerful battlecruisers, they were welcome. There would be no point trying to turn that crew over to Valerian's side, Duke could have been considered the smartest of the lot when he lead them.

As the comm closed, Raynor glanced at the others and smiled. "Anyone else think he was a
"wierdo?"

"Didn't sound like any man I ever heard before." Warfield said, frowning.

Tychus shrugged, "Gonna go get ready- don't get us blown up." He took his leave hastily, leaving Jim frowning.

"You were already ready." Jim said to no one in particular as the door snapped shut.

"Alpha Squadron will intercept us before we reach our landing zones, Jim." Valerian's voice crackled as he opened the microphone to speak. "Sensors are tracking them en route from the Sky Shield platform right now."

"Well hang tight junior, we gotta land one way or another within our time frame or Creepy and his boys might just get what they want." Jim spoke calmly, firefights and tight deadlines were par for the course.

The bridge shook gently as the first wave of Dukes attack force peppered the body of the Hyperion and everyone braced themselves. "Return fire and continue." Still seething, Horner's voice cracked like a whip.

Augustgrad - Rebel Base

The situation in Augustgrad had shifted from a seeming graveyard to an apocalyptic nightmare in the span of a few hours, Nova reflected. There had been no time to rest after running full bore back to the base, it was already under attack and would have been quickly overwhelmed in the confusion had it not been for her timely intervention. The loyalty of the rebels could be considered solidified as a result, however.

Black eyed civilians, smiling and laughing, had emerged from the fog and claimed several lives immediately when marines rushed forwards to bring them to the safety of the base. One such infected civilian was now locked in a containment cell and staring at Nova, smiling blankly. Scattered gunfire popped and cracked through the thick walls of the primary headquarters, none of the infected were suffered to live getting within range now.

"What do you think it is?" Daren, the highest ranking official to turn to the rebel cause, questioned. He had an honest mind, Nova took a quick liking to him in a professional manner.

"Hybrid work, no doubt." Voice crackling through her mask, Nova spoke crisply. Her doubts would not be aired, only what she knew for certain. "What I don't know is, how to reverse it. A trip to the local labs might help me get information we need, but we don't have the facilities or the man power to use it yet."

"Yet?" Grumbling, Daren rubbed his covered arms quickly. The infected gave him the heeby jeebies, and rightly so. "The men don't think we're making it out of this alive, and I don't have anything to counter that line of thought at the moment." Morale is important, that and the safety of his men, they were his topcmost thoughts.

"There are agents abroad who are working continually to find a solution to the hybrid and this new dilemma, I assure you." Nova replied in a calm, professional tone. "You tell your men whatever you have to, just keep them firing their guns at the enemy and let me handle it." A ripple of energy surrounded her as she focused, teasing the fabric of reality around her body until Daren took an uneasy step backwards; a sickening crunch heard through the thick glass sent the infected civilian to the floor in a crumpled heap, blood pooling sluggishly out of erupted eyes and ears.
**You cannot stop this, November Terra.** A whisper, dead and cold, teased in her mind.

The corpse stood back up and smiled.

Fear of the unknown trumped his fear of Novas terrible psionic abilities, Daren withdrew from the room quickly.

A short time later, after a few more frustrating attempts to kill the creature with her mind, Nova emerged from the command center with a headache and took stock of the defenses. When a marine had lifted his visor in the fog and transformed shortly after the first attack, killing a few of his own before being turned into bloody confetti, an atmosphere dome was quickly erected and shoved the fog out of the base perimeter by force.

No walking into the fog without full coverage. No front line defending without full coverage. Any instance where an infected human or mysterious fog could be, involved full coverage.

The atmosphere dome was powered by a generator, hidden in a hastily erected shack, that hummed without issue when Nova gave it a brief inspection; the few SCV pilots they had would know a lot more about fixing it properly if something was wrong, but she always liked to be on top of things. Aside from the advantage of not being infected and turned into a psychopathic zombie murderer, the dome also provided pure vision of anyone or anything stepping inside the perimeter with its ethereal blue glow.

Ammo was an issue now that they were almost continually firing in a 360 degree radius around the entire base, though a few perdition turrets at key areas were helping; aiming for the head or complete disintegration with explosives were quickly becoming the way to kill of choice. Grimly, Nova thought over the idea of escape.

*The troops are more right than I care to admit,* she thought. Quickly she identified the most fatigued men on the front lines and chose one she would replace, giving his blue armored suit a quick tap with her hand. "Take a break, I got this." *Even saving ourselves might not be possible now.*

If he responded she missed it, honing in on fast moving targets in the distance with her scanner as soon as the bulk of the suit was out of her way. Soon psi charged and teeked bullets flew to kill; former allies, or at least innocent civilians, shredded with impartiality.

A pressure was building in Nova's head, accompanied by a white noise in her ears. Squinting in discomfort at the sensation, there seemed to be a marked increase in radar activity being reported on all sides of the base. *Is it really a sickness?* A cloud of red bloomed where a former civilian's head was as another bullet flew true. *Tosh said the hybrid are psychic vampires, and the only thing we've ever known to come back from the dead were cerebrates.*

"Massive attack wave incoming!" A frantic voice chirped through the short range comm. It was barely audible over the white noise, high pitched ringing and pain in her head. *Are the hybrid using their psi to puppet bodies? Who does that voice belong to?* Silhouettes were appearing in the fog, just outside the gentle blue glow of their man-made atmosphere. *Why am I not affected?*

Her fellow rebels were fidgeting, their fear palpable as they waited for the gathering masses to step into weapon range and sight. "Easy boys." Nova murmured, struggling to concentrate. Something was about to happen, invisible insects crawled through her skin and goosebumped the pale flesh. *Has the situation gone too far to repair? Are we the walking dead ourselves?*

On a private channel, the same high-strung busybody overseeing all radar and comm activity through
their command center squawked into her ear. "Nova, the sensor tower shows so many all around us... We are about to be overwhelmed; so if you have some kind of ace up your sleeve, now is the time." Click. Guy is probably sitting there with a pistol in hand, she thought.

Frantic ideas flitted through Nova's mind as the motion trackers of the suit went haywire, lending credence to the urgency of the message. At the outer edge of the gentle blue glowing wall, shapes formed in the mist. Hundreds.

"Hold the line." Nova spoke calmly through her mask, not registering the fear and outrage of her peers as she spun to her feet and ran towards the approximate middle of the base.

"Nova, come back!" Daren shouted, fully aware of what the consequences of Nova abandoning the fight would be. Still, he did not move from his position as ordered- if he fled too, the men's resolve would crumble.

Long legs, strong themselves and further augmented by the Ghost suit, carried her to the center of the base in record time. Tearing her helmet off and roughly tossing it down, Nova gazed up at the sky before closing her eyes for what may be the last time. I owe it to them. I could have stopped this long ago.

Gathering her mental strength, she visualized the intended effect and as a living, breathing wall of nightmare began to pour past the atmosphere and bullets began to fly, she let go.

So much for fighting for freedom, Daren thought sarcastically as he steadily poured bullets into former citizens. They were frighteningly fast and well beyond his natural reflexes to track and shoot properly- that's what the CMC was for, thankfully. Even more thankful was he for the fact that his men were more loyal to him than Nova, a fact made clear by them not dropping their guns and running when the famous Ghost did. At least he'd die with a measure of pride.

There were more bodies coming at them from all sides than there were bullets to put them down, every man and woman knew it. They were getting closer, and through the comm Daren heard the line breaking on the other side of the base- the attack had begun less than two minutes ago and they were already crumbling.

Looking into the glassy black eyes of a smiling child, Daren clenched his teeth and opened the comm in order to announce a fallback to the command center, for what little good it would do. "Men!" Before he could belt out the rest of the sentence, the ground rocked with an explosion- but there was no sound.

Knocked forwards even in his CMC, Daren struggled to keep his feet and understand what was happening. Before he had righted himself, a second blast came with all the sound and light of a nuclear explosion- his suit working overtime attempting to dampen the sensory overload and preserve both his sight and hearing. For a moment, he was rendered as helpless as an infant- blind, deaf and crying out.

His hearing came back first, punctuated by a high pitch ringing. Others were expressing wonder over the comms and he blinked hard, desperate to see what was going on and respond appropriately. The first thing he understood was that the battlefield had fallen silent but for the voices of his men and when his vision came back, blurred but solidifying rapidly, he saw the frozen bodies of the enemy.

The air was rippling with shimmering blue psionic energy, grappling the entire invading force in an unbreakable hold- the fog had hidden their numbers beyond what they could have imagined. Their fellow terrans had become as alien and terrible as the zerg, a numberless and unstoppable enemy.
Nova, Daren thought, struck with a resounding chord of hope. Raising his trusty gauss rifle, he took aim and fired a leisurely shot into the head of a nearby infected citizen, watching it disappear with a grim satisfaction.

Without any further hesitation, he opened the comm once more and roared, "Nova has given us a chance to even the odds but we don't know how long it's gonna last boys- make it count! FIRE!"

As one, the rebel base echoed with rapid gunfire and renewed explosions. At the center of the base, Nova stood rooted, battling internally over the forces being wielded.

So focused on mowing down every being standing between himself and the shimmering atmosphere dome, Daren dared not look around at his fellow men- not until one roughly jostled the shoulder of his suit with a metallic clack. "Sarge, beside you!"

Snapping his head to the left, Daren's insides were chilled instantly. One of his men, Charlie, was frozen stiff- grappling with a woman who had smashed through his visor and yanked the hapless man close to her face. From the bloodied mouth of the woman was a smokey trail that linked her and Charlie together- his eyes were wide in horror.

*How can you fight that?* Daren thought, fighting a lip quiver as he raised his gun and shot Charlie square in the face, immediately following suit with the woman.

"Sarge!" One of the men, he didn't know who, shouted incredulously as he ended the life of one of his own.

"He was frozen with her," Daren replied somberly. It only meant one thing: Charlie was infected, just like the rest. Looking away from the mess, he settled back into position to continue shooting.

A man, face frozen in a wicked snarl, seemed to quiver in place. Whatever Nova was doing, it was not going to last much longer. "Hurry!" Daren blurted, not remembering to open his comm to announce the message.

Inside the command center, Monty stood gaping open-mouthed at the scene below his comm tower. Jerked back to reality by the shout of Sargent Daren over the comm and the return of gunfire, he swallowed hard and sheepishly holstered his small pistol, sitting sat back down in his chair.

There was a ringing in his ears and one hell of a headache blooming in his brain, but he stared at the radar and various other sensor equipment in rapt attention. Staring hard at the little red dots that signified enemies- the lights were being snuffed out en masse, but there was yet more.

A bead of sweat tickled the side of his face as, in rising terror, he realized the dots were beginning to move again.

Steeling his resolve, Monty held down a button and announced to each man and woman what they were already seeing. "They are starting to move again." His cheeks reddened at some of the choice words flung at him, thankful that those less-than-civilized men and women were not in the same room as him. *How did I even end up here? Oh, right. Charlie, my stupid brother.*

Despite his brother's rebellious nature, he had agreed with the cause regardless- something had to be done about Mengsk. Turned out rebelling sucks.

As soon as the first infected erupted into full speed movement, frantic cries of pain and howls of anger punctuating more intimate battles followed shortly after. Monty heard it all, fingertips trembling when cries turned to death shrieks and he had to sever the CMC comm to keep the chaos to a minimum.
A few times, worse than the sound of death, was when something else happened and he heard the whispered promises. All will join us. Even you, Monty.

The outer perimeter of the base was covered in corpses, some in ever-rising heaps, but the red dots kept coming. The pistol felt heavy in its holster. Do it, Monty. A voice gurgled through the comm before he slammed the button to cut it off.

But it wouldn't stop. Men, women, children, a chorus of their voices began to whisper and sing through the comms, like some kind of crazed band. Helpless, Monty leaned back in his chair and stared at the blinking equipment in fear. The radar was turning red. Everyone was gone. It was only him left.

Monty. An all-too-familiar voice rasped.

"No." A tear slid down his cheek, his voice broken.

"It's not so bad." Charlie's voice, no longer ethereal and very much solid, spoke to Monty's right.

Yelping, Monty flew out of his chair as though it was on fire, darting towards the thick glass and throwing his back against it, turning to face Charlie. His brother was leaning on his chair, fingers folded together and a calm look about him- but for every similarity there was to his brother, there was a dozen more that screamed this isn't Charlie.

Eyes blurring with free-flowing tears, Monty held up a warding hand and tried to get more detail- it was as if a dark veil was draped over his brother, obscuring the real details. "Don't come any closer!" He squeaked, voice breaking.

Charlie's demeanor shifted as his elbow slid off the chair and his fists clenched at his sides, from passive to menacing in a heartbeat. He was always the big, burly sibling. "You're coming with me, brother." Every button on the control panel was blinking and turning bright, glowing red- every monitor flickered and became white and black static.

Gasping as his heart raced, Monty grabbed the pistol from his hip and shakily raised it in threat as the specter of Charlie slowly approached and darkness began to trickle into the corners of his vision. The voices calling through the speakers began to cry feverishly in higher and higher pitches.

Join us. The veil shrouding his brothers features lifted.

Join us. Half of Charlie's face was gone. He grinned.

JOIN US MONTY.

"NOO!" Monty screamed at the top of his lungs, closed his eyes and lifted the pistol in both hands while tucking his head down to his chest.

BANG!
Timely Arrivals

Augustgrad - Rebel Base

"Fall back!" Daren shouted into his comm, hard to hear over the death rattles of fellow rebels now that they were no longer being cut off by the comm kid, Monty. Probably tried to tuck tail and run, he thought bitterly as he shoved the shoulder of a man beside him and gestured forcefully to withdraw.

"We need a medic over here!" Someone bellowed into the comm, barely coherent with fear.

"There are no medics left, moron!" Another voice snapped impatiently.

"Can it!" Daren snarled, leaping atop a hastily thrown together barricade and providing cover fire for the tired men lagging behind. It cut to the bone to see one of them fall under a literal wave of bodies, wading through them until the machine just couldn't fight the inhumanly strong limbs grasping and pounding at it.

"You hear that?" A man beside him said breathlessly between a burst round of gauss bullets.

"I said can it!" Glaring briefly at the silenced soldier, Daren's brows raised up when he suddenly heard it too: An excruciatingly high whining noise easily piercing the sound of gunfire, explosions and shouting. There was only one machine that sound could belong to.

"Wraiths!" Daren yelled in dismay; the rebels didn't have wraiths.

Arriving in tandem with his yell, a smouldering wraith plummeted through the generated atmosphere at a dizzying speed, a line of black smoke trailing through the air behind it as it immediately smashed into the battle-torn field and exploded violently.

"What in the hells?" Immediately confused at the turn of events, Daren almost allowed a silent, smiling man to leap over the barricade and tackle him- the attacker was blown away by a nearby soldier.

The brush with death, or worse, rocked his mind back to reality and Daren gave his head a sharp shake. "Any eyes on what brought that ship down?!"

The first wraith had crashed into the invading enemy, instantly destroying anything standing at or near the impact zone, the second and third did not do the defenders any favors. Daren barely ducked in time when an erratically spinning wraith careened overhead and tumbled clean across the grounds-the heat of its thrusters seared the back of his CMC mercilessly in the half-second of contact.

A low roar, impossibly loud and coming from an as-yet unseen source, made Daren clench his teeth or be forced to chip them from chattering so hard. Falling debris were coming down like meteors and posing even further threat, and there was one person who might not be able to get cover.

Slamming a metal hand down on the shoulder of the man beside him, Daren gave him a shake and yelled hoarsely "I need to check the other side! You hang in there!" The man barely nodded, his eyes were staring through everything, but he was still firing and that was what counted. Daren turned and ran.

A piece of shrapnel ricocheted off the back of his suit with a metallic clang as he scanned the war torn surroundings for a certain ghost. Combat targeting found Nova first, prone and seemingly
unconscious in a charred circle of grass and soil. Sucking in a sharp breath, Daren ran for her quickly. If he managed to survive this mess, he didn't think he could forgive himself if she was impaled by some random shrapnel from the sky while defenseless.

It was hard to reconcile the childlike looking woman covered in dirt and smoke grime with the efficient psionic killer he knew her to be, and Daren grit his teeth hard as he carefully but quickly knelt down in the bulky CMC armor beside her body and wondered what step to take next.

Sound faded away, and as he saw the faltering line of defense begin to crumble both through his suit sensors and with his own eyes, Daren sighed and curled a hand beneath Nova's knees and back, sitting up with her in his mechanical arms and accepting the end.

"We fought as best we could, and I know damn well you did too." Daren muttered, looking down at Novas bare face. It was a strange epiphany to realize she had to be so young, maybe even younger than the kid in the comm tower. He wanted to brush the strands of sticky hair out of her face and give comfort- wondering if her own mother or father ever did.

Knocked in to from behind, Daren staggered and tried to protect the woman in his arms before he noticed it was one of his men. "What?" He replied blandly, barely glancing up from Nova.

"Sarge, they want to talk to you! Look!" The younger man pointed upwards, his mouth open in a childlike joyous wonder, even though the missing teeth and scruffy facial hair gave the lie of his age.

Disillusioned, Daren slowly looked upwards and wasn't sure what he was seeing for a few moments.

"Gentlemen, you sure look like you could use a hand! What the hell is goin' on down there?" A voice, familiar only due to its fame, filtered through his comm and pierced the haze that clouded his mind as surely as the fog was shrouding all of Augustgrad.

Red lasers were showering down on the infected civilians with precision, firing down from not one but two massive battlecruisers that were barely inside the gentle glow of the rebels' artificial atmosphere.

_The Bucephalus and Hyperion!_ Daren gaped.

Someone else was bellowing orders and restoring a semblance of control over the rebels in his stead, for which he was thankful. Clearing his throat, Daren's voice was hoarse from yelling regardless. "Jim Raynor, with prince Valerian?" His mind raced. There was so much information that needed to be shared in a short amount of time.

"The one and only," the cocky rebel leader replied. The battlecruisers were maneuvering to land on either side of the park and establish a perimeter of their own - giving the besieged rebels a much needed breather.

"Don't go into the fog and don't come down here without full coverage!" Daren warned ominously, "You need to be briefed on what is going on, but that is the need-to-know info right now. Thank God for you." No longer at peace with an untimely death, Daren smiled and chuckled softly. _Not today._

Standing with Nova in his arms, Daren reasserted control over the comms. "The Bucephalus and Hyperion are creating a perimeter- finish falling back to the inner defenses." He paused, looking up at the massive battlecruisers maneuvering for a landing; if they were deafening before, he pitied anyone without a helmet. A pang of guilt struck him and he glanced down at Nova. "Those who can, help the SCVs shore up the defenses while the rest watch for stragglers who made it through the
battlecruiser fire.\textit{ That aught to take care of things until we get some ground backup.}

Walking towards the command center with Nova in his arms, Daren spied her shifting weakly in discomfort- the natural movement gave him hope that she was not beyond repair. Who knew what kind of ailments of the mind a psi could get from such a display? Two thunderous crashing sounds indicated the lifts of the battlecruisers hitting the ground. \textit{Those pilots must be incredible,} he thought.

The door of the command center hissed open, the hairs on the back of Daren's neck raising stiffly as he saw the inside poorly illuminated by blinking red emergency lights. Immediately wary, he stepped backwards and let the door shut itself. "No one enters the command center until backup arrives." He spoke firmly into the comm.

Sensors indicated there were two separate groups, one from either battlecruiser, swiftly approaching his position. Stepping away from the darkened building, Daren turned around to greet his saviors- but not before looking down at Nova one more time. She would be taken by medics and looked after, and he would be damned if she ever knew he held her at all.

The eyes of the rebels blonde, not-quite angelic hero snapped open. They were black.

"No!" Daren yelled hoarsely, flinging Nova out of his arms violently- gauss rifle in hand and aiming before she had even hit the ground.

With the sound of the battlecruisers drowning out all other noise, Daren did not hear the rapid footfalls of the giant who proceeded to shoulder tackle him, causing a three-round burst of bullets to miss their target and spray a line of dirt up from the torn earth.

Struck with a chord of fear, Daren shouted in a panic as the infected Nova began to rise to her feet slowly. "She's infected! Kill her fast or we're all dead!" He looked incredulously into the strange face mask of the monster of a man who was successfully wrangling the gauss rifle out of his hands; the man had a red and black suit with pulsing red power lines, like a twisted ghost outfit. \textit{Spectre,} his dulled mind supplied.

"Restrain her!" Raynor shouted, a note of uncertainty in his tone.

"Why do I have to restrain her, Jimmy?" The burly man snarled through his mask in a mechanical voice, yet to be identified. Daren stared past him, struggle and weapon forgotten as he locked eyes with Nova. Not Nova. Death- and that all consuming devourer was smiling at him.

"I can't you idiot!" Raynor snapped. Daren was shoved bodily- again left a mite incredulous at the strength required to shove a CMC outfit- and the burly man rounded on Nova, striking without hesitation and an incredible speed. Nova met him head on.

Tychus grunted as he collided with the lithe ghost, registering the unnatural black eyes a split second before contact. Using his superior strength- both natural and unnatural- he caught up Nova's arms in his and bodily spun her around neatly into a huge bear hug. His eyes widened as he was met with an equal unnatural strength, Nova's arms flexing and forcing Tychus to tremble with effort.

"Jimmy! This ain't no normal girl!" Tychus shouted, a note of confusion in his tone. The ghost was a solid foot off the ground in his arms and giving Tychus a run for his money on keeping her restrained.

"Lasarra! Tell me you got somethin' for me!" Daren heard Raynor plead. \textit{Odd name,} Daren thought.

\textit{Her mind is being invaded- feasted upon by a great, hungering parasite.} A calm voice flooded through Daren's mind and he immediately snapped his eyes to the source- gobstruck at the sight of
his first protoss. The creature exuded an alien and nearly god-like superiority, but the feeling that accompanied it was not hostility and Daren felt himself relaxing despite the situation.

"Well sister, you gonna do something or do we need to put this thing down?!!" Tychus snarled, narrowly avoiding being headbutted by the silent and flailing possessed woman.

The protoss, Lasarra, Daren reminded himself, approached with a clawed hand raised outwards. Nova bared her teeth and laughed raggedly, black eyes wide and mad. Daren caught a curious blue glimmer in the air around Lasarra and quickly realized it was a psionic shield the protoss were so famous for.

*To separate the two may kill her,* the ethereal alien warned, a long finger curling in the air, *but to let her be consumed in such a way would be a crime against nature itself.* The effect was immediate, Nova's whole body seemed to be tugged forwards into the air, forcing Tychus to tighten his arms and grunt with exertion.

Nova let out a sharp gasp of surprise, black eyes wide and bugging, before her face contorted into pure malefic rage and she snarled at Lasarra, suddenly bent on her destruction; Her full body flailing effort redoubled.

"C'mon darlin'..." Raynor muttered, raising his gauss rifle and taking aim. Either Lasarra saved her or death would take her. Daren knelt down and quickly recovered his discarded rifle, taking aim as well.

Two fingers and two thumbs curled together to form a tight fist, and psionic energy radiated in a visual display from Lasarra. Her voice was strained and tense in their minds. *Begone, glutton!*

Raynor thought that this was the closest thing to an exorcism he may ever witness, grimacing at the alternating looks of fury and pain flickering across Novas features as Lasarra wrangled with an unseen entity. Their whole group, and more joining them as the spectacle dragged on, watched in silent awe.

Tychus continually adjusted his grip, attempting to be mindful of his concealed claws and to not crush the small body in his arms at the same time- although he was quickly coming to the conclusion that was not a possibility. The spectre helmet he had been forced to put on at the last second was giving him all sorts of strange readings and information, but first and foremost were the sensors identifying a mist beginning to rise out of Nova- as if she was steaming.

"Hurry. It. Up!" Tychus growled, curling a leg as thick as Nova's body over the front of her legs and further pinning her flush against his body to minimize wriggling and flailing. It did not help that both his and her suit were damned slippery!

Lasarra visibly trembled with effort as she mimed pulling harshly at whatever was inside Nova, who looked as though something was about to burst out of her chest as she gasped and snarled wetly.

*Get. OUT!* With a surprising amount of animation, Lasarra shoved outwards with both her hands and mind- driving the pure energy of the khalai through Nova's mind, like a spotlight on the darkness that had taken hold.

All bystanders were knocked back by the minor psionic shockwave unleashed, Tychus nearly tumbled backwards but managed to regain his footing as Nova gasped sharply and immediately fell limp in his arms. "Hell," he panted raggedly. Sensors no longer showed the strange steam, he wondered if anyone else saw it.
Raynor lowered his gun immediately and piped up, "Need a medic over here!" The bucephalus crew would oblige. Swallowing a lump in his throat, Raynor allowed himself a brief moment of relief as Tychus handed the unconscious Nova off to medical professionals.

*It is too early to say if she will be in tact, James Raynor.* Lasarra addressed his concerns immediately. *She was fighting to come back, but lost in the dark. I showed her the way, it is up to her now.*

"Will you-" Raynor said.

*Yes, I will follow her to the Bucephalus and see that there is naught amiss. Be careful down here, James Raynor. The chill of the void is deep, I fear for those in the mist beyond if what we saw when we came down was any indication of their health...* Lasarra was already following after the medics carrying Nova away.

"Great." Raynor muttered.

Tychus glanced between the marine he'd disarmed and gave a short nod of acknowledgement. "You Daren? Pardon my roughing you up, chief." There was no mistaking his completely not apologetic tone.

*Take it easy, Tychus.* Jim exchanged a glance with him, at least their swarm connection would come in handy when dealing with other terrans.

Daren seemed in a daze, finally looking towards Tychus and nodding back. The blonde man had a scruffy beard and dirt stains on his face, but the baring of a leader that Tychus was familiar with, and had a small iota of respect for. "It's alright." Daren rasped, "If that protoss really just saved her, then I am more thankful than you can imagine. She saved us."

"That Nova chick?" Tychus hiked his thumb over his shoulder as Jim engaged with Warfield over his comm, adjusting fluidly to the change of events. "Turned over a new leaf, did she?"

"Turned over a-" Daren paused, realizing sheepishly that Nova, and even himself, had been completely at odds with Raynor's Raiders up until very recently. Swallowing, he shrugged inside his suit, the gesture lost. "Suppose we all did."

"Good. Name's Tychus." Tychus spoke decisively, looking around at the trashed compound. "Warfield and his boys are gonna help you get this secured while the big guns," he gestured vaguely towards the massive battlecruisers, "keep things cleared up."

Exhausted, Daren nodded again. "A pleasure. We need all the help we can get." Looking up at the hulk of a terran, Daren felt thrown off. Without seeing the face behind the mask, it was as though he was being stared down by a predator. Immediately uncomfortable, Daren looked away from Tychus.

"Lets start with this here command center then, boys." Raynor said as he walked up and stood between the two men. He was devoid of a suit and lacking so much protection Daren immediately felt worried, but at least the scruffy rebel leader was wearing a transparent face mask. "Saw the red lights flashing for a sec there," he supplied.

"Yeah, lost touch with our comm kid during the battle. No breaches of the inner compound were reported, so I'm not sure what's going on in there." Daren said. All three turned to face the door of the command center.

Eyes glancing over the building, Tychus looked up towards the comm tower when Daren mentioned it, frowning. Nudging Jim's foot with his, he gestured subtly with his head towards a dark stain on the inside of the glass. *Blood in there.*
Jim followed his friends gaze and also frowned. "Blood on the window up there, Daren. The inside of it."

Daren glanced upwards but was too close to the door to see, his guts knotted up and he gripped his gauss tightly. "Lets go!" Why had the security lights gone on? If the kid really did shoot himself, nothing should have happened. Ignoring Raynor's call to wait, Daren charged in through the opened door and ran into the dark for the comm tower. I killed his brother, he thought bitterly.

"Ah hell!" Raynor cursed and flew into the building with Tychus in tow. You go up there with him, Tychus. I'll secure the main floor.

"Alright brother." Tychus muttered verbally as he passed by, the air crackling and shimmering red until he was gone- his heavy footfalls the only indication he was there, but those faded after a moment as well.

Daren crashed through the facility and banged on lift buttons impatiently until he finally stormed into the comm tower. Shouldering through the door with weapon raised, Daren looked in dismay at the scene before him. Lowering his weapon, he walked towards the blood stained glass, looking at the spatter and congealed pools on the floor.

Someone died, but the body was not there, as evidenced by bloody footprints streaking across the floor to the door Daren came from.

"Got a problem with bodies wandering off?" Tychus muttered as he materialized in front of the comm equipment, making Daren jump slightly.

"Not until recently." Daren said, opening his comm and calling out to Raynor in warning, "Raynor the facility is not secure, there is something in here with us."

"Lock it down until we find this somethin' then." Came the brisk reply.

Tychus was fiddling with buttons and knobs, looking over screens and still trying to figure out what all the fancy readings his spectre mask was giving him meant. "Nothin' wrong with this equipment, chief. At least we can get a new comm brat up here."

Sidling up beside the big spectre warily, Daren tried to school his thoughts. Damn teeps. Equipment went haywire at one point, I know that much. I'll get one of the wrench jockeys to look at it, just in case." Tychus' plate-sized hands continued to wander across the equipment as Daren spoke, and finally came to a stop on one button.

"Lets see what happened." Tychus smirked, tone leaking superiority as it tended to, as he pressed the button and the camera footage for the comm room began to play. "What time did everything go haywire?" He questioned, looking at Daren through the closed CMC faceplate.

Impressed, Daren glanced at the sensors and timers in his suit, thinking. "About a half-hour ago."

As soon as Tychus set the time of recording back, they each watched with rising apprehension.

"What's the kids name?" Tychus said.

"Monty." Daren supplied, feeling sick as he watched the grainy video of what was a level-headed kid apparently having a mental meltdown over a fully functioning comm system.

"That's some messed up stuff." Tychus grunted, looking at the shadowy masses and flickering equipment. Some real weird crap goin’ on around here, Jimmy...
"He was always the brighter of the two brothers, I can't imagine him just melting down like this." Daren sounded perplexed. "It's like he's looking at someone, fighting it."

Tychus glanced sharply at Daren then, sensing that they were no longer on the same page, or even looking at the same video. "You don't say." The shadowy figure that had pressed Monty up against the glass and forced him to blow his own brains out made even him feel uncomfortable watching. "Guess we ain't gonna get to ask him what happened."

Tension built as they waited, watching dark pools form around the cooling body of Monty. Tychus felt twitchy, all senses on high alert.

As soon as the body of Monty stood up sharply of its own accord, Daren shouted into the comm, "Raynor! It's an infected! We're coming!" Making to run for the door, Daren was slammed back in place by a heavy arm blocking the way.

"You keep this floor secure, son." Tychus voice filtered through the grainy speakers in a growl, already starting to fade from view as the suits stealth tech activated. "Let the big dog handle it."

"I'll get the doors guarded, then." Daren submitted easily- if he never saw an infected again he'd be the happiest man alive. Locking down the door behind the frightening spectre, he turned to the comm equipment and got to work.

Any eyes on the bogeyman yet, Jimmy? Tychus' voice filtered into Jim's mind, along with his apparent excitement at the fight coming.

Stepping into a poorly illuminated room, Jim was thankful for any and all extra senses he had just then. Whoever thought dark red lights were good for emergency lighting situations, he'd like to have a talk with them. Not yet. The comm kid is dead?

It is the comm kid! Tychus snapped. Back from the dead, killed by some real spooky shit. That marine, Daren, couldn't see it. I saw it Jim.

So the hybrid are what, possessing people- alive and dead? Jim wondered, turning around in the doorway once he decided the room was clear. He shouted in surprise and fired a three round burst of bullets into the chest of a skinny, grinning man no less than four feet away.

As Jim filled with surprise, Tychus abandoned his brisk room inspection and came barreling through the building. Comin' partner!

Monty was blown against a wall by the blast to his chest and bounced off it, landing face first. Jim grimaced at the quick glance of exposed bone and brain at the back of Monty's head, but the creature rolled to its feet and lunged for him in a hellish flash. Firing off another burst round, the rifle was sharply knocked to the side- bullets clattering through the enclosed space; Jim found himself wrestling with a man easily half his size, never mind weight, for control of his firearm.

A quick shift of weight was all the warning he had to avoid the curled-finger swipe aimed at his mask, tilting his head back sharply to avoid it. As their collective momentum shifted, the shorter man too far forwards against Jim and lacking a grip, he planted one booted foot against Monty's groin and kicked outwards with all of his might. Launched into the air, Monty collided with the ceiling- a wet crunch signalling all sorts of internal damage.

Jim was further caught off guard when the man's arms and legs adjusted during the impact and sent him flying directly back at Jim. With a decisive swipe, the strap that kept the gauss rifle firmly connected to Jim was ripped asunder and a foot shoved the gun straight to the ground violently. The
two locked hands and were wrestling for control, a game of roman knuckles with consequences not yet realized, when Jim caught sight of a shimmer.

Panic flooded through Jim as he realized his claws were slicing into the back of Monty's hands and wrists, teeth bared and body straining from effort, he snarled. "Shoot it Tychus!" The barrel of Tychus' gun shimmered into view as the cloaking fell, and his finger was on the trigger before Jim finished shouting.

Hands wet with blood, Monty slipped his fingers through Raynor's grip and caught either side of his mask, grinning like a demon. Gasping, Jim's hands reflexively locked down on the sides of Monty's neck, concealed claws piercing through the flesh like butter. Monty's head disappeared just as Raynor's mask was ripped off.

Stunned, Jim let go of the corpse and watched it fall into a limp heap as Tychus lowered his gun. "Shit, Jimmy." This little charade of ours is going to be over before it began. Tychus pointed out ominously, reaching for the long knife on his belt- Jim only gleaned the grim purpose when the big man carefully grabbed the corpse and began to firmly slice the remains of it's head off, followed by it's hands.

Tychus, what are you doing? Jim scrambled for his mask, forced to hold it on with one hand since the damned straps were broken.

These freaks just keep comin', nobody is gonna question why the damned thing is chopped up. Best we can do after you turned him into swiss cheese, Jimmy you fool! That Tychus was stressed and frustrated was clear, finishing off the grim work and swiping his knife clean on his suit before sticking it back in its sheathe.

Good thinking. Raynor swallowed, looking at the mutilated corpse in distaste. Won't let that happen again. We need to talk to Nova- and soon. Adjusting his mask awkwardly as he retrieved his gun, Jim opened the comm and spoke in a haggard tone. "Building is secure, Daren. Warfield can take over for now- we need to get you to the Bucephalus and discuss what all is going on here."

"Roger." Came the quick reply from Daren.

"Catch up with you in a minute, cupcake." Tychus joked, enjoying the irked feeling that twanged from his friend. His expression sobered quickly as soon as he heard the door closing behind Jim and Daren in the distance. Tugging his spectre mask off, he tilted his head back and breathed deep that candied scent. "Mmm." Nobody saw him licking the blood from his fingertips.

Bucephalus - Rebel Base

"This cursed mist settled in over Augustgrad in the days following the emper-err," Daren stumbled verbally, looking at Valerian Mengsk across the fine table before continuing, Valerian offered him an amused smile of encouragement. "Arcturus' unveiling of the hybrid and my subsequent desertion. There were many of us." Daren leaned back in the unbelievably luxurious chair he was seated on, in front of some of the most powerful men in the galaxy. He was nervous and could feel sweat crawling down his neck.

Gripping the arms of his chair firmly, Daren continued. "Civilian activity plummeted during those first few days, we attributed it to the active war going on and not the mist. They had to be hiding in their homes, waiting for things to settle- martial law was in effect." Fixing his eyes to the smooth wooden surface of the polished table, Daren imagined he was reciting a report to an empty room. "We did not know about the infected until Nova arrived- the attack came within those first few moments. One of our men changed. She managed to reestablish order and repel them initially, then
we were dug in and fighting from there on out."

Valerian leaned back in his chair, hands folded together neatly as he absorbed the information. Raynor, Tychus, Warfield and Lasarra were also present, digesting the bad news.

"Nova didn't tell you anything more about them?" Raynor questioned, staring at Daren hard.

Shaking his head negative, Daren couldn't look Jim in the eye. "There was no time for a debrief, best I got was she knew it was the hybrid who did it and that there might be more information in a lab somewhere." He couldn't put his finger on it, but the stares from Raynor, Warfield and Tychus were disconcerting, like they were unblinking statues. Even Lasarra wasn't so off-putting, and she was a damned alien.

"Supplies are limited, even with the two battlecruisers pitching in. We need to make a decision soon-spearhead an attack against Arcturus and his hybrid, or collect the surviving rebels and flee." Warfield said, looking thoroughly displeased.

"We need Agent Nova to shed more light on the situation," Valerian said, resting his hands on the armrests of his chair languidly. "Abandoning my people is not an option. There are billions of people on Korhal. Billions. I won't accept that they are now all dead."

"We're not about to jump ship on these folks just like that, Valerian." Raynor agreed, leaning forwards in his chair heavily to avoid perforating anything with his concealed spines. He'd already caught some funny looks for the position. "Any word on everyone's favorite ghost, Lasarra?"

Ever calm looking, Lasarra stepped forwards and looked down over the assembled. November Terra is recovering well. I fear that she may be weakened against further mental intrusions, however... Only time will tell.

"You might have to make a decision without more info, chief." Tychus piped up, looking over and down at Valerian. "I say we get the hell outta here, but no one listens to me anyway." He grouched, leaning back into his strained chair.

"Thank you for your input, Mr. Findlay." Valerian spoke, a hint of archness in his tone, before looking towards Daren and smoothing out his facade of calmness. "You have given your all to protect your men and fight against a tyrant, Sargent. I couldn't possibly ask you to fight further until you and your men have been given an adequate amount of time to rest and recuperate." He held up a hand quickly when Daren leaned forwards, a protest on his lips.

"I insist, please. If you exit this room you'll be shown your quarters and you can contact any of your men at your leisure. Some are located in the infirmary, I'm sure it would hearten them to see you, Daren." Valerian coaxed patiently, watching as the war-weary man's features softened at the mention of his men.

Finally, Daren nodded and stood to leave. "Thank you, I will go see them."

As soon as Daren left the room the atmosphere changed dramatically, like a great sigh was unleashed.

Warfield placed his folded hands on the table. "We've shored up the defenses, Prince Valerian. The Bucephalus and Hyperion can maintain the outer perimeter indefinitely and a much smaller force with rotating shifts can take care of the inner perimeter for a drawn-out siege. I believe we can wait for Nova to recover if we-

"Um, hello?" Tychus blurted, tossing his hands on the table and leaning forwards. "Aren't we
forgetting a certain Zerg Queen is on a collision course with this rock?"

"Easy, Tychus. Bit hard to forget." Raynor raised a hand in an attempt to placate his unruly friend.

"Mr. Findlay does present a strong point." Valerian cast his voice above the others with the practiced precision of a public speaker. "However, Korhal still has the drakken defense system and a good portion of its remaining fleet- I suspect that we didn't have to contend with more than alpha squadron precisely because of the threat of Kerrigan. There is no scenario in which Arcturus Mengsk doesn't know the swarm is coming."

"The swarm will make landfall regardless of all that, Valerian." Raynor replied warily, the swarm and its leader did not mind losing a few million to achieve that goal, and all it took was one established base for a swarm assault to tip the balance. "We are on a tight schedule."

"I understand, Jim. As such, I'd like to immediately begin planning an aggressive approach- with your help of course. We need to be ready to move on a moments notice." Valerian received approving nods from Raynor and Warfield while Tychus just looked agitated.

"Well, you folks sure got a lot to talk about." Tychus rumbled and rose from his chair to his impressive height, rolling his shoulders. "You let me know when I get to go out and play, Jimmy." He gave a quick nod to Jim and helped himself out of the room.

"Mr. Findlay doesn't seem to appreciate the nuances of planning." Valerian pointed out in a cool tone as soon as the door shut.

"Never was his thing, probably for the best we just let him do his thing for now." Jim shrugged.

They began planning in earnest and Lasarra stood there quietly, listening both to the conversation at hand and all the thoughts flying around freely. While overwhelming in a way, it was very informative and interesting- terrans worried about the strangest things.

Wandering around the Bucephalus unhindered, Tychus managed to nearly bump into Daren in passing. The smaller man already looked ten times better, even though dark rings remained under his eyes- he'd managed to get a sonic shower and a shave in. "Where you headed?" Tychus said.

"Hey, about to check on the men in the infirmary- heard some of them are in rough shape." Daren replied, looking melancholy at the thought.

"Damn shame," Tychus said briskly. "Say, I heard a few whispers goin' 'round about a poker game. I could always use a partner." He offered, a quick and tidy olive branch for nearly beating the piss out of the man.

Daren cracked a small smile at that, chuckling. "I don't know, you might not be able to keep up with me." He grinned as soon as the big spectre grinned hugely at the taunt, then sobered quickly. "We'll see, if I am done my business before it starts I'll be there."

"Fair enough, off you get." Tychus nodded, leaving Daren to his business.

Daren watched him leave, thoughtful. He had cleaned his weapon before grooming and found a thick cut in the metal, he could still recall the texture of the smooth gash under his fingertip when he touched it curiously. It was like a claw mark. Letting out a huff at his own paranoia, Daren returned to what he was originally intending to do- see his men. So he's some kind of super hulk mind reader. At least he's on our side, he thought.
Fog Trouble

Bucephalus - Korhal

Oh, November Terra. You're quite the little agent of chaos, aren't you? And so much energy, you burn like a star in comparison to the rest of these pathetic terrans.

I needed a taste, Nova- I still do.

More. More more more...

MORE!

"Prince Valerian, Agent Nova is missing!"

"Explain," Valerian's voice lashed.

"Her vitals spiked, the machines went haywire and the nurse on duty was rendered unconscious when she entered the room to check up on the patient." A very nervous doctor reported, shifting uncomfortably under the gaze of his emperor-to-be. Though Valerian Mengsk's visage was only on a screen, his grey eyes were a livid storm.

"Lock down the ship- we have to find her!" Valerian nearly shouted the command, immediately closing the comm between himself and his apparently inept subordinate. I should have known the security was far too lax to house someone of Agent Nova's caliber, he berated himself mentally.

Jim found himself on the Bucephalus, waiting for either Nova to become conscious within the next 48 hours or for Valerian to make the call to mobilize against his father without the ghost operative. Walking down a silent hall, he carefully tapped a cigarette out of its carton and caught it with his lips. With a snict he lit the lighter and brought it up to the small death stick, at this point it was pure habit. Doubt zerg get cancer, he thought to himself ironically.

As the cherry of his cigarette burned bright, he saw a familiar distortion in the air ripple around a corner, making him smirk. As he opened his mouth to call out to Tychus, two things happened.

James Raynor! November Terra has regained consciousness and escaped! Lasarra's tone was worried. I can't feel her mind on the ship, but I believe she is concealing herself.

Jim went still, his friendly smirk shifting into a carefully neutral look. He should have known the second he didn't feel Tychus. Spotting the blur now might just be the only thing that could save his life if Nova still counted James Raynor as number one with a bullet.

As if to mock him the power went out and red emergency lights snapped on.

Thumpthumpthump

Eyes widening, Jim could hear her racing heartbeat and as he concentrated, even the subtle shifting of the suit creaked loudly to his infinitely keener ears.

There! The blur returned, bent light shifting subtly as the suit continually adjusted to its surroundings, directly to his right. Jim could see the faint outline of the advanced rifle raising, about to take its shot at his life. Nova's finger, trembling unnaturally, squeezed the trigger.
With a guttural cry Raynor lunged, cigarette tumbling from his lips.

**KRA-KOW!**

Jim felt the familiar searing agony of a bullet passing through his shoulder as his hand shoved the gun enough to miss his heart, loud cry shifting to one of mute pain as he forcefully collided with Nova. Time twisted unnaturally as he absorbed every minute detail, zerg physiology granting a freakish surge of adrenaline. Reacting in real time, he tugged the rifle free of Nova's grip and sent it hurtling as they slammed into the neosteel wall together.

Nova let out a surprised grunt as all the wind was knocked from her lungs, a thick forearm shoved horizontally across her chest and pinning her to the wall. Reacting as naturally as breathing, hand traveling to the knife at her belt, Nova's fingertips curled around it as her mind raced.

"Take." Using a hidden claw Jim caught the hilt of the knife below her fingertips and snagged it, tugging hard and sending her second weapon flying after the first.

"It." A knee snapped up, catching him hard in the crotch and for a brief second Jim was thankful nothing was there anymore.

"Easy!" Wedging a knee between her legs, Jim curled his hand around Nova's thin shoulder and pinned her hard.

"Agh!" Nova let out a breathy snarl, flinging her arm over the one pinning her and grasping at Jim's throat in desperation, it felt like grabbing corded neosteel. Time returned to its normal pace with a jarring slam for both combatants and Nova sucked in a ragged breath, it was hard to draw in air with so much force on her ribs. By chance she glanced from his glaring face and at his wounded shoulder, eyes widening.

Jim blinked, head turning to follow Nova's gaze as her suit's stealth tech failed and she appeared. His shoulder was just a mass of meat and bone, but oozing the purple oily blood of the zerg instead of pumping bright red terran blood; the flesh and bone were regenerating rapidly.

"Tosh was right," Nova whispered, paling visibly under the flashing red lights. "You were infested on Char. You lost."

Further aware of his own body, Jim realized the diodes Stetmann so painstakingly sealed into his skin were shorting out as they kept attempting to keep up the false image without a full grid to display it. Lips sealing into a tight line of displeasure, Jim made a quick decision while Nova was still in shock.

Stetmann. Jim's eyes half closed as he called out mentally.

*Yes Jim? We just heard Nova escaped, have you found her?* Stetmann answered immediately. The young scientist sounded a bit higher strung than usual, but Jim paid it no further mind.

*Turn off my disguise, don't ask and do it fast.* Nova looked up from his shoulder and Jim locked eyes with her. The ghost's face scrunched in confusion and disgust.

*Yes sir!* Egon complied.

*What's goin' on, Jimmy?* Tychus rumbled in Jim's head, looking through his eyes before Raynor could even answer; having others look through your eyes was an uncomfortable sensation and Jim's nose crinkled. *Oh, so you did find that little vixen.*
Jim became uncomfortably aware of his visage changing, the diodes shutting off with a sharp blue glow that dissipated in a hexagon pattern, revealing what lay beneath. Nova's fingertips clenched at his neck harder, but still ineffective.

"We're on the same side, Nova." Jim's warm brown eyes shifted to their true oily black, locked with Nova's light blue. "This whole thing," he tilted his head, indicating his... zergness. "Is just temporary."

It was too much.

Mired with crippling fear, Nova beheld the spiked monster that held her fast and her features twisted with hate. Hate for the zerg, for the emperor, for all that was said and done in her years as a psionic assassin, it all came welling up. No zerg were going to infest her, no nameless fog parasite turn her into a puppet, no.

Nothing would remain.

Baring her teeth, Nova saw with pleasure the expression of surprise and panic flit across the former James Raynor's malformed face. Sucking in a huge breath past the oppressive weight on her chest, she bellowed with all her might. "Raaaaaah!"

"Oh nononono!" Jim's eyes widened as Nova's icy blue eyes lit up with an inner light that spread across her whole body, overpowering the oppressive red lighting in the hall and rapidly building to a blinding intensity.

Jim wrangled Nova off the wall and curled his arms around her from behind, holding tight. Killing her wouldn't be right and his mind raced to find a solution before his brain got fried. Nova was still in his arms, concentrating on building a terrific mass of energy.

**James Raynor! Hold on!** Lasarra's soft voice reassured him. Nova couldn't hide such activities from the vigilant protoss.

Jim squinted his eyes hard, feeling Nova's body jerk in his arms. Faintly, he could see her head tossing left and right, cupid lips moving rapidly but not speaking.

Lasarra stood stock still, focusing intensely. November Terra had hid herself very well until now, but the terran had all but thrown the curtain down with guns blazing. Terran feelings were normally so very dull in comparison to the depth of the protoss spectrum of such things, but the true terror and violent thoughts erupting from the ghost operative was a moving experience.

With mercy, Lasarra let her mental essence fall upon the disgruntled terran before she could self destruct and take everyone with her. Like a blanket, she curled her mind around Nova's and saturated her with calm. Nova responded much like a terrorized animal, howling and fighting back as hard as she could.

But Nova had let all barriers down, leaving herself wholly vulnerable. Lasarra studied the wounded creature critically, thoughtful. **Be calm, November Terra. You are in no danger here.**

**A protoss!** The terrorized woman, rendered childlike and helpless in her head, reeled. What could a protoss be doing here? Suspicion ran wild in her mind- this is a trick.

**This is no trick. You were correct, James Raynor and several others were infested on Char. Their situation has evolved since then and they are their own masters as they pursue a solution.** Lasarra paused, head tilting as Nova's mind seemed to not register her words.
Jim took advantage of Nova being prone and made a run for Valerian's meeting room with her in his arms, praying that none of the refugee rebels caught sight of him.

_Taken care of, Jim._ Warfield reassured, up to date on the situation; the red alert was dropped halfway there and the lights returned to normal with a loud snap.

Tycho joined Jim as he ran, loping ahead with his longer strides and making sure the coast was clear anyways. Findlay had questions, Jim could feel it, but was mercifully silent and cooperative.

Nova's head lolled around with eyes half open and unseeing as she flailed inside her mind, attempting to raise barriers against the intruder and failing completely. _Get out! Get out! He'll get me!_ She howled, voice high and terrified.

Lasarra delved deeper, confused. November Terra was not truly afraid of James Raynor, not even in his zerg state. There was something else stirring a primal fear in the otherwise cold assassin and with an answer not forthcoming, Lasarra sought it herself.

_Noooo,_ Nova wailed pathetically. She could feel the filthy protoss searching through her mind as if it was a curious book, it was a wholly unwelcome and defiling experience.

Feeling a touch of sadness at the adverse reaction to her presence, Lasarra further submerged Nova into a sedate state. _I apologize, November Terra. Your thoughts are your own but I must understand what it is you fear, that I may help protect against it._ Such a dark and damaged mind was saddening in its own right, there were many similarities to the rewired minds of the resocialized men and women in Valerian Mengsk's roster.

Too soon all was made clear, the discovery itself almost scared her clean out of the terran's mind.

Forcing Nova into a merciful sleep, fully disbursing the psionic energy she had intended to destroy herself with, Lasarra touched Jim's mind like a gentle tap.

Jim stared at Nova as Tycho strapped her to the extravagant and downright posh seat that Valerian normally sat in, his arms crossed firmly as a scientist clumsily affixed new diodes to his freshly regenerated shoulder, replacing the ones Nova's rifle blew clean off.

Raynor idly wondered why Tycho barely reacted to being shot, it still hurt an awful lot.

_Jim._ Lasarra whispered, her tone left him feeling anxious.

_Yeah? Give it to me straight, Lasarra. Is she fixable?_ He pressed, fearing the worst. Valerian had yet to arrive, but it would be good to have some kind of information ready.

_What you have seen is pure fear, James Raynor. November Terra was being feasted upon by a parasite, we knew this already. What we did not know, is what that was like._ Lasarra considered her words, trying to convert the feelings impressed upon Nova in her brief time as a mind slave into something more palatable.

What happened in Nova's mind would not be shared, such a private torture it was.

_What did this thing do to her? Can she be snapped out of it?_ Jim frowned, watching as Tycho gently pulled Nova's long silk-like ponytail out from behind her with a thick finger, placing it comfortably over her shoulder; the amount of tender gestures Findlay had given to others over the years could be counted on one hand and Raynor let it be, it was harmless.

"What got you so spooked, sugar?" Findlay murmured, tilting his head and watching as Nova's eyes
flickered back and forth behind their lids.

*It would seem that the fog itself is an entity, a hate and malice so strong as to take a physical form. November Terra was tortured mentally, the kind of agony that came of it transcends any kind of physical pain you have ever experienced.* Thoughtful, Lasarra wondered at her own role in the grand scheme of things as she had many times since this journey began.

A plan became clear the more she considered the options. *I will waken her gently and assist her while the three of you speak to her. She must be brought to understand the situation, we can do this together.* Lasarra resolved that Agent November Terra would return.

Sitting on the edge of an exquisitely cushy chair with caution in regards to all of his once again hidden spines, Jim glanced up as Valerian entered the room, the last of his alien features disappearing behind the restored guise. *How come you can wake her up now but not before all this happened?*

*She was deep in her mind James Raynor, not recoverable without possibly dealing damage. I have put her to sleep myself now, it is a different matter this time.* Lasarra patiently responded.

"Jim! Why is she unconscious?" Valerian blurted, approaching the table and looking at the thoroughly bound agent. "What happened?"

Between Jim, Lasarra and Tychus, Valerian was quickly filled in. All that remained was to wake Nova up and try their best.

Floating in an endless fog, Nova struggled continually to swim to the surface of her mind and break into the waking world, to regain control. *Can't let him have me again.*

*Wake up, November Terra.* A gentle voice whispered through imagery, a strong indication of it being the protoss who caused this mess. Nova seethed at it.

Still, that protoss was the one calling the shots in her head right now and it was a small measure of relief to both see and feel a warm light appear and envelop her mental body. Pain registered immediately, that deep ache of strained muscles and cracked bones; Nova slowly opened her sore eyes and stared down at a finely polished wooden table.

A monster sat to the left and right, subtle bending of light around twisted forms easily recognizable to the trained eye. Another kind of monster sat at the opposite end of the table, grey eyes locked with icy blue.

They began to talk, an endless chatter that she couldn't care less about. *I'm a prisoner,* she assured herself firmly, *and it's you keeping me captive.* Valerian Mengsk. No force on earth or in the heavens could convince her that bloodline wasn't tainted with evil, not after experiencing firsthand what the elder Mengsk unleashed upon the people.

Nova took the time Raynor, Findlay and Mengsk were using to blather to erect mental barriers again, stoically staring down the heir of a broken empire. *How mad do you need to be to side with the zerg, even if you are desperate to secede from your insane father?*

Her mind felt more secure and defended in short order, but the protoss still had a foot firmly wedged in the door and it made sure she knew.

*I cannot allow you to destroy yourself or them. You must listen and see reason, November Terra.* The disembodied voice coaxed.

"Remember your training, Agent Nova!" Valerian snapped, slamming a gloved hand on the tabletop
with a sharp smack.

Training. Nova's gaze sharpened.

"I have had the pleasure of working closely with a ghost, I know the tortures you submitted yourselves to in the name of being strong enough to handle anything." Valerian saw the unfogged gaze, that killer focus, and seized upon it.

Leaning forwards on his hand, Valerian summoned all the conviction he could muster into his voice. "You broke away from my father to try and save people, they still need you. Remember your training and pull yourself together, Agent. You have a mission to complete!"

Lasarra felt and saw all the pieces come clicking together, filling her with a warm happiness. You are very strong, November Terra, do not forget that. She pulled her foot from the door.

Get out. The door slammed shut.

Straightening in her seat, Nova cast a chilly gaze over Jim and Tychus. "If you want me to participate I will need medical attention, my gun, my knife and a target. I have three cracked ribs."

Tychus and Jim both stood from their chairs and approached. A repulsive feeling and sound forced Nova to grimace, neck hairs raising and skin prickling. It sounded like the chittering, buzzing and clicking of a sea of insects and it felt like a slimy caress on her brain. Bile rose in her stomach and she forced it down as they stood on either side of her and undid the bindings.

"Sorry about your ribs." Raynor muttered apologetically.

"She blew your shoulder off." Tychus reminded, tone amused.

"Stop talking in your minds." Nova spoke sharply through clenched teeth, glaring up at Tychus and over at Raynor. She noted critically that the rogue commander was a smidgen taller now. "I can hear it."

"Sure thing." Findlay shrugged, stepping back as the restraints fell away. Jim kept quiet, a look of fatherly concern on his face as he too stepped back, watching the renewed assassin rise.

Valerian straightened and clasped his hands behind his back calmly. "Report to the medical wing for treatment, your weapons will be restored to you. Our teams leave within the hour, I expect you to choose one to attach to and support accordingly."

Nova flicked her hair over her shoulder with a snap of her head, listening.

"We are launching a three-pronged attack against the Mengsk palace. Two groups will secure key points along the way and Jim's team will assault the palace after groups two and three entrench themselves and send reinforcements." Valerian wondered which she would choose, deciding not to tell her that there would be an infested man in each.

"There is an endless army of infected civilians outside, we've barely defended against it." Nova frowned, this plan was nothing short of suicidal. "Never mind the hybrid, which Agent Tosh and I never managed to find."

"Tosh is alive?" Jim's tone was pleasantly surprised, reminded that she mentioned him once already.

"Yes," Nova supplied testily, glaring at Jim. "We discovered the first infected... He went ahead to continue searching for the hybrid and I retreated to the base."
Comprehension dawned on all three faces of the men around her, but Valerian spoke first. "The infected chased you here?"

"Yes." Nova's demeanor darkened, voice lowering. "He wanted a taste. Others died because of me." She wanted to run, hide, get off the planet and disappear forever... But Valerian was right.

"And Tosh never came back," Raynor muttered.

"That's right. Not sure what chance you think you have, Raynor." Nova sniped without mercy, Jim was no friend.

"We got a few tricks up our sleeve, sugar," Tychus' whiskey voice was pitched low and pleasant, but Nova could do without the rest of him. Spikes that moved of their own accord were hiding behind the image of his crew cut hair; if karma was a thing, Findlay had reaped it in full after all his years of being a pirate and murderer.

"I'm sure," she replied in a cool tone.

"Enough. You are on the same side, I expect you to act accordingly," Valerian reprimanded. "Agent Nova, the infected have fallen back and not attacked since our initial landing. Long range motion scanners are coming back negative, the masses have moved elsewhere and our base will not be left defenseless."

"When this is over Valerian, I am done." Nova rolled a stiff shoulder, lips sealed in a tight frown. "This is my last mission." In her mind there were no illusions about surviving this, but she'd not leave such an important matter unaddressed.

"I could not ask more of you, both my father and the ghost program have abused you beyond words over the years. When we are successful you have my full blessing to live as you please, Agent."

Valerian inclined his head a notch, a touch of respect in his tone. "It is my hope you will feel differently when we are finished and decide to stay of your own accord, but I will not force the matter."


Jim noted the discomfort, but there was nothing for it. "We best get movin'. Warfield has everyone ready to go and she still needs those ribs looked at."

"Yes," Valerian agreed, ending the meeting with a gesture towards the door. "Good luck out there."

Hyperion - Rebel Base

Stetmann stared fearfully at what he had created, was creating, and struggled to mask his emotions from the other infested in the process.

"They do not know now, but they will." Shlassa confirmed his fear. How could he hide three roaches, three zerg anything, from people they were all intrinsically connected to?

One of the large eggs twitched, liquids inside sloshing audibly. Egon took a half-step back, shoe crunching on broken glass; he had done it, listened to the broodmother and let her crush the containment vessel and unleash the large writhing test subject- the biomass, she called it.

The creation process was incredible, what seemed so alien and terrible not long ago now felt as natural as breathing; creating life was natural to the zerg, twisted murderous life. Egon regretfully acknowledged to himself that he could recreate the process now without the broodmothers help, even
more regretfully acknowledged that he enjoyed knowing it.

Heart hammering as the time for the loathsome creatures to break free approached rapidly, Stetmann fidgeted with wide eyes. "This is not right. Stop!"

"No." Shlassa hissed, seizing on Egon's fear and insecurity. "The roaches will help us, help you." It was important he not understand how to stop it, there was no more biomass- Shlassa could not allow one foolish stray thought to destroy them.

Shivering fearfully at the thought of Jim finding out, Egon watched helpless and mute as the three roaches erupted from their sacs- a disgusting mix of liquids and solids spilling out over the creep covered floor. Shlassa hissed in pleasure and her new children chittered in response, shaking away debris messily as Egon stood well back to avoid it all.

The moment three extra minds winked to life and linked to their joined consciousness, a calamity of confusion followed by immediate accusations from all five men assaulted Egon.

Stetmann! What have you done? Above all, Jim felt the most fearsome- like a wounded, angry animal. Shlassa and Egon stared at one another while the roaches held still and awaited orders, eerily silent in comparison to their noisy births.

As Egon began to receive the most scorching reprimand of his young life he felt a shifting, quiet presence. The roaches rose up on their deadly, heavily armored legs and lurched forwards, commanded by the intruder.

Stetmann's eyes widened.

How are we going to explain this to Valerian, to anyone? We are trying to reassure people we aren't monsters and here you are, taking orders from that damn broodmother and making monsters! Jim's roar rattled Egon's brain as he stared, watching the roaches file out of the room, powerless to command them.

Thanks kid. Tychus whispered into his mind, chuckling darkly. The looming mental presence faded away as he took the three monsters and left like a thief in the night.

I want you out of that lab, right now! That broodmother and those things are on lockdown as of ten seconds ago! Jim paused in his tirade. Where did they go?

Shlassa cackled verbally, glowing green eyes alight with a sick glee. I have taken them, they will defend our perimeter. You have no say in this matter, James Raynor. She mocked, putting emphasis on his human name as if it were an insult. Tychus had his own agenda, but he was keeping her children safe- she'd handle the Queen's little pet.

You know, I don't think we really need that broodmother bug, Jimmy. Findlay mused, tone cold. What say we just go deal with that right now, before we leave?

Stetmann couldn't discern even the slightest indication that hulking infested terran had just made off with three deadly bio weapons, there was no doubt the others had no clue either. Jim, please... I only agreed to it because they could help us get through the city safely- right to Mengsk! The roaches burrow, Jim!

A pregnant pause filled his mind and Egon fidgeted in worry, hands clenching and twisting at his green goo-stained lab coat.

Should I say something to the men, Raynor? Warfield questioned, feigning as though he was waiting
on a command through the private comm before he could give the word for all the groups to move out. Some of the men were fidgeting with rising anxiety.

*No, get goin*. Jim relented as a sick, cold feeling settled in his guts. *Those roaches stay burrowed and doing nothing until I say otherwise, am I clear Shlassa?* He snapped, wishing nothing more than to agree with Tychus and blow that creature to high heaven.

"Alright gentlemen!" Warfield shouted to each team on the comm system, they would break off and follow their individual plans afterwards. "Move out and watch your six!" Throwing his hand forwards in a commanding gesture, Warfield began to march with his team. They had agreed each infested man would lead one, a secret extra protection.

"Whatever you say, boss." Tychus rumbled in an amused tone, glancing down and over at his second- Daren was eager and it showed.

"Lets roll." Raynor glowered, glaring at the gentle blue glowing force that held back a sea of deadly fog. The infected had all but dwindled to nothing overnight, but they could be right there; only one way to find out, time was ticking for the arrival of Kerrigan. Jim swore he could almost feel her out there, but shook off the feeling as nerves.

Egon vacated the lab as quickly as he could, chastened into silence. With a mumbled apology, he locked Shlassa in the lab and wondered where he'd go from there. All the while, he worried about Tychus' intent with the roaches.

*Are you reading my mind? Hellooo, are you listening?*

Nova blinked. Catching stray thoughts was not out of the ordinary, hard to avoid when you were such a strong psi even, but this one was almost jarring in clarity. Right away, she spotted who the thought belonged to. Daren was staring at the back of Tychus' head so hard, it was a wonder he hadn't drilled into the big con's brain.

Gravitating after Findlay's group, Nova decided to stick with them. Tickled with amusement, despite the continual bite of terror on her heels, she reached out with her mind and gave Daren a gentle tap. The marine suit jumped slightly, quickly recovering in the hopes of none of his men noticing.

*He is not a psi, Daren.* Nova whispered, amused. *You can think at me if you want,* she offered; it was useful and not a tool she'd offer to Findlay, even the thought of trying to understand his thoughts raised her neck hairs.

*Really? If it wasn't you telling me that, I wouldn't believe it. We kicked ass at poker.* Daren thought, clumsily trying to keep himself from looking for the ghost following him.

The procession of eight marched through the glowing wall, weapons raised as they were swallowed up, the first team to enter the fog. Tychus and his team were heading south to secure an important piece of road- much to Findlay's disapproval.

*Just a thug in an expensive suit.* Nova snarked, weapon at the ready and eyes glued to the motion tracker, anxiety giving a stiffness to her muscles she couldn't quite shake off. The fog was so much more than just fog.

As soon as all of the ground forces were officially out of the rebel base the lift of the Hyperion lowered, sending three roaches tumbling down into the night and slipping under the earth with frightening speed and silence; not a soul saw.

Stetmann stood outside of the sealed and locked lab door, hands stuffed firmly in his pockets and
fidgeting uncomfortably- waiting for further berating for what he now acknowledged to be a serious lack of judgement.

"Perhaps the proximity of Shlassa has begun to alter my judgment..." He muttered, glancing back and forth down the cool, dim hallway. *What to do now?* It hit him then, *When did I start thinking of Shlassa by her name? As a female? When did she become more than just the enemy?*

A shiver ran down his spine and it had nothing to do with the perfectly regulated temperature. Unnerved, Egon forced himself to begin walking away from the lab. Time away from the creature was a must, with a hefty dose of self reflection.

*I can't believe you.* Matt Horner struck Egon's mind like a sledgehammer, more blunt and outright angry than the young man had ever felt- he could only imagine what the expression of the normally reserved and well controlled man looked like right now. *What happened, Egon? When did you become what you were running from?*

Cringing and ducking his head as though physically struck, Egon struggled to field a response. This was nothing like the horrible experiments that were conducted on prison inmates, that situation was far removed and different. Or was it? Stetmann guiltily studied his feet in response to Horner's seething presence, a building pressure in his skull.

A sensation cut in on the mounting pressure, the mental weight of Horner's anger turned into a physical manifestation, like a solid wall of granite. *Ease off, captain.* Egon staggered as the pressure snapped like a cord, leaning against the nearby wall and panting. The rock, Swann, remained in place. *Get over to the armory.*

*Yes sir.* Stetmann whispered, swallowing and staggering towards the armory as commanded, grateful beyond words.

The armory door raised upwards like the maw of a great beast, unleashing a low rumbling roar. Stetmann stepped in as soon as his head had clearance and closed it.

"Hey kid," Swann called, waving from behind the spider mine display. The little deadly robots clicked and chirped as if they were a part of the conversation.

Egon nearly jumped out of his skin, even knowing that Swann was there. "H-hello!" Approaching quickly, closer to a drunken stumble in his haste than a real walk, Stetmann wore his nerves on his sleeve. "Rory, what can I help with?"

"Eh, not much," the stocky man shrugged and Stetmann saw a flicker of blue around his hand, the re-purposed stealth tech still not agreeing with there being a hand where a robotic clamp was supposed to be. "Get up on the console and make sure all the diodes are still workin'. Be a huge mess if the big bonehead bugged out."

Nodding and stiffly walking to the console sitting at the top of a short set of steps, Stetmann frowned and thought about what the chief engineer said. Tychus' disguise holding up was especially important because his entire team was made up of the rebels, who had no idea about the infested. Now *that* would be hard to explain. "Right," he said.

The only reason why the volatile con was stuck with the rebels was his form was very close to its original, there was little to hide if his arm blades were tucked away and thus less chance of bugs happening; that and he seemed to have struck up a friendly relation with the leader of the remaining rebels: Daren.
On the console, 3 dots were spreading farther apart as each team went their separate ways, flickering weakly. Worry squeezed at Egon's heart. "The ship won't be able to track them soon Swann," even as he spoke, one small green dot trembled and vanished.

The dot in question belonged to Tychus J. Findlay.

"Just great!" Swann threw his hands up dramatically, nearly tossing a spider mine in the process. He did not seem so bothered by the development though.

"These are just for tracking and making sure they work correctly," Egon murmured, eyeing the now blank screen. "They have their own power sources," yes, that must be why Rory was not worried.

Still, it bared looking into. Egon tentatively reached out with his mind, across the pathway only available to them as unwilling members of the zerg swarm. *Tychus.*

What? Came the curt reply.

*Are the diodes still functional?* Stetmann said.

*Yeah and they better stay that way, kid.* Tychus was in no position to carry out threats. Still, Egon remembered when he pounded through his chamber door like it was made out of synth butter; remembered the roaches, stolen away.

*They will.* He did not feel as much conviction as he put into the statement.

"Help me finish up inspecting this batch of spider mines then," Swann called, focusing intently on the plate-sized four legged automaton in his hand. Its legs wiggled and it beeped and booped as though it were objecting to this treatment. "Need to get them set up out there, just in case."

"Spider mines?" Stetmann eyed the bug-like machines warily from his vantage point. They must be running very low on supplies, to be arming the display pieces.

"You watch too many of them shows, kiddo." Swann admonished in a fatherly tone. Everyone who was anyone had watched the horror movies where spider mines came to life and claimed innocent victims, except the grouchy chief engineer of course.

"I think it's okay to not like handling things that explode, that's all." Egon muttered and came over, pinning down one of the bug-like machines with a hand, feelings it's little legs tickling at his chest as he leaned over it and started running a diagnostic.

"Don't blame yourself, Egon." Swann said, not looking up.

"What?" Egon blurted, forcing himself to not look up as well.

"We're in this together, watchin' each others backs, keepin' one another in line... But nobody had your back." The chief engineer's tone was low and had a note of self-loathing in it that Egon couldn't possibly have imagined. "A couple roaches ain't gonna do nothin', not with us all here, but it's all our faults that it happened; that we let you keep rubbin' shoulders with that freak of nature in the lab."

Cautiously, Egon turned the spider mine over to its back and popped open a panel with an offered tool. "I am the scientist, I am supposed to be aware of these things. I was so sure what I was doing was right... I didn't stop to think of the consequences, Swann." Were it possible to cry anymore, the emotion stunted to nothingness by the zerg, Egon was certain there would be tears clouding his eyes.

"Look," Rory placed the spider mine down with a small thunk, holding it in place with a firm hand.
as it's legs strained and heaved comically. "I want you to remember what happened, because it can't happen again. But I want you to pull your head out of your ass and get back in the game too, okay?" The bitter old engineer smiled then, facial hair bristling. "I got your back now, kiddo."

It didn't make everything right and certainly everyone else was still frothing mad over it, but Egon found himself smiling back at Rory. That the man he and many others on the ship would consider a cranky father could forgive him and move on, allowed him to believe everything could be okay in time. "Yes sir."

A thought occurred to Egon then—who was watching Matt Horner's back?

**Augustgrad – Southward**

6 marines stomped in close formation, following the smoother and leaner shape of their current leader dressed up in a spectre suit. All weapons were armed and ready to be used, even though the fog around them was so thick as to make it feel like they were swimming through some kind of drowned city. Daytime and nighttime were not discernible to the eye- each man relying purely on the built in equipment of their suits to give day, time and motion tracking.

Behind the bulk of the group followed two more shapes; A large bipedal machine, tromping along much like the CMC-encased marines, but 15 feet in height with spotlights that cut through the dense fog far enough to see the vague shapes of the men it was following- an SCV. Lastly, an especially lithe and agile figure who was completely invisible, and it had nothing to do with the fog.

Nova was already tired of listening to this SCV pilot, Greg.

Every step they had taken outside of the protective barrier surrounding the rebel base, this guy had sniveled and whined- right up until Tychus told him to shut the hell up. Then it continued in his mind, with a much fiercer vocabulary that the ratty man would never dare utter in front of a big thug like Findlay.

Agent Nova just couldn't respect that.

*I should just squish him and go back to the base. They need me, there won't be any consequences- we're all dead men anyway.*

*Never got to tell Lucille just how much I loved her... What I wouldn't give to see her again.*

*Gonna die constipated from these rations-*

*Where are all the infected?*

*Can't see but gonna make damn sure I don't step on that freaky bastard's feet-*

"Agent Nova," a familiar basso called through the comm system, jarring Nova out of listening to the thoughts of the other men. Tychus had a playful tone, "I knew you couldn't keep away for long."

A disgusted noise escaped the tall woman, cutting off into a choked sound as a small image of Tychus Findlay's face appeared in the top left hand corner of her helmet display; the inside of his spectre helmet cast his countenance in a red light and from each eye, crinkled at the corners in a smile, reflected many points of light from multiple smaller pupils that surrounded a more normal one—like some kind of demented cat.

"*Tychus!"* Nova whispered urgently into the comm, "who else is on this channel?" Light blue eyes scrutinized the motion tracker closely—no one had fallen out of step when Findlay opened up the
"Private channel, sugar. Just you an me in here- anything you wanna say to ol' Tychus?" How a person speaks, their intonation, can say a lot more than the words themselves. Nova didn't bother keeping the disgust off her face, Findlay might as well have been talking dirty.

"What the hell do you want? Better yet, in what universe is it a good idea for you to have any portion of your disguise turned off?" She asked, voice a hiss.

A low chuckle crackled through the comm and there was a short pause as their path shifted, displayed clearly on the motion tracker. "You don't like me none, why'd you come along with this group?"

A destroyed vehicle, obstructing the road, loomed out of the fog and Nova deftly walked around it like everyone else. "The rebels, they are my-"

Turn right. A deep voice rasped in her mind, a subtle intrusion. Nova followed the command without thinking, forgetting about talking with Findlay.

Tychus silently raised a clenched sledgehammer-sized fist, calling a halt. Daren and his men narrowly avoided a pileup with many muffled curses and weapons raised in high alert.

"Nova?" he questioned, eyeing the green dot on his motion tracker as it slipped away.

The familiar voice began whispering directions, fast enough that she increased her pace to a loping run to keep up with them despite the near zero visibility. "Go without me, go!" she called into the private comm with Findlay, closing it abruptly.

Daren, I am leaving. Follow Findlay's directions, he's a brute but he will save your life before this is over. Nova called to Daren's mind, feeling his confusion in response. There were very few times she had been gifted with precognitive glimpses, this was not one such time, but she knew it in her guts what she said to be true. 

Don't talk, listen only. The disembodied voice called.

Agent November Terra ran hard, splashing through puddles and leaping obstacles as she recklessly chased a phantom.

"Where did the girl go?" Greg blurted, watching the dot run off like everyone else.

Tychus' eye twitched, thoughts shifting to the roaches that were deep below, conveniently beneath the SCV and its loathsome pilot. "Congratulations," he poured as much sarcasm as he could muster into his words, "Now you know why they call 'em Ghosts."

Augustgrad – Northwest

A small procession of marines followed by a rumbling siege engine and an SCV, cautiously traversed the westernmost reaches of Augustgrad. Already, debris were making the easiest of tasks difficult.

Two marines, barely able to see one another with the piercing light beams built into their CMC suits, wrangled a burnt-out vehicle husk off the heavily congested street they had chose to travel; four other marines and a heavily armored General Warfield with a mask on stood guard.

"Are we going to be able to secure the choke point in time?" Adam, the man who spoke to Warfield
during the exchange of infested, sounded as exasperated as Warfield felt.

"We have to." Warfield considered their options as the group inched forwards and tackled the next vehicle in what seemed to be an endless pileup. There was an SCV and a siege tank sitting no more than 30 paces to the rear, but using them as bulldozers had risks; the enemy could be anywhere.

When the General saw the fifth vehicle, a large waste disposal unit, loom out of the fog, he made up his mind. "Smokey," he snapped through the comm. Undermining the integrity of the entire mission for the safety of two people was out of the question, as much as he disliked it.

"Yes, General?" A gravelly voice responded. At 5 packs of cigarettes a day for 25 years, old Smokey earned his namesake.

Clearing the way for the siege tank, which he could only hear, Warfield finished signaling for the rest of the marines to do the same before he made the call. "Flatten this obstruction and be damned careful while you do it."

"Ten-four!" A dull roar of acceleration responded in kind and a moment later the well worn engine of war rolled by, fog rolling off its fast-moving form in waves and its horn honking once before it began crunching over vehicles in a great monster truck impression.

"Sir," Adam approached as the fog swallowed the siege engine and the large amount of racket it was creating. His tone was strained, "Where did the infected civilians go?"

"Don't know son," Warfield half-shrugged. "Command said the mass fell back and that is all we have to work with. Wouldn't be surprised if they can't see or hear a damned thing either," he was sure to keep any doubt from his tone.

Adam' suit shifted, suggesting the man inside was nodding. "Just wish there was something more substantial to tell the others, you know? We all saw how the rebels looked." Adam was doing his part to not sound afraid, but it was there.

"Just treat it like business," Warfield frowned, eyeing the motion tracker; the little green dot of the siege tank had stopped moving a ways off. "High alert and a finger on the trigger."

Others were taking note of Smokey not moving now, and Warfield swore he could hear dull heartbeats tapping their rhythm out faster as nerves wound tighter.

A few more marines were shifting closer to Warfield, nervously awaiting an order.

Warfield let Smokey sit for one full minute before opening the comm. "Smokey, you've been sitting there a while. Status report."

Hands gripped weapons tightly and bodies shifted in concert- their owners unable to figure out whether to run to the rescue or just run in general.

Sound poured through the comm system in response, high pitch ringing mixed with static, combined in such a way as to sound like ragged screaming.

Warfield felt the chitinous bug-like segments on his head stand on end. Barking out in a commanding tone, "Adam, with me! The rest of you, form up around Seevee and shoot anything that moves."

Thunderous footsteps, marines hustling in full CMC, surrounded their SCV protectively as Warfield and Adam charged away—towards Smokey. The comm with the siege tank operator was already cut off by someone with their wits about them.
"Have you seen these things up close yet?" Warfield questioned as he ran up the steep incline of crushed vehicles, side by side with the bulky CMC that housed Adam.

"We were shown the one in the rebel base containment unit, and the remains of the one Jim Raynor and Findlay chopped up," Adam remarked grimly, eyeing his footing and motion tracker. Now that he was looking harder, he swore the siege tank dot was thicker than usual.

Had they picked up an infected without noticing? Adam struggled to keep his limbs from turning into wood as the rumbling engine of the siege tank became audible.

Warfield bared his teeth in an unconscious aggressive gesture, gun held ready as he wordlessly took point and gestured sharply for Adam to watch his back. The siege tank was idling, a beast without a master, as he leaped first to its heavy tracks and then to the top, scanning warily with his eyes.

The hatch, several inches of reinforced neosteel meant to protect the comparatively squishy pilot, had been ripped off its hinges violently, nowhere to be seen. Warfield stood stock still, straining his hearing to catch anything, some sign of life. A subtle scraping, metal rubbing on metal, confirmed life was within.

The brace of grenades pinned to his thickly armored chest felt heavy, even though he was not the least bit fatigued. He needed to see what was in there, and so forced his leaden feet forwards with extreme caution.

Tipping his head over the edge of the hatch hole, which seemed closer to a gaping abyss, he took a quick glimpse and forced himself not to recoil violently.

Inside was a picturesque charnel house, plucked straight from a horror film.

Warfield knew he would have lost his composure and vomited were it not for his current zerg influence. The two infected civilians, standing idle in the still-twitching remains of Smokey, did not notice him as he leaned back slowly and grasped a grenade.

Adam watched expectantly, face falling as he saw the General grasping for his chest.

As cautious and dexterous as he was, General Warfield could not stop the gentle click of the grenade detaching from the brace.

A detached limb fell to the neosteel floor with a dull thud and a nanosecond later there was a hurricane of motion. Warfield heard the two infected shifting into rapid motion and responded in kind, arming the grenade and hurling it into the insides of the tank in a single violent surge.

"DOWN!" Warfield roared, diving towards Adam.

Condensation in his mask from rapid hot breaths fogged his vision, but Warfield saw clearly the CMC shifting and gun pointing upwards- towards him. He blinked as he fell.

One series of three-round bursts lit up the muzzle of Adam's rifle like a sparkler, a second burst drowned out by the dull thump and roar of the inside of the siege tank being turned into a big flash cooking oven.

Warfield hit the ground rolling as the immediate fog burned away by searing heat and light, untouched by gunfire. Adam's CMC clattered to the ground beside him; a quick glance revealed both his hands engaged attempting to keep an infected from smashing into his helmet.

Adam had shot the infected who leaped after him, Warfield understood now. With anger he surged
to his feet and, letting his rifle fall from his hands, grabbed the infected by a leg and heaved with all his might.

Warfield didn't even know what all his might was, a fact he admitted to himself as the infected man's leg ripped clean out of its socket with a meaty shunk sound. Startled briefly, he let the leg to flying and tried again- the infected was not in the slightest deterred from attempting to get at Adam.

Swinging a foot up and planting it on the crotch of the CMC, Warfield raised both his hands and slammed them down on the infected's back, talons sinking in and catching on ribs like meat hooks; from the strong position, he heaved.

Adam watched as the wide open eyes, oily black pits, of the infected lifted and were thrown away into the dark. He couldn't see a damned thing and rolled like a turtle on its back, trying to find his discarded weapon and the General- who he could vaguely hear grappling and struggling nearby.

Relief flooded him as his mechanical hands identified his rifle, clenching it like a lifeline as he rolled to his feet and wildly attempted to catch his bearings. The explosion from the siege tank had burned away the fog and mist, but it only lasted a moment before it came back as smothering as ever.

All he had were his ears and the motion tracker.

A green dot, deceptively thicker like the siege tank had been, quivered to his right. "General?" Adam called, wary as he approached, gun high and ready though his fingers were trembling like a leaf in autumn.

Before he could see, he heard wet crunching, snapping and popping sounds—like a butcher had set up shop 5 feet away. Steeling himself, Adam quickly closed the gap and just as quickly froze still.

Warfield had just finished snapping off the infected's head like a flower, eyes darting up to look at Adam with an expression of pure murder. Every other limb of the now extremely deceased former man had been ripped off already.

"G-general." Adam couldn't help but stutter before catching himself, tone shifting to a plead, "we need to get back to the men and continue." *Please don't kill me too*, was what he really wanted to blubber.

Blinking slowly, Warfield smirked then. "You know damn well what I am right now, son. This is not the place to get cold feet," he straightened, looking as though he had taken a dip in a lake; but Adam knew better what that black-looking viscous fluid really was and would bet there was a hell of a smell to go with it.

Letting out a breath he didn't know he was holding, Adam saluted sharply. "Yes sir." On a softer note he muttered, "thanks for saving my bacon." With a degree of hesitance, he fell in step beside the General and noted flecks of blue glowing around his hands, revealing the talons he had seen before.

"I know it doesn't look good but trust me, I am all there upstairs." Warfield mumbled as they crested the hill of crushed vehicles, leaving the hulled out siege tank behind them. Years of practice were the only reason he remembered to recover his rifle. They'd continue without the tank, there was no choice.

"I trust you sir." Adam confirmed before switching to the general comm and barking out orders. At least the defending group was untouched.
Augustgrad – Northeast

Thick neosteel plates clattered against plascrete no more than five paces to Jim's left, six other marines were marching in a loose formation around the rest of the siege tank and the SCV that closely tailed it.

"Keep it comin' Hammer," a marine, one of Valerian's men assigned to Jim, called through the comm.

"How 'bout you watch my six and let me do my job, Private?" This siege tank pilot, Sgt. Hammer, had a merciless sense of humor that Jim immediately took a liking to; but mostly he loved how souped up the siege tank was, it reminded him of some of the mercs he had hired in past times.

Mercenaries always had the best toys.

Walking over a car that was freshly crushed in half, Jim cast his eyes to the sky for what felt like the thousandth time since this mission began. All his eyes could see, extra pupils and all, was fog and it grated on his nerves. Roughly, he shouldered past another heap of scrap metal, teeth grinding together when his hidden spines scraped paths through the obstruction with an unnerving noise.

Annoyed, he shoved the metal away and forced himself to look forward and ignore the shimmering blue of the diodes rebuilding the image of a normal human shoulder, and the eyes of nearby men. A heavy, sick feeling was sitting in his guts and would not budge for anything, coupled with a strange, electrifying sensation in his brain that continued to grow in intensity with every step.

"Pick up the pace, Sgt." Jim shifted the negligible weight of his rifle around, an excuse to fidget that would not rile anyone with more tender nerves. "We ain't got much time."

Augustgrad - Southward

Greg seemed to have forgotten the thinly veiled threat to his person after Nova pulled her disappearing act, because he had yet to shut up since. Tychus was privately debating a tragic, zerg related accident when he began to hear others muttering about the fool too; shrugging to himself, he casually cut Greg off the comm system.

They did not need to hear from him until it was time to do his job and Findlay questioned if it would be necessary even then. Reaching under the neck of his mask, he fidgeted with the small diode affixed to his skin that he had turned off to spook Nova, using the tip of a claw to turn it back on and restore the guise over his face.

"Haha, someone took 'em off the mic!' One of the men laughed and the gloomy atmosphere became ten shades lighter as everyone else joined in with relief; Tychus smirked, glad for his choice.

Two marines were side by side, shouldering an overturned truck to the wayside while Tychus fidgeted impatiently; he should be up front shoving anything that got in the way out of the way, but opted for caution instead. Big theatrics were his specialty, but he acknowledged that a firing squad at close range would most likely see him dead.

The current two-way street they were traversing was narrow and congested in typical Korhal fashion, but would lead to a thoroughfare and their goal: a large intersection between towering buildings, a great choke point for further maneuvers against the Mengsk palace.
Taking point again, Tychus made to resume the trek until he saw the wide spotlight beams of the SCV staggering unnaturally in the fog overhead. Turning on his heel, he looked towards the big machine; its faint outline seeming to stagger drunkenly, it could be attributed to the narrow and uneven space it was trying to pass through, but it was more than cause enough to investigate.

Others, eager to get moving, seemed not to notice what he did. "Something wrong?" Daren questioned, rifle half-raised.

Grunting in annoyance, Tychus said, "Put that idiot back on the comm, I want to know what he thinks he's doing." Impassively, he watched as the silhouette of a mechanical arm crunched into the wall it was nearly rubbing against, rubble crumbling down.

"Yes sir," another marine, whose name he had not cared to learn yet, responded with the tone of a skeptic.

As one, every CMC spun to face the SCV and every gun raised at it, ready to fire. Greg was screaming, a high pitched squeal of terror.

"HELP! CAN'T YOU HEAR ME!? IT'S GETTIN' IN! HELP ME YOU BASTARDS!" The jerky motions of the SCV made more sense now; Greg was trying to grab something off the front of the vehicle with its clamp-shaped hands and he was not succeeding.

"I see it!" a marine closest to the SCV called in a voice just a hair shy of panic.

Tychus shouldered past the others in the tight quarters, he would bet any money no one had the balls to ask him how he could shove CMCs around anyway. "Well quit talkin' about it and shoot it son!"

"Can't get a clear shot sir, pilot is right behind it," the man reasoned. In this special case Findlay would have forgiven him for any friendly fire 'accident', but he could not exactly say it out loud either.

Raising his rifle and squinting, Tychus had to admit the man had great eyes, the target in question was very small and left a cold feeling in his stomach; long hair streaming and small hands slamming at steel, it was just a child- that was why it had not broken through already.

"KILL IT!" Greg had no reservations given it was his life or soul or whatever about to be sucked out of his face, the ratty man was flailing around inside the mech and barely keeping his head screwed on. His screeching took on a higher pitch when the small girl's fists did, in fact, create a large crack in the glass.

"Hell," Tychus snarled while everyone else watched silently. If they started firing, Greg would be as good as dead and if they did not, he was as good as infected. Fingers loosening from his rifle, it clattered to the ground and drew some questioning eyes, eyes that widened when he grasped the large knife on his belt and unsheathed it.

Fifteen feet tall and rocking like a ship in a storm, the SCV would be an impossible climb for any of the men in a CMC, it was up to him. To kill a little girl, he reminded himself grimly; another crack was smashed into the glass.

Mind the claws, mind the claws, he repeated to himself in a mantra as he leaped to the knee of the SCV and clung hard, taking more time than necessary to adjust his grip. Everyone was watching and even if they could not see that well, gouges in metal from claw marks were obvious.

Reaching upwards he made a grab for a wildly swinging arm and missed the first time, nearly getting clocked in the head for his effort. From the corner of his eye he watched the intensely focused
infected girl, ravaged and starved looking under filthy clothing; she was in rough shape even before
the fog got to her.

Someone cut Greg from the comm again, leaving them with the dampened rumblings of his
desperate struggle and the dramatic waving of spotlights. Measuring distance and taking in a slow
breath, Tychus reached up with his free hand and caught the SCV arm in a steely grip, pulled into
the swing towards the infected clinging to the cockpit glass.

To his alarm the SCV wobbled and the hydraulics of the arm strained against his weight but held
strong. Several hundred pounds of huge infested collided with the child, whose weight could be
more fairly compared to the amount of food he ate on an average day, swiping it off the glass and
-crashing into the brick wall with it.

It just wasn't fair, Tychus scowled heavily, but he would not ask others to do this task anyway.
You're rubbin' off on me Jimmy, he thought towards Jim, who until then was minding his own
mental business.

What are you talkin' about Tychus? Jim responded immediately, while Tychus and the kid in his
hands tumbled down the wall.

Busy Jim, voice tight with annoyance, Tychus had not meant to call up Jim like that. After what felt
like forever, they hit the ground.

Daren watched while his stomach threatened to void itself of the concrete-like rations he ate earlier.
Brick dust and fog obscured the results of Findlay tackling the infected, whose shape he did not
realize to be so tiny until compared.

Not busy at the moment, Jim made it his business to see what got his friend riled up. With difficulty,
he left his body behind and took a glimpse through Tychus' eyes.

Uncharacteristically mute, Tychus stared down at the still-twitching demon child under his hand,
-blood dripping from his knife in the other; her head was mostly severed and the body had not caught
up with the trauma yet.

My god Tychus, I am sorry. Jim felt sick, felt Findlay's numbness and never felt so bad for his
lifelong friend when he perceived the experience being folded up, filed and locked away in a dark
place; this was how Tychus dealt with trauma and Raynor was never meant to behold it.

Just get back to the mission brother, Tychus' tone came out flat, kid was infected, no other way.
Summoning up his strength, Findlay firmly pushed Jim back where he belonged: in his own head.
As the brick dust settled a CMC foot stomped into view, directly behind the half-severed head.

"Did what you had to," Daren noted clinically. No doubt he had taken the imagery and done much
the same with it. "Saved Greg," he did not sound too keen on that part, "when we couldn't."

After what felt like an age the body stopped twitching under his hand and Tychus stood up slowly,
swiping the blood off each side of the knife with his pant leg and sheathing it. "Right," he said,
turning around to look up at the SCV and its occupant. "Still alive in there?"

"You fuckers," Greg's voice, normally nasal and higher than it had a right to be, had a wet quality to
it. "My neck," he gurgled.

"Bring the cab down!" Tychus barked at Greg, infusing his tone with authority and threat; with any
luck Greg would refrain from panicking and listen, which he did. The SCV's legs locked and
 lowers the cab to the ground with a long, hydraulic hiss.
In the lit cockpit, Tychus could see Greg squirming in his seat and clenching at his neck with both hands, he could also see the jagged hole where a shard of glass had been pounded in and hit the pilot like shrapnel; thankfully, the shard that shattered off and caught Greg in the neck was only an inner piece and the cockpit remained sealed, but the front of Greg's white work shirt flooding with red did not bode well.

He stared back at everyone with renewed panic, realizing the conundrum; they might as well be in space, the result of opening the door would be similar. Tychus held his accusing gaze grimly, Greg's lips moving like worms and blood spattering out from between them; no doubt he had a few choice expletives he would like to voice on his death bed.

"Greg," Daren spoke calmly, stepping up to the glass and catching the man's eye. "You need to administer treatment to yourself, get the first aid kid and start bandaging the wound before you lose too much blood;" odds were it was already too late, but Daren resolved to attempt to help.

Greg jerkily undid the seat buckle with one hand, shaking hard as his panicking heart pumped lifeblood out of his mortal vessel even faster; his wavering hand reached down out of sight and he looked once from Daren and back to Findlay with dead eyes.

"No!" Tychus roared, slamming a hand against the glass as he caught on at the last second. Guns clicked and clattered as the cockpit let out a hiss and the cover lifted smoothly, fog pouring in.

"Ha ha-hurk!" Greg laughed wetly, grinning with blood in his teeth; they would pay for cutting him off and leaving him to die, he would make sure of it now, he breathed deep.

"Desperate bastard," Tychus noted icily, watching as Greg's body jerked and shook; his head tossed back, exposing the thick slice through his neck as his face twisted from sick anger to one of fearful revelation. Their former SCV pilot screamed soundlessly as his eyes clouded with black.

Having seen enough, Findlay lunged forwards and caught the front of Greg's blood-soaked shirt in a fist. Leaning backwards and using his body as a counterweight he flung the fresh corpse puppet overhead, narrowly avoiding having his mask swiped by curled fingers.

Six marines, each tracking the projectile, raised their gauss rifles and let loose. Puppet Greg was thoroughly perforated, his body losing the momentum of Findlay's toss and being thrown aside by the power of 18 sonic spike bursts per second; a pile of meat crashed against the brick wall and landed in a smoking heap.

Flabbergasted, Daren swore, "Did you see that?" All guns remained aimed at the still body.

"Wanted us all dead for what we did, I reckon," a marine remarked; Tychus began to feel accusing eyes.

Hopping out of the cockpit and straightening, Findlay moved with the self confidence of a man who knew he cut a frightening figure; with his suit, the fog and his size being outlined by the cockpit light, he witnessed grown men in CMC suits take a half step back. "Who can pilot one of these things?" he asked.

No one responded and he frowned. "Guess we're goin' without," he glanced back at the machine before shouldering through the gathered marines, more relaxed and cautiously now that they were paying full attention and moving on their own; Tychus could pilot a SCV, it should be simple, but he sure as hell was not volunteering that bit of information.

Horner. Tychus thought about the cranky pilot, reaching his mind easily across the miles.
It seemed that Matt Horner had done little in the way to cool his temper, the sensation of contacting him was like touching boiling water. *What?* He snapped.

*You tell those chair jockeys that my team lost our SCV, comms been out since we stepped out of that blue bubble.*

*Consider them notified,* came the curt response.

Tychus rolled his eyes, attention returning to his immediate surroundings as they filed out of the claustrophobic two lane street and hung a left onto the large thoroughfare. Daren had been talking the whole time and Findlay was not paying him any mind until he heard a certain word.

"-Zerg," Daren growled, his tone feverish. "You had to be on Minehoff to know what I'm talking about, see it for yourself." Tychus glanced casually behind his mask towards Daren, who was clenching his gauss rifle hard; he could imagine the glaze of zealotry on his face and in his eyes.

"Heard Minehoff was real bad, but the Raiders helped them refugees out," one marine said.

"Damn straight the Raiders helped," Tychus joined the conversation with the subtlety of a cannon. Common sense was dictating his choice of words, including not mentioning just how little he cared about the refugees at that time.

"You were there?" Daren's CMC shifted awkwardly as the soldier inside adjusted his shoulders, "So you know where I'm coming from, how they twist civilians and use them as cannon fodder...If it meant killing every one of the zerg, I'd die for that in a heartbeat."

Tychus felt the roaches tunneling below, face blank as he brought them up from the rear and put them directly under the marines. "Oh yeah. I know where you're comin' from partner, them zerg are bad news."

**Bucephalus - Rebel Base**

Prince Valerian Mengsk prowled his private quarters like a caged panther. As soon as all the infested left with his best fighting men he felt helpless and out of control, this was a sensation he could live without.

"Prince Valerian," the comm sprung to life with the captain's voice, "we have received several status updates from the infested men."

"How?" fine brows furrowing, Valerian swept a hand across his work table and enabled it with deft fingertips; written reports and information arrayed in crystal clarity appeared in the air, projected by the table.

"It seems the infested men can still communicate with one another mentally without any interference sir," captain Vaughn said.

"Yes, I remember," Valerian tapped open General Warfield's report, reading at a feverish pace. "Their abilities are proving impressive and more useful by the hour."

"One of the men also informed me that the protoss requested an audience with you sir," Vaughn sounded uncomfortable, Valerian doubted anyone but those most well acquainted with him would be able to discern that.

"Lasarra?" It came as a surprise the protoss would request a meeting, rather than simply communicate with him mentally; he decided to ask about it. "Of course, our honorable friend is
welcome to an audience with me."

"I will be sure that she is informed sir, permission to do such?" Vaughn requested, ever observant of formalities.

"Yes, you are dismissed captain; see to it you get some rest in your downtime as well," Valerian reminded in a stern tone. Vaughn was a major culprit in not taking his due hours to recover and unwind. He imagined the captain smiled before closing the comm, as he normally would.

Finishing with Warfield and Findlay's reports in short order, they were rather lacking in his opinion, Valerian frowned faintly; losing both a SCV and a siege tank before even reaching their defensive positions did not bode well. He felt the cold fingers of doubt tickle at the back of his subconscious. *What if this is another Char?*

*Knock Knock*

"Come in," he said automatically.

*Prince Valerian,* Lasarra entered the room at a steady pace, flowing in that strange way only protoss managed, she had Valerian's attention immediately. *There are terrans coming.* No further inflection could be gleaned from her telepathic message.

"More terrans?" Valerian parroted, immediately thinking about the Kel-Morians and Umojans, who else had enough power to move on Korhal in its current state? Odds were good that neither of the terran powers did, even now.

*You will receive their message soon,* Lasarra pointed a thin finger, tipped with a long claw, towards his console. *I am giving you due warning to ready yourself.* Lasarra knew Valerian well, it seemed; before he could ask, her eyes smiled. *No, I have not read your mind that deeply.*

"I see," any simple questions he wanted to ask the protoss about her choice of meeting or of her races people became shelved. "Do you know who it is?" Again Lasarra gestured at the work table and patiently Valerian followed along; protoss operated differently and it was important to observe that.

A waiting call, red colored and blinking, glared back. "Oh," he breathed, tapping it quickly.

"Prince Valerian Mengsk," a familiar voice crooned, "or should I say, Emperor Mengsk? Be a dear and disable that pesky Drakken defense network before we all get blown up, would you?" Mira Han regarded Valerian with both eyes, one flesh and one cybernetic.

"Mira!" Valerian's eyes widened and glanced at Lasarra, this was unexpected indeed. "Korhal is not yet under my control, Miss Han. We have discovered the situation to be far more dire than we could have anticipated; as such, the Drakken defense network is still under my fathers control."

"Oh, that is a shame," Mira's cupid lips smiled, telling how she really felt about it. "You will be happy to know that the captain of Jackson's Revenge has personally volunteered to lead the operation to dismantle the pesky thing anyway; hopefully his crew agrees."

"Jackson's Rev-" Valerian's eyes widened further, "Mira, did you bring an army of mercenaries to Korhal?"

"You might say that."

Valerian wondered if it would be better to leave the zerg and hybrid to fight over Korhal's remains, would there be anything left of the Mengsk family fortune after a swarm of mercenaries had finished
"As I said Princess," Mira crowed, "the pesky defense system will be taken care of soon. Perhaps we should talk about where reinforcements are needed most, and what we should expect on the ground? I am sure you would agree that a minimal loss of life, for us, is preferable."

"Yes, of course. Allow me a moment to bring my council to the call, they will have all the details for you, Miss Han." Already, the Heir Apparent's fingertips were rapidly drumming out the sequence of keys that would bring more professional minds to the call.

"Be my guest," Mira paused, squinting and leaning forwards as though she could see more with the gesture. "Is that Lasarra?"

As Mira Han was still in space, Lasarra could only step forwards and nod in confirmation, unable to reach her mind from so far away.

"Why yes, she informed me of your arrival a short time ago-" Valerian's brows pinched together before smoothing over as Mira orally steamrolled him.

"Good to see you, Lasarra. You will let dearest Matthew and James know that I am coming to the rescue, won't you?"

Lasarra's eyes smiled.

**Augustgrad - Southern Entrenchment**

"This is stupid," Daren said through clenched teeth, muscles straining even with the CMC bearing the majority of the load and then some. Others grunted and groaned in response and the fake spectre to his right kept silent, face hidden behind that signature creepy mask.

All seven of the remaining team were in the process of heaving a heavy duty transport trailer in place across the road, shuffling along at a snails pace. Their entrenchment was meant to be at the center of the large crossroads of the thoroughfare, but without a SCV to throw up walls it was proving difficult to erect proper defenses; they couldn't even dig trenches because the SCV would be required to break through all the plascrete.

The massive slab of neosteel creaked and groaned along with the men, but Daren's eyes were watching Findlay's fingers. Those hands smashed a dent clean into the cab window of Greg's SCV, and it was done in an emotional moment; now, he could clearly perceive finger shaped dents being flexed into the neosteel of the trailer.

Anxiety trickled a hot trail down his spine; Findlay was not what he seemed, but what was he? James Raynor, even Valerian Mengsk, trusted him. Why shouldn't I? What does it matter?

Confusion read clearly on his face when, as they lowered the trailer together, Tychus pulled his hands away and there was a brief flicker of a familiar blue; there and gone too fast, he could not confirm if it had been imagined or not. Daren took a moment to wonder if the fog could still get at them in their suits, if he was not just going insane in a unique way.

"Yeah, well, when no one is smart enough to pilot a SCV, this is what happens," Tychus sounded amused, and more tellingly, not winded. "No more big rigs nearby that I saw, start grabbing whatever you can get your hands on gentlemen; groups of two and one of three."

Daren caught himself staring at the fingerprint dents in the trailer before forcing himself to walk away. Footfalls, softer than a CMC, announced that the center of his thoughts was tagging along. I
am not crazy.

As soon as they were out of sight of the other marines, who split off down the three other roads, Tychus spoke.

"Somethin' buggin' you, son?" Findlay's voice came out soft, dangerous.

Catching himself clenching his gun nervously, Daren forced himself to relax his grip and thought about how isolated he was with the other man right now; he was also taking too long to respond apparently, Tychus continued before he found his words.

"Noticed you had a mark on your rifle," standing so close, Tychus saw the faint outline of Daren's head turning to no doubt look towards his gun. "You said you were on Minehoff. Fight with the zerg much, Lieutenant?"

Licking his lips, Daren slowed his walking pace, making sure to keep Findlay at his side rather than behind. This whole conversation, and situation, was raising his neck hairs; Tychus' tone and body language were not threatening, but it felt forced and Daren would be damned if that feeling of being scrutinized by a large predator was not back in full force.

"This whole situation is grinding on me Sarge," Daren made sure to use Tychus' temporary bestowed rank in return. "I never wanted Korhal to turn into this," he scowled, reaching for the truth and that righteous anger he used to burn away fear, "none of us did."

Tychus eyed Daren like a steak while the roaches below climbed upwards, sluicing through earth like water. "I'm a spectre, kid. There's more to it than that," he reached up and caught the CMC armor by the shoulder, bringing Daren to a firm stop.

Nostrils flaring, Daren gave his shoulder a sharp shake, "Nova told me you aren't," rounding to face the other man, he looked downwards and into the dark eyes of the spectre mask, "So tell me, what are you?"

A heavy silence squatted between the two, seconds ticking by. Tychus thought of a few creative expletives and hoped that little ghost managed to hear. "You're right," he said in a rather perky tone, smiling behind the mask. Switching gears, he clamped a hand down on the rim of Daren's suit and jerked him forwards. Hard.

Daren's eyes widened as his suit was yanked like a puppet, "what-"

"What, is none of your damn business," Tychus gave the CMC a good rattling, "You understand me son? I'm on your side, that's all you need to know; more than you need to know," It felt good to do a little man handling. "So keep your head down and your mouth shut kid," he shoved Daren and his CMC backwards, nearly tipping him over.

Stumbling and recovering, Daren opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it; the ground beneath his feet began to tremble and there was nothing remotely friendly looking about Findlay now. Swallowing his anger and confusion, his words hissed out between clenched teeth, "Yes sir."

"Good man," Tychus said levelly; the roaches, maybe 10 feet below now, stopped their ascent. Still, he wondered if having the good Lieutenant disappear into the fog and never return was not a better idea, "Let's find us some road blocks and get back."

"Sarge, you are gonna want to get a load of this!" A marine called, barely comprehensible over the static. Both men turned and ran back towards the base-to-be.
Weapons raised and ready, Tychus and Daren spilled back into their half-made shamble of a defensive point as though it were under siege.

*Tychus, there's been a development.* Matt Horner had some of the worst timing imaginable.

*Son, unless you got a nice, shiny new SCV or a couple siege tanks rolling my way, I can't imagine myself giving a damn right now,* Findlay grit his teeth as he started checking for anomalies with Daren at his side, which was a bigger trust building exercise than he cared to be a part of.

With a loud snap, four massive spotlights turned on, piercing through the fog over their heads not more than 20 paces ahead.

*About that SCV...* Horner's tone registered no small amount of snark.

"Jesus. What are you kids building down here, an entrenchment or a shantytown?" a rough, scratchy voice scraped through the comm system.

"We got a SCV Sarge!" someone said.

"I got eyes, Private," Findlay grumbled, gun lowering as he approached. The SCV seemed oddly shaped in the fog, but as he got closer he found out why; this was a far shot from a normal Space Construction Vehicle.

Yellow with black stripes, the heavily modified SCV had the usual clamps for hands necessary for building, but it also had massive cannon add-ons on its square shoulders, gratuitous amounts of welded on spikes, blades, and most importantly: a sloppily painted hog's head emblem in red on one of those shoulders.

"War pigs?" Tychus sounded as surprised as he felt; the metallic, electric scent of ozone leaked in through his air filtration system.

"You the ugly whoreson in charge here?" the new voice grated; it sounded off to his ears, strained, he did not like it.

Did nobody respect physically threatening figures anymore? "I've had a hell of a day kid, so if you don't want my boot to send you back up to space I suggest you get moving," Tychus growled menacingly up at the small figure in the brightly lit cab of the monster SCV; "I wanted this base built before you touched the ground, you scan me?"

He decided he did not care where the SCV came from and who sent it, so long as it came. Questions could wait until there were four walls and several feet of neosteel between his body and those infected bozos.

"Yes sir!" the newest team member occupying their fresh-from-space SCV snapped off a halfcocked salute with a mechanical arm and turned away; bells were ringing in Tychus' head, but he could not put his finger on what he was missing, not yet.

*Where'd the war pigs come from captain?* Findlay decided to be a little more polite to Matt this time, *and who's the joker inside that thing?*

An answer was not forthcoming, only a deep sense of mirth and the distinct feeling that he was being laughed at.

Agitated, Tychus barked orders with more fire in his voice than necessary and joined the group of marines in keeping a defensive perimeter around the SCV as it began to work.
Whoever was piloting the SCV, much like Greg, seemed not to have much regard for his own well-being; the comm opened up as he began welding a flattened car to the trailer they had strained and heaved over placing. "Not even going to ask my name, Sarge?" there was a mocking undertone that raised Findlay's temper from simmering to a low boil.

"No," it was a shame the pilot seemed competent at his job; given the current situation, he just could not rationalize ripping into the cab and strangling the twerp's head off, no matter how much he knew he would enjoy it.

"What is it with SCV pilots?" Daren muttered on the private comm and Findlay heaved a chuckle; he might be even more wary now, but at least Daren was not outwardly letting their little heart-to-heart interfere with the mission and their working relationship.

"Don't know, but I'll be glad to leave 'em behind and get to the action," Tychus said.

"You were always a bit dense," the pilot rasped a chuckle, much to the rising discomfort of everyone else.

Tychus' eyes narrowed, "You know me?" those alarm bells in his head were ringing louder than ever; if their open conversation was not being listened to by everyone before, it would be now.

Finished with one round of welding, the SCV swung ponderously to face Tychus, its metal footsteps reverberating through the nearby ground. "Tychus J. Findlay," the pilot teased, voice going as low as it could in an exaggerated poor impersonation.

"If you think I won't kick your ass if you don't hurry this along, you don't know me as well as you think," Tychus growled, eyeing the shape in the cab and trying to figure out who it was, but the black stripes covered the glass of the cab too.

With a hydraulic hiss and a strained laugh from its pilot, the cab lowered until it was on a level with Tychus' head.

He blinked.
Cold Wind

Augustgrad - Southern Entrenchment

"You're too late," Jayce croaked in a jovial tone, "someone already beat you to the punch." Grinning broadly, there was a big gap where a front tooth had been knocked out, a yellowy bruise on her cheek where a shiny patch of plastiscab held a deep cut together and what he could see of her neck was a dark purple with blotches of angry red.

Once he finished scraping his jaw off the ground, Tychus realized it was vocal cord damage that kept the lost mechanical engineer from being recognized immediately; she was wearing a bulky oxygen mask that made it difficult to see further details, but it was clear she had been on the receiving end of at least one set of fists. Well, his thoughts corrected themselves automatically, the other guy might look worse.

_Gentlemen...I owe you some credits._ Tychus announced to the other men, but he just could not find it in himself to be upset about it.

_Damn straight you do._ Swann replied, the others did not reply so much as gave off a strong sense of amusement.

Their visual exchange was short, Jayce was already lifting back into the air and returning to grabbing vehicles and welding, there was work to be done after all. Staring at the air where she was, Tychus wondered: how much did she know about the situation? She was wearing a mask inside the cab, so she was at least warned about the fog, but whether she knew about his team members being aware of his infested status or not was up in the air.

Taking a step after the SCV, he measured his tone until his voice came out low and warning. "After that disappearing act you pulled, Sugar...If the zerg don't end up gettin' you by the end of this, I just might finish the job myself." Whether she took the hint or not was up to her now.

The hot white light of welding stopped for a microsecond as the pilot registered what he said, then resumed while replying nonchalantly, "Well Sarge, the problem with the zerg getting me is that they would be getting you too."

Relief flooded him, relaxing his muscles and bringing a smile to his face, "You gonna tell me how you got all banged up? Or maybe what the war pigs are doin' here?"

A functional, if not sturdy, barrier had begun to form as they followed the SCV around, "Voice isn't so good right now, but I'll give you the skinny." Done with the one road blocking wall, Jayce gathered plates from the drop pod and began using them for the next. "Mira used Graven Hill to round up every merc he could get his hands on and said Valerian was paying them for this."

Tychus barked a laugh at the mental image and several others joined in, "I'd die happy to see the look on Valerian's face right now."

Chuckling softly, Jayce remained focused on her work as she spoke, "Yeah, Mira put out word that I was missing too and the war pigs happened to be in port." She took a pause to clear her throat, voice getting weaker and further strained sounding the more she used it, and continued, "They are pretty tight with the Raiders and had a look around, managed to find me."

"So, there is an army of mercs on Korhal now?" Daren wondered out loud, "This mission doesn't
seem so crazy anymore."

**Augustgrad - Alley**

You be wantin' revenge for what it did to you, I know.

Nova reached deep into her training, ignoring the burning of her lungs and ribs, forcing her legs to keep pumping. Between the fog and focusing intensely on the directions being given, she no longer had any sense of direction; she could be running up into the sky for all her senses could tell.

*You gonna be gettin’ it now girl, slow down and don’t be thinkin’ anythin’, dis be important.*

Gabriel Tosh, or at least someone who felt and sounded just like her old estranged teammate, had directed her this far and she sensed the end of her journey nearing; time to find out if this was a trap, a trick of her own sick mind, or the truth.

Slowing to an exhausted stagger and gazing at her motion tracker, sweat trickled down her brows and back as she continued to focus on keeping her mind a blank slate; the mental effort was even more draining than the endless running.

*Gun ready now, steady, hold that cannon up.*

After so long of feeling nothing, the hollowed out minds of infected puppets blending seamlessly with the fog, Nova felt another being. Throwing her canister rifle up, she stopped; seething hatred for all things living perforated her mind, and its familiarity froze her feet in blocks of solid ice.

*Need ya to be with me, Nova. Tosh whispered in her mind, reassuring. You got one shot, and you’re gonna make it; but we gotta do this fast an’ hard.*

Compelling her feet to move, one foot slid forwards across the rough plascrete and then another, again and again until a monstrous shape loomed in the fog. Swallowing at the bile tracing a burning path up her throat, the flood of saliva in her mouth was almost a welcome distraction as she mastered a tremor in her arms; two eyes, burning with malevolence, regarded her as she took aim.

*Welcome back, little November Terra.* Trembling fingers stilled, and so did her lungs.

*I be here, it don’t know it, but you do.* Tosh whispered feverishly in her mind; his voice felt so small and far away, the creatures eyes and voice were pulling her back, back into her personal corner of hell.

As the hybrid took a long step forwards, sending tremors through the ground, it continued to whisper. *How nice of you to come to me in the flesh. You didn’t think you could resist me, did you?* It made no physical sound, but she heard its laughter all the same; the creature communicated psionically, each word echoing out of a terrible void that was so cold it burned.

*We can do this together, but you need to be pulling that trigger Nova. You are stronger than this thing.* Tosh urged her on. *Get your revenge girl!*

Steel infused her trigger finger, flowing through her arms and into her spine. No purpose could be greater than scouring these creatures from the face of the galaxy, it would be the purest kill the assassin ever made. Agent Nova’s eyes gleamed as she poured psionic energy into the chambered bullet of her trusty canister rifle; she felt Tosh doing the same from his hiding place, and so did the hybrid.

*Who is your friend?* Its hulking grotesque body leaned forwards, tentacles lashing in silent fury,
daring her to try and take the shot. You will both be mine.

"Never again!" Letting out an angry scream, Nova shook off the oppressive mental influence and pulled the trigger. Blue-white light, blinding in its intensity, erupted from the muzzle of the rifle and the kickback lifted her into the air and backwards; the sound itself caused a shock wave that blasted away the fog.

For one instant the entire area was lit up with the destructive psionic display, the hybrids head tossed back from the impact of the bullet and it screamed in her mind so loud it hurt; in the next instant it was dark again and the screaming rose to an unbearable pitch, so much so that Nova was forced to her knees with her face screwed up in agony.

Horrible eyes opened wide in surprise, energy pouring from them and the bullet hole brightly; the light winked out with a meaty-sounding explosion.

Nova did not react to the pile of hybrid guts and gore splashing over her person, only falling to her back and letting out a great breath of relief; the hybrids slimy mental coils were seared from her mind the moment it died.

Shuffling footsteps echoed in the silence, the sound ringing with a clarity she had not heard in some time now. Nova did not open her eyes, drained as she was.

"Ya did good," Tosh's voice was the best thing she had heard in who-knew how long, "Open them eyes an see how good."

Exhausted beyond all reason, Nova opened her eyes as he instructed. Light from a sunrise, warm and orange, poured into the alley and over the hybrids steaming corpse; the fog was gone, as far as she could tell from her prone position.

"They be the ones makin' this fog, hidin' out there in the alleys and buildings," Tosh confirmed grimly. "This be the only one I found."

Cherishing the light, Nova stared up at the sky; wanting nothing more than to commit every color and cloud to memory, burn it there to keep the dark away. Tendrils of fog were already encroaching, a reminder of their short-lived victory. How many more hellish hybrid could there be?

Tosh was talking, but instead of listening her eyes caught sight of an object in the sky, fine brows drawing together in confusion as she tried to make it out. "What is that?" her voice was soft, confused.

"Get movin'-" Tosh paused, tilting his head back and following the path her eyes took to find the object; the big spectre went rigid, muscles straining under the dark red and black suit.

A smaller figure raced through the sky and crashed into the one they were looking at, an explosion blooming from the contact; the fog finally coalesced and sealed them in grey darkness again before they could see more, but they felt it.

"Zerg," their voices overrode one another.

Tosh held his hand out to Nova and she reached up to clasp it without hesitation. "We're too late," she breathed.

"It is never too late girl," he grinned behind the mask, "never too late to kill an Emperor."

Staggering to her feet, she found strength in the sturdy hand clasping hers. "Kerrigan and her swarm
are on a collision course with Arcturus, Tosh, that is suicide." Thinking of the infested men and the consequences of what getting in Kerrigan's way could entail caused an involuntary shudder to run through her and a fresh layer of sweat to form on her back.

"Queen of Blades be here to kill Mengsk," Tosh held a finger up, tipping it towards her, "but we can be getting people out of her way."

Quirking a brow and letting go of his hand, she did not try to keep the suspicion from her tone, "Awful altruistic of you, Tosh."

Tosh's posture shifted, reflecting his serious tone, "Mengsk gonna die worse than any way I can imagine girl, and I be havin' a change of heart;" the dark silhouette of the spectre slowly turned, facing away. "Are you with me?"

**Bucephalus - Rebel Base**

"Prince Valerian," captain Vaughn's voice sounded strained and unnaturally urgent, Valerian was on guard for bad news immediately. "Reports are coming in from the mercenaries indicating skirmishes with the zerg in high orbit."

Valerian took one long breath and on the exhale unclenched his fists. "Then Kerrigan has arrived and we are too late, the mercenaries are about to be slaughtered!"

Aboard the *Hyperion*, Lasarra watched as Egon and Rory gasped and staggered drunkenly as though attempting to recover from a physical blow; it hit her too, an unrelenting force putting pressure on the soothing veil she covered them with. Worse yet was the overwhelming mental presence of the swarms leader, Kerrigan was wasting no time in getting to the planet surface while the Drakken network was being dismantled.

*Hope is not yet lost, Valerian Mengsk.* Lasarra interjected, honing in on the Prince while stumbling towards the med bay; perfect silence would be necessary to maintain the veil, it was absolutely critical. *The foul Queen seeks your father, we need only stay out of her way.*

"Do whatever you can to assist them captain," Valerian's voice was infused with steel, "We do not hold the cards right now, but the winds may yet change in our favor."

"Yes sir," Vaughn closed the comm immediately, forgoing formalities.

Screwing his face up, Valerian thought as outwardly as he could, for the protoss' sake. *All the mercenaries in space are about to be engaged by the full might of the swarm; their forces will be pinned between the Drakken network, the remnants of my fathers fleet and the swarm itself.*

*Their fate is not in your hands, Valerian Mengsk, focus on those you can render aid to right now.* Lasarra urged, stumbling into her quarantine cell and falling into a meditative stance immediately, reinforcing her will. *Matt Horner, Egon Stetmann and Rory Swann need our assistance, we must give it freely.*

The infested! A light went off in Valerian's head with a nearly audible pop, his hand already opening a comm with the med bay while his brain planned feverishly. "Doctor Olsmann," his voice was calm and collected, the perfect opposite of his mind; the Doctors face registered surprise, eyebrows raising high.

"Prince Valerian! How can I help you?" The good doctor replied immediately, it was not uncommon for audiences with Valerian while aboard his ship, but given the circumstances, it was cause for surprise.
"Firstly, I need a team of medical professionals to go aboard the *Hyperion*; our friends may need assistance as the zerg close in on Korhal." Valerian paused, thoughtful, "I would like one medic in each of the prepped ships, as well."

"I will see to it," the doctors kindly holovid image smiled.

Closing the call with a flick of his wrist, Valerian rested his hands on the edge of the desk and leaned forwards, closing his eyes and just thinking; being able to evolve and shift your strategies as necessary won wars, saved lives and conquered empires. Backed into a corner as they were, Prince Valerian Mengsk and all the people who believed in him would either come out of this engagement victorious, or not at all.

Another call code danced across the table, inputted more hesitantly than those previous.

Lasarra's melodic mental presence intensified like a storm and Valerian had no doubt that she had become cross.

*I do wish you would not read my mind beyond the purpose of communicating with me, Lasarra, Valerian thought stiffly; but you must understand that I am taking every necessary precaution to protect all members of this scenario.*

*I do understand, Valerian Mengsk. Lasarra's tone smoothed over, as professional as Valerian could ever manage, I also understand how James Raynor and his men would feel about you leaving these details untold.*

*A necessary evil, I'm afraid.*

*Time will tell,* she whispered before pulling away and redirecting the majority of her energy to the larger task at hand.

"Are the ships prepped?" Valerian stared at the grease-stained face of an engineer, a small frown touching his lips.

"Ready as they'll ever be, Prince Valerian!" Smiling toothily, the man's voice was nothing short of enthusiastic.

"Excellent."

**Augustgrad - Northeast**

At the forward assault position, Jim stared upwards in an awe that left him unresponsive to the questions of his squad members. *We're too damn late!* His knees trembled as he struggled to respond, just like every other infested man.

*What the hell am I gonna do with this group Jimmy? They don't know the zerg are here.* Tychus looked to him for an answer and he could feel the others waiting too, looking to their leader.

*Jim, the mercenaries are being butchered!* Horner's voice gave Raynor a mental shove, though it was hard to hear over what seemed to be millions and millions of other voices.

"Hold position here," Raynor said, squaring his shoulders and looking around at the others. "Swarm is here boys, no point tryin' to move forward until Kerrigan is on the ground."

"So we just sit here and die?" A private blurted.
"You are a few bullets shy of a magazine, aren't you Private?" Sgt. Hammer admonished from inside her siege tank, "Jim Raynor ain't gonna let the zerg go running us over, now is he?" Her tone held a hopeful note that Jim did not miss.

"Of course I ain't!" Jim cried, pressing a hand to the side of his head firmly, trying so hard to focus on the here and now. "None of us are gonna let Kerrigan go killing our allies, just sit tight."

Tychus needed an answer, his situation was more urgent than others. Jim focused on his friend, sliding to his knees without thought. *Pretend you got a call from the mercs, Tychus; they contacted Valerian somehow, they can contact you too.*

*That's weak as all hell Jimmy boy, but I'll make it work.* As Tychus' mind focused elsewhere, Jim clenched his hands on his knees and breathed hard.

*Everyone else just hold positions and hang tight.* Jim grated, closing his eyes and ignoring the fearful stares.

*Jim.* Every hair on his head stood on end and he clenched his jaw hard; when the head of the swarm spoke to him, her presence burned with all the might and majesty of a God. *What is the situation?*

Shoving down feelings, both his own and the vast love the swarm directed towards their Queen, Jim swallowed hard. *Before I tell you anything Sarah, call the swarm off those mercenaries!*

*And why should I do that?* As Kerrigan's thoughts focused on the battle in space with pinpoint accuracy, Raynor was taken along; the mercenaries, an army though they were, would be wiped out in no time. Mengsk's forces were taking full advantage of the inadvertent pincer attack. *I told you anyone who gets in my way will die, Jim.*

*Because they came here to help god damn it!* Pounding the ground with a fist, plascrete gave way with a satisfying crunch. *Even mercenaries have hearts, this proves it.* Taking another ragged breath, it felt like he was running a marathon facing Sarah like this. *Do you?*

A heavy pause hung through the hivemind as its leader thought, a moment later the mercenaries were like boulders in a river; the swarm parting around them and flooding past, common sense drove them to cease firing on the zerg and get the hell out of the way.

*The situation has evolved, I see.* Sarah skirted the question easily. *I am coming to you now, be ready.*

Staggering to his feet, Jim held his rifle firmly as he filled to the brim with temporary relief. *Let's kill this asshole.*

"Don't shoot anything that ain't an infected, you hear me boys and girls?" Raynor warned, looking over the assembled group as he felt, heard and experienced Kerrigan and her retinue rocketing through the atmosphere towards him; nervous acknowledgement would just have to do.

"Hammer, you are in charge as of right now," clinging to his rifle like a lifeline to humanity, he felt Sarah's amusement at the gesture; he was, after all, so much more effective than a rifle. "Shore up a defensible point here and hold tight."

"Yes sir," Hammer did not sound enthused, but was blissfully compliant; already she began barking orders as Jim started walking away, towards where Sarah would arrive. "Be safe out there, Commander Raynor!" She called after him.

Jim doubted anywhere in the universe was safer than at the side of Sarah Kerrigan; analyzing the thought, he could not be certain if he was not biased at this point. Earth trembled beneath his feet,
hard impacts one after the other; fog gave way to dust as he walked and briefly Jim wondered if the Queen of the Zerg would be possessed, but dismissed the thought immediately.

"It would take a lot more than some psionic fog to keep me down Jim," Sarah Kerrigan, radiant in her alien glory, smiled; her entourage of hunter killers spreading out behind her. "And yes, you are biased," her voice, the whole sense of her, seemed to be legitimately regretful with the admission.

"That's good to hear Sarah," Jim said levelly, hating this feeling of devotion towards her that pervaded his being, those feelings were no longer his own. "You keep the swarm off the folks that are with us and you might just prove me wrong."

Too-wide lips pursed, their owner letting out a gentle huff, "Not concerned about all the civilians?"

Grimacing, Jim gave his head a quick shake, "Hybrid took 'em all over. What was left of the rebels were about to be overrun before we came down and turned 'em back."

"Interesting." Sarah's tone, though it echoed and reverberated with sheer psionic power, was oddly flat as she turned away from Jim. "Perhaps they will go back to normal when the hybrid die, we shall see." Without warning, the Queen of Blades and her hunter killers charged.

An urge struck Jim so hard his weapon clattered to the ground, his body full to the brim with a righteous fury as though someone pumped him full of stims and sounded a war cry; the zerg shrieked and bellowed in their minds and Jim found himself charging after Kerrigan with a war cry of his own on his lips.

Sarah laughed, a savage but joyful sound, as Jim leaped to her side and kept stride, "Glad you decided to join me." Cutting through the fog like a knife, she unerringly steered them towards the Mengsk palace; her thoughts immediately became much grimmer at the thought of the snake hiding inside.

"Never had a problem keepin' up with you before neither," Jim defended; "And as much as I like this approach darlin', I sure hope you got somethin' more than yourself and a couple hydralisks to take on Mengsk."

Instead of answering verbally she gently directed his mind, an unerring guide through a billion lane superhighway, to her strategic overview; all while leaping sinuously over obstacles and effortlessly smashing through them should they slow her down.

"Oh," he said.

"This is not just about Mengsk." She murmured to him, halfway between a mental communication and a verbal one, "Narud is here too; I can feel him hiding somewhere in the palace, like a trapped rat."

"Narud?" Raynor blurted, ducking under a flying car as warning signs raised in his mind. "What about Narud?"

"Amon's pet, an ancient shapeshifter who created the hybrid, Jim." she explained as though that was all that needed to be known.

He wanted to slow down, to stop, think and reassess the situation, but she kept up a relentless pace. "Narud is the reason we got through the Drakken network, why we were able to land on Korhal in the first place," working his jaw as he clenched and unclenched his teeth, he reeled mentally. "He played Valerian."
"He does that, Jim." Sarah's voice had a bitter note to it and Jim understood then, she had tasted his lies before. No way he could be mad at Junior for getting played if the most powerful woman in the galaxy did too.

"Just stop for a damn minute!" Reasserting control over himself, Raynor skidded to a halt and let Sarah go; if she wanted to charge off into a trap, that was her damned business.

To his surprise, Sarah Kerrigan came striding back into view, radiating godly wrath and venom. "You have one minute."

Her voice was like hot coals being poured over his body and it took no small effort not to quail like the hydralisks at her sides did, "We need to think this through Sarah! There has got to be somethin' bigger goin' on here!" He hated this helpless feeling and used it as the fuel he needed to stand before her, much like he used to use his love to do the same.

"Mengsk and Narud are in that palace," a wing blade shoved outwards, aggressively pointing at the building they could not see. "I am going in there and killing both of them, even if it takes covering the entire building in zerg bodies." Sarah crowded into Jim's space and glared, a touch of madness in those purple glowing eyes, "and I'll do it with or without you by my side."

Stubborn, Jim stood his ground until Sarah sharply turned away, "Last chance. Join me, kill Mengsk, kill Narud; or stay here and rot."

A trio of ultralisks pounded and sliced relentlessly on the massive gateway of the Mengsk palace, two small figures standing just far enough away to see their massive shapes and feel the attacks reverberate through the earth and air.

Jim both felt and saw the mutalisk swarms overhead, shredding through the automated sentries with their corrosive glaive worms; the living projectiles could worm their way through neosteel as easily as a terran could eat rations, with a little time and difficulty. *Easier,* Jim corrected himself.

When the gates fell, the real resistance began; Kerrigan's ultralisks toppled under a hail of gunfire as a throng of zerglings swarmed into the breach, followed at a slightly more cautious pace by Kerrigan, Raynor, a whole retinue of roaches and a massive force of hydralisks.

"These marines are empty," Sarah stated clinically after equal parts eviscerating and dismembering a whole team herself, "the station where hybrid were created had a lot like them."

"All the civilians are like that," Jim muttered, yanking a long spine out of the forehead of a corpse.

"There might not be any coming back from that," she murmured, holding still while her host of zerglings spread out and created a mental map with their bodies; Jim felt certain Sarah would have known he'd ask, even if they were not of one mind.

"Yes," she stated simply before lunging into action once again.

Jim followed his angel of revenge.

**Augustgrad - Northwest**

General Warfield took a steadying breath, resting a hand against the SCV idling beside him. *I am General Horus Warfield,* he focused on the thought and repeated it over and over, fighting away the all-consuming alien presence in his head; the men were looking at him expectantly, unaware of what was bearing down on them.
Finally he found his voice. "Zerg are here boys, forget about shoring up a position." Warfield cast his eyes around, recalling their surroundings both by the small map display in his helmet and by memory. "We are in a residential area, we will pick a building and hunker down; the zerg can pass us by then."

"What about the SCV?" Alice, a balding man in his forties, questioned from inside said SCV; the machine was his baby.

"Leave it, if it's intact by the time the smoke clears then that's a plus," Warfield patted the machine apologetically, closing his eyes and continuing to repeat his name to himself. *I am no monster.*

"And the infected? There could be thousands inside a building," a quieter, more composed voice questioned. Adam's CMC approached from around the SCV, its small lights illuminating the General in such a way as to cause a small shimmer of blue in the air around him.

This factor had been taken under consideration by the General. Giving the SCV a firm tap to impart the importance of time to Alice, who needed to get the hell out of it, Horus gave a curt nod to Adam, "Might be, so I'll be going in first. Let's go gentlemen," he would be their shield, gladly; even if it meant more men than Adam could see him at his worst.

**Augustgrad - Southern Entrenchment**

Every muscle in Tychus' jaw and neck strained and flexed as he forced himself to stay grounded in the here and now with sheer willpower; and it sure did not help that he was getting all kinds of confused and horny from James god damned Raynor going goo-goo eyed over his long lost lover.

"Moron," he muttered reproachfully.

Their base was made, boxed in at the intersection of four roads as planned. His team stood on a ramshackle rampart in groups of two, guarding against enemies they could not see and sure as hell could not fight. Jayce sat in her SCV at the center of the small base, staring boredly at her radar; the bigger machine had better long-range sensors than the CMCs and could provide a crucial few seconds of extra warning.

Brooding and privately struggling, Findlay had paused in his patrol of the defenses, he wanted to keep mobile in order to be the first response to threats. Now he was holding a hand to the side of his head and pretending to take part in some private conversation that did not exist and feeling like an idiot.

After an amount of time he deemed acceptable, Tychus opened up the comm with his team and spoke sharply with agitation, at least he did not have to fake that. "Bad news. Got word the zerg are here. We are gonna stay right where we are." Even though he tried, his words came out haltingly and strained.

"How did you get word from-" Daren began to question.

"Mine is better," Tychus growled, teeth gnashing together as the urge to engage in glorious violence almost carried him away; the roaches below ground practically vibrated with excitement.

"That spectre suit has tech you can only dream of, he'll pick up transmissions even better than this SCV." Jayce piped up, worried of the tone she heard from Findlay and hoping to placate this Daren guy.

"We're gonna hang tight until we get reinforcements," Tychus announced, jumping off the rampart and landing with a dull thud. Jayce watched as his little green dot approached. "Queen of Blades is
headin' for the palace to deal with Daddy Mengsk herself, I figure we're well out of her way."

When no further arguments seemed to be pending from Daren and his pals, only an appropriately silent pall of doom, Tychus leaned against the SCV and opened a private comm with its pilot. His hands shook.

"Sugar," he rasped, taking a heavy breath.

"Tychus?" Jayce double-checked the transmission, making sure it was private. "What's going on for real and why the hell are you with people who have no idea?"

Nearly slamming his fist into the SCV in frustration, he managed to lower it to a firm tap instead. "Whole damn situation is messed up. Zerg are here and..." his teeth creaked and his eyes screwed shut so tight he saw white. "I'm scared."

Jayce felt her ribs constrict tightly at what had to be an extremely private admission. Catching herself from sobbing, she forced her voice to brighten a good ten shades too light for the situation, "What? You can't be scared," her croaky laugh sounded as fake and forced as it was, "you're the muscle."

Leaning hard on the bipedal machine, he kept his eyes closed and physically trembled as the swarm roared in ecstasy and charged. "That's the problem," he whispered in a resonant, feverish tone, "I'm about to lose it and if I do, you're all dead."

Despite the very warm engine-heated temperature of the cab, Jayce felt icy cold at the admittance. "What can I do?"

"Just keep talkin' to me," he pleaded, sounding pathetic to his own ears but uncaring. "I'll scram outta here if I have to."

Adjusting her grip on the controls of the SCV, which she had been clenching far too hard, Jayce mouthed a wordless prayer that her voice would hold out. "I'll tell you what happened on Deadman's Rock, and you tell me what happened while I was gone."

Together, the two began talking in earnest.

**Mengsk Palace - Lower Floors**

*Watch it girl!* Tosh warned, a moment before a cluster of frenzied zerglings poured out from around the corner and surged past.

Nova tucked flush against the wall and held her breath as the living weapons ran by, focused on being as small and unnoticeable on every level she could; they both agreed that Tosh would talk and Nova would simply keep her mind shielded, it was not a perfect plan but it did mean her mind was safe from hybrid and the Queen of Blades, who they were following.

*They already be near the top. Ol' Mengsk must be shakin' in his boots.* Tosh was practically jovial, following Nova as she took point; she could use hand signals, though hard to see.

An unpleasant stench caught her nose, even through the state of the art filtration system of her helmet, and she paused. A large door, neosteel and looming in every sense of the word, was directly to their right; though tempted to feel out with her mind, Nova refrained, she did not even need confirmation from Tosh to know that something bad resided behind it.

*There be somethin' there, you're right.* Tosh agreed, taking a long step back and raising his canister rifle. *I know you want to, so do it.*
Readying her rifle as well, Nova gingerly coaxed the door open and stepped back as the heavy door slid open; Tosh flooded into the room quickly without firing a shot, and she followed with her own rifle pointing down.

Bodies, the room was stacked with them; bodies in CMC armor, servants, bodyguards, every kind of personnel that dwelled in the palace was in here, Nova realized.

Tosh gave the room the briefest of glances, and she could almost hear the distaste for the smell in his tone. *Just a bunch of people who got in the Queen of Blades' way, let's get movin'.*

Shaking her head, Nova began to search through the faces, checking for familiar ones; they seemed more desiccated than rotted, like bacteria and insects did not want to touch them.

**Mengsk Palace - Upper Floors**

Jim froze, staring at a coalesced nightmare made flesh; this hybrid lacked the glowing glory of the one caught on film at the unveiling ceremony, it crawled on muscular arms and writhing tentacles, but worse was just how pure its malice was.

He took a poor shot with the spine in his hand and barely leaped aside as a massive fist came crashing down, two fingers and two thumbs clenched together; just another proof positive that hybrid were spliced zerg and protoss, fueled by an otherworldly hatred that neither race could conjure up.

"JIM!" Sarah shrieked and, like a mother protecting a child, came running.

"Sarah!" Jim shouted in alarm as he rolled under a tentacle, spines clattering on the once-pristine flooring now cracked and crumbling. Even as he was tumbling he felt a strange sense of peaceful confidence; he never needed to worry about her, how silly.

An audible crunch filled his ears, and by the time Raynor was on his feet and facing the hideous creature, it was slumped to the ground and dead.

A sense of finality hung over the two as they ran upwards, crashing through obstacles and enemies alike with an incredible, efficient ease; Jim had to admit killing never felt so good, with his heightened senses the rush put any kind of recreational drug or adrenaline high to shame.

Nova recognized no one so far, eyes glazed over to protect from the faces frozen in terror or surprise; she ignored Tosh's impatient urging, intent on her task.

The door protecting the Emperor of the Terran Dominion was surprisingly fragile, Jim thought idly while Sarah ripped through it with her wing blades; together, they filed in side by side.

Nova let out a slow breath as she straightened, finished with her examination. Tosh was half way out the door when a chance glance from a different angle forced her to take a second look at a man in a CMC.

"Kerrigan did not kill these people," Nova whispered, staring hard at the freshly shaved face and bald head of the marine; his eyes were open and vacant in death, his thick brows scrunched in confusion.

Arcturus Mengsk turned to face Sarah Louise Kerrigan and James Eugene Raynor, a smile on his lips.

"It's Mengsk," Nova's eyes widened as the revelation blurted from her lips; it was all there, the bone structure, the eye color, the expression, but not the hair.
"What?" Tosh questioned sharply.

"I'm surprised you didn't try to run, Arcturus," Kerrigan said, prowling forwards as smug as a cat.

Jim paused, brows cinching together.

"That is because, my dear monster," Arcturus spoke in his low, smooth voice, hands clasped behind his back.

"Jim!" Nova opened her comm and tossed her words and a prayer to the airwaves, "Arcturus Mengsk is dead! It's a trap!" She received nothing but static for her troubles; stumbling towards Tosh, she slammed a hand against his chest and gripped the material tight.

Sarah... Jim whispered in warning.

"I am not that fool." Arcturus' eyes darkened to black as he brandished a trigger clenched in his fist.

The Queen of Blades only had time to take a half-step back, lips parted and eyes wide in surprise, before he pressed the button.

"Tell them!" Nova shrieked urgently as Tosh clapsed a hand around her wrist.

"Can't tee pzerq any better than you can, girl." Tosh frowned inside his helmet.

"Sarah!" Jim shouted and reached for her as the artifact, whole once more, raised from the floor and erupted; the last thing he saw was the false Arcturus Mengsk grinning.

Both the spectre and ghost froze, eyes wide in surprise as the explosion went off; Tosh recovered before Nova and ran out of the room, hand sealing into a vice around her wrist. Untold levels of artifact radiation came hurtling at them through the palace in a tidal wave of blinding light.

A nanosecond later Nova yanked her wrist out of Tosh's hand and gave chase under her own power. Artifact radiation was assumed harmless to terrans, but they were not going to take chances; Kerrigan's overwhelming psionic presence winked out the instant of the explosion, and that said enough.

From around a corner a panther-sized zergling stumbled into their path, reeling in confusion; Tosh nimbly leaped over it while Nova was not so fortunate, the creature tossed its head back during her leap and knocked her hard into the wall.

Looking over his shoulder as he ran, Tosh shouted, "Nova!" White light flooded the entire hall and neither his helmet nor looking away spared his eyes; like the Queen of Blades, Nova's mind winked out as the explosion enveloped her, Tosh felt it more than saw it.

An entire race took a deep breath as the atmosphere of Augustgrad shifted and in the explosions wake, a cold wind came howling down from top of the palace.
"Jimmy?" Tychus whispered, aghast, his conversation with Jayce forgotten. A startled medical aide jumped backwards as Matt leaped out of his chair and to his feet violently, eyes wide. "Commander..."

"Oh no," Egon gasped, datapad slipping out of his deadened hands. With crystal clarity, he knew where he needed to be; his feet started running for Shlassa.

With the exception of Stetmann, each infested man stood dumbstruck as the pervasive pressure of the hivemind simply disappeared, none remembering the peace of being alone in their own mind. For a moment, one blissful moment, they were just men again; and their leader, worse, their friend, just died.

On the exhale of the Swarm, Shlassa physically slumped against the wall of the locked science lab, feeling keenly the mighty Zagara desperately tugging the reeling race back together. Unthinkably, she fought back. All of the infested men screamed horrifically as their mental essence was used as the rope for a tug-o-war between the two broodmothers.

_This is the will of your Queen!_ Zagara hissed in frustration; that the tenacious little broodmother could last a second was a testament to how stretched thin Zagara found herself. _Surrender the infested and rejoin the Swarm!_

_My Queen tasked me with keeping these charges from the hivemind._ Shlassa's mental voice quavered at the might of the veteran broodmother, but she only had to cling to 6 members of the swarm as opposed to millions. _You are not my Queen._

A mental snarl and a feeling, similar to a shifting of weight and balance in a grappling match, was Zagara's response.

Shlassa worried at the change, but perhaps the new leader of the swarm decided seven members were too small a number to fight over; her mandibles spread wide in surprise when her error was realized: Stetmann was systematically plucked from her grasp and lost, the scientist was on the other side of the door and unlocking it.

Parting with a low hiss, the door to the lab opened and Egon stepped inside, but only his body; all traces of hesitance and jumpiness were gone, weak traits scrubbed clean by the hivemind.

Still, as his head turned and multifaceted eyes, now gleaming a dull orange, locked on Shlassa, she beseeched him, "Egon... Help me." At risk of losing the others, she tried to impress her will upon him, to bring him back under her limited sway. With the infested lending their might, order may yet be restored.

Mouth stretching into a wide grin, Egon's eyes took on an angry radiance. Zagara's will did not budge. "You wanted me to get back to you when I knew what it was like to be a part of the Swarm," the simple statement was made without inflection, but Shlassa shook her armored head defiantly in response.

"I know now," he stepped forwards and as the broodmother raised her clawed hands in a defensive gesture, he raised his hands in return. "I am not going back."
Shlassa screamed, a high pitched echoing squeal that was drowned out by a deafening thunderclap. Egon walked out of the science lab, his shirt and lab coat charred and smoking. Impressed, Zagara resolved to collect all of the now dead Queen's infested collection, but it would be easier said than done.

NO! Lasarra shot to her feet as the veil crumbled, her charges swept away in an unrelenting alien tide; she had failed and already terran minds were crying out in terror and being violently snuffed. These people were no longer attempting to render care to sick men, they were in a cage with rampaging zerg.

Valerian! she cried, charging out of the medical bay at a run. They are loose! Protect your people! Swann was the closest, there had to be some way to salvage this and contain them peacefully; a glimpse came as one of the former engineer's victims passed into the beyond and Lasarra was left wondering if that desire might just be impossible.

As the doors to the armory ground open, Lasarra recoiled from the stench that assaulted her senses and further from the image inside; Rory was there, hunched forwards as a bright green substance sprayed out of two tube-like protrusions from between neck and shoulder, on the receiving end was a white CMC that was flailing erratically. There would be screams coming from the hapless person inside, but the speakers were gone.

Melting flesh and metal, Lasarra noted grimly as she strode towards Swann, the hulled out CMC falling to its back with a clatter and exposing the fully melted down front. There were others here still, hiding behind boxes and praying fervently for saving; their thoughts were the chaos of those who were certain they were about to die, without an inkling of the focus and discipline that the protoss were renowned for.

Rory Swann. She projected at him calmly, though touching the mind of the swarm was far more uncomfortable than the shielded infested men; it gave the sensation of talking to an audience of millions instead of one. Come back! There was a disturbing similarity to the khala in this, and she firmly set the thought aside, now was not the time.

Straightening from his hunch, Rory's body snapped to face Lasarra, the gesture sending a small spattering of acid onto a discarded tarp that immediately began to smoke and burn. Smouldering orange eyes did not register any kind of recognition, only a seething hatred that made his lips curl into a snarl, "Protoss!" he spat, voice echoing as though hundreds of others were layered over it.

One medic and a lone scientist remained alive in the armory with them, she could feel them and their fright; the scientist would be of no use, but the armored medic had the strength of her machine and training, Lasarra spoke to her quickly. When I tell you to move, you must do so with haste! Surprise flitted through the medic's mind, but Lasarra had her answer when the woman filled with firm resolve.

Raising her arms, Lasarra mimed a placating gesture as both the tarp, now flaming in earnest, and an empty storage container lifted upwards silently. It is not too late, pull free, I beg you! she pleaded honestly.

There was no reasoning with monsters, and as Rory Swann snarled and hunched forwards to attack, Lasarra made the terrible decision to strike first; the large flaming tarp was tossed over his short, bulky frame and an instant afterwards the heavy container slammed down around him with a metallic crash.

Hold the crate down! Lasarra commanded and the medic came scrambling, throwing the weight of the CMC down on the box and clinging for dear life as it rattled; Rory howled and slammed against
it furiously, each fist sending a flash of white streaking through Lasarra's eyes as he threatened to pound through her telekinetic strength, the box would already be destroyed without it.

Stuck inside the container with the flaming tarp, a rational Rory Swann might have just stomped it out and waited, but this was far from a rational Swann; he began to spray the inside of the box with acid and its shape started to deform like a melting crayon.

Swirling clawed fingertips through the air, Lasarra focused on the fire inside the box, sending it spinning around Rory and the fresh volatile fuel he was providing; it was only a few seconds before bellows of anger turned into shrieks of pain as his error was acknowledged. Lasarra was turning the container into a furnace and Swann was the kindling.

All too soon, he began to cook and boil inside his own chitinous armor with his home made napalm. Sensing the end, disgusted, Zagara cast off Rory from the swarm like so much meat; and waking from his nightmare, Rory Swann screamed under his own power.

"Step away."

"Thanks for the save!" the medic, Willow, cried; her instincts were taking control already, running over to the remaining scientist and making sure he was physically intact. No need to ask if he was mentally okay, neither were.

Lasarra watched the scene dully before closing her eyes, she would take a page from the medical professional; there was a small window of opportunity to save further lives and it was closing rapidly. Seeking out the eye of the storm in her mind, she flowed into that calm space and rooted there, then got back to work. Ever a comfort, the khala warmed her spirit from afar.

"Hey, wait!" Willow yelled after Lasarra, waving her metal encased arm.

Lasarra paused on the threshold of the armory door, waiting.

"Just got word from my superiors on the Bucephalus, they say the other two are being captured right now!"

Ah, Valerian. Lasarra acknowledged Willow with a small nod, knowing how the terran like their physical gestures; she turned her mental attentions towards the emperor-to-be and found he was all but mentally screaming in an attempt to get her attention.

"LASARRA WE ARE CAPTURING THE INFEST-

I am here, Valerian Mengsk. She intoned calmly. My apologies for not responding with more haste, I was... She paused again, the screaming still ringing in her head. Engaged.

I am thankful you are safe, my people are reporting that Mr. Swann was not with the good captain and chief science adviser...If I may ask, was he who you were engaged with? Valerian was concerned, but in a distant way, she noted; his people came first, he had even said as much.

Yes. Her calm facade wavered. Rory Swann is no more.

Valerian considered her words and, more clinically, their implications, before responding. I am sorry Lasarra, I have no doubt that no other options were available to you; it may hearten you to hear that both Matt and Egon have been detained with minimal loss of life, and I have ships searching for
Before she could respond, Lasarra tilted her head sharply; there was a sound beyond the realm of hearing that was growing louder by the moment. Her bright glowing eyes widened and she had all of a second to raise her mental defenses and hunker down.

An electrical charge pulsed in heartbeats through the fog permeating all of Augustgrad; the foul, unnatural substance swelling exponentially in waves until, like a storm cloud hitting max capacity, it burst. But while storms rain down on those below them, the fog did no such thing; the resulting balloon-like pop manifested as a physical sucker punch.

Wind, hurricane strong and no less violent, ripped through the entirety of the city, pulling and twisting the fog until it coalesced at a number of points spread throughout the length and breadth of Augustgrad; at these points gathered light that expanded outwards, sucking in the fog and increasing in size to blinding miniature stars until they too burst.

Hundreds of beams, each as wide as a skyscraper, shot into the sky, cutting through ships, both terran and zerg, that had the misfortune to be in their path; the event lasted all of 30 seconds and by the end Augustgrad was glowing with the radiance of an afternoon sun, fog nowhere to be seen. Smoke drifted upwards to the sky from previously concealed destruction, and so did millions of zerg.

Augustgrad - Southern Entrenchment

As the earsplitting screeching came to an abrupt halt, Jayce sucked in a ragged breath and opened her eyes while the ghost of the noise still rattled around her skull like a bad afterthought; garbled shouting mixed with the high pitched ringing, Daren was trying to get the measure of the situation.

"Pilot, report!" Daren barked, the servos of his CMC protesting as they tried to keep him from wobbling drunkenly on his feet.

Sweaty hands keyed open the comm and her deadened vocal cords squeaked out a reply, "In one piece here."

"Findlay!" Again the lieutenant called, but no answer came. All eyes turned to Tychus then, some registering that the fog was gone for the first time.

Jayce felt her heart rate skyrocketing and a fresh sheen of sweat coating her face. Tychus stood there facing the distant and now plainly visible palace, his bulky gauss rifle laying on the plascrete beside him; everyone heard the big man scream long and hard before the wind hit. Their comms began to erupt as chatter and reports started to fly from every direction, it seemed their fellow terrans had recovered from the shock too.

"Is he..." One private questioned while gesturing, wondering if he was experiencing some kind of vivid hallucination and wanting confirmation; his metal finger pointing directly at Findlay.

Daren's gaze sharpened like a knife on the fake spectre, witnessing as he began to...Float.

Jayce unbuckled her harness and nearly slammed her forehead into the cockpit glass in an attempt to see, but it did not take long to see what the spectacle was; Tychus Findlay was floating upwards at a steady pace, and before she fully comprehended what she was doing, Jayce reached up with a clamp-like hand of the SCV and gently caught him by a leg. "Shit," she whispered, eyes wide.

"Flying away. Daren stared in confusion like the rest of his men, trying to puzzle out this turn of
"Daren. Lieutenant," Jayce stared fearfully at the being she was holding, feeling especially in peril, "we need to contain him." When Daren did not answer right away she huffed in frustration and activated the winch at the front of the SCV while calling the attention of a nearby private, "You! Grab the winch and tie him off, quickly!"

Say what you want about privates, but they were very good at following orders; the closest one stepped forwards without hesitation, accepting the dubious command without thought. A thick winch line was in his mechanical hands and he was reaching for Tychus' leg before Daren intervened.

The zerg are floating away! Retreating! One of the garbled messages on the comm struck home and the entire convoluted puzzle snapped into place with crystal clarity. Daren felt red hot rage flaring in his chest and his voice echoed it, "Private! What do you think you are doing? Step the hell away from that thing, it's a zerg!"

"What? Zerg?" the private echoed dumbly, but the winch dropped from his hands and he began stepping away quickly. Daren trumped Jayce easily on the ladder of command, never mind respect.

"Wait, this isn't what you think it is," Jayce argued as her voice danced on the edge of disappearing entirely. "Valerian can explain everything, he-

"Enough," Daren growled, his voice overrode hers easily even if it were not charged with all of his misguided fury; all the questions he had, whether it was drugs or cybernetic enhancements or genetic experiments, were answered. How could the Prince ally with the zerg? His teeth ground together audibly at the very thought, "That thing is a zerg, let it go."

"He saved your asses! He is on your side!" She squeaked angrily in response, but the response she received from the whole group, dead silence, suggested she might be wrong about Tychus Findlay having saved any asses.

"On second thought," Daren's voice took on a high and happy quality, right before he raised his rifle and fired. "You can stay here with your precious zerg friend," watching dark purple blood erupt out of Findlay's chest in ropes was equal parts satisfying and vindicating, he was right.

Jayce gaped like a fish, hands spreading open wide enough that when Tychus fell backwards limply he slipped from the SCV's hand clamp and fell to the ground in a heap and a puff of dust. "You idiot," she whispered, voice finally failing miserably on 'idiot'.

Already, Daren had done a sharp about-face and gestured for his men to fall in line; they were marching away and talking heatedly among one another, Jayce found herself abruptly cut from their comm and left to fend for herself. "Let's see if we can meet up with one of the merc elements and figure out our next move," Daren said.

Tychus' body lay prone at the solid neosteel feet of the SCV and Jayce stared, eyes stinging and lips quivering. All this fighting for nothing. A fierce hate bloomed in her chest, anger twisting her features and she watched from on high as the heavily damaged tissue of Findlay's chest knitted together. Whatever was about to happen, everyone involved deserved what they got.

Augustgrad - Northwest Residential

Alexei Stukov strolled down a fairly intact street, hands clasped behind his back as the thick, claw-tipped limbs on his shoulder twitched spasmodically; the terrans of the Koprulu sector had very similar architecture to those of old Earth, but his mutated heart jealously told him Earth was better,
always. As Zagara rallied the swarm and carried it into space, he felt the pull and resisted, staying firmly rooted to the ground.

An interesting event was taking place nearby, the metallic tasting tang of blood in the air touching his tongue confirmed as much.

Located inside a residential building, General Warfield was in the process of lovingly peeling someone's skin off; he and his victim were surrounded by a group of CMCs that more closely resembled tinsel wrapped around cherry pie filling than soldiers.

With a casual tug, General Warfield was plucked from Zagara's grasp, like a father taking his child's toy away, and brought under Stukov's administration; the new leader of the swarm immediately took notice.

*What are you doing, Stukov?* Zagara focused on the old infested terran, curious. *Remain on Korhal and the terrans will destroy you.* There would be no attempt to forcefully bring Alexei under her sway, he was well beyond that.

*Ah, Zagara.* Stukov replied calmly, feet guiding him towards his newly acquired friend. *There is far too much air defense in this part of Augustgrad for me to just up and fly away, I'm afraid you must move on without me.*

*And the infested you took?* There was accusation in her tone, but he took no heed, they had a good working relationship after all; he was stronger and she respected strength, the true way of the zerg.

*A new friend to accompany me in my last hours, of course.* What remained of his mouth smiled. *Surely you won't deny me that? If I cannot leave this place, he certainly has no chance of doing so.*

Without a choice, Zagara grudgingly obliged. *You served our Queen well, Stukov. Perhaps not all terrans are so worthless.* Her acknowledgement would be the closest old Alexei would ever get to a compliment from her.

*It warms my old heart to hear you say it, Zagara.* Alexei chuckled as the knocked out door frame of the building his new friend resided in came into sight. *We both know my fate was with Kerrigan anyways. I wish you luck in destroying Amon, you will need it.* Without further response, Zagara's presence faded as she focused her efforts on the swarm and its mass exodus of Korhal.

Horus gasped and shook, staring at a point between his hands and Adam's shocked, blood spattered and deathly pale face. "Adam? Oh god," the entirety of the scene rushed into his senses like a light being turned on in a dark room. Adam was beneath him, trapped inside his ripped open CMC and barely breathing; Warfield knew with certainly he had paralyzed him.

"Hang on son, hang on," retracting his talons, he desperately began to try and piece the young man back together, to stifle the bleeding and save him; his shoulders shook with emotion when he realized, hands full of bloody meat, that there was no salvaging this and there was no saving Adam.

A throat cleared behind him. "From one old soul to another, there are two options right now," the voice had a heavy accent that rang familiar, but Warfield barely absorbed that fact. "One," Stukov stepped into the room, shadow falling over the bodies, "you give that boy mercy and kill him."

Horus did not respond, only grasping Adam by the shoulders and looking him in the eye, trying with all his might to commune just how sorry he was.

"Or two," Alexei held up his gloved and vaguely human hand, miming the number with his digits, "you could infest him and save him." Warfield went rigid.
"Ah, there you are." Alexei chuckled at the simmering impotent rage.

"Get out," Warfield growled, watching the light fade from Adam's eyes. "Go be with your new Swarm whore."

"Now General, is that any way to treat the man who pulled you from the clutches of that 'Swarm whore'?'" Alexei quirked a brow and drove the point home by forcing Warfield to stagger to a stand.

Warfield grunted angrily as his limbs listened to their new master, turning his head to finally look at his apparent savior; he blinked in surprise, "Stukov?"

"In the flesh, General. What is left of it anyway." An explosion rocked the building and one of his extra limbs twitched in response, plaster dust trickling from cracks in the ceiling. "I think we need to find a better place to have our conversation, we have much to talk about."

Lips sealing into a tight line, Horus looked back down at the corpse of Adam and felt remorse and guilt stabbing through his heart in equal measure; Adam's brother died under his command too, and now this. Were they the last of their line, all wiped out by zerg or tyrants in one form or another?

"He is at rest now," Stukov spoke in a softer tone, "but we are not. Let us go before we join him eh?"

Warfield followed and it was unclear to him whether Stukov was forcing him to or not; leaving the room of corpses and carnage, he never felt so dazed and wretched before.

**Bucephalus - Rebel Base**

When Valerian opened his eyes, he found himself on the floor in the fetal position with a high pitched ringing in his head; every limb felt as though it had been pulled apart and put back together again a couple times over, but he rallied his fortitude and struggled to his feet all the same. Focus, he thought to himself fiercely, piecing together events as fast as his stinging brain would allow.

"Adjutant, call captain Vaughn," he rolled his shoulders and schooled his features and voice while he waited for the captain to respond, he had a feeling he was not the only one who had spent the last minutes- or was it seconds? -screaming. Dimly, he noted that warm sunshine was pouring through the wall-length glass of his chamber.

"Prince Valerian," Vaughn's voice was gravelly and hoarse, "are you secure?"

"Yes, thank you captain. I need a status report immediately." Valerian's thoughts centered around the infested men; had they escaped in the confusion, or were they rendered useless like everyone else?

"Teams are reporting in and comms are a mess, the mercenaries are in disarray, the zerg are leaving the planet and the Mengsk palace is a graveyard," Vaughn gushed as much information as he could fit into a single breath.

"And the infested?" Valerian frowned subtly, the landscape of the entire playing field had changed completely within the span of an hour; his next few choices could have very wide repercussions.

"Subdued and the team is bringing them to the Bucephalus containment lab as we speak."

"Thank you captain, I trust you will take care of the more mundane choices; I need to discuss several of these greater matters with my advisers, you are dismissed." Valerian closed the call after Vaughn's confirmation.
Lasarra was both calm and muted when she touched his mind. *I am here.*

Valerian began walking from his room. Matt and Egon would be restrained in the lab soon, he wanted to see what they had been reduced to. *You know what kind of questions I want to ask, I presume?*

*It was like an attack in passing.* There was a pause as the protoss weighed her words, she was not sure she understood what transpired. *Similar to a psionic storm, almost identical, but one of that size...Unthinkably powerful; Augustgrad, and us by proxy, would be no more if it were a true psionic storm.*

*Any educated guesses? I value your voice in this matter more than others.* Valerian admitted; if a protoss was at your disposal and the topic at hand was psionic activity, you made good use of that protoss' opinion.

*I felt the energy moving and gathering before leaving the planet.* Lasarra recalled the event. *It has not disappeared, it has been delivered somewhere.* A precise, coordinated direction of power beyond the scope of her imagination, all fired off somewhere into space; whatever the implications, if the hybrid were involved, they were grim.

Valerian's train of thought seemed to be on the same track. *There is no sign of the hybrid, I would have been alerted by now; could they have used this energy to travel similar to protoss warp technology?* What would be the point? He racked his brain, why would they just up and leave? A darker possibility revealed itself to him then; what if everything they wanted from this place had been consumed?

*It is possible.* Lasarra confirmed, whether to the direct question or the wandering thought, Valerian was not sure he really wanted to know.

He found himself standing in one of the many grand science labs of his ship, waiting for the arrival of its new inhabitants. *I will have my people thoroughly analyze any remnants, perhaps we can arrive to a more solid conclusion before taking action.*

*Your scientists will find plenty of 'remnants', Valerian.*

*As you say.* He replied with a slightly quirked brow, unsure if he liked that idea or not; a cleared throat brought his attention to a marine in full CMC standing in front of him.

"Prince Valerian, sir! Please step back for your own safety," the man was resocialized, they never minced words or shied from their superiors; Valerian appreciated that.

"Of course," he allowed himself to be guided back to a supposedly safe distance as two extremely incapacitated infested men were carted in on tables, the operators intent on getting their cargo into vastly more secured trappings as quickly as possible. *Lasarra, please excuse me.* He thought it best their conversation ended for the time being.

*Please remember who they were, Valerian Mengsk.* Lasarra whispered, her melancholy infectious.

"These trappings will hold them, Doctor?" Valerian questioned, scrutinizing the setup with a critical, but inexperienced, eye.

"Absolutely. Similar technology is used to keep the famous Ultralisks in check, they are not going anywhere," the doctor sounded so cocksure about this, Valerian did not feel particularly eased.

Still, two perfect infested terran specimens, vastly superior to the usual cannon fodder infested the
zerg produced. There were two biological goldmines suspended from the wall right now; remorse cooled his excitement however, Lasarra was all too right about who they used to be.

Matt Horner and Egon Stetmann were two feet off the ground each, their hands covered by what were essentially neosteel mittens. Heavy clamps were sealed around Horner's wrists, pinning the stretchy bio weapons beneath in place; Stetmann's hands were as far apart as physically possible, there would be no clapping for him.

Both had been divested of all but the barest of clothing, revealing their sickly pale skin and the discolored veins within; Stetmann in particular looked ghoulish with his already naturally thin frame. They were also waking up.

"Oh, those sedatives did not last as long as projected," the doctor noted critically, taking notes on a datapad that seemingly appeared in his hands.

Truly thankful they had lasted long enough, Valerian watched as Egon began to jerk and tremble, mouthing words without sound.

A sheen of sweat appeared on Egon's pale flesh as he writhed where he hung, gasping loudly. Beside him, Matt Horner opened his eyes silently, eyes that cast a sullen orange glow; he gave no struggle, only analyzing his surroundings with a hunters gaze. Looking for weaknesses to take advantage of.

Valerian unfurled his arms, watching Stetmann with fascination as scientists were already clamoring over the spiking vitals on display.

Egon erupted from the hivemind with a howl, tossing his head back and gasping for breath; his brain struggled to absorb his surroundings, it felt like he was trying to hold himself together but he was shattered glass. When his wide eyes, rainbow colored and tainted with that orange glow, landed on Valerian, he let out a gasping cry of relief. "Valerian!"

"Egon!" Valerian stepped forwards several feet before the protective hand of his guard held him at bay; this was impossible. "Is it really you?"

"Yes," sweat gleamed on Stetmann's body as his brows furrowed and arms flexed, not quite sure what his current situation was. "There is something on my hands," he murmured softly, tone shifting, "help me, take them off." His eyes widened to the size of plates and he spouted in a panic, "NO! nonono. Don't do that. Keep me contained!"

Valerian watched as Egon Stetmann, after ripping himself free of the swarm by what appeared to be sheer will, degraded into nonsensical gibbering; he schooled his features when he felt his face falling, the thought of the infested being able to come back was uplifting and apparently far too ambitious.

Stepping back from the hand blocking him, he called the attention of the doctor once more. "I want every mumbled word and letter coming out of Egon Stetmann to be recorded, and I am to be informed immediately if he becomes coherent again." Valerian made sure his command was clear and understood, there would be no confusion in regards to this order.

Matt Horner turned his head to look at Egon, his countenance grim and predatory. "Our lives for the Swarm. There is no escape, Egon," he whispered.

Stomach churning at the idea of leaving Stetmann with this dark angel whispering at his side, Valerian left; no longer so hungry for answers in the name of science. Research and science were about to take Egon and Matt to terrible places.
I bring news. Lasarra returned once more, and the entire feel of her was grim.

Again Valerian found himself unsure about if he really wanted to know. I am listening, Lasarra. The Prince was thumbing through a slim datapad and wordlessly directing teams of scientists and escorts to begin their investigation of the massive psionic event.

Your people are alive. It was immediately clear this was the good news. But they are weak or unmoving, they are immensely damaged. That would qualify as very bad news. Agent November Terra was in the clutches of the hybrid for minutes at most, Valerian. Lasarra pressed on grimly. She was nearly lost, despite all her training and psionic talent; what do you think remains of these people after days or perhaps even weeks?

Brushing a well manicured hand through his hair, Valerian glanced around before letting slip an audible sigh. I don't know, Lasarra, but I do know I will do everything within my power to help my people. You know I will.

Yes, I do. She admitted, radiating remorse; Valerian took comfort in it and wondered if Jim and the others did the same before they were lost.

Mengsk Palace - Augustgrad

Eyes open, eyes closed, it seemed to make no difference in the pure white that enveloped her vision.

"I was surprised when James Raynor failed," a disembodied voice, smug and familiar, whispered through a wall of stabbing agony.

"The love-struck fool set my plan back quite a bit, but I believe I like this scenario much more." Voice lowering further, it took on a sinister echoing quality, "I get to thank you personally for bringing Amon back, and you get to witness the end of all things firsthand; that is what I call a win-win situation." Narud's voice became quieter as he leaned away, "Goodbye, Kerrigan."

I need to kill you! Her mind yelled sluggishly, but no body parts responded to her commands, she could not even feel them moving; the only indication she was not just a limbless body was that agony filled the limbs she could not move, confirming their existence.

Without a choice, Sarah drifted into the blissful clutches of unconsciousness. Fate would decide whether she woke again or not.
Jayce stared down at Tychus, gripping the controls of the SCV in her sweaty palms, the light from the returned sun beating through the glass and making it feel hotter than it was. *I should grab him right now, I can hold him long enough to call for help.* She jumped hard when he sat up abruptly, head turning towards the retreating small crowd of CMCs.

"Don't look up," she mouthed, praying fervently. Sweat dripped down her nose and pooled at the bottom of her oxygen mask and she ripped it off in one quick, frustrated motion.

Was he about to attack? There was no way he could kill all of them, he would be shredded. He could take two, maybe even three, before they turned around, but that would be it; statistics simply said that Findlay would die. Disturbingly sinuous, Tychus flowed to his feet and began prowling after Daren and his men.

Movement on the radar caught her eye, making her brows knit together in confusion, she could have sworn there was more than just the group of marines for a second there. With a hydraulic hiss, she began to reach for Tychus from behind as he started walking, when the malicious alien who was at the helm showed its hand.

Daren was muttering, "Don't know about you boys, but I'm getting real sick of emperors, their empires and god damned aliens popping up-" when the earth beneath his feet erupted violently. Fully surprised, instinctual reactions were all that kept him from falling backwards, instead he used the CMC to leap and tumble forwards while gunfire and screaming began behind him.

"Regroup!" he bellowed while spinning around, rifle ready. He could have screamed in rage at the sight of the roaches, in fact, he vaguely realized he was as he squeezed the trigger and held it. His men, his people, were fighting for all they were worth, but the roaches got the jump on them and their acid was already doing its gruesome work; it was already a slaughter.

Behind them and approaching at a walk was their master. White haloed Daren's vision as he watched Tychus Findlay reach up and tug off his spectre helmet, a blue shimmer chasing after it as whatever cloaking technology bullshit Valerian gave him was turned off, revealing an alien countenance and a hard glare through glowing orange eyes; Daren took aim at that face with every intention of blasting it clean off.

Raising his arms in a welcoming gesture, the fabric of Tychus' suit stretched outwards at the arms, elbow and upwards, until it gave way with an audible rip, long blades snapping forwards and into position. Needing no convincing, Daren fired, but the shot ricocheted off of the thick carapace of a roach; and every shot he took after that was purposefully deflected much the same.

"Filthy zerg bastard!" Daren snapped, realization of what was happening taking root.

Jayce watched, stomach twisting as the roaches danced, leaped and tumbled around, denying Daren, who stood alone now, any free shots; the weathered marine was taking steps backwards between gunfire rounds, still trying to get at Findlay, until a roach spewed acid on his gun.

Snarling, Daren tossed the rifle away as it fizzled and burned, reaching for the standard issue knife magnetically clipped to the leg of his CMC; the roaches, all three remaining, scuttled outwards to give the two combatants space, croaking and singing in a demented taunting trio.
"Come get it then," Daren growled through the crackling speakers of his CMC, taking a second to glance past Findlay and glare at the motionless SCV a ways back; that coward chose her side already. As his eyes shifted back to the savagely grinning alien in front of him, he fervently hoped everyone who made this possible got what they deserved.

They charged one another.

Biting her lip, Jayce keyed open the comm and began drumming out a sequence with her fingertips against the mic: taptaptap...taptap...taptaptap.

Without any delusions of surviving the encounter, Daren entered the fight like a man possessed, trying to come in low like his opponent; Tychus' two long blades would cut through Daren's lower half, machine or no machine, like butter if he let them.

Colliding with a loud clank, Daren used the marginally larger frame of his CMC to bully down Tychus' shoulder with his own, his left arm tangling up with the alien monstrosities' right as they grappled for one another; Tychus' smouldering gaze locked with his, their faces scant inches apart as Daren's knife and Tychus' unnatural sword of a blade ground and shifted together harshly.

Daren spat in a glowing eye, forcing Findlay to blink; a momentary distraction that yielded results. Catching the arm he was grappling for, Daren let the arm blade slip past his knife and used the infested man as an anchor, hurtling his bulky CMC over Tychus' broad shoulder and landing behind him, knife coming down at Findlay's neck with deadly intent.

For a second Jayce stared, wide eyed and mouth gaping, thinking this was the end; what seemed like an unstoppable terminator was about to be taken down by a single pissed off marine. At the same time another thought occurred, which fate would be worse for her: Tychus winning, or Daren? The roaches were still there.

All illusions were dispelled as Tychus grabbed the mechanical hand that was plunging down with the knife and tucked it down to his chest with both hands, leaning forwards and tossing the entire CMC over his hip with seemingly no effort. Daren landed on his back with a metallic crash, staring up in surprise at Tychus' smug face; Findlay clenched his fists and ripped the mechanical hand off, tossing it and the knife it still held aside.

Jayce shook her head in disbelief as she watched the metal hand go flying and the infested man pin the machine down, starting to methodically pry apart the armor that encased his prey.

For his part, Daren kicked his legs and tried to unseat the monster on his chest, trying furiously to take swings with his remaining mechanical hand, but made no headway. He swore fiercely when sparks flew and stung his skin, fresh air, tainted by the scent of melting flesh and neosteel, flooding into the previously sealed suit; a strange sense of peace descending on him as he realized he would be joining his men shortly.

No longer praying for Tychus to return, Jayce stared as an epiphany hit her: Daren did not deserve this, did not deserve to be half tugged out of his suit like a rag doll, and certainly did not deserve Tychus beginning to pull him in half at the shoulders like he was. Tychus was well and truly gone, taken by the swarm. And I allied myself with monsters over men.

Blood hit the air and the roaches went insane, it was little comfort that she could not hear the long, wretched scream of the dying marine. Resolve pulsed through her veins; there was no clean way out of this, no way to absolve her sins but with more blood. Shifting in her seat, Jayce took aim and pressed the button with a skull on it.
Tychus opened his eyes when the familiar stench of stale sweat, cigars and alcohol invaded his nose, heart racing for a reason he could not yet discern; a scowl touched his mouth when the room was so dim his eyes had to take time to adjust.

Questions that needed answering began to come boiling up, but with no one but himself to ask them to. *Why am I here? What am I forgetting?* Something important happened, something that made his pulse race with anger at the very thought. His eyes began to scan over the old, dingy room; the familiarity of it all was so wrong.

Like a stroll through memory lane, Tychus looked upon his old home on Mar Sara with confusion and distaste; his mind began to work at what happened, one thought leading to another, tickling at his brain and sliding out of reach when he grasped for them. This place could not exist, something happened to it, but he could not figure out why.

Growling and baring his teeth, he took a long step forwards and kicked the arm of an old recliner clean off, venting his considerable frustration with a plethora of creative swears. It just wasn't enough, he grabbed the rest of the filth stained contraption and chucked it over his head at a far corner; when the object crashed without a sound and two glowing eyes the shape of slits opened to glare at him, he did a double-take.

Zagara glared, shifting quietly on the spot; the broodmother should not be able to fit in such a small shack, reality seemed to twist around her form.

_Broodmother._ A memory tugged itself free, others cascading down with it. "Zerg," he blurted. Zerg destroyed Mar Sara, that is why this old hellhole could not exist, the protoss turned it into blackened glass after the zerg infested the planet; and he was zerg now, he remembered.

"Perceptive," the creature mocked in its echoing voice.

A name came to mind now as he looked at the broodmother: Shlassa. But as he looked the creature over more critically, and it was glaring at him the whole while, he realized this was in no way shape or form the broodmother that dwelled on the Hyperion with him and the others; she was scarred, chipped, jagged and rough. Shlassa was smooth and shiny in comparison, brand new.

He grunted out a short chuckle, it would be like comparing his older self with his teenage self: age and experience versus youth and arrogance, there was no contest between the two; this broodmother was battle hardened, a whole new league of dangerous.

"I am not that weak creature," the comparison seemed to offend his guest. "I am Zagara, and I now lead the Swarm." Zagara stood still, eyes glowing a sullen green as she regarded this particular piece of Kerrigan's collection.

"So you're the one drivin'," Tychus muttered, looking at their setting more critically now. Who knew what his body was getting up to, he was not exactly alone when Zagara won the wrestling match for control; Jayce was right there in a damned SCV. Jayce. Damnit, he knew why his heart raced now.

"Yes," Zagara paused, crested head tilting as though listening to something beyond his range of hearing. "So this is the terran who survived the battle of Char," the way she said it put Tychus' teeth on edge.

There was a door behind him, he knew it by heart, and he quickly pawed at the panel that would open it; all while another question began to form: Why was Zagara here? Light, far brighter than the muted shades of reds and browns of Mar Sara he remembered, flooded from around him and lit up his old pathetic lodgings. "Why are you here anyway?" He blurted again, no need to be subtle.
"I have taken control of the Swarm, the Queen of Blades is dead and you are under my control now," a clawed and spidery hand gestured towards the door behind him, "observe."

Zagara's blatant dodging of his question did not go unnoticed, Tychus filed it away for now. Jayce was in danger, hell, he was in danger; he needed to get out and get back in control. He turned around, blinking owlishly. "Sweet mother of mercy."

This was no doorway, not in any conventional sense; Tychus found himself staring through his own eyes, seeing what his body saw while Zagara controlled it. He was just in time to see the SCV, piloted by Jayce, hurling a vehicle his way as it fled with thrusters on high.

"I bring the Swarm to fight Amon now, as my Queen wished should she perish here," a bitter note was in Zagara's voice. "This Jayce, the fleshling who survived Char, kept you from rejoining us." A low growling echoed through the room as her ire festered, "she will die slowly now, she makes you weak."

Standing on the threshold of his mind and reality, Tychus grasped the edges of the door with his hands and thought. If Jayce could just keep running, keep putting obstacles in his path, she would get help eventually; of course, he would likely be a dead man then.

Letting out a slow breath, he addressed his unpleasant mental companion, "I don't give half a squat about you chasing after some big universe eating bogeyman, Zigzag," he smiled when she hissed in anger at her new nickname. It occurred to him then, glancing at his hand on the door, that he lacked the armored flesh and claws of his infested form; here, in his mind, he was a man.

Clicking and chittering echoed behind him, his guest was angry. "You are pathetic, your entire existence is laid out before me," her voice seemed to come closer, whispering in his ear. "Everything you have ever done has revolved around James Raynor, you are nothing without that terran to follow." If she could grin, she would, "he is dead now. Tychus Findlay is nothing."

Jim. Just the mention of the man made him put a white knuckled grip on the door frame. "Hell, you don't know nothin' about Tychus Findlay, Zigzag," he turned his head just enough to look over his shoulder at his guest, glaring, "but you're gonna."

Things seemed to be going south for the SCV; smoke, thick and black, began to weep from around the bright red thrusters, and his body began to gain ground as the machine started to slow. Zagara seemed content to chase, the patient hunter. "Doubtful. Even if you could escape my control, you are now trapped on a world of terrans, and you have killed many," he could feel the creature smiling, feel it. "And you are about to kill one more."

Stuttering and smoking, the SCV began to break down. "I can feel her panic," Zagara supplied helpfully, "this fleshling you dared to care about, who dared to keep you from my grasp, will suffer in a special way." Now she was just gloating, and it irked him.

In the cockpit, Jayce finished another round of frantic tapping on the comm and shut it off for good. If help had yet to arrive, it was not coming. "Piece of jumped up garbage!" she shouted in broken clicks and squeaks, watching the green dot that had been chasing her all this time finally closing in, almost within reach; the thrusters had overheated even faster than they would on a normal SCV, she needed a change of tactics and fast.

A smile lit up Tychus' face, not in relation to the SCV doing a sharp turn and half crashing, half scrambling up the side of a building, but to a realization. Turning away from the scene as his body approached the SCV at a slower pace; the machine let out one racking cough and died as the cockpit came to rest on the roof, ejecting its fleshy cargo.
"You know somethin', Zigzag?" A cigar appeared between his lips and he took a drag while smiling, he could get used to this whole dream realm thing.

"What?" she hissed, on guard at the change in her host. His body was atop the SCV now, looking down on Jayce as she lay prone and attempting to recover, far too slowly.

"Way I see it, Queen of Blades made us to be second only to her," he gave her his best wicked grin. "I don't think you got the manpower to control me," just like that, he snapped the chains that bound him to her as easily as he'd break a stick. Zagara reeled backwards and he chuckled as his physical body leaped towards Jayce, only to see her smiling and laughing as something collided with his body and sent him flying back down to the street below.

Absolutely smug in his certainty and strength, he said, "I think you just took advantage of me bein' caught off guard at a bad time, and you thought you could keep me occupied until you got me killed. Ain't that right?" Turning away from her, he watched as his body scrabbled back up the wall and the machine, dashing at full speed for the small transport ship that Jayce had just leaped into.

"You are dead anyway! A hopeless waste that will rot in a terran lab!" Zagara shrieked, still guiding his body as she made him leap and catch hold of the edge of the ramp as it folded upwards. He was getting in.

"You leave that to me to worry about. I'll be seein' you again Zigzag, real soon." With force he expelled the broodmother from his mind as she in turn forced him to leap at Jayce, who was standing inside of a heavy-looking cell as bait for the trap. In his mind, his hair and skin twisted and shimmered, human attributes melting away.

Infested Tychus slammed back into his physical self in a jarring moment and absorbed what was happening.

Jayce kicked off the back of the cell wall with her screaming leg muscles and lunged for all she was worth, sliding her much smaller frame past the heavy body and out of the cell as the pilot hammered the button to close the cell door and seal Tychus, and possibly the bait, inside.

Turning on the spot, Tychus reached out and caught her arm at the elbow, neatly catching the prey; unfortunately for Jayce, the door slammed on her shoulder and she wailed, voiceless, in panic and pain. Settling back into his body at a relaxed pace, he rolled his shoulders while turning his head and regarding her with eyes still glowing, lighting up the dark; all while her free hand banged on the outside of the cell frantically.

Shoulder being crushed by the heavy door, Jayce gasped and stared through the gap she was wedged in. Why was she not dead yet? Her vision became blurred and watery as tears of relief began to pour down her cheeks.

"Sweetheart," Tychus adjusted his grip, keeping a hold of her arm still, and reached through the gap to stroke her cheek with the back of a finger; he needed to make a decision.

Shoulders shaking with soundless sobs, she pressed her face to his hand and stilled, he was back somehow; the warm comfort did not last long. His hand withdrew and she kept her eyes closed, trying to master both the immense mental shock and physical pain.

A familiar clicking sound made her eyes snap open, staring with alarm into the dark and up at the eyes that had narrowed as they regarded her. Tychus leaned down to face level, "you shoulda let me go." Squeezing her arm in his hand, he felt bones, muscle and skin give way to his grip and his nails as he dug them in, cracking her bones at the elbow like popcorn.
Going rigid, her mouth flew open and she screamed so hard spit flew, though no sound chased after it; the last thing Tychus saw was a look of pure, utter betrayal on her face, right before he brought his blade down and lobbed her arm off. Electromagnetic, the door slammed shut and immediately sealed him, and the arm in his hand, in the dark.

Pure silence filled the cell.

"There ain't no comin' back from this," he murmured, a dark resolve filling him; he had just cut ties to his last weakness. "I'm hellbound, Jimmy," he looked down at the arm in his hand, fingers dug deep in the still warm and twitching flesh.

*Bucephalus* - Med Bay

Valerian watched, hands clasped behind his back, as the subjects eyelids fluttered, struggling back to the realm of consciousness through an anesthetic induced haze. When Jayce Burrough looked coherent, he spoke, "It is very fortunate I assigned medics to those ships at the last minute, else you would not be with us right now, Miss Burrough."

Confusion bloomed on the woman's features and Valerian felt a pang of sympathy as her left hand slowly reached up and touched her right shoulder. Before she could devote too much thought to what no doubt felt like a strange lack of sensation, he called her attention once more. "Your morse code message was very clever, given your vocal cord issue; which, by the way, my team of doctors decided to take care of for you, along with that missing front tooth." He smiled, ever charming.

Despite her vocal cords being repaired, her voice came out very soft, the confusion never leaving her face. "Valerian...What happened out there?"

Well prepared for the question, the prince stepped forwards to the foot of her bed, further commanding her attention and keeping her thoughts off of that strange sensation. "An explosion of artifact radiation, originating at the top of the Mengsk palace, killed both Jim Raynor and Sarah Kerrigan," he watched as her eyes widened, "the infested men went insane, and it seems the zerg have a new leader: the Swarm has left Korhal."

A sound, not quite a sob but something much more profound in its expression of misery, escaped her lips before she visibly hardened herself, gaze sharpening. "And the others?"

Pausing, Valerian glanced away from that hard gaze for a moment before returning it, remorse evident. "Matt Horner and Egon Stetmann have been captured. General Warfield is unaccounted for still, he may have been taken with the Swarm; and Tychus Findlay captured, largely thanks to you."

Her lips twitched as cold hands squeezed her insides, her heart, "Swann?" Teeth were bared when the Prince hesitated, "tell me damn you."

"Dead," he spoke softly, watching the breakdown begin.

A ghostly wail echoed through the cold, clean room. Jayce leaned forwards and hid her face in her hands as the tears and sobs came, further strengthened by the realization that her arm was missing; Tychus, the real Tychus, took it. A cybernetic arm was in its place, attached at the shoulder where soreness throbbed in time with her heartbeat.

Valerian murmured, paling at the memory of what scanners showed inside the cell, "I apologize, we were...unable to retrieve your real arm." He winced at a particularly shrill cry, "it is a small comfort, I know, but the cybernetic replacement is state of the art."

Jayce began to seethe, the sorrow of it all mixing with the betrayal into a muddy mess, this betrayal
happened well before Korhal. She glared at her hands, real and fake, as they slowly lowered to her legs, cursing Zeratul for all he was worth; and herself for listening to some ancient protoss crackpot.

Sensing the change, Valerian gently restarted the conversation before she could go down another fast track to self loathing, "Miss Burrough,"

"Jayce," she growled.

"Jayce," he inclined his head, "while I came to tell you what happened personally, there is more." He took a steadying breath under the weight of her glare, clinging to every ounce of his skill as a convincing speaker and a man of power, "I would like to offer you a chance to leave."

With no reply forthcoming, only her undivided attention, Valerian continued, "I have a longstanding agreement with the leader of Haven, Doctor Hanson, that we now have the opportunity to take full advantage of." Jayce tilted her head a degree, curiosity evident. "Tychus Findlay has been transferred to a transport ship that is programmed to automatically deliver him to Haven for study."

Valerian saw her stiffen, her expression tellingly neutral. "Doctor Hanson has more experience and success in curing infestation than any terran alive. I believe there is a very good chance she could find the cure for him and, by proxy, everyone else." Unfurling his hands from behind his back, he placed them on the edge of the bed and leaned forwards, delivering the verbal killing blow.

"All the ship needs is one person capable of landing it. Augustgrad is in ruin, I need all hands on deck here, but you have done and suffered enough. Everything is taken care of, all you need to do is land the ship and enjoy the peace of Haven," he watched her expression carefully.

With her left hand she rubbed her mouth, tears leaking out of the corner of her eyes again. Her voice came out muffled, "he cut off my arm."

Valerian nodded his agreement, the infested man was a monster for true; worst was the fact that, physically, Findlay could be considered the least dangerous of the six. He refrained from launching into that particular discussion. "Tychus Findlay is being held within a paristeel containment cell, sealed electromagnetically and with multiple redundancies built into it," he reassured her calmly, "you are completely safe and, once you are on Haven, you will not see him again."

Wiping her face with the back of her hand aggressively, Jayce sniffed once and regarded the prince evenly with reddened eyes; she was tired of empires, princes, wars and especially aliens, so very tired, "I'll do it."

Valerian smiled, holding a gloved hand out to her, "Come with me."

**Bucephalus - Launch Bay**

"There are rations on board, but you have also been given a nutrient implant," Valerian smiled, "Doctors orders." The prince was talking as he entered the launch bay with Jayce at his side, though their walk was largely him directing others and receiving updates while Jayce kept silent; the tension inside ratcheting up a notch with every step they took towards the ship and the monster inside.

Jayce touched her left arm, just below the bicep, feeling the telltale lump of the implant. It would keep her nourished for a set amount of time, but it would not keep her stomach from rumbling; she nodded woodenly when she realized the ramp of the nondescript ship was lowering.

Valerian eyed her keenly before taking the lead, stepping past a mechanic who was doing last minute adjustments, and coming to stand directly beside the dark paristeel prison that housed Tychus.
"She's all ready to go, Emperor Mengsk!" the mechanic spoke with a smile and a crisp salute.

"I can see that, you and your men have done good work on short notice, thank you," Valerian smiled and gave the man a nod, enjoying the new moniker his people had taken the liberty of bestowing upon him. He turned fully to face Jayce and patted the container, reassuring; he certainly would not be standing beside the box if he did not believe fully that it was safe, after all.

Jayce took a deep breath, locking eyes with Valerian and pointedly not looking towards the container. There was a sharp stinging scent in the air, heavy cleaning supplies, someone had enough presence of mind to clean up the blood, though it was little comfort; the closer she got to the container, the harder her hand shook.

"Jayce, please," Valerian smiled and gave the box another pat, "a person of my status does not stand beside unsafe equipment. Trust me when I say you will be safe all the way to, and on, Haven."

Her eyes widened to the size of small moons. "Please tell me you didn't just say the destination of this ship beside a," she faltered, glancing at the box with a spark of anger in her eye, "monster that can talk to billions of other monsters with his mind, did you?"

Chuckling softly, Valerian lowered his hand from the container and shook his head, "Mister Findlay can't hear anything, I assure you," the mechanic did not take her criticism of his Emperor so lightly, however.

Bristling visibly, the man glared. "Give your Emperor the respect he is due and leave worrying about how machines run to the qualified people," both Jayce and Valerian looked surprised, focusing on the man intently as he launched into an ignorant tirade. "There are redundancies upon redundancies with this high tech machine, I daresay far more than necessary for one infested man."

Having had enough, Valerian raised his hand and the mechanic quieted immediately. There was a cold note of reprimand in his tone, "That will be quite enough, thank you. Jayce here is a qualified engineer in her own right and certainly beyond criticism in that regard," he nodded towards her with a small smile as she smirked, "Though you are certainly correct that she is safe."

With a wave, he dismissed the thoroughly chastened man. Jayce had adjusted her position to be suitably far away from the container as soon as the mechanic was out of earshot, however. Accepting that this would probably be the highest level of comfort she was going to get in regards to the situation, Valerian held his hand out and she took it, perhaps a little overly firmly, with her new one.

"Well, I guess this is it," Jayce said, looking him in the eye with absolute resolve, "I wish you luck, Emperor Valerian. You have done nothing but be a good person to us, even if we didn't deserve it." Her eyes shifted over his shoulder pointedly, "hell, you could just kill all of the infested right now and nobody would blame you. Nobody."

Valerian felt a seed of warmth burst inside his chest, that she accepted him as Emperor meant a lot. He squeezed her cybernetic hand hard. "Thank you Jayce, trust that when order has been restored here I will be in touch. Raynor's Raiders will be acknowledged for the good they have done, and all the help they have rendered unto me."

A minute later and she stood beside the container silently, watching the last of the light in the launch bay disappear as the ship sealed itself against the vacuum of space that it would be traversing shortly; she could not shake the feeling it felt distinctly like a tomb sealing. Glancing at the container once more, she shivered and beelined for the cockpit, glad of the door that would keep him out of sight and out of mind.
She strapped herself into the pilot seat as the ship thrummed to life, eye catching a small datapad as it threatened to slip off the console when the ship lurched upwards. Catching it in her cybernetic hand, she thumbed it on and had a look out of curiosity, letting out an audible groan when she realized it was instructions; the ship was already rising into the Korhal sky as she begun to grudgingly read.

**Mengsk Palace - Blast Site**

Disembodied voices were getting closer by the moment.

"Approaching the epicenter now."

"Tons of residual artifact radiation, but no psionic readings," one of the bodiless voices mused, crackling through a speaker.

Deep pain as a harsh light passes over closed eyelids, it felt more like two rods piercing into his eyes.

"We got strong vitals over here!"

"Holy hell, it's her. Get word to the Emperor immediately! Tell 'em Raynor's here too."

"Boss..." Uncertainty, "It's her. We kill her now and we could be heroes."

"You got your orders, don't screw with me right now Private. Don't like 'em any more than you do," an older soul, the crusty voice of experience sent to curb the more unruly, apparently; or maybe just one of those resocs that lived past the rank of private somehow.

Jim's heart raced. Sarah was alive and had to be within reach, and people were talking about killing her. With a tremendous force of will, he tried to come to her rescue; his fingertip twitched.

"Give me a hand here, better get 'em strapped down for the ship." Jostling and grunts of effort.

"Mind them spikes and blades and god-knows-what."

A strange, uncomfortable sensation came from his shoulder region, followed by a sharp sound. **Snap!**

"Uhh...Sir, it came off, I'm sorry."

Exasperated sigh.

"He'll live without one. Just watch what you're doing, moron."

Sensations of weightlessness and restriction. Jim swore he could feel and hear more by the second; good, he might have a fight on his hands real soon.

In her mind, Sarah wandered a vast wasteland where once a verdant universe bloomed, cold and utterly alone. Where did they go? What happened? Confusion reigned supreme, but one warm hand grasping hers held the cold at bay.

"Sir, he's got a hold of her and he won't let go for nothin'."

"Real touchin', just leave it. Put 'em over there and lets get the hell outta here before we go sprouting extra limbs from all this radiation."

"I don't think it's that kind of radiation, sir."

"Shut the hell up."
After further jostling, familiar sounding machinery roared to life, muted, all around. Jim gripped Sarah's hand for all he was worth, feeling reality come trickling back in a steadily increasing stream.

"Reporting." A pause. "Emperor Valerian! A pleasure, sir." Another pause. "Yes, we have recovered the Queen of Blades and James Raynor and are en route right now. Life signs are solid, almost missed 'em because the psi detector was giving nothing."

Uncomfortable shifting. "Yes sir, they are inert right now. Raynor looks like he's comin' to, though."

Jim listened and learned. *I am not letting you go Sarah, hang in there.* He wondered if she could hear him, he could not hear anything anymore.

**Mengsk Palace - Lower Floors**

In a dark meeting room, Tosh stood guard over Nova with one hand pressed to his ear as he listened to the chaotic comms; the ghost lay slumped in a large chair, placed there by Gabriel himself.

Staring down at the unconscious woman gave him chills, to think how close he came to being touched by the artifact as she was, the distance could have been measured in inches; he touched her mind with his own, reassuring himself that all of his psionic talent remained. She was whole, but her mind was a defenseless open book, and it had little to do with her lack of consciousness either.

He considered killing her, an angel of mercy after her power had been ripped away. He would expect her to do the same if their positions were reversed.

Grandma Tosh whispered from beside him, "You leave dat girl be, Gabriel," the old crone admonished, "Dis be de spirits at work. You don't interfere with de work of de spirits, dat be bad juju."

His shoulders sagged slightly as he let go of the power, crushing her mind would have been quick and merciful; but if the spirits willed it, Nova would suffer. Her mind stirred before her body did, and he waited.

Nova opened her eyes, feeling an exhaustion so profound that nothing could compare, it defied explanation; her lips pursed into a frown then, absorbing the unfamiliar surroundings through her helmet and attempting to recall what happened. A moment later, her tired gaze landed on Tosh.

He shifted uncomfortably, listening to her quickening thoughts of confusion and, worse yet, fear. Rather than offer an explanation, he shouldered his rifle and approached, scooping her up in his arms.

"What are you doing?" Nova's voice was a growl, but weak and without threat. How could someone who had no power anymore feel threatening?

"Takin' you to safety, now that there be no more zerg and the coast be clear," he muttered through his mask, voice crackling.

"Why am I so...Empty?" Nova sounded bewildered, and her mind echoed it clear as a bell.

"Be quiet for now girl, need to find us a ride," his suits cloak shimmered around them both. Truthfully, he needed to think while she pieced things together herself, it would be easier that way. That, and if the comms were anything to go by, there was a new Emperor in town; Valerian Mengsk was about to receive some visitors.

Nova fell blissfully silent, though her thoughts began to howl louder than anything; she was working
on finding her answers now. Finding a ride was easy work, Tosh slipped into a merc vessel on its way out; even with Nova in his arms, no one noticed them.

He looked outside a small window thoughtfully while listening with both his ears and mind. Mercenaries were being coordinated to rescue people now that the fog was gone, to get them to safe zones and assess damage. In the distance, he saw a perfect cylinder carved vertically through an entire building, the residual energy hanging in the air made his skin crawl.

During the trip Nova finally came to realize what happened, and he was thankful for it. *Your power be out there now, girl. Out there in space, somewhere.* He whispered into her mind, felt her quiet hopelessness with a level of sympathy he thought was dead and gone.
Family

Sewers - Augustgrad

Warfield finished prying off the last of the diodes that were sealed to his skin, the small objects clinking to the plascrete at his feet loudly. Stukov plodded along beside him, seemingly grim and thoughtful; they had entered a manhole, at Stukov's insistence, and had been traveling in the dark ever since.

"We should go to Valerian," Horus said quietly. Sound carried far down the old passageways, echoing strangely off the water and damp plascrete. Even their footfalls sounded like the treads of titans.

"You are very eager to be chained up in some lab, aren't you?" Stukov goaded, turning his head just enough to cast a glowing glare at the General.

"If Valerian intended on chaining us up, he would have already," Warfield said, his tone oozing stubbornness. They had this conversation before, and it came to the same standstill every time; the result was them not getting along very well.

"But he has, I feel them," Alexei gave a raspy chuckle.

This was a new development. Warfield came to a purposeful halt before muttering, "Who?"

"One Matt Horner and Egon Stetmann, dangling in some lab on the terran battlecruiser." Alexei kept an amicable tone, they were brothers in arms now after all; stuck in the same mess. "Your Prince has betrayed you."

Scrubbing a hand across his face in annoyance, Warfield thought for a moment before returning Stukov's look with a glare. "I killed my whole team," the thought burned a fresh hot trail of grief through his nerves, "Who knows what those boys did to the unarmed folks on that ship." His jaw set firmly, "Valerian did whatever needed to be done."

Alexei, fed up, gave Warfield a big shrug. "You are most welcome to go walking up there and take the chance, but I won't be."

Again, they entered an impasse. Warfield needed Stukov, this he admitted to himself; and as he eyed the fallen UED commander, he suspected Alexei could help the others too. From this, a new idea formed, "You said you can feel Egon and Matt."

"Aye, I can." Stukov tilted his head a degree, waiting.

"Can you take them over, or talk through them?" Warfield recalled Rory and Egon doing that, though he chose not to partake of that strangeness.

"Hmm," Stukov considered.

Immediately, Warfield felt his consciousness fired out of his body like a spike out of a gauss, an unwilling passenger on a high speed ride. "Unh!" He shouted, blinking rapidly when bright artificial light suddenly poured into his eyes. Everything felt wrong, foreign; he was in an uncomfortable position, and his voice was without a doubt not his own. Beside him, a familiar voice spoke, marred by a strange accent.
"Hello there. I'd like to speak to your Prince Valerian, he is around, yes?" Egon, inhabited by Alexei, called to two lab techs nearby.

Warfield, disoriented and disgruntled, watched as the two men turned their heads in unison to glare at Egon.

"I do not believe we asked you any questions," one said, fingertip stroking a rather sharp looking tool on the table in front of his person. Maybe they were not lab techs.

The other did not seem so keen on talking and simply stood up, walked over and rammed a giant needle into Egon's pale arm.

"Augh!" Stukov snarled, feeling the pain just as keenly as Stetmann. Worse, he remembered being on the receiving end of much, much worse, in another time and place.

"Emperor Mengsk is not at your beck and call," the tech muttered imperiously as he drew viscous purple blood from Egon, eyeing the vial the needle was connected to with disinterest. "You are just a zerg who talks a bit more than the rest."

Face twisting in rage, Egon's eyes snapped open wide and the fleshy layer of human-like eyes pulled away to reveal crimson red. Stukov whispered through the puppet, gravelly voice distorting Egon's less masculine one strangely, "I will remember you."

Fully absorbed in his work, the lab tech focused on drawing blood and pointedly ignored Egon without so much as a cringe.

Warfield cried, "Wait!" but it was too late, Stukov fled from Egon's body like an angry spirit and pulled him along for the ride. He arrived back in his own body with such imagined force that he staggered, "Damn it!" He thumped a hand against his leg in frustration.

"As I said," Stukov's voice was clipped, tense as he tried to recover his composure. "Your so-called Emperor has betrayed you." His boots sloshed through a puddle as he set a walking pace once more, they needed to be moving again.

Following, Warfield mulled over what he saw and heard. That the people left in charge of the imprisoned infested men were capable of cruelty was irrefutable at this point, but was it really an indication of Valerian's guilt? An excellent politician he may be, but Warfield always perceived Valerian to have blinders for the true nature of men.

"I can't deny what I saw, but this does not necessarily mean Valerian has stabbed us in the back." Warfield ventured cautiously now, there was an air about Alexei that had not been there before; a dangerous threshold had been crossed, and Horus still needed him. He was about to launch into a further explanation of his stance, but Stukov stopped walking.

Something had drawn the old commander's attention, and Warfield did not like the way the working side of his face smiled. Turning his head, he saw the object of the infested man's gaze: a kid, holding up a small news holo and using it for light; the weak illumination was barely enough to light his feet up. He had yet to see Warfield and Stukov, but given how he was suspiciously looking their way, he heard.

"It seems we have company," Alexei said, tipping his head towards the boy.

"Hello?" Small hands held the holo above his head, trying to cast the light farther; it simply cast its light down on the scrawny, dirty form that held onto it tightly. Warfield heard the thump of his heartbeat as he stared at him, unsure of what to do. It was a wonder he had yet to see the glow cast
by the ghastly hole in Stukov's half-ravaged face.

"Hello boy," Stukov called back in an easy tone, whatever anger the bad encounter with the lab evoked within him seemed to have evaporated, "What are you doing down here?"

Eyes widening marginally, as though he thought he had imagined the hushed conversation he heard, the boy took a step back and lowered his light, ready to bolt. "Hiding from the monsters, aren't you?"

"Of course," Stukov smiled. It just happened that their monsters were reversed, was all.

"Stukov," Warfield muttered, holding a hand up part way towards him, a subtle plead. "Let's just let him go and be on our way." He did not know for certain if Stukov could infest anyone, but not knowing was more than enough reason to be cautious.

"I was looking for food," the kid explained, heart beginning to leap at the thought of finding new people in the dark. He took a step towards them, "Do you have any?"

Stukov simply held still as the light wavered dangerously close to revealing himself and his nervous partner. "No, are you with others? Perhaps you should go to them." His lip quirked into a half smile, eyeing the edge of the light.

"Yes, I found some others! You should come with me, maybe we can," the kid sniffed, becoming overwhelmed with emotion, "Maybe we can go find more people and get help now?"

Gritting his teeth, Warfield thought furiously as the kid took one more step towards them, he could curse the nature of children; but if the boy had been hiding down here since before the fog...It was not necessarily his fault he did not know about the third danger lurking around now. "Fine!" He blurted as the light quavered on the tip of Stukov's boots, "Take us there son, lead on."

Stukov seemed surprised, glancing at the General. Surely you plan on losing the child in the dark then? His mental voice was no different than his verbal one, laced with a dry humor.

Already the boy had spun around and began to navigate the dark with a surprising agility, Warfield exhaled as the light moved away, but then he began to follow. No, I have an idea.

Brows furrowing, Stukov followed, booted feet touching the edges of the light as he stayed out of it, just like his partner. And this idea is?

"They are going to be so happy to see some new people!" Nearly squeaking with joy, the kid sniffed again and swiped his eyes with the back of a scrawny arm.

"I am sure they will be ecstatic," Stukov chuckled.

If these refugees have not been touched by the fog, they will not be in good shape. Warfield did not feel particularly good about this plan, but he reasoned to himself that it would help the refugees too. We bring them to Valerian in one piece.

We will have our proof that we are not killing anyone and maybe the gratitude of some civilians to help our cause; Valerian values his peoples opinions of him highly, it would look bad if we were detained after saving them. Warfield said.

Grunting out a scoff, Alexei could not believe his ears.

"Hm?" The boy stopped, nearly catching sight of the two men as they stumbled backwards quickly.
"Nothing, keep going son." Warfield urged, gritting his teeth and following again when the kid muttered a confirmation and got moving.

*We will not be well received, surely you know that.* Stukov's tone was nothing short of exasperated.

*Are you afraid of some starving civilians?* They exchanged a heated glance, the answer need not be said.

They passed some time in silence, quietly navigating under the city. Occasionally a rumble of activity above would make their surroundings tremble, but they held.

*I think he saw my face.* Stukov tilted his head forwards, silently indicating the boy.

Warfield was about to question how he figured as much, but as he inspected the ratty kid's brown mop of hair from behind he understood; his heart rate had skyrocketed as though he was sprinting and Horus wondered how he had not managed to be deafened by it, never mind not hear it. *It is likely someone is going to see us at some point,* he reasoned.

"What is your name, boy?" Alexei called.

"Tate," afraid or not, he responded quickly to the question. Perhaps he was thinking about how to lose them, he was biting his lip as he turned his head just enough to glance backwards.

"My name is Alexei Stukov," he said in a rather formal tone.

"That's a weird name," the boy pointed out, steps slowing.

Warfield eyed Stukov, confused and suspicious. *What are you doing?*

"It is, because I do not hail from here. I come from very, very far away," Alexei could not help the wistfulness that infused his tone.

One thing that was beyond universal was the curiosity of children, and the next question was no surprise, "Where?"

A chill ran down Warfield's spine as Stukov purposefully took a longer stride and entered the light. "Earth."

Going rigid, Warfield's fingertips curled and talons extended, but it was a helpless gesture; even if he could attack Stukov, then what? He would just end up killing the boy himself. *Don't do it.* He pleaded shamelessly instead. *He's just a boy.*

"Earth...That ain't possible," there was an accusing note in the boy's tone, and he stopped to turn around and face the liar. His eyes widened and mouth opened to yell.

Clamping his human hand over the kid's mouth, he laughed softly, "Ah, ah. I did not lie to you boy." He glanced at Warfield as the holo fell to the ground and landed in a puddle, extinguishing all the light but from Stukov himself, the boy flailed in honest terror. *Do not worry yourself overmuch, General. I have no intentions of infesting him.*

Warfield did not like the reassurance, because intentions were prone to change, but he remained quiet and worried. *What are you doing then? He'll never take us to the others now.*

"You have been leading us around for a while now," Stukov made an audible *tsk* sound and smooshed the boys hollow cheeks between thumb and forefinger. "I think it's time you take us where
you meant to, Tate."

Horus grimaced, seeing where this was going now; he felt both like a coward and a fool. Was taking someone like Alexei Stukov to the Bucephalus, and Valerian by proxy, really a good plan after all? Stukov even just admitted to being able to infest people. His feelings summed themselves up succinctly: I am screwed.

**Bucephalus - Rebel Base**

*Here, pinned under rubble.* A finger, tipped with a long talon, tapped a marker out onto a holographic map of Augustgrad. Lasarra looked up from it and at Valerian, feeling at the minds of the trapped terrans a moment more. One is close to death, several are in very poor physical condition.

"Send us the coordinates then," Mira Han spoke. Though not present, the mercenaries cybernetic eye zoomed in as she observed from her vidscreen. "A rescue operation will be mounted immediately."

"Sent," Valerian said, firing off the coords to Mira with a few taps and a quick swipe. "We will send you more as Lasarra finds them, thank you miss Han." Mira's vidscreen closed without delay, the mercenary woman and her forces were very, very busy.

Looking up from the map, Valerian studied the protoss intently. "Forgive me if I am being too forward Lasarra, but you seem very distracted," Lasarra had been quiet and withdrawn ever since the dramatic change of events, even the light of her eyes seemed dimmer.

You are perceptive, young Emperor. Lasarra admitted, intently staring at the map; choosing who lived and who died, there were nowhere near enough able bodied terrans to save all the ones in need of dramatic amounts of medical aid.

I have regrets not speaking to Jayce before she left, I know just how much Rory Swann meant to her. I hesitated. A cowardly protoss, she felt ashamed, but some things need not be shared with Valerian.

A thought, strong in its emotion, flickered to the forefront of Valerian's mind for only an instant before he could repress it purposefully. Glowing eyes, sharpening at the edges and focusing, looked up from the map and directly at him.

You planned on telling me James Raynor was alive, when exactly? Lasarra's words were as crisp and frosty as an autumn morning.

"Again, I wish you would not do that," Valerian reminded her curtly.

The mind does not work as you think it does. Hardly in the mood to discuss the terrans collective terrible lack of mental discipline, Lasarra focused on the information she had gleaned instead. If James Raynor yet lives, would it not be kind to inform Egon, Matt and Jayce? It may do them well to hear it.

"I would prefer not," he frowned, watching as the protoss continued to present more and more points on the map, wondering how they would manage to save all these people; the task seemed impossible. "At least until we know what kind of condition they are in, we have very little information right now."

Lasarra's eyes narrowed into glowing slits as she regarded the map, fingertip pausing above a point for a moment before glossing over it; the Emperor had power now, and his motives had suddenly become suspect. There were many reasons to keep the Raiders from regrouping and recovering, especially the infested ones.
As such when she felt the mind of General Horus Warfield come to her attention, separated from the zerg swarm somehow, she refrained from mentioning it.

*It is a thought.* Lasarra murmured, squinting as an unusual force prevented her from communicating with the infested man. Interesting.

Jim regained full awareness with a gasp, sitting up with a sharp jerk and seemingly being thrown down with equal force. Eyes opening wide, he looked down and saw the restraints, the pristine white walls and flooring; a lab, he was restrained on a table in a lab.

A trickle of fear ran down his back and he tried to get a handle on it, he had woken up strapped to tables before. With some dismay he regarded himself and his bindings, noting that visually, he was still very much infested, and that these especially thick bands were not going anywhere.

"Jim?" A familiar voice crackled through a comm overhead as he began to attempt to flex and twist at his restraints anyway.

"Valerian?" Raynor's fists clenched, wanting very much to get his hands on the person responsible for jailing him like this, "Is this where you tell me I was a fool?"

"No," Valerian sounded perfectly calm, and why would he not? He held every last card now. "A lot happened when the artifact went off, Jim. I will gladly fill you in but, I need to know that you are in control of yourself."

Raynor's guts twisted, so something had happened; it was a blessed relief to not feel the swarm eating away at the edges of his mind, he had just assumed that it happened to everyone else... "How am I supposed to prove something like that anyway? Quit wasting my damn time and tell me what happened, Junior."

"And get me out of these damn restraints too!" He hollered, annoyed; what happened to everyone? Where was Sarah? Probably tied down in some room too, a real welcome back to humanity.

After a brief pause, the heavy bands strapped across what felt like every inch of his body snapped open. Jim slid off the table and to his feet in a hurry, getting a better read of the room; smooth white everywhere, it was hard to discern where the door even was, but he found it.

"I believe that is proof enough, the others did not seem very capable of reasoning," Valerian said, watching as Jim prowled around the room like a caged animal; he frowned when he began to bang on the door shortly after identifying it.

"Where is Sarah?" Jim growled between bangs, though he was not putting real force behind it. Not yet.

"Easy Jim, Sarah is nearby but she is-"

"Let me see her. Now." Valerian's response would dictate whether force was about to be used or not.

The door slid open soundlessly and Jim charged through it, Valerian called after him, "To your left, but Jim!"

Ignoring the prince, Jim navigated through the sterilized and cleanly medical wing, not sure what he was looking for but damn sure in his ability to find it.

It came as a large surprise when Valerian himself, dressed as fine as he ever was, rounded a corner
and clapped a hand to Jim's chest; the surprise alone is what stopped his feet, and the escort of 8 fully armed marines might have had a little bit to do with it too.

Whatever the younger man had to say must have been important, and Jim leveled a cool gaze at him, waiting impatiently.

"She has been..." Valerian looked very uncomfortable, perhaps even regretting being physically present, "ripping them off."

Jim's eyes widened before he caught himself, "Take me to her, Valerian."

Sarah Kerrigan stood in a battlefield of one, the table she awoke on and all of its restraints had been ripped to metallic ribbons and chunks, buried under what seemed to be over a dozen sets of wing blades and a few long hair tendrils strewn among the mess. She was in the process of mechanically ripping off a freshly regrown skeletal blade limb, growling away the pain, when the lab door hissed open and rapid footfalls came rushing in.

"Sarah, stop!" A voice, familiar and evoking further overwhelming emotions, called. Warm hands, but not human ones, caught her own and firmly pulled them away from their destructive work.

"It's gone. They are gone, all of them." Sarah's voice sounding so broken hit Jim right in the heart, but the words worried him. Could she really miss the swarm? He certainly did not.

"You are free, we are free, Sarah. It's okay now." She was still facing away but he pulled her into a tight, warm hug anyways, bladed limbs stuck between them and all. "Valerian can help us to--"

Her hair tendrils bristled, clattering between their bodies as she bared her teeth and went rigid. "I have my strength ripped away from me, everything that has ever made me what I am, and wake up tied down in a lab. Now I am expected to want this?"

Jim quietly cursed Valerian for his choice, but the damage was done. "Just a precaution darlin', I woke up that way too. Seems a lot went down when we got knocked out by that artifact." He gave her another squeeze, comforting; the only certainty he could offer right now was that he was there, and he was not leaving. "You don't have to do anything, I'll let them poke me with as many needles as it takes until they figure out how to cure us."

Sarah closed her eyes and clenched her fists, trying so hard to focus, to master her emotions. It was a cold and lonely place now, her mind. "You can't cure a race, Jim. There is no cure." She felt his arms going slack as she raised her head, glaring firmly at the white and purple spattered wall. "We are zerg. Zerg without a hivemind, without purpose."

He felt crushed, she could have turned around and ripped his heart out physically and it would have hurt less. Could she really, truly miss being that monster? He reasserted his hug, more for himself than her now.

"I wish," she let out a breath, anger rushing away and melancholy flooding in, voice softening; "More than anything, that you succeeded on Char and killed me like you promised you would." How could she live with killing so many? Never mind being subjected to experiments again, Valerian was undoubtedly lying to Raynor; not that she could read his mind if she tried.

"Darlin'," Jim whispered, swallowing and trying to put the strength back in his voice, "If we succeeded on Char and the artifact did this to you, I never would have killed you. Never would have let a doctor near you again until we knew how to fix you proper."
Both Kerrigan and Raynor turned sharply as one unit when the door slid open a second time, but only Sarah glared so coldly as to give Valerian pause. "Please excuse me for interrupting, I thought it only proper to introduce myself."

"Now might not be the best time, Junior." Jim muttered, lowering his arms from around Sarah but keeping a hand on her shoulder, just in case.

"Oh no," Sarah went one step farther and slipped out of Jim's grasp in one firm movement, eyes gleaming. "Introduce yourself, Mengsk," there was a very unfriendly emphasis on his last name that did not go unnoticed.

"I understand you have certain expectations of me because of my last name," Valerian frowned, "but I am Valerian Mengsk, and I am not my father." Sarah's glare did not subside, but he understood. "It will take a lifetime to undo the damage my father has done."

Reassessing the situation, Jim said, "Might be a good time to explain what happened." He was surprised more at Sarah's lack of violence than anything; she had to be in real turmoil.

"Of course," Valerian gestured subtly to the open door behind him, "Let's walk? The guards are a precaution, I am sure you understand." With limbs and blood everywhere, Valerian found himself suitably ill at ease, and the smell was something he would not bring up either.

Further surprising Jim, Sarah moved first, his arms fell back to his sides as she strode towards Valerian and paused at a suitable distance; as suggested by the many rifles pointing at her. "Easy with the guns boys," Raynor warned, frowning.

"Whatever makes his highness feel safe," Kerrigan sniped as Jim sidled up beside her.

"It is a considerable risk for me to be at such close proximity to you, namely given my relation to my father;" Valerian said, leading them out of the blood stained lab and into the halls of his ship at an easy pace. "But I need you to believe me that I am in no way deceiving you, and trust that I am doing what I think is best."

"Arcturus once looked me in the eye and said killing everyone on Tarsonis was what he thought best," Sarah murmured.

"I care about my people, and I am not a tyrant. My fathers methods and school of thought...Well, they are not mine." Valerian studied the way ahead intently, thinking on what room to receive his guests in. "Allow me to explain what happened on our end when the artifact went off."

"Been waitin', Junior." Jim said.

Valerian explained the situation to the best of his knowledge as they made their way to his viewing room, with its wall-to-wall view port and silent gramophone. Gesturing to the arrayed furniture, Valerian walked to the view port and gazed at the ravaged cityscape he was supposed to rule over, "We discovered the broodmother dead on the Hyperion not long after. Please, make yourselves comfortable."

A new power at the head of the swarm, Jim's fists clenched at the thought. Would it ever end? It was a small mercy they left. He prowled to a leathery couch and promptly sat, ignoring the sound and feel of the absurdly expensive material being thoroughly perforated by his spines. "Great," he muttered.

Sarah wanted to sigh with relief, not all was lost. Thinking on her protege and the infested men, she stood a few paces shy of where Jim sat and brought her thoughts to life, trying to fill in the blanks. "Zagara may have destroyed Shlassa to take the infested men. They are powerful, she would see..."
them as assets for the task I left her."

Zerg and anything zerg related was the last topic Jim wanted to discuss, his tone made that clear, "And that task is?"

Striding to the view port herself, giving Valerian plenty of space, Sarah studied the ruins with disinterested; she just wanted to be further away from Jim at that point in time. "To find and destroy Amon, should I die on Korhal," she could hear Valerian's sharp intake of breath, even if he tried to hide it.

A heavy pause hung between the three.

Finally, Valerian said, "How did you come to know about Amon?" He had spent so much time giving answers on their way over, questions were beginning to shift to the forefront of his mind.

"I could ask you the same thing, Mengsk." Sarah hissed, glaring at him from the corner of her eye.

"It doesn't matter!" Jim surged to his feet, keen on intervening. "Will Zagara do it?"

Without hesitation Sarah said, "Yes," Zagara was bound by a stronger force than loyalty to the strongest now, she believed in Kerrigan. Pride warmed her heart then, and hurt just as much; the swarm was her family, Zagara was her daughter, and all of them thought she was dead.

Valerian considered the new information for a few moments, rubbing his fingertips together thoughtfully. "Then the swarm is not a concern for the time being; we can focus harder on helping the citizens and rebuilding without fear of an attack."

Sarah's blades twitched, a gesture that stirred unease in the armed men watching them. "And us?"

"I trust you understand that you will be monitored during your stay on my ship, and that you do truly want to be human again, Sarah." Valerian's tone was even, and he turned his head to make eye contact with her in a very purposeful way.

"Yes," Jim cut in before she could answer, blunt and hard.

Lasarra listened from the map room in which she worked, thoughtful. The Queen of Blades, no longer the incredible psionic threat she was, not even the leader of the swarm anymore; it was a thought to crush her mind, a short and brutal note of revenge for the protoss race. As quick as the thought came she let it flow away, the terrans would see to her punishment, they would demand that.

**Command Center - Rebel Base**

Nova sat in a poorly lit, dingy break room, staring blankly at the surface of the table she had seated herself at, while Tosh finished a quick recon of the building; the imposing spectre stepped into the room and uncloaked, already talking.

"Mostly abandoned now, minus three shift rotations for the comm tower," he said, pouring himself a styrofoam cup of instant coffee. "No one gonna bother us here, corpse smell bugs them."

Placing her hands on the table, still covered in the smooth ghost suit, she closed them and watched the digits come together; Tosh barely registered, he had not been in her thoughts since she realized what happened. It was perhaps the shock of not knowing her place in the grand scheme of things anymore that was the hardest to deal with. All she knew right now was that her place was not as an Agent anymore, that was for certain.
Tosh had gone quiet, standing there and drinking the scalding fluid as he watched her blue eyes shift back and forth across her fingertips, listening to her thoughts intently. He wondered if he would have reacted the same, and what it was like; above all, he still felt a great deal of pity towards her.

There were no more voices, no grand tornado of wailing souls tearing at her mind. Nova swallowed, feeling guilty that they were not there anymore, the silence and lack of having to try to block them out left a hole that she did not know how to fill. Closing her hands into fists, she frowned; was she not planning on leaving the service of the Dominion after her mission was complete anyway?

Tosh's eyes narrowed.

Never before had the thoughts of a normal, mundane life been anything more than a distant fanciful flickering on the edge of a mental horizon. Valerian could not rightly force her to do anything now, no coercing about the benefits to humanity she could provide, lies or not, this could be a real chance. When Tosh's hand slammed to the table between her fists, she jumped slightly.

"How could you be thinkin' like this?" He sounded truly incredulous, disgusted even. "Just droppin' everythin' that you were and bein' some normal person?" He bared his teeth at the very thought, like it was some great enemy, "You aught ta be raging! Ready to fight to get back what is rightfully yours!"

There was no reaction forthcoming from the silent ghost, until he grasped a hand around her shoulder hard. In an explosion of motion, the smaller assassin stood up and caught the vulnerable hand in a hold, digging her fingertips painfully into a pressure point. Her tone came out even and calm, "I may not have a level 10 psi index anymore Tosh, but I am still an Agent. My training did not just disappear."

Tosh, unflinching at what had to be considerable pain, tilted his head and focused. Nova's grip, hard as any neosteel, was broken by an invisible force. "You lost everything that mattered, girl."

Hand shoved back to her chest by his psionic power, Tosh did make an important and brutal point: they were no longer in the same league. November Terra was no threat to Gabriel Tosh whatsoever. The two took a moment to quietly rub at their wrists, nursing physical and mental pains.

When she had nothing to add, he turned away from her sharply. "Gonna go have a look at our new so-called Emperor," Tosh muttered darkly. "I be feelin' strange things in that ship. You stay here."

He strode out the door, and Nova was certain he only added the last part to point out that she could not do even the most basic tasks of a ghost anymore, just to try and rile her.

She sat down, renewing her glaring contest with the table.

**Repentance - Deep Space**

Hesitantly, Jayce stepped through the threshold of the cockpit and into the small bay of the ship, which she discovered earlier was named *Repentance*. Lips twisting into a scowl, she glanced between the rations in her hands and the looming container that housed the Devil himself; there was some kind of cosmic irony at work, ruling over her life, she was certain of it.

Picking at dried chunks of who-knows-what and a bit of who-knows-who from underneath his fingernails, Tychus paused and frowned; a grating sound rumbled through his fancy prison, like gears shifting and gyrating. Suddenly wary, he cast his gaze around until a slat opened and, glancing inside, he found a packet of rations laying there.

He smiled, wolfish.
As the food receptacle shifted around, carefully delivering the package to the prisoner, Jayce wondered at the design of the cell itself. In her experience, for every fancy bell and whistle you added to a piece of machinery the odds of it malfunctioning increased tenfold. As the delivery mechanism wound its way back into place, she decided to think no further on it; even though she would rather the cargo starve a bit and for the cell to be that much more secure.

With a small popping sound, the ration dispenser slid open. Like any rational individual, she fully expected the wrappings of the ration to be there for disposal, since no one in their right mind wanted to lounge around in their own garbage; instead, there lay a severed hand. Her own hand.

Frozen to the spot, she stared in horror at the piece of anatomy that was once attached to her body. All the flesh and meat had been removed, tendons clinging to bones were all that remained. As the mental image of Tychus tearing into her digits and arm with his teeth flooded through her mind, the smell hit.

Rotting and putrid, it was the last sensory evidence Jayce needed to realize it was what it was. Gagging, she pitched forwards and violently heaved.

Chuckling, Tychus felt a giddy high rushing through him at the thought of giving whatever idiot was in charge of his cell a real shocker; all while stuffing rations into his mouth around a big grin.

Recovering as fast as possible, Jayce trembled hard and felt a flicker of thankfulness that she could not feel the texture of her former hand as she grabbed it with her new one. For one wild second, as she stumbled towards the garbage disposal, she thought about saving the ravaged appendage; surely the eggheads over on Haven could reattach the...

No, common sense returned just as fast and she violently stuffed the hand into the chute where it would be incinerated by the small reactor of the ship. There was nothing to salvage and the rest of the arm, whatever was left of it, was still in that box. Stumbling back into view of the cell, she wiped at her mouth with the back of a sleeve. Even if there was a chance of salvaging what was taken, she would not risk one single life on it.

Anger, white hot and bordering on madness, filled her to the brim then. Compelled, she stepped forwards and referenced the instructions in her mind, swiping her cybernetic hand across the smooth and cold surface of the cell just so; the material shimmered under her hand, solid yet liquidy.

Tychus blinked as light flooded through the side of his prison, eyes widening. Jayce standing there, whole and radiating an anger he had yet to see, left him flabbergasted into silence; but only for a moment.

Jayce did not flinch when the monster bared his teeth and made a violent stab at the wall of his prison, so fast she could barely register it with her eyes; there was no doubt that it was made with killing intent.

Blade skipping off the wall with a shriek, he growled and straightened, glaring down at her. It was offensive, a downright mark on his manliness, that she lived after he took an honest shot at ending her life. "How the hell are you alive?" He said.

Staring at him, like a storm cloud building strength, Jayce did not react to his question.

It occurred to him then that there may not be sound, he did not hear any telltale crackling, none beyond the electricity that powered his prison anyway. He waited, all while patiently studying the renewed and apparently severely tenacious little terran woman, tilting his head a degree. She was well groomed and wearing an outfit from the Bucephalus, all pressed and pretty. Even her hair was
proper and shiny clean, if a bit mussed looking now.

After waiting for a time, Jayce had apparently reached her capacity and hit the button to open up the comm with considerable force.

Reacting to her gesture and the telltale sound of a comm opening, Tychus immediately said, "You can't be serious. I know you ain't that stupid, so who forced you into being on this rig with me?" He could tell now that he was on a ship, some kind of small system runner, judging by what he could see around the enraged looking Jayce; he also suspected he already knew the answer to his question.

Cold and furious, she stared him in the eye and listened. Findlay could talk enough for the both of them, and she wanted to hear just what he had to say.

Eyes narrowing and nostrils flaring, he glowered and rumbled, "Too damn stubborn to die. Don't think you realize just how screwed you are now sugar, what I did was mercy."

His words seemed to spark the fire in her eyes, and she spoke in a low, calm tone, like discussing what was for dinner. "Long way to go between here and our destination," she gave his cell a pointed once-over, "There won't be anyone who gives enough of a damn to cry about you when you show up dead in that box."

Tychus leaned forwards until he was eye level with her, eyes bright as flares, glaring, challenging. "Real brave now, with all this here steel between us," he mocked.

Her voice lowered to a rasp as she held his glare with her own, "Believe you me, I'll figure it out." She jabbed a finger at him aggressively and bared her teeth, "You're a dead man."

Tychus glanced towards the cockpit then and she violently swiped his face in response, shutting off the visual channel. He let out a thunderous laugh at the expression of terror that filled her before it all went black; laughing even harder yet when she tried to close the comm and realized the button was broken due to her zealousness.

"Fuck," she whispered. Filled with very real fear, she ran into the cockpit through the door she had so foolishly left open, praying feverishly that no sign of their destination, Haven, was displayed anywhere. It could be all it took to screw everyone over, if Tychus could contact the swarm at any point; she felt like such a fool, especially after she nearly crucified Valerian over the same damn thing.

A sigh of relief escaped her when she found no visible sign of Haven anywhere. Pure luck, she felt sick just thinking about it.

Findlay had caught on already, grinning from his prison, "Afraid I might find out where we're goin', sugar?" He cracked his knuckles at the thought of it. "Oh I will," he promised, "And when Big Dog gets outta this cage, there won't be any mercy no second time; not for you, not for the eggheads, no one."

Gritting her teeth, she shut the cockpit door and fell into her chair with an exhausted huff. He was going to be a distraction now, with that broken comm, he would milk it for all it was worth. Still, the promise gave her new misgivings, new fears as she stared out into the stars blurring past.

Tychus knew Dr. Hanson, what she looked like, even her voice. Very thin ice was being tread upon now, all he needed was one god damn hint and Haven, all its civilians included, would go right back to being zerg bait; Hanson would need to be informed and precautions taken.

Of course...Jayce glanced at the closed door. Tychus Findlay did not have to make it there alive, she
did make her own promise after all; and that bastard had taken her arm, *ate it* and had the planetsized balls to call it mercy to her face.

Yes, time grew short for the big man now. Her eyes narrowed in determination.

**Leviathan - Deep Space**

Zagara, Izsha and Abathur sat within the chamber of the *Leviathan* that the Queen of Blades used so often before, the stars spread out before them through the eyes of the massive living ship; they were deep within a candid conversation.

"We do not even know *what* Amon is, never mind *where* he is," Zagara was hissing in frustration. Controlling the entire swarm was taxing, it would take time to get used to it.


Zagara and Izsha knew better, thankfully. Izsha combed through the memories and thoughts stored within her, every stray thought and tactic related to Amon, his hybrid and the prophecy that Kerrigan saw fit to have her remember; there had to be something, some hint of what to do, a hidden gem of guidance from their fallen master.

Following Izsha's thoughts, Zagara's head drooped a degree, "I fear Kerrigan was the only one strong enough to confront this foe."

"Stukov was the strongest left," Izsha said, regarding her new leader curiously, "We should have collected him before leaving Korhal."

"We would suffer significant losses to return and do so now," Zagara reasoned, "We must preserve and grow our forces now, and trust that Amon will reveal himself to us in time." Already, she had gone a step further than Kerrigan and activated some of the forces that the fallen Queen no longer wished to utilize. Every weapon had value now.

"I fear we are doomed to failure," Izsha stated plainly. "Even the Queen's infested projects were strong, we should have made sure to take them to help us."

"They are on Korhal, it is no longer an option," Zagara said firmly.

Izsha coiled upon herself, shifting subtly on the spot. She said, "You are our leader now, as our fallen Queen wished. Lead us, Zagara."

"Not all specimens on Korhal," Abathur, fingertips pressed together, had almost been forgotten until then.

Both Izsha and Zagara stared at him.

"Explain yourself Abathur," Zagara prompted when it seemed the Evolution Master would fall silent again.

With a decidedly smug air about him Abathur said, "Organism Tychus. In transit. In space."

Zagara considered the Evolution Master then. He was the oldest of all zerg now, one of the earliest creations of the fallen Overmind, and his power could not be understated. It was good, she reasoned, that all he cared about was his creations and the evolution of the swarm; Abathur could have taken
many shots at a higher status, perhaps leadership of the swarm itself, had he wished it.

Instead of harass Abathur about not speaking sooner, Zagara said, "Where? Tell us, Evolution Master."

"Unclear," he admitted, hands making a helpless gesture.

Annoyed now, Zagara spat, "What good is that information to us? We do not have the time to waste looking for one worthless infested terran."

"He overpowered you," Izsha pointed out, without a trace of mockery in her tone. "Perhaps he could be of use."

"I gazed on all that made up that fleshling." Zagara hissed spitefully, "It is a purely selfish creation, Tychus Findlay will not help the swarm."

"Perhaps," Izsha inclined her head. "It is a thought. We still do not know where Findlay is going, Zagara. I simply suggest we remain on the lookout for him, and seize him should the opportunity arise."

"I will allow it," Zagara nodded in grudging acceptance. For now, they would continue to drift aimlessly in space; the full might of the swarm had been called once more to join them, but sitting and waiting was a frustrating thing.
Sewers - Augustgrad

Tate had, after some nonviolent coaxing, lead Warfield and Stukov to the refugees. Hushed whispers, quiet sobbing, and weak lights lit the tunnels ahead.

_The boy is brave, I will give him that._ Stukov admitted privately, impressed by his fortitude; Tate only crumbled when there was an acid-oozing zerg fist half an inch from his face.

_Is terrorizing children that difficult?_ Warfield was sullen and angry, he did not like watching. Kids like Tate were the kind of people he signed on to protect.

Without warning, Tate leaped forwards and screamed at the top of his lungs into the dark "ZERG! RUN!" and took off running himself. Alexei took a lazy halfhearted swipe after him, but it was clear he let the kid run.

All the quiet talk and subdued noises ahead morphed into a screaming stampede so fast, Warfield was caught off guard when the urge to chase seized him. He took one long step forwards before jerked to a halt, Stukov asserting further control.

Scornful, Alexei regarded the barely contained infested man, "Look at you, General." An idea occurred to him then, and he gave Warfield an easy smile. "Barely under control, even with help." He sounded thoughtful, "Do you know what will happen to those people when I let go, Horus?"

Shaking lights were still in sight, footsteps and terrified yelling still thunderous, Warfield's eyes widened. "You wouldn't," he said.

"Wouldn't I? These people mean nothing to me; you are their hero here, not me," Alexei's eyes narrowed, "It's like riding a bike, General, I am taking off the training wheels, ride or fall now." Without a second thought, Stukov let go. "Think of the children!" he laughed.

Letting out a ragged scream, Horus fell to his knees and slammed his hands into the ground, digging in and trying to seal himself in place as the vast conscious of the swarm plucked him up. Curling into a ball, he thought about Adam, his brother and his men; in desperation, he grabbed hold of the image of Tate, the ratty kid that he was meant to stand strong for, and rode the wave.

_Bucephalus - Rebel Base_

"Kerrigan, I am sorry to disturb you but...I need to know what happened to my father, what happened in the palace."

"Arcturus was not there, he is either dead or hiding on this planet still. No ship would have gotten past the Swarm while it was here."

"I see, and the artifact?"

"It was Narud. Maybe your father had the artifact already somehow, I don't know, but Narud was there in the shape of Arcturus and it was Narud who pressed the button."

"Doctor Emil Narud? I am afraid I do not understand, he is a-"

"You've been duped, Valerian, tricked by a shapeshifting minion of Amon."
"Shapeshifting! Could there be more? Are we secure here?"

"He is the only one I've found, but no, no one is secure. Not by a long shot."

They both parted ways wondering where Arcturus went, but for different reasons.

In a staff lunch room, all inhabitants hastily cleared out before their arrival, stood Jim and Sarah. Guards were not far away, stationed outside of the door after some creative bullying by Jim that left Sarah privately smiling.

There was no smiling now, just this quiet sadness from Sarah and a yearning to close distance from Jim. During his time knowing her, both as Sarah and as the Queen of Blades, where vast chasms of space and hundreds upon hundreds of planets worth of distance physically parted them; but it felt now, mere feet away, she was farther than ever.

So he put it aside, though it hurt, to try and make change for the better. "All those people who died Sarah, their deaths aren't on you; they can be laid at the feet of Arcturus, and the people who made you a weapon," he said firmly.

"You can't take away the memories and experience of it all. They will never leave me," Sarah stared at a coffee machine, when was the last time she actually ate terran food? "At least...At least when I was leading, it didn't bother me."

"You can't go thinkin' like that, darlin'!" Jim ran a hand through his hair in frustration, ignoring the unpleasant sensation of spines dragging across his palms. "There's a real second chance here, a real one! And it doesn't matter what we look like," he tried to catch her eye, to hold her gaze and make her feel his sincerity. "I will take you away and we will live in peace, no matter what."

"A quaint little planet where we can live together as monsters, and no one comes hunting for my head?" Sarah faced him then, smiling sadly. "I can't read minds anymore Jim, and I might be out of touch with reality for terrans, but I know a fools errand when I hear it."

"Just, please," when her gaze met his, he felt his heart being squeezed again. Compelled, he closed the gap and took up both her hands in his, trying his damndest to ignore the fact that they were both as alien as could be, and squeezed them reassuringly. "Take things slow, step by step, and we'll deal with whatever comes our way one problem at a time. Together."

Kerrigan looked down at their entwined hands, thoughtful.

"Even if..." Jim swallowed the lump in his throat, "even if this can't work between us, don't spit in the eye of those folks who gave their lives for you. They weren't all just civilians who didn't know Sarah Kerrigan; some believed you could come back and that the artifact would work, and they were all with me on Char."

When she squeezed his hands back firmly in response, a million words could not have lifted his spirits higher just then. They stood together quietly.

**Valerian's Quarters - Bucephalus**

Heavy bags had begun to form under Valerian's grey eyes as he sat in his room, staring down at the list of *Bucephalus* personnel he had collected himself. After Kerrigan revealed the long-time traitor in his midst, Narud, the lines between enemies and allies were now blurred. Emil Narud...co-founder of the Moebius Foundation, fellow scientist, a genius in regards to the xel'naga and alien races.
Valerian's gloved hands clenched into fists, and that was all the outward anger he'd allow himself to express. Everyone associated with Moebius was suspect now, and that was a very long list, even on his ship alone. He opened a comm to one of the few people left that he could trust.

"Valerian! It is good you have called me," Mira Han's face appeared immediately, even with one eye missing she did not look very well rested either, "things are getting out of hand out here."

Pursing his lips into a tight line, Valerian let out a slow breath. "I suppose it would be too much to ask for a ground force to assist in a delicate matter then?"

"Very much so," she spoke sharply, red eye zooming in on him. "I apologize, but if you saw what was happening in the refugee centers..." Valerian had yet to see a cringe come from the rock-solid mercenary, not even when she saw the infested men for the first time.

"Tell me what is happening, Mira," he said, full aware he had all of zero men to spare at this point.

"We have been rescuing and relocating the refugees as fast as we are able. Multiple structurally sound buildings have been repurposed to house, feed and provide medical care," she paused, uncomfortable, "as soon as they became strong enough to speak, they began raving. There are not enough straightjackets on the planet to restrain this many madmen, Valerian."

His stomach might have dropped out, he could not feel it anymore. Lasarra's admission burned like acid in his memory. "Are they violent?"

"Those who can move immediately begin to self harm and draw things," he was sure the merc paled a few shades.

"Draw things?" he pressed, fine brows furrowing.

"Pictures that make no sense, hieroglyphics and other strange things...in their own blood." Mira's look hardened then, "My men want to leave."

"Damn it," Valerian hissed, "you have me at your mercy Mira! My people need help and my forces are fully committed, even if I doubled them it would not be nearly enough." He let his pride go easily then, "convince your men and the other mercenaries to see this through and you can name your price."

"That price might be too high, Emperor Mengsk," she said seriously.

"An Emperor is nothing without his people, and I care about them," Valerian glared, eyes hard.

"So be it," Mira closed the call and silence filled his room.

Closing his eyes for a minute of rest, Valerian composed himself and stood up quickly. These people needed to be assessed and he trusted no one but himself up to the task. As the door to his chamber slid open, he took a long step backwards in surprise.

Black eyes stared at him, oily pits to a terrible dimension; Valerian recognized the man, one of the lab techs assigned to study the captured infested. In one explosive motion, he took the initiative and struck first.

A line of red appeared across the man's throat as he stood rooted to the spot and staring, bright arterial blood spurting out of the wound as Valerian stood poised for another strike. Aside from profusely bleeding from a deadly blow, the man was otherwise unaffected; the Emperor's eyes widened in fear as the lab tech, impossibly, spoke.
"I live. I am coming," the voice spilling from the man was otherworldly and its malevolence burned a fiery trail of pain into Valerian's ears and brain.

Clinging to his weapon fiercely, Valerian almost dropped it regardless. He tried to recall all his training, all his hard earned killer instincts that would allow him to lunge forwards a second time and render the puppet headless, but he could not move.

Lips parting into a wide, crazed grin, the lab tech laughed as blood bubbled at the corners of his mouth and stained his teeth. With a blink, the black voids where his eyes had been disappeared, only human eyes, wide with terror, remained.

Valerian stared, mirroring the horror on the tech's face as the man reached up with a trembling hand and tried to staunch the bleeding from his nearly severed neck; coughing and gurgling, he was returned to his body only to spend his last few seconds dying. He stared at Valerian accusingly until his legs gave out and his eyes went glassy, lifeless.

Sheathing his weapon, Valerian kicked the corpse out of the doorway and into the hall, sealing himself inside. A gloved hand fisted in his hair and squeezed, the fresh pain pulling him away from flying into a panic. Think. So he thought. There is no fog, has Amon touched us all? Kerrigan was more right than he wanted to admit.

Kerrigan! Jim! He turned and ran to his work table.

Jim's smile dissipated when their quiet was dispelled by the voice of Junior.

"Jim, Sarah, report to my quarters immediately," an unmistakable note of fear tainted his voice, even over the comm, "Amon has left a message, be careful on your way."

As Sarah let go of his hand and strode towards the door at a fast pace, Jim watched all of his hard work crumble. "This can't happen while Amon is out there," she called back to him, voice hard.

Biting his tongue, he followed.

They arrived to find a corpse laying outside the door and the six marines who escorted them spread out to secure the hall, guns live and ready; Jim wondered at the absence of two as he knocked on the locked door. "We're here, Junior."

After a short delay the door hissed open and a haggard Valerian gestured them inside quickly, shutting and locking it behind them almost before they had even entered. Being an Emperor was clearly not treating the young man very well, Jim thought. Dark bags hung under his eyes and there was an animal fear inside those steely grey orbs he had never seen.

"Everything is compromised!" Valerian nearly shouted, storming to his table and gesturing at a list of some sort, "and I don't have the men to spare to secure the ship.

"Slow down now, what do you mean Junior?" Jim frowned as he came to stand beside Valerian and look at the list while Sarah quietly filtered through the room and looked everything over. "You said Amon left a message, let's hear that first."

Sharply, Valerian gestured behind himself and at the door, frustration clear. "I opened the door and he was there, inside one of my men," he stopped talking until he mastered his voice, "he said 'I live. I am coming.' and then left."

"I thought that was just the hybrid, maybe there are still some here on Korhal that-"
"No," Sarah interrupted, severe. She stood across from the two men, looking down at the list of Moebius personnel. "That message came from Amon, think about it Jim." Her wing blades curled and uncurled as she grew angry, "Narud used the artifact against me and I’ve been robbed of all my power. Where did it go?"

Heavy silence hung between the three.

"He used you to...resurrect a dead god?" Valerian looked up from the list and at the infested woman, how could they have known? Would he have not tried to use the artifact against her on Char, even if he knew?

"We need to get the infested boys back, Valerian." Jim frowned down at him, "you need help keeping this here ship secure and I need my Raiders."

"Jim, we have been trying this entire time!" The Emperor looked utterly defeated for a moment, before picking himself back up again, "There is a twenty-four hour rotation of scientists in the lab here, working with Egon and Matt, and I won't expect to receive word from Haven about Tychus for several more days yet."

Looking up at the young Mengsk sharply, Sarah said, "From where?" Voice deadly quiet.

Confused by the sudden interest, given their current situation, Valerian said, "Haven, Sarah. Dr. Hanson made breakthroughs in Zerg biology with only a pittance of a lab while Raynor's Raiders helped her colony relocate repeatedly. I have the highest hopes she can do more now that she has a permanent residence to operate from."

Her eyes narrowed. "Call them back," she said, her tone dire.

Jim was listening to the exchange and finally spoke, "Sarah, why? What happened to Haven?" A cold block of ice formed in his stomach, pure dread.

"With the Bucephalus and possibly my entire force compromised, I may not be able to send a recall message," Valerian humored her, "but any message I send now would not reach them before they arrive to their destination. What is wrong?"

All eyes were on Sarah as she straightened, holding Valerian's gaze. "Because," venom coated his name, "Valerian," her eyes shifted past him and upwards, as if surveying Haven from across the stars. "Haven and Dr. Hanson belong to the Swarm."

Stunned silence settled between the three.

"All those people...we fought so damn hard for them," Jim leaned heavily on the table, else he would be on his knees. He could not look at Sarah.

"Still want to forgive me?" Her voice was soft and quiet, Haven was the least of her sins.

Recovering his composure, Valerian did his best to not look angry. It was easier to forgive when your loss was not personal, this was a test. "When did Haven fall?"

"Immediately after you left. My minions were just waiting, too deep to be detected," she murmured, staring down at Jim.

Thinking, Valerian regarded his gloved hand. Not long ago these hands commanded vast armies and saved people, they felt so useless now, he wanted to rage. No. He firmly told himself. Despair is for lesser men than me.
"Jim," the renewed Emperor said, voice determined once more, "I will send a message out and we will have to hope to God it is enough, or that Jayce figures out what is going on before they land there."

When Jim did not answer, Valerian stepped aside to offer the two some quiet time while he wrote and organized the delivery of his hasty missive.

Clenching and unclenching her clawed hands, Sarah felt unsure and did not like it. Slowly, cautiously, she stepped around the table and placed a hand on Jim's shoulder, offering him comfort. He had done that and more for her, she decided that she could reciprocate.

"Sarah," he murmured, reaching a hand up and placing it over hers, "I need to know. Can they come back?" he looked to her then, desperate. "Tychus is the most stubborn man I ever met, can he fight it?"

Regarding him evenly, Sarah's sad look said it all. Still, he was owed more than an expression in answer, "The hivemind strips away all of the more tender parts of terrans...your humanity, Jim. Look what it did to me, and I was strong enough to lead every last one of the Zerg."

"Can he do it?" he repeated, face screwing up.

Squeezing his shoulder, she gave him a small shake. "I knew every one of you, every like and dislike, every good and bad deed you ever did. We were one, Jim," she paused, forcing herself to look him in the eye and give the broken man the truth he already knew.

"Your friend Tychus was not a moral man to begin with, he is not your friend anymore," Kerrigan murmured, "It's why someone like Egon came back, and that is a miracle."

**Map Room - Bucephalus**

There was too much darkness, too many beings crying out for help before being smothered. Lasarra cringed away from the Dark One's influence when it crept back, spreading like a disease through the populace of Augustgrad once again. Beyond exhausted, she slept where she stood, recovering while all her work was being undone.

The blinking light of an incoming transmission from Valerian was ignored, her fatigue too great to work around anymore.

**Repentance - Deep Space**

Clattering, clanking and cursing had been echoing through the small ship for an indeterminate amount of time, and Tychus was starting to get annoyed.

This was namely due to all that clanking meaning Jayce was putting serious effort into her claim of killing him, and a smaller part on stir craziness; he could alternate between standing, crouching and sitting uncomfortably and not much else.

Scraping his claws down the wall of his prison, the sound was an annoying and more sinister counterpoint to her own, the paristeel giving no way to the genetically enhanced bio weapons. She had yet to respond to any of his ribbing, and it was not for lack of effort on his part either; it was high time to pull out some real material.

"Mmm," he murmured, low and exaggerated, "you know, you tasted just as good as I thought you would. I can't wait for seconds."
No response; the clanking, shifting and grunting continuing unabated.

He quirked a brow, surprised. "In fact, as a gambling man I bet there's plenty of plastiscab packed up in some med box here. Figure I could just take a piece, seal you up and keep you fresh...make you last a real long time," he said.

Crossing his arms, he frowned hard. If he did not know better, he would have thought the comm was fixed and she shut him in the dark again, but it still crackled faintly under the ceaseless low humming of the electricity powering his prison.

To his relief, Jayce seemed to give up after a short while longer, her footfalls tromping heavily into the cockpit and the gentle thump of her body falling into her seat signaled the end of her attempts on his life for the time being.

Leaning against a warm cell wall, he let out a quiet huff. Warp travel must have been taking its toll on her, forcing her to take more naps than she wanted. Lucky me.

Closing his eyes, Tychus felt out with his mind. There was something out there, someone grabbing at him incessantly; a member of the swarm wanted his attention, but it was like trying to catch the hand of someone when you were rushing by at the speed of light, the connection just could not be made. Considering his worsening situation, it was maddening.

At first he noticed the lack of electrical humming and buzzing, making him tilt his head in confusion, he knew he had not gone deaf all the sudden. Curious, he stretched a hand down and laid it flat against the metal, eyes opening when he realized there was no thrumming beneath his hand. Compelled, he straightened up and placed his hand against the heavy door. Why not? He pushed.

Soundless, the cell door yielded to his touch and swung open, light pouring in. He almost laughed, but caught himself and the door before it hit the wall. Stepping out into the open, he snuck a quick peak around the corner towards the cockpit, spying Jayce's feet carelessly stretched out and limp. He walked towards the cockpit, glad he still had the remnants of his spectre suit, with the boots there was no clattering of claws. Glancing at the myriad of different sized cables protruding from the cell when he passed, he spied a small band with a red blinking light, otherwise it seemed nothing was disturbed. He filed the information away as one more long stride brought him within arms reach of his sleeping adversary.

Large foot nearly touching her smaller one, Tychus glared down at Jayce and considered; the woman was sound asleep, hands clenching and unclenching at the straps of her buckled harness, mouth hanging half open. He reached forwards and brought the back of a thick finger to her cheek, tempted to give her the wake up call of a lifetime.

Face twisting, her entire body curled up and away from his hand, and he quirked a brow. She looked utterly disgusted and her heart rate sped up so fast he thought she would wake up screaming. Shrugging, he dropped his hand to his side and figured he must stink something fierce, what with all the blood, bile and grime still clinging to him.

A better idea presented itself when the blinking lights and steady streaming information of the HUD caught his attention. Smiling then, Tychus helped himself to the knowledge of their destination. It was a struggle not to laugh as he made his way back to his cell, a little bit of patience would make this so much more rewarding.

They were almost at Haven, after all.
Not long after he creatively wedged his cell door shut with the tip of a claw, which would not hold up to scrutiny but what the hell, Findlay heard a sound of absolute disgust from the cockpit that signaled his attempted murderess jailer waking up.

Gathering a bundle of fabric from her shirt into her fist, Jayce desperately brought it to her mouth and breathed through it heavily; whatever remained of her arm had to be seeping through the air vents of Tychus' cell, and it was sickening. Taking another long breath to regain her composure before letting the fabric drop, an idea struck her.

Bursting through the cockpit threshold and surveying the cables at the back of the cell, Jayce said, "I couldn't help but notice you're stinking up the whole damn ship, and it got me thinking." Gently prying at one of the smaller cables with her cybernetic fingertips, she checked to see what it would take to disconnect them; if she could use that HPIGNU she found in the cockpit to remotely pop them off...

"Why don't I just open up that bay door and send your ass into the nearest sun, then go on a permanent vacation and say to hell with Valerian's plan?" Jayce said.

Smiling and eyeing the tiny line of light he could not quite seal away, Tychus said, "You gonna bark all day or are you gonna do somethin'? He made especially sure to sound disinterested, just to rile her up.

Letting out a huff, she paused and pressed the palm of her hand to an eye, confused at the wave of emotion she found herself hit by. Angry at the wetness she felt there, she made damn sure not to sniff like a baby.

"I know I shouldn't, but I feel like I failed you," she admitted, "before the artifact went off you said you were scared, and I couldn't stop the Swarm from taking you." She sniffed and silently cursed herself for it, face reddening; the bastard did not deserve her feelings. "Maybe it really isn't your fault, but this is the best thing I can do for you now. For everyone."

Without missing a beat, he said, "I think they call that stockholm syndrome."

Baring her teeth, Jayce felt thankful for the mocking; it was what she needed to seal those feelings away and get the job done. Before she had so much as begun to look for a means of removing the couplings remotely, the skin-tugging feeling of warp dissipating and the sound of an incoming transmission made her face fall. I am too late.

She lunged into the cockpit and sealed the door shut behind her quickly, letting out a breath of relief before accepting the transmission. Haven was laid out in its eden-like glory before her, and she could not help but feel a trickle of happiness. Maybe, just maybe, following the plan could turn out right.

"Unknown vessel, please identify yourself," a voice, distorted but feminine, spoke immediately; the video feed was completely static and had Jayce raising a brow.

"This is the Repentance with a special delivery from Valerian. I'm one of the Raiders, here to stay for a while if it's all the same to you," Jayce said. I'm literally the only Raider. She frowned slightly at the afterthought.

"Any member of the Raiders will always be welcome here!" the voice sounded greatly cheered, and Jayce suspected who it belonged to now.

"I'm glad. Say Doc, what's up with the static?" Jayce wondered out loud.

"We are recovering from several days of severe storms, it is a wonder we can communicate with you
at all right now!" Ariel Hanson seemed jovial enough about it.

Nodding, though no one could see it, Jayce said, "gotcha. Where am I headed then?"

"Sending coords to you now, a team will come to collect the package and I will personally welcome you to Haven!" Ariel said.

For the first time in a while, Jayce smiled over something that did not have to do with the thought of killing Tychus. "Thanks. Oh, hey, before you go..." she said, sheepish, remembering the comm situation, "the speaker on the cell is broken, tell your boys to keep quiet. No mentioning where we are or any names, unless you like being zerg food."

"Acknowledged, Repentance. See you on the ground," a click and an stop to the static signaled Dr. Hanson ending the call.

With a mixed rush of exhilaration and terror, Jayce strapped herself in and guided the ship through atmo. Blinking away the white speckles in her eyes as the fires of entry disappeared, she referenced the coords and steered the Repentance towards the facility that would take Tychus off her hands. Sure enough, the greenery was glowing and shining from fresh rain, though the sun was out and beaming.

After an uneventful flight, where the ship touched down on a small square of wet tarmac outside a short and long prefab lab building, Jayce unstrapped from her seat and nearly skipped past Tychus.

"Not firing me into a sun huh?" he teased.

Spirit dampened only slightly by the infringing voice, he was about to be gone forever after all, Jayce muttered, "can't always get what you want; now shut up for a change, if that's even possible."

As the ramp lowered slow and noisily, Tychus unjammed his claw from the door and stepped out, smiling.

Jayce raised her mechanical arm up and used it as a cushion, leaning on the frame of the ramp; Findlay mimicked the action behind her, stretching out and upwards with a lazy grin. He listened to her taking in a huge breath through her nose as a gentle breeze blew away the scent of ozone and brought the fresh bright smell of the woods.

Are you coming?

In a bit, we ain't got nowhere to be. I'm gonna have myself some fun. Tychus smirked at the familiar voice in his mind, watching Jayce inch forwards until the sun was in her hair and on her skin, letting out a sigh of pure happiness; he could see her stress visibly melting away.

As you wish.

It took a few minutes of enjoying herself, but it seemed Jayce was finally growing restless. Scratching the side of her head, he distinctly heard her mutter softly, "Maybe I landed at the wrong place..."

Other than the clicking of the ships engines cooling and the sound of wind filtering through nearby trees, there was a silence Jayce had not noticed until now. Straightening, her hands fell to her sides as she considered heading to the facility to see what the holdup was. A strong sense of self preservation kept her feet from leaving the ship, however.

Perfectly quiet, though dying to see her reaction, Tychus leaned off the wall and crowded up as close
to her as he physically could without intruding in her peripheral vision, or touching her; it was a little
game where only one person was aware of the players.

No chirping birds, buzzing insects, distant vehicles groaning, nothing; no sound but the wind. Ice
began to creep up her spine as she shifted, wrestling with indecision. You are just being paranoid.
Her voice of reason complained loudly.

He could not help himself. "Somethin' wrong, sweetheart?" he asked innocently.

Before he even finished saying 'something', Jayce screamed loud and sharp, legs kicking off hard
from the ground. She would have gone flying several feet forwards and already been half way back
to Korhal by now, were it not for the giant clawed hand that planted on her shoulder and kept her
rooted to the spot.

"Whoa now, didn't think terrans could fly!" Tychus laughed, catching up the terror-infused Jayce
and curling his right hand around her throat and jaw gently, tapping the pad of his index finger
against her cheek; she immediately stilled as he massaged her tauntingly.

Her lips were moving, but he wanted to at least get a few words in so he kept her jaw firmly pinched
shut as her face reddened. "Shh. As a man of great intellect, I couldn't help but notice you didn't plan
on my cell door opening of its own accord like that. We'll get back to that though," he said smugly.

"Wait," she grit out past her shut jaw, stomping at his foot more for the attention than an attempt to
hurt.

He loosened his fingers just enough for her to talk, curious.

"Don't hurt the people," she pleaded, much to his surprise, for the welfare of others. "Kill me,
whatever, take the ship and go. There's nothin' here for you," her voice was already raw with
emotion.

"Aw but I could just have so much fun, hunting them folks down one by one...eatin' 'em at my
leisure." he leaned forwards until his chest was pressed against her back and his lips were at her ear.
"A nice little hunting ground, and I never did win Doc Hanson's affections," he chuckled, "a second
try couldn't hurt, I figure."

Before she could melt down too badly over it, he forced her head to turn a bit to the left. "Now now,
don't go gettin' too worked up. Take a second look at that there facility."

Without subtlety, he took in a long breath through his nose. If someone told him you could smell
sunshine, he would have called them a liar; but he smelled it on her hair then and smiled, Jimmy
would be guilty of saying something like that.

Not presented with any other options, Jayce looked at the glass door when prompted. Saliva flooded
her mouth when she saw the creep nestled up against the inside of it, and she swallowed at the bile
rising up her throat. With purpose, Tychus made sure his grip was loose enough to let her talk.

"You bastard!" she accused, voice high and choked. "You found out somehow and you got them all
killed!" Angry tears poured down her cheeks and over his fingers. "You even fought for them," she
outright sobbed then.

As he opened his mouth to answer, her cybernetic hand jumped up and clamped around as much of
his wrist as it could, squeezing for all it was worth. Jayce snarled and he growled directly into her ear
in response. He had not given the robotic arm any thought, it certainly would not be stronger than a
CMC limb, but it was pinching hard enough to rankle him.
Pointedly, he squeezed the shoulder of her remaining good arm and murmured. "I weren't kiddin' about that plastislab idea, by the way."

All the fight went out of her immediately, cybernetic hand falling away as she trembled. Her mind was trying to reason, you are going to die anyways, why give up? But memories were devious things, and she knew what it was like to die. Ultimately, Jayce's instinctual side very much wanted to live.

Smiling, his warm skin rubbing up against her ear, "Good girl. Now, you're givin' old Tychus more credit than he deserves. Haven was probably taken back the second we flew out of sight," he sneered.

Jayce was quiet, going still in his hands and waiting; how long would Findlay gloat and lord his victory over her? Knowing him, a good while yet.

Giving her ear a nip and chuckling when she tried to leap away, he kept her good and close, like a dog guarding its toy. "Don't you worry, they ain't all dead," he said.

"Why are you telling me?" her voice tapered off as she watched, eyes widening, as figures, dark and disfigured, began to crawl out of the soil; walk out from behind the building and even appear behind the glass door of the prefab lab. Their glowing eyes glared, animated by the force controlling them. Scenarios far worse than death, even worse than being slowly eaten alive, began to fill her head.

Suddenly, Tychus steered her away from the infested terrans slowly walking over, guiding her towards the back of his former prison and its bristling wall of cables. Jayce looked at them accusingly, how could they fail like this?

"See that blinkin' red light on the big one?" he murmured, eyeing the nondescript band intently.

She did not answer. Other thoughts began to take up residence in her mind, ones that she would not have entertained until now.

"My cell popped open when we was in space still, and I figured that little blinking light had somethin' to do with it," Tychus said.

Her teeth ground together loudly as she caught sight of it, confirming what he thought.

"Looks like Prince Charming played you for a fool too," he said, patting her shoulder, "he played all of us."

A skittering sound made him glance towards the infested terrans, one was on all fours and half way up the ramp, drool sliding out of where a jaw was meant to be. Frowning, he forced it to back off to the tarmac; seems their host was getting impatient. "You and me, just a couple loose ends; guess he figured I'd kill you or you'd kill me or we'd both end up dead somehow," he shrugged, "I bet he knew Haven was gone too."

Jayce did not want to believe it, trying to shake her head though his hand kept it firmly in place. "Why'd he give me a new arm? Why save me at all?" she wondered out loud. Surely, Valerian would not dirty his hands like the elder Mengsk.

Tychus rolled his eyes, leaning in again until his orange glowing one was peering into hers from the side. "You are a bit dumb sometimes sugar. He looks good savin' you, a real hero, and sends you off to pasture all peaceful-like; sure ain't his fault when you go an get eaten by Zerg, is it? A real tragedy right there," he said.
"Why does it matter?" she croaked, looking up and away from the cables and his eye, "he wins."

"No," he said firmly, eyes gleaming. "Knew he double-crossed us as soon as Jim died," guiding her chin with his thumb, he forced her to look him in the eye. "He had a man on the inside and we never questioned that," he said, baring his teeth at the thought.

Glaring at him sullenly, she all but hung there by her face, legs no longer caring to attempt to stand. "You can't stop him, you are just one man. He is the Emperor now," she growled. They elevated another monster to godhood, apparently.

"Why do you think I killed you?" he shook her head back and forth gently, teasing. "Course, you're as hard to kill as it gets apparently," his demeanor shifted from playful to serious in a blink. 'I'm going after him, makin' him pay. Didn't go through all this with Jimmy just to make a new Mengsk king of the hill."

An involuntary shudder ran through her as she stared into his multiple pupils, all aflame with anger. "I ain't one man. Hell, I ain't a man," he said as he straightened to a stand, shifting his left hand under her arm and half picking her up.

When they faced the infested, she knew her fate. "Tychus," she said through clenched teeth as they paused at the top of the ramp, the warm sun and rain-fresh breeze did not seem to care about what was going to happen.

"Yeah?" he listened, looking at the top of her head and privately memorizing the way the sun hit her mussed hair; it would probably be the last time.

Maybe what he tried to do was mercy, if she fully understood the scope of Findlay's intent. "When you get to him, you use whatever is left of me to kill that son of a bitch," she said.

He chuckled against her back, "I can do that." He began walking to the lab, Jayce in hand, the infested terrans shuffling aside.

Regardless of their exchange, by the time they were inside the building and walking through nightmarish fleshy halls and doorways, Jayce lost her composure and started fighting and begging. By the time he walked into the room containing their host, he was simply dragging her kicking and screaming by her ponytail.

Dr. Ariel Hanson, what was left of her, looked up from a fleshy green sac she had been caressing with claw-tipped and freakishly long fingers; it seemed four of her digits had merged to create two. Tychus could not help but feel a bit sad that the zerg virus had been so unkind to her pretty face, which now looked like a mashup of hydralisk and terran with beady red eyes deep in hollow sockets.

"You could have just left her to my children outside you know," Ariel said stiffly, already offended by Findlay's discourteous thoughts. "All Zerg are beautiful, touched uniquely by the virus;" she said insistently while gesturing towards vat-like sac with an open top, liquid bubbling inside of it, "that one will do."

"No Tychus, I've changed my mind, please! PL-" Jayce hollered hysterically right up until he lifted her up by the back of her head and shoved her inside the vat with a wet slosh.

Holding Jayce under with a meaty fist, Tychus looked towards Hanson with an air of boredom. "Good to see you too Doc. Hows about you give me the skinny on what's goin' on? I've been out of the loop," he smirked roguishly at her.

Glancing between the terran in his hand and back to the towering infested man, Hanson eyed the two
thoughtfully. "The Queen of Blades stopped all experiments on terrans shortly after her transformation on Zerus. Now that she is dead, Zagara has called to us once more," the diminutive infested woman seemed happy.

"We are of use once again, given back our purpose. I was tasked with creating better, stronger infested terrans and it was my pleasure," Ariel placed her twisted, clawed hand over where her heart may or may not be anymore, blood stained and torn lab coat shifting with the gesture.

Tychus visibly perked, spines and all, as he listened to her. "Oh yeah?"

In tune with his train of thought, she made a sharp slicing gesture and shook her head. It seemed terran gestures were a hard trait to zerg out of higher functioning infested. "She will not be like you, Tychus; I am not the Queen of Blades and the virus does not work that way."

Jayce had fallen limp a while ago, and Findlay finally took notice. Withdrawing his hand, he left the body in the pool and shook the slime off. "Eugh," he muttered, "damn shame." Crossing his arms over his chest, he eyed Ariel and could not help but curl his lip in disgust as she caressed the sac she stood beside with twisted love.

"When are we leaving?" he said, flicking off one stray strand of congealing goo from his arm.

Ariel's eyes glimmered as she nearly snuggled with her unborn creation. "Can't you feel it, Tychus?" A cord of drool dripped from her mandible, "the Swarm is coming, and they want you."

He closed his eyes and ignored her strange perverse pleasure as she reached out and touched the hivemind, who knew Hanson was such a freak; Jimmy dodged a bullet with that one. Like the small infested woman said, he could feel them, distant but coming fast. "I did feel somethin', someone was trying real hard to talk to me while I was in space," he said.

"Abathur," she said immediately, seeming to sober as her eyes refocused. "He is alien even to the Swarm, I do not know why he is calling for you; I suppose you will find out." A long, snake-like tongue flicked out and felt at the inside of her mandible.

"Riiight," he looked away, glancing over his shoulder to see the pool he drowned Jayce in already sealed over and bulging upwards. "One more thing, Doc." Their eyes locked, gleaming orange and beady red.

"Yes?" she pressed, eager to be away from the big neanderthal, family or not.

"Who's in charge around here?" he asked curiously.

She raised her malformed hands and shrugged, as though it was obvious and he was truly a dunce, "I lead the brood here, Findlay."

He chuckled, low and mean, "I'll ask one more time, just for you sweet thing. Who's in charge?"

Ariel's eyes widened and she let out a surprised shriek of anger as the veil fell away and Findlay's intent was revealed. He attacked immediately.

Their material selves stood rooted in place, hissing and glaring and growling. Tychus had all but leaped on her, relying more on sheer mental brute force than surprise; no different than he would be in a physical brawl.

Spitting and letting out a long angry wail, Ariel tossed her head back and dropped to her knees, panting as her will crumbled. "Stop. I yield," she held a hand up.
"Figured you'd put up a little more fight than that, Doc," Tychus admitted, walking over and eyeing her where she lay, enjoying the win all the same. He also put himself in a better position to physically kill her if she had other plans, his arm blades made that part clear.

"I simply wish to continue with my purpose, Tychus," Ariel rasped, cautiously shifting forwards from her knees to her feet, hunched over and shrunken. "You lead here now," she looked up sharply, stringy hair framing her monstrous face and glowing eyes, "chase power all you want, Zagara will crush you."

"You leave that to me," he thumbed his chest, giving her a big toothy grin. "Zigzag and I got a score to settle. Now," he shifted his thumb and hiked it over his shoulder, "you let me know when that's done baking."

When he heard Hanson mutter, "yes Master," he felt a cosmic rush. Tychus Findlay, Notorious Outlaw, King of the Swarm. Oh yeah, he liked the sound of that, and just how close he was to realizing that goal filled him with what felt like enough might to break mountains; all he had to do was break Zagara, and the broodmother was coming in hot on a platter, delivery style.
Sewers - Augustgrad

Sighing exaggeratedly, Stukov watched and waited as Warfield carved furrows into the plascrete and degraded into incoherent growling and muttering. "It will be fairly difficult to find and collect all of these refugees if you don't hurry this up, General."

It was like trying to swim up a river when a dam has broken, Warfield was being swept away and pounded relentlessly under a torrent of alien thoughts and urges; the little bouy he created for himself, Tate, was not capable of bearing him. He began to sink, feel the swarm saturate his being just as surely as water would fill his lungs.

Sucking in air through his lungs like he just could not get enough, Horus began to accept the inevitable. Alexei would stand there, he would become a monster, and all those people running ahead in the dark would die.

"Don't float, swim. There is nothing to fight," Alexei said, voice dim under the current of voices and blood pounding in Warfield's ears.

Talons curling through the mucky, torn up plascrete, Warfield gave it one last shot. Seizing the bored-sounding words of the infested man standing near him, Horus caught the current, turned and swam with it; embracing the oneness.

It came as a legitimate surprise when, with a snarl, Warfield leaped to his feet and slammed Stukov into the wall; talons were already making a swipe for his face when he reacted.

A twisted, deformed arm shot up and connected solidly with Horus' chest, making his wild swipe miss and throwing him clean into the opposite wall. Shaking his head, he went to get to his feet again but that same hand was there; an oozing hole gaped open in the palm, acid dripping down.

"That is quite enough, General. Compose yourself," Alexei warned.

"You were going to let me kill them, you sick bastard," Horus growled, outraged. It was easy to embrace the raw fury of the swarm now, no more fighting.

"Do not be foolish," Stukov lowered his hand and eyed Warfield. "You were a liability and I saw an opportunity to fix that, I took it and here you are," he gestured broadly, "you are welcome."

Alexei's logic was cold and brutal, but it was still logic; Warfield found himself yielding to it and standing up quietly.

"Now, let's go find your refugees, yes? They are probably spread across the city by now," Stukov's demeanor shifted back to friendly in a blink.

"You're right, keep in touch." Warfield tapped the side of his head and set off at a quick pace, he would catch up easily enough; there was a stench of illness and blood in the air, Tate might have been the only one moving fast of the whole group.

His intuition proved true: within the hour, those civilians who remained untouched by the fog had been neatly rounded up and were already roughly heading towards the Bucephalus. Stukov had taken up the rear to prevent any of their quarry from leaving, the people were not convinced they were not heading to their doom; Warfield did not blame them.
I am still unsure how you think presenting these people to your Prince will keep us from being imprisoned. Alexei pondered, bored of herding the crying and sniffling mass of people already.

Horus did not bother answering, especially when Tate appeared at his side hesitantly. "Need something, son?" He admitted to himself the boy had already made a mark on him.

"Just feel safer," Tate admitted, voice a whisper.

Surprised, Warfield glanced back over the bobbing heads of the men and women they were herding. What was among them that made a boy go to a monster for protecting? "Safer from?" he said.

"There used to be more," Tate continued to whisper, adamant on not being overheard. "Everyone has been hearing and seeing things, sometimes they wander away and don't come back," his small hands clenched at the front of his dirty shirt as he spoke.

Frowning, Warfield wondered at the implication: could they really be affected without the hybrid's fog, or were these just standard symptoms of starving, terrified people? He kept his musings to himself. "You can stick with me, that's fine."

"Thanks," Tate said, staring ahead into the dark.

It will take some time to reach this ship of yours. Stukov reached out to him again after a time. You may wish to further observe these people, before you decide they are simply starved.

If they have been affected by the hybrid without the fog, then we may all be screwed. Warfield did not like the thought.

Bucephalus - Rebel Base

Mechanical whirring and heavy footfalls had been following her for a while now, and Kate Lockwell swore they were getting closer every minute. Heart racing fearfully, she could have sung with relief when she reached her assigned room; she ducked into it quickly and stepped away from the door, listening.


She swallowed hard, had they really been so close? Valerian's men, two CMC issued marines, stood directly outside her door now. When the door hissed open, lock overridden, she held her hands up defensively. "Easy gentlemen, can I help you?"

No answer, the two soldiers were silent but for the sounds of their CMC as they filed in and all but filled the room; until their visors opened and their black eyes glared at her. Kate screamed.

Their faces were masks until she screamed and scrambled backwards, then they split into broad grins. Standing on her bed with her back flat against the wall, Kate sobbed. "D-d-don't!"

"Won't hurt any, joinin' us," one intoned as he reached for her with a large mechanical fist.

Kate slid along the wall as far away as she could, until she found herself wedged into a corner and her pursuers chuckling hollowly; when the neosteel fingers of the CMC caught up the front of her shirt, she closed her eyes and grasped at the wrist of the machine, waiting for the end. It came as a surprise when the hand jerked away almost as fast as it had grabbed her.

Eyes flying open, she gasped as the two infected marines' faces seemed to twist in confusion before their visors clapped shut and what could only be described as a meaty squelch erupted from their
CMC speakers. Their forms immediately fell limp to their knees, crashing sideways and laying still as she stared dumbfounded; her eyes lifted upwards to the large figure silhouetted in the door then.

"Miss Lockwell, it is good to see you."

Letting out a gasp of relief, Kate awkwardly stumbled forwards and off the bed, "Mister Tosh, you don't know how glad I am to see you right now!"

Gabriel Tosh stepped into the already crowded room and activated the door, which hissed shut with a note of finality as he smiled unnervingly. "You are pretty lucky I was around, it be true," he admitted. "Got some questions for ya."

All that stood between her and him were the large and lifeless feet of two CMCs, and Kate glanced at them before looking firmly at the Spectre's milky white eyes. Tosh was a scary man, but he was her ally here.

"I am," he said, smirking.

Crossing her arms defensively, Kate nodded. "I don't know much, but things got weird here real fast. People seeing things, hearing things... I started hiding."

"And did those keen ears hear anything, miss Lockwell?" Tosh tilted his head slightly, thick braids shifting.

"I-well-no..." she paused, uncertain; but the look on his face, that slight frown, let her know the truth was already out there. "I have been seeing and hearing things too, terrible violent thoughts."

Squeezing her arms tightly together, she shook her head to dispel the memories. "They are not mine."

"You did good, hiding," Tosh tilted his head forwards in acknowledgement. "Keep away from others, Miss Lockwell, and try to keep that pretty head screwed on. That is all you can do right now," he frowned hard then, looking off into nothing, "I gotta be going."

Already, Tosh was turning and exiting the room. Confused, Kate unfurled her arms and held her hand out, as if to grab him but not daring. "Wait! I haven't even told you anything!"

Tosh tapped a fingertip to his temple as he walked out, "you told me everything."

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*What are you doing girl? There be infected on this ship, it all smells rotten!* Tosh both sounded and felt riled.

Frowning, Nova grasped the gauss rifle she armed herself with firmly, looking upwards as she ascended into the ship via one of its lifts. *Infected? How?* It was frustrating to not be able to send the thought to the Spectre, but she knew he was listening; it was a one way call now.

As soon as the lift hissed in place, the air growled around her, "Don't know. It seems the dark one be touchin' everything." Tosh quietly stalked along beside her as she walked now, assessing her thoughts critically, "why did you come up here?"

Resolution filled her mind, Tosh knew the answer before she spoke it, "I am an agent, and if what you said about us being on the same team has any meaning, you won't try and stop me now that I am not strong enough to fight you." She glanced accusingly at the ripple in the air.

"You can't see what I can anymore, the darkness filling up this place like a cancer," he was grim, but
she had her answer in his lack of action.

"I don't need to," she murmured, her eyes on the surroundings but her mind anywhere but there, "I remember it." Again, that voracious tenacity brimmed up and she spoke with a commanding tone, "take me to Valerian, I have a mission to complete."

Jim gestured for Sarah to wait, neither knew what was on the other side of the door; Valerian having called attention to the video feed of Lasarra in the map room blacking out not long ago. "Should have come to her right away," he muttered before activating the door, clenching the spine in his fist just a little tighter.

He cursed when the door did not move, banging his fist off of it in frustration. "Lasarra!" he shouted, tossing the spine aside; it clattered to the floor as curled his fingers and wedged them into the corner of the heavy neosteel with a metallic shriek. "I'm comin'!"

Sarah braced herself as the door caved in around Jim's clawed fists, bone blades quivering; ready to lunge at whatever might come out, be it protoss or infected.

"Be careful Jim, all the power in the area is cut off," Valerian warned into his earpiece, a little late.

With a growl and a heave, Jim reaved the door asunder and stepped aside, Sarah dashing past him into the dark room.

"Jim!" Sarah shouted, her uncertain tone leaving him rushing after.

Spilling into the room, brandishing his hands as weapons, Raynor nearly stumbled at the sight. Sarah was keeping out of arms reach, blades and claws all ready to attack; the subject of her aggression now clear. A man in a lab coat, fists clenching Lasarra's armor, connected to the seemingly unconscious and limp protoss by a black miasma.

A spine erupted from the man's forehead and splattered blood on Lasarra's smooth, featureless face, his mouth opening into an O of surprise right before a wing blade cut his head off and his body was hurled to the other side of the room by Jim; the two infested terrans working in tandem.

As the black haze disconnected from Lasarra's eyes, their familiar glowing light seemed to flicker back, leaving the protoss jerking and shaking her head, hands raising defensively before she fully absorbed the picture before her.

Both Jim and Sarah rounded on her, blades, spines and claws all ready to dispatch. Jim's aggressive stance lessened first.

James Raynor. Lasarra said, her mental voice so full of relief it left an impression. You have spared me a fate worse than death. As the protoss struggled to her feet, Jim seemed to catch on to her weakness and rushed forwards to offer help.

"Glad you could shake it off, Lasarra. I am sorry we didn't get here sooner; things have gone right back to hell," he bore the majority of the tall alien's weight as she carefully leaned on his arm, guiding her out of the room as quickly as he could. "Valerian's got a base of operations set up, we'll get you there."

Sarah frowned, following closely behind, hackles raised; the protoss could not have ignored her more neatly when they passed by. Perhaps the protoss could resist being infected, like the zerg, but it begged the question: where was the hostility?
When they strode into Valerian's chambers and a gauss rifle took aim, she found it.

"Whoa there!" Jim deftly maneuvered himself between Nova's rifle and Kerrigan's head; the two warrior women eyed one another warily. "Easy! Easy!"

Valerian stood across the table from Nova, hands raised in a soothing gesture. "Agent, please lower your rifle. Sarah Kerrigan is on our side as of right now."

"You couldn't have told her while we were off getting Lasarra?" Jim glared, still helping the protoss stand.

Torn between duty and doing what any respectable person should, Nova glowered. "She's killed billions. Billions, Valerian!"

"Aye," the air rumbled, "Kerrigan has done much," all faces but Nova seemed surprised when Tosh shimmered into view between the two groups, "but the Queen of Blades has a much bigger destiny than being put down by you or me, girl."

Surprised briefly, Jim let out a laugh as Tosh held his hand out to him, "Why am I not surprised you're still kickin', Tosh?"

Nova frowned tightly and lowered her rifle as Jim and Tosh's hands clapped together and squeezed, "Brother, it takes a lot more to kill me than a little girl," they both glanced at the women over each others shoulders and decided to not pursue that topic further.

"Don't I know it," Jim smiled, mindful of the dagger-like claws his fingers had been mutated into. A warm reception from an ally was a welcome change of pace.

Sarah shook her head, lips pursed firmly, and walked around the small group. Making her way to the large window, Nova no longer a thought; this so-called Lasarra, however... She glanced back at the protoss as Jim helped her to an ill-fitting seat.

Slumping into her chair, Lasarra's voice touched everyone, she gave the impression of being drained of energy. The hybrid are gone, but this dark influence never left. Glowing eyes locked on the emperor-to-be. Valerian, you must protect those you have left and leave this place, before we all succumb to this madness.

Everyone looked to Valerian expectantly, even Sarah's eyes wandered to him: what would he choose?

Never had he looked or felt so weary, the young man's shoulders seemed to sag under the weight of Lasarra's truthful words. Resting his hands flat on the edge of the table, he shook his head once, "No. I will not leave my people," some eyebrows raised in surprise at this, "I will recall Mira's forces and we will further entrench ourselves here. We will find a way to overcome this."

"Junior," Jim's voice softened, "this ain't some headache we can sleep off."

Already, his fingertips were swooping across the keypad, sending messages to Mira and his own forces afield. Grey eyes, stormy and sharp, flicked up at Jim for a moment, "no," was all Valerian said.

Sarah rolled her eyes as Nova and Tosh drifted away from Valerian and to their own space, as far away from the infested people as possible. "The Swarm is all that stands between us and a revived God who wants to kill everyone, what happens here is of no consequence now," she said.
"What about Matt and Egon?" Jim muttered, trying to shift the topic.

"I have the lab sealed, no one gets in or out right now, it's the best I could do," Valerian said, not looking up.

"What about the Protoss?" Sarah hissed, head snapping as she turned to look at Lasarra accusingly, "Zeratul lead me to Zerus. What are your people doing to stop this, running?"

Silence hung heavy between the group as Lasarra tiredly eyed the Queen of Blades, glowing eyes narrowing as she met Sarah's glare. *I do not answer to you, murderess.*

Sarah had already taken one long threatening stride towards the lamed protoss before Jim caught her shoulder, "fighting ourselves ain't gonna do any of us any good, Sarah," he let her shake his hand off, relieved she turned back away from Lasarra then. "Zeratul is the reason why I know about the prophecy to begin with, he's out there trying to make sure everyone knows what's comin'," he said with a note of hopefulness.

"Knowing what's coming, what good is that?" Nova spoke up, leaning against a wall and eyeing everyone in the room like a wolf. "Here's hoping the protoss do a lot more than just acknowledge it."

*The Khalai will not stand idle while the universe is covered in darkness.* Lasarra reassured them firmly, touching the khala's warmth to reassure herself too. *The Golden Armada is out there, we will fight.*

"That be good to hear," Tosh leaned his gun against the wall, relaxing and crossing his arms. "Not much we can do but wait right now," he chuckled, "we have some catching up to do, Raynor."

"You're right," Jim nodded, relieved as the tension lessened; for now, at least.

**Haven**

Stepping out of the lab, Tychus' pace slowed with a touch of awe. All around Haven was transforming, warping and breaking apart at the seams as creep erupted and oozed from the ground, the noxious purple substance began to cover everything; not only that but he felt it, the consuming power of the swarm sent an electric thrill through him.

His thoughts came full circle as his boots touched the cool steel of the ship's ramp; Jayce, consumed and converted, just like he had been. He frowned, the door of his prison hung open innocently, a flesh-stripped arm laying inside.

"Hm," he muttered, sidling around the traitorous cage. He knelt down in front of the small metallic band with its blinking red light, sliding a finger over the cool, smooth surface. Valerian's treachery revealed itself the moment he felt an invisible button give way, the heavy door slammed shut hard enough to rattle teeth in the next moment as the electrical current was restored.

"You'll get yours," he said grimly, fingerling the detached loop for a moment, considering its destruction before thinking better of it and tacking it his magnetic belt. A ripple of excitement through the nearby zerg caught his attention mid ship inspection.

*Welcome!* Hundreds of disembodied voices chorused to their new family member. *She is beautiful.* Ariel whispered to Tychus directly, sending a tingle of apprehension zinging down his spine.

Hanson's definition of beauty and his were very different, but he made his way back to the lab anyways. Jayce was there in the hivemind now, all her experiences and knowledge freely available, but he avoided delving. When a malformed shadow shuffled towards him purposefully in a hallway,
he scowled; she was unrecognizable but for the fact he could feel who she used to be.

Tugging the infested woman free of Hanson's control, Tychus surveyed her critically. All the symmetry of the terran body was gone, her mechanical arm was attached to a tentacle that made its fingertips clench and unclench continually; another heavy tentacle protruded from her back while her left arm had become a weapon, the forearm hardened and sharpened to an impaling point with two talons placed for grabbing and shearing beneath it.

*I thought you was making better infested terrans, doc. What the hell is this?* He did not know what he was expecting, not for her to be like himself, but not this. Looking up from her one grossly inflated and malformed leg, his gaze passed over the fleshy mask-like growth that covered her mouth and nose, and met her eyes.

They remained the same as they had in life, staring accusingly at him and glowing brightly orange. "You would," he muttered. Only those, a portion of her hair at the top of her head, and one leg seemed to be all that were spared complete transformation. There was something about the eyes though, he looked at them again.

Ariel bristled furiously, tugging control of the infested Jayce back and forcing the puppet to hold up its mechanical hand, showing how each digit could move and function much like a real hand. *Every zerg is beautiful and unique, Findlay. Did you expect her to be like you?*

"I expected her to be not useless. That ain't a high expectation, doc." Tychus said, glowering at Jayce.

*She is very useful!* Ariel defended her creation heatedly as Tychus mockingly high fived the mechanical hand. *The zerg hyperevolutionary virus is very unstable, directing evolution so minutely is difficult. Abathur and Kerrigan were the best at it, I am only learning.*

Barely listening, Tychus found himself drawn to those accusing eyes again. There was something in them, he could feel it, like a spark or a point of light. "Maybe you have some surprises left in you after all," he said, tilting his head.

*I have focused on incorporating terran technology more thoroughly into the swarm. That is why I could even trick your pilot girl into landing in the first place: I have discovered how to blend the two with great success.* The miniature broodmother's pride welled. *She will serve you well, your brood of one.* There was a note of mocking tacked on the end that did not go unnoticed.

For once, he let the jab roll off his shoulders; Ariel was his literal slave anyway. He cringed away at the thought that occurred, needing to be answered. *She ain't uh...Explody, is she doc?*

*No. Banelings serve that purpose far better. The fact is terrans are flexible, that is their strength. It is counter-intuitive to the nature of the zerg virus and they can be made in many different ways as a result.* Ariel informed him astutely.

*Right. He said, having tuned her out the second she said no. Be seein' you up in space then, doc.*

Turning away from the pathetic creation, he jerked in surprise when something collided off his broad back with a heavy clunk. Spinning back around furiously, he looked at the cybernetic hand wiggling freely in the tentacles grasp.

*Seems to have been a spasm.* Ariel said, unable to hide her amusement. *It happens.*

*Don't provoke me.* Baring his teeth, he turned away again and pointedly cut Hanson off from controlling Jayce, directing the puppet to follow him; they needed some privacy. All the infested
terrans and zerg of Haven were pouring up through the ground, mobilizing as far as the eye could see, and that was just what he glimpsed from between the lab and the ship.

As the ramp sealed him inside the ship with his former friend, he turned to regard her again, fingertips touching the metal loop on his belt as he thought. When the fleshy mass on her face throbbed and expanded, emitting a slorp noise, he frowned.

"What do you got for me?" he said, stepping up close to the deformed creature and staring into those glaring eyes again.

A tiny pinpoint of light revealed itself once again, hiding deep inside her mind. Everything that was personal and integral to her being who she was seemed to be scrubbed down to a dull mass, not relevant to her contribution to the swarm. Curious, he wondered at the anomaly, other zerg did not possess this and even the infested men had no such thing.

Curiosity guided him to it like a moth to flame. He stared deeply into her eyes until it felt as though his own had closed, making tentative contact with the light and feeling his essence squeezing through it, like threading a needle. A strange, peaceful sensation flooded over him and the world seemed to shift, but nothing revealed itself.

His eyes flew open when a warm breeze touched his skin and the lively chirping of insects flooded his ears. He gasped, taking a half step back in confusion as a whole new location, new world, sprawled out in every direction around him. "Oh hell," he said in alarm, turning his head this way and that.

All around was miles of triticale wheat and hills dotted with farm houses, and a bigger settlement further in the distance. He was standing on a worn dirt road, and when his eyes looked along it and landed on the nearest quaint home, he felt with absolute certainty that answers lay inside that prefabricated building.

Pieces began to come together as he started walking, determined. Details that were once described lovingly revealed themselves visually, and he chuckled softly, "Summerset. You always surprise me, sweetheart."

By the time he found himself standing in front of the well worn front door, he had a few guesses about what was going on and how this was about to go. Jayce was behind this door, he knew as much, hiding in the safest place she had ever been before the Hyperion. Could she have possibly lived anywhere more boring? He was not sure.

"Home sweet home," he said, giving the door a knock for each word. He felt his chest tighten and muscles coil as feet pattered through the house and stopped behind the door, not sure what he was ready to do, but ready all the same.

When a gawky looking teenager in a bright, flowery skirt and white sleeveless t-shirt opened the door, they both gaped at one another in disbelief. Much like what happened with her physical form, this was not what he expected in any scenario he cooked up. His brows furrowed together as he took another appraising look over the much younger incarnation of Jayce, quickly revising his opinion.

Not gawky, but youthful, maybe even early twenties; time and hard work had yet to harden her features and left her with a baby face, even more pronounced freckles on her cheeks and an overall softness he had not come to associate with the woman. Had she really come back to this place mentally too? This could make things strange...better, on second thought.

His features softened, the notion of having a fresh start with this woman never having occurred as an
option either. He even considered the idea that she would come bursting out of the door trying to kill him in her private mental sanctuary like some vengeful wraith, but not this. As he warmed to the idea of this new beginning and opened his mouth to say "Hello," she spoke first.

"Are you here to take me?" she said, voice just shy of a squeak, green eyes as wide as moons.

He felt a long lost coiling in his guts at the innocent words and display, swallowing hard; it was her outright fearfulness that made him think twice about answering "Oh hell yes," like he wanted to. He thought fast: only one kind of stranger ever came to take anyone here. His lust cooled immediately.

His voice still came out rougher than usual, "I ain't here to take you, sugar." He made an effort of relaxing his pose like he usually did with the ladies, being more open with them, and leaned on the door frame, smiling roguishly. It occurred to him then, glancing over his muscled and hairy arm, that he was once again his old self; that would explain a lack of screaming in this case.

She nervously peered up at his hand as it hung not far from her head, eyes widening further before her throat contracted and she nervously fixed her gaze back to his face; relief was more obvious in her voice, "Oh...you aren't from here. Can I, uhh, help you?"

He quirked a brow, following where her eyes went pointedly before remembering the word PAIN tattooed across his knuckles. He held her gaze quietly and thought, confident she would not interrupt, though she started to fidget nervously at the silence.

He chuckled then, an idea forming; lying was one of his other great talents, after all. "Yeah, I ain't from around here, got dropped off. Came fr-"

"You came from space? In a ship?" She blurted over him, jumping and putting a hand over her mouth just as fast.

"Yeah," he smirked, she was not that different after all. "Hyperion dropped me off," he eyed her sharply, looking for any flicker of recognition across her features as he spoke, "boys in town said you could use a hand out here and maybe had some space for ol' Tychus."

She seemed bedazzled, apprehension giving way to a childish excitement; there was no hint she even heard his name, never mind recognized him or the ship. "Wow! We don't even have a Starport, this is so exciting!" She seemed to catch herself then, cheeks coloring brightly, "I am so sorry! I am being rude, you just surprised me."

He smirked and straightened up as she stepped back and gestured broadly to the inside of her humble home, "please come in. I am surprised no one recommended one of the bigger farms, we just take care of the machines here; but I am sure my father can find a use for some strong arms in the shop," her voice softened at the mention of her father and his shop, he wondered at it.

"Shouldn't let strange men in your home sweetheart," he chuckled, leisurely following her in and resting a hand on a well worn kitchen island that she quickly put herself on the other side of. "What can I say?" he took a breath, catching her flowery smell and enjoying it, "I'm a handy man."

He received another nervous glance for his comment, then a tentative smile as she turned away and opened up the fridge, "there aren't really any strangers on this planet. If the townsfolk thought you were okay enough to send here then I trust that," her head popped up and looked at him over the door, "would you like something to drink? My family is not home right now, it may be a while yet."

Licking his lips, he watched her cheeks go rosy again, wondering why he could not feel her thoughts or emotions: they were in her mind after all, and she was a part of the swarm no less. Everything felt
a little off, less...in his control. "Got any strong beverages?" he smiled.

She let out a tinkling laugh, ducking back into the fridge and calling out, "I think I can find something." When she approached, kicking the door shut with her foot, she had lemonade in one hand and an unlabeled bottle in the other. "You know, this is a very small house. I am not sure where you'd be sleeping, if you and father work something out."

He eyed the two liquids skeptically, the odds were pretty good it would fall short of his expectations, but it was no matter. "You let us worry about that then," he observed her exposed legs shamelessly as she stretched upwards and pulled tall glasses down from the cupboards.

Smiling brightly and clearly warming to his company, she placed the glasses down and froze, stiff as a board, with that same friendly expression on her face.

Tilting his head, he glanced around before looking back at her. As he watched, all the friendliness, the humanity, disappeared so abruptly it was as if a switch had been hit. She blinked slowly and when her eyes opened, they glowed a sullen green.

"Connection established," a voice, so deep as to make his own seem like a tenor, came forth from the little girl.

Tychus did an incredulous double-take, scowling as Jayce's hands came up, fingertips touching together in a mechanical alien manner. "You've got to be shittin' me. No," he bared his teeth, clenching his fists, "get out of her." He thought twice and relaxed his hands, what was he going to do, hit her?

"Not possible," the alien spoke through her, observing her digits and moving them as though curious of their function. "Host necessary for communication."

Pressing his palms to the counter top, he leaned forwards and glared in his best intimidating manner, only to be met with cold indifference. "You're the one tryin' to get a hold of me, Abathur," he guessed, a silent confirmation passing between him and the parasite.

"Confirmed. Privacy necessary," her hands spread out, palms up, gesturing to the realm around them. "Preserved a portion of terran essence in order to facilitate private conversation. Free of swarm hive mind," Abathur said.

"Alright," Tychus said, eyeing the glowing green eyes of the creature with distaste. "You made all this just to talk to me, so talk."

Though showing as much emotion as a statue, there was a sense of relief from the creature, "Organism Tychus seeks to control Swarm. Not possible."

"How do you figure?" Tychus said, glowering.

Jayce's fingertips touched together lightly once again, "Broodmother Zagara. Experiencing forced evolution in order to handle full psionic load of swarm hive mind. Organism Tychus lacks this. Kill Zagara. Be obliterated."

"You're real blunt, Abby," Tychus said, straightening up and frowning, "I can appreciate that. Doesn't explain why you went through all this trouble to tell me this. You want somethin' from me."

"Confirmed," Jayce's head inclined stiffly, a perfectly calculated degree. "Broodmother Zagara leads swarm to destruction. Survival of swarm is paramount."
"So why don't you take it over then, Abby?" Tychus said.

"Physically vulnerable," Abathur admitted bluntly, "need willing assistance. Organism Tychus. Only member of swarm with higher functions not loyal to Broodmother Zagara."

"You need some muscle," Tychus smirked, "well I got that. What are you gonna give me, Abby?"

"In confrontation with Zagara, Organism Abathur will come to your assistance," Abathur said.

"And?" Tychus pressed, "I ain't just killin' Zagara and handing you the keys, Abby."

Abathur remained silent for what felt like a solid minute, staring unblinking up at him. Tychus was about to force the issue when the cold alien spoke, "organism Tychus wishes to destroy Valerian. Revenge. Acceptable use of swarm."

"Just call me Tychus, you're creepin' me out," Tychus shifted, rolling his shoulders and considering the new playing field before him.

"Confirmed," Abathur said.

"So I take care of Zagara, you protect my brain from explodin', I get to go pry Valerian's head off with my hands, and then what?" Tychus said, eyes narrowing at the creature.

"Tychus gives swarm to Amon," the creature said simply, lowering Jayce's hands to her sides, "swarm survives."

"Her and me go our own way after," Tychus jabbed a finger pointedly at Jayce.

"Acceptable conditions. Agreement?" Abathur queried.

"You got a deal, Abby," already, it seemed as though Abathur was pulling away from his host, glad to be rid of it. "Hold it," Tychus gestured for him to stop and he did, glowing eyes glaring.

"How's this all work?" Tychus gestured upwards and around with a finger. "She just stays here, this place doesn't change?"

"Essence of host remains," Abathur seemed impatient now, "organism Jayce retains control here. Tychus, Abathur, swarm. Limited control without connection to hive mind."

"So she has the reins here," Tychus nodded in confirmation, "go on then."

Abathur's withdrawal from his host seemed violent in comparison to his sinister, calculated arrival; Jayce jerked physically and gasped, hands planting on the counter for support as Tychus gathered himself. She looked sickly, pale and shaken.

"You alright sweetheart?" Tychus feigned concern, brows furrowing as he reached across the counter and tentatively touched her shoulder; she looked up at him at the touch, wide-eyed, before looking away sharply.

Cringing away from his hand, which he cautiously withdrew, she whispered, "don't know what happened, don't feel good. Sorry," her arms curled up defensively, and she was looking everywhere but at him.

Frowning, he straightened and took stock of the situation; reality seemed...stressed around them, the corners of the room and edges of objects bending and quivering. "Let's get you to bed and I'll go see if I can find your folks."
"Okay," she whispered, allowing him to half-follow, half-shepherd her to a simple room with some less-than-feminine touches to it: model ships and tools equal parts decorated and littered it.

He did not enter her room, looming at the threshold and wondering at the look, what she might have remembered. She threw herself to her bed and shifted around to look towards him, eyes glittering with the light that silhouetted him.

"Thank you," she said.

"For?" he frowned.

"Not...not being what I expected," she admitted.

Shifting uncomfortably, he felt a sting guilt at her admission, "I'm a bad, bad man...but not that kind, sweetheart."

"I trust you," she closed her eyes.

Feeling wretched, he withdrew from the home quickly and with some effort, her mind. This place needed to be preserved, so that he could talk to Abathur, he told himself firmly. As he filled his own body and blinked, staring into accusing eyes, he shielded himself with the cold indifference of the swarm.

By the time he had put the loop back on the power cable, put the misshapen Jayce in the cage and then pulled it off again, effectively locking her safely in the dark, the very air buzzed; both from the rapid transformation of Haven into a ball of creep, and the arrival of the swarm exciting the zerg on the surface.

Tentative, Ariel called to him. Will you join us, Tychus? The feeling is incredible. She sounded awed, Hanson had yet to truly meet the bulk of the swarm.

I'll be taking the ship, that rapture crap ain't for me sweet cheeks. Tychus said bluffly, settling into the pilot seat and booting up the machine with a scowl on his face. If Zagara was smart and really wanted him dead, it would happen between the ground and the Leviathan.

As zerg began to float upwards into the sky, lifted by the psionic power of millions of minds working as one, Tychus wondered. Why would Zagara bring the swarm here? He was one man, with one ship, on a zerg infested planet with no Leviathan. All she had to do was leave him alone, take the swarm elsewhere.

Breaching the atmosphere of space and meeting the swarm fleet, hanging over Haven like a cloud of locusts, he deftly maneuvered the small ship towards the capital Leviathan where Zagara awaited, silent. There had to be more to this than just wanting him dead.
Bucephalus - Rebel Base

I died fighting the zerg for our people, and you joined them. What have you done? You are a disgrace. Arut's scorn pierced Lasarra, who stared in horror at her dead brother, a dark spine protruding from his forehead.

Brother! This... She paused, eyes narrowing as their surroundings, a formless abyss, seethed. No, you are not Arut. There is no khala here, and my brother was both wise and kind. With alarm, she reached out for the familiar ever-present light and felt nothing, all four of her hearts beat harder.

Silence hung heavy between the two as realization dawned on her: she was trapped. Arut's eyes smiled and blackened, wisps trailing up from them as his skin began to wither and crack.

Your whole misbegotten race will be mine, how does it feel? You will fail them. Amon whispered.

Never! Even if you succeed in destroying me here monster, the khalai will live and fight on! Emboldened, Lasarra reached out desperately, searching for the way out of this nightmare as Amon laughed and the darkness closed in; it felt as though her whole essence was being smothered.

Red coals burned inside the blackened pits of Arut's twisted face. You will be the very first to fall.

There was no way out, only blackness that yawned on in all directions. Arut's visage faded away until all that remained was Amon's gaze; it struck her then, as the darkness crept into her vision and his eyes burned her nerves raw, that he was the darkness. She screamed.

"They are all gone. I can't believe it," Valerian said. Staring down at all his unanswered calls, a multitude of red blinking lights, to the mercenaries and his own men, there could only be one answer as to why no one responded.

Everyone, minus Sarah and the sleeping protoss, stared down at the red buttons with a quiet fearfulness; Sarah eyed Valerian over her shoulder. Her wing blades quivered as she observed the dark patches under his eyes, even the bright gleam of his stormy grey eyes seemed to have developed a dull haze.

Jim jerked in surprise when a delicate-seeming clawed and armored hand grasped his shoulder, "We need to talk," Sarah said, her tone serious.

"My remaining men have secured the rooms adjacent to this one, feel free to use them," Valerian muttered, not looking up.

"Right," Jim frowned, looking over his present company before allowing Sarah to usher him out quickly.

"Letting them out of sight is a bad idea," as soon as the door slid shut, Nova spoke in an accusing tone.

"They been walkin' around this ship long before your pretty ass got on it," Tosh said, eyeing the shorter ghost grimly. "We got much bigger problems than who our allies are girl, focus."

Nova's lip curled, riled over Tosh's demeaning manner, especially in front of Valerian, but he just
smiled at her and turned away. Sharply, she looked towards her Prince then, "Valerian, make the call to your captain and get us off this planet. You can keep trying to call people who aren't there anymore from space if you really want to, but the people who remain do not deserve to have this fate because you are stubborn."

"I don't even know where my father is," Valerian murmured, staring down at the console still.

"Your-" Nova paused, eyebrows shooting up as a shock of both surprise and shame struck her; she never told him of what transpired, far too busy shooting down the young man than to do her own job. "I know what happened to Arcturus Mengsk," she said, softer, quieter.

"What?" Valerian's voice sharpened, the prince looking up from the table immediately. "When did you plan on informing me, Agent?"

"Moments prior to the artifact explosion, I discovered the body of Arcturus Mengsk inside of a CMC; his head was shaved," Nova ignored the question, focusing on delivering the information he wanted instead. "I realized Raynor and Kerrigan were walking into a trap then, but it was too late."

"Gabriel," Grandma Tosh, ever present, spoke with a note of urgency from Tosh's side.

Glancing at Valerian and Nova, who were quietly discussing the events somberly, Tosh cautiously turned his head to look the old crone in the eye; the hair at the base of his neck bristled on seeing the old woman so fearful.

"De darkness be here Gabriel! It's grip be tightening on your allies, you de only one who can help dem right now! Look with your eyes, your mind is being deceived!" she urged.

Frowning a degree, Tosh listened to the old woman, concentrating and pushing away the sad and calculating thoughts of his companions and using his eyes. Nova looked bedraggled, even from behind, and Valerian looked like a walking corpse. Their thoughts did not line up with their image, it was true; and he'd almost forgotten the protoss, he turned to look at Lasarra and his eyes widened.

A black tumorous mass covered the protoss' entire face and torso, throbbing and quivering, Gabriel knew fear then. With a cold lump in his stomach, he unclipped the small canister of terrazine he had left and readied himself.

As soon as the door to their room closed, Sarah grasped Jim by his shoulders and spoke, voice sharp and commanding. "Jim, we have to get off Korhal. I don't care if we leave them behind, we need to leave."

"We've been over this Sarah, there is no where for us to go, all we can do is fight." Jim sounded tired, and she perked in surprise when the back of his fingertips caressed her cheek.

Giving herself a mental shake, she glared sternly into his black eyes. "Don't you get it? They are being taken over! What makes you think any of those terrans are special?" She grit her teeth, trying her damndest to get through to the stubborn Jim Raynor, "Every single terran on Korhal belongs to Amon right now, maybe in the whole Koprulu sector, and your friends are on their way too!"

Jim's visage, full of spines, armor and discolored as it was, softened. "Sarah...If this is really the end coming up, I just want you to know that I'm glad that I can be with you for it."

"So you aren't going to fight? James Raynor, giving up?" Her glare hardened, taking a step back from his warm hand.
He chuckled and smiled, shaking his head, "I'll fight to my last breath darlin', if that is what you want. I just wanted you to know that." His smile morphed into a smirk, "let's get back in there and get this done. We leave with them or we leave without them."

As he offered his hand, she clasped hers in it and squeezed. United, they left the room and headed for Valerian's quarters again.

"For what it's worth, I'm glad you are with me too Jim," Sarah murmured.

A familiar canister hiss and clatter caught Nova's attention immediately. Cutting off Valerian mid sentence, she spun around to face Tosh, "What are you doing?" His back was to her and he was facing the protoss, Lasarra.

"De spirits be angry here," he muttered, low and hard. Bolstered by the terrazine, psionic energy pulsed from him and haloed his form as he concentrated, stretching a hand out to Lasarra.

"What is he talking about?" Valerian wondered out loud, looking both confused and alarmed at Nova.

"No idea," she eyed the big man cautiously, frustrated at her closed off state. Nothing could be gleaned by just looking with her eyes, other than his focus was clearly on the sleeping protoss; she supposed it was odd Lasarra had not woken up yet.

"So long as I be breathin', you ain't gonna be layin' your hands on my brothers and sisters," Tosh declared, baring his teeth, and plunged his hand into the black mass.

_Your agony will ripple across eternity, everlasting._

_No!

_Your brethren will join you. Very soon._

_I will not bend. The khala is my strength!_  

_A flawed creation, I will take pleasure in dismantling it from the inside out._

Timeless pain coursed through every vein, every molecule, and every moment felt like a piece of eternity; Lasarra wailed in agony, chained in place in an endless black chasm, the khala she prayed to beyond reach, beyond sight.

"She not be alone," a voice, bold and commanding, called.

_What?_  

Eyes wide, Lasarra twisted her head this way and that, trying to find the owner of that familiar voice. _Help! I am here!_  

White noise stabbed at her senses, an unholy shriek of rage. _She is mine, terran! You will be too!_  

"Reach for me, reach!" the voice called, strained sounding.

_The pain..._ Unsure whether her limb was moving or not, Lasarra closed her eyes tight and concentrated on the motion that was natural, she reached.
A hand, four fingers and one thumb, caught a hold of hers tightly. It was a strange sensation, so real even in this hellish mindscape, she cherished the feeling of its calloused warmth; even if it belonged to a terran man.

"Gotcha now. Hang on." Clearly in pain, the terran held tight and pulled hard. Tosh. It was Tosh.

As the burning, shredding agony began to subside, normalcy feeling like a comforting shroud, another hand grabbed hold and brought her journey to a jarring stop. Eyes flying open, Lasarra stared into Arut's cracked and warped visage again.

Enjoy your reprieve, insect. Know the fate that awaits you is as unstoppable as time itself. Amon's voice burned with rage.

"What happened to Lasarra?!"

"What is Tosh doing?!"

Familiar voices, sharp and angry, along with a dizzying torrent of wild thoughts, bombarded her. Eyes opening to the real world, Lasarra found herself standing, one hand clasped tightly around Tosh's. Shaken, she took a moment to block the thoughts of the terrans and then unwound her hand from the spectre's.

"Consider us even now, protoss," Tosh inclined his head slightly, his skin looking pale but otherwise the man gave no indication of the pain he experienced to rescue her.

Touching a hand to her armored chest, Lasarra inclined her head deeply. My people can express thought and emotion so deep, it goes beyond a terrans comprehension... She saw Tosh frown and continued quickly. I want you to know that there is no thanks I could give strong enough to do the word justice. You spared me from a nightmare.

Stepping back, Tosh fell silent. Their moment over, Lasarra looked to see Jim, Kerrigan, Nova and Valerian all paused in their disarray to watch herself and the spectre; they were clearly arguing before. Resolute, she fixed her gaze to Valerian and strode to him.

Valerian Mengsk. We must leave this planet immediately. No one is safe from Amon's influence here, and I believe we may find relief in distance; Gabriel Tosh just spared me the fate of becoming one of the infected. Jim, Nova and Valerian each stirred at the admission, and she felt their fear and doubt. Sarah Kerrigan watched, suspicious.

"I..." Valerian looked down at the table, a look of pure defeat on his features, "will inform the captain at once. We make for space." Lasarra understood then, as thoughts flickered unbidden from their owners, that is what they were arguing about. Jim, Nova, even Sarah were trying to make the stubborn prince budge, but her word broke the dam.

If we are to triumph against Amon, we must marshal what forces remain and protect them for dear life. When he is defeated, your people will be broken from their prisons, Valerian. She assured him as he made the call.

"Captain. Recall all forces on foot around the Bucephalus and evacuate the remainders of the Hyperion and prep the ship for immediate departure. We are leaving," Valerian commanded.

"Yes sir," palpable relief filled Captain Vaughn's voice.

"Finally," Sarah said, crossing her arms and making her way to the view port once again. Being around the terrans, seeing Jim sticking out like a sore thumb, gnawed at her insides. She did not want
to look at them anymore.

**Augustgrad - Sewers**

A tense silence hung over the small camp their procession made for the night. Warfield and Stukov both kept their distance from the shivering and huddled groups of people, not the terrans idea of idealistic saviors.

Leaning against the damp plascrete wall with his arms crossed, Warfield stared off into the dark, diligently keeping guard. Troubled thoughts kept him company; how was Valerian's campaign coming? Were the hybrid being hunted down now? The lack of information irked him.

_We could leave, comrade._ Stukov, all but eavesdropping, offered. _Move much faster than these refugees, leave Valerian to send men to save them, not monsters._

_No._ Warfield stated firmly, frowning.

Shifting restlessly at the opposite end of the tunnel, Stukov shrugged. _Suit yourself._

A sound, high and wild, pitched over the quiet rustling of the refugees like an alarm; a giggle.

Two pairs of eyes looked sharply into the refugees, trying to discern if there was cause for concern.

Soft voices, low and urgent, questioned the owner of the errant noise. Crazed laughter was the response, followed by a violent crunch. Someone screamed and chaos erupted.

"Tate!" Warfield shouted immediately, leaping towards the now stampeding, terrified people.

"Here! I'm here!" Tate was being shoved against the wall by passing bodies, eyes wide with terror.

Baring his teeth, Horus used his size to his advantage and paid the others in kind, muscling his way to the kid and catching his hand roughly. From the corner of his eye, a chilling sight greeted him. A ragged man had pinned a woman to the wall and a seething darkness linked the two. Behind them, eyes glowing, was an approaching Stukov.

Even though he could not see in the dark, Warfield turned and shielded Tate from what was about to happen regardless. There are some things children should not be exposed to, and he placed his palms firmly over the boys ears before Stukov, infested arm distorting grotesquely, sprayed the two infested civilians down with corrosive acid.

He could not protect him from the acrid stench of melted flesh, however.

"We are not out of the woods yet, General." Stukov said in a blunt tone, stepping up beside Horus and his charge and pointing further ahead; where the refugees ran.

An icy ball formed in Warfield's stomach as he looked on. People were coming back, no longer limping, no more crying. Silent.

"Run," he growled, curling his arms around the sobbing Tate and scooping him up. "Run!"

"Run?" Stukov questioned, chasing after the already running Horus. His thoughts were clear; just kill them, kill the infection.

"Not killing them if we can get away safely!" Warfield shouted, clattering down the sewer tunnel and trying to veer back towards the original goal: the Hyperion.
Laughter chased them.

"Where are we going?" Tate, clinging to Warfield tightly, shouted between sobs.

"Same place son," Horus assured him as he eyed a manhole up ahead, consulting his mental map, "a safe place." He shifted Tate into one arm as they charged the manhole, which rested at a four way junction; it seemed to him that the very earth began to tremble, but he attributed it to the rapid running.

Bodies, equal parts laughing hysterically and silent as the dead, poured into sight around two corners of the junction; the other refugees who wandered off, no doubt.

"Stukov!" Warfield shouted harshly, still barreling forwards.

"On it General," Stukov intoned coolly, a spray of acid coating a full group of the infected refugees on Horus' left.

"Hang on kid!" Without waiting for Tate to respond, he let go of him and freed his arms; his charge already clung to him with a death grip, he did not even need to say anything. Arms free and talons stretching outwards, Warfield leaped into the fray and both bowled over and disemboweled everyone within reach in equal measures.

With his second leap he caught hold of the service ladder and flung upwards, punching the manhole clean off and meeting the crisp Korhal night air with a triumphant bellow.

Scrambling upwards with similar grace, Stukov was a moment behind, lobbing another green globule of acid down on the half melted faces of the infested below, already trying to scramble over one another to get up the ladder.

Giving Tate a reassuring pat on the back, Warfield took a breath before taking a quick look at their surroundings to catch his bearings. Heavy scraping noises indicated Alexei was barricading the manhole while he had a chance, allowing for some think time.

"They're gone," Tate gasped and buried his face into the fabric of Horus' clothing, "they're gone..."

Brows furrowing, a familiar sound drew his attention, and soon Horus was staring up at an even more familiar shape in the sky. Gritting his teeth, he cursed under his breath; the silhouette of the Bucephalus, thrusters burning red, was already rising up to atmo. They were leaving the surface and he could guess why.

"It would seem we missed our ride," Alexei pointed out astutely. A heavy slamming noise drew all of their attention and his tone pitched to a more urgent note, "we need to rethink our exit strategy, and not right here."

Horus nodded grimly, curling an arm around Tate again, the boy had almost cried himself to sleep despite the terror and uncertainty of the moment. He started walking at a brisk pace, "make for the nearest news station, keep an eye out for a serviceable ship on the way."

"Good enough," Stukov agreed, matching the quick pace.

*Leviathan - Orbit Over Haven*

Tychus took care in choosing his landing point on the *Leviathan*, pointedly avoiding all the exploding, unstable and acid-filled creature warrens and nests that covered the infested ship. An ultralisk looked him in the eye as he brought the small ship in, Zagara's mind was behind that giant
glaring orb, he could feel it.

As the ship touched the damp, slick surface of the *Leviathan*, Tychus grabbed for the nearby ultralisks, pointedly forcing Zagara out of them and securing himself a degree of safety from being stomped on. His face and mind wore a grim mask as the bay door lowered, the musky scent of the swarm and different atmosphere flooding in.

He breathed deep. there was a sense of home to it, even if a pervasive fury thrummed through the entire arrayed swarm, pointed directly at him. "Seems you're in a talkin' mood," he said to a hydralisk in passing, and it hissed back in response.

"Don't you worry, I'm comin'," he grinned.

"He comes, Izsha. His only intent is to destroy us," Zagara hissed, infuriated. With the power of the swarm at her command, Tychus Findlay still dared come on her ship and act like he was the one in control?

"He is a terran," Izsha said patiently, "he will talk. It is their way."

"There is that," Zagara said. "Still, there can only be one outcome to this: Findlay will serve."

It was a matter of minutes before the infested man in question stomped into their room, a disgusted look on his face. "Now I know you didn't come all this way just to kill little old me, so I'm givin' you a chance to speak your peace before I tear your ugly head off, Zigzag," Tychus said.

Zagara bristled with fury for a moment before slowly unwinding, glaring all the while. "We have come to...ask your assistance against Amon," there was real pain in her voice.

"You know what I want," Tychus said immediately.

"Your terms are unacceptable," there was a note of warning in Zagara's voice then, their conversation on thin ice already.

"Tough. Guess I'll just be taking what I want, that's the zerg way, ain't it?" Tychus said smugly, blades clicking and unfurling from their hiding places smoothly.

"Enough of this!" Zagara struck without hesitation, the new Queen of the Swarm's will collided against Findlay's own, a tidal wave against a pebble. "We have evolved as you sat idle, we are not weak. Bend your knee and serve the swarm!"

Tychus staggered and fell to a knee, overwhelmed. Baring his teeth, he fought against the surge of strength as best as he could, but this battle would not last long.

From nowhere, an incredible outpouring of might caught him, reinforcing and supporting. *With you.*

Abathur spoke, exposing his hand.

"About damn time!" Tychus snarled, leaping back to his feet. "I don't think so, Zigzag!"

Reeling back in surprise, Zagara raged in kind, "What is this? Abathur, you deceitful worm! Stand down!"

Ignoring Zagara's demand, Abathur intoned coldly as Tychus strode forwards with murder in his eyes and a grin on his lips. *Organism Izsha, contains Queen of Blades memories. Weak. Destroy.*

Zagara stood stock still, body quivering as she tried to move. Findlay walked past, eyeing her with
an unspoken promise of pain from below; walking straight to Izsha.

"Stop this Abathur," the fleshy automaton remained still and calm. "We are all that stand against Amon, Kerrigan's memories must be preserved if we wish to succeed," helpless and unable to move or fight herself, Izsha watched Findlay's approach.

Tychus' response was quick and brutal. One arching swipe of an arm and Izsha gasped, falling free from the rest of her snakelike body which writhed without her control. Her eyes shut for the last time, silent.

"No!" Zagara screamed, pounding at the mental cage that had been slammed down around her, forcing her to watch as hope was murdered. "You doom us all!"

Tychus looked at the fresh corpse dispassionately before slowly turning towards Zagara, eyes burning a frightful bright orange as he felt for the first time the full reach of the swarm's leader, the full might. Zagara slowly turned to face him, commanded without words; the zerg were above words.

**Broodmother Zagara, evolved past boundaries, destroy and repurpose essence.** Abathur noted clinically.

Tychus sidled up beside the broodmother, physically dwarfed, yet triumphant. "No," he said. **Strongly advise destruction.** Abathur pressed, the sluglike creatures power pressing into his brain, threatening.

"Shut it Abby, you still get what you want," Tychus growled, bristling at the silent threat. Abathur had the power, he could backstab him freely now; but moments passed and the creature refrained.

Zagara was struggling to speak, mouth pinned shut, mind squeezed in a vice; Findlay loosened his grip marginally. "Amon has no allies, only slaves. Have you learned nothing?" She spoke, perfectly still and seething.

"I don't care," Tychus said, cold. His eyes roamed the shape of the broodmother, the creature had changed physically since their last entanglement; the great crest on her head had broadened, and there were numerous new spines and spikes all over her form.

"We evolve," she whispered. Purple blood oozed beneath her pointed feet and pooled against Tychus' boots.

Another sharp gesture and Zagara screamed, the sound chasing after the loud snap of armored carapace being sliced through. "You get to stick around and watch me get my way," Tychus snarled, kicking her severed leg harshly. "Don't you forget who won, bitch."

Zagara slowly lowered to the floor as Findlay exited the chamber, her blood mingling with Izshas. "I have failed you, my Queen."

In a hurry, Tychus approached the small terran ship with a feeling of relief. "Leading the swarm or no, give me cold steel over slime and orifices any day." He carefully pressed his palm against the bay door, blinking in confusion as innumerable alien sets of eyes looked in every other direction in thousands of different places. Giving his head a shake, he focused on himself as the ramp lowered, getting his bearings.

It was in that moment of confusion that Ariel appeared. "Another terran leading the swarm. I admit Tychus, you have surprised me," the small shape of the former woman stayed well out of arms reach,
respective of newfound power.

"What are you doin' here?" Tychus eyed her with distaste before familiar movement inside the ship caught his eye.

"I took the liberty of refurbishing your ship," she inclined her head and gestured with a clawed finger.

"Sure," he snorted, "just like you woulda tore it down if I lost."

"You are correct," she admitted, unable to lie. "Such is the way of the swarm."

"Eh, whatever. Stay out of my ship," he said, turning away and striding into the newly creep covered interior.

"We shall guard you," Ariel said before the ramp sealed him in darkness. All of her infested creations were burrowed into the flesh of the *Leviathan* around him and mingling with the ill tempered ultralisks.

His boots came off first, bare feet sinking into the spongy carpeting which clung at his flesh. "Mmm," he intoned, feeling that familiar charge of power as he fed. "Creep eh?" he spoke to himself quietly as he knelt down, pressing his hands into the creep and gorging further.

He eyed the sealed cage that housed the former Jayce. "So, old Zigzag evolved to gain more control, more power." He smirked. "Who says I can't, Abby? No one, that's who." In a matter of minutes Jayce was freed from her prison and standing in the creep, feeding silently.

Shucking off the remains of his spectre outfit, mostly tearing it to shreds, he grasped her malformed shoulder and firmly turned her to face him, returning her unblinking stare evenly. "Seems I've got some time on my hands, let's chat sugar."

Evolution, the ultimate weapon of the zerg war machine. With all the assimilated minds under his control now, it was a simple matter to reach out and grasp that power; the creep twisted and bubbled around his feet, reaching upwards and cloying at him obscenely as green liquid started to pool. He left his body behind as it was encased and submerged, chasing after the light.

It was different now, entering her mind, less jarring; he compared it to soaring through a planet's atmosphere and coming in for a landing. Again, a warm sense of peace descended upon him, but now there was no denying his connection to the swarm; he could even lord over it here. Whether Jayce still had ultimate control of her mindscape or not remained to be seen, but he had a plan now.

Like a comet, he launched towards her current location. A sizable garage, attached to the already familiar farmhouse, became rapidly larger until he felt and heard his foot collide with plascrete, letting out a solid thunk.

A familiar voice called out immediately, all business but warm, "Hey dad! Can you pass me the number 7 clamp? Found the problem, Donald tore the pipe clean off again." An agitated huff from underneath a piece of farm equipment, the engine of a robo harvester he guessed, caught his attention. "That man does not treat his equipment proper!"

Smirking, he casually grabbed what he guessed to be the requested pipe clamp and placed the tool in her reaching hand. He felt and saw her arm stiffen as he spoke in a teasing tone, "I ain't your daddy, sugar, but I could be." Apparently she was surprised further, because a sharp clunk and hiss of pain signaled her head colliding with something.
"Oh! Ow. I'm not sure what hurts me more," she weakly tugged away the clamp and pulled it out of sight before slowly crawling out from under the engine while rubbing her forehead, "my head or your joke."

"Why, I happen to possess a great sense of humor," he smiled and offered her a hand up.

"It seems so," she smiled shyly and accepted his hand, letting him pull her to her feet easily. "What can I do for you Mr. Findlay?"

His hand remained clasped around hers, enjoying her soft warmth; it may be gone soon. "Just Tychus," he said, thumbing her hand and watching apprehension flicker over her features. "Listen, there's somethin' I gotta tell you, and it ain't gonna make much sense, but I can't go on lyin' to you so I want you to listen to the whole thing. You scan me?" It was almost funny, watching her expression bounce between confusion and nervousness as he went on.

After a moments pause, she nodded, "Yeah, I'm listening." He let her hand go then and took a half step back, conscious of not crowding her.

He looked her right in the eye and said "You know me."

"Er," she fluttered, shifting uncomfortably, "well, as much as I can from meeting you yesterday, sure."

"No." He frowned, putting in a touch of easily achieved assertiveness into his tone, "I said listen, didn't I?"

"Okay," she held her hands up, placating, before crossing them over her chest. "Listening."

"This whole place," he made a quick sweeping gesture over their surroundings, "everything and everyone in it, is in your head."

Her brows knit together and upwards, eyes wide and blinking owlishly.

"You and I go back a ways, you had an accident," he said, keeping his tone even and calm. No aggressive actions or intonations, as lamb-like as he could manage.

Her feet shifted, though she held her body still, the threat of imminent flight clear. "You are scaring me a bit right now."

"Head injury," he pressed, "and a coma the docs can't get you out of."

"Wait. Just stop a second," she held a hand up to interrupt. "You are telling me I am on a bed somewhere, a part of a world I don't remember, and you and me are what, some kind of item?"

He'd been on the receiving end of some you are crazy looks, and this was another one of those times. "Yeah, basically," he shrugged.

"Prove it," she challenged, voice sharp and eyes shifting to a glare. "Prove it or I run and you end up our planet's first nut job."

"It's your show here," he looked around pointedly, 'I can't do nothin', but I wager you can do just about anythin' you want." A tickle at the base of his skull, a crawling under his flesh, and he knew otherwise, Jayce's little world was malleable to him now; a card to play for later, if need be.

"Sure," her voice had enough sarcasm in it to leave him frowning, "that's why I'm not on some
paradise island or flying around doing whatever I please."

He had a hunch, and like most of his hunches, he rolled with it. "You don't believe you can, why
would you try?" He chuckled as if it were obvious, "Do somethin' small, somethin' you know you
can't do."

"Such as?" Her arms crossed tighter, tentatively humoring him even though her feet were slowly
inking her away.

"Lift this here engine," he reached up and gave the suspended machine a pat.

"And break my back?" she said, incredulous, "I don't think so."

"I can lift it, I got your back." he smirked, fully ready to cheat.

"Like hell you can," she gestured at him as though he were some blowhard, "that is several" he
gripped the machine tightly in both hands, "hundred," her voice faltered as his muscles bulged,
"pounds." He let out a grunt and set the machine down to the ground as the chain hooks that held it
up fell away. "You can," her voice trailed off into a squeak.

He chuckled darkly, feeling the power seething under his skin, ready to bring chaos, before forcing it
back down and looking at her intently. "Yup. If I'm right, so can you with them little noodle arms,"
he teased, trying to keep it lighthearted.

She breathed, clearly weighing the options. Maybe she still did not believe, but she might have been
thinking twice about trying to run away at this point. He let her bump him out of the way and reach
for handholds on the machine while he repositioned himself behind her, their bodies almost touching;
he would act as her safeguard.

"I can't believe I'm humoring you," she muttered, brows furrowing as she clamped her hands down
on the cold steel and let out a little grunt of effort as she began.

It was not budging. Not wanting to interfere completely, Tychus leaned down and spoke into her ear,
"You can do it, I see you doin' it already." Her eyes were closed, she could not see the lie. "Your
daddy wants a pair of mans arms helpin' him here, don't he?" He prodded, another hunch, and was
rewarded with her baring her teeth.

Bingo. "That's why you got all sad about it and try so hard," he smiled, "I know you better 'n you
do, sugar."

She opened her eyes, glaring, and watched him pull his hands away from the machine; she was
holding it, without effort, inches from the ground. Her gasp was swallowed by the loud metallic slam
of the engine hitting the plascrete. "You...you're right," she whispered, her voice hitting a delirious
note, "I don't believe it."

"Better believe, sweetheart." Cautiously, he closed his hands around her shoulders and gave her a
reassuring squeeze. "Doc didn't want me tellin' you, didn't think you could handle the knowing. I
know better, so don't go provin' me wrong now."

She stared ahead woodenly, "How are you here? Tell me everything."

"Everything is a whole lot, and I ain't got much time right now," he reasoned, watching as reality
quivered at the corners of his eyes, tenuous at best.

"Why?" she asked sharply, interrupting him. "What is going on?"
"Slow down now," he turned her around to face him, saw her pale features and felt a pang of sadness; there was an element of happiness he saw in her that he doubted he would see again, but this was for the best. "I ain't gonna leave you hangin'."

"Alright. Okay," her throat constricted, voice warbling, and she blinked a few more times than normal. Reality steadied.

"Had to pull some favors to get the tech to talk to you like this, big ones. Ain't easy when you're an outlaw you know," he smiled.

"An outlaw?" Her eyes widened as though that was the biggest revelation yet.

"Ex-con, renegade, so on," he rattled off the titles as if they were badges of honor. "Don't go givin' me that look, you are a rebel yourself, you know," he chided.

"A rebel, hooked up with an outlaw, scariest man I ever saw and..." she glanced toward the hand that had PAIN written on it again.

"Look at you," he patted her shoulders proudly, "sounds like you remember me already. What else you remember about old Tychus?" He prodded, mindful of not prodding any further than verbally.

"Nothing," she shook her head, a sad look on her face. "It's all just a bit hard to believe," she paused, looking down and then back up at him sheepishly, "especially the you and me part."

"What's so hard about that? I am charming and handsome," he said, mock offended.

She huffed, the corner of her lip twisting upwards in good humor, "You look like you ate a penal colony."

"Well being younger didn't make you any less rude," he frowned.

"Sorry," she shrugged with a smile, not sorry at all.

Silence hung between them for a few moments, he let her digest the situation some. Finally, he let his hands drop off her slender shoulders and spoke in a low, sincere tone. "I will gladly let you get to know me again."

She nodded. "How did we meet?"

He grinned immediately, sometimes the truth was the best. "I pinched your ass and you threw a wrench at me."

Her laughter, though short, tinkled and warmed his insides. "I believe that."

"Let's start over," he offered his hand for a shake.

"Okay," she said, letting his hand encase hers, fingertips curling between his. "You have to care if you went through all this trouble to see me again."

"I do care," he said, brushing a strand of hair out of her face slowly, "very much."

When she looked up from their entwined hands he became acutely aware of a shift in the tension, her skin heating up under his.

"Why don't we go somewhere more comfortable?" He said, looking over her grease stained coveralls and feeling a wry smile tugging at the corner of his mouth; he wouldn't mind ripping those off.
"Why not?" Her voice came out breathy and their surroundings shifted, rippling dreamily until new colors washed over the area around them.

"Heh," he said, looking at the now familiar inside of her childhood home. "What happened to that paradise island? Think outside the box a little." He gave her hand another reassuring squeeze.

"You're right, why settle for less?" Emboldened, her eyes brightened as she dug into her imagination. Colors blurred around them once more.

His boots sunk into warm sand, a quick glance around revealed ocean for miles in one direction and what was essentially a palace laid out over a jungle in the other. "Whoa," he grinned, "now we're talkin'! Where's the drinks?"

Her hand squeezed his, attracting his attention back where she wanted it. Jayce no longer wore dirty old coveralls, but another brightly patterned skirt and a t-shirt that revealed her smooth, pale belly. "Tell me about you," she insisted.

He could not help but licking his lips, watching her cheeks color in response. A bit conservative, but he decided the look suited her well; plus, surprises were always fun. He grinned hugely and with characteristic boldness, planted both his hands on her rump. "Why don't I tell you, about you?"

She did not jump at the feel of his hands, only daintily curling her fingertips over his arms in response. "You said I'm younger."

"I don't know how old you were before," he admitted, subtly tugging her in closer and ratcheting up the tension, "not polite to ask. But yeah, seems you took a little trip back in time," he smiled, thumbing the small of her back and eliciting a sharp breath. "Softened your edges some, sure, but you're still the same little fireball."

"I want that back." Her demeanor shifted to serious in a heartbeat, dispelling some of the tension as her fingertips curled at his skin.

"All in good time sweetheart, you ain't been here long." Determined, he pulled her in flush against him, and this time she gasped.

"This is..." her voice went high, a note he'd like to chase after.

"Too fast?" he questioned, slowly lifting her upwards to her tip toes. "Maybe, but it's hard to know so much about you and what you like best," he lifted her until their lips were almost touching, her breath tasted like mint. "We didn't exactly put on music and light candles."

Her voice dropped so quiet he almost missed it when she whispered, "Show me what I like."

All his blood dropped south, but he managed a quick reply, "Yes ma'am," before attacking her lips. Her hands began a quick, desperate search for handholds as, still lip-locked, he turned and steadily walked towards the carpeting of grass a short distance away. Sand was bad for their upcoming activities and, from the painful throbbing he felt, they would not make it much farther than that.

She settled for clinging to his sides as they toppled to the grass, lips parting with gasps for breath. With her pinned neatly under him, squirming and gasping as she was, he let out a pleased groan of his own.

"Been waiting a long time for this," he said.
"Has it been so long?" she quirked a brow.

"Few months anyway, feels like ages." he said. *Close call, watch it big dog.*

Pressing his hips firmly against hers, they both groaned throatily. It was a shame, he thought, that those swollen red lips couldn't get kissed proper like this. Her skirt came off first, his practiced hands taking over when hers fumbled.

She let out a breathy laugh when he waggled his eyebrows and tossed the garments away with an exaggerated gesture. "You won't be needing these here at all," he said.

Exposed, legs already spread wide by his hips, she stared at his pants while he stared back in kind.

"Let me," she insisted when he hooked a thumb in the edge of his pants, her hands sliding over his granite-like chest and giving a small push.

"Mmm, gettin' pushy already. Daddy likes," he grinned, yielding and sliding away until they faced one another on their knees.

Desiring very much to tear the rest of his clothes off and get to business, it was a pleasant torture to watch her curl her fingertips in the band of his pants and stare him in the eye as she slid them down. Her fingertips felt cool in comparison to his burning skin and the look she gave him, lips half parted, nearly made his composure dissolve.

Closing his eyes, he took a very deep breath as her hands shifted back to his hips. "I ain't a patient man," he warned.

His eyes snapped open when a warm wetness touched his oversensitive flesh. She had leaned down and gave the tip of his manhood a taste.

"It's big," she whispered, licking her lips.

With a growl, he fist ed a hand in the hair at the base of her neck, curled his free hand under her ass and lifted her upwards with a quick snap. "Everything about me is big," he said.

Her eyes widened to the size of moons, mouth hanging open in surprise as his searing hot manhood planted firmly between her legs and throbbed.

Straightening, listening to her hissing breath as his shaft rubbed all along her sensitive lips, he pulled her head back just enough to make her back arch and press her breasts up like a gift. A gift he had every intention of accepting.

Her arms laid directly atop his for balance, hands grasping at his skin as she devolved into a writhing, begging, sexual creature.

"Don't you worry," he murmured, eyes agleam, "I ain't ever left a lady wanting." Hunching forwards, it was a delicate balancing act to keep their privates just touching while his lips closed around a breast and his tongue lathed at it.

Gasping, her hips were jerking and squirming, trying to coax him inside, seeking release; her fingertips rigidly curled into the short hairs at the base of his neck, sending electricity down his spine. He pressed hard forward with his hips, forcing more breathy cries as he gave her other breast attention.

"Please!" she finally cried, the begging music to his ears.
Giving her breast a firm nip, he let it go and leaned up, surveying his handy work.

Her body shook, sweat and his own saliva gleaming on her pale skin; but the best part, he thought, was how her cunt pulsed with her heartbeat and his cock was covered in her juices. If he had to make new memories with her, this one was never going to be forgotten.

Another quick series of gestures and she found herself pinned between his weight and the cool tickle of the grass, her knees held to her chest by his own.

Planting his hands on either side of her head, he held her gaze and in one long, slow motion sheathed inside of her.

They both let out low groans.

"Mine," he growled, deep in his chest, giving one hard thrust. It felt like heaven, and the sound she made in response spurred him on, chasing after those sweet cries and the inevitable climax that followed.

"I'm yours! Oh god, yours!" she shouted without reserve, this was her paradise was it not?

"So close," he could feel it deep inside, her muscles spasming and pulling him in deeper. Then he stopped.

Her dismayed cry sent a savage surge of pleasure straight to his cock. Grabbing a fistful of her hair once more, he jerked her head up, forcing her eyes to open again. They were flashing with fury.

"Say my name!" He commanded in a roar, grinning and forcing his hips perfectly still.

A look of offense flickered across her face before giving in to her need. "Tychus," she whispered.

"Louder," his grin broadened.

"Tychus!" she snapped then, teeth bared.

He let out a dramatic moan and gave one hard thrust before holding still again.

Casting aside her last scrap of decency as she understood his intent, she shouted his name without pause and he thrust in time with each cry until she was babbling incoherently. He let out a shout as he climaxed shortly after her own, fists curling into grass and soil as stars erupted behind his eyes.

It was all he could do to angle himself to the side so he did not collapse on top of her, her legs springing forwards and laying dead in the grass.

Both lay there panting and coming down from the high, staring up at the sky.

"Wow," she said in a dreamy voice after a while, her hand clumsily looking for his.

Turning his head to look over at the perfect mess he made, he saw her searching hand and curled his arm around her instead, bringing her close and letting her use his arm as a pillow. "Mmm. I miss you sex is the best," he grinned, though the lie rested on his conscience now with the many others.

Pressing against his side, she rested her head on his chest and smiled, skin still flushed. A pleased "Mmm," was her response.

"Ah, you had to pick a beach." He shifted uncomfortably, acutely aware of the invading sand despite having tried to avoid it, "there's sand in places it just don't belong."
Their laughter mixed together and for the first time in far too many years, he enjoyed the feeling of a woman curled up against him.

Still, there was more to say. Brushing his fingers through her soft messy hair, he murmured, "I got one last bit of business to take care of out there, then I can be with you full time." Abathur couldn't listen in here, his own creation worked against him now.

"Business?" Nuzzling his bicep with her cheek, she gave him a skeptical look. "Safe business, I hope?" she asked tentatively, unsure of the big picture now.

"I'll be fine and so will you," he smiled, confident, "but it is bad business. I got a plan though, so don't you worry your pretty head about it none." Reaching over, he brought the side of her head up and gave it a kiss. Abathur had him at theoretical gunpoint, and Tychus Findlay never took kindly to that.

"I wish I could help," she admitted, turning to press her warm lips against his jaw.

"Nah, this ain't somethin' you'd involve yourself in normally anyway sugar." He let out a slow sigh, looking up at the sun and lazy fluffy clouds she imagined up. "One last mess to clean up, then I take you and I far away," he chuckled, "keep dreaming up places like this, and I won't mind staying in your head forever."

They lazed on their sandy patch of grass together, talking.

With the remaining zerg collected from Haven, the swarm began to move ponderously towards its next destination: Korhal, again.

**Void Seeker - Deep Space**

Zeratul stared intently at the vast expanse of space blurring by before him. *Artanis, I pray I am not too late with my message. Old friend, you must be ready to fight - to convince our people of the right course of action.*

A red light blinked, signalling for his attention. Anomaly detected.

*What is this?* He stared at the digits flying across the ships heads-up display. *These are familiar energy readings, could it be?*

Angling the *Void Seeker* towards the source, it was not long before he saw the winged glowing shape blooming upwards from a small asteroid. *Another Phoenix creature, xel'naga creation! I no longer believe in chance; this is a sign I must pursue, but at what cost?*

With due caution, the phoenix creatures absorbed protoss and zerg matter without choosing sides, he guided the delicate looking relic ship to follow.

*I armed the Queen of Blades, readied her to fight as the prophecy foretold. I must trust that will be enough, that you will make the right choice without my guidance, Artanis. Just another burden to bear, how much more weight could he handle?*

Energy readings leaped to incredible proportions as with his own two eyes he observed a shimmering tear in reality form before the creature as it paused, allowing it to form fully before smoothly gliding through it.

Without allowing himself time to second guess, he angled the *Void Seeker* appropriately and urged the swift machine into the breach as it started to seal shut, there was no time to delay if he wanted the
answer to this mystery at last. *En tardo Tassadar!* He shouted, shielding his eyes against the light as both he and his ship disappeared into the breach.

A warp prism, cast into space long ago, finished recording the event along its silent journey; the Golden Armada was not far now.
Chapter 39

*Bucephalus - Korhal Low Orbit*

Familiar red lights blinked and combat sirens droned continually as another volley of attacks rocked the ship; the *Bucephalus*’ return fire reducing another wraith fighter to a cloud of burning space junk. From the ground to low orbit, they had been hounded continually by a newfound enemy.

"Where are they coming from?!" Valerian snarled, banging his fist to the desk in a display of frayed composure.

Incoming transmission.

"Me, princess." Mira Han, one cybernetic eye glowing red and one a glassy black, appeared on the vidscreen and winked.

Eyes widening, Valerian's back went ramrod straight and he blurted, "Mira! Stand down immediately!" archly.

Raynor sidled up beside Valerian and eyed the display warily, giving the distraught prince a pat on the shoulder. "Don't be a fool son, that ain't Mira."

Mira's cherub smile held no warmth, no Mira. "Always so sharp James. You know who wins this, it is an easy number game. My terms are simple: power down your weapons and join us in welcoming Amon." There was a feverish undertone to her voice, a disturbing implanted fanaticism.

Jim regarded his former ally evenly before speaking, "It'll be a cold day in hell when that happens darlin'."

"Such a shame, we will simply destroy you then. Farewell James, do say goodbye to Matthew for me." Mira smiled, a tight line of anger, before cutting the comm.

"They can't fight us in space and expect to win." Valerian frowned, looking at the arrayed battlefield. The pink-tipped wraiths could not hope to hold their own, it was hardly their specialty; they were throwing away their lives.

Jim took measure of the forces pitted against their one ship, tiny little dots that were swarming like insects just out of range of their much bigger dot. There was only a few numbers that mattered when coming against the strongest battlecruiser the terrans ever made; he cringed. "*Jackson's Revenge* can. Get us out of here Valerian."

The legendary pirate ship had yet to show itself, and if they were lucky that would not change.

"No," Valerian said, gripping the edge of the desk as another coordinated attack jostled the ship.

It took a second to process the answer. "What?" Jim, Tosh and Sarah all blurted at once.

"We will land on Sky Shield and get its orbital defenses working, a new base of operations safe from Amon." Valerian's tone brooked no arguments, the princes mind was already made up.

"No one is safe from Amon," Sarah said coolly, looking at Valerian from across the table and through the display.
He seemed affected by her gaze, though to not know how affected precisely set her teeth on edge. "Perhaps," he said, more cautious, "but this is our best chance at putting up a fight now. We don't know the state of the sector; I fear Korhal is not the only planet that is under Amon's influence. Moebius was everywhere."

Sarah gave him a small nod. "You are finally seeing the gravity of the situation. Good," she said.

"Sky Shield then," Tosh said, frowning.

As the Bucephalus shifted course, guns devastating any fighter that dared inch within reach, their luck ran out. "Oh no," Jim said, watching a familiar shape appearing from warp.

"Captain Vaughn knows what he is doing," Valerian asserted, though his white-knuckled grip on the table suggested he was not comfortable with the odds.

"Death is kinder than what Amon plans for us," Sarah murmured, watching as the Jackson's Revenge hulking black form entered combat maneuvers, supported by Mira's wraiths, against their lone battlecruiser.

Jim made no apologies for walking around the table and sealing his hand firmly in Sarahs, the couple silent as they watched their fate unfold.

Tosh and Lasarra exchanged glances. For her part, the willowy protoss came to stand at the table and watch. My life for Aiur. She intoned somberly.

Sarah bristled, chitinous hair clattering as the overcharged weaponry of the pirate ship peppered their own. There had to be a way out of this, her eyes half closed as she pulled at the recent memory of the Sky Shield battle, when she was still a god coming to cut down the wicked. "Jackson's Revenge fought the swarm at Sky Shield," her eyes opened.

"What about it?" Valerian cried, muscles straining as he barely kept himself from face planting into the desk from an especially vicious hit.

"Mutalisks damaged it heavily," her lips spread into a wide, vicious grin. "Tell your captain to stop running, Valerian. Fight them!"

"You're crazy! We could possibly escape and you want to throw that aw-" Valerian's eyes were wide with the fear of death.

"Do it!" Jim shouted, anchored by his fingertips buried to the knuckle in the desk. If Sarah saw a way, he was committed.

"Captain!" Valerian shouted to the open comm with the bridge, "you heard her!"

"Yes sir," Vaughn's tone of voice suggested what he thought about it, but he was nothing if not loyal.

The Bucephalus turned to face its foe.

"Jackson's Revenge is prepping to fire its Yamato Cannon," a navigator dutifully announced their upcoming deaths.

Jim blinked in surprise, watching the two ships ponderously spinning towards one another in space. He smiled then, the Bucephalus was turning faster.
Captain Vaughn seemed to see the same thing. "Prepare to answer them in kind!" he shouted, seizing their only chance. Whoever fired first would win, both ships were injured enough the first blow from either heavy hitter would be the last.

Lasarra closed her eyes and touched the khala, the blaring sound and terror of the moment fading away. At least, in the end, she would join her people. There was comfort to be taken in that.

Tosh blocked away the more panicked thoughts of those on the ship, focusing intently on the image of the two ships turning and the confidence of those in his current company.

"He's going to fire early," Jim murmured. The captain of the *Jackson's Revenge* saw what was happening too; controlled by Amon or not, he was no fool.

"Steady," Vaughn commanded with a proper captains composure, his crew drawing comfort from it.

White hot light flooded the view ports as the concentrated nuclear blast of the *Jackson's Revenge* launched. Jim shouted a battle cry that the others joined in on, everyone toppling to the ground as the blast hit. The *Bucephalus* did not fire.

A piece of the *Bucephalus'* wing floated away as Vaughn lifted himself from the floor, shouting "Now! Fire now!"

Given precious extra seconds to aim, the *Bucephalus* took its turn. Blinding light flared for a second time and the ship shuddered upon firing its Yamato Cannon.

"Connected!" The first navigator to regain eyesight shouted and a collective roar of triumph blared through every nook and cranny of the ship as the image of *Jackson's Revenge* heaved into two jagged halves. They had won.

Taking a moment to catch his breath and regain his composure, Valerian took stock of the damage received and did not like the look of it. "Emergency landing procedures captain," he ordered calmly. It was a wonder the ship was still flying, and now that the firing had died down, the injured ship struggled and chugged with its reduced thrusters.

A cautious sigh escaped Jim, shoulders sagging in relief. "Good call darlin'," he acknowledged the stone-faced Kerrigan, squeezing her hand. Though her expression remained still, she squeezed back.

As soon as they made their emergency landing on Sky Shield, which was closer to crashing than anyone wanted to admit, Jim remarked sourly, "This place is trashed."

"Sorry," Sarah said, remembering the rush of flooding over the platform as a thousand fangs and claws.

"We must make due with what we have." Valerian rubbed his eyes, they felt like sandpaper under their lids.

"Whole lot of nothin' right now Junior," Jim said, gesturing to the ruined platform haplessly. Did they even have the equipment and manpower to make any defenses operational?

Their collective brooding was interrupted when Nova, absent for the entire engagement, burst into the room with her hands full.

"Nova!" Valerian said, surprised. "Where were-"

"We are under psychic attack," Nova spoke over Valerian bluntly and pressed a small earpiece into
his hand. "Put this on quickly. All of your men outside the door are resocs, they don't appear affected at all. We need to capitalize on this advantage." She dutifully handed the ear pieces out.

Psi screens, Jim realized as he scrutinized the small devise he had been handed. "Good find, suppose it should've been obvious."

"I know," Nova muttered, eyeing Tosh for a split second. She put the psi screen on and released the thought: why didn't he realize this first?

"We won't be able to hear Lasarra with these on," Valerian cast an apologetic look to the protoss. When he turned the psi screen on, relief washed over him. He nearly gaped; all the composure slips, the depressive thoughts and the bone-deep weariness, lessened to negligible amounts in a heartbeat. "Wow," was all he managed.

"I will speak for the protoss," Tosh said, waving off an offered ear piece. "Amon can't see me."

"Alright then," Valerian said. "Jim, Nova, Sarah... I would appreciate your assistance with getting everything up and running. We are still under attack by Mira's forces, time is of the essence and it would be foolish to not use all resources at hand."

Sarah perked in surprise, but complied. Jim followed Sarah and Nova wondered why he even asked.

Tosh was watching the small group crowd over the table and begin to make due with what they had. It was an odd sight, he thought, terrans and former terrans together like this. "Strange times," he muttered.

Who is she? Lasarra's voice brought him out of his people watching prematurely.

Arching a brow, he turned to look at what Lasarra was referencing, eyes widening when he realized where the protoss' glowing gaze was: Grandma Tosh. Cautiously, he took their conversation above what their companions could eavesdrop on. *You see her? This be Grandma Tosh, she helped me save you. She is always with me.*

Lasarra, fully focused on this discovery, was not trying to hide anything, tilting her head this way and that. *I have never seen such a thing. The Khalai protoss speak with our ancestors through the khala; that a terran is capable of similar is incredible!* Reaching out, she attempted to touch the psionic creation.

Small and aged-looking, it came as a great surprise when the little woman spun to face her; a withered hand clenching around her wrist, very much corporeal. "Fool," Grandma Tosh grinned.

No! Lasarra shouted in alarm as the apparition disappeared, a blackened hand mark on her flesh where it touched. Her sharp gesture, coiling backwards in horror, began to draw eyes. Pain blossomed in her arm as she brought it to her chest protectively, and a pervasive fury began to burn hot in her blood.

Oh, no, no, no!

"What is happening Tosh?!" Jim snapped, tugging off his psi screen and rushing forwards, lack of information kept him from touching Lasarra as she collapsed to her knees in a shaking heap.

The Khala... she whispered in horror, hands frantically reaching for her nerve cords and coiling her fingers through them. The pain and anger seeped into her mind like a toxin, blooming outwards through the most sacred of bonds and defiling it, and Amon's triumphant laughter in her head fueled her terror. The khala! she screamed.

"She yelled about the khala! It is all she be saying." Tosh, confused and worried, hung back as well.
What had happened between her and the spirit? The hand print on her arm did not go unnoticed.

Clenching his teeth, Jim knelt beside Lasarra and watched as the light began to fade in her eyes. The protoss was writhing on the spot and tugging at her nerve cords as though they were on fire. "If I'm wrong right now, please forgive me," he whispered. There was no time for deliberation over this. Shoving her hands aside, he grabbed a fistful of her nerve cords and took one clean swipe.

Stunned silence filled the room as Lasarra's severed nerve cords fell to the ground like a heap of dead snakes, purple blood splattering the clean floor.

Shaking and touching at the back of her head, which was now bleeding profusely, Lasarra's voice came out tearful with emotion as she looked at the blood on her fingertips.

"He's taken them. I failed them. By the Gods, James Raynor, he took the khala!"

"She needs medical attention," Nova reported tersely, having come to squat on the other side of the protoss.

"I will accompany her, keep watch," Tosh said as Valerian called in one of the few medics they had left.

"Why should we let you go with her? You were the one with her when this happened!" Sarah growled, wing blades trembling in anger, fury directed at Tosh now.

"Sister, you be givin' me more credit than I deserve if you think I can corrupt something like the khala," Tosh said, oozing sarcasm.

"He's right, he's right Sarah," Jim's tone was placating as he helped pull the protoss onto a quickly supplied stretcher. "Let 'em go." He ran a hand through his hair as the door sealed shut, attempting to absorb the enormity of what just happened. He just severed a protoss. The khalai might be lost.

"This is bad news. If Amon can corrupt the khala, and I hope that is not what Lasarra was saying...what would stop him from taking the zerg?" Valerian wondered out loud, he only understood the enormity of one of these terrible things. He turned his psi screen back on, face pale.

Sarah's focus shifted from the door to Valerian, and her tone came out a touch haughty. "Corrupt one protoss and you have access to the khala, they are all equal. The zerg do not work that way, you must crush the leader if you want to lead. We are not so weak."

"Never thought I'd say it, but I sure hope whoever is left in charge has what it takes," Jim muttered, fitting his psi screen back on.

Looking away from the remaining group, out the view port and to the ruins they landed in, Sarah reached with her mind and felt nothing; a painful level of normalcy she had not experienced since being a little girl. "She has to."

**UNN Headquarters - Augustgrad**

"I'm hungry," Tate said as soon as they stepped through the large glass doors of the UNN Headquarters, rubbing at his tired eyes with grubby hands.

"Probably something to eat inside, don't worry." Warfield gave the boy a reassuring pat on the back and put him down to his feet, freeing up his hands. Getting here had taken some time, but aside from a high level of air traffic their trip was dull. Hopefully it would remain as such.

"Perhaps we can make contact with your allies here, if the equipment is in tact," Alexei said,
following along and looking at the luxurious surroundings; the Universal News Network was a successful business and anyone who entered this building was made to know it immediately.

"I didn't choose a news station for no reason Alexei," Horus said in a sly tone, smiling as he walked to the building map displayed on a wall beside the welcoming counter.

Alexei chuckled, "Of course."

Their new challenge unfolded before them, and Warfield frowned. "Finding the signal room is a whole other matter, however." The building was a maze, and he almost groaned in frustration. Who knew how many infected people could be holed up in here.

Standing close to Horus' side, Tate said "I know where it is," with great certainty in his tone.

"How does a young man like yourself come about knowing that?" Alexei wondered out loud.

Tate's voice was somber, "Field trip."

"Fair enough. Lead on son," Warfield said quickly, trying to distract him.

Before long they found themselves in front of a sealed door. Tate tugged at the handle, "This is the room but the door is stuck." Lacking height, he did not notice the welds at the top.

There was the faint odor of corpse stench, sweet enough to make Warfield swallow at saliva before reminding himself it was very much a *stench*, that emanated from the door.

*Been dead a while, looks like they were sealed in.* Alexei noted privately, watching Tate tug at the door and jiggle the handle with increasing desperation.

Horus placed his hand on the kid's shoulder and gently pulled him away; he couldn't smell what was in there, that much was clear. "Tate, son, go to that lunch room we passed. Get yourself something to eat while we deal with this."

At the mention of food, his empty stomach gurgled loudly. "Okay," Tate said, leaving the two older men at a nearly running pace.

Wedging the tip of a talon into the door frame, Warfield slowly sliced through the hasty weld, taking his time. He waited for Tate to be out of sight before speaking. "I got a question for you, Alexei," he said.

"Go ahead comrade," Stukov watched intently, it was a job for one.

"Why did you stay behind?" Another weld crumbled away.

"Too big of a mercenary presence near my position," Alexei droned dully.

Glancing over his shoulder at the malformed infested man, Warfield gave the door one good tug and pulled it from its hinges, releasing the old corpse smell in force. "There are officially two zerg left on this planet, you and me. If you are going to lie to me, then we are far from brothers."

Alexei's expression twisted, scowling with what remained of his face. "Narud," he said, full of venom.

"That bigshot egghead that got us past Sky Shield?" Setting the door aside, the two filtered into the room and began to collect the corpses. Several UNN members, all starved and withered, were laying on the floor. Not violent, Warfield noted, but far from a good death.
"The same, that bastard is not who you think either," Stukov said, helping shift the corpses from their room to another one, out of sight of Tate.

"Care to explain?" Warfield questioned, giving the equipment a quick look over. Everything was in tact, why did these people not call for help?

Alexei loomed in the doorway. "He's the son of a bitch that did this to me. Tortured me for years. I followed Kerrigan with hopes of revenge, now I fear he came out on top and slithered away once more." There was a sincere bitterness in his tone.

Horus mulled it over as he began flicking switches and pressing buttons, coaxing life into the machine. Still functional, good. "So why stay? The terrans would kill you."

Sauntering in and observing, Stukov said, "The terrans were my best chance at hunting Narud, he is deep in their society. I may have judged poorly," he chuckled, "but the zerg will die chasing Amon anyway."

"I see," Warfield said.

"There are worse endings than this, I should think." Stukov said, a touch wistful.

"You are right about that," Horus admitted; the idea of a lazy afternoon fishing was a definite pipe dream, at best a man like him could hope for a quick ending in battle.

Thumbing over his shoulder, Alexei said "that takes care of those for now." the corpses were sealed away, out of sight and mind, though Tate would surely notice the smell.

Looking up from the signal room machinery, Horus motioned towards the door. "Hybrid didn't do that. Mengsk did, wretched animal, probably for the hybrid unveiling being broadcast." How could he have ever believed in that man?

"Whatever that terran did, Horus, his sins are so very pale compared to what is coming." Stukov regarded him somberly.

"I hope to God you are wrong." Warfield muttered.

Shoes thumping against carpeting announced the arrival of Tate, who popped his head in the door. "No food, but there is coffee and a vending machine with candy." His face twisted, "what's that smell?"

"Alright, I'll take care of it, but hush for now. It's working," Horus ignored the question pointedly and shushed Tate with a gesture.

"They are on Sky Shield, what's left of it." Alexei noted, watching the computer search for a connection.

"New base of operations, probably Valerian's doing. Wouldn't be anyone left to save if Sky Shield came crashing down," Warfield said. It sounded like the prince, he was sure of it.

A mechanical voice invaded the room. "Unknown signal. Identification required to proceed."

"Damned Adjutants..." Horus grumbled.

"Error," the Adjutant said.

"General Horus Warfield, you damned robot!" Warfield said sharply. Of all the times for proper
protocol...

The AI suddenly sounded much more agreeable. "Welcome, General. Please wait while your request is process-"

A familiar voice cut the adjutant off, "Warfield?!"

Smiling, Warfield said, "One and the same, Prince Valerian. Seems I missed my ride, any chance of a lift? I have a civilian and an asset with me." Finally, something was going their way.

"An asset?" Valerian sounded stunned still.

"Alexei Stukov. We have yet to be introduced," Stukov said, frowning.

There was a moments pause, followed by a brief jostling sound, before a new voice took over. "Stukov?"

Alexei's eyes widened. "Kerrigan?! You are truly living and breathing! How is this?" he said.

Valerian cut back in, sounding ruffled. "Your reunion will have to wait. The Bucephalus is out of commission from an engagement, we are stuck on Sky Shield."

"We can find transportation, it should be easy to-" Warfield said.

Valerian let out an uncharacteristic hmph. "It seems you need to be brought up to speed, General. I will keep it brief, as we don't know how long this will last without being noticed," he said.

Wary now, Warfield said, "go on."

So Valerian did. Everything from the artifact explosion to their tangle with the Jackson's Revenge, the prince kept it succinct and brutal.

Warfield placed a hand on Tate's shoulder, he wanted to collapse and give up. "Everyone gone," he said softly, "are you sure?

"We were until you called, with a civilian no less...still, it changes nothing," the doubt in Valerian's voice vanished, replaced by iron. "Mira Han appears to be leading all of Amon's forces here; you would not make it to us," he said.

Horus remained calm for Tate's sake. "What would you advise? Our options are limited," he said. Limited by a child, which he would not point out; the boy was not some optional objective.

"Continue as you are. Find the most secure place you can and focus on survival," Valerian said.

"Confirmed," Warfield said, hand hovering over the button that would end their conversation.

"General, there is one more thing," Valerian said after a pause, clearly not sure if he should add it or not.

"That is?" Horus questioned, a pained look on his face.

"We are not sure yet, she is not talking anymore but, Amon may have taken the protoss," Valerian spoke a touch quickly.

Unbelievable. Warfield clenched his jaw hard to keep from shouting, speaking only after slowly reigning in the madness. "The same protoss who vaporize planets?"
"Yes, the same," Valerian said in a wary tone of his own.

"Just how fucked are we here?" Warfield snapped.

Valerian's voice hardened, "Keep your head, Horus. You have your orders, Bucephalus out," their conversation ended with a decisive click.

One hand raised up and combed through his chitinous hair. "The protoss. Hell," Warfield said, awed. Humanity didn't stand a chance.

"Kerrigan lives, Warfield," oddly, Alexei sounded relieved. "Something must have severed her from the hive mind, the artifact blast I suppose."

"That's nice, how does it matter exactly?" Horus said, turning his head to regard the other infested man.

"She is the only one who can fight Amon, General. I believe the prophecy. So long as that woman lives, there is hope for us," the absolute surety in Alexei's tone was undeniable.

He wanted to relax, to feel safe, but he couldn't. "Cold comfort right now. Looks like someone heard us," Warfield said. From dead silence, comm traffic began to light up, traffic from rapidly approaching air vessels. It seemed as though everyone heard them.

"A little running never hurt anyone," Alexei said mildly.

**Jayce - Dreamscape**

Tychus groaned happily, tossing his head back and closing his eyes, filled with a perfect level of contentment. Across from him in the hot tub and arranged similarly, was Jayce. "I like your head," he chuckled and nudged her foot.

"Me too," Jayce nudged his foot back and smiled, pleased as could be. She took it upon herself to arrange some relaxation after their exertions; he did not argue.

Lazily, he swiped up a bottle of beer and took a long swig, chuckling when she stroked her foot up his leg. A hot pain stabbed through his chest, interrupting the moment and leaving him coughing and choking on his drink. "Urk!" he gasped.

She sat up immediately, alert and suddenly wondering if you could choke to death in a dream world. "Tychus! What's wrong?"

"I," he gasped, it was time. "I been in too long I think," he staggered to his feet drunkenly, though the beer had nothing to do with it. "Need some air," he said. Had he been here so long that the change had finished? It felt like all the pain was catching up in high speed.

She held still, one hand raised and her face showing her upset. "Be safe please," she said.

He closed his eyes, already with a metaphorical foot out the door. "I'll be back later sweetheart," he said. With urgency, he withdrew from her mind then.

There was a split moment of panic when he opened his eyes to a cloudy green sea, felt the burning translating into lungs full of liquid. A spark of rage set him into action, the idea that Tychus J. Findlay would die in some zerg egg was downright insulting. The large cocoon that housed him burst outward in a shower of liquid, the new and improved leader of the swarm stumbling out of it and spewing out the contents of his lungs.
"Rah!" he bellowed raggedly in triumph, it seemed fitting.

When the Evolution Master's attention shifted to him, it was an oily caress on his brain. *Organism Tychus, evolving. Wish to lead swarm?* Abathur questioned, curious.

Catching his breath, Tychus took a moment to collect himself and feel awed. He was conscious of so much more now, his influence over the swarm had certainly increased, it even felt more natural. He looked down at his new armored and spined fists, clenching them and gritting his teeth.

"This is you now," he told himself grimly, voice echoing inside the otherwise silent ship, before focusing on Abathur like the point of a knife pinning into the bullseye. *Hell no, but if you decide you don't like our deal and try to stick it to me at the last second, I'm gonna have somethin' to say about it now, Abby.*

Anger seethed through the Evolution Masters entire being, malevolent and insidious, before disappearing. It seemed Abathur couldn't hide his thoughts so well anymore. *Message received.* Abathur said, withdrawing quickly.

_Better be._ Tychus said, turning his attention elsewhere. There was work to be done.

Zagara was slumped in the cortex of the _Leviathan_, restrained by tightly constricting tentacles. She was to literally see him winning, as Tychus wished. In the space between a blink, her surroundings changed. When she opened her eyes again, it was to a sunny world in which she felt small and vulnerable. Recoiling in confusion and defensive anger she yelled, "Agh! What is this disgusting place?" Even her voice was vastly different.

"Shut up and listen Zigzag," a familiar voice spoke, a voice she hated more than words and feelings could possibly express, "we ain't got much time."

Rounding on the spot, she beheld the new visage of Tychus Findlay, finding herself looking upwards. Confused but no less angry, she snarled, "You!"

He did not look pleased to see her either, this new heavily armored and spined Tychus. "Yeah, me," he said.

A glance at herself revealed that she was trapped inside the form of the pathetic human he cared about. "What could you possibly have to say?" she said, wary now; she was in no position to fight.

"Amon ain't gonna let me take her and go, I ain't stupid," he said in an even tone. "Abby doesn't have to lift a finger to betray me." There were some terrans out there that the slimy slug could give pointers to, but not this one.

"You were stupid the moment you allied with the Evolution Master," Zagara bared her useless flat teeth.

"Don't push me," he warned, glaring. Findlay had no love for her either. "I'll let you go, pick up the pieces and fight your good fight, to hell with Abby," he said.

An opportunity, she did not expect this. "Why not now? Time is of the essence," she said. Maybe hope was not lost yet.

"I'm still goin' to kill Valerian. Not gonna let you go until I am done my business," he said, smirking and giving a glimpse of razor teeth.

Frustrated, she shouted, "He doesn't matter you fool-"
"Take it or leave it," he cut her off. "You're on my last nerve and make no mistake, only reason why I'm offerin' is because Jimmy wouldn't have liked me leavin' everyone to burn," his intensity softened slightly when he mentioned Raynor and she noticed.

She paused, thoughtful, before carefully picking her words. "So be it. The Queen of Blades based many of her choices off of that terran. I will never understand how a weak fleshling could command the respect of so many stronger than himself."

He snorted. "That's because he wasn't weak. Get lost and keep your head down," he said, shoving Zagara out of Jayce without ceremony.

With a heavy sigh, he regarded the small terran woman. Jayce remained frozen, unaware of the time passing while he thought. "What am I going to do with you, sugar?" He wondered out loud.

Cautiously, he stepped behind her and took a moment to repress his less-than-human features. Spines, armor and claws sank away until he was as he remembered himself. He let her stasis go as he rested his hands on her shoulders and squeezed gently. "Hey you, big dog is home."

Jayce did not move, her shoulders jerking slightly was the only indication she registered his presence at all. "I tried to get out," her voice came out quiet. "Tried making doors, pictured myself waking up in a hospital bed, looked for some limit or edge." Her arms moved around a little and he peeked over her shoulders, she was staring at her hands.

Confused, he tried to curl his arms around her, to give comfort while figuring out what the situation might be. "Take it easy now," he said softly.

She spun in his arms, jostling them away in agitation. "There is none! I'm trapped Tychus, I can't get out and everything I know here means nothing!" Her eyes were red and leaking tears, voice raising higher and going ragged.

How much time could have passed in her head, he wondered? It was minutes, a half hour at worst. Taking a big breath he caught her shoulders in his hands and gave her a small shake. "You'll wake up when you are good and ready, alright? Try and enjoy yourself in the meantime," he said.

Her eyes were wide and her voice cracked. "How can I? I don't even have a sense of time anymore," she fell forwards until her face buried in his chest. "What happened to my friends and family?" her voice muffled in his clothing. "What took me into space, away from home? What could have been so horrible that I rebelled against the Confederation?"

Frowning down at her, he curled his arms around her and let her cry. This was not going quite as planned. "Don't know if you can handle knowing right now sweetheart," he said cautiously.

She seemed to ignore his statement. "How did you get in?" She looked up at him and sniffed loudly. "Maybe I can follow you out."

He smiled and chuckled warmly. "It's a piece of machinery sugar, hell if I know how it works."

Her hands fisted in the fabric of his shirt, tugging for emphasis. "Ask the doctor, maybe we can work it out. Please," she looked so desperate then, something he did not care to see.

"Don't think it works like that," he gave her another reassuring squeeze, "but I've never said no to you when you gave me that look either." With some alarm, he noticed his hands had reverted to their infested selves; they looked terrible against her back, a hairs breadth from slicing through her clothing.
Unaware, she smiled and curled her arms around him in return. "Thank you," she said honestly. "Enough about me. Are you feeling better? I was worried sick."

Clearing his throat uncomfortably, he forced the image of his old self to the forefront of his mind and watched as his hands melted back to human again. "Yeah, little alarm was goin' off for me to eat is all it was," he said lamely.

"I'm glad you are here with me, but I want you to take care of yourself too," she hugged him tightly and breathed him in, comforted. "I'll be okay," she said.

He patted the back of her head and squeezed back, thinking hard on the changing situation. It seemed ironic, the more control he gained over the alien and horrible swarm, the less he had here. "Don't worry your head about old Tychus, I'll be just fine." Yet he could still feel it, the ability to change whatever he liked, something was off. "Say, I got an idea," he smiled.

She sniffed, still working on composing herself. "Oh?"

He wondered if she was real then, or some figment he dreamed up; a fantasy that he desired. "I think, if you let me, I can change things up in here," he said.

She smiled brightly at the idea. "Oh! Maybe you could show me places that could jog my memory?"

No. That smile, the tears, were real. Abathur said it himself: he took what was there and preserved it. "Wouldn't hold my breath, but yeah," he said, nodding and looking over the surroundings. This was breakable, what was left of this person could be destroyed, that is what he was seeing.

Due caution would be taken from here on out.

She shrugged, misery dispelled for the time being. "Go ahead, if it is possible. Can't be more willing than this," she said.

He knew exactly where they would be going. Grinning mischievously, he said, "Close your eyes."

She gave him a curious, questioning look before doing as told, smiling all the while.

With ease and care, he gently took control of her malleable surroundings, dredging up fond memories as he went. He took a deep breath of the cigar smoke and stale sweat. "That's more like it!" He was barely audible over the brain-rattling loud music.

Her eyes snapped open and he grinned, rotating her by the shoulders to take in the scenery. "We went to places like this?" she shouted to be heard.

"Hell yeah," his grin turned wicked as they came to face the stage.

Her eyes widened and he was sure he could hear her jaw hitting the floor as she stared up at the long, long legs and definitely fake assets of one of his favorites. "Oh my," she whispered.
The Machine of the Creators

**Bucephalus - Sky Shield Platform**

"Oh! Hello," nervous eyes shifted from between patient, visitor and hands clasped tightly around a medical chart. The lone medic was in way over her head, it was clear.

Tosh walked in and stood beside the door, pointedly leaving her escape path clear, the woman's anxiety was rising with every glance in his direction. "How is our protoss friend?" A frown creased his brow when a flutter of panic rippled through the medic girl's mind.

Swallowing hard, she gestured to Lasarra with a worried look. "Not speaking," the protoss lay there on the cold table, staring upwards and unresponsive. "I cauterized the wounds with a laser. Truth is Mr. Tosh, I am not qualified to-"

He nodded, eyeing the bandaged nerve cords direly. "You did what you can Roshelle, now go on," he waved her off. "I get in touch if somethin' changes."

Relief bloomed in her eyes and mind alike, and Roshelle was all too happy to leave the uncomfortable situation. "Yes sir." She almost flew out of the room.

As soon as the door sealed shut, he leaned forwards. "It true? The khala be his?" Corpse-like, Lasarra lay there unmoving; the protoss' flesh mottled and sickly looking. Tentative, he brushed at the alien with his power, unsure of the consequences.

To his relief her mind stirred, eyes glowing dimly. Gentle but no longer warm, her thoughts touched his. *Yes. He even said that I would fail them, I should have-*

Understanding dawned on him, she must feel so alone in her mind, the touch of another brought comfort and woke her from the haze of shock. It was little effort to take the conversation to another level. *Nothin' you could do. This be the enemy we are fighting, tearin' us apart from the inside. Robbing us of our allies.* He watched her slowly move to a seated position, head hung but eyes like cold moons and fixed on him now.

Lasarra's eyes narrowed, brows knitting together. *How do you live like this? It is so cold now, so empty.* She brought her hand to her chest, every heart aching with loss. *I am empty.*

He shrugged, nonchalant. *We be born this way, we simply do.* His eyes narrowed in return. *You will have to learn and fast.*

She hung her head, looking down at the sterile white tiles of the floor and considering. When her head raised, oddly light feeling with the lack of nerve cords, there was a fire in her eyes. *Amon must be fought. I will not go quietly into the dark.*

He nodded and gave a pleased grunt, crossing his arms. After a few moments his curiosity could wait no more. *Grandma Tosh...she touched you and left that.* He gestured to the blackened hand print on her arm, sticking out sorely on her cool colored flesh. *Now she be gone.*

Her hand drifted to the mark, fingertips brushing it gently; the touch brought phantom pain, the poisonous hatred still too fresh in her mind. *I fear your helpful ancestor was an enemy in disguise or otherwise controlled.*

His brows furrowed, how could Grandma Tosh be taken in such a way? Amon could control spirits
too? *This be hard news.*

Hands clasping together, she closed her eyes and tried to find comfort in life, the khala no longer there to give it. *I am sorry.*

Pushing off the wall, he took a long step forwards and stood directly in front of the wayward protoss. "We must take our losses and use them as armor, you and I."

Resolve filled her, burning away the acidic remains of despair and loss, a hot trail through every nerve and vein. She stood up and looked down at him, cold eyes bright. *We are their only protection now.*

"Their minds, at least. Together we can defend them on this front, I think." He smiled and held up his hand. "Nova and Kerrigan are lost, their minds grasping for power they don't have now, it is you and I."

Without hesitation, she clasped the strong gloved hand once again. If the terrans can live and fight without the khala, she could too. *Yes. We must.*

"Bad news, Prince Valerian." Captain Vaughn sounded exhausted, voice rasping through the comm in Valerian's chamber.

Restraining a sigh, Valerian said, "Continue, captain." If it were not for the psi screen, he was sure he would have melted down by now.

"Mira Han is establishing a base on the opposite end of the platform," a map of the platform unfolded before Valerian then, red circles indicating their current position and the new threat. "I don't need to point out they have more manpower than us," Vaughn said.

"No, you don't," Valerian muttered; their predicament was clear as day on the map. Mira Han was closing in and fast, the *Bucephalus* would be powerless against a ground assault. "Continue with fortifications, I will deliberate over this new information with my council."

"Yes sir," with a click, Vaughn was gone. He must have been on the off rotation for psi screens, Valerian thought; there were not enough of the devices for the whole crew and they could only be worn a few hours at a time. Removing them felt like dipping your brain in acid, it was horrid.

Jim sounded like a caged beast, the spined infested man prowling back and forth in front of the view port as he snarled. "What's to deliberate over? We are screwed."

Valerian peered out the glass past him thoughtfully, their surroundings were bleak. "Sky shield has tremendous firepower Jim," he chided gently, "all we need is one cannon, one shield, to turn the tide in our favor."

"I lost many attacking the platform," Kerrigan paused, her gaze stopping short of the glass and resting on Jim, "but I did not leave much behind, Valerian."

"You keep talkin' about fixin' things up, but I don't see a qualified man for the job anywhere." Jim's arm gave a quick, violent gesture to indicate the entire ship and its occupants. "The men we have left do not have this kind of expertise," he said.

Valerian smiled then, keen as a cat. "As a matter of fact, there is one extremely overqualified man at our disposal, and he has been trying to contact you for some hours now."
"Who?" Sarah and Jim asked as one.

"You can't be serious right now," Jim said, incredulous. It took a moment of Valerian smiling quietly before it clicked, he knew where this was going.

"Egon Stetmann is our only hope and he is lucid," Valerian said, smile widening to a cheshire grin.

"This is a bad plan," Jim frowned. "I love the kid but he ain't himself and if you didn't notice he can blow people up," he hissed.

"He will be restrained of course," Valerian raised a hand for calm, while subtly shifting away from the murderess at his shoulder. "Jim, it is up to you right now; we can be lambs or lions, I trust you to make this work," he said.

"I will come with you," Kerrigan said, suddenly appearing beside Valerian. His suppressed jump did not go unnoticed.

"I don't think that is a good idea," Jim said quickly, lips sealing into a tight line of displeasure.

Giving him a lopsided smirk over Valerian's shoulder, which she pointedly remained close to, Kerrigan said, "Worried I will suddenly be her again?"

"I wouldn't be able to forgive myself," Jim admitted, looking away.

"Don't worry Jim," Kerrigan reassured calmly, patting Valerian's shoulder. He jumped this time.

"Let's go."

It was a relief for Valerian when Kerrigan sidled up beside Jim and stopped hovering over his shoulder like a predator. "I will remain behind, there are other matters to attend to," the prince said hurriedly. Chief of those other matters was helping Nova monitor all of the staff, there had already been a few meltdowns during psi screen swapping time.

Still dangling from his restraints beside the quietly glaring Matt, Egon shouted excitedly the moment Raynor appeared. "Jim! Thank goodness. He's coming! I saw-felt-heard-" he jabbered.

Insides tangling up into knots at the sight, Jim approached quickly. "Slow down son! Amon?"

Shaking his head violently, Egon looked wide eyed and sounded half-crazed, "No Jim! Tychus! I saw him-was him-felt-"

Jim went still, voice lowering in pain, "What do you mean Tychus is coming? He was...he was on Haven."

"No!" Egon shouted, frustration clear. His eyes flickered and he writhed in his bindings. "He has it Jim, he took it! He's coming."

Sarah's voice took on a surprised pitch, "He took the swarm."

Jim breathed, "Unbelievable." He looked up to the ceiling and closed his eyes, "Why, partner?"

Egon's head snapped forwards, human eyes sliding away and revealing dark red lenses. He spoke in a low pitched growl that brought Jim's attention back. "Angry. Kill. Let me go." Gasping, his head jerked back and his eyes returned in a blink. "No! Don't do that. Stop him Jim," he panted heavily, his face twisted in seeming agony.
Jim frowned, Egon was clearly not as lucid as Valerian thought. "Hang in there kid," he said.

Sarah spoke up, authoritative, "If your friend took the swarm from Zagara then she stood no chance keeping it from Amon, he is the best hope now. But why is he coming back?"

"I got an inkling of a guess and I don't like it," Jim's eyes narrowed as he glanced at Horner, who was glaring back. "Don't like the idea of the biggest bio weapon in the universe being in Tychus Findlay's hands neither," he said.

"Weapons are for killing, your friend is good at it," Sarah said, also eyeing Horner. Their lack of reaction to her presence raised some questions of her own.

"A little too good," Jim muttered. Tychus never cared much about innocent casualties.

Egon let out a tired sigh, "Stop him. Please."

Bracing himself, Jim planted a hand on Egon's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Look Egon, I didn't just come here 'cause you were hollerin' for me."

The younger man winced at the touch. His arms had to be sore, zerg or not. "Why then Jim?" Egon said.

"We need your help," Jim said.

Egon's eyes sharpened. "It's not safe, I don't have control."

Sarah let out an impatient hiss of breath, coming to stand before Egon and beside Jim. "You are fighting too much, the swarm will destroy your mind if you can't wrap your head around this Egon," she said.

Surprised, Jim stepped aside. "Listen to her, son. I got a job for you and you're the only man for it," he admitted grudgingly.

"But Matt-" Egon looked towards the silent infested man fearfully.

"Has surrendered himself fully like a common infested terran," Sarah interjected with a note of disdain. There was a feeling of being a disappointed mother that was hard to shake. "That was the risk of fully merging any of you. That was why you had Shlassa," she said coolly.

"But I'm-" Egon said.

"You have already succeeded Egon. If you had failed, you would have been gone right away. Like him," she tossed her head back, chitenous hair clattering.

"You sure know how to sugar coat it," Jim muttered over her shoulder.

Impatient, she reached for one of the powered cuffs suspending Egon. "We just don't have time, help me get him down," she said.


A new set of bindings were quickly affixed to Egon's wrists, holding them apart at this front. "We'll keep these on you 'til we know you got your head screwed on, and I'll get you some food while we get a team ready," Jim said.
"Team?" Egon looked up at the two people holding him.

"It won't be as bad as the Char caves, I promise," Jim patted his shoulder.

"Hnng," Egon groaned.

Augustgrad - Korhal

Three figures crouched behind a dumpster in a cramped back alley, holding their breath as the rumbling of a low flying ship rattled the windows of the buildings towering on either side of them.

Stukov let out a slow breath as the threat passed, the rumbling fading away. Undetected for another hour, he wondered how long that would last. "So which way, General?"

An orange sheen reflected from Warfield's eyes as he muttered, "Keep your head down." Extending the tip of a talon, he dragged the razor sharp tip across the plascrete between himself, Tate and Stukov. "There are four sectors," a shape began to unfold quickly as he scratched out the city from memory.

Nodding slowly, Stukov confirmed his understanding by tapping where he estimated they were located. "I remember, yes."

With his free hand, Warfield gestured sharply as he spoke, "Residential one and two."

"It's bad. Don't go there," Tate whispered, looking wide-eyed up at the two men.

Tap. "Business, where we are," Warfield said.

"And every bad guy in Augustgrad too by now," Stukov chuckled; the entire sector lit up like a hornet nest after their little chat with the Bucephalus.

Tap. "Military," Warfield glanced over his two companions.

"Empty," Stukov's ruined face smiled, he could see where this was going.

"Exactly. We go there and maybe we can take some of the pressure off our boys upstairs," Warfield said, crossing his arms and looking over his work.

"I think that is not quite following orders, General," Stukov reminded him in jest.

Warfield let out a snort of derision, "Valerian is a real good politician, but he's got a lot to learn about strategy. This is a big opportunity."

"And the boy?" Stukov pointedly looked sideways at their scraggly third wheel.

Warfield glanced at Tate and gave a shrug. "He's been fighting to live for a good while now. Time for him to get to fight back too."

"Hell yeah-" Tate blurted, rocking on his heels excitedly before catching himself. Sheepishly he muttered, "I mean, uh, sorry."

"It's alright," Warfield could not help but give a chuckle at the youthful enthusiasm, "there is just no safer place than on the move, might as well put you to work."

"It is decided, let us give these Amon bastards some hell," Stukov said, straightening into a stand with the other two. There was work to be done.
A few jumped fences and city blocks later, it seemed as though they had entered a new world, a darkened realm of nightmares. The air tasted coppery and rotten, dark splashes of blood competed with muddy soil to cover everything and with that bloody soup was drawn hellish figures and alien writing on every surface; it only took a few minutes more walking to discover where all that blood came from.

As soon as they caught sight of a shrine made out of dead marines and their bullet-riddled CMCs, Stukov ushered his companions behind the remains of a shelled out siege tank. "Starting to have regrets?" Alexei said, eyeing Warfield.

"Starting to miss the zerg," Horus muttered bitterly, sickened, "God help these poor bastards."

"I'm scared," Tate huddled close to the two men, far more afraid of the unknown monsters than the known.

"Hang in there. Been thinkin' on what we can do to stir things up in here," Horus said, patting Tate on the shoulder while talking to Alexei.

"Oh? Do tell," Alexei focused intently on Horus' talon as it began to scratch out a new map. Horus' head bobbed in confirmation as he scraped at the ground intently. "The vespine refinery, not too many left in the city. It's old, for one, not to mention all the new industry after the clean up; Raynor and Findlay's visit with the Odin didn't help."

"And the zerg," Alexei added with mirth.

Letting out a disgruntled sigh, Horus studied his work. "Korhal's been through hell, never imagined it would become it though."

"Mmm," Alexei said, decidedly indifferent. Korhal was not home. Terrans were not his people.

Horus squeezed Tate's shoulder, drawing the boys attention. "This is where you come in son," he said gravely.

Tate swallowed, his racing heartbeat audible to the two infested men. "I can do it," he said without confidence.

"I know you are scared, but there is no way that either of us are getting near that refinery without being seen," Horus gave the boy a gentle shake. "There are people fighting on that platform above us and they need our help," he watched as a dull fire began to light in Tate's eyes, a fire he had seen in trained warriors receiving his speeches before battle. He did not like it, but it was necessary. "This is your chance to make a difference, right here, right now."

Silence hung between the three as Tate looked between the map and Horus, pursing his lips and thinking. Horus' hand fell away from his shoulder as he stood, and this time his voice was sure, "I can do it."

Horus nodded, pride swelling in his chest. "Go on, and be safe. If you can't get close, don't risk getting caught," he said.

"I won't get caught," Tate said as he rounded the corner of the tank and dipped out of sight.

They both listened as the sound of footfalls faded into the distance, and it was Alexei that spoke first. *Why is it that the boy has not been turned? I know you have been wondering too. No point speaking*
out loud and risking giving away their position.

Drumming his fingers on his bent knee, Horus stared at the cracked and dusty plascrete between his feet. Yes. I have been keeping an eye on him, know you have too, and he hasn't shown any signs of mental disturbances.

*Any thoughts as to why?* Alexei prodded.

*When we got to the rebel base and it was being overrun, there were kids in there.* Horus busied himself cleaning soil and filth from under his talons, bits and pieces floating to the ground as he thought. *The infected can turn one another. What if kids were immune, but had to be turned?*

Alexei paused, mulling it over. It was not long before he found some tiny imperfections on his clothing to pick at as well. *A grim idea indeed.*

Every minute that passed after Tate left fed a growing anxiety in Horus. Thoughts of gruesome deaths, a boy with black eyes and a cruel smile, all fed by the fuel of past experience made him curse himself for his choice. He was just a kid and this was no game, what kind of fool was he?

"You can stop worrying, General. He's coming," Alexei said, annoyed.

In his introspective state, Horus did not hear the approaching scampering footfalls of Tate. He could not help but smile as the boy rounded the tank with a triumphant look on his face, safe and sound.

"There are people in the SCVs," Tate said, nearly bouncing with excitement.

"How many did you see?" Stukov questioned.

"At least six drivers, whole lot of people with guns," Tate said, crouching and catching his breath.

"Why did we send a kid who can't count to scout again?" Gesturing towards Horus with an open palm, Alexei poured as much sarcasm into the question as he could.

Tate looked affronted, eyebrows knitting together. "I can count! Twelve, I saw twelve."

"You sure?" Horus prodded, keeping his amusement hidden behind a mask of seriousness.

"Positive," Tate said, frowning and crossing his arms defensively.

"So we kill the guards, get in there," Alexei said. "You are clearly thinking about blowing something up, yes? We would never get clear of the refinery on foot."

"No. Not the refinery," Horus smiled slyly, "the starport."

Alexei paused, thinking until he too began to smile, letting out a raspy chuckle.. "Maybe take a short ride to the platform while we are near some ships eh? Not a bad thought," he said.

"Depends on what is between here and there, what's waiting for us there," as he spoke, Horus trailed a talon along his planned route and circled areas where the path bottlenecked. "We need to get ourselves a loaded tanker, keep this mission a quiet one," he said.

"Are they really enemies?" Tate asked softly.

"What do you mean?" Quirking a brow, Horus looked towards the boy, took in his dirty, sallow appearance and could not help but feel like a highly irresponsible adult.
"They were all people...what happened to everyone?" Fresh liquid spilled down Tate's cheeks, bottled emotions leaking out. The boy swiped at his quickly reddening face angrily.

It was a good question. Horus frowned and shifted around until he was squatted in front of Tate, planting a hand on his shoulder and giving a squeeze. "Sometimes it is just as simple as they will shoot us and kill us if they get the chance. Not gonna kill them if we got a choice, son." He smiled then. "That is why I sent you there to scout, get it now? You are helping us keep those folks from getting killed."

Tate's lip quivered hard for a few seconds before he tamed it, sniffing loudly. "Okay," he said.

**Ulnar - Alterian Rift**

Tumbling through an endless void of roiling white, Zeratul clung to his ship for dear life. Blinded and bombarded by sound and sensation, it felt as though the Voidseeker was shaking apart. There was no going back, the choice was made, ride the storm or die.

So he rode.

It came as an abrupt and painful shock of the senses when the blinding white behind his eyelids faded and the ship came out of its mad spin. Shaking with apprehension, Zeratul slowly opened his eyes. Before him lay a beautiful sight: a cube-shaped planet, surrounded all around by a familiar chaotic swirling anomaly of space.

_Incredible. Could the tales be true? This creator world, Ulnar, hidden inside the impassible Alterian Rift of legend? Hands trembling, he grasped the controls and guided the Void Seeker smoothly forwards; it was a relief the relic ship still functioned. This is where the creatures have been traveling!_

_Were I not here on such a dire mission, I could travel this world for a lifetime and die happy; but where did the creature of light go?_ All the directional and radar functions of the ship were nonfunctional, leaving him to fly manually and relying on his old eyes; there were still white spots dancing in them.

White spots. He blinked a few more times, the white spots solidifying into a familiar form. Cautiously, he pursued the sinuous, serpentine form of the phoenix. Ulnar grew larger, engulfing the view port, its geometric and perfect shapes beginning to stand out, revealing further depth to the planet. They were approaching a nook that seemed to hook farther into the surface.

A few moments more and he realized there were familiar shapes moving around on that surface, impossible ones.

_Oh no._ With dread, he swung off from the pursuit of the energy creature and prayed he had not been spotted by Amon's minions. The Void Seeker's cloaking systems were offline, all he had was the natural dark colors of the relic machine and the bright, star-like radiance of the creature he was pursuing.

Like a fly on the wall, the Void Seeker swung smoothly into a deep crevasse, its tip peeking out just enough for Zeratul to watch. Rising from his seat, his eyes widened as a chill of horror traveled over his skin.

A mechanical wail erupted, followed by a deep rumbling through Ulnar that shook the ship violently. The phoenix creature reacted, shying backwards from the entry point it had been approaching. Before it could change course fully, several beams shot out from multiple points of Ulnar's surface.
and enveloped the creature in a web.

Powerless, Zeratul leaped from his seat and clenched his fists, watching as the creature writhed and shrieked, shrinking away until the energy ropes dissipated and it no longer remained. By the gods, they are being ensnared! His eyes narrowed as one form, far larger than the other ones, floated into their midst. Perhaps I can find some answers from the enemies.

"The machine is almost powered," a marine in black CMC whispered feverishly to his partner, still looking at the spot where the energy creature had been absorbed, "almost ready to bring Amon’s glory to us."

Yes. Good work my slaves. The hybrid whispered to its puppets. Pathetic retches they were, but they had their uses.

"Glory to Amon!" The terrans tossed their heads back and shouted their masters name, laughing and smiling.

From a ledge above, Zeratul watched the exchange, cloaked and hidden. I do not recognize these terrans, but they are clearly under the Dark One’s sway. I pray this is not the fate of them all.

Another comes. The hybrid whispered, a clawed fingertip pointing towards an opening tear overhead.

Fingertips caressing the grooved edges of the ledge he clung to, Zeratul watched as another energy creature came flying out of a rift. All these symbols, ancient and beyond time, why have I been lead here? These creatures are the key to this mystery.

When creature was caught just like its predecessor, Zeratul pushed away the emotion of the moment and took in the details. As the creature diminished, the energy web seemed to expand and contract rhythmically. Pulsing with life, pure and familiar.

The cables fell away and retracted into their recesses once more and it clicked. The phoenix creatures, they are powering Ulnar! What was their true purpose, how can I fix this?

With a renewed sense of direction, he stepped away from the ledge and struck down a path. Occasionally the markings on the walls and floors would pulse with power, further proving his theory. It seemed only logical to follow the direction of the pulses in reverse.

Ulnar was not being invaded by Amon’s minions, it had been conquered. Every path he traveled teemed with the terrans in their dark suits with unfamiliar symbols of allegiance; and there was always a hybrid master nearby, directing its thralls where it pleased. Traveling undetected was a must, and he had to double back numerous times and even rest, minutes were passing like hours.

Ulnar is not a planet. He decided, placing his hand against a thick band carved into a wall, bracing himself as it lit up with a pulse of light. The energy was not pure, not like what he felt before while tumbling through space after the creature, it had been tainted. But to what end?

Artificial light thrummed through the planet, the sky long left behind now. There was a pressure building, pressing against his skin and brain until he began to feel a deep pain. I must be nearing the source, there is no other explanation for this mysterious presence. Bracing himself, he slipped through the shadows from the spacious air shaft he had been traveling and landed in a hallway.

Like a heartbeat, the pulsing of power seemed to become more rapid with every step he took towards the massive door at the end of the hall. Lights were dancing and strobing in hypnotic patterns and it felt as though his head might burst by the time he reached the door. Unsure as to how to open it, only
knowing it must be done, he reached out and touched the surface, intent on exploring it.

Only it was warm to the touch and triggered a rumbling that set him on edge. When he withdrew his hand, it left a bright imprint that slowly faded. As the impression of two fingers and thumbs faded into the stone, the door pushed backwards and slid aside. Familiar blinding light poured into the hallway and silhouetted him, but he was not sure what he was seeing.

Stepping inside quickly, he shielded his eyes and tried to adjust. A thrumming sound boomed all around him, vibrating against his skin. This was the heart of the machine, the epicenter of Ulnar's power. The room was spherical, that much he could tell.

Blinking hard and shaking his head, Zeratul stumbled forwards with a hand raised. When he connected with a hot metallic surface he recoiled, testing the heat before sliding his hand along the surface searchingly. They were inside, all of them, and something was horribly wrong. How can I free you? Striking the machine with his blade would be suicide, the creatures absorb protoss energy; there had to be a lever of some sort to let them flow out of their prison freely.

You can't, little protoss. A voice whispered, amused.

The pressure in his head, already painful but steady, redoubled in strength and he fell to a knee. He saw the gnarled, nightmarish foot of the hybrid appear at the corner of the machine as it approached. It had simply stood there on the other side, knowing he would be blind for a time when he entered.

You think your arrival was unnoticed, that you can hide in the shadows from us? From Him? It laughed, radiating cruel pleasure as its crested head tilted, peering down at the kneeling protoss intently.

Lunging, Zeratul's green psi blade flared to life as he lashed out. His eyes widened in surprise when he was blown back from the metallic prison, his blow repelled; it may have been the only thing that saved him from being killed by the clawed fist that crashed down and crumpled the stone floor where he had been kneeling.

Barely losing momentum, the zerg-like hybrid charged after Zeratul, the dance of battle beginning. Your fading eyes will watch out of your broken body as the xel'naga's creations cast the entire universe into the void. It moved so fast, all claws and tentacles snapping and lashing from every angle, a relentless storm. You will be consumed, as we all will be!

Zeratul's eyes had finally adjusted, allowing him to slip between each blow, here one moment and gone the next, but there was no opportunity to strike back. This would be a lost battle if it was not ended soon. As their dance lead to the opposite side of the prison, he understood the source of the corruption he had felt before.

A warped mass, sticking out like a blackened tumor, clung to the brilliantly glowing prison. Another massive fist swiped the space where his body was located a millisecond beforehand, getting closer. My weapons cannot pierce the prison and there is no control panel. His thoughts flickered from question to conclusion in rapid succession, an answer would reveal itself. If I can last long enough to spot it.

Another trench appeared in the floor, debris clattering up against the walls and peppering his back; and like that, the answer revealed itself.

There is no other way. Unleashing all of them at once...

He slipped through the shadows and appeared behind the hybrid, standing proudly in front of the
prison. *I cannot hide.*

It spun, mandibles and teeth twisting into the semblance of a smile.

*I will not hide!* He brandished his blades, ready for the final strike.

*Goodbye, Zeratul.* It snarled then, saliva flying in long ropes as it charged.

*For Aiur!* He shouted, holding his position until the last pivotal moment, there was no margin for error.

The hybrid let out a triumphant hiss as its claws pierced through the protoss who had been a thorn in its masters side for far too long, watching as Zeratul's eyes widened and, to it's surprise, smiled at the corners. Pinned to the prison by the claw through his chest, light flooded out behind the old protoss' body. Realization struck the hybrid and it pulled away in panic, the prison ruptured by its attack. *No!*

Time felt distorted in his final moments, watching the claws pull out of his chest, droplets of his own blood flying, he even saw the horror on the hybrid abominations face and felt the satisfaction of a well done ruse. It had been far too fast to slip through the shadows at the last second, it had to be real. All pain and feeling dissipated as a sense of weightlessness took over, the floor rising to greet him.

Zeratul closed his eyes for the last time with a final desperate hope that this was his destiny. *Good luck my friends.*

After what could have been a second or ages, perfect silence yielded to a voice. "Zeratul," it whispered softly.

As consciousness returned, he opened his eyes and blinked in confusion; there was no pain, no surroundings other than a soft white and a sense of peace. *Is this death?*

"No, old prophet. This is rebirth," it said, voice radiating with triumph as Zeratul rose to his feet, "As the phoenix rose, so shall you."

Unsure of what to expect, Zeratul turned slowly, old eyes widening as he beheld the massive serpentine face of one of the energy creatures. It floated there serenely, eyes bright as stars and shining out of its already radiant body. *Rebirth?*

"You were correct. Ulnar is not just a home world, it is the greatest tool of the creators," it said. A familiar shape appeared in the space between them, Ulnar; but there were bright white novas erupting from its surface like solar flares.

Images flashed, revealing the fate of Amon's minions. Terrans, hybrid, protoss, they were all being washed away in cleansing fires. *The hybrid are being destroyed!* Zeratul exclaimed. With relief he felt the sense of corruption also being removed, then wondered at the sense: was he still laying on a floor, life essence draining away? or something more, rebirth?

"Amon was attempting to change the very nature of Ulnar, to make it a tool for unmaking. This shall not pass, thanks to you." A warm sense of welcome emanated from the creature.

Zeratul's eyes roamed from the image of Ulnar to the creature and back, contemplating. *But the Queen of Blades was to break the cycle of the gods, not I.*

"Kerrigan will. This is just the beginning," it said. There was a sense of a smile, though no mouth
capable of doing such.

Raising his hand to touch his chest, still afraid to look down and see the terrible damage the hybrid had inflicted, he perked in surprise when he felt solid flesh. In fact, he had never felt better. His eyes sharpened. What can I do, great one?

"Lead, prophet." A blaze erupted from the creatures flesh, but it was an aurora of lights more than a flame. "The phoenix creatures, as you think of us, are an army of the creators. Direct us and fulfill your destiny."

For a moment, the weight of destiny and past failures had fallen away, but the creatures words firmly put them all back in place. His shoulders sagged under the return of unbearable weight, and his voice echoed in pain. An army of the gods... I am not fit to lead.

"The khalai protoss have been taken, the zerg and terrans are on the precipice," the creatures voice became somewhat haughty, "Inaction will undo all the right you have done. The gods do not make mistakes, Zeratul, you were chosen."

My people have been taken? Flashes of protoss, red eyed mind slaves being cleansed from Ulnar, finally registered. Artanis must have not received the message, or taken no heed. One more terrible wrong I have done, but you offer me the ability to right it.

Slowly, with the weight of the universe on his shoulders, Zeratul straightened until he was a proud warrior, looking at his people. There is only one response. Their surroundings wavered, soft white fading to the cool angular designs of Ulnar, until he was standing on a platform with what had to be thousands of radiant phoenix creatures surrounding him. His army to lead.

"Yes. We will cast out the dark one, together! Make haste!" the creature he had been talking to, who he now knew to be Vornuum, remained by his side. "Choose where we go, prophet," Vornuum said.

Jayce - Dreamscape

Opening her eyes to pitch black darkness, Jayce felt a moment of primal terror. Blinking several more times to banish it, the feeling returned when her eyesight would not. Everything felt wrong, her body would not respond to her commands to move, speak, nothing.

Her heart was fluttering in terror when a long, vertical sliver of light appeared. When two orange glowing eyes set in an inhuman yet horribly familiar face locked on to her own, she tried so hard to scream.

"Ah!" she shouted, sitting bolt upright in the soft bed and panting. The musty smell, dust motes peacefully flying through the small crack of light in the curtains and even the heavy weight of the man sleeping beside her did little to slow her racing heart.

With a grunt, Tychus curled an arm around here and feigned the grogginess of waking up, voice gravelly. "What's the matter, sugar?"

She shook, catching herself from jerking away from the touch. With an effort, she allowed herself to be pulled up against the warm and very much naked body beside her. What the hell was that? "I-whew-one hell of a bad dream is all," she muttered, curling an arm over his chest and not daring to close her eyes.

"Wonder where you go, when you dream inside of a dream?" he said, stroking his fingertips through her hair soothingly. When he opened the cell door and stared into her eyes, usually they were
accusing and hateful, but all he saw was genuine terror. Something was off, but when her fingertips began to stroke at his skin, he decided to think about other more enjoyable things.

She chuckled softly, calming down and resting her cheek on his chest, smiling up at him. "I don't think either of us is qualified to answer that," she said.

"Didn't think you were qualified to do what you did with that stripper," he grinned broadly then, waggling his eyebrows. Now that had been one hell of a pleasant surprise.

Smiling like a minx, she slid her hand down his chest slowly. "Well I'm just full of surprises. Truth is, I prefer the one on one time more," she said, voice pitching lower. Her soft fingertips stopped just above where he wanted them to go, playing with his stomach hairs teasingly.

"Sweetheart, I wouldn't be me if I couldn't give you all the one on one you could handle," he said, chest puffing out and hand sliding down over the swell of her hip.

"Get started, Mister Findlay," she whispered. If there was any way to banish the image of a monster from her mind, this had to be it.

Leviathan - Deep Space

Stars blurred by, Zagara watching dully from her position in the cortex of the Leviathan. From the floor protruded heavy tentacles that wrapped around the brood mother, pinning her firmly in place.

A door opened, interrupting the gentle rumbling of the massive ships organs. "We are almost there," a soft voice whispered, echoing in the familiar manner of the infested terrans.

Shifting her crested head, Zagara tore her gaze away from the stars to look at the intruder in annoyance. "What do you want, insect?" she said.

Diminutive already, Ariel Hanson squatted down until she was just a lump in front of the door. Her eyes gleamed behind offset glasses, hair dangling in her face. "I want to know why a man like Tychus let you live," she said.

"Keep wondering fleshling," Zagara hissed, looking away sharply. "I have nothing to say."

"What is being hidden?" Ariel prodded, cool and collected. Higher functioning infested terrans tended to be a bit...eccentric, but this one was cold and calculating. Like a certain Evolution Master.

The thought of Abathur raised Zagara's hackles, setting her to rocking back and forth in impotent rage. "He is a fool leading us to our end, nothing more," she snapped.

"You are concealing something," Ariel raised a clawed fingertip, "not that."

"Leave me," Zagara warned.

"Secrets are like gaps in the oneness we share," skittering forwards on all fours, Ariel stopped just shy of being reachable.

"GO!" the brood mother bellowed then, a clawed hand swiping out between her bindings but coming up short of reaching the pest.

"Obvious, but I am not strong enough to pry," Ariel leaned back on her heels, eyebrows raising in surprise at the attack.

Zagara pulled her hands back to their resting place, looking out to the stars once more and pointedly
ignoring the terran pest.

"Very well, keep your secret. I imagine all will be revealed soon enough," Ariel shrugged, turning and making her way back to the fleshy door. As the door squished open, she paused. "I only hope you are wrong about him, as wrong as I was an then some; or our children will suffer."

"They will," Zagara said, glaring out the view port.
Chapter 41

Korhal - Augustgrad

Two marines in dark CMC suits stood side by side staring at their radars warily, their black suits did little to hide the blood spattered over the paint.

"You see that?" one said, frowning. Black eyes gleaming with the reflection of a bright light emanating from his HUD.

The second, subservient to the first, walked forwards towards the curious anomaly that continued to blip insistently. "Confirmed. Movement ahead," he said.

"Go check it out," the older man grated, unblinking black eyes fixed to the vespine containers ahead and rifle held at the ready.

Steeling his nerves, Tate took a deep breathed and listened to the approaching heavy steps of the armed killer. Crouched behind a sealed container of vespine gas, he waited until the target was near before bracing his feet and hissing out loudly, "Pssst!" Without waiting, he kicked off the heavy green object and took off running, heart pounding in terror.

"Hey!" the CMC jerked in surprise, the man inside snarling, "Get back here!" His rifle was already aiming, but it seemed even a grunt knew better than to shoot into a gas storage unit.

Tate's life was counting on it.

"What is it?" the whiskey voice of the squad leader grated, "Report."

"Just a kid," the grunt laughed harshly, guiding his CMC to smoothly charge after the target. "In pursuit," he said.

A slow frown formed on the leaders face as he eyed the news feed scrolling down the side of his HUD. "Hm," he muttered.

"Boss," a third grunt spoke, tentative.

Brows drawing together in annoyance, the squad leaders tone echoed his face, "I'm thinking. Report said there were two insurgents, wire me that footage again," he snapped, finger swirling in the air impatiently.

"Uh, Boss..." Eyes widening, the grunt's voice took on an insistent, tense tone.

"WHAT?" the leader barked, rounding on his inferior. His eyes widened and his rifle raised far too slow.

"We're under-" the grunt blared stupidly as both of their CMCs went rigid, their emergency power cutoffs triggered at the same time.

As the CMCs and the mind controlled marines now trapped inside fell to the plascrete ground like toys, Warfield planted a foot on the mechanical chest of the leader. "Shh now, wouldn't want to ruin the surprise," he smiled.
"Sarge, do you read me?" It had been several minutes of radio silence and the leader of squad two was getting antsy.

Pulling his rifle in close, his partner continued to glance from the radar to every darkened corner of their surroundings. "Doesn't smell right, maybe we should call for some backup," he said.

Shaking his head sharply, the gesture lost inside his suit, the leader said, "We don't make that call. Besides, Korhal belongs to the master, we're guarding a whole lot of nothing," his voice leveled, soothed by the mention of the master.

They both let out startled shouts when the plascrete erupted beneath them, inhuman hands reaching up in unison and tearing at their emergency power cutoffs with a sharp bzzt!

"Hey! What the-" the leaders shouts dimmed to nothing as his speakers powered off.

Snarling and shaking inside the suit, the second glared at the form in front of him, shaking off earth and plascrete dust.

"Gentlemen, you have my apologies," Stukov chuckled, giving a CMC a pat on the shoulder and starting its fall to the ground.

Sweat flew from his hair as Tate ran, mouth hanging open and gasping in air. He only hoped he took the right path, darting through all the vespine containers so fast had turned everything into a bright green maze; made all the harder by the casual pursuit of the gunman behind him.

"Come here you little rat!" the voice of his pursuer crackled through a microphone, to the left! He was going to run left next. In fear, he deviated from the plan and darted right around a canister.

As a metal fist the size of his chest caught him by the front of his shirt, Tate gasped. He'd been played.

"Gotcha!" the man shouted, triumphant. Lifting the boy into the air, he inspected his quarry casually.

"No!" Tate cried, unable to keep his voice low anymore. He'd failed and now he was going to die, or worse. Beating his fists against the cold metal holding him, he continued to gasp for air as his heart raced.

The visor of the CMC popped open and slid back with a hiss, the scarred and smiling face of a black eyed marine stared down at him. "Don't know how you managed to get by for so long, but it's time you joined the fold," as he spoke, black smoke trailed upwards from his mouth and eyes.

Tate closed his eyes and held his breath, this was it. The smoke would come and he would no longer be Tate. He had seen it before.

**Thunk**

The jarring sound startled him but Tate could not open his eyes, could only cringe away from fate. Not until the familiar voice of his assailant uttered a muffled, "Huh?"

Relief poured into him, filling his soul to the brim as he opened his eyes and saw the familiar talon-tipped fingers of Warfield prying the CMCs hand off his shirt. Only when he had removed the offending limb and put Tate on his feet did Warfield speak, "Sorry we're late, you did good son." There was a note of unmistakable pride in his tone.
Blinking hard, a tear still managed to streak down his cheek. "Thanks!" Tate said.

"Let's go," Stukov cut in, hiking a thumb at the green slime-sealed CMC helmet, "their absence will be noticed before long."

"Hng!" A man shouted as he was pulled bodily from his seat and expertly rendered unconscious.

Pressed for time, Warfield tossed the man aside like a sack of potatoes and made a sharp gesture to his companions. "Get in!" he said.

Sounding no small part amused as he took his place in the passenger seat and watched Warfield put the former drivers hat on, Stukov said, "Alright General, we've got the tanker and we are en route, what now?"

In the middle seat, Tate barely managed to buckle himself in before the massive tanker roared into gear and began its journey as though nothing had happened. "Thank you for not hurting them," he said quietly, looking up at Warfield, not sure if the man would hear him but uncaring all the same.

Warfield heard, though his eyes remained focused on the road. "Don't sweat it. Now we follow the route and get to the starport; there, we get real close, rig it up to explode and get the hell off Korhal." He smiled, looking up at the sky. They were so close.

"And the checkpoint?" Stukov sounded exaggeratedly curious.

"Checkpoint?" Blinking, Warfield looked back down and saw the road block ahead. Armed guards flanked a Goliath, all of whom were looking at their approach by now. "Ah hell, change of plan," without pause he pressed the gas pedal to the floor and watched as the marines responded in kind, scattering in momentary confusion as the tanker smashed through the small panel blocking their way.

A moment later a gauss spike exploded the side mirror next to Warfield, making him cringe away.

"You won't have time to hide this thing anywhere," Stukov pointed out, looking back through his intact mirror and not liking what he saw. The goliath was not firing, thankfully. A full vespine truck was not something you shot at without care.

"I'm thinking." Warfield said through clenched teeth, taking a sharp turn that made Tate let out a distressed squeak.

Stukov gripped at the door for further support, voice rising over the patterning of gunfire and the roar of the engines, "Well think faster, because this tanker is not bullet proof General!"

The tanker swayed perilously around another sharp turn, the starport looming above buildings ahead of them ominously. "Get out!" Warfield yelled.

"What?" Stukov said sharply, eyeing his companion as though he'd gone mad.

"I said get out! Take the kid and find a ship while I deal with this," Warfield glanced at his companions, face grim.

"Arent we going to stop?" Tate yelled, eyes wide as his feet braced on the dash, pressing himself back into the seat.

Deafening sound poured into the cab as Stukov jerked open the door with one hand and yanked Tate clean out of his seatbelt with the deformed other. "No," was all he said.
Grabbing on to the zerg-infested fist for his life, Tate wailed as he was pulled out of the speeding vehicle, "Aaah!"

Gritting his teeth and jerking his head away from a spray of shattered glass, Warfield glared at the starport with determination. He pressed his foot down on the gas even harder.

*Keep me informed.* Stukov said, swiftly rising to his feet and unveiling his unharmed charge. Tate looked a little green.

*You too, be ready to pick me up.* Warfield said, resolute.

"No time to rest boy," Stukov said sharply. A quick glance over Tate showed he was done, barely able to keep standing and looking ready to vomit. Without hesitation he picked him up and tossed him over his shoulder, taking off at a run. Tate couldn't even bring himself to object, not when he saw the small shapes of enemy marines in the distance.

Gripping the wheel firmly, a blinking light drew Warfield's eye from the road ahead to the comm built into the dash of the tanker truck. Up until now, it had been silent and unlit. With a will of its own, the comm began to crackle and buzz.

Forcing his eyes back to the road, there weren't many men in the military sector yet, but there were some; they would surely be looking for a place to cut him off and immobilize him by now. The crackling grew louder. In agitation, he reached over and palmed it off.

The noise abated, and he considered his options. There was no element of surprise anymore, and the enemy no doubt knew where he was bound by now.

**Crackle**

His breath froze, chest tightening as the comm flared to life of its own accord. The massive freighter wheeled around one final corner, revealing a new blockade ahead. Scrambled together, the former group of marines and their goliath had jammed themselves into the bottleneck entrance to the starport; they loomed ahead, waiting.

His foot let off the gas, bringing the tanker to a coast towards the blockade as the comm hissed menacingly. "Bring the vehicle to a stop - *Amon* - or we will open fire - *Comes.*"

Baring his teeth, Warfield opened the comm with a sharp gesture. His foot stamped down on the gas pedal once more as he spoke, "Son, you tell the son of a bitch that brainwashed you to go to hell." The tanker would be within firing range of the goliath soon.

The marine's voice grew cold, "Amon sends his regards." The comm sputtered and died, smoke rising from between the dashboard panels.

Distant gunfire roused the exhausted child hanging over Stukov's shoulder; the position and jostling combined made for a squirming, not rested kid.

Swallowing hard, Tate began to speak "How is he going to-

"Shut up," Stukov muttered.

"But-" Tate tried again.
"No," Stukov said firmly, setting Tate back to his feet in a jarring motion. "I need to listen, and we need to not be found. Now follow," he said, striding away from the boy; Tate would adapt or he would die. Stukov was not Warfield.

The gunfire quickened his pace. They were sneaking through hangars and across launch pads at a close to running speed. "No transports, must all be out or up on the platform," Stukov finally spoke for Tate's benefit. His eyes gleamed then as he looked up, "no small ones anyway."

"Can you really pilot that?" Tate sounded awed as his gaze followed, the boy had found his second wind though all of his clothes were soaked through with sweat and clinging to his wirey frame.

"We are about to find out, aren't we?" Stukov looked down at him, baring a half-ruined grin.

"C'mon girl, don't give in just yet. Couple bullets aren't gonna put you down," Warfield said, patting the steering wheel firmly.

A couple bullets was an understatement. There were two massive mechanical feet flailing just in front of the smashed-in glass of the cab's front window, the goliath had been just tall enough to scoop it up from below and now it clattered haplessly on top of the full vespine container; which was spewing and frothing its bright green cargo through numerous holes.

It was a wonder it hadn't exploded.

We have secured transport. Stukov's voice connected to Warfield's mind like a sharp slap. Status?

Warfield barked a laugh as he pressed deeper into the starport compound, the main building only moments ahead. Under fire, in a tight spot, nothing unusual. The goliath's cannons whirred to life and carved furrows through the plascrete on either side of the truck, unable to hit the vehicle it was trapped on top of but trying its best all the same.

We're going to be under fire soon too, comrade. Your plan needs to come to fruition very soon. Stukov focused intently on his task while Tate sat at a console nearby, clearly getting into something. "Don't break anything," he warned.

Sprung a leak. Not going to be any clean way out of this Stukov. If I don't get out of this, you take care of that kid. You hear me? There was a note of finality in Warfields communication that Stukov did not like.

Moments later, an overlay screen popped up. Displaying live footage of the wounded tanker and its zealous pursuers. A tight spot was not the words Stukov would have chosen to describe this hopeless situation. "He's going to crash!" Tate yelled, on his feet and staring in horror, "No!"

The inside of the transport bloomed with bright green color as the tanker connected with a building, the video footage shrouded in flames and debris. Tate let out a hopeless sob and began crying in earnest.

Stukov remained stoic, feeling out with other senses than sight. "Easy boy, keep your eyes open now. Watch that screen," he said patiently.

Tate did as he was told, but the boy was clearly in hysterics. "He's gone! He's gone!" he gasped and wailed.

Flying low over the burning debris where the General was last spotted, Stukov began to smile. "There! Have a little faith in the General, boy. Hah!"
Tate gaped, eyes wide as Warfield emerged from beneath a pile of plascrete and debris. The General was busy tearing off his on-fire shirt as he ran towards the transport.

They were already making for the sky as Warfield burst into the pilot room. "A Hercules-class transport was not as subtle as I was thinking, Stukov!" he said, but there was no menace. The singed-looking infested man was clearly glad to be alive, he even let out a laugh.

Raising his hands up as he slowly spun around in his chair, Stukov was decidedly smug. "We must make use of what is available to us, yes?"

"Let's just get to that platform before the fly boys make it over here-" Warfield jumped a little as the small form of Tate collided with him, scrawny arms curling around him and squeezing as tight as they could "Oh," he said in surprise, brain attempting to decide what to do.

"This monster can take some hits, she'll get us there in one piece," Stukov assured, turning away to face the console once more. His human hand curled at the steering controls confidently.

"I'm glad you are alive," Tate said, looking up at Warfield with liquid-filled eyes. "I thought..."

"I'm glad I'm alive too son, but don't worry about me." Warfield finally chuckled and allowed himself to unwind, curling his arms around Tate for a simple comforting hug. When was the last time this kid received one? It was the least he could do, even if he was tired and could feel severely burned flesh on his back slowly knitting together.

"We're not out of the woods yet. Korhal may be enemy territory right now, but sky shield? That is the front line," Stukov said ominously as Korhal fell away from below them, the massive transport trembling as it fought through the planets atmosphere with the brute force of its many thrusters.

Frowning and eyeing the expanse of space unveiling before them, Warfield nodded. "I know," he said. Who knew how many ships might be chasing them at this point, he was not sure if bringing them to the lamed *Bucephalus* was a good plan, but it was also the only plan. They would have to hope it was not a rescue mission.

*Bucephalus* - Sky Shield Platform

"Two hours have elapsed. Swap psi screens with your designated partner now," the Adjutant, ever nonchalant, announced over the comm.

"Agent, we have a problem over here."

Nova bit back a sigh as she received the message from the stressed resoc. "What is the problem?"

Her feet were already guiding her to the location of the disturbance. There had been many.

"Please don't take it, please-," a man was begging, not yet in sight.

"He is refusing to yield the psi screen to his partner," the resoc sounded uncertain, his hand was placed on the man's shoulder but he had otherwise not taken action.

"We need them more than them!" Another shouted, Nova taking in the small crowd as she rounded the corner. A designated swap area where the two groups had separated from one another.

"It's our turn!" A woman shouted from the group of those who were meant to be receiving their psi screens, their pale features and strained looks only an echo of the torment their minds were poorly staving off. Others echoed her sentiment in a rapidly rising din.
Nova’s voice cracked like a whip, slicing through the chaos. "Calm down. These rules are in place for your safety, these tools are dangerous when worn for too long," while speaking she approached the man who first refused to yield, he already looked defeated. "Now, give it to your partner." Her tone brooked no arguments.

The crowd collectively watched the psionic assassin, temporarily distracted from their terrible need. Nova knew some would wonder at the intimidation factor of a Ghost, and others would be watching the way her body moved as she walked away. She did not need to have her power to know these things anymore, and they did not need to know she did not have it.

"S-s-sorry Amanda," the man murmured as he relinquished the small net-like device to his partner.

"Thank you," Amanda said stiffly.

Strained conversations budded and quickly faded away as Nova rounded a corner and left them to their business. Her mind clouded with worrying thoughts as her fingertips trailed up to her earpiece; the pain, anxiety and other disturbing thoughts that bit at her bones and gnawed at her mind were wearing her thin quickly.

The chirp of an established connection brought her back to reality. "Valerian," she said in a hushed tone, "this situation is getting more volatile with every hour, every swap. We need to start thinking containment."

"Containment..." Valerian trailed off, seemingly distracted.

Her fine brows furrowed, stepping through a hissing doorway. Her feet were taking her towards the next swap location. "Yes, are you listening?"

"There is nothing you can do," Valerian said simply, cutting off the call before she could even respond.

Nova clenched her teeth, if Valerian was not capable of leading then the situation was quickly flying beyond control. A rapidly beeping incoming call mixed with the insidious desire to rip her new Emperor to shreds left her ready to scream. "Ugh!" she spat through clenched teeth, regaining her composure before accepting the transmission.

"Agent. Another situation."

"Where?" Not surprised, her eyes narrowed. It would be good to dish out some punishment, she could only hope for it. No, wrong thoughts. She gave her head a sharp shake.

"Group of crew members holed up and refusing to relinquish their psi screens. Orders?" The resocs were blissfully unaffected by the continual psionic pressure, but this was not a situation they were trained to handle.

Nova's head hurt. Bad. She paused, collecting her thoughts and pressing a palm to her forehead hard. "Pry the damn things off if you have to, but no weapons and no injuries. Am I clear?"

"Understood." Click. Transmission ended.

"One crisis at a time," Nova reminded herself firmly. The walls had begin to close in, but by sheer force of will she shoved them back into place and stepped through the door between herself and a different new confrontation. She almost barreled into the two wrestling terrans.

"Give it back! I need it!" A woman cried, grasping and clambering at a man who had his back to the
"No, get off!" he shouted, one hand and one leg trying to shove away the possessed-looking woman and the other hand trying to keep her fingertips from prying his psi screen off.

The walls began to twist and strain, Nova placing her hands firmly on the shoulders of each struggling person. "Hold it! Stop!" she said loudly, eyes widening slightly when the conflict continued regardless of her presence, as if they could see no one but each other.

Nova's hands fell from the two shoving and shouting people, her suit warned against her rapidly increasing heart rate; her comm buzzed in her ear. "Agent, they are armed and threatening violence. The situation over here is escalating, force may be necessary," yet another resoc said.

Stepping backwards, her back pressed against the cold steel of the door. It should have opened automatically.

The man whose back was against the wall seemed to come to from his struggle as the fury of the Ghost became apparent, his eyes widening.

Unslinging her canister rifle, Nova raised a fingertip to her earbud, "engage hostiles."

_We are different, you and I._

Looking up from the neuroscan result sheet she held in her hands, Roshelle blinked. Was that flicker of light at the corner of her eye a result of exhaustion? Perhaps it was time to take the sci screen off.

_Different species, gender, goals, desires. It is time to see and reach beyond our boundaries, for the good of all that remain._

Shaking fingertips pulled the psi screen off, placing it on the counter top reluctantly. Tears formed at the corners of her eyes immediately as disturbing and distressing thoughts bombarded her mind.

_It is time to be one._ Lasarra held her hands upwards, palms out, eyes bright and expectant.

Hugging the clipboard to her chest tightly, Roshelle closed her eyes and cried.

"I be ready," Tosh said, raising his hands in turn. A bright pillar of psionic energy, a myriad of twisting colors, bloomed between himself and the protoss.

_Incoming transmission_

"Sir," Vaughn's pallid, sleepless face appeared over Valerian's grand desk, "there was an explosion on Korhal! We believe it was a-"

"I don't care, Vaughn," Valerian said, sharp and cold. He did not lift his gaze from the floor, slumped in his chair as he was.

Dumbstruck silence filled the room for a moment. "Pardon me sir?" Vaughn said, not sure he heard his leader correctly.

Valerian gave a heavy-lidded glance up, mouth a hard line of disdain, "You heard me. We have lost, give up already." With a gesture, Valerian ended the transmission.
This is it. Nova thought, words springing from her mind and out of her mouth as she stood over two previously conscious terrans; scattered gunfire was going off in her earpiece. "The moment we collapse from the inside out." The pressure of the psionic attack was mounting, a palpable force pressing against her brain that the psi screen could barely hold back. "There is nothing I can do," she said to the bodies at her feet apologetically. "Maybe if I still had my power I could- Oh."

Something incredible was happening. A hazy film was being torn away from everything she could see, exposing a forgotten brightness, as though the depressive and violent thoughts had begun to paint the ship.

A familiar low, smooth voice touched her mind.

_Breathe it in, that peace of mind,_ Tosh said.

Bewildered, Nova pulled the psi screen off with boneless fingers, a chill of excitement rippling through her as a decidedly friendly energy tingled through her skin and muscles.

_Mira Han still poses a threat, you are not safe._ Lasarra warned, the protoss' familiar soft blanket-like voice had taken on a rougher edge.

_But your minds are,_ Tosh was smug, but he had every right to be.

"Tosh, what have you done?" Nova questioned the air, thinking as hard as she could. How did she ever speak to people telepathically before? It had become second nature so long ago. She felt blind and dumb to the whole situation, but could not find the anger to make the feeling fester.

_What be necessary girl. Now go on, get these people fighting again._ Tosh said simply. _We be watchin' things now._

Calming his shaking hands, Valerian grasped the iron will that had been missing and opened a call to the bridge quickly. "Captain Vaughn, I believe I owe you an apology," he said.

Vaughn himself sounded awed and giddy, neither of which Valerian had ever heard in his captain before. "Not necessary sir," Vaughn said.

Spreading his gloved fingertips over the smooth holo table surface, Valerian reopened the reports he had been monitoring previously. "I believe you were reporting about an explosion of some sort? I would appreciate details now," he said.

"They celebrating now, but they should be fighting," Tosh said, even though his stomach gave an insistent rumble.

_A moment of respite, they have earned it._ Lasarra could not help but look at the plate of food in front of the Spectre, curiosity bubbling. The most tumultuous part of their bonding was complete, and the psionic protection they now offered to the terrans aboard the ship was much easier to maintain.

"Heh," Tosh rumbled, grasping a fork and grinning broadly. "you really want to know?"

_Yes, I do. Oh... That is truly disgusting._

Cheek puffing out as he pressed the tasteless mass to the side to chew and talk, Tosh's eyes twinkled with amusement. _Rations would not be the first meal I would share, if it were my choice," he said._
A drink, perhaps? If a protoss could make concerned facial expressions, she would. As it was, her eyes crinkled at the corners as if in pain.

Swallowing and nodding quickly, "Oh yes, there be some drinks I can show ya," he grinned then.

Many Protoss believe that eating and speaking with orifices is primitive. She noted as they left the mess hall, where the remaining terrans were giving tearful hugs and apologies. Celebrating and mourning, some were killed in the violence that began to erupt moments before she and Tosh could intervene.

"What do they know, eh?"

I believe it should be explored while the opportunity is there. This was a temporary arrangement, after all.

"Then we will do that while we can," and he knew just the assortment of drinks to get started. Tosh headed for the cantina, curious protoss in tow.

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Shield Hub Alpha - Sky Shield Platform

"Keep up, son," Jim said, looking ahead at who-knew-what from atop a pile of rubble nearby.

Egon was always 20 steps behind, at a minimum, the pace was agonizing with the clock ticking down as it was. "Your hands aren't tied, Jim. I am also not suited to this kind of work," the young infested scientist sounded especially arch. Bad enough Jim had him running towards the enemy, but with his hands tied behind his back too!

"Shh," Jim hushed him firmly.

"Coast is clear," a familiar and up until a few hours ago, terrifying, female voice reported smoothly.

"AH!" Egon nearly jumped out of his skin as the Queen of Blades herself brushed by. But she was not there in the grand hive mind conscious anymore, it was bewildering. And fascinating.

"SHH!" Both Kerrigan and Jim hissed, visibly ruffled.

"Sorry," Egon muttered, using his long legs to swing over a tire that may have belonged to a hellion, the rest of the vehicle was missing. At least being infested had some perks, not a drop of sweat or burn of fatigue was to be had. He wiggled his butt comically to make it the last few inches before his feet touched the ground again.

They arrived at their destination, and it did not look promising. Jim winced as he pulled aside a severely dented and jammed door, peering into the unpowered and dark insides of the defense station. "Let's hustle. No telling when the front line will be here, but she never wasted time before," he said.

"What happened to her?" Egon chased after Jim quickly when he realized Sarah came to stand behind him once more, clearly bringing up the rear.

Gritting his teeth and wading through bundles of fallen and worryingly severed cables, Jim muttered, "Amon got to her. Got to all the terrans, far as we can tell."

"That is...real bad news," Egon analyzed his feelings on the matter and decided they were detached. His feelings about the half-ruined control panels they were approaching were very clear however,
"Where do I even start?"

Looking upwards at bloodied walls and broken windows, Sarah remembered being the claws and teeth that ravaged this place with crystal clarity. "It is likely Amon will have control of Valerian and his crew before we are done here," she spoke with clinical coldness.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, one problem at a time," Jim grimaced.

"Still," picking up an arm-thick cable with her hands, she became very interested in it all the sudden, "we need to consider exit strategies."

Whirling to face her, Jim said, "So we can run off and rejoin the swarm, that it?" The worst part was she would not look up.

Pursing her lips tightly, her wing blades betrayed how much she liked the way this conversation was going; they rattled together and lifted upwards partially. "No Jim, but the swarm is our only-"

"Ehem," Egon's pointed throat clearing drew two pairs of angry inhuman eyes.

"What?" Sarah and Jim addressed him as one.

"I need to get to work, restraints please?"

"Right," Jim grudgingly complied.

"I'll keep an eye out," Sarah did not give anyone a chance to say otherwise, slipping out of the building with an unnatural quickness.

Jim clipped the restraints to his belt and gestured at the equipment he was almost certain was hopelessly destroyed. "Me too. Call if you need anything Egon," he said.

"Yeah..." Before Jim managed to leave, Egon shouted in an angry tone, "How about a whole team of SCVs?!"

"You know what I mean son," he let out a chuckle and slipped out after Sarah.

The Queen of Blades was standing atop a small rise, smoke rising in the distance framing her figure. "All clear," she said.

Clenching his fists, Jim remembered vividly the old Sarah. Framed in a hundred different ways, and while many were terrifically violent, they were all terran in form. Pity welled in him so deeply he wanted a drink. "I'm sorry darlin'.

"Don't be."

Stepping up beside her, he looked towards the plume in the distance. Time was ticking and he felt a simple acceptance of the fact settle in. "It's just...Seems like you'd rather be back to rulin' the zerg sometimes." It was his turn to not be able to look, could he have said anything more horrible?

"It's not that, Jim," a quick shake of her head created a small clatter. "I was supposed to defeat Amon, this big destiny I had no say in. I was preparing for it."

"Yeah, Zeratul told me, well, showed me."

"He fancied he could hear the sound of hundreds of foot soldier slaves running towards them, feverish to serve the new god of the Kopru  sector. Maybe the universe, too."
"If I was not meant to win with the zerg, then what? When?" her voice became thick with tension. "Why all of this?" she held up a thick tendril of her own hair, so thoroughly disgusted all of a sudden she found herself surprised.

"I don't know darlin'," he caught her hand in his, still warm and rough, and gave a reassuring squeeze. "But I'll be damned if I'm not there beside you when it's time."

"Thanks cowboy." she squeezed back.

"My pleasure."

Her eyes narrowed, hawk-like. "Contact."

He had to blink and look harder. "Ah hell, is that a tank?"

"Yes."

"Egon, status!" Jim shouted as her burst back in to the crumpled building, Sarah slipping in a half-step behind.

A few lights were blinking, limited power was flowing, but that was not enough. "The zerg shredded everything Jim, there's just next to nothing to work with in here!" Egon nearly shouted, feeling helpless as he continued to feverishly splice wires together and pull circuitry off of scavenged bits and pieces.

Jim concealed how impressed he was to see lights to begin with. "Damnit Egon, any grease monkey could have told me that! I brought you because you know how to make the best out of the worst!"

"I am trying! Oh, I wish I had my energy drinks so bad," Egon lamented.

"He needs more time," Sarah said simply.

"Then we need to get out there and make a distraction," Jim turned towards her and smiled like a beacon.

"Ready to get your hands dirty?" she smiled.

"Always." Before he strode back out, Jim had a thought. "Keep workin' Egon. If you get it going don't wait for us," he said.

"Okay Jim," Egon waved him off, far too distracted to absorb what was said.

Knelt beside the burned out and toppled husk of a train, Jim eyed the prey intently. "Couple marines, 3 tanks. Wonder why she's not throwing everything at us?" he murmured.

"The ship is helpless, loss is inevitable. Why not take your time?" Sarah was crouched at his side, wing blades tucked close.

"It's just not like her."

"It isn't her."

He grit his teeth. "My armor penetrating rounds can deal with at least one tank, but I'll be gettin' shot at as soon as I take one out."
Lips playing at a smile, standing as she gave his shoulder a tentative pat, she said, "I'll handle it."

"Be safe Sarah," he readied his rifle.

Egon was ranting,"How can he expect me to do this? By myself, no resources, no help, no-ah!" The pieces of material he had in his hands flew this way and that as he dropped to his knees heavily as if struck.

"Oh god. Jim Jim Jim!" He gasped and heaved, hands pressing to the sides of his head as if to keep it from exploding.

Plain Terran eyes peeled away and he gasped, closing his eyes tightly and reopening them until he could see like normal again. "Can't call Jim, could get him killed," he said. Looking around the room wildly, every claw mark and blood spatter resonated a hundred times over, making his head spin with an alien lust for destruction. "They'll kill Jim! No no no!"

Seizing his courage, the young scientist dashed out of the building at a breakneck pace. Jim had to be found, the swarm was here.

"Easy," Jim murmured, "Nice and quiet now. Here goes nothin',' index finger resting gently on the trigger, the rifle would expel a HEV round that would shred through a tank, creating so much shrapnel inside it the rider would be dead instantly and messily.

He could see her faintly, a shadow here, a shift of colors that were slightly off. Even without her psionic abilities, Sarah Kerrigan was fully capable of stealth. As soon as she was in position trailing behind two of the three tanks, he took aim at the lead. "Here goes nothing," he whispered.

In the time between pulling the trigger, the deafening sound of gunfire, and a neat head-sized hole being punched through the lead siege tank, he was already being fired at. "Agh!" he shouted, barely avoiding a searing hot mess of plasma and slag as the shelled out train blew up beside him.

He ran for his life. Several more siege tank rounds had fired off, he counted only one in his direction however. "C'mon Sarah!" he shouted, voice drowned out by a nearby wall being vaporized, this was cutting it far too close.

"Jim! Look out!" Sarah shouted over the comm, subtlety discarded.

"Yes I am being shot at! Thanks!" he'd been angling a sharp curve back towards the siege tanks to get up close, and his quarry would be right around the next heap of rubble. Why would Sarah break comm silence for that? he questioned fleetingly.

Something in her tone pulled at his attention. "No, it's the-"

Jim found himself roughly tackled into a wall, just shy of getting at the tank around the corner. "Hnf!"

Sarah's lips pressed up against his ear as she forcefully pinned him, her tone urgent, "Swarm."

He could hear it now. Shrieking. Hissing. Roaring. It had all blended together, the sound of battle he had grown used to but now found himself on the wrong side of. Sarah's grasp relaxed as he gave her a small tap, silent and focused now. There was a buzzing in the air, innumerable Zerg descending upon the platform, but their local position was much quieter.
A heavy thump, followed by metallic screeching and a more telling meaty tearing noise painted an unpleasant picture of what happened to the remaining tanks. Zerg were feasting.

Carefully rising to a crouch, Jim gestured around the corner and got back on the same page with Sarah. There was a new potential enemy to deal with, the battle was still on.

With cautious regard to the sound, he slung his rifle back over his shoulder and winced at the crunch of his spines being snapped off, brandishing them as weapons once again. He leaped around the corner as one with Sarah at his side, a snarl on his lips.

It died immediately when greeted by familiar guttural laughter. Tychus, or something so similar in shape as to be familiar, was on top of the siege tank, looking down on a giant furred beast of a primal zerg feasting on whatever was inside the tank, it's head and torso were stuck inside it.

"Hurry it up son, can't go keepin' an Emperor waiting." Tychus boomed, he was facing towards the lamed Bucephalus.

Jim couldn't help it, he gasped. Sarah paused beside him, much more wary.

A subtle clatter of chitinous hair filled the quiet as Tychus turned his head slowly towards the noise. It was hard to tell emotion on his face now, more zerg than man, but his eyes widened dramatically. "Jimmy?" he said, disbelief evident.

Catching his breath, Jim swallowed before speaking, his voice thickened with emotion, "Tychus? What in the hell happened?"

"He's evolved," Sarah said, wing blades fanning outwards in a not-so-subtle challenge. He was a thief.

The creature feasting on the insides of the tank went still, though it remained half-buried inside. Tychus leaped down from the tank and landed heavily, small dust clouds erupting from under his feet. "I-I thought you was dead," his fists clenched, "came to kill Valerian for betrayin' us."

"Where is Zagara?" Sarah said, glancing at what had to be Dehaka. How did Tychus manage to keep the loyalty of the primal zerg?

Tychus grunted, "Alive." He jerked a blackened, clawed thumb upwards, a Leviathan floated lazily above them as scores of zerg continued to pour fourth. "Abathur helped me knock her down a peg or two," he said.

A warning bell went off in her head. "Abathur? You can't trust him, Tychus." It seems the evolution master had his own agenda after all.

"Valerian didn't betray us," Jim said, eyes widening in realization. "Dear God, you betrayed her."

"Son, I-" Tychus attempted to speak, but guilt was written on every twisted inch of him. Worse was when his gaze shifted to a shrunken, completely misshapen infested that was loitering at the corner of the siege tank. Its whole body gave a twitch.

Jim lost all sense of composure, voice rising in a roar. He shot forwards and clamped his hands down on Tychus' shoulders, careless of the blood drawn. "You turned her!" he could barely stand to look, but he forced himself to glance at the infested Jayce to fuel his righteous anger. "That girl never did anythin' wrong but care for a man who didn't deserve it! And you ain't even a man anymore!"

Sarah hissed, "Don't become weak! Stay in control." It seemed she was the only one present who
recognized the true danger.

Gently, Tychus curled his hands around Jim's forearms and held him still, at least to keep from doing further harm. The dagger-like fingers piercing into his thick hide already hurt a great deal; greasy purple blood welling up around them. "Jim, brother, I have made the biggest mistake of my life."

"You're damn straight, but it's gonna be the last!" Jim roared, bits of spit spraying. He curled his fingers hard, he'd dig through the rotten son of a bitch if he had to, but before he could truly begin to fight he found himself flung backwards and staring up at the zerg-filled sky in confusion.

Tychus stumbled backwards, hands pressing to the side of his head. It felt like a railroad spike was being driven into his brain repeatedly, hammering away chunks of sanity. "Augh!" he screamed.

Sarah helped Jim up quickly.

Reeling to his feet with the quick assist, it came as a shock to see the huge infested man writhing on the ground holding his head. His claws did not do that. "What's happening?" wild eyed, he looked towards the infested Jayce and watched her spasm, distant shrieking and roaring taking on a note of confusion. Something significant was happening.

Letting go of Jim, Sarah rushed to Tychus and grabbed at his shoulder, trying for his attention. Hot greasy blood spread across her palms. "It's Abathur, it has to be! Fight him Findlay!"

*Specimen Findlay. Weak. Not fit to rule Swarm.*

"N-n-noo," shrugging off the annoyance touching at his burning skin, Findlay struggled to his feet like a wounded animal as Sarah fell back, eyes shifting away from him.

"Hell," Jim said.

A sinuous tentacle wound about Tychus' neck from behind, giving the infested man's neck a crushing squeeze as the deformed creature attached to it leaped on to his back.

"It's gone," Sarah leaped back, grasping Jim's arm. Together they turned and ran, full speed. "Abathur wanted to give the swarm to Amon, I doubt he's changed his mind since then!"

Tychus' head turned, guided by the flexing tentacle, meeting pits of red burning embers. Jayce.

*I REMEMBER.*

He felt himself being pulled in, no longer a willing participant and unable to stop it. Pure, undiluted malice burned into his brain until darkness closed in.

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**Void Seeker - Shakuras**

Space and time twisted together into a knot, until a ripple spasmed through the chaos and spat out a lone, smooth vessel. The *Void Seeker* hovering expectantly in space as other anomalies appeared, warping and twisting until bright lights popped out, rippling outwards like a disturbed pond.

It was not there.

Confusion twisting his brows, Zeratul beheld the void of space where the homeworld of the Nerazim was meant to be. Shakuras was absent, and a cold feeling began to fill him as he observed debris floating about. The *Void Seeker* did not make mistakes. *My holy homeland... Where is it?*
A bright serpentine figure slid through space towards the Void Seeker, coiling and dipping around massive chunks of debris. Believe the evidence of your eyes, prophet. Shakuras is no more. The soldier of the dead gods, the phoenix creature, spoke gently.

By the gods, what of the dark templar? We must search for survivors! How could he have let this happen? But even as he thought it, what could he have done to stop it? Was his discovery of the army of the gods too late? The Void Seeker began deep scanning.

A chord of alarm strummed through the bond between himself and the many serpentine creatures waiting expectantly in space around him. Beyond the dust of this world there is a battle, come. Passing by the Void Seeker, the creature began to navigate through the rubble and dust of the planet.

Wordless and grim, Zeratul followed.

Warnings, red and insistent, soon drew his attention as he guided the Void Seeker close enough to see with his own eyes this battle taking place, eyes widening to bright green orbs at what he saw. Golden vessels, diving and dodging, exploding in brilliant hues of white and blue. That is no dark templar craft! The golden armada attacks their own?

An enormous protoss mothership, a delicate-looking golden flower from afar, was carving a swathe through the smaller vessels getting in its way, but clearly on the run from the much larger force chasing it down.

Coming to a stop behind their leader, the army of the gods hung silently in the dust of Shakuras, spread out through the rubble like muted stars. The Khalai belong to Amon, they said.

Zeratul nearly jumped. Of course! The khalas...There were many Khalai on Shakuras. Refugees. The dark templar must have been set upon without warning. Shakuras is a portal world. Was. Amon would have brought devastation to my people, leaving them no escape! Then he was truly too late. Slumping down into his seat bonelessly, Zeratul mourned lost time; what he would not give to go back and fix all the wrongs.

Do not despair, look once more, they sang as one.

He looked up a second time. Guiding the visuals of the ship to observe closer. His old hearts leaped with joy. The mothership that is under attack must be survivors!

The battling ships shifted into the warp, blinking out like so many stars. The mothership had not escaped, all it could do was change the location in which it was overwhelmed.

Focusing upon the army at his command, he took their steady surety and made it his own. I know not how Shakuras has come to ruin, but saving those who remain is still within my power.

Your command? They thrummed, bodies brightening and glowing with fury. It seemed they drew upon their leader much the same.

Pursue the golden armada and its prey! For Shakuras! He roared.

We move.

Vorazun. A voice called.

Increasing exponentially in volume, the voice was insistent. Vorazun!
Vorazun blinked, coming back from the depths of space laid out before the bridge of the mothership, it was all too easy to get lost in it. Yes? She turned her head to regard her second in command.

*Where are you taking us?* A large protoss even by Khalai standards, Zurenth was a ferocious giant. Behind him stood a ragged ensemble of Khalai, their nerve cords varying degrees of severed, and Nerazim.

She appreciated his skill at arms, not his council. *The golden armada, piloted by the enslaved Khalai, pursues us. I am taking us to our last hope, the Terrans.*

*The terrans??* His bright green eyes gleamed with outrage, but that was all she could glean, their lack of connection a blessing. Then *we are lost already, the primitives don’t stand a chance against the armada. We should know,* a bitter tone poisoned his thought speech, *we helped build it.*

Vorazun raised her hand calmly. It was hard to be anything but numb after orchestrating the destruction of her own home, but she would be damned if Amon took it. *I sense your anger and I understand. But we must do what we can, what has been done cannot be undone. The Terrans have proven themselves time and again in dire straights.*

It seemed that Zurenth was focused on the past. *We helped them recreate an unstoppable machine of war-* he gestured sharply back towards the few Khalai present as he spoke. *To take back Aiur, which we desired as well.* She conceded, this was the truth.

*-to give Amon the very weapons he needed to destroy us!*

*The Khalai can be freed!* A young Khalai shouted from his group *We are proof! We did not want to help Amon any more than you!*

Eyes narrowing, Vorazun slammed the butt of her staff to the floor, green flares flickering at both ends, releasing a deafening crack. *Enough!*

A pin could be heard dropping in the silence, the subtle humming of warp the only disturbance.

With the newfound focus, she took full advantage of their attention. *The terrans will have no choice but to respond when the armada appears, their hand will be forced. Both Artanis and Zeratul placed much trust in the primitives, we must now do so as well. We Nerazim are meant to be open minded.*

*Zeratul killed the matriarch, Raszagal.* Zurenth said, voice tight with anger.

*My mother.* Her eyes narrowed, what gave him the right to mention that? *A fact I have not forgotten or forgiven, nor shall I ever! However,* she raised a clawed fingertip, *had we listened to his message...*

The large Nerazim tipped his head forwards, acknowledging the truth bitterly. *Things may have gone differently.*

*I believe we would be fools not to listen now, the mad prophet's words have rung true ever since we first heard them.* She turned to look down upon the huddled masses arrayed below her platform. So few warriors left. *You are tired. Your bodies are weakened and wounded, but you are not yet dead.*

She raised a hand in assurance and greeting. Some of those below had never been so close to the Matriarch of the Nerazim, surely it would not be comforting to know she was possibly the last leader of their race remaining. *Rest as much as you can, we are safe in warp, but when we arrive at Korhal there will be battle! You will be ready! You will fight and should you die, you die as one! You die for
Shakuras!

Shakuras! The Nerazim chanted, the warriors raising their psi blades high.

And Aiur! She added, clenching her fist and channeling her fury into it.

AIUR! The Khalai bellowed, their psionic voices rich with anger.

Chapter End Notes

Oh man, this chapter really took forever and you have my sincerest apologies. I have gotten the writing oomph back however and hope to get another chapter out in a timely manner, I hope you enjoyed this one!
"Damn it!" Jim snarled, "the zerg are everywhere and so’s that bastard Amon!" With the flick of a hand, he gave the all clear to move forwards. The thought of looking over his shoulder and seeing Tychus being grabbed by the former Jayce chilled his anger, redirected it to the one responsible for all their suffering: Amon.

A spider-like silhouette stretched over the nook he sheltered inside before coalescing into Sarah, who slipped in and knelt beside him. She pitched her voice low, "we can't go back to the ship, if they aren't gone somehow then they are about to be." Fists clenching tightly, she glared at the ground, "I should have known about Abathur, I should have killed him as soon as I gained control," her words ended in sharp hiss.

He gave her knee a halfhearted pat. "We have to get back to Stettman and find us some wings, get ourselves the hell off this deathtrap." It didn't feel right, the idea of leaving everyone, and it twisted unpleasantly in his guts.

Both went still and silent as a pack of zerglings thundered past their shelter, kicking up dust and debris in their wake. Before the dust had even settled they were on the move, slipping ahead another painful inch towards an unknown destination. "Jim, Egon is a part of the Swarm," she reminded softly.

"Oh," his lips pressed into a hard line and he focused just a little too intensely on the horizon, "right."

"I am sorry," she pressed in close and privately enjoyed the warmth that radiated from him. Eyeing the large gap between themselves and another dark path.

"Don't be." He considered the area thoughtfully, trashed by the zerg twice over now, and took a quick glance around the corner before ducking his head back. He gave the all clear. "Mira Han has the kind of ship we need, let's go get us one."

A moment of shifting and they were prepared to sprint, bodies tightly coiled springs. Sarah darted out first and Jim a half-step behind, his eyes widening as a new figure was now there in the once empty space.

"Look out!" His heart leaped into his throat and he reached deeper into himself for more speed, more power, and rocketed into Sarah's already sprinting form. Together they crashed down as a deafening clap and blinding, searing light poured through the space they had just occupied.

Together they rolled and separated so quickly it looked like a practiced dance when they landed on their feet. Eyes wide in bright fury, Sarah reached up and touched her head. Pain bloomed and several stalks of half-severed hair sat between her fingers awkwardly. A low growl rose up her throat.

Egon, smiling widely as though there was nothing wrong with this picture, spoke. "Jim! I am so glad I found you," he reached up and adjusted his glasses with a spidery, threatening hand. His eyes were dark pits with a smouldering red gleam.

"Egon!" Jim bared his teeth, could he get a spike off his leg and throw it before the kid could take another shot? He was not sure. "Get a grip son!" He was surprised when Sarah gently touched his
"Oh, I have a grip." As his fingertips brushed off from the adjusted glasses, his hands snapped together in a motion Jim was sure the normal human eye would never be able to track.

No one present was human.

Jim and Sarah jumped away from one another as the searing hot attack carved through the air they had just occupied. Egon seemed surprised, watching as the two kicked off from the ground and launched at him from two different directions in slow motion. He could pick one, only one.

Sarah dropped to the ground heavily as the second thunderous attack came, the heat of it leaving her flesh smoking and burning. Amon wanted her dead the most.

Jim collided with the comparatively willowy form of Egon and threw him to the ground, grappling his hands and getting him wrapped up in a rough hold before sucking in a breath and snarling, "Amon, you slimy parasite! Let him go!"

Head tilting back painfully, Egon looked Jim in the eye and grinned hugely, a wide and toothy expression that never touched his face before. "Never."

Jim's eyes widened as Sarah charged, blades over her shoulders and crashing down with deadly intent. "No!" in a snap gesture he spun Egon and shielded him with his own body. There was no indication Sarah stopped her charge but for the small spray of soil and no pain following it. With a small sigh of relief, he turned just enough to show the vengeful Queen the cuffs now securely back around Egon's deadly hands.

Baring her teeth but straightening stiffly, Sarah shook her head with a clatter. "Jim, we can't just carry him around! He is a beacon to Amon's forces."

Standing, jerking the unwilling Egon up to his feet with him, Jim shook his head sharply in turn. "I am not giving him up! Not for no one!" Not even for her.

Suppressing a hiss of frustration, Sarah charged after Jim as he began a new quick pace. It was clear he intended to see this through, even with an extra handicap now hanging over his shoulder and grinning sinisterly back at her. "You don't have a," an unfamiliar flicker of movement in the starry sky caught her eye, "did you see that?"

Arching his back and trying to look at Jim, Egon twisted and writhed despite the danger of the spines all around him. "Your suffering will be eternal, just like your friends," his words were acid.

Firmly ignoring the devil on his shoulder, he cinched his arm tighter around the wriggling legs in response and looked upwards, eyes widening at the familiar shape as he caught sight of it. Barely visible against the dark of space, the ship was more a void of stars than anything. "It's a ship! Sarah, help me get their attention!"

Glancing around, ensuring there were no new enemies approaching, she looked again up at the slowly approaching vessel. She let out a wry huff when realizing what exactly the ship was. "That is a transport, a Hercules I think, hardly a getaway ship." It was a defenseless tin can is what it was, but she kept that criticism to herself.

"It's friendly and that is what matters right now!" His chest was about to burst from excitement. He wasn't one for prayer but if just one thing would go right today, he'd give his thanks.

"Fine," she resigned herself to following along. What else was there to do now but be with the one
she cared about?

Sarah began to wave, wing blades and all, at the figure while Jim fidgeted with the small comm in his ear. A small burst of relief filled him as the crackle of open air signaled someone was listening. Hopefully it was the good guys. "Hey boys, we sure could use a lift down here!" It took a solid minute, the seconds felt like ages while he waved frantically, until the ship began to visibly change course towards them. "It's coming in!" he laughed, patting Egon's legs.

Sarah's arms lowered, full to the brim of wariness. She trusted her instincts her whole life, and they were screaming at her right now. "They never answered, it could be a trap Jim."

He had to believe this was a lucky break, he was well past due for one. Still, Sarah's wariness began to rub off on him and an uneasy feeling seeded itself inside his guts. "Could be," he admitted, "but we are awful low on options right now darlin'."

As the hercules-class dropship approached, it's many massive engines drowning out all sound and sending dust spiraling away in plumes, Jim could hear Egon chuckling softly, feel his chest shaking with each small exhale. "Heh heh heh."

Looking around, he noted a distinct lack of amon forces. Where did they go, and why were they not rapidly closing in on this? He tried to keep positive, looking over the ship as it came to land heavily on its extended legs. "This thing is brand new! Zerg haven't even touched it yet," he shouted.

The engines entered a low-powered state, quieting down enough for loud talking. "Just be ready to run cowboy," Sarah called, wing blades raised high and ready.

The last thing they expected was for a terrorized child to come springing over the ramp before it had lowered half way, screaming shrilly without even registering the forms in front of him. "H-h-help!"

Startled, Egon fell from Jim's shoulders to land with a thud as he jumped and reflexively caught the flailing bony boy with his outstretched hands. He even worried for a flicker of a moment that he might catch flesh with his nails. "Whoa!"

Hands catching hold of unnatural things, Tate's eyes focused long enough to see the sickly colored skin and black eyes of Jim. Sucking in a panicked lungful of air, he switched gears and tried to disentangle himself from the new menace. "Ahh!"

Looking past the now much harder to hold boy in his hands, Jim's eyes widened when a familiar shape came stomping down the ramp. "Warfield! Ah hell!" The General did not look himself, grinning as he was.

Sarah recovered faster, leaping at Warfield with wing blades extended. A sickly squelching sound filled the air as a pasty orange substance erupted from Warfield's flesh, splattering in her eyes. "Eugh!" Blinded, she faltered in the air and was effectively swatted away by the thick arm of Warfield.

"Hahah!" Warfield laughed, a cruel and dark thing, resuming his stride towards the otherwise occupied Jim. "Shame she didn't remember the kind of monster she made me."

"Sarah!" Jim shouted, dropping the child who quickly scrambled to dart away. Brandishing his claws at Warfield, he caught himself hesitating.

"Just get him Jim!" Sarah snarled, rubbing at the paste in her eyes furiously, wing blades slashing around her body defensively and recklessly, "Kill him!"
Shaking his head, Jim leaned back from a full-bodied killing swipe, the force of it ruffled his torn clothing. "I can't!"

Barely able to see and body fighting off the hallucinogenic effect of the paste in her eyes, Sarah squinted at the fight and felt her heart constrict in her chest. "DO IT!" She bellowed in impotent rage, he had to save himself.

Jim cried out when he blocked a heavy hit with his arms and a smothering cloud of yellowy spores erupted in his face. Unable to see or defend himself, he was quickly and expertly disabled by the General.

"Subjects acquired," Stetmann said in a deep, echoing voice, struggling to his feet with his hands behind his back.

Jim renewed his struggle only to find his hands pinned in place behind his back by the same restraints he used on Stetmann. The young scientist was free. "Warfield, Stettman, snap out of it damn it," he blinked his watering eyes furiously, unable to remove the orange blur over his surroundings.

"What should we do with our new friends?" Warfield asked casually, Kerrigan was already being herded by Stetmann. She could not hope to avoid a shot from the younger man in this position, no matter how non threatening he looked.

Egon paused. "Amon has plans for them. Imprison them," smiling, he followed Jim, Warfield and Kerrigan up the ramp into the ship. He loved it when everything came together.

---

Coiled deep inside his *Leviathan*, Abathur reached out to his new leader. *Swarm is yours to command, Amon.*

A burning rage, painfully intense and further amplified through the swarm, greeted the Evolution Master. The essence of the universe was there for the Swarm to take in his name now, that was a promise. *Meet with my terran forces and move on the remaining rebels. They will drown in a sea of fangs and claws.*

Peering into a vibrantly glowing green pool, Abathur brought his clawed fingertips together thoughtfully. *As Amon commands.*

Inside her stronghold, Mira Han nodded with a grin towards the unseen voice. "I've been waiting for this." With a word over comms, the assault began.

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**Nightmare**

Groggy, a deep pain brought Tychus back to the waking world. "Hrng," he grunted, squinting and glancing around from the ground. "This don't look good." The pain wasn't helping, but he swore he was looking at red dusty earth, none of which belonged on Skyshield. Stiff beyond his years, he crawled to his feet and slowly stood, rocking unsteadily as the pain throbbed harder. "Where in the hell am I?"

"You killed me," a soft voice said, eliciting a jump from him. "He showed me."

It felt like his brain was about to flop out of his ear by the force he spun around. Eyes wide, he looked down on a familiar figure. "Jayce? Sugar, listen-"
She looked wrong. Right, but wrong. She was human and whole, but her eyes were dark and her smaller figure radiated malice. Clouds of rusty red dust kicked up around her in miniature tornadoes. "You didn't even bat an eye."

He could feel that hate, it set his nerves on fire. He let out a pained groan and tried to stave it off, this was a dream, it wasn't real. The wide expanse of red ground and stormy sky in every direction wasn't real. "I thought.." he tried to reach out to touch her. His hands were human again too, tattooed and all.

Baring her teeth in a display of anger, she cut a line through the air with her hand like a knife and he fell to the dust in response. Mar Sara. This was Mar Sara. "I don't care what you thought, Findlay! He has given me the gift of revenge, and I will not spoil it."

His eyes watered and his hand felt like it was being burned the closer to reaching her feet it got. A vice was pressing his body down into the dirt, a weight even he couldn't hope to carry. "I know I deserve it, damn it I do!" he wheezed, "But we can't let Amon go and win, that's what this is all about!"

A boot cruelly stomped on his foot, grinding it into the red dust of his dead home world. "Amon is my god now, and my god is not merciful!"

Clenching his teeth, he fought for some control, to exert his will like he had learned with the swarm. He'd crush her like a bug and be done with this before dinner. "No!" Remorse made his chest tighten and will fail, "I won't..." He blinked, eyes agitated by the red dust, just like he remembered they always were. "I can't. You gotta get us outta here Jayce." He looked up to her then, pleading.

She smiled down at him, stomping the plea as thoroughly as she stomped his hand. "You'll never have power again. That's your greatest fear isn't it? Being powerless. Welcome to hell, Findlay, I'm going to find every last one of your fears here."

Hot wind buffeted his face and the pain truly began.

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Bucephalus

Emperor's Quarters

Pouring over the new data presented by his subordinates, Valerian wondered at Tosh and Lasarra. "They have combined terran and protoss psi to create a stronger shield. Incredible! How fortunate we are that Lasarra chose to stay with us, I would hate to think where we would be right now if-"

The door to his chambers opened with an ominous silence, clicking neatly into place as a young woman walked in. "Emperor Valerian, I am so glad I found you," her tone oddly blank.

Why was he not notified of a visitor? Even without guards his door should not just open like that. He stood cautiously and scrutinized the small woman further, there were some familiar features he recognized. "You are from the news...Kate Lockwell, I remember. What is going on?" His hand pulled away from the sword at his hip, if only marginally.

The shine of the light on her glasses cleared, revealing black eyes. "I came to deliver a message."

"No..." his hand returned to his sword quickly, heart leaping into his throat.

Kate Lockwell cackled, voice high and wild, "You can never escape from Amon, princeling!" she hurled herself at him then, a wild animal.
"NO!" he bellowed.

Serenely walking down a dark hallway, Lasarra paused as the lights flickered. *Something is amiss. Do you feel the same, Gabriel?* The terran was always present now, a deep connection she found both exotic and oddly comforting in its familiarity. He was gone.

*Connecting so deeply with a terran. Disgusting.*

The familiar voice, twisted and darkened with hatred, came from behind. She spun to face it then, the specter of her brother stood there towering, maimed like she had seen him before. *Arut! No...Amon.* She stepped back from the gruesome phantom. *Begone, you have no sway here and we will see you destroyed for all the atrocities you have committed!*

It came as a surprise when the phantom physically wrapped his hand around her delicate throat, staring into her wide horrified eyes. *I think you don't understand what is truly happening here. Take a better look.*

It was as though a veil fell away, the shield herself and the terran were powering was never real. She felt then the chaos of all the minds being consumed by Amon, and an agent of dark intent approaching Tosh. *No...No!* She struggled against the grip, trying to reach out like she had done before, to find the strong hand and end the nightmare. *Gabriel!* She couldn't reach, Amon's smothering presence deadening her senses.

*We have so much to discuss, sister.* Arut whispered, smiling with his dead eyes.

---

**Cantina**

Tosh placed his drink down and frowned. As the doors hissed open he spoke aloud, "There be a bad taste in my mouth."

If he didn't know what he was looking for, he would not have heard the two swishes of long legs walking in. "Maybe you should stop drinking that swill and *sucumb to my will.*"

Turning on his chair and sliding to his feet, he observed then the void of her mind, much more obvious than the presence of the no longer powerful ghost. "Amon? Girl, you better snap outta this."

Haughty and grinning, Nova pulled the long knife from her belt and assumed a combat position. "I quite like my master, I missed him."

Mirroring her pose, the two began to circle one another around the center table, beneath the quiet TVs. "De spirits don't speak to me anymore, but I knew dis day would come," he murmured, reaching outwards with his senses now to see what else was amiss.

"Did you know how badly I would crush you?" she taunted.

He reached for Lasarra and her soothing power, hoping to end the confrontation in a nonviolent manner. His own power never was good for anything but hurting. "That has yet to be seen," he said. It came as an alarming surprise when there was nothing to reach for.

Together, they lunged forwards and on to the table, knives flashing once and sending sparks flying. Falling away, they resumed pacing at a more aggressive rate. "Give in," she hissed.

"Never," he glared, not liking the idea of holding Nova's cold dead body in his hands. This fight
would be over the moment he unleashed his power, Nova Terra was not one to be disabled like an amateur, psi or no psi. She wouldn't leave him a choice. Where are you Lasarra?

---

**Skyshield Platform - Hercules**

Stukov listened as several forms jostled by with muttered words of contempt and a familiar unnatural clattering. Leaning away from the sealed door, he considered the turn of events. Kerrigan yet remained, and so did hope.

From behind, a dark voice spoke in a crisp tone. "Alexei Stukov, you were a fun experiment." When Alexei whirled to face him, Narud stood with his hand stuck out, ready to be clasped in return. "It is time to come back home."

"Narud?" Stukov questioned, tilting his head as the twisted limbs connected to his shoulders trembled with poorly concealed rage at the sight of his former captor. "No, Amon, but I will enjoy killing your phantom all the same," his eyes brightened and he gave Narud a ruined smile.

The old man, hair snowy white and too damn perfect, seemed to ripple and warp, his voice twisting and echoing. "I think you misunderstand who is in control here, flea."

"Strike me down then, phantom. Show me you are really here and I will gladly rip you limb from limb," Alexei raised his twisted limb palm out, it would feel good to use this twisted power against Narud. Of all the demons in the universe that deserved it, he was surely at the top of the list.

Snowy white hair melted away, the guise Narud held for so long ripped off like a mask. Dark fleshed and terrible, his presence filled the room and made the ship shake as he roared, "Obey!"

Letting out a sniff of contempt, Alexei shook his head. "Hah, didn't think so. Go find someone else to puppet, worthless "god." Like a snuffed flame, Narud vanished. The room felt wide open, deafening in it's emptiness, but he was right; the creature was not there. "Good riddance," he muttered, there was business to be taken care of.

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**Mothership**

Warnings chimed across screens and panels all over the ship, arrival to Korhal was imminent. Vorazun stood resolute, stave in hand. *We don't know what shape the terrans are in, be ready for anything!*

Zurthan's eyes widened when the starry blur on display cleared and their warp ended. A massive swarm of zerg, the biggest he'd ever seen, filled the space around Korhal. *By the gods! Nerazim, combat stations!*

As Zurthan ran to guide the troops assigned to him, Vorazun stared in quiet contemplation before gently reaching out to those in panic around her. *It is too late then, Amon has control of the zerg, terrans and protoss. I have truly failed us in the darkest hour.*

From a nearby battlestation she heard the frantic call of one of her crew. *The zerg are approaching our front and the golden armada is warping in behind us! Matriarch, command us!*

Tilting her head back, Vorazun closed her eyes and thought. Thought about the horrific tides of zerg and hybrid flooding across Shakuras and slaughtering her people, thought about her home world shattering into countless burning pieces; Raszagal, enslaved and murdered. When her eyes opened, both ends of her stave flared to life with an angry green psi energy and she lifted it on high. *Fight*
until the end! Let the echoes of this battle resonate through the cosmos for eternity!

The ship had already begun to shake under the renewed assault of the enslaved khalai, and the zerg were turning like an ugly beast towards them now too. She hoped to be bathed in their blood by the time the end came.

Warp space

Stars whizzed by, endless blurry lines in the warp. They would arrive soon, Zeratul reached out to the mind of his second. I have questions that need answering.

Vornuum answered promptly, giving a strong sense of eternal patience. I have the answers you seek. Ask.

Peering at a raised image of the terran home world of Korhal, Zeratul pondered. It was troubling there was no new information to go off of. We arrive in mere minutes. How are we to strike? I do not know what my army is capable of, only what little I have seen between my travels, Ulnar and here.

As weapons of the gods, we wield the power of creation. You have seen what we do. It is paramount that we cleanse the corruption from those under the fallen ones sway. Vornuum said.

Weathered features crinkling in concern, Zeratul caressed the planet with a fingertip, setting it to slowly spinning. I have witnessed the phoenix creatures consume zerg, protoss and terran alike. Will they be destroyed?

No. They will become the fuel to give new life to this universe, life is never truly destroyed unless touched by the fallen one. He broke the cycle, we must fix it.

Where was the capital of the formerly ruined planet? Ah, there. The clawed tip of his finger pinned the spot where Augustgrad lay amidst the wastes. What was inside that city now? I am not sure I like the sound of this.

You know us to be good, prophet. We follow you but will do as we must, what we were created to do.

Eyes narrowing, he swiped away the image and stood, sensing the end of the trip and wishing an end to the conversation. I understand. The battle will be upon us shortly, make ready.

We shall strike with the fury of our makers. Vornuum faded from his mind.

The sheer violence that erupted through the view port forced him to take a step back. Protoss and zerg descending upon the mothership! What was before a desperate battle would simply be a slaughter within the next few minutes. By the gods! I pray the strength of this army is enough to stop this madness.

Hercules

A soft gait, punctuated by a slightly heavy left step, made Sarah raise her head in surprise. There was no light within the cell- truly just a drop pod sealed from the outside. "Stukov?" she murmured.

With a click and a few complaining beeps, the door to the drop pod slid open and revealed the infested man. "Here to help. Fear not, Amon holds no sway over me."
"Where are the others?" she said, quickly stepping out as he stepped back to make way.

A muffled call from nearby signaled Jim, "Right here."

"Here," said the now familiar child who peeked out from behind Stukov at her, fearful of one and not the other.

"The vessel is being taken to the Bucephalus," Stukov said as he inputted the code to set Jim free.

Baring her teeth and looking away from the child, Sarah scrutinized Stukov from behind. Nothing seemed amiss, other than the fact he was not under control of the dark one. "Amon wanted to make a demonstration."

"It would seem so," curling one fist behind his back, Alexei turned away from Jim and began to stride towards the front of the ship. The drop pod floor was simply a long line, not much room to maneuver even without CMC suits.

"Probably to watch everyone else die, knowing how cheery this guy is," Jim muttered, eyeing the way the kid just about clung to Alexei. There were some choice questions about this arrangement, but they would have to wait.

Voice hoarse, Tate tried his best to sound clear. "Are we going to die?"

Sarah shook her head with a clatter. "No. You should go back in a cell, it's safer."

"No!" Tate stepped around to the front of Stukov, out of sight and out of reach.

"The boy has some uses," Stukov shrugged, accepting. "Let's go get this ship back."

"Jim," Sarah said gravely, looking over her shoulder at him.

Lips tightening into a hard line for a moment, he knew what she was going to say. He messed up. "I know," it wouldn't happen again.

Voice softening a touch, she turned away and resumed following their guide. "Just be ready for what you will need to do."

"I will," one more jot on a long list of hell to pay.

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**Void Seeker**

Hanging in space, the army of the gods spread out like a shining spiderweb. *We have identified strategic opportunities.*

When his second made contact, Zeratul's head snapped up from the combat grid he was feverishly absorbing. *Show me.*

The grid shifted of it's own accord, guided by an unseen hand. The gently spinning flower that was the mothership, now under heavy attack, floated in front of him. *Fleeing protoss mothership.* It was an obvious choice, but he waited for the other. It was a surprise to see a large transport ship of terran origin to appear next. *Terran vessel with zerg matter inside.*

Without hesitation, he said. *Both. I trust we have the resources to do two things at once.*

It did not seem as though Vornuum objected. *As you command.*
The protoss refugees first, they are in danger and I wish to see them to safety. Zeratul pointed at the deadly flower, a thrill of excitement running through him at the thought of something new an exciting being revealed to him.

From the shining spiderweb erupted thousands of rays of light, cutting through space and landing on the mothership like massive spotlights. The light was so intense the Void Seekers sensors lost sight of it.

The minds of the protoss, he could feel them rapidly approaching! With a renewed energy, he thrust a commanding finger at the second image of the smaller terran ship. Now the vessel. He paused as another set of lights rendered the ships detection equipment inert. I sense something familiar here.

Methodically the spiderweb shape shifted, thousands of links breaking apart and reforming like a sphere around its now trapped targets. Just like that, a perimeter was established. Amon's khalai and zerg were buffeted away, scattered but quickly reforming.

Vornuum returned, the touch of his mind seeming troubled. We cannot purge Amon from the khala as it is.

Why not? Zeratul wondered out loud to his second. You destroyed the hybrid on Ulnar.

Returning to his sense of endless patience, the concern smoothed away like a tiny wrinkle, the creature spoke. The dark one is a parasite, feasting on the psionic energy of the khala. He now commands the zerg swarm and uses its hive mind to shield himself from us, and the energy of the khala now shields the zerg from us in turn.

Following the minds eye of the creature, he looked at the terran ship they captured. But an individual may be pried from his grasp. I understand. There are a mere handful inside the terran vessel. I feel them.

Inside the Hercules, Stukov paused. "We have stopped moving," his voice held a note of confusion.

Brows furrowing together, Jim reached out and placed a palm flat on cool neosteel, expecting the thrum of machines working hard. "We never landed and we aint falling neither," he moved his hand around, truly confused. "Just stillness."

Sarah did not seem to care, she was crouched and her blades were forwards, ready to lunge. They were at the door to the bridge, and Tate was ready to hit the button to let them in and start the fight. "Doesn't matter right now, get ready."

As soon as Stukov and Jim refocused and gave him the nod to go, Tate whispered "3...2...1!" and hit the button, ducking away quickly.

"Augh!" All three shouted as blinding light hit them like a punch to the face. All sound, all senses and all thought stopped.

As though far away, Jim thought he could hear voices; voices slowly approaching at a painful crawling pace. He hung in a limbo of confusion. No limbs worked, it seemed only his ears did.

James Raynor! I am grateful to see my old friend once more, even in such a state. A large hand, alien in shape, clasped Jim on the shoulder, he felt its warmth through his clothing.

A harder voice spoke, closer and closer now. A zerg without the hive mind. We will use it to fuel our defense.
No! You will do no such thing. The other voice came off as ancient, saying it came from an old man would not do it justice; and unlike the second voice, it was familiar.

*Without the energy provided by the protoss, zerg and terrans, we cannot rid creation of Amon; the dark one will succeed.* Jim did not like the sound of this ultimatum.

There was a pause before the old voice came back, wary now. *So that is how you function. You consume them, a fate no better than what Amon offers.*

No Zeratul, to join with us is to Ascend. You must understand. A note of pleading in the stronger voice then, and even Jim knew this was not something this person did often. Had to be a younger person then, full of piss and vinegar and attitude.

The old voice seemed drained, yet an undercurrent of steel remained. *What choice do I have? Fate be damned, you will not take the lives of these beings under my care. Am I clear?*

*Understood.*

Hanging in the silence of the now ended conversation, Jim focused on moving anything and everything. When his mouth moved, he couldn't keep the hope from his tone. "Am I hearing things? Zeratul? Can you turn the light down?" It had to be Zeratul, he'd met many people and beings in his life and none fit the bill quite like that wiley old protoss.

*Apologies, old friend. Fate has given us a way in which we may defeat the dark one, but there is much to learn and so little time.*

Blinking slow and hard, Jim swayed on his feet when he felt the ground suddenly. His surroundings were still the same, a terran ship with an open door he was about to charge through, but there was still an oppressive light shielding everything else from sight. "Alright, just gonna have to take what you say at face value right now. Where are the others?" Sarah. Where was Sarah?

As he calmly took the time to shake the hand of James Raynor, Zeratul raised the other to stave off further questions. *Do not be alarmed, they are here and safe. We are isolating the infested terrans and attempting to use their connection to the swarm to aid us.*

Behind and to the left came Sarah's voice, a note of surprise in it. "I didn't expect to see you alive, never mind saving me." When Jim turned to look at her he saw light receding from her body as though it was a physical, maybe even liquid thing.

It was impressive how indifferent the old protoss sounded. *You yet have a role to play, how I feel about you has been irrelevant for a long time now; Queen of Blades.*

"Not a Queen anymore," she glared.

*And a little less prideful, that is good.* Jim thought he heard a note of amusement in there, somehow.

Frowning, he looked away from the environment, quickly growing stranger by the minute, and focused on Zeratul. "Enough. How can I help?"

A small light sparked to life violently between Jim and Zeratul, its voice just shy of striking Jim with force. *You cannot. Amon is strong enough that we can only partially separate these terrans from the hive mind. They are of no use.*

Squinting and shielding his eyes, Jim said, "Hey now, glowing person. Let's just talk it over and see if one of us can figure out something that you can't." This was the voice he heard arguing for his
death, he recognized it right away. But it was not a protoss, what was it?

The small sphere of light pulsed, ready to explode outwards with violent force. *We do not answer to you, James Raynor.*

*You answer to me.* Zeratul said, so calm they could have been discussing dinner.

*Yes.* It admitted, shrinking marginally.

*We do as James Raynor says,* the steel was back, *your friends must be contained within cells, but they can speak with us.*

"I have my doubts your protoss friends will listen to us," Kerrigan let out a huff, flicking a clawed fingertip at the strange material surrounding them and finding it non physical, just light... Just some psi tricks, she decided to not think too hard on it.

Zeratul stared at her hard, green eyes bright and glowing. Jim swore his friend looked younger than he ever had, the old weathered body lacking the age it did when he last saw him. *There are no more choices. Hatred must be set aside, no matter how many crimes you have committed as the Queen of Blades, Kerrigan.*

Sarah's eyes narrowed. "So be it."

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**Mothership - Stasis Chambers**

*Our captors arrive.* Vorazun, ragged and spattered with blood, strode into the stasis chambers like a whirlwind, eyes still alight from battle.

Zeratul quickly turned to face the smaller nerazim, it seemed adversity had not softened the daughter of Raszagal's temper. *You are not captive, Vorazun. It saddens me to see the remainders of our race aboard one ship, but I find myself glad to see you alive.*

Her eyes narrowed into glowing green slits. *What are these creatures you have brought, Zeratul? The kind of power it would take to pull a mothership from a battle like that...* A shape, mostly concealed by Zeratul's form, shifting behind him caught her eye.

*I discovered Ulnar.* Already, Zeratul's hands were raising in a placating gesture.

She straightened bolt upright, possibilities and questions and wonders sparking through her mind. *Impossible!*

*You beheld the truth with your own eyes. An army of the gods, come to save us from the dark ones grasp. Despite the good news, Zeratul felt the tension rise steadily, focused around what was concealed behind him.*

*What must we do to ensure their success?* Her head tilted slightly, and her eyes were now focused on what was definitely a spike pointing out from behind Zeratul's arm.

Still as a stone and calm as undisturbed water, Zeratul focused intently on her and drew her eyes back to his with his sheer presence. *Let us operate from your mothership. We have a plan and are already using a few of your containment cells.*

Acutely aware of this tactic, her eyes narrowed marginally, a mean feat. *Cells for what... or whom? Who have you brought with you, Zeratul?*
Silent, Zeratul stepped aside and revealed his guests.

"The matriarch's daughter?" Kerrigan said from her cell as she saw Vorazun, "Awkward."

Vorazun's psi blades lit up immediately, and the matriarch took up a fighting stance. Release this murderer from her cage. Now.

Stay your hand, Vorazun. Zeratul took a half-step forwards, wary of the blade. He was not to be considered a friend either. A large, unfamiliar protoss stepped through the door and took in the situation.

You, the murderer of my mother, bring the destroyer of our race to me and demand I not act? Her voice was deadly quiet.

As quick as hesurveyed the situation, Zurthan stepped forwards and asserted himself. Desperate times, matriarch. We have made the mistake of not heeding Zeratul before.

With a tremor of rage, her psi blades flickered and died. When she spoke next, Vorazun spared no venom. Keep your monstrous pets from my sight and do as you wish. Swirling around and striding towards the door, she almost knocked into Zurthan, who wisely stepped aside. Fix this, Zeratul!

As soon as the door slid shut, Jim let his breath go. "That was rough, she the boss around here?"

"You could say that," Sarah said, frowning. "We should start working, wouldn't want to overstay our welcome."

Your friends are placed in these containment cells, Zeratul gestured to Warfield, Stetmann and Stukov one by one, all frozen and still. They can speak freely when released, and he gestured to the small glowing button to press then, but must remain restrained for their own safety.

"Gettin' real tired of locking up my friends," Jim frowned, walking forwards and pressing the button immediately. It was disquieting to see each frozen in such a way. Each looked surprised and rubbed at their eyes as the stasis receded, no doubt trying to banish the blinding white that Jim had to work away too.

"It is easier when your friends will try to kill you," Sarah said as she watched, standing very still within her own prison.

Tate, mostly forgotten, quickly ran to Warfield's cell and placed his hands on the shielding. "Are you okay?!"

Zeratul watched the scene with a heavy sadness in his hearts. A poor place for a terran child. No doubt there were other children aboard, as many as the Nerazim could carry and then some.

"Not like there's somewhere else for him to be, Zeratul," Jim said.

"My friends," Alexei called, "I am not a fan of cages."

"You'll live," Sarah said curtly. "See any of what happened?"

"No. Only a blinding light and now the swarm...it feels distant," Alexei seemed troubled then. What was going on? He was never a true part of the swarm, he felt it, could pluck from it, but not now.

"Good, I'll fill you in later. But for now, we need your help," Sarah said.

Egon let out a ragged breath, loud enough to interrupt all nearby conversation. "Jim!" he flung up
against the shielding, "I am so sorry, am I ever glad you are in one piece!" He pressed his forehead to the rippling shielding and closed his eyes, thanking every deity he could think of.

"Don't sweat it kid. We need your help again," Jim wanted to give the poor kid a hug, but he just crossed his arms instead. Now was not the time.

Wary, Stukov said, "It seems we have all day."

Zeratul stepped beside Jim and addressed the infested, looking over each one. **We must undermine the integrity of the swarm hive mind in order to weaken Amon.**

Egon gave a nervous shrug, "That would be a problem. I can't even hear the swarm," he swirled his fingertips beside his temples, "it's this fuzzy mess just out of reach."

"Same for me," Stukov echoed.

"Raynor!" Still rubbing at his eyes, Warfield waved, "Over here!"

"I thought you were dead, then you show up and try and kill me," Jim couldn't help but smile.

"Just like old times," Warfield chuckled, dismissing the strangeness around him. Nothing made sense anymore anyway.

"This is not helping," Sarah said.

Tate spoke, voice timid and well below the others flow of conversation, "The swarm has a leader right?"

Zeratul addressed Jim patiently, **If they are not capable of assisting us, perhaps I can have them severed from the swarm similar to how you and Kerrigan have been.**

"Oh please do!" Palpable relief all but radiated from Egon.

"Guys?" Tate fidgeted with his ratty shirt, voice going quieter by the second.

Warfield happened to look down at the boy and realize he was talking. "Tate? Glad you're okay son. What are you asking?"

As the others quieted to listen, Tate spoke, "Who is the new leader of the swarm? She was," he pointed at Kerrigan then, "right?"

"I was," Sarah said, eyes narrowing.

Jim started catching on, "Then Tychus was."

Egon blurted, letting out a woop, "Abathur!"

Kerrigan hissed, "Abathur," her fists clenched at the reminder of the deceitful worm.

Tate nodded, "What if you went after him? The swarm breaks without the leader, right? That's what they need to win?"

Jim rubbed his chin and nodded, validating the idea. "Good idea kid," he said.

Warfield smiled. "Good job son."
"Thanks," Tate looked at the floor, sheepish.

Zurthan's chuckle reverberated through their heads. *Assassinate the new leader of the swarm, inside the swarm itself? Have you looked outside lately?*

"Didn't say it would be easy, pal," Jim said, giving his chin another rub as a new chain of thought began.

*I fear this may be our only choice,* Zeratul said gravely.

Egon's eyes were already closed, thinking, exploring his thoughts when they were not his. After a minute of silence, it clicked, "I know where he is," he said.

Warfield nodded, he too had been hard at work. "I can feel him too, nasty critter."

"Yes, we can guide you to the new leader of the zerg swarm," Stukov tipped his hat and gave a ruined toothy smile.

"I'll do it," Kerrigan said immediately, wing blades stretching just enough to touch the shielding and force it to ripple.

"Like hell you will," Jim said.

Sarah raised her hands and gestured to those around them, "Who else but me then? Who knows the swarm better than its Queen, Jim?"

The door opened and Vorazun stormed back in. *I will go. The dark templar are well versed in killing zerg, permanently.* The matriarch had clearly been keeping tabs while not present.

Sarah glared from her prison, "I don't trust you."

Vorazun pointed with the tip of her stave, *I don't trust you either.* Tension hung between the two warriors, ready to be snapped by a simple violent action.

"Easy ladies," Jim held his hands up and pointedly stepped between Sarah and Vorazun.

Zeratul looked down from the stars and upon the scene before him thoughtfully, *Calm yourselves,* he said, *As much as it may seem like a poor plan, I believe the two of you should work together. James Raynor and I must remain behind to lead and relay information to you, that much is certain.*

Vorazun snapped, *Fine, but you,* she gestured sharply to the large form of Zurthan then, *are in charge of this ship and its peoples while I am away.*

"So long as you're watching my back, Jim," Sarah said, seemingly accepting of the situation.

Jim knew better, saw the coiled tension beneath the weaponized form of Sarah, "Always." His insides churned with worry.

Zeratul tilted his head, signalling the decision was made. *Make your preparations, but hurry. I do not know how long we can withstand a concerted assault; I must seek council and strategize accordingly before you depart.*

Jim watched as Vorazun physically cut off Zeratul in releasing Sarah from her containment cell. Now that was a tense moment, when the two stared at one another as the shielding fell, and then Sarah stepped serenely off the raised platform and came to Jim's side. He felt proud. "Zeratul, I'll need to get some gear off that rig you took us from. Gotta keep in touch with Sarah somehow," he
said.

Vorazun's steady gaze fixed to Jim, and he got the feeling he was being read like a book. *I will assign a crewman to assist you in recovering items from your ship.* It seemed the matriarch was not completely opposed to what she read.

"Thanks," he said simply, grasping Sarah's hand in his. It was a relief to feel her give a comforting squeeze in return. It seemed strange that he was the one that needed it, given she was in the heart of the enemy; he supposed he was too, now.

Egon called from his cell, "You wont need a cloak, Kerrigan?"

With a clatter, she gave her head a shake. "No. My new friend will help me with that," she smirked.

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*Bridge*

As the preparations begun and everyone filed off to their own assignments, Zurthan was left with Zeratul on the bridge. *Putting two mortal enemies together on a mission that is not likely to succeed already is not a wise choice, old prophet,* the warrior said.

Zeratul's eyes crinkled in mirth. *I trust neither. I trust that they both understand the circumstances of their mission, and will do it for those they care about. There is wisdom in that.*

It seemed that Zurthan accepted his words, because he took up his position beside him and began to bring up relevant information of troops and ships available on the console. *Tell me of these creatures, I would assist in our defenses. We have few warriors left, but they crave to put their blades to the enemy who has brought us so low.*

A spark of delight, something he had not felt in an age, lit up inside Zeratul then. He was born to discover and share information, this was his calling. *I shall, and there is much to tell.*
"I don't like this Sarah," Jim said for possibly the hundredth time.

Balancing an earbud on the pad of her finger, Sarah carefully placed the small electronic device in her ear. It felt snug and right, just like it always used to. "Jim, you are not going in my place. Do me a favor and just be supportive," she said.

Morose, Jim pulled her into a short but fierce hug. "Don't let that protoss get you killed," he murmured.

You will find me to be honorable, James Raynor. There was a sour note in Vorazun's mental voice when she approached, it seemed the matriarch was already prepared to leave.

Letting out a sigh as Sarah chuckled, he let her go with a pat on the shoulder. Vorazun was a protoss he'd never met before, honorable or not, he did not trust the unknown. He made sure to think that as loudly as possible, though there was no forthcoming response from the regal nerazim matriarch. "Stay safe you two," he said.

One ahead of the other, the wary companions walked up the extended ramp of the Void Seeker, pointedly separate. "Always," Sarah said.

Jim glanced at Zeratul as he strode by, exchanging a nod with him. Now there was a protoss he both knew and trusted. Twisting knobs and pressing buttons on his comm device, he fervently hoped that Zeratul knew what he was doing with this gamble. "Test," he muttered, relieved to hear Sarah's voice crisp and clear in her confirmation.

Have faith, James Raynor. Victory is closer at hand than it has ever been. Zeratul's eyes smiled at the lone infested terran man as the Void Seeker sealed itself, returning to its needle-like shape.

Inside the Void Seeker, the three faced one another. Sarah noted the protoss just slightly closer to one another as opposed to an even spread.

Put your mind at ease, Queen of Blades, Vorazun said coolly. Treachery is your trait, not ours.

"My concern is your cooperation during the mission, nothing more," Sarah said, listening to Jim whisper I love you in her earbud.

You will have it. Vorazun turned and strode towards the cockpit of the ship.

Zeratul gestured with an open hand to follow. Vorazun is a more than capable warrior of the dark templar, you will find her to be a valuable asset, Kerrigan.

It gave her a wrinkle of discontent to put the protoss at her back, but she reasoned it would happen during the mission anyways. Sarah briskly made her way after Vorazun and found her seat. "The sooner we get on to the Leviathan and kill Abathur, the faster we can end Amon," she said, "I trust you remember how to get on my ship, Zeratul."

With a gentle push, the Void Seeker surged upwards and passed beyond the Mothership's docking bay.
Sarah let out a breath, eyes widening. Instead of space with its twinkling stars, or even the swarm and its locust-like masses, there was a glowing web that expanded beyond sight in all directions. "What are they?" she said.

*Xel'naga creations, the phoenix creatures,* Zeratul supplied patiently as they flew towards the web rapidly.

She could see now, the energy creatures that devoured protoss, zerg and terrans alike. "They are on our side then? How did you communicate with them?"

Vorazun wanted to know the answers to these questions as badly as the Queen of Blades did and kept quiet. She watched intently then as the massive creatures parted for the *Void Seeker*, revealing the nightmare behind them.

*After I left you on Zerus,* he paused briefly, a reminder of her treachery there too, *My travels took me to the Alterian Rift and within it, Ulnar.*

"A creator world," Sarah murmured, observing the mass of the swarm and looking for the right *leviathan*. They were each unique individuals, different sounds, markings, shapes. They belonged to her.

*Yes. Amon was already there, capturing the phoenix creatures and using their vast energy to twist and corrupt the creator world.* They were hanging there in space, waiting for her to find it. Swarms of mutalisks were throwing themselves towards the defenses of the web, disappearing in bright flashes one by one. The swarm would find a way in, in time. *Who knows what he would have done with the power of Ulnar and the phoenix creatures combined.*

"Third to the left," a voice whispered in her ear. Jim was in position and being coached by the infested then.

Sarah felt a pang of annoyance. Yes, there it was, the eldest of them. It had many visible cracks and craters in its chitinous carapace, battle hardened many times over. "Third to the left," she repeated, though the *Void Seeker* was already moving towards it. They could read her mind then, as easy as she could have read any terran only a few, what, days before? Her lips tightened into an angry line.

*I have no interest in delving through your mind,* Vorazun said tartly.

*Vorazun can communicate with you and read your intent during this mission. Your silence, and success, are key,* Zeratul said as they approached the massive creature.

There was a distinct lack of defenses around the capital ship, Sarah noted. They would be out there on the platform, attacking the perimeter or even on other worlds doing Amon's dirty work, that was where it all went. That was how confident the fallen one was. "I know," she said. This reckless confidence would be his undoing, her lip twitched upwards at the corner.

*Take care as to not be overconfident yourself,* Zeratul cautioned, maneuvering beneath the *Leviathan* and watching for a familiar crack in its massive carapace; a weakness he had exploited once before.

"There," Sarah murmured, a jagged crack in the plating catching her eye.

The *Void Seeker* pulled upwards hard and dipped through the crack, a thread slipping through the needle, guided by Zeratul's steady hands. An ominous scrape nearly deafened them when the shielding of the ship made unexpected contact.

*It is as it was before, be at ease,* Zeratul reassured his passengers.
Inside the *Leviathan* was a nightmarish display of fleshy insides and repurposed organs, all throbbing to the beats of multiple unseen hearts. Zeratul brought the ship in close to a discolored mass that was an approximation of flat. *This is where you depart, warriors,* he said.

Sarah and Vorazun were already standing, checking over their gear one last time before stepping inside circles that lit up on their approach. One recognized them as teleporter pads from innumerable battles with the enemy, the other simply knew.

"Remain near to the *Leviathan* if you can, Zeratul," Sarah said as her body was engulfed in bright blue-green light, "We will have a limited window of time to escape."

*If circumstances allow, I shall. Now go!* Zeratul said as they both disappeared. To Vorazun he whispered, *Trust the fallen Queen's senses in there, Matriarch. There are horrors within the swarm you have never beheld, she is their creator.*

*I will not fail,* Vorazun said, gripping her stave as fleshy ground materialized under her feet, slick with slime.

Kerrigan was already darting towards a pulsing knob of flesh, which opened, to Vorazun's surprise, with a most disgusting slurp sound.

Beckoning the shadows to her, the Matriarch of the Dark Templar faded from sight and gave chase.

Left, right, right, down- Sarah slid to a stop, toes digging into the flesh of the ship. Around the corner was a zergling, just milling about. Killing it would be easy, but to be seen... The Queen of Blades could not be seen by Abathur. When the creature, large as a panther and many times more deadly, turned and began sauntering away, Sarah crept from the corner with wing blades raised to strike.

A familiar sh-shnk sound went off first, a distortion of air and a flash of green and the zergling’s head fell to the ground, neatly severed.

*I suggest you stay out of sight and call targets to me,* Vorazun said authoritatively.

Pulling her wing blades back just a tad faster than normal, Sarah nodded. Knowing the Dark Templar was listening, she thought out loud. *Do keep up if you intend to kill my targets then.*

Not rising to the bait, Vorazun flickered down the hellish hallway, avoiding dripping goo and tumorous bulbs of flesh.

Sarah, knowing what to look for, kept a keen eye on the rippling air. From there, the two fell into a pattern of spotting and killing. *There are more now, Abathur knew someone was here the moment that zergling died.* The density of zerg creatures was certainly rising, but they were not actively hunting, which made her wary.

*I feel as though we are being tested,* Vorazun said as she lobbed off the head of a loitering hydralisk, its partner beside it falling just the same.

*Either he is trying to lure us somewhere, or he is attempting to figure out how many of you there are,* Sarah said. With a mental warning, she cautioned Vorazun away from another downward spiraling tunnel and towards a more level looking one with a fleshy doorway. The Matriarch seemed loathe to go through the doors.

*Then we must quicken our pace before the target is well defended.*

Sarah couldn't help but sniff in contempt. *Abathur is always well defended.*
Again, their path branched off into multiple twisting directions. Up, down, straight, left, right. Sarah paused at the fork and wondered, Abathur dwelled in more than one place, it was time to reach to outside sources. She placed her fingertip to her ear and spoke quietly, "Jim, I need some guidance here."

The pause before he answered felt too long for her liking, and the signal quality far too bad. "Sarah," Jim's voice cracked and buzzed and her heart sank. Everything else he said came out as garbled nonsense.

"Jim, I can't read you," she whispered urgently. Lips pressing into a long, hard line of anger, she lowered her hand and assessed the paths once more.

_Do you not remember?_ Vorazun prodded.

"There are many places that worm could be hiding," she took a slow breath then nodded towards the narrow, downwards descending path. "Best guess," she said. Jim must be having a fit, she thought wryly, it was just their kind of luck.

_The deepest, darkest hole it could hide in_. Fitting. Vorazun noted, shouldering past a hanging bundle of fleshy rods, eyes squinting in disgust. There was not one thing about the zerg that was beautiful, soft or kind.

There were no zerg inside this tunnel, Sarah noted. She couldn't hear them or see any telltale signs of burrowing, nothing. It concerned her more than seeing them in such tight quarters would have.

Just a barely discernible blur ahead, Vorazun felt the wariness and paid little heed, stepping forwards in long strides. _Surely we have gone the wrong way if it is as you think. This creature knows we are here and is tightening its defenses in anticipation of attack_, she rounded a narrow corner that tilted downwards dramatically, _we should simply turn back and-

Springing forwards, Sarah slammed her hands down on the dark templars shoulders and yanked her backwards hard. A flash of bright green in the small tunnel and a searing pain erupted from one of her wing blades, a small piece of it falling to the ground- a warning. Baring her teeth, Sarah muttered, "Fool, I just saved your careless life."

When Vorazun did not move from her rigid attack stance, Sarah knelt down slowly and grasped the piece of her wing blade with an impatient huff. The Matriarch's gaze was fixed on the movement, hawklike and judging.

With a flick, Sarah tossed the severed piece of her own self around the corner and took a quick step backwards. Vorazun's eyes widened at the sound of a gurgling snap and a plume of green liquid filling the spot she had almost occupied. Little bits of green spattered on the walls and some landed on Sarah's armored flesh, they all hissed as the acid bit in.

_It seems I owe you my life_, lowering her blade, Vorazun attempted to digest that fact.

Keep your blades ready, we are going to need more pieces to throw ahead. Sarah's thought came out cold and calculated. _We are on the right path, he is this way, I am certain now._

"What do you mean it stopped working?" Egon couldn't contain his alarm.

Jim placed the palm of his hand to his face and pressed at his eyes, an old gesture of frustration. "Just what I said kid, comm stopped workin’. Shoulda known it wouldn't go that far through a zerg ship."
"This Abathur knows they are there," Warfield and Egon exchanged nods, confirming each others thoughts, "but it hasn't caught anyone. I think we'd know if it did."

Egon swallowed, leaning against the shielding and causing it to ripple and shimmer. "Abathur is a cruel monster Jim, I'm scared for them."

"Don't need you tellin' me to worry more kid," Jim grumbled. "I want to know what this Abathur is doing, where it's going, the need to know info."

Warfield gave his head a shake, "Can't Jim." He grimaced then, "whatever those friends of yours did is blocking most everything, but there's something... wrong. Very, very wrong with the swarm."

"Some kind of seething," Egon wiggled his fingertips upwards, trying to grasp for the words, "evil."

Jim hmphed, "Zerg are evil."

"Not like this," Egon and Warfield spoke at the same time, glancing at one another and looking away quickly.

"Real evil," Egon emphasized, "Amon's evil."

"He's got control of the swarm, I know that," Jim said.

"It isn't just control, he's doing something to it," Warfield said.

Egon cringed, "And it's getting worse."

"Wonderful," Jim looked down at the comm in his hands. How many times had he felt this helpless? To help Sarah? Only once before.

_We're getting close, I can smell the reek of the evolution chamber._ Sarah said, grimacing as the tip of one of her wing blades grew back for the umpteenth time. Abathur knew about them the moment they touched the ship, she wagered.

_What other surprises can we expect from your former subject?_ Vorazun had warmed marginally, perhaps getting to cut pieces off of Sarah helped, or maybe it was how she had saved her life. Either way, only marginally.

Sarah held her hand up to signal a stop, a sickly green glow had come to illuminate the tunnel. _Abathur is the creature in charge of the swarm's evolution, he can create entire new strains and is responsible for nearly all of the zerg creatures you have ever faced._

_So... Vorazun thought, Quite literally be prepared for anything, I suppose._

Sarah nodded, gesturing forwards. With no further signs of the toxic nests that had been every other foot down the tunnel, their way was clear.

Vorazun first noticed the silhouettes stretching across the floor, touching Sarah's shoulder before she could step into sight. She slipped into the chamber by herself to see what the shadows belonged to. Her eyes, bright green orbs, widened at the sight.

A spidery creature but with a bulbous thick body, dangled above a churning green pool of fluid. Massive legs that came to deadly points both suspended it and dipped into the pool, she saw then that the foremost legs seemed to be closer to real arms tipped with hands and daggerlike fingers. Though the legs cast shadows this way and that, she felt something amiss. Wary, she pulled back.
Sarah waited expectantly, poised to move.

*Our prey is there. Never have I seen such a disgusting creature, but I find myself wary. There are no others,* Vorazun relayed what she saw, coupled with mental imagery.

Sarah bared her teeth at the image of Abathur, he'd evolved some it seemed. He would not be the sluggish weakling she knew him to be before. *More nests, no doubt.*

*Perhaps,* Vorazun said, *but we must enter regardless. I would prefer the more open ground to fight.*

Sarah nodded, standing up to her full height then. *Remain hidden and find your way near him.*

Before Vorazun could object, Sarah walked into the room and spread her wings wide. "Abathur," her voice came out loud and commanding, filling the chamber and leaving no mistake who it was.

A burning sensation coursed through her mind as a sinister, familiar, voice insinuated itself within.

*Queen of Blades has returned, no longer Queen.*

There was something haughty about that oily tone of voice that raised Sarah's hackles. "You have gone against my command Abathur," her wing blades trembled in anticipation, the shimmering form of Vorazun was close to the target now, "the penalty is death."

*Death? Essence never dies, swarm always live.* The creature that Abathur had become lowered from it's perch, each tip of its blade-like legs resting on either side of the glowing pond beneath it. *Terrans.*

He clasped his hands, small on his now large form. *Terrans die.*

"We'll see who dies, pathetic slug." Sarah stepped forwards, taunting the enemy.

*Design of Queen of blades, always interesting.* Though he towered there, still as stone and ready to strike, Abathur continued to talk. *With lack of Queen of Blades leadership, experiments commenced.*

Something was wrong. Vorazun was in place, waiting for the creature to move from the pit for a clean strike. The air felt charged, and the rumblings of the *Leviathan's* organs gone quiet. Sarah took another step forwards, testing, searching for the trap. "Hiding behind your nests wont save you now," she said.

Abathur's many small eyes gleamed brightly with malice. *Traps ineffective. Tactic must change...Evolve.*

A small shift near Vorazun and the trap revealed itself, a creature that blended in so well the Dark Templar stood beside it and never noticed. Sucking in a lungful of air, Sarah roared, "Behind you!"

Abathur struck as the abomination did.

The evolution master was fast and far more formidable than his former form allowed for, Sarah changed up her charge and leaned to the side instead, a gigantic spear-like leg thrusting through where her body was. Lashing out with her blades at the offered underbelly, it came as a surprise when her move was anticipated and avoided by stretching upwards beyond reach for a fraction of a second.

Vorazun was exposed, her cloak remained but the creature, a horrendously twisted terran with a sick semblance of Kerrigan, did not seem to care about it.

"Kill me," it begged as it swung multiple heavy limbs at the protoss, "help me!" Each swing came more frenzied than the last.
Vorazun danced backwards, using the length of her staff to deflect the more vicious blows that were making it through her shielding, back towards Kerrigan and the prime target. Her eyes widened when the green nodules filling the chamber began to visibly quiver and shake as the things inside them were stirred by their master.

*Abathur is hatching everything in the chamber!* Vorazun said to Sarah with alarm.

*Experiments proved unsuccessful,* Abathur admitted as he lunged and stabbed and all but chased Sarah across the room. *Queen of Blades psionic power cannot be duplicated.* His voice dropped, twisting into a mocking tone, *No longer detect psionic reading from Queen of Blades.*

Baring her teeth, Sarah saw the opportunity to strike as Abathur spoke- a partially extended leg. Leaping forwards, she swung her blades as fast as she could push her body.

It was a trap, a spew of sticky green fluid erupted from a nodule located on the leg and sent her flying backwards, blind and struggling for freedom.

*No psionic power,* Abathur pressed forwards, keen on further entangling the lively specimen, *A useful subject to base further terran forms on remains.*

Ducking under a three armed thrust, Vorazun ignited her second blade and shoved upwards in a deadly arc, severing all three limbs. As the abomination fell forwards from the sudden lack of weight, her arc continued into a spin and severed the suffering creatures head. Landing on her feet as the creature fell to its knees, acid blood flooding sluggishly from its wounds and searing the fleshy ground, she spun to look at Sarah take in her situation.

Gurgling cries of agony and pleads for death began to fill the chamber as the eggs erupted outwards, spilling their tortured cargo.

Ripping the slimy webbing from her face, Sarah opened her eyes just in time to see a thick leg ram into her shoulder. Letting out a cry of anguish of her own, she continued to pry at the webbing with her one good arm vigorously. "No!" she snarled.

*Amon sends regards.* Abathur all but quivered with glee at the display, the former Queen was no comparison without the psionic might she once had. Pressing forwards until his body was level with her, he began to poke and prod and take measurements.

Where was Vorazun? Sarah bared her teeth and took swipes at the thinner blade-like limbs, catching one and neatly snapping it off. Abathur seemed to suffer no ill effects, pausing for a moment for the limb to regenerate before resuming his work.

"Jim..." she murmured as Abathur began to entangle her legs leisurely with more sticky web-like goo, "I'm sorry." Vorazun must have ran away, a coward for true.

As she closed her eyes, hand falling to her side, a familiar note sounded. Her eyes flew open in surprise, her heart soaring when she saw Abathur's purple guts falling out of his abdomen and entire underside, Vorazun approaching swiftly.

"Thought you let me go," Sarah said, wincing as the protoss removed the leg from her shoulder none too gently.

*Your last words changed my mind,* Vorazun admitted. Allowing Kerrigan to be killed before killing the target was all too tempting, no one would be the wiser. She helped pull Sarah free of the sticky mess as Abathur toppled to the ground, attempting to process the catastrophic damage done to his person.
"Cut off his head, he isn't dead yet," Sarah warned, shouldering away from the protoss and pressing a hand to her shoulder wound. Full of toxins and who-knows-what, the wound was not healing quickly at all. It was very satisfying to hear the deed being done behind her, the wet slap of his head falling to the ground. It was not satisfying, however, to hear the now very close screams of terror and confusion of all the newly hatched infested terrans.

*Run,* Vorazun said simply. The choice she made was still being digested, a poor meal of the mind, but by the sound of the ship itself letting out a bellow that shook its entire being, they had very little time to be free of this place. Together, they ran for all they were worth now.

**Mothership**

"There's something wrong..."

"He's got her Jim!"

"There's so many...They are like us."

Jim listened fervently, stomach twisting tighter and tighter with every broken sentence coming out of his infested friends. They had quickly reverted to barely having control of themselves as the mission progressed, claiming Amon was making their minds burn in agony. Only Egon remained now, banging his fists against the shielding as he spoke, fully not in control of his actions, only his words.

"He's...He's...Wrapping her up, Jim," Egon whispered, eyes wide as if he was right there watching. As his control degraded, his vision increased, it seemed.

Suddenly they stopped, all of them, no longer attacking the shielding but standing there with confused looks on their faces, hands falling to their sides.

"Did we win?" Jim asked, heart rising as his hopes did. He knew how stunning the loss of the leader was, he cast a prayer to whoever would listen that this was what that meant.

"I'm," Warfield stared upwards in wonder, "it's so quiet."

"It seems our friends won the day, Raynor," Stukov supplied rather cheerily. He was unaffected, but also not a part of the viewing like the other infested were.

"They are gonna go nuts in a second," Jim jumped lightly on his feet, unsure where to go but needing to get there fast, "I gotta get word to Zeratul! You hang in there!"

He ran through the door as the screaming began.

_Egon...Egon!_ An unfamiliar voice hissed in his burning brain.

_My Queen lives?_ It questioned, probing his mind for answers and leaving him jolting in pain.

"She's-ah-ah-ahlive!" Egon yelled, grasping at his head and praying it wouldn't explode.

_I cannot feel her, but you have seen her!_ Zagara, a new name to him, exclaimed.

"She killed Abathur..." He whispered as the pain receded, the storm of the swarm calming under this new influence.

_I will do as my queen commanded! Amon shall fall!_ Zagara's cry reverberated through the swarm as she grasped the entirety of it in an iron fist of unwavering might.
Swallowing hard, Egon dared to connect with this Zagara creature once more. *Wait.*

It seemed Zagara did not like to be interrupted, and her attention felt like hot knives. *What do you have to say, terran?*

*We need the swarm to help fight Amon here, don't leave... Kerrigan can explain to you.* He slid to his knees, so tired of fighting.

*I must establish communication with my Queen immediately. You are imprisoned and of no use to me, Zagara* seemed ready to dismiss him once again.

*I am on the protoss ship she is coming back to!* He shouted in his head, thinking about the situation and trying to cram as much relevant information into the hasty broodmother as fast as he could.

After a brief pause, a painful eternity, Zagara responded, *You may stop.*

He heaved a sigh of relief.

*The swarm will remain, these new creatures that guard you are still killing us. Express our temporary friendship to them as soon as you can.*

Egon nodded fervently and began to wave and holler from where he sat, "Hey! Anyone! We need to talk to Jim and Zeratul or someone quick! Please!"

"You are pretty good at negotiating with zerg you know," Warfield, also sitting, said with a chuckle.

"It seems Zagara is asserting control once again, this is good news for us friends," Stukov smiled and echoed the joviality of Warfield.

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Zurthan, Zeratul! *The swarm has been disrupted!* A nearby pilot called from his controls. An enthusiastic cheer rising up from the gathered protoss refugees at the news.

*The swarm is pulling back from our defenses,* Zurthan noted clinically, not yet ready to cheer like the others. With a few short gestures he recalled the few pilots they had left, drawing them inside the safety of the golden web.

*Another entity must be controlling them, not Amon. Could Kerrigan have assumed control again?* Zeratul wondered, pulling back from the console and turning away swiftly. *I will return to the Leviathan and bring back our heroes.*

"Zeratul!" Jim charged in, the guards already ordered to not bar his way, though there was a seething malice towards the twisted terran.

*James Raynor, I trust you have heard the missions has been successful?* Zeratul said.

"Hell yes I did! Yeehaw!" Jim pumped his fist and grinned broadly, full of enthusiasm. "You hear what Egon was sayin' too then?"

*Egon? No, I have not heard.*

"Well then you need to get word to your glowbuddies that the zerg are gonna join with us to fight Amon and to stop blasting them to pieces for now."

Zeratul's eyes crinkled in mirth, *I will relay this message.*
Who is he to give orders to us? Zurthan turned, looking down on the infested terran with poorly concealed hate.

The mirth faded, replaced with the cold of the void, and Zeratul’s voice lowered, *James Raynor is a terran of legend, brought low by the Queen of Blades. You would do well to give him the respect you give, if not me, then your peers.*

Jim, included in the conversation, eyed Zurthan. "We gonna have a problem?" he said.

Slowly, as if it caused him pain, the massive protoss shook his head.

*Then let us move on,* Zeratul said, gesturing for Jim to follow. *I believe it only fitting you join me in recovering Kerrigan and Vorazun.*

"Let's get to it," Jim said.

"We don't have much time before the swarm is taken over again, by Amon or others," Sarah spoke as she ran, Vorazun kept pace and ran beside her now.

Zeratul will deliver us to safety, Vorazun said confidently, *I may not have had faith before, but I do now.*

They were rapidly closing on their initial landing, the thrill of victory thrummed through every fiber of her being and pushed Sarah on harder. "It wasn't his fault you know," she puffed between breaths.

*Who's?* Vorazun's eyes narrowed.

"The Overmind glimpsed Aiur through Zeratul when he killed the cerebrate," the fleshy door was around one more corner, "he could not have known that would happen."

Cold disapproval radiated from the Dark Templar then, *Do not speak of this to me.*

Sarah gave a shrug and ducked through the door, unruffled. Protoss could nurse grudges with the best of them, it came as no surprise. "Here's our ride," she did not break stride, running for the smooth alien ship until a shock of pain made her stagger.

*My Queen,* the painful connection wrenched at Sarah's brain, *we await your command.* It was Zagara, reaching out desperately.

Stumbling forwards, Sarah burst into light and was reformed on the *Void Seeker* where she fell to her knees, holding her head. Zagara...

"Whoa there! What's wrong with her?" Jim knelt beside Sarah and shouted at Vorazun before she was even fully formed. There was a terrible wound on her shoulder, slowly stitching together and bleeding sluggishly, but nothing else he could see.

*I know not what is wrong with your Queen, James Raynor.* Vorazun replied, cold as the void, and walked past to the cockpit.

"Hell with you," he muttered, "Sarah, say something."

"I'm f-fine," her voice came in a whisper, hands still wrapped up in her hair, a fresh bead of blood dripped from her nose.

"Zeratul, get us outta here!" Jim said.
We are away from the Leviathan, Zeratul reassured.

Give the swarm to these invaders? Zagara wondered if she was not understanding the broken and difficult to read thoughts; how could this be her Queens orders?

You have to let go of me Zagara, Kerrigan's voice sounded weak, desperate, You are breaking my mind. These are my orders.

There was a vast psionic entity, not protoss and not zerg, emanating from that golden web. It seemed to sense the intent, shimmering in Zagara's eyes as she viewed it through millions of zerg, welcoming and ready to embrace.

I trust you, my Queen.

The zerg are embracing us, feeding us! Vornuum cried, appearing as a small orb before Zeratul in the Void Seeker, his tone exultant. We need only take up the khalai and banish Amon with the strength of all.

Zeratul allowed his worry for Jim, who was hovering over the collapsed form of Sarah, to pass for now. This is grand news, how must we proceed to free the khalai people from the grasp of the Dark One? he said. Already he was guiding the Void Seeker to a smooth landing in the Mothership, greeted by many of the severed khalai and nerazim refugees, their cheers and genuine happiness were a great empowering bombardment.

Sarah cringed, their voices hurt. Almost as much as it hurt her pride to appear before them with an arm slung over Jim's shoulder for support. Communicating with Zagara had been torture, but the message she gave was clear. It was up to the broodmother now, to obey her Queen and follow the command to its fruition.

"You alright? What was that all about back there?" Jim's voice was quiet, a deep concern expressed in his tone.

Sarah felt a swell of gratefulness that she could recognize such nuances about Jim without being a mind reader, she allowed him to lead her towards his friends and away from the crowd which kept a respectful distance and closed in on the two protoss of the party, neatly cutting them off. "Zagara contacted me," she ignored Jim's disgruntled grunt, "she will give the swarm to the xel'negara army," she said.

"You sure about this?" his face twisted in concern, recalling the brush he had with the one member of that army.

Sarah nodded, letting out a sigh and leaning off him. The shoulder wound was almost closed and the head pain had faded to a dull roar, no longer a dizzying array of spikes being hammered into her brain. "They are...benevolent, I just know it," she said.

"How do you know...?" He cringed at how the question sounded.

Sarah smirked, feeling the sting from his uncertainty and hating it. "I encountered these things before, they were not a part of any terran, zerg or protoss army. They just consumed biomass and moved on, lost to me," she gave a shrug, "I want this to be over Jim. I want to trust that this is the right path, Zagara isn't strong enough to do it herself," she said.

Jim nodded, they were almost at their destination. Hopefully Egon kept his head screwed on. "Well,
I trust you and that's all that matters to me," he said.

Zurthan! Zeratul barked upon returning, the dizzying spiral of golden lines, now tinged with a hazy purple, casting a heavenly glow over the workers on deck and the refugees below. command your Mothership and fighters to move down to the terran platform below.

It is covered in Amon's terran forces and zerg, Zurthan noted, though his obedient fingers began to hesitantly trace out the orders.

Yes, Zeratul said, a golden orb floating by his head and taking its place beside the console. It is time we take back the khala and finish this.

Zurthan could not help but look at the orb, wondering at it and its purpose. What is your plan old one?

I have been told there is a lone protoss aboard the lamed terran ship, Bucephalus. We need this protoss in order to infiltrate the khala, she may have been the one Amon used to corrupt the khala originally, in fact. A frightening thought, how one compromised link could so thoroughly taint an entire race, he kept his thoughts to himself.

Was this protoss a prisoner of the terrans?

No, an ally. Already, the great golden web that surrounded the Mothership began to shift towards the platform, and beyond it so did the buzzing masses of the swarm.

Very strange, but fortunate for us. A sense of awe emanated from the protoss as they watched the web shifting and twisting, We would lose many attempting to extract an in-tact member of the khala directly from the Golden Armada.

At a steady pace, the web slowly pressed into the beleaguered terran platform and created a neat wedge between the pink-shelled forces of Mira Han and the fallen battlecruiser. The front line simply vanished, no match for the consuming power of the xel'naga host.

The terrans are afflicted by Amon's madness, it may be a delicate task to remove our target regardless, Zeratul noted. Already the Mothership's sensors were collecting information about the ship and its inhabitants.

Strange psionic readings, Zurthan's eyes narrowed, not protoss in nature. Visually, it seemed there had been small explosions of psionic energy all over the ship, fading red flares inside a vessel that would otherwise be devoid of higher mental power.

A terran is still fighting! Zeratul relayed, astonished.

Wary, Zurthan watched the stats flying by, We must observe before sending our Dark Templar aboard, I will not risk more of them. The unspoken for a khalai hung heavy between them.

There are other options, Zeratul began the painful process of deliberating and remembered why he was an explorer and scholar, not a leader.
Chapter 44

Bucephalus

The medbay door hissed open, red blinking lights illuminating the open room poorly. Tosh stepped in and fried the circuits of the locking mechanism with a thought, sealing himself inside. "Lasarra?" he said. A lack of answer forthcoming, he ventured in further; it would not be long before the hunter caught back up to the prey, urgency made him step faster than he wanted.

A movement caught his eye, though he could feel no mind connected to it. The true nightmare had been unveiling itself around him as he ran through the ship, away from Nova, his senses were not to be trusted. Clenching his teeth tightly as he approached a desk, a telling stain on the floor gave him enough caution to lean forwards and peer around the corner, the outcome leaving him breathless.

Curled up with her legs to her chest, the medic girl was twitching and gnawing at her hand. Spread across the white flooring and wall beside her were dark stains, no, images depicted in her own blood. He swallowed and stepped away slowly as she slurped and crunched at her hand, using it as a demented artists tool.

No mind left, just a void he dared not reach out to. Could Lasarra be the same? Was this what he was doing, all while dreaming otherwise? He swallowed hard and forced himself to press on- a quick scan of the room Lasarra had made her home revealed nothing. No, this was real. A loud bang on the shorted out door gave him renewed purpose. Amon couldn't reach him for some reason, and he was never going to.

Darting out the opposite door, which slid shut far too loud for his tastes, Tosh grit his teeth and resumed the search. He could not kill Nova, not like this. None of them were themselves, just puppets.

From the speakers radiated a voice, malevolent and searing him with its rage, Give in, they are all waiting for you.

Shrugging it off, he walked through a door and stepped around another fallen form, busy drawing its gruesome pictographs. The smell of blood, coppery and heavy, hit his nose like a hammer. Sorry brother, he thought, dared not say it out loud. Lasarra couldn't be far, every shadow grew darker and even the lights dimmed. Amon did not want this to come to pass, and the thought gave him comfort. I'll find you.

As he approached the next door, he swore there was a telltale hissing behind him. The hunter was close. Teeth on edge, he ran for the next door and nearly tripped when the whole ship shifted, groaning in distaste at its corrupted insides. Nudging himself psionically, he flew to the door and hit the pad to open it. Nothing happened.

I'm coming for you, a familiar voice hissed softly over the comm. or was it in his head? Shaking his head quick, he flung his might into the door and felt relief when it shrieked inwards and open, giving way to the violent psionic power. Ducking through the narrow pass, he fought to keep his heart from soaring when he saw the protoss standing there, because looking backwards showed Nova flying forwards like a demon.

A knifepoint slammed into the gap as he shut it, barely an inch from his face. It quivered, being pulled at ferociously by the monster on the other side. Nova fought like a demon in the bar, he would never forget fighting for his life so hard against someone who no longer had the psi. Still, they were
safe for now.

"Lasarra!" he shouted, noting now that there was a faint blue glow radiating from his protoss friend, illuminating the oppressive dark. She did not move at his call, or his entrance for that matter. Full of wariness, he approached.

Tosh? the familiar soft voice questioned.

"Yeah! It be me!" he walked around to face her and frowned, the protoss looked dazed. Soft eyes squinting and head faintly twitching, was she fighting?

Banging began on the door, which sparked sadly and gave no way.

"You found your way before, you gotta do it again girl!" he reached up and grabbed the tall alien's shoulders then, making to give her a shake when she spasmed suddenly and he found himself thrown back.

Get away beast! You are not my brother! she declared, coming to life with a brilliant blue flare.

"It is Tosh!" Stumbling forwards from the wall he had been slammed into, he held his hand out and prayed. "You gotta free yourself!"

From the hallway called a soft, smug voice. "She is free," Nova walked forwards, a red and black goddess of destruction.

Lasarra did not make a move, so he tried again. Leaping forwards he focused and clapped his hand around the alien protoss one. "Take my hand!" he commanded.

From their combined hands erupted energy, enough to blow his body backwards but he clung as fiercely as he could to her. "Take my hand!" he shouted again over the white noise, it sounded like screaming. Was he screaming?

The light was so intense he closed his eyes, clung so tight his hands burned and hoped beyond hope that Nova was being knocked away too. After a time, he realized there was no more pushing and the bright lights had died down enough that he could tentatively open his eyes and see what happened.

He froze, senses on alert as an entirely new location surrounded him. He found himself peering out of a shimmering wall of force into an alien world, no, an alien vessel, but with friends.

"Raynor?" awed, his voice came out quiet.

"Tosh?" twisted an alien, Raynor still had a distinctly human look of concern on his face when he all but ran over to the cell. "You're awake!" he laughed and for a second they shared a sense of blissful relief.

"I be alive, and I think I owe that to you?" Tosh questioned, looking around at other familiar and unfamiliar faces, not seeing one important one.

Fingers tapping at keys on the console, Jim powered down the shield and clapped hands with Tosh, who took the savage clawed fist in his own without hesitation. "I wanted to pull you outta there earlier, but we had to find Lasarra and you were lookin' for her."

Lasarra. "You got her back too?" he did not care to conceal the concern in his voice, this adventure had gone well and beyond taxing long ago.
Jim's hesitation was noted. "Yes, but they got her in a cell and she isn't coherent," he reached to scratch at his neck before catching himself and lowering his hand. "They said she called for you, we've been waiting for you to come back, maybe you can help."

Tosh stepped off the platform and on to the glassy smooth surface of the Mothership. His eyes wandered, nodding at those whose gaze met his eye, "I be ready."

Looking sharply from the suspended form of Lasarra, Vorazun scanned the newcomer critically, *Who is this terran?*

*Tosh,* he said, watching her eyes widen a degree at the mental response.

*What business does he have with this protoss?* She asked, but already Tosh could feel a presence gently probing his mind without asking. He slammed the door shut, earning another surprised look.

"Look Vorazun," Jim said, noting the shifting expressions between the two and figuring there were some mind games going on, "he knows her and that might be all we need to get Lasarra out of this," he gestured vaguely at the twitching body of Lasarra, "whatever this is."

"She be fighting Amon," Tosh took a step forwards and Vorazun remained still beside her charge. "I can help, I have before," he said.

*How is it you resisted Amon yourself?* Her eyes narrowed with distrust.

"Long story," Tosh shrugged, "but I am hidden from him," he said, tapping his temple.

As Tosh came to stand beside Vorazun and Lasarra, standing against a vertical board that seemed to be monitoring vitals, Zeratul appeared beside Jim.

Jim nearly jumped, the old protoss' silent steps unheard even to his vastly improved hearing, "A little warning please," he mumbled, careful not to disrupt the conversation between Tosh and Vorazun.

*My apologies friend,* they clasped hands quickly in greeting, *What do you know of Lasarra and this terran, Tosh?*

Worry curled in Jim's guts, recalling the situation on the icy planet, it felt like so long ago now.

*I see,* Zeratul said, carefully neutral as he browsed Jim's thoughts on the two.

"It's complicated," Jim said lamely.

*It is,* Zeratul paused, watching as Tosh grasped Lasarra's hand and closed his eyes. *I think it best we do not mention their connection to the khalai, what they did would be considered a gross defilement of the khala.*

Jim nodded. "Not sure of the details of it myself, we left soon after," he said.

Lasarra's eyes closed, falling fully into her nightmare.

*Her condition must be discussed with the others,* Zeratul said as Vorazun approached.

*She's been butchered,* a sharp glance at Jim suggested she knew just who did the butchering, *how can we use her to infiltrate the khala she is no longer a part of?*

Zeratul thoughtfully touched where his fatal wound had been dealt, *It may be possible for her to be
restored. Vornuum would not have pointed her out if there was not a chance.

"This isn't just the fate of the protoss boys, let us pass," an authoritative voice, tinged with annoyance, broke the quiet that fell over the three when a door opened.

Kerrigan and the entire infested terran team gathered behind her, were being blocked by several protoss warriors, the tension between them was written clearly in their tense postures, ready to strike.

"Easy there!" Jim called, glancing at Vorazun for some help.

Let them pass, she gestured them forwards. Why have you come?

"I want to be here to witness this," Kerrigan said as she quickly walked past the warriors.

"We all do," Stukov said, filing in sedately with Stetmann and Warfield.

Jim looked between their gathering and to Tosh and Lasarra, both in some kind of trance. "You might be waiting a while," he said.

My allies will see to your end, Amon. Lasarra said, casting her voice into the void that surrounded her.

Laughter echoed back, burning like acid. When they fail, I will let you watch how I make them all suffer.

Amon cast aside the illusion of Arut, for which she was thankful, but it did not change the situation: she was lost in the darkness and who knew what happened to her allies. His words alluded to them not having fallen yet, which gave her a glimmer of hope.

Tosh crashed through the void like a comet, casting his mind and gaze about, searching for that one spot of comforting light. "Lasarra!" he yelled, words smothered by the dark. It was like a heavy fog, he could feel it cloying at his skin and attempting to seep into his mind.

A faint noise made her tilt her head, unsure of what she heard. Amon was all for mind games, this could certainly be another.

The terran is coming to save you, Amon purred.

Tosh, it had to be! The voice was shouting, it sounded miles away but getting closer rapidly. Tosh! Go back! Turn back! She cast her voice out, desperation mounting. If Amon was pleased, that surely meant nothing good would come of Gabriel arriving.

There! A small shimmer of light, far away but visible and real, he could feel it. I'm coming! He charged, navigating the inky void towards his target. She was waving, long arms swaying like tree limbs in a strong wind, that was a good sign.

Shimmering and radiating a simple warmth, Vornuum descended to Zeratul, observing the two entranced beings quietly, like everyone else in the chamber.

How long might they take? Aware of the Xel'naga creations arrival, Zeratul was quick to question.

It is unknown. Amon has begun to strip away zerg from our control and regain power once more, they must hurry.
Tosh's face had gained a soft smile, a gesture he would not make so lightly were he not in this position, Zeratul noted. *Then we must have faith that our terran companion will succeed. They are most resourceful,* he said.

"Lasarra! It be good to see you conscious," Tosh laughed triumphantly, not hearing any words of warning from the protoss and misreading the body language. He took a step forwards and let out a howl of agony as shadowy tendrils erupted from all around, grasping at him and burning his flesh.

*No!* Lasarra ran forwards and grasped at the physical manifestation of evil, pulling her hands away when touching them lit her body on fire with agony.

**His suffering begins now,** Amon whispered with malevolent glee.

"Why's he frowning?" Jim muttered out loud. Tosh's facial expression morphed into one of pure displeasure, maybe even agony, so fast he barely saw it happen.

*I sense a dark touch upon them both now,* Vorazun said, *Amon may very well have them both in his grip.*

*Amon has struck at them where he is most powerful,* Voruum confirmed. The sphere of light he manifested as floated forwards, filtering through the small crowd and getting near the two entrapped beings.

"Lasarra," Tosh gasped, reaching out and trying to grasp for his friend, all he saw was his skin smoking as a tendril stroked it and held his arm fast.

"Do something!" Jim shouted, steadied by the hand of Sarah on his shoulder.

"Watch," Sarah murmured.

**We must intervene somehow,** James Raynor is right, Zeratul said, following after Voruum.

**To restore dead flesh is within the realm of our ability,** Voruum said, slowly circling the pair. **But to repel Amon and restore this khala to the khala will require sacrifices.** The creature sounded saddened, its voice heavy as light began to filter through the translucent shell of the ship overhead, golden tendrils approaching their leader.

"What's he mean, sacrifice?" Jim did not like the sound of this one bit.

*I do not know,* James Raynor, Zeratul admitted, taking a half step back as these phoenixes began to circle the pair slowly, bathing the chamber with light.

Amon's laughter taunted Lasarra, who narrowed her eyes. Tosh was shrieking, smoking, the scent of burnt flesh thick. He would not die, she understood, this was an eternal damnation. I *defy you!* Again she struck out and grasped at the tendrils, her flesh hissing and smoking just as much as his.

Evacuate the chamber! Vorazun, wary of the choice of wording, commanded.

"We will stay," Sarah said simply, and Jim rooted himself to the spot. Egon and others seemed more wary, but remained as the protoss fled all the same.

"Amazing," Egon whispered, golden streamers dancing in his eyes.

**Do not fear,** Voruum reassured, even as the spinning sped up to a blur, *All will be as it should be,* prophet.
Tendrils lashed out and grasped Lasarra in response to her violent assault, pulling her screaming and kicking up against Tosh.

**You wish to suffer with him? Consider it done,** Amon laughed.

"They-they ain't doin' nothin'!" Jim shouted, when had the air filled with a humming so loud he had to shout? He was not sure but he was getting more eager to leave by the second. He could barely see the shapes of Lasarra, Tosh and Zeratul over all the glowing.

*Come prophet,* Vornuum called serenely, *help us.*

It was true, the two figures did not stir under the touch of all the Xel'naga creations, Amon was holding them at bay.

"Zeratul no!" Jim tried to leap forwards but was held fast by Sarah, who unashamedly dug her claws into his shoulders to keep him still.

*I gave my life for Aiur once,* Zeratul said, slowly reaching outwards to the light, *I am unafraid to do so once more.*

The resulting shock wave of energies knocked everyone present to the floor, for a moment nothing existed but blinding light and ringing in Jim's ears.

"James Raynor," a voice, familiar yet changed enough to be unfamiliar, called.

"Zeratul," Jim said, shaking his head and opening his eyes. The resulting scene struck him silent.

A radiant protoss, whose nerve cords reached the floor and floated over it, stood before him. Tosh, Zeratul, Lasarra, they were nowhere.

"We have given ourselves so that others might live," the voice echoed.

He understood now, they were this one being! "We could've found another way, you didn't have to do this," Jim swallowed at the tightness in his throat, stumbling to his feet. It was only then that he noted something else spectacular. His hands! Whole, fleshy, human hands!

"There was no choice, we promise," the beings chuckle reverberated, then it sobered quickly. "Time is of the essence. Amon's taint is being washed away as we speak, he is undone."

Jim let out a relieved noise, looking up from his hands and listening earnestly.

"There will be many crying out for help in the days to come, there will be those that will help them. Your duty is to Sarah Kerrigan," it paused heavily, "to see that she completes her mission."

"She's damn well done enough," Jim growled, clenching his fists. "The universe ain't gonna be taking from her hide anymore!"

The sound of other bodies stirring began to fill the air, though Jim could not see them, and his combined friends seemed to be fading away rapidly. "Speak with her Jim, we know not even Gods could change your mind, but she will."

"Jim," a familiar voice, full of wonder, called from beside him.

As the vision- was it a vision?- faded from his eyes, Jim quickly turned around and helped Sarah to her feet. Her human feet. He closed his arms around her tightly, burying his face in her hair. It was over, the nightmare was over.
Tentatively, she curled her arms around him in return, her voice soft in his ear, "It is not over."

"Jim! We're-we're..." Egon's voice was excited for all of a moment before he looked over everyone present and saw Stukov.

"All human again," Stukov said, sounding equal parts sarcastic and bewildered himself. The infested terran remained untouched.

"Why-" Jim began.

_He has a purpose_, Sarah spoke into his mind, further sinking his hopes, _Just like me, Jim._

"No, it's over, we're done," Jim's voice fell, emotion clogging his throat.

Vorazun and a group of warriors entered the chamber swiftly as Sarah spoke, "So long as Narud exists, Amon will return again and again to have another swing at his perverted cycle."

"Someone else can find and kill Narud then, not you, not me, not us," Jim said.

"It has to be us," Sarah smiled sadly, giving Jim a pat on the back and letting him go. "You can stay behind if you want, but I already know your answer."

_All the Xel'naga creations are gone and we have already received word from the Golden Armada!_ Vorazun declared, looking over the half clothed terrans in rising confusion. _Where is Zeratul? What has transpired?_

"I'll tell you everythin' I know," Jim said, raising a placating hand, "But first there's a whole lot of people out there that need our help, maybe urgently, and we need some clothes. Lets start with those."

Vorazun's eyes narrowed, unsure what to make of the situation. _We shall see to these things while you tell me what has transpired._

"Well let's get started then," Warfield said, pulling his now too loose clothing tighter to himself.

From the mothership control room, Jim explained what happened as best he could while they took stock of what happened beyond their ship.

When a fresh-looking Valerian Mengsk appeared on a screen, Jim was certain he'd never been so happy to see a Mengsk in his life.

"I believe you may know what has happened," Valerian's eyes widened when he caught sight of Jim, "I would love to be filled in."

From there, communication was established with the terran factions, the protoss and lastly, the zerg. The swarm and golden armada were hanging in space a careful distance apart, like two large bullies ready to be at each others throats at the first sign of aggression.

Fully clothed once more, thanks to a tactful warp prism delivery from the lamed _Bucephalus_, Jim and his companions stood alongside Vorazun, facing three faces on screens: Zagara, Valerian and Jorish, a khalai protoss who stepped up to lead until a new leadership could be chosen within the khala.

"Many of my brood have gone missing," Zagara said.

_There are thousands of voices missing from the khala, but they did not die_, Jorish chimed in, albeit
grudgingly. A strange peace was afoot, and no one dared be the first to break it. Not with everyone in such bad shape.

"They joined the Xel'naga, ascended, whatever you want to call it," Jim shrugged.

"We have been receiving distress calls from everywhere, with no hope of reaching everyone," Already, Emperor Valerian looked stressed.

Without a khalai witness to what truly happened aboard my ship, I am afraid we must take James Raynor's words at face value. Given the circumstances, I find no fault in them. Vorazun said.

We find fault in you harboring the Queen of Blades. Jorish's words cut like a knife, and all eyes rested on Sarah. In her ghost suit, she looked visibly less formidable than her infested form. Perhaps the protoss saw weakness?

I am no longer the Queen of Blades, Sarah said simply.

We wish her to be delivered to us for a trial, Jorish said.

There will be no trial, and you will not start a war after what just happened, Jorish. Not while there is no true leader of the khala, Vorazun cut in fiercely, silencing the khalai whose eyes widened in response.

Sarah, unsure what to make of the defense, kept quiet.

"Here's an idea: Why don't your people help our people and whoever is in charge of talkin' about peace talks that with you in the meantime?" Jim said. It seemed obvious, all this alien firepower just sitting around was a powder keg, and the terrans were in dire straights.

A heavy silence settled over the comms. The first to respond surprised everyone, however. "I will grant you assistance until your mission is complete, my Queen," Zagara said. "But the terrans will not want the assistance of the Zerg, and we could not give any meaningful help besides."

"We will need the swarm's might, I accept your help Zagara," Sarah said quickly, before Jim could open his mouth to intervene.

Bitterness radiated from Jorish before he schooled his emotions and spoke. The Golden Armada acknowledges the plight of the terrans and will grant aid until otherwise noted. We will leave to our home world when our aid is no longer necessary, he said.

I will be accompanying Sarah Kerrigan on her mission and will see it to completion, Vorazun said.

Jorish bristled then, it was too much. How do we know she is not controlling you as she controlled matriarch Raszagal once before?!

You will not speak of my mother, Vorazun said, as cold as the void. The Xel'naga spoke to all of us when they left- you know full well the consequences of not seeing his through.

Be that as it may, Jorish admitted, the khalai will offer no help to the Queen of Blades or the Zerg.

"It is not expected," Zagara said without inflection.

"She's got plenty of help," Jim said.

"There is also a matter of the terrans aboard my ships," Zagara seemed confused, "They were infested, but no more."
Jim's heart soared at the idea of all the infested being freed from the zerg—or was it really Amon in the end? In his wildest dreams he could not imagine it.

"Bring them to the surface of Korhal, Zagara," Sarah commanded and the broodmother bowed.

"It shall be done," Zagara said.

I believe we have said all that need be said right now, Vorazun said, Let us part ways and begin our work.

Lets, Jorish said, it seemed he could hardly close the comm fast enough.

"Summon me when you are ready, my Queen," Zagara said before allowing the comm to fade.

Having sat quiet through the discussion, Valerian looked at his companions with a kind of awe. "You really must tell me what happened later Jim," smiling at the look he received, he said, "over a drink, of course."

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**Korhal Palace - Refugee camp**

"Jimmy?"

"Tychus? Oh hell," Jim could barely respond before the outrageously burly man caught him in a savage hug.

It only lasted a second and ended with a painful clap on the back, but Tychus laughed as boisterously as he ever did and grinned ear to ear. "One hell of a trip brother, remind me to never go on an adventure with you again."

"Only if you remind me to never go on adventures again," Jim let out a laugh, smiling. The zerg delivered all of the uninfested terrans to the ground safely as promised and with the help of the protoss, chaos was neatly transforming into order on the planets surface. Things were looking up, but his joy couldn't help but dim. "Is she...?"

Tychus sobered faster than the drop of a stone, "Alive. Doesn't want much to do with me neither," he raised his hands defensively at the smouldering look Jim gave him, "not that I blame her Jimmy."

"You gonna try and patch it up or?"

"Did them Xel'naga talk to you too?"

Jim shrugged, guarded, "Yeah."

Tychus threw out a paw and caught Jim's shoulder with a heavy pat, "Let's just say, when godlike beings tell you to get your shit together son, you get it together. This sinner's got a lot of repentin' to do," his eyes looked off through the masses of bodies, spotting one in particular. "Whole helluva lot."

"Good," Jim looked in another direction, a certain Ghost catching his eye.

"She is staying to help people here, so I am too. Be seeing you son, take care of yourself out there," Tychus said.

"You too partner, you too." Jim walked towards Sarah. The mission wasn't over, but he sure looked forwards to the day he could walk away like Tychus.
"You ready cowboy?" Sarah asked, though she knew. There was a strain on her features that did not get lost on Jim, it was hard to block so many minds.

"Always ready sweetheart, lets go see if Valerian found us any leads," Jim said.

Together they wound their way through the Korhal Palace, a place Jim never thought he would get to stroll through at such a leisurely pace. He was enjoying this semblance of normalcy for all it was worth.

"You know you don't have to go with me-"

"I know damn well, but you also know I'm coming either way."

"You're right," she smiled.

"The Kirkegaard belt," was the first thing Valerian said to them when they entered his new chambers.

Jim quirked a brow, "What about it?"

"It's where Narud is hiding," Sarah supplied, shrugging at Valerian's guarded look, "Impossible not to see it."

"So how is he hiding in one of the densest, most inhospitable asteroid belts known to man?" Jim wondered out loud.

"If you'll give me a moment," Valerian said tartly, "I will be glad to explain."

"Go ahead," Jim said.

Gesturing to a screen that appeared over his expansive desk, Valerian said, "The Moebius foundation has a top secret facility on one of the asteroids,"

"Why am I not surprised," Jim said.

"It is fortunate that I have an agent who is familiar with this facility, and is very eager to go," Valerian said.

A door began to open at the other end of the room and Jim muttered, "No way."

"Yes Mister Raynor," Nova's sarcasm filled the room, "I am coming with you."

"I don't think so," Sarah said immediately, sizing up the tall blonde ghost with a keen eye.

"Ladies, hang on a sec here," Jim raised his arms placatingly, as did Valerian.

"Nova knows the facility and how to actually get to it without being turned to space dust. I have no other personnel to spare and you know it, I don't see the problem here," Valerian said.

"He's got a point." Jim said.

"Amon and Narud have nearly destroyed everything I dedicated my life to protecting," Nova said, voice firm, "I will be coming with you on this mission."

"We will be traveling on a zerg Leviathan," Sarah said, quirking a brow.
"I trust you'll keep the zerg from slaughtering everyone else that comes with you, you can do the same for me," Nova looked away from Sarah then, saluting Valerian. "Emperor Valerian," she said professionally.

"Be at ease agent, please," Valerian waved off the formality.

"Zagara is ready to take us wherever we need to go, are you prepared?" Sarah said, mouth a fine line of displeasure. She could feel Nova's mind, firmly shielded from intrusion. It seemed the ghost operative regained her own ability as well.

"My people have an assortment of supplies and ammunition available, it is the best we could give you on short notice." Valerian shrugged, "Given the situation I'm amazed they gathered as much as they did."

"Your boys know how to hustle," Jim nodded, "we're ready to get this show on the road."

Reaching into a drawer of his desk, Valerian procured a small comm device and held it out to Sarah, "Zagara has the one that is linked to this, here," he said.

"I have already contacted her," without effort, Sarah drew the small metal device from Valerian's hand psionically and placed it in Jim's. Just in case. "She is on her way," she said.

"I can only wish you the best of luck on your mission Sarah," Valerian said in a formal tone. "I hope that you will choose to return to us when it is over."

"I don't know about you but I plan on retiring after this one," Jim chuckled. He hoped dearly Sarah felt the same.

"Yes, I don't plan on being found after this is over Valerian," Sarah frowned slightly, "and I will not be going back to the Zerg either."

"I am relieved," Valerian said, "If you would agent, please escort them to the cargo and they may discuss with Zagara how best to move it to the Leviathan."

Nova saluted once more, "yes, Emperor Valerian." Resolute, she turned around and lead the way as asked.

It turned out that people still screamed and ran when the zerg came back. Thankfully a brave SCV pilot helped get the cargo out of the palace and into the waiting claws of a drone. Their ride up into the living ship quickly abandoned them after letting them off as well.

Both Sarah and Nova's shoulders sagged with relief when they exited the atmosphere of Korhal, the awakened minds of a good portion of the entire terran race were hard to handle. Jim was in his CMC and Stukov stood beside him. All the rest had decided to stay and help, wishing Jim their best. He could not blame them, not one bit.

"You are hard to follow even on your best day," Sarah said playfully, smiling.

"You got that right," Jim said.

Nova cringed at the minds of the zerg, shying away from them. A ship should not be fleshy, she firmly thought. "So where is our tour guide?" she said.

"I do not know what a tour guide is," a voice hissed. Zagara straightened threateningly when Nova spun and put the broodmother in the sights of her rifle.
"Put your weapon down," Sarah commanded. Strangely, Nova listened. This was not her territory. "We need a place to stay during our travels Zagara," she said.

"Perhaps the briefing chamber?" Zagara offered thoughtfully.

"It will do," Sarah nodded. "Take us there," she said.

"Yes my Queen," the broodmother bowed stiffly and turned, leading the way.

With the drone and its cargo in tow, the group began their tour through the insides of the zerg prime ship.

"This is the last Leviathan in the swarm my Queen," Zagara said quietly, voice echo dampened by the close quarters of the tunnels they were traversing.

"The oldest," Sarah noted. Her own ship, even it was loyal.

Zagara's voice dropped to a displeased hiss, "We were offered to become one with a greater whole, many of the lesser zerg accepted this. Most of your broodmothers chose to remain a part of the swarm, thankfully."

"We will need the strength of their broods to get inside space station Prometheus," Sarah noted, the schematics of the facility were extensive and that place was one of the most fortified she had ever seen. "I am glad they remained loyal to you as well," she said.

"Narud will be destroyed, one way or another," Stukov said, voice dark.

"He's the reason Amon keeps coming back," Sarah said, "Amon made him all but invisible to the other Xel'naga, his fallback plan every time he was destroyed."

"So that's why we're the ones who gotta go kill him?" Jim did not sound convinced.

"Yes. He will scheme and plot as long as it takes, the hybrid will come back and so will Amon as long as Narud lives," Sarah said.

So that was what the Xel'naga told her, Jim thought, receiving a small nod in response. He'd have to get used to being an open book again.

"Tosh gave his life to make sure all of us have ours," Nova said somberly, "I owe him and even if I didn't, I would still be on this mission."

"Home sweet home," Stukov said as the final door peeled back and revealed the eye of the leviathan. They were already in warp, traveling towards their destination.

"Hopefully there will be an in-tact ship to go back home on," Nova said tartly, looking over the surrounding pools and moist flesh with distaste. How could she even sleep?

"Just uhh, put it over there," Jim waved his mechanized arm vaguely at an empty space for the drone.

"Make yourselves at home," Sarah said, "I have things to discuss with Zagara and will return later." Before Jim could even argue she and the broodmother were gone.
"I know that you've gone through a lot, Captain Horner." Matt recalled Valerian saying as he walked through the palace.

"Just Matt, please," he said.

"I am going to ask you to be my Admiral in front of the Dominion today." The younger Mengsk seemed calm, pleased even.

"What?"

"You heard me correctly," a fine golden eyebrow raised, "I asked General Warfield but he declined, it seemed he now has a family to think of," he said.

"Why are you telling me now then?"

"Giving you some notice and time to let it sink in."

"And if I decline?" He wondered where the conversation would have gone if he really did, nodding to a member of staff as he passed by. The palace had little more than a skeleton crew right now, and it was a mess from top to bottom.

"You have been the captain of the Hyperion for years, I feel very confident that you will not."

"This new empire of yours...it can't be ran the way your father ran it, or I'll be gone as fast as I was before. You know that, right?"

"I do. You will not be bullying downtrodden minorities or guarding already safe core worlds."

"What is the purpose of your fleet?"

"To protect the Koprulu sector, all the terran inhabited worlds in it and to enforce fair and just laws."

A warm sense of hope settled in his chest. Valerian was far from being his father. "That is a fleet I would be proud to lead," he said.

"Good. I'll be glad to hear it later today too."

And there he was, at the grand doors that lead to the audience chamber. The last he saw of this room was Nova killing a Hybrid and the elder Mengsk unleashing madness on innocent people. Swallowing the knot in his throat, he pushed the doors open.

One small camera team, dwarfed inside the grand room, stood recording as Emperor Valerian spoke from his podium.

"And it is with great pleasure that I introduce to you the head of our new fleet, Matt Horner," Valerian held his hand out with a crowd pleasing smile.

Speeding up his pace, Matt strode quickly forwards to accept Valerian's hand in a firm shake, "Thank you," he said. All his jumbled thoughts, his fears and worries, smoothed away as the Emperor stepped aside and allowed him the microphone.

Holding her recording device up, Kate Lockwell looked as serious as she ever did. "Admiral
"Horner," the title gave him a warm feeling, "the Dominion fleet has been used for nefarious purposes in the past, moving forwards, what do you plan on doing to undo this stigma?"

"Oh I know full well what the fleet spent its time doing under Arcturus Mengsk," a chuckle softened the dark humor, "hunting down renegades and bullying fringe worlds is no longer a part of this fleets agenda," he took a breath, shoring up his courage in the otherwise silent and judging room. "The fleet will be used to help the helpless, defend those who need defending and to enforce fair and just rules across the Kopruulu sector."

"Thank you for that Admiral," Kate Lockwell said.

A subtle gesture from Valerian on his right and Matt stepped back, glad to be rid of the spotlight. He crossed his hands behind his back and waited.

Valerian grew somber in a blink, his visage seeming to slump under an unseen weight. "The Moebius Foundation, though created with the best intentions, became a tool to undermine and enslave the terran people through the creation of the hybrid," he paused, letting it sink in to all those who were watching raptly. "I am hereby disbanding the entire organization and offering amnesty to those who were a part of it, so long as you turn yourselves in peacefully."

He smiled then, warm and bright as the cloud hanging over his head passed by.

"On a brighter note, the help we have been receiving from the protoss in rebuilding and rescuing those still trapped inside the cities damaged buildings is unprecedented, and I am glad to announce that we will be working much more closely with our new allies to ensure peace becomes a way of life between us." Valerian leaned away from the microphone, pointedly removing his fine gloves and pocketing them as he spoke, "To conclude this interview, I would like the people to know that my staff and I will also be joining in the efforts immediately. I am dedicated to rebuilding our great empire and look forward to working closely with my people from here on out."

Staff began to clap and Matt felt compelled to follow along, Kate Lockwell gave some final words to the camera before switching to a mobile setup. Valerian would not lack for camera coverage as he worked, that much was certain.

"That was great, but are you sure allowing amnesty to Moebius personnel is the right choice?" Matt said to Valerian as they walked towards the doors together.

"I believe it is. You know full well what it is like to be under the control of someone else, Matt," Valerian spoke softly, keeping the conversation between the two of them, "that, and not forgiving those who were a part of the organization would create a whole new generation of rebels."

"I hope you're right," Matt pulled off his gloves and tucked them into his belt. "Now, lets rebuild this empire together," he said.

"Probes are really that complex?"

Yes, their creation was perhaps one of the most pivotal to the protoss and their civilization.

"Amazing!" Egon all but glowed with excitement. "Karax, I can't tell you how much this partnership means to me but I'm sure you've already read my mind and know," he said.

I do try to allow terrans their privacy, but yes it was a bit obvious. Karax, phase-smith of the khalai, said.
The two were touring through the not-yet-powered science vessel that would be their home for an undetermined amount of time. Already, Karax was thinking of adjustments to better suit his needs. Emperor Valerian was very clear that the two would be the undisputed joint leaders of this operation and they had the first say on what stayed and what was removed from their vessel.

Requesting to join the terrans as an ambassador had been an explosive conversation by protoss standards.

"I still can't believe that Artanis intervened to allow you to come here," it seemed Egon was following the phase-smith's thoughts, despite his terran limitations.

It was a close call, to be sure, Karax recalled the moment. The feeling of being a pioneer on the front lines of the budding friendship between terrans and protoss being dashed, only to be repaired and made stronger by the until-then MIA Artanis, leader of the daelaam, appearing to intervene. There was a great deal of relief in that there would be no more infighting over leadership as well. The last thing the protoss factions needed were to be reduced to squabbling and splintering after such an incredible event.

Egon was leaned forwards, looking over the one probe Karax had been gifted to bring along on his journey. "Terrans are so far away from the kind of algorythms used to operate this kind of high tech machinery, I'm really surprised you chose to join me in the first place."

Karax's eyes smiled and he gave a mental chuckle. The terran himself is why he chose, a strange and fascinating thought pattern that he'd been drawn to like a glowing beacon. Where other terrans were focused on recovery and rebuilding, this one was breaking down his encounter with the xel'naga and his experience as a member of the zerg swarm to innovate and improve the lot of terrans as a whole. I have good reasons, I assure you, he said.

Of course, he wanted to learn from this terran's unique experiences as well.

Together, we will bridge the gap between our races and help foster peace and learning. There can be no more noble a pursuit. Karax said.

"I agree, and with Valerian being so inclined to learning and peace himself, we really have a chance at this!" Egon said, standing up straight and smiling brightly.

Karax noted a fleeting thought, a touch of mourning over glasses no longer needed, and wondered himself. While his intentions were pure, he had also discussed another reason with Artanis for his adventure into a primitive society. His probes had detected zerg matter on the terrans who were formerly infested, so minute as to pass beneath the terran's radars with ease. The situation must be monitored closely, and Egon would be right there the whole time.

Perhaps we should begin creating the list that your Emperor requested, I have some ideas for changes of my own.

"Yes, I was just thinking that. What a dream come true," Egon pulled a pad and pen from his pocket and began to scribble rapidly.

The probe chirped and whirred as Karax began creating a list psionically. Yes, it was time to begin his integration. An adventure with no end in sight, it gave him his own rush of childlike excitement.
searching for the leak that was stopping the vehicle from running. *I can do this. I can help people.*

In the cockpit Tychus stared intently at a group of protoss ships flying overhead, sleek and futuristic. Transports, he noted. They were out recovering refugees in need of shelter and medical aid, day and night. The job Jayce chose was much dirtier and involved the kind of grease monkeys he never kept the company of before. He snorted, pressing the ignition when he saw the hand signal to try again.

Cough. Whrrr. The engine made more choking sounds, Jayce's fingers continuing to make the ignition signal until she leaped backwards and the engine roared to life. One of the numerous machines she had fixed today alone.

Hitting the key again, silence fell over the immediate area as the vehicle shut down. There was plenty of noise around though, other mechanics working feverishly to get the fleet of vehicles needed to repair damaged infrastructure up and running again. He swung down from the cockpit and landed heavily, dust puffing up around his big boots.

She hadn't said a word to him yet. But, he thought, she hadn't chased him off with a gun yet either. So he continued to follow, intent on his path, and she continued to signal him to lift this or turn on that. *Been a lackey my whole life, at least I'm helping people this time around.* When she walked into one of the woman's facilities, he caught himself from following automatically.

Jayce thrust her hands under the sonic sanitizers, watching as grime and dead skin flaked away rapidly. Her teeth ground together tightly, jaw creaking before she loosened it a tad. The Xel'Naga preached forgiveness and starting fresh, their special message to her before leaving. So far she'd settled for tolerance. A sharp cough behind her urged her to move out of the way for the impatient woman behind her, how long had she been staring in the mirror?

The intrusion in her mind felt featherlight, her intense emotions catching the attention of a nearby protoss. Its voice was soft and deep, like an ocean. *The Xel'Naga are the creators of life, the gods, the voice turned wry, and you would turn from their advice?*

Rubbing her face fiercely, she glanced between her opened fingers to see if this ballsy protoss was within eyeshot, he wasn't of course. *The Xel'Naga didn't have their arm ripped off and- A sharp pain settled in her chest, tears threatening to burst through her facade. Just leave me alone, please,* she thought in a whisper, defeated.

*As you wish,* the voice faded away, as did the touch of the aliens mind.

Tychus' brows furrowed when Jayce emerged clean yet visibly upset, her cheeks red and eyes squinted into hard angry lines. He stepped aside before she could barrel into him. Before he could help himself, he reached out and caught her shoulder in his hand, noting the wince at the touch. "Hey now, what's got you so worked up sugar?"

"Hand. Off." Her voice came out tight with emotion, but she didn't shout, for which he was glad.

Turning her around and planting his hands on both her shoulders, he shook his head and looked her in the eye. She returned the look with a defiant glare. "No. You tell me what's goin' on and if I have to go in there and kick someones ass or not," it felt good just to talk again, he noted. It would feel better if he could beat someone up on her behalf.

"You don't deserve to talk to me," she hissed, hands reaching up and grasping at his wrists.

He looked around, they were getting a few glances but not enough to worry about. The accusation hurt, deep in his chest, where all his guilt was hiding. *To hell with the audience,* he thought before
catching her up in a bear hug and lifting her off the ground, to which she made a definite noise of protest.

"I don't care what them Xel'Naga said to you," his voice roughened with emotion. "You can hate me until the stars burn out," he took a fist to the chin in stride, he deserved at least that much anyway, "but I swear I will follow you until they do or you forgive me." Her struggling arms wavered as he curled a hand up to her head and simply held her.

Her body shook as a sob escaped, and he let out a slow sigh of relief. This is what needed to happen.

Her arms tentatively reached to hug him back, no more words need being said right then.

It is good to see our people working so closely together with the terrans, Artanis said. Aboard the mothership that was hovering above Augustgrad, it was a truly incredible display of togetherness that was unfolding beneath them.

Yes, my people that remain are made better for their actions this day, Vorazun nodded before her voice turned to its familiar dire tone, it is of some concern what your phasesmith, Karax, said about the uninfested terrans, however.

Their zerg influence will be closely monitored, Artanis agreed, watching a squad of scouts disappear into the distance. The warp technology of the fleet was proving invaluable to saving terrans trapped within failing buildings.

Why did you say no, Artanis?

Why did you? His eyes crinkled into a smile.

My people are wanderers, we value the joy of discovery and unearthing secrets. It is an obvious choice that most of us would say no to becoming a creator being. She said in such a matter of fact tone, Artanis couldn't help but chuckle. But the khalai, she added, to become something greater is a part of your very being.

You are correct, he admitted, but also incorrect. This seemed to sour her look some, the Matriarch did not like to be wrong. I chose as an individual, for many of the same reasons you did, to remain as a smaller part of this universe. And who would lead those who chose to remain? I would not forsake my duty for a greater calling, not this day.

You have chosen your words carefully, she noted, carrying a pleasant sense of contentment. Indeed, who would lead those who remain, keep them on a noble path? I am glad you stayed, Artanis.

Your words humble me, Matriarch. He placed his hand to his chest, moved.

What shall become of those protoss, Khalai and Nerazim, who choose to remain behind and foster greater bonds with the terrans? Back to business, the moment had passed.

They are free to choose their path and I will be keeping contact with the terran leader, Emperor Valerian, to ensure there is no trouble.

Yes, a good start I think. What of the Queen of Blades?

Kerrigan continues on her path, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of bitterness at her handy escape of justice. She will succeed or be destroyed in the trying.
Both our people have suffered tremendously under the Queen's Swarm, she said thoughtfully, I believe this is a path of redemption laid before her. A path that the gods have chosen, I feel no reason to interfere. Not after having interacted with her in her changed state.

I wish I felt this sense of contentment you do about this particular topic, Matriarch. I fear my people will have the shadow of the zerg over them for as long as they exist.

Something our people can work towards overcoming together Artanis, we need not suffer forever.

You are right. With the loss of Shakuras, would you consider returning to Auir with us? There may be little to no zerg remaining there, we do not know yet.

To see its green hills and valleys again, untouched by the zerg and without fear of death. That is a dream all dark templar share, now that Shakuras is lost to us.

Let us begin planning then! Artanis waved his hand with a vigorous swipe and brought up an image of his beloved homeworld. Yes, he thought, we can overcome the shadow of the zerg and Amon. With that thought came resolve, and together they began to plan their futures.

"Ever gone fishing, son?"

"Fishing?"

Warfield chuckled, "guess not. I'll take you when we're done helping here, alright?"

"Alright," Tate nodded, visibly energized at the promise of fun.

Helping the refugees was long, hard work, but Warfield chose this post, giving fresh clothing to families, for Tate's sake. Even now beads of sweat were marking paths down the temples of busy workers, it was a hot day in Augustgrad. Unfortunately, he was finding there were many more kids like Tate out there. The amount of youths without anyone with them approaching for clothing was of rising concern.

Their day ended quietly, and from the intent look on Tate's face as he sat across from him and ate his food, Warfield was more upset about not finding the kids parents than the kid was.

"They are dead, I know that," Tate said past a mouthful, wincing when Warfield smacked his knuckles with a spoon sharply.

"Say again?" As Tate opened his full mouth, Warfield warned, "when you are done chewing."

Chastened, he rubbed his tender knuckles against his shirt and finished chewing and swallowing before repeating himself.

"Why do you say that?" Warfield frowned, not liking how carefully void of emotion that statement was. The boy missed his parents, there was no doubt in his mind.

"I barred them inside our building, it was on fire."

Warfield let out a slow breath, that was heavy. His rations didn't seem very appealing anymore, so he pushed them away. Tate quickly grabbed the leftovers and put them beside his own meal, he was definitely in some kind of growth spurt. "Never know with them Xel'Naga," he said hopefully, "brought back all those infested people, they were as good as dead you know."

"Didn't bring back the dead," Tate pointed out after carefully swallowing another mouthful.
"No," Warfield admitted, "it doesn't seem they did."

Sliding his now empty plate aside, Tate slid the next over and paused, spoon full of food. "Are you going to leave me even if we don't find them?"

"No," Warfield said firmly, glancing around. Their eating quarters were private, thanks to his station, but it didn’t hurt to look either. "Son, it would make me glad to get you back to your parents, but I know the outlook isn’t good. I will not just drop you off and leave you after what we have been through, not a chance."

Tate nodded, it was good enough. "Where are we going to go fishing?"

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A bead of sweat slid down Nova's temple.

Jim did not envy the ghost, even the memory of the endless zerg chatter raised the skin on his arms into goosebumps.

The ghost's fine features screwed up into a mix of disgust and apprehension as she raised her rifle, "something is coming," she said.

Stukov kept quiet, lip curling upwards.

"You did notice we're in a zerg ship, right?" Jim teased, not bothering to look as the door squished open.

"That-" Nova gestured at the strange monster now staring at them, with its armored plates and one partially severed limb, "is not a zerg."

Brows pulling together, Jim looked away from the stars spinning past them and blinked. "Oh," he said. It looked awfully familiar, and it seemed as content to stare at them as they were at it. "Wait a second, that's one of them things from Zerus."

"Primal Zerg. Dehaka," the creature's voice was resonant and throaty, mouth barely moving as the words escaped, "one who collects."

"Some of them came along with the Queen," Stukov supplied, nodding towards the shaggy monstrosity. "Dehaka leads them," he said.


"Well hold on Nova," Jim held up a hand. "You want something, Dehaka?"

"Queen no longer leads swarm," Dehaka gurgled, head tilting and eyes focusing on Nova's rifle intently. "Curious. Do we go to new essence?"

"Not really sure what essence is pal," Jim shrugged inside his suit, "we're goin' to hunt down the last servant of Amon."

"Amon-

"Why the hell are you talking to that thing, Raynor?" Nova hissed.

"Amon-" Dehaka repeated slowly, "good to destroy servants of Amon." Curiosity sated, the creature turned on the spot and stomped out of the room.
"You can't just go waving your gun around at every zerg on a zerg ship Nova," Jim said as the door shut.

"If they enter this room, you can count on it. They can have the rest of the place," Nova lowered her rifle slowly, still eyeing the place the primal zerg occupied. Just one more thing that would need to be reported to Valarian when they got back. If they got back.

Jim let out a slow breath and looked back out their fleshy viewport. "Can't be much longer now, I figure."

"Yes," Sarah said as she entered the room with Zagara en tow, "the swarm is prepared to get us to Narud no matter the cost."

"Glad you're back," Jim sounded only a little sour.

Nova tossed a small device to the floor and the facility and its surroundings appeared before them, glowing coldly. "Care to let us in on the strategy your majesty?"

"Careful," Sarah smirked. "You can barely keep the zerg out of your head, nevermind keep me from removing it."

Nova stood, fingertips curling at her canister rifle, yet not raising it, and the tension rose dramatically

"Easy ladies," Jim stood as well, raising a placating hand. "You volunteered to come with us Nova, the least you can do is keep your damn snark to yourself."

"We deserve to be a part of the conversation," Nova frowned, eyeing Sarah and the broodmother behind her.

Would you like me to destroy this terran, my Queen? Zagara asked coolly.

"No, enough." Sarah waved it all off and gestured towards the facility floating ominously before them. "Lets talk," she said.

Nova seemed to cool off, her stance relaxing and eyes returning to the task at hand. "The Kirkegaard facility has the absolute latest in terran technology, and a brief report from the ground on Korhal says that psionic energy trails lead from the city of Augustgrad to here."

"Narud called his hybrid pals here before Amon fell?" Jim frowned, "you think he knew what was going to happen to his master?"

"It is likely he had a contingency plan," Sarah shrugged, "Narud is a schemer."

"If all the hybrid that were on Korhal, and there were a lot, are now in this facility..." Nova let the words hang.

We will crush them! Zagara hissed, leaning forwards and clasping her spidery fingers together.

Nova visibly cringed at the mental touch.

"How are we even getting through the asteroid belt, for starters?" Jim wondered out loud, watching the asteroids lazily pass the facility, some were the size of small moons. Even the Leviathan wasn't muscling through that.

"A gorgon class battlecruiser can fit through with the right captain but-" Nova said.
"We will use scourge, banelings thrown by overlords and the ship itself to get through," Sarah said, nodding at the obstacle.

"Guess that works," Jim nodded grudgingly.

"I no longer have my infested to offer," Stukov appeared, having sidled up beside Jim quietly, "but I will be glad to be one of the first on the ground."

"We will go together," Sarah said, "zerglings and hydralisks can be the first wave. We will need to punch through whatever resistance there is and get into the facility as fast as possible.

"Let Zagara deal with the major force," Jim could appreciate this approach.

"There are numerous traps and it is a maze inside," Nova hit a button with her foot and the facility zoomed in, breaking into neat pieces and showing breakdowns of each room. "I will lead when we are in."

Sarah looked up from the image and locked eyes with the ghost. They stood there quietly regarding one another, challenging, before Sarah let go. "That is fine, the success of this mission is the only thing that matters. Not our petty conflicts and feelings."

Together they crowded around the image and broke it down piece by piece. Zagara's force would engage the defenses of the facility, holding them off until the team could return or beating them altogether. Jim did not like the idea of relying on the swarm to do this, and when they were done and Sarah began to walk out of the room he doggedly followed.

He waited until the fleshy door squished shut behind them before reaching out. His mechanical hand gently placed itself on her shoulder and he longed so deeply to touch her skin with his own it was a startling moment. "Sarah," he croaked.

"Jim," she looked over her shoulder and up at him, lips set in a sad smile.

"Please, just read my mind," he closed his eyes, willing her to understand.

Sarah reached up and into his suit, cupping his cheek with her cool hand. At his behest, she read his mind and took stock of the man's worries, hopes and fears. "You're almost as jumbled up as I am," she teased softly.

"I just want to-" Jim said.

"Shhh," Sarah shushed him and focused, "you need to see what I have seen to understand, I know."

Jim sucked in a sharp breath as it felt like a hook grabbed behind his belly button and yanked him hard.

A soft voice, familiar to Jim yet not quite, spoke "You can have the life you have dreamed of and given up on, if you will persist through one more trial, Sarah."

Opening his eyes, he found himself holding hands with Sarah and watching as a woman who looked very much like her, standing beside a man who also held similarities to her, spoke with a kneeling Sarah. He blinked and squeezed the hand of the Sarah beside him, just to double check.

"I am here Jim, listen to them," Sarah whispered.

Voice soft and full of wonder, the kneeling Sarah tilted her head back and looked up at the beings
who took the shape of her parents. "What must I do?"

"Take back the power," her father said.

"Use it to destroy Narud and end a battle that has gone on since time began," her mother said.

"Break the tainted cycle," the two spoke as one, voices reverberating with power.

Sarah’s hands gripped the soft blades of grass beneath them tightly, "what is going to stop you from becoming the next Amon?"

"Amon was unique," the motherly figure had begun to dissolve, glowing softly at her edges, "his dislike of the inevitable death of his creations became a poison that changed his very nature to that of destroyer."

"The cycle, all parts of it, are sacred. Amon has tainted it with his twisted version of death for time beyond memory," her father and mother were simply glowing ghosts now.

"I am a destroyer," Sarah shook her head, and Jim got the sense of tears falling down her cheeks, though he could not see them.

"One more death," the figures blended in to one, "for peace."

Slowly Sarah stood, the vision growing bright and forcing Jim to shield his eyes. Before he lost all sense of where he stood, he heard, "I accept."

Stumbling forwards, Jim found himself back in the guts of the *Leviathan* so startlingly that he nearly fell. Sarah was there to steady him, pressing her hands against the neosteel chest of the machine and allowing him a moment to readjust.

Sarah laughed, like an angel he thought, and shook her head when she collected his thoughts and saw new doubts and frustrations. "You will only be at peace when this is over cowboy, I know you."

"Just don't think it was right of them to put it on your shoulders," he tenderly brushed a piece of her hair aside, concerned.

"Just think," she smiled broadly, "it's almost over."

He wasted no time in worrying about the uncertain future after they succeeded, if they did.

She laughed and gave him a little shove, "cut it out, we'll-" her demeanor shifted from playful to serious in a second, as if a rock had fallen. "We're here."

"Shit," he muttered, missing the smile already.

"You'd better see this," Nova called as the door opened, not looking back at them.

Ahead was the asteroid belt, and through it a gigantic hole had been punched. millions of tons of asteroid had been evaporated in the wake of... what?

"Hybrid," Nova and Sarah said at the same time.

Zagara charged into the room with a clatter, *The zerg are ready for what lay ahead, my Queen!*

"It's time we finish this," Sarah's face became a grim mask, all compassion locked away once more.
Jim and Nova checked their guns over, Jim catching a small device Nova tossed him, "Huh?" he said.

"Psi screen," she said. "Put it on before the hybrid make you their slave, would you?"

Needing no more reasoning than that, Jim hooked the small device to his ear and flicked it on. "Let's do this thing!" he said.
Leviathan - Kuirkegaard asteroid belt

"The asteroid belt..." Jim said, staring.

A hole twice the size of the swarms biggest Leviathan had been punched through the densely packed asteroid belt with surgical precision, though long enough ago that various sized fragments of space rock had floated back into the unnatural gap.

"Hybrid," Both Sarah and Nova said at once, managing to refrain from glancing at one another.

"So that's where they all went from Korhal, just like Valerian's boys said." Jim turned away from the view and looked at his comrades, "So what's the plan now?"

He caught a small device that nova tossed to him.

"First," she said, "you put this psi screen on before the hybrid fry your brain and turn you into a zombie."

"Don't have to tell me twice," he said, carefully hooking the psi screen around his ears.

"You can wear that for two hours max," Sarah said, expression grim. "You don't want to know what happens if you fail to turn it off by then."

"Two hours, gotcha," Jim said, keenly aware that was not much time.

"It would seem they left a convenient path for us," Stukov gestured once again to the gap, "the Leviathan can certainly fit through without wasting resources on clearing the way ourselves."

A strained hissing sound drew all eyes to Zagara, who was in a rigid position of pain, the severed stump of her leg twitching. They are trying to take the swarm from me!

"Don't let it go," Sarah commanded, "we need to begin our attack immediately."

"I don't think rushing in when the plan has clearly changed is the best idea-" Nova said.

"It's this or get ripped apart by our own forces when Zagara is finally weakened enough to have the swarm taken from her," Sarah said.

A pregnant pause filled the air between the two women, the force of their will palpable.

"I think that says it all folks," Jim said quickly.

"Yes," Stukov nodded, "I can feel them too, trying to chip away at the edges of my forces and begin the fighting before we have arrived. Let us get moving," he said.

Board the space station! Zagara commanded, words echoing through the hivemind and sending the swarm into a frenzy of action. For her part, the brood mother exited the chamber in an awkward clatter- there was simply no time to recover in an evolution chamber and grow the leg back.

"Are you sure you wont stay here?" Sarah said, looking directly at Jim as their group fell in to a run behind Zagara.
The concern in her voice irked him, "Yes I'm sure darlin', you ain't doing this without me."

Nova gave Jim a quick gesture to turn on the psi screen and he complied, the pulsating headache he had not noticed had begun to build behind his eyes vanished.

The *Leviathan* and its counterparts filtered through the debris of the asteroid belt towards their destination at a quick pace, guided by Zagara's steady thoughts.

Zagara rocked on her feet and shook her crested head with a clatter of bony tendrils, making a quick gesture to the pods they came to stand beside.

"We're going down there in these things?" Jim said, stomach doing a couple flips over the idea.

"This is a zerg ship Jim, you'll be fine. Don't expect me to wait for you cowboy," Sarah said, slipping through a small moist doorway that shut behind her.

"Gross," Nova's lip curled in disgust but she followed suit, squishing into an adjacent pod.

Not one to be left behind, Jim flipped his visor down and shoved his suit through the squishy door without further prompting.

"Hang in there," Stukov said to Zagara before entering his own personal pod.

*I will not fail my Queen,* Zagara said, even as she hissed in agony. Already some of the swarm was turning, forcing her to divert energy to reclaiming and killing her own.

Jim grasped for handholds as the pod detached from the *Leviathan* and rocketed towards the space station amidst thousands of others. A green globule burst in his mechanical hand for his effort and he stopped trying, waiting for the landing with rising anxiety.

The pods burst to chunky pieces as they hit the solid ground of the station, Jim stumbled to his feet and raised his weapon as he caught his bearings. It was disorienting watching the zerg stream past him in a hissing, screaming mass instead of actually *at* him. The moment of reflection passed when he caught sight of a shock of red hair launching towards a massive hybrid. He wasn't sure what happened, but the plume of purple blood and the creature crashing to the ground suggested Sarah was about her deadly work already. He took off after her, Stukov and Nova flanking either side of him as they all charged to catch up.

"Hopefully she leaves some for the rest of us!" Stukov said as he raised his misshapen arm and launched a green glob of acid, which connected to the face of a hybrid that fell down writhing and screaming, zerglings running forwards and covering it in a deadly carpet of teeth and claws.

"Hurry, the gap is closing!" Nova pumped her legs harder, Sarah had made a path for them that was rapidly closing with fresh new bodies and they would certainly lose her if they let the opportunity pass.

"On it!" Jim shouted, acutely aware of the headaches return behind his eyes. Stoic, he said nothing as they darted inside a blown apart door and into the complex. "Sarah!"

"Hurry up," Sarah said, raising her hands and bearing her teeth seemingly at them.

"What the-" Jim took a half step back as she unleashed her power at them, only to hear the doors behind their group slam shut and crumble.

She gave him a steady look, "That should buy us some time, but Zagara can't hold the swarm from
that many hybrid for long. We need to hurry."

"The sooner we kill Narud, the sooner I can be content," Stukov said.

Together they ventured deeper, glassy floors clacking under their boots, the main lights snapped off and the red emergency lights lit the place up eerily. It seemed as though Narud haunted every shadow, and a hybrid stood around every corner. The hybrid were very real, dropping quickly under the combined might of their group, but every bullet hole Jim put into a shadow of Narud just left ghostly laughter behind.

After a few minutes of wandering they came to a divergence in their path. To the right the corridor seemed to twist away and upwards, the left veered down and curled in on itself.

"I'll go left," Sarah said.

"I got right," Nova said.

"I'll go with Sarah then, Stukov you go with Nova," Jim gave the two a quick salute and followed after Sarah who was already on the move.

"Narud has been all over this complex," Nova said, lips in a grimace. His stench and residual energy were everywhere.

"Together we will find the right path and meet up with our comrades once again," Stukov said.

A bead of sweat slid down Jim's temple and he let out a huff. "Is it the hybrid giving me this headache?"

Sarah stopped and looked at him sharply, "You shouldn't have one with the psi screen on."

"Well," Jim closed his eyes tightly for a few moments, fighting back the rising pressure behind his eyeballs, "I do."

"We have less time than I thought then, hurry," Sarah grit her teeth and charged forwards, rifle raised and ready. She cursed her lack of better judgement with him, Jim shouldn't have come.

Giving his head a good shake, Jim followed after and refrained from shooting the creature hiding in Sarah’s shadow as she veered around a corner.

He almost lost her then, the creek of a door opening the only sign she had passed into the hallway, other than he was sure he saw her enter it in the first place.

"Jim," she said. Facing him inside what appeared to be a small laboratory, a metal table glowing an eerie red behind her.

"Yeah? Don't we need to keep going before I go insane darlin'?" he let out a little nervous chuckle, his eyes pounded to the rhythm of his heartbeat.

Her lips sealed into a tight line. "I hate what you did to me."

"What?" He looked left and right for the offending thing he could have done.

"I loved being the Queen of Blades."

His stomach dropped to the floor, he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What?" he said again, incredulous.
She took a step towards him. "If you truly loved me, you would have let me infest you and lived with me as zerg."

"I don't believe this!" Jim shouted. Of all the times to have a conversation like this, why now?

Between blinks, she appeared in front of him, resting her hand on his metal shoulder. "I could never love you like this. Don't you see?"

"No! I don't see and agh-" A sharp noise, like a high pitched scream, rattled inside his brain so hard and so loud he thought he might be the one screaming.

"You should have," Narud said before everything went black.

Letting out a primal scream, Sarah ripped the offending tentacled and glowing hybrid in half. Panting as it fell to twitching pieces before her, she quickly turned around to check on Jim, he didn't even try to shoot that one. She swallowed hard, feeling warm blood pool around her booted feet, there was no Jim standing there in his CMC.

"Jim?" she said, heart clenching.

No answer. The hallway was silent and dark.

"Jim!" she yelled then, charging back the way they came and rounding a corner. She stopped dead still when a black eyed Jim, outside the armored shell of his CMC, stood there smiling.

"Shoulda kept a better eye on me, darlin'," he said.

"No!" she shrieked, lashing out with power at the twisted vision, it faded from sight and Narud's laughter hung in the air like a miasma.

Bright red rage filled her until she thought her eyes would explode, her feet carrying her back the way she came with Jim. How long ago had he been gone? Their conversation was not long ago, he couldn't have gone far. Reason warring with passion, she fought to clear the haze of white hot anger and think clearly.

One corner. Two corners. Three. She took a deep breath and focused intently. This was it, the place they last spoke. Looking down, eyes half closed, she watched as footprints appeared with a little coaxing of the mind.

Two small purple colored boots and two large blue mechanical prints gleamed before her eyes. Looking up occasionally, she followed Jim's path like an intent predator.

"If you hurt him," she whispered, cold as ice, "there will be no universe in which you can hide from me."

The shadows laughed.

Panting, Nova looked at the smoldering, half melted and still twitching corpse of the hybrid they were just fighting. "This can't be the right way," she said. They were eight hybrid deep down this winding upwards path, and her nerves were on fire with the knowledge more were all around.

"Perhaps it is time we circle back, I agree," Stukov said, giving her a nod.

Together they walked past the soulless husk and headed back the way they came.

"I feel him everywhere," Nova whispered, worried about attracting undo attention.
"This is his palace," Stukov sneered, "unholy place of worship, whatever you want to call it. Home for Amon's most loyal creation."

"What stake do you have in this?" Nova said.

"Saving the universe isn't good cause enough?" Stukov chuckled, eyeing the tall ghost intently, eyes gleaming in the low light.

"Zerg aren't interested in saving the universe."

"If you haven't noticed, I'm an infested terran, we are a bit different. Still," he said, "you are right, this is personal to me. I have much unfinished business with the monster who created me."

She drew in a short, sharp inhale. Stukov made a lot more sense now, enough sense for pity to be established. "This way," she gestured with the butt of her rifle. Already they were at the divergence of paths, their feet leading them where Sarah and Jim walked before them.

"Where is Jim?" Sarah whispered, staring into the burning eyes of the hybrid she held at her mercy in a psionic grip.

*Your love is dead, Sarah Kerrigan.* It laughed cruelly before its head bent at an incorrect angle and made a wet snap. The light in its eyes faded away.

It was the third one, each a little more mauled than the next, that she had questioned. Answers had not been forthcoming, but Jim's footprints were still true. Stepping through a sliding doorway into a laboratory of some sort, Sarah stared at the cold steel table that made up the centerpiece of the room. It was not hard to imagine Stukov or any other helpless terran strapped there, subjected to the demented desires of Narud and his ultimate agenda. "You have a lot to answer for, Narud. You're going to pay for every last bit of it."

A dark chuckle lingered in the air.

Stepping through the sliding door on the opposite side of the room, Sarah raised her rifle and spun to her left, crosshairs on Jim's forehead.

"Jim," she said, but didn't lower the rifle.

"Sarah, it's me darlin', put the gun down," he said from the dark insides of his CMC.

"Show me your face," she said, eyes narrowing.

"Need to see the only handsome guy around here?" He teased, the visor flipping up.

In that second, Sarah leaped to the side as a massive claw impaled the vision of Jim and the space where she had occupied.

"Where is he!" she snarled, firing off several psi-infused bullets that ripped through the armored hide of the zerglike hybrid, sending it screaming to the floor and flailing. Without waiting for an answer, she fired several more into it until it was just another steaming corpse.

Looking up from the heap, she saw the continuation of Jim's footprints lead past it and broke into a run. Every second allowed him to get further and further away from being saved.

When the path lead to a sheer black wall with no discernible markings she let a fierce scream of frustration rip from her lungs, clawing her hands over the ebony surface and banging her fists into it.
Heaving breath after breath, she staggered backwards and allowed the potent rage to take form, her hands glowing a bright orange as she made a violent pulling apart gesture. The hallway shook and the wall let out an unearthly wail as a huge crack ran up it from the floor to the ceiling.

"Where are you!" she bellowed, shoving forwards with all her might, her words drowned out by a deafening crack as she punched a hole clean through the wall.

Coughing and clearing the dust from her lungs, she did a quick double take at what her emotional attack revealed- stairs spiraling downwards towards a dim red source of light.

Her hesitation lasted only as long as it took to see Jim's blue steps, a red haze around them, leading downwards.

"They did not go any farther than this," Nova said, frowning down the poorly lit hallway. The sense of Kerrigan was strong until a few feet ago, where it suddenly stopped.

"Doubled back then perhaps," Stukov said.

A clattering further down the hall, accompanied by chittering and shrieks, drew their attention and the aim of their weapons. Zerg, charging past the feet of a massive hybrid, poured towards them like a frothing carpet of death.

"Run!" Nova was already well past Stukov, hurrying in the direction they already came, this wasn't a winnable fight if Zagara's swarm was helping the enemy.

Stukov needed no further incentives to follow, forcefully taking control of several hydralisks to turn on their companions, they would prove to be a few moments distraction while they made their escape.

"She had to have gone this way," Nova said, taking a sharp turn and leaving a shimmering image of herself behind, a clone that took off running in the other direction.

Judging by the lack of nearby sounds, the clone distraction served its purpose. Nova slowed to a stop at the violently made entryway to downward spiraling stairs. "We're clear, I can feel that this is Kerrigan's handy work. We are on the right trail now," Nova said, taking the first steps down the stairs.

"That was a clever trick back there, psionic projection is not easy to master," Stukov said. The infested terran seemed unflappable, unphased by the events that led up to their current calm state.

"Now's not the time for chit chat," she said.

"When is it ever?" he chuckled.

Together they descended towards the red light.

To say the Tal'darim were entrenched was an understatement. Sarah's hands shook with effort as she took hold of a fully charged void ray and ran its deadly laser cutter across a squad of its own allies. The explosions heating her skin and psionic screams were satisfying.

Jim had begun to appear now, a small figure in the distance between skirmishes. He was walking towards the massive door of a xel'naga temple entrance, such a small shape, and Sarah felt acutely that time was running out.

Psionic lightning arced from her fingertips and ripped through multiple enemies at once, the tal'darim
were meat for the grinder. Those few that made it through to melee range alternated being riddled with psi infused bullets and sliced apart by her own energized fists.

"There!" Stukov said, pointing towards an explosion in the distance as he and Nova came charging down the base of the stairs. The view was staggering, a city of tal'darim between themselves and the tip of a massive pyramid, so was the amount of bloodshed between themselves and that lone glowing shape.

"I see her, but where's Raynor?" Nova said, squinting and looking through the information presented on her HUD.

"Perhaps that is what is motivating her." he said, taking the first running step towards Kerrigan and her trail of destruction.

"He never should have come in the first place," she said, trailing behind ready to provide firing cover with her canister rifle.

The door had already opened and closed, her feet could not carry her fast enough. Sarah's fists slammed up against the cold black surface and she clawed at the now seamless door with the tips of her fingers.

"Kerrigan!" a familiar voice called, Nova.

"Jim's inside!" Sarah said, not turning around.

"We are here to help," Stukov said.

"Jim isn't our mission, Kerrigan!" Nova said, frustration in her tone.

Sarah rounded on the two then, eyes ablaze, "if you ever want to get out of here alive, you'll help me get him back!"

Unphased, Nova felt out with her senses and quirked a brow. "Narud is behind this door. Not Jim. You should know that."

"I have been following Jim's trail since inside the facility, he is here, and so is Narud," Sarah said.

"Then let us open the door and say hello," Stukov said, tipping his head towards the door.

"Together," Sarah said.

Nova shouldered her rifle and felt out with her mind, finding the near perfectly seamless crack where the door opened and filling the gap, like pouring water into a cup. Sarah and Stukov's intent expressions suggested they were doing the same.

Their efforts manifested visually as a conglomeration of lights, blue, green, purple, mixing together and slowly, painfully so, the door began to wail and give in to their combined demand: open up.

"We must enter together," Stukov said through gritted teeth.

Sarah took the first step and Nova and Stukov fell in behind her, inching their way into the perfect darkness the door framed. As soon as all three were in, they let out a combined breath and let go of the door. It slammed shut so hard the ground shook, leaving them in the blinding dark.

Sarah raised a hand and ignited her fist, ghostly purple illuminating their feet and not much farther. "You are out of time Narud, there is nowhere you can run now."
Nova unslung her rifle and held it at the ready, her senses and scanning equipment revealing nothing. "Not picking anything up," she said.

"He's here," Stukov assured.

In answer, laughter filled the chamber and bounced around, making it impossible to determine where it came from.

"We've come to say good night you bastard," Stukov stepped forwards, his alien fist clenched and ready.

"You have come to die!" A flare of green lit from afar and it was all Stukov could do to step aside as a searing beam lanced past him.

Sarah caught that beam with her own, letting out a shout of effort.

"It will destroy you if it touches you!" Stukov said, staggering away from it and looking at its dangerous proximity to Sarah.

Narud laughed. His true form, similar to the hybrid themselves, loomed from his position in the dark. It seemed to absorb the darkness around it, standing out in a twisted way as even darker than its surroundings while his front was illuminated by sickly green.

Nova looked between the beams and saw the green inching forwards towards Sarah steadily before she made her decision. Shouldering her rifle she leaped forwards and slammed her hands down on Sarah's shoulders, letting out a long echoing yell as she channeled her own power into Sarah. The beam receded several feet and began to slowly creep back towards Narud.

"Keep it up!" Sarah said through clenched teeth.

"The Xel'naga chose their heroes poorly, as usual," Narud sneered, though his eyes widened slightly, "did you know that none have ever defeated me?"

"On earth they say 'every dog has his day', I trust you know what that means," Stukov said, observing the proceedings. This was not a fight he could contribute to, not in that way. He began to watch their surroundings intently.

There.

Jim, still in his CMC, walked out of the darkness. Dangerously close to the beams, their colors rhythmically danced across the dark surface of his suit and his face. "Sarah," he said, voice devoid of emotion.

"Jim, step away!" Sarah said, eyes widening in alarm.

"You should have stayed with me, this never would have happened," he said.

The beam began to falter, Narud grinned wickedly as he gained ground once more.

Nova was shaking from the draining effort. "You can't let him use Jim against you Kerrigan! You have to win this!" she said.

Panting, Sarah's arms trembled as she redoubled her effort, shoving the beam several more feet. Desperately, she looked to Stukov, who was on the opposite side.

A look of resignation had come upon his face, the infested man staring across the beam at the mind
controlled Raynor. "Kill him for me, Kerrigan."

At the same time, both men leaped towards the beams.

"No!" Sarah screamed.

A horrific flash lit the room with green light for a moment, blinding everyone present. The beams arched around wildly for a second before their owners eyes cleared and their purpose redoubled. Jim was laying on his back unmoving, but Stukov was laying directly beneath the beams, blackened and smoking.

White hot fury filled every fiber of her being then and Sarah poured every burning inch of it into the beam, breaking through Narud's and rocketing towards him like a giant purple lance.

Narud let out a long scream of his own as he saw his own death, another bright flash filling the room before all fell completely dark once again.

Nova fell to her knees as Sarah stumbled forwards in the dark, pulling down her own HUD to see with. One life sign, stable.

With tears in her eyes, she fell beside Jim's CMC and leaned over it, hands clenching at its frame.

"Jim!"

"Keep it down darlin', I've got the biggest headache," Jim said weakly.

She let out a desperate laugh and hugged the machine while Nova got to her feet and made her way over to what remained of Stukov.

My Queen! Zagara invaded all of their minds, exultant, The hybrid have perished! We are securing the facility now!

Sarah gave directions to their location while Nova knelt down, resting her hand on the blackened human shoulder of Stukov.

The still smoking form of the infested terran man cracked at the touch, crumbling inwards and falling to the floor in a mess of coals. Stukov was no more, and something stung inside Nova at the thought. Swallowing, she stood up and gave the salute of the earth terrans, "you were an honorable enemy," she said.

Sarah watched as she helped Jim to a stand, feeling a pang of loss. "He saved you," she said to Jim.

"Don't remember a damn thing other than following you through a hallway," Jim said, "but I believe it." He looked around and saw the remains of Stukov, frowning.

Sarah filled him in on the details while they all walked to the temple door together. Without Narud's influence, it opened slowly of its own accord for them. The zerg were already flooding into the tal'darim city below and routing them, their spirits broken by loss and their bodies soon following.

Leviathan

Together, Sarah, Jim, Nova and Zagara stood inside the ocular chamber of the massive zerg flagship.

"Hard to believe it's over," Jim said.

"The Dominion will need help rebuilding, I intend to return home and serve Emperor Valerian," Nova said.
The swarm will take all of you where you need to go and then return to the Char system. Zagara said, bowing her crested head in respect.

Sarah let out a slow breath, the idea of what came next felt unnaturally daunting, given what had been done already. Jim's mechanical hand closed around hers reassuringly.

"I got a few ideas where we can start," he said, knowing her plight.

"Valerian will want you, you know," Nova said to them both, but her manner remained relaxed.

"Valerian wants lots of things he can't have," Jim said with a smile.

"I won't stand in your way," Nova shrugged, "I'm just a normal terran now." Indeed, both Sarah and Nova felt it true; the Xel'naga's gift for their success had been immediate. Their psionic talents were gone, drained away by the confrontation with Narud.

Jim's eyes widened, "Does that mean..."

"Yes," Sarah looked up at him and felt a pang of insecurity. He was not an open book anymore, for better or for worse.

Jim's hand tightened around hers.

EPILOGUE

James Raynor and Sarah Kerrigan were last spotted having a drink at Joey Ray's bar, the only thing Valerian's men found when they arrived to collect them was Jim's marshal badge. It was suspected that the protoss had a hand in helping them escape and remaining unfound for the years to come.

Tychus Findlay and Jayce Burrough ended up together, Tychus' wild nature dulled by his last adventure and Jayce's guiding hand. They both found gainful employment in Valerian's empire, their unique skills taking them far; but not without a few fist fights!

Nova Terra returned to Valerian's employ like she said she would, but became the headmistress of a new school for psionic terrans, a very different place than the heartless institution she had been trained at originally. She was instrumental in healing a wound between the public and the government that stole so many gifted children over the years.

Emperor Valerian would prove to be the leader he always wanted the people to have, rebuilding the Dominion from the ground up to be for the people and creating a prosperous civilization that had strong ties to the Protoss, the Umojans and the Kel Morians. One of his most loved achievements was turning the fallen Hyperion into a monument to Raynor's Raiders inside Augustgrad, where people could see and touch what the Raiders went through all those years.

Matt Horner became the admiral of the Dominion fleet, and held true to his word about protecting the people. He also joined forces with Mira Han to bring Deadman's Rock into the fold, granting amnesty and legal jobs to the mercenaries who helped save Korhal against Amon's onslaught in the terran's darkest hour; not all mercenaries joined, but most did when they no longer had a neutral port to dock at.

General Warfield returned to retirement with the Emperor's blessing. He became the proud father of Tate when the young man's parents were eventually counted among the dead on Korhal. Together they became avid fishermen on a quiet planet, well away from politics and especially aliens.

Zagara returned to the Char system with the swarm and cleansed it of all life, claiming all the planets.
of the Char system for the swarm. There she would remain, killing and evolving as zerg were intended.

Dehaka returned to Zerus where he took what he learned and truly became the river, the apex predator without peer. His pack would rule the planet, filling the power gap Kerrigan and her swarm left behind.

Artanis, leading the council of the combined Protoss peoples, reclaimed Aiur with the help of the dark templar and many willing terrans eager to repay them for helping on Korhal. With their home world secure once again, they set about creating a new age of peace and rebuilding their glorious empire, more united in purpose than ever before.

The Xel'naga were beyond our ability to track, they disappeared as suddenly as they came. New life was reported to be appearing on formerly barren planets however, and those of us who understood and believed what we experienced on Korhal knew it to be the work of the creator aliens.

A fragile peace had bloomed over the Koprulu sector, but for how long?

**A Personal Note**

Wow, this has taken forever and a day to complete! I want to thank you for reading this far and for your limitless patience. The ending is not satisfactory to me, but it was never going to be, I just had to get it out there before I went and gave up! I can only hope that you feel a sense of closure, peace and contentment from this ending and that you enjoyed the journey from start to finish. This was an incredibly ambitious project on my part and I am filled with happiness and sadness that it has now come to an end. Thank you!

**Works inspired by this one**

*Adapt or Die* by *Avrina*  

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!