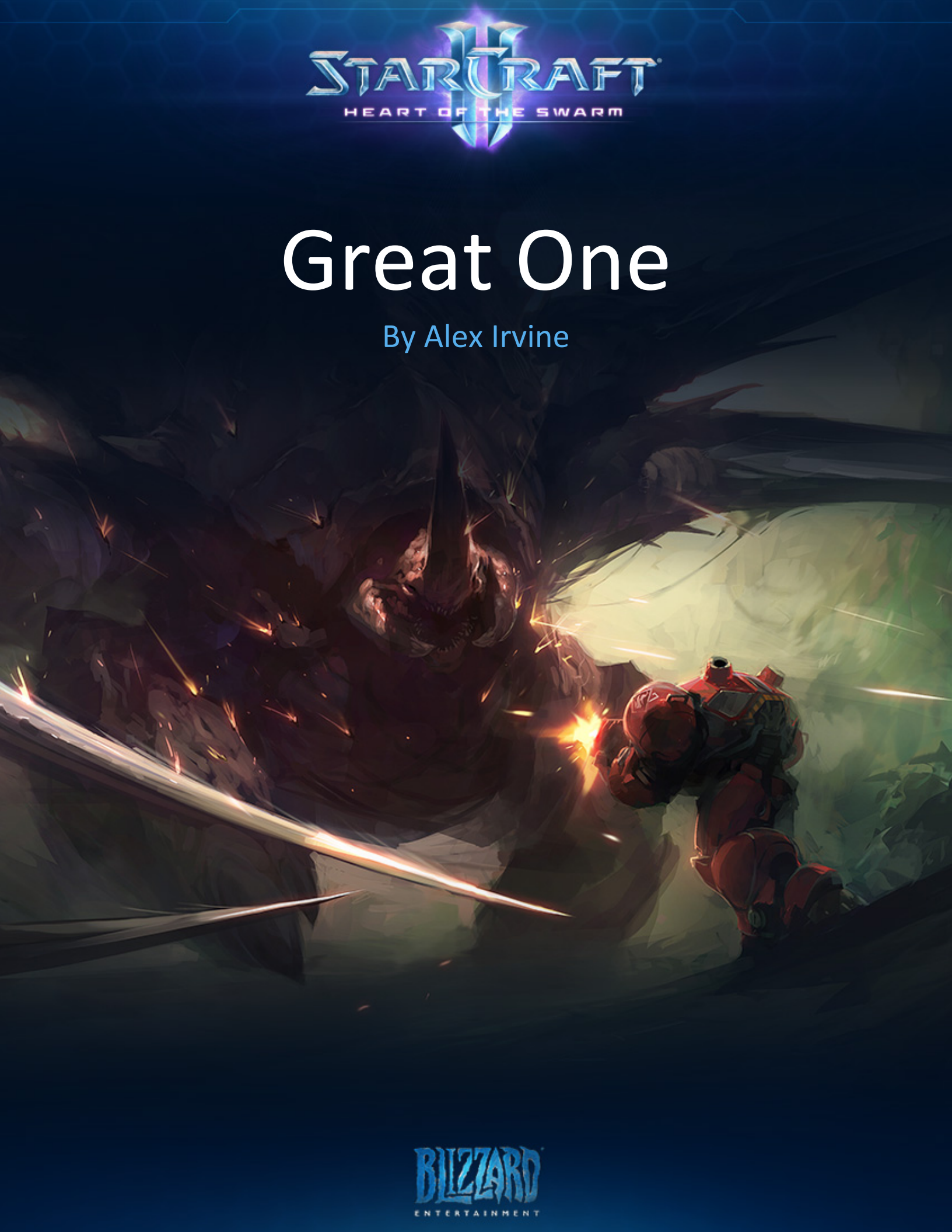


STARCRRAFT
HEART OF THE SWARM

Great One

By Alex Irvine



Patient: Sergeant Norwood Doakes, of Torch Seven. That's the 7th platoon, 4th Marine Division.

We are on the battlecruiser Scion, in parking orbit around the planet Vygoire. This is a debriefing and medical report. The short version: He's in bad shape.

How bad?

Bad enough that we might have to kill him to get what we need.

Let's try to avoid that. But if it's necessary...

Right. On with the debriefing. I'm going to give him a shot. It'll snap him out of it long enough that we should be able to find out what happened. There we go. That ought to do it. For now.

* * *

We hit Vygoire like we knew it was going to hit us back, straight down out of the dropships by the book, boots on the ground two at a time and one second apart, the way Torch Seven does it. Terrain was jungle, jungle, and more jungle, with the occasional clearing or river bend mudflat. We formed up on one of those mudflats and got the latest weather and maps pinged down from the *Scion*. Right on the money. The lab complex was half a klick through the jungle away from the river. "Give us the lesson, Sarge," one of my wise guys said.

I think I'm the only man in the platoon who hasn't been brain-panned. The guys let me hear about it all the time, like I joined the marines to slum with lowlifes. One time, we were on Mar Sara, and I started talking about the history, just to kill time. The unit decided I was a professor because I read something other than a weapons manual once. Now they're like a bunch of kids sometimes. Tell us this, tell us that, what's this, where does this

come from.

I don't mind. Long as they still listen when I give them orders. And they do. There's twenty-seven of them and one of me, but every man in Torch Seven knows who's in charge. Sergeant Doakes is fekking in charge: that's who.

I didn't have a lesson about Vygoire. All I knew was the briefing all of us had gotten. Remote, recently discovered, overrun by the Swarm three years ago. Cleared two years after that. Currently home to a single science installation, personnel numbering approximately one hundred. Location of interest because said science lab had failed to answer routine communications for nearly six months.

We had orbital images of the planet that showed no trace of creep. Also the sky-eyes had closer shots of the lab complex that showed some damage, but it looked like natural phenomena had caused it. The lab was set at the base of a hill, and the hillside near the damaged buildings had a big scar in the vegetation. Looked like a landslide, and that was the theory we went on.

Up close, we didn't have any reason to think different. Rocks and mud from the hillside, along with tree trunks, were all churned together with the ruined walls of the damaged buildings. It was raining like hell, and it wasn't too hard to guess that landslides were pretty common in the jungle parts of Vygoire.

The lab complex was six buildings, with at least two subterranean levels we knew about from the schematics we had from the mission briefing. The building closest to the hill was a total loss. Two others were partially wrecked, but their roofs had held. The other three were undamaged. The whole area was fenced in, with a gate for vehicle traffic to the southwest. A two-track road led away from it into the jungle. Aggregate area was maybe

two acres. Near the gate there was a functional missile and radar installation, with an attached comm tower.

We went in on standard urban-recon protocols, clearing the lab complex building by building and room by room. I had Milner and Jouvert leading fire teams up front, hopscotching while the rest of us advanced in a support formation. We stayed tight because we didn't know what we were looking for. Pretty soon we were sure the lab was deserted, but it hadn't been for long. The power was on, and some of the automated processes were still chugging away. In the parts of it that weren't wrecked, anyway. I don't know what they were doing. We glanced through the central terminals and found something about a research project. It was focused on a common plant that produced a certain kind of psychoactive spore.

The other thing we saw all over the lab was weird graffiti: two curved lines that intersected about two-thirds of the way to the top of both. Like parentheses that had fallen into each other. It was drawn on desktops, scratched into the walls... a couple of places we saw it painted in what looked like blood, but on that first sweep we didn't stop to analyze it.

Human remains were present in two of the buildings, both near the hillside. We counted four sets of remains, but it was tough to tell because they were scattered around.

* * *

Listen to him. The shot turned him into a robot.

Better than the way he was raving before, wasn't it?

You're the doctor, Langridge. Keep him alive and talking. There are a lot of interested

parties waiting on the results of this mission.

* * *

There was a trail leading from the north side of the lab complex into the jungle. We followed it and found some evidence of Vygoire's recent zerg-infested past. A battle had taken place here. Pieces of armor and a crashed diamondback were still visible in the regrown jungle. It looked like our guys had been cutting a trail through the jungle—the trail we were walking on—and the zerg came out of the green from all sides. I had a little flashback to what that must have been like.

Jouvert scouted ahead and reported that the trail went down a ravine about a hundred meters ahead of the battle site. We pulled back to the perimeter of the lab complex, near the gate, and I made a quick status call to *Scion*. Also I figured that if the lab personnel were hiding out somewhere, they would be using their own frequency to communicate, so I had Hamzi patch us into the comm tower. While we waited for him to finish the patch and test it, we all popped our faceplates. Our Pigs—that's HPIGNUMs, Handheld Personal Information-Gathering and Navigation Units to you non-marines—were reading good air and no dangerous compounds or airborne microorganisms. Vygoire was starting to look pretty good. Breathable atmosphere, no zerg. Must have been tons of resources if this kind of jungle could grow there. *In a hundred years*, I remember thinking, *it'll be capital of this sector once the big industrials get prospectors out here and see what they've been missing.*

"Attention, personnel of the Vygoire scientific installation: this is Sergeant Norwood

Doakes of the Dominion Marine Corps," I said. "If you receive this message, please respond."

Nothing. I repeated the message and waited.

"They're dead," Milner said.

"What killed them, then? We ain't seen anything bigger'n my glove," Jouvert said.

"And the zerg have been cleared out for a year now."

I broke off the call and said, "That's what we're here to find out."

Nothing in our briefing had suggested that the native fauna on Vygoire were anything to worry about. It was a Permian-level ecosystem, all ferns and insects. But something had happened to the scientists. I pinged the *Scion* with an update on what we had found.

"Battlecruiser *Scion*. Report, Sergeant Doakes."

"Not much to report, *Scion*. The lab complex is deserted. Vygoire has no advanced life-forms, correct?"

"Correct."

"And the zerg were eradicated."

"Correct."

"You sure you got no signs of creep anywhere?"

"Negative. Vygoire's clean."

"We are continuing recon, then," I said. "Will update when we have located the lab personnel and we need extraction."

"Don't rush, Torch Seven. We are pulling out of this system on an emergency redeploy for escort duty."

"How long are we talking about, *Scion*? We're only carrying supplies for initial recon and return."

"Short duration. We will notify you when we are back in-system and extraction is available. Enjoy your vacation, Torch Seven. *Scion* out."

"Short duration," Jouvvert said when I had signed off. "Guess we better start building houses. Sarge, you can be the schoolteacher."

* * *

I piped up a slightly more formal version of the field report, attaching the research notes about the spores. Our Pigs weren't picking up anything dangerous, but my policy is when you don't know what's important, include everything.

Since we weren't getting any response from the science staff, we went back into recon mode. There was a clear footpath leading down the ravine. We followed it. Down at the bottom was a cleared space. In the middle of it was a tree trunk with the curved-line symbol carved all over it. It was one of the biggest trees I'd ever seen, even with its lower branches all snapped off and huge gouges taken out of its trunk. Surrounding it were ruts and furrows that looked like something real big had been doing acrobatics. Also there were little bits of unmistakably human remains.

"I told you: they're dead," Milner said.

"Some of them." The full lab staff had numbered a hundred or so. I couldn't make any precise estimate of how many sets of remains we'd found, but it wasn't anywhere near that. Even so, something was killing them.

The tactical part of my brain had been processing the terrain all the way from the edge of the lab compound to where we now stood. I took a look around to get a more complete picture. Just past a line of trees on the southern edge of the clearing, I could see water, what looked like a sizable lake. The stream that ran down the ravine drained into it. The north and east sides of the clearing ended in thickly forested and steep slopes. Back up the ravine, the lab compound was half a klick or so to the west-northwest.

On the side of the clearing across from the bottom of the ravine, another trail disappeared into the jungle gloom. This one looked like it followed around the edge of the lake, and judging from the way the trees rose up on the other side, it was the only way to get to the clearing from wherever the trail led. The trail itself was big enough for about six marines in full CMC armor to walk down side by side, and the trees on either side of it were scarred. Some of the smaller ones were uprooted or snapped off two or three meters from the ground. Freshly broken branches still dangled and oozed sap. I sent Chen over for a closer look, and he came back saying that there were tracks. Huge tracks. Quadruped, he said. I remember that word because he'd just gotten it out of his mouth when we heard the roar.

"What the hell is that?" Jouvert said. Torch Seven went to combat footing, weapons leveled, five-meter spacing, the whole routine.

Then something else happened that didn't make sense until later. One of my men went into full-on freakout. Started screaming out coordinates that didn't make any sense, racked his gauss, and went tear-assing across the clearing in the direction of the sound. He was saying something about gods, but I don't know which gods he meant.

I also think he said the words *Great One*, but at the time I didn't know why.

And I didn't have time to think about it because of the ultralisk that came tearing out of the jungle, right into the middle of our formation.

If you've never seen an ultralisk... it's bigger than a goddamn tank, and louder, and faster. Tall as four marines in full armor, and long enough that in the jungle you can be fighting the front end before you can even see the back of it coming out of the bush. It's got two pairs of scythes attached where wings might be on a dragon. They're called kaiser blades; I don't know why, but I've seen that they can do. They sweep through marine battle armor like it's tinfoil. You can unload a C-14 at an ultralisk until the barrel melts, and you'll only make it mad. Correction: madder. They're already mad. Ultralisks get out of bed mad and hungry. When they're done slashing you to bits, they stomp on the pieces of you before you're all the way dead.

This was my first time seeing one. I'd done all the simulations and seen all the files, but none of it does justice to the presence of the thing. Your first thought when you see an ultralisk is, *There's no way I can kill this thing.*

We hit it with everything we had, and it didn't even slow down. While we fired, I was shouting orders, getting Torch Seven to what cover there was, and trying like hell to figure out how you fought something like that with small arms in open ground. The answer is you don't.

Singh lost his legs and then his head before the ultralisk was all the way out into the clearing. Morrison was next, spiked on the tip of one of the blades and flung into the underbrush with his armor opened up and him spilling out of it. Then I lost track of specifics. Torch Seven took thirty percent casualties before their training asserted itself and they formed up in the only way that made sense: a covering-fire, get-the-hell-out retreat.

We backed straight up the ravine until it narrowed enough that the ultralisk could barely squeeze through. It stopped, and we kept firing, starting to do some damage as a spike here and there found a joint or a crack in its carapace.

Then it backed out of the ravine into the clearing, still roaring over the sound of our C-14s, and turned around to rumble back the way it had come. That was when I saw that Twohy, who had gotten us into this mess, was down under a fallen tree trunk the ultralisk had knocked over on its initial charge. The ultralisk didn't even see him, but it crushed his entire upper body flat as it passed by on its way back into the jungle. Part of him shot out from under its foot like ketchup squirting out of a ruptured commissary packet. It splattered across the churned-up ground in a curve of pink and red.

That's when the graffiti suddenly made sense. It was a warning. At least that's what we thought at the time. The curving, crossed lines were kaiser blades.

My comm was full of noise. Everyone was babbling, and behind it all was a strange kind of rumbling sensation, a dumb black rage that could never be satisfied. I've been on plenty of battlefields and killed plenty of things, but never in my life did I want to kill just for the sake of killing until right then. You know what I mean, right, Vera? You were there. I know you said it doesn't affect you, but that can't be true, it's everywhere, you can't escape—

* * *

He's starting to rave again. Is it too soon to give him another shot?

You know more about the spores than we do. You tell us.

I don't know that much more. It probably won't hurt him. He's a marine.

Yeah, but he's not one of the brain-panned ogres we usually deal with.

He's a marine. Give him the shot.

* * *

What?

Now, we thought we were on a rescue mission. We formed up, did what we could for the wounded, and called in evac for the dead.

Recovery call was denied even though *Scion* was going to be back in-system within hours. Word came down that *Scion* wasn't outfitted for atmospheric maneuvers, and dropships weren't coming down until the ultralisk was either taken care of or vacationing on the other side of the planet. "An ultra can tear a dropship in two," was the comm officer's pithy summation. "Report again when you've taken it out."

Well, shit. That was my highly trained and tactically astute reaction.

I said it out loud when we were attacked again.

This time it wasn't the ultralisk. Spears started coming out of the trees around us, and that was almost as surprising as the ultralisk. Who the hell would use spears against CMC-armored marines? The worst they could do was hurt your ears when one of them banged off your helmet. We laid down a suppressing fire, and I sent four guys in under it to take care of whatever native life-form was using us for target practice.

They came back with three humans wearing shredded clothes that used to be lab coats. Two men, one woman. All three raving about something they called the Great One,

which wasn't too hard to figure out. But the men were also in a panic because they were terrified of the doctor.

And who was the doctor?

"Van Rijn!" one of them screamed. He was full-on crazy, foaming at the mouth, veins in his forehead about to pop. He'd bitten his tongue while the marines brought him in, and I almost wanted to shoot him just so he'd shut up. But that's not the kind of example I want to set for the men. I mean, they may be brain-panned, but they're not animals. At least, not most of the time.

"Who's van Rijn?" I asked.

"The doctor! We have to get back so we can be next!"

"Next what?"

"Next for the Great One!" the captive cried, spraying bloody spit everywhere. I'd opened my visor to interrogate him, and I regretted it.

I took a step back. "You worked at the lab? With the doctor?"

One of my noncoms, Corporal Blodgett, said, "Our info on the lab says that Gerhardt van Rijn was the director. Also, Sarge, what about Twohy?"

"What about him?"

"The running down the ravine, shooting into the trees and screaming."

I saw where he was going. Twohy had gone nuts and run straight into the ultralisk's blades. Now we had three lab rats who sounded like they wanted to do the same thing, if that was what they meant by "next for the Great One."

Something was way out of whack here.

"Take us to him," I said.

The woman, who hadn't said a word until then, spoke up. "Wait. You're in charge?"

"He's in charge," Blodgett said.

She took a step toward me but stopped when the motion got six C-14s aimed at her.

"I need to talk to you," she said.

"So talk," I said.

"It's—just us," she said. She looked scared, but not of me. "Please."

Some of the men snickered. I knew what they were thinking but didn't bother to address it. "Step over here," I said, and led her a short distance away. "Okay. Talk."

"My name is Vera Langridge," she said.

"Okay, Vera Langridge."

"I was one of the lead researchers at the station. We were looking into the aftereffects of zerg creep on an ecosystem."

"Okay."

"That was when we found out about the spores."

It took me a second to catch up. "The spores mentioned in the lab reports?"

"You saw those?"

"We searched the lab before coming down here. What about the spores?"

Vera looked back toward her two pals, still surrounded by marines and blathering about how they had to get back to the doctor, and had to be next. "You don't understand!" one of them said to a marine who looked like he had no interest whatsoever in understanding.

"I'm immune to them."

"Immune?" The word set off a chain of associations in my head. "What do they do?"

"I'm still trying to figure it all out, but... oh, no. You and your men. You've all had your faceplates up since you were here?"

I thought about it. "Yeah."

"Then you're all infected too."

* * *

You too probably now, Doc.

No, my immunity has held up this far. I'm testing myself every hour.

We're still all going to be quarantined until Command gets a full analysis. Maybe even after that, depending on what it says.

It's a prudent measure. We've got Doakes as a subject affected by the spores, and me as a subject who isn't. Until the reason for that is clear, I'd quarantine all of us too.

Hurry up and figure it out, then.

* * *

There's not a word in the language I hate worse than *infected*. "Infected by what?!" I shouted at Vera.

"It's just a technical term," she said. "It doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"*Dead* is a technical term, too. And it means something. Now, what is this fekking spore, and what does it do?" I was thinking of the strange sensation I'd had at the end of the firefight, like a hallucination but more intense. A gateway, it had felt like, into a

consciousness so alien I couldn't even quite call it consciousness... Was that the spores? Was I already infected? I could still feel it, a little, like a new space had been opened in my mind, but with something other than me living in it. This put a whole new spin on the mission.

"I'm not completely sure," she said.

"Sarge," Haddawy said. I looked away from Vera, back at him, and saw that while I'd been getting the news that all of us were infested with spores, the lab personnel had shown up. They were in a loose group, all wearing variations on the shredded lab-coat ensemble we'd seen on Vera and the other two. At the center of the group stood the single exception. He was tall and had more hair on his face than on the rest of his head. His white coat was in pretty good shape. And he had carved the crossed-curve symbol into his forehead. The scar stood out against the wrinkles, pink and lumpy as if he'd rubbed something into the initial wound to make sure it didn't heal right.

"I am Gerhardt van Rijn," he said. "You are intruders, and not welcome. Leave Vygoire at once."

"Soon as we get what we came for," I said.

"What would that be?"

"You," I said. "And the rest."

"Impossible," van Rijn said. "We are here for the Great One now. Return my three—"

"No. You don't want to come, that's up to you. But I got wounded marines, and I'm going to get them to high ground and get the hell out of here before the ultralisk comes back. You want to feed yourselves to it, be my guest."

"You do not understand! The Great One is here for us, not we for him. One by one we

become part of it, as the merit of each individual permits." Van Rijn lifted his chin and placed a hand, fingers spread, on his chest. "I, of course, will join the Great One only after the rest of my children have made the journey."

"This guy's crazy," Haddawy said, loud enough for everyone to hear. I held up a hand for silence, but van Rijn had already heard.

"You will soon understand," he said. "You will meet the Great One."

"No!" shouted a number of the other lab rats. "Not him first!"

"Patience, children," van Rijn said with a chuckle. "The Great One will not return so soon. It has its own communion to undertake."

I had just figured out that he was saying the ultralisk was infected by the spores too when it came out of the jungle again.

I still can't decide whether it was eating them or not. Training materials told us that the Swarm had created the ultralisk out of the brontolith, which was a vegetarian. But I've seen the ultralisk swallow bits of my marines. Maybe that was an accident, but I don't think so. I also don't think the so-called Great One was content to digest the cultists one at a time. It wanted a full-on buffet spread, and when it burst from the trees, it nearly got one.

The scientists, or cultists, or whatever, ran like hell. Torch Seven moved like a single organism, striking and moving and also running like hell into the thicker underbrush.

This time the ultralisk came after them, and after us. Its blades scythed through the jungle, mowing down great swaths of trees and undergrowth as it charged after the cultists. It caught one of them and paused, tearing its victim into more pieces than I could count. The air around it was a storm of leaves and blood, and flowers torn loose and catching filtered sunlight through the jungle canopy. We held our fire for fear of taking down too

many of the scientists, but if I had it to do over again, I'd mow them right down.

Even with a fresh victim, or meal—or communion?—the ultralisk didn't stop. Lifting its head, it saw, or sensed, the two scientists, our original prisoners, who were fighting over the right to be vivisected and hadn't moved from where we'd left them. It obliged them both, kaiser blades slashing through them in a quick back-and-forth that left bits and strings of them dangling from rough spots on the ultralisk's carapace.

And I'll be goddamned if my head didn't start to get a little fuzzy again, like there were voices in it... and at the same time the ultralisk started to shake its head again. Not like it was attacking something, but like it was trying to clear its head.

The colonists had all stopped in their tracks. Some of them were crying; some had dropped to their knees. Over it all came their guru's voice.

"No, no, no!" van Rijn was screaming. "One at a time!"

"Torch Seven," I said on the open comm, "while the ultra has its snack, we are leaving. Rendezvous at the lab complex, double-quick."

It was hard to form words over the welter of voices in my head, and the strange feeling that I was experiencing things that weren't really happening. I tasted blood even though I hadn't been wounded. There was no time to think about it right then because I was hauling ass through the jungle back to the ravine, but right now it seems... Wait. I'm feeling it again.

* * *

No, no. Don't give him another shot yet. We need to observe this.

He's raving.

He's communing, Commander. That's what the spore does.

Communing with what?

Nothing right now because there's nothing to commune with. He's quarantined. That's why he's raving.

So if there were others infected by the spore...?

Yes. Including, as he says, the ultralisk itself. And by extension, the rest of the zerg. You see why this is important?

* * *

Report. Report. This is Sergeant Norwood Doakes of Torch Seven marines, reporting from the Great One... What?

What?

Right. The lab. We fell back into the lab complex and did a head count when we'd gotten deep down into its underground levels.

Some of the scientists came into the building, spaced and marching in unison as if they were in some kind of formal procession. At their head was van Rijn. None of them looked like they had just barely escaped death at the hands of a zerg monster. They were placid. They moved in unison. They made me think of what Vera had said about communion.

"What the hell did you do to that ultralisk?"

"I, alter the Great One?" van Rijn asked mockingly. "Impossible. It is what it is. We

seek to be part of it. When we join it, all of us experience the communion for a moment. Yet we must do it singly. When two or more go to the Great One at once, the impressions get garbled. The experience is not pure." He smiled at me as if I were a child just grasping a lesson. "As you have discovered."

"How do you know?"

Van Rijn tapped the side of his head. "I felt it. Just as you did." Then his demeanor changed, becoming lofty and stern. "Your presence has riled the Great One. It has become wanton in its hungers."

What I wanted to do was shoot him. Instead I said, "I don't think an ultralisk is known for delicate appetite. They start out wanton and get worse from there."

He sniffed. "So you would think, because your first experience was so confusing. It is your own fault, but you cannot be blamed for thinking as you do. We, however," he went on, spreading his arms to encompass his followers, "understand the purity of the communion. And the two moons are about to reunite. Thus we go forth to seek it again."

Without another word, the scientists processed out just as they had come in.

"Vera," I said. "Two moons unite?"

"You will have noticed that Vygoire has two satellites," she said. I had in fact noticed that but hadn't thought it unusual. "One of them orbits faster than the other, and they appear to overlap once every twenty-three days. That's when van Rijn starts the ritual."

So it wasn't unusual unless you had spores. "And that's today?"

She nodded. "Well, tonight."

It was hard for me to believe that the ultralisk waited around for the twenty-three days to pass. "What do they do in the meantime?"

"Hide," she said. And with a shiver added. "Close together. The spores apparently have an effect on the parts of the brain that predispose human beings to ritual behavior."

"There are parts of the brain that do that?" Haddawy wondered.

"You'd be surprised," Vera answered. "The spores act on them, and that, together with the way they create links among minds... it's unpredictable but very powerful."

"All right. Enough. We're supposed to rescue these fekkleheads?" Jouvert grouched. "They don't want rescuing. This is the part where we call down dropships and watch the nukes fall from orbit. Right, Sarge?"

"Not just yet," I said. "We can't get evac if there's an ultralisk running around. The *Scion* can't make planetfall. Do you want to trust their accuracy from orbit? Doesn't do us much good if they nuke the ultra and take us with it."

There was a brief pause as the surviving marines of Torch Seven fired up their gerbil wheels and reached the conclusion I knew they had to. "So if we don't take out the ultralisk, we don't leave," Iger said.

"That's about the size of it, boys," I said.

"Well, shit." Haddawy this time.

* * *

Now you have it from the horse's mouth, so to speak. Direct testimony. How much longer can we wait?

However long it takes. This could change everything.

You ask me, we should nuke the whole place. Scientists or no scientists, quarantine or

no quarantine.

Not a chance. This is too good to pass up. This is not a zerg organism, but it can control the zerg. Do you understand what that means? Not to mention applications in small-unit tactics and God knows what else.

Fine, Dr. Langridge, but if you want me to make that case to Command, we need the rest of Doakes's report. Fast.

Understood. The regular stimpacks aren't doing the job anymore. We're going to have to try something a little experimental.

Try whatever you need to try. As long as it works.

* * *

"Okay," I said. "Here's the plan."

I knew that any installation like this one would have compressed vespene tanks for an energy source. And I knew that some of my surviving marines were clever mechanics, no matter their other societal and criminal failings. So what I decided to do was turn those vespene tanks into a bomb, put the bomb at the chokepoint at the base of the rock slope where it curved toward the ravine, and bring the whole goddamn hill down on the ultralisk the next time it tried to chase us up from the clearing.

It took less than two hours to pull the vespene tanks and wire them up with a couple of grenades and a Pig repurposed as a remote detonator. Then we moved out, and a team laid the tanks in a crevice right at the base of the ravine under an overhanging rock with the kaiser-blade glyph carved into its face. If the bomb and the rockfall didn't kill the

ultralisk, at least then it would have to come up after us instead of charging across flat ground. Our only problem was van Rijn. He and his "children" fought us the whole way, lying down in front of the ravine and trying to form human chains. We threw them aside without much trouble, but I turned down no less than one million formal requests to shoot them all so we could get on with taking down the ultralisk.

"Great One," they chanted. "Great One, we come to you."

The ultralisk was nowhere in sight. "Where does it go?" Haddawy wondered.

Jouvert snorted. "Who cares?"

That about summed it up.

Not one of my marines had opened his faceplate since we'd heard about the spores. We could see what prolonged exposure had done to the scientists. I asked Vera about it. "Cumulative exposure might or might not be more intense," she said. "I haven't had time to study it."

They wanted her back, too, or at least van Rijn did. He eyeballed her from the center of the group of lab rats after I detailed four marines to push them out of the way and stand guard. In his look you could see lust, disappointment, and curiosity, all at once. No wonder she didn't want to go back.

"It's all in place," Haddawy reported. "Now all we need is an ultralisk."

"That's my cue," I said.

My thinking was that if the ultralisk was used to having someone tied to the pole for whatever ritual van Rijn had concocted, it would know when that was happening. The spores, see? It might even be in tune with their timing and have some kind of Pavlovian anticipation going. So I would go down; the ultralisk would come running; and I'd get the

hell out of there back up the ravine. "You don't gotta do that, Sarge," Jouvert said.

"I wouldn't volunteer someone else," I said. "I'll do it."

So I did. I went down the ravine alone, walked straight out into the middle of the clearing littered with the shreds and scraps of my dead marines, and leaned a hand on the pole. And waited. I could hear the colonists shouting and chanting from up above, and I kind of wished we'd smoked the whole bunch. When I looked up at the sky, I could see the two moons, just touching.

It didn't take long. I got a feeling first, a flood of adrenaline and then the psychological rush that comes when you know you've got the upper hand and you're about to deliver the killing blow. My heart rate went through the roof, and I started to sweat. I wanted to open my faceplate but held myself back, just barely.

I heard it roar before I saw it. I felt the impact of its footsteps coming up through the soles of my CMC. But I waited. Partially because I knew I needed to get it chasing me, but also because I was feeling the communion. I heard the chants of van Rijn's nutcases in the back of my head, and I felt the ultralisk's roar like the call of a god.

Then it tore out of the jungle into the clearing, and I woke up real fast.

I also ran real fast. When I passed the vespene bomb, I called out, "Set it off in ten! Repeat, ten!" Then I skidded through sloppy gravel, splashed through the shallows of the stream running out of the ravine, and set some kind of galactic record for climbing at a dead sprint in marine armor.

I'd been well ahead of the ultralisk when I started running. Now it was close enough that if I slowed to look over my shoulder, it'd be the last thing I ever did. I could swear I felt it breathing down my neck, but that might have been an effect of the communion spores.

My men started firing down from their positions at the very head of the ravine; I'd kept them back so the explosion didn't drop them down in the middle of a rockslide. The C-14 spike sustains muzzle velocity pretty well up to a few hundred meters, and I heard impacts on the ultralisk's hide.

You want to know what's crazy? I also kind of wanted to stop. I was still hearing "Great One, Great One, Great One..." and I wanted communion.

But the shockwave from the detonation blew that desire away. Then it knocked me flat on my face, hard enough to take chips out of my faceplate. I scrambled to my feet and kept running until rocks and pieces of trees stopped landing around me. Then I spun around just as a rolling cloud of smoke billowed up out of the ravine and obscured everything. "Torch Seven, report," I said. "Who's got visual observations?"

"Now?" Haddawy said. "Nobody. Let me run— Yeah, infrared is showing fading heat signatures down there, but those are probably cooling rocks that were heated up by the explosion."

"The ultralisk, marine! I don't care about rocks," I said.

"I know, Sarge. Okay. The ultralisk... I don't know," he said. "I can't see it, but zerg don't always have good heat signatures anyway."

It had started raining, I noticed belatedly, and the smoke was swirling away in the breeze accompanying the storm front. "Hold," I said to the platoon, and held myself too, looking down the ravine as the smoke cleared.

The explosion had collapsed the whole bottom third of the ravine. If we hadn't had our faceplates down, it would have blown our eardrums even from three hundred meters away. The echoes were still dying away as the last of the smoke dissipated in the rain. I

couldn't see the ultralisk, or any motion.

I climbed the rest of the way to where the remains of Torch Seven held a position just above the head of the ravine. From there you couldn't see down to ground zero of the vespene bomb. "Jouvert," I said. "Take a peek."

Jouvert headed for the first ledge on the right-hand side. He tested the ledge to see if it had been loosened by the explosion, then stepped out onto it. I could see him running scans in various wavelengths. He was a good scout.

There was a rumble from down in the ravine as rocks settled in the aftermath of the explosion.

Then Jouvert dropped his scanner and ran.

Right behind him came the ultralisk.

We opened up as the ultralisk charged over the lip of the ravine and tore Jouvert to pieces with a back-and-forth double swipe of its blades. While his limbs were still flying, C-14 spikes were hammering into the ultra's head and front legs.

The colonists took advantage of the situation as their four guards decided ultralisk duty was more important than herding them. Crying out, "Great One!", they ran toward it. *Toward* it. And they died, man.

Right in the middle of it all came the call: "Torch Seven, this is your extraction alert. Rendezvous previous drop point immediately."

"We are under attack," I answered. This was not the same comm officer I'd talked to the last time. I could have argued about why we were getting this call when we'd been told we weren't going to get this call, but those conversations never went anywhere with staff officers. "Will reach drop point ASAP." We were in fact only about a klick from it.

"Torch Seven, what is the nature of the attack?"

"Ultralisk."

"Repeat."

"I said it's a goddamn ultralisk, *Scion*! The same goddamn one I told you about before! You said Vygoire was clear, but I've got marines in pieces down here!"

The comm officer ignored this. They're professionals at ignoring things. "Status of the lab personnel?"

The ultra had closed the distance and was now among us. I could see that the explosion and rockfall had taken a toll on it. Zerg ichor was leaking from fractures in its carapace, and its left rear leg was clearly broken. "Concentrate fire on that leg!" I ordered.

"What was that, Torch Seven?"

"Wasn't talking to you, *Scion*." I started shooting at the ultralisk, and after everything that had happened, that was the moment I let it get too close. It reared up over a group of van Rijn's "children," its kaiser blades spread and then lashing down into them. They raised their arms to meet it. Cries of "Great One!" rang over the field and in my head, too. I even heard it in the comm. Some of my marines were saying it even as they shot at the ultralisk. I was covered in bits of van Rijn's people. Vera was at the edge of the field. I remember seeing her standing apart, close enough to the lab complex to make a break for it if necessary but close enough to the battle to see what was happening. She was studying.

Studying the communion.

"Extraction cannot commence with an ultralisk in the area, Torch Seven. We are aborting."

At least he agreed with the last comm guy about that. And I didn't have time to argue

about it because a backswing from one of the ultralisk's kaiser blades knocked me down, denting the side of the armor's torso hard enough to crack my ribs. I hit and rolled, the ultralisk's pillar-like foot slamming into the ground next to my head and splattering mud and blood across my faceplate. I thought it was about to stomp my brains out the way it had Twohy's.

Then it charged ahead, over me. As it passed, I jammed my C-14 into the hollow behind its left front leg and ripped off a long burst. Ichor exploded from the wound, splattering all the places on my faceplate that didn't already have mud on them. I was blind, but I could hear it somehow, hear its fury and its pain. The ultra's momentum tore the C-14 from my hands, and it kept going, cutting a trail through the rest of my men on its way to the cultists. I heard them in my mind, dying.

Scrambling to my feet, I swiped the mud and ichor from my faceplate in time to see the ultralisk bear down on its most devoted worshiper. "GREAT ONE!" van Rijn screamed out, loud and long, and I swear his voice was still sounding after the ultralisk scythed his body into eight or ten bloody pieces with an X-pattern sweep of its kaiser blades. They snicked against each other as they passed through van Rijn's torso, with a scraping sound that set my teeth on edge right through the filters in the CMC audio sensors.

The cultists treated the ultralisk like they were teenagers, and it was the latest holo heartthrob. They fell on it, clinging to its sides and throwing themselves under its feet. It was killing them as fast as it could, but the remnants of Torch Seven were still firing. They'd quit caring about the cultists as collateral damage, and they unloaded on the ultra with everything they had left.

All the while the lead dropship pilot was yammering in my ear. "Torch Seven,

rendezvous is right now. Repeat, rendezvous is right now. *Scion* requires status update on the surviving lab personnel."

I got to my feet and got my C-14 back in my hands. It was coated and dripping purple with the ultralisk's blood. I wasn't sure it would fire.

But the ultralisk was dying.

I thought I might be too. Everything seemed washed in a hypercolored aura. My eyes were watering. I looked down at myself and realized I wasn't standing up anymore. The world started to spin, and I felt the consciousness of the ultralisk, dying and striving to live on pure rage alone. I think I was babbling something into the comm, and I know the dropship pilot was still talking. I heard her voice right along with the presence of the ultralisk's... *mind* isn't exactly the right word. I felt its presence in my head.

I looked down at myself and noticed that one of my legs was pointing in a bad direction, the armor bent and broken around the knee joint. The ultra's nails, each as thick as my wrist, had gashed the surface in a twisted sunburst pattern. "You stepped on me," I said to the ultralisk.

It didn't answer. It was too busy dying. I fell on my side and slapped at my Pig. "Torch Seven," I said. Or I think I said. "Torch Seven calling for communion."

I meant to say extraction. But the Great One's dying... thoughts? ...were starting to speak for me.

Yeah. That was the spores. I don't know how they work. I'm just trying to tell you what happened so that you can turn this ship around and burn that fekking ball of jungle and contagion before it gets anyone else. Spores. You can't see them. I've got them. How do you know you don't?

How do you know Vera isn't carrying them, just because she doesn't get the communion? Let me tell you the rest of it. No, no, no, don't give me another shot. Don't...

I got her on the ship. And the rest of Torch Seven. Thirty of us went down; nine came back. Where are the rest of my men?

I'm about to go to sleep. Vera, Vera, don't let them...

Great One. I can hear you.

* * *

*He's raving again. Is he going to survive the trip? And are there any surviving lab staff?
We'll need data.*

We've got plenty of data right back there in the med-bay. I've already told the medics to stabilize only. We're not going to purge the spores.

Dr. Langridge, you are the only one who is immune to the communion spore.

So far.

Doakes is on life support. He's calling for you whenever he's conscious.

I told you: he's in quarantine, and that's hard when the spore is active. Once we can get him to a secure facility in a civilized part of the sector, we can...

You have a sample, you're saying? You have enough to do what you want to do?

Commander, I'm under strict orders to—

Dr. Langridge, I have no interest in your orders. Whatever you do with this spore, you're going to do with the amount Doakes is carrying. Scion is nuking Vygoire as of now.

Commander, I must insist—

Dr. Langridge. You mentioned orders. Who from?

I'm not at liberty to say.

And you just happen to be immune to the spores? While you're researching them on orders you won't tell me about?

It's time for this conversation to be over, Commander.

He just asked a good question. Where are the rest of his men?

Taken care of. Now, as I said, this conversation needs to be over.

That guy in there fought an ultralisk. For you.

For me? He's a marine. He did what he was told. Just like I am now. This is much bigger than him. Much, much bigger. He's a carrier now. That's all. You may make your report to Command. Tell them Vygoire is no longer a problem, and tell them to have a lab ready for me when we return.