

STARCRRAFT
HEART OF THE SWARM

ICEHOUSE

By Michael O'Reilly and Robert Brooks

“There are many paths to death. There is only one to victory”. —Icehouse Precept #1

Gabriel Feltz couldn't breathe. The recycled air stank of hot trash, getting worse every time the twenty-four other poor bastards in the hold exhaled. They lay on the hard floor in the dark, the shaking of the ship's hull thrumming through them all. Gabriel hadn't managed more than a few minutes of sleep at a stretch for days.

The shaking ended with a thump that caused some passengers to cry out. The doors opened, and light streamed in. They might have been grateful were it not for the simultaneous blast of cold air. It struck like a physical blow, blanketing skin and constricting the throat. There seemed to be nothing outside but the light and the smell of snow.

Then a large shadow strode forward and stood between the doors. Everyone knew what it was. Six feet tall and built like a statue, a massive slab of gun in its hands. It pointed the rifle and shouted.

"Everyone up! Forty seconds till you freeze! Move it!"

Gabriel shuffled out with the rest of them, shielding his eyes against blowing ice. He yelped as his feet left the ramp and landed in a foot of snow. More guards in combat armor herded the prisoners toward a massive set of doors that opened before them like the jaws of hell. Some warmth came from that entrance, and the group surged into it.

When the doors shut, the lights illuminated their new home. It was certainly manmade, all steel and wires, a corridor leading farther into wherever they were. A guard barked a command and they moved on until they reached another door. Beyond that was a hall big enough for five hundred men.

"Line up!" shouted the guard. "The warden shall inspect you!"

Warden Kejora stood in the very center of the Hub, hands behind his back, looking over the dozens of screens before him. Each one showed new arrivals. He liked the look of none of them. Not a surprise. A small percentage of humanity was resistant to resocialization in some way, but even among that tiny group, his program only received the dregs: pirates, petty crooks, murderers. Maybe a political dissident or two.

Not for the first time he considered having them all shot, but that wasn't his job. Emperor Mengsk wanted reapers, and by god, he'd get reapers.

"Tell me about that one," Kejora said, pointing. "Seventh in line."

It was a short, underfed young man, a boy in truth. His head and bare shoulders were decorated with acid burns, the lower arms crisscrossed with scars. The eyes that looked out from the battered face were like a protoss's, wide open, betraying nothing.

One of the analysts, an ensign, called up the answer. "Private Samuel Lords, age twenty-two. Multiple counts of assault, misuse of military equipment, and destruction of military property. Six counts of murder. Psych profile is a hell of a read, sir."

"I can imagine. What's the story behind his scars?"

"The wounds on his head happened on a zerg-held world, sir. He was one of the first to make the drop against a hive cluster. The op wasn't well planned; whole squad got hit with zerg biotoxins. Somehow he survived. The other injuries were self-inflicted."

Kejora magnified the screen's view over the tracery of ruined tissue about Lords's head, thinking about the boy's crime sheet. Who knew how many synapses had been bathed in alien poison, turning that kid into a golem? The training would discern how much use he was. The warden zoomed out and returned to the others.

Most of the new inmates kept their gazes forward or down. A few looked at the guards in a challenging way. But one pair of eyes darted to and fro, on the verge of panic.

Kejora had never seen anyone so terrified in the hall before. "Who the hell's that? Twentieth in line."

The techs tapped away at their computers, but after several minutes, they still hadn't answered. He turned to find three of them huddled over a screen.

"What is it?"

"We've got next to nothing, sir. Name's Gabriel Feltz, picked up from a colonial outpost. No criminal record, no details, not even a note on neural aptitude."

Kejora frowned. It wouldn't be the first time a bureaucrat had skimped on paperwork. "Send a request to Korhal. We need more than that."

"It will take them at least a day to get back to us. Should we pull Feltz from the lineup?"

"No. Patch me through." A few clicks later, and the yellow light in front of the microphone at the center of the Hub lit up.

Kejora's voice boomed through the hall. "Welcome to the Torus system, prisoners. You are here because nobody else in the entire galaxy wants anything to do with you. This is your final

chance to make yourselves useful to the Dominion. There are only a few rules here, but they boil down to a simple concept: you will become a reaper, or you will die trying. Do what you must."

***"Victory is worth any cost. The cost is always high."* —Icehouse Precept #2**

Shivers rippled through the line of inmates, as they always did. Kejora never failed to enjoy it.

"Training begins after your next sleep cycle. It ends when I say it does." A pause, and he finished with, "Welcome to the Icehouse."

The guards motioned the inmates to another set of doors, deeper into the complex.

The guards did not follow them inside, and the heavy doors locked shut. Some of the inmates looked around for their new custodians. Robots, each a head higher than a man, were positioned in alcoves along the corridor, armored and armed with twin gauss cannons. They did not move, but Gabriel imagined they could spring into motion on their tracked wheels any moment.

None of the inmates seemed interested in testing them.

A prim, feminine voice spoke. Some complained, muttering curses on adjutants and the like. The voice formally welcomed them to the reaper training facility, and said it hoped that they would prove worthy contributors to the Dominion. The young man with the scarred head managed a dark laugh at that.

The adjutant happily described the facility as if reading from a holiday brochure. It almost made the place sound attractive, but you didn't have to look far to see the ugly signs of what was to come. The air was dry and cool yet smelled cooked. On a wall panel was a red, dried patch... no prizes for guessing what that was.

The sense of being watched was palpable. Gabriel glanced up and saw clusters of sensory apparatus all across the ceiling—thermal sensors, motion detectors, cameras, who knew what else. So much for privacy.

At last they reached the dormitory. It turned out to be a section filled with cells, and they weren't empty. A hundred men who probably had arrived only a few hours earlier emerged to greet the newcomers.

Gabriel knew this wouldn't be a pleasant encounter. He tried to make himself less conspicuous. Doubtless someone would be sized up, challenged, and made an example of. As if in answer to his thoughts, a rangy hill of a man swaggered toward the new inmates, grinning like a crocodile.

"What's this here?" came a coarse voice.

Everybody was looking at the victim the brute had picked—the scarred kid. The larger man still had the reptilian smile on his face; he was dying to swing a punch, but he wanted to play first.

"Where you from, runt?"

"I dunno." No fear. No emotion at all.

"*I dunno*," the big guy mimicked, evoking nasty laughter around him. "How about your name? You too dumb to know your own name?"

"The Lisk."

Gabriel felt his arms prickle.

***"Inmates must pay the price for their own survival."* —Icehouse Precept #3**

"Oh yeah? You're a mutalisk? Look at 'im. I think he needs a new name. Maybe *Runtalisk*. Little rat... What the—?"

Gabriel couldn't see what the big guy saw, but others could, and they weren't laughing. It was then the kid made his move. He punched the lug in the stomach, hard, doubling him over. A rapid series of vicious kicks to the side toppled the larger man, who fell and lay there, mewling softly.

The kid looked about him, smiling. It was a ghastly smile, all filed teeth and scabbed gums, a monster's smile.

"It's just the Lisk."

Their sleep cycle didn't last long. An alarm battered their ears until all occupants exited their cells.

They were herded to the canteen, where a machine dispensed their first meal, an unwholesome goop of nutrients and god knew what else. It tasted of nothing; it did not satisfy, but it was all that was given. A larger inmate snatched away Gabriel's bowl after only a couple bites. He decided not to make an issue of it.

Nobody went near the Lisk as he ate, the paste leaking out of gaps in his teeth.

The adjutant invited them back to the hall, which had been converted to a sadist's idea of a track-and-field course. The inmates were ordered to run, jump, bend, stretch, dash, catch, again and again. A set of sentry guns kept them moving.

The first day ended, leaving every man an exhausted, battered mess yearning for rest.

It was going to get worse.

The days bled together. There was no consistent cycle. The time for sleep was at the adjutant's whim. The food never changed, but the training did.

It wasn't enough to say that machines ran the Icehouse. The Icehouse *was* a machine. Every room contained a robot of some sort, many devoted to but one aspect of training. The robots took on the forms of moving targets, sparring partners for combat techniques, obstacles. There was no leniency, no slacking, no way for the inmates to take it easy.

The worst days were in the sim-cages. Each inmate was led to a coffin-shaped array of bulbs, wires, and straps, and the adjutant invited him to lie within it. Refusal wasn't an option.

What followed was nothing short of a nightmare. Lights and sounds were fed directly into the brain, chosen to inspire an emotion. Gabriel would lie strapped in one of the devices, his feelings plucked like strings. He would feel ecstatic joy and numbing despair, terror that made him want to destroy himself rather than endure.

Each session ended the same for every inmate: crawling out and falling to the ground, weeping and shaking. Even the Lisk responded to this treatment, though his eyes were more avid than wretched.

After three weeks, one man did not wake up. The adjutant ordered the inmates to vacate the cells. Gabriel caught a glimpse of a quivering wreck on a bunk, blood caking his mouth. When they returned, he was gone.

"There's something about you."

Gabriel looked up from the bench. The Lisk was talking to him. The nut hadn't talked to anyone since they'd first arrived. "What do you mean?"

"Ain't as scared as you should be." The Lisk grinned. His sharpened teeth made him look anything but happy. "The others take your food. Take your bunk. Make you wait for the latrine. You down at the bottom. You should be more afraid."

"Thanks, I think," Gabriel said, and ate another spoonful of his bland gruel. Nobody else had approached the table since the Lisk had sat down. Maybe Gabriel would get to eat the entire bowl today.

"Inmates must protect themselves at all times. Regard every calm moment as a battlefield, and every battlefield a calm moment". —Icehouse Precept #4

"Wasn't complimenting you," the Lisk said. There was no malice in his words, just unnerving curiosity. "You act weak. You look weak. But you ain't scared. So you ain't actually weak. You hiding."

Gabriel suspected the Lisk wouldn't accept a denial. "I figure things'll get worse here before they get better," he said. "Maybe I'll have an advantage if they underestimate me."

The Lisk didn't seem to hear him. He stared at the bright purple bruise on Gabriel's arm. "You didn't need to get that."

That was true enough. The course had been covered with robots firing rubber bullets. The machines were slow moving, couldn't duck or dodge, and they could barely track a running target. It should have been the easiest thing to evade.

Then a robot had projected a hologram of a child, not solid, not even well rendered, but it had startled him, making him hesitate. The robot shot him in the arm as punishment.

"Couldn't help myself," he said, but the Lisk made that awful smile of his.

"Yes, you can. I see it. I don't think they do." He pointed at the ceiling.

Gabriel laughed. "Lisk, anyone ever tell you you're a little weird?"

The Lisk shrugged. "Just am."

Kejora was far from idle. Every day he watched his charges, arranged their rotations, managed their nutrient batches. They didn't realize that they had eaten eighteen different meals so far, each one an individual concoction of steroids, neutralizers, hormone retardants, and what boiled down to poison. The batches were something of a guessing game, and as good as the success rate was, there were always one or two failures in the early stages of the training cycle.

He looked over the recording of prisoner Henisall's autopsy. As he watched the dissection, he spoke to the doctor standing to his left. "So you've no idea what killed him?"

"I suspect it was batch seventeen, though still not sure how."

"Okay, put them back on sixteen, and we won't use seventeen until a full analysis has been completed."

The doctor nodded and left the Hub. Kejora returned to the screens. Inmates queued for their tasteless porridge.

Minutes later came a moment he'd seen over and over these past weeks, when an inmate by the name of Polek snatched Feltz's food. Feltz had let it happen every time. Not now.

Kejora almost laughed as Feltz rose from his seat and clouted Polek in the back of the head. Food and inmates scattered as the two men crashed into each other. Screams of encouragement shook the mess hall. Even the technicians in the Hub stopped their work to watch.

Kejora carefully observed Feltz. The recruit's fighting skill had improved, but he was playing catch-up. Polek had probably brawled twice a week during his formative years. Feltz might have never been in a real fight at all.

Polek smashed Feltz in the face with his opening blow, staggering the smaller man. Three swift punches later, and Feltz was down. Polek pinned him to the ground. Feltz didn't have much of a chance after that. His heavier opponent batted his arms away and proceeded to pummel him like a piece of dough. The inmates egged it on. It was a massacre.

Kejora couldn't keep a frown off his face. Policy dictated that he not interfere. *Regard every calm moment as a battlefield, and every battlefield a calm moment.* If Feltz couldn't hack it, he wasn't cut out to be a reaper.

***"Your enemy is your greatest teacher. Learn well."* —Icehouse Precept #5**

On the other hand, Kejora had authored those rules. He decided he could forgive himself.

He punched a button, and sirens went up through the mess hall. The yellow light in front of the microphone lit up. "Meal time is over. Return to training." Slowly the inmates complied, Polek rising with some reluctance. They filed out of the canteen, leaving Feltz by himself, unmoving.

Kejora turned to one of the techs. "I want a med team to pick him up and treat him. I want him talking."

"Sir?"

"Korhal hasn't responded yet, and I'm tired of waiting for answers. That man does not belong here. I want to know who thought he did."

* * *

A thousand bruises fought for Gabriel's attention the moment he woke up, but the pain was far away, a mere silhouette on the horizon. He felt nice, even though he couldn't move. Straps held him tightly to a bed that was too clean to be his cell bunk.

"Awake at last."

Gabriel turned his head toward the source of the voice. All he could see were pretty lights swimming around a vague shape. A vague, *impossible* shape that was changing with each heartbeat.

"Why are you an apple? It's rude for an apple to melt into ice cubes." Gabriel giggled.

The voice barked a quick laugh. "Enjoy the painkillers while they last, Feltz." Gabriel heard a machine hiss softly, and the feeling of peace evaporated in an instant. The sight of a thousand dancing ice cubes resolved into the view of a brightly lit medical room and Warden Kejora.

"Feel better?"

Gabriel's heart raced, and his mind spun around in circles. He felt alert, and the pain wasn't so distant anymore. "No. Very no."

"Get used to it. It's the same cocktail they put in stimpacks, only watered down by a factor of six or so. Helps you focus even under unpleasant conditions." The warden took a seat next to his bed. "Inmates usually have to earn medical treatment through exceptional performance, Feltz. You haven't been here long enough to qualify. I'm breaking the rules just for you."

"I'm flattered."

"I'm flattered, *sir*," Kejora said.

Gabriel briefly considered defiance. Very briefly. "Yes, sir."

"My people have a dozen different theories on who you are, Feltz." Kejora's eyes never left his.

"The only thing we can agree on is that you're not Icehouse material. Intelligent, focused, empathetic people don't belong here."

"Never allow your enemies to lull you with a false front. Look behind their deception, and the threat shall reveal itself to you". —Icehouse Precept #6

Gabriel couldn't keep sarcasm out of his voice. "Sorry to disappoint you, sir."

"How did you end up here?"

"Sir?"

The warden leaned forward. "What crime did you commit? Why are you here?"

"You don't know?" Gabriel said, hurriedly adding, "Sir?"

"Pretend I don't."

"Yes, sir." Gabriel gathered his thoughts. If ever his story needed to sound solid...

"My brother and I were part of a new resettlement a year and a half ago. Turned out to be a bad decision."

"Resettlement is a hard life."

"It's an *impossible* life with the Dominion running the show. First the red tape, then the abolishment of personal supplies, and within two months they had to press-gang half the colony into the mines just to keep the malcontents contained underground for fourteen hours a day. My brother was forced along with them; then he went missing."

The warden nodded. "So you did something about it."

"I went to the magistrate to ask a couple questions. He didn't want to hear about it, so I asked louder. When he threw me out of his office, I managed to tip over a bottle of his scotch on his shirt. His grunts went to work on me, and I woke up on the shuttle to the Icehouse."

Warden Kejora stared in disbelief. "That's it?"

"You don't believe me."

"I believe that a colonial lackey would *want* to send someone here just for messing up his suit. I just don't believe he *could*." Kejora seemed lost in thought. "It's not easy to land in the Icehouse, Feltz, and you don't fit in."

"Sorry for lousing up the place, sir. What do you plan on doing about it?"

Kejora smiled. "Nothing."

"What?"

"The Dominion needs reapers. That's enough for me."

"That's... Sir..." Gabriel sputtered.

"Cut the throttle, inmate," Kejora said. "We build reapers out of *nothing*. Most of your neighbors down in the cellblock aren't worth the transportation costs to get them out here, but we give them a chance anyway. Maybe ten or fifteen percent of them rise to the challenge. The rest don't. No big loss.

"But you," Kejora continued, "you have more than half a brain. Until today, you backed down from the fights you couldn't win. Raw power isn't everything. If you can square up to this, you'll be one of the finest assets in the service. My reapers have received commendations from the most respected commanders in the Dominion. My reapers put the fear of the devil in our enemies every moment in combat, and do you know why?"

"We do what we must," Gabriel whispered.

"Damn right." Kejora stood up. "Take that to heart. If you want to live, train and fight like the others and get through my program."

"That simple, huh?"

Kejora ignored the absence of a "sir." "You'll be fit for training in two days. I suggest you start making friends who can fend off more beatings."

Gabriel waited for Kejora to walk to the door. "I'll do what I must, *sir*." Something in his tone made the warden turn around.

"We'll see."

Gabriel felt the cameras and sensors tracking him at all times. He managed to avoid any more confrontations with Polek, and the Lisk helped scare off attacks from others.

After three months the adjutant ushered them to a room they had never entered before. It was the closest thing to a treat they'd had in the Icehouse. The long, narrow room was lined with a series of armored suits. Smaller and leaner than a marine CMC, each bore a large jetpack on its shoulders. The suits, inert as they were, looked ready to leap. The Lisk smiled at the sight.

When the adjutant ordered the inmates into the suits, there were no jokes. Just eagerness. Within minutes, the next phase of training began, and the Icehouse managed to get worse.

The first challenge was the jetpack. The inmates initially had no control over the boosters; it all belonged to the adjutant, which seemed to delight in igniting the things at the worst moments, launching men into ceilings and walls until they learned to steer. Concussions were common. Two recruits died from skull fractures.

They began training with new weapons. The "Scythe" P-45 gauss pistol was a small spitting monster, the suit barely compensating for the recoil. The shooting range was torn to shreds. Several men were cut down by fellow inmates.

When they finally reached seventy-five percent accuracy, the adjutant congratulated them. Then it asked them to use two at once.

Last there was the D-8 explosive charge, designed to blow apart structures. It had more than enough power to plaster the less attentive against the wall. Bomb prep and disposal were the objectives, but the conditions were extreme and relentless: loud noises, total darkness or blinding light, rooms where gravity was suspended. Injuries and fatalities stacked up quickly.

The inmates battled on. Some died in action; others were found dead like Henisall; a few were suicides. Gabriel kept going. There wasn't a choice.

Kejora had a new addition to his routine. Before lights out, he would review the training footage of Gabriel Feltz. He couldn't explain why. Well, he could, but he wasn't ready to admit it.

These last two years in the Torus system had been productive and satisfying. Once out of the Icehouse, the reapers went where they were needed, safeguarding Dominion interests with fire

and death. Medals and accolades, many of them posthumous and classified, trickled back to the Icehouse, the names of the receivers joining a growing list of success stories.

But never before had an innocent man been subjected to the Icehouse, so Kejora watched and worried. It was a threat, a very simple one. What if someone found out? What if the story of Gabriel Feltz, the colony boy with a streak of incredibly bad luck, hit the nightly news on UNN? Even those talking heads would risk wrath from up the ladder for a lead that good.

The notion of a leak wasn't unlikely. Somebody had already violated protocol: Feltz should never have been sent here. Kejora still hadn't tracked down the person responsible. The magistrate hadn't returned his calls, and the computer logs suggested that nobody had actually given the order to have Feltz transferred.

The notes from the techs weren't helping, either. Feltz's character was the center of plenty of debate. His behavior had changed. The loner attitude was gone. Instead he'd established some bonds with others, especially Lords—the one who called himself the Lisk. The two ate together at every meal and teamed up during exercises and sparring matches. To most observers, they had become fast friends.

Kejora let the technicians speculate; he hadn't told them about the advice he had offered to the recruit. Feltz knew getting close to the scariest man in the Icehouse kept less friendly attention off him.

Still... Feltz was improving. Dramatically. Moreover, he was showing an unusual aptitude for tactics and strategy. Leadership potential. What if he joined the ranks of the reapers?

He would be a successful test case, Kejora realized. Feltz would be living proof that the reaper program needed skilled, intelligent recruits, instead of just squeezing the last few drops of value from the defective dregs of humanity. The reapers were already widely sought for frontline

action, but if they could be even better, every commander in the Dominion would demand that Kejora receive a better class of recruit.

In short, if Feltz was victorious, he'd usher in a new age of Dominion warfare.

Kejora made his final notes and closed Feltz's file. The last phase of training for the current group of inmates would begin today. "Graduation day," he said with a thin smile.

He gave the command to the Icehouse staff.

"Final exams approved. Spike the next food batch and activate all predators in two hours. Time to cook the Icehouse."

"Something's off, man."

Gabriel smiled at the Lisk. "You've been saying that the last two days."

The Lisk spooned another beige lump into his mouth. "You know what I'm talking about."

Gabriel had to admit that the Lisk was probably right. Their training had plateaued. They'd even had enough free time to get a decent amount of sleep for two days in a row. That couldn't be good.

The Lisk slammed his palm flat on the table, making his half-empty bowl bounce off the surface. "I can't take much more of this."

Gabriel flinched. "I know."

"You don't know!" The Lisk jumped up, snarling. "None of you do. Especially you! I'll kill you first, right now!"

Gabriel stumbled to his feet and backed away. This wasn't the normal Lisk. If he didn't shut his mouth, Gabriel might have to kick him in his teeth and rip his head off and then get to work tearing apart every other one of the recruits until he, and only he, stood alive...

What? Gabriel was jolted back to lucidity.

Madness swept over the entire mess hall. Fists clenched; faces contorted in anger. It started with shoving, then grappling, and in seconds punches were being thrown. The Lisk seemed to have lost focus, searching wildly for someone to fight and grinding his teeth loudly.

Gabriel looked down at his bowl. *The food. Of course.* This had to be Kejora's game. Fury burned like acid in his chest, and his lips pulled back in an involuntary grimace. Kejora would pay. In blood. For everything: for the training and the dead and especially for Dennis—

Stop it! Gabriel forced the rage down by sheer will. "Lisk! Back off the throttle; it's the food! It's just the food!"

The Lisk didn't hear him. He was walking in a small circle as if he were in a cage. Gabriel grabbed him by the arms.

"They've put something in the food!" The Lisk was shaking his head, but Gabriel pressed on. "There's no zerg here, right? Nothing's worse than the zerg! That's what you told me!"

The Lisk's eyes focused on him. "Yeah," he managed. "Nothing worse than the zerg..."

Gabriel almost fainted with relief. So, Kejora wanted them spooked and angry but able to control themselves. This had to be part of a new test. What would come next?

The mess hall was emptying as inmates made for the exits, shouting and flailing. Several prisoners lingered, Polek among them. Gabriel dragged the Lisk over to him, resisting the red voice in his veins. "We've got to get going too."

Polek sneered. "In what universe do we listen to you, runt?"

Gabriel jerked a thumb behind him. "You wanna end up like them?"

Seven of the inmates had reacted very, very badly. Four of them were already dead from repeated blows to the head; another was clutching his ruined face. The last two were trying to crush each other's throat. Even Polek looked sick.

"Come on; we gotta get out of here." Gabriel led them away.

They left the frenzy of the canteen to find the corridors flashing. The adjutant's voice boomed through the complex. "All trainees, proceed to armory bays 1 through 8 and prepare for combat. This is not a drill. I repeat—"

"We're riot police now?" someone asked.

Gabriel kept his head on a swivel, searching for new threats. "This is still training. Stay alert."

"Hey! You hear that?"

Steel claws clacked on the ground.

Something was crouching farther down the hall. It looked and moved like a cat, but it was a machine the size of a vulture bike. It turned its bullet-shaped head toward the inmates and opened its metallic maw. A bloodcurdling shriek assaulted their ears.

"Run!"

They bolted through the corridors, the galloping stamp of metal feet not far behind. One man was dumb enough to look back. The mechanical beast had him a moment later, jaws snapping around his torso.

“Dictate the battle to your enemies. Leave them no option but to face you in the manner of your choosing.” —Icehouse Precept #7

The others kept their heads and ran on until the open doors of an armory loomed ahead of them. They hurled themselves through the opening as if it were the path to heaven.

"Shut the doors!"

The doors started to close, too slowly. The machine slammed into the gap, unable to force itself all the way in, yet its blood-flecked head squeezed through, snapping its terrible mouth. At last Polek freed a gun from the racks and emptied it into the robot, shredding it like paper.

Before he could brag, Gabriel pointed past him. "More of 'em!" Sure enough, an entire pack of the things was rushing down toward them. Gabriel shoved the battered remnants of the robotic cat away, and the doors shut tight. There was a crash against the other side, swiftly followed by the sound of metal scraping through metal. A cacophony of roars reminiscent of every beast imaginable came muffled through the doors.

"What now?" asked the Lisk.

Gabriel looked across the armory at the reaper suits, the pistols, the D-8s, even a set of specialized stimpack delivery systems.

"What now? We'll do what we must."

Kejora glanced over the figures the techs were relaying. Four trainees dead within the first minute. Twelve dead by the end of the first ten. There had been worse starts.

The spiked food had done its work. He had suspected Gabriel Feltz would be an early casualty, and was surprised to see the other survivors so readily accepting him as a leader. The data from this exam would be interesting.

Kejora steepled his fingers and watched the monitors. Dozens of recruits fought for their lives all over the Icehouse, while the staff hid away inside secret safe rooms. The door to the Hub was open to the main corridor, but that had been locked down long in advance of this exercise, inaccessible to both the recruits and the machines.

The inmates were beginning to emerge from the armories. Now lay the start of the real test, delivered by scores of predators with nothing to do but attack anything with a pulse.

A monitor chimed as the recruits fanned out through the corridors. Feltz showed up inside suit RP17. That made forty men armed and ready to fight. A third of them wandered solo; they wouldn't last long after the next wave of robots. There were nastier things than mechanical cats to come.

"Ain't no zerg here!"

Another machine creature, shaped like a hydralisk, reared up and flailed two scythe-like limbs. The Lisk fired at it, screaming like a child. He didn't stop even when the thing toppled over and clattered to pieces.

"No zerg! No zerg here!"

The others shrugged and carried on firing. No time to calm the Lisk down. Too many damn fake zerg to kill.

The initial breakout of the armory had gone well, but the machines had readily replaced their losses. No choice but to run, jump, dive, and shoot, blasting away at anything that twitched. Gabriel and his team left a trail of casings and scrapped parts behind them.

The robots were too slow, too clumsy, too amateur to stop them. Though his body ached and his lungs protested, Gabriel loved it all. Kejora hadn't been kidding about the challenge. Tough, but doable. Gabriel was going to make it through.

But there was something to do first. He started shooting at the ceiling.

Kejora stared at the suddenly dead screens. "What just happened?"

"Sensors went out all along a corridor. We're blind across section L4."

The warden swore. That was where Feltz was.

"Sir, a group of suits has gone black."

Kejora looked at the information. One of the suits was RP17. "Dead?"

"Null info. No data at all."

"Well then, Ensign," Kejora said with deliberate patience, "can you tell me what the data said *before* the suits went dark?"

"Elevated heart rate and blood pressure, substantial agitation... nothing unusual."

For this exercise, anyway. Kejora shook his head.

"Any abnormalities in suit RP17 just before the outage?"

"No, sir, not really."

Kejora took a deep breath. "*Not really?* Care to elaborate?"

The ensign swallowed hard, sweat beading on his brow.

"Y-yes, sir. He reloaded his weapons prior to the outage, and his heart rate slowed slightly," the technician said. "He was calm. I don't think they were ambushed—"

"*Shh!*" Kejora slashed the air with his hand. The technician went blessedly silent, and Kejora stood up, listening intently. He could have sworn he'd heard a hiss outside the entrance to the Hub, a hiss that sounded like—

—a stimpack.

Kejora kicked his desk onto its side and ducked behind it. "Get down!"

The roar of two gauss pistols filled the room, and the desk shuddered as bullet hits stippled across its surface. Technicians screamed and died as the smell of copper and cordite clogged the air.

Kejora drew his sidearm—only a small semi-automatic pistol, but it wasn't nothing—and waited until the din subsided. Lingering moans told him some of the techs were still alive, but they would have to fend for themselves for the moment. He had a pretty good idea who was outside the door.

"Feltz?"

The recruit laughed, his voice manic from the adrenaline and the chemical rush. "Yes, sir, Warden, sir, reporting for duty, sir."

"Decent ambush, Feltz. Small deduction for giving away your position. The chemical delivery system is loud, even in combat. High marks overall." The effects of stimpacks lasted only a few seconds. If Kejora could stall him for just a little longer—

"That means a lot, coming from you." Another deafening volley of gunfire shook the Hub.

"Enemies must be confronted and destroyed with efficiency. Method matters not. Use the knife, or the gun, or the bomb, or the fist. Never hesitate." —Icehouse Precept #8

Kejora rode it out calmly. Through the chaos, he heard heavy footsteps; Feltz was moving to flank him. The warden blindly fired his pistol around the desk, not willing to stick his head out for a better shot.

The footsteps stopped next to a row of computers against the far wall. Empty magazines clattered on the floor.

"You missed, Warden."

"Guess so." Kejora reloaded his pistol. "Unhappy about something, Feltz?"

"Unhappy about my brother, *sir*."

The warden recalled their chat in the medical ward. "The one who went missing. What about him?"

"I didn't exactly tell you the truth, Warden," Feltz said. "My brother isn't missing. I know where he is. Or rather, where he was."

"Really?" Kejora needed to string out the conversation as long as possible. The gunshots in the Hub had automatically triggered a dozen different silent alerts. Security teams would soon converge from all corners of the Icehouse.

But they would be delayed, he realized. The ongoing final exam meant they would have no clear route to the Hub. They'd have to fight their way through the same enemies the recruits were facing.

Kejora doubted he could keep Feltz from killing him until they arrived.

"My brother was here, Warden. At the Icehouse, under your tender care." Twin clicks echoed through the room as Feltz chambered a round in each of his guns. "It took a lot of time and a lot of money to get that information. A *lot*. You wouldn't believe."

"Can you get a refund? You're the first Feltz we've had in here."

The reaper's words cut through the distant thunder of combat. "Don't see the family resemblance? Not worth it to remember the ones who die in training? I'm not surprised."

"I remember every inmate."

"Even the washouts? The ones who failed to be useful?"

"Especially them."

Feltz's voice turned to ice. "My brother's name was Dennis Staton."

Dennis Staton? He had died barely a week into training; batch seven hadn't agreed with him, and a few of his vital organs had become slush. It wasn't much of a loss. Dennis Staton had been an unremarkable, useless recruit.

Kejora decided to gloss over the details. "I gave your brother a chance. The same one you had. It simply didn't work out."

"My brother *never* had a chance," Feltz said. The stimpack had worn off. The chemical crash made his voice tremble, but his words retained all their venom. "Not from you. Not from anyone else."

"You're wrong."

"I knew what I was getting into. I was *ready*. He wasn't." The whine of the reaper's jets suddenly increased in pitch. Feltz was preparing to make his move. "And neither are you. The Grim Reaper has arrived. Time for payback."

"Payback? For what?" Kejora gripped his pistol tightly. "He was going to be executed, Feltz—"

"My name is Staton."

"Your brother was a criminal, Staton, and not a bright one. If he'd had an ounce of your control, he would have only spent a couple weeks locked up for petty theft," Kejora said. "Instead he killed two civilians for the handful of credits in their pockets and didn't even manage to get three blocks before the law caught up with him."

"He was my brother. He deserved better than your personal hellhole."

"My personal hellhole *works*." Kejora scanned the room, looking for a way out. There were only bad options, exposed paths. "Tell me it doesn't. Tell me that I didn't turn you into one of the most efficient killers the galaxy has ever seen."

"Congrats on a job well done, Warden," Feltz said. The jets in his armor whined impossibly loud in the tight quarters. "Here's a special token of my appreciation."

Kejora closed his eyes. The desk wouldn't protect him against much more sustained gunfire. There was no chance of fleeing without crossing Feltz's fields of fire.

No way out.

The earsplitting sound of a gauss pistol filled the Hub, and the desk's surface rattled and bent under a stream of bullet impacts. A second P-45 opened fire.

Then a third. And a fourth.

What?

The noise died away, and Kejora heard an armored body tumble to the ground.

He remained crouched.

"Warden?"

It was a different voice, a familiar voice. Kejora smiled. "Lords?"

Smoke wafted from the Lisk's two gauss pistols. "Yes, sir."

"Good work, recruit." Kejora stood.

Feltz—not *Staton*, he would always be *Feltz* in Kejora's memory—lay on his side, bullet holes punched through the back of his armor. Kejora knelt next to Feltz and carefully removed the recruit's headgear and mask. Bright-red arterial blood foamed with every shallow, gasping breath, each one weaker than the last.

Feltz's eyes showed shock and confusion. He tried to turn his head toward the Lisk, and a wordless question gurgled from his throat.

Kejora patted Feltz on the shoulder. Feltz had, in a way, utterly exceeded all expectations for the program when he defeated the Icehouse's lockdown—despite having his mind addled with

drugs during a combat situation, no less. He had located and cornered his target, outsmarting innumerable security systems designed to prevent that very scenario.

It was proof the Icehouse worked with better recruits. If Kejora took the idea directly up the ladder to Emperor Mengsk himself, he could have a higher grade of conscripts by next month. The curriculum would require some adjustments, of course, but that was to be expected.

The other reaper stared down at Feltz, a curious look on his face. "Why did I do that, sir? I think he was my friend."

"You are a reaper, Lords," Kejora said.

The Lisk considered that silently and watched Feltz's eyes cloud over. Finally, he nodded.

"I do what I must."

"There is no truth but in victory. All else is dust, easily swept away". —Icehouse Precept #9