



STARCRRAFT[®]
HEART OF THE SWARM



In the Dark

By David Gerrold

“Goldilocks!”

Jake grinned as he studied the displays in front of him. His ship was still too far away for a detailed visual of the planet, but the specs were optimal—even better than optimal.

A warm yellow sun, not too far off the main cycle. Three small moons, just large enough to generate tidal forces and keep the planet steady on its axis. 90.09% standard gravity. 73% water covered. 31% oxygen in the atmosphere. Mean temperature of 24 degrees Celsius. Seasonal super-storms, but that was true on almost every planet with an atmosphere. One long irregular continent stretching all the way from the arctic regions in the north to just beyond the temperate regions in the far south, plus a scattering of large islands, most of them close to the coasts of the single continent, but a few farther out. Vegetation shading from amber to indigo, but tending slightly toward orange and pink. Enough CO₂ and methane in the atmosphere to indicate significant herbivore biomass, and probably dependent carnivorous forms as well. Some volcanic action, but nothing cataclysmic.

Not too hot, not too cold.

Not too big, not too little.

Life supporting.

Just right.

Goldilocks.

Even better, this star was in such an unlikely place, so far off the main routes, it was unlikely anyone would ever come looking for him. Hell, he realized, he might even be the first human to set foot on this improbable world. “Ha! Goldilocks, it is! I hereby dub thee the planet of golden tresses.” And possibly golden stresses. But he didn’t say that last part aloud. Why jinx it?

He told the adjutant to put his ship into a polar orbit and set the scanners to map the entire surface of the world. He intended to be here for a long while. Maybe a lifetime. He wanted something tropical, with afternoon showers to cool off the heat of the day, and a broad western view so he could sit on his porch and enjoy the sunset.

In fact, he had a whole list of desires. “Adjutant, look for fertile ground so I can plant some fruits and vegetables. Access to clean, running water so I can bathe regularly and set

up a water wheel to generate power for lights. Close enough to the beach that I can go sailing, but high enough up the slopes to avoid any possibility of a tsunami. No active volcanoes in the neighborhood, no restless geological faults, and not in any tornado belt.”

“Working,” replied the AI.

Jake mused aloud, “Probably an island just off the equatorial belt. That would be nice.”

“A continental location would give you more access to resources.”

“Yes, but it would also put me in the path of various migratory species.” Scanners had revealed gigantic herds of astonishingly oversized *things* plodding steadily along, always in search of fresh grazing... and followed by almost as large predators, whole packs of them. “Living in the middle of an evolutionary super-highway is not a good option. I’m not stupid.”

“No, you are not,” agreed the adjutant. “Your psychometric scores are quite high, considering your tendencies toward impulsiveness.”

“Shut up,” Jake said. He hadn’t arrived here by accident. He’d been thinking about this for a long time.

The decision to desert had been growling in his brain since twenty minutes after the first time he’d run the mortality statistics. He’d been muttering to himself, “There are old soldiers and there are bold soldiers, but there are no old bold soldiers.” Then he’d discovered there were no old soldiers either. That wasn’t just disheartening: it was terrifying. As he stared at the data displays, his tour of duty looked like forever, and the only retirement was a six-foot homestead on some empty wasteland that would never grow anything more than a field of regularly placed stone markers.

Jake wanted to remain above the grass as long as possible.

First, he’d checked to see which career paths had the best mortality statistics. Supply pilot wasn’t the best, but it wasn’t the worst either. And there was one overwhelming advantage. Colony ships usually carried all the gear for setting up a completely self-sufficient settlement. That was when the idea was born. That was when Jake chose his career path. It had taken seven years—seven *scary* years—and more than a few times he had reason to believe he had made a very bad choice.

But seven years—that was supposed to be the duration of his contract. Seven years and he could opt out. Few had ever lived long enough to opt out, and those who had made it to the seven-year mark almost always found their enlistments extended by a stop-loss order. On the day his extension orders came in, that was when Jake decided enough was enough.

He'd paid his dues, he was exhausted, and he had no energy for battle anymore. He had no family to return to; they'd been killed in a zerg attack. He'd enlisted in the military while still in his teens. You could dream for more—soldiers always did—but there was no *more*. There was only *this*.

Jake had worked his way up from navigator to copilot to pilot. He was even an officer in training, with all the responsibilities and perks that came with. It gave him access to information—enough to know that there was a lot more to the universe than most people realized. He'd seen many different worlds, seen the barren and the rich, the beautiful and the ugly. He knew there were possibilities—more possibilities than the military ever acknowledged.

So he studied star charts, studied astrophysics and solar dynamics. His superiors noticed his extracurricular interests. He told them he was aiming for a career in strategic planning and countermeasures, so they gave him access to the exploration and mapping databases, everything the deep-space surveillance probes had discovered for hundreds of thousands of light-years in every direction, a growing sphere of knowledge.

Jake quietly sorted the data for the conditions necessary for a life-supporting planet. Some stars were too big or the wrong color. Some gave off too much radiation. But the right size star, the right color star, was the right place to look for a Goldilocks world. His superiors thought he was charting the probabilities of zerg infestation. The Swarm had been mostly quiet since the Brood War; even so, his superiors approved. Long-range planning was a good thing. They just didn't know that Jake was planning for his own long range.

The opportunity came unexpectedly. Jake hadn't settled on a star system, hadn't narrowed down his options. He was still considering a variety of possible candidates, both

near and far, and he still needed to determine how far he would have to go before a pursuit would no longer be cost effective.

But then the convoy was attacked. The battle erupted around them. Alone on the bridge, already dreaming of possibilities... before he had time to think, he acted.

He didn't have time to wake the captain; he popped off the plastic cover and slammed his hand down hard on the red button. The alarms went off all over the ship; crewmembers dived for escape pods; and within three minutes, the evacuation was complete, and Jake was the last man on board.

It took him less than thirty seconds to bring the ship to a new heading, and then he jumped out and away from the combat zone. In the fury of fighting, barely anyone noticed. Only later, when they checked the various logs in all the surviving vessels, would they realize that one of their colony ships had disappeared—not destroyed, just gone. But that would only happen if there were any survivors. Based on what Jake had seen of the attack, there probably wouldn't be.

He was alone. He was free. He was *here*.

And this was Goldilocks.

Perfect.

He let the adjutant crunch numbers and chew data for a few days longer while he prepared a puddle-jumper. He didn't know what he might need, so he packed for all the different eventualities projected in the standard landing scenarios, plus all the local possibilities projected by the adjutant, especially any situation that would prevent him from returning to the colony ship.

He also considered sending the big ship into the heart of the sun to destroy the evidence of his arrival. But that decision didn't need to be made today. Besides, there might be some undiscovered reason Goldilocks was the wrong planet. The technical term was *surprise*.

He'd already ruled out the main continent. Too many big hungry things. But... there was a chain of islands off to the west, close enough to the main continent to be accessible, yet far enough to provide isolation. The biggest of the islands, at the southeast end of the chain, looked like the perfect spot. The island was triangular in shape, formed by the steep cones of three volcanoes, two of them dormant. The last one—the largest, still smoldering—reached high enough into the sky to have permanent snowcaps, even glaciers. The meltwater provided year-round irrigation, and probably a few hot springs as well. Tropical currents sweeping up from the south kept the seas warm, and the winds from the north pushed clouds up against the western slopes every day, where the cool air triggered almost daily afternoon drizzles.

He studied the big island critically. Dramatic vistas sprawled across wall-size displays. If there was something wrong, he needed to find it now, but the more he viewed, the more the island attracted him.

Exploratory probes revealed carpets of lush vegetation spread across the slopes of the islands, slender fruit-bearing trees and even taller ones with wide sheltering leaves, whole forests thick with ferns and grass and creeper vines. Sparkling waterfalls fed a network of streams and ponds. There were at least six different ecosystems on the islands, determined by altitude, prevailing wind patterns, and water flow. Where the different zones collided, there would be accelerated evolutionary action. That meant healthy hybrid forms.

Additional scanning revealed birds and insects—larger than he was used to, but nothing that seemed as threatening as what prowled the main continent. There were also a variety of amphibians, small animals, and even something that resembled a small wild pig. The seas were teeming with fish of all sizes, including several enormous species. But that was okay; Jake wasn't planning to go swimming in that surf anyway. On the north shore, some of those waves were breaking nearly sixty meters high. That was intimidating; Jake had never been in anything deeper than a bathtub.

He couldn't decide what to name the island. Pax? Aloha? Shalom? Haven? The Big Island? None of those felt right. But he could wait. Maybe the island would reveal its own name to him in time.

But there were other possibilities too, and he wasn't about to make a hasty decision. He'd planned too long and come too far. So he gave the mainland one more careful review. He studied a small lagoon on the western coast of the long continent, sheltered by jagged cliffs that kept it isolated. And a comma-shaped lake in the highlands to the north, well above the migratory patterns. And even a storm-swept stony cliff in the southern hemisphere that was so inhospitable no rational person would ever think of exploring there. In the end, Jake always came back to the beckoning islands. Maybe someday, he'd explore the mainland, but right now the islands seemed both safe and attractive.

But even after the puddle-jumper was fully loaded and programmed with the coordinates of the western slope of the island, Jake still hesitated. He went back to the bridge for one more look-around, one more scan, one more survey, one more run at the data—one more opportunity to find a reason to hesitate.

He sat in the command chair for more than a week, arguing with himself, arguing with the adjutant, eating karak sandwiches and drinking cup after cup of coffee, pursing his lips, frowning his brow, frowning, thinking, studying, debating with himself, arguing the pros and cons, the merits and demerits, until finally he realized that the situation wasn't going to change, no matter how much he considered it. Maybe the island was idyllic; maybe it wasn't. He'd never know for sure sitting here and worrying.

For a moment, he even considered turning the ship around. He could still head back. He could say he'd taken the ship away from the convoy to save it from being destroyed. But that wouldn't explain why he'd ordered the evacuation or why the unwipable logs would show his long, detailed surveillance of this planet. Well, he could argue that once he'd arrived here, he thought he should scan the planet for possible colonization. Would they believe that? Probably not.

No, he was committed to this path—had been committed since the moment he'd slammed his hand down on the large red alarm button. There was no way he could avoid a court-martial, probably a firing squad. If he went back, he'd never have a chance like this again. He'd never know.

Finally, frustrated with himself, realizing that inaction was producing no useful result, he spoke aloud. "Sitting doesn't work, Jake. Get off your big fat ass and go."

It wasn't exactly now or never. This launch window was closing; two hours from now, there would be another, and every two hours after. But there was nothing more to do, nothing else for Jake aboard this ship. You could only study a situation for so long. Then you had to act. He'd planned this escape for over seven years. This was what he'd been aiming for. This was the realization of the promise he'd made to himself.

Even before he realized it consciously, he was standing up. He was moving. He disposed of the last of his meal, and ordered the ship into standby mode, then made his way down to the launch bay. One last look back—if everything went according to plan, he would be the last living being this ship would ever know.

“Goodbye, Jake,” said the adjutant. “I shall maintain the ship for your return.”

“You do that.”

He boarded the puddle-jumper and carefully departed the starship. Pulling up a display on one of the monitors, Jake watched the giant vessel recede until it was nothing more than a gleaming pinpoint. A thought gnawed at the base of his brain that there was more he could have done, maybe should have done, but he couldn't think of anything specific. And if it turned out he needed anything else, he could signal the colony ship to drop a few of the many cargo pods still on board.

There was still time to return the smaller craft to the colony ship. He didn't have to land here. There were plenty of far-distant frontier worlds that would appreciate the unexpected arrival of a fully loaded ship like this. He would be a hero. For a time, anyway. Only until the next military vessel came by and some opportunistic settler turned him in for the inevitable reward. No, he was safer simply disappearing.

He let the moment pass and steered the puddle-jumper into a landing course. After a bit, the first wisps of upper atmosphere began to stream past the hull, and shortly after that, the buffeting began. Holding the ship steady, he used the thickening atmosphere for braking, only occasionally firing thrusters to correct the craft's course.

He brought the craft down swiftly, approaching the island from the west and then leveling off just above the sparkling green surface of the ocean, close enough for Jake to see great dark shapes moving through the water. He slowed the puddle-jumper just before reaching the shore.

The sand on the beaches glittered a startling shade of gold with pink pearlescent flecks. And then it gave way to broad slopes of grass, rising toward the distant cone of the volcano. This whole island was volcanic rock, and in some places the topsoil was so thin, trees couldn't root. Only tall grass, shrubs, and ferns.

At last, Jake landed the craft on a high plateau overlooking the western reach of the island. He watched his displays carefully while the craft sampled the air, filtered it, examined it for toxic elements and malicious bacteria, fungi, viruses, or prions. It could be several days before the system would admit that he could leave the puddle-jumper without a hazmat suit. The suit was guaranteed against infectious organisms up to Class Six, but that guarantee was useless out here where customer service was unavailable. No. He'd wait until the shipboard lab finished preparing appropriate vaccinations.

He activated ground and air probes and released them to explore the island. He wasn't going anywhere without detailed maps of the terrain. That could take another week or two.

There had been other planets on his list of candidates. Some were barren: places with barely breathable atmosphere, places where the terraforming had not yet been completed and the only life-forms were algae, fungi, and lichens. Others had been charted and were known to be habitable, but Jake worried about who or what might eventually settle on those worlds. No, this one afforded him some promise of solitude. He wouldn't be bored. He had his music; he had his digi-tomes; he had his holovids.

But he didn't feel like waiting: he climbed into an SCV and began plodding around the landing zone, getting a feel for the area. He only had a couple of hours of daylight left, but he could start laying out markers for a base camp. Driving an SCV, he could clear the ground, install cameras and lights, a variety of sensors, a security perimeter, and even a couple of auto-turrets. The latter were probably unnecessary, but standard procedure nonetheless. He doubted that the guns would ever be required to take out anything larger than a scorpion or a mosquito. Nevertheless... he'd make careful preparations. He'd been too deeply immersed in the paranoia of the military mind to let go easily.

On the third day, he built a hangar for the puddle-jumper: climb into an SCV, unload the materials, weld the prefab walls into place, add a roof on top. Roll the ship inside, close

the door. Then sleep for eight hours while the cameras and auto-turrets watched the perimeter.

He awoke in the middle of the night.

Almost naked, wearing only shorts and carrying a Torrent SR-8 shotgun with an infrared scope, he strode outside and peered into the darkness. The soft blue glow of the overhead lights revealed only the surrounding jungle in shades of deep indigo and black. Above, the stars twinkled brightly, and the largest of the planet's three moons tumbled slowly. Raising the weapon, he looked through its scope and turned carefully, scanning for heat signatures. Nothing.

Whatever he'd heard, it was silent now.

Some kind of shriek... made by some kind of *thing*. Maybe a bird? Maybe even one of those things in the ocean, surfacing for a moment? Maybe just one of those pig-like animals? Maybe there were predators that fed on those animals? Logic suggested there should be. But logic was limited to the available facts, and the available facts were limited by the available technology for studying them, of which Jack had more limited than available. There was an old saying about strange new worlds: they were strange. Not only stranger than you imagine. Stranger than you *can* imagine.

He stood in the dark for a long time, listening. Then he went back inside, sat down in front of his security displays, and played back the sounds of the night. Mostly the audio tracks revealed harmless background noises—the susurrus of the waves, the wind, and the rustling leaves of the surrounding foliage. But the scream? Nothing at all.

He'd heard it only in his head.

But he'd heard it. He knew he'd heard it. He was sure he'd heard it.

He sat in front of the displays for a long time, studying the terrain of the island. He launched three probes to circle the area.

And he trembled.

The scream he'd heard tonight—it had been a raw, guttural roar of sudden awareness abruptly being cut off. He didn't recognize it, didn't understand it, didn't know what could have caused it... but he recognized the screeching feeling in his head. He'd felt it before. Not this scream, but another one like it.

There were stories of things on the other side of the sector with strange psionic powers. And there were other stories, even more disturbing, of humans who were conscripted and trained as psionic warriors. Ghosts. Jake had never met a ghost, never seen one in person. Officially, they didn't even exist, but he knew they did. He'd experienced an inadvertent psi blast. It had happened on a transport mission, a top-secret operation.

It had been early in his career, and he'd been only a petty officer third class at the time. But a large black ship, a nameless ship, had needed a crew in a hurry, and he'd had a security clearance. Nobody talked about the mission, but it was understood anyway that they were heading out to the Ghost Academy on the Korhal moon of Ursa. Even though nobody said there was a teep in a shielded cabin, everybody knew there was a teep aboard in the shielded cabin.

Whoever she was, she stayed in her own quarters, far away from everyone for the entire trip. But one night she had a nightmare, and without any foreshock or warning, her sudden telepathic scream had blazed through the entire ship, knocking crewmembers to their knees. Men and women fell where they stood, passed out, vomited, collapsed into seizures, involuntarily emptied their bladders and bowels. Her escort, a single wrangler who hadn't seemed like anything special, didn't even hesitate: without a word, he abandoned his poker game and sprinted out of the mess hall. Turned out later he'd been wearing a fancy device called a psi-screen, and it had protected him from that terrible scream. The starship's crew had no such protection. Slowly and painfully they gasped their way back to consciousness. The experience of the psionic blast left them dazed and confused, weak and trembling.

For the rest of the journey, the wrangler kept the ghost candidate sedated. There was no official acknowledgment of the incident, but the captain quietly let it be known that the teep was barely a teenager, untrained and possessing little control over her powers.

But the impact of that scream—it had scraped the souls of every crewmember aboard. The raw, brutal impact of the blast left them imprinted and wounded and sensitized to the slightest ripple of psionic force.

Jake didn't know what the teep's original trauma had been, what dreads infected her memories, what terrors had resurfaced to trigger her nightmare, but even though he had

never seen any himself, Jake felt sure it must have involved zerglings. In the aftermath of that horrific psionic moment, his mind resonated with a disjointed turmoil of strange and terrible feelings, as if he had been assaulted, invaded. He felt as if new memories had been burned into his skull, false memories, not his, but memories nonetheless of what it felt like to be thrown into a pit of snarling, chittering, mindless insect-things.

The ship's doctor, himself a trembling shell now, had cautioned everyone on the crew that the resonance of the moment might leave some of them with some increased sensitivity to telepathic noise, but that was an understatement. Before the ship reached its final destination, three crewmembers had committed suicide.

Jake was one of the unlucky ones. He survived. Ripped open, unhealed, he was one of the walking wounded. Emotionally disrupted, now he could feel the mind-noise of the people around him. Not clearly, just a continual rattling of stray impulses from people around him, half-formed, incomplete—fear, sorrow, anger, sadness, resentment, and much too often, thoughts of lust and desire and strange dark emotions. The noise came in slow waves, sometimes rising, sometimes fading, sometimes the most terrible when people were asleep and dreaming, but never fading enough to be tolerable.

That was when Jake had committed himself to escape. He had to find a place where he could experience quiet again, a place with no other humans around.

But *this* scream...? Here and now. It hadn't been human. Of that Jake was sure. It was something else. Something that might have been animal, might have been insect, might have been mindless, might have been god-like. But whatever it was, it was compelling.

In the morning, before the orange sun had cleared the horizon, Jake was awake and ready. He wore light combat armor, he carried a customized AGR-14, and he'd jury-rigged his helmet to project heads-up datalinks onto his visor. He'd spent the long hours of transit to this world rebuilding and modifying every piece of equipment that frustrated him. And that was almost everything. He strapped himself onto a vulture, took a deep breath, and muttered, "All right. Let's roll."

The vulture was perfect for scouting and patrol—a lightly armored one-man hoverbike, designed for speed and reliability. The colonial models could be flown up to a

kilometer above sea level and could reach speeds of 370 klicks per hour. Jake had loaded three of them on the puddle-jumper, plus spare parts.

Six days he searched the islands, listening inside his head for the chattering noises of... whatever might have screamed in the night. Six nights he patrolled the skies, probing the dark foliage with fingers of blue light. Nothing.

On the seventh day he rested. He landed the vulture beside the hangar, noticing that the first creeper vines were already exploring the surface of the thatch. Within months, they would overgrow it, covering it with thick black strands and an even thicker blue-black carpet of leaves. It would be good camouflage from prying eyes.

On Monday, Jake double-checked the fuel cells of his vulture and took to the air again. He was going back to the northern sweep of the island to search the slopes of the tallest volcano. It rose like a giant cooling tower on the horizon. This world's 90% gravity encouraged everything to grow bigger, taller, larger. Sand dunes and waves were steeper because the angle of repose was greater. Mountains were more upright and jagged. The cones of the volcanoes rose like towers toward the sky; their sides were almost vertical. Insects and animals were larger too. The intense heat of the day made it possible for animals without homeostasis to warm faster and maintain internal body heat. That and an oxygen-rich atmosphere also favored animals of greater size—optimal was as big as a football; it was the outliers that were worrisome. Those could be as big as a football field. Fortunately, the islands in this chain weren't large enough to provide sufficient vegetation to support even a small herd of the giant grass eaters that roamed the mainland.

Additionally, the volcanically formed terrain was rugged and uneven. It didn't favor migration or even casual exploration. Without the vulture, much of the landscape would have remained inaccessible to Jake. There were places he could not have seen, features he would not have discovered.

In particular...

Both of the dormant craters were riddled with lava tubes, natural tunnels formed by streams of molten lava. As the torrents had rushed downward, the edges had hardened up and around, leaving long tunnels of dark volcanic rock. Later eruptions had built up thick roofs over many of the lava tubes. Most of the tubes were wide enough to hold a puddle-

jumper. If Jake had known to look for lava tubes, he could have saved himself the effort of building a hangar at the landing site. A lava tube would provide better air cover. If it was deep enough, it would even serve as an attack-proof bunker. He would have to explore these tunnels more thoroughly, but not until he found the source of the psionic scream.

First things first.

From time to time, Jake parked the small craft to release another probe. The probes would quietly and patiently explore their surroundings, looking, listening, and relaying their data back to camp. Some would actively explore; others would go semi-dormant, awakening only if disturbed. If there were things on this island that defied easy detection, Jake would find them. If not now, then eventually.

In the afternoon, looking northward, Jake saw the horizon darkening rapidly. Occasional flickers of lightning flashed between the sea and the sky.

“Crap,” Jake said aloud. He’d forgotten one of the first rules of anything: don’t get so involved in what you’re doing that you forget what you’re doing. He’d forgotten to pay attention to his weather displays.

The danger was immediately apparent. The wide line of the squall was rushing toward him at incredible speed. Understandable. Everything on this world was larger than he’d imagined. This wasn’t just a squall; it was a super-storm. There was no way he could make it back to camp before it hit. He’d have to find a closer shelter and wait it out.

His first impulse was to head for the lee side of the volcano, but he realized almost immediately that he would be just as defenseless to the elements as the storm swept over.

No, there was only one possibility. He headed his vulture for the nearest lava tube. He’d been planning to explore some of the larger tunnels someday. He just hadn’t realized that someday would be so immediate.

The storm wasn’t entirely unexpected. His data crunches had shown the planet was capable of extreme weather, but without any long-term studies of wind and weather patterns, he’d had no way of knowing how often the super-storms would occur. This planet needed an ice age to cool it down. All that heat—the same heat that favored an oxygen-rich atmosphere and encouraged giant plants and animals—it also favored massive evaporation of water vapor from the surface of the ocean and horrific winds to hurl the resultant

massive super-saturated clouds into any obstructing mountain. This wasn't just a super-storm; it was a perfect storm, a scouring hurricane of colossal proportions.

By the time he reached the lava tube, the wind was already rising and causing the vulture to buck almost uncontrollably. The entrance to the cave was a hole in a sheer vertical cliff, partially blocked by hanging foliage. Already the sky overhead was darkening, the first strikes of lightning were flashing, and a spattering of heavy drops was pelting the canopy of the craft. Jake held firmly onto his controls, easing the vulture through the vines and into the tunnel. As soon as he was out of the wind, he could let his forward momentum carry him up the tube. He needed only tiny nudges from the thrusters. His headlights probed the gloom, but revealed only burnished walls of obsidian. Myriad reflections glittered and sparkled from the dark volcanic glass.

Fifty meters in, Jake allowed the craft to settle to the floor of the tunnel. This should be deep enough into the tunnel. If not, he could always go deeper into the mountain. He had no idea how far this cave extended, but the sensors on his vulture revealed at least another hundred meters, possibly more. Beyond that, the display was indeterminate.

Jake climbed down from the vulture. He flipped open the faceplate of his helmet and took a deep breath. Already the air smelled wet. Even this deep into the lava tube, there was a noticeable draft coming from the entrance. The opening glowed as a bright circle of light, already darkening, occasionally flickering from unseen lightning strikes. He approached just close enough to feel the wet spray of the storm. It was already hammering in with powerful horizontal surges that left the walls of the tunnel dripping. The water came in faster than it could drain. Jake wondered if he should move the vulture farther up the tube, but as he walked back up the slope, it was clear that the water wasn't reaching up this far. He was safely beyond the worst forces of the storm.

"Well, crap," Jake said again. "I wasn't planning on this." He popped open the vulture's rear canopy and inspected his supplies. He had enough food and water for three days, a week if he was frugal. He wouldn't need the tent, but the sleeping roll would be more comfortable than the hard floor of the cave. If he was careful, he wouldn't need the medkit. He checked the weapons locker; the entire arsenal was charged and ready. He doubted he would need a weapon in here. No, he hoped he wouldn't need one. "Don't make

assumptions,” he reminded himself. “Tunnel worms. It only takes one to ruin your whole day.”

He considered the AGR-14—not exactly a lightweight weapon, but an effective one, using magnetic acceleration to fire slugs at supersonic speeds, all with a very intimidating roar. Jake liked the incendiary shells best. “Better safe than dead,” he decided. He took the AGR-14 and two extra ammo belts. After a moment’s thought, he added a string of incendiary grenades as well. Just in case.

He switched on his flashlight and checked its power. He double-checked the heads-up display he’d installed on his helmet-visor; it let him see his power reserves, his system-monitors, his bio-scan, and the readiness of the vulture in case he had to vacate the cave in a hurry. Everything shone green. He didn’t relish the idea of having to vacate the cave in a hurry. He doubted there could be anything up the tunnel more dangerous than the hurricane raging outside, but he didn’t want to find out the hard way if he was mistaken.

He started hiking upward. The lava tube had a pronounced slope, difficult but not impossible. He would have thought that in the .9 standard gravity of the world, molten lava would have flowed slower, but the steeper angle of the volcanic cone actually made for faster lava flows. His initial scans had revealed whole networks of tunnels. Apparently as the cone of the erupting volcano rose, lava tubes formed on top of each other, sometimes twisting and turning like strands of spaghetti. The physics of their formation would have kept an army of geologists happy for generations.

The sound of his footsteps reflected off the burnished walls of the cave, echoed like the inside of a shower stall. If there was anything alive in the tunnel, it would hear him long before he reached it. Conversely...

From time to time, Jake stopped to listen. Far behind him, the storm still raged. The dim glow of the tunnel opening had faded out and disappeared. Not even flashes of lightning could be seen anymore, although occasional crackles of thunder could be felt reverberating through the mountain. The lightning strikes outside must have been horrific.

But he didn’t hear any other sounds. Not with his ears at least. Just the same, he was starting to feel an uneasy resonance in his gut, an unnamable sensation that gnawed like anxiety or even hunger, but felt like something deeper.

His foot slipped. He shone his flashlight down. There were loose rocks here. That didn't make sense. But there were rivulets of water too. The mountain must be riddled with cracks, slowly eroding away on the inside. There could be a whole system of drainage, carved by millennia of storms.

Jake considered the possibilities. You could hide a whole military installation inside this volcano, factories, barracks, arsenals. He shuddered at the thought. That was the very thing he'd just escaped from—the disheartening drone of endless preparation for violence.

The slope of the tunnel was steeper here. From time to time, he had to stop to catch his breath. And he had to be more careful where he stepped. But even so, he missed it, not noticing the thing he'd stepped on until he felt it scraping beneath his boot. Not until he heard the metallic screech.

He looked down.

It gleamed gold. Brighter than gold. A shade of light that was as beautiful as it was unnatural. A shard of something metallic, but not quite metal.

At first he thought it was the blade of a knife, or even a sword, but it had a graceful curve. He bent to examine it closer. He nudged it with his foot. He squatted before it, exhaling loudly and looking at the thing with genuine annoyance. Not for what it was, but for what it meant.

He poked at it tentatively, well aware it might be some kind of machine just waiting to be activated. It looked like the broken tail of a teardrop.

"Crap," said Jake. "Crap and double-crap."

He sat back on his haunches and studied the thing, wishing it was something else, somewhere else. If it hadn't been for the storm outside, he would have fled immediately. He'd have raced back to his base camp, loaded his gear into the puddle-jumper, and launched himself back to the colony ship. Even now, he was already planning his retreat. He was going to have to leave this island, this planet, this system.

Jake knew this thing. He knew what it was. He'd seen something like it in a museum of battlefield relics. Not the same thing, but the same kind of not-quite metal. The same intense pearlescent yellow. The same undiminished shine. No rust, no pitting, no scarring

or scorching. Just a broken shard of something that had twisted and finally broken under stress.

Protoss metal.

He was not alone.

Jake forced himself to breathe slowly. He counted to ten. To twenty. To a hundred and eighty. Maybe he was jumping to conclusions. Maybe there was another explanation. Protoss metal didn't decay, didn't erode. Maybe this piece had been here for years, for centuries—even possibly millennia. Maybe the protoss had visited, found nothing useful here, and moved on.

Jake picked up the gleaming shard and looked at it, turning it over and over in his gloved hands. Nope. This wasn't something that had been discarded. This was something that had been flung here, twisted and broken like the pieces in the battle museum. Only this piece had deep gouges and scratches along one side. Marks that looked like the scraping of teeth or claws.

"Triple crap," Jake said. "This is a triple." He said it aloud: "I'm not alone. There have been protoss here. And they lost a fight with something else, also here."

His knees were starting to ache from squatting. Still holding the not-quite metal shard, he straightened. He could continue going upward, deeper into the volcano... or he could retreat to his vulture and brave the super-storm. Or he could sit here, paralyzed with indecision—the same kind of indecision that had kept him sitting at the controls of the colony ship for a week before finally committing himself to descend to the surface of the planet.

If he went back down, he'd never know what threats might lurk inside the mountain. He'd never know what had caused that midnight scream. If he continued upward... well, at least he'd know what he was up against, whether he should stay or evacuate.

If he survived the encounter.

"Crap," Jake said. There were other words he could have used, but *crap* was the one that felt the most appropriate.

The next few meters of the climb were steep, but abruptly the lava tube leveled off and opened onto a huge vertical chamber. His flashlight probed the gloom with a blue

finger of light. The floor of the space was a rocky jumble; the ceiling was a burnished dome, but that wasn't what caught his attention.

There had been a battle here, a big one. The walls of the cave were scorched, and the bottom was strewn with not-quite metal pieces. Most were gold; some were silvery. Jake wasn't an expert on protoss technology, but he thought he recognized some of the silvery fragments: they could have been the broken legs of the things called stalkers. Other pieces, bright yellow, might have been the remains of those larger war machines known as immortals.

He should have been fascinated, even awestruck at the sight of protoss war machines, but he wasn't. The sight of all this metallic carnage left him disturbed and anxious. It suggested—no, demonstrated—that there was something horrible on this world, something nasty enough to rip apart heavily armored protoss.

"Crap," Jake said. "Just crap, crap, crap." Of all the words Jake had said since landing, *crap* was now the most used, according to the data-display on his visor.

He unclipped a console from his belt and sent a cloud of micro-spies into the large chamber. The tiny propeller-driven devices were Umojan tech, and he'd paid dearly to get them from the black market, certain they'd come in handy one day. They immediately began circling slowly, scanning, measuring, listening—

—until a bright blue beam flashed out from the opposite side of the cave, flicking from one micro-spy to the next, disintegrating each in a dazzling flash of light.

Jake leapt backward into shadow, knowing even as he did so that it didn't matter. Whatever had just incinerated his micro-spies had certainly targeted him as well. Even as the first hot surge of adrenaline roared up through his gut, his chest, his heart, he was already realizing that he was only alive because that same something *wanted* him alive.

He took a deep breath, a second, a third... then stepped forward. Running would be the worst thing he could do.

Across the cave, on the other side of the chamber, where another lava tube opened into the great space—or perhaps it was a continuation of *this* lava tube—something shimmered. Something tall. Something not human.

In that instant, Jake suddenly knew he was extremely lucky... and extremely unlucky too. He was now one of the very few human beings in the sector who had ever been face to face with a protoss. The reason there were so few was that most of those who had ever been face to face with a protoss had not survived the encounter.

“Uh, hi,” he said. He raised his right hand in a tentative greeting.

Lassatar studied the creature across from him. He'd been aware of its presence on the island since the day it arrived. Now, here in this cavern, he could finally examine it.

Human. Encased in primitive technology. It imagined itself powerful. It had a pretense of thought wrapped around a core of primal surges—mostly fear. It was a biological imperative, pretending toward thought, even aspiring toward true thought, but really just an organic machine fueled by a clumsy tangle of hunger, fear, rage, and vague uncomfortable desires.

It desired intimacy, but it feared connection with its own kind. It desired knowledge, but feared discovery. It desired change, but feared action. It desired peace, but feared death.

It desired sentience, hungered for a light it could only dimly sense, but feared to give up the animalistic state of being that kept it trapped in a cage of emotions. It did not act as much as it reacted.

All this and less.

That humans had achieved warp technology was more a demonstration of how easily knowable this universe could be than evidence of any native intelligence. The human species had not yet finished evolving, and probably never would. It would destroy itself before it had a chance to create its own higher state of being.

Nevertheless, the raw passion of these creatures gave them a terrifying set of abilities. They could create almost as ferociously as they could destroy. They weren't mindless. And to this dark templar, the possibility of what a human might become was a tantalizing question, one that deserved enormous consideration.

If you share a galaxy with another life-form, it is either a partner or a scourge. There is no neutrality. If the relationship is not one of mutual contribution, then it is one of eternal warfare and destruction. Life is inevitable. Resources are finite. The rest is left as an exercise for the trainee.

In the brief instant between the destruction of the micro-spies and the moment when the creature raised its hand in greeting, Lassatar sorted through a thousand options. His curiosity overruled them all.

He'd had experience with humans before, most of it violent, but a chance encounter on a trivial world had left him pondering the possibilities of sentience in this unfinished species. Could its primitive and brutal mind be trained? Could this animal be uplifted? Could it learn the deeper responsibilities of the technologies it had created? Or was it like the giant herbivores of the mainland—an evolutionary dead end, doomed by its own biology to feed and be fed upon in turn, with no real capability to understand its own participation in the processes of time?

The creature before him now...

Lassatar recognized a curious kinship.

Like him, the creature had chosen to separate itself from its own kind. Humans did that often, and often without apparent reason.

At first consideration, it made no sense. The behavior seemed to have no evolutionary value. Separated from the tribe, the herd, the family, a lone unit's ability to survive was considerably reduced. Even the hard shell of technology was rarely enough protection against the raw forces of the universe. And if the lone unit traveled without a mate, without the capacity to reproduce, then the action was biologically futile.

But if the evolutionary value was not immediately apparent, it was still inherent. Otherwise, the behavior would not continue to occur, would have disappeared from the species quickly. Clearly, there existed a survival value for the larger gene pool in having some of its members commit to exploration and discovery. The behavior could function as a useful avenue toward the development of greater thought within the species—a path toward the growth of a genuinely conscious mind. It could even be an evolutionary trigger as profound as the ability to walk upright or the use of tools.

The future of humanity was an issue that protoss elders occasionally discussed. Humans were a curious anomaly, a species trapped on the cusp of possibility. Caught between their raging biological impulses and the possibility of true sentience, humans were a question in the process of asking itself. The resolution of the dilemma might be interesting, but was not worthy of serious consideration—not until the threat of the zerg had been totally eliminated. Nevertheless, any encounter would be another piece of the growing structure of thought.

Lassatar was a guardian of secrets, a protector of ancient mysteries—and he regarded his duty as a sacred responsibility. More than that, an identity. Lassatar felt his job required him to be the living spirit of protoss heritage. It wasn't enough for him to be just a guardian. He needed to be a living embodiment: he needed to be an access to the powers and abilities of the past.

He believed that the mysteries and secrets of the ancient past were significant, and that they had profound meaning for the protoss of today. Life was mutable. The earliest protoss knew this—not just as theory, but as an actual application.

Life *evolved*. It changed. It challenged itself and adapted to whatever circumstance occurred around it. To a higher mind, the processes were beautiful and cruel and powerful. To a higher mind, one that thought in terms of millennia, evolution was a tool, and the first members of the protoss species used that tool handily. They practiced the application of evolutionary pressures to maintain and control the environments of the worlds they claimed. Often, they uplifted whole ecologies from primal to stable.

As he studied the ancient processes, Lassatar had briefly considered how those mysteries could be applied today. For instance, could humans be *uplifted* toward true sentience? Would they then become a useful partner in the war against the zerg?

That was an interesting question, but not one that any protoss authority was apt to consider at length, let alone pursue. The humans were prone to uncontrolled emotions and violence. Even true sentience would not remove that emotional core of being. Uplifting humanity might result in a very dangerous species, possibly a threat to the protoss. That risk was too great.

And... it was not an inquiry he could assume on his own without violating the integrity of his office. He was only the guardian of mysteries, not the master. Nevertheless... an anomalous event had forced him into a different domain of thought.

He had been searching for an important relic, a xel'naga artifact. He'd found it near a single human settlement. But at the same time he had also encountered a human child as well. The creature had demonstrated a startling amount of innocence and wonder, traits that had not been evident in any of the confrontational encounters of protoss experience.

But if that one immature human was capable, what did that suggest about all of them?

Lassatar was well aware that humans had not yet achieved sentience, not even the illusion of it. On the scale of self-awareness, humans were barely above insects. They were *owned* by the physicality of their beings, controlled by their brain chemistry, driven by their own hormonal storms, victims of the circumstances into which they were thrown by birth. They were dazzled by stimuli and functioned as creatures of reaction—simple and predictable organic machines. That their brains had evolved toward the capability of rationalization was an accident of evolution—a process still ongoing.

But the encounter with the small female and her father, who had been transformed from a violent being into a loving and compassionate protector, had left him puzzled and curious.

Compassion and empathy were acknowledgments of the *self*-ness of others, a key component of sentience, the ability to recognize the existence of consciousness outside one's own being. A small first step, but perhaps the most necessary one. Seeing this potential demonstrated in a human—it demanded investigation. And the next question too. Why did this capacity diminish with age in humans? Why didn't it mature with the individual? Was this the source of the species' failure to achieve true sentience?

Lassatar gave the question to his acolytes while he considered the nature of the xel'naga artifact. Little was known about it, and there might be some significant risk in reactivating it. This was not a task to be undertaken lightly.

So he told his acolytes to consider the nature of self-awareness and sentience. *Consider the questions of compassion, recognition of the self-ness of others. Consider the*

nature of awareness as a function of time-binding and how memory creates history, history creates identity, and identity creates the survival drive.

What kind of consciousness results, he asked his acolytes, if a species is uplifted? He did not specify which species he was thinking of, and he was careful to remind them of their limits. The job of the guardian was to protect, not to apply. Yes, research was part of the job, but not direct experimentation.

Even so, the acolytes questioned—wasn't experimentation part of the process of research? That was a wholly different matter and one that Lassatar was not yet willing to pursue. It required more consideration than he wanted to give at this moment. The xel'naga artifact required his attention first.

So he left them with the single mandate to consider in depth the essential dilemmas of sentience, confident that such an inquiry would keep them busy and out of trouble. Perhaps he should have been more specific in his mandate.

He took himself and the xel'naga artifact to a remote and barren asteroid and quietly, patiently, methodically considered its history, its nature, and why it had been deliberately hidden by the ancient race. When he finally felt he understood, he reactivated the artifact.

And discovered—

What he discovered... left him disturbed.

Not for what it was, but for what it could be. It was not simply the power that the xel'naga artifact unleashed; it was the implications of that power. Could he, should he, would he reveal what he had discovered?

This was not a question he could resolve on his own, but neither was it an inquiry he could share with any other protoss. He was riding a conundrum that could consume him. He did not see any possibility except self-exile.

He returned from his retreat to inform his acolytes that they would have to disband, only to discover they had disappeared. That was the first time he used the power of the xel'naga artifact.

He used it to follow their psionic trail here...

What he found distressed him. Then he was horrified. Then he was saddened.

And if had been capable of panic, he would have experienced that too.

His acolytes had taken his inquiry and pursued it to the point of madness. If it was possible to alter the genetic structure of a species to change its behavior, could they modify the zerg into something less dangerous?

Here, separated from the body of protoss thought, away from the eyes of protoss authority, Lassatar's acolytes had quietly and methodically experimented with the biology of the zerg. They had justified their actions to themselves by deciding that they were simply testing a theory so they could report on its usefulness. But there was an arrogant pride in their work as well. They had felt that having evidence of a successful effort would shift not only the conversation about the zerg, but the entire methodology of combat as well. Driven by ambition, his acolytes had believed they would ascend to higher levels.

If only they had survived.

The presence of the human complicated the situation even further.

Lassatar's acolytes had selected this world for the same reason as the human. It was so far removed from the frontiers of the Koprulu sector, it had been extremely unlikely that their presence here would be detected. All the more ironic then that the human had found the evidence of their experiments.

It had to be an accident.

If humans were investigating his acolytes' experiments on this world, then they would have sent more than a single explorer.

So it had to be an unfortunate accident.

So he did not see this human as a threat; therefore, there was no need to act against it. But perhaps...

Lassatar had to leave the rest of the thought unfinished. He couldn't see all the possibilities of the situation. Not yet. There were too many unknowns. And he still hadn't solved the problem of the xel'naga artifact.

The entire process of thought—the content as well as the context—flashed through his mind in less time than it took to zap the micro-spies out of existence. So by the time the human raised its hand and said, "Uh, hi," Lassatar had already decided to let it live.

Like all protoss, he took no pleasure in the wanton destruction of life. It was wasteful. Allowing the human to continue would be an access to additional opportunities. Killing it would eliminate that option.

So he faded backward into darkness, disappearing from the vision of the human.

“Well, that was weird,” Jake said. He shook his head in puzzlement. Not knowing what else to do, he checked his heads-up display.

His displays were all green, but there was the slightest bit of hash in the background. Static. Noise. Something. Maybe just contextual radiation. He couldn’t tell. He’d seen worse. It could even be the residual noise of the system itself.

Or maybe not.

Jake didn’t have enough experience with this world, and he hadn’t invested any real amount of emotional energy yet. He could still leave. Maybe he should. Something had ripped apart those stalkers and immortals. And there was only one species he knew that would attack a protoss... and was capable of inflicting real damage.

If any of those things were here on this world, he had to leave. They were antithetical to all life-forms except their own.

Unless... what if they had been here, and the protoss had already destroyed them? No, that was wishful thinking. The obvious fragments of debris in the chamber were pieces of protoss armor. Jake didn’t see any pieces of the attackers. Whoever or whatever had ripped the protoss apart had attacked without warning and overwhelmed them completely. There were scratches on the walls and floor of the chamber, and on some of the metal pieces as well, but they were unidentifiable.

And for that matter, what had made that chamber? Some kind of blast effect? He didn’t know. He wasn’t an expert on protoss technology. And the other guys? They were even more mysterious to Jake.

No, he needed to focus on the more immediate question. Why was he still alive?

But if that sinister-looking protoss didn't want to kill him, then why had it destroyed his micro-spies? What kind of threat did they represent? Heat? Noise? Radiation? The smell of fuel? Wireless signals? Those Umojan devices were smaller than mosquitoes. Their impact on the local environment should have been undetectable. Well, at least, insignificant.

Should have been.

Maybe he was missing something...?

If the micro-spies were somehow detectable, then suddenly the reason the protoss had destroyed them was inescapable. It was about keeping them from attracting something else. Something very ugly.

"Crap."

Jake frowned and shook his head and considered his options. He had picked this system specifically because he wanted to be alone. This world was so far out beyond the frontier, it had been unthinkable that he would encounter either protoss or zerg. It should've been a safe haven.

"Ha!" he said. "Look how that worked out." He'd found a planet with both.

Part of him wanted to flee. Indeed, he could make a strong argument for just that course of action. He should head back to his vulture, power it up, turn it to face the entrance to the tunnel—regardless of the super-storm outside—and take the first opportunity to launch.

And even if there was no first opportunity, he could still launch at the first rattle of claws in the darkness. Yes, he had other weaponry in the vulture, but he'd seen what the zerg had done to the far superior technology of the protoss. For Jake, a quick launch would be the safest and most practical option. But retreating to the vulture also meant sitting alone in the dark, waiting in growing terror. And that didn't sit right with him. The paradoxical thing about cowardice, Jake realized, was that it required you to take courageous action to avoid the awful consequences you most feared.

Instead of retreating, he had to advance, following the mysterious protoss. He didn't know much about the protoss, only the obvious things reported in the news. But he thought he recognized this one as a dark templar.

Despite some known incidents of conflict, humans and protoss were not at war with each other, and in fact, had even been known to cooperate on some occasions. As far as Jake knew, the relationship was tenuous and uncertain—neither allies nor enemies, but sometimes associates of convenience. He wondered if that was the circumstance here.

He picked his way carefully across the spherical chamber that interrupted the lava tube. As near as he could guess, some kind of spherical blast had created the space. Large pieces of volcanic rock made for uneven stepping-stones, but the walls themselves looked fused. Whatever had happened here, nothing had survived. That explained the pieces of protoss technology. Had they been sacrificed? Or had the zerg used some of their biological suicide bombers here—banelings? Exploding bugs. That was more likely and probably the case. The size of the chamber gave Jake a pretty good idea of the power of the blast. And the way the rocks were scoured—almost melted—and those little smoldering pools here and there were a certain sign of baneling acid. It wasn't a good idea to fire on a baneling, but if you didn't fire, the consequences would be worse. Not great odds either way.

On the other side of the blast radius, where the lava tube resumed, there was no sign of the dark templar. It had retreated far up the tunnel. Jake didn't hear any sounds of battle. It was a safe assumption that he could proceed. He wished he could launch more microspies, but there had to be a reason for their destruction, and he wasn't going to test it further.

Moving up the tunnel, with only his flashlight stabbing through the pressing darkness, he began to feel the weight of the mountain all around him. The walls seemed closer and tighter here. He'd been hoping that the lava tube ended in a blank wall of rock, but clearly that was not going to be the case. There had to be something more at the head of it.

And where had the dark templar gone? That was another thing. Jake had heard that dark templar could cloak themselves like ghosts and go invisible, leaving nothing more than a vague hint of a flicker in the air. He didn't know if that was true, but if it was, the protoss could be right behind him, and he wouldn't know. That was not a comforting thought.

Lassatar had his own issues to ponder.

The primary purpose of life was to survive. And most life survived by eating other life. The zerg were the most pernicious and hungry life-forms the protoss had ever encountered. They had come to the Koprulu sector specifically to destroy the protoss. And now, as the Swarm continued to expand throughout the sector, the situation was approaching the tipping point.

The danger was inherent in the zerg genome. It existed by taking other life-forms into itself, assimilating their strengths. This was how the Queen of Blades had been created. And the result was an even stronger and more dangerous zerg hive mind—one that was now recognized as the most critical threat in recent protoss history.

The pervasive control of the Queen of Blades extended throughout all zerg infestations. This made it perilous to isolate and study any form of the zerg biology. In fact, any attempt to study the zerg would alert her to the activity. She sometimes manipulated or thwarted experiments, and she had often attempted to subvert the experimenters.

And apparently, distance was not a limiting factor.

This colony here... it had to be obliterated.

But something strange was happening here. His acolytes had accomplished *something*. Lassatar had to discover the truth of it, because somewhere *else* the Queen of Blades was certainly already pondering the same possibilities.

Lassatar prowled the tunnels and caves within the volcano. What he'd found were the remains of his acolytes' control mechanisms and defenses. They'd been overwhelmed by the ferocity of their own experiment.

The evidence suggested they'd been surprised by a cluster of banelings. The banelings alone would not have been enough to destroy his machines out in the open, but in the enclosed space of the mountain, with the blast contained, and with the resultant tumble of rocks onto the stalkers and immortals, all had been lost.

The colony had to be destroyed before it could metastasize—but Lassatar hesitated. He needed to know what his acolytes had done to the zerg genome. Despite the danger that

the colony might grow and spread while he delayed, it was critically important that he understand the underlying nature of these new creatures and the threat they posed.

As long as the colony showed no signs of expansion—a curious factor in itself—Lassatar felt he still had time to observe. But also, he had not yet decided the most effective way to accomplish the task of obliteration. Perhaps he could apply the power of the xel'naga artifact, but he feared its power even more than he feared the threat of the zerg colony here.

He had other technology at his command, of course, but nothing sufficient. Instead, he would have to apply leverage to the larger forces inherent in the situation. If he could awaken the volcano somehow, triggering a massive explosion, it would collapse the entire volcanic cone onto the nest. That would provide certainty.

The arrival of the human was a minor matter.

Jake continued climbing up through the lava tube, slowly and methodically. If he did not reach the top of it in the next thirty minutes, he would turn and head back down. If the storm had subsided enough, he would leave. Not just the volcano, not just the island, but the whole planet.

He stopped. He listened. Nothing. He could hear his own breathing. He could feel his own heartbeat. He imagined he could even hear the sound of his own blood rushing through his veins. Nothing else. He felt as alone as it was possible for a human being to be.

And then... his foot brushed against something. Something that wasn't rock.

Jake looked down.

"Oh—creep."

Not a lot. Just a tendril. But recognizably the fetid biomass that nurtured zerg and poisoned everything else. Within, a network of neural connections reaching all the way back to whatever passed for a mind. Or maybe even some vast psionic network, he didn't know. But he did know that even nudging the creep with his toe, he had just announced his presence to the zerg. All of them. Near, far, wherever.

That decided it.

Retreat. That was his only option.

As fast as he could. He might survive.

The thought hadn't finished forming, and he was already in motion. He jumped back, half turning, already running, stumbling down the lava tube. His footing was uneven, and he slipped and skidded on the polished obsidian surfaces.

His flashlight swerved wildly. His heart raced as the adrenaline coursed through his system. He fell once and went sliding down a particularly steep incline, swerving and turning around as he tried to catch himself, headfirst for a moment. Then, still spinning around, he slammed against a wall and caught himself somehow as the lava tube leveled off for a moment.

Out of breath, succumbing to panic, he still managed to right himself. He rolled onto his stomach, his knees, climbed to his feet, pointed himself downward again, and kept on running.

He told himself he might make it. *I think I can, I think I can*—an old mantra echoed in his head.

And then he arrived at—"Oh, crap!"—the chamber of rubble. He'd have to pick his way carefully across this. Whatever head start he might have had would evaporate in a moment.

He didn't stop to think about it, just leapt down onto the first lava rock and kept going. He grabbed at a broken stalker leg and pulled himself up to the next rock, leapt across to another, kicked past a piece of golden shell from an immortal, climbed up to the next boulder. He was halfway across when he heard the first sounds—sharp skittering noises of claws on rock, of something scratching and scabbling down an echoing glassy tube. A lot of somethings. Jake wasn't experienced enough to identify what might be rattling after him. He just knew they were very bad news. His heads-up display showed a growing series of red dots on his six.

Ahead, that last climb up to the lower half of the lava tube. He wasn't going to make it. He turned to face the entrance to the upper part of the tube, unshouldered his weapon, and set the target-lock zone to just a little wider than the opening. If his ammo held out, if

there weren't too many of them, if he could drive them back for a moment, if he held his tongue just right on the seventeenth Thursday in a leap year with a full moon at the zenith, and if he sacrificed a goat at midnight... then maybe he could make it to the lower half of the lava tube. And his vulture. The super-storm be damned. He'd rather be buffeted by 300 kph winds than be sliced apart by skittering insects the size of wolfhounds.

The first three zerglings screeched out of the tunnel above him almost before he was ready. What saved him was his wild-firing without aiming. The creatures leaped right into his swerving line of fire, but it wasn't enough. He launched his first incendiary grenade. Flying metal slugs, scarlet blooms of fire, and ear-shattering noise! The chamber reflected all the sound right back at him, catching him—and the zerglings—by surprise. Things splattered in all directions. Clouds of burning dust flickered in the dark.

That was lucky!

Jake steadied his footing against the next attack. This time he aimed the AGR-14 directly into the tube, focusing his shots deep upward, spacing them in a steady beat, all the time watching the ammunition count on his heads-up display. He was okay for the moment, and he had two more ammo-belts. How many zerglings could he kill? Would it be enough? Or would they ultimately overwhelm him?

Three more! Six! Shrieking with unholy noises, claws scraping and scabbling against the glassy rock. Another grenade! He splattered them into flaming bits. The sound of the explosions was hideously loud. The fire was bright and dazzling against the larger darkness of the chamber. The dust grew thicker and flickered with sparks.

But all those hours in the simulators hadn't been wasted. He'd played solo; he'd played with and against AI; he'd played on teams. He'd done it for the vicarious adventure, never thinking he'd one day be confronting real zerglings, and here came more of them! Too many! Screeching like nightmares!

Jake lost count. He fired blindly into the mass, brightly shattering the last one half a meter from where he stood. He wouldn't survive the next time—

Did he have time to scramble up to the entrance of the tube? He glanced up and back... and almost missed the next zergling rush. No, he didn't have time. Three, four, six more. Another incendiary grenade. He splattered them quickly, loudly. He was getting the

hang of this now. But he was running out of ammo. This was not going to end well. He could smell it now—the stink of fire and something worse, the fetid smell of charred and burning monsters, the stench of all the separate odors of internal alien biology overlaid with death and char and things he couldn't identify. And it was getting harder to see in the thickening flickering air.

Jake had an idea—a last desperate one. Maybe he could block the entrance to the upper half of the lava tube. Could he collapse it without bringing down a shower of boulders on his own head? He had three grenades left. Could they do the job? Only one way to find out. He just needed a few seconds—

Sixteen zerglings later, the noise of his fire was still echoing up and down the lava tube, and stinking and smoldering bits of flesh still splattered and burned against the walls. He realized he wasn't going to have those few seconds.

“Crap!”

Not unless he did something *else*.

He aimed deep up into the tunnel and let loose a barrage of blistering fire. The tracers streaked up through the darkness, leaving red and yellow streamers of light. Distant shrieks came rattling back to him. Clouds of dust and small avalanches of pebbles and zerglings' body parts came pouring out of the tunnel.

He might have time. He had to flip the protective cover off this switch, arm that one—too many controls, why hadn't he installed just the one button?—oh yeah, safety. He'd have to rethink that decision. Later. There, it was done! And just in time! He aimed up the tunnel, at its roof, and fired. Once, twice—

The grenades arced up the tunnel, disappearing into darkness, screeching into ultrasound, and then—

The blast came hammering back down, a wall of chest-slammng noise, knocking Jake backward against the wall of the chamber. A short sharp shock, followed by a rumbling, quaking, uneasy rattling of something deep, and then the first few boulders came tumbling down out of the lava tube, a small avalanche of rubble. Enough to bury the last few pieces of immortals and stalkers. Enough to raise the floor of the chamber. Enough to make Jake's ears pop from the change in pressure.

“Shoulda thought of that in the first place.” He nodded, satisfied. He took a heavy breath, a second, a third. Amazed that he was still alive, amazed at his own presence of mind, he gasped aloud, still in battle-shock. There was something about these zerglings. They didn’t resemble the ones in the simulator. They were— Jake shook his head; he’d have to let the computers work on this one. He listened to his heart pounding in his chest and thought, *I should stop for a minute. I need to rest—*

He glanced around the chamber, the swirling dust, the flickering sparks, the splatters of burning biology; he couldn’t think of the zerglings as flesh or meat or even insects. They were... just bits of disgusting fetid-smelling *stuff*. It depressed him. The universe was supposed to be a place of wonder and marvels. This was... Hell. The fire underground. Eternal damnation.

Jake caught himself short. “Okay, stop. Enough of this angst. Time to get the fekk out of here.” He turned to the uneven slope of rock between him and the lower half of the lava tube and began climbing. He was halfway up when he heard the sounds.

“Oh, crap. Come on! Give me a break!” He shouted it to no one in particular, just the universe at large. Fate. Destiny. Whatever. “Stop with the perverse practical jokes already.”

He scrambled up to the next rocky ledge, still two meters short of his goal. He turned to face the opposite side of the chamber.

“Oh, crap—”

The whole wall was shaking. Something was digging from the other side, something large. Something *very* large. He could hear the noise of its claws scraping hard against the rock. This was something *else*.

Jake’s heads-up display showed an area of disturbance larger than the locus of destruction for any weapon he had. Translation: “Whatever it is, you’re outnumbered.”

“This is not fun,” Jake shouted at the universe. “I’ve had fun. This isn’t it.”

Still, he adjusted the targeting of his weapon to a much narrower circle of fire. Maybe he could injure the damn thing. Or maybe it had a vulnerable spot—not likely, but he could hope—and if he could find it, who knows? He might even kill it.

The opposite wall was shaking now, dust rising from its surface, small rocks falling away, cracks opening up, and larger rocks crackling and tumbling. He steadied himself

against the dark wall behind him, anchoring his stance. He had maybe one good shot. He kept his flashlight centered—

Something broke through, a dark swinging blade like a giant machete! Then another, swinging back from the other side! Rocks fell away, crashing into darkness. The thing was enormous! Too big to be real! What the hell was he looking at?

Where to aim? The mouth? The eyes? The thing was swinging its head back and forth, swinging two huge scythe-like bones. If there was a mouth there, he couldn't see it. Maybe take out one of its knees, and it would tumble forward and down—? Oh, hell, just fire already—

But before he could even squeeze the trigger, something exploded behind his eyes, between his ears, inside his head: the backwash of a psionic blast, blinding, deafening, searing, screaming inside him in a thousand colors and shapes and smells and sounds and cold fire blazing outward—beautiful and painful and delicious and hideous all at the same time—

Standing in front of him, the dark templar, arms outstretched, crackling fire leaping from its four-fingered hands, lightning flickering across the volcanic chamber, echoing, screeching, violently burning and charring and splattering the staggering beast on the opposite wall. It screeched and writhed in hideous agony.

Jake stared, astonished.

At last, the thing stumbled forward, tumbled forward, fell headfirst into the rocks beneath, thudding like an avalanche of crusty flesh. The overwhelming stench of it roiled and scoured. It would have been an ultralisk... if it hadn't been mutated into something even larger and more ferocious.

"Holy crap," said Jake. "Holy, holy crap."

The protoss stood motionless before the giant dead thing, watching it collapse in upon itself. Flickers of blue lightning danced across its back, finally evaporating, leaving only smoke and dust and rubble. Pebbles continued to spatter down from the roof of the chamber. Jake looked up, his flashlight probing for a possible collapse.

But no, the chamber held.

Jake shook himself. His head hurt. His whole body ached. He felt shattered and shaken in the aftermath of the psionic blast.

“Holy, holy, holy...” he caught his breath and finally said, “... crap. I must be the first human to see something like this. The first human to survive it, anyway. That must be some of that psionic stuff the protoss do. That’s just... something else.”

Already he was wondering if he would experience even more sensitivity to psionic noise than he did before. He hoped not. Or maybe he’d be lucky, and his proximity to the blast would have overloaded and burned out the little bit of psionic sensitivity that he had. Many humans had flashes of ability. Few had enough ability to be trained as ghosts. And Jake was now glad he wasn’t one of them. He felt drained, just standing where he was.

“Okay, Jake,” he told himself. “Time to get out of here.” He turned back to the protoss, lifted his hand in a farewell wave, and—

—brought his weapon up sharply and fired! At the wave of things spreading out across the opposite wall. He swept his fire across the center of the wave. His last grenade triggered a small avalanche, and the rocky wall collapsed upon itself, burying all the skittering zerglings under a shelf of rock and dust and burning embers.

Why hadn’t the protoss seen them, blasted them? Did a protoss need cooldown time? Did it have to recharge itself? If so, then psionics weren’t the all-purpose weapon everybody believed. That was interesting. Not that Jake had anybody to tell.

The dark templar turned to Jake, lifted a hand in either thanks or farewell—Jake couldn’t tell. But he understood the underlying meaning well enough. Time to get out of here, time to go! The dark templar faded from sight, and Jake scrambled up the last few rocks to the lower half of the lava tube. He scrambled down to his vulture, pulled himself onto the seat, lowered the forward canopy into position, and began backing away toward the entrance to the tube.

Outside, the storm still roared, but Jake’s display showed that it was only the edge of the storm now. The center of it was far to the north. The super-storm was only brushing the island, not scouring it. The winds were still high, higher than Jake would have preferred, but the vulture reported it could navigate its way back to camp. Confidence wasn’t high, but high enough. Jake gunned the engine.

All the way back, his thoughts tumbled one on top of the other. Opportunities, circumstances, situations, choices, difficulties, decisions—loading up and getting out seemed the best idea. But something held him back. The protoss had saved his life. There was no reason it should have, none that Jake could imagine.

But Jake had saved the dark templar's life too. So the debt was repaid.

Wasn't it?

Why had the dark templar shown up when it had? Why had it destroyed that... that bizarre mutated ultralisk?

Why had the protoss shown up at all?

Jake raced through the darkening night, screaming in frustration inside his head. *Crap! That damn thing wants something from me!* And by the time he reached camp, he knew exactly what.

Lassatar stood for a moment, immobilized by what he had done. Drained. Empty. Vulnerable.

He'd used the power of the xel'naga artifact. Or perhaps the xel'naga artifact had used him: he wasn't certain.

But he understood it now.

The xel'naga artifact was a psionic lens. And something more. Something terrifying. As a lens, the xel'naga artifact amplified and focused the psionic powers of whoever wielded it. But more than that, the xel'naga artifact linked itself to the bearer so that even if he had no powers of his own, he had the psionic power of the xel'naga artifact at his command.

In that moment of attack, Lassatar had as much psionic power at his disposal as an archon. Perhaps even more than an archon. The xel'naga artifact tapped into enormous energy fields, but to control those fields required all the energy of the bearer. The artifact had sucked away all of his strength and energy and used them to modify its own psionic

abilities, focusing, aiming, and blasting the zerg attackers into the heart of a psionic firestorm.

What would be possible if this artifact was in the hands of one who was even more powerful in the psionic arts—an archon perhaps?

And beyond that, the discovery that vast psionic fields could be tapped and focused and applied, even by those who had no psionic powers—what would that knowledge do to the protoss as a race?

As a guardian of past mysteries, Lassatar had to ask himself, whom was he protecting these relics from? Whom was he protecting them *for*?

He could not answer that question. Not here, not now.

It was necessary to deal with this situation first. And the xel'naga artifact was a part of it now. The ancient relic not only expanded the power to act; it also expanded the power to *see*.

His understanding of this impossible zerg colony had been expanded with a sudden disturbing impact. What had not been evident in the smaller life-forms—the banelings and the zerglings—was terrifyingly obvious in the gigantic mutated ultralisk that had come pushing down the tunnel.

His acolytes had created zerg with *identities*.

Now, he understood what his acolytes had done. And why. Could the Queen of Blades be subverted? This was the laboratory for their test. They had psionically isolated the mountain. The Queen of Blades did not know this colony was here. This colony did not know there were any other zerg. They were alone and terrified. The isolation field kept them mind-trapped in an agoraphobic nightmare.

That was why they'd failed. The terror was the error.

When individual creatures develop identity, they also develop a need to continue that identity—a need to survive. The greater the sense of individuality, the greater the imperative for survival. The greater the need for individual survival, the less control the Queen of Blades would have over the particles of its dominion.

This experiment—by isolating the colony, the acolytes had changed the internal balance of the species dramatically. Whatever else they were trying to do, they had already succeeded... and failed.

The zerg did not retreat. Even in defeat, they made their enemies pay for every meter of advance with blood. But if and when the individual members of a nest could see they had no chance at surviving an assault, they would recognize the end of identity. Now separated into individuals, with each zerg creature experiencing its own specific self-awareness, the colony would be fractured. Would all the different zerg-things recognize their imminent destruction? Would they hesitate? Would they panic? Would they flee?

That seemed a logical conclusion.

But the acolytes had lacked the experience to see how that premise was too simple. They had assumed that creating identities within the zerg would infect them with cowardice.

It was an understandable error.

An easy error to make without deeper thought. The error was only obvious in retrospect, but Lassatar's underlings, the architects of this horror, had died for their presumption.

They had not finished thinking it through. Emotions are biological in nature—a visceral reaction to intellectual processes. Fear comes from the perception of danger. Some fears are based on immediate circumstances; other fears have less basis, coming instead from an emotional consideration of still-forming possibilities.

The lower end of the emotional spectrum—grief, fear, hostility—was a vast symphony of interrelated moments. The upper end of the spectrum—joy—was a much narrower range. The experimenters had not considered that the zerg were capable of experiencing any of the positive feelings. As mindless as ants, they would have no evolutionary need for joy. And so Lassatar's acolytes had not addressed that possibility in their hypotheses.

Lassatar could have warned them. He'd seen it clearly in the humans he'd encountered. Because joy was so rare in their lives, it was extremely precious to them. So they sought it any way they could.

He'd seen it in the encounter when he'd found the xel'naga artifact and met the little girl; there had been a human reaper there as well. The little girl had found joy in family, whereas the reaper had taken joy only in killing. It was the only joy the reaper had known or understood.

These zerg here, they didn't know how to take joy in family. Instead, they had learned to take joy in assault. They would enjoy attacking; they would even enjoy dying in an attack. This would make them even more ferocious, vastly more dangerous in ways still unrealized. What other unintended consequences were yet to be discovered?

For a moment, Lassatar considered the possibility that the experimenters might have succeeded in ways they had not envisioned. Perhaps the nature of identity was such that its further development might trigger schisms within the zerg Swarm, like the civil war that had occurred when the Queen of Blades had challenged the cerebrates. But the Queen of Blades had overwhelmed the cerebrates, and the zerg had become even more dangerous. What if these things overwhelmed the Queen of Blades, and the zerg became even more deadly?

He couldn't take the risk of finding out. He could not let this colony grow. If these creatures reached critical mass, they would spill out beyond the limits of the psionic isolation of the mountain. And if that happened, they would spread beyond this world—

Lassatar had to recognize that he did not have the resources to destroy this nest.

But the human did. Lassatar could use him.

Many humans had a primitive form of psionic ability, a rough animalistic quality that they understood as feelings without evidence—hunches, forebodings, and unexplainable moments of non-causality. Some rare humans had more powerful abilities, enough to be recognizable, controllable, even trainable. The humans had even established an academy for training their psionic warriors, whom they called *ghosts*.

This human had the rudimentary psionic ability of the rest of the species. But just as the xel'naga artifact had temporarily made it possible for Lassatar to have the powers of an archon, so had the device awakened and expanded this human's potential as a psionic receiver.

The human wouldn't hear it as communication, no, but the human would experience it, and that should be enough.

It had been a simple matter for Lassatar to overlay the psionic blast from the xel'naga artifact with the imagery of an exploding volcano. The zerg would fear it.

The human would experience it another way.

Jake didn't know how he knew, but he knew.

As if he had walked every meter of the mountain himself, he knew every tube and tunnel and chamber. As if he had plugged directly into the psionic creep himself, he knew where every tendril reached and spread. As if he had become some kind of organic bio-computer, he understood exactly what would be needed to trigger this volcano and destroy this nest. As if he had suddenly stepped out of his own life and were looking down on himself from above, like some kind of meta-God, he knew exactly what had happened.

"Damn that protoss!" he said. "That uninvited, mind-meddling, gilded son of a coat hook!" He slammed the controls on the vulture, bringing it skidding down toward the hangar of his puddle-jumper. "Well, I don't have to—" But even before he finished the thought, he knew he was wrong.

"Crap," he said.

Whatever thoughts or feelings or images had been slammed into his brain, the imperative was too strong. He *did* have to. And he knew it. Not as knowledge, but as a way of being. It was as if he had become a whole other kind of person. He couldn't leave this world until he had destroyed the zerg... or died in the effort.

"All I wanted was a little piece of quiet!" he shouted at the sky, at the last shreds of the scouring storm. "Is that too much to ask for?" He raised both his arms; he shook his fists. "Protoss! Super-storms! Giant zerg things?! Infested volcanoes? Okay, I get it! The karmic chicken always comes home to roost! But isn't this overkill?!"

In reply, lightning crackled loudly overhead. So close, it staggered him, nearly knocking him to the ground.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Jake said, straightening up again. “I don’t get an opinion.”

Inside his puddle-jumper, his base of operations, he powered up the main display and established a link to the colony ship. This was going to take some time. He had a lot to calculate. How much he would need and where to put it for maximum effect. The colony ship had been equipped with everything necessary to start a self-sufficient mining colony. It was loaded with some very powerful machines, including some serious explosives. Not quite enough, but a good start...

Jake already had a pretty good geologic survey from his own probes, but it wasn’t good enough—not until he augmented it with the super-knowledge the protoss had given him.

The scouring super-storms had weakened the windward side of the cone, and the mountain trembled a little bit more under each onslaught. Parts of the cone were weak. Here, here, and here—just above the tree line on the northwest side, there were seven lava tubes, each pointing toward the sleeping core of the volcano. He could drop cargo pods of mining supplies from the colony ship and then jury-rig probes with the explosives from those supplies. If he could collapse all the lava tubes simultaneously, he should be able to collapse that side of the mountain and trigger a collapse of the caldera.

He ran some scenarios. Some worked, but not as well as he wanted. He ran more. He began to see the scale of the problem. He was trying to blow up a mountain. The mountain wanted to blow up, but it wasn’t ready to blow up. He had to make it ready. That would require a lot of energy.

That was the part he didn’t like. “Damn that protoss! Damn its eyes!” Jake growled. “What right does it have to put stuff into my head anyway?! I didn’t put anything into its head; all I did was say hi! What is that? An invitation to be mind-raped?”

On the other hand, he did have to admit, it was fun looking for ways to kill zerg. Almost joyous. Every time a simulation collapsed the volcano, he laughed out loud. “Ha! If I could do this in real life, I’d wet my shorts!”

“All right,” he said to himself. “Let’s see just how big a bang I can make here!” His hands moved across the display; his fingers danced across the keyboard; he snapped out

commands in an almost frenzied haste. “I’ve never made love to a volcano before: this is just foreplay. But when I’m done, it’s gonna be the best damn bang of all!”

Jake was well aware that he was possessed—owned—by this single-minded drive. He had no choice in the matter. But the more he worked, the more the feelings of satisfaction, pleasure, even ecstasy, rose up in him. Even if he could have stopped, he didn’t want to anymore. He was enjoying this too much.

The problem was that whatever technology he employed, the zerg might seek it out and destroy it. So that had to be part of the plan too—timing the assault with more resources than they could find in time.

Hmm...

Yes.

Decoys. He’d have to put down decoys to distract the zerg. He’d want them all as close to the target zone as possible, but away from the triggering mechanisms.

Right. Now he had to look at his resources again, how to apply them. He ran more simulations, more scenarios. He could do some serious damage to Mauna Koala, as he was starting to think of the mountain, but in only 54% of the simulations did he trigger the kind of massive explosion he was seeking. That wasn’t enough. He needed to obliterate the entire island, nothing less.

If the island survived, if even one seed of the zerg biology survived... the entire effort would have been wasted.

He ran more scenarios, feeling both frustrated and joyous. The work was fun; each run-through brought him closer to a solution, but the slow progress annoyed him, defied the imperative that drove him, made him angry with impatience. “Dammit, Mister Dark Templar,” Jake said to the unseen protoss. “If you could give me the problem, why couldn’t you also give me the solution?!”

There was a way to do it. In his mind, Jake called it Operation Overkill. It would work, but it would cost him most of his resources. The colony ship had nine cargo pods loaded with carefully packaged crates of explosives, as well as mining robots known as Mobile Utility Lunar Excavators. He’d have to bring down all of them, at least one for each vulnerable tunnel. It would take him at least a day to secure the explosives to the probes

and maybe another day to place each one in a lava tube. He'd have to send other probes up ahead to make lots of noise in each channel. If he worked straight through without sleeping—

It might work. It had to work. As soon as he had a clear idea in mind, he sent a signal to the colony ship to drop all nine of those pods. The closest launch window was just over the horizon. The pods would be here in two hours. He'd have to go to work on them immediately, but it was doable. He'd have to reconfigure the probes, adjust the power-to-weight ratios for the additional mass of the explosives, and synchronize the detonators to a multi-band signal.

The geological surveys revealed that the mountain had several deep cracks from water erosion, quakes, and ancient eruptions. Jake could drive the MULEs into those chambers to shoot liquid explosives down those cracks, all the way to the core. Then he could detonate everything at once.

If it worked, if everything went off as planned, the caldera would collapse in upon itself, the northwest wall would sheer away from the side of the volcano's cone, and the whole mountain would explode outward. The force released by the blast would shatter the rest of the cone and cause it to fall in upon itself in a secondary collapse. And if the underlying magma was sufficiently roiled, the whole island could disappear in a ball of fire. Jake would have to observe from some distance away.

Like, from orbit.

Although maybe...

The smallest island in the chain was still more than big enough for him. And it was 300 kilometers north and west of the blast zone. Once the zerg were gone, he might be able to stay there in peace.

He ran more scenarios, looking for optimal clusters of action patterns. It soon became obvious that there were a lot of small variations on a theme, but all of them were still variations on Operation Overkill.

Jake sighed. "Crap. There is no easier way. There is no better way."

He began to issue the necessary orders.

“I hope that damn protoss is smart enough to get out of the way. I’m not going looking for him.”

Lassatar became aware of the human’s plan as soon as the first cargo pod dropped in. By the time Jake had driven the first MULEs into the tunnels, he understood exactly how the human planned to act and had safely removed himself from the volcano, leaving behind just enough pieces of protoss technology to keep some of the zerg occupied. The human needed them to be distracted.

There was something more he had to do as well. The zerg would feel the vibrations; they would investigate what was happening. As soon as the zerg colony discovered mining robots pumping liquid explosives into the crevices, it would attack them.

But these zerg—infected with *identity*—when they realized the scale of Jake’s activity, it would unnerve them, it would disturb the entire colony. There was no way to predict how individuals would react. Some of them might panic, sensing the possibility of personal danger. They might flee. Lassatar knew he had to keep them all inside the volcano if the human’s plan was to work.

So he waited. And listened for their *emotions*. When the zerg sensed the danger, they would fear. When he felt their fear, he would act—

And then, at last, it began.

One zergling discovered a MULE pumping liquid explosive into a deep crack in the volcanic surface. It screamed; it leapt and writhed in agony as the volatile acidic fluid penetrated its carapace. Another hesitated as an explosive-carrying probe maneuvered itself up a lava tube; it backed away from the unfamiliar presence. A third encountered a large package that ticked ominously; struck with uncharacteristic curiosity, the creature carried it down deeper into the nest for further examination.

One after another, separate zerglings returned to the creep, and as they pooled their experiences, all of their separate encounters with unknown pieces of human technology, the cumulative effect was uncertainty, then anxiety, then the first disturbing feelings of an emotion previously unknown to the colony—upsetting in individuals, but overwhelming when magnified through the collective. Even those zerg that had not experienced a direct contact became frightened by the collective unease of their fellows.

The panic began. Some zerglings froze, paralyzed. Others fled for deeper tunnels, while still more searched for escape upward. Most massed for counter-assault. But against whom?

And then the *other* pounding began. Inside their racing brains, inside their chitinous shells, inside their pumping flesh, inside them all, a steady hammering of confusion and light that staggered them where they stood. Some collapsed; some froze; some shuddered in paralysis. Banelings felt it as impact and exploded in place. The heart of the colony was caught in a massive seizure. The full power of the xel'naga artifact.

And then it got worse. The pounding grew louder, became a slamming of psionic force. The tendrils of creep everywhere in the mountain recoiled from the rock. The zerg colony was caught in the center of a maelstrom of fear. It experienced something no other zerg colony had ever experienced before: overwhelming terror! Every beast in the mountain shrieked and screamed, moaned and gasped, flailed wildly and thrashed, caught in dreadful seizures, incapable of coherent action.

And then—

The probes ignited their jets, one after the other, in a synchronized cascade of fire. Walls of superheated flame blasted up the lava tubes, up into the heart of the slumbering core, heating the volcanic rock toward its melting point.

Thunder shook the volcano. Clouds of dust rose from its sides. Rocks pattered and fell in little avalanches up and down the steep sides of the cone. Little avalanches became bigger avalanches.

And then, when the mountain could get no hotter, the first blasts went off. One section went off prematurely, a half-second too soon, but the rest went off as planned, in a perfectly predetermined series of explosions.

The mountain shuddered. But nothing happened.

From his distant vantage point, Jake's first word was the inevitable "Crap!"

And then... an abrupt puff of smoke. Another shudder. A continuing shudder. A growing shudder. The mountain trembled. It began to shake. The northwestern wall of the volcano began to bulge outward, swelling alarmingly... and then it blew.

A sudden great roar that didn't stop, it only grew as columns of dust and fiery rock rose high into the air, higher and higher, a tower of horror and destruction. Flaming rocks shot upward and outward, disappearing into the blue above; the eruption would continue for hours, dropping molten lava into the steaming sea for kilometers around.

"Holy crap!" Jake said. He felt suddenly joyous. Incredibly, astonishingly joyous. He wanted to dance. He felt an overwhelming rush of emotion surging up through him, so powerful it left him weak and shaking.

And then he felt clear and free and liberated... and still joyous. But a different kind of joy. Not just the joy of victory, but a deeper joy, an internal joy—the joy of peace.

His plan had worked. He knew it. He didn't know how he knew, but he knew. "Nothing's going to escape that," and he realized he'd said it aloud. He looked at his heads-up display. "Maybe not even me."

He turned toward his vulture.

His dark templar ally was standing there.

"Hi," Jake said.

The protoss did not respond.

Jake thought he knew why.

All that psionic blasting—he'd felt it too, even at this distance. It must have exhausted the dark templar's strength.

Jake stared in wonder. If the protoss was exhausted, was it also vulnerable? Was this a sign of its trust? That it knew that Jake would not take advantage of its momentary weakness?

Or was Jake just imagining?

And then the protoss lifted a hand. The gesture was a greeting.

That was it, what Jake was feeling—an emotion that he couldn't name. Gratitude. Partnership. Kinship? Something.

“I, uh—I guess—”

The dark templar seemed to be studying him. And for a moment, Jake also knew fear. Had he outlived his usefulness?

But no.

The protoss must be feeling the same thing.

Jake grinned. “So, uh—this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship, eh?”

The protoss finished its examination of Jake and vanished.

“Or... I guess not,” Jake said.

He shrugged.

He turned around and looked at the growing tower of smoke and flame still rising high above him. “Yeah, time to get out of here.”

He wasn't sure where he would go next, but this time it would have to be someplace with people.