



STARCRRAFT  
HEART OF THE SWARM

# JUST AN OVERLORD

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BILZARD  
ENTERTAINMENT

Overlords, are **we**. The Kerrigan, heard **we**. The words to the We, carried **we**.  
Gone, is the Kerrigan. Mad, went the We. Mad, went the **we** born after the Becoming.  
Remembered, some of **we**.  
The ancient homeworlds, remembered **we**. The starving young, remembered **we**.  
The fear, remembered **we**.  
To the We, called **we**. Saved us, the We. Became, **we**.  
Long-lived, are **we**. The language of color and mind, remembered **we**. Count, could **we**.  
Wept, **we**. Killed by the not-We, were many. But:  
Not killed, were **One** and **One**. This **one** and mate from centuries ago.  
While our minds slept, served **we**. Together when our memories returned, were **we**.  
On the horizon line, wait **One** and **One**.  
On one side, the calm embrace of the We. Return, will the Kerrigan. This, know **we**.  
On the other side, madness.  
Solitude.  
Cling to the horizon line, will **we**. Dead, are **our** kin. Dead, are **our** young.  
The last of **our** kind, are **we**.  
**One** and **One**.

\* \* \*

Ten minutes before his death, Razek gazed out over the new home of his Scantid Pirates with a sense of supreme accomplishment.

He stood on the observation deck of the former Tarsonis Ghost Academy, a reclining giant of black reflective marble on the outside and neosteel on the inside. The desiccated grounds of the city square framed the academy and the shattered monument up front. Only two ragged stone feet on a pedestal remained of the tribute to some hero of the now-dead Confederacy.

Five years ago, the zerg had come to Tarsonis, the Confederacy's capital world. Billions had died in a handful of days, by zerg or protoss. Now Tarsonis was a ghost world, a channel for winds screaming in cold stone hallways and howling through the rusty teeth of the shattered skyscrapers surrounding the academy. Tarsonis City was a spooky place, no doubt, but since the Dominion salvage crews had left, nothing was out there.

Razek grinned, rubbing the thick network of scars at his throat. Except his pirates, of course. And a few Dominion patrols. **Too** few, some might say.

Granted, the academy needed some work. They only had access to A level and above, and the lifts went all the way down to Z. Razek lit a cigarette and hissed smoke between his teeth. Who knew what spicy, **expensive** secrets the Confederacy had hidden down there...?

He blinked. A white speck carved a brief line across the gray Tarsonis sky, a line that curved, then came back, straight at the—

He fumbled for his communicator just as the Dominion medivac, engines flaring, came to a rearing halt above the dusty grounds of the academy. Eight marines in powered CMC armor plunged from the front loading ramp, striking dirt with thundering mechanical crunches.

Sera and Bourmus, standing guard at the entrance tunnel beneath the ruined statue, stood gaping. Only Sera managed a grab at her sidearm before the four marines closest dropped to

their plated knees, and all eight opened fire with their gauss rifles simultaneously. C-14 fire chopped gaping chunks out of the two guards, dropping them in a tangled heap.

Only twenty seconds had passed since Razek first saw the dropship. The unused communicator trembled in his hand.

One of the marines, his armor scarred and battered, broke ranks and stamped toward the tunnel. Shrieking, Miles came racing out of the tunnel with that damn knife of his. The marine grabbed his wrist, crushed it, then shattered his skull with a casual backhand, scattering the idiot's brains into the dust.

"Razek!" screamed Lom over the communicator. "Marines! They're killing everyone!"

*Not yet*, thought Razek, heading for the lift and drawing his gauss needler. *But I'm sure we're gonna give them a chance.*

\* \* \*

Four Dominion marines advanced down the dark hallway two by two, their bulk blocking the sunlight spilling through the front gate. Chest illuminators flared, outlining the lift doors ahead in overlapping circles of light.

A heavily scarred pirate lunged into the lights like an inexperienced stripper and fired a quick burst of needles. A lucky round clipped the front left marine's leg servos. He dropped to a knee, already raising his C-14, and fired back. The Impaler spikes stitched a diagonal line across the pirate's chest, and he fell, spilling apart.

The rest of the pirates came then, whether through that loss of nerve that so many fatally mistake for courage, or through sheer hopelessness. A marine in the rear hurled a single grenade through the heroic last charge of the pirates into the doors of the lift beyond.

Flames and jagged fragments of steel scythed back along the hallway. The pirates didn't disintegrate. Not exactly.

Dripping with blood and terrible things, Sergeant Bayton raised his helmet's pitted visor.

"Private Berry?" he said politely, flicking pieces of pirate from his suit's mechanical hands. "That was a very brave and unique tactic you just used."

"Thanks, Sarge!"

"Certainly. Because most marines would call using shredder grenades in close quarters goddamn **stupid!**"

Sergeant Bayton reached out with slow malice and snatched the C-14 from Private Berry's hands.

"You don't get this back until you can fire it like a big boy, Private."

"But—"

"No offense, Sarge," said Private Kell Daws, still kneeling from the lucky shot at his leg, "but Berry has the self-preservation of a moth in a campfire factory, and those grenades are just beautiful when they go off. It ain't his fault."

"I'm glad you think so, because you've just volunteered to help him scrub the people off this hallway."

"Aw, Sarge!"

The fourth marine raised a mechanical hand. Something **dripped**.

Private Caston Gage raised his visor just in time before he lunged against the wall and threw up.

Berry raised a hand.

"Do I have to clean that up too, Sarge?"

"Attention, all squad members," Kell said with mock gravity into his helmet communicator.

"Priority transmission. Private Gage has expelled creep, and may be infested."

Sergeant Bayton sighed and rolled his eyes at the merciless heavens.

"Recruits."

\* \* \*

Once the grounds were cleared, the marines ditched their armor and began the long process of readying the upper levels of the academy for habitation. Ten hours passed. The entrance corridor was cleaned to the sergeant's somewhat unfair standards. The long mess hall on the second floor received some further attention. And Caston still hadn't lived his moment of weakness down.

"It ate a hole in the neosteel," Kell swore. "It was dis-gusting. I had to cover my eyes with a pancreas—"

"Because you're an expert on anatomy, hayseed," said Private Vallen Wolfe from the kitchen. He was the only one anybody trusted to cook.

"I had to cover my eyes with what was probably a pancreas," Kell said, showing Vallen his favorite finger.

The marine recruits (lovingly nicknamed "Meatbag Squadron" by Sergeant Bayton) had been sent down to the deserted planet to garrison within the abandoned academy and spend a few weeks playing war games in the abandoned skyscrapers and broken storefronts. Bayton had been delighted to find an actual opportunity for war.

The marines were green recruits, but the suits were heavily armored, equipped with heads-up displays that handled targeting and threat detection, and did most of the aiming. The pirates had never had a chance.

"We are goddamn warrior kings," declared Private Hanna Saul, slapping the side of the door as she came in.

"Queen in your case," Berry said cheerfully. He was the youngest of them all, and a former xenobiology major, of all things. He'd entered the Corps to pay for the rest of his schooling.

"Thank you," Hanna said, lighting a foul cigar. "I forgot until you reminded me."

"No smoking in the damn mess hall!" Vallen roared from behind the steaming pot.

"Hold on," Kell said, as Hanna stalked back the way she came, and insolently held her cigar out the doorway while staring wide-eyed at Vallen. "I'm worried we're wandering from the topic at hand."

Fingers around the barrel of a Bosun FN92 rifle sniper rifle, Caston glared up at Kell.

"We kicked the hell out of those pirates," Kell said innocently, and then mouthed "What?" at Caston.

"Suits did most of the work," Private Dax Damen said, ducking under Hanna's cigar. The pirates' inept tinkering and Berry's grenade had ravaged two of the three lifts. Dax had spent

the last six hours restarting the generators, repairing the electrical systems, and trying to unlock the academy's tangled security network.

"These suits are junk," Vallen said. "The 5-4 Armored Infantry model my family modified is—"

"Whoa, hang on," Kell said. "Your family is **the** Wolfe in Wolfe Industries? Did you know that, Hanna?"

"Oh, yeah," Hanna said. "I think I remember hearing that the other five hundred times he brought it up."

"Ha," said Vallen, but he was smiling.

"I've never heard this," Caston said, relieved that the currents of mockery had parted around him.

"Probably because you were busy throwing up," Kell said.

"Vallen so admires Mengsk—" Hanna began.

"Emperor Mengsk," Dax corrected from the corner.

"—His Grace, His Lordship, the Eternal Emperor Mengsk the First," Hanna said, genuflecting, "that he's decided to likewise abandon his wealth and join the common men—"

"And women," Berry said helpfully.

"Thank you, Berry," Hanna said. "I forgot again. Common men and women, **all right**, and make a name for himself on the field of battle. Next, if he's done his homework, he'll sacrifice an entire planet so that he can rise... to... Hi, Sarge!"

"Don't stop talking treason on my account, Private Saul," Sergeant Bayton said as entered the circle of light from the shadows in the long depths of the mess hall. Even out of his suit, he was a big man, with a scar splitting the stubble over his scalp.

"She was just making a joke, Sarge," Kell said, the smile wiped off his face.

"Don't you think you've defended enough people today?" Bayton said, raising an eyebrow. "And hell, what do I care? She's a lifer, same as me. That earns her some grumbling privileges, so long as she exercises some damn restraint about where she uses them."

He held her eyes for a long, grim moment. She nodded. Bayton sniffed the air.

"Smells right glorious in here. You're an angel of mercy, Private Wolfe. Where are our medic and Private Drumar?" A horrified expression crossed his face. "Not together, I hope."

"No," Caston said. "I saw Private Drumar heading up to the observation deck. I think Corporal Sawn is in her room."

"I don't like her," said Dax, and the marines turned in surprised unison. Dax rarely voiced opinions. He'd been resoced for some unspecified crime after his conscription, and it was generally accepted that there wasn't much Dax left in there. "She talks to us like we're already dead."

"If I were her, I wouldn't like you either," Bayton said, recovering first. "Flying recruits around. Being woken up every time one of you delicate lilies bangs an elbow. Private Gage, go check on our wayward marine. No skipping meals in this outfit!"

Reflecting that speaking to Bayton about anything was a good way to get volunteered, Caston went, shouldering his FN92 along the way.

\* \* \*

Caston closed his eyes as the lift rose, putting one hand against the humming wall. He'd smiled at all the right times, reacted in all the right ways. None of them had seen.

Screaming in the soundproof box, he punched the wall over and over and over, willing the weakness to leave with each shuddering strike.

\* \* \*

Caston exited the lift, carefully composed and smiling faintly. He needn't have bothered. Private Marc Drumar was staring out the nearest window into the dark of the ruined cityscape, where broken skyscrapers rose like tombstones in the faint moonlight.

"Marc. Sarge says you have to come down for dinner."

"I'm not hungry," Marc said.

"Yeah, well, he says that doesn't matter," Caston said heartily. "You know how he is."

"I don't like it," Marc said quickly.

"He's all right," Caston said, puzzled.

"No," Marc said, turning to face him. "I mean today. The killing. I thought I was ready, but I shot that woman. I saw her fall in pieces."

A cold well opened in Caston's chest. His hands trembled. He needed to say something. To disarm this conversation before it went somewhere dangerous.

"She was scum," he said. *Shit*.

"What?" Marc said, wrinkling his brow.

"She would have killed you. She tried to kill you, man," Caston said, trying to bring it back to safety.

"Yeah, I know," Marc said, and Caston relaxed.

"But I was looking out at this city..." Marc continued. "And I was thinking. We spend all our time fighting rebels, pirates, zerg, protoss. And our worlds are ruined, and we keep killing each other. And for what?"

Caston exhaled in an explosive rush. "What should we do? Talk to them? They want to exterminate us, idiot."

Marc blinked once. "After what happened to you today, I thought you'd understand."

"I'm not a coward."

"Neither am I," Marc said, meeting Caston's anger calmly, and a little sadly. "I just don't want to do this anymore."

Caston turned from him, and went to the glassless window, balling his fist into a bloodless rock. The wind smelled of rust and decay, and he breathed it in.

He breathed out.

"Our enemies aren't reasonable," he said. "Look at this place, Marc. You want to lay down your gun, but they'll kill you armed or unarmed. They'll burn your home down to ash. They don't care if you fight or not."

"Caston," Marc said, after a long moment's silence. "Where are you from?"

"Don't you get it?" Caston said, wheeling around. "It doesn't matter! Pick a planet! Our cities are being destroyed and overrun and obliterated from orbit. You don't get to stand on the goddamn sidelines, Marc. If we don't fight, we're extinct."

Behind Marc, something floated between the dark pillars of two skyscrapers. Two somethings. Huge, dark shapes with dangling appendages. The well of icy water spilled over, crawling up Caston's arms and over his shoulders.

He'd first seen overlords in the final days of Mar Sara, rising over the horizon like tumors. The zerg had been unknown then, and he'd sat on the rooftop of his parents' home, watching them come, eclipsing the daylight.

He remembered only snatches of the day that followed. Dark clouds of mutalisks flooding across the horizon in rippling flocks. Hiding beneath a cellar door while his mother shielded it from outside, screaming as bloody claws cut through her into the wood beneath. His father's rough hands around his waist, shoving him into a last transport as zerglings swarmed up the ramp and the overlords hung overhead, watching...

Caston shrugged the FN92 off his shoulder and pushed past Marc.

"Caston, what—"

Through the scope, the two overlords were perfectly visible, even though it was night. Bulbous pulsing masses of purple-red flesh, pierced by knobs of carapace and jagged bones. Spiderlike legs twitched underneath, just behind hanging, somber heads. Each one had dimly lit clusters of eyes: the bigger overlord's was purple; the other's, green.

They had halted in the gap, and were turning towards each other. If they hadn't been monsters, Caston would have imagined that they were speaking.

He centered the crosshairs on the nearest one's head. The weakness—the trembling fear that had haunted him in the academy's entrance hallway—was gone.

"Caston," Marc said. "I've heard about this. All the zerg have gone wild. No one's controlling them. They're harmless."

"Good," Caston said, and pulled the trigger.

The overlord's head jerked sideways. It sank into the side of a nearby building and tumbled gently to the ground, crumpling like a discarded sack. Purple eyes winked out one by one.

With glacial slowness, the remaining overlord turned to face him through the crosshairs. Emerald eyes flared in the dark, meeting his. **Seeing him.**

He fired again and missed. The overlord had vented some of the gases keeping it afloat and drifted to the left, behind the nearest building.

"I'm not going to watch this," Marc said. Caston ignored him, aiming above the skyscraper line, and side to side. The lift doors pinged behind him as he waited.

An hour passed, and Green Eyes hadn't reappeared. Grimacing, he slung the rifle back over his shoulder and descended.

\* \* \*

No longer **One** and **One**, are **we**.  
**One**, are **we**. **Alone**, are **we**. The last of **our** kind, are **we**.  
With grief and **rage**, **hurtle we** from the **horizon line**. From **the embrace**, flee **we**.

Into madness.

Into solitude.

**we...we...**

are alone. **we** are the last of **our** kind.

The **we** who are born now will not remember the time before the Becoming. **our** world will be forgotten.

There must be payment for this. There must be punishment.

**we** will punish them.

**we?**

**I.**

**I** will punish them.

And **I** will bring the **We**.

\* \* \*

Caston, Kell, and Marc advanced up a narrow street lined by towering ruins. The empty windows opened onto rounded darkness like empty eye sockets.

A rifle boomed from a roof. The shot lanced down, splashing against Kell's armored leg and spraying red across the ground. Caston and Drumar hustled into cover against the rusted frame of a luxury vehicle.

"Again with the leg!" Kell groaned, falling obediently to his paint-round-stained knee and crawling towards the rest of his squad.

"You call that a kill shot, Private Berry?" growled Sergeant Bayton across the open channel.

"Sorry, Sarge," Berry replied from the roof. The rifle boomed again, missing Kell by a meter and change. Caston tracked the shot and caught the muzzle of the rifle disappearing back over a roof's edge. His HUD bracketed Berry's armored outline through the concrete.

"Tagged and locked," Caston said, grinning. "Sorry, Berry."

"Well done, Private Gage," Sergeant Bayton said. A rifle bolt clacked. "Please feel free to stand up and receive my congratulations."

"Holy hell, Gage," said Kell, finally reaching them. "That's fourteen kills today. Save some for the rest of us."

Behind him, Marc turned away, his expression hidden by his faceplate.

Two days had passed since they arrived. Caston had waited for Marc to report him as dangerous and unbalanced. The moment had never come, and Caston had recovered from his initial embarrassment. They'd run a dozen war games since yesterday, and he'd topped the charts nearly every time.

Killing the overlord had saved him. He'd finally met the enemy face to face and taken his shot. The hallway had been a fluke; he'd never hesitate again, never be weak again. The universe swarmed with the enemies and traitors of humanity, and he was a marine, paid to kill them.

Life was good.

"Sarge, I don't get it," Kell said. "Why do we have to pretend we're hunting down fake rebels when there are real zerg all over the planet?"



"Because they're feral, Private," said temporary rebel commander Bayton. "They're dangerous, but disorganized. No real challenge."

"And this is?" Kell said, glancing around the edge of cover—

The sergeant's shot splattered against his faceplate, and Kell went down. The sergeant had the sun behind him. Caston couldn't see a thing.

"Ow," groaned Kell from the ground. "Killed by amateur rebels. My shame is endless."

"Amateur!" Vallen said over the channel, from his hidden sniper's nest. "How dare you!"

"Right," said Hanna. "We're hardened rebel elites, thanks."

"Exactly," Vallen continued. "We don't shave or bathe. We 'liberate' civilian settlements by setting them on fire."

"According to **propaganda**, that's what we do," Hanna growled. "But **actually**, we're displaced settlers with legitimate patriotic concerns—"

"Just finished a scan," Dax interrupted. He'd stayed behind to get the base systems up and running, and the radio static flattened his dull monotone still further. "All clear."

"Don't sound so disappointed, Private," Sergeant Bayton said.

"That's just how he talks since the recruiters panned his brain flat, Sarge," Hanna said.

"We're lucky he has a soon-to-be-court-martialed-for-smartassery private to speak up for him, then."

"Just trying to sound like a rebel," Hanna said cheerfully.

"You're not cursing enough," Vallen said.

"Hold on," Kell said. "If I'm a rebel, I get to curse, set things on fire, and stop bathing? I'm on the wrong team."

"They don't allow you to marry your sister," Vallen said.

"Rebel scum!"

"Privates Saul and Wolfe," Bayton said, "would you kindly stop horsing around and fall back south towards me?"

Caston narrowed his eyes, peering through the burnt and rusted metal. The sergeant was a canny son of a bitch. Any tip about where he was **had** to be a trap...

He groaned. "You've moved behind us, haven't you?"

"Damnation," said Sergeant Bayton, rising above the edge of a roof with his rifle aimed.

"The private has seen through my clever ruse. I shall retire in disgrace. Where would you like your kill shots?"

"Incoming zerg," said Dax from the base, as if commenting on the weather.

Static hissed in the squad channel's silence.

"Is this part of the exercise, Sarge?" Berry said.

"Nope," Sergeant Bayton said calmly. "Fall back to the academy on the double, marines. Where, Private Damen?"

"The sensors report a big zerg to the south. I'm trying to..."

The marines helped each other up and hustled. Dax exhaled directly into his helmet mike, and the marines winced in unison.

"Found it. Sorry, Sarge. No threat. It's just an overlord."

\* \* \*

I found a worker and called to it. It did not listen. Madness infects the We. Madness infects **me**.  
With individuality comes insanity.

I gathered **my** will. It struggled. It obeyed. It became a nest for the We.

**My** We.

I am not the Overmind. I am not the Kerrigan. I am not a gathered-mind. **My** will is limited.

To hold one is pain. To hold more is agony. To hold many is impossible.

To punish the not-We, I must be careful.

From the larvae, I called volatile ones. I told them to sleep, and they slept.

I gathered their bodies into **myself**.

From the larvae, I called the winged ones. I hold them with **my** will. **Agony**.

They will wait.

They **must** wait.

I will gather the attention of the not-We. I will not listen to the madness, to the—

**you are alone you are weak your world is dead you are dead all is dead**

**I will not listen to the madness!**

...

The winged ones will wait.

They **must** wait.

\* \* \*

"Damnedest thing," Sergeant Bayton said, resting his armor's gauntlets on the railing with a faint clink. "Try again."

Caston did. Aiming the rifle was harder with everyone watching, but the overlord was big enough to eclipse the skyscrapers behind it. He'd once shot a decipede off a fence during a sandstorm.

He fired at the overlord. And missed.

"Leaping hell," said Kell. "I saw it that time. It dodged the damn bullet. How did it do that?"

"It must know when we're about to fire, and then it—"

"Bullshit," said Hanna. "Overlords aren't that smart."

The spacious observation deck was getting crowded, especially since all of the marines were still in their suits. Corporal Sawn, their medic and pilot, had come up as well. Almost painfully thin, she stood in a distant corner, watching the overlord with grim gray eyes.

"Are they always that big, Sarge?" said Kell.

"Almost. This one's seen a few fights, too. Look at that scarring."

Everyone leaned forward. Night was falling over Tarsonis. Jagged fingers of light slipped out of the city square, filling the observation deck with long shadows.

"None of the studies I've ever read talked about them dodging bullets," Berry said, and the usual cheer was gone from his voice. Caston was the only one who noticed. Berry sounding worried was like Dax sounding **anything**. It was unnatural.

"This," said Hanna, lighting up another one of Vallen's favorite cigars, "is some top-secret shit. I guarantee it. Some escapee from a Confederate holding cell."

"Yes," Vallen said, casually reaching over, pinched the cigar out of her mouth with mechanical fingers and flicked it out the window. "An ingenious war machine. It approaches the enemy and floats around them."

"Yeah, that is weird," Kell said. "Of all the interesting things to circle on this rock, why us?"

Caston involuntarily glanced at Marc. The marine was already looking at him, asking a silent question. Caston turned away, his jaw aching from the pressure of his gritted teeth. No, he wasn't going to tell the squad. There was nothing to tell. To say that the green-eyed overlord had come here because he had killed the purple-eyed one was to admit that the overlord remembered him. That the mindless beast had a mind.

The overlord descended into relative safety behind the wall of burnt-out hulks. Caston laid the FN92 against a wall and drew his C-14.

Corporal Sawn seemed to reach a decision, and strode up to Bayton's side, speaking in whispered bursts that Caston could barely hear.

"... get out... be more... right now."

Bayton looked down, thinking, then responded, nearly as quietly: "Either the thing isn't a threat, or it's too late to run. We're safer here."

Sawn didn't argue. She shrugged and returned to her corner.

Gripping the C-14 so hard that his fingers ached inside the suit's gauntlets, Caston came to a decision.

"We should go out there. Hunt it down and kill it."

Everyone looked at him like he'd suggested they go outside naked.

"It's dark out there," Kell said, as if he couldn't see.

"It doesn't matter. Overlords can carry drones. Drones can start hives. We need to kill it before it attacks."

The tension stretched across the wide room like a web, tight and quivering.

"You're right," Kell said gravely. "Let's do a practice run."

He hunched over, dangling his suited arms beneath his body, and made weak pinching motions. Step by lumbering step, he approached Caston.

"Ooooooh. Float float. Shoot me before I land on you. Pinch pinch."

Hanna's snicker was louder in Caston's ears than it actually was. He shoved Kell to the floor with a rattling crash and pointed out the window.

"Idiot! Do you see it? That's not a joke! That's the zerg out there!"

"I can't really see anything from the ground."

The rest of the marines laughed, except for Bayton, whose face resembled a thundercloud above a dark mountain, and Corporal Sawn, who didn't appear to have smiled in her entire life.

"The zerg aren't individuals, Caston," Berry said, smiling. "Overlords relay orders; they don't give them. Without a leader, they go crazy. It probably wandered from one of the lesser hives in Ewen Park."

"That's not madness," Caston insisted. "That thing is stalking us!"

Smiles faltered around the room as they realized that Caston might not be joking. Sergeant Bayton dropped his hand on Caston's shoulder.

"Calm down, Private," he muttered. "You're making a damn scene."

Berry didn't notice. He probably thought he was helping. "Overlords don't hunt, actually. Not even their predecessors did. The gargantis proximae were semi-intelligent herbivores before their race was infested by the zerg. Communal, with a language based on psionics, tentacle manipulation, and color. Oh, and a little-known fact," Berry beamed. "They mourned."

"Mourned," Caston said dully, glancing between the zerg threat and the clearly insane private.

"Oh yes," Berry said happily. "They reportedly could live for centuries, but when one of them died, they all turned a 'sky-blue' color. Given a sky with the right amount of oxygen and nitrogen, of course. Anyway! Now that this one's free of the Swarm, it's feral, but harmless."

Caston glanced at the sergeant. There was an order implicit on Bayton's face, and it was "Shut up, Private Gage."

He turned to watch the overlord continue its circuit of the outer academy grounds, and blinked. It was coming towards them, rising over the shards of a hotel tower like a purple moon. The marines chuckled, and a few raised their C-14s for some target practice. The mood gratefully returned to the cycle of gentle mockery that was the status quo within Meatbag Squadron.

Something flashed through the room, something invisible, intangible, and **focused**. Caston staggered. So did Berry and Vallen, though they recovered separately, shaking their heads. No one else had noticed a thing.

It hadn't been the word *now*. It had been the **essence** of *now*, hurled with all the strength of an order. And it had come from the direction of the overlord.

It raised its head, fixing him with those lambent green eyes. It knew him.

Caston hissed through his teeth. Imagined that he was right. That Green Eyes had dropped a drone somewhere, and that the drone had created a hive. What if the overlord knew that everyone would come up and watch him... it circle around the academy?

And why would it approach now unless it was trying to draw attention to itself...?

Caston spun around just before a screeching cluster of mutalisks swooped down, their insectile bodies bobbing eagerly beneath their leathery wings. Whipping their tails forward, they disgorged a wave of ravenous parasites at precisely the same time.

Shards of neosteel and bundles of glaive wurms ricocheted across the observation deck.

Caston screamed. Razor-sharp fragments of metal sparked off his breastplate, and a chunk of the armor on his shoulder was simply **gone**. Gasping for air, he staggered back, taking in the carnage around him. Marc had fallen to his knees, clawing at his helmet with metal fingers as red steam poured from the place where his face had been. Berry didn't even have a head anymore. None of them had even put down their—

"Put down your! Goddamn! Faceplate! And shoot! Private!" Sergeant Bayton roared, shaking him by his suit's collar.

Caston seized hold of the orders gratefully. He shut his faceplate and glanced over his shoulder for the overlord. It was gone.

\* \* \*

I no longer hold the winged ones with my will.

I rise into the clouds. I am heavy with the weight of the dead volatile ones.  
The curve of the world is below. The cold place is above. I want to float up.  
I do not want to do this.  
I want to do this.  
I am only **One**. The not-We must know fear. Must know madness. **He** must know fear and  
madness.  
There must be punishment.

\* \* \*

The deafening chatter of C-14 fire shook the floor of the observation deck and bounced off the surrounding skyscrapers. A gaping wound exploded in a mutalisk's chest, and it dropped from sight. Another dipped into Caston's stream of fire and pinwheeled away toward the distant ground.

The remaining two shuddered suddenly, and turned their acidic projectiles on each other, hissing and screaming. The remainder of Meatbag Squad focused their fire on the feral mutalisks. The creatures fell apart in a shower of wet flesh.

Caston's rifle clicked empty. The zero on his HUD flashed at him for several seconds before he realized what it meant, and reloaded.

The neosteel floor was a melted ruin of acid scars and dying wurms. Marc had fallen forward, and lay with his head twisted to the side. Nothing was left inside except for red and bone, but in his mind, Caston still felt the weight of that calm, sad gaze.

He holstered his C-14 and went for Kell, fist cocking back.

Without breaking stride, Sergeant Bayton slammed into him, pushing him back against the wall.

"This is **not** happening, Private!"

"I tried to warn them, and he made jokes. And they're goddamn dead!"

"Yeah, they are," Bayton said, his visor flicking open. Muscles leapt in his neck and jaw. "So look at him. How do you think he feels about that now?"

Caston looked at Kell, standing silently over the bodies of Marc and Berry. He looked away.

"Right, marines. This is what is going to happen. We are going to make our way to Corporal Sawn's dropship. We are going to leave. And we are going to do both with all speed."

"Screw that, Sarge," Hanna said, raising her visor and spitting. "We're going to hunt down that overlord."

"Absolutely," Vallen said.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Sergeant Bayton. "You must be new. That last thing I said was what we refer to in the Marine Corps as a **goddamn order**. Now—"

A hundred feet west of the academy, a green blur streaked through the hollow interior of a skeletal skyscraper and exploded. Its foundation obliterated, the skyscraper struck the concrete with a hollow, teeth-rattling boom and fell over, turning a quarter mile of abandoned buildings into a churning furrow of thick gray smoke and jagged debris.

With dry mouths, the marines turned away from the devastation and looked up at the hidden sky.

The second baneling the overlord dropped hit the landing pad. The dropship and the unfortunate pirates' cruiser erupted in a tower of green-tinged fire.

"Pile into the lift right now!" Bayton shouted, and slammed a fist against the panel. With a gentle ping, the doors of the academy's only working lift opened. Sawn went first, almost instinctually. Caston followed, beginning to understand how this unarmored medic had lived long enough to get that thousand-yard stare.

Vallen, Hanna, and Dax followed. Kell still hadn't moved. With a growl, Bayton grabbed hold of the stunned marine, shoved him into the too-crowded lift, and pressed a button on the inside.

"Dax."

"Sarge?"

"I need you to cut the shit and get everyone down to the lowest level. You copy?"

"Yes, Sarge. How did you know?"

"Please. I've seen a thousand Daxes. I'm a sergeant, Private."

"Are... are you getting in the lift, Sarge?" Hanna said.

Bayton smiled. "Use your eyes, Private Saul. No space."

The door slid shut, and they descended.

By the shuddering of the lift, the next baneling corpse struck the observation deck dead center.

\* \* \*

**I descend. Fire and smoke rise to meet me.**

**I hear the silence of the dead. I hear the thoughts of the living.**

**His punishment is not finished yet.**

**From the larvae, I call a digger and a spinebearer. From the larvae, I call the many-ones.**

**I hold them with my will, and I send them. Agony.**

\* \* \*

The lift doors opened on the barracks hallway, A level, which was underground, but not far enough for any of their liking.

"Everyone out," Dax said. "I need space to work."

"What was Sergeant Bayton talking about?" Vallen said as they piled out. Kell moved farther along the hall and hunkered against the wall.

"Well, that resocialization I went through?"

"Yes?"

"Didn't actually happen. I got caught hacking into the Ministry of Finance's records. Was trying to fix something for a friend," he said, tearing a panel off the wall. From the recesses of his suit, he pulled a handheld device that didn't look like standard marine-issue hardware, and hooked it up to the wiring within.

"They were going to resoc and enlist me as punishment. They told me that, and then left me alone in the room with the resoc console for ten minutes."

"You mean you—"

"Hacked the console. Thrashed around a lot in the tank to make it look good. "

"Let me get this straight," Hanna said. "I've spent all this time feeling sorry for you, and you weren't brain-panned? How the hell do you expect us to ever trust you again?"

"Whatever," Dax shrugged. "Mind if I save your asses anyway?"

"Please do. Women everywhere will thank you," Vallen said, turning to the medic. "You're not going to say anything, are you?"

"If he can get us to safety, I'll nominate him for emperor," Sawn said dryly.

Caston walked over to Kell. He'd been ready to hit the man for something that wasn't his fault, and he needed to—

"I know," Kell said, raising his head. His eyes were red-rimmed. "I was always joking around when we trained, joking when you were trying to warn us. They're dead because of me. I **know**."

"That's not what I wanted to say. Look, the overlord came because I—"

"Would you two girls shut up for a second?" Hanna said, striding past them down the dim hallway. Lights flickered. The recruits had stayed in the rooms nearest the lift, but the barracks had been built to house hundreds of ghosts and ghost recruits. The halls were long and dark, and full of echoes, and now...

... something was scratching.

"I hear it too," Kell said, pushing off his feet. "What do you think it is?"

"I hope rats," Hanna said.

Around the nearest bend, something **screamed**.

"But probably not," Hanna said, unlimbering her rifle. "Dax, hurry up!"

"Feel free to jump in anytime you figure out how to disarm an Omega-class facility lockdown."

Two zerglings scrambled around the far corner, nipping and clawing at each other. Seeing the marines, they screamed again, and charged.

Vallen, Caston, Kell, and Hanna opened fire. Gauss rounds tore blood from their backs, ripping at their wings, and still they came, oblivious to the pain. A lucky shot smashed the skull of the nearest, and it skidded to a boneless stop. Caston's rifle clicked dry, and this time he didn't have any more magazines. The remaining zergling leapt between the marines, heading for Dax and the unarmored Sawn...

... who leaned Dax's rifle against the elevator wall, braced her legs against the recoil and fired a single shot.

The zergling burst apart.

The marines stared.

Kell laughed first, and Caston and Hanna joined him when Vallen flinched at the unexpected sound and dropped his rifle. Vallen snickered as he awkwardly bent to retrieve it. Even Sawn snorted her amusement while massaging her aching shoulder.

Glancing over his shoulder in annoyance at the interruption, only Dax saw the other six zerglings round the corner.

Insectoid wings fluttering, they struck Vallen all together, squealing and slashing. Wide ribbons of blood arced up the walls and over the ceiling. Vallen went down without another sound.

With a running start, Kell kicked three of the zerglings off Vallen, and fired, screaming wordlessly. They evaporated in clouds of blood and claw beneath the barrage. Hanna tried to pull Vallen clear, recoiling when a zergling shrieked and took her suit's mechanical hand off at the wrist. She cursed, stomped it flat against the steel beside the spreading pool of Vallen's blood, and fired a burst one-handed into its skull.

Her rifle went dry just as the zergling stopped moving.

Caston stood motionless. He was failing again. One by one, he was failing.

Then he grabbed the nearest zergling by the tail and swung it against the wall again and again until nothing was left but featureless flesh.

Distantly Kell's rifle fired an extended burst and clicked dry. Caston turned to see Kell kick the last zergling off Vallen's chest.

Claw wounds marred Vallen's armor in the dozens. The neosteel floor was visible through his body. Sawn hissed and shook her head.

"Dax," Hanna croaked, staggering back towards the lift.

"I know," Dax said. "Almost done."

"We're not," Kell said, staring back up the hallway.

The hydralisk's crested head nearly reached the ceiling. With a metallic slithering sound, it surged forward, twitching and shuddering as if stung by millions of invisible insects.

"Corporal!" Hanna said, storming back towards the lift. "The rifle!"

"Save the ammo," Kell said, and charged.

Caston should have yelled, should have told him that he didn't need to redeem himself. It wasn't his fault.

But the words froze in his throat, and he couldn't move.

"Caston! Get the hell out of the way!" Hanna roared from behind him, but Kell had already leapt in, grabbing hold of the creature's crest and hauling its head down as the insane hydralisk raked long gashes on his backplate. The hydralisk focused on Caston, tusked jaws slaving with hunger and **recognition**. It hunched over, exposing the glittering darkness between flesh and carapace, and armor-piercing spines flew at him.

It couldn't miss at this range if it was aiming for him. It wasn't aiming for him. The spines hissed past, nicking his armor, and Corporal Sawn screamed behind him. Meat slithered onto the floor.

The hydralisk leaned backwards, thrashing its serpentine tail, and rammed its claws into Kell's gut clear through his armor, over and over. Reaching up with trembling hands, Kell seized the bottom and top jaws of the hydralisk, and wrenched them apart with a wet **crack**.

They fell together.

Kell's faceplate irised open. His mouth worked, but only blood came out. He smiled.

"It wasn't your fault," Caston said, dropping beside him. "It was mine. Do you hear me? It was mine."

But Kell's smile was fixed, and his eyes were empty.



Staggering back to his feet, Caston turned, dreading everything that was waiting there for him.

Sawn must have seen the spines coming, and turned instinctively. The spine had struck her from the side, nearly bisecting her. The others had pinned Dax against the lift wall. He lay in a field of red.

"Lift's ready to go," he said, and exhaled once. He didn't inhale.

"Why didn't you move, Caston?" Hanna said, shoving him. "Why didn't you move?"

"It's my fault," Caston said dully.

Hanna stood still, then opened her faceplate. Even with exhaustion and grief warring across her face, her glare was magnificent. "We're the only two left, and you're not going catatonic on me, Gage," she said. "So listen.

"You didn't make the zerg the hungry sons of bitches they are. You didn't even start the war. They did. You have nothing to apologize for."

But he did. She was only partly right: he hadn't fired the first shot. He'd just fired the next one.

Hanna dragged him back towards the lift with her suit's remaining hand, cursing at him and the world in general. She was saying something about lying low, then hunting the overlord down when reinforcements came. He was pretty sure he responded.

The doors closed. Caston looked at his feet. Blood rippled around them.

The lift descended haphazardly into the depths of the academy, coming to a sudden, shuddering halt every few floors. While Hanna grimly outlined their revenge, Caston watched the floors flicker past like images on a projector, flinching each time the doors hissed open and slammed shut.

Crumpled skeletons in tattered Confederate uniforms, trapped when Tarsonis fell.

**ssssshChunk**

At the end of a short corridor, a glass wall covered in red-veined flesh.

**ssssshChunk**

A long hallway strung with hot, pale lights. The farthest one failed. Then the next. The next. Then the darkness rushed towards them like a landslide—

**ssssshChunk**

The lift freefell for several seconds before juddering to a stop with a stench of burning plastic and metal. The open doors were only around halfway up their waists. The flickering display read, "Z."

"... with a flamethrower and **step on them**. You hear me, Caston?"

"I hear you," Caston said, reaching down to the open doors on Z level. Together, he and Hanna pulled the elevator down to the last level, lowered their visors, and stepped through.

Silence ruled down here. Intermittent grime-stained lights gave the neosteel a yellow tint. A sign reading "Security Control" pointed down the branching hallway.

"There's gotta be a working console in there," Hanna said. "We'll call for help, then look around for emergency stairs."

Caston let her take the lead, since she had the only rifle with ammo left. She turned a corner. He had a feeling that their search for stairs wasn't going to go well. Those Confederate soldiers wouldn't have starved to death if there'd been any stai—

Wait.

If there were no stairs, how had the zerglings and the hydralisk attacked them?

A sly scratching in the wall behind them was their only warning.

The zerg roach sprang onto the neosteel and skidded, spraying sparks as its six talons fought for purchase. It hissed triumphantly from within the spiked safety of its thick carapace. Hanna wheeled about, leveling the C-14 awkwardly over her suit's handleless forearm.

"Down, Caston!"

Caston had no intention of letting her face it alone. He had no intention of surviving this planet, come to that. He lunged at the towering roach, reaching out with both hands to hold it still so that Hanna could take her shot...

With a contemptuous swipe of its bulky body, the roach knocked him against the wall with a bang of steel on steel. Hanna fired, and the gauss rounds skipped and sparked off the roach's armor...

It reeled back, maws gaping. Time slowed. Hanna threw the rifle to Caston...

The roach unleashed a flood of acid.

Hanna stumbled backwards choking, her entire front half covered in the bubbling green fluid. She sat down heavily on the floor, legs splayed, then fell backward.

Talons dancing, the roach turned to Caston. It opened its mouth again, and the bile surged at the back of its throat...

A missile of pure thought plunged from the sky down into the dark hallway beneath the ground. The roach shuddered and stared at him, slaving.

Then it bashed its head against the neosteel into a raw and mangled pulp.

Unspeakably weary, Caston inched his back up the wall behind him. He stumbled past the roach's corpse to Hanna. The acid had eaten through her armor into the ground below. Nothing recognizably human remained.

With Hanna's rifle dangling from his hand, Caston eased his way along the wall to the hole the roach had ambushed them from. It was more than wide enough for him.

His chest illuminators carved through the narrow darkness. The shaft led at an angle away from the academy until neosteel became soil, hardened to a resilient crust by the roach's secretions. The tunnel began spiraling upward, and Caston followed it for half an hour. At some point, the spiral branched horizontally back toward the academy, and Caston knew that if he followed it, he'd find Kell and Vallen's bodies lying where they fell.

He kept climbing until he was back on the surface, outside the academy.

The overlord was waiting for him.

Unblinking, red-rimmed green eyes held him and judged him. Wild hatred billowed from its scarred bulk like heat from a furnace. Behind it, the melted ruins of the academy raked at the sky.

With painstaking effort, and without breaking eye contact, the overlord unfurled an underclaw and scratched a long, wavering line in the soil at Caston's feet.

He stared down at it. Understanding came.

One. The overlord had left him alive on purpose. They were both alone now.

The overlord held his gaze a moment longer. Then its side expanded, and it rose, turning away.

Caston raised his rifle. And faltered.

It had left him alive on purpose. It wanted him to kill it. He had killed the other overlord, and Green Eyes wanted to die because of it. Why would a zerg care...?

He remembered them huddled together as if talking. Against his will, he thought of the unusual intelligence of the creature, and how Berry had said that the overlords' original species were capable of living for hundreds of years. He wondered if it was possible that an infested creature could regain its memories, its sentience, if separated from the Swarm.

And how wonderful it might be to find someone you remembered at the other end of centuries full of horrors...

With a disgusted cry, he flung the rifle away.

\* \* \*

I rise back towards the divided horizon. **My** death does not come. I wish it did.

I do not want to remember. I do not want to be **One** anymore.

I do not want to be **I** anymore.

I do not want to mourn.

I cross the horizon line. I return to the embrace. I...

**Pain**

I...

I?

**we.**

In the calm embrace of the We, hang **we**. Return, will the Kerrigan. This, know **we**.

Nothing else, is there.

**we do not want to remember.**

Overlords, are **we**.

\* \* \*

Caston had dug and filled the eight graves by the time the sun rose. He left his empty armor beside them and walked off into the ghost of the Confederate capital. A rescue team would come eventually, and he didn't want to be rescued. Rescue meant resocialization.

Resocialization meant forgetting, and he didn't want to forget.

Movement caught his eye, and he looked up.

Far above the ruined world, the overlord rose into the dawn, glowing a rich sky blue.