

STARCRRAFT®

LEGACY OF THE VOID™



BILZARD
ENTERTAINMENT

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Sector Six

By Micky Neilson

It seemed as if the screaming had gone on forever.

Any vet worth his beans knew that if you pumped a hot spike into the plasma feed of a firebat's gauntlet at the correct angle, it would roast the poor bastard inside his own suit as soon as he tried to activate the Perdition flamethrower... a lesson currently being illustrated by the charity case waving his arms and hopping along the mucky "ground" of Beta Saul, death wails emanating from his silly orange suit's external speakers even as servos kept the hardskin upright.

Commander Dorian would have been lying if he told himself he didn't enjoy listening to the pirate scumsucker yelp like a spitted skalet.

Finally, the caterwauling ceased and the suit gave up any attempt at keeping its occupant vertical. The hardskin pitched forward, dispersing and then disappearing into the pea-soup fog.

The "air" of Beta Saul, from ground to exosphere, was a noxious cocktail of deadly gases that condensed to zero visibility about a meter above the surface. Said surface was a thick sludge, punched through sporadically by strange, cypress knee-like projections, some only two meters tall, some twice the height of an average man.

All that remained visible of the firebat now were the tanks protruding from the suit's back. Somewhere in the surrounding quagmire lay three more corpses, one of them wearing a spike-riddled hardskin so outdated it made the CMC suit Dorian had on look freshly issued; the other two were clad in a hodgepodge of protective gear that could only be called "armor" if the word were used as the punchline of a particularly morbid joke. The dropship that had dumped off this suicide squad had disappeared into the shifting bile sky.

"Head back?" Spanneti's voice asked through his external speakers. Dorian shuffled his boots in the muck so he could catch a sideways glimpse of the subordinate soldier through his faceplate. He and Spanneti were the only two who had separated from Brute Squad. Spanneti had taken a hit to the upper-right armplate—hopefully nothing their medic, Zimmerman, couldn't handle—and Dorian's hardskin had gotten scorched when the torch-monkey had lit him up, taunting him all the while... But it was Dorian who had managed to get in the final word: something about liking his meat extra crispy.

"Yeah, let's—"

Staff Sergeant Bekkins's staticky voice cut through on the squad's encrypted frequency. "Sir, it's Bek. The drop was a decoy. They're comin' after the package." She sounded absolutely, appropriately (for her, anyway) calm. Dorian had called her "unflappable" once. Spanneti had agreed, saying he had offered to flap her all the time, but she refused.

"Go!" Dorian yelled to Spanneti. Servos kicked in as the two men stomped back through the goopy slough in the direction of the xel'naga temple, a kind of pyramid structure towering through the putrid haze.

Then, another voice in Dorian's ear: "Brute Squad, this is Command. Status report, over."

As usual, Command was useless. It would take Dorian longer to explain what he was doing than it would to simply do it.

"Status report is I'm busy. Why don't *you* tell *me* your location and ETA?"

A huff. "ETA is ten minutes. Over." The comm officer sounded testy.

Even with the augmentation of their CMC armor, it would take Dorian and Spanneti a solid minute to close the distance. The two of them coming out here—only the two—had been a gamble, but Dorian believed in rolling the dice. Doing things strictly by the book, after all, was for rookies. The "experts" who wrote the book had never stared down the business end of an AGR-14 assault rifle.

Sometimes you just had to use common sense. Immediately upon hearing the report of enemy contact, Dorian had suspected a feint. Why else would the dropship have passed directly over Spanneti's lookout position? The pilot had wanted to be seen, to draw protection away from the pirates' objective: the relic.

It was usually about a relic. Or an artifact. Or some item with a name no one could pronounce and a purpose no one could guess.

This relic was no exception. It was old, really, really old, and that was the extent of Dorian's knowledge. All company ops were "need to know." "Upper management," a.k.a., the Moebius Foundation, specialized in, among other things, archaeological research on long-extinct alien civilizations. It hadn't always been this way for Brute Squad. Their boss used to be Arcturus Mengsk, and the team used to be one hundred percent Dominion Marine Corps. But after a few secret handshakes and behind-closed-door meetings, Brute Squad had been transferred to the Moebius Corps, the military arm of the Moebius Foundation.

So... the Moebius Foundation called the shots. When advance scouts had located this particular xeno temple, belonging to a millennia-old race known as the xel'naga, Brute Squad had been sent to seek out and recover the relic inside. Simple enough. After all, the scouts had reported that the planet was uninhabited and that the temple was abandoned...

Which it was, until the "Players' Club" (these pirate groups had an uncanny knack for choosing the stupidest names) showed up.

The alien structure expanded to fill Dorian's field of vision as he and Spanneti closed in on the south entrance. They could hear gunfire, then loud, booming noises, followed by three tooth-jarring explosions. Unless Dorian missed his guess, the heavy artillery was the handiwork of Specialist Cranston, their marauder—a thickly armored ordnance professional who dispensed Punisher grenades like a furlough soldier making it rain credits at a strip bar.

As they rounded the temple's base, Dorian sighted Brute Squad's dropship sitting right where they had left it, several meters out from the structure's entrance and off to one side. There was another vessel as well, an old grizzly. Dorian had to admit the "Players" weren't complete morons: they had situated the grizzly at an angle opposite the Moebius dropship and were using their transport's onboard weapons, in addition to suppressing fire from behind his own team's ship, to keep Dorian's crew pinned down at the temple ingress. This was classic "Zeus." (That was the name taken on by the pirates' cocky leader.) Brute Squad and Zeus had crossed paths a few times in past years. Unfortunately, the pirate had gotten away each time... usually at the cost of many Players' lives. Somehow, though, he always managed to shanghai more recruits.

Clearly, in this instance, the pirates had hoped to lure the majority of Dorian's force away. After all, what kind of squad leader would spare only two soldiers to engage a dropship full of enemies?

Dorian smiled behind his faceplate. A squad leader who was one step ahead, that was who.

And now he was a few steps behind... behind the pirates' cover position at the Moebius dropship.

A hand signal from Dorian brought Spanneti to a halt. The two men raised their weapons and unloaded on the pirates, shredding the sorry sons of bitches right where the three of them had huddled near the dropship—and, yes, punching a few holes in the Moebius craft's outer shell and ramp-extension legs in the process.

Dorian, Spanneti, Bekkins, and Cranston all cut loose on the grizzly. Even Private Hopper, the youngest and most risk-averse member of the squad, was firing from cover. The grizzly's armor wouldn't hold out for long, and the pilot knew it. Engine wash buffeted Dorian, then painted swirling lime-green brush strokes through the air as he watched the transport lift up, bank, and sail like a phantom into the obscuring haze.

Spanneti went to check on the others. Zimmerman was already with them so she could provide medical attention if needed.

"Command," Dorian said after he activated the encrypted frequency. "Looks like the party's over." He walked back to the squad's dropship, staring down at the two bodies there.

"We're gonna—"

Two bodies?

There should have been three. One of them had been wearing CMC armor. He must have survived.

A husky baritone broke in on the open frequency. "You hit me, Commander. Not enough to put me away, though. You're the one who should be dead. You and your toy soldiers. But you didn't follow protocol, did you? Not like the other loyal Dominion robots would have... I'll remember that. For next time."

That voice belonged to Zeus. It had been him in the CMC armor. Dorian could have finished him. He'd had the pirate pissant right there at his mercy. And now he was getting away. Again.

Like hell. Given the layout, there was only one direction Zeus could have run without being seen.

"Command, this is Squad Leader. In pursuit of prime suspect Zeus. Repeat—"

"Negative, Squad Leader. If the package is secure, retrieval is your only priority, over."

Dorian could have used the old "What's that? You're breaking up!" gag, but after the first few times, his superiors had actually caught on. This time he didn't even bother; he simply chose not to respond.

Spanneti gave a hand signal, asking if Dorian wanted backup. The commander waved him off. No sense in *everyone* getting reprimanded for disobeying orders.

After coming around a canted corner of the pyramid, Dorian spotted Zeus's silhouette standing on open ground, weapon raised. Zeus fired. Dorian fired. Spikes cut the air to the commander's left, tearing closer. Dorian's own discharge tattooed the left arm, shoulder, and headpiece edge of the pirate's hardskin just as a massive form dove in, scattering putrescent cloud plumes in its descent. In the next instant, the grizzly was blocking Dorian's line of fire, and out of sight, Zeus was no doubt boarding the vessel.

Dorian's fusillade continued, but the spikes ricocheted off the bulky beast's armor as the craft shot upward and vanished into the miasma.

Several hours later Commander Dorian was staring out the observation window of a planet-hopper. Asteroids, some the size of vulture bikes, others the size of battlecruisers, appeared and disappeared and, many times, whizzed by just a little too close for comfort.

The ship's onboard computer had been programmed with a very specific flight path to navigate the belt, called Revanscar. An error of even a meter could result in loss of integrity, which was basically a nice way of saying that the craft would be smashed to pieces by one of those space-hurling rocks and that all occupants, including Brute Squad, would sail off into the asteroid field... a field that represented what was left of the planet Revan.

Now that he had thought of it, he couldn't get the image out of his head: Dorian and his team members floating amid the scattered debris, a life expectancy of roughly ninety seconds in the void—less, if they were pulverized by a stone projectile traveling at nearly twenty-five kilometers per second before then. And the precious cargo, that slab they had risked their lives for, how long would it last? Perhaps longer than any of them. After all, it had survived up until now. Perhaps it would find a permanent home in the cold, silent vacuum.

The pilot announced that they would reach the Moebius Foundation facility shortly. A quick glance through the window verified that they were closing in on the massive rock that served as the Moebius Corps's base of operations. As they neared it, the commander was treated to a better view of the installation, which dominated almost half of the terrestrial mass. The base was composed of flat, sprawling neosteel structures that spread out from a central core like fingers from a giant's grasping hand.

The ship bypassed multiple turrets and was vectored toward the starport, prepping for touchdown. It couldn't be quick enough. Dorian was anxious to be rid of their cargo and to report to Major Braxton for his team's next assignment. Whatever that might be.

"You can forget Braxton," Lieutenant Colonel Sparks blurted out. Sparks, Dorian was learning, blurted out everything. Just like every other commanding officer he had served under. "You report to me now."

Dorian already hated this guy. Why all of these armchair soldiers resorted to condescension and disrespect to establish superiority was beyond him.

"Sure, the major talked you up—touted your operational track record. You know what I think? I think he couldn't wait to pass you off! Make you someone else's problem. I suspect that may be the very same reason Arcturus handed you over to Moebius before he went belly up: to jettison dead weight! Measured by success rate, yeah, you're a superstar. Judging by disciplinary action, you're a worthless scrub."

The LC's desk was immaculate, just like the rest of his office. Dorian wagered that if he ran a finger across the top of any one of the commendations adorning Sparks's wall, it would come back spotless. The only two items on his desk were a holo-projector and a thin, tapered remote, and even those had been placed *just so*.

"Well, guess what?" the old bird continued, strutting behind his desk while Dorian stood at parade rest before it. "Now you're a pain in my ass. I don't *like* pains in my ass, Commander!"

That narrow remote, with its slightly pointed end, would make a fine stabbing weapon, Dorian thought. It was long enough that if he shoved it in the inner corner of the LC's eye, it might just reach his brain.

Dorian embraced the vision of Sparks convulsing on the floor, clutching at the embedded remote, bleeding and spitting his life's end all over the pristine panels.

"Well?" Sparks barked.

"Sir?" Dorian responded. He hadn't realized how completely he'd tuned out the old junkyard dog. Sure, he fantasized about throttling people every once in a while, but not usually in such *detail*.

"I asked if you had any intelligent idea as to why I don't hand your worthless carcass off to some other unfortunate bastard. Clearly the answer is no. The reason, my ignorant friend, is because I'm shorthanded. So, guess what you and your superstar team get to do?"

"No idea, sir."

Sparks had stopped pacing, one hand on his hip, the other thrusting a pointer finger at Dorian that mirrored the LC's jutting jaw.

"You get to pull security duty. Right here on base. Sector Six. Advanced Research Division."

Security duty? Was he serious? Babysitting lab coats and all their experimental crap? Protecting their projects—and them—from whom? Or what? Nothing could get through that asteroid field.

"Does that not excite you, Lieutenant? Does that not make you happy? It may not surprise you to know that I don't give a shit! You can bet your sorry hide that good ol' Braxton, whatever new top-secret assignment he's on, is laughing his ass off right now."

Dorian didn't doubt that one bit.

"What kinda crap is this?" Spanneti was pissed, throwing his hands up in the air, face turning red. "This ain't what we do!"

Spanneti was fortunate to be *able* to wave his arms. Zimmerman had done a fine job repairing his wounded limb. Of course, she had patched up injuries that were a lot worse on the team over the years.

Private Hopper leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "I don't like this a bit. Somethin's going on. There's something they're not telling us." Dorian frequently accused Hopper of jumping at his own shadow. "It's a bad sign," he continued. "We're gonna get drummed right outta the corps."

Hopper threw a pointed look Dorian's way. The kid wouldn't say it; in fact, no one had said it yet, but—

"Is this because you went after that pirate, Zeus?"

Zimmerman wasn't afraid to say it. She was leaning back, arms folded, glaring at Dorian disapprovingly. They all knew that Dorian had a way of... ruffling Command's feathers. Ever since the Dominion days. Pangs of guilt twisted the commander's chest. His head, which had already been throbbing from the mother of all headaches, pounded that much harder.

"It's no secret that Braxton had it in for me," Dorian answered. "Almost since the beginning. And, yeah, maybe this is some kind of payback. But this much I know: you guys"—Dorian waved his finger across them—"are the best at what you do."

He looked at each of them in turn, seated at the table in the small breakroom. Zimmerman didn't appear as if she was buying it. Spanneti was nodding. Hopper was fidgeting. Cranston—who had been brain-panned, or "neurally resocialized"—stared back with wide eyes, a slight smile tweaking his lips. And Bekkins—Bekkins was Bekkins. Unreadable as always, though she massaged her temple with one finger, making Dorian wonder if she was nursing a headache, too. And... she had just the tiniest sheen, visible on her bare arms and upper chest. Dorian and the rest of the squad were wearing tanks and shorts. Despite that,

the room did seem hotter than it should be. Dorian felt a trickle of sweat inch down his own temple.

"Zimmerman," Dorian continued, "you'll be assisting the medical staff inside Sector Six during this assignment. The rest of you, like I said: guard duty. Security detail. Ride it out. Once Sparks has had his jollies, we'll be back in the saddle, kickin' ass and takin' names."

He had no idea if that was true, but it sure sounded like the right thing to say. Spanneti spoke up. "You pulled our asses out of the fire on Braxis... led us to victory on Korhal, Ghobi Station, Pantera Prime... Hell, if we can't trust you by now, we all might as well pack it in." One by one, the others nodded—even Zimmerman, though she was last.

Dorian smiled. It was always nice to know that his team had faith in him, no matter what Command thought. "That's what I like to hear, Brute Squad."

The commander concluded the meeting as his headache kicked into overdrive.

The first forty-eight hours were tedious. Dorian had a hard time getting a straight answer out of Sparks as to how long their assignment would last. The commander was hoping for a six-month stint, which was fairly standard, but in the Moebius Corps, there were no guarantees.

His headaches and fever had been consistent, but there were no accompanying flulike symptoms, so Dorian basically wrote it off as some minor bug. The others had caught it, too, but it wasn't affecting their work, so it was no big deal.

The most bizarre thing was what he had awoken to last night—a high-pitched screech unlike anything he had ever heard before. The closest equivalent he could think of was the

long beeping noise hospital equipment made when a patient was flatlining. It had roused him from slumber but then ceased seconds afterward.

There had been nothing in the room or in the hallway of the officers' barracks when he had glanced out his door. He had attributed it to some strange dream that he just couldn't remember, but as he stood now outside Gate Four, Sector Six, he wasn't so sure. He couldn't get that sound out of his head, and he could have sworn that it had continued briefly when he was no longer asleep.

Dorian wished like hell they'd turn up the AC. It didn't help that he was in tac-gear. It had minimal armor, but if he were wearing a full CMC rig, at least he could manage the suit's temperature control. Glancing at the time on his headset's eyepiece, Dorian was dreading the next two hours.

That was when the screaming started.

The bellows weren't like the wailing from his dream (if that was truly what it had been). These were very human, the kind of heart-rending cries emitted by people who either were about to die or *believed* beyond any doubt that they were about to die. Dorian had heard their like many times—usually cut short by gunshots.

Thoom! Thoom!

And there were the gunshots.

Dorian was already in motion, swiping his badge through the scanner to access the entry. As the door whooshed open, he raced through, the butt of his assault rifle tucked to his shoulder, fanning left and right. He cleared the doorway immediately and kept on the move.

A lab tech ran from a room farther down the hall, mouth open, eyes wide in terror, nearly slipping on the paneled floor as she scrambled past.

Another scream came out of the room she had emerged from. Another shot. Silence.

Dorian cleared the corner. A gray-haired man in a white lab coat stood near a workstation, looking down at a still, prone body, that of another tech whose lifeblood was leaking out onto the polished metal. The man stared at the victim with a blank expression, mouth set, holding some kind of compact weapon Dorian had never seen before.

The commander continued forward, waiting for the tech to look over and raise his weapon so Dorian could fire two short bursts—one to the chest and one to the head—but the moment never came. As Dorian drew close, the man did look up, and as he did so, something flickered across his eyes: something that could have been a kind of... recognition. But then the bastard actually smiled and said...

"His shadow... lengthens."

Dorian answered by cracking the schizo freak across the jaw with the butt of his rifle. An emergency alarm rang out as the old man dropped his weapon and stumbled back into a workstation. His falling body scattered equipment before he went limp and moved no more.

"The gun was an experimental plasma rifle," Sparks said. He was standing behind his desk, hands on his hips. "He stole it from another sector of the base."

Dorian stood at parade rest, frowning. "And brought it to Sector Six. To shoot people... apparently at random. I'd like to know why." He had taken some headache pills earlier that

hadn't even put a dent in the migraine he was suffering through. Worms. It felt as if worms were burrowing through his brain... It was worse than any head pain he had experienced before. It might help if the office weren't so damn *hot*.

"Well, now, that's a job for the investigators, isn't it?" the LC countered. "You're not an investigator." Sparks leaned on his desk, placing both hands wide as if he were claiming the piece of furniture as his own. "You're security. A security agent who let two people die on his watch."

"Could have been avoided, maybe," Dorian replied, "if some of my team could stand guard *inside* the sector."

"You'll stand where we tell you to stand," Sparks shot back.

"Whatever sent the old man over the edge... could it have been what he was working on? Is there a risk of another incident?"

Sparks replied that all officers in Sector Six would be toting sidearms from here on out. He then went on with some standard nonsense about security clearances and protocols and that old "need to know" chestnut. It was true; Sector Six was beyond classified. No one knew what was worked on in the deepest recess of the facility, though rumors had hinted at experiments in xenobiology.

As the LC continued yammering, an image entered Dorian's mind, surprising and uninvited, of Sparks, positioned exactly as he was but without skin. Dorian imagined it in vivid detail: no clothing or hair, only animated muscles, tendons, veins... Sparks removed his hands from the desk, and in Dorian's mind's eye, he left behind two bloody handprints on the wood.

Dorian closed his eyes for a count of three. He reopened them to see Sparks's face scrunched up as if Dorian were some nasty piece of food the LC had just regurgitated.

"You might want to see a medic," the LC said, somehow making it come across as an accusation. "You look like shit."

Dorian was back in his room, trying to get some rest, when the holographic, robotic head of an adjutant appeared on his desk, stating that Staff Sergeant Bekkins had requested to speak with him in her quarters.

Bekkins's room in the enlisted barracks was an ice cave. It reminded Dorian of the temperature setting in his own billet, which, along with the pain pills, had relieved his headaches enough for him to function. When Bekkins answered the door, she was pale and sweaty in her tank and shorts despite the chill air. She walked back and sat on her bunk; Dorian sat across from her in a small chair.

"Something's not right," she began. Her shoulders were slumped forward as she scratched at her left arm. "I don't know what's been going on, but... I've been seeing things out of the corner of my eye. Movement, shadows, things that just aren't there." She looked at him, and for one of the first times Dorian could remember, an emotion revealed itself on her features. It was subtle, but it was there.

Fear.

"My skin crawls. I hear stuff, too," she said. "Things behind the walls. Scratching. Sometimes... screams. Long, drawn-out screams, and no idea where they're coming from. I haven't been sleeping. It's almost worse when I sleep... what I dream about. The things I'm... doing in my dreams."

Dorian waited to reply. He could tell she needed to get this out. "And it's not just me," she continued. "The others, they have it, too, but not as bad. Except maybe for Cranston... There's no way to tell with that lobotomy case. How many times did they wipe him?"

Dorian shrugged. There were rumors that Cranston's first neural resocialization didn't take and that it was necessary to repeat the procedure. Some scuttlebutt suggested that the operation had been done on him a few times, resulting in permanent brain damage. No one on the team knew the whole truth, not even Dorian. All the commander knew was that Cranston was an effective soldier.

Bekkins went on. "This all started when we snatched up that thing on Beta Saul. I was the one who saw it, picked it up, carried it... Gave me the creeps. Still does."

"You get checked out by medical?" Dorian asked.

Bekkins shook her head. "Not yet. Some of this... I don't want Command to know. Not looking to get booted on a psych charge."

"Okay," Dorian said. He chose his response carefully. "I've been a little... off, too. I want you to get checked out, at least for the physical symptoms. Same with the rest of the squad. Maybe—maybe we just caught something while we were there... even through the suits. I don't know. Or on the way back. Maybe meds'll clear all of this—"

A chirp sounded from the table next to the commander. The holo-projector there displayed an adjutant head. "Staff Sergeant Bekkins, audio call from Private Hopper," it said.

"Accept," Bekkins replied.

Hopper's voice came through the base of the projector. "Staff Sergeant, it's Hopper. You seen Spanneti?"

"I thought he was on guard duty," Bekkins said, looking questioningly at Dorian. He nodded confirmation.

"Yeah, I'm his relief," Hopper said, "but when I got here, he was gone. Not like him to leave his post, y'know? Makes me worry..."

Hopper always worried. Dorian was concerned that in this case, however, Hopper's worries might actually be justified.

When Dorian arrived, Hopper was nervously pacing back and forth in front of Storeroom B, where he was meant to relieve Spanneti. Storeroom B was also where the relic they had retrieved from Beta Saul was kept.

"Did you find him?" the kid asked, wiping sweat off of his forehead.

Dorian stopped and stared at the door, and thinking of what lay behind it held him temporarily transfixed—mesmerized. "No," he answered. And without taking time to consider his actions, he approached the door and swiped the badge affixed to his sleeve across the reader.

"You—you're not supposed to go in there," Hopper said.

"I know," Dorian replied as the door whisked open.

He stepped in, and the door slid closed behind him. It was a bare, medium-sized room, bathed in bright white light from above. In the center of the space stood a podium; atop it, the relic hovered. Such a simple-looking thing: a black, rectangular slab, half the height of Dorian, with edges that bowed slightly inward at the middle and curved just enough to

seem... off. Not much to look at, really. And yet Spanneti was standing one meter away from it, staring.

There was no recognition of Dorian's presence. Spanneti stood perfectly still, head inclined, arms limp at his sides, gazing blankly as if lost in some form of deep hypnosis. His slack face, as well as his posture, reminded Dorian eerily of the crazy lab tech standing over his victim.

"Spanneti," Dorian said.

No response.

"Spanneti!" Louder this time, his voice bouncing off the walls.

The soldier blinked, raised his head, and looked over.

"Oh," he said. "Oh, hey, sir."

"Hopper relieved you fifteen minutes ago," Dorian said.

Spanneti's eyes were still distant, as if he were daydreaming. He swallowed and said, "I guess I, uh, lost track of time."

Dorian looked at the relic. There was something about it. Something unfathomable, something in its onyx skin that spoke of the vast gulfs between the stars.

With a great degree of effort, Dorian removed his eyes from the object. "You're not supposed to be in here," he said to the younger man.

"Sir, yes, sir," he replied. "I didn't—am I in trouble?"

Dorian turned and swiped his badge. "No," he answered, "but I'm walking your ass over to medical."

Brute Squad was prescribed flu medication. Dorian suspected that most (if not all) of the others knew that what they were afflicted with was something far more malignant than influenza.

He wanted to talk with the insane lab tech, who was being held somewhere in an isolation cell in Sector Six. Unsurprisingly, Lieutenant Colonel Sparks refused to provide Dorian access to the man.

But Dorian had a knack for circumventing such obstacles. In this case, however, he needed an accomplice. Someone on the inside.

It had taken all of fifteen minutes to convince Lieutenant Zimmerman that his reasons were justified. Zimmerman was one of the lead medics in Sector Six and, as such, enjoyed a higher security clearance than Dorian. She was also the primary care physician for Professor Benz (which, it turned out, was the crazy lab tech's name).

Zimmerman had been hearing and seeing things, placing her in a perpetual, confusing state beyond her control. She had retaliated with a regimen of self-administered treatments—a cocktail of her own devising, which reduced her "symptoms," though it also rendered her sluggish. She had been administering a variant of the same concoction to Benz. The professor's condition, she confided, was "extreme." She didn't elaborate further, other than to say that although she had been unable to diagnose the cause of the affliction, she believed it had something to do with the relic, and possibly with experiments on live xenos that were taking place in the deepest vaults of Sector Six, in an area called "Black Wing."

Dorian wanted to know where she was getting her intel from. Regarding the relic, Zimmerman had learned that Professor Benz had been the primary tech analyzing the piece. According to her research on him, the old man had never shown signs of hostility prior to that assignment. As for the rest of her information, it turned out that Zimmerman had made a "friend" in the mess hall, a security worker who had taken a liking to her. His job was to keep a watch on the various camera feeds that provided surveillance throughout Sector Six. In Black Wing, he had confided to her, there *were* no camera feeds.

Though Zimmerman didn't think her admirer was "afflicted," he did show signs of mild paranoia. The medic, however, felt that his suspicions weren't completely unfounded. Her superiors were keeping a close eye on her and had twice administered psych evals that it was clear she needed to pass in order to continue working. Her would-be beau had undergone them as well, and the two of them believed that the evals were required for key Sector Six personnel. As for their superiors, all high-ranking officers had begun wearing a device on one ear. Zimmerman wasn't sure what it was, exactly, but she had heard people call it a "psi-screen."

Throughout their conversation, the medic expressed reluctance to cooperate with Dorian's plan. Ultimately, however, she believed that the risk from not acting outweighed the potential punishment. Something, she agreed, was very, very wrong... and it was time for them to find answers.

There was no camera inside Benz's cell, and none that could see directly into it. There were cameras outside and in the Iso Wing and Sector Six hallways. In preparation for this, Zimmerman had mentioned to Watkins (that was the name of her mess hall suitor) that she would be escorting an outside specialist to Benz's cell for a more thorough diagnosis. Thankfully, due to his interest in her, Zimmerman knew when Watkins was "available," and as a result, she also knew when he would be on duty.

And so the medic and Dorian both knew that Watkins was probably watching them now as they progressed through a maze of corridors, navigating the passages of Sector Six to the Iso Wing. Though he hadn't been this far into the sector previously, Dorian sensed that its labyrinth only deepened, that somewhere farther in existed the facility's dark heart, waiting like a gluttoned spider at the hub of its web.

Most techs did not look up from their workstations, and the few people they passed in the halls seemed to pay no attention to Zimmerman and the man accompanying her in the white lab coat. Nonetheless, the medic was clearly on edge, and she bluntly told Dorian how anxious she was to have done with their little escapade. Despite her nerves, she looked better than Bekkins did. Zimmerman had offered up doses of her special concoction; Dorian had taken some for himself and had handed out phials to the others. And the commander had to admit his pounding head pain had lessened to a dull, persistent discomfort.

Finally they reached the cell, and Zimmerman swiped her badge. The door opened; Dorian walked in while the medic waited outside.

The cell had solid walls on three sides. A floor-to-ceiling observation window that faced the hallway occupied three-quarters of the remaining wall, with the difference made up by the entrance Dorian had just stepped through. There was a single bed extending from the wall opposite the window, and a toilet in the corner at the foot of the bed.

Bright overhead lights revealed a series of symbols that had been brushed onto the white walls. They seemed unrelated at first, but the more Dorian observed them, the more he considered them to be closer to some primitive pictogram language. There appeared to be a pattern, a sequential order—small elements that showed up in places and then repeated—though Dorian did not recognize the symbols themselves. Only one was somewhat identifiable. It was the largest, and it dominated much of the wall space above Benz's bed: an upright figure, many-limbed, both zerg-like and protoss-like in appearance. This illustration, like the others, had been rendered in varying shades of crimson.

Benz wore an ill-fitting white jumpsuit. He was hunched near the head of his bed, at the wall opposite where Dorian stood. The commander's position afforded only a view of the old man's back as he carefully executed some action on that wall, presumably adding detail to his sprawling composition.

"Professor Benz," Dorian said. The other man did not answer; by the movement of his right shoulder, it looked as if the professor had put his hand to his face and then returned it to the wall.

"Professor!" Dorian called out.

The old man rotated just enough to see the commander. His cheeks were furrowed with scabbed-over scratch marks. His wide eyes had receded into the sockets. His face and overall form were gaunt, and his scrubby chin and the front of his jumpsuit were soaked red. Benz reached a similarly coated finger to his mouth, stuck the digit in, worked it around, then pulled out the freshly dipped, makeshift brush and returned to his painting.

Looking down at the professor's feet, Dorian made out two teeth, and he realized with disgust that the old man was using his own bloody cavities as a macabre inkwell. He thought of Zimmerman telling him earlier that the tech's condition was "extreme." *Yeah, that's one way to put it.*

Dorian walked over and placed himself next to Benz, who was, in fact, contributing some inscrutable addition to his latest image. The commander noted that the professor's arms, revealed by rolled-up sleeves, were scored with ragged wounds similar to those on the man's face.

"Professor, I want to ask you some questions," Dorian said. He looked over his shoulder at the observation window, where Zimmerman stood. If she was trying to appear nonchalant, she was failing miserably, her eyes darting from one end of the hallway to the other.

"His shadow—" the old man began.

"Lengthens. Yes, I know," Dorian said, turning back. "You said that before. Whose shadow? Did someone force you to... do what you did?"

Benz continued in a low, hoarse rasp, lisping due to the absent teeth, one of which was a top-front incisor. Dorian had to strain to hear and decipher the old man's words. "The Eternal One... sees all. Obeisance will be rewarded. Resistance... will be punished."

"Who's the Eternal One?" Dorian pressed, drawing closer.

Benz halted his work. He turned away from the wall, took a short step, leaned over the bed, and reverently swept his widespread fingers over the depiction of the strange life-form.

"His messenger."

Dorian stared at the crude rendering. "That's his messenger? The Eternal One's messenger?"

"I... obey," Benz said to the idol, over and over. "I obey. I obey. I obey..."

Sharp rapping on the observation window made Dorian jump. He looked over at a scowling Zimmerman, who rotated her hand quickly at the wrist, urging the commander to hurry up. Dorian nodded. Yes, the longer they stayed here, the greater the risk of getting caught.

Dorian strode to the doorway, casting one final glance at the blood-scrawled deity, or messenger, or whatever it was... and its slavish devotee.

Zimmerman was sweating as they departed, her frantic eyes zipping in all directions. She and Dorian had progressed back the way they had come without incident and were within a few meters of Storeroom B when a chirping sound caused both of them to stop.

It was Zimmerman's fone. The medic and the commander shared a look. Zimmerman was clearly hesitant to answer. Taking a deep breath, she removed the device from her pocket, pressed a button, and said, "This is Zimmerman," in a slightly cracking voice.

Dorian heard someone on the other end. Whatever was being said, it sounded urgent.

"Yes, sir," Zimmerman said, and she ended the call. She turned to the commander. "There's been an emergency in the clean room. I'll catch up later." Zimmerman replaced the fone in her pocket with a shaking hand and hurried away.

Fifteen minutes later, when Dorian met Bekkins outside Storeroom B, she was looking better. Still, he didn't want to take any chances that she might relapse.

"Head out, Bek. I'm relieving you," he said.

There were scratches healing on the backs of the staff sergeant's hands. Her face was clear, however, her eyes unclouded. "You sure?" she asked.

"Yeah, get some rest."

"Copy that," Bek said, and she departed.

Time crawled for the first hour. The hallway was deserted. Dorian found himself looking again and again at the storeroom doorway, thinking of Spanneti standing inside, lost in the relic.

When he wasn't looking at the door, Dorian was considering what his next move would be, worrying for his team, especially after the conversation—if you could even call it that—with Benz. At first Dorian's headache had strengthened, but after that initial hour, the pain receded; the more time that passed, the more at peace he felt. Soon he was leaning against the wall near the doorway, head inclined. His eyes closed. He caught himself, snapping his head up, and he walked around. But it wasn't long before he slowed, stopped, and had his back against the wall again, drowsing, eyelids settling...

His body was somewhere else. His... soul? Spirit? Whatever it was, it was floating. He was calm, content, free of any pain. The void itself was simply an absence of all things. There was nothing, and then there was a voice, emanating from nowhere and everywhere.

"The countdown has begun. You are among the Chosen."

That voice seemed to resonate throughout his entire being. "Chosen what?" he asked.

"Servants. Of the Eternal One," the voice said.

And then he realized—his surroundings, the feelings of serenity, it was all smoke and mirrors, all horseshit. "I don't *serve* anyone," Dorian replied.

"You will obey," the voice returned. It was more forceful, yet still somehow soothing.

Dorian said, "What you're trying to do here, it's not gonna work. You might as well just give it up. I'm on to you. You hear me? Stay away from me and my team. If you don't, I'm gonna come after you, and I'm gonna put you down. Mark my words, you alien fre—"

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE—"

The scream was like a white-hot knife searing through the center of his brain. He bent in half, squeezed his eyes shut, and clapped his hands over his ears, but that only seemed to make it worse, as the screeching noise was *inside* his head.

After what felt like a full minute, the sound stopped. Dorian's headache was back with a vengeance. Slowly he opened his eyes, fully expecting to be in the hallway outside Storeroom B.

But he wasn't. He was *inside* the storeroom. The relic hovered above its pedestal like a black mark on reality itself, a gaping wound in time and space. The commander imagined how he must have appeared from the outside a few seconds ago, standing before the slab, insensate, exactly as Spanneti had been.

Dorian rubbed his temples as he walked toward the door. He wanted to follow up with Zimmerman about the emergency in the clean room before talking to the team about what he had just been through.

And... he was going to need more of her special drug cocktail.

Within minutes, Dorian was in Officer Barracks C, standing before Zimmerman's door, punching the call button.

No answer.

The commander was still in his tac-gear. Lieutenant Colonel Sparks's voice broke in over the headset's secure channel. "Commander Dorian, this is Sparks. I've been trying to find Lieutenant Zimmerman for the last hour."

Did the LC know he was standing outside her door?

"I... haven't seen her in that time, sir."

"If you do, contact me immediately." Sparks ended the transmission. Dorian removed his fone, tapped in the medic's number...

A chirping noise, muffled but audible, sounded from the other side of Zimmerman's door.

She could be in the shower... but Sparks had been trying to find her for an hour. That would be one long shower.

Security personnel possessed a master code to unlock all barracks doors in case of emergency. Given recent events, the commander felt justified in using it. He put the code in the keypad beside the door, which immediately whooshed open.

Dorian entered the room. Zimmerman was lying on her bunk, clothed in a tank and shorts. Her lips were blue; her complexion was ghostly white; her mouth and eyes were open wide. The lower parts of her legs, where the skin showed past the shorts, were purple. Her left hand was down at her side, and the right was cast out so that it hung over the edge of the mattress. A very precise cut ran vertically up the inside of her wrist. The sheets beneath her body, and a large portion of the metal floor, were red with her blood.

The commander rushed to her, pressed his fingers to her neck. No pulse. He began chest compressions, knowing deep down that it was pointless. She had obviously been dead too long for any chance of revival. He persisted nonetheless for several minutes until his arms

gave out. He knelt, sobbing, his thoughts running amok. Had she done this to herself? Had someone else done it? If she did do it, why?

He looked up, noting that the tips of her first two fingers were coated with blood. The image reminded him of Professor Benz...

Dorian turned and stared at the wall facing the foot of the bunk.

Written across it were four words, repeated over and over and over again, bold red letters on the white surface:

"I WILL NOT OBEY. I WILL NOT OBEY. I WILL NOT OBEY..."

"I can't believe she's dead."

Bekkins was tired, and it showed. She was also thunderstruck. They all were (except, probably, for Cranston). The team had gathered in Dorian's room, and their disbelief was evident in the silence and their blank, lost stares. The only one who didn't seem bowled over was, of course, Cranston. He just eyed Dorian with engaged anticipation, like a dog waiting for its master to throw the ball.

"What did Sparks say?" Bek wanted to know.

"I haven't reported it yet," Dorian said. In reply to the shocked faces before him, he added, "I think Moebius is keeping a xeno in Black Wing of Sector Six... and I think it's been gettin' inside our heads. Makin' us feel like crap, makin' us see things, hear things, breakin' us down... all so it can control us."

Spanneti nodded. Bek remained impassive. Hopper looked away. Cranston smiled. Dorian continued. "I also suspect it's been using that relic we retrieved... like some kind of amplifier."

"Maybe you're right, sir," Spanneti said. "It makes sense."

"I didn't report Zimmerman for a couple of reasons," Dorian went on. "I don't know if the xeno has gotten to anyone else, and if it has, how high up the chain that goes. Sparks didn't seem too motivated to conduct a proper investigation of Professor Benz's outburst..."

"You think the xeno got to Sparks?" Hopper said.

"I just don't know," Dorian admitted. "Our old commander, Braxton... he may not have liked me, but I believe he would listen. Unfortunately, I have no way of contacting him directly; Sparks hinted that he's running some spec op."

"So... so we go higher up," Hopper insisted.

"You mean go through *proper channels*?" Bekkins's words were tinged with acid. "You know how long that'll take?"

"She's right," Dorian confirmed. "Even if we could get around Sparks, how many more could die during that time?"

"Right," Spanneti interjected. "So we take that relic and send it outta here, or hide it somewhere..."

"We leave the relic alone," Dorian said. "Because if we mess with it, the xeno will know something's up."

"You said there were a couple reasons why you didn't report Zimmerman," Bekkins put in. "What was the second reason?"

"To buy me a little bit of time. And I stress *me*. Not you guys. What I plan to do goes against every rule in the book and could get me court-martialed or worse. Hell, I might wind up dead. But if I'm right... I'll be saving a lot of lives, preventing that alien from doing whatever it's set on. So to me, it's worth it." Dorian then let his eyes drift across the faces before him as he said, "What I plan to do... is kill the son of a bitch."

The commander hadn't expected the team to throw in with his plan. He didn't want them to share the risk. But Zimmerman, despite being an outspoken pain in the ass, had saved *all* of their lives at one time or another. Every single one of them communicated the guilt they felt at not being able to save hers, and they vowed to exact revenge on the thing that had taken her from them.

So in the end, they all stepped up. Even Hopper. And they wouldn't take no for an answer... although there was confusion concerning Dorian's plan at first.

Infiltrating Sector Six would not be easy. There might be automated defenses. And they might encounter human resistance. Auto-turrets weren't such a big deal, but what about innocent lives?

"Non-lethal rounds," the commander had said. "Lights out. Same as we use for pacification." There had been times when native populations had defied attempts by the Moebius Corps to recover items of importance. In cases where the locals weren't using deadly force, Moebius employed non-lethal measures. The "lights out" rounds short-circuited the central nervous system and left the target unconscious for anywhere from twenty to forty-five minutes.

Once the team was on the same page, they all took doses of Zimmerman's concoction and then acquired the proper ammo from the armory. After that, there was another element of sector security they had to be ready for: the cameras.

Thanks to Zimmerman's association with Watkins (and the visit to Benz), Dorian knew the security worker's schedule. "Dinner" time at the mess hall happened just before Watkins was set to start work. The commander had pilfered sedatives from Zimmerman's room before leaving. What he didn't know was how strong a dosage was required or how long it would take for the drug to have an effect. Once those questions were researched and answered, it was relatively simple for Spanneti to drop his tray and cause enough of a distraction for Bekkins to lace Watkins's drink.

Dorian was also banking on the likelihood that either Zimmerman's body wouldn't be found before he could execute his strategy, or if the body was found before then, no one would notice right away that her access badge was missing.

The commander had considered conducting an emergency evacuation, but of course, that would draw more attention—and very quickly—than he cared to attract. So, Dorian and his team entered the sector armed and in full tac-gear. The idea was to keep moving, weapons holstered, and assure anyone who might ask that there was nothing to be concerned about (*and* hope that somewhere, in a room filled with video monitors, Watkins had nodded off in his chair).

So far, so good.

They traveled through the outermost work areas and then into the Iso Wing on their way to—hopefully—the sector's core. Dorian suspected that there were other routes they could have taken, but the nice thing about the Iso Wing was that it seemed to receive little foot traffic. After Dorian's encounter with Benz, he understood why.

Inside the wing, they passed empty cells as they proceeded toward the one housing the professor. Before reaching it, however, Dorian and his team found another occupied room...

It was a woman. She had ripped away swaths of her jumpsuit to reveal slashed and raked skin. Some wounds were fairly fresh; others were scabbed over. She was in the process of decorating her wall in the same bizarre fashion as Benz when she turned to leer at Dorian, her nose flattened, smashed, with broad stripes of blood widening from her nostrils, running down over her mouth, and dripping off of her chin.

She gazed rapidly for a few seconds before pressing a finger to the blood just under her nose; then she turned and reengaged in her grisly diversion, using the finger to complete some esoteric symbol. Was this the "emergency" that Zimmerman had been called about before? Possibly. Not that it mattered now.

Dorian had explained to the team what he had encountered with Benz. They silently passed the woman's chamber, and within a few steps, the commander was peering into the observation window of Benz's cell.

The mosaic of cryptic symbols had grown to include the window itself. To the far right, near the door, the grouping was tightest, making for a nearly opaque coating on the glass. The swirls and slashes thinned out as they stretched toward the left side. The commander was absorbed in one of the strange markings when the form of what he assumed was Benz lunged at the glass, smacking a wet palm right in front of Dorian's face. He recoiled, staring in disbelief at the grotesque figure before him. The professor had stripped away almost all of his jumpsuit, along with most of his skin. Muscles showed through on the old man's shredded face, the epidermis mostly gone, save a few lone strands still clinging to the nose and scalp. One of the professor's ears was completely missing.

He mouthed two words through a toothless maw, just loud enough for Dorian to make them out. "I obey. I obey. I obey..."

Behind the commander, exclamations of shock and horror sounded from the team. Dorian stepped away, looked back, and motioned for the squad to follow him.

Deeper in, beyond the Iso Wing and through a short maze of corridors, Zimmerman's badge provided access to a changing area. At the opposite end of the floor was an airlock door. Along the right side hung a row of protective suits, clothing meant to cover the wearer from head to foot.

Bekkins looked at Dorian questioningly. "I take it we're supposed to wear those before we continue?"

"Yeah," the commander responded, and then he turned to the others. "Okay, put on the outfits, but keep your weapons ready."

The team did as instructed. Dorian was unsure how much farther Zimmerman's badge would get him, but it did succeed in opening the first airlock door, as well as a second.

The next space they encountered was a massive, open clean room. Huge fans regulated the air from a ceiling that was two stories high. Technicians worked busily at stations dedicated to (as far as Dorian could tell) bioorganic experimentation. There were organisms (and parts of organisms) that the commander didn't recognize, along with a few that he did: various pieces of zerg were hooked up to tubes and monitors, some being dissected by robotic arms inside protective pods, others immersed in large tanks of clear liquid. Along the wall far to his left, an entire observation chamber, running half the length of the room, seemed to be reserved solely for creep, the organic, living carpet used by zerg for nutrient intake. It covered different parts of the glass, and where Dorian could see inside the room, the bio-matter had spread over the walls, soft light pulsing through the thick slime, bathing the whole enclosure with an eerie purple glow.

Was this Black Wing? Dorian didn't think so. There was no sign of a full-bodied xeno that wasn't clearly dead. Glancing ahead at the opposite end of the expanse, the commander spotted another airlock door.

Most of the technicians were absorbed in their work. A couple of them noticed the team and paused, but they didn't say anything. Dorian was ten meters away from the next airlock when his ears picked up a familiar voice. The man was standing to the commander's left, hands on his hips, hollering through his suit's mask at a flustered tech. It was Sparks, and Dorian noted the sidearm he had strapped to his right leg, outside of his suit.

Tirade complete, Sparks spun and took two steps before stopping cold, staring at Dorian and the rest of Brute Squad. The LC's eyes traveled to the weapons they were carrying. Dorian stepped toward Sparks, left arm raised, palm out, but Sparks's hand had already snatched his pistol out of its holster. "Drop your weapons!" Sparks shouted as he lifted his own. Dorian lunged to grab the LC's right wrist. Sparks yanked that hand upward, firing a round into the overhead fans.

That was when the screams started. The commander was vaguely aware of a stampede toward the airlock he had entered through. There were shots then, weapon discharges that Dorian assumed were from his team, firing non-lethal rounds to prevent the workers from escaping and raising an alarm. All of this only registered peripherally as the commander continued tussling with Sparks. The LC had a hand on Dorian's wrist, trying to take his gun, resulting in a back-and-forth contest of strength that moved both men closer to the workstation where the LC had previously been standing. Sparks was brawny for his age and held nothing back. Several times, his knee shot forward in an attempt to make Dorian double over. The commander sucked in his midsection in response and finally answered with a thrusting kick, catching the LC square in the gut.

Sparks staggered back and cracked his head on a cylindrical tank holding what might have been a zerg broodling. The LC went down on his side as the split glass above him gushed

yellowish liquid onto his suit. The container gave way an instant later, dumping the rest of its fluid, as well as the dead xeno, on top of the officer. Cursing, Sparks threw the zerg off of him as Dorian raised his weapon and fired a "lights out" round. The LC grunted with the impact, seized up for a few seconds, then went limp.

As he caught his breath, Dorian turned his attention to the main floor. Several bodies in clean-room suits lay prone all across the open space before the airlock exit. But there was something very, very wrong: crimson shone brightly against the white cloth, pooling across the tiles.

Dead. The workers were dead.

The team stood among the cluster, looking down at the bodies, then up at Dorian as he approached unsteadily and pulled off his mask.

"How...?"

"It was Cranston, sir..." This came from Bek, who had removed her mask. "He just lost it and started blasting away with live rounds." She pointed her weapon at one of the fallen. The commander could see through the faceplate that it was Cranston, bleeding out from multiple wounds. "We had to switch our magazines and take him down before he turned on us."

Dorian's head was swimming. The pounding pain broke through, hammering his thoughts to mash. The other team members had taken off their masks. "A few workers got out, sir," Spanneti said. "You want us to go after 'em?"

How many dead? Dorian scanned the carnage: eight bodies, including Cranston's. It should never have come to this...

"Sir?" Spanneti said.

Finally the commander shook his head. "No. No... we gotta keep moving." Dorian ripped at his suit and stepped out of it on his way toward the next airlock door. He attempted to use Zimmerman's badge there, but it didn't work. Then he noted the biometric scanner.

Spanneti and Dorian hauled Sparks, still unconscious, to the retinal reader, propped him up, held open his eyelids, waited for a few tense seconds... and were relieved to receive a green light.

The door opened. Once the commander and his team had gone through, it was necessary to repeat the process in order to open the next door. With that complete, they emerged at last into Black Wing.

Black Wing was aptly named. The surroundings were composed entirely of black polished metal. Pulsing blue lights ran through where the walls met floor and ceiling. Hallways stretched out to either side. Before Dorian loomed a half-circular structure with no discernible door.

Sickness twisted his guts. Images of the blood-spattered technicians flashed continuously through his mind. It wasn't right. It shouldn't have happened that way.

An alarm blared. One of the escaped techs must have notified someone of a breach. Plates in the floor and walls opened as auto-turrets emerged. Next to Dorian, Spanneti took a knee, fired twice, ejected the magazine, and reached to his thigh to retrieve the next one. He slapped it in and continued firing...

Those bodies. Shouldn't have happened that way. It was wrong. Something about all of this was wrong...

Shots rang out, echoing off the walls and down the passageways. Dorian turned, feeling as if he moved in slow motion. Standing in the hall to his left... was Zimmerman. Zimmerman? She stared intently. Her skin was pale and etched with veins... blue, like her lips. Her rigid posture belied the fluidity of her movement as she rotated and strode farther into the passageway.

The pounding in Dorian's head strengthened. Wrong. This was all so very wrong.

Dorian followed, his pace quickening as he attempted to catch up to the medic. Deeper in, the walls curved. Dorian rounded the bend and saw Zimmerman step into a connecting hall on his right.

We had to switch our magazines...

The commander came to a short passage. Zimmerman was standing at the end of it, a black, blank, curved wall behind her. She stepped backward, into and *through* the barrier.

Dorian stumbled forward, images flitting rapidly through his throbbing mind—the bloody, scattered victims; the team, standing in clean-room suits, looking down; Spanneti, ejecting the magazine and replacing it from his thigh pocket; Cranston, smiling that innocent, oblivious smile of his...

The commander reached out and touched the solid wall, heard multiple footsteps behind him. Hopper, Bekkins, and Spanneti were all there when he turned, watching him closely. Dorian stared back, shaking his head.

"You couldn't have switched the magazines," he said. "The mags with the live rounds should have... should have been in your cargo pockets. You would have had to remove the suits to get to them."

"Take it easy, sir," Bekkins said. "Your mind might be a little fuzzy." The three of them were standing close, blocking the exit, eyeing him warily.

"You had live ammo loaded the whole time." Dorian's hand tensed on his weapon. "And Cranston... he must have... he must have been the only one *not* killing the techs. Because the xeno couldn't get to him... because of all those brain wipes..."

"It's okay now," Spanneti said. "We've reached the end. Everything'll be okay."

Dorian raised his rifle. "Lower your guns," he said.

"There's no use fightin' it, sir," Hopper said. "We tried."

"I'll put you down if I have to," the commander said, waving his weapon at the three. A soft noise, of something thick sliding on a track, sounded behind him. Dorian felt a light breeze on the back of his neck as a warm glow bathed the team's intent faces.

"I will. I..."

Dorian turned, his eyes drifting upward. The xeno was there, standing in a doorway. It looked much like the depiction on Benz's wall: a cross between protoss and zerg anatomy, with a thin face, an expansive carapace headpiece, segmented plates over spindly limbs, and massive black claws. It was towering and hulking, a dominating presence, strange and unique and wholly alien. And its eyes... its eyes reminded Dorian very much of the relic's black surface. A vast, immeasurable void waited behind those orbs, and Dorian felt himself falling into them, becoming lost.

"I..."

There was only the abyss. There was only the Eternal One's shadow, lengthening across oblivion. Those selected to stand within it were the lucky ones. There were the xenos, the hybrid, messengers who enforced the will of the Eternal One. And there were the Chosen. The Chosen would serve.

Dorian turned to face his companions. He looked upon them with eyes that mirrored the hybrid's black orbs. And in a voice that was no longer his own, he said...

"I obey."