



STARCRRAFT
HEART OF THE SWARM



The Education of PFC Shane

By Robert Brooks

"Each and every one of these young men and women volunteered," said Emperor Arcturus Mengsk, "and after months of sacrifice and toil in training, they have earned their place among the noble Dominion Marines. They have joined humanity's vanguard. They have chosen to stand against an unforgiving universe."

Murmurs of approval echoed within the crowded assembly hall. Daylight flooded through the ceiling-high windows on the east wall, spotlighting the Dominion leader and the five long rows of smartly dressed recruits standing at parade rest before him.

One of those recruits—nineteen-year-old Geoff Shane, soon to be Private First Class Geoff Shane—was fighting a private battle and losing. The effort of keeping a broad grin off his face felt as if it would make his head burst, and the corners of his lips drifted upward against his will.

The emperor is speaking at my induction. The Hero of Korhal in the flesh. It didn't seem real. He wanted to pinch himself, but he didn't dare break parade rest. It would be unbecoming of a Dominion marine.

"We still face terrible threats. Two bloodthirsty, savage alien races regard us with envious eyes," Mengsk said. "Humanity's outcasts, scoundrels, and dissidents continue to act against human interests to rebel against the Dominion."

Emperor Mengsk surveyed the rows of fresh recruits. "But today, we honor these recruits. We celebrate their triumph. Training is over. Now, we set them on the path to conquer our foes."

The emperor's eyes came to rest on Shane. Without thinking, Shane turned his head to meet Mengsk's gaze and looked back with a sloppy grin on his face... and remembered too late that he was supposed to keep his attention front and center.

Shane snapped his eyes forward. Mengsk chuckled.

"I can tell these young heroes are ready and willing to tackle anything the universe can throw at them," he said, "although some may need a bit more training first."

Laughter echoed through the crowd. Shane kept his eyes locked on the steel-wrought Dominion insignia suspended high above the hall, behind Mengsk's pulpit, studying it carefully, his face burning red. Despite his chagrin, his smile crept back. He had a feeling he would never live this down.

Shane waited for the emperor to continue his speech. The crowd fell silent.

Moments ticked away. The quiet deepened. And still Emperor Mengsk said nothing.

Shane's nervous smile evaporated. Had something happened? He didn't dare look. His hands clenched into fists in the small of his back. The hush remained unbroken. The total absence of noise grew deafening.

Shane's skin crawled. The hall sounded not only quiet, but empty. Utterly empty.

There were no rustles, muffled coughs, restless children. No breathing. Nothing at all that indicated hundreds of people were seated only a few meters behind him.

Blood pounded in Shane's ears. Sweat beaded on his forehead. A headache sprang to life and his stomach churned with fear. He continued to stare at the insignia, irrationally afraid of glancing at the podium.

He imagined that Emperor Mengsk and the entire crowd, along with all of the recruits, were staring at him. Waiting for any further mistakes unbecoming of a Dominion marine.

Just a quick glance, he told himself. Moments passed. Shane couldn't do it. *Just your eyes. Just for a second. The emperor thought it was funny last time. He won't care.*

Shane still couldn't move. He wanted the speech to continue. He wanted the crowd to laugh. He wanted anything that would make the headache and the uncomfortable pressure inside his skull disappear.

Finally his eyes darted over and back. Shane didn't believe what he was seeing. He turned his head and looked directly at the podium.

Mengsk was gone.

So were all of the recruits. Shane turned around, panicked.

So was the crowd. Shane stood alone inside the barren assembly hall.

Confusion held him motionless. This wasn't possible. One person might slip away in a crowd without a sound, but hundreds? Everyone? In an instant?

No. Not everyone. A single figure sat in the last row at the back of the hall, out of the direct daylight from the windows. He was big and bulky, too large to sit comfortably in the hall's seats.

Shane recognized the figure's shape. It was a marine. A Dominion marine in full combat armor.

"Hey!" Shane was surprised by the panic in his own voice. "Hey!"

No reaction. The armored marine appeared to be staring at the ground.

"Hey, you!" Shane bellowed. Nothing. No answer at all. Sudden rage surged into Shane's mind. *He did this*, Shane irrationally knew. *That marine*. Whatever had happened to the crowd was that marine's fault. It had to be. Shane had never been so certain.

This was supposed to be Shane's special day. His graduation from basic training. The beginning of his glorious service to the Dominion. The rage became an inferno inside Shane's head. He would pry *that marine's* armor off with his teeth if he had to.

Shane took a deep breath and screamed, "*What did you do?*"

No response. It was too much.

Shane took off down the center aisle at a dead run between the rows of empty seats, his eyes focused on the lone marine. *That marine*.

Shane closed the distance in a few seconds and flung himself with a howl at the armored figure, teeth bared. Shane's arms reached out.

The marine hadn't moved, hadn't stirred at all, until Shane had leapt into the air.

Then he looked up.

The inferno froze solid in an instant. Time seemed to stop. The pressure inside Shane's head swelled into agony.

Staring back at nineteen-year-old Geoff Shane was the weary, war-battered face of Geoff Shane. An older Geoff Shane with emotionless, inhuman eyes.

Shane's momentum carried him relentlessly toward the marine. Toward himself. His outstretched fingers brushed the marine's metallic armor. It was very, very cold.

Shane blinked.

"Each and every one of these young men and women volunteered," said the image of Emperor Arcturus Mengsk, "and after months of sacrifice and toil in training, they have earned their place among the noble Dominion Marines. They have joined humanity's vanguard. They have chosen to stand against an unforgiving universe."

Murmurs of approval rippled within the crowded assembly hall. Daylight flooded through the broad windows that reached from floor to ceiling on the east wall, spotlighting the projected hologram of the Dominion leader on the raised stage.

In the bright daylight, the life-sized holovid seemed to shimmer and sparkle. Emperor Mengsk's charisma shone even through the transparent image, towering above the podium and the five long rows of recruits standing at parade rest before it.

Nineteen-year-old Geoff Shane, soon to be Private First Class Geoff Shane, stood rigid with terror.

What just happened?

Murder. Shane had tried to murder someone. *You tried to murder yourself*, his mind whispered. No. It was a dream. It certainly couldn't have been real.

He had imagined it. He had dreamed that Emperor Arcturus Mengsk had personally visited his basic training graduation; that was all. *Irrational things happen in dreams*. Shane supposed he should have been happy his pants hadn't disappeared along with all the dreamland bystanders.

Do you often doze off in front of hundreds of people, his mind retorted, while standing upright? Shane fidgeted.

"We still face terrible threats. Two bloodthirsty, savage alien races regard us with envious eyes," Mengsk said. Shane guessed the speech had been prerecorded. How likely was it that the leader of the Dominion had time to schedule his day around a basic training graduation ceremony?

Shane's head was hurting again. Pressure built within his skull as if his mind were holding its breath and beginning to feel the first twinges of air hunger. It was already stronger than any headache he had ever known, and showed no signs of slacking.

Shane swallowed hard and tried to focus on Mengsk's speech. A few moments passed before he realized the emperor had fallen silent. Again.

No. It wasn't possible. Shane risked a glance at the podium. The hologram was gone.

No, not again, Shane thought. *They're all gone again; I know it...*

He turned on his heels in a panic, ready to flee. The faces of nearly one thousand Dominion citizens stared back at Shane.

He froze in place. His head hurt. His eyes darted left and right. Were the other recruits also staring at him?

No. They were not. They were gone. Every eye in the packed assembly hall focused on him. He noticed the expressions on the faces in the crowd: Disgust. Fear. Horror. Anger. Curiosity. They looked at him as if he were a monster.

And what exactly did I do to deserve that? Anger flared deep within him. Again. "What are y'all looking at?" Shane asked quietly. They continued to stare.

Awful, dark impulses bubbled up into his mind. Visions of death ran gloriously wild. His anger felt cleansing, wonderful, natural and comfortable and righteous.

A glimpse of a silhouette at the back of the room caught Shane's eye. Was someone standing up? No. It was simply a large, bulky figure sitting down in a seat far too small to hold it.

It was a marine in full combat armor.

Shane's legs carried him down the aisle at a full sprint. The pain and fury in his head boiled over and his words shattered the silence as he ran.

"—I'll kill you I'll burn you crispy—"

In his rage, he didn't notice that the expressions of the crowd stayed exactly the same. Their eyes tracked him. They seemed oblivious to his outburst.

Shane closed in on the motionless man in the combat suit. He wanted to leap at him straight on. Tear at the armor and destroy the person within.

"Let us help." The marine spoke the words softly, yet they cut through Shane's hoarse raving.

Shane skidded to a stop only a few scant paces away. He stared in disbelief. The marine had spoken with Shane's voice.

The man in the armored suit hadn't moved. He continued to look down at the ground. "Let us help," he repeated.

Shane didn't know how to respond. The phrase meant nothing to him. *Help with what?* "Who are you?"

The marine raised his head, regarding Shane through the combat suit's transparent faceplate. He didn't answer. He didn't need to. Shane saw his own face, scarred by war, looking back at him.

Some horrible truth crawled just out of Shane's understanding. He knew the answer, but something kept it from surfacing. Something had corralled it away from his mind's eye. The silent crowd continued to look at him. Just him. All eyes on Shane. The pain in his head grew.

"This is a dream," Shane said. Snippets he had heard from an old vid with stuffy doctors talking about dreams floated into his mind. "You're the junk in my brain that I don't talk about. My subconscious, right?"

The marine shook his head. "We are not you," he said, "yet."

"We?" Shane's voice was calm. His emotions were not. "Who is *we*?"

The marine raised an arm and pointed toward the windows on the east wall. Shane glanced over and saw nothing but daylight. He gave the marine a hard look before walking over to the windows. The eyes of the crowd followed him.

Shane stopped a couple paces from the east wall. "What am I looking for?"

"Us."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

No answer. Shane tamped down a fresh surge of fury and looked through the windows.

Everything was a seething mass. More than everything. He had the impression that the actual terrain was flatlands, maybe meadows with a few scattered groves of trees, but he instead stared at writhing chaos, a wild landscape of organic, living hills and valleys.

Shane's entire body went slack. He swayed on his feet. Only sheer will kept him upright.

Small four-legged creatures scurried from place to place, weaving in and out of the paths of larger slithering organisms. Giant hulking beasts, dozens of meters tall, lumbered about. Heaving pyres of flesh waved like boneless arms, and towering peaks of pure living mass seemed to spawn even more creatures by the hundreds with each passing moment.

The sight stretched to the horizon and farther still. Shane could sense entire planets teeming with the creatures. More sailed through the cosmos, seeking new homes. The scale boggled the mind, soared past what he could imagine, but his consciousness perceived yet even more billions of the creatures, all working in terrible harmony.

This was the zerg. All of the zerg. The Swarm itself. They were letting him see it. They were *making* him see it.

Who is we? Shane had asked. Here was his answer. They were legion.

Shane turned around. The assembly hall was empty again but for the marine in the combat suit. Shane didn't give the crowd's absence a second thought. He felt calm. Perfectly serene. He even smiled.

"None of this is real," Shane said. "This is a dream."

"No." The marine shook his head again. "We believe some of it is true."

"Which part? The part where a crowd vanishes into thin air? The part where a marine with my own face talks to me?" Shane's smile expanded into a sloppy grin.

"Do you recognize this place?" The marine gestured toward the front of the empty assembly hall.

"It's where I graduated," Shane said.

"From training," the other creature said.

"Yes."

"You're certain?"

Suddenly, Shane wasn't. "Yes," he lied. He looked around the room again. He *had* been here; he was sure of it; but the warm memories of pride and honor he had always associated with that day felt different, corrupted. Twisted.

Bile rose in Shane's throat as the faint shadow of another memory wafted into his mind. He could smell sweet smoke.

"This man, Mengsk," the marine hissed. "He spoke to you that day?"

"He... yes," Shane said. Had he? He remembered believing that Emperor Arcturus Mengsk had personally sworn him into service, but that was impossible, right? Maybe the speech had only been broadcast via holoivid, or maybe it had been sent as a prerecorded message. Shane couldn't quite remember.

"In person?"

"Hey," Shane said, angry. "How are you inside my dream? *Why are you asking me anything at all?*"

The pressure in his head pulsed along with his racing heartbeat. The pain was immense.

The marine didn't respond for a moment. "We told you this is not a dream."

Enough of this. Shane kicked one of the empty chairs as hard as he could, launching it into the air. It came crashing down several rows away, toppling more chairs with a deafening clatter. The sound was profoundly satisfying.

The kick hurt his foot. His toes throbbed in harmony with his head. How could Shane still be dreaming? Shouldn't physical pain force you straight awake?

Shane leveled his finger at the marine. "Let me out." Shane knew in his gut the armored figure was responsible for this. For all of it. "If this isn't completely real, then none of it is. That means this is a dream. Let me out."

"This is not a dream," said the other, older Shane. "This is a memory."

Silence reigned over the assembly hall for a long, long moment. "A memory?"

"Yes."

"A memory that changes?"

"Yes."

"How can that be a memory?"

"It is the memory you remember."

"That clears it right up." Despite his anger, Shane felt queasy. He was growing convinced that he—this twisted Geoff Shane with the expressionless eyes—was telling the truth as best as he knew how.

The headache was relentless. He felt as if his mind would soon burst at the seams. He lifted his fingers to his temples. The pain was blinding.

The marine slowly stood up. The floor creaked under the massive weight of his armored suit.

"You remember Mengsk"—and he hissed on the name again—"speaking to you, do you not?"

"He wasn't there. Not in person," Shane said through gritted teeth. He was certain of it now.

"But you remembered it that way." It wasn't a question. Shane didn't answer. The marine drew himself fully upright, towering over Shane. "Did it actually happen?"

"Fine," Shane growled. His hands gripped the sides of his head. He fought to keep his eyes open against the pain. "It wasn't real. So what?"

"That memory is false. What else is false?"

The question was simple. It added only a feather's weight to Shane's agony. But it was enough.

He felt something tear open in his mind, just a bit. It was as if two hands were pulling apart thick canvas, with tiny rips opening up at the weakest points of the fabric. He shuddered, and reality seemed to tremble with him.

Shane could see little black spots floating around the assembly hall. Little windows into the deep void of madness. They were dancing around his vision, and when they collided, they joined together. Some of the tiny dots grew into gaping holes.

There was nowhere to run. The darkness would overwhelm him. *What else is false?* If the answer was *everything*, Shane knew he would be lost to insanity. He desperately concentrated on the opposite question: *What is true?*

The assembly hall. That was true. That was firm. That was the bedrock. Shane clung to it. The tearing sensation stopped. The pressure didn't slacken a bit, but it didn't increase. The holes hovered in place, quivering.

"We've seen this before with your kind," the armored Shane said, "often. You're right to be afraid. There's no coming back from... that." He waved toward one of the larger dark holes. It trembled like a mad dog at the end of its leash. It wanted to grow. It wanted to swallow Shane's mind. All of it.

No coming back. Shane believed it. There was something final down there. He could only muster a whisper. "How do I stop it?"

The answer came without hesitation. "Let us help."

Shane wanted to scream, *Do it. Help me!* The pressure ratcheted up a notch. The darkness shivered with anticipation.

"How?"

"We will strip away the lies. But you must let us in."

Shane's eyes went wide. Us. We. *Them.* The zerg.

The Swarm.

They were already touching his mind. The zerg were here, speaking to him with his own face. Something clicked. He could feel the connection between the marine standing before him and the masses of zerg outside the windows. They were one and the same.

"Bastard." The pain in his head worsened, but Shane didn't care. The holes in reality grew. "Get out of my head. Get OUT!" Shane focused and lashed out without thought, striking in a way he didn't understand. The armored marine disappeared instantly. The figure's eyes left a pair of burning purple shadows in Shane's vision. He looked out the windows and saw that the zerg had vanished as well.

The pressure, however, remained. It grew even worse by the moment. Shane now stood truly alone within the assembly hall.

He dropped to his knees, his fingers digging into his head. His fingernails tore grooves into his scalp, and warm blood trickled down his face.

I'm going to die.

A howling, squalling silence scratched at his eardrums. Shane screamed. His own voice sounded thin and distant to his ears. Some of the holes in reality stretched from floor to ceiling and beyond, still merging and doubling in size with each heartbeat. That final darkness threatened to overwhelm his vision.

Shane didn't doubt the pressure inside his head would tear his mind apart. He feared the alternative more. *I won't let them in. I won't.*

He held on, keeping his eyes wide open. In a few more moments, the assembly hall would unravel along with the remnants of his sanity. That would be the last thing he would ever see.

His thoughts spun, desperately searching for a way out. *The assembly hall is true.* He knew that. Everything else about his induction ceremony seemed foggy and insubstantial. He focused on the assembly hall. Only on the assembly hall. That would be his foundation.

The pressure burst free, turning into a roaring river, threatening to carry him into the darkness. Shane let everything else go and clung only to his bedrock. Madness yawned before him.

The current carved canyons in his mind. Shane held on as the chaos peeled something back, exposing a raw and primal and smooth surface.

Shane's memory of his induction ceremony shredded into tatters, and then mist, and then nothing at all.

Emperor Mengsk's speech was gone. The recruits were gone.

The pressure was gone. *The lies are gone.*

The assembly hall remained.

Shane blinked.

"Herein passes the solemn judgment of the Dominion," said the judge, peering down from his bench. "On count one, premeditated murder: guilty. On count two, torture and sadistic actions leading to the death of the victim: guilty. On count three, arson leading to the death of the victim: guilty."

With each verdict, the murmurs of approval grew louder in the crowded assembly hall. The daylight that flooded through the ceiling-high windows on the east wall spotlighted the newly convicted criminal and the court officers who stood at his side, holding him upright before the judge.

Nineteen-year-old Geoff Shane, soon to be condemned inmate Geoff Shane, hardly paid attention as the judge continued to announce the guilty verdicts. Kidnapping: guilty. Defiling a victim of a violent crime: guilty.

Shane had laughed when his defense counselor had told him he would be charged with more than twenty different crimes. That many? For one junkie? "They need to fill a quota or something?" he had asked.

He scowled at the court officer on his left, who was gripping his elbow, putting constant pressure on Shane's shoulder.

Mutilation: guilty. Use of narcotics in service of an assault leading to the death of the victim: guilty.

"I'll kill you," Shane whispered to the officer. "I'll burn you crispy. You like that?"

The officer merely looked back and increased the pressure on Shane's shoulder, not exactly trembling from fear. Shane felt his old familiar temper flare up. A red mist settled over his vision. He imagined how the pig would scream while burning alive.

Shane could feel the eyes of the crowd on him, staring and judging. *Like they ain't never done nothing wrong.* "What are y'all looking at?!" Shane shouted, and was rewarded with an open-handed blow to the side of his head from the officer on his right. Shane snarled at him.

"The defendant will remain silent," the judge said. "On count sixteen, arson with the intent of destroying evidence of a heinous crime: guilty."

In the back of Shane's mind, far from his smirking exterior and growing uneasiness over the long list of convictions, a tiny spark of his consciousness watched the unfolding proceedings with pure horror.

This can't be true. This can't be what really happened.

As the judge rattled off more guilty verdicts, that same small part of Shane's mind tried to deny it all, tried to damn it as another lie or false memory. It wasn't. This was his bedrock. This was the unvarnished truth he had clung to.

Free from the lies, a word finally returned to the surface: *resocialization*. The Dominion had hid his crimes from him and replaced them with strong, positive memories, layer by layer. Even the very concept of resocialization, the word itself, had been locked up and buried until the scouring of his mind had unearthed it along with all the rest.

He could see how the lies had been fashioned onto his own memories, anchored to something firm and real. Instead of having sentence passed on him for murder, he had stood in front of the Dominion's supreme leader and been sworn into the Marines. Instead of facing the disdain of a vengeful crowd, he had pledged himself in service and been applauded. The pretty fiction had been carefully molded until almost nothing remained of the truth.

Shane desperately wanted to believe this trial, too, was a lie. His trial—no, his *conviction*; the trial was done and over—had the same sense of weight and truth of his bedrock. This was all real.

The lies were gone. Stripped away.

Stripped away by the zerg. Warning bells sounded in the aware part of his mind.

The judge finally finished reading the verdicts: guilty on all 23 counts. He asked Shane if he had anything to say that might mitigate the heinous nature of his crimes, but the nineteen-year-old grinned sloppily and spat and shouted curses at the top of his lungs until the court officers wrestled him to the ground and clamped a metal device to his jaw, pinning his mouth shut.

That only enraged Shane further. As his garbled vulgarities continued to rise from the courtroom floor, the judge passed sentence, delivering the punishment the crowd had hoped for: death.

Spontaneous applause broke out. The bailiff called for order. The officers dragged the condemned inmate Geoff Shane out of the assembly hall, off to a swift execution. No appeals would be granted. His sentence would be carried out by sunset.

Shane knew what was coming. The aware part of his mind cried out for the memory to stop. He didn't want to experience this again. *No more.*

They dragged him from the transport. They carried him into a featureless building. They pulled him onto a secure lift that traveled well belowground.

No more, please.

They forced him into a whitewashed room, still manacled. They left him there for hours, ignoring his curses and threats and screams and growing panic about his imminent walk to the execution chamber.

The aware part of his mind knew that he would not be executed. He knew the Dominion had use for him. He knew that soon the military grunts would come and drag him into the dark room with the Dominion insignias. They would shove him into one of those awful, awful tubes. And then the pain would begin, and his memories would change.

That would be his true graduation. His true induction into the Dominion's service. He cried out in his mind for help. Any help.

Soon, it came.

A marine wearing a fully armored combat suit stood in the whitewashed room with him, regarding Shane with emotionless eyes. The light was funny. His eyes seemed to glow.

The two Shanes stared at each other for a long time in silence.

"Let us help," said the marine with Geoff Shane's face.

"Who are you?" Shane said, voice cracking.

"We are what you could be."

Shane remembered the view outside the assembly hall windows. He remembered the unending fields of zerg. "How? How could I end up like you?"

"Ask."

"No."

"Let us help," the marine repeated.

"I don't need that kind of help," Shane said.

"You do. We've seen pain like yours before in your kind," the marine said, "often. Your leaders seem to prefer it."

Shane felt helpless. His crimes had been laid bare before an inhuman perspective, and they had been described as *pain*. "What I did can't be forgiven."

"We accept."

The statement caught Shane off guard. "What?"

"We accept."

"You *want* people like me?" That sounded like a good reason to refuse.

"We accept, just as they did."

Shane spat. His manacled hands jerked uselessly. "The Dominion didn't accept me. They changed me."

"Yes."

Shane could hear the two meanings in the word: *yes*, the Dominion changed you, and *yes*, they accepted you.

Shane squeezed his eyes shut. Another concept locked away under his resocialization surfaced. He remembered deformed marines lumbering alongside the zerg, with guns and tentacles and absolutely no remaining humanity. Enslaved.

Infested.

Fresh terror flooded his stomach. Shane—Private First Class Geoff Shane—had seen them with his own eyes. He had fought them. He had watched with envy as firebats had burned them to a crisp. The infested had been nothing to fear. They were simply zerg. Targets for the Dominion's ordnance. Resocialization hadn't allowed him to think of them as anything else.

PFC Shane had taken on the infested in more battles than he cared to remember. PFC Shane had won.

He saw no reason to switch sides.

"We accept," the marine repeated.

"You didn't accept them; you killed them," PFC Shane said.

"You killed them," the marine said. They meant it literally. PFC Shane had personally gunned down many of the abominations.

"They were dead before I ever saw them."

"No."

"You turned them into... you," Shane said.

"Yes. We accept," they said.

"Bastards. You..." Shane stopped talking. His earlier words echoed in his head. *They turned them.* "They didn't switch sides. They didn't choose. You captured them and changed them." His stomach roiled.

"They chose."

Shane barely heard the marine. His mind had finally made the connection. "So you must have captured me, too," he said. His voice trembled only a bit.

The zerg marine with PFC Shane's face didn't respond.

"Where am I right now?" Shane asked. No response. "Have I been captured? Wake me up. Let me see."

"No."

I have been captured. Shane kept himself calm. The infested humans he had seen were deformed. Unrecognizable as humans but for two arms and two legs. The zerg were somehow keeping his mind underwater, trapped in his memories while they did god knows what to his body.

He might already be one of them. *But maybe not.* Shane clung to that thought. It might not be too late. He needed to escape. If they kept him buried in memories, asleep, escape would be impossible. He needed to convince them to wake him up. "Let me see," Shane said.

"No."

"Yes."

"Not until you let us help."

"No," said Shane.

The marine stood silent for a moment, and then that familiar pressure returned to Shane's mind. There was only the faintest hint of a headache, nothing like the sheer agony of before. The pressure seemed to lurch and twist, unable to find a grip, sliding over his mind with numb fingers.

Shane smiled. That was nothing. He could handle that forever. "Uh oh. That's not working anymore, is it? How strange. It kind of feels like you don't have anything left to hurt me with."

The marine didn't answer, and Shane grinned broadly. "Can't hook into my brain without a little ragged resocialization to work with? You can keep me down here, but you can't tear me apart again, can you?"

"Let us help," the zerg marine said.

"You dumb bastards. That line don't work no more. Is this how you break marines? Push 'em to the edge of insanity and wait for them to panic?" Shane stared down his doppelganger. "I bet all that pain of scraping away resocialization works as a pretty good motivator. And then you're right there waiting, offering a hand in friendship. 'Let us help.' Go to hell."

The marine kept silent. That was fine with Shane. He was just warming up. "You almost ripped my brain apart. You almost killed me, but I threw you out and rode the whirlwind myself."

Sarcasm crept in. "Is that unusual? Does that make me special?"

The marine finally responded. "No. Others proceed that way."

"Need our cooperation, right? Can't just squash us flat? It does too much damage, doesn't it? You need me to *let you in*." Shane laughed. It felt good. *Finally, an advantage*. "Guess what? I won't cooperate down here. Ever. You lost your chance and now you can't pin me down. Kill me, or let me wake up and then we can talk. I don't care either way."

The marine looked down at the floor. He—*they*—seemed to be thinking. A long moment passed. Then the marine's glowing gaze rose again to meet Shane's.

"There is no escape. We could force you if we wanted."

"If you could've, you would've," Shane said.

"We still could." The inhuman eyes bored into his, and Shane heard the marine's voice, his own voice, turn alien and cold. All pretense of humanity evaporated. "But we don't need to," they said. "You may stay as long as you wish."

The marine vanished. Shane was all alone in the whitewashed room.

He remained there for hours. The zerg presence never returned. The Dominion officers came for him and dragged the kicking and screaming Shane to the resocialization tanks.

The scientists had gone to work with boredom.

The transparent tube door had closed over him and Shane had screamed as the pain finally began, but neither the officers nor the scientists had taken notice. He was a murderer and worse. Pure scum.

Agony pulsed through his head. Memories rose to his mind's eye unbidden and shuffled away just as fast.

Shane hadn't been able to control it. He hadn't understood what was happening. His life had marched past as he had thrashed and cursed.

Now he understood. The scientists had inspected his memories. Catalogued them. Found the ones that hurt the most. They had made him relive them all. Only later had they changed them.

He blinked. They had started at the beginning, and it began with pain.

Eight-year-old Geoff Shane had fallen backward and landed on his back, dazed and bleeding from the nose.

His father had been yelling, demanding an apology, fist still clenched. Geoff had apologized over and over, something about a chair he had accidentally broken. His head throbbed from the pain.

PFC Shane wasn't merely remembering it; he was reliving it. His thoughts swam. His tongue felt thick and numb. Some of his teeth wiggled loose on the left side of his jaw. He could smell the poisonously sharp stench of whiskey on his father's breath. He heard his younger self mumble yet another apology and felt the slap he received in return.

His father had wanted a more sincere apology. "Tell her you're sorry like you mean it," he had said.

Don't laugh, PFC Shane wailed. The boy couldn't hear him. In his daze, eight-year-old Geoff had laughed, unafraid. "Mom's dead and she would have hated that chair," the boy had giggled.

His father's fist had whistled through the air, and the memories grew fuzzy for a time. PFC Shane heard two of Geoff's ribs cracking and felt more pain in his head. When the boy had

finally woken up, his thoughts had been out of order. Fear had retreated far into the distance, but anger and pain had throbbed in its place. His heartbeat had pounded in his ears. Sweat had beaded on his forehead.

His head had felt as if it would burst at the seams.

His father had been asleep. Or passed out. It didn't matter. Geoff had stood in the bedroom doorway and watched his father's chest rise and fall for a while. He had thought about grabbing a knife from the kitchen or finding his father's "Koprulu Special" revolver with the chrome siding.

A belch had escaped his father's mouth. The smell of alcohol had wafted through the room.

The eight-year-old boy had walked unsteadily out to the kitchen and noticed for the first time the mostly empty bottle of strong hooch on the table. He had sniffed the dark amber liquid. He had thought about it. PFC Shane remained silent and numb.

When Geoff had made his decision, he had walked back to his father's bedroom and dumped the remainder of the bottle onto the sleeping man's chest.

No. PFC Shane tried to escape to another memory. Anything else. He even tried running back to his resocialization. To his conviction. He would have gladly welcomed that pain. It didn't work. They were going to make him relive every awful moment.

His father had snorted and licked his lips as the alcohol had splattered over his body, but he hadn't woken up. Geoff had found his father's lighter next to his cheap Umojan cigars and flicked it. He had held the dancing orange flame over his father and stared. Then he had dropped it.

Geoff had been surprised at how slowly the flames had grown. He had been equally surprised that his father had never woken up. Smoke had filled the room, and the smell of burning fabric and flesh had made Geoff retch. He had stumbled outdoors and watched as the flames had

spread through the home, and had remembered far, far too late that his three-month-old sister had still been sleeping in her bedroom.

He never tried to save her. He had sat silently with his head in his hands and peeked out between his fingers, watching the flames twist.

Shane blinked. He was back in the resocialization tank, screaming in pain, and then reality fell away from him again.

Please stop.

His memories hopped forward a decade. Eighteen-year-old Geoff Shane had lured a young girl to his dump-house apartment with promises of free snoko. The girl had been strung out. She hadn't needed much convincing, and she had nodded off after a few minutes, her eyes darting around underneath her eyelids in some drug-fueled dream. It was what Shane had been waiting for.

PFC Shane wasn't merely remembering it; he was reliving it. Shane's anticipation was his anticipation. Shane's pleasure was his pleasure. It was more horrific than he could have ever imagined.

No more. PFC Shane knew what was coming. He tried to turn away. He tried to stop watching. He called out in his mind for help. None of it worked. He couldn't blink unless eighteen-year-old Shane blinked. He couldn't turn away unless Shane did.

"Let us help," PFC Shane heard a voice say.

Shane had watched her chest rise and fall for a long time. He had lifted one of her eyelids and stared into the dilated pupil. She hadn't stirred, and Shane had been mesmerized. Then he had set the fire. She had finally woken up and her eyes had gone wide, showing pale white circles in the suddenly orange light.

He had stayed close as the flames had spread. Her screams had sung in his ears. His eyes had danced over the sight of her thrashing form.

PFC Shane tried to wake up. He struggled for the surface but felt his mind collide with a ceiling. The zerg were keeping him under.

"Let us help," a voice said.

Shane's skin had blistered and cracked as he had leaned in close. He had breathed deep. He had craved the aroma. There was nothing like it in the universe. It was always so fresh, the smell of a living, breathing creature roasting in its own juices.

He had drunk in the sweet, sweet scent, making PFC Shane drink with him. And it *was* sweet. It was the smell of sugar caramelizing. Always a bit different but always the same.

PFC Shane rebounded off the ceiling again and again. It hurt each time, but he no longer cared.

"Let us help," a voice said.

Her screams had choked off but her weak struggling had continued. A sharp new smell had filled the room. The flames had roared with renewed vigor, and Shane had smiled. Joy and glee invaded PFC Shane's mind. He tried to push it all away. He tried to hate it.

He was lying to himself and he knew it. He loved it. He always would.

"Let us help," a voice said.

A marine in a fully armored combat suit appeared before eighteen-year-old Geoff Shane, backlit by the growing inferno. Shane looked deeply into the figure's glowing eyes. And blinked.

* * *

Two structures still burned about half a kilometer in the distance, but the last screams had long since died away. In the sky and on the ground, the Swarm moved through the wreckage of the

terran outpost. The thick mass of creep spread relentlessly, already licking at the bodies of fallen enemies, eager to envelop and claim them for its own.

In the shadow of the floating overlords, one member of the Swarm sank to its knees. The creature wore the armor of the Dominion Marines, the plated steel barely fitting over the warped humanoid shape. Tendrils and giant fleshy growths squeezed through the gaps.

Two glowing eyes peered out from under the creature's helmet. Its breath was steady but heavy. Smoke coiled around it. The creature sniffed and snorted. The smell wasn't very sweet.

Nearby, a zergling bounded over the smoldering remains of a Dominion Wraith and skittered to a halt. The smaller four-legged creature looked up at the taller being, scythelike jaws clacking together happily in front of its wide fanged grin.

The larger two-legged creature looked down and huffed deep breaths of satisfaction. The Swarm was victorious. It was done.

Its glowing eyes blinked.