



THE TEACHER

Matthew Maxwell



The hydralisk's tongue was smooth and slippery as it ran across her hand. Countless muscles rippled and slid in a wave, working as one. *Just like the Swarm*, Dr. Loew thought. *Countless creatures bound by a single will, turned into a single organism.*

The tip wrapped around the chunk of meat held loosely between her pale fingers.

"Steady," she said calmly, in control.

The tongue pulled like a fish caught on a line.

The hydralisk chuffed through the spiracles on his cheeks. He tugged again.

The observation gallery couldn't have been more bored. The pack of scientists and ministers was distracted, thinking of something, anything, other than the spectacle before them. Instead of being in awe at Dr. Loew playing tug of war with a monster, they were making laundry lists of complaints to be voiced later.

"The hydralisk," she recited, "was forcibly evolved by the zerg Overmind from the slothien, according to protoss records we have obtained. Slothien are more commonly known as 'caterpillar cows' and little resemble their fearsome descendants." Discussing this much was safe among scientists and government officials; the public knew only that anything alien was to be feared and reported to Dominion authorities.

"Stay," she commanded.

Loew looked into the creature's red eye, resolute. The thing was huge, towering almost double over Loew's full height. She had only her voice to maintain control, not even a psi collar, which she had needed at the start of training.

She continued, injecting some urgency to combat the audience's growing disinterest. "Armed with razored scythe blades on its forelimbs and protected by an array of armored plates, the hydralisk is a formidable fighter in close quarters."

"Back," she commanded, speaking from her diaphragm.

The tongue relented and flowed away. The monster shifted his weight backward. The hydralisk, more than any other creature, was symbolic of the entire zerg Swarm's power, known and feared even by those who'd never seen one in the flesh. Everyone, apparently, but these spectators, who resented being here.

"The hydralisk is also a threat at a distance," she intoned. "It can launch organic spines at blinding speeds, penetrating neosteel plating at half a kilometer." Not that any civilian would willingly get that close to one, much less close enough to touch it.

Her eyes went from the audience to the hydralisk again. "Hold."

She smiled and finished the lesson, the creature held solely by her voice and intent. "Hydralisks are to be approached only by trained soldiers, preferably with heavy armored support."

She paused and turned her smile to the creature.

"Good boy. Good boy, Dennis. Okay."

She hated being firm with him, but it simply had to be done. Even tamed, he was dangerous due to his sheer size and mass.

Dennis took the meat tenderly, teeth barely grazing her skin, a reminder that they were still there and sharp.

A moment later, Dennis lay relaxed and motionless on a huge steel table at the center of the demonstration theater. Lately, the Dominion's interests had turned away from zerg-control schemes and toward more direct suppression or extermination of residual nests. The sparse attendance suggested that her work had already been written off, no matter how impressive the earlier demonstration had been.

"As you've seen, this full-grown hydralisk is completely pacified without the use of drugs, which require constant administration and precise dosage control."

The creature lay still as surgical fingers unlatched the metal plate on his skull. Spiderlike, a camera probe swung in and focused on the access port. "On your feeds is video of an organic structure that has been grown from the subject's brain mass, a tertiary lobe."

There was only a dry cough in reply. Someone lit a cigar.

"This lobe's purpose is twofold—"

"This... lobe," interrupted a chilly voice from the darkened gallery. "Do you have to operate on every single zerg that receives it?"

She saw a single face illuminated from below by the blue glow of a remote console, the visage square and more than a touch flabby, older, well-fed, and accustomed a little too much to getting whatever it wanted. The ember of his cigar flared a bright orange.

"Excuse me?" Loew furrowed her eyebrows in an expression that mixed anger and astonishment.

"Do you have to sedate every one of the slimy bastards that you want to control? If that's the case, then I'm wasting the emperor's time."

"That... that would be impossible," she said. "There are countless zerg—"

"Then how does it work?" He wasn't angry, acting as if her work didn't even rate that from him.

"We use a PPO: pathogenic prionic organism. The PPO infects the hydralisk and genetically 'tricks' the host into growing a new cerebral lobe. This lobe allows for outside control by my system. This is all covered in the—"

"Boscrap," he said dismissively. "Utter boscrap. That's a pipe dream that the UED tried to live out through Project 'Black Flag.' Nearly killed us all. Maybe you were too busy in your books to notice."

"It's not *boscrap*. Black Flag was upside down."

She dropped her remote console on the steel table in frustration. "The UED tried to force a new *top-down* control scheme on organisms that have been evolved to follow their own hive controllers for perhaps millions of years. A completely different approach is needed for this problem.

"I've proposed a *bottom-up* solution, hitting the zerg where they are weakest: at the individual level."

Her irritation robbed her of her manners. "Let me make this as basic as I can for you."

The cigar ember above her glowed in sullen response.

Her fingers danced on the console, and the monster rolled off the table, not with an involuntary jerk but with a smooth and fluid motion, repulsively graceful.

"He won't listen to his queen. But he will do what *I* say!"

Dennis flowed into a crouching position next to Dr. Loew, dwarfing her. Arms held in for the moment, he waited, coiled in an attack posture.

The people in the gallery started at the display, a clamor of shadows. The questioner held his seat and sucked in his smoke.

She swept out a command code on the console.

Dennis tensed. His arms snapped out and back; he was ready to leap.

"Dr. Loew, we're all suitably—"

"Hold your questions!" she barked.

The motion was quicker than any eye could hope to follow. A rush of umber and glistening skin flicked by as Dennis leaped from the floor of the theater to the observation window on the other side of the room.

He hit the window with the force of a truck. Bony scythe blades scratched at the barrier in a frenzy. Dennis then reared back and slammed into the glass once more, cracking it.

There were screams from the audience. No questions, no rebukes. Only screams. Maybe now they'd understand the degree of control she held.

"Take the target," the questioner said to nobody in particular.

There was a clatter of metallic boots on the tile floor behind her. Four marines burst into the demonstration theater, weapons coming up the instant they cleared the door. Dennis would be dead before he turned to face them.

"No!" Loew shrieked, all pretense of control discarded. "You'll destroy years of research!" she yelled, but she did not put herself in the line of fire.

"Call it off," said the voice.

She nodded silently as she entered a command.

Pushing off with his arms, Dennis leaped back and landed with a meaty slap. He rolled backward, then stood beside Loew at eased attention.

There was furtive rustling from above, trousers and jackets rubbing against one another. An exit door slammed shut.

"Good timing, men," he said.

The marines didn't lower their weapons.

Dr. Loew was spent, trying to disguise her rushed breath, to recover some semblance of composure. She had regained control of the demonstration only to lose control of herself.

"He wouldn't have hurt you," she offered. "It was a demonstration. Watch."

She pulled a surgical probe from her lab coat and pointed it into the hole left open in Dennis's head.

"I could turn his brains to jelly and he wouldn't twitch." She held the position, nearly touching the exposed brain with the probe.

She put the instrument away and turned her back on the creature. Another swipe on the console, and Dennis relaxed in on himself, robbed of energy and impetus, deflated.

"He is no longer a threat to any of us, unless ordered to be."

The questioner's cigar flickered and dodged in the dark. "I've seen enough. Put your pet away, then give my assistants a chance to change their clothes." The orange glow flared as he sucked in hard. "Then we'll talk."

His name was Garr, and he was dressed up like a military man. Loew couldn't tell whether or not he was just a dress-up soldier, as were most of the ministers and counselors she'd met.

The adrenalin from the demonstration had faded away, leaving her feeling small and not a little ashamed of her performance. In moments she'd gone from underdog to mistress of contempt and then back to nearly begging for Dennis's life.

She broke the silence first. "We've been able to tame hydralisks so far. The PPO seems uniquely suited to adapting to the hydralisk base species."

"So you chose hydralisks because of the ease of taming?"

"Pragmatic."

"And not because they're a highly versatile backbone force for the zerg?"

She paused, looking as if that had been the farthest thing from her mind.

Garr sighed. "You can make more, yes?"

"Yes, whatever we can capture and infect. The tamed zerg themselves carry the pathogen and pass it along to new recruits."

Garr blew smoke out of the corner of his mouth.

"What about contingency planning? What happens when they don't follow orders?"

"That's impossible with successful PPO infection," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"You seem terrifically confident."

"There are several safeguards in the system. Constant signal integrity and feedback regulation. Plus there's a fail-safe called Somnus. When Somnus is engaged, the parasite lobe on the brain puts out a cascade of irreconcilable neural signals, resulting in death in seconds."

Garr considered things, watching the zerg march in mock military formation on the office's screens.

"You'll need a bigger facility," he said. "And more resources."

"It's a successful pilot program, and in time—"

"Nonsense," he interrupted as thoughtlessly as he breathed. "Harris, how's our window? Is His Imperial Majesty available?"

His assistant came to instant attention, standing in the doorway. "We've been granted one minute of tele-audience."

"Very well." Garr turned to Dr. Loew and pointed at her. "Emperor Arcturus Mengsk is about to speak to you," he said, as if she were about to be spoken to by the Creator himself. "You will not address him unless addressed. You will answer any questions directly and succinctly. You will *not* waste his time."

Loew reeled. She had thought she might get the attention of a deputy science minister at most. She couldn't speak.

"Calm down, Dr. Loew," Garr said with a reassurance that was so easy it drifted into meaninglessness. "The emperor only punishes failure."

The Dominion insignia flashed crimson on the screen with the words **SECURE TRANSMISSION** below it in bold type.

Garr looked directly at the seal, deferential.

Loew wanted to gasp at the bearded face when it appeared. She had seen it thousands of times on currency and on holoboards in the streets, on every Dominion transmission. But it had never been like this: focused yet relaxed, in command but not commanding.

"Colonel Garr," said the emperor in the same clipped and impatient tone that Garr himself had used on Loew. "Enlighten me as to this 'Project Tamed.'"

"I've been convinced of its feasibility, Your Imperial Majesty, for both internal and external applications." Garr's reply was muted sunshine, positive but not gushing.

"Hmhmh." Mengsk seemed to be looking at something just off screen. "Complete control. And it'll rob her of primary forces." He smiled at something, his teeth not as white as Dr. Loew had expected. His gaze swept up, locked on her now, as if he had been reading her thoughts.

"Dr. Sandra Loew," he said as an introduction.

"Yes?"

Garr tapped her shoe with the sole of his boot, ever so slightly.

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty?" she corrected.

"We're quite impressed with the potential for your work," Mengsk said with a semblance of earnestness, before sharpening his focus. "Tell me: can Project Tamed remove the Queen of Blades as an external threat?"

Dr. Loew hesitated. He didn't mention the Swarm. Just Kerrigan. It was a daunting thought. She'd considered nests, even hives. But the queen herself?

Then again, why not? She had only to crack the code to fashion PPO carriers for the other species. And that was simply a matter of time. The rest of the Swarm would fall in line soon enough.

"Your Imperial Majesty, if my system is properly enacted, there will no longer be a zerg Swarm, but rather a Swarm under Dominion control."

Mengsk smiled coolly. "Remove the head from the body, and then I will be satisfied." His voice spoke of an unhealed scar inside him, still tender and raw.

His eyes then bored directly into her, burning gray.

"You have earned my support. Do not squander it," he warned. His attention shifted abruptly to Garr. "Colonel Garr: results first, balances afterward."

"By your will, Your Imperial Majesty." Garr's voice was comforting and velvety.

Mengsk looked away for an instant, and the transmission was over like that.

"Good," Garr said, standing straight. "Aside from your terrible etiquette."

"So, where do things go from here?" Dr. Loew asked, head swimming. "When do we begin?"

Garr chuckled. "Ten minutes ago. Requisitions have been expedited, based on running audits of your program. You're being provided with the full backing of the Dominion. Something not every xenobiologist can lay claim to."

Dr. Loew swelled with pride. She had arrived. Her work would go toward saving lives, no longer having to impress ministers and counselors.

"Just ten minutes ago?" she asked with an archness that she couldn't quite pull off.

"Now there's a proper attitude," Garr said.

Loew's remote console chimed with a tone she'd never heard before. It would have been beautiful but for its shrillness.

Her eyes grew wide when she read the message.

"What...?" she mouthed, pride receding abruptly like a slug from salt.

Garr was making ready to leave, glancing back at the screens.

"What is this?" she demanded. "Human-interaction testing starts tomorrow?!"

Garr chuckled sheepishly in reply. "I'm sorry we couldn't get any volunteers here sooner. Is that going to be a problem, O mighty tamer of the hydralisk?"

She shook her head silently.

He snapped his briefcase closed and strode out of the office. Dr. Loew followed him, more out of reflex than anything else. She had to oversee the hydralisk feeding anyway.

"And, Harris, have the files on Thys sent to me as well. Maybe we can finally get some movement from those traitors."

Garr and his assistant were already elsewhere, confident that their attention could move on. Their shoes clattered noisily and echoed too loudly off of the scuffed tiles and bare walls.

By the time she'd reached the hydralisk pens, she'd almost convinced herself that things were still under control.

Dennis shuffled out at the sound of the pen door opening. He made a low noise, somewhere between a snort and a purring growl. It echoed off of the bare walls.

Dennis looked at her with an air of expectation and made another sound, this one more questioning. It seemed like the only time anyone had said *please* to her all day.

Her console chirped. With curiosity, she brought it up and swung the face toward her. Several incandescent blue pulses tracked across the screen, monitoring the mental activity of the captive and tamed zerg. There had been a brief flurry of activity, a spike that the hardware and filtering couldn't account for.

She held out an arm. "Stay, Dennis."

The hydralisk regarded her warily as she peered into the screen. Loew requested a brief diagnostic from the monitoring system. PPO lobes were all online and functioning normally.

Dennis sat motionless for the next ten minutes as she ran logs from the last week of feeds. Nothing at all like the spike. Loew was going to have to put pressure on Bayma and the rest of the signals crew to make sure that this was a transcription error and not something originating from the lobes themselves. Loew needed more bandwidth on monitoring processes, but with the emperor picking up the bill, that wouldn't be a problem.

"Okay. Dinnertime," she said after swiping out the last command, confident that the anomaly was nothing that needed immediate attention. Besides, there were much larger fish to fry.

She entered a code on the wall plate, and a door slid open. There was a platter of cubed meat, vat grown, marbled with fat. She put it down an arm's length from her.

"Wait," she said firmly.

Dennis crouched, eyes fixed on a spot between her and the food so that he could keep his vision on both. He trembled faintly, wanting to lunge but holding back.

"Good boy!" she said with more excitement than necessary.

Dennis fell upon the metal platter, scraping it across the concrete floor as he gulped deliberately, without hurry. Teeth clicked together, percussive over the grinding sound.

At least here the relationship was simple, direct. Dennis might not have any affection for her, but he understood who was boss. If only everything else were that easy. Dennis had surpassed everyone's expectations. Everyone's but hers. She'd known exactly how he'd perform. She could do this. In truth, she'd already done it.

Everything would be fine.

The scraping stopped and Dennis stared at the platter. He prodded it with his jaw, and it rang empty. Remaining in his crouched stance, he glanced up at Dr. Loew with a gleaming red eye.

She returned the look and smiled. "Oh, you greedy little creature." She gently patted him on the head. "No, that's enough."

Dennis chuffle-whined at her once.

"No. Enough." But she was still smiling as she spoke.

Dennis blinked with eyelids that could repel a bullet at point-blank range.

"Okay, okay. Just *one* more. You did very well today."

She turned to refill the platter, and the hydalisk followed her with his stare.

"But only because I say so. *You* remember who the boss is here."

Dennis ate the second platter with leisure while she waited.

Loew hurried to meet the incoming transport. Three weeks into the program, and Garr was making a surprise visit.

As she crossed the yard, she watched the training grounds. A platoon of soldiers nicknamed "Lost Wolves" stood by as the Tamed, led by Dennis, cleared a mock mining installation. *The zerg don't occupy buildings*, she thought.

Garr beamed as he disembarked into the bright daylight, suit spotless. "I just want to tell you how thrilled the senate, Command, and even the emperor have been with your progress. You should be congratulated, Doctor." He expectantly held out his hand, the first time he'd done so for her.

She took it and found it to be cool and vaguely moist, as if he'd just toweled it off before stepping out of the transport.

His face went slack as he withdrew his hand and pocketed it. "Good, good. Now that pleasantries are disposed of, we need to discuss the situation with the program."

"What situation?" she asked. "You just said—"

"That was this morning. Let's discuss *now*. Like getting some field-based results."

"We can talk about that right after we talk about my hydras being trained in urban tactics."

"Your vision is limited. We need to plan for all kinds of eventualities. In fact, we've already found a suitable test bed."

She felt as if something had been snatched from her fingers. "Am I not in charge of my own program?"

"The *Dominion's* program," Garr corrected deftly. "Thys is a vespene-mining colony on the fringes, recently reporting a rogue zerg force moving on the main refinery. Intel suggests the colonists will fall in short order. We want our forces on the ground in thirty-six hours to prevent that."

"You want my Tamed in the field in a day and a half? Against other zerg?"

"Not *want* but *will have*. You will be directly observed by the most important members of the Xenobiology Department of Special Research Ops, as well as their military counterparts."

Loew wanted to tell him that it was flatly impossible. She couldn't find the words. It would simply have to be done.

He smiled as he regarded her lack of protest. "Cheer up. This will primarily be a mop-up operation, with only a possibility of sustained combat."

"Sustained combat?"

"The mine's managers are... difficult. Malcontents. Rabble, really."

Internal applications, she thought.

"But they're humans," Loew said.

"If it helps, think of them as traitors, Dr. Loew. You know how the Dominion punishes traitors."

Her face drained. "But the entire basis of this program is to protect humans from the zerg! It—"

"The basis of this program is *redirection* of the zerg to targets of our choosing." Garr lost all traces of warmth, cooling and deadening in a heartbeat. "Should the colonists at Thys turn on us after we rescue them from the zerg, they will become the next test."

"If you use the Tamed on humans, I'll be responsible for any deaths they cause." Dr. Loew clenched her fists so tightly that she couldn't feel them anymore. "My subjects—"

"Your subjects are *weapons*. Spare me your naivete."

Her anger threatened to consume her. Instead, she grabbed onto the only thing she could: her breakthrough, her genius. Perhaps control was slipping out of her hands, but she would not let it go so easily.

"Very well, Colonel Garr." Her voice was flat, without resistance or tension. This wasn't the moment.

"Do more than say it, or we'll install a project manager who can deliver."

Dr. Loew nodded, feeling the sting of her own fingernails digging into the palm of her left hand.

"Good. Now let's really give our enemies something to fear." He lit a fresh cigar with an antique lighter and sucked in, then exhaled blue smoke.

Over Thys, white lightning clawed at clouds that hung in the air like scabs. Between them, the sky oozed red and pink. The wind smelled like bone. Metal towers vented waste gasses of bright yellow flame, illuminating the backs of several hundred enemy zerg advancing on the refinery gates.

The sergeant's voice crackled over the comm. "Wraiths are going to work area denial. We go in while it's still hot.

"NOW WHO'S READY TO GO GET SOME?!"

"LOST WOLVES READY TO GET SOME!!" said his men as one.

Dennis and the clutch of hydralisks chuffed noisily in response. The freshly painted stripes on their heads reflected the transport's interior lights, now a dingy orange.

The transport slowed and the deployment hatch slid back, letting in the graveyard smell of Thys's atmosphere.

"GO GO GO GO GO!" someone shouted.

The humans hit the ground running, the Tamed behind them and fanning out in near silence. Loew followed, forcing herself to stay calm, monitoring her zerg's telemetry and coordinating their larger motions.

Dominion Wraiths came out of thin air and opened fire, lighting up the enemy zerg's ranged formations. Incandescent red lances blazed into the mass of creatures, lines of seared and burned carapaces in their wake.

The ships and the ground teams had cut a jagged X across the multitude of zerg at the colony's gates. The zerg army was forced to divide its strength between the Wraiths and the incoming Dominion troops.

Firebats opened up a ragged perimeter of flaming plasma and lurching bodies. Tamed hydras followed while the ground was hot, slashing and tearing and blasting. They ripped into anything that could fire back, locking down ranged defense. For the moment, the enemy seemed not to acknowledge the presence of hydralisks not under zerg control. It was as if the Tamed weren't really there.

Curious, Loew thought. She hadn't anticipated that.

Dennis and his clutch turned toward the seemingly empty sky. Several blurred and winged shapes swept through the roiling clouds. A wave of mutalisks sped in for a strafing run. The Tamed gave a warning shriek that cut through the gunfire and chaos.

"Above! Above!" shouted Loew.

The Tamed fired spines as the mutalisks came into range. The wild zerg returned with a barrage of glave wurms. The scene devolved into strobing images lit by automatic fire, torn mutalisks crashing into the ground, seeps of red between gashed armor plates.

"Wraiths! Friendlies below! Air only!" Loew barked into her comm.

Jets whining, the Wraiths dropped their strafing pass and banked hard to engage the mutalisks, taking pressure off the ground lines. With any luck, they'd be able to cut through the enemy troops and further separate the two zerg masses.

The rain of glave wurms continued to hammer at the Dominion's offense. The zerg weren't picking individual targets, simply pinning their enemies down while they surged back to reclaim ground. Several of the Tamed were hit and leaking fluids, firing until they fell over in unrecognizable shreds. Loew held her breath at the thought of Dennis being among them. She knew what had been asked of them, but knowing was not seeing it in the flesh.

"Loew! Troop status!" the sergeant yelled.

She glanced at the data. So many dead. "Lost a lotta signals! Half strength, if that!"

"Soldiers get asked to die," came his reply. "Whatever's alive goes to the west perimeter to prevent enemy zerg from re-forming!"

She wanted the assault to be over, but there was no telling what reserves the zerg had. Experiments could be measured in moments, but battles could drag on endlessly. The Tamed didn't falter, fighting with a ferocity and resolve that left even their wild brethren cold.

What passed for daylight on Thys broke, a weak and pale pink that slopped over everything. Countless broken bodies, mostly zerg, some human, littered the field in front of the mining facility.

Garr's gleaming transport gingerly set itself down before the colony's gates precisely fifteen minutes after the last zerg had been reported dead. A private detachment of guards stepped off well before him, forming a defensive barrier. Other Dominion transports made their way down, confident that if Garr could debark, then they could land as well.

Most of the counselors had chosen to appear in business suits, as if they were attending a formal meeting and not a field demonstration in a war zone. They delicately stepped around corpses so as not to get blood on the cuffs of their trousers.

Garr stood commandingly in a brushed gray uniform, insignia shining on his breast like a target. "Muster your troops," was all he said.

Loew's gauntlets were smeared up to her elbows in zerg blood, the doctor having tried to patch up some of the wounded. Too many Tamed had died, and watching each one fall had gotten easier but never easy.

She was worn and drained, standing only because she'd locked her legs when she saw Garr approach. She thought of possible improvements just to give her brain something to do other than shut down. Maybe she could spend time re-engineering the Tamed's armor growth; maybe that would have saved some of them.

"Loew. Muster your troops," came Garr's crushed gravel growl.

After an instant, she snapped back to the battlefield. "What did you think of the demonstration?" she asked sharply, not caring what he actually thought.

He sucked on a cigar.

"I'll let you know when it's over."

It took a moment, but the reality resolved itself, pulled into focus. "You always meant this, didn't you?"

"Just get them over there."

The Tamed shuffled over, ragged and torn but still ready to fight. They were poised behind the remaining Lost Wolves, awaiting orders. The Lost Wolves were in stim-low, sagging in their armor.

Garr licked his lips as he looked at the open gates. Smoke issued slowly from crushed bunkers.

"Begin your advance. Take the facility. Kill anyone who prevents it."

"Understood." Loew's fingers danced across the scratched and smeared surface of the remote console, then stopped. The Tamed twitched to attention. Dennis was carefully watching a fixed point just ahead of him.

The wind whistled low, mean.

"Attack now," Garr said to Loew with a voice like a glacier cracking. "And you bastards will back us up, or I'll tell them to eat you—"

"Done!" Loew shouted. She entered a command sequence without looking. New targets, new priorities.

The hydralisks clenched and leaped over the Lost Wolves, exploding into the Dominion regulars and the counselors and scientists they protected.

Arm-scythes cleaved into chests and severed limbs from bodies. Sharply pressed silk was no protection at all, but not even battle armor would have been.

Tears streamed down Loew's face. She knew she should feel sick, but she didn't. She would not call off her zerg. Not for anything. They were hers. If Garr wanted them to be used against humans, then that was what she would give him.

The Tamed went wild, ripping into Garr's stunned guards, who had expected to stand there and look dangerous while their boss went on his rounds. Only a couple of them were able to get a shot off before the hydralisks ravaged them.

Garr went pale with terror. He was fumbling for his sidearm when something passed through him with a snap. He was sliced from shoulder to opposing hip, tumbling apart slowly.

She wouldn't call off the zerg, but neither could she make herself watch, turning away before more blood flowed. Garr's body hit the flat stones with a liquid slap.

The Lost Wolves came to sudden attention but were unsure what or whom to attack. Some dashed to cover at the sound of spastic and useless gunfire.

Unlike the prolonged chaos of the previous battle, this assault was executed with a precision that bordered on surgical. In less than thirty seconds, the Dominion regulars, counselors, and scientists were dead where they stood, with no losses for the Tamed.

The transports had closed their deployment hatches and were attempting to escape. What was supposed to be a spectacle had become audience-participation carnage.

Loew let the ships go.

The Lost Wolves had taken defensive positions around their transport, which had been slow to move. Looking at the numbers, Loew knew the Tamed had the advantage, but they weren't yet pressing it.

She tried to stop her tears. Garr was a monster, and he deserved what he got. He wasn't the only monster, though; he just happened to be within reach. Still, she'd been the one to kill him, hadn't she? All had died by her order, her hand tapping out the commands.

"What the hell is going on here?" the Lost Wolves' sergeant asked. "Are you still—"

"Yes, I'm in control," Loew answered. "I told them to attack."

Dennis and the other hydralisks stood at the ready, the yellow stripes on their heads spattered with blood that was drying in the morning heat. They watched but did not move.

She bit back the hot tears. "I couldn't let them take the Tamed. Not if this was how they were going to use them."

The air was filled with nervous scrapes across the stone, weapons being held in anticipation, glinting in the morning light.

The monitor chirped at her. Loew couldn't take her eyes off the zerg as they stood there, ready to do anything for her. She wouldn't watch them kill, but she would make herself watch them die. She owed them that much.

"I'm so sorry, Dennis." She breathed raggedly as her fingers swept the console. "Time for Somnus," she said like a promise.

She triggered Somnus, flicking her hands quickly. Acid boiled in her throat as she set fire to her life's work. Soon. Very soon. They would twitch and die.

The hydralisks continued to stand at the ready, relaxed. No convulsions, no sign of any distress.

The monitor persisted in its chirping, and she finally looked at it. There was that signal peak again. But it wasn't just a brief anomaly now. It was a new pattern, a completely new system, wild and irregular.

Loew's program had been wiped out. All nodes offline. Impossible. She entered the diagnostic sequence. Her heart lurched in her chest, slamming against her ribs, fit to smash its way out.

"My god," she whispered. "They're not... I'm not..."

Survival took over, throttling any idea of devotion or protectiveness; there wasn't any room for that in her heart. Instead, she silently rattled off all the ways that these creatures could kill her in an eyeblink. Just as Garr and the others had died.

"Shoot them! Shoot all of them!" Loew's own voice was alien to her. "They're loose!"

"Suppression! Now!" the sergeant yelled as he raised his rifle and opened up. Loew narrowly avoided having her right foot razored off as she leaped toward cover. The dread bit deeper than her heart, enveloping her and swallowing her whole.

The deception wasn't what made it so awful; it was the question of how long the zerg had been playing along at being tamed. Loew huddled under the landing gear of the transport. Spines whistled through the air and sunk into the ship's lower hull, ruining it. Even if it could get up, going into the outer atmosphere would be a death sentence.

How long? How long have they waited? she asked herself. She couldn't tell. The memory flashed of Dennis waiting patiently to be fed. *Even then? When?* Had she ever controlled them?

"Run!" Loew shouted. "Get to the refinery!" She was up and off without knowing what she was doing, out of control.

The Wolves were quickly being overrun as the last transport was lifting off, or trying to. Alerted by the sound of the ship's engines, the hydralisks opened fire on the fleeing craft. Barely six meters off the ground, it took heavy damage and then listed. The hydralisks continued to attack, the hisses of their shots drowning out the gunfire.

Hundreds of spikes slammed into the hull. The stress of takeoff was too much, and the ship began to crumple. The nose dipped down as smoke poured out of the control cabin.

Engines set to full getaway burn, the craft crashed to the earth, gouging out a trench and scorching the area before going up in flames. There would be no dustoff.

But the explosion lent cover.

Loew ran. She felt as if she were floating, pushing through heavy water or lead. Behind her fell diminishing gunfire.

Twenty meters to the gates, maybe less. A ragged company of colonists urged her on to safety.

There were shrieks behind her, and the clattering sound of claws on stone. The creatures flowed to either side of her so quickly that she felt as if she were standing still. They leaped ahead and into the stunned colonists, slicing into the humans. These weren't soldiers. There was no contest.

A handful of hydras stopped in front of Loew and wheeled around. They brandished their scythe blades and hissed with their mouths open wide, red and wet.

She halted, almost falling over.

The firing behind her came to an end. All that was left was the sound of meat and bone. She was surrounded. Her breath rattled around like a sparrow in a blast furnace.

The zerg stood down. Claws lowered, some of them still wet. Her eyes darted around, but she didn't move. She didn't turn her head. She just held her breath, still as a stone.

As one, the zerg moved on, leaping or slithering away. She let herself breathe again. There was no explanation. Maybe it was enough that the last order had been fulfilled. Maybe she'd been imprinted upon them.

In any case, she was safe. She was clear. The zerg had departed. She allowed herself a step toward the refinery gates. Perhaps there was a way to call for help.

But she couldn't shake the memory of the hydralisk tongue slithering between her fingers, tugging angrily. She wanted to cut off her hand even now to rid herself of it. Revulsion twisted and kicked inside her like a nest of snakes hatching. Her hand was still wet, and that nauseating feeling seemed as if it would never go away, never let go of her.

Gravel crunched behind her, ripping the thought away. She knew the source without looking. It was a hydralisk, belly plates muscling into the ground.

She turned her head slowly.

The sun glinted off the metal plate in Dennis's skull. It could only be him. He watched her with expectation, as though she had a bag of meat scraps that she might throw to him at any second if he was a good boy.

He chuffed once, impatient this time.

"Dennis?" She couldn't believe it. But then again, he had been her first and most successful subject. He would be the most loyal. He would be the last to shake her control.

She looked at the overrun colony gates and then back at him. He was rosy in the pink of midmorning, relaxed but not unprepared.

Loew slowly took a step toward him. Maybe she could rebuild her project. This was just a setback. But now she could start over without Dominion interference. The PPO lived on in him. She could take what she'd learned and wipe out the zerg threat. She could—

Dennis's eyes narrowed as he raised his arms. There was no need to hurry. She was soft and without defenses.

"No," she whispered. "No, no, no. Not you. Not *you*."

She darted away but was nowhere near fast enough to outrun him.

* * * * *

The Queen of Blades narrowed her focus for a moment, reaching out from Char and into the perceptions of her children on Thys. She narrowed further, tasting the rush of pursuit as she rode along with the hydralisk.

Kerrigan could feel the hot and empty wind, smell the blood of the fallen, taste the agony and fear of the lone, stupid woman who'd sought to take what was hers and hers alone.

Still, the woman had given her an incredible opportunity. Trade several foot soldiers for how many Dominion brains? Pawns for bishops and rooks and even a pretender queen? Her only regret was that she would not see Mengsk's face as he heard of it.

The Queen of Blades relished the perfume of the woman's fear, just a step or two ahead of her former pet. She decided that she would let the false queen run for a little longer.

But only a little.