

*When something goes to hell*, one of Tanya's instructors back in the Ghost Academy had liked to say, *everything else will probably go to hell with it*. In this case, Ulavu barely had time to warn that a zerg was approaching when ten of the creatures burst through the foliage a hundred meters away and headed straight toward them.

Tanya felt the air freeze in her lungs as she reflexively ran the numbers. Five leopard-sized zerglings were ranged at the front of the pack, their sickle-bladed limbs and razor fangs poised to cut straight through CMC neosteel and tear into human flesh. A baneling anchored each end of the line, the bloated acid sacs on their backs pulsating as they strode along. That acid would take marginally longer to destroy their armor, but would be no less effective at the job. Behind the banelings were a pair of hydralisks like the one the group had encountered earlier. But these two had nothing of that first hydralisk's air of idle curiosity about them. Their eyes were fixed on the intruders, their claws twitching, the muscles that launched their poison needles rippling with anticipation.

And behind all of them, one of the nastiest heavy-ground zerg of them all: a ravager, standing even taller than the hydralisks, its broad, turtle-like shell surrounded by a crown of bone spikes. Set deep within the circle of spikes was an organic mortar capable of launching globs of acidic bile through the air, strong enough to destroy even protoss force fields.

"Combat stance," Whist said, his voice unnaturally calm as he took a wide step to the right and brought up his gauss rifle. "Hold fire until they close to seventy meters, then target the hydralisks first. When the zerglings get within fifty meters, switch targets to them—"

"Wait," Erin protested. "They may not be attacking. Shouldn't we wait to see if they are?"

"Why do you think I said to wait until they reach seventy?" Whist countered. "If they're still coming—"

"Incoming!" Dizz snapped.

Tanya caught her breath. A globule of orange slime had shot out from the ravager's back and was arcing toward them like a well-kicked football.

"Scatter!" Dizz barked, the word almost lost as he kicked power to his jump pack and leaped up into the air.

Out of the corner of her eye, Tanya saw Erin stagger as she tried to get clear of the acidic ball in her still-unfamiliar suit. She started to turn toward the scientist, wondering if she would reach her in time.

But Ulavu was already on it. Tanya had barely taken her first step when the protoss brushed past, moving faster than she'd ever seen him travel. He grabbed Erin and hauled her away from the incoming bile. Tanya checked her own motion and backpedaled hard, taking another quick look at the arcing globule. It would be close . . .

Luckily, not quite as close as it had looked. The bile splashed to the ground a solid two meters away.

Just about where she and Erin would have been if she'd tried to get the other woman out of the way.

A second later her headset erupted with the staccato crackle of Whist's gauss rifle on full auto, the sound counterpointed by the slightly higher pitch of Dizz's P-45 gauss pistol as he soared over the battlefield, firing angled shots beneath the hydralisks' armored heads into their torsos.

*All right, she told herself firmly. You've practiced for this. You can do it.*

Sure enough, even as the thought flashed through her mind, she found reflexes and muscle memory taking over, bringing her canister rifle to bear and squeezing off a round into the hydralisk on the right end. Normal C-10 ammo wasn't rated at this range against heavily armored zerg like hydralisks, but Cruikshank had assured her that the rounds he was sending down with her were the latest innovations that Dominion tech had been able to produce.

He was right. The round blew a small but significant piece off the hydralisk's exposed-rib-style torso armor. She chambered another round and fired again, taking another chunk off the enemy.

Her secret concern earlier was that she wouldn't be able to do her job as a soldier. That fear was now gone. She was indeed a soldier.

Time now to see if she was also a ghost.

Back at the academy, her instructors had originally told her to go for the brain. What no one had realized at the time was that the thick skull carapace was an amazingly good heat sink. Unless she positioned her hot spot directly in the center of the brain matter, the heat got siphoned away so quickly that it took forever to scorch enough tissue for a kill. The eyes were another good target, but with the same limitations.

Fortunately, zerg also had a lot of interior organs, and those weren't nearly so well protected. She'd studied the anatomy of every zerg variation known, most of it on mangled corpses brought in from the battlefield.

Time to see how well she'd learned her lessons.

The attack force was getting closer. She fired a pair of rounds into one of the banelings, sending it staggering with the impact. Then, shifting her attention to the ravager at the back of the formation, she focused her mind.

She'd never used her power against a live zerg before. Her instructors hadn't wanted to take the risk that even an isolated prisoner might somehow be able to use its psionic connection with the Swarm to leak information about her ability. Still, each of her experiments had ended the same way: a few seconds of effort, a careful focusing of her pyrokinetic power, and the carcass would burst into flame.

Only it wasn't working. The ravager continued on, shrugging off both her efforts and the bursts of hypersonic 8mm spikes Whist was occasionally sending into its torso when he could spare a moment from his assault on the hydralisks. Tanya leaned into the effort, wondering desperately what was wrong. Even at sixty meters the creature should be well within her range. Was its movement throwing off her aim? Was its circulatory system dissipating or diffusing the heat like the skull carapace did? She clenched her teeth harder . . .

And without even the slightest poof of flame or smoke, the ravager abruptly collapsed to the ground and lay still.

“Shift fire to zerglings!” Whist shouted over the noise.

Tanya blinked, refocusing her attention on the rest of the battlefield. The leading edge of the assault line of zerglings had passed the fifty-meter mark, and both Whist and Dizz had abandoned their attacks on the larger zerg to the rear and concentrated their fire on the closer threat. Firing a round into each of the two nearest zerglings, Tanya shifted her mental attack to one of the hydralisks.

Once again, it didn’t work. Or at least, it didn’t work fast enough. She kept trying, firing her C-10 on pure reflex at the charging zerglings, focusing all her power on the hydralisk.

And then it went down. She smiled in private victory—

—only to realize it was Dizz’s fire that had killed it. Swearing under her breath, she took another moment for assessment.

Not too bad. Two of the zerglings were down, but the other three were still coming, fighting stubbornly against the blasts that Whist and Dizz were hammering into them. The two banelings were relatively untouched; Tanya fired a pair of rounds from her C-10 into the closest, staggering it to a momentary halt, at the same time focusing her power on it. It got a few more steps before it collapsed, though whether from the explosive rounds or her pyrokinetic attack, she couldn’t tell. She shifted her attack to the remaining baneling, noting out of the corner of her eye that one more zergling was down and that Dizz was also firing at her baneling. The baneling went down, and Tanya shifted her attention to the remaining two zerglings.

Ten seconds later, it was over.

Tanya took a deep breath, let it out in a long, shuddering sigh. *So did I do it?* she wondered.

Maybe. Maybe not. She’d faced combat, and she’d lived through it. That was something. But how much of their victory had hinged on her power, she still didn’t know.

But she hadn’t lost control. That was the possibility that had worried her the most. She’d waded into the heat of combat, and hadn’t lost control.

“And that, boys and girls,” Whist said into the suddenly deafening silence, “is how it’s done. Anyone hurt?”