

STAR CRAFT III



BILZARD
ENTERTAINMENT

Waking Dreams

Stone knows who is on the other side of the door before it opens.

He'd heard the explosions and gunfire, the panicked reports from Defenders of Man troopers that a ghost had infiltrated General Carolina Davis's compound, the deafening silence on the comms as they fell in battle. The Dominion agent could have only one target, and Stone is the general's last line of defense.

General Davis and the Defenders of Man were humanity's best hope against aliens like the zerg and protoss. What could be more worthy of fighting for? Dying for? Stone had spent his entire life training for moments like this, the chance to give everything to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. He is ready. He will not—must not—fail them.

Few ghosts could shred through the Defenders' garrison like this. As the door to Davis's outer office opens, Stone senses a powerful psionic energy—a familiar one—and he's filled with disappointment and dread.

Agent X41822N. November "Nova" Terra.

From Stone's cloaked position, he watches as Nova enters the large room cautiously, weapons ready. She pauses to take in the imposing statue of Emperor Arcturus Mengsk just to the right of Stone. But then she scans the room. She knows someone is close by. She knows it's Stone.

He should attack first, use what meager element of surprise he has—he'll need any advantage he can get to beat her. But he had once trusted Nova with his life. He had once considered her the closest thing someone like him could call a friend. He has questions.

He's also angry.

"I knew I'd see you again," he says.

She pinpoints Stone's location. He drops his shield so she can see him, and the commando rifle he's holding. She narrows her eyes.

"Stone. What happened?" she asks.

"You deserted me and sided with the Dominion to murder your former comrades. Guess I'm next."

"They've altered your memories. This isn't you."

Her mind probes at his, trying to read his thoughts.

"We are who we choose to be . . . And you chose this." He's strong, but she's stronger, and he won't be able to block her telepathy for long. He fires at her.

Nova takes cover behind another large statue across the room, one of the two Wolves of Korhal flanking the statue of Mengsk—his family insignia and the symbols of his regime.

Stone is well aware that this is a battle for his life, but the only life that matters is the one he is sworn to protect. He has to stop Nova from getting past him to General Davis.

On the battlefield, Stone is used to taking on normal humans; even if they are well trained and well armed, they aren't a match for a ghost's psionic abilities, especially equipped with one of the most advanced pieces of technology ever created: the hostile environment suit. The skinsuit allows Stone to channel his psionic power, boosting his strength and agility, rendering him essentially invincible.

But then, Nova has a skinsuit of her own, and she has a psionic index of 10 to Stone's 7. A fight between two ghosts closely matched in power and skill is rare. It's

more like a chess match than a full-on assault—a game of strategy, endurance, odds that can tip with a bit of luck. Stone has sparred with Nova before in training sessions. He’s seen her in action against a common enemy.

He’s going to need a lot of luck.

Stone activates the experimental phase reactor in his suit and teleports to a position right behind her—or where she had been a moment before. She’s gone almost as soon as he blinks in, weapon firing. Did she simply move fast, cloaked, or has she somehow gotten hold of the experimental teleportation tech herself? And he feels her once again on the edge of his consciousness, breaking through. This is going to be a match of wills as much as strength.

“You were the best of us, Nova. Why betray us?” he calls out.

“It was your idea, actually.”

“More lies!” He catches movement out of the corner of his eye, pivots, and fires. He misses. But she doesn’t. He takes a hit from behind and nearly loses his footing. By the time he turns, she’s gone.

And so it goes. Stone gets some shots off, but he’s doing more damage to the office than to Nova. As he blinks around, trying to find an opening in her defense, she always seems to be one step ahead of him, using the environment strategically to avoid his shots and get the drop on him.

Nova’s wearing him down. And yet . . . she seems to be holding back. He knows what she’s capable of. He should be dead by now, if she really wanted to kill him. Which means she doesn’t want him to die. He just doesn’t understand why.

This isn’t happening, Stone thinks to himself. This is a memory. Or a dream.

Suddenly disoriented, Stone loses track of Nova's position. A moment later, he feels another impact. He loses consciousness.

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Stone came to slowly, but once he was awake, the memories rushed back, battering his mind with a flood of images and a turmoil of emotion.

His first thought: *I'm sorry, General.*

His second and third: *Where the hell am I? Why aren't I dead?*

He opened his eyes, wincing against even the low light in the room. He'd spent enough time in sickbays to know one, just by the strong odor of disinfectants. His helmet was off, and he'd been stripped of his skinsuit, too, making him feel exposed. Vulnerable.

The first wave of pain came over him. A pounding headache, pressing right up against the back of his eyes. He tried to reach for his head, but his arms were strapped to his sides. His legs were restrained too. His right shoulder burned, probably a torn rotator cuff. He ached all over, like his skin was one massive bruise.

But the physical discomfort was nothing compared to the crushing sense of failure. He was supposed to protect General Davis, and instead he had gotten himself captured by the enemy. Had the general been taken as well?

But from a distant corner of his mind, one question lingered, coloring everything else: Why had Nova gone easy on Stone?

A memory flashed. He was helping Nova escape from a base in Sharpsburg. A high-speed chase on vultures along the highway.

But that mission had never happened. Nova was a traitor to the Defenders. She was the enemy.

Which meant the Dominion was now holding Stone. He had to get out of here. But first he needed to know where “here” was.

Stone turned his head to take in what he could of his surroundings. An empty medical bed to his right, recently vacated based on the rumpled covering. A diagnostic terminal to his left. He was on a ship, he decided, feeling the gentle thrum of technology through the thin mattress. Another memory bubbled up, the story of “The Prince and the Pebble.”

He only recalled fragments of it, like everything else in his life, but it was about a boy prince who became bored of palace life and ran away to explore the city on his own. He was swiftly rounded up with the rest of the city’s youth and forced to join the army. As he was being taken to the front lines of whatever war was being waged at the time—to his certain death—the prince confessed that he was the son of the emperor and demanded they return him to the palace. No one believed him, because the emperor had never announced that his son was missing.

However, a wise general decided to test the boy’s claim. The night before the big battle, she invited the so-called prince—dressed in full armor—to join her for tea. She directed him to sit upon a soft pillow across from her. She quizzed the boy about the emperor and life as a prince, but the boy had difficulty answering her questions. He was too busy scowling and squirming and shifting in his seat, and he never even touched his tea.

“What’s the matter?” the general asked.

“This must be the lumpiest pillow in the empire!” The lad jumped up and tossed the pillow aside. Beneath it he discovered a small pebble. The general clapped. “You are who

you say you are,” she said. “Only a prince could be sensitive enough to feel a pebble beneath a cushion and through full armor as you have.” And so the general saved the prince’s life, and her own.

That was odd. Fairy tales were definitely not a part of training in the Ghost Program, and Stone had been raised in the Academy on Korhal ever since he could remember. So where had he heard that story, and why did it make him feel such an aching loss?

Stone was far from a prince, but memories were like that pebble—he could feel *something* under all the layers of programming and reprogramming and implanted memories over the years, but he couldn’t tell what it was. The truth was an itchy, nagging feeling at the back of his mind.

Stone tried to sense Nova’s presence with his telepathy. If she was on this ship, then perhaps so was General Davis.

“*Nova!*” He reached out for her mind. But he was still too spent from their fight to rally his strength. In fact, it was all he could do to keep his eyes open right now.

Then a voice snapped him back to alertness.

“Welcome back, Agent Stone.”

It was a deep voice, warm but cautious. Stone flitted his eyes around, straining to focus long enough to catch sight of its source. Then someone stepped into view on Stone’s right: a black man, bald, with broad shoulders and cybernetic arms. He studied Stone like he was a lab specimen.

“Who are you? Where am I?”

“I’m a friend,” the man said.

“I don’t know you.”

“I’m Reigel. I work with Nova. So I suppose I’m more of a friend of a friend. But she asked me to take good care of you.”

Though Reigel’s expression was somewhat guarded and clinical, his eyes seemed kind. His voice was soothing, cadenced to put Stone at ease.

Stone pulled at his restraints. “You consider this taking good care of me?” he asked.

“It’s a precaution, for your own good.” Reigel tilted his head. “And, of course, for the safety of the crew.”

“So we *are* on a ship,” Stone mused.

Reigel’s expression didn’t change. *Come on, give me something here*, Stone thought.

“Am I a prisoner?” Stone pulled at his restraints again. With a skinsuit, he would have torn through them like tissue paper. They were starting to give, but it was going to take a while.

Reigel walked slowly around the head of Stone’s bed, holding out a medical scanner. Stone followed him with his eyes, silently pulling on his bindings.

“Only in the sense that you have been a prisoner of your own mind,” Reigel said. “Your memory has been altered.”

“That just means it’s a day ending in y.”

“You don’t work for the Defenders. You never did. You, Nova, Delta, and Pierce were working undercover. You helped free her from their facility, but you were recaptured in the escape. And then Carolina Davis used you, likely hoping that you would put Nova off her guard.”

“Delta and Pierce,” Stone murmured. “Are they okay?”

“They’re alive.”

“Usually that’s the best we can hope for,” Stone said.

Another memory wormed its way into his consciousness, of fighting his way out of a Defenders’ facility. *Did that really happen?* he wondered.

Stone shook his head. Did it matter which memories were real? Or who was programming them? Stone was a weapon, and at this point, he had served under so many different masters, he couldn’t keep them straight. It was much simpler when he was just following orders. When he didn’t have to deal with the memories of what he’d done, or the consequences of his actions.

Stone had tried to kill Nova. If she really was his friend, that wasn’t something he was proud of, even if it wasn’t his fault. She, at least, had managed to put him down without killing him or hurting him—much. He hadn’t given her the same consideration.

“Can you wipe me?” Stone asked.

“I can’t. Not yet anyway.”

There it is, Stone thought. If they could clear his mind so easily but refused to, they had to have a reason. They were hiding something. He couldn’t trust anything this man told him.

“Nova asked me to wait. To not do anything until she’s had a chance to talk to you. Besides, you’ve been shot, attacked psionically, and physically beaten. You’ve been through enough for now, don’t you think?”

“Go on, rub it in,” Stone said. The arm restraints were definitely looser now.

“What I’m saying is, you’re weak and sorting through compromised memories. Get some rest. Nova will talk to you after the mission.”

A mission? What could they be doing so soon after storming General Davis's compound?

They're delivering her to the Dominion, Stone thought. They had to be. Which made him even more confident that Reigel was lying. They wanted to keep Stone off guard until they could turn him over to the Dominion too.

Stone sighed. "You're right. I'm . . . tired."

Reigel leaned in, looking closely at Stone's face. Stone was a pretty good liar, because he was good at hiding both his emotions and his thoughts. But it wasn't suspicion on Reigel's face—it was concern. He actually seemed to care about Stone's well-being.

Maybe he was just a good actor too. Reigel clearly had been through a lot in his life—that was true of most of those loyal to the Dominion. And if Reigel was a survivor, then he was smart. Two qualities to be wary of in an enemy.

"I can give you something to help you sleep," Reigel offered.

Stone closed his eyes. "I don't need it." He concentrated on making his breathing slow and regular. Once he heard the sickbay doors open and close, he continued working on the arm restraints.

It might have been an hour or more later of sweaty work, but finally he had stretched them enough to wriggle his left arm free, then his right. He sat up and grabbed the band around his legs, eyes shut and jaw tight as he pulled with all his might. Metal creaked and one end of the restraint snapped.

"Come on!" He pulled, jaw clenched.

And then he was free.

Stone caught his breath. With everyone on the ship occupied with a mission, they would be distracted. Now was the best time to find General Davis and steal a shuttle to escape. Or better yet, commandeer the ship and deliver her crew to the Defenders. Maybe he could still make up for his failure on Vardona.

Stone swung his legs off the bed and hopped to his feet. The room spun and dark spots crept in around his vision. He reached for the edge of the bed.

He missed.

Stone's legs gave out and the floor rushed toward his face. He was out before he slammed into it.

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Stone woke with a start. He was covered in sweat and his heart was racing, adrenaline pumping through his body.

The room he was in was dark, except for the stars racing by outside a wide viewport to his right. He wasn't in a sickbay anymore. He sat up, more slowly this time—he wasn't restrained. His nose throbbed painfully, but it wasn't broken.

"Well, that was embarrassing," he said aloud. "Stone zero, artificial gravity one."

His voice sounded distant, removed from his inner thoughts. He shook off the sleep and unsettling dreams that had felt vivid enough to be memories.

A city, overrun with feral zerg. So many of them, he and Nova would have been killed if the Defenders of Man hadn't saved them at the last moment.

Saved? Or captured?

Nova finishes installing the anti-zerg device their wrangler had given them.

“Didn’t the Dominion brass say that feral zerg attacks weren’t a threat now? I wonder what changed,” Nova says. She stands back and looks down at the seemingly innocuous device. Its yellow core pulses steadily, almost mesmerizing.

“Must be something big. Takes a lot of time and money to make security equipment like this,” Stone says.

When it came to military defense, governments spared no expense. The Ghost Program was perhaps the best example of their willingness to invest in the long game: raising and training people with psi abilities like Stone took a lifetime, not to mention all the technology it took to control them, and the expensive gear that enhanced their skills and protected them. Stone abruptly felt a strange sense of kinship with the machine at their feet.

“If it works like Maxwell said, this tech could be a big help to us out in the field. Why hasn’t anyone told us about it?” Nova asks.

“Could be an oversight . . . could be they’re lying to us. Either way, I don’t like it.”

“I need to know more. Something seems off about all this,” Nova says.

That’s one of the many differences between him and Nova: Stone follows orders, but she never stops asking questions. He might get a little creative in how he executes said orders, if it would save innocent lives, but he’d never gone rogue.

It’s even odds which of those activities will kill you faster in their line of work.

New Andasar, Stone suddenly thought. The city had fallen to a zerg invasion, but Stone hadn’t remembered being there—until now. It seemed so obvious; he hadn’t just been there, he and Nova had caused the zerg attack.

Security equipment advanced enough to neutralize feral zerg . . . It had sounded too good to be true. But Stone never could have imagined that the Defenders of Man had used him to plant psi emitters to bring the zerg to Antiga Prime, unbeknownst to the Dominion. On General Davis's orders.

Stone squeezed his eyes shut. No, the Dominion was messing with his head. They wanted to make him think the Defenders were the enemy. They must have reprogrammed him while he slept, despite Reigel's assurances to the contrary.

Stone climbed out of bed and tested his balance and strength. Physically he felt fine; it was his mind that was on shaky ground. He went immediately to the door. Unsurprisingly, it wouldn't open. He switched on the lights and looked around. The guest quarters were spartan, devoid of furniture aside from the standard single bed and a small desk with a screen and a metal chair. No personality, nothing he could use.

Stone eased himself into the chair and activated the screen. It was restricted to reader mode, so he wouldn't be able to learn anything about the ship he was on, or contact the Defenders of Man for help. But he could find out what had been happening in the news.

Turned out, quite a lot was going on, and it didn't take him long to get caught up. It was all over the headlines.

“General Carolina Davis Identified as Defenders Leader, Arrested”

“Defenders of Man Blamed for Zerg Attacks”

“Tal'darim Attack Vardona, Davis Escapes Custody”

“Davis Dead”

Stone stared at that last headline in shock. He was too late.

He skimmed the article, but it was scant on details. During the Tal'darim Death Fleet's attack on Vardona, Davis had commandeered the *Medusa* and fled to a hidden Defenders of Man base at the Cerros Shipyards. There had been a scuffle between her forces and the Dominion's Gorgons, and General Davis had apparently been killed in the battle. Some of the information was likely to be classified, but Stone smelled a cover-up.

Nova, he thought. He glanced again out the port at the moving starfield. There was no way to tell where they were going, but he was willing to bet a month's wages that Cerros was at their backs. The article had been posted only this morning, and Reigel had mentioned a mission.

He should have been fighting alongside his general. He should have done a better job of protecting her.

Stone pushed the screen away from himself in disgust. How much of this could he believe? Under the Dominion, the news was almost easier to falsify than memories.

He jumped up and started pacing. He needed to get out of here; he needed to take this ship. He eyed the door, considering whether he could bust through it.

If I'm a prisoner here, there'll be someone watching the room. And he'd have a harder time overpowering them after fighting his way through a damn door. So he decided to try another tactic.

He knocked.

A moment later, the door slid open to reveal a white man in a muscle shirt and cargo pants: Agent X20991N, Theodore Pierce. The other ghost smiled, but his eyes were guarded. They darted about, making quick assessments of Stone, just as Stone was doing of him. He was ready for anything, or at least he thought he was.

“Pierce,” Stone said.

“Hey, Stone. Good to see you back on your feet. How are you doing?”

“I’ve been better. But I’m starting to feel more like myself.” *Whatever that means*, Stone added silently. He rallied his psionic power to block his thoughts from Pierce’s telepathy. Fortunately Pierce’s psi ability was weaker than Stone’s, so as long as Stone kept up his defenses, Pierce wouldn’t know what he thought or planned until it was too late.

Pierce looked to be in peak physical condition, but Stone had the advantage with both a higher weight class and a younger age. On a good day, Stone would use his superior endurance to best Pierce, as he usually did in their training fights. Then again, Pierce had a sidearm holstered at his hip, and this was far from a good day.

In Stone’s weakened condition, still recovering from his confrontation with Nova, he was not in fighting shape—especially without a skinsuit. He had to be smarter, then, and use his knowledge of Pierce against him.

“I’m glad you’re all right,” Stone said. “What happened back there?”

Pierce came in, closed the door, and leaned against it. “The same old story. The Defenders used us. General Davis fooled the Dominion—you and Nova—into bringing zerg down onto Antiga Prime. She’d been leading the Defenders the whole time, a traitor among us. When Nova figured it out and Valerian came after her, Davis reprogrammed us—made you, me, and Delta think *we* were loyal Defenders, to try to protect her.”

Stone nodded slowly. “You remember all this yourself, or did they reprogram you with these memories?”

Pierce ran a hand through his short hair and sighed. “Neither. Nova and Reigel explained what happened to me when they brought me on board.”

“And you just . . . believe them?”

“I do. It’s the only thing that makes sense to me, with everything I know. The Dominion rescued us, Stone. In fact, things have changed for us, for all the ghosts. Emperor Valerian revised the terms of the Ghost Program since we went MIA: our memories will no longer be erased or replaced without consent. We have more freedom now.”

Stone was stunned, and slightly appalled at the idea, which undermined the very foundation of the Ghost Program—of everything he had ever known. “The freedom to do what?”

“The freedom to choose.”

Stone crossed his arms. “That’s a hell of a thing to wrap my mind around.”

“The fact that we’re even having this conversation proves their sincerity. We finally have some control over who we serve and what we do.”

“Maybe.” Stone felt Pierce probing at his mind. Rather than block him outright, which would have raised red flags, he concentrated on partitioning his thoughts, hiding them so Pierce would accept what he was saying at face value. “What about Delta? Does she buy all this too?” Stone asked.

“Delta . . .” Pierce lowered his eyes. “No. She couldn’t accept it, not at first. When we came aboard, she had her mind wiped.”

Stone drew in a sharp breath. “So much for the freedom of choice.”

“But she did choose it. There are always going to be some ghosts who won’t be able to handle what’s asked of us—to face the things we’ve already done. They say ignorance is bliss, and giving up some memories can be a blessing, wouldn’t you agree?”

Stone grunted.

“The mind wipes are a tool, just like a gun,” Pierce went on.

“Or a ghost,” Stone said.

“It’s all on the people who are using it, whether they do good or evil. I know it’s a lot to take in. You’re even more stubborn than I am. But I’m here to help you. Whatever you need.”

“Okay.” Stone sucked in a deep breath and let it out gradually. “Okay. Help me then. Help me understand. So we’re on a Dominion ship?”

“It’s called the *Griffin*, and it’s not exactly Dominion, no.”

“Come again?”

“We’re technically . . . unaffiliated at the moment.”

“If the *Griffin* isn’t part of the Dominion fleet, and it isn’t a Defender ship, then who does it serve?”

“Nova Terra.”

Stone’s eyebrows shot up. Pierce smiled, as if he’d been expecting that reaction, and enjoyed it.

What the hell have I missed? I bet there’s a story there. He let Pierce receive those thoughts—some confusion was to be expected right now, and Stone didn’t even have to feign it. “But doesn’t Nova work for Valerian?”

“It’s complicated,” Pierce said. “You have no idea.”

“Complicated. Well, where does that leave us then?”

Stone had spent his whole life in service to someone else. Regimes came and went, but the Ghost Program was forever, changing only slightly with whomever was in power at the time.

Pierce spread his hands wide. “We have an opportunity for a fresh start. Valerian says we can even leave the program if we want to.”

Leave the Ghost Program? That had never been possible before. No one had ever even breathed the idea of something like that. If it was true . . . would he leave? For as long as he can remember, Stone had only ever been a ghost. He was raised by the program. He *was* the program. What would he even do without it?

Stone frowned. Pierce had slipped up. He had gone too far, claiming that the Ghost Program was effectively over. Maybe they were telling Stone only what they thought he wanted to hear, to throw him off. He still couldn't figure out what their angle was here, what they wanted from him.

Was this a test of his allegiance? Now that they'd gotten rid of General Davis, they could be cleaning house; his psi abilities were strong enough that sometimes mind wipes and resocialization weren't complete. It had been a problem before, and it was why his mind was trying to reconcile fragments of conflicting memories now.

The truth was always hidden somewhere, if you peeled away enough layers to look deep enough. At least bits of the truth, perhaps even memories of Stone's brief life before the Ghost Program. The life and family that he could never remember.

That's how it had always been. His memory was full of holes, unaccounted for hours and actions. And the pieces that weren't missing . . . well, he never knew whether they were real or not.

So if Reigel and Pierce were lying to him now, hiding something, then maybe there was a reason for it. Nova hadn't wanted to kill him back at Davis's manor. So if they couldn't reprogram him, or wipe his mind, or kill him—they had to want something from him.

He must have information they want, and they couldn't risk losing it. Finally something made sense.

Everything Stone had seen or heard since he had woken up on this ship was suspect. Which meant maybe General Davis was still alive.

Well, he wasn't going to find out the truth sitting in here, chatting with an old "friend."

He sensed movement in his peripheral vision. Pierce was going for his gun. Stone cursed to himself. *He* had slipped up now, let his thought shield drop enough for the other ghost to pick up on his mounting suspicion and paranoia.

"Stone, you feeling all right?" Pierce's voice had a hard edge.

Here goes, Stone thought.

"I'm just a little . . ." He shook his head. "Dizzy? I think you should get Reigel." Stone turned back to Pierce and pretended to lurch forward. Pierce, with his carefully honed reflexes, rushed forward and caught him. He grabbed Stone under his arms.

Stone pretended to reach for Pierce's gun, counting on Pierce to expect that, to read the intent in his mind—but Stone didn't want the gun, he just wanted to make sure Pierce

couldn't get to it first. As Pierce twisted away and went for the pistol, Stone grabbed his right forearm, turned, and heaved, flipping Pierce over his shoulder.

Pierce landed hard on his back. He was winded but already recovering as Stone snatched up the one piece of furniture that wasn't bolted down: the desk chair. He swung it down at Pierce's head.

Pierce rolled out of the way and the chair missed, breaking apart. The impact vibrated up Stone's arms. He gritted his teeth and held on to what remained of the chair: the backing and rear legs. He hefted the makeshift metal batons. That would do.

In a smooth motion, Pierce rocked back onto his feet and came up with his gun drawn.

"Don't do this," Pierce said.

"We're already doing this."

"Why? I'm not your enemy. We're trying to *help* you." Pierce sent the words into Stone's mind even as he spoke them, as if he could make him believe them.

"That's the part I don't believe." Stone lunged toward Pierce.

Pierce fired his pistol, but Stone spun around backward to his right and the bullet just grazed his chest; he completed the rotation as he came closer to Pierce. He slammed one baton into Pierce's side and brought the other down hard on the man's wrist. Pierce cursed and dropped the gun.

Stone tried to smash the batons on the sides of Pierce's head, but the other ghost dropped beneath them and they clanged together jarringly. Stone swept out a leg and kicked the gun out of Pierce's reach. It skittered under the desk. Pierce grabbed Stone's outstretched foot and yanked, knocking him onto his back. He dropped the batons.

“Enough!” Pierce screamed the thought into Stone’s mind, loud enough to get through his shields. Loud enough to blur his vision for a moment and disorient him. When the spots cleared from Stone’s eyes, Pierce had one of the batons. He held it horizontally with both hands and pushed it against Stone’s neck, crushing his collarbone and holding him down. A knee dug into Stone’s chest painfully.

“What do you want from me?” Stone grunted.

Pierce eased up on him a little. “Just stop fighting. Let us help you.”

Stone tried to laugh, but it came out as a raw cough. “Why is everyone suddenly so interested in helping me? You *must* be after something.”

They were working to get him to trust them, so whatever knowledge was hidden in his mind had to be given freely. But what could be so important? If he was carrying vital information, it was a secret even to him. It was hard to come up with answers when he didn’t even know the right questions.

“I get it. We’ve all been accustomed to being used. It isn’t like that, Stone. It doesn’t have to be.”

Stone fumbled about blindly until his right hand closed around the other fallen baton. He swung it up and hit Pierce in the temple, just hard enough to stun him and break his grip. Stone shoved the man off him and stumbled to his feet, gasping for air.

“Where are you planning to go?” Pierce shouted. He touched the side of his head and glanced at the blood on his fingertips. He wiped his hand clean across his shirt. “You can’t get off this ship.”

Who says I want to get off the ship? Stone thought, not caring if Pierce could hear him or not. If Davis was still alive, still on board, he would rescue her and hijack the

vessel. If not, it might be enough to just take the *Griffin* down—eliminating Nova as an ongoing threat, avenging Davis’s death. That would deal a heavy enough blow to the Dominion and boost the Defenders’ morale.

But then Stone faltered. He didn’t even know who he worked for anymore, or why. If the news was right . . . if Davis was truly dead and the Defenders all but defeated, run to ground, then he was a free agent. And if Pierce was right—he had been a Dominion operative, and he was on an independent ship—then he was also a free agent. What was he fighting for anymore?

Pierce swung his baton at Stone again, and without thinking, Stone blocked it with his own. He danced around Pierce, falling into patterns from kendo practice at the academy.

Survival. That was the only thing worth fighting for right now. And if he could unravel the truth along the way, all the better.

Stone delivered a roundhouse kick, which knocked Pierce to the side, but his opponent hit him twice rapidly with his baton, on the knee and then on his spine, causing Stone to fall—for real this time. He bounced back up, grimacing against the pain, and they resumed. They traded blow after blow. Striking, parrying, thrusting, evenly matched.

Stone may have been a better fighter than Pierce with a higher PI, but he was still recovering from his injuries and wrestling with conflicting memories.

So it was a standoff. They circled each other slowly on opposite ends of the room, waiting for an opening. The basic room offered no cover and no advantage. It was just the two men, trained psionic killers.

Two men . . . and a gun.

Pierce slumped his shoulders. “I screwed this up. I told Nova I could get through to you. I thought I could help you get back to yourself.” He reached for the communicator at his hip.

“Wait—” Stone said.

“Reigel,” Pierce said into his comm. “It’s no good. Nova’s going to have to—”

Stone dove for the pistol under the desk and leveled it at Pierce. His finger tensed against the trigger. Pierce locked eyes with him for a moment.

“**You aren’t going to shoot me,**” Pierce thought.

“**Get out of my mind!**” Stone conjured an image of the bullet punching through Pierce’s skull as he fired a shot just over his head. Pierce ducked and scrambled out of the way—while Stone raced for the door.

Pierce had left it unlocked while he was inside. *Not something you do when you’re talking with a dangerous prisoner,* Stone considered. But he didn’t have time to think things through right now. Heavy boots were running toward him, approaching on the right. He slapped his hand against the access plate. The door closed, and he caught a glimpse of Pierce dashing toward it. Stone shot the panel to freeze the lock and slipped away in the opposite direction of the patrolling security forces, the muffled sound of Pierce banging against the door following him.

#

In a closed room without weapons or a skinsuit, there wasn’t much Stone could do. But set him loose on a starship, with all its blind corners, dark passageways, recessed doorways, access panels and conduits, and he was much more in his element. A ghost could move around undetected and unimpeded indefinitely, even without cloaking tech.

Despite the fact that the entire crew was on the alert that Stone was free and armed, he had no trouble getting by them unnoticed and, when necessary, neutralizing them. It quickly became clear that most of the personnel aboard had never seen combat, or at least had never needed to use their combat training in a serious way. For his efforts, Stone had already picked up a second firearm, a crew uniform, and a comm unit. Though he could use it to overhear onboard communications, he'd be sacrificing stealth, and perhaps opening himself up to being tracked.

Stone stalked a young, nervous engineer hurrying through a corridor. Stone matched his footfalls, but his longer stride closed the distance between them quickly. He was almost on top of the hapless crewmember when the engineer startled and turned. He caught sight of Stone and opened his mouth . . . until Stone grabbed his left shoulder and covered his mouth with his right hand, pushing him against the wall. The engineer let out a muffled gasp and winced.

“Sorry, did that hurt?” Stone said. “Tell me what I want to know, or you’ll feel much worse.”

The man’s eyes widened. He nodded.

“Okay.” Stone pulled him into a room, which turned out to be an empty hydroponics lab. He let the man go and crossed his arms. He didn’t even have to draw his pistol; the man knew when he was outmatched.

“Now talk. What ship is this?” Stone asked.

“The *Griffin*.” The engineer coughed, rubbing his throat.

“Who is its commander?”

“Nova Terra.”

Stone raised an eyebrow. Pierce's story was checking out, and since the engineer wasn't a teep, his mind was an open book. He was telling the truth.

But it didn't make any sense. Why would Valerian give Nova her own ship, and let it operate outside of Dominion control? She had served the Dominion well, she was the best ghost the program had ever had, besides Sarah Kerrigan.

Valerian wouldn't let go of an important asset so easily, but he might be calculating that it was in his best interests to grant her some freedom while indebting her to him and his cause. More likely than not, she was still being used by him, whether she wanted to admit it or not.

"And where's Nova now?" Stone asked.

"I don't know. Probably the bridge? Or her quarters?"

"What about General Davis?"

The man looked at Stone incredulously.

"*Carolina Davis*?" Stone prompted. "Where are they holding her?"

"Davis is dead. It's all over the news."

Again, no deception behind his words, though he could simply believe he was telling the truth.

Stone checked himself. He didn't feel any strong emotions about Davis, except for a mild, underlying resentment. Wouldn't that be different if he'd truly been loyal to her and her cause? He was used to controlling his emotions, not letting them get the better of him, but he still felt *something*. But right now? Not a thing.

Suddenly Stone *did* feel something, but it was external: another psionic presence. He blocked them from reading his thoughts, but as they pushed against his mind, he recognized who it was: Delta.

Her PI was a 7, just like Stone's, but she was a little more powerful; she was one of the few ghosts with telekinetic abilities. If she kept pushing, she would break through Stone's shield eventually. But instead, she withdrew.

Then he realized his mistake.

The engineer had a low psi index, so he couldn't block a telepath from reading his thoughts, and right now, he was thinking about Stone—and likely broadcasting their location without even knowing it.

“Damn.” Stone resisted the urge to shoot the engineer to cut off the psychic link, and settled for knocking him out. He felt a twinge of sympathy for the guy, but again, he couldn't process all that right now.

Stone switched on his stolen comm and heard Reigel's voice. “—located. Prepare for emergency shutdown of life support on Deck 3 and decompression in three minutes.”

Stone dropped the engineer and looked around. So they were on Deck 3. And they were clearly trying to flush him out. He needed to find a spacesuit or get to another deck. This guy could have told him where to go, if Stone hadn't knocked him out. And if Stone left him here, he would run out of oxygen.

Stone sighed as he looked down at the unconscious engineer. He bent down and hefted him onto his shoulders.

The lights in the corridor were flashing red now, and the computer's soft voice was counting down: “*Two minutes until decompression.*”

With the engineer on his shoulders, Stone worried that he was drawing even more attention to himself than before. He tried to stick to the shadows, but fortunately the crew was too busy clearing out to notice him. Stone hurried down the corridor in the opposite direction they were moving until he found a hatch in the deck, which someone had already secured. A ladder—leading down.

“One minute until decompression.”

If he wanted to confront Nova, he would have to move higher, to the bridge on the main deck—but that’s where the rest of the crew was headed. He figured the shuttle bay had to be below, and probably his best option for escape.

“Another day, Nova,” Stone muttered.

He dropped the crewman and began twisting the handle to unlock the hatch. Once it was open, he grabbed the unconscious engineer again and clambered with him down the narrow steps, readying himself for a fight at the bottom. But the Deck 4 passageway was empty, flashing with the same red lights as the level above.

“Thirty seconds . . . twenty-nine . . . twenty-eight . . .”

Stone lowered the engineer to the deck, more gently this time, then hurried back up the ladder. He heaved the hatch closed and tightened the lock.

Reigel’s voice blared from the comm. “Prepare to shut down life support and decompress decks 2 and 4.”

“Hell!” Stone shouted. They were not messing around. They had boxed him in on the lowest level of the ship, and now there was no way he could climb three levels up to safety, especially not with Crewman Deadweight here. Maybe there was a room he could seal off on this level, even if it meant waiting for them to come for him.

“Three minutes until decompression.”

He checked the sign beside the ladder and felt a surge of hope. He wasn't out of this yet, and he was pretty sure they were going to regret sending him down here.

The shuttle bay was indeed at the aft end of the deck—but the armory was forward, and closer to his location.

Stone lifted the engineer again—he somehow felt heavier than before—and followed the arrows forward to the armory. At least the man proved worth his weight in gold, because his handprint opened the door.

Stone had been in dozens of armories on dozens of ships before, and possibly dozens more that he couldn't even remember. He knew right where the skinsuits were usually kept and was surprised to see his own equipment there—all repaired. His brain started picking at that—*why repair all his equipment here, if they were going to return him to the Dominion anyway?*

“Two minutes until decompression.”

The computer jolted him from his wondering; he didn't have time to question this right now.

He quickly donned the suit and fitted the helmet in place. He grinned. *Now* he felt like himself. He'd been unsettled ever since he'd first woken aboard the ship, and he knew now it wasn't entirely due to the jumbled memories and the difficulty in deciding what to believe. They called it a skinsuit for a reason: not only did it fit as closely as a second skin, it felt like an extension of himself. It allowed him to focus his psionic energy and enhance his physical strength, but more than that, being in a skinsuit was the closest thing a ghost had to the comforts of home.

Psionic terrans were feared, hunted, and discriminated against. For all its many flaws and questionable ethics, the Ghost Program gave them a home. A purpose. It accepted who they were and what they could do. It turned a maligned, difficult to control set of abilities into valuable talents that gave him a tactical advantage. Without the program, Stone would have lived his life in hiding. Within the program, hiding wasn't a necessity but a skill.

And he wasn't just surviving. Under the right command, he was making a difference for others. His life mattered.

And now, he felt himself come into the full force of his abilities, channeling his psionic energy to increase his strength and bolster his own defenses. He felt like he could take on anything now. He'd certainly be able to withstand decompression, and he'd be able to breathe for a short while without the ship's oxygen.

"Sixty seconds until decompression."

Stone next grabbed a standard spacesuit and stuffed the engineer into it. He was already moving more quickly and confidently than a moment ago. He affixed the helmet over the man's head and sealed the suit just as the countdown reached zero.

"Three . . . two . . . one." Stone braced himself for the rush of air being pumped out into space.

Nothing happened.

Stone pulled off the engineer's glove and pressed the man's hand against the armory console, unlocking access to the computer. All decks showed green, operating as usual.

Either they had called off the operation, perhaps to secure more personnel, or it had been a bluff. But why?

They had wanted Stone to move around, expose himself. But he'd ended up here, and now he had his skinsuit.

He thought of the old joke: What's a ghost without a skinsuit?

Dead.

A fully armed and armored ghost was much harder to deal with, so if you were trying to capture them, you would want to keep them as far away from a skinsuit as possible.

Stone left the sleeping engineer in his spacesuit in the armory, just in case, and engaged his cloaking device. He slipped into the passageway outside, intending to head toward the shuttle bay on the opposite end of the deck. He immediately knew something was off, but his scanners showed nothing and his mental probes—

There was another psionic presence, but his mind kept sliding away from it, unable to pinpoint or identify it. Until a ghost uncloaked on his right.

Agent X10128B. Delta Emblock.

“Hey, Delta.” Stone dropped his cloak and turned to face her. Her weapons weren't drawn. Her hands were up, showing she meant no harm—an odd paradox considering she herself was the weapon in a skinsuit of her own.

“Stone. You've been busy. How are you feeling?” His shield couldn't withstand the constant prying from her telepathy, so he didn't waste the energy.

“Better now.” He flexed an arm. “What are you up to? Why lead me back to my skinsuit?”

“So we could have a talk.”

“I don't follow,” Stone said. “And I'm not interested in anything you have to say. Pierce told me you chose to be wiped—I can't exactly trust your judgment right now.”

“You can’t trust your own either. I was where you are, Stone. We’ve gone through the same thing, and this is how I can go on.”

“Why are you here? What do you want?”

“I asked her to come.”

Stone whirled around at Nova’s voice. He couldn’t see her, but she must be near. She was speaking directly into his mind.

“Nova! Where are you?”

“We only want to help you, Stone. You have a choice, just like Pierce and Delta did. Just like I had. Davis mind wiped all of us. Don’t throw this chance away. I know you’re scared—”

“I’m not *scared*,” Stone said.

“I was,” Nova said. She decloaked right in front of him. Now he was pinned between her and Delta.

Nova shrugged. “I still am most days, to be honest. But I keep going. I made a plan, and I take it one step at a time.”

The door to the armory opened and Pierce walked out, in his own skinsuit.

“Cute trick back there, Stone,” Pierce said. “I owe you one.”

Pierce must have teleported into the armory. Now Stone was severely outnumbered and almost surrounded. He could see only one way out of this.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Nova said. “You think there’s only one way out, but there are so many more possibilities for you now.”

“I hate it when you read my mind,” Stone said.

“I know.” Nova smiled. “And I know you, Stone. In fact, right now, I probably know you better than you know yourself.”

“Why all this?” Stone turned around and looked at Delta, Pierce, and then back at Nova in turn.

“You needed time to sort out your memories, and we knew you couldn’t do that in sickbay, or locked up in a room. You would never believe in anything unless you figured it out for yourself.” Nova put a hand on her hip. “As always, you prefer doing things the hard way, and I respect that. But that tendency can also be self-destructive. Trust me.”

“Trust you . . .” Stone shook his head. “So this was a test? To see what I would do?”

“I already knew what you would do, but you still needed to go through the motions. Stone, as ghosts, we don’t usually get a say in our missions, but you’ve always found a way to protect people whenever you can. And even now, when you were all but certain you were a prisoner, you didn’t kill Pierce—”

“Barely even hurt me, really.” Pierce sniffed.

“Uh huh,” Nova said. “And you kept Oslo safe even though he slowed you down.”

“Who the hell is Oslo?”

The engineer came to the door of the armory, holding one hand to the side of his head, but smiling sheepishly. “That’s me. I’m Oslo. I’m definitely hurt, but I’m not dead, so thank you for that much.”

“No problem . . .,” Stone said uncertainly.

“Can I see a doctor now?” Oslo said. “I’m pretty sure I have a concussion.”

Stone winced.

“Pierce, take him to sickbay,” Nova said.

Pierce nodded and escorted the shaky engineer down the corridor.

“Then why the suit?” Stone said.

“To prove that you have a choice. If it’s going to be a fight, it’s going to be a fair fight,” Nova said. “You deserve that much.”

“Two on one is fair?” Stone asked.

Delta grinned. “I’m just here to watch Nova kick your ass.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence,” Stone said. But she wasn’t wrong.

“I did beat you before when you were at your best,” Nova said.

“And you didn’t kill me when you had the chance.”

“You weren’t in control of your actions.”

“Think about everything you know about the Defenders of Man and the Dominion,” Delta said. “Regardless of what you *think* you remember, which side do you want to be on? The side that uses ghosts for political gain, that puts innocent lives in danger to sway public opinion? Or the side that’s trying to protect terrans from the zerg, that’s giving everyone—including ghosts—freedom over their own destiny?”

“You can’t possibly think I’m stupid enough to believe that the Dominion suddenly cares about ghosts,” Stone said.

“Maybe they don’t, but I do,” Nova said. “And I wouldn’t lead you wrong.”

“The *Defenders* are trying to protect all of us from aliens. No one has done more to fight the zerg and the Tal’darim,” Stone said. But the words sounded hollow as soon as he heard them.

“They used feral zerg to try to discredit Valerian!” Nova shouted. “They destroyed Antiga Prime, Tyrador IX . . . They endangered others just so they could pretend to be

their saviors, and murdered countless civilians in the process. When we discovered what the Defenders of Man were really up to, you and I tried to stop them. Because that's what *you* do, Stone: try to help people whenever you can."

Stone tilted his head. At a certain point, he had to fall back on the likely truth: that the simplest answer must be the right one. If he accepted that all of this wasn't some complex conspiracy to trick him into defecting from the Defenders of Man, that Nova was being sincere, then he had to believe what she was telling him. He had to ignore his memories, which he already couldn't trust, and rely on his instincts: what he saw and heard right now, with the information he had.

So considering all that, he had to accept: he was a Dominion operative, and General Carolina Davis had gotten what she deserved.

"We are who we choose to be," Nova said. "You told me that. That didn't come from the programming—it came from *you*. If you can't believe anything else, at least believe in yourself."

Maybe the truth didn't matter anymore. Not if he could get away and make a new reality for himself.

"Okay." Stone held up his hands. "I'm listening. So what happens now? You turning me in to the Dominion? Are you taking me back to Korhal?"

"I don't work for the Dominion. None of us do. Not anymore. I don't want to bring you back, Stone, unless that's where you want to be. What do *you* want?"

"No one has ever asked me that before," Stone said. "As far as I can recall."

"Well, it's time we changed that."

#

Stone woke up. He was back in sickbay. But this time he knew exactly why he was there. He had chosen to be there.

He sat up in bed and immediately noticed something different. His psionic power was unfettered. He was free.

“It’s really done,” Stone whispered.

“The procedure was a complete success,” Reigel said.

Stone turned and saw Reigel and Nova approaching his bedside.

“You okay, Stone?” Nova asked.

“I’ve never felt like this before.” He sensed her presence clearly. He knew exactly where Delta and Pierce were on the ship. He could feel all the other terrans on board with their various psi levels. He had an awareness of his environment and himself that even the sensors in the skinsuit couldn’t compare to.

“Part of me thought I might wake up reprogrammed after all, or in a Dominion prison cell. But you were telling the truth,” Stone said.

Reigel held up a mess of circuitry and wires. “Do you want this as a souvenir?” he asked.

Stone shook his head—and immediately regretted it.

“Wonderful! Another one for my collection then. It’s not often you come across ghost hardware from the old days. A fascinating antique.” Reigel slipped the device into a pocket in his lab coat, smiling to himself. Nova looked at him with a disturbed expression.

She drew closer to Stone and lowered her voice. “You sure about this, Stone?”

“A bit late for that, don’t you think? But if I can really leave the Ghost Program, I think it’s the best thing for me.” Delta had said he could choose the Dominion or the Defenders of Man, but if he was truly free, he chose neither. It would be hard for him to find a new way to live, but like Nova and the crew of the *Griffin*, this was a path he needed to walk on his own.

“Just don’t forget to check in with the Dominion first,” Reigel said.

Nova rolled her eyes.

“To give your formal notice,” Reigel went on. “With the inhibitor gone, all your memories should be restored to you eventually.”

Stone was dreading that more than a little. He worried about the faces of those he’d killed, the revelations that would likely come to him with time. But it was still better to choose a new life for himself than to stay a prisoner living in a series of dreams he’d never wake up from.

And he wanted to wake up.

“You’ll always have a place here,” Nova said softly. “We could use your help out there. Someone has to hold the universe together and keep the peace.”

“Being a ghost is all I’ve ever known. I need to be me for a while. Although . . . I guess I need to know who *me* really is. Get to know . . . myself.”

Nova nodded. “I understand. What will you do now?”

Stone leaned back and smiled.

“Once you drop me off, I’ll do what a ghost does best: disappear.”

THE END

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