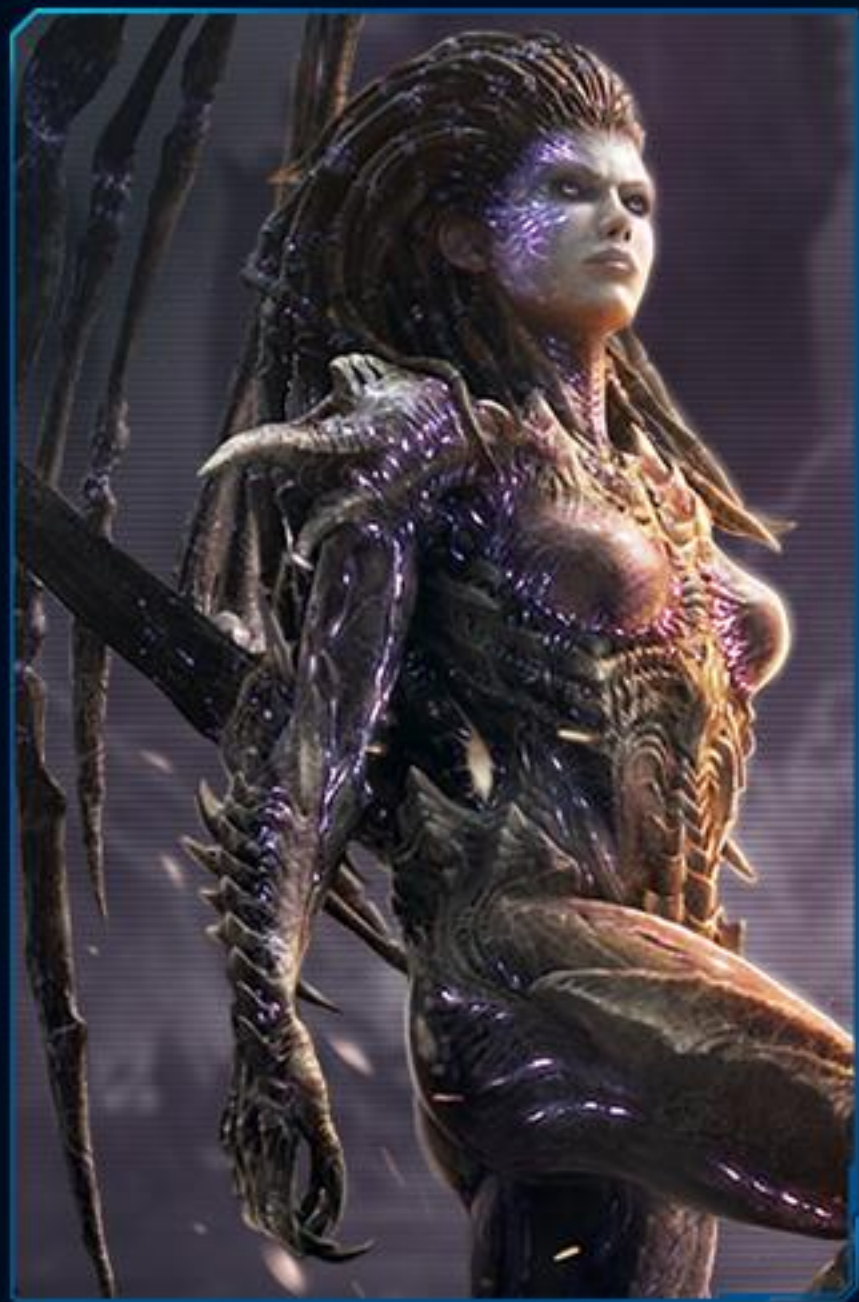


STAR CRAFT III



BLIZZARD
ENTERTAINMENT

Operation Blind Devil

Cassandra Clarke

CommID 309132

Dominion Center for State Security

FOR IMMEDIATE DISSEMINATION

Ongoing Zerg hostility at Angdra, southern hemisphere. Attacking Zerg swarm at Angdra estimated as of 17:00 at 200,000 total. Kaukovaara and Port Neville locked down, per General Dudka's orders. New Helsinki, Keilerton, and the vast majority of the Anrako continent prepared for lockdown as well.

Current estimated Terran deaths 15,000 as of 17:00.

—End transmission—

###

CLASSIFIED

CommID 309209

Dominion Center for State Security

Secure video transmission from Takashi Kurkku to Carl Periwag

Finally got some good news out of the mess at Angdra. One of my boys secured a subject for

Operation Blind Devil. You owe me a couple of drinks.

Who you thinking to head up the lab? You know my vote's for Phillipa.

Respond on this channel ASAP. Kurkku out.

—End transmission—

###

CLASSIFIED

CommID 309213

Dominion Center for State Security

Secure video transmission from Carl Periwag to Takashi Kurkku

PERIWAG: Takashi? Sorry I missed your comm. Wasn't expecting you so soon.

KURKKU: (Laughter) Ye of little faith.

PERIWAG: Are you still surface side?

KURKKU: Hell, no. We got what we came for. You want to see it?

PERIWAG: See? Where are you keeping that thing? In your quarters?

KURKKU: No, that's more Cullen's speed.

(Laughter)

KURKKU: But seriously, I'm headed your way now. Cargo's fully secure. Have you made the final lab team selections?

PERIWAG: Working on it.

KURKKU: What's there to work on? Broadhurst will be perfect. She's already set up for this kind of work.

PERIWAG: Dr. Broadhurst can be a bit—

KURKKU: You ever been to her facilities?

PERIWAG: No.

KURKKU: (Laughter) Yeah, it's way the hell out there. But look. I have. This won't be her first rodeo, you know what I'm saying? Her lab techs are trained. *She's* trained.

PERIWAG: She can be erratic. I was thinking someone like Dr. Finch might be better—

KURKKU: Finch doesn't have the experience we need. You know the director agrees with me.

KURKKU: Carl? You still there?

PERIWAG: The director hasn't worked with her. I did, back on [REDACTED].

KURKKU: So you know exactly what I'm talking about.

PERIWAG: I see where you're coming from, yes. But if you're familiar with [REDACTED], then you should see where I'm coming from too.

KURKKU: Look, Carl. It's war. Kurkku out.

—End transmission—

###

CLASSIFIED

CommID 309232

Dominion Center for State Security

To: Dr. Phillipa Broadhurst

From: [REDACTED]

NOTICE OF ASSIGNMENT

PHILLIPA BROADHURST, report immediately to station #980 to receive orders and directives for your role in OPERATION BLIND DEVIL, code 2908DX9. Upon successful completion of OPERATION BLIND DEVIL, all black marks will be expunged from your DCSS

record. IMMEDIATE RESPONSE REQUESTED.

#

He moves cautiously, claws clicking against the shiny floor. It's cold on his feet, smooth.

Strange. It does not feel alive. It's not spongy or warm, like the tissue of the leviathan in which he lives.

He walks in a circle, listening to the *click click click*. If he goes fast enough, the clicks seem to multiply as if he's out where he's supposed to be, following the Queen of Blades across the nerve center of her leviathan. Did his footsteps sound like hers would? He knows she isn't dead. He can feel her where she's supposed to be: a constant whisper in the back of his thoughts, a running reassurance that he is not alone, even when he is alone.

Other zerglings slide across the walls of this strange round room, following him around and around.

He walks, *click, click, click*. But aside from his footsteps, there is just emptiness. A strange and hollow thing.

The other zerglings are still behind him and he's angry that he has been trapped here with them so he whirls around and snarls and charges. But he doesn't hit a zergling! He hits a wall that, like the floor, is smooth and shiny. He shakes his head. Growls again. The wall zergling does the same, and he thinks he must have injured it somehow; one of its horns is missing its sharp point.

He scrapes his claws on the floor. The wall zergling does too.

He crouches. So does the wall zergling.

He moves closer to the wall. He feels something snap inside his head. It's like when the Queen of Blades issues a command, and he feels himself turning on, knowing what to do, where

to go. *Understanding*.

He *understands* something.

That zergling on the wall? It's him.

He's never seen himself before. He's pleased that he looks so much like the rest of his brood: a part of a whole, even though there is no whole in this place. He is alone.

He flaps his wings and watches them move across the wall. He wonders if this is how the Queen of Blades feels, when she calls her zerg to her and then sends them out. If she moves as they move. Separate, but still together.

Broken Horn, he thinks, looking at himself on the wall. It was what she called him.

He resumes his pacing, *click, click, click*. He doesn't like this, being alone. He can still feel the memory of the Queen of Blades' last command. But if she were to call him into action now, what would happen? He couldn't fight for her. He is trapped in this strange hollow place.

He hears something: a soft, distant *whump*. He braces himself to attack, but the room is flooded suddenly with white light, and that is all he can see: a burning, searing whiteness. Pain lances up through his legs and he crashes forward, hitting the cold, slick ground headfirst and then flopping uselessly to his side. He tries to kick out his legs, tries to right himself, but it only ignites the flame. He screams and howls as the dazzling light fades away.

Then: the soft meaty stench of prey. A hot urge roils up in him: attack! But he can only lie motionless, his body a burning weight.

Two figures step into the room. He can smell the hot blood inside their bodies, and he hisses and snarls. But they don't recoil from him, even though they don't wear the metal carapaces he's used to seeing on their kind. They have wrapped themselves only in shiny wingstuff, coiling it around their torsos and limbs and faces, not even using it to fly.

They make noises at each other. The zergling growls deep inside his throat, but even that is starting to hurt. Two more prey come into the room, from a rectangle filled with more light.

These ones have a metal slab between them, and they pull it up beside him.

Panic seizes him. He kicks and claws, but nothing happens. He can't move.

And then they're touching him with those strange, clawless paws. He realizes with an angry jolt that there are even more than he thought, all ringed around him, chattering and barking.

He lets out a long, low kean as they lift him from the floor and drop him on the slab.

Then he is rolled toward the shining rectangle. He cries out for the Queen of Blades, but he knows she is very far away, more distant than a star.

Light washes over him. It is as bright and sharp and clean as the light that struck him down and it makes his heavy, useless legs tingle. He flicks his gaze around, trying to take in his surroundings even though he can't move his head. There's nothing but light and clinking.

He's jostled to a stop beside a forest of metal rods and coiling wires.

There's a loud screech, and the slab rises up in jerky fits and starts. Horrible damp paws crawl over him, pulling on his mandibles and wings. They shine purple lights on him and make more noises and they don't care when he tries to snarl and snap at them.

There is no stink of fear.

The paws go away. The purple lights blink. Is that it? Is it over? Will he be able to attack and destroy, to bite and—

Pain erupts in the side of his head, pain that blinds like the cruel, cold lights. He tries to roar but finds he cannot; his mouth, his jaw have gone stiff. The pain bores deeper into his head, until it is at the center of him, a supernova of agony.

Prey noises.

A mechanical whirring.

Because of the shiny walls in the room he knows what he looks like, and he can imagine himself leaping to his feet and lashing out with sickle limbs and claws and teeth, splattering the white walls with hot, thick blood.

But he can't move.

The pain in the center of his head radiates outward, sliding down his spine. Every part of him burns and he cannot stop it. He can't even flinch away.

Then, the whirring stops. The pain throbs in fast shuddering beats.

Somewhere, the clank of metal against metal, a voice, high in pitch and lilting a little in a way that reminds him, suddenly and horribly, of the Queen of Blades, makes a questioning sound. Purple lights shine over him. They shine into his eyes and the pain surges up in a wave.

More prey noises. The one like the Queen of Blades, she sounds pleased.

And then he's moving again, rolling back through the white light and into the shiny room. He braces himself for more touches but instead, the slab tilts upward and throws him to the floor. The pain of landing is extraordinary.

Everything goes dark, then white again. Then gray. A cold, ceaseless gray.

The room is empty, save for him. The prey are gone. The white rectangle is gone. Broken Horn still can't move.

He stares across the space, at the Broken Horn on the wall, who lies slumped, a beaten, worthless thing. Blood seeps out of a gaping hole in his head and drips on the floor.

He closes his eyes. He can still do that much, at least. And he stretches out his thoughts—

Something's wrong.

The panic comes roaring back but all he can do is growl softly. The wall-Broken-Horn stares

back at him with wide, manic eyes and bared teeth.

She's gone. The Queen of Blades.

Gone.

Broken Horn drifts on a black tide, seething and hot and empty. No Queen whispers commands in his head. He is without direction, without purpose.

He's alone, trapped in a terrible emptiness, lost in the unordered chaos of the universe.

#

She finds Warfield sprawled out in the rubble, a metal beam jutting out of the old man's chest. She sends the zergling to him first, the one with the shattered horn who always stays at her side. But she draws him back in the seconds before he would rip the old man to shreds.

"Kerrigan," he says, his voice rough with disgust.

Kerrigan listens. Let him say what he wants to say. He's dying; the beam has pierced his armor and plunged into the worthless body underneath.

Her zerg will overtake this planet in minutes.

She listens to his pleading, his feeble protestation. Injured men and inhumanity. None of this matters to her. He is too weak to understand her.

She can feel the zergling on the edge of her thoughts. One pulse of command and he would tear the armor from the old man's body and pull out the old man's insides in thick, bloody ropes.

But she doesn't. She lets him speak. Her anger is not with him.

And then the old man says a word. A name.

"What if Raynor could see you right now?" he snarls, and the rage erupts inside her, a heat that fills her limbs. The beam slams deeper into the old man's chest, and he gurgles, and slumps, and dies.

Kerrigan looks down at the zergling, who stands motionless beside her, its eyes fixed on the old man's corpse. She brushes her hand across the top of its head. Already she is pulling her zerg back. Let the injured terrans escape. The old man is right: they are no threat to her.

She whirls away, stomps through the rubble, the zergling marching, steadfast, behind her.

#

It's hard for him to walk. He tries to pace around the room but it spins sideways from him, and when he lifts one foot, his claws sink into the flesh of his other leg, sending him stumbling. He cannot tell one direction from the other: Is he coming; is he going?

When those creatures took away the Queen of Blades, it was as if they took away part of his body, and now he is imbalanced. Lopsided.

But still he forces himself to walk, despite the dizzying spin of the room. He hates the horrific emptiness inside his head and knows the only way to bring back the reassuring weight of the Queen is to leave this place, to find her.

He's shuffling across the slick floor when the light comes again, a neon agony that slices straight through him. He is barely able to scream his rage when he collapses, unmoving, to the floor, his throat locking up until all he can do is mewl and whimper like some dying thing.

As before, when the light fades, the weak creatures come to collect him. They roll him into that same bright room, with its empty scent, and he's trapped on their platform, his body betraying him.

There are fewer of them this time, although they are all identical to the ones before, still wrapped in that shimmering wingstuff. They don't make as many noises, either, but they move with a rhythm that sends bolts of odd discomfort through his chest: he moved like that once, with his fellow zerg. He knew the dance of the swarm.

He watches them glide back and forth. He cannot move his head, so he sees them only when they pass in front of his vision. When they are elsewhere, he can see the far wall, a blank white marred by a single silver box with an unblinking red light.

Behind him is a whirring sound. The chime of metal. A strange scent wafts through the air, alien and unpleasant, like the scent of their metal leviathan. Grating prey noises.

He stares at the light and it gets bigger and bigger until the whole world goes red.

Then, abruptly, it changes to a bright, painful green. Something hisses, then clangs, and then the room is silent save for an eruption of chittering.

The light goes red again.

A creature walks into his field of vision.

It is dressed like the others but moves differently: its shoulders thrown back, its head lifted.

It nods, and the swarm-dance begins again, bodies crowding around him.

That whirring sound returns.

And then—pain. A vivid, extraordinary pain, a pain that swallows his entire body whole. He tries to roar but cannot.

The prey make their noises but they seem far away, muffled by the agony tearing his body apart.

Purple liquid splatters across the wall.

A creature moves into his line of vision. At first all he sees is its torso, the strange soft exoskeleton they all wear. But then it crouches down.

Broken Horn recognizes it by the sharp quality of its eyes. This is the leader, the one commanding the swarm. It was this voice he heard that reminded him so much of the Queen of Blades.

There is so little space between them; it would be easy to lash forward and crush its head in his jaws. But he can't move. He can't even bare his teeth.

The leader pulls its mask away, revealing her face. She curves her mouth in that odd, distant way the Queen of Blades does sometimes and studies him, eyes flicking back and forth.

She says something. Puts her paw on his side, the touch sparking a new round of pain. He keens in the back of his throat, a tiny, futile noise, his thick tongue the only part of his body he can move.

She lifts her gaze, rattles off more sounds. Immediately, the pain swells again, the whirring grows louder. She stays crouched down, watching him with her head tilted as the pain reverberates through his body in waves. Watching all of them: the other creatures too. An UnQueen.

Kill her, he thinks in a voice that commands like the Queen of Blades but is not the Queen of Blades. *Kill her and you will kill all the rest of them.*

And then the pain flares, too blinding for him to bear.

#

Kerrigan steps into the damp, curling steam of the evolution chamber. Moisture beads on the skin of her face, and she can smell the sweet rot of transformation.

Abathur lifts his bulbous head toward her. He stands a few meters away, beside an evolution pit, pulsing and rippling with new life.

“Is ready.” He gestures toward the pit with one claw. “A test. Will inform work on Zagara.”

Kerrigan nods. It will be useful for a brood mother to understand the nature of strategy, as Kerrigan does. It was a tall order, what she requested of Abathur, and she is pleased that he has moved forward so quickly in their agreement. A lower being first. A zergling, perhaps. To ensure

the methods work as they should.

The surface of the pit grows more turbulent, fluid spilling over at the edges.

“Soon,” Abathur says. “Watch. Wait.”

Abathur drops his hand toward the pit. A shadow moves beneath the surface, a talon nearly clawing its way out of the goo.

“You should have called me after it emerged,” Kerrigan says, but she doesn’t move from her place beside the pit. There is something beautiful in the way it strains its way to the top, awakening to a greater purpose than a zergling would normally know.

The transformation Abathur ordered *is* close to completion.

Kerrigan crosses her arms over her chest. The surface is nearly broken—

Suddenly a grunt as Abathur sinks his graspers into the pit. A sudden second of violence as he hauls the zergling out with a spattering of viscous transmogrification liquid, landing a few fingers’ width from Kerrigan’s feet. The mess slaps across the floor in vivid green streaks.

At the center of it all, a single, familiar creature.

It rises, unfurls itself, a knot of claws and teeth and gossamer wings, and sniffs the air, beady yellow eyes gleaming. Even after evolution, one of its horns is broken.

“You chose that one.” She frowns.

“Yes. Good choice. Identifiable.”

The zergling shakes itself, throwing off webs of transmogrification liquid. It lumbers forward, dark scales flashing the occasional smear of phosphorescent light.

“How will we know it’s worked?” Kerrigan asks.

The zergling looks up at her. Its eyes are brighter than they were before. Not with light, necessarily. With something else.

“Must watch. Monitor.” Abathur stares at the zergling, his long fingers tapping against each other. “If changes acceptable, will do same to Zagara.”

The zergling shuffles in a lazy circle, taking in its surroundings. It stops when it sees Kerrigan and gazes up at her.

“Let’s see what you are now,” she whispers.

#

CLASSIFIED

CommID 312099

Dominion Center for State Security

Secure recorded transmission from Phillipa Broadhurst to [REDACTED]

This is Dr. Phillipa Broadhurst, recording from my office on [REDACTED], per operation protocol.

I am pleased to report that Phase I of Operation Blind Devil has been completed successfully. My team and I were able to replicate our work from [REDACTED] with no complications, and, indeed, the process felt quite smooth compared to our prior experience.

Using the burn-surgery techniques pioneered by Dr. Arthur Barclay, we extricated the subject from the overall zerg swarm. Subject showed signs of disorientation and loss of motor functions but was otherwise still suitable to continue forward with the mission.

But of course, nature abhors a vacuum—or in this case, the laboratory does. (*Laughter.*) Forgive me, [REDACTED], it’s been a long day.

With the subject fully severed from the swarm, we proceeded to the next step of removing the subject’s central nervous system and replacing it with a prototype of the control-spine device. The implantation has proven successful, although further monitoring of the subject will of course

be required. As soon as we are assured that the subject's body has not rejected the control-spine device, we will move on to Phase II: programming the spine. I look forward to bringing you another positive report as to our findings during that phase.

This concludes my simplified laboratory report for [REDACTED], recorded per secure methods and sent immediately via secure channel 0982D, 20983E, or 39082N.

Broadhurst out.

#

Kerrigan is leaving the nerve center of her leviathan after sending out orders to her brood mothers, when the zergling scrambles out of a pocket chamber in the corridor and stops in front of her.

“You.” The sight of the zergling unsettles her. Earlier, she told it to return to the zerglings' chamber on the other side of the leviathan, as she often did in this space. The twisting network of microchambers and narrow corridors holds nothing for a zergling.

“I gave you an order.” She kneels down, aware of the blood pumping through her body. “Are you—?”

The zergling grunts and flaps its wings.

A fluke. A mistake, surely. “Go join the others,” she tells it again, moving toward her personal chamber.

It follows her.

Kerrigan stops, and the zergling stops too. She takes a deep breath, a moment of anger welling up in a hot pulse. Abathur was tasked with creating a zergling who could understand vision, not one who could defy her.

“Go join the others,” she says, for the last time, pushing out her will with more strength than

should be required for any zergling. Even this one.

At last, it lopes away. Kerrigan watches it go, then turns toward the evolution chamber.

She finds Abathur amid the steam and moisture. “What did you do?” she hisses. “It disobeyed me.”

He turns toward her. “More mind. To think. Stronger commands.”

She doesn't like this, a zergling who requires *stronger commands*. And, despite his usefulness, she still can never fully trust Abathur. Kerrigan's eyes glow as she inflicts pain on the evolution master.

“Test. Yields results,” he fumbles out. “Work on Zagara can proceed.”

Kerrigan releases her hold on him and turns away. Whatever annoyance he's caused, she cannot deny his results. Zagara's mind is growing just as the zergling's is.

Perhaps that is why, when the zergling finds her outside the evolution chamber, she lets it stay.

Better a zergling, she thinks, than a brood mother.

There's no escaping the zergling. As before, it follows her everywhere: from her chamber to the nerve center, crouching in the corner as she strategizes and plans. It trails behind her as she walks through the corridors, moving from chamber to chamber to look in on her swarm.

But some things are different.

When she visits the zergling chambers, it makes an odd keening noise it didn't before and won't go near the chamber entrance. It sits apart, watching her as she peers in on the zerglings churning together in a great, glittering mass.

One time, she tests it, to see if it will still obey, or if Abathur has done something he shouldn't have. “Join them,” she tells it, tired of its presence. “Go on.”

It stares at her. Something about those eyes always strikes at her core. They're too bright.

Too—

Intelligent?

“Go,” she says, pushing harder. Instead, the zergling moves closer to her, eyes fixed on her face.

Abathur, she thinks coldly.

But why is the creature refusing her orders at all? She isn't ordering it to its death.

And then the realization sparks sharp inside her.

“You want to stay with me,” she says.

The zergling makes a soft gurgling noise and immediately trots over to bump its head against her legs.

Kerrigan feels a coldness weave through her body. Is this affection? Before, she always compelled it to stay with her—its presence was calming, to have a small part of her swarm always at her side. But now, it is *choosing* to stay.

A small difference. The implications make her dizzy.

What has Abathur done? She strides over to the zergling, leaving his brood to pile together in their chamber. She stretches her hand across the zergling's head, the way she always does, and reaches out, through the thick clambering static of her swarm, to this one single creature.

It peers up at her with its bright eyes.

Kerrigan feels a strange pulse in the rhythm of the swarm. An aberrant flutter. And then—the zergling lifts its head, and butts against her hand with a tenderness it shouldn't possess.

She jerks her hand away.

The zergling rears up, as if reaching out to her. Cautiously, she smooths her hand along its

brow, brushes her fingers against its left mandible. It makes a soft trilling noise, one she has never heard before.

She pauses her hand and leaves it pressed to its head, unsure if she heard correctly. But the zergling does it again. It is undeniable to her, even as it is unbelievable, that the sound is a musical one of contentment.

Uncertainty pools in her belly. She knows she needs to keep this zergling close to her. She has to understand what Abathur has made it into.

“Come along,” she whispers.

After that day, she never lets the zergling out of her sight. Instead of skittering down the corridor after her, she lets it walk alongside her. Sometimes, she finds herself placing her hand against the top of its head in a gesture of—what, she isn’t sure. Ownership? Protection?

But there’s a comfort in it too. To always be able to glance over and see the zergling’s bright eyes staring back at her. No matter what she’s doing—planning her next attack, overseeing the development of a new strain of zerg—the zergling crouches at her side, taking it all in. If she concentrates, if she reaches out to it, she can feel that strange, arrhythmic disruption that means it’s learning.

One night, Abathur comes to her when she is alone with her zergling. “Is working?” he says, creeping toward her, one claw gesturing at the zergling curled up at her feet.

“In a way.” Kerrigan watches Abathur carefully. “But it disobeys. I have to exert more will for it to follow my commands.”

Abathur chitters, waves a claw around. “That is what needed, yes?” His eyes gleam. “Zerg thinking on own.”

Kerrigan feels her hackles rise. At her feet, the zergling stirs, turns its gaze toward Abathur.

“Zagara must still obey,” she says, her voice edged in irritation. “Or I must destroy her. She is stronger than a zergling, more valuable to the swarm.”

Abathur has no response, and Kerrigan’s anger flares.

The zergling attacks.

She didn’t command it to; she can handle Abathur better than a single zergling could. But it launches itself at him with a roar, wings beating into a blur. Abathur roars and lashes out with his claw—

Kerrigan stops him before he can hurt the zergling, although she lets the zergling slash into his flesh before pulling it back to her side. It startles her how much effort it takes to drag the zergling away from Abathur—more even than to hold Abathur in place, rage blooming in his eyes.

“Leave us,” she orders him, and he jerks away, a trail of blood tracing his path out into the corridor.

For a moment, Kerrigan stands unmoving, watching the place where Abathur stood. Then the zergling bumps up against her leg.

“You did that without my order,” she says flatly, still deciding how she feels about it. Should she dread the thought of a zergling, the lowest of the swarm, acting on its own? Should she feel pleased, that the zergling would risk its life for her willingly?

She kneels down and puts her hand on the zerg’s head and concentrates, zeroing in on its presence in the swarm. It’s never hard to find: this zergling always stands out. A flash of red in the white noise.

She sees herself through its eyes, sees how it longs to be close to her. She has the sense that it feels—*chosen*, is the only word she can think of, that it is allowed to sit in this chamber with her.

Kerrigan draws her hand away. The zergling gazes up at her, its curiosity rippling through her. If it could speak, she senses that it would ask her what is wrong.

Lucky, she realizes, that Abathur tested the process on this zergling. The one she forced to stay by her side for so long that it came to care about her, in its own way.

She finds she doesn't like thinking of it as "the zergling."

"How about a name?" she says slowly. It doesn't seem to understand.

She puts her hand on its head. "A name," she says again. "Broken Horn. You." She points. "Broken Horn."

The zergling lets out three lilted growls, akin to the rhythm of its new name.

"Yes," Kerrigan says. "Broken Horn."

The zergling repeats the three growls, makes that strange and horrifying trill of contentment. Kerrigan smiles, even as something hardens inside her heart.

#

Broken Horn creeps along the wall of his small cold room. Every part of him hurts, but he finds if he focuses on taking these slow, steady steps, the pain retreats to the back of his mind.

Suddenly, light spills into the room, and he jolts in fear. It's not the freezing light, though; it's softer and smaller.

The opening in the wall has reappeared.

Broken Horn stops, crouches down as best he can with his stiff limbs. A figure steps into the opening. It's one of them.

The creature walks into the room. The opening vanishes, replaced by the shiny wall.

Broken Horn catches a whiff of fear, sweet and musky. He bellows and launches himself, claws outstretched, ready to plunge into the prey's soft chest.

Pain explodes through his body.

Broken Horn shrieks and slams against the floor; have they frozen him again? No, he can move; he can scabble to his feet. But when he tries to leap at his quarry, the pain shoots through him again, burning and unbearable. This time he lands on his back, crushing his sickle limbs. He hears a *snap* and feels a wave of dizziness.

And then he hears the Queen of Blades, except she is not in his head. She is outside of him, somehow, making her noises.

Broken Horn rolls himself over, his blood streaking across the floor, his sickle limb hanging crooked. But the Queen of Blades is not here.

It's the UnQueen, and the noises she makes are not nearly as sweet, slicing like a zerg's sharp teeth.

She yells something and the opening reappears and she leaves the room and Broken Horn is left alone, blood dripping down his back and onto the floor. He waits, crouched in place, but nothing else happens. The freezing light doesn't flash; the opening doesn't reappear.

Eventually, he slinks back to the wall and slams himself against it until his broken sickle limb clatters to the floor. A spasm reverberates through his body: new pain and old pain both.

He doesn't know how much time passes before the wall opens back up again. He lifts his head, wary, but no creature appears to taunt him. The wall gapes open.

He pushes himself up and moves forward cautiously. The opening doesn't lead into the cutting-place, but to a narrow corridor.

An escape?

He glances back at his broken sickle limb, still lying in a pool of congealed blood.

He feels sure that these ones will hurt him again.

He sits back on his haunches, staring at the opening. The urge to move through it intensifies, a strong, violent pull to *run*. Somewhere, the swarm is *running*. The swarm is *escaping*. He should be doing the same—

But something isn't right!

He stands up, moving as if on the grid of the swarm. He isn't moving only for himself; he's moving for the others—

But there are no others!

Broken Horn roars and pushes backward, his claws scratching against the floor. Pain floods down his back, into his extremities. His head throbs.

The opening in the wall glows with soft light, cool and inviting.

Freedom.

No! This is wrong!

Broken Horn stumbles forward, roaring and shrieking, his wings beating frantically to keep him from moving forward. Dots of light flash in front of him, and then they are swallowed up by dots of darkness. Somehow, he understands that if he were to give in, if he were to push forward, the pain would stop; he would be free—

It is what the UnQueen wants.

He roars again, his anger reverberating off the walls of his room. His body strains against itself, a ceaseless pulling, like being dragged apart—

And then the room floods with the freezing light.

Broken Horn slams into the ground. The pain fades away. Being frozen, he understands.

Another opening appears in the doorway and a figure marches in, her soft, worthless paws curled into tight balls. When she crouches beside him, he sees that it is the UnQueen, her eyes

blazing, her face half covered, and he feels something like what he feels for the Queen of Blades, only this is sharp and burning.

The UnQueen barks out a stream of sounds, and her swarm spills into the room, their arms filled with glints of silver. The UnQueen grabs one of the silver boxes from the others and waves it over Broken Horn, blue light shining into his eyes. Then she tosses it aside and grabs a bright, silver claw and slams it into the side of his head.

Broken Horn's wail of pain is strangled and weak. Dark blood splatters across the UnQueen's body covering as she works the claw through Broken Horn's carapace, her brow knitted with determination. One of the creatures barks to her, sounding afraid; when she responds, she sounds angry.

All Broken Horn can see is her torso turning purple with his blood. When she makes her noises, she sounds far away, even though she is still right next to him, digging inside his head.

Eventually, she grabs the silver box and shines the blue light again. She makes a frustrated sound and tears out of the room.

The other creatures gather their things and follow her, and then the walls are walls again, no openings through which Broken Horn can escape. He has not yet come unfrozen, and even if he could move, he wouldn't want to, not with the pain pulsing through him so intensely.

So he lies on his side. He looks at himself in the wall. At the blood seeping across the floor.

And he rages. His thoughts are hot and vicious, like acid. He is sure the Queen of Blades has felt this before, this burning cocoon wrapping tight around him. They had been attacked by these same creatures who picked their way through the leviathan, killing zerg. When the Queen of Blades found them, she ripped their limbs from their bodies, and Broken Horn had watched and understood her hatred, her determination. She did not stop until they were chunks of meat

littering the floor.

He thinks of the cutting-place. Of the UnQueen and her swarm.

He must find that determination. He must tear her apart.

#

CLASSIFIED

CommID 312290

Dominion Center for State Security

Secure transmission from [REDACTED] to Phillipa Broadhurst

What in the god damned hell is going on? What is your status report? You know Lenski is my intermediary and you know damn well I should not be contacting you, secure line or not.

You are putting this entire operation at risk, Phillipa. I swear, if we have another [REDACTED] on our hands, I will use you as zerg bait.

[REDACTED] out.

###

CLASSIFIED

CommID 312293

Dominion Center for State Security

Secure transmission from Phillipa Broadhurst to [REDACTED]

At no point did I ask Mr. Lenski for you to contact me directly. I am well aware of the security protocols in place, as evidenced by my following them *to the letter* in every communication I have sent to DCSS. Nathan is trying to undermine my work. We are still on schedule, despite a minor disruption.

Broadhurst out.

###

CLASSIFIED

CommID 312301

Dominion Center for State Security

Secure transmission from Nathqn Lenski to Phillipa Broadhurst

Phillipa, you still have not submitted your status report. I needed the transmission three days ago, and I need to know what this “minor disruption” is. Blaming me for your mistakes is not sufficient.

Lenski out.

###

CLASSIFIED

CommID 312310

Dominion Center for State Security

Secure transmission from Phillipa Broadhurst to Nathan Lenski

The recent delay was caused by a need for additional, unexpected tests. Upon completing those tests, I have confirmed what I suspected initially: that I was provided a defective subject.

My work, both on Operation Blind Devil and on [REDACTED], is based upon previous research conducted by the Dominion. I was using that research as a foundation for my understanding of a zergling’s brain structure. My control-spine device is designed entirely around those findings.

But the subject in Operation Blind Devil *does not* correspond with any previous zergling research. Its structure and thought process is markedly different from that of all previous zergling subjects. This is not a mistake; I have manually scanned the subject’s brain tissue personally.

I am sending you an image capture of the scans I took—again, *manually*, myself. Do you see the activity along the interior? The streaks of blue? Now, look at this scan of a typical zergling brain structure—do you see how little activity there is?

In order to successfully complete my assignment, I will need either another subject or more time. Your choice.

Broadhurst out.

###

CLASSIFIED

CommID 312311

Dominion Center for State Security

Secure transmission from Nathan Lenski to Phillipa Broadhurst

Do you have any idea how difficult it is to capture a subject alive and unharmed?

We can give you two more weeks. Find out what the hell it is you're dealing with and adapt. Our end goal is to control an entire swarm, not just zerglings, so adaptability is what we're looking for anyway.

Lenski out.

#

Broken Horn swims out of darkness toward a single spot of light. It grows larger and larger, and for a moment he sees the Queen of Blades gazing down at him with softness in her eyes.

Then she is gone. The darkness is gone. And Broken Horn is in the cutting-place.

He is on the slab, and he is frozen. There is no pain, though, and that makes him cautious.

Suddenly, the slab jolts, sliding upright. He is pinned to it, he realizes, when he doesn't slide off. Slowly, the ceiling drops away, and he finds himself looking at the UnQueen, her face

uncovered. She wears something flat and white on her head, a light blinking at the sides.

“Subject is awake,” she says.

Confusion floods through Broken Horn. Her noises—they’re like the Queen of Blades . . . He is connected to her somehow; he can feel her thoughts. But the Queen of Blades, her mind tethers him, gives him purpose. The UnQueen’s mind is frantic with an uneven energy that makes his skin crawl.

“Aha,” she says softly. Then, louder: “Note that there was a surge of brain activity at the sound of my voice.”

Broken Horn growls as best he can. The UnQueen glances at him, frowning. “There’s no need for that.” She looks at a silver box she holds in her lap. “Another surge of brain activity. Interesting.”

She fixes her gaze on Broken Horn, and inside he is a hailstorm of rage. How dare she put herself in the place of the Queen of Blades? How dare she put her voice, her demands, inside his head?

“Let’s have a chat,” she says.

He snarls.

“You can’t speak or understand me, not really.” She tilts her head to one side, eyes boring into him. “But you understand what’s happening, don’t you? You know that I’ve hooked into your nervous system, even if you don’t have the words for it.” Her fingers brush against the white cap. “Which proves the problem is not my technology. I hope you’ll make a note of that, *Nathan*.”

Broken Horn strains against his immobile body, but it’s pointless. He is forced to listen to this strange chittering as it transforms into a directive inside his head.

The UnQueen stands up and walks over to him, the silver box pressed against her hip. She leans in close, but he can barely smell the salt of her blood beneath a strange, sterile scent.

“Something’s going on in there.” She taps the side of his head with her finger. “You understand my will”—she looks down at the silver box—“but you resist it.” Her eyes narrow; her mouth tilts into a smile. “Did you ever disobey *her*, I wonder? Kerrigan?”

Her mouth sends a jolt of terror through him. Every time it curves upward like that, he is dropped into a well of pain.

“The next step in the process,” the UnQueen says, stepping away from Broken Horn, “is to determine the cause of these structural differences. Only then can we determine a work-around.” She looks at Broken Horn. “But we’ll get there. We’ll see inside your head.”

Broken Horn’s roar of protest and fury lodges in his throat.

#

The leviathan approaches Angdra, a planet laced with terran settlements. Kerrigan watches from the nerve center as the planet grows larger against the black backdrop of the galaxy. Broken Horn watches the approach from her side.

She closes her eyes and breathes in deeply, drawing into her mind the entire swarm, churning and swirling in unison. The zerglings will be her first wave, laying waste to the planet and clearing a path for her descent into a small Dominion government building on the edge of the sprawling city below. A computer is there, filled with the information she needs to complete her mission.

Broken Horn scuffles along the ground, knocking up against her legs. The leviathan shakes and roars; they are entering Angdra’s atmosphere, moving through clouds and fire, until finally they touch down on firm ground.

Kerrigan's eyes fly open.

The swarm is released, streaming out of the leviathan in a single, coiling ribbon. Kerrigan smiles as she guides the swarm in three separate lines, each set to devour the city in their wake.

She moves toward the exit of the leviathan, and Broken Horn follows. "You should be down there," Kerrigan tells him as they step out into the chill air, the sound of destruction roiling in the distance. "Perhaps I shouldn't spoil you by letting you stay."

Broken Horn growls softly, though in disagreement or anticipation she cannot say.

The government building is just up ahead, squat and bland. It looks abandoned, no terrans circling in defense; she was sending her swarm in the opposite direction, drawing the terrans away from her target.

But what if there are still terran soldiers in there? What happens if this is a trap, and they somehow break her link, send her swarm scattering and worthless?

"Broken Horn," she says. "You will do something for me."

She puts her hand on his head and, just for a moment, splits herself, sending her instructions directly into his thoughts. She can feel him lapping them up without resistance.

She looks down at him, momentarily breaking away from the swarm. That's the difference. He can be compelled to act as she wishes, but it isn't necessary. This one acts because he wants to please her.

Kerrigan frowns. She snaps back into her swarm and sends Broken Horn into the building. Then she watches as he does, not what she *makes* him do, what she *asks* him to do: he shatters the window to get inside. He snuffles through the bright, abandoned offices, computers still glowing with credentialed information, their owners too panicked to secure them properly.

She smiles. Just as she hoped.

With one thought, she directs her swarm in their ballet of destruction. With another, she sees what Broken Horn sees as he moves from screen to screen, the light flickering in the back of her head. He shreds through walls and closed doors with inexhaustible strength.

And then he finds it: A name. A map.

Kerrigan hears a shout. Terran soldiers, tearing down the empty road, in a military convoy. It squeals to a stop in front of the building.

Broken Horn is still inside, staring at the screen.

Leave! she screams at him as she returns to her leviathan.

She can see his movements, jittery and confused. He lopes back the way he came, and she sighs with relief.

But then he turns again, runs back toward the computer.

No! she commands with greater force. *Return.*

He whirls around, but the building is a strange, convoluted maze. And through his sight, she sees the terran soldier. And then she sees nothing.

She knows he's lost.

#

CLASSIFIED

CommID 312310

Dominion Center for State Security

Secure transmission from Phillipa Broadhurst to Nathan Lenski

I have spent the last two days studying the zergling's brain systems. I did all surgical procedures myself, including a direct observation, without terminating the subject. And I can reach only one conclusion:

The subject is sentient.

The zerg are a hive mind. They cannot operate as single units. Our technology works on that principle. When placed inside the nervous system of a zerg subject who can operate independently, who can, as far as I can tell, *choose* how much to operate within the greater swarm, it simply fails to function as programmed.

I advise that we continue Operation Blind Devil on another subject, while Subject 20983 is surrendered to me for further study.

Broadhurst out.

###

CLASSIFIED

CommID 312310

Dominion Center for State Security

Secure transmission from Nathan Lenski to Phillipa Broadhurst

Phillipa, we are not paying you to indulge in your Frankenstein fantasies. Subject 20983 is property of the Terran Dominion. Your work on [REDACTED] is property of the Terran Dominion. You will complete Operation Blind Devil as required, with the use of that subject.

Lenski out.

###

CLASSIFIED

CommID 312310

Dominion Center for State Security

Secure transmission from Phillipa Broadhurst to [REDACTED]

Nathan, you absolute fool. Do you not understand what I have in my possession right now?

What study of it could bring to the Dominion?

Broadhurst out.

###

CommID 312310

Dominion Center for State Security

Secure transmission from Nathan Lenski to Phillipa Broadhurst

It's not up to me, Phillipa. Direct orders from [REDACTED].

Continue Operation Blind Devil as instructed.

Lenski out.

#

Broken Horn crouches in the shiny room, numb to the pain of his broken body. And he remembers.

He remembers the soft curved space in the nerve center of the Queen of Blades' leviathan, where she communicated with her advisers. He listened to the hum of her voice and concentrated on the thrum of their connection. And he *understood*.

He still understands.

He understands it is important to overwhelm this kind of prey. That is the strength of the swarm. He understands it's possible to trick them with distractions and strangely timed attacks.

He also understands that here, in this terrible place, these creatures are the swarm, and he is the prey. He understands this gives him a disadvantage.

He sees the other Broken Horn in the walls, face and body scarred with angry dark lines, his left sickle limb a crusted-over stump. And even worse is what *can't* be seen, the scars left when the UnQueen carved out pieces of his thoughts, when she severed him from the Queen of Blades.

He is a broken thing. But he will prove himself. He will show that he is still worthy of the Queen of Blades.

He has stopped resisting the strange pull of the UnQueen, as much as it makes him churn with disgust. But if he resists, the creatures use the freezing light on him. If he is frozen, he cannot attack.

So he walks where the creatures want him to walk, slinking into traps where they blast him with sparks of searing, painful light. He does not attack them. He lets his body betray him, over and over.

They stop using the freezing light.

Eventually, his patience is rewarded. The wall in his room slides open, leading into the cutting-place. His head buzzes with a compulsion to walk inside, to crawl onto the cutting slab.

He shuffles forward. The terrans watch him closely, faces half-covered. The UnQueen stands waiting beside the slab, a table set out with long, silver claws.

Broken Horn stops beside the slab and looks up at her. She tilts her head, says something. He cannot understand her anymore; she has set aside that white cap that made her speak like the Queen of Blades.

But the urge to jump on the slab is there. He gives into it and jumps onto the slab, the metal denting beneath his feet. Some of the terrans jerk back, although the UnQueen gazes at him level, unmoving.

His eyes dart around the room. This swarm is scattered and empty-handed. Declawed. He only hopes the freezing light cannot work in the cutting-place.

An urge to lie down pulses through him. This, he ignores.

The UnQueen says something, her noises sharp. He whips his head and looks at her.

She takes a step back.

And then he leaps off the slab, pushing through the pain of refusing her commands. He slams into the closest prey, his claws sinking in easily through the shimmery fabric. Blood spurts.

The creatures erupt into screams.

He launches forward, moving on instinct, wild and uncontrolled. He lashes out at any sign of movement, roaring and shrieking, following the sprays of hot blood. It is not like fighting with the swarm—he is alone, he is unstable.

He slips in the spilled blood and careens across the floor, slamming into a great metal structure that he then rips into, yanking out its glittering innards.

Instantly, the room goes dark, then re-emerges in a red haze and a siren scream. The remains of the swarm beat their paws against the wall, and Broken Horn leaps toward them, feet first, and cuts and cuts until they are nothing but broken limbs and a smear of blood on the walls.

A voice echoes through the room, tinny and distorted.

“Let’s see if this works,” says the UnQueen.

Broken Horn stumbles in the blood. Whirls around. It can’t be. He’s alone.

“The scanners aren’t working—no, no, no. Damn it!”

Broken Horn roars and slams up against the wall, making the room shudder.

And then a dark square appears in the wall. The UnQueen gazes out at him, her face streaked with blood, the white cap perched crookedly on her head.

“You tricked us,” she says. “You pretended the implants worked!” She shakes her head, panic bright in her eyes. “How is that even—”

Broken Horn races toward her in a blur of rage. But when he attacks, he slams into something hard and solid that knocks him back onto the floor.

“That means you’re smart,” she says. “Smarter than you should be.” She stretches her mouth out, baring her teeth. “We can communicate. We can reach—reach an agreement.”

He jumps at her again, pushing with all his force. This time, he’s prepared for the barrier, and he lands back on his feet. He jumps again. Again. The UnQueen talks to him, but her chittering blurs together in the haze of his fury.

And the barrier cracks.

Broken Horn and the UnQueen both stare at it, that thin line splitting her in half. She gapes at it. Then she looks at him.

And then she vanishes.

He roars and jumps and the barrier shatters into a thousand slicing talons that rake over him as he sails into another room, smaller and unfamiliar. It reeks of fear.

There is an opening. He goes through it, entering into a corridor, narrow and dark. A flash of movement, just up ahead.

He runs.

The UnQueen’s stench wafts toward him as he barrels mindlessly around corners, his hatred rising off him in a wave of heat. Then—

The UnQueen. Just up ahead. She glances backward, her eyes wild with panic.

The battle frenzy floods through him, and he pushes forward in a pulse of energy. The UnQueen slams up against the wall, pressing her paw into the metal. An opening appears.

He leaps—

And lands on her back, driving her down into the soft ground. He attacks, biting and clawing, shredding her out into glistening, red ribbons. He must destroy her swarm. There are others; those he killed in the cutting-place were too few. If he can kill the UnQueen, he can destroy these

creatures for good.

Eventually, though, there is nothing left to destroy. Broken Horn totters away from the remains of the UnQueen, flush and satisfied. He reaches out, trying to connect with the Queen of Blades—

But there's nothing. Just the same hollow emptiness. Not even victory can bring him back into the swarm.

He sits back and takes in his surroundings for the first time: he is out in the open, on a vast, rocky plain, the dirt dark and sparse. Stars spin out overhead in swirls and streaks that remind him of the Queen of Blades, the bright of her eyes.

She is out there, sailing with the swarm in the belly of her leviathan.

He sits on the cold ground and looks at the stars. At first he is calm, but then there's a squeezing in his chest, a strange burning taste in the back of his mouth. Confusion wells up inside him, but when he tries to move, to get away, his vision is marred with black spots. The squeezing grows tighter. He digs his claws into the rocks.

The dark spots grow bigger and bigger until there is nothing left.

#

Kerrigan stands in the nerve center. Angdra burns beneath her, the green of the surface laced with black smoke and red coils of fire.

She left him. Broken Horn. Sent him to die in her place.

She does not feel the guilt she thinks she should. There's only a curious numbness in her chest. A hollowness. Something that was there, isn't anymore. Maybe it was something special. Maybe it wasn't.

On the surface of Angdra, hundreds of thousands of zerglings move in tandem, shredding the

terran civilization into rubble. Thousands of them will die and still she will ride away from this place with the information she came for. Because they are a swarm. They are not whole creatures unto themselves.

There's no reason to mourn a single piece of the whole. Not when there are a thousand more than can swell into ranks to fill the gap.

And yet, she keeps her gaze on the fires of Angdra, and she thinks the name *Broken Horn*.

* * *

Written by: Cassandra Rose Clarke

Edited by: Chloe Fraboni

Produced by: Brianne Messina

Lore Consultation by: Madi Buckingham, Sean Copeland

Creative Consultation by: Jeff Chamberlain, Kevin Dong, George Krstic, Ryan Quinn,

Ryan Schutter

Special Thanks: Thomas Floeter, Martin Frost, Felice Huang, Chungwoon Jung, Jaclyn Lo,

Alexey Pyatikhatka, YuSian Tan