

StarCraft: Revelations, by Chris Metzen, is a Blizzard-authorized StarCraft short story published in Amazing Stories Magazine, issue 596. Amazing Stories Magazine is now defunct.

GUNNERY SERGEANT ANDRE MADRID watched the vidscreen in shocked disbelief. His companions, huddled together like children caught in the path of an oncoming storm, looked to him for assurance. He had none to give. As the satellite images flooded the small, static-filled screen, he was struck by the grim certainty that neither he nor the young cadets under his command would survive the coming ordeal.

Madrid watched as the satellite tracked two impossibly huge Protoss warships descending from high orbit. Sealed within a reinforced shelter beneath the surface of the planet Chau Sara, Madrid wondered if the colonial fleet orbiting the planet had offered any real resistance to the alien vessels. He looked about the room and saw the terrified cadets clutching anxiously at their unfired Gauss rifles. Stifling a panicked giggle, he briefly visualized the absurd notion of the cadets tossing pebbles at a landslide.

Warning klaxons shattered the stillness as the ships reached striking distance from the planet. Emergency floodlights bathed the shelter in an aphotic crimson haze. Madrid saw first one, then two bright flashes emanate from the belly of the first ship. They all watched in horror as enormous bolts of azure fire rained from the sky. The cadets began to scream, curse, and pray to whatever awaited them in the hereafter. Madrid held his breath behind gritted teeth and felt the first tremors of the firestorm.

A pure white light filled the vidscreen and then gradually subsided to a burning vortex of flame. The fireball, which seemed to reach clear to the roof of the sky, spread itself over the vast desert, consuming everything in its path. The reinforced parasteel walls of the room shuddered as the Protoss vessels continued to rain their devastation upon the planet.

Memories of the stories from his mother's tattered old Bible raced through Madrid's mind as he pictured the horrific imagery of the final judgment of Armageddon. Yet he couldn't bring himself to believe that this wanton destruction was a prophesied act of God. It was an act of sheer will; a cold, calculated display by the vile, soulless Protoss.

The brightness of the vidscreen forced him to squint as he watched the fireball thunder toward the shelter. The cadets' panic reached a fevered pitch as shock waves ripped through the shuddering room. Above the furor of the seismic assault, he could hear anguished screams of pure terror.

Madrid woke with a start.

As he sat trying to calm the pounding of his heart, he could still hear the screams echoing in his ears. He got up from his bunk and walked out of the barracks into the cold morning air. Shakily, he dug his fingers into a slightly crumpled pack of Rebel Reds and pulled out a cigarette. Cupping the open flame of his lighter, he took a drag off the harsh smoke and wandered aimlessly across the compound.

It had been nearly three weeks since the mysterious Protoss had appeared and burned the unsuspecting world of Chau Sara. Miraculously, Madrid had survived. Thanks to the signal of his personal emergency transceiver, he and a handful of others were found under the shelter's ruins by a nearby Confederate medevac team. He remembered looking down and marveling at the devastation that stretched across the burning horizon as the dropship carried him away from the planet.

For the past two weeks, Madrid had tried to lose himself in the monotony of his duties in a new unit stationed on the planet Mar Sara. He watched as the sun rose over the rocky landscape that was a stark contrast to the rolling green plains of his former home—plains that were now as desolate as the terrain he surveyed all around him.

He took a final drag off his cigarette and crushed it under his boot. As a marine, he had seen his share of the horrors of war. That was the life of a marine. But the Protoss attack on Chau Sara had shown him a new kind of horror—a horror

he could barely comprehend. Fleeting images of the friends and family he had lost on Chau Sara drifted through his mind.

The sudden wail of sirens broke the early morning calm, snapping Madrid out of his haze. Marines appeared everywhere, running to their stations with their tac-gear and weapons in tow. He sprinted back to his barracks. As always, his power suit was left nearly assembled with his Gauss rifle right beside it. He was locked in and geared up in less than a minute. After a ritual check to confirm that his rifle was loaded, he dashed out toward one of the defensive bunkers that encircled the compound.

As he stepped down into the bunker, the other marines inside were concentrating on the horizon, scanning for any sign of hostile forces. The bunker was little more than a pre-fab paristeel box sunk into the ground. Big enough for a handful of marines and a few supplies, a combat bunker was designed to take massive punishment while the marines inside could fire on everything around it in relative safety. Some of the marines called them battlefield coffins, but as far as Madrid was concerned they were better than crouching behind a rock. He took his place next to the others and turned his attention to the landscape outside.

The auto-response missile turrets in the distance began firing before Madrid could see their targets. Hundreds of deadly missiles filled the sky, disappearing into fiery explosions just over the horizon. Feeling his heart skip a beat, he pushed the small button on the side of his helmet that lowered his sight visor. As the darkened visor closed over his face, small holographic projections and status displays appeared before his eyes. Switching the visor to infrared mode, Madrid could see the landscape broken into pixelated patches of reds and blues. To his horror, he saw that the dim haze on the horizon was composed of hundreds of spindly flying creatures approaching the camp at high speed.

The creatures sped toward the missile turrets. Hundreds of the twisted flyers swooped down, spewing flames from their open jaws. Even as the missiles blasted dozens of creatures from the sky, many of the turrets exploded under the assault of the alien swarm.

Madrid's com unit blared in his ear. "Fire Base Chimera, this is recon patrol zero-nine," the voice shouted. "Advancing force is negative for Protoss profile. Repeat—advancing force is not Protoss. We are receiving heavy fire from unclassified hostiles. Please advise."

A second transmission cut in: "All units, this is Command Bravo. Unclassified life forms confirmed," a smooth, detached voice reported. "Stand to repel attack. Life forms confirmed hostile."

"They got that part right," one of the marines growled as another turret exploded in the distance. Everyone kept focused on the advancing aliens, peering through thick smoke as thousands of horrible creatures scrambled madly toward the base. These ground units were different from the flyers, but just as deadly. They surged over the remaining turrets, destroying them with devastating volleys of razor-spines.

Madrid had become so mesmerized by the chaos in the distance that he almost missed the fact that a group of aliens closing on the bunker had come within firing range. With fangs bared, a mob of leathery, catlike creatures rushed towards the electrified wire surrounding the base. As the first line was blasted apart, another wave rushed in. Pulling his rifle to the left, Madrid fired into a writhing mass of aliens. Mutilated bodies began piling up around the base's perimeter. For every creature that fell, it seemed two more rushed in to take its place.

A group of snakelike aliens lurched forward and showered the bunker with hundreds of deadly razor-spines. Many of the spines rained in through multiple gunports, and Madrid felt the body of a marine drop next to him. With a defiant roar, a marine equipped with Firebat combat armor opened up with his twin flamethrowers. Concentrated napalm enveloped the frenzied creatures, and dozens of them fell to the ground in burning heaps.



Minutes passed like hours as Madrid spent clip after clip. The battlefield was littered with thousands of their dead, yet the aliens kept coming. It's better than Chau Sara, he thought. At least here I have a fighting chance. He cleared his mind of everything but the monsters' lifeless black eyes and lost himself in the rhythmic recoil of his rifle.

The bunker began to shudder violently as the flyers attacked it from above. Massive cracks appeared in the paristeel roof as it began to collapse. Lost in the heat of battle, Madrid was startled when the Firebat grabbed his shoulder.

"The bunker's toast!" he yelled. "If we ain't outta here soon, we're gonna end up sharin' a tombstone."

"Fall back to the command center," Madrid barked at the others as he let loose another burst from his rifle. "Move!"

Madrid broke for the exit hatch as what was left of the squad made its way out. Emerging from the darkened bunker into the light of the midmorning sun, he almost froze in his tracks as he surveyed the compound. The scene was utter chaos. Huge winged beasts swarmed over the base, showering everything with blasts of burning plasma. Other small, jittery aliens ran rampant through the compound, streaming past the bunkers and tearing into any marines that stood in their path. Madrid fired wildly at a group of the creatures, hoping to butcher them before they fixed their attention on him. This place is a killing ground, he thought.

Madrid turned towards the base's command center and caught a brief glimpse of a huge, raylike creature flying overhead. He heard a sickly spurting sound and felt a hammering blow strike him from behind, knocking him back to the ground. As the world spun around him, he could feel a searing pain in his back that spread through his limbs like tentacles of wildfire. He was dimly aware of something lifting him up as he lost consciousness.

MADRID WOKE TO FIND HIMSELF staring at the ceiling of a stark room. Pain wracked his body, and his head swam. He fought dizziness and confusion as memories rushed into his head. Protoss are wiping us out as we hide here cowering underground. Their ships are annihilating everything on the planet's surface like the hand of God. No, not the Protoss, he thought. That's not right. Something else is out there. Strange images flashed in his mind. A sea of horrible creatures washing over the base, tearing through everything in their path. Wait, who are the Protoss? He tried to remember. Those things out there are coming to kill me. Where's my rifle? What happened to my squad? I need to kill them all. Kill. His blood boiled within him, calling forth a primal instinct. Kill who? The Protoss? I have to get out of here. Keep moving. Kill.

A face loomed over him. It was human. He could see its mouth moving, speaking to him.

"Where the hell am I?" Madrid asked. He saw other marines around him, some moving about the room and others sprawled on the floor.

"Just lie back and rest easy, Sergeant. We're under the command center. You're safe here," the young field medic said. "At least for a while." Madrid was covered in both red and purple blood, and his power suit had been split open down the front. He could see that the medic had applied field dressings to his wounds and had stitched up a deep cut in his chest.

"What's wrong with me, boy? Why can't I move?" he asked.

A look of consternation crossed the medic's face. "You were hit," the medic told him, "by one of those things. I don't know what it was, but your vitals are freaking out. As far as I can tell, there's some kind of poison in your system, but I've never seen anything like it before. I injected you with a stim-pack, so you may experience a little anxiety." With that, the medic was gone.

Madrid tried to stand up. He felt the stim coursing through his system, tightening his muscles and making his scalp crawl. However, the artificial energy boost was no match for his pain and fatigue, so he slumped down heavily against the wall.

The room appeared to be some kind of storage space. A few transport crates were stacked in the corner, but Madrid couldn't make out the stenciled writing on their sides. The room has no windows or fixtures, just four steel-gray walls and a doorway. The medic was busy tending to injured men and others who just sat staring into space with glazed eyes. Marines ran back and forth through the hallway outside, occasionally entering the room to confer with men who were frantically speaking into portable com systems. Madrid couldn't make out what they were saying.

Too weak to move, all he could do was sit and wait. Death was coming. His rifle lay beside him, for all the use it was. His mind reeled. We're doomed.

What did we do to bring this on? Both of these races appeared and descended on our worlds like plagues. Fighting them is pointless. They'll spread through the stars, taking planet after planet. Unyielding. Unstoppable. He saw the spindly aliens in his mind, spreading across entire galaxies, overwhelming everything, fulfilling their dread destiny.

"No!" Madrid screamed as his body convulsed. What's happening to me? I need to get out of here. They're coming for me. He was trembling. He saw other wounded marines staring at him in detached sympathy. This is crazy. His fists were clenched, and he couldn't stop grinding his teeth. If only I could get out there, he thought again. I'll kill them all. Exterminate them. Nothing else matters. It is my destiny. We will sweep through the stars, driving the others before us. We will prosper. We are unyielding.

Visions of marines being torn apart by deadly claws filled his mind. No, this is all wrong. I'm not thinking right. A coppery taste filled his mouth, and he felt a thin trickle of fluid drop down onto his chest. Blood. I'm dying, he thought. No, it is our enemies who will die. Death cannot stop us. That feeling came to him with complete certainty. The visions continued. Huge creatures leaped over the dead bodies of their brethren and pushed on towards the enemy.

Those aren't my thoughts, he realized with horror. He still sat in the same spot with his back against the cold wall. The sounds of gunfire echoed down the hall. Where are these thoughts coming from? He clasped his head in his hands and doubled over in pain. A sickening sensation crawled through his veins, from his stomach up to his brain. The backs of his eyeballs felt so hot they could melt.

A flurry of bizarre images and impressions assaulted him. Two ominous thoughts stood out from the maddening din and shook him to the core. You are growing. You are mine.

Madrid screamed until he ran out of breath.

He felt another presence in his mind. What are you? He searched for it in his thoughts, but found nothing. Suddenly a horrifying image overtook him, eclipsing all else: a sprawling mass of living tissue pulsing with a dark, alien intelligence. Madrid reeled as he felt its sinister consciousness permeate his being. Although he had feeling throughout his body, he found himself unable—or perhaps not allowed—to move.

Gunfire and screaming erupted in the hallway, ripping Madrid out of his trance. A number of marines backed into the room, firing their rifles into the hallway. The wounded men around him sat up in alarm as a group of aliens skittered into the room and tore into the defending marines. Everyone capable of movement grabbed a weapon and tried to fend off the invaders. The creatures flooded the room and overwhelmed the scrambling Terrans, tearing them to pieces. Madrid closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the carnage. Wet, slashing sounds and the tortured screams of the dying filled his ears until the fighting ceased and all that remained was a soft, humming vibration.

Madrid opened his eyes to see two of the creatures staring straight at him, standing close enough that he could feel their hot breath as they sniffed him. Their black, menacing eyes were hooded by the flat carapace plates that adorned their bestial heads. Their muscular, catlike bodies were covered by tough, leathery skin, and long segmented tails stretched out behind them.

Madrid closed his eyes and waited for the creatures to strike. But just as suddenly as they had appeared, they skittered out of the room, leaving him alone among the dead. Minutes stretched into hours as he sat in the dank corner, contemplating his fate and trying to shut out the luring whispers of the alien voice in his head.



FINALLY THE ROOM'S SILENCE was broken by shrill screams echoing down the hallway. Madrid cowered, frozen in place and unable to pry his gaze from the entryway. He could hear scuffling and scratching noises in the hallway. Have they come back to kill me? he wondered. As his vision faded to red, he focused his thoughts towards the creatures scurrying in the hallway and briefly touched their bestial minds.

Four creatures. All of them alien. All of them born of the same terrible species.

Three small creatures, like those who had killed everyone else in the room, skittered through the hallway. However, a far more frightening creature accompanied them. This was a dark, clever beast, and Madrid reeled from its soulless presence.

One small creature snaked its head around the door frame. The catlike alien stood there for a moment just staring into Madrid's eyes. It scurried forward and cleared a path of entrance for its brethren. The two others entered the room slowly and took positions beside it. The creatures, seeming relaxed and almost playful, simply sat watching Madrid. What the hell do they want? It's like they're just waiting for me to die, he thought.

Madrid's breath came in short gasps as the fourth creature slowly approached the room's entrance. He could hear the sound of its passing now—a resonant, serpentine hiss that could only come from a creature of enormous size. A scraping

sound split the air as if sharp barbs were being dragged across the room and walls. The smaller aliens seemed to straighten and alertly shifted their attention towards the doorway.

Madrid imagined he felt the stale air being sucked from the room as the huge, graceful creature entered. Filling the entire doorway, the monster opened its hideous, dagger-lined jaws and shattered the tense stillness with a ferocious scream, causing Madrid to shiver with quiet panic.

The creature's head and muzzle looked similar to those of the smaller aliens, except that its eyes held a glimmer of intelligence. Its long, craning neck was covered by a massive carapace plate that had a distinctive pattern, not unlike snake-skin. The armor plates covering its enormous upper body bore a variety of spikes and jagged growths. Madrid noticed a number of barely distinguishable fractures along the length of the creature's flexing shoulder plates. As he ran his eyes over the creature's grotesque body, he made out the long, spindly arms it held tightly at its sides. The arms, which ended in razor-sharp, bony scythes, looked as if they could tear apart a solid parasteel bulkhead with ease. The most bizarre aspect of the creature was that it supported the weight of its huge upper body with a thick, snakelike tail. Just as with its plating, the tail was encrusted with spines and strange deformations. The creature's horrid appearance reminded Madrid of the terrible dragons that had filled the myths of ancient Earth.

He watched helplessly as the creature slithered slowly across the broken floor with an eerie grace. Thick, milky liquid dripped from the beast's open jaws as it lowered its great crowned head until its eyes were even with Madrid's. Its burning eyes bored into Madrid and locked him in their hypnotic stare. He could feel the creature's hot, rancid breath upon his skin.

Groaning through gritted teeth, Madrid was suddenly overwhelmed by the creature's base musings. Harsh and unintelligible at first, unmistakable impressions raced like quicksilver through his mind.

Unity...soon.

Just then, an explosion rocked the room from outside. Dust rained down from the ceiling as the ground shifted under Madrid's body. New, metallic sounds rang through the hallway.

Someone's coming, Madrid thought excitedly.

He could hear heavy clomping, like the sound of two marines, nearing the room's entrance. A wave of courage washed over Madrid, and he barely stifled a cry of joy as the two warriors appeared in the doorway. Then his blood suddenly ran cold as he saw the two silhouettes before him, and his hope of rescue disappeared as he realized these were two Protoss warriors.

They stepped further into the room and glared at the four misshapen aliens. The dragon-creature squinted its hellish eyes and crouched in a defensive stance, while the three smaller aliens began circling the warriors slowly, preparing to strike.

As the two Protoss squared off against the other aliens, Madrid gazed for the first time upon the beings whose ships had destroyed his homeworld, and whose forms he had seen only on holos before now. Their fierce eyes, which glowed like molten sapphires, were the only distinguishable features on their scaled faces. They had no mouths, ears, or noses, only a series of tribal-like, tattooed markings that ran along the harsh ridges of their cheekbones. Their heads were covered with a bonelike plating that bore a striking resemblance to the dragon-creature's armored carapace. Long, sinewy appendages flowed out from underneath the warriors' head plates and were fastened together like bands of thick hair that ran down their slightly hunched backs. Their long, armored legs were buckled backward at the knee, reminiscent of the cloven-hoofed devils of myth. Their strong, muscled bodies were covered by thin, wet, reptilian skin that was marked with the same strange tattoos as their faces.

Madrid looked upon the Protoss with unabashed awe and terror. These were the destroyers of worlds. These were the executioners of man. These were the dark gods, who had come at last to claim his soul.

The small, catlike aliens suddenly sprang at the two Protoss with their multiple talons and glistening fans bared. Within a fraction of a heartbeat, burning blades of azure energy sprang forth from the warriors' gauntlets. With a blinding flash of



blue fire, the first of the attacking aliens was cut down in midair by the Protoss' swift attack. The other two aliens, surprised by the savagery of the strike, attempted to slow their advance and skittered around the warriors. Yet one of the Protoss gracefully leaped ahead of the second creature and tore through its skull with his fiery blades. The other Protoss warrior, stepping in to protect his comrade's flank, outmaneuvered the third creature and split it in two with a powerful blow.

The dragon-creature's massive tail swept out and crashed into one of the warriors. Madrid watched in awe as the Protoss flew across the room and smashed into the far wall. Its limp body punched a hole through the parasteel plating, weakening the wall and causing more rubble to topple into the room from above.

Without a second glance, the remaining warrior turned to confront the dragon-creature. Madrid's eyes focused on the monster's shoulder plates, which began to heave and swell. The tiny, hairline fractures expanded and split to reveal row upon row of sharp, finger-sized needles. With a massive surge of stale air and a flurry of sickly squirting noises, the dragon-creature flexed its torso muscles and let loose a volley of poisoned spines from its shoulders. The spines toward the warrior, yet the Protoss stood his ground without even a flinch as the speeding needles shattered against an invisible barrier before they reached him.

Madrid was flabbergasted. Not one of the spines had even grazed the warrior's body. He noticed a slight blur and an azure flicker around the form of the Protoss. The warrior seemed to be protected by some sort of energy field, but the blue light was twinkling as though the field might have been weakened. The dragon-creature seemed to consider its next move for a moment, then fired another volley at its enemy. With the grace and skills of an acrobat, the Protoss tumbled and leaped out of harm's way, evading the spines as they tore through the reinforced wall behind him.

The dragon-creature spun around, but was too slow to react as the warrior kept tumbling and then leaped upon its armored back. The creature flailed in protest, desperately trying to buck the Protoss from its body.

Igniting his energy blades and pulling one of his arms back, the warrior seemed ready to separate the creature's head from its neck—but suddenly, one of the creature's scythelike arms swung around and skewered him through the midsection. Madrid saw a weak flash of blue as the last of the warrior's shield energy dissipated. The stunned Protoss took a final desperate swing and severed the arm that was buried in its torso. Hissing in rage and pain, the creature drove its remaining arm into the warrior's armored chest. The Protoss's body, wracked with violent spasms, went limp after a final, heaving shudder. The smoldering azure light in its glassy eyes slowly faded to blackness.

Madrid was shocked by the battle's outcome. Somehow he never imagined that the dragon-creature could actually defeat the Protoss. It didn't seem real to him that the destroyers of worlds could bleed and die like other beings. He imagined that he could feel the furious pounding of the dragon-creature's heart and taste the Protoss's bitter blood on his lips. He relished the primal joy of the creature's savage victory. This isn't right... These aren't my thoughts, he thought to himself, on the verge of panic. Yet, as the seconds ticked away, the rage inside him began to cool.

In the wake of the fevered rush, Madrid could only stare in confusion, feeling tinges of remorse and disappointment at the warrior's death. Although he found himself strangely invigorated by the warrior's valiant efforts, he shrugged off the notion and coldly reminded himself that the warrior was a Protoss, and the Protoss were murderers. It was as simple as that. Yet, as he gazed again at the savage dragon-creature, Madrid began to doubt his understanding of the nature of murder.

The wounded beast, visibly shuddering under its heavy carapace, attempted to slither toward the room's exit. The creature abruptly stopped and turned back toward the far side of the room, sniffing at the air. Slowly, the Protoss warrior whom it had flung across the room rose from the rubble.

The Protoss's eyes scanned the room and came to rest upon the crumpled body of his comrade. The creature flexed its huge shoulders, and a hundred needles shot out at the warrior. The Protoss whirled at the sound of the expulsion and was shocked by the tiny blades that tore his flesh and embedded themselves in his worn armor.

Bleeding immediately from dozens of wounds, the warrior faltered slightly as the spines' poison spread throughout his system. With grim resolve, he inched toward his enemy. The frayed dragon-creature, with no projectiles left, swung its remaining scythe-arm at the Protoss. The warrior blocked the clumsy attack and thrust his energy blade up into the



beast's soft underbelly. The creature screamed in agony as the Protoss worked his blade deeper into its shuddering body.

Madrid winced as the creature's thick, purple blood splattered around its body. His own blood surged and quickened, as if a presence inside of him could sense the creature's pain and torment. Damn Protoss butcher, he thought bitterly.

At last, the warrior extinguished the blade and pulled it out of the creature. Though it was mortally wounded, the creature continued to thrash and hiss as it towered weakly above the Protoss. Taking hold of the creature's splintered rib cage with both hands, the warrior gave a great heave and lifted its massive girth from the ground. Madrid marveled at the warrior's strength as it flung the dragon-creature over his shoulder. The heavy body hit the floor with a wet smack and lay still.

The warrior made a solemn, signing motion with his left hand, which Madrid surmised was either a salute or a curse. Though his body was battered, he struck a defiant pose that seemed meant to impress Madrid with his courage and valor. However, Madrid only glared at the victorious Protoss as if it had butchered an innocent child.

The warrior's gaze shifted and fell upon his fallen comrade. He walked over to the mutilated body and knelt beside it. Madrid, with beads of sweat running down his fevered face, strained to see what the warrior intended. Taking hold of one of the dragon-creature's broken talons, the warrior placed it in his dead comrade's hand.

"EN TARO ADUN, KHAS IL'ADARE." A voice boomed in Madrid's head. Even though the Protoss made no audible sound, he knew it was the warrior's voice, but he was unable to understand the Protoss language. A wave of nausea rushed over him as the alien poison caused his blood to roar in his ears. Whatever was inside him was reacting violently to the Protoss's mental presence.

What's happening to me? he thought. Fearing that the Protoss could hear his thoughts as well, Madrid tried to clear his tortured mind, yet his will wasn't strong enough to block out the power of the Protoss's psyche. He watched as the warrior ceremoniously crossed his comrade's arms over his chest plate. Madrid sensed that the warrior was overcome with grief over the loss of his comrade. The Protoss seemed to wince in pain as he continued to speak.

"Und lara khar. Anht Zagatir nas," the warrior finished softly. The words had the feel of a prayer or a ritual in honor of his fallen friend. The Protoss turned his gaze toward Madrid, whose body once again began to quiver with fear.

without a sound to give away its passage, another Protoss entered the room with all the grace and power of an earthbound god. Madrid watched as the large Protoss made his way over to the surviving warrior and crouched beside him. There was something distinctively regal about him, something heroic in his proud stature that commanded immediate reverence. Like the warrior, the larger Protoss was heavily ornamented in archaic-looking battle armor, but it was the color of molten silver clouds just before the breaking of dawn. The armor was also inscribed with swirling, cryptic runes that seemed to pulse with power. Beneath the grand armor, the Protoss was adorned with a flowing, midnight-hued stole that reminded Madrid of a priest's mantle. The Protoss's face and skin bore the same look as the warrior's, yet harsh lines and wrinkles around his eyes gave the impression that he was very old, marked by untold years and experiences.

Again, Madrid heard the warrior's thunderous voice in his head as the two Protoss began arguing with one another. The large Protoss stood up and gazed intently at the paralyzed Terran. Madrid cowered in his combat suit as the Protoss crossed the room and knelt carefully before him.

Reaching out with his huge, scaled hand, the Protoss placed it gently on the Terran's forehead. Terrified, Madrid shrank away from the Protoss, but was surprised to find the touch was warm. The Protoss closed his eyes and seemed to sink into deep meditation. A strange, tingling energy raced along Madrid's nerve endings, and he imagined a slight tugging in his brain, as if the Protoss was scanning his body and manipulating the delicate process of his mind.

Madrid found himself unable to scream as terror overtook him once more. This is it, he thought to himself. The Protoss abruptly took his hand away and stood up. He walked back over to the warrior, and they conversed again. Slowly, Madrid began to comprehend the meaning of the Protoss's thoughts. He had no idea what the Protoss had done to his mind, but it allowed him to understand their thoughts just as if they were speaking his own language.

“This world is lost, Executor!” Madrid hear the warrior say. “Let us depart this place and strike elsewhere!”

The other Protoss shook his head in disagreement. “That is my decision to make, Thuras. I will not abandon this world until all our efforts have been exhausted.” The one called Thuras turned and stared at Madrid, suddenly aware that his thoughts had been overheard. The warrior stood up slowly, holding Madrid in his harsh gaze. Madrid’s frayed nerves finally snapped.

“Go ahead and get it over with, you son of a bitch!” Madrid screamed. The warrior’s eyes blinked in puzzlement. “I know you can understand me!” he spat at the Protoss. “Make your move, you ugly bastard!”

“My business here has nothing to do with you, Terran,” Thuras said coldly. Madrid was surprised that he could understand the Protoss so clearly. He could tell that the warrior was restraining his fury. “You would do well to keep silent in my presence. Unlike some of my comrades, I have little patience for your kind.” The warrior’s threat was unmistakable, and despite his burning fever, Madrid felt chilled to the bone.

“Be at ease, Thuras,” the other Protoss said. “This Terran is afflicted and poses no threat to you.”

Thuras lowered his eyes and bowed respectfully to his superior. “Your pardon, Executor. I reacted in haste,” Thuras said humbly.

“I understand, young zealot. You are wounded and have lost an honored comrade to the enemy. Yet, in your grief, you must remember that we have come here to protect the Terrans,” the older Protoss said.

“With your leave, Executor, I wish to return to the battle outside. There are many comrades to be avenged this day,” Thuras said resolutely.

The larger Protoss nodded to him. “Go then, with my blessings, young Thuras,” he replied. “I will remain here and tend to this Terran. Khassar de Templari.”

“En Taro Adun,” Thuras answered, and quickly made his way outside. The large Protoss turned toward Madrid and held him with his sapphire gaze, and though it lacked the disdain that emanated from Thuras’ burning stare, Madrid found himself shrinking from the mighty Protoss anyway.

“You need not fear me, Terran. I am Tassadar, Executor of the Protoss fleet that has come here to protect you,” he stated in a soothing voice. Madrid gritted his teeth and refused to accept the Protoss’s words.

“Bullshit,” he snapped. “This is just some kinda mind-job you’re pulling. I’ve seen what you’ve done. I lived through it!” The Protoss looked surprised at the Terran’s rage. “Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m saying! You remember Chau Sara!” he shouted accusingly. “I was there when your damn fleet burned the planet down to the bedrock!”

Tassadar lowered his gaze and leaned heavily against the cold wall. The alien poison in Madrid’s blood surged at the Protoss’ apparent moment of weakness. The Terran screamed, “I had family on that planet, and they’re dead now because of you! Is that your idea of protection?”

Tassadar paused in contemplation. He lifted his head and looked at Madrid evenly.

“You are correct, Terran,” Tassadar said flatly. “My fleet did burn the world of Chau Sara. Regrettably, I was ordered to do so by the Protoss conclave which I serve.”

Murderer, the sinister alien consciousness whispered in Madrid’s mind.

“Your bosses ordered you to wipe out a colony of four hundred thousand people!” Madrid hissed. “You murdered entire families that never once did you or yours the slightest harm!” He felt the temperature rising again and had to focus to stay conscious.

“You are mistaken,” Tassadar replied, suddenly defensive. “The Conclave ordered me to burn the planet because it had been infested by a malignant alien presence. The culling of the Terran colonists was an unfortunate transpiration. Their

lives were of little concern to my superiors, many of whom believe that the eradication of the Zerg should be paramount to any other duty. Even our duty to protect the lesser races under our care.”

“Lesser races? What the hell are you talking about? What’s the Zerg?” Madrid stammered. Tassadar straightened and looked up at the roof of the room as if the stars beyond it were lulling him with some unheard lullaby. With a start, he turned back to Madrid.

“There is so much that your people do not understand about the nature of things,” Tassadar said sadly. “So much, I fear that all of your worlds will be consumed by the time you learn. The Zerg are a race of insatiable destroyers who have come from the far reaches of the cosmos. For many generations, the Zerg Swarm has ravaged its way across countless worlds, striving to accelerate its evolution by incorporating the strongest races that it encounters. Now it has come to claim humanity as its own.”

Unity, the alien presence insisted.

“I’ve heard them,” Madrid admitted nervously. “I can hear the voice in my mind now.”

Tassadar nodded and looked upon the Terran’s fevered condition with concern.

“The Overmind. You hear the Overmind speaking to you. It embodies the collected consciousness of the Zerg Swarm. All of its ... minions hear its call and must obey.”

Madrid stared at the Protoss, letting the words sink in. “No! I would never give in to them!” he hissed. “I’m a man, not some mindless animal!”

“That distinction is now only valid for a matter of time. You know what you are becoming. You can feel the Zerg’s virulent bloodlust within you now,” Tassadar said bluntly. Madrid’s body began to spasm uncontrollably. “Your nervous system has been infected with the Zerg’s hyperevolutionary virus. Your body is processing Zerg genes and is rapidly mutating on a cellular level. In time, you will become an agent of the Swarm and will be irrevocably bound to the will of the Overmind.”

Madrid’s breath quickened as his body continued to shake violently. “But we never saw this Overmind or any swarm on Chau Sara!” he gasped with short breaths. His shaking was becoming more violent. “There was nothing there! I just don’t understand why all those people had to die,” he said weakly, lapsing into a fit of coughing.

Tassadar’s brow furled in sympathy as the Terran began to spit up blood. When Madrid’s fit eased, Tassadar continued.

“Although the Swarm itself had not yet reached the planet, its advanced hive spores had. Your technology was unable to detect the subtle infestation, but I assure you that it was there. My superiors ordered the planet burned to prevent the infestation from spreading to any more of your worlds,” Tassadar said. “Though I grieve for the loss of every Terran life on Chau Sara, I fear that many more of your kind will die if the Swarm’s rampage is not stopped. The Swarm is the most dire threat that this galaxy has ever known.”

“I had no idea....” Madrid whispered. Tears welled up in his eyes as the true horror of his situation settled in his mind. Through the psychic link that existed between them, he could see into the depths of Tassadar’s spirit and was certain of the sincerity of the Protoss’s words.

“Your metamorphosis has progressed too far,” Tassadar explained stoically. “I am afraid that I cannot save you. The infestation, once begun, is irreversible. However, if you wish, I can give you peace.” Madrid looked into his sorrowful azure eyes and immediately understood what the offer entailed.

“I knew some Protoss bastard would kill me sooner or later,” Madrid said chidingly. “I just didn’t figure it’d be this sociable.” Tassadar made a peculiar sound. Madrid was unsure if it was a bemused laugh or a sign of remorse.

Madrid sucked in his last conscious breath. So this is how it all ends, he thought to himself. Better this than the alternative. He summoned up all his courage and gave a trusting nod to Tassadar. With his great hand resting gently on the human’s fevered forehead, Tassadar let loose the full force of his power. Searing blue arcs of psychic fire shot out

from his hand and engulfed Madrid's limp body. The bolts surged through the Terran's limbs, burning out the invasive alien cells within his blood.

Madrid's pain was immediately washed away as he felt his consciousness slowly rise out of his body. A swirling vortex of blue, violet, and warm gold flashed before his awestruck eyes. His mind reeled, not in confusion, but in the realization that all his earthly troubles had washed away with his pain.

Reaching out with his consciousness, Madrid sensed Protoss spirits gathered around him. He became fleetingly aware of hundreds and then thousands of their minds, all scattered throughout the swirling ether that he beheld. Each of them emitted strength and nobility that beamed out of the vortex like white-hot rays of sunlight. As Madrid watched, the pure white beams began to coalesce into a single, shining band of inexplicable beauty and power. Madrid imagined the glowing band to be a great, fluid lifeline that spanned the entirety of the Protoss's existence. The mere sight of it filled his spirit with a profound bliss.

"En Taro Adun, brave Terran: Unto the grace of Adun may your spirit soar," Tassadar intoned reverently. He opened his eyes and looked down upon the still body of Andre Madrid. Though the Terran's body was ravaged and broken, his face shone with peace and wonderment, and Tassadar knew the Terran could no longer feel the pain of his affliction. He remained kneeling for a few moments while thin wisps of smoke drifted up from the Terran's blackened power suit. Regaining his composure, the mighty Protoss lifted Madrid's body from the broken floor. Carrying the lifeless husk as if it were a sleeping child, he walked outside into the half-light of the setting sun.