

StarCraft: Hybrid, by Mickey Neilson, is a Blizzard-authorized StarCraft short story published in Amazing Stories Magazine, issue 601. Amazing Stories Magazine is now defunct.

AMANDA HALEY sat in the corner of the dimly lit cell with her knees tucked to her chest, concentrating with fixed purpose on the locked door across the room.

A voice inside her head (that nagging voice she always chose to ignore) reminded her that she had tried to force the lock for the past several days and failed...so why should this time be any different?

Amanda drove the voice out of her mind. As she did, she felt the mechanism inside the lock give slightly...then the sensation was gone. Amanda exhaled heavily.

In the week since her capture Amanda had heard, day by day, cell doors in the hall outside phasing open. She had heard the cries and pleas of her fellow crew members as they were led to whatever godforsaken fate awaited them. The sounds of those phase doors and woeful pleas had plagued what few minutes of sleep she was able to manage each night. But most disconcerting of all was the fact that, day by day, those sounds were growing closer.

She knew it was only a matter of time before the lock on her door would disengage, and that door would phase open (They won't disengage the lock with their finger, not like a human would, she thought with a shudder), and the creatures would take her. They would take her and they would—

Just focus on the lock.

Although she could not physically see the lock, she could picture it perfectly in her mind. She had spent two cycles as a medic on board an orbiting platform, assisting patients in cells not too different from this one. Gathering her strength once more, she closed her eyes and imagined the lock; imagined the disengage button giving way under her invisible finger....

It was no use. She felt her energies being dampened, diluted somehow, making the strain of concentrating on the lock nearly unbearable. It wasn't just fatigue; they were interdicting. Her brain felt as if a thick, heavy blanket had been stretched across it. She tried to relax, to think of better times—times when the only monsters in her life were human.

She tried to tell herself that she was being kept alive for a reason; that whatever these creatures held in store for her, she could be able to survive or at least have a chance of escape.

Just then the lights dimmed even more, flickering several times before slowly returning to their former dull state of illumination. Last call, said that voice inside her mind. She forced the voice way, concentrating once more on the situation at hand.

One fact she felt sure of was that the purpose of her being here was related to her ability. This certainly wasn't the first time her "gift" had drawn the attention of others. She focused one last burst of effort on the lock without result. Then, exhaling deeply and resting her forehead against her knees, Amanda thought of the past...and wondered if she would live to see the future.

DARKNESS ENVELOPED the Zerg Queen as she entered the long, desolate corridor.

The blackness, however, was not absolute. A circle of light like a full moon loomed at the passageway's end. The symbolism that could be drawn from this particular atmosphere was not lost on the Queen—trite, outlandish notions such as transcendence, passage to an afterlife, or even rebirth, just to name a few. A half-smile tugged at the corner of her lips. Such musing need not occupy her mind. They were wretchedly sentimental; but far worse than that, they were also inextricably...human.

The circle of light grew larger and finally gave way to a catwalk overlooking a massive, gloomy chamber. The catwalk itself was a stark contrast to its immediate surroundings. Much of the orbiting platform's infrastructure and processes (including electrical power and artificial gravity, the latter of which her kind had little use for) were still functional

despite the station's assimilation by the Zerg. Her Brood had simply taken what the humans had built and adapted it to suit their means. And was it not efficient to do so? The Queen certainly thought it was. Adapting was something she had been doing her entire life.

The creature who had once been known as Sarah Kerrigan stood, observing. On either side of her position, sinuous cords snaked out to the center of the room. Similar cordage adorned the three adjoining walls and trailed across the ceiling and down, like the massive web of some impossible spider. The cords pulsed and heaved with peristaltic motion, making the chamber seem alive.

Suspended at the center of this morass was an expansive, amniotic sac. The liquid inside the membranous enclosure sloshed back and forth, making the sac sway drunkenly. Inside the cocoon, surging cords wrapped around a human host like the roots of a strangler tree, winding their way into the nostrils and mouth of the subject.

The voice of the Cerebrate invaded the Queen's mind: Preparations are complete.

The Queen's unwavering eyes stared at the human subject within the cocoon.

Commence, she replied telepathically.

The subject lurched once, then fell still as the hyperevolutionary virus was fed into him.

The Queen looked at a bank of suspended monitors to the immediate left of her position. The monitors offered views of the various containment cells and the human animals occupying them.

Her eyes traveled to one of the monitors on the far left, where a young, blonde-haired woman sat in the corner of her cell. Her demeanor was unlike that of the others; this one seemed intent on something, as if she still clung to hope. What a waste, thought the Queen. Still, there was something about her. The Queen remembered a time when she had inhabited a cell of her own. It seemed like an eternity had passed since then, since she had been so vulnerable, so naïve...so human.



“CEASE YOUR sniveling!” shouted Lieutenant Rumm as he leaned closer. “Pity and weakness are synonymous. Remorse is forbidden. Compunction is forbidden. Do you understand?”

Young Sarah Kerrigan wiped at her cheek and returned Rumm’s stare with mild defiance. She sat at the sterile, metallic table, both hands resting placidly on its surface. A dark-colored brand on her forearm, marking her as specimen number 24, stood out against her pale skin.

“It is my job to break you, child. And that’s exactly what I intend to do.” The lieutenant began pacing.

Sarah had scored highly on all phases of the psi-evals despite the fact that she was only eight years old. At this point she was physically just a shade of the beautiful woman she would eventually become. Shy and somewhat gawky, she was gifted by a symmetry that would, with time and under the proper conditions, produce a stunning example of a human being.

It was Lieutenant Rumm’s job to peel away the girl’s aspect, layer by layer, until he came to what he knew lay beneath: an incredible, innate power shared by a select few and almost never evident at such a tender age. The girl had displayed this power only once, but that single episode had been more than enough to send her father into a downward spiral of insanity and land her unfortunate mother a spot in the TarKossian morgue.

This raw, formidable ability was much like the child herself: a wholly undeveloped source of potential, a gift that would grow and mature with age. It fell to the Confederacy to influence the girl's ability in a way that would suit its needs. And in order to achieve such a goal, the lieutenant knew full well that the first stumbling block he must overcome was the girl's judgment—her ability to distinguish between what she had come to believe was right and wrong.

Hence, the kitten: a cute little animal that the girl had been allowed to play with and grow close to over the past three weeks. This particular "cute" little bundle of fur was now suffering from a malignant tumor, a growth implanted in the animal by the science department. Lieutenant Rumm gestured toward the kitten, which lay prone, breathing in long, shuddery gasps.

"Obviously, the animal's condition will result in death—a slow and, I'm sure, a painful one. You alone can end its suffering. You know this, and so do I. These games will avail you nothing. Trying to hide your ability is senseless and futile. Now do as you've been told."

Just then a long, wailing scream echoed from somewhere outside the room. The voice rose to a pitch, then came to a sudden, abrupt halt. Silence followed.

"I won't," the girl replied.

"That wasn't a request. It was an order, and failure to execute that order will have dire consequences. Do it, child. I am growing weary, so do it now." The lieutenant's thinly veiled anger was beginning to surface. He stopped pacing once again.

"No."

The lieutenant's left eyebrow twitched. He took a deep breath, then said. "One last time—"

"No! I won't, I won't, I won't!"

Circling behind the table, the lieutenant drew his weapon—a standard-issue repeating—and lowered it to the kitten's head.

He spoke in a calm voice. "End the animal's life, or I'll do it for you."

A fresh tear fell from the girl's right eye. The lieutenant felt the pistol in his hand waver slightly—or was that his imagination?

"I said no. If you don't know what that means, then go ahead and shoot."

The lieutenant smiled. This was going to be fun indeed.

"I'm afraid that won't do, little one, won't do at all. No easy way out for you, child."

The lieutenant lowered his weapon.

"We're through for today."

Behind the little girl, a door opened silently. Stepping down, the child glanced briefly at the kitten and wiped her cheek before leaving the room.

Lieutenant Rumm stood motionless, hands clasped behind his back. A skittish man dressed in white stepped into the room. The lieutenant glanced briefly in the tech's direction.

"Shall we recommend employing a neuro-adjuster?"

"Not yet." The lieutenant wanted to save that unpleasantness until last. He knew that allowing an adjuster to meddle in the girl's brain could kill the patient. The science, after all, was not yet exact...and their methods were questionable, to say the least.

“Perhaps they’re wrong about her,” said the tech.

“I doubt that,” the lieutenant replied. Still, he wasn’t sure. The proof would come, however; it would come later that evening, as the lieutenant went about the nightly routine of polishing his boots, ironing his uniform, and cleaning his weapon...for he would find that the triggering mechanism of his standard-issue repeating pistol had been melted to a lump.

AMANDA LAY curled in a fetal position in the corner of her cell. She had stopped concentrating on the lock three nights ago, but not because she had given up. She had simply come to the conclusion that if she could save her strength, somehow ferret away a reserve of her energies, the perhaps—just perhaps—she would have enough in store for one small, final attempt at freedom. But the timing would have to be just right.

Last night she heard the sound she had dreaded would come—the crackling, electrical sound of the access door in the room next to hers phasing open. She heard muffled cries, pleading, and a brief struggle. Oh, my God, Henderson, they’re taking Henderson, she had thought to herself. Just a few hours ago, the lights in her cell had dimmed and flickered ominously once again.

You’re next, said the voice within her. She told the voice to shut up. It was the voice of weakness, and she refused to listen. Not while she still drew breath. She had seen her share of hard times, of turmoil and tribulation, but she had persevered through the worst of it. She would find a way out of this, or die trying.

Amanda hugged her arms close and lay in the darkness of the cell, waiting.

THE QUEEN was disappointed.

The slobbering, insensate monstrosity before her was a useless failure. How long would this take? Soon they would run out of subjects, although it would be a small matter to procure more. Still, the lack of progress, the lack of activity, annoyed her. She would much rather be engaged in some desperate battle on foreign soil than babysitting lab rats on this derelict platform.

She reminded herself of the possibilities, of the potential that lay in the experiments.

The metamorphosis had taken only two days in the latest of the experiments—far shorter than the Queen’s own gestation period had been. But, thus far, they had been unable to duplicate the result of her change. The Queen’s situation had been unique, resulting in a being who retained the mental faculties and psychic abilities particular to specific humans, while at the same time inheriting Zerg traits of regeneration and near invulnerability—in short, a perfect creation.

The Queen knew it would be impossible to reconstruct such a magnificent being as she. But if they could just come close....The Zerg had long been fascinated by the human psychic potential, and coveted it; coveted it in the way a land-bound organism might look to a winged creature and covet flight.

So far, all attempts had ended in failure. The human subjects, after the transformation, would awaken brain-dead and invalid—horribly malformed anomalies like the one before her now. Each time, however, adjustments in the formula were made; each time she felt they were getting closer.

The voice of the Cerebrate coursed once more through her mind: Refinements complete. Incompatibility with subjects possessing subordinate gene pattern. Ramifications of gene pattern/formula codependence are currently being assessed.

Interesting, thought the Queen. Perhaps some progress was being made after all.

She scanned the monitor bank, her eyes falling on the monitor displaying the cell of the next candidate. It was the young woman. The girl had hardly moved in the past three days. Perhaps she had given up after all; perhaps she wasn’t as strong as the Queen had thought.

She had telepathically called one of the workers from below. The aberrant creature stepped forth out of the shadows. It was a mutated, almost reptilian being that at one time may have been a human. The worker did not meet the Queen's penetrating gaze.

"Bring out the young female subject," she said. "Her time has come."

THE TUMOR on the kitten's neck had now grown to three times its original size. The rise and fall of the animal's rib cage as it breathed was almost indiscernible.

Sarah sat staring at the kitten through bleary eyes. Lieutenant Rumm smiled. Somewhere outside the room, a patient shrieked unintelligibly.

Lieutenant Rumm reached into his pocket, withdrawing a fused clump of metal. He threw the mass onto the table, where it landed with a heavy thud.

"Do you know what this is?"

No answer.

"It used to be a trigger assembly. The trigger assembly to my weapon, to be exact. The possibility of this happening without outside interference—such as a plutonium leak, let's say—is about a thousand to one. I brought this matter before my superiors, but the trigger mechanism itself wasn't enough to convince them. They require incontrovertible evidence. And so our game continues."

The lieutenant began pacing. Sarah thought it was a wonder that he had not yet worn a permanent rut in the floor.

"I am convinced beyond a doubt that ability was the cause of this. You used it to neutralize my weapon, yet refuse to use it on the tumor. Why?"

Silence.

"I have my own theories, of course. I believe you refuse to channel your ability into any thing organic because of what you did to your mother."

At this Sarah looked up, her eyes suddenly very wide.

"What did she do, child, send you to bed without supper? Chastise you? Yell at you?"

Number 24 looked down slightly.

"Ah, she yelled at you. And so you used your ability to try and make her stop. And what happened next, hmm?"

Tears began to run down the girl's cheeks.

"Massive cerebral hemorrhaging, as I remember. I spoke to your father, who saw the whole thing happen. He would say only one thing, over and over. Do you know what that one thing was?"

Sarah closed her eyes.

"He said, 'I saw her head come apart'"

The girl bolted to a standing position, her hands balled into white, tiny fists at her sides, her voice breaking as she screamed: "I'll never use it on anyone ever again, and you can't make me! You can't make me!"

A door on the side of the room opened, and two men dressed in sealed flak armor emerged. They grabbed the girl by her arms and feet and dragged her through the main doorway and down the hall.

Lieutenant Rumm stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his head lowered in thoughtful consideration.

On the table not far away, the little kitten exhaled one final, quavering breath and was still. The lieutenant did not notice.

AMANDA COULD feel the moment drawing near. She told herself not to look when the creature stepped through the doorway. The distraction would be too much. She could not afford to have her focus interrupted. She prayed that whatever dampening field these monstrosities held over her was not wholly unyielding.

A noise, intermittent and barely audible, came from the hallway outside. It was a sound she didn't immediately recognize. Then, with dawning horror, she identified what the sound was—it was slithering.

The noise drew undeniably closer. Amanda shut her eyes tight and forced all nonessential thoughts from her mind. Time's up, said a tormenting, childish voice inside her. End of the line.

Amanda took a deep breath, feeling her heart pounding in her chest. She hoped against the hope that the voice inside her was wrong. No more thoughts. Clean the slate, Amanda, and steel yourself....

As the lights began to flicker, Amanda heard the crackling sound of the door across from her phasing open.

THE QUEEN glanced over at the monitor bank as the cocoon underwent preparation. Her eyes, growing wider, were fixed on the monitor displaying the young woman's cell as the lights inside began returning to half power. She could not believe what she was seeing.

The worker had stopped in the doorway, tentaclelike appendages clutching at either side of its cranium. As she continued to watch, captivated, the worker crumpled to the floor, its head expanding.

Unwelcome memories rushed back to the Queen in a flood: the image of her mother clutching at her temples and screaming; her father observing with eyes full of horrific revulsion at first, the only blankness; the sound of her mother's skull splitting open....

The Queen shut her blazing eyes tight, reopened them, fixated once again on the current crisis.

The young woman inside the cell was gone. The worker was now lying still, its lifeblood oozing from a rupture in its skull and spreading across the metallic tiles.

The Queen took the catwalk in the opposite direction of the monitors, toward the cargo bay access lift. Once there, she stepped in and pressed the button marked HANGARS 1-12.

How could this have happened? She asked herself, even as she answered the question.

She had simply underestimated the girl, had lumped her in with all the rest of her kind—human beings made inferior by fear and emotional dependence. But, as the Queen had suspected once before, this one was different. The Queen could not help but feel a kind of...respect.

Telepathically summoning one of the warriors to follow, the Queen stepped out of the elevator and into the hangar level. Now that her instincts had been reawakened, the Queen was fairly certain that the female was intelligent enough to hope that some of her race's craft had been left in the hangar. Of course, all such nonessentials had been jettisoned long ago, but the subject did not know that.

And so the Queen proceeded to the only lift connecting the cell-block level with the hangar level. She stood in front of the doors, waiting. She heard an engine winding down, gears grinding, a gush of hydraulic steam...then the doors before her opened, and she looked into the eyes of Amanda Haley.

AMANDA FELT her heart sink. The creature standing before her must surely be the leader of the monstrosities. The characteristics that marked her as alien—from her luminescent yellow eyes and olive skin to the spindly blades protruding from her back and shoulders—also served to mask something beneath: features that suggested that this creature had not only been human at one time, but had been attractive as well.

Glancing briefly over the creature's shoulder, Amanda could see that the hangar was empty. Any hope of escaping this place was instantly dashed. Don't give up. Not yet, she told herself, forcing her eyes to meet those of the alien being before her.

"I applaud your effort, though it was in vain," said the Queen. "I am Kerrigan, matriarch of the Zerg. I would know your name."

"Just go ahead and get it over with," retorted Amanda.

"Oh, we shall." The Queen smiled. The girl remained defiant even in the face of unquestionable defeat. The Queen was reminded so much of herself that for a moment she felt—

There has been a setback, Queen? Interrupted the Cerebrate.

Not at all, she responded. Merely an intriguing turn of events.

I trust the operation will continue to run smoothly, answered the Cerebrate.

Put your trust where you will, returned the Queen. The schedule I adhere to is mine alone.

Just then the warrior arrived. The Queen sent a message. The creature obeyed, wrapping a snakelike cord around Amanda's throat with one appendage and restraining her arms with the other.

Amanda closed her eyes, hoping that whatever the creature did, it would be quick.

A diminutive, spiked tentacle wriggled out from under the creature's skin. Amanda felt a prick as the spike-needle pierced one of the tiny veins at her wrist.

The warrior stood still for a moment, then turned its head in the direction of the Queen.

Genetic strain incompatible, it relayed telepathically.

The Queen nodded.

Then the formula will likely be ineffective, offered the Cerebrate.

The Queen knew. Most likely the process would result in failure, stripping the woman of any shred of humanity, rendering her a base, servile mutation for the rest of her days. The brave girl would become a thoughtless, debilitated drone.

You wish to proceed, Queen? asked the Cerebrate.

The Queen hesitated.

Queen...?

THIS ROOM was new. Sarah had not been taken to this place before. She sat abounded to a chair with reinforced restraints, facing Lieutenant Rumm, who paced back and forth before a blank wall.

The lieutenant stopped pacing and lowered his somber gaze to the little girl. "I want you to know that you forced me to do this. It was not my intention to take this course of action."

Sarah stared back, impassive.

With an electric hissing sound, the solid wall behind the lieutenant phased into transparency, affording a view of an adjacent room, not unlike the one Sarah was in. Bound in a chair similar to Sarah's, and facing her, was the emaciated form of Patrick Kerrigan, her father.

She had been able to visit him only once since “the incident.” He had appeared then much as he did now—staring forward, not looking at Sarah but through her, with wide, unseeing eyes.

Sarah felt her throat swell. Her eyes grew bleary.

Standing next to Patrick was a tech holding a pressurized syringe in his right hand. The sleeve on Patrick’s right arm had been rolled up; veins stood out like ropes along his scrawny forearm.

“The serum in the syringe is the same that was injected into our little friend the kitten,” the lieutenant said in a matter-of-fact tone. “If you do not agree to cooperate with us fully from now on, your father will be injected.”

Sarah’s brow creased, her lips becoming a thin line.

“You do remember what happened to the kitten,” said the lieutenant, drawing nearer. “Death will not come quickly, child—no, not at all. It will be a marathon of suffering, even to such a dull-witted specimen as he.”

The lieutenant was leaning over Sarah’s chair now, both hands plant firmly on the armrests, waiting for a response. Looking in the girl’s eyes, he saw fear, pity, and agony...but not compliance.

“So be it,” he said. Setting his jaw, the lieutenant turned to the window and nodded his head.

Inside the adjacent room, the tech placed the syringe to Patrick’s arm.

“No! If you do this, I’ll use my power to kill him and me!”

Sarah’s wide, furious eyes turned to the lieutenant. “I’ll do it—I swear I will! I’ll kill both of us!”

Suddenly Sarah felt a prick in her wrist. A needle in the arm of the chair had punctured her skin, delivering a powerful sedative into her bloodstream. Sarah felt fire flow in her veins, and the room began to go dark. The last thing she saw was her father’s haggard, uncomprehending face and those wide, oblivious eyes.

The lieutenant breathed a sigh of relief as Sarah’s chin slumped to her chest. He turned and made a brief vertical motion with his hand. The tech nodded and removed the syringe. The wall shimmered and became opaque once more.

The lieutenant stood looking at the little girl, his emotions conflicting. He did not relish the decision that he must now make, but he was an animal of the Confederacy, and ever since he was a child he had always bowed to the wishes of superiors, be they right or wrong. A neuro-adjuster would be employed. He would recommend it. The little girl would never be the same again.

THE QUEEN stood once more overlooking the massive, gloomy chamber, waiting for the cocoon to open. The decision to continue had not been an easy one. But then again, why should she care for the welfare of some human subject, brave or not? Because of the potential, she told herself. There’s still a possibility...

Metamorphosis complete, interjected the Cerebrate.

The Queen watched as the bottom of the sac opened up, spilling its contents onto the floor below. There, huddling and shivering in a fetal position, was what remained of Amanda Haley: a slobbering, malformed, half-Zerg, half-human genetic defect.

The Queen sighed, sending a telepathic message for the creature to stand, which it is immediately obeyed, struggling to an upright position, on shaky, alien limbs.

Another drone, thought the Queen. Her mind belongs to the swarm now. The potential is wasted.

As suspected, the formula was incompatible, offered the Cerebrate.

The Queen nodded. The Cerebrate had a way of stating the obvious. Looking down at her arm, the woman who had once been known as Sarah Kerrigan could see the faintest traces of an old mark—a scar, really, —that still glistened despite the molecular changes her body had undergone. It read “24.”

“So be it,” whispered Kerrigan as she spun on her heel and stepped once more into the long, desolate corridor.