

STARCRRAFT

A WAR ON

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BILZARD
ENTERTAINMENT

The zerglings got Irmischer at the Battle of Lawndale 12, a backwater incursion during the Brood War that no one ever writes about in the history books.

Irmischer was only a kid, right out of upper school, fresh faced and full of piss and vinegar, the type that never lasts long in the Dominion Marine Corps. At 18, with no real prospects, he went door to door selling unregulated fones to make enough money to take girls out and pay rent. One day he knocked on the door of Sergeant Robert Maury, a Dominion marine recruiter who wasn't all that interested in Irm's wares. Three days later he was on a dropship to Turaxis II for boot camp, getting his head filled with stories of heroic combat, legendary R&R trips, and the glory of earning medals. But fighting zerg wasn't exactly the eminent career path he was told it would be. There was nothing glorious about watching men, though more often than not it was watching boys, be shredded alive in front of you, savagely ripped apart by monsters, blood spurting from their mouths and filling their CMC's helmets like a macabre daiquiri blender.

At nights when all of Rho Squadron were huddled together in the dank innards of a quickly set-up barracks, he'd pull up a picture on one of his unregulated fones and show the boys "the girl I'm gonna go and get once this war is over." She was a pretty blonde thing with looping, curly hair worn in the fashion of the Marlowe elite. Her name was Mary Lou, and he'd met her just days before meeting Sgt. Maury. "Hell... you ain't gonna get any of that, boy. That there is high class," Birch, an older marine, would razz him. "She's more suited for a stud like me."

They'd met at one of the underground stimbars that were supposed to be illegal, unless you were wealthy enough to own one or knew the right people who could get you in. It was a torrid night that he only remembered in adrenaline-filled flashes of memory—dancing, laughing, Scotty Bolger's. He said they kissed. At least, he thought they did. He hoped. He got her contact info after, and they'd shared exorbitantly priced interplanetary messages ever since. As the weeks went on and he spent more and more time on the front lines, a gasp away from death, she slowly became more than a girl to him. She was an idea. An idea of a time when he didn't spend his days in heavy CMC armor, huddled together with a bunch of older marines, more like brothers, teasing him about every little thing that came out of his "naïve" mouth, Irm praying for the days he'd no longer be "the kid." Her image reminded him of a time before he'd heard the sound of a swarm of zerglings charging toward him, before he knew the feeling of certainty that there would be blood and gore and death. That sort of knowledge changed a man.

"You'll see," he'd always say with the dreamer's smile of the ignorant, gazing at her image, getting lost in its potential. "Yep, you, sir, will see."

The day the zerglings got Irmischer wasn't all that different than countless other days in war. Most of them were spent waiting. They were spent sitting around and listening to the wind howl and fade into a dull quiet. It was a pregnant quiet with a dark promise.

Rho Squad had been assigned to hold the line and defend Lawndale 12, a small communications relay on the south peninsula of Anselm. They'd dug deep trenches around the satellite system a week before and set up bunkers and two siege tanks on the perimeter. A base had been established to receive data and beam it out to the fleets deep in the sector. A barracks had been built as well, but Rho Squad never

spent time in it. Precious seconds out of the field could mean death in an assault, so the discomfort of dirt-laden trenches became their home.

No one had thought the zerg would ever really attack Lawndale. The strategic value in the grand scheme of the war was minute. So when the alarm ripped through the silence and Virgil Caine, Rho Squadron's sergeant, began barking orders, his marines all scrambled to their feet and prepared for the worst. But it wasn't the worst. It was suicide for the zerglings. There was no real point. The beasts were outnumbered and outclassed. Still the stupid, seemingly mindless xenos came anyway.

You'd hear them way before you'd see them, yards out, the churning buzz of their chittering rattling into your ears.

"Why they coming? What could they possibly want?" Irmischer could see them now, twenty slavering zerglings, teeth bared, talons poised, horrific ooze frothing from their mouths, their strong legs propelling them forward. They looked like rabid and mutated dogs turned loose by some cruel master.

Irmischer would never get answers to his questions. The sound of hypersonic spikes filled the air, and there was no more time to consider. There was only action.

The zerglings were outnumbered, but it didn't matter; it was as if any terran death was worth their own ten times over. Rho Squad quickly realized that command had made a bad decision in ordering the trenches dug. Several zerglings crawled their way into the tight confines, and, given the bulk of the CMC armor the marines wore, many of Rho Squad were trapped in there with them, friendly fire hailing down and crashing into the makeshift dirt walls.

Irmischer screamed when the zerglings got him. He howled as a razor-sharp talon ripped through his visor and pushed deep through his clavicle, followed by another, which tore open his armor as if it were a tin can.

He was still alive when the last of the bastards were killed. He was still wondering why they had assaulted when they had no chance of survival. He was wondering why they'd come just to kill so few, to kill him. As he faded away, stims jutting into his veins, heart slowing to a gentle thump, thump, his CMC suit safeguards trying to seal off torn arteries, Birch cradling his frame while Sgt. Caine watched, Irmischer whispered, "Mary Lou."

Virgil Caine screamed into the darkness. He had sweat through his sheets during the night and now was cold from kicking the covers off of his naked body.

"Virgil!" Rufi said, clutching his arm and pulling him back down to the softness of their pillows and her lips. "You're here, baby. You're with me." She nuzzled his strong shoulder, her delicate blonde hair like silk against the stone of his muscles. Virgil was breathing hard, almost panting. His chest heaved up and down and his heart pounded.

"Hell. I'm... I'm sorry, Ru... I'm..."

"Shhh. Hush, baby. I know. I know."

Over the year of their courtship she had grown used to his night terrors... his memories. When they got engaged, she committed to living with them. She had grown used to the times when she'd wake him up, wiping the tears off of his face, staring at the tender incongruity of a man of his size, his strength, crying in his sleep. It was just one more thing that made her love him.

"I just... They're back, baby. I can't believe they're back. I always knew, but... a man hopes, you know?"

A woman does too, she thought. "You're not answering the recall, Virgil. You don't have to go back. I told you. We decided: Daddy will take care of this. We gonna start over. Ain't no one is going to find out who you are. No one needs to know where you been. Tomorrow night, all this worry will be behind you."

He thought about those words a moment before answering. He thought of the possibility of not being the man who had faced down the zerg during the Brood War, the man who'd held the line against wave after wave of zerglings during those long months and survived. He didn't know who he was without that part of his life, and the thought of finding out was one of the more terrifying things he'd ever experienced.

"I know, Ru. I know. Part of me, though... I've never been a man to run before."

"You ain't runnin'. Damn it, Mengsk got his best outta you. He's got new marines to deal with this. What the hell he ever do for you, huh? For us? Daddy paid for your surgeries, not the Dominion. You paid your debt and you know it. How many times you almost die, Virgil? How many friends you lost?"

"I don't want to talk about this anymore." He was thinking about the UNN report he had seen before bed. He was thinking about the images of *them*, a horde rampaging over Tiria, overrunning lines of soldiers. He was thinking of those teeth and talons and that horrible, harmonic chittering sound they made as they charged.

"The recall ain't right, Virgil. It ain't. You're out of the military. They have no right to call you back in just because there's a new threat. You were there four years ago. Let someone else handle this one."

"I told you I ain't going back, Ruffi... So I won't."

He leaned over and kissed her forehead the same way he did every night before they turned off the lights and went to sleep. He pulled her tiny frame toward him, and her warmth and softness felt right. When they came apart, she rubbed her finger across the large jagged scar that ran down his neck to his belly button, then up to the zergling tooth that he wore around his neck on a rope of skalet leather.

"I hate this thing. You know I hate it when you wear it to bed. Pokes me... Take it off."

He smiled. "Alright. I'll take it off." And he did, setting it on the nightstand.

"Tomorrow, we go... All of it will be behind you. 'Sides, it ain't like I'm not sacrificing here too, Virgil. I gotta start over too. Leave my friends, my family. Daddy."

"I know that."

"Now go to sleep, you big lug!"

As she rolled over, Virgil stared at the ceiling fan. It churned around and around, casting bladed shadows against the dark walls illuminated only by yellow moonlight from outside. He thought about the new life Rufi was offering. Salvation from all he'd faced. He wondered if once a man had faced the zerg, lost friends to the zerglings, and looked them in their vacuous, bleak eyes, whether he could ever get them out of the deep recesses of his mind.

The UNN reports were horrific to watch, but he couldn't stop. He had been up since sunrise, glued to the vidscreen and sipping burnt coffee. He'd almost drunk an entire pot by the time Rufi came into the kitchen.

"Why are you watchin' that, Virgil?"

"Don't you wanna know what's going on out there? Gotta make sure we can still even get ourselves a planet-hopper. There's a war on, baby."

On the screen was footage of that war. The carnage of a battlecruiser crashing down into a skyscraper as mutalisks dove, swarming it in midair, spitting projectiles into the flaming, smoking hull. Ribbons of text scraped the bottom half of the monitor. None of the words were positive; they all spoke of mind-numbing body counts, worlds under siege, casualties. A war was certainly on.

"My lord." Rufi covered her mouth with both hands. Even in the morning, hair astray, mascara smeared, she was a creature of petite and caring beauty. "It's horrible."

"That's for sure, darling."

"I'm calling Daddy now. He said the forged identification docs will clear by afternoon."

"Your father's taking a big risk. Plush government jobs like his don't come around every day."

"Don't you think his daughter and future son-in-law are worth a risk like that?"

He nodded, turning back to the screen. A screaming reporter being filmed by a cambot was running down an alley.

"Shoooot." Virgil saw them rounding the corner and storming down, down toward the reporter and cambot. The zerglings were countless: long claws slicing outward, carapaces clattering against the narrow walls, those dead, unfeeling eyes. Closer. CLOSER.

The scene was quickly interrupted as Donny Vermillion, UNN's most celebrated news anchor, appeared in the station's broadcast room, cutting in right before the zerglings filled the cambot's entire frame. He

was ghost white and not doing a good job at covering his revulsion at the brutal death that his colleague was facing.

"Is he...?"

"Yes." Virgil was matter of fact, stopping her before she could ask the obvious. "You calling Dad?"

"Y-y-yes," she answered, leaving the kitchen.

Virgil took a sip of coffee, his mind flashing to the image of zerglings tightly compacted, forcing their way into the alley. It reminded him of those trenches long ago. He exhaled long and hard, letting every ounce of air seep out of his lungs before he closed his eyes. A war was on.

The zerglings got Albee in the Long Shadow canyons of Asteria during one of its famed saffron-hued sunsets.

Albee was a resoc, big and dim, with the blissful grin that only manifested in those who'd had their memories replaced and revised. But that didn't bother Virgil or Birch or Dave or the rest of Rho Squadron. For a resoc, he wasn't so bad. He was a helluva soldier and as lucky as a man could get. Like most resocs, he was part of the front line, flung forward into the throngs of zerg to face down their initial assault. He'd seen and survived more action in his four years, first in the Confederate Corps, then the Dominion Corps, than most soldiers saw in a lifetime... and somehow, he always made it out of the front lines, ichor splattered across his CMC, wearing that big silly grin on his face.

During downtime, Albee would talk about growing up out in the countryside of Halcyon on the prime continent. He reminisced about the beautiful green hills covered in high grass that rolled on for what seemed like an eternity beneath blue skies and little fluffy clouds. He talked about the litter of puppies that followed him everywhere he'd go, tails wagging, and how much he loved their warm, wet licks sandpapering his face on lazy afternoons, nestled up under the shade of a banyan tree. It was an idyllic childhood, and one he missed. It was what he was fighting for, so that others could enjoy moments like he remembered, so that mankind would endure against the zerg and protoss and anyone else who stood in its way.

Of course, they were fake memories, implanted in a resoc chamber on Norris VI. Everyone in Rho Squad knew it and had heard the same exact forged memories from other resocs. But no one in Rho would ever say a bad word about the gentle giant or his illusion of a past. On R&R at Bacchus Moon in the Cat House Bar, one of the privates from Alpha Squad who'd had too many Umojan zippers tried to point out these fake memories to Albee. He was quickly met with a gut punch from Virgil that resulted in a barroom brawl between marines. Virgil wanted Albee's memories to be his own, fake or not: to be the one respite the brute had from the horrors faced day in and day out on the battlefield. No one was going to discredit them.

In the streets of Nephor II, Caine and Albee encountered a woman who, upon seeing the big resoc, began screaming and pointing at him. "The Butcher! My god, he's the Butcher of Pridewater! Here?!"

Stop him! Someone has to stop him!" She was immediately escorted away by local authorities. Neither Caine nor Albee knew what had caused it.

Weeks later, with the incident gnawing away in the back of Caine's mind, he did some research on his lucky front-line soldier. It was then that Caine learned some things were best left unknown when it came to resocialized marines. Albee, who talked about the joy of puppies and the beauty of hills that went on forever, was also known as "The Butcher of Pridewater" for a string of murders that spanned over ten years in the slums of the capital city. He had been known to torture his victims, to enjoy the sound of their pained screams, keeping them alive for days. The images that accompanied the data were horrific, and Caine now understood where the savagery he had seen take hold of Albee on the battlefield came from. But still, every time Albee's eyes would glaze over in bliss as he talked about the smooth beige fur of the tiny puppies, their nipping baby teeth caressing his arms, wet noses sending his skin into goose bumps, Caine could only think about what a success the resoc program actually was—redeeming even the worst among us.

When the zerglings got Albee, he was knee deep in thick purple creep. Rho Squadron had marched into the Long Shadow canyons with a contingent of firebats and backed by the heavy bombardment of siege tanks and goliaths. They had come in to "mop up," as Caine put it. The zerg infestation had been pushed back deep into the canyons to a hive cluster tucked within. As long as a hive survived on Asteria, the zerg would never stop attacking. The strike was a roaring success. Charred hydralisk corpses had sunk into the creep, and spawning pools oozed larvae carcasses. Hatcheries and other structures crumbled in bioplastic splashes.

The thundering boom from siege tank fire rattled Albee's CMC suit. As always he was leading the charge, at the forefront of the battle and pushing deeper into the hive cluster. It didn't seem as if there were many zerg left, most chopped down in a hail of goliath autocannon fire. Albee didn't think there was much to be concerned about when he lowered his gauss rifle to take in the carnage he and his boys had wrought. It was a glorious sight for a terran. The living entities that were zerg structures were now ripped apart and had splattered onto one another, throbbing and pulsing veins jutting out, spraying the ground with a thick bloody miasma. This was victory. Albee felt a sense of pride.

The zerglings burst from a nearby spawning pool with a cacophony of rabid and mostly unheard screams. Albee didn't see them; no one did. The golden light of the famed canyon sunsets had cast everything in muted sepia, and the infamous long shadows had cut swaths of dark over the creep. The moment must have hit home with the lucky private. It was as if the dust particles dancing in the light reminded him of spring leaves drifting in the country breeze of his fake youth.

He had no idea what had hit him as he collapsed face first into the creep. Zerglings poured on top of him, jabbing and cutting, slashing and ripping, like wild animals come to feed, fighting over position as if they took joy in making sure each one of the pack got to pound its talons deep into the mess below them.

When the battle was over, there was nothing left of the Butcher of Pridewater. He was little more than a scattered Rorschach stain on violet creep, nothing more than a memory etched permanently into the minds of those who had served with him.

"You could farm. Shiloh's got great agriculture programs," Ruffi said, stuffing her duffel bag with a lavender blouse.

"We gonna be farmers now?"

"Sure, why not?" Her laughter was musical. "I think that sounds like a nice life; don't you?"

Virgil reached in the closet and yanked a t-shirt off the rack. She waited for his response. He slowly took the hanger out from the collar, tossed it aside, and pushed the shirt into his bag.

"Well?"

The charming grin that had made her first find him attractive, despite the scars and stoic demeanor, filled his face. "Farming sounds like fun... It's honest work... You gonna be my little farmer's wife?"

"Why, you know it. Just think, Virgil: open space, growing our own food. Our kids... if we have kids, that is... well, our kids could grow up with fresh air, have all that land."

"You think we got enough credits to have a lot of land?"

"Things are cheap on Shiloh."

"You bet they are. Why do you think that is?" It wasn't a question. It was a statement.

Her radiant smile drooped to a frown. "Why would you say that? I'm... I'm trying here, Virgil. I'm really trying."

He walked over to her and brought her close. She tried to pull herself away but was instantly returned to his firm grip. "Listen here, little lady. I'll be your farmer husband, and we'll have those kids you're always talking about and a simple little life where we'll know all our neighbors' names and—"

"And never talk about zerglings or... or Rho Squad again?"

He squeezed hard. "Now why would *you* say that? The Corps will always be with me, Ru."

As close as they had gotten over the last year, there would always be a gulf between them. She couldn't possibly understand what he'd experienced.

"Doesn't mean you have to let them rule your life," she said.

"I don't."

She looked him in his eyes. Her smile came back, filling her whole face like a balloon bursting with helium. "I'm gonna be a farmer's wife."

He kissed her gently. "I appreciate this chance to start over. I do."

"Oh! Gotta go. The IDs should be ready. You, mister, need to have that closet cleaned out and be packed by the time I get back."

Virgil let her go and walked to the closet. He clicked the light and kneeled down. He lifted up a pile of shirts. Underneath was a dusty footlocker.

"You can't bring that, Virg."

"I know."

"You gotta get rid of what's inside it too, you know? There can't be any evidence of who we were. You heard Daddy."

"I know."

"I know it ain't easy."

"It's not."

When she left, he turned back to the footlocker and opened it. Memories wafted up with the dank, moldy smell from inside. He hadn't opened it in years. There were medals that he was once so proud of, now collecting dust and hidden away; a dried cigar; a hypersonic spike; one of Irmischer's unregulated fones. Then he felt something sticky. His initial reaction was to yank his hand back. *Creep!* Of course, it wasn't creep. It slowly came to him.

"Dave." The name came out in a breathy exhalation as he pulled out what he'd found. It was a half-used chunk of blue wax... thruster board wax. Virgil brought it up to his nose and took a deep whiff. The rich, nutty scent brought him back to the time he was trying to escape from.

The zerglings got Dave in his own bed, sleeping off a drunken night of poker. Sometimes that was how it happened.

Big Wave Dave came from Santori Isle on Miranar. He was a member of the Screaming Sixes, a thruster board club that was famous for surfing the mountain-sized waves that pulverized Santori's coastlines. They were the same waves that were responsible for the hydroelectric charges that powered the cities across that world. Scientists said waves of that scale were due to Miranar's triple-moon gravitational pull, a perfect alignment of nature; the odds of it occurring elsewhere were extremely miniscule.

The Screaming Sixes were known to follow the planet's mercurial seasonal weather patterns and flock to the island continent during winter, when those patterns were sure to coalesce. The swells were massive then, 30- to 60-meter dark oceanic peaks frothing up from the depths like ominous harbingers. The embattled towns that lined the coast would be flush with thruster boarders from across the system, their hospitals and morgues bloating with the bodies of wannabes. It was one of these wannabes who led Dave to the Marine Corps.

"If it wasn't for dem faker punks, I wouldn't be out here with you slikes," he'd say to Virgil or Birch or anyone of Rho in earshot who would listen. "It's just your luck that I had a hot temper."

The Dominion Marines had a strong recruiting presence among the prison systems throughout the sector, and it was on those rosters where they found Dave, who did indeed have a hot temper. At Bar Method, an underwater hot spot six clicks below sea level, one of the hottest thruster board hangouts on the planet, Big Wave Dave had run into a few tourists who were getting a bit too fresh with one of the local girls.

"I was like a knight in shining armor, bro... Walked up to dem boys and taught 'em what happens when you mess with a Santori loc."

And he did, except things got out of hand and Dave lost control. A few broken bottles later, and the bar was covered in blood. A med unit had to be called in to remove the crippled messes that Dave had created. At the time Dave had been a scraggily, skinny thruster punk with long dreaded hair and islander glow tats, what the boys in Dominion prisons called "fresh meat." After his sentencing, admiring the sort of temper that could put so many men in the hospital, a Dominion recruiter made him an offer: 10 years of loyal service to Emperor Mengsk, or 40 of hard labor in prison. The answer he gave back was:

"Do I have to cut my dreads?"

Though it pained him, they were gone, and he was off to boot camp. Several stim and steroid treatments later and he was on the front lines of the Brood War, 50 pounds of muscle heavier and a Rho Squad poker fixture. Criminal recruits didn't get R&R, and so Scotty Bolger's and gambling were his only escapes.

He missed the days out on the waves. He missed slicing the open face of a deep gray, building-sized swell, the board's ion thrusters pushing him higher and higher, and his dreads, the dreads he missed, blowing back in the breeze. To compensate the best way he could, he kept a bar of Mr. Snorggs's Thruster Wax in his footlocker and took deep inhales from it during downtime, not caring what Virgil or Birch or any of the others said when they mocked him. He knew, in ten years, if he could just hold on, survive, time would fly by and he'd be out there again, carving the winter waves of Santori.

The zerglings got Dave in the barracks after a sensor tower malfunctioned and a litter of the monsters made a mad dash into the base on Seti. Dave was so stone cold drunk he slept through the internal alarms and the sonic spike fire. He slept through as the xenos shredded the security gates and ripped their wave into the barracks. He slept through all the way to the point when one leaped on top of him, shaking his bed with its thunderous weight.

When he woke up, it was in a state of delirium, glaring up into the eyes of death incarnate, a zergling with a Cheshire cat grimace forcing open its mouth. He woke up in time to feel the pain of large talons ramming into him over and over and over, his entrails pouring out of his stomach, looking like his long-cut-off dreads.

Virgil and Birch managed to shoot the zergling down while it was still on top of Dave. Maybe there was some satisfaction to be had in that.

Virgil looked down at the two little bags that composed all that he would bring to start his new life as a farmer or father or both. Everything else of his had been thrown out. Alone in their tiny apartment, the silence was deafening. Every time he closed his eyes, all he could see were visions of zerglings, of hydralisks and mutalisks, of news reports of carnage and death. But mostly zerglings, because that was what you always saw first and most.

He jumped with a start, eyes snapping open, as she entered the front door. Tears streaked her face like long transparent veins. She wiped her nose with the sleeve of her shirt. He thought it was cute.

"Oh, Ru. You okay?"

"Just hard sayin' goodbye, is all... Just hard." He got up and wrapped his arms around her, and she smiled. "Daddy said he can try to visit when things calm down a bit. Maybe a year or two. He thinks he can come under a fake identity. I'll... I'll see him again."

"You get the IDs?"

She yanked herself away, nodding and digging into her oversized purse. She pulled out two holocard digi-IDs, the kind that had come into use on Shiloh, and handed him one. Virgil pressed the tiny button, and a holoprojection popped up from the thin card. It was his face, all right, but not his name or data. His holographic head circled in 3-D, showing all sides while paragraphs of personal information scrolled next to it. Ruffi looked at his reaction through the image, biting her lower lip, wondering how he'd respond.

"Derek Dayton?" he finally said. "I sound like a character from a superhero vid."

"Well, mine's Jossie Thomas... That ain't too pretty... And I went to school for bioplasmic studies, of all things." She pressed her ID card, and a holographic rendering of her head beamed out. "My shuttle leaves in an hour. Yours in two. Daddy made the arrangements that way so as not to draw no suspicion. He said we shouldn't give anyone reason to think we knew each other before planetfall. He said we should meet there... maybe in the starport... pretend it's the first time."

"Gonna have to do a lot of pretending from here on out, I imagine."

"I imagine... I should go, Virgil..." Her chime-like laughter returned. "I mean, Derek."

"Come here, Jossie." He kissed her forehead the way he always did. "I love you. You know that."

"I do." And she kissed him on the lips. It was long and slow, and what was most important was that their bodies were pushed into each other. What was most important was their closeness. Finally, after what seemed like an eon, she released him. "You're on shuttle 3801. Don't be late! There's extra security given the zerg threat."

"What would I do without you?" He grinned.

"Don't ask me." She laughed. "See you there."

And she was gone, leaving their little apartment, leaving their old life for good.

Virgil sat back down and did nothing. He stared at the dirty wall for an hour, mind a blank for the first time in ages. When the hour was up, he stood, lifted his bags, and walked to the door. But something stopped him. Something was missing. He set the bags down. He looked back at the apartment. It was so empty now. The flavor that had been the collage of her life and his smashed together was gone. It was just a drab, plain space, the barren landscape of what was.

Before he left he decided that he'd better give the place one more once-over just to make sure he didn't forget anything.

He saw it the second he walked into the bedroom. There, on the nightstand, was the zergling tooth. He picked it up and ran his finger against its serrated edge. It was still so sharp that he didn't even feel the thing slice his hand. It wasn't until he noticed the blood running down his arm that he became conscious of the tiny gash.

The zerglings got Birch when they overran the terran base on Urona Sigma. Once again, the evacuation dropships were late, the way it always seemed they were.

Birch was once an upper school demolition star from Shiloh, a greasy motor head who knew little else. Demolition was a particularly brutal sport, the kind parents always tried to have banned from the schools but never could succeed in doing. Much like the demolition derby drivers of Old Earth, demolition jockeys built their vehicles and then used them to "knock out" their competitors. It was king of the hill at 190 kilometers an hour with no hill, just unstable, rocky gravel. The car with the most knockouts (that could still function) won. Every year scores of young men and the occasional woman were hospitalized for severe burns, breaks, and bruises; a handful would die. Birch was the best. Hands down. It was all he lived for. His life outside of school had been spent elbow deep in the engine of whatever car he had been building at the time, thinking about getting back into the arena. In upper school he held the record for most knockouts and never once had been hospitalized for injuries. For a time, he had been a local legend.

When he graduated, the depression set in. He no longer had the fame, praise, or weekly adrenaline rush of his upper school days. He had never made the greatest grades, so he went to work doing the only other thing he was good at and became a mechanic. After two years of tinkering away at cars, transports, and vulture bikes, all the cheerleaders who remembered his glory days had moved on to other worlds or other lives. His trips back to practice when school would get out had been met with less and less enthusiasm by the newer crop of motor heads, who all thought Birch's records sounded breakable. Day by day, his small-town fame had become a fading memory.

The underground demolition leagues were run by the mob. Everyone knew that. Everyone knew that working for them meant offering yourself up to thrown matches, loss of financial control, and dishonor. As much as Birch missed the rush, the roar of the engines, the vibration of the uncomfortable seats he'd use because they were cheap, and the spike in his heart rate as the world would fade away and he'd

zone out, accelerating right at a rival, he wasn't willing to hand over his record to the betting whims of an underworld mob boss who would ask him for the occasional loss. Birch took pride in what he was good at and couldn't imagine letting that one thing go.

But he did miss the rush. He missed being in the action, uncertain if at any moment all hell would break loose, the only thing stopping that being his pure focus. That sort of concentration in the midst of fury had made him alive. Without it he'd started to feel dead, redundant, like someone else. It was a Dominion Marine Corps holo ad that got him. It was the sound of Emperor Mengsk's inspiring voice over images of neosteel-covered marines firing heavy gauss rifles that made the idea of leaving Shiloh and joining the Corps a viable option. There was a threat in the universe, and maybe he could combat it. Days later he was in boot camp on Turaxis II. Initially, given his past, he had assumed that he'd be signed up as a vulture or tank pilot, but the Corps already had enough of them. What it needed were front-line marines, grunts, fodder.

Virgil Caine and Birch hit it off instantly. Caine got a loyal partner in crime to help execute his orders, and Birch had a real friend for the first time since his demolition days. They'd talk late into the night over bottles of Scotty Bolger's, sharing things that only the bonds of combat allowed men to. Caine opened up to the younger soldier, telling him that he never thought he would find a woman who would love him, that he was too much a man of the Corps, and women were intuitive and could sense that sort of thing. Birch did his best to discourage the idea, but they both saw an element of truth to it. Birch told Caine that he never thought he'd ever experience the sense of accomplishment he'd had in his upper school days again, and that the idea of it scared the hell out of him.

When the zerglings got Birch, the base was already overrun, and most of the standing structures were consumed in flames, bombarded by mutalisks soaring down from above. Virgil and Birch were running as fast as their CMCs would carry them toward the rendezvous mark. Command had said that dropships were inbound for evac. Command said a lot of things.

"Where the hell is the damned evac?!!" Virgil screamed into his comm as a concussive, splattering blast ripped up the ground next to him.

"No one's answering," Birch said, turning back and firing blindly. "My God," he whispered, startled. There was nothing in the universe that struck deeper terror in a man than the sight of an army of zerglings flooding a compound. There were hundreds, hopping and charging, ripping men down and shredding buildings. They were legion, overwhelming. It was nothing but a biological sea of muted browns and purples, claws, talons, and teeth. A swarm of dead-eyed monsters. Birch continued to fire!

"Cease fire!" Virgil insisted. "Keep moving, soldier. You're only drawing attention to us... This battle is lost. Go! Go! Go!"

"Damn it, Sarge, I want to kill these bastards."

"Just keep moving!"

"For what? Evac's left us here, Virg; ain't no dropships on the horizon. This is our last stand."

"That's an order, Birch... Hell, forget that. Do it for me, for your friend. Not rank!" That was all Virgil had to say. Birch stopped firing and broke back into a run without a second thought.

Moments later, coasting across the skyline came two dropships like a beacon of red hope.

"They're coming... They're coming in."

"Move!"

It didn't take long for a mutalisk to see the aid and tail the terran vessels. The two dropships divided, one trying to break the mutalisk off of the other and lose it in a chase. The muta followed as the other dropship arced to the rally point, where Virgil and Birch stood waving their arms.

The dropship hatch popped open, and a female voice screamed from inside, "Strap yourselves in, boys!"

Just as the two were about to hop aboard, a whistling scream ripped through the sky above. But it wasn't a zerg; it was the sound of the other dropship spiraling out of control, smoking and on fire, heading right toward them. Without a second to react, the dropship that had been waiting for them pulled up, trying not to get caught in the explosion that was sure to follow and leaving Virgil and Birch scurrying for cover.

BOOOOOOM!

When the dropship hit the ground, the earth below rattled. Flames licked the surface and ignited in long snaking strips across the rally point. High above, the remaining dropship began to turn back, searching for the right angle to evac Virgil and Birch.

That was when they heard it, that familiar sound of horrible chittering, amplified by numbers. A hundred or maybe five hundred zerglings charged at them.

"Run, Sarge... Damn it, Virg, run!"

"Birch, follow me! That's an order."

But he didn't. Instead, he turned and faced the throng, mashing down on his trigger as fast and as hard as he could until, like a colossal wave breaking over the shoreline, the horde hit him so hard that he toppled over and was trampled as if he had never been there to begin with. Some stopped to shred his body; others focused on Virgil, who was still running toward the now-waiting dropship.

"Hurry, marine, hurry. Do not look back!" the pilot screamed.

Virgil just ran, though every fiber of his being made him want to look back, to see if he could get one last glimpse of his friend, to see if he was still alive. He knew that thought was ludicrous, but he hoped. Finally, he reached the dropship and leaped inside.

But he wasn't alone! A zergling soared into the air as the ship was pulling away and clamped onto the railing, yanking itself up as the hatch closed down.

"Shoot! That thing is getting in." The pilot was terrified, doing her best to get the ship out of the fire zone, and even more frightened at having a live zerg this close to her. Zerglings looked scary enough from up high, but at this range they were a living nightmare.

Virgil backed against the metal frame of the ship. The zergling had managed to get inside and with uncanny speed flung itself toward him, talon extended up to strike!

At such a close range the sonic spikes from Virgil's rifle turned the zergling's head into hanging, disjointed ground meat, nothing more than a putty of gore and teeth. But it didn't stop. The creature kept coming and drove its talon down into Virgil's chest, cracking apart the CMC armor and ripping the flesh underneath. Virgil screamed as the gun fell from his hand. The zergling was dying but was still conscious enough to pull its talon back for another desperate strike.

That was when he acted, fighting back the darkness that was clawing at his consciousness from the loss of blood. As the talon came in for a second slice, Virgil swung his fist right into what was left of the zergling's face, smashing its teeth to bits and knocking it back. With every ounce of willpower he ever had, Virgil thrust himself forward and punched again with the full automated power of the CMC behind the swing, and again and again and again, until the creature stopped moving and he tumbled over to his side, the world fading to black.

The last thing he remembered seeing before waking up in the hospital was a broken zergling tooth clenched tightly in his gauntlet-covered hand.

Birch was dead. Rho Squad had been obliterated during the base assault. Virgil was all that was left.

After bandaging his hand, Virgil put the tooth around his neck and walked to the front door. He knew that he should have left it, that no farmer heading to Shiloh had a zergling tooth for a necklace, but it was something he just couldn't throw away. He made sure it was underneath his shirt's collar so no one would see it. But he knew it was there.

The streets were alive with panicked citizens rushing to who knew where. A holocast reporter, 20 meters high, was broadcasting the events that were taking place throughout the system. Graphics showed the Swarm's interplanetary assault spreading from world to world. Virgil tried not to look; he tried hard to keep his head forward, focused.

As he turned the corner he saw a group of men and women huddled around a Dominion recruiting office. There were two lines forming. One read NEW RECRUITS; the other, RECALL SOLDIERS. A war was on, and soldiers were signing up to fight.

Virgil hastened his steps, trying not to look at the men and women who were signing back up, doing their duty.

He reached the transpo pickup station and sat down on the bench, waiting for the next ride to Kurtz Starport. The display showed the bus was inbound. It would only be moments now.

Across the way he could see a UNN broadcast on one of the monitors. He could see Emperor Mengsk at a podium next to General Warfield, a legend of a commander. A ticker tape of updates screamed across the lower half of the screen, body counts rising.

Sitting there in silence, Virgil was certain he could hear the chittering. He could have sworn that he heard a zergling's high-pitched squeal and a hail of gunfire blending into the sound of an explosion. He closed his eyes only to see the rush of movement from a hundred zerglings clawing toward him like the ones that got Birch, and Dave, and Irmscher, and so many other fallen comrades-in-arms. It was all in his head. It would always be. There was no escape from it. Opening his eyes, he knew that now.

A loud screech came around the corner, and with it the transpo, hovering a meter above the ground. A wave of warmth from its engines hit Virgil in the face. He looked up. The transpo driver opened the door to let him in. Virgil just sat there, listening to the bus's engine purr. It reminded him of the sound a vulture bike made while whirring its way into a combat zone.

"Hey, buddy, you gonna sit there all day, or you gonna hop in?"

Virgil stared at the man for a long moment. Finally, he stood up. "No, sir... I'm sorry. I was just... just resting my legs."

"Oh, screw you, then, buddy! Rest your stupid legs on a bench that's not a pickup station... Idiot!" The driver sped off.

Virgil walked back down the block.

As he got closer to the Dominion recruiting office, he stopped at a street garbage can. There, he pulled the forged digi-ID from his pocket. It was the key to a different life, one far away from zerglings and combat. For a moment, images of Rufi and him splashed into his thoughts. They were farming the lands of Shiloh, gorgeous children running after them, giggling; their laughter was musical like their mother's. They were projections of a life that could have been, a life foreign to a marine sergeant with a war on. He tossed the fake ID into the garbage can, reached under his collar, and lifted the chipped zergling tooth from beneath the fabric, letting it proudly be displayed for all to see: a badge of honor, his favorite medal.

Moments later, Virgil was in line at the Dominion recruiting building with the rest of the old marines who had come face to face with the zerg, men who understood what he'd seen, what he'd been through, and how he would never be the same as those who hadn't.

End