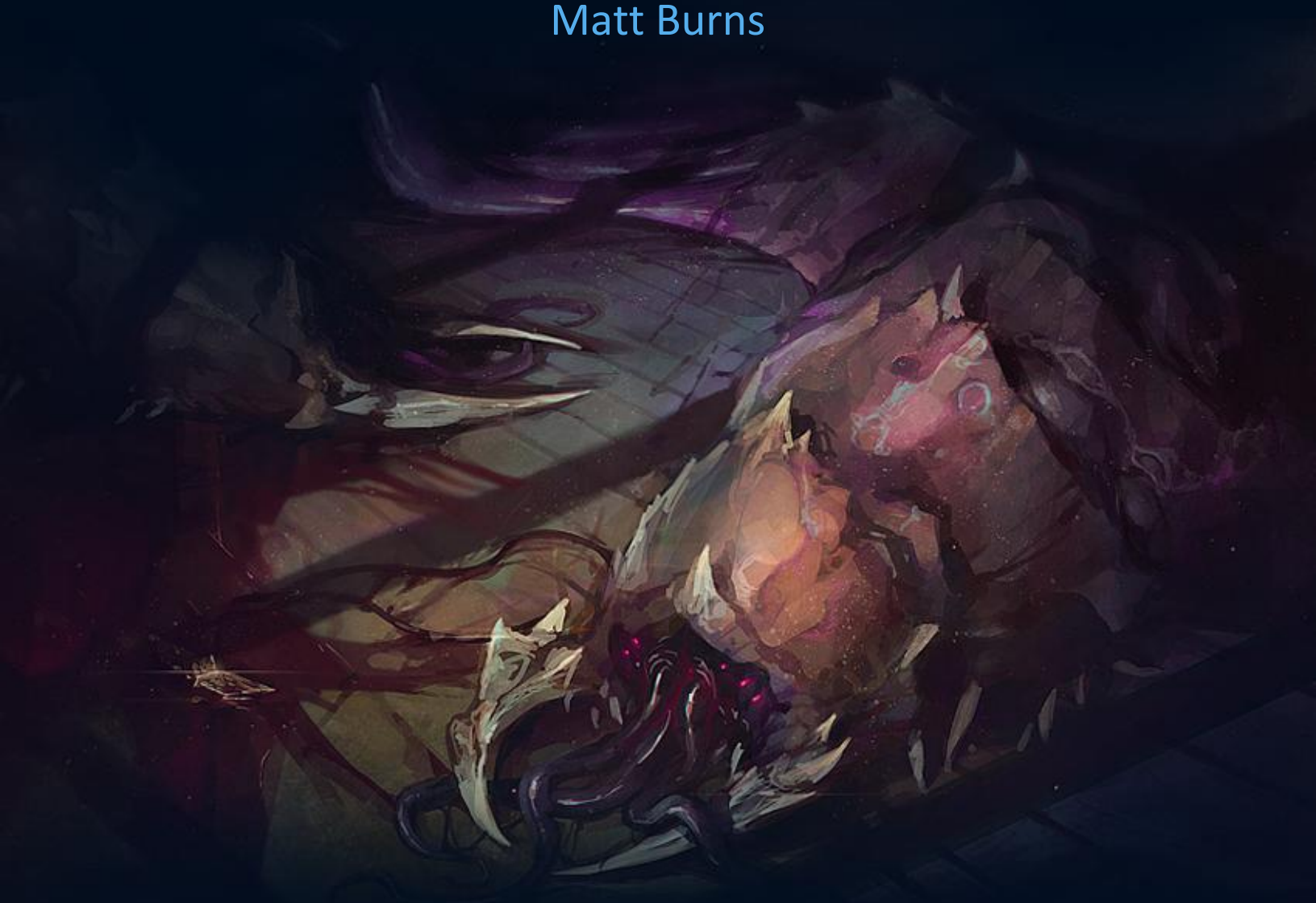


STARCRRAFT

IN THE BLOOD

Matt Burns



BILZARD
ENTERTAINMENT

BEEP.

BEEP.

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP.

The port grub awoke in a cold sweat, as usual. The transponder implanted in his wrist cried its shrill alarm at five-second intervals. The boss man, Ivan, was calling. New product was in.

Instinct seized control, issuing orders to the grub's body. Twin adrenal glands juiced his veins with nature's own brand of stimpack. His lungs billowed. His heart raced. Blood cells rich with oxygen surged through muscle tissue as he began the rituals of awakening.

The grub rolled off the moldy pilot seat where he slept and squirmed into a grimy jumpsuit reinforced with a hair-thin layer of neosteel threading to ward off shivs. Dull lights flickered on overhead, illuminating the grub's home: a crumbling system runner cockpit. He sifted through the disemboweled electronics strewn across the floor, scavenging for an emergency ration pack. No such luck.

The urge to leave, to obey Ivan's call, was strong, but the ritual wasn't over. He scuttled up to the system runner's corroded control panel and reached into an open compartment. His hand emerged from the darkness holding a pair of gold pilot wings attached to a length of rubber cord. The grub slid them over his head, and the metal pressed against his chest, cold and strong and reassuring.

He slowly said his own name: "Vik." It was easy to forget sometimes when the days bled into one long string of near-death experiences. "I'm not like *them*... I'm Vik."

The port grub named Vik bolted out of his system runner, sealing the door behind him with a set of maglocks. He allowed himself a brief moment to acclimate to the environment, his sensory organs taking in the new day. A gray miasma hung thick overhead, stretching out as far as the eye could see. Muted sunlight crawled across the twisted ship hulls, metal beams, and other discarded trash that formed the arterial streets of Deadman's Port. *Home sweet home*.

The junkyard city hummed with activity, an insect-like buzz that gave the illusion of budding life to a place trapped in perpetual decay. Somewhere, smugglers loaded a hundred kilos of hab cut with industrial solvents into shipment crates destined for rich kids on Turaxis II. Somewhere, refugees who thought they'd bought a ticket to paradise disembarked from their transport into the welcoming arms of slavers.

Just another day in the port.

Other grubs were scrambling through their daily activities, running product for local crime lords, doing odd jobs for gambling halls and brothels, or thieving cargo from the starport. Their grimy skin and soiled clothes acted as a natural camouflage against the gunmetal surroundings. People called Vik's kind a lot of things: street urchins, parasites, leeches. He didn't disagree. Abandoned and unwanted in a city wedged firmly between the treads of humanity's boots, they'd become animals in order to survive.

I'm Vik. I'm not like them...

He wove through the dusty streets, walking with a measured pace and mostly keeping his eyes forward. He risked glances at passersby, noting the subtle flush of blood beneath their skin--unconscious biological markers that could warn of impending attack. He stepped over a body swarming with mangy red-eyed nerrats. A few days old from the look of it. No one was ever buried in the back alleys.

Before long Ivan's chop shop came into view. The refurbished vespene refinery towered at the edge of Deadman's Port proper. The grub was sprinting forward, glad he'd made it through the gauntlet unscathed, when someone reached around a corner and grabbed him by the collar.

He balled his hands into fists and readied to defend himself until he saw the attacker: another grub. Like Vik, and every other member of his kind, the assailant was dressed in ratty clothes and had a shaved head marked by fresh insect bites. He looked dangerous. He was Vik's only friend.

"Late again. My ass too, y'know," Serj said as he released his grip.

"Screw you." A smile edged across Vik's face as he looked up at the other grub.

Serj was big. He could've been a real skull cracker in some crime lord's outfit, but he had brains, something in short supply on the port. The two grubs had met out in the streets and combined their penchant for engineering, doing repairs and selling goods to save up enough credits for tickets off the port. They'd made a pact to leave this place on their own terms, without becoming nothing more than animals on two legs, like the rest of the grubs. Then Ivan had caught wind of their talents and "hired" them, implanting transponders in their arms. Employment was non-negotiable. Vik and Serj had thought about running off from time to time, but without money, there was nowhere to go.

"Lemme see 'em." Serj pointed at Vik's chest.

"Want 'em today?" the other grub said as he pulled out the pilot wings. Serj had found them on a dead guy in the back alleys. They were the one thing that had kept their eyes on the future in recent years. Even so, Vik wasn't as optimistic as he'd once been. Whenever the two grubs started saving up a good stash of credits, a grub gang would rob them, or they'd run out of food and have to spend their savings on more. Something always came up. Life in the port had a way of grinding you down into a nub of what you were. It tired you out. It dulled dreams.

"Nah. Keep 'em. You say the words this morning?"

"Course. You?"

"I'm the one who taught them to you, ass." Serj shoved Vik's shoulder. "By the way," the big grub said as he tossed an emergency ration pack to his friend. "Could hear your stomach growling down the street."

Vik shrugged, a little embarrassed, and then tipped his head in thanks. "Not your last, right?"

"Eat up," was Serj's only answer. Vik knew better than to argue with him. It never worked.

As he downed the gelatin mix of nutrients, he noticed the dark circles under his friend's eyes. Every day Serj looked a little more worn out, and Vik wondered how much of it was due to looking after him. Vik had never had a family--no grubs did--but if the concept of "big brother" existed here, well, Serj fit the bill.

"C'mon." Serj headed toward the shop's open blast doors. "Somethin' big came in."

Vik's mind raced with what kind of tech he could sink his teeth into today. Ivan's crew had perfected the art of focused piracy, hijacking lone transports that dealt in contraband goods. Usually Ivan's boys pulled in medical goods or foodstuffs, but every so often they'd reel in some rare tech that Vik would reverse-engineer before his boss sold it off to the highest bidder. Those were the good days.

"Well? What is it?" Vik urged.

Serj turned on his heels. There was something in his eyes... disgust... unease... fear.

Vik's instincts snarled. *Run.*

"Zerg."

Vik had heard of the zerg. Everyone had. A few years back they'd appeared in terran space and wreaked havoc, destroying worlds and slaughtering millions of colonists. Even the Terran Confederacy--the biggest government in the Koprulu sector at the time--had crumbled and died in the wake of the alien invasion. The zerg were nightmares. They were the *enemies* of all terrans.

He'd thought they'd be bigger.

Three of the critters, about half Vik's size, sat on the floor in the chop shop's belly. Thick, spiky carapaces covered their segmented bodies, supported by rows of tiny legs. Serrated mandibles extended from the head of each alien, framing a number of dull--almost lifeless--multifaceted eyes.

A bullet-riddled neosteel box, three meters long by two deep, rested near the creatures. From the crystallized ice caked around the edges, Vik figured it was some kind of freezer or cryogenics container.

"Don't look so tough." Hutchins, one of Ivan's mercenaries, hefted a zerg into the air, luminescent tattoos contorting as his muscles flexed from the effort. The other mercs were standing around the aliens, a big cluster of bandoliers, knives, cybernetic limbs, and dented body armor.

The grubs edged around the group for a better view, past towers of shipment containers. The shop's central room was a musty, cavernous space lit by harsh floodlights. Rusty engines swayed from rustier chains in the shadowy rafters overhead. Over the ten years he'd been in Ivan's employ, Vik had helped retool and upgrade most of the shop. It was his second home: a prison of his own design.

"It's Ivan's property. Drop it." Jace's gravelly voice was like an old engine running on its last leg. The beast of a man towered over the other workers, scratching at an old puckered scar that ran across his face from ear to ear.

"Boss ain't gonna find a buyer." Hutchins waved the zerg in the air. Vik expected the alien to rear up and rip the man in half. Instead, it just dangled there, helpless. Disappointing. "We don't deal in life-forms. Dog food is what these are. Might as well have some fun."

"You had your fun already." Jace tapped his boot against the pattern of bullet holes in the freezer box.

Hutchins snorted. "Come off it already. The smuggler fired on us, so I fired back. Not my fault he used his own cargo as a barricade."

"All I'm sayin' is you're already on Ivan's bad side." Jace shrugged.

The other merc dropped the zerg, and Vik flinched when the alien smashed into the metal floor. Hutchins was a newer member of the crew, and he'd gotten himself into trouble on earlier occasions, but this was different. Never disrespect the boss's property. *Never, never, never.*

Ivan, though, wasn't around. He was probably holed up in his private office, making contacts and sniffing for potential buyers. Still, Vik felt uncomfortable even watching the disobedience.

"We should go," Vik whispered to Serj. His friend didn't reply. Like the mercs, he was staring at the aliens.

Vik shifted his feet and gazed around the room. Something moved in the shadows of a doorway leading into the shop's belly. *Ivan...* watching. A large four-legged creature padded at the boss man's side.

"How about a little gentlemen's wager?" Hutchins drew a pistol from his belt and leveled it at one of the zerg. "I'm thinkin' my P220 would punch right through their armor. Any takers?"

No one had a chance to reply. Ivan flicked his hand out toward the merc in a silent command that only Vik witnessed. The animal near him snarled and then bounded into the light, revealing itself as one of the boss man's shale dogs. The mottled canine leapt through the air and knocked Hutchins flat.

"Get it off!" the merc roared as the hound's jaws latched onto his arm. Hutchins pounded his fist against the dog's hide of iron-rich fibrous plates, but it only riled the beast up.

Ivan calmly sauntered up to the gathering, dressed in his signature black suit. He looked benign next to the heavily armed mercs, except for his eyes. They were alert and cold, the color of ice. The boss man loomed over Hutchins and the dog as they wrestled on the floor.

"I didn't do nothin'!" the merc shouted.

"It's not what you did; it's what you were thinking of doing. Just because a rabid dog doesn't bite, doesn't mean it's sane. Only a matter of time before a beast like that draws blood."

"I get it, boss. I get it! Call it off!"

Ivan snapped his fingers, and the dog abandoned its prey.

"Fekk's sake, boss." Hutchins inspected a bloody bite mark on his arm as he rose.

"You should be thanking me, Hutch." Ivan grabbed the merc's P220 from where it had fallen to the ground. "I saved you a bit of embarrassment with that bet."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"These zerg here are tough little buggers. Larvae, they're called. Back during the war, even Confederate marines toting gauss rifles had a hard time putting 'em down. Your P220?" Ivan looked at the weapon with disdain. "No contest."

Vik's boss slowly moved the pistol toward one of the zerg. "The round would've glanced clean off like this," he said as he touched the gun to the alien, and then arced it back toward Hutchins. He stopped with the P220 pressed against the merc's chest. "And ended here."

Hutchins didn't say a word. The boss man liked to string people along. Toy with them. Vik never knew when he was serious or playing a joke. In a city where survival depended on reading your opponent's next move before he made it, Ivan's unpredictability made him a constant terror.

"See." Ivan grinned and patted the merc on the shoulder with his free hand, breaking the tension. "You would've been the butt of every joke from here to Moria. Mercs across the sector would've had a good long laugh about how a zerg larva killed you."

Hutchins forced a nervous chuckle. "Yeah, yeah. I get it."

"Now, at least, they'll just say it was me."

Gunfire roared in Vik's ears as Ivan pulled the trigger, blowing a hole through Hutchins's chest, body armor and all. The lifeless merc tumbled back into a stack of crates like a rag doll.

Ivan pointed at the merc's body and clicked his tongue. His dog raced forward and began gnawing on Hutchins. "It's not hard, boys," he said. "You bring in the product; I sell it. Until then, it's not to be tampered with."

The mercs nodded, not sparing Hutchins another glance. Why would they? They were alive. They'd survived another day. That was all there was to it.

"You find a buyer, boss?" Jace idly scratched at his scar.

Ivan rapped his knuckles against the freezer box. "Turns out the smuggler you boys pounced on was bringing this property to a lab rat named Branamoor. Had to use a lot of favors just to weasel that information out."

"A private buyer?" Jace asked.

"Not likely," Ivan said. "This isn't the first time the smugglers made a delivery to him, so he's got deep pockets. Government, probably. I couldn't find out which one. Maybe Umojan, but I'd put my money on Dominion. They've always got their arms shoulder deep in some kind of shit. Doesn't matter either way." Ivan swatted at a few flies gathering near Hutchins's corpse. "Important thing is that I managed to contact Branamoor through an intermediary. He's keen on keeping this whole business hush-hush. If he is Dominion, the last thing he wants is a UNN report about him trafficking live zerg. But he does want these puppies *bad*... bad enough that he's sending one of his assistants here to make the pickup. Four days."

"How much?" Jace voiced the question on every merc's mind. They were paid a cut of the amount their stolen goods netted on the black market. Precious cargo could mean a small fortune.

"You'll find out when we make the exchange, like always. Get to work." Ivan turned to Vik and Serj as the mercs shuffled off to inventory other hijacked goods. "Grubs. The buyers want this piece of terran ingenuity up and running by the time of the drop. I aim to please them."

Because the lab rat doesn't know they're out, Vik thought to himself. He knew the game--never show your hand. Likely the buyer still believed his product was safe in the box. The grub didn't see what difference it made, though, unless there was a danger to leaving aliens outside.

"Pen the zerg up in one of the empty dog cages," Ivan continued. "Watch over them while you fix the box. Anything happens, anyone screws with 'em, you come to me."

"Sure, boss." Just thinking about being in a cage with the zerg made Vik's skin crawl.

"The buyer wants them *alive*. Understood?"

Serj snapped out of his daze and looked away from the zerg. "We scan you, boss."

Vik nodded profusely as his eyes drifted to the shale dog. The beast's tongue rolled out of its mouth through rows of yellow fangs and lapped up the blood that had pooled next to Hutchins. When Ivan turned on his heels and whistled, the hound slunk to its master's side, leaving the rest of its meal behind.

Good dog.

The kennel was in a long corridor at the back of the shop, the only entrance to which was a rusty door that led into the facility's belly. The place was reserved for old products that the boss man had never found a buyer for. Shipment crates packed with Guild Wars-era frag grenades and munitions, spare parts, medical supplies, and industrial goods lined the walls. Corrals containing broken-down Avenger fighter craft and transports occupied one whole side of the room. Vik had worked on all of the vehicles at one time or another. He'd given each of them a name. He liked machines, always had. Aside from shoddy engineering or external influence, they performed as intended.

Life-forms, though... he never knew what they'd do next.

After claiming an empty dog pen, the grubs hauled the freezer and zerg inside. Vik agreed to take care of the repairs in the hopes that working on the box would mean he could ignore the aliens until they were out of his life for good. With time on his hands, Serj lounged against the pen's fence and buried his face in a remote console, researching information about the larvae on the hypernet. Hidden military schematics and classified government documents--mostly junk from the days of the Confederacy--were floating around all over the net. If you knew where to look, like Serj did, you could find anything.

Nearby, ten angry hounds yowled, snapping their jaws and hurling their metallic bodies against the chain-link fence of their cage. They must've smelled the zerg. Vik sighed and banged on the fence of his own cage, but the dogs wouldn't shut up. He'd heard that the animals, native to Korhal IV, used to be fluffy, lovable critters. Man's best friend. Then the Confederacy had nuked the rebellious planet with a thousand Apocalypse-class warheads, flash-frying over thirty-five million terrans. Some of the hounds, though, had survived. Warped and irradiated, they'd scattered into the wasteland of slag and desert glass. They ate whatever their mutated digestive system could process. They were true survivors, hardened by their brush with extinction. Ivan liked that about them.

Vik thought they were annoying. He tuned out the yapping as he pulled on a pair of thermal shades and hunkered over the box to assess the damage. His vision resolved into a sea of shifting heat patterns. Cool blue streams snaked out of the container through eight scattered bullet holes. The bullets' impact had also created stress fractures invisible to analog eyes along the freezer's outer casing.

The shell wasn't much to look at, but it was packed with sleek tech. It ran on a thermosonic engine that used high-amplitude sound waves to pump out heat and bring the zerg down to freezing temperatures. Delicate sensors relayed each larva's condition to three small screens attached to the top of the box. A single power cell fueled the whole thing. Fragile stuff. All of it had survived Hutchins's shooting spree against the container's original owner, from what Vik could tell. It would need a bit of patchwork, but that was it. A few days' work.

Vik fired up a plasma torch and began. Every so often he caught audio from Serj's console.

"... larvae are the backbone of the Swarm, the tools necessary to build a zerg army. 'Biological super-cache' is an apt categorization for the creatures. They contain the DNA of the entire alien collective. It's for this reason that they can transform into nearly any zerg subspecies."

"No wonder the lab rat wants these things, huh?" Serj nudged Vik's leg with his boot. "All that info locked inside... must be worth a fortune."

Vik nodded absently to appease his friend, hoping he'd eventually get bored of the vids. He didn't.

A few hours later, Serj ripped the shades off Vik's face and shoved the console in front of him. "Gotta check this out." A collage of vids played across the screen: larvae transforming into mounds of pulsating flesh. The cocoons burst open, and out streamed the monsters Vik had seen on UNN: hydralisks, zerglings, mutalisks, and other grotesque beasts. Creatures of nightmare.

"Zerg overlords issue psionic commands to larvae, initiating their metamorphosis," a dull voice droned over the vid. "The duration of the pupal stage is contingent on the complexity of the final organism."

Vik glanced at the larvae and startled. They'd turned their long, jagged bodies toward him. Their mandibles clicked. Their spindly legs scraped the floor. Goosebumps prickled over Vik's flesh.

"I thought they were just big slugs, y'know?" Serj said. "They're dangerous."

"Haven't changed yet. Don't think they will." Vik looked away from the aliens.

Serj turned the console toward the larvae, replaying the vids of them transforming. "Yeah, well... Maybe they just need to see. They don't know how to do it yet."

"Cut it out." Vik kicked his friend in the leg. "You want them to transform?"

Serj shrugged. "Just seems like a waste. I don't know... They could be more than that."

"Yeah. And then they'd eat us."

"Maybe..." Serj drew the words out, dream-like. He settled back against the cage's fence and thumbed through the vids of the larvae transforming, replaying them over and over again.

"Eat up, boys." Serj emptied two ration packs in front of the zerg. Deep red tentacles slithered out from between the larvae's mandibles. They prodded at the gruel for a few seconds, but didn't eat.

"Waste of good food," Vik grumbled.

"C'mon, it's not that bad." Serj said to the zerg.

Click. Vik flinched at the sound. Jace and two of his fellow mercs stood at the edge of the pen, snapping pictures of the aliens with their fones.

"Now that's sweet. That's *real* sweet." Jace smiled.

Vik ignored them like he always did. Eventually they'd get bored and leave. They just wanted to remind themselves they weren't the lowest rung on the ladder.

Metal groaned as Jace opened the pen door and stepped inside. He kneeled down and extended an enormous hand toward the zerg. "All that talk on UNN about how badass these things are..."

Serj slapped Jace's arm away. Vik slowly turned, screaming inside. *Idiot.* What had gotten into him?

"They'd tear you up good if they were in their true forms," the big grub said. "They turn into other zerg."

"We've got a scientist in our outfit," one of the mercs laughed.

Jace wasn't smiling. He rose, looming over Serj. "Did you just fekk'n hit me?"

Rather than back down like he should've, Serj mirrored the threatening posture. "Don't recall Ivan sayin' you had business here."

The two men stared at each other for a long moment, seeing who would stand down first.

"I thought I told you lot that the zerg are off limits until the drop!" Ivan's voice rattled through the room. As Vik's boss marched up to the pen, the mercs cowered away.

"Just wanted to get a look, boss." Jace picked at his scar. "Not every day we see zerg."

"You've seen enough of them already."

The mercs took their leave without argument. When they were gone, Ivan said, "Status."

"Soon," Serj replied.

"'Soon'?"

"Soon, *boss*," Vik corrected his friend's blunder.

Ivan backhanded the smaller grub. Pain blossomed from the corner of his mouth. His boss, however, never took his eyes off of Serj. He held the grub in his hard gaze. Vik saw his friend's muscles tense, but after a moment his shoulders hunched back down.

"Soon, *boss*," he finally said.

"'Soon' was yesterday. Twenty-four hours." Ivan was gone before the grubs could reply.

"You alright?" Serj put his hand on Vik's shoulder.

"No thanks to you." He licked the wound on his lip. "What was that?"

"Just... tired of taking their crap."

"So am I. That's why I don't give them a reason to dish it out," Vik said. Neither of them had ever lashed out at one of the mercs. They'd always played it cool; that was survival. Blend in. Hide in plain sight. Obey. Those were the *rules*.

"I know. But then I see these things..." Serj gestured to the larvae. "They look like nothin', y'know, but with all that DNA inside, they could be anything. It just got me thinkin'... Never mind."

Serj settled back against the fence and resumed watching the console. Vik's temper cooled as he got back to work. After a few more hours of tinkering, he finished patching up the box's bullet holes and

stress fractures with scrap neosteel. Things were looking up. But in the port, that was usually when something was waiting just around the corner to knock you back down.

Vik powered up the box, but was met with silence. Cursing, he inspected the container again and found a small puncture in the power cell he'd missed before. Shrapnel from a P220 round had ripped right through its heart. Repairing the cell's core was possible, but it would take at least a week. The grub scrambled through the shop and scavenged three older-generation power supplies, figuring he could rig them into the container. It would be dangerous work. One misstep, and the cells could blow his hands off. But even that was better than missing Ivan's deadline.

"Vik..." Serj muttered later that night. "How much longer you think it'll take?"

"Half a day." Vik pulled a microwelder back from the power cells. He wiped sweat and grime from his forehead. "Plenty of time before the drop."

"Don't think we've got that long." The grub swiveled the remote console toward Vik. Viscous purple terrain appeared on screen. Larvae were crawling all over it like nerrats on carrion.

"For survival, larvae depend on creep, the biomass that fuels zerg hives. If isolated from it, a larva's lifespan is dramatically decreased. Calculated survival time can be anywhere from hours to days."

"Hours," Serj said. "That's why the buyer wanted them in the box."

Vik shivered as images of Ivan's dog slurping blood from the floor and gnawing on Hutchins's flesh filled his head. Without a word, he leaned over the box and touched the microwelder to the power cells. His focus honed in on the task at hand, and the world around him faded away. He continued all through the night, bleary-eyed and fueled by terror. It was the best work he'd done in his life. By noon the next day, he'd finished the box, hands intact, and fired it up. All lights green. *Good to go.*

"We did it, Serj. Well, I did it," Vik joked. Another job done. Another disaster averted. Another day survived. He pumped his fists in triumph as he turned to the larvae. Serj was hunched over one of them.

"It's dead," his friend stated in a flat tone. "Its little legs just stopped moving."

"He'll know." The microwelder trembled in Vik's hand. *"He'll know."*

They'd stuffed the larvae into the box, putting the dead one on the left. The vital sign screens on top of the container were relatively crude. Each one displayed a green or red light depending on whether the specimen below was alive or dead. They were easy to change. The question was whether Ivan would buy it. Vik's boss was meticulous with his product.

"Forget about it." Serj paced around the pen. "It doesn't matter."

"Forget about it?" Vik put the finishing touches on the display screen above the dead larva. It blinked from red to green. "We have two options: we tell him, or we trick him. I don't recommend the first."

"Or we take them. Sell them ourselves." Serj squatted down near the other grub and spoke in hushed tones. "Think about it. We always talk about getting off this rock, right? This is it. The larvae are worth a fortune. Otherwise, why would the buyer come to this junkyard to pick them up? If it's true he's a government lab rat, then he wouldn't deal with the likes of Ivan unless he were desperate."

"It's Ivan's property."

"He *stole* it. It's as much ours as it is his."

"What is it with you? One day you're fine, and then the next you're..."

Serj laughed a cold, sad sound. "I'm what? Not acting like a dog anymore? Not cowering down whenever I hear Ivan's boots behind me? Every morning we do our ritual to remind ourselves that we're not animals. Then we come in here and get treated like them. I'm tired of it... just... tired..."

"We lie low. We bide our time and save up credits. That's how we do it. That's what you taught me."

"We've been working for years, and what do we have to show for it? Nothing. If we--"

"Grubs!" Ivan shouted. They turned toward their boss as he approached the pen. "Status."

"Just finished, boss," Vik said. Maybe for the first time in his life, he was relieved to see Ivan. He hoped that the boss man's presence would smack some sense into Serj. "Zerg are inside. Locked tight."

Ivan cracked open the box and peeked in at the three larvae collecting a new coat of frost. Dead or alive, they all looked the same. The three displays on the box's lid glowed green.

Vik held his breath until his boss nodded. "Good. You're done here."

The grub waited until Ivan was well out of earshot before speaking. "Let's go. Enough of your crazy idea."

"No." Serj stood his ground. "What's crazy is living like we do. We could do anything... be anything... but we accept being treated like this. It's gone on too long. Now, are you going to help me or not?"

"I... it's too dangerous, man. It's--"

Serj reached into Vik's jumpsuit and pulled out the pilot wings. He yanked hard, snapping the rubber cord. "Why do you wear these if you're fine with livin' your whole life as one of Ivan's dogs? You'll work and work, and then you'll die. No one will give two licks either way. Born a port grub, die a port grub."

Enough. He'd had enough. Emotion got the better of Vik, and he charged into Serj. His friend grabbed him by the collar and flung him against the chain-link fence.

"Go. Run home." Serj stuffed the wings into his own pocket. "Wait for Ivan's call like a good dog."

So Vik did, the anger building with every step. Serj... what had happened to him? If he wanted to kill himself, so be it. How would he even get the zerg out of the shop? Where would he find a buyer?

By the time Vik reached his system runner, his eyes were burning. He made it inside, where no one could see, before the real waterworks began. The crying just made him angrier. He took a wrench to the system runner's old console, where he and Serj used to spend hours acting like pilots, dreaming that they were soaring over some exotic jungle world and talking about their plans to make it off the port.

When the console was smashed and cracked, he shattered the dusty canopy and then curled up on the ratty pilot seat. He clenched the old foam with white-knuckled fists and buried his face in the damp fabric. The hardest thing was that he knew Serj was right. Vik had run home like a whipped dog, fleeing at the first sign of danger to save its own hide. *Born a port grub, die a port grub.*

Don't go. Ignore it. Wait it out.

It was night. Ivan's transponder was chiming in Vik's wrist.

Don't go.

But he did.

Vik entered the chop shop expecting to see Serj's flayed corpse dangling from chains, but nothing looked out of the ordinary. A few mercs shuffled around rearranging shipment crates in the shop's belly. Jace was watching UNN feeds on a vidscreen. The others were all sitting at a table, playing cards, sucking on cigars, and knocking back shot after shot of Scotty Bolger's Old No. 8.

They all turned and looked at Vik as he walked through the facility. They usually never looked.

Ivan appeared and wordlessly led him to the back room. Only a couple of the overhead lights were on, making it difficult to see. Vik did, however, make out the freezer box, sitting right where he'd left it.

Maybe Serj had shelved his stupid plan. Maybe he'd gotten smart and gone back to the alleys to sleep off whatever suicidal dream had latched its teeth into him. Or maybe he'd crashed and burned.

"These zerg are fetching a high price; you know that?" Ivan asked.

Vik tread carefully, fearing another one of Ivan's games. "I figured as much, boss."

Ivan reached into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of credits. They clanked and jingled as he hefted them in his hand. "The boys will be getting a big cut. Seems you should get a little something too."

Vik was speechless. His hungry gaze locked on the coins, and relief washed over him. *Serj... idiot. We lie low. We bide our time and save up credits. Those are the rules.*

"Loyalty is always rewarded," Ivan said as he put his other arm around Vik's shoulder and then turned him in the direction of the main pen.

"You see them?" The boss man extended his chin toward the dogs. They'd stopped barking. They always did when Ivan was near. The grub squinted at the shadows shifting in the pen.

"People always ask me why I keep the hounds around. They think I'm some kinda animal lover. It ain't that. It's because they're loyal. That's everything. That's what separates us from beasts like the zerg."

Vik heard the dogs padding around, their paws squishing against something sticky and wet.

"If there's one thing I can't stand, it's disobedience. You know that."

Ivan flung open the cage door and nudged Vik inside. The grub took a few hesitant steps as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The hounds were shining... No... glistening wet. Everything was.

"Last night the other grub tried to steal the zerg. My product. Didn't get far. He claimed he was working alone, that you didn't know what he was up to."

Blood. It covered the ground. It covered the dogs. One of the hounds gnawed on a giant bone. Human. Vik reared back as his brain processed the horrific scene, but Ivan caught him by the scruff of his neck and hurled him into the ground. The grub's knees slammed into the floor, and his hands slipped forward, the blood lapping between his fingers.

And there, right in front of him, atop a pile of torn fabric and gristle, were his gnawed pilot wings.

"You didn't know, did you?" Ivan continued.

"I'm loyal, boss. I'm loyal!" Vik shouted.

"Maybe. But I can't hand out rewards when I don't know all the facts, can I?" Ivan slipped the credits back into his own pocket. He squatted and whispered in Vik's ear, his breath hot and reeking of smoke and whiskey. "Next time you catch wind of someone making moves against me, you *tell me*."

Ivan gave him one last shove, sending the grub sprawling face-first into the blood.

"Clean up the pen before you leave. I'll call you when the next shipment is in." The cage door slammed shut behind Vik. The metal clink of his boss's boots slowly receded into the distance.

The grub wrapped his hand around the wings and then closed his eyes to shut everything out, but the blood was waiting for him in the darkness. Big crimson waves crashed around in his mind, afterimages burned into his visual cortex and given new life by fear. Blindly he scrambled to leave the pen, hands and legs sliding on the slick red floor. Warm metallic air clung to his tongue. He vomited and trembled. He banged his head against the fence until his hands found the door and he dove out in frantic lunge. The grub crumpled to the ground, his chest heaving with exhaustion. The terror, though, had disappeared. Every feeling had, as if he'd been detached from the outside world in some feeble attempt to deflect the shock waves of trauma. Vik stared at the ceiling as his body went numb.

Slowly, deep down in a place beyond the reach of consciousness, a fault line ripped through the grub. Vik--the dreamer, the friend, the terran--sank into the blood pools that still haunted his mind. All that remained was the beast he'd struggled to suppress over the years, the watcher behind the eyes, ruled by dark and primal neural pathways where self-awareness had never dared tread. The ritual was forgotten. Passive survival lost its allure. The grub hungered for something more.

Pain burned in his palm. The grub opened his hand and saw the chewed-up pilot wings and a trickle of fresh blood where they'd punctured his skin. He watched the red line work down the creases of his hand, the data of an entire species hard-coded on double helixes within the crimson liquid.

It was the same blood in Ivan and every other badass he'd heard of. They'd just learned how to use it in different ways. The larvae were no different, Vik thought as he gazed over his shoulder at the freezer box. They possessed the capacity for even greater change. All that power locked beneath their thick shells... all that potential. That must've been what broke Serj: an idea of transformation so radical that it had turned his worldview on its head. No more "Born a port grub, die a port grub."

But the larvae didn't have the key to change. They didn't have what Vik had, what Ivan had given him.

The grub sucked at his wound, savoring its sweetness. In the distance he heard the sounds of laughter from the center of the shop, the clink of poker chips in celebration of the payday to come. Vik looked out across the spare parts, rusting vehicles, and shipment crates in the room as if for the first time, seeing them through the eyes of a creature born in a pit of twisted metal. Once, he'd viewed it as a prison, but now it was a playground filled with the tools of his trade. His neosteel jungle.

At 09:00 Ivan and his crew marched into the back room. Vik watched them from the rafters.

"Payday!" Jace bellowed.

"Buyer will be here in thirty, boys," Ivan said as he approached the dog cages with the other mercs. "We load up the box and head out in force. We make the drop, then we come back and split the earnings. Business as usual. Let's do this clean, and we'll--"

"Boss!" Jace stopped just outside of the dog pen. The container was inside, its lid hanging open. Nearby, a giant hole gaped in the chain-link fence as if something had torn through it.

"The zerg. They opened the box!" another merc yelled.

"They can't open boxes," Ivan growled. "Jace?"

"I did my rounds like you told me, boss," the big man said. "No one coulda made it out with the zerg."

Vik had seen Jace periodically wandering through the room. The grub had worked all through the night, melting into the shadows whenever the merc came in for his inspection.

Ivan's eyes swept across the room. "Then they're in here. Empty out every one of these crates!"

The workers hurried through the narrow room, held tight in the grip of uncertainty. The shale dogs were howling louder than usual. Saliva foamed across their jaws. They smelled the fear.

"There's one, boss!" Jace thrust a meaty hand up at the top of a stack of containers. The spiky carapace of a larva peeked out over the edge, right where Vik had put it. The big man clambered up the containers and plucked the alien from its perch. The critter was tucked up in a ball, its body glued together with industrial adhesive. The grub was glad he'd found a use for the dead larva.

"Musta crawled up there." Jace turned the alien around in his arms. "It's all curled up."

"Then uncurl it and put it in the box!" Ivan ordered. "Find the others."

"C'mon now, little bugger." Jace grabbed each end of the larva with his enormous hands. "Ain't gonna help where you're goin'."

Vik slid his thermal shades down and set them to dampen heat and light patterns. *Showtime.*

Jace yanked, unfurling the larva and triggering a cluster of frag grenades the grub had rigged to its belly. The explosion sent the merc's legs rocketing off in opposite directions and reduced the rest of his body to a shower of biomechanical machine bits.

Vik reached for a makeshift control panel he'd wired into the facility's electrical lines, and thumbed a series of switches. The first overloaded the shop's power core, killing the floodlights. Backup generators kicked in, painting the room in crimson emergency strobes.

The second switch wirelessly detonated a dozen grenades he'd scattered in the shipment containers stacked against the far wall. Fireballs blossomed in the room. Thunder shook the walls. Shards of molten shrapnel fanned out in all directions, cutting down a third of Ivan's cronies.

"ZERG!" someone yelled.

The mercs scattered and dove for cover. *Pop! Pop! Pop!* The whole crew unloaded their weapons--pistols, shotguns, and assault rifles--at shadows with reckless abandon.

Vik triggered the last switch. Thermite charges ignited across the outside of the cage containing the dogs. The structure's fence melted into a pile of molten goop. The terrified animals surged out of the pen, lunging at whoever stood in their path of escape and safety. The chaos was absolute.

The grub slid down a maintenance ladder and stalked into an empty vehicle corral where he'd loaded the two remaining larvae onto a hoverdolly. Pushing the dolly in front of him, he wove through the carnage, his thermal shades affording him preternatural vision.

He raced along one side of the room, positioning the hoverdolly between himself and the frantic mercs and hounds. A hail of stray rounds slammed into the larvae carapaces, ricocheting back into the melee.

Then Vik was out, tossing the thermal shades aside and pushing the dolly into Deadman's Port proper. He made a beeline for the starport. Thinking back on his escape, the grub realized Ivan had disappeared during the fighting. He cursed himself for not noticing earlier. The boss's absence should've been a warning.

A transport engine snarled behind him. Tire treads clawed at the dirt. Vik glanced over his shoulder and saw his boss, gunning the four-wheeled metal beast toward him. The grub slipped into the familiar backstreets of his home. After a few twists and turns he lost sight of the transport, but he heard the growl of its engine echoing through the alleyways. It was impossible to place.

Grubs poked their heads out of their makeshift homes built from abandoned ship scraps to survey the ruckus. Vik ignored them and gritted his teeth as he pushed the dolly into the street ahead. He was racing toward the other side when Ivan's transport careened around a nearby corner.

It all happened so fast that Vik only had the time to step back as the vehicle slammed into the dolly. The impact ripped one of the larvae into pieces and sent the other, along with the grub, flying. Vik tumbled across the ground, bruised and battered, but alive.

The commotion drew more grubs. They bounded and leapt through the webwork streets. They crawled and clambered atop derelict ship hulls and towering nests of jagged neosteel. Dozens of feral eyes set in grime-smudged faces peered into the street. They didn't come to intervene. They came to watch. Fights meant death, and death meant scavenge.

Ivan stepped out of the transport, clutching a needle-gun. He picked up a piece of the dead larva, looked at it for a few seconds, and then hurled it across the street, screaming. It was the most emotion Vik had ever seen his boss display. The grub felt a grim satisfaction that he had shattered the crime lord's mask.

"What part of our talk last night didn't you understand?" Ivan asked. "You're filth, down to your bones. An animal like the rest of these leeches!" he yelled, waving his gun at the watching grubs.

Less than a meter away from Vik, the living larva scratched at the dirt road with its legs. The grub pulled the alien close, using it as a shield, and then struggled to his feet.

Ivan marched forward in long strides and leveled his needler at the grub, but he pulled it back as he neared. "No. I'm going to bash your head in like I did with the other grub. He cried, you know. Whimpered like a dog. Didn't even have the honor to die like a man."

His chuckle turned into a hoarse cough, followed by a stream of blood that dribbled from his mouth. Vik's heart rate quickened at the sight of it. He scanned his enemy and found a barely noticeable patch of crimson on his stomach, partially hidden by his black suit coat. *Caught a stray bullet in the melee...*

Vik's adrenal glands doped his bloodstream with a fresh wave of epinephrine. His vision became dagger-sharp as he focused on the wounded animal standing in his territory. His blood howled, and all at once he felt a rush of invincibility. He wasn't a grub. He was the purest expression of survival, the bearer of a genetic code honed and sharpened by natural selection over the course of terran existence.

"Let this be a reminder." Ivan grabbed Vik's jumpsuit as he addressed the other grubs. "My product, my-
_"

Vik sank his teeth into Ivan's hand, tearing away a strip of meat. He sprang forward on the balls of his feet, swinging the larva down. His boss fired a wide shot just as the zerg's spiky carapace tore through his suit, through his flesh, and to his bone.

And then Vik was pinning Ivan to the ground, smashing the larva down on his boss again and again. The carapace crashed down with sharp cracks, shattering bone. His blood howled for more, and he indulged its cravings until the crime lord was nothing more than a smear of road kill. The grub ascendant rose, holding his larva overhead. Blood coated his body like a new hide, a symbol of superiority that spoke more to his kind than threats, titles, or credits ever would.

Most of the watchers kept their distance. A few even cowered low to the ground in some animal approximation of a bow. But one lunged forward, reaching for Ivan's fallen gun, driven by the desire to defeat the new champion and assert his dominance.

An inhuman scream boiled out of Vik as he kicked his boot into the challenger's sternum. The grub cried in pain and rolled through the dirt. He slowly crawled away in defeat, keeping his eyes to the ground. They all were, Vik realized. Not one of the grubs had the courage to meet his gaze. They were scared. They were his.

"Ivan's shop is open for business! First come, first serve!" he bellowed.

The grubs cheered, raising dirty fists skyward, and then scattered off in the direction of the facility. Vik would've joined them, but he had a fortune in his hands. The larva's legs clawed wildly at the air. He wondered if it comprehended its victory, if it realized how far it had come with his command.

Vik brought Ivan's transport to a screeching halt at the edge of the dust-blown landing area that passed as the city's starport. He hopped out of the vehicle, dressed in a ratty shirt and pants. He'd taken off his jumpsuit and wrapped it around the larva to avoid the attention of the starport's regulars. The clothing concealed the alien entirely, making Vik look like just another grub lugging around useless junk.

He almost missed the buyer's vessel. The lab rat had been smart. The beat-up, common-looking ship fit right in. What gave it away was a plump man waiting outside, clean-shaven and dressed in a crisp black jumpsuit. Branamoor's rep, Vik remembered Ivan saying before. The man probably would've been hassled if not for the armed guards--mercs, from the look of them--standing nearby.

Vik was trekking toward the ship when a wave of fatigue hit him. Every bruise and scratch he'd earned over the past twenty-four hours flared painfully to life. The larva suddenly weighed a thousand pounds in his rubbery arms. As he shifted his hold on the bundled zerg, the pilot wings slipped out of the jumpsuit's folds. The grub stared at them for a moment, not immediately recognizing what they were.

But something inside of him did. The primal fog shrouding his mind parted. Fragments of his old self, locked away in his subconscious, stirred. He struggled to keep them back, those weak and unnecessary parts that were anathema to survival.

"We're not like them: that's what's important. We're not animals," he heard Serj's voice say.

"Shut up..." Vik growled. He stomped on the wings to silence the unwanted speaker. Inside, his other half clawed up toward the surface of thought, armed with memories, accountability, and guilt.

"When we finally make it off this rock, we'll fit in with people. We'll be real terrans."

Vik stumbled. Images of the past day hit him like a maglev train: Jace's body coming apart, shale dogs tearing out the throats of terrified mercs, and Ivan's remains plastered across the street. He hadn't really seen any of it happen at the time. It hadn't been *him*; it'd been someone else. Something else.

"Vik..." the grub said as he went to his knees. "I'm Vik."

The buyer's rep stared at him in disgust, oblivious to the treasure cached under his bloodstained jumpsuit. The man's eyes, cold and calculating, reminded Vik of Ivan's. The grub hugged the larva protectively, thinking of emotionless figures in white lab coats poking and prodding the alien with strange devices. Freedom was meters away, and all it would cost was another life, an alien and unthinking one at that. Just one more sacrifice to finish this path built of blood...

"We both forgot..." Vik plucked the wings from the ground and then turned away from Branamoor's rep. "We both screwed it all up. I should've stayed... talked you out of it. We coulda found another way."

He collapsed at the edge of the starport, his body limp with exhaustion. For hours, he sat there and watched the ships come and go. Eventually the lab rat's ship took off empty-handed.

The larva died later that night. Its tiny legs stopped moving, and its body went rigid. Vik dug a hole in the ground and laid the alien inside. He stood over the grave, thinking of all the UNN vids he'd seen about the zerg. Any other terran would've called the larva a monster, but the grub didn't. The little critter hadn't been turned into one. Zerg changed their skins when they became killing machines, but Vik's kind remained the same. They hid their beasts behind masks of carefully manicured normalcy. Maybe that made his species more dangerous than a million bloodthirsty aliens stampeding toward a helpless colony. At least with the zerg, you could see them coming.

As Vik began throwing dirt into the grave, a hard lump formed in his throat. In his fit of terror and emotional detachment, he realized that he hadn't felt anything for Serj's death. But peering down at the half-buried larva dislodged those dormant feelings. It was the first time in his life he'd ever seen a dead thing and felt truly sad... the first time he knew what it was to feel like a real person.

The next morning, Vik traded Ivan's transport to a group of smugglers for a space in their puddle-jumper's cargo hold. He never asked where they were going. Apart from the clothes on his back and Serj's wings in his pocket, he left everything else behind. It was only Vik who ascended the ship's landing ramp. The dreamer. The friend. The terran.