

# STARCRRAFT®

HEART OF THE SWARM



# Lost Vikings

By Matt Forbeck

"We are not ready for this." Erik Snabb squirmed in his viking's harness as the craft scudded across the ice-blue sky of Braxis. The unwieldy machine handled like a rented mule, and he felt like getting out and beating it like one. Maybe he'd save that treatment for the engineer who'd come up with the idea of putting wings on a war walker and forcing it to fly.

"Speak for yourself, rookie." Major Stortand Varg grunted at Erik over the open comm channel. "You knew what you were in for when you volunteered."

The other members of the flight wing laughed. Erik's cheeks burned in embarrassment. He took some small comfort in the fact that no one could see that.

Then Varg's ugly, battle-battered mug popped up on Erik's screen, glaring down at him. In the past, a hydralisk had slashed open the veteran's face with one of its meter-long claws, and he hadn't bothered with reconstructive surgery until it was too late to do him much good. The scar ran across his mouth, twisting his lips into a permanent sneer and exposing the metallic replacements for the teeth he'd lost in the battle.

To Erik, Varg's face served as a stark reminder of the horrors of war that he'd hoped to leave behind. He'd flown a Wraith for the Dominion for just over a year during that distant tour of duty, and he'd loved every minute of it. Erik had never felt so alive as when he sat behind the controls of a fighter, feeling the power in his hands and keeping the galaxy safe for terrans.

He'd seen it as his obligation to use his talent and skills as a combat pilot where they could do the best good. Fighting for the Dominion against forces that threatened to strangle it in its crib had seemed like the smartest way to help the greatest number of people. The fact that he'd gotten to fly some of the most powerful and deadly machines around hadn't hurt, either.

That had lasted until he'd met Kyrie and fallen in love. Much as he adored flying, he just couldn't stomach leaving her behind. He'd seen the way Kyrie wept for him every time he

went off to battle, terrified that she would never see him again, and he knew that he couldn't put her through that forever or, worse yet, leave her to mourn his death.

His superiors hadn't been happy about his wanting to resign, of course. They'd harangued him about how the emperor had invested a fortune in his training and how Erik needed to spend the rest of his life repaying that. In the end, though, as much as part of him agreed with those officers, Erik had left. Once he'd discovered that Kyrie was pregnant, even Emperor Mengsk himself couldn't have convinced him to stay.

As soon as his tour of duty was up, he and Kyrie got married. As his wedding gift to her, he mustered out, packed Kyrie and their sweet young daughter, Sif, onto an interplanetary transport, and took them here, to Braxis.

Lone and icy Braxis sat far enough away from the rest of the Dominion that Erik hoped he wouldn't fall prey to the temptation to re-up. He almost gave in to it a couple of times after watching the news on UNN, but he always came to his senses before finding his way to a starport.

Instead, he'd gone back to his job, flying transports across Braxis's frozen wastes, hauling goods from one settlement to another and precious ore from the mines to the refineries. It paid well, although it kept him away from Kyrie and Sif for days at a time. It also gave him far too many moments alone with his thoughts.

The instant he mentioned leaving the planet, Kyrie knew what he meant. "You can forget it," she said. "We have a good life here. It's safe, far from all the troubles of someone forging an empire for himself, and it's the kind of place our daughter has a real chance of growing up knowing both her mother and father. Why would you want to change that?"

Erik shrugged. "I just don't feel that useful here, is all. History's happening out there somewhere, and we're not even going to witness the footnotes."

Kyrie shook her head. "Tell me that's more important than your marriage. More important than letting your little girl keep her dad. Go ahead and do that, and then I'll consider it."

He wanted to turn away, but she grabbed him by the chin and forced him to look at her. "Come on," she said. "Try."

He couldn't manage it. He took her in his arms and held her until the urge to leave went away. He needed an awfully long time.

So he returned to his work and made the most of it. If that meant being just a truck driver, he meant to be the best damn truck driver around. He did a good job, and he moved up in the organization. His bosses kept him close to home and only sent him on shorter runs, so he got to spend more time with his family.

He'd made his peace. He felt content. Happy, even.

And then the zerg arrived.

All that precious ore Erik had been moving around the planet turned out to be just as valuable to the zerg as to the terrans. The aliens didn't issue a warning when they invaded. They didn't make any demands. They just squirted down to the planet's surface and set to work taking what they wanted and slaughtering anyone who got in their way.

Kyrie was in tears when Erik finally made it home. Sif—sweet little blue-eyed Sif—had done her best to comfort her mother, but she had failed. The girl was so relieved to see her father that she raced up and leaped into his arms the moment he burst through the door. Then, once she felt safe, she allowed herself to weep, too.

Erik had been listening to the UNN reports all the way home. He knew the planet was already lost, at least the Braxis he'd known. It was only a matter of time before the zerg scoured every terran from the face of the planet. Even if the emperor sent a force to stop

them, the war between the two sides was sure to rip the settlements to pieces. Erik, Kyrie, and Sif had to leave now and hope there would be something to come back to later.

They were packing their things for the evacuation when the call came. The local recruiter told Erik that the military had concocted a plan to slow down the zerg, at least for a while. With luck, it would hold them off until most of the people on the planet had a chance to escape. But the Dominion needed more combat-ready pilots to help implement that desperate plan, and it needed them now.

Hearing that spurred Kyrie into action. "Go," she said to Erik as she wiped the tears streaking her face. "Do whatever good you can. We'll be waiting for you when you get back."

Erik took just enough time to kiss Kyrie and Sif good-bye before he raced to meet the recruiter.

Within hours, Erik found himself in the cockpit of a viking, joining a unit of veterans as they rocketed toward the northern ridge of the Grendel Mountains, the spot where Command said the zerg had landed their invasion force. Erik hadn't flown a fighter in over three years, and he'd hoped the muscle memory he'd relied on during his active-duty days would come back to him right away.

But the viking threw him hard. The controls bucked in his hands like reins on a wild horse. There was just too much for him to keep track of, and he hadn't had any time to train with the damn thing before he'd been asked to climb into it.

"Are you sure you don't have a Wraith back there somewhere?" Erik had said when the armorer told him he'd be operating a viking.

The man laughed at him and shook his head. "The few we had are out helping with the evacuation. You're flying with Varg. You get a viking."

Erik had spent so much time in his Wraith that it was like a natural extension of his body. By contrast, the viking felt like a violation, as if someone had surgically attached two extra legs, three extra arms, and a prehensile tail to him. The problem wasn't that he didn't know how to operate any individual piece; it was that he couldn't figure out how to coordinate them in a way that didn't feel as if he was going to trip and fall—or crash.

Of course, everyone else on the team had put in dozens, if not hundreds, of hours in these craft. These pilots worked together like a well-oiled machine, able not only to wield their vikings like fencers with sabers but also to anticipate one another's movements. It was as if their actions had been choreographed and practiced endlessly, the team a seamless whole but for the jagged bit of broken bone that Erik represented.

Erik had never been in a viking before—a real one, not a simulator—and he'd never met anyone in the crew, much less worked with them. He'd heard of Varg, who was a legend on Braxis, but the rest of the team remained a mystery. If there was a weak link in this chain, he knew who it was. He could only pray he wouldn't snap and destroy them all.

"We're practically there, kid," Varg said, interrupting Erik's reverie. "Time for regrets ended after takeoff."

"I wanted to defend my family," Erik said, explaining now to Varg why he'd volunteered for this mission. "I didn't realize it would be in one of these."

"You got to choose whether or not to fight," Varg said. "That's more than the rest of us got. You just didn't get to choose your weapon."

"I know how he feels, though." The voice belonged to Olaf Kraftig, a massive bear of a man flying off Erik's starboard side. "These beasts are neither fish nor fowl. An armored walker that can convert into an aircraft? It doesn't seem natural, does it?"

Varg laughed at the comment. "What do you have to say to that, Scorch?"

"Scorch" was the nickname for Captain Drake, a redheaded firebrand of a woman Erik had spotted in the hangar. They hadn't spoken, but she'd snapped a quick salute at him as he climbed into his viking, and he'd reciprocated, more out of reflex than intent.

"It's a machine that can do it all," she said. Her voice was so raspy that Erik had to wonder how she'd damaged it. No one sounded that raw and throaty naturally, right? "Air superiority *and* ground-support capabilities. What's not to love?"

"Might ask Johan," Baleog Grym said in a bitter tone. "He was flying young Erik's rig up until last week."

The fifth and final member of the wing, Baleog hadn't had much to say to Erik the entire trip. He seemed to resent Erik's presence, to think the wing would be better off without him. Erik wasn't sure he could disagree.

"What happened to Johan?" Erik said.

"Put it this way," Baleog said, grim as ever. "If he was still around, Varg here wouldn't have asked for volunteers to take his place."

Olaf threw back his head and laughed. "Too true!"

"He died in a training accident," Scorch said. "He lost control of his craft while transforming from an assault walker to an air-superiority fighter. Smashed right into the ground."

"Happens more often than you'd think," Varg said. "There's nothing easy about flying a viking. Only the best of the best can pull it off."

Baleog grunted at that. "The best—or the desperate."

"Look," Scorch said, "there aren't a whole lot of spare combat-tested terran pilots on Braxis these days. Varg wouldn't have asked for Erik if we hadn't been stuck."

Erik felt his heart sink. "How desperate are you?"

"I wouldn't have tapped you if I didn't think you could hack it," said Varg. "Having a bad pilot in a wing's worse than being shy a ship."

"That's the truth," Baleog said.

"I went over your military records before you got the call. Your old commander said you were the best damn pilot he's ever seen. Racked up the most kills in your unit."

"That true?" Scorch said.

"True enough," Erik said with no trace of pride.

"Well, there haven't been enough terrans here on Braxis, period," Baleog said, a grudging note of respect in his voice. "Not since the protoss blasted the whole place clean."

"Have you seen pictures of how it looked before?" Scorch said. "Mostly flat and round as a marble, with a mountain range here and there. Pretty standard stuff. Not now, though."

Erik had spent a lot of time flying high over the planet's icy surface. Some called Braxis a frozen graveyard. Erik preferred to think of it as a clean slate.

He marveled at the way it had re-formed after the apocalyptic heat from the protoss cleansing had turned every bit of water on the frozen planet to steam. From what Mr. Wotan—one of the first terrans to resettle Braxis—had said, most of the planet's surface might have vaporized, but that didn't mean it had disappeared.

After the horrifying job had been done and the protoss had left, the planet had cooled again, and all that water vapor in the sky had turned into snow and hail. The storms must have been almost as terrifying as the cleansing that had preceded them, vast oceans' worth of precipitation falling back to cover the scoured lands, which had been exposed for the



first time. The insane weather had created gigantic crystalline structures that seemed impossible, jutting from the surface like monstrous works of art or some dead god's toys.

In many places, the ice had re-formed solidier than ever. In others, it had formed a fragile latticework that looked stable but couldn't be trusted. It might be able to hold tons of frozen water without collapsing under its own weight, but the right amount of pressure at the wrong angle could cause the entire area to give way. Although he'd never had to make an emergency landing in the wastes, Erik had heard tales of those who had, only to have the ice swallow their transport whole.

"Yeah," Erik said. "It feels alien, but it's beautiful."

The words escaped his lips before he realized that he meant them. He'd learned to care about his new home since he and his family had moved here. Too bad he'd come to recognize it only now, when the zerg were about to drive them out.

"You got this far; you're going to do fine, kid," Varg said. "Time for us all to shut our yappers and concentrate on the task at hand. We hit the LZ in 60 seconds."

Despite Varg's encouragement, Erik winced at how ill-prepared he felt for this mission. The viking didn't help. The way it moved read wrong to him, at least compared with the Wraiths he remembered so well.

"We're coming in hot," Varg said. "We need to put down a few clicks out from the site of the zerg infestation and leg it from there. Command thinks that should let us get closer to the trouble spot before they start firing at us."

Rumor had it that the zerg had landed on the far side of the planet, a preliminary force that would soon blossom into a full-scale invasion. Braxis might be big enough to hold both species, but the zerg didn't like to share.

The Dominion had launched an airstrike against the infestation, but the zerg had brought the terran flyers down before they'd completed their mission. That was when some bright bulb in the command structure came up with the idea of sending the vikings. Soon after that, Erik was called in.

The evacuation of all non-essential personnel had begun, and Erik had been planning to leave with the rest of his family. He hadn't thought the Dominion would need him if they'd already decided to abandon the planet. Maybe he shouldn't have answered when they came calling, but the moment he heard who it was, he knew his hiatus from combat had ended.

Sif and Kyrie were still slated to go out with the second or third round of evacuees. They said good-bye to him that morning. Erik and Kyrie had agreed not to let Sif know what was happening, telling her only that she and Mommy were leaving on a trip and that Daddy would catch up with them as soon as he could.

Kissing them before he left—knowing that he might never see them again but unable to say anything that might tip off his sharp little daughter—was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

Right up until now.

"We're here, Erik," Varg said as the vikings skimmed down toward a bare patch of snow. "I want you on the ground first. Switch to assault mode now!"

Erik hauled the viking back as hard as he could and punched the button to lower the aircraft's legs. With any other machine, doing something like this would cause it to stall out, which would be fatal at this altitude. The rapid stop hurled him against his harness, but it held him tightly against the wild inertia. Now he understood why the viking had more than double the straps, pads, and packing that the Wraith had. All of the crazy ups and downs the craft went through as it switched from one mode to the other were brutal.

As Varg had ordered, Erik was the first to get his walker's feet on the ground. Landing a viking was one of the trickiest maneuvers in the entire fleet. If he was going to crash, it was better if he didn't land on any of the others and take them out, too.

Erik had flown over the frozen wasteland that made up most of Braxis on more trips than he could count, but he'd always been safe inside his transport, a klick or higher in the air. This was the first time he'd been this close to any part of the planet's surface outside of its few settlements. He wondered if the snow would hold him or if he'd sink right through to whatever it was covering—and he wondered how far down that would be.

The snow did give under the several tons of the viking's weight, but the walker's legs found solid ground to stand on only half a meter down. Whether it was ice or rock or something else entirely, Erik couldn't tell. He just felt grateful it was there.

Enveloped by the dense white cloud his landing had kicked up, Erik couldn't see a damn thing. He pushed the machine forward, and it slogged through the thick, heavy snow. The viking's legs cut through the mess as if it wasn't there, but the movement felt sluggish.

Erik had operated only civilian walkers before, using them to help unload the cargo from his transport every now and then. That was probably another reason why Varg had sought him for the job. Not many pilots had any experience in a walker, even if it was just one of the stomping forklifts he'd tooled around in the distribution center.

He didn't know enough about military walkers to tell whether the machine's movement was normal. Did its gait feel off due to the nature of the viking, or might it have something to do with the weather? At this point, he supposed it didn't matter much. Either way, he'd have to put up with it and account for it.

Once he emerged from the mess that he and the others had churned up around the landing zone, Erik stopped to survey the landscape. A chain of snow-capped mountains was huddled off to what the heads-up display on his screen told him was the west. Or maybe they were mountains of snow. He couldn't tell from this distance.

Icy plains yawned to the north and south, wind sending curls of white powder winding and cutting through the air. Nothing obstructed Erik's view all the way to the darkened horizons but storm clouds scudding about in the distance, lightning strikes flashing across them, pregnant with thundersnow.

The sky lightened to the east as the sun's first rays strove to break through the incessant cloud cover. They illuminated a long ridge that stretched for clicks in either direction, forming a sheer, crystalline cliff that had to be hundreds of meters high. Under other circumstances, the vista would have stunned Erik with its stark beauty. Instead, the sight of a zerg infestation burrowing through the cliff threatened to turn his stomach.

Erik's time with the Dominion military had been spent fighting other terrans, mostly rebels. He'd followed the struggle elsewhere against the zerg and the protoss through UNN broadcasts, but he'd never been ordered into battle against any aliens. He had seen dead zerg before but never a live one, not outside of a recording. Most people who did weren't fortunate enough to survive the experience.

The way the bugs squirmed along the cliff's ledges, abruptly disappearing and reappearing through a series of holes that had been eaten or drilled into them, reminded him of a termite infestation he'd seen as a kid. The termites had demolished the infrastructure of the house his family lived in. The exterminator told them the place was too far gone to be saved. The only thing to do was to have their home destroyed.

Erik wondered whether Braxis had reached that point of no return. He didn't know how much it would take to remove the zerg from the planet, but if they had infiltrated it as they had already riddled the cliff, he couldn't imagine that anything less than orbital bombardment would dislodge them.

"What the hell are we doing here?" Erik said.

"Killing the bad guys," Varg said. "First chance we get."

Erik checked his rear-view camera and saw that everyone else had emerged from the landing zone. Could the ice their vikings stood on handle this much weight? A viking might be able to fly, but when it walked on the ground, it made a deep impression. If they were on top of a frozen sea, Erik could envision breaking through the crust of ice and disappearing into the black waters below.

"Let's march out." Varg began trudging forward through the snow. He kicked up a haze as he went. Erik and the others fell in line behind him fast, and as a group they soon managed to cause visibility in the area to drop to only a few meters.

"What's the plan from here?" Erik said. Maybe he should have just waited for Varg to start barking out orders, but he needed to know what he'd gotten himself into.

The major grumbled. Erik had a hard time making out the back of the man's armor through the snow, and Varg strode only a few steps ahead of him.

"We're meant to provide a distraction," Varg said. "Our job is to keep these bugs occupied until Command gets the rest of our forces in line—or decides to turn tail and run along with the civilians."

"They're using us as bait." Baleog gave Varg an approving grunt. "Drop us down on the far side of the zerg infestation and use us to draw their forces away from the settlements."

"Right," Varg said. "We don't have to take the bugs out. We just have to pull their attention away long enough for our people to escape."

"What about us?" Olaf said.

Erik hated the big man for asking the question. He'd wanted to ask it himself, but he feared the answer. Would it really be better to know?

"How about it, Varg?" Baleog said. "Do we constitute acceptable losses?"

"Damn right you do. We all do. What's more important: a wing of vikings or every other terran on the planet?"

As long as "every other terran" included Kyrie and Sif, Erik knew how he'd answer that.

They trudged on in silence, their vikings carrying them closer and closer toward the icy cliff. Even though Erik could no longer see it through the snow whirling around them, he knew it was there, and he dreaded every step forward. Still, he didn't let that stop him from marching on.

"Halt!" Varg said, raising one of his viking's Gatling cannons to make sure he had everyone's attention.

Erik and the others stopped in their tracks. The snow they'd kicked up settled down, swirling to the ground. The viking's climate-control system kept Erik's windshield clear, and he could soon see all the way to the ridge again. It sat much closer this time.

Varg gestured at the ridge with a Gatling cannon. Zerg drones squirmed in and out of countless tunnels in the icy face, parts of which had been coated with creep, a substance that reminded Erik of a spider's webbing. It covered much of the ridge, turning the sparkling white surface a filthy gray.

Things that Erik didn't recognize hung in the air over the ridge, scooting back and forth like flying jellyfish. He couldn't tell what kind of zerg they were, but his HUD identified them as overlords. They were sprinkled with a strong force of mutalisks.

"We're going in by ground until we get close enough to hit those bastards with as much firepower as we can muster. Vikings move too fast in the air for us to get decent targeting on anything standing there."

Erik groaned. "You would think the engineers who built these things could have included guns that pointed down." His Wraith had been able to attack both ground and air targets as it soared above the battlefield, and the lack of that flexibility pained him.

Baleog growled at him. "The viking is and remains the pinnacle of terran personal-combat systems. You want to fight something in the air? You get in the air and shoot it. You want to fight something on the ground? You slam down and get your feet dirty. No other weapon is as flexible or dangerous. Inside my rig, I can take on any terran machine and tear it apart. Anytime you think you're up for it, you're welcome to climb into a different ride and give that challenge a try."

Erik muttered an apology. "I was only making a—"

Baleog cut him off. "You might be the best damn transport chief around. Out here, you're nothing but a baby bird with a big mouth. Now shut up and try to learn something that might keep you from getting us all killed."

Erik didn't respond.

Varg pointed his Gatling cannon at the ridge again. "We go in fast before they notice us, then hit them hard with our big guns. Once that gets their attention, they'll send out some ground troops to deal with us. We'll jump into the air and switch to fighter mode before they reach us."

The tip of Varg's Gatling cannon rose up to target the airborne zerg. "From there, we go in and take out as many of those sky bugs as we can. Focus on the mutalisks first, the ones with wings. They're the biggest threat."

"And once we're done with that?" asked Scorch. Erik liked that she thought ahead.

"We land and start taking out the ground bugs again. We keep at it until we get the word that it's time to go home. Clear?"

"As ice," Scorch said. The others chimed in as well.

The plan seemed like a good one. It had the benefit of simplicity, which Erik prized, given how little experience he had in a viking. Back when he'd been flying a Wraith, his commanders had employed the same sort of hit-and-run tactics, only without the wrinkle of landing and taking off again. Erik felt a surge of hope, which he hadn't known since he'd first heard of the zerg invasion.

At Varg's signal, they resumed their march. Once they got within what the major deemed to be an acceptable range from the zerg, he called a halt again. When the snow settled this time, Erik saw how large the ridge really was, and hope drained right out of him.

From this distance, Erik could see the color of the zerg carapaces, the bruised purples and unnatural greens that bulged out of their basic palette of shit browns. He could see their mandibles moving, chewing, and his stomach churned in disgust. He didn't have much time to wallow in his growing sense of dread, though.

"Hit 'em hard!" Varg opened up with his Gatling cannons, and the rest of the vikings joined in.

Erik spun up his own cannons, one mounted on each of his walker's shoulders, and let loose. A fire-hose spray of metal slugs spat out and tore through the hard-shelled zerg, the thick and viscous creep, and the honeycombed ice underneath. The viking's carapace protected Erik's ears from the thunderous racket the guns produced, but he could still feel the constant rattle of the discharge thrumming through his bones.

Baleog howled with glee as the vikings' assault turned the zerg on the cliff's face into dark purple paste, and Scorch and Olaf chimed in. The vikings had caught many of the creatures unawares, killing them before they had a chance to flee. Others, though, had managed to slip back inside the ridge through the myriad tunnels they'd chewed into it, disappearing from sight.



"Keep it up!" Varg said. "We got 'em on the run!"

A grin broke out on Erik's face, and he found he couldn't suppress it. Taking out the bugs was more of a thrill than he could have imagined. The fact that doing it might save his wife and child and everyone else in the settlements only made it that much better.

His guns began to glow. At first they just showed a hint of red around the tips, but it soon crept backward along the barrels, growing brighter. The heat from the friction of the bullets must have been tremendous, especially given how cold it was outside.

"Looking good, my little vikings!" Varg said.

Rather than burrowing into the ridge, one line of zerg made a mad dash for the foot of the cliff. Erik followed them with his weapons, tearing them to pieces. The few that he missed managed to escape into tunnels near the base, and Erik redoubled his efforts to blast the zerg out of there, exposing them in their hidey-holes one vicious bullet at a time.

"Watch it, kid!" Varg said. "Raise your guns! You keep that up, you're liable to bring the whole—oh, shit."

As Varg spoke, the face of the ridge began to collapse. It started with the small section near the bottom where Erik had been focusing his fire. He'd just spotted a huge infestation of zerg, and no matter how many bullets he'd fired at it, more of the creatures squirted out of their burrows, as if there wasn't enough room for them all to hide.

That turned out to be true, Erik saw, when the first several meters of ice crumpled and gave way. The exposed zerg were packed in so tight that they almost exploded outward with the fragmented ice, and they scrambled for cover like cockroaches from light. They didn't get far, though, before the rest of the wall tumbled down on top of them.

Without the ice at the base to support it, the wall's face cracked and crumbled away, crashing to the ground like a combination of an avalanche and a waterfall. Erik could feel

the impact through the viking's insulation, rumbling like thunder that might never end. As the ice landed, it shattered and rolled up into the sky, forming a gigantic cloud that roiled out from the ridge like a tidal wave of snow.

"Dammit!" Varg said. "Brace yourselves!"

Erik had already planted his viking's feet square on the ice to deal with the recoil from his Gatling cannons. He didn't think the oncoming crush of snow could be much worse. As soon as it smacked into him, he realized how wrong he was.

The snow wasn't the thin, stirred-up powder that obstructed his vision when he and the rest of the vikings strode across the land. This was solid, heavy stuff, shards of ice that had stood there since the planet had refrozen after the protoss purification. It slammed into him like a tank and drove him backward, burying him deeper with every centimeter he gave.

At first Erik fought hard, struggling to stay upright, but he soon realized it was pointless. He raised the walker's Gatling-gun arms and did his best to ride the rising wave of snow. It swept his viking off its feet, and for a moment he felt as if the machine were treading water backward in a tsunami.

Then everything went white. And then it went black.

An avalanche hitting you was nature doing its level best to murder you. The noise—a low rumble like thunder from the ground—tumbled through him hard and fast until it felt as if it had absorbed him, as if he'd become a part of it. Although he could breathe just fine inside the viking, the avalanche's speed and force rattled him against his restraints and knocked the wind from him. He was sure he was about to die, and if it was going to happen, he hoped it would be quick. At least then, the sheer terror of the instant would be over and he'd be spared having to endure it any longer.

Employing his fear as a spur, Erik struggled to make the viking swim toward the surface of the avalanche, using its pumping legs and flailing weaponry to keep the craft upright as best as he could. After a moment, the force of the rolling snow ripped the bucking controls away from him and snatched his fate from his hands. As the viking spun down to a stop inside a massive crumble of ice, rock, and snow, the noise abated, and he realized he was alive—and stuck good.

Sounds of panic burst at Erik over the comm system. He couldn't make out any of the words, not for sure. He just knew that the people he'd come here with were in a great deal of trouble, and he couldn't do a thing to help them.

"Report!" Varg said. He might have been saying it for a while. "Shelve that damn squealing and report!"

The immediate danger over, Erik felt new dread over his situation threaten to reach up and swallow him. Hearing the officer's strong, stolid voice gave him a lifeline to hang on to. "Here!" Erik said.

"Present," said Olaf.

"Yo!" said Baleog.

No one else responded.

"Scorch?" Varg said. "Dammit! Scorch?"

Nothing.

Then her voice came over the comm, soft and weak but clear. "I'm, ah..." she said. "Um, here."

"Anyone got a visual on her?"

"I don't got any visual at all," said Baleog. "I'm buried up over my head."

"I'm afraid I've fallen over," said Olaf with a pained grunt.

Erik peered out through his windshield and saw little but a dim gray. He supposed that was a good thing. If he were buried deep, it would be nothing but utter blackness. The fact that he could see anything meant he wasn't too far beneath the avalanche's surface, or so he hoped.

"No visuals here." He tried to move his viking's arms. His Gatling cannons had been so hot that he wondered if they had melted any snow that came near them. Instead, it felt as if they'd been encased in blocks of flash-frozen ice. "Can't move my guns either."

"Don't panic," Varg said. "We're not licked yet."

"Sure," said Baleog. "As long as your name's not Scorch."

"Not helping," Varg hesitated for a moment. "Anyone got mode-transformation controls operational?"

Erik checked his HUD. The diagnostics section glowed green across the board, except for his guns, which were highlighted in bright yellow. "I'm good," he said.

"Me too," said Baleog. "My rig's left leg's shattered, but my cockpit's still intact."

"Affirmative," said Olaf. "My cockpit has maintained integrity as well. I lost one of my cannons, though. A rock clipped it clean off."

"Fire those engines up," Varg said. "Activating your vertical-lift jets ought to generate enough heat to bust you loose."

"How about you?" asked Baleog.

The major grunted. "I'm in one piece, but the avalanche spun me upside down. I fire up my engines, and I'll go in the wrong direction. Might be able to break free, though, if you three can loosen things up for me."

"We can manage that, right?" said Erik. "We've already accomplished our mission, which should give us plenty of time. And we did a lot more than just distract the zerg. That avalanche should have crushed them too. The clock's on our side."

Baleog let loose a sharp, bitter laugh. "You don't know much about the zerg, do you?"

Erik, who had been pretty thrilled about the avalanche until he was caught up in it, felt his heart sink. "How could anything have survived that?"

Varg coughed a weak laugh. Erik wondered if the man was hurt worse than he wanted to let on.

"The zerg are burrowers, kid," Varg said. "As long as that icefall didn't crush them flat, they have everything they need to dig themselves out of it."

"Must have got some of them, though," Baleog said. As gruff as he sounded, Erik detected a note of fear lacing his words. "Right?"

"Sure," Varg said. "Maybe. But all of them? Not a chance. They're out there, and they're pissed."

"Pissed and looking for revenge." Olaf's voice sounded small for a man as large as he was.

Varg only grunted at that.

Erik started to activate his viking's fighter mode as fast as he could. He set it up in sequence, in his head running through the checklist that Varg had gone over with him again and again on the flight out. When Erik reached the part about making sure his ship wasn't

held down or restrained in any way—because that might result in an overload that could cause the viking's engines to explode—he skipped right over it. He didn't have much choice.

"Fuel rerouted? Check," he said to himself. "Power to legs cut? Check."

He reached out and grabbed the lever that would transform his viking's arms into wings. He squeezed the green safety trigger on the end of it, then hauled on the lever with as much muscle as possible.

Nothing happened. Not a damn thing.

He swore and pulled on the lever again, putting his whole back into it. He could feel the lever start to give, but he feared it might snap off in his hand. He listened hard and thought he could hear the viking's servos whining in protest as they tried to dislodge his craft from what had to be at least a ton of snow on top of it.

"I'm stuck!" he said. "Standard operating procedure not providing results. Any ideas?"

"I am stuck as well," said Olaf.

"Try activating your VTOL jets," Varg said. "Just by themselves. Put as little juice into them as you can."

"How about we disable the auto-shutdown circuit?" Erik said. It made him nervous to try it; the governor had been installed to keep him from accidentally breaking the ship. Now, though, he needed every bit of help he could squeeze out of the machine, dangerous or not.

"Can't hurt," Varg said. "Well, it could blow you up, but that's the least of our problems."

"Wha's that?" Scorch said. "Wha's that noise?"

"Scorch!" Varg said. "You need to snap out of it."

"Somethin'—somethin's out there," Scorch said, concern creeping into her pain-drunk voice. "Can hear it scratchin' on m'rig."

"That's the zerg!" Varg said. "You got to move, Scorch! Do something now!"

A horrible cracking noise sounded over the comm. Erik had no doubt where it had come from, but it still made him jump.

"Dammit," Baleog said, his tone so soft with horror that Erik had to strain to hear him. "They found her."

A scream leaped out of the comm and pierced the air in Erik's cockpit. "Get off me!" Scorch said, her voice sharpened by terror.

There was something then that sounded like clicking and gnashing and squishing all together and all at once. Erik shuddered at it.

"No! NO!" Then there was another horrible gurgling noise—something far too human—that was cut short.

Erik wanted to bellow in rage at the zerg. He hadn't known Scorch that well. He'd never worked with her before today. But he ached to pulverize every last one of those damn creatures that had killed her.

Instead, he cut out the safety protocol that included the auto-shutdown circuit and gunned his VTOL jets. He felt them thrum to life. He might be too late to save Scorch, but if he didn't get moving, he'd be too late to save himself as well.

"Come on," he said. "Come on!"

He tried to move his viking's legs and found that the snow around them had loosened. It had probably vaporized into scalding steam. He knew that if he stopped his jets now, the ice

would re-form around the legs in a matter of seconds and trap him even tighter in Braxis's frozen shell.

He gave his VTOL jets a bit more gas and felt his armor shake from head to toe. Something would have to give soon. He just hoped it wouldn't be the viking. If he overdid it with the jets, they might malfunction, and that would kill him faster than a zerg. At least it would be over quick.

Still, dead was dead, and Erik wasn't ready to give up yet. He gunned the VTOL jets again, and this time, he heard a horrible crack.

Daylight appeared above him, almost blinding him with its brightness.

The snow beneath his VTOL jets had gone from solid to steam, and the pressure from that had built up around his viking until it had to find some way to escape. Instead of crushing his craft, the steam had expanded upward until it located a weakness in the layers of snow under which he was buried, blowing them away.

"You all right, kid?" Varg said.

"That sounded like his craft detonated," said Olaf, his voice filled with awe.

"Better than being eaten by the zerg," said Baleog.

Erik wanted to respond, but he was too busy getting his viking into the air. He was used to flying something more reasonable. Moving from a stand to zipping through the air was never easy. Even an expert like Varg would have a hard time getting a viking to pop out of a deep hole without sending the craft into a spin.

Erik wrestled with the controls, trying to reorder the proper maneuvers that would get him airborne and stable. He managed to slip from the hole fast enough, but he came out at a slight angle that sent him sideslipping back toward the ice. He had to swing down the



vertical jets hard, and then he fought for balance like a tightrope walker struggling through a tornado.

But he survived it. A moment later, he punched the control that triggered the rest of the transformation. The craft's legs folded in, and the wings at his shoulders stretched out, giving him the kind of lift he needed to stay in the sky.

"I'm out!" he said.

Baleog whooped with delight, and Varg chimed in.

"Excellent work!" Olaf said. "Is it possible you could give us a hand?"

"Hold on," Erik said. "Let me see what I can do."

He stopped short of kicking in his craft's rear jets. If he gave the engines their head, he'd be fully airborne, and the viking's momentum would make it hard for him to come back and help the others. Of course, landing his viking on the ice would leave him vulnerable to burrowing zerg, but Erik knew he didn't have a choice. He had to try to dig out his compatriots.

The only problem was that he had no idea where they were. Not only had the avalanche spun him dizzy, but it had also taken out most of his sensors. He couldn't pinpoint where he was, much less where the rest of the pilots were trapped.

"I can't see you," he said. "Can you—I don't know—send up a flare or something?"

An instant later, the snow about ten meters in front of him began to glow from some light source far below the surface.

"Does that help?" Olaf said.

"Nice headlights," Erik said. "I'm coming over."

He moved his craft to the spot where the freshly turned snow glowed, and then he lowered his legs again. He fired the VTOL jets straight down and peered over to see the ice melt away beneath them. But it was hard for him to look in that direction, and the buried viking remained hidden.

Erik didn't want to just melt anything he stood over until the others appeared. For one, he'd soon run out of fuel or time. For another, he had to be careful not to melt them as well as the snow. The viking's shell would protect them from some of the heat, but it wouldn't shield them from a sustained burn.

"If you could bring yourself back about two meters," Olaf said, "that might do the trick."

Olaf wasn't shining his headlights straight up but at an angle, Erik realized. He moved away from the surface of the avalanche's ruin and gunned his jets hard. As they lifted him into the air, he saw the top of Olaf's viking appear, and the big man whooped with joy.

Erik moved to the side fast, and a moment later Olaf's craft rose from its frozen grave to hover beside him.

"How about the rest of you?" Erik said. "Where are you?"

"Get the hell out of here!" Varg said. "Those mutalisks have to be coming back by now."

Erik glanced up, which he had been too busy to do before, and saw how right Varg was. High above, a huge number of flying zerg, more than he cared to count, were diving toward him. He didn't know when they'd spotted him—if it was when he'd burst out of the ice or when he'd fired his VTOL jets to free Olaf. Either way, his time was running out.

"We got a minute." Erik wasn't sure whether he was lying, but he wasn't about to give up. "Show me a signal—something—and we'll get you loose."

"I'm stuck face down," said Varg. "Headlights might not do much good." He hesitated for a moment. "See anything?"

Erik scanned the churned-up ice and snow. He thought he saw something glowing, but when he moved his viking forward, it turned out to be just a trick of the sunlight. If it were darker, he might be able to see the lights from Varg's viking, but he couldn't sit there and wait for the sun to set.

"Guns?" Erik suggested. It was dangerous for the major to fire blind, but at this point they were running out of options.

"Damn things are frozen solid."

"Same problem here," Baleog said, "but I think I got my jets working. Give me a second."

"Argh! Dammit!" Varg said. "I can hear them! They're tearing against my armor!"

"Where are you?" Erik said. "Show me something! Anything!"

"Get clear! I'm a dead man, but I'm going to take as many of these bastards as I can with me!"

"Hold on!" Baleog said. "Give me five more seconds!"

"I don't think I can—gah! They breached my cockpit!"

Erik studied the snow below him, but the avalanche had stripped it of any features. Other than the holes that he and Olaf had made, he couldn't see any difference between one part of the ice slide and another. All he knew was that the major was down there, dying.

The sound of gunshots cracked over the comm, mingled with Varg's bellows of anger, frustration, and rage. The major fired round after round into the creatures, determined to kill as many zerg as he could. Erik could tell he wasn't going to bother saving a bullet for himself.

Erik wanted to melt every bit of snow until he found the man and rescued him, but he knew there wasn't time. The only thing he and Olaf could do now was get themselves into the air as fast as they could.

He looked up and saw a mutalisk right on top of them. The great bat-winged creature glared with its deep-set red eyes as it angled its massive tail toward him, the fanged and gaping maw on the tip reaching for him with ravenous intent.

Olaf was already transforming his viking into its airborne mode. As the mutalisk got nearer to him, he gunned his jets and was gone.

Erik tried to do the same, but he could see that he would never make the transformation in time. Instead, he did his best to backpedal from the creature. His only hope was that the bug had misjudged the distance to the ground and would smack into it before it could correct its course.

But the mutalisk hauled up at the last instant, the bottom of its thrashing tail hanging over the top of the snow. The creature had come so close to crashing, though, that it had to wind up its tail tight to cushion its partial landing on the ice.

The zerg bounced as if it were hopping on the curl of its backside, flapping its wings wide and hard. Then the ground beneath the mutalisk exploded. The blast tore it to shreds and sent Erik's viking skidding backward.

When he managed to get the viking's legs back underneath it, Erik wanted to stare into the smoking crater that had appeared, but he knew that indulgence might cost him his life. Having been granted another chance to survive, he wasn't inclined to waste it.

He punched the controls that would launch his viking into the air, and he shoved himself back into his harness, preparing himself for the impending tug of inertia. He glanced up and saw that the gathering of zerg coming his way had spread out to become a blanket. If he didn't move fast, it would close over him like a net.

The viking rocketed forward. If the transport he had driven for a living was a lumbering beast, the viking was a speedy jungle predator: quick, nimble, and almost impossible to control. He felt it struggling to escape his mastery, and he knew that if he let his grip over the craft slip even in the slightest, he might not live long enough to regret his error.

Olaf had drawn some of the mutalisks away, but just as many of them converged on Erik's craft. His HUD brought up targeting reticles centered on two oncoming mutalisks, and he took the hint. With the squeeze of a trigger, he let loose a matched pair of Lanzer torpedoes.

To Erik, it seemed as if they barely moved faster than his viking, and he feared that he might reach the mutalisks at the same time as his munitions. The torpedoes slammed into the creatures and detonated, sending shrapnel and bits of zerg everywhere. As Erik piloted his viking through the blast, debris splattered across the aircraft's windshield, splashes of acid etching fragile trails along its surface.

Erik couldn't help but throw back his head and whoop in triumph. But his elation lasted only a moment.

"Baleog?" Olaf said over the comm system. Erik spotted the freed pilot's viking beyond the perimeter of the overlords, circling back to join him.

"Varg loosened up the ice packed around me," the buried pilot said. "Just need another few seconds."

Erik looked back and scanned the fractured ice. A little ways off from the smoking crater where Varg's viking had been, he spied the top of another viking poking out of the ice. He also saw a number of mutalisks converging on it. The explosion might have scared them off for a bit, but they seemed to be getting over their fear fast.

"You're out of time," Erik said as he nosed his craft toward Baleog's snow-mired viking.

"There are too many of them," Olaf said. Erik saw his viking peeling off. "We cannot take them all on."

"We don't need to," Erik said. He knew how to handle himself in a dogfight, and for the first time today his confidence surged. The familiar rush of endorphins from engaging in midair battle felt just as great as he remembered. "We play the mutalisks here like Varg planned to play the whole force."

"Right!" said Olaf. "It's not necessary to challenge them all. We just need to draw them away from Baleog until he can get free."

"Exactly!"

Erik headed for a point to the far right of the bulk of the mutalisk flock. As he went, he started to let loose round after round of torpedoes. He didn't much care what they hit as long as they hit something. In such a target-rich environment, he knew they were sure to manage that.

As the first few torpedoes blasted apart a group of mutalisks that had been flapping too close to one another, Erik spotted another set of Lanzers zipping over his right shoulder. They found targets of their own and added to the mayhem.

"I can smell them!" Baleog said. "The zerg. They're ripping through my armor. They're coming for me!"

"Just hold on!" Erik glanced back over his shoulder to spy Olaf zooming up behind him, and the sight put a grin on his face. A huge flight of mutalisks that had been closing in on Baleog peeled off from that attack vector and set itself on Erik's and Olaf's tails instead. Their ploy had worked.

A scattering of glowing green glave wurms lanced through the sky. A few of them brushed close to Erik's viking, but none found their targets. The vikings were just too far away, and Erik aimed to keep it that way—at least long enough to give Baleog a chance.

"We bought you that time, Baleog!" Erik said into the comm system. "Use it!"

"I can hear them outside! They're tearing at my hull!"

"Punch it!" Erik said. "Go, go, go!"

For a moment, the comm went quiet, and Erik feared that roaches had destroyed Baleog's antenna. They might be tearing him to pieces, Baleog screaming his guts out, but Erik and Olaf would never hear a thing. Maybe he should think of that as a mercy.

Then the ice surrounding Baleog's craft sloughed away, and a third viking joined Erik and Olaf in the freezing air. Baleog roared in wordless triumph.

"I'm good!" Baleog said as he cleared the bug-filled portion of the sky. "Let's get out of here!"

The mutalisks were nimble little bastards, and they moved fast to hem the vikings in. The zerg had nothing on the terran craft when it came to sheer power, though. Erik and Olaf were able to evade the mutalisks' attacks until they could find daylight and break free. Soon enough, the pilots flew alone.

Once away from the zerg, they brought their craft around in a wide arc designed to intersect with Baleog's path, which curved to reach them too. Within minutes, they were flying in formation, with Erik at the point and the others at his wings.

Erik glanced at his rear-view camera to see the ruin of the ridge, the avalanche of ice and snow that had fallen at its base, and the wide column of smoke and steam still rising from where Varg's viking had exploded. He shook his head in disbelief. So much destruction in such a short time.

"Think that did the trick?" Baleog said.

"I certainly hope so," Olaf said. "I don't think we could survive another incident like that."

"I've got the only ship in one piece," Erik said. "I could go back and give them hell."

"Forget that, rookie," Olaf said. "You saved my life there. You try to return, and I'm coming with you."

"I think we've lost enough vikings for today," said Baleog. "Let's head home—for as long as it's still there."

"I'll bet they left the taps open at the tavern," said Olaf. "Drinks are free until doomsday."

"Right," Erik said in a solemn voice. With luck, Kyrie and Sif would be safely away before he and the other vikings made it back to the base, and they'd have some time to kill before the last transport left. "We have fallen friends to toast, and their tale to tell."