

# STAR CRAFT

HEART OF THE SWARM



# Momentum

By Danny McAleese

All at once, the explosions stopped.

For a long and eerie moment, silence reigned. Then, slowly, the plumes of white and gray smoke that choked the combat zone rose lazily into the still air. Revealed beneath, like some cruel magician's trick, the full scope of the smoldering battlefield faded into stark, naked view.

The protoss had been brutally thorough in their attack. Shattered combat suits that had once been living, breathing marines lay scattered in various stages of destruction. Some lay scorched by particle disruptors, their armor penetrated by the unrelenting stalker fire. Others had met a more surgical demise, sliced to pieces by the searing energy of a zealot's psionic blades. All of them were lifeless.

Or nearly all.

The apparent stillness of the Kel-Morian encampment was broken by sudden movement. One by one, from the back of the ranks, soldiers began creeping their way forward. They were marauders, lumbering in their mammoth armored suits—firebats, dragging the blackened and glowing barrels of their Perdition flamethrowers. Their once-neat formations were in fragments, like the twisted wreckage of the installation they were tasked to defend. But they had held. They still breathed. And that, to them, was victory.

Captain Marius Blackwood saw none of this. On either side of his racing siege tank, the strange Morian terrain blurred by. As vast, reaching plains of red dust stretched out in all directions, Marius focused upon the small, closed world of his forward viewport. Instead of the shrill blaring of the stronghold's Klaxon horns, he heard only the reassuring thrum of the engine beneath him.

"Enemy forces are in rout," came the voice over his comm. The words were as synthetic as ever: robot-directed instructions piped in from central Command. "All squads report to platoon commanders. Primary objective alpha. Perimeter breach at—"

Marius thumbed the kill switch of his headset, putting a stop to what he knew would be an endless stream of useless electronic chatter. His well-calloused hand closed over the shift lever without even a glance downward. The Arclite shuddered for an instant as it

roared into the next gear, treads kicking up great billowing clouds of crimson dust in their wake.

But Marius saw none of that, either. He saw only the colossus.

The thing was absolutely massive—an intimidating monster silhouetted against the grim, blasted landscape. He watched as it retreated on long, spidery legs, its strange, otherworldly head turned backward to cover its escape. It was still way beyond range. Marius knew it would continue to outdistance his siege tank, except for one tiny detail.

It was limping.

The lone robotic walker lacked the speed and grace it'd had when the war machines first attacked the compound. This one had suffered some damage. Rolling the zoom forward on his targeting screen, Marius could make out its badly crippled leg. With each step the walker took, the leg dragged heavily behind it.

He gunned the engine. Far ahead, the empty plain gave way to the darker shapes of distant, jagged mountains. He would need to get the colossus before it reached them. Marius locked the reticle on his target, his eyes drawn to the proximity readout that flashed below. There was only one thing he was sure of: it would be close.

A white light blinked rapidly on the console before him. Marius did his level best to ignore it and almost succeeded; then he sighed as he punched it with his fist. On the cracked, filthy viewscreen, a familiar figure came into view.

"Blackwood!" the lieutenant colonel cried. "Where in the hell do you think you're going?"

"Forward," Marius replied snidely. Already he could tell what kind of conversation this was going to be.

"Forward my ass," the lieutenant colonel reprimanded him. Her blue eyes gleamed brightly even through the dirt and grime of the splintered viewscreen. "Party's over, Captain. Get back here now. We've got—"

Without warning, the siege tank was rocked by a brilliant explosion. Hydraulic actuators in the undercarriage absorbed most of the impact, but they didn't stop Marius's head from its impromptu meeting with the forward console. He struggled to maintain

control, fingers going reflexively into his dark tangle of hair. They came back covered in blood.

"I thought the enemy had been routed!" Marius roared into his mic, eyes sweeping the landscape through his viewport. Despite all the missions he'd run in this thing, the veteran driver still didn't fully trust his sensor screens.

"They have been," the lieutenant colonel snapped. "But you're too far forward. You're running into retreating stragglers, Captain. You're way out in front—"

Another blast shook his tank, this time only a glancing blow. Turning to one side, Marius laid eyes on his new enemy. A single stalker had targeted him as it fled, moving in the same general direction that he was. Its legs were an astonishing blur of speed as it scrambled away.

*It shouldn't be here*, he thought curiously. By now the stalker should've blinked away to join its robotic counterparts. Perhaps it was damaged. Whatever the case, Marius wasn't going to give it the chance to prove him wrong.

He acted. It was always this way, when he drove. Through years of practice, Marius had learned how to become one with his machine. As a result, there was no delay between thought and action as he jerked the control wheel to the left.

The tank responded sharply to his input. Skidding wildly, Marius waited until the stalker was lined up in his sights before jamming his right foot on the opposite stabilization pedal. There was a tremendous roar as the tank shuddered, righted itself, and came out of the skid without missing a beat. It continued forward at a terrifying speed.

*Gotta keep up that momentum*, a voice echoed inside his head. *You lose it, and they'll punch your ticket.*

Cione. Again. Marius winced, squeezing his temples with a dirty thumb and forefinger. "Not now, brother," he said softly. "I'm kinda busy."

The stalker's torso had swiveled forward, presumably to calculate the best angle of escape. It turned back to find sixty-plus tons of steel bearing down upon it. Quickly leveling its disruptor cannons, the enemy managed a single ill-placed shot before Marius squeezed

the trigger on his 80mm. The twin blasts tore through the robot's remaining shield, blowing it to pieces only a split second before the siege tank drove over its broken frame.

Marius felt the satisfying crunch of metal giving way beneath his treads. A quick glance into the rear HUD revealed shattered fragments of the walker flying in every direction. At least these things died properly. Not like the zealots, who disappeared in a creepy flash whenever you killed them. A shudder ran through him. That had always spooked him out.

"Nice one," the lieutenant colonel's voice crackled over the comm, and not without a shade of sarcasm. "Okay, you've had your fun, Captain. Turn around *now*."

Her last word came with stern intensity, and for good reason. Marius had already nosed the tank over so it was once again pointed at the colossus.

He keyed his mic. "Be back in a minute," Marius said innocently. The tank was nearly at full speed again, racing across the red landscape, kicking up dust. He allowed himself to relax for a moment. The scream of the engine was almost soothing.

"I'm ordering you to return immediately!" the lieutenant colonel went on. "I know what you're doing and there's no way you'll get that thing. Besides," she said after a short pause, "radiation levels are still unsafe."

Marius glanced to his right, where a dark and ominous cloud hung motionless in the pink sky. This was all that remained of the tactical blast that had ultimately turned the battle for them. Somehow, a ghost had gotten in deep. Perhaps too deep; rumor over the comm was that the poor bastard had probably cashed his chips calling it in.

To be honest, Marius had no idea why. The Kel-Morian settlement they were assigned to defend was officially known as Remote Mining Station Four—another dig hole, like just about everything else on this planet. This one sat in the center of a vast dust sea, surrounded by a whole lot of nothing in every direction. So much, in fact, that the "Four" had long ago been painted over with the word "Forsaken."

As mining colonies went, Forsaken Station was unusually militarized, as if it protected something important. Something the protoss wanted pretty badly, judging by the amount of firepower they'd thrown at it.

Not that Marius cared. None of those details were any of his concern.

All he knew was that from the very beginning, the battle had been savage. The initial onslaught of the protoss ground forces had been backed by three lumbering colossi. Marius had never seen a colossus before, but it didn't take long for him to be impressed. The juggernauts towered hellishly over everything else on the battlefield, tearing the combat zone to fiery shreds with the superheated beams of their thermal lances.

Two of the behemoths were eventually brought down. It was a feat that required a full wing of vikings and more dead pilots than he cared to count, and only after an entire team of goliaths had sacrificed themselves as well. Those soldiers had died especially badly. Marius could still hear their agonizing screams as their machines were turned molten, instantly liquefying around their bodies.

And still he felt nothing.

It was horrible, the worst kind of horrible, but Marius couldn't bring himself to care. These people were nothing to him—all of them strangers, down to the last. They laughed; they played; they joked about everything... and they were young. So damned young. They palled around with each other as if they were old friends, even though they weren't, and that was what pissed off Marius the most.

It was the same everywhere he went. No matter which backwater planetoid he set treads on, people shunned him. In time, some learned to become outright afraid of him. They claimed he took too many risks and cared too little for their own safety. On the battlefield he was reckless, fearless, dangerous. One of his commanders had even called him bloodthirsty. Marius had come perilously close to laying the man out when he said that. But the more he thought about the comment, the more he realized how much it applied.

Of course, every once in a while, a group would try to include him in their camaraderie. He was to play the role of grizzled, battle-scarred veteran, imparting his knowledge and fatherly wisdom to his younger brothers-in-arms. It was sickeningly cliché. Every time it began, he stomped all over it.

In the end they would always shrug and go their own way. They developed kinships, formed bonds, and became brothers in battle. But they were not *his* friends. Not *his* brothers-in-arms.

And that was because all of his brothers were dead.

Stoltzfus, Tallman, Marciniak. Cione. All of them were gone. At first Marius had blamed the fight: the protoss and their deadly weapons, the seemingly never-ending swarm of zerg. Hatred for his enemies had taken his friends' place in his heart, filling the void that they left behind. But, as veterans often did, Marius Blackwood eventually realized that his true enemy was not the one he'd been facing on the battlefield over the long years.

The real enemy was time.

Time had taken his friends. It had erased them, eradicated them from the hearts and minds of all who would ever remember them. Of the five of them, Marius was the last. And when he was gone?

It would be as if they had never existed at all.

A flashing red alarm pulled him back to the present. Marius punched another button, signaling his acknowledgment that the Arclite's engine was approaching the redline. He wasn't worried. He'd driven this machine through far more dangerous situations, taxing it to the very edge of its critical-failure limits and sometimes beyond. He knew what it could do better than the engineers who'd designed and built it.

Up ahead, his target was noticeably closer. Marius could see its broken leg more clearly now. A steady stream of dust hung in the air behind it, marking the places where it had dragged. The planet's windless environment created a long, foolproof trail that led straight to the giant walker.

But Marius didn't need a trail. All he needed was one good shot.

"Captain!" the voice on the comm was shouting. "One last time: get back here!"

The comm signal was breaking down now. Marius suddenly remembered that the boost array had been totaled in the first stages of the attack. A few more clicks and he'd be out of the base's range entirely, just another annoying problem that would go away.

"Blackwoo—"

Abruptly, Marius decided upon a different approach.

"You saw what happened!" he howled, cutting her off while doing his best to sound fiercely angry. "How many of our men did that thing burn to ashes? You expect me to just let it walk away?"

It was one hell of a performance. He almost felt proud of himself. There was a long pause, followed by a burst of static. The next voice Marius heard was calm and emotionless.

"Fine," the lieutenant colonel said resignedly. "It's your court-martial."

"That it is."

A flash on his display indicated his target had changed direction. For some reason the colossus was now moving on a diagonal. As Marius vectored his tank to intercept, a glance through the viewport told him why.

To the east, a small set of cliffs broke the unblemished surface of the hard clay floor. They were low enough to allow the colossus to step over them, but sheer enough to stop his siege tank. Marius swore a scathing oath, then punched a series of buttons on his forward console.

A holographic image appeared on his HUD, showing a 3-D representation of the surrounding topography. He zoomed in on the cliffs, rotating the image from all angles as he looked for a way up. Half a minute later, he found one. Not far south of the colossus's potential entry point, a rocky incline offered him access to the top of the hill. It was steep—dangerously steep, in fact—but he was fairly sure he could make it.

Setting a course for the base of the ramp, Marius used the back of one arm to wipe a thick sheen of sweat from his eyes. The inside of the tank was dripping hot; long ago he'd had the Arclite's interior cooling system completely removed. Conditioning the air only taxed the engine, and the heavy compressors were dead weight to him.

The heat he could live with. In a twisted way, he'd even learned to like it. Every drop of his sweat was another ounce of speed; trading comfort for performance was just one of the many customizations Marius had made to the old Arclite. Smirking inwardly, he recalled the day he'd grabbed a plasma torch from one of the spanner monkeys and used it to cut



out his forward viewport. When his superiors saw the hole Marius had sliced into the 15 centimeter neosteel hull, they nearly lost their lunch. But, after the mother of all ass-chewings, it was just one more thing the veteran had gotten away with.

Marius stared into that viewport now, through the thick window of plasteel he'd bolted on so many years ago. The colossus neared the cliff. Even crippled, it was oddly beautiful. The sleek, angular body was cut with intricate designs, making it look more like a work of art than the devastating war machine it truly was. From within, it glowed with a ghostly blue luminescence.

*You gonna sit there and gawk at it or are you gonna blast the thing?* Cione's voice again. Marius lowered his head. His gaze fell heavily on his filth-smearred boots.

He could remember a time when those boots had been polished to a near-mirror finish, every single day. Barely. They'd all been so heartbreakingly young—fresh-faced kids, straight out of the academy. They were unbiased, unjaded, optimistic. And they were oh so ready for war.

In those days, nothing was out of reach. Everything was possible.

The five of them had stayed together through thick and thick; thin just wasn't in the equation back then, and that was fine with them. They were true brothers, always looking out for each other, helping one another survive their trial by fire. Even after their platoon split up, they managed to stay in touch, solemnly vowing to meet up when they could, every year or so, at the Shed.

It was a horrible, god-awful place—the most ramshackle of bars, tucked into the back end of some failing substation near Shiloh. But it was the site of their first assignment, and that made it special to them. In time, they grew to love it. Over the years, they'd made it their own.

The Shed was the one good thing Marius ever had going for him. Through all the years of fire and hell, it was something he could look forward to. The one shining constant in his ever-shifting, soldierly life.

But eventually, even that changed. One by one, less of them made the trip. First to miss it was Stoltzfus, who they learned had eaten the business end of a hollow point just before

his thirtieth birthday. Apparently he stood on the wrong side of some stupid uprising. It kind of made sense; the kid was loveable and trusting, but he was never too smart to begin with.

Marciniak disappeared a few years later, somewhere out near Char. A couple of good years followed, and then Tallman came next. His ticket got punched only a month after he joined some crazy mercenary outfit. They never did get all the details—something about the collapse of a real grimy deal—but this was the one that had really hurt. Billy Tallman had always been larger than life. He'd spilled the most drink, won the most fights, bedded the most beautiful women. He was their unspoken leader. And if any of them were truly unstoppable, it would've been him.

In the end, it had come down to Marius and Cione. For a long time they upheld the tradition: meeting up, reminiscing, even raising a toast to their fallen comrades. It didn't matter where he was or what he had going on. When it came to the Shed, Marius wouldn't have missed it for anything.

And then, one year, Cione didn't show up either.

It took a bit of work to find out what happened. Cione was apparently killed by friendly fire. Some Crucio operator had gotten sloppy with his targeting, and most of Cione's unit had taken an unwanted shower in superheated tungsten. There wasn't even a body.

Marius squeezed his eyes closed at the memory. His commanding officers never could understand why one of their best drivers repeatedly declined to upgrade from his Arclite. Even when it became mandatory, Blackwood had refused, becoming the butt of almost every joke in his division. Then, as time went by, the younger recruits started to view him as more of a mystery. They saw him as bullheaded and nostalgic, a fossil who refused to change with the times. But Marius knew different. Whenever he thought about Cione, Marius remembered exactly why his foot would never pass through the hatch of a Crucio.

That visit to the Shed had been the last, five years ago this month. Marius had ordered one final beer for his friend, placing it on the bar before Cione's empty seat while he finished his own. Then he left. It was that simple. That final. He turned back one more time as he passed through the doorway, to where five battered seats—seats that had once been

filled with warmth and laughter and life—now stood cold and empty. He was just in time to see the bartender washing Cione's beer down the cold steel drain. The last beer his friend would never drink. Gone for good, like him.

Like all of them.

An alarm chimed softly as the tank reached its temporary waypoint. Gritting his teeth, Marius started up the base of the ramp. It looked much steeper than it did on the HUD, and felt about ten times as rocky. The vehicle bouncing uncontrollably, it was all he could do to maintain his position in the driver's seat, much less manipulate the controls.

He'd flipped his tank once, back when Marius had first started training as a driver. It was a most unpleasant experience, and one he'd never looked forward to repeating. Back then it had been a simple matter of a tow cable and some laughs; a few embarrassing minutes later, he was righted again. But getting caught out here like a turtle flipped on its back? That would have grave consequences. The colossus could reverse direction, turn its beams upon him. With the hatch jammed shut he'd be trapped, unable to either move or defend himself. He imagined what those final moments would be like: the tank's hull rocked by those fiery, white-hot beams. The already unbearable temperature inside, quickly rising...

Marius glanced down to where his C-7 lay reassuringly strapped to his hip. It was no coincidence that he'd bought the pistol the day after he'd flipped the tank.

The slope grew steeper. Marius downshifted through two gears as he crossed the 50 degree mark, jaw clenched tightly as he double-checked his gyros. He could do an incline of 60, tops. *Maybe* 65. Any more than that and he'd tip straight backward, his body bouncing around like a human pinball as the tank rolled helplessly to the bottom of the embankment.

Outside the noise grew to deafening levels, the siege tank's treads spitting back chunks of jagged rock and gravel. They devoured the terrain, shoving the machine forward and upward with the terrible scream of steel against stone. Inside, Marius could feel the center of gravity shifting. His stomach dropped. Icy fingers of fear clawed at the back of his mind. Then, in a euphoric wave of absolute relief, the top of the hill edged into view.

The attitude indicator read 63 degrees of incline as Marius slammed the tank into one final gear. It lurched forward, barrels pitched to the sky as it crested the top lip of the ridge. There was a heart-stopping moment as the back end gave out, treads spinning into nothingness as the tank lost purchase and slipped a half meter backward. But a second later, it crashed nose-first onto the flat plain of the upper mesa with a resounding boom.

Surging forward from the latest cloud of billowing dust, Marius quickly spotted his quarry. Vectoring his tank to take the ramp had created new separation, but it was a distance he could easily make up. The colossus continued dragging its leg behind it like some great wounded insect. It seemed to be glaring at him.

*You're crazy. Absolutely crazy.*

It could've been Cione's voice, but Marius thought it was perhaps his own. Either way, the lunacy of what he was doing suddenly occurred to him. But it also occurred to him—and with equal if not more weight—that he just didn't care.

That, of course, hadn't always been the case. At one point Marius had actually cared a great deal. He looked down grimly to an empty spot on the corner of the big steel console. Vaguely, he made out the shape of a faded rectangle, so faint he could barely see it anymore. A photo had once been pinned there. A photo gone for so many years now, it felt like a dozen lifetimes ago.

Hannah.

Just another of his life's failures.

To think she'd been his "one great love" made Marius laugh. But in another time, in another place, she was certainly something. Hannah had been his one real shot in the dark—his only half-hearted attempt at maintaining a relationship.

They met in a fishing village while he was stationed on Shiloh, back when his life still had some small semblance of normalcy. She was young like him, only brighter, more intelligent, and strikingly beautiful. Steel-gray eyes. Hair the color of honey. He fell hard. But unfortunately for Marius, harder than any soldier who'd campaigned across nine known worlds had a right to. Not with duty calling.

Marius rubbed a grease-stained finger across the spot where the photo used to be. He could remember the picture as vividly as if it were still there: Hannah standing before the lake, smiling broadly, a big yellow flower tucked into her hair. She'd taken him boating that day, of all things.

Now he couldn't help but sneer. The girl, the photo—they were such foolish ideas to begin with.

A brilliant burst of searing yellow light came from out of nowhere, causing him to throw one arm instinctively over his eyes. Even through the small, smoky viewport, the glow nearly blinded him with its intensity.

Dead ahead, the colossus was firing at him. On either side of its elongated head, two large turrets moved in unison. Marius braked the tank hard, suddenly very aware of his enemy's ability to slice his vehicle to molten pieces. But as the colossus let loose another burst, he realized its weapon was still safely out of range.

Again and again, twin beams from the walker's thermal lance array ripped the sky. They tore harmlessly into the planet's compact clay surface, creating huge swaths of destruction in the form of deep molten fissures. And in that same instant, Marius knew exactly what it was doing.

The siege tank shuddered as it ran full speed into the first of the glowing-hot ravines. Stabilization systems took over, minimizing the impact on the Arclite's frame, but there were too few breaks in the newly torn landscape for it to make much of a difference. The machine porpoised violently forward and backward, Marius struggling to steer it wide of the devastated terrain.

The colossus kept firing. Marius eventually guided the tank beyond the danger zone, watching as the beams cut fresh grooves into the ground behind the walker. Staying outside the arc of destruction would cost more time; no longer could he point his nose directly toward his target. Even so, the Arclite was still gaining. It was only a matter of minutes.

Two blinking lights caught Marius's attention as they went from yellow to white. Rear-proximity alarms. He'd gone too far, way beyond the limited scope of the mining

installation's primitive communications arrays. They couldn't raise him on the comm now even if they wanted to. And he couldn't raise them either.

Not that it mattered.

In fact, nothing much had mattered to Marius for quite some time now. Happiness was completely off the table. The best he could feel these days was content, and even that was only when he was busy immersing himself in what he did best: soldiering. There were numerous times he had passed up promotions, transfers, even a chance to retire, all so he could keep on going, caring only for whom and where he would fight next. Without realizing how it had happened to him, Marius had gone from living his life to living solely for the thrill of battle.

And there had been many, many battles.

Many kills.

He smirked as the tank bounced over the terrain. Marking their kills was something each of them had done from the very beginning, an age-old tradition they'd resurrected together, as a group. It started with Billy running a tally across his helmet, back when all five of them were still infantry. From there it graduated into a friendly competition, although it escalated to great heights over the years.

As a result, the side of his siege tank was decorated with many such victories. Marius tallied zerg, protoss, even the terran enemies he was sometimes forced to face. Each and every one of his conquests was counted, all of them lovingly branded, laser-etched into the neosteel plating of his humming, thrumming killing machine.

His kills were his trophies. They were his friends.

They were all he had left.

The tank swerved left and right as it barreled down the dusty plain, Marius keeping it just outside the borders of the shredded terrain. Perhaps it was the intense heat, or maybe the thing had finally realized the ineffectiveness of its plan, because eventually, the lasers stopped. Turning its head away from him, the colossus continued lumbering forward.

He buried the throttle, his pulse quickening as he zeroed in on his prey. He felt alive—alive and nearer than ever to blowing this cursed leviathan into the next world. In a few

minutes it would be nothing more than a mark on the side of his siege tank, but a very important mark at that. Because in all the years he'd been driving, Marius had never killed a colossus.

And he very desperately wanted one.

Aiming in his enemy's general direction, the captain squeezed off a quick shot. The rounds fell far short of the colossus, just as he knew they would. Still, he wanted its attention. He needed it to start firing again so he'd know how close he could get before taking his real shot.

Marius had no illusions about range limitations. Those thermal lance beams would rip him to shreds long before his twin 80mm struck home. He'd known all along that his siege cannon was the only real chance he had of taking the walker down. But when it came to the Mjolnir, he had no illusions about that, either. He was good with it.

His mind began racing with calculations—distance and range estimations that only an experienced driver could possibly understand. Still, the colossus refused to fire. It kept striding ever onward, dragging the twisted remains of its leg behind it. The walker showed no fear, no concern. It moved no faster or slower than it had since the chase began. Its complete lack of humanity actually personified it. At this distance, it looked hauntingly malevolent.

Marius started flipping switches, turning off the preliminary safeguards so he could go into siege mode. The tank hurtled inexorably onward, gaining ground on his prize with each passing second.

He waited until the last possible moment... until the colossus turned its head. Then he made his move.

There was a hellish squeal of dirt and metal as Marius brought the tank from full speed to a full stop. Skidding across the packed clay surface, the Arclite slid sideways for a good fifty yards before grinding to a halt. Red dust obliterated everything. Before it was even at a complete stop, Marius had begun working a quick, familiar series of buttons and levers.

The tank rose beneath him like a living thing. There came the sinister hiss of hydraulics as the Arclite's support legs thrust outward and then down, slamming heavily into the dry,

unyielding clay. For an agonizing few seconds, he could only watch expectantly as the lock-release mechanism finished its cycle. Then the ready light flashed from red to green, signaling the full activation of siege mode.

With the tank stopped, the colossus was pulling away rapidly. Marius peered into his targeting computer, where the walker was already locked. Streams of information began rolling down either side of his HUD, offering all sorts of trajectories and possible course corrections. Marius ignored them all. He gripped the artillery cannon's controls and visually tracked the colossus, which by now was burned into his mind.

The ground sizzled. Just outside the safety of Marius's tank, the landscape erupted in yellow-orange flame as the colossus started firing again. A strange smell reached his nostrils—burning ozone—while at the same time all the hairs on his arms stood straight up at attention. The view beyond his tank was completely obscured. On his display, the reticle around the colossus was approaching the Mjolnir's maximum range. His thumb hovered over the button, but it didn't shake. He went about the task as he always did. By eye. By gut. By instinct.

He fired.

The Arclite's shock cannon roared thunderously. Marius let go of the controls at once and immediately leapt forward, pressing his nose hard against the dirt-streaked viewport. One second ticked by. Two...

There was a brilliant and spectacular explosion. The colossus reeled savagely to one side as the superheated 120mm shell ripped through its body. It teetered precariously, nearly regained its balance, and ultimately fell. As it struck the ground, a secondary detonation occurred, blowing the once-beautiful walker into half a thousand glowing pieces.

Marius exhaled a long, deep breath. He fell back heavily into his seat, his body tingling, reveling in the ecstasy of the kill. He lived for this moment. He always had. In such a hard, cold life, moments like these were all he truly had left.



For a full minute he just lay there, eyes closed, adrenaline surging through his sweat-soaked body. But Marius was pulled from his trance by the hum of an unknown alarm. When he opened his eyes again, half the lights on his console were flashing brightly.

A myriad of new information raced across his HUD, causing him to bolt upright in his seat. When he peered through his viewport, his blood instantly ran cold.

Stalkers. Dozens of them. The horizon behind the shattered colossus was dotted with advancing protoss forces, all of them scrambling his way. The long, slender legs of the smaller walkers kicked up multiple plumes of swirling dust. And ahead of them, even closer, were what Marius immediately recognized as the deadly, hulking exoskeletons of immortals.

His hands were moving before he realized it, punching out the series of commands that would reverse the tank out of siege mode. The immortals hurtled toward him, skittering across the perfectly flat terrain. With the speed they were making, Marius figured he had less than a minute. Hell, maybe it was already too late.

Precious seconds passed. The wait was excruciating. When the tank refused to shift beneath him, Marius knew something was wrong. A buzzer sounded from somewhere behind him. On his HUD, the holographic representations of the Arclite's support legs were flashing red.

They were stuck.

*I told you not to lose your momentum*, Cione laughed from inside his head. In his mind's eye, Marius could see his friend smiling. *You're getting way too old for this, brother.*

Shutting out everything else, he pounded his thumb on the release button. Nothing happened. The jagged teeth that kept the tank anchored during siege mode remained firmly embedded in the clay landscape. Marius pressed the button again, gripped by helplessness, only this time he felt a slight tremor. On the third try, the legs broke free.

The tank lifted. The hum of hydraulics played like sweet music in Marius's ears as the Arclite's supports retracted into its body. A series of lights flashed green, and the treads touched ground again. Even as they did, they were already spinning.

Marius reversed direction and tore across the dusty plain, climbing quickly through the tank's gears. Protoss forces now clouded every inch of his rear HUD. The targeting computer began locking them in automatically, emitting an annoying series of chirps as it tracked each approaching enemy. He switched it off and, at the same time, keyed up his mic.

"This is Captain Blackwood, Arclite 2717. Do you read me?"

Marius unmuted his headset and jacked up the volume on the forward comm. He was rewarded with nothing but static.

"Lieutenant Colonel Maxwell, this is Blackwood. I'm on my way back. Are you getting me at all?"

Still nothing. On his HUD, he could see the first of the immortals' disruptor bolts striking the ground behind him a good distance away. His proximity sensors, however, told a more frightening tale: the stalkers had blinked forward. They stood just behind the immortals now, and were gaining rapidly. Too rapidly.

"Gwen!" Marius shouted, doing his best to antagonize the lieutenant colonel with the use of her first name. "There's a second attack coming! Stalkers, a ton of 'em. Immortals too, maybe more. Lieutenant Colonel! Anyone! Are you receiving this? Transmitting now on all emergency frequ—"

Marius was thrown forward as the tank rolled over one of the deep rifts in the clay floor, a parting gift from his prized colossus. Glancing ahead, he concentrated on steering clear of the remaining fissures.

Another blast suddenly lit the tank, this one exploding somewhere out in front of him. The stalkers had range now. His time was almost up.

*So this is it*, thought Marius. This was how his ticket got punched. The colossus would be his last kill... his one last beer before he was swirled down the drain of oblivion. It was all so hilariously fitting.

The edge of the cliff came onto his topographical display. It still appeared way too far away. For a moment he considered punching his own ticket by driving right off it at full speed, launching himself into that stupid, ridiculous sky. He chuckled at the thought. But

no, that wasn't his style. If anything, Marius would turn around and fight. Even with his machine in the redline, he could do some serious damage. He was pretty sure he could take one or two of the walkers down with him.

Then, directly ahead, a light in the sky. It started out dim, growing brighter and more pronounced as he rapidly closed the distance. It was a spotlight. The spotlight from a dropship!

His heart leaping into his throat, Marius punched the throttle so hard he was afraid he might break it off. But the tank was already at full speed. He could do nothing but watch as the dusty ground rushed by.

The pilot of the G-226 lined up with him smoothly, its engines rotating downward as it dropped through the sky. Marius approached the ship head-on. Stalker bolts erupted all around him as he saw the transport's forward ramp starting to lower, opening to receive him as it was set down at the edge of the rocky precipice.

An explosion at the back-right side of his Arclite threw the machine sideways. Instantly Marius fought to right the tank. He overcompensated, drifted dangerously for a moment, and eventually corrected the second skid as well.

*No!* he thought wildly. Not now. He was too close! Willfully or not, hope had seized Marius in its viselike grip. After everything he'd been through, he sure as hell wasn't going to let go of it.

Dust flew everywhere as the dropship neared the ground. A hard clank reached his ears, and Marius began easing off the throttle. There was no room for error. One skid might send him into the side of the dropship, launching them both off the edge of the cliff in a tangle of twisted metal.

All at once the evac ship was down, actuators flexing beneath its weight. Marius slowed, focusing on controlling his deceleration. Teeth clenched, he guided the nose of the tank up the ramp and into the receiving bay of the G-226. He stomped on the brakes, shuddered to a halt, and engaged the magnetic locks on the Arclite's treads. Then he felt his stomach drop like a brick as the pilot tore his ship from the ground and launched it into the strange pink sky.

Outside, the blaring of disruptors could be heard as a dozen or more stalkers tried to shred the ship to pieces. The sounds quickly became fainter and more distant, until finally, they disappeared altogether. Flying from the cliff had put a near instant separation between the transport and the enemy. It was over.

Marius stood and popped the hatch. Cool, sweet air rushed into the tank. He filled his lungs with it greedily, hungrily; to him, nothing had ever tasted so glorious. Climbing out, he sprawled prone across the top of the Arclite. It felt warm beneath him as he allowed the chill air to sweep over his sweat-soaked body.

As he bathed under the bright lights of the evac ship's cargo bay, Marius closed his tired eyes. The silence lasted less than a minute.

"Captain Blackwood, sir," came a booming voice from somewhere above him. "Very glad to have you aboard!"

The ship's pilot. Marius slid down from his tank, legs nearly buckling as his boots touched the corrugated metal floor. He stretched them, wincing mightily. Both of his knees popped in vehement protest.

"Relax and enjoy the ride, Captain," the pilot's voice continued. "It's smooth air from here to base. I'll have you back in no time, so smoke 'em if you got 'em."

Absently Marius reached into the pocket of his vest and produced half of a dog-eared cigar. He began walking around his machine, surveying the damage.

"Tell the lieutenant colonel I'm going to kiss her when I see her!" he shouted into the emptiness of the G-226's cargo bay. His voice echoed loudly off the smooth steel walls. "Court-martial or not!"

He was pretty sure the pilot couldn't hear him, but it didn't matter. Marius patted himself for a light and came up with nothing. He put the cigar in his mouth anyway and chomped down on it.

Passing the back end of the Arclite, he stopped. Most of the tank's rear armor had been completely torn away. Only a few small pieces remained, twisted and distorted by withering stalker fire. The outside edges were still smoldering, glowing white-hot in some places from the intense heat.

Marius carefully leaned forward and lit his cigar against the superheated metal.

Strolling to the opposite side, he breathed a sigh of relief. His kills were still there. Marius ran his hand over them, touching them, feeling how deeply etched they were in the neosteel plate. At the end of the long string of tally marks, he stroked a smooth blank space.

The colossus would go there. Finally.

There was a horrific boom. The dropship dangerously lurched to one side, throwing Marius to his hands and knees. Pain rocketed through his legs as his knees popped again. Gripping the treads of his tank, he struggled to pull himself upright.

Another explosion, this one so loud it was nearly deafening. The ship shook violently, fishtailed, then dropped nose-first with a sickening tilt. Unable to hold on, Marius was tossed clear across the receiving bay, as helpless as a child's doll.

There was a flash of blue and white, followed by an intense blast of heat. Marius could hear the shrill sound of air escaping the ship's pierced hull as he scrambled for any possible handhold. He found nothing.

A moment later, the world inside the dropship exploded with the terrifying scream of steel tearing away from steel. The floor dropped out from under his feet, no longer there, and Marius fell through the sickly pink sky. He was falling, spinning, his arms and legs splayed out in a futile attempt at regaining control before he finally surrendered to the inevitable. The last thing he saw was the hulking form of his siege tank, tumbling wildly beneath him...

There was not an ounce of fear as he fell.

He felt relief. Peace. Freedom.

Marius grinned.

\*\*\*

Swirling clouds of dust danced beneath the phoenix as it landed.

With a hiss, the canopy opened. The protoss pilot emerged, climbing down to where the mangled pieces of the terran dropship lay smoldering in the stagnant air. To one side, the turret of a siege tank was embedded in the broken clay surface. The war machine's twisted barrels pointed defiantly at the sky.

The pilot bent and retrieved a single piece of white-hot neosteel from the flaming wreckage. Grasping it in his gauntlets, he could make out the crude marks that represented this human's previous victories. The protoss bowed his head once in grim salute. It was a gesture that transcended both race and language; he understood this warrior.

No, not warrior. Brother.

Striding back to his ship, the pilot used the jagged piece of metal to etch a symbol of his own into the fuselage, alongside all the others.

Then, after discarding his trophy on the cracked red landscape, he rose into the sky.