

# STAR CRAFT

HEART OF THE SWARM



**BILZARD**  
ENTERTAINMENT

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

# The Exit

*By Danny McAleese*

"You hear that? They're inside the wall."

The metallic booming sounds were barely audible over the swirling wind, but there was no mistaking them. The four men seated around the table huddled just a little bit closer, not so much for fear but for warmth.

"Do you think so?" asked Prescott, not even trying to hide the nervousness in his voice. "I mean those walls, they're so thick. I didn't think—"

"Shaddup," Garrick grunted, turning over his next card. "He's screwing with you." Then he shot a knowing glance across the table at his companion, a smirk creeping over his face. "Or is he?"

They enjoyed scaring him, Charn realized. They were getting off on it. Watching the blood drain from Prescott's face was infinitely more entertaining than anything else they'd done for the past six days, and especially better than playing cards.

"If they're inside the walls, it's all over," Kort said matter-of-factly, feigning an overly resigned sigh. "They'll chew out the power cables and we'll freeze to death down in this rathole."

Garrick picked up another card. "Nah," he disagreed. "They'll get to us way before we freeze. We're the warmest thing within 20 clicks. The bugs'll chew their way in here before they go anywhere else, and that'll be that."

If there was one thing the old marine was right about, it was the bitter cold. Six hours ago the furnace had finally burnt out, and although they'd found many things in the old bunker, fuel wasn't one of them. The geothermal conduits running through the floor offered the only heat they had left, but it was abysmally inadequate.

"They can't be here yet," Prescott reasoned. "The ghost would've seen. He'd have called it in, and we'd be on our way out of here."

The second part of the hand was dealt. Kort raked in the pot: six large washers, ten small ones, and a couple of chipped dominoes. Yesterday they were playing for meals and sonic showers, but their futures had become way too intangible at this point. Too bad there weren't enough dominoes to play an actual game, Charn thought. It would be a welcome change.

"Maybe that sound we heard was *him*," Prescott offered hopefully. "Maybe he's getting ready to call it in."

"Maybe he's dead," Kort countered, shutting the younger marine right up. An uncomfortable silence followed. The veteran's words echoed what everyone had been thinking but no one wanted to say.

"I... I think—"

"No one cares what you think," Garrick cut him off. "The evac's not coming. If special ops took off, we're on our own. No one else knows we're here."

That was probably true, Charn thought. Orders had been pretty straightforward: they were to stay on the shell of the abandoned compound until the zerg were sighted. At that point the ghost assigned to their unit would call in a precision tactical strike and then radio for the evac.

Put as simply as possible, they were *bait*.

Charn didn't like it any more than the rest, but it was his first assignment. His first drop. He wasn't looking to break ranks or disobey orders unless they had no other choice.

The only problem was the ghost. They'd lost contact with him 26 hours ago. Hell, none of them had even *seen* him during the entire mission. He was nothing more than a choppy voice on the other end of a beat-up comm, and that voice had gone eerily silent.

To make things worse, the ghost was also the only one with the evac transmission codes.

"Try calling again," Charn told Garrick. "Raise him on every frequency."

"You think I haven't tried that?" the marine disdainfully snapped back at him. "Nothing but static."

"Then we have to go to him," Charn stated simply. "We have to check."

Kort looked at Garrick, and wordlessly they shared a thought. Charn knew the two marines had seen long action, and he respected that. Together they'd been places and done things Charn hoped to one day experience for himself. It was why he'd enlisted.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

"*One* of us goes," Kort said firmly, breaking the silence as if he were in command. He wasn't. As a matter of fact, none of them were, not since the corporal had disappeared.

Prescott looked confused. "One of *us*?"

Garrick nodded slowly in agreement. "Cherry's right. It's time to make a move."

"Who—"

"We play for it," Garrick said, gathering up the cards.

The compound wasn't huge, but it was big enough. The ghost had been holed up in the south tower, watching the horizon. There was no direct way of getting there without crossing the courtyard, and everyone knew the courtyard would be dark, immense, and freezing cold.

Charn watched as the big marine shuffled the dog-eared deck of playing cards that had kept them occupied for the better part of the last week. His broad hands swept nimbly over the table as he dealt, the backs of his fingers covered in scars.

"Low hand goes," the old marine confirmed. "No backing out, no 'two out of three.' You go out, you come back, and we figure out what to do from there. Agreed?"

Everyone nodded. Prescott was the last. Nothing else really needed to be said. Charn watched the others pick up their hands before touching his own cards.

Two queens. Big. Huge.

"Three," Charn said, pushing the rest of his cards face down across the table. Everyone else discarded three cards as well, with the exception of Prescott. After some hesitation, the young marine turned over a single card.

"You only need one?" Garrick asked him. Prescott nodded almost apologetically. Garrick shrugged and dealt out the remainder of the hand. Everyone picked up their cards.

"You first," said Kort, looking directly at Charn. He turned his head and spat on the floor.

Wordlessly, Charn laid down his three queens. Garrick let out a low whistle.

"Damn. You're lucky, cherry. Guess *you* ain't goin'."

"I'm not going either," said Kort, turning over his own hand to reveal a pair of jacks. "And thank God for that, because I'm already freezing my balls off."

Everyone's attention went to Garrick. He intentionally made them wait a few long seconds just for effect. "Pair of nines," he finally announced. Then, more convincingly, the marine flipped his cards face up on the cold metal table.

The game came down to Prescott. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, glancing from his own cards to the other players' hands as if trying to make things work. Eventually he tipped his cards sheepishly forward, so everyone could see.

"You got nothing," Kort told him, scanning his hand. "Ace high."

Garrick took Prescott's cards and laid them out on the table. "What the hell were you going for, anyway? Another inside straight?" He pushed the younger soldier's cards around with one thick finger. "You remembered that this deck was already down a king when we found it, right? So stupid."

Prescott still hadn't said anything. Shoulders slumped, he was slowly shaking his head. His hands went up in a futile gesture of surrender, palms flat, fingers spread.

"Well, bundle up," said Garrick, reaching for the cards. "'Cause it's gonna be—"

Charn's hand suddenly slapped over Garrick's wrist and held it there. "Hang on a second."

Annoyed, the marine jerked his arm away as if he'd been wounded. Charn let it go, nodding toward the cards in front of him. "Looks like you have two nines of diamonds."

All eyes fell upon Garrick's hand. It was true.

Kort burst out laughing. "Oh man! Where the hell'd you get *that*? All those one-way tickets... all those times we've drawn straws together, I always thought you were being straight with me!" He continued laughing, fingers closing around the offending card. Not only did it come from a different deck, but the back was also an entirely different color.

"Shut up!" Garrick snapped, his words dripping venom. He delivered a scathing look in Charn's direction. "Little cherry here got three queens. How cute. Only queens he's ever seen in his *life*."

Garrick stood suddenly and rose to his full height of two meters tall. The marine slammed a booted foot on the table and drew back his torn leggings to the knee, revealing a wicked, jagged scar that ate away half of his calf muscle.

"See that?" he said, pointing. "That's where a zerg queen nearly took my leg off on Revera. Lost eight hundred brothers that day, six the next."

Everyone was standing now, but nobody said a word. Prescott wouldn't take his eyes off the floor. Kort was still smiling.

"And this," Garrick said, jerking back his mop of filthy black hair, "this is where a slugthrower carved a groove in my skull." He traced the gouge with a finger, probing it obscenely. "Friendly fire. *Great* day."

Charn stood his ground, but Prescott tried to step backward. Garrick grabbed his shoulder and pulled him face to face, yellowed teeth only centimeters away from the kid's nose as the big marine's lips curled back in snarl.

"You're *still* going," he told him. "This doesn't change anything. I've done my share, put in my time. I'm gettin' way too old for this crap. It's your turn now."

Slowly, Garrick released his grip. Prescott sank into his chair, utterly defeated. It was pretty obvious he wasn't going anywhere, anytime soon.

"I'll go," Charn said simply. It didn't even feel like the words were coming from him.

Kort turned curiously as if seeing him for the very first time. "Yeah? You sure?"

"Positive." Charn nodded, more to himself. "I'm done sitting here. Let's get this over with."

\*\*\*

The combat armor was as heavy as it was old. They'd found the chestpiece in the bunker's armory and the leg plates in a footlocker just outside the pressure doors. It was an ancient, unpowered strap-job that felt icy cold against Charn's skin, but at least it broke the wind.

The boots and gloves were long gone. Charn had almost left without the helm, too. "Here," Kort had said as he walked away, tossing Charn the visorless headpiece. "Brave's one thing. Stupid's another." And with those words, the marine had disappeared under the awning and back inside.

Outside the bunker, however, the wind was a driving force. Charn had to lean heavily into it to keep from falling down. The two remaining men were huddled beneath what was left of the awning, waiting desperately for their chance to go back in.

"The south tower's that way!" Prescott shouted into the wind, pointing. He was shivering from head to toe. "Go around the machine shop and past the third garage. When you hit the wall, go left and follow it down."

Charn nodded. Garrick handed him his modified AGR-14 and slapped him on the shoulder almost hard enough to knock him over. "Good luck!"

"Remember to reseal the doors once I'm gone," Charn reminded them.

Garrick smirked, already holding a plasma torch. "Have no fear of that."

His comrades disappeared. Charn turned into the swirling wind, cursing the fact that it blew against him instead of with him. Step by step he cut his way into it, shielding his eyes with one hand and steadying himself with the other.

To get to the machine shop, he had to cross the vast, empty expanse of the courtyard. This was the worst part of the journey; without any buildings nearby, the wind felt twice as strong and five times as cold. It ran like liquid over his body, across his exposed face and down his neck and chest. Charn's hands were quickly frozen in position, fingers locked in a twisted salute as he tried to protect his eyes from the worst of the wind.

Still, he kept moving. Step followed step. Soon Charn found himself at the halfway point of the icy courtyard. Looking around in all directions was like being in limbo. Behind him, he could only barely make out the vague shape of the low-slung bunker. Forward, the machine shop seemed miles away. Beneath was nothing but smooth black ice, and much deeper, the frozen asphalt.

Charn gripped his AGR-14 even tighter and continued walking. It took a good ten minutes to cross the courtyard, and another two or three to get around the shop. He found the line of garages Prescott had pointed out and began making his way toward them before realizing the second one was actually open.

He'd hoped to find a sheltered doorway in which to pause and drive some of the blood back into his extremities, but this was even better. Charn staggered out of the wind and into the open mouth of the darkened garage, righting himself as the momentum shifted.

It was hard to believe that just a few short months ago this outpost was active. Looking around, Charn tried to imagine the hundreds of people who had busily manned its walls. They drove the machinery, operated the defenses, maintained the structures. They slept in the barracks, ate at the mess hall, and kept the generators humming.

But all that was before the zerg. Before the Swarm had arrived to screw everything up. As Charn stood flexing his hands and fingers, it occurred to him that this type of thing happened way more often than not.

Then, in the corner of the garage... something moved.



The movement was small at first, almost imperceptible. But as his eyes adjusted to the lack of moonlight, Charn started picking out details. Shadows began shifting around the figure, betraying its size and position. By the time he realized what it was, Charn had already leveled his weapon and begun firing.

Starbursts from the gauss rifle's barrel lit the room at the insane rate of twenty-eight flashes per second. The zergling exploded instantly in a shower of blood and cartilage, wildly screeching as it died. Charn watched as its body danced strobe-like in the darkness, shredded literally to pieces by the hollow-point rounds of his weapon. He didn't stop firing until long after he needed to.

*Zerg. Here.* A shiver ran down Charn's spine even as his body flushed with the heat of sudden combat. The gauss rifle felt warm and good in his hands. It felt heavy and alive, almost as if begging Charn to keep the trigger pulled tight. It beckoned to him, or maybe his body just wanted to send more warmth into his hands and fingers.

Charn flipped the gun lamp and illuminated what remained of his enemy. Bits and pieces of carapace lay scattered across the garage; blood, mucus, and only God knew what else was splattered all along the side and back walls.

The marine stepped forward with curiosity, poking what was left of the shattered zergling. He marveled at how small it looked now. How seemingly harmless. Charn stood wondering how such a thing could be so dangerous, how so many horrific tales could be told about something so little and insignificant.

That was when the second and third zerglings came crashing into him from behind.

Ironically, it was their speed that actually saved him. The zerglings' impact threw Charn violently forward, knocking away the gauss rifle as he went sprawling to the ground. His two attackers went skittering even farther past him, claws and arm blades clacking noisily against the slick garage floor as they rammed sideways into the back wall.

The first zergling hit the wall hard. Leaping to his feet, Charn could see that it was stunned. It sought to find footing on the icy floor, one of its shattered wings now hanging at an odd angle. Mesmerized, Charn watched it struggle. He could feel those frenzied eyes consuming him, eyes that glowed like hot orange coals in the shadowy darkness.

The other zergling would be up and on him before he could reach his gun. Rather than try for it, Charn aimed a kick to the thickest part of the bug's segmented chest. He got lucky with the timing and caught it mid-flight, just before the two jagged scythelike claws came together with deadly precision, right where his head would've been.

The marine dove for his gun as the zergling recovered. Charn swung his rifle around and fired two quick bursts without looking, just as the creature jumped behind a pile of blackened debris. He wasn't sure if he'd hit it or not. Charn fired again and again into the debris for good measure, slugs kicking up clouds of dust, smoke, and bits of shredded metal.

Suddenly he remembered his other opponent. Whirling to his right, the marine was terrified to see that the first zergling had already disappeared. Backing slowly out of the garage, Charn began looking around for those telltale eyes. In the smoky darkness, those eyes would betray his enemy's location... or so he'd been taught.

The wind slammed into him the second he stepped outside. The now impossibly bright moonlight was spilling everywhere, in stark contrast to the shadows of the garage. For a few moments Charn fired blindly into the doorway, buying himself precious seconds in an attempt to get farther away. He squeezed off burst after burst, stepping backward the whole time, frantically looking for his next move.

He only glanced down for a second. The display on the rifle's magazine read 60. When he looked up again, the creature from the debris was already through the doorway, the razor-sharp jaws of the zergling slicing neatly through the flesh of his upper arm. Charn felt it happen way before he saw it.

Firing wildly, the marine swept his gun muzzle across the zergling's body. Charn's remaining fifty-nine rounds cut through the monster as if it were tissue paper, tearing it in half. The very last shot echoed loudly off the walls of the empty base, reverberating six or eight times before silence descended and took over.

Blood ran freely down Charn's forearm and spidered outward over the fingers of his left hand. The flesh of his shoulder was in tatters. It stung as if some vile poison were coursing

through him. He dropped the rifle, which was now blinking double-zero and chiming an ammo alarm. Turning, he ran past the third garage and began looking for the wall.

Finding it didn't take long. The wall was immense, twelve meters high and unreasonably thick. There were emplacements on top where turrets had once stood. Now only wires dangled from empty holes, dancing crazily back and forth with each gust of wind.

Charn took a moment to unbuckle his chestplate and fling it away. The upper part of the armor was now twisted, bent, and digging painfully into his neck with every step. Without the rifle and armor, he felt naked but immeasurably lighter on his feet. He turned to the south and picked up the pace.

Ninety meters down he stopped. There was a hole bored into the wall twice the size of a large truck. The surrounding steel had been melted from the outside in, much of the ground now covered in pools of hardened slag. It could've easily been the work of an incendiary shell, only no shell could be that big.

Every ounce of self-preservation screamed for him to keep moving. Charn could see the tower now, rising ghostlike in the distance. The irony was not lost on him. He managed a nervous laugh that scared the marine much more than it made him feel better.

Charn was halfway to the tower when instinct made him turn around. Something was running along the wall, and it was moving impossibly fast.

The zergling with the broken wing was coming for him.

His feet pounded hard against the cold asphalt as Charn broke into a run. Making the tower was his only chance. He had one shot to beat the creature before it could reach him, and there wasn't time to calculate whether or not it could be done.

Oddly enough, he was sweating. He was cold, frozen, bleeding... and hotter than he'd ever been in his life. Charn's shirt was soaked through with blood and sweat, and his lungs burned savagely from sucking in all the icy air. The tower loomed before him, a sleek metal spear thrust violently into the sky.

He reached the elevator way ahead of the creature and punched the large yellow button. Nothing happened. Instantly Charn's heart sank. He punched it again, harder this time, and that was when he realized it was never going to work.

The compound was on auxiliary power—life-support systems and emergency lighting only. He knew this already, of course, having spent the past week in the bunker. In the heat of the moment, it had slipped his mind.

Charn could hear the zergling now. It was screaming as it ran. That terrified him more than the actual visual; the creature's inhuman screeching rose slowly over the wind, increasing steadily in pitch and volume as it got closer and closer. Eventually it would be up in his face, next to his ear. The sound would drive him absolutely mad... right before those jaws snapped shut around his throat.

There was a service ladder. Metal rungs were bolted into the far side of the tower, shooting up its entire length. Charn flew toward them, not daring to look back. He put one hand out in front of him, centered it on the highest rung he could reach, and climbed for his life.

He had two feet on the lowest part of the ladder when one of the zergling's claw-appendages impaled his leg, an unyielding anchor that bit bone-deep as Charn struggled to pull free. He kicked with his other leg and caught nothing but air. Below, the screeching seemed to shift from anger to triumph.

The zergling raked Charn's legs. The pain was excruciating. The creature's bladed forelimbs swept back and forth, sending ribbons of blood scissoring across the base of the tower. Charn screamed through clenched teeth, pulling upward with all his might. Something popped in one knee, but he kept on pulling.

With a powerful jerk, the creature slammed Charn's body against the cold steel tower. The loud clang of metal on metal rang sharply, piercing through the cloud of pain in a moment of sudden, brilliant clarity.

*The stinger.*

With one shaking hand, Charn reached down and drew his sidearm. The C-7 wavered uncontrollably as he pointed it downward. He squeezed the trigger. Again and again he

squeezed, ignoring the high-pitched shrieks and inhuman screams that followed. The sounds rattled his skull and threatened to drive him insane, but Charn kept on squeezing until all he heard was a series of hollow clicks.

Opening his eyes, he looked beneath him. The spike pistol had pinned the zergling to the frozen ground in a dozen places. Its crumpled body was struggling vainly to pull free, but it was broken and shattered.

Charn climbed down a step. He turned the butt end of the pistol toward the creature's head and smashed away. Then, slowly, he began the windy 18-meter climb up the tower face.

\*\*\*

Inside, the tower was gratifyingly warm. Two steam furnaces were providing the heat, and Charn found both of them running full blast as he entered the upper chambers.

The hatch he had climbed through had been smashed open, presumably by the ghost himself. It was a good sign. Between that and the heat being on, Charn was feeling optimistic.

He stepped onto the observation deck, and what he saw immediately took his breath away. A large plasteel wall offered an unhindered view in almost every direction. Two white moons hung low to the east, lighting up a blasted landscape. It was both beautiful and desolate, pretty yet lonely at the same time.

Charn caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass. Head to toe, he was smeared with filth and blood. His shoulder looked swollen and nasty, the gashes on his legs even worse. Silently he wondered if Garrick would still consider him cherry.

At the end of the viewing window stood a human figure. He was half in and half out of shadow, head tilted so that he was looking outward. It was the ghost. He was absolutely motionless, and for a moment Charn wondered if he was indeed dead.

The ghost's head moved. He turned to look directly at Charn, as if sizing him up. Charn couldn't see anything of the man's face; the robotic eyes of his mask were glowing and empty. It was chilling.

Just as slowly, the ghost's head turned back to the moonlit landscape. He said nothing.

"Hey," Charn said, removing his helmet. "Hey! What the hell's happening? How come we lost contact?"

The ghost stood stock still, arms folded, gazing out over the darkness. Charn waited half a minute for a response, then worked up the courage to take a step forward.

"We're done rotting in that bunker," he said, this time more assertively. After his ordeal outside, this was nothing. His fear was fading rapidly, anger taking its place.

"It's time to go. Call the evac. The Swarm's not gonna—"

Something off in the distance caught Charn's eye. Without knowing it, he took another two steps toward the plasteel window. He could see something down there, something way beyond the walls of the compound.

"We, uh..."

The marine's words caught in his throat. Something was moving down on the horizon. Something was churning. *Swarming*.

"The Swarm!" Charn swore, awestruck. "There it is!"

There were hundreds, no, thousands of zerg gathered a good distance from the outer compound wall. They weren't advancing, but Charn could see they were buzzing with excitement. He saw whole colonies of zerglings, and larger bugs among them. Way out in the sky, he saw mutalisks, swooping and flapping in slow, lazy circles.

The ghost said nothing.

Charn stepped up to the viewing window. "That's it; call it in! Call in the nuke right now, and we'll get all of them at once!"

Eerily, automatedly, the ghost spoke just two words.

"*Already done.*"

Charn's eyes closed. Relief flooded over him in a euphoric wave. Finally the strike. Finally they could all go home. He breathed deep, wiping sweat and hair from his face. Off in the distance, he imagined he could hear the engines of the incoming dropship.

Everything was fine now. Everything but the red dot on the floor.

The ghost reached up and removed his headset, revealing eyes that were white, glazed, lifeless. He shifted forward with a mechanical jerk, and that was when Charn saw green tentacles reaching out from the man's spine, gripping his neck and head... tentacles belonging to the neural parasite that was now controlling the ghost's every action.

*"Already done,"* the ghost repeated, only his lips did not move. Instead, the muscles around his mouth began to curve into a smile. It was the sick, unnatural smile of something that never knew what a smile should be.

The ghost stepped backward into the shadows. The last thing Charn saw was the telltale shimmer of a cloaking device being engaged.

His mouth dropped open, all the blood draining instantly from his body.

The red dot on the floor blinked on, as the roar of the engines got louder and louder.