

At first glance, it was a junkyard -- mangled, ruined steel and a stench that stained the walls. As the morning light crept in to what was no more than a cavity in a bed of rocks it was easy to tell that it was more of a grave than anything. The lifeless bodies of four marines were scattered across the ground while one sat against the wall. Two firebats and two ghosts were collapsed in a pile, their suits destroyed and dusty. All of the dead lay twisted and some face-down like the contents of a toy box carelessly emptied across the floor.

A patch of bright light found itself striped across the face of the marine against the wall. The intense ray heated his face for several minutes until his hand instinctively went up. He rubbed his chapped lips together and ran his tongue around his teeth, swearing under his breath as the sour taste and smell enveloped him. Once he was able to swallow, he looked past the bright light to the outside. In the distance, overlords dotted the sky, hovering. Below them was what was left of the battle on Mar Sara. Ultralisks were feet away goliaths. But the usually unrelenting bruisers were only shells of their former selves; the ultralisks mere carcasses and the goliaths abandoned. These weapons of war stood monumentally amongst the countless fallen infantry that had amassed around them, as if down to pay reverence. If wars are won by the side that lives to tell about it, the victor was obvious as packs of zerglings ran across the terrain, tearing apart anything that moved.

The marine's arm fell to his side and he rolled his head around on his shoulders. He drew a quick breath and reached for his rifle which was just out of his grasp. He strained but snatched it up and used it as a leaning post to bring himself to his feet. He could see clearly that the bright glare was reflecting off of the wreckage of a wraith and took a single step towards the light.

"Don't kill me," a puny voice bounced against the rock walls.

The soldier cocked his rifle and held it tight as he fixed his aim from one body to another but it was too dark to see any small movements.

"I'll light this hole up if you don't show yourself," the marine threatened.

"Just don't shoot. Please," the voice whimpered.

The marine didn't assure him of anything. Instead he just waited with his finger on the trigger until one of the ghosts he'd thought to be dead got to his feet and faced him.

"What's your name, soldier?" The marine fixed his aim on the ghost's chest.

"Wilthem. Ghost operative," he replied.

"Lance Corporal Gabrel," the marine replied.

Gabrel had only worked with a ghost once years ago on Tarsonis and he found them to be arrogant. It had been a simple search and destroy mission with clear orders but he remembered the operative telling him to keep the team out of his way – this was a one man job. Gabrel had thought then that being raised to become an elite combat tactician must force you to look down on everyone else

who had their lives on the same line. That ghost was chased down by a rebel siege tank and blasted to pieces by the time Gabrel's team was in and out. But beyond that, Gabrel didn't trust anyone who could disappear. The Lance Corporal knew that he wouldn't have to worry about that with Wilthem though. His suit's sensor indications and psionic charge, which were usually alive with phosphorescent surges, were pitch black - inactive. After looking a bit closer he could see that his protection was thinner than usual. Ghosts wore slim armor but even that had been stripped away from his shoulders and legs. It was protocol for ghosts to wear their headgear at all times when they were on the field. So why did Wilthem not wear his?

As odd as it all was to Gabrel, he was going to keep him at the end of his barrel until his one pressing question was answered:

"Why do you have your eyes closed, operative?"

"If I tell you, you have to swear you won't kill me."

"If you don't tell me, I will."

Wilthem ran his hand across his forehead. His shoulders fell and he began speak quickly, like he anticipated every word would burn him and enrage the hefty gunner he stood in front of.

"I was heading up a squad that was gathering intel just before we engaged. We took heavy fire from mutas and my cloaking failed. Before I could get out of there a queen hit me."

Wilthem had large, black circles under his eyes that seemed to droop even more when he opened them.

"I'm carrying a parasite." Wilthem's voice shook as he spit out the last of his sentence.

Gabrel's hulking form imposed on Wilthem as he leaned in to examine his moist, red eyes. Not unlike the sky outside that was blemished with idle Zerg, his eyes were clear but spotted randomly with a dark liquid that pulsated slowly on the surface.

A trained combatant or not, Wilthem was unprepared for the solid knock to the floor from Gabrel's heavyweight forearm.

"Are they coming?" Gabel tried to keep his voice down but his eyes darted quickly between the blood running from Wilthem's mouth, his eyes and the one and only entrance.

The maimed ghost spat the blood from his mouth and looked back Gabrel, "I don't know anything for sure," he said, assured in his own mind that one burst from the Lance Corporal's rifle would shred him like paper, "but if you can get me back to base, they can treat me and get you home."

"Treat you like a science project. There's only one cure for what you got."

"I'm not the first to be infected. I heard of something that affects the Zerg pathogens; it's similar to the StimPack your men use."

“Those don’t do much other than keep you moving.”

Wilthem shook his head, “I know where the expansion is ...and I know you don’t.”

Gabrel chewed on his own teeth as he thought things over and considered the operative’s angle, “I’m better off without alien eyes on me, don’t you think?”

“I’ll keep them closed. But we have to move now, while they’re still regrouping.”

Gabrel thought for one more second and stopped chewing, “Go on then,” he directed him to the outside with his weapon.

“You go first, you’re the only one equipped to fight.”

“I’m not letting a bug walk behind me,” Gabrel sneered, “You stay ten steps ahead.”

Wilthem glared at him. It was against all tactical instinct for an unarmed operative to lead infantry on the field. He had already sacrificed his sight to appease Gabrel’s paranoia and now he would be out there without as much as a pistol to throw if a hydra popped up in front of him. On top of all of that though, Gabrel was everything that he hated about the NCOs; his Tarsonian drawl, the cartoon of a pipe-smoking, one eyed sailor on the shoulder of his suit, and the way he held his gun – in one hand, dropped to his side like he was on vacation. How could Wilthem, a first-class soldier trained by the very best, take orders from this thug?

“Quit looking at me like you’ve got options,” Gabrel said.

The light of Mar Sara washed over the men as they slunk from their shelter on to the edge of the war zone. There were no brave moves to be made at this time. Their one focus was to keep their backs to the stone and be invisible. If too much force was put on the rock face, it would crumble. If they didn’t walk softly, they could wake a burrowed army. Gabrel had never moved so thoughtfully in his life while Wilthem, even with his eyes shut, never made more than a footprint. They went on like this for almost two miles until the edge cleared and opened up to endless wasteland.

Gabrel checked the skies and saw nothing but the overlords they had left behind in the distance.

“This way,” Wilthem said and started to march.

“I hope you don’t have those eyes open up there.”

“I’ve been running missions on Mar Sara for years. I can tell you where we are by how the wind blows or doesn’t. Were you here before the Zerg showed?” Wilthem said.

“Came here under orders to secure a colony. Ended up in a bunker at the border. Turned out that same mission I missed out on, the Magistrate and Marshall both went rogue and messed up everybody’s day,” said Gabrel, but it was useless to continue on more details, “And you know the rest.”

Gabrel checked his surroundings even closer. The red soil beneath him was not just a wasteland, it was beaten, victim of centuries of draught and the stomping of thousands of soldiers across its face. The marine didn't walk lightly himself and one of the large cracks in the soil almost ate his entire foot at one point when he wasn't looking. He knew what Wilthem meant by the wind now blowing. The air was still; it didn't blow even the tiniest speck of dust across the desert. Everything here was dead; the life had been sucked from it and it was relentless. Gabrel, almost as if the barren planet was drinking him up, staggered and fell to one knee. The metal of his suit clanged against the ground and Wilthem instinctively began to turn around.

"Are you o-" Wilthem managed to say before a high powered burst of gunfire exploded from Gabrel's rifle. Even though Wilthem had been in wars before, he'd never heard an infantry firearm discharged in silence more complete than that and it rattled him. His mind was frozen again an instant later when the spikes passed only inches from his head and although he couldn't hear the hypersonic ammo, he could feel it in his bones.

"Don't look at me. Don't turn around." Gabrel forced out. His breathing was labored and his entire body trembled as he kept steady and held his firearm.

Wilthem didn't move; he didn't say anything. But he could hear the armored infantry fidgeting around behind him.

Gabrel, satisfied that the ghost was not going to face him, laid his gun at his side and adjusted a control panel on his left wrist. His PCS let out a quick but loud hiss and, inside his helmet, Gabrel's teeth gnashed together.

Wilthem was all too familiar with that sound; that of bad intel or overwhelming odds or fear. A stim was the last thing a desperate conscript did in a no-win situation. The adrenaline became addictive for those who stimed and lived to tell about it. Conflicting studies showed up so often that it was impossible to tell the truth. Some scientists proved that it enhanced the human immune system, pain threshold and overall physical endurance. But others said the body was not meant for that kind of strain and it caused more internal complications than it was worth. Could a stim force the Zerg parasite strain from his body and destroy his disease from the inside out? In the end it was a matter of survival; weighing your choices. And if there was a chance that a StimPack held the answer to getting the vermin out of his head, he knew what his choice was.

"Everything ok back there?" he yelled to Gabrel.

"Keep on to base," Gabrel shouted back, his voice now as gruff and confident as it was earlier.

"Those things are no good for you, you know."

"You need to worry about you."

"I'm saying -- there's a time to fight the pain and a time to take it."

“Either way, you’re in the wrong suit.”

They were in the wrong suits, Wilthem thought to himself. He had considered himself a dead man the first second he saw the dust drift off of Gabrel’s breast plate and painted underneath it was a stark, white emblem of the Blood Hawks. He’d been clashing with the Confederacy his entire life and seen many Terran colonies and rebel groups come and go, but to see the white crests on his enemies meant only one thing: the Confederacy had vested interest in the mission. Even though they were based in the Sara quadrant, they were rarely dispatched unless the consequences of failure were so great that Tarsonis couldn’t risk it. The Blood Hawks never failed. They also never took hostages.

Wilthem thought that, surely, after Gabrel walked behind him for more than five seconds, he would recognize the crest sewn to the back of his armor, and shoot him dead. The crest, of course, was unmistakable – a defiant red to Gabrel’s white, the sign of rebellion – The Son’s of Korhal.

Gabrel could have killed his friends in the past or vice versa. That is how deep the waters of resentment ran between the two.

Wilthem had to put this out of his mind. On any other day under different circumstances he would curse his name and stop at nothing to see him dead and no longer a threat to Mar Sara. In his eyes, the Confederates were worse than killers and worse than traitors, they were dissimulators. They flew flags that stood for dignified causes and compassionate men but would defy both in an instant to gain an advantage. They had littered a galaxy with bodies of their brothers, all in the name of unity. Their grasp on the Terran was so tight, that people knew no movement. And as far as he and Arcturus Mengsk were concerned, there was no boundary the Confederacy would stop at until all Terrans were convinced that the choking oppression of the Confederacy was the limit of free will.

However, the Lance Corporal hadn’t killed him yet and that was a good sign. It was probably best not to bring it up.

“So you don’t know any more than I do about them?”

“Just what we’ve been learnin’.”

“We’ve had intel come in just in the past few days. They say the swarm all follows one leader. Their minds are connected somehow.”

“Uh huh.”

“Just one big cockroach does the thinking for all of them. What the hell kind of life is that?”

Gabrel didn’t pay much attention to what Wilthem was saying.

“They got no choice. They’re slaves. They don’t even know the difference,” said Wilthem.

“What’s it matter? I mean they only got one thought anyway.”

“You don’t have anything you cherish, Gabrel? Because they don’t have that. They can’t imagine it.”

The drought ravaged land under Gabrel's feet crumbles as he walks but there is a slight difference; dust falls down the deep cracks of soil, ever so slightly disturbed.

"Mindless obedience like that, it destroys. It turns people against one another," the operative raised his voice.

"They ain't people," Gabrel interjects but Wilthem ignores him.

"It's going to be their downfall, that they can't see past the annihilation of others to see their own."

Gabrel stops and takes his rifle with both hands. He looks down and can see the dirt trembling on the surface of the dead planet.

"The worst thing you can do is compare them to us. There's nothing to compare," Gabrel grumbles.

Wilthem stops as well and bends down, putting his fingertips on the ground, sensing the same movement as Gabrel.

"What's the one thought you think they have?" said Wilthem.

"Don't die and kill everything," Gabrel says as his reflective visor locks into place, covering his face.

Rocks and debris fly into the air as two packs of zerglings unburrow and start to charge at the Terrans without mercy, their claws flailing and their jaws loose for the taste of blood.

Wilthem throws himself into a shallow ditch and Gabrel ducks behind a large boulder after haphazardly firing off a round in the creatures' direction. He then lets off a few rounds over his shoulder but doesn't have time to check his aim. Even if he had hit his mark though, they were outnumbered.

Coming up behind the zerglings and unbeknownst to the soldiers, a hydralisk unearthed itself and returned fire in Gabrel's direction.

Hydra spines rattled against the rock as he shouted to Wilthem, "they aren't gonna kill you! Get out there and cover me!"

Both trained in battle, they knew it would only be a split second more before they were rushed by the remorseless enemy.

Even all of Wilthem's training couldn't prepare him for a time when the enemy could see out of his own eyes. There were two possibilities; he closes his eyes and jumps out to the battle blind, giving Gabrel a few seconds to open fire while he draws an attack or he opens his eyes and the Zerg would no doubt be distracted but move on, not able to kill one of their own.

"Open your damn eyes!" Gabrel screamed at him from his vantage point before he burst another round of cover fire.

Wilthem knew Gabrel may not have been as calculating a tactician as he was, but he knew the basics. Gabrel was trying to save his life by drawing the attack.

It was noble. But it was not the way that he'd choose to live. Gabrel was his only ally and he had not killed him despite many factors.

Wilthem shut his eyes hard and jumped out of the ditch towards the scuffling of the on-coming attackers. He screamed as loud as he could. His throat pulsed and his lungs burned.

Over such an inhuman roar, Wilthem couldn't hear the zerglings trip over their own feet as they came to a dead stop nor could he see the hydralisk stand tall and hiss in his direction then examine him from a distance.

Wilthem's voice gave and he was left standing on the dirt – his chest heaving. He swore that he could feel the ground rumble just lightly beneath his feet.

"Good job," Gabrel said, "I thought they'd recognize you, even with your eyes closed."

Gabrel's voice seemed close and Wilthem opened his eyes and turned his head to ask what had happened as well as, ultimately, thank him. But his head only rotated a half an inch before it came up against heated metal.

"They'll move on. They wouldn't want me to hurt their little toy," Gabrel chuckled.

It was, of course, the end of Gabrel's gun that was forced against the side of his head. Gabrel hadn't planned to take the brunt of the attack but rather to take a hostage.

"Now let's get to base," Gabrel ordered.

In one fluid motion, Wilthem knocked the gun away from his head and out of Gabrel's hand, straight to the ground, "This isn't a game."

Just as quickly, Gabrel grabbed Wilthem with both hands by his uniform and picked him up off his feet, holding him in front of his visor.

"You want a piece of me, boy?" Gabrel said calmly as another hiss popped off from within his suit.

Wilthem, dangling a foot off the ground and hearing the sound of the stim, did not as much as speak a word since he knew any fight now, would be useless. Instead, he stared at his own reflection in Gabrel's visor and realized that he had put himself in a position where there was no choice but to move on if he wanted to live. He closed his eyes again, maybe, he thought, for the last time.

The Zerg had been left far behind but what seemed like an equally persistent threat was still upon them; the exhaustion. Traversing Mar Sara on foot was no pleasure but walking for endless hours in the dry heat with your eyes closed will drain any man. Gabrel had not tripped, stumbled, fell out of line or even scuffed his boot since his last stim while Wilthem struggled every inch. Wilthem's sanity was

also running short as Gabrel and he had not spoken since the attack and instead of feeling like he had a companion in battle, he felt like he was being marched to his death.

After nineteen consecutive hours there was finally a sound over Wilthem's shoulder. Unfortunately, it was the sound of another StimPack injection.

"The Son's don't usually use stims, you know," said Wilthem.

"Good for them."

"It's not that they don't want to, but we haven't perfected the system yet. The plans we have for the suit were a generation old. The Confederacy's first prototype introduced solution to the bloodstream that encouraged hemostasis once the heart rate fluctuated."

Wilthem shuffled along, his energy wasted.

"A year later we learned they scrapped it for the StimPack. Apparently any healing factors on the field distracted from orders to engage. The way I hear that, they'd rather have you half dead and fighting than half alive and running."

"Doesn't sound like anything but protocol to me."

"Tough love," Wilthem muttered.

"You don't know anything about tough love. I've seen blood in half the mud of this galaxy without as much as a thank you from command. I don't do it for the love I do it to keep people like you from messing with people who want nothing to do with you. And trust me, I'm one of the nice ones."

"What makes you so different?"

"I don't wanna be like you all."

A command center reflected against Gabrel's visor and he stopped suddenly.

"You know what this is?" he said.

"I'm thinking we're home," Wilthem smirked.

"Open your eyes."

Wilthem opened one eye just a crack. From the command center it looked as though there was a plume of smoke moving impossibly fast towards them.

Wilthem stood up straight and opened both eyes as the dust around them began to settle and the object itself was becoming clear.

"We can't stop anything that fast," said Gabrel.

“We won’t have to,” the ghost remarked without turning back, “it’s vultures.”

The words hadn’t left his mouth for more than half a second before the relieved expression on his face was erased when Gabrel gun butted him from behind and he dropped to the ground.

Gabrel grabbed his limp arm and began to drag him forward, towards the base.

Now in plain sight and with no weapons charged, the vultures cooled their engines and slid effortlessly over the cracked rock to hover within shouting distance of the Lance Corporal.

The bikes were not in perfect condition but that was the state of most vultures used by the Son’s. These bikes were different though. The Son’s of Korhal emblem was clear and accurately done but ovetop there was a spraypaint marking in black that hardly resembled anything if you weren’t familiar with the Death’s Head Legion’s skull and crossbones.

“You ok, there buddy?” one of the riders yelled out.

“Fine,” Gabrel yelled back.

The second rider squinted his eyes and saw Gabrel’s tags.

“Sir, we’re happy to give you a lift along with, you know, whatever cargo you have,” the rider gestured to the body of Wilthem.

“He’s one of theirs.”

“Desperate times, Sir.”

“And he’s the host of a parasite.”

The first rider chewed on the end of a cigar.

“Then what the heck are you bringing him back to base for?”

“I can’t brief you on my mission, soldier,” Gabrel took a step forward and the vultures engines ignited and brought them close to frenzy.

“You know I can’t do that, Sir.”

“We’d have to get Reikson online and clear it,” the other rider chimed in.

“This is my mission and my cargo. If you get Reikson online I’ll have Duke straighten this out and your whole detail’s gonna be cleaning the mess out of the SCVs all day; I know those boys don’t take bathroom breaks.”

The two vultures look at each other. Gabrel stands tall in front of them, facing them square on with rifle in hand. The only look they’re getting back is the sight of themselves in his visor.

“What’s your name?” asked the second rider.

“Lance Corporal Gabrel.”

“We’ll talk when you get back to base. Watch your back. There’s bugs out there somewhere.”

The engines finally expend all of their pent up energy and the bikes take off like a shot.

Gabrel looked down at Wilthem who was still out cold. He grabbed his hand firmly and began to drag him towards the base that was now coming into sight.

“Saved your butt again, operative. They woulda done you in a second,” Gabrel coughed out a laugh.

Wilthem’s face was pale with an orange tint. Although his vision was distorted, it was the dark clouds on his eyes that he couldn’t stop regarding. Where before they were simple freckles, now it was more like a group of galaxies against a white universe that swirled ever so slowly. It took him a half a second more to realize he was staring at himself in Gabrel’s mask. He had just regained consciousness and his arms and legs were burned raw from being dragged the last few miles.

Gabrel manhandled him around to face the door of the only barracks on base. Gabrel’s arms shook – the strain of holding up Wilthem was clearly almost as much as he could take. The surroundings were empty. Where other bases flourished and kept busy, this seemed like a ghost town in comparison.

A deputy at the door steadied Wilthem but then retracted his hands once he saw his eyes.

“You can’t bring him here,” the deputy said, “He isn’t right.”

Gabrel spoke slowly, forcing words out now, “Take me...to... the one in...” he grunted.

“He’s one of Duke’s. He saved me. He needs a medic we’ve been walking for days.”

A small group began to gather around, watching Wilthem, a freak of nature and an enemy in their eyes, defend a Confederate.

“Quit looking at me and get us some help, damn it!” Wilthem screamed desperately.

The deputy stood in front of the entrance, not letting Wilthem so much as get a foot into the barracks.

“Operative, close your eyes, we can’t have you in here,” the deputy insisted, “There’s Confederate’s and rebellion in here. We can’t afford to lose more men. We’re awaiting an evac.”

Another stimpack popped off while Wilthem ignored the deputy’s reasoning and screamed to get Gabrel medical attention.

Unable to sustain himself, Gabrel dropped down to one knee again, keeping himself up with only his rifle. Wilthem kneeled down beside him to console him.

“We’re going to be fine. They’re going to get us the meds we need and back to Tarsonis. You just need to hang in there,” Wilthem said, “I don’t know how to thank you for getting us both here in one piece.”

The two vulture riders break through the crowd that has amassed at the front door between the Confederates wanting to kill Wilthem and the rebel’s feeling the burn of embarrassment.

“Gabrel? Lance Corporal Gabrel?” the rider shouted as he charged towards them.

“You need to tend to your man, Marshall,” Wilthem shouted.

The rider pulled out his pistol but by the time it was pointed Gabrel’s way, Wilthem had snatched Gabrel’s rifle from under him and had it aimed at the rider’s head. The crowd gasped and became larger as fights started to break out all around with aid being offered and threats being thrown around.

“Gabrel never came back from the mission to secure the colony,” said the rider, shaking now under the pressure of having a rebel ghosts sights set on him.

“I know,” Wilthem said, “we were lost in the battle afterwards.”

“No, he’s been lost. That colony was overrun by the Zerg weeks ago,” the rider explained.

Wilthem turns to Gabrel and enters a code on his PCS to release his visor.

Wilthem watches as his reflection in Gabrel’s visor disappears and is replaced by the pale, horrid face of what is left of a man. Gabrel’s deformed and his flesh is eaten almost to nothing. If Wilthem’s eyes were rushing rivers of infestation, Gabrel’s were waterfalls. There was no sign of humanity left on them.

Gabrel, although most of his suit was intact, had seemed to suffer a blow from behind. It was as though something had torn through the heavy layers of metal and life support in the back of his suit. Instead of a wound where the torn SCP was, it was pulsing pink flesh that almost oozed out. The damage was brutal and obvious but the Overmind was careful not to let Wilthem ever get a glimpse of it.

Gabrel’s breath stank as he pushed four words past his lips and into Wilthem’s face, “Don’t die. Kill everything.”

A voice in the crowd yelled in panic, “Infes—,” but all sounds in the area were decimated by the explosion that tore through the barracks. It had spared no one inside the building and left it as nothing but rubble. Mar Sara had been won for the second time by the Zerg and although the Terran’s had recognized their incredible power they had only begun to see the treachery and manipulation that a race destined to destroy the stars would employ.