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LEGACY OF THE VOID™



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ENTERTAINMENT

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Ascension

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Part One

Alarak stopped in the shadowed path between the black cliffs. His skin prickled. *Impossible.* It was only midday, yet there was terrazine in the air.

There. On the western cliff. Ribbons of violet haze—terrazine—curled away from a fresh, jagged crack running down the cliff's face. A tremor must have ruptured an underground gas pocket. A small one. This gift would not last for long. Alarak stepped into the terrazine mist and lifted his arms, palms upward, allowing the Breath of Creation to envelop him.

It sank into his skin.

It flowed through his veins.

It expanded his mind.

It brought him closer to Amon. To the Dark God.

Alarak could feel Amon's will, Amon's cold purpose, Amon's dark heartbeat pumping just beneath the fragile skin of this universe, a surging web of veins within the Void that even now throbbed with anticipation. The final masterstroke against the corrupted cycle was at hand. Alarak and the rest of the chosen protoss, the Forged—the Tal'darim—needed only to wait for a little while longer.

Ascension is nigh, promised Amon.

But all too soon the swirling mist melted away in the breeze. The waves of bliss lingered only a few moments longer.

No more terrazine would arise until sunset. Then it would fill the entire atmosphere, just as it did every night. Why? It was the will of Amon. All Tal'darim on Slayn, high and low alike, were surrounded by His glory until the sun rose and His gift faded away. Every night, all Tal'darim were equal in His dark gaze.

Not so in daylight. In daylight one had to earn his or her place. That, too, was the will of Amon.

Heavy boots crunched on small broken rocks behind him. "Master Alarak." It was his subordinate Ji'nara, approaching him cautiously. "You are needed."

She was the Fifth Ascendant. He was the Fourth, one link higher in the Chain of Ascension. One day she would try to kill him.

But likely not today, Alarak thought. He didn't bother turning around. "It can wait," he said. He wanted to survey this location for further terrazine pockets. *If more will arise here during the day...*

"No, it cannot," she said. "Master Nuroka sent me. He wishes to speak with you."

"Very well." As the Fourth Ascendant, Alarak could not disobey First Ascendant Nuroka any more than he could disobey Amon. "Did he say why?"

"He has challenged Highlord Ma'lash to *Rak'Shir*," Ji'nara said. "One of them will die tomorrow."

Silence filled the canyon. Alarak showed no reaction, made no movements. He couldn't. It was as if all of his thoughts had frozen solid in an instant.

Impossible.

Was she lying? No. Absolutely not. Ji'nara was cunning, not reckless. If she were to lie about this, Alarak would gut her and leave her corpse for the hungry zoanthisks. She had seen him do it to different subordinates. It had to be truth. "Interesting," was all he said. His other thoughts he kept hidden from her. Just as she was hiding hers from him.

"Did you know?"

Finally Alarak turned around to study her expression. "Yes," he said. That was a lie, of course.

Rak'Shir. There hadn't been one of those among highly ranked Tal'darim in months. Amon's plans were so close to blossoming. Once they did, every living Tal'darim would rise to glory under Amon's new order. Challenging the Highlord in a fight to the death? Now? It was madness. *Why would Nuroka...?*

Ji'nara was watching him closely. Alarak's next words would determine whether she would join the ritual.

He met her eyes. "Will you fight tomorrow?" he asked.

"Perhaps," she said.

"It should be quite entertaining. Highlord Ma'lash does not permit his challengers to die quickly," said Alarak. *This must stay contained.* If too many ascendants joined the fight—if too many Tal'darim leaders died—the chaos could delay Amon's plans by months. Or decades. Alarak would gain nothing from that. *If Ji'nara stays out, none beneath her rank will dare join. Not for a Rak'Shir this unexpected.* He put an edge on his tone. "Enjoy watching. I would hate to kill someone of your competence."

She didn't seem to react. Only the slight twitch of her shoulders beneath her black, jagged armor betrayed her emotions. "I understand," she said flatly. And it was clear she did. Ji'nara would not fight tomorrow. "Master Nuroka instructs you to go to his quarters," she said.

"Very well," said Alarak, dismissing her with a sharp gesture.

Ji'nara left without another word, glancing over her shoulder at him. She would talk. That was good. Alarak wanted the others to believe he would declare himself as a combatant. But he did not want them to know for whom. If they were confused, so much the better.

It would mask the confusion within himself.

Alarak left the canyon along the narrow path that had brought him there. It was not far to the Tal'darim outpost, but it was time enough to think.

Questions weighed heavily on his mind. Who would join the fight? Whom would they fight for?

And how many could Alarak kill?

Part Two

The will of Amon was simple.

Rise up. Higher. Ever higher.

Or fall forever.

Alarak had always appreciated the clarity. From Amon ran the sacred Chain of Ascension, and every Tal'darim was a single link. You obeyed the links above you. You commanded the links below you.

Simple.

And if you wished to rise higher? Ever higher? Challenge the link above you. *Rak'Shir*. The stronger would survive, the weaker link in the Chain would be removed, and the Tal'darim as a whole would become more powerful. Simple.

Of course, it never stayed simple. In matters of life and death, nothing ever could. Alarak appreciated that, too.

In *Rak'Shir*, others could fight on your behalf. Many others. There was no limit. Any number of Tal'darim, from any rank, could join with you or fight against you. Some rituals had been single duels between two combatants. Others had a thousand allies on either side. After the dead were tallied in those larger fights, the sacred Chain had huge gaps. You could find yourself rising five, or ten, or a hundred links. Indeed, that was how Alarak had risen so quickly. Even Amon's chosen were susceptible to vanity and pride. With the right push, Alarak had convinced many ascendants who were higher on the Chain to enter *Rak'Shir* with confidence. They had learned all too late that he had arranged for them to fall before overwhelming numbers.

Most challenges were a long time in the making. You needed to know the odds were on your side. There were often months of simmering tensions, of politicking, when both sides rallied as many allies as possible.

But not today. There was no time.

A chill settled over Alarak. Was that Nuroka's plan? It had to be. Nuroka had a keen strategic mind. Only a month ago he had demolished the Terran Dominion's outpost in a nearby system, exploiting holes in its defenses so quickly that the humans never had time to send a single distress message before the red blades of the Tal'darim found their throats.

This was the same tactic. An attack on the enemy's blind side.

I am the target, Alarak realized. His direct superior, Third Ascendant Zenish, was a brute. No sense of maneuvering. Above him was Second Ascendant Guraj. She was cunning, frighteningly so, but not one for rallying allies. She preferred to poison the minds of rival factions, letting them rot from within and slash uselessly at each other. But here, near the top of the Chain, there were few factions to corrupt, only individual ambitions.

Among the ascendants, only Alarak was known to groom and manipulate allies. All others with those skills were dead. Alarak had seen to it.

The path through the narrow canyon ended, and the pale gravel beneath Alarak's boots gave way to solid rock, blackened by centuries of soot and grime. It had been at least that long since the last jungles of Slayn had suffocated beneath the nightly fog of terrazine. (A small price to pay for the blessing of the Breath of Creation, in Alarak's mind.) Before him rose the buildings of the Tal'darim, bold and strong, a testament to their readiness for war, not at all like the vain monuments of the Templar. *Fools, all of them*, Alarak thought. The Tal'darim knew the value of pain. Conflict was the essence of life. Only the ignorant would try to smooth it away with gleaming citadels and false unity.

In a few minutes Alarak reached the edge of the outpost. It was early afternoon now. There were a great many lower protoss scuttling between buildings, their excited thoughts filling the area with a hum. For them, this *Rak'Shir* was nothing more than entertainment. They would discuss little else until it was done.

Alarak strode through their midst. They moved out of his way.

First Ascendant Nuroka's quarters were not far. The entrance faced the street; there was no opportunity to sneak in. Others would see Alarak. They would talk. *The Second and Third Ascendants will know about this meeting*. Alarak wondered if that could be used to his advantage.

A wave of heat and humidity enveloped Alarak as he stepped inside. It mimicked the climate on the world of Nuroka's birth. The First Ascendant had never enjoyed the dry, harsh weather here. The door closed behind Alarak. He knelt. Nuroka was not in the room, but he was nearby, and certain formalities needed to be maintained, even on the eve of *Rak'Shir*. "I obey and serve," Alarak said automatically.

"You are late," Nuroka said. He was not in this room yet, but his words were clear.

"Apologies, Master."

"Have you spoken with Guraj or Zenish today?"

Alarak ignored a flash of irritation. *Have you?* That was what Alarak really wanted to know. Was there already an arrangement in place? Was one—or both—of them already pledged to Nuroka's cause? Without those answers, Alarak would be walking blind into tomorrow's *Rak'Shir*. But there was no use in asking, because there was no trusting the answers. "No," was all Alarak said.

Nuroka finally entered the room. With little light seeping in through the building's small windows, it took a moment for Alarak to understand what he was seeing. The First Ascendant was not wearing the traditional armor of the ascendants. He wore only a simple gray robe.

A robe stained with fresh blood.

Alarak leapt to his feet and ignited his blades. *Assassins!* "How many attacked you? Where are they?" *It was the Nerazim. It had to be. Or was it the Highlord? Sending someone to kill his challenger—*

"Did I give you leave to stand, Fourth Ascendant?" Nuroka seemed amused, not alarmed.

For a long moment, only Alarak's shimmering blades moved. Then Alarak let them vanish, and he knelt down again. His heart, pumping hard, began to slow. "My apologies, Master," he said carefully.

Nuroka made him stay there, kneeling, longer than was necessary. "You may stand," he finally said.

Alarak felt irritation boiling within himself. He kept it there, buried deep, and stood up without complaint. "What happened, First Ascendant?"

"I needed to send a message." Nuroka rolled up the sleeves of his robe, exposing raw, bleeding flesh.

"To whom?"

"The Highlord and Amon."

Alarak kept his expression neutral. Nuroka's wounds were straight and even, showing where perfect squares of skin had been removed. There were no signs of hesitation in the cuts. *Nuroka did this to himself?* This explained much. Nuroka had made such an unexpected challenge of *Rak'Shir* because he had gone insane.

"No. I have not," Nuroka said coldly.

Alarak cursed himself. *Keep your thoughts hidden, you fool!* At least there was no Khala to reveal his emotions. Alarak didn't know how the Templar could stand such an existence. "I do not understand, Master. What are you doing?"

Small runnels of Nuroka's blue blood dripped to the floor, smacking into the stone with loud, wet plops. "I want everything to be clear tomorrow." Dark humor crept into his words. "I want Highlord Ma'lash to be revealed, though he will not live long enough to suffer properly for it." He let his sleeves fall back over his arms. "When I was young and lowly ranked, I carved Amon's words into my body. Did you?"

"No," Alarak said.

"Because you doubted Him?"

"No," Alarak repeated. He had simply never seen the point, even as a low-ranked votary. There were other ways to show zeal for Amon's teachings.

Nuroka drew his finger over his sleeves where the words had once been sliced into his skin. *"Serve me and rule. On the Day of Ascension, the corrupted cycle will end. On the Day of Ascension, you will rise beyond any master. You remember those words?"*

"Of course." And all the rest. *Rise up. Higher. Ever higher...*

Nuroka's eyes bored into Alarak's. "So why do you think I would remove them?"

There was heresy in the air. Alarak knew he was being herded toward it. "I do not know," he said.

"Because the Day of Ascension we expected will never come," Nuroka said. "And that is why I need your help. Tomorrow, I will rule the Tal'darim. And once I do...

"... you will help me kill Amon."

Part Three

Alarak prided himself on his self-control, his patience, his restraint. So he was surprised to find himself leaping for Nuroka's throat, blades ignited and slashing.

What are you doing? his mind asked.

Killing the traitor! his heart sang.

It was the perfect opportunity. Nuroka had no armor on, no weapons that Alarak could see, so the Fourth Ascendant swept his blades downward and—

—*flew*—

—and slammed into the room's east wall with a skull-rattling crash. He tumbled to the floor hard but slid to his feet in a defensive stance.

Fool! his mind shrieked.

His heart had no response this time. Nuroka was three links higher on the sacred Chain. He would never have made it there if he were not a fearsome fighter. And Alarak had just attacked a superior outside of *Rak'Shir*. That was one of the Tal'darim's highest crimes, punished by death. An unpleasant, public, prolonged death. Yet even now Alarak's body quivered as he resisted the urge to try to take the First Ascendant's head for blasphemy.

Nuroka calmly watched and waited. He had no weapons. He didn't need them. He had just hurled Alarak the length of the room with his bare hands.

Alarak dropped his stance and let his blades vanish again. "You have gone mad," he said.

"How would you kill Amon?" Nuroka asked.

"You have gone *mad*."

Nuroka let that pass. "Tell me how."

"Amon cannot die," Alarak said. *You heretical lunatic*, he didn't add. But then a new thought occurred to him. *This is a test*. It had to be. Nuroka did not seem insane. No. His eyes had not the touch. He was simply testing Alarak's loyalty to Amon in a dramatic way. Alarak clung

to that thought. "It would be easier to destroy every star in the galaxy," he said. "Amon gives us life. He shares with us the Breath of Creation. What would the Tal'darim be without His guidance?"

Nuroka's gaze was cold and unflinching. "Free. Without Amon, the Tal'darim would be *free*," he said.

"Free to die with the other heretics." Worms of uncertainty began to crawl through Alarak's mind. Alarak sensed nothing but sincerity from Nuroka. "Unless you believe those Templar puppets can resist Him." *Could he truly want...? No. This is a test.* "And we will be free once Amon succeeds. We will be our own masters. That is Amon's promise."

Mockery dripped from Nuroka's response. "Do you remember the edicts of *Rak'Shir? Defeat your masters, or fall beneath them?*"

"What of it?"

"Those were not Amon's true words. They were twisted by Ma'lash and the Highlords who came before him." Nuroka's eyes glowed violet. The color of terrazine gas. "Last night, when the Breath of Creation rose, I stepped too far beyond the veil. I saw the truth."

"How?"

"Highlord Ma'lash once admitted even he did not know all of Amon's secrets. I delved deep into the Void. I sought to know Amon's hidden thoughts. I wanted a glimpse of the glory He promised us." Nuroka's robe was growing damp with more blood, as if his anger were spilling out. His heartbeat must have been racing with rage. "I found more than I had imagined. Amon has let His guard down. His anticipation of victory has overwhelmed His caution." Nuroka slowly walked over to Alarak. "This is what Amon truly said: *Defeat your masters, or rise beyond them.*"

Alarak held his ground as Nuroka loomed over him. "That means nothing."

"Amon does not see death as failure. He sees death as the highest ideal. I have seen it in His heart." Nuroka's eyes shimmered. "What did He name our dueling grounds? The Pits of Ascension. He *mocks* us. Amon does not celebrate the winners. He salutes the losers. *They*

are the ones who ascend in His eyes. He makes us carve each other into bits because that is His plan for us all."

Alarak said nothing. If Nuroka was not testing him, Alarak's true thoughts needed to stay hidden.

Nuroka seemed to sense them anyway. "You do not believe me."

Alarak answered with caution. "Amon is unknowable. When you touched His thoughts, you did not see the truth. Your mind interpreted it incorrectly."

"There was nothing to interpret. It was clear. Amon's ascension is our oblivion. He means to erase everything the xel'naga wrought. Including us. He wants us *all* scattered to dust, along with every planet and every star. That is His final goal. And Ma'lash, that fool, he knows." Nuroka leaned in close to Alarak. "You have not touched Amon's hidden heart. Not yet. But think on what He wants. An end to the cycle. An end to *life*. Why would we be spared that fate?"

Alarak had no answer. So he changed the subject. "What did Zenish and Guraj say about this?"

Anger flashed across Nuroka's face, and he turned away from Alarak. "I said nothing to them. They have no imagination. Not like you."

Alarak couldn't keep the ire out of his response. "I do not know how to kill Amon either."

Nuroka sat down cross-legged in the center of the room, facing Alarak again. The First Ascendant's irritation had been replaced by amusement. "Not yet."

"Not ever," Alarak said.

"What would it take?" Nuroka pressed. "If Amon's death meant your survival, how would you do it?"

Alarak stepped toward the door. It was past time to leave. "Goodbye, Nuroka. I do not believe we will ever speak again. Highlord Ma'lash is far stronger than you."

"One more step, and I will kill you." Nuroka did not move a muscle, but Alarak stopped anyway. There was icy promise in the First Ascendant's words. "This is a direct command. Tell me how you would kill Amon."

Alarak briefly considered disobeying. Nuroka was unarmed but dangerous. If violence began right now, Alarak might lose. Might. "May I sit, Master?" There would be time enough tomorrow to kill. Nuroka gestured to the floor, and Alarak sat down in front of him. "You are asking the impossible. Amon is of the Void. He cannot be killed."

Nuroka's gaze did not waver. "Killed. Destroyed. Banished. Pick a word you like better. How would you free the Tal'darim from Amon's grasp forever? But let me be clear," he said before Alarak could answer, "I am talking to you because I know who you truly are." Nuroka's eyes narrowed into glowing slits. "I know what you arranged four years ago. When you were made an ascendant."

Alarak went still. Four thousand combatants in a single *Rak'Shir*. Eight hundred deaths. He had kept his involvement hidden. Very hidden. He hadn't even participated in the ritual. As far as he knew, nobody suspected he'd had any part in it. "I do not know what you're talking about."

"Nor did I. Not until last night. Amon knows exactly what you did." Nuroka grimaced. "He found it amusing. An entire wing of our best leaders dead. Our fleet in disarray for months. Amon's own plans delayed. He didn't care. Neither did you. You *flew* up the Chain that day. That is why you are the one to answer my question. The Tal'darim see the sacred Chain as a holy purpose. You see it as a game. If you reached the top, you would not be satisfied serving Amon. How would you topple Him?"

I could not. But the question *was* fascinating. Just from a hypothetical standpoint, of course. "You would have to go to the Void. If it is possible to kill Him, it would have to happen there." A place where Amon could manipulate matter. Alarak couldn't imagine surviving three steps there without Amon's blessing. "You see? It is impossible."

"Difficult, not impossible," Nuroka said. "But you will have time to find a solution once you are First Ascendant."

After such an unexpected, strange conversation, Alarak had begun to think there would be no more surprises. He had been wrong. "What?"

"When I win the ritual, I will be Highlord. I need someone with your instincts to challenge Amon. Zenish and Guraj are not suitable. So you will kill them. If either of them survives tomorrow, you will challenge him or her. I will be your ally. It will not be difficult."

Alarak let his skepticism show. "They may ally against you tomorrow. If so, there is nothing I can do." There were only three wild cards—Alarak, Zenish, and Guraj—so there would not be an even fight. If all three joined the ritual, one would be facing the other two ascendants. A death sentence.

"Then strike a bargain. I do not care how," Nuroka said. "Convince one of them to join you and me. This is what you are good at." The First Ascendant closed his eyes, a content expression on his face. He settled into a calming pose, allowing himself to begin meditating for tomorrow's fight. "And if you choose to abstain from the fight and I survive, you will die at my hands. And your death will be a long time coming. Do you understand me, Fourth Ascendant?"

"I do." There was nothing else to say.

"Then leave me."

Alarak did.

In an hour the sun set and the terrazine rose. All Tal'darim bathed in the glory of Amon and reveled in the promise of the dawn's ritual. Alarak drifted through the night, thinking.

Planning.

Deciding.

Part Four

Night passed. The horizon lightened. The terrazine vanished. And then it was time. Thousands of Tal'darim gathered on the borders of the Pits of Ascension, standing utterly silent. Waiting.

The grounds encompassed a huge area, big enough to hold a fleet of carriers. At either end lay a huge, gaping pit that stretched down to the depths, the final resting place for the defeated. Those who fell in *Rak'Shir* would not stop falling until they found the molten center of this world, a journey that would seem to last for an eternity.

Alarak arrived shortly before dawn. Highlord Ma'lash levitated a pace above the ground near the eastern pit, gathering power, his face hidden behind his jagged steel mask, red energy sparking and rippling. First Ascendant Nuroka sat near the western pit. He still wore no armor, just his bloodstained robe. That was stirring conversation among the spectators.

Even Ma'lash could not resist commenting. "A pity. I was looking forward to being the first to spill his blood." He made sure his words were heard by the entire crowd. "But at least the First Ascendant and I are united in wanting to see him bleed."

Between the pits stood the only other Tal'darim who outranked Alarak: Second Ascendant Guraj and Third Ascendant Zenish. They both stared at Alarak. They had certainly heard that Nuroka had summoned him the night before, and they were wondering what arrangement had been struck.

Alarak did not meet their gazes. He moved toward the spectators, taking care to stay outside the Pits of Ascension. He spotted Fifth Ascendant Ji'nara and stood next to her. She looked surprised. "Going to enjoy watching?" she said acidly. He did not answer.

Alarak. It was Nuroka. He didn't look at Alarak, and he kept his words private. None would know they were speaking. *What are you doing?*

Alarak said nothing.

Fourth Ascendant. It was a command. *Answer me.*

Still Alarak said nothing. Dawn was only minutes away, and he stood outside the grounds. Guraj and Zenish slowly began to understand. They looked astonished. Alarak was not going to participate in this *Rak'Shir*. The great opportunist Alarak was going to leave his fortune in the hands of others.

Menace rolled from Nuroka's mind. *I warned you what would happen if you betrayed me, he seethed.*

Alarak finally responded. *I promised you nothing. I betrayed nothing. I have not spoken with Guraj. I have not spoken with Zenish. I have not spoken with the Highlord.*

Declare your allegiance to me, Alarak. Now.

In response, Alarak sat down.

Nuroka's rage erupted. *You would ally with Amon? He betrayed us. He means to see us all dead. Are you such a fool—*

I am no fool. Alarak focused on Guraj and Zenish. *They know you spoke with me. They know you did not speak with either of them. So they would vow to oppose your plans. I cannot defeat them both, First Ascendant.*

So now I have no allies at all.

No? Alarak asked.

Guraj and Zenish were sizing each other up. Zenish's hands balled up into fists. Guraj's legs began to drift into a combat stance. They slowly stepped away from one another.

Alarak allowed himself to revel in grim satisfaction. He had been right. They had planned to ally against Nuroka not because they cared for the Highlord, but because Nuroka had made this challenge so suddenly. Joining together was the best way to overcome his secret plans with Alarak.

But now...

Alarak was out. It would be an easy victory against Nuroka. An easy victory that would gain Guraj and Zenish little. They would rise only one link in the sacred Chain. No future challengers would die. How unsatisfying.

It was Third Ascendant Zenish, the brute, the scourge of Slayn, who broke the deal. "I declare for Nuroka!" he bellowed.

Ma'lash growled. "Pathetic."

Guraj gave Zenish a stare that promised a slow death. Then she looked at Alarak. He remained motionless. She needed to decide soon. Custom dictated that all declarations be made before *Rak'Shir* began at dawn. She appeared uncertain. She could abstain from this fight entirely. She could join with Zenish against Ma'lash for an easy victory. But she was an ascendant. Nobody made it to this rank without ambition. And ambition always outranked prudence. Alarak was counting on it.

Today, ambition meant eliminating as many threats as possible. After all, one day Zenish would try to kill her.

"I declare for Ma'lash!" she said.

Nuroka showed no reaction. Ma'lash spread his arms wide. "My loyal servant. Guraj, you will be exalted today," he said.

The sun nudged over the horizon. Still Alarak remained seated. Still he made no declaration.

Nuroka spared him one vengeful thought. *This is not what we agreed to.*

I agreed to nothing, Alarak replied. And then it was time.

Rak'Shir began.

"Your heresy ends today," said Highlord Ma'lash. He lunged forward. First Ascendant Nuroka thrust his palms up. The two combatants sent waves of psionic energy leaping toward each other, crashing together, jagged bolts of lightning dancing outward. The ground around them, the stone and metal blackened from centuries of soot and endless

battles, began to smoke and crack. The rows of Tal'darim onlookers were forced to step back from the heat.

Only Alarak remained where he was, allowing the smoke to curl around him. Even Ji'nara had retreated. Zenish and Guraj were still watching him. They still expected him to join the fight, custom be damned. He didn't.

Finally Zenish turned away and ignited his blades. Pure energy, drawn from Amon's realm and honed into an edge that the ancient masters said could cleave entire planets in half, darted toward Guraj's flesh. She parried his strike in one motion.

The fight had truly begun. The challenger and the challenged slung raw, naked power at each other. Guraj and Zenish fought beside them. In *Rak'Shir*, allies could not interfere directly with the duel. But they could lend their own psionic power. That was why you needed more allies—to overwhelm your opponent. Even now, with just one ally apiece, Nuroka and Ma'lash delivered blows that were exploding between them, far more destructive than either could have managed alone.

Zenish was the stronger champion, in raw force and in psionic potential. That much was clear. His power, added to Nuroka's, was forcing back Highlord Ma'lash one step at a time. Zenish's skill with his blades was also impressive. His right elbow slammed into Guraj's temple, and his left blade simultaneously slashed through her armor, slicing open the skin beneath. She jumped back before Zenish could drive the blade home. When he pursued, she kicked him in the head.

Guraj was already losing. That, too, was clear. She was in pain. Injured. Zenish was pressing his advantage without mercy. He lunged, sweeping both blades forward at shoulder level. He wanted to take her head and end this now.

In doing so, he left his midsection exposed.

Injured though she was, overpowered though she was, Guraj was still very, very quick. She set her feet and shoved forward. Both of her blades stabbed into Zenish's chest. She twisted them, and the two glowing tips punched out of his back. He went limp, and his blades vanished. Guraj held him upright, still impaling him, staring into his eyes until the last bit of

light left them. Then she flung Zenish's corpse to the side. Slowly she stalked back to the whirling vortex of energy, not allowing her pain and fatigue to show.

And that was that. The Tal'darim spectators murmured in appreciation. It was over. Nuroka had no champion left. Guraj's power, added to Ma'lash's, easily overwhelmed his. The First Ascendant was pushed back not by steps but by leaps.

Nuroka had lost. "Fear not," Highlord Ma'lash said. "I will allow you plenty of time for regrets."

Alarak stood up. "Do not follow me," he told Ji'nara. She stared in astonishment as he sprinted onto the grounds. All eyes in the crowd swiveled toward him. Alarak ignited his blades, two red shards of power crackling above his wrists, and he felt a buzz of surprise ripple through the rest of the Tal'darim.

It was custom to declare your allegiance before the battle, yes, but *only* custom. It was not a law of Amon. It was not even a law of the Tal'darim. And thus Alarak chose to ignore it.

Guraj felt him approach. Despite her surprise, she turned and snapped her blades into a guard position. Alarak did not slow. He used his own blades to slap hers away, leading with his shoulder. He impacted her at a full run, taking her off her feet. At the same moment, he opened his psionic power to Nuroka.

The First Ascendant crowed with delight and drank deeply from Alarak's power. Suddenly Nuroka was not being pushed back. The balance of raw power was nearly even. *Finish her quickly, Alarak, and I will overlook your... creativity*, he said privately.

Guraj was enraged. She scrambled to her feet, her blades already swooping and darting. Alarak dodged what he could. Several strikes found his flesh with small cuts. He ignored the stinging, flashing pain and focused on evading the flurry of attacks.

Her anger was almost enough to make up for her growing exhaustion. Almost.

Guraj's movements were slowing. Her stamina was fading. Alarak kept parrying her strikes, staying on the defensive. There was no need to force a quick conclusion.

"Cowardly filth," Guraj said. She knew how this would end. But she didn't yield.

It didn't take too long. When her arms began to sag, Alarak slashed through her defenses and carved out her middle in one quick strike. She made no pleas for mercy. She showed no signs of pain. The lights in her eyes and her blades were extinguished in the same moment. Alarak did not celebrate. He simply let her fall where she died.

And now it was Highlord Ma'lash who had no ally. Against the combined power of Nuroka and Alarak, he could do nothing.

Nuroka hammered the Highlord with blunt volleys of energy, forcing the Tal'darim's leader toward his doom. "You knew, yes?" Nuroka seethed. "You knew of Amon's treachery. You knew He means for us to die."

Ma'lash did not respond. He raised barriers of energy against Nuroka. They were smashed to pieces almost before they were formed. Step by step, he was forced toward the eastern pit.

The dueling grounds were massive. It took nearly half an hour before the Highlord finally reached the pit's edge. Alarak kept pace with Nuroka and Ma'lash the entire way, eyes always watching the onlookers, waiting to see if anyone would follow his example and join the fight without warning. He kept a special eye on Ji'nara. She was sitting down.

"Alarak, you traitor," growled Highlord Ma'lash. "You do not know what Nuroka plans for us. He will betray Amon." Ma'lash planted his feet at the edge of the eastern pit, his death yawning open behind him.

"Amon betrayed us first!" Nuroka raged. He began summoning power for his final blow. "Under my rule," he gloated, "we will be free of Amon. We will stand against Him. We—"

Alarak hadn't said a word since entering the fight. That was a deliberate choice. Now he made another one.

"I declare for Ma'lash," he said, and he withdrew his power from Nuroka.

The First Ascendant's final psionic blow fizzled. Alarak calmly opened his power to Ma'lash, and the Highlord seized it without hesitation, unleashing it in an explosive wave that blasted Nuroka back eight paces.

"*What?!*" roared Nuroka as the Highlord advanced from the pit's edge. "You cannot change your allegiance during *Rak'Shir!*"

"No, I cannot," agreed Alarak. That was even a law of Amon: *Once declared, the bond cannot be broken but by death or victory.* "But I never declared for you. I said nothing at all." Nobody in memory had ever fought in *Rak'Shir* without declaring his or her side, but that was *not* law. Only custom. And so he had chosen to ignore it. "And now that I have declared..."

"He cannot change," Ma'lash said with dark mirth. "He must serve *me* until the end."

"No," Nuroka whispered. "You have doomed us all."

"Highlord Ma'lash," Alarak said. "Amon's plans are so close to completion. Nuroka would ruin everything."

"*No!*" Nuroka shrieked.

"Yes, he would. You chose very wisely, Alarak," the Highlord said. "I will enjoy this."

He did. It wasn't until sunset that Nuroka, his mind broken and his body shredded, was lifted over the pit. Ma'lash held him there, savoring this final moment.

"He knows, Alarak," Nuroka murmured. "Highlord Ma'lash *knows* of Amon's betrayal. I swear it."

"Swear what you please," Alarak said. Nuroka had shaken him, yes. Alarak could feel the small seed of doubt lingering in the firm foundation of his faith. *But I will not allow it to grow*, he thought. Amon was the Dark God. His will was unknowable. His power was glorious. His promises were true. Alarak would have to guard his thoughts carefully against any other uncertainties.

His own path was clear. Today Alarak would rise far along the sacred Chain, and soon the cycle would end, the puppets would fall, and he would ascend to the glory of Amon.

As the horizon darkened, Ma'lash finally released his grip on Nuroka's neck. Gravity did the rest. Scraps of the First Ascendant's bloody, ripped robe floated down after him.

Thus ended *Rak'Shir*.

Part Five

"You are clever," said Highlord Ma'lash. "Clever servants annoy me. I am tempted to kill you now. Amon would not care in the least."

Alarak remained kneeling and said nothing. There would be no ceremony besides this. There was no need for one. By now, all Tal'darim had heard how Nuroka's challenge had ended. Ma'lash had prevailed. His ally, Alarak, had tipped the balance and advanced three links on the sacred Chain.

The Highlord's threats mean nothing, thought Alarak. Too many ascendants had died this day to lose another. No military, not even the Tal'darim, could function without enough skilled subordinates to carry out orders.

Ma'lash continued. "Tell me, First Ascendant. Do you wish to rule one day? Do you wish to be Highlord?"

"No."

It was clear that Ma'lash did not believe him. "You dream of nothing but serving me and Amon? How reassuring."

"On the Day of Ascension, we will all rise beyond our masters, Highlord," Alarak said.

"So Nuroka did not shake your faith?"

"How could he?" Alarak said evenly.

"Everything he said was a lie, of course," Ma'lash said.

"Of course."

The Highlord did not like his tone. "Understand this, Alarak. I felt the full measure of your power at the Pits of Ascension. I know how strong you are." The Highlord's hand lashed out and clamped down on Alarak's face, gripping his cheeks just beneath his eyes. Ma'lash roughly lifted Alarak upward, holding him aloft as he had held Nuroka above the pit. Alarak did not resist. Ma'lash's words came with the force of a meteor storm. "Challenge me, and I

will crush you. Challenge me, and you will beg me for a death as swift as Nuroka's. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Good." Ma'lash let go, and Alarak's boots thumped to the ground. "You will be rewarded well enough on the Day of Ascension. Your new duties begin tomorrow. They will not be pleasant."

"I understand, Master," said Alarak.

And then Ma'lash was gone. Alarak could still feel the Highlord's hand squeezing his skull. *Now I have felt his power. I know precisely what I need to do*, he thought.

Serve... prepare...

... and seek the right champions...