



STARCRRAFT[®]
HEART OF THE SWARM



Carrier

By Michael Kogge

Koramund—the protoss had named the carrier the "great wonder" of its class, and to Iaalu, the ship's third engineer, it could not have been called anything else. The elegance of the craft's curves was undeniable; it had sleek hull plates meticulously shaped by khalai craftsmen, which made Iaalu recall the Shreka Hills of northern Aiur. Then there was the unique spark in the power conduits that, defying all rational explanation, pushed the core systems beyond specification, especially when faced with extraordinary challenges. And Iaalu prided himself that the hangars and manufacturing bays he supervised produced some of the fleet's most battle-ready interceptors, which regularly tallied double or triple the kills compared to those of other carriers.

But where the *Koramund* truly measured up to its name was a prestigious record that few ships could match. During the centuries of its service, it had established more colonies than any vessel since the Aeon of Strife, while leading the charge in countless battles. Enemies often fled at initial detection of the ship, fearing its interceptors, so widespread was the *Koramund's* legend. When the execrable zerg struck at Aiur, Tassadar himself had requested that the carrier fight alongside his flagship, the *Gantrithor*, and it did so with most glorious honor until the bitter end. Even with the deployment of the new, allegedly more efficient void rays, protoss reverence for the *Koramund* had stopped the Great Fleet from retiring it like so many carriers in its ranks. The *Koramund* was, to Iaalu and millions of other protoss, a potent symbol that the old ways of Aiur would never perish.

That symbol was now in jeopardy. The *Koramund* was spiraling toward a fiery death on the planet Vanass with zerg pursuing, unless Iaalu could restore the engines, and soon.

"Where in the name of Khas are you?" shrilled Tenzaal, the templar who managed the engineers during battle. As always, the sheer pitch of her mind's voice made Iaalu cringe. It would make everyone's life so much easier if she could just lower her—

"What was that?"

"Nothing, templar," Iaalu replied. He had to watch his errant thoughts; his helmet's psi link was set at the highest sensitivity to enable communication in the mental hubbub of

battle. "Presently in the engine access tunnel, climbing to the junction. Should be in sight of the relay hub shortly."

"Make it faster! Shields are failing, and we are down to one—"

The ship spun and shook, buffeted by small explosions. Ialalu gripped the ladder with both gloved hands to keep himself from falling free in the zero-g. Klaxons blared at full alert.

"Interceptors gone! Glave wurms on the hull, zerg penetrating the bridge—"

As if she'd been cut off by a psi blade, Tenzaal's voice went dead.

"Templar?"

He adjusted the link. Random cosmic interference sometimes disrupted communication. But his helmet readout registered peak receptivity.

Ialalu then tried to reach out with his mind, knowing full well, given his poor psionic faculties, it was probably a lost cause. As a member of the Khalai caste, he didn't have the robust mental training to sense much outside his personal vicinity.

Third engineer to command bridge, please respond. Third engineer to command, please—

There was a response—a sudden tide of agony so intense it blew the capacitors in the psi link and flooded his mind with pain. He jammed a leg through the ladder's rungs to keep the shockwave from blasting him back down the tunnel.

Uhn dara ma'nakai; uhn dara ma'nakai. He repeated a Khalani mantra he'd learned long ago, which had become his succor in times of distress. *Uhn dara ma'nakai. Our duty is unending.* It was the only thing he knew to buffer himself from a complete mental breakdown.

Uhn dara ma'nakai... Uhn dara ma'nakai. Gradually, the cacophony receded and his mind began to breathe again, in fits and starts, until leveling to a more normal pattern so he could comprehend what had just occurred.

Dead. They must all be dead. The praetor. Her command staff. Tenzaal. The zerg must have breached the bridge and massacred its crew. There was no other explanation for a psionic spike of that magnitude. No other explanation for the anguish he had felt. Their voices had been ripped from the Khala, and he was lucky to be alive in the wake of their torment.

This slaughter should never have happened. Fleet command had assigned the *Koramund* to lend its firepower to protoss forces engaged in a nasty fight with the zerg. But on the journey to the front, the *Koramund* had picked up a distress call from what had long been believed to be an abandoned colony on the remote planet of Vanass.

The distress call had been a ruse; the *Koramund* warped right in the middle of a zerg swarm. Retreat was not an option. Within minutes of the attack, not only were the *Koramund's* gravity compensators destroyed, but its engine relay mysteriously failed, making the ship a sitting lumbard for the zerg. Iaalu and his team rushed to prep the fighters as zerg corruptors and mutalisks pounded the carrier relentlessly, demolishing its starboard decks. Half of the crew died in that attack, the first and second engineers among them.

Seniority placed Iaalu next in line to repair the engines. Tenzaal had ordered him to hurry to the engine access tunnel, thereby leaving the launch of the *Koramund's* interceptors to his subordinate, Sacopo. It did not matter that Iaalu's expertise with crystal matrices and power relays was middling at best. There was no engineer still alive who knew the carrier better than he.

The damage to his psi link compounded his predicament. Its loss prevented him from communicating with the ship's crew, if any of them indeed had survived. The fate of the *Koramund* now rested on him, and him alone, its third engineer.

Iaalu cleared his mind of the last echoes of that fatal shriek. He did the only thing he could to speed his approach toward the relay matrix: he abandoned his climb, kicking out against the wall to propel himself forward.

Weightlessness brought about its own difficulties. One mishap or sudden shake of the tunnel could rocket him backward. He had to be careful.

Unwittingly, the zerg attackers gave him a boost. The explosions that pelted the hull—glave wurms, he suspected—accelerated him in the right direction. Nearing the junction, he snatched the ladder rungs on either side. His legs pitched in front of him, and a few swings later he'd made the sharp turn, soaring down the last length of tunnel toward the crystal relay matrix.

Or where the matrix should be.

There was no light at the end of the tunnel. No pale blue glow, not even a glint of the crystal that was supposed to be there. Nothing but darkness.

That was impossible. Praetor Quordas had said the matrix was here, and he had believed her. She had been not only the carrier's commander, but also a templar of the highest order, able to feel the presence of things to which he, belonging to the khalai, was blind. The Khala had furnished her with insight he would never have.

He hit the wall that housed the relay hub and grabbed its handholds as the force of his collision bounced him back. His whole body was stretched from foot to finger, and for a moment he felt as if the muscles in his arms would rip apart. But they held, and he was able to pull himself toward the hub.

Once secure, he toggled the floodlights atop his helmet to inspect the hub's components. The pressure sensors blinked when he waved his hand across. He counted all eight relay cables. He felt the pulse in the main power conduit when he touched it, and the manifold purge line gave him a slight tingle from recently spent energies. Everything was

there, apparently in good working order, with one exception: the crystal matrix that connected the cables to the conduit was missing.

Could Praetor Quordas have been wrong?

He buried the thought, glad his psi link was shot. Harboring such feelings was tantamount to treason. He had to focus on the problem at hand. That was his duty as an engineer and a khalai.

He assessed his options. Power would never flow to the engines without a specially attuned matrix, yet constructing a new one was out of the question. He had neither the time nor the psionic ability to map the crystalline pathways of an engine matrix. It was conceivable that he could jury-rig the cables, disconnecting the impeters and jamming the relays into the main conduit, but that would provide only a burst of energy, and afterward the contraption would be completely fried.

No, he needed the matrix. If he wanted to save his beloved *Koramund* from crashing on Vanass, he needed it *now*. But where did it go? If the crystal had fractured, he should have found shards. Conversely, if it had been taken from the hub, the ship's log on his helmet readout should have shown passage through the access hatch.

That was unless someone—or something—had come into the tunnel through another means.

He brought his floods to bear on the tunnel. Nothing but the ladder ran the length of the wall. He had his helmet scan for any heat sources or signs of life. Again, all data showed—

A red blip appeared on the holo-screen, indicating motion above him. Iaalu turned, falling back as a gleaming, dagger-filled jaw clacked shut. The intensity of his floods saved his life; the attacker recoiled from the bright beam, screeching and hissing.

He had seen this breed of zerg countless times in his primings, but close up, the mutalisk was infinitely more horrific. A mad perversion of tooth and claw, it had two leathery wings and eight hideous eyes that burned a sick orange-red. Spikes jutted along a scaled serpentine body that terminated in another fanged barb of a mouth, its cloaca. Out of this salivating orifice spewed a mass of squirming, bladed flesh—a glave worm.

Iaalu dove and rolled. The worm struck the wall behind him, and the resulting explosion sent him reeling in the other direction, groping for anything that could slow his free fall. Unable to reach the ladder, he grabbed the only thing he could: the edge of the mutalisk's wing.

The creature writhed, trying and failing to shake him off. As it vented its frustration in rivet-rattling shrieks, he glimpsed a distinct glow stuck in its throat, pale and blue. He recognized it immediately. The glow of the crystal relay matrix.

Somehow the mutalisk had made it past the interceptors and slithered into the carrier tunnel. And despite how brainless this zerg breed was believed to be, this one had been smart—or hungry—enough to swallow the crystal matrix.

Whatever the reason, he now had a chance. If he could retrieve the matrix from the creature's gullet, he might be able to restore the *Koramund's* engines and speed the vessel far away from here.

The carrier rocked again, this time with such force that both Iaalu and the mutalisk smacked into the relay hub. Iaalu held on to the wing as everything started to spin around him. The mutalisk whirled, shrieking in pain, firing off a cannonade of glave wurms. The wurms nailed the walls in rapid succession, *boom bam boom*, and the combined explosions blasted holes through the hull. Light streamed into the tunnel, not the dim illumination of a billion stars but the blaze of day.

In the blur, Iaalu thought he could make out the shapes of continents and oceans below. The *Koramund* must be falling through the clouds of Vanass. A crash was imminent.

Iaalu did not have the combat skill of a zealot, and his claws were dull from years of disuse. But his mind was an engineer's, adept at evaluating and rectifying situations with the tools available. And perhaps he was holding the very tool he needed.

He removed one of his hands from the wing, then almost lost his grip with the other when a jolt of atmospheric turbulence shook the carrier. Yet his fingers clutched a bone, and he was able to pull himself over the wing, landing a kick to the tail-mouth's midsection.

The creature screeched and twisted its cloaca around in retaliation, its sphincter already plumping a glave worm. And now, no longer shielded behind the mutalisk's wing, Iaalu had nothing to protect him from that horrible appendage.

Which was what he had anticipated. He let go of the wing bone and dropped right before the worm bulletted out at him. Or, more precisely, where he *had* been.

Iaalu knew from his primings that the glave worm was nothing more than an organic machine. Its single motivating purpose, the be-all and end-all of its happiness, was to knife through its targets, exploding bits of itself upon impact until it was gone. That was the summation of the worm's existence; that was what the zerg had perfected it to do, down to its very life cycle. The mutalisk's womb genetically modified every worm to reach full maturity upon collision with its final target, therefore inflicting the maximum damage.

This particular worm lived a few moments longer than designed. As it flew through the space Iaalu had previously occupied, it blossomed into the incandescent green of adulthood, ripe for detonation yet deficient in the brainpower to alter its trajectory and locate its intended target. Puncturing the mutalisk's thin wing, the worm proceeded through its life cycle, maturing into the emerald sheen of middle age, then withering into the viridian of senescence, until it finally slammed into the abdomen of the mutalisk.

All eight of the mutalisk's eyes widened in infernal fury as the worm at last found its destiny. Devoid of self-awareness, the little organic machine had no idea it had burrowed into its own parent; it just lived out its purpose of blowing apart on impact, which it did,

from barbed mouth to barbed mouth.

The explosion hurtled Ialalu back into the relay hub. Flailing his arms, he hooked an elbow around a cable to keep from rebounding. But that didn't screen him from being drenched in the mutalisk's blood. The vile acidic fluid neutralized his defensive shields and began eating through his radiation suit. He quickly unclasped its front shell and wriggled out of it, using the leggings to wipe the slime off his helmet.

A pale glow welcomed him. Floating like a blue dwarf amid constellations of blood droplets was the crystal matrix.

Ialalu reached through the red cloud and snatched the crystal without considering the harm to himself. Acid sizzled on his skin, permeating to the flesh beneath. His muscles cooked; cells vaporized. The agony was excruciating. *Uhn dara ma'nakai. Uhn dara ma'nakai.* If he could get the engines online, he would not suffer long. Deprived of a protective radiation suit, he would be battered into peaceful oblivion by the spent ions bouncing around.

The planet's gravity took full control, jostling the carrier and sending it into a corkscrew plunge. Oceans disappeared from view in the hull breaches, and Ialalu caught a glimpse of forests of cone-tipped baleh trees. He had little time left before the *Koramund* crashed.

Uhn dara ma'nakai.

He reset the pressure sensors, dreaming of the Shreka Hills he saw in the carrier's curves. He coupled the relays to the crystal in the same octagonal pattern he used for connecting the relays of the ship's interceptors. He jammed the main power conduit into the crystal's center, whispering his mantra to that special spark he knew—he hoped—still lingered in those lines.

It did. The crystal lit up in a brilliant blue as energy coursed through the matrix

pathways. Seconds later, the engines began to hum with life. Iaalu, in turn, looked forward to inevitable death, waiting for the shower of ions.

It never came.

Without warning, the relays popped loose; the manifold sputtered; the engine hum died; and the crystal matrix shattered, showering him not with ions but with shards.

Iaalu fell back into the mass of cables as the *Koramund*, great wonder of the protoss, smashed into the forest ceiling of Vanass and became yet another ghost of their great despair.

According to the teachings of Khas, light—radiant, invigorating, blissful light—would fill those communicants entering the final stage of their current life and kindle the beginnings of their next.

Iaalu woke to darkness. Darkness and pain. Agonizing pain.

His skin cracked when he tried to move. Air currents drifting over his chest seared him like licks of flame. His right hand throbbed. His left sole ached. Organs he did not know he had announced themselves in torturous flashes. He felt as if he'd been roasted from the inside out.

This was far from the bliss Khas had promised. Either he had fallen into the Void or—

He was alive?

Images, memories, nightmares returned to him. The tunnel. The mutalisk. Its blood.

He should be dead.

For some reason, he wasn't. Somehow he lived. Raw, exposed, half-consumed by acid, but alive.

How?

His helmet. Its shielding had saved his brain and nerve cords from liquefaction. Yet it alone could not have saved him from—

The crash. He shouldn't have survived. Under no conceivable circumstance could a craft plummet from orbit, reach terminal velocity, and withstand a planetary collision. Not even carriers as celebrated and special as the *Koramund*. Ship and crew should have perished in a fiery wreck. He should be ashes.

Should. Incineration would have been a far more merciful fate than what he suffered now, burnt by zerg acid and thirsting for light.

He surveyed the darkness, hoping that his vision was adjusting. Even a single beam or ray would lift his spirits and alleviate some of his pain. For light was the essence of the protoss. Light was what gave them their wisdom and their energy. Light was what gave them life.

The darkness was total. Soon the thirst would drive him mad, if he wasn't already.

His helmet—that could generate light. He issued a thought to switch on the floods. The holographic readout failed to display, but the light flickered, then stayed on, and he imbibed every photon he could as if it were water.

He saw that he was tangled in cables atop the relay hub, with the engine access tunnel above him. The carrier had turned over during impact with barely a dent in its walls. Thick baleh branches had pushed through the hull breaches and covered the ladder in budding cone tips.

Had the trees somehow cushioned the brunt of the crash? Or was this some

hallucination he was having?

He reached out with his mind, searching for other presences in the Khala. Though his psionic talent was limited, diminished further by pain, he should be able to receive a general impression of how the crew fared.

There was nothing. Not an echo. Not a buzz. Not even a primal sensation of life. The Khala was quiet and dark.

His hearts sank. He might be the lone survivor.

He lay considering his fate for hours, or days; it was hard to judge time in his state. He might have lain there until death returned for him had he not felt a tingle.

It was so slight he almost didn't notice it. It traveled down his left arm, which rested on the main power conduit, and came at intervals, in rhythm, without the pain of an acid burn.

A pulse. A pulse flowed through the conduit. Faint and fading. But there. There was power in this line. The *Koramund's* spark had not died. Not yet.

He must do something. He loved the *Koramund* as he loved nothing else. The carrier had given him his career and an opportunity to be part of its legend. Perhaps he could save it from being overgrown with baleh trees or the fungal rot of the infestors he knew would come to nest. Perhaps somewhere in the ship he could find a way to jump its engines. He had a duty to this carrier and its crew, if any survived, to do what he could, however remote the chance of success.

With great effort, he mustered the strength to untangle himself from the relay cords and got to his feet. More of his skin crumbled and flaked, his flesh tender underneath. But when he squeezed the conduit and felt the *Koramund's* heartbeat, weak as it was, he forgot some of the pain.

He grabbed a baleh branch and began to climb up the tunnel.

Vanass's heavy gravity made his ascent nearly intolerable. He couldn't float or propel himself in the right direction as he had when the ship had been in orbit. He had to pull himself up by ladder and tree. The rough branches chafed his burnt palms. His epidermal layers further peeled apart when he stretched for a clear section of the ladder. What skin he had left, he shed. Not wanting to look, he knew the acid had denuded him of everything but his bare flesh.

Uhn dara ma'nakai. It came without prompting. Instinctually. *Uhn dara ma'nakai.*

He recalled the first time he had heard those words. They had come from Rimmicu, a templar he had assisted during the early days of his service. Zerglings had taken not only Rimmicu's entire unit but also his limbs. Yet the templar had refused to allow disfigurement to deter him from duty. He channeled his pain into a will of its own, molding it into the muscle that piloted the hover-platform Iaalu rigged for him from interceptor parts.

Uhn dara ma'nakai. Rimmicu had such faith in those words that he defied Command and returned to the battlefield where he had lost so much. In a streak of vengeance, he hunted down and killed every last zergling he could find, before finding death himself in the maw of a zerg queen.

Uhn dara ma'nakai. "Our duty is unending," Rimmicu used to chant.

Iaalu had neither that templar's discipline nor his endurance. He could not convert his misery into ammunition to use in combat. As an engineer, he possessed a different set of skills. His talent was with tools, not weapons, and that was how he had to master his pain. He had to harness it as a tool and use it to motivate, to push. To remember how fortunate he was to feel pain and be among the living.

He reached the tunnel junction and heaved himself over the edge. He took only a moment's rest before standing up.

The crash had aligned this part of the tunnel horizontally. He didn't have to climb; he could walk. Or limp. His legs refused to move any faster.

When he slid open the hatch and saw the horror beyond, Iaalu wished his legs had refused to move at all.

Corpses and their sundry body parts lay strewn about in corridor after corridor. Heads, limbs, torsos, all in various states of mutilation and decay. Many of them were his friends, his dear friends, his dead friends, survivors of the crash yet not of what followed.

The zerg had done this. Their tooth and claw marks inscribed everything they had not devoured. Needle spines staked arms and legs to the wall. Vomited organs showed the acidic stains of attempted digestion. Nerve cords seemed to be a zerg favorite, maybe even a delicacy; they'd been torn off every protoss cranium Iaalu saw.

He nervously twined his own cords. The zerg's barbarism explained why he hadn't felt even the lingering echoes of his crewmates' deaths. Their minds had been severed from the Khala. He prayed that bliss and new life would come quickly to them.

Once every few turns, a zergling carcass lay among the corpses, showing signs of psi driver electrocution or a brutal beating by hammertongs. How repulsive the creatures were in the flesh. They offended his sense of design. The sickle appendages protruding from the neck seemed ill suited, as if they had been yanked from a larger organism and sloppily grafted onto the zergling body. That, of course, was the principle of zerg mutation: incorporate the nastiest bits of different species to create something even nastier. In this warped version of evolution, zerglings were a kind of crowning achievement. It sickened him.

Where the rest of the zergling packs had gone, Iaalu could not tell. Most likely after the zerg had picked apart the crew, they had abandoned the ship. He hoped so. He doubted he could take down a zergling, especially in his condition.

What truly disturbed him was that among the dead, he saw not one member of the Templar caste. The deceased were all khalai—engineers, scientists, medics, and mechanics—apparently left to fend for themselves. The fact that these khalai had killed the number of zerg they had was a testament to their fearlessness and ingenuity. Their defiance against such overwhelming odds deepened his own resolve to launch the *Koramund* off Vanass. Other protoss should know of their bravery.

As for the templar, he cared not if they went forgotten. They had pledged their lives to protect the khalai, yet there was not a shred of evidence they had bothered to participate in the defense of his colleagues and friends.

Iaalu stepped up his limp to the meditation chambers, driven by anger.

Soft sammuro root muffled the sound of Iaalu's footsteps. It carpeted this deck so that passersby did not distract those zealots and other templar meditating in the chambers beyond. When not called to combat or related duties, templar came to this section of the carrier to exercise, rest, and attune their bodies and minds to the Khala.

It was here that most of them had probably died.

He had been too quick to question the templar's loyalties. The main corridor into the meditation chambers ended in a crumpled bulkhead with a zealot squashed in the rubble. Adjacent passages had been similarly demolished. Not only had the zerg crippled the carrier's engines, but they had also destroyed the levels that housed the ship's complement of protoss warriors.

This seemed like more than just a fortuitous ambush for the zerg. The internal layout of each carrier varied, reflecting the creativity of its design team. For the corruptors to have pinpointed the meditation chambers so immediately showed that they had an intimate knowledge of the *Koramund*. Did someone in the crew inform them?

He had no idea what his suspicions implied, but Iaalu did not like having them. He was an engineer; his job was to puzzle over convoluted circuits and faulty wires, not the nefarious plots of the zerg. Already he had wrongly judged the templar. Perhaps his misgivings were signs he was losing his mind. Or had survivor's guilt. Emotional trauma from the appalling savagery he had witnessed.

Iaalu put his hand on an exposed conduit for support. The anemic pulse of the *Koramund* comforted him. He was not alone. The *Koramund* was alive with him. Its heartbeat told him so.

But where was its heart? Where was that unique spark that still gave it life? If he could find that, it might give him a clue to repair the engines.

He spread his fingers and concentrated on feeling the current's flow. The pulse seemed to head toward the engine relay. Dragging his hand along the conduit, he went in the opposite direction, backtracking toward the pulse's source.

His mind eased when the conduit led him into the main hangar. So did his pain. Though the pulse originated farther in the ship, Iaalu took a moment to look around the hangar—*his* hangar—maybe for the last time.

He knew every cranny and corner of this space, every tool on every wall, every scratch of every panel, and every proper twist for every bolt and screw. He could grab the proper gauge of phasespanner from thousands on the bench without even a glance, and could pinch the vespene hose just right to double the capacity of fuel tanks with room to

spare.

His living quarters were on the barracks deck, but the hangar was his home; this was where he had spent most of his waking hours, building and repairing his pride and joy, the *Koramund's* legendary interceptors, which sat in their docking cradles, as shiny and resplendent as he had left them.

His fingers fell from the wall conduit. He closed his eyes. Had he been dreaming? He cleared his mind and looked again.

All the interceptors were docked, with umbilicals attached and not a dint in their hulls.

This was not right. Not right at all. These interceptors had been destroyed; Tenzaal had told him so when he was climbing through the access tunnel. Even if one or two had miraculously made it through the zerg forces back to the carrier, they could never have been restored to pristine condition without the full resources and talents of the crew.

Without *him*.

He shuffled up to an interceptor, the one he had dubbed the *N'rithaa*, his "little arrow." He placed his palm on its plasma cannon. The cold metal soothed his burn.

Then he saw the corpses behind the cannon, and he knew he wasn't dreaming.

He could not bear to look at their faces, though he recognized them without doing so. Yaiino, Wotarra, and Palmet, the junior engineers who had served under him with the utmost competence and dedication. And Sacopo, blustery, boisterous Sacopo, who was a century older than Iaalu and would have been promoted to third engineer if not for his petty disagreements with Tenzaal. His chubby body dangled over the launch-control podium, with his nerve cords piled like worms at his feet. A single cauterized wound pierced his skull.

Iaalu returned his gaze to the other corpses, the faces he had avoided. They bore similar wounds, deep, cauterized holes that went through their skulls. No blood.

The zerg were never this clean. This was the precise work of a psi blade.

He surveyed the hangar again and regretted having his floodlights on. The beam fell on three serpentine creatures slithering out of the tunnel he had just come from. The zerg hydralisks spotted him and hissed, splitting carapace plates to launch poisonous needle spines.

Iaalu switched off his floodlights and ducked behind the *N'rithaa*. Spines whooshed over him and twanged into the hull of another interceptor.

He could not cower behind the *N'rithaa* for long. But in his state, he could hardly walk, let alone run. The tools that could best be used in a fight, the psi drivers, hung on the other wall, across the hangar. Even if he did manage to grab one, there was no way in the Void he could electrocute all three of the hydralisks. He had to find a more potent weapon, or he was dead.

The *N'rithaa*. It sat there, waiting to rust. Its cold metal begged to be warm.

He yanked out the umbilical cords and pulled an emergency rod on the interceptor's underside. Though the *N'rithaa* could not launch without direct commands from the *Koramund*'s bridge, the cannons were operational thanks to the independent fire-control circuit he had installed. This interceptor's ability to keep firing, even if the enemy jammed the command signal or knocked out its robotic brain, was why he called it his "little arrow."

As the hydralisks converged on the interceptor, the *N'rithaa*'s targeting sensors converged on them. Iaalu hobbled out of the hangar to the shrieks and sizzles of zerg engulfed in plasma.

The conduit led him down the carrier's central spine, toward a set of doors before which he had not dared approach. They were cut from the kwai-leh trees of old Aiur, a most rare and precious commodity since the planet's fall. Pastoral scenes were etched in the wood, reminiscent of happier, simpler times before the many years of war. The doors possessed neither handle nor lock, and they barred entry to all except the one who knew the mental command to open them.

These were the doors to Praetor Quordas's quarters. And as he neared, they opened.

Iaalu knew, as a khalai, he was not permitted beyond that threshold. Yet it was from those rooms that the pulse originated. He could feel its current past the doorway, inside, where—

He saw something he would have never imagined in a thousand rotations.

Two protoss staggered to the doors, locked in a fierce embrace. One was Tenzaal, whose death he swore he had heard in the Khala, and the other was—

Praetor Quordas?

He stumbled backward. Theirs was no embrace. It was a primal struggle, and Tenzaal had the upper hand. She activated her psi blade, and its light confirmed what he could not feel in the Khala: her opponent was indeed Quordas, hallowed commander of the *Koramund*, though gashes savaged her once-regal visage and white bone nubs exposed the spots where long, beautiful nerve cords used to hang.

"Tenzaal, what are you..." Iaalu could barely think, his mind frozen in disbelief.

"*Foolish khalai! You should have stayed dead,*" Tenzaal shrieked, plunging her psi blade into the praetor's abdomen.

Quordas's eyes bulged and her skin darkened, the psi blade sucking out her inner light. She did not scream when she crumpled. The loss of nerve cords meant her death went

silent in the Khala, saving him from the mind-crushing echo that would have surely resulted.

It did not save him from the shock. This murder was unfathomable. Tenzaal was a templar, one of Quordas's most trusted lieutenants, on the path herself to being named praetor someday.

Tenzaal was a traitor.

"Please, khalai, spare me your ignorant thoughts." She pointed her psi blade at him. "Just lower yourself before me, and I will make your termination painless."

A sudden rasping hiss behind him made Ialalu's choice easy.

He dove into the praetor's quarters, for once in his life grateful for the zerg. Needle spines shot over him to find a mark in Tenzaal. Unlike Quordas, she screamed out in the Khala.

Unlike Quordas, she lived.

Wincing from her cry, Ialalu marveled as the shields of Tenzaal's armor buckled but held, fortified by her psionic strength. In a single spin, she shook away the full brunt of the spine attack. Activating her second psi blade, she turned to the plasma-scarred hydralisk in the doorway. It must have survived the interceptor's cannons.

"Straggler. I sent your kind into the forest to die."

The hydralisk's carapace plates split to fire another round. Tenzaal pounced straight into the volley. In a blur of strokes, she deflected or destroyed each spine, then landed before the hydralisk, lopping off one of its scythe-arms.

Crawling back into the shadows, Ialalu almost felt sorry for the zerg. Almost.

"Uhn dara ma'nakai."

He stopped his crawl. He hadn't thought the mantra this time. It came from another mind.

"Uhn dara ma'nakai."

Praetor Quordas was looking at him. A light still flickered in her eyes, mirroring the glow of the crystal amulet she clutched and through which she projected her thoughts.

Iaalu knew that high-ranking members of the Templar caste carried amulets as lenses of their psyches. These amulets always held rare and dazzling khaydarin crystals, artifacts of the ancient xel'naga and worthy emblems of the templar's rank. Quordas's khaydarin crystal was small—small, oblong, and jagged, its glass cloudy, nothing to be cherished or set as a pendant or even plucked from a mineral field if found. Yet he could not take his eyes off it. Dim as it was, the khaydarin's glow pulsed in a cadence he well knew, that which flowed through the conduits and had led him through the halls.

This dingy, unremarkable crystal could be nothing other than the carrier's spark. Quordas held in her hand the heart of the *Koramund*.

"Uhn dara... ma'nakai," her mind whispered to him, and then her eyes went dark. Death relaxed her fingers. The amulet fell to the floor and rolled toward him.

"Touch that crystal, and you will suffer a death that will haunt your next life." Atop the hydralisk's squirming body, Tenzaal glared at him as she drove her psi blades into the creature's skull one last time.

He returned her glare without fear. The truth was she couldn't make him suffer more than he had.

He reached out to take the amulet.

Tenzaal leapt off the carcass at him. Propelled by her power suit and buoyed by her psionic skill, she traveled close to the speed of thought.

He was already gone when she landed.

The khaydarin crystal gave him sustenance. It gave him strength. It gave him speed. It made him feel... *illuminated*.

In what could have been no longer than a blink, he went through the engine access hatch and arrived at the tunnel junction, using the amulet's glow to look down into—

A forest.

The baleh cone tips had germinated and bloomed, flourishing without water or sunlight. Branches crossed the tunnel back and forth, with foliage so thick he couldn't see the relay hub below. He could barely find the ladder.

I will kill you I will kill you I will kill you

Tenzaal's thoughts trailed him, nearly vicious enough to do the deed. She was closing in. He took a rung and began to scramble down the ladder.

He had not gotten far when a bough smacked his nerve cords with the force of a brick. He shoved it away only to have cone-tip roots wrap around his legs and another branch open its foliage like a claw. It snatched his arm and wrenched him off the ladder.

He hung suspended in the air, a prisoner of the baleh. More branches extended their leaf claws toward him—toward what he held.

They wanted the khaydarin crystal.

He struggled, and the roots just wound themselves tighter. A repulsive sap oozed from cavities in a branch. Some of it dribbled on his chest and burned like... *mutalisk blood?*

The zerg must have infiltrated the baleh genome and mutated it. For as mindless as zerg were, they knew what this crystal was. They knew what a khaydarin crystal could do.

He clenched the amulet with both hands. The zerg would have to rip him apart to get it.

Kill kill kill—

Tenzaal charged down the ladder, cleaving a path with her psi blades. Roots and boughs retracted to avoid being chopped. Suddenly Iaalu was free.

And falling. Falling toward the relay hub. He could see it as the baleh foliage withdrew.

"Oh no, you do not."

Tenzaal caught his foot and tossed him into the wall. He struck it with a crunching thud and slid down to the bottom.

The impact should have killed him. It would have killed any average khalai. But in the last few hours, or days, Iaalu had endured worse. Far worse. And if there was anything he'd learned, it was how to take a hit. The crystal didn't need to help in that regard.

He got up and staggered over to the relay hub. He had gathered the eight relay cables and the line for the main power conduit when Tenzaal landed on the other side.

She stood across from him, her glare fierce, psi blades humming, but did not attack. Instead, unbonded ions in the tunnel began to come toward her. She was summoning a power only a templar possessed—a psionic storm that could annihilate not just him but also the engine tunnel and much of the carrier.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked, trying to stall her as he coupled the matrix as fast as he could. Although the khaydarin crystal was lumpy and roughhewn, it conformed to the cable ends as if it had been carved to fit. "Are you dark?"

"A dark templar? Does it look as if my cords are cut?" The nimbus around her brightened with energy. "No, khalai, you do not feel my mind because I conceal it from your weak one. But there is no point in wasting that effort now. Here. Have a peek."

She released her thoughts in a torrent that slammed into his mind and made him tremble. She held nothing back; she revealed every detail of her treachery, from her discovery of a zerg swarm at Vanass, to the distress call she had faked, to the engine vent she had left open, to the protoss deaths she had caused, all links along a chain of logic that narrowed to a sharp terminus, the point of a dagger, aimed squarely at the heart of the thing he most loved.

"You... you want to destroy *Koramund*."

Psionic energies now traced her limbs. Within moments she would have enough power to kill him with a mental blast.

"We are in a new era of warfare, khalai. The *Koramund* and the other carriers of its class are relics of a failed past. They are inefficient, weaponless juggernauts, depleting the fleet of valuable resources and personnel, putting good templar at needless risk. The zerg have fought our carriers so many times in battle, they have memorized the vessels' individual layouts, their unique weaknesses, their chinks. Our loss here at Vanass, like many of our recent defeats, once again proves that zerg knowledge of these craft has become instinctual; it is in their genes."

"So you would let them wreck it?"

"Because our people refuse to, khalai! And their nostalgia is costing us this war. They consume precious time commemorating the past when they should be preparing for

the future. If they cannot abandon their attachment to these aging, lumbering hulks, someone must step up and cut this cord for them."

Iaalu nearly fumbled coupling the seventh cable as he tried to understand. Was there truth to her madness? Was he, like many protoss, allowing his sentiment for the *Koramund* and its legacy to prejudice him against what was rational, what was necessary to win this war?

The last relay cable tugged toward the crystal, attracted like a magnet. But he kept the two separated.

"If this was your purpose, why did you send me to fix these engines?" he asked.

"I required you away from the interceptors. I suspected you had implemented some designs of your own that might spoil my plan. I did not expect you to right the ship and save it from oblivion. You have made my job all the more difficult, khalai."

"And you killed my team."

"A necessary evil." She thought it with conviction. And not a hint of regret. Energy danced around her body, yet in her eyes he saw only darkness.

He didn't need to be a templar to know that *necessary evils* were not the way of Khas.

Praetor Quordas, Yaiino, Wotarra, Palmet, Sacopo, and the rest of the crew had served with dignity their entire careers. They deserved better.

"You are a murderer."

Her mind chuffed. Ions began to swirl around Tenzaal, her limbs, her body, her nerve cords. "When this war is over, the preservers will remember me as a savior."

She stretched an arm toward him, and he felt the pull of her brewing storm as if a vacuum were about to suck out his light. He clutched the praetor's amulet to his chest.

Uhn dara ma'nakai.

With all his strength, he pressed the main power conduit into the center of the crystal. If this worked, the explosion of light would jump-start the engines, rocket the *Koramund* off Vanass, and turn both Tenzaal and him into stardust.

Nothing happened.

Tenzaal laughed. "You blind, pathetic khalai. Do you think I would just let you restart the engines? Do you not see the crystal?"

The khaydarin crystal was dark. No pulse. Dead.

"This ship cannot fly. The *Koramund* is old; it is tired, and its spark is dead." A cyclone of energy spun around Tenzaal, her two burning eyes the only evidence of intelligence. "And it will never, ever see the stars again."

With a furious berserker shriek, Tenzaal unleashed her storm. Ialalu stood his ground and prayed for the bliss Khas had promised.

There was only darkness.

"What have you... done?"

That was not his thought. The voice of its thinker was shrill, grating to the mind.

He had to squint, overwhelmed by a bright blossoming of light. It was beautiful, of the quality that illuminated protoss life and sprung anew at the birth of a child. And it was strong, so strong that it bathed the tunnel in its brilliance. It flooded out from the relay

cables, into the arteries that interlaced on the walls. Sensor rings winked. The manifold purge exhaled. The tunnel hummed. This light was more than light. It was power.

The *Koramund's* engines were warming up.

The crystal. The khaydarin crystal. What a marvel it was, this small, uncut, ugly thing. It must have absorbed the psionic energies of the storm to rekindle its own spark. Although the light radiating from the crystal made it impossible to see, it throbbed against his chest, in his hands, quickening, its pulse gaining like a heartbeat recovering from a long dormancy.

"Stupid khalai... you have doomed us."

Beyond the light, a shadow he knew as Tenzaal fell to her knees. Her psi blades were sputtering. Her armor was breaking. Her skin was cracking. She cried out, but her echo was distant as if she were a galaxy away, while his mind remained clear. Blissfully clear.

He reached out to her. For who was he to judge? As much evil as she had done, she was in pain. She was still one like him. A protoss. In need of light. Light he could give her.

"Get... away." Tenzaal shielded her eyes from him, from his light, as if it were antithetical to her existence. Rather than take his hand, she let her flesh wither, her psi blades die, and her body slowly dissipate into darkness.

Even with all the light, he could not save her. This war had turned protoss against not only zerg and terrans. It had turned the protoss against themselves.

Her ashes fell atop a pile of crystalline shards. He almost didn't notice the shards since they reflected none of the light. But he knew their oblong shape as he knew his own. The shards of the khaydarin crystal. Now pitch black, opaque, drained of translucence.

His hands returned to his chest. The relays flowed with light, with power, but there seemed to be no amulet in the middle. There were only—

His hearts.

His heartbeats matched the pulse. Or, they *were* the pulse, perhaps the pulse he had felt all along.

As the bliss took him to the next cycle of his life, the light revealed that he—Iaalu, born of the Furinax tribe of the Shreka Hills, third engineer of the carrier *Koramund*—he was its spark.

Uhn dara ma'nakai.

Koramund—the protoss had named the carrier the "great wonder" of its class, and that was what it was. A great wonder that lifted off Vanass without commander or crew, its sleek hull gleaming, its engines blazing, and its heart carrying the memories of old Aiur back into the stars.