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LEGACY OF THE VOID™



BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Children of the Void

By Matt Burns

A cloaked observer drifted through the muted sky of Shakuras. It was one of many automated drones that patrolled the planet day and night. This one in particular tracked a surveillance route over a small section in the heart of the capital, Talemатros.

The city stretched for kilometers in all directions, an expanse of metal and stone that resembled a vast reptilian hide. Thousands of pointed spires jutted up from the surface. A dense fog layer diffused and refracted the light from the illumination crystals that dotted the cityscape. At this time of night, all was quiet. Most of the Aiur protoss and the Nerazim who lived in Talemатros were asleep. The only movements the observer detected were those made by sentries and other security drones elsewhere in the city.

The observer's bulbous sensor matrix swiveled from side to side like a massive insect eye, soaking up these details. The drone determined that much of what it saw was unimportant. Its main purpose was to protect the residents of Talemатros from any perceived dangers. And that included threats they posed to each other.

The observer was not capable of understanding the subtleties in the relationship between the Nerazim and the Aiur protoss, nor the reasons why tensions between them had reached a fever pitch of late. The drone had only one imperative: to help preserve the Daelaam, the unity government.

Sensing nothing out of the ordinary, the observer circled back to retrace its preprogrammed route. That was when it detected the anomaly. Something had changed at the Citadel, the seat of the Daelaam. No alarm had sounded from the building, but the sentries there had suddenly gone offline.

A gravity-field thruster propelled the observer toward the Citadel to investigate. The pyramidal structure towered above the fog that concealed much of the city. Intricate geometric patterns crisscrossed the Citadel's gleaming alloy surface. The building was atop a massive disk that would often levitate during the day, lifting the entire Citadel into the air. But at night, the disk rested on the ground. A long banner hung from a window near the Citadel's apex. Four offset circles—the symbol of the Daelaam—were woven into the fabric with brilliant gold thread.

The observer came to a stop and hovered a few meters from the window. The drone queried the sentries that were stationed inside the building. They made no reply.

Someone moved on the other side of the window. Someone shrouded by a cloaking field. The observer's sensors saw through the camouflage. The figure was a Nerazim male. His eyes were green, not blue like those of the Aiur protoss. The nerve cords that extended from the back of

his head had been severed, a Nerazim custom. But the observer could not identify who exactly this stranger was. His face was hidden behind a mask carved from a zerg hydralisk skull.

A warp blade flared to life from an armored gauntlet on the figure's wrist. He swept the energy blade in a tight arc just outside the lip of the window. The Daelaam banner fell, cut free from the building. It curled in on itself as it disappeared into the undulating fog.

A new banner unfurled from the window. This one was green in color, its edges tattered and torn. Twenty-seven violet crystals had been sewn along its length.

The Nerazim gazed at the sky, and his lambent eyes settled on the cloaked observer. It should have been impossible to see, unless the stranger had set up his own surveillance devices inside the Citadel. Perhaps he had. The drone detected energy sources pulsing within the building, but it could not determine their purpose.

Aware that it had been seen, the observer began turning away from the window. But it was already too late for that. The Nerazim struck out and slammed his warp blade through the drone's metal hull.

The lone observer plummeted from the sky, trailing ribbons of smoke, and vanished into the fog below.

Vorazun planted her staff on the floor and closed her eyes as the transport platform accelerated, lifting her from a lower tier of Talemattros toward the highest level of the city.

The memories surfaced again. A holographic recording of a Nerazim transport ship colliding with a squadron of Aiur protoss phoenixes in orbit above Shakuras. Shields rupturing. Metal hulls and bodies disintegrating. Psionic screams of pain going silent as the twenty-seven Nerazim in the transport became one with the eternal night.

Vorazun had watched the recording so many times that it was the only thing she saw when she closed her eyes, the only thing she saw when she dreamt at night. She wondered again if she could have prevented the tragedy. She had always opposed the Nerazim's joining the unified Daelaam military, the Golden Armada. But should she have done more to keep her people from taking part in it? If she had, would those twenty-seven still be alive?

And would this incident at the Citadel still be happening?

"Who else knows about this?" Vorazun opened her eyes as she projected her thoughts into the psi-link system on her gauntlet. Air screamed by outside the transport platform, whipping her violet robes and face veil into a frenzy.

"Only a few, apart from Hierarch Artanis and Executor Selendis," Zahan replied through the link.

"They were overseeing maneuvers with the Golden Armada in another part of the solar system when they heard the news. It will take them an hour to reach Shakuras. In the meantime, they

have sent Mohandar and a handful of zealots to keep watch at the Citadel." After a brief pause, Zahan added, "The other Hierarchy members have not been informed."

"Including me, but that is not surprising."

Vorazun understood why Artanis hadn't contacted her. She was his most outspoken critic in the Hierarchy. Artanis and the other Aiur protoss members of the government had always lamented Vorazun and her "Nerazim tendencies" whenever she spoke out against the Daelaam's activities. The collectivistic philosophies of the Aiur protoss made them incapable of understanding why anyone would argue against the majority. All too often, they sacrificed common sense on the altar of conformity.

The tension between Vorazun and Artanis had only increased of late, after Artanis had failed to attend the funeral rites of the twenty-seven Nerazim. According to his advisors, he had been too busy with the Golden Armada.

Too busy. The thought of it filled Vorazun with anger. How did Artanis expect to win her trust—to win the trust of the Nerazim—when he couldn't set aside time to honor the dead?

"But the fact that Artanis is leaving the other Hierarchy members in the dark *is* something of a surprise," Vorazun said. "It seems he wants to keep this incident quiet. He wants to resolve it before the city awakens." The whole move was strange and unorthodox for an Aiur protoss.

Artanis had only called on Mohandar, the leader of the Nerazim, to help him deal with the situation.

"That would be wise. The Aiur protoss will not be happy if they discover that Nerazim have taken over the Citadel," Zahan replied. "Not after what has been happening recently."

Hundreds of Nerazim had abandoned the Golden Armada in the wake of the accident. This had drawn the ire of many Aiur protoss, who saw the defections as an act of treason, and had led to small instances of violence between members of the two protoss societies. Tension had always existed between them. But the deaths of the twenty-seven had awakened something dark, pushing them to act on hatreds they had once held in check.

"Do you know the identities of those who are responsible?" Vorazun asked.

"I fear not. I apologize. I have failed you in this."

"Nonsense. You did everything you could, friend Zahan."

Few of her loyalists were as resourceful and reliable as Zahan. He was part of an intelligence network that worked for Vorazun, gathering information about the Nerazim in Talemattros and any troubles between them and the Aiur protoss. If not for Zahan, Vorazun never would have known about what was happening at the Citadel.

That in itself troubled Vorazun. She encouraged freedom of expression among her people. Most Nerazim who were planning to conduct protests against the Daelaam or Artanis came to her for approval. Perhaps those at the Citadel assumed she would have disapproved of their plans. Taking over the government's seat of power was extreme, even for Vorazun's tastes. But could she really blame them for going through with it anyway?

No. She couldn't. Not after everything that had happened. Artanis's decision not to attend the funeral rites was only one part of the problem. After the accident, he and the other Aiur protoss in the Hierarchy had pushed forward with the Golden Armada's preparations like cold, calculating machines. They hadn't even drafted measures to prevent these types of incidents in the future. The only important thing to them was finishing the Armada and launching it on its grand mission to retake Aiur from the clutches of the zerg. In the minds of those Hierarchy members, what did twenty-seven deaths matter when the destiny of their entire race was at stake?

"How shall we proceed?" Zahan asked.

Vorazun considered the question as the platform decelerated and came to a smooth stop at its destination. She stepped from the transport chamber and into the clinging fog and chilly night air. She knew she couldn't change the past. She couldn't save those twenty-seven. All she could do was prevent any more of her people from dying needless deaths.

"I will look into this myself. We both know we cannot rely on Mohandar to do so."

The statue of the late matriarch Raszagal loomed over Mohandar. The elderly, hunchbacked Nerazim stared up at the stone effigy of his former ruler, the leader who had welcomed the Aiur protoss to Shakuras after their homeworld had fallen to the zerg. In so doing, Raszagal had laid the foundations of the Daelaam and changed the fate of the Nerazim forever. The statue stared back at him with the same stoicism and air of calm that the matriarch had been famous for in life.

Mohandar shivered and looked away from the statue. Something was in the air this night. He had never been sensitive to premonitions, not like Raszagal, but an intense feeling of unease gripped his soul with icy fingers. His surroundings trembled with discord. The darkness of the twilight sky above seemed infinite and unforgiving in its depth.

He wondered if the ten Aiur protoss zealots who patrolled the perimeter of the Citadel felt it, too. They marched in pairs in the outer courtyard of the building, watching for anyone who approached. Even through the gauzelike curtain of fog, their armor gleamed in brilliant shades of gold and white. The zealots didn't speak as they performed their duty, at least not that Mohandar could hear. But he knew they were sharing thoughts and emotions through the Khala, the communal mind link that bound all Aiur protoss as one.

Mohandar envied the zealots' youth. He shifted his weight as another wave of pain radiated out from his old joints. Centuries of living had made it difficult for him to stand for long periods. At

times like this, he was especially glad that he was a Nerazim and that he did not have the Khala; otherwise, everyone would have known of the suffering he was going through.

"Mohandar? Do you have any final thoughts on this matter?" Hierarch Artanis asked through the psi-link system on Mohandar's gauntlet.

Mohandar's pulse quickened. He had been lost in his thoughts again. Artanis and Executor Selendis were currently en route to Shakuras, and they had contacted him to discuss their plans for removing the Nerazim rebels from the Citadel.

Artanis must have sensed Mohandar's confusion. The hierarch said, "Removing the Nerazim before the rest of Talemattros awakens is our primary objective. Time is of the essence. Selendis will lead a group of zealots into the Citadel to apprehend the rebels. She assures me it will be bloodless."

"Yes," Mohandar quickly replied, remembering what they had been discussing. He felt useless not for the first time this night. His mental faculties had been degrading over the past few years at an alarming pace. He hadn't told anyone about his condition, but he assumed the other Hierarchy members knew. "I do not envy your position," the elderly Nerazim continued. "But your plan is sound if our goal is to resolve this incident quietly."

"I am glad we are in agreement. We will contact you as soon as we reach Shakuras. Keep us apprised of any developments," Artanis said.

"As you wish, Hierarch."

As you wish. The words came easily to Mohandar. He wondered if Vorazun and the other Nerazim who criticized him were right. Did he side too often with the Aiur protoss at the expense of his own people? Why was he thinking about such questions now, of all times?

This is what you wanted, is it not, Raszagal? The Daelaam? The protoss race unified after a thousand years of separation? Mohandar thought as his gaze drifted back up to the statue of the former matriarch. Before her death, Raszagal had told Mohandar that things would not be easy, but in the end, it would all be for the better.

One day, my daughter will understand that, too, she had said. But she will need your help to do so.

"Mohandar!" A zealot stormed through the fog and saluted with a clenched fist to his chest.

"Yes?" Mohandar asked.

The warrior pointed toward the wide staircase that led up to the Citadel's inner courtyard. A figure was standing at the foot of the stairs, a lithe Nerazim dressed in purple robes and carrying a staff. A hydralisk skull adorned her shoulder, a trophy from a zerg she'd slain when the aliens had invaded Shakuras years ago.

Vorazun.

"I will deal with this," Mohandar said to the zealot. "Continue your watch, young one."

The elder Nerazim hurried forward, his zerg-bone walking stick clacking against the gray stones at his feet. Again the pain stabbed through his joints, but he didn't falter.

Vorazun was watching Mohandar as he approached. From afar, she reminded him so much of Raszagal. Vorazun had that same proud bearing, those same slim, chiseled features that so many Nerazim considered elegant and beautiful. But the similarities ended at the eyes. Vorazun didn't have that inner tranquility that Raszagal had possessed. No... the daughter's eyes blazed with something wild. Something dangerous.

"*En taro Adun*, elder one," Vorazun said as Mohandar reached the stairs.

"*En taro Adun*." Mohandar mulled over his thoughts. He hadn't spoken much with Vorazun since the argument that had broken out between them after the Golden Armada accident. "I was expecting you to come," he finally said. "Nothing happens in Talemattros without your knowing, even at this time of night."

"Perhaps it would have been simpler to call on me yourself."

"Hierarch Artanis wished to keep this a secret," Mohandar replied.

"He also plans to send in Selendis and a team of zealots to deal with the Nerazim by force. How do you think our people will react when they hear that news, especially after recent events? At the very least, he should have considered including Nerazim warriors on the team."

Interesting. She was better informed about the situation than Mohandar had expected. Did she have one of her loyalists monitoring the psi-link communications? It didn't matter. Even Mohandar had supporters in the city who would feed him information.

"Artanis did consider that, but he thought it wiser to use only Aiur protoss. Taking over the Citadel is an act of treason against the Daelaam. There could be other Nerazim working with the perpetrators... perhaps even some in the military. Whatever Hierarch Artanis wishes, we must stand by him," Mohandar said. "Solidarity is paramount."

"The well-being of our people is paramount. Have you contacted the Nerazim to see if they have any demands?" Vorazun said. "They must have done this for a reason."

"They have made no demands thus far," Mohandar said. "I attempted to contact whoever is inside, but I was not acknowledged. The Nerazim have taken control of the Citadel's sentry drones and are using them to seal the entrances with force fields."

"I see." Vorazun turned and began ascending the staircase.

"Where are you going?" Mohandar plodded after her.

Vorazun stopped and turned her head, one lambent eye staring back at Mohandar. "Artanis and Selendis will not be here for an hour, correct? Then where is the harm in trying to contact the Nerazim again? I will not give up on them as easily as you have."

The daughter of Raszagal crested the stairs, the fog sweeping in behind her as if to warn away any who would dare follow in her footsteps.

A pale blue force field shimmered at the Citadel's vaulted entrance. Other barriers bulged from the windows at the upper levels of the building. Nothing stirred beyond the semi-translucent shields.

"They must know we are here," Vorazun said, her patience wearing thin.

"They will not listen. Reasonable individuals would not do something like this." Mohandar stabbed his walking stick at the ground, poking at the debris of an observer that had fallen from above. "And opening a discussion with them will only give legitimacy to their actions. Others may be inspired to act out against the Daelaam. We live in a unified society now. We must consider what is best for—"

"Our people and the Aiur protoss." Vorazun had finished his thought. "You know I support unity."

That was one thing that Artanis and the other Hierarchy members never seemed to understand. Just because Vorazun criticized the Daelaam didn't mean she opposed unity entirely. Only when that unity came at the cost of her people. Since the day the followers of the Khala had fled Aiur and found refuge on Shakuras, Vorazun had watched her home change. She'd watched the Daelaam strip-mine the planet to feed the Golden Armada war machine. She'd watched young Nerazim abandon their ancient traditions in favor of those of the Aiur protoss. She'd watched her culture transform, become diminished. *Weakened*.

The Daelaam had formed on the promise of unity, but it always seemed to favor the Aiur protoss. It always seemed as if they were in control, even on the Nerazim's own homeworld.

"When you defy Artanis, you encourage the other Nerazim to perform these types of rebellious activities," Mohandar said.

A note of blame tinged his psionic voice, a subtle implication that Vorazun was in some way responsible for this incident. Had it come from anyone else, she would have been furious. But Vorazun found it difficult to be angry at Mohandar. The elder had been a close friend of her mother's. After Raszagal died, Mohandar helped Vorazun through the abyss of grief and sorrow that nearly swallowed her whole. For that, she would always love him.

And that was why when Mohandar was named the leader of the Nerazim, she had not protested the decision. He was her elder, and he had served Raszagal for many years. In recent months, more and more Nerazim had begun looking to Vorazun for leadership rather than to

Mohandar. Some even called for the elder to step down. But Vorazun never supported those calls, even though she often questioned whether Mohandar was the best leader for her people. He could be... if only he would take a stand against Artanis from time to time.

"It is the Nerazim's choice to do what they want," Vorazun said. "Is that freedom not the cornerstone of our people? Is that not what separates us from the Aiur protoss?"

"That and many other things." The voice echoed in Vorazun's head. It did not belong to Mohandar. It belonged to someone else she knew.

Vorazun whirled, tendrils of fog spiraling around her. She found the speaker standing on the other side of the force field. The figure was distorted by the barrier, a vague silhouette with glowing emerald eyes. But Vorazun recognized the tenor of his psionic voice.

Taelus. One of her loyalists, a proud warrior she had once mentored in the ways of combat and philosophy. Vorazun was pleased. This was someone who would listen to her.

"Taking control of the Citadel," she said. "Quite the feat, young Taelus. I applaud your boldness. But it is rather extreme, with emotions running high in the city."

Taelus made no reply. His silence filled Vorazun with disquiet.

"What is it that you want?" Mohandar tapped his cane on the ground to punctuate his words.

Again, no reply.

Vorazun stepped closer to the barrier. Her skin went numb from the waves of psionic energy that radiated off of the force field. "I understand why you are doing this. I am just as angry as you are about the deaths of our warriors and—"

"Save your thoughts." Taelus's voice was jagged, verging on a psionic mental assault. "*Words without action are no more than a tactic to lead us into a false sense of victory. A means to dull our fire until only embers remain. And if we allow ourselves to become complacent, the Aiur protoss on the Hierarchy will have succeeded in getting their way, for we will have forgotten what it was we were fighting for.* Do you recognize those words, Master Vorazun?"

"Of course I do." Vorazun had said those things more than a year ago, to a gathering of her loyalists. She'd made the speech in response to the Hierarchy's proposal to mine the Naszar, a mountain range considered sacred to the Nerazim. For centuries, Vorazun's people had traveled to the region to meditate and train in bending the Void to their will. The mountains also happened to contain some of the largest resource deposits on Shakuras. In the end, Vorazun had convinced the rest of the Hierarchy to abandon the plan to mine the site.

"And yet you no longer follow your own teachings," Taelus said. "You have become like Mohandar. Another empty voice in the Hierarchy. But what else would one expect from the daughter of Raszagal?"

Mohandar lurched forward. "You will treat the late matriarch with respect."

Vorazun placed a hand on the elder's shoulder to calm him. She was no stranger to being compared with Raszagal. The other members of the Hierarchy often said they wished Vorazun could be more like her mother. They used Raszagal's name as a tool to pursue their agendas—an easy thing to do when the former matriarch wasn't around to agree or disagree with what was happening.

As a reaction to this misuse of Raszagal's name, many young Nerazim had begun seeing her in a different light. They viewed her unwavering calm and philosophies of unity as signs of weakness. Vorazun was in large part responsible for this shift in how her mother was remembered. More than once, she had openly criticized Raszagal's decisions. It was a tactic to neutralize the other Hierarchy members' use of her mother as a symbol. But Vorazun knew it was also something more than that. On a deeper level, she wanted to distance herself from Raszagal. She wanted to crawl from that immense shadow and create a legacy of her own.

"I have not given up the fight," Vorazun said. "I have protested the accident and how Artanis dealt with it."

"An act to appease your supporters, and nothing more," Taelus replied.

"There is more..." Vorazun wondered how much she should say, especially with Mohandar present. There was no point in holding back. "I think it may be best for the Nerazim to leave the

Golden Armada entirely. We welcomed the Aiur protoss to our planet to give them shelter, but that does not mean we should also fight their wars. How many Nerazim will die if we help them retake their home from the zerg? Thousands, at the very least. We must preserve our lives to protect Shakuras and our culture, not sacrifice ourselves for a planet that is not ours."

Mohandar turned toward her, but he said nothing.

"That is why I am here," Vorazun continued. "The Aiur protoss plan to send in soldiers to force you out. Do you understand what will happen if that comes to pass? The Nerazim in the city, across all of Shakuras, will lash out at the Aiur protoss. There will be violence. Perhaps even deaths. I want to protect you and the rest of our people."

"Is it not better to die with that fire still burning in your blood than to live and watch your culture fade into the night?" Taelus said, quoting another part of Vorazun's speech. "Tell the Aiur protoss to come. We will not go peacefully. *Korshala Adun*, Master."

And then he was gone, disappeared back into the depths of the Citadel.

"*Korshala Adun...*" Mohandar repeated.

"I heard him," Vorazun replied. What was Taelus thinking? "*Korshala Adun*" was a phrase the Nerazim used before setting out to battle. It was a farewell that meant, "Until we both meet with Adun," signaling that the warrior did not expect to return alive. "He cannot mean—"

The earth groaned and heaved beneath Vorazun's feet. Her muscles coiled as she fought to maintain equilibrium and keep herself upright. Overhead, an explosion had torn through the top of the Citadel, illuminating the inner courtyard with emerald light. Vorazun grasped Mohandar by the forearm and pressed him against the side of the building. Chunks of stone rained down around them, impacting the ground with enough force to rattle Vorazun's skull.

When the shaking stopped, Vorazun surveyed the damage above. Where once the Citadel had ended in a sharp spire, now mangled metal and cracked stone crowned its top. The explosion had not been set off to destroy the Citadel. It was meant to wake up Talemattros.

Taelus, and whoever else was inside, wanted an audience to witness what was to come.

"There are others," Mohandar said.

"Other what?"

"Explosions. Artanis has contacted me through my psi link. Bombs were detonated in some of the orbital shipyards. It does not appear there are any casualties." Mohandar was silent for a moment as he continued speaking with Artanis. "The hierarch will be here soon. Once he arrives, Selendis and her zealots will warp in to the Citadel and apprehend the rebels."

"That is exactly what Taelus desires." Vorazun shook her head. She had expected this to be a mere protest, an act of disobedience meant to embarrass and irritate the Hierarchy. "He wants

to sacrifice himself in a fight with the Aiur protoss. How could he be so foolish? We must get inside. I can talk to him. He will listen."

Mohandar swayed on his feet in silence, the psi-link system on his gauntlet pulsing with energy. Finally, he said, "I have explained this to the hierarch. He believes it is too dangerous for us to go in alone."

"There is still a chance to resolve this peacefully."

"Artanis has asked us to pull back for now," Mohandar said.

"Then go." The words came out harsher than Vorazun had intended. She turned away from Mohandar to collect her thoughts. It wasn't the elder's fault that this was happening. In some way, Vorazun feared she was responsible. How had she not seen this coming from one of her own supporters? Had there been signs? Had she ignored them?

Mohandar shuffled to the force field. "You will need a sentry to bore through this, or some other type of weapon. But we do not have the time for that."

"We?"

"You are right. If we can end this without Aiur protoss intervention, it will be better for everyone."

Mohandar's walking stick clattered to the ground. He extended his gnarled hands toward the force field, his frail body trembling from exertion. A small orb of emerald Void energy took shape between Mohandar's palms.

"Well? Are you going to stand there or help me?" The elder groaned, his psionic voice barely a whisper. "I am old, but I still have some surprises left in me."

Vorazun understood immediately what he was doing. She dropped her staff and held out her hands, focusing her mind on the unseen. She reached into the ether, into the Void that was all around them, and gathered what energy she could. A sphere coalesced in her hands, numbing the skin of her palms. In unison, Vorazun and Mohandar channeled the energy into the force field. A gaping hole yawned open in the barrier, large enough for them to crawl through.

Mohandar stumbled over the pieces of a sentry that lay scattered about the Citadel's inner corridor. From the look of it, Taelus and whoever was with him had disassembled the sentry, torn out its force-field generator, and then used that to create a permanent barrier at the Citadel's entrance. It was no easy feat. The rebels were technically minded and resourceful. That also made them dangerous.

"Let us rest for a moment." Mohandar collapsed against the smooth, featureless wall of the main corridor. Breaking through the barrier had taken more out of him than he'd expected. His mind was growing foggy again. He wanted his mental faculties sharp for what was to come.

"Of course." Vorazun leaned against the wall opposite Mohandar and set her staff beside her. She stared at him, her green eyes like stars in the darkened hallway. "Thank you for coming with me."

"We must do something. In that, you are correct," Mohandar said. "But what you said earlier about removing the Nerazim from the Golden Armada..." He trailed off. He didn't want to bring this up now, but he was still shocked that Vorazun was entertaining such an idea.

"I stand by what I said. Is it not enough that we have given the Aiur protoss a new home?" Vorazun said. "That we have helped them build the Golden Armada? I do not think that Nerazim should die in a war that is not our own."

"Aiur is the home of all protoss," Mohandar countered. "Whether or not we live there matters little. As a symbol, it represents all of us."

"And what will be the price of reclaiming that symbol?"

"Is it the loss of life that troubles you? Or is it the thought that some of our people might one day choose to live on Aiur if the Golden Armada succeeds?" Mohandar asked.

"Both," Vorazun said.

Her honesty surprised Mohandar, and he felt himself taken somewhat off guard. He stared back at the younger Nerazim in silence. Perhaps it was the dim light, but once again he was reminded of how much Vorazun looked like her mother.

Mohandar's thoughts turned to the statue of Raszagal, to the legacy she had left behind. How would the Nerazim remember Mohandar when he had passed on? Would they say he was a mere stepping stone between Raszagal and Vorazun? A forgettable leader who lived in Raszagal's shadow and then in Vorazun's, but never cast one of his own?

Despite the circumstances, these thoughts warmed Mohandar's soul. They were rooted deep in Nerazim ideologies of individualism and legacy. These were things that the collectivistic Aiur protoss did not worry themselves over. Not most of them, at least.

If Mohandar could do one thing to make a difference for his people, he knew it lay with Vorazun. He had no intention to manipulate her. How Vorazun lived her life was her choice. All he could do was set an example.

"Too often, you see only the differences between our people and the Aiur protoss," Mohandar said.

"We are different," Vorazun added. "That is what makes us unique."

"Yes. But we are also the same. The thing that defines *every* protoss is our willingness to put ourselves in harm's way to protect others. To sacrifice for the good of all."

"*The good of all*. That is what defines the Aiur protoss," Vorazun replied.

"It is our legacy as well. It always has been, since the first Nerazim left Aiur to find refuge here."

"They did not leave. They were driven away," Vorazun countered.

"Because the Nerazim were different. The Aiur protoss feared them for that. And yet despite what was done to our kind, your mother welcomed the followers of the Khala here when they were in need. She did so because she knew that if she turned her back on them, we would be no better than those protoss who had done the same to the first Nerazim."

Mohandar pushed himself away from the wall. He took a clumsy step forward and leaned in close to Vorazun. "We must be better than that. We *can* be better than that," the elder said.

"Our culture is strong enough to survive the Daelaam. Preserving it does not have to come at the cost of unity. If you convince our people to abandon the Golden Armada, you will be betraying our pride and our honor—the very Nerazim ways that you fight so hard to protect."

Vorazun said nothing. Her eyes narrowed as she considered Mohandar's words.

"I am old," Mohandar continued. "When I pass, you will become the matriarch of our people. They will follow you as they followed your mother and as they follow me now. Your word will decide their fate. And you must find a balance between protecting our kind *and* unity."

Mohandar held up a wrinkled hand. The psi-link system on his gauntlet pulsed bright. "Artanis and Selendis will be warping in to the city soon. We must go forward. Quickly. If Taelus does not listen to reason, are you prepared to stand against him?"

"He will listen," Vorazun insisted.

But Mohandar sensed the unease and confusion in her thoughts. "*Korshala Adun*" was not a phrase used lightly. To go back on one's declaration of sacrifice was a cowardly act.

"Come," the elder said as he started down the corridor. "Let us see what lies ahead."

They made their way through the Citadel in silence before reaching the inner chamber. The massive doorway that led inside was open, an invitation to the unknown that lay within. Vorazun entered first, her muscles tense and her mind alert. She paused at the threshold, taken aback by the work of calculated vandalism in the Daelaam meeting room.

The antechambers and corridors of the Citadel were largely featureless and unremarkable. But the inner heart of the Citadel, where the Hierarchy conducted its business, was different. It had

changed over the years. In its current incarnation, it had been marked by intricate wall patterns and colorful banners representing the various protoss tribes. Crystal panes set into the sides of the room had displayed a forest of stars and galaxies, real-time projections of space recorded by satellites in orbit around Shakuras.

Everything was different now. Scars ran through the beautiful wall patterns. The crystal panes were shattered. The colorful banners, except for the Nerazim ones, had been ripped down. In their place were long cuts of fabric embellished with twenty-seven gleaming gems—smaller versions of the giant banner that hung outside the Citadel.

Taelus was not alone. He was joined by four other Nerazim, their faces partially covered by masks made from the skulls of zerg hydralisks. The five rebels were gathered around a massive slab of metal that served as the Hierarchy's meeting table. Above it shimmered a holographic image of the Citadel. Data scrolled by on the holo. From the look of it, Taelus and his followers had assumed control over all of the Citadel's security apparatuses.

Vorazun took note of the other Nerazim rebels as Mohandar joined her. Despite the masks they wore, she could still make out some of their features. She recognized Taelus's allies as young warriors who had attended her speeches in the past. Each was armed with a warp blade gauntlet and dressed in purple robes.

The five rebels looked away from the holo-image to regard the newcomers. They made no move toward Vorazun or Mohandar. There was something calm and confident about them.

"We saw you break through the force field." Taelus gestured to the hologram. His voice was thick with annoyance. "You are wasting your time. I have nothing more to say to either of you. If you have not come to join us, then I must assume you stand against us."

"Listen to me, please," Vorazun pleaded. She knew she would only have one chance to win Taelus to her side. "You know me. You know that I am trying to—"

"I did know you." Taelus's words blazed with the cold fury of a Nerazim warp blade. The force of them sent a spike of pain through Vorazun's mind. "I lived in your shadow for many years. I learned our ways from you. I came of age armed with your training and wisdom. But I have my own shadow now. I find that yours has become... empty."

"What do you hope to gain here? You would sacrifice yourself to incite violence among the protoss." As Vorazun spoke, she became aware of a change in Mohandar. His wizened form radiated with intense psionic energy, like a muscle wound tight and ready to spring free.

"In a way," Taelus replied. "We will give our people the push they need to break free from this foolish Daelaam and its war. Yes, there will be violence. Yes, Aiur protoss and Nerazim alike will die. But the losses our people suffer will be far less than if we were to take part in the invasion of Aiur."

A red orb shimmered to life over the Citadel hologram. It floated in the air, blinking softly.

"Sensors detect a warp prism overhead," one of Taelus's followers reported. "It is Selendis and her zealots. They are scanning the inner corridors."

There was no time left to debate, Vorazun realized. She and Mohandar had to act. Despite how much she wanted to believe that Taelus and the others would listen to reason, she knew they would not. Vorazun gave a short nod to Mohandar and then steeled herself for what was to come.

"If it is Aiur protoss blood you wish to spill, you will need to spill ours first," Mohandar said.

The rebels exchanged wary glances—all but Taelus. His posture became one of battle readiness. His green eyes stayed locked on Vorazun, burning with cold, righteous fury.

Remember what I said, young one. You must find a balance... Mohandar's voice was quiet in Vorazun's mind, meant only for her. She looked into his eyes and saw a fleeting mix of joy and sorrow.

And then Mohandar was gone. Where he had been standing, a cloud of oily smoke coiled through the air. All that remained was his walking stick, toppling forward. A split second later, the elder rematerialized behind one of the Nerazim rebels. Mohandar struck at the ends of the warrior's severed nerve cords with an open palm. A flash of emerald Void energy blazed at the point of impact. The young Nerazim's body went limp before he ever had a chance to react. He crumpled to the floor and lay in a motionless heap.

He was not dead; he was merely unconscious. Mohandar had forced a burst of Void energy through his foe's severed nerve cords. A non-lethal combat maneuver developed by the Nerazim.

Emerald warp blades hissed from the gauntlets of Taelus and his remaining rebels. They whirled in the direction of their fallen comrade, but Mohandar had already cloaked himself in shadows once again. He was more agile than Vorazun had given him credit for.

She took advantage of the distraction. Vorazun reached out with her mind, grasping for the Void energies that lay beyond the veil of physicality. A cold fire, so familiar after a lifetime of training, ignited deep in her chest and expanded through her bones. She wove the primal energy around her, used it to cloak herself and leap forward at high speed.

She reappeared before the closest Nerazim rebel, a young male whose severed nerve cords were adorned with a handful of small zerg bones. Vorazun struck at the warrior with her heel, shattering his gauntlet. The rebel's warp blade sputtered and then disappeared. Vorazun spun around her adversary, slamming her palm into the ends of his nerve cords and flooding his body with Void energy. The warrior sank to his knees and collapsed to the floor.

In the time it had taken Vorazun to incapacitate this Nerazim, Mohandar had already dealt with two other rebels. He was leaning on the center table, shaking from exhaustion.

Vorazun searched the room for Taelus. He was gone, hidden from sight.

In the midst of a strike.

Vorazun dived to the side to avoid the attack, but it never came. Not for her, at least.

Taelus reappeared from a roiling mass of smoke. He was a blur of violet robes, verdant gems, and clattering zerg bones. His warp blade carved an emerald crescent through the air as he stabbed forward, plunging the weapon straight into Mohandar's back. The tip of the warp blade burst through the elder's chest. It was a clean strike. A single killing blow.

Taelus somersaulted backward and cloaked himself again. Mohandar collapsed onto the table, his body sinking through the hologram of the Citadel. He shuddered once. Twice. He grasped at the table, desperate to find some purchase as his strength left him.

"Mohandar!" Vorazun rushed forward. She dropped her staff, catching the elder before he could fall. She kneeled with him in her arms, violet blood soaking his old robes. Mohandar stared at Vorazun, his eyes dimming. His gnarled, bony fingers brushed against her face.

"Matriarch Raszagal... I have missed you..." The elder's voice was like a shadow, faint and devoid of life. "You are back again... but how can that be? How... can..."

He died in Vorazun's arms.

She stayed there, cradling the elder in disbelief. He wasn't dead. He couldn't be dead.

But he was. She knew that.

Rage and sorrow boiled through her, shattering her disbelief. Her body shivered from the surge of emotions. A shimmering, wild aura of Void energy crackled to life around her, tendrils of emerald light lashing at her surroundings.

"Taelus!" Vorazun howled.

A wave of heat buffeted the right side of Vorazun's face. Instinct took hold. She plucked her staff from the floor and pushed Mohandar's body to the side. She rolled backward just as Taelus attacked. His warp blade cleaved through the empty air and into the table.

"You are not the warrior I trained!" The force of Vorazun's psionic scream shook the scarred walls of the room. She pulled Void energies into her staff, igniting a warp blade on each end of the weapon. She whirled it in the air, testing her grip.

"You told me that if we live too long in the shadow of another, we will never find out who we really are and what we are capable of." Taelus sidestepped toward Vorazun's right, his warp blade still licking at the air from the edge of his gauntlet.

"And is this who you really are? Is this the legacy you have chosen for yourself? One of blood?"

Vorazun stalked around the room, matching Taelus's movements. "Of murder?"

"I choose a future where the Nerazim can dictate the terms of our fate," Taelus replied. "I choose a future where we can be proud, where we will not be strangers on our own planet!"

Thirteen red lights appeared on the Citadel hologram. Selendis and her zealots had warped in to the upper levels of the building. Security systems were tracking them as they made their way down to the meeting chamber. Vorazun glanced at the lights, then back at Taelus.

"And will you kill me, too?" she asked.

"If I must," he said. "*Korshala Adun.*"

"*Korshala Adun.*"

In unison, the warriors wrapped themselves in shadow to hide their movements.

Vorazun used all of her willpower to put aside her anger and raging emotions. They would not help here. This was a duel of Nerazim warriors, a test of wills and patience. One strike—that was all it would take to decide who lived and who died.

She sensed movement to her left and launched herself at the unseen figure. She charged forward until she surmised that her adversary was within striking distance. At that moment, she shed her cloak of shadows and swung her weapon.

Taelus did the same. He had predicted Vorazun's movements well.

But not well enough.

His weapon seared through Vorazun's unprotected shoulder at the same instant that one of the warp blades on her staff tore through his chest. A geyser of violet blood erupted from Taelus's wound, spraying across the meeting table. The young warrior collapsed.

Vorazun fought off the pain lancing through her shoulder. It was not a serious injury. She moved to where Taelus had fallen with a mind to strike him again, but seeing him there, lying at the edge of death, diluted her anger. This warrior was like a son to her.

Confusion and loss rippled through Vorazun. She had come here to protect the Nerazim, to prevent further bloodshed. She had failed.

"I did this... for our people..." Taelus's voice was weak, a ghost from somewhere in the Void.

"I know." Vorazun dropped her staff and knelt by the young warrior's side. She took his hand, half expecting him to pull it away. But he didn't. Taelus held her hand with surprising strength.

"I go... to the eternal night..." Taelus said. "Protect our culture... as you promised you would..."

"I will," Vorazun said as Taelus's eyes dimmed and faded to black. "I will..."

From outside the chamber came the heavy footfalls of Selendis and her armored zealots. Vorazun ignored them, her attention fixed on the dead. To one side lay Mohandar. To the other, Taelus. Two Nerazim she had known and cared for, each in different ways.

One was a teacher; the other, a student. One, the past; the other, the future.

And in the middle, trapped between both, was Vorazun.

"She is coming out now," Selendis said over the psi link. "We will bring the others."

Her voice betrayed no emotion, but Artanis sensed Selendis's agitation through the Khala. He could barely contain his own unease and fury as they boiled through the communal gestalt that bound the Aiur protoss' emotions as one. Nothing had gone according to plan.

Nothing.

Artanis understood why Vorazun and Mohandar had not obeyed his orders. The rebel Nerazim had been planning to sacrifice themselves to the Aiur protoss to start a revolution on Shakuras. Mohandar and Vorazun's intervention had stopped that, but the cost was high.

His mind turned to the report Selendis had given him about Mohandar's death. Artanis still struggled to accept that the elder was gone. Mohandar had been one of the wisest members of the Hierarchy, and a crucial ally in building relations with the Nerazim.

I could have prevented this, he thought. I should have sent in a team of zealots before the explosion awakened the city... before Mohandar and Vorazun went inside.

More than that, Artanis knew he should have taken greater steps to appease the Nerazim following the Armada accident. Circumstances beyond his control had prohibited him from doing so. Nerazim weren't the only casualties from that day. Two phoenix pilots—two followers of the Khala—had also lost their lives. Many Aiur protoss had been in an uproar after the incident. They blamed the Nerazim pilots of the transport ship for what had happened. Some of Artanis's own warriors had argued that they should not fight alongside the Nerazim anymore, that the military should be split into two separate forces to avoid future catastrophes.

Artanis had chosen to spend his time calming down these Aiur protoss rather than attending the Nerazim funeral. It wasn't an easy decision—whatever he did, he risked alienating one half of the Daelaam. But he knew that maintaining the core strength of the Armada was critical, and that meant focusing his efforts on the followers of the Khala, no matter the consequences.

It had taken Artanis days to ease tensions among the Aiur protoss. In the end, they had understood that the Armada's mission outweighed their personal misgivings. Through the Khala, Artanis's people had found balance and returned to a state of cooperation. The Nerazim,

however, had not. Many had remained bitter and unforgiving about the incident and Artanis's handling of it.

Many, like Vorazun. With Mohandar dead, she would become the leader of the Nerazim. Such a turn of events troubled Artanis. He and Vorazun rarely agreed on anything, but Artanis was surprised by her actions today. Vorazun had risked her life to stop the Nerazim rebels from getting their way. Had she done it to undermine Artanis's authority in Talemattros? Or had nobler intentions driven her to act?

Artanis did not know. He wasn't sure what to think of Vorazun anymore.

He paced at the foot of the staircase leading up to the Citadel, his eyes on the gathered crowd. When Artanis had warped down to Shakuras, hundreds of protoss had already reached the building. They had formed into two large groups: the Aiur protoss in their elegant robes of blue and gold, and the Nerazim in their dark, tattered wraps and zerg-bone trophies. Rumors had spread among the crowd about what was happening in the Citadel. Fueled by hearsay and deep-seated anger, the two sides were poised on the brink of violence.

Artanis had called upon dozens of armored zealots to prevent bloodshed. He had also summoned Nerazim warriors to help, despite his earlier reservations about using them on Selendis's strike team. These Daelaam soldiers now stood between the Aiur protoss and the Nerazim in the crowd, a meager line of defense should violence break out.

A low, dull murmur of psionic voices suddenly rose up from the crowd. The eyes of Aiur protoss and Nerazim alike were fixed on a point over Artanis's shoulder. He turned and saw what they were seeing: a figure in the dissipating fog, standing atop the stairs.

It was Vorazun, and she carried a body in her arms.

Vorazun's arms burned from fatigue. Violet blood welled from the shallow gash on her shoulder. She kneeled and laid Mohandar at her feet. As she stood again, she heard the psionic voices of the crowd, a chorus of discontent rising like the winds that preceded a terrible storm.

"Typical Nerazim behavior. Traitors."

"How can you Aiur protoss pass judgment when you do not yet know the facts?"

"The Citadel belongs to the Nerazim! It was our ancestors who built it!"

"Is this how the Aiur protoss solve their problems? Brute force?"

"That seems to be the only way to deal with you Nerazim."

"Do you see the body? That is Mohandar!"

Several Nerazim wearing long, dark face veils surged against the Daelaam soldiers who stood between them and the Aiur protoss. The threat of violence spread like an infectious disease. More protoss began jostling against each other in an effort to break through the line of soldiers.

"Stop!" Vorazun strained to project her psionic voice over the noise of the crowd, but it had no effect.

"*Mohandar is dead!*" an unseen Nerazim shrieked. "This is the work of the Aiur protoss!"

"It was us!" Vorazun replied. "We did this!"

This time, the crowd heard her. One by one, the protoss went still and turned toward Vorazun. Unease was written across the faces of the Nerazim. The Aiur protoss were not as easy to read, but Vorazun knew they must be experiencing their own confusion through the Khala.

"It was a Nerazim who struck down Mohandar," Vorazun continued, "and Nerazim who took control of the Citadel. They wanted to turn us against the Aiur protoss and break the Daelaam. But..." Vorazun trailed off, unsure of what to say.

She looked down at Mohandar's crumpled, lifeless form. With the elder gone, leadership of the Nerazim would fall to Vorazun. She had the power to decide the future of her people—of her world.

Vorazun could persuade the Nerazim to abandon the Armada. She would save Nerazim lives by doing so, but her people would be remembered for turning their backs on the Aiur protoss in their hour of greatest need. Such an extreme decision wasn't the answer. It would only breed more ill will between the Nerazim and the Aiur protoss, which in turn would give rise to other violent rebels like Taelus. The Daelaam wouldn't survive that tension. It would crumble from within.

Mohandar had been right: the Nerazim could be better than that. Vorazun needed to find a balance between unity and protecting her people. And Aiur was critical to that balance.

"I know many of my kind fear for our future," Vorazun finally said. "I do, too. This Daelaam has been a struggle. It has tested our resolve. But we are Nerazim. Our ancestors braved the unknown and came to this planet to forge a new identity. We do not need to abandon our allies to preserve that identity. It is strong enough to survive *anything*, is it not?"

Vorazun saw the change take hold in the gathered Nerazim. Subtle shifts in posture and facial expressions revealed that they agreed with her. Their anger ebbed away.

"It is our duty to support the Daelaam and help the Aiur protoss retake our homeworld," Vorazun continued, her voice swelling in power. "Lives will be lost in the war, but they will be lost for a just cause. And in the end, through victory or defeat, we will remain Nerazim!"

The crowd dispersed peacefully. Once it had, the zealots marched the Nerazim prisoners out of the Citadel. Shimmering blue energy fields shrouded the young rebels. Bands of coppery metal, thrumming with psionic power, bound their hands together. None of the rebels would meet Vorazun's eyes as they passed by. She would speak to them later.

The last two zealots carried Taelus's body between them.

"Set him here." Vorazun motioned to where Mohandar's corpse lay.

"Next to Mohandar?" one of the zealots asked. "This one is a murderer."

"He deserves funerary rites nonetheless. That is the Nerazim way."

After a brief hesitation, the zealots laid Taelus's corpse on the ground. Vorazun kneeled to inspect the dead Nerazim. Blood drenched his robes on his chest where she had made her killing blow. She touched his forehead and whispered, "You fought well, young one."

"It is quite noble of you to show him such respect."

Artanis approached Vorazun, bedecked in his golden battle regalia. He took a knee near Mohandar's body and clasped one of the elder's cold, withered hands in his own.

"He did what he thought was best for his people," Vorazun replied. "And he was a friend."

Artanis nodded. "I have lost my share of friends, and I fear I will lose many more in the days ahead. But with the support of the Nerazim, I know we can prevail and retake Aiur. Thank you for what you said, and for what you did in the Citadel. You will be a great leader for your people."

"You will support my ascension?"

"I will," Artanis said.

That surprised Vorazun. She looked up from Taelus and met Artanis's eyes. "I will help with the invasion however I can," Vorazun said. "But I am not Mohandar, and I am not Raszagal. I cannot commit all of my forces to the war and leave this planet defenseless. Therefore, I must stay behind with a contingent of Nerazim warriors and watch over Shakuras."

"I understand, and I will honor that decision." Artanis stood and offered an open hand to Vorazun. "You know what is best for your people and your world."

Vorazun took the hierarch's hand and rose to her feet.

"Where shall we take them now?" Artanis gestured to the bodies. "If you will allow me, I would like to carry Mohandar and attend the rites of passing."

"Will you have time, with all of the preparations for the Armada?" Vorazun knew that Artanis might take offense to the question, but it was a legitimate concern. Much to her surprise, the hierarch made no outward show of irritation.

"I will make time from now on."

Vorazun nodded, and then she lifted Taelus in her arms. Artanis did the same with Mohandar.

Together, they descended the Citadel stairway. Emerald and vermilion crystals flared bright across the highest tier of Talematros, signaling the start of a new day.

And among the stars above, invisible to the naked eye, tens of thousands of protoss continued their preparations for the Golden Armada. One day soon, it would leave for Aiur. Of the Nerazim who went with it, many would never return. But they would always be remembered, and from the shadows they cast, a glorious new legacy would arise.