

STARCRRAFT
HEART OF THE SWARM

COLD SYMMETRY

By Cameron Dayton



Why did I have you come to meet me beneath the full moon, young one?

I do not know, Master. Is it because of the light? Saalok is bright tonight.

You approach the answer, Teredal. The full moon, it echoes the symbol of our order. The Zealous Round is a sign of purity, of focus, and of thought. We trace its form on our hearts when we take our vows.

I did not know that was because of the moon.

Even the smallest measure of an arc fulfills the greater circumference, and there is much you have to learn. But for now, all you must know is that Saalok is sacred to the zealot order. Since time before time, the guardians of Aiur have built their lives around the discipline the moon teaches.

Teaches? But... it is just a moon.

Young one, did you know that the moon of Aiur is a rarity amongst the stars?

Forgive me, Master. How is that possible? The protoss have been to many worlds and have seen so very many moons. Some that are larger, or brighter, or more—

Rarity does not always come from having more or less of a thing, Teredal. Sometimes rarity is found in completeness. In wholeness. Saalok is rare in her perfection. She is an almost mathematically perfect sphere, and that is something unheard of in all of the cosmos. It is no mistake that such a moon was placed in the skies above our world. It is no mistake that our people have looked to its purity for guidance and clarity throughout the darkest ages of history.

You say that it was placed. By whom?

There are some questions which have no answer, and some questions which will be answered in the fullness of time. But purity, light, and order are the fruits of intelligence, Teredal. Intelligence calms the bestial roar of chaos. Intelligence channels noise into harmony.

This is at the center of everything we hold sacred, and has been at the core of all your lessons—from the mental focus required to ignite your psi blade, to the crystalline thought you have woven into this consecrated armor.

Now, do you think that I called you here just to chat about the moon?

I... No, Master. I do not. I had hoped you wished to begin my initiation.

You approach the answer, Teredal. Come, stand before me. It is time for you to take the first vows of our order.

...

It was an ambush, and it was a bloody one.

An ambush? snarled Zeranek, his blades flashing. *I thought these zerg were feral.*

The hydralisk reeled back with a screech and redoubled its attack. It struck, long claws tearing with savage precision. In a flicker of ghostlight, the zealot's shield blunted the onslaught and then was depleted.

Even dumb animals hunt by surprise, shot Kehdana.

She slid past the hydralisk, ducked under its claws, and spun her poleaxe in a bright arc, a lethal curve of psionic energy. The hydralisk fell in pieces.

Kehdana's telepathic voice was steady in the midst of battle. *Focus, zealot. We are outnumbered.*

The warning came too late for Zeranek. Two zerglings sprang through the opening left by the hydralisk, knocking the soldier to the ground. His psychic cry was a growl of rage and pain; losing your feet among these beasts meant death. Kehdana wheeled in a dark blur of motion—the shadowy dance of the Nerazim—and her stroke cut through both the zerglings and Zeranek. His cry went silent.

Teredal noted the cold mercy, nodding as he stepped away from the dead hydralisk at his own feet. He then leapt and drove his blades into another of the creatures, which had foolishly turned its back on him in order to finish off a dark templar. The hydralisk fell, almost crushing its victim, and Teredal had to push the zerg aside. The bleeding Nerazim—Teredal remembered his name as Kherenoss—reached up to thank Teredal, trembling in pain. Teredal tried to lift him, then saw that Kherenoss had been separated from his legs. It was too late. The dark templar trembled once more and went still.

Dead. There is no escape from death on this mission, no quick journey home.

Shrouded in the temporary cover of Kherenoss's fading cloak, the scarred veteran surveyed the battle with his one eye. Of the dozen warriors who had touched down on Saalok at dawn, only three remained. It had happened so fast.

The stalkers had fallen first, crumbling under a storm of hydralisk spines. The dark templar had swiftly moved to aid their cybernetic brethren, leaping in front of them to

intercept the next salvo of spines with whirling warp blades. It was too late to save the stalkers, their spidery, silver forms splayed across the sand in broken angles, but it was not too late to wreak vengeance on the zerg responsible for their deaths. Teredal could see that two of the cloaked warriors still fought, blurs of umbral motion gilded with streaks of alien blood against the pale sand. Dark templar were nightmarish in melee combat, feared throughout the sector for their lethal stealth. But stealth was no ally in an ambush. Each was ringed by the bodies of zerg, both living and dead. Each was about to be overwhelmed.

The zealots had stormed into the fray without pause, grim combatants who knew they were outnumbered. A zealot did not hide in shadows, did not strike unseen like the Nerazim. A zealot led the charge and drew first blood. So it had been on countless battlefields on countless worlds. The zealots in Teredal's aexilium were no different: they had closed the distance with blades drawn, running the zerg down in a rush of wordless fury. A sudden mist of black blood and severed limbs. The zealots' advance had blunted the ambush, boiled against the enemy, and almost turned it back. Almost.

But a second wave of zerg had arrived in the bowels of an overlord, dropping to the ground in a splash of chittering bile. Their counterattack was relentless: pouncing, crawling, slithering over their dead kin, and the zealots had been swept under, drowned in claws. Each of them had fallen, buried in the twitching corpses of zerg.

Each of them but Teredal, the last zealot standing of the six who had disembarked, a team of seasoned warriors selected by the council for their experience against the zerg. They were to provide support, a pair of them to accompany each dark templar/stalker team as they scouted out zerg strongholds hidden within the chalky arroyos of Saalok. This mission was supposed to have been one of infiltration, marking priority fortifications for later strikes. With the warp stones removed from the aexilium's armor, death here would be final. There was not supposed to be bloodshed.

Teredal shook his head.

And there would have been none if we had come in a cloaked vessel. But why hide your ships from a mindless enemy? Animals cannot track orbital insertion, cannot tell the difference between a star and a shuttle...

The mission had failed. Now Teredal stood against a score of hydralisks and zerglings with the two—no, the *one*—dark templar who still lived: Kehdana. She was surrounded, fending off a storm of scythe-claws in a dizzying ballet of blades, psionic fire, and blood. Teredal could tell that it was her final surge of effort, and he sprung from behind Kherenoss's body in an attempt to draw attention away from the fading warrior.

It worked: three hydralisks turned to pursue. A pair of zerglings bounded after them with hungry screeches.

Teredal heard the whistle of hydralisk spines, spun on his heels to dodge a volley that tore past. He continued the momentum of his spin to meet the descending claws of a zergling, the pion-fire energy of his wrist weapon slicing through its talons with arrogant precision.

Driven by fury, heedless of the pain, the zergling leapt through the spray of its own blood, determined to eat, to kill. The reaction was instinctive, one that Teredal had learned to trigger. Long years battling these beasts had honed a reflexive order of parry-riposte into his muscles. With practiced grace, he bent low and allowed the arc of the monster's trajectory to carry it headlong through his raised blade. Two twitching halves of a zergling tumbled into the pale lunar dust behind him.

Death cries echoed through Teredal's mind as the psychic fabric stormed and snapped with the grim arias of his comrade zealots. The Khala connected the protoss in thought and passions, and Teredal felt the deaths of his aexilium in cold, stabbing sorrow.

Stay low, he sent. Stay low and stay in motion.

They have teeth both high and low, responded Kehdana, the dark templar's mental voice strained with effort. And they are too ma—

Her words were cut to silence, and Teredal turned to see her fall beneath a trio of zerglings. More spines ripped through the air, and Teredal raised his gauntlets over his face as he dove. He felt a sharp impact against his armor, heard the cry of torn metal as he hit the ground. Rolling to his feet, Teredal saw two more hydralisks move into firing range. One shook the dust from its head, a ghostly cloud drifting slowly around the creature's spiked carapace.

Teredal knew that he could not stand against another barrage, that the empty ripples in the Khala meant he stood alone against the remaining zerg. A quick downward glance while he pivoted in concert with the circling monsters showed his right gauntlet destroyed; only one psi blade now functioned. His shield batteries were spent. The lead hydralisk hissed and arched backward, retracting the covers from its spine ejectors. More dust drifted from its shoulders.

The dust—these zerg just emerged from burrows.

The realization drove Teredal forward. He took three running steps and then leapt toward the hydralisk, tucking into a ball as spines whistled underneath him. The beast, surprised by Teredal's move, ducked low and slithered to the side. Teredal landed and, instead of turning to confront the hydralisk, sheathed his blade and dove into the dark hole behind the

creature. Into its burrow. The only place where he could escape the crossfire and force his enemy into close combat. Tight quarters—where a zealot was most deadly, most sure.

Teredal crouched low in the blackness. The tunnel was occupied; dry shell-sounds of digging stopped abruptly as he spun around. The scrabbling noises were familiar to Teredal—signs of a zerg roach, the burrowing frontispiece of the chitinous army. Teredal reignited his single functioning psi blade, painting the darkness with tongues of blue light. Squatting an arm's length in front of him was the roach. Cold, empty eyes. Toothy maw. Jagged mouthpieces flayed open in animal rage. The roach filled the tunnel, thick claws poised to strike; its hiss became a roar, shaking pebbles from the curved walls.

Teredal buried his blade into its center eye, leaning sideways to dodge the claws as they flailed against the tunnel floor in death throes. The roar trailed off into a bubbling sigh, and the roach trembled, then went still.

More sounds behind Teredal: the dry slithering of the hydralisk as it wormed back into the burrow it had emerged from. Its head and shoulders were already protruding into the chamber. Teredal turned and grabbed the ridge of the hydralisk's chest plastron with his free hand, hauling it down *into* the hole and slamming the creature's head into the hard-packed gravel wall of the tunnel. He wrenched his blade from the roach and drove it in the hydralisk's neck, pinning it to the floor. The creature's heavy serpentine body thrashed against the rough walls and clouded the air with dust. Teredal twisted his blade, severing its head. The hydralisk's thrashing only increased, pulling the tunnel down in a shower of crumbling rock and sand as the zealot leapt backward. With the entry hole destroyed, Teredal extinguished his blade and was swallowed in darkness.

Teredal held himself motionless; perhaps the zerg would think him lost in the cave-in. The zerg species he had witnessed in the ambush were not creatures of extraordinary

sensitivity—or intellect—when left to their own devices. The zealot's survival now depended on their interest waning, their attention focused elsewhere. Sounds of rustling, a high-pitched growl as a zergling snapped at its pack mate, and then the noise gradually became fainter. The zerg were moving on. Teredal stood in the darkness.

Now to see if—wait!

There was something up there. A hydralisk. The zealot could hear its tail sliding against the rock overhead.

Odd that one would remain. The feral zerg do not leave scouts behind.

The creature was moving slowly. It was... *feeding*. Teredal felt the word pierce his mind like an icicle. The hydralisk was feeding on protoss warriors, champions of his people and noble guardians of Aiur's lost children. As he had done countless times before, Teredal reined the boiling anger that threatened to overwhelm him. As he had done countless times before, he channeled it into a cold, focused rage, a sharp blade bent toward duty.

He crouched low and took measure of the situation. Zerg fed only when they were far from creep, the nourishing bio-terrain that carpeted the ground surrounding a hive. This meant that the zerg encampment was distant, possibly a several rotations' journey. It was conceivable that this ambush had been devised by an isolated group that would either return to the hive after victory or continue traveling along some sort of patrol. Regardless, if Teredal just stayed silent, the remaining hydralisk would move on. With only one functioning blade and the shield batteries in his armor empty, he knew it would be the safest decision. Maybe he could emerge from the tunnel after the creature had left and try to complete the mission. That would be the wisest course of action.

But it would be futile.

The mission had been constructed around the idea of a mindless population of feral zerg inhabiting Saalok. Hives of animals—dangerous animals—that could be scouted out, mapped, and then swept clean from the moon by the fleet parked in extrasolar orbit. It was a costly fleet, one composed of light transport shuttles loaded with hive-scouring reavers. The force poised to drop down on Saalok was perfectly honed to destroy an infestation: reavers bearing explosive scarabs, automatons programmed to crawl toward marked enemy units and installations, then explode. Reavers were highly effective against ground forces, and orbit intel had made it clear that the feral zerg on Saalok were almost entirely land-bound zerglings, hydralisks, and roaches; the few overlords floating above this rabble were hardly considered a threat. The reavers would arrive with minimal air support... and they would be torn to shreds by a tactically sound adversary. An adversary prepared for their arrival and armed with mutalisks, the winged aerial beasts that the Saalok hives were most certainly spawning now that they knew of the protoss' presence. Or perhaps had already spawned, an armada hidden in the deep lunar canyons that wormed through the moon. It was a deviously irresistible lure, and the executor had not seen through the guise.

Teredal felt the doom of his people like a shadow over his head, thunderclouds gathering beyond his reach. Even a light force of mutalisks would tear through an army of land-bound reavers. The fleet was set to land by the next lunar rotation—dawn, from Teredal's location. This would be catastrophic.

Regardless, I am no use in this condition.

In the claustrophobic dark of the tunnel, ringed by dead zerg, Teredal set to work removing the broken armor from his right arm. The creature feeding overhead was making too much noise to hear him, and the zealot was worried about the wound he had taken. He could

tell that his gauntlet was a ruin of bent metal. Not one, but *two* hydralisk quills had struck the ceramic bonding spine that ran along his forearm. It was a wonder that he could still feel his fingers. Teredal flexed his hand, felt warm blood dripping from his elbow.

This will require some light.

Teredal ignited the tip of his remaining psi blade, holding the blue light above his arm. Yes, the gauntlet had blocked the monstrous spines... and cut his arm as it twisted under the force of impact. The bleeding was minimal due to the compression provided by the intelligent servos in his armor, but his arm was bleeding nonetheless. He had to fix the wound.

The zealot lifted his blade, casting his gaze around the tunnel. Behind him, the passage turned slightly before ending in the crumpled form of the dead roach. In front of him, a slope of fallen rocks and the creature responsible for the cave-in. The decapitated hydralisk lay half-buried under the stones that it had pulled down in its death throes. A layer of pale dust blanketed the monster. Scowling, Teredal crept over and pulled its severed head away from the body. More black fluid soaked the surrounding gravel. Teredal silently pushed some of the larger rocks aside and set to disemboweling the hydralisk. Its tendons would serve as bindings for his wound, would help staunch the flow of blood. He had used them during the Black Grass Raid on Tepperus, had saved the life of a praetor years ago. The zerg tendons would save his life now.

While he worked, he considered what he had seen in the ambush. Were the zerg truly moving under the command of an intellect? Was he sure that this wasn't his imagination? Teredal had to allow that a score of uncontrolled zerg could have ambushed his veteran party, even destroyed it under the right circumstances. Perhaps he was confusing bad luck with tactics. Five Aiur zealots, three stalkers, and three dark templar all dead by claw, spine, and fang in a matter of minutes. A barrage targeting the more mobile and well-armed stalkers first,

followed by a rush of zerglings to confine the dark templar. And the overlord that had remained just out of range, the floating dropship of the zerg army, no more sapient than a zergling. But its presence had lent a skein of pack-animal cognizance and psychic sensitivity to the minions swarming below. Bad luck?

No.

An ambush too perfectly executed by creatures that should have been in a state of savagery.

I know how feral zerg act. I have been scouring them from our worlds ever since they were set wild. These ones moved in concert. They were being controlled.

It was not a question for Teredal. He had fought against the zerg when they had been under the command of their biological demigod, the Overmind. Teredal had adjusted to new alien tactics when the upstart human Kerrigan had taken control of the Swarm, and he remembered the sick aftertaste of youngling terran strategies woven through the old zerg patterns like mold on fossilized bone. More recently, Teredal had adapted to the madness of the zerg deprived of their bastard queen—a chaos of claws and hungry rage that made the previous engagements seem tame.

Teredal knew the zerg and how they fought. He knew their instincts and he knew their weaknesses. The lessons had been earned with countless scars, a map of experience charted in jagged lines across his body. Even Teredal's eye, lost during the Plaza Strike, had paid for a lesson in killing the mighty zerg ultralisk. Teredal considered it a worthwhile price for the wisdom received—wisdom, and an enormous monster cut into pieces across the holy prayer-tiles of Nelyth.

These hard-earned lessons were why he had been selected. Why he had been ordered to escort Kehdana to a zone where the executor presumed zerg activity to be the hottest, to protect the dark templar while she set her beacons. Command knew that Teredal could lead Kehdana through the center of a hive if it was asked of him. Teredal knew zerg.

And he knew that the executor was wrong. The zerg were being controlled. He could not say by whom or what. Not yet. The beasts' formation in the ambush had felt different than Kerrigan's maneuvering, but it was definitely familiar. A rougher version of the Overmind's control—the same organic feel, but without the smooth, practiced grace that Teredal remembered from those earlier battles.

Has a new cerebrate been spawned to take the fallen queen's place?

Regardless, this cast a heavy shadow over the current plan to retake Aiur. Teredal had to speak to the executor, had to halt the invasion at dawn. This was more than just a simple mission. The protoss were already fatally diminished, their numbers a fraction of the shining empire that had once stood proudly astride the stars of the Koprulu sector. This foray was their last gambit, an expensive all-or-nothing assault to gain a foothold on what had seemed to be an untended enemy stronghold.

If Teredal did not warn the fleet, it would show its belly to an enemy poised to strike with speed and ferocity. The protoss needed to pull back, to reconvene the council and align their tactics against a *thinking* foe.

Only he had no way to tell them. Teredal furrowed his brow, considered screaming his thoughts in the Khala as far as he could. But he knew it was no use. The fleet was deliberately distant. Deliberately beyond his range.

This mission had been specified as a *silent* strike, a request from the Khala-free Nerazim in order to keep the feral zerg from honing in on the more powerful psionic waves the protoss required to communicate and to warp off-planet. Zerg, even in a bestial state, seemed to have the uncanny ability to sense stronger psychic emissions. Teredal wasn't sure why. Perhaps the protoss wavelength resembled the Overmind's frequencies? It was not a zealot's job to puzzle out mysteries best left to the high templar. But he knew that the zerg were drawn to powerful psi-emissions like moths to a flame. In fact, some theorized that the creatures were *more* sensitive to psychic energy because they lacked the discipline or the biological ability to construct mental filters. These filters were necessary in an intelligent society that spoke telepathically; young protoss were taught how to dampen the often noisome thought-fabric at an early age. The zerg had no such need.

So the shuttle that had dropped his team onto Saalok had been mute, an automated vehicle programmed to deliver its cargo and then return to the fleet stationed just outside of psychic range. The fleet would most likely see what had taken place here; visual-surveillance scanners aboard the capital ships would certainly be capable of observing the results of the ambush, since this hemisphere of the moon was currently facing the fleet. But Teredal knew that the attack would not concern the executor, at least not in a tactical sense. The plan, clearly expressed to him at the outset, would be to move ahead with the scouring of Saalok regardless of his team's success. Too much had been invested into this engagement to pull out based on a fumbled first strike. If the aexilium's failure to complete its mission meant that the subsequent strikes would move less efficiently, so be it; the reavers would simply be set on hunting patrols throughout the cavernous face of Saalok instead of targeted toward the beacons Kehdana and her dark templar were supposed to have placed.

Teredal shook his head, tried to cast away the hopelessness threatening to overwhelm him. He took a step back from the wet lengths of tendon laid out across the tunnel floor. There was nothing he could do.

Nothing.

The zealot leaned back against the cool packed stones that made up the passage wall to consider his situation, attempted to bring greater focus to the problem. This was how he had lived for so long, survived so many battles when others had crumbled under fear and indecision.

Young one, did you know that the moon of Aiur is a rarity amongst the stars?

His master's voice echoed in his head, not merely as memory but as the vibrant remnant of a soul woven through the Khala. It was a knowing that permeated the threads of the universe. Teredal was too far from his brethren to communicate with them in any deliberate manner, but he could sense their essences—living and dead—even across light-years. He could hear the voice and feel it in his bones. His reply was both a prayer and a whispered plea; he spoke to himself and the resonance of his master that existed inside him still.

Master. I see the doom of our people, the beginning of the end. My weapons are damaged and I am alone. What can one old zealot do against the hives of Saalok?

Then, thinking that his master would chastise him for sitting idle, Teredal bent over and began wrapping the tendons around his bleeding arm. The tough, moist flesh clung to his skin, and it stung where the alien tissue touched his open wound. Pulling the bindings tight, he tensed as pain ran up his shoulder. The pain was good; it would keep him focused. When the wound was wrapped, Teredal flexed his hand to make sure he still had a full range of motion. The bleeding had stopped.

The zealot looked down and, in the flickering light of his psi blade, noticed that he had extra lengths of tendon left over. Hydralisk tendons were strong and practically impenetrable,

but flexible as leather. The zerg's frightening adaptability put their flesh and bone on par with any of the armor and weaponry forged by human or protoss. Teredal flexed his hand again, regarded the long hydalisk claws lying discarded in the blood-soaked dust.

You approach the answer, Teredal.

...

The hydalisk had almost eaten its fill, and it dropped the limb it had been gnawing on as the ground crumbled away behind it. Something was emerging from the burrows, something moving quickly.

Spinning around with a screech, the creature was met with the fiery blue arc of a zealot's blade. *Pain!* The weapon cut into the hydalisk's shoulder, burning through flesh and bone. The hydalisk snapped down with its powerful jaws, wrenching the zealot's one armored wrist between sharp teeth. Metal groaned. The zealot's other arm had no fire and it smelled of blood. *Prey!* It was trapped and helpless! Raising long barbed claws to strike, the hydalisk drooled in anticipation. This meal would flail as it was eaten.

Then the zealot looked up and sent *sounds* into the hydalisk's mind. Word-sounds full of ancient rage that was primal and clear.

Your meal is finished, monster. Now taste your own blood.

He swung around with his other arm, driving another pair of long barbed claws into the hydalisk's mouth.

...

Standing in the cool dawn light, Teredal finished wiping the blood from the claws strapped to his wrist. It was a motion heavy with ritual from the distant past of his people, before civilization. Before technology that allowed thought to be focused into blades of pure energy. This simple action brought clarity and a sense of peace. Peace brought focus.

Use this focus.

The scarred zealot crouched and, with his finger, marked three dots in the sand. The three arms of the protoss fleet, waiting for signals from his fallen aexilium—signals that would never come. Under those three dots, he traced one long line, and then another. Two lines: one Saalok day and one night remaining until the fleet would launch its inevitably failed attack. A rotation on Saalok was short; the moon was not tidally locked to Aiur, and its full revolution took place in roughly half the duration of a day on Teredal's homeworld. There was not much time.

Next Teredal drew six slashes in a circle around his marks. The six beacons. Crystalline constructs carried by each zealot in the team, compact tools designed by Nerazim artisans to provide precision flares of psychic energy. These would have led the fleet to critical enemy hives with surgical exactness. They now lay spattered with blood in the pale sand around him.

Teredal's orders had been to assist the dark templar in setting the beacons. Then he was to escort the Nerazim away from the zerg swarms that would be drawn to the signal, away to the preset rally points, where they would coordinate the reavers' scouring of Saalok. The aexilium would be picked up after the moon had been cleared of zerg; extraction was a tertiary concern for the executor. The primary goal in this mission was to provide the fleet a commanding position in lunar orbit around Aiur—a position that would set up the final push to retake the protoss homeworld.

In the event of mission failure, surviving members of the team were to convene at the nearest rally point. Teredal rubbed the heel of his hand against the scar where his left eye had been; it ached whenever he was still for long. Perhaps he could signal the fleet from the rally point with a beacon. Maybe the executor would take the sign as a distress signal and send him a shuttle. No, it was too much of a risk, and the psychic noise would bring more zerg down on his head. Besides, by the time he reached the rally point, the fleet would be committed to the assault. The capital ships would have shown their positions, arrayed around a thinking enemy in a vulnerable formation.

It was... hopeless. In another sunrise, the last arm of protoss power would be extinguished. On an impulse, Teredal reached down and drew a circle around the six slashes. The Zealous Round, sign of his order. The perfect circle of Saalok. A symbol of purity, of focus, and of thought.

And suddenly it was clear. A way to deliver the message to the fleet. It was a simple plan but was shadowed in certain death. Teredal's will faltered, and his psi blade surged with sympathetic light.

He would place the beacons along the path of a perfect circle, using the navigation tools in his armor to map them at calculated distances. As each crystal screamed into the sky, its psychic paeon would draw zerg to the epicenter. This was expected. The executor waiting in the fleet above would observe this, would assume all was going to plan.

And here was where Teredal would depend on the clarity and intelligence of his people: he would need the fleet to note the placement of the beacons, an odd symmetry blatantly atypical in zerg formations. Certainly in feral zerg. But that was not what would convince the executor of the zerg's unexpected sentience, not entirely. Teredal's blade surged again, bathing his face in flickering blue light.

The executor would be convinced when she saw the zerg *predict* the pattern. When the zerg moved to intercept the final beacon in the arc, showing the cognitive ability to read the circular path and calculate where the next signal would fire. And that was where Teredal would most certainly die, torn apart in an ambush that he had created for himself.

It was... not what he had been ordered to do. This action went against everything that a zealot stood for, was an audacious attempt to circumvent tactical matters that stood high above his stewardship. Teredal traced his finger around the circle, the Zealous Round.

It is no mistake that our people have looked to its purity for guidance and clarity throughout the darkest ages of history.

Teredal began gathering the beacons from the bodies of his fallen brethren. The crystalline orbs were no larger than his hand, heavy and crafted with curious workmanship. He ran his finger along the access groove on each construct as he lifted it, and each gave the welcome glow of blue light, which signified function.

Even the smallest measure of an arc fulfills the greater circumference.

Words his master had often repeated, and now Teredal felt the meaning. He would need the odds to lean in his favor if this was to work. Returning to where he had drawn in the sand, to where he had received his epiphany, Teredal took measure of his own state. His arm still hurt, but the dull throb would not be too much of a distraction; he was familiar with pain. The ambush had taken a degree of energy, but nothing Teredal was unaccustomed to. Another blessing: his legs were unhurt. He would need their strength today. Teredal had always been a powerful runner and was about to run his swiftest race. Most assuredly his last.

He swung his arm, testing the length of his new claws. They were bulkier than the psi blade, and less armored with the gauntlet missing. But they were deadly sharp. It had been deeply satisfying to see them rip into that hydralisk, the serrated edges tearing through alien flesh with incestuous ease.

Because he now carried six beacons, he would not have a full range of movement. The beacons attached magnetically to his armored belt. They would be bulky and restrict his pace, but that would only be at the outset. As each was placed, the burden would lessen, and the danger would grow.

The sun had almost cleared the horizon. Time was running out. Crouching, Teredal wiped his markings clear from the sand and then placed the first beacon. He touched the arming groove, where hidden sensors tasted his cells and acquiesced. Red light began to shine from the beacon, soft pulses that indicated a signal would fire after one hundred and one flashes. Teredal stood and prepared to run.

A sound came from the rocks to his side. He spun and ignited his blade. Nothing there but the fallen bodies of his comrades entwined with dead zerg. Had one of the monsters survived? He almost went to investigate—

No time. The beacon is set.

Teredal ran. The distance to the next beacon's arming location was a shorter chord of his overall run, but he wanted to be far enough away from the first beacon when it went off. It was going to be heard by every zerg on the moon, and Teredal knew that the surprise signal from an enemy presumed dead would bring the monsters coming from all directions. Luckily, this leg of the journey would take him through a narrow canyon, and he wouldn't have to spend too much time dodging curious zerg. He hoped.

The sand hissed beneath his swiftly moving feet, and Teredal let the rhythmic pace carry him across the white face of Saalok. Aiur began to rise on the eastern horizon, and it was more beautiful than he could have expected. From here, the vibrant greens and browns and blues that marked out the continents and oceans of his homeworld seemed pristine, untouched. Broad strokes of whiskered clouds swept across the poles, and Teredal felt a yearning for Aiur that was undiminished by time.

Then the beacon went off.

A scream, a roar, a terrible hurricane of psionic noise that raged across the Khala. The dark templar had prepared him for this, had warned him about the shockwave that would follow the release of each beacon. Kehdana had suggested that he move to a minimum safe distance and then kneel to put up a mental barrier before the beacon fired; its signal had the dual purpose of sending a message into space and creating a violent ripple in the local psychic fabric that would call to any of the feral zerg on Saalok. Teredal had been prepared for some degree of disorientation but had not expected such furor. He stumbled and then pitched forward into the sand. For a moment, he could not see or breathe, his entire soul struggling against the buckling chaos that had been the Khala. And then, as quickly as it had come, the signal was spent.

If that does not call the Swarm, I do not know what will.

He looked up into the star-strewn skies and called out to his people, a lone voice lost in the storm.

Mark this beacon, brothers. And mark those which follow.

And then Teredal stood and ran. He wiped blood from his eye and shook his head clear.

Run.

The sand grew thinner, and Teredal's path turned to gravel and stone. It was easier to maintain his speed now, but more treacherous as his noisier footfalls increased the odds of alerting the zerg. He would have to be more careful as he sped along the narrow chalk-lined arroyo.

As he counted his paces, the zealot organized the concerns that had been flying through his thoughts. Some of them he could address. Some of them were beyond his control.

First, there was the worry that the zerg might see the pattern too early. If they predicted Teredal's course before enough beacons had been set, the protoss might not be able to interpret his message. Teredal would have to set the beacons quickly. He would have to keep this pace and complete the circle before the next dawn.

Second, the beacons would need to have a significant distance between them for their placement to be legible from the fleet's location. He had already calculated the coordinates, the vectors for each path from beacon to beacon; such figures came naturally to the trained zealot mind. But knowing the path and being able to finish the grueling run at full speed were two very different things. The beacons would need to be triggered in respect to Saalok's rotation. If Teredal simply ran the circumference of the circle, placing the beacons as he went, this hemisphere of the moon would spin away from the fleet's viewing angle before he could complete the path, for the second half of a circle's contour curved back toward the origin. He would have to place the remaining five markers on either side of the origin, running diagonally back and forth to increasingly distant points to assure that the growing circle started and ended within the fleet's view. It meant that Teredal would be running a greater distance than the actual length of the perimeter. The run would be hard, even for a zealot. A day and a night with no time to stop and rest. Teredal was not some young recruit. He was a veteran who had

already fought a battle this morning. He had to accept the fact that this run itself might cause one of his hearts to burst.

Finally, there was a chance that the mind or minds controlling the zerg would see through his ploy and would not respond, or would respond in a fashion crafted to appear random. Then the zealot's plan would fail. Teredal shook the thought from his head. It was paranoid—and ultimately useless—thinking. If the zerg were canny enough to feign feral behavior, then why had they not done so when his team had landed?

For now, there was only running.

...

The second and third beacons had been set without incident and without zerg interference. The enemy had not been able to predict Teredal's pattern.

Yet. After three points, they see only a triangle. The fourth will reveal the pattern, making the fifth and sixth beacon locations more predictable.

Teredal leapt over the boulder that sat astride his path, landing in a roll that maintained his momentum, and then was up and running again. Now three beacons remained attached to his belt, and less weight meant that he could afford more speed and more agile maneuvers to avoid going around obstacles. He had gone from morning until midday with only two quick stops: setting the second and third beacons. After the first beacon, the western point of the

circle, he had hit the northwestern and then had run south to the southwestern point. This next stretch would be the longest straight shot, between the southwestern beacon and the northeastern—a distance equal to the entire diameter of the circle. If Teredal could keep this pace, he would reach the fourth location by sunset.

Teredal had learned to trigger the beacons and then follow the prime number countdown as he ran, stopping to put up his defenses for a few seconds to avoid the worst of the blast. He regretted having to interrupt his pace but, after being knocked off his feet by the first psionic klaxon, considered the risk of injury during a fall to be worse than a slight delay.

The zealot ran as sunlight poured clean and undiminished through the thin atmosphere of Saalok. The warmth on his skin brought renewal, beams from Aiur's solar star, which had nurtured his kind for aeons. The protoss were creatures of sunlight, creatures who had used their cleverness and speed to hunt across the great plains and jungles of Aiur long before language and civilization ever began. To run under this clear summer light, this was what it meant to be protoss.

There had been no zerg encounters yet, although Teredal kept to the cover of dunes and boulders whenever it wouldn't pull him too far from his path. Once he thought he saw an overlord floating in the distance, but he stayed low until it was out of sight. Teredal had noticed with some assurance that the creature seemed to be moving in the direction of his last beacon.

As the sun began to set over his right shoulder, Teredal sensed an intangible bond stretching across time to his ancestors. His mission was clear, his death certain, and the zealot felt a strange peace that syncopated his steady footfalls. He bowed his head as he ran and traced a circle on his chest.

According to Teredal's calculations, the location for setting the fourth beacon was up ahead. He slowed his pace as he drew near.

This is where the three points become four, where the triangle begins to take the form of a circle. Every step from this place will be shadowed by death.

The sun had almost disappeared behind the chalky ridge at his side. Teredal stretched his arms in the fading light, bade farewell to the golden orb his people had worshiped in a forgotten age. The remainder of the run would take place in darkness, with none of the rich, warm sustenance that had kept Teredal fueled throughout the day. Already his chest ached, and the zealot's wounded arm trembled as he knelt and set the beacon in the sand. Teredal tried to put his concerns aside. There was no time to rest. At dawn, the fleet would be here. He triggered the beacon and then ran into the growing shadow.

...

While cold and treacherous, the cover of night proved valuable. Teredal had barely reached the halfway mark on the fourth leg of his journey when he almost ran into a pair of ultralisks.

Two of them!

His well-honed reflexes brought him to a skidding halt as heavy, low-frequency moans echoed off the rock wall at Teredal's side. Ducking behind an overhang, the zealot tried to still his trembling legs.

He had been following a narrow series of canyons for most of the course, leaving its shelter only when it wound too far from his destination. But the canyons had soon run out, and Teredal had been forced to follow a cliff wall. While it was better than running across an open plain, the zealot felt exposed and tried to keep his eye focused on whichever boulder, crevice, or overhang lay ahead in case he had to find cover. It was an exhausting habit he had picked up during the siege of Torenis Prime, requiring the mind and reflexes to stay in constant, frenetic motion when they wanted nothing more than to surrender to the calming rhythms of running. The habit saved his life.

The ultralisks had been preparing to descend from the cliff above him (part of the ledge had crumbled and provided footing for the monstrous creatures). Some part of his mind had recognized their calls bouncing off the nearby rocks. Teredal's instincts had directed him underneath the overhang almost before he consciously noted them. The ultralisks stomped past the ridge above Teredal's hiding spot, their massive pillar-legs sending tremors through the cliff, and cascades of rock and sand tumbled loose. He fought the urge to ignite his blade and attack. Some action, some blood, a vent to his pain after this day and night of running. But Teredal knew the fight would cost him energy and time that he did not have.

Save it for the beacons. There will be blood soon enough.

As he waited for the beasts to pass, the zealot tried to rest his aching hearts. The pain had steadily grown over the night. He flexed his right arm and tightened the bindings that held the claws in place. They were moist with slowly seeping blood; Teredal worried that some zerg infection was keeping the wound from healing. The edicts of his order forbade the use of alien

tissue and weaponry for just this reason, but Teredal suspected that this desecration of protoss flesh and armaments was less of a priority than completing his suicide mission. This would be over long before a little blood loss was a factor.

Enough rest. The ultralisks are gone. Time to move.

He crept out from under the ledge and scanned the cliff top for movement against the stars. There was nothing. It was odd to see a pair of ultralisks patrolling like that; usually the heavy creatures charged into the brunt of battle, where blood was certain.

Unless they were not patrolling. Unless they were sent to confront an aexilium of protoss along a suspected path of travel.

Teredal nodded to himself. It was further evidence that the zerg were indeed controlled by a conscious and tactically minded entity. Not incontrovertible, but another piece in the puzzle. He began to run again; his pace quickened. He knew that the final picture would become clear at the next beacon.

It came sooner than that.

The hive was directly in his path. Teredal had avoided two more patrols: a group of hydralisks and another ultralisk. This time both had been accompanied by overlords, and he had recognized their movements as search patterns. The overlords had been glistening with what Teredal recognized as zerg embryonic fluids—evidence that the creatures had been newly spawned from a nearby hive. And sure enough, as he had continued cautiously forward, the unmistakable clicking of drone mandibles had rattled through the thin air. Cursing the delay, Teredal circled wide around the sound. Already the journey had taken longer than he had planned. It would be a race to beat the dawn.

There was a stretch of empty space between where one canyon ended and another began. The gap was not large—only the distance of fifty paces or so—and Teredal could see no way around the opening that would not require him to backtrack. He would have to sprint.

He crouched low and clenched his fists, summoning his strength for a burst of speed. He traced a circle across his chest and then leapt out of the shadows and into the starlight.

Ten paces... Twenty... Thirty... Almost there—

He caught a glimpse of the zerg hive in the twilight to his left, and what he saw brought him to an abrupt halt. Two tall, slender towers, each tipped with a bulbous minaret. They gleamed under the stars, pulsing with vascular motion. As Teredal watched, the towers grew. Slowly, in small and palpitating measure, they grew.

They were spires. The zerg organ-edifices that, when mature, provided the enzymes and genetic materials required to spawn the flying creatures that made up the bulk of the alien fleet. These spires were newly formed, an obvious response to Teredal's actions on Saalok. The zerg knew that something was coming and that their previous strategy of feigned savagery had been revealed. He predicted that the zerg would have the beginnings of a fleet in another day, and a sizeable force not long after; the quick generation of military units was a specialty for these monsters. Protoss would find a moon inhabited by thinking, vicious creatures that would tear them apart before they ever reached Aiur.

An ultralisk roared from the hive, and Teredal realized that he was standing in the open. He turned and disappeared into the canyon. The ache in his chest now became a stabbing pain.

Faster.

...

The zerg were waiting at the fifth beacon spot. Teredal could hear them in the shadowed valley far below. While the four previous beacons didn't necessarily point directly toward a fifth, this was one of two or three locations that would make sense if one was hunting for a pattern. Teredal imagined that similar groups had been stationed along other possible beacon points; that was what an intelligent tactician would do. Once the fifth marker had been placed, however, there would be no more question about the configuration. The location of the sixth marker would then be obvious, and every claw and fang on Saalok would descend upon it.

One thing at a time. The fifth beacon needs to be placed first, and this valley is occupied.

Teredal slid back from the peak that looked down into the valley where his goal lay, one hand over his chest. He would have to act soon but knew that he did not have the energy to confront the patrol gathered below. An ultralisk, six hydralisks, and an overlord. Melee strength, ranged firepower, and a coordinating force to keep the zerg under control. The zealot took some comfort in the patrol's composition; obviously whoever was controlling these zerg had no idea what sort of enemy was setting these beacons. The patrol had been built to handle a variety of imagined possibilities. Teredal would have laughed if he had the energy.

Would they imagine a wounded old soldier with piecemeal weapons?

He lifted his claw-bound arm, regarded its jagged edges with a critical eye. Still sharp, still deadly. Far below, the patrolling beasts were headed back up the canyon toward his

intended mark. The overlord floated over them, muscular gas bladders contracting as it propelled itself forward.

The zerg had swept his people from their homeworld with a ferocity that had countered protoss wisdom at every turn.

It is time for the protoss to return that ferocity.

Teredal thumbed the trigger on his beacon and leapt into the darkness. Guided by the sounds below, spurred by a rage kept chained for far too long, he pushed through pain, the fatigue, and leapt.

He landed on top of the overlord, which jettied forward in shock. Thrusting his claws through the fleshy bladder on one side, Teredal was met with a blast of warm, moist air and a psychic scream that rattled his skull. Teredal clung to the creature as it tilted and began to sink. There was a collective hiss from the hydralisks below, and Teredal knew that the overlord was calling out to them. Feral creatures would cry for help. Sapient creatures would demand an attack. Teredal used the claws to climb around the wounded overlord as a volley of spines tore into the place he had just been.

If I had any doubt before, it is now gone.

His mount was sinking rapidly, gas whistling from several ragged holes. The ultralisk rumbled forward, intent on intercepting the compromised overlord when it hit the ground. Teredal did not plan to be there. Guided by the lumbering sounds of the monster's footfalls, he gathered himself and leapt again, igniting his psi blade like a torch in the dark canyon. He would need light for this.

Blazing like a falling star, Teredal plummeted through the night sky to land with a crunch against the heavy carapace over the ultralisk's shoulders. Again, the claws held firm on the monster's bony shell. Teredal felt a new pain cutting through his side.

Ribs... broken. Have to reach the... neck joint...

He had hard-won knowledge of the ultralisk, had achieved some acclaim among his brethren for slaying the beasts singlehandedly. But his victories had always come at a price and had never followed such a grueling run, or such injury. The wounded veteran clung to the ultralisk's back as it bucked and spun, the monster trumpeting rage that echoed off the canyon walls. Slowly, deliberately, Teredal crept toward its neck.

Just... like the plaza of Nelyth...

With a slash of his fiery blade, he split the thin plate across the monster's neck and plunged the claws deep into exposed flesh. The ultralisk roared and gave one final lunge, dislodging Teredal and flinging him into the air.

The zealot was able to roll as he landed, skidding across a stretch of sand. He came to his knees as the hydralisks circled around him, hissing hungrily. The ultralisk stomped forward, ichor running down its chestplate. It was wounded, but it still lived. Teredal was bleeding, outnumbered, and drained of energy. He extinguished his blade and knelt before the beast. The hydralisks drew closer.

Four. Three. Two. One.

The beacon exploded in a blast of psychic energy that tore the ultralisk's head apart. An incandescent wave of blue and violet rippled out from the gaping wound where Teredal had

planted the device, washing the valley in cold fire. The hydralisks screamed, writhing as blood spouted from their mouths. They fired spines as they fell, piercing each other in blind agony. The canyon walls shuddered with metaphysical resonance, the very fabric tying their atoms together trembling with the force of the blow. Teredal's shield, fully recharged, flickered once, twice against the storm of energy and then was spent. As he knelt, the zealot placed his remaining strength into the psychic defenses he had learned as a child. They were all he had. At this range, with the full force of a beacon meant to roar across the face of a planet, there was little hope a single protoss would survive.

Little hope...

It means there is some.

You approach the answer, Teredal.

The zealot crumbled into the shadows and was still.

...

Light. A trembling, coursing whiteness. Teredal blinked, saw nothing but streaks of light that trailed wet radiance across his vision.

Such beauty. Is this the Khala? Have I...?

No. There was light, but there were no voices. Silence. Tradition said that after death, the Khala was an unending chorus of minds woven in harmony and joy. But... the zealot felt only *pain*. Teredal rubbed the heel of his hand against the scar where his left eye had been; it had begun to ache.

How long have I been lying here?

Teredal rolled over.

The light?

Stars. Falling stars. Saalok was passing through a meteor shower, and the cascading light brought a pale and liquid texture to the canyon walls. The brilliance had woken him, and Teredal now felt all the sharp agony of his broken body. Two ribs had been cracked in several places; his arm was a blaze of pain where the infection had taken hold; and his skull still echoed with the crash and roar of the beacon.

But my hearts no longer hurt. And these shadows mean that the dawn has not yet come.

Teredal shuddered and twisted to his side. He felt the final beacon, still bound at his waist.

Even the smallest measure of an arc fulfills the greater circumference.

Now stand, zealot.

He leaned forward, wincing in pain as he crawled to his feet. Stumbling to the side, he collapsed against the fleshy, shapeless mass that had once been an overlord. It was cold in the

damp sand. Teredal pulled himself up, resting against the gory thing for a moment and then stepping away. The meteor shower grew faint overhead, the last few streaks of fire disappearing into a horizon that was growing slowly lighter.

Now run, zealot. Run for Aiur.

And Teredal ran. He stumbled after a dozen steps, tripping into the sand. But he lifted himself up again and kept running. This final bit would be little more than half the distance of his last leg, but already his hearts were aching. And Teredal could not shake the blur from his vision.

Run.

The shadows began to slowly creep away from the base of the cliff he followed. Teredal urged himself to run faster, and his legs stretched into that steady, timeless pace for which the zealots were known. Sand became gravel became rock became sand again.

Faster.

He ran faster. The pain dimmed, and Teredal knew that this was the numbing taste of death as it drew near.

Faster.

His footfalls sounded heavy against the sand. They echoed off the rock walls. Echoed and grew, magnified into pounding, crashing waves of noise. Ultralisks. Screeches carried through the thin air. There were zerg behind him, hungry beasts hunting the creature who had evaded them for so long. Now his path was known, his cover vanishing as the sky lightened.

Faster.

Rocks tumbled down from the canyon walls on either side. Zerglings were running parallel to Teredal's course, matching his speed as they searched for a way to descend and attack. The rumbling was louder behind him. He could see light rimming the top of the mountains. Dawn approached.

And then Teredal was through the canyon and out into an open patch of gravel. His destination lay ahead: an ancient crater, a circular mark on the face of Saalok discernible from Aiur. There would not be any more cover. No more hiding. Only running.

The noise was louder now. Teredal could hear the quick sound of claws on stone, the zerglings sprinting for the last stretch. The creatures were fast.

But they are not zealots.

Faster.

A final burst of speed, energy coming from reserves Teredal did not know he had. The crater grew larger ahead, and he pulled the beacon from his belt.

The ambush lies there. If I can just deliver the beacon before...

An ultralisk appeared at the lip of the crater. And another. The pair he had seen patrolling during the night. They clashed their wicked scythe-talons together and stampeded down the crater's edge toward him. The ground shook. Behind them, the sun rose. Dawn had arrived. Teredal ignited his blade and charged.

For Aiur!

Teredal's call rang through the Khala, strong and clear and undiminished. And was joined. Voices echoed Teredal's cry with a fury that matched the ultralisks' roar.

For Aiur!

Bolts of blue energy cut through the dawn, blasting the ultralisks apart in a shower of blood and bone. A trio of protoss void rays spun through the gore, followed by a dozen scout fighters. They thundered overhead, lancing the air with a tempest of superheated particles. Teredal turned, saw for the first time what had followed him. It was an army of zerg: hydralisks, roaches, and zerglings without number. Ultralisks bellowed in the searing heat, defenseless against the aerial onslaught. The zerg were caught in a firestorm, and only those nearest to the canyon's edge were able to escape into shelter.

Teredal fell to his knees, the numbing darkness taking hold of his body. He felt no pain in his arm, and his chest seemed empty. The zealot tipped over into the sand, saw the final beacon roll from his limp fingers. Aiur rose on the horizon next to the sun. It was beautiful. Golden and green and perfect.

As he watched Aiur climb into the sky, more voices wove through the Khala around him.

Yes. You were correct, Executor. The zealot is here.

Teredal is here?

I do not know how, but he is here.

Teredal struggled to respond. His body would not move, and his voice felt weak, a quiet gasp trembling through the Khala.

Recall... the fleet, Executor. Recall the fleet.

There was silence, and then a response echoed down from the sky.

We have seen your marks, zealot, and the executor shall consider their meaning. Meanwhile, the fleet is being recalled. Aiur shall wait for another day.

En taro Adun, zealot.

Teredal nodded, the white sand cool and brilliant against his cheek.

En taro Adun.

He imagined for a moment that he was standing on Aiur, standing next to his master as they watched the moon overhead. The light was almost blinding.

Saalok... is bright tonight. So very bright.