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LEGACY OF THE VOID™



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# It Will End in Fire

By Robert Brooks

## Part One

Everyone on both motherships was doomed.

Rohana and her sisters were trillions of kilometers away, but they knew it as surely as the crews did. Strong emotions stood out amid the chaos. *Desperation. Shock.* This was not supposed to happen. This was not possible. *This cannot be our fate,* the crew members' hearts cried as one. Rohana felt it keenly.

Yet gravity pulled them relentlessly toward their deaths. She felt that, too.

The motherships' misfortune had begun without warning. A khaydarin crystal—the critical source of power—had fractured, cutting off one ship's propulsion. Since the vessel had not yet achieved orbit with the neutron star, it had fallen toward it. The other mothership had anchored with it, the commander hoping its thrust would lift both ships away from the star. It worked. Together, they had moved toward a safe orbit.

There had been such intensity in those moments. *Pride. Exhilaration.* The eight thousand, four hundred and sixty-three crew members had been united in those emotions, celebrating the second ship's ingenuity and bravery.

And then the impossible happened.

The second mothership's crystal had also gone dim. *Fear. Disbelief.* Two khaydarin crystals failing simultaneously—unthinkable! They were crafted with such infinitesimal precision. Only one had

*ever* failed in all the millennia the Firstborn had traveled the stars! Now two? At once? In a decaying orbit?

The Khala carried those emotions and more. The grand preservers witnessed them all.

"There has never been a disaster like this," Rohana said.

Her older sister agreed. "A unique tragedy. It will fall upon us to understand this accident," Orlana said.

The youngest sister shook her head. "Accident? Sabotage is more likely," Shantira said.

"In two ships?" Orlana asked.

"Precisely. Consider the probabilities. It happens once, it may be an accident. It happens twice, rapidly, it may be intentional."

All three quieted. They were grand preservers. The crews were not dead yet. Their emotions would reveal the truth. The sisters delved deep into the Khala, inspecting each ripple and current. There was not a speck of grim satisfaction among the crews. Not a hint of pleasure. Every soul onboard was fighting to survive. A saboteur would certainly have felt *something* at odds with the others.

Shantira calmly bowed to the evidence. "It was not sabotage," she concluded.

Momentum carried both ships toward the neutron star. *Determination. Frustration.* This could not be how it ended. It would not be. There had to be a solution. The crews scurried desperately for hours. All in vain. Gravity had no mercy. Temperatures began to rise as the ships' heat weirs were overwhelmed. Wings glowed from the star's radiation. Soon the shields would fail, and the crews would be subjected to an agonizing death.

A burst of new emotions shot through them all. It began with one phase-smith and spread through the Khala like wildfire. *Horror. Despair.* The problem had been discovered: a small thing, an imperfection in the way excess energy was vented between a mothership's wings while maneuvering in unusually high gravity. A pulse had been fed back into one ship's crystal, destroying it. When the second had anchored to the first, the exact same flaw had destroyed its crystal, too.

Not sabotage, but a billion-to-one circumstance at the worst possible time, in orbit around an unmapped neutron star. Only there, in such a strong gravity well, would this prove fatal.

And there were no more doubts, even among the most hopeful of the crews: this *would* prove fatal. No other protoss vessels were nearby. The empire's warp network did not extend to this uncharted system. The star would claim them all.

*Anger. Rage.* It exploded among the crews. Many onboard had dreamed of a glorious death on the battlefield, not *this*. Not a meaningless end due to an accident.

"Is there nothing left to do?" Rohana asked. Her expertise was in military matters, not in physics. She wanted consensus. Her sisters understood.

Shantira had already been calculating, her finger unconsciously drawing figures in the air as a mental aid. She finally let her hand drop. "They have crossed the point of no return. They have no escape," she said.

"None at all," Orlana agreed. She was sifting through the emotions of the ships' leaders; they had abandoned hope.

The anger lasted only a few moments. All protoss, no matter their caste, were schooled in dominating their emotions in times of stress. Without self-control, the Khala could grow unruly. Even in the face of certain death, they would not shed their honor and heritage. Soon, the crews' rage faded. In its absence came something else.

"There it is." Rohana's eyes widened.

She met her sisters' gazes. They sensed it, too.

"The final emotion," Orlana said.

The sisters identified it even before the crews did. The seeds of it pulsed deep within the Khala, far deeper than most protoss could knowingly go. Few would ever try. Though the Khala was not dangerous, its currents were powerful. In its depths, it was difficult to maintain focus and balance long enough to examine each mote of emotion. Only the strongest of minds could. Most preservers would fail.

That was why the three sisters were grand preservers. They could sense what others could not.

And what they sensed bubbled up from the depths, spreading through both motherships in mere heartbeats.

*Acceptance.* The final emotion.

If fate had decreed *this* end, so be it. Anger was natural, but it had been cast aside. The final emotion filled each heart, a rising tide, and the Khala lifted them up, uniting their spirits. Thousands and thousands of souls were embracing the end all at once, and the song of their last moments soared through the cosmos.

It was no longer just Rohana and her sisters who heard it. Others on Aiur were becoming aware. They joined in, millions of them, raising their own spirits in solidarity. Before long, every caste on Aiur was one with the motherships and their crews. The chorus of glory spread to other planets. To other systems. To the whole empire.

The doomed crews felt the eyes of all Firstborn upon them, and their souls soared ever higher as they lost themselves in that ecstasy.

It was all the three sisters could do not to join them. Rohana trembled with the effort of it. This day would be spoken of for millennia. There was nothing as pure and beautiful as the final roar of a Firstborn. To hear the entire empire roaring together as one...

*Not since the Last Stand of Khardalas eight centuries ago, and the Ambush at Faranai two centuries before that...*

No. There would be time enough later to analyze. Eight thousand, four hundred and sixty-three protoss were about to die. Their memories needed to be saved. In doing so, the grand preservers would experience their deaths. Every single one of them.

"This will not be easy," Orlana said.

Rohana closed her eyes. *Orlana has a talent for understatement.* It had been generations since such a loss of life had occurred, and back then, the preservers had only managed to save a portion of the fallen's memories. That would not happen today. But the weight of it would be unbearable.

One of her preserved memories called to her. There was an ancient tribe that had weathered countless storms on the mountains of Aiur. Its members had learned to survive typhoons on the exposed plateaus, in winds so strong they could rip trees out of the ground by the roots. There was much to glean from this example. "*Bend before the wind. Let it pass over you and around you,*" Rohana said, quoting a tribal leader speaking to his followers. Not only her words but *his* traveled through the Khala to the other grand preservers' minds. "*Do not let it break you.*"

Rohana felt her sisters shift. They would follow her advice.

They were floating in a circle a pace above the floor, legs crossed, held aloft in the gentle grasp of psionic power. Now they joined hands. They opened their minds to those eight thousand, four hundred and sixty-three individuals and tried to shut away all others. That would be impossible, of course.

Orlana tightly squeezed her sisters' hands. "There they go," she said.

The crews began to die.

The phase-smiths, exposed more directly to the neutron star's radiation, died first. It was not a quick end. Yet they fought against their pain, lending their minds to the Khala's song for as long as they could before death finally granted relief. The phase-smiths' technical knowledge, their expertise, their every heartbeat, from their first to their last, passed into Rohana, Orlana, and Shantira.

Preserved for all time.

The other crew members did not last much longer. And they were all going at once, on both ships. The force of their memories fell on the three sisters in crushing waves.

Rohana felt her mind being hurled around in the tempest. She did not fight against it. Sweat beaded and dripped down her back. Whenever one of the sisters lost focus, the other two would anchor her in place until she regained her composure. Entire lives flew through Rohana's mind. She clung to them all, even as the Khala's song of glory and the agony of thousands of deaths dragged her up and down.

But she bent before the wind. She did not break. Neither did her sisters.

*This one lived on Aiur his entire life... This one had overcome a crippling injury on the planet Zhakul and escaped a volcanic eruption... This one had built a new type of carrier launch array, and she was beginning to work on a new expansion to the warp network...*

Fire ended the living in one explosive moment.

And each soul—yes, *all* of them—had been preserved.

It was over. Relief struck the three sisters like a physical blow. Orlana fell backward, her feet slamming against the ground. Rohana and Shantira kept their grip on her so she wouldn't completely collapse. Soon, she recovered. Her feet lifted again.

"Thank you," Orlana said.

The song in the Khala continued. The empire had felt the crews' *acceptance*. Only Orlana, Rohana, and Shantira had just experienced eight thousand, four hundred and sixty-three deaths. Even the crew members had only needed to die once.

The sisters stayed there, together, until the pain passed. It took time.

"They burned alive," Rohana said. She was weeping. They all were.

Orlana squeezed her hand. "I know."

"That is not the way a Firstborn should die."

"No." Shantira shuddered.

"We have their memories. There will be much to learn from them." Rohana hesitated. They would have to relive those deaths repeatedly. Yet that was their duty. She would not flinch away from it.

"This tragedy was born not of malice nor stupidity, but of circumstance. This is our new charge, Sisters. We will tell the empire how to prevent this from happening again."

"The flaw in the motherships will be fixed. We are not needed for that," Shantira said.

"No, we are not. Not for that," Rohana said.

Orlana blinked. She understood Rohana's intent. "A hidden flaw brought down something mighty. You want to find a solution to *all* hidden flaws."

"It may not be a pair of vessels that falls next to an unanticipated disaster," Rohana said. "Today we lost explorers. Next time we may lose an entire colony. Or a warfaring fleet. Imagine what could unfold. Even Aiur itself might perish."

"That will never happen," Orlana said.

"But you see my ambition."

Shantira was beginning to understand, though she still hesitated. "It is impossible to account for *every* potential disaster," she said cautiously. "All progress causes mistakes. Sometimes lives are lost. It is regrettable but expected. If we stifle innovation out of fear of what *might* happen, we might foment stagnation."

"I do not suggest that we can prevent every death. I say that every death is a lesson. Not just today's deaths. All of them. We have the memories from each Firstborn who has lived since the Aeon of Strife ended," Rohana said. "We will find patterns. We will find blind spots, in those past lives and in our own. We will regard the future with open eyes; we will see what makes our empire vulnerable, and we will correct it."

Her sisters' hesitation vanished. New emotions rose. Complex ones, shot through with *resolve*. They all throbbed with the agony of the day's tragedy. Such pain could not simply be endured. It propelled them to action.

"We will," Orlana said.

Shantira went still. "To treat random chance as the enemy. That has never been done. Not in all of our history." Her mood shifted, becoming grimly pleased. "What a legacy we will leave if we defeat it, yes?"



## Part Two

It had taken so long to construct, so long to perfect. Now, it was done.

Orlana led the way onto the ship's bridge, so excited that she let her feet down and actually ran with her own two legs. She probably hadn't touched the ground since the mothership disaster so many centuries ago. "Incredible," she murmured. Her feelings mirrored her sisters'. She wordlessly swept her arms over her head, a gesture that said, *Look at it all*.

This was the first of its kind. The first arkship.

"What a legacy we will leave," Shantira said softly.

The name called back to ancient days, when primitive Firstborn still worked with their hands to till the soil and hunt game. Those who had sailed Aiur's oceans millennia ago learned to respect the winds and the waves. Change could happen in minutes, and small boats fared poorly in storms. Those tribes had built bigger ships—arkships—floating havens where everyone could flee when the dark winds rose.

*And so it will be again*, Rohana thought. With this new breed of arkship, the protoss needed never fear any dark wind. Ever. Not simply because of its armaments, though they were substantial, and not for its technological advancements, which were unprecedented...

A fully crewed arkship could fight a war without support. It could evacuate an entire colony—an entire *system* filled with colonies and outposts—thanks to its vast halls of stasis pods. It could lose power and drift for centuries and keep all of its crew alive the whole while. The arkship was scores of kilometers long, dozens of kilometers wide at its rear, yet nimble and responsive. It could manufacture a squadron of scouts each day, coordinate an unending space battle, and warp civilians to safety all at once. Every system had redundancies. It had been conceived and designed as a solution—the solution—to any imaginable disaster and any foreseeable war. The Conclave had seen the wisdom of such a solution, and it had focused the full ambition of the Firstborn empire to fulfill it.

Orlana's raw joy kept rising, pulsing through the Khala. She'd always had a special love for architecture. "You were right, Rohana," she said. "The walls. I thought they would be a nuisance. But look!" Here on the bridge, the walls were made of sculpted, sheer energy. Invisible. The ship's commander would have an unobstructed view of the battlefield. All around them, they could see the

city lights of Aiur stretching to the horizon, and the twinkling stars above their heads. "It is marvelous."

How many lost battles in history would have been won if only the leader had full, firsthand knowledge of the battlefield? *Almost all of them, likely. Wise commanders confirm with their eyes what their subordinates believe.* The Khala only passed along emotions. An inexperienced warrior might very well judge a battle incorrectly. "The credit goes to your youngest sister, not me," Rohana said. "Without her, the phase-smiths would never have completed this."

Rohana felt Shantira's quiet emotions. *Pride. Satisfaction.* The technology that made this ship possible had indeed been her doing. The Khalai workers knew engineering better than she did, but she had the memories of generations of masters to guide them, and a brutal grasp of physics to challenge their ideas. To succeed, they had to go through her. She made them earn their glory.

A member of the Conclave approached the three sisters, a Judicator named Mardonis. "Will you join us below for the launch?" he asked.

"Of course," Rohana said. This was a historic moment. The grand preservers had a duty to witness it.

Mardonis led them from the bridge to the depths of the arkship. He walked; they followed. After many kilometers of hallways, they reached the core, home to only a few control panels and a truly massive sphere that towered above them. Even here, in the center of the ship, one could see the stars gleaming above Aiur. But those stars held no interest, not for the grand preservers, not for Mardonis, not for the rest of the Conclave, nor the master phase-smiths, nor the single warrior standing in their midst.

Those stars were far away, distant.

A new star was about to be born right here.

Mardonis gestured to the warrior. "Adun, will you please do us the honor?" he asked.

Adun pressed a fist to his chest. "Thank you, Judicator." He stepped to the phase-smiths. One handed him a jagged block of solarite. Rohana's eyes narrowed. They were letting him handle that volatile substance too casually; she could recall dozens of moments when that had ended disastrously.

*No fewer than eighteen spaceborne vessels have been destroyed due to solarite flares... An entire village eight centuries ago was burned to the ground...*

Shantira touched her shoulder. Rohana shrugged her away, both her hand and her attempt to soothe through the Khala. "This is foolish," Rohana told her quietly.

"Solarite becomes unstable only when it is jostled too heavily," Shantira replied. "And only some of the time. Say, one in five occasions."

"That does not make me feel better."

"Think of it this way," Orlana said, humor touching her eyes. "If it explodes, we die quickly and painlessly. We might as well reach the end with grace."

Rohana said nothing, but her mood already had been lifted.

Adun deserved this honor, of course. Few living commanders had ever shown such clever use of military tactics as he. But Rohana's feelings did not reflect her sisters'.

They felt respect and admiration for him. She was more suspicious. It was possible for commanders to be *too* clever. *Inventive leaders die when their luck runs out*, she knew. A tremendously inventive commander had once attempted to use his own vessel to lift a dying mothership away from a neutron star, for instance. A brilliant idea, brought down by a hidden flaw.

That memory still caused her discomfort. Strange. The solution was here. Her misgivings should have melted away. She set aside her emotions. It would not do to let unpleasant doubts intrude on everyone else.

Adun placed the solarite at the base of the massive sphere. He stepped back.

The solarite glowed. Then the huge sphere above it glowed. With a mighty crash, the solar core came to life, settling into a gentle, muted hum, its impossibly bright light and heat contained by its shell. The arkship began to tremble. And then it began to move. It ascended, leaving Aiur's atmosphere so smoothly it defied belief. In minutes, despite its size, it had achieved a stable orbit.

Such was the power of the solar core. A synthetic star. Harnessing its energy would sustain all operations on this ship—and the thousands upon thousands of soldiers and crew who would one day live in it—for an incalculable number of years.

This arkship was truly a marvel. Mardonis blessed the ship with its name: the *Spear of Adun*.

When the ceremony ended, Adun was warped back to his fleet. The Conclave remained behind to speak with the grand preservers. "We have been disagreeing, and we seek your advice," Mardonis said. They had all traveled back to the bridge. Now that they were in orbit, it appeared as though Aiur was slowly rotating above their heads. "This arkship is everything you hoped for, yes? A bulwark against unforeseen disasters."

Orlana spoke confidently for her sisters. "Without question, Judicator."

"We have already begun construction on two more. What then?" Mardonis asked. "How many more do we need?"

Rohana blinked. *Surprise. Confusion.* "I do not understand."

Mardonis explained. Constructing each arkship required an astonishing number of resources—so many that other endeavors, such as colonizing new star systems, were being delayed. "The *Spear of Adun* is enough to wage an entire war on its own, even against an enemy that is our equal." He spread his hands wide. "We have no equal. There is none who can challenge us Firstborn."

"Not today. Not next year. Not next century." Rohana began to call up the memories of generations past. She let a choice few flow through the Khala to Mardonis so he could understand her full meaning. "It is always the unexpected attack that threatens the greater power. As you said, the *Spear of Adun* is our bulwark against disaster. But it cannot be everywhere at once. More arkships will mean more security. Three is good. More would be better."

She was surprised to feel her sisters disagreeing with her. She turned toward them. "Do you have a different perspective?"

Shantira tilted her head. "You speak of war millennia away, Rohana. They speak of something more insidious: depletion. Should we spend too many resources on this—"

"Our empire has plenty of resources."

"For today. For next year. For next century." Shantira's gentle voice kept the rebuke from stinging. Mostly. "If the day comes when we do not, a fleet of arkships will not save us. We will need colonies to resupply us. Firepower has its limits. So does our warp network. More colonies will mean a larger field of escape for whenever it becomes necessary."

Orlana held up a hand. "There must be a balance. The Conclave has posed a question that we cannot answer easily. We must withdraw and debate. It will take time," she warned Mardonis.

The Judicator gestured in agreement. "Our empire can build those other two arkships without strain. We only seek guidance for more. You will have whatever time you need."

"Then we will be thorough," Orlana said.

"Yes," Rohana agreed. That small doubt, that misgiving, it still wasn't going away. Maybe this task would be exactly what she needed to root it out.

### Part Three

The years passed. The grand preservers searched their memories. The question of the arkship was a nuanced one. No single moment in history would answer it. They relived wars. Disasters. Discoveries. Anything that might illuminate their way.

At the beginning, Rohana had been certain that the Firstborn should commit themselves to building every arkship they could. That way, even the total destruction of one arkship would mean nothing for the protoss' survival. Now she was not so certain. There were too many memories of foolhardy leaders who had spent resources recklessly and paid a dear price for their errors.

And there was the practical point: after more than a century, the *Spear of Adun* had not been committed to battle. Not even once. It spent its time escorting colonists to fresh planets. The arkship was remarkably useful in that regard. But why build more and more weapons when there was nothing left to fight? Perhaps three arkships would be enough. Perhaps not.

She didn't have an answer yet.

But the question did not consume her or her sisters. They were grand preservers. They had pupils to train. Memories to preserve.

And advice to give.

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Orlana made no attempt to hide her dismay. "Your plan is foolish, and it will get your subordinates killed," she said bluntly.

The colony leader gestured wildly with his hands as he spoke. "None of us fears death, and we believe this will work," he said. *Determination. Stubbornness.* A dangerous combination of emotions when one was preparing to risk lives. "The temperature on that planet is not that low. It has measured as high as 1.3 degrees!"

One point three degrees above absolute zero, he meant. Even the emptiness of space was not so cold.

"Your equipment will fail, and you will freeze," Orlana said. "But even if you do not, you are destined for an early death."

"Why?"

She recalled a memory and channeled it into the Khala, allowing the colony leader to experience it as well.

*... The great explorer was the first to climb Aiur's tallest peak and the first to chart its oceans. He held within him an insatiable desire to see the unknown, to examine the undiscovered. Yet he always traveled alone. He insisted on it. He knew that one day he would encounter a challenge that he could not overcome, and he refused to condemn anyone else to death for it. And indeed, it was inside the caves of the Middling Peaks that he met his end, when a tremor shook loose untold tons of rock and buried him alive, his life extinguishing in an instant...*

"Your desire will never go away," Orlana said. "You will be driven to greater and greater risks. This is not immoral. The Firstborn celebrate those with your spirit. By testing limits, you show an entire empire what is possible. But you do not yet understand that this is a path you must walk alone." She fed a few more memories into the Khala, of other explorers who had died while traveling the unknown. "Go to this planet if you must. Let your followers watch you as they orbit the world in safety. Do not allow them to share your risk. Pride and awe will compel them to accompany you if you ask. Do not ask."

The colony leader was shaken but not deterred. "Not every death must be in battle, Grand Preserver. If my end comes on new frontiers, so be it. My followers share my beliefs."

Orlana did not relent. "Do they? I can feel them nearby. They admire your convictions, but they do not share them. They follow you because they seek glory. They do not truly understand the risks they face at your side."

The colony leader thanked her. "I will think upon your advice." Orlana knew he would not be swayed, and she knew he had no obligation to obey her. He was free to discard her advice.

A year later, she felt those eighteen souls begin their expedition. They landed on that barren, frigid, rogue planet. Twelve days after, their equipment failed.

With great sadness, she preserved their memories, too. Another cautionary tale.

"There are always those who will follow fools," Orlana concluded to her sisters. "And there will always be fools ready to lead them."

That bothered her in ways she couldn't quite identify.

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The Templar master of training came to them and knelt. He was trembling. His mind and emotions were in turmoil. "I fear change," he said, "and that may doom us all."

The rigors of warrior training had been enshrined among the protoss for generations upon generations. From a young age, the Templar were tested for combat aptitude. Those with spiritual leanings would be mentored by the high templar in the use of psionic warfare. Those with physical gifts would learn the art of the blade and the dances of war.

Now some were suggesting that the two schools of training should be combined. The warrior zealots would wield psionic power in more ethereal ways. The high templar would stride onto the battlefield trained in hand-to-hand combat. Perhaps one day, the differences between them would be erased entirely. There would be only one approach to martial training.

The master opposed it all. Yet after decades of debate with philosophers and young prodigies, his will had weakened. "Different wars will require different tactics," he said miserably. "Perhaps I am wrong. I have the power to resist change, but if I do so in error, I condemn our warriors to obsolescence. They will be ill-equipped to fight the wars of the future."

All three sisters were attending this discourse, and all three quickly reached the same conclusion. "Great master," Rohana said, "do not give in."

He lifted his eyes.

Rohana showed him not one memory but dozens. Battles. Zealots who excelled in combat. High templar who turned the tide of war in an instant. "See the way they move, the way they think," Rohana said. "See their focus. They claimed victory in impossible circumstances because they were masters of their gifts. They did not waste their training, struggling to adopt ill-fitting techniques. They were brought to the finest edge of skill and righteous rage in accordance with their talents and natural aptitude. They were kept there by masters such as you. Wars do indeed bring new tactics. But it is the highly trained warrior who can adapt. Those who know their own potential know how to employ it."

"And more important," Orlana added, "we Firstborn rest upon our traditions in the way a building rests upon its foundations. To neglect them is to guarantee collapse."

Rohana nodded. An adage from an ancient philosopher floated to the top of her mind. She shared the memory with them all. "*It is not the wind that topples the tree, but the unseen decay that corrupted the roots,*" she recited.



"I see. I understand." The master's gloom faded away. Relief took its place. "I thank you, Grand Preservers."

Rohana felt him return to his duties. He was continuously challenged by those new philosophies, yet he held firm. He stayed true to tradition, never wavering.

"All Firstborn could stand to learn from his example," she told her sisters. Yet it troubled her. There would not always be one like him to guard the protoss' foundations.

That might one day cost the protoss dearly.

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Shantira communed with a dozen phase-smiths for more than a month. They sat before her, engrossed, submerged in her unending memories of masters past. There was no great crisis to solve. They simply loved to learn. And Shantira loved to teach.

Rohana and Orlana let her be. But when the phase-smiths left, Shantira was troubled. "They might have stumbled upon the answer to our arkship question," she said.

That certainly got her sisters' attention.

They sequestered themselves away from petitioners. "Speak, Sister. We are listening," Rohana said.

Shantira gathered her thoughts. She was clearly frustrated. "The answer was there. I know it. Why can I not tease it free?" She looked up with despair. "I had the answer. Now I have lost it. I do not understand."

"Start from the beginning," Orlana said. "We will help you find it."

The phase-smiths had been drawn to memories of legendary inventors among the Khalai caste. Certain advancements had been made only because elevated minds had dared to question conventional wisdom. That had even been done recently: one phase-smith, still living, had developed a rapid-teleportation system for motherships. This unique technique, this means for the mothership to "mass recall" itself and nearby forces to safety, allowed for instant escape from lethal situations. It single-handedly erased the danger of a repeat incident like the one that had claimed the two motherships nearly eleven hundred years ago.

Shantira's explanation stopped. There was silence. Her frustration rose again. "It is here. There is something here, swimming through the Khala, and *I cannot find it*. Why would the answer *intentionally* elude me?"

It wouldn't, of course. "The destruction of those motherships was a chaotic moment. It is difficult to sort through so many memories quickly," Orlana offered.

"That is not it." Shantira grimaced. "It is as if there were some creature inside the Khala that does not want me to know the answer."

They all knew there was no such creature, but that was irrelevant. "Where does the truth lie, Shantira? Within the memories of the mothership crews, or in the past beyond?" Rohana asked.

"Farther back. Way back." Her eyes suddenly widened. "Khas. That is it. The great Khas."

That was a name all protoss knew. Khas, the one who first united the warring tribes by connecting them through the Khala. Without him, the entire race would have destroyed itself in civil war. "Why were phase-smiths seeking Khas's memories?" Orlana asked.

"He was the first and most enduring example of an elevated mind," Shantira said. "He saw an option no others could have even imagined. And so he unified our emotions. Such foresight is the trait that led to our greatest discoveries and carried us into the stars." Her frustration wavered and then floated away. "This is the answer. We have been discussing the need for arkships to prevent tragedy. That is not what they are meant to be. That is not how Khas would have thought. Khas did not *prevent* civil war, but he let us survive our barbarism."

Orlana's emotions went cold. "There are always those who will follow fools," she muttered.

Rohana rounded on her. "I hope you are not calling Khas a fool."

"No," she said sharply. "He was the only one who was not. There is something that has been occupying my thoughts for years, Sisters. A simple concept: we Firstborn are not immune to faulty decisions." Orlana waved off the response she knew was coming. It was not exactly a profound revelation; if protoss could not make mistakes, there would be no need for grand preservers. "When you mentioned Khas, all I could think about was what he was forced to confront." She closed her eyes. "A war, started by fools who imagined themselves wise. They thought their reasons were pure, and they led their people into slaughter. It took a radical viewpoint to see the truth, and the

Khala united us in a way that even a fool could not shatter. You are right, Shantira. We have been approaching the question of the arkships incorrectly."

Shantira was pulling back. Clearly, she felt this was a leap in logic. "Civil war is improbable in this age. But I shudder to think of what might happen if arkships were involved."

That was a genuinely terrifying thought. "Orlana, that is not what you mean, is it?" Rohana asked.

Uncertainty crept into Orlana's emotions, not for her idea but for her perception of her people. "I cannot imagine that the Firstborn will be divided again. But over the centuries, we have seen troubling things, yes? We have been considering the arkships as a bulwark against small flaws."

"The mothership disaster," Shantira said.

"Yes. *That* is what we have feared. A small flaw destroying something mighty. But the Aeon of Strife did not result from one small flaw. It was born of endless petty conflicts that even forced the xel'naga to abandon us."

Rohana saw where Orlana was going, and she felt ill. *It is not the wind that topples the tree, but the unseen decay that corrupted the roots.* She rebelled against the implications. She had to. "The protoss have ascended beyond that, Orlana. The Khala and our traditions will never let us fall to such arrogant depths again. It is not possible."

Fear suddenly radiated from Shantira. "No, Rohana. It is not simply possible. It is certain."

"What?"

"At some point, we will falter. We will. It is mathematically irrefutable," Shantira said. "We dream of the protoss empire standing for all of eternity. But we know—we *know*—that we cannot eliminate every hidden flaw. We have been considering how to deal with the consequences of individual disasters. We have not considered how to deal with the day when the Firstborn face extinction. Maybe it will come from us; maybe it will come from an enemy. But the day will come."

There was silence in the chamber for a long time. Each sister could feel the others' emotions boiling with fear and doubt.

Orlana spoke first. "The arkships. They are still the solution."

"I am not so certain," Shantira said.

"All it would take is one surviving arkship," Orlana said, "and our civilization would endure anything, even the destruction of every Firstborn planet. It could flee among the stars until it found a haven to establish as our new home. We have not considered it for so dire a situation, but the arkship is more than capable of doing that."

"Perhaps," Shantira said doubtfully.

Rohana listened to them, fighting the emotions rising from deep within. *Determination. Frustration.* To treat extinction as a certainty was infuriating. *There must be another solution,* she thought. *This cannot be our fate.*

With a jolt, she realized, *That is exactly what the mothership crews believed.*

A new emotion, *despair*, flooded into her so suddenly that her sisters fell silent. "Rohana?" Orlana asked quietly. "What has happened?"

"A moment, please," Rohana said. "Give me a moment."

They waited. Rohana stopped fighting her emotions. She let them play and rage within her. Her sisters were there, with her and in the Khala, their sympathy an anchor in the turmoil. She would survive it.

But she didn't want to explain it. A terrible, terrible solution had just occurred to her, and giving it life with words would make her responsible for the outcome. *Anger. Denial.* There had to be another way.

There wasn't.

Finally Rohana spoke. "We have built the arkships too soon."

Her sisters looked at her, waiting for her to explain. They felt her distress. It bothered her that she would have to share it.

Rohana continued. "You are right, Orlana. A single arkship would be enough to see our kind survive in the end times. But there will be no surviving arkships, no matter how many we build," she said. "When the end comes, what will be our first response? We will send an arkship, every arkship we have, to confront it directly." Rohana sent quick snippets of lives past to her sisters through the Khala. Proud warriors all, facing death with courage. Every one of them believed victory was possible even as they strode toward impossible odds. Pride was the protoss' great asset, and their

great curse. "The Firstborn do not run. Not ever. The arkships will be squandered because the possibility of defeat will not enter the commanders' hearts until it is too late." *Until gravity has a firm hold and the threshold is crossed.* "And when the arkships burn, so, too, will the hopes of our kind. Our culture, our empire, our people—it will end in fire."

Shantira and Orlana considered her words carefully. Rohana could feel them searching their own preserved memories, searching for anything that would refute her. She wanted them to succeed.

They didn't. Protoss sought glory in death when victory was impossible. Firstborn warriors were absolute believers. Should a truly indomitable foe emerge, retreating in an arkship would not be considered, even if it was the only option.

"Rohana, I can feel your anguish," Orlana said. "You have a solution in mind, and it is causing you pain."

"I hope there is another way," Rohana said desperately. "I hope upon all our ancestors that you can find a path that will not separate us."

Jolts of surprise shot through the Khala, landing on Rohana like physical blows. "What would ever separate us?" Orlana asked.

Rohana told them.

It took days of debate and deliberation to examine her reasoning. When they were done, there was no emotion left but one. The final emotion.

*Acceptance.*

## Part Four

The Conclave had been eager. After so long, to finally have an answer to the question of the arkship would be a blessing. But the grand preservers had entered the chamber somber and grim. Their mood had spread quickly.

And then the sisters had explained their reasoning, bolstered with the vivid memories of others.

"It is simple math and probability," Shantira concluded. "There will come a day when nothing, not even an arkship, can forestall extinction."

The members of the Conclave exchanged glances. *Shock. Numbness.* Their earlier emotions—*denial, stubbornness*—had melted away under the weight of countless preserved memories. Finally Mardonis responded. "Some might call you doomsayers," he said.

"That is literally what we are at the moment, yes," Orlana said evenly.

Rohana had to suppress a sudden rush of amusement. That emotion would not fit the tone of this meeting.

"But our arkships are mighty. Why will they fail?" Mardonis asked.

"They will be squandered," Rohana said. "We would use them to forestall survivable tragedies. We could suffer the loss of a thousand motherships to exploration, and our race would survive. We could lose a thousand colonies and still have hope. But it is as you stated so long ago: these arkships require incredible investments. We have three? Good. We can preserve them. But we do not need more."

The Conclave members caught one of those words: *preserve*. None missed the meaning, not with three grand preservers standing before them.

"You have a plan," Mardonis said.

"We do."

"To preserve the arkships until the moment they are needed most?"

"Indeed," Rohana said. "The *Spear of Adun* is not meant to continue shepherding colonists. It is meant to rise up when all hope is lost, to carry the remnants of our traditions, and to strike back at whatever seeks to end us."

"How?" Mardonis asked.

"The arkships must be kept safe. They must be accessible. They must not be launched before it is necessary," Rohana said. "The simplest solution may be the best. They should be buried, carefully, with mechanisms in place to send them to the stars."

The elders heard their words. Now they needed to discuss them. They did so, repeatedly, over the course of years and decades. The three sisters made themselves available for every meeting. It took time.

In the end, the Conclave arrived at the same conclusion as the grand preservers. And the elders had already begun to make plans. "In those dark days, an army will be needed. We can keep thousands of soldiers and crew in stasis on those ships," a high templar commander said. There was round agreement to that.

"And us as well," Rohana said.

There it was. Her words silenced the Conclave. The Khala quivered with surprise.

*The threshold has been crossed. There is no going back,* she thought.

"There are three arkships," Orlana explained. "And there are three of us."

"When the end times come, advice and perspective will be needed," Shantira said.

"And," Rohana added, "we must preserve our history and our legacy."

An elderly Judicator stood up, her eyes piercing. "If the end comes, I can only imagine it will be... unspeakably chaotic. Not every arkship is likely to survive. Not all three of you are likely to wake," she said.

Orlana shook her head. "No, we are not."

"That changes nothing?"

"Nothing at all," Rohana said. "Our duty is to preserve. We stand ready. Do you?"

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All three of the arkships were buried on Aiur. It had been a monumental task. None had ever attempted to excavate pits dozens of kilometers deep. But it was done.

Three different cities across Aiur now had massive launch cradles recessed beneath the soil. In the event of a disaster, the arkships could quickly leave the planet.

There had been years to prepare for stasis. The grand preservers had committed their own memories to other preservers, ensuring that nothing would be lost even if none of them ever woke. The sisters had rarely left each other's company during that time.

And now that time had come to an end. The arkships were powered down, their solar cores dimmed, only the faintest lines of energy still pulsing through the halls of stasis pods.

Shantira entered the *Pride of Altaris* without looking back. *Calm. Determined. Accepting.* "Things will be so different when we wake," she said. An hour later, she succumbed to stasis and faded from the Khala.

Her absence tore at Rohana's heart as though Shantira had died. Orlana felt the same way. "We do not even have the honor of preserving her memories," she said sadly.

A day later, Orlana arrived at the *Memory of Nezin*. She let her feet down and walked inside. "Farewell, Sister," she said.

"Farewell." Rohana remained still, guarding her emotions until Orlana entered stasis.

Then she fell to her knees and howled wordlessly into the Khala.

Her anguish cut through the tranquility of Aiur, shocking the entire world. A swell of sympathy rolled back to her, even though the population did not know why she wept. It did not help.

Preservers studied the past; they could only guess at the future. So why was Rohana consumed with the certainty that she would wake and her sisters would not?

She beseeched her ancestors, hoping they would hear. *Let me die. Not them. This was my idea.* She could have rushed into stasis and found the peace of sleep there. No. She refused. Rohana would not hide from this pain. She would accept it and be glad for it. Each scar upon her heart would stand as a testament to her sisters and the bond they shared.

If she ever awoke, it would be to the end of all things. She needed to be ready. Her mind would be firm. Her purpose, clear.



When the agony receded, only the final emotion remained. *Acceptance.*

She traveled alone to the *Spear of Adun*. It was quiet. When she woke—if she woke—it certainly would not be this way again. Rohana glided throughout the ship. She stopped briefly in the war council chambers. *It will be here*, she knew. This was where she and the commander would commune about how to save their people from oblivion.

Rohana left the war council area and entered the stasis chambers. In the darkness, she could dimly make out the thousands upon thousands of occupied pods. There had been no shortage of volunteers for this long sleep. To be part of the final army of the Firstborn? The last bastion of hope against disaster? So many zealots could only dream of such an opportunity. Even the Templar master who had so assiduously guarded traditional training had volunteered, determined to ensure that the warriors of the last days would be prepared.

Rohana moved into her stasis pod. The door closed around her. A gentle, cool mist filled the chamber, and Rohana's mind drifted away. She wondered who would command the protoss when she awoke. She wondered if they would be up to the challenge.

*If they are not...*

*I will make them so.*

*Farewell, Sisters.*