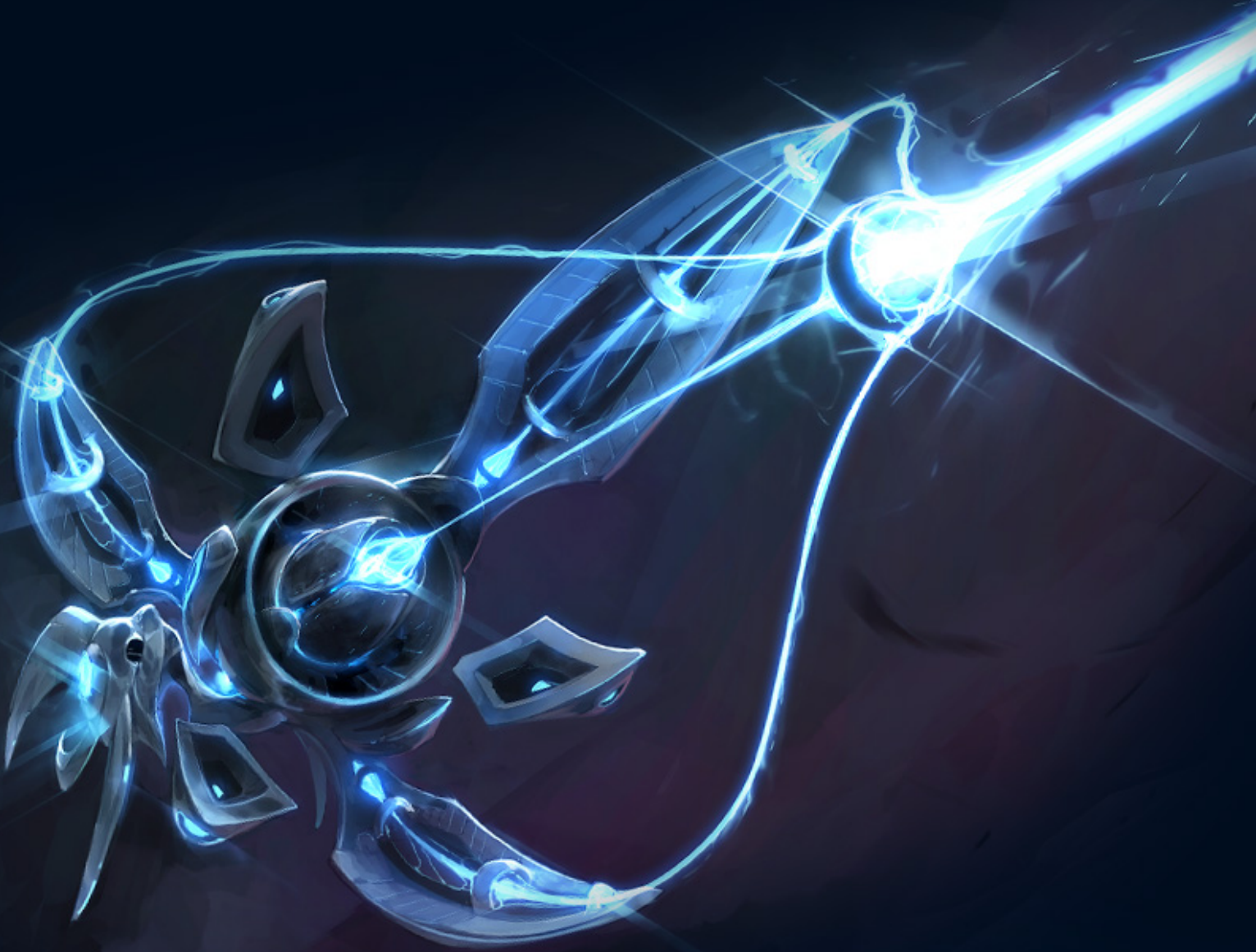




# Lens of the Void

By Hugh A. Todd



The bridge of the *Purity of Form* shuddered.

"Shields holding!" called out the damage-control officer, his psionic voice projected for all to hear.

"Request air cover from Command," Feranon ordered. The bridge crew had been instructed to speak in a public form of telepathic address so as to accommodate both khalai and Nerazim. As commander of one of the protoss' newest ships, Feranon had a duty to make sure that the recently integrated groups worked well together despite their differences. In these dark times, those who followed the Khala and those who rejected it would need each other if they were to survive.

Feranon himself thought that the reintegration would bring strength to all protoss. This attitude, and his stellar record as a leader, might have been why the Hierarchy had given him command of the *Purity of Form*. He was proud of his posting and would prove to his superiors that they had made the right decision.

From his perch in the commander's chair, he admired the bridge, larger than any to which he had previously been assigned. Protoss worked at rows of terminals, monitoring the mechanisms that caused the void ray to be one of the mightiest ships his race had ever created. These terminals radiated out in concentric circles from his chair, giving him a clear view of all personnel. Filling the air close to his seat were semitransparent holographic screens, affording him summaries of the various stations' output.

The bridge was not just efficient, but it was beautiful as well, reflecting the aesthetics of the whole ship. Feranon was impressed with the remarkable abilities of the protoss who had designed it. The *Purity of Form* was graceful for such a deadly weapon. Of course, this ship's conception would not have been possible without the close teamwork of khalai and Nerazim. Together they had achieved a pinnacle of both science and art. Astonishing!

"Air cover arriving," reported a communications officer. Feranon could feel the crew member's satisfaction through the Khala. It would have been more economical for all of the bridge crew to be khalai, as they would have instantly known the feelings and thoughts of the others without the need to form words. However, just as the ship had been designed by

the two groups working together, so would it be crewed. The *Purity of Form* would be stronger for the amalgamation.

Feranon watched on a floating screen as phoenixes ripped through the flock of zerg mutalisks that had been harassing the void ray.

"Excellent. Continue to our attack point with all haste."

Without the zerg forces to hinder it, the *Purity of Form* quickly arrived at its assigned location.

"Commander, target within range."

Feranon studied a screen showing a line of ultralisks lumbering down a stark hillside. Data detailing everything from their disposition to the very composition of their skin streamed around the zerg outlined in front of him.

"Bring the prismatic beam online. Deploy one flux field projector," commanded Feranon. Crew members moved to comply. The *Purity of Form* vibrated with the energies funneling through its frame.

"Fire on the ultralisks as soon as the weapon is online."

The vibration intensified until it attained a pure tone. The bridge was bathed in the blue light of the energies that arced to the main crystal. From this crystal, positioned at the mouth of the void ray, the prismatic beam leapt to the figures below.

On-screen, Feranon observed an ultralisk staggering as the beam slammed into it, but remarkably, the zerg continued on, unhurt.

"Commander, their armor is too dense. The prismatic beam will not be able to break through it."

Feranon reviewed the data but didn't contradict the technician's conclusion.

He swiveled his chair, turning to the area behind his command post. There, at the back of the bridge, lay a couch. Heavy cables spread out from the head of the bench, and behind it, beyond thick transparent walls, the prismatic core glowed like a living cauldron of power. Lying on the couch was a young dark templar. An ancient protoss stood at the side of the recumbent figure. Feranon inspected the teacher for a moment.

Theromos was the oldest protoss he had ever known. His dress did not match that of the younger Nerazim Feranon had met. Even the stylized designs on the clamps that

capped his shortened psionic appendages were distinctly archaic. When Feranon had first learned about the assignment, he had asked other Nerazim about Theromos. Every one of them had told the commander of the great respect that they held for their previous mentor. Many had remarked how his teachings had changed their lives.

Feranon turned his attention to the young Nerazim. The commander spoke softly. "Althai, we need to bring a second flux field projector online."

Before the reclining protoss could answer, the telepathic voice of the elder at his side rang out. "My pupil is not ready. He does not have the discipline to handle a second projector."

Feranon focused on the older protoss. "I understand that students usually have more time to learn how to manipulate the void ray's power, but we are in a difficult situation. There are enough ultralisks down there to rout our ground forces. We were commanded to eliminate them, but a single projector cannot break through their armor."

Theromos fairly growled his frustration. "Your second projector may give you what you need to destroy the zerg, but you run the risk of killing your crewman."

Althai interrupted before Feranon could respond. "Commander, activate the second projector. I will try to keep it under control."

Even though the dark templar were not a part of the Khala, Feranon could sense the trepidation in the words of the young Nerazim.

Theromos was quiet for a moment and then spoke. "I have warned you."

Feranon swiveled his chair to face forward.

"Bring a second flux field projector online. Keep the beam trained on that ultralisk."

The tone that vibrated through the ship changed pitch as a second arc of energy sprung up, merging with the first at the main crystal. Once again the ultralisk staggered, but then the beam began to liquefy its tough skin, and the zerg was torn apart, consumed from the inside out.

"Target the remaining ultralisks."

The beam fired, tearing through zerg flesh and bone. What had begun as an army, almost two dozen of the towering beasts, was quickly reduced to ash. The *Purity of Form* scoured the battlefield until the last ultralisk fell still, its body a smoking ruin.

"Shut down the beam," commanded Feranon.

The vibration that shook the *Purity of Form* subsided, and the bridge dimmed with the loss of the arcing energy's glare. Feranon turned to congratulate the young dark templar, but stopped at what he saw. Althai lay unmoving.

Theromos bowed his head over the still form. "You have your victory, Commander. It only cost you one of your crew. I will need a new student."

The bridge was quiet as the old dark templar strode from the room.

\* \* \*

Although there was no answer at Theromos's door, Feranon entered his cabin anyway. The space was empty of furniture. Theromos sat in the middle of the room in a meditative posture, his back to the commander. One wall of Theromos's quarters looked out at the prismatic core, the heart of the void ray. The bright flow of energies drew patterns across every surface of the small stateroom. There was a stillness here that reminded Feranon of a xel'naga temple he had once visited. This cabin carried the same sense of ancient peace, but in this case, it emanated from the seated dark templar.

"Althai was brave to take the risk he did to protect our people. His sacrifice will be remembered." The serenity of the room swallowed Feranon's words. The silence extended so long that Feranon thought the old Nerazim wouldn't answer, but then Theromos's psionic voice growled forth.

"*Sacrifice*. Is that what you would call it?"

"Either we destroyed the zerg then or our warriors would have paid the price later."

"I do not argue against the need to fight the zerg. But Althai was not ready. I had trained him only for a couple of weeks, and he had yet to demonstrate the discipline required to control the Void energies produced by this ship."

"Althai thought himself ready. And he was successful long enough for us to be victorious."

Theromos's grim laughter spread across the room like gravel. He turned to meet Feranon's gaze. "Do you allow every eager young warrior who thinks he is ready to leap

into battle against an overwhelming foe? No. I have been training dark templar far longer than you have been alive, Commander. Almost as long as there have been dark templar. If you push them before they are ready, you end up with dead students. As we have today. I should be back on Shakuras, teaching Nerazim, instead of here, helping you kill them. The only reason I do so is out of respect for the Hierarchy and its request for my help."

"There are other void rays in the fleet. Other dark templar acting as Void lenses. They manage. You yourself could fulfill this role for a ship, but you refuse."

"Yes, there are many experienced dark templar, although few with the discipline to manipulate the great forces used by this unhealthy creation of our scientists. As for my reasons for refusing to handle the Void energies, they are my own. I will teach. It is enough. Now leave me to my meditations."

Theromos turned away from the commander, once again assuming a meditative pose.

Feranon looked at the old Nerazim for a moment and then walked from the room. He paused in the doorway.

"Your new student is warping in as we speak. I will have her report to you when she is settled."

When Theromos didn't respond, Feranon went on, his psionic voice quieter. "Theromos, I am not your enemy, nor was I Althai's. I want only what is best for both our peoples; I want to help save the protoss race."

Theromos's words barely disturbed the stillness of the room. "The zerg did not kill Althai, Commander."

Feranon had no answer to that.

\* \* \*

"The Void is not like the Khala. It does not draw us together and connect us in a blanket of warm feelings. The Void certainly does not offer itself willingly. A dark templar stalks the Void and, through will and discipline, forces it to give up its power." Theromos

waited, sitting in his restful pose, for his new student's response. The constantly shifting glow from the prismatic core painted light and shadow across the room like a living thing.

Sharas obliged. "I know these words, teacher. They were a part of our texts when we first began to learn the ways of the Void."

"It is good to know they still teach the words as I wrote them." The old Nerazim paused for a moment and then resumed. "You have passed through the Shadow Walk; else you would not be here."

Unsure whether this was a question, Sharas merely nodded.

Theromos continued. "The void ray is one of the first ships designed by the scientists of Aiur and Shakuras working together. It gathers the psionic energies of the Khala, focused through phase crystals, and combines them with the might of the Void. They meet in the prismatic core and then are amplified by the flux field projectors. The energies arc from the projectors to the main crystal, the source of the prismatic beam. However, while our brethren's technologies can align and contain the Khala's powers, taming the Void's potency requires a dark templar to focus and funnel it into a useful form. Without a disciplined Nerazim mind, the forces generated by the void ray will become too wild and cascade beyond control. You must be a lens of the Void. You will need a greater understanding of its nature than you have ever had before, but if you wish to follow this path, I will lead you."

He paused, judging how well his student had grasped this information. "Shall we start with a demonstration? Show me what you have learned."

Sharas stood and bowed her head. At first Theromos saw no change, but then he noticed the moving shadows in the room beginning to take on a different rhythm, independent of the glowing reflections from the core. These umbras coiled, connecting to form a ring around Sharas. Cloudy tentacles flowed up from the floor and began to wind their way around her legs and arms, radiating from them like filaments of mist. Sharas brought one hand up, and the tendrils merged around her body, mimicking her movements. The hypnotizing dance ceased when the young Nerazim took a step backward. The Void swallowed her as if she had slipped into a cloak held behind her, the dark ceasing to be a

mere absence of light and becoming a physical thing that enveloped and hid the dark templar from Theromos's eyes.

But the elderly protoss didn't use just his eyes. He waited in his seat, only lifting his hand at the last moment to catch Sharas attempting to tap him on the shoulder.

"Excellent, student. Control, subtlety, improvisation—these are but a few of the virtues of a well-trained dark templar. We must work on your discipline and your will."

Theromos released Sharas's hand, and she returned to her seat in front of him.

"I did not think you would sense me."

Her teacher nodded. "It was not easy, but when one has looked upon the Void itself, many things that are usually hidden become clear. Still, if you had been patient and had a stronger hold on the Void energies, you might have eluded even me."

The ancient teacher's head tilted as he inspected his student closely. "You remind me of one I studied with long ago. She had a similar impatience, but it came with a passionate brilliance. If you can match her skills, you will find yourself puissant indeed. However, you should beware this path. The more quickly you embrace the power, the greater the danger. Your path must be slow and well thought-out to attain the summit of your abilities."

Theromos stood and motioned her to follow his stance.

"We will begin with simple exercises designed to open you to the Void energies and focus your will on them."

Sharas copied his stance, and they began.

\* \* \*

"Continue to the main zerg base. Fire on all available targets. Give priority to any units nearing our ground forces," ordered Commander Feranon.

The *Purity of Form*'s beam rained death upon the zerg below. The tone of the ship's weapon remained steady as it tore apart a group of zerglings and then was redirected to a



cluster of banelings. From his screens, Feronon could see the protoss line advancing, easily overcoming the few zerg forces that managed to avoid the void ray's attacks.

"Commander, three spore crawlers are forming beneath us."

Feronon brought up the relevant data and responded, "Notify Command immediately. If those structures become functional before we are out of range, we will be in danger."

Battlefield communications among the protoss were efficient, and soon a platoon of zealots arrived. It made short work of the growing spore crawlers. The *Purity of Form's* beam cauterized the site and the surrounding creep, ensuring that there would be no more attempts to attack from this area.

Feronon turned to his navigation officer. "Bring us within range of the main hive and lock onto it as our primary target."

The tone of the void ray's beam faded as it was brought offline and the engines engaged. Satisfied with the status of his ship, the commander swiveled his chair to observe how the new student was doing.

Sharas was lying on the focusing couch. Feronon thought he detected some tension in her body, but as she was not a part of the Khala, he couldn't fully judge her mood. Theromos bent over her, discussing her performance and giving her guidance. So far, Feronon was impressed with the new recruit. She seemed to grasp the techniques of this position much more quickly than previous students, even ones who had gone on to master the void ray's energies at their highest settings. Trusting that the old dark templar had things well in hand, the commander turned his attention back to the battle.

The protoss ground troops were focusing on the outlying structures while the *Purity of Form* flew straight to the heart of the invading forces. If the void ray could destroy the hive, the rest of the zerg would be simple to exterminate.

"Commander, we are within range of the central hive."

"Bring the first flux field projector online. Focus on the center mass of the hive."

The bridge vibrated with the beam's distinctive timbre. Feronon studied his screens carefully. At first, the weapon tore into the great hive, incinerating its organic structure easily. Then, like skin reacting to a sting, the surface of the hive began to change. Bony

plates with spiky protrusions emerged across its hull. The beam failed to damage this new armor, spattering harmlessly.

"Commander, our sensors are identifying those humps in the creep nearby to be growing hydralisks."

Feranon reviewed the data flooding across his screens. It supported the technician's analysis. With so many hydralisks evolving before his eyes, the *Purity of Form* would quickly come under attack if it couldn't find a way to destroy the hive.

The commander turned to the dark templar behind him.

"Void lens Sharas, we need to bring up the second flux field projector, or we must flee. Can you handle the added power?"

Before the student could answer, the teacher intervened. "You cannot keep doing this, Commander. You put my pupils in danger by rushing them to use this much Void energy so soon. Look at what happened to Althai."

Feranon tried to contain his annoyance. "I would not ask her to take such risks if others were not being threatened. When the zerg larvae below us hatch, they will attack not only this ship, but also our advancing warriors."

"Or it could be that the second projector will not be enough, and you will put Sharas's life in peril for naught," Theromos snapped back.

This was too much. Feranon shouted, "Elder Theromos, I am the commander, and I will judge the hazards and answer for the consequences!"

Before the ancient dark templar could reply, Sharas spoke, her telepathic voice sharp with anger. "Enough! Teacher, I appreciate your concern, but I believe I am ready. Commander, deploy the second projector. I will do what is needed."

Theromos shook his head but didn't contradict her.

Feranon turned and gave the command. Immediately the tone that rang throughout the ship changed to a higher note, and the bridge shuddered in response. The stream of energy began to melt the armor plating on the hive, and with an explosion that was felt even on the ship, the *Purity of Form's* target burst in a gout of flaming organic matter.

As soon as Feranon confirmed that the hive had been destroyed and the larvae consumed, he ordered the beam shut down. Turning to the two Nerazim behind him, he

noted with relief that Sharas was alive, if shaken. Her skin was pale and mottled with the strain, but she was able to stand under her own power.

The gamble had paid off.

Feranon swiveled his chair forward. "Navigation, return to base."

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Feranon found the old Nerazim meditating in his quarters. The commander wondered whether Theromos did anything but teach and meditate. Feranon waited a moment to see if Theromos would speak, but the ancient protoss seemed content to ignore him.

"I came to apologize for my outburst on the bridge."

Theromos spoke, not shifting in his meditation. "It does not matter. You gambled with Sharas's life, and it concluded in your favor."

"It does matter, Theromos. I understand what I am asking, especially in light of Althai's death. I must put my crew at risk, but I do not do so recklessly."

Still Theromos didn't stir from his seat. "We are at war. There is danger for everyone, my students included. Sometimes we die. That is the way of the universe. I merely dislike waste."

Feranon strode farther into the room, moving into Theromos's line of sight. "For one who has taught so many young protoss, you are awfully detached when you speak of death."

The ancient Nerazim turned his head to meet the commander's eyes. "You command protoss in a time of conflict. You must have seen death before, lost comrades to the Void's embrace."

"Yes, I have. But I speak their names after they are dead. I mourn them and honor them for their sacrifices."

Feranon thought he saw a flicker of emotion in the old protoss's face, but he couldn't be sure.

"Commander, I will keep my own counsel regarding my students. We Nerazim are not as demonstrative as the khalai. Over the centuries, I have seen much death."

Feranon shook his head. "I have met many Nerazim, and even though they do not share the Khala, I know they feel just as strongly as any protoss. And would time not make you more sensitive to the loss of life?"

"Be that as it may, Commander, it is not your business. I will thank you for my privacy."

"My crew is important to me, and I am responsible for its health, physical and mental."

"You may rest easy as to my mental health, Commander. If I mourn, I will do it in my own way and without your hovering presence. Is there anything else?"

Feranon was frustrated by the lack of a connection between him and his Nerazim crewman. He believed that Theromos was suffering from some emotional wound, but without the deep psionic link provided by the Khala, he couldn't see how to help the old protoss.

Feranon nodded. "Very well. But know that you can always come to me, if only to talk."

Theromos didn't answer. He merely resumed his meditation. Stillness filled the room as Feranon left.

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Sitting in the calm center of his quarters, Theromos waited until Sharas had matched his meditative pose before speaking. "You did very well today. I expected you to have more trouble handling the power of two projectors, but you rose to the challenge. However, do not think that this makes you a master. Few dark templar can control the full might of the void ray's weapon. Some have even died, their minds unable to focus the Void's raw energies."

Sharas shifted uncomfortably but didn't answer.

Theromos shook his head. "You took control of the Void energies through your anger. I could see your fear fueling the strength you needed to keep them within your grasp. This will work for a while, but eventually your passion will falter."

Theromos inspected his student. "Let us try another exercise. Create a stream of Void energy between your hands."

Sharas brought up her arms, holding them apart at shoulder width. As she concentrated, wisps of shadow curled around the fingers of her left hand until the bunching threads reached a critical mass and leapt. The dark tendril flowed between her palms, left to right, appearing on one side and then dissipating on the other.

Theromos nodded. "Good. Now break it into smaller strands and weave them together like a rope."

Sharas's brow furrowed. The dark cord of energy split into a number of narrower tendrils, and after a moment, they pulsed in sync. The new band was wider than before, and individual strands moved in a braided stream.

"Adequate. Hold that in your mind. The rope is strong; it will not break, because your focus sustains it."

The braid tightened, the energy flowing more quickly from one hand to the other.

"Now, reverse the flow. Draw the energies from your right hand and dissipate them on your left."

Sharas struggled to comply. The threads slowly loosened. The motion of the energy stopped and reversed, but the movement was uneven and streams began to unravel.

Theromos pointed to her hands. "No, you must..." He broke off as understanding flashed across the young protoss's face. Immediately the rope tightened and the energy flowed more evenly. If anything, the stream was stronger than ever.

"Excellent." There was respect in Theromos's tone.

Sharas's skin flushed in pride as she let go of the Void and the tendrils disappeared.

"Once again, student, you show your ability to leap to understanding. I expected you to take much longer to grasp these concepts, but you have mastered them as quickly as any student I have known. I caution you, however. Sometimes this leap will be of help, but often

epiphany will escape you. If you do not have discipline and will to fall back upon, the Void shall consume you."

The room was quiet as Theromos's student thought about the lesson.

Finally, Sharas spoke up. "If handling this much power is perilous, should we not have two dark templar manage the energies in tandem?"

"That creates its own dangers." Now Theromos looked uncomfortable.

He stood and turned to face the far wall. "I have not talked of this in centuries. But you remind me so much of her."

Theromos collected himself and then continued. "When I was young, the Nerazim were still experimenting with the Void energies, still discovering the various paths to their use and their hidden secrets. I spent many years deep in meditation, following the currents of the Void. But I was not alone.

"Naraza and I were close friends throughout our training; we even passed our Shadow Walks on the same day. She was my complete opposite. Where I plodded, she flew; where I was methodical, she was mercurial. She found her power instinctively, jumping ahead to the answer. In those days, we Nerazim were particularly independent, preferring solitary work and study, but Naraza and I complemented each other well. Together we accomplished much more than we could have individually. My studies were the rock to which she could anchor herself as she cast her mind farther into the Void.

"However, our investigations took us into dangerous territory. We discovered techniques that suggested we could merge to create a dark archon, one that could survive far beyond the usual brief lifespan. Back then, forming dark archons was forbidden due to the great forces they wielded. But we Nerazim have never shied away from breaking rules. Naraza became obsessed, pushing us to develop these techniques. Finally, she laid plans to enact the transformation ritual.

"I followed, inspired by her brilliance, hoping to solve any problems through logic and dedication, but in the end I failed her. As we began the ritual, I found I could not complete it. I was filled with the fear of losing myself or, worse yet, destroying us both. I tried to help Naraza recover, aborting the ritual, but in a fit of pique, she continued on. She would not let my pace slow her down. She reached for far more power than she could

control, and it consumed her. In my grief and disappointment, I swore I would no longer embrace the Void energies and instead would teach others to handle them safely."

There was silence as Sharas digested Theromos's story.

It was Sharas who spoke first. "I do not believe you failed her, teacher. I think she failed you."

"It does not matter. She died and I could not save her. But I can teach you to avoid her folly."

Again, the room was quiet. The flickering reflections of the prismatic core swam across the walls in slow waves.

"Teacher, what—" A convulsion that shook the whole ship interrupted Sharas's question. The battle alarm sounded, and Theromos and Sharas hurried toward their stations.

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The bridge was in chaos when the two dark templar arrived.

"Zerg invading from all sides. Ground forces are holding, but the enemy just keeps coming. Pylons 3, 4, and 5 are down," called out a crew member.

Sharas ran to the focusing couch, and Theromos helped her with the interface.

Noting Theromos and Sharas, Feronon fired a rapid staccato of orders. "Bring up the prismatic beam, one flux field projector for now. Identify all targets. Priority to those zerg attacking pylons, then to those harassing ground forces. Be alert for any mutalisks."

The bridge crew moved quickly to carry out his commands. The familiar tone of the prismatic beam swelled to a deep hum. On his screens, Feronon could see the energies tear into the zerg below, carving through their flesh in an attempt to staunch the seemingly endless flow of tooth and claw. The beam destroyed zerg with great effect, but it could only slow the attack, not defeat it. When the void ray's weapon found a target, the zerg would survive just long enough so that when it finally fell, two were ready to take its place.

The protoss forces held their positions valiantly, but they were being overwhelmed. Feronon appealed to the dark templar.

"There are too many of them. We must bring a second projector online."

Feranon braced for another argument, but Theromos only nodded. Sharas remained calm and relaxed, nodding her agreement as well.

The commander turned back to the battle. "Bring the second flux field projector online. Continue to prioritize targets."

The hum of the weapon changed, and the newly empowered beam lashed out. This time, the zerg armor could not stop the powerful energies, and lines of the attackers were burned even as they emerged from the ground. The protoss troops began to make headway.

"Commander, there is a wave of brood lords incoming."

Feranon brought up the relevant screen and studied the attacking force. It filled the sky. The behemoths floated serenely toward their targets. They spat mucus-covered symbiotes down onto the photon cannons, which had been placed to protect the far edge of the protoss base. The cannons were destroyed before they could do more than damage a few attackers.

"Brood lords have no air defenses. Move to engage. Fire as soon as we are within range."

The *Purity of Form's* engines thrummed as the ship headed toward the line of manta-like creatures.

Once again the prismatic beam lashed out, carving through armor, tooth, and claw with ease. Feranon inspected the data. Although the brood lords couldn't defend themselves against the void ray's weapon, the *Purity of Form* wouldn't be able to eliminate them before they reached the nexus, the heart of the protoss base. There were simply too many of the beasts. Feranon turned to the focusing couch.

"We need to bring the third flux field projector online. I understand the danger, but it is the only way we can save the base. Without the extra power, we will not stop the zerg from consuming the nexus. All of our gains during the last offensive will be for nothing."

Theromos didn't answer; he merely looked at Sharas. Sharas, brow furrowed in concentration, nodded tersely.

Feranon shouted out his command. "Bring up the third flux field projector!"



Everyone immediately felt the results. The tone that filled the ship changed to an even higher note, one that vibrated throughout the crew's bodies. The beam tore forth, devouring brood lords whole. What armor they had didn't slow their deaths as the void ray's weapon converted beast after beast into flaming debris.

Suddenly the beam began to stutter. A plaintive whine accompanied the ship's vibration. A shriek from behind him caused Feranon to swivel his chair.

Sharas no longer relaxed on her couch but writhed in pain. Dark purple tendrils of energy arced between the cables and her head, racing over the length of her body.

Theromos leaned over Sharas and shouted, "Hold the power; guide it with your will! You must control it, or it will consume you."

Feranon saw her attempt to relax, but a new torrent of what looked like concentrated shadows flowed around her, filled with bright flashes of lightning, and she screamed once more.

"I cannot hold it! It evades my grasp. Please, teacher, help me."

Theromos turned to Feranon, but the commander shook his head. "We need the beam until the attacking force is destroyed. Hold on."

Theromos returned his attention to his student and decisively placed his hands on her head. Immediately the writhing energy engulfed him as well. But where it touched Theromos, it followed a statelier pattern. The tendrils cascaded around and between the two dark templar, pulsing in measured swells, all in rhythm. The thundering tone of the prismatic beam steadied.

Feranon heard a crew member report, "All targets destroyed, Commander."

He swiveled forward at the announcement. "Quickly, shut off the projectors."

The lack of noise from the beam was a relief. But the bridge wasn't silent. A strange tone came from the focusing couch, and when the commander looked, he saw why.

Sharas had reached up to grasp Theromos's shoulder, their gazes locked together. The tendrils of shadow still played over teacher and student, but now the Void energies began to brighten. The Nerazim's eyes glowed more strongly, and wisps of red fire raced across their limbs.

Theromos yelled, "Resist! I know the power is upon us. I know the draw of the Void and the oblivion it promises, but you must resist."

Sharas shouted back, her psionic voice tinged with a deep new note. "The Void calls to me! It calls to us. We could become so much more. Together we could become one with the vast energies of the Void."

Theromos shook his head, trying to break the connection that was forming between the two dark templar. "And we would be lost. You would be lost. Let it go. Return to your merely physical form and be content."

His words must have had some effect upon Sharas, because slowly the tendrils dissipated and the shadows faded.

Soon only two exhausted Nerazim remained.

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Sharas found her teacher seated in meditation as usual, his stillness filling the room. She knelt beside him and waited for him to speak.

"You did very well, student. Few dark templar with your experience could accomplish as much."

Sharas bent her head. "But I failed. I was not able to focus. I almost caused my own destruction. And when you risked yourself to save me, I nearly destroyed you as well. I am ashamed."

Theromos sighed. "You did not shame yourself or my teachings. You attempted more than you were ready for. Like Naraza, you tried to fly before you could walk. There is no shame in impatience, merely a lesson to be learned. In the end, you resisted the temptation of power put before you. In that you succeeded."

Sharas looked up. "And what of you, teacher? After all these years, you have wielded the Void energies. Did I cause you to break your vow?"

"I broke that vow willingly. And would do so again. It is time for change. I realize that we must forget the wounds of the past and forge ourselves anew. You have helped me let my own pain go."

Sharas stood and formally bowed. "Thank you, teacher. Thank you for my life and for your guidance."

Theromos climbed to his feet and returned the bow. "And I thank you for the lessons that you have taught me. Now, let us discuss where the power escaped your grasp, and how you could have prevented it."

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When his door chimed, Feraanon turned from his desk and answered, "Come in." He was surprised to find Theromos in his entryway.

The ancient protoss took a couple of steps into the room and bowed. "I have come to thank you, Feraanon."

Feraanon's face showed his amazement. "For what? Almost killing you and your student?"

"No. I want to thank you for your patience and your understanding. I have made things difficult for you. Though I am a teacher, I have learned much in the last few days. Once I have completed Sharas's training, I wish to stay on as the Void lens for the *Purity of Form*, if you will have me."

Feraanon acknowledged Theromos's words with a formal nod. "You will be a welcome addition to the ship, not just as a lens but as a teacher. I am sure there is a lot you can teach us all."

"Your crew members are efficient, but they will have to work hard if they wish to become my students."

For the first time since the ancient Nerazim had come aboard, Feraanon detected a hint of humor in his speech. Astonishing!