

STAR CRAFT III



BLIZZARD
ENTERTAINMENT

One People, One Purpose

“High Executor, there has been a death.”

Selendis considered the protoss who had spoken, sunk to one knee on the newly replaced stones of the temple square. He wore light armor that looked new in manufacture but old in design, the sort of Golden Age style that had recently come into fashion among some of the Templar—or rather, former Templar. She did not approve of such backward-looking styles; her own armor was just as new, with graceful modern lines that suited her slim build. “Has there been a battle?”

“No, Executor.” Everything about his tone and posture felt wrong; he was uncertain, Selendis could read that much, even without the emotional connection the Khala had once provided. It had been some time after its severing, and still she felt the absence of the telepathic gestalt that had connected the Khalai for millennia—the instantaneous empathy and unified purpose. In its place were new things to navigate: easy deceit, profound loneliness, misinterpretation. It meant, too, teasing out understanding the long way, with questions and body language, a slow and annoying process.

The questions now: Why be uncertain about death, the most certain thing in the universe? If there had been no battle, why disturb her with matters of old age or sickness? The protoss were not immortal and death did not care if their numbers had already been laid low. “Why have you come to me?”

“Because it is a strange death. A wrong one.”

Selendis listened to the endless buzz of activity around them, of Aldera being rebuilt, of a city returned to life. The new buildings shone in the hot afternoon sunlight, bright flashes

sparkling from the otherwise invisible movements of distant drones and wardens. The busy peace of the last few solar returns—had it really been so many already?—still felt strange after so long mired in conflict. Perhaps peace wasn't a natural fate for born warriors; perhaps peace was the state they had been born to protect. And perhaps, Selendis thought tartly, she needed to see more of the grand design of fate before she could come to any conclusions. "You will show me."

They warped to a small settlement that clung to the skirts of Aldera; the gentle bowl of the valley already lay half in a shadow thrown by the nearby mountains. Compared to the bright activity of Aldera, this place was strangely quiet and markedly shabby. Over half the dwellings were still temporary constructions that should have been replaced some time ago. A few drones, perhaps even the ones that should have been set to this task, hovered aimlessly above the ground. The few protoss in sight, sitting in front of their dwellings or beneath trees, watched them pass by with little interest.

Reaching for the Khala was as ingrained as Selendis's battle reflexes, and she reached for it to gain quick understanding of the situation. She still gasped slightly at the emptiness that greeted her; it felt like executing a perfect lunge only to be brought up short by a shield.

She followed the nervous protoss to one of the temporary dwellings. Before he had even opened the door, the scent of blood hung heavy in the air. Inside lay the twisted body of a male Khalai in a pool of black-dried blood.

Selendis was no stranger to death, but this was far beyond what she had expected. Psionic blades cauterized as they cut; combat among the protoss was generally bloodless. She'd only known blood like this on battlefields where they had fought the zerg, but there was no alien stench to be found here. She squatted down next to the body and read the story of the wounds: deep slashes ran across the corpse's throat, up and down his arms, across his chest, shredding the

simple cloth robe he wore.

Carefully, Selendis lifted one of his hands. He had been dead long enough that his muscles were not stiff. Dried blood coated his hands, and ribbons of his own flesh were caught in his claws. Of the thousands of violent deaths she had witnessed—some of which she had personally caused—she had not thought herself capable of being disturbed. Yet the sight sickened her. “He did this to himself.”

“As I said. It is wrong.”

“Do you know his name?”

“I do not know him. I was only passing by after I had delivered a message to someone nearby and smelled the blood.”

“And yet no one thought to check on him until you did.” She lay the dead Khalai’s hand down. In the blood and shadow near his neck, something glittered. She pushed the body onto its side. The claw marks were even deeper at the back of the neck, like the Khalai had been reaching to grasp the stump of his nerve cord. What Selendis had initially thought might be a decorative clamp on the stump, a Nerazim affect that some of the Khalai had adopted, was no simple piece of jewelry. Power flickered through the crystal embedded in it, and she could make out a few wirelike projections: a device of some kind, though she was no phase-smith to discern its purpose.

She did, however, know a phase-smith who could.

She let the body roll back down to the ground. “You were right to bring this to me.”

#

Selendis brought the body, stored in a stasis cell to prevent further degradation, to the laboratory Karax had built for himself in Aldera. Artanis, his sheer presence filling the room as befitted the

leader of the Daelaam, already waited there with the phase-smith; Selendis had thought it was best for him to see this firsthand. To her slight surprise, Talandar was also there, his massive, robotic Purifier body folded in on itself so he could squeeze between two banks of consoles and have a view of the table where she placed the stasis cell. The light from Karax's consoles glanced off the curving metal shells of his head and shoulders.

"Talandar was already paying me a visit," Karax explained. He was the shortest of them all, his head always tilted at an angle of curiosity that never left him. The three robotic tendrils, ending with extra hands, which he'd attached to the severed ends of his nerve cords, were always in motion even when he was still. "I thought there'd be no harm in his presence."

"I trust his insight," Artanis said. His tone alone indicated a wealth of trust and confidence.

"This is no great secret," Selendis said.

Karax gasped at the sight of the body; even if Artanis had declared him and all other protoss as Templar, he had the least experience with death of all of them.

"This is not something to be advertised, either," Artanis said as he gazed at the body. "What happened to him?"

Selendis explained what she had observed; as soon as the device was mentioned, Karax immediately collected his nerves. His extra robotic hands delicately turned the body and extracted the device, then began to clean it off.

Selendis continued, "Before I returned to Aldera, I spoke to some of the Khalai in the settlement. The dead one's name was Eranis and he was formerly Khalai caste. He had no family, no close bonds with his tribal bloodlines, no friends that any could speak of. He lived and died alone. No one seemed very surprised by his passing . . . or upset." Of the one-sided

conversations she conducted with the listless protoss of that settlement, that element had left her feeling the most frustrated.

“You sound disturbed, Selendis,” Artanis said.

“Are you not? But no, I am angry. Our numbers are few enough already. Why did none of them notice? Why do none of them care?”

“A good question. Was he so despised?”

“No. Nothing like that. It was as if they had been too long out of the sun and did not care to move.” She’d begun to wonder if there was a new kind of drug, but none of them smelled strange. “They did not act like protoss.”

Talandar shifted in the silence, then spoke. “When I awoke, I felt lost. There was no true Khala to comfort me,” he said. “I no longer knew who I was or what I was, and my purpose was unclear. I had never before or since felt so alone. And it would have been easy to become lost in that loneliness and forget the existence of anyone else, if I had not had an old friend”—he inclined the dome of his head slightly toward Artanis—“and my new friend”—then toward Karax—“to assure me otherwise.”

Selendis recalled the searing pain of cutting through her own nerve cords, and the sudden emptiness that had followed the loss of the Khala . . . being so abruptly and irrevocably severed from it. It had been better than losing herself in the eternal ocean of Amon’s hatred and rage, but it had still hurt like no other wound she had ever experienced, perhaps because it was a wound within her heart. It still hurt, at times.

“All of us have experienced this same . . . injury and yet we do not wander aimlessly.” She gestured toward the corpse. “And what of this? The loss of the Khala did not cause this.”

“It is part of the circumstances,” Talandar said.

“This is the cause,” Karax cut in, one of his robotic hands holding up the device, now clean. Without its coating of dried blood, it appeared to be a shell of unpolished silver metal, with wires of a slightly different hue weaving in and out of the surface. A still-flickering crystal pulsed within.

“And what is that?” Selendis asked.

“I’m not . . . entirely certain yet. But I can tell you two things.” Karax tapped the crystal. “One is that this is channeling void energy, though I don’t know why it’s not doing so at a steady rate. Perhaps it was damaged—”

“And second?” Artanis asked; despite the dire situation, his voice still held a tone of fond amusement for Karax.

“Second, yes.” Karax turned the device to reveal thin, needlelike projections. “It was at least partially integrated into his severed nerves. I have to study it to understand its real purpose . . . but if it was connected to his nerves and began to malfunction, that could have caused him horrific pain.”

“And thus he tried to claw it off,” Selendis said. That seemed a far more direct explanation than some sort of spiritual wound manifesting as profound self-harm. Yet how often was the simplest explanation true? The protoss were complex and multifaceted beings; it was impossible to have studied under Artanis without understanding this, to have led during the ever-shifting political grounds of the wars, to have observed the massive changes wrought by losing Aiur and then regaining it.

As Karax began a more meandering and detailed description of what he had already gleaned from the device, the doors to his lab opened, revealing a guard. “I am sorry, but I must interrupt,” he said.

“What is it?” Artanis asked.

“A body has been found,” the guard said. “The scene is . . . bloody.”

Where a terran might see coincidence or ill luck, Selendis sensed the undercurrent of something greater and far more worrying; she had no doubt Artanis felt it too. She took a step forward, but he raised one hand to stop her. “Talandar, you will investigate,” Artanis said. “See if their circumstances are the same . . . and send the body back here.”

“It would be my honor.” Talandar moved into the more open space of the lab, toward the door, and unfolded himself to his full great size.

“Karax, continue to work on this device,” Artanis said.

“Of course, my friend.”

“Report your findings to Selendis.”

While she might wish to pursue the investigation entirely herself, Selendis knew this was a more efficient use of time and resources, particularly when she still had her own duties to attend. “We shall see this matter concluded swiftly.”

#

Karax soon found himself in the company of a second body, sent in a stasis chamber by Talandar. Included was what little basic information the Purifier had found out: female, named Therun, formerly Templar caste. Her coloring identified her as most likely from the Venatir tribe.

She was more of a mess than the other corpse, and the blood that covered her was still tacky to the touch. This made cleaning off the device that she, too, had clamped on the severed ends of her nerve cord much easier, so that was what Karax focused on. The blood should not matter so much; it disturbed him on an emotional level, but it was more useful to think of the

bodies as biological machines that had malfunctioned so badly they had self-destructed. If he discovered what had caused this malfunction, he could prevent it from happening again.

The lab was quiet as he began his autopsy on the devices that had come from each body. The bustle of Aldera was shut entirely outside by the door and forcefields that allowed the waning afternoon light in but kept out all noise and dust. All that accompanied his own mutterings were the hum of power cores and consoles, the whirl of his extra robotic hands as they held tools or steadied his work.

The second device was superficially identical to the first: unpolished metal casing, unspecialized neural interface wiring that Karax personally found rather sloppy, and an uneven energy transmission matrix that explained the fluctuations of void energy from within. But when he began to examine the two side by side, he found distinct differences in the wiring, the matrix, and the computational modules that he hadn't yet unraveled the purpose for. These devices had been made by hand rather than fabricated, like the phase-smith was still searching for the perfect proof of concept that allowed a design to become a true reality.

This particularly, Karax did not like. The conceptual belonged in the simulator, not installed in a protoss's nerves. During the battles, his colleagues had been called upon occasionally to experiment and iterate on live subjects, but that was a move of desperation in the face of overwhelming necessity. The desperate times were supposed to be over.

The examination also revealed a sense of evolution. The second device corrected obvious flaws from the first: neural junctions that had been overloaded or energy channels that must have once been whole but had become warped. The second device's symptoms of malfunction were still obvious, but different; failure points had been patched and thus new failure points had been found.

He had set both devices down on a table and retreated to his console to begin simulations when a shift in the air of the room told him he was no longer alone. No one who had business in his lab was that quiet; really, no Khalai that Karax knew was that quiet either.

Karax turned to see a female Nerazim standing over the devices, turning one of them lightly with her claws. She was unusually short, even for a female, her skin dusky as night. She looked at him sharply, and in a blink she was at his throat. Her green eyes blazed. “So you’re the thief I’ve been hunting. I didn’t expect to find you hiding in the great Artanis’s shadow.”

Karax carefully raised his hands, even as one of his robotic appendages quietly began to extract a knife from under the console. He didn’t trust himself to be able to charge a psionic blade under these circumstances. “No thief. You may have noticed the bodies?” The fact that she didn’t so much as twitch told him that she had. “That’s where the devices came from, and I’m here in an official capacity to determine what they did. Perhaps one of them is your thief?”

He felt the weight of her mind against his, her regard. Finally, she took a step back and returned to the table. “These are copies,” she said. She held one up, her tone becoming disgusted and bitter. “Very poor copies. You Khalai do love to take what isn’t yours and poorly remake it so you can call it your own.”

“There is no joy in taking the invention of another,” Karax protested.

“Maybe you believe so,” the Nerazim said. “But some of your fellows certainly like to plate our work over with the style of the Golden Age.”

He throttled his urge to argue. *One thing at a time.* “What is your name?” he asked.

“Nerath.”

“And I am Karax. Are you a phase-smith?”

She set down the device and regarded Karax, amused. “If we must use *your* words, then I

suppose that's close enough to describe my family. They are the ones wronged by this thief."

That brought much of the conversation into focus. "We'll both get further on our individual problems by working together."

"And how might you help me?" Her tone was mocking.

"I have resources from Hierarch Artanis. The greatest barrier I face right now is in understanding the purpose of these devices. Once I know that, I can understand how they were altered and narrow down who among the Khalai phase-smiths could do that kind of work. Give me the information I need, and I will deliver a list of suspects to both you and Executor Selendis."

Nerath regarded him suspiciously for what felt like a long time. "There is no harm in working multiple sides, I suppose. These devices were meant to enhance one's connection to the void . . . and regulate the energies to prevent a void shock from incapacitating the user." Nerath idly spun one of the devices on the table. "Selendis had better hope she finds them first."

#

With the body of the dead Templar on its way to Karax, Talandar looked around her dwelling. It wasn't so different from what he thought of as "home" within the memories of his former self, Fenix: armor, clean and ready for battle on its stand; weapons hung in a place of honor on the walls; a few pieces of art (not to his personal taste) and books; the minimum of furniture required for comfort while resting. This didn't seem aimless in the way Selendis had spoken of the other dead one, but rather like the dwelling of someone who was waiting for a battle that would now never come.

As he built his catalogue of items, Talandar spoke through the network that connected all Purifiers, that pale facsimile of the Khala. Though now, it was far more than the Khalai had.

While his greatest foundation in life was the purpose he had discovered and the name he had chosen, the connection he had found to the other Purifiers also offered him the sense of being enfolded into one people again. Even without the emotional wave, the connection itself was a balm for loneliness—the knowledge that any whispered question would be heard by many others like him.

The question he asked now was if any of the other Purifiers had seen Khalai acting strangely, or witnessed a device to the specifications he could offer. The answers he received back were swift and uniformly negative with regards to the device. When it came to the behavior of any of the protoss, however, the Purifiers had no answers at all.

We prefer to keep to ourselves, Clolarion summarized, to general agreement. While we trust the word of Artanis that we will not be slaves again, there is little crossover between our societies. We have different needs. No reason for our paths to cross, beyond when one might ask a favor of us in the effort of reconstruction.

I have observed them on occasion, Mojo offered. Though I cannot provide any insight into their behavior, because their actions change as soon as they feel themselves watched by one of us.

We are all protoss, Talandar said firmly.

So are the Khalai and the Nerazim, and that does not make them all of one mind, Clolarion said. There was no malice in his statement, only dry fact.

Talandar kept his sigh of frustration off the network. In situations such as these, the only way to lead was by example. He loaded all of his observations and scans of the dead protoss's dwelling to one of Karax's terminals for later reference and then went out into the street.

The flow of foot traffic shifted as soon as he was outside. Respectful distance, certainly;

he was aware that his metal form took up a lot more room than the flesh body he once had; having four legs rather than two was only the start. But the way the other protoss looked at him . . . this *felt* like more than an issue of space. Rather than a quick glance of acknowledgment, he was on the receiving end of looks that ranged from curious to sorrowful to wary, the way any warrior might regard an unfamiliar but large machine. While those on the street were familiar and ordinary to him, he was plainly strange to them, no matter how he might feel within himself. It was a subtle and damaging kind of alienation, and perhaps another reason the Purifiers had chosen to keep to themselves. He had not noticed this before, perhaps because he spent most of his time with either the Purifiers or the Daelaam; the latter were all familiar with him from their time on the *Spear of Adun*.

Talandar set his disquiet aside; he still had a duty to perform. Therun had left more of an imprint of her life than Eranis had, at least; there were names for Talandar to seek out. He warped first to the other side of the city to seek out her father; perhaps family ties had strengthened with the end of the Khala. The old protoss that Talandar located, sitting on a bench in the fading sunlight, stared at him with narrowed eyes.

“I bring sad news of your daughter, Therun,” Talandar said. “She has—” He realized then that the normal words, the observation that she had joined her ancestors in the Khala, were no longer true. With only a slight hitch, he continued, “Joined the stars. Have you spoken with her, of late?”

“Why does a Purifier care to know?”

“I am charged with investigating her passing.”

“Ha. Even if I trusted your intent, I would have no answer for you. We haven’t met since our return to Aiur.” Without another word, the old protoss stood and walked away.

He isn't ancient enough to have been present for the rebellion of the first Purifiers, Talandar thought. No one was. But he'd no doubt heard the stories, and perhaps that was what made him so unfriendly. He turned his attention to the next name on his list, belonging to another former Templar who had served as a zealot alongside Therun.

This protoss he located near one of the archive buildings. He seemed to find Talandar's presence more a reason to wonder. "I did not know that you spoke!" was his first comment.

Talandar stopped, taken aback. "What?"

"I knew of Purifiers as our greatest machines of war. But we thought Artanis had sent you back into stasis after reclaiming Aiur."

"No?" Talandar regained his mental footing quickly. "I come seeking—"

"Don't Purifiers have all the knowledge of the protoss loaded into them?"

This protoss's strange enthusiasm was somehow more off-putting than the hostility Talandar had faced before. "You will let me speak," Talandar commanded, raising one arm—the one that carried the energy cannon—for emphasis.

"Of course. I'm sorry." The protoss cringed back, but only slightly.

"I have—"

"Is it true, then, that the Purifiers have become a force for espionage, and watch us through the drones?"

Eventually, Talandar was able to get out his questions, but he received no useful answers regarding the matter of Therun—only a disturbing education on the current conspiracy theories filtering through Aldera. Perhaps it was easy for made-up stories to fill the void left by the self-isolation of the Purifiers.

Talandar continued down his list of names and was rewarded with frustration at every

turn. Some stared at him and seemed too distracted by his presence to provide useful answers. A few were hostile. Some were hectically curious—those were his least favorite and wasted the largest portion of his time. Talandar was about to simply start battering down doors near Therun’s dwelling when the second-to-last name on his list, Maitana, yielded useful information.

She was formerly Templar caste; he could tell that much by the look of her, though now she wore quite shabby robes and appeared unwell, her skin pale and spotted and too thin, obvious even in the dying light of evening. She listened patiently as he began his now-practiced recitation of the news of Therun’s death. How terrible that felt, that the words were almost devoid of meaning because he had spoken them so many times.

“Perhaps Therun will find a battle worth her mettle wherever she has gone,” Maitana said.

“She felt she had no purpose?” He had felt listless, without a mission of his own—and galvanized when he had found it.

“Though there are battles still to be fought, we have not been called to combat for some time now. We are not Khalai caste, to lay stones or work forges. We followed our executors into battle for honor and glory.”

“Honor is the truth of your self,” Talandar said; this was another thing he had thought his way through, in the days after they had retaken Aiur. “Battle isn’t the only deed there is.”

“What would a Purifier know of this?”

“More than you imagine. We are warriors, like all protoss. We have made it our new purpose to rebuild, and protect, and grow. You can, as well.”

“I . . . will think on what you have said.” Maitana sounded a little ashamed now.

“A small victory is still a victory,” Talandar offered. “One step is still an advance. And

placing one stone upon another makes the wall stronger and protects those within.” Observing Karax had taught him that. “Did Therun feel as you do?”

“Yes, though she went looking for purpose, while I have . . . wallowed in its absence.”

“Did she find what she was looking for?”

“She spoke of a new temple. To replace all we had lost. She wished me to come with her.”

“And did you?” This was the most information anyone had offered yet.

“Once, though I did not go inside. I didn’t like the look of it, and told her so. She didn’t speak to me again after that.”

“Show me where it was.”

Talandar followed Maitana to the northern outskirts of Aldera, where the shadows had since grown long. It wasn’t as shabby as the place the first body had been found, but it felt like the skeleton of the city, waiting for its flesh to grow out. Maitana led him to an abandoned building that didn’t fit his mental image of any temple—it looked more like a machine shed, and his scanners confirmed the presence of oils and fuel vapors. The inside was utterly empty. “Was anyone else here, when Therun brought you?”

“Yes. A female of the Khalai caste. She was very tall. I remember that. And her skin was very pale.”

Talandar was already sending that information back to Karax even as he said, “Thank you. And if you wish to further discuss the new battles we face, I would welcome speaking with you again.”

#

To Karax’s relief, Nerath had left to continue her own investigation after giving him the full

specifications of the original device—though not before extracting the abjectly insulting promise that he not copy it. He also noted with annoyance that she had not promised to share with him any new information she might unearth. But it was easier to concentrate on the task at hand without her playing with his tools or poking at his terminals while airing her grievances about the Khalai, so he considered it an acceptable bargain.

He turned the new device this way and that with one set of robotic hands as the others scrolled through results on his terminals. This was a device to channel void energy, but here were additional circuits more akin to Purifiers' technology, and here, a modification that, while imperfect, malfunctioning, and partly melted, seemed an attempt to convert psionic energies to void energies. Was it to be a weapon? Why then have it anchored to the severed nerve cords . . . ?

“*Oh*,” he said into the quiet mechanical murmurings of his lab. It was an exclamation equal parts horror, disgust, and admiration for the mad, impossible genius of it. With the Khala gone, was someone truly trying to forge a new psionic link, mating it with energy from the void? Hastily, he set up a new simulation, one with these assumptions.

“Karax,” Talandar called; he was distant, probably still out in the city.

“Yes?” Karax glanced out the window; the entire afternoon had melted away in the course of his work.

“You sound disturbed, my friend.”

“I *feel* disturbed. I will tell you when I've reached my full conclusions. What have you found?”

“A great deal, though little of immediate use.” Talandar sounded thoughtful. “Do you know of any phase-smiths who are female, unusually tall, and have pale skin?”

Karax laughed. “A physical description is not as useful as you might think. I know most of the other phase-smiths and scientists from reading their research.” But even as Talandar muttered something about protoss who needed to spend more time outside of their labs, Karax thought of someone he’d met once who did fit that description. He ran a query on her name, Lantharis; she lived within Aldera. “I may know of one.”

“Where?”

Karax hesitated. Should he call on Selendis and Nerath? But he wasn’t certain; statistically, there could be a great many tall, pale female protoss, and no doubt some of them had once been Khalai caste and some percentage of those had gone into technical arts. Better to confirm this wild guess first. He told Talandar the location of her laboratory, then added, “I will meet you in the street outside.”

Talandar was already there when Karax warped the relatively short distance; no doubt he’d left immediately, while Karax had required a few minutes to make certain everything was secure in his lab. The massive Purifier was doing his best to be inconspicuous, which was . . . not working. Quite a few protoss were watching him from their windows or staring curiously as they passed by. The area was an unremarkable one, a neighborhood filled with artisans. Artanis might have abolished the caste system, but habits of a long-lived people were also long in the changing.

“It does not appear occupied,” Talandar noted. “I have seen no energy emissions.”

“She might not be home for the day,” Karax said.

“Then I will let us in.” The armor plating on a battleship was no match for a Purifier; the door offered no resistance at all . . . and opened onto a scene of chaos.

The fear that they were about to find another body fell crushingly on Karax for a moment, but he quickly realized there was no scent of blood or death. Calmer, he could read the

scatterings of metal and circuit components, the overturned papers in drifts, and begin to find the important absences in the mess: her terminals and tools, gone.

“Was she attacked?” Talandar asked.

“No.” The pattern of the wreckage was clear. “She packed in haste and ran.”

“From us?”

“A good working hypothesis.” Karax used his robotic hands to begin sorting through the papers, reading them at a glance. Some were pieces of plans—nothing to do with the device itself, but he could see her hand in it. Then he found a few scattered pages covered with dark, frantic Khalani characters. Much of it was incoherent rambling, but one sentence repeated several times caught his eye: “*Artanis has failed us. He has murdered us. He has killed our souls. I will find a new Khala. I will save us.*”

He flipped the paper away, feeling dirty and disturbed. “I was right . . . that *is* the purpose of the device, to rebuild the amputated Khala with new technology. This is a terrible idea! We severed our connection for a reason, and the way she’s going about it . . . she will drive her victims mad trying. It seems you were right, my friend.”

“We were both right, in our own ways,” Talandar said.

The time to discuss that would be later, Karax decided. “I will inform Selendis and Nerath.”

“Who?”

Karax rubbed his forehead. “I knew I’d forgotten something. I will explain in a moment.”

#

Selendis felt relieved when Karax sent for her. While her considerable mental focus had been brought to bear on her more mundane duties, the knowledge of the investigation and the deaths

had nibbled at the edge of her consciousness. Not enough to interfere with her tasks in an obvious way, but enough to leave her feeling short-tempered and impatient.

“But you do not know where this Lantharis has gone,” Selendis confirmed as she examined the ravings left behind. It would have been perhaps not trivial, but fairly simple, to find Lantharis when they were all still part of the Khala. Now, it was all too easy for those who did not wish to be found to hide and lie—*Like the Dark Templar*, she couldn’t help but think—another social wrinkle that they needed to address.

She’d never had it highlighted so profoundly before what a messy and slow process building a new social order apparently was.

“We do not, Executor,” Karax said.

“Though we have an idea of what social trail she might leave,” Talandar said. “The search must be widened, and quickly.”

Selendis contemplated a few crooked lines of Khalani, calling Artanis *the great traitor*, *the destroyer*, and dropped the paper on the ground. She wiped her claws, as if it might have left some residue. “Then it will be done. I will—”

“Listen to news from a mysterious yet beautiful hunter?” a new voice asked. The air in the abandoned laboratory stirred.

Selendis turned to see a Dark Templar, one she had not met before, standing at the doorway. She was short and small, wrapped in a cloak, and wearing a face covering of a blue so deep it was nearly black, the color of the sky just as the stars began to appear. “Who are you?” Selendis demanded.

“Oh, your little phase-smith didn’t warn you?”

Karax hadn’t, and Selendis intended to have a few pointed words with him about it once

they were alone. “No.” The general smugness of the Dark Templar had always gotten on her nerves, and this one was no exception.

“I was about to tell you,” Karax protested, spreading his hands helplessly.

The Dark Templar offered an ironic little bow. “I am Nerath. We’re investigating the same problem . . . from different sides. Murder for you; thievery for me.”

Selendis gave Karax a look sharp enough that it made him hunch his shoulders.

“Explain.” After both his explanation and the drawling commentary of Nerath, she said, “And what news do you offer?”

“In the course of my own investigation this day, I overheard a male Khalai mentioning a ‘new temple.’ Out of respect for your own efforts, I thought I would share.”

Or she had not known the significance of it until she had eavesdropped on our conversation, Selendis thought. “What do you want?”

“One people, one purpose, yes?” Nerath asked mockingly.

Selendis simply stared at her in response.

“I wish only for the thievery to end.”

Selendis was in no mood for verbal sparring. “You will take us to him and we shall question him.”

“Aiur protoss have no subtlety,” Nerath said. “Do you think, if he truly believes in this new religion of his, he would yield to hostile questioning rather than become a martyr?”

“They believe enough to allow their bodies to be altered,” Talandar observed.

“Then what do you suggest?” Selendis asked.

“We watch and see where he will lead us.”

#

While Talandar had initially volunteered to join Nerath in her surveillance of the male protoss, Selendis had declared that task hers in a tone the Purifier knew better than to argue with. She did not trust the Dark Templar or what she claimed was her purpose here, and Nerath's attitude, the way she always seemed to find everything just a little humorous, was another annoyance. They sat together on the roof of a shop, watching the street below; the male they tracked had gone into a dwelling a few doors down and had been there for several hours already. It was very possible that he was asleep and they would be here all night.

"I think the Purifier would have been much more pleasant company," Nerath said after she'd made yet another observation about a passerby in the street and Selendis had responded only with a grunt of acknowledgment.

"You are welcome to wait with him at Karax's lab," Selendis said.

"He seemed to have a sense of humor," Nerath continued as if she hadn't spoken.

"You talk too much." The worst part was that some of her comments had been a *little* clever.

"If you listened better, I wouldn't have to use as many words."

Selendis fixed Nerath with a sharp look.

The Dark Templar simply spread her hands in a gesture of calculated innocence and continued, "I am here to help you, Selendis, and in so doing, help my people."

Selendis snorted. "I have no doubt of the latter."

"Such hostility," Nerath said. "I'm wounded."

"*Your* people," she said, borrowing Nerath's mocking tone. "What of *our* people?" It was an unfair and not entirely honest thing to say, but her own frustration and worries spoke. Selendis knew it would pain Artanis, that she still mentally divided the protoss into the Khalai and the

Nerazim. As far as she was concerned, the Nerazim hadn't made much of an effort to change that.

“What of them? There is no *us* if the ways of the Nerazim must be destroyed for the Khalai to survive.”

“Very melodramatic,” Selendis said dryly. “No one seeks to destroy you.”

Nerath laughed. “Unity is not found in one remaking another in their image.” As Selendis tried to formulate a retort through a shock of denial and anger, Nerath made a cutting motion with one hand, her entire posture shifting to sharp alert. “Our quarry moves. We will finish this argument later.” In the street below, the male Khalai was headed in the opposite direction from which he'd come.

“We certainly will,” Selendis all but snarled.

“Where to next, I wonder,” Nerath mused as they followed him at a distance.

“It's beyond late. Perhaps to his home.”

“Wrong direction,” Nerath said. “I think a clandestine meeting where he will acquire some sort of shocking black market item.”

Selendis felt amused despite her herself. “You have a low opinion of his honor.”

“I've been watching him longer than you have. You should have seen where I found him.”

The male Khalai did, in fact, lead them to a dark alley. While they watched at a safe distance, a door opened for him. A tall, remarkably pale female protoss let him in. “I will call for Talandar and Karax,” Selendis said.

“Tell them they'd best be fast if they want there to be anything left,” Nerath said as she drew out her warp blade.

“Nerath—!” Selendis began, but the Dark Templar was already gone.

In the few seconds it took Selendis to call for Talandar and Karax, Nerath had already slipped inside the building. And then it seemed Lantharis had activated some sort of security system, because the door refused to yield to Selendis when she got to it. Her psionic blade did no good either, the energy crackling to nothing against a forcefield. As she cursed and searched for other ways to enter, Talandar and Karax arrived.

“The door!” she shouted.

Talandar took a few steps back to give himself room to charge. Energy surged through him as he struck the door, and a blindingly bright crackle of energy indicated the forcefield overloading. With a despairing metallic groan, the door bent inward and collapsed.

Selendis leaped around the Purifier’s bulky form before the door had even fully hit the floor. She found herself in a small antechamber, with steps leading downward; from below she heard Nerath shout, “You will not steal from us again!”

Another voice answered in a shout: “It is divine purpose!”

With Karax and Talandar at her back, Selendis leaped down the stairs, her psionic blade returning to bright life. At the bottom of the stairs, Nerath had Lantharis, who towered over her yet still cowered away, backed up against a work terminal. A network of circuitry and crystals laced the walls of the room. Beyond them, in a second room of the lower floor, there was a table, and the male Khalai they had followed lay on it, apparently unconscious, a strange instrument half through his nerve cord.

“Nerath, you will not—” Selendis began.

Lantharis did something, her hand passing over the terminal. Energy surged through the room. Nerath let out a strangled shriek and collapsed to the floor. Selendis felt the energy strike

her as a telepathic howling in her mind, drowning out all thoughts, and something clawing, looking for purchase, not exactly like but horribly similar to the presence of Amon. She was dimly aware of her own scream as she staggered and dropped to her hands and knees.

The air around her felt like thick fluid, her perception of time coming in uneven spurts. She saw Lantharis brandish a psionic blade, saw her start to lunge at Nerath's prone form. Selendis thought, of all ridiculous things, *But we haven't finished our argument*. She used all her will to force her muscles into motion, to launch herself over Nerath and bring her psionic blade up to parry.

It was all she could do, then, to hold on.

#

Talandar had read a surge of energy—*void energy*, his systems warned him, though not so much as to overrun his buffers—and around him Nerath, Selendis, and Karax had fallen. Selendis, energy streaming from her eyes, threw herself forward over the Dark Templar's prone body, her blade raised just enough to deflect the blow. In the instant of sparking energy as blade met blade, Talandar struck, his massive arms whirling to throw Lantharis across the room, away from the terminal. "Karax, the terminal," Talandar commanded.

Lantharis got back to her feet with a wordless snarl; she'd obviously had some combat training, though she was no Templar. Talandar closed the distance quickly, cycling a crackling blast of energy through his systems that shattered the shield she'd brought up. She blocked one of his fists with her blade, the psionic energy dissipating with little more than a wisp of smoke against his armor. His other fist crashed into the side of her head, stunning her. As she staggered, he drove another blow directly into the shortened ends of her nerve cords and she collapsed. Not wanting to take chances, he called in a probe to bring a stasis chamber and stuffed her limp form

into it.

Talandar turned to see Karax typing unsteadily at the terminal, using his robotic hands, which were steadier than his flesh ones. He struck it with one fist, and then he and Selendis both sagged as if in great relief. “I will . . . have to confiscate this for further examination,” Karax said.

“What happened?” Talandar asked.

“I’m not entirely certain. But it was very painful,” Karax said. “And I think you partially shielded me. So, thank you.”

“It felt like—like she was clawing into my mind, somehow. If that is even a distant fraction of what Therun and Eranis experienced, I understand their deaths.” Selendis, risen to her knees, bent to examine Nerath. “She is only unconscious.”

“Karax, will you . . .” Talandar gestured toward the unconscious male Khalai on the table.

Though he still rubbed his forehead with one hand, Karax was steady as he walked to the table. He carefully removed the instrument; immediately the prone male opened his eyes and gasped. “Can you hear me?”

He looked at Karax, at Talandar. “But what—”

“You are now safe,” Talandar said.

“I’m alone!” If anything, the male Khalai seemed even more agitated. He sat up and his hands went to the back of his head, the severed nerve cords still whole. “Why did you stop us? Why?” He flung himself at Talandar in a movement far too weak to be any real threat.

Talandar easily held him at arm’s length as he wailed brokenly. “This, I did not expect,” Talandar said to Karax.

Nerath uttered a dry, painful laugh and pushed herself onto one elbow. “Did you think you would receive gratitude for depriving a fool of his false hope?”

Put that way, Talandar found he could not argue.

#

Before leaving Lantharis’s building, Karax stripped it of everything he found immediately relevant, using a probe to warp it away, and then sealed it so he could finish cleaning it out the next day. The ache had nearly left his head by the time he finished with that task. Talandar had left quickly to deliver Lantharis’s still-raving would-be victim to the healers, since no one had really known what else should be done with him. Selendis had escorted away both the stasis chamber and Nerath, whom she let lean on her shoulder.

Karax was the last to arrive in his own laboratory. Artanis was already partway through listening to Selendis’s report, peppered with occasional commentary from Nerath that seemed to amuse and annoy them both by turns.

“Do you have anything to add, Karax?” Artanis asked, his attention an almost palpable weight.

“Not until I’ve given all of this”—Karax swept one of his robotic hands to indicate the disorderly pile he’d already transported to his work tables—“a thorough examination.”

Artanis turned his attention to the stasis chamber that held Lantharis’s form. He flicked the stasis field off; after a quick instant to orient herself, Lantharis’s gaze fixed on him and she let out a low hiss filled with such hatred that Karax recoiled. “*You*. Traitor.”

“I have betrayed no one,” Artanis said calmly.

“You murdered the soul of your people, and their bodies will follow if I do not save them,” Lantharis retorted. “The protoss were not made to wander alone, without purpose and

connection, and they will die if I do not save them.”

“Yet the Nerazim have managed just fine for a millennium,” Nerath said, sharp-edged and mocking.

“Soulless apostates,” Lantharis spat. “The Khala will be reborn by my hand, greater than you will ever know, and the new Khalai will rise—”

Artanis turned the stasis field back on. “I do not think she is interested in listening,” he observed. “Is that what she sought to do—recreate the Khala?”

“Ultimately, yes, using what she had stolen from the Nerazim to route it through the void. It’s . . . a mad design,” Karax said.

“But there were those eager to try anyway,” Artanis said.

Nerath appeared unsurprised by the revelation. “The Aiur protoss spent so much time as herd animals, no wonder some of you are still eager to follow a false leader to the slaughter.”

“Careful, Nerath,” Artanis said.

“I may not like her words, but I understand her point,” Talandar said. “There is a wound in our people. Great pain leads to desperation . . . and while that may bring victory in an unwinnable battle, it may just as easily lead to self-destruction.”

“The desperate will try anything to heal themselves,” mused Karax. He could no longer disagree with Talandar; while the devices had been the immediate cause of the deaths, the problem went far deeper. “Ascertaining the root cause of failure is often the most difficult part of a repair. We know the problem now. Next, we find a solution.”

Nerath scoffed. “You cannot ‘repair’ the lives of others from above. Each must find their own path or the struggle is meaningless.”

“Your way would let more like Therun and Eranis die,” Karax said, repulsed.

“In the end, we each stand alone,” Nerath said.

“That is not our way.” Selendis’s voice was quiet but filled with fury. “It has never been, and it will not be.”

“Your way changed when you ended your connection to the Khala,” Nerath retorted. “Even if you’re slow to realize it.”

“Unity is not found in one remaking another in their image, Nerath. *You* told me that,” Selendis said.

Nerath bowed her head, seemingly abashed. “The questions you ask yourselves now are the ones we asked when we were forced from Aiur.”

“So that means you have the answers?” Selendis retorted.

“It means that there *are* answers waiting on the other side of this challenge,” Nerath said with uncharacteristic softness, looking up at Selendis. “If the Nerazim are to be a part of something new that does not expect us to give up our full selves . . . we’re agile enough to bend with the wind.”

“We must make a new way,” Artanis said. “And I see now that simply declaring the caste system finished, or severing our link to the Khala, was only an ending. Beginning something new requires more from each of us.”

“Building is certainly more difficult than destroying,” Karax said.

“And Nerath is right that each must find their own path in this new world, no matter how difficult,” Talandar said. “No one from outside can tell you who you are. You must discover it yourself.”

“This turns us in a circle,” Karax said, annoyed. “You said before, your way was eased by friends. But I cannot simply . . . *build* friends for those who need them.”

“Many do not know how to connect to each other without the Khala; it is true. I have also noticed that the Purifiers keep too much to themselves,” Talandar said, sounding amused. “We come already assembled.”

Artanis laughed. “A creative solution, old friend. But there are not that many Purifiers—”

“And not all protoss would welcome us,” Talandar said.

“It’s a problem that has no single solution,” Karax said. He tilted his hands toward Nerath. “It may also help if our people look toward a new future rather than continuing to borrow from the past. This, at least, I can work on with the other phase-smiths. Creating work together builds its own sort of community.”

“It would certainly be more welcoming,” Nerath observed.

“Working together to a common goal forges connection. Connection . . . ameliorates loneliness, at least.” Karax glanced at Selendis, expecting her to have her own ideas to offer; she had a different viewpoint, after all. But she remained silent.

“I am not so foolish as to think such a great problem can be fixed in a single night,” Artanis said. “Take the steps you have thought of. I will set the Daelaam to finding more ways to knit us together so that when next an individual falls from their path, there will be many prepared to catch them.”

#

Evening had become the time for funerals, in the wake of the return to Aiur and the end of the Khala. There was a fundamental spiritual symmetry to it; the protoss were connected so tightly to their sun. If they could no longer hold the comfort of knowing the dead had joined their ancestors in the Khala, they could fall back on the more obscurely mystical idea that, with their sun now set, they would join the stars of the wider universe and perhaps find a new life there.

Selendis could find comfort in the idea of a passage to a new journey, and new battles. The protoss still had a place in the wider universe, an inextricable link to it, and this was a way to make that manifest. Yet it still felt hollow, devoid of presence. Without the fundamental connection of the Khala, all deaths were lonely ones, and this more than others.

Therun's family, though estranged according to Talandar's notes, had accepted responsibility to see to her body. No one had wanted Eranis—no, that was too active of a sentiment. Rather, no one had cared enough to accept his body or to see to his final journey, and so Selendis had chosen to take on this burden herself. She could have held his rites at the central temple that had been built around the newly made psionic matrix. But instead she chose to return him to where she had found him, half in the hope that this would galvanize the other protoss into some action, and half as a rebuke to them for caring so little about their fellow.

A few had wandered by and considered the chamber that would atomize his body with dulled curiosity. None had stayed. Selendis stood, alone, and felt as empty of answers as the area she had chosen for Eranis's funeral. Artanis, Karax, Talandar, and even Nerath had all had ideas on how to address this problem they had discovered . . . but not her, and she knew Artanis expected better of her than that. *She* expected better of herself.

This was only one death of the many she'd encountered in her life. Selendis wasn't certain why it had sunk so deeply into her spirit. Perhaps it was the loneliness of it. The pointlessness of it. Eranis hadn't died in the glory of battle or the comfort of old age. He'd been taken through violence caused by his own hand, in the throes of a pain he didn't know how to fight. Every detail of it only made her angrier, and it was an anger without a true target. She could blame him for his own death, or blame Lantharis, but her mind instinctively addressed the situation from more angles. There had been many failures before the final one that caused him to

claw his own skin apart.

Perhaps that was the problem; too many failures, and no clear enemy.

As she watched the sun descend toward its rest, a sudden stirring in the air told her she was not alone.

“Everything I’ve heard of you would indicate you’re not the sentimental sort, Selendis,” Nerath said, face tilting up toward her.

“Rumor is not the same as truth.”

“I didn’t expect you to celebrate my presence, but you sound quite angry,” Nerath said. “Is it because I have rudely not thanked you for saving my life?”

Selendis sighed. “I am not angry with you.” She couldn’t help but add, since Nerath liked needling her so much, “You are not as important to me as you might wish.”

Nerath laughed. “My heart breaks. Then who is it? The mad one in the chamber?”

Selendis dismissed Lantharis with a flick of her hand. That was an enemy she could understand, a problem they had solved together. “This is the place Eranis lived since our return to Aiur. And none here care about him or his death.”

“Did they tell you that?”

“Their lack of interest speaks volumes.”

“Does it? Or have you Khalai forgotten how to listen?”

Annoyed, Selendis strode over to one of the nearby, shabby dwellings; a thin, older protoss slumped on a crate in front of it. “You,” she said to him. “Did you know the one who died?”

“Eranis?” He shrugged. “Not well.”

“Did anyone visit with him before his death?”

“I don’t know. Probably not.”

Selendis glanced at Nerath, gesturing with one hand.

Nerath said, still amused and only to Selendis, “Your Khala really did atrophy your ability to converse deeply.”

The Khala had given them emotional unity, a deep ocean of empathy that flowed below all words and connected them. That had been a strength, not a weakness. But now all they had were those easily misinterpreted words, and it felt very shallow in comparison. She considered the protoss in front of her, wondering what depths might lay under his words, hating that she felt so separated from him that she could feel this frustrated. How to get him to speak more? And if she understood no emotion from him, she had offered him none in return, except her impatience communicated in sharp questions. She built her next question after much internal deliberation and spoke as gently as she could: “It appears to me as if you do not care what has happened. Am I wrong?”

He looked up at her, his gaze not exactly sharper but perhaps more intent. “It feels like it does not matter. That . . . we do not matter.” Selendis felt the urge to interrupt and disagree, but she forced herself to simply listen to the answer as he continued, slow and halting: “We were all Khalai caste, and we knew our place in the Khala. And now there is no Khala and there is no Khalai caste, and we have been told we are all Templar now even though none of us ever sought that. And we cannot even share our sadness or confusion. So what does Eranis’s death matter? We will all die just as alone and confused.”

When she was certain he was done speaking, Selendis said, “The Daelaam did not know of your isolation. But we do now. And you will not remain alone.” And how to accomplish that? She had no answers yet.

“I do not expect anything to change,” he said. “But I thank you for listening.”

Selendis returned to Eranis’s body, Nerath following her like a shadow. “This is a problem I cannot fight,” she admitted, not bothering to hide her frustration. The former Khalai caste were being forced to rethink their place in the world; until now, she had thought her own transition easy. All had been raised to be Templar; she was already Templar. But the meaning of Templar itself, too, had to evolve.

“Striking with a blade is much easier,” Nerath agreed. “I don’t envy you this task. But . . . I think you are stubborn enough to see it through, and I may try to help. In my own way.”

“I won’t thank you until I see if we are friends on the other side of you helping,” Selendis said, but she thought of earlier, of Nerath’s promise that there *were* answers.

“I am truly annoyed that you already know me so well,” Nerath said. She did not sound annoyed.

“It is as you said, one people, one purpose.”

Nerath laughed, a sound that started with surprise and, devoid of its habitual irony, became warm and almost musical. It was a sound Selendis thought she might like, though she certainly wouldn’t say so.

As they stood, watching the clouds slowly drift and take on the pink and orange of sunset, Selendis found the words that had been gnawing at her, that she had not known how to express before without the ease of the Khala’s empathy. Strange, that it would be easier to say them to Nerath than Artanis. Perhaps it was because she was afraid to disappoint him—and because Nerath had her own skill at listening, learned from birth as a Nerazim. “Artanis said that without the Khala, we would be free. But if this is freedom, why do I mourn?”

“Can both things not be true?” Nerath asked, and Selendis heard no hint of mockery in

her voice. She reached out to lightly rest her hand on Selendis's shoulder, an offer of comfort that Selendis chose to accept in spite of her own uncertainty.

Karax had been right, and wrong. Endings were *swift*; that did not make them easier. And beginnings were even more difficult, but Selendis had never shied from a hard battle, or from learning a new way to fight. Without the Khala she might still feel alone at times, but she knew she was not; she had friends old . . . and new.

The sun dipped below the hills, making the sky a wash of red and purple. As Selendis triggered the process to destroy Eranis's body, she saw that the one she'd spoken to had crept closer to bear witness, along with a few others from the settlement.

She opened the chamber; a beam of light that was all that remained of Eranis, broken to its purest elements, shot up into the sky. In a moment, it was shining dust, lost among the pinpoint lights beginning to show in the darkness. "He'll drift among the stars now."

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