

STARCRRAFT®

QUALIA PRIME

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Poker wasn't his best forte, but he was going to give it another try anyway. After years of living in this ramshackled spacecraft called the Renegade, Markus Rattai was on the verge of collapse. "Go pirate," his friends had told him joyfully following the desperate evacuation of Mar Sara; as if this was the only getaway possible to a successful life again. With time, he accepted that it was.

After the tragedy, piracy would become his inescapable destiny. Only if his fellow crewmates knew about it, they would call his the story of a Greek tragicomedy.

Before the Mar Sara apocalypse, Markus enjoyed a quiet family life there and a wealthy one too. He owned an industrial plant building CF/A-17 Wraith starfighters for the Confederacy of Man. Life was easy. As long as there would be rebels to fend off and problems to be solved with laser blasts, his military contracts would keep flowing. Then, the day came when the land grew creep and heavens rained fire. Ironically, only the Sons of Korhal came to help, if you could call that *help*. In Mar Sara, he left behind more than a shattered world and a family. He left his life.

After that point he wasn't just a refugee anymore. He became a leftover ordinance; an aggregation of breathing organic matter that nobody really knew what to do with. Right from the start, living with the rebels made his job experience obsolete. He had unwillingly contacted a rebel faction branded as terrorist by the Confederacy, but now to the eyes of that corrupted government, he was just another one of them. At the same time, though, he couldn't leave them because staying with the insurgents exposed him to their secrets, their hidden bases and plans. Leader Mengsk and his minions were not going to let him off the hook easily so he could run around the galaxy risking their organization's existence. Before he could even blink, Markus found himself in a prisoner's existence. Of course he got pressured to join the incipient rebellion under duress; Arcturus Mengsk in person even came to shake his hand, but nobody could disguise his true social status. Soon after, the Confederacy fell, but the war raged on unabated.

"Hell, if the universe is going down the toilet, I'm gonna take my rake before the final flush!" That thought is what made him the true pirate he was now.

Markus eyed his cards once more. Pocket tens. After a careful glance at his opponents, he looked at the flop and an imperceptible inward smile flashed through his mind. Top set. A monster.

A share worth of ten sacked Protoss ships were at stake in that hand. Four pirates sat in a murky and shady lobby near the Renegade's control room. Strategically located around their makeshift table, the players displayed their weapons at the ready. Markus had his zippy pistol next to his downfaced cards in order to deflect their attention. Mergan Villen, the Renegade's captain, had her Impaler rifle sitting on her lap. She even had the balls to slightly unbutton her low cut V-net, leaving the guys wondering about her bra size. Sukhwinder "Sukhi" Singh, the rascal quartermaster, had his bagh nakh claw-like dagger inserted in the knuckles of his mechanical right hand, while Enkh-Amgalan

“Mike” Dorgjotov, the Renegade’s systems engineer, held his Jambiya knife around his pile of khaydarin crystals and aged yellow cards.

Mike had just won the Arabian knife replica from Sukhi in their last game, but this time it was Sukhwinder’s turn. He had been winning consistently for the last two hours, a detail everybody pretended to ignore but secretly no-one overlooked.

It was Villen’s turn to act. Nonchalantly, she blew a provocative halo of smoke into Mike’s face from the cigar she was smoking.

“I see your three khaydarins, and I raise you two more,” she told him.

Mike was the grunt in charge of keeping airducts clean, the dock’s valves operational and water systems running. His prominent muscled arms were a factor to reckon, but his brain circuitry was less than optimal. Villen knew he was difficult to provoke and she took full advantage of that fact.

The ongoing poker game was slightly more creative this time than previous ones. The pirates were gambling in kind instead of crystal-minerals or gas to make the rush to covet the real items greedier, more real. When somebody waged loot too big to be put on the table, for example a siege tank, they just had to use tacky painted yellow cards representing it instead.

The biggest artifacts and stolen weaponry were always kept stockpiled in the seventh deck of the Renegade, located in the stern of the spacecraft. Business means business and safety precautions were put above diversion... most of the time.

Meanwhile, leaning against a vertical cooling pipe, James Flannegan was watching the game unconcerned. He looked a little amused, but turned an eye every few seconds to the panels in the nearby control room compulsively. He was the manic freak in the Renegade, the only one who could withstand the pressures of the control room.

A few meters from the improvised game laid a dead body soaked in a pool of blood. Some of his limbs were missing. Few minutes ago he was still Zhu Heran, their fellow crewman in charge of hacking software systems, but his ambition turned him too greedy, and after winning a precious zealot body armor from Villen in a brutal hand, he committed a fatal mistake. The captain caught him cheating. Without even reasoning or asking for explanations, Mergan Villen pressed the trigger in her rifle and sent Heran’s quartered body flying through the air. The opposite wall where Flannegan was standing got instantaneously repainted with a freshly brain stucco.

To a rookie eye, a kill over a common zealot armor might seem rather extreme, but those bodysuits were one of the most coveted items among antique dealers. The pirates were so fiercely involved in the game that nobody had yet called their slaves to clean up the mess. They just replaced the shredded table with another, and kept playing.

Back in the game, Markus’ limited psychological skills told him Sukhi, the other caller, was going nowhere. So the choices got simple: also call, or wildly re-raise? But with two more cards to come, Markus knew everything was still in the air, though with three tens on his side he was feeling increasingly reckless. In order to make the most of this hand, his brain would need to forgo all the hard work he had put in to amass this little fortune he was gambling on. This included his loot in the last assaulted Protoss ship. This time he took the biggest share of the spoils accordingly along with his big corporeal loss. The treasure was already priceless in any planetary market, but to win this hand now, it had to become worthless, like a paltry bullet in an Impaler gauss rifle. This was the only way to wage it against his opponents.

However this stratagem was becoming particularly tougher this time. Maybe it was related to the way those giant aliens fought them in their last *Razzia*. “*As if they knew we were coming.*”

Risking his life in every incursion hadn't been a mitigating factor since he joined the pirate crew three and a half years ago. Riding the bullet was just the basic lot in a pirate's life. He knew it, and everybody else joining a pirate ship in the Koprulu sector knew it too. No, what was tormenting him now was how that tall life-form had torn his left arm apart with the psionic blade. He had never lost a limb before, like most of his fellow pirates. Seizing the Protoss treasure hadn't been simple for anyone this time either, and that was something palpable in the environment around the poker table. It was as if the game was now temporarily re-awaking the cruel memories in all of them. The pirates looked at each other defiantly, with their eyes sipping the fear-ridden gazes that those Protoss had imprinted in all of them.

It didn't matter that Markus used his A-game aboard the alien carrier. Pitted against a Protoss zealot at a close encounter, premeditation usually precluded survival. In short, voice communicators or even thinking were no match against mind-reading capabilities. Coordination, the only single effective strategy against the Zerg, was paradoxically doomed against their distant cousins. All Terrans had discovered this detail the hard way. That fact was now widely available through the Interplanetary Net – Interpet- for beginners to learn, and tots were taught this early on in their schooling. That's why pirate crews used to be the most efficient contingencies against the psionic Gods. Pirates were careless and made their actions unpredictable to the Protoss' psyches. Everybody acted by instinctive and selfish reasons by nature. They didn't need training, to them, fighting Protoss fitted their own way of life. Their pirate fleets aggregated and dispersed spontaneously, attacking only stranded or lone ships. That's how they did it two days ago and now they were gambling the spoils. Their quest for greed was insatiable.

Now, like snakes after a meal they just had to rest and let things cool down. The high orbit over a lifeless tiny planet codenamed among freebooters as ‘Tortuga’ offered them an incommensurable ‘home’. Not only was Tortuga an unmapped planet, thus being untraceable in the Interpet, but its tiny volume offered a perfect blackout that shielded any ships around it from detection. It also had a system of rings, which the pirates prowled closely using them as natural deflectors against potential missiles or lasers in a patrol raid. Once in its vicinity, the pirates only demise would be if somebody followed them after a raid.

Life near Tortuga could seem idyllic, which didn't sidestep the fragility of the buccaneer's existence. It also had the downside of turning their lives into an evil sequence of monotony: raid, hide and rest. Then sell the loot, waste it and restart the cycle. Sometimes their lifestyles seemed an appendaged metaphor of assaulting a Protoss ship, their favorites. The feat had different phases, but the raiding procedure was relatively mechanical. First, the Protoss defensive shields were deactivated using myriad computer hacking tactics. The Protoss' incredibly advanced software wasn't an enigma to anyone in the galaxy anymore –excluding the neanderthalic Zerg. The pirates used khaydarin adapters to routinely infiltrate their systems. Then the ship's hull and neutron engines were smashed to pieces ramming them with junk from previous captured Protoss spaceships. That was a classic example of what pirates were good at too: turning Protoss'

technology against them. They had basically no other choice, since in order to pierce the Protoss armor the *right* way, one would normally need military-grade lasers or valkyrian missiles, the sort of gimmicks that pirates only dream of. Finally, the last step was the laser hooks for attachment, so the fun could begin.

Straightforward, right? But that was just an appetizer in a cocktail party. After that, the hardest part came: the dreaded close-combat inside the Protoss ship. Sometimes they used the privilege of captured zerglings as fodder to localize hidden traps, but more often than not they had to do it the old fashioned way: advancing hallway by hallway, helplessly alone. That's why the unknown architecture of the alien spaceships's interior was so intimidating. From the outside all Protoss starships looked the same, but every one followed a completely unique inner design.

"These Protoss kooks had to be artists to boot," Markus used to think all the time. Holding true to the mantra, premeditation had to be systematically left in the closet.

"But if you think this was the complete picture, you'd be mistaken..."

"I put you all-in," said Villen interrupting Markus' daydreams. After the Jack of spades came on the turn, Villen bet wildly on Markus' absentminded check. Sukhi and Mike folded, leaving him with only two options: fold or call, and in doing so jeopardize all his gains. Tough decision, since that implied putting the remaining of his material possessions at stake.

Villen had been winning every showdown with Markus since she convinced him to try the infernal game. The festering attraction Markus felt for her had only added fuel to their cold-war feud. Suspiciously, she always seemed to be one step ahead of him. This time was no exception.

Markus had been mulling around past details that now turned to be irrelevant. So far, he had lost an arm which he couldn't afford to replace either biomedically or mechanically, and now all his belongings were down to a single unknown card.

"With four ordered cards on the board, she probably has hit her straight..." But Markus noticed that Jack also exposed three spades, *"...or even the flush,"* he thought. *"My only way out is hitting the full house on the river."*

Then a shiver ran down his spine. Was he being hosed again? Villen's Asian eyes oozed too much confidence and they were looking straight at him, as if mentally saying "I dare you to call." Was she faking? Seconds went by and minutes dragged on.

Fidgeting with their weapons, people started to get impatient.

"So, Markus, are you going to call or what?" rebuffed Mike. He had folded early on in the hand, indulging himself instead on watching the gamblers tear themselves apart. "Man, are you waiting for your arm to re-grow?" he added again sarcastically.

Then, Markus raised his pistol and shot at Dorgjo point blank between his eyebrows, making his body fall back with a thud.

"That'll teach you to shut up and mess with big boys!" he said despondently.

The homicidal outburst didn't seem to affect any one of the pirates. On the contrary, it propelled the tension sky-high and made the hand even more interesting to them.

"Come on, grab your destiny!" shouted Flannegan from behind risking his own life now, which was funny, because at that point Markus' destiny made a sudden

appearance. The emergency alarms went off by surprise, indicating an immediate threat. Multiple sirens complimented the red light that now flooded the entire ship's atmosphere.

Everybody on board understood this wasn't break time anymore and readied for immediate battle.

The enemy's moves were broadcasted live through the ship's female voice communicator that linked all the crewmen's mikes and headsets. "Approaching from starboard at 50 nautical miles, three Protoss carriers with ten escort Phoenixes."

"Holy sh**! Those suckers went through?" Sukhwinder shouted in the communication system while running to man his gun turret.

"Is it possible...is it? Is it?" replied Markus incredulously.

Everybody was in a frenzy, taking positions, securing the cargo, closing the airdocks.

"Are they using the new cloak X21 devices?" Sukhwinder shouted once again, "Villen, damn you! I told you we should upgrade our sensors, goddammit!" Grumpiness was Sukhwinder's specialty, but Villen, didn't bother to answer.

"What? Oh, great, are you serious?" said Markus "That's cheating, f** it, f** them!" he exclaimed in desperation while tightening his armor suit for combat.

"Sure! Hey Markus, maybe our raids are finally pushing the Toss to behave like the wicked Zerg!" Even with their lives at stake, Flannegan still found room for jokes.

"Funny Flannegan, very funny," replied Markus over his headset.

For some mysterious reason that nobody really cared about now, a Protoss armada had run undetected through the pirate fleet's safe space perimeter.

"I bet they're the pals from the last raided carrier," remarked Markus.

"Please, don't do this to us, we'll be good guys next time!" said Flannegan mockingly.

"You would do the same if you could, Flann. They're just coming to get some piece of us," Markus replied while giving the final adjustments to the digital crosshair aligning his HUD with the blaster's muzzle in his laser turret. Then he pressed three green buttons and cocked the hammer.

"It's payback time," he thought after taking a deep breath.

"It's time for some reckoning," the one-armed man professed silently.

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"We have to use the best of what remains of us and them, to fulfill our mission," proclaimed the dark templar prelate Zeratul inside the capital ship of the Aurigae expedition. After witnessing the carnage wrought on their twin carrier ship, the ζ-Aurigae, the dark templars and the Khalai Protoss had been dangerously filled with an incipient form of hatred.

"We have to maintain serenity, my friends. Our actions should reflect beyond revenge. Even witnessing the despicable acts we all have seen, we should remember the duties Selendis put in our hands and remember the Aeon." All Protoss in the control deck agreed nodding with their heads, and even Artanis did it, reluctantly. It had been after his suggestion a few minutes ago that Zeratul agreed to indulge the crew to set aside protocol and use, just for this time, fire to fight fire. Infiltrating the pirates' fleet computers and turning down their security perimeters had been accomplished in a mater

of nanoseconds. In general, Protoss didn't care much about going stealth in major battles because their superior fighting and technology often gave them an advantage. After all, messing around with a 1 and 0-based software was like an infant playing with a jumping spider for them. Even though sometimes, that jumping spider made use of its painful sting.

At 50 nautical miles, the Protoss fleet left behind its visual camouflage so that the pirate ships' rudimentary camera systems could sight them clearly.

"Now, we have them where we want them...", stated Zeratul *"...surprised. Reflective. Scramble interceptors!"*

On top of their superior firepower, the Protoss had scattered observers all over the spacefield, effectively removing any fog of war in the battlefield. The pirate's escape was going to be almost impossible.

"Spare one ship. We are going to leave it for last. Destroy the rest." Zeratul's thoughts were instantaneously picked up by the carrier's operational command. Orders flowed to the interceptors as if an extension of his arms. If only the Terrans could witness such magnificence. If only.

During their approach at a blinding speed, the interceptors behaved like hunting wolf packs, mimicking the MO that the pirates used against their misfortunate ζ-Aurigae carrier. 45, 40 miles...The interceptors approached relentlessly. Their scale was much smaller though, but the precision infinitely higher. 30, 20, 10...

There were thirteen ships in total and all of them were already locked in the interceptor's firing visors.

That pirate fleet had successfully raided the twin carrier ζ-Aurigae using trickery and overwhelming numbers. Now the perpetrators were going to witness righteous fire and swift execution.

The interceptors proceeded to concentrate their fire on one target, then dispersed and moved on to the next one. They attacked from all sides, rendering any long term defense attempt useless. Proceeding from one ship to the next, they damaged one engine after another and brought down one laser turret after the other. The second-hand pirate neosteel armor was like a hot knife through butter for them. Relentlessly, they struck and brought down all pockets of resistance.

Sorting through the primitive pirate lasers was somewhat of a jovial acrobatic play, and although scores of interceptors were squashed by the enemy fire or crashed into ice particles, they were instantly replaced by new ones. The pirates knew from the start they were doomed against an all-out Protoss assault –and by extension of any king- but they would not surrender, they would die hard.

Like enticing bees out of a beehive with his arms, Artanis turned the interceptors away from maiming the enemy ships. He then concentrated their firepower against the numerous Protoss hulls being pulled by five pirate ships as tugboats a junk-freighter. Those hulls were the pirate's main weapons in their greedy fights for profit, accumulated through countless rounds of raiding. Several minutes of inclement fire dislodged their assembly, and the pulling pirate ships and their vicious cargo floated in space and started to incinerate in the vicinity of the planet's atmosphere. To Zeratul's eyes and the rest of the expeditionary force, beholding that poetic spectacle was going to be the best contribution they could render to the remains of their fallen kindred. Like matches

lighting candles in a celebration, their incineration gave them the resting peace they had been deprived of.

“*So be it,*” thought Zeratul, and the Protoss around him in the carrier’s command room, acquiesced. A feeling of purpose, integrity and reign over chaos was finally being pieced together.

“*Look Zeratul! That pirate ship is maneuvering to approach the ring-planet’s atmosphere. They intend to escape!*” pointed Artanis through their shared vision of the battlefield. “*All interceptors, concentrate your fire over them...*” But Zeratul laid his hand over Artanis’ shoulder from behind, reclaiming his attention.

“*Let them believe, Artanis...*,” Zeratul told him “*...let them believe they can escape.*”

“*What?*” Artanis questioned him surprised. “*You don’t want them destroyed?*” Then, releasing his shoulder and addressing him, Zeratul answered solemnly, “*Not yet my friend, not yet.*”

At this point Artanis’ confidence in Zeratul waned. Didn’t their expedition come to this confine of space to track down and annihilate the pirate fleet most responsible for their heavy losses over the years? Wasn’t this the primordial sense of agreement Zeratul had tried to promote in Shakuras before leaving? Artanis now remembered what the dark templar told them in New Antioch, “*Let us seek this endeavor, my friends, for which there is no higher reward than filling the void left by the fallen ones.*” That sentence pronounced after agonizing hours of incessant debate, seemed to carry the weight that tipped positively the balance, convincing even Selendis that a joint quick crusade against the pirates would be a first step into bringing the Khalai Protoss and the dark templar closer. But now, as a result of his companion’s contradictory order, Artanis’ beliefs started to wobble, as if realizing the dark templar was keeping a secret from him.

“*I fathom your concerns Artanis; but trust me. Let them go,*” Zeratul professed while taking a step closer to the carrier’s main window in the command deck. “*We just need to wait, and they will come back to us gratefully,*” Zeratul added, while in the distance, he could see one pirate ship spared from destruction falling into the gravitational pull of the ring-planet. A remote planet only known to Zeratul as Ghathik.

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A tremendous explosion jolted the entire ship’s structure. The Renegade took a blow to the stern.

“There is decompression on the seventh deck!!” shouted Villen over the communication system.

“Roger that!” answered Markus, “Flannegan, cut the power supply over the seventh and activate the tight valves, quick!! Or we’ll suffocate!”

“Gotcha, gotcha!” replied Flannegan dancing while pressing buttons amid a mayhem of blinking red, blue and green indicators and a cacophony of different alarm pitches in his control panel. Anyone without enough experience in the piracy business would be totally overwhelmed by such a chaotic input of data, and even with experience, there was always a serious risk of developing schizophrenic tendencies. That’s why Flannegan was the official “crazy dude” aboard, the only pirate zany enough by nature to be functionally immune to such a cryptic but vital flow of commands, orders and all sorts

of crap that kept flowing to his control post. He had to communicate with KUK'I, the Renegade's computer, and at the same time coordinate everything and everybody. Under routine piracy it was already a challenge, under a full-blown Protoss attack it could trigger a nervous breakdown. As a matter of fact, it didn't matter that Flannegan's brain was thirty percent robotically enhanced. Under a shower of interceptors and interceptor's fire and with people screaming and swearing while being constantly hit from all sides was enough to make a sane person want to give up.

Outside, a soundless and bright explosion blinded the crew for a few seconds. The resulting shockwave peppered the Renegade with so much debris that it wiped all their radar's antennas as if cleaning the kitchen marble.

"Oh wow, they've just blown another ship, the Radeon is gone!" shouted Flannegan half-disinterested as if broadcasting a radio-show.

"Forget the Radeon, Flann! Focus on us!" yelled back Sukhwinder.

"OK, OK, you want bad news, *marchando!*" Flannegan told the crew. "*Per primo piatto*, all our radars are swimming off port; *per il secondo*, the seventh deck is FUBAR and *per il terzo*, the valves are not working anymore, cads...I can't stop the outflow of air! I'm gonna have to let it go!"

"What? No wait! All our Protoss loot is in there!" exclaimed Markus.

"Goddamm it! Forget the f** treasure, our lives are in the line..." But before Flannegan could finish that last sentence, a resonating boom made the ship go lightless for a few seconds –as if they had offended God.

"Holy sh**! They pierced the reactor's armor, did you see that?" shouted Sukhwinder over his mike.

A blinking square in Flannegans' digital screen representing the ship's map confirmed the hit.

"He's right, our main power source has been exposed," agreed Flannegan. "One more hit in there and they will blow us to pieces." Time was running out.

"I see them coming, I see them coming...!" Sukhwinder yelled again.

"Direct all the fire at starboard 720S position!! Gooo now!!" Villen shouted in desperation from the bow post. The tension was reaching inhuman levels. 720S were the coordinates for the south west belly of the ship. Luckily, all the laser turrets turned south and opened an inclement blizzard of fire at once that succeeded in temporarily postponing the destruction of the ships' nuclear generator from a wave of two dozen interceptors.

"They'll send more soon!" coughed Sukhwinder as if he was being smothered with fumes.

"Hey Sukhi, are you smoking crack or something down there?" Sukhwinder's fan had just stopped working since the last hit that ripped open the reactor's shield.

"Cut the crap Flannegan, there's no time for jokes!" responded Villen.

"Sorry to interrupt people, but we need to get our asses out of here and quick!" intervened Markus. "We have no chance against those carriers."

"I agree," answered Villen, "KUK'I, take us out of this mess! Set course to crash land immediately onto Tortuga!"

"What??" the crew shouted all at once, as if distrusting what their ears just heard.

"Crash land into Tortuga?" "Are you out of your f**** mind Villen?" yelled Sukhwinder.

“Do you have a better idea?” she responded while laser hits kept puncturing the ship’s outer hull. “We can’t escape their detection, it’s too late, they might have observers all over the place,” she said again.

“But landing on that planet is gonna be a death sentence!”

“Well, then better a death sentence there than here!”

“Ehem, guys,” Flannegan intervened. “The ceptors left a corridor open at 315E, I thought you might be interested...”

“Look! They’re demolishing the junk hulks!” Villen shouted. “Ha! Idiots! They’re just wasting time and energy there. Good for us! KUK’I, take us to the planet, quick!”

“Impossible Villen, I have a P.B.A. order in my system,” KUK’I answered her.

“What the f*** is this bitch talking about? Somebody translate and quick!”

Flannegan pressed two dozen buttons at a blinding speed on three different layered keyboards.

“She’s right Villen, there is a Planet Ban Approach that forbids her from landing onto planets...after Mar Sara we gave it to her!” replied Flannegan.

“And it’s still in place? Are you all nuts guys? Get someone’s ass there and override that sh** before the ceptors come back!”

“OK, OK!” Flannegan answered.

After finishing off the massive bulk of Protoss junk ships, the interceptor skeins aggregated again acquiring a menacing spinning flower shape.

“Look! They are coming for the final strike!” shouted Markus in desperation.

“Engines at full-throttle!” replied Villen.

“I’m on it, I’m on it” added Flannegan.

“Come on, come on...,” Villen stuttered, and when they were seconds from entering the gravitational grip, Markus had a second thought, “*You have to know when to hold’em,*” and he shouted the final order, “Detaching the seventh deck!”

That move changed the ship’s direction, avoiding a massive beam of laser blasts that had been already thrown at them. It also gave them enough momentum to enter Tortuga’s atmosphere.

The interceptors, confused by the pirate ship’s sudden jerk, ended up only destroying the useless piece of junk that contained the Protoss loot. The pirates had left behind all their material wealth and in that final twist they had evaded a certain death. Or did they?

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Slowed by seven massive braking parachutes, the craft ground to a halt on the planet’s surface. They had never used them to land the Renegade since they stole it from the Dylarian system, and pirates were infamous to use anything to their advantage. That’s why they occupied the lowest echelons of integrity across the galaxy. The crew also quickly left behind their shipwreck, in case the Protoss would follow suit for more billing time.

Before descending into Tortuga’s atmosphere, their final thrust had exhausted all the reactors’ fuel, and even emergency power was drained. KUK’I also had experienced

an unexpected breakdown, so no Interpet and no limbs; Sukhwinder had discovered soon after the landing that his robo-enhanced arm didn't work either.

Now, the four remaining pirates and their three slaves advanced toward the only thing they thought might offer them a lifesaving getaway: a ruinous building-like structure. It had tall petrified spires, some of them broken, surrounding a protruding dome in its center. Spikes of all sizes adorned its surface, while the enclosing outer walls were peppered with pitch-black holes of all sizes.

Facing unknown dangers, the pirates risked retaliation and armed their slaves with Impalers, but surprisingly that turned out to be far from the slaves' thoughts. Was that a sign of forced cooperation under dire straits?

"This doesn't look like a Xel'Naga temple," Flannegan skeptically pointed out after some of the slaves had previously stated so.

Markus had been experiencing a strange feeling after the crash landing; something subtle rummaging his entrails, something intangible, inarticulable.

"I'm cautioning you guys..." interrupted Sukhwinder using a dreading tone. "If this is a Xel'Naga temple, I heard beasts used to come out of these things..."

The group of men stood now in front of a gigantic dusky cave entrance. Certainly, it didn't offer an inviting welcome to any of them, but few choices laid ahead.

"OK Sukhi," replied Villen while turning back as if losing her temper, "What do you suggest we do instead?"

"*Suggest?*" Markus thought for himself. He had never heard that word coming out from Villen's lips since he had joined the Renegade crew. That sounded as if Villen's famous ruthless and careless demeanor started to dilute.

"Do you prefer to crawl this deserted piece of rock instead?" she said while resting her rifle in the reddish ground. "Look around, there's nothing but wastelands to explore!"

"Well, hmmm," Sukhi bumbled as if choosing his words. "What about I stay outside to cover your backs while you go?" That proposition was an obvious ruse to avoid the potential dangers waiting inside. Right, nobody wanted to die in here, but Sukhi's unashamed excuse reached another low in the pirates' annals of chicanery. His try was nonsense, since they would need all available firepower inside, instead of *outside* in case they had a threat to face.

"OK, Sukhi. You stay here as you please. The rest..." and Villen looked in the eyes of all the remaining. "The rest inside!"

Markus was left flabbergasted. Had Sukhi's simple ruse really just cajoled Villen outright there? Was she being softened by Tortuga overnight? But Sukhi didn't seem satisfied yet, "Can some of the guys stay here with me too?" Everyone looked at him startled.

"The guys?" Flannegan questioned him. "What guys? The slaves you mean?" prodded Flannegan.

"Huh, right, right," Sukhi's answered him immediately. "Can they?"

Villen completely ignored him and with her hand she signaled and the group moved out. In a few minutes, the expedition force had disappeared inside the building.

Overflowing smugness throughout his capillaries, Sukhi sat down over a protruding rock and lit a cigar.

“Ah, there is nothing like beholding a sunset,” he said aloud while turning his head toward Tortuga’s horizon.

The sinusoid path which the pirates were following inside the ruinous building bifurcated every few steps.

“If this is a Xel’Naga temple, they’d better have some type of transport stored in here,” professed Flannegan.

Hovering half a meter over the ground, a musty red mist kept flowing outward. With the limited lighting that their rudimentary torches provided, the terran bucanears could see only a few meters ahead of them. The ceiling seemed to extend several feet over their heads and the walls were engraved with a blotchy mixture of scratches and craters.

“Guys, do you realize we don’t have any idea where we’re going?” exclaimed one of their slaves while looking around befuzzled. Nobody bothered to answer him. Besides the terrifying silence that enveloped them all, everybody’s attention was already overwhelmed trying to forecast from where a potential attack would come. If any.

Villen headed first the uphill advance of her crew. Nobody knew if she was following a particular instinctive direction or just stochastically choosing paths. Without maps or positioning systems, it didn’t seem to matter much. Their only hope was that trekking that mysterious place would lead them to some artifact of relevant importance to get the hell out of Tortuga.

Meanwhile, in the placid evening sky, Sukhwinder was enjoying the last puffs of his cigar. Completely unaware of the dread that his fellow crewmates were experiencing in the meandering caverns, he entertained himself watching the breathtaking panoramic view offered by the hilltop perch where he stood: a barren extension of vast plains drawn-out in all directions while a soupy-like mist bathing the planet blurred with the far-off horizon.

“Fly me to the moon; Let me sing among the stars; Let...” Sukhwinder kept singing while he started to experience an increasing level of drowsiness. Gazing at the inexorable sunset, the complete absence of any sound began to crack his discipline to stay awake. Gradually, his head started to nod. First one jerk, then two. Suddenly, his eyes snapped. The sight of a disturbing image got imprinted on his iris and his brain recognized that in the horizon an inverted pattern emerged. Instead of descending, a shadowy mantle stemming from afar now started to rise. If the rise of the vertical dark blanket had been horizontally straight all along, he might have dismissed it as a weird planetary event, but the shadow seemed to spike dynamically in certain areas while relenting in others. Sukhwinder knew that type of pattern couldn’t be astrophysical in nature, but organic.

He grabbed his goggles from his pocket and after zooming in, his head started to shake in disbelief. His hands followed suit with an involuntary tremor and his thigh muscles seemed to experience a concatenation of spasms. Only the most nightmarish species in the known galaxy could trigger that succession of reactions on a terran body.

The approaching swarms were so overwhelming this time, that their numbers were effectively blackening the planet’s skies with a frenzied hypnotizing texture.

Now Sukhwinder’s brain rushed to his mouth the name that exemplified the most horrendous way of dying, and he shouted it while running inside the cave as if losing his wits.

After an arduous periplus of more than thirty minutes walking that hollow maze-like place which brought up nothing but dead ends and empty alleys, the expedition finally reached a gaping chasm where it seemed all the paths conveyed upon. Progressively as they entered, the imagery being displayed acquired jaw-dropping proportions. A massive tall pillar at the very center of an enormous hall was surrounded by a concentric disposition of red-mist sipping holes on the ground. Above their heads there were also a plethora of beams that seemed to connect the pillar with the surrounding walls.

The ceiling expanded several feet above and ebbed into a dome with an open hole in its center, offering them the chance to even see the sky, and up high above, the stars. The place resembled more a spider's lair than anything else those pirates had ever witnessed before.

"I told you men; this doesn't look like a temple at all!" exclaimed Flannegan again as if confirming what everybody was already realizing. "To me, this looks more like some kind of neuralgic center of *something*..."

The beams that crossed the hall had a viscous appearance, as if life ran through them ages ago, but now they were solid rocks, as if fossilized.

"I agree," replied Markus. "And sorry to read the wall, people, but this is going to be a dead end again," he said while turning on himself to check a murmur that came from behind. It turned out to be nothing.

Villen and the others spread around the pillar in the hall and observed cautiously the holes in the walls that also kept regurgitating asynchronously the red mist.

Something deep inside seemed to be propelling it in a series of continuous gusts.

"This place drives me nuts!" shouted one of the slaves in desperation. "Let's get the hell out of here!" But Villen had other plans in mind. She raised her torch and suddenly a light flared from atop the high-rise pillar.

"Look at that, guys, high in there," she pointed with her finger.

A big crimson crystalline oval sat atop the pillar, as if an egg in its nest, spilling gushes of the red mist. When Villen illuminated it, it returned a faint reddish light exposing its diaphanous body.

"Looks like a giant spewing ruby to me," drawled one of the slaves.

"Looks like nothing that's gonna help us to get off of this f** planet to me," replied Flannegan, leaning his head. But before they could discuss the matter further in detail, a monosyllabic cry interrupted the silence in that room.

"Did you hear that?" asked Villen.

"Yes, it's coming from one of these caved-in holes," answered Flannegan.

Everybody raised their rifles.

"No, no, here, here, from here," replied one slave that stood near one of the entrances into the hall. The voice was approaching relentlessly and it was getting stronger.

"I think I know what it is," stated Flannegan. Everyone in the hall grasped its meaning and relaxed.

Sukhwinder appeared sweating profusely in front of them. He was hyperventilating as if he just finished a 26-mile marathon. "Zergs, zergs, zergs!" he kept shouting nervously as if possessed by an irreversible state of panic. "Millions of

them...zergs, zergs zillions, agh!" he choked on his own words but kept yelling, "They're coming, they're here!"

Keeping her cool, Villen made her way up and separated Flannegan and Markus who were assisting him.

"Let me see him guys, let me see," Villen told them. Then, grabbing Sukhwinder by his shoulders, Villen shook him trying to return him to rationality.

"Sukhi, Sukhi, relax man, what are you talking about?" But he just kept yelling the same monologue, "They are here, the zergs, the zergs, I just saw them, I saw them... Outside, they are coming...from there, there, there..." he kept pointing at all directions while adding, "Up there! Look!" and he fingered the open dome where now the peaceful sky was not visible anymore. A sudden buzz flooded the room.

"Mutalisks!" one slave shouted. "The whole sky is full!" But before anyone could react, a hydralisk popped from one of the dark holes on the ground and slashed one of the slave's body in half. A hideous cry of pain reached the adrenal glands and released a torrent of terran intravenous adrenaline. Then the same hydralisk hopped from one squashed body to the next and in a split second, the four freebooters found themselves alone without the help of their three unexpected allies.

"Look there!" shouted Flannegan, "Zerglings are coming out from the holes too!" Even so, Sukhwinder ran amok carelessly. Locking his sight into him, a fearless zergling jumped from a 30-foot-high orifice from the surrounding walls and landed on Sukhi's back. Ruthlessly, the beast shredded the terrified pirate into pieces and only hyper-fire from Markus' Impaler rifle stopped the carnage.

"Sukhi nooo!" Flannegan shouted in grief as if now their relation had metamorphosed from a temporal selfish association into a warming brotherhood.

"He's gone, he's gone!" replied Villen. "Quick, to the pillar's top!" she ordered.

Markus unleashed a second gust of incessant machinegun fire that cleared a half-dozen insectoid aliens, including the one that mutilated their slaves, but in a matter of seconds, his rifle ran out of ammo and with only one arm it made reloading painfully slow.

"Climb it, climb the pillar!" Villen kept shouting while shooting in all directions.

"Flannegan! Retreat, retreat!" shrieked Markus in the middle of a deafening ruckus of bullets and screams, but the usually borderline pirate now seemed to have entered a true state of insanity.

Beyond any audible reach, Flannegan kept aiming at the never-ending flow of monsters of all sizes that kept pouring into the room; though his maniacal shooting was as accurate as a smart bomb, his futile wrath ended up enveloping him with an indiscernible mixture of zergish claws, mandibles and limbs despite his efforts. A countless number of aliens jumped over him at once and hurled his existence into oblivion.

"I ran out of ammo, Villen" complained Markus aloud.

"Use your blade, keep climbing!" she said while rationing the remainder of her allotment.

After a few more seconds of impaling lead deterrence, both pirates ended up at the top of the solid pillar with nothing else but their swords. They were going to jump into posterity as a pair of old-fashioned buccaneers after all: surrounded from all sides, helpless and with pure swordcraft preserving them from impending iron stabs. This time,

though, the iron thrusts were going to be substituted by clashing maws and jumping razor-claws.

“Honestly, I wish I’d had the chance to screw you before ending up like this, Villen” he told her in a last ditch effort to lighten their wavering spirits. Zerglings kept falling from high atop but their swords deflected them, making them land in the increasingly zerg-filled bottom instead.

“A maju...maju mai,” Villen answered him using a dialect he couldn’t understand.

Then, a leaping hydralisk slightly brushed the lower part of Villen’s thigh and she pulled back. Due to her sudden jerk, she wobbled the crimson oval that stood in the middle of their position and fell with it into Markus feet.

“I didn’t expect such a quick acquiescence,” wittily he told her. He then threw his sword and with his only hand left he offered it to her to get up. Suddenly, when she grabbed it, their bodies froze. An ethereal blast of blinding white light appeared out of nowhere and everything surrounding them stopped as if in a state of cryostasis. The incoming zerg talons turned motionless and their minds suddenly felt as if they were already miles away from that hellish place.

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Quantum entanglement had been the last life-saving way they could think of to get out of Tortuga. The translocation hadn’t brought their swords with them, a detail neither of them missed.

The circle of light where they were confined seemed to be closing in slowly. Markus couldn’t stand it anymore. He felt a huge stomach pain that doubled him over onto his knees and he puked. The jump had been too wild. Villen’s body seemed to tolerate disintegration and re-integration much better. That Xel’Naga temple was destined to be their resting place, but maybe their fate had reserved them one last painful twist, he pondered.

Villen and Markus, the lone survivors of their pirate fleet stood now in a dark room illuminated only by a ray of light surrounding their stance. They couldn’t see what laid ahead in any direction and they were too exhausted to walk. The place was soundless and an impenetrable darkness added a feeling of spaciousness. Even though they stood in a limited space, they knew perfectly well where they were.

“We are in a Protoss ship, Villen.”

“I know Markus.” Their voices echoed in the darkness. “They’re looking at us.” Suddenly, an extra-corporeal voice resonated in their heads.

“You are aboard the ε-Aurigae, the twin carrier of the ζ-Aurigae, the last ship you pirated.”

“I told you, they could even be next to my shoulder, look,” and Villen, moved her hand to grab a seemingly invisible limb that turn out to be physical. Zeratul materialized next to her. Unsurprised, Villen left him free and spoke, “So you are the guy who has been hunting us, huh?” she said while still hyperventilating. Zeratul looked at her carefully and took time to answer. His eyes brimmed profusely in the dark place.

“Yes; and we also saved your lives.” The dark templar was much higher than Villen, and his tallness transmitted an ominous menace. The psionic blade extending

from his right arm was long and sharp, exactly as the one that tore Markus' arm apart. His face was shrouded by an aged red mantle leaving only his eyes exposed.

"My name is Zeratul; and these are Mojo and Artanis," he said while looking over his shoulders to the dark templar and the zealot that now appeared flanking him.

"And this is the crew of the Aurigae fleet, the punitive expedition to destroy your kind, pirates." Zeratul stated while simultaneously making an arch with his forehand that illuminated the whole room in a progressive kaleidoscope of bright lights. A circle of Protoss zealots surrounding Villen and Markus surfaced clockwise out of the darkness. Their blades extended accordingly, which prompted an eerie threat that made Villen grab the crimson oval that survived the jump a little bit tighter. Facing certain retribution Markus exclaimed, "So that's how it ends..."

Beyond the zealots, they could see a retinue of over a hundred dark templars and several more hooded Protoss standing in an elevated platform.

"You kill us and you purloin the oval." Markus stated affirmatively. There was no immediate answer. Ahead of them, the giant window giving a quiet view of planet Tortuga caught Markus' attention.

Then, an ethereal deep-pitched voice channeled into their heads as it had happened before.

"We thought the view might make you feel more comfortable." Mojo just shared Markus' thought after picking it up. The Protoss had lived up to their mind-reading reputation once more.

"No," intervened Zeratul *"You should not be afraid now, and soon, you will give us the oval willingly."* A pause let the thought linger in their heads. *"You are cunning, but you still have to realize many important details,"* explained Zeratul.

Both pirates were not intimidated by the aliens' chiaroscuro rhetoric. Only superior violence could do that feat, and that was going to be the only thing missing aboard the Protoss ϵ -Aurigae.

"Not really..." replied Villen. "Now that you brought us here, you made your central point self-explanatory." "This oval is the sole reason you spared our lives down there, right? It's some kind of twisted weapon you need, huh?" But Zeratul shook his head in dismay while breaking his stance and starting to walk. His gait was slow and solemn, hopping slightly with his digitigraded legs. The zealot circle around both men also broke ranks, as if acquiring a friendlier attitude. The aliens lowered their guns and the psionic blades dissolved. Zeratul addressed them once again, *"The oval in your hands has been beneficially altering you long ago, but you still don't grasp what it represents..."* Instead of easing their minds, Zeratul's increasingly convoluted aphorisms unsettled them instead.

"Look, I don't know what you expect from us," Villen answered him slowly. "But let's say you and your fellow Toss went after us because we raided your carrier. So what? That's long gone and we escaped your claws just because of our superior starcraft...so now we're even, huh?" Zeratul was unmoved.

"Do you really believe what you've said?" added Mojo smirking.

"Of course not! You left us alive so we could do your dirty work and retrieve this puking crystalline rock," said Villen while raising the red stone.

"Puking?" replied Zeratul.

“Yeah, and you also have some expenses in our bank accounts to cover, by the way,” added Markus jestingly as if reclaiming a mercenaries’ pay. Mojo’s eyes widened as in disbelief.

“Close, but not whole, my friends,” replied Zeratul. “You served a purpose, it’s true; but I spared your lives in the fight because you were the only ones who could have retrieved this artifact, and that’s why we are here now.”

Artanis, who was standing close behind Zeratul realized the implications of that statement. He immediately felt double-crossed and turned his head to Mojo in awe. Mojo was unmoved though, as if he knew in advance what Zeratul was revealing. His burning eyes simmered deeper, but his unexpected mental fortitude prevented him from revealing his logical thought, *“Betrayed!”* Otherwise, Zeratul would have picked it up, maiming their fragile entente.

Artanis felt detached by his self-restraint, as if Zeratul’s words were now not inflammatory anymore but trivial and bygone. He never experienced that feeling before.

The crimson oval was pervading even the Khalai Protoss.

“You mean, you couldn’t just land your carrier and retrieve this?”

“That’s right Markus. The absence of foreign energy in the entire planet isn’t a coincidence, if you recall. The unique geology of Ghathik, the planet your kind calls Tortuga, has the unique property of draining all non-organic forms of energy on its crust. Without a power source, as you might know, carriers cannot work and our fleet would have perished pointlessly during landing.”

What the Protoss revealed startled both men. Sukhwinder’s arm, KUK’I’s breakdown... All those mishaps returned to the surface of their memories in a split-second. There hadn’t been a streak of bad luck; the planet’s quality had done it!

“Fine,” said Markus. “But now we’re here, so what’s next?” Again there was a jiff of silence.

“The seeds were long ago sowed and the offspring turned sour and sad, Markus; but our eventual intersections started when the coordinates of a vanished world were found inside a Xel’Naga temple on planet Shakuras.”

“I see,” he replied sounding skeptical. Unlike the Protoss, his style was charismatically straight to the bush. “So that mythical world, Ghathik as you call it,” he said while relenting its pronunciation, “Also contains a Xel’Naga temple, which you knew the existence of even *before* deciding to set sail and give us chase, huh?” replied Markus while pointing at Tortuga through the giant space window.

Again, the implication of Zeratul’s last revelation resonated inside Artanis’ brain. Mojo again seemed unaffected, confirming Artanis’ suspicions that he had known about Zeratul’s plot all along. According to what the pirate just said, Zeratul had been using the entire Aurigae expedition for a selfish pursuit. He had managed to coax everybody, from Selendis to himself, into bringing the Khalai and the dark templars together with the pretext of a pirate’s crusade!

“Don’t rush yet, Markus. You must first know it’s not a temple, and then realize what you’ve witnessed, no living being, even the Zerg, has ever witnessed it before. You’ve had the privilege to venture inside an Overmind’s dead carcass and lived to tell about it.”

Villen and Markus looked at each other speechless and noticed their unnerving reaction had been spread even among the scores of Protoss around them. Everybody looked at each other, as if species, castes or appearances didn't enslave them anymore.

"A dead Overmind on planet Tortuga, or Ghathik?" Markus replied furiously as if feeling prey to another of Zeratul's ruses. The alien shook his head silently.

"Not a dead Overmind, but one of its shed outer shells," added Zeratul.

That correction made things even more puzzling.

"So you mean a discarded form of the most feared entity in the sector got encrusted eons ago on Ghathik before moving on and leaving its exoskeleton behind?" replied Markus.

"Yes, and that's why your feat has been vital, Marcus. You recovered one of the ovals the Overmind didn't assimilate." Zeratul paused and added, *"You proved the existence of the universal unifier!"*

"What? Wait a moment, are there *more* of these things down there?" said Villen pointing at the stone and recalling the red-gunk spiting holes in the grand hall they saw.

Mojo and Zeratul nodded at once.

"The crimson oval you have in your hands is not a red-mist spitting gem. It's a concentrated fountain of enotium, a miraculous mineral that sips from Ghathik's lithosphere and was thought to have vanished millennia ago!"

Artanis couldn't stand it anymore, but somehow he started to understand his friend. Even so, he broke his mental silence.

"Zeratul, I feel betrayed by your words, but I don't want to act on my disappointment." The two pirates turned to him. Then, as if expecting his contained reaction, Zeratul turned also around and answered him point blank, *"I know Artanis. Its pervasiveness is irresistible, isn't it?"* *"Even with its short presence in here, our bodies have been impregnated by it already. It reached every single cell and now we all are starting to change."*

"What?" replied Artanis surprised. *"Are you implying this mist contains a mineral that can modulate my actions?"*

"Not just yours, my friend, but everybody's," answered Zeratul. *"Look around! The pirates, you, me... don't you prescient the evolution of something unique and beautiful?"* Zeratul seemed to have entered a trance state. *"This mineral contains the potential to bring balance not just in all of us, not just to the Koprulu sector, but to the entire galaxy!"*

"Hey, hey, hey wait a moment fellas," intervened Markus. "Balance? You mean peace?" Now Zeratul turned to him, *"Yes, peace, peace at last!"* he answered raising his arms in a sign of victory. There was a brief moment of silence.

Pondering over Zeratul's words, Markus understood their slave's leniency down in Tortuga.

"But at what price?" spited Villen, "In exchange for being zombified?"

"Zombified?" Now Mojo intervened as if already knowing what Zeratul had been talking about. *"You haven't lost your free will, have you?"*

"I don't know, did I?"

"No!" replied Zeratul lingering. *"You still could kill us if you want, but the enotium in your body balances that feeling and makes you choose not to."* Invisibly, the

presence of the mineral in their bodies started to make the Protoss and the Terran interactions seem smoother and friendlier.

“Really? Then this means I’m possessed by something artificial, Zeratul. Something that turns my freewill into some sort of illusion.”

“*I could show you your awareness is already an illusion,*” stated Mojo semi-sarcastically, but Zeratul continued, “*But even in the case you would kill one of us, Villen, the enotium would make any future attempt more difficult, less appealing.*” A smirk appeared in Villen’s face.

“Ha! How do you know that?”

“*Because the Xel’Naga never lied,*” lectured Zeratul. “*Do you want to try?*” And then, he took Mojo’s warp blade forcefully out of his hands and threw it at Villen, “*Go ahead, slay me!*” His abrupt reaction caught all by surprise.

“*Zeratul, wait!*” Artanis’ thought reverberated with force across the hall. “*What are you doing?*”

“*Don’t you be afraid my friend,*” answered the dark templar, while stopping his advance. “*Trust me once more.*”

Villen’s hand tightly grasped the blade while brandishing the red oval with the other. Zeratul’s body was in striking range from the pirate, and Villen raised the double scythe slowly. Tension in the room reached its zenith. A silence even more terrifying than the one both pirates experienced after their teleportation now filled the huge hall. With the warp blade raised, Villen took a moment to look around her. All the eyes’ gazes were set upon her presence, even those of Markus. She looked once more into Zeratul’s eyes and something inside her started to fire up. Villen felt the power in her hands, the rush to act, the ease of being in a merciless pirate *Razzia*. Mere days ago, she would have done it ruthlessly, but now something deep inside her made her respect, doubt; and the doubt was growing stronger and made her relent. She further tightened her hold on the warp blade and realized Zeratul’s sight was directly at her eyes. Villen’s doubt metamorphosed and unbeknownst to her, the enotium flooding her system tipped the balance. She dropped the weapon onto Zeratul’s feet.

“OK, you can have them both,” she said, and tossed him the crimson oval as well.

Looking at each other, Villen and Markus shared a feeling of righteousness.

“*Do you fathom its force now, Artanis? I couldn’t expose the truth about this in New Antioch. The enotium’s extraordinary virtue would have been unfathomable without beholding its effects in real time.*” If Artanis would have had a mouth, it surely would be agape. The hidden motives of Zeratul had bloomed full circle, reaching their Xanadu.

Artanis nodded to the templar, as if their original endeavor promoted by the joint quest agreed upon in Shakuras would be coming to fruition.

But the enotium’s influence was too powerful to ignore at this point.

“*Our agreement, our unity Zeratul...it has been brokered by this mineral’s gift. What will happen when it runs out?*” Artanis had actually stolen that thought from Markus’ mind, leaving him feeling mugged.

“Hey, smart-ass, did you get that from my brain?” The Protoss looked at him as if he just blurted a rhetorical question, while Zeratul continued, “*We need to preserve Ghathik, Artanis; but Kerrigan has beaten us all. She predicted the entire Aurigae expedition, and now her control over Ghathik is going to be irreversible...*”

That revelation kindled an enthusiasm long ago quenched in the pirates.

“Ehem, sorry to interrupt you gentlemen, but we still have room to fight in here, right?” cut in Markus. The Protoss looked at him as if expecting his reaction.

“I know, but we can’t use any advanced technology to retake the planet...”

“Not really Zeratul, to my *field* experience, our Impalers still worked down there.”

“Impalers? You are going to need much more than that to bring down Kerrigan’s forces,” scoffed Artanis.

“What about a couple of nukes then?” suggested Markus. That didn’t seem to impress them either.

“Do you have any in your...,” Artanis looked at him upside down, *“Pockets?”*

That question left Markus’ ego badly shattered.

“Spare your rhetoric,” intervened Zeratul. *“If we want to retake Ghathik effectively, we will need all Terran and Protoss forces combined,”* he said. *“But the only way to do that...,”* continued Zeratul.

“...the only way to do that,” Villen interjected, “Is making use of the enot... or whatever you called it.”

“...and that’s just wonderful,” complemented Markus, “Because it’s going to be a nice dead end. In order to obtain more ento..ehem, we need to retake Ghathik...”

“...but in order to retake Ghathik,” continued Artanis.

“We need more of the mineral,” finished Zeratul, completing a full-circle of conjoined agreement.

The Protoss and the terran pirates looked at each other startled as if in appreciation of what had been accomplished.

“Well, this just means we all have a long exciting way to go...,” Markus concluded as if re-igniting a long forgotten feeling of purpose.

“One more thing Villen,” continued Markus, now addressing his female captain.

“What did you have in the last poker game?”

“What? asked Villen taken by surprise.

“Your hand...”

She ruminated a few seconds as if unwilling to give in. “Pocket nines,” she finally said.

“Damn!” professed Markus.

“I know,” Villen replied, “You would have hit your full house on the river, but that would have given me a four of a kind.”

“What?” asked an astonished Markus, realizing her answer was beyond clairvoyance. “Were you...” inquired with a frown.

“...cheating?” replied Villen with a surreptitious smile.

That confession left Markus aghast but offered him a sly peek into a brooding mutual attraction heralding them great expectations.