

## **The Decision**

by Goober5000

Admiral Amentep watched silently as the blue giant released an enormous solar flare. The star, easily twenty times the mass of the Terrans' home sun, shone brightly enough to blind any Terran who saw it from this short distance. Although the destroyer's viewports were equipped with solar shields to minimize glare, the Vasudan had deliberately reduced the shielding to the lowest tolerable setting, as if he could will himself back to the surface of Vasuda Prime by imagining himself gazing at its sun.

Though the mighty Typhon had been severely crippled at the Battle of Deneb a few weeks prior, it remained spaceworthy enough to retain on board most of her support crew and a substantial portion of her fighter complement. With resources stretched on all fronts, the PVN had deemed it too costly and time-consuming to effect the repairs required to bring her back to combat readiness. Instead, she had been moved into orbit around Cygnus Prime, where she now functioned as a makeshift command-and-control installation for the Deneb theater.

Admiral Amentep disliked the arrangements but accepted them without complaint. Sacrifices were required in war, and this war quite literally had had no equal in the history of his species. It was, indeed, fortunate that the Guardian had been able to escape; its Terran counterpart had not been so favored. But it had been a cruel fate... to have survived, and yet to have been unable to reach the node...

He composed himself. Even if the Guardian had been able to jump to Vasuda, one more ship would only have delayed the inevitable. The Guardian was much better positioned to make a difference here, where its oversight of the Terran expedition to Altair had allowed a joint team of scientists a vital opportunity to discover a potential weakness in the Destroyers' command ship.

But again, as so often seemed to be the case, the Terrans had deprived a Vasudan of the glory that was rightfully his. The Guardian had ensured the safe arrival of the Vasudan half of the xenolinguistics team, which had clearly borne the brunt of the translation effort. The Guardian had formed a vital communications link between Altair and Sirius, enabling the research team to keep in contact with the GTA and PVN while the Bastion returned to the front lines. And the Guardian had spent the better part of a month fighting off the Hammer of Light, which seemed to grow more numerous every day.

But it was the Bastion that was at the forefront of all the Terran news broadcasts. The Bastion's transports had ferried the scientists from Deneb to Altair and back again, and the Bastion's fighters had destroyed the Hammer of Light's flagship. And now, with a measure of gratitude quite incommensurate to the Guardian's contributions, the Bastion was asking for his help yet again.

The door hissed open, then closed. The Admiral did not move. Several moments passed in silence.

Then, a figure made its way to the window where the Admiral was standing. It approached to a sociable, though respectful, distance; then stopped and turned to match the Admiral's pose. Its humble garments and bearing belied the fact that this was one of the highest ranking members of the religious caste.

Eventually, the Admiral spoke. "A friend who shares in one's silence is wiser than a hundred counselors," he quoted, turning to his companion.

The figure bobbed his head softly. "With your indulgence, I hope to be able to serve in both capacities," he said.

Gradually, Amentep returned the bob, then turned, extended his left arm sideways, and slowly brought his hand to his chest. "Sa Vasuda, Prophet Rami. I am honored by your presence."

Rami returned the gesture. "And I by yours, Admiral Amentep. Please allow me to congratulate you on your extraordinary defense of the Altair jump node. Even now, though our renegade brethren continue to threaten the system, the node remains secure."

Amentep inclined his head. "I cannot deprive my crew of the credit that is rightfully theirs. I graciously accept your sentiments on their behalf, and will forward them along at my earliest opportunity."

There was a pause. Rami regarded the window with amusement. "I would not be so hasty to enter the Light, Admiral. There is still much work remaining for you to do."

Amentep looked at him skeptically. "You know this?"

Rami bobbed his head again. "No. But I believe I feel it. And the Light knows whether it is true, which is all that matters. But you are presently occupied with a different concern."

Amentep returned the solar shield to its standard automatic setting. "Yes. I have received a request for aid from the GTD Bastion."

Rami waited, but Amentep did not continue. "Specifically?"

"They wish me to transfer a wing of Vasudan fighters, with pilots, to assist them in their assault on the enemy command ship."

"That does not seem a difficult request."

Amentep exhaled. "No. But it is a request I fear I cannot grant."

Rami studied his companion. "You would not have sent for me if this were merely a matter of military insufficiency."

"You are perceptive. And yet, though our supplies and fighters are dear, my crew have husbanded our resources most capably. I could spare a wing if it were truly necessary."

Rami looked thoughtful. "You do not wish to aid the Terrans more than is required."

Amentep looked into the distance for a moment before responding. "That is not precisely the reason. I hold no love for the Terran species, but they are our allies. Honor compels me to respond to the Bastion just as I would to a Vasudan destroyer."

"And to defend the Terran homeworld as if it were Vasuda, is it not so?"

Amentep shut his eyes and visibly flinched. It was as if he had received a warhammer's blow to the solar plexus. The Prophet was clearly capable of both subtlety and bluntness.

It was some moments before Amentep responded. His voice had a hard edge. "I will not repay a debt I do not owe."

"If the command ship is destroyed, then surely that will be the necessary outcome."

"Our vendetta is against the Destroyers. Whether the Terran homeworld survives is incidental. I will yield to what the Light has decreed." Amentep looked at Rami grimly. "Although justice would seem to require that it should share Vasuda's fate."

"Ah." Rami inspected a wall decoration for a few moments. "The Hammer of Light has voiced similar sentiments."

Amentep laughed harshly. "Pfaugh! The Hammer of Light would have us all take the ghar'ak and consign our galaxy to oblivion. They ought to lead by example."

"Are we not delaying the Time of Renewal by our resistance? Should we not submit to the hammer ourselves, 'that we may be molded as fine gold by a skilled craftsman'?"

Amentep started, then looked at Rami angrily. "What in the seventh ring of fire are you saying? Is it not right to strive against the darkness? Are we not thereby refined?" He had not expected to hear the beguiling words of the enemy's philosophy from a Prophet of the Order.

Rami held Amentep's gaze for a moment, then bobbed slightly. "I see you remember your catechism. Indeed, it is only by being refined that we can reflect the Light, for none of us possesses without receiving. Forgive me; it is sometimes necessary to probe deeply in order to test the true nature of one's character."

Amentep's anger had not abated. "And do you now advocate the way of the Hammer of Light?" It was as much an accusation as a question.

"Ah, but that is the key!" Rami had become animated. "It is not the Light that is the instrument of the hammer, but the hammer that is the instrument of the Light! Our renegade brethren claim that they know the Scrolls, and yet they merely see without understanding."

The Admiral's pose softened, but only slightly. "I fear I do not follow."

"Their errors are threefold." Rami began reciting a text from memory. "According to the Scrolls, the Destroyers haunt the heavens, prowling the frozen void and scorching all with fire. Desiring and yet hating the realm beyond the stars from which they were cast, they are said to roam ever before the threshold of the highest heaven, seeking a way to storm its gates and suffering none other to approach. The Scrolls declare that the revelation of these Destroyers would presage the shift of the ages and the Time of Renewal, in which the servants of Life would come forth and the cosmos would be transformed. The heretical Hammer of Light conflated these two opposing forces in their misinterpretation of the prophecies."

"Yes, I have read that before. The Hammer of Light mistook the Destroyers for the ones who would transform the cosmos, putting light for darkness and darkness for light."

"A most grievous error. They also labor under the delusion that the Time of Renewal can be accomplished or immanentized by the efforts of men. Of necessity, this can only be done by the Light, and in the Light's own time."

"I see. And the third?"

Rami did not answer immediately, but hesitated, seemingly lost in thought. When he spoke, his manner was sorrowful. "They suppose themselves able to direct the Light as they will, as if they could grasp it in their hands. They have abducted a beautiful metaphor in the Scrolls illustrating the trials and rewards of

perseverance, and they have corrupted it into a mockery of itself. The phrase 'hammer of Light' now elicits fear and contempt instead of humility and hope."

Somewhat mollified, Admiral Amentep mused thoughtfully. Too many Vasudans, including many of his own colleagues, had found it impossible to resist the call of the Hammer of Light. Indeed, even for those who retained their loyalty to the PVE, maintaining morale required a conscious and sustained effort. There were many who joined the Hammer of Light because they truly believed its precepts, but there were not a few who fled to it out of despair. And despair was difficult to resist when beset on the one side by constant enemy victories and on the other by unremitting Hammer of Light propaganda.

Admiral Amentep set his jaw. "O, that the Light would manifest clearly, for all to see, and end this madness."

Rami sighed. "That is not the way. Exposure to the Light is fatal for those who have not prepared themselves. That is why the Light conceals itself. Who among us would bring a newborn to the surface of Vasuda?" The Admiral winced at the imagery. "Those of us without a mature carapace cannot tolerate the midday sun, and yet it is only through gradual exposure to the sun, at dawn and dusk, that our carapace can develop."

"The thickness of a man's skin is the measure of his courage, and he who dies a worm dishonors his house," Amentep quoted.

Rami nodded. "As you say. The Light teaches us through nature as well as the Scrolls."

The Admiral turned away again. "I wish we were not forced to ally with the worms."

Rami's eyes hardened. "'A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue.'"

Amentep turned abruptly. "Shall we not name them for who they are?"

"The Terrans are not cowards, Amentep! They have proven themselves in honorable combat, both against us and against the Destroyers. They must be judged by their actions, not their appearances."

"It is their actions by which I am judging them. They are belligerent and paranoid. Do they not show friendship to one another by baring their teeth?"

The Prophet turned and paced some distance away. "If you would indulge me, I wish to share a dream that has returned to me several times these past few months." He turned to look at Amentep. "A figure, a Terran, walking across the

galaxy from system to system, always in the same order: from Deneb, to Altair, to Aldebaran, to Alpha Centauri, to Vasuda. Wherever he walked, Vasudans died. It was as if the Terran was the physical manifestation of death. No Vasudan could stand up to it."

Amentep studied the Prophet. "And you believe this dream to be significant?"

"The Light speaks to us through dreams, if we have the wit to understand them. Recurring dreams are particularly important. This dream has visited me more than any other."

Amentep looked thoughtful. "The interpretation seems simple enough. The dream is a reflection of your present fears about the war. As a Vasudan, you fear the destruction of Vasudan systems. The figure wears the guise of a Terran because the Terrans, though alien, are familiar. The Destroyers are unfamiliar as well as alien."

Rami nodded. "Many of my colleagues are of the same opinion - as was I, at first. But this does not fit with what we have seen so far. The Destroyers have already visited Deneb, and from there they moved directly to Vasuda. They have never visited Altair."

"The sequence may not have been important."

Rami shook his head. "On the contrary, the sequence seemed very important - especially the beginning, at Deneb. This is why I felt I should share it with you. It may portend some event of the future, and you may have some crucial role to play, perhaps in your defense of the Altair jump node. I do not think it was just coincidence that you and I met tonight."

"You believe the Destroyers will attack Altair?"

"The Destroyers did not seem to be a concern. Since the figure was Terran, I believe it will be a Terran attack."

Amentep furrowed his brow. "The node from Deneb to Altair is already returning to its standard phase, and will not restabilize for many years, if at all. In fact, I considered it a clear intervention by the Light for the node to have been open during this conflict, for otherwise our recent recovery operation would not have been possible. If any ships use the node in the future, they would surely belong to the Destroyers. You know they have bypassed our fleets using unstable nodes before."

Rami shook his head. "I feel quite firmly that it was not the Destroyers who were the subject of the dream."

"Then that seems plainly impossible." Amentep inclined his head. "Yet, for the sake of argument, let us assume it is not. You believe the Terran fleets will betray us?"

Rami gestured helplessly. "That seems to be a more accurate interpretation, but I do not believe it is correct. The dream only showed a single Terran, not a horde, swarm, or fleet. It is of course possible that this Terran could represent the entire Terran battle group -- but I am more inclined to believe that it represents a unique phenomenon, one outside our current experience, though associated with the Terrans in some way. Perhaps a powerful dictator will arise, or perhaps a virulent plague will be unleashed. I cannot be sure."

Amentep looked dismissive. "And this dream condemns the entire Vasudan race to destruction?"

"No, no. I believe it is a warning, not a condemnation. The Scrolls record many stories wherein the Light warned tribes of impending disaster. Because the Light did not wish the tribes to suffer destruction, it sent many warnings in advance. When the tribes heeded the warning, the disaster was averted. When they did not, the disaster swept them away. It is therefore our responsibility to heed the warning."

"And how is that to be done? You said yourself that no Vasudan could resist it."

"True. Though the Terrans might be able to stop it. The dream did not address that."

Amentep's furrow deepened. "I do not understand. If this only within the Terrans' power to stop, then why should the dream visit us, if it is merely a warning, and not a judgement?"

Rami sighed. "That, I do not know. But I can conjecture. If the phenomenon only affects Vasudan systems, and the Destroyers are not involved, why would the Terrans feel it necessary to intervene? I do not need to remind you that the sentiments of the past fourteen years are very fresh on everyone's minds." He bobbed, but it was a stiff, deliberate movement. "If it is possible for the Terrans to come to our assistance, how can we be sure that they will?"

"Does not the treaty obligate them to do so?"

"The treaty is a cease-fire and non-aggression pact, nothing more. Vasudans and Terrans cooperate now because it is in our best interest, but very few of them, and very few of us, would do so without the Destroyers to create the necessity."

"And that is as it should be. Vasudans and Terrans are incompatible. After the Destroyers are defeated, if that ever comes to pass, we must go our separate

ways. Forceful integration of disparate cultures can only lead to chaos, turmoil, and the corruption of both."

"And I agree. Yet that should not prevent us from remaining friends. If this dream comes to pass, we may need them. A friend will help; a mere acquaintance may not. Indeed, one of their own great thinkers said, 'We must all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.'"

Amentep's eyes narrowed. "Another allusion to violence. And a tautology at that."

"Consider the saying before you pronounce judgement on it."

Amentep pondered for a few moments. Reluctantly, he conceded. "I believe I understand. But the Terrans have a dark sense of humor."

Rami bobbed slightly. "Perhaps you would prefer a saying of our own. "'Two lame men can prop each other up.'"

Amentep made a contemptuous noise. "And our governments are the two lame men? That is not a popular position." He sighed. "But you are correct. Indeed, if not for the arrival of the Destroyers, how long would it have been before they collapsed from exhaustion and lack of purpose?"

Rami bobbed again, a genuine one this time. "And that, you may find, may also be of the Light."

Amentep stared. "Explain."

"It is a very simple principle, and yet it is also one of the most profound. 'What others intend for evil, the Light can use for good.' Many of our greatest thinkers are still probing its depths."

Amentep was astonished. "I cannot see how anything good can come of this catastrophe, particularly given the unprecedented level of both Vasudan and Terran casualties. Who would believe that over four billion people could be killed in a single day?"

"Indeed." For a moment Amentep thought he could see an expression of great pain and suffering on Rami's face, but when he looked again, the Prophet merely appeared tired. "And yet, 'what is a man's life, but a single grain among all the sands of Vasuda'? There is more to our existence than what we see." He bobbed slightly. "And do not forget that history is inhabited by both the living and the dead. The dead have more influence on our lives than you may realize, and they have the benefit of seeing what the Light sees."

Amentep said nothing for several moments.

"I think you have all the information you require," said Rami. "I have done all I can. You must now trust the Light to lead you." He extended his hand and brought it to his chest. "Sa Vasuda."

Amentep returned the gesture wordlessly, and watched the Prophet depart. He turned back to the window, but its view was obscured by a hazy cloud, and in any case, the Typhon had moved far enough along its orbit that the star would have no longer been visible. He tapped his fingers on the side of the console, thinking.

He pressed a button. "Amentep to bridge."

"Bridge here."

"What is the status of the Bastion?"

"The Bastion will be ready to jump to Sirius within four hours. They are still awaiting your response."

He stared at nothing in particular for a few moments. "Tell them we will provide them with a wing of fighters, as requested."

"Yes sir. Is there anything else?"

He hesitated, then asked, "Have our technicians finished repairing the Thothes we captured from the Hammer of Light?"

"Yes sir. The last repair was completed this morning. Engineering reports that all four Thothes have completed final flight checks and have been certified for combat. They are being fuelled as we speak."

Amentep nodded, despite the lack of a video connection, then paced slowly across the room, leaving the line open. He paused at the far wall, considering.

The voice on the other end tentatively broke the silence. "Sir?"

He turned. "Inform the Bastion that we will be sending them the Thothes. Have our top four pilots report to the flight deck. I will be down to brief them shortly."

"Yes sir."

Amentep signed off and walked to the door. He took one last look back at the window, which now displayed a clear, brilliant field of stars.

"Sa Vasuda," he said to himself. Then he paused. "And... Sa Terra."