

BLACKENED KNIGHT

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Chapter 1

Lost sector, uncharted planetoid designated Tartarus.

Daniel Black stared up at the sky.

He had seen so much on this horrible alien world, Tartarus would haunt his dreams for years to come. It was good to know that even among the horrors of this world, something as beautiful as the night sky could remain unchanged. Even if the patterns were unrecognizable, he looked at that sky so filled with stars, wondering if these would be the last he'd ever see. Propping himself up, he looked around at that ruined, ancient city surrounding him. It stretched beyond what he could see. It could have changed the galaxy. This undiscovered culture, older than anything imagined, could have put all their names in the history books. They had hoped to find answers, perhaps even a greater meaning. They could have learned so much here, but instead, only found death.

The pain was returning to his hands and Daniel looked down at them. They were a tattered wreck, and it was doubtful that they would ever truly heal. Bone peeking out from beneath ruined flesh, seeming to glint in a hollow sarcastic humor, mocking his powerlessness. By now, Daniel had lost a considerable amount of blood and the whispers of unconsciousness pulled at his vision. He didn't hear the figure approaching. He reached for his weapon before realizing he was helpless. The hooded figure melted into view, and with it, an aura of malevolence. Moving within layers of rough, ancient fabrics, any face was hidden by unnatural shadows.

"You're here to finish me then?" Daniel murmured. His sidearm was right there on the ground next to him, but he knew he would be lucky to lift it let alone work a trigger.

"No" only one word but it was clearly Marin's voice, only harsher. That diminutive anthropologist had been the first to go missing. Only this thing was at least three feet taller.

"Then I'm already dead and this is hell," Daniel managed after a time, his voice ragged with pain.

"Perhaps I've always thought it a foul prison." Daniel could feel it gazing through him, "You will not speak of what you saw here. It is not yet time. They would notice even humanities feeble squalling. No, that comes later. Take joy, Daniel, for you will have a part to play. It is an honor."

Daniel couldn't even scream as the sensation of jagged fingers tore through his mind. Then it was done.

He was slumped into himself, hardly conscious when the searchlight of the jumpship found him. He was still slipping in and out of reality as he was raised into the ship. His beacon had been heard, but he could not grasp the terror of what this would mean, before he caught himself slipping into darkness, his mind unable to endure any longer. There was work to do.

Twenty bodies were found in the ruins of that ancient city, all withered and hollowed, as though drained of any traces of life. Only Daniel Black, an uncommissioned Sargeant, made it out alive.

It would be the only official survey expedition ever sent to Tartarus. After them, the planet was designated off limits and no one spoke of the failed expedition again. All records were either sealed away or erased, a blemish on the humanities galactic conquest, forgotten by all. And so it would have remained, if not for a small red journal. It had been written by Ivan Cross, the scientist in charge of the expedition and amongst the rest of his effects, the journal found its way back to the Royal Martian

College. There it would wait, high on a back shelf, like so many of the old books did, for who even used printed texts in these days of progress?

Five years later

Sarah Blake was born on Mars, in the great city. She was raised in the years after Mars' war of independence, in the planet's golden age. The first generation to be raised on a Mars truly independent of Earth.

It was a new renaissance of art and culture. Everywhere you looked there was a new building going up, a new discovery being touted. The fledgling republic thought it was going to last forever, but times like those never do. For soon the buildings crumbled and the well of new discoveries became stagnant. The economy collapsed and now, not fifteen years from their independence, Mars was deep in the grips of a depression the likes of which has not been seen since before humans first left Earth.

Sarah paid little mind to these things. In spite of her father's insistence she should join the family business in the martian bank. Born into a wealthy family, she would rarely want for anything, spending the first twenty years of her life fairly sheltered. When she was of age Sarah finally had her way, over the numerous protests of her parents, and was sent to study Archeology at the Royal College.

A good student and a thorough researcher, she graduated she found a job working for one of her professors.

Joseph Klaus almost as lauded by his students as by himself. He made a name for himself discovering a lost ship from the first deep space explorations, if he could believe Klaus single handedly rescued the old hunk from a pirate horde while still managing to grade papers. Sarah idolized him and like many of the girls in his class believed all of his stories. Before his papers were published and praised, as they so often were, Sarah would spend her time hunting for any flaw prior to their unveiling. Though she seldom could, Klaus viewed it as necessity so Sarah often found herself spending countless hours in the dusty stacks of the University Library, triple and quadruple checking, re-researching, and otherwise cut off from the world. It is on one of these nights in the library which she found a small red notebook. To think such a small thing would irrevocably alter the course of her life and shatter all of her preconceptions.

Walking through the stacks, partial manuscripts in hand, she caught sight of a strange shadow in the corner of her eye. Had it moved? She wasn't sure, but by now she had already startled, dropping her books as she shrieked, her body jumping away from it, slamming right into the shelf at her side. Not only had she managed to drop her own pile, but more than a few volumes had been launched from the shelf. Casting about for whatever was responsible, she found that of course she was alone. grumbling to herself. She was growing tired of these long nights, she hadn't become the assistant to a famous adventurer to be stuck in a dimly light library toiling away fact checking. She had barely slept this week. With a sigh she began to clean up her mess. A small leather bound book catches her eye. An odd looking thing, unlike any of the volumes surrounding it. Out of place. Turning it over in her hands Sarah opened the volume, quickly paging through it randomly Sarah realized she was most likely holding the journal of a dig, it was handwritten and worn from use. Shrugging to herself Sarah adds it to her pile, perhaps it would be an interesting interlude. Finding her way back to her tiny alcove, Sarah tries to continue her extensive referencing for Mr. Klaus's current paper on the long term effect of introducing concepts from alien cultures to the martian public, he was always so forgetful with his citations. It was lucky she knew her way around the old stacks so well, some of the research he used was so old it would have been easy to miss. She sighs leaning back in her chair. This was far from fascinating work. The book catches her eye

again, a small break couldn't hurt. she begins thumbing through the tomb. Sarah has barely begun to read when she almost puts it back down. It reads like the rantings of a madman.

"The shadows are moving again. They want me to destroy the box. I know Marin is right about the hall of bones. I tried to deny the truth but we have released something, old, terrible. What have I done. I cannot let this be my legacy."

The journal is cluttered with ravings of demons which come in the night, a darkness hungry for souls. But beneath the ravings it remained ordered and exact, clinical even. Something about it seems real in spite of the fantasies.

The journal detailed a military sponsored survey of a small world covered in the ruins of what seemed to be an undiscovered alien race. It seemed so fanciful to even start to believe, then she sees the name of the author, Ivan Cross, he was one of the most respected archaeologists in the past hundred years.

Cross was the first human to find alien ruins on Europa. It was during the early days of space exploration. Before hyperspace had been pioneered and before the Flame of Prometheus made first contact with a nonhuman race. He must have been going senile in his old age, but there was still a foundation of facts hidden among the madness.

As Sarah read the journal she realizes the research is sound, and provable. There was everything needed to mount an expedition, detailed maps, descriptions of the ruins, but most importantly, the exact location of the planet.

Her excitement getting the better of her, Sarah found herself rushing across town at five in the morning to professor Klaus' house.

She banged on his door with the journal clutched in her hand. He quickly answered.

"Sarah" he asked confused why she is there at this hour.

"Professor, I found something huge" she said barging past him into the house.

"What?"

"I was working in the stacks, checking your paper, when I found something" she said thrusting the journal into his hands.

Joseph took the book from her. It is clear he thinks it is a waste of time, but as he skims the journal his tiredness slips away. He realized what he is holding.

"Is this real" he asked incredulously.

"I haven't authenticated it yet but it looks real."

"This could be massive."

"An undiscovered alien race, millions of years older than anything known to date. If this is real it could change everything."

"And make us incredibly rich" said Joseph with a grin.

"The expedition won't be cheap."

"Not to worry dear, I'll take care of the finances. It would help if we could find a guide who knows the world."

"The journal says that it is uninhabited, and in a sector of space which is hard to navigate."

"Probably why nobody else has stumbled across it yet."

"Why have we never heard about this" asked Sarah suddenly concerned, "A discovery like this would have been splashed across every paper from here to New Jerusalem. Especially with Cross involved."

"This reads like the trashiest of fictions but the research is very good. It's quite simple It was a Military expedition." says Joseph as he pages through the journal.

"What difference does that make?"

"Half the time the military will bury everything found on expeditions they sponsor, and the contract they make you sign has a gag order written into it. I remember this on time on Antary seven when—"

"Anyways" said Sarah cutting him off before his mind began to wander.

“Yes?”

“You want a guide, there is a list of names. We can just hire one of the men from the Cross expedition.”

“Yes that should do. Well Sarah Blake how does it feel knowing you are about to be part of one of the biggest archaeological expeditions of our time?”

A few days later, Sarah stared across the road at a rundown building, a bar whose name “The Rusty Bolt” was declared brashly by a brightly flashing neon sign. Sarah was standing in the heart of Oldtown, the last section of the city still covered in the prefab housing left from the first few colonists.

Sarah could hear the voice of her mother telling her to stay away from Oldtown, *that was where the criminals and destitute poor lived*, as she walked down the street. Normally she would never even come here, but the man she was meeting had insisted.

Sarah and Joseph had gone through every name on the list, the only one they were able to find was Daniel Black. From what Sarah was able to learn he had been a promising officer in the UESC but he had suddenly been dishonorably discharged a little over four years ago.

Steeling herself, Sarah sets out to her destination. The building was old, it looked like it could crumble into a massive pile of rubble at the first sign of a light breeze. As she enters she takes in the walls clad in peeling linoleum and the smell of blood and sweat in the air. There is a sign advertising rooms for rent, though why anyone would choose to stay here was beyond her.

Sarah cast around looking for Mr. Black, he had told her that he would be here. She finally spotted him in a back corner, more dimly lit than the rest of the bar. As she walked over, she couldn't help but start assessing him. He was dressed in the dim colors which seem so prevalent of former military, his reddish brown hair is long and unkempt falling into his eyes. But the thing which Sarah couldn't help but see is the dull shine of metal peeking out from between the cuff of his sleeve and his gloves. He had a cybernetic hand.

Sarah sat across the table from him. Daniel seemed to be having his lunch, he is hunched over a bowl of stew.

“I trust you are Mr. Black” she asks.

“You can drop the mister, who're you” he asks taking another mouthful of the stew. It is a fairly unappetizing looking dish, consisting of a slimy green vegetable of some sort.

“I am Sarah Blake, we talked the other day?”

“Money first.”

“Of course” said Sarah trying not to get flustered by his brusque manner. She produced an envelope out of her purse, and slid it across the table. Black opened it and quickly counted the contents.

“What do you want” he asks, continuing to count the money.

“I understand you were in the UESC military?”

“Yeah.”

“During your service, you were part of an expedition, to a small planet called Tartarus? I am interested in learning what you know about this planet.”

“This conversation is over” said Black making to leave.

“Wait, I paid you the least you do is answer a few questions.” Black paused for a moment before retaking his seat.

“You've bought yourself five minutes, talk fast.”

“My employer and I are putting together an archaeological expedition to Tartarus. We would like you to sign on as a guide. I have looked and you are the only person I can find that has actually been there.”

"I shouldn't even be talking to you," he said with a sigh, "That's right, I've been there."

"The pay is five hundred a day plus a portion of the find. If you're willing to be our guide" said Sarah, leaning back in her chair.

Daniel paused looking as though a war was being waged behind his eyes.

"I will never return there" said Daniel with a tone like he was trying to convince himself. Sarah sighed getting to her feet, tucking her hand into her pocket she produced a small slip of paper. She looked down at Daniel in disappointment, this was a waste of her time and Joseph's money.

"If you change your mind the ship will be departing from here in two days" she said slipping the piece of paper across the table.

"I hope to see you there. This journey will be far safer with a guide who knows the way" and with that she walked away.

Daniel Black couldn't help but stare at the innocent looking piece of paper. He had tried to forget about that planet, but every day he is reminded by the mere sight of his hands. Tartarus is like an itch in the back of his head that never goes away, and the more he tried not to think about it the more it itches.

He glared impotently at the metallic glint peering from the space between his sleeve and his glove as he grabbed the paper to read the address. The army hospital had no choice but to remove his hands. They had been burned by a corrosive organic poison. Daniel was told he was lucky, he could have lost much more than he had.

Daniel had no memories of the expedition, much to his detriment during the inquiry. The brass doesn't like a soldier who not only lost his men, but claims to have no idea what happened. A few words of their deaths could have stopped that girl from even thinking of going, why hadn't he told her?

Daniel picked up the piece of paper, slowly unfolding it. The ship was docked in a cheap hangar a few miles from the Rusty Bolt. It's the type of place which doesn't ask questions. If their ship was there it meant either that the expedition was bordering on illegal, or they were on a shoestring budget, probably both.

Getting up from his table Daniel dropped enough cash to cover the bill and a fairly pitiful tip, before heading upstairs.

He had been living here for the past few months as he looked for work. The rent was cheap and you got plenty of parasites for company. He could feel a rash coming up on his leg from the sheets. At least the food was good.

He had hoped to be out of here inside a week, but there wasn't much work to be found these days. Flopping down on his bed he closed his eyes. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep but he tries anyways, he had a job tonight.

As he laid there he found his mind drifting to Tartarus again. Daniel wished he could simply toss it aside but it digs at him, that blank space in his mind. He tried not to dwell on that dark space too long, that itch that he couldn't scratch. Daniel felt like he was being watched again, he's too paranoid these days, feeling eyes in the shadows. He could recall the first day in the ruins, but everything after that was simply gone, and the more he tries to remember the more the shadows watch him.

A few hours later the sound of Daniel's alarm shattered the silence of his room, rousing him from dark paranoid dreams. He tried not to notice the slip of paper seeming to taunt him from the table as he leaves the room.

Mishka was having a bad week. When he had finished serving out his sentence in the penal camp he had hoped to find honest work, distance himself from his old life. But he had exited to find a Mars with little work for those who had experience, let alone a former legbreaker. Jobs were scarce and you had to make ends meet.

Mishka had always been big, and he had been mean. When he was a younger man Mishka took a great deal of pride in the infamy that he built for himself, and few were surprised when he started working for Aleksey the man who ran Mars. Sure the politicians and business conglomerates thought they were in control, but in the dark where they tried not to look everyone knew who was really pulling the strings.

Aleksey had been part of the first wave of immigrants from earth to the Martian colonies, but unlike the rest he wasn't looking for honest work. Back in those days the new unified earth government was cracking down on organized crime, so much it was all but impossible to make a profit. Aleksey realized that with new land came new opportunities. Within three years he had set himself up as the king of the Martian crime world.

This was all long before Mishka's time though. He was born on Mars, the youngest son of a working family. He grew up in Russia Town, the part of the great city where the Terraformer workers lived. In the days when honest work could build a world before the corporations and politicians came.

Back on earth the soviets fought the hardest of everyone against planetary unification. A ten year war was waged against what they felt was just another oppressive government trying to push them into the dirt. They fought but were outnumbered. Russia was dragged kicking and screaming into the new world order.

In theory Russia was brought into the unified government, the war left in the past, but some wounds heal badly. Many of the former citizens of Russia immigrated to mars, and the other in the outer colonies looked for a better life. Most of them found work on Terraforming Platforms, hoping to build a better life for their children. But there was little in the way of options for the children of those workers. You could grow up to work on the terraforming platforms, or you could work for Aleksey. Mishka chose the latter of the two options.

Mishka started out in the protection rackets working his way up until he was arrested. After everything, he got sentenced to working on the terraforming platforms. It took four years but Mishka served out his sentence.

Mishka thinks over all this as he performs his job. He had found work as a busboy, it was long hours for little pay but it was honest work. At least that's what he tells himself on nights like this when the old life feels so much easier. He is taking out the trash when someone he never thought he would see again calls his name. Standing in the back of the ally containing the restaurant's trash is Jason, an old ally almost even a friend. He and Mishka had come up together, Mishka hadn't seen him since he was arrested.

"Jason is that you?"

"It's me Mishka" replied the skinny man, Jason was thin as a crack addict with a hawk nose and a scar across his face.

"What are you doing here" asked Mishka with suspicion.

"What you're not happy to see your old friend?"

"I'm out Jason, I want a simple life. I've told the others, I had hoped not to tell you as well."

"Ah but wouldn't that simple life be so much sweeter with a nest egg to keep you comfortable" said Jason with an expression Mishka recognized. He always had that look when he was playing an angle.

"Spill."

"I have a friend who knows a man who is looking for security for a lucrative job."

"Job?" asks Mishka against his better judgment. Taking his interest as a good sign Jason continues.

"It's an off world archeological dig. Seems this guy stumbled across a map to some untouched ruins, you know what alien artifacts can go for on the open market."

"How much does it pay?" Mishka may have wanted to leave his old life behind him, but Jason has a point. The simple life is much easier when you have a cushion.

"Thousand a day plus a piece of the profit."

"Where?"

"You're in then?"

"Maybe, where is it?"

"They're meeting at *The Fighting Irish* port, look for *The Phoenix*, it's an old rustbucket but I didn't pick it. The job is on an uncharted rock called Tartarus."

"Comforting name, and what do you want for pointing me to this job out of the goodness of your philanthropic heart?"

"What, me? Well I just want to help an old friend get back on his feet, plus twenty percent."

"Ten."

"Fifteen."

"Done" said Mishka offering his hand. Jason shakes it with a grin.

"Hey what's wrong with the name?" called Jason after him as he walks away.

"Don't know your mythology do you?"

"What?"

"Tartarus, it was what the Greeks called hell."

Chapter 2

Daniel Pulled his jacket tighter around his neck against the cold of the night. He hadn't been able to find steady work over the last few years. The number of people lined up to hire a former soldier with a psychological discharge were few and far between. Lately he had been partnering with an old friend from his days in the UESC, they had been selling their services as extra security. Jerry was far from dependable, but he wasn't in a place he could choose his coworkers. Jerry hadn't fucked up enough to make it worth walking away from the money his help brought. The man was connected in all the wrong places and always managed to find them work. So far their partnership, such as it was, had been working out fairly well for both of them.

Daniel came to the corner they had agreed to meet, Jerry pulled up in a moving truck. Daniel got in and they pulled away. He could already tell that this is going to end badly when he sees the joint hanging out of the corner of Jerry's mouth. While some people can work high without issue Jerry got dumb as shit.

"So what's the job" asked Daniel gesturing to the truck.

"We're moving some cargo."

"And the cargo" asked Daniel easing one of his weapons from its holster under his arm, and checking it over.

"I didn't ask."

"Shit, if I get shot over this I'm blaming it on you" Said Daniel holstering his handgun forcefully. The two of them drive, Daniel takes in the beautiful night.

They follow the directions Jerry was given, ending up in a rundown area of the city which used to be the industrial district before the bottom fell out of the market.

Jerry pulls off into a dilapidated building which looked like it used to be a warehouse of some sort. Daniel could feel the hairs rising on the back of his neck, bad vibes in the air.

Jerry stopped the van and they get out. There were two men waiting for them, dressed in expensive looking suits.

"You're late" says the man on the left. The two of them are all but indistinguishable save for the scar on the face of the one standing to the right.

"Five minutes, chill man we'll get back on schedule" said Jerry with an absent smile. Daniel felt like whimpering at Jerry's stupidity as Scarface gives him a disgusted look. Daniel was worried that Scarface has decided it would be simpler to just kill them and get a new courier. This fear escalates when suddenly, Scarface turns around and walks into the shadows. He is relieved when instead of bullets suddenly coming out of the darkness Scarface returns driving a loader. The remaining man begins to talk as his partner finishes loading the cargo into the back of the van.

"I should hope it goes without saying but you are not to open the cargo. If any of the cargo is missing upon delivery it will fall upon you to rectify our disappointment in your work. You have two hours to transport the cargo to its destination" finished the man.

"No problemo" said Jerry with a smirk. Daniel barely stopped himself from hitting Jerry as they turn and walk back to the van.

"Speed and I'll shoot you before the cops get a chance" said Daniel coolly.

"Chill dude."

"How did you find this job?"

"Harvey, he's a friend of a friend who knows these dudes. They needed this transported and didn't want customs looking at it. You know how hard it is getting anything through these days."

"These guys got the Aleksey to give them the ok on this right?"

“Sure” said Jerry in a tone which left no doubt of the fact he was lying.

“Shit Jerry, if they find out about this we’ll be lucky if they just kill us.”

“Chill dude.”

“Chill, CHILL?” Daniel felt like wringing the stoner’s neck. He knew better than to cross the Russians.

“Just drive” said Daniel finally. He pulled out his gun again nervously checking it over.

“You seeing shadows again?”

“Shut up and drive” replies Daniel harshly. It was beyond stupid to cross the Russians. Daniel had heard stories of the small timers who thought they could go around the established order to save a few bucks, it never ended pretty for them. Fuck, too late to turn back now.

The drive passed with the agonizing slowness which all activities you wish would simply end seem to thrive on. Daniel was beyond high-strung when he finally stepped out of the van at their destination, he couldn’t help but imagine he could feel sniper scopes on him.

They had driven to an isolated area outside the great city. It looked like the type of place you would see pictures of in the news accompanying a story about a triple homicide.

Daniel kept his hand close to his weapon as they waited for someone to show for the cargo. Their wait was short. It had been all of a minuet when a man stepped out from the shadows.

“Was beginning to think you weren’t going to show” said the man lighting a cigarette.

“We got your cargo, deal was cash on delivery” said Jerry to the man.

“Here” said the man tossing Jerry a wad of cash. As the money changed hands, Daniel looked into the shadows, the night was too still. He is just being paranoid, right? Daniel could feel movement just outside the periphery of his vision. On instinct it caused him to turn, just in time to see a red dot appear on the forehead of the smoking man.

“Jerry down” said Daniel pulling his guns. As he and Jerry grabbed dirt the smoking man’s head disappears into a bloody mist. Figures appeared out of the darkness. Without thinking both he and Jerry break for it. Daniel sees Jerry take a bullet as they run, there was no questioning that he is dead.

Daniel suddenly found himself cornered. He had run down a narrow alley between two buildings and right into a wall, it is too high to scale. He would leave himself completely open to the shooters.

He turned putting his back to the wall and raised his weapons. That itch in the back of his mind was worse than ever. He could feel eyes on him and it made his skin crawl. Fuck it, he’ll take them with him. Daniel was always one to go down swinging. Thumbing the twin handguns to full auto, Daniel watched the men come into view. He empties his weapons into the heavily armed men.

Mere seconds passed and Daniel stood surrounded by bodies. He could feel his hands begin to shake as the adrenalin starts to clear from his system, it strikes him as funny they can still shake like that. Daniel bent down to check over one of the bodies. There were no IDs but it was a safe bet that they were working for the Russians. Daniel slumped back against the van. He was in a mountain of shit. When these men were found he would have the Russians and the cops after him.

Pulling himself together Daniel got to his feet. He walked over to the back of the van. Opening the back he grabbed a crowbar and started prying open the crate.

Hundreds of perfectly ripe oranges poured out from the large crate. Daniel didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, all this for fresh produce.

Dropping the crowbar Daniel gets into the driver’s seat and starts to drive.

Daniel could still feel the leftover adrenaline coursing through his system as he opens the door to his small room. He cast around the room looking for anything resembling a solution to tonight. A way out, he needed a way out. He suddenly saw the slip of paper still sitting on the table from earlier. He quickly grabs it and stuffs it into his pocket.

It didn’t take long for Daniel to pack up his few belongings, he had always been someone to travel light, and hadn’t accumulated many possessions during his time here.

Pausing for a moment he pulls a handgun from its holster under his arm. With a deep breath he took a seat at the lone table in his room. It would be a bad idea to leave in a panic. That would raise too many questions to fast. Quickly breaking down the weapon, he started cleaning it. The familiar action cleared his mind and slowed his pulse.

The weapon had started its life as standard issue plasma enhanced handgun. Plasma enhanced weapons came into popularity during Earth's unification war. It was a fairly simple process, when the gun fires it superheats the plasma cap in the round creating a far deadlier round which was much lighter than it's lead counterpart. Conventional firearms were still used by most, but Plasma enhanced weapons were becoming more prevalent. It wasn't exactly legal for him to possess the weapons but he had kept these from his days in the Military. The UESC had been less than thorough in its search of his possessions at his discharge. Daniel had done a fair bit of aftermarket work on his weapons, mainly reworking the grips and trigger guards to work with his prosthetic hands.

Daniel finished reassembling the sidearm, bringing his mind back to the present. Tucking the weapon into the small of his back Daniel grabs his bag. He takes a final look back at the small room he had called home for the past months, he would not be returning here no matter how this went. He takes his keys from his pocket and tosses them on the bed.

Daniel leaves the Rusty Bolt and heads toward the Port that was named on the slip of paper. Fighting Irish Private Dock port, it was across town but he should be able to make it in time. The slip of paper showed the departure time as seven hours from now.

Hopping the cross town bus Daniel was whisked across the distance. He couldn't help but take in the scenery as they go. Twenty years ago this was all enclosed by an atmo-dome, it would have been instant death to leave its protective borders without an EVA suit. But now after years of terraforming Mars it had a breathable atmosphere. Granted a thin one but it was equivalent to being on top of a large mountain back on earth.

Daniel brings his mind back to the present as he sees his destination nearing. If this job was on the level he would make enough money to disappear for a while, maybe buy a homestead on one of the outer colonies. If it turned out to be as crooked as it looked, well, he'd still be far from here.

Daniel couldn't believe it when he sees the ship sitting in the docking port address he was given. A grey colored former military transport, it's rusted hull painted in bright letters proclaiming its name as The Phoenix.

As Sarah looked up at the ship which Joseph had hired, she reads off the name written across the nose of the old ship. It seemed appropriate that the ship which would take them to Tartarus is called the Phoenix. The ship is large enough to easily fit several dozen crew, but by the standards of spacecraft it is a small vessel.

The UESC employed hundreds of ships just like this one to transport supplies from earth to the blockade of Mars. It felt odd to be planning the spend weeks inside a symbol of the old world and its wars. Ships just like this killed so many martians. They were called the eagles of death once. Sarah takes in its shape, a large forward section with snubbed wings, a tail running back to terminate in a fan shaped thruster, all together the Phoenix had the look of an overweight bird of prey.

The ship was piloted by an balding old spacer who insisted on being called simply Fergus, he never gave a surname. Sarah tried to ignore the fact that he was taking his fifth long drink from his hip flask since she had gotten there. His face has the flush of a man who has been a heavy drinker most of his life.

Sarah had already started to load the supplies. She had just finished carrying in a load and stowing it, when she hears voices from outside. Exiting the ship she finds Daniel Black talking to Fergus.

“Hell if I’d known you had signed on, I would have asked for double the money up front” said Fergus to Black.

“An’ if I’d know you were the pilot, I would have packed an extra EVA suit” says Black with a smirk taking the big man into a hug “Good to see you again.”

“An you lad.”

“I see you have decided to join us Mr. Black” said Sarah to the former soldier.

“I decided that I just might.”

“You and Fergus seem to know one another?”

“You Kiddin” says Fergus, “me, an’ the lad have pulled each other’s’ arses outta the lurch more times than I can count.”

“Mr. Klaus will be arriving within the hour with the remainder of our crew, I trust we will be able to depart by then?”

“Hell, love I can always dust off in five minutes if I need ta.”

It is a half hour later that Joseph Klaus arrived with several men who all have the looks of career criminals. The leader of the group of men who introduced himself as Boris.

Sarah pulls Joseph aside.

“Are you sure about these men?”

“Don’t worry, Boris and his people will do fine” replied Joseph as he finished grabbing his gear to take aboard.

Daniel was already making himself at home in his quarters when a giant of a man entered carrying a large duffle.

“Hello” said Daniel not sure if the man is there to fight, or bunk down in the increasingly small seeming room. Daniel had seen the group he had arrived with, while it wasn’t like Daniel was one to judge, the look of the rather large group of men did leave something to be desired.

“Seems that we’ll be doubling up, small ship” Said the Giant.

“I got top bunk, ditch your stuff wherever.” Replied Daniel. The man was large to say the least, easily standing over six feet, his hair is dark and stringy, bearing the look of rarely being washed, he didn’t seem to carry the same air of violence as the rest of the new “crew” though.

“Daniel” he said by way of greeting.

“Mishka” replied the man.

“So you worked many jobs like this before?”

“A few” said Mishka. Seeing that the man had no desire to talk Daniel grabbed a book and vaulted up to his bunk.

The engines of the Phoenix roared to life as the first archaeological expedition to Tartarus in five years began its journey. It took only seconds for the vessel to break orbit.

Moving to a safe distance from the planet's gravity, Fergus set in the last of the navigation coordinates, and activated the FTL drive. Space seemed to warp as an indescribable sight formed before the relatively small ship, a window into hyperspace. The Phoenix moved forward into the window, and seemed to vanish as the portal closes behind them.

That night Daniel was sitting in the mess looking out the window at the sight of hyperspace rushing by the ship. It wasn't really much to look at. Hyperspace exists outside the realm of human perception, it wasn't that there was nothing to see so much as the human mind wasn't capable of seeing it. There used to be stories of people going mad from staring into hyperspace too long. Daniel never believed it, but it always gave him a strange shiver trying to see what couldn't be seen. In the days before hyperspace, back when Mars was first colonized, space travel was quite a different affair it took years, even decades

to reach a planet. But then the first hyperspace drive was successfully tested, it was found that by shifting a ship into a slightly higher dimension you could travel between the stars a fraction of the time formerly necessary.

Daniel took a drag from the glass of whiskey in his hand, say what you will about Fergus he always kept a good stock of the Irish stuff aboard.

Daniel was already starting to regret coming on this mission, as soon as they broke the atmosphere he got a bad feeling that no matter what he tried was impossible to shake. He'd had the same feeling at the onset of the last mission to Tartarus.

The sound of another person entering the mess hall broke Daniel from his silent reverie, turning he looked over his shoulder to see that Joseph had joined him.

"Oh hello, I didn't think anyone would be here at this hour" said the archeologist. He was a fairly young man to be so accomplished in his chosen profession, maybe in his early forties. He has the look of a man who thinks highly of himself, his hair a little too well kept and containing a large portion of styling products. Daniel had immediately started disliking the man upon first meeting him, he was an obvious liar.

"I can never sleep first night in hyperspace" replied Daniel finally.

"I suffer the same affliction. I was going to have some warm milk do you-" he cut off his sentence when Daniel showed him his glass of liquor.

"So tell me Mister Black," asked Joseph as he took a seat across the table from Daniel, "what should we expect from Tartarus?"

"Same as most planets like it, it's cold, and dark. Tell me though, Mr. Klaus, what do you expect to get out of this little trip?" Why wasn't he telling these people what happened to the last expedition? The man clearly doesn't know. From what Daniel had squeezed from Sarah the journal ends shortly before the blank space in Daniel's memory. Just when the shadows started moving too much. Damn it, that itch again.

"Well, I want to find something new, something to put my name in the history books" replied Joseph with a greedy smile, it broke Daniels train of thought.

"Well you might just find that, question is, will you like it?" asked Daniel swallowing the last of his drink, he got up from the table and headed to bed.

The journey to Tartarus was three weeks long, short in the scheme of things but long enough to make the crew start to chafe. It was five days in when the first big fight broke out.

There had been a number of smaller scuffles, but this was the first one that came to blows. Daniel was sitting in a corner reading a book when he saw two of the "security staff" locked in a heated argument. It seemed the same as any other argument he had seen between the two over the past few days, but then one of them started pummeling the other. Normally he would have just let it play out, it doesn't pay to pull ire onto yourself for breaking up a small scuffle, especially on a ship this small. But then he saw one of them pull a knife.

Rocketing from his seat Daniel grabbed for the man's arm, trying desperately to stop him from putting his blade to use. He managed to grab the man's arm, but that simply brought Daniel to the larger man's attention. A fist impacted with his gut doubling him over in pain.

"That all you got" asked Daniel knowing, as he said it, that it was a bad idea to open his mouth. He could see the man winding up for another hit. Daniels eyes closed involuntarily, he knows pain is coming. Then, it doesn't. When Daniel finally opened his eyes he sees the large man's wrist being held in Mishka's iron grip.

"Now that's enough of that Boris. He was just stopping you doing something you would regret tomorrow" Said Mishka through a predatory smile. Mishka was large even for the brutes Klaus hired, and his massive hand holding Boris at bay was unyielding.

Boris had a look of utter rage on his face as he backs away.

"I'll be seeing you Mishka, you and the hero" said Boris pointing at Daniel with his blade.

"Could 'a taken him you know" said Daniel from his place on the floor.

"Sure you could" said Mishka helping him to his feet.

"Really I was about to make my move. What's with those two anyway? that's the third time I've seen them going at it."

"Sorry about Boris, he and Anton have never been able play nice. Anton used to be married to Boris's sister."

"I take it the divorce wasn't amicable?" said Daniel taking a seat.

"A fancy way of putting it, want a drink" asks Mishka taking out a hip flask.

"Sure" said Daniel taking a swig which he quickly coughed back up, "What the hell is that, lighter fluid?"

"Ha ha, my family recipe, drink enough of this and it'll turn you Russian. Tell me they are saying that you have been to this world before?"

"Where I got these" says Daniel raising a hand.

"I guess that answers whether this will be an easy job" says Mishka taking a swig from the flask.

The trip to Tartarus is far from a smooth one. The planet was located in a section of space which was all but impossible to navigate, this is perhaps the largest reason it had remained undiscovered for so long. To reach it they had to traverse a section of Hyperspace which was warped by a cluster of black holes. Meaning that it had to be navigated in normal space, leaving the phoenix and her crew open to countless dangers.

despite, or perhaps in spite of the fact Fergus was a skilled and knowledgeable pilot this voyage would not prove uneventful. The dangers of the dark galaxy can't be avoided all of the time.

It was a rogue asteroid far from its place and hurtling through the black abyss on an incalculably long course which would bring the phoenix to a crashing halt. It happened in the middle of the night, well what passed for night in space. Everyone was asleep except for Daniel. The shadows were lurking in his dreams more every night, the closer he came to Tartarus the stronger they became. Why had he come? He knew better than to return to that place of death and shadow. He hadn't even questioned his decision on mars, as though some form of compulsion was steering his course. Why is he returning?

In his musings Daniel had found his way to the cockpit to watch the stars and nurse a Whiskey. He didn't see it until it's already too late.

Daniel was staring into that vast darkness of space, when proximity alarms flaired to life, filling the room with loud claxon and a harsh red light. Daniel's drink smashed on the floor forgotten as he sees a massive asteroid suddenly filling the viewport. It was vast, easily twice the size of the ship.

Daniel lunged for the controls, his cybernetic fingers flew over the console as he tried to shift the vessel away from the massive asteroid.

The Phoenixes engines fired to life and until he feels the impact, he thinks he might have succeeded. The Phoenix almost managed to evade its would be destroyer but the asteroid was just too big, the ship shook as bulkhead was scored deeply. The asteroid rushed by continuing on its path undamaged and uncaring.

Warning lights continued to flash creating a harsh light in the cockpit as the ship started to depressurize in several compartments. Daniel barely managed to seal off the affected areas in time. He thanked whatever deity was watching over them that it was only storage compartments which were affected by the impact.

"What the hell happened" asked Fergus as he stumbled into the cockpit.

"An asteroid hit us."

“Didn’t you see it coming?”

“Yes I did, I just thought it would be fun to see what happened if it hit us” snapped Daniel as he continued checking the extent of the damage.

“How bad is it” asked Fergus sliding into the secondary control console.

“Five compartments depressurized three others with major structural damage. We’ve all but lost one of the wings”

“We can’t keep going with the ship like this. We’ll have to stop to make repairs. Break out the EVA suits we’ll be here a while.”

Daniel headed down the hallway to the EVA Suits. He hated going out in vacuum, especially now, that cold black was nothing but shadow; there was little he could do to help that now, they had to get started on the repairs. Every second they were sitting there, they were sitting ducks for pirates. Marauders always liked to drift in areas like this where they knew ships would be forced to fly through normal space. It was all but impossible to hijack a ship in hyperspace, but there was little difference between the vacuum of space and the open waters of Earth.

Daniel is surprised when Mishka enters the EVA storage. Behind him and takes a suit off its hanger.

“You’re EVA rated?”

“I worked on a terraforming platform, there are a lot of places you have no choice but to wear one” said Mishka as he started putting on the heavy environmental suit.

Little had changed in EVA suits since the Apollo missions, the technology was basically the same. They had however been made much lighter and easier to work in. That wasn’t to say they were made of feathers. Daniel could feel the weight of the kevlar reinforced outer armor as he finally finished suiting up. In zero gravity it would barely be noticeable but in the Earth norm of the ship it was hard to stand.

“How bad is the damage?” asked Mishka as they walk heavily to the airlock.

“Couple of compartments are open to space. Luckily the damage was confined to storage decks.”

“Can we go to Hyperspace?”

“Until we patch up the hull we can’t risk it. The damage could be enough for the jump to crush us like a tin can” said Daniel as he sealed them into the airlock.

They could hear the hiss of the small compartment depressurizing. When the room finally equalized to the outside vacuum a warning light flashed to life, and the outer door opened. Daniel and Mishka clipped their tethers to the guardrail and floated into space.

As the two men drifted out, their tethers holding them from going too far, they take in the sight of the damage. A whole side of the ship looked as if it has been raked by the claws of a massive creature. The deep wounds are dark against the grey of the ship.

Daniel thumbed the controls of his radio opening a channel to Fergus.

“It doesn’t look as bad as I thought” he said.

“We’ll need a welding torch and plating to do the patchwork” said Mishka patching into the channel.

“I’ll send it out” said Fergus, “Fix my ship” he finished.

Over the following hours Daniel and Mishka settled into a pattern of welding the plates onto the ship. Their work would do little in the long haul but it would be enough to get them to the planet. They were close to finishing when Fergus comes onto the radio yelling.

“We have incoming, finish up we have to go.”

“Shit we aren’t done yet, how far out are they” asked Daniel.

“Not far enough.”

“Mishka it’ll have to do, we don’t have the armaments to hold out against pirates” said Daniel dropping his torch and starting towards the airlock. Nodding Mishka followed his lead. The two barely got to their destination when the first shot is fired. The massive energy of the other ships Plasma cannon rocked the ship as it barely misses, it was a warning shot. They could hear the radio come to life as the Pirates send their message.

“Halt and prepare to be boarded by the great Teh’ran.” The voice echoed over the Phoenixes intercom as Daniel and Mishka ran, shedding their EVA suits, toward the cockpit.

“Did you fix it” asked Fergus as the two rush in. Daniel slid into the secondary control console bringing up the ships readouts of the attacking ship.

“Here’s hoping” Daniel replied. He could see the encroaching ship in his scopes. It was a massive UESC cruiser, judging from how badly it was patched and repaired it was probably salvaged from a battlefield of the Martian liberation. Daniel had once served on a ship much like that one not long after his time on the Phoenix. There was no way that they would be able to even scratch it let alone mount a defense capable of fighting it off.

“Fergus now might be a good time to step on it” said Daniel.

Piracy was an offence punishable by death in the civilized galaxy, as such Pirates never let their captives live.

Fergus finished the activation sequence for the engines. There was a sound of power rushing through the conduits, feeding the massive requirements of the ship's engines. The Phoenix was smaller than the pirate vessel, and much faster. If they could reach top speed the hulking mass of the heavy cruiser wouldn't have a chance in hell of catching them. But instead of the comforting sound of the engine firing to life the ship shuttered and fell silent.

“Shit” said Fergus trying to figure out what was wrong.

“What happened?”

“We have a break in the conduits, the energy isn't getting where it's supposed to.” Fergus rushed out of the cockpit, activating readouts built into the walls, trying to find the fault.

“Mishka, help him, I'll see if I can by us any time” said Daniel as he began to warm up the weapons. A small hatch opened in the floor in the back of the room. Getting out of his seat he dived down the hatch. Daniel landed in the seat which makes up the inside of the lower gun turret. A familiar feeling came over Daniel as he grabbed the weapon controls. It had been close to ten years since he'd last been in this gun turret, but it feels like yesterday.

Daniel had been the gunner for the Phoenix, back when she was still a UESC cargo transport, he had shed blood and sweat in this very chair. Fergus had been the captain back then, he loved the old boat so much that he used his pension to buy it when he retired. Thumbing the controls to life, Daniel shifted the guns around bringing the pirate vessel into view.

Daniel had joined the UESC straight out of high school, he wanted to see the galaxy. Instead of the grand adventure the recruiter had promised he found himself in the mind-numbing job of gunner on a long-haul transport.

The United Earth Space Corps, they were originally meant to serve as the first line of defense for Earth and her colonies. But they had gained a bad reputation during the Martian War of independence. That was years before Daniel had enlisted. In the relative peace and boredom of Daniel's time in the Phoenix there had been nothing to distract himself except target practice.

Daniel turned his attention to the vessel in his scopes. He knew it would be impossible to do much damage but the large cruisers had always had a slight weakness. He targeted the primary power relay station, it was a small external node which the engine and weapon power was shunted through, it was a small target but it was possible.

Locking the targeting systems Daniel took a breath, exhaled, and fired. Daniel watched as the superheated plasma rushed toward its target, for a moment it looked like it would miss, but the hit is solid. He could see a flash of light then, as the node overloaded, and the ship went dark. Daniel reached to a panel above his head and activated the ship's intercom.

“Fergus, I bought you a few minutes, but they'll have their systems back online fast.”

“Understood” replied Fergus.

Daniel leaned back in his seat and waited, that was the only trick he had. Once the pirates figured out how to reroute their power there would be nothing he could do. Taking a deep breath he tightens his grip on the firing controls, it wouldn't make a difference but there was no way he wasn't going out fighting.

As all of this was happening Sarah was trying to figure out what she could do. She saw the people around her cleaning and readying weapons. She wasn't a fighter, she had always avoided anything resembling self-defense classes. Now as they waited to be boarded by Pirates, she was rethinking that choice. Out of the corner of her eye Sarah could see an animated Klaus headed for the cockpit of the ship. Seeing a chance to distract herself from the rising terror of their situation Sarah follows, surly he knew what to do.

"What can we do?" she asked trying to keep up with him.

"I'm going to reason with them, they just want our supplies. I'm sure we can come to an arrangement" he said.

"But they're Pirates" she replied. She knew Klaus had a reputation for daring but this seemed foolhardy. As they made their way to the cockpit they run into Fergus and one of the men Sarah couldn't remember the name of.

"Ah pilot" said Mr. Klaus as they near the two.

"The name is Fergus" replied the man not looking up. Fergus had thrown himself on the ground reaching into an open compartment bearing the internal wiring of the Phoenix.

"I have come to see what sort of demands these so called pirates have made."

Fergus barely took notice of Joseph as he wriggles deeper into the small compartment fiddling with something Sarah can't see.

"I think I found the fault, looks like the impact cracked a coupling" said Fergus to the other man.

"Mr. O'Shea I wish to know what you intend to do" an irritated Klaus all but yelled trying harder to make himself heard.

"Mishka can you hand me that wrench?"

"Mr. O'Shea, I am talking to you." By this time Joseph was barely containing himself at being ignored. Sarah had never seen this side of Klaus, it was disturbing to see his reaction to their current state. He was supposed to be experienced with these situations. Wasn't he?

"No you're wasting my time Mr Klaus, get out of my way and maybe we will all live through this. Mishka, duct tape" called Fergus from his cramped position, reaching out his hand for the tape.

Fuming Klaus storms past them to the cockpit, Sarah knows instinctively he is about to do something stupid. Marching into the cockpit Klaus heads straight to the command console. Sarah entered the room just in time to see him opening a radio channel.

"Mr. Klaus, this is a bad idea" she says trying to stop him.

"Sarah I've talked my way out of being eaten by the cannibalistic tribal population of Afeda 7, I think I can convince these second rate thieves to leave us be" he huffed with the sort of certainty which ensured failure.

"This is Professor Joseph Klaus to Mr. Teh'ran, respond. I have wish to parley." Klaus' words were followed by a silence that seems to stretch longer than seems possible before being broken by a voice.

"What could you have to bargain with that I cannot simply take?"

The pirate's image appeared on the monitor before them. His face was a horrible visage. The pirate was obviously a surgical addict, one of the growing number of humans who perform needles cybernetic enhancements upon themselves seeking some form of superiority.

“I guarantee you will find no resistance, you may have whatever you wish, I only ask that you leave us unharmed” klaus all but stammered. He was losing his composure.

“I might have agreed to your terms, let you live even, if you hadn’t fired upon me. Soon my ship will once more be repaired and I shall visit my wrath upon you. And the very fact you would contact me in this brief moment of victory, begging for my mercy, does nothing but prove you can not stop me.” As he spoke Teh’ran hunched closer to the camera his face a horrible visage, his voice a grim whisper. Joseph was left speechless as the pirate terminated the link, for once in his life he didn’t know how to respond. He tried to grasp for words. Sarah can see him attempting to build himself up in his mind, how had she never seen this side of him? Fergus finally broke the sad tableau rushing in and shoving the man aside. Fergus dropped into the pilot's chair, his hands flying over the controls of the ship.

“Here goes nothing” he whispered activating the engines. The sound of the massive energy drain resounded through the ship building to a crescendo as the Phoenix roared to life.

The crew of the Phoenix can hear the strain of the engines as the ship struggles to reach its full speed. The gravity anomalies of the black holes tearing at the fresh repairs. Below the cockpit still in the gun turret, Daniel could see the glass around him start to bend.

“MOVE!!” it was a horrible twisted voice that echoed through his mind but it was enough to snap Daniel into action. The steel and duralar of the structure wouldn’t hold long. Quickly unstrapping his safety harness he pulled himself back into the now rather crowded cockpit. Daniel barely sealed the hatch in time, seconds after his departure the small compartment shuddered its last and collapsed under the pressure.

Daniel turns to the four others in the cockpit.

“Well that could have been bad.”

Sarah stared out the porthole on the wall of her quarters. The ship was currently traveling through hyperspace again, finally free of the warped gravity fields of the black holes. The empty blackness was an eerie sight.

This voyage was Sarah’s first time off world and she was starting to think it would be her last. Already she had survived a run in with a rogue asteroid and a pirate ship. She was beginning to believe that the farfetched spacer stories were all true. And the universe really was a dangerous cold place better left alone. She would be lucky to make it home at all.

Turning back to her work Sarah attempted to regain some measure of composure. She had already read the journal cover to cover, but she kept going over it as though she would be able to find something new in its pages. She didn’t put much stock in Joseph’s theory that the military had simply buried the information, it didn’t seem possible. She hoped, in point of fact, that he was wrong. Sarah very much doubted that the UESC would be pleased if something they buried came into the light.

Sarah picked up a cup from the table attempting to drink its contents only to discover it was empty. She was tired but sleep would evade her tonight, no point even trying with the way her mind was racing.

Sarah left her quarters, making her way to the mess. She had rarely left her assigned room since their run in with the pirates. It was surprising at first to find the halls completely empty, until she realized that it was the middle of the night according to the ship’s clock. It was so easy to lose your sense of time in space. Finding her way to the kitchen, Sarah set about to making herself a fresh cup of tea. Looking around to make sure that she was alone, Sarah pulled a small book from her back pocket and begins to read while her drink steeped. She is so lost in her reading she manages to spill her now cooling tea when she looks up to see a slack faced Daniel standing in front of her. He was looking at her blankly as though he didn’t know her face.

“Daniel?”

There was no reply. Reaching out a hand Sarah touched his arm. The touch was enough. Daniel automatically focuses on her like a deep dreamer suddenly awake.

“Sarah?” he asked confused.

“Are you alright? You looked lost.”

“I was.... I was just. Adventures in the deep of space?” He asked looking at the book clutched to her chest.

“Oh, Um, I always loved pulp novels” she said quickly hiding the book in her pocket.

“No judgment, just unexpected” said Daniel holding up his hands in supplication.

“What are you doing up?” asked Sarah quickly returning the book to her pocket. In response Daniel reached up to one of the shelves and pulls down a bottle. Sarah saw blood catch the light against the metal of Daniel’s hands.

“You cut yourself?” she asks pointing to his hand, she couldn’t tell where it could have come from.

“this?... Yes, yes I did” said Daniel, looking at his hand absently. “ I was looking for a nightcap, care to join me?”

“No, I never drink unless for a special occasion” said Sarah shying away from Daniel’s still absent eyes.

“Oh well, goodnight” he replied disappearing into the porthole as silently and absently as he came.

After the pirates, the trip actually progresses rather smoothly. The only excitement was when Boris went missing for a day in the wake of the pirate attack. He was finally found in the cargo hold attempting to hack his way into one of the escape pods, he was bruised and bloody. He had a serious concussion and was babbling about shadows. His babbling was quickly dismissed by the crew as the result of brain trauma and stress from the near miss with the pirates, and he was confined to his bed until planetfall. They had to stop once more to finish the repairs, but this time there were no pirates lying in wait.

Daniel and Mishka actually became friends of a sort as the trip progresses. They are the only two besides Fergus trained to work in EVA suits, so they found themselves spending a fair bit of time together. They talked about family, what they planed to do with the money they made from the expedition. All the things people with little in common talk of when working together for long periods of time. The days turn to weeks and finally the crew of the phoenix found themselves floating over Tartarus.

It was a small world, greenish blue from orbit, most of its surface was covered by jungle rather than water. A perfect marble floating in the black of space containing all the hopes and expectations of their voyage.

Daniel was sitting in the copilot’s chair as they came out of hyperspace, he and Fergus were the first to see Tartarus. Daniel had hoped that the sight of the world might start to bring back his memory but all he felt looking at the planet was an overwhelming sense of fear and dread. Not for the first time since agreeing to return here he had a sinking feeling this trip is a mistake.

“It’s a pretty world” said Fergus from his post behind the controls braking Daniel from his reverie. He keyed the intercom calling Klaus. Daniel and Fergus looked over the telemetry, the ship was receiving and trying to see where to land.

“There” said Daniel marking a location on the readouts, “That’s where we landed last time.” Daniel wanted to scream at Fergus not to go there but his jaw locked closed, he could taste blood.

Joseph and Sarah finally arrived in the cockpit. The two of them had mostly kept to themselves during the trip, they were the only ones with private rooms allowing them the luxury. Daniel had only seen Joseph during the evening meals, Sarah had seen even less.

Getting up from his chair Daniel offered it to Sarah, Joseph obliviously took the seat instead.

“We’ve narrowed down the options” said Daniel pulling up the information.

“Three locations?”

“They all look promising, but the ruins here” said Daniel pulling up the location of the last landing “Stretch for miles. This is where we set down last time.”

“Well then, If Mr. Cross thought it was good enough who am I to argue? That’s where we’ll be starting” Replied Joseph with a grin. Daniel wanted to cry, scream, take control of the ship and aim them in any direction that would take them away from Tartarus. But it was like he had no control of his own body. He felt like a meat puppet held up on invisible strings.

“Ok then, fix your seats and tray tables in their full upright position, it might be a bumpy ride” said Fergus with a smirk as he sent the Phoenix diving towards the planet.

Daniel quickly dove for one of the straps hanging from the ceiling as the Phoenix’s artificial gravity starts battling the Planets much more powerful field.

“Irish bastard” said Daniel as he was thrown violently against the bulkhead.

“Right back at you” replied Fergus with a laugh. That’s when Sarah lost her lunch.

Chapter 3

Lost sector, uncharted planetoid designated Tartarus.

It truly was an amazing sight, thought Mishka looking out over the ruined city. Mishka had never really had an interest in travel, let alone space travel; yet a sight like this was, perhaps, worth it.

They had made camp on a ridge overlooking the ruins they would soon begin exploring. Mishka was sitting on the edge of the cliff considering his options, he knew that in all likelihood this was going to go south. He needed to decide which side he would be on when it hit the fan.

He had hope that it would be a simple job, but Mishka knew as soon as he started talking to Daniel that he had no idea of Mr. Klaus' plans for this world. Which meant that the crooked archaeologist had no intention of letting him live. Damn, why couldn't this be simple?

"Surveying the beauty of our temporary home" asked a voice from behind him. Mishka turns to see that it is Daniel.

"It's bigger than I thought it would be."

"Maybe it was their capital city back in the day, or Disneyland."

"What do you think they were like?"

"We found some carvings last time I was here. Kind of funny looking, short people with big heads."

"It is a little odd don't you think, the sort of people Mr. Klaus decided to hire for this job."

"Yes, seems our financier puts high stock in the Martian rehabilitation system."

"I do not think that they plan for all of us to return" says Mishka gesturing to the camp.

"I know, Klaus probably wants to strip the ruins bare and sell the spoils off. We'll go missing, terribly tragic, can't have anyone who can lead someone else here. Or report the grave robbing, all so someone with a diversified portfolio will have an expensive wall hanging."

"Do you have any ideas on how to survive this?"

"Working on it."

"Work faster, because I can't see a way out without a large body count."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"You didn't need to tell me what was happening, could have kept your head down gotten paid."

"I've done that too many times" said Mishka getting up from his perch.

"They'll probably make their move tomorrow night, after seeing if this site has anything worth stripping."

"I'll be ready."

"We'll need to see if Sarah is in on it or not."

"Goodnight Daniel."

"Goodnight." Daniel stood, looking out over the ruins of the ancient city, it really was a beautiful night.

Across the camp Sarah was poring over the journal of Ivan Cross. She couldn't understand what had happened to this man to make him break. The first half of the journal read like any empirical record of

an archeological dig. It was three days in that something changed. They found something in the ruins, something old. After that night the journal read like something out of a horror flick. Sarah read over the description of the object again.

Journal of Ivan Cross, fifth day of expedition.

"We found something in the caverns today. Johnson and I were working in the temple for the dead when I fell through the floor, I was lucky and did not injure myself. The accident however seems to have the hand of providence behind it as I fell into a chamber which had been sealed. It was empty save for a small box set on a pedestal in the center of the room. It is an incredible work of craftsmanship, covered in intricate carvings and writing.

I have already started deciphering the text, it seems to detail a disaster myth, and the carvings support this. It seems to be the tale of a great battle between good and evil.

Johnson and I have as yet been unable to open the chest, and it has resisted all scans from my equipment. It seems to be made from a metal which is shielding it. I hesitate to simply cut it open as this may damage the contents but I find myself ever more so needing to know what this chest contains.

We are unsure as to the box's significance to the people who once lived here. It seems from how it was displayed that it was an object of great importance to them, perhaps a religious icon of some sort.

The shadows want it. Since our find they are always watching. I feel them when I sleep now. Like they can see even my dreams. It seems as though they want us to do something for them. I fear what they want."

Sarah put the book down. Turning off her light she tried to go to sleep. Tomorrow all her questions would be answered. it's funny, the shadows did seem like they were watching her.

The morning came to find Sarah wandering through the ruins of the old city with Daniel and Mishka shadowing her. She didn't know why they were sticking so close to her today but decided she could use the muscle if she needed to move broken stonework. Sarah tried to ignore the gun riding low on Daniels' hip, at her questioning he had simply said that the ruins could be dangerous. He had refused to leave it behind.

Following the detailed notes from Dr. Cross's journal Sarah wound her way through the maze of dilapidated cobble paths. She was looking for the temple detailed in the journal. She had to see the chamber Dr. Cross found the box in, maybe that would make it all make sense.

It didn't take long to find the temple, it was located in the center of the city. Dr. Cross theorized that the entirety of the ruins had served as a sort of city of the dead for the race which lived here.

It was a massive structure, actually quite similar to what the Mayans built on earth. Entering through the massive doorway Sarah and her two followers were taken in by the sights they saw.

The walls are made up of the bones of the dead, skulls stacked in towering columns. It is an amazing and disturbing sight. Sarah had heard of traditions like this, the bone churches of Europe and the great cathedral of death on Elisia, but she had never really seen them for herself.

She saw Mishka crossing himself at the sight of the chamber. Casting her light about Sarah looked for the hole that would be left from Dr. Cross falling through the floor. Sarah quickly located it, moving over she began unbinding the rope she had brought for this purpose.

"Mishka, Could you tie this to something" asked Sarah handing him the end.

"You're going down there?"

"Of course."

After a moment of hesitation, Mishka took the rope tying it to the bottom of a column. Sarah tossed the rest of the rope down the hole along with a glow stick to give her an idea of the distance. It looked like the floor was about ten feet down. Sarah clipped the rope to her belt and jumped into the darkness.

Reaching the floor Sarah unhooked her belt from the rope to free her movement. It was rather small, she sees that there was a tunnel leading off into a deep void, she could only make out darkness from within it. But what really caught her attention was what sat on a pedestal in the middle of the room. A small box, covered over in writing and intricate carvings, it glowed silver in the light. The pedestal itself was a work of art, carved over in scrollwork, looking at it Sarah suspects that it may, like the room above, be constructed from the bones of the dead. But somehow it still glowed and reflected like metal.

Sarah Grinned to herself as she gently takes the box into her hands. It was lighter than she expected. It was about a hand span long and half that wide. Slipping it into her pack she returned to the rope.

"I'm coming up" yelled Sarah to Daniel and Mishka. She doesn't hear a reply but they started pulling her up when she tugs that she had hooked her belt up again.

Finally returned to the surface Sarah was at first blinded by even the dim light of the cathedral. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the light, when they do she was shocked by what she saw.

Daniel and Mishka were standing against the wall, their hands in the air as three of the men Joseph hired held them at gunpoint. Sarah saw Daniels' gun lying on the ground in front of her, but before she can even think further one of the men roughly pulled her from the hole.

"Find anything interesting love" asked the man as he pushed her against the wall alongside Daniel and Mishka, his breath reeks of halitosis and cheap vodka.

"No, it was just a room."

"To bad" replied the man raising his weapon.

"Vlad, come on, we've known each other for years" said Mishka to the man holding a gun on him.

"Sorry Mishka, but Boris says you're on the red list too" said Vlad.

Sarah knew she was about to die. She didn't see that Vlad had gotten too close to Mishka. Striking like a viper Mishka grabs Vlad roughly. Vlad was quickly relieved of his gun as Mishka crushed his hand in an iron grip. The sickening sound of snapping bone and cartilage echos in the once sacred space. As Mishka does this Daniel pulled a second gun from the small of his back quickly dispatching the man holding a gun on Sarah. The third man panics letting loose with his weapon as he runs.

One of the bullets hits Daniel in the shoulder. Clutching at the wound Daniel reclaims his other weapon from the ground.

"Grab his radio will you" he said to Sarah. Somewhat shell-shocked Sarah complied, grabbing the dead man's radio and handing it to Daniel.

"You alright?" he asked.

"Uh....."

"Are you injured?"

"No."

"You good big guy."

"Da" replies the large Russian as he finished checking the bodies for anything useful. Thumbing the radio to life Daniel spoke.

"Daniel to the Phoenix, come in."

"Yeah, what you want" Asked the annoyed voice of Fergus, it was clear that he had been sleeping.

"Things have gone south, bug out, I'll call you when we're clear."

"Shit, I'll be in orbit, you gonna be ok?"

"Don't ask stupid questions" replied Daniel clutching at his shoulder.

On the far side of the ruins Fergus was already warming up the engines of the Phoenix. He took great pride in always being ready to leave in five minutes, unfortunately for him that was too long this time. He didn't see the man coming up behind him with a gun.

Sarah didn't know what to make of the events of the past few minutes. Suddenly she had found herself surrounded with dead bodies, Daniel and Mishka however seemed to have been expecting this.

"What is happening" asked Sarah, finally fed up with having no answers.

"Your boy Joseph has decided to renegotiate our contracts" replied Black with a smirk hardly distinguishable from a grimace. He had bandaged his shoulder as best as he could from a small medpack recovered from their would be assassins.

"What? Why did those men try to kill us?"

"Joseph made a deal with the Russian scumbags he hired, no offence Mishka."

"Huh, oh none taken."

"He plans to sell off anything valuable he finds on this rock one piece at a time, and now he wants to take care of anyone who could complicate that plan. Theft of alien artifacts for sale on the black market, you know what the penalty for that is."

"But that doesn't make sense, I've known Mr. Klaus for years, he would have no reason to want to kill me."

"Not even the billion credits he will make off this?" Sarah didn't know how to reply to this. Mr. Klaus had always been a man looking for his big score, Sarah had never thought he was capable of this though. She was so wrapped up in wondering why Joseph could be doing this that she almost doesn't hear what Daniel was saying to Mishka.

"What do you think? Hide out in the ruins until night, and then call Fergus?"

"I don't have any plan that sounds better" replied Mishka.

"They'll be combing the city."

"That room down there" said Sarah, "It had a tunnel leading away from it. Dr. Cross's journal said that there was a honeycomb of tunnels under the city. We could hide there until dark."

It didn't take long to get down into the room. The rope was still in place so it only took moments for the three of them to descend into the dark room.

The tunnel was dark and cramped, their flashlights the only source of light in the cave darkness. The tunnels were built for the local population, so they were short for the three humans. They adapted a crouched walk, which quickly became tiring. They had been walking for what seems like hours when the tunnel opened up into a massive cavern. The space is so vast that their lights simple disperse into the black night of the structure, the walls are too far away for the beams to hit them.

"This should work. We'll wait here until nightfall" says Daniel dropping to the floor undoing the cap on his canteen. He drank deeply from the container before offering it to Sarah. The cavern was harshly hot in comparison to the planet's surface.

"I'm good" replied Sarah to his offer. Sitting with her back against a wall Sarah drew the small box from her pack. She needed to distract herself, and what better way than to start decoding her find.

It was an amazing piece of craftsmanship. The sliver of the box seemed to almost glow. Sarah looked at the writing, etched almost too small to read, it looked like Old Norse but that was impossible.

Suddenly, Sarah was disturbed from her study of the object by a sound from off in the darkness. Looking up she saw Daniel and Mishka sitting with their backs against the wall to her right. She almost dismissed the sound until she heard it again.

"Do you hear that?"

"Yeah" said Daniel getting to his feet. Daniel drew his weapon as he tried to peer into the darkness. He could barely see five feet, only as far as the small circle of light their makeshift camp was casting. Daniel turned back to Mishka and Sarah.

"Guess it was nothing" he said holstering his weapon.

Suddenly a creature appeared in the light. It grabbed Daniel violently dragging him into the darkness. Mishka raised his weapon to fire on the misshapen beast but was too slow, he had nothing to shoot at.

Boris' head ached. It was a constant pain that he had endured since his beating. That boy, Daniel, the darkness in his eyes still terrified Boris. He was still jumping at shadows. He would feel better once Daniel was dead, he kept trying to convince himself. Turning away from the view of the setting sun he clutched at his lantern like a security blanket. There were things in the shadows here, he could feel it. Not that he could tell anyone, or let his fear show, such weakness was not tolerated.

This was supposed to be simple, kill the civilians and grab Joseph to tell them what was valuable and strip the ruins bare for Aleksey. But Daniels' eyes, and the shadows. Boris could feel something was wrong here.

Boris turned back to Joseph, the man was tied to a chair blood dripping from his nose.

"I told you everything you wanted to know" said Joseph through weak breaths.

"Oh I believe you, but you see I'm having a bad day, and I need to take it out on something" said Boris. He was about to start in on the Archeologist again when he heard gunfire from inside the camp. Grabbing his gun from the table Boris exited the tent to see what was happening.

"Tony I swear to god if you're shooting at rats again" yelled Boris. His words were cut short, a massive creature stood in the center of the camp. It was over ten feet tall, twisted and grotesque, skin pale and wormlike. Boris watched as tentacles ensnared one of his men dragging him to the creatures gaping maw. The creature swallowed Tony whole as it shrugs off the camps' gunfire like a light rain.

Boris raised his weapon and begins firing at the creature. He didn't see the second one coming out of the jungle from behind him.

Daniel was trying to get his second gun as the creature pulled him into the darkness of the cavern. The sounds of gunfire echoes from behind him, he could feel the wind whipping by his face as the thing ran. Finally getting his weapon lose he aimed for the center of mass of the creature, well he couldn't really see anything so he aimed for where he thinks the center of mass was.

Thumbing his weapon to full auto, Daniel emptied his clip, the plasma enhanced rounds create flashes of light in the darkness. He caught glimpses of the thing as the small explosions of light pulled it from the darkness. It was a disgusting thing, skin like a worm, grey and smooth, which only served to accentuate the malformed muscles beneath. His weapon didn't even scratch its hide.

Daniel tried to prepare himself for what he knew was to come. But then instead of the painful death he was expecting, the creature suddenly stopped and dropped Daniel to the ground. His injured shoulder twinged at the abuse.

"I have been waiting for your return" said a voice from the void. Daniel cast around blind in the darkness, suddenly light flared up blinding him painfully for a moment. When his eyes finally adjusted he saw a humanoid figure standing before him, its face hidden by a large hood.

"I know you" said Daniel unsure of himself. He could feel the memories scratching at the edges of his mind, but couldn't quite reach them.

"No, not anymore. I destroyed your memories of this place, of me, and left a shadow to guide you back to me. It is ever so lonely here and my children are always so hungry."

"Why have you brought me here?"

“Well because I like you, I want you to survive. And unlike the rest of those who have come here, I am going to give you a chance to do just that. In fact I like you so much I’ll even consider giving you back your memories” said the cloaked figure. Daniel wanted to run, to scream to fight. But he had no control of his body. It’s like iron has set in his bones.

“And what would I have to do to bring on this purposed generosity?” He finds himself asking through clenched teeth.

“hehehe, I see the shadow has taken root in you. sweet isn't it? No need to thank me have a seat.” The cloaked creature gestures and Daniel drops to the floor like a puppet whose strings have been cut.

“It is quite simple, I need you to destroy a box.”

“That’s it, smash a box and I go free?” asked Daniel trying to get back to his feet.

“Yes that is why I like you. Such fighting spirit even in the face of the inevitable. It is such a human trait, you are like worms screaming at the universe, I'M IMPORTANT! I'M IMPORTANT! You fight the inevitable like there is a chance you could actually change what is inevitable. It is so amusing to watch.....” It trails off absently. The creature, and creature is the only thing to call it for it lacks any sense of gender or species save for its vaguely human mouth, had begun pacing around Daniel as it trailed off. Turning back to Daniel it spoke again, “While you oversimplify it, yes, I want you to smash a box. The girl, she took it. Obtain the artifact from her, and destroy it. But be wary pet, it will be anathema to you now. Those lovely hands you have,” Daniel feels his hand lifting into the air as if a puppet string is pulling at it. He is little more than a passenger now looking out helpless and impotent.

“Yes those lovely hands will do quite nicely. Do not let it touch your skin. Take it, destroy it, kill anything that gets in your way.”

“Well then,” Daniel feels himself speaking. Something is speaking, what is happening to him. Why is his body not responding? Daniel feels like he has been shut off from his own body. “I’ll be needing a lift.”

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As soon as the creature grabbed Daniel another appeared out of the darkness. Mishka immediately opened fire, peppering the misshapen monster with plasma. The creature shrugged off the projectiles capable of punching through a tank. Mishka grips his weapon tighter as the thing rushed him.

Tentacles shot out of its mouth and wrapped themselves around his waist. Mishka screamed as the viscous fluid covering the writhing appendages began to burn through his clothes and skin.

Mishka kept firing his weapon. As the thing tried to swallow him whole, he shoved his gun into its mouth burying his arm to the shoulder. He can feel as his skin was eaten away by the creature. Ignoring the pain trying to overwhelm him, Mishka fired his weapon unloading it into the thing’s gullet.

The creature screamed out, it’s horrible voice searing its way into his mind. The thing slumped to the ground, its grip on Mishka loosening as it died.

Sarah runs over to him reaching out to untangle him from the tentacles still ensnaring most of his body.

“Don’t!!!” he yelled stopping her “They’re coated in acid.” Slowly he managed to disentangle himself. He can’t feel the pain any longer, his body is shutting down going into shock. Sarah helped him to the wall awkwardly avoiding the acid still eating through the large Russian. She managed to arrange him so he was slumped against the wall.

“Looks like this is it” Said Mishka with a hollow laugh.

“NO, we can get you to a doctor, you’ll be fine” said Sarah trying to be comforting.

“Don’t have enough time to try dragging me to the rendezvous point. Not with those things waiting in the shadows. Get to the ship, survive, have fat children.” With limp, barely functioning, Mishka hands Sarah the handgun Daniel had dropped.

“No, I.”

“You’ll be needing it. Now go I’ll make sure you’ll be covered.” As if to punctuate his statement, the darkness was filled with the unearthly sound of more of the creatures in the distance. They sounded angry.

“Thank you” said Sarah taking the weapon. Trying not to look back she runs down the tunnel, back to their entry point. It was the only exit she knew.

“So this is how it ends” said Mishka to himself. He gathered the last of his strength and readied his weapon. He had always thought Boris’ sister would be the death of him.

As she ran down the cramped tunnel Sarah could hear the sound of gunfire and screams echoing from behind her.

It took what felt like hours to make her way back to that small room beneath the cathedral. The cavern was too open to attack from those creatures, but she couldn’t risk going back above ground until nightfall. So Sarah crouched in the furthest corner of the room from the entrance to the tunnel trying not to break into hysterics. She cradled the weapon Mishka gave her like a security blanket.

Sarah could hear sounds coming from the passageway. She had hoped it would be too small for one of those things to fit through. She raised the gun, knowing there is little she can do against those monsters, she had never even fired a gun before.

Sarah barely stopped herself from pulling the trigger when a figure appeared out of the darkness, it’s Daniel. She dropped the weapon from nerveless fingers as relief overwhelmed her.

“How did you escape” she asked, barely believing he was alive.

“I got lucky” said Daniel with a smile that seems out of place on this night.

“They killed Mishka, and... and I ran” said Sarah, shame crept into her voice.

“Running was the smart, there was nothing you could do. Mishka took three of them with him. Quite a feat for a human.”

“What? how did you know that?”

“Sarah you don’t happen to have a small box in your bag do you? It would have been on the altar over there?”

“Well, I found something, but what does that matter right now” she asked confused.

“Could I see it” asked Daniel. His eyes are too dark, even for the shadows of the cavern. He held out his hand expectantly. Sarah let out a breath, she was being silly, it’s only Daniel.

“I guess” said Sarah producing the small metallic box. Daniel took it and began turning it over in his hands.

“So much trouble for such a small thing” said Daniel. His eye began to twitch as he obsessed over the box. His smile had been replaced by a sickly look like he was about to vomit.

Suddenly he dropped to his knees, gasping for air.

“Daniel! What’s Wrong?” Sarah’s voice was shaky as she tried to comfort the now writhing man.

“it’s in my head.” The words are a whimper like a beat dog begging for mercy.

“What?” Sarah pulled back her hands, a feeling of dread overtaking her.

“I didn’t want to do it. I didn’t want to do it...” He kept saying his voice breaking with sobs.

“What have you done Daniel?”

Daniel seemed to fold in on himself, falling dreadfully still. After a moment that stretched to eternity he looked up at her.

“It made me bring you here, It’s inside my head.”

“What are you saying, you aren’t making any sense.”

“I’ve been a puppet on his strings, We’re all going to die here” said Daniel tears running down his cheeks. He is clutching the small box to his chest, cradling it like he would rather die than let go of it.

The cloaked figure walked through a field of bodies. The camp of this latest expedition had fallen depressingly easily. The being could remember with longing the days when mortals still put up a decent fight. It seems like a thousand years since his last good fight.

The figure came to a stop over one of the men. There was still life lingering in this one. The body was badly burned by the pre-digestive fluids of It's pets. They did so love playing with their food.

The figure pulled back its hood revealing what passed for it's face to the night. Reaching down It grabbed the dying man by the throat and lifted him off of the ground. Holding him in the air like a ragdoll the creature looked into what was left of the man's eyes. The creature unhinged its jaw and its face stretched impossibly wide. It seemed to suck an ethereal essence from the mortally wounded wretch. Dropping the now spent corpse to the ground like so much garbage, the creature pulled its hood back up to cover its head. It had been so long since the creature had such sustenance. Once it had gorged on the souls of worlds, left star systems dead and empty in its wake a great comic entity drifting through the void between stars. It was a creature of darkness, meant to be so much more than this pitiful shadow, trapped by its own foolish pride. What existence is this for a god? Feasting on such pitiful offerings. Suddenly its head snapped to the left, looking into the heart of the ruins. Something was wrong. One of its pets was in pain. Little did that matter but what here could cause such a thing? The weapon? No that was still dormant. This was unexpected and required a new approach. Looking down at the husk at its feet the creature sighed. Perhaps this meat could still be of some use. The being pulled up the sleeve of its robe, bearing the ruined flesh beneath. Drawing a fingernail down the length of its arm the creature opened a vein, impossibly red blood wells from the wound.

The creature held its arm out letting its blood fall into the open mouth of the meat.

"You will make sure the human completed his task. Bring him to me, and you will be rewarded. I will be free of the wretched prison. I have been trapped in this limbo far too long."

Chapter 4

Daniel ducked down behind the remains of a crumbled wall. He was still clutching the box to his chest. It had somehow freed him from the prison of his own mind and a terror gripped his soul at the thought of being parted from it. His shoulder still hurt, it felt like he was bleeding again.

He had just seen another of the creatures lurking in the ruins. Looking back to Sarah he realized she hadn't seen it yet.

"Get down" he said in a hoarse whisper.

"What? Why?" she asked ducking to the ground.

"I saw something move."

The two of them had been weaving their way through the ruins for hours, at every turn there was one of those things. It felt as though they were being herded. Daniel peaked over the wall and saw the massive creatures wasn't more than five feet away.

"Shit" he said as the creature looked their way. Daniel quickly ducked back down behind the wall but he knew it was too late.

"It saw me" he said in a shaky voice.

They wait for the terror to come. For what felt like hours they waited, but it didn't. The terror which gripped Daniel had turned his legs to lead. No! He would not die like this. He was not some meat puppet, not a toy. He had been barely more than a passenger in his own skin since this nightmare had begun. If he was going to die here it would be as himself, not a coward. Taking a deep breath to steady his ragged nerves, Daniel unholstered his gun.

"What are you doing?" Sarah asked as he stood up.

"I'm not a sheep, or a puppet, I'm me."

Sarah looks at him, confused, and scared. He must look crazy. Almost immediately upon standing the creature saw him. Daniel readied himself for the pain, bringing up his gun for a useless final defiance. But the creature didn't charge them. It was standing there, frozen. It's too many eyes focused on one single point. The box. Realizing this Daniel clutched it closer to his chest.

"It wants the box" he said scared. Sarah had stood up next to him. Her face was stretched in fear but she was standing her ground.

"Couldn't it have already taken it if that's what it wants?" Her tone was confused. Daniel was confused too, the creature almost looked scared. Clenching his teeth Daniel took the box in one hand and brought it into full view. The creature shrank away from it. It lets out a strangled and horrible sound, and dashed away into the darkness.

Boris thought he knew pain, he had inflicted enough of it to think it a friend. But he had never felt anything like the blinding, all encompassing, white light of pain he existed in now as the viscous fluid that demon had covered him in ate through his flesh and organs. His attempts at getting the substance off of him had only succeeded in coating his hands in acid. He knew he was going to die, alone and lost in this hell.

But then it came. Boris could barely understand what the being was saying to him but he did understand that the pain was gone. He could taste something in his mouth, he wanted more. He came back to the world leaving behind that blinding void for reality once more, to see that a cloaked figure was now standing over him.

"Who are you" he asked.

"Your god." it said in a harsh rasp.

"I have work for you."

"Yes, lord" says Boris, he knew he would do anything for this creature. Should that scare him? He jumped to his feet finding new strength in his limbs. Looking down at himself Boris found no trace of his wounds, save for ragged holes in his clothes.

He grinned as he felt new strength, it felt good. He was no sooner back to his feet though, then a new pain overtook him. His bones broke and reknit, his skin stretched unnaturally.

"Of course.. I will need to make some changes to you first" said the creature unfeelingly. Boris doubles over, he falls to the ground as muscle and bone continued to reform within him.

They had made their way to the edge of the ruins. Sarah holds the weapon Mishka gave her close, peering into the darkness around them.

Daniel was trying to raise the Phoenix on his stolen radio. Ever since the strange encounter with the creature he seemed to have returned to some semblance of his old self. Sarah found herself always keeping one eye on him and one to the darkness. Nothing could be trusted in this place of nightmares. Soon they would leave this horrible world, it would be nothing but a bad memory.

"Daniel to the Phoenix, come in Fergus" said Daniel into the radio. Sarah saw the worry in his face. He had been trying for the past ten minutes to raise the Irishman, he should have answered by now.

"Maybe there is some sort of interference" asked Sarah hopefully.

"There isn't anything in this system that should be able to block the Phoenix's radios."

"But he was going to take us away from here."

"Well we might need to rescue him first." Daniel got to his feet and started toward the camp.

"But that's where the people who want to kill us are" said Sarah at his choice of direction.

"Yes but at least they're easier to kill than the things out here. And maybe we can figure out what happened to Fergus at the camp. Maybe they grabbed him before he could dust off." Daniel's voice was harsh and ragged but a determination had seemed to grip him.

The two of them made their way through the dense vegetation which covers the outskirts of the ruins. It was slow going, the jungle like foliage was determined to repel all seeking to penetrate it. For once Daniel was finding himself grateful for his prosthetic hands as he pulls aside razor grass which would have carved bloody wounds into flesh. He constantly checked on the small box, it was a comforting weight inside his shirt.

He turned to look at Sarah, she had a look of fear in her eyes.

"So tell me, why archeology" he asked her, hoping to get her mind off of their surroundings.

"Archeology?"

"Yeah, of all the things you could have done with your life, why archeology?"

"As a kid, everyone was so focused on the future, where we were going. I read stories of knights, ancient civilizations. The future is boring and we forget too much of the past. I want to remember what was."

"Your parents like your career path?"

"They don't much care what I do. What about you, what did your family say when you joined the military?"

"I never knew my parents, drifted through a few foster homes but never stayed anywhere long." Daniel stopped suddenly, motioning for Sarah to be quiet. He could see the camp just on the other side of a few bushes.

Daniel was surprised at the lack of movement. He figured with those things out they would have all pulled back to the camp for the night. Maybe the creatures didn't keep to the ruins like he had hoped. He could feel the fear welling up in his belly again. The box would protect them, it had to.

Gesturing for Sarah to stay behind him, Daniel moved out into the open. He was brought to his knees by the sight which greeted him. The camp was a slaughterhouse. Bodies littered the ground, and the air reeked of putrefied flesh and blood.

Daniel barely registered Sarah coming out into the camp behind him until he heard her vomit. He saw the Phoenix still parked where it had first landed. Fergus had not escaped. God, Fergus.

Getting back to his feet and pulling himself together Daniel walked toward the ship, only pausing to make sure Sarah was following. Opening the sealed doors of the ship, the two quickly made their way onboard.

Daniel had his weapon out at the ready as they made their way through the ship. He headed straight to the cockpit. If Fergus was still onboard that was the most likely place to find him.

The ship was eerily quiet. It was like walking through a mausoleum. It doesn't take long for them to make their way through the deserted ship.

Coming to the sealed cockpit door Daniel paused. He knew what he was likely to find on the other side of that door, but he had to know for sure. He opened it. His friend was slumped in the pilot's chair, it would have been easy to mistake the posture for a deep slumber, save for a puddle of drying blood on the floor. Daniel didn't know whether he should take comfort in the fact he had died from a gunshot wound to the head, at least Fergus had died fast and painless.

After a moment Daniel crossed the small space to Fergus' body and closed his eyes. He stood there for a moment, attempting to pay his respects to the old captain, before moving over to the secondary control console. He quickly checked over the readouts of the ship making sure the Phoenix was ready to fly.

"Daniel, I'm sorry about your friend" said Sarah from the doorway, she stood there not knowing what to do with herself.

"Happens to us all one day. The ship is good to go, the engines just need to warm up a bit. I programed the autopilot all you have to do is hit this button" He said pointing to a large button on the console. "We'll need to get enough supplies to make the journey."

"They brought all the food out to the camp."

"We should move fast" said Daniel initiating the engine warm-up. The two of them headed back to the camp. Daniel was distracted, he wasn't paying enough attention to where he was going. So he was as surprised as Sarah when he stepped through an archway heading to the exit only to be greeted by a wrench pummeling him in the face.

Sarah didn't know what she was doing, she saw Daniel hit the ground and she reacted. She raised her weapon and fired wildly missing her target completely. So she was very surprised when the response to her wild firing was a scared voice coming from behind the door arch.

"Please don't shoot me, I surrender." Sarah recognized the voice through her fear.

"Mr. Klaus?"

"Sarah" asked the scared man, gaining some strength at the familiar voice. Joseph came out from behind the arch his hands in the air. He looked awful, his hair was slick with sweat, his face covered in

dried blood. It looked like his nose had been broken, badly, his eyes were bruised and beginning to swell shut.

“Why did you attack Daniel?”

“I thought he was with the Russians.”

“You mean the criminals you hired and planned on having me killed?” asked Sarah keeping her gun trained on the weasel of a man.

“I had no idea what they had planned. I’m in debt, to a really bad man, he said if I let his men come, let them strip this place, he would call us even.”

“And you thought they’d just let us all walk away after seeing them commit a crime like that? Please don’t tell me you’re that ridiculously stupid Klaus.”

“I have no words... No excuses...”

“God” said Sarah lowering her weapon. “To think, I used to think you were a genius. Help me check Daniel.” Sarah moved over to the drowned man, turning him onto his back to check if he was still breathing. She was relieved when he groaned at her moving him. He was already coming around, Klaus was a lousy aim even with a club apparently.

“What happened” he asked weakly.

“You were clobbered by a monkey wrench” replied Sarah glaring at Joseph.

“He’s still alive?” asked Daniel at seeing the man.

“He’s still alive.”

“He’s behind the whole double-cross thing?”

“He says no.”

“Huh.” Daniel rolled over and got to his feet with a groan.

“You sure you should be moving?”

“Don’t have time to be lying about.” Daniel gingerly took a few steps making sure nothing is broken.

“You coming Joseph?” Asked Daniel over his shoulder continuing on his path to the supplies, “we need to move a lot of supplies fast.” Sarah followed after him, Joseph close on her heels.

They came out into the night to find the bloody camp as they had left it. Moving fast hoping that the creatures were far away, the three survivors grabbed the supplies needed for the long journey ahead of them. They were into their third trip when the creatures came again.

Daniel knew it was going too smoothly. They were carrying in the last of the supplies when the creature fell upon them. One second they were in the clear, the next there are a half dozen malformed beasts between them and the ship.

“Hello hero” said a voice from behind them. Daniel turned to find Boris standing with a perverse grin on his face. Boris was barely recognizable, he was grotesquely distorted from his original form, the man’s voice was the only thing unchanged. His spine was bent into a horrifying contortion, and the bone seemed to have burst through his skin in places, forming ghastly spikes jutting out from his back. He was almost bestial in his stance, crouched on all fours, looking like he could perhaps no longer stand as a man. His skin had taken a pale smooth grey pallor much like that of the creatures blocking their path.

“I actually hoped you had died in the slaughter” said Daniel at the sight of the criminal.

“Sorry to disappoint, my new master saw fit to elevate me rather than let me die with the rest.”

“Why are you here then rather than licking his feet then?” Asked Daniel. Rage flashed across Boris’ face at the insult, but he quickly quashes the emotion.

“I am to bring him what he desires. You.”

“I’m flattered, really, but I think I’ll be leaving instead” said Daniel glibly. As he talked Daniel was slowly reaching for his weapon. Daniel knew there was little chance it will do much after whatever the creature did to Boris, but he was always one to go down swinging.

It was all finally too much for Klaus. Letting out a terrified squeal the man ran for the ship.

The distraction was just enough for Daniel. He pulled his sidearm and began firing on Boris. He barely seemed to notice the plasma as it splashed against his skin. Snarling the once man rushed Daniel.

"Sarah run!" Yelled Daniel, he needn't have bothered, she had already followed Klaus.

Daniel grappled with Boris, but it was immediately apparent that his strength was greater than Daniels. Boris quickly dropped Daniel to his knees. He could hear the metal creaking in his prosthetic hands as Boris effortlessly put enough pressure on them to make components begin to fail.

"Did you really think that would work" asked Brois with a contemptuous smile.

"Not really" said Daniel with a grin "but it did distract you" he said as the Phoenix's engines fired and it rose from the ground.

"They do not matter, the master has plans for you, they were little but food to him."

"Yeah, but he doesn't get to have them." Daniel laughed in Boris's face as the deformed man raised a fist. Daniel barely felt the blow, it sends him into unconsciousness.

Sarah stared dumbly at the controls of the ship, she can't believe she just left him there. After everything she just ran, again.

Sarah realized she couldn't do this, she had to go back. She began studying the controls trying to figure out how to reverse their course.

"We made it," said Joseph walking into the cockpit "now we have to get our stories right, we play this well we can get a book deal out of it. I see myself as the daring adventurer, facing terrifying odds. We can figure something for you" said Joseph sitting down in the copilot chair. He barely noticed what Sarah was doing as he wove tales of his own daring heroism in the face of doom. Suddenly he realized that Sarah hasn't responded to anything he has said.

"What are you doing?" he asked suddenly.

"Going back for Daniel."

"What, are you crazy? We're free, we escaped, why would we go back?"

"Because he'll die unless we rescue him." Joseph got out of his seat and walks around behind Sarah.

"I guess you're right. It will make a great last chapter, how I rescued the screw-up guide" said Joseph. Sarah tuned him out as he prattled on about book deals and fake stories. As he talked Joseph moved out of Sarah's field of vision, she payed him little mind. Sarah didn't see that he had grabbed the fire extinguisher from the wall.

Rushing up behind Sarah, Joseph clobbers her over the head with the heavy object. She slumped forward falling against the console. Blood pooled over the electronics.

"Sorry but I can't be a dead hero" said Joseph as he checks that the ship was still set to its original course. For a moment he thinks he will have it all, that he has beat the system. Then he sees the pirate ship drop out of hyperspace, directly in the path of the programed course. They had followed the Phoenix.

Daniel woke in a cold dark place, for a moment he thought he had been blindfolded. He quickly realized though that it is simply so dark he couldn't see anything. He cast around trying to see anything, but even his hand might as well be non existent.

Then there was light, it was so bright to his eyes that it was blinding. It took what felt like hours for his eyes to finally adjust. When they did he saw that he was back in the cavern. The cloaked figure stood before him, it's back to Daniel. Boris was off to the side looking at Daniel like dinner. The figure spoke.

"I am disappointed. I gave you such a gift, and at the first chance you defy me. Was it so much I asked of you?"

"I will die before living as your meat puppet."

"There is something to be respected in that I suppose" said the figure seeming amused.

"Don't suppose it's respectable enough for you to be willing to let me go?"

"No I have use for you yet. But I will give you a choice between a clean quick death, and a much more unpleasant end" Boris widened his grin at the mention of the latter of the two options. Daniel could feel wet breath on his neck suddenly. He went stiff realizing one of the large creatures was standing right behind him.

"What would the first option require?"

"Well upholding the deal you already agreed to."

"What is this box that it means so much to you?" asked Daniel producing the small object from his shirt "I mean it's pretty and all but it's just a box."

"Oh, is it? you cannot lie to me meat! Even a base creature such as yourself can feel its power. Tell me what do you know of the people who once inhabited this world?"

"They died, never did learn the details."

"Well that is the end of the story but there was more to it." The creature sat on a rock seeming to make itself comfortable "This world was once called Illyria, they once ruled an empire which spanned a thousand galaxies. Their golden age was a thousand years before your ancestors first got the notion of crawling out of the primordial ooze. That box is the last vestige of their knowledge, and I want it extinguished from the universe."

"what if I decide not to, just to spite you?"

"Think on the pain you will suffer at my hands if you continue to try my patience. Destroy the object!"

Daniel couldn't see any way out of this. He had always been able to escape, to fight his way out. Everyone's luck does run out eventually. He was so tired. The darkness was still scratching at his mind, barely held back by whatever the box was doing. Daniel doubted the box can hold it at bay much longer.

Seeing no way out, Daniel nodded in submission to the furious being. He knows what he is about to do will probably be the prelude to the end of his miserable story. He felt something wet on his forehead, for some reason it was all that he could think about. Reaching up he wiped his brow. His hand came away bloody. He was still bleeding from the blow Joseph dealt him. Without thinking he touches the still bloody hand to the box.

Daniel didn't see the creature as it rushed toward him with what looked like fear in its eyes. Nor did he see Boris breaking into a run. The murderous expression on his face leaving little doubt of his intentions. Daniel didn't see any of this, because the instant he touched his hand to the box, the moment it contacted his blood, he died....

But that is not the end of Daniel's story.

Chapter 5

Daniel opened his eyes. He was in a vast white void laying on a ground which didn't seem to exist. He cast around trying to find anything resembling an answer to where he was, but he was alone. He checked himself over, getting to his feet. Daniel almost fainted when he saw his hands. They are his own two flesh and blood appendages.

"Well I never thought to see a human here" said a voice from behind Daniel. He turned around to find a man was now standing there looking at him with an amused expression. He was the definition of nondescript, dressed in a grey three-piece suit.

"Where am I?" asked Daniel.

"A place of, choosing" replied the man sitting down in a chair which appeared at his need "Have a seat" he said gesturing. A chair appeared beside Daniel.

"Choosing of what" asked Daniel sitting down.

"Why your fate of course" replied the man with a mirthful grin.

The two of them sit in a silence which stretched too long. It has been several minutes since either of them has said anything.

"You know" said the man finally "That intro usually brings on a lot of questions. Most people hear choosing, and fate, in the same sentence and it opens the floodgates."

"Well I was waiting to see where you were going with it" replied Daniel.

"Different. Well, to know where you're going you must know where you are" said the man gesturing at the floor between them. A horrifying writhing black mass appeared on the floor.

"What the fuck is that?" yelled Daniel standing on his chair to get further from the things reach. It looked like a mass of worms and eels.

"This is what the creature planted in you. A seed of his darkness. It has grown throughout your being, supplanting and overtaking you. I fear he has designs to use you to escape his prison, it has prepared you to be the ideal host. A few more weeks and it would have consumed you, and there would be nothing of of you left but a hollow shell for the creature to escape in."

"So where I am is fucked in every way?" asked Daniel his eyes wide and breath ragged.

"Not necessarily. There are other options. Your blood unlocked the seal on one of the last, true swords in existence. We are here to decide whether you are worthy of wielding it."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"I remember when knights kept a civil tongue. How the universe has degraded. The Illyrian empire once stretched throughout the vastness of the known universe. How would you keep the peace in such an empire?"

"I don't know, make something terrifying to prevent rebellion?"

"Well, yes actually. The knights of Illyria were quite formidable, both holding the greatest aspirations, and becoming the most feared emissaries of the empire. Each was chosen by a true sword, and sworn to uphold the laws and virtues of the empire. Each knight held the power to destroy armies, enact the emperor's will, and maintain peace in a vast empire."

"What the hell does this have to do with me?" Asked Daniel with wild eyes. The creature still writhed on the floor between them. The man looked down as if he had just remembered that it was there. With a gesture it disappeared again.

"Your blood has awakened the last sword. Now you must either prove yourself worthy to be it's knight, or die."

“No pressure then” said Daniel sitting down again, he couldn’t keep from eyeing the floor suspiciously.

“This is a great honor. Once it was the culmination of a lifetime of preparation to offer oneself to a sword. These are more than mere weapons they are a lifelong partner, a soul given form in steel and fire. Truthfully I do not know what she sees in you.”

“How do we get started?”

“Simply take hold of the sword” said the man as a beautiful blade appeared standing balanced upon its point between them. Daniel was captivated by the blade, it was the most flawless work of art he had ever seen. A hand and a half sword, its hilt and pommel seeming to be of brass, the blade gleaming pure silver. As he studied the weapon it seemed to radiate a cool calming light from within.

Daniel rose from his chair, his mouth felt dry. Reaching forward, he grasped the blade.

Images flooded into his mind, strange disjointed flashes of a world populated by countless beings of species he had never encountered. Finally, after what seems like years, the flood of images settled on a dimly lit room. The only light came from a pit of molten metal centered in the space. As he watched figures appeared around the pool. Daniel realized he was bearing witness to the creation of the weapon he still held grasped in his hand. The history of the blade unfolded before him. The unclaimed blade, disgrace of the order. Every being who submitted to it died, the sword finding them unworthy. For a hundred years it claimed no bearer, until finally the knight generals ordered it sealed beneath the great temple of the dead, so no more would die in vain.

That was the start of its millennia long wait. A wait for a bearer it began to think it would never come.

As the flashes and images all blur into a dizzying and sickening mess, Daniel found the world changing around him. He was now standing in his small room, back on Mars.

“So this is your mind” said a feminine voice from behind him. Daniel turned to see a woman standing behind him. She was beautiful, her hair golden, her eyes green. She stood there with the confidence of a warrior dressed in a flowing white dress, its floor-length hem seeming to be stirred by a wind which he couldn’t feel.

“I think I like it here” she said with a smile.

“Who are you?”

“Why I’m your sword.”

“You look a little different than you used to. Isn’t a sword usually, well a sword?”

“Well, it isn’t like I have to look like a blade all the time” She says with a smirk.

“What are we doing here?”

“We are getting to know each other” she said taking his hand and motioning him to be silent. The images begin again, but this time it is Daniel’s life. His childhood blurred by, all the moments of his life, every victory, every regret, all laid bare.

“I think, I have decided I like you.” Said a female voice finally. Daniel had fallen to his knees, he felt as though he should vomit but nothing was coming. Her voice brought him back to the room.

“What’s your name?” asked Daniel.

“I am a disgraced daughter of a dead race” said the woman sitting down next to him “they never really gave me a name.”

“I can’t call you Sword.”

“What would you call me?”

“It seems to me that’s the sort of thing you should decide for yourself.”

“Then call me Epitaph, if I am to be the last song of my people I wish to remember it” she said getting back to her feet.

“Does this mean I’m not going to die?”

"I just needed to be sure I could stand being stuck with you for the rest of time. Looks like we're going to be partners, if you want me that is" said Epitaph walking off.

"What?" Asked Daniel, quickly getting to his feet and following her out of the room.

"First things first we'll need to deal with is the soul eater desecrating the tombs of my creators." Said Epitaph to Daniel. They exited the room back into the white void. The room disappeared as soon as they exit.

"Soul eater?"

"Yes, the creature, he strives for immortality through the consumption of sentience. We shall remind it what mortality is."

"How? He's surrounded by those things, and I doubt he will be any easier to kill than his pets."

"Why with me of course, are you forgetting about your weapon already?"

Suddenly the man in the suit appears in front of them.

"So you have chosen him" he asked, his expression between relief and disappointment.

"Yes" said Epitaph with a smile.

"Do you consent as well" the man asked Daniel.

"I have a choice?"

"Of course. If you refuse her you will be returned to the moment we took you from, all things left unaltered." The man's tone was harsh and Daniel thinks back to the writhing mass. He looks at Epitaph and her smiling face. He liked the idea of finally getting his revenge on the creature for all it did to him.

"You have my consent" said Daniel with a smirk. The man lifted his hand.

"Then I congratulate you knight, and send you on your way." There was a bright flash of light and suddenly Daniel was standing in darkness once more. He fell to his knees, his head felt as though it will burst from everything suddenly stuffed into it. He barely noticed that his hands are still flesh the prosthetics gone. Unimaginable knowledge coursed through his mind, sights and sounds never seen by him or any other human. He realized that he now knew what the creature was and how to kill it.

"You survived?" Said the creature from the darkness. Daniel got to his feet, despite the darkness he could see as though it were midday. The cloaked creature stood before him seeming to radiate pure rage.

Daniel is suddenly in an iron embrace, Boris, the once man had come from behind while he was distracted. Daniel fell to his knees as the air is squeezed from his lungs. Daniel was close to passing out when suddenly Epitaph appeared in his hand. With a quick motion Daniel scored a deep cut on Boris' arm, the mutated creature's blood boiled on contact with the weapon. Suddenly free of Boris' grip, Daniel quickly jumped back to his feet readying his blade.

Boris backs away from the sight of Epitaph as though it burns him simply to see the ancient weapon, he seems to melt into the darkness.

Epitaph herself suddenly materialized in the cavern next to Daniel. She has the look of a ghost, slightly transparent and radiating light in the darkness. Daniel could feel Epitaph's pure glee at her newfound freedom.

"It's good to finally walk the world" she said.

"I had not thought to see your kind again" said the cloaked creature, bringing their attention back to him. Daniel brought the sword back to a ready stance, Epitaph seemed to ready herself as well.

Daniel tried to rush the being only to find he couldn't move. It was as though his bones had been filled with lead. Daniel dropped to his knees, he didn't not have the strength to stand under the suddenly crushing weight.

"It has been countless centuries since I have had the pleasure of tasting such a rare morsel" said the creature picking up Epitaph from the ground. He gazed at the weapon like a starving man looking at a steak.

Daniel struggled to move under the weight which seems to be trying to crush him to the ground, he could see a look of fear on Epitaph's face. All they could do was watch. The soul eater lowers its hood to reveal its horrible face.

"I would never have been able to consume this unless you had unsealed it. I thank you human" said the creature through a horrible grin. It seemed to unhinge his jaw, its face stretched impossibly wide. Epitaph screamed as her ghostly form seemed to be drawn into the man. Daniel struggled against the weight crushing him, trying to rise from his prone position. The creature was consuming Epitaph.

All Daniel could hear was the sound of Epitaph screaming. Something broke in Daniel's mind, an invisible bond, and he moved. Daniel could still feel the weight pressing down upon him, but he no longer cared. He rushed the creature, the only thought in his mind the need to save Epitaph, he wouldn't fail her.

Suddenly Daniel's hands were around Epitaph, and he was trying to wrestle it from the soul eater's grasp. Daniel was barely in control of his actions, lost in the primal reactionary state of survival. Then he heard Epitaph's voice sounding through his mind.

"Daniel, stop fighting, I know how to end this." Daniel was unsure, but there was no time to decide how much he really trusted Epitaph. The ultimate leap of faith, and he leapt.

All he felt was pain, mind-numbing intense pain. Daniel floated in an ocean of unthinkable fire, until he once more heard the voice of Epitaph. He grasped onto that small echo of familiarity like a drowning man.

"Daniel" called Epitaph "lend me your strength, we can't do this alone." He reached a nonexistent hand out grasping on to Epitaph. As their hands met it was like an explosion, all he could see was intense, unbelievable light. And in that moment, the ancient creature of darkness felt pain. It had never felt pain before.

The soul eater pulled apart the rough fabrics of its cloak exposing ancient skin. He cried out in fear as its flesh was stretched. It looked like faces pressed into a leather sheet, trying to burst through their prison.

The creature looked up into the great darkness of the cavern screaming its denial of what was happening.

Suddenly the pressure from within was too great, the soul eater exploded! The countless souls he had consumed, the millions of sentient beings which had fueled his endless life, finally escape their prison.

The flood of escaping souls lasts for minutes, until finally, there were only two. Daniel stood over his body, Epitaph at his side.

"Is this the end?" he asked turning to Epitaph?

"No" she said grabbing him by the shoulders and thrusting him back into his body. He gasps violently as life returns to him "This is the beginning."

The End

Blackened Knight
Story and illustrations by Quinn R, McSherry

