

Knight Errant

Chapter 1

A Whisper of the Future

Space over the planetoid designated Tartarus,

After all is said and done, it is our choices that define us. Not simply the choices we make but the choices we are forced to make. The way we react, and the split-second gut instinct that will drive a person to bravery or cowardice. That is the measure of a being, great or small, in this universe.

It was the choices of a lone knight in the dim and distant past that forged the foundation of an empire that would span the stars. She was not so different from her compatriots, save for the choices she made, and the wizard that created her sword. A blade so powerful it could split a planet. With that blade Illyria founded an empire that spanned the known universe, she raised an order of wizards and gave them a the forgeworld of Tartarus to make more weapons. This was the founding of the Knights of Illyria.

She was not so different from her compatriots, but when she came to moments of fear and doubt she didn't run, her choices drove her forward, for good or ill in the end.

At this moment Daniel is contemplating the results of his choices. He is alone in the darkness, and he knows he is going to die. He reaches out for Epitaph but she is gone, the ever-present companion that has shared his path all these years.

Once so very long ago, he had thought failure was impossible, then Gwen fell to the darkness, and hope fell with her. Daniel Missed her, she had kept hope alive. She was the first to fall, Now Eo was dead too, it was less than an hour since Daniel watched it happen too far away to do anything but witness his friends' death. Eo was a warrior till the end. Daniel felt ashamed he was too slow to act, too powerless to change any of it, now even Epitaph was Lost. looking at the husk of the wizard floating next to him Daniel could at least take a small measure of satisfaction he had managed to slay the corrupted creature. Small satisfaction.

As Daniel floated through the debris of the destroyed capital ship he can see the distant lights of fighters, they are closing in. the elvish ships are sleek and shimmering in the darkness, almost too pretty to believe they are the enemy.

this is how it ends?

With a final sigh, Daniel produces the last weapon remaining to him. A small plasma enhanced sidearm, he carried it more as a remembrance than for its usefulness. It had been his sidearm since he left the UESC what felt like a lifetime ago. He doubted it would even scratch the shields of the oncoming fighters. They have already begun firing through the debris at the human fleet behind Daniel. Their weapons tearing through the earth vessel shields like tissue paper. The moment of calm after the capital ships destruction had blossomed into full battle, fire and small explosions of venting atmosphere illuminating the darkness. And beneath them, Tartarus, a cool

and uncaring observer. After all this planet had born witness to the death of the Illyrian empire, what did it care for the squabbling of children over the carcass of civilization.

Bracing the firearm with both hands Daniel aims, and waits. A half second before the closest fighter would be in range, it probably doesn't even see him on its sensors, it was fixed on the human fleet behind Daniel.

Daniel takes a deep breath to steady his hand, and as he exhales he fires. There's always a weak spot in the shields, you just have to know where to look. His single shot hits its target penetrating it and overloading the system. Daniel and the Fighter are both consumed in fire. Daniel feels a small momentary flash of pride that he is taking one of them with him, then all is pain.

The conflict that began here over Tartarus, would spread like wildfire, and it would consume the known universe, the balance of power that had been so precariously maintained for a generation would be obliterated. Every fledgling empire that sought to claim superiority would squabble for what remained of Illyrian worlds and their tech. Civilizations would burn, and it was too late to stop it. Daniel had tried, and he had failed. Perhaps the war started the moment he freed Epitaph, or when he first ventured to Anwyn, the Night King woke in response to his actions there, and his dark elves now flood across the universe.

As Daniel drew what should have been his last breath, the fire around him turned to a chasming white void.

Shit, not this again.

10 years earlier, Tartarus,

A lone figure stands in a moment of victory his sword clasped in his hand, and he is terrified. He is gripped in fear at the result of his choice and all he wants to do is run from it.

Dropping the sword in his hand Daniel backs away. Epitaph falls to the floor with an echoing clatter.

"So, we're done now right?" asks Daniel of the ghost-like figure next to him. Her luminous form is the soul light in the cavern.

"No Daniel, I told you, this was only the beginning," says Epitaph. She glides forward her feet a full foot above the ground, and with a gesture, the blade floats into the air and hovers between them.

"I didn't sign up for more of this, just want to buy a farm and disappear. Find someone else to be your knight" says Daniel looking at the blade like it is a viper poised to strike. An intelligent blade containing the essence of Epitaph. A weapon of antiquity more powerful than any firearm or conventional armament. The woman standing in front of him was simply an illusion, a talking head, it was the blade he was really speaking with.

He could feel her in his brain, fingers tickling through his synapses and expanding to make themselves comfortable. He was sick of other things squirming about inside his mind. He had eliminated the soul eater only to gain another uncontrollable hand pulling at the marionette strings of his mind. He could already feel her presence trying to alter him, it was like he was being downloaded with a storehouse of knowledge, filling his memories. He knew this cavern

was called Tara Anima'unt the place of lost souls, where those dishonored in life were buried so their shame would not infect the honored dead. How did he know that?

"You swore a sacred oath to me, Daniel. Before the first Wizard in accordance with the laws of our order, That is not something either of us can break."

"I had no choice, it said yes or die."

"That would have been honorable the honorable choice, if you were not willing to be my partner it would have been better you had died. I will not be cast aside human" says Epitaph. She was behind him now, her hand grasping his arm, he could feel her fingers cut off his circulation, that shouldn't be possible. Daniel could feel the fingers in his brain wrapping tight. His arm raises to grasp the blade still hovering before him, it glowed a cool blue in the darkness.

NO! He would now be controlled again! Not like this! With a scream, he grasps the sword and drives the point of the blade into the ground. Panting he steps away.

"Stay away!" Yells Daniel as he runs into the darkness.

Quickly exiting the cavern Daniel tries to ignore the fact he can see perfectly despite the cave darkness. Instead, he focused on Escape.

"I'm a part of you now Daniel, no matter how you wish to deny it, I have all of time to wait for you to change your mind" Epitaphs voice echoes through Daniels mind, he could feel her settling into his brain like a cat readying itself for a nap.

"Leave me alone!" there is a crack of desperation in his voice

"We have all of time human, I can wait" the words are a whisper, but they echo through his mind like a scream. No matter how far he runs she would always be there.

Daniel somehow finds his way to the surface to find sunlight breaking over the destroyed Illyrian city. Small traces of wet blood the only remnants of the horrible night that had just passed. The creatures would not venture out into the sunlight, their master was gone now, the soul eater was what drove their murderous intent. Daniel knew they would avoid him now. The creatures would since he wasn't entirely human anymore. Not the only thing to worry about was Boris, he was still out there somewhere. Both thoughts terrified him.

Lacking any other impulse, Daniel returned to the campsite they had made upon landing on Tartarus. The Phoenix was gone but maybe there would be tools to cobble together a distress beacon, at very least there would be food.

Daniel makes his way to the campsite to find nothing but some scarce supplies no way to reach the long gone transport ship, the Phoenix would not be returning. It was hopeless.

Working quickly Daniel gathers the few scarce supplies left behind, He can't help but marvel at his hands as he packs his bag. It wasn't all bad he supposed, he never thought he would see his hands again, they looked so alien now. He had grown troublingly used to the metal prosthetics he had worn for years. That was one gift Epitaph had given him he could not ever thank her for.

taking his bag filled with the meager supplies he could salvage from the remains of the campsite, Daniel wanders back to the ruined streets of the city. what could the next step be? what could it possibly be? become a hermit and live out his life here, among the creatures and darkness. Wait for Boris to finally grow enough of a spine to kill him in his sleep. Daniel could feel the half man's eyes on him but he was hiding in the rubble. The soul eater had changed him into a creature of Tartarus, he would never leave this planet.

Daniel knew he was being a coward, he was running from what he had to do and it felt wrong, but it did little to bolster his courage to face this fight head on to realize this. Venturing back into the city Daniel looks for a defensible position to sleep for the night. He didn't fear the creatures, no they wouldn't care about him, it was Boris he had to watch out for. He makes sure the plasma pistol at his hip is charged and ready, just in case. Daniel didn't think that Boris was watching him still but the man had been murderous enough as a human and hated Daniel's guts. After a few hours of walking Daniel finds a tower that ascends into the sky a sharpened spire, it was a library once, more things he shouldn't know, it bothered him less and less the flashes of Epitaphs knowledge, that most of all should worry him.

The former library was overgrown with vines, the shelves once filled with scrolls and books now containing little but ash and dirt. Even the data crystals seemed unusable, covered in dust and some cracked by age or vine roots. So much knowledge lost. Daniel wanders the rooms of the library taking in its faded beauty, it was gorgeous once. Suddenly Daniel feels something crunch beneath his boot; pulling him from his absent reverie of the dessicated library. Bending down he finds a small device about the size of his hand covered by a thin layer of dirt. Carefully, Daniel excavates the curiosity, it is a small datapad, its screen now cracked from his boot. The device looked like the sort city guards were issued to carry. Slipping it into his pocket Daniel decides to look for stairs. Night would be falling in a few hours and it would be better to find an elevated place to hole up for the night.

It doesn't take long to find the stairs, they were made of stone covered with intricate scrollwork made with an elegance that still remained even if faded and hidden beneath layers of dirt and grime. Everything about Tartarus spoke of its former beauty, now married and faded by the ravages of time and disuse. The stairs had become precarious and dangerous from the centuries of disuse, covered in vines and steps missing, but slowly, Daniel makes it to the top of the tower. Long after he had lost count of how many levels he had ascended, Daniel finally found a room that is intact enough to appear safe. The space is open to the sky allowing for a view that would let him see anything attempting to invade the tower long before it reached him. Daniel slumps against a wall and looks out over the ruins of Tartarus. It was so alien to the cities of earth or Mars. The broken, towering, spires as far as the eye could see. This planet was a decayed work of art. Humanity didn't build like this, not anymore. Earth was all metal and glass, stifled and regulated. Nothing out of place and everything just so. Mars was simple and cheap, buildings thrown up overnight out of need and left to fall apart from lack of funds to fix them. Half the buildings of the great city remained from the first building machines of the first colonists, those were at least built to last. Here, there was artistry put into the architecture. It reminded him of the stories of ancient cities long dead, Rome and the Greek ruins he saw pictures of in his textbooks as a child, they built things to be beautiful. Daniel wonders when humanity lost that urge.

Tartarus was a scarred beauty though, It was like looking at a burned forest after the ravages of fire had long since left it and new growth began to take over. At once horrifying and beautiful. Daniel turns his attention back to the dessicated room. It's bare stone and small remnants of furnishings were cold and dead. It had perhaps been a reading room or librarians quarters once upon a time, but all signs of its use were gone. It is bare stone and the debris what was probably once quarters or a reading room. Daniel pulls a thick leather jacket he had found in the

remains of the camp out of his bag and wraps it around himself, he also produces a pair of fingerless gloves. Both were a little off size for him being left by the large Russian enforcers who had accompanied the expedition, but they would hold back the biting cold of Tartarus night. It was worse at this elevation than Daniel had hoped. A vicious wind was rushing by the missing walls of the room, but he was mostly sheltered from it in his corner. Perhaps this wasn't the best campsite for the night but he preferred the visibility, there was no telling what horrors the night might still hold, just because the soul eater was dead didn't mean there weren't worse things waiting out there.

To distract himself from the cold and keep his fingers moving Daniel began to fiddle with the small device he had found. It was in remarkable condition the crystal processors undamaged. He chipped away corrosion that had built up around the device's small power source in the hopes it might still be usable. Finally, after minutes of fumbling as his fingers became numb a warm glow came from the small chipped screen, accompanied by a comfortable warmth as the ancient processors felt a charge for the first time in centuries..

It was now the only light except the stars. Daniel pulls a jacket from the salvaged supplies a little tighter wrapping himself in it like a blanket. He breaks out a small chemical heating packet and puts it close to his heart hoping it would be enough to keep him through the night, tomorrow he would have to find a warmer place to hole up. Settled in for the night he begins combing through the device. He shouldn't be able to read the strange Illyrian script but he could. Daniel barely noticed the knowledge seeping into his consciousness at this point.

The information on the device was mostly dry and boring, the standard reports of the officer who carried it. The man was an ass and overly concerned with writing citations, but that proved to be an advantage for Daniel, it was painstakingly written and due to the sheer number of minor citations Daniel was able to begin piecing together a vague picture of what the city was like. Epitaph was bound away centuries before the fall of Illyria, the knowledge he was gaining from their bond had no context for how the thriving forgeworld could fall to the hell it had become. In the era of this guard's citations, it was clear that the Illyrian empire was in the midst of an energy crisis. The details were hard to put together, but it was clear that the government was suppressing the facts from its citizens, and they were starting to notice.

455-22

Report of centurion #235

Once more the rumors of Etheria shortage have been causing trouble in the learning centers.

Today three citations have been issued to citizens.

Citation 1

Speaking out against the council of three.

Citation issued for 300 credit fine and one day of civic duty for slanderous remarks of the council implying they are hiding facts from the people.

Citation 2

Inciting civic district

Citation issued for 500 credits and 10 days civic duty for inciting the public to disobey mandates against unregulated assembly.

The citizen was caught in the act of passing out flyers calling for a citizens assembly to address the forgeworld council representative to go before the council of three. This is the sixteenth citation of this sort issued in the past five days.

Citation 3

Failure to properly dispose of pet waste

Fine of 50 credits issued to the citizen for improperly disposing of pet waste after it relieved itself in front of the city library.

It was like piecing together a puzzle with half the pieces missing but it was forming an image. This Illyria was changed from the place he was getting flashes of from Epitaph. Daniel could tell from Epitaphs memories that the Illyrians had access to a form of energy that humanity could not dream of. That was the only way they could have come to rule such a vast region. Even the best human hyperspace drives would take months to go from star system to star system. How would a government survive and maintain power if it would take a century for their fleets to put down a rebellion.

However, the more Daniel dug into the logs the more questions he had. It was clear there was no answer as to where the soul eater came from or why he was here. Let alone details of the energy shortage.

Daniel spent a few more moments fiddling with the device, it was clearly a communicator as well as ticket log, but the signal was weak it would never be powerful enough to break the atmosphere, let alone reach the Phoenix.

With a sigh, he tucked the device into his pocket and tried to huddle against the wall for warmth. It was cold in the open room but at least he didn't have to worry about the ceiling caving in on him, there was none.

Daniel drifts into sleep, a deep fitful sleep that took him away from any knowledge of the waking world.

shadowy figures stood around a table, on the table arranged in a perfect circle, swords glistening in the light, Epitaph sits on the table before him smiling, not the smile of malice he saw last but the smile of a friend.

To Daniels right one of the figures stepped forward, she pulled back her hood to reveal a beautiful face. She was dark skinned and proud, carrying herself like a queen, with eyes that seemed to look into his soul.

“Tell me of the stars sir knight? Tell me of places far from here. Daniel's heart aches to tell her everything he has ever seen, to show her places far from here, but he can't. Why can't he? Daniel reached out to the girl but even as he does it was already too late, the figures melted away, then the room, until Daniel is in a white void. Daniel drops to his knees overwhelmed by a feeling of loss. What in the hell was that?

Finally coming out of his grief Daniel gets to his feet, the man in the suit is standing with a bored expression on his face waiting. Daniel knew he was going to be there, this was the same endless void he had bonded with Epitaph, and the man was the First Wizard.

"Hello Human," says the man with a bored sigh.

"What the fuck was that?" asks Daniel in response.

"A memory leaking into the past, doubtless a side effect of the reason you are here. It matters little as there are more important matters to discuss, such as the fact you are going to fail worse than any knight that preceded you. I knew to let a human bond with a sword was a mistake."

"What?" asks Daniel. This was aggravating, nothing has made any sense since coming to Tartarus. He was sick of it. With a thought, Daniel summons a plush leather chair and takes a seat. Thought was all that mattered here, anything could be created or destroyed with enough concentration, and Daniel wanted to sit down.

"I asked you a question Wizard!" the man looks at Daniel with a quizzical expression for a moment before responding.

"Already learning something of your new place in the world yet still squalling like an infant, will wonder never cease. Did you know in the times of Illyria it was considered the highest honor to have a private audience with a high wizard? Knights would prostrate themselves before me, it was dishonorable to ever raise your head higher than mine, even the emperor would bow to a wizard, yet you sit and raise your voice like I am a commoner. Child races have no respect for position" the man in the suit takes a seat in a chair matching Daniels a snifter of whiskey appearing in his hand. Strange how human the man and his actions appeared for all his complaints, perhaps it was a perception filter of some sort.

"Time is a construct of the lower planes, some beings are able to see beyond the physical layers of habitation to the ethereal plain," says the wizard in a haughty voice.

"Sounds like a mixture of quantum theory and pseudo science" replies Daniel.

"I try to speak to you as an equal and this is what I get, fine, I will explain it as to a child. You are not simply a Human anymore, you are a Knight of Illyria, forget the rules you think you know. But all of this doesn't really matter as you have started down a path that will lead to destruction and death on a scale more vast than has been witnessed in the past five ages. I am giving you an opportunity to fix your colossal mistakes before they happen. You should consider this an honor, this has only been offered once before to Illyria herself." says the Wizard. Daniel begins to question the man but before he can even open his mouth the Wizard gestures with his hand and his voice disappears in his throat. He cannot speak.

"Don't speak, for once just listen," says the wizard. He gestures with his long fingers and Daniel falls. It is hard to describe what transpired next save to say the chasming white void opened into endless darkness, And Daniel fell. It felt like he fell for centuries then as suddenly as it started it ceased, Daniel did not hit bottom, he simply stopped falling. and a figure with a long beard wearing a torn and burnt spacesuit stood before him. Daniel recognized him, it was the face he saw in the mirror every morning if a bit more worn and weary. Why the beard? Daniel always hated having a beard, they were itchy.

"You finally made it," says the old man with a smirk. Daniel tries to speak but his voice is still gone.

"Oh yeah, he does that," says the old man with an apologetic look.

"Sucks right? I'll keep this short and to the point, I'm not supposed to say too much because it could create a schism, Take up the blade and embrace your destiny, Daniel. You need Epitaph, there is a fight coming and she will give you the power to fight it. If you fuck this up again, they all die, Gwen dies. I will not let your foolishness be the cause of all of this."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Asks Daniel with a monumental effort forcing his voice out in a whisper.

"You always were thick. Listen to me carefully because I'm going to make this beyond simple for you, get your worthless ass to Anwyn and find Gwen and protect her with your life, she's in more trouble than she knows. If what I'm about to do doesn't kill you there's a chance this will go right this time around." The old man grabs Daniel by the arm as he speaks. His grip is iron and immovable. The old man looks Daniel in the eye and places a hand over his forehead, there is a flash of light brighter than any sun, it envelops and consumes him.

Daniel wakes from his dream panting and screaming. He feels like his body is on fire. He is soaked in sweat and gasping for air. It was just a dream?

Daniel lays there for what feels like hours trying to move, it isn't until the first traces of light break across the floor of the grimy room he, at last, regains control of his limbs.

"Troubling dreams?" Epitaphs voice breaks the silence.

"I have no idea what the fuck that was."

"Some knights have been known to be gifted with prophecy I have never heard of it causing such pain though. It was intense enough to manifest me here. You are the first human to ever be bonded perhaps this is how your species responds to foresight. Tell me did it feel like you saw things to come?"

"It made no sense." Replied Daniel gruffly deflecting the question. Forcing himself to sit up Daniel breathes deeply he needed to unwrap what he saw. It was fading but the fragments remained. "Get to Anwyn, find Gwen", what was Anwyn? His head was on fire, rummaging through his bag he finds a small bottle of painkillers and dry swallowed a pill. Feeling a need to keep himself busy, Daniel began working on producing several components he salvaged from the campsite the day before. His head felt like it was splitting open.

Epitaph receded to the back of Daniels' brain as he worked. He could feel her seething there, not appreciating being ignored. After a few hours of work, Daniel finally laid a truly inelegant combination of human and Illyrian tech on the floor before him and grabbed a protein bar from his dwindling rations. He couldn't put this off any further, it was time to stop being a coward.

"come out Epitaph, we need to talk"

"Now you wish to speak with me?" asks Epitaph in a bitter voice forming into her usual visage. Elegant flowing dress accented by shining plate armor. At once ready for battle or a cocktail party. she stands arms crossed glaring at Daniel.

"what do you see this as Epitaph? Our partnership" asks Daniel pushing his hair out of his eyes.

"Partnership? Well, I need you, I Have been trapped here longer than you can comprehend, and I want to be free."

"So you see me as a body suit to walk you out of here?"

"Well I wouldn't put it that way exactly," says Epitaph turning her back on Daniel to look out the window, Daniel could feel her embarrassment.

"If you hadn't been in danger from the soul eater you would never have chosen me would you," says Daniel with a sigh.

"I like you Daniel, but no, I wouldn't have chosen you. Knights would train for centuries just to attempt a bonding, you are a child compared to those I refused. But you were my last chance, I knew that. However, do not pretend your agreement to the bond was any more meaningful, you would never have accepted me if you had other options. It's far too late to discuss this now, we are bonded until one of us ceases, and there is little capable of truly killing either of us anymore."

"What a pair we make, both wishing to be free yet apparently stuck together. I can feel how your presence has already begun to change me, physically and in my mind. I think it should frighten me. Even a few days ago it would have terrified me but now it seems the natural course of things. I'm not going to crave blood or grow hair on a full moon am I?"

"What?"

"An Earth joke. I will not be your puppet Epitaph. I have let too many people and things control my actions, I refuse to be a pebble in the sea anymore."

"The Knights of Illyria were created by the shining ideal of honor," says Epitaph with a wistful sigh. "They were to be the gleaming centurions of an endless empire, meant to protect all equally in the known universe."

"They were guardians?"

"Yes, and Warriors. Wherever darkness threatened the light you would find a knight fighting back the shadows."

"They sound honorable."

"They were, at the beginning."

"What do you want this to be then Epitaph? You tried to overtake me in the cave, that was not the actions of a guardian."

"The knights that made me were long since lost to such idolatry human. They were awakened to the truth of the universe, there are the strong and the weak, and I will never be weak again."

"I can understand that. But we can be stronger as partners. You named yourself Epitaph, the last daughter of Illyria. Will you be an Epitaph of hatred and enslavement?"

"I am sorry for what I did Daniel, I could sense the fear in you and I reacted. I am not proud of that."

"You were scared, I'm not one to judge for action taken in fear. I don't know if I trust you yet Epitaph, but I think I want to. Neither one of us wants to be stuck here, but we will need each other to escape, are you willing to be my partner?"

"There is little I would not do for freedom."

"Partners then?" asks Daniel reaching out his hand.

Looking at his hand strangely for a moment Epitaph also rises. She reaches out and grasps his hand.

"Partners."

"Then partner," says Daniel looking at the small device he had managed to repair "what say we get out of here?" with the push of a button Daniel activates a distress beacon, time to find an escape.

Space, in proximity to planet, designated Tartarus.

The hulking shape of a ship swims like a bloated whale to its destination. It stalks the void like a wolf that has finally scented worthy prey. The red-skinned surgical addict who serves as its captain stands before the towering view screens of his throne room looking toward their prize.

The planet floats like a pearl waiting to be plucked by the right hand.

“My lord, it appears the human was not lying. There are signs of unknown tech littering the entire planet. This place is a treasure trove. There is also a distress beacon sending out a weak signal on a human frequency.”

“To think he thought to scare us away with his fairytales of monsters,” says Teh’Ran.

Turning his back to the viewscreen, he stalks to his throne, the harsh sound of metal scraping on metal echoing from every step. He tries to ignore the uneasy feeling of dread emanating from Tartarus. Sprawling into his gruesome perch, Te’Ran tries to distract himself from his uneasy feeling by admiring his new addition to the decorations. The humans’ head was a nice addition to the collection of skulls from a dozen species that decorate his throne. The man’s perfectly quaffed hair counterbalanced the look of utter fear frozen on his lifeless lips.

Yes, he was a very nice addition. A message to any who dared disobey his will.

“I want a complete survey of the planet while you make preparations to land, I believe we will be staying a while,” says Teh’Ran his lips stretch into a disturbing smile as he watches the planet grow larger in the viewscreen before him.

He always loved winning.

End chapter 1

