

Knight errant
The Dark Blade part 1

In the darkest reaches of space, beyond the known borders of humanities expansion, lies a world names Tartarus, a cursed world, filled with the tattered remains of a once great civilization. Once a sparkling forgeworld of an empire it is now a place of dark things and grim creatures. Tartarus is a place of death, but despite this grim reality a lone human has managed to survive here. It is A strange thing to encounter a human so far from the UESC and their fledgling empire. He is deep in fitful sleep. The same nightmare that has haunted him for weeks, familiar eyes boring into his soul screaming at him he needs to find Anwyn before it's too late. The words hammer into his skull finally waking him, gasping for air Daniel sits up too fast banging his head against the low-hanging stone of his lackluster shelter. It takes him a moment to realize there is something new in the air, something wrong. Daniel could feel it. Something was stirring in the catacombs beneath the broken towers of Tartarus. It was old, and It was hungry.

Whit fitful breaths of air he sinks further back into the small hidehole attempting to shrink away from the searching tendrils of thought. What is it? The walls were no bar to it but they granted some measure of imagined protection. He could feel epitaph grow warm against his side lending her efforts to shield his mind. Daniel had never encountered anything like this dark entity. Even the soul eaters touch seemed warm and familiar by comparison. He knew that if it found him it would devour his mind with little hesitation. He could barely breathe as he felt its searching tendrils pass him by unnoticed.

As suddenly as it had come, the strange entity disappeared from notice, perhaps slumbering, it felt so very old and alien.

Epitaph Appears before him, her form glowing and ethereal in the darkness, it was so easy to forget she wasn't really there, simply a projection in his mind's eye.

"What was that?" asks Daniel with a shiver.

"I Don't know," says Epitaph, for the first time Daniel saw true fear on her face.

"It felt, Hungry," says Daniel.

"It is waking up from a long sleep, with any luck it will stay dormant long enough for us to make our leave of this place." Epitaph pauses for a moment before continuing to speak. " Daniel, you spoke of us being partners, if that is so I must ask you, do you intend to live as a knight of Illyria? Or when we leave this place will you return to your old life?" the words hang in the air for a moment between them. Daniel isn't really sure how to answer.

"I don't really have a life to return to. When I came here I was running, I planned to disappear into the outer colonies and be a farmer, or something. It all feels so far away now."

"I have looked over your memories Daniel, you have always been in search of something to devote yourself to. As soon as you were of age you joined your human military looking for a cause, just because you realized that you had joined the wrong cause does not change the man you were."

Daniel leans back against what passed for a wall behind him. He was still shaking off the cold feeling of the nights' invasion but sleep was gone. It had been a very long time since he had

considered any sort of meaning for himself. So many years just trying to survive, to make it to the next week with food in his belly. It was a foreign almost alien notion to consider anything beyond that again. When he was a child he wanted to be a hero, wanted it so much as soon as he could he ran into the waiting arms of the UESC and their promises of adventure and heroism, god that was a lie.

“What does it mean to be a knight?” the words leave his mouth as though he is thinking aloud. “There are five oaths every knight takes,” says Epitaph, her voice takes the tone of a lecturing teacher but Daniel doesn't mind this time.

A knight swears to protect the weak and vanquish the wicked,

To renounce pride and prejudice,

To serve only justice, and to put the wellbeing of their order above any government or movement of politics,

A knight renounces wealth and all worldly possessions,

And finally, a knight vows to put the greater good above all even their own life.” the small cave is silent in the wake of Epitaph's words.

Daniel mulls them over in his mind. A few months ago this tableau would have been unthinkable to him, but now, it felt right. He wasn't the idealistic kid who left earth so long ago, but he didn't want to be the jaded prick who didn't believe in anything anymore. He had seen too much here. He knows that there is real evil and darkness in the universe. Tartarus was proof that the darkness can take physical terrible form.

What could stand up to creatures of madness, he had barely survived his encounter with the creatures that lurked here. This was probably the most foolish decision of his life, it was probably, no definitely going to get him killed. Daniel picks up his sword gingerly placing it in his lap, it's so easy to forget that the woman sitting across from him wasn't real, just a figment of the conciseness held within this blade. They weren't friends, not yet, but they were, perhaps, becoming partners.

“I think, no...” with a deep breath Daniel looked up at Epitaph's luminous eyes. “I want, my life to mean something. Epitaph, I think we were meant to meet, I have no idea how to be a knight, I'm going to make mistakes and I'm going to fuck up, but I want to be more than I am. I want to be your partner, I want to be a knight of Illyria to perhaps balance something of the darkness I helped spread in my lifetime.”

“Daniel, I would like to show you something,” says Epitaph with a grin.

“Now?”

“Yes, now.” and with that, her glowing form leaves the small cavern into the waiting night.

Daniel follows after his curiosity outweighing the fear of what had just happened.

The beasts of Tartarus were still roaming the city but they kept their distance from Daniel, his blade was one of the few things capable of killing them on Tartarus.

They Make their way through the broken and overgrown streets of Tartarus to a corner of the city Daniel had never thought to venture to before. The sun was just breaking over the horizon as Daniel beholds a cathedral-like building. It is tall and imposing despite its weathered and overgrown condition, flanked by imposing statues of robbed Illyrians holding swords. Their cloaked visage seems to stand as a challenge to the notion Illyria has fallen, they still stand

proud and defiant. Daniel felt strangely judged by their unseen glairs. Their faces had long since decayed to age, now all that remained was a dark Cowell.

"They are the Twin brothers who founded the order of Illyrian Knights. First to be granted blades by the wizard after Illyria herself. Their story is lost to even the records of Illyria but it is said they were the first acolytes of her cause" says Epitaph in a wistful voice.

"Epitaph how is it I understand how to read Illyrian and even seem to have some passing knowledge of Illyria itself yet don't know that?"

"If I was to let all I know flow into your mind it would melt into a warm puddle of liquid flesh. The human brain is far inferior to that of an Illyrian" replies Epitaph haughtily.

Daniel almost makes a flippant response but an eerie feeling has come over him, there is something watching them from inside the decade cathedral.

"Follow me, Daniel, I want to show you the hearth and home of our order," says Epitaph as she floats forward to the broken doors of the cathedral. Wordlessly Daniel follows.

They make their way through twisting corridors with walls bearing paintings all but erased by time, only the barest traces of once bright pigments still catching light in the dim ever twilight of the building. There is a coldness in the air that cuts to the very bone.

They walk down a dark hallway. The decaying murals on the walls show knights in shimmering armor. All wear clothing that leaves their shoulders and legs bare, a strange uniform of sorts, ornate helmets adorn their heads.

"There were 12 knights, and they bore 12 blades, I was to be the thirteenth. Always an unlucky number thirteen." her voice is tinged with a barely hidden sorrow. The only reason Epitaph and Daniel were bound was that she had never accepted an Illyrian bearer. She had been hidden away, forgotten. Daniel gently brushes his hand over the image of a four-armed male clasping a blade across his lap.

"This one, he isn't Illyrian?"

"There were few bearers who were not of the Illyrian race, beings of great respect and lineage. It was exceedingly rare and frowned upon by the order. You are the least evolved alien ever taken as a blade's partner."

"Each blade was passed down from knight to knight?" Daniel tries to ignore the implied insults in Epitaph's words. Her barbs were common and he was learning to ignore them.

"If one died another would take their place if deemed worthy by the blade. A knight may be slain in battle but will not age, to pledge yourself to a blade is to walk the long and slow path of the ages. I can feel your mind spinning human, yes I do mean you. You will live to see all you knew crumble and wither and you will be untouched and unchanged. At least on the surface."

"It would have been nice to know that in advance," says Daniel a touch of anger tinging his voice with a hard edge.

"Do not play the victim, most would consider immortality a gift."

Daniel is about to respond when something moves in the corner of his eye, his blade is in his hand ready for an attack, a cool blue glow emanating from the steel. It brings illumination to the dark hallway revealing Daniel is alone.

"You're jumping at shadows," says Epitaph dismissively.

"Something feels off here, we aren't alone" replies Daniel, he is on edge, the feeling of being watched has only grown worse since entering the building.

“There are no beings here besides the beasts, they would not dare venture here. We’re almost to the main hall” says Epitaph gesturing for Daniel to follow her.

Trying to bury the feeling of wrongness Daniel sheaths his blade and follows Epitaph.

After a few more long minutes of walking the hallway opens to a cavernous hall. The ceiling is caving in letting streams of light bath the intricately inlaid floor. Patterns of gold and silver laid into the white marble have weathered the test of time. They are covered by decayed leaves and the remains of the roof. The pattern swirls around the visage of a blade its tip pointing towards a staircase. Daniel can not tear his eyes away from what rests at the top of the stairs. It is a stone, ancient even for Tartarus.

“What is that Epitaph?”

“Something your eyes are unworthy to gaze upon, worm,” says a guttural and familiar voice.

Space above the planetoid designated Tartarus.

Teh’Ran lounges in his throne swirling a glass of Juperin brandy as he stares out at the planet his ship is currently orbiting. He wants to land to claim its plunder but a fear has him gripped in indecision. He taps on the scalp of the newest addition to his throne of Skulls, the human had told stories of monsters laying in wait, dark creatures that could not be killed by mortal means. His reputation could not allow for fear but the human had clearly believed what he was saying, and now as his floating palace sits in the vacuum just beyond the reaches of the gravity and atmosphere of that cold planet he can feel a dread gripping him. There is something wrong with this place, yet he had promised plunder and riches to his men, to turn back now would mean a mutiny. One he was ill-equipped to ut down.

“Summon the crone,” says Teh’Ran to the steward waiting over his shoulder. He need not look to know that the man has scurried away to complete the task. Yes, she would have an answer for him.

It takes longer then he would have liked for the birdlike visage of the aged sorceress to appear before him. Her four eyes glair at him from across the throne-chamber, the light of Tartarus is all that bathes the room.

“You summoned me lord?” she asks in a haughty and rasping voice.

“How long have you been with me crone?”

“It was close to 20 cycles ago you found me drifting in the black Lord,” says the crone with false humility.

“You promised me you would use all your dark talents to aid me in my reign,” continues Teh’ran

“And together we have expanded your territory to five times its size. An impressive feat my king.”

“All this yet I remember once you offered me more. A great power that comes at greater risk.”

Te’ran can see an evil grin break the crone’s dark expression, quite an achievement since the verlon has a beak rather than the familiar lips of simian decent.

"I remember lord. A gift I offered you in exchange for an oath of loyalty and position at your side as your most trusted advisor. A weapon that would make you a true power to be feared in known space. Have you decided you are ready to take the test of blood?"

"As simple as that?"

"No, very far from simple lord," says the crone producing a small black box from her cloak. It is covered in intricate markings and seems to absorb the dim light of the room. It emits an evil feeling as though it thirsts for something.

"If I pass the test I will be powerful?"

"If you pass, tell me lord, I have offered you this gift many times in our time together my king, why now?"

With a gesture, Teh'Ran dismissed his attendants clearing the room. He glairs at the box like a viper. He had hoped this day would never come, but he had become weak. That small transport had crippled his battleship and fled, it had made a mockery of his name and reputation.

Capturing it and killing all he found aboard had done little muddy the blood in the water from his defeat. He saw the sidelong looks from his officers, it would take little more for them to decide he was weak enough to replace. He could already see the looks of doubt in the eyes of his followers. The very fact he could see their eyes was proof enough of his perceived weakness. Teh'Ran sighs finishing his drink. Suddenly, he crushes the glass chalice in his mechanical hand. His hand, legs, lungs, half of his spine and his cranium, all mechanical yet never enough to make him as strong as he wanted, needed, to be. This "Gift" it would make him strong. If he survived the test.

"It is none of your concern why simply that it is time," says Teh'Ran his voice hard. Taking a shard of the glass chalice he slices into the flesh of his left hand, blue blood welling up over his red skin. The crone offers forth the box expectant and Teh'Ran places his hand over it his blood pooling into the engravings.

Barely a moment passes and Teh'ran ceases to exist as he is torn apart at the molecular level. The last thing he hears before he dies is the crone laughing.

