

## Part 3

### Tartarus

Karas tested his new body. Flexing his new fingers and feeling the click of taught cartilage and bone as he made a fist. He didn't often inhabit human bodies, the backward species normally wouldn't be able to contain his presence for long. His energies had a necrotic effect on most hosts but certain species could last longer than others. This Daniel though, he had been enhanced by bonding to the blade. What was her name again? Epitaph, yes, that was it. The portion of his psyche toying with the blade spirit was growing frustrated with her but she would lose her stamina soon.

The human had been incapacitated by Karas' initial invasion but he was waking. Karas could feel the human's panic at his new prison. This part was always the most fun, when a new host realized it was no longer able to touch the world, it was always so delicious.

But unexpectedly the panic quickly faded and turned to a seething anger. It usually took months for a host to find that level of calm, most went mad first. How odd.

"You may think you have won, but this is far from over" the words are biting and strike like a blow. Karas actually felt his confidence waver for a moment. He had never been spoken to by a body before, and he traded his way through so very many over the centuries. He had little choice considering his body was lost to him. Hidden away by Illyria and her pet wizard. The memory brings back his rage always simmering never forgotten.

Well, Karas could take joy in using this creation of the Illyrians, this sword of power, to wreak havoc across the civilized universe. He looked at the blade in his hand, with a thought marshalling a small portion of its power and filling himself with the nourishing energy, it made the blade glow a cool blue. All the limitless potential held within a simple weapon of an obsolete age. The human had barely begun to grasp what it was capable of. Karas had witnessed Illyria herself split a planet with her blade, destroying it utterly.

This blade, would be his key to a lasting revenge for what she had done to him. She had been so smug in her victory over him, well he would have the last laugh.

Karas looks over the hall for a moment, the broken glory of the Illyrian knights. The dead meat of the Boris creature laid sprawled in the middle of the floor, its decaying flesh framed by the circle and lines of the sigil of the knights emblazoned on the floor in gold. It had been an uncomfortable body. Not sparing it another though Karas moves across the hall to enter an adjacent hallway. He had been here once before when it was still young and alive with knights. Karas walks to what had once been the armory as he drifts through dim memories. It is little more than a husk of a room now, open to the sky. The room is flanked with withered statues of the knights of Illyria, twelve figures flanking the queen herself Illyria, kneeling at her right hand is the hated wizard Ba'al. Karas' face twists into a jealous rage and with a slash of Epitaph an arch of blue light crashes through the ancient statue obliterating it. He feels a small satisfaction at watching the faces of the statues melt into dust. With a howl he swings the blade repeatedly destroying every statue not stopping until the wetherd forms are all reduced to dust and memory. He pants looking at his handiwork. They were long since dead, why did it feel like they were still taunting him?

Looking at the pedestal which once housed Illyria Karas smiles, brushing away the dust he presses a sigil emblazoned on the pedestal. With a sharp sound it opens to reveal a compartment containing a mummified corpse. The smell of embalming fluids and must wrinkle his nose as he examines the remains of the wizard Ba'al, clothed in the armor of the order of Illyria, buried with the full honors of a knight. It was saccharin enough to make Karas sick. The sudden exposure to air after millenia sealed in a hermetic environment was enough to quickly degrade the remains. Even as Karas watched the Illyrian body began to wither and decay. Karas chuckles at the sight, it brought a small satisfaction to watch. With a sharp motion he grabs the wizard's breastplate and jerks it free of the body. The motion crumbles the remains of the wizard to dust. All that remains is his armor. The wizard must have spelled it to make it invulnerable to the passage of time. Chuckling to himself Karas dons the wizard's breastplate and helmet. It would be a fitting tribute to wear the wizard's regalia. A small cherry atop his plans. Soon the universe would vilify this mask, and all memories of the Illyrian race. He would sweep across all that is known and poison the memory of Illyria so none would speak her name save to curse it. Yes this was going to be a sweet revenge. Karas is about to leave when he sees a small leatherbound book among the dust that was once the wizard. It looked harmless enough but if it had been spelled against the ravages of time it must have meant something to the wizard. Karas slips it into his jacket now worn over the wizard's armor, it would bear further study at a later time.

Karas began laughing to himself as he kicks down a desiccated wall and exits into the cold light of Tartarus. He couldn't help but to revel in the feeling of his new flesh, most meat would have already begun to show slight signs of necrosis his energies beginning to desiccate and wither the soft tissues, but this creature was holding his essence like it was made for him. Why had he not tried to possess a knight sooner? Well most weren't as untrained as this one. The last knight Karas had encountered was Arlal, that one had been difficult, their battle had been long and he had almost bested the dragon spirit, but Karas always won in the end.

Karas is distracted from his musings by a presence descending from space, Karas marveled at the serendipity of the timing. He could sense the pilot was a blade bearer, though the energy of his weapon was foreign to the dragon's memory. He had encountered several bearers in his lifetime, killed a few even, but he could not claim to know them all. He had thought they were all as dead as their empire.

This should be enjoyable. Karas attempted to ignore Daniels cold anger surging from the human's mental prison, it was intensifying to an irritating level. It felt like the human was just waiting for its moment. Foolishness, no vessel had ever been able to break free of Karas' barriers. Shouldering the blade in his hand Karas walks jauntily down the dead streets of Tartarus, with an absent thought he traps the human in a pain loop, a special concoction of torments that should break its psyche in time, it was unsatisfying. The human didn't even respond to that properly.

Trying to ignore the frustrating human Karas focuses on the present, this world had changed in the millenia since he had last been here. Once it had been a thriving metropolis that spanned the entire world, climate controlled, populous content and bland as toast. It had been amusing to toy with them but he had quickly grown bored, they were so uninspired even when fanned to hatred. Apparently the shadow king had taken things a bit further during the great war. Karas

had secluded himself in the etherian pathways outside of normal space during those times of terror that had reshaped the galaxy. He enjoyed a good war but the shadow king terrified even the disembodied dragon. Karas only returned to play with the mortals again when the darkness finally fell to slumber sated on the corpse of the illyrian empire. He missed the illyrians sometimes, it was so strange to have lost his favorite toys after such a long time. Mostly Karas was just bitter something else was the cause of their death as a species. He had wanted to be the reason for their failure.

A sonic boom echoed through the empty streets. Karas looks to the sky to watch a ship sailing overhead, its birdlike wings leaving a trail of exhaust behind it. He grinned, it would do nicely. The only question remaining was where to start. Perhaps he would respond to the humans tactless words, visit the human homeworld of earth. Yes that would be a good place to start his reign of chaos. From the Daniel's memories Karas could see Earth was in the midst of political turmoil that would be perfect for him to gather a willing hord behind him. The humans seemed to be all but begging for a cause to throw their combined avarice and xenophobia behind, it was a world ripe for the picking. They seemed to be decades away from a new war with Mars over mere political posturing, it would be simple enough to shape that fear outward at anything not human. It was so beautifully simple it made Karas salivate at the possibilities.

Karas had wondered to an open square as he watched the shuttle land. Its engines blow up billowing clouds of dust and various debris that rattle against his armor. He barely notices lost in thought. Karas watches as an entry ramp extending out to reveal a red skinned man holding an ornate longsword. The being's horns almost brush the roof of the doorway as he strides with authority. He is bare chested, segmented armor covers his thighs to his knees and he wears articulated boots that allow for fast movement. It was the traditional dress of a warrior of demada. Karas hadn't seen one of the horned species in some time, they had been flung across the galaxy in the wake of a planetary extinction event. A dying species with no homeworld. It was adorable.

The demada strode towards Karas awash in anger and carrying himself with the bearing of a king, Karas would enjoy this.

"Daniel Black, I challenge you to single combat, your blade to mine. You cannot run from me this time human." puzzled Karas searches the humans memories quickly, there was apparently some lasting animosity from a small space battle some months ago, how petty.

"And you are?" asks Karas looking to get a rise out to the pirate. It works better than expected, Teh Ran's face contorts in anger and he attacks Karas swinging out violently. Karas easily deflects the blow laughing. This was so much fun!

### Astral space

Daniel was in a great deal of pain. After all he had been through, after all the soul eater had subjected him to however it was barely noticeable. He took the pain, and let it wash over him melting away everything but what he needed. He clung to his anger, but didnt let it rule his mind, he couldn't afford that, no he must stay clear headed.

He could still feel his body, he could feel it moving at Karas' will it was beyond enraging after everything he had endured. But he couldn't lose his calm. Karas thought he had Daniel contained, the Dragon spirit was wrong. Daniel was slowly worming his way into the mind of

Karas, subtly, slowly, careful not to alert the dragon to his incursion. As he went Daniel learned. The ancient mind was vast and organized. It almost felt like slowly browsing through dusty stacks of a library, one containing wisdom and dark things best left unlearned. Karas had acquired much knowledge in his life on a great number of things but Daniel's time was limited and he had to focus. He found all the dragon knew of the psychic plane, and the powers of the mind, Daniel learned fast. He sought how the dragon had separated Epitaph from him. Daniel knew he couldn't defeat the dragon alone. As he learned from the dragon Daniel discovered how to split his mind, separating his forward mind from the pain the dragon had trapped him in sped to learning. With a thought Daniel sent his astral body deeper into the vast depths of the dragons mind. It was dangerous to wander this deeply but he had no choice. It was a small blessing that the dragon was distracted by the sword fight it was currently engaging in using Daniels body. He should be more angry at that but he had no time.

Finally Daniel found what he was looking for. The dragon was keeping the barrier intangible through an effort of will. By keeping it constantly in his mind Karas was twisting the wall around any attack. Daniel felt at the wall with a mental probe, it was soft and spongy, the only way to destroy the astral wall was to distract the dragon enough he had no choice but to tie it off and give epitaph a solid barrier to attack. Daniel hoped she was ready, he tried to send her a warning to prepare herself through their bond, he hoped it would be strong enough to make it through the barrier. He could feel her panic faintly. With a sigh Daniel sinks back into the prison Karas had made for him.

This would be unpleasant.

Karas laughed as he cut another gash on the shoulder of Teh'ran. This was too much fun. Karas hadn't had a good fight in a century. The pirate wasn't a great bladesman but he made up for his lack of skill with a great deal of spirit.

"You godless son of a harlot, I will make your head the centerpiece of my throne."

"I'm not sure if you honor or mock me sir, for that implies you believe yourself capable of winning" replies Karas with glee.

The Dragon Spirit is so intent upon the fight he is entirely taken by surprise when the human lashes out with a psychic blow. Karas stumbles at the unexpected assault letting Teh'ran through his defences. The pirate opens a welling gash on his side letting red blood flow down his pant leg. How had the human done that? It shouldn't have been possible.

You bleed like everyone else human. Let's see more of.." Teh'ran's words are cut short, as Karas absently ends the duel with a flick of his wrist. Blue blood welles down Teh'ran's chest. Karas redoubled the waves of psychic pain tormenting Daniel's psyche, Karas lashes out a vicious kick to the Demada's groin and as the pirate falls to the ground. The demada whimpers in pain but karas barely notices continuing past the dying captain and boarding the shuttle.

The doors close behind him as he walks to the cockpit. The human, Daniel, was fighting him, how was he doing it so well? It puzzled and worried the dragon spirit as he attempts to find a pattern in the wild attacks and figure out how to fight back, after a few seconds Karas realized he recognized the knight's tactics. They were the same the dragon would employ.

Keying in random coordinates into the ships controls, it lifts off and within moments breaks free of the atmosphere, but Karas is focused internally on the battle being waged there.

"You've managed to worm your way into my mind I see" says Karas with barely contained anger. When you were a being of spirit you began to hold your mind as your most sacred possession. This creature had trespassed where it did not belong.

"You left your barriers untended" replies Daniel. They stand in a star filled void staring at each other. Daniel is seated with his legs crossed, Karas in his native form is coiled like a serpent. Though their astral forms appear still a battle is being waged between them. Karas is powerful and skilled sending bludgeoning blows that could shatter Daniel's psyche if they landed but Daniel is holding his own, managing to just barely deflect the blows. He cannot simply shield himself from the pummeling blows so instead he uses his mind like a surgeon's knife ever so narrowly altering the course of each attack so each attack seems to bend around him. Daniel is barely holding his concentration. Any waiver of will, any misstep would mean death. Everything Daniel had stolen from the dragons mind is burning through him. But this was not enough. He could feel the barrier wasn't tied off. With a deep breath Daniel changed the pattern of their battle. Between the dragons attacks Daniel lashes out with a vicious strike. The dragon wildly deflects it losing the pattern of his attacks in a desperate attempt to fend off the human's sudden and seemingly reckless move. Not giving Karas a moment to regain balance Daniel throws everything into raining a thousand small attacks. None had the power of the dragons mighty blows but they were too many for the dragon to block and slowly smoe made it through karas' defences. Daniel allowed himself a grin as the dragon reacts to the growing pain. Then, he felt a change in the barrier. It became hard and inflexible. The dragon had tied the psychic construct off. Daniel hoped Epitaph was ready because he wouldn't be able to block the counter he new was coming. He had gambled everything on his partner. She better come through on her end.

Epitaph was terrified. The massive visage of the dragon was nipping at her toes. She couldn't flee fast enough. She had felt a strong sending from daniel what felt like a lifetime ago, an overwhelming urge to prepare herself, but she couldn't survive this much longer. She was scared, and alone, and so very tired. It was so tempting to just give in and let the dragon consume her. To emmd her flight and finally be at peace. But something kept her running. Then suddenly the barrier changes. She had continuously clawed at the spongy menace but now it was suddenly different. Hard and immobile. Desperately she threw all she had left into a massive blow at the barrier hoping she was strong enough and it wouldn't rebound this time. If it did she wouldn't be able to survive the blast. She desperately waited the moment for the psychic attack to reach the barrier and screamed in joy as it shattered like glass. Amazingly so did the visage of karas chasing her. An illusion?

Barely taking a moment to catch her breath Epitaph rushed to Daniel. His astral form burned like a small star in the darkness. She is shocked to see him locked in a mental battle with the ancient dragon, and he appeared to be holding his own, but she could see his strength was faltering. Not pausing to speak or distract Daniel from his battle Epitaph grasps his hand in hers and attempts to lend him her strength.

Their minds meld and she sees the pattern of the battle, the ebb and flow of attack block attack block. And she attempts to break it. Adding her attacks to daniels Karas falters. He had not

expected her. He hadn't had to fight like this in close to a milenia and he was not prepared. He had grown soft in the time since he had last faced a knight. Pushing through exhaustion Daniel and Epitaph redouble their efforts and manage to land more blows on karas' astral body. He was covered in dozens of glowing gashes, leaking his essence into the ether of astral space. With a shocked roar of terror karas suddenly flees. Epitaph can tell Daniel wants to give chase but she holds him back. They had won this small victory by virtue of luck, a continued engagement may as easily turn the tables.

Daniel is relieved to feel the alien presence leave his body. Fast as lightning he throws up mental barriers, to prevent anything else violating his mind. The mercifully he falls into a slumber. He was safe for a moment.

Tartarus.

The crone looks down at Teh'ran. He is broken and bloody but his soul has not left yet. The duel had been viewed by the whole crew from orbit, a pack of hounds waiting to see the fate of their master. When the lieutenants had begun to mutiny at the sight of their captains defeat she had for a moment considered leaving him, but she had invested too much time in the pirate. So instead she stole a warbird and found her way to the planet even as the carrion ascendent entered hyperspace leaving this cursed place in its wake.

With a mighty effort the crone moves the dying captain to the medbay of her stolen warbird. She would keep him alive because she still had use for him. The path to Etheria was long and treacherous, she had long since learned this, the deposed captain now owes her his life twice over, he would make a good right hand. With a sigh the crone wraps her withered fingers around a green gem hanging on a chain around her neck and sends a jolt of energy through the dying man's body, The shard of crystal in her hand was a small piece of the great puzzle a shard of etheria. Letting its energy flow through her she sends enough lifegiving light through the captains veins to reknitting broken bone and heal wounded flesh.

This story was only just beginning.