

Regeneration

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Fifteen minutes before sunset the sirens sounded, just like every night. The clamour echoed through the emptying streets, the last citizens scurried quickly home to the protection of heavy shutters and electrolock doors and Sophie looked up from her work, surprised.

"Already?"

The afternoon had slipped away - time sliding past unnoticed as she and Greg put the final pieces into place.

"I guess." Greg didn't look nervous. Not even a little. "Doesn't matter though, we're ready."

Somewhere in the distance a mother shouted for her kids - the desperate edge in her voice obvious, even from this far away. Sophie listened for a moment and then turned her attention back to the project. Greg didn't even lift his eyes from the monitor.

"If this works," he said, "We'll be heroes. The most famous fourteen-year-olds in the world."

"What if it doesn't?"

At that, finally, he lifted his eyes, tearing his gaze away from the body they'd spent the previous month working on - rearranging it again and again until it looked nothing at all like the little old lady they'd dug up.

"If it doesn't work, then we're dead."

Sophie shrugged. There wasn't anything more to say. Somewhere a dog started howling.

"It's time."

As they did every night, the scourge of the twilight emerged from their caves. The paranoid citizens slept uneasily in their bunkers. It seemed the same as any other night on Tartarus II.

But tonight was to be different.

For it was the last night the people of Daelen would labor away in the name of the Swarm.

Again, the mother called out. Greg hesitated. They were safe in the observatory, but he was still uneasy about leaving his mother to worry about his whereabouts, especially after what happened to the old professor.

No time to lose now. The Professor had shown them everything they need to do. His head went back down, focusing on the computer screen displaying the body of their old neighbor, old Mrs. Pulna that lay in the other room. It now resembled something akin to a cross between a giant squid and a fiery red lobster-a hybrid imbued with the power of flight - a Scourge Prowler - just like the ones that patrolled the city under the cover of darkness, responsible for the deaths of many unfortunate souls who found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The police of Daelen, the Prowlers were impervious to all forms of weaponry –bombs, nukes, anti-planetary devices - everything, except for one – another Prowler.

Prowlers, the most violent and sadistic of the Swarm breeds, were regenerated from the bodies of the most innocent and pure-hearted of the human species. The less corrupted the person, the more powerful the Prowler spawned from it became.

This was the task before them.

Finding a suitable corpse, while an unpleasant task, was the easiest part -after a suitable vessel of life was found, it must be molded - a task taking Sophie and Greg all of 24 days to do - and finally, hardest of all, it must be awoken.

Normally the awakening was performed by a Monarch, but in absence of a 3-metre tall spider, the only way awakening could be achieved by a human was through using an emulator to create an electrical current strong enough to -literally - wake the dead. At least, that was the theory.

"We've waited long enough, Sophie. Come on!"

Checking the Prowler was connected to the emulator, Sophie flicked all 17 of the great contraption's switches to "on".

At first, nothing happened. Then there was a deep, rich hum, causing the entire structure to vibrate.

Instantly the Intruders surrounded the building. They must have sensed the disturbance.

With the emulator at full power now, it would only take one minute to reincarnate the Prowler, but it was clear that this was going to be the longest minute of his life. Vile, beetle-like monsters, the Intruders bored into the steel with jaws like jackhammers, creating an unnerving wrenching sound.

"30 seconds left," stated Sophie. Her voice quivered as the emulator sent high-voltage sparks flying across the floor.

10....9....8....

Overhead, the massive flying Behemoths drifted leisurely but alarmingly towards the observatory. The distinctive whirring of their iridescent beetle wings was deafening. Emerging from the enormous jaws were huge, grotesque globs of goo, splattering and smearing the entire structure with a corrosive and destructive layer of acidic spores.

7, 6, 5, 4...

With an ear-disintegrating screech, the grand observatory began to collapse under the multiple assaults of the Swarm and the electrical storm inside. Pieces of the ceiling rained down on the two like iron hail.

3,2,1,0..!

With a blinding flash, a thunderous bolt of lightning shot out from the emulator. The electricity so strong, the body was gripped in a seizure that lasted for eternity. But when the last current left the convulsing body, it remained lifeless.

All hope lost. The Professor had died for nothing. They'd soon be the most famous fourteen year olds – only they'd be dead.

“No use!” Sophie screamed. “Run!”

But just as the Behemoths began to descend into the observatory, the mutilated figure that was once Mrs. Pulna jerked to life. The air sacks on its flanks began to inflate as the eight tentacles unraveled and elongated, stretching like it had just awoken from a deep sleep. Greg could not believe his eyes as the two mallet-like claws began to swing around, gnashing at the air.

Is this the hope of Tartarus II?

Without warning, a green aura radiated from the Prowler. Emitting a horrific, unearthly hollow roar as the great beast rose high above the operating bed. The sonic-sounding clicks that followed caused the frenzied Swarm to pause in confusion. Gawking longingly as their quarry scurried away, they could only screech at the new reborn.

Who was this that dared to defy the Order?

In reply, the Prowler let out a dominating roar, and the angry swarm backed down.

The thing turned towards him.

Transfixed by its haunting gaze, it merely stared back at him. Then, it winked. Just a twinkle from the corner of its repulsive green pustule of an eye. What? It was just like the wink that Mrs. Pulna used to give him when he snuck onto her lawn to play, plying him with cookies after.

Towering before them, this alien beating the heart of Mrs. Pulna – the last hope of Tartarus II.