

I: Metallic Revenant

Spathi held his breath and listened as the footsteps of the prison guards made their cruel rounds to each dimly-lit cell. Holding the air in his lungs, every muscle in his body tensed and quivered...then he silently exhaled. Littered with old scars, soot, and grime, he anxiously felt the port the Goenans had surgically implanted in his arm where his elbow bent. How many forced blood injections had he endured from syringes? How much blood had he lost? With fingers twitching, he stroked the port's circular metal orifice, sensing every abrasion against the steel hole and the bruised flesh swollen around it, feeling every tiny mark, every callus, focusing on something—anything other than pain or darkness.

Or oppression.

His eyes darted outside the thick bars of his door towards the opposite cell, at a woman seated cross-legged. He recalled them bringing her to Goena a good while back, two Enpherom: a man and a woman. The man had been hauled to a distant part of the prison while she was thrown into the cell directly in front of Spathi. She certainly wasn't of the Rinyox tribe. Spathi had remembered the mural of the Jyodem in Enerbiez's crypt in Ixod. Some had survived after all. Long, straight hair draped down just past her breasts and down to her shoulder blades, the locks white as snow. Her toned skin was gray with the texture of her joints pink with scabbed wrinkles. Soft grooves outlined her small yet tight muscles as if armored plating bulged just beneath her flesh, a unique trait of the Enpherom humans. In the scant light, her scornful eyes glared at Spathi with pink irises and sclerae of light-purple. Her weapons and bone armor had been confiscated by the guards, leaving only the remnants of her sleeveless torn button-up brown shirt and the knitted rags of salvaged denim and leather adorning her firm upper thighs and broad, jagged hips. Her prominent legs seemed almost too long for her buxom torso. She was freezing, yet she had fought the guards with such fervor, cursing the Drixiles and Drixilacs with every expletive in the Enpherom language, no doubt. She didn't mind cursing Spathi either, or giving him the occasional middle finger for staring.

The guards' footsteps grew closer. Spathi tensed more.

He held his breath again, listening and shifting his gaze to the right of his cell. The dungeon's sounds waded in and out with the inconsistent cacophony of other tortured prisoners and the steely bludgeoning of the guards' bians, those unforgiving hard whips, against torn flesh. He had heard all sorts of snark, vitriol, and other crass lingo from both the guards and from crazed prisoners far off. Yet, he no longer could discern whether the

inmates where sobbing in utter anguish or howling in hoarse, hysterical laughter. He exhaled again. Breathe. He had to remember to breathe. Someone had told him that some time ago, yet he failed to recall whom. He had forgotten many things.

Amnesia.

That damned amnesia still afflicted him.

But he also remembered some things. Some memory came back, including the manifestation of new ones: Raktogin, Prister Yethomi's military, New Neva...Constanvol...and the deal.

The deal!

Spathi's eyes widened at the bleak, shadowy ceiling of his cell. The deal. Yes, the bribe Emperor Gyeno had offered him, the hope that kept Spathi alive.

The hope...that never came.

Spathi scowled. There was no bribe. He had to face the reality. Yet he needed *something* to distract him from the prisons of Goena and its baleful Drixile inhabitants, even if it was a delusion. Something had to detract from his failure...and from Drixilo's recent emergence on Raktogin. The devil had finally arrived: the demon host.

He felt his scars, mended only to be ripped back open again, many of which were from that flesh cloak, the one Malroc "bestowed" upon him, the one that betrayed him, leaving him for dead and taking Roxus's flaming sword with it. Bestowed. The word sickened Spathi. Nothing was ever truly a gift; everything he had ever received always had strings attached, unsolicited boons with unwarranted consequences to bite into him for the remainder of existence itself. Surely, he wasn't the only one. That was "life." Either that or the slowest damned way to die.

Again.

But apparently life was precious. Something still made Spathi yearn to see...her again. He recalled the smell of earth...and her perfumed dead roses.

Where had she gone? Where had those Udenthen highways taken her?

Where?

He glanced at the Enpherom woman again, then let out a despondent sigh.

Maybe she was dead. Maybe she was possessed once again. Maybe she had simply vanished into thin air, like a dream, a mist doomed to merely dissipate. The speculation was maddening—he had to know for sure! He breathed in and out frantically, hearing the guards draw closer. He gulped, then gulped again, trying to steady his breathing.

Breathe. Remember to breathe.

Who had told him that? It was driving him insane.

Everything was insane—even time!

What was time in this place? How long had he languished here? Did days even exist anymore? Months? Or had eternity set in at last, driving all chronology into one meaningless, linear blur of shit?

Days.... There were no days.

Or weeks, months.

Or years....

But there was still morning, noon, and night. And the sun still loathed Spathi—its rays just *inching* to hate his flesh right off his bones! He knew the sun was still there...as well as the moon. He knew, because Spathi was more than just a prisoner.

He was a lab rat.

On certain “days” of his imprisonment, after enduring a heaping, violent dose of the prison guards “Goenan mercy,” Spathi would be led out of his cell in shackles by Drixiles and the lobotomized Drixilac soldiers to certain areas of Gyeno’s “conditioning facilities.” But not without a fight. Each time his cell door opened, Spathi seized the opportunity for escape—punching and wrestling out into the hallway...only to be beaten more and shocked by electric prods before being wrapped in metal cables. Once captured and subdued by the sneering guards, Spathi would peer out the corridors’ tinted windows to catch glimpses of Goena’s capital polis.

What remained of “civilization.”

The city was always garbed in arctic sheets of ice and peculiar shards of jagged glass, forming and slithering through the frost like the dorsal spines of viscous dragons beneath the thick snow. Often times, the sun would exude a halo with two parhelions, sundogs, one on each side of the brilliant ring shining through the crystal haze. On some days, the halos would display an extravagant symmetrical array of multiple curved iridescent lines, its scalding, remorseless majesty greatly juxtaposed with the grim, shadowy skyline of the glacial dystopia. Goena’s crimson banners flew all too proudly in the wind, whether in blizzards or brisk winds on cloudless days, with larger ones draping the façades of ostentatious government buildings. Cameos of Gyeno’s wretched face was hewn just about everywhere, ranging from a spectrum of various sizes and materials. The buildings themselves were ornate yet hi-tech, featuring compact neighborhoods of rather dingy brutalist apartments and living quarters. Some of the entrances were a crude and vain combination of lavish voussoirs and paifangs. Many of the double-eaved hip roofs consisted of black terracotta tiles of imbrices and tegulae with some constructed with rotundas supported by colonnades of fluted columns; each roof’s curled corner was tipped with a wing-like acroterion. Different shrines and tholoi, each with images of a grinning Gyeno seated within, had immolated offerings placed on decorative altars in

front of each idol. Meanwhile, advanced military vehicles patrolled the iced streets, vehicles very similar to what Prister's army utilized but much sleeker with no improvised modifications. Around each tholos's altar, Gyeno's bald disciples in red robes worshiped his image; some of the lesser "Gyenos" levitated a few feet off the ground in meditation, each disciple surrounded by the faint glow of an intricate star tetrahedron constructed of runes of light. They were nothing more than petty magicians, pompous wizards and witches seeking solace in elaborate nonsense disguised as "illumination" while pampering the "sacred self." During their meditations in the snow, some of their geometric cages would generate blinding flashes, causing Spathi to remember Stelford, the bitter goggled soldier who had claimed to have almost lost his sight.

The one that was impaled by Drixilo in the Imperial Core.

So much for *that* poor bastard....

In the distance, two other smaller cities sat at the horizon, visible only in fair weather. A well-fortified garrison encircled the capital, fashioned from the remains of a massive, tall bridge and derelict overpasses once joining it. Armored checkpoints, guard booths, and spotlights were built into the heavy walls with ramparts of soldiers keeping watch, allowing cargo vehicles and military cruisers in and out of the city. Tangled above the bridge's ruined pinnacles, Spathi could see him: the accursed feathered spider dragon, that bird demon.

Eregatho.

The Royal Arm of Goena.

The demon had spun a messy molten web and hung in the air on its huge threads facing Goena's outskirts, watching for any movement with his six sunken owl eyes. Spathi could see the monster's corrugated underbelly shimmer in the day and in the city's spotlights in the snowy night. But Spathi observed other webs in the distance, with...smaller Eregathos.

The bird demon...could reproduce? How?

On days when it did not snow, Spathi could catch glimpses of the citizens, consisting of some Enpherom, mostly Rinyox, and many deserters of Prister's army. He even could have sworn he witnessed a few Vauphec in the streets! Even in such frigid temperatures, none of them wore jackets or armors, unlike the soldiers. They were only clad in nothing but sandals and white robes, men, women, and children. How were they not freezing to death? Like Gyeno's military Drixilacs, Spathi could also see each forehead with an orange blinking light on the right side, bored into their frontal lobes, the so-called "reptilian brain" forever defused and modified. Their free will was permanently replaced by Gyeno's constricting despotism disguised as independence and liberty. Such irony. Spathi was tempted to believe he had more freedom confined in his prison cell with his

mind scarred than the citizens of the unified “world government” prancing around with wide, vacuous smiles through the streets, held captive without prison bars. Spathi’s mind may have been broken and been through literal hell. But it was still his, thoughts, nightmares, negative emotions, and all. It still belonged to him. It still worked somehow.

The citizens, on the other hand, didn’t have to worry at all. “Government” would take “good care” of them. They wouldn’t have to suffer the “tyranny” of genuine emotions, the “slavery” of having to think for themselves, or the “horrors” of self-awareness. No, Gyeno and his diplomats had that all covered for them. Pitiful. Utterly pitiful. They were lost. Yet it didn’t seem to faze Spathi much. Perhaps prison had successfully desensitized him. The world had gone to shit, after all. But there was one thing Spathi did *not* see in the skies.

Drixilo, that airborne damnation. That bloodied hurricane, where was it?

Where *was* he? Where was the devil?

And where were the Arczells? Where the hell were the angels?

But that question was *far* too old to even ask anymore, let alone demand an answer to it. After all, Spathi was just another hopeless prisoner...and a lab rat.

An unusually *prized* lab rat.

Upon leaving his cell to pass the city of brainwashed Drixilacs, Spathi would enter the subterranean conditioning facilities and undergo the “trials.” Each chamber was an absurd and garish obstacle course of sorts: serrated mazes filled with spring-loaded spikes, hallways rigged with myriad booby traps, and amphitheater arenas filled with demonic elementals the Drixiles dubbed “animi.” Such entities were unseen evil spirits assuming forms on Raktogin’s material plane by manipulating and existing within natural phenomena or synthetic designs. Each animus Gyeno would deploy manifested in forms of either liquid metal, petroleum, or glass. The emperor would even boldly provide Spathi with an arsenal of Drixilian weapons imbued with magic to combat these animi, ranging from daos, axes, spathas, guandaos, war hammers, and even scythes. The Drixiles would always observe from a good, safe distance, some taking notes on clipboards and electronic tablets. Gyeno attended each session seated on a throne, clad in a crimson robe, the hood always veiling his smug face with his long wavy silver hair cascading down his royal armor.

Standing next to the emperor, a female figure draped in a cloak—presumably a Fallen—would also watch Spathi flounder hopelessly in the trials. Her four wings were almost always folded around her, each feather seemingly made of pewter. A few locks of her hair poked just outside of her silky hood.

Red hair.

Very red hair....

But what infuriated Spathi the most about the trials was that each one provided a chance for escape. A door was always left wide open at the end of each obstacle course, blowing frigid air and snow and yawning out into the arctic wastes of Goena, a seeming reward for completing the trial. Yet, each time Spathi bolted for the door, Gyeno's metal floor would come to life like living mercury and engulf him, then carry him back to the prison guards. Even worse, Gyeno would not allow Spathi to die. If he were mortally wounded in the trials in any way, a Drixile would come to infuse him with either red or black blood, just enough to heal him. During such fatal encounters, that strange light would appear from Spathi's forehead, but it was nowhere near as brilliant as it was in New Neva's Imperial Core, however long ago that was. Yet, it caused the demons no less revulsion of the bizarre glow. The times Spathi teetered on death were innumerable. After each day's tests, Spathi would be placed back in his cell, injected with more blood to sate his hunger, and left to lie on the cold metal floor of the dark prison.

But upon completing each trial, Gyeno's conceited telepathic voice would burn in Spathi's mind, reminding him of his alleged "promise."

Tests, trials, then back to the dungeon. Rinse and repeat.

Goena was one immense mechanism, and Spathi was part of its machine.

For how long, he could not determine. Time had lost all meaning.

Everything had lost all meaning.

Well...*almost* everything....

Spathi eyed the Enpherom woman again, then at the sound of the approaching guards. She also looked, gritting her teeth in fury. Spathi tensed even more as metal clacked in the adjacent cell to his right. The guards bickered amongst themselves.

"Why didn't they just leave this thing to rot in that hole?" a bald Drixilac questioned.

"That's above your paygrade," the Drixile captain in red armor jeered.

"But why not at least put it in the lab?" the bald Drixilac pressed. "It's just an...arm."

"And we will, grunt. Soon enough," another Drixile with shaggy hair assured. "Gyeno's orders. Best not to ask questions."

"Yes, sir," the Drixilac conceded.

Spathi twitched and bolted to his feet as chains and more steely noises clangored in the nearby cell. One of the Drixiles, with ashen skin, turned and noticed Spathi.

"Well, if it isn't ol' Sucky," the ashen Drixile sneered in a deep, staticky voice through his respirator, rattling his bian back and forth menacingly against the door's bars. "Rise and shine, worm. Care to give us yet another one of your awkward clown shows in the amphitheater today?"

"I wouldn't want you bastards to do without," Spathi spat.

“How kind of you,” the Drixile disparaged.

“Wow, ol’ Sucky finally managed to develop an attitude *and* a sense of humor!” the other Drixile barked. “Must be too evolved.”

“Must be a shame to be a glorified janitor like yourself,” Spathi huffed. “Gyeno has all the fun while you do his dirty work down here? That’s just mediocre. I pity you.”

“Oh, really, now?” the Drixile mocked, ceasing his clattering against the bars. “You, the zoo animal, pity *me*?”

“That’s right,” Spathi said. “You will never amount to royal status. *I’m* a celebrity around here. You even bothered to give me a stage name. I pity you. I pity all of you.”

All of the jailers turned to him, glowering. Spathi glanced at the door’s lock, readying his feet and flexing his calve muscles.

“You’re nobody,” Spathi said grinning. “And you always will be. You’ll never be like Gyeno or any of the other royals.” He turned to the bald Drixilac. “That’s above *all* your paygrades. Is that the reaction you were looki—?”

Bang! Clash!

The portcullis cell door lock clacked as the nearby Drixile unlocked the door with one of the many keys on his large ring. As the gate slid upward, the Drixile stomped in, growled, and swung his bian. Spathi ducked and clutched the demon’s fist, rammed him against the cell wall—and jabbed the bian through his respirator and skull!

Air hissed from the busted mask’s hoses as blood gushed from the demon’s face. Spathi bit into the ashen Drixile’s neck and drank as the other guards surrounded and bludgeoned. Spathi took the bian and deflected their spears and maces. The dead Drixile disintegrated, leaving the husk of his armor and crushed respirator behind. As he fought, Spathi’s foot slipped on the demon’s dissolving blood. The other guards pummeled him, snatching the bian from his hand. From the other side of the hallway, the Enpherom woman shouted at Spathi in her language. The Drixiles beat Spathi harder as his ears rang, everything growing darker.

“Unzelkoyte!” the woman shrieked.

The guards halted, then turned to the woman. Fervently, she wrung her hands around the bars of her cell door, glaring at the jailers. The shaggy-haired Drixile turned and raised his weapon again, but the bald Drixilac caught his arm.

“No—you know what happens if he nears death!” the bald guard said.

“I don’t care anymore!” the Drixile boomed. “That light will fizzle—it’s nothing—it’s just a pathetic trick to—!”

“Enough—stop it!” the red Drixile captain commanded. “His time will come. You’ll get your chance.”

The shaggy-haired guard snorted and reluctantly stepped aside.

Spathi wheezed on the floor.

The Drixile captain huffed through his respirator, then turned to the bald Drixilac. "Inject him before he falls unconscious. That's an order."

Spathi watched as the Drixilac stooped down and removed a vial of red blood from a pouch fastened on his armor. With his thumb, he pressed a button at one end of the vial, extending a needle from the other side like a writing pen. The other guards held Spathi down as the needle entered his arm port. Spathi writhed as the fluid permeated through him, burning his veins. There was something other than blood within it.

It had never burned like that before. Never!

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

The Drixilac finished as the other guards removed the deceased Drixile's armor from the cell and walked down the hall.

"Go and bring one of the vessels," the red Drixile guard told them. "He's too rabid today."

Spathi felt his cuts and bruises mend as he heard the shaggy Drixile snort again down the hall to his right. The portcullis gate to his cell closed, locking in place. He glared at the red Drixile captain, who had a dao drawn at him.

"You honestly style yourself as a 'celebrity,' blood-eater?" the demon captain chided, then shook his head. "If you truly think that...then *I pity you.*"

Spathi spit at his feet. The Drixile captain sheathed his weapon, then turned and roared at the Enpherom woman! She backed away as if blown down by hurricane winds, then yelled back in rage. With that, the Drixile captain stepped away towards where the other guards had departed.

Spathi groaned. The burning stopped. The ringing in his ears ceased. Slowly, he turned to face the Enpherom woman, sitting on her cell floor.

"Why did you say that?" Spathi questioned her.

The woman only glared at him with her pink irises.

"Why did you say 'Unzelkoyte?'" he demanded.

The woman spit at him, then flipped him off with her middle finger.

"Fine, whatever," Spathi growled. "To hell with you, too."

Spathi sat on the floor and sighed. The sounds of the dungeon had died down to the faint scuffling of feet and the distant arctic draft howling from somewhere outside. Then, chains rattled, right next to Spathi.

"Why did you say you were a 'celebrity?'" a male voice said in the adjacent right cell.

Spathi peered up at a small rectangular hole, a barred ventilation gap in the wall that met the ceiling, leading to the next cell. A faint green glow emanated from the lattice slits.

"Just to piss him off," Spathi said. "I'm not a *complete* idiot."

"Well...whatever," the other prisoner sighed.

Spathi raised an eyebrow. The man's voice sounded familiar.

"Did he say...something about an...arm?" Spathi asked.

"What?" the man said.

"The guard just now," Spathi explained. "He said something about putting an arm in the lab instead of putting it here."

The man sighed gutturally. "That's because I *am* just an arm. That's all that's left of me."

"What's your name?" Spathi asked.

"Don't worry about it," the man grumbled.

Spathi eyed the green glow again. A pale-green glow.

"Deven?" Spathi asked.

The chains jangled violently.

"Is that you?" Spathi said.

The chains stopped, then the man sighed. "Come closer, towards the vent."

Spathi got up and placed his back against the wall of the other man's cell. Cautiously, he approached the vent as if sneaking around a corner. His nose was right at the lattice, then he stopped.

"No, come closer," the man said. "I want to see your face."

Spathi raised his fingers to the lattice.

Shing!

Two fiery blades jutted from the bars! Spathi jumped back; the swords narrowly missed his fingers as the flames faintly singed his flesh.

"What are you trying to do?" Spathi barked.

"Trying to skewer your eyeballs, Spathi Ansdari!" the familiar male voice snarled.

"I thought you died, Deven!" Spathi growled. "Down in the Imperial Core!"

"Not yet," Deven, the prisoner Arczell, said. "I've been trapped in the Nevarifta all this time, then I was sent over here at Gyeno's request."

"Why are you trying to kill me?" Spathi argued.

"What part of, 'I've been trapped in the Nevarifta all this time' did you not understand?" Deven rebuked. "And when I get a hold of that wretched succubus for tearing me in half, I'll—!"

"It wasn't her who did that!" Spathi defended. "It was Zilan, and you know that!"

"Bah! I'll see to it that—!"

"You won't do anything, Deven."

"Says the one who failed to stop the ritual...and Drixilo."

Spathi started to speak but then watched Deven's ghostly face near the vent's bars. The angel's face had been reduced to an ethereal skull with ragged hair, white eyes, and a scarce outline of spectral flesh.

"Like what you see, Spathi?" Deven said.

"I've seen worse," Spathi scoffed. "So have you."

Deven's blades clacked maniacally at the bars like a giant pair of angry scissors.

"You'd better be glad I can't come in there," Deven blared, "or I'd—!"

"Will you shut up?" Spathi mocked. "You remember what happened the last time you stabbed me. You broke down in tears."

"Yeah, let's see what happens when I take your head off!"

Deven's feverish swords snipped and clanged louder, twisting and cutting, straining to reach Spathi's face.

"Yes—let's do, Deven! But you better try harder than that! Those chains won't break themselves!"

Deven groaned as his swords retracted back to his steely gauntlet arm, the only thing left of him. Spathi watched the angel revenant return and sink into the pale-green cyst, the rose-window pattern much more distorted than what he remembered.

"So..." Deven grunted, "I see we're back to hating each other."

"I'm not," Spathi said. "Won't do any good. Besides...."

Spathi reached into his trousers' pocket and pulled out the Drixile guard's large ring of keys. He held it up to the vent lattice. Deven's ghastly eyes widened.

"Look what I got," Spathi said.

Deven scoffed. "He already knows you have them. You know that, don't you?"

"Then why hasn't he taken them from me, Deven?" Spathi sneered.

"The same reason why he put me in the cell directly next to yours," Deven growled. "I'm beginning to see now. It's all part of Gyeno's plans. Do not think for one second you have the upper hand, Spathi Ansdari."

"A little late for that," Spathi said, then tossed the keyring up in the air and caught them. He put them back into his pocket. "And Drixile plans fail."

"Don't you *dare* talk to me about failure!" Deven rasped through clenched teeth.

"Go ahead and grind your ax against me, Deven," Spathi grumbled as a loud clangor sounded from the right hallway. "I'll get us out of here."

"I'll find my own way," Deven said. "Even if you *did* manage to escape, I *refuse* to go anywhere else with you. You're a traitor!"

"What did you call me?" Spathi blared.

"I know all about Gyeno's so-called 'bribe.' It's all part of his design. He's finally turned you."

“He didn’t turn me, you imbecile! I never accepted his bribe!”

Deven chuckled mordantly. “You have no idea what you’re dealing with. No concept at all. No. Clue. Whatsoever.”

As Spathi opened his mouth to speak again, the noise of the Goenan guards invaded the cold hallway again, along with more metallic clamor...and some disturbing whir. A mechanical hum.

Growing closer. And closer.

Chills ran over Spathi. He knew that whir, that haunting sound.

“Demons lie, Spathi,” Deven said.

“No shit!” Spathi sniped. “I didn’t accept—!”

“Shh! Shush!” Deven rebuked, now alert.

They approached, the red Drixile captain leading them. Hovering over the floor, a vertical metal fisk casket loomed, a demonic cocoon fashioned like a faceless robed corpse. Spathi stepped back. Even the Enpherom woman scampered all the way back to her cell in terror. She also knew what it was. Spathi tensed and felt the keys in his pocket, pondering what Deven had told him. The sarcophagus faced the portcullis door as the barred gate raised upward. Spathi’s eyes widened. The cocoon casket’s surface unhinged and separated into four symmetrical polygonal parts. He watched the sickening oily entity squirm within.

The thing emerged: a steaming animus of petroleum and black mercury!

Spathi stepped back as the horrific thing’s face yawned, screaming like a wraith. It lurched out and elongated like a viscid shadow, grabbing and constricting him, pulling him inside! Spathi wailed as the four sarcophagus panels shut on him.

“Enjoy the ride, ‘celebrity,’” the red Drixile sneered.

The oil animus gagged Spathi’s mouth, fastening him down into place. All he could hear were shrieks, laughter, and ghoulish groans. Spikes and quills seared his flesh with jabs. It was hell in a box! Spathi failed to struggle, only staring forward in the chaotic boiling darkness, fighting to focus on what to do next, straining to tune out the malevolent racket and trying to listen to his thoughts.

Focusing.

Focusing on his ace in the hole, still jingling in his trousers’ pocket.