

I: He Who Was Buried

Pain. Spectral blackness swam all around him.

Scars reduced his tattered flesh. His body was a useless hide wrapped over his angst-ridden bones. His eyes throbbed. Another throb bit into him. Jagged anguish pillaged his dying veins. With his sore eyes faintly open, he watched the golden embers of the void float around him in an aimless flurry. His numb skin disregarded the stings of the fiery flecks. His will departed into the astral darkness around him. The remainder of his energy disbursed to the feeble jerks of his limbs.

The fog of memory taunted him. He recalled only hot dirt and clashing steel.

Clashing...faded away.

Spasms of panic jolted the ruins of his anatomy. His muscles grayed and contorted beneath his torn skin. Lungs attempted desperately to pulsate with oxygen, yet breath's absence steadily proved irrelevant. He struggled against the toxic haze of his mind, reaching for the ephemeral sounds and sensations of recollection. Obscure images flickered like heat lightning, then unraveled into oblivion. Notions raged into the black hole of naught. The questions concerning his wounds lay abandoned. Logic forsook him. Thoughts crumbled away. He failed to conceive answers to cure the malice of his enigma. Unable to close his eyes, he continued on the black drift of that frontier. Anxiety waned as he embraced the grim caress of futility. He let go. Death infiltrated him.

The clashing metal briefly echoed again. Enigma and void converged.

Darkness. Uncertainty. Torment.

He felt another throb, then another. Agony remained. Agony became a cold comfort, a morbid security. He dwelled in nowhere with no one to bother and nothing to question. Another weak throb stung him.

He languished in cold space, one massive expanse with no gravity. The reality settled in his broken mind; he was a guest among gilded motes. Another throb ached and then came...warmth. Heat contrasted against his flesh. Waves of stings and throbs washed over him.

A pulse?

His eyes rolled towards a murky red silhouette whispering in an unclear voice. In the dark, ten crimson needles reached from the figure, pulling him in.

The red figure, who was it?

Who?

Before him, a hot blur burst open. Flames passed over him. Another pulsation ensued, a yearning to gasp. The black void around him morphed into a grainy dead end of bitter dirt. His nerves bit him alive with wretched convulsions. A sea of throbs stoked him. Anxiety became irritation. Rage. The prison of gravel became brittle to his flailing wrath.

Under the earth, he scraped his way upward. The ground that encased him simmered to a dark brown and abruptly boiled to a scalding bituminous muck. Pain throbbed inward, then outward—pain everywhere! His pawing hastened. Paranoia burned like fuel. The tar's scorching textures, the lack of oxygen, and anger was *all* mortifying. At the peak of the gelatinous hell, his fingers punctured the surface. He growled through grimy teeth and emerged from the burning ooze's torture. His arms came out, followed by his elbows and shoulders. From the roasting orifice of the earth, he burst forth, gasped, and bellowed a haunting screech toward the grid of the dark, smoggy heavens.

Free from the ground, he crept away from the burbling womb of ashes and tar. He slung his head back and forth, shaking the remnants of the smoldering bitumen from his frayed hair. Again, he screamed gutturally through the filthy lattice of his salivating teeth. Everything stung, burning.

So...much...burning!

Through the burning and throbbing, something cackled before him.

"Shee-shee-shee...shee...shee...hagh-hagh-hagh...hagh...hagh!"

The dry, wheezing titter of an old man mocked him.

On his belly, the corpse grunted and dragged himself towards the laugh. His eyes squinted at a hooded silhouette. Dusk's last light obscured some of the grisly form. The gruesome heckler wore a tattered red robe of mummified animal pelts studded with brown bones. His gnarled fist gripped a staff of black metal forged with crude effigies. Atop the man's crimson hood, a frayed straw hat rested embroidered with strange runes. Beneath the hood, his two sunken eyes glowed a sickly yellow, almost like candlelight. Underneath the eyes, a filthy grin twisted across his face. His teeth clicked, jittering the same cackle.

"Shee-shee-shee...shee...shee...hagh-hagh-hagh...hagh...hagh!"

The desert wind howled around them. The corpse flopped closer to the hooded one.

"Y...you..." the cadaver croaked.

"Yes," the hooded figure cawed. "*Do* come...clossser."

The corpse shambled faster to the hooded heckler. Another pair of eyes lurked on the hooded figure's shoulder, ghostly white eyes belonging to a black quilled bird creature with a vertebrate tail. Its fanged beak and nostrils emitted wisps of silver mist...then screeched!

The tone tolled in the cadaver's skull. His head throbbed even more.

The hooded man cackled again.

"Shee-shee-shee...shee...shee...hagh-hagh-hagh...hagh...hagh!"

The ragged man's gravelly laughter was atrocious, grating like wet rust.

"*Now* you're awake, dead one!" the man sneered.

"*To hell* with you!" the cadaver groaned.

"Shee-shee-shee...shee...shee...hagh-hagh-hagh...hagh...hagh!"

"Put me back, animal man!" the corpse snarled.

The ragged man crouched down and grinned. His quilled bird gurgled.

"No. Your slumbering ends, Spathi Ansdari."

The name pierced through the corpse's mind. The memory of the clashing steel flickered, then faded.

"What?" he sputtered.

"You shouldn't go back, Spathi," the animal man cackled. "Too dark down there, yes?"

"What is...Spathi?" the cadaver coughed.

"*What?* You don't even recall your own *name*?" the animal man jeered. "What *else* did you forget?"

Spathi Ansdari, the dead man, peered up. His bloodshot eyes showed only emptiness.

"You forgot...*everything*?" the animal man scoffed.

The quilled bird waffled a deep, whooping laughter. Spathi groaned. His groan became a growl, rising to a scream.

"Stop laughing!" Spathi yelled.

His own shout ached his bones, triggering a coughing fit. Each hack scorched his lungs, stinging his esophagus.

"Stop coughing!" the animal man crowed.

Spathi hacked more, then he subsided. He groaned again, squinting upward.

The polluted desert sky brought Spathi nausea. Thick cowls of dust slashed about in ghastly wails of hostile winds carrying the aromas of death and musty cinders. Past the dense brown smog, a network of luminous yellow lines erected across the unclear heavens measuring a seemingly infinite distance. Within each square space of the lattice, a gilded skeletal constellation of a dead reptilian entity spiraled amidst the light cage's bars. Each skeleton wrought their faint glow like moonlight, shrouded by storm clouds and ash. Beneath the grid, gray plateaus and needlelike precipices like massive, bony fingers twisted and pointed obliquely upward, almost as if the wastelands were blaming the corroded skies. The reality of such an abominable place shook Spathi to his broken bones.

The animal man clicked his browned teeth. His bird familiar blew more mist.

"He sinned against you, Spathi," the animal man said. "His prejudice is beyond redemption. He has fed you to the hounds of death. You *know* he did, don't you?"

"Who...?"

"Who?" the animal man mocked.

He slammed the black staff's end down on Spathi's chest with a dull, moist ping. Spathi yelped, squirming and gasping. The staff's crude designs wavered in his sight, decorated like a ghastly draconic female with elephant skulls severed symmetrically in two.

"*Who?* Why a bastard, of course! A hellion who holds disdain for you," the animal man rasped, pressing harder on the staff. "You don't remember him, either?"

"Whooo...?" Spathi moaned.

"I just *told* you!"

"Why should *I* care?" Spathi wheezed. "Put me—*akk!* Put me back...in the hole!"

The animal man's grin faded. He pointed a crooked finger at the small tar pit.

"You mean...*that* hole?" the animal man said.

Spathi clenched his teeth and inhaled hissing air. His wounds throbbed more.

The animal man sighed. "Well...you'll just die again."

"Then let...me...."

"I'll just pull you back out again, Spathi," the animal man grumbled. "And better *me* do it, too!"

"Damn! *Put* me—"

"Stop it! It's no good," the animal man snapped, surveying the desert. "This Raktogin world we dwell in, well...it isn't...what it used to be," he leaned into Spathi's face, "I offer you opportunity."

"Rak...to...togin?"

"I saved you so that the Drixiles wouldn't come for you," the animal man said. "You go back in that hole, and...well there's no telling what'll find you out in this desert. I raised you so that you can avenge yourself by killing the one who took your life. That's how this world works, vengeance...and then...."

"Then...what...?" Spathi sputtered.

"Then," the animal man said, "then you can die. Properly! So that you can go to the next life. That's how Raktogin works. At least...recently."

Spathi heaved breath, throbbing all over. Stings and burns riddled his flesh.

Spathi coughed, "There's...there're other ways...right?"

"Mmm...nope. Sorry, Spathi," the animal man sneered. "Rules are rules."

Spathi scowled up at him.

The animal man squinted at Spathi.

"What? I don't make the rules, I just try to live by them," the animal man rebuked. "That's what *I* do in these parts, call the dead to redemption, got it?"

"Why?"

"For justice."

"*My* justice?"

The animal man glared him down. "For. Justice."

"Why me...?" Spathi sputtered. "Why did you...choose...me...?"

"What? *You?*" the animal man crowed. "Why any? Don't you be thinkin' *you're* anything special, Ansdari—you're not the first dead one I've pulled out of the dirt. Shee-shee-shee...shee...shee.... And you definitely won't be the *last* one, either."

"What are you?" Spathi asked.

"Never mind that!" the animal man croaked. "Instead...."

He took his dragon staff and knocked Spathi's head over. Spathi peered at aerial blackness, a distant storm of thick smoke and jagged flame spouts. Orange flashes arced through the cloud. Below, a pillar of brown dust plumed into the smog tempest. At the dust's nexus, tiny specks scaled the dunes, a soundless stampede of monstrosities.

"You should mind *that*, though. See that horde of rippers over there? I told you about those demons, didn't I, Spathi Ansdari? Those Drixiles?"

Terror clutched Spathi. The hateful tempo of throbbing wounds increased. The blackened quilled bird grumbled unclear syllables.

"The—the sinner!" Spathi stammered. "W-what is...his name?"

"He that killed you? That'd be...Constanvol. A demon baron."

"Constanvol?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Where?"

"Don't know right now. *You* must seek him, Spathi! I can't hunt him for you."

The animal man observed the cloud. Spathi groaned. The throbbing worsened.

"Get going, will you?" the animal man scolded. "That ripper horde is coming! Stop wastin' time!"

"I can't!" Spathi screamed.

"Why?"

"Ahhh!"

Frenetic anguish plagued Spathi. His ears rang, his head feeling as though splitting in two. The animal man chanted dark syllables; his eyes blazed with geometric yellow lightning and fire that stretched to a mighty, horizontal width. His withered hand pulsed with cosmic fury.

Pulsing...pulsing...pulsing.

The incantation grew into a rancorous crescendo. Nefarious sounds blared in Spathi's ears and deafened him of his thoughts. All became a manic chorus of hollow bells and chiming glass shards. Horrific visions besieged his mind as gilded snake spirits thrust their spectral fangs into his neck. The venom of the reptilian ghosts prickled Spathi's veins with such heat, it seemed glacial. The inner pandemonium overmastered his thoughts. His futile yells rang and rattled through the acoustics of the night.

Spathi shut his eyes, teeth gritted. The lightning cleaved his face in half, tearing from scalp to chin, then peeled down his neck and sternum. A void manifested within Spathi's cadaverous shell. Underneath, his entrails imploded into an unforgiving maelstrom. His abdominal muscles skittered; astral spiders marched unseen within him. The fire flayed his flesh of unknown yore from his frame. His throat constricted to a taut cylinder, his chest thrumming with deep, otherworldly chords. Blood churned and ran back through the deltas of his veins. His anatomy converted into a cosmological ecosystem, euphoric with spectral stimulation. All became a shrill inhalation within his skull. Pain and relief

mingled. Nausea reigned inside. Then the sickness diminished, leaving only a prickle in his stomach.

The prickle became an itch; the throbbing changed tune.

Spathi heard the drum of a heartbeat: his.

Wind keened around him. Smoke whipped around his body, then wisped away into the desert gusts. A mass of slender things separated from Spathi, compelled by individual drive. The pain ebbed. Everything hushed. His eyes opened. The cool breeze brushed over him.

“Get up!” the animal man squawked.

Gravity released him. Spathi winced. His knees bent up. The hips followed as his vertebrae arched toward the sky. Feet became level. He breathed without his lungs inflamed, yet a faint throb still lingered in his veins.

He relaxed his jaw, then closed his lips. His joints moved and popped. Strange grooves were cut into his renewed tan flesh. For a moment, he admired his restored carcass. Then he noticed a leathery strap...wriggling beneath his forearm. He jerked his arm and saw more of the things, rust-colored strands coiling around him.

“W-what *is* this?” Spathi snapped.

More strands squirmed onto his back. Something chittered in his ear. The tendrils of jerky reached into the flesh grooves. A convulsion overtook Spathi. Frenzied, he tugged at the leathery mass. Each tendril had beaks and small mouths, squealing.

The strands squealed—the accursed things, they squealed!

The bird whooped mockingly, ruffling its quills.

Spathi grunted. The writhing things entered the scars, locking into his new flesh. Spines mercilessly bored into his backbone; he screamed as each spike drilled into his vertebrae one by one. More of the strands found their place all over him and unified into a single garment of jerky. The tendrils implanted themselves around the back of his head, down his back, in his arms, and into his shins and feet. The straps anguished him, then the pain slowly ceased. Spathi growled and yanked desperately at the chattering parasite.

“Settle that down, imbecile!” the animal man growled. “You didn’t mind it being on you just a minute ago!”

“On me? What the *hell* did you do?”

“It is a cloak of your filthy flesh!” the animal man grumbled. “It won’t harm you!”

“Flesh?” Spathi snarled. “My...dead skin?”

“Dead. And yet alive, like you,” the animal man barked. “Old flesh is utility, Ansdari. Remember by whom this boon is bestowed upon you.”

“Boon?” Spathi spat.

“Get going!” the animal man snapped. “Search for Constanvol, and then you can crawl into any hole you please!”

“Where do I look, then?” Spathi grumbled. “Tell me.”

“Try nearby!” the animal man crowed, pointing to the ruins in the distance. “Check the cities, the skyscrapers! Check every nook and cranny. Tear down anyone who gets in your way! I’ll check on your progress later. Make haste!”

“Where are *you* going?” Spathi demanded.

“Make haste! Go now!”

“Why can’t you tell me *now*?”

“Make! *Haste!*” The animal man shouted.

His hooded form bristled with lightning. Spathi shielded his face. A blast of energy ripped around him! The lightning vanished. Spathi gazed at the serpentine bolt’s vivid departure beneath the desert horizon.

“Wretch!” Spathi blared.

He glared at the cloak and pulled at some of the straps again.

The cloak only clung to his back even tighter and tremored. Some of the ropy strands wrapped around his limbs, forming gauntlets on his arms and crude greaves on his legs. Some twisted around his chest, shaping into an external rib cage armor. Both halves of his skull’s old drooping flesh had been melded into the cloak, fashioned into two disturbing shoulder plates; the split jaw elongated down the jerky of his old deltoid muscles.

Around his waist, an old belt held up his filthy black trousers, the legs torn away at the knees. His black hair tumbled down to his shoulders. Carefully, his fingers felt where the cloak fused around the back of his jaw and neck.

“Boon...?” he scoffed at the cloak. “Insanity....”

Spathi surveyed the desert more closely. The last sliver of the pathetic sun slouched below the horizon of the corrupt landscape inviting nightfall in the wasteland. At the horizon, the decrepit sunlight reflected increasingly less yellowish and more dark-orange on the brown sky’s strange web of quadrilateral sections and draconic bone spirals. In the distant skyline, corroded towers and skyscrapers jutted here and there, each leaning in various directions; some were propped against each other. The frames of rusty carts sat halfway buried in the sand, some with four doors with mechanisms mangled in the front compartments of the vehicles. Four metal wheels peeked out from the dirt. On the left side of each vehicle, a small steering wheel of ragged leather protruded from the interior panel in front of each old driver’s seat. The vehicles were like steel carriages but much sleeker and far more advanced. Spathi drew closer to one of the rusted frames and felt some of the machine’s components. The texture of such coarse grit summoned something within him. He closed his eyes...then images flickered before him.

A ticking clock tolled. Soldiers in silvery armor rode horses and carried swords and crossbows; others on foot loaded flintlock rifles by the muzzles. The smell of oil from lanterns burned in a sweltering blacksmith’s shop, then a barracks came into view, reeking of gunpowder, hay, and manure. Flames blazed next to mirrors being used as spotlights in watchtowers in a mountain stronghold and in lighthouses near some ocean. A fire gun spewed flaming bitumen from a wooden warship. Carts, catapults, and cannons

fired from a tall brick rampart, guarding towers of stone and cathedrals adorned with angelic statues and elaborate stained glass.

Spathi shook and opened his eyes!

The images faded. Breathing heavily, he strained to conjure the images again but failed. Where had he seen the fortress? Where were these things? Was it a memory? Was it a vision? Was it anything? He looked at the cart where his fingers touched the rusted gears. Though its design of the four doors was foreign to him, Spathi somehow knew it was some sort of cart but with far better technology than the ancient things had in his vision just now.

He looked at the cities in the distance, at the skyscrapers.

Skyscrapers. That was what the animal man had called them. Yet these monolithic cage-like ruins were unlike the ornate towers during his brief vision.

He recalled the words of the animal man: *this Raktogin world we dwell in, well...it isn't...what it used to be.*

"Raktogin," Spathi grunted. "Constanvol...."

A dull boom echoed to his right.

The ground shook.

He turned and glared. The storm and the Drixiles drew closer.

"I'll find you," he said. "I'll find the—will you *stop* it?"

He tugged at the tendrils yet again. The cloak growled, refusing to release him. Spathi grumbled and sighed. At least the pain subsided. He licked his front teeth...and felt six strong fangs, extraordinarily sharp. Four jutted from his top jaw, two from the bottom.

Did he have them...earlier?

He looked up at a dune above him. Among the disheveled masses of metal vehicle frames and ragged skyscrapers' foundations, ancient structures of a baroque design protruded out from the sand. Smashed pillars and an eroded stairway vanished into the hill. Such an aged structure seemed so...out of place.

Very out of place indeed.

An abrupt flash caught Spathi's view above. Behind the sand hill, beams of blue spotlights aimed at the brown smog and shone from the black skyline of towers that were equipped with slender cannons. Heavy clacks, mechanical whirring, and hollow alarms blared on the other side of the dune. Motorized pistons and turbines thrummed in the distance, yet they were unlike the ticking clock during his fleeting vision. These engines roared much louder, more powerful.

Sets of twin beams of faint yellow light peeked over the dunes, piercing the dust. The shouts of men approached. Gunfire rattled hastily beyond the dune. Bullets with a blue glow zipped over the hills towards the demons and pelted the dirt. Spathi ducked, narrowly dodging the projectiles.

"What is that?" Spathi sputtered.

He looked up at the approaching light beams, then at the galloping rippers, the demon horde in the smog storm. The stampede's infernal haze whirled closer and closer, generated by hundreds of clawed feet. Spathi clenched his jaw, showing his fangs. The two armies raced, about to sandwich him. The advancing clamor of battle's violent orchestra tremored the ground beneath him. He gulped and crawled up the decorative stairs and the dune. The prickling feeling in his stomach only grew stronger. The small gastric sting lingered inside him, an urge he failed to comprehend, an itch he could not scratch. An obnoxious pull irritated him there, a bizarre sensation pulling harder.

Demanding.

Spathi grunted. He scanned the desert wastes again and tensed.

Raktogin, the strange and confusing deathscape, stretched before him, offering a crude trial by combat. Whatever that vision was earlier, finding Constanvol should definitely evoke some sort of answer. Even more so, here was a second chance to prove himself worthy of a proper death, to pass on back to the void.

Perhaps there was something *better* than the void.

Or worse.