

## I: Flayers' Stirrings

Lightning snapped! Fire flickered! Steel clashed!

Spathi, Staea, and Deven all ricocheted away from Id-Zix's luminous draconic bulk atop the stark gray mesa. The crisp midnight air of the desert canyons lashed around, chilling the sweaty flesh of Spathi and Staea as Endylius, the moonlike star, above bathed the desolate, wind-scarred ravines and plateaus in soft platinum light. Surrounding Endylius, the iridescent halo and paraselenae were steadily fading due to the lofty cirrus clouds moving away towards the Southeast. Huffing, Spathi glared the ghostly emperor down; the desert's serenity was short-lived.

Not surprising.

Id-Zix stood several yards away, still disguised as "Camacoatl." Tilled ruts had formed in the rocky slabs around his reptilian digitigrade feet where Spathi, Staea, and Deven had pushed him back during the melee. The brawl had lasted for what seemed like hours, with the emperor's ethereal form wearing fresh lacerations where the edges of supernatural steel had found their marks. Id-Zix grunted, favoring his wounds, the scars oozing badly with an infernal black ichor. Spathi couldn't help but smirk. The emperor was actually dying at last. To see *demons* suffer for once was truly a rare delicacy, one to be immensely savored.

*Snap! Pop!*

Tendrils of voltage snaked across Spathi's skin again. He winced and banged his possessed dadao sword against a stone, stymieing some of the electric discharge. Defeana, the Fallen revenant trapped within the blade's opaline cysts, let out another gravelly, vengeful cry, determined to fry Spathi to pieces. The maggots within his veins reacted to the Fallen's energy, gnawing more fervently, more awake.

Id-Zix uttered a hoarse chuckle. "Running on empty?" He stomped a few steps towards them. "If I don't kill you...they will. All of you."

Spathi raised an eyebrow.

They?

"They know you and your band of patsies are here," Id-Zix sputtered. "All I have to do is perturb them, and they'll—"

"Why don't you keep bluffing?" Deven, the Arczell revenant, said. He raised one of his two phantom swords at the fallen emperor. "We're too far south for them."

"Them' *who*?" Spathi growled through the electric havoc.

*Boom.*

A dull rumble sounded beneath their feet.

"See?" Id-Zix gurgled, flashing a bloodied grin. "They're coming."

Spathi's eyes widened, then glared at Deven. The angel stared back at him.

"We're. Too. Far. South. For them." Deven repeated sternly.

"For what?" Spathi growled. "Tell me right—"

Id-Zix roared and lunged! Spathi and Staea blitz him. Deven somersaulted.

Then jammed his two phantom swords into his torso, carving. Carving madly!

Id-Zix wailed!

Spathi and Staea sliced each side of the emperor's Udenthen bulk, severing his wings and his legs. Ghostly Drixile fluid spewed and sizzled everywhere as Spathi strained against the Ravaged maggots inside him, straining against the rabid temptation to quench his bloodthirst with the emperor's fetid essence. The last thing he needed was for the Drixile to inexplicably possess him or anyone else, whether through his wanton blood-eating or through any other means.

Id-Zix had to die. He had to make sure this time.

Once and for all!

"Move!" Deven yelled.

Staea failed to listen. Her natural ire for incubi seized her as she leaped into the air with Chauvien, the holy Selebane spear.

*Shing!*

With one clean swipe, Id-Zix's head came clean off, his mortified head shattering like cosmic glass. Deven waved them away from Id-Zix's dying ghost. Spathi turned. The body writhed in death throes with the sickening muscle memory of a rattlesnake. Then it pulsated, flaring, becoming unstable.

Fracturing.

"Staea, c'mon!" Spathi shouted.

She spat at Id-Zix's feet, then turned and followed Spathi and Deven. The gilded energy keened as yellow flames and embers sprayed.

*Boom!*

The wriggling draconic spirit exploded like a ceramic effigy. Bone and ethereal flesh scattered like shrapnel before disintegrating into embers. Spathi watched as two of the crystal skulls once orbiting Id-Zix screamed and bolted through the sky, fragmenting. Then they arced downward like falling stars.

Into the other side of the canyon's cliffs.

*Boom! Blam!*

The distant rocks crashed, causing a rockslide into the ravine below. Spathi, Staea, and Deven skidded to a halt, cringing at the thought of the rocks crushing the caravan below. More dull booms resounded as the stone beneath their feet quaked.

Then it subsided, followed by the frantic din of the Enoshah-Enpherom resistance far below.

"Damn it!" Staea hissed.

"Great," Spathi growled, looking towards the crater where Id-Zix once stood. "Now the resistance think *we* did it."

All three of them breathed heavily, staring at the smoldering hole.

"Is he dead this time?" Spathi snapped.

Deven nodded. "Yes. Yes, he's eliminated." He looked around. "Finally got the wretch this time. Finally...."

"How can you be so sure?" Staea huffed.

"When an evil spirit splinters into shards like that," Deven explained, "they don't come back. No regeneration, no reincarnation, nothing." The angel shuddered. "Just oblivion."

Spathi looked around, then noticed where the two fiery skulls had collided. Multiple holes and cavitation where something had excavated showed under the weathered gray rock, resembling the interior of a demolished ant hill. Chills ran down his spine.

They? Them?

"What did you mean by 'We're too far south' just a minute ago?" Spathi said.

Deven exhaled through his nostrils. "Id-Zix was referring to Kelvoc's territory. It's several miles north of here." He gestured one of his swords to the nearby ruins. "This is the site where the holy city of Frus Kylea once stood. An earthquake engulfed it centuries ago. But he was bluffing about the rippers. Kelvoc's kind has never burrowed through here."

"Until now," Staea said, pointing at the cavitation in the cliffs.

Deven turned and glared at the rocks.

"You sure you're not slipping, Deven?" Spathi said.

"That's impossible!" Deven said. "Those over there must be the remains of...something else—I can't sense anything over—!"

*Boom.*

The ground rumbled again, stronger this time. They all peered down, then Spathi and Staea glowered at the angel. Deven shook his head.

"Something must be meddling with me here," Deven said, looking around. "Why can't I sense them? Why would they be here? Why now?"

"The Ravage," Spathi postulated.

They turned to him.

"Could the Ravage have caused them to migrate?" Spathi said, looking at Staea. "Did they expand their 'territory' during these past five years? Do you know?"

Staea shook her head, stupefied by the question.

*Boom.*

The distant sound of howling echoed far off. All three of them turned, watching the dark silhouettes of Enoshah and Enpherom sprinting towards them, all rifles aimed in their direction.

Spathi growled at the incoming troops. "That wasn't us, you—*ow!*"

*Snap! Pop!*

Spathi fell to his knees as tendrils of Defeana's voltage scathed his flesh more and more. He grunted, then yelped with smoke wisping from his skin. Gritting her teeth, Staea stood over him—and jabbed Chauvien into the dadao's blade. Defeana's spirit shrieked within from the holy energy of the spear...then her lightning dwindled.

"Let me crack the bitch open!" Staea snarled. "I'll send her back to hell too!"

"If this sword breaks," Spathi said, wincing and rising to his feet, "she might...possess you again."

"Well, there's gotta be a way!" Staea protested.

"I'll try to keep her at bay," Deven said, his revenant retracting into the metal gauntlet still fused on Spathi's left shoulder blade. "But don't expect flying colors out of me."

"Do what...you can." Spathi panted.

He and Staea turned and squinted at the arriving squad of soldiers. He recognized some of them: Aipha, Rand, Jalusa...and Prister, with his crossbow aimed at Spathi's head.

"Thought you died," Prister barked.

"I know, right?" Spathi smarted. "Must be so disappointing."

"The hell's with the rockslide?" Prister blasted.

"Wasn't us, jackass," Staea spat, turning her gaze to the smoldering crater.

The soldiers lowered their weapons.

"We need to get out of this canyon," Spathi said. "Now!"

"Why? What for?" Rand retorted.

"It's not safe here," Spathi said.

"*Nowhere* on Raktogin is safe!" Prister argued. "No point in leavin'!"

Jalusa looked at the ground pensively. Focusing.

"What's goin' on?" Aipha said, then she turned to Jalusa. "And why haven't you been detained along with Alehi?"

"We'll deal with that later," Prister grumbled, then he eyed Spathi. "As for *you*—"

"Shh!" Jalusa hushed.

"We need to mobilize the caravan and leave—right now," Spathi urged. "It's too dangerous here!"

"Oh, I see." Prister squinted harder at Spathi. "The guy who conspires with deserters from *my* regime wants to command *my* soldiers to—"

"Shh—just listen!" Jalusa snapped.

They all stood still. Then the Enpherom woman stooped and laid down, pressing her ear to the stone ground. Her pink eyes widened.

"I hear...scratching," she said. "Squealing. Howling." She sat up and rose to her feet. "Rocks crushing. Rising upward."

"I don't hear anything." Rand said.

*Boom.... Boom.... Boom, boom, boom.*

"Back up. Back up!" Prister yelled.

All of them staggered backwards, spreading out, their weapons aimed at the igneous rock beneath their feet.

Cracking. Crunching.

*Boom! Boom! Boom!*

The ground detonated!

Holes erupted in numerous places all over the canyon and plateaus in geysers of rock and dust. Out from the debris, rippers of various sizes rushed out like an angry hive with ungodly agility, some vaulting several feet into the air like oversized fleas; many of their forms were very similar to Kelvoc himself.

And were almost as huge!

Like their other Drixile brethren, the rippers were at last infected with the Ravage. Each one had been rendered skinless, their exposed muscle tissue and jaundiced ligaments weeping with a black ichor that seemed to slither around their bodies like an animated muck; the maggots bathed and reveled in its putrid, stringy rivulets.

Black ichor. Like Gyeno's nullifying lodestone.

The soldiers turned and shot at the invading hordes while the entire canyon roared in a hollow cacophony of raw firepower: bullets, missiles, and cannons, all hailing upward at the Drixiles and their burrows in incandescent volleys. Prister, Jalusa, Rand, and Aipha turned and opened fire at the stampeding fiends. Staea ran at the demons, cleaving each one down with Chauvien's brilliant strokes. Spathi cringed and fulminated at the sky as Defeana's electricity railed all around him. Skin blistered, burning. Burning all the way down to his bones, down into his soul! He stared the ripper horde down.

And raged forward!

Bolting through the demonic throngs in bolts of lightning!

Voltage rampaged all around the rippers as the world around Spathi rang like blaring bells, melding with Defeana's wild shrieking. The maggots rallied inside his flesh. Waves of devil gore sloshed away in Spathi's swath, splitting ripper bodies to pieces with each electric, razor-sharp strike of the dadao. He was a thunderstorm, a mad hatchet from hell, hacking, severing through them in fluorescent lunacy atop the plateau.

Then he plunged straight down its steep slope!

Like a comet, Spathi lashed through the climbing ripper hordes, the small ones, the hulking ones, and everything in between. Yet, Defeana was moving too fast to allow him to sup on their blood. He only caught a few gulps each time the rippers' diseased fluids splashed across his face. After zigzagging across the mesa's side, Spathi came to the grim realization.

He wasn't wielding the sword.

Defeana was wielding *him*.

*Boom!*

He landed in the valley amidst the caravan, growing weaker, sore. Depleted. His smoldering body was moving more sluggish as Defeana relinquished her lightning. He

scowled at the dadao's cyst, seeing the Fallen's shit-eating grin mocking him. The huge rippers circled him and aimed their bony fins at his throat. Spathi fell to his knees. The gunfire suddenly ceased as a massive, distinguished bellow reverberated from the ruins of a nearby cathedral's belfry.

Spathi looked up at a foreboding, monstrous form, standing at the belltower's top.

"Lay down your weapons!" the monster snarled. "Or watch your children die slowly before you!"

"Deven, do something," Spathi grunted.

"I can't," Deven wheezed. "She's...she's too strong."

Defeana chuckled inside of the dadao.

"You...bitch," Spathi spat at the sword.

"Me? No," Defeana sneered. "*Payback's* a bitch. I suggest you eat it!"

Spathi looked around at the caravan...and his eyes widened. The rippers were holding the survivors of the resistance hostage. On one of the dropship's terraces, he saw the two generals, Den Mautre and Jenaya Devral, amongst the other soldiers, all still clutching their guns. All around him, he saw the mutilated corpses of the fallen Enoshah and Enpherom. Spathi glared at the rippers. Bastards. The rippers had outnumbered them. The valley swarmed with the gaunt Drixiles, crowding the slopes so much that the crags appeared to be alive, moving around with appendages, clicking, chittering, and squealing.

The figure from the belfry came into view. Spathi squinted...and discerned the diabolic shape. The Dranixile of the rippers.

Kelvoc. The Flay Sire.

"Trespassers!" Kelvoc's front maw yelled.

"Yes, trespassers, in our domain!" the back mouth snarled.

The rippers went in an uproar, then quieted.

"But one of their scents stands out from all the others," the front snout barked.

"Yes, brother," the back maw concurred. "One of them is different from these others. Very different."

Spathi glared harder as Kelvoc pointed directly at him, singling him out.

"Spathi Ansdari!" Kelvoc's two mouths proclaimed.

The rippers emitted another din, all facing him. With a mighty lunge, Kelvoc leapt into the air — and landed several yards away, quaking the earth with his bulk. Spathi eyed the Flay Sire with disgust; the demon's form was even more vomitous than before.

The Ravage had bestowed Kelvoc with a grisly upgrade to his former physique. Each spine now curled like small antelope horns. His sharp elk antlers now slithered and bobbed, resembling spiked centipedes. The brothers' faces were skeletal, the flesh having mostly rotted away. From the scalp, the silver mane of scraggly hair was stained with fresh red blood. The orbits of Kelvoc's chameleon-like eyes were reduced to bony spheres ignited like candlewicks. Spathi's stomach curdled; the archdemon's gaze reminded him

all too much of Malroc's drooping, ghostly sockets. Yellow maggots steadily dribbled from slender pores within their exposed muscles. His two large bone blades were hinged along his primate forearms and were now lined with small, palpitating proboscises wrapped in the gruesome lattice of veins and ligaments. His whiplike tail swayed behind him like barbed wire while his cloven hoofs emanated with a red-hot glow, scorching the ground where his unguigrade legs lumbered. Spathi shook his head. He once thought the Flay Sire couldn't get any uglier.

Until now.

"Lay down your weapons!" Kelvoc repeated.

"Well, if it isn't the Shit Brothers again!" Spathi growled.

Kelvoc bellowed his foul breath at Spathi.

"Don't piss 'im off!" Mautre rasped.

"Why not?" Spathi snapped.

"Because they've got the medical ward pinned, idiot!" Mautre spat.

"It's where the majority of the women, children, and elderly are," Devral said.

Spathi looked at a huge landship several yards off, right next to Kelvoc. The rippers were crawling all over the rig, itching to murder all inside.

"There's way too many of them," Devral said. "I don't know why they're doing this. It's not like rippers to slow down."

"They're sadists," Mautre grumbled. "The Ravage is makin' 'em take their sick kicks to the next level is all." He looked at her. "They're gonna kill us anyway."

"Not if I give myself up," Spathi said.

"You're crazy," Mautre scoffed.

Spathi glanced up at him soberly...and winked. Mautre shook his head while Devral looked at the medical ship, struggling to stymie her anxiety.

Spathi looked at Kelvoc. "It's *me* you want, isn't it? You want a rematch."

"The blood-eater must die!" Kelvoc's back snout yelled.

"But he must receive a special destruction, brother," the front maw snorted. "Spathi cannot die like the others."

"Sure he can," Spathi smarted, "and who better to do the honors than the big, bad Flay Sire himself?"

"What?" Deven coughed. "What are y—?"

"Shh!" Spathi whispered. "Trust me."

Deven grumbled inaudible things while Spathi scowled at Kelvoc, feeling Defeana's unforgiving electricity course through him again in consistent pulses. The Ravage only synergized with the Fallen's increasing wrath, the maggots responding with vindictive glee. Spathi's glare tightened so hard, his face throbbed.

He was so done with this shit!

With arms outstretched, Spathi proceeded towards Kelvoc.

"Make way!" Kelvoc's front snout blew.

The rippers complied without question and parted, making a path for Spathi and the wretched Flay Sire. Kelvoc pounced with the speed of lightning and landed with the dull noise of crushing rocks beneath him and started towards his quarry. All Spathi could hope for was to kill the Dranixile leader and induce an abrupt power vacuum amongst the other rippers.

Induce...anarchy. Confusion.

"Make any sudden movements," Kelvoc's front maw began.

"And your friends will be ground meat," Kelvoc's back mouth finished.

Spathi stood before the Flay Sire. "I got a proposition for you."

"Do you, now?" Kelvoc's front jaws snapped.

Spathi cocked his head. "Don't you want...the *other* blood-eater too?"

"Yes! You reek of her!" Kelvoc's front mouth blurted.

"I can help you find her," Spathi said. "Then, you can kill *both* of us."

"Bring her here," the back maw commanded.

Spathi shook his head. "Can't do that. Not down on the ground. Need a high vantage point."

"What a bunch of loud smoke!" the back mouth sneered.

"You rely on your sense of smell a lot, don't you?" Spathi said. He glanced at a distant monolith and pointed. "From up there, I can find her, and you can smell her out without all the scent of gunpowder and blood down here to mask her odor."

"Then why would we need you?" the front snout growled.

"Because you can't find her with scent alone," Spathi said. "I have to perform a ritual on a high place to pinpoint her location."

"We can find her!" the back maw retorted.

Spathi shook his head. "If sense of smell was all you needed, you would've found her by now. She's skilled at stealth. She's no ordinary prey. As a blood-eater myself, *I* know she's nearby, but I don't know her exact location unless you heed my advice. Take me up to that pinnacle, the one I'm pointing to, and we can find her together." Spathi smirked. "And Drixilo will reward you for your efforts."

One of Kelvoc's chameleon eyes shifted to the back maw. "What say you, brother?" the front mouth said.

"We don't need him!" the rear snout roared. "We will sniff her out."

"I cannot smell her, brother!" the front maw argued. "Neither can you!"

Both the Flay Sire siblings debated amongst themselves. During their exchange, one of the hatches on one of the cruisers creaked open, revealing an incapacitated Enoshah soldier. Two obscured figures, a redheaded Enoshah soldier and an Enpherom man with short white hair, crept out from the cramped brig, armed with sniper rifles. From the stained-glass cyst in the metal gauntlet on Spathi's back, Deven's weary revenant silently watched them escape.

Alehi. And Tawpa.



"The court martial'll have to wait," Alehi mocked the unconscious guard.

"Keep out of sight," Tawpa said.

"Yeah, yeah," Alehi bickered. He looked at Kelvoc. "The hell?"

"Spathi's lost his mind!" Tawpa rasped.

Alehi squinted and shook his head, then he turned to Tawpa. "Just get into position. Get ready."

Both gunmen split up and slowly skulked in the shadows amidst the cruiser's deck, trying to find a hidden perch, hoping that the rippers were too focused on their master to notice them. As the two slinked around, Spathi gulped, feeling the cool desert wind briskly lash around him. The two conjoined Dranixile brothers snorted at each other, their quibbling subsiding.

Then they both eyed Spathi. Menacingly.

"Move, and they die," Kelvoc's front snout admonished.

Spathi gulped again as the archdemon loomed over him. The front maw opened—and gripped Spathi in his jowls, then toted him off like a dog retrieving a shot bird. Spathi winced, feeling Kelvoc's slimy, rancid gums and sharp teeth press against his skin. He looked and saw where the two ripper brothers were taking him.

To the base of the monolith.

Kelvoc's two throats thrummed with the nauseating noise of anger and phlegm.

"You had best be right, blood-eater," Kelvoc's rear mouth snarled. "No tricks!" He looked to the lesser rippers. "If they move, kill them!"

The Flay Sire's subordinates emitted a roaring chorus of chitters and howls, then they tensed their muscles, eyeing their mortal hostages in the canyon. Kelvoc's lanky limbs started up the narrow monolith as Spathi grunted, feeling the demon's serrated jaws steadily nicking him back and forth like the teeth of an oily saw. The further they ascended up the rocky pinnacle, the more Spathi regretted his half-baked plan. Part of him wasn't expecting the Flay Sire to be so...naïve. Yet, part of him believed that the two fused Drixiles were much shrewder than what they let on. Regardless, Spathi struggled to concoct the rest of his plan, whether it was to stall...or wait for some miraculous split-second opportunity. He cringed.

Not much of a plan. At all.

He was in deep. Balls-deep.

Teeth...digging deep. Deeper. Into his flesh.

Spathi felt something other than saliva running down his torso: blood. His blood. And maggots. He weakly peered up. They were almost to the top. The frigid desert wind whipped harder around them, blowing furiously in Spathi's ears. As Kelvoc continued to scale the monolith, Spathi peered down where he had left Staea and Prister. Amidst the army of rippers near the plume of smoke where Id-Zix's final grave lay, he made out a tiny glint on the plateau's top.

A teal and orange flame.

Spathi squinted.

Was it the general's crossbow?

He then turned his attention to the dark portions of the canyon just north of the caravan. The ruins of a city lay in shambles, bathed in the silvery light of the Endylius star above. A huge gash had been carved right through the massive ghost town from passing cruisers, war, weather, time, and wear and tear throughout the years. Rows of chain-link fencing crowned with rusty coils of razor wire was tangled up in various places of the ruins. Charred piles of lumber and toppled oxidized steel beams lay here and there, jutting out from heaps of busted concrete infested with gnarled rebar sticking out from the stone rubble like metal nightcrawlers forever petrified in place. Yet, something was peculiar about the corroded asphalt of the streets' remains; they were riddled with numerous cracked indentations, sunken craters.

Sinkholes?

"Here!" Kelvoc's back snout snarled.

Spathi looked around as the Flay Sire shimmied up on the pinnacle's narrow flat top. Carelessly, Kelvoc's front maw released Spathi, causing him to flop onto the stone, almost rolling off. He coughed and rose to his knees.

"Do the ritual!" Kelvoc's front mouth barked.

"You...smell her," Spathi grunted, favoring his puncture wounds, "don't you?"

"All I smell is *you!*" Kelvoc's front jaws retorted.

"As do I, brother," the back maw concurred.

Spathi looked back down—and immediately regretted it. They seemed to be at least half a mile in the sky! And Defeana wasn't making things any easier. Her unseen voltage still radiated through his sore flesh in dull electric hums. Deven did his best to bulwark her power, yet even the Arczell's strength was waning. Spathi steadily tightened his grip on the dadao's hilt and glanced at the sickening arteries in Kelvoc's throbbing neck, the only vital spot seemingly not covered in the thick carapace of his thorny exoskeleton.

"Do the ritual, pest!" Kelvoc's front snout blared.

"Yeah, alright," Spathi puffed from fatigue, still bleeding, "but first...I'll need something...in order to commence the ritual. But you're not...gonna like it."

"What?" Kelvoc's back mouth growled.

Spathi muscles slowly tensed, readying himself.

"In order...to do the ritual," Spathi explained, "I'll require...some of your blood."

"Do what?" Kelvoc yelled.

"She, like me...is a blood-eater," Spathi said. "If we are...to lure her out...we must...bait her...with the blood...of a Drixile," he squinted, "preferably...a high-ranking archdemon...like yourself."

"Oh..." Kelvoc's front mouth hissed. "I'm sure you do."

Both Kelvoc's maws uttered a low growl like monstrous dogs. The chameleon eyes squinted down at Spathi as the demon brothers' head neared him. Around the Flay Sire,

all the spines flexed, all tendons twitched. Then the two slender bony fins unfolded like swords, their small quill-like proboscises dripping with black mucus. Spathi gulped...and tensed harder.

The Flay Sire was calling his bluff.

*Blam!*

A distant gunshot resounded far below. An electric-blue bullet suddenly sliced through one of Kelvoc's bulbous eyes! Kelvoc wailed and staggered as black, maggoty blood splattered from his wound.

*Boom!*

Spathi stumbled and turned. A fiery bolt had been fired from the plateau, exploding against the monolith. Rocks crushed and popped far beneath them. The pinnacle cracked, shuddered...then tilted, away from the caravan.

Towards the ruined city below!

"Shit!" Spathi spat. "That damned, crazy asshole!"

Kelvoc swatted. Spathi deflected, then tackled Kelvoc as the two plummeted toward one of the craters in the streets. He saw the scar going down Kelvoc's entire body, the seam fusing the two brothers. Lightning surged all around Spathi, enabling him, imbuing him, driving him! At last, he embraced Defeana's cruel rage...and made it his own.

They were lightning. They were one.

*Shing!*

With a vicious strike, Spathi sliced Kelvoc in two! The dadao separated the brothers! Blood and maggots rained as the charged hot steel quickly cauterized the enormous gash. The brothers squealed as Spathi took off the head of the front brother—then zigzagged through his flesh, feasting upon his oily essence, losing himself in the blood-hunger! The puncture wounds slowly mended. As the front brother's butchered remains scattered in the air, the crazed rear brother grappled Spathi and gnashed at him, snapping at his head.

*Boom! Smash!*

Both of them rived the rocky street to pieces, falling through the hollowed-out portions of the stone networks beneath. Both Spathi and the remaining Kelvoc brother bowled through the freshly-carved ripper tunnels, then through old, sloping subways, through ruined sewers, sliding, rolling.

Into a yawning chasm.

Spathi jabbed Kelvoc in the neck. The demon wailed and released him. Impetuously, Spathi lunged and landed through a stained-glass window hewn into the cave's wall as Kelvoc fell into the gaping gorge below, howling. The scraping noise of his scrabbling claws faded along with his mournful howling. Spathi tumbled, splintering ancient wooden pews, stone pedestals, and finally rolling onto a dusty marble floor, his mind rattled from the brief skirmish. He looked around...and heard the sounds far above him. Bombs and gunfire resumed overhead as more rippers of all sizes scurried up to the surface through the tunnels ignoring him. Yet, their snarls seemed more agitated. He

even saw a few nipping and clawing at each other, fighting for dominance. He groaned with fatigue and relief.

He had instigated a power vacuum amongst them after all.

Maybe the resistance would survive....

Spathi tried to rise to his feet, yet he felt trapped, stuck in place. Paralyzed. His legs wouldn't work. Slowly, he felt enfeebled as a shrill ringing blared in his ears, the ringing of invisible energy. As his eyesight darkened, he glared at the floor. Then his eyes widened. As he slowly fell unconscious, he recognized the scarred marking on the floor.

A labyrinth.

The ringing in his ears subsided as the racket of the world whirred away. Spathi lay his head down on the cold marble floor, no longer able to struggle against the mysterious force, no longer able to resist.

To fight.

He succumbed. To darkness.

A darkness that was slowly changing.

To a dark-blue.