

PROLOG

ONE YEAR AGO

I felt the world around me bend and sway like the branches of a willow in a storm. Strange colors turned, misshapen geometries that couldn't possibly exist but somehow did, drifting like snowflakes, patterns within patterns within patterns. My vision brightened then dimmed, repeatedly, and in no perceptible rhythm.

Come...

A voice...where? I turned, the world kaleidoscoping.

Come to me...

The voice pulled me on. Come to me, *sons of Chaos*...

I followed the sound across a land of ever-changing design and color to a tower made of skulls, some human and some clearly not. I stretched out my hand to touch its walls, but my fingers passed through the bones as though through fog.

Not real.

A vision? A dream?

A nightmare, more like it. The thought came from deep inside.

Come... the voice called to me.

I gave in to the sound and drifted forward, through the wall of skulls and into the heart of the tower.

Shadows flickered within. As my eyes began to adjust to the gloom, I could make out a stairway of arm and leg bones that circled the inside wall, climbing into a deeper darkness, descending into murky, pulsating redness.

I drifted down, and the redness resolved into a circle of torches and five men. Four of them wore finely wrought silvered chain mail of a design I had never seen before. They held down the limbs of the fifth man, who lay spread-eagled on a huge sacrificial altar, a single immense slab of gray marble threaded with intricate patterns of gold. His chest and stomach had been opened and his entrails spread across the altar as though some augur had been reading the future from them. When the victim shuddered suddenly, I realized the men were holding him down because he was still alive.

I reached instinctively for my sword. In any other time or place I would have rushed them, decency and honor commanding me to try to rescue this poor victim. *Only he isn't real*, I told myself. This was some sort of vision, some kind of fever dream or premonition.

I forced myself closer, staring at the dying man, trying to see his face. Was it mine? Did this vision predict *my* fate?

No, I saw with some relief, it wasn't me on the altar. His eyes were a muddy brown; mine are blue as the sea. His hair was lighter than mine, his skin smoother. He was little more than a boy, I thought, maybe fourteen or fifteen years old;

"Who are you?" I whispered, half to myself.

The suffering victim turned his head in my direction.

"Help me," he mouthed. He seemed to be staring straight at me, as though he could see me.

I reached out for him, but my hand passed through his body and into the stone of the altar. Had I become some sort of ghost? A powerless creature forced to watch atrocities unfold around me, with no power to act?

I pulled my hand free. A mild tingling, like the return of blood after circulation had been cut off, shot through my fingers, but nothing else. I couldn't help him.

The young man turned his head away. He shuddered again, but though tears rolled down his cheeks, he did not cry out. Brave and strong, I gave him that.

"Have courage," I whispered.

He did not reply, but his body began to shake and his eyes rolled back in his head.

Again that wild, uncontrollable rage surged inside me. Why was I here? Why was I having this vision? What could it possibly mean?

I looked at the soldiers, searching their faces for an explanation and suddenly I realized they were not human. Their slitted eyes glowed a faint red behind their helms. Nasals and cheek guards concealed most of their features, but could not hide the faintly iridescent pattern of scales around their mouths and chins. I had never seen their like before. They must have the blood of serpents in their veins, I thought, to kill one so young in such a horrible manner.

The victim on the slab gave one last convulsive shudder, then lay still. They released him.

“Lord Zon,” one of the soldiers croaked.

Something stirred in the darker shadows by the far wall. Slitted eyes, much larger than the soldiers’ and set a foot apart, opened, then blinked twice. As the creature shifted, torchlight glinted off its metallic-gray scales and the sharp talons of its four spindly limbs.

I felt a sudden chill, a blind panic that made me want to run screaming from this tower. Yet I steeled myself and held firm in my place, facing it, knowing this to be a true enemy—the enemy of all men.

Yes, it said. The creature did not speak, but I heard the rumble of its words clearly in my head.

“He is dead.”

Bring me the other son of Dworkin.

A shock of recognition went through me. *Dworkin!* I knew that name. But it had been such a very long time since I had seen him....

Calmly, two of the serpent-soldiers turned and left the tower through a doorway set deep in the shadows. The remaining pair pulled the young man off the slab and dragged him to a small hole in the floor. They rolled him into it, and he plunged into darkness. I did not hear him hit the bottom.

A moment later the other two returned, half carrying, half dragging another man between them, this one older than the one who had just died. He wore the tattered remains of a military

uniform, but I did not recognize the design, and his face and hands were bruised and dirty. Still he bucked and fought, kicking and biting, struggling frantically to free himself. He almost threw off the serpent-soldiers several times; he was strong and determined not to be taken easily.

Instinctively, my hand sought my sword again. I wished I had the power to help him. But I remembered how my hand had passed through the body of the last victim and knew I could do nothing but watch.

The two soldiers who had disposed of the young man's body rushed forward, and together the four of them managed to heave the newcomer up onto the altar's slab. All four leaned on his limbs heavily, holding him down despite his valiant efforts to free himself.

The serpent-beast in the shadows stirred, immense scales sliding across the floor's stones. I heard a laugh that chilled my heart.

Son of Dworkin. You will help me now.

"Never!" the young man yelled. "You'll pay for this!" And he followed with a string of obscenities.

Then he raised his head defiantly, staring at the giant serpent, and the flickering torches revealed his features for the first time.

My features. For he had my face.

I could only gape. How was it possible? Was this nightmare some premonition of things to come? Would this Lord Zon capture me, drag me here, too, and read the future from my guts?

Drifting closer, like a phantom, I peered down at the man. I had to get a better look, had to know more about who he was and how he had gotten into this situation. If this really *was* some future vision of myself—

Fortunately neither the soldiers nor their serpent-master seemed aware of me. I might have been some spectral figure wandering through their nightmare world, unseen and unheard, forced to witness atrocities beyond all human suffering but unable to stop them.

And yet, I reminded myself, before his death, the first victim had seen me. How? What did it all mean?

As I continued to study the man with my face, I began to notice small differences between us. Like the boy before him, he had brown eyes to my blue. But despite our eye colors, there were many uncanny similarities between us. The high rise of our cheekbones, the shape of our noses and our ears...we could have been brothers.

Or father and son.

My father is already dead, I told myself. *This cannot possibly be him*. Could it?

No, my father would have been much, much older.

This man looked about my own age.

Tell me of Dworkin, the voice in my head commanded. *Where is he hiding? Where else has he spread his tainted blood?* I felt my heart leap. *Dworkin again*. What did my former teacher have to do with all of this?

The man on the slab spat at the creature, then declared, "I have never heard of Dworkin. Kill me and be done with it!"

Let *him go*, I thought desperately, dreading what might come next. *Whatever you are, you're looking for me, not him*. I'm *the one who knows Dworkin!*

The serpent-creature didn't hear me. Talons lashed out from the darkness, seized the man, and ripped his chest and stomach open like cheesecloth. I gasped, stunned. The prisoner screamed and kept screaming. With a quick motion, the creature pulled his entrails across the altar's slab like an offering to the dark gods.

Blood sprayed in the air and hung there, forming a cloud, a shifting pattern like the snowflakes of color outside the tower. But this pattern was different, somehow—I could see holes where it was incomplete, jagged, and somehow wrong.

Come to me...

The serpent-creature writhed, body undulating before the pattern in the air, working its foul sorcery. Rings of light burst from the floating droplets of blood, spreading out through the walls of the tower, disappearing into the greater void outside.

Come to me, *sons of Dworkin...*