



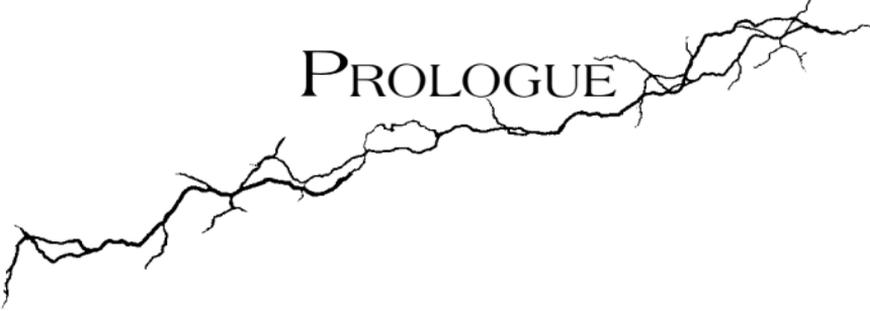
AMBER AND ASHES

the Dark Disciple

Volume 1

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PROLOGUE

The temple dedicated to his worship was located below the castle's walls and ramparts, below the towers and spires, below the great hall with its moldering tapestries, below even the dungeons. The noble family to whom this castle had once belonged had buried their honored dead in this subterranean vault in order to maintain the holy sanctity of death, to keep the tombs safe from grave robbers and worse.

The grave robbers came anyway.

Eons ago, the noble and long forgotten family was consumed in some noble and long forgotten war. With the castle abandoned, there was no one left to protect the dead. Although the vault had been dug deep and the stairs that led to it were hidden, those who have a nose for treasure were able to sniff it out. The robbers pried loose the marble slabs, carved with the likeness of noble lord and noble lady, from the tops of the tombs and tossed them, broken, to the floor. They stripped the ruby rings from bony fingers, lifted the golden circlets from grinning skulls, snatched up the diamond pendants, and carried away the bejeweled swords.

After the robbers came worse.

Reviled throughout Ansalon, those who embraced the worship of Chemosh, Lord of Death, were forced to hold their sacred rites and rituals in places hidden from public view. Temples dedicated to the worship of Chemosh were established in caves, catacombs, and basements, and it was rumored that there was one in the sewers of Palanthas. The choicest of all locales for the god's temple were those already dedicated to Death, for there the power of the god could be most keenly experienced. Local cemeteries were ideal, but these tended to be visible and were therefore often raided by local authorities seeking to eradicate the undead, thus making them dangerous places of worship for the clerics of Chemosh. The discovery of a family vault that was unknown to the rest of the world was an important find. Chemosh's followers did all they could to keep it safe and keep it secret.

Clad in their ceremonial black robes, their faces hidden by white skull masks—for these followers of Chemosh trusted no one, not even each other—the clerics of the Lord of Death performed the rituals that brought the bodies of the dead back to what they considered “life.” When they themselves died, the souls of these clerics were not free to join the River of Souls to the next stage of the wondrous journey. Having pledged their loyalty to the god in return for favors given to them while they were living, they were constrained by the god to remain in the world after death, forced to do his bidding, their mortal remains animated and ordered to guard temple or treasure and fight off invaders, their corpses dying over and over again, to be reanimated over and over again.

When the Age of Mortals came and Takhisis stole the world out from the other gods—including Chemosh—his clerics lost their power. No longer would skeletons rise at their command and take up arms in their fleshless hands to guard them against their foes. Some of the clerics burned their black robes and white masks and blended in with the neighbors. Others kept the faith, kept it safe and secret. Trusting that someday their god would return, they locked up the vaults, the tombs, and the crypts and

carried such secrets in their hearts. The living loyal to Chemosh bided their time, and so did the dead.

When Takhisis, Queen of Darkness, came seeking souls to fuel her return to the world, she could not locate many of those souls who were bound to Chemosh. Hidden in the darkness of undeath, they kept silent when she called, waiting for their master.

And now he was here, world found, treacherous Queen deposed and deceased. Chemosh was back, but he wasn't happy.

He stood in the family vault that had once been his temple, stood amidst the dust and the rat droppings and bits and pieces of dismembered bodies—a collar bone here, a shin bone there—and he looked at his followers, who were slowly making their shambling way out of dark corners or pulling themselves up out of coffins. His lip curled.

“What an ugly lot you are,” he told them. “And you stink, too. Stink to high heaven. I'm surprised I couldn't locate the world from your stench alone.”

The corpses didn't understand. They turned empty eye sockets in his direction and waited in tongueless silence for his command. As they stood, looking incredibly stupid, a finger bone dropped off one. Another lost its kneecap. An arm fell off another.

Chemosh frowned. A rat ran across his boot. He was so plunged in gloom that he didn't bother to kill it but let it go. The creature took refuge inside a skull, its tail sticking ludicrously out of the grinning mouth.

“There you stand, awaiting my commands. And just what am I supposed to tell you to do? Go out and recruit followers for my worship? Wait!” he commanded irritably. Some of the decaying bodies, having mistaken this for a command, were heading for the exit. “That wasn't an order, you brainless jumble of bones. I can imagine the sort of followers you are likely to bring me. Everyone is eager to worship a god whose devotees are in the last stages of rot.”

Chemosh glowered at them, then made a sudden, impatient

gesture. "Oh, go on! Get out of here. You turn my stomach. Go terrorize some village. With any luck," he added, as they clanked and clattered and shuffled their way out, dropping body parts all the way, "some holy cleric of Mishakal will find the lot of you and smash you to bits."

Chemosh sat on the lid of a sarcophagus and flicked a fragment of bone off the black velvet of his breeches.

"Where are the young, the strong, the beautiful?" he demanded. "Why don't they come to me? I'll tell you why." He cast a disgusted glance at the departing skeletons. "The young don't think of death. They think of life, of living, of joy and happiness, youth and beauty. Speak of Chemosh, and they laugh at the thought. 'Come back to talk to me of him when I am old and ugly,' they say. Those are the worshippers *I* attract—arthritic old geezers who haven't a tooth in their heads, cackling old crones who chant my name and wave black cats at me. Cats!" he muttered. "What do I want with cats?"

Chemosh kicked at the skull and sent it rolling. The rat went skittering off into a dusty corner. "What I want is youth, strength, power. Converts who come to me willingly, eagerly. Converts who will frequent my temples in broad daylight and proclaim that they are proud to worship me. That's what I want. That's what I need." His fist clenched. "To gain the seat of power in the heavens, that is what I must have."

He stood up and roved restlessly about the vault. "Sargonnas has his minotaur empire that grows larger every day. The namby-pamby Mishakal. How they adore her, all flocking to her worship with cries of 'Heal me, heal me!' How can I compete with that?"

He paused to brush strands of sticky cobweb from his black velvet coat. "Even Zeboim, that wanton trollop, has the heart of every sailor in the fleet. Me? I have large quantities of mold and mildew. And spiders. How can I become a king among the pantheon when the most intelligent of my followers are the maggots who feed off them?"

Chemosh wiped the dust from his hands, shook the dirt and bone fragments from his boots, and stalked out the broken-down door that led into the vault. He wound his way up the stairwell that led back to the surface, back to sunshine and fresh air.

“I am going to make changes,” he vowed. “Death will have a new face. A face with bright eyes and ruby lips.”

He emerged into the night and paused to gaze up at the stars, the newly formed constellations, the newly returned three moons. Chemosh smiled.

“Lips people will be dying to kiss.”