

PROLOGUE

The first thing he knew was everything.

He knew the form his consciousness had taken was the body of a devil, that he was capable of taking many forms, and that each was more powerful and destructive than the other in some way.

He knew the power guilt carried, and that the humans on Earth had only begun to toy with this great power. They were creating demons from that guilt, demons they couldn't see. Demons they couldn't resist.

Demons they couldn't stop.

In the first moment he was, he saw it all. The past stretched forever behind him, the future trailed off into eternity, and he saw every ecstatic and agonizing moment of it before he had taken his first breath.

He knew the one that created him was obligated to ignore him forever. In the same moment he had been made, he had been cast out. For the same reason he had been made, he had been cast out. In seeing it all, he saw there was no reason and no purpose to asking why. A million whys would be answered by a million silences, and he knew before he asked the silence would be too much to bear.

He knew his name was Roche, in that first moment.

In the next moment, he breathed in.

A darkness entered along with the breath, invading every part of him. His ecstatic vision of a moment ago was gathered up in the darkness and swept away with his breath. Everything he had just known was gone, replaced by a bottomless emptiness within him. Now he saw where he was, in a place of light and clouds. Although he had been made here, he did not belong here. He knew it like he had known everything a breath ago, as a certainty that knew no doubt.

Then he saw her.

She was like him, but different in every way. Her soul was pure and clear and empty, and on the rise. Her mind was without thought, without reason and without doubt. Even her name was the same as his, while being exactly the opposite of his.

"Ehcor," he murmured.

She turned, and the light shone forth from her. Lifting a hand to cover his eyes, Roche felt his skin soak up the blinding luminescence. The pain was almost too much to bear, yet his skin seemed to hunger for the light. While the pain soaked in, the hunger rose up to greet it; and as he stared through splayed fingers he saw her clearly within the brilliance.

Twisted in hate, her face moved to form the first words he had ever heard spoken. The words were thrown at him violently.

“You!” she cried. “You don’t belong here! You are cast out!”

Roche felt his own voice trying to burst forth. He listened to the whirling thoughts in his head that told him they were the same, that she was a part of him and he a part of her. While he hesitated, she acted.

Two bright hands of light burst forth from the cloud of brilliance enrobing her. She extended them toward him, hands bent at the wrists to show him her palms. A ball of light erupted from between them, and shot toward him. Roche felt his eyes go wide as it hit him, felt his arm thrown back over his head, and felt his body go skittering helplessly across the soft clouded floor.

Somehow he slipped over the side, or through what they had both been standing on, and Roche felt himself falling. Lights and sounds passed him as he fell, but he could find no way to grasp anything. His body began to spin as it descended, and his eyes rolled back in his head as Roche felt his consciousness slipping away from him.

CHAPTER 1

Just because it wasn't home didn't mean he couldn't learn to live here. The only home he had ever known was in a mind that would never think of him again, and he had to live somewhere.

Roche surveyed the landscape, and smiled for the first time.

He had come awake on a low hilltop, with gradual slopes rolling in every direction away from him. The land was nothing more than dirt, but the soil was streaked in blacks and browns and golds in a way that made it seem alive. Off in the distance he could see where the rise began again. Gradual at first, the soil became rock and the rock became a wall. The wall stretched up and out of sight, as did the similar vertical face far behind him.

Surely it met to form a stone ceiling overhead, but Roche couldn't make out its features for all the light shining down on him. Warm and invigorating, the light kissed his skin and put another smile on his face. He let his eyes wander the horizon once more, and spied a dark spot where the ground became wall.

Roche left his vantage point behind, moving forward over the packed dirt. He thrilled at the feel of the wind on his face, his feet against the ground, and the sweet pungent scent that entered his nostrils with every breath. The only other place he remembered had been odorless, the air itself without texture. In this place he could nearly taste the dirt as he strode across it.

Had he not been so caught up in the experience of being alive, Roche surely would have noticed the forms gathering behind him. First two came together, matching his pace; then three more fell into step with them, and moved along with him towards the dark spot in the distant rock face. When the last two caught up, a lone voice called out from the group.

"Ho there," the voice said. "I think you may be lost."

Roche stopped, and turned.

He watched them as they continued to move toward him, spreading out to form a loose circle around him. They looked like he did, sort of; yet there was some distinct difference he couldn't put his finger on.

While he glanced from one to the other, without turning to see them all, Roche heard one speak behind him.

“He looks like an old devil,” he said.

Roche whirled toward the new voice, only to hear another comment from one of the devils that was now behind him.

“Old and senile,” he said.

This time when Roche turned the last one that had spoken continued talking. He had gotten a glimpse of each of them, of their metal coverings and their array of weapons. Most of them carried a curved sword, with a dagger sheathed and hanging from their belted waists. Two had spears, and one hefted a club with metal spikes sticking out from every angle around the rounded thick end.

The one with the club was still speaking.

“Who else would wander around naked and alone, this deep in Hell?” he asked no one in particular. “Only a new devil or an old one that has lost his mind.”

One of the swordsmen nodded.

“Look at the size of him,” he said. “And those horns. He must be ancient. He probably lost his mind a long time ago.” Roche stood still, letting his eyes flit from one devil to the next as they passed the thread of comments. The next voice came from behind him, and he didn’t turn to see who it was.

“He’s got nothing,” the devil said. “And maybe he hasn’t lost his mind. Maybe he likes to battle bandits. We got nothing to gain by finding out.”

The armor they wore was finely wrought, contoured to each of their bodies to give their muscled torsos room to flex and move. A single piece of steel bent over each devil’s shoulders to cover their backs and chests by simply fitting it over their heads. From the waist down, they were covered in loin cloths that hung between their naked legs. Although they were a ragged band, with hair and beards that looked both unwashed and uncut, the armor lent a uniformity to the group.

That was not the difference between him and them that Roche couldn’t figure out. He was bigger than all of them, but a couple were near his size; yet somehow he could feel they were all the same in some way, some way in which he was different.

One of the largest of them was directly facing Roche. He had been doing much of the talking, and he leaned to one side to speak once more.

“Someone is scared,” he sneered.

He was looking past Roche when he said it, narrowing his eyes at the

devil that had expressed his doubts. After speaking, he let his eyes find each of the others in turn.

Roche sensed movement behind him.

"I'm not scared," the one behind him responded.

The words were followed by an audible gulp, and hesitant footfalls.

Roche felt a different internal response to this movement. Everything inside of him seemed to stand still, while his senses all became immediately and almost painfully heightened. He turned, to see what approached from behind. The turn was not rapid, or panicked; yet he could see that he was moving much faster than the devil as he brought his sword up over his head and stepped forward once more. Roche had time to cock his head curiously to the side, and narrow his eyes, before the curved blade began its arc toward him.

With no hurry to his movements, Roche easily moved aside and grabbed the devil's sword arm by the wrist as it passed harmlessly through the spot he had just been standing. The motion was punctuated by a loud cracking sound, and the devil howled in extended slow motion as he dropped the weapon. It had hardly fallen when Roche let go the devil's wrist and grasped it by the hilt. He swung the blade three times before his opponent could react with anything but a look of shocked surprise.

The first swing was awkward testament to the fact that he had never held a sword or seen one in action. It glanced off the devil's breastplate, driving him further off balance but doing no real harm. Stepping back and swinging again, Roche felt as though the blade had become an extension of his arm. He cut the devil just below the shoulder, and the appendage with the crushed wrist fell cleanly to the packed dirt at his feet. Before blood could flow, Roche swung the blade once more.

Another arm hit the ground with a thump, and Roche drifted back as the dark syrupy spray began to fountain from the devil's stumps. Purple wetness covered the soil, coloring it as it sunk in. It began to puddle immediately, in several small pools. When the devil made to take a step, still howling, he slipped in his own blood and pitched backward.

His head struck rock, and the devil fell silent.

Roche glanced at the others. A few were staring wide-eyed, but the rest were clearly seeing a challenge where those few saw danger. Two of the larger devils rushed forward; one from behind, the other from his right.

Whatever had slowed the world down or sped him up was still with him, and Roche imagined and discarded three possible ways to respond before he chose one and acted. He stepped forward, letting them crash

awkwardly into each other, spun to face them and brought their skulls together with a satisfying thunk. One went down, his eyes rolling back in his head; the other dropped to his knees and swung his spiked club at Roche's legs.

He let the blow land, curious what effect it would have. It nearly drove his legs out from under him, and the points of pain that dotted the larger concussive ache almost made him cry out. Roche held his ground, and pried the weapon from the devil's hand and then from his own leg. Bringing it down on its owner's skull, Roche watched the light go out of the devil's eyes as his body dropped lifelessly the rest of the way to the ground. He had stepped back again, to let the body fall; and he had stepped right between two others when he did.

Two blades were coming at him, and each bit into his torso in the same moment. First he felt the pain, and a fury rising within him; then another shift washed over him, and the scene stood nearly still.

Roche felt a thirst deep inside, a pure killing steak that wanted to turn his body from what he was to what it was. Part of him wanted to let it loose, and watch the cloud of darkness rain stark destruction on the remaining devils. Another part of him feared that transformation, and wondered if he could even make it happen if he wanted to.

The time he spent warring internally over whether to resist the impulse or surrender to it felt like a brief eternity to him. For the others, it was a passing moment; they remained nearly still, moving in exaggerated slow motion while he contemplated the choices he didn't know he had. The fury rising in him passed in that eternal moment, and Roche calmly spun in place. What felt like a measured response to him looked like a whirlwind blur to them, and their weapons were yanked painfully from their taloned hands.

He spun again, and the swords let go the flesh they had bitten to fly in opposite directions and clatter harmlessly outside the broken circle. By the time he stopped twirling the wounds were healed. Roche pushed the two devils away with a casual explosiveness, surprising himself with how far they sailed away from him. He saw the first that had fallen rising again, and saw the arms he had chopped off growing back slowly.

Roche dropped the spiked club and grasped the hilt of the curved sword with both hands. Some instinct within him told him what to do, and the next devil was already rushing at him. Roche let him come, swinging the sword with all his might at his charging adversary. The blade cut past the charge, between the devil's defenses and through his neck. His body took one more step before it fell and began gushing thick purple blood.

A moment later the devil's head rolled to a stop at Roche's feet, eyes vacant and unseeing. While the other wounded regained their feet and their limbs, the headless one stayed down.

They all came at him at once, and Roche found himself wondering if he would die should one take his head from his shoulders. The thought was fleeting, and was left behind as he stepped gingerly around the converging attack. One head after another fell behind him. By the time he returned to the place he had begun the thought, seven crimson corpses dotted the field. An equal number of heads lay lifeless in the dirt, streaks of purple describing the paths they had taken away from their bodies.

Roche felt time begin to settle into its previous slow pace, just as he saw another devil approaching from the distance. At first he saw every feature of the figure as it neared; giant legs pumping as he ran, he seemed to be moving at the same rapid speed Roche was watching in. As his perception slowed, the devil became a dark red blur streaking across the landscape.

Distant and thunderous, a rumbling sound punctuated by regular cracks seemed to be coming near at the same pace as the racing devil. The noise grew louder as the blur came closer, and Roche expected it to cease when the devil halted a dozen paces short of him. Rather than stop, the rhythmic rumbling continued to increase in volume.

The devil didn't seem to hear it at first. He looked at the carnage surrounding Roche, glared hatefully at him, and howled his rage to the sky. The roar was deafening, and Roche could feel his chest trembling with it. While he was being attacked by the smaller devils, Roche had briefly wondered for the first time whether or not he could be killed. Now he stared at a devil nearly twice the size of any of his previous opponents, and considered the possibility that he was about to get a very final answer to his earlier internal question.

When the devil's roar fell silent, he noticed the approaching sound at last. His face went from a mask of rage to a confusing mix of surprise and terror, and he began to lift his eyes to the sky.

In a startling blink, Roche was no longer looking at a devil. A deep scarlet winged serpent stood where the devil had just been, in a trench created by its halted descent. The ground trembled beneath Roche, while dust and rock and liquid devil rose into the air only to fall all around him. He stared at the creature, wondering why time had sped up at such an inopportune moment. All he wanted to do was run his eyes over the scaled torso, to examine the reptilian visage, and take in the wonder of this horrific killing machine.

“You’re a dragon,” he breathed.

Roche didn’t know how he knew the word, or how to register the flood of knowledge that accompanied the statement. He only knew the teeth and claws on the monster made the swords and spears the devils had carried look like so many playthings.

The dragon laughed, and Roche breathed out.

“I am a dragon,” she said, inclining her scaled snout.

Her voice was melodious and flinted at the same time, almost musical. Roche let the surprise show on his face for a moment, and she misread his expression.

“You didn’t know dragons can talk?” she said.

Roche shook his head.

“Actually, I did know that,” he said. “Somehow. But I’ve never met a dragon before, and I didn’t know a dragon’s voice could sound so...”

She interjected, impatiently.

“Normal?” she said. “Intelligible? What?”

Roche shrugged.

“I guess...” he paused. “Beautiful.”

A slight smile had settled on her lips while they talked, upturning the corners of her mouth. Roche had thought it was meant to be threatening, as it showed him a considerable number of teeth he couldn’t see when she spoke. Now he watched the line take a downward turn, and realized how threatening a dragon’s face could be. Her eyes narrowed to slits, and flashed with fire.

Then she laughed, the sound rolling over the field and echoing back to them from the distant walls and subterranean ceiling. Roche noticed a cruelty in it he hadn’t heard when she spoke, a sinister note that made him wish time would get on with slowing down again.

When she returned her eyes to his, the slight smile was back.

“The queen would see you,” she said.

Her voice had gone flat, as though she had deliberately tried to remove the musical tone. Now he could hear the cruelty in it. He shrugged his shoulders, to show her he didn’t know what she meant.

“Who?” he said.

The dragon’s body seemed to inflate, as she pulled in a deep labored breath. Roche remembered somehow that dragon fire was not to be trifled with, and had a good long moment to wonder if perhaps he was about to learn more details about that inner caution.

She sighed, and turned away.

“The queen of Hell,” she said. “She wants to know where you came from, why you arrived here, and why you began your visit with a killing spree. After you talk, maybe she’ll let me kill you.”

Roche had begun to approach her, mistaking the way she had positioned her body as an invitation to climb on and ride her. At her last words he stopped, and stared.

Pulling back her wings, the dragon leapt into the air in time with the first powerful down-thrust. That newly familiar loud cracking sound accompanied the motion, as did another blast of dust and rock. Roche was pushed away by the explosive takeoff, and staggered backward a few steps while the thunderous sound filled the air again. He heard her call out to him, barely.

“Try to keep up!” she cried.

The carefree lilting tone was back in her voice, and she was already a dwindling dot overhead. Roche took a good long look at the crimson and purple puddle of goo in the trench she had just vacated. He wondered, while he stared, what sort of creature might command a monster like that.

Roche began running.