

PROLOGUE

Dark, pagan heart of the occultist, ancient religions and practitioners of the blackest diabolism fester within the putrefying corpse of this world of dread. Seekers of power through congress with the most twisted hell-spawn find no shadow bathed merciful corner to crave solace from the consequences of their corrupt ambition. Devil priests plot as ancient prophecies foretell the coming of everlasting night and over-reaching fools hear not the warnings. Thus the hell dimensions, which teeter at the edge of the chasm of Hades as dark forces make a battlefield of the mountains, the plains and oceans. Their fate resting in the merciless hands of soulless beings brought forward in time from the ancient realms of long forgotten civilisations, released from their limbo by the blackest of magic. And through these beings shall flow rivers of the reddest blood, cleansing the populace in its deluge, washing away their sins and purifying their souls.

And two shall lead an army of the damned against an army of the damned. Two siblings, sisters of great age, ancient soulless remnants of a long forgotten world, 'The Witch Hunter' and 'The Daemon-Whore' shall they be forever known. And wherever their shadows shall bleed over the land, hell shall not be far behind.

(Translated from the original Icirik and taken from a passage of the scrolls of Randa Thoth. The Prophecy of Transition, the Death of Worlds.)

Ten thousand ages of the seven moons, in the dark and distant past when the medieval realm of Da' Kharis one of the infinite kingdoms of Hell were governed by a perverse brotherhood of sorcerer monks known collectively as 'The Mage.' They ruled the ancient world with impunity from their mysterious mist shrouded mountain citadel of 'Dark Soul.' Their grasp on power was absolute, their vengeful reach, infinite. None betrayed them, none defied them and none dared. Except that government by fear will inspire obedience in most and rebellion in some and strongly

motivated rebels can encourage defiance in others. Throughout the long terrible reign of 'The Mage' rebellions grew and were crushed, burrowed underground, emerged some little time later only to be pummelled into defeat once more until the long-standing rebellion found an unlikely leader. A member of 'The Mage' itself, a willing subservient to depravity and dark magic, a former priestess of their sinful church, a warrior sorceress by the name of Ryth'n Dar. Sister and lover to the leader of 'The Dark Brotherhood', the Lord High Abbott of 'The Church of Chaos,' Highest Priest of 'The Mage', some would know him as 'The Dark Messiah,' Dar' Muk, Mor' Ga Deeth.

Although the reasons for her betrayal were never fully known, Ryth'n Dar's treachery shook the very foundations of her brother's seat of power. Cruelly, she sacrificed her rebel followers as layer by layer she eroded 'The Mage' defences, working her way toward the throne of Mor' Ga Deeth. There followed one thousand days and nights of unrivalled bloodletting, trailing all the way to the streets of Dark Soul. An orgy of savage violence led to 'The Mage' forces being decimated before the angry rebellion. 'The Dark Messiah' was captured alive, tortured then crucified outside the walls of the city by the enraged mob. His eyes were burned out and his tongue removed, preventing him from uttering dark incantations. He was left to die as black clouds heralded the arrival of dark and mysterious thunderstorms, which raged overhead and speared the citadel with harsh torrential rain.

The survivors went about the unenviable task of counting the cost of their defiance, burying their dead and collecting together body parts in order to ascertain, which bloody limbs belonged with, which torso. And in the aftermath of their madness they neglected to realise that their dark benefactor, 'The Mage' Ryth'n Dar had mysteriously vanished.

Ten thousand ages later, the disciples of 'The Dark Brotherhood,' a priesthood of devoted slaves calling themselves 'The Followers of the Dark Path' search the ruins of the ancient world, seeking out remnants of an ancient forgotten magic. Scrolls and parchments written in a long dead tongue, which will bring forth, the Second Coming of their 'Dark Messiah' and with the resurrection of his ancient brotherhood, 'The Mage' will return to tread the realms of Da' Kharis beneath their feet once more.

CHAPTER I

A chill wind blew across the uneven flight of stone steps strewn with the long dead decaying corpses of ancient warriors. Their rotting bones splintered by sharp cruel weapons and headless bodies separated from their better halves by vicious battle axes and sword strikes. Discarded crumbling skulls intermittently decorated the steps, grinning insanely at some private joke only the dead could appreciate, the sightless eye-sockets eternally staring at the surrounding carnage and decay. The crowns of some of those skulls caved in or completely shattered within the frenzy of battle or as a final retribution for the crime of defiance. Long dried blood stained and discoloured the steps, caking in the wide cracks, which scarred the stone ascent. The blood had long turned to powder and blew like crimson dust across the stairwell. The very air itself hissed like a stale serpent's breath descending ominously from the dark summit of the long wide stairs. Mist snaked possessively around the discarded cadavers like spectral tentacles becoming denser the higher the steps climbed toward the lofty heights.

Muscular legs, cut and scarred, glistening with golden perspiration and smeared with blood ascended the stairwell one agonising step at a time. The solitary figure had already climbed halfway up the steep steps but the summit, shrouded in cloying blackness and a rolling wall of ever present mist appeared unreachable, yet the figure persevered. Discarding heavy chain-mail and cumbersome weapons the warrior climbed pushing onward through a barrier of fatigue and trepidation. Stepping over the abandoned dead, weary feet kicking the disembodied skulls aside or sending them skittering down the steps, their tumbling descent clattering against the cold cracked stone of the crooked stairwell, the warrior stumbled, scraping its already wounded knees against the sharp edges of the stairs. Shoulders hunched over, the half-naked warrior breathed heavily and rested against the steps, taking the time to gather its failing composure. Looking up toward the summit, the climax of the climb still appeared far beyond reach, the top of the steps still obscured by a shroud of mist and murky shadow. Yet the warrior felt compelled to continue the journey as if being drawn ever upwards by some irresistible force. The knight had to obey, had to find out what lay at the end of this arduous ascent and driven by this unseen force the solitary figure pushed itself back

to its feet, ignoring the discomfort in limbs screaming in torment and continued its treacherous climb.

On either side of the mountainous stairwell protruded the husks of long dead trees their petrified bark as grey and as forbidding as tombstones. Their spiky branches like the twisted arms of crippled old crones lying draped across the steps, crooked twigs and thorns extended and deformed like gnarled fingers, poised to grab at the ankles of any attempting to ascend the mountain. They'd been laying that way for some time, at least as long as the skeletal corpses that intermittently decorated the flight of ancient steps. The exposed bones lay entwined within the twisted arms of the trees, thick tendrils threaded between the gaps in the ribs and large threatening thorns protruding through the empty eye sockets of silently screaming skulls. Sometimes the tendrils seemed to move and lash suddenly at the warrior's feet, forcing the half-naked knight to continue a slow cautious ascent.

Perspiration rolled with deliberate leisure between the shoulder blades of a back that was slender yet muscular. The figure stood erect pulling back the shoulders and stretching chest and back muscles. The spine cracked loudly in the eerily silent atmosphere, the sharp snap sending a shudder through the tense frame. The warrior held its breath and listened to the silence, concerned that the loud snapping noise might have attracted the attention of some dormant predator concealed by the night. The mountain remained silent except for the uneven sound of the warrior's own fractured breathing. Forcing a long ragged breath through lungs fighting against the altitude for every last gasp of air, the knight proceeded ever upward toward a pinnacle that seemed to move further out of reach with each weary step.

The rolling cloud of vapour appeared to grow thicker, enveloping the warrior like some spectral cocoon and obscuring the long hazardous descent. The knight could no longer see the steps below and the flight ahead remained invisible, hidden behind the curtain of living mist. Left with little choice and proceeding ever upward the mist started to thin ahead, rolling aside like the parting of interlocking fingers to finally reveal the summit of the mountainous flight of steps.

Before the warrior, towered a dais upon which sat a giant of a figure, its features obscured by shadow and rooted to a grotesque throne of skulls, bones and twisted sinew. It seemed as if this creature had actually grown out of the throne as if this vulgar sculpted seat had actually given birth to this perverse and imposing figure which had emerged fully grown and remained secured to its dead mother by some sickening umbilical cord. The warrior climbed toward the dais approaching cautiously, eyes squinting in the gloom to better see the features but the figure remained enfolded within an ever present shadow, which stuck to the creature like thick black tar, its face being forever hidden from the light. As the warrior drew closer, the composition of the figure gradually revealed itself. It appeared to be mostly skeletal, the ribcage exposed and jutting out of a metal breastplate apparently ripped asunder by some powerful blow. Tattered rags, the remains of once elaborate rich garments hung around the shoulders and legs and upon the bulbous head was an elaborate helmet, large twisted rams horns sprouting from either side and disturbingly realistic skull carvings decorating its crown and face guards. All of this became increasingly visible, the closer the warrior drew to the throne but the face inside the demonic headdress remained concealed as if the face alone had been swallowed by a vacuous blackness.

Climbing higher as if drawn toward the figure by some ghostly voice, wisps of mist began to billow between the gaps in the giant's exposed ribcage, squirming from inside the decayed body like ethereal serpents composed of smoke. Rather than being deterred the warrior continued its approach until it could almost reach out and touch the throne of vulgar corruption. The warrior hesitated, halting in its ascent and stood naked, exposed and vulnerable beneath the hideous throne and its corrupt occupant. Her lips slowly parted and she hissed in her breath between her tightly clenched teeth. Her eyes, featureless white orbs stared through strands of raven black hair, caked with perspiration and ancient dust, hanging lankly in front of her face and obscuring much of her features.

She stood staring up at the giant on the throne with her sightless eyes, her pouting sensual mouth twisting into a cruel half-smile as she stood exposed before the craven image of an ancient god. Then she heard the creaking and cracking, amplified to an almost deafening level by her acute sense of hearing, like rotten

joints locked and straining to flex after lack of use over many years. Around the exposed ribcage the bone began to rot and crumble, dripping down over the torn breastplate in a trickling drizzle of dust. Pieces of bone fell away, bursting into clouds of ash as they tumbled from the torso. Suddenly the ribcage burst open, swinging wide like the welcoming doors of hell and slimy, putrefying intestines whipped out of the dark cavity like lashing tentacles, reaching for the blind, naked warrior. She sensed their presence but could do little to avoid them. She had abandoned her weapons and armour and now stood before this perverse threat vulnerable and totally defenceless.

The intestines whipped around her neck and coiled about her body like snakes. She could feel them slick and slimy against her skin as they tightened about her, pressing her arms into her ribcage and squeezing the air from her lungs. She was being pulled forward toward the creature on the throne. She could hear its heart thumping steadily, the beat becoming more rapid as she was drawn closer. The muscle pulsed within the deep dark recesses of the chest cavity oozing blood as it pumped. She could hear it in her head, replacing her thoughts with the constant thrumming until she could no longer think. All she could hear, all she could focus on was the near deafening drumbeat of that pulsating heart. Attempting to release a cry of anguish the slick tendrils coiled tighter around her throat until all she could manage was a pitiful breathless whimper. Her nostrils filled with the stench of exposed putrid organs as her face was drawn level with the open cadaver and blood spat into her face and mouth from the constantly beating heart. She swallowed, unable to stop herself. The blood tasted old and stale and made her want to gag. Then the heart burst open showering the female warrior with slick crimson pulp as a thick slimy tendril shot out of the splattered muscle toward her, forcing itself into her gaping mouth. She choked on its length and thickness as she felt it sliding down her throat into her belly as she became intensely aware of the creature on the throne leaning forward and licking its dry withered lips. As she choked blood began to seep from the bones in a slow steady trickle, transforming into an oozing mass as her eyes widened and her nostrils flared with the stench of death and decay. Suddenly the skeletal figure erupted with a spray of crimson liquid gushing from between the bones and the deep, dark recesses of the pagan helmet, showering the young female warrior, soaking her naked body in thick oily blood the weight of which

plastered her hair across her face, filling her mouth and nose with coppery, bitter fluid. The deluge washed down the mountainous steps like some hellish crimson waterfall and amidst the torrent, drenched in gore stood the naked warrior, thigh deep in the continuously flowing mess, appearing like some exotic demonic siren rising out of a river of blood.

Merydan Tyranna screamed like she had never screamed before, her body convulsed and she jerked upright, hellish visions cavorting in the darkness before her sightless eyes. She felt a trembling as her world shook and a voice, a strong powerful yet comforting voice forced its way into her world of nightmares. Someone was holding her shoulders and shaking her. At first she thought it was the slimy tendrils tightening their grip around her body but as she became increasingly aware of another presence, the hellish visions began to fade and melt back into the shadows from which they had emerged.

“Merydan, Merydan.” The voice continued to call her name until the dark forbidding world, surrounding her dispersed, melting away into the recesses of her mind until she sat amidst the darkness staring into the endless abyss.

“Merydan, it was just a dream, just another nightmare. You’re safe now. No one’s going to hurt you.”

She continued to stare emotionless straight ahead, her blind, alien eyes fixed upon a point in the darkness, as if she and only she was aware of something lurking within those shadows, hidden from the eyes of those possessed of normal sight. She was vaguely aware of a strong calloused hand gently stroking her hair and a gruff male voice cooing soothingly in her ear. The man appeared suddenly distracted. There was someone else in the room and he turned from the young girl to face the new presence.

“It’s nothing.” The man replied to an unasked question. “Your sister had another nightmare, that’s all. Go back to bed.”

The other girl remained framed in the doorway, her brow furrowed as concern etched itself into her young features and she refused to move.

“They’re just bad dreams. They can’t hurt her. They can’t hurt anyone.” He insisted, unconvinced by his own reassurances.

“I know you’ve had those dreams too, Kryssa and they must seem very real to both of you. Dreams often do seem real but not so much in the light of day.”

“Even in the light of day. Flashes of the dream seem to appear to us like visions and we are back there, back in that decaying world. We are there but we are awake and yet we can still see those things from our nightmares.” The voice was Merydan’s and as she spoke her words appeared chilling and eerie.

“What is it that you see?”

“A throne, a throne of decay and corruption and a figure sits upon that throne, high on the pinnacle of a mountain of steps littered with the corpses of long dead warriors.”

There followed a moment of uneasy silence.

“What happens then?” The man asked.

“The throne bleeds and we drown in an ocean of blood.”

The man appeared uncomfortable and seemed to experience difficulty in swallowing.

“It’s still only a dream, now go back to sleep.”

“Sometimes, we’re afraid to close our eyes.” She spoke while continuing to stare blankly into the darkness her voice seeming so small and far away.

“I know.” He replied. “But you can’t stay awake indefinitely. You’ll exhaust yourselves. It’s almost morning. Try and get back to sleep, please.”

“The dreams are becoming more vivid. They’re a warning. They’re coming for us.”

The man paused.

“Who’s coming?”

“You know, Ba’ Klemus, you know. It won’t be long before they find us. We’re running out of time.”

The young blind woman felt the man she knew as Ba’ Klemus shudder at her words.

“We’ll talk about this in the morning.” But the young woman shook her head adamantly.

“No, Ba’ Klemus, tonight. We must leave tonight. Tomorrow may be too late. Kryssa and I can feel their presence. They’re very close.” Merydan held out her hand and her sister instinctively stepped forward and seized it, squeezing it protectively.

The man called Ba’ Klemus looked from one young woman to the other unwilling to make a hasty decision based upon ominous dreams and cryptic sensations.

“They search among the dead for ancient relics of a forgotten world. A quest begun ten thousand ages past has almost reached its conclusion and from the corruption and decay of time Dark Soul shall rise again.”

Merydan stared expressionlessly into the void of night as she spoke, almost appearing in a trance, her voice emanating from somewhere else a long way from the relatively safe seclusion of her bedchamber. The disturbing announcement tightened like a vice around Ba’ Klemus’s heart. He felt his blood freeze in his veins and spiders of ice seemed to be crawling along the length of his spine.

“It may not be safe for us to leave in the dead of night but if your nightmares are a warning then it might prove less prudent to remain. All right, pack whatever items you can carry, leave anything you don’t need. We’re leaving.”

“Where shall we go?”

“You choose a hell of a time to ask. Just get dressed and pack your belongings. Leave the travel arrangements to me.”

The two young women took hardly any time at all to pack. In all the time they had been residing with their protector they had acquired few possessions, a fact they had little realised until now. It was still dark when they emerged through the crooked uneven doorway of their domicile to find Ba’ Klemus waiting outside, standing enveloped within the corrosive shadow of Pytharmon’s Keep, their home for these past seventeen years. He stared into the night, transfixed by the darkness as if wary of something terrible residing at its heart.

Ba’ Klemus was tall and muscular, forever standing erect in spite of his advancing years and the weight of the disfiguring hump on his back. He was unexpectedly handsome, his hair cut close to the shape of his head and his thin dark beard trimmed to the outline of his chiselled jawbone. His dark thick eyebrows overhung and seemed to blend with the deep hollow of his eye sockets making his eyes of the darkest jet appear luminous against the white of his clear orbs. He leaned against his staff, a formidable looking weapon crowned with the image of some nightmarish mythical beast composed of a serpent’s body, the head of a wolf and the wings of a bat fanned out as if ready to take flight. The elongated serpent’s trunk coiled itself possessively down the length of the staff, the raised, intricately carved scales providing a firm hand-grip. Immersed within the depths of his private thoughts, he barely heard the two young women approach. But as they stood silently, watching him, he gradually became aware of their presence and he shuddered inwardly as if a sliver of ice had skewered him between the shoulder blades.

“We’re ready Ba’ Klemus.” Merydan, the blind sister announced as he turned to face them.

“So I see. You’ve left nothing behind?” They both shook their heads. “Good, because it might be some time before we can return here.”

Taking one final farewell glance at the grey, crumbling, haunted ruins of Pytharmon’s Keep, the hollows of the deep black windows seeming to stare back at them like the eye-sockets in a rotting skull, Ba’ Klemus turned away and led the two sisters down the hill and into the night.