

Prologue

A cloaked figure, garbed in black with a hood drawn across its eyes, stared around at the cave. It was warm and dry, ideal for the Ritual. Black boots crushed the dry leaves that carpeted the cavern floor. The torrent outside continued as though even the Gods wept. His yellow eyes glinting feverishly; he beckoned to his companion, his hands almost claw-like with long dirt-brown nails. Another cloaked figure entered the cave, taller and broader than the first man. Behind him came a third figure, shorter, more youthful, eyes flickering about the cave in mistrust.

“Come, come,” said the first man, waving his arm impatiently. His frown suggested he was not a patient man. “We must hurry if we are to perform the Ritual before dawn. Darren, do not be a slouch and hurry up.”

The youth paused, anger flashing in his eyes. “Kryan, do not take that tone with me. I volunteered for this, remember.”

Kryan tried to conceal his smile. Since when did a four year old boy volunteer? That was Darren’s age when he was snatched from his village ten years ago and, since then, the boy’s training had been intense. But whatever was certain, he was no volunteer.

Gallan was reverently placing candles about the cave. The big man’s frown was one of intense concentration. Soon a gentle light illuminated the interior revealing scar-ravaged walls, boulders strewn about the cavern floor and dark, sinister looking recesses where even the light seemed afraid to penetrate.

Kryan liked Gallan; he was the silent type who just got on with jobs. He hated people who blathered, especially those with nothing much to say. Kryan breathed in the dry air, scenting the years of accumulated dust. The cave was ancient, just what they needed to summon the spirits of the dead. Kryan turned just as Gallan was handing him a knife. The weapon was silver and the hilt inlaid with gold wire. An expensive item, but Ryocho demanded no less. Kryan took the weapon and turned to Darrell.

Darrell was shaking and his brown eyes looked uncertain. His earlier bravado was gone and he now looked his fourteen years.

“Your shaol is strong, Darrell. You do not need to be afraid,” Kryan said with just a hint of condemnation in his voice, deliberately bristling the younger man.

Darrell’s fear vanished and anger blossomed behind his eyes. “I told you, old man,” he sneered. “Watch your tone or it will be you lying on the ground and not I.”

Inside Kryan laughed. He cast Gallan a look and saw that the other man understood. Darrell’s training had been superb; arrogance would force him to do what they wanted. Arrogance and the belief in Ryocho, his god.

“My apologies, Darrell. You are correct, and I have overstepped myself. Now come here and kneel,” Kryan said, bowing ever so slightly in mock respect.

Darrell’s eyes hardened and Kryan sensed his growing rebellion.

“Oh, do not fear. You are not kneeling to me. Do you not feel *his* presence, here in the cave?”

For the first time, Darrell’s eyes swept the cave interior. He, too, must have sensed the antiquity and a look of reverence crossed his face.

“He is here?” he asked in child-like innocence. “Here, with us now?”

“Communicate with your shaol, and ask him what he sees. You will have a better answer from the spirit world than from me.”

Darrell did not close his eyes. He had no need. In truth, Kryan was growing afraid of the younger man and the strength of his bond with his shaol. Given time he would be powerful indeed, but the experiments must go on. If Drachar was to be served, he needed an army. An army of invincible warriors, even stronger than the growing number of warrior Priests of Ryocho, a god created in name only to serve a greater god – Drachar. Until the time was ripe for the people to believe in his return, Drachar’s name must remain a preserve of the trusted. Ryocho would do, but Ryocho was a sham, nothing more, nothing less.

Darrell’s eyes grew hard as though he had focussed on something upon another plane. Kryan felt a shiver run down his spine; something was wrong. He summoned his own shaol and, as always, the link was there but tenuous. His shaol was warning him, but of what he could not say. Fear cascaded down his spine and he glanced uncertainly around the cave, trying to see into the hidden depths where evil might lurk like a plague about to be released upon the world.

Kryan was playing with proverbial fire; imps, demons and devils were not to be toyed with. One mistake and his soul could be rotting in hell for an eternity of damnation.

All at once Kryan felt his age and his own arrogance died. His wrinkled flesh on the back of the hand gripping the ornate knife suddenly reminded him of his own mortality. He was so afraid to die. The aches and pains of age were suddenly forgotten and he felt an overpowering love of life. Why did he feel so threatened?

Darrell fell to his knees and turned his eyes up to look upon Kryan with a look of reverence that Kryan had never seen before. For a moment he feared that Darrell was seeing his fear as a smile spread upon the youth's face. Kryan tried to straighten his shoulders. He looked across at Gallan to see whether the other man had felt a similar premonition, but he might well have been looking at rock for all that Gallan's expression betrayed. The other man's broad features were impassive. His dark, shaggy eyebrows and long fringe all but hid his eyes. Kryan felt afraid, but knew he must continue, if not just to keep face amongst his peers.

Darrell was now smiling in almost feral glee. Kryan fell back on his last resort when cornered by something he did not understand — bullying and tyranny.

“Here, take the knife,” he commanded proffering the weapon to the youth. Darrell grasped the blade and, for a moment, the two men held the weapon as Kryan turned to Gallan. “Do you have the cloak, belt and scabbard?”

Gallan nodded and for once Kryan wished that he would say something.

Turning his attention back to Darrell, he said, “You know what to do. Ryoch demands your soul.”

Kryan was shocked; always when he said these words there was horror in the eyes of the person he spoke to. Never had he witnessed the calm acceptance that he now saw. It was his hand that shook, and not Darrell's, as he passed the knife over. Once more he glanced at Gallan but again it was like looking at stone.

“Ryoch,” Kryan shouted and, to his own ears, his voice trembled. “Ryoch, your servant kneels before you and offers you his life.” As required he felt his own shaol scream the name Drachar over and over. This time, though, he heard it clearly, rather than as though across a vast expanse of time. He again realised that something was wrong. This was going too well. Whereas they had always failed before, now doubt crept into his mind. He looked about the cavern as though expecting to see Drachar's shade smiling down on him, an evil smile of the damned.

Darrell had taken the weapon. He exposed his chest, unbuttoning the jerkin he wore and then the shirt beneath it. Still wearing the feral grin, he placed the point of the blade against his chest and then his eyes met Kryan's

in silent challenge. A brief instance of pain, a grimace, a low moan escaping dying lips and Darrell sank slowly to the cavern floor before Kryan even saw the blade move. It was over and Kryan was suddenly enamoured by the power of a false god that he had helped to create.

Shocked, Kryan watched the flow of crimson as Gallan came over with the cloak. "There is no need for that," Kryan sneered, his bravado returning as adrenalin coursed through his veins. But Gallan did not stop. He placed the cloak about the air above the corpse, and, when he removed his hands, the cloak remained, suspended in mid air. Unseen hands adjusted the cloak, tying it about an invisible throat. The hood came up and it took all Kryan's strength of will to remain standing.

Gallan looked at Kryan, his eyes dark and brooding. "You did not believe," he accused. "You have never believed. It is your failure that this moment has taken so long to achieve."

Gallan strapped the belt and scabbard about the ethereal form. The figure stooped, drawing the knife from the dead boy's body. Kryan heard his shaol screaming repeated warnings and, too late, he turned, seeking an escape. Intense pain blossomed in his back, a pain like no other. It felt as though he had been kicked by a horse and, all at once, he could not breathe. He fell to his knees, his head turning and his eyes seeking the reason for his demise.

"I told you not to use that tone of voice with me," a hollow voice said.

Kryan fell forward, his eyes darkening. He panted for breath but none came. He felt life leaving him. Behind him he heard Gallan issuing instructions to the abomination. What had he done? In his mind's eye, a phantom took shape and, with the recognition, came terror. His master was calling and behind him was his creatures; all the demon's of hell. His master opened his arms, welcoming Kryan to his domain. His failure was to be punished; a punishment lasting all eternity. Even long after he had died, his wail of remorse filled the cave.

Chapter 1

Flight of Fear

Tumarl crashed through the thick undergrowth, half running, half stumbling in his haste to escape. He ran with the unsteady gait of a man close to both his physical and mental limits. He had long since given up trying to reason, and madness threatened his fragile hold on reality. Even the trees seemed threatening. Claw-like branches snagged his clothes as though deliberately seeking to hinder his escape.

KinKassack.

A forest of such dread that no sane man would volunteer to walk beneath its shadow. A place heard of only in tales, best told sitting in the comfort of home, the storyteller murmuring in whispers, lest the evil in the world hear and curse the teller.

He was a sad reflection of a man. At one time, his face had been broad and strong, but now grey flesh hung from his bones, and he looked far older than his thirty years. He wore a permanent scowl, born from years of hardship.

Slow down, fool, a voice nagged.

Eyes wide with fright, he stopped, looking about for the speaker.

Idiot, continued the voice. It's you. You're talking to yourself.

Gleefully he hooted. Wonderful! He had a friend.

"Shut up!" he screamed back. A bird took flight close to his legs, causing him to yelp in fear. Staggering like a drunkard, he ran, cackling dementedly. In two more strides he misplaced his footing, stumbling headfirst into thick undergrowth. He struck his head on a root. Blackness engulfed him, and mercifully he knew no more.

Some time later, he awoke, cold and confused. Rain lashed down, running in rivulets along the length of his upturned face. Overhead, a rook cawed, the only sound of life in the dismal forest.

The shock of the fall had partially helped him to regain his sanity.

“Where am I?” he croaked. The memory of a narrow smelly mine, men working with picks until their hands bled, sweating bodies, and cries of terror descended on him. Then he remembered his escape.

They would be after him. He had to flee.

Muttering, he willed his madness to remain at bay. Picking himself up, he continued to lope along the narrow trail. The night was nearly done, and he needed to be much farther by dawn.

All too soon his hopes were dashed. Dodging between low branches, he almost collided with a rock face that seemed to appear from nowhere. His mind wailed in frustration. Would he never escape this accursed forest?

Looking up, the rock towered high into the night sky, its surface bleak and forbidding in the difficult light. To his frustration, the wall continued as far as he could see on either side of his position.

“Now what do I do?” he sobbed.

How many friends had he seen die while he stubbornly sought to escape his fate?

No! He refused to give up.

Knowing it was folly, he started to climb. It was easy at first, and he felt elated that he was finally escaping. Level with the treetops, he paused. Looking up, he still could not tell how high the cliff was., It disappeared in the dark of a dismal night.

A scream from below froze his blood, causing his heart to lurch and his fingers to slip on the surface. Scrabbling, he prevented himself from falling but at the cost of bruised and bloodied fingers. The sound was inhuman and an image of a grakyn sprang to mind. That they could fly made his predicament all the worse.

In his haste to climb, he tore his already bloody fingers on sharp outcrops of rock as he hauled himself higher. It was a desperate ascent. The rock face was slippery with wet moss, and the handholds few and shallow. Panting with exertion, he pulled himself onto a ledge. It was not very wide and on it a scraggly bush clung tenaciously to life.

At that moment the moon chose to peek between the clouds, bathing the land in a silvery glow. Foolishly, he looked over the edge and his mind reeled with vertigo as he scrambled back. It was a long drop to the ground. A cold wind gusted, causing him to shiver. He realised at some time during his ascent, the rain had stopped, but that was no longer a blessing. He could see every leaf and twig far below which also meant anyone following could now see him.

Another scream sounded, stretching further his over-taut nerves. Taking advantage of the light, he looked up to the next stage of the climb. It was smooth and slick with water, with few, if any, handholds.

He cursed bitterly. He was trapped.

The bush he shared the ledge with prevented him from leaning back and turning around. He angrily pushed against it, seeking to make more room. His hand met with little resistance and, shocked, he tumbled forward, throwing up his hands to protect his head from the inevitable collision. But it never came and instead he fell flat onto his chest.

Untangling himself, he realised he had unexpectedly found a cavern. Gratefully, he scrambled forward and to his surprise, instead of narrowing, it widened and there was even sufficient room to kneel. Inside it was completely dark and he was forced to explore with his hands. His fingers traced a rough stone surface that stretched as far as he could reach to either side. The darkness was threatening, and he glanced back towards the entrance and the faint outline of light.

An assortment of rocks and nesting material littered the floor. Taking up two rocks, he experimentally struck them together. Nothing happened so he discarded one rock and tried another, repeating the process until a spark rewarded his perseverance.

Next he groped about the nesting material, seeking soft down. Striking the rocks he nurtured a tiny flame, feeding it with more down and twigs as the flame grew. Grateful for the light, he looked about. A long tunnel stretched away into the distance to either side, but he dared not explore without a torch.

By his foot, roots protruded from the rock and, by continuously twisting one, he managed to break it off. Eagerly, he tore strips from his shirt, wrapping these about the wood before holding them in the fire.

Once lit, he scattered the fire, pocketing the stones he had used to light it. As he rose, his joints creaked in protest. Trusting his instincts, he chose the right hand tunnel, hoping it would lead to safety. After a while, it forked and, without hesitating, he took the left hand entrance, almost as if guided by an invisible presence.

Exhaustion started to make his mind wander and, then, abruptly, he was standing in front of a large cavern, swaying on unsteady legs. His torch spluttered, threatening to expire.

Someone was in the cave. He stepped back into the shadows, pressing himself against the wall, already knowing it was too late to hide. Nothing happened though and, upon reflection, something about the scene seemed unnatural. A shiver ran down his spine; a compulsion seemed to be driving him on, even though he was nearly dead on his feet.

If there was somebody in the cave, they would have seen your torchlight, a voice reasoned. He looked about for the speaker. This time it was not his own mad ramblings, and he could almost feel warm breath on his cheek.

Timidly he looked into the cavern. The figure had not moved and he realised there were actually three figures huddled together as though deep in conversation. Entering the cave, he went over to them, stepping over objects cluttering the floor. The assortment of shapes caught his attention, and he recognised a long knife and more importantly several torches. Gratefully, he bent to retrieve one, nearly fainting as his vision swam.

With trembling hands, he lit it using his own makeshift torch which was already threatening to expire. Dropping that, he bent to pick up the knife and, armed, felt more confident.

His attention went back to the figures and, to his pain-racked mind finely balanced between sanity and madness, they seemed a mixture of reality and imagination.

“Statues?” he croaked uncertainly.

Silence! the voice warned.

He touched the nearest shape, feeling a cold, hard surface. The figure was that of a large man whose bearded face was contorted in a look of abject horror. In one hand he grasped a double-edged axe while the other rested on the shoulder of his companion.

Why would anyone make a statue and then hide it away in the depths of a cave? he thought.

Swaying, his attention went to the next statue. This man was smaller and conveyed an air of nobility. His features were fine and delicate although he, too, looked dreadfully afraid.

Whereas the first two men looked terrified, the third looked strangely resolute. One hand rested on the shoulder of the smaller man while his other clenched a sword held on the big man’s shoulder. Something about his look suggested inner strength, a power beyond that of the cavern, and his eyes seemed distant as though he were looking into another world.

Tumarl touched the statues gently, as though sharing their pain.

There was a flaw in the last figure,; a large chip of rock had been broken off below the breast. The wound was deep and around it the stone was discoloured.

A feeling of unease suddenly overtook Tumarl, and he felt a thrill of alarm.

Hide! urged the voice.

Without thinking, he cradled his torch in the arm of one of the figures and retreated into the shadows. Briefly he giggled reminded of his youth,

believing he was back with friends, playing hide and seek as his madness sought dominance once more.

Entering the tunnel leading away from the one he had entered, he waited and watched for his brother to come and find him, intending to jump out and frighten him with his knife. He looked down at the blade, wondering where he had found it, and a frown creased his brow.

Gradually, his racing heart slowed. He pressed himself against the cold rock. Feeling very tired his eyes started to close.

Wake up! demanded the voice.

The voice was annoying him now and, angrily, he clutched the dagger. Glancing into the cavern, nothing had changed and he was getting bored. He yawned as once again sleep threatened.

Stay awake. Just for a few moments, the voice whined but, instead, warmth stole over him and his heavy lids seemed to fall of their own volition. Movement jolted him to wakefulness. A creature stood at the light's periphery. Immediately came recognition.

A grakyn.

Demon spawn.

It pointed its arm and barked guttural words, and a ball of flame leapt from its outstretched talon, illuminating the cavern and blinding Tumarl. An explosion followed, causing him to duck instinctively as a hurricane tore at him, trying to dislodge him from his hiding place. An ear-splitting bang followed, penetrating the very depths of his soul and causing the ground to shake.

When the blast died down Tumarl risked looking back into the cave where he saw the grakyn approaching the statues, lifting its feet to step over small fires. The grakyn's wings were tucked behind its back as it stole across the cavern floor like a cat hunting its prey.

Tumarl stifled a sudden urge to giggle, gripping harder the hilt of his dagger.

Silence, said the voice and he quietened, trusting the voice. Suddenly, he frowned as the smoke from the explosion drifted away.

The statues were gone and instead three men lay where the statues should have been. Not broken remnants of stone but people of flesh and blood.

Instantly Tumarl's madness fled. Too often he had witnessed friends butchered by creatures such as this. A red haze descended as, with a strength borne from despair, he leapt from his hiding place, raising his blade, which gleamed in the light from the burning wreckage. He covered the short distance as an eerie howl rent the air, not even aware that he had screamed.

Too late the grakyn turned as he drove the blade deep between its shoulders. With a cry of triumph he forced the blade deeper, clinging desperately to the hilt while trying to sever the grakyn's life force.

The creature reared as a scream escaped its lip-less mouth. Wildly it thrashed, seeking to dislodge its assailant. In desperation it smashed Tumarl against the cavern wall, inadvertently driving the blade deeper.

The impact forced air from Tumarl's lungs, and waves of agony lanced through his body. Gritting his teeth, he twisted the blade screaming his defiance, and then his strength failed as he collapsed, trying desperately to breathe.

The grakyn stood with its back to him, the hilt of the knife protruding starkly from its back. Then, with a thud it, too, collapsed.

Tumarl sucked air into his lungs and on wobbling legs, he stood. The fires within the cavern were dying and darkness was swiftly returning. Tumarl hung on to consciousness not needing the voice now to urge him on.

Reaching out for the double-headed axe lying on the ground, he took it up, but its weight threatened to topple him. Bracing himself, he lifted the weapon over his head and, with the practised ease of one used to chopping wood, he swung the blade. The weapon clove through flesh and bone as though they were nothing more than brittle twigs, and the blade rang from the rock, sending a shower of sparks flying across the floor.

The sparks were the last things Tumarl saw before falling unconscious to the floor.