

## Prologue

- After the War of the Morning -

“Thus passes the ungrateful father,” the black witch whispered into Clegan’s ear...indeed, the words pierced into the little boy’s mind. “We hated him,” she whispered. “As he did *not* love us.”

“We hated him,” The little boy repeated. “We *shall not* cry for him. We *shall not* shed a tear for him.” But the tears came. They flowed, salty and warm down the cold, pink cheeks.

Clegan, now seven years of age, stood in the black cavern of the Thrait of the Kurgenmoore a mere arm’s length away from the bottomless black abyss. Spirits from the abyss called out to the black witch...and to the boy. A cold wind funneled up from the dark, out of the frozen wastes that lay at the bottom of the world. “*Boy,*” the wind whispered, stretching out the word so that it lingered in his ear.

“We are the Thrait of the Kurgemoore, spirit!” The boy cried out. He wiped away the tears, quickly. “We do *not* fear you!” Yet he sniffled once more. “We shall *command* you!”

The witch held the boy's shoulders, keeping him tight against her, fearing that the dark wind may decide to take him into the abyss.

“*Fool,*” the wind mocked. “Foolish child,” it swirled.

Clegan was about to cry out again at the spirits, but checked himself. He was not a coward. He was the Thrait in waiting. He was “of the blood” and had been taught that he could not be harmed by the dark forces that lived at the bottom of the world. For *by his blood*, he would one day command those of the abyss, and through him alone could come the dark life-blood of the Kurgemoore. Still, his father’s tales of his invulnerability to the spirits had not been tested. Clegan himself had only heard stories of the dark wind until it showed itself to him this day.

“He *has* the blood,” the witch spat at the invisible wind, then cried, “Ohhhh,” as she felt the icy wind coil up around her left arm and then breeze past her cheek.

“We have the blood...as *she* says,” Clegan called out again, but the fire in his words was lost in the echo of the black witch as she moaned and trembled.

The witch begged, “Why do you wait, spirit? He *is* of the blood. No other stands before you and may not for yet another millennia. He is your *only* blood.”

“We do not know time, foolish wretch,” the spirit whispered through the wind. “There will be another. *The boy* shall not be the last.”

Suddenly, the once dim torches posted throughout the cavern began to burn brighter and brighter until they bellowed a thick, gray smoke. The spirit took the form of the smoke and swirled directly in front of the witch, forming death’s head.

The black witch stepped back in fear as the skull spoke to her. "Will the child finish what his father has begun?"

"He will," the witch answered, trembling. "I have *foreseen* it."

The hazy skull grew long fangs, and the holes for its eyes grew wide and its whisper grew loud. "You have foreseen that he will *prevail*, wretched witch?"

"I have foreseen that he will *conquer*..."

The skull expanded and suddenly engulfed the witch. She fell to the floor, writhing back and forth, her clawed fingertips digging into her own palms. She screamed so loudly that Clegan forgot himself and covered his ears with his hands, and shut his eyes. A moment later, the witch was still, and the gray smoke drifted up from the sockets of her eyes ...and wafted up and out of her mouth.

Clegan opened his eyes and saw that the witch was dead. He wanted to cry out for her, but he could not. The

smoke transformed into the horrid death-skull once more and a grueling, fanged smile formed on its lifeless face. It smiled at the boy.

Clegan felt the cold again... as if the room had turned to ice. He waited, forcing back the tears that wanted to come. The smoke dissipated and the skull disappeared. Dust swirled around the boy as the icy wind chilled his skin.

"It shall be," the invisible wind whispered.

Clegan felt a hope rise within him... but it was *not finished*. The true words had not come from the spirit. The boy knew that the spirits were tricksters... and he knew that this one might be playing a clever game. No—it was *not done*. He was about to call out, but the spirit moaned the final word as it disappeared into the abyss.

"*Thrait*," it whispered.

Clegan fell to his knees, while above him and against the cavern walls for as high as could be seen, hundreds of hoods

drew back to reveal pale faces and yellow teeth as murmurs of approval became louder. The Black Hands of the Kurgenmoore once more had a Thrait.

Clegan stood and raised his face to his Black Hands as they moaned for him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw another black witch...old woman not unlike the witch who lay dead at his feet...and he ran to her, pulling at her with all her might. At first, she resisted, but the child was the Thrait, and she was his to do with as he pleased.

The little boy ran the woman over the side of the abyss. "It should have been you!" he cried as she fell, tumbling into the forever. He looked at the other black witches who stood shocked, their eyes lowered. "It should have been all of you—but not *her!*"

The cavern went silent for a moment, but then the figures once again covered their faces with the long, black hoods. The little boy of seven moons, the Thrait of

Kurgenmoore, fell to the still body of the black witch. She had given her life to show the spirits what she knew...to pass to them her visions of the boy's future. Clegan wanted to weep. He needed to cry for her, for twelve days earlier, he had lost a father who hated him, and now here laid the mother who had *loved* him. Instead, he drug the body to the edge of the abyss and without a word rolled it over the side. It was done.