

## Chapter 1

It was the Witching Hour. The malevolent force he was hunting had only been active during these hours, when magic was at its most potent and mortals most susceptible to its effects. He kept no watch, but Grimpluk knew it was time. He could feel it in the chill of the air, cold even for an early autumn night. He'd been waiting outside the little shack, underneath a tree, meditating; honing his focus.

According to his client, Kazu, the thing had been masquerading as a protective spirit known as a baku. Baku were rare on the continent of Ornesea. Most of them existed in the far east, in countries Grimpluk only knew from a few of the books he'd studied as an apprentice, but when families migrated, sometimes the spirits followed them. Baku were relatively benevolent, usually aiding children with curing non-demonic nightmares. A prayer was needed, and always with caution. Calling a baku was a last resort for the parents of the suffering child. If the nightmare didn't satisfy the spirit, it could turn on the child and eat more than the nightmare, devouring hopes and dreams as well. That's why it had taken so long for his client to realize what was happening. It had devoured not just his child's nightmare, but kept going, feasting on her dreams and then her hopes, nearly leaving only a shell. They thought that was the end of it then, that the child would sleep once more, and they could begin the recovery process.

But it kept returning, night after night, eventually feeding on Grimpluk's client. Father and daughter were left drained and miserable the creature fed on them. Beyond the nightmares, beyond the dreams, beyond their hopes, to the very essence of their lives, taking small bites out of their souls. Once the pair died, the demon would be free to feast on their souls in full. After speaking to the child, Hoshi, Grimpluk could see that if she didn't get sleep soon, she would likely die. The poor thing had a deathly pallor to her and was so still and quiet, she seemed dead already.

Grimpluk had found telltale signs of a spiritual presence: ectoplasm, mostly, as well as a dark miasma that hung in the air of the little shack no matter how much light was let in. He'd suspected the demon had been the cause of the nightmares, subtly creating the need for a baku, and Hoshi's story confirmed that. The nightmares had begun—merely bad dreams at first—before descending into full blown terrors. The ritual prayer may have even called a baku forth, but if the demon was strong enough, it would have consumed the spirit.

In the end, it didn't matter. A dark presence had answered the prayer. Dreameater demons were vicious. The nightmares they created were for torture, for pain. They instilled fear—not to feed off of it like fear demons, but to make the effects of the dreams worse, silently tormenting their victims.

The creature was back and likely to finish off Hoshi. Grimpluk watched the yard silently, his mind serene from meditating. The thing moved unseen to the shack, the only sign of its presence being the blue ghost fire coming to life and dying with each step. The fires grew and flickered brightly in front of the door to the shack, turned black, and disappeared. Grimpluk stood and went to the door, silent as a predator, and laid out a dark blanket on the threshold. The blanket was embroidered with a pentacle and five sigils in silver thread; a demon trap. *If* it got past him, the trap would catch it, rendering it unable to escape until he killed or released it.

With the trap placed, Grimpluk waited another moment. The worst part about hunting dreameaters was needing to wait until it was feeding before you could attack it. He pressed his ear against the door and when he heard the whispered cries of the child, he slipped in.

The shack was but a single room, a simple wood structure with a tin-covered roof. In one corner

was a cast-iron stove, a counter, and a small table. In the other was a meager but large bed. And standing against the bed, translucent and glowing an ethereal light, was the dreameater. Its body was flabby and pale, the light it cast dimming and flaring from what could be referred to as its heart. Its thick legs ended in rough claws, while its spine was covered in bony protrusions that undulated from its head to its tail and back again. Already, the walls around the bed were covered in a sheen of ectoplasm brought on by the demon's influence. Grimpluk drew his revolver and aimed at the thing's almost elvenoid head, where its ears drooped and flapped while the trunk sticking out of its face was jammed into the little girl's temple. A second trunk reached out from the first for Kazu. Hoshi cried out again, as softly as a cooing dove.

Dreamer and dreameater both screamed when he fired the gun. The bullet ripped through the creature's trunk, severing it. The demon fell away in a thrashing madness before righting itself and racing past Grimpluk, almost too fast to react to. When it passed the door and hit the trap, it screamed again, the sound something like a child's impression of a dying horse and a squealing hog all at once. He opened the door wide and fired one last time. The screaming didn't stop so much as disappeared. The air cleared of the sound like it had never happened.

Green ichor spilled out from the trunk and the hole in its head in waves, smoking and stinking of brimstone. He waved the smell away as he holstered his gun and knelt down, pulling a massive knife from behind his back as he did. The knife pierced flesh like that of a rotting carcass: too soft and wholly unpleasant. The knife slid through it like water, passing cleanly into the faint, sputtering glow of the thing's heart. A flick of the blade shook loose the blood, slinging a bit of the green ichor onto the corpse.

Kazu, dark-haired and eyed, stepped carefully outside as Grimpluk stood. The man's eyes were deathly purple, baggy, rimmed red and watery.

"It's dead, sai," Grimpluk said.

"That is it?" he asked, his accent a bit stiff as he eyed the corpse at Grimpluk's feet with disgust. "The demon is dead and will not bother us anymore?"

Grimpluk nodded at the man. "Dead. I'll dispose of the body in a moment. Your little girl pass out when it died?"

A sob choked the man as he collapsed. "Gods, yes. Right back to sleep and nearly me with her." Another sob fled the man's throat, taking a nervous laugh with it. "I will mark your bounty and then I beg you leave us be, hunter. I pray to never see you again."

Grimpluk sighed. A common response and an understandable one, given the man's predicament. "Happy to oblige," he said gently, pulling the bounty from his pocket.

The man took the paper with a trembling hand. "Two gluts. Will she be okay?"

"Reckon she'll want to sleep a lot for a while. Just let her. Be gentle."

"Orc says to be gentle. That's *my* daughter in there, sai. Now take this and leave." He made his mark on the bounty and slapped it onto Grimpluk's chest.

Grimpluk took it as the man's hand slid away. Kazu dragged both hands down his face as he went back inside. After a moment, Grimpluk knelt next to the demon's corpse. As before, the knife passed swiftly through the flesh as he removed the head. More green, goopy blood spilled out. Next, he plucked a thin, folding knife with a clipped point and a honed edge out from a pocket inside his coat. Quietly, Grimpluk set about carving an expulsion circle, sometimes known as an exorcism circle. It was similar to the demon trap in design, but the circle had openings between the points of the star, essentially doing the opposite of what the trap did. Once finished, the body convulsed violently before sucking into itself with a dull *pop*. The only sign of its remains were a little puddle of ectoplasm and the head, which felt like thick jelly to the touch.

He gave one last glance at the little shack before heading back to town.

Tosawa's peacekeeper office was easy enough to find. The town was small in population, but spread out among a crossroads and several outer streets. Despite the hour, the door was still open. He

passed through a bit of lingering pipe smoke as he entered. Most of the town had appeared to be human, with a smattering of elves and dwarves, and now he found a pair of diminutive halflings. The one nearest the door tapped their pipe thoughtfully upon seeing Grimluk, clearly the source of the smoke. The other halfling was sitting behind a desk only a few feet away. They both looked up at Grimluk with bright eyes and bushy heads of dark, curly hair, possible relatives. They also both wore what amounted to the peacekeeper uniform: vests over work shirts, with denim trousers, their oversized, hairy feet still visible, an old habit most halflings still tended toward.

“How can we help ya, sai?” the one with the pipe asked.

“Here to claim a bounty.”

“Say true? Which un?” the other halfling asked.

“Demon at the Kazu fella’s place,” Grimluk answered, setting the demon’s head on the desk in front of him and pulling out the bounty notice. “Here’s proof of the kill and he made his mark on the notice.”

The halfling with the pipe started at the sight of the head and began coughing up smoke. “Gods, man, warn a lady, first, won’t ya?”

“Beg your pardon, sai.”

“Let’s get on with it,” the one behind the desk said, pulling out a ledger and a metal box. “Name and guild association.”

“Grimluk, Hunter’s Hollow, New Gilead.”

“Very good. He made his mark and we have proof. Two gluts to ya and then head next door and let the magi-tell operators know the bounty’s claimed.” She opened the box and pulled out two rectangular pieces of paper. “Anything else?”

“What’s this?” Grimluk asked, taking the paper.

“Governor’s council put out a new policy last year,” the halfling at the desk began. “I s’pose it ain’t reached New Gilead yet. Paper money is to replace gluts. Eventually bilts, too.”

“That right?” Grimluk replied, inspecting the new currency. The paper felt more like cloth, with similar markings to the coins and a gold sheen to it. Each edge was marked with a 1, decorated with flowery antiquated elven-style flourishes, and various official-looking markings and numbers.

With a shrug, he folded the bills and placed them in the coin pouch hidden inside his coat. “Much obliged.”

“Sai...what do we do with this?” They pointed to the ruined head, dribbling its viscous green blood.

He sighed. “You know, we been reportin’ to you peacekeepers for as long as I can remember and almost every time, one of you asks that question. Fertilizer. Or have your witch or magician dunk it in war water. Probably don’t give it to a wizard. Ain’t met one yet that didn’t try to ‘harness its power’. Damned idjits. And maybe write this down in case it needs doin’ again.”

“Very well,” the halfling said in a miserable tone.

“Fine, now get on next door,” the pipe-smoking halfling replied. The tone made it difficult to tell if she was hostile or just disinterested. Either way, Grimluk did as he was instructed.

The magi-tell office was fairly empty, save for the clerks and operators. Humans sat at desks behind the clerk’s counter, one hand on crystal orbs and the other scribbling down messages. The crystals were a part of a communication system, known by most as magi-tell, that allowed for nearly instantaneous messages to be sent out, albeit in small bursts due to the energy and focus required to use the orbs. It allowed for notice boards in any town that had an office and an easy supply of work for a variety of jobs, including demon hunting.

“Welcome, sai,” one of the clerks began, before looking up from his stack of papers.

Grimluk approached, watching the friendliness drain from the man’s face. “Demon bounty at the Kazu home has been claimed. Reckon the board needs an update.”

“Kazu, yes, I see,” the clerk responded flatly. “Chidi, Kazu bounty’s been claimed. Send out an

update soon as you're able."

"I'll do it momentarily, sai."

With a nod, Grimluk walked to the wall-length bounty board behind him. Four job columns greeted him. The Guarding column was all but empty. Labor was fairly full with listings for the autumn harvests that were getting under way now. His eyes passed to the Hunting column. Not quite as sparse as Guarding, but pretty close. A copy of the job he'd just finished still hung there, joined by several others. The first read "Imp Infestation" at the top. This was probably the most common job a demon hunter could take. He'd killed scores of imps over the last ten years and expected he would keep doing so until he retired or died on the job.

The three other notices mentioned "rye aunts" and "field maidens," two names for what amounted to the same thing. There were many names for harvest demons. Notices about these things always started cropping up around the peak of summer and lasted until the first snows fell. The demons manifested in the fields of farms, moving through corn stalks, wheat, anything that grew tall. Children were usually their targets—hurting them, turning them into strange beasts or merely controlling their minds. Quite dangerous.

The last notice spoke about "brain drinkers." As Grimluk recalled, those were fairly nasty beasts to deal with as well. The things were actually similar to dreameaters, but less subtle and far more aggressive. If not killed immediately, a brain-drinker would leave people as nothing but blank slates at best or shuddering husks at worst. The former could be made to serve the demon, while the latter would be little more than an empty vessel, which led to new issues entirely.

As he thought over the jobs, a faded yellow notice finally caught his eye on the Other column. It was the only listing, done up festively. Curious, he read it.

DUNVICH FOUNDERS FESTIVAL  
TO HONOR THE FORMATION OF OUR SMALL TOWN  
WE CALL OUT TO ALL WITH A BRAVE HEART  
COME JOIN FOR FOOD, HISTORY, AND GOOD FORTUNE

He grunted and returned to the bounties. The brain drinkers were probably the most dangerous, but the harvest demons were a problem as well. "Where do the roads go from here?" Grimluk asked the clerks. "How far are these places?"

"Oh, Main Street heads east a few days and then forks north and east on yet. Second Street heads north and south, but them's mostly for the farmers. None of our farmers have the demons in their crops. Brain drinkers was just claimed 'fore you arrived. Them other farms is on east. You'll want to avoid the north, sai. The wizard's town is no place for anyone these days. Don't even think the farmers have crops anymore."

Before Grimluk could thank the clerk, the other clerk spoke up. "Listen to Mitchell, there, sai. Dunvich ain't been a town worth seein' for long years now. Prospered once, but most likely cursed now."

"Yar," came a third voice, whose owner had remained unseen, until the dwarf stepped out of an office in the back. "Founded by a right, proper wizard. Their folks traded with us for a time, but after the Sunderin', e'rythin' seemt to dry up out there. They have that festival every year to honor the wizard, with promises of prizes for brave folk. Fools wander up that way sometimes, figure they'll win some treasure and make somethin' of themselves. Some come back, others don't."

"People see stuff out that way. Kids like to head out there sometimes, see who's bravest, who can get closest to the town," the first clerk, Mitchell, added with a dismissive grunt. "Few ever make it. Say the road there spooks 'em too badly."

"My grandpap once wandered up that way, for the festival, he said, and got chased off by somethin' what looked like a giant bird," the second clerk, Chidi, followed up.

The dwarf nodded solemnly before adding, “That were after the Sunderin’. We sent a hunter out there after that. Never came back. Sent a couple more since then, but they says ain’t nothin’ there but people dealin’ with trolls and, what were it? Gas pockets.”

Stories like this were common in Grimluk’s travels. Some of them were the truth, others exaggerations that grew to overshadow the truth. Rarely were they outright lies, especially after the Sundering fifty years prior. The Sundering, supposedly caused by greedy dwarves hunting treasure in the middle of the continent, had ruined those same lands, turning them into what was now known as the Wastelands. With the Sundering came an increase in demonic activity and new cults had started springing up with it. They never lasted long. One run in with a hunter and they scattered. Grimluk was always more suspicious if there *weren’t* stories like this. He listened to the three of them ramble on about rumors and hearsay. Everything from various demons to dragons, and even an old tale of a giant moving through the trees.

“Much obliged for the directions, friends,” he finally said, interrupting the conversation. “I’ll head east then.” They merely nodded politely, falling back into a discussion of their neighbors as he exited. East then. If he happened upon something that needed killing along the way, he’d take care of it. Otherwise, he’d try to find his way to one of the farms and put down some harvest demons. Come morning, he’d be on the road once more.

The area grew hillier as he traveled over the next four days. A dense forest filled the area, creating the semblance of a tunnel along the road. Limbs reached overhead and leaves filtered the light from the sun, creating vast shadows as leaves turned and fell. As he neared the fork the clerk had mentioned, and saw the signpost, the air grew still and almost quiet. All birdsong had ceased except a strange, repetitive song trilling up and down before pausing. The song grew louder and more dissonant the closer he got to the signpost as other birds joined in the song. Some sang in time with each other while others kept their own pace, but the melody was the same from all of them. Grimluk found his hand on the butt of his gun as he realized something was watching him. The songs changed as another voice joined them. As the trilling song echoed among the trees, a long, low whistle began underneath it all. When he stopped at the signpost, the strange birdsong and the whistling ceased, leaving only the sound of a sudden breeze.

The post had three signs on it. One pointed back the way he’d come with “TOSAWA” on it, while the one below that pointed east with a list of three more towns. Above them all was a faded sign that read “DUNVICH,” pointing north. Another long, low, warbling whistle filled the air as he looked at the sign and the road north.

Trying to ascertain where the sound was coming from, Grimluk looked around at the trees. He turned a full circle, hand still at the ready to slap iron if needed. He saw nothing and the whistle died away. His throat rumbled.

*Dryad. Maybe a leschy*, he thought. Dryads, spirits of the forest, rarely interacted with travelers, but some of them liked to play pranks. A leschy, on the other hand, was a more territorial forest spirit and had a nasty habit of leading travelers off the paths and roads forged by mortal use. Grimluk knew better than to leave the road unless he had to, and even then, the leschy would have to attack him directly. Hunters used a blood magic enchantment on their boots that kept them from becoming lost. He’d recently renewed that enchantment, too.

With a shrug, Grimluk started heading east again. The leschy or the dryad had probably scared off the clerk’s grandpap, or else he’d been drunk. Maybe both.

He managed two steps before the creature came screaming down at him from above. A piercing shriek exploded in the air just before a set of massive talons wrapped around Grimluk’s shoulders, slicing into his skin with ferocity.

He looked up to see the bird creature he’d been told about. It was tall as a middling human, with a

wingspan that seemed double or triple that. The feathers were a dirty white and gold, and the head was that of a human with full, black eyes, and a thin, black beak where its nose and mouth should have been. Long, blonde hair mingled with feathers, waving in the breeze as it tried to carry Grimpluk away.

It managed to get him off the ground by about ten feet from pure speed and strength before Grimpluk jammed the barrel of his revolver into its thigh and fired. The bullet ripped through one thigh and into the other, causing the thing to drop him. It screamed in pain, the sound mingling a human and an owl.

Grimpluk hit the ground in a roll and came up with his gun trained on the beast, but the demon was moving too fast despite its size and heading north in a hurry. The owl-woman was a harpy, also known as a lechuza, an alkonost, and a number of other names from all over Arkod. It was a type of demon knight, servants of demons who gave them great power; power that grew as the demon implanted within them corrupted the knight's soul. Harpies were typically practitioners of magic who decided they wanted more power and made deals with demons. Most of them had been town magicians in life. Some wronged, some fed up with serving the community good, others just spiteful and cruel to begin with. Like almost all demon knights, they were dangerous. Grimpluk followed.