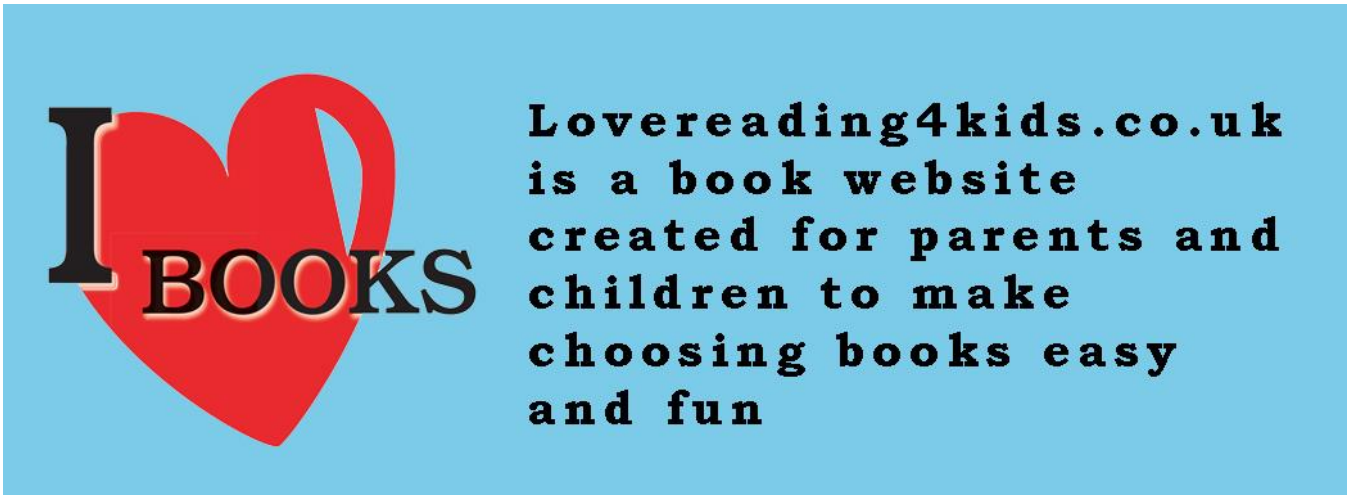


Opening extract from

Spook's: The Dark Assassin

Written by

Joseph Delaney

Published by

The Bodley Head Ltd an imprint of Vintage Publishing

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

THE BODLEY HEAD

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

The Bodley Head is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

www.penguin.co.uk
www.puffin.co.uk
www.ladybird.co.uk

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2017

001

Text copyright © Joseph Delaney, 2017
Title lettering by www.blacksheep-uk.com
Cover illustrations copyright © TwoDots, 2017
Interior illustrations copyright © David Wyatt, 2014

The moral right of the author and illustrators has been asserted

Set in Palatino by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978–0–370–33219–2
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978–0–370–33220–8

All correspondence to:
The Bodley Head
Penguin Random House Children's
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL

FSC www.fsc.org MIX Paper from responsible sources FSC® C018179

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Do not think that you will be returned to Earth with a beating heart and warm blood coursing through your veins. You will never again dine on fish or meat or berries. Nor will you sip cool water from mountain streams or feel the warmth of the sun on your skin. Firstly, each return to Earth will be extremely painful and you may only dwell there during the hours of darkness. Before the cock crows you must return to the dark or else be burned to ashes by the first rays of the morning sun.

Hecate, Queen of the Witches

PROLOGUE

I awoke in darkness, shivering with cold, my mind numb and void of memories.

Who am I?

I was lying on my back, staring up at a pitch-black, starless sky. The full moon hung low on the horizon and it was the colour of blood.

I felt bewildered.

Where am I? I wondered.

I sat up slowly and looked around. The ground was flat, dotted with dead trees and patches of scrub. I could see lights in the distance, and the faint outline of what looked like cottages.

I began to stumble towards them, weak and unsteady on my feet. Perhaps someone there could help me – or at least tell me the name of this strange place. I didn't like the look of that moon; it should have been a pale silvery yellow – not a monstrous bloated thing, its staring face covered in blood. It seemed to be watching every step I took.

I gradually grew stronger and made better progress towards the cottages – but suddenly I was brought to a halt by what sounded like the growl of an animal in the darkness behind me. It growled again and my anxiety became a stab of fear.

Something was stalking me. I could hear it padding closer in the darkness. Filled with panic, I fled, sprinting towards the nearest of those lights.

I hadn't run far when I saw the silhouette of a figure approaching, walking directly towards me. Now there was danger ahead as well as behind.

I am skilled at judging people by their gait, I realize. The figure had a swagger that comes from confidence and walked the walk of a fighter. The threat was growing.

Whoever it was halted about six feet from me; I halted too, my whole body shaking with fear. Perhaps this was the moment when my life ended. Maybe the trembling of my limbs was telling me that my demise was near . . . My mind was bewildered, but perhaps my body sensed its demise?

'Grimalkin? Is that you?' the figure cried.

The sound of that name acted like a spell. It affected me profoundly. My body stopped trembling and my fear fell from my

shoulders like a worn-out cloak. Somewhere in the distant past I had heard that name before. I struggled to recall everything that was associated with it.

Then I realized that the voice I'd heard was that of a girl. She stepped closer and smiled; a smile that was like a light illuminating the darkness.

I knew this girl well. Her name was Thorne.

Suddenly the name Grimalkin awoke my memories. Images flashed into my mind in vivid colour. I saw my opponents fall before me, their bodies soaked in blood. My knives sliced and pierced; I drew my scissors from the secret sheath beneath my left armpit and snipped away the pallid thumbs of my dead enemies.

Suddenly my identity surged back.

I am Grimalkin.

I am dead . . .

But I am still Grimalkin.

I was now in the dark. I remembered the confrontation up on Anglezarke Moor. I remembered how I had attacked Golgoth, the Lord of Winter, running towards him with my blades. I'd known that I could not win, but I'd bought time so that Alice, the earth witch, could fight back.

There had been a moment of freezing cold and intense pain; then I had fallen into the dark. My life as a witch assassin on Earth was over.

My fear ceased. I was now aware of the straps that criss-crossed my body, and was pleased to find my blades in place:

short ones for throwing and long ones for fighting at close quarters. I felt under my left armpit: my snippy scissors were also safe in their sheath. There would be other dead witches here in the dark; enemies I had encountered in the past, and perhaps new adversaries too. Would I be able to take their thumb-bones to increase my own strength? Was the dark like Earth in some respects?

All at once I was aware that my heart was beating and I was breathing steadily, just as I had on Earth.

It was then that I had a moment of regret.

Never again would I be the witch assassin of the Malkin clan. Another would take my place – probably already had. Nor would I be able to help the humans in their fight against the Kobalos – a race that had waged war, intending to slay all human males and enslave the females. I thought of the girls and women who were already slaves of the Kobalos and felt sad. I had sworn to free them – but now, in the dark, I could no longer keep that vow. I could only hope that my allies left behind on Earth would still prove victorious without my help.

Death was final. It was hard to accept that, but what had happened could not be changed. I had to let the past go and deal with my new situation.

How would things differ now? I wondered. What opportunities would the dark present?

My attention returned to the girl in front of me. When we knew each other, I'd been training her to become a witch assassin like me. We had been close.

I'd wept when my enemies slew Thorne – but tears are a waste of time. They achieve nothing. And afterwards I'd taken my revenge and hunted down every one of her killers.

I glanced at her hands. She had died when her thumbs were sliced away, but now they were whole again.

'It's good to see you, child,' I told her.

My memory had now fully returned. My mind was sharp and clear, just as it had been when I was alive – maybe even better.

'It's good to see you again, Grimalkin,' Thorne replied. 'But I wish we were meeting under better circumstances. The dark's a terrible place. It's hard to survive.'

'But you *have* survived, child. I'm impressed,' I told her. 'I obviously trained you well. Now you can teach me what I need to know of this place.'

'That's why I came. When a soul arrives here, the first hours are the most dangerous. I'll help you, if you will allow it,' she said.

'How did you know that I had died?' I asked her.

'There are those here who specialize in knowing the affairs of Earth – we call them Watchers; they take the shape of ravens. They told me of your death, so I came to help you. This dank field is where most of those who serve the dark materialize after death.'

'Do you know what happened immediately after my death? Did the others survive?' I asked.

'Yes, I do know much of what happened. Tom Ward and his apprentice, Jenny, continue the struggle against your enemies. The god Pan fought Golgoth and drove him away. But

although Pan won that battle, he's badly weakened, and the conflict simmers on. Golgoth will eventually return, stronger and more dangerous than ever. Since then the Kobalos have won battle after battle and are now close to the shores of the Northern Sea. No doubt they plan more attacks upon the County. But there is nothing we can do about it from the dark.'

'Thank you for that information,' I said.

'We must leave this place immediately,' Thorne said, her eyes flickering to and fro as if searching the darkness for some threat. 'It is dangerous to remain in one place for too long.'

'I put myself in your hands. Lead the way!' I commanded with a smile.

Now the trainee would train her trainer; I followed Thorne towards the distant lights.

As we set off, I glanced back over my shoulder but could see nothing.

'Something was following me,' I told Thorne. 'It padded on four legs. I was being stalked.'

'You'll have to get used to that,' she replied. 'There are lots of predators in the dark. Some are human, but there are all manner of other creatures that are hungry for blood. They usually concentrate on lone victims; now that there are two of us, we will be more secure. You will find that those who dwell in the dark have formed groups – there is safety in numbers.'

We left the wasteland behind and emerged onto a narrow cobbled street. At first glance it could have been somewhere in the County – Priestown or Caster perhaps.

The baleful blood moon lit only one half of it, but I could see that the cobbles were a shiny black. On our left was an open drain, with dark, old blood trickling along it. It could have come from a slaughterhouse or a butcher's shop . . . but I sniffed and knew instantly that the blood didn't come from animals.

It was human blood, its coppery taint clear in the damp air.

On either side of us the small windows of the houses were illuminated by candlelight, shaded by black lace curtains that twitched like spider webs.

Were eyes peering from behind those curtains? I felt sure that they were. If so, were they spies, dead humans, witches or other creatures of the dark?

Dead people shuffled along the street towards us. Some showed evidence of the manner of their death. A man was staggering forward with a wide gash in his throat that gaped like an extra mouth; he was moaning with pain and the wound was still dribbling blood.

If you were carried over into this dark domain of the dead complete with your wounds, then I should surely be in bloody fragments – after all, I'd been blasted into pieces of flesh and bone by Golgoth, the Butcher God.

I glanced sideways at Thorne. Why did she still have her thumbs? I wondered. Why was I whole? There was much to learn here. I lived for challenges; I thrived on combat. This was a whole new world to understand and eventually dominate. My interest was aroused. Death might even be better than life!

Then I noticed that the dead were walking along with their eyes fixed on the cobbles, as if they dared not look others in the eye.

'Why do they walk with their eyes cast down?' I asked Thorne.

'So as not to draw attention to themselves,' she explained. 'These are weak souls who are mostly just prey.'

'Prey to what?' I asked.

But before Thorne could answer, I heard a screech in the distance, and simultaneously a big bell began to boom; a terrible tolling that vibrated through the soles of my feet.

Was it some kind of warning? I started to count the peals.

Thorne looked anxious. She pointed towards a narrow alley and started running. I followed her into the shadows. At the thirteenth peal the tolling stopped. In the new silence I heard screams and wails of terror from every direction.

'What is happening?' I demanded.

'That bell serves more than one purpose,' Thorne told me, 'but right now it signals an immediate threat. Now predators are permitted to hunt whoever they like. It's best to hide until a single chime signals that the period of danger is over. Predators are legion and take many forms. Look! There's one above us now!' She pointed upwards.

Something large swooped low over the alley, letting out a raucous screech. It hovered directly above our heads, bathed in the light of the blood moon. It looked like a giant bat, with glowing eyes and long, bone-tipped wings terminating in clawed hands.

'It's a *chyke* – one of the lesser daemons. They hunt in packs and we're their chosen prey!' cried Thorne. 'They are very sensitive to the fresh blood of new arrivals to the dark. That is why it's found you so quickly! It will be directing other predators towards us. Hopefully the second bell will chime soon.'

Anger flared within me. It was not my way to cower in an alley like this, hoping for a bell to save me. I listened carefully. There were cries of fear and pain all around us, but they seemed to be concentrated ahead of us, in the direction of the moon, where they were accompanied by screams of agony. That was where most of the predators and victims must be gathered.

I turned, gestured that Thorne should follow me, and began to run towards that baleful red moon; towards those cries.

'No!' Thorne's voice shook. 'That leads to the basilica square. That's the killing ground!'

I ignored her, gathering speed as I ran through the narrow streets, each turn taking me closer to those terrible screams. I could hear Thorne running close at my heels.

'Please, Grimalkin, listen to me!' she called. 'There are too many of them to fight. They'll rip us to pieces. You can die again in the dark. And if you do, you become nothing. You fall into oblivion!'

'Better to be nothing than to cringe in fear!' I retorted.

Now I was sprinting, easing the first of my blades out of its leather sheath. The square was a vast flagged area with the great stone walls of the basilica rising up beyond it, even higher than those of Priestown Cathedral.

Who prayed within those walls? To which dark entities did they offer worship?

In front of the basilica, the square was a scene of carnage. The flags ran with blood and there were bodies everywhere, some dead, others still twitching or attempting to crawl to safety. The air was full of chykes that swooped and tore, slaying those who cowered below. The sound of screams rent the air, but loudest of all was the infernal beating of huge wings.

One creature saw me and glided forward, eyes glowing, talons outstretched. I hurled a blade into its throat and it fluttered to the ground, blood spraying from its open mouth.

Then I raised two of my long blades high above my head and yelled out a challenge: 'Here I am! Attack me if you dare!'

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Thorne's face; it was full of alarm and fear. Had the dark diminished her so much? I wondered sadly.

The chykes flocked to where I was standing, and soon I was spinning and whirling, performing my dance of death, slaying my enemies with each stab and thrust of my blades.

Suddenly I realized that the alarm on Thorne's face had changed to grim determination. Soon we were fighting back to back. I laughed as we slew our enemies.

I'd gone to the dark, but nothing had changed.

I was still Grimalkin.