

JOSEPH DELANEY

SPOOKS

I AM GRIMALKIN



*She is out for revenge.
Do not stand in her way.*

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About the Author

The Wardstone Chronicles

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Q&A with Joseph Delaney

About the Book

WARNING: NOT TO BE READ AFTER DARK

'I am Grimalkin and I have already chosen those I will kill.'

Grimalkin has made it her lifetime ambition to destroy the Fiend, avenging the brutal murder of her son.

Having grudgingly joined forces with the Spook and his apprentice, Tom, and assisted them in the binding of the Fiend, she is now on the run. and her mission is deadly.

In order to bind the Fiend's spirit for ever Grimalkin must keep his severed head in her possession. No matter who - or what - comes after it ...

This latest chilling instalment in the Wardstone Chronicles follows Grimalkin, the terrifying witch assassin, feared wherever she is known.

SPOOKS

I AM GRIMALKIN



JOSEPH DELANEY

Interior Illustrations by David Wyatt

RHCP DIGITAL

for Marie





Grimalkin carves the symbol of her scissors on trees to mark her territory or warn others away ...

The current assassin of the Malkin clan is Grimalkin. Very fast and strong, this assassin has a code of honour and never resorts to trickery. She prefers her opponent to be a challenge. Although honourable, Grimalkin also has a dark side and is reputed to use torture. All fear the *snip-snip* of her terrible scissors.

She uses these to shear the flesh and bone of her enemies ... Grimalkin's favourite killing tool is the long blade, and she is a skilled blacksmith who forges her own weapons.

*Taken from John Gregory's notebook,
The Spook's Bestiary*

Grimalkin made her first Wardstone Chronicles appearance in *The Spook's Battle* when she was sent by the Pendle witches to kill Thomas Ward.

Since then she has featured in her own short story (in the anthology *The Spook's Stories: Witches*) where we learned about her background and extreme hatred for her sworn enemy - the Fiend.

Now this deadly witch assassin has formed an alliance with Tom, the Spook and Alice. The narrative follows straight on from the end of *The Spook's Destiny*. What Grimalkin carries must be kept out of the clutches of their enemies at all costs ...



THE HIGHEST POINT IN THE COUNTY IS MARKED BY MYSTERY.
IT IS SAID THAT A MAN DIED THERE IN A GREAT STORM, WHILE BINDING
AN EVIL THAT THREATENED THE WHOLE WORLD.

THEN THE ICE CAME AGAIN, AND WHEN IT RETREATED, EVEN THE
SHAPES OF THE HILLS AND THE NAMES OF THE TOWNS IN THE VALLEYS
CHANGED.

NOW, AT THAT HIGHEST POINT ON THE FELLS, NO TRACE REMAINS OF
WHAT WAS DONE SO LONG AGO, BUT ITS NAME HAS ENDURED.

THEY CALL IT -

THE WARDSTONE.

CHAPTER
1
A LARGE GREEN BITTER APPLE



Look closely at the enemy before you. Do you see his bulging eyes and berserker fury? Do you see his hairy chest? Can you smell his unwashed body? Keep calm. Why be afraid? You can win. After all, he is just a man. Learn to believe me. I am Grimalkin.

ONCE I REACHED the centre of the wood, I swung the heavy leather sack down from my shoulder and placed it on the ground before me. Then I knelt and undid the cord that sealed it - to be met by the rank stink of what lay within. I grimaced and drew forth what it contained, holding it up before me by its hair, which was greasy and matted with dirt.

It was very dark beneath the trees and the moon would not rise for another hour. But my witchy eyes could see clearly despite the gloom, and I gazed upon the severed head of the Fiend, the Devil himself.

It was a terrible sight to behold. I had stitched the eyelids shut so that he could see nothing; I had stuffed his mouth with a large green bitter apple wrapped in a tangle of rose thorns so that he could not speak. My enemy had

been well looked after; dealt with exactly as he deserved. Not withstanding the stench, neither the head nor the apple had rotted; the first was due to his power, the second a result of my magic.

I spread the sack out on the ground and lowered the head onto it. Then I sat cross-legged opposite it, scrutinizing my enemy carefully.

Somehow it looked smaller now than it had appeared when freshly severed, but it was still almost twice the size of the average human head. Was it shrinking as a result of being separated from its body? I wondered. The horns that protruded from its forehead were coiled and curved like those of a ram; the nose resembled an eagle's beak. It was a cruel face and deserved the cruelty that I had inflicted upon it in turn.

All about my body, a series of leather straps bore scabbards that held my weapons and tools. From the smallest of these I withdrew a thin sharp hook with a long handle. I thrust it into the Fiend's open mouth, pushed it deep into the green apple, and twisted and tugged. For a second there was resistance, but then I pulled the fruit out, bringing with it the tangle of rose thorns.

Relieved of the obstruction, the mouth slowly closed. I could see the broken teeth within: I had smashed them with my hammer as the Spook, Tom Ward and I had bound the Fiend. The memory of it was vivid, and I watched it again in my mind's eye.

Long had I waited for the opportunity to bind or destroy the Fiend, my greatest enemy. Even as a child I'd disliked him intensely. I observed the subtle ways in which he increasingly controlled my clan; saw how the coven fawned over him. They spent most of each year looking forward to the Halloween sabbath, the time when he was most likely to visit. Sometimes he appeared right in the centre of their

fire, and they reached forward, desperate to touch his hairy hide, oblivious to the flames that seared their bare arms.

My growing revulsion was something instinctive in me - a natural born hatred - and I knew that unless I acted, he would become a blight upon my life; a dark shadow over everything I did. He was clever, subtle and devious, often achieving his aims slowly. Above all I feared that one day, like many other witches who had once opposed him, I would finally become in thrall to him. That I could not bear and I needed to do something to make it impossible.

And I knew exactly what I had to do: there is one certain way in which a witch can ensure that he keeps his distance. It is very extreme but it means that she can be free of him for evermore. She needs to sleep with him just once, then bear his child. Thereafter - having inspected his offspring - he may not approach her again. Not unless she wishes it.

Most of the Fiend's children prove to be abhumans, misshapen creatures of the dark with terrible strength; others are powerful witches. But a few, a very few, are born perfect human children untainted by evil. I knew I risked giving birth to a dark entity, but it seemed worth it to be rid of the Fiend.

I was fortunate indeed. Mine was a beautiful, fragile baby boy, perfect in every way.

I had never felt such intense love for another creature. To have my son's soft warmth against my body, so trusting, so very dependent, was wonderful - blissful beyond anything I had dreamed of; something I had never imagined or anticipated. That little child loved me, and I loved him in return; he depended upon me for life, and for the first time I was truly happy. But in this world such happiness rarely lasts.

I remember well the night mine ended. The sun had just set and it was a warm summer's evening, so I walked out into the walled garden at the rear of my cottage, cradling my child, humming softly to lull him to sleep. Suddenly

lightning flashed overhead and I felt the ground shift beneath my feet; the air became sharp with cold. Although I had anticipated a visit from the Fiend for some time, I suddenly realized that his arrival was now imminent and my heart lurched with fear. At the same time I was glad because once he'd seen his son, I knew that he would leave and never be able to visit me again. I would be rid of him for the rest of my life.

Previously, the Fiend had always appeared to me as a handsome young man with dark curly hair, blue eyes and a mouth that often turned up at the corners with a warm, welcoming smile. But he can take on many shapes, and this time he appeared in the form that the Pendle witches refer to as 'his fearsome majesty'; it is a shape that is used to intimidate and terrify.

He materialized very near where I was standing, and his fetid breath was so close to my face that I struggled not to retch. He was large - three times my height - with the curved horns of a ram and a huge naked body covered in matted black hair. No sooner had he appeared than, with a roar of rage, he snatched my innocent baby boy and lifted him high, ready to dash him to the ground.

'Please!' I begged. 'Don't hurt him. I'll do anything, but please let him live. Take my life instead!'

The Fiend never even glanced at me. He was filled with wrath and cruelty. He smashed my child's fragile head against a rock. Then he vanished.

For a long time I was insane with grief. And then, as the long days and sleepless nights slowly passed, thoughts of revenge began to swirl within my head. Was it possible? I asked myself. Could I destroy the Fiend?

Impossible or not, that became my goal and my only reason for living.

I achieved part of that goal just one month ago. The Fiend is not destroyed, but at least he is temporarily bound. That binding was accomplished with the help of the old

Spook, John Gregory, and his young apprentice, Thomas Ward. We transfixed the Fiend with silver spears, then nailed his hands and feet to the bedrock of the deep pit at Kenmare in the southwest of Ireland, where his body is now buried.

I still delight in remembering the moment of our victory. The Fiend was standing on all fours, tossing his head about like an enraged bull and roaring with pain. I stabbed the first nail into his left hand, then struck the broad head three times with the hammer, driving it right through the flesh to pin his huge hairy paw fast to the rock. However, in my eagerness to bind him I became careless, and that was the moment when I almost died.

He twisted his head, opened his mouth wide and lunged towards me as if to bite my head from my body. But I avoided those deadly jaws, then swung the hammer back hard into his face, smashing his front teeth into fragments and leaving only broken bloody stumps. Few things have given me greater satisfaction!

After that, Tom Ward wielded the Destiny Blade given to him by Cuchulain, the greatest of Ireland's dead heroes. With two deadly blows, the Spook's apprentice cut through the Fiend's neck and I carried that severed head away with me.

While body and head are apart, the Devil is bound. But his dark servants pursue me. They want to return the head to its body and pluck out the nails and silver spears so that he is free once more.

To thwart them, I keep moving. By doing this, I buy time so that the Spook and his apprentice can discover the means by which the Fiend may finally be destroyed or returned to the dark. But I cannot run for ever and my strength is finite. Besides, it is in my nature to fight, not run. This is a conflict I cannot win; there are too many of

them - too many powerful denizens of the dark for even the witch assassin of the Malkin clan to overcome.

'It feels good to have you in my power!' I told the Fiend as I sat in front of him.

For a moment the severed head did not reply, but then the mouth slowly opened and a dribble of blood-flecked saliva trickled down his chin.

'Unstitch my eyes!' he bellowed, his voice a deep growl. His lips moved but the words seemed to rise up from the ground beneath the head.

'Why should I do that?' I demanded. 'If you could see, you'd tell your servants where I am. Besides, it is my pleasure to watch you suffer.'

'You can never win, witch!' he snarled, showing his broken teeth again. 'I am immortal; I can outlast even time itself. One day you will die and I will be waiting. What you have done to me I will repay a thousand times over. You cannot begin to imagine the torments that await you.'

'Listen, fool!' I told him. 'Listen well! I don't dwell on past failings, nor do I project my mind into the future more than is necessary. I am a creature of the "now" and I live in the present. And you are here in the present, trapped with me. It is you who suffer now. You are in *my* power!'

'You are strong, witch,' the Fiend said quietly, 'but something stronger and more deadly stalks you. Your days are numbered.'

Suddenly everything grew quiet and still. Our reference to 'time' had spurred him to attempt again what he had already tried but failed to do the previous occasion I'd lifted him out of the sack. He had the ability to slow or halt time - though being separated from his body had limited his usual powers. However, taking no chances, I rammed the thorn-wrapped apple back into his mouth, then twisted my hooked implement out and pulled it free.

The Fiend's face twitched, and beneath the stitched lids I could see the orbs of his eyes rolling in spasm. But I could

hear the breeze whistling through the leaves above my head once more. Time was moving forward. The moment of danger was past.

I returned the head to the leather sack, stared into the leafy darkness and concentrated. One quick sniff told me that this was still a safe place. Nothing dangerous lurked in this copse that shrouded the summit of a hill and it was an excellent location. My enemies could not approach undetected.

My pursuers had gradually been increasing in number, but I had lost them late in the evening, and soon after had employed some of my precious remaining magic to cloak myself. I had to use it sparingly because my resources were almost exhausted. Now it was nearly midnight and I intended to rest here and regain my strength by sleeping until dawn.

Some time later, I awoke suddenly, sensing danger. My pursuers were climbing the hill towards me and they had spread out to encircle the wood.

How could that have happened? I had cloaked myself well: they should not have been able to find me. I sprang to my feet and swung the leather sack onto my shoulders.

I had been running for too long. Now, finally, it was time to fight. The thought lifted my spirits; the anticipation of combat always did that. It was what I lived for: to test my strength against my enemies'; to fight and kill.

How many were there? I fingered the thumb-bones that hung from the necklace I wore around my neck, drawing forth their magical power before probing the darkness with my mind.

There were nine creatures approaching. I sniffed three times to gather more information. There were others further back - almost a mile away - maybe twenty or more moving in this direction. Something puzzled me and I sniffed again. There was a new addition to this larger

group; someone or something with them that I couldn't identify. Something strange. What was it?

Something stronger and more deadly stalks you.

That was what the Fiend had said. Was this what he was referring to?

Perhaps it was, but for now that whole larger group could be forgotten. First I had to deal with the more immediate threat, so I began to assess the level of danger posed by the group of nine.

Seven of them were witches. At least one of them was of the first rank and she used familiar magic. That might be how they'd found me. A witch's familiar could be anything from a toad to an eagle. Sometimes it was a powerful creature of the dark, although they were hard to control. So the familiar might have been able to find me despite the cloak I'd wrapped about myself.

I could also tell that one of the group climbing the hill was an abhuman - and that the ninth was a man; a dark mage.

It would be easy to make my escape by choosing the path of least resistance. Two of the witches were young - hardly more than novices. I could simply break through the encircling line at that point and flee into the darkness. But that was not my way. I had to remind them who I was. Send a clear message to all who pursued me that I was Grimalkin, the witch assassin of the Malkin clan. I had run for so long that they had grown disrespectful. I had to teach them fear again. So I called down the hill to my enemies.

'I am Grimalkin and I could kill you all!' I cried. 'But I will slay only three - the strongest three!'

There was no answer, but everything became very still and quiet. This was the calm. I was the storm.

Now I draw two weapons. In my left hand I grip the long blade that I use for hand-to-hand combat; in my right a

throwing dagger. My enemies are entering the trees now, so I descend the hill, advancing to meet them. First I will slay the mage; next the abhuman; finally the familiar witch, the strongest of all.

I am walking slowly, taking care to make no noise. Some of my enemies either lack the skill to do likewise or are careless. My hearing is acute and I detect the occasional distant crack of a twig or the faint rustle of long skirts trailing through the undergrowth.

Once in position above the mage, I come to a halt. He is only a man and will be the easiest of the three to overcome. Even so, he is undoubtedly more powerful than six of the advancing witches. A witch assassin must never underestimate her opponent. I will kill him quickly, then move on to the next.

I coil myself like a sharp metal spring and concentrate on my attack, searching for the mage, probing the darkness with my keen eyes. He is a young man, but although his magic is strong, physically he is out of condition and overweight, breathing heavily from the climb.

I whirl into motion. Three rapid steps downhill, and I hurl the throwing blade without breaking my stride. It takes the mage in the heart and he falls backwards, dead even before he can cry out. His magical defences proved inadequate.

The abhuman is my next target. He is big, with wide-set eyes and sharp yellow fangs jutting up over his top lip. Such creatures – children of the Fiend and a witch – are immensely strong and need to be kept at a distance and tackled at arm's length. To fall into their grasp is to risk being torn limb from limb. They are invariably brutal and morally debased, the worst of them capable of anything. If my child had been such an evil creature I would have drowned it at birth.

I sprint towards him at full pelt, plucking another throwing knife from its leather sheath. My throw is

accurate and would have taken him in the throat, but he has been protected. The witches have infused him with their power, creating wards that deflect my blade. It skitters away uselessly and he surges towards me, roaring in fury, wielding a large club in one hand and a barbed spear in the other. He swings the club and jabs with the spear. But I have moved before either reaches me.

The heavy sack bounces against my back as I change direction again. Then, with my long blade, I cut the abhuman's throat, and he falls choking, a stream of blood spraying upwards. Still without checking my stride, I run on.

Now I must deal with the third enemy - the familiar witch.

I am running widdershins, against the clock, so that my left and more deadly arm is facing towards the slope and the remaining witches, who are still moving upwards in my direction. A witch attacks, but not the one I seek. I ram the hilt of my blade into her face and she falls back. She will live, but without her front teeth.

By now the powerful familiar witch has sensed my attack, and she turns to face me, sending dark enchantments like poisoned spears towards my heart. I flick them aside and head directly towards her. I hear the beating of wings and something swoops towards my face with claws outstretched. It is a small hawk - a kestrel. I sweep my blade upwards in an arc and the hawk screams, its feathers falling upon me like blood-flecked snow.

The witch shrieks as her familiar dies; she shrieks again when I cut her the first time. My next blow ends her life, and the only sounds now are the *slip-slap* of my feet on the ground and the *wish-swish* of my breath as I accelerate down the hill and leave the cover of the trees.

I speed eastwards out of the wood, leaving my enemies to find their dead. As I run, I go over in my mind what has

happened. An assassin must evaluate both her successes and her failures; she must always learn from the past.

I consider again the means by which they have found me. The witch was powerful, but her familiar was just a small hawk. Their combined magic could not have seen beyond the cloak that I had cast about myself. No, it has to be something else.

What about the strange presence advancing with the larger group further back? What is it? Is it this that has discovered me? If so, it must be powerful. And it is something that I have never encountered before. Something new.

It is wise to be wary of the unknown. Its unfamiliarity makes it dangerous. But soon it will be dead. How can it hope to defeat me?

I am Grimalkin.

CHAPTER
2
AN UNKNOWN THREAT



Each day say to yourself that you are the best, the strongest and the most deadly. Eventually you will start to believe it. Finally it will come true. It came true for me. I am Grimalkin.

JUST BEFORE DAWN I rested for an hour, drinking cool water from a stream and chewing my last few strips of dried meat. My supplies were almost exhausted and I would need fresh meat to keep up my strength. Rabbits would have been easy to trap, but I was still being pursued and could not afford to rest for more than a few moments. The majority of my enemies were almost two miles back now, but one of their number had come on ahead of the group and was closing on me. It was the unknown creature that I had first sniffed in the wood.

It was moving faster than I was. Whatever the danger it presented, soon I would have to turn and face it. But first I had to know more. So I took a small mirror from its sheath