

JOSEPH DELANEY

SPOOKS

SLITHER'S TALE



A new darkness is rising . . .

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Extract from The Spooks Bestiary

Epigraph

Prologue: Nessa's Nightmare

Chapter 1: Is it a Trade?

Chapter 2: No Manners at All

Chapter 3: The Dark Tower

Chapter 4: The Kobalos Beast

Chapter 5: I Must Feed!

Chapter 6: The Shaiksa Assassin

Chapter 7: The Bite of a Blade

Chapter 8: Only One Chance

Chapter 9: North to Valkarky

Chapter 10: The Hyb Warrior

Chapter 11: His Big Stinky Mouth

Chapter 12: The Keeper of the Gate

Chapter 13: The Haggenbrood

Chapter 14: Gossip and News

Chapter 15: Grimalkin

Chapter 16: The Dead Witch

Chapter 17: Do We Have a Trade?

Chapter 18: A Very Interesting Question

Chapter 19: Hostile Hungry Eyes

Chapter 20: The Tawny Death

Chapter 21: The Slarinda

Chapter 22: The Kangadon

Chapter 23: He Who Can Never Die
Chapter 24: Daughter of Darkness
Chapter 25: Farewell to My Sister
Chapter 26: The Slave Kulad
Chapter 27: A Cry in the Night
Chapter 28: We will Meet Again

Slither's Dream
Glossary of The Kobalos World
About the Author
The Wardstone Chronicles
Copyright

About the Book

My name is Slither, and before my tale is finished, you'll find out why . . .

Slither is not human. Far from the Spook-protected County, he preys upon humans, sneaking into their homes to gorge upon their blood while they sleep.

When a local farmer dies, it's only natural that Slither should want to feast on his lovely daughters. But the farmer has offered him a trade: in return for taking the younger girls to safety, Slither can have the eldest daughter, Nessa, to do with as he wishes . . .

Slither's promise takes him and Nessa on a treacherous journey where enemies await at every turn. Enemies that include Grimalkin, the terrifying witch assassin, still searching for a way to destroy the Fiend for good.

The latest instalment of the Wardstone Chronicles introduces Slither, one of the most terrifying creatures Joseph Delaney has yet created.

SPOOKS

SLITHER'S TALE



JOSEPH DELANEY

Interior illustrations by David Wyatt

RHCP DIGITAL

for Marie



Illustration by Julek Heller called 'Kobalos'

EXTRACT FROM THE SPOOKS BESTIARY

Illustrated by Julek Heller



The Kobalos

The Kobalos are not human. They walk upright but have something of the appearance of a fox or a wolf. The body is covered with dark hair; the face and hands are shaven according to custom; the mage wears a long black coat with a slit in the back to accommodate his tail, which can function as an extra limb.

These mages are solitary creatures who shun their fellow citizens and usually dwell beyond the fringes of the frozen Kobalos domain, which is far to the north of the continent known as Europa. Each one 'farms' a haizda, a territory which he has marked out as his own. Within it there are several hundred humans, living in hamlets, villages and farms. He rules by fear and magecraft, harvesting souls and accumulating power. He usually lives in an old, gnarled ghanbala tree, sleeping by day but

travelling the boundaries of his haizda by night, taking the blood of humans and animals for sustenance. He can shift his shape, taking on the appearance of animals, and can also vary his size. This type of mage is also a formidable warrior whose favourite weapon is a sabre.

The Kobalos are a fierce, warlike race who, with the exception of their mages, inhabit Valkarky, a city deep within the Arctic Circle.

The name Valkarky means the City of the Petrified Tree; it is filled with all types of abomination that have been created by dark magic. Its walls are constructed and renewed by creatures that never sleep; creatures that spit soft stone from their mouths. The Kobalos believe that their city will not stop growing until it covers the entire world.^{[1](#)}

^{[1](#)} *The above is based upon the writings of a very early spook called Nicholas Browne, who travelled far beyond the borders of the County. Apart from his notebooks, there is no evidence that any of his assertions are true but we must keep an open mind. The world is a big place and much remains to be explored - John Gregory*

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 FELS, NO TRACE REMAINS OF WHAT
WAS DONE SO LONG AGO,
BUT ITS NAME HAS ENDURED.

THEY CALL IT -

THE WARDSTONE.

PROLOGUE
NESSA'S NIGHTMARE



IT IS VERY dark in my bedroom. The candle has guttered, the flame has flickered and died. It is cold too, despite the extra blankets. It has been a long winter, one of the very worst. This is spring but there is still a crust of frozen snow on the fields and the farmyard flags, and also ice inside my room patterning the windowpanes.

But it is my birthday tomorrow. I will be ten. I am looking forward to the cake. I have to blow out all its candles with one really big breath. If I do that, Father will give me my present. It is a dress - a red dress with white lace at the neck and hem.

I want to sleep. I squeeze my eyes tight shut and try. It's better to sleep because then the night will pass quickly. I will open my eyes to see sunlight streaming in through the window, dust motes gleaming like tiny suns.

Suddenly I hear a noise. What is it? It sounds like something scratching on the floor by the wainscot. Could it be a rat? I fear big grey rats with their small eyes and long whiskers. My greatest fear of all is that one might find its way into my bed.

My heart begins to race with fear and I think of calling out for my father. But my mother died two years ago and he manages the farm all by himself. His days are long and tiring and he needs his sleep. No, I must be brave. The rat will soon go away. Why should it bother with my bed? There is no food here.

Again there comes a scratching of sharp claws on wood. My heart jumps with fear. The noise is nearer now, halfway between the window and my bed. I hold my breath, listening for the sound to be repeated. It is, and now it is much closer, just below my bed. If I were to look down, it might be staring up at me with its small beady eyes.

I *must* get up. I will run to my father's room. But what if the rat's whiskers touch my feet? What if I tread on its long thin tail?

Now it gets even louder. I feel a tug at my bedclothes and shiver with fear. The rat is climbing up onto my bed, using its claws to pull itself on top of the blankets. In a panic I try to sit up. But I can't. I seem to be paralysed. I can open my mouth, but when I scream, no sound escapes my lips.

The rat is crawling up onto my body now. I can feel its small sharp claws pricking into my skin through the blankets. It is sitting on my chest. Its tail goes *thumpety-thump*, faster and faster, keeping perfect time with the beating of my heart.

And now there is a new thing, even more terrifying. The rat seems to be growing heavier by the second. Its weight is pressing down on my chest, making it difficult to breathe. How can that be possible? How can a rat be so large and heavy?

Now, in the darkness, I sense its face moving closer to mine. It's a big face and I can feel the rat's warm breath on my skin. But there is something even stranger than its size and weight. Its eyes are glowing in the dark. They are large and red, and by their lurid glare I can now see its face.

It isn't a rat, after all. The face is that of a fox or wolf, with a long jaw and big sharp teeth. And those teeth are biting into my neck now. Long, thin, hot needles of pain pierce my throat.

I scream. Over and over again, I scream silently. I feel as if I am dying, slipping down into the deepest darkness, away from this world.

Then I am awake and the weight is gone from my chest. I can move now, and I sit up in bed and begin to cry. Soon I hear the sound of heavy boots pounding across the wooden boards of the corridor. The door is flung open, and Father enters carrying a candle.

He places it on the bedside table, and moments later I am in his arms. I sob and sob, and he strokes my hair and pats my back in reassurance.

'It's all right. It's all right, daughter,' he murmurs. 'It was just a dream – just a terrible nightmare.'

But then he holds me at arm's length and studies my face, neck and shoulders carefully. Next he takes a white handkerchief from the pocket of his nightshirt and gently dabs it at my neck. He scrunches it up in his hand and quickly thrusts it back into his pocket. But not quite fast enough to prevent me from seeing the spots of blood.

Is the nightmare over?

Am I awake?

Or am I still dreaming?

CHAPTER 1 IS IT A TRADE?



I WOKE UP feeling very thirsty.

I'm always thirsty when I wake up, so there was nothing different there, no hint at all that this would be a day to remember.

I climbed out through the cleft, high in the trunk of my old ghanbala tree, and gazed down upon the white, frosty ground far below.

The sun wouldn't rise fully for almost an hour and the stars were still visible. I knew all five thousand of them by name, but Cougis, the Dog Star, was my favourite. It was red, a bloodshot eye peering through the black velvet curtain that the Lord of Night casts over the sky.

I had been asleep for almost three months. I always sleep through that time - the darkest, coldest part of winter, which we call *shudru*. Now I was awake, and thirsty.

It was too close to dawn for taking blood from the humans in my haizda - the ones I farmed. My next

preference would be to hunt, but nothing would be about yet. There was nothing to satisfy my thirst – yet there was another way. I could always go and intimidate Old Rowler and force him to trade.

I squeezed back into the tree and slipped my two sharpest blades into the scabbards on my chest. Then I pulled on my long, thick, black overcoat, which has thirteen buttons made of best-quality bone. The coat comes down as far as my brown leather boots and the sleeves are long enough to cover my hairy arms.

I'm hairy all over – and there's something else I should mention. Something that makes me different from you.

I have a tail.

Don't laugh – don't pull a face or shake your head. Be sensible and feel sorry for yourself because you don't have one. You see, mine's a long, powerful tail that's better than an extra arm.

One more thing – my name is Slither, and before my tale is finished you'll find out why.

Finally I laced up my boots and squeezed back through the cleft and onto the branch.

Then I stepped out into space.

I counted to two before flicking up my slithery tail. It coiled and tightened; the skin rasped against the lowest branch, breaking off shards of bark that fell like dark flakes of snow. I hung there by my tail for a few seconds while my keen eyes searched the ground below. There were no tracks to mark the frost. Not that I expected any. My ears are sharp and I awake at the slightest sound, but it's always better to be safe than sorry.

I dropped again, landing on the cold hard ground. Then I began to run, watching the ground speed by in a blur beneath my legs. Within minutes I'd be at Old Rowler's farm.

I respected Old Rowler.

I respected him just enough to turn what might have been a cruel taking into a wary trade. He was very brave for a human. Brave enough to live close to my tree when many others had fled. Brave enough even to trade.

I strolled along below his wooden boundary fence, but the moment I reached the farmyard flags, I blew myself up to the size that works best with most humans. Not big enough to be too intimidating, but not small enough to give Old Rowler ideas. In fact, exactly the same size as the farmer had been before his old bones had started to weaken, his spine to bend.

I rapped on the door softly. It was my special rhythmical rap. Not loud enough to wake his three daughters but audible enough to bring the farmer huffing and puffing down the stairs.

He opened the door no more than the width of his calloused hand. Then he held a candle to the crack so that it lit up my face.

‘What is it this time?’ he demanded belligerently. ‘I hoped I’d seen the last of you. It’s months since you last bothered me. I was hoping you’d never wake up again!’

‘I’m thirsty,’ I said, ‘and it’s too early to hunt. I need a little something to warm my belly for a few hours.’ Then I smiled, showing my sharp teeth and allowing my hot breath to steam upwards into the cold air.

‘I’ve nothing to spare. Times are hard,’ protested the farmer. ‘It’s been one of the hardest winters I can remember. I’ve lost cattle – even sheep.’

‘How are your three daughters keeping? I hope they’re well,’ I asked, opening my mouth a little wider.

The candle began to dance and shake in Old Rowler’s hands, just as I’d expected.

‘You keep away from my daughters, Slither. D’ye hear? Keep away.’

‘I was only enquiring after their health.’ I softened my voice. ‘How’s the youngest one? I hope her cough’s better

now.'

'Don't waste my time!' he snapped. 'What are ye here for?'

'I need blood. Bleed a bullock for me – just a little blood to set me up. You can spare half a cup.'

'I told you, it's been a long hard winter,' he said. 'It's a bad time and the surviving animals need all their strength to get through.'

Seeing that I wouldn't get something for nothing, I drew a coin from the pocket of my coat and held it so that it gleamed in the candlelight.

Old Rowler watched as I spat onto the flank of the bullock to deaden the feeling there; so that when I made a small, precise cut in the hide, the animal wouldn't feel a thing. The blood soon began to flow, and I caught it in the metal cup that the farmer had provided, not wasting a single drop.

'I wouldn't really harm your daughters, you know,' I said. 'They've become almost like a family to me.'

'Your kind know nothing about families,' he muttered. 'You'd eat your own mother if you were hungry enough. What about Brian Jenson's daughter from the farm near the river? She disappeared early last spring, never to be seen again. Too many of my neighbours have suffered at your hands.'

I didn't bother to deny his accusation, but neither did I confirm it. Sometimes accidents happened. Mostly I control my taking, husbanding the resources of my haizda, but occasionally the urge gets the better of me and I take too much blood.

'Hey! Hang on a minute – we agreed on half a cup,' Old Rowler protested.

I smiled and pressed my fingers against the wound so that the blood immediately stopped flowing. 'So we did,' I

agreed. 'Still, three quarters of a cup's not too bad. It's a good compromise.'

I took a long drink, my eyes never leaving the farmer's face. He wore a long overcoat and I knew that its lining concealed a wickedly sharp sabre. If sufficiently threatened or provoked, the old man wouldn't hesitate to use it. Not that Rowler, even with his sabre, posed any real threat to me, but it would bring our trade to a close. And that would be a pity because they were useful, men like him. I preferred to hunt, obviously, but the keeping of bloodstock – especially bullocks, which were my favourite – made things easier when times were hard. I wasn't prepared to keep them myself, but I did appreciate the place of this farmer in the scheme of things. He was the only one in my haizda that I ever traded with.

Perhaps I was getting old? Once I would have ripped out the throat of a human such as Rowler – ripped it out without a moment's thought. But I was past my first flush of youth and well-advanced in the magecraft of the haizda. Already I was an adept.

But this, my two hundredth summer, was a dangerous time for a haizda mage – the time when we sometimes fall victim to what we call *skaiium*. You see, living so long changes the way you think. You become more mellow, more understanding of the feelings and needs of others. That's bad for a haizda mage, and many of us don't survive these dangerous years because they lead to a softening of the blood-lust, a dulling of the teeth.

So I knew I had to be careful.

The warm blood flowed down my throat and into my stomach, filling me with new strength. I smiled and licked my lips.

I'd no need to hunt for at least another day, so I handed the cup back to Old Rowler and headed directly for my favourite spot. It was a clearing in the small wood, on the southern slopes that overlooked the farm. Then I shrank

myself down, coat and boots included, to my smallest size, the one I often use for sleeping. Now I was no larger than a grey-whiskered sewer rat.

The ox blood, however, remained exactly the same size, so that my stomach now felt very full. Despite the fact that I'd only just woken up, the combination of a very full stomach and the newly risen sun made me feel very sleepy indeed.

So I lay on my back and stretched out. My overcoat has a special slit, like a very short sleeve, to allow my tail out into the air. When I'm running, hunting or fighting, it coils up my back very tightly, but sometimes in summer, when the sun is shining and I'm feeling sleepy, I lie down on the warm grass and let it stretch out behind me. Happy and relaxed, I did that now, and in no time at all I was fast asleep.

Normally, with a stomach as full as that, I'd have slept soundly for a day and a night, but just before sunset, a scream cut through the air like a blade, waking me suddenly.

I sat up but then remained very still. My nostrils dilated and twitched as I began to sniff the air.

Blood . . .

I raised my tail and used it to gather more information. Things couldn't have been better and my mouth began to water. Ox blood was sweet and delicious, but this was the most appetizing blood of all. It was freshly spilled human blood and it came from the direction of Old Rowler's farm.

Instantly my thirst returned; I quickly got to my feet and began to run towards the distant fence. My long loping strides soon brought me to the boundary and, once under the fence, I immediately grew to human size. I used my tail again, searching for the source of the blood. It came from the North Pasture, and now I knew exactly whose it was.

I'd been close enough to the old man to smell it through his wrinkled skin, to hear it pounding along his knotted

veins. Old blood it might be, but where human blood was concerned I couldn't be too choosy.

Yes, it was Old Rowler. He was bleeding.

Then I detected another source of blood, though this was far weaker. It was the scent of a young human female.

I began to run again, my heart pounding with excitement.

When I reached the North Pasture, the sun was an orange globe sitting precisely upon the tip of the horizon. One glance and I understood everything.

Old Rowler lay sprawled like a broken doll close to the trunk of a yew tree. Even from this distance I could see the blood on the grass. A figure was bending over him. It was a girl in a brown dress, a girl with long hair the colour of midnight. I sensed her young blood too. It was sweeter and more enticing than Old Rowler's.

It was Nessa, his eldest daughter. I could hear her sobs as she tended to the old man. Then I saw the bull in the next field. It was stamping its feet angrily and tossing its horns. It must have gored the farmer who, despite his injury, had managed to stagger through the gate and close it behind him.

Suddenly the girl looked back over her shoulder and saw me. With a little cry of terror she rose to her feet, pulled up her long skirt above her knees and began to run away towards the house. I could have caught her easily, but I had all the time in the world now, so I began to walk towards the crumpled body.

At first I thought that the old man was dead, but my sharp ears detected the faltering rhythm of a failing heart. Old Rowler was dying, for sure: there was a massive hole beneath his ribs and his blood was still bubbling out onto the grass.

As I knelt down beside him, he opened both eyes. His face was twisted with pain but he tried to speak. I had to

bend closer, until my left ear was almost touching the old man's blood-flecked lips.

'My daughters . . .' he whispered.

'Don't you go worrying about your daughters,' I said.

'But I do worry,' said the dying farmer. 'Do ye remember the terms of the first trade we made?'

I didn't reply but I remembered them all right. The trade had taken place seven years earlier when Nessa had just turned ten.

'While I live, keep away from my three daughters!' he'd warned. 'But if anything ever happens to me, you can have the eldest, Nessa, in return for taking the other two south to their aunt and uncle in Pwodente. They live in the village of Stoneleigh, close to the last bridge before the Western Sea . . .'

'I'll take care of them,' I'd promised, realizing that this could be the beginning of years of useful trade with the farmer. 'Treat 'em like family.'

'A trade,' the old man had insisted. 'Is it a trade?'

'Yes,' I'd agreed. 'It's a trade.'

It had been a good trade because, according to the law of Bindos, each Kobalos citizen has to sell in the slave markets at least one purra - or human girl - every forty years or become an outcast, shunned by his fellows and slain on sight. As a haizda mage, I did not normally dabble in the markets and did not wish to own females in the customary way. But I knew that the time would come when I must meet my next obligation or suffer the consequences. Otherwise I would become an outlaw, hunted down by my own people. Rowler was old; once he was dead I could sell Nessa.

And now here he was before me, dying, and Nessa was mine.

The farmer began to cough up a dark clot of phlegm and blood. He hadn't long now. Within moments he'd be dead.

It would take a week at most to deliver the two younger girls to their relatives. Then Nessa would belong to me. I could force her north to the slave market, taking my time while I sampled some of her blood on the way.

Suddenly the old man began to fumble in the pocket of his overcoat. Perhaps he was searching for a weapon, I thought.

But he pulled out a little brown notebook and a pencil. With shaking hands, not even looking at the page, he began to scribble. He scribbled a lot of words for a dying man. When he'd finished, he tore out the page and held it towards me. Cautiously, I moved closer and accepted the note.

'It's to Nessa,' Rowler whispered. 'I've told her what she has to do. You can have everything – the farm, the animals and Nessa. Remember what we agreed? All you have to do is get Susan and Bryony to their aunt and uncle. Will you keep to our trade? Will ye do it?'

I read the note quickly. When I'd finished, I folded it in two and pushed it into my overcoat pocket. Then I smiled, showing just a hint of teeth. 'We made a trade and I'm honour-bound to keep to it,' I said.

Then I waited with Old Rowler until he died. It took longer than I expected. He struggled for breath and seemed reluctant to go, even though he was in great pain. The sun had sunk well below the horizon before he gave a final shudder.

I watched him very carefully, my curiosity aroused. I had traded with Old Rowler for seven years, but flesh and blood is opaque and hides the true nature of the soul within. I had often wondered about this stubborn, brave but sometimes cantankerous old farmer. Now, at last, I would finally find out exactly what he was.

I was waiting to see his soul leave his body, and I wasn't disappointed.

A grey shape began to materialize above the crumpled overcoat. It was very faint and ever so slightly luminous. It was helical in form, a faint spiral, and much, much smaller than Old Rowler. I'd often watched human souls before and I liked to wait and see which way they would go.

So what was Old Rowler?

Was he an 'Up' or a 'Down'?

I harvest souls and draw power from them, absorbing them into my own spirit. So I prepared myself to reach out and snatch the farmer's soul. It was a difficult thing to do and, even with the whole force of my concentration, could only be accomplished if the soul lingered a while. But this soul did not tarry.

With a faint whistle it began to spiral away, spinning up into the sky. Not many did that. Usually they gave a sort of groan or howl and plunged into the earth. So Old Rowler was clearly an Up. I'd missed out on a new soul, but what did that matter? He was gone now and my curiosity was satisfied.

I began to search the body. There was only one coin. Probably the same one I'd given him earlier for the ox blood. Next I pulled out the sabre. The handle was a little rusty but I liked the balance and the blade was sharp.

I swished it through the air a few times. It had a good feel to it so I thrust it safely into the lining of my own overcoat.

That done, I was free to begin the main business of the night.

Old Rowler's daughters . . .