

Chapter 1 = THE MONSTER HUNTERS

“Why’d the boatman insist we wait ’till dark before he rowed us in from the ship to shore? Their captain... odd how much respect a mere woman received from her crew. I got the strangest feeling that they were afraid, well, nervous at least in their dealings with her. Also, a pretty hardened bunch, don’t you think? A simple merchant ship, I think not, more like ruthless pirates,” commented the man.

“Not important. Whether they bought our story or not,” his mustached companion added, “they still ferried us across to Dee’ellkka Valley all the same. Most wouldn’t have, not for the amount of gold we had to offer up for the trip.”

“Yes, I agree, I’m just saying it was a little strange. That sinister little smirk of hers as we neared the bay? I tell you, something wasn’t right about her and that ship,” then combing his bony fingers through his short dark hair, the wiry man asked, “Bernt, you sure this is the right place?”

“It better be, Kren,” answered his portly companion with irritation, “After all we’ve gone through to follow up on this lead.”

“So the town, Shirkint, it’s not far?” said Kren as he rummaged through his pack by the side of the road.

“Apparently,” he grumbled, “Just hurry up with that damn lantern, would ya?”

“Got it.” A match from the tinderbox burst into flame and then, once lit, the comforting glow of the lantern began to light their surroundings.

As Kren held the lantern high, the light fell over his partner and the familiar bushy black caterpillar of a mustache upon his plump face. His dark beady eyes glared at him impatiently.

“Let’s move,” Bernt barked, “We’ve got some ground to cover yet.”

The two men once again started their trek along the dirt road from the water’s edge towards the town. “Eerie,” commented Kren as he shone the light about.

“What is?” muttered Bernt, kicking a medium-sized stone to the side of the road where it grazed the trunk of a tree. It was mostly oak and birch in the area, and being late autumn, their leaves littered their path in places.

“It’s night, granted. Stars and the moon are bright tonight. The dark, it’s... I don’t know, unnatural,” he tried to explain, “It’s silly, but it almost feels as if we’re being watched. You don’t think that...”

“You moron,” Bernt snapped at him, “Impossible. Superstitious non-sense, the lot of it.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Kren commented nervously, “Still, I’d feel a little better once we get to this town.”

“Quit yer belly-aching, would ya? We’re here to do a job. You gonna back out now,” he laughed coldly, “Afraid of the dark?”

“I know how to get it done,” Kren assured him, “I’m not backing down, not for that kind of money. You think he’s good for it though, truly?”

“Has been in the past,” reminded Bernt.

“Yes, you’ve dealt with him before. I keep forgetting that,” he paused in thought a moment before adding, “But just how certain is he that these creatures even exist? We could well be chasing some storybook fantasy of his. What if this woman can really turn into some

horrid serpent creature. And what of venom? We weren't told if there were a risk of that as well in this. Seriously, are we even really and truly prepared if these things are real?"

"I am," Bernt replied bluntly, "aren't you?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so. I mean this is the sort of thing I do, for the right bounty that is. They appear human though, isn't that right?" he asked him shining the lantern towards him.

"Yes, don't tell me that has you all bothered now, does it?" said his companion.

"No, of course not. But I'm not a mercenary, mind you. It's not just about the money, you know. I have no qualms about dispatching these foul unnatural beasts, but how do we know for certain if someone actually is one of these creatures, I mean if they don't transform that is, and well I don't feel right 'bout torturing to provoke a transformation. I wouldn't feel right if we got it wrong."

Bernt sighed. "Pathetic. I don't know why I bring you. These serpent-shapeshifters, they are without navels, if you must know. You really gonna get that close enough to check? Lift up their shirt a bit, are you? You make a stupid move like that; making it obvious that we're hunting them, by seeing what we're looking for? You'll be killed before you have a chance to check, you idiot. There are humans that believe these beasts have the right to walk among us, you know. How's that gonna weigh on your conscience if one of them steps in to protect them from being eradicated like the vermin they are, eh? Those fools that think we should submit and invite goblins and Garcs, to rape our women, invade our communities, and defile our way of life? Are we supposed to bow down to accommodate elves and centaurs and the like into our society, taking our jobs, taking our homes, flirting with our women, their young corrupting our own children into thinking our races are on equal terms? It's us humans that suffer for it. Their races are always looking for handouts, but when it comes to them returning the favor, then we are nothing to them. Yeah, I don't like this idea of such a deadly creature being able to hide, pretend it's one of us, right in plain sight. Kill first and ask questions later, else you'll be the one that's dead. Then, my noble friend, then you can check to see if the belly is smooth or whether we've just merely rid the world of a traitor to the human race. That's what they are, don't you dare compromise our mission because of someone getting in the way like that."

Kren's wiry face contorted slightly and he finally said, "You're right. You can count on me to do what needs to be done. Any human minds that have been corrupted is, in turn, the doing of these foul beasts and therefore at fault for this as well."

"Exactly," replied Bernt, calmer now.

"But why do they not have navels?" Kren asked out of a nagging curiosity.

"Don't know. The young are hatched from eggs. I suppose that's why," he told him.

"Alright," he said, cleared his throat, and added, "Why is it that you were provided with all this information about our intended target and yet I was told near nothing at all?"

"Apparently, you have a loose tongue," he said, glaring out at him from beneath two black eyebrows that were only half as bushy as his mustache.

"Oh, well..." he trailed off, "Let's not be reminded of that, now shall we?"

Bernt chuckled coldly and said, "Yeah, okay, whatever you say."

"What is with this damn darkness? I've never seen anything like this. I've had better sight stuck in thick fog compared to this. I swear, it's this cursed valley. We were warned about this place," he said looking nervously about, glad to see the trees thin out giving way to more grassy terrain, at least from what he could see by the light of the lantern.

Bernt snapped, "You and your non-sense. There's nothing to fear here. It's a haven for half-breed mongrels mostly is what it is. Just remember to stay focused on our task, no matter what kind of mixed abomination shows itself upon the streets of this town we're going to."

"Noted," he agreed, "but, ah, what about, the ah, stories, you know, about The Black Shadow."

"Non-sense," his friend answered firmly, "There is no way. Something that dark and evil as they say, with the immense power this creature is supposed to hold; it's just not possible. The entire world would be in ruins, with death and torment everywhere, a playground for demons. If there is a creature somewhat similar to what these stories and rumours are based upon, well then they are greatly exaggerated, and you know well that we have both dealt with those kinds of situations. Remember the Beast of Bak'knat?"

A grin spread across Kren's thin lips as he remembered. "Okay, yes, you're right. The terrifying Beast of Bak'knat, with fire breath, claws the size of daggers, poison-tipped tail, and a howl that could shatter bones. Poor beast ended up being a deformed two headed deer. Remember, thing could barely breathe and then seeing it try to drink from the river? We did it a favor by putting it out of its misery and the townsfolk paid us for destroying a monster. It was a creature of gossip and nothing more. You truly think that's what this Black Shadow is?"

Bernt shrugged, saying, "Sure, why not? Silly superstitions is all. We're getting paid to check up on a different matter, and whether this serpent-shapeshifter is a fact or not is besides the point. Our employer is paying us to investigate and kill the woman."

"You were told a lot it seems, about what she is. Didn't tell me much in that aspect, nor of who she is," Kren commented, "He say much to you?"

Bernt shook his head.

"What was the name he gave us? Sinva?" Kren asked wanting to go over the details once more before they arrived, "Crossed him somehow? Didn't say how, did he? Probably stole something or insulted him somehow, but as if that really matters, after finding out that she is also this horrible monster."

"Yeah, that's right. Is that a wall up ahead? Looks like we're about to arrive at the lovely town of Shirkint," Bernt stated wearily, peering into the night beyond the light of the lantern, "This is where she's supposed to live, disguised in humanoid form. There's a wall that runs all the way around the town, however the front gate is wide open, actually no gate, just a parting in the wall, or at least that's what I've been told. I guess we'll see soon enough."

Kren commented, "I could use a drink, maybe something to eat."

When the two men entered the town, all was quiet and the streets were bare. The only other light that they could see was a dim glow from a lantern hanging on a wooden post outside a small stable. It was a little way north along the street in front of them. To the left of them was a little shop and to the right was another street that ran the length of the outer wall to the east past what looked to be more shops. Their windows were dark, obviously closed and locked up for the night. On the corner of these two streets, before the two men, was The Old Scabbard Inn. Its worn and faded sign swung gently over the thick and heavy wooden door before them. The large mottled window was covered in grime and barely any light could be seen through it.

"Where is everyone?" Kren asked nervously, "I'm not liking this."

"It's a small town, not like what we're used to. Most everyone has gone home for the night; nothing to be worried about. Come on, we'll stop here at the inn for a bit," he instructed.

The short, bald, and pudgy bartender, behind the counter in the right corner of the room, nodded at them as they entered. His ugly face wore an unwelcoming grimace as he looked them over for a moment. The two men sat at the far end of the larger table by the window near the door.

The room was dimly lit by a few lanterns hung from hooks on the walls and bare candles in holders placed about the tables and the bartender's area. Several tables lined the left wall. There were benches built against the wall and rickety looking chairs on the opposite side of the tables. At the back of the room, an archway led to a staircase to the upper floor and the guest rooms.

"Think they have a room available?" Kren asked his friend.

"It's late, but most likely they don't get a lot of travelers, being a small town. Perhaps they do, I don't know. However, not such a good idea at the moment. I'd like to check the area a bit before we make any commitments for the night," replied Bernt.

"Can you believe this?" Kren whispered, speaking about the other patrons seated at the tables, "What exactly is that? That's not what we're looking for, is it? Looks half dragon or something."

He looked over to the strange humanoid dressed in brown suede seated at a table opposite a human woman in a faded yellow dress and with a fuzzy white shawl about her shoulders. "As the legend goes," replied Bernt quietly, "a dragon was supposed to have tricked a human into mating with her in some demonic spell that created these foul beasts. Dragonites they're called or some just call them simply human-dragons."

Kren's eyes narrowed and, with disgust, he said, "Look at the way she's smiling at that monster, dressed up like she is. Some twisted courtship between them, is that what I'm supposed to believe? They just let these things stroll in here, sit and be served as if they were some sort of person?"

Kren looked the creature over to the point where the Dragonite finally interrupted his conversation with the woman to glare back at him as a warning that he was getting irritated by it. Completely hairless, with patches of scales here and there along his skin, large round eyes, large clawed hands, and a long reptilian tail; he was certainly a site to be seen.

Bernt whispered, "Just calm the hell down. Things are different here, remember? Don't you dare cause a scene. We have work to do. After we've collected on our prize, then we can remind a few of these arrogant monsters of their proper place."

A dark-skinned woman brought a mug of frothy ale over to the elf seated by himself at the far table, asked how the Dragonite and woman were doing, and finally came to ask if she could get the two men something to eat or drink. It didn't sit right with them that they had been tended to last over the others, but they let themselves ignore that fact.

"Ondaff, they be wanting two mugs," she called back to the bartender after they had ordered and paid her.

"So come and get it, wench," he harshly barked back at her.

"You lazy son of a..." she muttered.

"Myla?" the elf called out to her, holding up his empty mug.

"Already?" she grumbled in disbelief. She then called over to the impatient drunk, answering wearily, "Sorry. Right away."

The two men waited for their drinks and had both gulped down over half before Bernt said, "That storyteller Rasindell; he travels around, but he is supposed to be here at this town right now. People say, that beneath his robes, that all that remains of him are the bones of his

skeleton. What, who, and also where we should be looking for this creature; this is where our employer got the information, from Rasindell."

Kren drained the last from his mug and commented, "Odd coincidence. Perhaps we should go see what kind of vision we can get from this storyteller. Some sort of oracle, isn't he?"

"You can," his portly, mustached companion laughed, "There's no way that I'm letting some long dead wizard invade my mind. We'll just go on the information we have already been told; that should be enough. In fact, we should check the layout of the town and also the area we'll be searching tomorrow."

Kren whined, "Now, really?"

"Come on. Bring your lantern," Bernt commanded and led him out the door into the dark once more.

By the light of their lantern they made their way through the streets of the town, passing by a few shops and eventually some houses, gradually nearing the marketplace in the north-eastern part of the town.

"I don't like this," Kren whispered, "There's no one out here but us. We haven't seen a single person since we've left the inn. All the houses are locked up tight, windows dark, no sign of movement. It's so quiet you could hear a pin drop."

"Don't be so paranoid," he snapped at him, "The marketplace is where this woman is supposed to have set up shop, some sort of jewelry stall or something. We should be nearing this market soon. It will be empty, everything closed up for the night, from what I was told, but we'll check it out and plan something from there. Maybe we'll discover a good spot from where to watch her activities from, somewhere where we won't attract much attention to ourselves. We just have a rough description of her; so we'll have to speculate a bit."

The only sound was their boots scuffing along the worn cobblestone streets; they continued in silence.

Kren kept shining the lantern nervously around them.

"Would you quit that?" Bernt finally said.

"I thought I heard something," he told him.

"Non-sense. There's no one out here but us. Why don't you just...", he started to say and then paused.

There was the distinct sound of something small falling and trickling down the wall from the rooftop of the building next to them.

"What was that?" Kren gasped in panic, "Someone's on the roof."

"Relax, you idiot. Probably someone's cat out and about knocking debris from the gutters," he sighed with irritation, "Would you stop it? Why would someone be on the roof anyways?"

"Following us?" his thin companion whispered, and he shone the lantern over towards the wall. He went over to investigate.

"Oh, come on," Bernt grumbled.

"Broken shingles," Kren announced, "You telling me a cat did that?"

The burly man sighed, "Would you just come on. I don't want to be out here all night. No one's following us. Leaping from rooftop to rooftop? Look at the distance between them, really?"

“Yes, alright, I see what you mean,” he realized and started off down the street once more.

Suddenly, Kren jumped and spun around, the lantern shaking, clenched tightly in his bony hand. “Did you hear that?” he whispered in fear.

“Hear what?” Bernt muttered, “Not again.”

“Someone said something,” he told him.

“There’s people in the houses; not surprising,” he explained.

“Really? Looks like everyone’s asleep,” he said shining the light around, his eyes wide, “Besides, this came from behind us.”

“There’s no one there. See for yourself,” Bernt said and then, deciding to humour his friend, asked, “What did they say?”

“Shh,” he hissed, “I don’t know; I couldn’t make it out. It was more of a hushed whisper. There... there it is again. You hear that?”

“Probably just the wind. I didn’t hear anything,” he answered.

The thin man spun around again, shining the light forward. “There!”

“Ow, get that light out of my eyes,” Bernt said, shielding his face, “What, it’s in front of us now, you fool, no one passed us. It’s the damn wind. I didn’t hear anything.”

“Oh, yeah? What wind? I don’t feel any, do you?” Kren protested, and he opened the glass door of the lantern, “See, where’s the wind? Not a flicker.”

“Close that, and stop shining it in my eyes, would ya?” his friend grumbled at him.

“Oh... no...” the thin man stammered, “It can’t be,” and he raised a trembling finger to point behind his companion at something farther up the street.

The mustached man turned around, staring into the dark of the empty street before him. “There’s nothing there,” he told him and then everything went dark. “Damn it, I told you to leave it closed. Where’s the tinderbox?”

He turned around and to his amazement his companion was nowhere to be seen. “Oh, I don’t believe it,” Bernt exclaimed loudly with annoyance, “That bloody coward and his superstitions. What’d he do, run back to the inn and leave me in the dark?”

With a heavy sigh, Bernt started back in the direction of the inn.

Suddenly, the lantern fell to the ground with the sound of metal and broken glass. “What the...?” he said in confusion, looking at the lantern and then up to the rooftop from where it had fallen.

Something wet dripped down onto his forehead from above. He wiped at it, surprised that it felt almost slippery.

“*This isn’t water,*” he thought to himself, “*What is this, blood?*”

He thought he saw a dark shadow slip fluidly down from the rooftop to the street below, but he wasn’t sure. Everything was cast in darkness. A wild panic gripped him and soon he found himself pounding loudly on the door of the house across from him.

“Open up!” he called out, his voice wavering, “Open up, damn it! We need some help out here!”

Bernt thought he saw someone pull back the curtain slightly in the upper window and then quickly pull it shut again. “*There, looks like someone’s coming,*” he thought with a bit of relief.

An eerie sound echoed down the street, something that sounded halfway between a chuckle and a growl.

“Open up!” he shouted again, pounding frantically on the door. *“No one’s coming,”* his mind screamed at him.

He gave the door a mighty kick, but to his surprise it held firm under the force.

He began to run blindly through the dark, soon finding that he was coming into the marketplace.

*“Wide open space,”* his mind reasoned, *“at least I’ll be able to see what’s coming.”*

Bernt searched wildly around in the darkness. *“What the hell happened to him? Did he run back to the inn? Is he dead? No, just get a grip,”* he told himself, *“It’s not The Black Shadow. There’s no way. Some sort of vampiric demon, or whatever he’s supposed to be? It’s not possible. Some all powerful evil creature of the night? Able to hear one’s very thoughts?”*

A deep rumbling laugh filled the air around him, seemingly from every direction.

A torch burst into flames to the north, then another.

*“What is that? Looks like a stage? The storyteller? Rasindell? That undead skeletal wizard? Is this his doing? It can’t be, but the stronger magic users were all hunted down or at least forced into hiding, all those that didn’t belong to the wizard’s guild. Who or what is after me?”*

The hollow sound of boots upon cobblestones came echoing toward him, calmly approaching the marketplace. The many empty stalls and tables that surrounded him offered him no salvation.

A dark shadowy figure emerged from the street into the open where the moonlight had improved visibility for the man. He could see that the figure was dressed in black; shirt, pants, gloves, boots. He nervously eyed the black hood and the black flowing cloak. He watched in terror as two dark red eyes began to glow from out of the darkness beneath the hood of the approaching figure.

Fear gripped him, his mind repeating the same name over and over in terror, *“The Black Shadow. The Black Shadow.”*

He was still a distance away. *“Could I outrun such a creature?”* he thought in desperation, *“Possible to stand and fight?”*

A cruel laugh emanated from The Black Shadow.

*“Can he really hear my very thoughts?”* wondered Bernt.

The man in black tossed something toward him, it traveling quite a fair distance between them, to land at his feet.

The portly man recoiled in shock and terror as he looked down upon a bloodied arm, the limb appearing to have been torn from the rest of its body.

*“You killed Kren? Do you find this humorous, you foul thing?!”* Bernt shouted.

The fingertips of The Black Shadow’s right hand elongated into a deadly-looking claw, and, with eyes glowing as red as blood, he began to dash forward to close in on him.

The man ran, as fast as his thick legs could carry him, racing toward the light of the torches at the stage. No one else was there except the storyteller. He was sitting lifeless upon a wooden chair in the center of the stage, a grey tattered robe draped over the bones of his head and body.

Sharp searing pain erupted from his back as The Black Shadow sliced into him. A scream escaped his lips as he fell to the ground. A gloved hand lifted him up with incredible strength, where he wriggled desperately in the air near a foot off the ground and clawed madly at the hand that held him by his throat.

With a low growl The Black Shadow squeezed until he heard a satisfying crunch. He let the man drop, where he lay dying, choking on the blood that gurgled up through his nose and throat. Next, The Black Shadow pounced on him, sinking his fangs deep into the flesh of his neck until he drained him of what blood and life he had left.

The Black Shadow leapt to the rooftop of the building overlooking the stage. His lips wet with blood, he sat there crouched at the edge of the roof looking out at Rasindell, the storyteller.

He had rescued Rasindell long ago, given him the means to create a daughter out of a spider, had made him into an undead creature able to relay the legends of their world after his death, and had rescued the boy he had grown so fond of in his storytelling. Oddly, the reasons behind his own actions in doing these things eluded him.

The bony figure slowly turned his skull to stare over and up at The Black Shadow. Surprisingly, Shadow's vision began to slowly cloud.

*"Is Rasindell trying to use his power on me? Can he? Is this possible?"* Shadow thought in astonishment, *"I suppose it is, if I let it. What is there that he could possibly show me that I don't already know?"*

He let the power of the storyteller envelope him to see what he would be shown.

Chapter 2 = EZMEARA