

# Chapter One

**K**EO OF THE SWORD did not expect to have to fight a demon today on his way back home from running errands in the nearby town of New Ora. Nor did he expect this same demon to announce to Keo that he was but the first of many demons and that all of Lamaira was going to fall underneath their power, and from there, the rest of the world.

It all started earlier that day, when Keo—a young man with short dark hair and skin tanned from spending his days working and training in the sun—was walking through the Low Woods, a large forest located in the southern region of the former Kingdom of Lamaira. He was heading back from New Ora, where he had bought bread, milk, and other supplies that his master and mentor, Tiram of the Blade, had asked him to buy.

This was normally an easy task, even though Keo disliked having to go into civilization for any reason. All he had to do was walk into town, go to the merchants in town, stare at all of their wonderful wares (including one merchant who claimed to sell genuine Dracone talons and scales, although Keo thought that they were probably fake and so didn't buy any), buy what Tiram had asked him to buy, and then leave. He never really talked to anyone because he didn't know very many people in New Ora, even though he had lived in the forest near the town for years. He hated being around other people anyway, except for his mentor and his friend Nesma, although he had not seen Nesma since she joined the Magical Council—the ruling party of South Lamaira—a year ago.

So Keo was usually in and out of town very quickly, and thus was walking along through the Low Woods taking a familiar rough path he had walked upon many times during his life. The trees around him were large, tall, and thick, their leaves and upper branches providing relief from the hot summer afternoon sun. Cheep-chirps—a small, red-colored bird common in Low Woods—sang somewhere above him, but no matter where he looked, he could not see their red plumage or any sign of them. But he liked to listen to their musical chirps, as it was a comforting sound he had always associated with peace and solitude since his childhood.

The air in the Low Woods was also cool and easy today, as the sun's rays could not penetrate through the thick canopy above to warm it. Still, Keo could feel the cool air already starting to fade and he knew that within the next hour the Low Woods would be not quite as hot as the town of New Ora, but warm enough to make outside chores uncomfortable. And he had many outside chores to perform back at the cabin that he and Master Tiram shared. He wasn't looking forward to it.

As he walked, Keo kept his eyes and ears open for any sign of the various dangerous creatures that lived in the Low Woods, such as the mammoth bears and knife-tooth wolves. They rarely attacked, as most of the animals in the Low Woods feared humans, but every now and then a particularly hungry or crazy beast would assault travelers through the Woods and kill them.

Keo rested his hand on Gildshine, his magical sword, which was sheathed at his side. He rarely had to use it due to the fact that most of the creatures in the Low Woods knew to avoid his master and him, but he was always prepared to wield it just in case. And he knew how to use it well, too, otherwise he would not be known as Keo of the Sword. Master Tiram had taught him how to use a sword well, so

Keo was confident he could defend himself with Gildshine should he be attacked.

But today seemed like a slow, idle summer day. The chirps of the birds above seemed lazier than normal and even the merchants back in town who hawked their wares with the fervor of preachers had seemed a little more reserved than usual. It was probably because it was the height of summer and the summer heat always had a sleepy effect on everyone exposed to it, including Keo himself, even in the cool air of the Low Woods.

That was when Keo heard the crunching of leaves and branches nearby. His first thought was that it was perhaps a mammoth bear walking nearby, probably not going to attack him based on the easiness of its pace. Still, Keo kept one hand on the hilt of Gildshine, just in case he was wrong and the bear attacked.

But then Keo noticed that the cheep-chirps had stopped singing and he immediately stopped. He listened for the birds' tune, but no matter how hard he listened, he heard nothing.

Cheep-chirps only stopped singing at night, when they slept ... or when there was danger and the cheep-chirps were trying to hide from predators. Of course, what Keo had discovered from living in the Low Woods for his whole life was that anything that threatened a cheep-chirp could often threaten a human being as well.

Keo listened for anything that should not be. All he heard was the same sound of fallen leaves and branches being crunched underfoot. It seemed like the cheep-chirps had silenced themselves when they heard those same sounds that he did. He didn't know for sure, of course, because there were many predators of cheep-chirps in the Low Woods that were far quieter than whatever was walking around nearby, but without hearing anything else, he had to assume that that was the case.

Then that sound of the creature walking also stopped, but not before Keo realized that the footsteps of the creature belonged to no Low Woods beast that he knew. It sounded almost like the footsteps of a human, which was possible, but unlikely. As far as Keo knew, the only humans in the Low Woods were Master Tiram and himself. Of course, the Low Woods were located near the southern border of South Lamaira, near the country of Hasfar, and so travelers from that country often passed through the Low Woods on their way to other parts of South Lamaira. Just the other day, in fact, Keo helped a Hasfarian traveler lost in the forest find his way to New Ora (although it was hard at first because the Hasfarian tongue was very different from Lamairan and the Hasfarian himself only knew a few Lamairan words whose pronunciation he butchered).

But this part of the Low Woods was never traveled by anyone except for Keo and Tiram, and Keo knew that Tiram was currently at the cabin back home resting, which he did more and more in his old age. That meant that there was something else nearby, but what it was, Keo didn't know.

Keo lowered his bag of goods onto the ground and drew Gildshine. He contemplated using the sword's magical power, which would require him giving up half his energy to make Gildshine capable of cutting through anything, but decided against it. The thing he heard might not require Gildshine's magical power. In fact, Keo had only ever used Gildshine's ability a handful of times over the years and both times left him too exhausted to do anything for nearly a week, which was why he didn't want to use it here in case the creature avoided his attack.

So Keo listened again, but now it seemed like the source of the footsteps had vanished into thin air, because he could not hear it. The silence and stillness of the Low Woods was normally a comfortable

thing, but right now it was unnerving and tense.

Then Keo heard breathing. It was slow and wet, like someone breathing through a dampened rag. It was coming from his right, behind a grove of trees that he had passed by many times over his years of traveling on this road. Keo slowly turned to face the grove, but did not yet move closer to it. He tried to see if he could spot anything in the branches and shadows, but the trees grew together so thickly that it was impossible to tell for sure what might have been hiding behind it.

“Who's there?” said Keo. “Are you a traveler? Are you lost? If so, I can help you.”

No answer.

Keo tensed. He considered whether or not to step forward and decided that that was the best action to take. So Keo raised one foot and then put it back down on the ground.

As soon as Keo took that step, something large, furry, and loud burst forth from the trees with astonishing speed. The creature barreled toward Keo like lightning, but Keo jumped out of its way, just barely dodging it. As the creature passed, an awful stench like mud and blood followed the creature, making Keo gasp and cough as he walked backwards away from the creature, which came to a stop on the other side of the path and then turned to face him.

Keo had never seen anything like this creature in his entire life. It was large and round, almost like a ball, with two stout but strong legs and large fists with claws that gleamed like metal. The creature had a furry face with human-like features, but there was nothing human about the bloodlust in its red eyes. And it was large, easily twice as large as Keo, who was not a small man by any means.

Keo tried to remember if Master Tiram had ever described such a creature to him before, but he kept drawing a blank. This thing looked like it had stepped right out of his worst nightmares, but Keo did not run or show fear, because he had a feeling that this thing, whatever it was, would tear him apart if he showed even the slightest hint of fear in its presence.

But one thing Keo did notice about it was the sheer aura of evil that radiated from it. And 'evil' was the operative word, because Keo had never felt such a mighty aura from any creature dwelling in the Low Woods before. Most animals in the Low Woods were too mindless to have any conception of good or evil, but somehow Keo could tell that this thing was smart enough to tell the difference between the two concepts and had already made its choice about which one it supported.

And that, more than anything, was what made Keo afraid of the creature and what it wanted.

“What are you, creature?” said Keo, never lowering Gildshine. “Another inhabitant of the Lost Woods that I was unaware of until just now?”

The creature hissed loudly, but then Keo realized that it was simply that monster's way of chuckling. “No, human, I do not live in these pathetic woods. But I will rule them soon, as my master promised me.”

Keo raised an eyebrow. “Who is your master? Is he like mine?”

“I know nothing of you or your master, but I will say that my master is the greatest of them all, much greater than any human master,” said the creature. “Unfortunately, my master is unable to do anything in his present state, but worry not, because I will be the one to free him and when I do, your country will fall.”

“What are you even babbling about?” said Keo. “You still have not even told me what you are.”

The creature looked at Keo with glee in its eyes. “The true name of my people is unpronounceable

in your mortal tongue, but you know of us in legend as the demons.”

Keo's eyes widened. “Demons? But demons are a myth, a scary story told to scare young children into obeying their elders. You cannot be a demon.”

“Whether you accept my existence or not, I don't care,” said the demon, shaking its head. “All I care about is freeing my people and my master. They are rising, becoming more and more powerful with each passing day, and you humans are too stupid and divided to do a thing about it.”

“How do you know if the demons are rising?” said Keo. “What does that even mean?”

The demon hissed again, this time actually hissing and not simply chuckling in a demonic way. “It means that, exactly six months from today, the Kingdom of Humans will end. It was a terrible age, one which I will be happy to see come to an end.”

Keo had no idea what the demon was even talking about. “If the Kingdom of Humans is about to end, then what will replace it?”

“The Kingdom of Demons, of course,” said the demon. “The rivers of your land will run red with your peoples' blood and there is nothing you can do to stop it.”

None of this made any sense to Keo, who had always grown up believing that demons were myths and nothing more. Still, he recognized a threat when he saw it and this demon was by definition a threat, whether there was any truth to what it said or not. That meant it had to be stopped, and right away.

“I don't know how much of what you say is true and how much isn't,” said Keo, “but I do know that you tried to kill me and are probably planning to kill other people. And I cannot allow that.”

The demon shook its ugly head. “When did I express a need for your approval, human? The invasion will start in the heart regardless of whether you like it or not.”

Keo took a fighting stance. “I didn't say I would stop this 'invasion' you speak of. I was just going to stop *you*.”

Keo dashed toward the demon, Gildshine gripped firmly in both hands, and swung his blade at the demon. The demon blocked the blow with its claws and tried to swipe him, but Keo jumped back out of its range and stabbed at the demon.

The demon blocked the block with both of its claws and then charged at Keo with the speed of a rampaging ox. Keo dodged it by jumping to the right, but he also took advantage of its speed to slash it as he passed him.

Thus, Keo was shocked when his sword bounced off its hide. He was so shocked that his grip on Gildshine loosened and the sword flew out of his hands and landed on the ground several feet away, leaving Keo defenseless.

The demon turned to face Keo, a malicious grin on its awful face. “Surprised that your pitiful human blade failed to cut my skin? We demons have skin as hard as iron. Your puny human weapons cannot even scratch us.”

Then the demon barreled toward him again, but Keo, as before, avoided it. He ran over to Gildshine, grabbed its hilt, and held the sword before him defensively as the demon stopped and turned to face him once more.

“Still going to try to hurt me with your sword?” said the demon. “Weren't you listening to what I just said about how useless your humans weapons are?”

Keo did not respond. He just looked at the demon defiantly, silently challenging it to attack him if it felt so brave. Of course, deep down, Keo was afraid of the demon because, if he could not harm the demon with Gildshine, then his chances of winning this fight fell close to zero. He seriously considered using Gildshine's magical ability, but at the moment he wasn't sure that he would get a chance to use it before the exhaustion kicked in and rendered him utterly defenseless.

*I need to get close enough to the demon to cut it,* Keo thought. *But its fighting style makes it impossible to get close. It attacks quickly, forcing me to dodge, and then stops well outside of the range of Gildshine before it attacks again. I need to get it to stop near me somehow.*

The demon shook its head. "Never mind. I will just tear you apart piece by piece anyway, regardless of whether you own a dinky human weapon like that."

The demon reared back, but instead of barreling toward Keo at high speeds, it launched itself through the air at an astonishing speed. Keo realized that he needed to duck to avoid it just in the nick of time, but the demon still slashed at him with its claws as it passed by overhead and cut deeply into his right shoulder, causing him to cry out in pain as blood shot out from the wound.

Staggering forward, Keo glanced at his torn-open shoulder, which stung in the cool air of the Low Woods, and then looked over his shoulder to see that the demon had landed on one of the trees. The demon clung to the tree like some kind of bizarre, monstrous spider and its head turned almost all the way around to look at him. With a chilling smile on its lips, the demon raised its bloody claw and licked the blood off of the tip of its claw.

"Delicious," said the demon with a sigh. "It has been so long since I feasted on human blood. Maybe I will drain you of your blood first before I tear you apart, because all of this fighting has made me very thirsty."

Keo had no response to that, because his wounded shoulder made it impossible to talk without screaming from the pain. He stepped backwards, but even he knew that there was no running now. The demon was still as strong and fast as ever, which meant that Keo had to end the fight now if he hoped to survive.

*But he's still nowhere near me,* Keo thought, wincing at the blood running down his arm. *And I'm wounded. Wounded and alone. Not even Master Tiram knows that I'm under attacked, so I can't rely on him to save me.*

That was when a new thought occurred to Keo, a new plan for dealing with the demon: He would make the demon come to *him*.

Gritting his teeth, Keo raised Gildshine and said, "Come on, demon. Hit me with your best shot, if you think you're so strong."

The demon looked genuinely surprised for a moment. "You mean you *aren't* going to fall down on your knees and beg me to spare your pitiful life? All of the tales I heard said that humans are cowards who break down at the slightest sign of death."

"Looks like someone lied to you," said Keo. He wanted to scream, wanted to move, but he stayed where he was because if he moved, then his plan would fail. "We humans are a lot stronger than we look."

The demon shrugged. "Oh well. Whether you die fighting like a soldier or on your knees like a slave, it will be very bloody and painful for you and great fun for me. Now die!"

The demon launched itself off the tree toward Keo, this time faster than ever. At the same time, Keo focused on Gildshine. Feeling his bond with his sword, he told Gildshine to take half of his energy so that it could cut anything. And Gildshine, as always, immediately complied, but Keo did not yet feel exhausted beyond help.

Instead, Keo felt Gildshine become stronger in his hands, saw its blade sharpen. And that fact made him smile, which the demon flying toward him must have noticed, because a look of confusion spread across the demon's features as it hurtled through the air toward Keo.

With a roar, Keo slashed Gildshine down on the demon when it was within his reach. In the brief second before Gildshine's enhanced blade made contact with the demon's face, Keo almost believed that even Gildshine's magic would not pierce the demon's skin and that all of his striving would be for nothing.

But in the next second, Gildshine cut straight through the demon's face and body. Both halves of the demon's body passed by Keo without touching him, although the black demon blood splattered over him anyway. The two halves of the demon crashed to the ground behind Keo, but Keo still turned around to make sure that the demon was not going to rise again.

To his astonishment, the demon's halves immediately started crumbling, turning into a sand-like substance, which sank into the earth rapidly until soon there was not even a hint that the demon had been there. It was like the demon's halves had been drawn into the earth by some unseen force, although that may have simply been the way that demon bodies decomposed after death.

In any case, Keo was glad about his victory only briefly, because a second after the demon's halves vanished, a sudden, heavy exhaustion fell over Keo. Then the pain in his shoulder became white hot and he staggered forward, barely able to remain standing.

*Must ... get ... back ... to ... Master Tiram*, Keo thought, his eyes heavy and his mind sluggish.  
*Now ...*

Keo managed to walk back over to his bag of goods, but before he could pick it up, he fell face-first onto the ground. The blood loss and exhaustion from using Gildshine were too much for his body to handle and he soon lost consciousness completely.