IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

by Alette Smith (Scriv the Bard)

Creature: *Nukekubi* | **Level:** *5 - 8* | **CWs:** *Mild violence, themes of abuse*

SYNOPSIS

Life in Fellbrae isn't for the meek or faint of heart. The harsh wind and waters of this coastal fishing and mining village hardened its people to the rougher side of life—practicality and realism are the tools of the trade. When bodies start turning up with no suspects identified, superstitions and old wives' tales that have persisted through the generations fill in the missing answers due to an ineffective judicial system. Rumors of vengeful demons haunt the town as the magistrate struggles to find the truth.

ADVENTURE HOOK

The party may arrive in Fellbrae for a few reasons: they could be hired guards for trading caravans, escorting merchants and traders with interest in the fishing or mining industry, they may have heard rumors of strange deaths from nearby, or they could be there to deliver a letter from the capital to the magistrate, inquiring after a new law that has been passed. The magistrate is known for being unusually strict, but hesitant to deal out punishment before all information is considered. The new law requires there to be three witnesses to a crime who are willing to come forward for it to be a punishable offense.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

The people of Fellbrae are very superstitious, and the recent mysterious deaths are only encouraging their superstition. Townsfolk think that spirits are to blame - spirits of those wronged in the past seeking retribution.

Common superstitions include:

- Always store away excess lantern oil, or demons will be attracted to the warmth of the leftover oil.
- Names written in red ink doom the subject to misfortune. This is also how the local court notates the names of the guilty in the registry.
- Don't whistle at night. It attracts bad luck. And whatever you do, never answer a whistling you hear in the night.
- Don't follow strange lights at night; they're restless spirits that will lead you into danger.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- **Magistrate Dalen Sorem:** Male elf, darker skin with pale blonde, almost white hair. Seems old in a way that isn't reflected in his bearing or lines of the face, but in his eyes. Lawful and strict, but selectively so (for example, when it comes to his daughter's health). He is overly cautious when it comes to his daughter's well-being ever since her mother's (Deidra) death. He is hesitant to pass judgment without full information/details concerning a case, which leads to some culprits escaping punishment.
- **Nadia Sorem:** Female elf, daughter and only family of the Magistrate. Has the same pale hair and composition as her father, but with shockingly blue eyes (from her mother). At 13 years old, she feels trapped by her overprotective father, and has been feeling ill lately. She wants to become a lawyer herself one day.
- **Isla the Guard:** Female wood elf, tall, brown eyes, dark hair in a braid, a fighter who dual-wields axes. She guards the door to the magistrate's home. Has been in Sorem's employment since Nadia was a child and sees her as a little sister.
- **Yannik the Guard:** Male half-orc, guard assigned to the magistrate's home. Keeps hair shaved on the sides, but long on top, pulled back into a short ponytail. Gruff but kind.

- **Bokki the Innkeep (The Brass Canary):** Dwarf innkeeper. Salt and pepper beard that looks as though it hasn't seen a comb in days. Rowdy but friendly, encourages drinking and settling disputes with one's fists. Has a secret fascination with fancy mixed drinks and cocktails.
- **Talinn the Blacksmith:** Female human, highly skilled blacksmith who supplies the town's tools, equipment, and weaponry for the guards. She trains with the spear in her spare time. Shorter in stature, but strong. Keeps her forge clean and tidy and the fires hot to counter the chill, biting wind outside.
- **Victor the Drunkard:** Retired miner who spends most of his time hanging around the Brass Canary offering wisdom to all who don't seek it. He's probably pickled by now and no one believes him when he says he saw a floating head. Gray hair, missing a couple teeth, left eye is glass.
- **Kaizen the Librarian:** Male dwarf, lighter brown hair kept in a neat ponytail. Reserved and gruff, but brightens up if the party shows interest in books and old stories. He can introduce them to Granny Min.
- **Granny Min:** The unofficial expert on the town's superstitions and folklore. She's Kaizen's mother and enjoys gossip and a good cup of tea. She'll share a story if you bring her tea and biscuits. Wild hair kept back with a handkerchief, though her aggressive curls seem to ignore it.
- **Lisette the Fisherman:** Female gnome. She owns one of the fishing boats with her husband.
- **Garmin the Fishmonger:** Male gnome. Husband of Lisette, he sells fish in the market by the docks.
- **Craig the Miner:** Male human, middle-aged, very superstitious. Can be found in the Brass Canary.
- **Bastien the Cleric of Llyr:** Gnome cleric of Llyr, the god of the sea. Followers of Llyr believe in personal freedoms, and respecting the strength and tempestuousness of the sea, while also cherishing the bounty it brings. Bastien is a retired sailor.

Chapter 1 – A Torn Net and Ghost Stories

You have arrived in Fellbrae, a coastal fishing and mining town characterized by rocky cliffs and caverns rising tall on either side of the docks and cove leading out to sea. The townsfolk live a tough but comparatively prosperous life. The architecture showcases simple yet sturdy stonemasonry, built to withstand the heavy wind and rain battering the coast. A tall iron gate serves as the entrance to the town, with guards on either side. There is only one main road that winds down through the town, with smaller footpaths branching from it, terminating at the docks. There seems to be a perpetual mist in the air, providing a sharp contrast to the backdrop of vibrant green hills farther inland. It's winter, and preparations for the midwinter fair are underway, but spirits are dampened by a series of strange murders plaguing the town.

You arrive a couple of hours before sunset and head to the local inn where miners and fishing crews unwind after a long day of work. It can get a bit rowdy at times, but such is the manner of life in Fellbrae—leisure time is just as intense as the work done during the day.

Outside the inn there is a man yelling at his son for snagging a fishing net on the cobblestones and allowing some of the fish to scatter into the street. He strikes him hard before telling him to go home to his mother, with instructions to have dinner ready for his return. Other townsfolk walking by gasp, shake their heads, and mutter under their breath at how children shouldn't be treated in such a way, but no one stops him. Unchallenged, the man shakes his head and proceed into the bar, where he drinks his ale sullenly. If the party challenges him, he angrily tells them to mind their own business. Depending on how the party handles the situation, a successful DC 15 Charisma (Intimidation or Persuasion) check may help the man decide he "doesn't want a drink after all" and he'll walk away.

The party may also interact with the boy, Danny. He is young, not more than ten years of age, and is

trying to collect the fish before heading home. He's thankful for the party's kindness, but shy and not very talkative. He goes home after the interaction ends.

THE BRASS CANARY

The town's only inn and tavern is a tall, two story building wedged between the guard post watching the main gates of the town and a general goods store. Windows are lit with candles and slightly fogged from the warmth within, giving it a welcoming glow. When you enter, you are greeted with loud laughter, mugs clanging, heated conversations, and somewhat discordant music. There are two fireplaces on either side of the room and a bar along the left-hand wall, behind which you can see stairs leading down into what is most likely a cellar. A central wooden staircase leads up to the second floor. Your boots click against the cobbled stone beneath your feet as you walk to the bar where Bokki, the innkeeper, greets you with suspicion hidden behind a broad smile.

This is where the party can interact with some NPCs and learn more about the deaths and superstitions. Here are some things they may learn:

Bokki is a down-to-earth realist who doesn't believe in ghost stories or fairy tales. He believes in the fish in a net and the ore in the mine, "real" things that support the town. He serves the party kindly and offers them rooms in the inn (5 cp a night), but if they want ghost stories, he tells them to ask Victor. If they want more, find Granny Min at the library. He isn't eager to talk about the deaths, but says that some folk think it's ghosts, but personally he thinks there's some sort of vigilante out there.

- If they ask about the man from the street, they learn that his name is Jeremiah. He lives with his wife, Mona and their son, Danny. He's known for being a hard worker, but unkind and impatient. He lost a brother last year to a cave-in in the mines, and he hasn't been the same since. People are afraid to confront him. "People mostly mind their own business here." Jeremiah doesn't stay long. If left to his own devices, he finishes his drink and leaves while the party speaks to other NPCs. He's out of sight by the time they leave if they try to follow him.
- Victor is sitting by the hearth, singing along drunkenly and out of tune as Craig plays a spirited tune on a tin flute. He sits by himself; most people seem as though they don't want to get too close. Victor is untrusting of the party at first, but with a successful DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) check, he warms up to them. If they ask him about the deaths or ghost stories, he's initially defensive and asks if they're just here to mock him and call him crazy. He shares that he's seen strange things late at night, after the lanterns have been snuffed—strange blue lights, "ghost lights," he calls them. He says that sometimes he even hears them whistling. He only tried to follow one once, but it led to him stumbling into some buckets in the alley and he lost it.
- Kaizen is sitting and laughing with Talinn, Lisette, and Garmin, and invites the party to join them at their table. Here, the party can learn more about the deaths. The victims are people who were either on the brink of being charged with a crime, or were suspected of a crime without enough evidence or witness accounts. Recent happenings include the body of a cruel man accused of betraying his wife that was found in the mines. Another body was found in the woods after she poisoned her mother-in-law. There are patterns among the victims:
    Crimes against women or children
    Pale corpses, drained of blood
    Bodies are found in isolation
    Puncture/bite wounds on arms
- Garmin and Talinn think there's a vigilante, Lisette is unsure, and Kaizen thinks there's something supernatural at work. He invites the party to the library in the morning.

The night continues and the party can either take a long rest or walk around the town. If they go outside, they see people removing the street lanterns with long poles, extinguishing the flames, and removing the residual oil before replacing them. Soon, they are the only ones outside, and as they walk, they start to hear a faint whistling carried on the wind. If they follow the sound, they come upon the docks at the "bottom" of the town, and with a successful DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check, they see glowing, blue lights floating at the end of the harbor, just above the water's surface. If they move closer, the whistling abruptly stops, and the blue lights fly towards the party at high speed, revealing themselves to be three **will-o'wisps**! In addition to their listed abilities, these will-o'wisps also have the following special ability:

Mimicry. The will-o'wisp is able to mimic the sound of whistling or soft whispers, but cannot speak or create complex noises.

DEVELOPMENT

Once the fight is over, the wisps dissipate into the air. If the party looks in the water where the wisps were floating, they find the body of Jeremiah, the cruel father from earlier that day. Like the other bodies that have been found, he is cold and drained of blood.

They can leave the body for town guards to find or report it to the nearest guard (Isla at the Magistrate's manor) so they can begin their investigation. If the party asks to see the Magistrate, they are turned away, but offered an appointment in the morning.

The party won't find anything else of significance and can return to the inn for a long rest.

The party doesn't know it yet, but Jeremiah was killed by the **Nukekubi**. This vampiric creature appears as a normal humanoid by day, but once they fall asleep, their head separates from their body and flies through the air, searching for a victim. The Nukekubi is usually unaware of their condition and has no memory of the night before. A successful DC 15 Intelligence (History) check allows a character to recall stories of some sort of vampiric creature that used to haunt the region.

CHAPTER 2 – STORIES

The next morning, the party investigates and tries to learn more about the rumors, vampire-like creatures, and Jeremiah.

If they ask around about vampires, they learn of the Nukekubi that used to haunt the area, and that it disappeared long ago. Going to the library to see Kaizen and Granny Min yields more information.

The library is modest and comprised mainly of old, donated books from families through the generations. It is cozy and has the musty smell of old parchment. If they speak with Kaizen, he seems appalled at the discovery of Jeremiah's body, and numbly wonders who would be next. However, he concedes that Jeremiah wasn't exactly loved by the town, though he worries for the family left behind. If asked about creatures and old tales, Kaizen refers the party to Granny Min whilst he looks for a relevant book.

Granny Min recalls the stories of the Nukekubi, the vampiric creature that was seen many years ago, but says it has since disappeared. She also recalls that it didn't harm people, but a few sheep and stray cats would go missing here and there, only to be found drained of blood later. She also tells the party that only a special ritual can banish it. At this point, Kaizen returns with a dusty old tome. Granny Min tells the party if indeed there is a Nukekubi, they must draw the glyphs/runes from the book around the body and activate the spell before the head re-attaches to it.

MEETING THE MAGISTRATE

The characters return to the Magistrate's manor, and Yannick (who is now on duty) escorts them inside. It is easily the grandest building in Fellbrae: two-story stone construction, dark wooden flooring inside, covered with finely woven carpet that must have been brought in through the trade routes. There are a few low shelves in the foyer, containing books on law, historic records of Fellbrae, and some family records. There is also an oil painting of the Magistrate, his wife, Deidra, and their daughter, Nadia, hung over the mantle. All in all, the home is finely furnished, but seems a bit too orderly to be comfortable.

After they've had the chance to examine the room, the Magistrate descends the central wooden staircase, wearing formal robes and the chain of his office, silver balancing scales of Forseti, the patron deity of justice and fair trials. He greets them unsmiling, and a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Insight or Perception) check reveals that he bears fatigue in his posture and his eyes seem tired. He is well-intentioned, but the recent events have led to many sleepless nights.

Here, the party learns a bit more about the strange happenings (both victims had been accused and were awaiting trial) and Magistrate Dalen suggests that someone is behind the killings, and that the ghost stories are things designed to scare children and nothing more. He confirms that rumors have been spreading and requests the party's aid in identifying the vigilante, asserting that the accused and suspected must still stand trial, regardless of what others may say.

If the party mentions the strange lights (will-o'-wisps) fought the night before and suggest that they might have something to do with the strange deaths, Dalen suggests they had one too many drinks at the Brass Canary. He dismisses the hypothesis as an old

wives' tale meant to scare children that has no place in a court of law.

If asked about his family, he mentions that his wife passed away when Nadia was very young, and her grandmother helped raise her while he was holding trials. Unfortunately, she passed away about a decade ago, and had gone a bit mad in her later years. During this part of the conversation, Nadia makes an appearance at the top of the stairs, sniffling and looking rather ill. The party learns that the daughter is sick with a chill and has taken to wearing a thick red scarf to keep warm. The Magistrate excuses himself from the meeting to take care of his daughter, signaling an end to the visit.

If there is a cleric or healer in the party, Dalen may permit them to examine Nadia. If asked, she reveals that she's been sick for several days now and has been having nightmares. Dreams of flying that start out beautiful and serene twist into dreams of bad people who are hurting others. Next thing she knows, those people turn up missing or dead.

Her father dismisses this once again as fanciful imaginings and worries that he tells her too much about the town's goings-on. She argues that she can handle it, since she's been studying to become a magistrate herself one day. He shakes his head and assures her that it's not the kind of work a young girl should worry over.

Upon examination, the players see that Nadia is pale and drawn, and if they ask to examine her throat, they see strange markings, like thin white lines, around her neck, which she assures them are only birthmarks. She's self-conscious about them, however, and doesn't want to talk about them further.

DEVELOPMENT

If the party leaves here, they may notice Nadia watching them from a window on the upper floor (her bedroom), with a sad expression on her face, before receding back into the room.

From now until nightfall, the party may discuss the day's events and make any preparations they require for the Nukekubi ritual. Whether they are in the Brass Canary that evening or elsewhere, they notice with a successful DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check more strange lights hovering outside the window and must give chase as this is the Nukekubi's head with four will-o'-wisps. This is when they witness the lights and the glowing, floating head disappear into the magistrate's house through Nadia's now open window.

CHAPTER 3 – REVEALING THE NUKEKUBI

The party can either request entry from Isla (if they tell her what they saw, they only need a successful DC 5 Charisma (Persuasion) check to gain entry) or break in and prepare for the ritual, sneaking through the halls and picking locks. When they go upstairs, the first door to the left is Nadia's room (the room she emerged from when they first met her). They can enter by opening the door from inside the house with a successful DC 10 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check or by scaling the wall outside and climbing through the window. The room is smaller, with a four-poster bed, wall shelves with books and some toys displayed, and a wardrobe. There is also a small bedside table holding a dimly lit oil lamp and a small framed picture: it's a younger Nadia with an older woman, who must be the grandmother. They are both wearing heavy scarves identical to the one Nadia was wearing earlier that day.

It is confirmed that Nadia is the Nukekubi when they find her headless body sleeping in her room. Before long, the head emerges from behind the wardrobe with two more **will o'wisps** and attacks the party!

To defeat the Nukekubi, the characters must:

- Keep the head from reattaching before the sun rises.
- Perform a ritual on the body while the head is detached, which awakens Nadia and dispels the Nukekubi when the head re-attaches.
- Some characters have to perform the ritual while others fight off the head.

During the battle, Isla, Yannick, and Dalen may try to enter the room, if the party did not lock or bar the door. If that's the case, Isla and Yannick (**guard**) try to help fight the Nukekubi and the party must prevent them from killing her and ruining the spell. Dalen becomes frightened and calls out Nadia's name.

CONCLUSION

The girl reawakens as the sun breaks the horizon, with full memory of all that has happened. She recalls that her mother and grandmother before her were also Nukekubi, but her grandmother attempted to hide her nature and knowledge of the condition after her mother passed away.

"My Grandmother thought it was a curse, too, like all the others, but it isn't. It's just the way we are… I think I can control it now."

The trait had been dormant in her blood, and been activated when Nadia became angry with her father's lack of action when dealing with those who harm others. She subconsciously decided to take matters into her own hands, and the wisps just used it as a way to feed upon her targets.

The will-o'-wisps are actually malevolent spirits who have been sapping energy from Nadia while in her headless form, thereby making her ill. The ritual did not reverse the "curse," as the Nukekubi state is simply something in her family's blood, but it protects her from the spirits while she sleeps and enables her to control when she goes into the Nukekubi state. It also gives her the ability to "see" through the will-o'-wisps.

Dalen rushes into the room once the fight is over and embraces Nadia tightly. The party can tell him what happened, but Nadia interrupts them, preferring to tell him herself. She maturely thanks them for all they have done, and reassures her father that everything is okay.

REWARDS

Magistrate Dalen rewards the party with 300 gp each, and Nadia gifts them her red scarf. Upon further inspection, the scarf has a healing enchantment woven into its fabric, granting the wearer 10 extra hit points and resistance against poison. If asked, Nadia tells the party her grandmother made the scarf for her to keep her safe.

The party is also able to keep the book they received from Kaizen and Granny Min. It is a tome of strange and unusual creatures. Whomever studies it for 30 hours or more gains proficiency in creature-based Nature checks and advantage on attacks against either undead or fiendish enemies.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

This adventure features a creature from Japanese folklore, the Nukekubi.

The Nukekubi is a cursed demon whose head detaches from her body while she sleeps to wreak havoc around town—from drinking the oil from lamps to attacking and sucking blood from terrified victims. The head then flies home and re-attaches to the body before the sun rises. When the woman awakens, she has no recollection of the events from the previous night, save for some strange dreams. If the Nukekubi is aware of the curse, she often wears a scarf during the day to hide the tell-tale lines or wrinkles around her neck, indicating where her head detaches at night.

This accursed state falls upon people—most often women—who commit some sort of sin or betrayal, though it also afflicts women whose husbands commit the sin. No one ever said demons were fair, I guess. What's more, the curse can pass from mother to daughter, thereby marking the entire family for misfortune. According to legend, the Nukekubi can be stopped by hiding the body from the head until sunrise, thereby preventing it from re-attaching. There are also tales that claim the cooked liver of a white dog can cure the curse, though it will simply pass to another person. Poor dog.

This adventure also experiments with an Eastern storytelling tradition, Kishōtenketsu.

Kishōtenketsu is a four-part structure found in classic Chinese, Korean, and Japanese narratives, with its origins rooted in Chinese poetry. This style of story is often identified by its lack of a central conflict, featuring instead some sort of contrasting elements to create a dynamic plot.

IT BREAKS DOWN IN THE FOLLOWING MANNER:

- **Introduction (ki):** Offers an initial description of characters and setting. In the adventure, this is where the party arrives in Fellbrae, interacts with the NPCs, and learns about the mysterious deaths.
- **Development (shō):** Further develops the characters, setting, and the interplay between the two. This is where the party learns more about the "ghost stories" and encounters will-o'-wisps with Jeremiah's body.
- **Twist or Contrast (ten):** Turns toward a seemingly unrelated development. When the party meets Magistrate Dalen and Nadia, the information about their family and the fact that Nadia is ill has no obvious link to the initial plot.
- **Conclusion or Reconciliation (ketsu):** Integrates and concludes the first three parts with a cohesive narrative. This culminates with the final battle, when the party discovers that Nadia is a Nukekubi and the connections between the deaths and her strange sickness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alette Smith (aka Scriv the Bard) is an all-ages Dungeon Master and independent *D&D* 5E adventure author based in Cambridge, UK. She got her start at a local bookstore holding introductory games for children and their families, and has now expanded into regular family workshops in which she teaches children how to create and run *D&D* stories of their own. She also runs a blog where she writes about storytelling, running *D&D* for children and families, and offers original and commissioned OGL adventures. You can learn more about Scriv at scrivthebard.com or on Twitter and Instagram @ScrivTheBard!

Nukekubi

Humanoid, chaotic neutral

Armor Class 16
Hit Points 140
Speed 60 ft. (flying head), 10 ft. (body)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
13 (+1)	18 (+4)	17 (+3)	18 (+4)	18 (+4)	12 (+1)

Saving Throws Dex +9, Wis +9, Cha +7
Skills Perception +9, Stealth +9
Damage Resistances necrotic; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks
Senses darkvision 120 ft., Perception 17
Languages Common, Elvish, Undercommon
Challenge 13 (10,000 XP)

Misty Escape. When it drops to 0 HP away from its body, the Nukekubi head transforms into a cloud of mist instead of falling unconscious. It must return to its body within two hours or be destroyed. After spending 1 hour connected to its body with 0 hit points, it regains 1 hit point.

Sunlight Hypersensitivity. The Nukekubi takes 20 radiant damage when it starts its turn in sunlight. While in the sunlight, it has disadvantage on attack rolls and ability checks.

Innate Spellcasting. The Nukekubi's spellcasting ability is Wisdom (spell save DC 17). The Nukekubi can innately cast the following spells:

At will: *charm person*
3/day: *dominate person*

Actions

Multiattack. The Nukekubi makes a bite attack with its head and an unarmed strike with its body if it is within 60 feet of the head.

Unarmed Strike (Body Only). *Melee weapon attack:* +9 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 8 (1d8 + 4) bludgeoning damage. Instead of dealing damage, the Nukekubi can grapple the target (escape DC 11).

Bite (Head Only). +9 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 7 (1d6 + 4) piercing damage plus 10 (3d6) necrotic damage. The target's hit point maximum is reduced by an amount equal to the necrotic damage taken, and the Nukekubi regains hit points equal to that amount. The reduction lasts until the target finishes a long rest. The target dies if this effect reduces its hit point maximum to 0.