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Opening extract from

Seventh Son
The Spook's Apprentice

Written by

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Character profiles

Tom

Thomas Ward is the seventh son of a seventh son. This means he was born with certain gifts – gifts that make him perfect for the role of the Spook's apprentice.

The Spook

The Spook is an unmistakable figure. He's tall, and rather fierce looking. He wears a long black cloak and hood, and always carries a staff and a silver chain. Like his apprentice, Tom, he is left-handed, and is a seventh son of a seventh son.

Alice

Tom can't decide if Alice is good or evil. She terrifies the local village lads, is related to two of the most evil witch clans (the Malkins and the Deanes) and has been known to use dark magic.

Mam

Tom's mam has always known he would become the Spook's apprentice. She calls him her 'gift to the County'.



CHAPTER 1
A SEVENTH SON



When the Spook arrived, the light was already beginning to fail. It had been a long, hard day and I was ready for my supper.

'You're sure he's a seventh son?' he asked. He was looking down at me and shaking his head doubtfully.

Dad nodded.

'And you were a seventh son too?'

Dad nodded again and started stamping his feet impatiently, splattering my breeches with droplets of brown mud and manure. The rain was dripping from the peak of his cap. It had been raining for most of the month. There were new leaves on the trees but the spring weather was a long time coming.

My dad was a farmer and his father had been a farmer too, and the first rule of farming is to keep the farm together. You can't just divide it up amongst your children; it would get smaller and smaller with each generation until there was nothing left. So a father leaves his farm to his eldest son. Then he finds jobs for the rest. If possible, he tries to find each a trade.

He needs lots of favours for that. The local blacksmith is one option, especially if the farm is big and he's given the blacksmith plenty of work. Then it's odds on that the blacksmith will offer an apprenticeship, but that's still only one son sorted out.

I was his seventh, and by the time it came to me all the favours had been used up. Dad was so desperate that he was trying to get the Spook to take me on as his apprentice. Or at least that's what I thought at the time. I should have guessed that Mam was behind it.

She was behind a lot of things. Long before I was born, it was her money that had bought our farm. How else could a seventh son have afforded it? And Mam wasn't County. She came from a land far across the sea.

Most people couldn't tell, but sometimes, if you listened very carefully, there was a slight difference in the way she pronounced certain words.

Still, don't imagine that I was being sold into slavery or something. I was bored with farming anyway, and what they called 'the town' was hardly more than a village in the back of beyond. It was certainly no place that I wanted to spend the rest of my life. So in one way I quite liked the idea of being a spook; it was much more interesting than milking cows and spreading manure.

It made me nervous though, because it was a scary job. I was going to learn how to protect farms and villages from things that go bump in the night. Dealing with ghouls, boggarts and all manner of wicked beasties would be all in a day's work. That's what the Spook did and I was going to be his apprentice.

'How old is he?' asked the Spook.

'He'll be thirteen come August.'

'Bit small for his age. Can he read and write?'

'Aye,' Dad answered. 'He can do both and he also

knows Greek. His mam taught him and he could speak it almost before he could walk.'

The Spook nodded and looked back across the muddy path beyond the gate towards the farmhouse, as if he were listening for something. Then he shrugged. 'It's a hard enough life for a man, never mind a boy,' he said. 'Think he's up to it?'

'He's strong and he'll be as big as me when he's full grown,' my dad said, straightening his back and drawing himself up to his full height. That done, the top of his head was just about level with the Spook's chin.

Suddenly the Spook smiled. It was the very last thing I'd expected. His face was big and looked as if it had been chiselled from stone. Until then I'd thought him a bit fierce. His long black cloak and hood made him look like a priest, but when he looked at you directly, his grim expression made him appear more like a hangman weighing you up for the rope.

The hair sticking out from under the front of his hood matched his beard, which was grey, but his

eyebrows were black and very bushy. There was quite a bit of black hair sprouting out of his nostrils too, and his eyes were green, the same colour as my own.

Then I noticed something else about him. He was carrying a long staff. Of course, I'd seen that as soon as he came within sight, but what I hadn't realized until that moment was that he was carrying it in his left hand.

Did that mean that he was left-handed like me?

It was something that had caused me no end of trouble at the village school. They'd even called in the local priest to look at me and he'd kept shaking his head and telling me I'd have to fight it before it was too late. I didn't know what he meant. None of my brothers were left-handed and neither was my dad. My mam was cack-handed though, and it never seemed to bother her much, so when the teacher threatened to beat it out of me and tied the pen to my right hand, she took me away from the school and from that day on taught me at home.

'How much to take him on?' my dad asked,

interrupting my thoughts. Now we were getting down to the real business.

'Two guineas for a month's trial. If he's up to it, I'll be back again in the autumn and you'll owe me another ten. If not, you can have him back and it'll be just another guinea for my trouble.'

Dad nodded again and the deal was done. We went into the barn and the guineas were paid but they didn't shake hands. Nobody wanted to touch a spook. My dad was a brave man just to stand within six feet of one.

'I've some business close by,' said the Spook, 'but I'll be back for the lad at first light. Make sure he's ready. I don't like to be kept waiting.'

When he'd gone, Dad tapped me on the shoulder. 'It's a new life for you now, son,' he told me. 'Go and get yourself cleaned up. You're finished with farming.'

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