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Opening extract from

The Spook's Apprentice

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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.'

When I walked into the kitchen, my brother Jack had his arm around his wife Ellie and she was smiling up at him.

I like Ellie a lot. She's warm and friendly in a way that makes you feel that she really cares about you. Mam says that marrying Ellie was good for Jack because she helped to make him less agitated.

Jack is the eldest and biggest of us all and, as Dad sometimes jokes, the best looking of an ugly bunch. He is big and strong all right, but despite his blue eyes and healthy red cheeks, his black bushy eyebrows almost meet in the middle, so I've never agreed with that. One thing I've never argued with is that he managed to attract a kind and pretty wife. Ellie has hair the colour of best-quality straw three days after a good harvest, and skin that really glows in candlelight.

'I'm leaving tomorrow morning,' I blurted out. 'The Spook's coming for me at first light.'

Ellie's face lit up. 'You mean he's agreed to take you on?'

I nodded. 'He's given me a month's trial.'

'Oh, well done, Tom. I'm really pleased for you,' she said.

'I don't believe it!' scoffed Jack. 'You, apprentice to a

spook! How can you do a job like that when you still can't sleep without a candle?'

I laughed at his joke but he had a point. I sometimes saw things in the dark and a candle was the best way to keep them away so that I could get some sleep.

Jack came towards me, and with a roar got me in a head-lock and began dragging me round the kitchen table. It was his idea of a joke. I put up just enough resistance to humour him, and after a few seconds he let go of me and patted me on the back.

'Well done, Tom,' he said. 'You'll make a fortune doing that job. There's just one problem, though . . .'

'What's that?' I asked.

'You'll need every penny you earn. Know why?'

I shrugged.

'Because the only friends you'll have are the ones you buy!'

I tried to smile, but there was a lot of truth in Jack's words. A spook worked and lived alone.

'Oh, Jack! Don't be cruel!' Ellie scolded.

'It was only a joke,' Jack replied, as if he couldn't

understand why Ellie was making so much fuss.

But Ellie was looking at me rather than Jack and I saw her face suddenly drop. 'Oh, Tom!' she said. 'This means that you won't be here when the baby's born . . .'

She looked really disappointed and it made me feel sad that I wouldn't be at home to see my new niece. Mam had said that Ellie's baby was going to be a girl and she was never wrong about things like that.

'I'll come back and visit just as soon as I can,' I promised.

Ellie tried to smile, and Jack came up and rested his arm across my shoulders. 'You'll always have your family,' he said. 'We'll always be here if you need us.'

An hour later I sat down to supper, knowing that I'd be gone in the morning. Dad said grace as he did every evening and we all muttered 'Amen' except Mam. She just stared down at her food as usual, waiting politely until it was over. As the prayer ended, Mam gave me a little smile. It was a warm, special smile and I

don't think anyone else noticed. It made me feel better.

The fire was still burning in the grate, filling the kitchen with warmth. At the centre of our large wooden table was a brass candlestick, which had been polished until you could see your face in it. The candle was made of beeswax and was expensive, but Mam wouldn't allow tallow in the kitchen because of the smell. Dad made most of the decisions on the farm, but in some things she always got her own way.

As we tucked into our big plates of steaming hotpot, it struck me how old Dad looked tonight – old and tired – and there was an expression that flickered across his face from time to time, a hint of sadness. But he brightened up a bit when he and Jack started discussing the price of pork and whether or not it was the right time to send for the pig butcher.

'Better to wait another month or so,' Dad said. 'The price is sure to go higher.'

Jack shook his head and they began to argue. It was a friendly argument, the kind families often have, and I could tell that Dad was enjoying it. I didn't join in

though. All that was over for me. As Dad had told me, I was finished with farming.

Mam and Ellie were chuckling together softly. I tried to catch what they were saying, but by now Jack was in full flow, his voice getting louder and louder. When Mam glanced across at him I could tell she'd had enough of his noise.

Oblivious to Mam's glances and continuing to argue loudly, Jack reached across for the salt cellar and accidentally knocked it over, spilling a small cone of salt on the table top. Straight away he took a pinch and threw it back over his left shoulder. It is an old County superstition. By doing that you were supposed to ward off the bad luck you'd earned by spilling it.

'Jack, you don't need any salt on that anyway,' Mam scolded. 'It spoils a good hotpot and is an insult to the cook!'

'Sorry, Mam,' Jack apologized. 'You're right. It's perfect just as it is.'

She gave him a smile then nodded towards me. 'Anyway, nobody's taking any notice of Tom.

That's no way to treat him on his last night at home.'

'I'm all right, Mam,' I told her. 'I'm happy just to sit here and listen.'

Mam nodded. 'Well, I've got a few things to say to you. After supper stay down in the kitchen and we'll have a little talk.'

So after Jack, Ellie and Dad had gone up to bed, I sat in a chair by the fire and waited patiently to hear what Mam had to say.

Mam wasn't a woman who made a lot of fuss; at first she didn't say much apart from explaining what she was wrapping up for me: a spare pair of trousers, three shirts and two pairs of good socks that had only been darned once each.

I stared into the embers of the fire, tapping my feet on the flags, while Mam drew up her rocking chair and positioned it so that she was facing directly towards me. Her black hair was streaked with a few strands of grey, but apart from that she looked much the same as she had when I was just a toddler, hardly up to her

knees. Her eyes were still bright, and but for her pale skin, she looked a picture of health.

'This is the last time we'll get to talk together for quite a while,' she said. 'It's a big step leaving home and starting out on your own. So if there's anything you need to say, anything you need to ask, now's the time to do it.'

I couldn't think of a single question. In fact I couldn't even think. Hearing her say all that had started tears pricking behind my eyes.

The silence went on for quite a while. All that could be heard was my feet tap-tapping on the flags. Finally Mam gave a little sigh. 'What's wrong?' she asked. 'Has the cat got your tongue?'

I shrugged.

'Stop fidgeting, Tom, and concentrate on what I'm saying,' Mam warned. 'First of all, are you looking forward to tomorrow and starting your new job?'

'I'm not sure, Mam,' I told her, remembering Jack's joke about having to buy friends. 'Nobody wants to go

anywhere near a spook. I'll have no friends. I'll be lonely all the time.'

'It won't be as bad as you think,' Mam said. 'You'll have your master to talk to. He'll be your teacher, and no doubt he'll eventually become your friend. And you'll be busy all the time. Busy learning new things. You'll have no time to feel lonely. Don't you find the whole thing new and exciting?'

'It's exciting but the job scares me. I want to do it but I don't know if I can. One part of me wants to travel and see places but it'll be hard not to live here any more. I'll miss you all. I'll miss being at home.'

'You can't stay here,' Mam said. 'Your dad's getting too old to work, and come next winter he's handing the farm over to Jack. Ellie will be having her baby soon, no doubt the first of many; eventually there won't be room for you here. No, you'd better get used to it before that happens. You can't come home.'

Her voice seemed cold and a little sharp, and to hear her speak to me like that drove a pain deep into my chest and throat so that I could hardly breathe.

I just wanted to go to bed then, but she had a lot to say. I'd rarely heard her use so many words all in one go.

'You have a job to do and you're going to do it,' she said sternly. 'And not only do it; you're going to do it well. I married your dad because he was a seventh son. And I bore him six sons so that I could have you. Seven times seven you are and you have the gift. Your new master's still strong but he's some way past his best and his time is finally coming to an end.

'For nearly sixty years he's walked the County lines doing his duty. Doing what has to be done. Soon it'll be your turn. And if you won't do it, then who will? Who'll look after the ordinary folk? Who'll keep them from harm? Who'll make the farms, villages and towns safe so that women and children can walk the streets and lanes free from fear?'

I didn't know what to say and I couldn't look her in the eye. I just fought to hold back the tears.

'I love everyone in this house,' she said, her voice softening, 'but in the whole wide County, you're the

only person who's really like me. As yet, you're just a boy who's still a lot of growing to do, but you're the seventh son of a seventh son. You've the gift and the strength to do what has to be done. I know you're going to make me proud of you.

'Well, now,' Mam said, coming to her feet, 'I'm glad that we've got that sorted out. Now off to bed with you. It's a big day tomorrow and you want to be at your best.'

She gave me a hug and a warm smile and I tried really hard to be cheerful and smile back, but once up in my bedroom I sat on the edge of my bed just staring vacantly and thinking about what Mam had told me.

My mam is well respected in the neighbourhood. She knows more about plants and medicines than the local doctor, and when there is a problem with delivering a baby, the midwife always sends for her. Mam is an expert on what she calls breech births. Sometimes a baby tries to get born feet first but my mam is good at turning them while they are still in the womb. Dozens of women in the County owe their lives to her.

Anyway, that was what my dad always said but Mam was modest and she never mentioned things like that. She just got on with what had to be done and I knew that's what she expected of me. So I wanted to make her proud.

But could she really mean that she'd only married my dad and had my six brothers so she could give birth to me? It didn't seem possible.

After thinking things through, I went across to the window and sat in the old wicker chair for a few minutes, staring through the window, which faced north.

The moon was shining, bathing everything in its silver light. I could see across the farmyard, beyond the two hay fields and the north pasture, right to the boundary of our farm, which ended halfway up Hangman's Hill. I liked the view. I liked Hangman's Hill from a distance. I liked the way it was the furthest thing you could see.

For years this had been my routine before climbing into bed each night. I used to stare at that hill and

imagine what was on the other side. I knew that it was really just more fields and then, two miles further on, what passed for the local village – half a dozen houses, a small church and an even smaller school – but my imagination conjured up other things. Sometimes I imagined high cliffs with an ocean beyond, or maybe a forest or a great city with tall towers and twinkling lights.

But now, as I gazed at the hill, I remembered my fear as well. Yes, it was fine from a distance but it wasn't a place I'd ever wanted to get close to. Hangman's Hill, as you might have guessed, didn't get its name for nothing.

Three generations earlier, a war had raged over the whole land and the men of the County had played their part. It had been the worst of all wars, a bitter civil war where families had been divided and where sometimes brother had even fought brother.

In the last winter of the war there'd been a big battle a mile or so to the north, just on the outskirts of the village. When it was finally over, the winning army

had brought their prisoners to this hill and hanged them from the trees on its northern slope. They'd hanged some of their own men too, for what they claimed was cowardice in the face of the enemy, but there was another version of that tale. It was said that some of these men had refused to fight people they considered to be neighbours.

Even Jack never liked working close to that boundary fence, and the dogs wouldn't go more than a few feet into the wood. As for me, because I can sense things that others can't, I couldn't even work in the north pasture. You see, from there I could hear them. I could hear the ropes creaking and the branches groaning under their weight. I could hear the dead, strangling and choking on the other side of the hill.

Mam had said that we were like each other. Well, she was certainly like me in one way: I knew she could also see things that others couldn't. One winter, when I was very young and all my brothers lived at home, the noises from the hill got so bad at night that I could even hear them from my bedroom. My brothers didn't

hear a thing, but I did and I couldn't sleep. Mam came to my room every time I called, even though she had to be up at the crack of dawn to do her chores.

Finally she said she was going to sort it out, and one night she climbed Hangman's Hill alone and went up into the trees. When she came back, everything was quiet and it stayed like that for months afterwards.

So there was one way in which we weren't alike.

Mam was a lot braver than I was.