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opening extract from

The Spook's Nightmare

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Joseph Delaney

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THE SPOOK'S NIGHTMARE



JOSEPH DELANEY

Illustrated by David Wyatt

The Bodley Head
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To Marie

The highest point in the County
is marked by mystery.
It is said that a man died there in a
great storm, while binding an evil
that threatened the whole world.
Then the ice came again, and when it
retreated, even the shapes of the
hills and the names of the towns
in the valleys changed.
Now, at that highest point on
the fells, no trace remains of what
was done so long ago,
but its name has endured.
They call it –

The Wardstone.

CHAPTER 1
RED WITH BLOOD



The Spook, Alice and I were crossing the Long Ridge on our way back to Chipenden, with the three wolfhounds, Claw, Blood and Bone, barking excitedly at our heels.

The first part of the climb had been pleasant enough. It had rained all afternoon but was now a clear, cloudless late autumn evening with just a slight chilly breeze ruffling our hair: perfect weather for walking. I remember thinking how peaceful it all seemed.

But at the summit a big shock awaited us. There was dark smoke far to the north beyond the fells. It looked like Caster was burning. Had the war finally reached us? I wondered fearfully.

Years earlier, an alliance of enemy nations had invaded our land far to the south. Since then, despite the best efforts of the combined counties to hold the line, they had been slowly pushing north.

'How can they have advanced so far without us knowing?' the Spook asked, scratching at his beard, clearly agitated. 'Surely there'd have been news – some warning at least?'

'It might just be a raiding party from the sea,' I suggested. That was very likely. Enemy boats had come ashore before and attacked settlements along the coast – though this part of the County had been spared so far.

Shaking his head, the Spook set off down the hill at a furious pace. Alice gave me a worried smile and we hurried along in pursuit. Encumbered by my staff and both our bags, I was struggling to keep up on the slippery wet grass. But I knew what was bothering my master. He was anxious about his library. Looting and burning had been reported in the south and he was worried about the safety of his books, a store of knowledge accumulated by generations of spooks.

I was now in the third year of my apprenticeship to the Spook, learning how to deal with ghosts, ghasts, witches, boggarts and all manner of creatures from the dark. My master gave me lessons most days, but my other source of knowledge was that library. It was certainly very important.

Once we reached level ground we headed directly towards Chipenden, the hills to the north looming larger with every stride. We'd just forded a small river, picking our way across the stones, the water splashing around our ankles, when Alice pointed ahead.

'Enemy soldiers!' she cried.

In the distance, a group of men were heading east across our path – two dozen or more, the swords at their belts glinting brightly in the light from the setting sun, which was now very low on the horizon.

We halted and crouched low on the riverbank, hoping that they hadn't seen us. I told the dogs to lie down and be quiet; they obeyed instantly.

The soldiers wore grey uniforms and steel helms with broad, vertical nose guards of a type I hadn't seen

before. Alice was right. It was a large enemy patrol. Unfortunately they saw us almost immediately. One of them pointed and barked out an order, and a small group peeled off and began running towards us.

'This way!' cried the Spook and, snatching up his bag to relieve me of the extra weight, took off, following the river upstream; Alice and I followed with the dogs.

There was a large wood directly ahead. Maybe there was a chance we could lose them there, I thought. But as soon as we reached the tree-line my hopes were dashed. It had been coppiced recently: there were no saplings, no thickets – just well-spaced mature trees. This was no hiding place.

I glanced back. Our pursuers were now spread out in a ragged line. The majority weren't making much headway, but there was one soldier in the lead who was definitely gaining on us: he was brandishing his sword threateningly.

Next thing I knew the Spook was coming to a halt.

He threw down his bag at my feet. 'Keep going, lad! I'll deal with him,' he commanded, turning back to face the soldier.

I called the dogs to heel and stopped, frowning. I couldn't leave my master like that. I picked up his bag again and readied my staff. If necessary I would go to his aid and take the dogs with me; they were big fierce wolfhounds, completely without fear.

I looked back at Alice. She'd stopped too and was staring at me with a strange expression on her face. She seemed to be muttering to herself.

The breeze died away very suddenly and the chill was like a blade of ice cutting into my face; all was suddenly silent, as if every living thing in the wood were holding its breath. Tendrils of mist snaked out of the trees towards us, approaching from all directions. I looked at Alice again. There had been no warning of this change in the weather. It didn't seem natural. Was it dark magic? I wondered. The dogs crouched down on their bellies and whined softly. Even if it was intended to help us, my master would be angry if

Alice used dark magic. She'd spent two years training to be a witch and he was always wary of her turning back towards the dark.

By now the Spook had taken up a defensive position, his staff held diagonally. The soldier reached him and slashed downwards with his sword. My heart was in my mouth, but I needn't have feared. There was a cry of pain – but it came from the soldier, not my master. The sword went spinning into the grass, and then the Spook delivered a hard blow to his assailant's temple to bring him to his knees.

The mist was closing in fast, and for a few moments my master was lost to view. Then I heard him running towards us. Once he reached us we hurried on, following the river, the fog becoming denser with every stride. We soon left the wood and the river behind and followed a thick hawthorn hedge north for a few hundred yards until the Spook waved us to a halt. We crouched in a ditch, hunkering down with the dogs, holding our breath and listening for danger. At first there were no sounds of pursuit, but then we

heard voices to the north and east. They were still searching for us – though the light was beginning to fail, and with each minute that passed it became less likely that we'd be discovered.

But, just when we thought we were safe, the voices from the north grew louder, and soon we heard footsteps getting nearer and nearer. It seemed likely that they would blunder straight into our hiding place and my master and I gripped our staffs, ready to fight for our lives.

The searchers passed no more than a couple of yards to our right – we could just make out the dim shapes of three men. But we were crouched low in the ditch and they didn't see us. When the footsteps and voices had faded away, the Spook shook his head.

'Don't know how many they've got hunting for us,' he whispered, 'but they seem determined to find us. Best if we stay here for the rest of the night.'

And so we settled down to spend a cold, uncomfortable night in the ditch. I slept fitfully but, as often happens in these situations, fell into a deep slumber

only when it was almost time to get up. I was awoken by Alice shaking my shoulder.

I sat up quickly, staring about me. The sun had already risen and I could see grey clouds racing overhead. The wind was whistling through the hedge, bending and flexing the spindly leafless branches. 'Is everything all right?' I asked.

Alice smiled and nodded. 'There's nobody less than a mile or so away. Those soldier boys have given up and gone.'

Then I heard a noise nearby – a sort of groaning. It was the Spook.

'Sounds like he's having a bad dream,' Alice said.

'Perhaps we should wake him up?' I suggested.

'Leave him for a few minutes. It's best if he comes out of it by himself.'

But if anything his cries and moans grew louder and his body started to shake; he was becoming more and more agitated, so after another minute I shook him gently by the shoulder to wake him.

'Are you all right, Mr Gregory?' I asked. 'You seemed to be having some kind of nightmare.'

For a moment his eyes were wild and he looked at me as if I were a stranger or even an enemy. 'Aye, it was nightmare all right,' he said at last. 'It was about Bony Lizzie . . .'

Bony Lizzie was Alice's mother, a powerful witch who was now bound in a pit in the Spook's garden at Chipenden.

'She was sat on a throne,' continued my master, 'and the Fiend was standing at her side with his hand on her left shoulder. They were in a big hall that I didn't recognize at first. The floor was running red with blood. Prisoners were crying out in terror before being executed – they were cutting off their heads. But it was the hall that really bothered me and set my nerves on edge.'

'Where was it?' I asked.

The Spook shook his head. 'She was in the great hall at Caster Castle! She was the ruler of the County . . .'

'It was just a nightmare,' I said. 'Lizzie's safely bound.'

'Perhaps,' said the Spook. 'But I don't think I've ever had a dream that was more vivid . . .'

We set off cautiously towards Chipenden. The Spook said nothing about the sudden mist that had arisen the previous night. It was the season for them, after all, and he had been busy preparing to fight the soldier at the time. But I was sure that it had appeared at Alice's bidding. Though who was I to say anything? I was tainted by the dark myself.

We'd only recently returned from Greece after defeating the Ordeen, one of the Old Gods. It had cost us dear. My mam had died to gain our victory, and so had Bill Arkwright, the spook who'd worked north of Caster – that's why we had his dogs with us.

I'd also paid a terrible price. In order to make that victory possible, I'd sold my own soul to the Fiend.

All that prevented him from dragging me off to the dark now was the blood jar given to me by Alice, which I carried in my pocket. The Fiend couldn't approach me while I had it by me. Alice needed to stay close to me to

share its protection – otherwise the Fiend would kill her in revenge for the help she'd given me. Of course, the Spook didn't know about that. If I told him what I'd done, it would be the end of my apprenticeship.

As we climbed the slope towards Chipenden, my master grew more and more anxious. We'd seen pockets of devastation: some burned-out houses; many that were deserted, one with a corpse in a nearby ditch.

'I'd hoped they wouldn't have come so far inland. I dread to think what we'll find, lad,' he said grimly.

Normally he would have avoided walking through Chipenden village: most people didn't like being too close to a spook and he respected the wishes of the locals. But as the grey slate roofs came into view, one glance was enough to tell us that something was terribly wrong.

It was clear that enemy soldiers had passed this way. Many of the roofs were badly damaged, with charred beams exposed to the air. The closer we got, the worse it was. Almost a third of the houses were completely burned out, their blackened stones just shells of what

had once been homes to local families. Those that hadn't gone up in flames had broken windows and splintered doors hanging from their hinges, with evidence of looting.

The village seemed completely abandoned, but then we heard the sound of banging. Someone was hammering. Quickly the Spook led us through the cobbled streets towards the sound. We were heading for the main road through the village, where the shops were. We passed the greengrocer's and the baker's, both ransacked, and headed for the butcher's shop, which seemed to be the source of the noise.

The butcher was still there, his red beard glinting in the morning light, but he wasn't carrying out repairs to his premises; he was nailing down the lid of a coffin. There were three other coffins lined up close by, already sealed and ready for burial. One was small and obviously contained a young child. The butcher got to his feet as we entered the yard and came across to shake the Spook's hand. He was the one real contact my master had amongst the villagers; the only person he ever

talked to about things other than spook's business.

'It's terrible, Mr Gregory,' the butcher said. 'Things can never be the same again.'

'I hope it's not . . .' the Spook muttered, glancing down at the coffins.

'Oh, no, thank the Lord for that at least,' the butcher told him. 'It happened three days ago. I got my own family away to safety just in time. No, these poor folk weren't quick enough. They killed everybody they could find. It was just an enemy patrol, but a very large one. They were out foraging for supplies. There was no need to burn houses and kill people; no cause to murder this family. Why did they do that? They could just have taken what they wanted and left.'

The Spook nodded. I knew what his answer was to that, although he didn't spell it out to the butcher. He would have said it was because the Fiend was now loose in the world. He made people more cruel, wars more savage.

'I'm sorry about your house, Mr Gregory,' the butcher continued.

The colour drained from the Spook's face. 'What?' he demanded.

'Oh, I'm really sorry . . . don't you know? I assumed you'd called back there already. We heard the boggart howling and roaring from miles away. There must have been too many for it to deal with. They ransacked your house, taking anything they could carry, then set fire to it . . .'

CHAPTER 2
YOU AIN'T DEAD YET!



Making no reply, the Spook turned and set off up the hill, almost running. Soon the cobbles gave way to a muddy track. After climbing the hill, we came to the boundary of the garden. I commanded the dogs to wait there as we pushed on into the trees.

We soon found the first bodies. They had been there some time and there was a strong stench of death; they wore the grey uniforms and distinctive helmets of the enemy, and they'd met violent ends: either their throats had been ripped out or their skulls crushed. It was clearly the work of the boggart. But then, as we left the trees and headed out onto lawn near the house, we saw that what the butcher had said was correct. There had

been too many for the boggart to deal with. While it had been slaying intruders on one side of the garden, other soldiers had moved in and set fire to the house.

Only the bare, blackened walls were standing. The Spook's Chipenden house was now just a shell: the roof had collapsed and the inside was gutted – including his precious library.

He stared at it for a long time, saying nothing. I decided to break the silence.

'Where will the boggart be now?' I asked.

The Spook replied without looking at me. 'I made a pact with it. In return for guarding the house and doing the cooking and cleaning, I granted it dominion over the garden: any live creature it found there after dark – apart from apprentices and things bound under our control – it could have, after giving three warning cries. Their blood was its for the taking. But the pact would only endure as long as the house had a roof. So after the fire, the boggart was free to leave. It's gone, lad. Gone for ever.'

We walked slowly around the remains of the house and reached a large mound of grey and black ashes on

the lawn. They had taken a load of the books off the library shelves and made a big bonfire of them.

The Spook fell to his knees and began to root around in the cold ashes. Almost everything fell to pieces in his hands. Then he picked up a singed leather cover; the spine of a book that had somehow escaped being totally burned. He held it up and cleaned it with his fingers. Over his shoulder I could just make out the title: *The Damned, the Dizzy and the Desperate*. It was a book that he'd written long ago as a young man – the definitive work on possession. He'd once lent it to me when I was in terrible danger from Mother Malkin. Now all that remained was that cover.

My master's library was gone; words written by generations of spooks – the heritage of countless years battling the dark, a great store of knowledge – now consumed by flames.

I heard him give a sob. I turned away, embarrassed. Was he crying?

Alice sniffed quickly three times, then gripped my left arm. 'Follow me, Tom,' she whispered.

She picked her way over a couple of charred beams and entered the house through the jagged hole that had once been the back door. She found her way into the ruin of the library, now little more than charred wood and ashes. Here she halted and pointed down at the floor. Just visible was the spine of another book. I recognized it immediately. It was the Spook's Bestiary.

Hardly daring to hope, I reached down and picked it up. Would it be like the other book we'd found – just the cover remaining? But to my delight I saw that the pages had survived. I flicked through them. They were charred at the edges but intact and readable. With a smile and a nod of thanks to Alice, I carried the Bestiary back to my master.

'One book has survived,' I said, holding it out to him. 'Alice found it.'

He took it and stared at the cover for a long time, his face devoid of expression. 'Just one book out of all those – the rest burned and gone,' he said at last.

'But your Bestiary is one of the most important books,' I said. 'It's better than nothing!'

'Let's give him some time alone,' Alice whispered, taking my arm gently and leading me away.

I followed her across the grass and in amongst the trees of the western garden. She shook her head wearily. 'Just gets worse and worse,' she said. 'Still, he'll get over it.'

'I hope so, Alice. I do hope so. That library meant a lot to him. Preserving it and adding to it was a major part of his life's work. It was a legacy, to be passed on to future generations of spooks.'

'You'll be the next spook in these parts, Tom. You'll be able to manage without those books. Start writing some of your own – that's what you need to do. Besides, everything ain't lost. We both know where there's another library, and we'll be needing a roof over our heads. Ain't no use going south to Old Gregory's damp, cold Anglezarke house. It'll be behind enemy lines and it's no place to spend the winter anyway – no books there either. Poor Bill Arkwright can't live in the mill any more so we should head north for the canal right away. Those soldier boys won't have got that far.'

'Perhaps you're right, Alice. There's no point in waiting around here. Let's go and suggest exactly that to Mr Gregory. Arkwright's library is much smaller than the Spook's was, but it's a start – something to build on.'

We left the trees and started to cross the lawn again, approaching the Spook from a different direction. He was sitting on the grass looking down at the Bestiary, head in hands and oblivious to our approach. Alice suddenly came to a halt and glanced towards the eastern garden, where the witches were buried. Once again she sniffed loudly three times.

'What is it, Alice?' I asked, noting the concern on her face.

'Something's wrong, Tom. Always been able to sniff Lizzie out when I crossed this part of the lawn before . . .'

Bony Lizzie had trained Alice for two years. She was a powerful, malevolent bone witch who was buried alive in a pit, imprisoned there indefinitely by my master. And she certainly deserved it. She'd

murdered children and used their bones in her dark magic rituals.

Leading the way, Alice moved cautiously into the trees of the eastern garden. We passed the graves where the dead witches were buried. Everything seemed all right there, but when we came to the witch pit that confined Lizzie, I got a shock. The bars were bent and it was empty. Bony Lizzie had escaped.

'When did she get out, Alice?' I asked nervously, afraid that the witch might be lurking nearby.

Alice sniffed again. 'Two days ago at least – but don't worry, she's long gone by now. Back home to Pendle, no doubt. Good riddance is what I say.'

We walked back towards the Spook. 'Bony Lizzie's escaped from her pit,' I told him. 'Alice thinks it happened the day after they burned the house.'

'There were other witches here,' Alice added. 'With the boggart gone they were able to enter the garden and release her.'

The Spook gave no sign that he'd heard what we said. He was now clutching the Bestiary to his chest

and staring into the ashes morosely. It didn't seem a good time to suggest that we go north to Arkwright's place. It was getting dark now, and it had been a hard journey west, with bad news at the end of it. I just had to hope that my master would be a bit more like his old self in the morning.

Now that they were in no danger from the boggart, I whistled to summon the dogs into the garden. Since our return from Greece, Claw and her fully grown pups, Blood and Bone, had been staying with a retired shepherd who lived beyond the Long Ridge. Unfortunately they'd become too much for him, so we'd collected them and were on our way back to Chipenden when we'd seen the smoke over Caster. The three had been used by their dead master, Bill Arkwright, to capture or kill water witches.

I made a small fire on the lawn while Alice went hunting rabbits. She caught three, and soon they were cooking nicely, making my mouth water. When they were ready, I went across and invited the Spook to join us for the meal by the fire. Once again he didn't

so much as acknowledge me. I might as well have been talking to a stone.

Just before we settled down for the night, my eyes were drawn to the west. There was a light up on Beacon Fell. As I watched, it grew steadily brighter.

'They've lit the beacon to summon more troops, Alice,' I said. 'Looks like a big battle's about to begin.'

Right across the County from north to south, a chain of fires, like a flame leaping from hill to hill, would be summoning the last of the reserves.

Although Alice and I lay close to the embers of the fire, there was a chill in the air and I found it difficult to get to sleep, especially as Claw kept lying across my feet. At last I dozed, only to wake suddenly just as dawn was breaking. There were loud noises – rumbling booms and crashes. Was it thunder? I wondered, still befuddled with sleep.

'Listen to those big guns, Tom!' Alice cried. 'Don't sound too far away, do they?'

The battle had begun somewhere to the south.

Defeat would mean the County being overrun by the enemy. We needed to head north quickly while we still could. Together we went over to confront the Spook. He was still sitting in the same position, head down, clutching the book.

'Mr Gregory,' I began, 'Bill Arkwright's mill has a small library. It's a start. Something we can build on. Why don't we head north and live there for now? It'll be safer too. Even if the enemy win, they may not venture any further north than Caster . . .'

They might send out foraging patrols, but they would probably just occupy Caster, which was the most northerly large town in the County. They might not even spot the mill, which was hidden from the canal by trees.

The Spook still didn't raise his head.

'If we wait any longer, we might not be able to get through. We can't just stay here.'

Once again, my master didn't reply. I heard Alice grind her teeth in anger.

'Please, Mr Gregory,' I begged. 'Don't give up . . .'

He finally looked up at me and shook his head sadly. 'I don't think you fully understand what's been lost here. This library didn't belong to me, lad. I was just its guardian. It was my task to extend and preserve it for the future. Now I've failed. I'm weary – weary of it all,' he replied. 'My old bones are too tired to go on. I've seen too much, lived too long.'

'Listen, Old Gregory,' Alice snarled. 'Get on your feet! Ain't no use just sitting there till you rot!'

The Spook jumped up, his eyes flashing with anger. 'Old Gregory' was the name Alice called him in private. She'd never before dared to use it to his face. He was gripping the Bestiary in his right hand, his staff in his left – which he lifted as if about to bring it down upon her head.

However, without even flinching, Alice carried on with her tirade. 'There are things still left to do: the dark to fight; replacement books to write. You ain't dead yet, and while you can move those old bones of yours it's your duty to carry on. It's your duty to keep Tom safe and train him. It's your duty to the County!'

Slowly he lowered his staff. The last sentence Alice uttered had changed the expression in his eyes. 'Duty above all' was what he believed in. His duty to the County had guided and shaped his path through a long, arduous and dangerous life.

Without another word he put the charred Bestiary in his bag and set off, heading north. Alice and I followed with the dogs as best we could. It looked like he'd decided to head for the mill after all.