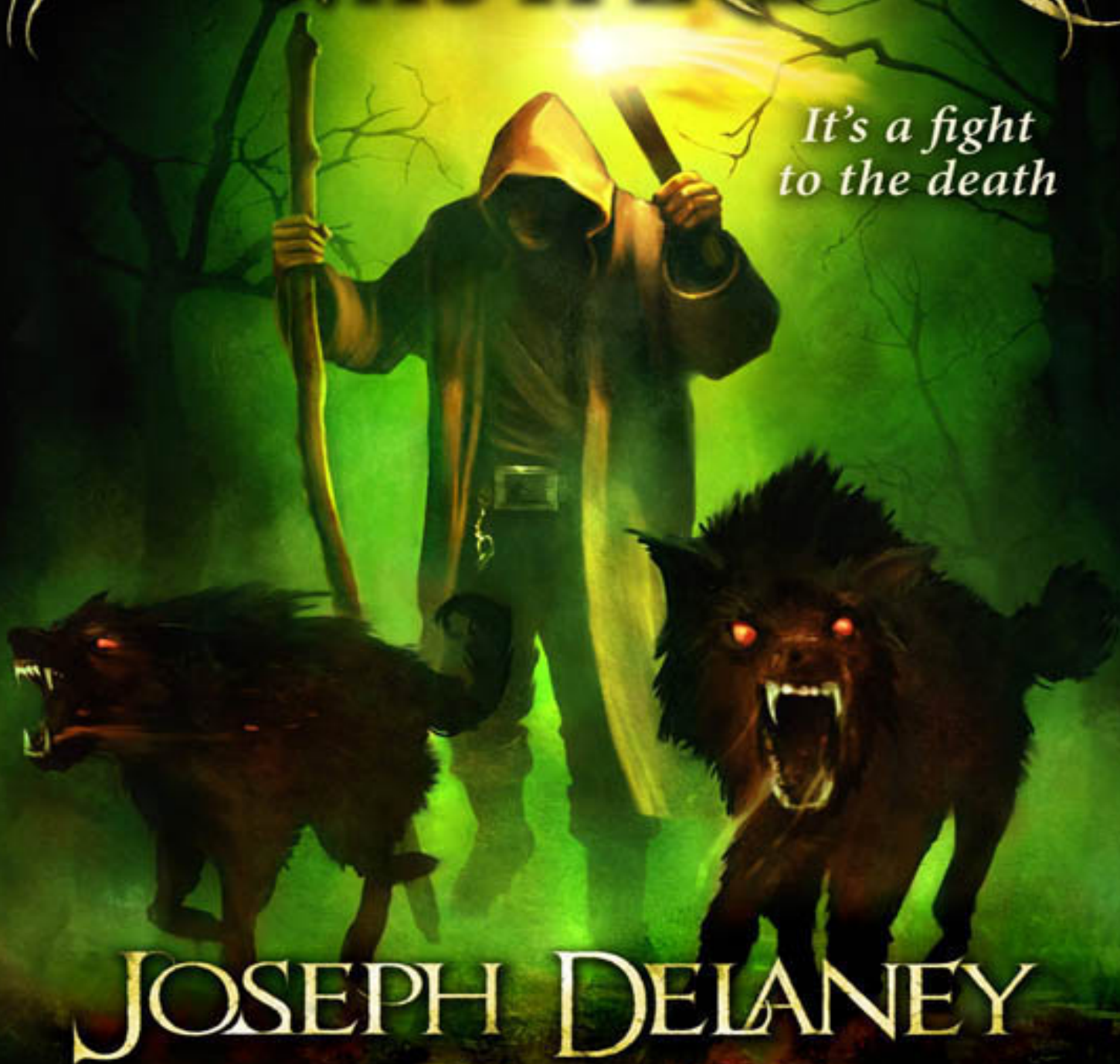


# THE SPOOKS MISTAKE

*It's a fight  
to the death*



JOSEPH DELANEY

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About the Author

Also by Joseph Delaney

The Wardstone Chronicles

Thomas Ward's Journal

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# About the Book

WARNING: NOT TO BE READ AFTER DARK

*'The Moment of danger is close. Very soon our enemies will be here.'*

As danger increases, the Spook sends his apprentice, Tom, to be trained by another spook whose methods are harsh and tough.

But faced with a powerful water witch, Tom's new master makes a fatal mistake, leaving Tom to face his enemies alone.

Can the Spook get there in time to save Tom?

Together can they beat such terrible dark power?

And will the Spook's own mistakes give final victory to the dark?

*The fifth chilling tale in the Wardstone Chronicles*

THE  
SPOOKS  
MISTAKE



JOSEPH DELANEY

Illustrated by David Frankland

RED FOX

for Marie

## 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. He can see and hear the dead and he is a natural enemy of the dark. But that doesn’t stop Tom getting scared, and he is going to need all his courage if he is to succeed where twenty-nine others have failed.

### *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.

For over sixty years he has protected the County from things that go bump in the night.

### *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. But she was trained as a witch against her will and has helped Tom out of some tight spots. She seems to be a loyal friend, but can she be trusted?

### *Mam*

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

loving mother and an expert on plants, medicine and childbirth, Mam has always been a little different. Her origins in Greece remain a mystery. In fact, there are quite a few mysterious things about Mam ...



# How to Read Spook's Symbols

Boggarts

Beta for Boggart

**B** P ← ripper      **B** Naturally bound boggart

X ← rank      **B** Artificially bound boggart

Gregory ← name

I - dangerous

X - hardly detectable

Ghosts/Ghasts

**γ** X ← I - dangerous

Gregory X - hardly detectable

Witches

**O** M ← M - malevolent

Gregory B - benign

U - unaware



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 THE KING'S SHILLING



CARRYING MY STAFF, I went into the kitchen and picked up the empty sack. It would be dark in less than an hour but I'd just enough time to walk down to the village and collect the week's provisions. All we had left was a few eggs and a small wedge of County cheese.

Two days earlier the Spook had gone south to deal with a boggart. Annoyingly, this was the second time in a month that my master had gone off on a job without me. Each time he'd said it was routine, nothing that I hadn't seen before in my apprenticeship; it would be more useful for me to stay at home practising my Latin and catching up with my studies. I didn't argue but I wasn't best pleased. You see, I thought he'd another reason for leaving me behind - he was trying to protect me.

Towards the end of the summer, the Pendle witches had summoned the Fiend into our world. He was the dark made flesh, the Devil himself. For two days he'd been under their control and commanded to destroy me. I'd taken refuge in a special room Mam had prepared for me, and that had saved me. The Fiend was now doing his own dark will but there was no certainty that he wouldn't come hunting for me again. It was something I tried not to think about. One thing was certain: with the Fiend in the world, the County

was becoming a much more dangerous place - especially for those who fought the dark. But that didn't mean I could hide away from danger for ever. I was just an apprentice now, but one day I would be a spook and have to take the same risks as my master, John Gregory. I just wished he could see it that way too.

I walked into the next room, where Alice was working hard, copying a book from the Spook's library. She came from a Pendle family and had received two years' training in dark magic from her aunt, Bony Lizzie, a malevolent witch who was now safely confined in a pit in the Spook's garden. Alice had got me into lots of trouble but eventually became my friend and was now staying with my master and me, making copies of his books to earn her keep.

Concerned that she might read something she shouldn't, the Spook never allowed her to go into his library, and only one book at a time was ever given into her keeping. Mind you, he appreciated her work as a scribe. The books were precious to him, a store of information accumulated by generations of spooks - so each one carefully duplicated made him feel a little more secure about the survival of that knowledge.

Alice was sitting at the table, pen in hand, two books open before her. She was writing carefully into one, copying accurately from the other. She looked up at me and smiled: I'd never seen her look prettier, the candlelight illuminating her thick dark hair and high cheekbones. But when she saw I had my cloak on, her smile instantly faded and she put down the pen.

'I'm off down to the village to collect the provisions,' I told her.

'Ain't no need for you to do that, Tom,' she protested, concern evident in her face and voice. 'I'll go while you stay and carry on studying.'

She meant well but her words made me angry and I had to bite my lip to stop myself from saying something unkind.

Alice was just like the Spook – overprotective.

‘No, Alice,’ I told her firmly. ‘I’ve been cooped up in this house for weeks and I need a walk to blow the cobwebs out of my head. I’ll be back before dark.’

‘Then at least let me come with you, Tom. Could do with a bit of a break myself, couldn’t I? Sick of the sight of these dusty books, I am. Don’t seem to do anything but write these days!’

I frowned. Alice wasn’t being honest and it annoyed me. ‘You don’t really want a walk down into the village, do you? It’s a chilly, damp, miserable evening. You’re just like the Spook. You think that I’m not safe out alone. That I can’t manage—’

‘Ain’t that you can’t manage, Tom. It’s just that the Fiend’s in the world now, ain’t he?’

‘If the Fiend comes for me, there’s nothing much I can do about it. And it wouldn’t make much difference whether you were with me or not. Even the Spook wouldn’t be able to help.’

‘But it’s not just the Fiend, is it, Tom? County’s a much more dangerous place now. Not only is the dark more powerful but there are robbers and deserters at large. Too many people hungry. Some of ‘em would cut your throat for half of what you’ll be carrying in that sack!’

The whole country was at war but it was going badly for us down south, with reports of some terrible battles and defeats. So now, in addition to the tithes that farmers had to pay to the Church, half of their remaining crops had been commandeered to feed the army. That had caused shortages and driven up the cost of food; the poorest people were now on the verge of starvation. But although there was a lot of truth in what Alice said, I wasn’t going to let her change my mind.

‘No, Alice, I’ll be all right by myself. Don’t worry, I’ll be back soon!’

Before she could say anything more, I turned on my heel and set off briskly. Soon I had left the garden behind and was walking along the narrow lane that led down to the village. The nights were drawing in and the autumn weather had turned cold and damp but it was still good to be away from the confines of the house and garden. Soon Chipenden's familiar grey-slatted rooftops were visible and I was striding down the steep slope of the cobbled main street.

The village was much quieter than it had been in the summer, before things had deteriorated. Then it had been bustling with women struggling under the weight of loaded shopping baskets; now very few people were about and I went into the butcher's to find myself the only customer.

'Mr Gregory's order as usual,' I told the butcher. He was a large red-faced man with a ginger beard. At one time he'd been the life and soul of his shop, telling jokes and keeping his customers entertained, but now his face was sombre and much of the life seemed to have gone out of him.

'Sorry, lad, but I've not much for you today. Two chickens and a few rashers of bacon is the best I can do. And it's been hard enough keeping that under the counter for you. Might be worth your while calling in tomorrow well before noon.'

I nodded, transferred the items to my sack, asking him to put them on our bill, then thanked him and set off for the greengrocer's. I did little better there. There were potatoes and carrots but nowhere near enough to last us for the week. As for fruit, the grocer could manage just three apples. His advice was the same - to try again tomorrow, when he might be lucky enough to have more in.

At the baker's I managed to buy a couple of loaves and left the shop with the sack slung over my shoulder. It was then that I saw someone watching me from across the street. It was a scrawny child, a boy of probably no more than four, with a thin body and wide, hungry eyes. I felt

sorry for him so I went over, fished into the sack and held out one of the apples. He almost snatched it from my hand and, without a word of thanks, turned and ran back into the house.

I shrugged and smiled to myself. He needed it more than I did. I set off back up the hill, looking forward to the warmth and comfort of the Spook's house. But as I reached the outskirts of the village and the cobbles gave way to mud, my mood began to darken. Something didn't feel right. It wasn't the intense cold feeling that alerted me that something from the dark was approaching, but it was a definite unease. My instincts were warning me of danger.

I kept glancing back, sensing that someone was following me. Could it be the Fiend? Had Alice and the Spook been right all along? I quickened my pace until I was almost running. Dark clouds were racing overhead and there was less than half an hour before the sun went down.

'Snap out of it!' I told myself. 'You're just imagining the worst.'

A short stroll up the hill would bring me to the edge of the western garden and within five minutes I'd be back in the safety of my master's house. But suddenly I halted. At the end of the lane there was someone waiting in the shadows beneath the trees.

I walked a few faltering steps further and realized it was more than just one person - four tall burly men and a lad were staring in my direction. What did they want? I felt a sudden sense of danger. Why were strangers lurking so close to the Spook's house? Were they robbers?

As I got closer, I was reassured: they stayed under the cover of the bare trees rather than moving onto the path to intercept me. I wondered whether to turn and nod at them but then thought it better just to keep walking and not acknowledge them at all. As I passed beyond them, I gave a sigh of relief but then I heard something on the path behind me. It sounded like the chink of a coin falling onto stone.



I wondered if I'd a hole in my pocket and had dropped some of my change. But no sooner had I turned and looked down than a man stepped out of the trees and knelt on the path, picking something up. He looked up at me, a friendly smile on his face.

'This yours, boy?' he asked, holding a coin out towards me.

The truth was I wasn't sure but it had certainly *sounded* as if I'd dropped something. So I put down my sack and staff, then reached into my breeches pocket with my left hand, intending to pull out my change and count it. But suddenly I felt a coin pressed firmly into my right hand and looked down in surprise to find a silver shilling nestling in my palm. I knew there hadn't been one in my change so I shook my head.

'It's not mine,' I said with a smile.

'Well, it's yours now, boy. You've just accepted it from me. Isn't that right, lads?'

His companions stepped out of the trees and my heart sank into my boots. They were all wearing army uniforms and carried bags on their shoulders. They were armed too - even the lad. Three of them carried stout clubs and one, with a corporal's stripe, was brandishing a knife.

Dismayed, I glanced back at the man who'd handed me the coin. He was standing up now so I could see him better. His face was weather-beaten, with narrow cruel eyes; there were scars on his forehead and right cheek - he'd evidently seen more than his fair share of trouble. He also had a sergeant's stripes on his upper left arm and a cutlass at his belt. I was facing a press gang. The war was going badly and these men had been travelling the County, forcing men and boys into the army against their will to replace those killed in action.

'That's the King's shilling you've just accepted!' the man said, laughing in an unpleasant, mocking manner.

'But I didn't accept it,' I protested. 'You said it was mine and I was just checking my change—'

'No use making excuses, boy. We all saw what happened, didn't we, lads?'

'No doubt about it,' agreed the corporal as they formed a circle around me, blocking any hope of escape.

'Why's he dressed as a priest?' asked the lad, who couldn't have been more than a year older than me.

The sergeant bellowed with laughter and picked up my staff. 'He's no priest, young Toddy! Don't you know a spook's apprentice when you see one? They take your hard-earned money to keep so-called witches away. That's what they do. And there are plenty of fools daft enough to pay 'em!'

He tossed my staff to Toddy. 'Hold onto that!' he ordered. 'He won't be needing it any more and it's good for firewood if nothing else!' Next he picked up the sack and peered inside. 'Enough food here to fill our bellies tonight, lads!' he exclaimed, his face lighting up. 'Trust your canny sergeant. Right, wasn't I, lads? Catch him on the way back *up* the hill rather than on the way down! Well worth the wait!'

At that moment, completely surrounded, I saw no hope of escape. I knew I *had* escaped from worse predicaments – sometimes from the clutches of those who practised dark magic. I decided to bide my time and wait for an opportunity to get away. I waited patiently while the corporal took a short length of rope from his bag and bound my hands tightly behind my back. That done, he spun me to face west and pushed me roughly in the back to help me on my way. We began to march quickly, Toddy carrying the sack of provisions.

We walked for almost an hour, first west and then north. My guess was that they didn't know the more direct route over the fells and I was in no rush to point it out to them. No doubt we were heading for Sunderland Point: I'd be put

on a boat to take me far south, where the armies were fighting. The longer this journey took, the more hope I had of escape.

And I had to escape, or my days as the Spook's apprentice were well and truly over.

CHAPTER  
2  
THE TRUTH OF THINGS



WHEN IT WAS too dark to see where we were going properly, we came to a halt in a clearing near the centre of a wood. I was ready to run for it at the first opportunity but the soldiers made me sit down, and one of them was assigned to watch me while the others gathered firewood.

Normally I'd have been hopeful that the Spook would come after me and attempt a rescue. Even in the dark, he was a good tracker, more than capable of following these men. But by the time he got back from binding that boggart, I'd have been put aboard a ship and would be far beyond help. My only real hope lay in Alice. She'd expected me back and would have been alarmed once it got dark. She could find me too - I was certain of it. But what could she do against five armed soldiers?

Soon a fire was blazing away, my staff tossed casually onto the kindling with the other wood. It was my first staff, given to me by my master, and its loss hurt me badly, as if my apprenticeship to the Spook were also going up in flames.

Helping themselves to the contents of the sack, the soldiers soon had both chickens roasting on a spit and were cutting slices of bread and toasting them over the fire. To my surprise, when the food was ready, they untied me and

gave me more than I could eat. But it wasn't out of kindness.

'Eat up, boy,' the sergeant commanded. 'We want you fit and well when we hand you over. You're the tenth one we've taken in the past two weeks and probably the icing on the cake. A young, strong, healthy lad like you should earn us a good bonus!'

'He don't look very cheerful!' jeered the corporal. 'Don't he realize this is the best thing that ever happened to him? Make a man of you, it will, lad.'

'Don't look so down-in-the-mouth, boy,' the sergeant mocked, showing off to his men. 'They might not take you to fight. We're short of sailors too! Can you swim?'

I shook my head.

'Well, that's no barrier to being a Jack tar. Once overboard and in the sea, nobody lasts long. You either freeze to death or the sharks bite off your feet!'

After we'd emptied our plates they tied my hands again, and as they talked, I lay back and closed my eyes, pretending to sleep while listening to their conversation. It seemed that they were fed up with pressing for the army. They were talking about deserting.

'Last one, this is,' I heard the sergeant mutter. 'Collect our pay, then we'll disappear north o' the County and find ourselves some richer pickings. There's got to be better work than this!'

Just my luck, I told myself. One more and then they were finished. I was the very last one they intended to press into service.

'Not sure about that,' said a plaintive voice. 'Not much work anywhere. That's why my old dad signed me up to soldiering.'

It was the lad, Toddy, who'd spoken, and for a moment there was an uneasy silence. I could tell that the sergeant didn't like being contradicted.

‘Well, Toddy,’ he answered, an edge of anger to his voice, ‘depends who’s looking for work, a boy or a man. And it depends what kind of work we’re talking about. Still, I know the job for you. There’s one spook who’ll be looking for a new apprentice. I think that’s just the job you need!’

Toddy shook his head. ‘Wouldn’t like it much. Witches scare me ...’

‘Just old wives’ tales. There *are* no witches. Come on, Toddy. Tell me! When have you seen a witch?’

‘Had an old witch in our village once,’ Toddy replied. ‘She’d a black cat and used to mutter under her breath. She had a wart on her chin too!’

‘The cat or the witch?’ mocked the sergeant.

‘The witch.’

‘A witch with a wart on her chin! Well, doesn’t that just have us all shaking in our boots, lads,’ brayed the sergeant sarcastically. ‘We need to get you apprenticed to a spook and then, when you’ve finished your training, you’ll be able to go back and deal with her!’

‘No,’ said Toddy. ‘Wouldn’t be able to do that. She’s dead already. They tied her hands to her feet and threw her in the pond to see if she’d float ...’

The men roared with laughter but I couldn’t see what was funny. She’d clearly been what the Spook called ‘falsely accused’ – a poor old woman who didn’t deserve to be treated like that. Those who sank were presumed innocent but often died of shock or pneumonia if they hadn’t already drowned.

‘Well, Toddy? Did she float?’ the sergeant demanded.

‘She did, but face down in the water. They fished her out to burn her but she was already dead. So they burned her cat instead.’

There was another burst of cruel laughter even louder than the first, but the conversation soon became desultory before ceasing altogether. I think I must have dozed off because I suddenly became aware that it had grown

extremely cold. Only an hour previously, a chill damp autumn wind had been gusting through the trees, bending the saplings and causing older branches to creak and groan; now everything was perfectly still and the ground was coated with hoar frost that sparkled in the moonlight.

The fire had died right down until there were just a few glowing embers. There was plenty of wood lying in a heap at the side, but despite the bitterly cold air, nobody had made a move to fuel the fire. All five soldiers were simply staring at the cooling embers as if in a trance.

Suddenly I sensed something approaching the clearing. The soldiers did too. They came to their feet as one and peered out into the darkness. A shadowy figure emerged from amongst the trees, moving towards us so silently that it appeared to be floating rather than walking. As it drew nearer, I felt fear rising in my throat like bile and stood up nervously.

My body was already cold, but there's more than one kind of cold. I'm the seventh son of a seventh son and I can sometimes see, hear or sense things that ordinary people can't. I see ghosts, and ghaists; hear the dead talk; feel a special kind of cold when something from the dark approaches. I had that feeling now, stronger than I'd ever felt it before, and I was scared. So scared that I began to tremble from head to foot. Could it be the Fiend, come for me at last?

There was something about the head of the approaching figure that disturbed me deeply. There was no wind yet its hair seemed to be moving; writhing in an impossible way. Could this be the Fiend approaching now?

The figure moved closer; suddenly it entered the clearing so that moonlight fell on it properly for the first time ...

But it wasn't the Fiend. I was looking at a powerful malevolent witch. Her eyes were like fiery coals and her face was contorted with hatred and malice. Yet it was her

head that terrified me most of all. Instead of hair, she had a nest of black snakes that writhed and coiled, forked tongues flickering, fangs ready to inject their venom.

Suddenly there was a moan of animal terror from my right. It was the sergeant. For all his brave words, his face was now deformed by fear, his eyes bulging in his head, mouth open as if to scream. But instead he gave another moan, deep from within his belly, and set off into the trees, heading north at full pelt. His men followed, with Toddy bringing up the rear, and I could hear them in the distance, their frantic footsteps receding until they'd faded away altogether.

In the silence I was left alone to face the witch. I had no salt, no iron, no staff, and my hands were still bound behind my back, but I took a deep breath and tried to control my fear. That was the first step when dealing with the dark.

But I needn't have worried. Suddenly the witch smiled and her eyes ceased to glow. The coldness within me ebbed. The snakes stopped writhing and became a head of black hair. The contortions of the face relaxed into the features of an exceptionally pretty girl and I looked down at the pointy shoes that I knew so well. It was Alice, and she was smiling at me.

I didn't return her smile. All I could do was stare at her, horrified.

'Cheer up, Tom,' Alice said. 'Scared 'em so much they ain't going to follow us. You're safe enough now. Ain't nothing to worry about.'

'What have you done, Alice?' I said, shaking my head. 'I sensed evil. You looked like a malevolent witch. You must have used dark magic to do that!'

'Ain't done nothing wrong, Tom,' she said, reaching out to untie me. 'The others were scared and it spread to you, that's all. Just a trick of the light really ...'

Appalled, I pulled away from her. 'Moonlight shows the truth of things, you know that, Alice. It's one of the things



you told me when we first met. So is that what *I've* just seen? What you really are? Have I seen the truth?'

'No, Tom. Don't be silly. It's just me, Alice. We're friends, ain't we? Don't you know me better than that? Saved your life more than once. Saved you from the dark, I have. Ain't fair, you accusing me like that. Not when I've just rescued you again. Where would you be now without me? I'll tell you - on your way to war. You might never have come back.'

'If the Spook had seen that ...' I shook my head. It would have been the end of Alice for sure. The end of her time living with us. My master might even have put her in a pit for the rest of her days. After all, that's what he did with witches who used dark magic.

'Come on, Tom. Let's be away from here and back to Chipenden. The cold's starting to get into my bones.'

With those words, she cut my bonds and we headed straight back towards the Spook's house. I carried the sack with what was left of the provisions and we walked in silence. I still wasn't happy at what I'd seen.

The next morning, as we tucked into our breakfast, I was still worrying about what Alice had done.

The Spook's pet boggart made our meals; it was mostly invisible but occasionally took the form of a ginger cat. This morning it had cooked my favourite - bacon and eggs - but it was probably one of the worst it had ever put on the table. The bacon was burned to a crisp and the eggs were swimming in grease. Sometimes the boggart cooked badly when something had upset it; it seemed to know things without being told. I wondered if it was concerned about the same thing I was: Alice.

'Last night when you walked into the clearing, you scared me, Alice. Scared me badly. I thought I was facing a malevolent witch - one of a type I'd never met before. That's exactly what you looked like. You had a head of

snakes rather than hair and your face was twisted with hatred.'

'Stop nagging me, Tom. It ain't fair. Just let me eat my breakfast in peace!'

'Nagging? You *need* nagging! What did you do? Come on, tell me!'

'Nothing. I did nothing! Leave me alone. Please, Tom. It hurts me when you go on at me like that.'

'It hurts me to be lied to, Alice. You did something and I want to know exactly what.' I paused, blazing with anger, and the words slipped out of my mouth before I could stop them. 'If you don't tell me the truth, Alice - then I'll never trust you again!'

'All right, I'll tell you the truth,' Alice cried, the tears glistening in her eyes. 'What else could I do, Tom? Where would you be now if I hadn't come along and got you away? Ain't my fault that I scared you. Aimed at them, it was, not you.'

'What did you use, Alice? Was it dark magic? Something Bony Lizzie taught you?'

'Nothing special. Similar to *Glamour*, that's all. It's called *Dread*. Terrifies people, it does, and makes 'em run away in fear for their lives. Most witches know how to do it. It worked, Tom. What could be wrong with that? You're free and nobody got hurt, did they?'

*Glamour* was something a witch used to make herself appear younger and more beautiful than she really was, creating an aura that enabled her to bind a man to her will. It was dark magic and had been used by the witch Wurmalde when she'd tried to unite the Pendle clans in the summer. She was dead now, but dead too were men who'd been in thrall to the power of *Glamour* and had only realized too late the threat she represented. If *Dread* were another version of that same dark magic, it worried me that Alice had used such power. It worried me deeply.

'If the Spook knew, he'd send you away, Alice,' I warned her. 'He'd never understand. For him nothing ever justifies using the power of the dark.'

'Then don't tell him, Tom. You don't want me to be sent away, do you?'

'Of course not. But I don't like lying either.'

'Then just say that I caused a distraction. That you got away in the confusion. Not far from the truth, is it?'

I nodded but I was still far from happy.

The Spook returned that evening, and despite feeling guilty at withholding the truth, I repeated what Alice had said.

'Just made a lot of noise from a safe distance,' Alice added. 'They chased me but I soon lost 'em in the dark.'

'Didn't they leave somebody guarding the lad?' my master asked.

'Tied Tom's arms and legs so he couldn't run away. I circled back and cut him free.'

'And where did they go afterwards?' he asked, scratching at his beard worriedly. 'Are you sure you weren't followed?'

'They talked about going north,' I told him. 'They seemed fed up with press-gang work and wanted to desert.'

The Spook sighed. 'That could well be true, lad. But we can't afford to take a chance on those men coming looking for you again. Why did you go down into the village alone in the first place? Haven't you the sense you were born with?'

My face flushed with anger. 'I was sick of being mollycoddled. I can look after myself!'

'Can you now? Didn't put up much of a fight against those soldiers, did you?' my master retorted scathingly. 'No, I think it's time I packed you off to work with Bill Arkwright for six months or so. Besides, my old bones ache too much now to give you the combat training you need. Harsh though he is, Bill's licked more than one of my apprentices into shape. And that's exactly what you need!'

And just in case that press gang come back looking for you, you're better off away.'

'But they wouldn't be able to get past the boggart, would they?' I protested.

In addition to kitchen duties, the boggart kept the gardens safe from the dark and any sort of intruder.

'Yes, but you're not always going to be protected here, are you, lad?' the Spook said firmly. 'No, it's best if we get you away.'

I groaned inside but said nothing. My master had been muttering for weeks about seconding me to Arkwright, the spook who worked the part of the County north of Caster. It was something my master usually arranged for his apprentices. He believed that a concentrated period of training with another spook was beneficial - that it was good to get different insights into our trade. The danger from the press gang had simply hastened his decision.

Within the hour he had written the letter while Alice sulked by the fire. She didn't want us to be separated but there was nothing either of us could do about it.

What was worse, my master sent Alice to post the letter rather than me. I began to wonder if I'd be better off up north after all. At least Bill Arkwright might trust me to do something by myself.

## CHAPTER 3 A LATE REPLY



FOR ALMOST TWO weeks we'd waited for the reply from Arkwright. Recently, to my annoyance, in addition to collecting the provisions, Alice had been sent down to the village every evening to see if it had arrived, while I'd had to stay in the house. But now a letter from Arkwright was finally here.

When Alice entered the kitchen, the Spook was warming his hands at the fire. As she handed him the envelope, he glanced at the words scrawled on it.

*To Mr Gregory of Chipenden*

'I'd know that handwriting anywhere. About time too!' my master commented, annoyance strong in his voice. 'Well, girl, thanks for that. Now run along!'

With a downward turn of her mouth, Alice obeyed. She knew she'd find out what Arkwright had written soon enough.

The Spook opened the letter and began to read while I waited impatiently.