

# 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.