

Glade Hall

Chapter 9 - Dig Quest

“You know who they are lad. Just keep that young woman of yours out of The Glade. Especially at night.”

Σ

~Then~

Lydia Maynard had allowed her husband to take her and Jonah to The Glade. Their son was just over three months old and newly baptised in their own chapel. Not by anyone local, James had paid a senior member of the clergy to travel from Oxford for the day. Her new contacts among the local aristocracy had supplied two sets of God parents; James seemed to have no real friends. There were his strange looking servants and Izzy, the wild woman, but no one suitable to act as God parents for their son. She was stood among the leaf litter, her foot poised to set foot on the oval of grass between the two standing stones. The presentation of her child to the spirits was supposed to be a happy occasion, yet Lydia was crying.

“You’re sure he won’t be harmed James ?” She asked. “You swear that our son’s immortal soul won’t be tarnished ?”

Tarnished, such a mild word for what she was imagining. She’d already agreed to so many of the things James had asked of her. There were scars on her palm, where she’d offered her blood to The Glade and her lifelong service. Now James smiled less when he wanted something and he demanded, rather than asked.

“Do you think I’d harm my own heir ?” He replied. “Jonah has been named for your Christian God, now I want him named for.....”

James attended a service in their chapel every Sunday, claimed to be as God fearing as their neighbours. Now the mask had slipped a little.

“Admit it James, finish your words ! You want our son named for your Gods.”

He turned on her and for a moment the anger in his eyes turned to genuine hatred. He’d never struck her, but his hatred hurt her worse than any blow from his fists might have done.

“Why not name him here Lydia ?” He yelled at her. “My Gods will give him wealth and power, what will yours ever give him ?”

He had a point and that too hurt her. Faith was something her parents and their friends excelled in, but Lydia had always had doubts. She held her son tight against her breast and let her foot touch the grass. They didn’t like to be teased, those Gods that James loved so much.

“Fine James, name our child in their unholy place.” She said. “Let me do it though, tell me the right words.”

He seemed surprised, but his head nodded at her. Lydia walked towards the largest of the stones and knelt, close enough to be able to see the glint of quartz in the ancient rock. James whispered instructions to her and passed her a knife that he’d sharpened that morning. It was easy, barely three or four lines to be remembered. Lydia ran the palm of her right hand over the rough edge of the stone.

“I come to offer my son into your service.” She said.

Shadows in the trees, even in the bright daylight of a Sunday afternoon. James had wanted to come at night and she had refused. It was all far less sinister in daylight, far less unholy.

“I wish to name my child in your sight.”

She held her son's tiny hand, using the sharp point of the knife to prick the end of his thumb. His eyes popped open but he didn't cry. A tiny prick and just a few drops of blood, but it was enough. She pressed his thumb against the stone.

"I name my child Jonah and ask you to protect him."

More shadows, hundreds of them. She looked over her shoulders, seeing some of them becoming almost corporeal. What horrors had she offered her child to? Lydia wanted to hold her son tight and run. It was too late though, they were both now servants of older Gods than the one her parents prayed to every night.

"Well done." Said James. "I'm proud of you."

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~Still Then~

Alex Godfrey was old school, done his time at the BBC, learning how to be a damn good producer. He'd even survived a brief stint working on Dr Who, the famous burial ground of TV careers. True he was a bit of a cliché, a gay TV producer, about to buy a house near the coast with his boyfriend, but he was still the best TV producer in the reality TV game.

"We've been here three weeks Mel, no one has died. Get them out there for a few scenes with the finds."

Mel was his long standing assistant, who'd probably go on to far greater things than Dig Quest. In theory, the show was all about a group of archaeologists digging around for four days, in the hope of finding the Holy Grail, or a big shiny sword. People sent in thousands of letters, asking for their village or manor house to get the Dig Quest treatment. In reality, each episode took over a month, with weeks of pre-production research. They also cleared up after themselves, which could take another week to ten days. TV audiences liked tension and peril though, so they pretended it all happened in just four days.

"Josh insists something touched his arm." Said Mel. "He won't go back into the cellar, until you've checked over that corner."

Mel was giving him her, 'this is serious, I'm not fucking about,' look.

"And he wants more lights down there." She added.

"Then we lose the atmosphere." He replied. "Light it up like a football match and it looks fake, loses that Indiana Jones moment when Josh hold up the thing we found a month ago."

"You need to tell Josh, he won't listen to me anymore."

Josh was a pro, he'd presented dozens of reality TV shows. He turned up on time, never caused trouble and sat in his trailer for most of the day. If Josh was getting a bit flustered, there was something to be worried about.

"Fine, I'll go and work my charm on him." Said Alex.

Mel was grinning at him.

"Must you? He's scared enough already."

"Yeah, yeah, come on sweet Mel, we'll look at that corner of the cellar first. You can be my witness that we found no boggy man, or Michal Myers waiting to pounce."

They left the marquee the production team used as a war room and walked the twenty yards or so to the wide open French windows. Cables went everywhere; it was a health and safety nightmare that the public never saw. Alex stepped over the various junction boxes and across the deserted lounge area. They'd been given a free run of the place; the current owners had seemed pleased to leave for a few weeks. Two basements and then a door to the lower cellars, Alex had been walking the same route for weeks.

"I thought I told everyone to keep this door locked."

"I think the lighting guy is still down there."

The old wooden stairs wobbled, but they'd been checked out by an expert and pronounced as safe. There was a lighting guy, hanging a couple of spots, for the upcoming 'money shot.' Josh was going to get excited about the find of the century and hold up a piece of Saxon jewellery. Just so long as they could persuade Josh to enter the cellar again. Alex was already formulating a plan B, maybe filming the scene by the pretty bridge over the lake.

"Can you use a Steadicam?" He asked.

Officially all the expensive tech was supposed to be under lock and key, a kid at one dig had run off with a hugely valuable, broadcast quality TV recorder. They were underground though, well away from the local urchins and their sticky fingers. Josh picked up the high tech piece of kit, offering it to Mel.

"We can show him a nice harmless part of the cellar." He added.

Mel took the device off him, turning it on and adjusting the eyepiece to her height.

"I'm not that good with these." She said. "Don't expect too much."

"Just keep it on me, pointing at ghost free cellars."

He walked past the rock that really did look like an ancient altar. The team always avoided words with religious connotations, calling it a stone platform. Further back he walked, right into the corner of the room.

"Are you getting all this Mel?"

"Yeah, yeah, just prod the wall a bit, so we can leave."

Alex didn't prod the wall. He moved forward to give it a good thump with his hand, but the floor collapsed from under his feet. At first he thought he was going to die, as he fell several feet. Luckily, he landed on a heap of loose soil and debris, ending up covered in dust and pieces of wood.

"Crap Alex, are you ok?" Yelled Mel. "Do you want me to fetch help, or something?"

Or something! Typical Mel. He stood up and nothing seemed broken, though his backside hurt from hitting the stairs. Light was his main problem, the lack of it.

"I'm fine, fell through some sort of wooden trap door I think." He replied. "Can you get a lamp Mel? Something on a long lead."

Mel went away to find a light of some kind, while he used his hands to brush off most of the dust. A trapdoor was the culprit, made brittle by centuries of gradual decay. He pulled off a large piece of rotting wood, just as Mel returned.

"We're Dig Quest." She said. "Of course we have lights on cables."

She dragged over a four bulb halogen array, perfect for inspecting a sudden hole in the ground. Mel was looking at the rotting piece of wood he was holding.

"Woodworm, look at the holes." She said.

"Just waiting for me to stand on it and land on my arse!"

Alex dragged the lights to the top of the stairs and aimed one down them. There was a lot of debris, but the stairs ended on a clear area of floor.

"I'll get some of the archaeologists." Said Mel. "They'll love this!"

"Not yet, stay put while I have a quick look. Hand me the Steadicam."

He'd once used a similar camera to film a 'fly on the wall' documentary, he was quite good at handling it. He switched on its two built in lights and swung the camera towards the hole in the ground.

"Don't go far." Said Mel. "Its power pack is down to fifty five percent. The lights eat power."

“That’ll be enough, I’m not going far.”

He gave her a huge grin.

“Why should the boffins get all the fun ?!”

“Ok Alex, just be careful.”

The Steadicam was heavy, but designed to balance perfectly, once it was held properly. Alex ignored the pain in his rump and carefully made his way down the stairs. The camera recorded onto a magnetic tape, he just hoped there was enough left to get everything.

“This will be great for the Christmas party outtakes.” He yelled.

“You’re a crazy man Alex.” Shouted Mel. “Ten minutes and I’m fetching some help.”

He swung the camera to his left, seeing a long and very damp passage, leading off into the distance.

The floor was interesting, it seemed to be covered in fragments of yellow quartz crystals.

“Josh will love this.” He muttered.

A whole hidden cave system ! That could get their show renewed for another season, maybe even a Christmas special. He followed the path, having to step over tree roots and wade through several deep puddles. A noise behind him.

“You just had to join me, knew it.”

Alex turned, expecting to see Mel, but there was no one behind him. Maybe a shadow, in the distance.

“Is that you Mel ?”

Nothing, his eyes saw nothing and there was just a hint of a shadow on the camera eyepiece. He decided to ignore it and carry on. There was no way he was going to become infected by the hysteria of people like Josh. The Steadicam was heavy and designed to be swung round nice and slowly. As he aimed it down the passage, he saw the man holding a bow.

Alex closed his eyes for a second, blinking, trying to see clearly. He was still there, the man who looked for all the world like a pre-historic hunter. It had to be one of the crew playing a joke, Mel had to be in on it.

“Yeah, great joke.” He said. “Apart from the bruise on my buttocks.”

The hunter seemed as confused by him, peering at him and reaching for a nasty looking knife. So far the man hadn’t made a sound, but as his hand held the dagger, he began to yell. A battle cry of some kind, in a voice and language Alex had never heard before. He turned and ran !

He might have dropped the heavy camera, but he had no other lights. Alex forgot his slight paunch and his age. He ran like he had Lucifer himself chasing him ! No breath to shout a warning to Mel, he just ran and hoped the hunter would keep to the dark passages.

“Oh fuck !”

He felt something sharp cut into his right shoulder. Alex stumbled, crashing into the passage wall, destroying one of his precious lights. No way was he going to end his days in a dank passage in Oxfordshire ! He ran again, actually leaping over several tree roots. There was no sound behind him, but he knew the hunter was there. The stairs were in front of him and Alex felt another sharp wound in his shoulder, going in deep this time.

“I refuse to die down here !” He yelled.

He ran for the stairs, taking them two at a time. His heart was hammering in his chest, he couldn’t breathe fast enough, he felt like he was going to pass out. Mel’s voice called out, wonderful sweet Mel.

“What did you say Alex ? Did you find.....”

Alex ran into her at full speed and hit her with his own weight and that of the camera. It was an uneven contest ! Mel was sent flying backwards, the camera lens trying to dig into her chest. He saw a flash and sparks, as the final camera light blew apart. Alex felt Mel under him, as they rolled to a halt.

"Mel, sorry !"

He forgot the stinging in his shoulder, rolling Mel into her back, looking her over for any apparent damage. The lighting guy ran over, obviously in a state of panic.

"It's this fucking place." He said. "I'll get help, but I'm not working down here anymore."

He ran, across the cellar and up the stairs.

"Call an ambulance !" Alex yelled at his retreating back.

"Don't worry, I'm calling everyone !!"

Mel was moaning, showing signs of returning consciousness. He'd later have to live with the decision, but Alex decided his next move would be to find the tape. Without the recording, no one would believe him. It would look like he'd gone mad and attacked Mel with the Steadicam. Alex pushed the camera about, until he could see the slot for the tape.

"Damn ! Now no one will believe me."

It was fried, the cover was still glowing red hot. No magnetic tape could survive that. Somewhere, probably during the collision with the passage wall, the tape holder had been destroyed. He could hear shouting now, people running through the basement areas.

"Mel, are you alright ?" He asked.

She seemed to be coming to, but there's a red stain on the front of her 'Dig Quest' T shirt. Several stains, growing all the time. Pressure ! He'd done a first aid course, you put pressure on wounds to reduce the flow of blood.

"Alex, we've called the ambulance."

Josh calling from the top of the stairs. Good old Josh, he'd know what to do. Even his familiar voice was likely to get a better response time for the ambulance. Alex lifted Mel's T shirt and all of her seemed to be bleeding. From her chin to her navel, all looked like one vast wound. Crap !

He picked the biggest hole in her abdomen and pushed hard on it. At some point he must have passed out. He was in an ambulance, Josh sat next him.

"Is Mel alright ?" He asked.

"They don't know yet." Answered Josh. "They're taking her straight to a specialist hospital."

Alex wondered what they specialised in and his mind began to remember her body, looking like one huge wound. That kind of damage had to be life changing, even if she survived.

"Did they find the hunter ?"

"What hunter Alex ? What happened down there ?"

Alex didn't answer, he'd passed out again.

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~Now~

Emma Hooper had decided that an afternoon at Sheila's Flowers, might be less stressful than spending the afternoon at Glade Hall. That had been a mistake. The door closed and another nosey customer left with a bunch of flowers, they'd only purchased to gain access to Emma.

"How many more today ?"

"I don't mind." Said Sheila. "They're all buying something. You can't blame them Emma. Dead sheep, the police and Tommy sleeping with your dad's gardener."

Sheila Hower was grinning from ear to ear.

“You must admit Emma, it’s all pretty exciting for a quite village.”

The police had interviewed everyone and it was inevitable that they’d find out about Tommy’s affair with Lysette. Being a small village, everyone heard about it, five seconds after the police knew. For a sleepy little place, the sex was more attention grabbing than a few dead sheep. Emma was building bunches of their cheapest stock, to be sold at a high profit, to the nosey locals. Knowledge, it appeared, came at a price.

“What did the police think had killed the sheep ?” Asked Sheila.

“Not you too ?!”

Sheila was crossing her index finger, over her heart.

“I promise.” She said. “Not to ask anything about Tommy and.... That woman.”

It secretly pleased Emma that the village had taken against Lysette. True it was a bit stereotypical, the woman being the homewrecker, while the man was seen as some sort of victim of his own urges. Actually, when she thought about it. Men really were like that ! Even Dean seemed to think with his dick.

“Well, the police are sure it’s not an animal,” she said, “no local beast of Glade Hall.”

“That’s a pity.” Said Sheila. “Rumours of an escaped big cat, would be good for tourism. What do they think then ?”

Emma thought there was no harm in telling her, the local police seemed to be letting the whole story out. The police hadn’t told her much at all, but they’d told her dad quite a bit. Her dad had told Tommy, who’d told Sean. It was all about fourth or fifth hand information, but that wouldn’t worry Sheila.

“A human did it Sheila, person or persons unknown. Probably as a grudge thing against Tommy or my dad.”

“Oh dear, why do they think that ?”

“They had a ministry vet at our house, before we’d even had breakfast.” Said Emma. “Everyone seemed to think a big cat was responsible and the police were really worried.”

Sheila looked so concerned, that she was completely ignoring a woman wanting to pay for a bunch of roses.

“So what did he say ? This vet.”

“They weren’t bitten. The sheep had their throats torn out, probably by some kind of weapon. And that’s not the worst bit !”

“What’s that ? You have to tell me now.”

Emma nodded at the customer, listening intently to every word. Sheila took her money for the roses and when she left, the shop was empty.

“I’ll put up the closed sign if I have to.” Said Sheila. “Tell me ?”

“This came from Sean, who was told by someone else..... The vet said there were no big cat paw prints, none at all. But something had nibbled at the dead sheep and the tooth marks looked human.”

Sheila had actually gone quite pale.

“That’s it ! I’m never going out on my own again !” She said.

That was pretty much what her dad had said, but he’d been talking about Emma.

“No wandering around the grounds after dark.” He’d told her. “Until the police catch this lunatic.” She’d agreed, but he didn’t know about the tunnels, her underground route to The Grotto and who knew where else ? The tunnels seemed safe enough and she’d have the fearless Dean Jenkins with her. The old passageways gave her freedom to wander, without upsetting her parents.

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Dean had decided to try and find the site of the old Tudor manor house and the mythical missing village of Lower Worton. He wasn't by nature a keen historical investigator. Like Emma, he just wanted to get away from the general angst that was taking over Glade Hall. The police had interviewed everyone, stirring up the builders and the cook. Mrs Hargreaves had a full on tantrum about it all, so Dean decided to become an archaeologist for the afternoon.

"Just don't damage my camera; it cost more than my car." Emma had told him.

With expensive camera safely over his shoulder, he was looking at the wood, which had been planted on the site of the original Tudor building. James Maynard's builders had dug up every stone, using them in the construction of Glade Hall. Dean knew that, but surely there had to be some trace of the old manor house ?

"You won't find much. They even dug up the old foundations. Cheaper than buying newly quarried blocks."

Dean hadn't heard Tommy Milner approach. He thought the farm manager was probably trying to avoid all the fuss and an angry wife.

"Saw you heading this way." Said Tommy. "I guessed you were looking for the ruins."

"Yeah, Emma's doing an afternoon at the florists." Replied Dean. "I was at a loose end and there's all the trouble....."

Dean wasn't the most diplomatic person in the world, but he knew when to shut up.

"It's alright." Said Tommy. "I know what's being said. The police have told me not to leave town until this is all sorted out. As if I'd harm my own sheep !"

"I was told they suspect a lunatic did it."

Tommy was glaring at him, Dean knew he'd upset him in some way, but had no idea how.

"Anyway, they left two gate pillars, if you're looking for something to photograph ?"

"Yes please."

"It's the other side of the wood." Said Tommy. "Rough going, it'll take us a while to get there."

Dean prided himself on not being taken in by all the ghost nonsense. Yet, he felt that something was watching them, as they moved through the trees.

"This was a coppice wood once." Said Tommy. "That's why it's so thickly planted."

It was hard going and Dean was breathing hard, he just couldn't shake the idea that someone was following them. He spun around when he heard what sounded like a footstep. There was no one behind them.

"Pay them no mind." Said Tommy. "It's not you that they think betrayed them."

"Who's following us Tommy ?"

"You know who they are lad. Just keep that young woman of yours out of The Glade. Especially at night."

Dean almost made an excuse to go back to Glade Hall. Tommy might have been a middle aged farm manager, but he was beginning to scare him. Only the thought of Emma calling him a wimp, stopped him from forgetting all about Lower Worton and the Tudor building.

"There you are." Said Tommy. "Not much, but all they left standing."

Two stone gate posts, both covered in weeds and barely recognisable. It seemed insulting to ignore them, so Dean pulled some of the weeds away and took a few pictures.

"Do you know where Lower Worton used to be ?" He asked.

Tommy was giving the sort of look that made Dean want to run away and hide.

"Who's been filling your head with nonsense about Lower Worton ?"

“Emma heard about it, from Sheila in the village.”

In truth, there had been quite a bit about the legendary vanishing village, in the documents Alice Hooper had brought back from New York. Dean didn't think that was any of Tommy's business though.

“Well it did exist, no matter what you might hear to the contrary. My family were the only people to survive the destruction, the only Milners to carry on the name.”

“What destroyed it ?”

“Vengeance lad, pure vengeance ! They thought the village had betrayed them. Maybe some of the villagers had been unfaithful to the old ways, but they didn't deserve to die like that.”

Dean didn't want to upset Tommy, but he had to ask.

“How was Lower Worton destroyed Tommy ?”

“By fire of course ! Burnt to the ground, everyone with it. Apart from two of my line, the Milners. Saved for some reason, though no one knows why.”

“Who did it ? Who are they Tommy ?”

“That's the second time you've asked that and you know who ! Emma has seen them and you know who they are. The spirits lad, the shadows !”

There was the picture Emma had taken in the cellar. Dean didn't want to admit it, but that picture did look like some creature that had escaped from hell itself.

“Lower Worton was about two miles south of here.” Said Tommy. “I can show you where it was, some of the paths are still visible. If you want to see it ?”

Dean was being offered a way out of spending more time with a very disturbed Tommy. Seeing the site of the missing village had been the main goal of his afternoon though.

“Yes, that would be great.” He said.

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Emma left Sheila's flowers feeling exhausted. So many people had been in to buy flowers, simply to gain some gossip and hear rumours. On the plus side, she'd met just about everyone in the area, or at least everyone who was pathologically nosey. Actually that did seem to be everyone !

Her car was in the central square, parked next to the post office, which doubled as a convenience store. She liked parking there, perfect for buying Jerry Jr some sweets. A mini Toblerone tonight, he was becoming very fond of them. On the way she passed Smith & Sons, who sold second hand furniture, but called themselves an antique shop. The window display had been changed and something caught her eye. The local shops tended to close early, but Smith, or maybe one of his sons, had left the 'Open' sign on the door. Emma opened the door and went inside.

“Hello Emma Hooper, I've seen you in town.”

He was old, with eyelids that drooped down. He might have easily been in his eighties, Emma was useless at judging such things. He had a kind smile.

“Sorry, I don't remember when we met.” She replied.

“I'm sorry.” He said. “We haven't met. It's just that new faces are rare and everyone knows who you are. I think everyone within five miles has been in to buy flowers today. Sheila must be pleased.”

“Oh she is !”

He had a nice smile, Emma liked him, but still had no idea who he was.

“Not all of us are that nosey Emma. I'm Jeremiah Smith by the way. Yes I know, but biblical names are quite big around here.”

Nineties rather than eighties, by the way his hands trembled, but there wasn't much wrong with his mind.

"I came in to look at the document box in the window." She said.

"It's not an antique." Said Jeremiah. "A local man makes them. Cedar wood, supposed to keep the moths off whatever you keep in them."

"It looks perfect for what I have in mind."

They went to the window display and the box was quite light, Jeremiah easily spun it around and opened it. Perfect ! It had two clasps to hold it shut and a nice red felt lining.

"I have something far nicer in mahogany, a real antique."

"No, this is exactly what I want. How much is it ?"

It was probably only worth a few pounds, but he wanted sixty pounds for it. Something made her pull a face and haggle. Eventually she left the shop with a cedar wood box that had cost her forty five pounds. Emma was ridiculously pleased with her purchase and for getting Jeremiah Smith to give her a discount. The box would make a perfect coffin for Hermione's remains.

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Dean seemed to have every thorn in Oxfordshire, sticking in his feet or stuck in his jacket. The journey had been a tough walk with few regularly used paths. He'd walked into at least a dozen spider's webs and suspected that at least one spider, was still in his hair. It had been a crap way to spend an afternoon.

"We're here." Said Tommy.

"This is it ? We're in the middle of a conifer wood."

Tommy refused to lose his enthusiasm.

"Close your eyes." He said. "Trust me, I want to show you something."

Despite a little temporary insanity, Tommy didn't seem like the sort to push a blade through your ribs and leave you to bleed to death. Dean shut his eyes and allowed Tommy to move him around.

"When I say." Said Tommy. "Open your eyes and look down. Find the start of gravel path and then look up, imagining the path extending into a medieval village. Got that ?"

"Ok Tommy, when do I get to open my eyes ?"

"Not quite yet."

More pulling and Tommy getting him to exactly the right spot, facing just the right way.

"Now !"

Dean looked up and the angle of the sun showed him just a trace of an ancient pathway. Once he had it in his mind, he could follow it into the trees, even see other paths leading off it.

"I see it Tommy, I see the paths."

"Imagine houses along those paths and the people going about their business."

"I can Tommy..... This is amazing !"

Just a few paths, but his mind was filling in the gaps, seeing the villagers, even smelling the livestock they kept next to their homes. It was there in front of him and it was real. He was looking at the legendary village of Lower Worton.

"It's real Tommy. I apologise for ever doubting you."

"But you need to see it in your mind." Said Tommy. "Take hundreds of pictures and all you'll see on them is trees and more trees."

It was true ! Dean reached for Emma's camera and in that instant of looking away, he'd lost the mental link to the pathways. All Dean saw was a boring and lifeless conifer forest. He took pictures, lots of them, but he knew they'd show nothing.

"I know the truth Tommy. The village of your people was here."

"Come on lad, we should get back before dark."

~ ~

Sean believed, of course he did. His entire family had been educated by nuns and attended church every Sunday. His father back in Ireland still drove a 'Sunday car,' an ancient relic that just about managed to transport three adults and four kids to church. So of course he believed in unseen forces and the power of evil. He also believed that he was immune to any harm, because of his faith. At least four times a day, he kissed the crucifix that hung around his neck and trusted his God to protect him. Since Oliver had died and then Wendy..... He'd been adding a few extra lines to his short prayer. "For yours is the kingdom and power and glory forever....."

He prayed when he was alone, it didn't fit in with his hard drink, hedonistic image. Sean wasn't about to give up a lucrative contract, but he had concerns about Glade Hall. Too many strange occurrences, even if you ignored the bad history of the place. He'd signed a proper contract though, to clean and renovate all the original 18th Century panelling. It was a dream of a job; he genuinely loved renovating interiors that were hundreds of years old. He wasn't a fool though; he knew when something was wrong.

"Right, I'm out of here." Said Declan. "Are you coming down the pub?"

"Maybe later, I want to finish this section."

"Just remember..... no one ever got a medal for working themselves to death."

Declan was right of course, his contract was to complete the work in a given timeframe. The work was actually ahead of schedule, he could leave at five if he wanted to. He loved the work though and some of his chemicals would dry out. Another hour and a section of panelling would look as good as the day it was put in place. Better actually, modern finishes brought out the texture of the wood better. The original artisan had put his initials on the back of the panel. Probably written around seventeen fifty, the blue letters of A.G. were still clearly legible. Henry had asked the local amateur archaeologists about AG, his initials were everywhere, always in discrete corners or the back of panels. His identity was unknown, even to the Oxford Archaeological Society. In the end, the renovation team had started referring to the bygone worker of wood, as Aggy. Not very polite or complimentary, but the name was said with some affection.

"Hi Sean, doing another late one?"

Emma made him jump, he'd been daydreaming about long dead artisans. The owner's daughter was looking pleased with herself and carrying a wooden box. It looked heavy.

"Yes, just finishing a bit of tender loving care on one of Aggy's panels. Is that heavy? I'll help you get it wherever it's going, if you want?"

He liked the girl, she'd been through a lot and had managed to keep smiling. Affection for girls her age could be misinterpreted though, so he rarely initiated their conversations. He was pleased though, when she put her box down and obviously intended to stay for a while.

"It's quite light." She said. "Modern, something to hold my college stuff. Who was Aggy?"

"Nobody knows Emma. He was the person who constructed most of the wooden panelling of Glade Hall and some of the staircases. His initials are everywhere and the occasional phrase in Latin. We've all become rather fond of good old Aggy. Look here."

He showed her the initials in some kind of blue ink, written over two hundred and sixty years ago.

"It's all hidden away or in corners you'd never think of looking in." Added Sean. "We've found nearly a hundred of his little notes to a future world."

"How do you know AG is a he?" She asked.

"They all were in those days Emma. Building houses was always a male profession. We have no idea who Aggy really was, but we can be certain, he was a man."

"I'd loved to have seen them Sean. Can you tell me if you find others ? I'd like to take pictures of them. Social media is a good source of information. Someone might actually give you a proper name for good old Aggy."

Of course, she was right. Sean cursed himself for not thinking about it. Everyone was on social media now, someone would have knowledge of their AG.

"I have them, on my phone." He said. "Copy them, send them wherever you want. Not now though, I need my phone tonight."

He gave her his Samsung smartphone, watching as her expert fingers flicked through the pictures of Aggy's seventeen fifty graffiti. She stopped on one picture.

"This Latin, have you had it translated Sean ?"

"No why ?"

"My Latin is rusty and Aggy's writing is fairly awful. I can see Agla Dominus though, at the end of one line. It looks like something an occultist would write, a form of spiritual protection."

Sean felt for his crucifix, silently saying the words he was now going to recite at least ten times a day.

"They were all like that though weren't they Emma ? Everyone in that period would be thought of as religious nutter, if they were alive now."

She wasn't looking convinced.

"Yes of course, but few of them knew Latin. Only the rich and the clergy learned Latin. Let me look through the others."

Her grin went and then her smile. When Emma began to look worried, Sean began to get worried. Maybe he would start calling a few contacts and look for other work, even if it did mean outside work in the winter.

"It isn't good is it ?" He asked.

"No, there's the phrase sigillum sanctum fraternitatis, used several times. I'm no expert, but I'm pretty certain that only occult groups would use it so often. It might be that Aggy isn't a person. AG might be the how this occult group signed themselves."

"So Aggy wasn't a warm and cuddly old artisan ?" He asked.

"No, not unless he needed protection from something unholy. Serious protection !"

"Can I borrow your phone now ?" She asked. "I can Bluetooth the pics and have it back to you in half an hour, maybe quicker if I can find USB drivers."

Sean was stunned, he just wanted to get home and never return to Glade Hall. He didn't see Aggy as some sort of occult group. He saw Aggy as another man like him, terrified of something unholy at Glade Hall.

"Christ Emma, Aggy was terrified of this place, two hundred and sixty years ago !"

He could have kicked himself ! Everyone knew that Emma had been badly affected by the place, there were rumours about her being locked in at night. All for her own good of course and his thoughtless words weren't helping. Instinctively he reached for her hand.

"Sorry Emma I'm overreacting, it's been a long day. Keep my phone tonight, give it back to me in the morning. Send the pictures out. Hopefully someone will know about this AG."

She hugged him for a while, he could feel her sobbing. When the sobbing stopped, she wiped her hand across her eyes and picked up her wooden box.

"I'll give you the phone back when you get in tomorrow." She said. "Thank you Sean, thank you."

Emma left him, still trying to wipe the tears out of her eyes. Sean gave up on finishing the panel; he'd make up a fresh batch of chemical in the morning. He put his brushes in a pot of cleaner and

made sure everything was out of the reach of small fingers. They were all aware that Jerry Jr was very good at escaping his mother and wandering in areas that weren't that child friendly.

"Hell of day huh ?"

She looked out of place, but something was prodding at his memory. The college, the religious people, they'd dressed their students in clerical robes.

"Sorry ?!"

The girl looked to be in her early twenties and smiling, there was even a name tag on her robes, telling the world that she was Natalie. Her head and neck were far from ordinary and Sean felt his pulse begin to race.

"Got a taste for the young ones have you Sean ? Naughty boy."

Her head was still straight, but far too over to the right of her body. It was as though her neck had been broken and stretched across her shoulders. She was dead of course, another horror of Glade Hall. Sean held onto his crucifix.

"Sweet Lord Jesus, please help this miserable sinner." He muttered.

"No good Sean. I prayed to him, six times a day. The bastard never saved me !"

"What do you want ?" He asked.

She was between him and the hallway, or he'd have run. As it was, he felt his bladder trying to empty into his trousers. Sean believed and that made him vulnerable. He really believed he had an immortal soul and that soul could be harmed by the things that inhabited dark places.

"You want fun Sean, I'll give you fun."

She lifted her robes, showing him her naked body. Blotched skin and wasted muscles, she looked like a corpse he'd once helped to remove from a local river.

"Leave her alone Sean. Don't help her, don't encourage her and don't fuck her !!"

Natalie had moved slightly, there was enough of a gap for him to get past her. Sean ran, down the corridor and towards the car park. Part of his mind was trying to rationalise what had happened, attribute it all to past events and his state of fatigue. Sean had faith though, he believed and that belief included Satan and all his creatures.

Sean hurtled through the door at the end of the corridor, hearing the crash as it slammed closed. Jerome Hooper had insisted on solar powered lights for the car park, despite being told he'd have a dark car park all winter. It was summer though, the lights left no shadows among the cars. Sean stood in the centre of the gravel, turning this way and that, looking for any sign of his tormentor. Once again he clung onto his crucifix, kissing it.

"Lord Jesus please protect me. I'm a dreadful sinner, but I truly repent those sins."

His heart began to slow down, his breathing eased. He could see a full three hundred and sixty degrees and there was no sign of Natalie. Sean found his car keys and opened his car door. He was definitely going to begin ringing contacts to find a new job.

"Leave her alone you fucker !!"

An arm smashed through his car window, claw like nails ripping through his shirt and into his skin. Sean passed out from the shock, or maybe the pain as her nails dug deep into his arm.

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