

## The Stag's Head

The woman's voice came from the nearby table again, even louder this time. Smiling, Tony leaned across and said quietly, "It's her birthday. I think she's had a few."

Opposite him, his wife Celeste raised her eyebrows and mirrored his smile. Simon, sitting at his sister-in-law's left, grimaced. "They've already shushed her once, for goodness' sake," he muttered. "If she can't take her drink she shouldn't be allowed out."

Simon's wife Davina reached out her leg beneath the table and tapped his ankle with her foot. "Quiet, darling. They'll hear you."

Simon pretended to study the specials' board propped up on a chair beside their table, and shot the woman another glare. "I've come out for a quiet meal," he growled. "I'm going to say something."

Celeste laid a hand on his arm. "Don't, Si." Shrugging her off, he stood and strode over to the other table.

"Look, do you mind?"

The six occupants of the table glanced up at him, surprise written over their faces. "Beg your pardon?" one of the men asked, not entirely politely.

Simon looked down at him. "I wasn't talking to you." He turned to address the raucous woman again.

The man stood, and moved away from his seat, his suddenly massive frame filling Simon's view. "Anythin' you want to say to my wife, you can say to me," he said slowly and clearly, his west-country accent filling the words with menace.

Simon hesitated. True, the man looked older than he by a good fifteen years, early seventies probably, and the other two gazing up at him likewise. And, by the looks of them, they too had drunk more than their fair share, whereas he, needing to keep his head clear for driving, had only had the one, and that only half-finished. The three women he discounted, of course. But still, for all their age and insobriety the men were the barrel-chested labourer types, and could prove tricky. Even with Tony – whom he knew would back him up come what may – on his side, a scuffle with them might not go entirely his way.

Deciding, he gave the man the look that he habitually used on his employees. "Just keep the noise down, or I'll get the manager onto you." Turning on his heel he strode back to his table.

Davina studied him worriedly as he sat. "Really, darling, did you have to?" She shot a nervous glance at the other party. "They're all looking, and muttering."

"Let them." He took another mouthful of his pint.

Even though he himself lived in a country village, a few miles away from the inn, it was at least genteel, populated by his sort of people – refined, mostly retired gentlefolk, the kind who kept themselves to themselves and didn't disrupt the peace. The perfect place for R&R away from the factory and its problems. Exclusive to those with money, it was clear of the local rabble.

And he'd hoped that this particular inn, with its reputation for decent food at rather more than average prices, would be similarly deterring to the hoi-polloi. He marvelled that he'd never tried it before, even though

the factory that he and Tony co-owned – passed onto them by generations of antecedents – was literally a few hundred yards away up the hill, nestled on a small industrial estate, a few cottages dotted together on a piece of land adjoining it. He'd assumed there would be no local inhabitants to encroach on his quiet evening with his brother and their wives, at which he had business to discuss. To have it spoilt by this harridan and her crew...

He sat fuming. The damned woman was still at it! Deliberately now, he reckoned, just to spite him and his companions. The others at her table were even joining in, creating a cacophony that threatened to take the roof off. His head felt about to explode; Davina was staring at him, clearly worried. He'd damn well show them!

But before he could move, the party at the other table, miraculously, stood to leave. One of the men went to pay their bill, the others, unhurriedly and still talking far too stridently, filed out past him – the drunken woman's husband bumped into Simon's table as he passed, jogging their drinks and causing Simon to snatch at his pint glass to avoid it being overturned. He glared up at the man, but he'd gone on his way. The drunken woman herself was the last to leave. As she reached his table, she lurched as if stumbling, then suddenly leaned in towards him. "I curse thee, knave," she said quietly, then righted herself and left, and he gaped after her, dumbstruck.

His brother and Celeste were chatting animatedly, but Davina was still staring at him. "Did you hear that?" he asked them, indignation spilling over.

Tony and Celeste stopped talking and joined Davina in gazing at him. "Hear what?" Tony asked.

"She said—" he choked off, and reached blindly for his beer to compose himself. "She told me she was cursing me. 'I curse thee, knave', she said." He was still staring in the direction the woman had left. "'I curse thee, knave'." He swivelled round to look at Davina. "Did you hear her?"

She shook her head slowly, watching him anxiously. "Can't say I heard it, did you, Cel?" Tony said.

"No, I can't say I did," his wife replied. "Are you sure that's what she said?" she asked Simon.

He nodded. Tony spluttered. "Well, that proves she was three sheets, then. Who the hell nowadays says, 'I curse thee, knave'?"

Celeste joined in his laughter, and Davina made a brave attempt at a smile. Just then one of the waitresses, a buxom brunette of about twenty, came to take their order.

This broke his mood, and soon he was savouring braised venison, Dauphinoise potatoes, cauliflower cheese, carrots and broccoli. The chatter was inconsequential, and even Davina seemed to be relaxed and enjoying herself. All was going well, and Simon was thinking of setting his proposal out to Tony for the future of the business. He glanced to his left as a movement caught his eye.

A waitress was walking past. Not the buxom one, but a taller, more slender girl. He raised an eyebrow at the way she was dressed: a long, lavender skirt with what looked to his inexperienced eye like a darker purple tablecloth folded over the top half; a white, off-the-shoulder gypsy-style pull-over top with, of all things, some kind of purple and black corset affair laced over it; and a white mob-cap on her head, from which tumbled a cascade of blond curls. He frowned, wondering what the fancy dress was all about. He hadn't seen any notices about medieval theme-

nights, and the other girl had been clothed normally, if a little tartishly for his taste.

She'd emerged from the doorway at the upper end of the room, and was heading towards the door at the lower end, one that lead to the bar. His gaze followed her, and his eyes widened and his jaw dropped as, impossibly, her costume changed instantly, a plain red skirt and t-shirt replacing the medieval ensemble. She went through the door, and he gawped after her, stunned.

"Are you all right?"

His head shot round. "Did– did you see that?" he gasped at his wife.

Davina, Tony and Celeste stared at him. "See what, Si?" Tony asked.

"There was—" He shook his head furiously. What the hell *had* he seen?

The buxom waitress appeared. "Is everything okay with your meals?"

She'd also changed, to a similar costume that the other girl had worn. "What—?" he managed, then rocked backwards in fear as, in the blink of an eye, she too reverted to her ordinary clothing.

"Si?" Tony leaned across, concerned. Simon kept his eyes fixed firmly on the girl. As he watched, her costume changed several times, flickering between the two dress-states faster than his eyes could comfortably follow. The room, too, was acting weirdly in his peripheral vision, transforming itself from a modern, if slightly retroactive, restaurant chamber to a full-blown thirteenth century, sawdust-littered hovel, then back again as if the alteration had never occurred. The other girl, the slim one, came back through the lower door – her clothing flickering through the changes like some psychedelic nightmare.

He buried his head in his hands. "Si?" Tony said again.

Simon scrapped his chair back. "Excuse me," he mumbled. "I– I don't feel..."

He left the sentence unfinished, bolting for the door, stumbling where the décor was changing so rapidly. He could feel the eyes of everyone in the room following him, but he was past caring. The ancient-looking oak door to the car park was mercifully free of hallucination, and he crashed through it.

Outside, he gulped in deep breaths of damp late-evening air. Then recoiled again as he registered mud oozing around the tops of his shoes rather than a solid tarmac surface beneath them. He took in the scene, peering closely through the dark, his mind reeling. No cars – where were the cars? Instead, a broken-down cart, its twin shafts indicating its horse-drawn nature, sprawled in one corner, one wheel leaning at a drunken angle. Apart from that, nothing. And the wall between the car-park and the road. Where had that gone? He looked behind him. The exterior of the inn had undergone its own transformation, the whitewashed décor having been replaced by a dull, unpainted mud-brown surface. Part of it had vanished, too, the part that would be enclosing the bar area, and a wave of nausea hit him again at its absence. He stumbled away from the transfigured building, slipping through the ooze. Towards the road – and again, the modern surface had vanished, and a rutted dirt-track met his gaze. Swinging his head round wildly, he lurched out into it. Without thought, he blundered up the incline leading towards his factory. Occasionally his ankle threatened to turn over in the potholes scattered liberally through the track's surface. He ignored the threat, wanting only to get away from the inn as quickly as possible.

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Back at the inn, Celeste returned from the ladies' cloakroom. "She's okay," she told Tony. "Just shaken up."

Tony shook his head. “Why’s he started acting like that?” he wondered, half to himself. The waitress, who’d also been concerned when her customer had left so abruptly, was standing by, fortunately having no other customers to attend to. Tony turned to her. “Could you get my sister-in-law a drink?” he requested. “A brandy, I think.”

She nodded, and hurried out to the bar. As she left, Davina returned. “How are you, Vina?” Celeste asked.

She gulped and shrugged, but said nothing. Tony touched her arm gently. “He’s been acting strangely all evening. Any idea what was wrong?”

“I don’t know. I know there’s something he wants to discuss with you. But he was fine when we were getting ready to come. And all the while we were driving here. It wasn’t—” she hesitated, then went on reluctantly. “It wasn’t until he got angry with that woman and she said that thing to him that he changed.”

Tony stared at her. “Do you mean he took notice of what that silly cow said?”

She shrugged again. “I only know that’s when he changed.”

“Are you sure?” Celeste asked.

“I know him. I could tell.”

Davina’s brandy arrived, and she gulped it down gratefully. Tony turned to the waitress. “I think we need to pay our bill,” he said. “Could you get it for me, please?”

While she was away, he said, “We need to go and find him. He’s obviously been disturbed by something, and the sooner we sort it out, the better.”

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Simon stumbled onwards, lost in the night but aware that he was still heading uphill. So far he hadn’t seen anybody, or heard anything. If only he could make his factory soon, the solid structure that he felt would anchor him to the real world.

He must have been drugged, that was all he could conclude. And obviously – his foot hit another pothole – it was still effective. None of the scenery he could make out was familiar, and he knew this road in detail, driving it every day to work. He should be level with the small settlement of cottages now, the ones that he—

Suddenly, something loomed out at him in the darkness, further ahead, squarely in the middle of the road. He hurried towards it, then stopped dead. The stern countenance of a stag, a disembodied head atop a thick wooden post, antlers large and magnificent, stared glassily at him. He crept towards it. He realised with a flash of insight that this must be the stag’s head from which the area – and subsequently the inn – derived its name. He reached out a hand. Its pelt was warm to his touch.

A movement to one side caught his attention, and he turned towards it. He stiffened as the drunken woman from the inn, and the other members of her party, emerged from the gloom. His instinct told him to run, he was heavily outnumbered by the three men, all of whom were glaring at him with menace apparent in their faces, but his legs seemed unable to respond. The woman strolled towards him. The men, thankfully, held back.

Suddenly, he realised that they, too, were now dressed in ancient garb. He blinked as the woman thrust a torch towards him, a fiery rag wrapped around a heft of wood. She studied him closely. “Who— who are you?” he rasped.

She smiled, a grim smile without humour. She said nothing, and her silence chilled him. “*What do you want from me?*” he yelled.

One of the men stepped forward. “Thou dost not shout at the Wise Woman,” he growled.

“W– Wise Woman?”

The men and the other two women bowed towards her. “The Wise Woman of our village,” one of the women said. She and the others raised their torches, and flares of light responded behind them. Simon gasped as he saw an assemblage of huts, their occupants standing around them, torches of their own held aloft like trophies. The village was standing in the precise spot where his factory should have been.

The Wise Woman advanced till she was toe to toe with Simon. Even at a foot shorter than him, he could feel power emanating from her. “I call thee knave,” she muttered, and he shuddered as he recalled her words to him at the inn.

He tried to laugh, the noise sounding thin and tremulous. “Wha– What have I done to be a knave?”

The Wise Woman indicated behind her. “My village,” she said, her voice packed with some emotion he couldn’t fathom. “Our village at the sign of the Stag’s Head.” She glared at him. “The village thou destroyed, years hence.”

He attempted to process the remark and failed. “Sorry,” he managed to find a semblance of his normal voice, “I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about. ‘Destroyed’? ‘Years hence’? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Thy ancestors.” She went on without any seeming relevance to this remark, encompassing the scene with a sweep of her arm. “Thou art at the meeting-place of two times, thine own and mine. What thou sees

here is what is mine. And then—” she leaned in again, and he felt another tremor of fear “ –and then,” she repeated with a hiss, “thy ancestors, those before thy time but after mine, took their labourers, cleared my land of its people and its good, simple dwellings, and raised thy foundry – thy place of devils’ work and base trade.”

“But that’s ridiculous! I don’t know anything about your village. It’s never been here in– in my time, as you put it.”

“Thy ancestors took it and ground it into dust,” the Wise Woman growled. “My people were displaced, scattered, made wastrel. Many died, either killed by thy ancestors’ workers in the clearing of it, or of hunger in their wanderings. All for the sake of thy ancestors’ comfort.” She turned from him, and looked towards her companions. “And now, knave, there must be a reckoning.”

Her words chilled him to the core, and as she walked slowly away, he extended his arms in entreaty. “It wasn’t *me*,” he called desperately. “It wasn’t me.”

“But thou wilt be thy ancestors. Thou wilt complete their work.” The words, none of which made sense, hung in the air. All at once the scene changed, the woman, her companions, the village and its occupants vanished and his factory appeared, shadowy in the gloom. And just as it registered in his mind, a twin beam of immense brightness lit up himself and the road around him. He screamed in terror, there was an answering screech of tyres, and then the car was upon him. He was thrown into the air like a rag doll, and then he knew no more.

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“What the hell was that?” Tony rasped as the Alfa Romeo slewed sideways, the double shock of the impact and the sudden appearance of the object seemingly from nowhere causing him to wrench the wheel

violently. In the passenger seat, Celeste grunted as she was thrown forward and the locked seat-belt cut into her midriff and sternum. Davina, in the middle seat at the back, narrowly avoided smacking her face heavily against the front seats. “Everybody okay?” Tony queried after the car had shuddered to a halt.

Both women replied in the affirmative, and slowly he disentangled himself from his seat-belt and opened the car door. Dread filled him – he was certain, despite his earlier question, that what he had hit had been human. *Please, don’t let it be Simon*, he implored.

Celeste and Davina had both emerged too, and he motioned them to stay back with an outstretched arm. Cautiously he padded down the slope, back towards where the impact had been. A figure became apparent, its broken back towards him. As he reached it and knelt, he knew with despair in his heart that it could only belong to one person.

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Tony’s shock had mostly worn off, and he knew that Celeste was holding it together for Davina’s sake. Davina, naturally, had fared worse by far, and had had to be treated extensively. Tony sat in the hospital corridor, his face buried in his hands. The breath-test the police had immediately taken at the scene had been negative, but he was still under suspicion all the same, and the fact of killing his brother cramped his stomach till he couldn’t breathe. He’d already vomited twice, and felt he might need to do so again.

Someone called, and he looked up. It was Celeste, her arm held tenderly round a weeping Davina. Tony left his chair and hurried towards them, taking Davina’s other side. Together, he and Celeste helped her to a chair.

After a while she’d recovered slightly, and was able to accept a small plastic cup of instant coffee from a machine at the end of the corridor. Tony had forgotten to add sugar, but she didn’t appear to notice. The hand holding the cup still shook slightly, but she’d been discharged, she told them.

After a while she began to talk, nonsensical reminiscences mainly, but they let her ramble. Gradually she became more coherent, as the coffee had an effect. “And he was so excited about the future,” she murmured after a while. “So excited about the factory.”

Tony started at the recollection. “You told me he was going to discuss something with me,” he prompted her. “Something about the business.”

“He had plans.” There was a far-away look in her eyes. “To expand.”

“Expand?”

“Mmm.” She sipped down the last of the coffee. “The cottages by the side of the factory.”

“What about them?” he asked, intrigued.

“Simon was going to suggest the business buy them,” she said. “At a good price – then knock them down and extend the factory. He was talking of enormous profits within a few years.” She gazed blankly down at the cup still in her hand. “He thought he’d be able to retire by the time he was sixty. A life of comfort after that. It’ll never happen now.”

Dropping the cup, she hung her head and began to weep again.