

The Witch of Wicken Fen

Huw, Captain of the Duke of Chepstow's household guard, had patrolled the Welsh borders for a dozen years both as soldier and officer. In all that time he had never encountered a sight as gruesome and troubling as the one that now appeared before him, that of a dead body in a hut in the tiny hamlet of Frome. He had scoffed initially when he had been summoned to Frome with wild tales of black magic and Devil worship. A man of faith, Huw had nevertheless grown up trusting the evidence of his own two eyes above all else and he had been quick to dismiss mutterings of sorcery and the like – old wives' tales as far as he was concerned. However, even his own instincts were now telling Huw that what he had discovered was the Evil One's own work, for surely no human could be responsible for *this*.

The body was that of a middle aged man, somewhat on the portly side but with the coarse skin and rugged look of a peasant farmer. His body was splayed out on the floor of the hut and a chalk circle had been drawn around it so that the impression was that of a pentacle – a witch's tool – with the man taking the place of the five-pointed star that would usually appear inside the circle. There was not a mark on the dead man's body and it might therefore have been difficult to determine the cause of death had it not been for the fact that the corpse, which was barely a day old, was marble white already. The poor fool had been drained entirely of his blood.

"The Baobhan Sith?" said Owain, Huw's young Lieutenant, in a questioning whisper, articulating the worst fears of many of the villagers that they had met.

Huw shook his head roughly. As far as he was concerned tales of the vampiric Baobhan Sith were nothing more than that – just stories told to scare children that were no part of a serious investigation. He was disappointed that Owain, who was otherwise a promising young officer, had allowed the hysteria which had gripped the inhabitants of the hamlet to overcome him to such an extent that he had suggested a supernatural origin for the murderer.

"Nonsense Owain, there is no doubt in my mind that the agency behind this foul deed is mortal, albeit one so warped and twisted as to barely deserve to be called human. I'll have no more talk of ghosts, witches or the Baobhan Sith while we carry out our investigations." Huw said.

"But sir," protested Owain, "we have checked this hut for signs of intruders and found none. There is no evidence that anyone else was here apart from the victim, Gruffud ap'Pwyll, at the time he was killed. This hut does not even belong to the dead man – we have no idea what he was doing here."

Huw was seized by the sudden urge to leave the enclosed space of the tiny hut immediately. Dead bodies did not particularly disturb him most of the time – he had seen more than enough in his previous life as a soldier even before it had become his job to investigate crimes committed in the Duchy on his master's behalf – but there was something about this place that made him uneasy. The atmosphere was dank and there was a prevailing gloom that was a result of the lack of light that filtered through the tiny windows – slits really – in the walls around them. Then there was the body itself. Although it was still relatively fresh and free from the cloying stench that it would gradually acquire as the hours wore on, especially in the heat of Mede, the sixth month of the year, it troubled Huw in other less definable ways. The worst thing was that it seemed horribly familiar for some reason, although Huw was no nearer to identifying why this was than he had been when he had first seen it earlier that morning. He made a decision then that nothing more was to be gained from remaining

inside the hut for the time being – besides, in the course of his musings Owain had stumbled inadvertently upon a potentially useful line of enquiry.

When Huw left the hut the first thing he saw was the same milling crowd of peasants that had followed them here when they had first arrived in Frome. Their headman, a huge fellow named Geraint, approached cautiously, a mixture of curiosity and fear warring upon his face.

“My lords,” he said, inclining his head to show his respect for them as Duke’s men, “My people are restless, concerned that the Evil One walks among us. Any word on when the Church will send a priest to exorcise the shadow that has fallen over our village?”

“I have seen no evidence of magic here, black or otherwise,” said Huw dismissively, “and so long as the matter remains temporal rather than spiritual in nature it is the Duke’s authority that will hold sway here, not that of the Bishop.”

“Of course my lord, of course,” said Geraint, bowing this time, “I did not mean to suggest...”

Huw knew what the headman had not meant to suggest and had no wish to hear it spoken out loud. Everyone in the Duchy knew that Duke Edric of Chepstow and the Bishop, Gilles de Giscard, were not the best of friends, despite their efforts to maintain the seeming that they were. Although the Saxon Duke had been baptized and kept a Christian home and hearth, even going so far as to marry a Norman noblewoman, he had been born and raised in the Marches and was deeply familiar with the Old Faith that had existed in these parts long before the coming of Christianity. Bishop Gilles, all too aware of Duke Edric’s mixed loyalties, was always alive for the opportunity to discredit his erstwhile ally. Huw had no doubt that the most lurid rumours concerning what had happened in Frome had originated from outside the village, probably from Chepstow Abbey, but for the time being he would keep his suspicions to himself – after all, that was all they were until he had proof to support them. For now Huw would do nothing to further fan the flames of the superstitious paranoia that was currently sweeping through the Duchy – an effect that could only strengthen the position of the Bishop and undermine that of his own master.

“Enough,” Huw said, raising a hand to forestall Geraint’s apology, “I need to know who this hut belongs to.”

“Of course my lord, this is the home of Fenran the Forester. He is a good man, a widower since his wife and child died last winter and he has understandably been somewhat withdrawn since that happened. He is often away from the village for a few days at a time collecting timber and supplies in the Whispering Wood but...” Geraint’s face fell suddenly, “...my lord, you cannot think that he had anything to do with this – this abomination!”

“I have formed no conclusions yet Master Geraint, I am merely gathering information at this stage.”

It was a phrase that Huw had used many times before, a phrase that he was sure had been used on countless occasions by other men of the law before him. Huw knew, however, that this time he and his men would need help if they were to bring Gruffud’s murderer to justice. Huw only wondered if the price for resorting to this help would be greater than his master the Duke would be willing to pay.

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