



Frank Tuttle

THE
CADAVER
CLIENT

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The Cadaver Client: The Markhat Files, Book

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TheCadaverClient:TheMarkhatFiles,Book4

Markhat's new client is already dead and buried—or is he?

The Markhat Files, Book 4

Humans, Trolls and even the halfdead have all passed through Markhat's door—more than once—seeking his services as a finder of missing persons and lost loves. This is a first, though. This time, his client is a dead man. At least that's what Granny Knot claims. But as long as the coin is real, Markhat has no trouble working for a guilt-ridden ghost.

Trouble is exactly what he finds, and soon he suspects his client, ghost or not, has darker motives for finding his estranged wife than the reconciliation he claims. Left with a cadaver for a client, a spook doctor for a partner, and Mama Hog as advisor on all things spiritual, Markhat must unravel a dark mystery ten years old, and do it before another grave is filled. Maybe his own.

Warning: This work of fiction involves the occult, several rather questionable uses of stuffed birds, the release of sarcasm inside a cemetery and numerous disparaging portrayals of wood elves.

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Dedication

I'd like to thank the Academy—wait, wrong speech. Okay. I dedicate this work of fiction to all the good people at Samhain Publishing, especially Beth, my editor, who took great pains to make sure the book you just bought is the very best book it can possibly be.

The Cadaver Client: The Markhat Files, Book

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Chapter One

“Happy birthday, you mangy fleabag, you.”

I scratched his battle-scarred head. He rewarded me with the merest flick of his long, black tail.

I sat in my chair, my shiny new boots propped on my battered old desk, and watched Three-leg Cat lick the stump of his missing paw.

That’s how I celebrated the tenth birthday of my business. It had been ten years ago today that I scraped together enough coin to pay the rent on the office on Cambrit Street and hire a man to paint a finder’s eye on the bubbled glass pane set in the weather-beaten door. Three-leg, then a mangy injured kitten, had been the first living soul to pass through my open door.

For the last ten years I’d done what every finder does—I’d found things. Sons or daughters, fathers or trouble. If you’ve lost something, or someone, you can seek out my painted finder’s eye and I’ll pull my feet off my desk, and for the right handful of coin I’ll see if I can find it for you.

I’d done very well, right after the War, finding fathers and sons left abandoned by the Regency when the Truce was declared. These days, I didn’t look for missing soldiers nearly as often as I looked for straying wives or errant husbands.

I reflected on that as Three-leg Cat washed his scar. For awhile the soldiers I’d found often brought their families joy, but the news I brought my clients lately was anything but joyous.

Three-leg Cat looked up, as though he’d heard my thoughts, and gave me a scathing look of feline contempt.

“Buy your own breakfast then,” I muttered.

Three-leg Cat leaped down from my desk, and it was then I heard Mama’s voice close by my door.

I groaned. I’d inherited Mama Hog along with the office. Her card and potion shop was two doors down from mine. She’d taken me on as a project the very first day, and ten years later she was still trying to browbeat me into the Mama Hog version of respectability.

I hoped she’d pass on by, but as usual, luck was showing no love to Markhats near and far. Mama banged on my door, then tried the latch.

“You in there, boy?”

I swung my legs down to the floor. “I’m closed, Mama. No, I’m retiring. Going to sell off my business and buy a barge.”

Mama guffawed and swung my door open, and it was then I saw Mama Hog wasn’t alone.

I gaped.

Mama Hog is old. She claims to be a hundred and twenty, and though I doubt that, I’d buy even the odds she is on the bad side of eighty. Mama carefully cultivates every clichéd Witch Woman affectation ever spoken—a wild tangle of grey hair, fingernails that could scare a grizzly bear, and a mole that sometimes changes cheeks from day to day. That’s Mama, and I gather the look is good for business, even in downtown Rannit.

But if Mama was two-dozen clichés stitched together with wrinkles and cackles, her companion was something straight out of myth.

She was a head higher than Mama, which put her just a bit below my shoulders. If she had hair at all, I couldn’t see it, not beneath that trail-beaten black bowler hat. She wore a faded poncho that might have been striped in orange and black zigzags half a century ago, and six or seven layers of castoff rags under that, all clashing, all tattered and trailing threads or bits of cloth.

Her face, though—there were eyes, tiny and black, recessed so far beneath wrinkled grey brows I wondered how the woman saw. Her nose was a wart-encrusted proboscis that sprouted its own crop of fine, white hairs from within, and her chin protruded far enough forward to nearly meet the tip of her

nose.

~~She had hands the color and texture of old leather, and black fingernails four times longer than Mama's and sharpened to points besides.~~

She held a gnarled walking stick in her right hand and a handful of dark rags in her left. She was muttering, and though her black eyes were turned up toward mine, I didn't think she was talking to me. She confirmed this by raising the rags to her lips and whispering to them, then shaking her head as if they'd replied.

"Boy, this here is Granny Knot," said Mama. "I brung her here myself so I could make introductions. Granny Knot, this is that finder what I told ye about. His name is Markhat. Markhat, this is Granny Knot."

Mama caught my sleeve and hissed at me. "Don't you dare make no mock of her, boy."

"Pleased to meet you, Granny Knot."

Granny whispered into her handful of rags, then held it to her ear, listened and cackled.

"Granny here needs to be hirin' herself a finder," said Mama. "I told her you was the best, boy. And I told her you'd deal fair with her. Don't make a liar out of me."

I groaned.

"Mama," I began. "I just took on a big case, I was just headed out the door—"

"I pays," said Granny Knot. Her black eyes sparkled, back in the shadows. "I pays good. Got one coin. Three hundred crowns. Pays you fifty."

I almost snorted. Three hundred crowns, especially in pre-War old coin, was a small fortune. I didn't figure Granny Knot of the handful of rags had ever seen three crowns stuck together, much less three hundred.

"Granny here is a spook doctor," said Mama. "Best in Rannit."

"Nice meeting you, Granny." I rose. Spook doctors claim to converse with spirits. For a price, of course. Always for a price. "Nice hat."

And that's when Granny cackled again and pulled a canvas sack from somewhere beneath her rags and let it fall onto my desk with a tinkle and a thump.

"Three. Hundred. Crowns."

And then Granny cackled again and went back to her whispered conversation with her pet rags.

Mama grinned at me, her two front teeth shining in triumph.

"I'll leave you two alone to talk business," she said. She made a small courtly bow to Granny, who plopped down in my client's chair while a pair of grey moths escaped her wardrobe and began to dance around my office.

Mama stomped out. Granny beamed at me, and the coins in the sack shifted with that magical sound of gold on gold.

"You've hired yourself a finder, looks like." I said. "So, tell me what it is you've lost."

Three-leg Cat was back on my desk, working now on his left front paw. He'd glanced at the bag of Old Kingdom coins on my desk, and then ignored it once he determined it contained neither bacon nor mice.

I took the bag in my hands and hefted it. Three hundred crowns. Hell, had I made three hundred crowns in the last ten years? I doubted it. Maybe I had, before you deducted my beer and sandwich tabs at Eddie's. A man has to eat.

I shook my head, shoved the bag in the big drawer of my new desk and locked it up tight. Not that a mere lock would deter thieves. I hoped Granny had the sense to keep her mouth shut where the subject of bags of money was concerned.

I gathered Granny did though. She'd been full of surprises, after Mama left. Beginning with her

first words to me.

~~“I trust you’ll keep all our dealings confidential, Goodman.”~~

That was the first thing Granny had said, once we were alone. In perfect Kingdom, not a syllable slurred, not an inflection out of place. And none of it aimed at her handful of rags, which lay in her lap.

I’d managed to nod an affirmative. She’d laughed at my surprise.

“Yes, I am both literate and quite sane,” she said. “Though my own clients expect a rather more colorful figure. It’s a pity, really. I do get so tired of mumbling and cackling, and these bloody rags itch all summer.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. Granny laughed too, and doing so took twenty years off her face.

“You should be on the stage, Miss.” I poked the bag of coin. “Is this a prop too?”

“Call me Granny. No, the coin is quite genuine. As is my talent, and my wish to hire you.”

I let the genuine spook doctor comment pass. I hadn’t been ready to believe in her spirits any more than I was ready to believe her handful of rags was whispering to her earlier.

But I do believe in Old Kingdom crowns. Oh, yes. That’s something we finders can all have faith in.

“You do not believe me.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. But no matter. Believe or disbelieve, I wish to hire you. On behalf of a client of mine.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“A spirit. Does that concern you, Mr. Markhat?”

“Not as long as I get paid, Granny.”

She smiled. “Wonderful.” A moth flew between us, and she giggled, high and girlish. Coming from her ancient countenance, the effect was oddly disturbing.

“Ten years ago, a man came home from the War.”

“Good for him. Huzzahs all around.”

She ignored me. “This man made his way to his wife’s door. He’d fought in so many battles. He’d nearly died a dozen times. Yet, when he stood there, his hand raised to knock, he heard something inside. A baby was crying. His baby.”

I nodded.

Granny shook her head. “He didn’t knock, Mr. Markhat. He stood there, knowing his wife was inside, knowing she was raising their child by herself, wondering each and every day if her husband was dead or alive or near or far. She lived her life around that door. And the man knew that. But even so, he didn’t knock. In fact, after a while, he turned and walked away, and he never went back.”

“Sad story. Which brings us to what?”

“This man died, Mr. Markhat. He died six months ago. He died without ever seeing his wife or his child again. By his own choice, yes. A choice he still doesn’t understand. He has regrets, Mr. Markhat. Deep regrets. He cannot rest.”

Realization began to dawn on me.

“So this bag…”

“Yes,” said Granny. “He spent ten years amassing this. Perhaps not honestly. He spent the rest of his life trying to atone for that one moment at the door, Goodman Markhat. But he died before I could see it given to his wife—and now I intend to help him see that done.”

“By hiring me? To do what?”

“Find the wife he abandoned, Mr. Markhat. Find her, or her child, or both. And give them her fortune.”

I frowned. "I thought ghosts had all kinds of mystical powers. Why can't he just float around and find her himself?"

"How, Mr. Markhat? He can no longer ask questions. He can no longer even hear or see many of the living. Rannit itself is never quite the same twice, for him. He could wander the streets, certainly—but she might well be dead and gone before he chanced upon her."

"So, what he's really afraid of is meeting the Missus in the next world without sending her a hefty bribe in this one?"

Granny laughed. "Mama said you were given to somewhat plain speech. I rather enjoy Goodman. It's quite refreshing. Even at my age."

I took a deep breath and tried to decide what to say next. The bag of gold on my desk suggested a hasty yes, but that little voice in the shadows of my mind still had objections.

"How did you come by this money? I didn't think spooks kept their pockets in the Blessed Hereafter."

"He kept it buried in an old butter churn buried beneath a public privy."

I nodded. It was nice to know I wasn't the only working person who found himself in some unsavory locales from time to time.

"And he showed you where to find it."

Granny's black pinprick eyes had bored right into me. "He did. You could of course simply take the money and claim you delivered it, if you doubt me so thoroughly," she noted. "If my talent is sham, I'll have no way of knowing whether you found the missing wife or not."

"I'm not in the habit of cheating my clients, Granny."

"Nor am I, Mr. Markhat."

I guess we stared at each other for a good four breaths. To this day, I don't know who blinked first.

I do remember getting out my good pen and my prized pad of rough-edged paper, so I could take names and dates and particulars.

Even a dead client deserves nothing but my utmost attention.

An hour later, I had names. And dates. And an address, which promised to be less than helpful because that whole neighborhood had burned to the ground and been rebuilt twice since the end of the War.

Granny Knot was gone. She had lapsed back into her put-on old hag stoop and deranged bout muttering before she even opened my door. She had left with a wink, the handful of rags held close to her ear.

I'd listened to her shuffle and mutter down the street and away, and I'd wondered if Mama was putting on a similar act, one she dropped when I wasn't around.

Three-leg Cat batted at one of Granny's stray rag-moths. I read the names and dates I'd written down, let them sink in. I'm terrible with names, and nothing is more awkward for a finder than forgetting who you're trying to find while you're out asking questions.

Marris Sellway, the abandoned wife. Doris Sellway, the name of the child. Marris would be forty years old now. The child, nineteen. They'd lived in the top of a tall, narrow walk-up at Number Six Cawling Street.

Cawling Street didn't exist anymore. That much I knew. And nothing else.

Just like the old days. I was given a name and coin, and I was expected to sally forth and not return until I'd found a breathing body or a lonely grave. Of course, in those days, I'd been looking for soldiers. And soldiers all belonged to units, and the units been paid, and all that left records behind which were easy for a former soldier with the gift of literacy to uncover. I suspected there would be no written records of the former Mrs. Marris Sellway left behind anywhere.

But neighbors know, and remember, and odds are many of them hadn't moved far from Cawling Street even after the second fire.

"Time to get to work," I said to Three-leg Cat.

Instead of ignoring me, he backed growling into the corner, every matted hair on his scarred three-legged body standing up, his back arched, his yellowed fangs bared and issuing a loud, ferocious hiss.

I swung around, expecting to find another cat or a Troll or a brace of wayward pumas lurking close at my back—but there was nothing, save my own awkward shadow.

Three-leg Cat arched up more and his growl rose. I got up and opened my front door before the daft creature attacked me.

He vanished in a blur of mismatched feet and freshly shed hairs.

I looked back. I saw nothing but my shadow, my desk and a single moth flapping blindly below the ceiling.

"I don't believe in ghosts," I said aloud. "Just so you know."

And then I locked my door and followed Three-leg Cat into the daylight.

Cawling Street, before the fires, was maybe an hour's walk from my place. Or twenty minutes in a cab, if one was so inclined.

One was, and thus I was across the town and in the middle of the tall, new brick buildings that rose like square-caved canyons on each side of Regency Avenue, formerly Cawling Street.

Regency is a nice place. They planted rows of poplars on each side of the street, and one day long after I'm a ghost myself, they'll maybe peek above the rooftops. For now, though, the trees are dwarfed by the buildings, and they only get a good swallow of sunlight at noon.

The sidewalks were wide and straight. The street itself was cobbled and sported far fewer potholes than any street between there and my place. The people I met were brisk and purposeful, and some of them even felt like smiling.

I remembered the original neighborhood as I walked. Cawling had been just a few more sunken roofs and broken windowpanes from being an outright slum. The street had been so thoroughly mined for cobblestones it was more mud than pavement. The ramshackle wood-frame buildings had leaned and huddled like so many drowsy drunks.

I came upon a roofing crew as I walked. While the roofers themselves scrambled around hammering and shouting out of sight far above, a band of ogres was positioned on the scaffolding below. The ogres, rather than hauling the bundles of shingles up ladders, simply hurled them from one to another as easily as you or I could have tossed a bag of feathers.

A mob of kids danced and hooted as the ogres tossed. The ogres were hamming it up, throwing their loads underhanded, overhanded, eyes closed, from behind. The kids rewarded particularly impressive displays by throwing the ogres fat, red apples, and the ogres thanked them by pelting them with the soggy cores.

All in all, I wasn't sure the fires had been such a bad thing after all.

Four out of every five of the new buildings around me were residential. Some housed bakeries or bathhouses or pubs or smoke shops or eateries. I didn't figure I'd get any help from those—no, what I was looking for was an elderly woman with a broom, or an old-timer idling on a bench in the poplar-dappled shade.

I was having no luck finding either, until a door opened right at my left elbow and out popped a well-dressed, elderly gent with a child in hand on each side.

"Bugger," announced the man.

"Bugger," cried both children, with the inerrant instincts of the very young concerning curses and words. "Bugger bugger bugger!"

The man's face went crimson, and he nodded apologetically to me.

~~"Me and my mouth," he said. "Daughter's gonna choke me for sure."~~

I laughed and stopped walking. Both kids danced and continued to employ their new word for my benefit.

"Obviously not the first time they've heard it," I said. "And it certainly won't be the last. If that's the worst thing they encounter today, I'd say you've done a fine job of babysitting."

"Isobell sure as...sure as the world won't see it that way," said the man.

I shrugged. "Name's Markhat," I said, before he could get away. "Say, you don't happen to remember this place when it was called Cawling, do you?"

The man grinned. "I knowed it! I knowed I knew you from somewhere. You're Emma Bowling's boy, ain't you?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, not me," I said. "Do you remember a Marris Sellway?"

"Sellways?"

"Sellway. Marris. Had a daughter, Doris? Lived upstairs in old Number Six?"

He pondered that, while both kids yelled and jumped and jerked in his hands.

"I don't recollect no Sellways," he said, squinting back through the years. "I lived two streets over near to the old ironworks. On Ester. Febin is my name. Now, there might have been a Sellways up Northend way..."

Behind me, a cab rolled up, and the children started shrieking their prized new word at the top of their lungs. A woman in the cab began to shout back. The old man blanched, and I bade him farewell and beat a hasty retreat.

That's finding, nine times out of ten. And you never run into the right person first, either. If I were more knowledgeable about Angels and their duties, I might know who to blame that on, but I hadn't been under the shadow of a Church dome since the War.

So I walked. I ambled. I whistled. I idled. I bantered with bakers, gabbed with garbage men, hobnobbed with haberdashers, gossiped with maids. I learned quite a lot about Regency Avenue, and what a lovely, wonderful, peaceful place it was, but damned near nothing about bad old pre-War Cawling Street.

At lunch, I found a place that made a better ham sandwich than Eddie's, even if it was twice the price. The barman there, a scowling old grump who'd probably been in a bad mood for longer than most of his patrons had been alive, had lived on Cawling before the fires, but aside from cussing about having his lot stolen by the City, he had nothing else at all to say.

I kept walking, kept talking. By midday I'd covered maybe half of the north side of the street. By the time the shadows were beginning to get long and the buildings on the south side blotted out the sun, I was nearly to the end of the south side, with nothing but sore feet and an afternoon of useless anecdotes to show for my efforts.

I shrugged. My client was, if Granny Knot was to be believed, as dead as the Regent's sense of philanthropy. I didn't figure another day or two would make much difference to a dead man.

A stray wind set the skinny poplar trees to swaying, and in the shade a chill rode up my spine. I saw a patch of lingering sun across the street and made for it, just as the doors to one of the three fancy coffeehouses I'd found opened and a small crowd of a half-dozen men piled out.

You stay in my business long, you develop a sense for trouble. And even if you don't, when six stalwart strangers pull up their sleeves and crack their manly knuckles in near unison while the tallest and widest of them fixes you in a glare and says, "Hey, you," you know you've just landed in the proverbial wrong place at the unfortunate wrong time.

I stopped and raised my hands.

"Whoa there, gentlemen," I said. "My name is Markhat. I'm a finder. Licensed."

They weren't having any. They rushed me, covering the dozen steps between us at a run.

~~There are a couple of things you can do when you find yourself unarmed and outnumbered six to one. You can stand your ground and put up your fists and laugh in their bullying faces, or you can follow me in a spirited retreat and hope your pursuers just enjoyed a very heavy meal and are wearing high-heel shoes three sizes too small.~~

They hadn't, and they weren't, and I was never much of a sprinter.

I went down, tackled and flailing, right in front of a dressmaker's shop window. I caught a brief glimpse of a lady's upraised hand and look of horror, and then numerous beefy fists fell hard about me and the last thing I recall is hoping I didn't spoil her day out shopping.

"Boy."

I tried to cover my ears and roll over.

"Boy."

Someone dashed water in face, and I came to, sputtering and mopping my face.

It did open my eyes though. At least my right eye. My left one was swollen nearly shut, and the taste in my mouth was blood.

"See what you done to him? I ought to hex the lot of you!"

I groaned and tried to remember things. That was Mama's voice, but how had she gotten mixed up in this?

My right eye cleared enough to let me see.

I was seated in an office. Mama stood beside me, shaking a tiny stuffed owl at a burly, red-faced man seated behind a massive, oak desk. The man looked worried. The two men flanking him, who stood at perfect Army attention, looked worried as well.

Mama snarled and gave them all one last good shake of her owl before turning back to me.

"You hear me, boy? You back at your senses yet?"

I tried to nod an affirmative, but that just made the room spin.

"All they done was rough him up some, Missus Hog," said the big man behind the desk. He wrung his hands while he spoke, and his knuckles were white. "They didn't break no bones."

Big man he might be, but his tone and demeanor toward Mama was anything but tough.

"Yeah, they were gentle as lambs," I managed. I looked the big man straight in the eye and spied old blood on his fancy Kempish rug. "I just hope nobody got bruised when they ganged up on me."

I swear the big man blanched.

"Mister Markhat," he said. He rose and came around the desk and put his hands behind his back. "They thought you was nosing around, maybe looking for a place to rob. They didn't know who you were."

"Hell they didn't." I spit again, out of pure spite. "I told them who I was. Told them that I was a finder. Right before they dived in swinging."

Mama puffed up, and I thought the man—who was a good head taller than even I am—was going to break out in tears.

"Mama," I said as I worked my jaw and probed the top of my head for fractures, "tell me what's going on."

Mama snarled. I swear she snarled, and her general lack of teeth did nothing to reduce the ferocity of it.

"This here big pile of stupid set his bully-boys on ye." Mama's Hog eyes were cold and merciless. "Once they'd done beat you half to death, one of 'em found that finder's card you carries. They brung it to Mister Smart Britches here, and he knowed of a finder named Markhat what was a friend o' mine, so he fetched me here to see if'n you was you."

My hand went to my back right hip pocket. It was empty.

~~“Now, we got all your possessions right here, Mr. Markhat,” said Big Pile of Stupid. “Nothing missing. Money, city-issued finder’s card, pad and pen. All safe and sound.”~~

I grunted. My head was spinning again. But I was glad they hadn’t thrown that finder’s license in the gutter—damned thing costs me half a crown a year, and like everything else issued by the City they don’t hand out free replacements.

“So why the special greeting?” I asked. There was a knot on my head the size of an egg. “What do I do to rate all this?”

Mama gruffed and started to say something, but the big man dove in instead.

“My name is Owenstall,” he said. He almost extended a hand for me to shake, thought better of it, and stomped back behind his desk and sat. “Regency is my neighborhood. My men and I keep it safe and orderly.”

“Depends on who you ask.”

I took a deep breath and tried to clear my head. Some things were starting to make sense. A lot of neighborhoods had taken to patrolling themselves during the war, and had continued the practice afterwards and until the present. Given the general effectiveness of the Watch, I couldn’t blame them.

“So, you keep the streets clear of thugs and ruffians by giving them badges and having them pour on passing finders.”

“They were never told to beat down—to act with violence toward anyone,” said Owenstall. “That’s against policy. I assure you, Mr. Markhat, the man responsible for instigating this will be fired.”

“Gonna be worse than fired, I learn his name,” muttered Mama.

“You know this upright defender of law and order, Mama?” I asked.

Mama snorted. “Knowed him since he was knee-high. Knowed him when he was stealin’ apples off’n barges. Knowed him when he was gettin’ beat half to death onced a week by the Leaf Street gang. Knowed him when he had him that there problem with the ladies—”

All six and a half feet of Owenstall shot to his feet and turned the color of fresh-cut beef.

I managed to start talking first. “I get the picture. Look. I’m here asking questions on behalf of my client. That’s it. If I’d known you boys were so picky about who soils your sidewalks, I’d have asked permission first.”

Owenstall nodded the whole time I spoke. I wondered briefly just what else Mama knew about him, and resolved to ask later in case the dent in my skull proved permanent.

“The boys got out of line. But Mr. Markhat, see, we try to keep this a nice neighborhood. We’ve kept out the gangs and the whammy-men and the lay-about. People can walk the streets, kids can play on their stoops, nobody has to worry about nothing as long as we keep the wrong people out.”

I raised an eyebrow. Since it was the one over my swollen eye I hoped it made my point.

Owenstall raised his hands in surrender.

“Didn’t mean you. Meant people actin’ suspicious-like. That’s what they thought, and I’m telling you to your face they were wrong and I am sorry.”

He’d turned and looked right at Mama when he said the words “I am sorry.” I just grunted. It was obvious who he was really apologizing to.

“Looks like I’ll live.” I leaned forward and scooped my belongings off the desk and put them back in my pockets. “Now, since we are all best friends, I’m going to ask you the same questions I asked everybody else.”

Mama snuffled and crossed her stubby arms over her chest, but she turned down the furious glare a few notches and Owenstall visibly relaxed.

I laid out my standard spiel—I was looking for Marris Sellway who had a daughter named Dorcas Sellway who had lived in Number Six on Cawling before the fires. I hinted that an inheritance was

involved.

~~And once again I got blank stares and mumbled “Nos” in response. No to knowing the name Sellway, to knowing a Marris with a Doris, no, no and no.~~

I made my address known and resolved to stand. I did it, without wobbling too much, and decided it was time to head home.

Owenstall rose with me, and this time he stuck out his hand.

“I truly am sorry, Mr. Markhat.”

For the first time, he sounded sincere. I forced a grin and shook his hand.

Mama gave everyone a last shake of her dried owl and stomped out the door ahead of me.

The street was engulfed in shade. People gave Mama and I wide berth. Between Mama’s furious scowl and the blood on my good, white shirt, I guess we were very much out of place on scenic peaceful Regency Avenue.

I didn’t make it far before I had to plop down on a bench and rest. Mama joined me, her dried owl clutched in her hand in case, I suppose, anyone passing by needed to be warned off.

“You can get into the biggest messes, boy.”

I rubbed my temple. My jaw was too sore to point out who’d dropped this mess square in my lap.

“I reckon you’re of a mind that Granny Knot is a put-on, ain’t you, boy?”

“No, Mama, I figure anybody named Granny Knot can naturally talk to spooks. Why do you ask?”

Mama guffawed. “Most of them what claims they can talk to ghosts is crazy. Granny Knot ain’t crazy. You hearin’ me, boy?”

“I’m hearing you, Mama. Not saying I believe you, but I’m hearing you.”

“Good. Now, boy, I don’t hold with talking to dead ’uns myself. They had their time, had their chances. They ought not to pester the living, in my way of thinking.”

A cab rattled past, and I lifted my hand to hail it, but the cabby gave us a hard eye and snapped his reins and urged his ponies on to less bloody fares. Mama shook her owl at him and whispered a long string of words I couldn’t understand.

“I reckon Granny knows more about such things than me. Still, boy, I wants you to be extra careful with this.”

I laughed out loud, which hurt, so I finished with a groan and my face in my hands.

“Granny may know them dead folks, but I knows the livin’ ones,” said Mama. “And I know trouble when I sees it too. This here is trouble, and a lot worse trouble than that knot on your forehead.”

“But you brought her to my door anyway. Thanks, Mama.”

Mama shrugged. “She just said she needed her a finder what she could trust with money. I knowed she could trust you. Also knowed you needed some money—or have you and that mangy tom-cat got rich without me knowin’ it?”

“Not rich. Just bruised.” I took a deep breath and stood, since it was becoming obvious cabbies this part of town were picky about their fares.

Mama rose as well.

I started walking. “You sure put the fear in big and ugly back there, Mama.”

Mama guffawed. “That young ’un’s been scairt of me for years. I likes it that way.” She huffed and puffed as we crossed the street. “He ain’t a bad man, deep down. I reckon them goons of his are going to have some fast talkin’ to do. So, what’s next, boy? You gonna just go door to door askin’ about that woman?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

Mama grunted. “Well, you got the mouth for it.” Mama eyed me critically, then waved her owl at an approaching cabby.

He didn't even slow until Mama stepped out in the street, directly in his path, and screeched something at his ponies.

They came to dead halt, whinnying nervously, and Mama cut the cabbie's curses off with a glare.

"Get in, boy," said Mama. "We's ridin' home on Granny Knot's coin. Reckon she owes you that much expense."

I wasn't going to argue. I flipped the scowling cabby a coin and clambered aboard the cab, after holding the door for Mama.

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Chapter Two

I was back at my desk holding one of Mama's infamous herb poultices over my swollen eye when the Big Bell rang out Curfew.

Three-leg Cat waited until the last peal died away before he sauntered to my door and demanded to be let out. I watched him dart into the deserted street, heedless of the Curfew or the threat of the thirsty halfdead that were free to roam the streets once the Bell sounded.

I doubted even the thirstiest vampire would look twice at Three-leg though.

I shuffled back to my chair and resumed my convalescence. The poultice smelled like Mama had stuffed something long dead with something even worse and then boiled the lot in cow piss. But it was taking the swelling down, and the first whiff of it had cured my headache.

The street outside was quiet. Rare, even for Cambrit Street, where the Curfew was more suggestion than a command, and the Watch didn't even bother to feign concern for anyone dumb enough to dare the halfdead. Aside from the barking of dogs and the far-off rattle of the first dead wagons, Rannit seemed to fall silent, all at once.

The lamp on the shelf beside me began to flicker. I gave it a one-eyed glare, because my office was too small to be hosting its own evening breezes.

And yet the flame danced to and fro, dancing like a drunkard.

A chill ran mouse-foot down my spine.

I groaned.

"So Granny laid some back-alley hex on my lamp," I said aloud. "And I'm supposed to watch and get all goose bumped because I'm being visited by the spirits of the dead."

The flame kept right on flickering.

"Client or not, dead or not, it's after hours, and I'm sitting here with a lump on my head and blisters on my heels. I've got nothing to report. So beat it. And next time knock first."

I closed my eyes and leaned way back and held the stinking poultice tight against my face. When I opened my eye again, the lamp flame was steady and bright.

"Nice one, Granny," I mumbled.

I've got a bed in the room behind my office. I sought it out soon after, and when I slept, I dreamed I was being chased by hobnailed children all screaming "bugger!" at the tops of their vicious little lungs.

As ten-year celebrations go, it needed lots of work.

Morning came. I wasn't impressed. But both eyes were open and aside from a split upper lip and a truly nasty purple bruise around my left eye, I was in better shape than I expected.

A trip to the bathhouse down the street and another stop at Eddie's for his skillet-fried eggs and burned bacon did wonders for my temperament, if not my appearance. I believe I was even whistling when I rounded the corner a block from home and came face to face with the same well-dressed thug who'd given me the black eye on Regency.

Today, we matched. His left eye was even worse than mine in that it was still swollen shut, and from the way his nose looked, I figured it was not just bruised but broken.

He saw me and stopped and raised his empty hands, just as I'd done.

"I ain't here to cause no trouble," he said. "Mr. Owenstall sent me. Said he found out something about that woman you might want to know."

I nodded. I was too full of bacon and eggs to do anything except sit anyway.

"Fine. Why don't we go on to my office and talk about it? Unless you'd rather kick me in the back

again. That we can do right here.”

~~He shook his head. “Look, Markhat. We was wrong for jumping you like that. Believe me, you know that now.”~~ He fingered his broken nose. “Maybe this can help make up for it.”

I shrugged. “Maybe it will,” I said. I started walking, and he fell into step beside me. “So, what’s your name?”

“Bolton.” He stuck out his hand awkwardly. I didn’t see any reason not to shake it. At least my nose wasn’t broken.

So we shook on it, just in time for Mama Hog to stick her head out her door and grunt and withdraw.

“I ain’t never seen the boss scared of nobody,” said Bolton, after Mama shut her door. “Even during the War. Seen him knock a Troll down and jump on it bare-fisted. But he’s scared of that woman, and that’s a fact.”

“Mama’s meaner than any Troll. So, you served with your boss?”

We were at my door. I unlocked it and motioned Bolton inside.

“Most of us did,” replied Bolton. I assumed he meant his fellow pugilists from yesterday. “We were all in the Fifth, out Hinge way.”

I grunted. That meant they were supply wagon guards and potato peelers.

“I heard you was a dog handler, out West.”

I just nodded. Some guys can’t wait to go on and on about the War. I’d rather forget even the miserable minute of it.

“Have a seat. You said your boss found something out about Marris Sellway.”

Bolton sat.

“No Sellways on Regency. Never have been. We asked some of the old folks, the ones who lived on Cawling before it burned. Nobody ever heard of a Sellway, woman or man.”

I waited for more and frowned when I realized nothing else was forthcoming.

“You walked all the way from Regency for that?”

“It ain’t what they said, Mr. Markhat. It’s the way they said it. The old ones, I mean. They went all shifty-eyed and stooped when they heard the name. I know they remembered it. But not a soul would admit it. Now, if this Sellway woman lived on Cawling before the fires, that puts her back a good ten years. That’s a long time to be scared of something.”

I nodded. “Could be they were just scared of you.”

Bolton shook his head. “It ain’t like that, Mr. Markhat. The Boss don’t hold with them ways. We make sure the old ones got firewood in the winter. We make sure somebody talks to ’em every day or so. Hell, we take ’em to doctors if they need it, haul their groceries home. Boss don’t want the people that live on Regency to be scared of us.”

“Just stray finders passing through.”

“We thought you was a scout for another gang, sizing up the take. Happens a lot. People think the Boss is soft cause he don’t beat down the residents.”

I put my fingertips together and assumed my Thoughtful Finder pose while I digested the concept of a civic-minded gang lord.

“What do you know about Cawling Street, back in the day?”

Bolton shrugged. “It was a slum,” he said. “Bad before we left for the War. Worse when we got back. The Boss staked it out, cleaned it up, saw it rebuilt with some of that Reclamation money.”

“Who was running Cawling, before you boys got back?”

Bolton frowned. “Bunch of punks calling themselves the Bloods,” he said, grinning. “I reckon some of ’em are still running.”

I groaned.

“I say something wrong?”

“No. But you did just expand my search to include aging street gang members.”

“You think they might know something?”

“They might offhand remember the names of the people they extorted, yeah,” I said.

Bolton’s brow furrowed. “The head knocker was a punk named Stick. We never got around to face-to-face. He took off when he saw we were moving in.”

“Any of the others put up a fight?”

He shrugged. “None that lived to tell.”

“So, you think the name Sellway brought back some bad memories among the old folks, who are too scared to talk to this day. And the gang running the neighborhood is either dead or scattered all over the Frontier by now.”

“Fraid so.” He pushed my chair back and stood. “Wish I had more to tell, but that’s it. Hope makes up for yesterday. Boss said you could come back and ask questions if you wanted, no problem.”

“If they won’t talk to the men who tuck them in their beds and carry their groceries they aren’t likely to talk to me either.”

“Well, if anybody does decide to tell any tales, we’ll let you know.”

“Thanks.”

Three-leg Cat emerged from the back room after Bolton was gone. He meowed a few times to express his displeasure at being wakened so early and then settled into my lap for a rare session of loud, rough purring.

I had no desire to shake down frightened, grannies for decades-old neighborhood gossip.

“My best bet,” I told Three-leg, “is to find someone who moved away from Cawling Street about the time Owenstall and his lads took over, or find a surviving Blood and hope they feel like talking.”

Three-leg Cat didn’t seem enthused about either prospect.

Neither did I. Either task could take weeks. And that’s assuming any of the former Bloods had survived until the present. You don’t meet many middle-aged youth gang members. They just don’t live that long, even in postwar Rannit.

But I did have something I don’t usually have when I’m trying to find someone.

I had a fat bag of solid gold crowns.

Three-leg Cat felt the shift in my mood and jumped out of my lap, insulted and stiff-tailed.

“Somebody has to work around here.”

Three-leg broke wind and sauntered out, his opinion of that statement made pungent and all too plain.

I found a printing shop and had them make up a waybill. I ordered four hundred and fifty copies. I’d never seen anybody covered in that much ink ever look so happy.

Then I went looking for Granny Knot. I don’t like spending a client’s money without their say so, and since my client was currently busy pushing up the oft-quoted daisies I figured Granny would have to speak for him.

Mama wasn’t home, and when I finally found Granny’s place she wasn’t answering her door either.

Granny Knot had said she had a place on Elfway. I’d been a little surprised. Elfway is one of those old, narrow lanes that twists and turns and are now so popular with the newly wealthy because, I suppose, they look quaint.

And it did. I gathered a lot of people spent a lot of time and considerable effort to keep it looking that way. The storefronts were all tall, with exaggerated overhangs and round-topped doors (because nothing says Elf like a round-topped door, apparently) and leaves worked into every visible surface. Everything was Elf-themed, whether it was taffy or glass or hats or jewels. Even the restaurant menus posted in the windows were done up in faux Elf.

And here I'd always thought Elves were a bloodthirsty lot of murderous elementals with penchant for casual torture and a taste for human infants.

I kept watching the numbers posted haphazardly here and there, and the street suddenly seemed end well before I got to Granny's scribbled address.

I kept going anyway. The street didn't exactly stop, it just sort of lost its cobbles and became hard-packed dirt footpath for a while. Vacant lots sprouted weeds and trash about me. Here and there the hulk of a burned-out building stood twisted in the sun. The backs of buildings a street over rose windows boarded against the grim sight of Elfway and the burglary-inclined residents thereof, until made another block.

And then I was on cobbles again. A hand-painted sign informed me I had just entered Old Elfway and that I should enjoy my visit.

The prospect seemed unlikely. The structures were all pre-War wood, grey with age and weather and neglect. Not a board I could see had been spared curling and splitting.

Faces moved behind curtains. Doors slammed shut as I passed.

I decided Mama would be right at home in Old Elfway just as I reached No. 19.

Granny's door had no glass. But painted on it was a grinning white face, which, like my painter-finder's eye, led the illiterate to our doors.

As I said, Granny wasn't there. I knocked, and then I sat down on her tiny rotten porch. I decided to wait until the Big Bell clanged out four before I headed back to the print shop to check on my waybills.

Granny's neighbors began to show themselves once they could see I was waiting for Granny and not, therefore, looking for random heads to knock. Half a dozen paraded back and forth before me carefully not making eye contact or acknowledging my wide and charming smile.

Still, I waved and greeted each one.

I was still waving and greeting when I heard a familiar cackle ring out down the street, followed by a much softer muttering.

I stood up and wiped ants off my britches. Mama and Granny ambled up, gabbing away in some private, incomprehensible Old Lady tongue while giggling and snorting like tipsy teenagers with their first bottle of grown-up hooch.

"Good day, ladies," I said, with a practiced tip of my hat. "I hope I'm not too late for tea."

Granny shrieked in laughter and gobbled something at Mama. I suppose it was funny because it sent them both off for so long I nearly sat back down again.

"I was hoping to talk to you, Granny," I said when the gales of laughter subsided.

Granny muttered into her fist of rags, and then scampered up and unlocked her door.

Mama barged in, right at home. I followed, stooping to fit beneath the door, which lacked a rounded top but was scaled for Elves nonetheless.

Granny shut the door behind me and then listened to her rags for a moment before motioning me into a chair beside Mama.

I sighed and sat. Asking Mama to leave would be like asking goats to take up painting.

"I need to spend some of that money," I said without preamble.

I laid out the problems inherent in locating people who'd last been seen ten years and two major fires ago. I hinted that something that had happened in that neighborhood, which might not have had anything to do with Marris Sellway, was making people nervous and therefore quiet.

Then I described my plan to use good old-fashioned greed to provoke recollection and loosen lips.

If Granny had rather Mama didn't hear our dealings, she'd have to throw her out herself. She didn't.

Mama chuckled, and Granny held a long conversation with her rags. When that was over, she

looked me in the eye and nodded, and when Mama wasn't looking, she winked.

That was all I needed.

Almost all.

"I do have a question, Granny."

She tilted her head, silent and expectant.

"Something's bothering me. You say the dead—you say your client spent ten years wracked with guilt, amassing a small fortune to give to this Marris."

Granny nodded. Mama listened, too, her beady Hog eyes fixed in a frown.

"Why doesn't he know where she is, then? Surely he kept tabs on her, on the kid. Anybody willing to put that much coin in a bag isn't going to just let them vanish. He'd want to know if they had a roof over their heads, had food. He'd want to know if they were dead or alive. So, why can't he tell you where she is?"

Granny listened. Her handful of rags apparently had things to say, directly into her ear, as usual.

"He couldn't bear it." Her voice croaked and wavered. "The guilt. The shame."

"Horse flop."

"Boy!" Mama grabbed my elbow. "Don't you shame me with that lack of manners."

"I'm not saying Granny is lying. I'm just saying that if her spook had the ability to tell her where the bag of coin was, it's reasonable to ask why he suddenly forgot an address he certainly knew."

"The dead. Don't think like the living. Confused. Life fading like a dream."

I sighed. I was really wishing Mama would scoot, so I could speak to Granny in plain Kingdome and dispense with the carnival sideshow diction.

"Fine. Our heart-broken, guilt-ridden spook can lead you to a bag of coin in a buried butter churn in a privy, but he can't cough up even part of an address. Wonderful. So I have your assurance, Granny, that he won't come rattling his chains at my place in the middle of the night because I spent thirty of his precious crowns to find his estranged spouse?"

Granny dutifully whispered all that back to her rags, giggled at the reply, and finally gave me my answer.

"No. Do it."

I nodded. "Ladies, if you'll excuse me, I have chores to tend."

We exchanged farewells, Mama and Granny and Granny's rags and me. I got out of there when Granny uncorked a bottle of something pungent and dark. The prospect of seeing Mama tipsy was far more daunting than walking back through Elfway and its faux Elf tackiness.

I didn't figure the print shop was even a quarter of the way rolling out my handbills. So I had time to take the long way back toward my place. Long enough to visit the workhouse over on Kerston, long enough to gather up a mob of street urchins and feed them all at a soup stoop, and then sit them down and explain what I wanted them to do.

They listened with an intensity far more mature than their years should have allowed. I wasn't going to mind parting with that portion of the treasure. It would probably be more money than any of them had ever seen.

Sad thing was, I knew it would probably be just that, for the rest of their lives.

Once they were fed and instructed, I placed myself at the head of the line, and led my very orderly soot-faced parade all the way across town and to the very heart of Regency Avenue. I made sure my soiled army understood their mission, made sure they knew the lay of the streets and the way the neighborhood had grown and shifted. We went up and down the street, then up and down Talent and Farstair and Wicker and Holt, where I hoped at least a few former residents of Cawling might have settled.

That done, and dark and the Curfew approaching, I led my parade back to the printer's, and waited outside for the handbills. True to their word, the staff of Carson and Sons made the deadline.

and as the Big Bell banged out the last hour before Curfew I was divvying up waybills and handing out final instructions.

I told them all to wait until first light before they struck out. And I could see it written plain on their dirty faces that none of them meant to let things like the Curfew or the prospect of a grisly death deter them from making their wage.

I'd not truly thought through my promise of a bonus to the lad who brought the gift horse to my door. But it was too late to change the plan.

I just hoped the vampires would leave them be in favor of older, cleaner fare.

My brave mob dispersed, waybills clutched in their eager hands, the promise of coin burning like true love in their thin, little chests.

I went home feeling dirty.

I sat in my office, daring that lamp-flame to find a wind in the dead still air. It didn't.

But it did illuminate my waybill.

SEEKING MARRIS SELLWAY, it read. FORMERLY OF CAWLING STREET. MOVED AFTER THE WAR.

The printers had inserted a little artistic do-dad below that. It did help to space out the words.

SOUGHT BY THE FINDER NAMED MARKHAT ON CAMBRIT STREET. LOOK FOR THE DOOR WITH THE FINDER'S EYE.

And below that, a perfect rendition of the same.

THE PERSON BRINGING THIS WAYBILL AND ACCURATE INFORMATION CONCERNING THE WHEREABOUTS OF MISS MARRIS SELLWAY FORMERLY OF CAWLING STREET WILL RECEIVE TWENTY (20) OLD KINGDOM CROWNS. THE FINDER WISHES NO ILL TOWARD MISS SELLWAY. AN INHERITANCE IS INVOLVED.

Below that, the printer had decided to reinforce the point by adding a crude drawing of a pile of coins.

And below that, centered, was a number. I'd assigned a range of numbers to each kid, and the one who brought in the winning talker would get a gold crown of his very own.

And they'd all get a half crown just for handing out each and every one of their waybills.

So I sat, and I did what I'd done so many nights when I'd served my six in the Army. I got my whetstone and my oil and my leather rag, and I laid into my old Army double-edged combat knife while I listened for footsteps heading my way.

It didn't take long. I'd loosed a band of half-starved kids out past Curfew, and hunger scared them a lot worse than any vague threat of the halfdead.

Mumbles and a knocking at my door. I scooped my whetstone and oil and cloth into a drawer and accidentally left my knife in its sheath under my shirt before I opened my door.

One of my urchins—owner of Waybill Number Six, called himself Skillet—stood there. He was kicking his companion in the backside, an act rendered simple since the companion was on his knees retching on my sidewalk.

"He knowed the woman," said Skillet. His eyes were old and hard, and if they had any fear they didn't show a hint of it.

He was maybe ten.

He kicked the man again and yanked his face up by his wild mane of filthy hair.

The retching gentleman was maybe ten years my junior. Maybe. With weedheads it's hard to tell. He didn't have any teeth left. His eyes were sunken and vacant. The smell oozing off his trembling frame would have set ogres to gasping and backpedaling.

"Right," I said. The weedhead bowed his head and vomited again, narrowly missing my shoes, and

I decided an invitation to come inside was out of the question.

“He got a name?”

“Stick,” said the kid.

I didn’t bat an eye.

“Stick it is, then,” was all I said. “Well, Mr. Stick, you don’t look so good. Life take a hard turn after you left the Bloods?”

His head snapped up, and I saw recognition in his rheumy eyes.

Fate was finally showing the Markhats of the world a bit of long overdue love.

I dropped down to my haunches so I could meet Stick eye to eye. I didn’t figure I’d have time to wait for him to sober up and stand to meet mine.

“So, tell me about this woman, Stick. Start with her name.”

He had to get through a bout of dry heaving and coughing, but he finally managed to croak out a name.

“Sellway. Mary Sellway. Or Marris. Something.”

I nodded. “Marris. But that much is printed on the waybill, Stick.”

Stick snorted. “Ain’t been to no school. Can’t read.”

“What a shame. Still. You want my coin, you’ve got to do better than that.”

Stick started growling and grinding his empty gums, the way weeders do when they start losing. I let him see my knife and watched him slowly calculate his chances of taking me on and living.

He opted for more dry-heaving and a brief bout of uncontrollable shaking instead.

“She. Had a kid,” he managed to say. “Girl. Doris. Darcy. Something.”

I nodded. I’d purposely left that part out. Just a way to separate the wheat from the chaff.

“You need to think really hard about what you say next, Stick.” I paused and let the words sink in. “Really hard.”

He gulped and nodded.

“Where is Marris Sellway, right now?”

He licked his lips. He took a deep breath. He struggled to put the right words together in the right order.

And then his pupils flared, his muscles went slack, and he passed out face-first into the liquid remains of his last pitiful meal.

Skillet kicked him and spat out a stream of cursing that would have made my old sergeant proud.

Stick was beyond feeling, though. I cussed a bit myself.

“Look, mister, I brung him. You heard what he said. He’s the real thing.”

“You’ll get paid.” I sighed. “Help me haul his stupid butt inside. Be my luck the halfdead will get him if I leave him on the sidewalk.”

We both picked out bits of Stick that were the least encrusted in filth and wrestled his limp form inside my door. I rolled him onto his side so he wouldn’t choke and put a handful of copper in Skillet’s outstretched hand.

The kid’s grin was the only thing about him that still looked young.

“You can stay here too,” I said. “It’s not safe out there.”

The coins vanished. A kitchen knife, honed down to a wicked edge, replaced them. “I got a little sister to watch,” he said.

I just nodded. “Come back around tomorrow. You’ll get the rest then.”

He nodded and was gone. I never once heard a footstep.

Stick moaned and twitched. His attendant stench wasted no time in pervading my office. I lit every candle I had, pulled my favorite lead-weighted head-knocker out of its hiding place under my desk and settled in for a long and malodorous night.

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Chapter Three

The bathhouse attendant, a blind old man named Waters, gathered up Stick's clothes with the end of his cane and without a word hurled them into the furnace.

"That there man stinks," offered Waters. "Use all that soap. I'll go fetch more."

And off he went grimacing and muttering.

I gave Stick a couple of good hard slaps, which roused him to mutter but not open his eyes.

So I hauled him up by the scruff of his neck and simply tossed his ugly, naked butt into the blazing hot, copper bathtub.

Three-leg Cat couldn't have put on a better show of flailing and howling and sputtering. I put my right hand on his head and pushed him back under briefly.

"Good morning, Mr. Stick." I had him by the hair, and though he punched and struggled all he did was splash. "It's bath day. If you behave yourself, it'll also be breakfast day. If you keep making ruckus, well..."

I put him under again. The water, I noted, was turning muddy.

At least it was cutting down the smell. Waters arrived as I let Stick back up for air and dumped a bowl of something fragrant into the tub.

"Gonna need more of that," he opined before shuffling off again.

Stick was furious, but beginning to wake up. He quit trying to punch me, and a ghostly recognition flashed across his face.

"You."

"Me," I agreed. "The finder? The one with the coin? The one who wants to know all about Cawling Street and a woman named Marris Sellway? Ring any bells, Stick?"

"You said you pay."

"I did. And I will. But first you're going to get yourself clean. And then you're going to eat. And then you and I are going to sit and talk about the Bloods and Cawling and Marris. Got it?"

Stick closed his eyes and brought up his hands to run water over his face.

"Got it."

I let go of his head and tossed him a bar of soap. "Waters here did your clothes a favor and burned them. I'm going to go back to my place and get you some of mine. If you want the coin you'll be here when I get back. You do want the coin, don't you, Stick?"

The weed-lust in his eyes was the only reply I needed.

"Don't make trouble for Waters, you hear?"

"I hear."

I told Waters what I was doing on my way out. My place is just a short walk away, and I swear I could smell Stick in the still, early morning air all the way back to my door.

I found an old shirt and an old pair of brown trousers and a pair of socks with holes in the toes under my bed. They bore the faint aroma of Three-leg, who had apparently been using them as a bed. Even so they were a vast improvement on anything Stick was likely to ever own again.

A pair of old black shoes, soles worn paper thin, completed Stick's new ensemble. I gathered them all and headed back, more worried about Waters and the possible application of his cane to Stick's head than I was about anything Stick might decide to do.

Mama popped out of her door as I neared.

"No time now, Mama," I said. "Bath emergency."

Mama eyed my bundle, and wrinkled her nose at me. "Something stinks. Come back around when you finish your doings. Got some things to say."

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