



*Frank Tuttle*

DEAD  
MAN'S  
RAIN

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# Dead Man's Rain

*Frank Tuttle*

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## Dedication

To Beth, my ever-patient and long-suffering editor at Samhain, who single-handedly taught me the evils of semicolon overuse, to the gang at Speculations, who have been unflaggingly supportive and helpful for many years, and especially to my wife Karen, who puts up with my frequent sessions at the keyboard and my even more frequent and prolonged lost-in-thought writer's stares.

Oh, and to New Zealand, my very favorite large island landmass—you should have been a continent, and that's no lie.

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## Chapter One

Noon found me standing at the edge of a fresh-dug grave. Sunlight mocked and set the blue jays singing, but couldn't quite reach the Sarge's casket, no matter how hard the sun shone.

I crumbled a damp clod of earth, let it fall.

We'd lived through the War, the Sarge and I. Lived through the three-month siege at Ghant. Lived through the fall of Little Illa. Lived through two years in the swamps. I'd once seen the Sarge snatch an arrow out of the air and shove it in a charging Troll's eye, and now he was dead after slipping and falling in a public bath.

"Bye, Sarge," I said. "You deserved better."

I met an Orthodox priest as I walked away. He dipped his red mask in greeting and slowed to a trapeze, but I fixed my eyes on a big old pin oak and marched past. I'd said all my words, and had no use for his.

I was halfway to the cemetery gates when Mama Hog stepped out of the shadow of a poor man's headstone and planted herself squat and square in my path.

And that's when it started. I knew before she spoke what she was going to say. And I knew that I should have just keep walking, ignoring her like I did the priest, ignoring everything and everybody except a bar-keep named One-Eyed Eddie and his endless supply of tall, cold glasses. The Sarge was dead and I turned forty with the sunrise and the Hell with everything else.

But I stopped. "What is it, Mama?" I said, gazing out over the neat, still ranks of sad-eyed angels and tall white grave-wards. "Come to pick out a spot?"

Mama grinned up at me with all three of her best teeth.

"Come to find you, boy," she said. "Come to send you some business."

"The only kind of business I need now is the kind Eddie runs," I said. "Anything else can wait."

Mama frowned. "This ain't any old business," she said, shaking a stubby finger at my navel. "This is Hill business."

Behind us, the first spade of dirt hit the Sarge's coffin with a muted, faraway *thump*.

"Hill business," I said. "One of your rich ladies need a finder?"

Mama's card-and-potion shop does a brisk business when sleek black carriages that hurry to the curb disgorge Hill ladies wrapped in more cloaks and veils than the weather truly demands. I don't know how Mama attracts such well-heeled clients, but she does, and more than twice a week.

Mama Hog cackled. "Rich widow, boy. Rich widow." She grinned and shook her head. "She needs more than a finder, I reckon, but you're the best I can do."

The *thump-thumps* of earth on coffin came faster now. I squinted toward the gate, not wanting the Sarge's widow to catch me in the graveyard. Outsiders aren't welcome at Orthodox funerals, and the service would begin as soon as the coffin lid was fully covered with earth.

I sighed. "Let's walk, Mama," I said. "You can tell me on the way."

*Thump-thump*. Another shovel rose and fell.

"He was a good man, your Sergeant," said Mama. She fell in step beside me. "No words taste more bitter than goodbye."

"Tell me about my new client, Mama," I said. "What's her name, how high up the Hill is her house, and what does she want me to do about her dear sweet Nephew Pewsey and that awful

conniving gypsy girl?"

Mama Hog chuckled. "Her name," she said, "is Merlat."

Behind us, after a while, I heard the Sarge's widow start to cry.

The Widow Merlat sat across from me, breathed through her scented silk hanky, and did her best to make it plain she wasn't one of those Hill snobs who think of us common folk as mere servant fodder. No, I was all right in her book—not a human being like her, of course, but as long as I kept my eyes on the floor and knocked the horse flop off my boots, I'd be welcome at her servant's entrance any day.

"You come highly recommended, goodman Markhat," she said, daring Rannit's unfashionable south-side air long enough to lower her hanky while she spoke. "The most capable, most experienced finder in all of Rannit. I'm told you are discreet, as well. I would not be here otherwise."

I sighed. My head hurt and I still had cemetery dirt on my shoes. I did not need to have my face rubbed in my humble origins by a Hill widow who doubtlessly thought her son was the first rich boy to ever take a fancy to the half-elf parlor maid.

"I'm also told you are expensive," said the widow. She plopped a fat black clutch purse down on my desk, and it tinkled, heavy with coin. "Good," she added. "I've never trusted bargains, nor shopped for them. Money means nothing to me."

"Funny you should say that, Lady Merlat," I said. "Why, just the other day I was telling the Regent that money means twenty jerks a day, to me. Plus expenses. And that's only if I decide to take the job." I leaned back in my chair and clasped my hands behind my head. "And, despite your generous display of the money that means nothing to you, I haven't said yes yet."

The widow smiled a tight, small smile. "You will, finder," she said. "I'll pay thirty crowns a day. Forty. Fifty. Whatever it takes, I will pay."

Outside, an ogre huffed and puffed as he pulled a manure wagon down the street, and all the silk and Hent wasn't going to keep the stench out of the widow's Hill-bred nostrils.

The widow shoved her purse my way. I shoved it back.

"Tell me what you want," I said.

She nodded, once and quickly, and took a deep breath. A hint of color fought its way past the powder on her cheeks.

"My husband is dead," she said.

She was wearing more black than a barge-load of undertakers. "No," I said, straight-faced. "How long?"

"Two years," she said. More color leaked through. "Two years. He caught fever." The widow's voice went thin. "He caught fever and he died and I buried him." She took in a ragged breath. "But now he's back, goodman. Returned."

"Returned?" I lifted an eyebrow. "How? Rattling chains, wearing a bed-sheet?" I stood. "Nice talking to you, Lady."

Her small bright eyes got smaller and brighter. "Sit," she hissed. "I am neither senile nor insane. My husband has returned. He walks the grounds at night. He rattles the windows, pulls at all the doors. All but four of the staff left after his second visit." The widow Merlat gave her hanky a savage twist. "I had to hire caterers for the Armistice Day Festival," she said. "The canapés were spoiled, and two of my guests fell ill after sampling the stuffed mushrooms."

"Tragic," I said. "Shocking. And the wine?"

"Goodman Markhat," she said. "Are you mocking me?"

I sighed, eyed the coin-purse, sat. "Lady Merlat," I said, "this sounds like a matter for the Watch or the Church, or both. Why me? What can I do that they can't?"

She twisted her hanky and chose her words. "The Watch. The Church. Don't you think I tried  
goodman? Don't you think I tried?"

"I don't know, Lady," I said. "Did you?"

She glared. "Sixty crowns a day," she said.

"So your husband is a revenant," I said, slowly. "And he's tracking up the flower beds and scaring  
the neighbors and the coachman is also the butler and nobody can cook a decent meal."

"Sixty-five crowns," she said, her voice glacial, to match her eyes. "Seventy, if you vow to hold  
your tongue."

I grinned. "Sixty-five it is," I said. "And I need to make one thing perfectly clear, Lady Merlat.  
I saw a lot of folks get suddenly, tragically dead during the War. What I didn't see was anybody  
walking around afterward complaining about it."

"You doubt my word?"

"I believe you believe, but that doesn't make it the truth," I said. "Have you seen your husband  
Lady Markhat? Really seen him?"

She shuddered, and went corpse-pale underneath the powder. "Once," she said in a whisper. "The  
second time. I'd moved upstairs, kept the windows shuttered and bolted. But I heard the dogs barking  
and Harl, the footman, shouting and I peeked outside and there he was, standing there, looking up  
at me." She shivered all over, fought it off. "It was him, goodman Markhat. Two years in the grave—but  
it was Ebed."

She hesitated. And then she lowered the hanky and looked me in the eye. "Please," she said, and  
the word stuck in her throat, so she repeated it. "Please."

"All right, Lady," I said. "All right." I opened my desk, pulled out a pad of ragged pulp-paper and  
a pair of brass dipping-pens. "I'll do this much. I'll try to find out who or what you saw," I said. "Give  
me three days. If I come up empty, you only owe me for two."

"I saw my husband," said the widow. "I saw him, and others have seen him, and I'll pay you sixty  
five crowns a day to find out why he has returned, and how I can put him to rest."

I sighed. "I need to know a few things, Lady Merlat," I said. "Names, dates, addresses. And the  
location of your husband's tomb."

She found a fresh hanky and took a big breath.

Revenants and funerals and aching in the head.

Happy birthday to me.

Rannit awoke around me. Ogres huffed and puffed as they passed, their dray-carts empty but not far  
long. Bakers and butchers and tailors yawned, pulled back their shutters, propped open their doors.  
Blue-suited Watchmen worked the alleys in pairs, kicking and poking and pulling at bits of garbage to  
see if the bodies beneath were sleeping off cheap wine or going stiff and still.

I passed a parked undertaker's wagon, giving the tarp-covered, black bed of it wide berth. Those  
lumps under the tarp would be Curfew breakers, bound for the tall grey cinder-brick smokestacks  
and the crematoriums down by the river. The Watch is careful to find the bodies before dark, before the  
fog rises again.

The only vampires we tolerate in Rannit have tailor-made cloaks and big houses on the Hill.

The undertaker grinned and tipped his crooked stovepipe hat as I walked past. I crossed the street  
in a hurry, risked a trampling by the hurried ogres, took a shortcut through the Carnival just to watch  
the yawning clowns cuss and smoke and stomp around in their big red shoes.

I passed the ragged tents of the Carnival, kept walking. The streets began to slope down, toward  
the river. The air went thick with the stench of the slaughterhouses and the leather tanneries and the  
paper mills. Big sixteen-horse lumber wagons thundered past, their wheels striking sparks on the



broken, rutted cobblestones.

There, in the shadow of the crematorium smokestacks, one of the widow's coins bought me a rickshaw to Market Street, a cab to the good side of the Riverfront district, and a full-blown brass-and-velvet carriage with glass in the windows and cushions on the seats for the ride across the Brown River and onto the Hill.

My carriage clattered on to the New Bridge, nearly ran down the slowest of the traditional trio of clowns who capered and danced at each end. They scattered, cursing, as the driver snapped his reins and the team's hooves *clop-clopped* sharply on the fresh cobbles. The bridge arched up and Brown River fell away below, until we rose over the water so high it actually sparkled and the stench of the cattle-barges was lost in the wind.

I grinned and waved at strangers. Carriages and coins, like the song says—I was having wild fantasies about new shoes, and a haircut.

I wasn't fooling the carriage driver, though. He kept his lips pinched and his shaggy grey eyebrow curled in a scowl and when he called me "Sir," he let me know he'd rather be using more colorful honorifics. He had me made for a burglar or a pimp or a blackmailer, out for a lark in the Heights pockets full of ill-gotten gain.

"Sir," he said, using his special tone again. "Will you be entering the grounds of the Merlat estate or should I pull to the tradesman's entrance at the rear?"

"You are an amusing wight," I said with a small laugh. "Tradesman's entrance, indeed. *Haw-haw*." I let him stew.

"Just drive past, won't you?" I said. "I need a good look at the grounds. Especially things like doors, gates, dog kennels. A man in my line has to know these things before he goes to work."

He shut up and drove.

Massive oaks lined the streets, wide green lawns flanked the sidewalks and huge old pre-War mansions loomed up like slate-roofed mountains against the cool blue sky. The air smelled of clover grass and honeysuckle. No potholes in the cobblestone streets, no filth choking the gutters, no bodies sleeping or otherwise, sprawled on the sidewalks—my, what a gulf the Brown River spans.

I checked street-side ward-posts for brass-wrought house numbers. Three-forty-four was a four-story behemoth with gingerbread trim and arrowhead turrets.

Three-forty-five looked like a wedding cake with doors.

Three-forty-six, three-forty-seven—and there it was, three-forty-eight.

House Merlat. I whistled and gawked.

The front lawn was ten acres, every inch of it lush and verdant. Flowerbeds and walking gardens lined the yard and the paved carriage track. Blue sparrow and red highland roses and white arden waves waved in the breeze—all the colors of Rannit's flag.

Lurking here and there amidst the shrubs and flowers was an assortment of pigeon-spotted ornamental statuary—knights of old with swords uplifted, ruined columns surrounding pools filled with water-lilies, the odd sad angel in flowing Old Kingdom robes. A squirrel fussed at me from atop a knight's armored head.

A dozen blood-oaks and a lone gnarled madbark tree shaded the angels and the flowers. Although someone had mowed the lawn recently, oak leaves lay where they fell. Between the unraked leaves and the early signs of shagginess in the untrimmed hedges and the walking corpses in the yard after dark, I imagined that the widow's neighbors were waxing quite peevish.

Above the flowers and the shrubs and the oaks, though, loomed House Merlat itself.

Five stories. Four towers. Doors the size of garrison gates, windows of leaded glass, again worked with the form of Rannit's standard and a shield-and-gryphon design that I took to be the sigil of House Merlat. The gutters and roofs were copper, green with age; the walls soot-stained granite behind

growth of unkempt ivy.

~~I made a quick count, found twenty-two windows on the street-face of the bottom floor along~~  
Twenty-two windows, and all but one of them shuttered and barred.

“Cheerful little hut,” I said. My driver grunted.

We passed it by. I had the driver turn and pass again, ignoring his subtle commentary about  
prisons and the Watch.

“Well, well,” I muttered. “Look at that.”

Ward-walls. I’d missed both of them the first time, too bedazzled by visions of the good life to see  
the telltale signs of spiked iron behind the fireflowers that bordered the Merlat lawn. I squinted  
counted spikes and saw that every fifth fence-spike sported a fist-sized ball of smoky glass. The glass  
would glow faintly after dark—and anyone walking too close would be treated to a fatal bolt of rich  
man’s lightning.

The ward-walls were new, I judged. The Merlat’s rows of fireflowers, obviously planted to hide  
the ranks of ugly iron spikes, were all white and blue, with none of the red petals that show up after  
the second season.

We were only barely past when a flat, open delivery wagon, its bed filled with thick wrought-iron  
door and window bars worked in intricate oak-leaf patterns, pulled into the drive of the Merlat  
southern neighbors. A gang of carpenters emerged from a hedge-maze, all wiping their hands on their  
pants and grabbing up their tools.

Ward-walls. Bars on the windows, bars on the doors—all done in a hurry, too. The Merlat  
neighbors weren’t happy. You’d think a family of sidhe had just moved in.

Or, perhaps, a well-heeled revenant.

“Driver,” I said, shaking my head. “Let’s head for Monument Hill. I think I’ll lay out flowers for  
dear old ‘Nuncle’ Tim.”

He snorted and snapped his reins and didn’t even bother with a “Sir.”

Cost him his tip, that bit of cheek.

Curfew in Rannit falls with the sun. The night belongs to the half-dead, the Watch and anybody  
crazy enough to risk running afoul of the former or tripping over the recumbent, snoring forms of the  
latter.

Curfew fell, and the big old bells on the Square clanged nine times. Before the last notes had faded  
Mama Hog herself was yelling “Boy, wake up,” and banging on my door.

I swung my feet off my desk, put my sandwich down on a plate and hurried to the door.

Mama Hog looked up and grinned. “The Widow Merlat found you,” she said, not asking for  
reporting.

“She did indeed,” I said, opening the door. “What a chucklesome old dear. She’s coming by late  
for tea and a séance.”

Mama cackled and trundled inside. “The Widow Merlat’s got the fear, boy,” she said. “Got it bad.”  
Mama plopped down into my client’s chair and started eyeing my sandwich.

“You make that?”

“It’s from Eddie’s,” I said. “Tear off a hunk.”

She tore, bit, chewed.

“You sent me a lunatic, Mama,” I said, shaking my finger. “Shame on you.”

Bite, chew, swallow. Then Mama wiped her lips on her sleeve and grinned. “She ain’t crazy, boy.”  
Mama said. “She’s ec-cen-tric. Ain’t that the word for rich folks?”

“She thinks her dead husband spends his evening knock-knock-knocking at her door,” I said.  
“Eccentric doesn’t cover that, Mama, and you know it.”

Mama shrugged and chewed.

~~"I have no love for the idle rich,"~~ I said. ~~"But I've got no desire to fleece sad old widow women either."~~ I went behind my desk, pulled back my chair and sat. "Why not send her to a doctor or priest, Mama?" I said. "Why me? Why a finder?"

My sandwich—melted Lowridge cheese on smoked Pinford ham—was vanishing fast. I grabbed a hunk when Mama paused to speak.

"The widow ain't crazy, boy," she said. "Could be she ain't seeing things, either."

I shook my head and swallowed. "Your cards tell you that?"

Mama Hog nodded. "Cards say she's got a hard rain coming, boy," she said. "Turned up the Dead Man, and the Storm, and the Last Dancer, all in the same hand. Dead Man's rain. That ain't good." Mama grabbed another morsel of sandwich, guffawed around it. "But I don't need cards to see the sun. The Widow Merlat is headed for a bad time. She knows it. I know it. You'd best know it, too."

"Dead is dead, Mama," I said. "That's what I know."

Mama grinned. "There's other things you need to know, boy. Things about the ones that come back."

"First thing being that they don't," I said.

Mama pretended not to hear.

"Rev'nants only walk at night," she said. "It's got to be pitch dark."

"Do tell."

"You can't catch 'em coming out of the ground," said Mama. "It's no good trying. They're like haunts, that way. Solid as rock one minute, thin as fog the next."

"Sounds handy," I said. "Do their underbritches get all misty and ethereal too, or is that one of the things man was not meant to know?"

"Don't look in his eyes, boy. Don't look in his eyes, or breathe air he's breathed."

"I won't even ask about borrowing his toothbrush," I said.

Mama slapped my desktop with both her hands.

"You listen," she hissed. "Believe or not, but you listen."

"I've got all night."

"His mouth will be open," said Mama. "Wide open. He's been saving a scream, all that time in the ground. Saving up a scream for the one that put him there." Mama lifted a stubby finger and shook it in my face. "Don't you listen when he screams. You put your hands over your ears and you yell loud as you can, but don't you listen. Cause if you do, you'll hear that scream for the rest of your days, and there ain't nothing nobody nowhere can do for you then."

Silence fell. Only after Curfew do we get any silence, in my neighborhood. I let it linger for a moment.

I leaned forward, put my eyes down even with Mama's, motioned her closer, spoke.

"Boo."

Mama glared. "Don't get in his way, boy," she said. "He didn't come back for you. But that won't mean nothing if you get in the way."

"Dead is dead, Mama," I said.

Mama sighed. "Dead is dead," she agreed. "Sometimes, though, good and dead ain't dead enough."

Mama rose, brushed crumbs of my sandwich off her chin, and headed for the door.

"When you going to the widow's house, boy?" she asked, as she turned my bolt.

"First thing tomorrow," I said. "Going to stay a few days, see what I can see. If Old Bones shows up, I'll stuff my ears with cotton and give him your regards."

Mama rolled her eyes. "You watch yourself," she said. "And not just at night."

I frowned. "Meaning?"

Mama shook her head. "Meaning them Merlat kids would as soon gut you as say hello," she said. "Bad 'uns, the lot of 'em."

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"Whoa, Mama," I said, rising. "You know something about the Merlat kids, sit back down. I'm a lot more likely to run into one of them than their dear departed daddy."

Mama didn't go out, but she didn't back away from the door either. "Told you all I know. The bad. All of 'em."

"How many would that be?" I asked. "Two? Four? Ten? Tell me something I can use, Mama. The sandwich was a good sandwich you gobbled."

Mama made a snuffling noise. "Three of 'em," she said. "Two men. One a gambler. One on weed. One woman. Not sure what she is, but I know it ain't good."

"Did one of them have anything to do with Papa Merlat's plot on the Hill?"

"I reckon they all did," said Mama. "But not in the way you mean. You be careful, boy. Reckon you be careful."

Then she opened my door and was gone.

I thought about following her. I've broken Curfew before, just like everyone else, but I didn't go up, and Mama's footsteps were fast and then gone.

She'd said what she meant to say. I brushed crumbs off my desk, found a bottle of beer in a drawer, and settled back to watch the dark.

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## Chapter Two

“This will do,” I told my driver. “Pull over.”

The cab rolled to a halt. I opened the door and hauled out my Army-tan duffel bag.

The cabbie looked down at me and wrinkled his brow. “Look, pal,” he said. “I don’t mean to tell you your business, but this ain’t the place for the likes of us come sundown.”

I’d hauled a handful of coppers out of my pocket to count out for the fare, and I was so shocked I lost my place. “What do you mean?” I asked. “I’ve got a job. I’ll be indoors. The Merlats aren’t half dead, and even if the neighbors are they don’t bother the help—do they?”

The cabbie’s eyes darted up and down the empty, tree-lined sidewalk. “It ain’t the half-dead you need to watch,” he said, and then he pointed with his chin at the Merlat house. “It’s them.”

I put out my hand, and he took the coins. Before I could ask him anything else he snapped his reins and was gone.

I watched him go. I considered chasing him down and asking him if he’d like more coins, but rich people tend to look down on common folk running through their lawns, so I heaved my duffel bag over my shoulder and set off for House Merlat.

I think I even whistled. It was hard not to, that morning—the sun was up, the birds were singing, I had a sock stuffed with silver and a rich man’s bed to sleep in.

A wrought-iron swing gate worked with griffins and roses opened to the Merlat’s yard, and I took a walk that wound through it. I opened the waist-high gate and sauntered through, watching the house. A curtain moved in the big window to the right of the front doors, and I heard, faint but clear, the tinkling of a bell.

Behind the house, dogs began to bark and snarl. I switched my duffel to my other shoulder and kept my pace steady. Marble knights and silent angels looked on as I passed, their blank eyes moving to follow my every step.

The house was set dead center of the big square yard. Ward-walls, each erected by the Merlat and his neighbors, covered three sides. The street-side front fence was just painted iron, a little more than waist high. Mama Hog could have climbed it, so if Old Man Merlat was really taking long evening strolls, he was entering the grounds from the street.

The right-most front door opened, and the Widow Merlat herself stepped squinting into the sunlight.

“I’ve been expecting you,” she said, before I’d mounted the first of the dozen tall treads that led from the lawn to the house. “Come in.”

The widow wore black, of course. She did not smile, though she did nod her head in what I took to be greeting. I guessed that the widow was not accustomed to receiving her own guests.

“Thank you,” I said. I took the door, she backed up into the shadows of the house and I stepped inside and let the door shut behind me.

I blinked and lowered my duffel. My feet made crunching noises on the white marble tiles that led down the entry hall. I could see that the hall made a tee about ten paces in, and that going right or left would take you into big dark rooms that hadn’t seen direct sun or a good dusting since the Armistice. Straight ahead, past the tee, the hall opened into a big tile-floored ballroom, and wide, curving oak-railed stairs rose out of the ballroom and wound its way to parts unknown.

There were stained-glass windows, too, somewhere high out of sight from the ballroom. I couldn't see them from where I stood, but I could see the splatter of rainbows they cast on the white marble floor.

"You have a beautiful home," I said.

"It was, once," said the widow. Then she frowned. "Jefrey should have been here to see to your luggage," she said, keeping her eyes off my battered Army duffel bag.

"Don't bother," I said. "I'll manage."

The widow cocked her head, listening, I suppose, for Jefrey's footfalls on the tiles. I listened too, but if Jefrey or anyone else was in the house they were sock-foot and tip-toe.

I picked up the bag. "If you'll point me to my room," I said, "I'll go and stow my gear. We can catch up with Jefrey later."

The widow sighed. "You'll be on the second floor," she said, turning and marching toward the staircase. "You'll be sharing the floor with Jefrey, but you will of course have rooms to yourself."

"That's fine," I said, trotting to catch up. The hall was wide enough to ride four abreast, so I had no trouble sidling up beside the widow. "Before the rest of the crew shows, though, we'd better have a talk," I said. "For starters—are you sure you want it known what I'm here to do?"

The widow didn't slow. "I will not engage in deceit in my own house," she said. "Those who have seen Ebed know I am right. Those who have not soon will." She gave me a hard sideways look, then turned away and shook her head.

"You tell them who you are and what you came to do," she said. "And you ask them what you will. If they want to stay, they'll answer, or I'll see them gone by sundown."

We'd reached the foot of the stairs. I put my right hand on the rail, and gazed out at the ballroom and its acres and acres of empty white tiles. The stained-glass windows were set high on the east and west walls; each bore scenes of knights and dragons, in which the knights seemed to usually have the upper hand. The room smelled faintly of lilacs.

"We had a dance here, about the time you were born," said the widow. "Not since."

"Pity," I said.

A door banged shut, and hurried footsteps made clattering echoes in the hall.

"Lady Merlat," said a breathless voice. "Pardon, but the dogs..."

A small, white-haired man in a too-large black butler's coat trotted into the ballroom, saw me, and stopped. His eyes went narrow, and the set of his thin, wrinkled face turned clamp-jawed and frowning.

"You're him," he said without cheer.

"I'm him," I agreed. "You must be Jefrey."

The tails of his coat reached well past his knees, and he'd rolled up the sleeves so they wouldn't leave the tips of his fingers poking out. Jefrey was slim, probably sixty or sixty-five. He wore his thin, ashen hair in an Army straight-cut that reminded me instantly of the Sarge.

I held out my hand to shake his, but Jefrey grunted and turned his gaze toward the widow.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but I don't like this."

The widow blanched. "I did not ask your opinion," she snapped.

"You didn't," said Jefrey. "But after twenty-eight years I reckon you'll hear it anyway. That man is here to take your money, and if you get anything in return it'll be heartache and missing jewelry, and that's a fact."

The widow bit back a reply, turned to me and then started back up the stairs without a word. I shrugged at Jefrey and followed, and after a moment he came stomping up behind us.

"What do you know about revenants, Lady?" I asked.

Jefrey made a strangled choking sound. The widow didn't flinch.

“The Church claims revenants don’t exist,” she said. “And yet they offer exorcism, in what the priests described to me as ‘extreme circumstances’.”

Jefrey snorted. “What means they’ll do most anything if the price is right,” he said. I almost forgave him then and there for not taking my luggage.

“Our mutual acquaintance has another view of revenants,” I said. “She claims they come back to take revenge on their killers.”

I was half-turned and eyeing Jeffrey when I said it. I wasn’t sure if he’d cuss or jump or swing, but I was surprised when he just shook his head and glanced at the widow.

“Is that what you believe, goodman Markhat?” she said.

“I don’t believe at all,” I answered. “And I won’t, until I’ve seen.”

Jefrey looked back at me, and some of the hostility left his face. “Thought you was here to bag a spook,” he said. “Thought some old soothsayer from the Narrows sent you.”

“I’m just here to find out who’s been tramping around Lady Merlat’s yard,” I said. “That’s all. Who, and why.”

“For sixty-five jerks a day,” muttered Jeffrey. The Lady Merlat spun her head around, and her eyes blazed.

“That is enough,” she said, and it echoed. “No more!”

We’d reached the top of the stairs. The house sprawled off in three directions—one lit by dusty windows, two as dark as tombs.

I put my bag down to take a breath, and Jeffrey snatched it up. “I’ll take him to his rooms,” he said. “Then we’d better see to the kitchen, Lady,” he said. “Briss and Envey quit.”

The Lady closed her eyes and took a breath. “I’ll wait for you here,” she said. “Goodman Markhat, settle in, then find us in the kitchen. Down the stairs, take the right-hand hall, follow the sounds.”

I nodded. “Gladly,” I said. I started to ask if House Merlat had entertained walking corpses in the yard last night, but I decided it could wait.

Jefrey sped off down one of the dark halls. I followed, leaving the widow to twist her hanky and stare down at the empty ballroom. I hoped she was remembering dances and not funerals, but I had my doubts.

Jefrey halted at a big black oak door. “In here,” he gruffed as he shoved the door open. My duffel hit the floor. He stepped aside, and I poked my head in and peeped around.

“Nice,” I said after a whistle. “But where’s the jewelry?”

I was wasting my breath. Jeffrey was stomping away, his boot-heels loud on the polished oak-plant floor. I shoved my duffel inside and closed the door behind me.

The bed was big and soft, and the room, once all eight windows were open, was cool and bright and airy. I lay back on the bed for a full ten minutes, just soaking up the gentle sounds of birdsongs and wind and far-off carriage wheels.

“It’s good to be rich,” I said. And then I picked myself up and left to find the kitchen and see how many well-dressed skeletons House Merlat had hanging in its closets.

At the stairs, I heard voices, wafting down from above. Two men spoke, their voices hushed, the words fast and running over those of the other—brothers, no doubt, rehashing an old argument more by rote than passion.

And then came laughter—a woman’s laughter, loud and shrill and humorless. Up until that moment, I’d set foot upon the upward stairs, intending to stroll right up and introduce myself to the Merlat children. But something in that laugh made cat-paws down my spine, and I turned to the downward stairs instead and clambered toward the kitchen. I’d meet the children soon enough, I told myself, and it might be best if Mama was there to swat their behinds and keep them mindful of the

manners.

I was halfway down the stairs when a commotion broke out below. I heard Jeffrey bellowing, and another man shouting, and I charged off the stairs and onto the polished marble floor just in time to see Jeffrey deliver a solid blow with a shiny black walking stick to someone standing outside.

More bellowing. Jeffrey raised his stick again, but the door slammed into him so hard it took him back a pair of steps. He dropped his stick to put both hands on the door and push.

The door pushed back. Jeffrey grunted and cursed and heaved, but went steadily back, his boots leaving long black marks on the tiles as they slid.

I charged at the door, right shoulder first, hit it hard and kept going. Jeffrey scrambled for footing but found it, and between us we slammed the door shut. Jeffrey threw the lock-bolt and sagged down on all fours on the tile.

“Didn’t think they came out in daylight,” I said, puffing a bit too, just out of friendly consideration.

“Ain’t no rev’nant,” gasped Jeffrey.

Outside, a beefy fist began to pound, and then Jeffrey and I heard the barking and snarling that meant the Merlat dogs were loosed at last.

The pounding stopped. Jeffrey sprang to the thick leaded glass panel beside the door and squinted out into the yard. “Get ’em, boys!” he shouted. “Tear ’em up!”

I turned to my panel, squinted through it. Two men dashed through the lawn, half a dozen snarling Eastern wolf-hounds at their heels. The dogs took turns leaping and biting, though they could easily have taken both men down with a single rush.

“Temple missionaries?” I asked.

Jeffrey laughed so hard he went into a fit of coughing. I slapped him on the back and waited for it to pass.

“Moneylenders,” he spat at last. “Come to see young master Abad, I suspect.”

“Jeffrey!” snapped the widow. I hadn’t heard her approach, not even on the tiles, for Jeffrey was hacking and sputtering. “You have no right—”

“Who loosed the dogs?” I asked, interrupting the widow. “Are there members of the staff here that I haven’t met?”

The widow turned her glare on me. “I loosed the dogs,” she said. “When it became apparent that no person was not going to leave, even when told.”

“Good thinking,” I said. I offered Jeffrey a hand, and he took it and stood. “If they’re moneylenders, though, they’ll be back.”

“No they won’t,” said Jeffrey. He met the widow’s glare. “She’ll send word to the banking-house and they’ll pay off whatever Master Abad lost at the Victory Round.”

Victory Round was a gambling den. Not one of the better ones, though—it was on my side of the street, Brown, for starters, and with a handful of the widow’s coins and bit of a wash, even I could probably walk right in. Victory Round and dives like it were one of two things—breeding grounds for gamblers on the rise, or last stops for those whose luck and credit were long gone. I didn’t have to flip a coin to see where Junior fit in.

“Jeffrey,” said the Widow Merlat. “Be still.”

Jeffrey shrugged, turned his gaze back toward the glass. “They’re gone,” he announced. “I’ll go fetch the dogs.”

“I’d better go with you,” I said. “They might decide to circle back and call again.”

Jeffrey picked up his walking stick, unlocked the door and threw it open. “Suit yourself,” he said. “Mind the fireflowers.”

I followed Jeffrey out into the yard, and shut the door behind me.



I made a few friends that afternoon. Horga and Surn and Vlaga and Thufe, to be precise; the other five of Jeffrey's dogs, aside from the occasional sidelong glare and low snarl, would have nothing to do with me.

But after Jeffrey introduced me, the four females were all lapping tongues and wagging tails. Thufe, the biggest, hairiest, most ferocious of the females, actually rolled over on her back at my feet and let me rub her belly.

Jefrey looked on with something like awe. "Ain't never seen 'em do that," he said, as Thufe licked my knee and made happy-puppy noises. "They hate everybody."

I grinned. "Always did like dogs," I said. "Better company than most people, I say."

Jefrey nodded in agreement.

We were halfway to the street, all gathered in the dappled shade cast by the tossing boughs of a century-old madbark tree. The grass was soft and cool. Flowers swayed, birds chased and sang, and the air was breezy and sweet. Had the dogs not been wild-eyed, shaggy wolfhounds bred for fat maiming, we'd have looked like something out of a Pastoral Period oil painting.

The widow's head popped out of the door.

"Jefrey!" she shouted. "Put the dogs up and get back to the kitchen!"

"Yes ma'am," said Jefrey. He rose, stretched, yawned.

"I reckon I was wrong about you, earlier," he said, not looking at me but up at the wide blue sky. "Reckon you ain't what I thought."

"Jefrey!" shrieked the widow.

"It's hard to know who people are," I said. I rose too, as did all my shaggy new friends. "Take your time. Take the Merlat kids, for instance. I don't know them, won't have time to know them. You do." I brushed twigs off my pants. "Tell me who the kids are, Jefrey. Who they really are."

Jefrey's face darkened, took on its usual tight-lipped, pinched expression.

"I reckon they're a right lot of useless, bloodsucking, backstabbing bastards," he said softly. "Monsters, all, and don't you tell the Lady I said so."

"I won't," I said. "The girl too?"

"Her especially," said Jefrey, and he began to stomp and grind his jaw. "You mind her, finder," he said. "She'll come on to you, first thing, all sweets and juices. I reckon you'll like that."

I remembered the laugh from upstairs. "No, I won't," I said. "Thufe here is my only girl. Right Thufe?"

The dog barked. I swear it did, and Jefrey nearly stumbled, so much was he surprised.

"You ain't doin' some mojo, are you?" he asked. "I swear, if you are—"

"I'm not doing anything," I said. "Relax. The dogs just like me because I like them." I paused, edged around a fireflower bed, fell back into step with Jefrey. "We had dogs in the Army. I was a handler. That good enough for you?"

Jefrey turned. "A handler? You?"

"Fifth regiment, eight brigade, out of Fort Armistead," I replied. "Six years, one after the Truce."

Jefrey cocked his head. "Didn't they use dogs to sniff out Troll tunnels?"

I nodded. "We did," I said, and Thufe looked up and licked my hand. "Don't ask."

Jefrey shrugged. By then, we were close enough to get on the sidewalk. The widow shouted once more, something about meeting us at the back, and the big door shut.

"Abad's a gambler," said Jefrey. "Diced away his inheritance in two years flat."

"What's he playing with now?" I asked.

"The widow's money," he said, ruffing the big male Hort's neck-mane. "He borrows against the Merlat name, pisses it all away and then they show up. She always pays," said Jefrey. "Ought to be"

'em gut the rat-faced little bastard.”

We neared the corner. “What about the other brother?” I asked. “Arthur, isn’t it?”

“Othur,” said Jeffrey, and he spat after pronouncing the word. “Weed.”

I nodded. “How long?”

“Long as I can recall, it seems,” said Jeffrey. He was looking about now, checking windows and doors to see if the widow’s shadow fell across any of them. “Took to it when the old master left for the War. Ain’t much left of Othur now, ’cept when he’s running low. Then he gets mean. He’s the reason I lock my door at night, Markhat. Them others is bad enough—but I reckon they’re too lazy to cut a poor man’s throat for a handful of copper jerks. Othur, though—he’d kill you just to wait a day and snatch the coppers off your eyes, you mark my words.”

I nodded, kept my mouth shut. Jeffrey was getting nervous, and though I wanted to ask about the daughter again, I didn’t want to put Jeffrey on the spot with the widow.

We neared the kennels, and the dogs yipped and trotted. Jeffrey wrestled open the top of a barrel and began to scoop out pellets of dog food.

“Here you go, you monsters,” he said, moving toward the line of bowls just inside the fence. “You done good, you did. Eat it up!”

I put my hands in the dog food, savored the smell. It was the same dry feed I’d used in the Army and I hadn’t seen it since.

Jeffrey finished feeding, shut the kennel gate. “We’ll let ‘em out at dark,” he said. Then he wiped his hands on his pants, grinned crookedly at me and held out his hand to shake.

“I reckon any man that can rub Thufe’s belly has a hand worth shaking,” he said.

I shook. Then he turned away and stomped toward the kitchen, the dogs barked their goodbyes and I followed him out of the sunlight.

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## Chapter Three

“We dress for dinner at this House,” said the Widow Merlat. She rose when she said it, and the glare she turned on Othur would have sent a normal man back at least a pair of steps.

But not Othur. He just slumped against the polished cherry door casing and turned a bleary half-smile back upon the widow.

“I am dressed, Mother,” he said. His voice was thick and wet, and he pronounced each word with the slow, elaborate care that makes weed-addicts think they’re speaking normally. “Dressed much better than him.” He’d raised a pale, thin hand and pointed at me.

Abad, seated across from me, snickered. Beside me, the daughter Elizabeth pretended to be furious and used the occasion as an excuse to reach down and give my knee a friendly squeeze.

“You will sit down,” said the widow, still standing. “And if you disgrace your father’s table again tonight, you shall find yourself sleeping on the street.”

Othur shrugged, ambled toward a chair. The widow followed him with her eyes. “That goes for all of you,” she said. “This man will ask you questions, after we dine. You will answer them. Know that if you insult, if you lie, I shall cast you out. Out of this house, out of the will, out of the Merlat name. Is that clear?”

She waited for nods, got grudging ones and sat.

And so we dined.

The dining room—one of three I’d found, this being the smallest—had floors of Saraway marble shot through with gold. The walls were paneled with cherry—one was hung with tapestries, one with weapons various Merlats had borne to battles diverse. One wall sported a mahogany and glass curio cabinet full of bric-a-brac and a door that led to a wine cellar.

The wall behind the widow, though, commanded my attention. Centered upon it was a portrait of Ebed Merlat himself. He was depicted as a tall, powerful man, dressed in cavalry officer’s blues, his helmet gone, his hair white and wild and flowing in a wind. He held up a sword at least a length and half too long to have ever been real, and the horse he was mounted upon would have been a freak were it truly that large.

But the effect worked. You didn’t see the soldiers in the background, or the fires, or the bulking forms of Trolls encircling them. All you saw was Ebed Merlat, his uplifted sword, his fierce blue eyes. I found it difficult to meet the painted man’s gaze.

He was probably four-foot-nine in real life, I decided. Four-foot-nine, balding, and the closest I ever got to a horse like that was watching the painter sketch it out.

The widow was seated at the head of the table, directly under the watchful glare of the painted Ebed. I assumed she did this intentionally, and applauded her attention to detail.

The table was polished blackwood, the chairs high-backed, cushioned with red velvet and still about as comfortable as a stump. Over the table hung a lead-glass chandelier from which three dozen candles shone. The light should have been brighter, but the ceiling was a dark red tile, and the room just seemed to suck up the light.

Even so, I was able to get good looks at each of the Merlat children. Abad, who had arrived first for dinner, was nearly thirty. He was clean, at any rate, and his clothes were new and well-kept. He had his mother’s small sharp eyes and coal black hair and his father’s tall straight frame, but he’d missed

getting a chin of any sort from either of his parents. And while the Widow sat still and silent, Abad was a fidgeting, finger-drumming, fork-twirling mess of nervous habits. So far, though, the only attention he'd sent my way had been a glare that vanished as soon as I returned it.

The daughter, Elizabet, had shown up a few moments later. She'd dressed for dinner, too, though from the Widow's sharp intake of breath and slight paling of features I'd known that the Widow Merlat and her daughter had different ideas about dressing.

So did I, for that matter. Elizabet's bright red, over-the-shoulder, slit-up-the-thigh dress said loads about the wearer, and most of the messages had no place being sent in the presence of one's mother. She had slinked in slow, stopped in the doorway to speak to her mother and turned as she spoke so I could get the full view.

I'd gotten it. Long black hair done up in Old Empire curls that fell over her shoulders and cascaded down her back. Big brown eyes under lashes done up with just the right make-up for the room and the lighting. Legs in dark silk stockings treated with a powder that made them shimmer in the candlelight.

Her voice was low and husky, and when she repeated my name she smiled with her lips and let her eyes widen just a bit. Then she looked me over and kept smiling, as though she'd just found something she'd been looking for all day.

I let her think she had me hooked, even going so far as to pour her a glass of middling good wine. The widow watched, glaring and hawklike, and once just before Jeffrey barged in with a serving cart, I saw Elizabet give Abad a quick look of triumph.

Jefrey served, moving from plate to plate and filling each with food from within his steaming pans. We had duck with bread stuffing, mashed potatoes and something Jeffrey called *jelad caromead* that turned out to be a three-bean salad and a slice of ham. It wasn't bad, either; I made sure to ask Lady Merlat to compliment the cook, though we both knew that either she or Jeffrey had cooked it all.

Abad choked his down and demanded seconds and thirds. Othur pushed his around without even lifting his fork, drank five glasses of wine and slipped a solid-silver serving knife up his sleeve when he thought no one was watching. Elizabet, like Othur, merely toyed with her food, though she did manage to eat a few beans and most of the ham slice.

The widow's plate sat untouched. The meal was quick, with the only conversation being of the pass-the-salt variety. Finally, the widow rang a tiny silver bell, and Jeffrey rolled his cart back in and began collecting plates.

"Now we talk," said the widow, as Jeffrey scooped up my plate.

"Fine, Mother," snapped Abad. "And what are we to talk to this gentleman about?"

He said "gentleman" with a sneer.

"Do you remember what I said, Abad? About insult?" said the widow.

Before he could answer, I spoke. "I'm here to find out who—or what—has been frightening your mother," I said. "To that end, I need to ask some questions."

"Go ahead," purred Elizabet. "We all want to help Mother, I'm sure. Don't we?"

The brothers Merlat issued a weak round of yeses. Elizabet beamed and turned toward me.

"Do me first," she said.

Jefrey threw a handful of forks into a metal pan, but I ignored him.

"Fine," I said. "Tell me, then. Have you seen your father's shade?"

"Oh, yes," she said, and she drew her arms across her breast and huddled closer to me. "More than once."

"How many times?" I asked. "And when?"

She bit her lower lip. "The first time was—oh, three months ago," she said. "I'd come home for a few days, to visit Mother, and the dogs began to bark, and the footmen were shouting. So I opened m

window—I was in my room, on the fourth floor—and looked down, and there was Father, standing there, looking back up at me.”

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“What was he wearing?” I asked.

She frowned. “Shrouds,” she said. “Grey, gauzy shrouds. He had grave-mold all over his face—on Mother, I’m so sorry, but he did.”

“And you’re sure it was your father?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “It was him,” she said. “His ghost, I’m sure of it.”

“And you’ve seen him since.”

She counted on her fingers. “Three times,” she said.

“When?” I asked. “I need dates. If you can’t recall the exact day, that’s fine, but the nearer you can narrow it down, the better I can help your mother.”

She struggled, came up with four dates, one of which was a maybe, but close—within a couple of days.

“All right,” I said. “One more thing. You know the revenant stories, that they come back to take vengeance on their killers. Tell me, then—why is Ebed Merlat coming back here?”

At that, Elizabeth shrugged. “They’re only silly old wives’ tales,” she said. “Surely you don’t believe such nonsense.”

“I don’t believe—or disbelieve—in anything yet,” I said. “I’m only asking you a question—why do you think your father would come back?”

She looked away. “I’m sure I have no idea,” she said. “That’s your job, isn’t it? To find that out?”

I shrugged. “If that’s what it takes, Miss Merlat, that’s what I’ll do.”

She drained her wineglass, and I’d moved on to question Othur and Abad.

Neither was helpful. Othur spent so much time “away”, as he called it, that he had neither seen nor heard anything. And Abad grudgingly admitted that he’d been home on two of the occasions that an apparition was seen, though he wouldn’t claim it had been his father. He gave me dates for both days, said he didn’t know what might drive his father out of his grave and retired early, Othur at his heels.

Elizabeth soon took her leave as well. “Good night,” she’d said to me, more in promise than farewell. Then she’d sauntered away, sure I was watching her go every languid step of the way.

Jefrey came banging back in. He held a covered plate in his hand, which he took to the widow. “I see you didn’t touch a bite,” he said, plunking the plate down and removing the cloth. “You got to eat, Lady Merlat.”

On the plate was a grilled cheese sandwich and a thick dark slice of chocolate cake.

The widow sighed. “Thank you, Jefrey,” she said. Jefrey stood there and watched until she picked up the grilled cheese and took a bite. Then he left, collecting a few wineglasses and pausing to look at me with a “Well, what?” expression.

I shrugged in return. I’d gotten nothing, except the firm conviction that everyone but Othur was lying.

Elizabeth’s revenant wore shrouds. The widow’s wore a burial suit. Abad’s ghost had mad red eyes and a bloody white shirt, and it screamed out the widow’s name.

Othur wasn’t lying only because he probably saw legions of revenants every night, and forgot them all with his first puff of weed in the morning. We could parade dancing Trolls past his bed, and get nothing out of him the next day but pouts and slurred insults.

I looked up at Lord Merlat’s blood-and-thunder portrait and propped my chin on my hands. *What about it, Old Bones?* I thought. *What are you up to, and why?*

The widow put down her fork, tinkle of silver on china. “Well?” she said.

I sighed. Lord Merlat’s eyes, mere dabs of paint and shadow, bore into mine.

“About what I expected,” I said. “They’re claiming to have seen something they haven’t, unless

your visitor has a more extensive wardrobe than the spooks in the stories usually have.” I lifted a hand when the widow puffed up.

“Ignore me, Lady,” I said. “I do have a few questions for you, though.”

“Ask.”

I rose, stretched, pushed back my chair. “I’m going to take two angles on this, Lady,” I said. “First I’m going to assume that someone is dressing up in grave-clothes and taking strolls in your yard.”

“Nonsense,” said the Lady.

“Maybe,” I replied. “I’ll also entertain the notion that your husband really has returned. I’m just telling you it’s a distant second.”

“It is the truth.”

I prowled about the ornate display cases, which seemed to favor china plates and silver teapots.

“Either way,” I said, “I’ve got to work backward from your visitor in the night to the root of the problem.” I turned to face the widow. “Why would someone want to frighten you, Lady?”

“I am not frightened,” she snapped.

“Why would someone want to make you think your husband needs vengeance before he can rest?” I said. The widow’s eyes went narrow and cold. A pair of blue veins popped out on her powdered forehead.

“I do not know,” she said, snapping out each word as though she could make it hurt me.

I met her eyes, held it. She blinked first, and looked away.

I sighed. “All right,” I said. “You’ve got trouble, never mind what kind. The best kind of trouble never comes cheap. So tell me this, Lady Merlat. Are you having money problems?”

She met my eyes, glared.

“House Merlat is hardly reduced to paupery,” she said.

I shrugged. “Fine,” I said. “Wonderful. Are you causing anyone money problems?”

She swallowed, closed her eyes briefly, spoke.

“My husband invested well,” she said. “Aside from our banked assets, we receive a quarterly sum from various investing firms.” She swallowed again. “The funds are generated by careful, discrete investing. We engage in nothing rapacious. I tell you, goodman, money is not the issue here.”

“What about your will, Lady?” I asked. “How do the kids figure into that?”

Pay dirt. I saw it on her face. Her face went red, her knuckles white, before she dropped her hand into her lap.

“You said I’d get answers,” I reminded her. “I need this one, too.”

“The children will be provided for,” she whispered, after sending a furtive glance around the room. I noticed she let her gaze linger at the bottom of both doors, just to see if feet might be lurking quiet beyond. “They will not have full access to the Merlat fortune. But they will not starve.”

I considered my words. “Do they know this?”

“They do not,” she whispered. “I will present the official revision at court next week.”

“Next week.”

“Surely you do not think—”

“I don’t think anything yet,” I said, cutting her off when her voice threatened to rise above a whisper. “But I need to know these things, Lady. It may be relevant, it may not. But I still need to know.” I paused. Jeffrey’s footfalls passed by the door, continued down the hall and were swallowed up by the dark empty House.

“You’re sure the kids don’t know?” I asked again. She flushed further, glared.

“I am not a fool,” she said. “Nor am I so blind that I cannot see what they have become. They will be able to keep up a pretense of wealth after I am gone—but they shall have no access to the bulk of my husband’s fortune, nor the house, nor the investments. I will not see them loot what it took us

lifetime to amass.”

“And Jeffrey?” I asked. “What does he get?”

The widow swallowed. “Half a million crowns,” she said. “A year.”

I whistled.

“He is impertinent, rude and uncultured,” said the Lady. “But he has remained. Through it all. I cannot say that for anyone else.”

I nodded. I tried to picture Jeffrey in the role of scheming frightener of old women and failed. Thufe would smell it in his heart and bite his head off.

What I could see, though, was that secrets rarely stay secret. The widow might not tell—but someone drew up the new will, someone else witnessed it and someone else filed the appeal for revision with the Court in an act that would need to be witnessed by another half-dozen Court functionaries. A dozen people probably knew. It would only take one of them to talk.

How that would bring about a charade involving revenants, I couldn't say. But I couldn't get the idea out of my head, either. That much money, a gambler, a weed-addict—I didn't need Mama's cards to see something nasty was inevitable.

“You are wrong,” said Lady Merlat, reading my face. “Money has nothing to do with this. My husband did not come back from the dead to engage in a petty squabble over the terms of a will.”

“I'd hardly call it a petty squabble, Lady,” I said. “And you've got to consider my point of view—that your husband isn't out there at all. But someone is, and we need to figure out who.”

“I saw Ebed,” she said. “I tell you it was him!”

“Then tell me why he came,” I said. “What brought him back? What is this vengeance he needs and why has it brought him back to you?”

She stood, and the look in her eyes matched that of her husband in the portrait. “I don't know. Her voice rang off the tiles. “He died of a fever. What vengeance shall he take? Upon whom shall I visit it?” Her eyes flashed, but she bit her lip and I could tell she was glad she wasn't facing her late husband's portrait.

“I don't know, Lady,” I said. “Not yet.”

The widow sat. “Find a way,” she said, her jaw clenched tight. “Mistress Hog said you could put him to rest. She said you would find a way.”

I stood, backed away from the table. “You really ought to eat something, Lady Merlat,” I said. “And get some sleep, too. I'll be watching tonight.”

She shook her head. “Put him to rest,” she said. Her eyes were wet, and she clenched her jaw tighter to keep it from quivering. “Please.”

I backed out of there, Ebed Merlat glaring down at me every step of the way.

Jeffrey and I took up residence in the Gold Room, so called because the wall and door trim were covered with a small fortune in gold leaf that had begun to peel at all the corners. We shoved furniture around until we wound up with a pair of chairs against the wall opposite the room's three windows.

Jeffrey sat. “Well,” he said. “I reckon you'll see something tonight.”

I sat. “Why do you say that?”

“They're all here,” he said. He lowered his voice. “The kids. I reckon it's one—or all—of them that the old Master has come back to get.”

I frowned. “I thought you didn't believe,” I said.

“I never said that,” he said. “I never did. I just never said I believed in front of Lady Merlat.”

“So what have you seen, Jeffrey?” I asked.

Jeffrey shrugged. “Not a damn thing,” he said. “Not even when Harl and the widow and that fool butler Ichabod was pointin' and wavin'. I can't see it, Markhat.” Jeffrey shook his head, and his voice

fell to a whisper. "But that don't mean he ain't there."

I stared out across the lawn. Even with dusk lingering, I could barely make out the shapes of the trees and the statues through the window-glass. Three-bolt glass, I think it was called, meaning it was so thick you'd need to shoot it three times with a crossbow before it shattered. Old Bones could be out there dancing with the angels, I thought, but unless he was carrying a pair of torches, I'd never see him.

"Why do you think it's the kids he's after?" I said.

"They're always here when he comes," said Jeffrey. "Always, at least one of 'em."

I turned in my chair, recalled the notes of dates I'd made. According to the widow, the revenant had walked several times when the kids were away.

"Hold on," I said. "That's not what I heard."

"Don't care what you heard," said Jeffrey. "They were here, every time. You think the widow always knows what that bunch is up to? You think they don't come here to hide or stash weed or defile the Master's house whenever they take a whim?" Jeffrey snorted. "They come and go as they please," he said. "But the dogs know. Oh yes, they do." Jeffrey snickered. "Dogs was trained not to raise ruckus at the kids, early on," he said. "Bet I could train 'em to forget that. Love to see them bastards try sweet-talk Thufe."

I rose, started pacing. If someone walked the grounds only when the Merlat heirs were around, there was bound to be a reason.

"Tell me about Master Merlat's last days," I said.

"Ask the Lady," said Jeffrey.

"I'd rather hear it from you," I said. "The Lady seems disinclined to discuss it."

Jeffrey shrugged. "I reckon she does," he said. "He caught fever."

"I heard."

"Something out of them swamps down south," said Jeffrey. "Turned his insides into sores. Open sores in his mouth. In his nose. Ruined his eyes. His ears, too, I reckon. Got all down his throat. He tried to talk and cough up puss and blood."

I'd heard of it. Wet fever, it was called. Rare, and not contagious, but so nasty a fear of it lingers to this day. I wasn't surprised the widow hadn't named it.

"Wet fever."

Jeffrey nodded. "Worst thing I ever seen," he said. "Tried to help out. The smell—god, the smell. He shook his head. "She never left him, though. Never did." His gaze went up to the ceiling. "Sickroom is right above us. Door's locked now. I think she buried the key with him."

An odd custom, the death-room key burial. But not an uncommon one, though I hadn't figured the Merlats as Reformists. I nodded. "And the kids?"

Jeffrey snorted. "Didn't show 'til the funeral," he said. "Othur fell out during the service. Aba asked his mother for a loan. The girl had a screaming fight with her man of the week." He would've spat, but he eyed the polished oak floor, had to swallow instead. "Bastards."

"You say she never left him."

"Not once," he said, and his wrinkled face softened. "She loved him, Markhat. You mark that. I don't know nothing about vengeance or haints or what-not, but she loved that man and he loved her, and if he's come back looking for trouble it ain't with the Lady."

I knew when not to speak.

Instead, I watched the light fail. Jeffrey rose, lit more lamps, then sat with his shiny black walking stick across his bony knees.

"So what's the plan?" he said after a time. "You just gonna walk outside and grab him when he shows?"



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