

A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark hat and a dark, open-collared shirt, is shown from the chest up. He is looking slightly to the right. The background is a stone building with several arched windows and a red door. In the foreground, a human skull is visible on the ground.

Frank Tuttle

THE

BANSHEE'S
WALK

Dedication

To Mom, with love.

Chapter One

If you're a finder, you never know who might next knock at your door. People are always losing something—husbands or wives, sisters or sons. Faith or hope. Trust or money.

If you're a finder named Markhat, well, then you're me, and you know exactly what I mean.

It was barely sunup, and it was hot. Hot days in Rannit raise a mighty stink from the Regent's new sewers, and since half the damned ogres this side of the Divide haul their manure carts past my door, I get a double dose of stink 'til sundown.

I resolved to just start walking north and not stop until my boots sank in fresh snow when someone started pounding at my door.

You can tell a lot about a person by the way they knock. Women usually don't do more than tap. A woman with husband troubles tend to dart up and tap twice and then turn and scurry away, as if they weren't in any way associated with my door and its painted finder's eye. Heavens no, I was just standing here waiting to cross the street.

But this was a man's knock. Knock, knock, knock. Good and loud, with a pause to listen, followed by another fusillade of determined thrice-struck knocks.

I swung my feet off my desk, and Three-leg Cat scurried for the back. I got up and opened my door to trouble.

"You hight Markhat," she said. Her words lay halfway between a question and an accusation.

I ogled.

I'm never at my best before noon.

"Well, 'ere you Markhat or ain't you?"

"I am indeed," I replied. I motioned her in, which was wasted because she was already stomping inside, her big blue eyes taking in my office and me and showing every sign of finding us an immediate and sore disappointment.

"Mama said you was a man to be reckoned with." She spoke the words as if the statement invited spirited debate. "But I reckon she ought to know."

She was tall. Easily as tall as me. Clad in long skirts and a high-necked, long-sleeved smock made of a coarse plain cloth with all the femininity of old burlap, if less of the comfort. The smock was belted, none too tightly, at the waist with what looked suspiciously like a length of tattered bell-pull rope. The toes of the scuffed country boots that peeped out from beneath her skirts reminded me of Army issue doggers and a second glance revealed that's exactly what they were.

I decided she was what doting aunts tend to refer to as big-boned. Her hands, which she kept crossed over her bosom, lest, I suppose, I have a look, were large and showed evidence of hard work.

Her hair was a pleasant surprise. I imagined the tight severe bun, if released, would reveal the kind of pale gold tresses even Elves get envious over.

Her jaw was strong, her teeth were good, her nose was—
Oh Hell. Her nose, her eyes—

“Are you by any chance related to—?”

I never finished my sentence.

“I hight Gertriss.” She damned near did a clumsy little curtsy, thought better of it and dipped her head instead. “Missus Hog is my mother’s eldest sister.”

I remembered my manners, made a small bow and motioned Gertriss, daughter of Mama Hog’s eldest sister, to my chair.

“Any niece of Mama’s is welcome here, anytime,” I said. I meant it too. Already, I was thinking, *poor kid, first time in the city, must be so lost and alone...*

Like I said, I’m just not at my best in the mornings. That little voice wasn’t even awake yet—the one that should have not only raised red flags when Mama’s name came up, but set them afire and waved them under my nose.

So all I did was smile and ask “What brings you to Rannit, Miss Gertriss?”

Gertriss smiled. She had a good smile. I figured her for twenty, maybe a few years older, not much.

“I’m ready to get started, Mister Markhat.”

That little voice inside me woke up then and started screaming bloody murder.

“Started?” My smile froze on my big dumb face. “Started?”

Mama, you scheming, conniving old witch...

Gertriss nodded, eyed my office, sniffed and wrinkled her sun burnt country nose at a lingering odor Three-leg Cat must have left behind.

“Reckon where I’ll sit?”

“Mama!” I said, in a loud, dry whisper. “I know damned well you’re in there. Open this door right now.”

I banged Mama’s door once, just for emphasis.

I heard cussing and rattling inside, and then Mama’s bolt threw and she opened her door, just a crack.

At least she had the courtesy to keep her beady little Hog eyes on the dirty street below.

“Now, calm down, boy, it ain’t like you can’t use the help.”

“Help? Help?” I nodded back toward my place and glared, not wanting to discuss Gertriss where she might hear. “Open up, Mama. We really need to talk. Now.”

Mama grumbled, but unfastened half a dozen useless door-strings and finally ushered me inside.

Mama’s card and potion shop is a bit larger than mine, a hell of a lot more cluttered. Three-leg Cat and fifty of his rat-gobbling pals could break wind for a solid hour in my place and the stench still wouldn’t come anywhere close to matching the odors wafting from Mama’s two bubbling iron cauldrons. Mama can deny it all she wants, but I’m dead certain the lack of rats on our end of Cambrit Street is largely due to Mama’s ever-present concoctions and the pungent vapors thereof.

If Mama’s shop is a hovel, Mama fits right in. She’s every witch-woman cliché ever spoken, stitched together, peppered with warts, covered in a mane of wild white hair, given two teeth, and turned loose with a taxidermist’s cast-offs and a finely-honed

cackle.

Right now, she was shuffling and hunched, putting on a doddering old lady act I knew was a lie. Mama had been among those who faced down a halfdead blood cult a few months back. Word was she'd taken down a furious halfdead on her own, with nothing but a meat cleaver and a bloody-minded resolve that impressed even the ogres at her side.

I turned Mama's single rickety chair around and sat hard.

"Mama," I said. "You've pulled some real stunts, but this—"

Mama raised a hand. "I meant to tell you sooner, boy. I swear I did."

"Tell me?" I stared up at the ceiling. Soot-covered sigils and signs stared back.

"Mama. I am the Finder Markhat, of the firm Finder Markhat. That is my business, my livelihood, my butt on the line—you don't get to tell me squat."

"Ask, ask, I meant ask, boy." Mama shook her head. "When you gets to be my age, boy, sometimes things gets confused, slips your mind..."

I made a rude noise, and I swear some of the dried birds in their dusty jars turned to face me.

"The only thing wrong with your mind, Mama, is that you let it do the thinking for other people," I said. "Me, mainly. Now Gertriss is a sweetheart, and a rare fine girl, I'm sure, but what makes you think she can just step out into the street and be a finder? What makes you think I can afford to pay her, or watch her, or..."

A sudden awful thought blossomed.

"Mama. You aren't trying to marry her off, are you?"

Mama's eyes went cold and bright.

"You listen here, boy," she said. "I ain't thinkin' no such thing, you hear? No such damnfool thing. I sent her to you 'cause she needs to learn city folk and their ways. She needs to know what makes 'em act the ways they do, if she's goin' to take over for me one day."

I frowned. Mama sounded sincere. But...

"If you want her to take over here, what's that got to do with me? I can't show her how to shove bats in a pot."

Mama snuffled. "I can teach anybody to make potions and read the cards, boy. But that ain't all of it. That there girl needs to know how to look past what people are sayin', and see what they mean, what they wants, what they *needs*. And not just any people. These here people."

"Mama. What I do. It isn't always safe. You know that. Better than anybody."

Mama nodded. "You think what I do is safe, boy?"

"Aside from the risk of succumbing to the smell, I do. You get bad paper cuts from those cards, sometimes?"

"I ought to hex that mouth of yours one day, boy." She picked up her favorite dried owl and shook it menacingly at me, an effect largely ruined by the number of feathers it shed. "Ought to hex it good."

A knock came at Mama's door.

I knew the knock, so I opened it, while Mama stroked her mummified owl and glared at me.

Gertriss poked her head in, frowning.

"Mister Markhat?" she said, eyeing Mama's grim demeanor. "There's a woman

down to your office. She's got some troubles, so I come to fetch you, seein' as how she didn't want to wait."

Gertriss looked me in the eye. She smiled. It was a big, good-hearted, smile, wide as a country lane, free of guile or artifice. It was a rare kind of smile, innocent and fragile, and easily, permanently slain.

I rose. "Thank you, Gertriss. We'd best get back then. We finders don't like to waste a client's valuable time."

Mama grinned at me, triumphant.

"I'll have ham and biscuits later," she said. "If'n y'all finders have the time."

I closed the door softly behind me and made a solemn vow to march toward the snowy distant north at the very first opportunity.

Chapter Two

“So who’s the client?” I said, as we marched toward my door.

Gertriss frowned. “Said her name is Lady Erlorne Werewilk,” matching my own low tones. “I reckon I ain’t no expert on city folk, Mister Markhat, but she seems a might...diff’rent.”

I chuckled. “Gertriss, there’s one thing you’ll need to learn fast, about Rannit.” We got to my door, and we stopped, and I leaned close and whispered in her ear, “We’re all a bit diff’rent here.”

I opened my door, and motioned Gertriss inside.

The Lady Erlorne Werewilk was already standing. Posed in my corner, so that the light from my bubbly glass door slanted down across her. I like a woman with a sense of drama. Especially a woman with a sense of drama who can manage to suggest all manner of things merely by leaning against my none-too-clean office walls.

“You must be the famous Markhat,” she said. Then she took a long inhalation from the tobacco stick she was smoking while she looked me straight in the eye.

“I wouldn’t have used the word famous,” I said. “But since you did I’ll be polite and agree. You are Lady Erlorne Werewilk?”

Another drag of her smokestick, another practiced exhalation. The smoke wandered lazily in the still air. At least it masked the scent of Three-leg Cat’s most recent digestive adventures.

“Have a seat, Lady Werewilk,” I said, motioning her to my famous client’s chair. I crossed behind my desk and in a stunning display of old world manners waited for Lady Werewilk to be seated before I did so myself.

Gertriss shot me a look, and I folded my fingertips together and nodded toward her as if we’d done this same thing a thousand times.

“Gertriss, bring us tea, and an empty saucer for the Lady’s ashes, please,” I said.

Gertriss nodded and stamped out to Mama’s.

Lady Werewilk turned her face to avoid blowing smoke my way.

She had a good face. Not so young as to be girlish, not so old as to remind one of grandmothers or matrons. Her eyes were the grey of boiling summer thunderheads. Her nose was long and just sharp enough to hint at a pixie or two in her ancestry. Her teeth were straight and white, and her skin was pale, but not cadaverously so. She wore a clingy high-necked black dress that reached from her soles to the top of her neck. Lady Werewilk was made for that dress, or maybe it was the other way around, but in either case her slim figure made the visual journey downright epic. Her black-veiled hat, which managed to obscure her eyes, added a hint of well-coiffed mystery.

Her flair for the dramatic extended to her makeup. Darla has taught me a thing or two about the female arts of cosmetic deception, as she calls them, and if Darla was an expert, Lady Werewilk was an artiste. Big soft eyes, high cheekbones, the almost Elvish nose—I stared until she caught me looking and then I smiled.

“I’m rendered speechless, Lady Werewilk,” I said. “But I’m sure you didn’t come

all the way to Cambrit Street just to show off your good dress. What can I find for you?”

She blew smoke and lifted a narrow black eyebrow. “Peace of mind, Mister Markhat. I believe someone intends to steal my house from me. This I will not have.”

I nodded. “Good for you.” I opened my desk, pulled out the new yellow-paper notepad Darla had given me just yesterday, and found one of the perfectly sharpened pencils Darla had left right next to the pad. “Tell me about your house, Lady. You’ll forgive me if I’m unfamiliar with your family name.”

She nodded. “Few people know of Werewilk. I prefer it that way. The house is located in the Wardmoor district, south of the old wall. I believe the locals call my neighborhood the Banshee’s Walk.”

I nodded. I knew of it, though it had been years since I’d passed that way. A few old fortified manor houses were all that remained. Each stood outside Rannit’s Middle Kingdom walls. Half the old homes were abandoned, the others lost in woods and treacherous roads and bridges that the country folk often quarried for their granite stones when the Watch wasn’t looking.

Rannit had moved up and away from Wardmoor, even before the War. The big farms were north and west. The new reservoir was east. The only roads I knew of that went south were logging roads, and even those were seldom used, since it was easier to float timber down the Brown than it was to haul it through the woods and the mud.

“I run the House now,” said Lady Werewilk. “I’ve made it an artist’s colony. I house thirty-five of Rannit’s most talented painters and sculptors. One day their works will be known as the single most important body of work since the end of the War.”

I nodded, as if that was of course a widely known fact.

“Do you know of anyone who might wish a different direction for the House, Lady?”

Lady Werewilk frowned. “I do not, Mr. Markhat,” she said. The ashes at the end of her tobacco stick were getting dangerously long, and I hoped Gertriss was hurrying.

“You have family?”

She nodded and inhaled. “I have a brother. Milton. Our parents are long dead, no aunts, no uncles, no distant cousins, no one left. And Milton—well, Mr. Markhat, Milton is simply incapable of plotting to seize the House.”

“We’re very relaxed here, Lady Werewilk,” I said. “I’ll sweep the floor later.”

She thumped her smoke stick, and the ashes fell, and she used those few moments to gather her words. I pretended to scribble notes and gave her some time. No one, rich or poor, likes to be rushed when showing the family skeletons to tradesmen.

“Milton served in the War,” she said. “When he came back, he was...changed.”

I nodded. Some called them changed. Others called them the Broken. You see them all over Rannit, slumped and silent and vacant-eyed, still fighting their own dark battles years after the last bugle sounded. “I served too,” I said. “And I saw a lot of changed men, Lady. I understand.”

She smiled at me, for the first time. It was brief, but bright.

“Milton is not insane,” she said. Her smile vanished. “He is not—what do they call it? Broken. But he has retreated. Into a world of his own making. He has no interest in the House, or anything else, for that matter. He would no longer eat, if I didn’t have Singh sit him down twice a day and force him to chew and swallow.”

“Singh?”

“Butler,” said Lady Werewilk. “He’s been with us for forty years. He amassed a small fortune himself, during the War. His loyalty is without question.”

I nodded as though I agreed, although questioning unimpeachable loyalties is often what I’m paid to do.

Gertriss knocked once and then came bustling in, balancing a tea tray carefully in one hand. On it, a silver teapot gleamed, and I wondered just where Mama kept her good china.

“Lady Werewilk was just telling me about her House, Gertriss. She has reason to believe someone might want to remove it from her control.”

Gertriss, bless her, just nodded and set about pouring tea.

“Go on, Lady Werewilk,” I said. “So you have thirty-five artists, Singh the butler and your brother Milton. Who else?”

“A staff of ten, not counting Singh.” She took a dainty sip of her tea, her grey eyes intent on Gertriss, who blushed. “Forgive me,” said Lady Werewilk, to Gertriss. “But you, young lady, have a unique look. I believe some of my artists would be fascinated by you, those skin-tones...that face. Would you be interested in posing at Werewilk, dear? There would be no pay, of course, but I believe some of our works are destined to be masterpieces.”

Gertriss wrinkled her brow. “Me, my Lady? Pose for a picture painter? Why, I wouldn’t even know what to wear.”

“You’d wear nothing, of course. We are interested in the nude human form, not any passing fad of fashion.”

“Gertriss, I need more sugar,” I said quickly. “I’m sure Mama has some, will you see?”

I was relieved that Gertriss didn’t slam the door on her way out.

Lady Werewilk laughed. “Oh dear,” she said. “I’ve ruffled some feathers, have I not?”

I nodded and made a rueful face. “This is her first day in Rannit,” I said. “And I’m sure it’s also the first time she’s ever been asked to be painted in the nude. It may even be the first time she’s ever heard the word nude spoken aloud.”

Lady Werewilk stubbed out the remains of her smoke stick on the saucer left by my fleeing Gertriss. “Pity,” she said. “Most of the models I get are stick-thin rich men’s daughters who starve themselves because they think it looks Elvish. She has a certain earthy appeal, your Miss Gertriss. Tell her the offer still stands, should she change her mind.”

“I’ll do that, Lady Werewilk.” I leaned back in my chair and did my best to appear studious. “Now, tell me about your staff. All of them. Start with the most recent ones hired and work backwards.”

Lady Werewilk nodded, lit another smokestick with one of those newfangled red-tipped matches, and set about describing her household while smoke-wraiths swirled and danced.

Gertriss knocked.

“Come on in, Gertriss,” I said. “Lady Werewilk is gone.”

Gertriss, still blushing, stomped in.

“I’m sorry ’bout that,” said Gertriss. “I reckon I’ve got to get used to city folk and their ways, and turnin’ red and puffin’ up ain’t the way to handle it.”

I nodded, though I could almost hear Mama’s voice coaching Gertriss to say just that.

“You did fine. Lady Werewilk was unusual even by my standards.” I picked up the long thin birchwood stick that was lying on my desk and handed it to Gertriss. “Do you know what this is?”

She took it, eyed it gravely. “Looks like a surveyor’s marker,” she said.

I beamed. “That’s what it is. It doesn’t have a maker’s mark on it, so I don’t know who it belongs to, but it’s a surveyor’s stick. Lady Werewilk has been finding them all over her property for the last several weeks.” I motioned Gertriss into the client’s chair. “Nobody admits to planting them, or to knowing anything about them. What does that suggest to you, Gertriss?”

She wrinkled her brow. “Somebody wants her House or her land. Or at least part of it.”

“One thing a finder should never do is jump to conclusions.” Her big blue eyes fell, so I spoke again quickly. “But that’s what I’m going to assume too, at least until we find otherwise.”

She smiled and put the stick down. “She got brothers, sisters, cousins?”

“One brother,” I replied. “He came back from the War broken. She doesn’t believe he is capable of dressing or feeding himself, much less snatching the House out from under her. We’ll assume that’s true too, at least until we meet him in person.”

She brightened at that. “I’ll be goin’ with you, Mister Markhat?”

I nodded. “You won’t be much use to me sitting here. But I have conditions, Miss. First, you stay quiet as much as possible, but you listen.”

She bit her bottom lip and nodded.

“Next, while you listen to what people say, watch what they do. Watch where they go. Watch who they talk to or don’t talk to. Sometimes that tells you more than their words ever do.”

Again, a nod. I chuckled inwardly.

“Oh, and Miss Gertriss. No posing nude while you’re on my payroll.”

Finally, she laughed, and her eyes twinkled.

“I weren’t plannin’ on no naked shenanigans. On your pay or off it.”

“Good girl,” I replied. “Now here’s the plan. We head south tomorrow, first light. We’ll be staying at the House until we find our mystery surveyor or until Lady Werewilk gets tired of paying us, whichever comes first. As junior member of the firm Finder Markhat you get one of every five crowns we’re paid. Do good, and the next case might get you one and a half. Is that a deal?”

She went wide-eyed. I guess by backwoods standards a crown was a small fortune. In Rannit, she’d learn soon enough, it was somewhat less than that.

I held out my hand. She took it, shook it, and the Finder Markhat agency officially doubled its staff.

I let her take a breath.

“All that means we’ve got some things to do today,” I said. “We want to blend in, Gertriss. We want people to forget who we are and where we are, as much and as often as possible. And that means we’ve got to get you into some city clothes, before we

go.”

She blushed again, and her right hand instinctively caught at the rough unsewn hem of her coarse handmade blouse.

I raised a hand before she could protest.

“I have a lady friend who will handle all the personal attention,” I said. “And don’t worry about the cost. One thing Darla has is plenty of clothes and a soft spot for young ladies dressed in burlap.”

“But, Mister Markhat, Mama said I could borrow some of her old...”

I had a flash, saw Gertriss arrayed in moth-eaten rags four feet too short for her that trailed owl feathers when she walked.

I stood up. “I am the boss, am I not, Gertriss?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then here’s another condition. No wearing anything Mama gives you. Ever. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

I smiled, rose, nodded for her to do the same.

“Glad that’s settled,” I said. “Let’s go meet Darla. I’ll tell you about House Werewilk on the way.”

Gertriss rose. I guessed she was still none too sure about dressing in lewd, lascivious city garb but determined to hang onto her pay even at the cost of burlap-enforced modesty.

“Will we be walking or taking a cab, Mister Markhat?” she asked.

I thought about those Army-issue doggers she was wearing and the long hike to Darla’s and added the cost of a cab to my loss of every fifth crown and forced a big wide city fella smile.

“Why, a cab, of course,” I said, snatching my good grey hat off its peg and offering my arm to Gertriss. “We city folk never walk when we can ride in style.”

Gertriss looked at my proffered elbow in sincere puzzlement. “Somethin’ wrong with your arm, Mister Markhat?” she asked.

I laughed, and we made for the street.

It was a day of firsts for Gertriss. Her first ride in a cab, her first sight of ogres walking shoulder to shoulder with human folks, her first sight of red-clad street preachers and the bridge clowns on Cyrus and the short skirts and open solicitations of the whores that line the streets between Camus and Drade. And everywhere, of course, the ragged Broken, the nimble beggars, the ever-present cries of the whammy men and the clanging of distant foundry machines in the factories that line the south bank of the River.

I tried to fill Gertriss in on the Curfew and the dead wagons on the way. I explained about the Big Bell banging out Curfew every night, and how the halfdead were legally entitled to snack on anyone who wasn’t Watch or a marked city employee after Curfew. I explained about the dead wagons that stalked the streets each morning, and what caused that smoke that wafted from the tall crematorium chimneys along the Brown.

“Missus Hog claimed you broke Curfew all the time,” sputtered Gertriss, unable to tear her eyes away from the antics of the bridge clowns that paced our cab as we

crossed over the canal at Drade.

I shrugged. "I've had to break Curfew a few times," I said. A clown caught hold of the cab's window and capered along with us, gibbering and hooting at Gertriss until the cabbie landed a whack on the top of his head with a stout shaft of oak. "That doesn't mean you can do it. If you're ever caught out, and you hear that bell ring, you get indoors if you have to break in somewhere, you understand? The halfdead won't enter a business or a dwelling. That's the law. They don't break it." Because they don't have to, I added, mentally. The sad fact is that there is a more than sufficient supply of idiots and criminals. So many, in fact, that most Curfew-breakers never see a halfdead, much less wind up dead by one.

Gertriss nodded, still mesmerized by the capering clowns. "Too, I have this," I said. I produced the medallion Evis gave me, a while back—it marked me as a friend of House Avalante, and while that wasn't an iron-clad assurance of safety, it meant that anyone harming the wearer would face the wrath of a Dark House, and even other Dark Houses weren't usually that hungry.

The cab clattered along, and Gertriss drank it all in, gabbing happily along the way. I managed to learn that she'd been a farmhand back home, mainly dealin' with hogs. She reported she was the oldest of six sisters, and she had once seen a Troll in the woods taking a shit in a creek. Not exactly a sterling resume for becoming a street-wise finder. But there was an intelligence behind her countrified accent and naiveté, so I resolved to give her a chance. One chance, and no more, and if Mama took that hard that was just too bad.

We reached Darla's, and I paid the cabbie, and as Gertriss noted the fare she got her first taste of the high cost of living in the city.

I shrugged and grinned. "Welcome to Rannit," I said, pulling her quickly onto the sidewalk before a passing cab spun her out of the way.

She looked up and around, gawking openly at the wonders of three-story wood-front buildings and the glass windows that revealed everything from jewelry to clothing to fancy lamps for milady's tea room.

"This is Darla's," I said, easing her toward Darla's fancy oak and glass entry. "Darla is a friend of mine."

"More'n a friend, way I hear it," said Gertriss with a sly grin.

"It's a wonder Mama Hog ever gets any sooths said, the way she gossips," I noted. A bell on the door chimed, and Darla herself came darting out from the back, a long black gown twin to the one Lady Werewilk had been wearing in her hands.

"Darla dearest." I probably smiled. "I'd like you to meet someone."

Darla smiled back. She has a good smile. And big luminous brown eyes and short dark hair. She draped the gown over a mannequin and came quickly over to meet us.

"Miss Darla, this is Gertriss." Gertriss blushed and wondered what to do, until Darla stuck out her hand to shake. "Gertriss is Mama Hog's niece. She's come to Rannit to learn Mama's trade."

"Pleased to meet you," said Gertriss. "I'm working with Mister Markhat, for now."

Darla lifted a narrow brown eyebrow and tried to hide a grin. She'd sized up the whole morning's events faster than I could have explained them.

"We start our first case in the morning," I said. "Miss Gertriss needs some new clothes."

Darla nodded and took my hand and squeezed it. The twinkle in her eye said “And then she needs to burn all her old ones.”

“You know, I believe we have some casual day-wear that would fit without much alteration,” she said. She eyed Miss Gertriss critically, walking around her, while Gertriss blushed even deeper.

Darla didn’t start out as a dressmaker. But since she lost her job at the Velvet—my fault, I’m afraid—and was now co-owner of the dress shop with Martha Hoobin, she’d become quite a competent seamstress in her own right, as well as the book-keeper and general money manager.

“I’m thinking three new outfits, one new nightgown, two pairs of shoes, one pair of slippers, a bathrobe, a dressing gown, two pairs of lady’s trousers, four blouses, two hats and a coat,” said Darla, as she walked. “I’ll just add all that to your account, shall I, Mister Markhat?”

She grinned, full of sudden mischief.

I sighed. “Make it three hats,” I said. “No one’s ever accused me of being cheap.”

Darla laughed. “Three it is, then,” she said. “Now, Mister Markhat, if you’ll excuse us, I need to take some measurements, and we won’t need your services for that. Why don’t you go pester some vampires or tug at ogre beards for, say, two hours? Then you and I have a lunch date, if you’ll recall.”

I didn’t recall, but being a quick-thinking street-wise finder I merely nodded quickly.

“Back in two hours, then,” I said.

Darla stood on her tiptoes and planted an ambush kiss on my lips. Her perfume enveloped me, and I scandalized Gertriss by wrapping Darla up in my arms and kissing her back, maybe longer than propriety demanded.

“Not a minute longer than two hours,” she said, when she stepped back.

I nodded, breathed in more perfume, and headed out the door.

Chapter Three

I had two hours to kill. Ordinarily, I'd have headed to Eddie's for a beer, but that day, I decided to immerse myself in the heady, erudite world of Rannit's burgeoning art community.

My previous experience with art was limited to sneering at outdoor statues of War Hero This or General That, and cheering on the pigeons that managed to sum up my opinion of them perfectly, day after day.

My mother once found a case of mostly-empty paint jars and a pair of camelhair brushes, and she painted a surprisingly good portrait of my father with it, and even though she ran out of black before finishing his moustache and his right eye was a darker blue than his left, her painting hung above our mantel for all my childhood. That was the only fine art the Markhats had ever owned.

It's never a good idea to head into the heart of a mess that may well center around some walk of life you know nothing about. That worried me about the well-dressed Lady Werewilk's situation. I might be staring right at the obvious lynchpin of the whole thing, but because I don't know my red paints from my antebellum surrealists, I might not ever see it.

So I told the cabbie to head for Mount Cloud and ignored his snort of derision.

Mount Cloud isn't a street. It's a neighborhood, one I'd only passed through a few times. It's where the Regent's Museum had stood, until the fire in the opening years of the War had gutted it. Reconstruction had only just begun, and although the surviving pieces of Rannit's thousand-year art history were still safely tucked away somewhere in a deep, secret Regency subbasement, the neighborhood itself was lousy with galleries and art sellers of every description.

We clopped along. I tried to recall what little I'd ever known about art—it was once taught, here and there, before the War brought such frivolity to a halt—and decided I remembered only two things.

One was that bad old King Throfold had outlawed the depiction of bare-chested ladies in 1276. The other was that the worth of such paintings had tripled or quadrupled immediately thereafter, which resulted in a veritable flood of bare-chested ladies in paintings for two centuries thereafter.

I was never much of a student, but for some reason that stuck with me.

I grinned and wondered for the thousandth time if that hadn't been King Throfold's idea all along and then the cab pulled onto Cannon and I had arrived.

I tipped the cabbie and set foot along the cheery galleries and elegant cafes that lined the shaded streets.

I took in a few window-fronts as I walked. It seems art doesn't keep banker's hours, something I hadn't considered when I set out, and every gallery I passed was most unapologetically locked up tight.

But the windows were open, and the sun was out, so I could see what passed for art in Rannit these days well enough.

I wasn't impressed. Like old Throfold, I preferred my art to be pleasant to look at. What I saw, in window after window, was the War.

Heroic soldiers faced down slaving Trolls. Banners waved majestically in smoke-choked winds. The fires that ringed every battle only served to illuminate the fierce patriotic resolve that lined each soldier's face with courage.

I was there, people. It wasn't courage that kept us fighting. It was the simple lack of any other choice.

I fell into a damned march cadence without realizing it, and into a deep scowl when I did. Window after window revealed paintings of battles, sculptures of upraised swords, and tattered old regimental flags encased in glass and the like.

I did come to one conclusion. No veterans ever shopped these places.

They'd just not have the stomach for it.

I was about to hail a cab and head for Eddie's when I came upon a door propped open with a brick and a pair of workmen carefully easing a blanket-clad canvas into the place. Being an inquisitive fellow, I fell into step right behind them and became the day's first patron at Moorland Galleries, Established 1998.

"Where does this one go?" asked the nearest workman, of me.

"With the others, please," I replied. No need in prompting a fusillade of questions at this hour of the day, after all.

They grunted and made their way through a rear door, and I took a moment to browse.

General Stark on horseback, sword uplifted. The Battle of Three Gates, ringed by fire. The Charge at Impriss, wind blowing the majestic banners the wrong bloody way. And then something unexpected—the Fall of Right Lamb.

I was gritting my teeth and thinking inartistic thoughts when someone softly cleared his throat right beside me.

"One of my personal favorites," said a voice from below my shoulder. "It's a Kelson, as I'm sure you know. Only Kelson can do twilight with such foreboding, don't you think?"

I nodded. To me, it looked like someone had painted the awful thing using only three shades of dark bloody red and then blotted it liberally with lamp oil before leaving it out in the rain.

"Kelson is a master of subtle twilights," I said, sensing mention of lamp oil or rain might offend my new friend's delicate sensibilities. "Are you perhaps the proprietor?"

Laughter, mild and polite. "Goodness, no, sir. I am Steven, the manager. I wake before noon, you see."

I chuckled and turned, and we shook hands. It wasn't his fault the War was staring me back in the face from all sides.

"My name is Markhat." Steven was a short skinny man, pale and bookish, but he had a scar running all the way from the crown of his bald spot to his shoulder, and I had a feeling he didn't like these fine works of high art any better than I did. "You've got some interesting pieces here."

"Thank you, sir. Is there an artist you're interested in? We have quite a range of styles and techniques."

I nodded, tried to tear my eyes off the Fall of Right Lamb. I'd been there. I'd seen it. Hell, I'd nearly died there, half a dozen times in that awful last night.

“Actually, I’m wondering if you know of a Lady Erlorne Werewilk,” The faces fleeing the Trolls in the painting before me at once became familiar—there was Otter, there was Walking Paul, there was the Sarge, flailing away at Troll heads with his crossbow when the bolts ran out. “I hear her House has produced some interesting pieces of late.”

Steven who rose before noon looked suddenly and furtively about.

“I know something of her,” he replied, his voice a terse whisper. “The name is not known to me,” he then said, in a much louder voice tinged with disdain.

I nodded knowingly, and a pair of jerks made their way to my palm, and then quickly into his.

He motioned for me to follow, and I ambled away in his wake, happy to be rid of the Kelson and its unsubtle remembrances.

“Here we have a pair of remarkable Galways,” he said, in a loud stage voice. “She’s not exactly embraced by the bosom of Rannit’s art community,” he added, in a soft whisper. “She refuses to depict anything involving the War. That doesn’t follow in line with the galleries, or even the Regent’s Council of Art. Makes her a pariah, truth be told.”

“So is she able to sell anything?” I asked, whispering.

“Sir, one of her artists could smear manure on a soiled bed sheet and sell it for twice anything here. The galleries claim they don’t want her, but the truth is it’s Lady Werewilk who doesn’t need the galleries. One vet to another.”

I grinned, and another jerk appeared and just as quickly disappeared.

“I find his use of perspective somewhat disturbing,” I barked.

Steven made commiserating noises. We moved on, circling the gallery, and while Steven prattled on about this use of color or that sense of scale and perspective, I mused on more worldly matters.

Lady Werewilk’s House might lack political power or even the kind of wealth that might make the Hill crowd nervous, but she had certainly caused an uproar in Mount Cloud. And if her crowd was selling their paintings like deep-fried money, that had to be putting a crimp in the coffers of every gallery on the street.

Lady Werewilk hadn’t ever alluded to any such thing, and probably had never considered it. I doubted she thought of the money itself as anything but a way to keep track of whose art was lining the most walls.

We’d come full circle, and I found myself standing before the Kelson that depicted Right Lamb. I inquired about the price just to be polite.

Eight hundred and ninety-five crowns. That was an easy fifteen years of work for most of Rannit.

“None of that is right, you know,” I said, not caring who might hear. “There weren’t any mounted lancers left, by dusk. And even if there had been, no one ever convinced a horse to charge a line of Trolls at night.”

“Indeed, sir,” said Steven, with a small disgusted sniff.

But he pointed as he spoke. Bottom left of the painting, a tiny hillock, one burned oak tree atop it.

“I’m sorry you are not interested, sir,” he said. His eyes were grim. One Tree, they called it. Only six men out of two hundred left that hill alive.

“Maybe another day,” I said, and then I got out of there.

I guess I'll never understand art.

I ambled around Mount Cloud for another hour, and actually caught two more art shops open. I was shown out of both at the mere mention of Lady Werewilk's name, the last time accompanied by a rather snippy "we deal in art at this establishment, sir, not amateur dabblings, good day."

Which only confirmed everything early-rising Steven had said. Lady Werewilk may or may not be making art history, but she was making enemies.

Enemies who might be leaving surveyor's sticks littered around her property.

I checked a big brass clock in a shop and decided I had time for a cup of that high-priced coffee that I got hooked on during the War. Of course, we'd strained it through scraps of tent-cloth and used creek-water heated over a campfire, but I must admit I like the fancy café version better.

I sat and sipped and watched people pass. Not once did I see anyone walk past with a just-purchased painting, but there was a lot of traffic in and out of the galleries. Some were workmen, some were clerks hurrying to work, some were bleary-eyed owners squinting in the sun.

None looked particularly formidable. But of course if Lady Werewilk's troubles were coming from Mount Cloud, they'd hire out the dirty work. People who don't get up past noon are hardly likely to know anything at all about the surveying trade.

But of course plenty of people did. With the slow but steady post-War boom, surveying was a big business. Trying to sift through the thousands of people who might know enough math and have some experience setting marker sticks would be a lot more difficult and time consuming than shaking down every gallery owner in Mount Cloud, and even that was impossible.

I drained my cup and waved the waiter off. I'd be back to Darla's in exactly two hours, which I figured would be at least an hour early but if anyone was going to gloat it was going to be me.

Finding a cab was easy. I let Mount Cloud roll past, and I kept my gaze out of those windows.

The Big Bell was banging out the appointed hour when I returned to Darla's. Neither Darla nor Miss Gertriss was available, quoth little Mary the salesgirl, though from the giggling and hushed words coming from the back I didn't have to guess where they were.

Darla keeps a chair for me in the corner. I've always been a little nervous about that chair and its quiet implication that I'll be spending so much time waiting for her that I might as well have a seat and fossilize. But it's a nice chair, so I sat and pulled down my hat and was more than halfway to a snooze when someone tapped lightly on my shoulder.

A woman was standing over me, smiling.

My mouth was open to say something—I still don't know what—when the woman laughed, and it was only then I recognized Gertriss.

Her hair fell down on her shoulders in a smooth blonde wave. Her eyes were luminous, her lashes long and dark, her skin aglow as if from candlelight. She smelled of soap and a hint of Darla's own perfume.

Gone was her burlap smock. She was dressed smartly, not seductively, in black

pants and a dark red blouse and shiny leather lady's boots. Her waist was belted with a silk sash, and Mama was likely to emit steam when she saw the figure Gertriss was hiding under all that sackcloth.

"Damn," I said. Gertriss went wide-eyed and jumped back, as though I'd sprouted horns and cursed, and I realized with instant regret she was half right.

"I meant you look amazing, Miss Gertriss," I said, rising.

"She does, doesn't she?" said Darla, stepping out from behind her counter. "A little make-up, a few simple street clothes, and I believe she's ready for life in the big city."

Gertriss blushed, deeply and suddenly. She kept her hands together, as if hiding them, and Darla grinned and caught them both up in her own.

"We're going to get you a manicure right now," said Darla, with a sideways wink to me. "Mary, wrap up her things, will you? And see that Mister Markhat here gets the bill."

"Yes, ma'am."

Darla took Gertriss by her elbow and led her toward the door. "We'll be back in a bit, Markhat," she said. "By the way, I left you a note."

And then she blew me a kiss, and left with Gertriss in tow.

I shook my head and grinned. Mary darted up to me, curtsied and handed me an envelope.

"Thank you," I said, as she busied herself wrapping and hanging what appeared to be the entire shop's inventory of clothing.

The bill wasn't as bad as I thought, and since that would be Mama's burden anyway I managed a smile and put it away. Darla's note was folded in the far-too-intricate way of hers, so I took again to my chair and unfolded it and read.

Darling, it began. I grinned. She always pronounced the word with a put-on aristocrat's air, and I could hear it plainly in the letters she'd written. Your new protégé mentioned Lady Werewilk, and the case, and it just so happens one of our clients has a brand new Coltin—that would be one of Lady Werewilk's resident artists—hanging above her mantle. It also happens that our client is to have a gown delivered this very morning—so if you could be persuaded to take a parcel to her, you might strike up a conversation about Lady Werewilk from someone who knows her. I have no idea how well they know each other, or if my client will even speak to such a rogue as yourself, but I know you'd prefer tramping around Rannit to sitting comfortably in my chair. Mary will give you the gown and the address. Mind you don't let the hem touch the ground. Dinner tonight at seven. Love, D.

And there was Mary, grinning that female-conspiracy grin, address in one hand and gown wrapped in linen on hanger in the other.

"I've never worked at a dressmaker's shop before," I said. "Do I curtsy before I hand over the gown, or after?"

Mary wordlessly handed me her things and darted away. I tramped out the door, the famous finder Markhat abroad, gown in hand against a sea of troubles.

Mary, at least, had the good grace not to giggle.

Chapter Four

The name on the card was Mrs. Adorn Hemp. The address was a complicated mess of turn lefts at the butcher's and go right three blocks down from the Hanged Man and then look for a half-painted house—half red, half white—that stood next to a cab-stop.

I wondered how many half-red half-white houses I was likely to encounter, next door to cab-stops or not, as I plunged into traffic and headed south and east. I judged the Hemp residence to be about five blocks, total, when I set out. It turned into an easy fifteen by the time I backtracked and wound through the old Spice District and finally gave up and asked a blue-capped Watchman for directions.

Turns out they'd finished painting the house just that morning. All red, this time. I pondered the danger of relying too much on assumption all the way to the Hemp's sturdy, tall walk-up.

The stairs were freshly swept, and the door was ajar, and there were voices inside. Raised voices, a man and two women, the man choosing to employ bellowing and the women opting for a duet of high-pitched shrieks.

I looked about. There were people nearby a—woman digging in a flowerbed, a man and a boy playing catch on a lawn smaller than my office, another woman staring at the sky while her poodle-dog defiled a rather nice rosebush with fertilizer of its own. I know they had to hear the voices, but none of them so much as glanced in my direction.

I was about to knock when the man bellowed out "I'll kill you both," and then a woman screamed.

I dropped the gown and charged through the door.

The door opened into a foyer, and it opened into a great room, and I came stomping through it. There was a man a good four strides from me, his hands clamped around a tiny woman's throat, while another woman looked on in horror.

The man was wearing a badly fitted black suit and a monocle. The woman being choked was a busty brunette who managed a healthy squeal despite the large hands wrapped around her pale white throat. The other woman, a tiny blonde, stood by the fireplace and screamed, her hands raised to her chin in a useless expression of horror.

The man doing the choking and the woman being choked were far too occupied with the business at hand to even notice me. A fireplace poker was leaning against the wall, and I took it and raised it and would have brought it solidly down on the gentleman's murderous head had not the tiny blonde woman spoken.

"You're not Robert," she said, in a voice far too casual to be used at the scene of a brutal murder. "Don't tell me he's claiming sick again."

She never lowered her hands from her mouth, or lost her expression of dawning horror.

"He'd better not be," added the woman being choked. Her tone indicated the sort of offhand annoyance one might express as being short-changed a penny by the kindly old apple-seller. "Or I swear I'll see him replaced, today."

The monocled choker nodded, released the chokee, frowned at the poker in my hand, and then reached into his jacket pocket and produced a dog-eared sheaf of papers.

“I thought I got hit with the poker in Act Three,” he said, rifling through the pages. “They haven’t changed it again, have they?”

I lowered my poker.

The woman being choked produced a similar document and, frowning, began to leaf through it.

“You’re not Robert,” repeated the blonde. She finally lowered her hands, and looked confused rather than terrified. “You’re not even in the cast, are you?”

“My name is Markhat,” I replied. Confused glances were exchanged all around. “I heard what sounded like a woman being murdered, so I let myself in.”

The blonde raised an eyebrow. “So when you lifted that poker...”

“I was about to enact Act Three a bit too early and a bit too hard,” I said. I leaned the poker carefully back where I’d found it. “I apologize for barging in. Are you Mrs. Hemp?”

“He thought we were real,” said the brunette, beaming. “He thought you were really about to kill us.”

The man grinned. “Not bad for a stand-in, huh? I haven’t rehearsed Robert’s role.”

I stuck out my hand. It was the least I could do, after nearly braining the man.

“You had me thoroughly convinced,” I said. Then I turned again to the woman while we shook hands.

“Mrs. Hemp?”

“Oh, yes, yes, I’m Mrs. Hemp,” she replied, smiling. “I’m sorry. I should have closed the door, but I didn’t want to leave Robert out on the stoop.” She stepped forward, laughed again, and offered me her hand to shake. “We’re rehearsing,” she said, as we shook hands. “Of course we rehearse at the theatre as well, but this scene is so sticky we wanted to work on it here.” She brightened suddenly. “Are you with the theatre, Mister Markhat?”

I grinned back. “I’m not, Mrs. Hemp,” I said, while the brunette and her murderous male friend sat down on the couch and began a whispered exchange punctuated by numerous stabs at the script. “Actually, a friend sent me by with a parcel for you. She knows I’m interested in art, and I understand you have a new piece by—”

I trailed off as Mrs. Hemp flew into a silent but furious flurry of shushing signs at me. She glanced at the pair on the couch, sighed in relief when she decided they hadn’t been listening, and ushered me out of the room, through the foyer, and out the door, which she closed with a solid bang.

“That’s a secret, Mr. Markhat,” she said. “I’m not even going to hang it until the evening of our cast party for *Three Murders by Midnight*. It’s a Werewilk,” she whispered. “The best I’ve ever seen.”

I winced. Darla’s linen clad gown lay crumpled on the stoop, so I bent and picked it up and handed it ruefully to Mrs. Hemp.

“It’s from Darla’s,” I said. “I dropped it when I thought your friend was being throttled.”

She brushed it off and smiled. “Well, I can hardly blame you for that,” she said. “I doubt it’s hurt. Darla always double-wraps.”