

THE HAND THAT FEEDS ME

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It was one of those sultry summer evenings, warm and humid and hardly any wind. The sun was just going down and I was grazing the alleys downtown, not doing badly. It never ceases to amaze me the quantity of food that human beings throw away. Especially in warm weather. The only real problem about getting a decent meal is the competition.

When I saw the old man poking in a barrel I said to myself, "Here's trouble." I was wrong but I was right. The old guy was grazing too and at first he didn't notice me. But when he did, though I couldn't make out the words, he was obviously friendly. And then he threw me a piece of meat.

It's not always smart to take meat from strange men, but this old guy seemed genuine enough. I checked the meat out carefully, and then I ate it. It was good.

Topped me up nicely.

I stayed with the old guy for a while and we got along.

I'd root a bit, he'd root a bit.

And we'd move elsewhere.

Then he settled down to go to sleep. He patted the sacking, inviting 20 me to sleep too, but it was early so I moved on.

A couple of hours later it was semi-dark, like it gets in the town. I didn't go back down the old guy's alley on purpose. Things just worked out that way. There are forces in a town at night. They push you this way, they push you that.

I could tell immediately that something was wrong. I approached him cautiously, but nothing happened. But nothing could happen. The old guy was dead.

There was blood on his face. There was blood on his clothes. Someone had given him a terrible beating.

Beatings are something I know about.

I licked one of the wounds. The blood was dry on top, but still runny under the crust. And the old guy's body was pretty warm. Whatever had happened wasn't long over.

Nosing around, I picked up the scents of three different men. They were all fresh, hanging in the tepid air. Three men together, three against one. One old man. That could not be right.

I set out after them.

They had headed away from downtown. Curiously, they had stuck to the alleys, these three men, though they hadn't stopped at any of the places I would have. The places my dead acquaintance 40 would have.

The only time I had trouble finding the spoor was where the alley crossed a street near a couple of stores.

Seems they went into one of the stores, then headed back for the alley.

After another block I began to find beer cans they had handled.

At first I picked each can up, carefully, and I put it where I could find it again. But once I had one can from each of the men, I ignored the rest. I followed them with increasing confidence. I figured I knew where they were going.

The long, narrow park by the river is popular on a summer's night. I could tell immediately that it was teeming with life, and not just because so many scents crossed that of the trio I was following. All you have to do is listen. A dozen human beings, not to mention the other creatures.

But my trio made it easy again. They were down by the riverside whooping and hollering and throwing things into the water.

I was extremely cautious as I drew close. I wasn't quite sure what I would do. I only knew that I would do something.

I saw them clearly enough. Young, boisterous men, rough with each other and loud. They picked up stones and swung thick sticks to hit the stones into the river. Already drunk and unsteady, most of the time they missed, but when one connected they would all make a terrible din to celebrate the crack 60 of stick on stone. Lying in the grass behind them were more cans of beer and a pile of jackets. There was also a fire. A fire! On a hot night like this.

It wasn't until I crept near that I realised that in the fire they had been burning something belonging to the old man. The old man who gave me meat. The old man they had beaten to death.

I was sorely tempted to sink my teeth into the nearest one, maybe push him over the bank and into the water. But I was self-disciplined. A ducking was too good for these three, these murderers.

I edged close to the fire, to the beer cans, but just as I made my move, one of the louts happened to turn around and see me in the light from the embers.

He yelled ugly things to his friends, and they reeled back towards me. I am not a coward but they did have sticks. And I am considerably bigger than a stone.

I grabbed the top jacket and ran for it.

They chased me for a while, but they were no match for me running full out, even lugging the flapping jacket.

And this was no small, lightweight thing. It was heavy, leather and *not* clean.

But I got clean away, and the last I heard of the three young killers was what I took for loud, angry swearing as it floated across the humid night air.

I went straight back to the body of the old man. I laid the jacket 80 down by one of his hands and pushed a sleeve as best I could into its forceless grasp.

I left the old man three more times. After each trip I returned with a beer can.

Each can reeked of a killer. Other men might not be able to track them from the smell, but each of the cans bore a murderer's finger marks.

Then I sat and rested. I didn't know what it would look like from higher up, but from where I sat the scene looked as if the old man had grabbed the jacket of one of the men who attacked him. Beer-drunk men. The old man had grasped and wouldn't let go.

They, the cowards that they were, ran off.

I was pleased with my justice.

I raised my eyes to the moon, and I cried for the dead man. I cried and cried. Until I heard living men near the alley open their doors. Until I heard them come out into the still summer night. Until I heard them make their way to the alley to see what the fuss was about.

Once I was sure they were doing that, I set off into the darkness.