

The black SUV stood out against the depressed neighborhood.

Depressed. The term amused me. Calling this sort of place depressed was a pathetic cover-up of the realities of the area. This was a suicidal neighborhood. Surrounded by industrial zones, far from convenient transportation or concentrations of wealth, it was a place that no one would choose to live.

Then again, many were not given the choice.

The vehicle stopped and I got out, checking that my coat was neat and straightening my tie. The expensive clothing stood out even more than the expensive car. That was the purpose. To many of these people, who were more accustomed to worn jeans and thrift-store rejects, such a casual display of wealth would set me above mere mortals. I might as well have been the devil himself, come to walk the streets.

Or an angel, I supposed. It was not a devil that went to Sodom.

Before I had taken two steps away from the vehicle, my employees had fallen in on either side of me. Michaelson was on my left, Andrews on my right. Brown would remain with the car, ensuring that there were no unpleasant surprises when I returned.

Across the street, Michaelson opened the door with a key. He held it open as Andrews and I stepped through; the courteous gesture looked odd on him, at odds with his bulk, his almost brutish appearance. The key word there, of course, being almost. Michaelson was violent only when necessary, and brutish never.

Inside, we were in a large, dim room. It had been years since this slaughterhouse had seen any use, but the scents of blood and feces lingered. Although that last might have been my imagination. Greeley in general smelled strongly enough to cover any absence here. Meatpacking plants are excellent investments, but on the rare occasions I visit the city I almost regret my investment in the industry. It is...distasteful.

A trio of men were waiting for us, although they did not know it. Kneeling on the floor, bound and hooded, they knew very little. Michaelson nodded slightly at the one on the left, telling me which to start with. A subtle reminder from someone who seemed disinclined to subtlety, but that was Michaelson, generally. There was both more and less to him than met the eye.

I approached the indicated man and Andrews handed me a pistol before taking the man's hood off. His hands secured behind his back with cable ties, he was little to no threat. Not that it mattered, given that Michaelson and I were both holding guns.

Andrews was not, but he was likely still the most dangerous man in the room. He costs me a fortune, and is worth every penny of it. Whether he is worth the other costs is...open to debate, perhaps, would be the simplest way to phrase it.

"Good morning," I said, although the reality was closer to midnight. People seldom came near this building, but some business is still better conducted after dark.

"Fuck you," he said, glaring at me.

I put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger. It was a suppressed weapon firing subsonic ammunition, which was still louder than many people seemed to think, but not enough so to attract attention from outside.

The man fell on his side, and I stepped to the next. Andrews pulled this man's hood off as well. "Are you from Chicago?" I asked.

"You can't do this," he said. "Do you know who you're dealing with?"

I shot him as well, and then proceeded to the final one. "Chicago," I said confidently as Andrews removed his hood. "You know who I am?"

The man looked at the two corpses and then back at me. He licked his lips nervously and then nodded.

"Finally someone who can answer a question," I said. "My people caught you dealing drugs in Denver."

He paled slightly. He'd known that his position was precarious, of course, but he might have been hoping that he could deny any wrongdoing. Now, that wasn't an option.

"I have an agreement with the Chicago families," I said. "Out here, I'm in charge. I run the drugs. I run the prostitution. I run the bookies. If you're trying to renege on that deal, I'm going to be upset."

"I was just working for the capo," he said, sounding panicked. "I thought he'd cleared it with you!"

I glanced at Andrews, who in turn looked at the second man I'd killed. So the capo had come to handle this job in person. That made things simpler.

"I'm going to send you back to Chicago," I said to the bound man. "And you're going to explain to your family that this was all an unfortunate misunderstanding." I didn't bother with threats. If the corpses of his former associates didn't convince him that I meant what I said, nothing would.

Andrews hooded him again, and then we left. I handed the gun to Michaelson, and then peeled the gloves off my hands and passed them over as well. "Get someone to drive him back to Chicago," I ordered. "Keep him hooded on the way."

Michaelson nodded and then took out his cell phone, sending a simple text message. And that simply, the deed was done. As soon as we left, cleaners would descend upon the scene, ensuring that no incriminating evidence would remain. The bodies, the bullets, the gun, even my gloves would disappear. In New York, such things tended to find their way to the ocean; in Chicago, Lake Michigan was the venue

of choice. Colorado lacked such a convenient body of water, so the cleaners here had to be more creative. Sometimes they used the incinerator of a well-bribed funeral home; other times an abandoned mine shaft was more convenient. Either way, no sign would remain of what had happened here. Two more bloodstains on a slaughterhouse floor would go unnoticed by all.

"You left one alive," Andrews commented, while Michaelson made the arrangements. "You're usually more ruthless than that."

"I am a businessman, Mr. Andrews," I said. "Returning a competent employee is a sign of respect."

"So why not return all three?"

"The other two would have taken it as their due. That one will be indebted to me forever."

He nodded. "Everything's just business to you, isn't it?"

*No, I thought. Not quite.*

Back in Denver, I sat at my desk and read paperwork. I owned the building, as I owned a considerable proportion of the buildings in the city, and the state. A large part of why I had risen to prominence was my understanding that, approached with the proper attitude, legitimate business interests could be considerably more valuable than traditional criminal enterprises.

This particular location, however, was solely to serve my interests. The center of my empire moved on a regular basis, preventing anyone from becoming too confident of where to find me. Typically I used buildings that were still under construction, working out of the areas that weren't currently being worked on. That way the construction crews and I didn't interfere with each others' business.

Although, in reality, both sides were my business. I owned the property, I owned the construction company, I owned most of the subcontractors. When the buildings were finished I sold them at a profit and bought more property. This one would be a medical complex when it was finished, and I would probably have a considerable investment in it, in addition to having ready access to medical personnel.

Efficiency is the hallmark of good business.

The door to my office had not been hung yet, so Andrews knocked on the sheetrock before entering instead. I kept reading the letter I was currently dealing with. It was from a trusted accountant, and I didn't want to take the chance that it was urgent. Disregarding the advice of accountants had been the downfall of many empires, criminal and otherwise. I knew that much of my success could be attributed to my understanding of economics, and I likewise knew that ignoring such things could lead to my rapid downfall.

Of course, with recent events, many of the lessons life had taught me would need to be reevaluated. But, all things considered, I suspected that meant I had to pay even more careful attention to the reports I received in the next few days.

Eventually I finished it, made a small note of what was to be done, and placed it in the tray on my desk. "Yes?" I said to Andrews.

He nodded to me. "Boss," he said. "There's been an incursion in the southeastern part of the city."

"Understood. Take a group of troubleshooters and take care of it."

He hesitated, and then said, "Boss, you might want to check this one out yourself."

I looked at him sharply. Andrews was a powerful man in his own right, and I expected less subservience from him than I usually required from my employees. But he sounded concerned, or perhaps even worried, and anything that could worry the wizard was something that I very much wanted to pay attention to.

"Why?"

"It...isn't a *human* incursion."

I walked into the building, with Andrews on my right and Michaelson on my left. There was blood everywhere, staining my shoes and the hem of my slacks; I regarded this with mild irritation. The expense was negligible, but having to replace my clothing was always irksome. Bodies lay scattered around the room, broken and ripped apart, like toys after a child's tantrum.

The child in question sat on the counter, his feet dangling above the floor. He was wearing a suit not unlike my own, although his was entirely saturated with blood, and a beret that was similarly soaked.

There was one other person in the room, a young girl. Perhaps twelve years old, huddled against the wall. She was bloody, and she was crying.

I felt a natural protective instinct at the sight, remembering another girl, another night.

I quashed that urge immediately. This was not a time for sentiment.

"Redcap," Andrews murmured, watching the bloody man with a wary expression. "Nasty fae. Don't trust it, and don't get close."

"You're in my territory," I said to the man. Thing, if Andrews was to be believed; he had called it fae, and the fae were not men, however close the resemblance might sometimes seem. "And you just killed several of my clients."

The redcap shrugged. "What should I care for your clients, mortal?" it said. Its voice was smooth, almost musical, but there was a grating undertone that spoke of an underlying cruelty. It was off-putting, like a violin slightly out of tune.

Or perhaps I was reading too much into it. It must be difficult to sound benevolent while soaked in blood and surrounded by the bodies of your victims.

"They were my clients," I repeated. "I do not tolerate challenges to my authority. Should you continue to assault my clients, I will regard it as an act of war, and I will act to defend myself appropriately."

It looked at me oddly. I thought it was probably surprised that I reacted so calmly. "There are no rules protecting you any longer, mortal," it said. "I am under no obligation to leave you in peace."

"No, but your Courts explicitly grant self-defense rights to anyone who has expressed and proven a clear and substantial obligation to defend a person, location, or object which has been attacked, threatened, or stolen. I have expressed my obligation to defend my clients, and if you would like proof I can provide a copy of the contracts."

Its eyes narrowed. "You are not a part of the Courts."

"No," I agreed. "But an outsider can take advantage of the self-defense rights, provided they pay the requisite wergild to the appropriate Court." I smiled thinly. "It's in the charter of the Twilight Court. Section twenty-three."

"Clause seven," Andrews added helpfully. "Paragraph four."

I almost smiled at that. I read enough letters from my attorneys that I understood their language. It was amusing, if unsurprising, that Andrews could speak it as well.

"Self-defense only applies if you can do so," the redcap said. It wasn't smiling now. "I have killed thousands of your kind, mortal. Leave now and I may not do the same to you."

"I will provide a counteroffer," I said quietly. "Hand the child over, and get out of my city, or I will destroy you. Right here, right now."

The creature tensed, and it seemed about to attack for a moment. Michaelson had his hand on the machine pistol in his shoulder holster, but I doubted it would care about that.

Then it noticed that Andrews was touching the dagger at his belt, and it relaxed again, although it didn't look happy about it. "Take the mortal, then," it said. "But you will learn to respect your betters, human. I will enjoy the instruction."

I beckoned to the girl, who stood and ran to us. We left the building, the creature watching us the entire time.

"Will it attack us?" I asked, as we got back into the SUV. Brown was driving, as before. A quiet woman, but a very good troubleshooter. More than one person had underestimated her, and found to their dismay that she was quite, quite deadly.

"Absolutely," Andrews said, with no hesitation. "After you challenged its pride that way? There's not a chance it'll back down."

"Excellent," I said. "Ms. Brown, take us to the fallback location, please. Mr. Andrews, what can we expect from this redcap?"

"It depends on how badly he wants you dead," the wizard said. "If it's a casual investment on his part, stopping it will be difficult but not impossible. He's lethal, but more a predator than a fighter. Redcaps like to take their prey by surprise, ambush them or trick them somehow. You can't trust anything you see with him around. He'll also have other tactics, nasty ways of attacking. He'll be faster, stronger, and tougher than a human."

"I see. And if it isn't casual?"

Andrews shrugged. "If he wants it badly enough, there's an effectively unlimited number of ways he could attack us. I can't really give you advice on how to deal with it."

I nodded. "Could you beat him?"

"Maybe," he said, but he didn't sound confident. "In a straight fight, I'd give myself two in five."

"Yet he backed down from you in there," I said.

"He wasn't ready for a fight then. Next time, he will be. If he's really prepared for it, my odds drop considerably. I'd have to ask my patron for help. It would be...expensive."

"Understood," I said. "We'll have to use our other plan, then."

The fallback shelter was designed quite simply. The facade was that of a small office building, and on the upper floors this facade was a reality; doing things that way limited the potential of discovery. A heavy steel door blocked access to the basement level, ostensibly for security. The two basement levels were the defensible location, with the actual safe room a level below that.

Following certain incidents, many of them involving werewolves, it had become clear that I required an advisor for dealing with the less mundane threats to my power. Andrews served that role admirably, in addition to performing his other tasks. On his advice, I had taken considerable pains to ensure that my protections could serve against a broad range of enemies, human and inhuman alike.

A strong attacker, a werewolf, an ogre, could be handled easily. A skilled attacker was more challenging to defend against, but could be handled by brute-force tactics. An intelligent attacker was

more challenging yet, but I felt confident there were measures in place. If nothing else, Andrews himself was a significant deterrent against that type of thing.

An unusual attacker, one that approached matters in a more abstract way, was harder to deal with. It was hard to plan for people who made a point of approaching things from unusual directions. Unusual threats were problematic, to one degree or another.

The redcap, I was confident, was an *unusual* threat. Something that had to be dealt with in its own way.

Andrews was confident that the creature would take its time about attacking, waiting until the opportunity was ripe for the picking. I waited in the safe room, sitting at my desk. Michaelson was seated next to the door, having already dismissed the few workers still in the offices upstairs, and arranged for my troubleshooters to be waiting in another building across the street, also owned by me.

Their weapons would not be enough to bring down the redcap. But they might be of use if it brought friends.

The girl we had rescued was curled into a small ball on one of the three cots in the room. She had not spoken since we extracted her. I was not concerned; I had seen this type of reaction to stress before, the overwhelming shock. Likely she would recover. If not, there wasn't much I could do about it.

I was halfway through a notice from one of my lieutenants in Colorado Springs when Andrews came in. "Redcap's on his way," he said. "Two blocks out and closing fast. He's got a lot of friends."

"Anything that we should take special precautions with?" I asked, dropping the paper and standing. Michaelson stood as well. Like me, he was wearing body armor. Unlike me, he was carrying a large steel axe.

"No," Andrews said. "They're fae, so use iron. And remember not to trust anything you see."

"Very good," I said. "Mr. Andrews, please stay here and ensure that nothing gets past us. Mr. Michaelson, let's go give our friends a warm welcome."

Upstairs, on the first basement level, we stopped at a low wall. In front of us, a single long hallway stretched; at the other end was a narrow set of stairs, leading up to the ground level. Behind us the hallway took a ninety-degree turn and led down another set of stairs to the next level.

I ignored the waiting gun emplacements and turned instead to the video screens on the wall beside me. I pressed a button and they came to life, showing slightly grainy video of the building's exterior.

For almost a minute, all was quiet. Then something bounded around the corner, looking almost like a dog, but wrong, too large and oddly proportioned. My uncle had bred dogs, and I was familiar with a wide variety of breeds. This was larger than anything short of a mastiff, but leaner, built to hunt rather than to guard.

More followed it, first one and then five and then dozens, until there might have been a hundred of them rushing at the building. Behind them, almost invisible behind all that fur, was the redcap. It was wearing armor, matte black mail with spikes at the shoulders and elbows, and it was armed, carrying a black staff in its hand and a silver sword on its hip.

A few seconds later guns began to fire, and the dog-creatures began dropping, spraying blood. The troubleshooters were not using light or suppressed weapons; attracting police attention was unlikely at the moment, and I was planning to abandon this location after today in any case. These guns were heavy, military-grade rifles, and the damage they could do was such that not even monsters took it lightly.

"That's our cue," I said, going to the wall. Michaelson grunted and joined me, kneeling behind the wall a short distance to my left.

We waited there for perhaps another minute before something struck the steel door, causing it to buckle. It was hit again, and again. The fourth blow tore it from its hinges entirely, and it flew back with enough force to hit the opposite wall before falling to the floor.

I frowned. Disappointing. Andrews had been confident that a heavy steel door would be an impedance to fae beings. Evidently he had overestimated their vulnerability to the metal.

"Hold fire," I murmured to Michaelson, slipping my own finger into the trigger guard. He grunted at me.

A few seconds later, the first of the dog-creatures bounded down the stairs and turned towards us, sprinting down the hallway. It was fast, very fast, but it was also a long hallway. "Hold fire," I said again, putting just a bit of tension on the trigger. Michaelson's grunt was more annoyed this time. He knew this as well as I did.

More creatures came down the stairs, until the hallway was thronging with black fur and glowing eyes. The leading creature was close enough that I could clearly see its teeth.

"Fire," I said, squeezing the trigger.

The M2 Browning belt-fed machine gun is one of the most widely used heavy weapons in the world. At a full rate of fire, it can send approximately five hundred rounds per minute downrange, each of which will travel fully two thousand yards while retaining enough energy to inflict lethal damage.

Using two of them in a confined space was, to phrase it lightly, overkill.

Bullets began pouring down the hallway, ripping into the enemy. The leading ranks of dog-creatures went down almost instantly, their bodies more shredded than shot. The creatures behind them fared better, on the whole, simply because they were shielded from the onslaught by their less fortunate brethren. But these rounds were designed to penetrate tank armor; even after passing



through five or six other bodies, they retained enough momentum to inflict very serious wounds on those they struck.

The guns fired for less than ten seconds before they both jammed at the same moment, locking up entirely. A moment later the fluorescent lights illuminating the hallway flickered and died, leaving the area entirely devoid of light.

I smiled at that. Humans are a primarily sight-oriented species. Removing that sight is one of the most straightforward, effective means of incapacitating someone. It's been a common tactic throughout history. Nonhuman attackers—the fae, werewolves, vampires, practically anything, really—tend to find it particularly effective. They can function better without vision than a human, and the fear that blindness causes is a weapon in itself, driving people to panic, pushing them beyond the point of reason.

It was also, of course, an entirely predictable tactic. Andrews had identified twenty-three different ways an attacker might plausibly attempt to blind us. Contingencies were in place for each of them.

Simply turning out the lights was one of the simpler approaches, and one of the easier ones to deal with. I took a step back and turned, moving for the staircase. At the same time I reached up to my forehead and pressed a button. A moment later the headlamp began emitting light, bright enough to make any worries about dimness seem laughable.

Downstairs, I waited for Michaelson to join me, and then hurried down the hallway. Behind us the dog-creatures were howling, and from the sound of it they were already reaching the bottom of the stairs.

I opened my mouth, but Michaelson was already taking a grenade from his belt. He pulled the pin, held the grenade for a second, and then tossed it backwards before hurrying on.

A moment after we reached the end of the hallway and ducked behind cover the grenade went off. My ears were still ringing from the machine gun fire, but I could hear the explosion, and I could hear the dog-creatures screaming afterward.

I smiled. A fragmentation grenade in an enclosed area was a phenomenal weapon. When it was loaded with steel shrapnel, and you were fighting fae, well, that was just icing on the cake.

Peering down the hallway, it looked as though all of the dog-creatures were dead, and no more were coming down the stairs from above. Good. I doubted the main threat had been eliminated yet, but removing the auxiliary threats was very good.

Several seconds later, the redcap walked down the stairs. Two humanoid figures stood to either side of it. None of them were obviously injured.

"Mortal," the redcap called. "You accomplish nothing with this pathetic attempt. Give me the girl, admit your weakness, and you may yet live through this night."

"Let me think about it," I said, waiting for the other humanoids to join it at the base of the stairs. Once they had, I reached out and grabbed an unobtrusive lever at the top of the next flight of stairs. I tugged on it, triggering an entirely mechanical reaction. My understanding was that electronic devices could become unreliable when exposed to certain types of magical energy, so I had gone to great lengths to prepare for that. This trap involved no circuitry whatsoever. A marvel of engineering, really.

When pulled, that lever had three effects. The first was to open a trapdoor above the stairs, dumping napalm over the people standing there. The second was to trigger a pair of thermate grenades hidden at the base of the stairs.

Michaelson and I hurried down the stairs as the flames began, and the creatures started screaming. I was a little surprised at how human they sounded. I would have expected such creatures to be more obviously alien while in pain.

Down in the safe room, we stopped and waited. Andrews was standing by the door, holding his dagger in one hand and a wooden staff in the other. "Is he dead?" I asked, gasping a little. That had been quite a bit of running.

Andrews shook his head, watching the stairs with a blank expression that suggested he was *seeing* something entirely different. He didn't say anything and I didn't ask him to, walking over to my desk instead. I took my pistol from its shoulder holster and placed it on the desk in front of me, then grabbed the submachine gun from the desk drawer and held it loosely, pointed at the door.

The girl was still curled up on the cot, evidently having not moved the entire time. I frowned. That could be problematic.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of another, louder explosion from upstairs, as the redcap discovered the *third* thing the lever had done. The pressure trigger had not been armed when Michaelson and I crossed it, and as a result the landmines in the wall halfway down the hallway hadn't detonated.

The redcap and its allies were not so lucky.

Once the noise of the explosion had faded, I looked at Andrews. He shook his head, not looking back at me, and I nodded. Predictable. The redcap was still alive, then. Pity.

The next few seconds were ominously silent, before a small black ball rolled down the stairs. It hit the ground and rolled to a stop a few feet away, just inside the door. I stood, thinking that I might take a closer look at the thing, and then I saw that Andrews was pressed against the wall as far from it as he could get, cowering and holding his staff between himself and the thing.

If Andrews was frightened of what this thing could do, that was all the reason I needed to feel similarly. I ducked down behind my desk and waited to see what would happen.

I didn't have to wait long. Only a few seconds later the stone went off. It was something like the opposite of a grenade; rather than explode, it seemed to *implode*, pulling everything towards itself. The desk slid forward a few inches, I slid forward until I hit the desk, and my left shoulder pulled itself out of its socket.

The odd force faded after less than a second, and I pushed myself back to my feet with my working arm. Andrews had apparently been able to protect himself, but Michaelson was lying on the ground, evidently unconscious.

Andrews stepped between me and the redcap. The creature looked at him with something approaching respect. "Wizard. Stand aside. You need not die this day."

"I signed a contract," Andrews said quietly. "I meant what I said, and I don't back out of deals."

The redcap nodded, and the two began to circle each other. It was, in a way, like watching a man fight his evil twin. Andrews was carrying a staff of pale wood, wearing a light grey robe, and wielding a dagger. The redcap was carrying a dark staff, wearing black armor, and wielding a sword.

Which of them was evil was open to debate, of course.

The redcap cut at Andrews repeatedly, moving with inhuman speed. Andrews was limited to normal human speed, but nevertheless, none of the redcap's attacks connected. Somehow Andrews was always in just the right place to not be hit. He looked more like he was dancing than in a fight for his life. The redcap's sword came closer and closer to him, first six inches away, then three, then less than one, and still the wizard seemed perfectly calm, not even rushing his movements.

Even Andrews could make a mistake, though, and I didn't feel like taking the chance. So the next time I had a clear shot, I took the pistol from my desk and shot the redcap in the chest.

I thought it was the noise and the steel-jacketed bullet, more than any actual injury, that startled the redcap. Its head whipped around to stare at me for just a moment before it returned its attention to Andrews.

A moment was considerably too long. Andrews moved in exactly as I shot, still not hurrying, and lifted his arm exactly in time with the redcap's movement. As it turned its head back to the wizard, it dragged its own throat across the edge of the dagger.

The redcap was an incredibly tough combatant. It had been shot repeatedly, set on fire, and had two mines go off right next to it, and emerged unscathed.

But Andrews's dagger was an entirely different sort of threat.

The redcap was, in a sense, confronted with the same issues that I had been. It had to be able to defend itself against a wide variety of threats.

Against strong threats, a brute force approach, its swarm of dog-creatures would have protected it. Against skilled threats, artistry and grace, it would have been shielded by four fae allies it had brought. Against smart threats it was competent in its own right. The fact that it had faced off against Andrews and not immediately lost was sufficient proof of that.

But that dagger was an *unusual* threat. It was something that presented a unique danger, and which required unique countermeasures.

Under ordinary circumstances, perhaps, the redcap would have been able to block even that attack, which had been optimized specifically to bypass such defenses. Perhaps.

But it had already expended an enormous amount of energy, and all of its allies, just to get this far.

The redcap hit the ground in a rapidly-spreading pool of blood. Andrews watched it for a few seconds, then carefully wiped his dagger clean with a handkerchief and sheathed it again.

"Are we done?" I asked. The wizard closed his eyes for a few moments, then nodded. "Good. Check on Mr. Michaelson, please."

He grabbed the industrial-size medical kit from under one of the cots and dragged it over to where Michaelson was lying on the ground. I turned back to check on the girl.

She was still lying on the cot, watching me with wary eyes. She appeared uninjured; evidently she had been outside the blast radius of that strange grenade the redcap had thrown. That was good.

My first impulse was to bring her somewhere she could be properly cared for. A foster home, perhaps, or a psychiatrist.

Upon consideration, that impulse was a poor one. The situation out there was very uncertain at the moment. It was, I thought, not unlike a gang war. Tensions had been building up for a long time, and now that they had been released every side was fighting every other. As odd as it seemed, the safest place for her right now might very well be with me. I was likely to be tested again in the coming days, but at least I could defend myself.

"He's fine," Andrews said, interrupting my train of thought. "Just passed out from it messing with the blood flow to his brain. He'll wake up in a few minutes."

"Very good," I said. "Come help me reduce this shoulder, please."

He obligingly stood and walked over to me. "You know, Boss," he said quietly, as he moved into position, "this was a risky move. Luring him in like that...it was risky. And expensive. His werewild is going to be almost half a million, I think."

"He challenged me," I said. "Reputation is important. Letting people challenge you and get away with it is bad for business."

"Right," he said. "And you couldn't have dealt with it any other way?"

I noticed that he was looking over my shoulder at the girl on the cot. "It was business," I said, enunciating the words very clearly. "I do not tolerate challenges to my reputation, Mr. Andrews, particularly when they are likely to become public knowledge."

He took the hint and said nothing more as he pulled on my shoulder, tugging it back into place. I clenched my teeth around a scream, but the pain actually faded quite quickly. Andrews was quite skilled with simple medical procedures. A side effect, I thought, of his more unusual talents.

A few minutes later Michaelson woke up, and a few minutes after that he felt entirely recovered. "Very good work, gentlemen," I said. "Let us go and get some food. I suspect our work will only get harder from here."

"What about the girl?" Michaelson asked.

"My name is Carrie!" she snapped, the first thing she'd said.

"My name is Nicolas," I said to her, carefully not smiling. "You can come with us if you want to." She seemed to still be in shock, but there was clearly something in her that refused to give up. I suspected she was going to recover from this experience.

She considered it for a few seconds, then stood up and walked over to us. She paused to kick the redcap's body as she passed, getting a little more blood on her thoroughly bloodied sneaker.

I did smile at that. Yes, Carrie was going to be just fine.

Which was good, because I could see something of myself in her. Anyone who could get over her shock and feel grateful rather than frightened over the perpetrator's death so soon after the fact was...well, we had something in common, I supposed. A certain kinship, perhaps.

I'd lost one daughter to gang warfare already. They had kidnapped her with the intention of forcing a reaction out of me, and I supposed that it had succeeded, although not in the way they intended. I'd tried to save her, and a great many people died, and Julie had been one of them. At the end of the day, that was all that mattered. The rest of the story was just...trimmings.

The strange thing was that, in an odd way, it had been the biggest favor they could have done for me. Julie and her mother had been the only things left from my life before I started a career in organized crime. With one dead, and the other gone, I'd been able to dedicate myself wholly to my work.

In an odd way, they were the only reason I'd been able to rise as far as I had. With nothing holding me back, and a powerful motivation to gain power, I'd climbed the ranks very quickly indeed. I'd always been more ruthless than my peers. You would think that an accountant would have more principles than a thief, and in some respects you'd be right, but the scruples line up oddly with each other.

Between the lengths I'd been willing to go to and my understanding of how easy it was to bring someone down if you hit them with an attack they were utterly unprepared for, it had been surprisingly easy to set myself up as the sole ruler of organized crime in Colorado. I liked to think I'd done a decent job. I'd cut down on a lot of the violence. Even the cops agreed that I'd been a stabilizing force, even if they wouldn't admit it.

And none of it would ever bring my daughter back.

But in spite of the pain, I was still smiling as I reached out to pat Carrie on the shoulder. It was good to be reminded of that, once in a while. It was good to remember why I'd started down this road.

As I'd expected, she recoiled from my touch, an expression of shock and pain going across her face when the steel-jacketed bullet I'd concealed in my hand touched her.

I smiled sadly. I liked Carrie. I really did. But nothing is what it seems with the fae, and at the end of the day, business is business.

She hissed at me, her expression turning to fury, and in that moment it was easy to see that she was nothing human.

And Andrews's dagger came out again.