

Even Hand

Harry Dresden

by Jim Butcher, 1971-

Published: 2009



*A successful murder is like a successful restaurant:
ninety percent of it is about location, location, location.*

Three men in black hoods knelt on the waterfront warehouse floor, their wrists and ankles trussed with heavy plastic quick-ties. There were few lights.

They knelt over a large, faded stain on the concrete floor, left behind by the hypocritically named White Council of Wizards during their last execution.

I nodded to Hendricks, who took the hood off the first man, then stood clear. The man was young and good-looking. He wore an expensive yet ill-fitting suit and even more expensive yet tasteless jewelry.

“Where are you from?” I asked him.

He sneered at me. “What’s it to y—”

I shot him in the head as soon as I heard the bravado in his voice. The body fell heavily to the floor.

The other two jumped and cursed, their voices angry and terrified.

I took the hood off the second man. His suit was a close cousin of the dead man’s, and I thought I recognized its cut. “Boston?” I asked him.

“You can’t do this to us,” he said, more angry than frightened. “Do you know who we are?”

Once I heard the nasal quality of the word “are,” I shot him.

I took off the third man’s hood. He screamed and fell away from me. “Boston,” I said, nodding, and put the barrel of my .45 against the third man’s forehead. He stared at me, showing the whites of his eyes. “You know who I am. I run drugs in Chicago. I run the numbers, the books. I run the whores. It’s my town. Do you understand?”

His body jittered in what might have been a nod. His lips formed the word “yes,” though no sound came out.

“I’m glad you can answer a simple question,” I told him, and lowered the gun. “I want you to tell Mr. Morelli that I won’t be this lenient the next time his people try to clip the edges of my territory.” I looked at Hendricks. “Put the three of them in a sealed trailer and rail-freight them back to Boston, care of Mr.

Morelli.”

Hendricks was a large, trustworthy man, his red hair cropped in a crew cut. He twitched his chin in the slight motion that he used for a nod when he disapproved of my actions but intended to obey me anyway.

Hendricks and the cleaners on my staff would handle the matter from here.

I passed him the gun and the gloves on my hands. Both would see the bottom of Lake Michigan before I was halfway home, along with the two slugs the cleaners would remove from the site. When they were done, there would be nothing left of the two dead men but a slight variation on the outline of the stain in the old warehouse floor, where no one would look twice in any case.

Location, location, location.

Obviously, I am not Harry Dresden. My name is something I rarely trouble to remember, but for most of my adult life, I have been called John Marcone.

I am a professional monster.

It sounds pretentious. After all, I’m not a flesh-devouring ghoul, hiding behind a human mask until it is time to gorge. I’m no vampire, to drain the blood or soul from my victim, no ogre, no demon, no cursed beast from the spirit world dwelling amid the unsuspecting sheep of humanity. I’m not even possessed of the mystic abilities of a mortal wizard.

But they will never be what I am. One and all, those beings were born to be what they are.

I made a choice.

I walked outside of the warehouse and was met by my consultant, Gard—a tall blond woman without makeup whose eyes continually swept her surroundings. She fell into step beside me as we walked to the car. “Two?”

“They couldn’t be bothered to answer a question in a civil manner.”

She opened the back door for me and I got in. I picked up my personal weapon and slipped it into the holster beneath my left arm while she settled down behind the wheel. She started driving and then said, “No. That wasn’t it.”

“It was business.”

“And the fact that one of them was pushing heroin to thirteen-year-old girls and the other was pimping them out had nothing to do with it,” Gard said.

“It was business,” I said, enunciating. “Morelli can find pushers and pimps anywhere. A decent accountant is invaluable. I sent his bookkeeper back as a gesture of respect.”

“You don’t respect Morelli.”

I almost smiled. “Perhaps not.”

“Then why?”

I did not answer. She didn’t push the issue, and we rode in silence back to the office. As she put the car in park, I said, “They were in my territory. They broke my rule.”

“No children,” she said.

“No children,” I said. “I do not tolerate challenges, Ms. Gard. They’re bad for business.”

She looked at me in the mirror, her blue eyes oddly intent, and nodded.

There was a knock at my office door, and Gard thrust her head in, her phone’s earpiece conspicuous. “There’s a problem.”

Hendricks frowned from his seat at a nearby desk. He was hunched over a laptop that looked too small for him, plugging away at his thesis. “What kind of problem?”

“An Accords matter,” Gard said.

Hendricks sat up straight and looked at me.

I didn’t look up from one of my lawyer’s letters, which I receive too frequently to let slide. “Well,” I said, “we knew it would happen eventually. Bring the car.”

“I don’t have to,” Gard said. “The situation came to us.”

I set aside the finished letter and looked up, resting my fingertips together. “Interesting.”

Gard brought the problem in. The problem was young and attractive. In my experience, the latter two frequently lead to the former. In this particular case, it was a young woman holding a child. She was remarkable—thick, rich, silver white hair, dark eyes, pale skin. She had very little makeup, which was fortunate in her case, since she looked as if she had recently been drenched. She wore what was left of a gray business skirt-suit, had a towel from one of my health clubs wrapped around her shoulders, and was shivering.

The child she held was too young to be in school and was also appealing, with rosy features, white blond hair, and blue eyes. Male or female, it hardly mattered at that age. They're all beautiful. The child clung to the girl as if it would not be separated, and was also wrapped in a towel.

The girl's body language was definitely protective. She had the kind of beauty that looked natural and... true. Her features and her bearing both spoke of gentleness and kindness.

I felt an immediate instinct to protect and comfort her.

I quashed it thoroughly.

I am not made of stone, but I have found it is generally best to behave as if I am.

I looked across the desk at her and said, "My people tell me you have asked for sanctuary under the terms of the Unseelie Accords, but that you have not identified yourself."

"I apologize, sir," she answered. "I was already being indiscreet enough just by coming here."

"Indeed," I said calmly. "I make it a point not to advertise the location of my business headquarters."

"I didn't want to add names to the issue," she said, casting her eyes down in a gesture of submission that did not entirely convince me. "I wasn't sure how many of your people were permitted access to this sort of information."

I glanced past the young woman to Gard, who gave me a slow, cautious nod. Had the girl or the child been other than they appeared, Gard would have indicated in the negative. Gard costs me a fortune and is worth every penny.

Even so, I didn't signal either her or Hendricks to stand down. Both of them watched the girl, ready to kill her if she made an aggressive move. Trust, but verify—that the person being trusted will be dead if she attempts betrayal.

"That was most considerate of you, Justine."

The girl blinked at me several times. "Y-you know me."

"You are a sometimes associate of Harry Dresden," I said. "Given his proclivities about those he considers to be held under his aegis, it is sensible to identify as many of them as possible. For the sake of my insurance rates, if nothing else. Gard."

"Justine, no last name you'll admit to," Gard said calmly, "currently employed as Lara Raith's secretary and personal aide. You are the sometimes lover of Thomas Raith, a frequent ally of Dresden's."

I spread my hands slightly. "I assume the 'j' notation at the bottom of Ms. Raith's typed correspondence refers to you."

"Yes," Justine said. She had regained her composure quickly—not something I would have expected of the servitor of a vampire of the White Court.

Many of the... people, I suppose, I'd seen there had made lotus-eaters look self-motivated. "Yes, exactly."

I nodded. "Given your patron, one is curious as to why you have come to me seeking protection."

"Time, sir," she replied quietly. "I lacked any other alternative."

Someone screamed at the front of the building.

My headquarters shifts position irregularly, as I acquire new buildings. Much of my considerable wealth is invested in real estate. I own more of the town than any

other single investor. In Chicago, there is always money to be had by purchasing and renovating aging buildings. I do much of my day-to-day work out of one of my most recent renovation projects, once they have been modified to be suitable places to welcome guests. Then, renovation of the building begins, and the place is generally crowded with contractors who have proven their ability to see and hear nothing.

Gard's head snapped up. She shook it as if to rid herself of a buzzing fly and said, "A presence. A strong one." Her blue eyes snapped to Justine.

"Who?"

The young woman shuddered and wrapped the towel more tightly about herself. "Mag. A cantrev lord of the fomor."

Gard spat something in a Scandinavian tongue that was probably a curse.

"Precis, please," I said.

"The fomor are an ancient folk," she said. "Water dwellers, cousins of the jotuns. Extremely formidable. Sorcerers, shape changers, seers."

"And signatories," I noted.

"Yes," she said. She crossed to the other side of the room, opened a closet, and withdrew an athletic bag. She produced a simple, rather crude-looking broadsword from it and tossed it toward Hendricks. The big man caught it by the handle and took his gun into his left hand. Gard took a broad-bladed axe out of the bag and shouldered the weapon. "But rarely involved in mortal affairs."

"Ms. Raith sent me to the fomor king with documents," Justine said, her voice coming out quietly and rapidly. Her shivering had increased. "Mag made me his prisoner. I escaped with the child. There wasn't time to reach one of my lady's strongholds. I came to you, sir. I beg your protection, as a favor to Ms. Raith."

"I don't grant favors," I said calmly.

Mag entered in the manner so many of these self-absorbed supernatural cretins seem to adore. He blasted the door into a cloud of flying splinters with what I presumed was magic.

For God's sake.

At least the vampires would call for an appointment.

The blast amounted to little debris. After a few visits from Dresden and his ilk, I had invested in cheap, light doors at dramatic (as opposed to tactical) entry points.

The fomor was a pale, repellent humanoid. Seven feet tall, give or take, and distinctly froglike in appearance. He had a bloated belly, legs several inches too long to be proportionately human, and huge feet and hands. He wore a tunic of something that resembled seaweed beneath a long, flapping blue robe covered in the most intricate embroidery I had ever seen. A coronet of coral was bound about his head. His right hand was extended dramatically. He carried a twisted length of wood in his left.

His eyes bulged, jaundice yellow around septic green, and his teeth were rotted and filthy. "You cannot run from me," he said. His wide mouth made the words seem somehow slurred. "You are mine."

Justine looked up at me, evidently too frightened to turn her head, her eyes wide with fear. A sharper contrast would have been hard to manage. "Sir.

Please."

I touched a button on the undersurface of my desk, a motion of less than two inches, and then made a steeple of my hands again as I eyed Mag and said, "Excuse me, sir. This is a private office."

Mag surged forward half a step, his eyes focused on the girl. "Hold your tongue, mortal, if you would keep it."

I narrowed my eyes.

Is it so much to ask for civility?

"Justine," I said calmly, "if you would stand aside, please."

Justine quickly, silently, moved out from between us.

I focused on Mag and said, "They are under my protection."

Mag gave me a contemptuous look and raised the staff. Darkness lashed at me, as if he had simply reached into the floorboards and cracks in the wall and drawn it into a sizzling sphere the size of a bowling ball.

It flickered away to nothingness about a foot in front of my steeped hands.

I lifted a finger and Hendricks shot Mag in the back. Repeatedly.

The fomor went down with a sound like a bubbling teakettle, whipped onto his back as if the bullets had been a minor inconvenience, and raised the stick to point at Hendricks.

Gard's axe smashed it out of his grip, swooped back up to guard, and began to descend again.

"Stop," I said.

Gard's muscles froze just before she would have brought down the axe onto Mag's head. Mag had one hand uplifted, surrounded in a kind of negative haze, his long fingers crooked at odd angles—presumably some kind of mystic defense.

"As a freeholding lord of the Unseelie Accords," I said, "it would be considered an act of war if I killed you out of hand, despite your militant intrusion into my territory." I narrowed my eyes. "However, your behavior gives me ample latitude to invoke the defense of property and self clause. I will leave the decision to you. Continue this asinine behavior, and I will kill you and offer a weregild to your lord, King Corb, in accordance with the conflict resolution guidelines of section two, paragraph four."

As I told you, my lawyers send me endless letters. I speak their language.

Mag seemed to take that in for a moment. He looked at me, then Gard. His eyes narrowed. They tracked back to Hendricks, his head hardly moving, and he seemed to freeze when he saw the sword in Hendricks's hand.

His eyes flicked to Justine and the child and burned for a moment—not with adoration or even simple lust. There was a pure and possessive hunger there, coupled with a need to destroy that which he desired. I have spent my entire life around hard men. I know that form of madness when I see it.

"So," Mag said. His eyes traveled back to me and were suddenly heavy-lidded and calculating. "You are the new mortal lord. We half believed that you must be imaginary. That no one could be as foolish as that."

"You are incorrect," I said. "Moreover, you can't have them. Get out."

Mag stood up. The movement was slow, liquid. His limbs didn't seem to bend the proper way. "Lord Marcone," he said, "this affair is no concern of yours. I only wish to take the slaves."

"You can't have them. Get out."

"I warn you," Mag said. There was an ugly tone in his voice. "If you make me return for her—for them—you will not enjoy what follows."

"I do not require enjoyment to thrive. Leave my domain. I won't ask again."

Hendricks shuffled his feet a little, settling his balance.

Mag gathered himself up slowly. He extended his hand, and the twisted stick leapt from the floor and into his fingers. He gave Gard a slow and well-practiced sneer and said, "Anon, mortal lordling. It is time you learned the truth of the world. It will please me to be your instructor." Then he turned, slow and haughty, and walked out, his shoulders hunching in an odd, unsettling motion as he moved.

"Make sure he leaves," I said quietly.

Gard and Hendricks followed Mag from the room.

I turned my eyes to Justine and the child.

"Mag," I said, "is not the sort of man who is used to disappointment."

Justine looked after the vanished form and then back at me, confusion in her eyes. "That was sorcery. How did you...?"

I stood up from behind my desk and stepped out of the copper circle set into the floor around my chair. It was powered by the sorcerous equivalent of a nine-volt battery, connected to the control on the underside of my desk. Basic magical defense, Gard said. It had seemed like nonsense to me—it clearly was not.

I took my gun from its holster and set it on my desk.

Justine took note of my reply.

Of course, I wouldn't give the personal aide of the most dangerous woman in Chicago information about my magical defenses.

There was something hard and not at all submissive in her eyes. "Thank you, sir, for ..."

"For what?" I said very calmly. "You understand, do you not, what you have done by asking for my help under the Accords?"

"Sir?"

"The Accords govern relations between supernatural powers," I said. "The signatories of the Accords and their named vassals are granted certain rights and obligations—such as offering a warning to a signatory who has trespassed upon another's territory unwittingly before killing him."

"I know, sir," Justine said.

"Then you should also know that you are most definitely not a signatory of the Accords. At best, you qualify in the category of 'servitors and chattel.' At worst, you are considered to be a food animal."

She drew in a sharp breath, her eyes widening—not in any sense of outrage or offense, but in realization. Good. She grasped the realities of the situation.

"In either case," I continued, "you are property. You have no rights in the current situation, in the eyes of the Accords—and more to the point, I have no right to withhold another's rightful property. Mag's behavior provided me with an

excuse to kill him if he did not depart. He will not give me such an opening a second time.”

Justine swallowed and stared at me for a moment. Then she glanced down at the child in her arms. The child clung harder to her and seemed to lean somewhat away from me.

One must admire such acute instincts.

“You have drawn me into a conflict which has nothing to do with me,” I said quietly. “I suggest candor. Otherwise, I will have Mr. Hendricks and Ms. Gard show you to the door.”

“You can’t...” she began, but her voice trailed off.

“I can,” I said. “I am not a humanitarian. When I offer charity it is for tax purposes.”

The room became silent. I was content with that. The child began to whimper quietly.

“I was delivering documents to the court of King Corb on behalf of my lady,” Justine said. She stroked the child’s hair absently. “It’s in the sea. There’s a gate there in Lake Michigan, not far from here.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “You swam?”

“I was under the protection of their courier, going there,” Justine said. “It’s like walking in a bubble of air.” She hitched the child up a little higher on her hip. “Mag saw me. He drove the courier away as I was leaving and took me to his home. There were many other prisoners there.”

“Including the child,” I guessed. Though it probably didn’t sound that way.

Justine nodded. “I... arranged for several prisoners to flee Mag’s home. I took the child when I left. I swam out.”

“So you are, in effect, stolen property in possession of stolen property,” I said. “Novel.”

Gard and Hendricks came back into the office.

I looked at Hendricks. “My people?”

“Tulane’s got a broken arm,” he said. “Standing in that asshole’s way. He’s on the way to the doc.”

“Thank you. Ms. Gard?”

“Mag is off the property,” she said. “He didn’t go far. He’s summoning support now.”

“How much of a threat is he?” I asked. The question was legitimate. Gard and Hendricks had blindsided the inhuman while he was focused upon Justine and the child and while he wasted his leading magical strike against my protective circle. A head-on confrontation against a prepared foe could be a totally different proposition.

Gard tested the edge of her axe with her thumb and drew a smooth stone from her pocket. “Mag is a fomor sorcerer lord of the first rank. He’s deadly—and connected. The fomor could crush you without a serious loss of resources. Confrontation would be unwise.”

The stone made a steely, slithery sound as it glided over the axe’s blade.

“There seems little profit to be had, then,” I said. “It’s nothing personal, Justine. Merely business. I am obliged to return stolen property to signatory members of the Accords.”

Hendricks looked at me sharply. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. I already knew the tone of whatever he would say. *Are there no prisons, perhaps. Or, No man is an island, entire of itself. It tolls for thee.* On and on.

Hendricks has no head for business.

Gard watched me, waiting.

“Sir,” Justine said, her tone measured and oddly formal. “May I speak?”

I nodded.

“She isn’t property,” Justine said, and her voice was low and intense, her eyes direct. “She was trapped in a den of living nightmares, and there was no one to come save her. She would have died there. And I am *not* letting anyone take her back to that hellhole. I will die first.” The young woman set her jaw.

“She is not *property*, Mr. Marcone. She’s a *child*.”

I met Justine’s eyes for a long moment.

I glanced aside at Hendricks. He waited for my decision.

Gard watched me. As ever, Gard watched me.

I looked down at my hands, my fingertips resting together with my elbows propped on the desk.

Business came first. Always.

But I have rules.

I looked up at Justine.

“She’s a child,” I said quietly.

The air in the room snapped tight with tension.

“Ms. Gard,” I said, “please dismiss the contractors for the day, at pay. Then raise the defenses.”

She pocketed the whetstone and strode quickly out, her teeth showing, a bounce in her step.

“Mr. Hendricks, please scramble our troubleshooters. They’re to take positions across the street. Suppressed weapons only. I don’t need patrolmen stumbling around in this. Then ready the panic room.”

Hendricks nodded and got out his cell phone as he left. His huge, stubby fingers flew over its touchscreen as he sent the activation text message.

Looking at him, one would not think him capable of such a thing. But that is Hendricks, generally.

I looked at Justine as I rose and walked to my closet. “You will go with the child into the panic room. It is, with the possible exception of Dresden’s home, the most secure location in the city.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

I took off my coat and hung it up in the closet. I took off my tie and slipped it over the same hanger. I put my cuff links in my coat pocket, rolled up my sleeves, and skinned out of my gun’s holster. Then I slipped on the armored vest made of heavy scales of composite materials joined to sleeves of quite old-fashioned mail. I pulled an old field jacket, olive drab, over the armor, belted it, holstered my sidearm at my side, opposite a combat knife, and took a military-grade assault

shotgun—a weapon every bit as illegal as my pistol in the city of Chicago—from its rack.

“I am not doing it for you, young lady,” I said. “Nor am I doing it for the child.”

“Then why are you doing it?” she asked.

“Because I have rules,” I said.

She shook her head gently. “But you’re a criminal. Criminals don’t have rules. They break them.”

I stopped and looked at her.

Justine blanched and slid a step farther away from me, along the wall. The child made a soft, distressed sound. I beckoned curtly for her to follow me as I walked past her. It took her a moment to do so.

Honestly.

Someone in the service of a vampire ought to have a bit more fortitude.

This panic room looked like every other one I’ve had built: fluorescent lights, plain tile floor, plain dry wall. Two double bunks occupied one end of the room. A business desk and several chairs took up the rest. A miniature kitchen nestled into one corner, opposite the miniature medical station in another.

There was a door to a half-bath and a bank of security monitors on the wall between them. I flicked one switch that activated the entire bank, displaying a dozen views from hidden security cameras.

I gestured for Justine to enter the room. She came in and immediately took a seat on the lower bunk of the nearest bed, still holding the child.

“Mag can find her,” Gard told me when we all rendezvoused outside the panic room. “Once he’s inside the building and gets past the forward area, he’ll be able to track her. He’ll head straight for her.”

“Then we know which way he’ll be moving,” I said. “What did you find out about his support?”

“They’re creatures,” Gard said, “actual mortal beings, though like none you’ve seen before. The fomor twist flesh to their liking and sell the results for favors and influence. It was probably the fomor who created those cat-things the Knights of the Blackened Denarius used.”

I twisted my mouth in displeasure at the name. “If they’re mortal, we can kill them.”

“They’ll die hard,” Gard warned me.

“What doesn’t?” I looked up and down the hallway outside the panic room. “I think the primary defense plan will do.”

Gard nodded. She had attired herself in an armored vest not unlike my own over a long mail shirt. Medieval looking, but then modern armorers haven’t aimed their craft at stopping claws of late. Hendricks, standing watch at the end of the hall, had on an armored vest but was otherwise covered in modified motorcyclist’s armor. He carried an assault shotgun like mine, several hand grenades, and that same broadsword.

“Stay here,” I said to Justine. “Watch the door. If anyone but one of us comes down the stairs, shut it.”

She nodded.

I turned and started walking toward the stairway. I glanced at Gard. "What can we expect from Mag?"

"Pain."

Hendricks grunted. Skeptically.

"He's ancient, devious, and wicked," Gard clarified. "There is an effectively unlimited spectrum of ways in which he might do harm."

I nodded. "Can you offer any specific knowledge?"

"He won't be easy to get to," she said. "The fomor practice entropy magic. They make the antitechnology effect Dresden puts off look like mild sunspot activity. Modern systems are going to experience problems near him."

We started up the stairs. "How long before he arrives?"

From upstairs, there was the crash of breaking plate glass. No alarm went off, but there was a buzzing, sizzling sound and a scream — Gard's outer defenses. Hendricks hit a button on his cell phone and then came with me as I rushed up the remaining stairs to the ground floor.

The lights went out as we went, and Hendricks's phone sputtered out a few sparks. Battery-powered emergency lights flicked on an instant later. Only about half of them functioned, and most of those were behind us.

Mag had waited for nightfall to begin his attack and then crippled our lights. Quite possibly he assumed that the darkness would give him an overwhelming advantage.

The hubris of some members of the supernatural community is astonishing.

The nightvision scopes mounted on my weapon and Hendricks's had been custom-made, based off of designs dating back to World War I, before nightvision devices had married themselves to the electronics revolution. They were heavy and far inferior to modern systems—but they would function in situations where electronic goggles would be rendered into useless junk.

We raised the weapons to our shoulders, lined an eye up with the scopes, and kept moving. We reached the first defensive position, folded out the reinforced composite barriers mounted there, and knelt behind them. The ambient light from the city outside and the emergency lights below us was enough for the scopes to do their jobs. I could make out the outline of the hallway and the room beyond. Sounds of quiet movement came closer.

My heart rate had gone up, but not alarmingly so. My hands were steady. My mouth felt dry, and my body's reaction to the prospect of mortal danger sent ripples of sensation up and down my spine. I embraced the fear and waited.

The fomor's creatures exploded into the hallway on a storm of frenzied roars. I couldn't make out many details. They seemed to have been put together on the chassis of a gorilla. Their heads were squashed, ugly-looking things, with wide-gaping mouths full of sharklike teeth. The sounds they made were deep, with a frenzied edge of madness, and they piled into the corridor in a wave of massive muscle.

"Steady," I murmured.

The creatures lurched as they moved, like cheap toys that had not been assembled properly, but they were fast for all of that. More and more of them flooded into the hallway, and their charge was gaining mass and momentum.

“Steady,” I murmured.

Hendricks grunted. There were no words in it, but he meant, *I know*.

The wave of fomorian beings got close enough that I could see the patches of mold clumping their fur and tendrils of mildew growing upon their exposed skin.

“Fire,” I said.

Hendricks and I opened up.

The new military AA-12 automatic shotguns are not the hunting weapons I first handled in my patriotically delusional youth. They are fully automatic weapons with large circular drums that rather resembled the old tommy guns made iconic by my business predecessors in Chicago. One pulls the trigger and shell after shell slams through the weapon. A steel target hit by bursts from an AA-12 very rapidly comes to resemble a screen door.

And we had two of them.

The slaughter was indescribable. It swept like a great broom down that hallway, tearing and shredding flesh, splattering blood on the walls and painting them most of the way to the ceiling. Behind me, Gard stood ready with a heavy-caliber big-game rifle, calmly gunning down any creature that seemed to be reluctant to die before it could reach our defensive point. We piled the bodies so deep that the corpses formed a barrier to our weapons.

“Hendricks,” I said.

The big man was already reaching for the grenades on his belt. He took one, pulled the pin, cooked it for a slow two count, and then flung it down the hall. We all crouched behind the barriers as the grenade went off with a deafening crunch of shock-wave-driven air.

Hendricks threw another one. He might disapprove of killing, but he did it thoroughly.

When the ringing began to fade from my ears, I heard a sound like raindrops. It wasn't raining, of course—the gunmen in the building across the street had opened fire with silenced weaponry. Bullets whispered in through the windows and hit the floor and walls of the headquarters with innocuous-sounding thumps. Evidently Mag's servitors had been routed and were trying to flee.

An object the size of Hendricks's fist appeared from nowhere and arced cleanly through the air. It landed on the floor precisely between the two sheltering panels, a lump of pink-and-gray coral.

Gard hit me with a shoulder and drove me to the ground even as she shouted, “Down!”

The piece of coral didn't explode. There was a whispering sound, and hundreds of tiny holes appeared in the bloodstained walls and ceiling. Gard let out a pained grunt. My left calf jerked as something pierced it and burned as though the wound had been filled with salt.

I checked Hendricks. One side of his face was covered in a sheet of blood. Small tears were visible in his leathers, and he was beginning to bleed through the holes.

“Get him,” I said to Gard, rising, as another coral spheroid rose into the air.

Before it could get close enough to be a threat, I blew it to powder with my shotgun. And the next and the next, while Gard dropped her rifle, got a shoulder under one of Hendricks's, and helped him to his feet as if he'd been her weight

instead of two hundred and seventy pounds of muscle. She started down the stairs.

A fourth sphere came accompanied by mocking laughter, and when I pulled the trigger again, the weapon didn't function. Empty. I slapped the coral device out of the air with the shotgun's barrel and flung myself backward, hoping to clear the level of the floor on the stairwell before the pseudo-grenade detonated. I did not quite make it. Several objects struck my chest and arms, and a hot blade slipped across my unscarred ear, but the armor turned the truly dangerous projectiles.

I broke my arm tumbling backward down the stairs.

More laughter followed me down, but at least the fomor wasn't spouting some kind of ridiculous monologue.

"I did my best," came Mag's voice. "I gave you a chance to return what was mine. But no. You couldn't keep yourself from interfering in my affairs, from stealing my property. And so now you will reap the consequences of your foolishness, little mortal..."

There was more, but there is hardly a need to go into details. Given a choice between that egocentric drivel and a broken arm, I prefer the latter. It's considerably less excruciating.

Gard hauled me to my feet by my coat with her spare hand. I got under the stunned Hendricks's other arm and helped them both down the rest of the stairs. Justine stood in the doorway of the safe room, at the end of the hallway of flickering lights, her face white-lipped but calm.

Gard helped me get Hendricks to the door of the room and turned around. "Close the door. I may be able to discourage him out here."

"Your home office would be annoyed with me if I wasted your life on such a low-percentage proposition," I said. "We stick to the plan."

The valkyrie eyed me. "Your arm is broken."

"I was aware, thank you," I said. "Is there any reason the countermeasure shouldn't work?"

Mag was going on about something, coming down the steps one at a time, making a production of every footfall. I ignored the ass.

"None that I know of," Gard admitted. "Which is not the same answer as 'no.'"

"Sir," Justine said.

"We planned for this—or something very like it. We don't split up now. End of discussion. Help me with Hendricks."

"Sir," Justine said.

I looked up to see Mag standing on the landing, cloaked in random shadows, smiling. The emergency lights on the stairwell blew out with a melodramatic shower of dying sparks.

"Ah," I said. I reached inside the safe-room door, found the purely mechanical pull-cord wrapped unobtrusively around a nail head on the wall, and gave it a sharp jerk.

It set off the antipersonnel mines built into the wall of the landing.

There were four of them, which meant that a wash of fire and just under three-thousand-round shot acquainted themselves with the immediate vicinity of the landing and with Mag. A cloud of flame and flying steel enveloped the fomor, but

at the last instant the swirling blackness around him rose up like a living thing, forming a shield between Mag and the oncoming flood of destruction.

The sound of the explosions was so loud that it demolished my hearing for a moment. It began to return to me as the cloud of smoke and dust on the landing began to clear. I could hear a fire alarm going off.

Mag, smudged and blackened with residue but otherwise untouched, made an irritated gesture, and the fire alarm sparked and fizzled—but not before setting off the automatic sprinklers. Water began pouring down from spigots in the ceiling.

Mag looked up at the water and then down at me, and his too-wide smile widened even more. “Real y?” he asked. “Water? Did you actually think water would be a barrier to the magic of a fomor lord?”

Running water was highly detrimental to mortal magic, or so Gard informed me, whether it was naturally occurring or not. The important element was quantity. Enough water would ground magic just as it could conduct electricity and short-circuit electronics. Evidently Mag played by different rules.

Mag made a point to continue down the stairs at exactly the same pace. He was somewhat hampered in that several of the stairs had been torn up rather badly in the explosion, but he made it to the hallway. Gard took up a position in the middle of the hallway, her axe held straight up beside her in both arms like a baseball player’s bat.

I helped Hendricks into the safe room and dumped him on a bunk, out of any line of fire from the hallway. Justine took one look at his face and hurried over to the medical station, where she grabbed a first-aid kit. She rushed back to Hendricks’s side. She broke open the kit and started laying out the proper gear for getting a clear look at a bloody wound and getting the bleeding stopped. Her hands flew with precise speed. She’d had some form of training.

From the opposite bunk, the child watched Justine with wide blue eyes. She was naked and had been crying. The tears were still on her little cheeks.

Even now, her lower lip had begun to tremble.

But so far as anyone else knew, I was made of stone.

I turned and crossed the room. I sat down at the desk, a copy of the one in my main office. I put my handgun squarely in front of me. The desk was positioned directly in line with the door to the panic room. From behind the desk, I could see the entire hallway clearly.

Mag stepped forward and moved a hand as though throwing something. I saw nothing, but Gard raised her axe in a blocking movement, and there was a flash of light, and the image of a Norse rune, or something like it, was burned onto my retina. The outer edge of Gard’s mail sleeve on her right arm abruptly turned black and fell to dust, so that the sleeve split and dangled open.

Gard took a grim step back as Mag narrowed his jaundiced eyes and lifted the crooked stick. Something that looked like the blend of a lightning bolt and an eel lashed through the air toward Gard, but she caught it on the broad blade of her axe, and there was another flash of light, another eye-searing rune. I heard her cry out, though, and saw that the edges of her fingernails had been burned black.

Step by step she fell back, while Mag hammered at her with things that made no sense, many of which I could not even see. Each time, the rune-magic of that axe defeated the attack—and each time, it seemed to cost her something. A lightly

singed face here. A long, shallow cut upon her newly bared arm there. And the runes, I saw, were each in different places on the axe, being burned out one by one. Gard had a finite number of them.

As Gard's heels touched the threshold of the safe room, Mag let out a howl and threw both hands out ahead of him. An unseen force lifted Gard from her feet and flung her violently across the room, over my desk, and into the wall. She hit with bone-crushing force and slid down limply.

I faced the inhuman sorcerer alone.

Mag walked slowly and confidently into my safe room and stared at me across my desk. He was breathing heavily, from exertion or excitement or both.

He smiled, slowly, and waved his hand again. An unpleasant shimmer went through the air, and I glanced down to see rust forming on the exposed metal of my gun, while cracking began to spread through the plastic grip.

"Go ahead, mortal," Mag said, drawing out the words. "Pick up the gun. Try it. The crafting of the weapon is fine, mortal, but you are not the masters of the world that you believe yourselves to be. Even today's cleverest smiths are no match for the magic of the fomor."

I inclined my head in agreement. "Then I suppose," I said, "that we'll just have to do this old school."

I drew the eighteenth-century German dragoon pistol from the open drawer beside my left hand, aimed, and fired. The ancient flintlock snapped forward, ignited the powder in the pan, and roared, a wash of unnatural blue white fire blazing forth from the antique weapon. I almost fancied that I could see the bullet, spinning and tumbling, blazing with its own tiny rune.

Though Mag's shadows leapt up to defend him, he had expended enormous energy moving through the building, hurling attack after attack at us. More energy had to be used to overcome the tremendous force of the claymores that had exploded virtually in his face. Perhaps, at his full strength, at the height of his endurance, his powers would have been enough to turn even the single, potent attack that had been designed to defeat them.

From the beginning, the plan had been to wear him down.

The blue bolt of lead and power from the heavy old flintlock pierced Mag's defenses and body in the same instant and with the same contemptuous energy.

Mag blinked at me, then lowered his head to goggle at the smoking hole in his chest as wide as my thumb. His mouth moved as he tried to gabble something, but no sound came out.

"Idiot," I said coldly. "It will be well worth the weregild to be rid of you."

Mag lurched toward me for a moment, intent upon saying something, but the fates spared me from having to endure any more of him. He collapsed to the floor before he could finish speaking.

I eyed my modern pistol, crusted with rust and residue, and decided not to try it. I kept a spare .45 in the downstairs desk in any case. I took it from another drawer, checked it awkwardly one-handed, and then emptied the weapon into Mag's head and chest.

I am the one who taught Hendricks to be thorough.

I looked up from Mag's ruined form to find Justine staring at me, frozen in the middle of wrapping a bandage around my second's head.

“How is he?” I asked calmly.

Justine swallowed. She said, “He m-may need stitches for this scalp wound. I think he has a concussion. The other wounds aren’t bad. His armor stopped most of the fragments from going in.”

“Gard?” I asked without looking over my shoulder. The valkyrie had an incredible ability to resist and recover from injury.

“Be sore for a while,” she said, the words slurred. “Give me a few minutes.”

“Justine, perhaps you will set my arm and splint it,” I said. “We will need to abandon this renovation, I’m afraid, Gard. Where’s the thermite?”

“In your upstairs office closet, right where you left it,” she said in a very slightly aggrieved tone.

“Be a dear and burn down the building,” I said.

She appeared beside my desk, looking bruised, exhausted, and functional. She lifted both eyebrows. “Was that a joke?”

“Apparently,” I said. “Doubtless the result of triumph and adrenaline.”

“My word,” she said. She looked startled.

“Get moving,” I told her. “Make the fire look accidental. I need to contact the young lady’s patron so that she can be delivered safely back into her hands.

Call Dr. Schulman as well. Tell him that Mr. Hendricks and I will be visiting him shortly.” I pursed my lips. “And steak, I think. I could use a good steak. The Pump Room should do for the three of us, eh? Ask them to stay open an extra half an hour.”

Gard showed me her teeth in a flash. “Well,” she said, “it’s no mead hall. But it will do.”

I put my house in order. In the end, it took less than half an hour. The troubleshooters made sure the fomorian creatures were dragged inside, then vanished. Mag’s body had been bagged and transferred, to be returned to his watery kin, along with approximately a quarter of a million dollars in bullion, the price required in the Accords for the weregild of a person of Mag’s stature.

Justine was ready to meet a car that was coming to pick her up, and Hendricks was already on the way to Schulman’s attentions. He’d seemed fine by the time he left, growling at Gard as she fussed over him.

I looked around the office and nodded. “We know the defense plan has some merit,” I said. I hefted the dragoon pistol. “I’ll need more of those bullets.”

“I was unconscious for three weeks after scribing the rune for that one,” Gard replied. “To say nothing of the fact that the bullets themselves are rare.

That one killed a man named Nelson at Trafalgar.”

“How do you know?”

“I took it out of him,” she said. “Men of his caliber are few and far between. I’ll see what I can do.” She glanced at Justine. “Sir?”

“Not just yet,” I said. “I will speak with her alone for a moment, please.”

She nodded, giving Justine a look that was equal parts curiosity and warning. Then she departed.

I got up and walked over to the girl. She was holding the child against her again. The little girl had dropped into an exhausted sleep.

“So,” I said quietly. “Lara Raith sent you to Mag’s people. He happened to abduct you. You happened to escape from him—despite the fact that he seemed to be holding other prisoners perfectly adequately—and you left carrying the child. And, upon emerging from Lake Michigan, you happened to be nearby, so you came straight here.”

“Yes,” Justine said quietly.

“Coincidences, coincidences,” I said. “Put the child down.”

Her eyes widened in alarm.

I stared at her until she obeyed.

My right arm was splinted and in a sling. With my left hand, I reached out and flipped open her suit jacket, over her left hip, where she’d been clutching the child all evening.

There was an envelope in a plastic bag protruding from the jacket’s interior pocket. I took it.

She made a small sound of protest and aborted it partway.

I opened the bag and the envelope and scanned over the paper inside.

“These are account numbers,” I said quietly. “Security passwords. Stolen from Mag’s home, I suppose?”

She looked up at me with very wide eyes.

“Dear child,” I said, “I *am* a criminal. One very good way to cover up one crime is to commit another, more obvious one.” I glanced down at the sleeping child again. “Using a child to cover your part of the scheme. Quite cold-blooded, Justine.”

“I freed all of Mag’s prisoners to cover up the theft of his records at my lady’s bidding,” she said quietly. “The child was... not part of the plan.”

“Children frequently aren’t,” I said.

“I took her out on my own,” she said. “She’s free of that place. She will stay that way.”

“To be raised among the vampires?” I asked. “Such a lovely child will surely go far.”

Justine grimaced and looked away. “She was too small to swim out on her own. I couldn’t leave her.”

I stared at the young woman for a long moment. Then I said, “You might consider speaking to Father Forthill at St. Mary of the Angels. The Church appears to have some sort of program to place those endangered by the supernatural into hiding. I do not recommend you mention my name as a reference, but perhaps he could be convinced to help the child.”

She blinked at me, several times. Then she said quietly, “You, sir, are not very much like I thought you were.”

“Nor are you. Agent Justine.” I took a deep breath and regarded the child again. “At least we accomplished something today.” I smiled at Justine. “Your ride should be here by now. You may go.”

She opened her mouth and reached for the envelope.

I slipped it into my pocket. “Do give Lara my regards. And tell her that the next time she sends you out to steal honey, she should find someone else to kill the bees.” I gave her a faint smile. “That will be all.”

Justine looked at me. Then her lips quivered up into a tiny, amused smile. She bowed her head to me, collected the child, and walked out, her steps light.

I debated putting a bullet in her head but decided against it. She had information about my defenses that could leave them vulnerable—and more to the point, she knew that they were effective. If she should speak of today's events to Dresden...

Well. The wizard would immediately recognize that the claymores, the running water, and the magic-defense-piercing bullet had not been put into place to counter Mag or his odd folk at all.

They were there to kill Harry Dresden.

And they worked. Mag had proven that. An eventual confrontation with Dresden was inevitable—but murdering Justine would guarantee it happened immediately, and I wasn't ready for that, not until I had rebuilt the defenses in the new location.

Besides, the young woman had rules of her own. I could respect that.

I would test myself against Dresden in earnest one day—or he against me. Until then, I had to gather as many resources to myself as possible. And when the day of reckoning came, I had to make sure it happened in a place where, despite his powers, he would no longer have the upper hand.

Like everything else.

Location, location, location.

