

## Chapter Nine – “Cali vamps tan”

“You know, when people on the force told me they thought you might be a jinx, I had hoped they were kidding,” Detective Gao said to me. “But no, I should have heeded the advice of my elders and been more wary of the sort of mayhem and carnage you bring in your wake.”

“Hey hey hey, this one ain’t on me, Gao,” I said to him. “Well.” I scowled for a second. “That’s not entirely true, I suppose. It’s *mostly* not on me. The only things that I contributed here are the shattered window and the two living secretaries, instead of this being a triple homicide. Not that anyone’ll say thanks for that. How’re they doing, anyway?”

“Astonished you’re alive, more than anything,” Gao said with a roll of his eyes. “I had to bust in a window a couple of floors down to give you a plausible alibi. Said a wind gust shoved you and the guy you fell out with back into the building and through a window.”

“And they bought it?”

“It’s more likely than ‘He used a magic spell to stop himself from turning into sidewalk pizza,’ don’tcha think?”

I nodded with a grim smile. It was the most useful tool those of us who protected the Veil had – people’s inability to believe in what they *know* for a *fact* they saw. “Yeah, we get that a lot in my line of work. But you didn’t answer my question. How are they?”

“Their boss was just shot and his corpse was thrown out a window,” Gao said to me sarcastically. “They’re doing just peachy. They’re in fucking shock, Sexton. The fuck you think they’re doing? And what do you mean this one ain’t on you? You’re *here*. You were literally outside of the room when the man got shot, and I didn’t see a second body down there on the ground floor. You’re lucky one of the secretaries basically ironclad’s you being out of the room when the shots were fired, or I’d probably be hauling your ass down to the station right now.”

“Wrong place, wrong time, Detective,” I told him with a shrug. “That’s all you got on me here. I was coming to see the man with good news, and to offer him a promotion. Scout’s honor.”

“So, wait, you’re telling me this one’s tied to the other stiff you stumbled across a couple of days ago? She gets killed and this guy’s next in line to the throne or something?”

“Without getting too into the weeds, Detective, that other stiff held an extremely important job, and when she died, it fell on me to find a replacement to assume those job responsibilities.”

“Seems like somebody didn’t like your choice of who to take over the gig, huh?” Gao asked me.

“I’d been thinking along similar lines myself, Detective,” I told him, rubbing the back of my neck. “Although this guy was by no means a slam dunk for the position. Sure, he’d gotten a handful of key recommendations, but I hadn’t met him myself to size him up. That’s what this was supposed to be – me dropping by his office, getting a chance to meet him, take the measure of the man and then offer him the gig, if he wanted it, that was.”

“There a chance he wouldn’t want it?”

“Probably not,” I said calmly. “It brings with it a lot of passive income for not a lot of work. Sure, there’s responsibilities that can be a bit troublesome here and there, but for the most part, it’s easy money and a step up in respect, and that’s the kind of win-win most people love hearing about. It’s a good chunk

of change, but I wouldn't think it's worth killing folk over. There are a *lot* easier ways to make a buck in my community, and most of them don't involve murder."

"You wanna tell me about the guy who went out the window with you?"

"Didn't get all that great a look at him before he transformed into a bat and flew off into the night," I said to him. "Tall build. Long, black, stringy hair. Pale white skin. Fangs. Did I mention the whole 'transformed into a bat' thing?"

"Should I put out a bolo for a V.E. Tempes?" he asked me as dryly as he could.

"Good to see you've got your sense of humor about this," I said with a smirk. "This is going to be one of those cases where you're just going to attribute it to a random John Doe you get in the morgue in the next day or two, somebody who fell out a window and then died as the result of his fall. Worry about me trying to do the whole law and order thing here."

"Maybe I skip all that and just stamp it with the little crossed revolver stamp my boss gave me on the first day of work that I swore I'd never use," Gao grumbled. "She told me that there would come a day when I'd get a case where I'd know what truly happened, but that I couldn't possibly put it in my report for fear of being committed to the nuthouse. Every so often, I'd come across a cold case file with that little insignia stamped on it, crossed old school revolvers, and I'd wonder what the hell had really happened. Guess I'm finally having to deal with those kinds of cases myself."

"You had to know the day would come," I told him. "But hey, you're closing cases. You can close this one and the DiMaggio case. Chalk it up to the same John Doe. I'd originally figured that was just a crime of opportunity, somebody breaking into her office, not really knowing who she was, but that murder and this one? Definitely connected."

"Could be coincidence."

"I don't believe in coincidence, and I don't think you do either, Detective," I said to him. "No no, either there's a hidden connection between these two or the obvious connection has details I'm missing and need to find out."

"Not to be *that* asshole, but how's *my* case coming?"

I sighed, sitting back down in the little lobby chair I'd been waiting in when I'd heard the shots fired about an hour ago, looking up at him. "So, she *didn't* run off on you. That much I'm pretty sure of. And while I don't have any direct proof that she's tied up in all of this, I've got this gut feeling that I can't quite shake that there's some kind of link between all of this mess that I'm missing. Some piece of the puzzle I haven't found yet that'll connect all the various pieces. Your girl's Queen thinks pretty highly of you, though, and the marriage had been sanctified by their internal government body, so whatever's happened to her, they probably aren't involved, I think. Her body hasn't turned up yet, and her Queen hasn't declared her dead, and the Queen'd know if she kicked it, so that's proof positive that she's still alive, wherever she is." I shrugged a little. "Not the update you wanted to hear, I know, but I did promise I'd give you the truth, as uncomfortable as it might be."

Gao nodded, rubbing his chin. He hadn't shaved since I'd seen him last, and he was starting to get scruffy in all the worst ways. The bags under his eyes were deeper set, and the despair had begun to creep in around the edges. "How sure are you that she's still alive?" His voice was pleading for good news, something he could cling onto as a beacon of hope.

“98%,” I told him, putting forth as much confidence as I could. “The death of a leannán sídhe can’t pass the Queen’s notice, and if she had died, the Queen would’ve contacted me to let me know. So, unless she was taken off this continent before she was killed, she’s still alive. Take comfort in that. Besides, if she’s not dead now, then whoever’s taken her has a need for keeping her alive, and that doesn’t seem like it’ll end any time soon. I’ll keep working the case, and sooner or later, I’ll figure out who’s taken her, why and how to get her back. I can’t guarantee you’ll be happy with the end result, because without knowing why they took her, I can’t predict if her usefulness is going to evaporate or not before I get there. But it hasn’t so far, and you should take that as a good sign.”

“Alright, Gunslinger,” Gao said to me. “We’ll do it your way for now. But I want it known that I’m way more concerned about her safety than I am helping you cover shit like this up, at least until you’ve honored your end of the deal. I’m paying for results, not speculation.”

I smirked, giving him a little nod. “There you go. Now you’re getting into the spirit of the sort of bullshit palace intrigue you’re going to be dealing with for the rest of your life. Once you catch your first case like this, it’s like a cancer you can’t ever fully cut out. You’ll go weeks, maybe even months without an odd case catching your attention, but then they’ll start creeping back in again. This is your life now. Sorry you had to stumble down here into the muck and the quagmire, but it’s good to have another ally on the force.”

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that, Sexton? Get outta here, before I find a reason to forget that I’m paying you to be an asshole.”

I left Gao behind, knowing he’d be miserable cleaning up the mess I’d inadvertently made for him, but that he’d also definitely taken some comfort in the fact that his girl was still alive. That part I hadn’t been lying about, thankfully. As complicated as his mess was, I didn’t want to let him down, and I still had the title of Regent of Tides to bestow on somebody. I was supposed to be getting *rid* of problems, not *adding* to them.

For the time being, though, I needed to sit and gather my thoughts, so I headed over towards one of my favorite restaurants, The Stinking Rose. It’s a Bay Area institution, and specializes in garlic recipes, thus the name. As I ordered myself an early dinner, I pulled out the lists of names that my colleagues had sent me, because I suspected that the person responsible for the two murders was someone on this list, and the rest of the names on the list could be next in line to get bumped off.

None of the people on the list struck me as vindictive power-hungry backstabbing assholes, but then again, I didn’t really *know* a lot of the people on the list that well. The Dark Docks had done an incredible job of being vital to the region and yet somehow had evaded anyone giving it serious thought for decades. It had just been doing business as usual, and without much in the way of scrutiny.

Perhaps I was going to have to be the scrutinous eye.

The next thing I did while the staff continued to bring me course after delicious course of garlicky pasta was take out my sketch pad and pencil. One of the things that my father had always been impressed with about me was my ability to remember what I’d seen and sketch it out later. So I began drawing the vampire I had seen standing over Aquino’s body, committing each detail slowly to paper.

It was a time-consuming process, but it let me focus on all the details and try and discern what I could about the vampire in question. He was utterly pale, which meant it was unlikely he was local. I know, there’s a myth about all vampires being alabaster white, but if you ever take the time to get to know a vampire, you’ll find a lot of mythology is wrong. Vampires don’t have any problem going out during the

daytime. Oh, it's not their *preferred* time, but that's because it's harder to conceal munching on someone's carotid artery during the daytime than it is at night. But out here?

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There was also something about the guy's coat – nothing local, Russian or at least eastern European. Something heavy and designed for serving one's country out in the middle of the fucking snow and ice. It was cold just to look at the fucking thing. I committed its massive cloth folds to paper, and then I remembered how I'd only take a quick glance at the man's boots, but they were massive, hulking things, the perfect accompaniment to the jacket, leather that had seen mud caked on them so often that the owner had given up on the idea of polish and had resorted to just washing them off now and again instead.

Finally, the last detail that had jumped out at me was the gun. It was a snub-nosed .38 Special. I hadn't seen one in a while. Sure, back in the '60s and '70s they were everywhere, but they'd become less common over recent years, people preferring automatic weapons rather than a cylinder with only six bullets in it. The service revolver had been out of fashion for some time, and the gun the guy was holding had certainly seen better days. It hadn't been bought locally – that was that guy's personal gun, and he must've always kept it with him.

This meant out of town, but thankfully, I had my contacts inside of the vampire scene. It was getting to be early evening, which meant they'd all be up and at them, and it was a Friday, which meant the city would be bustling with life tonight and not a complete ghost town like it typically was on weeknights. That meant it would be easier to grill my contacts.

There were a lot of vampires in town I could go and talk to, but the softest target would be to go and see Ali. Ali Chen ran one of the feeding brothels in town that existed somewhere between the grey and the midnight, but kept their noses clean enough to fall within the accords. Plus, Ali had gone out of her way several times to stay on my good side, so I'd made sure that as long as they adhered to the strict bylaws of feeder brothels, they didn't get bothered.

Ali's Artery didn't advertise anywhere, didn't have any signage marking it off, and, in fact, could've been just another anonymous building in San Francisco's Chinatown district, but the building housed a dozen 'feeder' rooms, and employed close to a hundred 'professional meals.' That'll make more sense a little later.

When I got to the door, Felix was trying to be as indiscreet as a bouncer can be standing outside of a gate, but he smiled a little when he saw me. He was six foot tall and built purely out of muscle and leather, like a vampire Hell's Angel. "Hey Dale, what's happening?" he said to me, holding out a fist, which I bumped with my own.

"Ali around tonight?"

"Yeah, we've got problem with a meal gone off," Felix said to me. "Ali could probably use a hand with it, if you're looking for something to trade her."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a crisp hundred-dollar bill, tucking it into Felix's hand. "That's why I like you, Felix. You're always watching out for people."

"I know who my friends are, Dale," Felix said, squirreling the bill away before moving to open the gate. As he did, he reached under his jacket and pulled out a walkie-talkie, bringing it up to his lips as he clicked it on. "One coming in. Not a client. It's the Gunslinger, here to see the boss." He clicked off the walkie and holstered it back on his hip. "You should be good to go."

I stepped through the open gate and down a very steep set of stairs leading into the bowels of the building, walking down a very long dark hallway with a single lightbulb doing a piss poor job of illuminating the space. There were cameras up above me, watching my every move, making sure I was who I said I was. When I reached the end the hallway, a single door awaited me, with a small panel and a solitary button next to it. I pushed the up button and the tiny elevator opened. The elevator into the place couldn't fit more than four people in it, but thankfully I had the ride to myself. There were only two buttons to push, Out, the floor I was on, and In, the floor at the top. I pushed In and the elevator closed and began to rise in that terrifying way that only a hundred-year-old elevator can.

Once at the top of the three-story building, the elevator opened and let me out into the small parlor area where the punters came in and screened their meals before they sat down to eat. See, vampires need to feed on human blood, and while some vamps don't mind drinking blood from a blood bank, most prefer warm, fresh blood, drained straight from the source. Now, it's not all that difficult to do that without killing the source, as long as the vamp is being careful, considerate and doesn't get a big head about it, and the person being fed upon enjoys the experience.

Ali's Artery is a brothel where instead of sex, clients are coming in for blood. 'Meals,' as the people were called, knew what they were getting into, and could be fed upon once a week or so, being rotated out after that to let them heal up. Some people danced naked for money. Some people traded sex for cash. These people just had more literal skin in the game.

Usually when a client came in here, the madam on duty would bring out a laptop with all the various options on offer. Feeding on a person isn't just a simple transaction to a vampire – oh no, I've heard it described as if making a wine selection. You had to know what you were getting into when you fed on someone, and to cultivate their emotions to get exactly what you wanted out of the meal.

And instead of the madam on duty, Ali herself was waiting for me in the parlor, looking very much the woman in charge. She was only a hair's breadth above 5', dressed in a slinky red and black silk cheong dress with an intricate dragon pattern running from her neckline all the way down to her ankles, a long slit up the side exposing more than plenty of her elegant thighs. Her black hair was done up in a bun, held into place with chopsticks. She looked just about old enough to be a student at one of the local colleges, even though she was in actuality close to a hundred years old. "Well well well, look who's come walking into my joint," Ali said with a dry laugh. "I'm starting to think you really are psychic, and whenever someone's thinking, 'Gee, I really could use the Gunslinger's services right now,' you just mysteriously appear out of the fog."

"I should be so lucky," I told her with a smile, moving over to give her a hug. I was going to kiss her on the cheek, but she turned her head and pressed her lips against mine for a moment before pulling back, a wry smirk on her lips.

"I always wanted to do that," she said, licking her lips. "So tell me why you're *actually* here and then I can offer up what the cost of that is with the thing I need done."

"How do you know I'll do the thing you need done?" I asked her.

"Because you're practically a Boy Scout, Gunslinger," she said, moving over to the bar in the little parlor area, sitting on a stool, patting the one next to it for me to join her. "And you love helping people. That's what my ask is. Helping someone. How about yours?"

I reached into my satchel and pulled out the sketch I'd made earlier. "New vamp in town, fucking my shit up, causing all sorts of problems," I said, sliding her the piece of paper. "I need to find him and

deal with him. He's killed at least one person, more than likely a couple more beyond that. Not to mention throwing me out of a window, which, y'know, I take personally."

"Turned into a bat and flew off on you, did he?"

"Tale as old as time," I grumbled. "You know him?"

"I don't personally know him, no, but I'm sure I can find out who he is while you're solving my issue here," Ali said, taking the sheet of paper from me. "What I need from you is to figure out why one of my meals doesn't taste the way it's supposed to."

"You're sure they're here voluntarily? A couple of times your recruiters have used the thrall a bit too hard on them. You know that always leads to bitter meals, which is why you aren't supposed to do it," I said to her. "I know, I know, it's a dumb question, but when you're troubleshooting, it doesn't hurt by going over the obvious things."

"She's here voluntarily, although when she's being fed on, she's under the thrall, with her permission, of course. That shouldn't be spoiling the taste," she said to me. "Her name is Keegan, she's here from Kansas, and she was recruited for us by Arturo."

I rolled my eyes a little bit, shaking my head. "There's your first problem right there," I said. "I've warned you about Arturo before. He's a hammer in a job where you want a scalpel. I'll give you ten-to-one odds he screwed something up in the onboarding."

"You just don't like him because he dated one of your exes."

I smirked, rolling my eyes. "Everyone's dated one of my exes," I shot off casually. "I bet you've been banging someone I dated at some point in your busy social life. So, no, I don't hold that against him. What I *do* hold against him is that he's sloppy with his work. Let me see her file."

Ali passed over a folder to me, which I opened to find a headshot of a cheery, pretty Midwestern blonde in a bikini, sitting on Ocean Beach, looking out over the Pacific, a surfing board by her side, her hair tugged back into a ponytail. He was surprised she wasn't wearing a wetsuit, but decided the board was more of a prop for the shot. He turned past the headshot and read into her profile. Age: 23. Blood type: O+. Point of Origin: Council Grove, Kansas. Start of service: Two weeks ago. Likes: Masochism, subjugation, degradation, supernatural elements. Dislikes: Wimps, passive partners, romance. Recruited by: Arturo.

"What do you think?" Ali asked me.

"What's the problem, specifically?"

"She has a bitter taste to her, meaning the experience isn't to her liking, although she's not telling us, which means it's something we're doing wrong and she can't explain to us," Ali said. "You want to go have a run through with her, see if you can spot what we're missing? She's fine with servicing a man or woman's normal needs, in addition to working us with more sanguine pursuits."

"The price of you identifying my mark, huh?"

Ali smirked, rolling her eyes back at me. "Like you mind fucking a pretty girl."

"Yeah, alright," I said. "Let me go talk to her at least and sort out what your problem is while you're trying to locate who my killer is, considering he's one of your kind."

“You’re sure of that?”

“Saw him bat out right in front of me.”

“Can’t imagine someone dumb enough to not turn tail and run as soon as you drew a SoulEnder on them, but I bet if I dig deep enough, I’ll find them.”

“Yeah, okay then.” I sighed. “Let me go give her a rundown, and I’ll have your answer in half an hour or so.”

“Don’t rush on my account,” she said. “I might have to call in some markers. If you want to have a bit of fun with her, do so. She’ll only thank you for it, if you’re getting it right. She’s a bit shaken up, though, right now. Afraid we’re going to shitcan her, because she’s spoilt. I’m hoping you can correct that for our sake and for hers.”

“Where is she?”

“Room 3B, just down the hall on the right.”

“Back soon enough,” I said as I got up off the stool and started walking down the hallway. The Artery doubled as a brothel when the vampire population was light, and so the SFPD looked the other way, and business kept rolling, whether vamps were around or not, and one of the Gunslinger’s responsibilities was to make sure nobody was being trafficked. Once a year or so, I would come in, choose a woman or man at random, and then just screen them to make sure they were here of their own volition, and not compelled to be here. Ali was adamant about that kind of thing, which was one of the reasons I liked her.

I headed down the hall and was about to knock on the door when I found it partially open, so I stepped inside. There was Keegan, sitting in a red silk nightie, sniffing, holding tissues to her face. There were two small red dots on her neck that had immediately scabbed over as soon as the vamp had taken his fangs out, but still had a couple of blood trails running down to her collarbone. “Oh God, you’re here to fire me, aren’t you?” she said to me, fear in her eyes.

“Relax, honey,” I said to her with a soft smile. “I’m here to help get you back on track.”

“Really? Thank God! I need this fucking job, and I like the whole vampire thing, and the money’s really gr—”

“Silence,” I said to her and watched her fall deadly silent. “You were recruited by Arturo?”

“Yes sir,” she said to me, and I could see a shiver run down her spine.

“You like being fed upon?”

“Yes sir.”

“Do they fuck you when they feed?”

“I’ve been fed upon twice, sir. One time I was fucked beforehand. The other was going to fuck me afterward, but both people stopped feeding prematurely,” she said with a frown. “They said something was wrong and I tasted... off.”

“Mmm. That’s why I’m here,” I said, reaching into my satchel, pulling out a small copper bracelet. “Here, put this on.”

“But I—”

“No arguing.”

“Yes sir.”

She affixed the bracelet to her right wrist, and I felt a small shudder down my spine as I was connected to her nervous system. The problem with this kind of thing was that people sometimes false self-reported about what they liked, because they were trying to satisfy their handlers. The problem was that if things crossed into uncomfotability, then the taste of the blood soured, and the vamps didn't like how it tasted. The old saying is you only feed on the willing, but that was harder these days, because vamps weren't allowed to thrall people who weren't violent criminals, and so they needed not only willing, but eager participants.

“Kneel, slut,” I told her, and felt a positive tingle running up my back. So we were on the right track, and she did like being ordered around, and probably liked being talked down to.

“Yes sir,” she said, as she slipped off the bed and down onto her knees as I closed the door to her room, just so that we weren't interrupted. I didn't expect any punters to walk by, but I had to be sure of these sorts of things.

“Strip,” I said to her and she pulled off the nightie. One of her nipples was bruised purple, and I glanced at it, as it seemed like she wasn't sure what to do with it. “You seem to have been injured.”

“It's nothing, sir.”

I reached down and touched the bruised nipple and she winced, and I felt a negative tingle flushing through me. Then I moved my hand away and pinched her unbruised nipple, not so hard as to bruise, but enough for her definitely feel the protest of her nerves, and yet, the tingle turned back towards positive again.

‘Idiot,’ I thought to myself. ‘He's not adjusted for scaling. Fucking unforced rookie error.’

When I said Arturo was a hammer in a job that required a scalpel, I hadn't been being snarky for effect. Arturo was just smart enough to find out what turned someone on but wasn't smart enough to see if there was a cap on it. The girl was a pain slut, but in moderation and with a lower max than her partners had expected. Both the people who'd been feeding on her before had probably gone too far, and when that threshold was crossed, her blood started to curdle to their tastes. And, knowing Arturo, he probably hadn't gone down the line far enough during her recruiting to *find* that cap, so it was up to me to learn where the lines were, since it was clear Keegan wasn't going to say what they were.

“What is your safeword, bitch?” I asked her.

“This girl does not have one, sir,” she said, not looking up at me, her eyes trained on her hands.

I reached down and grabbed her chin and pulled her head to tilt it up to look at me. “Do you want to stay here and be fed on, slut, or do you want me to have them throw you back like an unpleasant fish?”

There were tears in her eyes. “This girl wishes to stay, sir.”

“Then you are going to pick a safeword right now, and you are going to get it ingrained inside of your empty-headed skull that when the pain has crossed from something you enjoy to something that no longer sparks pleasure, you will need to use that safeword, even if it is just to get your partner to back



down some,” I told her, making her stare up at me. The angle gave me a definite feeling of power, which I was using to make the point crystal clear to her. “When your body is feeling more pain than it is pleasure, you ignorant slut, it spoils the taste of your blood to vampires, which is why the two times someone’s fed on you, they’ve been unable to complete their feeding. They were both too rough, weren’t they?”

“They... they bruised this girl, sir,” she said, tears in her eyes. “But she did not wish to offend.”

I moved my hand from her chin up to wipe the tears away comfortably. “The only way this works is if you are genuinely enjoying yourself, girl,” I said to her. “No play acting. No faking it. Either you are feeling pleasure, or your blood will taste off to those who would feed upon you.” There was a kindness in her eyes, and I could feel the positive energy flowing back into me. “Do you like being spoken down to, degraded, or was that something you said to try and appeal to your recruiter?”

“This girl likes degradation with love, sir, a worthless slut who is being treated kinder than she deserves,” Keegan said to me, her face seemingly incapable of lying to me at that point.

I decided to test it and spit in her face. I felt a positive tingle pulse through me once more. So that much was true. “Do you enjoy your sex rough or soft? Don’t lie to me, bitch; I can read you like a fucking book, and if you lie to me, you will regret it.”

“Rough, sir, but with a soft landing,” she said, nervously biting her bottom lip. “Aftercare is important, but both times, we never got that far, because they couldn’t feed on me.”

I wiped my spit from her face and nodded. “Your safeword will be Druid,” I told her. “When someone is pushing you too far, you will give that once as a caution flag, twice as a warning, and a third time at the top of your lungs, and one of Ali’s people will come running. You chose this life, this position, and I can genuinely feel you want to be part of their community, not just for the money but because the idea of giving your lifeblood to someone else thrills you. To help keep them alive turns you on more than you can possibly describe. But the rules are there for reasons, not just your own protection, but to ensure the transaction is satisfactory to all parties. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir,” she said to me.

I considered her for a long moment, but eventually let out a soft sigh. “You can remove the bracelet, stand up and get dressed.”

“Sir?”

“I’ve got everything I need to make sure your place here is corrected, and that you and your clients will have nothing but ideal encounters moving forward.”

“Don’t... wouldn’t you like to fuck me, sir?”

“I wouldn’t mind taking the edge off, but you, Keegan, have had two tumultuous encounters in a row, and your blood sugar level is a little low,” I said to her, patting her shoulder. “I’m going to go have a talk with Ali, and we’ll make sure your file is updated so that your clients will do their best to give you as enjoyable an experience as you are trying to give them.”

“This girl feels bad she hasn’t given from herself to you, sir, for all that you’ve done for her,” she said, reaching up to stroke my waist.

I helped her back up to her feet, a slight chuckle on my lips. “If I promised to return another time to clear that ledger once you’re healed up, would that be good enough?”

“Thank you, sir,” she said to me, as she removed the bracelet from her wrist and the link was severed. “This girl would like that very much.”

I patted her on the shoulder once more and then turned away, opening the door to walk out of the room and back down the hallway as I tucked the bracelet back into my satchel. When I got to the waiting room, Ali wasn't there, but Arturo was – all nearly 7' feet of him. “You find out what's wrong with the product, Gunslinger?” he asked me.

There were only a few steps between him and I, so he never saw the punch coming that I delivered straight to his kidney. I watched him fall into a pile on the ground as I spat on him. “You need to learn some fucking moderation, you goon,” I growled at him. “That girl in there almost got herself killed because you can't tell the difference between someone who likes her ass paddled red and someone who likes to be hit hard enough to leave bruises. If this is going to be your fucking job, you better learn how to do it fucking correctly, because the next time this shit happens, I'll be down here and challenging you to a duel, so you don't screw up your boss's business any further.”

He coughed a bit and looked up at me, anger in his eyes. “It's just fucking product,” he said, right before I kicked him in the gut with my steel-toed boot, which made him slump down onto the floor.

“You done beating up my staff?” Ali's voice had come from the door and my head whipped up to look at her.

“Depends,” I said, trying to cool my jets just a little. “Your idiot recruiter somehow confused a mild masochist for a full-blown triple A pain slut. That's why she kept spoiling. The two feeders got too rough, and she was in pain instead of pleasure when they sunk fangs in. It ain't fucking rocket science. Arturo should've sized her up on recruiting, found that it wasn't that hard to push her into uncomfortable territory. She likes a *bit* of pain, not the full fucking main course. Update her file. I've given her a safeword. Your punters follow the rules and color within the lines, everyone'll be happy, and she'll probably be a good employee for several years.” I glanced down at the hulk-shaped pile beneath me. “This one, on the other hand... I find out he fucks up like this again or he refers to your employees as ‘product’ one more time, I'll show him the main product of the Druid Gunslinger. We clear?”

“Like a diamond,” she said, holding up a file folder for me. “And I held up my end. Everything I could gather on your flatliner fang, although it wasn't that much.” I walked across the room and grabbed the file from her hand angrily, as she put her other hand on my hip. “Swear to you, Dale. I'll handle this,” she said as quietly as possible.

“See that you do,” I grumbled. “That girl was terrified it was *her* fault, when your moron of a recruiter couldn't be bothered to take measurements for himself.”

Ali sighed and nodded, then gave me a hug. “Go get your asshole, cowboy. It seems like he's a black hat of the worst sort.”

I took the file with me and headed back towards the elevator, having made good progress, but in a fouler mood than when I'd arrived.