

Chapter 7 – Consequences

Callum was a wreck for the rest of the day. Not because it had been hard, but because it had been easy. So easy. Terrifyingly, horrifyingly easy. He was a terrible newbie mage with all of three or four tricks and he'd *destroyed* the vampires and their thralls. If he lost his mind and went on a rampage, there wasn't a single mundane in the world who had a chance against him, and he was *just starting to learn*.

It was almost enough to make him understand the restrictions GAR put on mages, but fortunately after a few hours of showering some semblance of sense returned. The only reason he'd gotten away with it was because their mage had been stupid and careless, the defenses were geared against shifters, and because he had a completely safe area coincidentally close enough to actually reach. In the real world, he couldn't fire a gun off willy-nilly even if he could displace the bullets a hundred feet away.

When the adrenaline high finally left him, he actually fell asleep in the shower, only waking up after he had exhausted the tank and the water turned cold. He tried crawling into bed but slept only fitfully, starting awake every time a car drove down the road. By the time he dragged himself out again it was evening and he was feeling a *little* more human, but there was still a tight knot in his stomach that he couldn't do anything about.

Callum went ahead and burned the clothes that he'd been wearing, though it wasn't likely that anyone could track them. In fact, it was far more likely that he'd be traced through one of the Langleys spilling what happened than it was from some forensic investigation of the scene. There wasn't much he could do about that.

In fact, in hindsight, it would have been far better if he could have taken care of everything without going down to that basement at all. Not that he regretted saving Clara one bit, but it would have been far better to agree, leave, and do things out of sight from everyone. He wasn't sure how he could have gotten Clara *out* of there without teleporting her, but if he'd done it somewhere other than the saferoom, it might have been easier to explain.

Either way, he was stuck with it. He couldn't change what he had done, just make sure he was better about it in the future. Part of him was actually surprised someone hadn't been by yet to follow up; it had been hours and the motel fire was probably out. The best case scenario was that the Langley shifters, or whatever they called themselves, had collectively decided to keep Callum a secret, but he couldn't plan for that.

He *hoped* he wouldn't have to abandon Winut, but he probably would. Which meant he had to plan for that, and that meant he needed to get the stash of loot. Callum cast his senses outside and, finding nothing suspicious, got on his remaining jacket and started his car.

Instead of going into town the usual way he circled around, coming at the gas station from the other direction. Unsurprisingly, the actual street where the motel had stood was blocked off, but he only needed to get within range of the gas station in order to teleport all the luggage into the back of his car. He replaced the entire bundle with a single screw enchanted as a siphon, in the hopes that if someone actually looked there wouldn't be any traces.

By the time he got back home he had been up and moving long enough to realize he was absolute ravenous. He basically hadn't eaten anything since the previous day, so he made himself a sandwich from the stuff in the fridge as he teleported all the loot into the main room of his house. Eight duffle bags of weapons, six large cases of ammunition, two briefcases with the hard drives he'd purloined, and then several large lockboxes with money and valuables. Finally, one loose duffel with the magical stuff he'd looted from the mage's room.

It was actually *too* much. He didn't have anywhere he could hide it all from a determined search. There were hollow spaces in the walls, of course, and some odd nooks and crannies, but the sheer amount of weaponry alone meant he needed to find or make a stash somewhere else. Callum summoned his notepad to his hand and wrote that on his list before digging into the actual specifics of what he'd acquired.

The weapons were, to his disappointment, just normal commercial weapons. He'd been hoping for some magically enhanced ones, but no. Not that he could really complain, since now he had enough armament to outfit an entire platoon. Callum itemized the actual numbers of pistols, rifles, and shotguns as he went. The pistols seemed to be mundane armament, since they were merely standard nine-millimeter types, but all the rifles and shotguns were big and heavy.

The magic, as it turned out, was in the ammunition. There were cases of normal commercial stuff, but most of it was not normal or commercial. The bulk of it was labeled *silverite*, engraved on the cases of rifle and shotgun ammunition, but there was a decent amount of black mordite and silver-grey corite stuff too. For use against vampires and fae respectively, he assumed. What people used against dragonblooded was anyone's guess.

While he could manipulate the silverite and mordite and corite with his magic, he couldn't see inside them. With a little effort he could sweep his spatial sense into a material, like a rock or a wall, but the magical ammunition completely resisted that. Which was a little discomfiting, but it at least meant he'd be able to identify the stuff easily enough in the future.

When he took a closer look at it, a good amount of the stuff he'd looted from the mage was the same way. There were a few jars of liquids and powders, with labels in a script he couldn't read, and trying to push his senses into them was difficult. They weren't quite as bluntly impossible as the anti-supernatural weapons, but it seemed anything that held magic was hard to sound out.

Aside from what he'd made himself, of course. It was an interesting question whether or not his little ball bearings would be magically opaque to another mage, or if he needed to do something special to get the effect. Unfortunately, there wasn't another mage to ask.

Along with the components there were a set of ceramic slates with designs on them, clearly made with the liquid and the powder. Probing them with his senses he found that while some of it was just as hard to read, the center was completely open with a loop of magic in it not unlike the vortices. If he had to guess, the plates were magical tools and the center was where the user fed mana.

He didn't try to use them. He had no idea what they did, and no matter how curious he was he didn't want to take the risk of blowing himself or his house up, or igniting some magical beacon that would draw attention down on him. The magic stuff became a note on his notepad to investigate later, and he put them aside.

The other source of magic was something that looked like a woman's compact, but the interior had a set of thin metal plates with etching similar to the ones on the slates, arranged so the user could flip through them. The main difference seemed to be that the compact's plates were far simpler. It was all very mysterious and he didn't dare supply it any mana or vis without knowing what it was.

Callum was really starting to get irritated, so he turned to the last bit, the lockboxes and the cash. At the very least, the more fungible part of the loot would cheer him up. Even though he didn't have the keys and hadn't learned lockpicking, he could simply teleport the stuff out of the locked containers.

There was just shy of one hundred thousand dollars in cash, but that wasn't really the main haul. The gold plates, each of them labeled at one hundred grams of 999.9 pure gold and stamped with an unfamiliar logo, were. Ten kilograms of gold was a lot of money. A *lot* of money. Callum's consulting business had put him comfortably right at six figures for income, but actually staring at so much money gathered in one place was something else.

There was also some sort of elaborate crest, the kind that used to be used for sealing wax on documents, that looked like it was gold but resisted his senses enough to be an alloy of one of the supernatural metals. It had some sort of abstract logo on it, nestled in among a bunch of baroque swirls, which if he was fanciful might represent vampire fangs, but it was difficult to tell. That, unfortunately, was something he couldn't sell. It might be magical, and it was *definitely* traceable.

Callum opened up the briefcase with all the hard drives he'd taken and stared at them. It had seemed like a good idea at the time but he actually had no idea what he'd look for. He had no

tools for cracking open encrypted files, he didn't have the resources to reference phone numbers or account numbers, and he didn't have the contacts to make use of any information he *did* manage to get.

Not to mention he didn't have the know-how to make sure his computer was safe from any malware or whatever that was encoded in the hard drives. Sure, that might be giving them too much credit, but he couldn't think of a single reason to take the risk. At the same time, he was loath to simply toss them, so he got a bottle of rubbing alcohol and wiped them off to get rid of his prints in case he ever did pass them on.

He wasn't sure he would. The only person he could give them to was Arthur Langley, and for all he knew shifters would be able to smell his scent on them unless he gave them a bath in alcohol or something. Obviously Arthur already knew Callum was involved, but whatever specialists would be trying to get at the data did not. The same was true of the crest.

Callum felt woefully underprepared. He had originally thought that he'd stay in Winut for years, slowly working out magic details while lying low, then when he knew more he'd know what the next step would be. Now it was clear that not only would that not be happening, he didn't have even the basic supplies for dealing with brushes with the supernatural.

The list on the notepad got longer. He could have used his phone, but he didn't entirely trust the sanctity of his data there. It might be excessively paranoid, but anything connected to the internet could be compromised, and without a supernatural-friendly phone he was probably even more vulnerable. The people at the top of GAR certainly didn't have to worry about their electronics being hacked. Or at the very least, didn't have to worry about the consequences if they were.

He hemmed and hawed over the magical stuff, but eventually put it in a separate bag. If he figured out or found out what it was, he might take it with him, but there was no point in loading himself down just because it was shiny and magical. Everything else got repacked and moved to the basement. If nothing else, it was far, *far* easier to deal with moving things with his magic.

One of the duffles got repurposed into his new bug-out bag, with all the currency and some of the new weapons. The old ones he'd brought with him when he moved to Winut would have to be discarded and destroyed, considering they were still registered to Callum Wells. Which was a shame, but if someone came by and wanted to inspect his guns, the matching serial numbers would give the game away.

For better or for worse, it was near midnight by the time he finished sorting. Which meant he couldn't actually address his list, but he was also still exhausted. It wasn't just from a lack of

sleep either, it was from the imagined echoes of what he'd just done. He could still feel the kick of the shotgun against his shoulder and hear the sound. Shooting targets was one thing; shooting people was another. Since he had run out of things to do, Callum ascended to his bedroom again and tried to sleep.

"So the weapons we retrieved from the building matched those that were used to commit the murders," Arthur Langley told the reporter. "We'll have a full report later, but we're certain that the murderer was part of the drug gang that was caught inside the motel." He found it absurd that even in a distant place like Winut, someone showed up hunting down news. Even after he'd vastly under-reported the number of bodies and attributed the fire to drug manufacturing gone wrong.

"You're confident that there will be no further murders in Winut?" The reporter asked, in exactly the most irritating possible tone.

"Nothing is certain but death and taxes," Arthur told her. "But those druggies won't be killing anyone else. No further questions." He walked away from the camera, ignoring the inane and useless questions she was shouting. It was all just a show anyway, because the people he *actually* had to worry about were yet to arrive.

Just as he was thinking that, his phone buzzed, the caller ID proclaiming that Gerry wanted his attention. He took a moment to make sure he was out of earshot of the mundanes before he answered it, sliding into his car.

"They're here?" He asked, turning the key and starting the engine.

"Waiting for you at the pack compound," Gerry confirmed.

"Please tell me they didn't bring a vamp along." It was still daylight, so a vamp wouldn't be particularly active, but they always traveled with an annoying coterie.

"They didn't, thankfully. It's a mage and a fae."

"Anyone we know?" Arthur wasn't surprised GAR hadn't sent a shifter agent. Considering the nature of the tensions, there would have been severe conflicts of interest.

"Nobody I know, but maybe you've heard of them. Agents Danforth and Black." That didn't ring any bells for Arthur, but he wasn't plugged in to the inner workings of GAR anyway.

"Text that to Alpha Chester," Arthur ordered. "See if he knows anything about them. I'll be there in ten minutes."

“Yes, Alpha.” Gerry hung up, and Arthur concentrated on driving for the next thirty seconds or so before his phone buzzed. He stopped at an intersection and checked the text from Chester.

Danforth wind mage. Black reads corpses. Be careful. Arthur replied with a thumbs-up and then continued driving. He certainly intended to be careful.

The pack compound was a sprawling converted farm outside of Winut, several hundred acres fenced off and filled with shifter-friendly buildings and amenities. He didn’t spend nearly as much time there as he would have liked, since his position as Sheriff wasn’t just for show. It really was a full-time job, though not coincidentally one that put him in control of any possible supernatural incidents, especially ones that might involve his own people.

He pulled into the driveway, noting there was a glider-plane instead of a rented car sitting in the field. It made sense for a wind mage to use such a thing, he supposed, especially since there weren’t any teleport circles nearby, but they’d need a car for use around town. They probably expected the pack to play taxi. Which grated, but was technically reasonable for them to ask.

The general mood through the pack bonds was subdued but positive. They all knew that there was absolutely nothing GAR could fault them for, but at the same time, they needed to be careful not to give anything away about their mysterious savior. Though there were only two pack members aside from himself, Jessica, Gerry, Clara, and Clara’s parents who actually knew about Mister Hall. The Wolfpack pair had already gone back to Chester, though, so they weren’t an issue.

He heard the tap of keyboard keys before he even opened the door, and smelled Danforth’s magic along with a colder, more floral undertone that had to be fae. So he wasn’t surprised when he entered and found the pair of them on their laptops in the big den. If they’d been friends of the pack, it would have been the kitchen, but it took a lot to earn that.

“Agents,” he said, considering but ultimately deciding against a shift to war form. They’d probably just see it as intimidation, rather than him just wanting to destress after a long few days. Danforth was a lanky specimen, looking middle-aged but still spry, while Black seemed very young and wispy, dark hair and pale skin a strong contrast to Danforth’s blonde hair and tan.

“Alpha Langley,” Danforth said, standing up and offering his hand while being careful not to look Arthur in the eyes. He had to suppress a grin. No Alpha that interacted with the greater populace felt much of a challenge from anyone that wasn’t a shifter, but it was nice to leave it in the protocols. “How goes the cleanup?”

“Your people were still digging when I left,” Arthur said. “But we have all the corpses in the morgue for you.”

“Excellent,” Danforth said, glancing at Black. She nodded faintly. “We’ll go there after we ask you a few questions,” Danforth continued. “Nothing sensitive, just to clarify a few points.” Arthur found it amusing that they were using the standard line on him, despite the fact that he was in law enforcement as well.

“Sure,” he told them. “Go ahead.”

“So, you didn’t challenge the Noreseti nest over taking up residence in Winut?” Danforth asked.

“Correct. I’ll be completely frank, we do not have enough mature shifters to deal with what they brought, and they knew it. I was discussing options with my Alpha when the situation resolved itself.”

“Resolved itself,” Danforth noted. “An interesting way to put it.”

“My pack certainly didn’t have anything to do with it.” Arthur shrugged.

“So you say,” Danforth said, and Arthur growled at him. The mage didn’t exactly flinch, but his body language became far more defensive. The man might be a GAR agent, but that didn’t mean he could insult Arthur in his own home.

“My apologies,” Danforth corrected himself. “It is just that it seems difficult to credit that someone could destroy a vampire nest of that size without being obvious about it.”

“It *is* difficult to credit,” Arthur agreed. “I’m still surprised. But as I said, I only asked for help from Alpha Chester, and only within the confines of territorial agreements. The destruction surprised me as much as anyone.” He was fairly certain that mages like Danforth couldn’t truth-scry him inside his own home. So far as he knew that required elaborate enchanting, and their own dedicated rooms, but it was easier to tell the truth. Just not the *whole* truth.

Danforth looked at Arthur for a few moments, then glanced over at Black. She shrugged silently and he sighed.

“Very well, let’s go see the corpses.”

“I didn’t see a car outside,” Arthur observed neutrally. Danforth’s mouth twisted.

“May I request transportation for the duration, Alpha Langley?” It was obvious enough that he was irritated by having to make the request, but that was just tough.

“Yes. We can take mine to the morgue, and I’ll arrange to have a loaner brought out.” Surely someone in the pack had a beater they wouldn’t mind foisting off on the GAR pair. It was maybe a little petty not to try and find a new car for them, but they were the ones who decided to come in an impractical wind mage vehicle.

The supernatural morgue was, obviously, not in the same place as the mundane one. Not that Winut had a mundane morgue, let alone one capable of holding thirty-three bodies. No, the supernatural morgue was nearly an hour away, in Alpha Chester’s territory. It probably would have been easier on everyone to meet the agents there, but GAR probably wanted to make a statement by having them show up at Arthur’s home.

He wasn’t looking forward to a full hour’s drive with them, but fortunately after a few more minutes of verbal prodding about the events of the Flats Hotel Massacre, which was what they were calling the case, Danforth defaulted to working on his laptop. And talking to Black, who only ever answered with pantomime.

Normally Arthur would have gone straight to Alpha Chester to pay his respects upon entering his territory, but that was another hour’s drive and he was in charge of the GAR agents. He contented himself with a text updating Chester about their location and intentions as he waited for them to gather up their laptops and exit the car. When they had themselves sorted he led them into the bland warehouse and down to where the charred bodies were laid out on the slabs.

The fire had done a pretty good job of rendering the bodies unrecognizable, and likely not identifiable outside of genetic matching and dental records, but they were still more or less intact. He’d been a little spooked when he’d seen them the first time, and seeing them a second time didn’t really help. Arthur was no stranger to death and dead bodies, but so many of them with the exact same wounds was bizarre.

Danforth’s mouth was set in a hard line as he and Black walked along the rows of corpses, stopping now and then to take pictures. What Danforth thought he’d get from the pictures, Arthur didn’t know, and fire-scorched mundanes were not exactly photogenic.

“They’re all identical,” he said after a while.

“Yup,” Arthur agreed.

“Every single mundane has an entry wound at the right temple. Every single vampire has one at the base of the throat, aimed upward,” Danforth continued, raising his eyebrows at Arthur.

“I noticed that myself,” he agreed. “I think you’ll agree that’s not shifter work. I’m not entirely certain what *could* do that.”

“That’s what we’re here to find out.” He nodded to Black, and she stepped forward and touched the seared skin of the nearest body with one finger with a moue of distaste. The cold scent of fae suddenly spiked as black veins popped out over Black’s pale white skin, her eyes turning into twin pools of darkness. Arthur had to keep himself from shifting; fae magic got really creepy sometimes, and Black was clearly on the far end of the scale.

It didn’t last more than two or three seconds. The transformation went as quickly as it came, and Black sighed.

“Completely blank. He was just standing there, and then he was dead. Didn’t see or hear anything.” It was the first time he’d heard her speak, and her voice was strange, holding some overtones that were probably magical. He was glad shifters had some resistance to magic, because there was definitely *something* in that voice he didn’t want directed at him.

“Maybe try one of the vampires?” Danforth suggested, and Black made a face, but went over to that side. They had been rather more thoroughly cooked, and bone showed through in a few places, so Black reluctantly touched the bodies with only the barest tips of her fingers as she read them.

“It’s the same,” she reported. “He was sleeping, and then nothing.”

“Well, keep trying,” Danforth told her. “Someone *had* to have seen something.”

But nobody had. Black focused on the mundanes, since it had happened during the day and the vamps had probably just been asleep, but she tapped out after five more and they’d all been killed the same way. One bullet, no warning, instant death. The most information she got was that some of them had heard gunshots in the far distance before they died. Arthur mentally revised his image of Mister Chase Hall from merely dangerous to absolutely terrifying. Not only had he destroyed a vampire nest in minutes, he’d done so without anyone catching him at it, and of course without getting a scratch on himself. He hadn’t even looked winded. Fae assassin was seeming a pretty reasonable guess.

“I’m afraid we’ll be imposing on you for a while,” Danforth said, discreetly propping Black up after her show of magic. “Someone who can do this is too dangerous to just let run around loose.”

“I’ll have to find some room with the pack,” Arthur said. “Our motel burned to the ground.”

“Ha, ha,” Danforth said, without a speck of humor, and Arthur pulled out his phone once again to update his pack. Since they were an hour away, it was a good time for them to go update Mister Hall, though if everyone kept their mouths shut he doubted that the agents would stumble on him.

There might be some evidence in the motel itself, as the cleanup crew was still going through it, but Arthur doubted it. If Mister Hall had been thorough enough to ensure that every shot he took was done without giving anything away at all, then he was thorough enough not to leave anything behind that the fire wouldn't take care of.