

Chapter 5-8 - Investment

Ray Danforth offered the mundane a professional smile, the kind that barely reached the lips and didn't touch the eyes at all. Not that people in the government expected anything else, especially not from people like him. Everyone knew what to expect from someone in a suit with badge, earpiece, and gun. Even if it was an arcanopistol rather than mundane issue.

"Thank you for your time," he said. "You may go." The employee scampered out without a backward glance. Ray sighed and rubbed his eyes, glancing at Felicia. She chuckled softly, the power of her voice thrumming through the air. He'd been interviewing most of the people even though Felicia could compel answers from them — precisely *because* she could compel answers from them. She wasn't just acting as someone's agent anymore; she was a Fae Princess and she couldn't forge her own story by acting like her predecessors and opponents.

"At least we're nearly done," she said. Ray nodded. Screening through entire government departments for people who might be affected by fae compulsions took a lot of time, no matter how much or little magic was used. They'd only found two people affected out of almost a thousand, but that was still two people too many. It didn't bode well for the rest of the departments — and other governments — they had yet to cover. But the more people they found, the easier it would be to find the root source and deal with it all at once.

It was clear enough that GAR and the Seven Lesser Courts were involved, but that wasn't good enough. They needed names, times, locations. If not for them, then for The Ghost. Arbitrary punishments were not a good way to start a new era of supernatural politics, and holding any random member they could find accountable would not be appropriate.

"Next is Senator Wagner's office," Felicia said, consulting her tablet. "We'll probably—"

Ray's shields snapped into existence as the wall exploded, thickened air stopping debris dead, and he reached for his combat foci by reflex. Something smashed into his shields so hard that he was flung out of his seat and into the far wall, only the cushioning built into his protective construct keeping him from being knocked silly.

"**Stop.**" Felicia's voice hammered out, every speck and particle and piece of debris freezing in place. Even mana stopped, his shield of solidified air turning crystal from the force of her command. It froze a man in midair, like a fly in amber — or rather, a vampire, his hands already partway around Felicia's neck. She stepped back out of range with a single, unhurried step and glanced at Ray. He gave her a thumbs up,

reaching for a vis cuff. The vampire was clearly powerful, but given sufficient time the cuff would drain him enough to be handled.

Then the vampire's head moved and his body flex, shattering Felicia's control. Sound returned, along with blaring alarms and screams as the building shuddered, creaking from the damage the vampire had done. Ray changed his mind and flicked out a combat focus, trying to pull all the air out of the vampire's lungs — but the attacker had already moved.

One of Felicia's guards appeared from her shadow, now taking the form of a uniformed agent, and aimed his arcanopistol before he even stopped moving. But he wasn't a strong fae just yet, and while fast was not up to the task of taking down the vampire. He managed a few quick shots, but was rendered into red mist an instant later.

Ray flung out walls of air shear, miniature vortices to stymie and disrupt the vampire's movement as he drew his own arcanopistol and switched the bullets to mordite. Even in the seconds that took the vampire threw Felicia through the wall, her power not quite enough to make him stop but at least enough to keep her intact as she fended him off. The other fae guards were entirely useless, outsped and outmuscled by the vampire's power.

“Burn.” Felicia's voice came again a second later, the command more directed, and the floor, the air, the mana itself all burst into flame where she was focused. The vampire reappeared for a moment, clothes combusted and smoldering, but not much harmed. In that moment Ray couldn't help but think about Wells' certainty, about someone coming for them. Apparently Wells was prescient, and considering the power of the vampire in question the only one it could be was Weltentor.

He took advantage of Weltentor's moment of distraction to fire on the vampire, which either didn't land or didn't hurt it, for a moment later the vampire smashed into his shield again. Ray could feel his vis shredding under the force of the attack, and he only managed to squeeze off one more bullet before the gun was torn away and the vampire's hands were around his throat, shrugging off the vis of Ray's bubble like so much water.

“Surrender yourself or he dies,” Weltentor said, looking at Felicia. Everything froze for a moment, her eyes meeting Ray's. He couldn't even gasp against the iron band about his neck, but he *could* move his vis. Ray mouthed a word at her, the one they'd settled on for certain types of emergencies, and he saw by the slight shading of her eyes as she got it.

Before Weltentor choked him out entirely Ray triggered his homebond, feeling it vibrate through him as he let his bubble collapse back into his body. There was a horrifying

sensation of being wrenched sideways, like every nerve in his body was being turned inside out, and then he was somewhere else.

Ray staggered and heaved, mentally cursing Wells' homebond, but when Felicia popped into existence next to him he was glad for it. Even if the first thing she did was lose her lunch. Normal homebonds were *not* that bad.

"You okay?" He rasped, and Felicia nodded.

"Aside from the trip and my retainers," she said sourly, wiping her mouth. Ray coughed and channeled vis into his scry-comm.

"Archmage Taisen," Ray he said, throat sore but functioning. They'd put their homebond in the Antarctic base, lacking a more secure place with fae mana. "We were attacked — will report soon." He wrinkled his nose as the confirmation came, feeling a little sorry for the janitorial crew that would have to clean up the mess.

They managed to get cleaned up and settled back in surprisingly quickly. Ray felt a little self-conscious about having Gayle come in just for a bruised throat, but he had to admit it was nice to be able to give a report without having to strain. Not that they *had* to give a report, as neither of them were technically under House Taisen anymore, but it would be stupid not to read their allies in about what had just happened.

"I'm not sure how much I like saying that Wells was right," Ray concluded. "Without those homebonds we'd have been properly screwed. But they aren't going to save us a second time. Whoever that is, they're still out there. I *think* it's Weltentor, but I don't know."

"I suspect it is," Taisen agreed. "Not many vampires could get through a shield with that little effort. Which raises the question of how exactly he managed to get from the Night Lands to Earth, and how he's managing to maintain his power here." Taisen shook his head. "Though I suppose that runs secondary to what we do about it."

"Or why they targeted us," Ray said. "I can see Weltentor having reason to go after Wells, or even you, but why Felicia and I?"

"Politics," Felicia said. "Finding Wells is nearly impossible. Finding us is less so, and Wells is invested in us."

"True," Ray said, grimacing. He still wasn't used to being something more than a simple agent. Inanely, the only thought he had at the moment was how hard it was going to make the investigation.

"At least what we do about it is obvious," Felicia said. "We have to remove Weltentor."

Callum's basement had what was probably the most valuable shelf in the entire world. Or worlds, to include the liminal spaces. Lucy had taken all his notes and modeling for the dimensional portals and printed out a statue of the actual spatial magic for each location, giving them their own bases etched with the corresponding GPS coordinates for each of the portal worlds he'd found. The row of figurines had all the information necessary to access every world that Callum had found so far, those that were habitable anyway, so that any spatial mage could reproduce access in the future.

He placed the latest miniature on the shelf, adjusting it slightly to make sure it was straight. There were reasons beyond just pure theatre to have the references. They were going to be, essentially, selling these to various Houses, and Callum had learned the value of presentation from his prior life as a consultant. True, private access to a pocket universe and infinite mana were strong selling points, but nothing beat a physical token when it came to holding people's interest. Of course, he'd have to be careful about who had access to a fully rendered model of the dimensional portals, considering the inherent dangers, so the mage houses would probably get something deliberately inaccurate.

"You know, it feels maybe weird we haven't run into a portal world with people in it," Lucy said, fiddling with her laptop to save the footage the latest pocket universe they'd found. One that seemed to be an endless stretch of lightless caverns, which probably was quite valuable but Callum was glad to leave the exploration and colonization to someone else. If there were critters in it, they were probably something horrific.

"Well, what, of the six main portal worlds there's only people in three of them? Deep Wilds doesn't count since it was colonized by humans. And I don't think the dragons come from the dragonlands." Callum shook his head. "Honestly I'm a little surprised we've found as many as we have, especially with *any* kind of life. I thought it'd be more like space, you know?"

"I actually thought it'd be more full of monsters," Lucy said. "You know, like those creepy giant space things from that first world you opened."

"Yeah, I'm a little surprised too," Callum admitted. "Though I've been restricting things to near-Earthlike dimensions. I bet a few of the ones we ran across that felt weird had all kinds of nasty monsters inside 'em."

"Too bad we didn't look closer," Lucy said sadly. "Monsters are cool. You know, on the other end of a camera."

“Y’know, if they’re like the fae, they might not *stay* on the other end of a camera,” Callum pointed out. “So I’d rather be careful. Anyway, let’s get this rolling.”

“Operation heavy bribery,” Lucy grinned.

“No surer way to get people to do what you want,” Callum agreed. “Time to get Rossi on the horn.”

They had a dedicated drone for the Guild of Enchanting now, given how closely they were working with Rossi’s people. Callum still didn’t really trust them as such, but he did trust that Rossi was smart enough to see where his best interests were. Nobody else could supply new portal worlds, and even if they were being used as political bribes, the Guild of Enchantment got a lot of value from being the sole and exclusive distributors.

“Mister Wells,” Rossi said, appearing on the drone screen a few minutes later. He had on a pleasant smile, probably because he knew that he was about to be extremely wealthy. If not by actual money, by the sheer amount of favor he’d get from the other Houses.

“Mister Rossi,” Callum said. “We have all twenty portal worlds for you.” Most of them were unexciting save for being endless sources of mana and, of course, extremely private. There were a few gems, like the enormous misty mountain valley that was probably even better than the island world Callum had claimed for himself, and he was sure that Rossi would know how to leverage that the best.

“Oh, that’s excellent,” Rossi said, beaming. “I’ve made a few discreet inquiries and I think we’ll want more soon enough, but with a full twenty that should be enough to start.”

“I’ve marked the most interesting ones with red stickies,” Callum said, teleporting over a stack of folders. “When you want access to one, just supply the frames and I’ll set up the anchors.” Despite the new portal world, with its own source of enchantment material, building twenty sets of portal frames out of his own resources was too much of an ask. Just the anchor pairs were a hell of an investment, since he had to buy pretty much all of that from the Guild.

Despite the cost, it was easier than spending the time trying to find a cenote in the Night Lands. Callum found it weird to be in a position where his time was more valuable than enchanting metal, but it was probably inevitable. As soon as he realized it was possible to open dimensional portals, they were always going to be the most potent use of his time. From a monetary perspective, anyway. He found having to come up with so many usable worlds to be tedious, and it gave him a pang of sympathy for Duvall. He

understood more what it meant for her to spend most of her time stabilizing portal world space.

There was one world that he'd found that wasn't on the stack of folders, because it went to House Hargrave. Taisen was happy enough with the tidal plain, and in fact preferred something desolate for a military outpost, but after Callum had found a few more conventionally acceptable places Lucy and Gayle had put their heads together and presented their choice to Archmage Hargrave. It wouldn't do for one of his allies to pay for the privilege.

"Excellent," Rossi said, fanning the folders with kinesis and glancing at them.

"Archmage Duvall has agreed to sell her stabilization services on the new portal worlds, too, so I'll get her one first. She's probably the best person to sell them to the rest of the Archmages."

"Too bad I can't hire her," Callum said wistfully. The enchantment he had worked well enough, but he was aware it wasn't quite as good. If nothing else, it meant there was *always* an enchantment surrounding them, and at some point Alex was going to get too vis-dense for it to do its job.

"Give it a few decades, she might change her mind," Rossi said, and Callum was once again reminded of the time scale these people normally operated under.

"I'm not holding my breath," Callum sighed. "Anyway, just so long as these other houses know where these private worlds are from." He doubted the Guild of Enchanting would try to sell him short, especially since Callum had his own sort of reputation.

"Oh, I'm looking forward to that part of it," Rossi said, clearly far more at ease with political wrangling than Callum was. "A lot of people are afraid of you, so you can imagine how it reflects on the Guild that we, along with Houses Hargrave and Taisen, have managed to convince you to part with such valuable things."

"Ha." Callum shook his head. He'd brought that reputation on himself. "Well, I guess I can't object to that image management. So long as it works."

After a few parting pleasantries, he left Rossi to sort through the folders and start the process with the other Houses. Callum expected they'd never be friendly as such, but the more he tempted away from Janry's side the easier it'd be to deal with the remaining ones. At some point there'd be few enough that he could take direct action.

He was just about to put everything away and take a break with his family when Lucy's laptop chirped with an incoming message. The tone was the one Lucy had set up for

Felicia, since she was now her own independent faction. One he was backing – a state of affairs that boggled the mind.

“Lucy here, what can I do for you?” Callum put away some of the remaining bits and bobs from their experimentation as he listened to Lucy’s half of the conversation. “Oh. Well! I’ll get him then.” Lucy glanced up at him and tilted her head to beckon him over. Callum joined her at the desk and she put the connection on speaker.

“We were attacked by a vampire like you said,” Felicia’s voice came, and Callum pressed his lips together. He wasn’t sure if he was worried or vindicated. “We had to use the homebonds, which are awful by the way,” she added with a laugh. “But they worked, so thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. “And believe me, they used to be a lot worse. I just don’t have the practice Duvall does. Anyway, your attacker got away?”

“He flattened us,” Felicia confirmed. “If he weren’t trying to take prisoners we would have been dead before we used the homebonds. Next time I don’t think he’ll make that mistake.”

“Likely not,” Callum agreed. “I don’t suppose you have any way to track him?”

“He has protection,” Felicia said, sounding grim. “He’s got some fae enchantments, probably given to him by one of the princes of the Seven Lesser Courts.”

“He just shrugged off mordite rounds.” Ray’s voice cut into the call. “Not that I’m completely sure I hit him. Most vampires can’t actually dodge bullets but I think this one *could*.”

“It’s probably Weltentor,” Felicia said. “I never really paid close attention to him before, though. Nobody did.”

“I find it pretty suspect nobody realized there was a vampire around that could just casually break combat shields,” Ray said, sounding aggrieved. “Not even Archmage Taisen.”

“I’ve always figured there were big old monsters out there,” Callum said dryly. “And I figured they’d come out when the chance showed itself. If anything I’m surprised you two survived.”

“Well, we won’t if we run into him a second time,” Felicia said. “Which was why I called. We are safe in Taisen’s base, but we can’t stay here. If nothing else, I need to finish tracking down the culprits who have been affecting mundane government officials.”

“The best defense being a good offense,” Callum mused. “You need me to take out this vampire.”

“I do,” Felicia said. “I beg it as a favor from The Ghost to Princess Blackblood.”

Callum pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. Those were magic words — literally. While he hadn’t internalized all the rules of supernatural interaction, he was no longer as ignorant as he had been and he knew that a favor was significant currency. Not that he would have turned down the request anyway, now that he was stuck in a web of alliances. For all that he’d started out trying to avoid them, he had ended up with a lot of responsibilities.

“Of course,” Callum said, bending his mind to the problem. “He probably isn’t based out of the Night Lands anymore. I’ll check anyway.” If he could catch the guy in the castle at the center of the now much-reduced settlement, that would solve everything.

“I very much doubt it,” Ray said. “But I’m not sure how we would figure out where Weltentor is. You showed how easy it was for a single person to hide.”

“Oh yeah, I’m very much aware of that,” Callum said, sorting through his drones until he found the one parked in the Night Lands. “I suspect we’re going to have to lure him out. I’m not sure how your glamours work, but could you show off a fake version of yourself? And Ray?” He had issues with glamours himself, but they seemed to actually function for everyone else so presumably a vampire would be fooled by a magical hologram.

“It’s possible,” Felicia said after a few seconds. “Though I do not think that I could effectively defend the glamoured versions.”

“No, it’s mostly to absorb the alpha strike anyway,” Callum said, poking at the laptop connected to the drone in question, bringing up the proper feed and pushing the computer over to Lucy. “A stakeout would be incredibly tedious but I can’t think of any other way to do it.”

“Stakeouts *are* boring,” Ray agreed, and Callum blinked, only remembering just then that he was talking to investigative agents. Of course they’d know. “If we’re going in that direction, though, we might as well have some of Taisen’s people around.”

“Probably a good idea if they can keep out of sight,” Callum agreed. “I can give you an anchor so I can be right there, and Taisen’s people can be the sweepers or net or whatever the proper term is. I’m sure he knows what he’s doing on that score.”

“Yes indeed,” Ray said. “I’d be worried about casualties unless the Archmage himself was part of the force, though.”

“If he wants to be, great,” Callum said. “Though if this vampire is anything like me he’s not going to show up if there are a bunch of mage bubbles around. We’ll have to play it by ear, and just be ready to hit hard when he shows up.”

“It’s not much of a plan,” Ray sighed.

“Unfortunately, being on the defense doesn’t give you too many options,” Callum said, watching the display from the laptop as Lucy sent the drone buzzing to where the settlement had been. What had been a large sprawl of lit estates was down to only a few, the Night Lands shuffling unprotected tracts of land off to somewhere else in the portal world, or destroying it entirely. The castle itself was gone as well, so there was no reconnaissance to be done.

“That’s worrying,” Felicia said, when Callum reported on his findings in the Night Lands. “If he’s using fae methods to get from the Night Lands to Earth, and they’re anchored to a building, then he could just let the Night Lands move it on a whim. I’m not fully certain how it works but I doubt anyone could keep up with it.”

“Bearding a vampire in his lair is probably not in the cards,” Callum agreed.

“C’mon, you can’t mix metaphors that way,” Lucy said with a laugh. “Will the cloak thing work to bypass the fae protection or does that mean mordite isn’t going to work for you either?”

“That is a very good question, but if I understand it correctly I have to use my own methods to get around defenses. The cloak just keeps my vis hidden.” Callum shrugged. “It’s a lot easier these days, though dealing with a vampire that has that much power might be an ordeal.”

“The more you try to stretch it, the weaker it’s going to be,” Felicia added. “If you only expect the cloak to hide you, it will be at its most effective.”

“Right,” Callum said. “That’s the plan.”

Anti-mana was going to be necessary, but he was pretty sure it wouldn’t be enough by itself. A vamp could move fast, and he could only make so many portals and aim them so quickly. The anti-material mordite rounds would be a great chaser, since he would bet that the anti-mana would take out whatever fae trinkets the vampire was using.

He had no illusions it would be anything other than a scramble. Against supernatural opponents, he couldn’t manage anything that wasn’t an ambush, and this would be at best a counter-ambush. But since he’d be operating through an anchor, the only real danger was to Felicia and Ray, and given sufficient glamour protections they probably wouldn’t be in any real danger themselves.

“We should start this as soon as possible,” he added.

“The vampire wouldn’t expect us to be out immediately, I think,” Felicia said. “It’ll give us time to brief a squad and get them ready.”

“Yeah, I can’t give you any advice on acting natural,” Callum said. “Just make sure you ping me before going anywhere. I’ll have an anchor to you in a few minutes, if I can just hand it off to Taisen.”

“Yes, please.” Felicia said.

A few minutes later, Felicia had a bad penny tucked in her pocket. He realized that was the first time anyone had actually gotten one of his anchors, and he’d been putting them inside drones for so long that he barely ever used an unsupported portal anymore. They were always there inside the various remotes and nexus relays, but it had been years since he’d used one by itself.

“Call me when you’re ready,” Callum said. “It’ll be good to finally close out the vampires.”

Weltentor stalked through the city streets, ignoring the spitting rain and the oblivious mundanes. He couldn’t stay for long; the mana of the Night Lands was thin, fading away as he consumed it. So far away from the Ways connection even the newest vampire would draw on the mana faster than it could be replenished. Thanks to Wells, the entirety of Earth was a slowly drying desert.

He had drained a number of mundanes since he’d arrived but without the Night Lands mana aiding the process it hadn’t done much. Better to stick to draining mages and drinking moonwater, if he wanted to stay satiated. He was sure that killing GAR mages would be looked on poorly by the organization, but they’d become toothless so he hardly cared.

The only people he actually respected were the fae princes and a few of the more aggressive Archmages. Hargrave and Taisen, of course, except they were unfortunately opposed to him. Janry was a calculating bastard, but Weltentor doubted he had much skill in combat — which made him, ultimately, just another useless fop. Archmages Saren and Tissini had actual skill, but hadn’t used it for so long their acumen was more theoretical than real.

“Any word on the target?” He asked through the scry-comm. Weltentor’s own network was, of course, nearly destroyed, so he had to rely on GAR and the Archmages for

intelligence. A task at which they were at least reasonably capable. Finding the people he *really* wanted to kill would have been impossible otherwise.

“She still hasn’t emerged from House Taisen,” the DAI agent on the other end replied. “They’re doing some sweeps in the area first.”

Weltentor shrugged. He would rather have clashed with the mages directly, but it wouldn’t have done anything to hurt the people he cared to. The Ghost himself was nearly unreachable, but the fae princess had to show herself. He was quite irked that he hadn’t managed to capture her the first time, but that was what happened when he tried to follow other people’s rules of engagement.

Next time he’d just kill her. It was easier and less prone to error. And he didn’t have time to figure out where their enchantments were anyway, so the fae princes could go hunt their own food. The Ghost had already shown no fear of them, so Weltentor didn’t think he owed them quite as much as they had accounted. Especially not with Jusael dead.

The progression was simple. With the princess dead, it would break whatever it was that shielded The Ghost. Once The Ghost was found, he could be destroyed. Weltentor didn’t know how, but not with a magical assault. Compelling a mundane general to deploy the most powerful mundane weaponry available would probably be the most effective. Weltentor would take no small satisfaction in that.

Only with the threat of The Ghost removed could Weltentor begin rebuilding his power base once again. Now that Weltentor had more personal power it would be far quicker and easier, and he wouldn’t be hampered by GAR delusion of hiding magic from the mundanes. *That* approach was gone, and the only reason the secret hadn’t been broken yet was that people wanted to get this struggle done with first. Bringing Earth to heel would require all their energies, after all.

“Tell me when she appears,” he said, not for the first time. Considering how late they’d been with notifying him the first time, he wasn’t confident they’d be attentive no matter how many times he said it, but he lacked the ability to go to the DAI and ensure they obeyed. Or rather, he lacked the time, given the restrictions of the new portal network. Gallivanting to France and back took entirely too long, considering how much he had to conserve his vis expenditure.

“Of course, sir,” the agent said, and Weltentor severed the connection.

He glanced about and crossed the street, entering a liquor house of some repute, where there were no posted prices. Earth didn’t boast anything quite like moonwater, but

certain alcohols were at least pleasant, and the proprietor was happy enough to take gold coins instead of the worthless paper the mundanes claimed was currency.

They were obsequious enough that he might even leave them alive when he had finished his tasks.

He was finishing a third drink, some complex mix of ingredients whose names he didn't really care about, when the scry-comm activated. The voice of the DAI agent came on, giving him an address halfway across the city. The mundanes were amusingly incurious, but they probably had *some* comment when he left at speed, shattering the front door as he sped out into the city streets.

Weltentor had a fae to kill.