

Chapter 14 – Payment

“This is a hell of a thing,” Ray said, looking at the scorched beds in the motel room.

“Same guy?” Felicia asked softly, hands in her pockets as she looked at the damage with him. The supernatural morgue was their next stop, but the shifters had insisted on having Ray take down the warding before anything else. With the vampires and their hired mage dead, there wasn’t anyone who could work the focus and shut it down properly instead of just breaking it.

Since he wanted to see the crime scene, Ray didn’t argue too much.

“Same guy,” Ray said. “Sure, the actual methodology is different, but none of these thralls heard or saw a single thing, aside from a solid thump. Probably the mage.” From what he understood, the mercenary they’d hired to ward the place had been pretty thoroughly mangled with something blunt. “It seems unlikely we’d have two ghost assassins operating in the Midwest. Not to mention the targets.”

“Mm,” Felicia agreed. Every single one of them had been one of Master Lavigne’s satellite nests, and every single one of them had been encroaching on Alpha Chester’s territories. They’d have to talk to Alpha Chester and Master Lavigne themselves eventually, and Ray was not looking forward to that.

It was obvious that the political maneuvering between the Midwest Alpha and the Master of Minneapolis had reached a boiling point. Keeping them in line wasn’t Ray’s job though, or Felicia’s either. It wasn’t likely either of them would reveal the agents they were using, but they had to ask.

“I don’t like that they’re *all* the same modus,” he said instead. “You’d think with different strike teams we’d see something different. It feels like this guy is using the GAR transportation network, which would make it an inside job.”

Felicia grunted but didn’t answer aloud. Of course, they were in public. Once they were alone he could get a better idea of what she thought, though he was pretty sure they were both thinking the same things.

“I found one!” One of the cleaners trotted up, holding up a tiny plastic bag with a steel bead inside it. Ray took it and puffed air into the bag so he could properly sense the bead, but any lingering magic from their target was long gone. He still wasn’t sure what they represented, but they were definitely a weird kind of calling card.

“Well, there’s confirmation.” Ray sighed. “How much do you want to bet our victims will have seen nothing?” Felicia just scowled. Normally her ability was very useful. For this perpetrator, she was almost dead weight and she hated it.

“We need a staff,” Ray decided, and Felicia prodded him in the side. “No, we do. There’s two more scenes like this, way too many people to question, and you and I are going to be tied up with Chester and Lavigne. And maybe King Ravaeb.”

Felicia made a face. Ray wasn’t really looking forward to it either, but King Ravaeb was the fae authority over, roughly, the same area. Now that they had a repeat offender, the collective knowledge of the local fae could very well be vital. Under the circumstances, Ray had GAR’s full weight behind him.

Instead of making a report, he called the head office directly. GAR didn’t have the huge number of personnel that a mundane law enforcement bureau might, but for this kind of thing they would take people off less important cases. They might even transfer in people from other regional offices.

“Great, thanks,” he said, maybe twenty minutes later. “Come on, we’ll hit the morgue and when that’s useless, we’ll go see Alpha Chester.” Felicia nodded, and they decamped.

“Did you notice that they use mundane methods?” Felicia said when they were back in the car. Their superiors had hustled them out so fast that Ray hadn’t even had time to get his glider, though with free license to use the GAR teleportation network, it wasn’t like they were slowed down much.

“Mundane? They didn’t use guns this time around,” Ray pointed out.

“No, but there’s no lingering magic, and I have the autopsy report here.” Felicia tapped her laptop. “Mage was killed by blunt force trauma with something wooden. The vampires were killed with thermite.”

“How would you even do that?” Ray scowled, trying to conceive of sneaking up on a vampire and hurling burning thermite at their face.

“Well, the steel plates were probably part of the delivery method. Maybe there was some enchanted part that was taken away,” Felicia speculated. “But it’s all brute force. No use of bane material. No direct spell effects. No shifter claw or toothmarks either.”

“Now that you mention it, that is quite odd.” Ray tapped the steering wheel thoughtfully. “You notice they didn’t kill any thralls in any of these incidents, either. Just the first.”

"I keep going back to the silverite chains. I bet the first was done out of passion. Vamps kidnapped someone he liked—"

"He?"

"I think so. It's so impersonal, even the stuff that looks like he got mad and killed everyone. Using a gun, so he likely wasn't prepared, considering no guns were used for these. These other hits are what it's like when he's doing a job."

"Okay, but if that's true we should have some records of this guy from before."

"Unless..." Felicia said, and Ray sighed.

"Yeah, unless it's one of GAR's troubleshooters gone rogue. I raised that idea before, but maybe now they'll take it seriously."

"We need to get a profile of *everyone* Chester's had contact with. This *has* to be coming from him, even if we can't possibly prove it." Felicia tapped in a query on her laptop. "I'm requesting an Archmage look at the profile on this guy though. Even if we don't have clearance to know about GAR's pet projects, they will."

"What, you think it's like a golem or something?"

"I don't know." Felicia shrugged. "Neither do you. There's just rumors."

During their drive to the supernatural morgue, Felicia's laptop pinged as people were directed to the project and they all started acquainting themselves with the details. Most were mages or magic-sensitive humans, as fae preferred field postings and the vamps were all asleep, but there were a few shifters in the mix.

Ray didn't have high hopes for them. Not when considering the nature of the investigation. Now, if it were shifter packs being decimated, that'd be another story.

"The hell." When Ray saw the line of essentially headless vampire corpses, he couldn't help but gawk. It was one thing to read the report, it was another to see so many people with identical and unusual wounds. The mage casualty, at least, had more normal injuries, though it was still uncomfortable to think that could be him. The mage in question was Fremont Jackson, and was a fairly successful mage for hire. Not quite as competent as Ray, but not someone who would be easily dealt with.

"Cause of death for Fremont was a severed spine," Felicia supplied, seeing where he was looking. "Might be our best bet so far." He nodded and followed her to the end of the row,

discreetly supporting her as she put her hand on the corpse's arm. A moment later she let out a breath, blinking rapidly.

"He sensed magic nearby, and his shield formed around him, but something hit him hard enough to get through the shield. It came from directly above, so he didn't actually see anything. Again." She scowled. "He was plugged into the wards at the time and didn't sense *anything* from them. Nothing touched the ground or came through the walls."

"So what, did he fly in?" Ray muttered, though he already knew the perp had ridiculous stealth ability. His ability to bypass wards was chilling, though any good mage knew that wards were not as secure as most people assumed. "Did Fremont have any idea what *type* of magic it was?" Though it wasn't possible to determine the aspect a priori, it was often relatively easy to figure out by the way it, or its effects, acted.

"No, but it appeared suddenly and close by. Nothing was sensed traveling toward him."

"Maybe an artifact, then?" A lot of magical items weren't particularly obvious unless they were active, and most mages didn't bother to put anything under that much scrutiny if they were behind wards. "Could be related to those metal balls we keep finding."

"Maybe," Felicia said, sounding doubtful. Ray agreed with her. There were too many strange aspects to the case that pointed to nothing in particular. It was impossible to do more than blindly speculate. He was certain that Alpha Chester knew, but aside from that, it was difficult to see any gleam of hope in identifying their serial murderer.

They didn't bother with more than one of the vampire corpses. Felicia simply confirmed what they'd expected: the vampire was asleep, and then it was dead. Definitely the same guy.

To get to Alpha Chester's compound, they used the GAR teleporters. In the Midwest they were so sparsely placed that Ray's glider was often the fastest means of transportation, since they needed to fly hundreds of miles anyway, and he was tempted to just fly to their destination directly. Alpha Chester did have a network link at his compound, though, so it was more polite to use it, but he stopped by the office to retrieve it in case they had any leads to follow up after their talk.

The wood, sourced from Portal World 1, also known as Faerie, was folded into a box about the size of a person. It could unfold of its own accord, using fae magic, but it also had a built-in focus so Ray could control it. That focus kept it hovering on a cushion of air, tethered to Ray as he took them through the teleporters.

The Midwest branch of GAR was actually located adjacent to the other regional branches, since the teleportation network meant they didn't need to be near the area they served. It was

mostly for organizational compartmentalization, though there were always people who wanted to merge it into one whole.

He waved vaguely at the supervisors as they went from the incoming gate to the outgoing, waving his mark at the receiver and requesting 116-A from the operator, the teleportation circle that was outside Alpha Chester's compound. There was a flash of transition and they were in the back of a small, pack-owned restaurant.

"Agent Danforth," a shifter who had to be nearly eight feet tall rumbled, already in war form. "Agent Black." He nodded to each in turn. Obviously Chester had been expecting them, even if they hadn't called ahead.

"Greetings," Ray said, flipping open his credentials by force of habit. "If you could take us to see Alpha Chester?"

"Right this way." The shifter didn't bother to change to human form as he led them out the door and across the street, the folded glider bobbing behind them. It was actually quite nice to be completely surrounded by other supernaturals. If only Alpha Chester weren't one of the major issues Ray and Felicia had to deal with.

They were shown through several layers of security, shifters in war form prowling everywhere, until they reached an office. Chester himself was in human form, but wasn't much smaller than most war form shifters at that, making an oversized laptop look rather miniscule.

"Welcome," Alpha Chester said, not rising. Even though neither of them were shifters, Chester's presence was palpable, pervading the room. "Be seated."

"Thank you," Ray said. "I'm assuming you know why—" He was cut off as a phone buzzed on the table to Chester's right. The Alpha looked over it and scowled, the temperature of the room seeming to drop.

"One moment," he told them, and picked up the phone. "Chester here, I'm afraid I'll have to call you back. I have some guests at the moment." He powered off the phone and set it aside, turning back to them. "There. Now, as you were saying?"

"We have some questions to ask you about yesterday's incidents," Ray told him. Chester smiled, and Ray knew he wasn't going to get anything useful.

According to the clock, Callum slept a good fifteen hours. The fact that all his joints ached agreed with that assessment. He really was not meant for the kind of thing he'd just done, and

his body was telling him so. There was probably some magic overuse ache in there, but everything hurt so he really couldn't tell.

At least, he couldn't tell until he tried to teleport himself out of bed so he wouldn't have to move and a massive migraine flashed lights in front of his eyes. He groaned, not wanting to move, but eventually forcing himself out of bed for painkillers and some water. It seemed he was going to have to wait until he recovered from overexertion to do anything useful.

For the next few hours Callum slumped in his chair and made some desultory attempts to poke around on his laptop but really couldn't focus on much. It was only after he'd gotten a lot of liquids and some real food down that he started feeling properly human again. He still had enough of a headache that he didn't want to risk doing much magic, aside from his spatial sense which seemed to be fine, so he went ahead and started going through the loot bags manually.

It was an awful lot of money and gold. Part of him regretted not taking the fourth target, but considering how he felt he probably would have run out of gas partway through the operation. Still, there were bundles of money and racks of the gold plates that the vampires used, as well as another crest.

He got out his notepad and started adding things up and making notes. There was definitely too much stuff to keep in one place, and while he didn't spot anything about the bills in question that would make them traceable, it wouldn't do to walk in with a pre-wrapped bundle of hundreds to try and buy something. Even so, the infusion of cash was welcome, though it wasn't like he could really do anything with it. Callum's day-to-day expenses were minimal and he certainly couldn't invest in anything large, as he'd have to be prepared to abandon it at a moment's notice like he had the house in Winut.

Without using his magic, it was surprisingly annoying to separate and organize everything, but actually physically moving around seemed to do him some good. He labored away for the better part of an hour before deciding he had done what he could. By that time he was feeling actually up to talking, which meant he had to drive. He started up the motorhome and went in essentially a random direction for an hour before he pulled another burner phone from his stash and dialed the number Alpha Chester had given him.

"Chester here," the voice came, but continued on before he could say anything. "I'm afraid I'll have to call you back. I have some guests at the moment." The phone beeped, and Callum frowned at the call-ended icon, not entirely happy to be brushed off like that. He was tempted to dial back immediately, but there was no telling who the guests were. For all he knew, Alpha Chester was schmoozing with the President or something.

After a few minutes he shrugged, checking up on the nearest town and making his way there. He brought his phone and his laptop with him, driving his motorcycle at a more sedate pace than usual to match his feelings of fragility. Also because he was still feeling twitchy and didn't think he could take getting pulled over, no matter how unlikely that was. In the fresh light of day, it was hard to believe he'd managed to do what he had done.

He didn't actually feel too bad about killing vampires, not after knowing what they were responsible for, but he was more conflicted about the mages. They were pretty damn guilty, all told, but it was harder to rationalize them as being outside of normal legal jurisdiction. He didn't want to turn into some crazy vigilante or cold-blooded killer.

Not that he was cold-blooded. It was more the opposite for him. Yes, the information Chester could provide was the reason he'd accepted, but knowing that his targets were hurting and killing innocents was why he could go through with it. At least that was how he justified it to himself.

That and similar contemplations kept Callum occupied on the ride. When he arrived he found a coffee shop with wifi to get himself set up. He still had the plate with the glamour enchant on it, since he'd been refreshing it studiously to keep it from fading out, and he could probably spare the energy for that even if he wasn't teleporting around like he preferred.

Considering the odd hour there wasn't much traffic, so he closeted himself in a corner with some fancy-sounding spiced tea and went to see what the actual news thought of what had happened. For some reason he wasn't surprised that there was nothing about it. Since he hadn't burned anything down or killed any normal people, there was really no official need to acknowledge it. The places were probably temporarily closed under some excuse, likely with some extra glamour punch behind it, and that was it.

He stayed there an hour or so, poking about online and catching up with news and entertainment, before his phone buzzed. Callum pushed a little bit of mana into the glamour focus, which made his entire body twinge but really wasn't bad, and accepted the call.

"You managed to call just as the GAR agents arrived," Chester rumbled, not actually apologizing for hanging up earlier. "They were less than pleased with the scenes you left them."

"But you were, I hope?" Callum made a face. That wasn't really what he wanted to say, but it had just slipped out. Aside from Gayle he barely spoke to people anymore, and with Gayle it was strictly business.

"Your service was more than exemplary," Chester said. "I have no complaints. I knew that GAR would come by when I asked you to take care of things. They're frustrated, of course, but as far

as I know they have no lead on you. It goes without saying that should you be identified, I can do nothing for you.”

“Of course,” Callum said. That was a given. Or at least, assumed, since it wasn’t worth doing something off the books unless it was truly off the books. “I’m hoping they’re well away from this conversation?”

“They teleported out,” Chester confirmed. “But we have wards around here to keep our privacy even so.”

“I wouldn’t place too much faith in them,” Callum said doubtfully. Not only could he thread his senses past wards, he could thread his magic, too. If he could, other people could, which meant that what most people thought of as genuine protection just wasn’t.

“Yes, I’ve heard about your rather impressive ability to bypass them. Most people can’t do that, so I think I’m safe for the moment.” Callum didn’t argue, though he would have loved to explain. Though Chester wasn’t a mage, and wouldn’t know. “I assume you called me about the payment I promised you?”

“Yes,” Callum affirmed.

“I actually have two introductions to make. One is to the mage expert you wanted; you can call him Harry. The other is to an information technology specialist. *She* wants to be called Money Penny.” Chester delivered the information in a perfectly serious tone, but Callum had to laugh. To be fair, it wasn’t like he was using a real name either.

“Is Money Penny the one who makes sure these calls aren’t recorded?”

“I sure am!” A new voice butted into the conversation, ignoring the light growl from Chester. “Gotta say, I’m a big fan of your work.” Money Penny seemed cheerful, though she didn’t actually reach bubbly. “You’re the best ghost I’ve ever heard of, but I thought I’d throw my black hat into the ring because you don’t have anyone covering you electronically.”

“It’s true,” he admitted. Callum didn’t think he lost anything by that, since it absolutely was the case and didn’t betray any confidences. “But you work for Chester already.”

“Only kinda-sorta. I do stuff for him but he’s not my *boss boss*.”

Callum restrained himself from his initial reflex of brushing her off and took a moment to consider it. His current identity was compromised anyway, so far as Alpha Chester and associates were concerned. If he had to make another identity, it wouldn’t matter overmuch if he had someone helping him with his current one. There was probably some downside he

hadn't considered, but aside from his basic response of preferring his own council, it actually seemed like a good idea.

"You realize that if I accept your offer, you can't research me anymore, right?"

"She's well aware," Chester growled. Money Penny laughed.

"Yeah, that's fine. Like I said you're a really good ghost, and anyway, boss-man here is satisfied that you're the real deal."

"I would hope so," Callum said. He was mildly offended that Chester had done background work on him, but it was no surprise and he'd taken steps with that assumption in mind. Finding it validated really shouldn't upset him, but it did. Callum still rather thought of himself as an ordinary private citizen, and resented people prying into his business even when it was expected.

"So is that a yes?"

"We'll discuss it later. Give me a number and I'll call you once we're done here."

"Yes!" Money Penny exulted, and a moment later his phone buzzed with a text that included both a phone number and an email address, along with several screen names for different chat clients.

"Now as for Harry, he *does* work for me," Chester said. "Not that I'm going to order him to record any conversations or the like, but I thought I would make that clear from the beginning."

"I appreciate that," said Callum.

"So, you wanted information on mages," said a new voice, raspy and male and tired. "And I assume not the public stuff, considering you were going to bookshops. I have a number of grimoires that I have scanned in, and L—" he stopped himself. "And Money Penny set up a file depot for them. I'll give you my contact information as well, of course, but most of what I know is in those books." The phone buzzed again, with another text. "Several archmages would have my head if they knew I was passing on some of this without their permission, so please don't spread it around."

"I can assure you this is for my private use only," Callum said calmly, but inwardly he was cheering. He had thought there would be some extended question and answer session, or something equally arduous, or maybe some need to actually meet. A cache of useful books was perfect.

"Before we split off, I do have a warning for you," Chester said, and Callum bristled.

“Oh?”

“Not about me,” Chester assured him. “The Master of Minneapolis, Antoine Lavigne, has sworn everlasting revenge and so on. So far as vampires go he *is* quite dangerous, so don’t get caught.”

“Good to know.” Callum wasn’t impressed. He already had all of GAR and the regular government on his case, so another vampire wasn’t really a big deal. In fact, it was more likely Lavigne was someone he would have to worry about only *after* GAR caught up with him. So, don’t get caught.

“That said, would you be interested in more jobs?” Chester asked, sounding hopeful.

“No,” Callum said firmly. He had what he wanted, and didn’t have any thirst for blood or lust for money.

“A shame,” Chester said, though he didn’t seem surprised. “Thank you again. If you ever feel like you need work, or you need some help, feel free to ask.”

“I will, thank you,” Callum said. Chester hung up.

Before calling either of the two Chester had recommended to him, Callum pulled up the file link on the burner phone and got the grimoire files. It wasn’t in one of the proprietary formats for magic computers, which made sense since the magical internet was locked down pretty thoroughly. There were probably ways around it, but none available to him, so it was just a set of images. That seemed safe enough to transfer over, but he’d still use a disposable laptop.

Just flipping through the so-called grimoires, Callum could tell they were not mass-produced titles like in the bookstores. They were for the most part typed, but with hand-drawn and on occasion hand-written inserts, and were all personal investigations into magic. It was fascinating, and there were even a few on enchanting, which Callum *absolutely* needed.

There was not, however, anything about spatial magic, at least not by title. There were bits on the four elements by different authors, a *lot* on fire magic, one book on wards, but no books on spatial magic. Which wasn’t surprising, but it was a little disappointing. He pulled up his phone again and called up Harry, waiting for the eight or nine rings before the man picked up.

“What?”

“It’s Professor Brown,” Callum said. “Did you give me your personal phone number?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I?”

Callum suppressed a sigh. That wasn't exactly discreet, but it was his lookout. It wasn't like Callum intended to keep that particular phone for much longer anyway.

"I guess it doesn't matter," he said. "Anyway, I looked at your books and I have a few questions before I try digging into them."

"Sure," Harry said, sounding unenthusiastic.

"How would someone see through a glamour?" Callum didn't have any idea how to even begin framing the question so he could find it in a book, and it was one of the major mysteries he wanted to solve.

"Huh? Well, breaking a glamour takes—"

"No, no, not breaking it," Callum corrected him. "See through it as if it weren't there."

"Oh." There was a pause. "Huh." A longer pause. "Well, that's complicated."

"I'm listening," Callum said. Already, he was glad most of the information was in book form. The guy's manner was incredibly irritating.

"It's really dangerous, actually," Harry said. "Using vis internally. With fire vis you could cook your own brain, with water vis you could burst your cells, that kind of thing. But some Archmages and GAR agents know how to use their vis to reinforce their senses. It's said that they can see past glamours and sense mana from miles away."

"...I see." Callum took a moment to digest that. Apparently he'd been using magic all his life and never knew it. Not that he had any idea how, or why, because he'd *always* been able to see through glamours. But it was internal magic, and he'd already noticed it was incredibly difficult if not impossible to sense the inside of a supernatural.

Then there were the dangers. He could see how most types of vis would be dangerous to use if their effects manifested inside the body, but space magic didn't seem to have much of any effect by itself. The projectile sphere spell came to mind. Every other type of mana seemed to have *some* effect, but not space.

He had his own theories as to why. Mostly, it was because unless space changed very rapidly very quickly, things just moved in it as normal. For something more common like fire or ice or water or anything physical, that wasn't the case. Healing might be safe, but he'd suggested some offensive applications himself and that kind of thing running rampant through the body could kill someone instantly.

The question was how he could *stop* doing that. Or *if* he could, if it was something he'd been doing unconsciously for thirty years. It was weird that he'd been running *vis* through his senses, or maybe his brain, since before he could walk or talk so it might be something he had no control over.

"Okay, well. That's actually very useful information, thank you." Callum looked at the books again. "The enchanting books. Do they have the technique for translating spells down into enchantments? Or at least the basic vocabulary for it?"

"In the second volume," Harry said, sounding offended. "Though of course the most advanced enchantments are only known to the Enchanter's Guild."

"That does not surprise me. What about foci? I'm guessing I'd have to go to the Enchanter's Guild if I wanted to get one of those."

"Of course." Harry sounded a little baffled. "Most mages will make some of their own, but they do the best stuff."

"That's what I thought, thanks." He decided to leave the interrogation about where exactly all the mage infrastructure was until later. It wasn't like he dared walk in and order a multifunction focus for himself. But still, all the guilds and families and so on had to have land and property and stores somewhere that normal people wouldn't see them. Though with glamours, they could be hidden in plain sight.

"What aspect does the mage you're asking for have?" Harry asked, sounding marginally energetic. "I can give you some recommendations based on what you're looking for."

"Harry..." Callum sighed. "I can't tell you anything. I know you could be more helpful if I did, but I have to be careful."

"Oh," Harry said. "Right."

"Anyway, thanks for the information. I'm sure I'll call again after I've read through the material you gave me."

"Sure," said Harry, and hung up. Callum rolled his eyes and dialed Money Penny instead, lips twitching at the name.

"Hey, big man! Gonna take my offer?" She was not only expecting the call, but also knew exactly who was calling. Not that it was difficult to ensure that was the case, even with burner phones and the like. If she did network and communications security, that was the minimum degree of competence anyway.

“Maybe, maybe,” he told her. “I mean, how much do you charge?”

“Fifty bucks and you can have me for a whole night,” she replied promptly, which was so unexpected and ridiculous that he laughed for thirty seconds straight before he could get himself back under control. He was pretty sure it was only the glamour that kept people from staring at him.

“Oh, God,” he said after he was able to breathe again. “I don’t think I’ve laughed like that in years.”

“Good to know I still have my touch,” Moneypenny said, a touch smugly.

“The touch you charge fifty bucks a night for?” Callum almost regretted his riposte, clumsy as it was, but Moneypenny just laughed.

“That’s the one! Seriously though, I charge Chester by the job. I’ll send you a price list, but honestly, I’m more into interesting jobs. It’s hard being in the supernatural world but not being able to actually *do* anything supernatural.”

“You know, to be honest, a lot of that hacking stuff seems pretty magical to me,” he told her. “But I thought you were a shifter, working for Chester and all.”

“Nah, I’m human. Parents were mages, but I didn’t get the spark.” She sighed. “Kind of makes me second class. Practically a mundane.”

“Nothing wrong with being a mundane,” Callum said, before pressing his lips together. Five minutes in and his lips were already far too loose.

“Tell that to a mage,” Moneypenny said dryly. “Here, I’ll text you my stuff.” The phone buzzed, and Callum glanced at it.

“Ah,” he said. “You left on your real name.”

“Yeah,” Moneypenny, or rather, Lucile said. “Honestly I don’t think they’ll catch you and if they do, a fake name isn’t going to throw them off the trail. Either Chester can protect me or he can’t.”

“You’re not worried about Chester,” Callum said, leaning back in his chair. Lucile was a lot easier to talk to than Harry.

“He’s practically royalty. He could murder a dozen people in broad daylight and all he’d get was a slap on the wrist. I mean, so long as it wasn’t an Archmage or master vampire.”

“Huh. So, Lucile—”

“Lucy,” she interrupted. “Lucile makes it sound like I’m eighty years old.”

“Lucy, then,” he said with a chuckle. “Do you have any idea what this whole vampire thing was about?”

“Vaguely. Exploiting some rules about GAR representation based on territory. The ones you offed weren’t really supposed to be there, but since GAR chose not to do anything about it, it was down to actual combat aaaand the vamps brought like, ten times more strength than the shifters did for each location.”

“Ah,” Callum said. “Selective rule enforcement.”

“Yeah, that.”

“Blech,” Callum said with disgust, and Lucy made a noise of agreement. “So what happened with the pair that I rescued from the vampires?”

“I hate to say it, but I don’t think it’s anything good,” Lucy said. “The Department of Acquisitions is notoriously opaque. I could find out for you, though.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Callum said, wincing. He should have known better than to let GAR take care of what they considered mundanes. But he could at least hold out hope it wasn’t too terrible. “Consider it your first job from me. I feel a little bit responsible, since I’m the one who pulled them out.”

“Yeah, I’ll bill you,” Lucy said, then paused thoughtfully. “Wait, how *are* you going to pay me?”

“I thought you’d have a suggestion,” Callum admitted. “I can always leave you money in a dead drop but that may not always be possible.”

“There’s some dark web ways to set up digital transfers that are obfuscated, but they’re complicated enough that you probably don’t want to deal with them,” Lucy admitted. “A dead drop works best, but I *can* ask Alpha Chester to help with the logistics on that so you have more geography to work with.”

“Right,” he said. “How about we start with two kilograms of gold for a retainer. That should give me enough of a tab that I can request things without worrying too much.”

“Damn, you don’t play around,” Lucy said. “I’ll take it!”

“Great, I’ll text you the location in a day or so.” He was sorely tempted to keep chatting with her, but he was afraid he’d compromise himself. Besides, he had books to read.