

Chapter 5-11 – Retreat

A tug on the pack bonds woke Alpha Chester, rolling him out bed before his was properly awake. His body operated on autopilot, his eyes barely opening in time to catch sight of the time as he went. Nearly three in the morning, and the images he was getting through the pack bond of the convoy on its way to the compound did not bode well. Military jeeps and personnel carriers, and lots of people with guns. They hadn't gone so far as to bring tanks, but it looked like some kind of national guard deployment.

That was bad enough by itself, but the shifters shadowing the group caught the distinct reek of magic. Considering that all the governmental interference had its origin in the supernatural community anyway, that was hardly a surprise, but a combined task force was tricky. If it were just mundanes or just supernaturals, it'd be easy enough to apply the appropriate measures, but a mix of the two required more finesse.

He prodded everyone else in the compound through the pack bonds to wake them up as he dressed and armed himself, holstering a shield-breaker he had acquired next to an ordinary – if high-caliber – pistol. That was all for show, since if it came down to combat it would all be done in war form, but weaponry sent a certain message. Chester had no illusions about what was coming, and the only question was how much damage would be done.

Already some people were bundling up the children and all the important items and hustling them through the main portal to the Deep Wilds or the emergency portal to the fallback shelter in the Rocky Mountains. Chester didn't *think* there was anyone along with the firepower necessary to really threaten him, but accidents happened – sometimes on purpose – and it was better to be prepared.

By the time he was outside, loping toward the edge of the compound, all the lights were on and some of the military materiel he'd managed to acquire was manned. Mages had a nasty habit of flying about and anti-aircraft weaponry could at least keep them busy, if not outright kill the more careless or arrogant ones. Demonstrating that he had military-grade weaponry at his disposal would make for difficult explanations when it came to the mundane authorities, but that's what the wards and glamours were for.

His Wolfpack joined him at the top of the guard post at the gates, while his scouts outpaced the cars to head back and join the rest of his people inside the walls. In the distance he could see the lights of the cars and hear the rumble of engines, and he waited with his arms crossed as the convoy drew closer. When the cars drew up outside the compound walls, he sent a message through the pack bonds and the floodlights came on, illuminating the men and vehicles.

There were sounds of surprise. Chester wondered who exactly was so stupid as to think that their approach wouldn't be noticed. The mages would certainly know that shifters would spot that many people approaching long before they arrived, and the military-minded mundanes would have to expect *some* kind of monitoring to be in place. In his public persona, Chester had private security, so it wasn't like the authorities were surprising some random house in the suburbs.

"What can I do for you gentlemen?" He called down, his voice booming as he put a little extra effort into it. They were recording everything just in case, but he was sadly certain that nothing that happened would ever make it into the public record. He looked down over the people milling about outside his gates, marking the mages and passing the tactical appraisal along the pack bonds. Even now he wasn't entirely certain what the goal was, though considering the late hour it was definitely nothing good.

"Chester Fredrickson?" Someone shouted back after several minutes, long enough that Chester had gone past impatient into amused. The posse was clearly not a well-oiled machine. He would have figured that magical coercion or simple bribery would have put them all on the same page, but apparently not.

"As I said, what can I do for you gentlemen?"

"We're here to search this compound and take everyone here into custody!" The man shouted back, squinting up into the floodlights.

"Really now? And do you have a warrant for that?" Chester boomed, not that he had any intention of yielding to such an obvious abuse.

"Come out here and we can discuss it," the answer came instead. Chester snorted. They probably *had* a warrant, but not a valid one, especially not at this time of night. Though that wasn't the point. The supernaturals just wanted to force a confrontation .

"No, I don't think I will. If you've got a warrant, you can slip it through the gate."

"Sir, you need to come out here so we can talk about this," the man said. Chester suppressed a sigh. It was like talking to a brick wall, but better than shooting, and the more time they spent arguing the more prepared everyone else could get.

They went around in circles for the next ten minutes. Chester timed it. The preparation wasn't one-sided, since it gave the mundanes time to suit up and arm themselves, and more importantly, time for some of the mages to disappear and spread out to surround the compound. Chester had his wolfpack track them directly, since they'd probably need to be taken down right away.

There was no telling how long they could have spent bickering if someone hadn't forced events. He was pretty sure it was a mage, but it could have been an agent with or without a push from a fae. Either way, a sudden report of gunshots rang out and people started shouting. Flashbangs and gas grenades went off at the gate, and Chester gave the signal.

The wards pulsed, a heavy burst of mana spreading outward and instantly rendering the mundanes unconscious. Which stopped most of the gunshots, and exposed the mages and fae mixed in with the ordinary soldiers. He sent instructions through the bonds to start incapacitating or killing the supernaturals, but even as the gates opened a bomb went off in the middle of the supernaturals.

At least, that was what it looked like. Chester could smell the distinct scent of human magic, and he realized instantly what was going on. If DAI couldn't get Chester to attack the mundanes, they'd just engineer it to look like he had. He adjusted the orders to his local people as he jumped off the wall himself, shifting to war-form on the way.

He broke through the shield of one of the mages with a swipe, the man's head flying off into the distance on the follow-through as the body simply dropped. His other people went after the rest of the supernaturals, but at least one fae simply faded away with a laugh. Others were not so lucky, and in a few seconds there were more dead bodies on the ground.

Emergency treatment. Fetch Gayle. Chester didn't personally care that much about the mundane agents, many of whom probably weren't magically mind-controlled, but the political implications could be disastrous. The federal government did not look kindly upon people who killed their agents, or at least were framed as having done so. His mind was already racing ahead, to how he would deal with the fallout, but first he had to make sure as many people survived as possible.

Rendering the mundanes unconscious had played right into the supernatural plan, knowing or not. None of them were conscious to provide witness. He growled deep in his throat as he pulled people out of burning cars, applied tourniquets, and separated the dead from the injured. Yet he knew that this wasn't over; as bad as the situation was he didn't believe that they'd go that far and no further.

Not less than two minutes later the ground started to shake. Chester took a moment to sort through what his subordinates were sending through the bonds. Only two of the dispersed mages had been removed; they had been incautious enough to stay low to the ground. The others had flown up out of sight, but the stench of magic was strong enough that they were clearly casting something into the ground. The wards were all ablaze with alarms and the shielding was activated, but the reserves were draining rapidly as they fended off vis attacks.

Chester and his people could oppose mages in direct combat, but shifters didn't have anything to deal with long-range, indirect assaults like that — which was one reason that shifters had been under the GAR aegis for so long. While he'd called on his allies, it was already too late for them to arrive. The real damage had been done.

Get the mundanes through the portal, he decided, and his people started grabbing bodies, unconscious or otherwise. It was bad enough that some of them had died; leaving them to be found with whatever setup the mages had in mind would be catastrophic. At shifter speed, shuttling thirty people through the portal to the Deep Wilds did not take long, but long enough that the combined efforts of the mages were starting to be felt.

"They're going to level our home," Lisa said over the radio, aggrieved. "Someone has to pay for that."

"They will," he said grimly, tossing the last person through the portal into the arms of a waiting shifter. "You'd better evacuate too. No telling how far they'll go." While his words were calm, he was looking forward to personally tearing the head off whoever was responsible. So far the only saving grace was that none of his people had been badly hurt; nothing that couldn't be taken care of by shifter healing and Gayle, anyway. The greater damage was to his official identity and the entire network he'd built up over the years to support it.

He was going to be leaving an awful lot of people high and dry, and he *hated* it.

Lisa was the last one through the portal, but he didn't follow, instead taking the portal frame itself and hauling it off at speed. His wolfpack had the remaining ones, and they all scattered in different directions as some mage with a *lot* of earth power finally broke through the shielding wards. He had already memorized the scents of the mages in question and as the compound walls began to crumble, he burned it into his memory.

Maybe the individuals were out of *his* reach, but he knew someone who was quite capable of removing targets with prejudice. No matter where they might be.

Felicia woke to a whispering in her ear, and it took her but an instant to recognize it as the spirit she had bound to her in the Ways. She sat up straight to listen, its not-quite-words telling her about the fae that were sliding and slithering their way through the Ways, bringing with them scents of might-be and never-was.

She knew that the Ways connected to Faerie itself, but that link was neither obvious nor easy, bridging the worlds as it did. Still, any doorway might be used even if it could only fit one person at a time, and a fae with the proper authority might well make the path

easier for a time. It wasn't like she could completely guard or close – at least not yet – but she had been keeping an eye on it to prevent any more deep Faerie monsters from wandering onto Earth.

The monsters spoke not of monsters, however, but an army. Or, if that was too bombastic, at least a horde. Too many presences for mere coincidence.

She rolled out of bed and dressed herself in the armor of her station. Felicia had yet to bring a fae into her service that could forge something fit for a princess, but the tactical outfit that she'd purchased from House Taisen and combined with a cloak and some inspired embroidery made for a credible regalia. Her guards prepared as well, the ones who had been waiting in her shadow sliding out to rest while new, fresh ones suited themselves and checked their weaponry.

"Ray," she said, rousing him. "We have work to do." Even though he wasn't much affected by her voice, she made sure to not invest her requests to him with any power. A relationship couldn't be filled with one-sided orders.

Less than a minute later Ray was suited up as well. While he didn't have regalia – yet – he did have a fae-made patch on his breast with her iconography. Like her, he had a mage-produced set of tactical armor, which wasn't quite as good as she would have liked against fae magic but it was far better than nothing.

"What's happening?" He asked, his voice still rough from sleep. She had to suppress an urge to comment on how good that sounded and focused on the task at hand.

"Someone's coming through the Ways. We will have to see what we can do to stop or deflect them." The spirit's whispering indicated that someone of real power was along, and while her own authority was steadily growing, she wasn't at the point that she could directly contend with a Prince of one of the Seven Lesser Courts. Which wasn't to say she couldn't do *anything*.

"Should we get Taisen?" Ray asked, fingers going to the scry-comm pinned to his collar.

"If we can," Felicia said. Taisen kept odd hours thanks to his global reach and living underground in Antarctica, but he was the only mage other than Ray that Felicia would be comfortable bringing into the Ways. Not just because of the secrecy, but because the Ways themselves would happily eat an unwary mage, given that they very much did not belong there.

Ray activated the scry-comm and muttered at the person on the other end. The new ones were designed so that only the user could hear them, and while Felicia probably could have flexed some of her burgeoning power to listen in anyway, she didn't need to.

She trusted Ray to handle things, while she turned on the faucet in the apartment kitchen and started to coax the Gate of Water from her wrist.

“He’s dealing with an attack on Alpha Chester,” Ray reported grimly. “So this is a full offensive. Which we weren’t ready for.”

“No, not yet,” Felicia said, though she knew that she probably couldn’t have been more ready than she was. Any fae was as much constrained by their story as empowered by it, and any shortcuts to power that she took would absolutely cripple her. If she wanted to compete with the old monsters of Faerie, she would need a lot more time. Even with, or maybe especially because of, her bloodline.

“Let’s go, then,” Ray said, slinging an arcanorifle over his shoulder. The Ghost’s success with firearms had made some mages, Ray included, carry them as backup weapons at the very least. They didn’t have bane ammunition, but it wasn’t a good idea to bring cold iron into the Ways to begin with.

Felicia pulled on the Gate of Water, expanding the half-filled sink into a shimmering film that filled one of the doorways. By her will, a dozen of her guards went through, followed by Ray and then finally herself. The glade on the other side greeted her as she stepped through, and the very far edge of the clearing shifted to narrow its perspective, looking out and down a slope that hadn’t existed before.

It took her a moment to place what she was seeing; a procession of animals and animalistic humanoids mixed together, surrounded by ambling packs of humans with shriveled skin and blank faces. Though she hadn’t encountered this court specifically, she did know of them. The Court of the Loa.

Felicia felt it was in bad taste, but certain kinds of fae loved making deals with mortals. Even from this distance she could tell the zombie packs were just that; mortals who had made one too many deals with the fae and had paid the price for it. That made them more substantial than conjured minions or even lesser fae who had been subjugated by their superiors.

The fae at the center of the invasion had styled himself after Baron Samedi, and several of his similarly-attired underlings anchored the other fae. Some of the others had forms that were barely corporeal, and they’d need the help if they were to get to Earth. Which, looking at the forces and comparing them to her own, Felicia couldn’t quite stop. But she could do *something*.

She reached out and channeled her power into the glade. The slope grew, turning into a cliff, the paths that led to that part of the Ways falling away and melding back into the realm. If nothing else, she could cut them off from North America, locking them out of

whatever was going on with Alpha Chester. They still could find other Gates to other places on Earth, but not to anywhere near something vulnerable.

“Let us have some target practice,” she said, gesturing to the cliff edge. While the Ways were not entirely a physical place, the things inside it were quite real. The terrain might be far more than it seemed, but they could still take advantage of the high ground to hit the enemy.

“That’s a handy thing,” Ray said, lips quirking into half a smile. “Though won’t they just scale the cliff?”

“It’s more than just a cliff, in this place,” Felicia said. “Though if I am to cut them off from our position entirely, they will be cut off from us and we have only a limited window before they will be gone from our sight. Even now time is fleeting.”

“Then there’s none to waste,” Ray said, unslinging the arcanorifle and handing it to her before stepping over to the cliff edge and channeling his vis. Felicia joined him with her guards, looking down at the processing passing through what had become a misty, haunted wood, and aimed the rifle.

“Fire,” she said, and squeezed the trigger. Ray’s winds rushed downward just behind the first volley of bullets, but the actual damage was minor. A number of the transformed humans were thrown out into the depths of the Ways, and would never be seen again, and several of the lesser loa fell to bullets or cutting winds, but the deceptive distance of the Ways worked against them.

None of the enemy panicked, though. Defensive magics of dozens of different types sprang into existence around the force while they searched for their attackers, but the Baron seemed to see straight through to where they were perched on their plateau. He raised his cane and pointed it in their direction, a great black shadow reaching, clawlike, and flashing up the cliff toward them.

“**Stop.**” Felicia commanded it. “**Be not.**” The shadow froze and vanished, dissipating like dew in the morning sun. She sank down to one knee, feeling drained from the effort of contesting what was either the Prince of the Court of Loa or a direct lieutenant. Sadly, she couldn’t see his reaction to his attack being so utterly destroyed, for their force was swallowed by the mists as her glade completely sealed itself off.

Overall, it was a frustratingly inconclusive match, but they hadn’t sustained any injuries and had at least denied the enemy an easy route into North America. But that wasn’t enough for Felicia, because that troupe would still come out somewhere on Earth, and it would be disastrous for anyone nearby when that happened. Even if the Court of the

Loa were not as deeply insidious as some of the others, they could very easily dig themselves into the right area and make it exceedingly difficult to remove them.

“Come on, Ray,” she said. “We need to shadow them and let *someone* know where they’re emerging.”

“Got your homebond?” Ray asked, holding up his hand to show the ring.

“I do,” Felicia said. Though it was really an exercise of last resort, especially in the Ways. There was no telling how much power she would lose if she simply fled that way. Escaping an assassin was one thing, hunting enemy fae was another. Ray’s vis resonated with the enchantments in her armor and they lifted into the air.

“Firskin, Gallade; come along. The rest of you, stay here until I return,” Felicia said, and two of her guards leapt into her shadow while the remainder spread out over the glade.

She opened a new path back out of the glade, manifesting as a steep mountain trail that they shot down at speed. While she had determined the basic form of the glade, she had no control over the winding of the path, nor of the craggy outcrops with trees clinging to them. There was a stretched and strained property to the cliffside, the half-real nature fighting with the presence of mage and fae.

They shot down toward the misty forest, which rapidly became a narrow jungle trail. Below them, she could see where the Court of Loa fae were winding their way through a long and sinuous path, one that turned upon itself as if it had no desire to lead the intruders to their destination. Felicia had to wonder if even the parts she had not taken control of were aligning themselves with her, or maybe just against the natives of Faerie.

By intent or simply by being lost after being cut off from North America, they had gone toward South America. Europe would have made more sense, as GAR still held most of its power there, but there wasn’t very much in South or Central America to prevent the fae army from doing what it wanted. The whispers from the jungle spoke of another Gate, at the bottom of a sun-dappled cenote choked with bones. It was a combination of two Gates at once, and so harder to find, control, or use, but also far more difficult to displace or remove.

Before she could figure out where, precisely, the Gate might be Earth-side, someone detected them. A whole section of the army peeled away and headed back toward them, and Ray promptly sent them rocketing the opposite direction. Great ghostly snakes chased them as they retreated, but a whispered word from Felicia slowed them and left them floundering in a swampy morass.

“We’ll have to put out the word,” she said grimly. “I might be able to cut off the Gate from this end once they’re through, and erase their escape route. But I cannot deal with that many fae at once.”

“Understood,” Ray replied, his magic keeping his words from being snatched away by the breeze. “Discretion is sometimes the better part of valor.”

“Details are still emerging about the raid on reclusive millionaire Chester Fredrickson’s estate, which seems to have been completely destroyed, possibly due to stored explosives. The man operated a cult-like compound with dozens of people living inside its walls, and the authorities were investigating him for possible tax fraud and terrorist connections. Fredrickson himself has not yet been located, and authorities have refused to comment on what casualties, if any, might have been involved.”

Callum stared at the news feed, a little loopy from lack of sleep. His mind was numb from holding the dimensional portal open for hours, but he could see how bad things were. There was just a big dirt hole where Chester’s compound used to be.

“Maybe it’s selfish, but I’m glad we didn’t decide to leave Alex there overnight,” Lucy said, trying to get their son to eat breakfast. Both of them were running on too little sleep, so of course he was more rambunctious than normal, but that was a reassuring piece of normalcy after everything that had happened. Despite the destruction of what he’d considered a safe space, Callum was too tired to be properly angry about it, though the fact that they’d already heard from Chester and knew he and his were safe helped.

“Yeah. Though maybe...” Callum trailed off and shook his head. He would have been useless in such a situation, at least unless he let the portal collapse. Even then, pitched battles weren’t his best realm. In fact he was pretty sure that if people were flinging magic everywhere it’d make it practically impossible for him to do anything.

“No, I guess it’s for the best, but we were using Chester’s place for a kind of headquarters. Not to mention for your medical checkups.” Lucy was well advanced with their second child now, and Callum was absolutely shameless about getting Gayle to smooth things along. Now that he had a redoubt there were other options for meeting, but being deprived of their normal safe place was disconcerting.

“Gonna make that meeting real interesting,” Lucy said, and yawned, clearly less concerned about that part than he was. “C’mon sweetie, you can’t *just* have bacon.”

“Like bacon,” Alex proclaimed.

“Yeah, I do too, kiddo, but fruit’s good too,” Callum told him, and held out a grape for Alex to eat. Which he did, reluctantly. “Have we heard anything from Chester other than that he’s okay?”

“Not yet. Given that mess it’s probably going to be a while.” Lucy rubbed her eyes. “Which means Alex won’t be able to see his friends for a while maybe. Those poor kids, having to run out in the middle of the night.”

“It’s an escalation,” Callum sighed. “The fae are one thing, but mages and the federal government — I don’t know. Is there any option that’s not all-out war?”

“I mean. You were talking about taking down GAR anyway. Now there’s just, y’know, more of a reason?”

“It’s more reason to aim at Janry, too,” Callum said. “I’ve always been a proponent of removing the people at the top, and we all know it’s Janry who is giving GAR their orders. I know that nuking archmages might start a real war, even a nuclear one, but I hate being unable to do the right thing because of the fear of reprisal. At what point is it no longer worth it if they just abuse our restraint to do what they want?”

“I mean, the stakes are pretty high, what with the potential end of civilization and all,” Lucy replied, handing Alex his cup. “Just a few more bites and we can go play, okay?”

“Okay!”

Callum yawned. He didn’t know how Lucy had the energy to play, other than copious amounts of caffeine. While he hadn’t had more than a single soda, he was feeling pretty terrible from staying up all night, like his head was in a fog. Just the distraction from talking with his family was enough for one of the rings of the portal to start slipping, and he clamped it back in place.

By his judgement some thirty or forty percent of the structure had converted itself to mana, and he had been right that those segments were stable — though he didn’t know if it was because they were made of mana or if it was just that the structures had established themselves locally. He supposed it didn’t really matter which, if the result was the same, but if he knew he might get a lead on Duvall’s ability to fix local space permanently.

He knew he should be focused on the debacle that had destroyed Chester’s civilian identity and what they were going to do about it, but he was too tired and scatterbrained to make any inroads in that direction. He was just glad it wasn’t worse, and there hadn’t been archmage-versus-archmage combat. Though how anyone was going to explain the enormous sinkhole that was obviously not a crater, he didn’t know. A secret government weapon, perhaps.

“You go ahead,” he told Lucy, as Alex squirmed off his seat. “I’m going to try and not fall asleep here.”

“C’mon sweetie, daddy’s tired. He’ll join us later,” Lucy said, holding out her hand for Alex’s. He looked at her and then walked over to Callum.

“Daddy needs to go to bed on time,” he said solemnly. Callum couldn’t help but laugh.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll do better tonight.”

Alex nodded and ran off to Lucy, both of them going outside. Callum yawned again and switched from the useless news report to the drone feed. The tiny island he was using off Barbados was populated by a number of the dragon war-forms, and not just of the cyber lizard type either. There were dozens of combat-capable Pteranodon-looking versions in the air as well. He wasn’t entirely certain, but he could swear that they had guns. It showed why people respected the dragonblooded, even if Shahey’s avatar hadn’t been very fearsome.

The stuff the dragons wielded was basically magic artillery controlled by a single mind. Callum didn’t know how it stacked up against archmage powers but an arbitrary number of perfectly coordinated attackers was a terrifying thing indeed. He still didn’t know what they intended to do to House Xu, since their payoff clearly hadn’t stuck, but the answer was probably something along the lines of *whatever they wanted*.

“So have you reconsidered your neutral stance?” Callum asked via drone. Shahey had an aged, sage version of himself there, more to answer questions than to oversee things. He had a hunch they’d be building a bunker around the portal as soon as it was safe, but at the moment nobody wanted to run the risk of destabilizing it.

“I think we’ll be forced to put our hand in at least a little, if we want to stay on Earth,” Shahey said. “I admit our current non-interference policy falls apart under the circumstances. Principles are all well and good, but only until they fail. Though I must confess; it is somewhat satisfying that *we* are not the cause of this upheaval.”

“I find that people are generally pretty good at upheaval all on their own,” Callum said. He wasn’t exactly certain how having the dragons more officially on their side would help, though. Between himself and the two archmages, their side didn’t lack the ability to apply force. It was more an issue of finesse.

“So it would seem,” Shahey said, amused. “The supernaturals put this one together all on their own.”

“Gonna get messy though,” Callum said, stifling another yawn as he clamped down on portal drift yet again. “If we’re going to have open war that’s just not going to turn out good for anyone.”