

Chapter 2 – Mictlān

There was nobody around. Callum had a certain amount of trust in his perceptions, considering that he'd been able to spot basically everything within his sphere. Even fae and dragonborn magic, while incomprehensible, was extremely obvious. So when a faint, indecipherable whispering started echoing all around them with no discernable source, he was fairly well spooked.

He shot to his feet, followed by Lucy, and wrapped his threads around them both as he prepared to teleport away. The only thing that stopped him from doing so immediately was that when he enclosed Lucy in his teleportation frame, he was absolutely *certain* the fae magic had begun to fade. It was working, if they could stay.

"The hell is that?" Lucy asked.

"I don't know. Gayle?"

"What is what?" Gayle replied, confused. Apparently the noise didn't make it through the phone-portal, adding to the weirdness of the noise. He kept his metaphorical finger on the button to teleport away into his cache, but was unwilling to do so while Lucy was still under the sway of fae magic.

"I hear—" Lucy began, then stopped. There was another voice that spoke in the same unknown language as the whispers. They quieted, and someone stepped into Callum's perception on the other side of the portal. Oddly, he wasn't a mage, or at least didn't have a mage bubble, but he was clearly supernatural by the vis density in his body.

"A moment of your time, young man?" The stranger called out, voice carrying weirdly through the portal space. It should have been a distant shout, but it sounded much closer.

"Only if you stay there!" Callum replied, feeling for his part like he did have to yell to push through the enveloping quiet. His instincts screamed at him to just leave, but he could practically see the dissolution of the fae spell. For the moment he had to rely on his reflexes being fast enough. They were, after all, several hundred yards from the portal entrance through a weirdly distorted space.

"Could this one tempt you into leaving the realm of Mictlān?"

"Not yet," Callum said bluntly.

"I dunno, big man. I'm starting to feel a little weird."

“Should I get Gayle?” Callum was glad he was used to splitting his attention, since he had three people to pay attention to at once.

“Maybe? I’m not sure...” Lucy wobbled, and Callum stepped closer to steady her.

“One points out that Mictlān is not for the living. In a single day and night, any mortal would become a whispering shadow.” The stranger said, and Callum couldn’t tell whether the man was listening to his conversation with Gayle and Lucy or not.

“I don’t intend to be here that long,” Callum called back, easing Lucy back to her seat. The warning prompted a memory to click, and he finally recognized the name of Mictlān. The underworld for the Aztecs and others of that tradition. Considering the weirdness of the portal world, it seemed appropriate.

“See that you are not. The shadows will get restive, should you linger.” The man sat down cross-legged outside the portal, treating water like solid ground, which made Callum relax fractionally. He still would have been gone already if it weren’t necessary for Lucy’s well-being. The situation was not at all under his control and he hated it.

“One is curious, however. You seem to have trained in the style of the priests of my people - with your power bound into blood and bone, rather than separating yourself and casting your power into a shell to block out the world.”

That got Callum’s attention. He had always figured that his own peculiarities as a mage, while rare or at the very least against prevailing orthodoxy, couldn’t be unique. He had never been able to set up a particularly strong bubble and found the process of doing so to be a strain. That was ignoring the way it left trails everywhere, which offended his sensibilities.

Unfortunately that implied that the person actually *was* a mage, and maybe even one with a passive sense like Callum’s. Or rather, he *had* to have some kind of passive sense, if he noticed that Callum wasn’t using a bubble and even called him a young man, and that was not good. He well knew he could cast where he could sense, so the other man was within striking range.

It was a tense standoff, at least from his perspective. The other man seemed perfectly at ease, sitting crosslegged on the ground and either meditating or just relaxing. Which just didn’t seem fair when Callum was coiled like a wound spring.

“I would be happy to discuss this later,” he said after a few moments, keeping a hand on Lucy’s arm. He had to purposely relax his grip, and she’d probably still have bruises, but Lucy hadn’t even winced. Callum couldn’t deal with everything at once, no matter how good he was at multitasking. The man had certainly piqued his interest and Callum

would have liked to talk under other circumstances, but it wasn't vital enough to be worth the distraction. Even if it *was* vital, he'd still choose Lucy.

In the end, people were more important than knowledge. There was no point in becoming more capable if he didn't keep his integrity. He *still* felt a little guilty delaying the Connor's rescue just to crib the portal plans, even with how well that had turned out.

"I'm not sure I should be here, big man," Lucy said hazily. "I think— no, I don't know..." She seemed to be wrestling with herself, which more or less confirmed what Callum had thought. Some kind of fae influence on her mind, which was quickly being shredded by the foreign space and foreign mana. If it had been a mage enchantment, it probably would have broken right away, but fae stuff seemed more flexible.

"Don't worry, Lucy," he told her. "I think you're almost clear."

"Clear? I—" Lucy suddenly groaned and leaned over to the side, making retching noises and spattering mostly bile across the obsidian. Callum grimaced, brushing her hair back out of the way as he steadied her. It seemed whatever it was they'd done to her was really nasty, or at least the process of removing it was. Admittedly, he was sure that his approach to dealing with the issue wasn't the usual one.

"Gayle, I think you're going to need to heal Lucy again in a minute or two."

"Okay?" Gayle seemed mostly confused, sitting on a chair in the middle of nowhere wrapped in blankets. It was in a way rather surreal. Portals made a mockery of the concept of distance, especially since he could chain them together.

The wispy, liquid construct of fae magic was rapidly dissolving, apparently having crossed some sort of threshold. Every moment it frayed further until suddenly it snapped, and the magic lost its hold on whatever was anchoring it to Lucy. Then it was just gone, vanished like a puff of smoke.

"God, it's gone." Lucy said weakly. "Thanks, big man. I think I gotta lay down for a while..." She started sliding off the chair, and Callum caught her before she went down.

Shadows started to slide in from the surrounding obsidian spires. It didn't make any sense, because there wasn't any light. There was nothing to cast the shadows, and they didn't register to his magical perceptions, but he could see the human-shaped silhouettes slipping toward them. All his hair stood on end.

"Time to go," he said, and teleported several things at once. His spare portal anchor went outside the entrance to Mictlān, at the bottom of the stream that filled the temple. Once the current crisis had passed, he *did* want to speak to the strange mage. Lucy went to the cave where he'd first put her and Gayle, and he withdrew to his cache.

Instantly he felt better, less oppressed, and without an active portal into Mictlān he didn't have to deal with the *incredibly* creepy shadows.

He really should have known there would be things his spatial perceptions didn't catch. If for some reason he was blind to glamours, it was obvious that there were a lot of different spectrums when it came to magic, and no single approach was universal. Also, it was obvious he should keep the hell out of Portal World Six.

"Gayle, could you help Lucy, please?" He hated leaving it to the other mage, but he couldn't deny the value of magical healing. Once again he opened a way between the north Texas cave and the surface, and Gayle ducked through, pulling in her bubble so she wouldn't break the portal with it. She knelt down where Lucy lay and started her work.

"It's not working? Why can't I help her?" Everything Gayle said sounded like an uncertain question, and Callum tamped down his temper.

"She's probably just exhausted. Who knows when she last slept, and what that thing was doing to her."

"What thing?"

"Some kind of fae magic enchantment entangled with her vis," Callum said.

"It was fae magic? I guess that makes sense, but normally I can fix things!"

"I don't imagine magic can fix everything," Callum said, trying to suppress his own worry. "Is she fine physically?"

"Yes?"

"Then just keep an eye on her for me for now, please." Callum pressed his lips together. He certainly had no interest in holding hostages but it'd be nice to have a pocket healer around a little bit longer. "I'll drop you off when I can," he said. "Might be another hour or so."

"I will," Gayle said. "But..." She trailed off hesitantly.

"Yes?"

"Can I at least get something to *read*?" Gayle asked plaintively. "I appreciate that you're just going to send me home but it's so awfully *dull* here."

Callum stifled a laugh and combed through his cave-cache. It was something he actually *had* thought of and had picked up a crate of science fiction paperbacks at a used book store for something like twenty bucks. He hadn't even looked at what they

were, and it wasn't like he could read with his spatial perception, so he just transported the whole crate over.

Then he dropped into one of his remaining chairs with a groan. He'd left the ones in Mictlān there, because the shadows could have them for all he cared. The thought made him reach out for the other half of the portal anchor he'd left, though. The strange man, presumably the one in charge of the portal world, likely wouldn't be patient forever.

The portal snapped open almost immediately, given the heightened mana near a portal world, and Callum was glad to see that the anchor was where he left it. He was less glad to see that the stranger had turned to face its direction. Considering the difficulty others had in locating it, he would have hoped the knowledge of the anchor would have kept for longer, but then he hadn't really been particularly stealthy.

Callum popped open a phone-portal, though reluctantly. He really disliked dealing with another mage that seemed similar to him, and under the circumstances he added a bit of safety by a sort of ad-hoc ward around the portal terminus. Both of them, actually. Rather than the elaborate frameworks that most mages used, he mostly had a thin frame filled with dense *vis*, just so he'd notice if something tried to push through it.

In fact, that frame might be enough to block the other mage's sight, the way mage bubbles did. He was pretty sure anything strong enough to get through it would also collapse the portal, so for a spur-of-the-moment defense it worked pretty well. He'd have to work on it once he had time.

"You asked for a moment of my time," Callum said. "I've got some now. First though, I can say I haven't actually received any training at all."

"Ah, a shame. One had thought perhaps you were some lost and distant inheritor."

"Not so far as I know," Callum said. "Unless you had some dalliance about thirty years ago." It seemed highly unlikely. The man had a completely different body type, so even if Callum mostly took after his mother, his father was almost certainly of European stock as well.

"Certainly not!" The man said with a laugh. "One is named Huitzilin," he said, the name very obviously not an English one. "You may use Wizzy, as one doubts you have encountered the proper tongue before."

"I haven't," Callum admitted.

"And you, I suspect, are Callum Wells."

"I am," he said cautiously, doublechecking the warding around the portal pairs.

“There is no need to worry,” Huitzililn said. “This one is not properly part of their nation. The people one protected died out long before they ever came to this continent, so now one is merely the guardian of Mictlān.”

“Well,” Callum said judiciously. “I am sorry for intruding, but I needed a portal world and there aren’t many I can enter easily.”

“Most would not consider it easy to enter Mictlān. It is hidden and protected, and the world itself is unwelcoming to outsiders. Though, you do not shout your power and shoulder aside the world with it like mages do. That is why the shadows did not notice you for so long.”

“What *were* those, anyway?”

“Those who walked into Mictlān and did not return,” Huitzililn said simply. “It is a land for the dead and only for the dead.”

“Will there be any lasting effects?” Callum asked, suddenly concerned. “We were only in there for a few minutes.”

“There are lasting effects for everything,” Huitzililn replied. “But I do not believe a few minutes of exposure will result in any harm. If the shadows had touched you, perhaps there would have been issues.”

“Good to know.” Returning to Mictlān was definitely out. “What about the obsidian?”

“You took some of the fragments from the old site?” Huitzililn didn’t seem perturbed. “You are welcome to them if you think they can be of use. Dead obsidian does nothing for anyone.”

“So long as no shadows came along with them.”

“Certainly not. They are of Mictlān, and cannot leave.”

“That is the best news I’ve heard today,” Callum said, but he still relocated all the obsidian into the sunlight above the cave-cache for the moment. He was pretty sure Huitzililn wasn’t lying. There wasn’t any point, in part, but he also didn’t seem to actually *care* that Callum was an outlaw. Maybe he just got that impression because he could actually sense the man and read his body language rather than just see a bubble.

“What was it you wanted to discuss with me, then?” He asked finally. If Huitzililn had some sort of agenda he was being very patient by answering Callum’s questions.

“One only wished to get the measure of the man who may herald the end of the cycle.”

“Um.” Callum said. “What? I’m not some sort of chosen one, I assure you.”

“Indeed?” Huitzilin asked with amusement. “One would point out that you have chosen yourself. Such is the nature of things. Civilizations rise and fall. Cities burn and new ones are built. One cycle ends, another begins. The higher the tinder is heaped, the smaller the spark that starts the fire. There is always someone who chooses to be that spark.”

“That makes some kind of sense, I suppose,” Callum said cautiously. “And GAR *does* seem massively unstable, especially considering the modern world.”

“They are far overdue for the deadwood to burn,” Huitzilin said.

“So you’re some kind of GAR revolutionary?”

“No, I’m too old. The cycle is the business of younger people,” Huitzilin said, rather fondly. “But it is the world I live in, so I have an interest.”

“Well, to be honest—” Callum started, then stopped. “Actually, I just had another thought. One second.” He opened yet another portal to Gayle’s cave, feeling the strain from holding so many constructs at once and for so long. Even if he could do sixteen-some teleports, maintaining things definitely wore at him.

“Gayle, do you know a mage named Huitzilin? Says to call him Wizzy?”

“Oh, Archmage Wizzy.” Looked up from her book. “He’s weird.”

“Archmage, is it?”

“One has been given the rank, though it holds little real meaning.” Huitzilin said.

“Oh!” Gayle said. “That’s mean! You didn’t tell me he was listening in! My apologies, Archmage Wizzy.” Huitzilin laughed.

“It is of no moment,” he assured her. “One readily admits to having grown eccentric over the years.”

“Would you two be okay with Wizzy bringing Gayle back to civilization? Might be better than dropping her off in a random city, but I don’t want to impose on either of you.”

“I would not mind,” Huitzilin said.

“I guess? Grandpa said that Archmage Wizzy wasn’t a bad sort, anyway.”

“Fantastic. As I was saying, even if it is true that things go in cycles and things eventually fall, I don’t really have anything against most of the people in GAR. I never really thought of becoming a revolutionary. But some things just cannot be allowed.

So..." Callum sighed. "I still don't have any desire to be a revolutionary. But I don't know that I can coexist with GAR when it enables preying on people."

"It is the nature of the strong to prey upon the weak," Huitzilin noted, not arguing, just stating a fact. "Every government that has ever existed has abused its people."

"Sure, and maybe I'm a hypocrite, but the supernatural is decidedly different. Civilization is one long built up process of figuring out how to deal with ourselves. But most people don't know you even exist, let alone have any way to deal with you." Callum shrugged. "Even then, I'm not really looking to try and put in a new government or anything. I just want to stop the people who are doing bad things. Like whoever put that thing on Lucy, or the guy who heads up BSE."

"Grand Magus Taisen isn't a bad person," Gayle burst out. "Everyone knows all he does is fight in the portal worlds! Everything else is other people!"

"Well, then whoever is responsible for blowing up a café I was in." Callum waved it aside. "I'm not going to discuss specifics, obviously. At this point, though, it's obvious I have to do *something*. We've long crossed the point where GAR would leave me alone."

"You're a murderer and a criminal!" Gayle said. "They shouldn't leave you alone!" Huitzilin just shook his head slowly, apparently content to let them argue.

"Maybe I am. I've worried over that myself. But all I've done was defend people who couldn't defend themselves." Callum sighed. "What else was I supposed to do?"

"That's—! You can't—!" Gayle spluttered. "You didn't have to *kill* anyone! That's insane! You're supposed to call in GAR when there's a problem!"

"This one very much doubts this is an argument that can be resolved," Huitzilin cut in with his leathery voice. "It has, however, provided one with the measure being searched for."

"I have a question for you, then. You said that I was more along the lines of how you were trained. Do you have any training exercises or any knowledge at all I could have?"

"Archmage Wizzy!" Gayle said, a little shocked. "You can't be thinking of *helping* him can you?"

"It is the duty of the old to provide wisdom to the young," Huitzilin said. "However, the mysteries of one's people were those of obsidian and blood, not of space. You seem to have already passed through the most critical part of awakening your power, regardless. The best advice now is to explore what you can."

“Thanks, I guess,” Callum said. It was a little disappointing, but not surprising. If anything he should be glad that an Archmage was willing to just chat with him. “What exactly is the difference between what you and I do and what people like Gayle do anyway?”

“Little in terms of magical technique,” Wizzy admitted. “In fact, the creation of the shell may be the better approach. One’s people would invest our own power back into ourselves until we brimmed over, and could reach out into the world once again. But there were many that did not survive that process.”

“Is that why there aren’t any others like you around?” Callum found it rather suspect that there had been no mentions of an entire other tradition of magic, and one that fairly neatly explained things. Not *everything*, but at the very least his inability to use magic until late in life. If such a thing was commonly known there wouldn’t have been such confusion over it.

“Not as such. It has simply been so long since the traditions of Mictlān that none of my peers remain.”

“I thought mages didn’t really age,” Callum said, frowning. He *knew* that the Archmages were all supposed to be hundreds of years old.

“It takes the touch of healing magic to catalyze the change in aging. To slow it or, for an Archmage, to stop it.”

That was news to Callum. He’d thought it was something just inherent to being a mage, rather than a property of healing magic. Which would have an enormous impact over history, since any mage *without* access to what was apparently a rare aspect wouldn’t live any longer than anyone else. Clearly Wizzy had encountered it, but the other mages had not been so lucky.

“So why weren’t any new mages born in this region?” He couldn’t indulge too much curiosity; even if Wizzy seemed relatively friendly there were probably reinforcements on the way. The best defense he had was simply to limit exposure. But he was having trouble passing up asking questions of someone who was so deep inside the magical world.

“Mictlān is for the dead and the shadows, not the living.” Wizzy’s voice was calm and firm. “The cost of that sacrifice was power, but by the time that was understood my people were long gone.”

“Huh.” Callum had always assumed that mages were connected to the Portal Worlds, so it was good to hear he was right. “My condolences.”

“It was many centuries ago,” Wizzy said, which dated him fairly significantly.

“I appreciate you being willing to humor my questions,” Callum said after a moment.

“But I really should get going. Gayle, how is Lucy doing?”

“Oh, um. Still asleep? I can’t find anything wrong with her.”

“Well, thank you for what you’ve done. I’ll open a portal over to Wizzy, unless there’s anything else.”

“One is satisfied for the moment, young Wells.” Callum nearly snorted at being called young, though the Archmage had to be hundreds of years old at least. He didn’t want to open a portal directly from where Lucy was to the temple, so he had Gayle cross to the outside first. Fortunately he only had to keep that one open a few seconds because he was starting to feel pretty ragged.

He did laugh when he saw, as he re-angled the phone-portal to catch her leaving, that Gayle was clutching one of the books he’d provided. One of the old masters of science fiction. Callum didn’t say anything, figuring that if she wanted to hold on to a penny copy it was more than worth the help she’d provided with Lucy’s healing.

A second portal brought her into the temple by Archmage Huitzililn, though Callum realized he had no idea how the Archmage had arrived. There weren’t any obvious entrances or exits. Still, that wasn’t really his worry. He gladly dispelled his excess constructs, leaving only the portal anchors and the warded phone-portal still up.

“I suppose it’s unlikely we’ll talk again,” Callum said. “But for what it’s worth, it was nice seeing you again, Gayle. I appreciate your forbearance, Archmage Wizzy.”

“You’re not what I expected,” Gayle admitted.

“You are almost exactly what I expected,” Wizzy said.

Callum closed the portal and retrieved his anchor. Suddenly free of other mages to worry about, he sagged back in his chair for a moment, before standing up and starting to break out some fresh linens for Lucy. He’d have to also scout and see if his Texas trailer was still safe. It’d be nice if she woke up somewhere that wasn’t a cave.

“He’s using a very small version of a breacher portal,” Archmage Duvall said. “I’m not fully certain how he’s managed everything, but it’s really not anything *new*. Just applied oddly. How he smuggled it in to begin with is not my problem.” She looked over at Grand Magus Taisen.

“Considering the size of the thing, it’s possible it could have been smuggled in with any supply delivery. Possibly even without a collaborator.” Taisen was unimpressed with Duvall’s analysis, and wouldn’t have been surprised if she were keeping some things to herself. Or a lot of things to herself.

He wouldn’t have used *odd* to describe what Wells had accomplished. *Effective* was a better word for his adaptation of spatial magic principles, which meant Duvall could be a lot more personally dangerous than she was.

“I’ve already instituted more stringent protocols for screening foci, but if we want to be truly safe against this sort of infiltration we can’t allow focus traffic at *all*.” He already had dozens of protests about the proposal, which he’d stolen almost whole cloth from military black protocol. No personal effects at all could move in or out of secure facilities.

People would have to leave everything – clothing, foci, hair bands, everything – and use facility-provided ones on the interior of the secure site. Admittedly, only Garrisons One through Three really needed that level of protection. That and Garrison Seven, but Seven was a complete black box and wasn’t even known to most Archmages.

“What about the spatial field I saw?” Taisen asked. “The gravity-like one.”

“I’m not fully certain *why* it acts that way yet, but it’s not very complicated.” Duvall waved her hand and replicated the construct he’d described to her, flinging her glass of water into the air. Her telekinesis focus caught it and corralled the water back in before placing it on the table. “It’s not very precise or particularly powerful, although I suppose it could be made more powerful. All it does is accelerate things.”

She said it causally enough, but Taisen recognized the calculation in her eyes. He wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d known it earlier, but even if she didn’t the applications were obvious. Accelerating objects was quite effective, as Wells had demonstrated. Duvall might be averse to fighting, but she wasn’t stupid, and being able to openly use a spell-form that could hurl *houses* was quite a boon for her.

“Apparently that’s enough, to judge by the havoc wreaked by that lava,” Archmage Hargrave said, echoing Taisen’s thoughts. “Force magic could do it better, but he only used spatial. So the question is — where were the rest of his team? Does he even *have* one?”

“Lucile Harper was under the impression that he did not. Apparently he was Chase Hall, and we’ve seen no evidence of any other mages, which does answer some questions. Such as how he can remain undetected. A single person with the degree of mobility he’s demonstrated will be nearly impossible to track down.”

“He’s not a single person, though,” Duvall disagreed. “There’s the Harper girl, and his fae friends, and we *know* Alpha Chester is involved. I want to know what’s going to be done about *him*.” She scowled around at them. “House Duvall is officially declaring Wells a heretic mage. With all the penalties that entails for anyone who deals with him.”

Taisen shrugged. He wasn’t going to contest it. Though it’d been ages since that particular proclamation had been used, he didn’t think anyone was going to defend Wells. Actually enforcing it was another question, but not really his business.

“You can do whatever you want on that score, but what I care about is my granddaughter. Where is she?” Hargrave demanded.

“I already have people sweeping for her beacon,” Taisen said. “A lot of people,” he added, at Hargrave’s expression. It was the first order he’d given after Duvall had evacuated everyone back to the European GAR facility. He had been faintly surprised that she’d been willing to do so without any complaints, and in fact had managed to get a portal open within minutes.

She’d borrowed one of their portal foci to do it, the very same breacher portal she had compared Wells’ device to, which made him wonder exactly how surprised she’d been that Wells was using a miniaturized version. The breacher portal focus was big and unwieldy, eight feet across and generating a portal big enough for several mages to charge through. The size made the evacuations easier, and was why it was used for assaults, but it was certainly difficult to carry around. Some of Duvall’s anger might be at someone revealing that an easily portable version was possible. Not that he was ready to accuse her, but it was food for thought.

“If she’s hurt in any way there will be hell to pay,” Hargrave growled, dividing his glare between Taisen and Duvall. Taisen’s scry-com chimed, and it in turn became the recipient of the Archmage’s ire.

“Go ahead,” Taisen said, ignoring the sheen of force armor flickering over Hargrave’s body.

“I have Archmage Wizzy here with Gayle Hargrave.” Taisen’s eyebrows went up.

“By all means, send them in.” With everything he had to deal with, that was an unexpected and massive relief. How Huitzilin, of all people, had managed to secure the younger Hargrave was an interesting question, especially since there was nothing to indicate the Archmage had secured Wells.

“Grandpa!” Gayle said the moment she stepped through the door. The elder Hargrave was up and out of his seat to enfold her in a hug before she’d taken a second step. Then he wheeled around to glare at the room in general.

“I’m taking my granddaughter home,” he declared. “I don’t care what the GAR or BSE laws say, she’s not going to be part of your idiocy any longer. Tell Fane — well, he knows what I think of him.”

“We should at least hear what she has to say,” Taisen said, though it was mostly a token protest. He hadn’t wanted Gayle conscripted into his forces to begin with, and if House Hargrave was going to be the one to institute that particular political struggle, he wished them luck.

“That can wait! We’re going home first.” Hargrave caught sight of Huitzilil standing behind Gayle, hands in his pockets, and scowled at him from force of habit before changing his expression to something more neutral. “Thank you,” he said, voice restrained.

“One can claim no virtue in this regard. Callum Wells asked if I would shepherd young Gayle back to her family.”

“You’re in contact with Wells? You’re in *collusion* with Wells?” Hargrave snapped out, pushing Gayle behind him as his force armor snapped into being. Taisen drew up his defenses by reflex as well, but everyone froze as a drop of red blood, blazing with *vis*, hovered in the air. Wizzy’s finger lowered from the pierced earlobe he’d used to draw the blood. Behind him, his weird shadow stared out with diamond-bright eyes.

Taisen had seen Huitzilil in action only once. The only one who could really threaten him was probably Fane, despite Huitzilil being classed as a water mage. He claimed he was in fact a *blood* mage, and his own blood could crush most defenses. Even Hargrave, nigh-invulnerable as he was, had a certain degree of caution toward the man’s magic.

“One merely encountered him in Mictlān,” Huitzilil said. “He withdrew soon afterward, but sustained a connection to converse. It was his own suggestion for Gayle to accompany me back to you.”

“Archmage Huitzilil, I would appreciate it if you would report on your conversation with Wells. Archmage Hargrave, I will contact you later, for Gayle to report on her experience at her leisure.” Taisen would have preferred it sooner rather than later, but he had no authority or force to push Hargrave to do things now.

“I need some sleep first,” Gayle said for herself. “Then I’d be happy to talk with you, Grand Magus.” Taisen inclined his head, and wondered as the Hargraves left exactly where Gayle had gotten a beaten-up copy of mundane fiction.

Huitzilin report on Wells, delivered in a laconic way, was not at all helpful. It didn't surprise Taisen that Huitzilin didn't actually care about GAR, or that he openly admitted he didn't, but Duvall didn't like it. Halfway through she stormed out in frustration.

"Thank you," he told Huitzilin. He'd have to warn Ravaeb that Wells might be lying in wait for him, but the fae would probably relish the challenge. As for Sen, Taisen very strongly considered not saying anything. The House Fane idiot was not a shining example of magekind. "I would have appreciated it if you could have brought in Wells, but thank you nonetheless."

"One never actually saw Wells with one's own eyes," Huitzilin said, which was believable enough.

"Actually, I wanted to ask about that. I doubt any of the other Archmages would answer my questions, but Wells seems to be able to cast spells without needing any line of sight. Somehow he's able to move his vis around in a very large range without even pulsing vis senses. If he uses the same techniques as you, how is he doing it?"

"An interesting question. One is not entirely certain." Huitzilin held up a hand to forestall any comment. "It is obviously a product of the majority of Wells' power being bound into his body, rather than separated like in your tradition. One has the ability to feel flowing blood at quite some distance, and Wells likely has some equivalent ability."

"Hmm." Taisen sighed. "I don't think I can put it off any longer. I need to be able to do that sort of thing, so I really need to push through into Archmage. Could you give me any advice on that? I know most of the theory, but I suppose you don't use the same stuff we do." Magic itself was no different – he could follow Huitzilin's spellforms just fine – but the exact way that Huitzilin had become Archmage was a different path than people like Hargrave and Duvall.

"Is it truly your desire for more power that is prompting this decision? Was it a lack of desire that prevented you from taking the step before?" Once again Huitzilin held up a hand before Taisen could reply. "One has no doubt your technical knowledge is sufficient, but power is not solely composed of technical details. The further one gets from the foundations, the more the character and approach of a mage – or Archmage – matters."

Taisen hadn't pushed to become an Archmage because he knew that he'd lose control of what remained of the portal defense force, his Defensores Mundi. Archmages weren't really part of GAR, and since he was of no House, that would leave him somewhat rudderless. In the current crisis, there was no chance that anyone would try and push him out. Better, once it was over, he'd be firmly established as an Archmage and would have the capability to *stop* people from pushing him out.

“I suppose this has been a long time coming,” Taisen conceded.

“It is better to be equipped for the future,” Huitzilin said. “One suspects there is only chaos ahead.”