

## Chapter 9 – Misdirection

“Well?” Constance snapped at Supervisor O’Keefe. She was not used to being summoned, and while pragmatically she outranked O’Keefe, appearances had to be maintained. The new GAR was still fragile and it wouldn’t do to seem like they were fighting each other already.

“Thank you for coming,” O’Keefe said, ignoring her tone. “I got a message from a fae in the American Alliance. He is rather displeased and wants to help us.”

“Huh.” Constance dropped into a chair and wrinkled her brow, considering. Fae were notoriously spiteful, so in a way it was hardly surprising that one of them would be offended enough to turn against Alpha Chester. Yet going directly to GAR was not their normal style. “How so?”

“I believe he’ll want to explain it himself,” O’Keefe said with a sigh. “But he has some insight into how to weaponize The Ghost and destroy his reputation.”

“We’re *already* weaponizing Wells,” Constance pointed out. “I don’t think we need any special insight for that.” Unfortunately, most of what they could do was spin incidents after the fact. Getting him to attack a target of their choosing was more of an issue. Especially since he mostly went after vampires, and they were fairly easy to control anyway.

“Perhaps not,” O’Keefe conceded. “But this fae is willing to feed us information from the inside, *and* has said that he can get Wells moving on a target. We just have to make up some convincing evidence.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure we’re in a position where we *care* that much. But...” She trailed off and considered. There was still the insistence from her fae backers about dealing with Taisen’s faction. It was next to impossible to get any inside information on what they were up to, but people did talk a little bit and there was good reason to suspect Wells had aided them. “It might be worth at least starting in that direction.”

“I’ll call him in,” O’Keefe said, and pressed a button his desk. A DAI agent showed in a rotund fae in a bowler hat, whose face was barely visible behind a bushy muttonchop. Constance hated him on sight. She regarded most fae with the same disdain, but was too professional to let that get in the way of her work.

“This is Toclerane Tinn. Mister Tinn, this is Director Earl of the Department of Acquisition,” O’Keef introduced them. “She controls most of the people who would be involved in carrying out any ideas like the one you had.” Constance frowned at the phrasing but didn’t correct him. Not in public.

“Excellent! It’s an honor to meet such fine personages!” Tinn exclaimed with false exuberance. “I am so glad to meet someone who might take that awful Ghost fellow down a peg or two.”

“Niceties can wait,” Constance said, ignoring Tinn’s outstretched hand. “What makes you think you know a way to direct the Ghost’s attention in any useful capacity?”

“Why, the mere fact that he investigated my complaint,” Tinn said, completely uncowed by Constance’s chill welcome. “If you could have heard the iron in his voice when he contemplated that someone might be threatening mundane children! Well. It’s certainly an easy button to press.”

“I see.” As much of a buffoon as the fae presented himself to be, he clearly knew what he was talking about. That was one of the more irritating things about dealing with fae — the more serious one appeared to be, the less likely they were to be worth dealing with. “Then let us discuss things.”

Once she got past Tinn’s overwrought way of talking, his account was quite detailed, and Constance made notes to check with the other party in the affair — Anexis. It was possible that Wells had done all his research without making contact, but it could also be that Anexis hadn’t reported an encounter with The Ghost.

It also seemed to confirm that the Harper dud was still plugged into the GAR network. She couldn’t imagine any other way that Wells would have established fae bona fides and researched their history so quickly. Assuming he didn’t stay up all night, it was merely hours between Toclerane’s request and Wells’ reply.

It was unfortunate that he *did* do research, but at the same time, it was something that could be worked around. Planting evidence was not impossible, especially since GAR controlled the way that evidence was reported. Using a few agents to falsify news reports or the like was not difficult either, though it would have to be done with great care.

“We appreciate the tip, Mister Tinn,” Constance said, not entirely insincerely. She could have and would have come to the conclusion on her own eventually, but having it shoved in her face made it easier. “The Guild of Arcane Regulation welcomes the ability to neutralize the effectiveness of The Ghost.”

She’d be testing it first, of course. There were certain fae that she needed to be dealt with that could be easily brought to the Ghost’s attention. She simply need to raise their crimes to be more visible. Once that worked, she’d be ready to aim him at more important targets.

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“Aha!” Callum smiled at the ugly-looking wire contraption. It didn’t seem like much to the naked eye, but it was doing what he wanted. Which was to say, it blocked the flow of mana. More than blocked; it was like a solid wall, keeping the mana completely contained and allowing the interior to reach equilibrium with the portal anchor inside it.

The downside of such a thing was that he couldn’t work his vis threads through it. The enchantments outside Mictlān were more efficient *and* permeable to his senses and magics, but they were also immense and that permeability went both ways. Trying to restrain the mana flood of a portal world was probably a fool’s errand, but his little portal couldn’t provide enough pressure to overcome the enchantments.

“Finally got it?” Lucy peered over from her new chair. She was starting to show, so Lisa had sent over something that was supposed to be easier and better for Lucy’s posture.

“Yep. Space stuff, part two,” he said, and slid the wire box across the table to her. It was more like a sphere, and the ugliness was more to do with the three enchantment layers not lining up and resulting in something without symmetry or pattern. That was a feature rather than a bug, since the structures locked together in weird ways once the enchantment was activated. To his spatial perceptions it was far more aesthetically pleasing. “Still gotta test it of course, but if this works we can make a bigger one and start actually *putting* things in space.”

“I wonder how hard it’d be to build like, a *room* we could put in space,” Lucy said thoughtfully. Callum chuckled.

“I might be an architect, but that’s a bit beyond my expertise. Atmosphere, radiation, all that stuff. It’s probably something that’ll have to wait until after we have all the portal stuff worked out,” he told her. “Besides, it’s one thing to have a little box floating around. Something room-sized might cause issues even with a glamour.”

“You’re still underestimating how much room is up there,” Lucy disagreed. “Outside of certain orbits you could have Everest floating around and it wouldn’t inconvenience anybody.”

“Huh.” Callum pursed his lips, momentarily considering how hard it’d be to teleport Mount Everest, then shook his head. “Well, that might not be a bad idea. It might even be a better place to put a cache, assuming we can solve the engineering problems. Or find someone who’s already solved them.”

“The internet is a wonderful place,” Lucy agreed.

It didn’t take all that long to set up the mana test drone, which Lucy had festooned with *Ghost Space Program* stickers. Calling their little experiment a space program was

perhaps overwrought, but it was fun. Besides, they *could* get into space. Even if he was cheating with magic, that felt special.

He lofted it into space the same way as before, though the containment was deactivated since the enchantment was powerful enough to interfere with his spatial box. He actually needed two anchors to monitor everything, since the insulating bubble blocked his perception and he needed to see what it looked like from the outside, too. Mana leak testing was something he had to do manually. There weren't any instruments to measure mana density that he knew of, and it'd be hard to calibrate them on Earth anyway.

Once activated, it was obvious that the first pass wasn't going to work. Callum wasn't sure if mana really followed the rules of pressure or mass or what, but it seemed like the disparity between the mana flooding from the anchor and the manaless vacuum was too much. Under pressure, what had seemed like a solid wall turned out to have a lot of holes. It leaked, and badly, not quite able to keep the density that Callum wanted inside. Though he was pretty sure he could take care of that with another layer or two.

"Getting there," Callum muttered. "A few more iterations and we can start thinking about moving the nexus."

So far there hadn't been any new attempts to crack open his portal anchors, but he'd also been very careful to clean up every place he used his magic. Even Toclerane's house and Jissarrell's court had gotten a number of his vis scrubbers to make sure that there was nothing to trace. When it came to security he and Lucy were on the same page. She had dozens of stories about how a vulnerability in the IT world could go unseen for years until it suddenly caused disaster, and he didn't want that to happen with his portals.

Putting his nexus in vacuum still wasn't perfect security, but it'd make things a *lot* harder for people. In fact he'd bet that most mages weren't really even clear on what a vacuum was, let alone the proper precautions for dealing with one. A quick-thinking mage or one with a homebond probably could survive, but most people weren't ready to pop out into an airless freefall hundreds or thousands of miles from anywhere.

There was also some part of him that wanted to actually do something *real* with it. Easy access to space was a lot like the infinite portal loop electricity. If mages actually worked with the rest of the world, they could do amazing things. But they didn't, and Callum was pretty sure he wasn't the best person to change that. There was no accounting for what might happen in the future, though.

All that was just wild-eyed speculation and wishful what-ifs. There was still an awful lot of work and learning to do, and a few months of practice with the Guild of Enchanting tutor was hardly enough. Especially since the tutor couldn't see his actual spellwork to give him pointers. He wasn't about to risk that kind of exposure, though.

While he was less worried about GAR hammering down his door, he still had a faint suspicion the Guild of Enchanting was trying to track him. Unless they managed to hack a portal anchor he was pretty sure they couldn't. All the electronics used a portal to link up rather than the actual internet, and tracing Lucy's online presence would only lead to the off-site server.

The largest worry he had was that they'd slip a locator of some kind into the equipment or materials they sent him. They knew he wasn't as talented at spellwork as other mages his age, and while they didn't know about the way his senses worked he still worried that they might get something past him. So he swept every single thing he took from them very thoroughly before teleporting it to a separate, remote cave. Only after they'd been there for a few days did he bring the materials to the bunker.

Time slipped away surprisingly quickly. Lucy and Callum worked on their respective projects, the garden grew, and the days grew hotter. He was glad that he'd designed the house with sufficient air conditioning, and had the power to run it. The summer heat was absolutely brutal.

In their regular meetings with Chester, he saw Clara and Arthur and Jessica on occasion. Clara started driving, and started thinking about college. With access to the Deep Wilds restored, Jessica ended up announcing her own pregnancy, so of course Lucy had to make friends.

GAR kept reorganizing, as any bureaucracy did when there was blame to be allotted. Neither he nor Lucy really paid too much attention to it, but various departmental heads stepped down and were replaced. Some internal reorganization recurred, this sub-bureau or that being shuffled into an adjacent larger structure. The end result seemed to be a more streamlined hierarchy, but there was really no telling how well it actually worked.

He even took care of a couple more vampire nests and a couple of fae that were brought to his attention. But according to GAR records there were *thousands* of vampires and possibly tens of thousands of fae, so even though he absolutely was removing monsters it was hardly a dent in the totals. He wanted to do more, but didn't know how to locate the source of the issue.

The entire time he was expecting another communique from Taisen, since he heard through Lucy's grapevine that there were still investigations ongoing, but it was quiet. They had more contact with House Hargrave in the form of Gayle and Gloria, whom they regularly met at Chester's place to give Lucy check-ups. Which Callum still felt twitchy about, but when his paranoia ran up against his family's health and safety, family won out.

It was during one of those checkups, sometime in early fall, that Lucy brought up the first inklings of more trouble. She was the one who was plugged into the wider world, and he was content to leave it to her. He was busy enough trying to shore up the holes in his self-taught magical capabilities, not to mention all the thousand chores of just living life. Lucy was the one to kept an eye on the outside world.

“Hey,” she said, glancing between Gloria and Chester. “Either of you know anything about an Alpha Curran?”

“Name doesn’t ring any bells,” Gloria said, and Gayle shook her head in agreement.

“European, I think,” Chester suggested. “Unless there’s one of the fae-aligned packs I don’t know about with that name.”

“Huh. Well, I’m starting to see some stuff about them outta GAR and I was hoping you would have more insight.” Lucy shifted under Gayle’s hand. “It’s surprisingly hard to dig up stuff about that pack.”

“The European shifters are generally more closely attached to mage Houses, rather than being independent,” Chester said. “One reason why I was much happier with being here in the US. More room here anyway.”

“Huh,” Lucy said. “I guess that’s why there’s nothing about them on GAR servers. House stuff is still kind of separate still.”

“I can ask,” Chester offered.

“I don’t know how well that’ll work,” Lucy sighed. “What I’m seeing is some hints that they’re going out hunting for people nearby.”

“So something I would need to take care of,” Callum said unhappily. He wasn’t much of a fan of Lucy bringing it up in front of the Hargraves either, on the off chance there was some connection there.

“If Curran *is* part of a House, then going after him means going to war with that House,” Gloria warned. “That’s not like a fae enclave that’s going to fall apart when the King dies. That’s the kind of feud that would go on for years.”

“House Fane fell apart pretty well,” Callum said. He wasn’t entirely certain what their status was now, but they seemed to have practically vanished off the face of the Earth.

“That’s because House Hargrave – that is to say, us – destroyed them,” Gloria said with grim satisfaction. “The Archmage removed all their top people and the other Houses divided the remains. Without anyone of note and after all the ill will they’d built up, there wasn’t anyone to hold them together.”

“Ah.” Callum grimaced. He hadn’t had anything against any of the other House Fane people, just Fane himself. But none of his actions occurred in a vacuum; anyone he removed represented a power vacuum that would be filled. Sometimes that helped people like Chester, but sometimes that would result in further destruction. Which wouldn’t stop him from removing monsters as he found them, but did make things more complicated.

“Well, I’m not sure that would be much different from GAR already being after me,” he decided. “There’s a reason none of you know where we live, even if we are allies. Though I’m surprised nobody’s tried leaning on you yet. Or maybe I’m just overestimating my own importance.”

“Oh, I’ve had some inquiries,” Chester said. “But unless they want actual war they can’t really pressure me. One of the benefits of being completely independent.” Chester chuckled softly. “We even have our own contacts with the Guild of Enchantment and, of course, our own black market enchantment supplier.”

“Good to hear.” Callum well knew that he wasn’t all that much help politically, and that his only real talent was basically just to threaten assassination. Hardly the best way to get allies or assuage the fears of anyone neutral. There needed to be some way to build things too, if he really wanted to improve the world, but that was sadly not his path. “When we get home we’ll see about looking into Alpha Curran.”

“We’re almost done,” Gayle said, standing up. “I wish there was more *diagnostic* stuff in healing magic,” she said. “I swear that would make things a lot simpler and faster.”

“Maybe you can invent it,” Lucy suggested. “With House Fane out of things aren’t you kind of the top healer around?”

“Um.” Gayle looked stunned by the suggestion. “I’m definitely not the best healer around. But I guess without House Fane’s expertise we have to start rebuilding techniques anyway. Diagnostic magic though? I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“I dunno either.” Lucy shrugged. “Not a mage. But the Guild of Enchanting might have something. They can measure magic output, right?”

“Yes...” Gayle frowned thoughtfully. “I know they can measure total mana and they provide the aspect sensors.”

“Then maybe they can measure more,” Lucy suggested.

“The feedback from wards reminds me a lot of old style television,” Callum put in. “Big old pixels. I don’t know if that means you can turn the magic feed into something that

works the same way but it might be worth asking.” Gayle exchanged a look with her mother and nodded thoughtfully.

“I’ll look into it,” she said.

He and Lucy had their own research to do, now that she’d brought up the specter of another monster. Not only did they need to find out more about this Alpha Curran, they needed to see if anything was actually going on. Which was less easy than he had initially thought, considering what he’d seen with the human trafficking. The line between normal crimes and supernatural crimes was blurrier than he’d expected, so just looking for mysterious deaths in an area wasn’t all that useful an indicator.

To that end, Lucy couldn’t just poke around online, even though that was the best place to start. They needed to get some intelligence on the ground — or rather, in the air. After she scoured the GAR databases to get a general region, they sent a drone to southern Italy to check on things.

The language barrier certainly worked against them. He sure couldn’t speak Italian, and neither could Lucy, both of them relying on machine translation. Which wasn’t terrible, but it certainly made things take longer than they should have. There were some hints in local papers, but Lucy wanted to compromise the local police station to be certain.

With no supernatural defenses, it was easy enough to open a portal and let Lucy plug something in. She didn’t even bother to infect it with a virus or anything. Her hardware let her pull the entire database without anyone being any the wiser. Callum wasn’t sure how that worked, but that kind of thing was her specialty.

If it were just vampires, he probably wouldn’t have been so careful. He already knew vampires deserved everything that was coming to them, but anyone else needed close scrutiny. The best thing would be to witness something himself, preferably something he could stop, to verify the claims.

In fact, their experience with Anexis had made Lucy suggest hiring a private investigator. If there hadn’t been a social media trail, they would have just had the word of one person against another and that was not good enough. Just police reports weren’t sufficient, considering the cover stories and coverups that were possible even without supernatural interference. Deaths could be victims, or cover stories for supernatural infighting, or completely fake identities.

They tracked a number of mysterious disappearances to a region by a little village in the mountains near the southern coast of Italy, which was where Callum took over. He skimmed around using the drone looking for supernaturals, since Lucy didn’t have access to much in the way of European records. In fact, the Europeans used the American



servers so they didn't even have their own, relying on paper and personnel for the most part.

Technically Callum could get access to that; his portal anchors did wonders for infiltration. But apparently most of the records departments were run by fae, and there was a huge difference between searching a database and trying to parse out information from stacks upon stacks of papers. Under the circumstances, he preferred searching the area to find things, since he could pick up on any supernatural people or structures with ease.

Sweeping a spiral pattern out from the village, it only took an hour or so to find the mage House. It reminded him a little bit of House Fane, since it too was a sprawling compound set into mountainous terrain, but it was very clearly full of classical Mediterranean architecture. There was only one road leading up to it, winding through picturesque forested foothills, so it wasn't quite as disconnected as House Fane, but it clearly got most of its supplies through teleport.

While he'd seen only mages and a few normal humans – or rather duds, as much as he hated that term – in the Fane complex, there was an entire shifter population inside the ward barriers of the mage House. Interestingly, they seemed to be security, to judge from the fact that the ones patrolling around the edges of the grounds had guns and blades. Bane weaponry, if he were to guess based on the mana signature.

“Any idea which House this is?” Callum asked Lucy, watching the camera views from the drone as it perched on top of a building. Once they were inside of the outer wards, the glamours no longer screened things. “They seem pretty martial.”

“A lot of the Houses are,” Lucy said, clicking through scanned documents on her laptop. “I'm reading as fast I can but none of this stuff is properly digitized.” Her voice was disgusted. “These people have *awful* handwriting, I swear.”

Callum snorted, but there wasn't a rush. Not yet. As soon as he saw something terrible he'd intervene, but until then he would just watch.

He didn't actually care about what the internal behavior of the House was. All he wanted to know was what they were doing when it came to the regular people nearby. So he parked the drone by the road and waited for people to leave. Which didn't actually happen for quite some time.

Callum actually had to keep an eye on the House for three days before a foray left along the road, a bunch of shifters in animal form. He stopped the enchanting he was doing to focus on them, teleporting the drone and anchor along after them. Given shifter senses they hadn't used the actual rotors anywhere near the House, so he was really just moving

the drone between the trees and couldn't get a good image of them on the cameras. Not that he needed it with his perceptions, but he'd been spoiled by Lucy's wall of monitors.

None of the shifters seemed to notice the presence of the drone, and he had no issues following them as they ran around seemingly just for fun. They were terrifyingly fast through the undergrowth, and surprisingly quiet according to the microphone pickups. *He* sure wouldn't want to be hunted by them. Compared to the Wild Hunt that he'd run into almost two years ago, they were a *lot* more professional. Callum would say more powerful, since they seemed to have more strength and speed and general physical prowess than the ones that had been hunting with the fae.

Something that was demonstrated when they ran down a deer, which had absolutely no chance against one shifter, let alone a dozen of them. It was kind of odd to watch, since he'd never actually seen any of Chester's pack doing that kind of thing, though of course they probably did.

After hunting down a few more unfortunate wildlife, devouring them, and running through hill and dale, the pack returned to the House. So it wasn't really anything worth commenting on, save for the fact that it was an excursion from warded grounds. Yet after they returned, Lucy grunted and tapped at her laptop.

"Okay, that's weird. I've just gotten a couple emails from GAR pop up on my filters that claim that they need some cleanup after Curran's people just ate a couple of mundanes." Lucy said.

"That's not suspicious at all." Callum scowled. "That feels like someone is playing at something, though I don't know what yet. Either they're being framed or that group was a distraction. Are there extra shifters we don't know about?"

"I dunno!" Lucy looked up from her laptop. "Let's check the town."

"Yeah," Callum agreed, and Lucy activated the drone. Back in town, she accessed the police database again and came up with two missing persons, just like GAR had said. The record was itself suspicious, since it had been entered by the lieutenant at the front desk maybe thirty minutes prior, as an anonymous tip, with no further information.

"Police don't mark a person as missing unless it's been a while. More than a few hours, anyway," Callum remarked. "That's some fast work from the BSE — and they're supposed to be understrength, aren't they?"

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark?" Lucy suggested. "Or Italy, I guess."

"Yeah. Something's weird. We'll stay on it. Get a second drone down there for more surveillance." He itched to do something about the deaths, assuming they were real, but

at the same time he had a deep uneasiness about the situation. Not to mention how frustrating it was to do all the spadework himself. Though he knew that nothing worthwhile was ever easy.

They spent another few days keeping an eye on the area, with Callum tracking Curran's pack whenever they went out, leaving another drone to patrol the area. It was a good thing he'd gotten used to splitting his attention, even if his surveillance didn't find anything. Which was a problem, since four days after the first report, there was another claim that two more mundanes had been taken by the Curran pack. There was even a Department of Acquisition form attached to the emails.

"Someone is playing at *something*," Callum complained, arms wrapped around Lucy as she lay against him. "Either Curran knows about our surveillance and knows how to dodge it, or these records are being faked for some reason."

"I don't know anyone who'd have anything against Curran's House, but I'm not up on House politics," Lucy said. She'd at least been able to figure out *whose* House that was, though it had been more difficult than it really should have been. "We should ask House Hargrave."

"I suppose." Callum grimaced, realizing that if he was going to do his job properly he had to at least allow that much. "Yes, go ahead and do that. I don't like all this. It doesn't make sense."

"Yeah, since when do mages make sense," Lucy dismissed his complaining. "Okay yes, there's probably a reason but what are the chances it has anything to do with us?"

"Pragmatically, it probably doesn't. But when I run into something like this I feel like there's a conspiracy afoot."

"That's because you're paranoid, dear," Lucy said fondly. "I'll call Gayle," she added, trying to lever herself upright and finding it a little difficult. Callum helped her up and she gave him a kiss before turning to her laptop. He only half-listened to her conversation, as she'd somehow become good friends with Gayle during the checkups. Though Lucy was far more personable than he was, so it wasn't that much of a surprise.

"That House is one of Archmage Taisen's, I think," Gayle said, after she and Lucy had made their way through several minutes of catching up. "Pretty sure anyway. A lot of the Houses still here on Earth are either with us or with Taisen."

"It sounds like they're being framed for something," Callum put in, leaning closer to the pickup. "It's probably a bit too much to think it's for my benefit, but I suppose GAR might have other axes to grind."

“Well, they’re still kind of part of GAR,” Gayle said. “Just Archmage Taisen’s supporters.”

“Which is exactly why they’re being targeted,” Callum sighed.

“I suppose so,” Gayle said with disappointment. “Boo. I’ll tell Grandfather about it. He and Archmage Taisen can figure out what to do.”

“We’ll keep an eye on it from this end,” Lucy said. “Might see what they’re actually up to.”

“And keep it quiet, if you can,” Callum added. “Don’t want to tip anyone off if we’re going to catch whoever is messing with us.”

“I’ll let Grandfather deal with that,” Gayle said. “He’s done this cloak-and-dagger stuff before.”

“If you find out anything, I’d appreciate it if you could let us know,” Callum said.

“I’ll call you back later,” Lucy added. “Tonight or tomorrow.”

“Sure!” Gayle agreed happily. “I want to pick your brain about some college courses when you do. I found quite a few but they all claim the other courses are terrible.”

“Of course they do,” Lucy laughed. “I’ll get you squared away, don’t worry.”

“Thanks, Lucy!” Gayle said. Callum shook his head as she hung up.

“You’re just so much better at that than I am,” he told her.

“Because I’m not scary and grumpy,” Lucy said happily. Callum just rolled his eyes and kissed her.

Considering what they were seeing, Callum moved the second drone to the vicinity of the local police station, to try and catch whoever was doing the reports. It might be some poor local compelled into it, but it might be an actual BSE agent and that would be telling. He was almost completely convinced of Alpha Curran’s innocence, but until things were resolved he needed due diligence and so he left the other drone parked where it had been.

It paid off less than a day later, when a vampire entered the police station late in the local evening. Callum had only been paying the vaguest of attention, but the feel of supernatural vis crossing into his range snapped him to alert, and when he identified the type of supernatural as a vampire he knew something bad was about to happen. Especially since the vampires were basically considered GAR’s lackeys.

“Heads up,” he told Lucy. “I think we’re about to get a lead.”

“Bwuh?” Lucy blinked at him fuzzily, lifting her head from where she was napping in the sunlight coming in from the big windows.

“Don’t worry about it,” he assured her. “Probably just going to be following a vamp around.” He was already sorting through the bane ammunition while the vampire in question spoke to a policeman.

“Bwuh,” she said, and flopped back on the couch. Callum couldn’t hear anything, not with the drone outside on the roof, but the wisps of vis that the vampire gave off and the way the officer at the front immediately turned to the computer let him guess what was going on.

This was the source of the reports. Callum left off what the report actually was for the moment and followed the vampire after it left the building. After one street it shifted from normal human walking speed to supernatural swiftness, and Callum had to teleport rapidly to keep up. Even after all this time he didn’t know what normal speeds were for a vampire, but the one he was trailing outpaced cars on the highway.

Some twenty minutes later, the vampire halted outside of a GAR office in a coastal town. It was a tiny one, nothing like what Callum imagined was over in Rome, but it still had a teleport. When the vamp stepped inside, Callum had to make a quick decision. He and Lucy hadn’t taken the time to try and decipher all the security protocols in the new teleports, mostly because he was still learning how to read enchantments, so he didn’t know what would set off the alarms.

He didn’t really have much to lose though, so he quickly ran a thread of vis into the forming teleportation framework and recalled just the drone, shifting his portal anchor onto the ground just behind the vampire. His biggest worry was that the vamp would sense it, but with all the other magic around, the more subtle teleport seemed to be drowned out. The teleportation framework energized itself and they went from the Bari office to a much larger GAR facility.

“You’ve got a serious look on your face,” Lucy said, handing him a plate of spaghetti. He hadn’t even noticed her get up and start dinner.

“I’ve got an anchor inside one of the big GAR offices,” he replied, taking the plate. “Following that vamp from before.”

“Ooh, infiltration.” She took the seat next to him. “Anything juicy?”

“I just got in,” he told her, leaning over to give her a hug before they started. “Next step is to make sure we’re unnoticed. Umm, we’re going to need a portal box that isn’t a drone.” He skimmed through the supplies they had in the basement while keeping half his attention on where the vampire was going.

“They’re the ones with a *P* in front of their number,” Lucy reminded him unhelpfully, and offered him the parmesan.

“Definitely too complicated for me,” Callum mused, and teleported a box on the table on the other side of the plates. “Could you check that really quick?” He ran a thread of vis through the assorted fields and enchantments that surrounded the GAR teleportation landing and teleported his anchor on top of an electrical box inside the far wall.

The GAR office was noticeably different from the American versions of the same, with older architecture marred by clear signs of renovation to install plumbing, electricity, and replace windows. If he had to guess it was GAR Paris, their main office in Europe. The vampire made his way into the office sections, and when Lucy handed him the box Callum snaked a vis thread through the various layers of warding. The box went just outside the office the vamp had entered, and he tapped the tablet to start recording.

“Third report,” the vampire said.

“Good,” a woman’s voice replied. That was all, and Callum was forced to juggle portal anchors as he split his attention between the vampire and the person he’d reported to. The vampire left by way of the front door, out onto the streets, and the women picked up a phone.

“Supervisor O’Neill? Yes. Has Toclerane reported on any movement from the Alliance? I see. Yes. We need another, then. A couple of kids should get Wells’ attention.”

Callum felt something cold coil in his gut. It was aimed at him, and it wasn’t hard to see what, or why. If he hadn’t started watching when he had, if he’d come to it after all the evidence had been properly planted and the traces erased, he probably would have taken the bait and killed a lot of innocents. To say nothing of any innocents who might be killed in order to make the attempted framing stick.

“Who is that?” Callum said, his voice coming out hoarse. Lucy looked absolutely murderous as well, and she took command of the cameras. He waited until there was no traffic, and as he teleported the box back into the hallway in front of the office. The name on the door read *Constance Earl, Department of Acquisitions, Director*.

“Right,” Callum said. “Constance needs to die.”