

## Chapter 7 – Pursuit

“We’ve got a potential hit at Weltentor Landing.” Zarin said. “Everyone, sound off.”

It only took a few seconds. They had their armor on, their foci primed, and auxiliary charges at their waist if necessary. Sen had been given an air mage’s standard loadout, which was essentially what he had worked with during his service, though of higher quality. The armor had built-in flying foci, with subordinate resonators to link up with his teammates, and the gauntlets had heat projectors for both the standard bolt spell and a few variations.

The built-in glamour was potent, probably strong enough to render them invisible to most mages at a distance, or at least those not using active sensing. Even Sen found it difficult to focus on the team when the glamour was active. The earpieces, though, were fairly standard, even if such things were a relatively new development. At some point in the distant past they would have needed dedicated far-speaking foci, rather than automated relays, but that sort of thing was irrelevant now.

In all, he was impressed by the quality of the equipment, and while some of it might be restricted to BSE he’d have to see how much of it could be gotten for House Fane. It was better than what he’d been issued for his service and, of course, better than his own personal foci. Similar, but crisper and more responsive.

He linked the mage’s mark on his wrist to the transporter pad and it resonated through his vis for a fraction of a moment, bringing them from the staging complex through to France. The moment they were through he keyed his flight focus to his partner’s subordinate focus, both of them lifting off the floor slightly. So long as they stayed near enough, the force mage could fly almost as well as an air mage thanks to Sen’s vis.

The others in their six-man squad joined him in a powered hover, darting out the door and crashing through the ward-line. The other two squads arrived just behind them, as soon as the transporter cycled, all of them spreading out into the air. They all ignored the alarms that set off, and Sen sent out his senses, taking in the surrounding miles and listening for any stray people. There were the ones inside Weltentor Landing, at their stations, but beyond it—

“South, two clicks!” Zarin snapped. “Go!”

Sen sent his partner and himself speeding south after Zarin, locating the target only belatedly. Down in the forest there was the sound of human breath and the radiant heat of a living person, and there was not supposed to be anyone in the exclusion zone. They had their glammers wrapped tight around them, and Zarin’s partner hefted a heavy arcane rifle. It was not a weapon that Sen wanted to be on the other end of,

considering the massive spelled rounds the thing fired. He couldn't imagine how expensive each round was, but it wasn't like BSE needed to worry about the scarcity of good enchanting materials.

They were a good fifty meters up as they closed in on the target, the other teams moving to block off the escape routes. They did have an unconfirmed report of a homebond implant, which meant they needed to scramble the mage's vis and incapacitate him as fast as possible. It was only if that failed that lethal force was authorized.

The moment they got within maybe half a kilometer, there was a subdued flare of magic and the target vanished. Obviously the mage was using active senses, but it had to be something subtle, considering that there was no clear sweep of vis to accompany it. Sen had a number of choice words spring to his lips but before he could actually say them, Zarin snapped more instructions.

"Teleport! Half click west! Two-Gimel, take the shot!" Even as he spoke they were altering course to head after the teleport, with Sen pumping vis into the flight focus to keep pace with Zarin. Somewhere ahead of them there was a bright flare as callsign Two-Gimel fired, a glowing ball of tight wards appearing among the trees.

"Miss," came the terse statement. "West again."

"We'll go ahead, herd him toward us," Zarin decided, and went faster. Their team zipped higher in the air, vis pulsing out into the surroundings as they scanned the terrain for their target. Sen knew they only had a limited time before the man used the homebond, assuming it existed, so they needed a clean hit.

Zarin hadn't yet signaled they were in position when there was another blip of magic, just below them, and the sharpshooter jerked his arcanorifle around. Force magic launched the capture round, which smashed through the tree cover toward the target below. Sen winced as it impacted, the unleashed vis blazing.

It didn't need to hit the target, and in fact, wasn't designed to. What it did was deploy a sphere of interlinked wards and shielding, to keep the mage physically and magically isolated. Not to mention a burst of light and sound, coupled with the Special Target Access Bypass, meant to disable any renegade mage. STAB had a chance to permanently impair someone's spellcasting, though, so it was rarely deployed. Even at that distance, he could feel it tingling through his mage mark.

"Target neutralized," Zarin said, confirming that the wards were up. "Moving to—damn!" He spun, and Sen followed the motion to find that somehow, some way, the

mage had gotten out of the capture area. He was almost half a klick westward, crouched down at the base of a tree.

“Goddamn,” Zarin swore. “How the hell—” He stopped himself. “Capture failed. Lethal force authorized.”

“Finally,” Sen said, and conjured flame into his hands.

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Callum hoped that he hadn't given himself away. There seemed to be more vampires out and about when he returned to the settlement, and he didn't know if that activity meant he'd been spotted or if was just that local morning had arrived. No matter the reason, there were people walking the streets and the perimeter than when he had left.

That meant he had to be more careful, but it wasn't an impenetrable surveillance. It did mean that he needed to get out of there quick, though, since he could only assume the trend would continue. Whether the vampires were waking up, were preparing for something, or suspected he was around, he wanted to slip out before it got worse.

The castle was essentially in the middle of the group of estates, so there wasn't a significantly better approach from any direction, but he still circled around the town to make an entrance from a different angle than his departure. The actual estates were so very tempting, but there was no way that old and powerful mages didn't have something impressive to protect their actual homes. Especially since he couldn't see whatever glamours were in place, which no doubt spruced up the dark stone buildings and would signal to people where they ought to actually go. The mage equivalent of a welcome mat or a no trespassing sign.

Unfortunately, he wouldn't find out anytime soon. Or maybe ever.

The added patrols meant that he had to take a slightly circuitous route into the keep, making sure to keep well away from any vampire that might possibly spot or sniff him. Once again, there were at least enough traces of mages about that his passage would blend in, but at the same time the increased patrols meant *something* was going on. It might be that his passage was far enough from normal traffic patterns to be suspicious in and of itself.

For that reason he popped up to the castle roof, inside the wards, as quickly as he dared, sending his perceptions down and through the portal. The moment before he teleported into the room behind the portals, dark and smelling of stone, he thought he sensed one of the vampires turn in his direction, blurring into motion. He couldn't be sure it was him that they'd sensed, but Callum was absolutely not going to wait and see.

He threaded his vis through the wards and popped back out into the woods, behind a tree, then popped another few times before pausing to figure out where he was going. The train station was the obvious choice, but part of him wanted to refrain from retracing his steps. It might be better to go north to Belgium, or maybe even head over to Luxembourg.

Even though he hadn't stopped for more than a second, orienting himself toward the borders, it apparently was too long. A set of mage bubbles appeared in his perceptions, high up in the air and moving quickly in his direction. It was so unexpected the sudden jolt of adrenaline practically paralyzed him, then he frantically cast his perceptions off in the opposite direction and teleported.

Only to find there were *more* mages there. Callum swore to himself as he scrambled to re-orient, popping in another direction just before *something* flashed and rumbled behind where he'd been, all kinds of magic strobing on the edges of his perception. Somehow, he'd given his location away.

Almost belatedly, Callum started charging his implant again. It wasn't entirely discharged to begin with, since he'd kept it close to topped off, or as close as he could get without it triggering and resonating through his vis. It was hard to teleport with it up, so he always had to trade off between being ready to bolt and ready to evade.

He popped in a few random directions while he charged it, finding there were at least two teams flying through the air. There was no telling how many personnel they'd sent out after him, or what had prompted it, but he absolutely had to get the hell out of there. He had to teleport a few more times, staying ahead of the teams, until the thing snapped into full activation and made him grit his teeth against the feel. He paused as another team approached and pushed the focus.

Nothing happened.

The teleport matrix around him just sputtered out and collapsed without taking him anywhere, leaving him completely stranded. His contingency had failed. He gawked at it, completely startled, for long enough that someone overhead took a shot at him.

It landed a dozen feet away, bursting into light and cacophonous sound that sent him reeling away, along with a swirl of complex magic that did absolutely nothing so far as he could tell. What *did* work was a framework that sprung up in a sphere around the source of the impact, trapping him inside.

Callum groaned, dazed and reeling, half-blind and half-deaf, but still clutching his luggage. The flashbang had done its job, but if the magical flares were meant to

suppress his spatial perception, they hadn't worked. Shahey's frozen mana had been far more painful and far more effective.

The framework glowed bright with power, but it wasn't so tightly woven that he couldn't get a vis thread through. There were multiple layers there, some obviously wards, some obviously not, but it was only the work of a panic-fueled moment to sneak past them and push out to the edge of his perceptions. He pushed another teleport, finding himself hunched under a low tree.

He knew he couldn't stop there. There was still a group on the edge of his perceptions, and it was obvious that they could sense him about as well as he could sense him. Away from the wards of the portal facility, he could tell there were active senses at play, diffuse vis clouds riding along the mana, and he hated himself for missing them to begin with. The excuse that he'd gotten too used to the overly-dense mana of the portal world wasn't good enough.

The next transfer was punctuated by the roar of fire as a spell lanced out where he'd been and set the entire area ablaze. It wasn't just flame, since there was plenty of vis lingering where it struck, and his instincts screamed at him that it was terrible and horrible and he should not be anywhere near it. Callum hastily popped himself ahead again, zigzagging at angles so it wasn't obvious where he'd appear, and had his forethought rewarded by an obviously leading shot missing. Instead, it flattened a stand of trees with a horrific crunching noise, as if it weren't already obvious they were trying to kill instead of capture.

Callum focused on just teleporting as fast as possible. He didn't know if it was possible for them to keep up, because six hundred yards per second translated to over *one thousand* miles per hour, but at the same time, he didn't have the time to clean up after himself, so they'd be able to track him easily. Plus, he couldn't keep up such rapid-fire teleports for an hour.

As he figured, he left the mages behind once he got going, but that absolutely wasn't going to matter for long. This was hide-and-seek, not a footrace. He was headed west, more by circumstances than by choice, and with at least two teams following him, he cared more about outdistancing them than trying any circumlocution. If he were them, he'd be casting a wide net just to prevent that. Maybe put a person at every teleportation point, though there were surely limits to their manpower.

The moment he encountered a road, less than a minute later, he shifted trajectory to follow it. What he needed was a town, somewhere he could blend in and physically move away from his trail. Even if they had some way to unerringly pick him out in a crowd, which he doubted since they hadn't before, just being in among buildings and people would force them to slow down.

It wasn't much longer until he landed in a small French town. Ten seconds at most. He normally didn't chain teleports that quickly, since he needed time to appraise things within his sphere of perception, so he wasn't prepared for exactly how fast it was. A six-hundred yard radius was an awful large circle.

He popped into existence between two buildings and leaned against the stone wall of some ancient courthouse or something, squinting and blinking. Everything was a big blur, his head was pounding, and his ears were still ringing from the flashbang. Callum *felt* concussed, though he was pretty sure he wasn't. Under the circumstances he didn't trust his ability to walk without falling over, so he just pressed his cheek against the cold stone while he sorted through all the people and buildings suddenly within his perceptual range.

Under the circumstances he was somewhat less concerned with glammers, but he still waited until he could find a small, empty restroom, and teleported himself and his luggage over. Callum fumbled to lock the door, then slumped down to rub at his eyes. He had no illusions he was safe, exactly, but he should at least have time to think.

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"The STAB must have damaged his implant," Zarin decided. Sen's assigned partner, the guy with the annoying Polish name, had been tracking the vis traces for the past ten kilometers, and they'd been consistent. It was a little too faint for Sen, but that wasn't his specialty anyway.

"He barely needs it, considering how fast he moved," someone else's voice came over the scry-com. "We're back at the teleporter."

"Team Two, wait in Saint-Quentin. Team Three, Reims. I'll let you know." Zarin said, flying after the tracker.

"Any intel on the endurance this guy has? He could get to the other side of the country before we catch up with him," said Zarin's partner, another man whose name Sen hadn't bothered learning. Just his callsign, One-Bet.

"No, but we have watchers at the airports. We do know that he uses planes, presumably to avoid GAR." They took a sharp turn in the air to follow a road, cars driving unaware some fifty meters below. "If we need to we can shut everything down. The French government already knows we're pursuing a renegade."

"What are they going to do?" Sen asked scornfully. "Wave as he goes by?"

"If he can't use GAR transport, then he has to rely on mundanes, so even just delaying things would be helpful." It wasn't exactly a reprimand, but Zarin's tone of voice was

warning enough. “Though, if we *can* track him now, it might be worthwhile seeing where exactly he runs to.”

“These traces won’t last all that long,” the man with the Polish name warned. “Given a day or so of lead time, these teleports wouldn’t be traceable.”

“Let me call it in,” Zarin said, and lifted a hand to his lapel. “Grand Magus Taisen? Yes, we have an opportunity here...”

Sen half-listened as Zarin spoke with his superior, frowning at the mundanes below. It was genuinely disappointing that Callum Wells, if that was indeed who it was, had fled so quickly. He’d been looking forward to paying back some of what he was owed for Wells making him out to be a prime fool.

Still, at least that bastard hadn’t completely vanished on them. There’d still be time to deal with him when they caught up. Maybe letting the man expose his entire operation would be more satisfying. After all, someone like him had to have a hole to crawl back to. They hovered for a moment while Zarin discussed it, then he waved them on.

“We’re still capture-or-kill, but if his homebond doesn’t work, only use lethal force if you’re forced into close proximity, or to defend yourself. Remember, he has demonstrated extreme lethality, so do not let your guard down.”

“But he’s a *space mage*,” Sen complained, though quietly. When he’d been performing his tour of duty, the space mage that had been their porter at the front hadn’t done anything but open portals and hide behind the walls. Well, there had been something she’d done with the quartermasters that he wasn’t quite clear on, but she’d mostly provided transportation for forays out into the wilds. He saw the value in not needing any break in the fortress wall, but without someone who could apply force it wasn’t exactly a fearsome repertoire.

The trail bent abruptly again at an intersection, heading toward a small town. Sen had to fly the perimeter with his partner, sweeping for a trail, but after they’d done a full circle the man grunted.

“Nope. He’s still in the town. No perceptible vis use there, though.”

“Odd.” Zarin’s voice came over the scry-com. “Spread out, going to incap, make sure you take care of the cars and the like. Ready?” Affirmations came from the rest of the team. Sen added his own, begrudgingly.

“Mark.” The ability to incapacitate mundanes with a mana pulse was a well-known one – and it had to be mana, not vis, for some reason – but harnessing that on any scale took work. Normally that was charged wards, though Sen wasn’t sure why they kept

such a large presence in the mundane world at all. He knew that some people made noises about things like smartphones, but such inventions were so clever they had to be mage work to begin with.

Zarin's vis reached outward, grabbing onto the local mana in an impressive display of control, and flung it downward. All the mundanes stumbled and slumped, while Sen and his team made sure to stop cars in motion and prevent any major damage. Sen found it a little silly that BSE had to hide its own actions, but nobody wanted the mundane world at large to know about mages.

He could only imagine how much clamor there'd be from the mundanes for mages and other supernaturals to solve all their problems. To clean up their messes. To do this and do that. They fought among themselves so much that he couldn't imagine what a pain it'd be to deal with them if they thought they could bring mages into the mix.

Sen left his companions to deal with the mess, not having any wish to baby the mundanes. Besides, force magic was far better with handling that sort of thing than wind or fire. Instead he focused on finding who wasn't affected by the mana pulse, because if the man really was in the town he'd be the only one to shrug off the effect.

Indeed, he found someone, standing inside a coffee shop while everyone else was preoccupied with falling over.

"Contact!" Sen snapped, then shaped a double-layered spear of air and fire through his weapon foci and launched it in the man's direction. It crashed through four walls, but the man vanished right as the projectile exploded through the front of the coffee shop.

"Dammit, Sen!" Zarin snapped. "Stop making a mess!"

"I almost had him!"

"Stow it! Brzęczyszczkiewicz?"

"On it." The tracker's vis spread out as he looked for the mage's trail. The hunt was on once again.

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Callum knew he had only a few minutes, but he needed to consult a map and he couldn't do that while half-blind. He managed to pry himself upright and stagger out of the bathroom, leaning against the wall of the coffee shop and taking out his phone in an attempt to look at least vaguely normal. The luggage was what marked him as out of place more than anything, but he didn't think *too* many people were looking.



He blinked rapidly, hands trembling as he tried to poke at the phone. It was obvious he needed to stop being found by people and go back to ambushing people so hard they couldn't shoot back. Or better, not deal with any of this at all, but that was a choice long since flown.

It was hard to see through the spots dancing in front of his eyes, but it looked like he was east and north of Paris, assuming the café's wifi had him at the right spot. The best thing would be to completely change direction and head to a different country, preferably by train, so he wouldn't leave any traces. Unfortunately, he didn't think he had *time* to find a train station and wait. It wouldn't be hard for them to simply blockade streets or shut down transportation.

Aiming for a major nearby city had a similar problem with the added issue of a native supernatural population to marshal against him. He could blend in better, true, and the mess of native magical trails might well disguise him, but he didn't fit in. Callum wasn't French, didn't speak French, and despite not having a bubble had far more *vis* than any normal human. It wouldn't take much searching to find him.

Unfortunately, he didn't have time to consider it much. He was still trying to focus on the map and failing when the traces of active senses swept over the town. He'd put an enchantment in the bathroom to sweep up his teleport track, but he wasn't sure whether it'd be sufficient, or if the enchantment itself would give him away, so he stretched out a single *vis* thread, ready to bolt at the slightest provocation.

If they had to search manually, he could probably slip out. His perception gave him a massive leg up in that regard. Even if he didn't use it for teleportation, he could just take routes that avoided the mages. If he was feeling clever, which he wasn't, he could even make it look natural. At best, he hoped that they'd take time to decide what to do.

He had no such luck.

The sheer scope of the mana manipulation that one of the mages performed was absolutely terrifying, showing how far down the totem pole Callum really was, despite his advantages. It wasn't clear exactly what was going on until the mana pulse suddenly swept down over the town, shredding his *vis* thread. But that was not the reason for the attack, because everyone just slumped over.

He'd completely forgotten about the way mana knocked out regular people. Or some such explanation; he had doubts about that exact wording since there was mana everywhere and it couldn't be the simple presence that did anything, it had to be an actual manifestation. That mana pressure wave was *something*, but he had more important things to worry about.

Like the spell bearing down on the coffeeshop.

Even though he knew that mages didn't care overmuch for mundanes, there was a difference between knowing it and seeing someone lob a bomb at a bunch of helpless folks. There was nothing he could do about either, since it was all he could manage to shove a thread of vis out to the edge of town. He was pretty quick at it, but it still took a finite time, and it was only by dint of long practice that he didn't fumble the framework. He shoved himself through in the same moment as the wall exploded, the sharp report cutting off abruptly. Not *quite* fast enough, though.

A chunk of wall hit him just before the transition, slamming into his ribs at an angle and sending him reeling as he dropped down from the hastily-placed teleportation field. He landed hard and awkwardly, mostly on his right leg, and something in his knee popped as he collapsed. He didn't quite scream, but he did wheeze miserably, still gamely clutching his luggage.

The searing pain scrambled him for a moment, unable to focus on anything else as he lay on the ground, clutching his knee. It was only dread that forced him to send out his perceptions, the knowledge that he had to keep going. He didn't need to be able to walk to be able to teleport.

Callum put a hand over his ribs as he moved himself along, feeling gingerly where the debris had hit him, but he didn't think it had done more than bruise under the winter jacket he had on. The knee, on the other hand, was less pleasant, already feeling swollen and stiff and throbbing painfully at the slightest movement. There wasn't anything to be done about that, though, other than take it as a reminder that he was not an *actual* mage with proper shields and ways to deal with high-powered magical combat.

Not that the bystanders were any better off. Callum had made a grievous error to think that he could simply hide in a town, that simply being among mundanes would make any difference. His presence had gotten people *killed*, because mages simply didn't care. It wasn't good enough to just hide from GAR, he had to get away from *everyone*, so there wouldn't be any collateral damage.

The answer came to him as he clutched the luggage and randomly teleported himself into the French countryside, and he could have kicked himself for not considering it earlier. The mages could trace his teleports, and he didn't have time to clean them up, but he did have a method of travel available to him that didn't leave a trail and was definitely too fast for them to follow. Not to mention, it wouldn't put any more bystanders in harm's way.

He just hadn't thought about it because he'd decided to associate self-gravitykinesis with the idiotic flying chair, after finding he couldn't sustain a gravitykinesis field on himself without completely losing his lunch and his bearings. Callum didn't actually *need* his terrible chair for it, though. His big rolling luggage was large enough to hang on to, and in fact had a number of straps that would make it viable for the purpose. It'd be even more rickety and makeshift than the stupid chair, but would probably work, and it should have been his first thought.

He wound his arms through the luggage straps, giving them several twists to make sure he wouldn't fall, then hugged it to himself as he wrapped the vis frameworks around it and himself. His knee refused to cooperate as he shifted to try and get a better grip, but he gritted his teeth and flexed the field to counteract his weight.

It jerkily rose into the air while he dangled below it, feeling like a complete fool and with the straps digging into his arms. Callum didn't need to get all that high, but he did need to at the least clear the height of trees and local terrain if he didn't want his jaunt to be cut abruptly short. It would be pretty damn sad for his amazing getaway to get stalled ten feet away because he hit a tree or a phone pole.

The problem with getting airborne, aside from the precarious position, was that it made him a target. The pursuing mages were way beyond his spatial sense, but he could see the blurry specks of things that weren't birds suddenly turn toward him. At least, he thought so; his eyes still hurt too much for him to put too much stock in what they told him.

Before they could start targeting him with any proper war magic, he put a second field around both himself and the luggage and dragged. The world blurred by with the monstrous acceleration, and he released the kinesis part almost instantly. His already abused ears popped and frigid cold smacked him as his surroundings resolved into being very high up. He shuddered and aimed himself down at the ground, a shoreline, pulling again and finding himself pressed up against the ground somewhere.

He really had no idea where he was. Not the ocean, not a city, that was about all he could tell. It was warmer, which made sense since he'd been aimed straight south, but that was it. Still, the change in climate was enough to imply that he'd at least gone quite a few hundred miles, although admittedly without a glamour. Hopefully that didn't really matter, and if anyone caught the second or so blur of him moving about, it was marked down to imagination or something.

The mana density was noticeably lower too, so he couldn't be as prodigal as he'd been in France and Switzerland. His reserves were near empty after that jaunt, and they weren't being refilled particularly fast, but he was far enough away from his origin point that he could move a bit more cautiously. Even better, he could clean up after himself.

Gravitykinesis left a bit more of a signature than teleportation, so he stuck a fork from his camp kit in the ground with a vis scrubber enchant and reclined against a nearby rock. He had aimed more or less south, which encompassed a lot of territory but shouldn't be complete wilderness. He'd dropped the phone at some point during the attack and subsequent flight, so he had to use local landmarks. After searching with his spatial sense, he did find a rough trail and followed it.

It turned out it was a hiking trail. He kept himself hidden from the hikers, since his winter clothing and rolling duffel would probably draw a certain amount of commentary, but following it downhill finally sort-of answered the question of where he was. There was a seaside town with fantastic Mediterranean architecture, which he couldn't help but admire for being so much more interesting than the steel-and-concrete boxes so prevalent in cities. Even better, it seemed to be a tourist town, which meant a lot of people probably spoke English.

He shucked his coat and disguised his hobble as best he could before entering the town, finding a small hotel that let him make an international call after he showed a twenty-euro note. There was only one way to know how the search for him was going, and how safe it'd be to travel. Hopefully it wasn't too early or late wherever Lucy was.

"Big man! How's Mallorca?" He could barely hear her over the persistent ringing in his ears, but her voice was still as cheerful as ever. That was something he needed under the circumstances.

"Oh, is that where I am?"

"You're in Mallorca and you don't even know it? Come on!"

"It's, ah, been a day," he told her, keeping an eye on the people wandering by the hotel. There weren't any supernaturals around, but maybe they didn't take Mediterranean vacations. For all he knew, Faerie was the prime getaway for the discerning mage on holiday.

"Yeah? What've you been up to?"

"Mostly getting chased around by some mages," he admitted. "They jumped me, but I'm pretty sure I got away clean. I was hoping you could find out for me whether or not they have any idea where I am or what I'm doing."

"Oof! Let me take a look, big man." He waited for a short time while she did whatever it was that got her access to GAR goings-on. "Man did you stir them up! Lotta messages flying. Nothing in your neck of the woods though, far as I can tell. I think you might want to avoid airports for a while."

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Callum said. “What about the fae? Did they stop tracking me?”

“Ahaha, so, Jissarrell has been telling that story for the past few days! How he followed a deadly and dangerous assassin to Europe before they noticed and severed the tracking spell. Yeah, you’re fine, unless they get another fae king to go after you.”

“How likely is that?” Callum frowned. “I mean, I did kill a bunch of them.”

“Yeah but you’re famous now so that’s practically an honor! I dunno, though. Let me look at something real quick.” There was another silence. “I’m not seeing any history of them helping anyone. It may be they *can’t* do it randomly. Fae magic is weird.”

“Thanks, Lucy.” He let out a long breath, not sure what to think about those tidbits. “I wasn’t sure whether I’d be dodging high-powered fae forever or what. Glad to know they have limits, too.”

“That’s what I’m here for, big man. Now tell me what you’ve been doing!”

Callum considered a moment. In general he didn’t tell anyone what he was doing, because it was safer that way, but it wouldn’t hurt to give her an edited view of events. She was actually inside the magical culture, so she might even have some insight on what had happened, and it would be nice to tell *someone*. He’d cut out Shahey and the dragonlands, but everything in the Night Lands was probably fairly harmless.

“Alright,” he said. “I’ll give you the edited version.”

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“That’s not spatial aspect,” Archmage Duvall said with flat certainty. “I don’t know *what* it is, but it’s not spatial aspect.” Duvall was the expert but Zhen knew a lot of magic and had no idea what it might be, if not spatial. The report had described the man gripping some kind of bag and floating in the air without using air aspect, which might well be gravity, but then apparently the man shot off at supersonic speed without leaving any trail or making any noise, which definitely was not.

Spatial was the only human magic it could be.

“When we tested him, he only manifested the spatial aspect,” Zhen said cautiously, not wanting to get any further on Duvall’s bad side. “We’re assuming this *is* Callum Wells, of course. Though I doubt there are many unknown spatial mages wandering around.”

“That test was terrible and you know it. A full one hundred thaums emptied? That’s as much as *I’d* absorb. No, he *faked* it. Oh, sure, the spatial results were real, but you missed another aspect.”

“There haven’t been any spatial mages in the past who manifested additional aspects,” Zhen said thoughtfully. “I would find it more likely he had some strange focus or even some fae artifact.”

“Then you’d better find who gave it to him,” Duvall said flatly. “I am very disappointed here! You failed to find my mage until some fae wandered by and then when you *do* find him, BSE can’t even capture him!” Her vis crackled around her as she eyed him. “If BSE cannot make *use* of the special privilege of having *my* apprentices tend to your needs over everyone else’s,” she said, her finger stabbing at his face with every word, “it may be time to revoke them.”

“He has twice escaped through novel methods, Archmage,” Zhen told her. “We are not experts in spatial magic.”

“A homebond isn’t new, you just failed to find it.” Duvall leaned forward, tapping her finger against the report sitting on the desk. “I have far more important people than you that need my time, and if I have to keep cleaning up after you I will make sure they know exactly why. If I am forced to personally take command of this situation, I will make sure to rebuild the Bureau from the ground up. This time without the incompetence.”

Zhen suppressed a wince. *That* was a major threat, and coupled with Duvall’s total control over the transport system, she could well cripple BSE for some time to come. Hopefully the others would talk her around, but Duvall was well-known to have strong opinions.

He hated dealing with Archmages.