

Chapter 4-6 – Direction

It was one thing for some tyrannical magical government to exist, because at least that was a structure full of people and could be grappled with. It was another to think that there were whole groups of supernaturals out there completely off the radar doing whatever they liked. Which might have been hypocritical, since he was exactly one of those supernaturals, but there was no guarantee these off-the-books enclaves weren't officially endorsed by GAR in some way in the first place.

A government that openly endorsed murder and kidnapping probably covertly endorsed more of the same. He couldn't imagine it would take much of a bribe to let some supernaturals through on the sly and set up where they wanted. Though he had to admit that the timing implied it was the new guard at GAR that was responsible, not the old one.

Chester's American Alliance at least seemed to be doing what it was supposed to, though he had no way of *really* investigating it. He didn't entirely trust everyone involved was keeping their noses clean, but they were supposed to be keeping an eye on each other. Callum's reputation as The Ghost probably did more work to keep people honest than anything else.

"There is *nothing* in the GAR networks," Lucy grumped, furiously scowling at her laptop and then at the cookies on the kitchen table. She erased the scowl and picked up a cookie, turning in her seat to look at him. "Nobody's talking about anything of any consequence, I swear. A million emails about meetings and nothing about what's *in* the meetings."

"That's pretty normal," Callum remarked, going through the precision exercises that he'd managed to finagle out of the Guild of Enchantment tutor. There were multiple versions, but he had settled on building a ship in a bottle through mana displacement alone. It was tricky, especially since moving too fast could result in mana sliding right through the matter, but it did force him to be both careful and precise.

He wasn't sure exactly how well that sort of thing applied to his thin threads, or conversely his tubes, since he had a finer control to begin with. Still, he was years and years behind on basic skills and habits. While he had a definite advantage with his perceptions, everything he made was extremely simple and nothing like the complex spell forms he'd seen from Taisen's men.

They'd almost certainly been using focuses, but equally certainly the focus didn't do *all* the manipulation. If they were anything like the telekinesis focus he had, there were big parts that were completely under the mage's control. Instead of individually manipulating threads, it was like flinging around a net; easier to deal with but still requiring finesse.

No matter how fine he could manipulate things, that wasn't the same as manipulating them *correctly*. He was entirely self-taught, so it was no wonder that he'd picked up bad habits. Though he was keeping a very, very close eye on the techniques to make sure they weren't counterproductive either due to his uniquely small threads or just because they were unexamined orthodoxy. On one hand, there were hundreds of years of practice and refining in the approaches and ideas of how to handle vis. On the other hand, this was a society full of secrecy and conflict and people who were probably not above sabotaging future generations.

He had a better idea of what the exercises were for now that he actually had a better understanding of spell forms. Things like teleports and portals weren't so much the simplest or most instinctive spellforms, though they were not all that complex, as they were the ones that came most naturally to the vis. Just putting a bunch of undirected vis threads in an area drifted into a vague approximation of one of the two, which made doing any other spell form more difficult. All the complex things like shields and whatnot obviously worked, but they all required making vis do things it didn't naturally want to do. Like any tool, really, but he didn't have as much an appreciation for it before.

It also made him wonder about his gravitykinesis. It hadn't taken overly much work to create, so he had to assume other spatial mages could. The Alcubierre effect, though, might not even be possible with a bubble up, or at least not with shields up, which made it less useful for normal mages.

Still, he couldn't believe nobody had ever found it. Or rather, that Duvall hadn't, considering she controlled all the space mages. But it was possible that she had – or someone else had in the past – and promptly discarded it due the danger. Accidentally winding up hundreds of miles above the ground was terrifying.

He realized his mind was wandering so he dropped the exercises and focused on Lucy's complaint. She was still grumbling under her breath as she poked at the laptop, squinting slightly against the midmorning sun coming in from the big front windows.

"I expect we'll only find out anything if Taisen talks to us again," he said, finding the thread of conversation again. "Assuming he gets anything out of his captives."

Callum wasn't overly concerned with the fate of the man-eating fae that Taisen had taken, just their victims. The mages had essentially cleaned them up, fed them, muddled their memories of the past month and set them down outside a fair-sized city. He couldn't object to any of that, even the mind manipulation, since it would be easier on everyone if they just knew something terrible had happened and weren't trying to claim that demons had invaded their village and kept them captive.

Or maybe not. Either way, he was not equipped in any way to deal with a large number of traumatized people who didn't speak the same language. It was one of the things that kept Callum grounded; he was all too aware that even the best he could do was eliminate some threats. Something like actually *saving* people was a lot more complicated.

"Well, nothing from him yet. *Do* have something about Duvall reinstating the travel network. With extra security and all those buzzwords you'd expect from an official communication." Lucy shook her head. "No explanation of what that security actually *is* though."

"Well, I expected the trick to only work once. Though I have to say, there probably wasn't a better target than the scariest Archmage of all." Taisen's shell had been intimidating and had absolutely outclassed Callum's *vis*, but the worst he could have done would have been to send something through the portal and out into the bottom of the sea. The nexus portals didn't even face each other for that reason. Compared to what Fane could supposedly do, that wasn't particularly scary.

"Yeah," Lucy agreed. "Though I can tell you from my IT experience that extra security measures are just more ways to mess with the system, half the time."

"Oh?" Callum sat up straighter. "You think that I might still be able to do something with the new and improved teleports? Not that I necessarily want to, but it's nice to know I *could*. If we have another Fane."

"Well..." Lucy made an equivocal gesture with one hand, tilting it from side to side. "Just because I know information security stuff, doesn't mean I could crack *enchantment* security stuff. A lot of analog bypasses are stupid tricks anyway, sort of sideways to how the security is meant to work, so we might not have the tools or background. But I wouldn't completely write it off."

"Definitely something to put on our list," Callum said. "Though we've got enough on our plates right now."

"More on your plate than mine," Lucy said, sliding her chair back and standing up to stretch. Callum watched appreciatively. "How's the portal world stuff going?"

"Eh." Callum shrugged. "I need to go back and watch them in action. I can't make a *normal* portal stable all by itself, and that's only one aspect of the dimensional portal."

"Too bad you can't ask the Guild of Enchantment people."

"I don't think they'd know. *Duvall* might. Heck, she might have been the one who made the dragonlands portal to begin with." Callum shrugged. "But if she were willing to talk

about it I'm pretty sure Shahey would already know how to do it. Or at least give me *some* hint. I don't think he's posing me challenges for my personal growth."

"I dunno," Lucy said, smiling wryly. "Dragonblooded are pretty weird. I could see one doing the wise old mentor thing for funsies."

"Maybe," Callum hedged. "But not in this case. I mean, think about it. No two types of magic are the same, so even fae can't exactly make portals, not the way I can. Plus the dragonlands portal is *definitely* mage work. I imagine they don't like that GAR can just shut them off."

"Wouldn't that imply GAR could shut off *any* of the portals?" Lucy asked. "That's a heck of a threat."

"I don't see why not. Which is probably why Chester needs an in. Speaking of which, we should probably call him and see if he's ready for the deployment." Actually making a teleport pad was easy enough, as was a feeder portal. Those were his staple enchantments and he was pretty good at them — by his standards, if not the Guild's. Finding a safe spot to put it on the other end, in the Deep Wilds, was another matter.

There was some kind of politics involved there, though the exact details had never been elaborated on. He didn't know if Chester and other Earth shifters were political exiles or expatriates or something else entirely, but regardless of their status it was apparently a bit of work to get some safe area over in the Deep Wilds. Chester didn't want to put him to the trouble of making something until they knew exactly what was allowed.

"We need a secretary," Lucy complained good-naturedly. "Though we'd need one that can make anonymously screened calls."

"Those are probably in short supply," Callum agreed. "What we need is to be less in demand."

"Ha," said Lucy. "That one's all your fault."

Felicia Black frowned through the glamour display at the fae wrapped in cold iron laced chains. He didn't have her sympathy. Not just for what he'd done, which was a violation of all the laws — and the reasons for those laws — that had once been set out by GAR, but for the choices he'd made.

Some of the fae that came to Earth chose monstrous stories for a reason. A hero gained power, but a monster *had* power. It was easy, it was lazy, and those who used it got what was coming to them. The fae she was looking at was probably no older than she was, and she was barely older than what her glamourised form looked like, and that sort of

inexperience showed. Archmage Taisen would have wiped the floor with them in any case, but they should have put up a better showing than they had.

“You know them?” Ray stepped up next to her, hands in his pockets.

“No,” Felicia said, speaking aloud since it was just the two of them in the insulated observation booth. “But I know their type. The kind of fae that thinks they can bestride the world because it’s their destiny to do so. You can find them by the dozen anywhere you go.”

“Sounds a lot like young mages,” Ray remarked. “So no idea where they came from? Interrogation is doing nothing.”

“Oh, I know exactly where they came from,” Felicia said darkly. “Not that it helps. They’ve got to be from one of the Seven Lesser Courts in Faerie. Some group of troublemakers and ne’er-do-wells being sent out to serve someone’s purpose somewhere else.”

“So nobody’s going to miss them,” Ray said.

“Oh, certainly not.”

“Then why wouldn’t they tattle on whoever smuggled them over?”

“I very much doubt they even know.” Felicia smiled without any humor. “It wouldn’t even be anything so crude as memory manipulation. Everything would have been their own idea. They would have come up with it and they would have run across exactly the right pieces of information they needed by sheer happenstance. It would have been their own cleverness and cunning that got them through the portal – if they even used it – and past the guards. And so on.”

“That’s insidious,” Ray said. “So no way to connect them to Constance?”

“I don’t see how,” Felicia said, frustrated. “I know she has to be involved. I’ve *seen* that she’s communicating with the Seven.”

They had spent a lot of time on research for Taisen, tracking down rumors like the one that had ended up locating the fae in India, but that wasn’t all they’d spent their time on. There was also GAR. She couldn’t just cut ties with them, not without severing threads of her story, so she had to find out exactly what they were up to and what had led to the betrayal.

Between Taisen’s own records that he’d kept privately and what the Hargraves had been kind enough to supply, she could read between the lines well enough. Not that the Seven weren’t subtle — but that was the point. There was no need for any of the supernatural factions on earth to hide their influences on GAR. More the reverse; they wanted to

demonstrate to their masters or their citizens that they had sway with GAR. But some people, mostly mages, were obviously acting in concert without any apparent contact or collaboration. She was quite familiar with that sort of invisible hand.

“Come on,” Ray said, putting a tentative hand on her shoulder. His skin was almost burning hot against hers, the heritage running through her veins giving her flesh the chill of early spring, and she disdained the touch of humans. Or fae. But Ray was different. “The temple place is clear and he wants us to take a look around, see if we see anything.”

“Sure,” she said, putting her hand on his before turning away from the projection. The prisoners probably wouldn’t survive for much longer, not without a patron to speak for them. Justice served, as far as she was concerned. A simple execution was far less cruel than what the Seven did to its failures anyway.

The mage on duty at the portal station energized the framework for them, and they walked through, Ray’s glider bobbing along behind in box form. The redoubt on the other side was mostly empty, but there were no plans to abandon it until Taisen had wrung everything he could from the area. The glider was a necessary component of that, since they didn’t have anyone to teleport them out to the site. Not this time.

“I can’t believe Wells was right there,” Felicia muttered as the glider unfolded.

“He wasn’t exactly,” Ray replied, half-distracted as the wood slid smoothly into the deployed configuration. “But I guess his spellcraft on-site is close enough. Such strange ships that pass in the night.” The glider door on her side popped open and she slid inside, Ray joining her a moment later.

“I don’t like dealing with a criminal like Wells,” Felicia sighed. “I know, it’s not really our jurisdiction or even our business anymore. Maybe we should even thank him. But he’s always going to be an outlaw to me.”

“Yeah, I’m kind of surprised that the Archmage dealt with him,” Ray said. “Though, I admit it did the trick. Hard to argue with his decisions when it works.” Felicia hummed agreement, looking out the window as Ray sent the glider over the densely-forested mountain foothills.

She could feel the remnants of an enclave as Ray flew them toward the battle site, the tatters of a nascent court slowly fading into nothingness. Hardly anything, in the end, not with so few and so pathetic a set of fae, but it was at least executed with more subtlety than most. Back at the redoubt even she hadn’t noticed, drowned out as it was by the abundance of human magics. Even so, she put a black mark on herself for not noticing when Wells apparently had.

Closer to the center, it was more obvious but not as much as usual, either because they had been trying to escape notice or just because it was dissipating with nobody left to anchor it. She had doubts there would be anything substantive remaining now, but the fae had been inexperienced. Even if there was nothing that pointed back toward Faerie or GAR, there might be some trace of other undocumented enclaves.

The remains of the building came into view soon enough, the bricks still pinned in the air from Archmage Taisen's spellwork. Seeing the disassembled rock hanging in space, faces polished from precise cuts, she was reminded yet again why the fae as a whole had taken the archmages' terms centuries ago. A fae king could do as much, and easily, but only in his territory. An archmage could do it anywhere.

There were a few mages still surveying the area with their tools, but ultimately they wouldn't get anywhere without an actual fae. Ray landed the glider and the two of them climbed out. While Ray usually took the lead, this time he trailed behind her as she took a deep breath of the lingering magic and followed its trail past the hanging chunks of stone.

At the center there was nothing more than a bare foundation of stone, at least to the naked eye. Likely to magesight as well, but she knew better. Hiding in plain sight was one of the first and earliest tricks any fae learned, and it never stopped being useful. Instinct and impulse led her to one particular spot, and she narrowed her eyes at the air there.

"Open," she told it.

Though she'd done her best to bury her heritage, it was still handy now and then. Especially since no human would be able to see any particular difference between it and the normal spread of fae abilities. Even most *fae* wouldn't be able to pinpoint the exact nature. Though most fae wouldn't be able to command another's workings.

The air split apart and a pile of goods spilled out, caught by Ray's telekinesis before they could hit the ground. Some gold, some silverite and mordite weaponry. A chunk of evenstar from Faerie, which was probably what they had used to found the enclave in the first place. She reached out and plucked the translucent silver crystal from Ray's magical grasp and studied it, but there was nothing that set it apart from any other minor fragment.

"Evidence?" Ray asked.

"Of backing from Faerie, yes," Felicia said. "Of who the backer is, no." She reached into her pocket for an evidence bag and deposited the evenstar inside. Not that the DAI had ever really concerned itself with chains of custody the way mundane law enforcement did,

but the basic idea was extremely useful. Taisen encouraged following such protocols for the sheer order they imposed.

“What about the dead?” Ray asked, glancing over to the small, earth-mage-raised dome fifty meters away. Felicia grimaced. Even if it was one of her most useful talents, she wasn’t overly enamored of playing with corpses. But she nodded, reaching into her bag and taking out her tablet since they were going to be near other mages. Sometimes she resented needing to use it, but most of the time she was glad to have an excuse not to feed the power of her voice.

The interior of the makeshift morgue was freezing, with some impromptu spellcraft by a fire or water mage preserving the bodies. Or the pieces of bodies, in some cases, since Taisen’s mages had not been gentle. Ray reached into his pocket and got out a package of wipes, the plastic crackling as he opened it. She nodded thanks before touching a finger to the closest of the bodies.

That particular ability was better for pulling out the identities of criminals than it was for a deeper dive into a dead person’s thoughts and motivations. She only had the barest experience of the last moments of life — though that was often enough. A mere touch pulled out the last lingering impressions from the nearest body and seared them across her mind. It was a jolt she was long used to, and she sorted out the emotions, images, and the ineffable shock of mortality’s end.

The fae in question had been so sure of his power and prowess that most of his last moments were spent in outraged shock that anyone would have the effrontery to challenge him. Something she’d seen many, many times before. There was, however, an actual useful twitch of thought toward the end, some concept that the *mages* had betrayed them.

“They had some mage allies somewhere,” Felicia wrote, after scrubbing her hand with the wipe Ray handed her. *“No idea where. I don’t think they knew where. But this wasn’t entirely on their own.”*

“Well. That’s not a surprise but it’s nice to have confirmation.” Ray grimaced. “The question is who. I figure GAR, but what if it’s one of the breakaways? They don’t have anyone overseeing them and bribing someone with corite would be easy enough.”

“Is anyone from the Hargrave Alliance located in Faerie?” Felicia scribbled. *“That’s where I’d look first.”*

“I have no idea,” Ray said, started to sigh, and stopped himself with a grimace. Even keeping the corpses cold didn’t make them smell any better. “Let’s finish up here and then we can check. Maybe you’ll find another hint.”

“*Oh boy,*” she wrote, without enthusiasm, and moved on to the next corpse.

Constance frowned as Supervisor O’Keefe of the Department of Arcane Investigation hurried through the door ten minutes late. Just like the unlamented prior head of DAI, though she imagined O’Keefe had no better reason for being late than Lane had. It just seemed endemic to the post.

“Now that we’re all here,” she said, quelling the chatter of the other department heads. “There is not much this time. The new transport network is being rolled out; does anyone have any concerns?” If anyone did, they didn’t dare voice them. “Then, the real issue: the official GAR response to the breakaway Houses. It’s been long enough and GAR should say *something.*”

Properly, that was the role of Archmage Affairs, but Magus Mavros was useless and besides Constance was the one with the connections to people of real consequence. The money, the materials, the connections that even the Guild of Enchanting needed if they were to continue to operate. Most of Constance’s backers hadn’t even been *that* put out by the transport network being down, since they were deep in Faerie or the Night Lands.

Any declaration that GAR made was effectively toothless. Taisen and Hargrave between them had stripped out most of the militant mages that were serving in GAR, and while the Houses had their own forces that wasn’t the same as having a proper military. The real purpose of condemning the breakaways was to allow the Houses still in GAR to apply pressure from other avenues, to have backing for whatever political overtures or maneuverings they had in mind.

Constance didn’t much care about their schemes, so long as her House in general and she in particular benefitted from the arrangement. Obviously that ruled out most *action*, since trying to conduct a campaign under the limitations of personnel and the appearance of maintaining GAR’s policies was impossible, but words were easy. She collected the committee-created proclamation regarding the Houses in question, a self-important thing that used such verbiage as *we condemn in the strongest possible terms*, and adjourned the meeting.

She returned to her office and settled down to think, needles clicking as she began to crochet. Every time she had to deal with communications she had to make a choice whether to use the electronic network or a written missive. It was a matter of tactics; she *knew* the former would leak, while the latter only might. Determining what should go public in the normal way, what should go public through back channels, and what was genuinely secret was a delicate mix.

She ended up sending three versions. The expurgated proclamation for public consumption, the real one to be leaked as it would, and an annotated version for her backers, making note of who contributed what. They'd already replaced Lane, both for his failure to deal with Wells and the Hargraves, and because he'd made some rather injudicious decisions when it came to pawns.

That thought transferred her telekinesis focus from dealing with the meeting notes to scribbling out another missive. There were of course costs when it came to dealing with the fae portion of her backers, and one such cost was finding a particular fae ex-agent of DAI. One that should never have been lost in the first place, to her understanding.

The Department of Acquisitions had more personnel than most now, and more freedom with the transport network coming back into service. Finding someone shouldn't be *that* hard. Though it wasn't like anyone had been able to track down Wells, despite his ongoing activities as The Ghost. A fae wasn't a spatial mage, though, so Constance had hopes that it wouldn't be as difficult.

Chores done, Constance sent a message to her secretary to deliver lunch and pondered the topic of Wells himself. The damage he'd done to GAR was enough that he was possibly the most wanted magical criminal of all time, but there was no real point in tracking him down under the current circumstances. It was far better to manage him, which could be done without even finding the man.

The secretary arrived with lunch, direct from a Parisian café, and Constance took a spoon to her chowder as she sorted reports with her telekinesis. The easiest thing to do was to imply some threat to the American Alliance by one of her troublemakers, and sooner or later Wells would take care of it. That had worked already, and she was hesitant to let such a weapon languish, but sadly most of the various groups were staying in line.

Before she could be content with the way things were running, one of GAR's fae messengers slipped through the door: a two-foot, cat-eared personage with one of the most annoying voices Constance had ever heard. He always seemed smug, too, though that might have been the cat aspect. She would have barred him from her office if he weren't one of her main links to the fae that her Houses was collaborating with.

"Delivery," he drawled, pulling a scroll larger than himself from nowhere in particular and tossing it into her desk before scampering out on four legs. She scowled after him, robbed of even a chance to properly protest his intrusion, and snatched up the scroll. Even the old mage families had graduated to sealed paper envelopes, so what looked like a vellum scroll in a silver-gilt case had to be from Faerie.

Constance opened it with a growl, wax seals crackling and crumbling once they were breached, and she glanced over the contents. Then blinked. She'd been expecting some

update on the immigration papers or personnel that she'd helped station at the portals, but the contents were of somewhat greater import.

It has come to Our attention that The Court of Long Claws has been extinguished. We will not brook such casual violations of Our agreements. Find those who have infringed upon Our prerogatives so they may be punished.

There was more, in high-flown language, but the first three sentences were all she really needed. Not that she had any idea who was in the so-called Court of the Long Claws but it had to be one of the favors that she'd let through. What she didn't like was the presumption that she could be simply *ordered* to do things, like some servant.

She was tempted to just toss it aside, but it wouldn't do to *completely* alienate such allies. If nothing else her House and her backers wouldn't thank her, though she felt that the mages on her side gave their fae allies more respect than they really deserved. *Mages* were the masters of GAR, not any of the foreign powers they brokered with.

Constance set the scroll on the corner of her desk with a click and scraped the last bit of chowder from the bowl with her spoon. Unfortunately she had a good idea of who was responsible, and it wouldn't help anyone. Taisen and his busybody House, thinking they had the authority to determine who and what was welcome on Earth. That or Wells himself, since he had demonstrated that he *could* survive the curse of a fae king.

There was no *direct* way to pull the claws of either one, for the same reason GAR couldn't force them to submit to the guild agreements. Neither of them could be reached by the guild, or had holdings in the guild. Nor did Constance have the authority to talk to them directly, despite becoming the first among equals at GAR. Not that she would want to anyway. But she might be able to finesse something.

The best thing would be to set them at each other. Infighting between GAR's enemies would only be to the good, though generating that kind of animosity was not easy. Even with the resources of the Department of Acquisitions, there was only so much she could do. She would have to be careful about it.

With luck, she could get her problems to solve themselves.