

Chapter 10 – Target

Callum emerged on the other side of the trailer house, stepping off the receiver plate. Tedious as it was, using the tube structures for enchanting worked *far* better. Getting the vis to bond cleanly and smoothly was much easier, and didn't require nearly as many tries. There were some scraps of mordite wire that would require recycling, because vis certainly did *not* come off of that without melting it, but it had been far easier with the new technique.

What was better, for the first time he could use his own teleport enchantment without any real issues. There was more of a jolt than with the official GAR teleporters, from what he could remember, but it was far from the near-incapacitating nausea and disorientation of Callum's own homebond. Which, itself, was far better than the original one he'd made with less robust materials.

The pads worked both ways, and had a mana acceptor with a converter structure he didn't understand but could still copy. The conversion rate was usurious, but it did mean that he could empower the teleporter without using his vis directly. Unfortunately, if he did that, he couldn't actually *use* it since the teleporter didn't grab him. It tried, but it just couldn't get a hold.

It was a weird feeling from his end, though it did imply he had least *some* ability to resist other mages. Not much of one, though, from his experiences. Admittedly there was a difference between a low-powered, non-weaponized teleport and something design to deal damage to another mage.

To make it work for him he had to feed his vis in directly, which mitigated the resistance enough for it to move him. It didn't completely *eliminate* it though, not like the implanted, vis-resonance version did. In exchange, the plates and their teleportation framework were large enough take multiple people through. It worked from either end as well, so it was a two-way transport.

Callum was pretty pleased, despite the mordite he'd have to recycle and the fact that it didn't even have the recirculation stuff to reduce the cost of sustaining it. Compared to the GAR stuff, or even the homebond he'd looked at, it was crude and ugly, but so long as it worked he was fine with it. So long as it worked.

He was still worried that Chester's pet mage wouldn't have whatever trick it was that made it so the teleport could take along supernaturals, but there might well be a super simple solution. Something that could turn off that resistance. In fact he was pretty sure that was the case, since it wasn't like Gayle's bubble changed when she went through a teleporter.

While he'd been working on that, he'd also used some of the fine wire and some key fob blanks to make himself a new glamour focus and a telekinesis focus. He still had gravitykinesis, and he preferred using it over the focus, but telekinesis was so easy a focus he figured he might as well have it. Plus, gravitykinesis couldn't really apply any pressure without him trying to shift the orientation of the gravity field around, and that usually just ejected the object in question.

The new foci, made with tubes, took noticeably less mana to manifest their effects, admittedly with a commensurate increase in residue. That restricted their use to cities with an already-heavy supernatural presence, or really, *really* out of the way spots. Even if he hadn't actually seen any signs of supernaturals around his trailer house, he couldn't be sure that some shifter pack or something wouldn't swing by on patrol.

For all he knew, doing too much magic practice would make that more likely. He'd been thinking about Shahey's comment about how supernaturals tended to be more comfortable around each other, and how mana was so disturbed in cities. Callum's theory was that all that churned up mana was similar to the dense flow near the portal worlds, meaning it gave mages more energy.

He wasn't sure about other types of supernaturals, since he hadn't seen anything unusual in Winut, but it might just have been something he couldn't directly sense. After all, it wasn't like he could tell the difference between the type of mana coming from the Dragonlands versus the Night Lands. There had to be subtleties he hadn't noticed yet.

Callum already knew he disliked where he lived, necessary as it was. What he didn't know was how much of that was something in his hindbrain, and how much was just that west-central Texas was an ugly place to live. That the trailer was a depressing place to sleep. That the pickup made a weird rattling noise that the mechanic hadn't quite been able to fix.

All these things bothered him, but now he had to wonder if they bothered him more than they should. He had to wonder if the idiosyncrasies of the old house in Winut hadn't annoyed him as much as they should have. There was no telling what instincts he needed to doubt.

An instinct he *didn't* doubt was the alarm in the pit of his stomach when he called Lucy and it went to voicemail. That had never happened before, and any break in normal patterns was suspect. If he'd bugged out the moment he'd seen something was off during the last disastrous visit to Gayle, he never would've been caught.

The sudden change meant he wasn't even sure if the number was safe to call anymore. It was true he'd never called her at an unreasonable hour, but at the same time, she'd answered pretty much immediately every single time. It didn't even ring, it just flipped

straight to a machine-generated message about reaching the inbox of a different number than one he had dialed.

Callum turned off the phone and climbed back into his truck. He'd have to try again later, in the evening maybe, but part of him was afraid that there was already someone tracing his position. If *Lucy* was compromised, they'd probably at least know he was in Texas, though Texas was quite the area to search. Maybe it'd be better to take a trip out of state for a while.

He loaded everything important into the pickup, not trusting the trailer to remain unmolested while he was away. Whether it was nosy neighbors or some supernatural stopping by, it was better not to leave anything identifiable or valuable behind. Besides, it wasn't like he had that much that was irreplaceable in the first place, just the enchanting materials, money, and electronics.

The last thing that went in the back of the truck was version three of the flying chair. He was still very, very leery of using self-gravitykinesis, since the last time had left him however many thousands of feet in the air, and it drained his vis reserves absurdly quickly. There was a very real risk, and even more substantial fear, of accidentally going too high, or even out into space, and killing himself with his stupidity and lack of control.

Even with all that, he couldn't deny that his personal warp drive could be extremely useful, when used with proper caution and forethought. Callum had no desire to use it to escape again, not when he had a working homebond again, but it was better to have the option than not. Even if it still looked silly, he'd put more thought into making the new version functional.

He'd found a tractor roll cage and installed a seat in it, then bolted some shelving below the seat. The top of the cage got some scrap metal and an army-green tarp covering it. The end result was something that looked like it could go either on farm equipment or some disused carnival ride, but it served his purposes. It didn't fall over when it was on level ground, it could carry equipment, it kept the rain off, and he could unroll the tarp to camouflage it somewhat. It didn't even look terribly out of place on the back of a beat-up pickup.

Callum headed north and east since, when he did get in contact with Lucy and Chester, any dead drop would be in Chester's territory anyway. He called twice more as he drove, at hour increments, and got a different voicemail number and a pizza place. If nothing else it answered why Lucy never gave him a different number to call. Callum wasn't conversant enough with tech to know *how* she'd set up some weird number routing system, but he could imagine how that effectively protected her end of things.

If it was broken, that might mean it *hadn't* protected her.

He stewed on it a bit as he made his way through Texas, not braving the interstate solely because he didn't trust his truck to handle anything faster than highway speeds. Unfortunately there was nothing he could do about it; he didn't even know where she was physically located if he was of a mind to check on her. Which he didn't, that sounded far too much like some sort of trap and he'd already walked into one of those.

From then on, he made sure only to call while driving on dirt roads, on the off chance someone was tracking locations. It was easy enough to keep changing directions too, since he didn't have a specific destination in mind. Nobody could get ahead of him if he didn't know where he was going next himself. It was late evening before he finally got a response, and Lucy's voice came through the receiver.

"Hey there, big man." For once Lucy did not sound chipper. In fact, she sounded positively exhausted.

"Everything okay over there, Lucy?" Part of him suddenly wished they'd established a duress code. Though he was pretty sure if someone was there Lucy would be fake-cheerful instead of glum.

"Bit of a few days at work," Lucy said. She didn't elaborate.

"Is that why I couldn't reach you earlier? I was a little worried when I kept getting different wrong numbers."

"Ah, yeah. Sorry about that, big man. Have to restrict my calls a bit." Callum chewed his lip as he considered that, stopping at a light and checking carefully before taking a right.

"I take it work got too dangerous for your side job? I'm not accusing, just, if you need me to be more circumspect, that's fine. I guess I was a bit spoiled before."

"It's nothing you did, big man," Lucy said, then paused. "Well, it probably is, but nothing you had control over."

"Huh." Callum took another turn. "Some shakedowns at GAR 'cause they haven't found me yet?" Considering the reaction he'd gotten over in France it was obvious they were serious about getting him, but that didn't mean he had any grasp of what the internal scuttlebutt was. He could have been their number one priority or just another annoying thing between real high level politics.

"That's my guess." Another dead stop to the conversation.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s perfectly fine,” he assured her. “But if you want to rant about GAR, I’m all ears. It’s not like I’m going to defend them.” His comment drew a laugh, though not a loud one.

“Yeah, I know,” Lucy said. “I guess, it’s just. I didn’t really think they were that bad, you know? Maybe not the bees knees and all that, and I’m a dud so I’m kind of a whatever, but it was a pretty good gig. But then they came in to audit us or whatever you call it, and it was like I wasn’t even a person. They didn’t even let me walk on my own, it was all under compulsion.” Callum’s grip tightened on the cracked faux leather of the steering wheel and he stepped on the brake, slowing down and steering into a strip mall’s parking lot.

“Are you okay?” He asked again. “I don’t— I can’t imagine what that’s like. That’s got to be horrible.”

“It wasn’t pleasant,” Lucy said. “But, I mean. All they did was ask me questions.”

“And they still let you go?” Callum asked. A slow-dawning alarm crept on him as he processed what that portended, but if Lucy wasn’t urging him to flee, there had to be a reason.

“Not to brag, big man, but just because an answer is truthful doesn’t mean it’s useful. They don’t think I’m more than an empty-headed office drone.”

“Damn, Lucy! That must’ve been some quick thinking.” The bit of burgeoning fear collapsed and he smiled, but it was more vindictive than happy. “I know when GAR came down hard on me I was kind of a wreck.”

“I’ve got a hard time imagining you being anything but a smooth operator, big man,” Lucy said, a little bit of forced cheer in her voice. “I don’t think I’m cut out for your kind of life though. All that was awful, but really, what can I do about it?”

“They say all it takes for evil to triumph is to do nothing,” Callum told her. “But you haven’t been doing nothing. You’ve been helping me, right? Besides, for the moment, nothing might be the better call. There’s no point in getting yourself caught.”

“Huh.” She fell silent for a moment to consider it. “Yeah, I’m gonna be walking the straight and narrow for a while. Nothing risky for Lucy.”

“Welcome to my life,” Callum told her, with as much of a wry twist as he could manage. “It’s fine, though. Better you be safe than get found out by the powers that be.”

“Yeahhhh, I’m with you on that one.”

“You know,” Callum said, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. “If they’re willing to use compulsion it might be good to establish some kind of duress code,” he said, following through on his earlier idea. “Not a set phrase or anything, that seems too easy to block.”

“You are *crazy* paranoid,” Lucy told him. “But in this case, I think you’re right. Umm. Let me think.” Nothing came over the phone for a while, but eventually she had an answer. “If I bring up my House, that should do it. They’ve written me off and I’ve written them off and good riddance, eh? So if I suddenly insert that into the conversation, you’ll know.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Callum said, though he couldn’t help but grimace. Being ejected from the family that way had to be terrible.

“Anyway, I’m guessing you’re calling about my other job? With the boss man?”

“Sure am,” Callum said, letting the subject drop. “I’ve got it finished and it works for me, but I don’t know if it’ll work for him. Under the circumstances I figure I’d better drop it off and let him poke at it rather than demanding money for what might be hard for him to use.”

“I tell you what, big man, I see so many emails about needing new teleport locations and having to do maintenance on the teleporters that if they knew you were making your own, they’d have apoplexy.”

“I can just imagine.” So far as he’d seen, every single spatial thing ran through Duvall, making her a tyrant among tyrants. Obviously he didn’t know her personally, but he’d worked with, though never for, people with the same death grip on their area of responsibility.

“Gimme a minute, see if I can get ahold of the boss man.”

“Sure thing.” Callum turned around and left the strip mall parking lot, turning on the windshield wipers as a November drizzle started. Less than a minute later, a familiar voice answered.

“Chester here.”

“It’s Mister Summers,” Callum said, having decided to just use his current name. Just on the off chance there was some kind of surveillance for Professor brown. “I have a prototype, but you should probably make sure you can get it to work before issuing payment.”

“That was quick,” Chester said. “I was on a waiting list for three years before they installed a GAR teleporter here.”

“I suspect they’ve got more to worry about than I do. Lots and lots of enchantments, lots and lots of mages who need them.”

“Likely so,” Chester allowed. “I’d prefer it if you would leave the package with one of my Alphas. Label it as coming from Clara’s friend. Lucy, would you send him a list?”

“You got it, boss man.” Even with Chester, Lucy didn’t sound quite herself. “Give me an hour and call me back, would you, big man?”

“Will do,” Callum said. Given the phone situation, all her network stuff was probably in disarray, so he didn’t blame her for needing a little bit to prepare. “Vamps still behaving?” He added out of idle curiosity.

“No, but with the sheer devastation of Master Lavigne’s numbers, most of what’s been going on is infighting.” Chester’s voice held a grim satisfaction. Callum found that he suddenly, intensely did not care at all. That was the sort of ridiculous internal politics that he’d wanted to get away from.

He still didn’t regret it, but his success at avoiding magical politics was very much mixed. At least he was meeting them on his terms, though, rather than as some pawn between a bunch of people who didn’t care about him. If he had played at all by their terms, he would have lost.

“Well, I wish you luck with that,” he said, and did mean it. Chester seemed like the sort of man he could have worked with in other circumstances. Even if he had only interacted with the Midwest Alpha a few times, Lucy didn’t seem to have any issues, which was an endorsement.

“Thank you, Mister Summers,” Chester said. “Is there any other business?”

“Not that I can think of.”

“Then I look forward to receiving the merchandise.” The line went dead, and Callum hung up, taking out his other phone to look for a hotel sufficiently far away from his current location. Part of him wished that he’d set up a teleport system between his truck and his house, so he wouldn’t have to bother with any of that, but he’d need something more robust than a pickup for that. Preferably something that had an interior that was completely safe, like an armored truck.

He kept driving east, yawning involuntarily as darkness fell, and dialed Lucy’s number at the appointed time. The hotel was still a ways away, since there’d be little point in possibly compromising a place he was intending to spend any amount of time at, and he’d taken the lesson that Chester had given him to heart. There were no straight lines to give away his path of travel.

“Hey there, big man,” Lucy said.

“Long time, no talk,” he replied.

“I’m pretty sure my great-grandparents used that joke,” Lucy accused.

“What can I say, it’s a classic.”

“C’mon, big man, you can do better than that!”

“Probably, but not at, uh,” he checked the clock. “Not at nearly nine.”

“Boo,” she said, still a little subdued. “Okay, big man, I have two things. One of them is the list that Chester wanted me to give you, but the other one is just for you.”

“Yeah?” Callum asked, interest piqued. He couldn’t actually remember if he had any standing requests with Lucy, but it had to be something interesting if she introduced it like that.

“So, yeah, I’ve got to lie low at GAR for a while, but before I shut down all my stuff I grabbed everything related to you. Most of it’s pretty useless, but I did find something I think you might want to deal with.”

“Uh-oh.”

“I’m afraid so. They, uh, tracked down that couple you rescued from the fae out near Creede. Well, the fae did, but GAR’s tagged them and brought them in.”

“They did *what*?” His voice came out cold, the steering wheel creaking under his hands again. He was only dimly aware of his surroundings for a moment, the back of his head buzzing from the sudden jolt of fury, and he had to steer off the road again so he didn’t cause an accident.

“I mean, good and bad. They’re just being held for questioning, but I mean, they’re sort of officially inside the supernatural world so I guess they’d be considered the fae’s responsibility? I’m not sure, since they’re part of the investigation into you so—”

“How did they even find them?” Callum demanded. “Why? They can’t possibly—” He cut himself off, since Lucy didn’t deserve his ranting. “Right. So. If you’re telling me this then they’re actually accessible, not buried deep in some GAR black site or something.”

Callum was more than willing to do something about the supernatural injustices he saw, but he wasn’t stupid or suicidal. Ambushing a bunch of unaware fae was one thing, but trying to break into a secure facility was something else. Especially since GAR could just teleport reinforcements even if he got the drop on whoever was inside.

He couldn't save everyone that GAR messed with. Or most, or even many. It was a sprawling bureaucracy in the highest halls of power and he'd have been just as happy never interacting with them at all. But going after someone he'd already rescued made it personal.

He hadn't forgotten what had happened to the young pair that he'd rescued from the vampires, either. There was still an accounting for *that* in the offing, once he figured out how. Callum wasn't prepared to go full vigilante, but some people had something coming to them.

"Yeah, they're being held at a GAR building in Miami. Guess they're not important enough to take to wherever BSE keeps the real scary folks."

"Or GAR is hoping to catch me by leaving them accessible."

"I don't think so, since like, there's only the normal boilerplate DoA reports on them. Hasn't even crossed the department head's desk I don't think. If you want I can send you the email text I found. Just thought you'd want to know about it."

"Oh, I do, absolutely," he assured her. "I'll have to be very careful about what I do, though."

"If you think it's a good idea," Lucy said, seeming a little hesitant. "Maybe it's not. I mean, if they're ready for you then you shouldn't go, either. The DoA handles this kind of thing all the time, they'll probably be fine?" It was more a question than a statement.

"From what you told me about the Department of Acquisition, they definitely won't be fine," Callum told her. "Even if they are lying in wait, I have to do *something*. If I don't do anything, then that just means there will be more and more of this. Someone told me recently that the strong do what they can, and if you don't do *good* things if you can, then you end up with no good anywhere."

"So you're a good guy, huh big man?"

"I don't know about that," Callum admitted. "But I do know I'm seeing evil."

"I guess it's hard to argue with that," Lucy said after a moment, suddenly sounding very tired. Not that he blamed her. It wasn't exactly a fun thing to contemplate.

Eventually Callum hung up, pulling up the promised text and copying the list of names and addresses of Chester's Alphas. He couldn't help but dwell in the news that Lucy had given him as he drove toward the hotel, unsettled and unhappy. The big problem with something like GAR was that it was a big machine and getting it to leave anyone alone was difficult. The more effort he put into it, the more of a target he'd make.

He was pretty sure that most people wouldn't be willing to do what he did and completely opt out of society, change their names, and start over. It wasn't likely they could go to the mundane authorities either, since they'd either be in cahoots with the supernatural authorities or just completely steamrolled by magical ability. Even normal agencies could fake evidence, so a magical one would have no trouble at all.

It weighed on his mind enough to unsettle his sleep, leaving him tired and grumpy the next day. He got up to deliver the teleport plates anyway, sorting through the fairly long list of Alphas to find one that was near enough that he could actually reach within the day. While he drove along, though, his mind was already skipping forward to what he was going to do rather than the job he'd just finished.

While he wanted to get going and head to Miami as soon as he could, the fact of the matter was that it wasn't something he could do half-cocked. There wasn't an immediate threat; the blow had already landed. Besides which, there was no way that he'd be able to sashay in and pull them out without any repercussions. The last GAR outpost he'd looked at had genuine security and staff, plus it was a good bet Miami had a significant supernatural presence for potential reinforcements.

It took more than a few hours of driving to get to Oklahoma and out to the address from Lucy's list. It was a huge, upscale compound, basically a development unto itself, surrounded by crops and cattle fields, and it would actually be difficult to approach anonymously. He had to park his truck by the side the road and pop himself though the fields toward the central house, which looked like an old plantation mansion.

The package got left on the front step with the note about Clara written directly onto the metal with a marker. He'd splashed the plates and packaging with rubbing alcohol too, in hopes of purging his scent, but he didn't know if that would really work. It wasn't even clear whether shifters who did scent-tracking used physical scent or some kind of magical residue he couldn't detect.

Then he drove off, to find a place with free Wi-Fi so he could do some looking at the local maps. Finding long-term parking was a pain, but if he was going to Florida he couldn't go in his old pickup. He wasn't even sure it'd make it that far. Besides which, no matter what sort of approach he ended up taking, he'd need more room than just the pickup bed.

For better or worse he didn't have to return home. With everything useful already along for the ride, he merely rented a small U-Haul van under the name he used for the truck and transferred stuff over. Part of him would have preferred something more separated, but he was not confident in driving something that large in a city. The motorhome had been large enough and he just *knew* he'd clip something in the city streets if he took something as big as one of the moving trucks there.

It was times like that where he fully appreciated being able to teleport and float items both small and large. While his knee wasn't terrible, he definitely would have had issues moving stuff back and forth, especially large things like the chair. What would have probably been half an hour or more of heavy labor took less than five minutes of sitting in the cab and concentrating.

Then it was off to Florida. What would have been something like a three hour flight was a two-day drive, even helping things along with judicious use of portals. It was a lot easier to drive the U-Haul through a portal than it was to teleport the whole thing, given the length of the van, but it wasn't something he could do too often. Even if a portal large enough for a van was not that much wider or taller than one for a car, the area scaling meant it took a whole lot more vis.

During the drive it was technically his birthday, but he'd not been one to celebrate such things for a while. Birthdays just didn't seem to be particularly exciting once he'd gotten stable finances and had taken a few vacations of his own accord. Once he didn't even have anyone to share them with, he'd more or less written them off. The only reason he marked that one was because he felt so damn old, with a bum knee and stiff muscles from spending all day driving.

It was ironic that he was seeing far more of the world as an outlaw than he had when he was a genuine student of architecture. Admittedly, he found that most cities just had the same sort of styles over and over, rather than the far more interesting local construction that had evolved from their own cultures and resources and limitations. Suburbia had the same sort of bland sprawl, which meant a good chunk of his drive was flat-out boring.

At least it gave him time to ponder over options for dealing with the GAR outpost. It might be for the best to just abscond with the pair, because it didn't sit right with him to try and assassinate some office workers who just happened to be in the building. On one hand, he'd seen a good number of these GAR personnel were complicit in the depredations of vampires and, he supposed, other supernaturals. On the other, there were people like Lucy who just happened to be employed by the machine.

He had second and third thoughts about going after the couple, whose names he still didn't know, but he had to do it. His own morals aside, he could well see GAR deciding to take and hold anyone he had even the slightest contact with, regardless of how innocent they actually were. Shahey's presence was probably the only reason that Tanner hadn't been locked down by GAR, and not everyone had that protection.

Whatever he did in Miami would be a statement, so he'd have to make sure it was the right one.

