

Chapter 8 – Tension

The car turning into Callum's driveway was familiar, and it wasn't the sheriff's. He was still feeling tired and hungover, even if he hadn't drunk a single drop of alcohol, so it took him a moment to recognize Jessica Langley driving and Clara in the passenger seat. Part of him was surprised it was just those two, but at the same time he was glad there was nobody else.

Of all the people who might have shown up after what had happened, those two were probably the least worrisome to see arrive on his doorstep. He struggled out of bed and splashed water on his face, making sure he affixed the hairpiece and summoned his cane to his hand. Though he'd been out of sorts when he'd gone to the café before, he couldn't allow himself to break the habits of his disguise. When the knock on the door came he grabbed his cane, stumped down the stairs, and opened it up while offering the pair a smile.

"I wasn't sure you'd be here," Jessica said.

"Should I have gone?" He could barely summon the adrenaline to wake himself any further, but he did reach out with his senses to find his supplies, ready to move at a moment's notice.

"No, I don't think so," Jessica told him. "There *are* GAR agents here to investigate things, but they don't know about you."

"I wanted to say thank you," Clara said abruptly, hovering uncertainly a moment before stepping forward to give Callum a hug, squeezing with more strength than a girl her age should have. He just stood there awkwardly, arms partly raised, too stunned to do anything but try and let his brain catch up.

"You're welcome," Callum said. "But remember, I wasn't there, I didn't do anything."

"We understand," Jessica said, as Clara finally let him go. "But at the same time, we can't just forget it, so..." She nodded at Clara, who picked up a large package from where it was resting on the porch and offered it to him. He hadn't smelled it before, but once it got closer the scent of steak and garlic and butter wafted to his nose. Callum's stomach growled.

"The Sienna Café is kind of closed for a while anyway, until they finish cleaning up the motel remains, so we brought you a bunch of food," Clara explained.

"Well, I *am* hungry," Callum said, suddenly feeling ravenous. "Why don't you come around back and you can fill me in."

He led them around the side, knowing that his worries that they'd be able to smell the guns and money he'd confiscated from the vampires was probably unfounded, but he didn't want to take

the chance. If nothing else, he hadn't exactly cleaned up the house for company. The back porch, on the other hand, was nice enough even with the chill in the air.

Callum got one of the take-out containers from the package, opening it to reveal a heroically large steak, far larger than he ever ordered. He did offer to share it with Clara and Jessica, but they declined. Clara slightly more reluctantly than Jessica. Though considering she worked in the café, he was pretty sure she could get ahold of all the eats she could ever want. On the other hand, teens were always hungry.

"If you don't mind my being rude by eating, what's going on?"

"Alpha Langley went to meet the GAR agents this morning," Jessica said, unperturbed. "He says they didn't get anything off the bodies, but they're going to be poking around anyway."

"Mmm." Callum mumbled through a mouthful of steak. Unless they had something specifically pointing to Callum, it was probably better to stay and try to brazen it out than vanish. If he decided to up and leave, that would look damn suspicious. Then they'd investigate his house and yard and probably find some evidence that he had been involved, considering how thorough forensics could be. His greatest security was simply not being suspected.

"The GAR people have been going over the motel for almost a whole day now," Clara put in. "But I don't think they found anything either. I don't really know much about what mages do, though."

Unfortunately, neither did Callum. He thought his little siphons and the subsequent fire would remove the only traces he'd left of his magic from the portals, but he really didn't know. There was always the possibility that there was some mage or, more likely, some fae who could just see the past and sniff him out no matter how careful he was.

"I appreciate you telling me," Callum said, cutting himself another bite. "I'm not sure there's anything we can do to affect things at this point, though."

"We're keeping our mouths shut," Jessica said. "But Alpha Chester is worried that your help might cost something. Something we can't afford."

"Alpha Chester?" Callum asked, then immediately castigated himself for doing so. If he was pretending to be a mundane, he wouldn't know anything, but if he was pretending to be a normal member of supernatural society, he really shouldn't ask about local leaders. Any ordinary person would know, and he *had* heard the name before. Admittedly, he wasn't in the best state of mind then.

“The Midwest Alpha,” Clara told him, not seeming to care about his ignorance. “He’s Alpha Langley’s own Alpha, so while you did help us, in a way you helped him too.”

“Well.” Callum considered how to play it. He wanted to use as few lies as possible, because that sort of thing was easy to get tangled in, but that wasn’t the same as telling the whole truth. It was best to just play the mysterious stranger, because then people would draw their own conclusions and confirm their own biases. “It was not something I did to get rewarded. I did it because I told you I would help if I could. And I could.”

“So you’re not looking to call in anything for what we owe you?”

“You don’t owe me.” Callum smiled briefly. “Like I said, I was never there. It never happened. In fact, while I appreciate the gratitude, I would prefer that we leave it there and not speak of it again.” For all he knew, a mage somewhere could listen in from a hundred miles away, and with two GAR agents in the area it was better to be circumspect.

“Yes, of course,” Jessica said, glancing at Clara. “Well, we’ll be opening the café again in a few days. I hope to see you there!”

“I’ll probably be out of food by then,” Callum said with a laugh, looking at the stack of takeout containers still in the package. “Well, maybe not, but you can be sure that I’ll be stopping by.” Assuming he was still there. Knowing there were actual GAR agents made him think of his to-do list. He needed to go into town and get supplies.

Now that he had some basic magic, he actually had two ways of bugging out. One was the mundane way, hitching rides, using cash, and generally not leaving a trail, and the other was the magical way. He could teleport himself now, or he could, at least in theory, nullify his own gravity and space-drag himself. That gave him the option of a poor man’s flight, though it absolutely came with issues of its own. Among them the fact that he hadn’t actually tried it yet.

The only problem was that he did have to worry about the vis itself being traceable. That probably wouldn’t matter too much most of the time, whatever disturbance he made lost over time or mixed in with the presence of other mages, but with a pair of GAR agents nearby he couldn’t take the chance. At least not immediately. He would only feel comfortable using magic if he was far away from anyone who could track it.

“Great,” said Jessica, and stood up, Clara following suit. “We’ll get out of your hair, then. Enjoy your meal!”

“Enjoy your meal!” Clara echoed, Callum stood to walk them out to the car before returning to put the take-out in the fridge and finish the absolutely massive steak. Alone, he teleported the notepad to himself and added more items, on the presumption that he might be able to bring

more than a bag or two with him. More of a pious hope, really, but it was better than not being prepared.

He drove out maybe half an hour later, circling around the closed road while he cast his senses out at the remains of the motel. It was still surreal to think that he'd done that, so hard to believe that it was like watching the actions of a stranger. But the truth was he'd do it again, considering what they'd done.

There were people combing over the ruins, as Clara had said, and while at least half of them weren't human, none of them were shifters. Nor were there any vampires; they seemed to be some kind of fae, by the pointy ears and the bizarre haze of magic coming off them. It wasn't threads and fields like mage spells, but rather like flowing water. He didn't dare probe too closely, but he did see some weak flickers of magic from some kind of mage, which probably did a great job of hiding any tracks he might have left.

The stores he needed to visit were far enough from the motel as to be out of range, but he kept his senses active anyway. Camping supplies, duct tape, hardware cloth, plastic bags, tarp — nothing that would raise an eyebrow by itself, but taken all together it might look like he was getting rid of bodies. Which was why he went to different stores, of course.

He got back home and busied himself with cleaning up his loot. The camping supplies went into the duffles along with clothes, money, and one each of the guns with a small amount of ammunition. While before he'd taken it for the principle of the thing, now he knew exactly how lethal he could be. And how lethal he might need to be.

The rest of the guns, the ammunition, and the magical items went in small packages, plastic bags wrapped in duct tape. He needed to cache it in some way, but he'd been chewing over the possibilities for that and had maybe a solution. It wasn't a pretty solution, but it would probably work.

Callum got a spade and went to the basement, then reached out with his senses to find a rock somewhere deep in his yard. He carefully surrounded it and exchanged its position with air, though if it needed an extra-hard push of mana, creating a little bit of a pocket that he quickly opened a portal into. It was about as wide as his hand, and he started shoveling dirt out with the trowel. Once it was big enough, he widened the portal and shoved one of the packages into it. Then for good measure, tossed a siphon bearing in with the package and dropped the portal, leaving the entire thing buried nearly ten feet underground.

He worked his fingers, feeling a little bit of strain from the short handle of the spade, but he had a *lot* of packages to cache. At least the soil was much softer and deeper in Winut. It would be impossible to go so deep back in his hometown of Tanner, so close to the Appalachians.

The bundle of hard drives got wrapped in the wire mesh of hardware cloth with some aluminum foil for the heck of it, on the off chance there was still some buried chip or something, or even some proximity thing for someone wandering around with a gadget he'd never heard of. That one went as deep as he could find, though it wasn't much deeper than any of the others. The magic bundle got a siphon bearing, even though he couldn't discern any kind of signature leaking from it, and the faraday cage wrapping just in case.

Once he was done, the only evidence that there had been stolen property around was a pile of dirt in his basement, and considering that it was unfinished the pile of dirt didn't even look too out of place. He had no idea if anyone would ever visit or look, but he felt a lot better with things cleaned up like that. Now he was ready for a visit, if the agents ever came.

"They're definitely hiding something," Ray Danforth told his partner. "There isn't a chance that Alpha Langley is as ignorant as he professes to be."

"So eavesdrop," Felicia Black suggested languidly. "I thought you could hear anything within a mile radius." Most people would have thought that pairing someone with siren blood with an air mage would be a recipe for disaster, but Ray had some certain advantages. Mostly, he'd been tutored in how to safely reinforce his ears with his air magic without accidentally causing an embolism or similar issue, allowing him to screen out magical effects.

Despite their improved hearing, a properly trained air mage was the *most* immune to siren effects.

"I have been," he told her. "You have no idea how lusty these shifters are. So I'm overhearing quite a lot, but none of it is pertinent to our case. In fact there's remarkably *little* gossip about it, for all that some mysterious benefactor came and handled their problem for them."

"I could try to get some of them to talk," Felicia suggested with a smile.

"With Alpha Langley here, that probably isn't the best idea." Ray frowned. Shifters were touchy at the best of times, but Langley clearly didn't like the idea of GAR agents in his town. Quite a reversal, considering the complaints Alpha Chester had to GAR in the files. Felicia's voice wasn't quite beyond the bounds of propriety to use, especially on a suspect, but hypnotizing random shifters was a good way to get teeth buried in someone's throat.

"So, actual groundwork?" Felicia asked, making a face as she sat up from the couch.

“Let’s see what the cleaners found first,” he said. “I’m sure we would have heard already if there was anything exciting, but you never know. Considering we have exactly nothing so far in this case, any evidence of anything would be welcome.”

“Fine,” Felicia sighed. “Let’s see what car they stuck us with.”

It wasn’t even a car. It was a white pickup, and Ray wasn’t much of a fan of the gearshift, but it did drive and it was, at least, scrupulously clean. If there was one nice thing about shifter compounds, it was that no slovenly behavior was tolerated. He let Felicia drive, her feet only just reaching the pedals, and focused on his air sense as they headed into town.

The local mana was more or less undisturbed. Shifters didn’t leave much magic residue and there didn’t seem to be many fae or mages around, so any serious use would stick out. He could use the nearby air to trace out small passages and check houses and basements for anything unexpected, but there was nothing terribly unusual. Not that he expected to find much on the drive to the crime scene.

Felicia waved her GAR badge at the fae keeping people out of the motel site and behind the police tape, and they were let through into the parking lot. The truck was so high up that even Ray would have to jump down, not to mention Felicia, if it weren’t for the fact that he were an air mage. Ray channeled his focus’ slowfall spell and targeted his partner, then himself, and simply drifted down with dignity.

“What do you have for us, Cenee?” Ray asked, approaching the other mage. A weak fire and earth type, he was excellent for dealing with smoldering rubble like the Flats Motel. Ray had worked with him more than once, especially when it came to incidents with dragonblooded. Dragonblooded *always* set things on fire.

“Well, I do have a magical signature for you, but I don’t think it’s going to help.” Cenee tossed a signature recorder to Ray, who reflexively pulled it to his hand with a gust of wind. He channeled some mana into it, through the signature, and the air manifestation glyph lit up.

“Damn,” he swore. “The vamps had an air mage with them, didn’t they?”

“Yes, Denise Hawking.” Cenee said. “You’ll have to check but they probably match. No other noticeable signatures.”

“Anything else?”

“A lack of something. We got a list of what they were supposed to have with them from Research and there’s none of that. I’ve combed it through with earth sense and there were only a few guns left. All the rest of the equipment is gone. The gold is gone. And the

Minneapolis Vampire Council really wants a gold and banic formal crest back, or at least what's left of it, but I couldn't find a trace."

Ray made a face. Banic alloy was a combination of mordite, silverite, and corite, and it actually was fairly useless. It didn't even disrupt the magic of various supernaturals nearly as well as the pure metals. But it was quite expensive and did hold enchantments extremely well, so people with excess money sometimes used it for status symbols. No wonder they wanted them back; that was probably almost one million dollars worth of materials.

"So it was looted. Actually that makes things easier. Felicia, get that list and make sure there's a watch put on those items. If nothing else, we can probably find him when he tries to fence them." Ray put the signature recorder in his pocket. "Anything else I should know before you write your report?"

"I found some silverite chains in the basement. No corpse associated with them, though."

"So they had, or had planned, to hold a shifter." Ray shook his head. "They didn't mention any of that, but if they'd taken one of the pack, this seems rather more explainable, doesn't it?" Felicia poked him in the side. "Yes, wild speculation, I know, but this didn't come out of nowhere."

"You know, I find the fire odd," Cenee remarked. "The pack could have just called in cleanup normally. It's not like we don't have spats between supernaturals all the time."

"Well, according to the pack, *they* didn't do this." That was the Alpha's official statement, and Ray was actually inclined to believe it. Shifters tended to kill with their warforms or beast forms, considering their claws and teeth could cut through magic to some extent. Not to mention it was easier and cheaper than mordite or corite weaponry. "Thanks, Cenee. We'll let you know if we have any other questions."

Cenee waved at him and went back to supervising the last of the cleanup. Ray tilted his head in the direction of the truck, where he applied a loft spell to help boost Felicia up into the driver's seat. He considered things as Felicia drove them away from the motel, heading nowhere, just driving the town.

"As I see it, there are two options. Either the person or persons responsible for this just happened to pass through at the time, which means we'll probably never catch them. The fire ruined the motel's records, and they didn't have any off-site backups. Or they're a local, and the vampires did something to provoke them. In that case, the fire is emotional."

"A local that is capable of murdering a nest of vampires and thralls in the morning without disturbing anyone with more than the sound of gunshots." Felicia nodded. "It's possible. Fae

have wandered off on occasion and not come back. I haven't noticed any fae around here myself, but surely Alpha Langley would know."

"We'll get a list from him," Ray decided. "And we'll start looking through the records of the townsfolk ourselves. See if anything pops out."

Callum tried to distract himself from the hyperawareness of his spatial sense by doing some more studying. He was starting to see some ways that being able to twist space would let him do completely ridiculous things, but he wasn't sure how to make that happen with his magic just yet. Or if he even had the power to do so. Pseudogravity was very, very simple and it still taxed his mental capacity, so more complicated things might require tools.

Tools he didn't have and had no idea how to get. He really wanted to see if he could find anything about that on the magical internet, but if there were GAR agents snooping around he didn't want to be caught with a magical laptop. So for the moment, the laptop was down in the basement closet of the café, where supernatural electronics might be expected to be found.

He'd scrubbed everything of his from the laptop first and wiped it with alcohol, but he actually wasn't worried about anyone messing with it. So far as he was aware nobody ever cared about eight-year-old laptops shoved into a random closet. If they could trace him back through *that*, they probably would have been able to find him already.

Callum had to stop himself from fidgeting magically. He'd developed the habit of juggling teleportations as part of his magical exercise routine, and of course he didn't want to do anything when there were people presumably sniffing for any scent that was out of place. Metaphorically or literally, in the case of shifters.

Jittery as he was, he caught the weird, almost shocking prod of a vis presence at the edge of his perception. He swore and jerked back, for all the good that would do, before he realized what it was. Or at least what it might be. Someone was poking about with their own senses, and not just passively either. It was like a strong wind blowing through one corner of his brain, and he hurriedly pulled things back, metaphorically closing his eyes.

After getting used to perceiving everything with his spatial sense, he felt off-balance and was glad that he had a cane. He might actually genuinely need it while he was pretending to be a mundane, and it wasn't hard to sell that his vision was poor as he groped for the cane and stood up. The other mage might not have sensed Callum's presence, since after all Callum wasn't disturbing anything with his vis, but if he had, Callum wanted to at least be armed.

Despite the scare, nobody drove up to his house in the next minute. Not even the next ten minutes. When he found himself pacing, Callum decided to just drag his laptop over to the window that faced out into the road and, if nothing else, browse his bookmarked entertainment sites while killing time.

Because of that he actually almost missed it when a big white pickup turned into his driveway, even though the rumble of the engine should have warned him before the crunch of gravel. It wasn't what he would have thought a pair of alphabet-soup type agents would drive, but the pair that got out of the truck definitely fit the profile. Dressed in suits, hard eyes, professionally neutral expressions.

One of them was a rather strange-looking fae, short, but with blue skin, pointed ears, and a slightly fishy face. What made that go from silly to intimidating was the flash of needle teeth, like that of an anglerfish, and the way the slitted green eyes had their pupils widen and then narrow as she looked at Callum's house. The other was a medium size man with medium features, the kind of person who stood out *because* he was so bland.

Callum took a couple of deep breaths, glancing around to make sure that there was nothing obviously off about his house. The only thing that might possibly look odd to the outside eye, so far as he could tell, was that it was exceedingly clean. He probably had gone overboard tidying up after getting rid of the loot from the vampires, but a clean house was better than a messy one any day.

A few seconds later, one of the two knocked on the door with a firm hand. Callum gave it a moment, as if he hadn't been expecting them, then picked up his cane and made his way to the door. He was damned glad he had seen the fae from a distance first, because up close it would have been hard to keep from staring, even with all the practice he'd had schooling his face.

"Good afternoon, Mister Hall," the man said, reaching into his suit pocket and producing his credentials. "I'm Raymond Danforth and this is my partner, Felicia Black. We're with the FBI." The badge he proffered certainly did not say FBI. It said *Department of Arcane Investigation* instead. Callum figured it was covered by a glamour, one that he wasn't seeing, so he just accepted it. Even without his spatial sense active, he could feel magic radiating off the man, far stronger than anything the vampire's wind mage could have summoned.

"Oh. I see," Callum said, examining the badge and looking back up at Danforth. "What can I do for the FBI, Mister Danforth? Officer Danforth? Agent Danforth?" He was, paradoxically, not worried about being worried. Most people would be thrown if an FBI agent showed up on their doorstep.

“We’re looking into the fire at the Flats Motel,” Danforth said, smiling professionally, in a way that didn’t quite reach his eyes. Callum instantly disliked him. “Do you mind if we come in and ask you a few questions?”

“That seems like the kind of thing I’d want a lawyer for,” Callum said cautiously, keeping in mind the maxim that nothing was to be gained by talking to the police. He’d bent that for Arthur Langley, but the sheriff was definitely dedicated to the welfare of Winut. The DAI agents, presumably under GAR, most certainly didn’t. The two agents glanced at each other.

“You don’t want a lawyer,” the fae said, speaking at last. The voice sounded weird, a little bit resonant with an accent he couldn’t even begin to describe, but it was still understandable. Thank goodness. He really needed to figure out how to perceive glamours because there was no way she went around talking to mundanes with that voice. Someday he’d run into someone who couldn’t speak at *all* without the glamours and that would give the game away entirely. That said, he really didn’t like the tone or the contents of the words. The trick was how much to push back.

“That sounds rather like a threat,” Callum noted. “I’ve heard the FBI can be aggressive, but surely it’s not that bad yet.”

The two exchanged glances again, but of a different type. He had issues reading Black’s expression, the fae face being just inhuman enough to make him unsure how to interpret it, but Danforth looked strangely worried. There was just too long a pause before they looked at him again.

“Mister Wells, did Sheriff Langley tell you about the people in the motel?”

“I heard that there were people from out of town a few days before the murders happened,” Callum hedged, nerves prickling from something in the agent’s stance. Danforth made a sort of a gesture, one that Callum recognized belatedly as being the one Sen used when he cast the obfuscation spell. He really wished that he had his senses up so he could study how it was done, but with another mage so close he didn’t dare.

Part of him was actually surprised that Danforth couldn’t tell that Callum was a mage simply by proximity, but then, Callum had noticed that unless they were actively performing magic it was difficult to tell someone was a supernatural. He hadn’t been able to push his senses inside anyone at all, mundane or supernatural, other than himself. Even normal people seemed to have a touch of *vis*, enough to make themselves immune to casual scrutiny.

“He didn’t mention the pack to you, or the vampires?” Danforth asked, and Callum blinked at Danforth’s sudden jump into supernatural business. Maybe he’d assumed wrong and *could* tell that Callum was a mage.

“I really don’t understand what you’re talking about,” he said instead. It was the first lie he told them, but he still had the makeup on his wrist to hide the mage tattoo, and he wasn’t fae or shifter.

“You will tell us what you know about the Flats Motel,” Black ordered, and this time he felt something strange when he heard her voice, some sort of magical pressure, and he knew he was in trouble. Not because of what Black was trying to do, but because whatever she was trying to do had failed. He didn’t know what his response was supposed to be, so he stuck with ignorance.

“I really can’t tell you anything,” Callum told her, and for a third time the pair exchanged glances.

“Look, Mister Hall, we’re just trying to find out what really happened there.” Danforth said after a moment. “We suspect that Sheriff Langley may know more than he’s telling us, so we’re hoping you might be able to shed some light on what went on.”

“I’m afraid all I know is what I heard on the news. Some druggies murdered those two people and then accidentally burned down their own hideout.” It was a pretty good cover, though he doubted it’d stand up to real scrutiny. Then again, the supernatural world seemed to be pretty good about covering its track so maybe that’s exactly how it would stay.

“I see. If you’ll excuse us, Mister Hall.” Danforth tapped Black’s elbow, and the two of them turned away, walking back to their truck. But they didn’t drive away, instead going into conference. Callum closed the door and watched them through the window, an uneasy feeling in his gut.

They clearly didn’t have enough evidence to link *him* with the crimes, but at the same time it was obvious they found him suspicious in general. If they ran his ID and started digging, they’d find out it was fake soon enough. And that was assuming they didn’t disappear him on general principles, as a supernatural alphabet soup agency was probably wont to do.

Callum didn’t even think of trying to take out the agents. There was no world in which that would help, even it was possible. They didn’t have guns themselves, but as agents they had to be able to handle themselves, and a fae and a mage could probably wipe the floor with him if he tried anything. Plus if he gave them any reason to look too closely it’d be obvious he was concealing a mage tattoo, and had even altered it, which would get him in a lot of trouble.

Their discussion didn't take too long, and they came back to his door. Callum opened it before they knocked. He was a little heartened that their body language wasn't particularly tense, but Black's words killed whatever small bit of optimism he'd managed to scrape together.

"Mister Hall, I'd like to ask you to not leave the jurisdiction, as you're a person of interest in this case. We might have questions for you later as things develop."

"Damn spooks," he told them, channeling the way Callum, Sr., had talked about the internal affairs agencies. "I have rights, you know!"

"And they aren't being infringed," Danforth said tiredly. He turned away and the pair walked out to the truck, climbing in and driving off. There was even a little bit of magic involved in boosting the fae up to her seat. Callum stared after them a moment, then scrambled back into his house and started packing. That was as loud an invitation to leave as he'd ever heard.