

## Chapter 19 – Recriminations

Callum dialed Lucy's number and frowned as it rang. Ever since the shake-up at GAR he'd made sure only to call in the evening when she was home, and while he didn't think she had nothing better to do than wait for him to call she'd always answered before. Once again, any break in normal behavior made him anxious. After the third ring someone answered.

"Callum Wells." It wasn't Lucy's voice. He nearly dropped the phone as he fumbled in a spasm of panic, barely hearing the rest of whatever spiel the man on the other end had for him. "—Agent Ray Danforth and—" Finally he stabbed the call end button then steered off to the side of the road and yanked out the components out of the phone. Then, lacking any nearby bodies of water within his perceptions, teleported the bits outside and ran over them several times before getting back on the road.

He felt sick. Somewhere in the back of his head he'd always known there was a risk that they'd find Lucy, especially after they'd interviewed everyone. But at the same time, since she'd already passed the magically-compelled interrogation, he'd thought she was safe. Even if she wasn't, he wasn't about to tell someone how to live their life. That was the exact problem he had with GAR, and it was wrong to inflict it on someone else.

Now he wished he had said something to her, though he knew that wouldn't have gone well. At least, *he* sure wouldn't want someone else butting in and telling him how to live his life. Even and especially if it was from good intentions. That was really the worst kind of condescension.

It was a good thing that he was on a mostly untraveled back road somewhere on the border between Idaho and Washington State, otherwise he might have run the risk of crashing into someone. He sure wasn't able to pay close attention to the road, fingers trembling with stress he wasn't able to release while he was essentially fleeing from where he'd placed the call.

Eventually he pulled off at a runaway truck ramp. There was enough random detritus around that he could just enchant loose bits of metal with his cleanup pattern before he teleported himself and the van through to his cache. Moving the portal through itself was always an odd experience, though he'd found that it mostly only collapsed if he used threads, the instability interfering with the portal structure. If he used tubes, it was perfectly fine; the *portal* didn't care where it was located.

Callum sat down in the cool darkness of the cave and rubbed his eyes. He'd been intending and hoping that after the Miami thing he could just lay low, collect enchantments, and work on his general prowess. Perfect his tricks and invent new

ones, maybe something as useful as the gut-portal. Admittedly, there wasn't much that *could* be as handy as that, but there was no telling what he could come up with if he had time to just sit and play around.

Part of him regretted just hiking around for two months and not doing any real magic practice, but the fact was he couldn't have done anything useful without enchantments. Probably. Either way, he'd needed that time.

There had been a lot to digest out on his very long hike. Mulling over the people he'd killed, over how he was a fugitive with no real prospects. Thinking about his prior thirty years of life, now that he knew magic, and wondering whether that latent magic had somehow caused his wife's death. The possibility that just being around him might have affected Selene, or maybe even his parents, was not a very palatable one.

Ultimately he had to come to terms with the fact that he couldn't have, or wouldn't have, done anything different. The best he could do was to work on his own abilities, so as to not waste the opportunities he'd been given. He still sincerely intended to take that time to work on making himself a better mage, but he had to do something about Lucy, first. Part of him was guiltily glad that he'd never shared anything too incriminating, or even called her from any of his safehouses. That didn't mean he was totally safe; they probably knew he was in Texas and there was no telling how long they'd been tracking his phone.

The Texas house was probably a lost cause and at the very least he'd want to change license plates or something for his van. It was generic enough that getting the numbers on it altered would be sufficient to preserve its identity. Obviously they didn't know it already, or he'd have been pulled over somewhere, but given enough time and data crunching they might be able to figure it out. He couldn't verify he'd never called from areas with some kind of surveillance. Despite the part of his mind screaming at him to do *something* about Lucy, he had to check over his own safety before he could start contemplating it.

Callum got up and paced the length of the concrete floor he'd installed, making his way by sense instead of sight. While he did have LED lamps scattered around, he didn't actually need them except to read. For a little bit all he did was walk, trying to shake out the buzzing adrenaline and clear the taste of stress from his mouth, his stomach churning with worry over Lucy.

The problem was that his attempts to insulate himself from everyone meant that he didn't actually know much about Lucy's own situation. He knew she worked for Alpha Chester and had a residence in that area, and that she worked for GAR, but that was it. Aside from the phone number she'd given him, he had no way to get in contact with her

— not that any such contact was possible if GAR had snatched her away. But if he'd known more, maybe he could have found a trail.

As it was he had exactly one contact who might know something, and that wasn't even someone he could talk to on his own. The card Alpha Chester had given him once was long gone, assuming that number was still being used. Not that he'd trust phones anyway. If they got Lucy to talk they'd know Chester was involved, and while Chester might have political protection that didn't stop people from tapping his lines or whatever.

He need to talk face to face. Or at least, voice to voice, in a way that would keep anyone from eavesdropping. Either way, he'd have to travel physically, though the more he thought about it, the less he thought he'd really need to be there in person. His implant and cache had really gotten him thinking about portals, and the abuses thereof when he could push his perceptions and magic through them.

One of the items he'd created was a second pair of portal disks, two dime-sized metal pieces, and there was no reason that he couldn't send half of that in lieu of his actual body. Such a thing wouldn't work everywhere — he'd already found that the portals spawned by the enchantments were fairly fragile and it would be easy for any mage to shut it down even by accident. They'd work well enough to insulate him from shifters, though.

It wasn't that he distrusted Alpha Chester, exactly. The man had proven to be as good as his word and seemed to be a fair dealer. It was just that Callum was very aware of how massively outclassed he was when he was within physical proximity of a shifter. They weren't human. He might well say something deeply offensive in shifter society and that was something he'd rather be at a distance for.

He spent a few minutes chewing over the concept before committing to anything, but didn't see anything really wrong with it. Except maybe the implicit insult in not actually arriving in person, but there was nothing to be done about that. Besides, if he was never physically there, that made it easier for everyone to assume there was no contact.

Callum teleported himself back up to Montana, but instead of getting out his van or his truck, he got the chair. The third or fourth version of his flying chair, he'd lost count, was practically identical to the previous, with the roll frame and shelves and a tarp, but was somewhat smaller. Since he didn't need to carry as much with him, the gut portal being superior to any kind of shelving, less volume was definitely better. The Alcubierre trick was extremely vis-intensive and his reserves weren't exactly enormous.

One of the changes he'd made was to add a tank of oxygen. It was far too easy to get extremely high up and he didn't want to suffocate if he made some kind of mistake. Not that he planned to do another jaunt like he had in France; that had come far too close to

him exiting the atmosphere entirely or going into freefall from thousands of feet up. No, he'd do things safely, but safely also meant he had to be prepared for emergencies.

He invoked his glamour focus and the gravitykinesis field, shielding himself and lifting the chair into the air. Since he was already up in the mountains he had a fairly good view and his first jaunt, aimed down at the ground, got him pretty far to the south and east. Winut was a fairly small target, but he could get most of the way there by the very coarse navigation afforded him through the flying chair.

One jaunt brought him into weather, and he was glad that the tarp provided some protection because, even bundled as he was, being hammered by sleet was not a fun experience. Lifting himself up only meant he was surrounded by fog, so he actually had to switch to the pickup and drive for a while toward his location. He wasn't going to risk running into something he couldn't see when completely surrounded by cloud.

When he actually made it to the Winut area, he was very cautious. The Langleys were probably well-disposed toward him, but assumptions were a very bad thing in his situation and even if they were happy to see him, there might be watchers about. Possibly even watchers the Langleys didn't know about.

He'd just have to hope he could track down someone he knew without getting spotted himself.

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Sherriff Arthur Langley tensed as he smelled a brief spike of human magic, and he glanced over his shoulder at the rear of his cruiser. There wasn't anyone else in the car, he could tell that much, since even a glamoured mage would displace enough air that he'd be able to tell *something* was off. Not that there had been enough magic for it to be a proper mage presence. Then there was another waft of magic from the passenger side, along with cold air and the smell of stone.

"Sherriff Langley?" The voice came from a small, dark circle hovering in the air, but it was a voice he recognized and he relaxed slightly.

"Mister Hall?" He had never thought that he'd hear from Hall – or rather, Wells – again. It was a shame, since Wells seemed like good folk and with fantastic skills. But it was understandable that he'd had to leave, given the way GAR wanted his head.

"Yes," Wells' voice echoed from the hole. "I realize using this to speak is probably a little bit rude, but you understand I have to be somewhat careful about when and where I'm seen."

“Certainly,” Arthur replied, a little bemused by the voice coming from a floating hole in space. He knew that mages were capable of all kind of tricks, and since Wells was a spatial mage something like that perhaps made sense, but it was still a bizarre application. He’d seen them use air-type magic for far-speaking, but never tiny portals. “What do you need from me?”

“I need to get in touch with Alpha Chester. Not through the phone,” Callum added immediately afterward. “I’m obviously using a portal to speak to you; there’s an anchor that I’d like you to bring to him so I can speak the same way.” There was another whiff of magical scent from Wells’ teleportation as a small disc of metal appeared in the front seat. The speaking-portal vanished at the same time, only to reappear a moment later. “Can you do that?”

“Certainly,” Arthur said, reaching over to pick up the metal disc. There was a faint tingle of magic from it, barely perceptible, and he had to guess the speaking portal was somehow being projected by it. “Can I just put this in my pocket or something?”

“Absolutely,” Wells said. “Just don’t damage it.” Arthur slipped the anchor into his breast pocket and reached for his phone, dialing Chester’s number.

“Chester here.”

“Alpha Langley,” Arthur said. “I need to come by in an hour or so on a matter relating to Claire.” He was aware of Wells still listening through the floating portal, and besides, there was some need of circumspection when it came to these things.

“You probably should expedite the matter,” Chester said, which Arthur well understood. The teleportation pad, Wells’ own creation as he understood it, was still stored at the compound. It would probably be moved eventually, but for the moment there was still instant transport between his house and Chester’s.

“Yes, Alpha,” Arthur said.

“I will make sure things are ready.” The phone went dead and Arthur hung up.

“Does that work for you?” He asked Wells.

“It does. I’ll be closing this portal now, but I know what’s going on around the anchor.”

“Understood.” Arthur did appreciate the warning. Not that it mattered overmuch, but he would have been somewhat put out if he *hadn’t* been told he was bringing an observing eye and ear along with him.

He reached for the radio to inform headquarters he was heading back to the compound and simply made a U-turn, driving back along main street. By the time he reached the

compound and dropped a few words about where he was going, John of the Wolfpack was in the basement room with the telepad. John tossed him a teleport token as he approached.

“Something happen?” John inquired idly.

“I have a message for Alpha Chester,” Arthur said. “And a bit of a package?” He tapped his breast pocket. “I’ve got an observer along so don’t say too much.”

John raised his eyebrows but shrugged and nodded, waiting for Arthur to step onto the telepad before poking at his phone. A moment later there was the snapping sensation of the black-market teleporter and they appeared in Chester’s basement. He wasn’t worried about giving away any particular secrets to Wells; the teleporters were from him and the basement saferooms for any shifters having issues were well known to begin with.

The smell of magic coming from the anchor in his pocket wavered oddly with the teleport but still lingered as Arthur stepped out of the saferoom where the telepad was kept. Chester was there in the basement in war-form, ears perked inquisitively in Arthur’s direction. For his part, Arthur inclined his head. As always in Chester’s presence, the pack-bonds shift and settled, reaffirming their connection.

“Hall – Wells, I guess – wants to talk. He gave me a magical anchor that lets him do so; said he was watching from it.” Arthur plucked the little metal disc from his pocket and offered it to Chester. The Alpha took it, giving it a frown, and then his ears slanted backward as he frowned at the hole that appeared in the air.

“Alpha Chester, I presume?” Wells’ voice came from portal.

“Indeed,” Chester said. He didn’t seem too excited, but Arthur knew that Chester resented how imperious Wells was. Even if he found the man too useful to properly chastise. “I presume you’re calling about Lucile.” He gestured for everyone else to take seats as he placed the disc down on the table, lowering himself into the massively oversized armchair that had been built just for him.

“I am,” Wells said shortly. “All I know is that someone else answered her phone.”

“Well, GAR took her in yesterday. I got the impression they had her under surveillance for a week or more before that. Of course they’ve interrogated her and I have some issues to deal with because they know about those telepads you made.” Arthur winced. Those were useful and expensive and GAR would almost certainly want to take them. He wasn’t sure if Chester could manage to keep ahold of them.

“Do you know where they took her, and what the dispensation of forces is at that location?” That was very odd phrasing, one of those things that made Wells seem like something other than the supposed architect his background provided. Chester shook his head.

“I owe Lucile some consideration for her service with me. She may not be pack but she is one of my people. However, that sort of consideration is not the same as sending you after a heavily guarded BSE facility as if you were some kind of guided missile.”

“So you won’t help?” Wells’ voice was flat and hard, and Arthur had to restrain an inhuman growl from his throat. Nobody talked to an Alpha that way. Fortunately, Chester had practice dealing with non-shifters and didn’t turn a hair.

“I didn’t say that, but this requires more consideration. If nothing else, there are shifters at the facility that I would prefer remain alive and intact.” That actually surprised Arthur a little. He didn’t know that Chester had gotten some of his people into GAR’s pool of shifter labor.

“I see.” Wells’ voice warmed fractionally. “A more considered approach is a better idea than just going in there half-cocked. What are you thinking?”

“This is not just some vigilante action,” Chester said, claws tapping on the reinforced arms of his chair. “This is an all-out declaration of war against GAR, to which I am not yet willing to commit either my pack in particular or the shifters in general. So any agreement between us would be, of necessity, a clandestine one.”

“So no change there,” Wells said, a trifle impatiently.

“No, but we need an agreement. If you would follow my direction—”

“No.” The response was instantaneous and reflexive, but no less final for all that.

“—then perhaps an alliance of sorts. You are very, very dangerous. Your brazen flaunting of GAR’s authority and their inability to catch you have already started the process of infighting. It’s a bit of a cause célèbre among the fae, some of whom are rattling the chains of authority.”

“It’s not much of an organization if one person can threaten it so,” Wells said.

“It is not the one person, it is that anyone is successfully defying their authority. The appearance of strength is strength; the appearance of weakness is weakness. How much faith would you put in an authority so publicly unable to fulfill their basic function?”

“Fair,” Wells said after a moment. “What did you have in mind?”

“Even if you will not operate at my behest as such, I would want to know what you are doing. So I can get my people out of the area, or take advantage, as the case may be. Or, despite what you may think, I may have knowledge of what you’re about.”

“The only reason I can do *anything* is because nobody knows what I’m doing, or where, or why,” Wells replied. “I could use more information at times, but anything you act on could compromise me or my plans.”

“Do I seem like that sort of blunderer to you?” Chester demanded.

“No. But two can keep a secret only if one of them is dead.” Wells was silent for a moment, and Arthur couldn’t help but shake his head at how deeply suspicious that sort of sentiment was. “I can agree to share information in good faith. Nothing more than that.”

“This is, after all, a gentleman’s agreement,” Chester said. “While we’re at it, it’s quite likely the teleportation equipment you provided will end up with GAR. They’re already insisting on it. I’d like more.”

“If you can provide enchanting materials, it’s not a problem,” Wells said brusquely.

“Now, what about Lucy?”

Arthur could see Chester controlling himself. It wasn’t so much the attitude as Wells not being there in person, so none of the normal signals a shifter would rely on were there. Tone of voice alone just wasn’t enough.

“The BSE facility is located in the Deep Wilds,” Chester said. “The only way in or out is by teleport; actually reaching it on foot is nearly impossible. I don’t know exactly what they have planned but I’m sure they have wards, guards, all of that. There hasn’t been enough time to gather what changes they’ve made, but I do have a building plan.”

“That would be helpful,” Wells said. “So far as reaching it goes — I have options, but could you have someone carry in an anchor like the one I’m using here?” Everyone’s eyes went to the small silver disk resting on the table. It was completely innocuous, but if it was a way for such a dangerous man to access something, it was also very ominous.

“I could,” Chester said, drawing out the second word. “What is it you intend to do?”

“Retrieve Lucy,” Wells said promptly. “That’s the main goal. How it goes from there depends on what I find. I would be lying if I said I was not prepared to level the entire thing.”

“I see.” Chester didn’t contend Wells’ assertion of his capabilities. It was obvious that Wells was deeply angry, but he was also not stupid or boastful. It wasn’t something a

shifter or a vampire could contemplate, but mages and fae had access to some truly destructive options. What exactly a spatial mage could do when provoked, Arthur couldn't imagine.

"Any shifter casualties will not be tolerated," Chester said bluntly. "I know you have the capacity to bypass obstacles. Most shifters at the site are simple menial personnel. There are a few who may be troublesome but it's better to avoid any shifters at all."

"I can't be held responsible for what the mages might do once a firefight erupts," Wells warned. "I can avoid targeting them directly unless I notice something truly objectionable, but last time BSE targeted me they killed a number of people in a café just to try to get at me."

"Yes, any direct action," Chester amended.

"I'll take responsibility for Lucy, but if she needs medical care or something I may have to come to you," Wells added.

"That is reasonable. She is, as I said, one of us. But you are right, she can't remain with us after such an assault."

"Then I believe we have an understanding."

"Yes. The soonest I can get the anchor there is approximately fifteen hours from now, with the next shift."

"Understood. Here is a number you can text the building information and tell me when the anchor has been delivered."

Wells rattled off a number and Chester gave his mate Lisa a glance. She wrote it down as it came and gave him a return nod.

"I will contact you later," Chester promised.

"Thank you," Wells said, and the black portal vanished, the smell of magic slowly fading from the room.

"What are you thinking?" Lisa asked. Not challenging, just curious.

"That I couldn't convince him to do anything else, regardless," Chester said. "We might as well take advantage of it. It's not like he's going to bring down the BSE, let alone GAR, but if they get their teeth kicked in enough we might be able to gain a little more independence."

"And if they capture him?"

“I don’t think that’s an option, for anyone.”

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Lucy was wrung out.

The fae’s compulsion had been far different and *far* more insidious than the vampire’s. She’d genuinely believed that the agent was her friend after the first few minutes of conversation, and it wasn’t until the spell was broken hours later that she’d realized what had happened. They’d even had drinks and chatted about life and work, bantering like old pals. It left her feeling sick and violated and she barely noticed the vampire escorting her out to a cell.

“You will sit down,” the vampire told her. They’d done whatever it was that removed her innate resistance again, and she was forced to take a seat on the cot. “You will not move,” the vampire added, and her muscles practically locked in place. As he turned to go, she thought he looked like the one who originally interviewed her.

Minutes ticked by as her thoughts spiraled in on themselves, unable to focus on anything but the mess she was in. Her muscles started to ache, then cramp, but she couldn’t even shift, the compulsion holding her in place. The cramping turned to creeping agony, but all she could manage was a pained keening noise as she was held prisoner by her own body.

She wasn’t sure how long that lasted, the searing, almost tearing pain and weakness stealing through her body taking away her vision as she panted, lost in a haze of suffering. Her entire world contracted down to the screaming of her muscles. Then, suddenly, a cold wave washed it away instantly, as if it were some nightmare she was waking from. Lucy blinked, seeing the face of a young woman out of the corner of her vision, since she couldn’t really even look around,

“Why aren’t you—?” The woman said. “Oh! I see.” She touched Lucy’s elbow and the feel of that cool sensation was accompanied by a loosening of the compulsion that held her in place. Lucy collapsed onto the cot. She couldn’t help it. Her body was refreshed with magical healing, all the pain vanished like a bad dream, but somehow that made it worse. Between that and the compulsion she didn’t feel like she could even tell what was real. It wasn’t until she felt the trickle of tears down her face that she realized she was sobbing.

For the most part she thought of herself as tough, but the preceding few hours had been by far the worst thing she had ever experienced. Part of her was terrified it would happen again, and she really didn’t know if she could handle it. Or what she might say or do to avoid having to go through it.

When she finally wiped her eyes free of the tears the woman was still there. She looked faintly sympathetic, but didn't actually move to help. Belatedly, Lucy realized that the woman had to be a healing mage, which was the reason why she wasn't in screaming agony anymore. In fact she felt really good, physically, even if her wits were scattered hither and yon.

"You're Lucile Harper, right?" The woman said finally, when Lucy managed to sit up and look over at her. For a moment Lucy didn't reply, feeling like she'd almost forgotten how to speak of her own accord, but then her brain recovered.

"Yes?" She felt like she should be hoarse and strained but her throat was fine. Which just seemed wrong.

"I'm Gayle Hargrave," the mage said. Even if she was physically fine, Lucy was so shaken it took her a few long moments to place the name.

"Oh," she said.

"You know Callum Wells, right?"

Lucy rubbed her eyes, trying to get her thoughts together. She really, really didn't want to talk about Callum anymore, but Gayle's question was a completely different thing than the interrogation from before. She'd even healed Lucy up and freed her from that horrifying hell of compulsion.

"I've talked to him, but I've never met him," she told Gayle. "I don't know— I don't know if there's anything useful I can tell you."

"I just wanted to know why he told me to use my healing magic for harming instead," Gayle said, a bit plaintively. "I don't *want* to be part of BSE but the anti-healing technique is supposed to be secret."

"I'm not sure if it helps," Lucy said slowly, "but I don't think he actually knew what he was suggesting. His background is really weird. It's like he's completely ignorant of most of mage society, but at the same time has some super elite training in certain things."

"That doesn't help," Gayle sighed and crossed her arms. "He ruined my life and pulled me away from my House and it was just an accident? That's just— no, I don't believe it."

"I think he's some House's pet project," Lucy offered. "One they lost control of." Either that or he was exactly what he appeared to be, which was actually a scarier proposition.

“You think he’s going to come get you?” Gayle asked abruptly, and Lucy blinked. For some reason that hadn’t crossed her mind, but now that it’d been asked, she realized a lot of the interrogation had centered around it. Everything she had said and felt during the fae compulsion was distant and weird, like someone else’s memories.

There hadn’t been anything she could tell them. She really didn’t know all that much about his capabilities and he’d been coy when describing exactly how he’d managed some of what he had. But one thing he hadn’t been coy about was that he would lever her out of GAR’s hands if they ever closed on her. Which they had.

“Yes, and they know it,” Lucy said. It wasn’t betraying anything she hadn’t been forced to say already. Gayle scowled.

“He’s going to answer for ruining my life,” she said and left the cell.

Lucy wasn’t sure the door was even locked, but she wasn’t about to try a facility full of mages and vampires. She hunched down on the bed, focusing on breathing. There was nothing she could do herself, not as a dud, but she could at least be prepared. She didn’t know when Callum would be coming, but when he did, she’d be ready to make a break for it.