

Chapter 3-3 – Unwind

There were no supernatural traces at all near Callum's trailer in Texas, even after he swept in a spiral three or so miles around it, so he felt he was fairly safe putting Lucy in the bed there. He wanted to crash himself, even as uncomfortable as the sofa was, but instead he forced himself to make some kind of brunch and hydrate. Hopefully Lucy would wake up soon, and if not, he'd have to get in contact with Chester again.

He'd assured himself there were no other lingering bits of magic or technological trackers, even though he was a little uncomfortable peering at Lucy that intimately. It was invasive, but he had to be sure for both their sakes. If anything, though, her own personal vis seemed stronger than it had been before.

Sitting in the bedroom waiting for Lucy to stir seemed a little bit creepy, spatial perceptions aside, so he moved a card table close to the door and set up with his laptop. Partly to get some of his thoughts down and partly just to have something to distract himself with. As well as the rescue had gone, he figured that the next time they'd have more mana jammers or something even larger and more powerful to deny his abilities. Or just more mages, since he really couldn't go against them. Not directly.

Though, with Lucy safe, he had hopes he wouldn't *need* to do anything for a while.

Callum was giving his usual sites a desultory look-through when Lucy stirred. Immediately he got up and knocked on the door to her room, making a conscious effort to act like a normal person rather than teleporting. He was pretty sure after the day she had, him appearing out of nowhere would be an unnecessary stress. While he tried not to peek too much, he sensed her jump when the sound came of his knocking, and she levered herself partly upright, her head focused on the door.

"What? Who is it?" She said, shrinking back in the bed. Callum didn't blame her.

"It's me," he told her through the door. "The big man."

"Oh!" She took a moment to survey herself before throwing back the covers and turning sideways on the bed. "Come in!"

He turned the doorknob and crossed over to her. She hesitated a moment and then stood up, half reaching out to him.

"Is it— are we safe?"

"Yes," he said. "We're safe." That wasn't entirely true; if nothing else they'd have to get rid of Lucy's tattoo. But it was close enough for the moment.

Lucy studied his face for a second and then practically toppled forward against him. Callum caught and steadied her in his arms as she sobbed into his chest. He didn't say anything, just held her, knowing that there were times to cry and considering what she'd gone through this was certainly one of them.

It was a little odd having another woman in his arms, when he hadn't even dated for years. Actually he was quite glad that Lucy was nothing like Selene; he'd mourned his wife and buried her, and he didn't want to feel like he was trying to find a replacement. Fortunately, Lucy was Lucy and there was no mistaking her for anyone else. After a while she pulled back a bit and wiped at her eyes, still keeping one hand on his arm.

"Sorry about that, big man. Usually I'm more put together."

"Hey, I understand completely," Callum told her, giving her as good a smile as he could manage. "It's been a rough couple of days for you, I'm sure."

"You can say that again," Lucy said.

"It's been a rough couple of days," Callum repeated, deadpan. Lucy burst into shaky laughter, punctuated by a hiccup.

"Oof, that was terrible. I needed that."

"Glad I could help." He reached out his hand and teleported a box of tissues into it, offering them to her. She blinked at him and then laughed as she took the box from him. "Wow, that is going to take some getting used to. I guess, I mean." She peered up at him, though she was only a few inches shorter than he was. "Am I going to be staying here or...?"

"I'd certainly like you to," he told her. "I never wanted you to get involved in my mess, but now that you are I'm hardly going to abandon you."

"Good," she said, head still tilted back to look at him. "You know, you're shorter than I expected," she added, squeezing experimentally at the arm she had her hand on. She seemed surprised by the muscle there.

"That's exactly what Danika Connors said," Callum told her with a laugh. "I guess my reputation creates some unrealistic expectations."

"Danika who? Oh, them!" Lucy blinked. "Huh, I can remember their names now. I wonder why."

"Well, I *did* take you into a portal world long enough to purge any fae magic lingering around," Callum said. "So how are you feeling?"

“Absolutely rotten,” Lucy replied. “But that’s not your fault. It’s better than before when I had that *thing* in my head!”

“Do you want to lie down again? Or get something to eat?”

“Oh, I’m absolutely ravenous, big man,” Lucy said, snuffling into the tissues. “Why don’t you show me around?”

“To be honest, there’s not much here,” Callum said, escorting her out into the small common room. It was actually a little embarrassing. He’d had a much nicer house before, and was building a nice one for later, but for the moment he was stuck in an aging double-wide. “But this is only a temporary base. I’m still getting something better built.”

“Yeah?” Lucy looked around with interest as he showed her to the couch. “Glad you said that because this place is kind of a dump. I mean, clean yeah, but. You know.”

“It’s not my favorite place either,” Callum said, turning on the small electric stove to start some soup heating. Then he teleported a bottle of water from the fridge to the table in front of Lucy.

“Thank, big man,” she said. “So. Wow. I guess I’m a criminal or something? An outlaw, on the run? Dammit! All my stuff is gone!” Callum glanced over his shoulder sympathetically, seeing her face running through expressions on fast-forward.

“Yeah, it’s a bit of a shock, I know. Takes a while to sink in.” It’d been over a year since he’d gone through the same process himself, but he remembered how he’d felt like he was drowning. Hopefully he’d be able to save Lucy some of that, though he wasn’t sure where the line was between helping her and telling her what to do.

“I would *kill* for a soda,” Lucy said, sipping at the water.

“We can pick some up when we go shopping,” Callum told her. “I mean, we’re going to need to. I don’t have any clothes for you or anything.”

“Oof. Wow, way to drive it home, big man.” Lucy rubbed at her eyes again. “You gotta give me something to take my mind off of this. What was the plan after breaking me outta there?”

“To be honest, that depends on you.” Callum left the soup to heat and went to sit in the overstuffed armchair on the other side of the coffee table. “I didn’t want to assume you were going to join me in being, you know, a vigilante on the run or whatever I am.”

“Eh, what else could I do?” Lucy waved it away with what was, to Callum, a rather forced casualness. “Go into mundane IT? Supernatural IT was boring enough!”

“I think you’d do really well as a security consultant, but I’m not going to be arguing that you change your mind.”

“You’d better not, big man, or I’ll start to think you don’t want me around.”

“Heaven forbid you should ever think that.”

“So, spill,” Lucy said, leaning back in the battered old couch and studying him. “How is it that you do what you do?”

Callum didn’t bother warning her again about how knowing all this stuff meant she was stuck with him. While he was worried she was still too shaken to make the best choices, it would just be insulting if he kept poking her about it. So he just started talking.

Sort of.

He’d thought it’d be cathartic to finally share everything, but he found himself battling his instinct to keep things vague. To leave out details. To obscure and obfuscate what he could really do. It actually took a concerted effort of will to be specific.

“Wait a minute, big man,” Lucy said after a bit. “You’re saying that this spatial perception lets you see *everything* in a six hundred-ish yard radius?”

“I do,” he confirmed. “Or at least, I can. If I really want to I can pull it back, like squinting or closing my eyes, but at this point I’ve pretty much gotten used to using it.”

“So that means you can sense right through people’s clothes?” She persisted.

“...yes,” Callum said, not liking where this was going.

“So that means you can sense through *my* clothes?”

“...yes.”

“You could at least buy me a drink first, big man,” Lucy said, flashing a grin. Callum laughed, a knot of tension easing.

“I try not to actually peek,” he said. “It does take some focus to really make out details and I usually reserve that for setting up teleports or getting through wards.”

“Which you can do because you have that tiny thread thing.”

“Which I can do because I have that tiny thread thing.”

“Crazy. You sure you’re just a mage, big man?”

“I’m not even a good mage! I can do like four things? Portals, teleports, gravitykinesis, and the sensory thing. Oh, and the spatial compression which is not very useful, so five.”

“Good enough for me,” Lucy said. “So what’s the plan now?”

“For the moment? Take a good long rest. My new house still isn’t done, and I have a bunch of magic practice to do. Some enchanting too.” Callum ticked off items on his fingers. “I also gotta figure out how to deal with the people who abused you.”

“Oh.” Lucy shifted on the couch, rubbing at her temples. “Can’t we just hang out somewhere? I don’t really want to think about running up against them again.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m intending to go on a rampage right away. I have in the past, but I think a more measured response is necessary.” Callum shook his head. “But can you imagine that they’ll let us – well, me, mostly – exist at this point? Though I wouldn’t ask you to come along on any of these projects. I mean, you could basically be Moneypenny, right?”

“Hah!” Lucy shook her head. “Honestly most of what I could do was ‘cause I already had access to the GAR system. I mean, I was admin! Not sure how well I’d be able to infiltrate things without that. At the very least I’d be more likely to get caught.”

“What about that nifty phone redirect thing?”

“Oh! Yeah, that. Sure, I could probably make another one of those,” Lucy said, looking thoughtful.

“Things like that, I could *really* use your help with. Plus, figuring out a good way to get internet in the bunker. I mean, don’t want them to trace us.”

“Right, right.” Lucy seemed more animated as she thought about it. “Sure, you’ll want to set up all kinds of security and harden things up. Plus you’re going to want to make yourself all anonymous for orders and things.”

“All of that. Now, so far as I know the only supernatural connections I still have are basically to Alpha Chester, but I think we have to assume that at the very least we have state actors looking for us the normal way. We can’t be caught on camera and we’ll need to get fake glasses or putty for our noses when we go out, and of course avoid anywhere that checks ID. If we have to take risks like that, we do so far away from anywhere we’re actually staying.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re kinda paranoid,” Lucy said, squinting at him.

“It’s worked pretty well so far,” Callum told her.

“I hate that you have a point,” she said, though it was with a smile.

She watched with some amusement as he teleported a bowl in front of her and then poured the soup in via portal, rather than the normal, sane way. In truth he didn’t tend to use his magic for fine manipulation like that normally, but he was maybe showing off a little. He hadn’t had anyone he could show off *to*, before.

“Kinda rubbing it in there a bit,” she said, and he stopped. It hadn’t occurred to him before, but she probably was rather tired of mages showing her up.

“Sorry,” he told her. “I kinda got used to doing stuff like this but it’s probably pretty rude.”

“Nah, it’s fine. Usually mages show off to demonstrate they’re better than mundanes or duds, not to serve lunch,” Lucy assured him. “Just don’t start acting like you’re better than me and it’ll be fine.”

“You don’t have to worry about *that*,” he said. “I’m still just some guy from West Virginia.”

“I’ll hold you to that, big man,” Lucy said. Callum nodded in understanding.

“Anyway, I’m planning to just crash for a couple days, but I need to get in touch with Chester again soon. He helped me break into that facility.”

“Oh, man. I hadn’t even thought about Alpha Chester. Guess I can’t work for *them* anymore either. Except, wait. I mean. Are they going independent or something?” Lucy dipped her spoon into her soup and stirred it. “I mean, if they find out that he helped you spring me that’s not gonna go down well. I know they already know what I know.” Lucy made a face at her own tortured sentence. “You know what I mean.”

“I know,” Callum said with a laugh. “It wouldn’t surprise me if he’s aiming to do something major but it’s fortunately not really our problem.” Callum ‘ported himself a bottled water of his own, unscrewing the top and taking a sip. “In the near term I have a bunch of enchanting work to do for Chester. Not that I’m complaining; rescuing you was absolutely worth it,” he said, inclining his head to her.

“Thank you, big man,” Lucy said, coloring slightly. “Enchanting, though. I’ve never seen it up close. Think I can watch?”

“Of course, though there really isn’t all that much to see,” Callum told her. “Maybe you’ll have ideas for electronic integration and stuff. I’m sure it can be done but it’s not really my specialty.”

“Man, I’ve been jonesing for a look at proper enchanting stuff. The only thing I’ve ever dealt with is those stupid dongles, and that’s just a black box you replace.”

“Well you can sit in when I do stuff. Though I have to admit, a lot of it I just design in CAD and send off to a metal shop to run through CNC.” Lucy blinked at him, then threw back her head and laughed.

“Ohh, I wish I could see the faces of the old farts in the Guild of Enchanting if they heard that. Though, I bet that BSE does something like that. I’ve heard that some of their new stuff is really good.” Lucy looked thoughtful. “Wish I’d checked on that before, well, you know.”

“Yeah,” he said. Callum was surprised by how easy it was to talk to her in person. It wasn’t always true that people were the same in the flesh, as he’d found out over years of being a consultant. Lucy was just as vivacious in person as she was on the phone though, even if he was sure that part of it was just bravado.

Despite how exhausted he was he stayed up to keep chatting with Lucy, and eventually they made a run to the store. She didn’t even have a change of clothes, and he could tell she hated having to borrow his money to get herself a proper selection. There was probably no way to drain her old bank accounts, sadly.

Eventually he did have to crash, and he left her to play around with his laptop while he got some actual sleep. The trailer was all of five hundred square feet with a single bedroom, and he’d have to break out the foldaway in the sofa, but he really didn’t mind. While he’d been living alone for long enough that he was used to it, there were some benefits to having someone else around.

If nothing else it’d force him to keep up-to-date on doing the dishes.

“He wrecked Garrison Two, he bypassed two Archmages and Grand Magus Taisen, and he pulled Lucy out of there in less than a minute.” Chester ticked the items off on his fingers. “All that from a little coin.” According to his subordinate, the portal anchor had been smuggled in by simply sticking it to a teleportation token, and nobody had given it a second look.

“Are we sure we want to keep dealing with him?” Lisa asked, offering him a chocolate chip cookie, fresh from the oven. “That’s a threat we can’t possibly mitigate on our side. That’s also maybe more than the BSE had bargained for. If they can’t come down on him, they’ll come down on us.”

"I know," Chester said, taking the cookie and biting down. He took a moment to savor the taste before continuing. "At the same time, it won't just be us. The vamps will be getting restive, the fae enclaves are *already* agitating. Besides, I don't think Mister Wells will be a threat as long as we stay in contact with him."

"What exactly is our goal, then?" Lisa flopped into his lap, leaning back against him. "If we try to steer him I'm pretty sure it'll backfire."

"Ride more than steer, I think. It's time to consider whether we want to play with GAR at all," Chester said, and Lisa tilted her head back to look up at him.

"Really?" She asked, just one word.

"We needed GAR back at the beginning, when we had to deal with the depredations of fae and vampire and human alike. When we needed them to hide. Now?" He shook his head. "The symbiotes have learned to project glamours a lot earlier than before. Most kids can do it before grade school."

"They aren't doing a good job of protecting us, either," Lisa agreed, somewhat reluctantly. "But do we actually have the *ability* to separate from GAR?"

"No," Chester said. "Not yet. Not when they can bring all their Archmages to bear. Or really, a few specific ones. But there's a lot we can do without outright declaring independence."

Lisa took her own cookie from the tray and considered it. She was basically the entire pack's godmother. Not grandmother, *never* grandmother, but sometimes Nana. The internal affairs were her responsibility, helping arrange marriages and the pack's disposition. She knew the temperament and attitude of Chester's shifters better than he did.

"I think most won't particularly care. Oh, a lot of them will be somewhat uncomfortable with what it might take to fend off GAR, but who actually likes dealing with those pencil-pushers? Of course anyone who's had to deal with vamps will support it, too."

Chester nodded. The pack was not a democracy; the decision was his and his alone. There would always be people who disagreed, but they were out of luck. The welfare of the pack as a whole was his worry, and not just in the near term. What worked for the moment might not in twenty, fifty, or a hundred years.

He was pretty sure that GAR's days were numbered. They'd been around in one form or another since the sixteenth century, which was before his time, but he knew back then things had been a lot harder. Magic less understood, supernaturals more exposed to the mundane world, the portal worlds less tamed and explored. Shifter symbiotes

hadn't even learned how to project glamour. Maybe back then the way GAR worked had made sense, but he was certain they no longer needed it.

Not that Chester represented every shifter in the world. He didn't even represent every shifter in *America*, though at last count something close to two-thirds of all US shifters were in his pack. But that was fine, the rest could stay in thrall to a dying organization if they wanted.

The trick was knowing when and where to push. Fortunately, Chester had an insider's view. There were some mages – even a few cadet Houses – that were on good terms with Chester, which helped. The trump card was Wells himself, who was certainly going to be making further waves, sooner or later. Waves that Chester would be able to see beforehand.

So long as Wells kept their agreement.

Archmage Harold Hargrave watched his granddaughter reunite with his son and daughter-in-law with a smile, but inwardly he was disturbed. Wells hadn't beaten them, not hardly. His spellforms were weak and poorly constructed, and while he was quick it was obvious they weren't being formed by either focus or reflex.

Yet Wells *had* bested them. He'd simply evaded, been able to breeze through wards and walls like they weren't there, and hurl mundane lava in quantities not seen outside an active volcano. Which, apparently, was exactly how he'd managed it if Duvall was to be believed.

Something that Hargrave wasn't sure about anymore. Wells was just one spatial mage, not even an Archmage, so what had Duvall been keeping from them? What could she field, with her apprentices and her ubiquitous transportation system? She'd always been averse to combat, true, but so was Wells. That much was obvious.

When it came to combat, range was king, but mobility was the crown prince. Wells had sidestepped them through pure maneuvering, formless in approach. It reminded him of certain passages from Sun Tzu, though Hargrave was more a fan of Clausewitz, himself.

Wells had demonstrated the sort of insight that was hard to square with simply releasing Gayle back to Wizzy, of all people. He could have secured at the very least a pledge of neutrality, or passed along a specific message with Gayle. Yet he had done none of that. True, Gayle was young and impressionable and he knew that her version of events would miss some subtleties, but there didn't seem to be anything to it.

Wizzy's involvement was itself suspicious. He'd made no secret of his disapproval of GAR on principle, or of his complete lack of interest in doing anything about it. The Archmage was a self-proclaimed watcher and an elder, someone who could give advice but did not change things. Which was contradictory and bizarre, because advice could have an *enormous* effect, depending on to whom it was given.

He hadn't really done much of anything for the past few hundred years, aside from pitching in on a few dire threats in the portal worlds. At least, that was what Hargrave had thought. Now he wasn't so certain. There was no possible way that Wizzy had met up with Wells by accident — though he was not at all surprised the Archmage had made no attempt to bring him in.

The difference between actively sheltering a fugitive and aiding them by being indifferent to their presence was sophistry at best. Hargrave wasn't sure he actually believed that Wizzy was genuinely working to undermine GAR, but he was choosing not to help. At least the man didn't have a full House to back his agenda, whatever it was. It didn't seem likely he was working with Duvall, but there was no telling what strange allies might appear these days.

"House meeting in three hours," Harold said. He got a nod of acknowledgement from his son and drifted out, heading to his own room. While he was not a political creature by inclination, he did have friends and friendly enemies among the other Houses. They'd have to be informed about what had just happened.

"Frankly, I don't think Duvall can be trusted," he said to a gathering three hours later. The eldest of House Hargrave itself, all its cadet Houses, and several of their allies were all there, seated in the enormous library within the Hargrave compound. "She's been making lots of noise about wanting to get her hands on Wells, but she did absolutely *nothing* when he showed up. They're both spatial mages, so there's some natural affinity there."

"Do you think that Duvall is making some kind of play through Wells?" Lord Elroe asked doubtfully.

"It's possible, though I don't see how. It seems more likely that Wells is one of hers gone rogue. Or rather, gone heretic." Harold grimaced. "Duvall's insisted that spatial magic is peaceful for centuries, and while we've used it for logistical movement we've never seen it used the way Wells has. Is he a heretic merely because he's revealed what spatial mages could do all this time?"

It was a discomfiting idea. Spatial mages were odd and different; the usual spellforms did nothing, and nobody else got any value from the portal and teleport frameworks.

But it had been assumed they followed most of the *other* rules of magic. Perhaps falsely.

“So, what, are we setting ourselves against House Duvall?” The question came from the head of one of the cadet branches, Lord Turner. “That seems to be a rather risky move.”

“Possibly, but consider what Wells did by himself. Duvall has herself and ten? I think ten. Ten apprentices, and we *all* have anchors in our homes. That is a threat that we *cannot* ignore. At the very least, it demands transparency and investigation. What, exactly, have we been putting all over the world – and in the portal worlds! – this whole time?”

By the time he finished his brief pitch, people were nodding. Many of them were old enough to remember the various House conflicts, the open bloodshed and clashes of spells in the streets. GAR had put most of that behind them, but not all of it. When people lived as long as mages did, old grudges never really died.

“Another thing that might affect some of you is that I do not plan on letting either House Fane or the BSE lay claim to Gayle. She’s not just my granddaughter, she’s an invaluable strategic resource that we can’t afford to lose.” Harold surveyed the room. “I don’t trust Fane, I don’t trust Duvall, and since neither Taisen nor I could actually neutralize Wells, there’s no way that GAR or the BSE can keep her safe.”

“House Fane is not going to like that,” Lord Elroe noted.

“I imagine not. Taisen is not likely to push for himself, but he hasn’t had full control of BSE ever since they shoved the extra policing in.” Harold waved it away. “The point is, neither GAR nor the BSE can guarantee safety from Wells, so we have to protect ourselves. I advise you to be very choosy about where the more vulnerable members of our Houses are posted.”

“Are you actually scared of Wells?” Grand Magus Abbot asked, to a withering glare by Harold.

“No. He’s no threat to me, and he’s no threat even to the people of this House. But he is a threat to lesser mages that someone like me can’t mitigate. He’s a threat to the infrastructure, everything we rely on, because there is pragmatically nothing we can do to stop him from destroying any enchantment or building he wants to. *That* is the issue. Along with the chaos in the *rest* of the Houses. Don’t forget we have a *lot* of people unhappy with us because of the GAR searches.”

“The Silent War all over again,” someone muttered. Harold didn’t catch who, but he nodded agreement.

“Some might see this as an opportunity to strike, especially if GAR decides to look the other way when it comes to our Houses.” He eyed them again, but nobody had the temerity to suggest that he let them steal Gayle away again. “There are certain questions about GAR that need to be resolved, and now is the best time to do it. They’re busy with Wells and shifters and fae, so they’ll be more amenable to leverage.”

It wasn’t as simple as that, of course. There were ancient defensive protocols to dredge up, new wards to set around their transport disks despite Wells’ ability to breeze past wards at will, and lists of personnel to redeploy. They weren’t going to drop out of GAR entirely or anything similarly drastic, so it was more in the nature of tightening up their oversight. Clarifying lines of communication and of hierarchy.

An organization that was unsteady was far different than one in control. There were dozens of mages operating entirely in the dark, neither reporting to nor getting instructions from the House they owed fealty to. A situation that could not be allowed to continue.

The audit didn’t take long in the end. Though Harold himself didn’t bother with the minutiae of House Hargrave, they had some *excellent* recordkeepers and the cadet houses took after their parent. The militant houses tended to be well-kept, since logistics was the backbone of any operation.

“We’ll reconvene soon,” Harold said, when the work was done. “It won’t be long before someone makes a move.”