

## Chapter 4-4 – Time

They had their honeymoon in the same cottage that they'd vacationed at once before, on the island of Barbados. Returning to the same place might have been unwise, but Lucy wanted to and Callum did his best to tamp down his suspicions. It wasn't likely anyone would ambush them and the only people who had even known they had ever been on an island were the Connors. Which was such a tenuous connection there was no reasonable way anyone would be able to trace them.

Being unplugged from what was going on and just spending time with Lucy left Callum unburdened for once, but they couldn't just hang out on the beach forever. Time continued on regardless and obligations piled up, so when they got back they had plenty to dig into. Even if they were relatively flush with cash, they needed something other than each other to occupy their time and Callum was very aware of the need to build his skills.

"I feel like I'm back in college," Callum muttered, sitting at the table on the porch as he took notes from one of the books that the Guild of Enchanting had supplied. "Having to do homework and everything."

"You're the one that asked for it, big man," Lucy said, sitting across from him with a new, oversized laptop. "But yeah I know how you feel. My stuff is pretty obtuse, too."

"CAD's the closest I ever got to programming," Callum told her, putting his notes aside for the moment. "I guess there's always new stuff to learn?"

"Oh yeah, nobody's an expert at everything. Heck I'm not even a *good* programmer, I just know some tricks and where to look for solutions. But rocket science is a *really* rough subject."

"Rocket science?" Callum blinked.

"You didn't think I'd forgotten about the moon nexus, did you?" Lucy flashed him a brilliant smile. "If we're going to do that I gotta figure out how to solve a bunch of issues, so I've got homework, too."

"I can't wait to see what you come up with," Callum said. He actually *had* forgotten about the moon nexus, mostly because he'd written it off as being just a flight of fancy, but as far as security went it was hard to beat a vacuum a quarter-million miles away. If it worked.

Most of Callum's work was more grounded and of more immediate import. He had a weekly video chat with Morgan, the Guild of Enchanting tutor. He was a grandfatherly-looking man, with a white beard and laugh lines around his eyes and a heavy Italian accent. Fortunately for them both, he didn't seem offended by teaching the very basics

to a grown man, though there was some difficulty since they couldn't observe each other's spellwork directly.

Nor did Callum mention the scale of his threads, and how he had to make tubes to get anywhere near the consistency of a normal mage's native vis. As useful and helpful as the Guild was being, they were not exactly his friend. Just a customer, and he'd learned long ago not to reveal all his cards to customers.

They clearly thought the same way, because they didn't reveal *all* their secrets to him. The materials they sent to him for enchanting on the scriber were mostly some kind of alloy, with only the bisected cores being pure bane material. There was even an attempt to obfuscate the enchantments he was making. The blank that they supplied to the scriber had a number of useless pieces to the enchantment, where the blank told the scriber not to insert vis. Something Callum wouldn't have noticed without his passive senses.

He figured that was the way that they normally outsourced stuff, assuming they tended to outsource at all. The vis input for the machine was something that didn't need to be right next to the scriber, considering they had some way to make it flow like water or electricity. It wasn't difficult work; in fact, the scriber made it quick and easy to enchant stuff, though more boring. He would have used it himself for his own enchantments but for the fact that his were far more compact. The scriber just didn't go that small.

"I actually have something to show you guys," Callum said, once he was more certain of where the Guild stood. It was very firmly a business, which had certain good points and certain bad points. "These designs were used by House Fane. The devices themselves no longer exist, and I have no idea what they did." He gave Lucy the nod, and she sent the files over to the tablet on the other end.

"Oh?" Morgan was only moderately proficient at manipulating the tablet, but he opened up the files and started looking at the renders.

"It might be something you made for him, but considering where it was, maybe not. I trust that you can figure out what it does and whether it is something that ought to be available at all." Callum was generally a big believer in the idea that it was people who were the problem, not tools, but sometimes things were purpose-built to be awful. Which seemed like something Fane would do.

"We will certainly look into it," Morgan promised.

While Callum was quite busy, The Ghost did not seem to be in demand. After he had very thoroughly stomped on the vampire nests, nobody else seemed to be poking their heads out, at least not enough to require Callum's special attention. Lucy monitored the GAR network and Chester had his own contacts, but everything was relatively quiet.

Not that he wasn't tempted on occasion to go knock heads, since vampires and a number of fae were antithetical to human life, but people had gotten smart. While he could track down large fae enclaves or obvious vampire nests, he didn't automatically know where supernaturals were. After the hit on the vampire nests a lot of supernaturals had decentralized, so if he wanted to find them he'd have to comb a huge swath of countryside.

Then there were the numbers. With upwards of ten thousand vampires on Earth, from GAR records, it would take him thirty years to get them all if he killed one a day. That wasn't the kind of thing he could keep up for thirty *days*, let alone thirty years.

It felt like a little bit of a weak excuse, but Callum was not some indomitable nemesis. He had human limits and was even less inclined to go and take risks when he was achieving some small measure of security and safety with Lucy in their little house. The glamours had even worked in warding off a few thuggish types who had come by, forcing a group of men in a truck to circle aimlessly before going past the front of a property they could suddenly no longer perceive. He couldn't glamour the entire hundred acres, but he'd made sure to cover the road access.

"For some reason that makes me feel more uncomfortable than most of the supernatural stuff," Lucy said, watching the battered pickup drive off through a drone feed. She had wired the property with surveillance to some extent, but setting up a full hundred acres was more than they could manage, so it was mostly focused around the road access, such as it was, and the house. The road itself was just dirt, and would get reclaimed by nature eventually, but for the moment Callum had just put a couple trees across it.

"I think I'm affecting you," Callum said mildly. "But yes, when someone comes after where you live it's a very different thing." They would have to set up some kind of war room, for when they needed to deal with those kinds of things. And they would have to deal with them.

"I need to get back to practicing shooting," Lucy muttered. "Just in case they come by again."

"That's the spirit," Callum encouraged her, and she wrinkled her nose at him, which just provoked a kiss. "We'll go shooting this afternoon," he said. "Glad you have that glamour on remote control."

"Yeah," she said. "Gonna keep that on me, too." Lucy tapped her pocket where she had the little encrypted wifi device that activated the tile setup in the basement. They'd even added a second emergency teleport, one over to Chester's house. The only thing better than one emergency hideout was two emergency hideouts. "I think I *am* getting infected with paranoia. But I can't say you've really been wrong about it too much."

“Better safe than sorry,” Callum agreed. “I’m almost worried it’s been *too* quiet.”

\*\*\*

Alpha Chester had attended quite a few weddings in his time. Everyone in his pack, of course, which added up to significant numbers after nearly two hundred years. Then there were pack friends, some of which knew who and what he was, and some of which just thought he was a well-to-do rancher. He never expected to be going to Lucy’s wedding, considering her black sheep sort of status and her general disconnect with her peers.

He *especially* wouldn’t have expected a wedding to the most notorious man in the supernatural world.

It was a little sad that his pack were essentially the only guests. Wells didn’t have any friends or family, though inviting them would have been an issue to begin with, and Lucy had burned all her bridges with GAR and mages. Though Chester suspected that they were both happy enough with something small rather than a grand ceremony.

Wells seemed fairly happy for once, which considering the stress that rolled off him essentially every time Chester had encountered the man was quite the feat. He was still twitchier than he probably should have been, but seemed to have relaxed enough that he didn’t reek of anxiety to shifter senses. Chester approved. If there was one day a man had the right to not fear, it was his wedding day.

After that, though, Chester mostly put the man out of his mind. The Ghost was important to the alliance Chester was trying to cement, but only in a distant way. The threat, the bogeyman, the symbol. The man himself was best handled carefully and at a distance, away from any real political discussion.

“We need more mana infusion for our glamour tokens,” Ferrochar said, sitting across from Chester in an upscale restaurant in Kansas City. “There are enough of us that don’t have native glamours in Miami that things are getting a little strained, especially with the GAR office closed.”

“The Guild of Enchanting is already charging us through the nose,” Chester sighed, cutting into the double-sized steak he’d ordered. “But we’ll ask. I’ll also see what our black market enchanter has to say. I don’t know if he’s gotten that far, but I suspect he’d be fine undercutting the Guild on that score.”

“Good,” Ferrochar said. “The teleportation pad has been quite useful, even if it is less polished than what the mages use.”

It was the fourth or fifth meeting, and that was just with Ferrochar. The fae king was the largest contributor to Chester's American Alliance, but not the only one, and there were always problems that needed dealing with. Most of them were petty enough, but there were some lurking feuds that needed to be buried. Along with certain troublemakers.

He hadn't bothered Wells for that. In fact, he wasn't sure that Wells would have even agreed with what Chester had done, but since it was between supernaturals it also wasn't something he would have involved himself in. But it wasn't anything difficult, and it was good to remind alliance members that he had teeth of his own. Outsourcing everything to Wells, even if he was amenable, would be a bad idea.

The largest development out of the past few months was actually some discreet communications from the Hargrave-Taisen alliance. They hadn't bothered naming themselves, just remaining aligned Houses, but they had very definitely broken from GAR. The two Archmages were terrifying enough that nobody considered overt action against them, especially with Fane out of the picture.

Actually Chester had somewhat more sympathy with GAR, dealing as he was with the members of his own agreement. Even if it was only a fairly loose coalition, he was spending more time than he would have liked holding it together. The lack of mages really did put a logistical strain on his resource, too, since they were the only ones that could produce consistent enchantments, so he would be glad to get on better terms with the breakaway Houses.

GAR itself had sent a few diplomatic protests but Chester hadn't encountered any real opposition from them. He thought it likely the lack of response was due to most mage Houses not even being in America. So long as the supernatural-heavy cities stayed signed on to GAR, Chester's independence didn't make a huge difference. He was sure there were a lot of mages and vampires who were sorely missing their janitors and groundskeepers, but that shortage had begun when GAR shut down the transporters.

Despite all the political annoyances, things were relatively quiet. Removing Ravaeb and Lavigne had immensely simplified Chester's defenses, and exiting GAR had helped his finances. While he complained of the Guild of Enchanting's price-gouging, it was still better than the fees and duties that GAR had demanded. Mundane taxes were actually more of an impact, especially as more of his people shifted from being employed by mages to running their own businesses.

"We're going to have to start involving ourselves in local politics," Chester mused to Ferrochar. "Otherwise we're going to end up butting heads with mundanes and needing to institute our own version of BSE. I don't know about you but I'd rather not reproduce all of GAR's nonsense."

“A fae mayor, can you imagine?” Ferrochar replied, smiling faintly. “It’s somewhat challenging to engage them on their own terms, without being able to use our gifts properly.”

“Only somewhat?” Chester raised his eyebrows.

“Well. They are still mundanes. Even the best among them has only a few decades of experience.” Ferrochar waved it away. “I am not so concerned. In Miami I am a fixture. What I obtained during that night of mischief is enough to keep a handle on the supernaturals in Miami that aren’t part of my court. Save perhaps the actual GAR office, but that’s barely staffed these days.”

“I haven’t much heard from GAR for a while,” Chester remarked. “I’m kind of surprised.” He paused as the waitress delivered another bottle of beer for him, and poured it into his glass. “Though I’m not complaining. Pursuing a war with mages is not an enticing proposition.”

“It is not.” Ferrochar lifted a bite of his own steak to his mouth. Unlike some of his counterparts, Ferrochar didn’t eat it as rare as possible. “Doubly so because there may be other troubles on the horizon. There have been some certain signs of things moving in from Faerie, either at the behest of the current version of GAR or because the current GAR can’t stop them.”

“I don’t like to hear that,” Chester said darkly. The fae were ultimately far more dangerous than mages or vampires, who had straightforward power. It was easy to determine what he needed to do if he wanted to deal with them, but fae might do anything and that was guard to prepare against. “I have noticed there are more vampires coming in, too. Ones that are less understanding of the state of local politics. So far there’s only been a little shoving on the edges of my territory but I suspect it’ll escalate sooner rather than later.”

“That *is* something The Ghost would get involved with, no?” Ferrochar asked.

“Possibly.” Chester preferred not to speculate on Wells’ motives to others, especially not since he was now a married man. There was a fair bit of difference between someone who was on their own and someone who had settled in with a partner. Wells would be both more dangerous, and less.

When he returned to his own home he sent out the word to keep an eye out for any unknown fae. For his own part, he started drafting a missive to King Jissarrell. That particular Fae didn’t really engage with the world the way other supernaturals did, keeping to his own enclave. But he was on Chester’s border, and Ferrochar had hinted in conversation that Jissarrell might be open to collaboration.

Chester didn't expect quick movement on that front. If anything, the speed with which the American Alliance had come together, fragile though it might be, was surprising. Even if months later he was still hammering out details and having to bribe, threaten, cajole, and flatter people to get them to agree to the very simple rules the Alliance had established.

As it rolled into spring he had the sense that everyone was catching their breaths and reassessing the new order. Nobody was willing to make major moves. Except for him, of course, as he sounded out people on the topic of GAR versus his Alliance.

The surprise that threw him the most came in late May, when Wells – both of the Wells, now that they were married – came for one of their visits. They came on occasion, maybe once every couple weeks – mostly for Lucy's benefit, Chester thought, but Wells had thawed at least a little. Chester tried to make sure that the Langleys came by whenever possible, as Callum was the most relaxed with them. Not that he objected to seeing his grand-niece more often.

He could smell it after the two of them stepped through the portal Wells used. Shifter senses were sharp enough that he could tell a lot more than most people would be comfortable with about a person's health and emotions. Normally nobody mentioned it, for a number of obvious reasons, but he could hardly turn off his awareness. So he was aware within seconds that Lucy was with child. So was Lisa.

"Why, congratulations!" She said, beaming and stepping forward to give Lucy a hug. Callum looked surprised, though not confused. So at least Lisa wasn't telling the couple anything they didn't know. "The nose knows," she added at Callum's look, tapping her own.

"Hey, you ruined our announcement," Lucy said with a pout. "We were all set to surprise you. Well, I was anyway."

"You never had a chance," Lisa told her, still gleeful.

Sometime later they were all seated in the living room, Lucy and Callum on one couch, Chester and Lisa on another, and a little tray with chocolates and brandy on the table between them. Not that either Lucy or Lisa were partaking in the alcohol. Neither of them really liked it all that much and Lucy of course couldn't indulge at the moment anyway.

"It's not just a visit for the announcement," Callum said at length, like the words were being dragged out of him. He clearly wasn't overjoyed about what he was saying, even if he was not at all unhappy about Lucy's condition. "But there are complications. Ignoring people who would want to use a child against me; the kid might be a mage. If he's a mage, he's going to need actual schooling, actual training, but not GAR. Even if he's not,

he's going to need other kids to play with. We're out in the middle of nowhere which is fine for the two of us but not for the three of us."

Chester nodded. He didn't envy Callum the issue. Shifters had it rough enough, where they needed to go back to the Deep Wilds during pregnancy to ensure the symbiote could cross over to the child. He would have to get Callum to create a teleportation platform linking there soon enough, since GAR controlled the actual portal. But at least there was a community to help raise new shifters. Mages only had the Houses, and those were fairly exclusive.

"You are, of course, welcome here," he said. "There's only so much we can offer, though. We're shifters, so we don't have too much insight into how to raise a mage."

"Neither do I," Callum sighed. "What about that mage you put me in contact with before? Harry?" It took Chester a moment to place the name, but he shook his head.

"Ah, you mean Jasper. It's not really necessary to hide his name anymore. Jasper might have some insights but I honestly would not trust the man with a child. He also doesn't have any real power anymore – which is a tragic story – but I suspect would be less than ideal for the purpose." Callum nodded, not looking too surprised.

"We are in tentative contact with the breakaway Houses, though," Chester offered. "As well as Archmage Wizzy. Though I'm surprised you didn't ask your Guild of Enchanting contact."

"That's business. This is personal," Callum said.

"They're kind of cold," Lucy added. "I want people who are, you know, actually human. Like you guys."

"We're shifters," Lisa said with some amusement.

"You know what I mean," Lucy said with a pout.

"We do," Chester said with a chuckle. "I don't have a much better opinion of most mages than you do, I expect."

"Putting us in touch with Wizzy and the other mages would be helpful," Callum said, nudging the conversation back on track. "There's also — well." He pursed his lips. "I don't actually *know* many people anymore. So as Lucy's friends, we were wondering if you would be willing to be the godparents."

"Of course!" Lisa said before Chester even had time to consider it. Not that he would have chosen any differently. Callum and Lucy weren't part of the pack, but their



contributions had been invaluable. Besides, they didn't really have anyone else. *Maybe* the Langleys, but Lucy didn't know them as well as she knew Chester's immediate family.

"We would be honored," Chester added instead. "And I'll send out messages today, to see who is willing to discuss things with you."

"Thank you," Callum said.

Chester was happy for them, but part of him couldn't help being worried. A man that lived for himself was dangerous enough, but a man who had a family to defend could be downright apocalyptic. He knew that he'd move heaven and earth for any of his kids or grandkids, and with what Callum could already do, there was no telling where the man's limits were.

\*\*\*

"You're reinstating the teleports?" Magus Mavros, head of Archmage Affairs, looked hopeful. Which was better than the pathetic hangdog attitude he'd been carrying around, but Archmage Duvall didn't have much sympathy for him either way. He at least didn't clash with the decor of her front room, in a cool blue suit and a hat properly placed on the rack.

"You should learn to listen," she told him bluntly. "There are caveats. Archmages won't travel unless they can verify both ends, so we're switching to portals. That will require an overhaul of huge portions of the system. For everything else, I've been working with the Guild of Enchantment on additional security precautions to prevent the spatial cores from being changed."

It had been a long slog. Ways to register when the core was removed — or when it was added. Methods to authenticate it was in fact the same core that was supposed to be there. Extra readouts for the operators to check that everything was functioning as it should. Most of it was just extra useless cruft, but it made people *feel* more secure — which was the idea.

She had let GAR suffer with its limited transportation system long enough. While *she* could go for years without personally suffering much of a side effect from the logistical pinch, other people were crying very loudly about it. About their pocketbook — or personal life. Especially the other supernaturals who didn't have flight foci to easily get from place to place.

"It's still an improvement over *no* transport," Mavros said. "I'll be happy to give people the news."

“The increase in infrastructure means that the fees will be higher,” Duvall warned. “The Houses may not thank you.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Mavros demurred. “House Corrilon and House Laurent have been very generous in supplying the needs of GAR ever since the Hargrave secession.” Duvall narrowed her eyes at that — she knew those Houses were simply the most visible of the new factions that had arisen. The old and distinguished ones that stayed in Faerie or the Night Lands and had mostly seemed to ignore Earth itself. She’d done a lot of work for them over the years, and could probably even name them — even if she hadn’t met them.

For the most part House Duvall was its own faction entirely. Her interests mostly ran toward keeping her House stable and secure, and ensuring that she had control over spatial magic — for exactly the reasons that Wells had shown. It could be quite dangerous if it were misused — when it *should* have been a safe and secure magical aspect.

“Very well,” she said at last. “If GAR will sign off on the costs, the Guild of Enchantment and House Duvall will begin installing the new enchantments.”

It seemed too easy — even mages disliked spending money. But perhaps she had simply underestimated how much the lack of ready transportation had pinched important people. There were allied Houses that were in entirely different portal worlds, so if they had neglected to secure very expensive private teleportation enchantments, they’d be *quite* inconvenienced.

She watched Mavros go from the window of the front room, passing out through the wards and flying back down the trunk of the enormous tree. Then she turned to call her apprentices. They had work to do, and she had orders to fulfill from various Houses who needed even more room in their various portal worlds. Under the circumstances she had put spatial stabilization on hold, but as things calmed down it would probably be safe to resume.

There was one wrinkle in any plans for spatial movement, and that was that heretic Wells. She had no idea what he was up to. Though he’d vanished for months on end before, and all the manpower in GAR hadn’t been able to dig him up. But if he was hiding in a hole it’d take a fae with exactly the right resources, talent, and reason to find him — in other words, impossible.

Duvall was under no illusions that she’d seen or heard the last of Wells. Though where he’d pop up she had no idea. At least the Guild of Enchanting hadn’t found any more of his awful teleportation devices. It was going to be harder to police the GAR breakways,

but everyone needed the Guild of Enchanting's services. Hopefully if he showed his face again, they would be able to deal with him somehow.

\*\*\*

"What the hell is going on?"

Gayle winced at Magus Mercator's language, glancing sideways at him for a moment while she attended to his subordinate. She did most of her work in Taisen's clinic, which looked a lot like the mundane hospitals she'd gone to see. Clean, bright, blue and white, with staff that weren't healing mages to assist her. So far she was still the primary healer, since most were still with GAR or the remains of House Fane, but Taisen had scrounged up a few lesser healer mages to help.

She had to agree with the question, because Magus Grunwald was the fifth mage in as many days that she'd needed to help regenerate a limb. Which meant there was something that was powerful enough to breach a mage's shield, but not powerful enough to kill instantly. It almost *had* to be on purpose; most injuries mages sustained were burns, frostbite, and crush impact. The last usually came from being swatted into the ground when their shields *didn't* give under impact.

"We're not sure, sir," Grunwald said. "I never saw what did this." He gestured with one hand at the stump of his other arm. It was grown out to the elbow now, something that Gayle was doing in stages to reduce the strain on his system. One of the things that mundane studies of bodies had helped her understand. Healing magic wasn't medicine, but biology still applied and some of the problems that arose did translate.

Gayle was dealing with injuries on a daily basis, but that was exactly what she wanted. Ever since they'd left GAR there had been no single mention of her using negative healing, no demands for useless and baseless practice, nothing but her own investigation into the healing arts. It was exactly the sort of freedom she never knew she wanted, and it was made even better by a lack of restriction on focuses. She could make a proper shield and had a real weapon, which she felt a need for after dealing with Wells.

At the same time, there were some issues. Shortages and logistics problems. The House was not easily accessible now that the teleportation network was down – and they didn't trust it anyway, since it linked up to GAR – so ferrying in food and goods from mundane areas had been somewhat of a scramble. She was pretty sure that was why her father was talking with the new American Alliance, just to get the personnel needed to keep things running.

"Right, well, you rest here. I'll go talk to Archmage Taisen," Mercator sighed. "There's *something* going on in India but it's hard to find what."

Gayle considered it while she passed healing vis through Grunwald's arm stump, her technique far more focused than it had been before she started looking at mundane medical knowledge. She only knew that House Taisen, what had formerly been part of the BSE and the Defensores Mundi before that, was looking for things that GAR might have missed.

They were soldiers, used to dealing with the portal worlds, not hunting among mundanes for something hidden. Taisen was stretched thin, manning the portal world garrisons *and* trying to account for Earth's safety. They would probably be able to figure it out eventually, but Gayle already had too many mages in convalescence.

Once she was finished with the day's session she left the clinic of Garrison Seven and walked through the windowless halls to Taisen's office. Something he barely used, actually, but at least he had a secretary there to make sure people could find the man. Fortunately for her, he was actually in, and he set aside some large maps when the secretary let her through. The room itself was completely bare besides the desk, two chairs, and one stack of documents. There wasn't even anything on the walls.

"What can I do for you?" Taisen asked, focusing his full attention on her. She appreciated that he took her seriously. Some of the other mages didn't, seeing her as too young to really know anything.

"Well, I had a thought, with all those mages coming in injured."

"Yes." Taisen looked grim. "I've gone to look myself but whatever it is has enough sense not to attack an Archmage."

"Well, we know someone who is really sneaky, right? Mister Wells? Wouldn't he be interested in helping with a threat too?" She felt almost embarrassed suggesting it, but she doubted anyone else understood that the man wasn't some murderous loose cannon. He didn't have anything against supernaturals as such, it was more the way GAR handled things. Taisen looked startled, then thoughtful.

"That's an interesting proposition," Taisen said. "I admit he's demonstrated certain abilities that even I can't quite duplicate. Though I have doubts he would be interested in working with us, especially considering his former run-ins with the BSE."

"Maybe not, but we could ask. When I talked to him, he told me that what he cared about was protecting mundanes from supernaturals. And this would certainly count, right? He's not going to be going after *our* people if we're protecting Earth." Gayle worried for a moment that she'd come on too strong — she hadn't talked to Wells *that* much. Though the little he had said really had stuck with her.

“Ask how?” Taisen raised his eyebrows at her. “He’s called The Ghost for a reason. So far nobody has come within a hundred miles of finding him when he didn’t want to be found.”

“House Hargrave is talking to the American Alliance,” Gayle explained. “And it’s openly known that they have The Ghost’s backing. Or at least blessing.”

“Then do so,” Taisen said, nodding. “I have nothing particular against the man, and *if* he can be trusted and *if* can do the job, I would be happy to have his help.”