

Chapter 3-12 – Evidence

Constance Earl was not happy. Normally her job was straightforward enough, though it took a lot of attention to detail. Managing the interactions between the mundane world and the real one took a bit of finesse, and nobody really appreciated the light touch it took to keep the work to a minimum.

She sat at her desk, but she wasn't working, she was thinking. There were papers stacked on the broad expanse of dark, polished wood, but she paid them far less mind than the needlepoint she'd taken from the basket she kept under the window behind her. It was something she'd learned as a girl and she still felt it helped keep her fingers busy while her mind worked. Plus she could work out her frustrations by stabbing something with a needle. Frustrations like how people did not appreciate the work she did.

Nobody was afraid of mundanes, but the sheer amount of effort it took to clean up after the more injudicious members of the supernatural community could very quickly spiral out of control. One incident led to another, mundanes sent in more personnel and became more suspicious, more mages or even fae or vampires were required to suppress it, and it could very quickly become an enormous mess. Like the incident with the BSE team chasing Wells, not even that long ago.

The current upheaval was making things a lot more difficult. Not only had her two best sources of additional resources been flat-out *killed*, but GAR and BSE had curtailed the number of people she could send to deal with things. Not to mention that the flow into her personal and House coffers was at its lowest ebb in decades.

That thought made her accidentally bend her needle in annoyance and she made a face as she got out a new one and threaded it. She was making a decoration for her grand-niece's room, so maybe it wasn't completely appropriate to work on it while she was annoyed, but she wanted to get it done on time. Which she wouldn't if she kept destroying needles out of personal pique.

Not only was her income suffering, but her own House had limited the number of people she could call on. There had been some clashes between House estates over in Faerie, and even a few disappearances in the Deep Wilds and Nightlands — nobody she knew personally, but it was enough to make her House draw up their defenses. Nor was her House the only one, leaving GAR with an almost skeleton crew in some aspects and loading more work onto the Bureau of Secret Enforcement.

Even *that* was a problem because Taisen was missing, and if anyone knew where he was, they weren't telling. His subordinates normally ran things anyway, but the House Fane sorts were at odds with the ones loyal to Taisen, and with *both* their masters gone

it was a lot of squabbling. All of which meant GAR was barely functional when it came to enforcing its rules.

Rules such as those imposed by the Department of Acquisition. Constance lowered the needlework long enough scowl at the stack of reports on her desk. She was pretty sure that some of the vampire nests and fae enclaves were taking advantage and going over their allowed limits without checking with her first. She was the final word on what was appropriate, and there was always room for negotiation, but she did not appreciate people violating her dictates. Especially when she couldn't hold them all to account.

Which wasn't to say she was helpless to enforce her policies. In fact, it might be easier once she called in the right favors and set up the right channels. The preoccupation of the larger Houses could be made to work for her, too. They were so focused on themselves and their old enemies that they'd hardly notice what was going on outside them.

Her telekinesis focus had long been an extension of her mind, and she preferred her magic to her flesh, anyway. Healing magic was fine so far as it went, but perfection could only be found in magic. She would be glad when she finished her shell and had completely freed her power from mundane clay.

She used that telekinesis to shuffle through the reports, riffling through dozens of pages at once and sorting them out on her massive desk. After she found what she wanted, she lofted three different pens to start assigning penalties. The Guevara and Lorentz nests had been the most uncooperative – and the nearby fae enclave didn't like them besides – so they were the easiest ones to deal with.

She would have called that enclave's Prince, who went by Sirrelan, but he was the kind of fae that eschewed modern conveniences, so she was forced to send a handwritten note by messenger instead. It wasn't a long note, but it didn't need to be. All it really needed to contain was a brief explanation of what the enclosed documents meant. Generally the internal correspondence of the Department of Acquisition wasn't meant for outside eyes, but in this case it was the entire point.

If GAR itself wasn't moving against the people who were thumbing their noses at the Department, then someone else would. After all, *technically* they were all part of GAR. Deputizing them was no overstretch of her authority. That would trim the sails of the vampires well enough, and best of all Sirrelan would owe her another favor for letting him go on a hunt and add a few vampire heads to his mantel. Six or seven, by her judgement.

Then there were her contacts over in Faerie proper, the Old Fae that had a monopoly on corite and had a very limited list of what they exchanged it for. Their support was

contingent on a steady supply of living bodies, though they weren't picky about race. Vampires, humans, shifters, or even other fae. Constance had no idea how they kept the other races alive in Faerie and didn't much care, but the current crisis might be a good opportunity to secure more corite.

The fae weren't the only ones to receive her attention. She stayed away from the principal actors in the ongoing crisis, the American Midwest shifters, because there were already too many people involved, but there were plenty of others who had snubbed her. Recently or in the past. A few shifter packs in Spain, a fae enclave in the Netherlands. A moderate number of deaths at the hands of their neighbors should remind people to stay in line, and she'd acquire goodwill and debts from the people she'd empowered to act for her.

On such small and friendly favors did the world run.

Constance focused back on her needlepoint, now more relaxed that she'd decided what to do. A small smile crossed her lips as she unspooled a new color of thread. It hadn't even been that difficult, in the end, to address the problems facing her. No more difficult than the needlepoint.

Alpha Chester slid to the side, claws flashing out to grip and throw Roy. The attempt to close was laudable, though a grapple wouldn't go well even for one of the best of his Wolfpack. Though with John helping his brother in the spar, even a momentary loss of freedom could be a problem.

Half the reason for the spar was to work off his frustration. Chester did not enjoy the scavengers nibbling at the edges of his pack, but the fact that it was merely scavengers and merely nibbling showed that GAR lacked the will to do more. To some extent, they also lacked the *ability*, now. He was well aware of how much they relied – had relied – on Fane and his command of offensive healers for force supremacy.

There was also the sudden and severe shortage of personnel. The Houses were withdrawing into themselves, old alliances and rivalries coming back into focus as Fane's death continued to send ripples through the supernatural world. There was a sudden sense of vulnerability from the death of that foul old titan Fane, and none of them liked it.

Of all of them, House Hargrave showed the most distance from GAR. Something that pleased Chester, as Archmage Hargrave was one of the few Archmages that was both militant and good enough at it that Chester couldn't possibly subdue him. Other Archmages could wreak enormous amounts of devastation, especially Janry and Kolar

with their Earth aspects, but were less inclined toward combat. It was well worth his time to consider approaching Hargrave, if carefully, to work out some understanding outside of GAR.

John wheezed as Chester's foot caught him in the stomach, sending him flying into the steel-reinforced wall with a meaty thud. That forced him backward just long enough for Roy to smash into his side, but Chester spun with the impact, metal squealing underfoot as his claws dug in, and hammered Roy with an elbow. He was glad to see he hadn't quite lost his touch, even if he was doing more administration than fighting these days.

He would need both those talents if he was going to deal with everything coming their way. GAR was hardly going to protect them even and especially with its reduced manpower, since Chester had all but declared independence from the governing body, but that meant he was more free to send his Wolfpack around to troubleshoot. Mostly by shooting trouble.

Ravaeb's fae were the largest source of that for the moment. He could deal with petty fines and legal proceedings, which were slow and easily deflected if there weren't real teeth behind them, but actual attacks were something else. Chester had known that Ravaeb had a cruel streak to him but he hadn't realized how much the fae had been constrained by GAR.

It was obvious, now, what sort of story drove Ravaeb. Winter winds had brought wendigo sweeping down from the north, leaving paths of rot through shifter lands. Entire households had been reduced to rotting bone before he'd pulled his people back, closer to where more powerful members of his pack could protect them. His Wolfpack had destroyed two skinwalkers, and thank goodness they had extra cold iron to dispatch the horrid things.

It was the kind of skirmishing that presaged a war, and GAR was hardly going to stop it. If anything, they might move to support the fae, and not just through the bureaucratic machinery. But Chester wasn't quite ready for that kind of conflict.

Chester needed allies, and that was a problem. The fae were notoriously mercurial, and the closest enclave was Ravaeb's, whom Chester was going to hold to account for the deaths he'd caused. Somehow, some way. So there were no friends in that direction. The vampires existed more or less to counterbalance shifters, and the two groups got along basically nowhere. Mages were under the thumb of GAR, with few exceptions.

One of those exceptions was Wells, whom Chester counted on his side. Chester was hesitant to call him an actual ally, since Wells was pathologically independent, but the

man at least had no ill will toward him. The other was the Archmage, that he'd only found out about thanks to Lisa's discussions with Lucy. Archmage Wizzy.

Chester hurled Roy at John, the latter reeling from another bruising kick, and he saw with approval that John wasn't blindsided by it at all, instead helping Roy land braced on his feet. But Chester held up his hand, done with sparring. They could go all day, and *had* before, so long as they were careful not to inflict injuries with their claws, but he wanted to spend some time with his mate and children. It wasn't good to do *all* his thinking during combat, since that colored his thoughts toward the militant and that was not always the best answer.

He mused on other options as he showered and ascended up to the open meadow behind the compound where pups gamboled in the grass. Wizzy was definitely neutral, but Archmage Hargrave was getting there, and House Hargrave itself had always treated shifters fairly. The Archmage had even managed to poach a small pack from under Chester's nose a couple centuries prior, which spoke well of the Hargraves considering the shifters involved.

Then there was Shahey, who had once been called Scaletooth back when Chester was but a pup and might well be a resource now that Chester had a line to him. The dragonblooded famously didn't take sides, but that didn't mean they did nothing. A little bit of extra insight or resources here and there could be incredibly valuable, if he could convince them to play ball.

The pups ran over to crowd into their granddad's lap and he laughed and tickled them. His family and his pack were a concrete reminder of why he was so careful, so cautious, and why he was so worried about what Wells was doing. The man might well crack open some other part of supernatural society, which made him dangerous beyond any personal threat.

There was part of him that reflexively wanted to remove that threat, no matter how helpful Wells had been, but Chester had learned to temper that reaction. That kind of thinking usually didn't go to good places, not in the long run. Still, Wells had been fairly quiet for a while, and that was a worrying sign.

No news was *not* good news.

"It looks practically done," Lucy observed, examining the small house. Or perhaps medium sized house, depending on one's standards. The yard was mostly mud, but there was fencing up around what would eventually be the garden area, where Callum had planted the fruit trees.

When nobody was around, of course. It wouldn't do to have a bunch of construction workers see dirt and potted trees flying around of their own accord. Even then he didn't do as much as he could have, just to prevent people from being overly suspicious. Lucy was mostly inured to his quirks, but that had gotten a brief roll her eyes and look of exasperation even if she didn't argue the point.

"The interior needs finishing, and I don't have any furniture for it," Callum said. "But we can start moving in now."

"That'll be great. The beach house was nice and the Texas trailer was, well, not so nice, but there's just something weird about living in a place that isn't mine. Well, yours."

"Could be ours," Callum said, putting his arm around her. She leaned against him and tilted her head back, looking up at him with dancing dark eyes.

"Ours, huh?" Lucy said after a moment, mouth crinkling into a smile. "I kinda like the sound of that."

"Yeah?" He pulled her closer, head drifting down toward hers.

"Yeah," she said, and he kissed her.

He was quite satisfied with the way the vacation ended. It couldn't last forever, though, and the bunker still needed work even if there was a roof over their head. With the portals it wasn't like they even fully needed to move out of the Texas trailer, not yet. With Callum's magic, it took more time to decide things than actually transport them.

One thing that he wanted to take advantage of, now that the basement was finished, was their experiments with the obsidian tiles. There had been a lot of value in being able to hot-swap enchantments, especially ones that Lucy could control. Even if that control was no more than turning them on or off, like activating or deactivating wards and glamours. Just changing tiles let them vary the enchantment size from house-wide to panic-room, either manually or through programmed actuators sliding things into place.

The latter was planned, at least, to have an off-site location. Lucy being able to flip a switch and be somewhere far away, yet still accessible to Callum was an enticing prospect. They just needed more enchantment material.

The two of them laid out the tiles in the walled-off section of the basement, though of course they couldn't experiment there while the workers were wandering around above them. With the obsidian being a limited resource – they weren't ever going back to Mictlān if he could help it – being able to run multiple enchantment types through the same projection framework was very helpful

“We need to get more enchantments,” Lucy said, sliding around the tiles in the grid form she’d printed.

“Yeah, I had been trying to do that before GAR found you out,” Callum admitted. “Kind of got side-tracked after that.”

“Then let’s see what we can find.” Lucy picked up her laptop and prodded him “Since we don’t have internet here yet.”

“I know, I know, we need more portals,” Callum said. He wanted to legitimately purchase an internet connection in some distant country and just use an anchor to connect them, but they didn’t have enough free anchors to dedicate one to that. Instead, they went wardriving for public wifi.

It wasn’t the best solution, because it exposed innocent people to potential reprisal. But state actors would know finding users of public wifi was hopeless and he had Lucy keep a log of whose access she used just in case. If supernaturals went after these businesses, he wanted to know.

Her hook into the GAR servers was still intact, though from what she said it wasn’t likely anyone would spot it unless they were very specifically looking for what she’d done. Possible, but unlikely, unless they brought in mundane talent who already suspected it. Still, he opened a portal into the armored van for them and then brought them out where one of the anchors was parked at the moment, out in Colorado.

It didn’t take long for Lucy to log into the server and start searching, but what she found was not the best news. Many of the largest repositories were off-limits simply due to being in Faerie, which he wasn’t prepared to deal with until he had a better handle on protecting himself from fae magic. The corite anchors might be sufficient, but they might not.

“If Faerie’s out, what’s the next best target?” He asked Lucy as they drove along the highway, keeping one eye out for some place to each lunch.

“Well, I guess it depends on how risky you think it is to use your anchors,” she said. He nodded thoughtfully.

Callum’s magic practice had paid off fairly well, even if there was nothing dramatically new or improved. He was faster, the wards he put up over his portal anchors were more refined, and he could produce tubes efficiently enough that they only took something like two or three times the vis of his threads.

There was less progress in other avenues. Native threads were still faster by far, and despite being more fragile were generally good enough for what he was doing. They

also cost less *vis*, which was still an issue since despite his practice he didn't seem to be getting all that much magical endurance. His gut-portal made it less of an issue since he could get extra mana, but he still couldn't sustain large constructs for significant lengths of time.

He'd also improved the ratio of spatial compression for his water grenades, even if he still couldn't make the spatial changes permanent or even cover larger volumes. He was sure his version of the technique was terrible, the worst kind of brute force, but it worked. Considering he *wanted* it to destructively fail, being terrible was actually a good thing.

In general there hadn't been any drastic improvements but, considering his portal anchor trick was so *very* good, that wasn't a problem. He wasn't exactly comfortable since he still lacked shielding, but once again physical dissociation and his perceptual sphere sidestepped that vulnerability under most circumstances. But at the same time, no new tricks meant he couldn't surprise people as easily, so he wanted to look at more spell forms, which brought him around to pilfering again.

"I think that I can deal with mages," he decided. "Even if we get caught, I don't think there's much they can do to us through the anchors."

"Then House Fane," Lucy said, fingers drumming on the desk mounted in the back of the van. "It's one of the few Houses that's still mostly Earth-side, and judging by these emails there's some kind of internal power struggle." She glanced up from the laptop with a toothy smile. "So I don't think they'll be hardened against someone like you."

"Aye," Callum agreed. The general chaos and confusion of infighting would work to his advantage when it came to borrowing and copying books or the like. People would be far too busy to keep a strict eye on their collections.

Callum didn't intend to actually properly steal anything from them. He could, and it would be easy, but that wasn't a road he wanted to go down. There might be circumstances where he could justify taking actual stuff rather than information from a House, but he wasn't there yet.

Back in the bunker, he settled in the basement with Lucy to send their drone over to the target. House Fane was located somewhere in the central north of China, in the middle of nowhere more or less, close to the border with Mongolia. The wilderness compound was a picturesque slice of some lost age, with hundreds of acres of dynasty architecture sprawled across rugged rock and ribboned streams. He had to taken a moment to appreciate it before moving on to the task at hand.

The chaos described in the emails wasn't obvious from just a surface look. There wasn't active warfare. Instead, people seemed to carry themselves almost hunched over, and stayed holed up in their rooms rather than going about their business. At least so Callum assumed; there was far less traffic outside than a facility the size of House Fane warranted.

Unfortunately, House Fane didn't have a map plan on any of the servers anywhere. Lucy had looked. Instead they had to pilot the drone around very circumspectly and Callum swept over each room with his senses, trying to figure out what was going on. Most of them were living space, of course, and he mostly skipped over those, especially the occupied ones. He wasn't there to play voyeur, and people would certainly notice if he temporarily snatched books or the like from occupied rooms.

The first potential spot was a heavily warded inner room at the center of one of the larger buildings, which revealed itself to be some kind of treasury. There was extra bane material there, as well as what Callum assumed was gold and silver bars of various sizes. There were even a number of items brimming with swirly fae magic. The display did rouse his cupidity but there was nothing there that seemed to be what they wanted so he left it untouched.

Deeper into the property his perceptions intercepted an extremely suspicious passageway leading down to a small complex of rooms underneath a manicured garden. Everything else he'd seen at House Fane was normal enough, but the underground rooms were straight out of some horror novel. It was proof of all the rumors that Lucy had found.

There was nothing living there, but there were weeks-old rotting corpses in tiny locked rooms, people who had clearly died of neglect and being stuck in something little more than a closet. The larger rooms had a variety of mundane medical tools, along with magical focuses that Callum was forced to assume were the same. There were exam tables with restraints, and freezers with partially dissected cadavers.

"Holy shit," he said, pulling his perceptions back, swallowing against nausea as he fumbled for some alcohol. He wasn't that much of a drinker but he needed a bit of reinforcement after seeing that.

"What?" Lucy said, blinking at the bottle of cognac that appeared on the table. Callum poured it into a shot glass with his own hands, knocking it back and feeling the burn spread down his throat.

"Found Fane's chamber of horrors," Callum said. "There's nothing alive down there now, for what it's worth, but dear God if anyone needed to go it was him."

“Yikes. Do I want to know?”

“No, you do not,” Callum said. “I’m tempted to go take another trip to the volcano to purge the place.” He took another swallow of cognac, despite the fact that it was a fairly expensive bottle. “There are some focus tools there but I don’t know what they do. I don’t *want* to know what they do.”

“How bad is it?” Lucy said, eyes wide.

“Ever read about the horrors of the gulags, the death camps, the medical experiments done by dictators and governments all throughout history? Fane’s making a good attempt at retreading that ground.”

“Damn,” Lucy said, eyeing the cognac bottle. “Sure you want to look at that stuff?”

“No, it’s better to know these things,” Callum said grimly. “Certainly puts any lingering doubts to rest. Also means I’m not going to feel too bad taking all their secrets.”

“You think we should maybe document it?” Lucy asked.

“Maybe?” Callum said. “I don’t know who we’d be documenting it for, or why. Fane’s dead, and I don’t think GAR cares much about mundanes, right? But…” He considered it. “There’s a difference between something happening off somewhere else and having it thrown in your face.”

“Yeah! I know a lot of people are, you know, indifferent but I don’t think most of them are *monsters*. Good thing I added cameras to the drone, that’ll make it easier.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re going to regret it,” he told her.

“That’s what the brandy is for,” she said, taking his glass and pouring a finger for herself before tasting it. “How do you drink this stuff, anyway?”

“It’s a bit of an acquired taste,” he admitted. “But I think we’re going to need it.”

His perceptions were one thing, but the pictures and video were even worse. By the end, Lucy had ended up downing a quarter of the bottle, and he’d helped her through a portal to the bedroom in the Texas trailer to sleep it off. It had obviously been abandoned for a while, likely since they’d taken out Fane, so if he had known he could have done something about it.

Instead, he had skipped out on vacation. It wasn’t his fault they’d died, but at the same time it had been a consequence of what he did. Callum was very much tempted to follow Lucy’s example with the brandy, because he sure as hell wasn’t going to be

getting any sleep, but instead he forced himself to continue the survey. Getting drunk wouldn't serve any purpose.

He skipped around the massive House complex until he found something that looked like actual focus storage. They weren't labeled particularly well and he had to be careful about activating the focuses, but with nobody around to even notice he was borrowing them, he had hours to make notes. There were offensive and defensive foci, which he was absolutely thrilled to be able to crib, as well as more consistent and coherent versions of utility focuses. Telekinesis, light, flight, glamour and illusion projection, all kinds of things. No healing foci, unfortunately, despite House Fane having a near monopoly on the aspect.

There were also books stored in the room, which seemed promising except for them all being in some variety of hanzi. The labels had been too, but one or two logograms were easy to translate. Entire books were less so, especially since he didn't even know what the important sections were. The best he could do was take pictures of the pages before and after the spell form diagrams, for later analysis. He certainly didn't have the time to digitize entire volumes.

In a way the focuses were an easier way to see spell forms. Even if he wasn't making them himself, he could at least see what the structures looked like if he channeled vis into the things. It didn't always help, since a number of the focuses had the conversion that meant someone else had used specialized vis, but at least he could make some connection between the topology and the effect.

Callum transcribed everything into his CAD program as well, just to have some place to store them. Good as his memory was, with the advantages of his spatial sense, the geometry was complicated and most of it wasn't even static. He'd have to ask Lucy about some way to do animations or something, to capture the motion, though recording things that way would be tedious in the extreme.

The most interesting forms he found were, to him, the one that redirected light and the one that temporarily conjured water. From what he understood, forms were more or less universal and it was the vis that decided the actual effects. Of course, the portal forms were completely meaningless to fire or water or healing vis, in the same way that his spatial vis had no effect in the normal ball form.

Redirecting space and conjuring space were both things he was interesting in doing. The former would be incredibly useful both as enchantment and spell if he could get it to work, and the latter might be the *proper* way to build an expanded spatial area. The problem was he wasn't that good a mage, so he had to go at things backward and hope the effects carried over like he wanted.

Lucy was still asleep when he tried practicing with the spell forms in the bunker basement, putting together tubes rather than his usual threads. While in a lot of ways he was clumsier with tubes, they were more stable and that made it easier for him to manipulate them in situ. Threads were fragile enough that if he got things wrong the spell form had a tendency to collapse.

After what he'd seen he wasn't in the mood for dealing with anything particularly tedious, so he mostly just gave each form a cursory test. As neat as the spells had seemed at the time they just didn't play too well with spatial vis. Which wasn't to say they didn't work at all; there were clearly some effects. It's just those effects were so weak as to be nonexistent.

Bending light, for example, was very different from bending space. There was some alteration there, an almost perceptible disjunct when he finally managed to put the tubes into the proper configuration, but tossing pebbles through it showed there wasn't much to it. He'd have to do some work and probably pump way more vis into the construct for it to do anything, and even then it'd probably take some massaging. Still, it did *something*, and subtle effects were what most technology was based on.

The conjuring spell, on the other hand, did practically nothing. So far as he could tell whatever new space it created dissipated almost instantly, making ripples that only his spatial sense could make out and only when he shoved a lot of vis into it. He ended up concentrating so hard on it that he knocked over his glass when he went to reach for it, a sort of clumsiness he'd almost completely left behind when he got his spatial perception.

Obviously the next step was to try and put the conjuring spell inside of a vis box, which caused the entire thing to collapse almost instantly. Callum wasn't entirely disheartened, since outside of teleports and portals, which were fairly straightforward and intuitive, everything else took a lot of work. He was going to have to fiddle with things and practice to get anywhere, but at least the spell-forms were stable by themselves.

His major problem was that he was half a lifetime behind mages born into a House. Not only did he not have the resources, he didn't even have any of the basic schooling. Sure, there was some help in the literature he'd gotten from Chester's contact all that time ago, but that wasn't the same as having first principles drilled into him. Most of what he was doing was blind fumbling and inferred rules. So he just gave up and got in the shower to try and wash away the stress.

"So what exactly are we doing with this footage?" Lucy asked, quite a bit after she'd gotten up and recovered from her hangover the next day. They were back in the Texas house, to avoid all the construction workers still tromping around the first floor. Neither

of them liked the idea of being drunk around a bunch of people they didn't know, though Lucy pouted a bit at having to stay in the old trailer when the nice new basement was available.

"Spread it out. Publicly email it to everyone like the Fane video. Maybe do it from Fane's own account? I'm just wondering if we ought to sign it as being from The Ghost or not."

"Why not sign it as being from someone in GAR?" Lucy suggested. "Stirring the pot and all."

"That's possible," Callum agreed, though he rather disliked that kind of maneuvering. Not liking it was no reason not to use it, though. It wasn't like he was overly fond of killing, either. "Who deserves that kind of trouble though?"

"Constance," Lucy said promptly. "She was involved anyway, considering what we found."

"True," Callum said with a grimace. Constance had been actively feeding people to Fane, making her a monster herself. One deeply embedded into GAR. "Though, I have to wonder if instead she'd just take credit for it. If Fane's dead and everyone turns against him, she might jump on this and somehow spin it to her advantage?"

"Sure, maybe," Lucy agreed. "But do we really care?"

"Hm," Callum replied, his worries derailed.

"I know you want to remove the Department of Acquisition entirely, so does it matter what sort of maneuverings they do in the meantime?"

"You know, it really doesn't." Callum shook his head. It was so easy to get wrapped up in certain trains of thought. Lucy was right; whether it caused trouble for the Department of Acquisition or not was somewhat moot. Especially as it seemed like Constance was directly responsible for the victims that Fane had acquired.

"Right then, I'll leave that to you," Callum said. "I've still got a ton of practice to do but when you're ready for it I transcribed a bunch of enchanting stuff. The drone's still there in case we need to reference things. Got a lot to work through already though. Plus I need to take you shooting."

"Ooh!" Lucy's eyes lit up. "I know it's not like the movies but I'm still pretty excited."

"We also need to test that big rifle," Callum said. "Going to have to go out into the middle of nowhere to try that." He was pretty sure a lot of gun ranges would have fun

with something that was basically one step short of crew served, but that was the kind of attention he didn't want.

"I can't even imaging firing that thing. It's huge."

"Almost as big as I am," Callum said, and Lucy stuck out her tongue at him.

"Keep dreaming, big man."

"Actually I need your help with it." She raised her eyebrows at him, but he just smiled and continued. "Since I'm not going to be lugging it around, just firing it from the cache, I need some way to remotely trigger it and cycle the chamber. Aiming shouldn't be a problem, but since some supernaturals can *dodge bullets* I'd rather not rely on a single shot."

"Yeah, makes sense." Despite how much she was looking forward to shooting her own guns, she was clearly still working up to the idea of proper self defense. "Honestly I don't think it'll be too bad. Probably illegal as hell, but a bunch of microcontrollers and some boards and I bet I can put together some kind of solution." She stopped, expression turning wistful. "Oh, for my 3D printer. Hey, I can actually get one now, can't I?"

"Absolutely," Callum said in amusement. "We can stick it in the basement instead of trying to fit it in here." He waved his finger in a circle, indicating the Texas trailer.

"Yeah! It's gonna be great! Not a beach, but you can't have everything." Lucy grinned. "Of course I'm spoiled by teleports. I thought the GAR system handy but you're twice as handy."

"I was blessed with two hands," Callum said, stepping up and wrapping his arms around her.

"Terrible," she said, a smile in her voice as she leaned into him.

She was far more serious when they called up Alpha Chester later in the day to talk about the recordings. As usual the discussion was conducted via portal-phone, and Callum was incredibly glad that he had two portable anchors now. There might be some limit to how many he could use at a time but it didn't seem like he'd reach it anytime soon. Sadly, no extra bane material was in the offing just yet.

"I honestly don't know what will happen," Chester told them, reclining in his basement with his wife Lisa and a few of his enforcers. "Some of the hardened old veterans, they won't care. Not unless it's *their* people. Younger mages, maybe they'll be sympathetic. Now, if it turns out that there's shifters involved that'll cause some sparks, but with

vampires or fae it's kind of a crapshoot. I don't think it'll be quite the splash you're hoping for, but just leaking it will make trouble for some people."

"I guess atrocities were more common a few hundred years ago," Callum mused.

"It's a lot nicer today," Chester agreed. "So maybe it'll have some effect, maybe not. Worth the effort, though, especially if you send it to *everyone* and not just the Archmages. Show the rank and file what's going on."

"I don't see how anyone can be okay with that," Lucy muttered. "Doing that to people."

"Hopefully more people agree with you than I think," Chester said. "Thanks for giving me advance notice. I'll add to whatever whispers go around."

"Right," Lucy said. "Off it goes."

All she'd done was package the media up without trying to do any editing, which Callum felt was a good idea. Not only was the footage disturbing and not worth the mental stress of reviewing, but any kind of editing would have run the risk of making it look doctored. The stark, silent video of what had been found in Fane's dungeon was enough of a statement.

The only text attached to the bulk email, which Lucy was sending out to literally *every* email address in the GAR database, was a line identifying it as belonging to House Fane. Neither of them knew enough about the head of the Department of Acquisition to try and fake some kind of message, so just spoofing her address as the origin would have to be enough. Someone would probably locate and delete the media from the server eventually, but that would take time and work since Lucy had done some trickery to lock the files away from any kind of modification.

He hoped it would cause trouble.