

## Chapter 3 – Reassess

Lucy was worried.

Once again she had been woken up by Callum stirring from the bed in the middle of the night, and she peered blearily after him as he headed to the bathroom. Probably for antacids, which he'd been chewing down like candy as of late. Alcohol was saved for special occasions, but the current method of coping wasn't helpful either.

"You okay?" She asked, when he came back to bed.

"Just heartburn," he said, crawling under the sheets.

"You gotta let things go," she said, reaching for him.

"Yeah, I know," he said, snuggling up to her. She squeaked in indignation from his cold feet. "It's just— there's so much that comes with what we're doing. We saved a lot of people, but how many *didn't* we save? We took out these vampires, but there are others, most of which we don't know anything about, that are just as bad or worse. Plus it wasn't like the *vamps* set up the trafficking rings. Not all the monsters are supernatural, but I'm just one man even if I am a mage. I have a responsibility, but I just *can't* be a big hero."

"S'way too heavy for this late at night, big man," she said with a yawn. There were too many cobwebs in her brain to grapple with that kind of worry. "But I tell you what, you can't hold the world on your shoulders. Too much a responsibility for one man."

"I suppose," Callum said unenthusiastically. "It still seems like it's my fault that things are starting to happen."

"Believe me, they were happening long before you came by." Lucy turned and rolled overtop of him, nestling her head in against his neck. His arms came up around her and she could feel him relax. "Let's get some sleep," she muttered. "You're gonna be useless tomorrow if you stay up."

"Yeah, yeah," he said, but drifted off again only a few moments later.

His maudlin mood seemed to have dissipated when they got up in the morning. Working clearly helped, at least when it came to the garden and the metal craft shed that he was putting up outside. It amused her, considering how many mages disdained physical labor and even used telekinesis foci instead of their hands for ordinary tasks.

She stretched out on the couch with her laptop, attending to her own business while he worked outside. Some freelancing online, where she'd reestablished her bona fides

under a different name, the investments she'd made with the money from salvaging, and catching up with friends and contacts. Mostly in Chester's pack.

Internet access was no longer an issue. She'd anonymously rented a piece of an office in Albania and Callum had set one of the portal anchors to connect there. It required a bit of a booster since it went through the nexus, but the Wi-Fi was good enough.

Lucy mused over the issues while she worked, since it was obvious that things couldn't continue with Callum being some kind of unaffiliated enforcer. He was physically and magically capable of it, but he didn't have the temperament. Not that Lucy was any real expert, but she talked with Lisa all the time and in some ways Alpha Chester's position was analogous.

The thought made her dial up her friend. Partly just to talk, but partly because Lucy and Lisa had ended up being the official contact point between Callum and Chester. If there was something that needed passing in either direction they managed it, though that wasn't really all that common. Mostly they just chatted.

"Hey Lucy," Lisa's voice came. Her friend usually used a headset, but Lucy could still hear thumps in the background. Probably in the pack gym then, with shifters sparring.

"Hey Lisa, anything new?"

"Actually there is! We had a representative from the Guild of Enchanting come by. Partly to establish relations with Chester, but they also wanted to talk to Callum." Lisa didn't sound concerned. "Apparently they had business matters they wanted to bring up."

"Huh." Lucy said, and jotted down the number that Lisa gave her. She knew that the Guild of Enchanting wasn't fully part of GAR, but she wouldn't have thought they were so separate that they'd be making independent deals with Chester already. Nor could she imagine what business they had with Callum, other than the deadly kind. But if Lisa was passing on the message they were at least moderately polite.

"I'll tell him," she said. "Is it urgent?"

"Not that I know of," she replied. "Tell you what *is* urgent, though. You and him. Can't keep putting it off."

"I know, I know," Lucy said with some exasperation. Lisa had been nagging more than was comfortable, but she *did* have a point. Not that Lucy didn't enjoy spending time with the big man but if they were going to have anything more it couldn't wait forever. "I honestly think he doesn't know what it's like to feel secure anymore. Not that I blame him after the past couple years. I'll work on it."

Lisa, mercifully, let it drop after that, and they just talked and gossiped about what was going on. Lisa's grandkids, Lucy's work, Callum's garden. The scuttlebutt out of GAR and out of the Hargrave-Taisen alliance, which didn't yet have an official name. Chester's moves to cement his authority over the Midwest region, at least when it came to supernaturals.

"One moment Lisa, he's back," Lucy said, still on the phone when Callum returned. He smelled of damp soil and wet grass, and leaned down to give her a kiss on his way to the kitchen. Lucy grabbed his wrist before he slipped away again and he looked at her with eyebrows raised.

"Something up?"

"Lisa says the Guild of Enchanting wants to talk to you," Lucy told him.

"I bet they do," he said, his face smoothing into that neutral mask he used when he was contemplating possible trouble.

"We can just use a box to talk to them," she suggested. "Heck, we can even put it somewhere with Wi-Fi access so you can clean up the vis before they get there."

"That is a good idea. I suppose there's no harm in hearing what they have to say." He rubbed at his forehead, leaving a smear of dirt from his fingers. "I guess we can set it up. Do you have their contact information?"

"Got a phone number," she said. "I guess they've got someone plugged into mundane stuff. I'm pretty sure they also have a presence online but there's no telling who pays attention to that."

"I imagine they wouldn't want to be caught talking to me," Callum said. "Sure, set it up."

"On it, big man," she said.

"I can't believe you still call him that," Lisa said with amusement, as Callum went to wash.

"Hard to think of him as anything else," Lucy said. "Not after he rescued me and all."

"I can't argue with that," Lisa said. After a little more discussion they hung up and she dialed the number from the Guild of Enchanting. She had been half expecting to be answered by some kind of secretary, but after a few rings the voice that answered stated a name that Lucy actually recognized.

"This is Lorenzo Rossi," a heavily accented male voice said. "Mister Wells?"

"This is Lucy, on behalf of Wells." She didn't want to use her family name, but it hadn't quite reached the point of taking Callum's, so she just had the one name for the moment.

“You wanted to set up a meeting?” It surprised her that the actual head of the Guild of Enchanting was answering a phone directly, but maybe they *really* wanted to talk to Callum. She couldn’t imagine the big man waiting on whatever layers of bureaucracy normally insulated Rossi from ordinary people.

“Yes, as soon as possible.” Rossi was brusque. “It is a matter of some urgency,” he added, contradicting Lisa, but Lucy imagined if it had waited this long then it wasn’t really time-sensitive.

“The best way to do it would be a public place in the mundane world, and we’ll attend through a tablet,” Lucy said. “He doesn’t trust any mages enough to meet in person, for obvious reasons.”

“I see,” Rossi said after a short pause. “I suppose that is sufficient. What do you suggest?”

The easiest solution would just have been to lean on Chester again, but Callum didn’t like relying on the shifters more than he had to. Which Lucy found a little silly, but she knew when to pick her battles when it came to his paranoia. It was hardly difficult to set up a meeting in a business incubator conference room over in California for the next day.

They made their preparations beforehand, of course, flying in with a drone and depositing the tablet hours before the meeting was supposed to occur. She could only watch through the cameras, on the tablet and on the drone, but Callum could see – or sense – everything. Lucy could scarcely imagine what that was like, but Callum mostly handled it fine. There were moments his eyes went distant, when he was clearly paying attention to something else, but for the most part he focused on the real world.

She didn’t see Rossi arrive, thanks to glamour, but Callum warned her he was flying in and after a moment he appeared on the cameras, a distinguished gentleman with dark hair and Mediterranean features. He came with three outriders, clear subordinates, carrying polished leather cases that were too small and too wide to be briefcases. Sample cases, maybe. They walked into the conference room and Lucy nodded to Callum, turning on the video link with the tablet.

“Mister Rossi?” Callum spoke, as it didn’t seem that Rossi noticed the tablet was on after a few seconds, holding a muttered conversation with one of his companions.

“Ah!” Rossi said, completely unflustered. Lucy studied him through the tablet camera as he seated himself, and he didn’t look very stressed or worried. Grave at most, so she didn’t think it was trouble. Or it was a lot of trouble, and they thought they had something of enough power to not worry about putting pressure on Callum. “Mister Wells?”

“That’s me,” Callum said, face set. Lucy was pretty sure he didn’t realize he did that. His normal face, when he talked to her or actually relaxed, was quite normal, but when he had to deal with the mages or other authority figures there was a hard, intimidating cast to his features. Personally, she felt it matched the moniker he’d gotten, and that he was the only one who thought The Ghost was a silly name.

“I actually have a rather large number of items,” Rossi said, apparently friendly, though everything Lucy had heard about the man was that he was a hard businessman. “But I’ll start with the first one. Could you *please* stop spreading Guild enchantment secrets everywhere?”

Callum blinked. Lucy stifled a giggle. Though Rossi probably wouldn’t be able to tell, especially since he only had the tablet to look at, behind Callum’s mask he was completely thrown.

“I wasn’t aware that I was,” he said stiffly.

“The teleportation pads you’ve been providing,” Rossi said, a touch impatiently. “All that work just out in the open! I know you don’t have any idea how much time and effort went into perfecting every single one of those designs but you could have at least covered it up!”

“That is fair,” Callum said after a moment. Lucy raised her eyebrows at him. She hadn’t expected that reaction; normally the big man flatly ignored any attempts to exert authority over him. “That is a reasonable change to make, though you understand I am constrained by my circumstances. I’m somewhat surprised you’re not asking me to desist altogether.”

“Yes, well,” Rossi waved it away. “As you say, you’re constrained by your circumstances. It’s obvious you have the power and expertise to examine and recreate enchantments, and after seeing your work I’m hardly going to start making demands.” That, despite already having made one.

“Indeed,” Callum said. “It hasn’t worked well for anyone else so far.”

“Exactly.” Rossi leaned forward toward the tablet. “I’d rather work with you. It’s obvious you don’t have any schooling in how to properly perform enchantment but you have some natural skill and insight. Like those tiles we found at your old place.” Callum didn’t react to that, even though Lucy felt her mouth turn downward of its own accord.

“We’ve looked at them and think there are some very promising applications. What a fascinating idea. However did you come up with it?” Callum smiled at that, very suddenly.

“That wasn’t my idea,” he said. “That was Lucy’s.” He beckoned toward her, and she joined him in front of the laptop camera, feeling somewhat self-conscious. “We work together on enchanting,” he continued.

“Oh,” said Rossi in obvious surprise. “Very well, then. I would like to extend both of you a business opportunity. I know I can’t *stop* you from enchanting, and you may not understand how limited our access to spatial mages is. Archmage Duvall and her apprentices make themselves available to a certain extent, but they all have demands on their time.” Callum took a breath and leaned back.

“So you want to, what, sell my enchantments?”

“Not exactly. Your work is, pardon my bluntness, barely passable. At least as it stands. But perhaps we could provide instruction — and more importantly *you* could provide portions of enchantments that *only* a spatial mage could provide. I assume you, or rather Lucy, would want the proceeds from properly registering your interlocking enchantment design with the tiles.”

“In short, legitimacy,” Callum said, and glanced at her. Lucy nodded firmly. Someone in the mage camp actually taking them seriously was a new one for her, and she thought it was a fantastic idea. The big man would probably have a lot of caveats and carefals, but moving out of the black market would be great.

“Perhaps, though there are a lot of caveats that we’d have to discuss,” Callum said. “Though I’m surprised you’re approaching me like this, considering GAR has a price on my head.”

“Ah, but the Guild of Enchanting does not work for GAR. We work *with* GAR, certainly, but we were there first and we have always prided ourselves on being a separate organization.” Rossi looked somewhat smug. “We deal with Houses on an individual basis, so there’s no reason we can’t do the same with you.”

“I see.” Callum pursed his lips. “Then let us discuss it.”

Lucy pulled her laptop around to take notes. She wasn’t about to turn down the option for learning more about magic and getting money for her work, but she was happier about how it would reduce the pressure on Callum. He felt, for good reason, that it was more or less the two of them against the world, and having another group of people *not* gunning for his head would be helpful.

Callum’s paranoia had been justified more than once. Setting up a distress phrase, insisting on shooting the guns remotely, and the bunker itself. There *were* people after them, they *did* have enemies, and the world was a scary place. Despite that, the strain of treating *everyone* like they were potential foes was telling. She actually wondered

exactly how he'd gotten along before being introduced to the supernatural, though the fact that he was working for himself, by himself, was at least part of an answer.

Being officially recognized by the Enchanter's Guild was at least one step to actually living like normal again, and hopefully not the last.

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Jissarrell watched as the crystals energized the teleportation pad, and a servant stepped in. He vanished, then reappeared a moment later to bow to his master. Jissarrell dismissed him with a flick of the finger, and stepped onto the pad himself.

It was not nearly as stylish as the Door of Glass, nor as exciting as the Ways. He'd done his best by surrounding the pad with a chamber more appropriate to a fae enclave. There was a walkway between the petals of a lotus ten feet high, with the teleporter ensconced at its center, but it was still transparently *not* proper fae magic. Though that did give it its own particular cachet.

He stepped onto the pad himself and pulled in his power, letting the human-wrought magic wash over him. It wasn't comfortable bottling himself up, pretending even for a moment that he was anything less than a King, but the teleportation pad was far too weak to affect him if he didn't make an effort to let it. There was a brief shift and then he was in Florida, in the endless halls of gilt and steel that surrounded King Ferrochar's court.

Ferrochar himself was waiting with his nobles, horns smoldering and a cloak of molten gold rippling the air with its heat. He inclined his head to Jissarrell, their powers briefly clashing in a friendly contest of wills before pulling back. Amusingly, despite his extensive holdings and court, Ferrochar's personal power was not that great. In Faerie that would be a weakness that ensured his court would be crushed by his neighbors, but on Earth Ferrochar's other holdings meant that he could contend with Jissarrell as an equal.

"King Jissarrell," Ferrochar said. "Welcome to our humble court. I invite you to partake in our hospitality."

"Thank you. I am glad to be received as a guest by the King of Miami." Both of them relaxed slightly as the magic of the words cemented their roles. "And believe me, I have such stories to tell."

"As do I," Ferrochar replied with a smile, gesturing for Jissarrell to walk beside him. "As far out as you are, you probably haven't heard about the new American Alliance."

"Ah?" Jissarrell's ears twitched. "You, binding yourself in an agreement with someone?"

"A very interesting one," Ferrochar said knowingly, tapping a finger to the side of his nose. "One that includes Ensharrehael." Jissarrell nodded gravely. While *he* didn't care much

about dragons, Ferrochar's story and his hoard aligned so well that it was no wonder the fae king found that to be such a coup.

"It also insulates us against a major threat," Ferrochar said, eyes gleaming. "The Alliance is, nominally at least, aligned with The Ghost. Or he with us. After Ravaeb's exquisite demise, that seems a reasonable position to be in."

"Indeed," Jissarrell said with a smile, the pair of them walking into a lavishly appointed room, half of it gold and iron, the other half greenery and water. The two kings took seats in their respective halves, facing each other across the divide. "I could feel the echoes of his death all the way down the Rio Grande. But I was not surprised. Where do you think the teleportation pad came from?"

"No!" Ferrochar said, delighted by the gossip. "What did you give him for it?"

"A bud from the Way of Roses," Jissarrell said. "It won't grow outside of Faerie or the Ways, but he wanted something that would conceal him from a King."

"Oh, how wicked of you," Ferrochar said approvingly. Neither of them mentioned that such a thing would allow The Ghost to go after *any* King if he wished. To do so would be awfully gauche, and besides, it would be perfectly ironic if Jissarell ended up thanks to that gift. "But apropos; the Ways *are* what I wanted to discuss with you."

"Indeed?"

"I know you don't have a Door of Glass in your enclave, so perhaps you have not been to the Ways lately. It has grown." Ferrochar paused as a servant brought them refreshments on a crystal tray, a deep green liqueur for him and a sparkling, fire-red one for Jissarrell in a touch of mirrored aesthetics.

"Is that not a good thing?" Jissarrell inquired, sipping the drink and nodding approvingly.

"It would be, if it were from our own efforts," Ferrochar said darkly. "I believe someone from Faerie itself has begun pouring power into the Ways. More, the Ways themselves are becoming wild. Some of the Old Things have begun showing up." He gestured a circle with his drink. "The daughters of Frost and Fell, the children of The Long Mile. Nothing to threaten you or I, but they did not come from me, or even from enclaves in the Old Country."

"I dislike that. Earth is not Faerie; they should have no purchase here." Jissarrell scowled into the dregs of his drink. "What has changed? Was that human organization truly standing them off? Did Raveab's death serve to fuel some deep purpose?"

"Regardless of the reason, we may need to begin fortifying our own enclaves," Ferrochar concluded. "These human teleporters are a good first step; the deep fae would not even



consider using that kind of magic. We shall have to see if we can get more from the Ghost.”

“You can reach him?” Jissarrell raised leafy eyebrows.

“As I said, our Alliance is nominally aligned. I can get word.”

“Then by all means. When a storm is coming, one takes every opportunity to reinforce one’s shelter.”

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Callum didn’t trust the Guild of Enchanting as far as he could throw them, but they seemed willing enough to honor their agreement. They were still lining up an instructor who would be willing to teach remotely, since Callum was hardly going to meet any of them in person, but they’d already dropped off the enchanting scribe and a significant amount of money for licensing Lucy’s tiling prototype.

After the initial meeting, she’d actually spent more time talking to them than he had, making several followup calls to demonstrate how the tiles could be changed out with linear actuators, and describing more advanced ways of doing it that required significantly more investment and infrastructure. He wasn’t worried about giving away any important secrets, and besides which it was her idea so she got the benefits.

“This looks kinda crazy,” Lucy said, examining the scribe Callum had out on the porch. Callum had to agree. It was a big metal arrangement, a series of complicated armatures like spider legs hanging over a flat plate of a working space. Several of the vis crystals of varying sizes were slotted into one side, forming a circuit connecting the armature bases with a pad on the other side of the device. With his perceptions he could see the pad was a deliberate intake enchantment, similar to his own vis cleanup spiral.

It had come with a user manual, one that appeared to be made with a genuine printing press rather than a more modern technique, and was bound with string rather than glue. Still, it was readable enough and the operation of the thing was fairly simple. He just fed vis in, selected an armature, and used it to trace out the geometry of the enchantment. What was more, there was even a way to duplicate the motion across armatures, a completely mechanical linkage, so he could trace a blank with one and the others would follow suit to enchant one or more copies simultaneously.

It was a very clever little device – or rather, big device since it was the size of an entire table – especially since it was almost entirely mechanical. It didn’t need ambient mana to run any of it. Callum was actually a little surprised how well it would work with his CNC approach, and he wondered if the Guild of Enchanting already used something similar.

Everything he'd seen had been handmade to some extent, but there was an enormous gulf of machine tools between hammer and chisel and a CNC device.

"I'm going to go over it again to make sure there aren't any surprises in it, but this will make things so much easier," Callum said. It seemed it was time to actually buy his own CNC device, so he could do *everything* in-house. Or in-shed, as it were.

"Especially with how much work the Guild wants you to do," Lucy agreed.

They hadn't signed any contracts, but Callum had agreed to at least cover and obfuscate the enchantments he provided to other people. That was only fair, since it wasn't his work to begin with and profiting off it was ambiguous at best. Amusingly, his work was not good enough for the Guild itself to sell, though they hadn't tried to make him stop. Instead they'd just asked him to do some enchantment scribing on teleportation cores and frames, supplying already-created unenchanted versions of both for him to energize.

"I tell you what," Callum said, wrapping a gravitykinesis bubble around the scriber and lifting it up. "This brings me back to when I was consulting for architecture. Now it's enchanting, but it's still that kind of work."

"Yeah? You know, you don't talk all that much about stuff in the past," Lucy said, walking along beside him as he floated the scriber over to his work shed. Though it was more advanced than just four walls and a roof; it had electricity, HVAC, and a solid concrete foundation.

"I haven't thought about it too much of late. It seems so weird and distant now," Callum told her, setting the scriber down on the big work table. "Back then I didn't know magic existed. Didn't have to worry about governments being after me. I was just sort of living my life for me, you know?"

"All by your lonesome?" Lucy asked.

"Well." Callum considered, and while he hadn't ever raised the topic before he wouldn't have been surprised if Lucy already knew. His life as Callum Wells hadn't been particularly hidden. "I'm a widower, actually. My wife, Selene, died of a brain embolism some six years back."

"Oof. I read up on you, so I guess I knew that, but hearing it..." Lucy trailed off and shook her head. "I guess I'm surprised that you shacked up with anyone after that."

"I did my mourning, and she wouldn't have wanted me to pine forever," Callum said. "But I just didn't find anyone interesting. Until you."

"Flatterer," Lucy said, leaning in against him. "I guess that explains why you've waited to get serious, though."

“Maybe?” Callum hedged. “I mean, it’s been a pretty wild ride and it feels like everything’s been up in the air.”

“Well it’s not wild *now*,” Lucy said. “I think we’re doing pretty well here, with this little house and official Guild of Enchanting work and everything.” She took in a deep breath and let it out again, looking away and over the yard. “Besides, I’m not a mage; I don’t live forever.”

Callum winced. That was not something he’d thought about very much, and preferred not to for the most part, but she was right. If the other mages were anything to judge by Callum could wait five or ten or thirty or even three hundred years and he’d be just as hale as he was now. Not so for Lucy.

“You’re right,” he told her. “We shouldn’t keep putting things off.”

“So...?” Lucy asked, drawing out the word.

“I’ll go shopping for a ring,” he told her, finally committing himself. After doing it once, the second time wasn’t as hard as he might have thought. Now that he was thinking about it, his mind jumped to how he could make the ring a homebond and use a vis crystal in the setting to fuel it. “I’m not putting it off, but I still have *some* preparations to make!” She laughed.

“Great. So what are we doing in the meantime? Just hiding out here and make some money?”

“For now, yes. There’s always the possibility that someone will make some moves that I need to deal with, but I don’t want to play enforcer all the time.” Callum grimaced. He was aware there was still stuff going on, abuses by more than just the vampires, but he couldn’t play world police all by himself. He’d kill himself with overwork or sloppiness if he tried that, and he arguably might make things worse.

Even as it was, he couldn’t be sure things were better for the average normal human than they were before he accidentally split GAR down the middle. The Department of Acquisition had been a source of great evil, and still was, but for the moment they seemed to actually be keeping a lid on more restive elements of the population. Someday they would be held to account, but only when Callum was sure he could act without inflicting even more damage.

It was time to wait and see how things developed. He would still stomp on anyone who needed stomping, of course, but if he kept trying to disrupt the reorganization all he would accomplish would be to generate more chaos. Which despite appearances was not his goal.

He was also worried about his actual capabilities.

Callum had a few good tricks, but most of them had been shown off and the proliferation of jammers showed that people had some idea how to lock him out. Add in the way Duvall could track his portals if they weren't properly cleaned up and there wasn't much separating him from people who could completely block or counter his repertoire. He needed time and knowledge to create more techniques.

The Guild's tutor would probably give them those, or at least a start on them. If he could translate his gravitykinesis to an enchantment, he'd have more. Perhaps it would even be possible to talk more with people like Wizzy, and get a better grounding.

But first he had to shop for some jewelry.