

# Paranoid Mage Book Four: Reclusive Mage

The Guild of Arcane Regulation has fractured, and new forces move on the board. Callum cannot quite declare victory, for even a weakened GAR still forces him to hide from the world at large, yet he is no longer prepared to run. Instead he builds his own strengths to stand against those who wish to do him harm.

Change, once started, is hard to stop. Callum's actions have brought change to the world of the supernatural, but that can bring chaos and destruction even as he eliminates tyranny and corruption. He has to move beyond being one man against the world, and stand in the world he's made.

## Chapter 4-1 – Moving

Callum and Lucy had spent a lot of time in the Texas trailer, and even with the bunker nearly complete they weren't entirely moved out. Callum's teleportation and gravitykinesis, or even telekinesis focus, made things a lot easier physically, but did nothing on the side of organization. Nor could his magic speed up how fast concrete or paint dried, so the move to the bunker was a slow and piecemeal affair, something they were still working on a week after dealing with Ravaeb.

At least until events conspired to force the issue.

Callum jolted into full wakefulness when a mage bubble brushed across the edge of his perception. Under most circumstances waking up with someone snuggled in against him was a pleasant thing, but the hammer blow of adrenaline ruined it. He was up and out of bed before he realized he didn't really need to be, since grabbing everything and leaving was purely a function of magic.

"Whuzzah?" Lucy said, stirring sleepily as he reached out with his vis and started transferring everything that was left. The mage bubbles were moving quickly somewhere overhead, and while not headed directly at his trailer he had to assume they'd notice *something* if they'd gotten so close.

"We gotta go," he told her. The food in the fridge, the clothes in the dresser, the grill outside. Some of the furniture had come with the trailer, so he didn't take that, but he grabbed everything else he could in the first few seconds. A handful of the cleaner beads got distributed over the whole house, and a more powerful one put on a small plate that he dropped on the floor of the room.

The mage bubbles were still several seconds away, and while he couldn't tell whether they'd seen him directly or not he had to assume they knew. Besides, they could launch attacks from that far away, so he wrapped both himself and Lucy in a teleportation matrix – tube based, so it wouldn't so hard on her – and pulled them into the cave. Only then did he feel like he could breathe, heart still hammering.

Lucy squeaked as she dropped a few inches onto the cot he had set up before propping herself up and squinting into the darkness of the cave. Callum reached out with his perception sphere and teleported an LED lamp into his hand, flicking it on and lofting it over toward Lucy. She squinted and snagged it out of the air, shivering in the cool cave atmosphere.

“The heck?” She demanded.

“I sensed mages overflying the trailer,” Callum explained. “I wasn't going to hang around and hope they passed by.”

“Oh.” Lucy said, wrapping her arms around herself. “Well, damn. How'd they find us? Not through the portal anchors I wouldn't think?”

“Timing is weird too,” Callum said, pulling clothes out from the piles he'd teleported and handing Lucy hers. Even if he'd gotten around to heating the cave, which he hadn't, it was still bare stone and concrete. “I would have figured it'd be earlier, if it were some magical scrying.”

“I'll have to doublecheck the server, though it's not like I ever even *accessed* it from the trailer house...” Lucy shrugged and hastily dressed, sitting on the cot to put on her shoes and socks. “What about the bunker? Do you think it's safe?”

“Not if they can trace us directly, but otherwise I think so.” The bunker didn't even have a mailing address as such. Even if some mundane organization found out about it from Miguel, the town councilman who was handling the local businesses, that didn't imply any supernatural activity. The greatest risk was that his bunker house would attract the interest of a cartel, and he had thoughts on how to deal with that, but for the most part he suspected the bunker was invisible to state-level actors.

That wasn't a certainty, though, which was why one of the portal nexus links was to another safehouse, a little campsite with supplies that wasn't too far from civilization. Lucy had a teleportation setup for it made of anchors and obsidian tiles, just in case she needed to escape while he wasn't around for some reason. Considering what had just happened, that seemed more likely than it had before.

“Well, at least we've got *power* here now,” Lucy said in resignation. Callum still had to wait for the last of the construction equipment to be cleared away before he could set up

the infinite portal generator, but the solar he'd gotten worked well enough in the interim, as long as the two of them were sparing with it.

"I guess it's not a terrible thing, even if I hate being forced to run away. Means we have to actually buckle down and finish our chores." Callum finished dressing and studied the cave-cache in his perceptions to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. All his supplies were there, minus the ones that had been ruined when he'd assassinated Ravaeb.

Callum still wasn't clear on whether the fae magic had gone through the portals or worked through more esoteric means. No matter how it had happened, Ravaeb had managed to send a fae after Callum, and only the presence of the shifters had kept him intact. More lasting damage had been done to the corner of the cave-cache where the antimaterial rifle had been, with the actual rifle being turned into some kind of goo and the water barrels blowing apart from the sudden growth of stinking algae. Even the stone had suffered, and while he'd portaled the worst of it back into the remains of Ravaeb's enclave, the stone under where the gun had been was still slowly crumbling.

The rest of his cache was intact though. The armored van, the other water barrels, the preserved food. The guns, the ammunition, the clothes and camping equipment. The secondhand furniture and bedding. The last were the most important at the moment since the bunker was unfurnished, and with the emergency move they'd have to make do until Alpha Chester came through on his agreement.

"Easy for you to say, mister I-was-on-my-feet, but you weren't the one who woke up falling," Lucy said, only half serious. "What time is it even?" Her hand went for her pocket by reflex, but her phone wasn't there. Callum located it in the pile of stuff he'd more or less blindly swept off the dressers and handed it over. Lucy groaned.

"Too early to be awake, but too late to go back to sleep," she said. Callum snorted. She wasn't exactly a morning person.

"I couldn't sleep anyway. I can still taste adrenaline." Callum grimaced, then opened a portal to the bunker basement, the only fully finished area so far. Since the cave was only a few hundred yards from the house, it didn't even need a dedicated portal anchor. With carpet and interior walls, the basement was considerably warmer than the cave and, when Callum flicked a switch, actually illuminated.

"Aight." Lucy yawned and meandered sleepily through the portal and over to where her laptop and 3D printer were laid out. The printer actually required so much power that with just solar panels they could only fuel the simplest of builds, but that wouldn't be the case for long.

Callum eyed the clock – it was quite early – and then the backhoe and dozers still on his property. The only real work left was taking care of all the dirt and mud and piles of gravel that were strewn about from the construction. But he could take care of that himself, with gravitykinesis.

“Hey Lucy, might as well set up the building-wide glamour, but don’t use it yet. I’m going to move all the equipment off and tell Miguel everything’s finished.” So far Miguel had been nothing but helpful, the town representative perfectly happy to put in the work so long as Callum supplied gold bullion. It was actually a little suspicious, but finding someone like him was preferable by far to trying to negotiate directly with the locals.

“Great!” Lucy yawned again. “Have fun with that.”

Callum would prefer not to use the glamour, since a building vanishing would be more suspicious than the initial construction, but he was worried about regular folks poking around. Supernaturals didn’t have any reason to check out the area, but it was hard to hide construction equipment and laborers. If he were lucky he wouldn’t need it, but Callum didn’t believe in luck.

Moving the construction equipment wasn’t really too difficult. Despite all his practice, creating a framework much larger than a car was still a strain, but not so much of one that he couldn’t move everything out to the edge of the property. He still had to use a portal anchor, since the house was smack dab in the middle of his hundred-acre swath and that was too far even for his senses, but they had enough extra that keeping one around the house was no issue.

Once he had all the equipment lined up next to the actual bit of road that wound near his property, he grabbed the van from the cave-cache and obscured the license plate with mud before he drove it into the village where Miguel lived. Despite it only having been maybe six months since he started paying Miguel for the house, there were some obviously new bits of infrastructure in the village. Which Callum certainly didn’t begrudge. He had expected a bit of skimming, especially since he was paying for things to be done quietly, and it was good seeing it being used to improve the town rather than Miguel’s own pockets.

He still wasn’t sure whether the toughs that always seemed to be around Miguel’s place were part of the village, belonged to a cartel, or something else entirely, but they didn’t hassle him so he ignored them. When he knocked on the front door, the usual man let Callum in and asked him to wait in the front room. With his sphere of perception he knew exactly what the guy was busy with even if he didn’t really want to, and wasn’t about to rush the man.

“Señor,” Miguel said, some fifteen minutes later as he sat on the couch across from Callum. “Is everything going well with the house?”

“Yeah, it is,” Callum told him. “Actually, I came by to say that they’re done. I know they were still working on some tidying up but I can attend to that myself.” He reached into his pocket and teleported two more gold plates into his hand. That pretty much finished off his gold bullion but the money from shipwreck salvage was a decent enough income for the moment. “Just wanted to settle accounts,” he said, extending the gold plates to Miguel.

“Thank you, Señor,” Miguel said. “I do wish to tell you there were some inquiries about who was building nearby. Idle questions, nothing special, but it is difficult to hide such construction equipment.”

“That’s fine, if anyone comes by I’ll take care of it,” Callum assured Miguel, though inwardly he grimaced. Those inquiries could be anyone from nosy neighbors to policemen or criminals. Though so long as they were mundanes the glamour would probably be sufficient.

“As you say,” Miguel replied, and Callum nodded to him before heading back out to the van. He didn’t really even need the cane anymore, thanks to the Connors. Lucy was still the main point of contact between Callum and the couple he’d rescued some six months back, and their input had helped his knee recover. Mostly. It probably needed mage healing to be perfect again, but Callum didn’t need things to be perfect.

He recalled himself and the van back to the cave-cache the moment he was out of sight of the village and then stepped back into the basement. Lucy was still tinkering with the obsidian tiles, and she gave him a wave as he appeared on the designated receiving spot. He’d made it a proper telepad, since it was Lucy’s escape hatch as well, adding in some drywall enclosures to create a homemade teleportation booth.

“Everything go okay?”

“Yup,” he confirmed. “Time to get us some power.”

“Woo!” Lucy left off her wiring and stood. “Let’s go.”

His infinite power setup was simply a pipe with a portal at the top and bottom, hooked up to a secondhand water turbine generator. Simple as it was, it developed more than enough power from his tests so all he needed to do was wire it into the house. Lucy had done wonders with setting up a little monitor and valve to actually reduce or stop the flow when and if they were at full capacity.

He used gravitykinesis to assemble it outside the back wall of the house while Lucy dealt with the wiring plugs. This was exactly why he'd had a consultant for the electrical wiring, because he was not going to mess with figuring out electrical distribution himself. There was just a simple connector for the generator's output.

Then he started transferring purified water from his barrels to the interior. The water's infinite fall was interrupted by the turbine blades, and the generator started to spin. The big house-supplying battery registered current, and nothing caught fire.

"Wonderful!" Lucy said. "Now all we need is the furniture."

"I guess we should check in with Chester," Callum said. They'd been laying low for a while, to let the excitement die down, so it was probably time to pop their heads out and see what had happened.

"Sure thing, link me up," Lucy said, heading back inside to get her laptop. Callum followed, reached out through the portal nexus and found the drone they'd left in the US. It was near to Chester's place, though near was a relative term when it came to the speed that he could achieve with the drones. It didn't take much maneuvering to get the drone near a café wifi and Lucy pulled up her VOIP program.

"Hey Lisa," she said. "Yeah, okay. Sure, we can probably come over?" She glanced at Callum, and he shrugged and nodded. He didn't have any objections, and it wasn't like it took any real time.

Half an hour later, he opened a portal to Chester's house. Unlike every other time he'd sent the drone in, there were no mage bubbles keeping watch. In fact, the entire GAR office that had been there, small as it was, had been demolished, and recently. There was still construction equipment in place near the foundations.

"Welcome," Chester said, for once not greeting them in the basement. With the break from GAR, Chester no longer needed to hide dealing with Callum. Which wasn't the same thing as being entirely in the open, since the warding was still up.

"Feeling okay? Recovered from the concussion?" Lisa asked, setting out hot chocolate for everyone.

"Yeah, everything seems fine," Callum said, accepting a mug with thanks. "You all haven't had any trouble?"

"Well, that's what we asked you over here to discuss," Chester said. "I assume you saw that House Hargrave and their faction also left GAR?"

"Lucy told me." Callum allowed himself a smile. "I don't imagine they liked that, especially coming on the heels of *your* independence."

“No, they do not, but it has actually helped us a lot. So far they haven’t been able to drum up any Archmages to try and force the issue with me and my allies,” Chester said. “So first of all, I have a number of contact requests from our allies.” He slid across a stack of cardstock. “I didn’t screen them, and I don’t know what they want, but I said I’d at least forward them.”

Callum grimaced. He didn’t want to deal with any other forces; he had barely wanted to deal with Chester and even though that had turned out okay that wasn’t likely to happen twice. Despite that, he wasn’t so blind that he didn’t see the value in at least being able to talk to a bunch of non-GAR supernaturals when necessary.

“Alright,” he said, taking the stack of cards, flipping through to see all the contact information and notation was in the same hand. Lisa’s, he was pretty sure. “I won’t promise anything but I’ll think about it.”

“The other thing is, we didn’t include any vampires in our alliance and some people took exception to that.”

“I bet.” Callum frowned and glanced at Lucy. “Is there anything about that in the GAR chattering?”

“There’s *everything* going on right now, big man.” Lucy flung her arms out in an expansive gesture. “People panicking and thinking that you’re going to attack them, people claiming the Hargraves have wiped out entire Houses, everything. Hard to know what’s real and what’s just nonsense right now.”

“We’re dealing with things ourselves for the most part,” Chester said. “But I thought you’d want to know that we’re seeing vampires actively expanding their thrall numbers. What I *don’t* know is how much of that is supported by GAR and how much is just people seizing what they can during the chaos.”

“Of course they are.” Callum pressed his lips tight together. He could hardly blame Chester for passing the problem to him, especially since it was something Callum was concerned about. He had no interest in going around punishing vampires one nest at a time; that would be stressful and probably impossible in the long run. But someone had to stop them if GAR couldn’t.

Especially since it was, at least in part, his fault that GAR was no longer curtailing their activities. Though GAR had outright condoned preying on normal folks, there had also been limits. Now there weren’t.

“If you could forward that information to Lucy, I’d appreciate it,” he said. While he was grimly satisfied with GAR’s dissolution, the problem was they weren’t yet out the other side into a new sort of stability. It was chaos, and he would have to put in the work to

make it better. Intentionally or not, he was the one who had created the current climate, and now it was his responsibility to do something about it.

“Certainly,” Chester said, nodding to Lisa. “I’ll keep you updated on anything else we find, too. I know you’re not our alliance’s avenging angel, but I expect a few showings of The Ghost will help keep people firmly on the side of not hunting mundanes.”

“Not to mention being the right thing to do,” Callum said, then shook his head. “That’s not fair. You have your own things to deal with. Are there any surprises I need to be careful of like with Ravaeb? I haven’t seen or heard anything about vamps being able to launch that kind of weird long range attack but I’ve only ever gone after low-hanging fruit.”

“In and of themselves? No. But the vampires are more heavily sponsored by the mages so they often have enchantments or mages themselves as defenses.”

“So I only have to worry if I sense any fae magic.” Not that Callum was going to leave things to chance. Any future attacks would be done from a place where he could teleport out if necessary. An empty field somewhere. “In a way I guess I’m going back to the beginning.” Chester raised his eyebrows at that, but shrugged it off.

“We also have the enchanted stuff from the GAR office for you,” Chester said. “We can’t use it or trust it even if we could, so we’ll pass it on to you for recycling.”

“Fantastic,” Callum said, glad that there was some good news at least. He wasn’t sure there would be enough stuff of sufficient quality for any more anchor pairs, but he had four pairs hooked into his nexus already and there wasn’t too much value in more. But he had a lot of enchantments cribbed from Fane to experiment with, and he could never have enough material to do it with. The less pure stuff especially lost its efficacy fairly quickly.

“I’ll have that sent over, and your furniture. If you want any folks to install cabinets or anything they’ll need a heads-up though.”

“I’ll let you know if I need it,” Callum said. His gravitykinesis and regular telekinesis focus meant that he might well be able to do it himself. He rather enjoyed that he could replace the requirement for extra hands and raw muscle with magic, and besides, he really didn’t want any supernaturals to visit the bunker. “Thank you.”

They didn’t stay for very much longer, but at least long enough to finish the hot chocolate and be shown to a pallet full of stuff. Despite mostly trusting Chester and his people, and Lucy’s friendship with them, he was still glad to be back in their own bunker. He just couldn’t relax around other supernaturals, not completely.

“So, gonna be going after people again, huh?” Lucy asked.



“They’re not people if they’re preying on folks,” Callum said reflexively, then sighed. “It’s not really my favorite thing, but it sounds like the vamps are asking for it. I’ll want you to make sure that we’re being given real information, though. I really don’t like the idea of turning into a weapon to be pointed at some bozo’s enemies.” Lucy nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, will do,” she said.

“While you do that, I’ll finally furnish the house.”

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Constance Earl, head of the Department of Acquisition frowned at Supervisor Lane of the Department for Arcane Investigation. He was hurrying in the door to the meeting room some twenty minute past the hour, and she had no idea why he was late. The man barely did any work. With GAR cut down to bare bones everyone *should* be working double time but it seemed like the complete reverse. Only the most basic stuff was getting done, save for in her department.

“Now that we’re all here, we can begin,” said Magus Mavros, head of Archmage Affairs. His tedious barb at Lane went unanswered as the man didn’t seem to notice, taking a chair and scowling around at the rest of them. The heads of the various GAR departments didn’t need to meet too often, but under the circumstances it seemed a good idea.

“The Archmage Council is meeting soon and they want some plan of action,” Mavros told them. While there was no overall leader of GAR, Archmage Affairs was the conduit between the Guild of Arcane Regulation and the Archmages it nominally served. There were, of course, representatives for each of the races, though Shifter Affairs was looking uncomfortable with his post. “Considering the current crisis.”

“What exactly are we supposed to do? The Houses are the ones who are causing it to begin with,” the head of Supplies said. “Have Duvall put her network back and I might be able to get something done but until then — what, ask people to carry freight around?”

“If you have to!” Finances snapped back. Constance let their squabbling pass as she deliberately opened her folder and looked over her notes. Unlike some people, she had seen the current crisis coming even before Duvall had raised things to the boiling point.

Her fellow department heads were gathered around a large table in GAR Paris, where most of GAR’s services were still intact. Despite the comfortable chairs, the expensive coffee and pastries, and the view of Paris itself through arched windows, nobody seemed particularly happy. The issue was, for once, not even something they’d brought on themselves. Which meant nobody could be held responsible for it or even blamed for it.

So they squabbled. When they were finished their quarreling, she had something actually useful to contribute. While Constance wasn't part of the big inter-House politics as such, there were factions she was in close contact with thanks to her role as head of Acquisitions. Someone needed to take up the slack that GAR had left off.

"If you're quite done," Constance said at last, as Finances and Supplies wound down their sniping. "I do have some offers that should make our lives easier. There are some fae who have their own transport network they would allow us to use for a moderate consideration, for one."

"That would be excellent," Logistics said.

"I haven't heard anything about that," Fae Affairs said with a scowl.

"I know," Constance told him. "They've been operating closely with me and a number of Archmages in Faerie, instead." Her primary backer was actually a neutral party, not really backing either GAR or the new factions. At least officially. Unofficially, he had many fingers in many pies, given how much infrastructure he'd created.

"Don't you have better things to do?" Finance said suspiciously. "I know for a fact that we're seeing an uptick in supernatural related incidents and that should be *your* job. If you're going to be off playing with fae maybe—"

"Don't blame me for BSE's lack of personnel," Constance cut him off. "These people have actually *helped* with curtailing some of this sudden flurry of illicit activity. Unless you want things to get worse and run the risk of breaking into the open. I'm sure the Archmages will thank you for having to deal with a huge population of restive mundanes."

That shut him up. In fact, she had everyone's attention, so she allowed herself a small smile. The factions that had kept the more militant bent of GAR at the forefront of politics had mostly broken away, or been crippled by Archmage Taisen's formation of his own House. While the current crisis was severe, it was also an opportunity for those focused more on the inner workings of supernatural society to take charge.

"I have certain proposals here for undertaking the rebuilding of GAR," she said, opening the folder. "With and without the support of House Duvall. I recognize the value of returning our transportation network to functionality, but in case that isn't possible, there have to be alternatives. Not only that, I have some ideas for making the current spate of violence useful to us, rather than increasing our workload."

They talked it over for a solid two hours. The coffee, tea, and pastries vanished, slowly but surely, and in the end Constance walked away with almost every concession she wanted. More importantly, her backers wanted. Constance herself was happy with the

expansion of powers for the Department of Acquisition, though enforcement of that would be ticklish for a while.

It was time to focus more on the life and welfare of supernaturals anyway. Let Taisen worry about the portal worlds; GAR should serve the people who did real work. Like herself.

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“I can’t believe he was living *here*,” Grand Magus Lorenzo Rossi said, pacing around the small trailer house in Texas that his agents had located. The Guild of Enchanting had spent quite a lot of time and money on locating Callum Wells, and it was irritating to only miss him by fractions. Though by all accounts he was quite slippery, and it was unlikely he’d believe that Rossi only wanted to talk.

“We probably would have overlooked the area entirely if he hadn’t spent a lot of vis leaving,” Commander Graham said, bald head gleaming in the morning sunlight. “As it is, his vortex enchantments have done a good job degrading a lot of his signature. But it’s still definitely spatial.” The Commander handed over the signature analyzer, and Rossi gave it a cursory look. It registered as spatial, but he hardly needed that for confirmation they’d found Wells’ haunt. Only one mage would stick around in a dilapidated old dump like the one they’d found.

“Are there any functional versions of the vortex enchantment about?” He asked instead. While he was pretty sure he knew what Wells was using and why, nobody really used vis spirals that way. They ran the risk of disrupting the very enchantment they fueled. It’d be instructive to see if Wells had made any changes, considering how much he used the thing.

“We have a steel plate with a partial. It’s already decaying,” Graham told him. Rossi grimaced. It went against the grain to use mundane materials for enchanting at all, but it was obvious that Wells used it for the very reason that it didn’t last. “But we found something more interesting while searching the house.”

“Oh?”

Graham beckoned him over to a small evidence box set up on a table outside the house, which held a few square pieces of black material that glowed faintly to his mage sight. Rossi picked up one of the squares, noting that it was cracked partway through, and seemed to be glass. More importantly, the surface was a familiar piece of enchanting design, though strangely only a piece, not something that could sustain itself on its own.

He picked up a second one and found that it was similarly damaged, with a big chip in the middle of the enchanting design relief, but the notch-and-groove arrangement on the

edges meant the two tiles fit together. Perforce, so did the two components of enchantment, the edges fitting flush against each other. It was a fascinating construct, and he could immediately see the utility even if he didn't much like the execution.

"What *is* this? Enchanted glass?" He frowned as he turned the tiles over in his hands and then he blinked. "Wait, is this from Six?"

"I believe so, sir," Graham said.

"Well, *we're* sure not going to reproduce this," Rossi said. "But the fundamental idea is sound. Not what I would have expected given his poor enchanting skill." Though even as he said it, he realized it was exactly the sort of thing someone who could only copy enchantments would come up with. Chopping up the bits and pieces for reuse rather than trying to make a single coherent whole.

"There's very little else here, sir," Graham said. "Nothing that seems related to Wells' work."

"I would think not," Rossi said, regarding the dump of a house. "Which is a shame. This is very interesting, even if his technique is the worst I've ever seen." He turned the linked pieces of glass over in his hand again before putting them in the evidence box.

"If there's nothing else, you might as well recall your men, Commander Graham," Rossi said. "We'll have to get at Wells some other way." With the fracture of GAR the Guild of Enchanting no longer had ready agreements with either Alpha Chester's or Archmage Hargrave's factions, so he needed to negotiate with them anyway. It was an open secret that Chester could get in contact with Wells, so there might be a way to approach him from that quarter. He still hadn't given up hope of stopping the man from broadcasting Guild secrets all over the place.

Or of getting the services of a spatial mage not under the thrall of Duvall.