

Chapter 3-11 – Vacation

Treasure hunting was actually more fun than Callum had expected. Lucy operated the sub drone to get pictures before he swept over the wreck and starting pulling stuff out. He had to admit she was right about the thrill of pulling up old valuables, though most of it was buried under sediment. Unlike the time-frozen galleons of media, a real shipwreck was mostly decayed with only bits and bobs sticking out from the ocean floor.

After consulting with Chester's team, Callum realized that actually getting something with significant archeological value was more effort than it was worth. Those were enormous productions, with way too much documentation to properly falsify, so he had to skip some of the larger wrecks and look for something small but with a good amount of metal.

There were some small encrusted weapons, swords and a swivel gun, the iron banding of a chest collapsed around a couple pounds of silver coins, some ancient Spanish type, mixed with a few gold coins of the same era. Lucy sent the photos to the salvage team and annoyingly what they had found was not really worth all that much in the grand scheme of things. Maybe a hundred thousand, after fees and taxes and the salvage team's cut. Not at all bad for a couple day's work but far from the tens of millions he could theoretically pull if he really tried hard.

Of course, tens of millions would draw too much attention, so that was for the best. All things considered it was obvious why people didn't bother with salvaging stuff like that because just *finding* it without the kind of perception Callum had would cost thousands in time and equipment. It cost him a couple of afternoons at the beach.

"Can we keep some of these?" Lucy asked, pouring the few gold coins from hand to hand and letting them clink against each other. The silver, on the other hand, needed to be properly polished and cleaned. "They're just so cool!"

"I can hunt around for another wreck and just get some stuff for ourselves," Callum said with amusement. "I think you've converted me. Bullion is neat, but old coins just have a certain cachet."

"I don't know how you ever had fun without me, big man," Lucy said.

"I really didn't," Callum said. "It's up to you to provide it from now on. I hope you're ready for such a heavy burden."

"I'll do what I can," Lucy said gravely. "But it's an uphill battle."

Callum had never really considered himself a beach person but the little rental house they'd found was extremely nice, as were the surroundings. Cozy, even, though it was

all too tempting to sit around and do nothing. Even he felt the pull of the hammock despite his general restlessness.

On the other hand, swimming was good exercise, and it sure didn't hurt that Lucy looked amazing in a bikini. After all the stress it was nice to actually relax. Especially since the only supernaturals he'd sensed on the whole island were what seemed to be a shifter family on vacation. The ready supply of *really* fresh fruit was a great luxury, the quality of the local stuff far exceeding anything Callum had eaten before.

They didn't even have to worry about the most annoying part of a vacation: travel. With his extra portal anchor, it was incredibly easy to pop back and forth between Barbados and Texas, or really anywhere else they needed to go. Such as when the cut obsidian came back, packed in a big wooden crate with truly absurd amounts of padding. Which it needed, given the way the delivery company had manhandled the thing.

He and Lucy sat outside the rented house, and he enchanted the squares while she tested assembly and swapping them around. There wasn't all that much ambient mana in Barbados for the enchantments to function, but that was fine for the most part. If they really wanted it, he had his gut portal, and the larger-scale testing could be done later anyway. Best to start small.

They even had plans for a size-variable portal and teleport setup, though the core would still have to be metal. He wasn't sure how well that would work, and it wasn't like glass was all that portable in the end, but it was still neat to have. Admittedly his ability to extend his personal sphere of influence by portal anchor was far and away more flexible, but he had limits to his ability to multitask. Automation was good. Things that let Lucy handle magic were better.

"Yeah, I can *definitely* feel this stuff." Lucy waved her hand through the manifestation of mana above the tiles. It was just a small glamour, not really accomplishing anything since it merely obfuscated a small area above the actual enchantment, but it was proof of concept for a more involved assemblage of the tiles.

"Hmm, I think I can see that myself," Callum said, focusing on it with his spatial perceptions. Lucy's vis seemed to be deflecting the mana threads, more than just a normal material would. Or probably a normal person, but he hadn't tested that. Even Lucy could break his little threads, but the thicker tubes could survive that kind of contact. "I wonder if you could learn to adjust the inputs?"

"Uh, maybe? I dunno, big man, it's not like I can work up any spell forms or anything."

"Sure, but if it's just taking in mana, you only need to be able to activate it." Callum put down the tile he was holding. "Which I don't fully understand myself actually, since I'm

pretty much blindly copying other people's work. But there *is* a trigger, in uh. This type." He slid across one of the tiles.

"Right, I remember these." She traced her fingers over the fine lines raised up from the glass. "Well, I guess we can give it a try?"

Callum enchanted the trigger mechanism right then and there and slid it over to Lucy, who rearranged the tiles. The tiny glamour collapsed, and Lucy put her finger over the bit that was supposed to accept mage input, nose wrinkling as she concentrated. It was absolutely adorable.

"Give it a second to accumulate enough mana," he told her. He could force it by shoving vis in but he didn't want to mess up the experiment. "It's relatively thin out here and even a small glamour takes a bit to set up."

"Right," Lucy muttered, but if anything her nose only wrinkled more. Callum watched closely, in case he could help, but for him the control element of focuses hooked right into his normal vis manipulation so he'd never had issues. At least Lucy had gone through the children's primers recently so she knew how someone was supposed to start manipulating mana and vis.

After a few long minutes the glamor suddenly flicked into place and Lucy blinked. She waved her hand through it, since she couldn't actually see the magic threads, then grinned at him. He smiled back.

"Looks like I got it, big man. It's not easy, but there's a kind of a thing there. Not sure I can do more than turn something on and off, though."

"Hey, on and off is a good start," Callum encouraged her. "Don't sell yourself short. Means that you can turn on portals and defenses and things! That's going to make setting up the magical part of the bunker so much easier."

"Yeah!" Her eyes lit up as frustration turned to calculation. "Man that's going to be so much better if I can light switch wards or shields or something. Whatever we put together. I wonder if there's some way to just register me in?"

"I don't have anything like that yet, but I'm sure it exists. I mean, the mage tattoo stuff has to work somehow right?"

"Oof, don't remind me," Lucy said, rubbing her wrist. The tattoo was mostly gone, but he knew how much it hurt to get it ripped out through teleportation, even if it was a tiny bit at a time. He didn't like doing it any more than she did, but the thing was far too dangerous to leave in place.

“Maybe you can find me a target with some neat authorization wards I can crib from. They’ve got to have some way to attune people.” He was mostly talking to himself, but Lucy nodded along. “It can’t just be a tattoo and vis thing.”

“Some sort of token like the shifters do,” Lucy said. “All the tattoo stuff was kind of set up by House Fane, I’m pretty sure. You need a healing mage to get other vis mixed up with yours, right?” Lucy asked rhetorically. “But I know that Chester’s wards and so on all use tokens of various sorts, we can probably look at those. Wish I could get at the Enchanting Guild’s stuff though; I think they do most of the actual work.” Her words weren’t entirely organized but he agreed with the sentiment. There was a lot of knowledge out there that they just didn’t have access to.

“Aren’t they located in Faerie or something though?” After Shahey’s warning about how the denizens would know he was there, Faerie was pretty well off limits. Even a portal anchor was more of a risk than in other places because fae magic was *so weird*.

“Yep,” Lucy confirmed. “S’okay, though, since there’s still a bunch of House estates here on earth or in the Nightlands and Deep Wilds. I bet any one of those will have what we want.”

“Mm. I haven’t been going after the actual Houses since my issues are mostly with GAR, but I guess some unobtrusive surveillance isn’t out of the question.” House Fane was the obvious target, but they were also the ones most stirred up – but that was probably just his bias. Lucy only had access to the GAR emails, not the internal House communications, but even from that there was a lot of chaos.

There were obviously a number of grudges on a variety of sides that had broken loose. Some people had stopped coming to work, whether because of their House or to avoid opposing Houses. There were fae who had been recalled to their kingdoms or vampires to their nests. Lucy had even seen a few emails asking where someone was, like they’d vanished entirely.

So far her tap into the servers was undiscovered. She’d sent the video from Sen’s email address, spoofing his phone, and that was a dead end since Shahey had taken care of him. Or maybe not, Callum wasn’t sure what internet forensics were possible, but since everything Lucy did was completely disconnected from their physical location even a complete reveal would only be annoying at best.

For the moment they were clear, which meant for once he wasn’t just reacting to GAR’s nonsense. After Chester’s salvage crew fronted them half the theoretical take from the salvage, split evenly between him and Lucy, Callum actually paid for another few weeks at the Barbados rental house. Part of it was simply because it was very nice in Barbados and quite miserable in Texas, and it wasn’t like Lucy needed to be in Texas

for wireless access. Part of it was a more pragmatic reason — any potential lead their enemies might find would point back to Texas.

Lucy had a completely different idea of what to do with her share.

“Fie on your paranoia,” she said. “If you portal them over they won’t even know where they are! You can’t just ignore your knee and hope it gets better, since we can’t get a magical healer. Especially now.”

“It’s awful difficult to argue against that,” Callum said, rubbing at the knee in question. It wasn’t *terrible*, but it sure wasn’t great and walking on soft sand certainly didn’t help. So while he wasn’t a fan of roping in the Connors to take a look at it, Lucy ran him out of excuses before he could even start thinking of them.

“Great, then I’ll call ‘em up and we’ll send a drone over to Florida,” Lucy said, ruthlessly forging ahead. “It’s still pretty early.”

“You think they’ll have time?” Callum asked, though he pulled the drone out from his cave-cache and started checking its charge level.

“If not now, later,” Lucy said. “Not like there’s travel time to worry about.”

“True,” Callum admitted, and Lucy pulled up her VOIP program to make the call. As it turned out, they were, in fact, pretty well free. By this point he and Lucy had enough practice with transporting the drone around through his Alcubierre gravitykinesis that shuttling it over to Florida was a simple matter.

The Connors lived in a fairly well-to-do suburb, probably attending to retirees. Even so, there was a slight edge of shabbiness to their particular house. The fence not painted as recently, the grass not cut to the same specifications. He wasn’t sure if that was due to an overabundance of work for the Connors, or the reverse. All he’d heard vaguely from Lucy was that they were having banking issues and she’d resolved them, but money flow was something else. As he well knew.

“Sure, just go out into your garage,” Lucy said, nudging Callum with her elbow. “You’re headed somewhere warm, just step through the portal.” At her prompting, he opened the portal for the Connors, and he watched two familiar faces come through.

While they certainly looked less rumpled than when he’d seen them last, they also looked to have aged somewhat. There were some new worry lines, at any rate, but Danika smiled as Lucy greeted them cheerfully. Callum leaned on his cane and waved at them as they glanced around.

“Didn’t expect to see you again,” Leo said. “Tell you what though, your girl Lucy there is a lifesaver.”

“She sure is,” Callum agreed, looking over at Lucy, who flushed slightly and ducked her head. “She mentioned you were having issues, and not of the kind I specialize in solving,” Callum added, feeling more than a little awkward. “Glad to hear that got cleared up though.”

“Well, mostly,” Danika put in. “We did lose a bunch of business from supernatural-affiliated people, which was weird. You’d think they’d have magical healing.”

“Oh?” Callum waved for them to sit down on the little porch of the rented cottage, an awning shading them from the sun. “I mean, I know you were supposed to be left alone but I didn’t think it’d go that way. Though maybe I should have guessed, with fae.”

“No offense to you, but I haven’t been much impressed by the magical world I’ve seen so far,” Danika said, taking one of the indicated seats.

“No, I’m right there with you,” Callum said dryly. “It’s how I got this bum knee in the first place.”

“A torn ACL is no joke,” Leo said, all business. He seemed to have forgiven Callum’s high-handedness in the months since they’d last met. “You should have been seeing a specialist since the very beginning. Hopefully you haven’t done permanent damage, but even so you’ve probably added in a lot of unnecessary recovery time.”

“Yep, let me take a look at it,” Danika said, picking up the small medical bag she’d brought along. Thankfully it was warm enough that Callum was wearing shorts, and he suffered himself to be poked and prodded while Lucy chatted happily with Danika. He teleported out a couple cans of soda for the Connors in the meantime, who reacted appropriately.

“Okay, *your* magic is really neat,” Danika said. “Maybe a little scary when you think about it but still neat.”

Lucy had no trouble talking with the Connors while Danika and Leo traded off telling him what he needed to do to fix himself up, but Callum still felt detached. It might have been because they were there to see him in a profession capacity, or that he’d spent so much time isolated, or just because their previous encounters had been so odd. But Callum was worried there was something to the assertion that mages didn’t get along with mundanes. That maybe his hindbrain recognized they didn’t have magic and that made him uncomfortable.

So he forced himself to be sociable. The Connors seemed normal enough people and Lucy liked them, which was an endorsement itself. It helped that it seemed they knew what they were about, as Leo made him go through a series of exercises and gaits.

“You probably don’t need surgery,” Leo said. “You’re lucky, but it’ll still be months of exercise before you’re back to full use.”

“If you reinjure it somehow you need to visit a hospital right away,” Danika added. “You’re not young and you won’t bounce back quickly.”

“Mages are supposed to live longer, but it really doesn’t feel that way,” Callum sighed.

“Your injury is consistent with your age, anyway,” Danika agreed.

“So while we’re here, I wanted to bring something up,” Leo said abruptly, and Callum realized that some of the awkwardness was due to whatever Leo had been chewing over. “I’m glad you got us out of there, and I don’t want to deal with those monsters ever again, but it’s not like the magic stuff has really gone away, you know?” He shared a look with Danika.

“How do you mean?” He didn’t want to deal with them being harassed, mostly because he was enjoying *not* having to worry about supernatural tyranny for a bit.

“Just, you know, they’re around. You see them wandering about. Well, we do, now.”

“I do know what that’s like.” Callum was pretty sure they hadn’t developed the same glamour blindness that he had, because their *vis* was still completely mundane. More likely, they were being excluded from the normal fae glamour, possibly as part of whatever working it was that kept them shrouded. Or maybe just because fae liked messing with people. “Are they harassing you?”

“No, not at all. They ignore us, which is the thing.” Leo still seemed to be chewing on how to say it. “It’s a hard thing walking around pretending not to notice all this stuff. We kind of want to be all the way in or out. But from what I’m hearing it’s not really possible to be all the way out.”

“Not as such,” Callum said, considering. He didn’t really blame them, since he’d lived that way for years and it was quite a strain. If they simply moved, they ran the risk of GAR or someone messing with them, unless they had protection. “The only thing I can think of would be to see if Chester needs a nurse and a physical therapist,” he said, looking at Lucy. She shrugged.

“There *are* places without supernaturals, but not all that many I don’t think?” He looked at Lucy.

“I’d have to check on the details, but yeah, some places of the world have less influence than others. You’d have to move though. There’s not many places in the US where you can be *really* free of supernaturals.”

“So beyond that, I think you’ll have to tolerate it for now,” Callum told them. “There’s politics stuff going on that might make things easier in the future. At the moment, it wouldn’t be a good idea to draw attention.”

“Fair enough,” Leo said.

They didn’t stay too much longer after that, though the whole visit ended up being a couple of hours. He sent them back through a portal and double-checked that there was no fae attention before he recalled the drone. Lucy stretched and reclined in her chair, having the good grace not to be *too* smug about her victory.

Aside from the new exercises he had for his knee, there was actual work to keep him occupied. Which was fortunate, because he was already starting to get listless from taking it easy. He had a tendency to be workaholic and, even if having Lucy there helped curtail it, he felt weird taking it easy for so long.

The limitations of the rental house meant he couldn’t do enchanting metalwork, not without going back to Texas, but playing with the glass tiles was another matter. The two of them built elaborate logical chains of glamour and ward, though there were certain limits. The actual library of enchantments they had was small and according to Lucy it didn’t work from a strict set of interchangeable core components the way circuits did, so it wasn’t like they could build a magical circuit board. Even the simplest magical components did unique and specific things. But they *could* build a glamor or even a portal that could switch between different areas pretty quickly and easily.

“I really can’t wait for the bunker to be done,” Callum said. “Can’t really install any of this stuff while the workers are still there.”

“Weird to call it a bunker. It’s just a house. A house in the middle of nowhere, but still just a house.”

“A self-sufficient house,” he reminded her.

“Yeah, and I admit your water portal thing is neat. House estates usually run off mana directly but you can’t do that with phones and computers so I like your solution better.”

“It was pretty satisfying to put together,” he admitted. “Though now that it’s getting closer to done we need to think about actual defenses. I was hoping that I’d be able to use enchanting for that but most of what I’ve found needs someone with a different kind of vis to do the work. So we’re going to need mundane options, even though glamours and such make that less than ideal.”

“Hey, you did pretty good with those vamps and such with just mundane defenses,” Lucy said.

“That was just distance and surprise, which don’t really work for a house. Plus magic can slip around mundane stuff too much for my liking.” Callum shook his head.

“Anyway, wiring up security and stuff was a job for a professional, which I’m not. But maybe you can?”

“Hmm.” Lucy pursed her lips. “Normally I just do, you know, electronic security. Not *security-security*.”

“Yeah, and I don’t know how effective things would be against mages or whatever, but it’s better than nothing.” He shrugged, and Lucy nodded.

“Gonna need something more than deadbolts and alarms to deal with supernaturals though,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, I’ve been kind of thinking of that. I need either more bane ammunition, which I have no idea where to get and is probably expensive, or I need heavier weaponry.” Callum made a face. “Which makes me sound like some commando but I’ve seen guns *do* work on supernaturals, if you can hit them.”

“So, what. Hit up a military surplus?”

“Yeah, there’s all kinds of ordnance for sale all over the world if you really go looking. Normally you can’t keep that kind of stuff in your back pocket, but I don’t have that issue.”

“Oh man, I’d love to see the look on some vamp’s face when you pull out a tank,” Lucy said with a grin.

“Well I doubt we can afford a *tank*, but something.” The bane ammunition meant that he could deal with supernaturals like regular people, but there wasn’t much of it left and he was not exactly a marksman. His portals meant he generally didn’t need to aim physically, which was a massive cheat, and his spatial sense was far more precise than his vision. Taken together, he could adjust portal location and orientation with more finesse than he could use his hands.

Unless he was planning to snipe someone from further away than he could sense, he didn’t even need to be *holding* the gun. Which was good, because considering the sheer amount of talent and practice that level of marksmanship took he was never going to be an expert. Given that his particular talents eliminated the disadvantages of heavy, bulky, but powerful weapons, he could benefit from getting something large that could do real damage.

“I’ll never say no to new toys,” Lucy said with a grin. “Gimme a bit and I’ll find out where we can go to pick up some big heavy stuff.”

“It’s probably not possible to get some of that crazy new stuff I’ve seen, the automatic turrets and whatnot, but I don’t know that they’d work against supernaturals anyway,” Callum said. “But some weapons and maybe some of those whisker-laser tripwires maybe? We’ll have to see what’s available.” He was only vaguely aware of the finer points of military hardware. It wasn’t like he’d ever considered needing the stuff.

Apparently it wasn’t all that difficult to find the information, especially through some of the dark web sites Lucy had encountered in her prior life. There was even a page with pictures of all the merchandise, which meant he needed to do research. No point in getting stuff blindly.

At the same time, Callum did some local shopping. Not for guns or armor or anything of that nature, but for plants. Actually thinking about his bunker, and the fact that’d be done fairly soon, meant he needed things to go in the yard. Useful things, not decorations, so he got some young breadfruit trees in pots. He’d never even heard of stuff before, but the equator was not like where he grew up in West Virginia.

If nothing else, needing to plant a garden would give him an excuse to play with his faux gravity more. It’d worked extremely well to hurl rocks and lava, but it would be interesting if he could use it to pull chunks of dirt out of the ground. He *could* thread his vis into the ground, so it seemed possible that he could make a gravity shear field and just rip chunks out easier than trying to teleport solid matter.

Really, he needed to practice more in general. There was no substitute for repetition and the only real technique he’d been getting practice with was gravitykinesis. He’d barely done anything with his home-brewed spatial expansion, for example, though he didn’t know what use it had aside from water-grenades. Which wasn’t an excuse to let it languish.

He and Lucy rented a small boat, a runabout with a tiny deck, so he could be certain any magical weirdness would be far from incidental notice, and he kept a portal open for Lucy’s wifi while he shaped vis. While he had made a little exercise routine for himself, Lucy helped by taking notes. There was a big difference between just pushing himself magically, and actually quantifying volume, duration, and speed of making various constructs. He also got a firm radius on his perceptive sphere, sitting at one thousand, nine hundred sixteen feet and some handful of inches. The edge was a little fuzzy, tapering from full detail to nothing over six or eight inches.

It was an insane amount of volume to cover, and the linear distance alone was nothing to scoff at. It was actually far enough that it took him a moment to string his vis from one edge to the other, even when there was nothing obstructing him. While there was no such thing as too much range, he was probably near the point of diminishing returns, especially since there was certainly a maximum volume he could reasonably view.

While he played with vis he also practiced shrinking his perceptive sphere, trying to get more accurate with reducing his maximum range. Turning it off was easy, and pulling it back to about half was not hard, but trying to set it to a specific distance was nearly impossible. At least, for the moment. He had no idea if trying to achieve finesse there would lead to improvements elsewhere, but it was worth trying while he was working on everything else.

That everything else included trying to get a start on cross-world portals. Not that he had even the slightest idea what made the portal world portals themselves capable of that, but he'd seen them so he could start trying to assemble something similar. It probably wouldn't work, but he might get hints.

"I swear, this looks like some scene from some cheesy action movie's training montage," Lucy said, amused.

"I suppose it is a little silly," Callum admitted. He was doing pushups while holding several blobs of seawater with gravitykinesis. It was partly to help with multitasking, though he was doing fairly well on that front anyway, and partly because he had to do *some* exercising when he was out on the boat. He'd already done the knee therapy for the day so it was upper body time anyhow.

"I didn't say to stop," Lucy said, her voice sly. Callum snorted and continued the exercises. He even badgered her into joining, since it was better to start good habits whenever possible. Lucy made faces but eventually succumbed.

It took another week or so for Lucy to figure out exactly where and how they would be getting their weaponry, which was not some awful black-market bunker full of toughs as Callum had imagined. It was just an open-air display out somewhere in eastern Europe with quite a few people wandering around. Even with that, Callum kept the glamour up while they were there, since he hardly trusted people shopping for heavy ordnance. He didn't even drop it as such, just expanded it to include the salesman when they wanted to get something.

Fortunately for him, everyone there was fine with the currency he had, which made the transactions simple. They didn't get anything as absurd as explosives, because there was no way he'd be able to handle those without blowing himself up, but they *did* get a wide variety perimeter sensors and an antimaterial rifle. The last was hilariously expensive, as was the incendiary-explosive ammunition that went with it, but he'd seen how tough supernaturals were.

He also, after consideration, got a number of tear gas cannisters. Since supernatural senses were stronger than human ones, the stuff might well work *better* on them. Or

not, since they might be less susceptible to the irritants. Either way, they were less dangerous than explosives and he could probably use them to good effect.

Lucy got a pistol and rifle of her very own, though it'd take some practice for her to be comfortable with them. While he still had a bunch of weaponry he'd confiscated from the vamps, most of it was just too large for her frame. She could use it, but since they were there he figured it was worthwhile for her to get something she really liked.

Rearmed and refreshed, they only needed to wait for the bunker house to be done, which was still weeks away thanks to weather delaying some of the construction. In the meantime they'd be looking more at what was going on with GAR and what the two of them needed to address. He would not at all be surprised to find that GAR's floundering and flailing had revealed more problems, beyond things like Ravaeb and the Department of Acquisition, but there was only so much he could do.

One thing at a time.