

Chapter 4-2 – Déjà vu

The first thing Callum did was go looking for more mordite.

There was no reason to suffer any vampire to live, in his opinion. Not on Earth. While he had nothing to say about their behavior in the Night Lands, on Earth they preyed on people and that could *not* be borne. Every vampire left alive was condemning people to death. But Callum wasn't physically or mentally capable of actually wiping out every vampire nest on Earth, and going after this one or that one in particular felt somewhat wrong. But given a target and a reason he *had* to act.

Chester had provided both, in the list of nests that had made themselves conspicuous by consumption. Creating thralls was killing people even if the body lived, and thralls themselves were more of an accident than a thing of calculated purpose. So they had supplied the reason, and Callum needed to deal with it. But he wasn't going to go in half-cocked. He was making sure he was *absolutely* prepared.

His experience with Ravaeb had shown him that normal weaponry had an effect, but he would need artillery to deal with anything of real power. An ancient vampire probably couldn't retaliate in quite the same way a fae king could, but might well be equally as tough. Buying artillery wasn't completely off the table – the black market where he'd gotten his antimateriel rifle had featured a few pieces – but the care and feeding of something like that was so difficult that bane ammunition was a better idea.

He knew there were ammunition manufacturers somewhere who could do custom work for him, whether it was by tipping or cladding larger calibers with the stuff, or by making the entire bullet out of either pure mordite or an alloy. Mordite acted like a normal metal, so that was easy enough to deal with, though he was still trying to figure out how the other bane materials were turned into bullets. Just in case. At least with Callum's abilities he didn't need thousands of rounds.

Some of the salvaged enchantments that Chester provided were a mordite alloy, but it really wasn't very much. Callum actually felt that his best bet would be to go back to the Night Lands — he knew what he was looking for there, and with the portal anchor and drone he could cover more territory faster. The portal anchor wasn't really susceptible to being stung by stirges, either, so he could take his time and make sure he got every last bit from any cenote he ran across.

"This is kind of boring," Lucy said, watching the feed from the drone. The approach to the Night Lands had been nigh identical to the first time he'd gone, only slightly complicated by some roving jammer fields and additional personnel. Even if they could see his tiny threads, they couldn't see them when they were inside walls or floors. Callum had spent a good hour or two just studying the portal itself, not only sketching its structure into CAD

but getting a feel for it. He didn't have solid grasp of how they worked, but with two world portals transcribed he had a better understanding of what he was looking at. He knew it wouldn't happen soon, but he took his agreement with Shahey seriously. Only once he was satisfied with his study did they actually breach the portal.

They'd been through and outside of the Night Lands settlement in less than two minutes.

"You'd think a land of eternal night populated by vampires would be exciting and chock full of ancient ruins or something, not an empty desert," she added.

"It's the shifting you have to watch out for," Callum told her. "That's what makes it weird and dangerous."

"So if there *were* any ruins, they'd be gone," Lucy said.

"According to one of the books, you have to have some kind of light to keep things from shifting. So yeah, I guess the moment things go dark any ruins would just vanish."

"What about the drone? Will it get shifted away too?" Lucy asked. She was piloting the drone herself, sending it zipping through the air. Callum was focused almost entirely on his senses, while Lucy looked for anything that might be a cenote in the low light of the enormous moon.

"Not so long as I've got a vis box around it," Callum said. "Now, that's a guess but it's a pretty good one. The light thing may actually only be the case if it's *magical* light, but the space twisting didn't affect me personally. Just everything around me."

"Well, either way I'd rather be here than there," Lucy said, leaning back in the new, very comfortable, padded chair placed in the sunny living room of the bunker house. Most of the beautiful handmade furniture was placed, with more on the way. He'd designed the living room to be open and airy and that was already paying dividends. The difference between being cramped into the trailer and having a real space to stretch was night and day.

"Yeah, there's not much to recommend it."

"There's not even— wait, what the heck is that?" Lucy leaned forward to stare at the screen, and a moment later what she was referring to came into his perceptions. They were way out away from the settlement, the better to find cenotes without attracting any attention, and for the first time Callum saw evidence that there was some truth to the reasoning behind the mage draft.

There was an enormous insectile monster almost fifty feet high and twice that long ambling along a ridge. It was a strangely angular thing, with a slate-grey, slab-sided body

from which projected a myriad of crystalline legs. The eyeless head had mandibles larger than a person, which twitched as it clicked its way along the rocky ground.

“Now, *this* is a good reason to have a portal world defense force,” Callum said. “Let’s not tempt fate and risk an anchor.” Lucy nodded agreement, and they sent the drone off away from the thing. After Lucy had snapped a few pictures.

It took a while to find a cenote, even with their speed and perspective, but pilfering from it was comically easy. Even though stealing mordite stirred up the wildlife, they just whisked the drone and anchor off and away before any of the animals could get the idea to even look for it. Unfortunately, not only were the cenotes rare, they didn’t yield all that much raw material.

Lucy decided to make a day of it, bringing him a surprise picnic lunch while he was taking a break from concentrating on the little mordite marbles. They snacked on sandwiches in chairs on the tropical lawn while navigating the Night Lands. Gathering weapons materials while safe and comfortable was oddly relaxing for something of such dire import.

Judging by the few bane bullets he had left, the alloy that was used in them was something like ten percent mordite, so even if he was going for double that it only took a few cenotes to acquire enough for a reasonable amount of bullets. A process that made him aware he was somewhat lucky to find one as quickly as he had, the first time. Lucy rattled them in the plastic container they were using.

“Doesn’t look like much, big man.”

“Yeah, but check this out.” He pulled his bottle of cenote water from where it was stored in the cave, only to find that it was just ordinary water. The magic had left it at some point, which explained at least why they didn’t ship it out to Earth. “Oh, never mind. I guess it doesn’t work on this side of the portal.” Lucy raised her eyebrows at his non-explanation.

“It looks like it’s liquid under the glow of Night Lands water,” he explained. “Next time I’ll siphon off some so you can see.”

“That does sound neat,” Lucy admitted. “But it just looks like metal now.”

“Just as well. That way it doesn’t raise any suspicions,” he said, and put the lid on the box of mordite marbles. He had a small crucible out back and some ingots of ammunition-appropriate lead alloy, so despite how much it hurt to use precious bane material for something other than enchanting, he headed outside and started the alloy process. A small test batch showed that the alloying process ended up with a loss in magical potency relative to the ratio of the metal. The end result was something with a magical signature partway between the vampire’s original bane bullets and what he’d been aiming for. Presumably the bane effect was of similar strength.

“Gonna make a lot of bullets,” Lucy said, watching him pour the metal from the crucible into the ingot molds. He was using a smaller variant of his lava technique, forcing the metal to slowly rise upward into a portal feeding directly to the top of the ingot mold.

“Hopefully more than we need. I really don’t want to go on some kind of rampage,” Callum said.

“Pretty sure nobody wants that,” Lucy said. “You’re already pretty scary in the magical world, mister Ghost.”

“I don’t like just letting vampires go either,” Callum grumped. “But it’d take way more bullets than I could ever get to deal with them.” He sighed. “Anyway, speaking of The Ghost, I assume there’s still a price on my head. How hard are they looking for me?”

“Officially? I think they’ve got one team but it’s kind of in name only. If you show up somewhere they’ll probably come after you but I’m not seeing much chatter about hunting you down right now. Mostly they have other concerns.”

“If they were smart, they’d take the opportunity to reform their policies,” Callum said. “But I doubt they will. Not for a while, anyway. It’s going to take time for Chester’s group to put real pressure on them.”

“To be fair, I don’t know how they can reform with vamps,” Lucy said, and Callum nodded. Though apparently vampires could survive on moonwater within the confines of the Night Lands, its potency drastically decreased in the scarcer mana of Earth. Actual vampirism was still an option in the Night Lands themselves, and even stronger there. Callum imagined the old vampires over on that side of the portal were truly monstrous.

Still, unless they could perform the kind of nonsense that fae magic allowed they were not exactly a threat to him. They could move as fast as they wanted, be as strong as they wanted, and since he wasn’t there they could do nothing. It wasn’t like he could be any more wanted by the supernatural authorities. The only reason they weren’t really actively looking for him was because the only way to track him was through his own failures. Or Chester, but he was a completely different thorn for GAR.

Lucy found a manufacturer out in Utah who was willing to work with supplied material, and the pair of them made a quick run to drop it off. He was certain that Chester probably could have dug someone up, but considering how much they were already relying on Chester for things, Callum wanted to diversify. It would be far too easy to just become an adjunct rather than his own agent.

The project would take a few days, but that was fine. While they were technically moved in, with the furniture arranged, there was always more tidying up to do, and Callum’s magic only helped so much when it came to planting the back garden. Or sweeping up,

for that matter, and if there was a cleaning enchantment in the books he'd copied from the Fane household he hadn't run across it yet.

In the meantime, Lucy had checked dug into GAR reports and found three vampire nests that had noticeably expanded their ranks of thralls and so had exposed themselves. Some of them had even increased their number of vampires, but that was importation from the Night Lands. Even though he knew it intellectually, sometimes Callum had to remind himself that vampires couldn't turn ordinary people. Though making thralls was bad enough.

"This feels like real spy stuff," Lucy said, sprawled in the early morning sunshine on the back patio and poking at a tablet as they monitored one of the nests in question. Callum had no desire to repeat the attack on Ravaeb, which had not been as clean and effective as he wanted. By preference there would be no collateral damage, no witnesses, and no survivors. Ravaeb's assassination had broken his streak, but that just meant he had to be even more careful.

"We do have certain advantages," Callum admitted. He'd installed a few of Lucy's monitoring boxes around the Madrid nest and while neither of them spoke Spanish the actions of the nest were obvious enough. As stereotypical as it was, they seemed to be involved in organized crime, preying on trafficking victims. Which meant Callum had already transported several would-be dinners or thralls out of their grasp and over to a nearby police station. It probably wasn't enough, but there was only so much he could do.

Despite the obvious differences, the entire setup felt a lot like what he'd seen the very first time he'd dealt with vampires. A building full of men with guns, with a smaller number of vampires, and a mage for defense. The only real change was that one of the vampires was obviously in charge, rather than it just being an undifferentiated group of supernaturals.

He'd stuck with shotgun slugs for the mordite rounds, because he just wanted something that did maximum damage at point blank range. Besides, he still had plenty of shotguns from his initial raid, having carried the weapons from cache to cache. The manufacturer had done an excellent job, delivering ammunition that was to his eye indistinguishable from commercial rounds, but Lucy made additional versions of the remote gun trigger just in case.

Now that he'd had more experience with mages, he was grateful the first one he'd dealt with had been at the bottom of the rung. The more trained and more powerful ones could throw out a shield that stopped multiple ton boulder impacts, let alone a falling chunk of wood. Judging by the vis bubble the mage monitoring and helping the vampires in

question wasn't much stronger, so he actually wasn't worried about whoever it was interfering.

Not that he was going to let the mage go back to whatever they were doing. The mage was there aiding and abetting something absolutely terrible, even if they wasn't holding the trigger themselves, as it were. Accordingly he had a simple plan to deal with them — a flashbang, and then a gravity-accelerated rolled steel joist that he'd picked up at a scrapyard. Metal mages were rare enough that he was pretty certain none of them would be stuck with scutwork like monitoring wards.

The second round of vampire assassinations went almost entirely without drama. There was no time crunch, no worry about physically transporting himself from site to site. He had enough portal anchors that he could use one for each nest; New York, Madrid, and San Francisco, in that order. Like Madrid, the New York nest got most of its victims through human trafficking, which made a grim kind of sense, and he'd arranged for an anonymous tip to the authorities through Lucy after he took care of the supernaturals. In San Francisco, they simply kidnapped vagrants and homeless, so there was less that could be done on the mundane side.

An RSJ moving at a hundred-plus miles per hour was enough to deal with the mages. He was actually surprised, and glad he didn't have to go with the other options he'd set up just in case that wasn't enough. There was just a huge difference between dealing with prepared Archmages and specialists, and ambushing the dregs.

The vampires, even the ones that were still awake, were practically helpless. Of course, he conducted the raids during the day, early morning in San Francisco and afternoon in Madrid. He had four shotguns set up by remote, which meant he could multitask on targets, especially since he wanted to recover the slugs for recycling. The bane shots were absolutely devastating, stripping away all the supernatural toughness of the vampires and resulting in horrendous amounts of damage.

It was horrible. He was glad that he didn't have to experience it with his other senses, and equally grateful he *wasn't* inured to it. He didn't want to turn into some cold-blooded psychopath.

He was equally glad that he hadn't performed the entire operation from his house. Callum could just imagine trying to relax in the sofa and having flashbacks to executing vampires en masse. The two of them were in the cave-cache, which at least *felt* more suited to dark and dirty business, and was something he wasn't actually *in* most of the time.

Unlike House Fane, there weren't any innocents involved with the vampires, no children or menials whose future or life savings might be bundled up with the cache of money and materials. He looted their vaults, though he restricted himself to actual money, gold, bane

materials, and weapons, which he piled up in the corner of the cave. There was probably more wealth in objects d'art or furniture, but Callum didn't have the time or energy to spare on that. He just wanted what he could use himself.

The three hits left every last vampire there dead, along with their attendant mages, but he left the thralls alone. Callum had been told that they weren't really people anymore, or something of that nature, but they were obviously victims. In the cold clarity of deliberate action, he could not and would not target people whose only crime was being abused by supernaturals.

Unfortunately, there were a lot of thralls.

"That's going to be a heck of a lot of arrests, big man," Lucy said, the drone perched on the building opposite the New York vampire nest showing a long series of flashing light as police cars and emergency vehicles pulled up. When an anonymous tip included a live feed of gunfire and dead bodies, it was taken a little more seriously. "The BSE folks are not going to enjoy cleaning it up."

"The original mess is theirs to begin with," Callum said. "Letting in these monsters and then aiding their depravity."

"Can't really argue with that, just that it's a big mess that involves a lot of normal people." Lucy shrugged. "Like, aren't you worried about the blowup if you expose the supernatural world somehow? I don't think most people would really believe it and there might be Archmages or Fae Kings who come out to stomp on the news, but it could happen."

"I'm not that worried about it, because in the end this isn't *that* much different from a normal criminal organization," Callum said. "But it is a worry. I'm not sure how much I agree with keeping the whole thing secret to begin with, but I cannot begin to imagine the violence that would ensue if the entire supernatural world were revealed. That's something more complicated than I'm qualified to deal with."

"Yeah, more than anyone is, but you might have to start thinking about it," Lucy told him. Callum sighed and rubbed his eyes.

"You know, I just wanted to be left alone," He mused. "Things have gotten a little out of hand." Lucy barked a laugh.

"I'll say! We might want to give a thought to slowing down here, let things work themselves out," she suggested. "Maybe pause to reassess and figure out how to deal with things for real and not just piecemeal."

“That would be preferable,” Callum agreed. “I can’t ignore some things, and I’ll have to act if I see them. But if people would stop *poking* me then maybe we could all get our bearings.”

“We have lost more of my people in the past two years than the last century,” the Master of Weltentor said, his voice cold and hard. Much like the room Constance was in, with stone walls and stone floors and blue magelights to illuminate gray raspwood furniture. The trees of the Night Lands didn’t actually yield a particularly good wood, but it was expensive and the crowded office demonstrated an appreciable outlay. “Is *anything* going to be done about it?”

“Do *you* have an idea of how to find Wells? The Ghost?” Constance asked tartly. Beside her, the Head of Vampire Affairs stirred uncomfortably, but didn’t add anything. The woman was frankly useless, put in place by the same forces that were behind Archmage Corrilon. Even Constance wasn’t sure exactly which Houses were part of the club, though she could guess it was the oldest ones. Her own backers moved in the same circles. There were a number of Archmages whose Houses predated GAR itself, yet they didn’t have enough direct power or responsiveness to shape things like BSE and DAI.

“It is not my function to police the human world,” Weltentor replied. “It is GAR’s.”

“Yet it is not *every* vampire nest that is being attacked, only those who are vastly exceeding their allotted behavior,” Constance said. “I am hardly in sympathy for those who are taking advantage of our present enforcement issues. All of them were in violation of GAR law.”

“You are saying you will just let it lie.” It wasn’t a question.

“I am saying that you have to accept the realities of the situation,” Constance said. “Don’t want to draw the attention of the Ghost? Don’t exceed the quotas that Acquisition allows. Those limitations exist for a reason.”

Weltentor frowned at her, but didn’t reply. Constance wasn’t exactly pleased by the damage that Wells had wreaked, and it was a flat out lie to say that they had exceeded their quota. She had given them tacit permission to expand as a reward for targeting certain other factions, but Weltentor didn’t have to know that. Nobody did; not when she could use it as a cudgel to replace some of the missing hard power.

People tended to listen when the alternative was turning up dead.

“At the same time, I’m aware that these issues can’t go completely unaddressed on our end,” Constance said. There had to be some carrot to go with the stick. When Vampire Affairs failed to take the obvious cue, she nudged the woman with her elbow.

“Ah! Yes.” The reedy mage with oversized spectacles jerked to attention. “GAR is issuing a number of additional emigration slots for you to use. Allowing you to renormalize your numbers much sooner.” It was also, effectively, a bribe. The Master of Weltentor was the opposite side of the Head of Vampire Affairs; a representative rather than any actual ruler. The extra numbers meant more he could profit from.

“We do not have infinite population to draw from. New vampires appear as they appear, and only some of them come to us,” Weltentor said. Constance said nothing. Vampire Affairs made some conciliatory noises but nothing concrete. Finally Weltentor tilted his head, conceding the point.

“If steps are taken to see that this does not repeat, there is a certain pool of fresh blood that is eager to step out from the Night Lands,” he said.

“Excellent. The best steps to take would be to refrain from violating any of GAR’s laws. As I said, they are there for a reason. Only those who draw attention to themselves run the risk of being targeted,” she lied. Nobody had any real control over Wells’ attentions except perhaps Alpha Chester, who was absolutely in contact with him. None of the vampire nests that had been targeted were at all in contention with Chester though, so it was hardly like The Ghost could be considered an agent of the new alliance.

The meeting didn’t last too much longer. Once Vampire Affairs turned over the papers for the extra allotment, Weltentor was just as glad to be rid of them. Overall, Constance was pleased, and not just because she hadn’t needed to make any extra concessions. Turning a potential issue to her advantage was always a delightful trick, and she was rapidly becoming the de facto first among equals of the various department heads at GAR.

Even though Wells was beyond her control, she could still use him as a club, a bogeyman to threaten people with and ensure they stayed under her thumb. Or at least, the thumb of GAR. His actions were very predictable in a certain way, even if there was no telling where or when he would strike. Which just made him even more effective for a phantom police.

Constance returned to her suite in Paris, small but tastefully appointed with gifts from friends and in thanks for favors done, and penned a few notes to people of import. After having her email compromised she was somewhat suspicious of the entire GAR network. The girl that they’d used to lure Wells out was apparently familiar with electronic networks, so Constance expected that she still had access. Nobody with any sense trusted the

networks anyway, and anything of *real* import was hand-written and hand-delivered, to be disseminated among the Houses and Old Fae through their own channels.

She sipped a fine Night Lands vintage while she worked. While the vampires themselves were indifferent to the culinary arts, the Houses that lived there had created a unique wine from a rare variety of native berry and moonwater, lending a pleasant mana-rich tingle to the liquid. It had been one of the little sundries that her friends among the new guard had supplied in appreciation for her services, a benefit she enjoyed very much.

There was to be another meeting, a similar one, with King Atreus and Fae Affairs, considering what had happened to Ravaeb. She expected that to be significantly different in tenor. While some of the fae kings were cautious about someone who could remove Ravaeb so easily, many of them simply took gleeful delight in the Ghost's destruction of one of their peers. Which didn't mean that they wouldn't use the incident to squeeze GAR for what they could. Atreus himself was one of her backers' close allies, so it was going to be more congenial overall.

Not that any GAR's troubles were any personal worry anyway. The so-called concessions only further cemented the power of her faction, moving authority from some of the departments to her own. Which was all to the good, since *someone* had to pick up the pieces and keep GAR from fragmenting.

Even Wells was doing his part, though he didn't know it.

Ray Danforth stood in line with the rest of Archmage Taisen's forces as the House Hargrave healer came through and gave each of them a refresh. He actually recognized the girl as the one who'd been involved with Wells way back at the beginning of the current troubles. It was a small world.

She stopped in front of him and gave him a smile as her vis flicked out to touch his bubble, and the familiar feeling of magical healing flowed through him. Ray wasn't actually injured; even in sparring it never went far enough to break through shields. Humans were far more fragile than something like a shifter or a vampire and the titanic forces mages could wield meant that anything that broke a shield would probably kill the target. But regular magical healing kept people healthy and alert, which was Taisen's goal.

"Thank you," he said, and the girl nodded at him before moving onto the next mage. Despite being among the combat mages, Danforth was, fortunately, not actually expected to sally forth himself. Taisen mandated everyone drill regularly, but he and Felicia both had been given something closer to their old job.

Once healed, they all returned to Garrison Seven by way of a portal — one of the BSE's old breaching portals, fueled by vis crystal charges for the transport. With the teleportation network both untrustworthy and unavailable, the only real way to use spatial enchantments was to repurpose portal devices, despite being energy hungry and lacking any way to verify who and what was going through in the way the old teleport system did.

It was also the only way to transport the growing number of mages who had removed their tattoos. All of Taisen's forces had taken theirs off, and Ray had followed suit. It was effectively a permanent break from GAR, but Taisen had bluntly informed them of the dangers of anything that bypassed their vis exclusion.

Deep beneath the Antarctic ice, Archmage Taisen had created a sprawling complex and fortified fallback position in case of anything truly horrendous. Before the events of the past couple years, Ray would have thought that was unnecessarily paranoid. Now, he well understood what had driven Taisen to make it.

The structure was similar to the way things were built in the Night Lands, with glamour-paintings instead of windows and plenty of light, a fairly comfortable place to live despite its location and purpose. The mages all scattered to their various tasks as they emerged from the portal, and Ray strode down the carpeted hall to the apartment complex. He turned off at the one he shared with Felicia, letting himself in and getting a wave from Felicia herself.

"Find anything?" He asked her, crossing over to the table and taking a seat next to her.

"There are some hints," Felicia admitted, passing a few aged reports over to him. They had been tasked with finding any hints of illicit supernatural settlements, or just things that might have slipped past the guards at each of the Portal Worlds. Since Wells had demonstrated *he* had no trouble bypassing the protections, Taisen presumed others could, too.

It was a thankless task of combing through ancient paperwork, but it turned up more evidence of supernaturals living outside the aegis of GAR than Ray had thought. Even though BSE and the DAI should have caught these things, they clearly hadn't. Or, perhaps more worryingly, they'd likely been covered up with a few bribes here or there, or the hints to rank and file that they needed to ignore anything above their station.

The only saving grace was it didn't seem likely that any of the horrors from the portal worlds that Ray had seen during his service had snuck through. They didn't use glamour, and a thirty-foot, bright blue wyrcat with serrated fangs would be obvious even to mundanes. But vampires and fae were cleverer. He wasn't sure about shifters; if they had gone anywhere it was somewhere populated sparsely enough that nobody was around to notice or report strange happenings.

Not surprisingly, at least in hindsight, a lot of the suspicious activity was in the areas of Earth that GAR had neglected. As mage-centric as the institution was, located mostly in Europe and China and the US, there were enormous swaths of land that were supposedly uninteresting to supernatural races. With no GAR support and no nearby portals, there would be less mana and it'd be less habitable for any supernatural who might go wandering.

South America, Africa, India. Those all lacked anything but the most cursory supervision and the issue was exacerbated by the language barrier. Aside from a few fae with unique gifts, there was no such thing as universal translation and while most mages were multi-lingual simply due to age, there were limits. Ray could speak most of the Germanic and romance languages to some degree of proficiency, but that only covered so much.

"We should talk to Archmage Wizzy about this South America stuff," she said, tapping one of the folders. "If we can get at him. He'd know if it was anything worth looking to. Or if it's from Portal World Six. The idea that nothing comes out of there should really be looked at again."

"There's no way he's guarding that portal for no reason," Ray agreed. "Not just because he doesn't want people going in. I've never been myself, and I don't know anyone who has."

"And we can't trust GAR about it," Felicia agreed.

"We'll have to be careful," Ray said. "There's no telling what we could stir up." The last time they'd been working on some unknown case, they'd found themselves up against Wells. Wells hadn't seemed interested in them, but there was no guarantee that would hold for anyone else. Given how much damage one rogue mage could do, he didn't want to see what would happen if more rogues started popping up.