

Chapter 16 – Foreshocks

Callum spent almost a week putting magical threads into portal world metals. It felt like he'd slowed down on that front, taking longer the more experience he'd gotten, but there were reasons. His new enchantments were more complex, with actual trigger potions, and far better made than his earlier stuff.

The designs were still being made by CNC, though. Lucy had found an appropriate machine shop in Mexico, very far from the cave cache, and while the shop had fleeced him on the costs the work was good enough. Four portal pairs and a very large teleportation pad for Jissarrell, the latter of which necessitated another trip into the fae enclave.

The second time around he made sure take a deeper and longer look at some of the spatial weirdness involved. Not only did he want to be able to do that kind of thing himself, but if he was going to start working on portal world connections he needed to expand his mind. The portals he'd seen were all different and he would definitely study them again, but there wasn't anything obvious about how and why they cut between worlds.

He knew that some of what he was seeing was just fae weirdness, since waterfalls plunging straight out of redwood-sized oaks into pools larger than the roots framing them were not an aspect of normal Earth terrain. At the same time he was more than willing to learn from people who had been warping reality for longer than he'd been alive. So long as he did the learning on his own terms at least.

Jissarrell appeared in the same glade that they'd met the first time, for certain values of meet. There was nothing there but grass and trees, not even other fae. The king was the only person within Callum's prodigious range, despite some obvious dwellings in trees and below the ground.

"So long as the magic is kept within the bounds of this wood, it will not be detectable," Jissarrell said, producing a sphere of dark, striated wood the size of a basketball from nowhere in particular. So far he hadn't remarked on Callum's use of the transmitter box, taking it completely in stride. Considering the sylvan surroundings that seemed strange, but perhaps it was just the reputation of the Ghost helping things along. "As long as there is no seam or crack, of course," he added.

"Of course," Callum said. It was pretty typical, there being some kind of catch. That was just how fae magic worked, he was pretty sure, but that was the kind of restriction he could manage. "I have your teleportation plates ready, as specified." Jissarrell had wanted them large enough for a horse, which was bigger than Callum had made before but only took a little extra enchanting material, and not even the good stuff.

He popped the plates out onto the grass, and Jissarrell let the wooden sphere fall. Callum caught it before it hit the ground, teleporting it off to a remote location through the makeshift portal nexus. There was no way he was going to trust the wooden ball. He was sure it would do what Jissarrell said it would, but he would bet that it wouldn't do one ounce more. He'd borrowed a small pocket in the earth, something too small to even be called a cave, in the northern Appalachian Mountains for the purpose.

"Pleasure doing business with you," Callum said.

"I look forward to seeing what the Ghost has planned," Jissarrell said. Callum recalled the communication box and anchor and let out a long breath.

"He is a little creepy," Lucy said. She'd been able to see his living-bark face from her own laptop, where she'd mirrored and recorded the exchange. "Kinda like a movie effect of some sort."

"Yeah," Callum agreed. "I'm actually a little weirded out that he doesn't seem to actually *care* I killed his subjects. Either he's really good at hiding a grudge, or he's completely inhuman."

"Fae king," Lucy reminded him.

"Yeah. Weird to think about, but yeah." Callum shook his head. "Well, we're done with him for now. Time to start working on the hidey ball he gave us."

"*Hidey ball*," Lucy said and giggled. "Don't worry, I'll have my shooty bit ready for your hidey ball soon enough."

"Shouldn't that be my line?" Callum asked, and Lucy snorted.

She closed out the conferencing program and opened up a file to get back to her own work. She'd made a remote fire mechanism for the antimaterial rifle, but was still debugging it, a process as arcane to him as his abilities were to her. Ultimately it'd probably be better to replace the entire firing assembly with something custom made, but for the moment Lucy had a device that literally just pulled the trigger. Which sounded easy, but making sure the timing was tight and consistent required a bit more finesse.

His part was the ball, and that meant doing something that he'd only ever had middling success with: tearing apart something solid with teleportation. Doing so with tiny bits of flesh was hard enough, and wood was even more difficult. Fae wood, doubly or triply so. Teleporting out a pea-sized chunk of wood from the center of the sphere he'd been provided knocked him flat for an entire day.

Which brought a lot of fussing from Lucy, something he didn't entirely dislike. She had a point that he wasn't by himself anymore, and he didn't need to just go off and do things by himself — and by corollary, risks he took weren't just his to bear. But he couldn't think of any other way he could have done it, and he had yet to find any particular risk in exhausting his vis other than having to rest.

Once he'd recovered, it was simple enough to open a tiny portal and drill through it to start removing material from the inside of the wood. He kept the shavings, though he had no idea what he'd do with them, and taped a portal anchor into the cavity he'd scraped in the ball. Callum really would rather have made a proper fixture, but it wasn't worth the extra time and effort when duct tape worked just as well.

They took the ball out to a quarry for testing. There were a surprising number of disused, abandoned, or otherwise deserted pits and mines and quarries in Texas, so he could go to a new one each time. Though as big empty pits surrounded by rock and scrub went, they were pretty much all the same.

"Great, this *should* work but I haven't tried it with live ammunition yet," Lucy said. She adjusted her ear protection, and Callum double-checked his before he opened a portal.

The rifle was anchored to a frame that was itself bolted into the rock of the cave-cache. They'd lined up a number of his water barrels in front of it just in case. Though it shouldn't go off unless one or the other of them triggered Lucy's device, it was still loaded and had to be treated with the respect it deserved.

He squeezed the thumb trigger Lucy had rigged the transmitter to and servos whirred as the signal traveled through the portal and to the receiver on the other side. They'd made sure to get a semi-automatic type, as it suited their purposes better, and several loud reports shattered the air as it fired rapidly. A single press was single-fire, but it wasn't likely that he'd ever use that. Even with his spatial-sense-assisted aim, he didn't trust that one bullet would hit. Or be sufficient.

"Woo, that's a racket," Lucy said, as Callum vented the cave to get rid of the smell and generally refresh the air. "It works though!"

"It works," he confirmed.

Fane Chen was less than happy about the state of House Fane. He couldn't enjoy the luxury of his office, the silk drapes and cushions, the gold inlaid desk, the glowing mana-powered sculptures that doubled as elegant light fixtures. Nor could he enjoy the magnificent view of the House gardens outside, properly and elegantly trimmed and kept green and thriving even during winter.

Ever since that *heretic* had banished Patriarch Fane – Chen refused to believe the Patriarch was actually dead, since he couldn't conceive of anything powerful enough to kill an Archmage – the House had been treading difficult ground. There were suddenly more Houses willing to flout them than there should have been, or even dared to oppose them outright! There had already been deaths, despite the threat of House Fane's wrath.

Then there were the internal problems, with Fane Yun and Fane Li Hua vying with him for control of the House. The utter fools. The Patriarch had seen their mediocre talent for what it was worth, which was why they had never been elevated beyond their stations. No, it was he, Fane Chen, who had been entrusted with the governance of House Fane, and he would continue to do so.

What he really needed to cement his control over the House was to demonstrate his superiority. His merits over the last hundred or so years had obviously not been enough, but they had all been done under the direction of the Patriarch so perhaps they had been less than visible. He needed to do something to prove he could keep the House's strength.

"Whatever happened to that Hargrave apprentice we were supposed to get?" Chen asked. He knew there had been issues with the Hargraves that had been resolved somewhat unsatisfactorily, but that was only to be expected from American barbarians. Chen's younger cousin, Xien, flipped through the papers, adjusting his reading glasses. That was an affectation; in House Fane there was *nobody* with the slightest deformity.

"Our collection emissaries were repulsed three times, once with casualties," Xien reported. "Hargrave still has not ceded her to us, nor to GAR or BSE."

"That is one of the few remaining orders from Patriarch Fane," Chen said. "We will rectify that. Despite its current difficulties, it will not do to let anyone think that House Fane can be stymied. Especially when it comes to healers." From what Patriarch Fane had said of House Hargrave and its master, they were too weak-willed and weak-minded to be much of a threat to a proper force.

"Yes, Manager Chen," Xien replied. He dutifully took down Chen's words, his own desk at one edge of Chen's expansive office.

"Gather our ten best combat mages, and three of our best Gu users. We should not let this linger."

"Yes, Manager Chen," Xien said.

While House Duvall had yet to reinstate the teleportation network, House Fane's private transport pads still worked, so they could at least get to the main GAR offices in the

United States. He had intended to demand additional BSE personnel there, but there seemed to be few about. Instead he was, after an infuriating wait as underlings talked on phones, ushered into the office of the new head of the Department of Arcane Investigation.

“I can issue you a warrant,” said Supervisor Lane. He had the overly pale look of one of the Houses that resided in the Night Lands, though Chen didn’t know which of the big Houses Lane was a part of. “But we’re low on personnel at this time of night. Especially of a caliber that can call the Hargraves to account.”

“Of course,” Chen sneered. It was no surprise that the Americans were so lax and haphazard that they didn’t even have the ability to police their own. Of course, that was why he had brought so many. “Give me the warrant, and the location of House Hargrave.” He obviously wasn’t going to simply use the private teleporter undoubtedly somewhere on GAR grounds. Not that he had any compunctions about bulling through to find it, but taking any losses would damage his merits.

“Yes, certainly,” Lane said, commendably quickly and with proper servility. Though he did not offer any refreshment while he wrote out the warrant and obtained the maps, it at least didn’t take the man too long.

Chen took both and returned to where his men waited in the main room of what the Americans called GAR East. He handed the map to Captain Sie and they all powered their flight foci as they left the building. It was nearly night, since the States had the bad taste to be on the opposite side of the world from real civilization, but that was probably better for an assault.

Finding the Hargrave estate barely needed the map. It was north and west of the GAR holdings by several hundred miles, but it fairly blazed with protective wards to his mana sight. There were guide markers built into the ward structure, which he followed to lead his people around to the estate front and dropped down to get the attention of the person at the post there. He was on official business, so he would use the front door.

A whipcord-thin man with no hair stood at the gatehouse, the interior light shining off his bald head as he regarded Chen from behind a powerful set of shields. Despite himself, Chen had to admit that the House defenses were impressive, though he was fairly certain the squad with him could punch through it. Though really, it was the Gu users who would do most of the work.

“I have a warrant for Gayle Hargave,” Chen said, holding up the paper. “She’s to be given over to the custody of House Fane.” The guard looked at them in silence a bit and then turned and spat. Not as a gesture of disgust, Chen realized after a moment, but because he’d been chewing tobacco.

“Ya’ll are from House Fane, then?” He asked, his English so accented that Chen had a hard time understanding it for a moment.

“Of course,” Chen said, almost affronted. He and all his men were in House Fane colors.

“Yeah, you’re not welcome here.” The guardsman didn’t seem to be much impressed by Chen or his entourage, likely because of the protective enchantments.

“I see.” Chen powered his scry-com. “Sie, Hua — remove this obstacle.” Despite the fact that he used a proper language rather than the mess of English, the guard seemed to understand what Chen had said and the wards flared. A kinetic shield went up around the guardhouse and rippled out to enclose the entire estate. No matter. Something that large could hardly be sustained for long.

The ground shook, and he lofted himself into the air again as Sie’s magic furrowed the earth, tons of rock shifting against the shield in a bid to shatter it. Hua wielded fire magic more precisely, a white-hot spear smashing against the protective energies. Unsurprisingly, other mages came flying in on the other side as the Hargraves own guard detail joined the sudden chaos.

Chen’s shields brushed aside a return kinetic bolt, and the air was suddenly filled with the energies of spells as magic shot in both directions. The trees around them cracked and caught fire, those that still stood in defiance of the churning earth quickly devastated by stray bolts or sparks. Shields flashed into momentary visibility as they turned aside the spells that were on target. Larger patterns emerged inside mage’s spheres of authority as specialized foci were brought into play, and either resulted in a massive fusillade of energies or were disrupted by spellbreaker bolts cutting far enough into competing vis to sever a link. It was all far too fast and chaotic for anyone to actually grasp what was going on, the automatic shielding and combat foci and honed reflexes doing the bulk of the work.

Suddenly the shield protecting the Hargrave guards gave way, finally disrupted or drained by Sie’s work, and Chen pointed.

“Show them Gu,” he ordered, and the healer-aspected mages who had been hanging back spun their own constructs. While healing constructs had a hard time going through ward shields, since they were pure mana in the end, personal shields were another matter.

He couldn’t *hear* the screams past the thunder of the impacts and explosions buffeting the water shield he kept about him, but he knew they had to exist as two, then three, then four of the mages dropped out of the sky. Chen pushed forward, finding one of the

downed mages was the bald man from the gatehouse. His left arm and cheek was already black and necrotizing.

“As you see, we’re more than capable of making our own entrance.” He couldn’t help gloating.

“My big brother can beat up your big brother,” the man croaked out. Chen frowned, about to attribute the words to a dying man’s delirium when something hard smashed against his shield and forced him backward. A series of boxes made out of pure force separated out the House Fane forces, and Chen felt a twinge of fear as his strongest water breacher did nothing but splash off the surface of the powerful vis construct. Even the Gu mages didn’t seem to be able to penetrate it, though they should have been able to break any mage’s vis by poisoning it.

A man utterly blazing in Chen’s mage sight dropped down from the night sky, ignoring the fires and the efforts of fourteen mages trying to break his constructs. After a moment Chen noticed there was a young girl with him, who immediately landed by one of the downed mages. Even at a distance, through the haze of the kinetic shield, he could see it was healing magic.

“Fane bastards,” the man spat, and Chen bristled. “Why are you here?” He continued, and Chen waved the warrant at him.

“It is the right of House Fane to hold any users of Gu! I have the dispensation from the Department of Arcane Investigation to take Gayle Hargrave into custody.”

“Do you now?” The man said. “In the face of an Archmage, the ultimate authority of a House, you dare to still make such petty claims?”

“*Your* man refused to obey the warrant!” Chen shot back. “GAR and the DAI are my authority.”

“Be damned with your warrant,” the man replied. “Be damned with the DAI and with House Fane.”

“You would flout the law?” Chen demanded. The man looked at him, then flicked a finger. The box containing Yui Xian, one of their Gu users, shot forward toward the man. Chen watched with horror as the gold-armored man simply punched forward, his fist passing through the box and Xian’s shield alike, and Xian practically exploded. There was a spray of red inside the box, and the man pulled his unstained fist back to leave behind only a layer of red sludge at the bottom of the kinetic box.

“Yes,” the man, who could only be the Hargrave patriarch, said coldly. “I would.”

Callum sorted through his box of tricks. He was more or less relying on the rifle, which was loaded with a ten-round cartridge of the insanely expensive explosive-incendiary rounds, but he wasn't satisfied with *only* relying on it. The tear gas and flashbangs were close at hand, as strange as it felt to handle that sort of equipment, along with his own water grenades, though they were weak enough that he doubted they'd do much. Maybe if he had cold iron casings, or a cold iron alloy, but he didn't.

He had made more thermite, given how terrifyingly potent the stuff was. The quick-ignite kind, anyway, though it wasn't likely to be all that useful against moving targets. While maybe he could have gotten other explosives or even poisons, he didn't have anywhere near the expertise to use any of it properly and wasn't interested in blowing himself or his cave cache up by accident.

"Right," he said, checking through it a couple times. "Once we place the volcano anchor we'll be ready." Callum doubted the volcano trick would do much against a fae that had made a volcanic region his home base. Besides which, mundane lava probably was nothing more than a warm bath to anything with potent nature magic.

"Almost ready," Lucy corrected him. "I think we could use some more backup. I didn't think about it with Fane because I know what mages can do. But fae are *weird*."

"So I understand," Callum said. "I've seen a bit, but not enough to really have a feel for it."

"Right, so I had a talk with Lisa," Lucy said. "I figured you'd be focused on all your stuff and wouldn't think about it, but if the fae can send anything or anyone back at you even despite the portals, I'm not going to be any help. But the Wolfpack? Battle shifters? They're fast and tough and they'd be able to tear anything apart. Or pull us out of danger."

"I— huh." He still thought in terms of solo operation. Lucy was a fantastic asset for setting things up, but in the end he was the one manipulating the portals and teleports so he wasn't used to thinking far outside that.

"She just offered to help us; we don't have to," Lucy said, maybe misreading his hesitation. His first impulse *was* to say no, but he didn't have any good reason to refuse. Alpha Chester was at least mostly trustworthy and Lucy was absolutely right about fae trickery.

"No," he said. "You're right, it'd be helpful to have people around who can deal with supernaturals better than we can. Up close, anyway."

"Great!" Lucy said with obvious relief. "I'll call up Lisa and tell her we're coming over?"

“Sure,” Callum said, still feeling a little bit weird about intruding that way, but found the appeal growing the more he thought about it. Callum wasn’t going to depend on shifter guards all the time – that would de facto make him one of Chester’s agents – but in this circumstance and against this target, it would be stupid to turn down the help.

He sorted through his preparations once again, mentally running through the various things lined up in the cave-cache, while Lucy called her friends. The work had come back from the metal shop, so he’d finished making up a new nexus. It was basically just a bunch of metal boxes chained together, and he’d put it right at one of the black underwater smokers he’d only seen on the nature documentaries he watched with his dad – well, granddad – as a kid. That let him keep one of the portal anchors open for Lucy to run her internet through.

While she was chatting, he started moving an anchor over to Pacaya, the same volcano he’d used before. There weren’t all that many places in the world where there was easy access to fresh, moving lava, especially ones that were stable enough for him to use. He’d found a few active lava basins on the internet but they all were so hostile that he was afraid his anchors would melt before he could get any use out of the lava.

“They’re ready for us,” Lucy said after a few minutes, and Callum switched to focusing on the anchor that was up closer to Chester’s compound. It was actually there because he had intended to use it to get close to Ravaeb’s territory before switching to the wooden ball, but it wasn’t like Chester’s place was all that far away.

“By the way, Lucy,” he said. “Thanks for thinking of that. I know I wouldn’t have.”

“That’s what I’m here for, big man,” she said happily. “To make sure you don’t turn into a big paranoid ball of curmudgeon.” He paused and put an arm around her, taking a moment to appreciate everything she did do for him. Neither of them minded the delay.

By that time, getting the drones into Chester’s compound was easy enough. Lucy just said hi to the gate guards through the mic and somebody brought the drone in. He could have just bypassed Chester’s security if he wanted, but that would have been unnecessarily rude.

He opened a portal into the usual basement, nodding to the shifter there — John, he was pretty sure the name was. Lucy followed him in, but before they could find seats to wait for Chester, John bestirred himself.

“We’ve got a more secure area for you,” he said, and Callum took a moment to actually look and see where Chester was. He knew the layout of the compound, of course, but that wasn’t the same as knowing what everything was used for.

He found Chester in something that Callum wouldn't exactly call a secure area, since it was basically just a big open field, but there were a lot of shifters there. Under the circumstances, that probably was better than a place where there might be collateral damage if something energetic happened. Even though Callum was satisfied he knew where they were going, he and Lucy both followed John on foot.

All the shifters were in their war form, making a crowd of eight-to-ten-foot-tall beast-men about twenty strong, scattered over the grassy courtyard. Seeing them all together, most of them were a shade of dirty white, but here and there were some exceptions. One shifter was jaguar-black, another one a sort of steely blue, and a couple had tabby patterning despite clearly not being cats. He still thought they looked half hyena, half wolf, and half lion, despite the mathematic impossibility.

"Hey, the gang's all here," Lucy said happily. While Callum felt uncomfortable confronted by all the shifter firepower, Lucy very obviously felt safe surrounded by people she knew. People she knew could handle themselves, at that.

"Hey Lucy," Lisa said, the incongruity of her voice coming from a half-ton beast making Callum blink. It more or less worked for Chester, whose voice just got deeper, but he'd never seen Lisa transformed and for some reason her voice hadn't changed either. "Welcome, Callum. When are you going to make an honest woman of Lucy?"

"I think we have to get past the current issue," Callum said, knowing better than to try to question her timing. Grandmothers were pushy. "I appreciate the bodyguarding."

"Sure, happy to help," Lisa said, completely ignoring the glare that Lucy was sending her way.

"Great," he said, trying not to stare too much at the crowd of shifters. "Lot of people." This many shifters meant that Chester wasn't keeping his cooperation with Callum quiet. Or at least, far less quiet, though considering that there were no mages within Callum's sphere it wasn't exactly public either.

"Yes," Chester agreed. "When dealing with fae magic, it's better to have a lot of people paying attention. Besides, everyone here has fought and killed fae, so we have some experience." There was a general rumble of assent, an animalistic communal growl. That, more than anything, raised the hairs on Callum's neck, but Lucy just rolled her eyes.

"Aside from protection while you deal with Ravaeb, is there anything you need?" Chester asked.

"Well, chairs and a table," Callum said, and produced his own from the cave-cache. Chester's furry eyebrows went up as the furniture simply appeared on the grass, but he

just shrugged after a moment. Callum was peripherally aware of reactions from the others that he had never seen and had never seen him, but nothing dramatic. “There actually isn’t much to see at this end. I do it all through the portal anchors,” he said, tapping his temple.

“Fair enough,” Chester said. “We’ll hang out here.” He didn’t make any obvious signal, but about three-quarters of the shifters standing or sitting out on the grass shifted into full beast form and stretched out. They *looked* relaxed, but they reminded Callum of the hunting hounds he’d seen when he was a kid and went to visit a ranch with his dad.

He and Lucy sat down at the table he’d pulled from his cache, and she directed the drone up into the air. He wrapped his framework around it and sent it off west, toward Yellowstone. Chester and Lisa and the Wolfpack he recognized took up stations near the table, standing on guard in an almost military way, but he didn’t let that distract him.

Callum had fae to deal with.

Ensharrehael considered the offer, sailing or floating or flying – depending on one’s perspective – through the endless blue of the mana world.

There were several good reasons that dragons didn’t have their avatars take too active a role in the worlds they could access. They had found years ago, to their detriment, that merely copying the biological architecture and playing a role was not sufficient to actually, fully *understand* the natives of the worlds they encountered. A multitude of seemingly insignificant misunderstandings could cascade into sudden and ruinous war – or even mass suicides and widespread devastation – if the dragons actually tried their hand at *ruling*.

Then there were the portals themselves. Dragons had many talents, but creating portals was not one of them. So far, they hadn’t run into any purely technological methods to cross dimensional boundaries. While some of the advancements in space travel on Earth might render that moot – the expanse of a proper universe was far more interesting than the empty sky of the liminal space between worlds – they were as yet made vulnerable by portals they could neither create nor control.

Earth was the first place Ensharrehael had personally encountered any sort of magic that could reproduce the effect. Unfortunately, the number of human mages that could actually create *new* dimensional portals was vanishingly small, and the one he knew could do it – Archmage Duvall – had flatly refused. She apparently already knew the dangers inherent to casual breaches of reality.

There was good reason to support anything that would make Callum Wells survival and success more likely, even if it flirted with breaking the rules he and his companions had set down a very long time ago. Moreover, it wasn't like Alpha Chester was asking Ensharrehael for direct help. Simply wisdom and guidance, which for the most part kept Ensharrehael from crossing over to the forbidden realm of actually being in charge.

He tinkered with a new avatar, dabbling in the concept of making it elderly — to better convey age and wisdom. His own body was, of course, effectively immune to the ravages of time. In the abyss of mana-saturated air he used a good amount of it for testing, converting and rebuilding sections of flesh and blood and scale. Most of him was no longer merely meat, but something closer to cybernetics, living metal and lubricant blood with fission hearts beating at intervals.

The chamber he used for designing new avatars was under his rear-left wing, in a small pocket of inert atmosphere. A place to play with some of the more useful, but combustible, materials born of Earth's technological progress. The elderly adviser avatar didn't need to be particularly exotic, though. He experimented with a beard but didn't like the way it looked with scales, so instead he used fins to provide the same sort of aesthetic, curling under the chin and the same dark green as the scales.

Even just making such a thing was effectively a decision. There were so many reasons for Ensharrehael to at least sit in as a revered elder, and not many to turn it down. It would be more amusing than trying to play elder for the *Fanes*, at least. They had been utterly without humor.

Even Ensharrehael, as alien as humans were to him, understood the humorless ones were not to be trusted.