

Chapter 2-20 – Heretic

Once again it was obvious why he couldn't just hide in a hole. He had a moral imperative to do something, in addition to his own personal responsibility. Technically, Lucy couldn't be used to get at him if he didn't allow it, but he refused to even entertain the possibility of abandoning her. Callum didn't want to leave Lucy in GAR custody for any longer than he needed to, but it was just like the couple down in Florida. He needed to prepare and do things right.

An unavoidable delay was letting Chester's people smuggle the portal anchor in. The fifteen hours was in a way a good thing, because it forced him to take the time to make sure he had everything ready on his end. Since he'd been stocking his cache for so long, it wasn't actually much a survey, but it was better to do that without feeling overly rushed.

There was one stop he did have to make before anything else, and that was to get a vacuum flask from the nearest industrial shop. The beat-up old thing wasn't rated to protect from something like lava, but it'd still prevent ambient heat from getting at the portal focus. The focus itself was metal so it could stand more heat than he could, but mordite had such a low melting point that he didn't want to take the slightest risk. He didn't even care if the dewar got trashed, so long as it worked long enough. His portal focus falling apart mid-rescue would be a problem.

After he recalled to his cavern-cache, he changed into the civilian body armor and helmet he'd gotten, which felt overly cumbersome but it wasn't like he was going to be running around. Nor did he expect it to block any serious offensive spells. He was more worried about shrapnel and debris and other incidental things, like what had hit him in France. Especially since he was going to be hanging out somewhere fairly dangerous even before the attack.

Callum's ability to work through portals gave him a ridiculous flexibility that he'd only just started to explore, but he'd already figured out one application. Not too far south and east of his Mexico hide out was Pacaya, Guatemala, which was in a near-continuous state of eruption. There were lava rivers all over the place, which was precisely what he wanted.

Fortunately, a thermal-reflective blanket was one of those things included in the basic camping equipment he had stashed away, and even though it wouldn't be all *that* effective, it was better than nothing. That combined with the breathing apparatus he'd already gotten was enough that he felt safe getting near an active lava flow, especially with the six hundred yard buffer.

Once again he used the chair to get around. It was annoying how dependent he was on GPS to figure out his location, but it wasn't like he could see what was going by whenever he was in mid-blur. By this time he'd picked up an old-school GPS hiking handheld, and while he wasn't completely sure he trusted it, at least it wasn't a smartphone.

While flying chair trips were still fairly draining on the vis front, the new model didn't need carrying capacity so it was just a little bit smaller, and every bit helped. So did the excess mana in the area, which helped him recover between jaunts. For some reason, the mana generated by the sixth portal world didn't seem to drop off as rapidly to the south as to the north, so he didn't even need to tap his gut-portal for the boost. It was only maybe four hundred miles, so it really didn't take him long at all, even though he was being far more conservative than the panic-driven stunt that had seen him to Mallorca.

Nighttime made it easier to navigate, actually, since the lava flows stood out starkly against the dark ground around the volcano. It was a sort-of tourist area and so not supposed to be terribly dangerous, but even so he had his breath mask out as he aimed himself down toward a dark patch near a particularly large flow. There were still hours to go until he expected a message, so he was going to have to camp out for a bit while he waited.

The value of a portal focus was made very clear with how he could leave it open without spending any focus or vis on it. That meant he could just keep his gut portal active and occasionally open a small portal to the area above his cave-cache. That was where he left his phone, since he could get a cell signal from the tower in the nearby town. It wasn't a great signal, and it wasn't a great phone, but it worked and that was enough for him.

It turned out that he didn't actually need the thermal-reflective blankets if he didn't try to walk right up to the lava itself, so he stayed on the rocky, ashy ground on the next slope over. He knew he had to nap before it was showtime, even if it was just a couple hours, but he was too keyed up to manage it right away. Instead he pulled up the layout that Chester had given him and looked it over for the fourth or fifth time.

The black site was surprisingly large and small at the same time. It sprawled out over a big compound with training and housing and storage and all the things a completely independent operation would need. Teleporters should have meant that a lot of that wasn't necessary, but he appreciated that the base was set up so it *could* be run independently if necessary. It made the place a lot different from most of GAR's centralized infrastructure, which made him think that whoever ran it was independent of the stuff he'd seen so far.

The actual holding cells were just in a small central area, underground, which was all he was worried about. There weren't many of them, so it wasn't like it'd be difficult to find Lucy, but at the same time it meant he wasn't likely to be able to cause a distraction by letting a bunch of prisoners loose. An isolated cell was better for him anyway because if she was surrounded by mages he had no idea how he'd deal with that without massive collateral damage.

Hopefully they didn't realize that themselves.

Even with all the preparation, with his boulders and water grenades and the lava flow, he actually didn't want to fight anyone. In fact, real combat was very much a losing proposition for him, since he didn't have training or proper magical defenses. The best thing would be if he could portal in, grab Lucy, and bail before anyone was the wiser. That didn't seem likely though, since they surely knew at least some of what he could do.

They'd be ready for him. He just had to make sure they weren't as ready as they thought.

"Are you sure he's even coming?" Harold Harper, head of House Harper, glanced up from the document he was signing and gave Ray Danforth a frown. "You said he hung up on you."

"Fairly sure." It was not a secret that they'd put Lucy in the BSE facility. In fact, they were making it as public as possible, because they needed Wells to know where she was. There was no use baiting a trap that was hidden away from the prey.

Ray had actually been surprised by how Wells had cut off the communication. Usually people listened and responded, even when it might not be in their best interests to do so. But Wells hadn't even hesitated, which made it difficult to know if he had enough information to actually come after the Harper dud. Lucile was the only connection they'd found inside GAR, and she was even the go-between for Wells and Alpha Chester.

So far, there hadn't been a hint of Wells contacting the shifters, though it wasn't like they could stop every subordinate that came to Chester's house for business. Not that they were making any secret of their scrutiny, and Duvall had even sent someone to demand the teleportation pads that Wells had supplied them. She had hit the roof when she'd found out, but she was far too busy to go deal with that sort of thing herself. Or at least so she claimed; Ray suspected the reason might be she just didn't like dealing with shifters.

Still, Wells had been shown to be resourceful and the more people who knew her location, the more likely it was to get back to him. Considering the effort he'd taken just to retrieve a pair of mundanes from custody, it didn't seem likely he'd leave Lucile Harper to languish. It still wasn't a sure thing, but they were acting as if it were. They had to.

"Here," Harold said, pushing the document across the table. Ray glanced at it before putting it in the folder. Officially removing Lucile from the Harper family was probably unnecessary; *their* loyalty wasn't in question as a cadet branch of House Janry, and it wasn't like they needed more leverage on Lucile. But Harold had insisted when Ray had come to spread the news.

"Thank you for your cooperation." The words were rote, and Harold barely glanced his way as Ray stood up to leave. He collected Felicia on the way out, who was half-glad and half-sad to be visiting the Janry-Harper estate on Faerie. She hadn't told him the full story of how she'd ended up on Earth and unaffiliated with any of the fae enclaves, but on the rare times they wound up in the portal world she was visibly uncomfortable.

"Should just hold her in Faerie," Felicia said quietly, even though she clearly didn't like the idea. "It doesn't matter how sneaky he is if the land itself is looking for him."

"What fae king would we owe if we did that?" The question was more rhetorical than anything, just like Felicia's comment. Felicia nodded in acknowledgement.

"My family would love to offer, and you'd be a fool to agree," she said. Her voice was more resonant than usual, the siren heritage coming to the fore along with a brogue that she'd worked hard to hide.

"You okay?" Danforth asked, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm worried," she said, the sky darkening with her words as just the tone of voice called in cloud cover. A good reminder of how the human portion of Faerie was still *Faerie*, and fae magic held sway. "They're already telling stories about the Ghost. Maybe that doesn't mean much if he's a mage, but there are fae undercurrents in motion. I'm not sure what happens if we can't catch him."

Danforth glanced around. The vestibule of House Janry was not exactly private, but there also wasn't anyone about at this time of night, so he pulled her closer. Underneath the glamour he could feel the corded muscle of her real form shift as she leaned into him for a moment.

"Time to get back to work," she said soon enough, thumping her head against his shoulder, then pulled away and straightened her uniform before turning back to the

teleporters. Danforth followed, giving her a little bit of space. She wasn't overly touchy in general, especially not on the clock, which told him how worried she really was.

When they returned to the BSE facility, it was in the process of being locked down tight. There were guards around the perimeter, in case Wells came overland with his flying artifact, and around the teleporters, if he could use the GAR transportation system. Lucile's cell was protected not by wards, which hadn't been very effective in the past, but by a high-powered mana jammer to keep *any* kind of vis construct from manifesting.

The two of them passed through a new set of magical scanners and a hastily-installed airport scanner to hopefully spot any implants that Wells or any of his group might have. It was annoying to have to pass his focus folio through the checkpoint, but that particular security measure was only temporary. Felicia had her token, and some bits of jewelry that she was equally reluctant to give up. One of them was the necklace he'd given her, but others were of purely fae origin and she clearly hated giving them up.

The pair passed deeper into the facility, through the hallway of the central building, past the interrogation rooms, and outside. The holding cells were in a completely separate building, forcing people to cross the open courtyard inside the walls of the BSE base. The grass there was the oddly springy, wiry stuff of the Deep Wilds, and outside the walls the canopies of the monstrous trees broke the horizon like distant mountains.

Unlike the Night Lands, where there was only ever the moon, or Faerie, where the time of day depended on location and the general mood of the inhabitants, the Deep Wilds had an actual light cycle, though twilight and dawn lasted a lot longer than they should. The oversized sun beat down overhead, through the dome that protected the courtyard from the similarly oversized wildlife that wheeled and circled in the too-blue sky.

Ray was already starting to sweat just in the short walk between buildings, and resorted to conjuring up a breeze to keep Felicia and himself comfortable. It didn't help that they were dressed more for Earth weather than the portal worlds, since they generally didn't spend too much time in any of them. Cooling enchantments brought the air to a more comfortable temperature as they stepped back indoors, in the vestibule of the jailhouse.

"Ah, good." Jahn looked up as they entered, the agent overseeing operations by sheer inertia, though the BSE employees knew what they were about. "You can't by chance lay a geas, can you?"

Felicia shook her head. Jahn heaved a sigh.

"Guess I'll have to ask King Ravaeb. He's about the only one we can use who's *not* involved, one way or another."

“Hopefully not,” Ray replied. Ravaeb had a brutal streak, which could make an already nasty business even worse. But it wasn’t his business, so he just moved on and held out the folder. “For what it’s worth, House Harper severed all ties with Lucile when I filled them in.”

“That’s not too surprising,” Jahn said, taking the folder and put it on the desk behind him without looking at it. “Nobody likes a traitor.”

“Out of curiosity, what is the geas for?” Ray was only passingly familiar with what exactly constituted a geas rather than a compulsion, despite having a fae partner. It was more of a fae royalty thing, and while he suspected Felicia was closely related, she definitely wasn’t in that power bracket.

“It’s because despite all this,” Jahn said, waving his hand around to indicate the activity, “there’s the possibility we won’t catch anyone. So it’s insurance. If we can get Lucile to report on whatever base they’re operating from, we can come in full force.”

“Ah.” Ray couldn’t argue with that. Everything they’d seen indicated a group whose strength was stealth rather than raw power. Wells hadn’t been particularly impressive back when they’d first accosted him in Kennebec, and he hadn’t even tried fighting back in the Ardennes. If they could locate his home base, they could attack him on their terms. “You think he’d slip past the Grand Magus? Or Archmage Hargrave?”

“Under the circumstances, I don’t think we can rule out other traitors,” Jahn said bluntly. “We know he’s made agreements with the fae and with Alpha Chester. We haven’t turned up anyone else here in BSE, but these are shifter lands. I wouldn’t assume we know everything and everyone around us, or that this facility is as well-hidden as it’s supposed to be.”

“I’d say you’re paranoid, but this case has been weird from start to finish,” Ray observed.

“Speaking of which, are you going to stay here while we wait?” Jahn asked. “I know you’re not as combat-rated as a lot of BSE folks.”

Ray didn’t answer immediately. Instead he looked to Felicia, who was not combat-rated at all and was actually inconvenienced by being in the portal world. On the other hand, she was more tenacious than he was and had a bit of a fixation on properly finishing their cases, even those that were supposed to be out of their hands. Not that Ray terribly objected, but for Felicia it was part of her fae story.

“We’ll stay,” Felicia wrote on her tablet, holding it up to show Jahn.

“Then get yourself equipped at the armory. I’ll ask Grand Magus Taisen to put you into one of the shifts.”

“Yessir,” Ray replied, and braced himself to head back into the unseasonable heat.

Lucy felt like her head was stuffed full of gauze wrapped around thorns. It was hard to think, and when she did think she couldn’t think about *some* things or else the thorns would start tearing and twisting, cutting through her memories and ideas. Trying to turn her into something else. The fae magic from before was terrible, but it hadn’t been like *this*.

She sat on the cot, holding her head in her hands, prodding at the chains the fae king had bound her with. It wasn’t the same as the compulsion which had made her act in accordance to strict rules, and it wasn’t like the siren song, which had made her believe something that wasn’t true. It had some components of those but it was all together in a single thing that she could *feel* poised around her, waiting to strike.

It was terrifying.

Just trying to think around the edges was hard and painful in a way she couldn’t properly describe. It would have been a lot easier to just relax and go with the flow, just lean into the geas and let whatever happened, happen. But if she did that, she had a terrible suspicion, creeping in from behind the gauze, that she wouldn’t be able to change her mind afterward.

Yet, as she groped around thoughts of the big man and shied away from them as the thorns threatened her, she felt there were gaps in the hedge. The geas had too many components, too many moving parts where things didn’t quite meet up. She couldn’t even articulate the thought that she could exploit them, but the feeling was there, down deep where the thorns couldn’t see.

She had to act natural, but she also had to find out everything she could. Be friendly and inquisitive, but not to the point of arousing any suspicion. Any time she got a chance to call in and inform them about what was going on, she had to, but at the same time could never do so where the big man or anyone with him would notice. The conflicting mass of requirements hurt her head, she refused to let them come together or try to make them make sense.

It would have been easy, and she was so tired, but Lucy had been lorded over by the magical all her life. This wasn’t new, or at least, that’s what she forced her fuzzy brain into thinking, even if deep down she knew. She knew she was in trouble so deep that she could never dig her way out on her own.

She had to rely in the big man. Even in the privacy of her own mind she didn't call him by name, and it galled her to have to just hope for external help. She'd worked hard to become self-reliant and self-sufficient, as nigh-impossible as that was for a dud serving in GAR. But that didn't mean she was so stupid or proud as to not know how bad things were.

The ambient magic was so high it hummed against her skin, vibrating off her teeth and making the back of her neck itch. She didn't know what it was, and the geas kept her thoughts from doing anything but idle uselessly for fear of being torn, but it was just another tiny torture to add to the rest of the mass of misery. She could recall how she'd felt after the first time they'd interviewed her, and how inconsequential that seemed in comparison. Lucy was sure that, one way or another, someone would pay for this.

"I don't like this." The sound of someone else's voice made Lucy twitch and peer blearily up to see Gayle sitting on a chair on the other side of the cell, lips pressed together in distaste. The geas twisted around, assuring Lucy that Gayle could be trusted and that she should tell people Gayle could be trusted.

"I'm not a combat mage. I don't even like using reversed healing!" Gayle continued to complain, though it seemed to not really be directed at Lucy. "I bet grandpa doesn't even know," she continued darkly. "Got half a mind to go out there and tell him."

Yet, she didn't.

Grand Magus Taisen laced his fingers together, frowning at the others in the room. He couldn't deny that Wells was the BSE's responsibility, but he disliked using the Deep Wilds outpost for it. It was never meant to be a containment facility. Like all the garrisons he'd built, it was designed as a training outpost and a staging area for eliminating some of the worst threats the portal worlds had to offer.

Unfortunately, he didn't have the ability to overrule two Archmages and the Master of Weltentor. In theory he had the authority, but pragmatically they'd just ignore him at best and remove him at worst, and Taisen doubted anyone else understood the logistics that kept the portal worlds under control. There were factions that already decried the resources he needed, and ignored the fact that small problems became large problems.

Just like Wells, in fact.

"We all want our pound of flesh," Hargrave said, his aura crackling slightly. "But there isn't enough to go around."

“He’s a spatial mage, so he’s mine,” Duvall said flatly. While her raw magical might didn’t match her fellow Archmage, her wealth and influence could absolutely bury House Hargrave if she wanted to.

“A spatial mage that nobody has been able to keep under control,” Taisen pointed out, keeping his voice mild. “How do you propose to do so?”

“Lock him down with vis drainers and set him to enchanting for the next decade or two,” Duvall replied, waving it away. “Even if he never amounts to anything else we *know* he can make enchantments. Speaking of which.” She glared at Jahn.

“We’re in the process of confiscating the teleportation pads,” he said mildly, showing remarkable aplomb for someone who ranked far below everyone else in the room both in terms of status and prowess. “They have been stalling a bit but I wouldn’t be surprised if I had them before anything happened here. Even if Chester is playing against GAR he’s not willing completely defy us.”

“And what of the vampires?” The Master of Weltentor, Victor Dumas, spoke in a calm and controlled voice. Taisen doubted he actually cared too much about the deaths himself, but as the nominal head of mage-vampire relations he had a valid complaint. “If nothing else, we are owed a weregild for the deaths of so many at the hands of this group.”

“When we find out who else is working with him, and what their resources are, we’ll make sure to include you,” Jahn said.

“I’m not sure there is anyone else working with him,” Taisen said, speaking at last.

“Oh?” Jahn suddenly looked more interested. “We have at least Wells and Hall that we know of.”

“True,” Taisen conceded. “But I’ve looked at the reports of the various incidents. I don’t pretend to know how it was done, but it all has the feel of a single mind, a single approach.” He couldn’t put his finger on it exactly, but it was the sort of instinct he’d learned after dealing with thousands of engagements, both supernatural and mundane.

“If it’s just one mage, then our preparations ought to be more than enough,” Hargrave said. “He folded easily enough the first time. Two Archmages and however many mages and shifters are here already ought to be more than enough to take care of him.”

Taisen suppressed a sigh. That was exactly the sort of attitude that caused disaster. He couldn’t really blame Hargrave though; the man was an absolute monster and practically invulnerable. There were few people on Earth that could really threaten Hargrave, and not much in the Portal Worlds either. But Hargrave wasn’t the target.

“Archmage Duvall,” he said instead. “As you say, he is a spatial mage and in your jurisdiction. But I’m unclear what your role is in our defense. Is there a method whereby you can suppress his spatial abilities?”

“No more or less than any other magic,” Duvall said with a tremendous scowl. “Spatial magic is special because of what it *does*, not how it acts. Any of you should be able to shatter his shell if you get close enough. From what the younger Hargrave said he is a far cry from being an Archmage.”

“Grand Magus Taisen,” Jahn said. “Ultimately, the actual combat is in your hands. We are trying to *capture* Wells, or whomever he brings with him, but I understand how difficult that can be.”

“He’s one of my spatial mages,” Duvall growled.

“Archmage, so far he has proven extremely difficult to deal with, and demonstrated abilities that don’t comport to spatial magic—”

“That...” Duvall sputtered. “That heretic is abusing some very dangerous and unusual corners of spatial magic. Nothing that could stand up to any real spellforms.”

“Heretic or not, he has done immense damage to GAR and to BSE.” Jahn said firmly. “Whether captured or killed, if— *when* he comes here, he will not leave.” The response to that was nods all around.

“Agreed.”

END BOOK TWO