

Chapter 3-18 – Fracture

“When we agreed to work together, you agreed to keep me in the loop for your decisions,” Chester began. “So I think it’s only fair I return the favor.”

“Mm?” Callum said, arm around Lucy as she leaned against him. He was still feeling a little disoriented as he reclined on the couch in Chester’s basement. Only the clock told him how much time he’d lost between vis exhaustion and a minor concussion from being smashed in the face, because he sure hadn’t kept track. So far Chester had been an excellent host and Callum had no complaints, but he was ready to leave and take Lucy home.

“With Ravaeb gone, I’m the only supernatural with any real power in the Midwest,” Chester said. That cleared some of the cobwebs from Callum’s head, and he gave Chester a sharp look. He was back in human form, looking like a Viking, but he shook his head at Callum’s expression. “I’ve got no intention of conquering anything, but it does mean that there’s nobody to apply pressure when I break from GAR. Which I’m going to be doing today.”

“Ah,” Callum said. “Congratulations. It’s probably for the best, considering all the issues with GAR.”

“Just so,” Chester agreed. “But of course, even I am not entirely capable of standing on my own. I’ll be meeting with some people to form agreements and get advice on any alliances. Not to make anything like GAR, but just a number of peers aligning themselves in the same direction.”

“That sounds promising,” Callum said cautiously. Anything that replaced GAR would just suffer from the same issues, but a coalition of smaller entities might be less of an issue. It might also be more of a problem, depending on who made it up; there was no such thing as a perfect solution.

“I imagine you won’t want to stay for the meeting, since that’d imply *you* were endorsing the alliance.” Chester raised an eyebrow, and Callum nodded agreement. It wasn’t like Callum had no interest in what Chester was putting together, since it’d pragmatically influence supernatural politics over most of the United States, but he couldn’t actually be part of it. The only role he could play was that of enforcer, unless he took a direct political stance, and either one would subvert his actual goals and approach.

He couldn’t really decide to be left alone if he was *in charge* of anything.

“On the other hand, I don’t want to end up in a position where you’re gunning for my head the way you were with Ravaeb,” Chester said.

“I’d rather not be in that position either,” Callum said. So far he didn’t have any issues with Chester, mostly because Chester had no issues with regular folks. Everything he’d heard showed that the Alpha ran a tight ship, and apparently a lot of shifters did janitorial work or construction, which probably helped. It was hard to have an ego when mopping floors or digging ditches.

“Right, so, what do I need to keep in mind to make sure that doesn’t happen?” Chester asked, spreading his hands. “I’m not asking for a Ten Commandments or a manifesto, just your offhand thoughts. You don’t strike me as an unreasonable man.”

“I try not to be,” Callum agreed. Lucy snorted.

“You’re plenty unreasonable, big man,” she disagreed. “But not about this kind of thing, so go ahead.”

“It’s pretty straightforward, I think?” Callum said, speaking slowly as he considered it. “You don’t prey on people. I can’t really say anything about fae or shifter internal politics; I wouldn’t want to meddle. But when it comes with normal folks, you just don’t.”

“You realize that excludes the vampires entirely, right?” Chester pointed out. “At least the ones on Earth. They can’t subsist on moonwater over here. They have to eat people’s vis.”

“Then that’s their problem,” Callum said firmly. “Even if they didn’t have anywhere else to go, I don’t care. You don’t prey on people. Anyone that allows that can be first in line and save the rest of us the trouble.”

“Ha! Well, I can say there’s no real love lost between us and the vamps *anyway*.”

“Or between anyone and vamps, really,” Lucy put in. “I know there’s some mage families that love ‘em, and they’re great for night shifts, but who wants to work with them?”

“Indeed,” Chester agreed. “That’s easy enough. I was already doing that, but I think the people I am talking to won’t be too put out by that limitation. It’s a good idea anyway, because why would you put yourself at odds with the people who control the entire planet?” He held up a hand. “Which I know is rather mercenary, but not everyone can be convinced by arguments about morality.”

“Sure,” said Callum, who hadn’t intended to argue anyway. “You’re the one who’s playing the politics, not me. Pretty sure I’d get fed up with it.”

“I’d worry about you having to play sheriff all the time if you were part of it,” Lucy said, taking his hand. “You’re doing that enough as it is.”

“I suspect there would be a lot of people who would not *want* to join an alliance where you’re an enforcer,” Chester observed.

“So that’s three votes against, motion carries,” Callum said. “I’ll leave you to declare your independence, then. I imagine by now you’re ready for the difficulties that’ll cause.”

“Without being able to field Fane or Hargrave against me, I suspect I’ll have little trouble,” Chester agreed.

“Then I guess there’s nothing else but to thank you for your help and your hospitality,” Callum said, standing and offering his hand. Chester took it, and then gave Lucy a smile.

“Take care of him,” he said, and Lucy nodded with faux solemnity. Callum rolled his eyes and opened a portal back to the Texas trailer.

“We’ll stay in touch,” Lucy promised, and linked arms with Callum as they stepped through. Once they were back in familiar territory, and the portal was closed, she stretched and gave a little shake. “You did it, big man! Was a little scary there, though.”

“Yeah,” he said. “It was the right call to involve the shifters.” Callum took a long breath and let it out. “Plus, Ravaeb seemed pretty damn nasty.”

“Yeah,” Lucy said, leaning into him again. “So what are we going to do now that the big bad fae is gone?”

“Well,” Callum said, looking down at her mischievous little smirk. He smiled back, knowing she didn’t mean work but he had to tease her anyway. “There’s always moving—”

“Nah,” Lucy said, grabbing his hand and hauling him toward the bedroom. “We’re gonna celebrate.”

“You can’t do this,” the mage threatened as Chester’s claws ripped apart the vis of the man’s shield. The mage reeled backward and Chester grabbed his arm. Neither of the watchers that GAR had installed were particularly powerful mages, so their magic was essentially impotent when he drew on his pack bonds.

“You might want to start using your brain,” Chester said, force-marching the man out of the well-appointed room that he’d been living in for weeks. At Chester’s expense, no less, which had made his presence all the more galling and his expulsion all the more satisfying. “If anything you should be thanking me for *merely* throwing you off my land.”

He had originally intended to shove the mages through the GAR teleporter, but with those out of commission he had decided to settle for tossing the mages out into empty grassland. Which was almost as good. Let them fly back under their own power.

The mage tried saying something else but Chester shut him up with a deep growl. It was freeing to be able to be as rude as he wanted to representatives of GAR, though he wasn't going to go so far as to injure them. Unless they really brought it on themselves, of course.

John had the other watcher in a headlock when Chester met him at the outside of the building, and kept batting away the attempts of the mage to form something from his focus. A twitch through the pack bonds and Chester gave him permission, so John tightened his grip and growled warningly in the mage's ear.

The two shifters raced for the edge of the compound's property, dragging the mages along. It was never pleasant for humans to be moved that quickly, but Chester didn't really care. The two of them stopped at the edge of the property, at the big private gate, and as one hurled the mages over the gate and into the grass beyond. Neither of them were talented enough to cushion their fall, but Chester wasn't going to feel bad for any bruises or sprains they got from the rough handling.

"Remember," Chester rumbled. "Tell your masters they are no longer *our* masters."

He watched as the pair of mages took to the air. Shifters technically didn't have any real air power, but that was why he'd quietly acquired a little bit of military hardware. The anti-air weaponry wouldn't do anything to an Archmage, but it'd do well enough for lackeys, and by the time anyone in GAR decided to move on him he would hopefully have more support.

The two mages vanished behind glamours, though Chester could still track them by the way they displaced the air as they flew off and away from the compound. Once he was certain they were gone, he joined in with the rest of his immediate pack. They had quite a bit of work to do in clearing out the inner courtyard and setting things up for the summit.

Wells had actually been kind enough to clean out the worst of Ravaeb's odious remains by simply sending the pieces back to the fae court. Nobody yet knew what the fallout of the fae king's death would be, and the last time a fae king had died it'd been over in Europe so Chester wasn't familiar with the process. So far the only issue was the stinking dirt he was helping to shovel into a dump truck, but there would be more. Which was why he was rushing the meeting a bit.

Fortunately he didn't really need to impress anyone with the surroundings for the summit. Most of the work was just making the area less offensive to the senses, and he would have done that anyway. The main meeting room in the big pack house only needed some touching up, and he already had someone out getting drinks and snacks while Lisa baked cookies.

Though he didn't have much to prepare, he still cut it close as he was just stepping out of the shower when the first guest arrived. Surprisingly, Shahey came by car, an old beat-up sedan that didn't look like it should even be on the road. But it smelled of magic and purred like a kitten, and to Chester's shifter senses it wasn't actually even an internal combustion engine. Dragonblooded secrets, it seemed.

"Alpha Chester," Shahey said, shaking Chester's hand. He had either dispensed with the glamour or acquired a new one, because the scaled man looked somehow old, with fins and scales somehow implying a bearded elder in a worn but impeccably clean suit. Though Chester imagined the clothes were just as misleading as the car. "I expect this will prove to be interesting, even if I am only here to give advice."

"I hope it's *only* interesting. There's always a risk in bringing people together." Chester escorted Shahey to the meeting room, letting him select one of the overstuffed armchairs.

"It would be quite rude for people to start fighting in front of me," Shahey replied mildly, and Chester nodded. That was at least some guarantee of good behavior from everyone.

Wizzy was next, the Archmage strolling up to the gates of Chester's compound from nowhere in particular, dressed in jeans and a duster. Like Wells, Wizzy didn't have any scent of magic lingering around him, but also like Wells, the very way he carried himself made it obvious he wasn't ordinary or mundane. Chester hadn't been sure he would come, since getting a message to the man was not easy, but it was good to have a mage involved.

"I don't suppose the Wells boy is going to be here?" Wizzy asked, in his leathery voice.

"No, we judged that to be too impolitic," Chester said. Wizzy seemed disappointed, but nodded anyway and took off his hat as he stepped inside. The others filtered in over the next couple hours — Ferrochar, who looked like an elf with dragon horns, Alphas Smith and Carlson, who headed the packs in the south and east respectively, and several unaligned but still powerful fae who lived in Chester's territory.

There were no vampires. Chester hadn't invited any to begin with and with Callum's condition he certainly wasn't accepting any crashers. Which there were, as insanely stupid as it was.

The information came through the pack bonds as he chatted with his guests. Someone had tried sneaking through and been run off. One was fae, the other vampire. Half an hour later, the anti-aircraft gun Chester had smuggled in coughed, swatting a mage out of the sky. These were all minor incidents though, and didn't require any of those inside to bestir themselves.

"To make it completely official," Chester said, once everyone had arrived. "I have declared independence from GAR as of today. The Midwest Pack no longer recognizes its authority over our actions."

"As has the Miami enclave," Ferrochar said immediately after, which Chester had not heard about. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if Ferrochar had decided that on the spot. "GAR has no hold over us." Chester gave Ferrochar an appreciative nod anyway.

"Nor do I have any interest in making my own version of GAR. I don't want to tell fae what to do, or dragonblooded, or even mages. Nor do I want to *be* told what to do. I merely wish an alliance of likeminded individuals."

"Including the dragonblooded?" One of the independent fae asked.

"Mister Shahey and Archmage Wizzy are advisors," Chester said. "Being by far the oldest supernaturals in America." Wizzy chuckled at that, but didn't contradict him.

"What were the terms you had in mind for the alliance?" Ferrochar asked.

"Nothing significant. I'm not certain that even mutual defense is the best idea; that is something better handled between individuals. But nonaggression between parties, and a commitment to prevent any behaviors that might bring us to the attention of mundanes." Chester shrugged. He really didn't think anyone there would be too interested in any military alliance as such, though he would be glad to be wrong.

"Though there is one particular mandate," he continued. "Provided by The Ghost." That got everyone's attention, though Shahey and Wizzy didn't seem particularly surprised. "He is not part of this alliance, nor does he approve or disapprove of it. But he has informed me that what he cares about is preying on people. Internal disputes for fae or shifters are not his problem, but he is very firm that we should live among mundanes rather than on them, as it were."

"Not everyone is going to like that," Ferrochar said with a frown. "Some of my—"

“The Ghost has destroyed Ravaeb,” Chester interrupted him. “For what he allowed his people to do. You may wish to take this opportunity to look to your own and decide if it is really worth pursuing that path.”

“Ah,” Ferrochar said, looking enlightened. *He* had probably noticed that Ravaeb was dead, but everyone else looked various degrees of surprised or stunned save Shahey. As well they might. Even Archmage Wizzy raised his eyebrows.

Chester had never seen Wells in action before, and was struck by how little there was to see. The man had just sat there concentrating — at least until a fae curse converged on him and pulled one of Ravaeb’s guards from wherever the fae were. Then there had been *something*. A brief roaring sound and then an impact like a meteor, to judge from the splatter. Chester had doubts he would survive that sort of thing himself — and he very well knew that Wells could insert his anchors into position with nobody the wiser.

“I don’t much care about fae, and hunting mundanes is stupid,” Alpha Carlson said. “But I don’t like the idea that you can send the Ghost my way.”

“I can reassure you on that part. I can’t tell the Ghost what to do at *all*.” Chester shook his head. “He’s turned down the opportunity to work for me more than once, and if he found out I was coercing him in any way I suspect he’d take it personally. If anyone *does* wish to contact him I would be more than willing to forward a message, however.” Several people spoke at once and Chester held up a hand. “After we’re finished,” he said.

“Now, let us discuss life without GAR.”

“We have a report, *finally*.”

Grand Magus Lorenzo Rossi looked up from the prototyping scribe and held up a finger while he shut down his equipment. The enchantment lab was gleaming and polished metal and ceramic from wall to wall, with dozens of analysis and production tools in their own isolated areas. There was probably more practical enchanting inside the lab than in most Houses.

“A report on what, Minot?” Rossi said with some exasperation.

“Wells,” Minot said, stepping inside the lab. He was familiar enough with lab protocols to use the defined path on the floor, careful not to stray into any of the working areas. Even when they weren’t active, some of the machinery was powerful enough or delicate enough that their boundaries were off-limits. When Minot reached the scribe Rossi was using, he handed over a tablet for the Grand Magus to study.

“Huh,” Rossi grunted, scrolling through the report. It was from the mundane agency they’d used, taking an analysis of everything they knew about Wells’ whereabouts. The phone calls they’d traced, the shops he’d used, the false addresses and identifications. There was less than he would have liked but more than he would have thought, and while Rossi hadn’t seen any patterns, clearly the mundanes had.

The report hadn’t been able to give them a concrete location, but it had managed to pinpoint an area. There was a noticeable hole in the middle of the scatter plot of observations, somewhere in the middle of Texas. Not a small hole, either, but enough of one that it seemed likely that Wells had at least one hideout in the area, and that’s what the hole was about. Several hundred square miles was a lot of searching, especially for something that was only a possibility, but it was better than the whole wide world.

“Wonderful,” he said. “See who we can put on this. I want to talk to Wells. And make sure that GAR doesn’t know about it; they’d just mess things up.”

“Yes, sir,” Minot said.

“I’ll be damned.” Ray Danforth stared at the screen of his computer. He even closed the email and then opened it again, just to make sure he had read it right. Felicia’s ever-so-slightly cold hand touched his arm as she peered over his shoulder.

“Oh,” she said out loud, and Ray’s desk trembled from her unsuppressed voice.

It wasn’t an official communication. It wasn’t even meant for their eyes, but Ray had a colleague in the Department of House Affairs who was willing to forward them the news. House Hargrave, House Elroe, and all their cadet houses had officially seceded from the Guild of Arcane Regulation. If that wasn’t enough, an announcement for a new House formed by Archmage Taisen had arrived with the same messenger.

While the news fell short of an actual declaration of war, it was only *just* short. With the crisis and Fane’s death the calculus of it all was beyond him, but he knew an opening salvo when he saw one. Maybe Hargrave did just want to be independent, but GAR could hardly allow that from a pragmatic point of view. A small House that would wither on its own soon enough was one thing, but several hundred mages and three Archmages was another.

“Well, I think it’s time for lunch,” he said, closing the lid of the laptop. “That’s not something to deal with on an empty stomach.” Felicia nodded, turning to get their jackets from the hook by the door of the office. The abrupt removal of the teleportation

network had altered the normal lunchtime routine, and weirdly had made it so that the easiest way to get a meal was to go to Paris.

The links between GAR offices still existed, and while the US GAR offices were off by themselves, GAR Paris was in the city. They'd have to take Ray's glider to eat anywhere nearby in the US, which wasn't a problem but sometimes they just wanted to go down the street and get something quick.

Of course, it helped that there were more supernatural-run eateries in Paris than even in New York, so finding a place where they didn't have to wait was easier. They ended up in a corner café with a properly ward- and glamour-screened booth, for fae like Felicia where their very nature could bother other patrons.

"So this is a right mess," Felicia said at last, leaning back against the aged wood of the booth's back.

"Yeah," Ray said, adjusting his cutlery on the lacquered tabletop while he thought. "The thing is, without Fane and without the teleports, it's going to be complicated to do anything. Who are they going to send after Hargrave? Let alone *Taisen*, I don't think we've seen a triple-aspect Archmage before."

"It sounds like GAR actually *won't* be able to do anything, then."

"Well," Ray said judiciously, leaning back as the waiter brought wine and appetizers. "There's a lot of other Houses that aren't on great terms with the Hargraves. Rinne and Toller and there's probably some Chinese ones now that Fane's sort of headless. But yeah. GAR is gonna have trouble."

"Where does that leave us?" Felicia asked, taking a sip of her wine. It was a red, as always, and she savored the taste for a moment before lowering her glass. "I sure don't want to be in the middle of that."

"Thankfully, we won't." Ray said. "Oh, it's going to be a pain for us, sure, but with Hargrave out it's not the DAI's business. We've got more than enough to deal with investigating all the stuff emerging now that GAR's shorthanded." He paused to consider the prospect. "I will probably want to move out of my House quarters, though. House Roth doesn't have any dog in this fight and might just close itself off."

"I'll get the guest room ready," Felicia said, and Ray gave her a sharp look. He wasn't certain whether she was teasing him or not, especially since she could manage her voice to be entirely ambiguous. She looked back with the completely inscrutable look that only real fae could manage, something ageless and beyond human understanding. So he was *pretty* sure she was flirting.

They were almost done with their meal when their phones chimed in harmony, and Ray took his out. He scowled at the name and header of the mail on the preview screen. Nothing requiring them to report to Supervisor Lane was good news.

“Well, there goes the afternoon,” Ray sighed, and signaled the waiter. Half an hour later Felicia knocked on Supervisor Lane’s door while Ray double-checked their suits. Being chewed out for sloppy dress was frivolous, but still not something Ray wanted to have to deal with again.

“Come in,” Lane said, and the two of them entered to stand in front of Lane’s desk. Even in the short time he’d been head of DAI, the man had made the Supervisor’s office his. There were pictures on the wall and knickknacks on the shelves, though nothing that showed why anyone thought Lane made for a good DAI Supervisor.

“Sir?” Ray said. Lane didn’t offer them seats.

“I have a report that House Hargrave denied a DAI warrant, issued on a complaint by House Fane,” Lane said. Ray almost asked whether that had happened before they had broken from GAR or after, but held his tongue. He didn’t officially know that yet.

“What kind of a warrant, sir?” Ray asked.

“One Gayle Hargrave is to be remanded to the custody of the BSE or House Fane, due to her use of restricted magics,” Lane said. As if Felicia and Ray hadn’t been in the middle of that whole mess.

“I believe Archmage Hargrave made his stance on that clear,” Ray said cautiously.

“Archmage Hargrave doesn’t run GAR,” Lane said coldly, which Ray thought somewhat undersold Hargrave’s influence on the organization. “Nor does he run the Department of Arcane Investigation. You two will go to House Hargrave with a new warrant for that and for the deaths of Fane’s personnel, and see it is carried out.”

“Yes sir,” Ray managed to squeeze out, though inwardly he was goggling at the man. Ray knew a few tricks specifically taught him so he could work with Felicia, but he wasn’t anywhere *near* powerful enough or important enough to deal with an Archmage. Let alone one that had just broken with GAR. Lane shoved a folder across his desk, and Ray picked it up.

“Dismissed,” Lane said, and Ray exchanged a glance with Felicia before stepping out into the hall.

“No way,” Felicia wrote on her tablet.

“Office, then glider,” Ray said in agreement.

He floated his glider outside the actual GAR building, which still felt odd considering how long he'd been using the transportation system. Once it unfolded and he helped Felicia into the passenger side, he climbed in and sent his vis through the focus, sending them into the air. Nobody remarked on the boxes they'd loaded the glider with, packed full of the few personal effects they kept in their shared office.

"Is he trying to get us killed?" Felicia asked, when they were safely in the air.

"I think he might be," Ray said after a moment. "He didn't even tell us that Hargrave wasn't part of GAR anymore. If we went in like we had actual authority behind us, things could go badly. Even if we *had* actual authority things would go badly."

"I do not like being set up for a fall," Felicia said coldly. Ice frosted over the window on her side of the glider.

"No," Ray agreed. Neither of them had actually spoken about their action out loud, so he decided to just say it outright. "We're going to have to leave the DAI. And GAR, because they'd probably lock us up if we just handed in resignations." That was putting aside the cloud they were under after their failure to deal with Wells.

"We should inform House Hargrave first," Felicia said. "I doubt we'll be the only ones they send."

"Yeah," Ray agreed, turning the glider northward. "What about you? I know this can't be easy." Not that an abrupt career change was good for either of them, but for fae that kind of thing could *literally* kill them if they didn't reconcile it.

"The organization we worked for isn't what we thought it was," Felicia said. "Now, we find a position with more integrity and investigate the real origin of our problems." It was the closest she'd come to outright stating what story she was trying to tell, something that was considered rather gauche normally. Either it was obvious or it wasn't. Ray had more or less figured out that she was the plucky investigator, and being caught up in events greater than she'd ever anticipated was an easy extension of that kind of thing.

"Hope Jahn is still answering his scry-com," Ray said in reply, fishing the focus in question from his pocket. He energized it and waited in silence, which stretched for a good few minutes until it connected.

"Agent Danforth," Jahn said, sounding somewhat distracted.

"Agent Jahn," Ray acknowledged. "We've run into some issues at GAR so I think it might be for the best that Felicia and I take up your offer."

"I see." There was another period of silence. "Do you remember where the staging ground for the BSE is, in the south of Germany?"

"I think so," Ray said. It'd been a while since he was there, years in fact, but he was pretty sure he could find it from the air.

"Meet me there tomorrow at sixteen hundred local time," Jahn said. Ray did some quick math.

"We'll need an extra day," he replied. "It's not like we can use the GAR teleporters."

"Very well. Day after tomorrow, then." Jahn was all business, but not brusque or hostile. Danforth had the impression that he was just busy.

"We'll be there," Ray said, and the connection went. "Not exactly the warmest of receptions," he remarked to Felicia.

"It's that or Faerie for help," Felicia said. "And you know what I think about Faerie."

"Yeah," Ray said. It didn't take much longer to get to House Hargrave's property, the journey there mostly filled by contemplative silence. Once the House wards became visible, Ray angled the glider down and brought it to a hover outside of the House's front entrance. An area that looked like it had been recently cleared, with a vast swath of open dirt.

He let his glider gently drift the last few inches and stepped out, giving Felicia a little bit of a lift to the ground. The two of them approached the guardhouse, where a man watched them warily but didn't openly challenge them. Under the circumstances, even that much tolerance was surprising.

"Business?" The gate guard grunted as they stepped up to the guardhouse, turning to spit tobacco into a spittoon in the corner.

"I'm Ray Danforth and this is Felicia Black, formerly of the DAI," Ray said.

"Formerly, huh?" The man said, giving them a sharper eye.

"Indeed. I just wanted to give House Hargrave the message that we were sent with paperwork about the incident with House Fane." He held up the folder. "I don't have any plans to actually enforce it, but I thought you might want to know they're trying to stir trouble. We weren't told about your secession."

"I see," the guard replied after a pause. "Wish I could say I was surprised, but I'm not. Guess the Archmage will want to talk to you."

“We’d rather not,” Ray said. “We have a lot to do since we, ah, quit the DAI without telling anyone.” The guard barked a laugh.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, holding out a hand for the folder. Ray passed it to him. “Ray Danforth and Felicia Black. I’ll make sure the Archmage knows. If this is all on the up-and-up, we owe ya.”

“I appreciate it,” Ray said. A favor from a mage House was no small thing. The two of them returned to the glider, and Ray lifted it back into the air and aimed it toward Felicia’s apartment. Now that the dangerous DAI warrants and accusations were out of their hands, they had a lot of packing to do.

Ray had no idea what exactly Jahn and Taisen were up to, but if he had to bet, he and Felicia wouldn’t be the only ones fleeing GAR.

END OF BOOK THREE