

Chapter 5 – Fulcrum

The trailer house was small enough that privacy was more an agreement than a fact. Callum could hardly miss it when Lucy woke up in the middle of the night with a cry, sitting bolt upright and fumbling for the lights. After a brief adrenaline scramble he realized what was happening. He hesitated a moment, then crossed over to the bedroom to knock at the door.

“You okay, Lucy?”

“Sorry, big man,” she said, voice subdued. She seemed smaller than usual, hunched in on herself. “Just, you know, having trouble sleeping.”

“Can I come in?”

“...yeah,” she said, after a moment of hesitation. They were both pajama-clad, since the trailer house’s HVAC was only barely up to the job of dealing with Texas in December, but it was still somewhat intimate. He quietly twisted the knob and stepped inside, trying not to make it seem like he was barging in as he leaned against the wall by the door.

“Nightmares about being captured?” He guessed.

“That and the geas stuff.” Lucy flexed her fingers for a moment before pulling the blankets up closer. “Makes me feel like such a damsel in distress, I hate it. Never had nightmares before, either. Not even when I was a kid.”

“I think it’s pretty understandable in the circumstances,” Callum said. He’d managed to escape having too many nightmares himself, though mostly by virtue of being flat out unable to sleep or crashing so hard he couldn’t remember anything when he woke up. “If it makes you feel any better I have rough nights myself. It’s not easy.”

“You, big man? You’re cool as cucumber!” Lucy said, but she smiled.

“I am an absolute *bundle* of nerves whenever I have to do something major,” Callum admitted.

“I’m not sure if that actually makes things better or worse,” Lucy mused.

Despite the calm he forced onto his words, some part of Callum was seething. He hated seeing Lucy like this, hated seeing her hurting. He hated seeing her made *less*. Her current state was a kind of vulnerability that nobody should ever suffer, let alone be put on display for anyone to ever see. Callum was so very tempted to target some BSE

agents and facilities and just wipe them out, but after Lucy went back to bed he cooled off a bit and started chewing on the problem seriously.

The problem was that most of the people involved had just been doing their jobs and hadn't done anything *too* objectionable by the standards of the supernatural community. There was a difference between people who were doing their best, being as moral as they could within an unjust system, and those who took advantage of their authority within such a system to abuse people. Some of the people who had questioned Lucy were ordinary cops, just doing their job. Others, like the vampire that had left her in muscle-locked compulsion or the fae that put the very nasty bit of magic into her head,

It was the machine of GAR that was the main issue. At first glance it was just a huge faceless bureaucracy of interchangeable parts, but like any organization it was made up of people. Some of those people had responsibility and authority, and thus were the ones who needed to be called to account for the behavior of those underneath them. Others were purposefully and personally cruel, and needed to be called to account for their own actions.

The second type was easy to deal with. They were obvious, the hunters and the abusers, and he had no qualms about taking whatever action was required to stop them. The first type, though, were *necessary* to deal with. Even if they didn't personally predate on people, they oversaw it, enabled it, encouraged it.

It took him a few nights of brooding to look at it from all angles. There was a big difference between intervening to save people – dealing with what he saw – and becoming an actual vigilante. Holding accountable those with ultimate responsibility. Those whose hands were only clean because of the number of steps between them and the actual events. Though by his standards, that type was *far* more deserving of punishment than their catspaws.

“Do you really have to?” Lucy raised the question when he brought up the topic. “Can't you just not?” She shifted uncomfortably as she ate breakfast, which was actually just fruit and oatmeal. And sugar. Lucy had a sweet tooth that was so severe it was worrying.

“This isn't going to stop, Lucy,” Callum told her, choosing his words with care. Actually articulating his thoughts was astonishingly hard. “Not unless GAR changes. And it won't, because it's a bureaucracy staffed by people who live forever. Or hundreds of years, anyway. They won't give up their power and their habits. The only way to stop what happened to you and me from happening again, to us or to others, is to force that change.”

“That’s an awful lot to shoulder there, big man. Sure, maybe things can use a change, but why do you need to do it?”

“If I don’t do it, who will?” Callum tapped his fingers against the table. “Is anyone else even in a position to? And it *has* to change. If I want to live in peace, if people *like* me want to live in peace, then I have to break the power of GAR. If I want to stop people being taken and killed by supernaturals, I have to break the power of GAR.”

“I mean.” Lucy swallowed a spoonful of oatmeal. “There’s all these big old houses with lots of powerful people. Are you really going to just start killing them off?”

“I hope I won’t have to,” Callum said. “There are some people who absolutely deserve what’s coming to them, but once some of them are held to account, it might inspire things to change fairly quickly.”

“Or it might not,” Lucy said. “The Houses and GAR are big old powers, pretty set in their ways.”

“It might not,” Callum allowed. “But I can’t just shrug my shoulders and give up. And it’s not like simple reason is going to work on people who would blow up a café because I’m inside. Which is another point to forcing that kind of change. There are people who are willing to flatten an entire town just to get at me.”

“That’s a fair point,” Lucy said, though she didn’t look particularly eager. “I wish I could say that we could negotiate with them, but yeah. Archmages barely listen to *each other*.”

“If it makes you feel better, it’s not like I’m going to be going there myself.” He held up his hand and teleported a portal anchor into it. That sort of conjuring trick was never going to get old. “Plus, it’s not like I’m just going to start randomly killing GAR employees. I’m going to need your help to know who is *actually* responsible. Sometimes it’s not even the people in charge.”

“I, uh. Wow. That’s a hell of a responsibility,” Lucy said, looking stunned. “Like, hey Lucy: you pick ‘em, I hit ‘em!” She affected a gruff voice in imitation of him. “I dunno, big man. If I do that, what if I choose wrong and you kill someone innocent? What if I screw up and choose someone you can’t handle and *you* die?”

“See, this is why I need you, because it *is* something that needs that kind of thought,” he told her. It was too deep a discussion to plunge into immediately, something that they could get lost in before they took the first steps. “I won’t force you, and we won’t start right away, but you’re the best person I know. You understand supernatural society, you have the contacts, and you’re neutral. Who else would I ask, Alpha Chester?”

“No,” Lucy said slowly. “I don’t think *he* would even say that. His pack comes first and that’s that.”

“Just consider it. There’s a lot of work to be done first, all the enchanting and hopefully getting the bunker finished and all that.” Callum waved it away. “Just thought I’d set it out so we both have time to chew it over.”

“Gonna take some chewing,” Lucy said, gesturing with her spoon.

“Yeah, I think we need a bit of a break. How about I make good on that offer I made a while back?” Callum nearly laughed at Lucy’s expression, the blank look and spoon hanging out of her mouth contrasting with the Sears-catalogue looks and prim and upright posture. “Take you out on a date,” he prompted her.

“Oh! Well, I think I could spare some time for that, big man.” Callum relaxed slightly as Lucy peered at him. Some part of him, a small part, had been worried. “I guess dinner at that burger place doesn’t count, then.”

“It does not. But it doesn’t need to be around here.” He held up the portal anchor again. “Travel is fairly easy, after all.”

“That’s a good point,” Lucy said. “Surprise me!”

So he did. While Lucy was working on some complicated version of the enchantment CAD drawings, Callum looked up some things and started moving the portal anchor. Pragmatically, he still wanted something relatively close to one of his permanent destinations and, more importantly, something Lucy would actually enjoy.

“So check this out, big man,” Lucy said. He looked up and she waved at her laptop, so he joined her the table to see what she’d done. The enchantment designs were familiar enough, though they seemed to have been rendered into vectors. Lucy had added notes on inputs and outputs for the various bits he’d identified.

“Now, this isn’t finished or polished or anything,” Lucy cautioned. “Probably will help though.” She demonstrated what she meant by running through a quick exercise in what was apparently a program that she’d made.

Each subsection of enchantment had been put onto its own tile, with the inputs and outputs arranged so they aligned with the cardinal directions. Enchantments could get really complicated geometrically, but the individual connections were generally linear, so segmenting things that way worked pretty well. She could click and drag copies of the tiles into a workspace, snapping together and even validating the inputs and outputs.

“I know it’s not all compacted like your portal enchants, and there’s a bunch of optimization that’s either really hard or just requires stuff I don’t know about yet, but we

can at least play around. Plus, check it out, you can just send one of these tile setups to CAD.” She clicked a button and, after the laptop whined for a few seconds, a program popped up where the designs she’d just made were indeed properly rendered.

“That is fantastic,” Callum said, and meant it. He hadn’t actually had much time to try and tinker with enchantment stuff, for a variety of reasons. Even if the program Lucy had hacked together didn’t actually validate that the enchantment *worked* – and he didn’t see how it was possible for it to do that anyway – it meant he could experiment with possibilities without needing to wrestle with individual lines in a CAD drawing.

It’d get even better as they acquired more examples, which was something that Callum hadn’t entirely given up on. Maybe when things had quieted down more he’d slip back to pilfer more designs from one of the supernatural areas. As it was, Lucy had really taken advantage of his notes and separated things far more finely than he’d tried to do.

“Thank you so much,” he told her. “This is more than I could ever have done myself. We might even have time to actually experiment with enchanting!” He remarked.

“You’re welcome, big man,” she said happily. “But don’t count your chickens this early. I’ve seen how much work we’ve got left.” Callum nodded and sighed. Most of his time was taken up with turning the salvaged cold iron into new enchanting plates for Chester. That had involved another trip to get stuff machined, because while he could do *some* of it at home, he couldn’t do it all. When it came to actual enchanting, it was straightforward enough but tedious and time-intensive.

Corite, or at least the corite that he’d recycled, took substantially longer than fresh mordite for the enchantment to lock in place. Just holding the framework, as still and tightly controlled as he possibly could, for minutes at a time was a surprisingly tiring process. He was about halfway through what he could do with the metal, which was two pairs of telepads for Chester.

He kept enough of the stuff for himself to produce another set of portal anchors, but he hadn’t started work on those yet. Mostly he wanted to take a bit to chew on it and consider better designs, since it wasn’t something he needed as soon as possible. Clearly he’d have to bounce ideas off Lucy, too.

“That’s the idea,” Lucy said happily. “I don’t know what tools the guild uses but they probably don’t use CAD and mockups like this.”

“Probably not,” Callum admitted. “They’ve got more people and more history, though. We’re basically starting from scratch, so we need something like this.”

“Glad you like it, big man.”

“I do,” Callum said firmly. “Now that you’ve got that done, ready to take a break?”

“What did you have in mind?” Lucy asked, eyeing him.

“You did say to surprise you,” Callum said, waving a hand and opening a portal up to where he’d finally put the anchor. Warm air billowed through, along with the scent of salt air and greenery. “Might want to ditch the sweater, though.”

“Ooh, the beach?” Lucy asked, doffing her sweater and tossing it on the couch before she stepped through the portal. On the other side was a small walk of hotel and stores, in the middle of surrounding jungle.

“There’s that too, but there’s some really nice swimming cenotes down there,” Callum told her, following her lead. “Figured they’d be more picturesque than the beach. We’ll have to buy the swimwear here, but that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“You just wanted to see me in a bikini,” she accused good-naturedly.

“Well, I can’t deny that,” Callum admitted. “But my other idea was a ski resort.” Lucy shivered.

“You made a good choice, big man,” she said.

Lucy found the big man a lot easier to be around than she had expected. While she still found it hard to think of him as *Callum* even to herself, he wasn’t the towering, deadly assassin she’d built up in her own mind. He could absolutely focus, turning an almost disconcerting intensity on things, but he wasn’t that way all the time. Mostly he was easygoing and scrupulously polite.

Actually, mostly he was *stable*. Her entire world had been upended, her job was gone, her house was gone, everything she’d worked for was metaphorically burned to ashes, and even her few friends were out of reach. Despite all that, the big man talked and acted as if everything was going to be okay, discussing little things as if they mattered, without ever condescending to her or making light of the situation.

She was still surprised he was a compact, ordinary-looking guy rather than some buff brickhouse, but it worked. It didn’t hurt that he was actually genuinely interested in her, as opposed to the few sad sacks from GAR she’d tried dating. After being so utterly dismissed as a dud it was a nice change to have someone taking her seriously. Not that she believed she needed the validation, but it sure didn’t hurt.

The best thing was that she still had stuff to *do*. Lucy was pretty sure she’d have gone spare if she’d had to sit around all day sewing or something. Or just staring out the

window, or even watching movies. Getting her teeth into the enchanting stuff was not only interesting, but it also distracted her from the lingering cloud of her time in GAR custody.

So had the date. She had been to the beach once before, but by herself it just wasn't anything special. With someone, it was a nice day off, and it freed her mind up to chew on some of her problems. Not the big ones, so much, as the small ones, like enchanting materials.

Lucy tapped her fingers against the bread-loaf-sized chunk of obsidian resting on the table, feeling the mana inside it tingle against her fingertips. The big man had pulled out tons of the stuff — a hundred pounds of it, anyway. Unfortunately, glass couldn't be worked the same as metal so figuring out a good way to turn them into enchantment substrate was slightly tricky.

He *could* just embed the spell forms in the glass bulk, in theory. In practice, he claimed that without any physical structure to follow the vis smeared out rather than locking in a particular place. Then there was the thread he used to connect himself to the spell form, which would stick in the mana-dense glass and form the enchanting equivalent of sprue.

She'd more or less volunteered to figure out a way to use the stuff. Which might have been silly, since *she* couldn't enchant, but it seemed like it would be an interesting challenge. Besides, the almost-translucent glass was neat, though she'd already cut herself on an edge.

The fact that it was just big bulk glass was likely one major reason why the enchanting guild didn't bother sourcing it. Even if there was an enormous amount of it, and it could hold enchants, it wasn't any good as a serious substrate. Of course, there was also the fact that portal world six was kind of off-limits and way too dangerous for most mages.

Lucy had spent half the day searching glass-working methods while the big man focused on the telepads. Which was a far better term than *spatial transportation receiving plate*, the term she'd seen on itemized budgets. Most of that work he did across from her, focusing on bits of wire as he referred to his CAD designs. Every once in a while he went back outside to seat the wire in the big metal plate, and she was happy to leave that cold chore to him.

"So, here's my idea, big man," she said, when he came back inside sometime after lunch.

"Lay it on me," he said, sliding into his seat across from her.

"Lay *what* on you?" She asked with a grin.

“Don’t start what you don’t intend to finish,” he told her, and she giggled.

“Well, we’ve got these tiles I’ve made for modeling enchantments,” she continued, tapping her laptop. “I’m thinking we turn those into *real* tiles. Find a place that’ll do the glasswork, but we chop all this obsidian into like, inch-square tiles, add a tab-slot thing so they lock into place. Can just mask-etch the enchantment patterns on them, so they’re raised up.”

“Seems a fantastic idea to me,” he replied, looking at the big block of obsidian. “I guess we have enough that it won’t matter if I mess up once or twice. Heck, we could even hot-swap enchantments, or see if that’s really possible.” The big man smiled as he thought about it, clearly following the same path of ideas Lucy had taken. For once, a mage not only listened to her ideas but agreed with them. “Yeah, just need to find someone who’ll actually do that kind of glasswork.”

“I’ve found three places that say they can, but not anywhere around here. Not a problem for us I don’t think.”

“Nope,” he agreed cheerfully. “Why don’t you go ahead and get the details and whatnot, and when you’ve figured out which one or ones we’re using, we can take a road trip. Well, more like a flying chair trip unless you really want to drive.”

“I can do without,” Lucy agreed. “Though speaking of the flying chair thing, can you use a portal anchor to do the same thing?”

“Yeah, though stability is a problem. I was thinking of making a little mini-chair type thing for the portal anchor,” he told her. “Since it’s so small it’d be less effort to do.”

“Right, so, what if you stick a portal anchor on a drone?” She suggested. “That way you don’t have to use magic to keep it in the air, and like, drones are pretty common everywhere now. Plus, we can run the control signal through the portal. Have GPS and telemetry and whatnot all on a computer.”

“Ooh, fancy.” His eyes lit up with the same sort of interest that she had when contemplating a new toy. “I knew there was a reason I liked having you around.”

“You betcha, big man,” she said, flushing. His flirtatious lines often came out of nowhere and caught her by surprise. “Maybe we can add a repeater into the anchor housing or something, but the metal is thick enough we can just force a signal through.”

“Right, right,” he agreed. “And we could make some integral housing where I could just teleport the anchor in and out, instead of having to unscrew anything.”

They continued spitballing ideas for a better portal anchor, and Lucy got out her design program to start making notes and prototypes. While it was true that she’d lost

everything from her prior life, it was turning out that living with the big man wasn't so bad. Beach trips, working directly with enchantments, and best of all, she was able to use her skills for something that actually mattered.

It was nice to be around someone who appreciated her.

"This is bigger than I thought," Ray muttered, rubbing his eyes and looking up from the records that Alpha Chester had provided. So far the shifter had been quite helpful, which Ray had found suspicious in the extreme. He was under investigation, and he'd even been polite to the people who came to cart away Wells' enchantments, so obviously Chester was holding *some* cards.

Someone who was under investigation only provided records without complaint if those records were wholly innocent. But they both knew Chester *wasn't* innocent. The enchantments proved that, and with Wells' status as a heretic there were serious consequences for anyone caught dealing with him. But there was proof, and then there was proof. Chester had enough money, connections, and personal might that it would be difficult for anything short of the most blatant dealings to really impact him.

Ray had to assume the financial and membership records were at least partly doctored, but the ones that were there spoke of an extremely large organization. Accountants, engineers, architects, carpenters, masons, janitors, everything. Of course they weren't all *employed* by Chester. Most of them had their own businesses or worked for someone else, supernatural or otherwise. But all of them owed fealty to Chester, and that added up to a *lot* of people and property.

"We need a staff," Felicia opined, looking up from the sheaf of papers she was perusing. Alpha Chester had, of course, provided *paper* copies of everything, not digital ones.

"What we need is to just give up on this stuff." Ray waved at the cartons stacked all about their office. "There's no way that there's anything useful in here. We can probably spend months combing through it and spotting *tiny* infractions, but we aren't going to find anything juicy."

"True." Felicia tossed aside her papers with obvious relief and no small bit of force. "Then where do we start? We don't have any dead bodies for this, at least not yet."

"Don't tempt fate," Ray warned her. "We should start at the other end. Lavigne. Pretty much every contact between Chester and Wells was related to Lavigne, and even if we can't prove it we know he wiped out Lavigne's nest. Chester might have sanitized his own records, but I doubt he thought to, or even could, sanitize Lavigne's."

“Mmm. What could we find?”

“I don’t know. But we aren’t going to find anything with this.” Ray pushed away the paperwork on his desk with disgust. “Offload it to whoever. I’ll go find the archives for Lavigne. While we’re there we can find out anything they have on other rogues.” Rogue mages did happen, of course, but Ray couldn’t think offhand of anyone that had given GAR such fits.

The two of them left the office and its boxes of useless paperwork behind. Ray’s destination was not much better than the mess he’d left behind, since the archives for GAR Midwest took up an entire basement. Filing cabinets lined the walls and racks of boxes made extensive aisles in the middle.

The thick-spectacled fae in charge of it was all of three feet tall, all knees and elbows, and he gave Ray a suspicious look when he asked for Lavigne’s records for the past year. Even after he showed his badge the archivist didn’t seem happy, but he snapped his fingers, swirly fae magic washing outward and drawing two thumps from the depths of the archives. A moment later a pair of boxes slid themselves over to a push-cart and hopped on board.

“Thanks,” Ray said, and wheeled the boxes back to the office. Unlike Chester’s stuff, these records were small enough that they actually fit into his and Felicia’s workspace. She was already there, with two coffees and some donuts that she’d procured from somewhere, and he took his share gratefully as he sank into his chair.

“You’re a lifesaver,” he said. “Now, let’s see if we can figure out if Lavigne had anything on Chester.”

“Fun,” Felicia remarked, but took a batch of folders from the top box and started looking them over. The best thing to find would be some evidence that Chester had broken rules of secrecy or territorial expansion in his long conflict with Lavigne. There were plenty of injunctions by Lavigne to go through, most of them probably frivolous, but it was frankly easier and more likely than extracting information from the shifters.

He didn’t want another repeat of Felicia’s off-the-books interrogation. That was dangerous, and the longer the case went on, such as it was, the more erratic Felicia was likely to get. Ray wasn’t entirely certain how the current twist would affect things; they’d never had a case be *ended* without being *resolved*. Most supernatural criminals couldn’t flout GAR and BSE.

For a while there was silence, punctuated by the rustling of paper and the sipping of coffee. Both of them were more field agents than desk agents, but GAR Midwest was

quiet enough that they probably spent more time at their desks than in the field. They had practice sifting out useful information from a morass of reports.

“Okay, there’s a lot of Department of Acquisitions reports here,” Felicia said eventually. “Like, a lot a lot. Somebody should have flagged this, because I’m pretty sure he’s over his limit.”

“We’re not investigating Lavigne,” Ray said, but shrugged. “Still, that’s probably related. If we take Wells and Harper’s testimony as it stands, vampire overreach – or the perception of it – is the inciting incident.”

“Constance?” Felicia asked.

“Might as well go to the top,” Ray said, picking up the folders. “You know, here’s a thought. If nobody was checking on Lavigne’s acquisitions numbers, the same might be true of Chester’s. He’s got a huge organization, did he get all those shifters through proper channels?”

Felicia shrugged, retreating to silence as they stepped outside the office. If Lavigne had been overrunning his numbers for so long, somebody had been fudging on his behalf somewhere in GAR and that could get ugly. It wasn’t directly related to their investigation, so it’d probably get handed off to some other agent, but it seemed likely to spark another round of internal investigation.

Nobody wanted that.

If they were lucky it *would* lead back to Chester. If it was a dead end, they’d have to actually tackle those reams of forms the shifters had given them. If they were extremely *unlucky*, they’d get to deal with another internal investigation and make even more enemies.

The Department of Acquisition wasn’t located in any of the GAR US locations. It was in GAR Paris, where *Guilde des Arcanes* was still blazoned on the walls in gold leaf. The head of the Department of Acquisition, Constance Earl, had an office with a view of the Eiffel Tower, if from a distance, but when the pair entered she was certainly not enjoying the view.

“I don’t care whose land they crossed, you go in there and get them,” she was saying, half-yelling into the scry-com in French, chronically red face even more choleric than usual. “No, I’m not going to call him! What, are you allergic to work? Do your job.” She cut the scry-com with a sharp gesture and glared at them. “What.”

“We have a few questions related to the late Master Lavigne,” Ray said, as Felicia squared up the reports. “Specifically, it seemed he was exceeding his allowance on hunting without being called on it.”

“Lavigne,” she said. “Yes, Master of Minneapolis.” Somehow she managed to butcher the city name in her heavy Parisian accent. “I heard about his death. A shame. He was a pillar of the community, and his work required a few tokens of appreciation.”

Ray shared a glance with Felicia. It wasn’t like they were unaware of the sort of political horse-trading that went on, but it was never above them in their chain of command. Usually it was the sort of thing that the pair of them investigated, that ultimately wound up in scenes full of blood and bodies.

“We have these reports,” Ray tried, and Felicia held out the folders in question. Constance didn’t move, and after a moment Felicia dropped them on her desk. Then Constance sent a flick of vis through a telekinesis focus to spread out the forms, glancing them over. She didn’t invite them to sit.

“And?” Constance said at length. “What is it you want?”

“Well,” Ray said, feeling a touch lost. “We were looking into Alpha Chester and his feud with Lavigne. Since Lavigne had so many overages we thought we’d bring it to you.”

“Yes, and?” Constance’s frown seemed to, if possible, grow more intense. “You have an offer for me?”

“No,” Ray said at last finally realizing what Constance was saying. She was thinking they were there to cut in on whatever deal she’d been running with Lavigne. “We were just hoping to get an insight on what was happening. Find out if something like that was going on with Alpha Chester.”

“That cagey old bastard? No, he wasn’t interested in any deals.” Constance flicked the folders back together with her focus and put them on a cabinet behind her.

“*What about the excess mundane deaths?*” Felicia wrote on her tablet and held it up.

“They’re not excess unless I say they are,” Constance said, voice suddenly cold. “It’s my department. So long as I keep things so that the mundanes don’t notice and cause trouble, it’s none of your business. Shut the door on your way out.”

Ray knew a dismissal when he heard it, and the head of the Department of Acquisition was far above his pay grade. Since they’d never sat down, he simply nodded and turned about, following Felicia from the room. The back of his neck itched as Constance’s hard eyes followed him out.

“What a bitch,” Felicia wrote and showed to him, making him laugh.

“Yeah,” he said. “Makes our jobs harder, too. Guess it’s back to interviewing shifters.”

“Woof woof,” Felicia wrote, and then wiped her tablet before anyone could see it. Ray shook his head. He was glad that she was in a good mood, because he didn’t like the idea of the next several months of work at all.