

## Chapter 4 – Portals

He'd been out of the country exactly once before, for his honeymoon with Selene. They'd gone down to the Caribbean, taking a cruise among the small islands there. His work had never really demanded much travel, since he was a consultant rather than an on-site type. Looking at the Swiss countryside, he wished he could have toured it with Selene. She would have enjoyed it just as much, if not more, but they'd never had the chance.

The cities were not as amazing as the brochures' breathless endorsement, but Callum had never been a city person to begin with. Besides, Geneva had more than its fair share of supernaturals. There was a lot of disturbance from mages in various parts of the city, and he could spot a number of shifters and fae, so he got out of there as fast as possible.

While Callum stood out a little bit, it was mostly as an American tourist, and heaven knew there were enough of those about. Not that he stayed in the populated areas too long. It was easy to forget that he was on the run when he'd spent the past hours sleeping on a plane, but he couldn't linger and see the sights.

Fortunately, the Matterhorn was less than one hundred miles away in a straight line. It was a considerable trip if he followed the roads, but he didn't need to, and at this point each teleport was somewhere around a third of a mile. Several hundred teleports was a lot, but the hours of sleep on the plane had helped with his vis-induced strain and he was ready to go. So long as he didn't have to transport other people or something like a car, he'd be fine.

The compass from his camp kit actually came in handy, as he mostly just had to set himself a direction and follow it. Since he just had a phone and not a proper GPS unit, he couldn't use that to find his way, though for all he knew an active GPS signal near the portal location would throw up flags somewhere. That was certainly a security precaution *he* would use, that or just blocking GPS like the military did.

Even the compass was barely necessary, though. The ambient mana was thicker in Switzerland than it had been in the US, and he could tell he was going in the right direction because it was somewhat like going upstream. He figured the thicker mana helped with his teleports, too, since he had more overall energy. Some of the early literature had mentioned that mage Houses had more mana locally, but he hadn't really understood how much of a difference that made.

He only stopped once, to get out a heavier jacket, as he made his way into the Alps. It was probably for the best that he was taking the direct route through wilderness, since

he couldn't speak the language. Or read it. Sadly, he didn't have any translation magic to hand and without an internet connection he didn't have translation technology either.

It only took him half an hour to get to where he wanted to go, in the rugged terrain away from the trails that crisscrossed the mountains and glacial kettles. That was a pretty ridiculous speed, though not one he could keep up for long. It was a fairly tedious and grueling process, finding the point on the edge of his perceptions that he could transfer to, forming the teleport, and popping forward.

The flow of mana made it obvious when he was near his target. The ambient mana did move, but generally it was slow enough that it was barely noticeable, not that it seemed to exert any affect on the real world to begin with. On the slopes, though, it was cascading down, obviously originating from a point higher up in the mountains.

There was no visible infrastructure until suddenly there was. No power lines or roads or radio towers were in evidence, but after the next few teleports he could suddenly see a structure built into the mountain. It looked like a house had been merged with the mountainside, solid stone with windows indicating two stories and a door letting out onto a small porch.

When it came within range of his spatial perceptions he could tell that it had a number of wards surrounding it, as well as glamours, so it was effectively invisible to normal people. It also had a teleport, which was a little worrying, but he didn't think it was likely that they'd anticipate someone entering that particular portal world. Indeed, the house was empty, though there was a bunch of active enchantment around.

He couldn't help but appraise it from the point of view of his former profession, finding that despite the sturdiness of the construction it was clearly made by an amateur. The floors weren't perfectly level, the hallways were too narrow, the rooms were almost perfect cubes. Which meant they had different ceiling heights, most of them too high or too low, and it was only the fact that it was made completely out of stone that kept the structure from being completely compromised. If he had to guess, some earth mage had worked it together rather than it being properly designed.

The back of the house opened into a cave, which to Callum's inexperienced eye looked coarse but not quite natural. He threaded his way past the house wards and popped into the cave, blinking as his eyes adjusted. The mana flow was even faster in the narrow confines and he almost felt like he was walking against a current, though it was all in his head. If he pulled back his perceptions and waved his arm around, he couldn't feel anything at all.

The portal itself came into sight and perception at about the same time, as he walked down a tunnel lit with soft white from crystals overhead. Visually, it looked no different

from any of his portals, though somewhat wider. It was just a hole, a doorway to somewhere else, though one tall and wide enough to drive a big rig through. To his perceptions, it was far more complex.

His portals were basically just a ring made out of vis, tearing open a hole between the two ends. There was some structure there, but nothing fancy. The magic holding open the entrance to the portal world, by contrast, was fantastically complicated, with intricate loops and swirls and branching fractal patterns. There were different sizes of magical threads, even, with different densities of unformed vis between them, and even that was made more complex by the mana rushing through the portal.

He wanted to stay and study it, his brain tickling with ideas, but he had to remind himself that he was here to get away from any possible fae pursuit, not to gawk. The portal would be just as visible from the other side. What was better, he was pretty sure that no fae was going to want to follow him into the dragonlands, even if they could.

The dragonlands were theoretically off-limits to GAR, which was why it only had a little outpost and not a full complex. His choice had been made by default, since he wasn't going to go to Faerie or the Deep Wilds, and wandering around the Night Lands seemed particularly foolhardy. He couldn't breathe underwater, and the supposedly empty portal world was in a nasty part of South America and he'd stand out there far more than Europe. Besides, that one just smacked of military-grade secrets.

Dragonblooded didn't come through the portal often, though, so it was essentially unused. If it weren't for the fact that humans were absolutely forbidden from going through, it'd be completely perfect. He figured it was a calculated risk; even if something was off-limits, if nobody was around to actually check he wasn't going to get into trouble.

Without any further rumination, he popped himself right up to the portal and walked through. Given that the center was basically just open space, he probably could have teleported through instead, but he didn't know for certain and it wasn't like he had to be sneaky. Besides, he could see through to the other side and there was certainly nothing worth speaking of there, just bare rock and moss. It was only when he stepped through that he realized what an alien place it was.

The rock and moss was mundane enough, but the view was that of sky. The portal was set into a cliff, but one of such scope that the mind boggled. Looking out from the ledge he couldn't see a bottom or a top, with blue sky in both directions. There was just an uninterrupted length of near vertical rock slope, dotted here and there with straggles of green.

It was enough that he took several steps back from the edge just to stop the vertigo. The space beyond the cliff was an absolutely enormous expanse of nothing, and it was completely impossible. He had known intellectually that the portal worlds were a bit weird, but that was a far cry from seeing something so staggering.

Nor was it just the visuals that were astounding. With his spatial perceptions he could tell that the fundamental nature of space itself, perhaps the underlying reality of the portal world, was different. He couldn't articulate exactly how, and he hadn't really ever noticed the flavor of space on Earth, but then, he'd never much thought about the color of sunlight either.

Along with the change in flavor, for lack of a better term, was an absolutely massive amount of mana. It was no wonder it was pouring from the portal on the other side. He felt energized and suppressed at the same time, unused to the amount of ambient energy.

After a moment he focused on the actual cliff face rather than the general sensation of weirdness he was getting from his surroundings. It was considerably more difficult to push his perceptions through the rock there than it was back home, and the cliff face seemed to be solid, anyway. There were just lots of protrusions or dents, one of which held the portal. There were another few places he would trust his footing within range, so he popped himself up to a little niche about two hundred feet above the portal itself.

That way he was gone if anyone poked their head through the portal, and what was better, he could still inspect the portal structure itself. It looked like it might be more difficult than he'd thought to find enchanting materials in this portal world, since there wasn't anything approaching normal terrain nor any civilization he could use as a guide to find the raw materials. He'd do some surveying himself, but between the dimensional portal and ditching any fae tail, he definitely didn't count it as a wasted trip.

Callum pulled out his laptop and booted it up, only belatedly realizing he was lucky that electronics worked at all. He could tell that space was different, and it might well have affected his computer, or fried it. Since it worked, he pulled up his CAD program and started transcribing the portal.

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King Jissarrell of the Moiral Enclave growled in frustration as the heart he'd been following suddenly evaporated in a puff of mana. The spell had only a few hours left in it anyway, but it was still an affront. It had been irksome enough to track it to one of the big human cities, and *then* the trail had gone over the ocean and he'd had to call in a favor to travel across the waters.

The fae of the Old Country thought themselves as far above King Jissarrell as they did their own subjects, but they did respect his pursuit. Revenge was one of the most time-honored traditions, after all. There was *some* scoffing about him pursuing a mere human, but only some. They did know what human mages could do, after all.

He reigned in the zephraim he'd been using to follow the trail from the Black Forest. All he knew was that his target had vanished somewhere in the south of Europe. Which was more than he'd known before, but he had been so looking forward to tracking the man down and peeling his skin off his body. Now, that pleasure would have to be delayed.

There weren't many things that could break that tracking spell, but any sufficiently powerful fae, like another king, certainly could. Even would, given sufficient inducement or simply knowledge that they'd be irritating another powerful fae without any risk. Spite was another one of those time-honored traditions.

He wheeled around in the air and headed back north, the zephraim stomping on the air, jagged antlers of lightning crackling as it made its displeasure known. He kept a firm hand on the reins, however, and steered it back to its home. Jissarrell dropped it off at the stables and proceeded further into the enclave.

The scent of proper fae magic was rich this close to Faerie, tempting him to cross back over, but he resisted. That would just put him under the control of the great faerie lords, and he was quite happy being his own monarch with his own land. The magic was weaker on Earth, and the mortals annoying, but it was better, as one wit had put it, to reign in hell than serve in heaven.

Instead, he made his way to the Door of Glass, pricking his finger and letting the blood drip onto the frame. The transparent crystal drank in the offering, red spreading up and out to cover the entire door. Once it had sucked in the appropriate amount of magic, the Door swung open, and Jissarrell stepped into the Ways.

They were few and hard-built on Earth, compared to their counterparts on Faerie, but with that came a lessening of danger. It was very little trouble at all to walk to the New World, with barely anything that would try to eat him, no matter that he was a fae king. Unfortunately the Ways didn't reach to the Moiral Enclave yet, but he could use the human transport network to return to an area within reach of home.

He could have taken it to the Old World, or to return for that matter, but that would have involved letting the humans know where his business was. Besides, it was far better that they didn't know about the Ways, thinking that everyone relied on their own transportation or movement overland. It kept them happy and foolish and easy to trick.

Alas, he was going to have to engage with those very same humans. With the trail broken, he'd have to resort to the unimaginatively named Guild of Arcane Regulation, who were supposed to police their own. It pained him to admit to the humans that he'd been unable to bring vengeance upon the offender himself, but he could at least take comfort that he'd be making annoyances for all the fae that lived in the Old Country.

The white-trunked trees and blood-red roses of the Ways rose on either side of him, screening out the great nothingness that was between, razorglass bowing before the power he carried with him rather than cutting his legs to ribbons. A small stream trickled across the path, and Jissarrell stepped over it very carefully. To dare the stream would be to dare an entire ocean at once, and even a fae king would be foolhardy to try that.

Trees and roses eventually gave way to a marble and glass arch, and Jissarrell stepped out of the Ways, emerging in the heart of the White Mountains in the northeast of the New World. He was on good terms with King Guisame, and servants came to attend to him the moment he emerged, offering him freshly gathered dew and the still-beating heart of a deer on a tray of polished maple. It was good to be shown the proper respect.

He took a bite out of the heart, blood dripping down his chin, and headed through the palace of living trees. Guisame would probably be holding court, and Jissarrell wanted to remain on good terms with him so he proceeded to the gardens, certain that the servants would inform Guisame of his whereabouts. Indeed, in fairly short order King Guisame arrived, his antlers bare and dry with the season and with Queen Lorenn on his arm.

"Brother!" Jissarrell clasped forearms with Guisame and bowed over Lorenn's offered hand.

"Brother," Guisame returned. "Was there any success in your hunt?"

"No, brother," Jissarrell replied. "Something drew a veil between me and my prey after I arrived in the Old Country. I will have to go to the human mages and let them know that one of their kind has broken the agreements."

"Ah, a shame you could not find him," Guisame said, then brightened. "At least it shall provide some way to make the humans squirm!"

"It will indeed," Jissarrell said with satisfaction. "Perhaps even make trouble for some of those in the Old Country, if they can find who might be shielding him."

"Ah, I look forward to that! You need not go to them, either. I can send a servant through the transport booth; might as well get some use out of the cursed thing."

“That would be most welcome,” Jissarrell agreed. Guisame crooked a finger, and a brownie went scampering off to fulfill his king’s wishes.

“You must tell us the full story of the one who has incurred such wrath,” Lorenn said, eyes sparkling in anticipation of a gory tale.

“I would be happy to.” There wasn’t much to it, but what there was had some interesting flourishes. Besides, there was nothing a fae king liked so much as a good story.

“That is fascinating,” Guisame said once Jissarrell had finished. “I have not heard of humans doing anything like that! One wonders what dark and desperate plots they have brewing.”

“Perhaps the humans will shed light on it, loath as I am to suggest such a thing,” Jissarrell said. “For no other reason than I believe human magic is involved. They do claim to have dominion over it.”

They frittered away the time on trivialities until a pixie returned with a human in tow, showing their age as humans did, even the mages. At the very least the man showed the proper courtesies, bowing and waiting for introductions. Jissarrell forgot the name as soon as it was said, since it was hardly relevant.

“I was told you had something to report about a renegade mage?” He asked after he was given leave to speak.

“Perhaps.” Jissarrell flicked a finger, knitting an image of the scruffy man from sunbeams and an errant breeze. “I can only tell you what I saw, but I believe that the holes in space were some form of human magery.”

“Holes in space?” The man repeated in that tiresome habit they often had. He took out one of those mundane contrivances and tapped at it in a disharmonious clatter. “Your majesty, could you explain exactly what you saw?”

For a second time Jissarrell told his tale, but the human didn’t seem to appreciate it, which was rude. When it was over, the man chewed his bottom lip, glancing from his laptop contraption to Jissarrell and back again. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision.

“King Jissarrell, we believe the man you describe may be the renegade mage, Callum Wells. He is considered extremely dangerous, as he has been involved in the recent vampire massacres as well as escaping from GAR custody. Can you be any more specific about where you may have tracked him in Europe?”

That sparked Jissarrell's interest. A random assault was one thing, but a visit by a renegade was far more interesting. Not to mention one that had already given the vampires a black eye!

"You know that is not sufficient," he told the man. "Give me a proper story."

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Callum found the portal world very strange indeed. It had taken him a little bit to realize it, but there was no sun. There was light, but it seemed to be coming from everywhere in the endless sky, and didn't vary in brightness at all. Besides which, he hadn't seen a single cloud, and while it was chilly it wasn't cold or windy like he would have expected a cliffside to be.

On the other hand, just because it seemed to be stark didn't mean it was lifeless. He had seen winged shadows in the far distance, seeming to be incomprehensibly vast, hazed by atmosphere as they were, but that was only a guess with no real backing. The rustle of wings had come on occasion from somewhere nearby, and it sounded more normal sized, but he hadn't actually seen what was making the noise.

He'd been snacking from his camp food and drinking from the water bottles he'd brought, and considering the lack of any local water he had a pretty strict limit on how long he could stay in the portal world. Admittedly, he could just pop back over to the other side and gather snow to melt, but he wanted to wait until the last possible minute for that.

That meant he needed shelter, and not just the tent. Callum was genuinely worried about something very large trying to investigate him in the middle of the night or something, and there was a particular dearth of places to hide on the exposed cliff space. Except for one bit.

The portal back to Earth wasn't flush with the rear wall of the depression in which it was located. That was actually true on both sides of the portal, so the pocket formed a very odd, narrow room with two rock walls from two different worlds. Portals were two-way, after all, and while he hadn't yet found a reason to use both sides at once, the fact remained that the back of a portal was just as much a window as the front. Or rather, there really wasn't a front and a back, save for what he was working with at the time.

Even though it was probably fine, he swept the air in the hidden alcove with a portal, exchanging it for the atmosphere outside. The way his perception worked as it went through the portal was somewhat brain-twisting, since he could sense the same area relative to him from two different perspectives, but other than the magic-sense equivalent of eyestrain he adapted easily enough. He even found that he *could* thread



his vis through the portal, so long as he didn't get too close to the edges. If the vis strand got anywhere near the mana threads that defined the hole between realities, it got horrifically shredded.

Working with his magic on the portal world was a bit different from Earth. It was definitely easier in terms of strain, because the extra mana available meant he could do more at a time. At the same time, it was harder because it took more effort to make and hold the magical structures. He could, somewhat grudgingly, see how it was useful for mages to train on portal worlds if they were all like that.

He set up his tent and checked his phone for the time, finding that despite the brightness outside it was after nine. After the day he'd had that was good enough for him, so he wedged himself up near-ish one of the portal edges, where there would be some airflow, and tried to get some sleep. It wasn't very comfortable, the differences in the environment nagging at his senses, but eventually he did manage to get some semblance of rest.

It wasn't the best sleep he'd had, especially when something passed by outside that was loud enough to sound like thunder but came and went almost as quickly. Whatever it was didn't pass close enough for his perceptions to catch it and he only thought of opening a spy-portal belatedly, after his heart had calmed down. He was glad he'd not tented out in the open, with something that big around.

Still, it was enough that he could feel his brain working again once he'd gotten up. For one thing, he was pretty sure the portal was artificial. It wasn't wholly out of the realm of possibility that it had spontaneously formed, but there were too many flourishes for him to really believe it.

For one thing, it had mana intakes regularly spaced around the portal's structure, taking advantage of the portal world's excess. He could have believed one was some random manifestation of magical nonsense, but purposely load-balanced like that seemed unlikely. There was also the plain fact that it looked like a portal made out of vis, if one far more complex than he was used to, even if after however many hundreds of years it was composed completely of mana instead.

If someone had made it, that launched an entire fleet of new questions, none of which were particularly relevant to him. What was relevant was that it demonstrated a number of techniques that he could use, or at least crib from. He might even be able to cover some of the weaknesses of being self-taught.

His self-appraisal, at least compared to Gayle, was that his fine control was terrible. While that was still true, after studying the portal he had some insight into why: his threads were too small. It seemed counterintuitive that having a finer structure meant

less ability to manage the details, but his little threads didn't handle the power quite right so things kind of smeared. The containment for his vis fields wasn't entirely static at the edges. It was something he'd only really seen after noticing the filaments in the portal that matched the size of his threads were very low energy indeed.

Not that making thicker threads helped at all, since they were just as overloaded and at that scale the subtle trembling of the outlines was even more visible, not to mention taking more vis out of him for no real benefit. He couldn't even figure out how to begin to flex things to change the power per volume, and none of the literature had mentioned anything about vis power density. Which had probably contributed to his oversight. It was probably *possible* to change, considering that there were variations in the portal structure, but since the portal was the first place he'd seen that it wasn't a common technique.

He didn't know whether that was just some natural inclination or a peculiarity of spatial aspect or his lack of formal training, but the same thing that let him sneak vis threads through wards meant that he had a huge problem when it came to the actual structures. Fortunately the portal had answers for that, too, because the magic that made it was big and energetic and it used tubes rather than threads for the most high-powered parts of the portal structure. There was no reason he couldn't do the same thing on a smaller scale, provided he could figure tubes out in the first place. Not a sure thing, but at least a direction.

Along with a potential solution to his control problems, there were bits of the portal that seemed to recirculate the energy so it didn't use nearly as much to keep itself open. That might possibly help with his scaling problems, where the maximum size of any portal or teleport he could manage was about the size of a car. He'd seen energy recirculation in the glamour enchant, so he knew it was possible, but he just was not good enough to translate it from the glamour to a portal. Now that he had a working model, it was worth a shot.

Callum popped back to his original niche and set out his solar charger while he took notes by hand. At some point he'd digitize them but he wasn't sure the solar charger would even work despite the brightness. For all he knew there weren't any actual photons arriving and it was all some magical handwave.

While he trusted in the accuracy of his notes, they weren't as good as studying the whole thing in motion, so he planned to stay and study the portal for as long as his supplies held out. The biggest thing he risked was that someone would be waiting on the other side, but if so he could take a gamble on his homebond enchantment, even if it was a terrible experience.

It was just too bad that there was no obvious source of enchanted materials, though he was seriously contemplating trying to chisel some rock off the cliff face. The stone didn't quite seem as mana-infused as the stuff he'd gotten from the vampires, but it was better than brass or other non-magical materials. Plus there was an infinite amount of it. If he could actually quarry the stuff he might even be able to build a house out of enchantable stone, which had all kinds of implications.

For a while he enjoyed the light and fresh air, and simply lost himself in sketching and note-taking. He tried forming tubes like the ones the portal had and, while he didn't get very far, he didn't get nowhere, either. That was better advancement than he'd gotten from vis density, and the portal was obviously the work of a master, so he wasn't worried overmuch. It wasn't something he could expect to master first try.

Even if he was absorbed in his work, he hadn't entirely forgotten that he was somewhere off-limits. He kept his perceptions stretched outward, and glanced at the sky in case he saw any of those giant shadows coming his way. Still, considering that he was in the middle of a bare expanse of infinite cliff he didn't expect many visitors. He was more concerned with someone coming through the portal, but so far there had been neither hide nor hair of anything on that end.

So when something did happen, it came with no forewarning at all and took him by complete surprise. The mana shuddered and froze and his perception fuzzed painfully, forcing him to pull it in even as he tried to pop himself back by the portal. The frozen mana made it almost impossible to push his vis through, and he hadn't gotten far when the stone to either side of his perch pulled away from the cliff and slammed together in midair.

He couldn't help but gawk as the granite fused into a marble dais, more pieces slamming in to form distinctly Greek columns and an ornate dais. An alien crystal vine sprouted from the base of each column and wound itself up to the top in the matter of a second or two, flowering into black leaves etched with a unfamiliar script in gold. Finally with a clap of thunder, a dragonblooded appeared atop the dais, looking stern and imperious.

"Mortal!" He thundered. "You have violated the laws of—" The dragonblooded faltered and blinked at him, continuing in a much more normal voice. "Wait, Callum? Callum Wells?" For his part, Callum was just as confused.

"Mister Shahey?"