

Chapter 4-8 – Lies

“We’ve got a message from someone who isn’t Chester!” Lucy looked up from her laptop, sounding a bit surprised. She *had* set up some kind of dead drop communications for other people from the American Alliance, but they hadn’t had anyone use it. Which was fortunate, since The Ghost only operated in a very narrow scope and it was never a good thing when someone needed them.

“Who is it?” Callum looked away from the enchanting he was doing, playing around freehand rather than using the inscriber. He was attempting to construct a version of the directed gravity spell form, and considering that he was still fumbling around with a very small amount of proper instruction there was no point in trying to make a permanent version. Instead he was just playing around with brass wire.

“One of the independent fae. Toclerane?” Lucy shook her head. “No idea how to pronounce the name. He’s on the list of signatories so I guess he’s real enough.”

“What does he want?”

“Says that he’s tipping us off to some malefaction – that’s the actual word he used – some malefaction by other supernaturals in his area. Umm.” Lucy’s fingers rattled over the keyboard. “Wichita.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Callum said, putting his wire model aside. “Did he say what *kind* of malefaction?”

“A-nope. Just has a number so he can consult you.”

“Huh. Wonder what’s going on. He’s part of the Alliance; shouldn’t they be taking care of it?” Callum asked, stepping around the table to peer over Lucy’s shoulder.

“Not everyone is part of the Alliance. Might be the other guy’s still with GAR,” Lucy suggested. “That’d make things complicated.”

“I don’t like it,” Callum grimaced. “But I suppose we’ll have to hear him out.”

“Should I dial him up right now?”

“If there are people at risk we shouldn’t delay,” Callum said, sliding a chair over next to Lucy and seating himself in it. They could and maybe should have gone to the office, but the living room was quite comfortable.

“Right.” Lucy poked at some of the programs she had in her laptop, and her VOIP window popped up. So far, at least so far as either of them knew, nobody had come anywhere near the servers and bypasses that Lucy was using for phone calls. Still, they weren’t

about to call directly from the bunker. The phone rang three times before there was a click, and a deep, cultured voice answered.

“Ye-ees?” The person on the other end sounded as if he were delighted to get a call, rich and friendly. Knowing that they were dealing with a fae, that immediately prickled Callum’s instincts and set his teeth on edge. “This is Toclerane.”

“This is The Ghost,” he said, keeping his tone and manner businesslike. “I understand you’ve run into an issue you feel should be brought to my attention.”

“Why, yes!” The voice, if such thing were possible, became even more friendly. “Fantastic! I was hoping you would call.”

“I take supernatural threats seriously,” Callum replied. “Your message was rather short on details. I will need more than that.”

“Oh, certainly, certainly.” Toclerane hastened to assure him. “I have been dealing with this intemperate rake for years, but I’ve never had the thought before that he might be someone who could be *permanently* stopped. I am hardly capable myself and this notorious villain is protected by his friends in authority.”

“Still short on details,” Callum said. He knew Toclerane’s type. They *loved* to talk, and could ramble on for hours without actually saying anything. “Who is it? Is he part of GAR? What exactly has he been doing?”

“Ah! This particular scoundrel goes by the name of Anexis and he has been deep in the pockets of GAR – or they in his – for years. He has vexed and hounded me and the people I have protected for some time, and it has only been through my efforts that his victims have not met with utter disaster.” Toclerane sounded rather smug about that.

“The very *specific* incident as of late, two days ago — Anexis used his particular skills to sabotage an entire building full of children! Poor mundane teenagers who had no idea what could be going on or the danger they were in. He dusted the place with a poisonous gas...” Toclerane paused dramatically. “And it was only by my hand that none came to harm. Yet, I am not powerful enough to confront this miscreant directly. My skills lie in other directions.”

“That does sound bad,” Callum conceded. There were *plenty* of stories about child-eaters that fae could draw from. In fact, it seemed the majority of monsters were stories for or about kids — and stories being appropriate for children didn’t make the monsters any less horrifying. “I need more details. What does this Anexis look like? Where does he live?”

There were other details Callum needed too, if he were to do anything, but it was clear Toclerane was far from objective when it came to facts. Assuming he wasn’t flat-out lying

– which fae *could* do, for the most part – there was some sort of threat at play and Callum certainly wouldn't brook anyone threatening children. But there was also no point in going in blind.

“Well! He *should* be tall but he has a hunch, and a long wicked nose! His hair is like a rat's nest of dirty straw and—” Toclerane went on in that vein for some time, using ten words when one would do, but eventually Callum had a location and description.

“I will look into it,” Callum said, and waved at Lucy to cut the connection.

“So this Toblerone guy,” Lucy said, after the program showed they were disconnected. “I dunno, he seemed a little overly impressed with himself.” Callum mouthed the words *Toblerone guy* and laughed, shaking his head.

“Well, at least he had real information. Just have to check it first. Does the GAR database have anything on that Anexis guy?”

“On it.” Lucy's fingers rattled across the keys again. “They still have too much stuff on paper. It's annoying.”

“I'm just surprised they have any electronic capability at all,” Callum said.

“Even magic can't beat email for management,” Lucy said. “I'm pretty sure the only reason we got it is all the office folks wanting to spend more time playing solitaire or whatever.”

“Sounds about right,” Callum agreed.

“Ummm, okay Anexis.” Lucy pursed her lips as she looked over what came up from the GAR servers. “Independent Fae. No address, just a neighborhood, but it's *close* to what Toblerone gave us.”

“Anything else?”

“Not in *this* database. No commentary on powers or attitude or anything. I'm sure there's something somewhere in GAR but these entries are pretty bare bones. No records associated with him though, so nothing to do with Acquisitions or BSE.” Lucy shrugged and leaned back in her chair. “So if he's causing trouble there's nothing in it that has reached the level of an official report.”

“Yeah, well, given that it's a bureaucracy there's a million ways for any such report to get 'lost.' I suppose you should keep digging and see if there's any incidental information, but the easiest thing would be to just put an anchor there and check.” Callum sighed. “There's no point in delaying if this fae is going after kids. Hopefully in the future the American Alliance can deal with this sort of thing themselves.”

“We could run it past Chester,” Lucy suggested, tapping her laptop meaningfully.

“I mean, yeah, shoot him an email, but it’s not like he’s in charge of anyone outside his pack,” Callum pointed out, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “Honestly Toclerane is doing the right thing in contacting us.”

“Maybe, but I could do without this kind of work,” Lucy said with a frown.

“Me too,” Callum sighed. “But if I don’t do it, nobody will, so best get it over with.” He reached through the nexus and located the drone closest to the area. Since he couldn’t sense writing with his perceptions, Lucy had ended up engraving numbers on the portal anchors so he could keep track of which was which. Anchor two was the only mobile one in Chester’s general area, since he didn’t want to mess with the anchor in the compound, and a short jaunt down to Wichita wasn’t that much of an imposition.

At the very least it seemed like he wouldn’t have to break out the stealth ball. The target area was an ordinary residential address, not some fae reality pocket. Presumably most of the fae he’d seen in various cities had the same arrangement, for all that he’d been concerned with enclaves. Though maybe the inclination to live outside enclaves was also an inclination to act more like a human and less like a monster.

When the drone got closer he could see through Lucy’s cameras that the region was a slice of Kansas suburbia, almost disturbingly generic in its appearance. A sprawl of endless identical houses covered the flat landscape, and with no apparent magical current to follow Lucy had to actually aim the drone camera at street names and house numbers to find the target.

“What a dreary place to live,” Lucy said.

“Right?” Callum shook his head. “It looks so weirdly inhuman that it seems like it’s fae place anyway.” Of course it wasn’t, since suburban sprawl was a perfectly normal phenomenon, if one he didn’t much like.

His perceptions encountered a few lone supernaturals as they swept over the houses, probably fae and possibly shifters, living as ordinary folks. Or at least among them. Since they were just mowing lawns or playing fetch with pets, Callum wasn’t about to bother any of them. There weren’t any piles of skulls or anything else like he’d seen in other places, so it definitely wasn’t any of his business.

The address they had for Anaxis was superficially identical to any of the other surrounding dwellings, but there was a definite concentration of swirly fae magic about the house and the yard. Lucy set the drone down on the roof of the next building over, while Callum took a moment to survey the situation. They were actually lucky, since it seemed Anaxis was home. Or at least, *some* fae was home, tending a grill in the back yard.

“Gimme a second, going to see if I can get an actual eye on him,” Lucy said, fiddling with the drone and the cameras. It took a little bit of repositioning, but after a couple minutes they had an image of someone who looked like just a normal suburban dad. He was blond, and *did* have an aquiline nose, but no hunch was evident, nor the issues of complexion Toclerane had described.

To Callum’s perceptions, the fae’s real form wasn’t too much different. A little taller and a little broader, which considering the frame and paunch of the glamour made him large indeed, though not outside human standards. The features were a bit more exaggerated, but it seemed that Anexis, or whoever was at Anexis’ house, was basically human-looking.

“Box?” Callum asked, and Lucy took one from the stack and toggled it on to check that it worked, then handed it to him. He teleported it onto a small table in the backyard, and turned on the microphone. Normally he didn’t communicate with his targets, but so far they had nothing but Toclerane’s unsupported word that there was anything going on. After all, he had claimed that he’d *stopped* most of what Anexis had been doing.

“Anexis?” Callum asked, and the fae spun away from the grill. Magic swirled a moment in startled reaction, but when the man spotted the box on the table it condensed down to coat his skin. Which Callum didn’t blame him for.

“What is it? Who?” The voice over the mic sounded ordinary enough.

“Are you Anexis?” Callum repeated.

“I am,” he said, approaching the box.

“This is The Ghost,” Callum said.

“Oh, what? Shit. Why?” Anexis said, backing away from the device. He seemed wary, but not panicked.

“I received certain information about your activities and, finding it suspect, decided to give you the chance to address it directly.” Callum didn’t like it. He wasn’t equipped for investigating thing beyond obvious evil, and for all he knew Anexis’ homeowners association was more evil than him.

“Information from who?” Anexis said sharply, then realizing who was talking to, moderated the question. “If you’re willing to say.”

“Perhaps. When I have satisfied myself that you are not a threat to the people around you.”

“I’m not!” Anexis waved the spatula that was still in his hand around at the neighborhood. “Do you think I’d live here if I were?”

“Possibly,” Callum said, unmoved by the argument. “How do you account for the accusations that you attempted to poison a number of teenagers two days ago?”

“What? Two days ago?” Anexis turned back to the grill, but the spatula in his hand trembled as he flipped the burgers there. “Look — I’m a bit of a prankster, okay? It’s my thing. So there was a school dance my friend’s kids were at and I did a bit of magic shenanigans. Just a, you know. Fart bomb, basically.”

Lucy dissolved into helpless giggles as Callum shook his head. Of all things, he was not expecting juvenile pranks. Of course, there was every chance that Anexis was lying too, which was why Callum didn’t like being put in this position. His role was not to arbitrate in spats between supernaturals.

“Can you check that, Lucy?” Callum asked, muting the mic briefly. “Maybe at least a school paper or something?”

“Find out which school,” she said, still stifling laughter. “I’ll see what I can do. Maybe someone gossiped in the school paper.”

“Where did this take place?” Callum asked, and then asked a second time because he hadn’t unmuted himself the first time.

“Southdale High School,” Anexis said promptly. Callum glanced at Lucy as she as she frantically typed away at her keyboard. He was no internet sleuth, but he imagined that finding something mentioning a prank at a high school dance was not going to be easy. At least, not without access to chat programs and such, and Lucy certainly didn’t have that.

However, he’d underestimated social media. That was something he had only used in connection with his business as a consultant, and never gotten into himself. But obviously a gaggle of high school students would post about what happened during a dance, especially if it was some obvious prank, so inside of five minutes Lucy had several posts and videos about it.

“Sure doesn’t *seem* too big a deal,” she said, pulling up a clip of some high-schooler laughing about it. “I mean, I bet some people were unhappy but it’s not exactly murder.”

“Mm.” Callum grunted, not entirely pleased, though Anexis wasn’t the problem. Playing pranks wasn’t necessarily nice, but hardly an offense worth sending The Ghost after. So Toclerane had massively played up the danger, or Anexis was lying too. “Any serious accidents at that school this year?”

“Ummm.” Lucy looked at him. “That’s a broad question. What do you mean?”

“Basically anything that resulted in death. Kids are idiots and break stuff all the time, so unless it was a *really* suspicious accident it’s probably just the natural course of things.” While they were talking, Anexis finished grilling his burgers and plated them. One was for him, and the other was for a neighbor that came through a fence gate to chat. The neighbor was a normal human, so Callum marked that as a positive in Anexis’ column.

While the suburban neighbors ate and chatted, Lucy did research, and Callum stewed. It was still possible Anexis was being clever, but he was pretty certain that Toclerane had simply tried to point him at someone the fae didn’t like. Callum had known that would be a potential problem from the moment he agreed to even *listen* to other people, and he had no desire to be someone else’s weapon.

“Well, it’s not the most thorough research job,” Lucy said some thirty minutes later. “But nothing jumps out at me. Couple sports related accidents, some idiots cutting themselves up jumping off the bleachers, that kind of thing. One death by traffic accident, but they were out of state at the time.”

“Sounds like Anexis is in the clear. And Toclerane is not.” Callum frowned. “Once he’s done with dinner there we’ll wrap things up.”

“We gotta do dinner too,” Lucy said, standing up and trooping over to get herself a refresh on her drink. Unsweetened tea, since she was still trying to cut down on sugar.

“Yeah, we’ll be done soon,” Callum said, taking the second glass that Lucy had poured for him. “Thank you.”

“Sure thing,” she said, and sighed. “Man, you know, we’re not even being paid for this nonsense.”

“It is an issue,” Callum agreed. “It’s not like we’re poor but it’s the principle of the thing. People will just end up wasting our time if there are no costs or consequences.”

“So what’re we gonna do about it?” Lucy wrinkled her nose. “Don’t like the idea of charging people for, you know, *rescuing* someone.”

“Just make things clear that The Ghost isn’t to be casually invoked.” Callum said. “I’ll think about it.” It wasn’t much longer until Anexis’ neighbor wandered back to his own yard, and Callum turned the microphone back on.

“Do you have any idea why a fae named Toclerane would wish you harm?” Callum asked. He didn’t have any compunction about revealing the source of the inquiry. He wasn’t a lawyer or a cop and wasn’t duty-bound or even ethically bound to keep things anonymous.

Especially not when he strongly suspected that someone was trying to use him like some petty thug. Which was something he would not allow.

Anexis jumped, turning to the box still resting unobtrusively on the table.

“Jeez, give a guy a little warning,” he complained, rubbing at his nose. “Lemme think,” he said, tilting his head back and looking up to the sky for a few moments. “You know, I suspect I do. He fancies himself a bit of a fairy godfather, and his current ward was at the dance. Perhaps he found my prank a little gauche.” Anexis shrugged, and Callum rubbed his eyes. He imagined that targeting the dance was *because* Toclerane’s ward was there, given how the explanation so readily sprang to Anexis’ tongue.

“I see. I shall address that matter myself. Your pranks are not my business, unless you cross certain lines.”

“What lines are those?” Anexis asked, but Callum didn’t reply, instead simply recalling the box. That was a *very* bad question to answer. Anything he said would be twisted against him, any specific rules immediately lawyered and exploited and turned inside out. It didn’t even take a fae to do that.

“Not too pleased with Toclerane,” Callum said. “But I’m glad I don’t have to kill any monsters today. Let’s get dinner, and we’ll figure out what to do about it.”

“Could get Chester?” Lucy suggested as she stood up and stretched, heading for the fridge. Callum followed.

“We can update him, but Chester’s not Toclerane’s boss, or ours either,” he disagreed. “We need to handle it ourselves. I’m not about to shoot him just for that, but he needs at least a good slap to the face.”

“So why don’t you?” Lucy said.

“What?” Callum blinked.

“I mean, sure okay you don’t want to go there yourself, but, okay—” Lucy waved her hands vaguely as her idea formed. “We’ve got some corite, right? Just put it on a plate and one of my servos can literally smack him with it if you teleport it to the right place.”

“That seems a little, I dunno. Overdone. And is it right for The Ghost? But it *should* be a shock like a punch to the face.” Callum tapped the refrigerator door in thought, holding it open while Lucy pulled out leftovers. “I think your idea about using corite is right, though. This needs to be a warning with some bite behind it.”

“Sounding like an old-school crime lord there,” Lucy said, microwave beeping as she started heating the food.

“Yeah, you’re right, I do.” Callum grimaced, watching the microwave timer tick down. “But *The Ghost* kind of is, right? I mean, what’s the alternative? I *can’t* let people just call me up for funsies.”

“I suppose not.” Lucy slouched against the counter. “Just don’t want to go all Godfather, you know?”

“Oh, I agree,” Callum started taking plates out from the cabinet. “I think we can get away with merely expressing displeasure in no uncertain terms. Killing monsters is one thing, but I’m not going to inflict harm on people just because I’m mad.”

“Oh, oh! What about just teleporting him off to the middle of nowhere? Like, plopping him down in rural Zimbabwe or something.”

“Closer, but we want people to *know* about this.” Callum pursed his lips. “Maybe pop him into the middle of Jissarrell’s or Ferrochar’s enclaves.”

“With a shame sign!” Lucy said. “We’ve got some crappy corite we could use right? Just make a chain and hang the sign around his neck.”

“That would be perfect,” Callum said, a little relieved they’d found another solution. “I wasn’t comfortable with the idea of slapping him around anyway. He inconvenienced us, we inconvenience him. Turning it into real violence is an escalation that just seems...” He paused for a moment, searching for the right word, then shrugged. “Unjust.”

On one hand, the low-quality corite he had was still something that could be used for enchanting, and there was certainly no end to that work. On the other hand, if he wanted to be able to portal a fae and not risk some kind of escalation, he needed to use corite. And making sure everyone knew that they couldn’t get away with lying to him was important, more important than a focus. It was an investment.

He never would have come up with the idea himself, but it played into fae perfectly, so far as he understood them. Even if he had the stomach to commit serious injury to Toclerane, that wouldn’t have *meant* anything. Not really. Especially with how robust fae were. But turning it into *gossip* was at the same time an acceptable level of response and the only real threat a fae would care about.

A big rattling chain would have been perfect, but what Callum had could really only be turned into a thick wire, which would have to do. He got to work on that the next day, while Lucy put together the shame sign. It was just a chunk of wood with *I tried to lie to The Ghost* burned into it, but she seemed to have a lot of fun making it. Admittedly, most people enjoyed using a blowtorch.

Even as simple as it was, it still took half the morning to put together, mostly thanks to Callum making a few false starts with the wire-drawing equipment. They weren't in a rush where seconds counted, but they still needed it to be done soon so it was seen as a proper reaction to Toclerane's actions. Once they were ready Callum sent one drone toward Jissarrell's enclave while Lucy took charge of the other, zeroing in on Toclerane's address.

For once Callum wasn't all that worried about being caught infiltrating a fae enclave, though he still used the ball to do it. The theatre of it all would be far better if *nobody* was expecting it, but on the off chance someone noticed, it wasn't the end of the world. His brief interaction with Jissarrell made him think that particular fae king would approve, but also might try and bargain over it, which Callum didn't feel like dealing with.

He stopped when he located the actual court, where there were buildings and a bunch of fae going about whatever business faerie courts dealt in. All he really needed to be sure about was that there would be an audience.

"H'okay, he should be in that apartment," Lucy said, zooming in one of the drone cameras. Toclerane didn't live in suburbia, but rather an apartment building in downtown Wichita, one that was full of supernaturals to Callum's sense. "Ready?"

"Yep, call him." Callum focused on the apartment building while Lucy dialed the number again. The fae in the apartment hurried over to the phone, but waited until it had rung three times before picking it up and answering.

"Ye-ees?" It was the same drawl, so Callum was satisfied.

"I do not like it when people attempt to manipulate me," Callum said bluntly, not bothering to introduce himself. He could have just teleported Toclerane then, but he wanted to be sure it was *very* clear why it was displeased. "Setting me after someone for a harmless prank is not acceptable."

"Harmless?" Toclerane was affronted. "It seriously compromised my work with my ward! That's not harmless at all!"

Callum didn't bother to reply. The Ghost wouldn't argue with someone and besides, it seemed believably fae that Toclerane would see such a minor inconvenience as something worth killing over. Lucy rolled her eyes and Callum reached out to the shame sign, wrapping it up in his threads before teleporting it around Toclerane's neck.

The fae staggered, and Callum could see the liquid currents of vis that surrounded his skin evaporate. Nothing stopped him from taking it off himself, but in the next instant Callum formed a portal, sweeping it over Toclerane and dropping him into the middle of

Jissarell's court. Though it was a little tempting, he didn't stay to catch the fallout, pulling back the ball and the drone.

"That was actually pretty satisfying," Lucy said with a grin. "I know I didn't do much personally but you're right. Don't like people trying to trick us."

"I hope this gets the point across." Callum shook his head. "Well, it turned out better than it could have. I don't know what I'd do if I ended up killing someone who didn't deserve it."

It was a remarkable jape, really. King Jissarrell hadn't thought The Ghost had it in him. He'd seemed dull and stodgy and no fun at all, too serious to appreciate true showmanship. Clearly there was at least *some* trace of poet in him, considering what he'd done to that absolute wet blanket Toclerane.

"Toclerane has left the enclave," one of his lieutenants informed him. In the grand scheme of things, he should probably *thank* The Ghost for removing as many of his nobles as he had. They had been fairly useless anyway. Foppish cavorting had its place, but not when *so many* took to it. Now he had people like his new subordinate who actually paid attention to what went on.

"And he left the sign," Jissarel said, not quite asking. Toclerane's apoplectic fury had been amusing, even if the cold iron that was part of the apparel was not entirely pleasant to have in his domain. Nevertheless, no matter how humiliating it was for the moment, it was an amazing story with a relic to go with it. *Jissarrell* would have kept it, though he might have also considered how he would pay back such an affront. Someone of Toclerane's status should simply be glad they had not earned any more severe a penalty, and use the incident for his own aggrandizement.

"He left the sign," the lieutenant confirmed, and Jissarrell snorted. Most fae who lived outside the enclaves had a good reason to do so, and sometimes that reason was that nobody liked them. If Toclerane couldn't take a joke, let alone appreciate such a dramatic warning, it was no wonder he was on his own.

"We shall have to hang it somewhere," Jissarrell decided. The cold iron would complicate the process, but it wasn't pure enough as to render all fae magic impossible. The only complication displaying it might create would be if other people thought pestering The Ghost would get them their own memento, rather than dead. Fortunately not many people had *access* to The Ghost, and he certainly was not about to provide it.

“Yes, your highness,” came the reply, and Jissarrell dismissed him with a flick of a finger. While the Toclerane incident had been an amusing diversion, there were more important matters. To wit; The Ways growing ever closer to his enclave.

Jissarrell had already decided against a Door of Glass, considering what was beginning to prowl the Ways. A Door of Roses might well serve, though, provided he could coax one to grow. Especially since he needed to control the access, before the Ways decided to make their own inroads to his enclave and ended up being something he had no authority over.

The storm that had blown through GAR had more or less passed him by. There was little practical difference between GAR and the American Alliance, save for who might actually help should he find himself in trouble. The encroachment of the Ways was another threat altogether, and not one that he could avoid or address with people like the Ghost. It was a fae matter, and a fae matter alone.