

## Chapter 15 – Favor

“There’s something I think we need to discuss face to face.”

Callum frowned at the phone-portal he was using to talk to Alpha Chester and then glanced at Lucy. She shrugged back. That sort of wording always made Callum think that he was in trouble somehow, but he was absolutely certain he’d done nothing that would irk Chester.

“What’s this about?” He asked, not quite ready to pop through on Chester’s say-so.

“I have a favor to ask. Or maybe a job for you to do.”

“Ah.” Callum wasn’t much enamored of doing jobs for other people, but so far Chester hadn’t asked for anything too outrageous. More importantly, he’d taken Callum’s rejections of direct employment with enough grace that it wasn’t like Chester as pressuring him into anything. “Is now good?”

“Yes.”

“Right, we’re coming through.” He would have preferred to be more indirect than opening a portal directly from the bunker, but they still didn’t have the new portal anchors made. There were language barrier issues and just finding a machine shop with the right stuff in South or Central America was more difficult. Not impossible, by any means, but they’d only just found someone who seemed like he could do it properly.

The reason he’d sent his only free portal anchor over to Chester was to see about actually selling another set of telepads. Perhaps even two. With the GAR system temporarily shut down, he was sure it’d be an easy sell, and perhaps not even to Chester. There had to be others out there willing to take the risk, even though Chester would probably play intermediary.

He opened up a portal for himself and Lucy, and stepped through from the Texas trailer into Chester’s basement. It was significantly warmer than their trailer and its relatively anemic heater, and Lucy happily shed her sweater before flopping down into one of the overstuffed armchairs in the room. For the first time Callum appraised it as a room, rather than as a secret meeting place, considering how much work it might be to put something like it into his cave.

“Thank you,” Chester said, in his half-form rather than human. Somehow even as a ten-foot hyena-cat-wolf, he still looked to have a viking beard with the ruffles of his white fur.

“Please, have a seat.”

Callum took the chair next to Lucy's, as Chester's wife Lisa came down the stairs carrying a tray of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies and an assortment of drinks. Lucy visibly perked up at the smell of the cookies, which Callum had to admit was quite enticing. Though really it only made him worry about what exactly Chester had in mind that required buttering up. Though it wasn't Chester that started things.

"Look at you two," Lisa said with a grin. "You're so cute together!"

"Um," said Lucy. Callum suppressed a smile, well recognizing the signs of the interested mother or grandmother.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Lisa asked Lucy as she put down the cookies. "Time's a wasting. When are you going to make it official?"

"Ummm," said Lucy, her face red. Callum laughed and rescued her.

"We're discussing that," he said. "Things are a little crazy right now."

"They're always like that," Lisa said dismissively. "Put off having a family for any reason and you'll put it off for every reason. Then you'll regret it." She waved a cookie threateningly in Lucy's direction. "So I'm expecting to see babies soon."

"Ugh. Now I know how *your* kids feel," Lucy complained. "Do you have to put it that way?"

"Yes," Lisa said unrepentantly. Lucy looked at Callum helplessly and he put his arm around her.

"It's a mom thing," he told her. Lisa wasn't Lucy's actual mother, but considering that Lucy had been completely disowned by her blood family, the shifter matriarch was clearly the better parent.

"With that out of the way," Chester said, unfazed by his wife's behavior as Lisa sat down beside him on the couch. "GAR is beginning to fragment, and some people who were previously behaving no longer are. I don't complain of this to you, since people have been chafing at their bonds for a while. Sniping and nibbling where they could get away with it. The only difference is that things have started happening much faster."

"Someone's giving you trouble?" Callum asked, taking a cookie for himself and getting a knowing smile from Lisa. He couldn't imagine that anyone could cause Chester issues short of GAR itself, or maybe an Archmage or the highest-powered vamp or fae.

"Let us say King Ravaeb has decided to embrace certain aspects that he had not emphasized before," Chester replied. "There are a lot of, frankly, *monsters* that he's let run rampant. Really, actively directed toward us."

“That certainly does not sound good,” Callum said cautiously. Part of him wanted to protest that it wasn’t his business, but he knew that wasn’t entirely true. From any angle.

“No. His people have been killing mine, as well as any mundanes that have gotten in their way,” Chester said bluntly. “I have had my differences with Ravaeb in the past but I did not realize he had been so constrained by oversight. Now he’s been granted full latitude by GAR.”

“Wait, wouldn’t he get in trouble for killing non-magical folks?” Lucy protested. Callum was happy to hear her *not* calling them mundanes.

“Normally yes, but they’ve got dispensation from Constance herself to be rather more profligate than before.” Chester shook his head. “It’s been practically a war between my people and his. Maybe the fae don’t care about deaths, but I do.”

“Constance again,” Callum sighed. While he was sure that Chester was telling the truth, he also knew that Chester’s goals had to do with his own stability and power. Callum did not like being used as a political pawn, even if the target absolutely deserved it.

“Okay, so it’s sounding like Ravaeb needs to go. Would that actually stop these attacks? I mean, if the fae are just monstrous wouldn’t they rampage anyway?”

“I’m surprised you didn’t ask for proof,” Chester said.

“Oh, I’ll want whatever you have, certainly, but you wouldn’t pitch something like this to me unless you could back it up.” Callum rubbed at his forehead, contemplating it. A fae king would actually be easier to take out than an Archmage with a teleport redirection, but he was pretty sure he couldn’t actually manage such a thing. Especially not now.

“For your question, no. With the chaos of having a king missing, and the way the kings make the enclaves, no. Even those that decided to run amok would not be nearly as empowered. Then there would be the infighting...” Chester shook his head as he contemplated it. “I do not think they would be nearly the threat without Ravaeb.”

“Mmm. I have a grudge of my own, but that wasn’t enough to justify going after him. This, though.” Callum pressed his lips together. “Those that prey on people cannot be suffered to live.”

“That feels a little strong,” Lucy said. “I mean, I guess I can’t argue but it kinda sounds fanatical.”

“Perhaps it is,” Callum conceded. “But it’s what I can point to and feel absolutely firm about. All the supernaturals are too complicated and all the infighting is old politics that

I can't really comment on. It's not my place to deal with old grudges or the like. But preying on people? That makes you a monster."

"You know, some would stretch that definition to include an awful lot of people," Chester said.

"Sure, but you know what I mean and I know what I mean. You can pick apart words forever, make anything mean anything." Callum shrugged. "I know I'm not good enough to debate semantics so I won't even try." He knew he was being a bit defensive, but he'd run into the word-twisting type more often than he'd liked, especially in his former life as a consultant.

"I do know what you mean," Chester said. "So I can rely on you for help?"

"Tell me what we're up against, first," Callum said, glancing over at Lucy. "I have certain advantages but I'm not some tactical genius."

Callum found it surprising that Ravaeb's kingdom was located deep in Yellowstone National Park, though he couldn't say why. Maybe because the names of the fae that Ravaeb commanded were from entirely different areas — though as he understood it, the fae were aping the legends rather than the other way around, after Lucy had filled him in on how fae tended to follow stories. Though just being in Yellowstone didn't narrow anything down, considering how huge the park was.

Specifically, Ravaeb was located in the rugged mountains near the continental divide, his enclave twisting space and time twisted so there was far more room than appeared on any map. Fae magic was, properly speaking, complete bullshit, as unlike shifters or vampires or even mages it could do almost anything. That was, fortunately for everyone, balanced by the fact that it was restricted by its own arcane rules, further twisted and turned by the fae's odd psychology. So the spatial stuff was not at all like what Duvall or, to a lesser extent, Callum could do, and only worked exactly where the fae court was.

Callum had seen something related to that kind of work down in Florida, but he hadn't stumbled across wherever the actual fae kingdom was — if indeed it was at all hidden, and not just located in one of the giant skyscrapers in Miami. Ravaeb's location needed a little bit more to obscure it, so he wasn't surprised they had their own version of glamour. While Callum expected that his senses would be able to see through that kind of trickery, he didn't actually know.

"Most fae kings are surrounded by their court, though not too much of it," Chester said.

"I obviously haven't been to Ravaeb's but you'd expect to see all kinds of smaller fae around the periphery and nobles in close to Ravaeb."

“So I probably couldn’t fly the drone in,” Callum said thoughtfully.

“Even if we could I wouldn’t trust it afterward,” Lucy said. “Fae magic does some spooky stuff.” Callum nodded grim agreement.

“Yeah I’d have to throw it into Mictlān to get purged and I’m not sure how much I’d trust *that* either.” Callum shook his head. “Is there any chance of luring Ravaeb out? Some kind of GAR meeting or something?”

“Maybe, if you hadn’t sent everyone scrambling after you killed Fane,” Chester said, though there was no bite to his tone. “Though I expect it wouldn’t be particularly healthy for me to show up to a meeting either. There’s probably more than a few people who’d like to catch me out in the open.”

“Ugh.” Callum grimaced. He knew that there’d be fallout from his defiance of GAR and his removal of people like Fane, but it wasn’t pleasant to hear about it. Not that he would change what he did. Other people reacting badly wasn’t something he had control over.

“So if we can’t lure him out then we have to get into his kingdom, and that sounds pretty difficult. At least, not without being noticed.” Callum drummed his fingers on the chair arm. “Is there some fae that are friendly that could give us advice? Maybe some kind of material we could disguise a portal anchor with?”

“You would have to go to the fae for that last one,” Chester said. “So far as friendly — well, I’m not sure I’d consider *any* fae to be particularly friendly. Not really. But doing business with the Ghost? That would probably work.”

“That nickname,” Callum said with a wince. “I guess it’s worth a shot. The only one I’ve had any dealings with is Ferrochar. Would you recommend him?”

“Actually no, the others might get jealous,” Lisa said. “I’d actually recommend King Jissarrel. You killed some of his nobles so dealing with him would end up with more credit to the fae mind.”

“They are so weird,” Lucy muttered.

“So long as I can do it at a distance, I suppose that’s okay,” Callum said with a frown. That was definitely business to transact through a warded portal, or really, one of Lucy’s boxes with the transceiver portal hidden somewhere nearby. Or, the easiest option, by phone. “I don’t suppose there’s a number I can call him at?”

“I don’t know of one,” Chester said. “Lucy?”

“I’m pretty sure not, but I’ll check after this,” Lucy said.

“He probably doesn’t, considering where his kingdom is centered,” Lisa said. “Over in Europe most of the fae kings have a phone somewhere, but some of the ones here are pretty well closeted away in wilderness.”

“Hmmkay.” Callum took a bite of his cookie and considered for a moment. He didn’t mind doing preparatory work — in fact, he needed to, since he could only get things done with tricks. But considering how irritating his last deal with the fae was, he really didn’t look forward to it. Especially if Jissarrel figured out what Callum was up to, since he was pretty sure that somehow Ravaeb would end up knowing about it.

“Right, then. Do you think he’d care about telepads? There’s not much I can trade without giving away my goal.”

“Everyone cares about telepads since Duvall shut down the network. Even back-country fae.” That made Callum wince. While he didn’t viscerally understand how much GAR had depended on the teleports, he knew that it had a deep impact. It was absolutely bizarre to contemplate that a few moves on his part had crippled a global magical authority.

Of course, it wasn’t like one incident would shut down an entire network. That didn’t happen in the mundane world and it wouldn’t happen in the supernatural one. People must have been just waiting for an excuse, some inciting incident to seize on. It was just luck, good or bad, that he’d been that incident.

“Right, well.” Callum pursed his lips. “Then I think we have a plan.”

“We do?” Lucy said, looking skeptical.

“An idea of a plan, at any rate.”

“I would offer you more material support if I could,” Chester said. “I’m aware this is not a simple task, but we are very low on cold iron ourselves and I suspect you don’t intend to stick him with a knife anyway.”

“What about the enchanting metalwork?” Lucy asked. “We’re having to do things the long way around for that.”

“I’d love to,” Chester said. “But all our businesses are under scrutiny of some sort. That would almost certainly get caught.”

“Oh, boo,” Lucy said, wrinkling her nose.

“You know,” Callum said, after considering a moment. “I actually have an idea for something your people could do that wouldn’t look suspicious. Do you happen to have anyone who does carpentry? I have a place that needs furnishing.”

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"This is an absolute mess," Ray Danforth said.

*"This scene isn't much different than the last eight."* Felicia scrawled on her tablet.

"I mean everything," he sighed.

The scene in question was one of shattered furniture, carpets crusted with blood, steel frames bowing out from the walls, and debris scattered about as if a tornado had hit the place. It wasn't even the first one like that the pair had seen in the past few weeks. So far the fighting between various factions was quiet from the outside, but that didn't make it any less vicious.

There were no bodies. The two of them could very well guess who had been involved from the sorts of damage that had been done to the suburban house. The brute force physical violence was vampire, considering the time frame and lack of any claw marks, while the odd patches of perfectly unmarred floor or wall indicated fae trickery at work. The glamours had failed along with the creators' lives, which was one reason why they were there. Someone had called the police after hearing the ruckus, as they put it.

The DAI was one of the few departments left in GAR operating mostly at full strength, but that hardly helped when there was more to investigate than ever. People had been taking advantage of the muddled enforcement and even open encouragement to settle old scores. It had reached the point where Ray and Felicia had been pulled off the useless Chester investigation again.

The sudden explosion of violence was strange if for no other reason than the perpetrators would be caught *eventually*. The supernatural world wasn't that large and people had loose lips no matter the species. It was as if people thought they'd never be held to account, even when GAR recovered. Which might well be the case; neither Ray nor Felicia really knew much about some of the people who'd been brought in as the DAI and BSE reshuffled themselves.

In a way it wasn't surprising. Most of the grudges weren't something generations past; they were within living memory for most fae and quite a few vampires, and GAR had made sure there was little goodwill between the different factions. Ray wouldn't go so far as to say GAR and the mages had played them off against each other in the past, but that was certainly going on now.

*"What do you expect? There's basically bounties out now."*

"Yeah, makes me wonder why we're investigating. We know why it happened and to whom."

*"Paperwork makes the world go 'round. That and favors."* Somehow Felicia managed to pack scorn into her handwriting as she referred to what they'd found out about Constance and some of the others high up in GAR after the bombshell of Archmage Fane's death and the revelations of his activities. They certainly didn't believe that Constance had actually sent it, especially since even moderate scrutiny had found a number of unpleasant facts that indicted Constance almost as much as Fane.

It was all out there in the open. There was really no attempt to hide the favor-trading and special dispensations Constance handed out. Probably because it was *her* department and who would hold her to account? Certainly not GAR, and the Archmages wouldn't care. Not that Ray had been *entirely* unaware of that kind of thing, but he'd never looked into the breadth of it before.

Their banishment to useless jobs had not helped.

"So are we done here?" Ray asked, and Felicia nodded. They didn't even need their supernatural talents for this particular crime scene. Just a keen eye and Felicia's tablet to take notes and pictures. Fortunately they didn't need to even try to wrangle any time from the overworked BSE to deal with any leaks, since if anyone had seen anything suspicious they were keeping it to themselves and that was good enough.

The two of them left the house, ducking under police tape. Which worked nearly as well as glammers sometimes. He took big breaths of fresh, frigid air to clear the smell of death from his nose, glancing up at an overcast sky that had a few flakes drifting down.

*"Useless. Have to go after Master Vinito."* Felicia wrote, looking as frustrated as he felt.

"Sure," Ray agreed. "If they actually want to stop this. Which I don't think they do." He cast a privacy shield around them before he said the last, just in case there were any observers. He was pretty sure there weren't, since he'd cast his vis out and found every breathing being within the nearest mile. There was nobody unexpected, but it was an important precaution these days. Just because he didn't notice anything out of the ordinary didn't mean there wasn't anything, as Wells' actions had shown.

*"We should find Jahn. He's got to have some idea of what to do."* Ray nodded.

Though he didn't look it, Jahn was far older than either Ray or Felicia and sat outside normal GAR hierarchy as a special investigator. He would have a better grasp of what the options might be, given that they were hardly in a position to trust the DAI. The problem was, Jahn was not exactly readily accessible.

The man had been in charge of an investigation that had not only ruffled the feathers of half the Houses, but hadn't even caught the target. Though there was still a concerted



effort to track down Wells, Jahn himself had departed under a cloud. And promptly vanished from the public eye.

Ray still had the scry-com Jahn had issued them, which ought to be linked to Jahn's. It was buried somewhere in the office, but now that Felicia had raised the idea it should be easy enough to find. They weren't really doing anything else meaningful with their time anyway, aside from Felicia stewing on GAR's sudden slide into deep corruption. Or rather, the sudden reveal of that corruption.

They headed back to the office, Ray's glider doing the bulk of the heavy lifting. That was another reason they were being leaned on to cover the reports of violence and death. Ray's mobility was abruptly far more valuable with the teleportation network so diminished. He wasn't complaining; he *liked* flying in his glider.

The scry-com was in the drawer of his desk, and he exchanged glances with Felicia before by silent and unanimous verdict they went back out. There probably weren't people listening in on the offices in GAR, but it wasn't worth the risk. Wells had been declared heretic by House Duvall, which was as good as automatically blacklisting or even targeting anyone who could be considered on his side. And in the current climate questioning GAR would definitely be seen as aligning with Wells.

Once they were safely in the air, soaring five hundred feet above Minneapolis, Ray energized the scry-com. Despite their precautions, he wasn't at all convinced it would actually work. With Jahn in hiding or seclusion, it wouldn't have been surprising if the linked scry-com had been destroyed. So he was actually surprised when the focus connected.

"Agent Jahn?"

"Agent Danforth," Jahn's voice came. "I'd forgotten I had this on my band. I assume you're not just calling for the fun of it."

"I am not," he said. "Felicia and I are hoping for some advice."

"Not sure how much I can give you," Jahn said wryly. "I'm not really part of GAR anymore."

"That's part of what we're asking," Felicia said, since the scry-com wouldn't carry the power in her voice. "DAI is being turned into a political tool and neither Ray nor I are comfortable with that. And we're on the wrong end, after everything that's gone down."

"Yes, I'm right there with you," Jahn replied. "Unfortunately, unless you're willing to play high-level politics there's not much you *can* do, other than keep your head down."

"Willing or not, neither of us are really *part* of high level politics."

“I thought Agent Black—”

“No,” Felicia interrupted, voice flat. Ray winced as the power bounced off him, despite the precautions he took to avoid being affected by her voice.

“I see. Well, the only options you have are to play the game or bail out.”

“What do you mean, bail out? Is that where you’ve gone? Holed up somewhere?” Ray didn’t want to push too much, but he was curious where Jahn had gone.

“I’m with Grand Magus Taisen,” Jahn said. “It’s not like there was anyone else who was willing to take me in.” Ray nodded, realizing he didn’t know what House Jahn was. Or maybe he was originally BSE, No-House, and had severed ties before becoming an independent agent.

“Where’d he vanish off to anyway?” Felicia asked. “People have even asked *us* about him.”

“Needless to say, he had a few more plans and contingencies than anyone thought,” Jahn replied. “I can’t tell you where we are, but we are in seclusion. The Grand Magus is trying to push to Archmage.”

“Oh.” Ray took a moment to just contemplate that. There weren’t *that* many Archmages, though there weren’t exactly official rolls. Perhaps thirty or so, and a few others that preferred not to show themselves, hiding away on a family estate and not engaging with the world. Just because someone had the power of an Archmage didn’t mean they had the temperament or interest in taking up the burdens of leadership and politics that came along with the title.

Even so, almost all Archmages had a single aspect. There were only a few people in history with a triple aspect, none of them had become Archmages, and none of them had as lethal a combination as Taisen. Though Ray wasn’t sure how much becoming Archmage would really change for the head of BSE; the man was an accomplished combat mage to begin with.

“I can’t invite you of my own accord, but I suspect the Archmagus would be glad to have anyone of good character that GAR sees no use for,” Jahn continued. Ray was glad that he’d taken the glider out. That was *not* a comment they needed anyone overhearing.

“That’s quite generous,” Ray said cautiously, exchanging a look with Felicia. “I don’t believe we’re at that stage yet.”

“Not yet, but I don’t like the way things are going,” Felicia said, which actually surprised Ray. He hadn’t directly asked what story she was following, but he was pretty sure it was the professional detective. It was difficult to know exactly where he slotted in, especially with the tension between them, but he wouldn’t have thought she’d turn away from her employer.

“We will certainly keep it in mind,” Ray concluded, going with Felicia’s decision. “I suppose it depends on how bad things get. What’s going on now could easily resolve itself if the Archmages got together and decided to fix it. But they aren’t. Which I’m kind of surprised they haven’t already, since Duvall shut down the transport network.”

“I think you’re underestimating the impact of someone killing Fane,” Jahn said. “The last time *any* Archmages were killed was hundreds of years ago, and it was Fane who did it. Now? They all have to feel vulnerable.”

“Wells is dangerous, but *that* dangerous?” Ray shook his head. His House was a minor one, and he’d more aligned himself with the DAI rather than House politics, so he wasn’t much in tune with the higher echelons.

“It’s more that it shows Archmages *can* be killed,” Felicia said. “I’m not even that convinced Wells is all that powerful. It wasn’t like he managed to breach any shields at Garrison Two. It’s more that he can completely blindside people. We don’t even know Fane is dead, just that he disappeared.”

“An academic difference at best,” Jahn replied.

“Yeah,” Ray mused. “But if that’s the case I’m surprised that the Houses haven’t stirred themselves to locate Wells of their own accord. Though I guess it’s not like they have any more leads than we do.”

“They’re probably blaming each other for Wells, but he might not be part of any House,” Jahn said. “I expect they’ll start going after people outside the direct Houses soon enough, too,” he added, unsubtly hinting at their own situation.

“I wonder if he knows how much chaos he’s caused,” Ray said, rather than a direct response to Jahn. They weren’t yet ready to say yes or no. “Or if that was his plan all along.”

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Callum hadn’t been back to the area where he’d rescued the Connors ever since his headlong flight months ago. Not that he’d had reason to, but the whole region still had a no-go marker in his head. Even by proxy it felt weird to return to the Creede area, especially since he was actually *looking* for fae.

He'd sharpened his senses considerably since then, so he could sense a little bit an alteration in the local density of mana. It wasn't so much a current, like with portals, as the edge of a pond, or possibly a lake. Part of him wondered how he had missed it before, but back then he hadn't known what to look for.

There were, in theory, official ways to get the attention of a fae king that didn't involve wandering into his territory, but Callum didn't want official. Nor was he wandering, strictly speaking, as he teleported his screened anchor deeper into the wilderness. It was one of the anchors made out of corite, since cold iron was the fae bane material and ought to provide an extra layer of defense against any trickery the fae tried.

Lucy had suggested *not* using the drone to fly in, since he was supposed to be the Ghost. Something obvious was not part of the Ghost's narrative, from the fae perspective, so he was manually working his way deeper into the fae kingdom. He had no idea how far he could get without being noticed but he'd have to talk to someone *eventually*.

"How's it looking?" Lucy asked, fiddling with the communicator box that she'd picked out for the task. Not only did it have the normal audiovisual stuff but, considering they were dealing with fae, there was a small corite-gridded cavity for him to open a portal and peer out or listen with his own eyes and ears. He wasn't sure he wanted to risk it but there was every chance the electronics would flat out fail to work.

"Nothing so far," he reported. "Just a few small fae so far." He also started noticing some weirdness to the general everything a few miles deeper into the fae territory. It was hard to puzzle out, but there seemed to be some fundamental shift that applied to the space in general, somewhat like the portal worlds' spatial difference but in reverse.

The deeper he went, the more change there was. The whole thing seemed to be an enchantment of absolutely enormous proportions, or maybe a spell. While he couldn't tell what the magic was actually doing, the fae lack of need for a frame seemed to work to their advantage to truly large-scale workings. The magic just floated about, doing what it did without any architecture to hold it in place.

There were more spatial changes too, something subtle but still noticeable. He was pretty sure there was a form of expansion, but it wasn't *just* that. While he didn't know how exactly the fae magic was doing it, there was a definite twist to areas of the forested terrain that almost hurt his brain.

"Okay, this is bizarre," he said, rubbing at his temples. "We're going to need, like, four dimensional CAD if I want to transcribe what I'm sensing here."

“Oh? Non-Euclidean stuff?” Lucy asked with interest. “I could probably try and hack something together but it’s *really* hard to get that stuff right.”

“Might have to come back to this, then,” Callum said. “It’s got to be useful, even if I don’t really understand it yet.” Especially if he was supposed to understand how to open up portals to different worlds.

For the moment he did his best to memorize what he was sensing before he somewhat reluctantly moved on. There was a reason he was there and it wasn’t like the fae enclave was going anywhere. The flourishes only got more prominent and more severe as he got deeper anyway, to the point that he could only imagine it would be massively disorienting for anyone trying to navigate normally. He wasn’t quite willing to pop open a secondary portal to look directly, but he could guess that there were areas that didn’t lead where they seemed they should, or were larger inside than outside, or just had distorted directions.

Obviously, quite a few of these were centered around dwellings that certainly weren’t houses, open-air meadows framed by pillars or trees grown into sheltering overhangs with furniture resting on naked grass. A number of them were inhabited, and it was difficult to tell sometimes which might be sapient fae and which might be beasts, or if there was really any difference.

There was what seemed to be a perfectly ordinary bear, save for the vis swirling about it, solemnly having tea with a two foot tall man in a suit. A man-shaped creature scampered happily about on all fours, despite not being anatomically suited for it, and lapped water from a stream like a dog. Callum would have thought him some enthralled victim save for the way magic swirled about him as he moved. Whatever he was, he was dangerous.

It was clearly not Jissarrell though. He’d seen what a fae king looked like in Miami and there was a world of difference between the man-beast and an *actual* powerful fae. So far none of them had seemed to notice the tiny portal anchor being teleported along at the edges of what he could sense, but it *was* small and he was definitely not getting anywhere near anyone or anything that might notice.

Not that could remain unnoticed for long. According what he could read and what Lucy and Chester had told him, a fae king was preternaturally aware of things that happened within the bound of his kingdom, and something like human magic should be obvious. Plus the vis cleanup beads he was leaving as he went. Even if his portal anchor was made from the fae bane material, that should only make it *more* obvious something was going on. Not that he was going to complain if he did manage to make it all the way to Jissarrell on his own terms.

A little deeper in, and things became even more obviously unnatural, with wispy trees supporting large platforms with dancing fae, or even houses built on the mists billowing up from a waterfall. The latter one was just *offensive* to Callum's sensibilities, but it wasn't his house so he forced himself to leave it be. It wasn't like he could do anything without drawing attention anyway, and he was pretty certain he was close to the center.

One teleport more and he finally got noticed.

The surrounding lake of denser mana – something that was precipitated out of the ambient flow like a brine pool on the ocean floor – trembled and a fae that had to be Jissarrell simply walked out of a tree near the anchor. It happened too fast for Callum to really understand what he was seeing, but it didn't seem like a teleport. Though it was probably a mistake to think of anything the fae did as having a direct equivalent to mage spell forms.

Some of the liquid fae magic swam into being around his portal anchor, a dense and rapid thing that would actually make it difficult for him to run a vis thread through without it shredding. Fortunately the barrier was not so close that he didn't have room to work, and he gave Lucy a quick signal before he teleported her box onto the grass above the anchor.

"King Jissarrell, I presume?" He said, and the fae stopped. The camera on the box showed an elegantly garbed man looking as if he had been carved from some pale wood, with pine needles for hair and beard. The trees and grass in the background were impossibly green and brown and bright, the entire scene like something out of some fantasy painting.

"I am," Jissarrell said, hands clasped behind him as he regarded the box with knot-like eyes.

"Good," said Callum. "I am the Ghost. There is something I wish to purchase."

"Really?" Jissarrell didn't seem particularly upset. Only interested. "If you really are the Ghost, you can tell me what happened to my people that you removed."

"They're in caves about twelve hundred feet underground from where they were hunting," Callum said. At this point it didn't seem to be necessary to keep that particular secret. He also had to refrain from any further comment on the situation.

"Ah? That makes a great deal of sense." Jissarrell nodded sagely. "Perhaps that is close enough to preserve in tableau. We will see." It jolted Callum to hear the fae king considering the dead only for their entertainment value, but he had to remind himself that fae were weird.

“To my requirements. I need a container or material that can hide the presence of human magic from a fae king.”

“Really?” Jissarrell said in some amusement. “It sounds like I would be giving you a weapon to use against me.”

“If I wanted to move against you, I would have already done so,” Callum said.

“That sounds like a threat.”

“I do not make threats,” Callum replied. He always felt a little stupid acting like some tough, aloof assassin, but apparently it was effective.

“Indeed,” Jissarrell said, and inclined his head to the box. “In return you offer...?”

“A telepad pair. No restrictions, no networking, just a pair of discs that will swap contents. You will have to have the capability to charge and trigger a human enchantment, but that is the only caveat.”

“An interesting proposal. We fae do have our own ways of moving about, you know.”

“Certainly,” Callum agreed. “But other fae would know about those, wouldn’t they? This would be something else, something they don’t have and can’t replicate.”

“Now *that* is definitely something worth paying for,” Jissarrell replied, the pine-needle hair rattling as his expression brightened. “I think we can do business.”