

Chapter 4-17 - Breakthrough

“Sure, yeah, I’ll fill him in,” Lucy said, on the phone with someone while she stretched out on the couch. “Glad you didn’t need our help with this one.”

Callum cocked his head at what sounded like some kind of business, but he didn’t interrupt. He found it was far less stressful to let Lucy deal with the people who wanted The Ghost’s attention most of the time. Half of it was nonsense anyway, despite the screening measures already in place, and if *he* had to deal with it there probably would have been violence.

He was busy anyway, since he still hadn’t quite cracked either dimensional portals or useful shields. He’d made progress, though, and it was a little irritating to think that he probably could have started years ago, just after he first started magic. Callum knew that was a little unfair, since half the tools he was using to experiment hadn’t existed until he made them, but it still felt like he’d wasted time.

At least it had been relatively quiet, even with needing to deal with Constance and the negative healing trap. The incursion by the cartel had him on edge, and though he was glad that the past couple years had only been interspersed with a little drama, he knew that was partly because he’d kept himself deliberately disconnected. Now, though, it seemed like things were picking up again. He just hoped he’d be ready for it.

The access to the dragonlands had accelerated his learning about portals, if for no other reason than the ambient mana made it far easier to make and sustain his prototype portals beyond a fraction of a moment. Though it seemed that one of the reasons they were unstable was what filled the other side.

The destination he’d actually managed to find, from refining and experimenting with the first form to give him a response, was the exact opposite of what he wanted in a portal world. Instead of being abundant in mana, it had some kind of *anti*-mana that utterly annihilated ambient mana and destabilized *vis* fairly quickly. When he managed to keep the portal open for longer than an instant, a void of energy spilled out both sides of the portal. Very quickly it formed something that looked a bit like a black hole, with mana spiraling in from the sides as the portal frame took it in while an opaque nothingness bulged outward.

Fortunately it was not self-sustaining, and the negative mana would eat his portal the moment he stopped channeling *vis* into and reinforcing the structure, but it was still disconcerting. He wasn’t sure if he had bad luck or if *anti*-mana was common, but if such a portal were opened at full size it would probably be catastrophic to anything magical nearby.

“So, if it’s anti-mana, how do you even *get* a portal there?” Lucy’s question was exactly the same one he had, and it wasn’t easy to answer.

“Well, I’m pretty sure my vis isn’t punching through to the other side to form the portal, it’s one-way instead of a synchronized pair like usual,” Callum hazarded. “Since the actual hole isn’t magic, the vis frame isn’t affected until the anti-mana spreads out enough to start eating at it.”

“Still weird,” Lucy opined.

“Weird, but useful,” Callum agreed.

It didn’t take much imagination to see how he could weaponize such a thing. Bane materials worked against people, since they disrupted vis, but did nothing against pure mana constructs or enchantments. The anti-mana, though, would probably punch through enchantment shields or wards as if they weren’t there. It was a fantastic discovery, but completely at odds with what he was actually trying to accomplish.

Now that he had a start on how to *make* such portals, he could start to try and adjust the destination. Something that probably wouldn’t have been possible without the statistical analysis software Lucy had dug up. Apparently it had originally been used for some kind of particle physics theory modeling, but it handled the complex interlaced torus patterns well enough. Actually putting numbers to things that worked and didn’t, and being able to compare the two, made him figure out what ratios he needed to alter and where.

Something that probably would have been impossible if he was doing things by paper and pencil. Or at least, required decades of experimentation, rather than just a lot of really intense bookkeeping. Even at the first pass he had a good idea of what portions of the spellform *had* to be just so, and what portions were more flexible.

So far he hadn’t managed to break into a positive mana world, but he figured it was only a matter of time. He’d been double-checking against the extant portals and there were a lot of things he hadn’t yet tried. The problem was that he was feeling the press of time, since the longer it took the more problems could proliferate.

It wasn’t like he’d gotten much further on the shield idea, either. Despite Wizzy’s advice, he’d more or less abandoned the idea of putting any kind of magic into his actual body. Even if he could somehow displace himself dimensionally, he still needed to *breathe*, and having *extra* dimensions would just expose his insides in a direction that didn’t normally exist.

His best idea was having it sit right on top of his skin, because pushing his vis out a few millimeters was no real problem. It was like clenching a fist, and while it wasn’t something

he'd want to keep up permanently, it'd serve for any kind of combat situations. Which still wasn't as good as normal mage shields, but any defense was better than no defense.

They'd need that defense sooner or later. So far there'd been no followup to the cartel incursion, but Callum knew it was just a matter of time before the incident attracted more attention. He wasn't sure if it would be mundane or supernatural, but he was already preparing for the day when they'd have to bail. If he was very lucky, he'd even be able to take the house with him.

"Okay, bye!" Lucy chirped and hung up the phone. "Well, sounds like there's *huge* problems down in Brazil and that area," she said, less happily. "Too big for us to do anything about, and I think Taisen's going to be spending some time cleaning house down there, but supernaturals being that big and flashy seems kinda, I dunno. Rash? Why are they being so big and dumb?"

"My guess is because they think they can get away with it," Callum sighed. "As bad as GAR was, it was at least a status quo. Now we're in the period where people are trying fill in that power vacuum. It probably would have happened anyway; we're dealing with a bunch of nigh-immortals here. It's pretty obvious these people have all had their own agendas, and all they're doing is taking advantage of an opportunity. The fact that we're starting to see trouble again might mean that the vacuum has been filled."

"Ugh. I don't think I like the idea of going up against the plots of people who have had decades to think about it."

"Which is why we don't," Callum said firmly. "Let Chester take care of the plotting and planning. The Ghost just removes monsters. That's it."

"I guess nuking the vampire portal still counts as monster removal," Lucy mused.

"On a grand scale," Callum agreed. "Assuming I can make it work."

"Then we have to worry about the fae invaders maybe?"

"I'm hoping that Taisen can deal with them." He turned away from the model on his desktop and blinked to rest his eyes. "There's a lot of fae that seem fairly okay, so I don't think that threatening their portal is really justified? If anything we just need to put Taisen in charge of screening people or the like."

"It's nice to find *responsible* nigh-immortals," Lucy agreed.

"Yeah," Callum agreed, trying not to dwell on the fact that *he* was probably one of them. Long-lived, at least, though it wasn't really clear how much things had slowed down for him. Three or four years just wasn't enough time to tell whether or not he was permanently stuck in his thirties. Admittedly, after Gayle's healing he was feeling fewer

random aches and pains. “Anyway, I’m glad that we don’t need to step in. Wonder why Shahey told me and not them, though.”

“Dragonblooded are weird,” Lucy opined. “Probably has to do with their rules. You’re kinda doing them a special favor so they can speak more freely.”

“Point,” Callum said, standing up and stretching. “If there are no crises brewing, how about we go out for dinner somewhere tonight?”

“Yeah!” Lucy said cheerfully. “I haven’t been to that little pizza place over in Creighton for ages.”

He put complicated topological nonsense off for the rest of the night, just enjoying the dinner and an evening with his family, and the next morning he had a few hunches bubbling from the back of his head. It seemed the break was just what his brain needed. Callum double-checked the dragon lands portal to make sure he was thinking right, then made a dimensional version out in space.

Mana came through.

The portal didn’t collapse for once, pulling mana from the other dimension, though it was *only* mana coming through. Appraising it with his senses, it seemed the other side was complete vacuum. It was also deeply distorted, even more than Mictlān, and he was pretty sure it would probably kill anyone who actually entered it in short order.

He took a little peek through the space-drone camera, pushing his vis through the portal so he could rotate it around and move the perspective. Considering the portal worlds that he’d seen before, he was curious what a version without an atmosphere would look like. The answer was that it looked just like any normal starscape, at least at first. Then he noticed the dots of light were moving far too quickly for them to be the same sort of star he knew, and he swiveled the portal around, trying to figure out what he was actually seeing.

The portal seemed to be in a binary star system, the two burning suns solid white disks to the camera. At least until the suns turned lazily and blinked. Callum swore as something the size of planets moved through the void, and he tore apart the portals. Even if the connection was tiny, he didn’t want anything like *that* with access to Earth.

“Okay! Success, but also, *yikes*.”

“Success?” Lucy squinted at him. “You cracked dimensional portals already?”

“What do you mean already, I’ve been at this for almost a year,” Callum grumbled. “And that’s with cribbing from six different examples! But yeah I made one that worked. Not

self-sustaining though, so it's not really a *real* portal, but it's at least something. Problem is, the one I made was kinda scary."

"Scary how?" Lucy asked, getting out Alex's lunch. Once again they were at Chester's place for a group playdate, which wasn't exactly daycare but it did mean that they could socialize or work without needing to keep quite so strict an eye on their son.

"Think Lovecraft," Callum said grimly. "Big scary monsters."

"Don't all the portal worlds have big scary monsters?" Lucy pointed out.

"Okay, true," Callum conceded with a nod. "But these were bigger and scarier."

"Next time get pictures!" Lucy said. He snorted and poked at the space cam feed, rewinding it and turning the laptop around to show her. She squinted at it, puzzled, until the twin suns turned out to be eyes of impossible proportions. Then she shuddered. "Okay, that was a good call."

"Yeah, so, I have the shape for that one down, but we're not going to use *that* one again," Callum said. "But I think I might have figured out the ratios to get mana worlds rather than the other stuff."

"So you think you're ready to deal with the, ah, elephant in the room?" Conscious of their location, Lucy didn't state the plan to close the vampire portal outright. Even if none of the shifters about were paying direct attention to their conversation, every single one of them could hear it. Which did mean they knew that Callum could open portals to other portal worlds, but that was less incendiary than closing existing ones.

"Probably so," Callum said. "To be honest, I probably could have before, but I wanted a few more tools." The weapon he intended to use was simple: anti-mana portals. He'd originally been hoping to make a version of the big portals to discover why they were so stable and then figure out how to get rid of them. If they were fragile they'd have been gone long ago, especially something like Portal World Five.

It was possible he could have closed them by just dropping a rock going very, very fast on top of the portal, or even just conventional explosive if he were willing to use it. But he didn't *know*, and if he just started attacking a portal site to no effect, it'd seem like weakness. Not to mention it'd incite a global manhunt — more of one than there was already, anyway. If he *succeeded*, that was an entirely different situation.

Succeed or fail, he needed preparations to ensure he could survive the attempt. Which he was really hoping to get from the portal world experimentation. In addition to fulfilling his obligation to Shahey, he could just put a portal to some nice, pleasant dimension up

by his moon nexus and be absolutely unassailable. Even a moderately livable one would work. He just had to keep trying until he found something that wasn't simply deep space.

Referencing Lucy's analytics program and making his own notes, he was pretty sure he had an idea about the portal destinations. He didn't have the language to discuss it, not without referring to the three-dimensional diagrams, but there were certain ratios and angles that seemed to have influence over where it emptied out. There was probably years and years of experimentation to get anything like precision from it, and he could imagine endless mathematical theories, but Callum didn't need that. He just needed something that worked for the moment.

Someday, someone would benefit from what he was learning, though he didn't know who. Considering what was on the other end of dimensional portals, it wasn't really a bad thing that basically nobody could make them. At least for most people they'd have to take the risk personally, rather than doing what he did and doing any testing very far away from anything important. Like Earth itself.

Lucy listened to his meandering thoughts on the portals once they got back home, even though he wasn't very articulate about it. There were pieces to the puzzle that were difficult to represent with the models, like the pressure and tension of holding the construct in place. He'd made notes as best he could, but without any instruments that could properly measure such things they were just impressions.

"So what do you think the chances are of finding a nice place like this?" Lucy waved her hand in the direction of the front garden. "I mean, I *get* wanting our own place but how likely is it?"

"I have no idea," Callum admitted. "Only two of the portal worlds seem particularly habitable. Now that I have a starting point, though, I can just keep trying. Rolling the dice."

"Portal world lottery, huh," Lucy said with a grin. "I should set up a betting pool."

"You probably should," Callum said with a laugh. "But we might run into some places that we can't talk about. I'm even uncomfortable spreading around that deep space portal world. Creeps me out."

"Hey, you don't know their names so you can't get their attention. That's how it works right?" Lucy winked at him. "So have you tested that portal in the dragon lands yet?"

"I actually haven't," Callum admitted. "I should. But if it's vacuum on the other side, hm. I guess I can just use the big steel block we have." He reached out into the cave-cache and grabbed the chunk of metal, teleporting it out to the dragonlands site. In hindsight, he probably should have been using that kind of thing to begin with, in addition to the

various protections he had on the space drone. He scribbled a note to himself and then reformed the successful portal.

Given that dragonlands space was slightly different, he wasn't really sure that the portal itself would work, but he matched the structure as precisely as possible. The dragonlands were not *too* terribly different from Earth anyway, certainly not as distorted as Mictlān or the Night Lands. It was rather like tracing a drawing on a slightly bent tabletop, so he was pretty sure he had it right.

The portal opened into a deep space once again, but this one was very different. There was no mana on the other side, nor was their anti-mana. The space felt very much like Earth's, and when he aimed the drone's camera through the portal he spotted an actual galaxy in one direction. A galaxy composed of green-white stars.

Callum was no space expert but he did know that there was no such thing as a green star. So while it seemed similar to Earth, there were probably completely different physics at play. Or maybe just subtly different, but that would be enough to make it completely uninhabitable. It wasn't until he rotated the portal around that he saw the exit was also a few miles away from a small swarm of objects. It was like an artist's idea of an asteroid belt, but it was all variously-sized red spheres of rock.

At least it seemed that portals came out near, roughly, objects of interest. From a strictly statistical perspective that made no sense, because the universe was so large that intersecting a planet's surface was essentially impossible. But there was clearly some kind of bias in the way the various portal worlds and universes connected. Mostly he blamed magic, though he was sure someone with a more philosophical bent would find something profound about the nature of reality.

"Well, looks like it's a different place to me," Callum said. He showed the viewscreen to Lucy, who happily recorded the odd cosmology.

"You know, you could probably just spend the rest of your life opening random portals and finding cool new places," Lucy said.

"Probably," Callum admitted. "There might be a pretty narrow range of portal worlds in existence, though. Or the other ones I can get to are just so alien they're unusable. Could be that's why they're taking so much juice."

"Don't be such a wet blanket," Lucy said, putting an arm around him and kissing his cheek. "Have a little fun! We get to sightsee dimensions!"

"We sure do," Callum said, succumbing to Lucy's good cheer. He still had to figure out how to make a portal self-sustaining for it to be *really* right, but it was enough of a breakthrough that he was satisfied.

He spent the next few days experimenting with portal destinations, both out in space and in the dragonlands, though he could only make a couple attempts per day and only did so at Chester's house. The drain made him put in an order for the capacitors that the Guild of Enchanting made, even if they were expensive, since there was no way he'd be able to try bigger and badder portals without some sort of external source. He could fill them between experiments, when he was doing other things. His magical endurance had improved over the years, but it was still well below what he'd seen out of most mages. After fifty or a hundred years he'd probably be up to par, but he couldn't wait that long.

Especially not when there were threats popping out of the woodwork. They both had been absolutely blindsided by the email that Lucy got, and it instantly sent him into an incandescent range.

"I'm going to kill her," Callum said, the sudden flush of anger making him almost lightheaded. For the most part he and Lucy ignored the rumors and scuttlebutt and blathering of uninformed. There were quite a lot of people in GAR and even in the supernatural community at large who had only bad things to say about the Ghost. That was to be expected.

That luxury seemed to be fading, and perhaps it was gone entirely. While people might idly wish death on him, impotent wishes didn't concern him at all. What did matter was people who might actually be *able* to get at him, one way or another. After his experiences with the fae, he wasn't really willing to assume that physical remoteness was enough to protect him. Or more importantly, protect Lucy and Alex. Especially if GAR, and whoever had taken control of it, was moving now.

The video seemed to have been captured by a smartphone, so all the glammers were intact. The people appeared human, but on closer inspection their features were so exaggerated that it was very clear that they were just fae masquerading as such. There was a man who was far too round, both body and head like stacked spheres; another had a head that was almost perfectly cylindrical, like a pencil eraser. The only one he really cared about, though, was someone who looked like a storybook crone, with a chin so pointed it could cut glass.

"Of course we can't touch him," she scoffed as he watched it again, trying to catch any details that might identify the people involved. "If The Ghost were so easily cornered he wouldn't have earned the name. Could any fae find such a person? But now he has a son, a firstborn." The crone leaned forward, eyes dancing in malicious glee. "And firstborns are *my* specialty. There are so many ways to tempt a child. A shiny thing, just out of reach. The whispered promise on the wind."

"To what point and purpose?" Asked the eraser-headed man. "Merely enraging The Ghost does not serve anyone."

“Ha! It’s the child that interests me,” the crone said, with a cackle that seemed to darken the room even in the recording. “Crack his bones for marrow and make candles from his fat. The firstborn of some legendary hunter would make for something so delectable I can hardly imagine it.” She licked her lips with a black tongue.

“More pragmatically, a lack of control works for us,” the round man said. “How much of these upstart groups’ own policy is due to The Ghost being out there and enforcing his arbitrary rules? Break that propaganda, and we can start cracking open everyone else.”

“I’m going to kill all of them,” Callum said, repeating himself, and stood up, even though he didn’t know where he was going.

“Whoa there, hoss,” Lucy said, standing up herself and wrapping her arms around him. “Don’t go off half-cocked. This is pretty clearly bait.”

“Bait or not, I’m not going to let anyone threaten Alex,” Callum growled. “Especially that *thing*. That’s a monster that *must* die.”

“Look, I’m not going to defend someone who eats babies,” Lucy said. “But *you* don’t have to do it. Listen to me, Callum. Going after these people yourself would be a mistake. Heck, they might just be malcontents with delusions of grandeur and all of this is completely toothless. Or it’s faked somehow.”

Callum grunted. He still wanted to tear someone apart with his bare hands, at least figuratively, and he didn’t buy that mere discussion was harmless when it came to fae. Charms and hexes were well within their abilities, and there was no telling how little they needed to aim one Alex’s way. It was ever so tempting to find them and nuke them from orbit.

“Hey,” Lucy said, slapping the table and snapping him out of his brooding. “You said I pick targets, right?”

“Yeah,” Callum took in a deep breath, letting it out and trying to clear his head. Lucy was right. The last time he got pissed and went after someone, he regretted it. Not because the person didn’t deserve it, but because of everything else that happened. And he *had* put her in charge of stopping him, so he couldn’t overrule her. “How did we even get that?” He asked, waving his hand at the laptop where he’d been watching the video.

“Right, so, I gave different contact addresses to Taisen and Hargrave and Chester,” Lucy said, pulling him away from the desk in the war room and out into the basement. “This came in under Taisen’s code, but completely anonymous. I traced the account and it’s just some random grandmother in Italy with unsecured wifi, so that doesn’t help. But only someone among Taisen’s people would have that code, and probably not many at that.”

“So you think he should trace it?” Callum said, considering it.

“Well, it may not be *that* secret, but who connected to Taisen would know about Alex *and* the contact code? And be in contact with nasty fae like that?” Lucy squeezed him and he took her hand. “Let Taisen run them to ground, instead of you running into another trap like with those vampires. I don’t think he’d suffer this kind of behavior either.”

“Okay, but in the mean time we have to be *very* careful about Alex,” Callum said. “Or — you know what, Taisen had something that could block out fae influence specifically. I’ll get that from him.”

“Yeah!” Lucy agreed. “The vigilante thing works sometimes, but for this? We have friends. Call in some favors.”

“A strange circle we’ve come in,” Ray muttered. Felicia nodded agreement. Working under Archmage Taisen was in many ways a step up from working for the DAI. Very little of it was spent policing internal affairs, but rather looking into serious threats to the stability of the world.

Yet they found themselves once again pursuing an internal investigation, and at the behest of no less than Callum Wells himself. Almost completely the reverse of how everything started. Not that Ray objected as such; if the video was to be believed that was definitely the sort of behavior that needed to be suppressed. But it was hard to be on Wells’ side after everything the man had done. Felicia didn’t seem to have the same kinds of reservations, being almost enthusiastic about the investigation.

“We were in DAI to take down bad people,” Felicia wrote, when he voiced his doubts. *“Now we’re here, and these are bad people. Just that simple.”*

“Still rubs me the wrong way to be doing it for a criminal,” Ray sighed. “I know, we’re not in GAR anymore, but you can’t trust people who just go vigilante.” He waved it aside. “Anyway, that video. Seemed almost staged to me, you know?”

“Not necessarily. Some types do talk like that.”

“None here,” Ray said.

“No, I don’t think it was in the base,” Felicia wrote, stylus tapping against her tablet. *“I don’t recognize those glamours and I don’t think any of those types fit in here anyway.”*

“Yeah, but someone here leaked it.” Ray sighed. “Between Gayle Hargrave and Archmage Taisen himself, there’s so many people who might know about Wells’ child, so it’s probably better to go at it from the contact angle.”

"Paperwork it is," Felicia wrote.

A great deal of investigation was tedious grind, and this was no exception. Asking questions of Taisen to find out where he'd recorded Wells' contact information, and who he told about it, took up several hours, and that just gave them a long list of things to follow up on. More questions to pursue, access logs, surveillance footage, and tramping up and down the Antarctic base even before they started considering the other outposts.

They kept things quiet and discreet of course; internal investigations were always delicate. Though Ray rather doubted it was any intentional leak. There were too many ways some fae could have heard about Wells' child, especially the way they liked to gossip, and a fae could quite easily have charmed the contact information out of any of the secretaries that had it available. Even if the people who had the contact information didn't really know what it was for.

Naturally, the portal into Faerie was the most closely scrutinized. While House Taisen was not exactly on hostile terms with GAR, using the GAR-controlled portals into the various portal worlds was a delicate proposition. Taisen had breacher portals set up to each of the various Garrisons, though, which remained under his control. Unfortunately, despite House Taisen having a more military air to it, there wasn't so strict a control that they knew the location of every person for every instant in time.

Two days later, they compared notes and dug through interview transcripts. As usual, no glaring candidates stood out, but there were a few connections that seemed promising. A few led into Faerie itself, but some led to the local enclaves.

"I really hope it's a local matter," Ray muttered, looking over the list of people and locations.

"I don't think I want to go to Faerie anyway," Felicia agreed, before wiping her slate. "I could not trust that I would be allowed to stay independent. Especially not now, with things moving and the Ways stirring."

"Politics ruins everything," Ray sighed. "That's fine, I can pop in and ask a few people. Not like I'd be going outside of the human areas." Felicia nodded, and Ray slid the pad across to her. "Right, any thoughts on who we should start with?"

For the rest of the day, Ray interviewed people while Felicia sniffed around for any hint of the fae in the video. The existence of the video was restricted but he wouldn't have been surprised if the glamours they showed weren't the usual ones. They were just a little too off to pass easily among mundanes, and if they were enclave fae they wouldn't have had glamours to begin with.

Unfortunately, they didn't get anywhere, so the next day Ray left his notes with Felicia for further work and went to the breacher portal to Faerie. He rubbed at his wrist by reflex as he waited for the mage in charge of portal access to open the way. With healer support, removing the tattoos had been little issue, but he still thought about it every time he used a portal. Even he had been surprised by how thoroughly the mage marks could compromise vis protection.

Stepping through into Faerie, the sky was almost painfully blue, the air unreasonably pleasant, and the grass, even in Garrison Two, was lush and green. On first glance it was as gorgeous and amazing as a storybook, but Ray found that the longer he looked the more unreal it seemed. Which was perhaps why he barely ever went back to his own House's compound in Faerie.

Garrison Two was not all that far outside of the place humans had claimed for their own, sitting in a mountain pass that overlooked a land of ice and darkness. There were things there that had to be fended off on occasion, beasts of faerie or rogue fae. Or just bored fae. He didn't hear any fighting when he emerged, though from the high vantage he could see movement stirring on the frozen plains.

After exchanging a few words with the lieutenant on duty, he took to the air, wrapping his travel focus about himself and shooting off through the sky. Unlike the skies of Earth, there was always traffic above the surface of Faerie beyond that of ordinary beasts. It was possible to see anything from schools of floating jellyfish to massive rocs to terrible snarls of eyes and teeth that attacked anything within reach.

He avoided a particularly hungry-looking cloud but otherwise was unmolested on the flight between Garrison Two and the vast spread of Houses. At least until a massive whirl of fae magic suddenly blew up from nowhere and surrounded him. His shields snapped into place as he tapped his offensive foci, suddenly unable to see through the mist around him.

"What have we here?" A voice said, and a fae that looked mostly human save for the blue skin and pointed ears appeared from the mist. He grinned at Ray, flashing prominent fangs, while bat wings beat languidly at the air. It was an odd look, suspiciously like some of the mundane stories about vampires, which was not something to be taken as coincidence. Not with fae.

"I'm Ray Danforth, House Taisen, here on the House's business," Ray said brusquely. "I would appreciate it if you would let me pass." He knew none of the Courts claimed this area, so in theory nobody should be accosting him. But this fae, whoever he was, had the aura of a King.

“Oh, *not* the fly I was expecting to catch, but — did you say *Raymond Danforth*? Little Felicia’s toy?” The fangs glinted as the fae’s grin stretched wider. Ray didn’t reply, suddenly feeling like he had gotten into something far deeper than he’d intended. Clearly someone had spilled details on the investigation, no matter that they were being careful, but he didn’t know how deep a hole he was in.

“Well then, come with me,” the fae said, pointing at him, and he froze. A hammerblow of compulsion magic washed over him, akin to Felicia’s best. But he’d been training against Felicia’s best, so it didn’t bother him. But he wasn’t sure he could get away, not against a Fae King. After a fraction of deliberating, he pretended to succumb to the compulsion. It would be a lot easier to deal with hostile fae if they thought he was under their sway, and they might not even think to properly frisk him.

“Yes, sir,” he said, even as he toggled his scry-comm with the distress/duress codes. Someone *ought* to be monitoring them. If not, he knew Felicia would do something. He didn’t know what, since she’d rid herself of any attachments in Faerie, but something. In the meantime he would have to figure out what this particular fae was up to.

It had been a while since he’d been undercover, but he was sure he could do it.