

Chapter 3-8 – Infiltration

“Finally.” Grand Magus Lorenzo Rossi opened the crate containing the black-market telepads with a flick of his telekinesis focus. It had taken a little bit of prodding to get them from Duvall, despite the fact that the Guild of Enchanting was on nominally good terms with the House. Considering the circumstances it was understandable, but not ideal. They had more stake in a rogue mage selling black-market enchantments than Duvall did, after all.

GAR should have sent it to *him*, rather than letting Duvall seize it, but after accounting for their various finesse tools the Guild of Enchanting had been more or less disconnected from the whole Wells imbroglio. *They* weren't being attacked or having their supplies stolen, though they'd doubled the protections on their stockpiles soon after the news arrived.

Rossi floated the four teleportation plates out onto the large table for him and his subordinates to examine. The things would have to be destroyed eventually, since they weren't Guild make and there was no telling how dangerous they were, but it was worth studying before then. It would be instructive to find out whether Wells had any Guild training or not.

It was also important to know if Guild secrets had leaked or not. Rossi didn't care much who Wells inconvenienced if it didn't cut into the Guild's business, and in fact there had been some fairly nice income from replacements they'd had to make thanks to Wells' activities. He wasn't so stupid as to presume that was a viable way to drum up business but he wasn't going to object to a temporary windfall.

The plates were very much not to guild standards.

First of all, the mundane material was plain steel, the exact grade to be determined, rather than the brass alloy they used to reduce degradation of portal world material. Then there was the unusual size. One set of plates too big, the other too small. The standard size was standard for a *reason*, being the best tradeoff between required enchanting material and efficiency. Both the plates were wasteful to anyone who knew how enchanting worked.

The worst part, though, was that the enchanting patterns were fully exposed. Guild enchantments were obscured inside meshed or even welded brass, to keep the hard-earned secrets away from prying eyes. People still tried, of course, but the Guild made sure it was *very* evident if there was tampering, and responded accordingly.

“God's blood,” Ordermaster Minot muttered. Rossi nodded grimly. Somehow Wells had cribbed *all* the flourishes from the Guild's teleportation pads. The core linking enchant

was well known, of course, but all the experimentation and optimization that had gone into the mana intakes, the recirculation networks, the fill leveling, all that, was secret.

Literally years of work and hundreds of pounds of enchanting material had gone into figuring the minute angles and relations. More, the painstaking logistics of encapsulating structures so that they could easily be applied to any of the high-powered enchantments the Guild provided. Seeing it all out in the open without any protections was practically blasphemous.

Especially since it was clearly just blindly put together without any individual considerations. He recognized the characteristic signatures of a number of his best artisans, all shoved together. Seeing such butchery of real professional work was actually painful.

Rossi directed mana into one of the platforms and watched the framework spring up above it and its sister. Worse than the blatant ignorance, the violation of proper practices, and the outright plagiarism was that the enchantment work itself was insultingly shoddy! There were flaws and inconsistencies that made even the Guild's finest work defective and inefficient.

It would *work*, certainly, but Wells – or whoever had done the enchantment – had absolutely butchered the execution, even if he somehow had managed to draw out even the smallest details of the actual design. In fact, the design was *so* perfect it was extremely suspect, given the shoddiness of the actual enchantment.

“Check the tool marks,” Rossi said, doing just that himself. “This was done on a machine.”

The Enchanter's Guild was no stranger to using tools. Unlike many Houses, they actively scoured the mundane world for techniques that could improve their craft. Enchantment blanks were carved with powered saws and drills, and the vis stylus had been receiving constant updates to its design for the past two hundred years.

Every single enchantment used the stylus these days, now that it was a piece of thaumo-electromechanical artifice that let mages lay down smooth, even, and perfectly matched vis threads. It even let them bring in mages that weren't read into Guild secrets to blindly supply vis for certain rare aspects, like healing. Or spatial.

Rossi, Minot, and their assistants divided the work between them, scrutinizing the teleportation plates with glasses and resonators to divine the internal structure. The fact that it was out in the open made it far easier, as did the fact that it seemed to be pure mordite and thus easy to distinguish from its surroundings. Which was a waste of good material and another indication that Wells had no idea what he was doing. Only the

core of a teleport enchantment benefited from pure mordite or corite; the rest could be of lesser alloys.

“This is a single plate, milled from a blank,” Minot said, running his fingers over the edges of the metal disk floating in front of him, studying the surface through an eyepiece. “Demonstrates the characteristic edges of numerical control machines.”

“Enchantment was done in the part-merge method,” Rossi added, examining the resonator. “You can even see where the mordite has been welded. Explains some of the quality of the projected spellform. The rest, well, that’s down to the mage.”

That was another reason they used the stylus. While most mages had fairly good vis control, the best enchantments required something better than *fairly good*. The part-merge method itself had been outmoded decades ago anyway, though it was still common for homemade, personal enchantments.

“So, what, he got the blanks cut on a machine and then filled it in manually?” Minot sounded almost incredulous. Rossi didn’t blame him. Going to all the trouble of ensuring that the geometry was precise and then enchanting so poorly was almost inconceivable.

“Keep in mind that, if GAR is right about Wells, he’s coming at this with a completely mundane mindset,” Rossi warned. “I imagine that’s exactly what he did. There’s no telling where he got the enchanting material from but it’s clear it was all done by hand.”

“How did he get ahold of our enchanting patterns, though?” Minot scowled at the delicate tracery of wire embedded in the plate. “Even if he stole a spatial transportation receiving plate, taking it apart without destroying the patterns should be nearly impossible.”

“Only nearly. Not completely.” Rossi well knew that the primary protection against people copying enchantments was actually the reputation of the Guild itself. Those who infringed upon its secrets were dealt with harshly. “There are some mundane techniques that could extract the patterns, given enough time and care.”

“I do not like the idea of our knowledge being recorded in mundane ledgers somewhere,” Minot said, watching the assistants take down notes on exact dimensions, numbers, resonance strength, and design.

“No,” Rossi agreed. “This is not the usual sort of pilfering.” There was always some pushing from the Houses, the newer and younger ones especially. Attempts to steal Guild designs, or more laudable ones to invent their own. But Wells wasn’t part of a House, wasn’t part of a shifter clan or a vampire nest or a fae kingdom. He was an independent, which was not something they’d had to deal with before.

The problem was still the same. The Guild was built on its reputation and its secrets. They couldn't possibly allow Wells to get away with stealing from the Guild, let alone selling those enchantments secondhand. Whatever they had to spend on running Wells to the ground was a pittance next to the integrity of the Guild of Enchanting. Not to mention finding and purging whatever records there were from Wells' plagiarism.

The issue was how to do that. The same reports that had alerted him to Wells' attempts at enchanting had told him that GAR had been trying to find the man for a while, but Rossi wasn't surprised they had failed. Glorified errand-boys and bureaucrats, the lot of them. The Houses and the Archmages were the real power, though if pressed Rossi might admit that some of the larger fae kings and shifter alphas counted.

"Call the Enforcers for a meeting. We have to deal with this quickly and quietly, but be able to claim it publicly when we neutralize him. More, we need to make sure that nobody *buys* from him in the meantime."

"We can blacklist that shifter, what was his name? Right, Chester. But shifters are not a significant market for enchanting to begin with." Minot tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the table. "Not since they learned how to do glamour, anyway."

Rossi nodded. *That* had been annoying. An entire market drying up, and not because of any competition or even a better option coming along. Just because the shifters had symbiotes that could adapt, however slowly, and generate their own magic. So far none of them had shown any signs of replacing the metal-joining or heating or cooling foci, but Rossi had no idea how long that would be the case.

Even if shifters weren't the largest market, blocking the ability of Chester's shifters to acquire new focuses was *something*. He had no idea how big the man's workforce was or even where he was located, not without referring to the reports directly, but it would certainly hurt him more than it hurt the Guild.

"Let it be known that if we find *anyone* trafficking in Wells' black-market enchantments, they will be banned from buying focuses of any sort, from anyone," Rossi decided. "If we have to move to more active punishment, we will, but that should dissuade most people."

Most mages couldn't even function without the focus tools provided by the Guild of Enchanting. It was a more dire threat than any more direct action, though that was on the table too. The guild enforcers were more than a match for anyone but Taisen's own disciples, in Rossi's opinion.

"I'll have Nico and Isabella make the rounds," Minot said. "What about GAR?"

"What about them? This is a Guild matter."

“Right, here we go.” Callum pushed his vis through the telepad. The test object was an empty propane tank, though really anything could have worked. The tank vanished from the pad and, in his senses, reappeared at the target before violently imploding.

Water, it seemed, was very similar to air. Or rather, fluids all had the same cost for shoving them around with spatial vis. It wasn't actually displacing anything, considering that it added space during the teleport, so the only force that had to be overcome with water was hydrogen bonding between adjacent water molecules. Or at least that was Callum's guess, because there wasn't any difference in the difficulty between teleporting into the bottom of a bucket and the bottom of the ocean.

Accidentally smashing himself into the bottom of the ocean was another nightmare to add to the potential issues of using the flying chair. Which he intended to never use again, now that he had the portal anchors. As it was, the portal anchor was enclosed in a solid cube of iron to protect it from being warped by the pressure. By itself, the portal anchor was small enough that the pocket of air inside might well collapse and ruin the entire thing.

He'd actually used his acceleration to get it down to the bottom of the ocean in the first place, since things did not sink very quickly. It would have taken hours to reach the bottom of the Marianas Trench, and he was impatient. An hour or two probably wouldn't make a difference either way, but he was feeling the time crunch of securing a solution before the week was up.

“Well, big man?” Lucy asked, unfortunately unable to see what was going on. He'd tried opening a portal at a shallower depth just for an experiment and found that it ended very poorly. The water shot through at full pressure and almost instantly destabilized the portal, resulting in a puddle of seawater in his back yard and not much else. So she had to rely on his descriptions from his senses.

“It got pretty well crushed,” Callum said, teleporting the remains back and letting them land with a thump on the table. It was a little wet, but his control was good enough that the teleport didn't carry much water with it. “Is it enough to deal with a mage shield? I have *no idea*.”

“There's not any deeper place on Earth,” Lucy said with a shrug.

“Well, what about the Portal World? Five I think? The sea one.”

“Now it's my turn to have no idea. There's a GAR outpost there – maybe it's a BSE outpost, actually – but it's all water so it's not exactly well explored. Couldn't tell you how deep it gets.”

“Maybe we can try it.” He considered the teleport plate and the block of iron sitting in the crushing, lightless depths, then recalled them. Now that they knew it worked, and how long it took to get things situated, he could plan out the deployment.

He was using an approach he’d thought of some time back, but had never followed through on: tampering with the GAR teleportation network. There were a lot of reasons he hadn’t, most having to do with how complicated it would be to get right. Even if he got it right, it’d probably only work once, so he’d reserved it for something dramatic.

Like killing an Archmage.

Some of the enchantments clearly existed as safeguards, likely to keep multiple teleports from happening at once, but other parts existed to do things like bypass mage resistance to teleportation. Which was a massive benefit to him, since there was no way he could brute force teleport or portal an Archmage. Ultimately all he needed to do was replace the teleportation core in the GAR teleporter with one that he’d made, then feed vis into the GAR core when his was charged to fool the matching enchantments on the other end.

The safety and security parts of the GAR system made it so he couldn’t just replace it and let it sit. It wasn’t clear how many alarms would be raised if the activity on both sides didn’t match, but he recognized the designs for *some* alarms in the enchanting. He’d tested his replacement surreptitiously with Chester’s help, sending one shifter through instead of another, using the GAR telepad located in Chester’s compound, and even if it was a bit of a pain it worked.

Callum really didn’t like having to rely on someone else, and sharing the secrets with them, but he had to know it would work. He tried to be glad that he did have a conspirator to run such a test with, but despite what his rational mind said, his instincts were conflicted. It was probably something in his blood, considering how Callum, Sr., had acted.

“Do we have the exact coordinates for Five?” He asked Lucy, instead of dwelling on it.

“We don’t, but I’ve got everything ready to hook up to the GAR network. Might be able to just get the information from there. I *think* all the BSE stuff is part of the network. They’re the most modern faction, anyway.” Lucy was clearly very ready to regain her information access. It wasn’t *really* necessary to tap into the GAR network when they could just look for themselves, but it was an excuse that Lucy was ready to seize on.

“Okay, we’ll see if we can get in,” Callum said. “Let’s head out to the van.”

“Awesome!” Lucy exulted, and bundled all her tools into the bag. He didn’t want her to connect to any GAR stuff from his house or the internet there, no matter what

protections they used. Instead, they were headed a few hours drive north to piggyback off of some random public wifi, though he used the drone-portal setup to get there instead of driving the whole distance.

“This still feels so ridiculously overdone,” Lucy half-grumbled as she set herself up in the van.

“I know, but stuff like this is why GAR couldn’t find me even when they knew I was calling you,” Callum said. He still didn’t know how long they’d had Lucy’s phone tapped before they brought her in, but it had been long enough that they would have found him if he’d ever called from his home.

“Yeah, I know,” Lucy sighed. “I guess it makes sense, too. I’m just not as paranoid as you.”

“It’s kind of my job,” Callum agreed. He wouldn’t have even considered trying to infiltrate an actual GAR headquarters before. Now that he had practice with the anchors, though, it was less insane. They were small and stealthy, far easier to hide than a person, and in a building full of mana and vis, wards and spellforms, they wouldn’t stand out.

Even if an anchor *was* noticed, he could just pull it back. The worst case scenario was the anchor getting disabled and GAR seizing it. In that case he’d have to dispose of his half before they used it to track him down somehow, but that wasn’t too hard. Now that he had just a few more anchor sets it was probably worth it to try and infiltrate GAR.

Not only would having access to the information there be extremely useful, but it’d be a good test to see if he *could* get into the main GAR buildings. Someday he might need to break in for something urgent, and it’d be good to know what the limits were. Still, he was being very careful, so the anchor they were using for the task was at a remove, chained through an intermediary portal set. From his Texas house to the cache-cave, from the cave to a deserted, jungle-choked beach on the northern part of the isthmus, and from the beach to wherever the anchor was going.

The chain actually required a signal booster for Lucy’s drone, going through all the distance and metal that it did. The three different perceptive spheres also meant that he had to pull back a bit to keep from overload, metaphorically squinting his eyes, which wasn’t ideal but he had doubts he’d ever be able to keep track of that much space. Besides, when it came to buildings, three or four hundred yards was *more* than enough.

The GAR complex, which held all the US branches, was in upstate New York, along the Hudson River. Callum was actually somewhat surprised it wasn’t in New York City proper, but it probably would have strained the limitations of glamours to block off such

a large area in the middle of one of the most populous cities on Earth. It wasn't like they needed to be in the city anyway, what with the teleportation network.

While there were multiple layers of glamour about it, the place stood out like a sore thumb because of the significant increase in mana nearby. If the small GAR offices had one or two feeder portals, the central complex probably had dozens. It wasn't as strong as an actual portal world link, but it was enough to pick up several miles away.

Lucy flew the drone in well outside the various layers of warding and glammers, putting it down in among a stand of trees within sight of the buildings. Callum had to admit the complex was a gorgeous example of the Beaux-Arts style, at least on the outside, with columns and carvings. The inside where he'd been had been somewhat converted to something more drab, but the exterior still looked great.

"It's a shame all this is invisible to the general public," Callum said. "There aren't many buildings like this left. Usually they're preserved on some historical registry or another."

"You know, I've never seen it from the outside before," Lucy mused. "I just took the teleporter into work."

"More's the pity," Callum said. "Seems to me people would be happier to work in a pretty building instead of a boring box office."

"Yeah, probably," Lucy admitted as he teleported the focus out of its holder on the drone. Lucy had rigged up something more graceful than literally duct-taping it to the quadcopter, a nice little bracket right by the transceiver, which made it easier to attach and remove the anchor. He pulled the drone back, letting it pop into existence on the table, and started toward the buildings.

According to Lucy, the server rooms were located in the basement. Or rather, one of several basements and subbasements, each of which might well have its own protections. He'd want to avoid popping himself into a fae's domain or up next to a vampire, since they might well notice something a mage would miss. Mages relied on wards, which he could bypass, not advanced senses.

The truth was the layers of wards around the central GAR offices seemed to be *less* potent than ones he'd seen around some of the branches. His guess was that they were just old, and had never been updated. From what he understood, rogues like him weren't very common, and even when they did appear it wasn't around the head office. Only a crazy person would try to break into or attack the place chock full of mages and other supernaturals.

"How's it going, big man?" Lucy asked, fiddling with the memory sticks she'd loaded up with malware. He essentially trusted that however she compromised the GAR setup it

wouldn't be traceable to the Texas house. Which apparently wasn't too hard to ensure, as much as the idea of having any connection back to his location rankled. When it came time to move to the bunker any kind of internet access was definitely going to happen off-site, though, though a portal focus.

"Right at the outer walls," he told her. The little dime-sized anchor was more or less hidden inside the decorative bushes planted around the perimeter of the complex. So close to a building, the enormous range of his perceptions was really driven home by how he could see into practically the entire thing. Dozens of mages and as many supernaturals of other types, independent wards guarding discrete rooms, and a bewildering array of vis and mana in use.

There was so much going on it actually hurt to perceive. Even inside a portal world, the mana was merely intense. A bright light, rather than a hundred different-color strobes. Having a full building of supernaturals doing supernatural things inside his perceptions showed one of the severe downsides of his spatial sense, that of overstimulation. If GAR had some idea of how things looked to him, it'd probably be extremely easy to generate a magical flashbang that actually worked on him.

The good part of it was that it seemed pretty obvious that his small portal anchor would be absolutely lost among all the spell forms running through the walls and ceiling and floors. Unless someone had perceptions just like his and was actively looking for a portal enchantment, the anchor ought to be obscured by everything else. Especially useful since, according to Lucy, the server area itself *didn't* have much magic about it. Just the central enchantment that tied in with the dongle all the supernatural laptops and phones used.

Which actually made it easy to spot. There was a basement area swirling with fae magic, one with a strict grid of intense mana, neither of which he wanted to touch, but Lucy's old office seemed fairly harmless. Except for the fact there was someone inside.

"We do have a slight problem," Callum said. "There's a mage hanging out in the office. I'm pretty sure if I open a portal it'll be noticed."

"Honestly we want the server room anyway," Lucy said, sliding over the sketch of the basement where she used to work. "I doubt they've changed anything significant. Passwords and such sure, but not the actual hardware. Kinda surprised they even found anyone who knows enough to work the server-side stuff, let alone a mage."

"The BSE folks and the young mages I've seen seemed pretty tech-savvy," Callum told her, snaking a vis thread down through the layers of wards and around into the server room. He made sure to keep it inside the walls, out of the magic sight of anyone who

might be paying attention. After springing Lucy he was *very* aware of how powerful being able to deny mages line of sight was.

“Yeah, I guess. Maybe I’m a bit biased ‘cause I mostly dealt with people who thought computer stuff was impenetrable nonsense. All complaining to me when they forgot to plug their computer in or whatever.” Lucy scrunched up her face in a pout before she smoothed her expression. “Kinda sore that they *did* find someone to replace me.”

“No one could replace you,” Callum assured her, and Lucy laughed.

“Flattery will get you everywhere, big man,” she said. “Now, there’s two boxes I need access to. Big server cluster and a smaller, flat thing. That way we can get in without any monitors noticing.”

“Unless they’ve added more monitors since then,” Callum said.

“Eh. I doubt it, they’d just replace the boxes at most; server architecture kinda is how it is. But it might be a good idea for me to take a look.”

Callum cast a cautious, metaphorical eye at the mage in the other room, but there were a few walls between the server and the mage so he took the plunge and opened a small spy portal so Lucy could see through. There was no reaction he could see, but there were so many bits of spellforms everywhere that if he’d tripped an alarm it wouldn’t be obvious.

“Pan left please,” Lucy said, keeping her voice low as she leaned forward to look through the portal hanging between them. “Pan right? Okay, looks like they kept the same architecture. Great, just get me a portal in by the ports on the back of that box over there. Thanks!” She happily shoved one of her memory sticks into a port and hummed for a moment as the lights flickered.

“Perfect.” She pulled the stick out and set it aside, then directed his portal over to one of the boxes on the rack. “I swear, I wish I had spatial magic to deal with wiring these things every time,” she said to him *sotto voce*, plugging in another memory stick. “It gets super awkward to deal with it.”

Callum had to refrain from shushing her. She *was* being quiet, far quieter than the loud hum of fans that came through the portal, so it wasn’t like she was going to attract any attention. It just seemed *wrong* to be chatty when they were breaking and entering.

“And we’re done,” Lucy said, pulling out the memory stick. By habit, he’d put cleanup enchantments into the metal racks, so even the small amount of magical residue he’d left would be gone soon. Callum snapped the portal closed and then recalled the anchor, marveling at how *easy* it had been to get at GAR headquarters. There had

been certain areas that were protected enough that he'd have issues dealing with them, certainly, but not the facility as a whole.

They'd learned from Lucy's rescue and there were jammers up around sensitive areas, where he assumed the portal feeds and ward boxes were. The teleports were still only protected by wards, probably because they wouldn't work with the jammers up, but any place where he sensed fae magic was just as well protected in Callum's mind. There was no telling what they could do or sense. But since he could see where those things were, he could just bypass all the layers of protection at once.

"Not used to having to do this remotely," Lucy muttered, tapping at her laptop. "Used to be I just had my own on-site server backdoor. Okay, Portal World Five. I can probably do better but here's the first thing that looks worthwhile." She swiveled the laptop around to show what looked like a set of scanned documents. No search function, all hand-written and hand-scanned, but legible enough.

It was an actual, honest-to-goodness report on Portal World Five, written by one Grand Magus Taisen. Callum recognized that name, and while he didn't know much about the man it seemed he wanted to make sure whoever needed to go to Five had the proper information. There were even pictures that had been scanned along with the writing.

Some of the background was fascinating, like the supposition that Five was actually the oldest portal world, connecting intermittently like Faerie had before it was stabilized. The portal had even been shrunk from something fifty feet across to more like five, though it had stayed underwater. Marginalia noted that it wasn't stable outside of water, which said potentially interesting things about the magic involved.

Apparently the actual fortress, Garrison Five, had been made by a bunch of earth mages and was a giant pumice thing that floated on top of the endless ocean of the Portal World. Which was pretty neat, actually. The important thing was that so far as anyone could tell it was endless in *every* direction, meaning down as well. Water mages could only verify a few kilometers down, but things got darker, heavier, and *bigger* down there. True leviathans lurked in those depths.

Given that some of the things they killed were as big as Jules Verne's kraken, that was saying something.

That was good enough for him. He'd gotten proof of concept with the Marianas Trench and the portal worlds had a certain advantage. Spatial focuses didn't work quite right, which would hopefully include Fane's homebond. In the absurd pressures miles under the surface of an infinite ocean, even a few seconds of delay might be enough to breach Fane's defenses.

“Send me that, would you please?” Callum asked, pushing Lucy’s laptop back toward her. “I’ll want to read it closer later on, but it definitely sounds like a perfect location.”

“Sure thing, big man. You do that, I gotta catch up on stuff in here. If they actually *do* find what I’ve done I’d rather have set everything to get transferred first.”

“Sounds good.” Callum got his own laptop and loaded up the program Lucy had installed to control the drone. He wasn’t nearly as familiar with the controller that she used to move the thing around but he wasn’t trying to do anything fancy. Mostly just make sure the thing stayed level.

Sending it out over the ocean wasn’t like sending it overland. On dry ground he could rely on the surface to stop him if he aimed downward, but over the water that wasn’t the case. Instead he had to move in short jerks high up in the air, making sure never to aim at the surface. Which meant it was good he had GPS coordinates, because mana stuck close to the surface and up in the atmosphere he couldn’t sense the flow he normally used to track portals.

Portal World Five was marked by a large buoy, more than big enough to land the drone on. The buoy itself held the glamours and protections to ward normal folk away from the area, though there were once again no personnel guarding the entrance. Not that Callum was surprised, considering the location.

The portal itself was some fifty feet under the water, oriented horizontally rather than vertically and with the buoy mooring chain running through it to the other side. Callum’s senses found that the destination was in a big pool of water surrounded by rock — the pumice mentioned in the report. There were ladders leading out of the pool and up to the level above, where there were actually a few mages in furnished rooms. He spread his perceptions throughout the entire fortress, finding it sparsely populated. None of the mages had the intimidating sort of bubble that marked an elite – probably an Archmage, from what he knew – but he wasn’t interested in the structure anyway. He just wanted to go straight down.

Callum threaded his vis through the wards and teleported the steel-cube-enclosed anchor into the ocean below the fortress. Immediately he could sense the strain on the anchor, as it left the space just around the portal and fortress. It wasn’t nearly as bad as Mictlān, where he wasn’t even able to keep it open without constant work, but he had doubts he’d be able to reopen the anchor if he let it close while it was in the portal world. The core part of a homebond would still work, but the mana intakes and recirculation framework would not, which would delay that escape option.

He enclosed the anchor in a gravitykinesis frame and dragged it downward, letting the seconds tick by as his vis poured out. By the time he stopped it was *far* deeper than the

Marianas Trench, and had stopped because it had fetched up on something solid. Not ground, but a body, full of vis and extending in every direction farther than his perceptions could handle. A body that was already starting to contort around the cube.

Reflexively, he snatched back the steel cube, but started laughing when he thought about it. Forcing Fane to deal with crushing pressures, spatial distortion, *and* horrifically large predators was far better than the pressure alone. It still wasn't a guarantee, but since he couldn't send Fane to the center of the Sun, it was the best chance he had.

"Sounds like it went well, then?"

"I think it'll do, yes," Callum agreed.

"Got some good news of my own," Lucy said, wagging a finger at her laptop. "Found an email from one of the Fane people. They're setting up a meeting in Beijing. Got the location and everything."

"Fantastic," Callum said. Less than an hour in and getting tapped into GAR's network and was paying off. "Let's take a look."