

Chapter 14 – Goals

Magical healing was strange. Callum thoroughly appreciated it, considering how close he had been to death, but it felt almost *too* easy. It turned a serious mistake and crippling injury into an ephemeral dream, and voided the weight of what had happened. Callum was still taking it to heart, the discomfort at *not* being discomforted enough to make him restless.

“We have to finish the job,” he said, glancing at the clock in the room at Chester’s compound. Gayle and Taisen hadn’t left yet, but they were being entertained by Chester at the main house. “I know we said no more vigilante work, but if we let on that this is enough to stop me it’s going to have nasty consequences.”

“Only if you can do it safely,” Lucy said. “Can you?”

“There’s a reason we got another antimaterial rifle,” Callum said darkly, reaching through the gut-portal to check on the status of said weapon. A quick teleport loaded it, and he was ready to use it. “It’s not as good as my usual approach but with those thin walls? I can go right through.”

“Well, we’re staying here until you’re done just in case,” Lucy said. Callum nodded agreement. There was no need to put his vis anywhere near the building. His perceptions worked just fine to aim the rifle and shoot some fifty-caliber bane bullets through the walls. He didn’t have many of those, but they were absolutely lethal.

Unfortunately, some vampires had left while he was incapacitated, but not all of them. There were still four left, and a moment’s work with Lucy’s remote was all he needed to put a high-caliber bullet through each one. Then he switched to cheaper ammunition and hammered the hell out of the booby-trapped ward box. He didn’t trust that the box was the sole source of the issue though, so he swept his perceptions over the building to find any trace of enchantment and shot what he found.

The buildings hadn’t been warded against something like the rifle, which was fortunate, but he expected next time someone would think of that. He knew mages *could* make bulletproof shields, even if he imagined doing that for something the size of a building was prohibitive.

Once he was certain there were no more active enchantments, he reached in and teleported out the remains of the ward box. It appeared in front of him, full of holes and broken in several places from the impacts. Whatever part of it had held the booby trap enchantment was unrecognizable, at least to his eyes.

“You really did a number on that,” Lucy said, eyeing it warily.

“Yeah, I guess I might as well hand it off to Taisen before we go home. Maybe he’ll figure out something useful but I think I’m going to have to move past being a vigilante. Figure out some way to solve the whole thing.”

“Fixing the vampire problem’s a big ticket item,” Lucy said. “I dunno how to even start.” She sighed and bounced Alex a bit. “Has to be something that doesn’t wind up like this, though.”

“Yeah,” Callum said, standing up. He still felt odd that he didn’t feel bad. “Come on, let’s go deliver this and then go home.”

Despite his words, it was some time before they escaped back to their house, leaving the ruined ward box with Taisen – along with the location of the building. Ironically, Callum’s attack wasn’t even something he needed to worry about cleaning up. Bullet holes were perfectly explainable. But finally they returned and had time to actually relax.

“There’s a few things to deal with,” Callum said later, when Alex was napping and he and Lucy had grabbed some lunch. “One is the fae-vamp connection. We still don’t know enough about that and for all we know it was designed to draw my attention. That booby trap was certainly directed at me.”

“Yeah, and whoever set that up has got to go,” Lucy agreed, a shadow crossing her face as she reached out to grab his hand. “But we have to be more careful, right? It doesn’t matter who did it if you run across one again, only worse.”

“Absolutely.” Callum passed a hand over his face. “I think I may have to ask Taisen about that one. He’s probably looking at it anyway, but neither you nor I are really equipped to do real detective work.”

“Yeah.” Lucy wrinkled her nose. “My GAR tap is getting less and less useful.”

“We got more out of it than I figured,” Callum said. “Much as I wish everyone in GAR was stupid, they aren’t completely.”

“Eh. I don’t know I’d go that far,” Lucy said, wrinkling her nose. Callum snorted. Lucy’s opinion of her former employers seemed to have dropped over time.

“Either way, it’s not our specialty. So there’s that.” Callum waved it aside. “The other thing is the vampires themselves. Their access to Earth in the first place.”

“Thinking of going after the Night Lands portal somehow?” Lucy asked, taking a bite of her pickle-free sandwich.

“Yeah, but that’s hardly going to be enough, is it? There’s still teleport and portal links that would connect the Night Lands to Earth. I have to *really* sever ties, natural and

artificial.” He tapped his fingers against the side of his glass tumbler, chewing it over. “Which means having to engage with all those Houses over on the other side of the portal, somehow.”

“Also what would happen if a bunch of vampires were stuck on Earth,” Lucy pointed out. “Assuming closing the portal even did anything for that.”

“Yeah, it might not have any immediate effect. And if it does, giving a lot of vamps absolutely nothing to lose could end badly.” He shook his head. “This has all kinds of strategic-level implications. If I can do it in the first place.”

“Not like you can exactly practice,” Lucy said.

“Not with existing ones,” Callum agreed. Lucy raised her eyebrows and took another bite of sandwich. “I know, I know,” he said to her unspoken comment. “I’m going to have to buckle down and do some real experimenting.”

Despite having a moon nexus, he hadn’t really been using it to its full effect. There wasn’t a great excuse for it, though he had some minor ones. The space drones lost their enchantment integrity far quicker than ones on Earth, even with the mana insulation that he’d put together. He had only vague thoughts on how to make a proper dimension-piercing portal, so even starting was difficult to get a grip on. But simply being difficult was not a reason.

“Since other activities are off the table anyway,” Lucy agreed. “I tell you what though, any experimenting ought to be done next to the teleporter. Which really ought to be closer to the war room, now that I think about it.”

“Yeah,” Callum agreed. “I’ll put in some work and make it into a proper panic room. I should have done that before, now that I think about it.” He rubbed at his eyes, thinking. “Until that’s finished, I’ll keep the experimentation for when we’re at Chester’s place, when we bring Alex over.” He grimaced. “It’s like the nexus doesn’t even matter, if things can get to me that way.”

“Just a few things,” Lucy disagreed. “It’s not even possible to stumble across the nexus by accident. Or use it to break through to us.”

“Heh. I’d like to see them try.” Callum nearly smirked. It was possible that someone might link one of the gun portals up to the cave-cache, but he cleaned up on the cache end even when it wasn’t quite as easy or possible on the other side. The anchors, on the other hand, were more or less permanent, and thus vulnerable to being compromised. He almost hoped someone *did*, just so they found themselves exposed to vacuum. After a moment of contemplating paying the booby trap that had caught him forward, he sobered.

“Unfortunately this project is going to have to be kept under wraps until we’re about ready to execute it. Not that I don’t trust Chester, but the rest of the Alliance is leakier than a sieve.” Anything that was meant for the Alliance’s information was as good as public. There’d been a number of attempts to compromise the proxy emails that Lucy was using, for all the good that would do anyone. Even if people tracked it down, it’d be a little server box in a random office in Estonia or the like.

They’d changed the location after each attempt that Lucy had logged, even if nobody had found the physical box. After running into the booby trap, though, he wasn’t sure about even leaving it up. They were reclusive, but not inaccessible, and that might need to change to be safe. Something that was at odds with regular visits to Chester’s compound, but he couldn’t think of any way to make an emergency link work without some kind of connection.

“Gotta get to it then,” Lucy said, picking up her plate to take it to the dishwasher. “Alex has a playdate this afternoon.”

Callum pursed his lips. Despite having been married to Lucy for almost two years, he still wasn’t quite used to her springing plans on him. It was quite different from his first wife, who had been very much a creature of habit. Lucy wasn’t committing him to terribly important, but it always felt jarring to have his time spoken for. They were still getting used to each other, and he was sure his disinterest in going out and doing things threw Lucy on occasion. Just one of the things people had to get used to when they were living together.

“Okay,” he said after a moment. “Let me go dig up my notes.” He also hadn’t adjusted to the fact that, at least for the moment, some of his research was relegated to when he was somewhere else, a place that people could get to in emergencies.

“That’s the spirit,” Lucy grinned. He teleported his plate and cup into the dishwasher and stood up, giving her a hug and a kiss before he went to his own office – though it was more just a corner screened off from the living room – to pull up the renderings and handwritten notes he’d made on the dimensional portals.

So far, he’d studied every portal save for the one that led to Faerie. That one was deep inside a Faerie enclave over in Germany and even with the stealth ball he wasn’t confident in getting too close to it. Especially after the booby trap. Five different dimensional portals was quite a lot to reference anyway, especially since they were all different.

Aside from the dragon portal, all the others seemed to have been created from the portal world side. The Night Lands had its own native spatial distortions, Mictlān had mana-energized obsidian and a weird non-Euclidean environment. The Deep Wilds had its portal inside one of the massive, physics-defying trees, where silvery amber had formed

a perfect circle. The mechanism for Portal World Five wasn't actually clear, but the tangled mess of mana was very clearly not something a person would make.

One major conclusion that he'd drawn was that the inefficiencies and idiosyncrasies mattered. There had to be *something* that made a portal connect to one place and not another, and while that thing was obvious for normal portals, it had to be intrinsic to the mana or vis structure for dimensional portals. It also made sense that the portals came to Earth from the other side; on Earth, magic needed to be spatial vis to make a portal, but in portal worlds other rules could apply.

Portal worlds were liminal realms. They weren't full universes with consistent laws of physics. That was most obvious in the Night Lands, where the world simply *stopped* a hundred miles away from Weltentor, but the infinite cliff of the dragonlands or the unfathomable depths of Portal World Five didn't make any real sense. When he'd put a drone high into the air in the Deep Wilds, he hadn't found a normal atmosphere. Instead the sun had blurred into a cloud layer and another layer of greenery became visible above, as if the entire thing was some inside-out hollow Earth.

The dragonlands portal was really the only evidence it was possible to punch through to a portal world from Earth. At least, so Callum assumed. Even Shahey didn't know which side it had been formed on, and of course Callum couldn't ask Duvall, who was the only one likely to know. It was just something he'd have to experiment with.

Callum made sure everything was copied over to his laptop, then slid it into his back along with his notebooks before slinging it over his shoulder. It wasn't like it would have been an issue if he'd forgotten something. He only needed a thought to move between home and Chester's compound, but he still had a lot of habits from before a time where he was a thought away from a dozen places at once.

"Alright, Lucy," he called, and carried Alex over to stand next to him. He reached through to nexus to the anchor parked at Chester's compound and opened a portal.

The so-called playdate was really an excuse for a bunch of Chester's pack to get together and chat. In a way it was a bit like daycare, but everyone was involved. The shifters acted more like a big extended family than any kind of hierarchy. Even though Callum wasn't like Lucy – on friendly terms with everyone – the general atmosphere was far more relaxed. It was how he reminded himself how to talk with people normally.

They walked into the nursery building and he spent a few minutes greeting the other parents, though it was really Lucy who did most of the networking. He even spotted Clara there, looking after a younger cousin, and spent a little bit of time talking with the girl and the other Winut residents who were there. Apparently she even had a boyfriend, though

he hadn't come along, which seemed weird to him but time passed for everyone, and people lived their own lives.

Once he'd gotten more settled, he staked out a corner table and set up his laptop and notebooks, then located one of the space drones sitting in the basement back at the bunker. He sneaked a vis thread through the mana containment, a hole that he'd specifically added into the design, and teleported the drone out to the moon. A quick Alcubierre jaunt upward left it hanging a few hundred miles above the surface of the moon, which was close enough to deep space for experimentation.

He made very small test portals inside the bubble of the mana confinement, mostly not getting anywhere. Which was fine, he hadn't been expecting much for his first tests. The fact that his portal structures didn't so much as stir the space inside them was not very hopeful, but he had dozens of configurations to test. Not to mention brute force and the process of just cramming as much spatial vis into an area as possible.

It actually took over a month of testing, on and off between actually living life, before he got the first tiny blip of a possible response. His portal construct was insanely complex, with lots of extra loops in a manner reminiscent of the dragonlands portal, requiring him to make a few sets of foci just to hold the pieces in place. Crafting the foci was a huge time sink, but a necessary one if he was going to get anywhere.

Even with the extra training he'd been undergoing, he didn't have the skill to hold such a complex construct in place. It wasn't so much the number of threads as how precisely he had to hold their relative orientations and movements. There was no way to abstract things like he could with teleportation or the Alcubierre or gravity box.

One of the things that slowed down the process was that he had to document every single attempt. That meant building a wireframe render of the threads and tubes every single time, often with vector annotations. Even with the macros and other tools Lucy had made to help him put together the renderings more quickly, it was a tedious process.

"Yeah, welcome to engineering," Lucy said with a laugh when he complained. "Nothing's simple, most of the time you're just guessing at most of what you're doing, and if you don't write anything down you're just going to be useless. Have to know what works and what doesn't."

"At least it's not as bad as it *could* be, thanks to your programs," Callum said, trying to imagine how someone in a prior age might have possibly recorded the portal structure. Normal portals were a simple torus, and the threads more or less wanted to stay in position. The dimensional portals were still a torus from the broadest scale view, but they had a bunch of nested, braided substructures that put an enormous amount of strain on the system, which was why he couldn't just tweak and fiddle to his heart's content.

Especially since drastic changes would require making entirely new foci, which was yet another time and money sink. Not only did holding all that stuff at once drain his vis, but since the actual setup was not entirely stable, it was easy to accidentally collapse when making adjustments.

“You know, if you’re recording all this stuff, we might be able to use it,” Lucy mused.

“How do you mean?” Callum poked at the render he was working on, tweaking the fine angles and distances to make sure it was completely accurate.

“Well, we can get one of those machine analysis or learning programs,” she suggested. “I don’t know what works, you don’t know what works, but we let a mathematical modeling program crunch down a bunch of models and we might get some insight on what the bits do. Once you have a working model, anyway. Heck, even having working and not-working to compare would be good.”

“Would that even work?” Callum raised his eyebrows at her. That kind of thing was well out of his wheelhouse. “I mean, it does seem to follow rules of structure, but it’s still magic.”

“Eh, analysis software shouldn’t care. Of course we can’t *rely* on it, but if we’re careful about the inputs we give it, we might get something useful out. I mean, you’re already doing most of the work with the renders so we might as well.”

“Sure, anything that might help” Callum agreed. Even the tiniest bit of extra insight would be useful.

“Awesome, I’ve always wanted an excuse to mess around with that stuff,” Lucy said, and went to get her own laptop.

He continued experimenting over the following days, poking around blindly, and when success came he almost missed it. The change was only slightly noticeable; a shifting of the spatial fabric inside the ring of the prospective portal. For a moment he thought he was imagining it, until he pushed more vis into the construct and the shift grew more pronounced, like a fabric wrinkling. Except it was kind of in reverse, becoming more wrinkled with tension rather than smoothing out.

“Ha!” Callum pumped his fist, attracting Lucy’s attention. And Alex’s too, since he suddenly started toddling over. Lucy followed behind, but let Alex make his own way as she raised her eyebrows at him.

“Had a breakthrough, dear?”

“Well, had a *reaction* at least. We’ll have to compare it to everything else and see if there’s something obviously different. Or not obviously different, I suppose.” Callum

reached down to scoop up his son. “What’s up, little guy?” Callum asked, and was treated to the rapid-fire babble only toddlers could manage.

“I think we’re going to have to think about testing the *little guy’s* magic soon,” Lucy said.

“Yeah,” Callum said. “I’m going to have to hurry things along if we want the world to be normal when he gets a little older.” He smiled down at Alex. “Back to work, I suppose.”

“I hate tracking fae,” Ray groaned. Felicia just laughed, a musical tinkle that set nearby flowers to dancing. Obviously *she* wasn’t put out by the complaint, which of course she took as a compliment. She had been in an excellent mood ever since they’d tracked down what Felicia called a *Gate of Bones* in South America.

Ray had promptly been sworn to secrecy about the Ways.

Personally, he wasn’t happy about the fae having a way around the world – and possibly even from Faerie to Earth – that was completely sideways from normal travel. It was strictly inferior to the teleport network, considering how few terminus points there were, but there was apparently actual *space* inside, and life from Faerie.

It was a huge problem for Defensores Mundi, though the only reason Ray agreed to a fae-backed oath of secrecy was that Taisen already knew that the Ways existed. Them being on Earth, however, was news to everyone. Properly controlling them was something only fae kings could manage, so once it had been found it became Taisen’s responsibility.

Which freed them up to track down a problem of another sort. The fae that were empowering vampires — or at least, purported to be doing so. Ray had already interviewed the shifters that had reported it and while *they* certainly weren’t lying, that didn’t mean much. When it came to fae, shifter senses weren’t exactly reliable.

That led them to the western coast of the United States. Felicia hadn’t gotten much from the corpses Wells had left behind, but there was a tiny hint that there *was* someone backing them, and where. Sadly, the cities of the West Coast were vast, sprawling, and chock full of supernaturals and mages. Mostly all aligned with GAR.

Felicia trailed him along the hillside in the Napa valley, where he *knew* there were some fae. He could hear them, but he couldn’t *find* them. Ironically, they were so deep in an enclave that Felicia’s sensitivity to fae magic wasn’t helpful at all. It was everywhere.

That or she was enjoying watching him hunt this way and that through the faerie maze. Close as they were, she still had that little impish twist to her that enjoyed pranks. Fortunately, she also had a sense of proportion that some lacked. Glamouring a mirror

to reflect a wild-haired, older version of himself was funny. Trying to genuinely convince someone they'd aged overnight was not.

Ray paused to run his senses through the wind again, closing his eyes to focus and turning toward where he heard faint voices and music. It didn't matter that it was directly where he'd just come from; traversing fae enclaves was sometimes just like that. With Felicia at his back, he tromped back down the hill, then turned left into a row of grape arbors.

Each arbor was larger than the last, rapidly towering like redwoods full of grapes in complete violation of what anyone would see from the outside, but that was par for the course. The actual Court for the enclave was under the last and largest arbor, with grapes the size of beachballs dangling from vines a thick as oaks.

The light-dappled glen in the midst of an eternal summer didn't seem like the kind of place that would be dealing with creatures of the night, but that very irony was why it was believable. He could hear Felicia straighten up behind him, and knew that she was putting on her professional face to deal with the fae here. They weren't in DAI suits anymore, but the gunmetal gray tactical uniforms of Defensores Mundi were a good replacement.

Before anyone even greeted him, a naked, laughing fae danced past and pressed a glass of wine into his hand. He handed it off to Felicia, since he sure wasn't about to trust fae alcohol when he hadn't even been introduced to whoever was running the bacchanal. Even looking for such a personage was difficult, since it seemed every fae he could see was involved in some kind of drunken revelry without any orchestration from above.

"Welcome, mage!" Someone exclaimed after he'd stood at the entrance to the bower for a minute or so, and a flower-crowned satyr staggered out of a pile of dead drunk fae near the center of the court. Despite the obvious inebriation, the fae still screamed danger to Ray's instincts, though he was pretty sure the one in question wasn't a king just yet. "What brings you to the Aestivus Court?"

"Prince Finidel," Ray replied with a polite bow. He'd at least been able to find that much out ahead of time. "I'm here on behalf of Defensores Mundi, merely to ask some questions about certain agreements that were made. Perhaps not by your court specifically, but I have reason to suspect a Prince of your stature would know who it is."

"Oh? And why would we know such things?" Finidel said, tottering closer. "And why don't you introduce me to your beautiful companion?" His drunken walk swayed past Ray somehow as he reached for Felicia.

"Stop." Felicia's order froze not only Finidel, but all the nearby revelers as well as some drifting petals and butterflies that halted midair. Ray was quite certain that she'd become

more powerful over the past two years. It wasn't just finishing up successful investigations and digging deep into her own story, either. He was pretty sure it was due to the Ways opening all over the place, meaning more Faerie magic about, but that was just his guess.

"I didn't introduce you because she bites," Ray said casually, gripping Finidel's elbow and turning the man around. "You know how it is. Some women are just prickly." Finidel didn't resist as Ray pulled him along for a few steps, only shaking off the command once they were a few feet away.

"Yes, yes I see," Finidel said casually, as if he hadn't been bearded in his own den. "So you had questions about certain agreements?" He snapped his fingers and a half-human, half-deer woman pranced over and handed Finidel an amphora of wine. Even if the fae seemed already mostly drunk, he wasted no time in tilting it back and swallowing a huge quantity of stuff so strong Ray could swear he was getting buzzed from the smell.

"Yes. There have been reports of some vampires displaying, shall we say, rather fae-like traits. The local enclave didn't know anything, but we followed the trail here." Ray wasn't really convinced by the drunken fop act. Even if he wasn't a king, Finidel was a Prince and hadn't had anything on his record at all, so he kept his nose clean.

"Ah! I do know what you mean," Finidel said agreeably, no doubt convinced more by Felicia's action than Ray's tone. Though after a couple years training with Taisen's people, Ray wasn't a slouch either. His combat foci were updated and refined and he could have flattened the oversized arbor with tornado winds. Or suffocated the court by taking away their air.

"What can you tell me about them?" It wasn't necessarily the agreements themselves that were the problem. Defensores Mundi couldn't exactly police deals between different supernatural groups. It was the weirdness of the two cooperating along with the anti-mage trap. Something which was not entirely created by the Guild of Enchanting, if the GOE was to be believed.

"Oh, it was nothing much. We just had someone come through from the Seven Lesser Courts," Finidel said airily, as if it were barely worth thinking about. Which perhaps it was, for him. "He had some gatherings and goings-on and there were comings and goings we weren't really intended to pay attention to."

"But you did?" Ray asked, since Finidel clearly wanted him to. Getting information out of fae required a bit of patience, which amusingly enough Felicia did not have.

"Well." Finidel said conspiratorially. "I didn't hear *everything* but I do have some names of people who were involved. Which I really *shouldn't* say but there's really no telling

what might come out in a drunken conversation between two people.” He took another quaff of the amphora, a swallow that would kill any human. “Care to join me?”

“We think he’s somewhere in Central America.”

Talbot Earl nodded at his superior’s words, but he didn’t see how much that helped. Teller Janry was at the head of House Janry’s efforts to suppress the power of the breakaway factions, but sometimes Talbot thought he was a bit too fixated on The Ghost. True, the man was an absolute menace, and showed that he could and would target persons of importance, but he wasn’t the political threat the American Alliance or the breakaway Houses were.

“That is quite the area to search,” Gracie Earl observed neutrally. Teller scowled.

“Don’t be so disingenuous. Of course that’s not enough to get anywhere, but considering that he seems to have his *own* worldwide teleport network, being able to narrow it down even that much is miraculous. Even the DAI’s fae can’t really get a read on him. It’s mostly mundane analysis at this point.”

There were some people sitting around the cozy study in House Janry that made faces at that, but they were mostly the types who hadn’t been back to earth in decades, if not longer. Talbot was sure most of them would come around when they saw the surveillance capabilities that mundanes were capable of now, to the point where even glamours were starting to fail at their task. Though not many of them were actually going *to* Earth. There was plenty to do to keep up relations with the other Houses, on Faerie and the other portal worlds.

“So why bring it up?” Gracie asked.

“I need you to liaison with the local governments and other organizations,” Teller told her. “They have thousands of people more than we do, and the man is completely off the grid. It’s more likely someone will run into him by chance, so we need the numbers on our side.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, without that much enthusiasm. Talbot didn’t blame her. Dealing with mundanes wasn’t the most prestigious assignment, but it needed to be done.

“Talbot,” Teller said. “I need you to see if Scaletooth can be persuaded away from the side of the American Alliance. The dragonblooded are *supposed* to be neutral, but that’s just the official stance. If they figure out something the dragonblooded want, then there’s really no limit to the amount of resources that Scaletooth could provide.”

“Yes, sir,” Talbot said, no more enthused by his assignment than Gracie had been. Trying to convince the dragonblooded to do anything was not likely to succeed, and he hated to report failure.

“Don’t push too hard,” Teller cautioned. “We don’t want to push him to active support. Just getting him to reaffirm that he will keep out of things will be enough, under the circumstances. We haven’t forgotten that he knows Wells personally, and that might be enough to make him biased.”

“Understood,” Talbot said. As soon as the meeting adjourned, he checked his focuses and took the teleporter out of House Janry and to GAR proper. Given the events of the past few years, he didn’t need to look up where to find Scaletooth — now Shahey. His involvement in the whole Wells case had put the small town of Tanner firmly on the map.

The teleport network still wasn’t up to full strength, so he had to actually fly out from one of the big East Coast cities, getting an appreciation for what had become of Earth civilization. It was one thing to visit a city on occasion, and it was another to see the massive ribbons of lit asphalt crossing the countryside. The sheer sprawl of what the mundanes had managed was just bizarre.

He did his best not to look too discomfited by the strange surroundings. He didn’t really understand why a dragonblooded would decide to lair in a small town in West Virginia, or why, since he did, he wouldn’t spend any effort making it look more pleasing. By Talbot’s standards, Tanner was downright dumpy but, compared to the surpassing beauty of Faerie, most places on Earth were.

He landed in front of the small, unassuming house that was supposed to be Shahey’s, and dropped his glamour. The mana was more comfortable than he’d expected, even if it was thin, but he didn’t sense anything that would betray the presence of a dragonblooded. Talbot frowned into the little black circle that was supposed to be a camera, and looked nothing like the big boxes he remembered.

He pushed the doorbell and waited, tapping his foot impatiently until the door opened. Suddenly Talbot could see magic, the distinctive glow of a glamour on top of the rather ordinary-looking man who was waiting at the door. He beckoned Talbot in, and once the door was closed behind him he dropped the glamour.

Shahey was the same short, green-scaled reptile-man that GAR had on file, though there was more to him in person. With the glamour gone, he fairly radiated power, more than the file said he was supposed to. Not that Talbot was intending to be rude to a dragonblooded.

"This way," Shahey said, leading Talbot down a stairway, where he suddenly could see that the entirety of the basement room seemed to be made of packed-together mana. It wasn't, of course, it was merely wood and stone, but it was impressive nonetheless. He took a seat where Shahey indicated and regarded the dragonblooded.

"Thank you for seeing me," he said, since Shahey didn't seem to be willing to start the conversation. "The Archmage's Council appreciates that dragonblooded have abided by their agreements for so long with so little difficulty. Would that all our members were so upstanding."

"We do try to abide by our agreements," Shahey said mildly. "So you are here on behalf of the Archmage's Council, rather than the Guild of Arcane Regulation?"

"GAR serves the Council, and under the circumstances I would hardly say that the dragonblooded are subject to the oversight of GAR. You don't use the teleports, or the services of any of the Departments. So we thought it was better to deal with the principals of the agreement."

"Admirable," Shahey said, reclining in a chair that could have bought half of House Earl, and waved a finger. A swirl of bright mana and vis condensed in his hand, and another one on the dark wooden table at Talbot's right. Shahey's turned into a snifter of something glowing faintly blue, while Talbot's became a large stein of what smelled like beer. "Though as you point out, the dragonblooded do not exactly need most of the services that GAR offers, so what is it that the Council wants? And what does it offer in return?"

"With the changes to the status quo, the Council doesn't think the current agreements are really applicable," Talbot said, picking up the beer and taking a sip. It was, unsurprisingly, excellent. "We are thinking about loosening some of the restrictions dragonblooded currently labor under, as well as offering some guarantees for territory."

"That sounds like quite the offer," Shahey said, the corner of his mouth turned up into a sort of smile. "But what exactly do you expect us to do? Certainly you wouldn't be gifting us out of the goodness of your heart."

"Perhaps not, but it would be for everybody's good," Talbot said, taking out his handkerchief to dab at the foam on his lips. "Things on Earth are starting to slip out of control, and the council believes it is in everyone's interests to bring it back in line."

"That seems appropriately vague," Shahey said, unimpressed. Talbot frowned. Mundanes could be useful, as Shahey had to know since he had a town full of them. But only when they were given proper direction. Expanding on that was the obvious next step, as was crippling the powerbase of the new American Alliance.

Which was why someone had been sent to approach Shahey first, and Talbot had been the only one with any prior dealings with a dragonblooded. Admittedly, not Shahey. It was known that Shahey in particular was at least nominally friendly with the American Alliance, so if he could be persuaded to withdraw that would make things easier in the future. He was also the only dragonblooded with a permanent address, and the best way to get in contact with the others.

“The Council is forming a coalition with certain fae and vampires to reduce the amount of chaos here on Earth and establish a more solid place for our people. After all, Earth is the only place *all* the races can live, and as the crossroads it’s an incredible strategic asset,” Talbot said, picking his words with care. “Which the current difficulties with breakaway groups threaten.”

“So you’re asking me if I’m going to stand neutral if you move against the American Alliance?” Shahey asked, far more bluntly than Talbot would have liked. “If not help you outright?”

“My understanding is that you would stand neutral under the current agreements anyway,” Talbot said. “But there are many shades and varieties of neutral, and as I said, those agreements may be subject to revision anyway.”

Shahey chuckled, draining his glowing drink and dissolving the glass, as if underscoring the power he held. Hardly necessary, considering the intense energy that saturated the well-appointed room. Then he clasped his hands together and regarded Talbot.

“I appreciate the offer, but I have my own interests. Dragonblooded have more reasons for being neutral than simply the agreements we made when we came through the portal.” Shahey shook his head. “There are only a few things that might make us reconsider, but unless you can make Archmage Duvall work for us it is unlikely.”

Talbot scowled. He didn’t actually represent the *full* Council, only a portion of it that was working in concert with their fae allies. Duvall was *not* part of that coalition, especially not after a rather hasty attempt to bring her under control. The shutdown of the teleportation network had been rather inconvenient and she hadn’t at all tried to make amends. Nor was there much way for the coalition to put pressure on her, given her monopoly, though there were efforts to break that monopoly that had yet to bear fruit.

“Very well,” he said. There had been strict instructions not to press, and besides, declared neutrality was almost good enough anyway. “Thank you for your time.”

“It’s good to know what my fellows are thinking,” Shahey agreed. “If anything changes I will be sure to get in touch.”