

## Chapter 18 – Alliance

The glade inside the Ways of Earth was no longer a simple clearing. Nor was it small. While the perimeter was not all that much larger than it had been when she'd first controlled it, the interior had bent to encompass several hundred square miles in order to accommodate Felicia's Court. The central tree and its attendant spirit remained, though it too had grown, and was now large enough to rival some of its progenitors in Faerie.

Fae artisans had assembled a courtyard manor under the massive spreading boughs of the tree, not quite a castle, but a grand and stately residence for someone of proper stature to live. Ivy crawled on polished stone and windows gleamed, while inside carpets and burnished wood gave dozens of rooms – including a grand ballroom – the feeling of comfort and coziness rather than cold opulence.

Beyond the manor was a spread of villages in a half dozen different styles, ranging from pre-industrial Japanese rustic ruralism to chrome retrofuturism americana. Felicia approved the enclaves. She didn't want her subjects to conform to the same style, because she was supposed to encompass all the fae on Earth, and enforcing a singular style for her seat of power would have undermined that effort. It also made the factions somewhat more visible, which was all to the good as she would be grappling with them for some time yet.

It was one thing to overwhelm a fae prince with direct force and extract an oath, and it was another thing to expect true loyalty. The story of any ruler included scheming those who wished their treason to prosper. If it had seemed far too easy to extract the fealty of various fae princes, most of them through raw and naked threat, that was because it was only the first step. A prelude to a long silent struggle and political turmoil that would have to be kept out of sight.

Felicia walked out of the manor, down the exquisitely-carved path that led out into the broader Earth-side Ways. Some of it had been done by artisans, but some of it had been done by the Ways themselves, the surroundings shifting and changing as it absorbed the workings of hundreds of fae with access to Earth technology and ideas. The Ways were taking on their own character, reflecting Earth's terrain, its flora and fauna, its places of importance.

As a child grew and eventually left her parents behind, so too was it time for the Earth's Ways to part with Faerie's. Her authority over the Ways had finally reached the point that she could secure her borders, and declare Earth separate from Faerie. With Ray at her right hand, a procession formed behind her, drawn less by any proclamation on her

part as by the reflection of her own intentions onto her demesne. Like an incoming tide, the pressure was palpable.

Some of those falling in behind her were those she'd hijacked from their original jobs, like Balobob and Intinkity, while others were those who had sought her out. Those included Dominic, Castellar, and other artisans who definitely wanted to serve actual royalty, as well as those who just wanted protection.

Their power and prowess added to hers, integrated with hers, and while they weren't exactly servants she could order about – not that she wanted to – they were still subjects who worked for her goals. Balobob's archive formed the basis of the manor basement, and the massive expansion of the glade. Intinkity's guarding of gateways had translated into more secure travel along the Ways, and both of those fae had become more than they'd ever thought they would under GAR.

Her train grew as she proceeded to the edge of the glade, the woods shifting and parting to reveal a sun-dappled, tree-shaded pathway winding widdershins in a way that should have simply looped back to the clearing, but didn't. It was broad enough to fit the entire procession, the very action of walking it acknowledging and reinforcing the path's reality and making it firm.

The path slowly looped, never intersecting itself, three full revolutions before it ended at a spit of land, a cliff jutting out over great dark seas stretching in all directions. A similar jut of forested rock rose facing them, only a small gap between the two, a crevasse bridged by precarious rope and wooden slats. All of it was real, and all of it was metaphor.

There were fae on the other side of the bridge, though they were not organized. Merely watchers or guards, with little enthusiasm for being stuck in the Ways so long. The primeval forest behind them was more bloodthirsty than the one that bent to Felicia's will, and it was very clear that only monsters lived there. When Felicia emerged with her entourage, several individuals in animal guises bolted off, but they would be too late regardless of who they reported to.

Felicia could have simply severed the connection. It would have been difficult, but it was possible. There wasn't any real point, though, as a new one would have formed eventually and been far more tenacious, and she didn't want to completely sever herself from Faerie. She just needed to control it.

**“Let there be a great bridge of stone and steel,”** she said softly, and felt the talents and magics of some of those at her back twining into her words. A great stone arch burst forth from the ground in front of them, rising toward the sky, and cables whipped out from its top. A walkway spun itself into existence as the cables raced forward,

crossing a gap that widened itself in response, going from mere crevasse to a deep gorge. In a matter of minutes a stone-anchored suspension bridge crossed it, high and wide.

**“Let there be an impassable gate,”** she said. **“Let it be sealed against any and all who have no right or invitation to be here.”** That took a slightly different set of talents, heavy silver and iron sliding down from the archway on their side like the closing of an enormous jaw, thudding into the ground with an impact that shuddered through the earth.

It had no obvious means of opening, but the upper portion of the stone arch above the gate formed itself into an ornate house, sized for someone only a few inches tall. Intinkity Belle flitted forward, and the moment she crossed the threshold of the miniature dwelling the heavy metal bars of the gateway shivered, twisting themselves into fanciful patterns and assembling Felicia’s crest to cover the center of the gate. Felicia felt the strain as she pushed forth her own power, trying to finalize a separation of worlds with a fresh and untested authority.

For a moment she trembled, and then Ray’s hand was at her back, his presence strengthening her resolve and the final length of the bridge spun itself into place. There was a sound like the ringing ringing like that of an enormous bell, once, twice, and then a third time. The bridge shuddered and settled into place, cables taking up slack and obdurate stone melding with the ground. There was the feeling of a sigh from behind her as the changes washed over them, and Felicia turned around to regard her subjects.

“I, Queen Felicity Blackblood, declare Earth as its own, separate, and sovereign realm. We are peers with Faerie, not a colony, subordinate, or untamed land. Guests will find us welcoming; intruders and trespassers of the fae will find only their own end.”

Her pronouncement didn’t generate cheers, but more of a grim and knowing chuckle. Most of those on Earth were there because they didn’t want anything to do with Faerie, either the Greater or Lesser Courts. While they didn’t all necessarily welcome her rulership, it was better than being trampled by the old and vicious rulers that saw Earth as nothing more than a plaything.

She had more power in the Ways than on the vast surface of Earth’s globe, but one influenced the other. Eventually she would control the portal itself, and that would make certain things easier, but holding the Ways was vital. Even if the portal itself were destroyed, the Ways would remain.

“This is the beginning,” she said to the assembled fae. “I name myself Queen not from a desire for power but because without that sovereignty, we are nothing. Just scattered

barbarians for the Lesser Courts to prey upon. As a single kingdom, we have rights and borders and the power to contest them. We can protect our own — and protect the mundanes, who provide this home.” She looked around, left, right, and put her hand over Ray’s, where it rested on her arm.

“We have work to do.”

\*\*\*

“You’ve got work to do,” Lucy said cheerfully, walking into the room where Callum doing some of the early magic exercises with Alex. There was, sadly, a limit on the guidance he could give, both because he didn’t use the shell method and because his internal vis method had made it impossible for him to see magic the way most mages did, with the naked eye. His spatial sense had a better fidelity for structure, but translating that to what Alex should see took some doing.

“I always have work to do,” Callum said, and put down the practice enchantment.

“Okay, kiddo, we can take a break.”

“Yeah!” Alex said, and hopped up, running over to the door and vanishing into the back yard. Then he ran back, gave Callum a hug, and ran off again before Callum could even say anything.

“So much energy,” Callum said, shaking his head. “What’s going on?”

“Time to put on your dancing shoes, or at least the suit again.” Lucy joined him on the couch, putting down the laptop she was carrying and leaning back with a grunt, laying her hands on her swollen belly. “Taisen’s on the line. We’ve got another fancy event to go,” she said, as Callum put his hand on hers. Archmage Taisen was visible on the screen, and Callum nodded to him, reaching out to adjust the laptop angle slightly.

“Mister Wells.” Taisen’s voice came from the laptop, and Callum nodded to the man, adjusting the laptop angle slightly to center himself and Lucy in the pickup.

“What’s going on?” Callum inquired, not really expecting anything official after the summit meeting. Not until it was time to break supernatural secrecy for good.

“We’re making the Earth Alliance official,” Taisen said. “With GAR out of the way and the Archmage’s Council at least considering our legitimacy, we need to push before the momentum lags.”

“Right,” Callum said, not even tempted to argue. Like it or not, he was one of the main guarantors for the Earth Alliance, and Chester had been right. He had to act like a sovereign power, which meant he had certain responsibilities. “When and where?”

“House Hargrave is hosting,” Taisen told him. “Two days from now. I know it’s not much notice, but we want to get this done before Janry starts to move. No matter what he does, it’s better that we act from a position of legitimacy.”

“I’d rather just nuke him and be done with it,” Callum muttered, since Janry had more than earned a kiloton rebuke. But that’d just undermine the attempts at legitimate authority — unless Janry attacked again. In which case it was just proper self defense.

“The day is coming, I’m certain,” Taisen agreed. Callum hadn’t yet been able to sneak a drone in to the secret compound that Janry’s people had set up, not with the jamming and the sweeps they made specifically for anything out of place, but he had left one with shifters who were lurking around to keep an eye on things. “In the meantime, it is better that we band together than stand separately.”

“Yeah.” Gone were the days of just hiding away from authority and hoping they’d forget about him. He was the authority, and nobody dared ignore his presence. Perhaps it had always been inevitable that the only way he’d be left alone was to make it so people feared crossing him. “Anything in particular you need me to do?”

“Just a repeat of your performance at the summit,” Taisen said. “Though with fewer explosions. There won’t be too many surprises, but the Archmage’s Council *will* be there.”

“Right,” Callum said, considering. “Lucy, I think you and Alex can come to this one. Alex might have to stay with the other kids, though.” It wasn’t like House Hargrave was unfamiliar, considering Alex went there for the mage equivalent of preschool. Though most of him still wanted to keep them in the private portal world, away from prying eyes and any possible threat, that wasn’t fair to them. He didn’t want to be a tyrant, and that was as true with his own family as with the world at large.

“Gonna need a lot of tailoring on my dress,” Lucy said, lightly patting her middle.

“Good thing we’ve already been to Savile Row,” Callum replied.

Unlike with the summit, Callum didn’t worry about making an entrance. He arrived with his family like usual, through the dedicated drone, and Alex went off to see his friends while Lucy met with Gayle. So near to term, both Lucy and Gayle wanted a magical healer checking things regularly.

Archmage Hargrave himself welcomed Callum, showing him to a big courtyard where mages and shifters were setting up furniture and snacks. There was definitely some magic involved in the weather, though it was a pleasant spring day regardless. Pleasant, but not quite a match for his own private portal world.

“None of Janry’s people will be here, of course,” Hargrave said, walking the perimeter of the courtyard with Callum as chairs and tables floated into place. “Not even the entire Council is going to be here. In fact, I’m pretty sure we’ll outnumber the neutral Houses.”

“At least one of them is going to be a Janry spy, or sympathetic anyway,” Callum pointed out, watching one of the shifter maids supervise place settings. “At this point, it’s clear he’s treading the path of the tyrant and he wouldn’t dare let his enemies meet without having an eye on it.”

“Which is all to the good. There’s the faintest possibility that the alliance might pressure him enough to stop his foolishness.” Hargrave didn’t sound hopeful, but Callum had to agree with him. Even a small chance they could avert a conflict with Janry was worthwhile, and they didn’t need to sneak around in the dark anymore anyway.

Lucy emerged from the interior with Gayle, and Hargrave passed Callum off to them as he went to go play host. There was still some kind of teleport network in place even with GAR gone, as most everyone seemed to be arriving through a portal frame set up inside its own set of wards in front of the main building.

“Honestly, I’m a little excited,” Gayle confessed to them, taking a glass of some kind of supernatural wine that was probably worth more than Callum’s house. “We’re almost ready to start reaching out to the mundanes, and I’ve got an entire staff for that. Granddad let me be in charge of the diplomacy for House Hargrave.”

“Oh, they’ll love you,” Lucy said, and Callum couldn’t disagree. Gayle’s charisma assured at least some degree of success, assuming she could deal with the scavengers. She came off as personally naïve to some extent, but her family and her House certainly were not.

Callum had thought himself early, but people were arriving despite the courtyard barely being set up. Felicia and Ray, in finery that could only be described as restrained opulence, then Wizzy, who was dressed in jeans and a plain white tee once again. Shahey showed up with another dragonblooded in tow, but the avatar looked female so he guessed it was the one who went by Miri. Both of them were using the oversized reptile-folk avatars and toted huge swords, which was probably a statement about their purpose at the meeting.

Rossi was the first one not inside the inner circle to arrive, and he was accompanied by Archmage Montgomery, the man he’d met at the summit before things took a turn for the dramatic. The round-faced man made a beeline for them and actually offered Lucy his hand, which was *definitely* not something normal archmages did.

“I do hope this new alliance works out better than GAR did,” Montgomery said, eyeing Shahey and Wizzy as they chatted.

“You knew GAR was a problem?” Callum had to restrain himself from asking why Montgomery hadn’t done anything about it. He couldn’t expect everyone to turn vigilante.

“Not until the wheels started coming off,” Montgomery replied. “It was supposed to keep Earth from getting out of hand and give our younger mages experience with combat and the portal worlds. It did that, so I never really paid attention to it.”

“That’s depressingly reasonable,” Callum said, swirling his glass and taking a sip of the wine. It did taste a little unusual, but he didn’t have the palate to pinpoint exactly what about it was supernatural. Assuming he could even taste that part. “So you’re not really upset at us for taking it apart.”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far,” Montgomery said, with a broad smile. “If you hadn’t stepped up with the portal worlds, there might have been issues. But the portal worlds, the new electronic networks and delivery services — all of these serve to salve the ego.”

Callum blinked. It wasn’t exactly a threat, and Montgomery was still friendly, but it was a good reminder that the people he was working with were much the same as cutthroat corporate executives the world over. It wasn’t Montgomery’s business to care about anyone else’s well-being but his own, and his House’s.

“I’m glad that things worked out then,” Callum said, glancing over to where Lucy was laughing over something with Lisa. Chester was just prowling the grounds, clearly impatient. He obviously wanted to get things done quickly and Callum couldn’t blame him. Chester’s entire family had been displaced and this was one step toward fixing that.

“I guess I’m a little surprised that you’re so blasé about this,” he continued, less certain about Montgomery’s attitude with that revelation. “Opening up the supernatural and all.” Montgomery chuckled, pulling an hors d’oeuvres to himself with a flip of telekinesis.

“I’m old,” he said, despite being one of the younger-looking Archmages. “I remember back when we could be killed by anyone with a sword or a bow or just a torch and some enthusiasm. I actually *remember* what it’s like to be afraid of mundanes. That weapon you showed us just brings it back to the same point. This time, though, we’re in a position to negotiate.”

“I never thought of it from that perspective before,” Callum said, having to take several mental steps back. “I was raised mundane, after all.” He wasn’t regretting his plan at all, he just hadn’t thought about the idea that mages like Montgomery had put together

their secret society for the same reason Callum had gone off the grid. Even now, if people started manifesting magical powers they would be put under lock and key by the government, so that particular worry hadn't entirely gone away.

"So long as you're not anti-mage," Montgomery said, chuckling at his own non-joke.

"Certainly not," Callum assured him. "I'm a mage, and my son is a mage. I definitely don't want us to become second-class citizens! I just don't want others to be considered that way." He pursed his lips in thought. "Is that worry, the anti-mage stuff, why Janry is trying so hard to control Earth?" Callum asked, more out of morbid curiosity than any interest in sympathizing with the man.

"No, he was born after mages had already separated themselves." Montgomery shook his head. "I wouldn't call him *young*, but he never had the proper fear for his own life instilled in him."

"That makes a depressing amount of sense," Callum sighed. "You'd think that a nuke would instill that fear but I guess not."

"There's a difference between a show of force, and knowing that you're surrounded by an entire people willing to put a knife in you," Montgomery said.

"You don't have to tell *me* that," Callum said, thinking of his early days on the run from supernatural authority. He still didn't really trust them, but there was a big difference between being a hapless new mage hiding out and the leader of his own House.

Mages continued to arrive for the next hour or so, trickling through the portal in ones and twos, and most of them weren't even archmages. He was dutifully introduced to them all, but most he didn't and wouldn't remember. It was strange having to suppress the urge to offer his hand every time, a reflex left over from years of living like a normal person.

Half the mages were from House Hargrave or House Taisen, and half the rest were from other Houses located on Earth. Hargrave and Taisen weren't the only Houses left, and as a matter of course the rest of them had been invited. Only six archmages and twice that many lesser mages were from the Archmage's Council, but so far as Callum understood it that was pretty good representation. There weren't all that many archmages to begin with, and not every House had an Archmage, the cadet Houses especially.

Most of them gave Shahey and Miri a wide berth, which amused Callum to no end. He was in an admittedly unusual position, but the dragonblooded had always seemed reasonable to him. Though from his perspective *everyone* there was doing impossible



things and could squash him flat if they were so inclined and he was off-guard. For mages used to being impervious and in control, it might be different.

At some point, presumably once all the guests had arrived, Hargrave stood and raised his hand for attention. He flared some sort of vis construct too, probably something eye-catching to mages, but Callum still couldn't see it. Something that he had yet to figure out.

"Attention, everyone," Hargrave said. "Today marks the official formation of the Earth Alliance. This is a momentous day, but it is important to emphasize that we are not going to be like the Guild of Arcane Regulation. This alliance has no advisory board, no bureaucracy. It's an agreement between peers, all of us that remain here on Earth, and a simple one at that. We do not treat mundanes as prey. Not like lessers, but not like fellow supernaturals." He looked around at the assembled people and then gestured Felicia and Shahey forward.

"We dragons know that introducing magic and the existence of the supernatural to a population is fraught with issues," Shahey said, his deep voice booming through the courtyard. "We know that everyone will benefit from proper relations with Earth at large, and so we are willing to lend our strength to enforcing the very few provisions of the alliance. We are not a police, we will not settle disagreements between Houses or Fae. But we will make sure that there is no conflict between the supernatural and the mundane."

That seemed to be all he had to say, for he merely offered a bow and stepped back. Felicia stepped forward, resplendent in her black and white and gold dress armor, cloak billowing in the wind. Ray stood at her elbow, colors matching, and looking rather more imposing than he had as an agent.

"I am Felicity Blackblood, daughter of King Oberon and Queen Mab," she said, though he doubted there was anyone there who didn't know who she was. "I have assumed the sovereignty of all fae here on Earth, bringing it into a single demesne. One that is separate from Faerie. This will have no affect on most of you, even if you have prior arrangements with the local fae, save that it may be easier to entice some of us to work for you.

"This demesne and this alliance means that some fae are no longer welcome on Earth. They are monsters, and humans cannot abide monsters." Felicia nodded in Callum's direction, and he suppressed a laugh. "But nobody here should want monsters either. Even wielded against your enemies, they are an uncommonly treacherous tool. As Queen, I can't claim all such monsters have been removed, but they are not welcome here."

That last statement got some reactions, albeit muted ones. Hospitality was an ancient tradition, and while Callum wasn't sure exactly what stories Felicia was using, it sounded like she was giving supernaturals free license to kill off anyone still trying to prey on regular people. Possibly even incentive.

Felicia's speech was followed by Taisen, expanding the remit of the *Defensores Mundi* to defense both from the portal worlds – a threat that was much diminished in the modern day, and without the Night Lands to worry about – and from bad actors within the supernatural community. Then Chester, who was fairly blunt about his desire to coexist with regular people. He even avoided the term *mundanes*.

“Unlike Queen Felicity, I don't have control of all of Earth's shifters, nor do I want it.” Chester finished, nodded to another shifter, who nodded back. Callum hadn't realized there were other shifter representatives, but he'd basically never met anyone who wasn't part of Chester's pack.

“Most of us are represented here and, like Queen Felicity, we consider those who desire to prey on humans as monsters. Of all the supernaturals, we work closest with the non-magical population, so I don't deny we have the most to gain from this. We'll also be the ones doing the most to enforce it, as we're spread out over more area and will see trouble first.”

Clearly the speeches were aimed at the Archmage's Council people, since he didn't need Chester or Taisen to tell him what they were doing. Though on further reflection, a recording of the Alliance might well be part of the initial opening with conventional authority. Proof that the Alliance was full of good guys.

All propaganda, of course. Most of the people there had their own interests and were signing onto the Alliance because it was the best option, not because of any moral consideration. Which was just as well, because if the agreement relied on good people with pure hearts it would never come into existence.

“I am Huitzilin, though you may call me Wizzy. If anyone causes trouble in Central or South America, I will remove them.” Wizzy's speech wasn't really even that, just the two sentences delivered in blunt threat. Despite his lack of finery, or perhaps because of it, he radiated absolute danger.

Callum was last. He didn't have much of a speech either, and would have preferred to skip the whole thing and just sign, but this was important. In a way it was the culmination of what he'd worked for, something to keep both him and normal people safe from the supernatural. Just before he went up he did chew on an antacid, just as a precaution.

“I am Archmage Wells, but most of you know me as The Ghost,” Callum said, looking over the gathered people. Some he recognized, most he didn’t. Despite being mostly focused on the ceremony, he kept his senses stretched out to check if there were any unexpected mage bubbles approaching. It would have been a perfect time to crash the party, though with all the archmages and the dragonblooded’s archmage-level vis nobody would get very far.

“This is the last time most of you will ever see me,” he continued. “You know what I have done, what I can do. What I want is a future where my family and I, and people like us, need not worry about the depredations of the supernatural. I will back this alliance with all my skill.”

It wasn’t as impressive a threat as Wizzy’s, but he would rather let the alliance and its agreements be front and center. He didn’t want attention for himself, any more than he already had at least. Almost everyone there was benefitting either from his portal worlds or his teleportation enchantments, not to mention Lucy’s work on setting up digital conveniences. He was more than happy to fade into the background.

Hargrave brought out the actual document they were to sign, which was fairly short. It wasn’t a legal agreement and there weren’t many requirements on the Alliance either, not even mutual defense pacts. The vast majority of the oversized vellum document was reserved for the signatures.

They weren’t just signing with normal ink, of course. Rossi had brought a pot of ink that was somehow a banic alloy suspension, and sealing wax that had been similarly treated. Callum was glad that he’d gotten a heads-up enough to practice using that kind of ink pen, though he vaguely knew what he was doing from calligraphy classes lifetimes ago when he was still in college.

Callum was the first one to put his name to the Alliance. He signed it just as *The Ghost*, and pressed the printed-that-morning House Wells seal into the molten wax next to his name, investing both with his vis. It wasn’t an enchantment, just an extra indication that the signature was his. The rest followed suit, and he stood back while Lucy slipped her arm around his, watching the proceedings.

There was still an immense amount of work to do, and of course Janry and his cronies still meant them harm, but something in Callum’s gut eased as the signatures and seals trailed their way down the long scroll. The summit had been his debut, but here and now he had finally shed his past as a fugitive and outlaw. He was a peer, a force to be reckoned with, and someone not to cross.

He was his own power, and he would be able to raise his family outside the trappings of secrecy or tyranny.

