

## Chapter 10: Day 222 – Blue

“This is...” Iniri paused for a moment to finish engraving a delicate rune. “This is a lot of mana. Which is saying a lot considering that link you gave me.”

*“I can probably turn it down, but I kind of want these to be powerful.”* The mana crystal itself only held one thousand mana, as always, but connected to a [Contained Star] that thousand mana was just the limit on how much could be spent at once.

“Which I understand. I just hope this one doesn’t catch fire.”

*“Yeah, me too. I really want to avoid making these out of [Firmament].”* If I had to make all the Fortress defenses from bulk supermaterial, it was going to take a long time to get anywhere. It would have been easier to just make normal magical items, but those required a person to interact with it. I needed something I could operate by connecting it to my mana, which required some actual testing.

The framework was a tiny strand of Aurum with Iniri’s [Starlance] Skill set in a piece of [Steelwoven Skyron], with a stellar Primal Source in the middle shaped into a dome lens. The stellar Primal might not have been necessary; we weren’t entirely certain how well they interacted with Aurum-stored Skills. It did appeal to my sensibilities to have a lensing material, at least, even if Iniri’s skill didn’t use such things.

The first few tests had ended up either pulling too little mana and doing nothing, or too much and overloading the runes. In a lot of ways overloading a rune structure was very similar to putting too much current through a wire, but with stellar mana the side effects could be somewhat spectacular. Things like transmutation of surrounding materials and burning metal at solar temperatures. Fortunately, [Torc of the Stars] meant that Iniri was invulnerable to such minor explosions.

“There.” Iniri finished her engraving and stepped back. I connected the empty mana crystal to the nearby [Contained Star] with [Mana Mechanisms] and watched as mana swirled into the magical device. A coruscating beam shot out and punched through the stone, Stonesteel, and Adamant Stone targets I’d set up, boring a thin hole into the backstop of mountainside before I cut the link and the mana emptied out.

*“It works!”* At least, the first layer of it did. I could turn a weapon on and off by myself. The targeting was entirely on Ansaë, going into an insanely complicated ward structure for the Chiuxatli to establish on and in the Fortress. Still, it made me happy to have it done, and since Iniri was drawing on some of the Chiuxatli knowledge to do the runes *anyway* they were more than capable of replicating the feat.

“It’s kind of terrifying. That’s almost as powerful as I can make it, and it can just go by itself forever.” Iniri shook her head. “Being able to put a fourth-tier Skill directly into a magical item is absurd.”

*“You know, that Flame Knight guy who was after Shayma when she showed up the first time – second time? – had a cube with Shayma’s Seeker Skill in it. I should still have it, actually.”* I took a moment to try and sort through my inventory, or at least my treasury, since the actual inventory list included practically every discrete object in Tarnil and the Caldera. It made the list nearly useless.

I did find it again, eventually, but it seemed to have run out of mana while it had been sitting around. It simply called itself a [Perfected Skill Crystal]. I pulled it out and pushed up a pedestal to show it to Iniri, who picked it up and looked at it carefully.

"This came from the royal vault, I believe. Yes, there's actually the Tarnil crest inscribed on this face," she said, pointing. I hadn't noticed, in fact, but it was obvious once she pointed it out. "Even if everything worked out, it irks me to think they used something from *my* treasury to track her down."

*"Whatever happened to the mercs anyway? I didn't see them after that one battle."*

"Oh, there's a standing bounty on their heads, plus you wrecked their headquarters when you melted half of Meil." Iniri smiled in satisfaction. "I understand Ir has been levying some fairly heavy fines on their sister branches, as well."

*"Huh."* I had completely let that slip my mind, but of course Iniri was on top of it. I was glad I had made such things her business anyway, since obviously I wasn't any good at keeping track. *"We've come a long way."*

"Yes, and thank you for it." Iniri said, lifting her hand up to touch her belly briefly.

*"We're in this together. Also, I can put that crystal back in your treasury if you want me to. I don't have any use for it."* My Aurum was better, anyway.

"Thank you again," Iniri said, and put it back on the pedestal. I dropped it into the vault below the Palace, putting it in place beside the rest of the stuff that had been recovered after the invasion. "So, what's next for the Fortress project?"

*"I'm still working on the Firmament for it, but a [Contained Star] weapon. Something to give me more control over my [Starlance]."*

"That's going to be an expensive weapon." Iniri laughed suddenly. "Considering what it's going on, that only makes sense. There's probably no such thing as overdoing it."

*"Definitely not. Especially if I'm going to deal with whatever the mage-kings are containing with all their war cores. Better to have something like that and never need it than the reverse."* The power of [Starlance] was impressive, but in the end it was fairly limited. The point defenses would probably do a better job of carving up blightbeasts than a Starlance, for example. Though if the mage-kings needed dozens of cores or more to contain the Blight and the rift, I might need that many fortresses to destroy it.

It was irritating that I hadn't gotten a good look at the actual rift from any of the mage-king discussions, even the incidental ones. Ansa's information was incredibly out of date and apparently the sheer saturation of depletion and mana made the whole area impossible to scry. I did suggest spying on it from space but since that wasn't how scrying worked, it'd take a lot of effort to invent something that *did* work that way.

Assuming there was mana out there. Ansa claimed she hadn't been out past the atmosphere, despite having her own moon, and there was no guarantee that mana escaped the gravity well either. In fact, if there was much air mana out there it would mean an atmosphere, so the atmosphere's very limits implied the constraints on mana. That was one thing I would have to test for myself once I finished the

Fortress' gravity engines. With a [Contained Star] as power, it wouldn't matter if there wasn't ambient mana out there. Probably.

The gravity engines were actually one of the things that the Chiuxatli had redesigned from scratch. I hadn't expected it of them, since I figured they'd be mostly familiar with wind and storm, but after seeing the ring setup I had they'd immediately produced a staggered-wave variant that worked far better. It was inefficient compared to what a Skill or proper magic item could do, and at some point I might replace the engines with something like the point defenses, but since I was dealing with multiple billions of tons of fortress the sheer scale was too large for most artisans.

Still, I could move the Fortress already, albeit slowly. Or rather, it would accelerate slowly. I didn't want to mess with it too much until I had more gravity metal in, otherwise I just knew I'd end up accidentally smacking into a mountain or something. Not that such a thing would be an actual problem, but it would be embarrassing.

Once Iniri and I wrapped up the testing, she went back to her royal duties and I went to check in on Shayma, who was helping her parents with the pair of our Ell prisoners. Or rescues. Whatever their status, they were slowly starting to get more character back. Hirae and Girul apparently didn't feel cravings for the drugs they'd been hooked on before, thanks to Keri and the Scalemind, but were starting to crave *something*.

Honestly it made me think that void Affinity was just a bad thing to get. Cravings and addictions were always harmful, even when the target was less obviously terrible than magical drugs. Though overhearing Sienne's lectures to the new Ells, part of the reason they were so badly off was just because they'd been raised to think addiction was the only way to live with themselves. That was true just for physical issues, and with magical ones intent would just reinforce the problem. Sienne was obviously something special if she'd managed to go her whole life without becoming ruled by her hungers.

*"You know, if you're looking for adrenaline junky stuff, I bet the Chiuxatli have some fabric and some ideas for a wingsuit."*

"Wingsuit? I get the idea from the name, but..." Shayma trailed off, waiting for me to elaborate.

*"It's a completely nonmagical way to glide. Just some very tough fabric and a harness and a high place to jump from and you can go pretty far, and it's at least moderately safe."*

"Huh. I'll talk to the Chiuxatli about it." Shayma looked over at where her parents were discussing things with the other Ells. "Though I have my doubts about Girul. I feel sorry for the guy, but I don't know that he'll ever really aspire to something better than drugs."

*"There are people like that. All you can do is the best you can do. Unfortunately I don't have any amazing insights into giving them better habits, not compared to Sienne and Giorn."*

"Then what use is your Power knowledge?" Shayma said, grinning to show she didn't mean it. "I'm still a little amazed that I have any opportunity to do this, though most of the Ells are over on Einteril. Which I'm looking forward to seeing."

*"It's probably going to be a while. Unless we somehow get a lead on an Ell that's not anywhere near Port Anell. I wouldn't stop you from going after that one."*

"I might, at that." Shayma said. "I didn't expect I'd save two already."

*"We kind of need to worry about that meeting with Tor Kot first, though. Not exactly looking forward to it, but it's Iniri's show."*

"Ugh, she never met him. He was pretty creepy." Shayma scowled, ears flattening. "I don't really want to talk to him again either, but I suppose we have to." She was silent for a moment, communicating directly with Iniri, by my guess. "We have a week to prepare for it, but I kind of wish it was earlier. I'd have less time to worry over it."

*"Hey, you nearly knocked him flat last time he was here and you are a lot more powerful now. Besides, he's not bringing a core so he's going to be less powerful, meaning that you can squish him if he starts acting weird."*

"That's true!" Shayma said, looking more cheerful. "I bet I could take his mantises, too. Maybe I should even ask for a spar..."

*"I'm pretty sure it'd just be bullying at this point,"* I told her. Shayma was ridiculously powerful and, if I understood things correctly, monsters didn't really get stronger the way people did. Tor Kot's oddly-named mantises would be effectively the same as they had been when we'd last seen them. Even if they weren't, Shayma's progress was absurd and I doubted *they* had doubled or more their effective ability in the past few months.

"They deserve it," Shayma said belligerently.

*"I don't think I can argue that."* Tarnil had been occupied in force by the mantis monsters for years before I came along. Pretty much everyone had a grudge against them. *"Gotta make sure I have everyone's [Soul Prosthetics] done before we have the meeting. Maybe I can trade one to Wright, though I have no idea how expensive a fifth-tier one will be. Third tier is expensive enough."*

"It's worth discussing," Shayma said. "If anyone can afford it, Ir could."

*"We've never traded supermaterials, so I have no idea what it'd cost. Though it'd be nice to see if they have any exotic metals for me to play with. I can only imagine what the magical or supermaterial version of tungsten or iridium would be."*

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but if it's a new and exotic metal, that means I'll get to play with it." Shayma flexed her hands in anticipation. "I haven't had nearly enough time to play with all the extra techniques in the [Crafting Hall]."

*"I don't think anyone is going to object to you pitching in on the Fortress project. From what I've been seeing there is going to be a lot involved in that. Oh, speaking of which! We got the [Starlance] defense thing working. Iniri is really the key there, since it needs runes and her Skill, but I bet if you actually formed the metal parts it'd be better. Somehow. I'm still not very good at imagining magical stuff."*

"Says the person who made a shiny new Affinity." Shayma snorted. "Not to mention the sheer amount of mana you control. It's a little bit silly for you to say that."

*"That is fair enough,"* I had to admit. *"Still, the subtleties of magical crafting escape me. Not being able to put intent into magic, or feel it, makes it hard for me to figure out how that works."*

“Don’t worry your core about it,” Shayma said with a grin. “Taelah, Iniri and I can take care of it.”

“That’s the plan.” I told her. “Oh, speaking of things you can take care of — we need to change my ANATHEMA before the meeting. Otherwise I might end up doing something stupid when it comes to Tor Kot and his monsters. I don’t think we need the extra [Bane] potency for this. Unless you think we do?”

“No, you’re right. I doubt it would go down well to have a Field suddenly try to eat Tor Kot. Plus I’m thinking I might saturate the area in something like [Panopticon] anyway, just to eat any depletion he may have around him.” Shayma swished her tail thoughtfully. “Let me check on my version of your Status right now, so we don’t forget.”

She took a moment to inform her parents she was stepping out for a short time, and pulled on the teleport I’d set up, moving back to the beach house. It only took her a few moments to walk through to where my Companion core resided in her bedroom, taking up a big chunk of space and reaching from floor to ceiling. It grew slightly every level, and it was actually too tall to fit in the room, meaning I had to make space above and below.

“Let’s see,” Shayma said, putting her hands on the core. Her eyes flickered as she examined an interface only she could access, which still irked me. It was obvious dungeons were intended to be run by more intelligent individuals, but I would have liked my Power status to give me access to my own functions.

“Huh, you’re already forty percent to your next level.” Shayma told me. With the overextension penalty gone thanks to [Floorless], it was theoretically easier to level up. But it was also reliant on Companions and depletion, and so not entirely under my own control.

“At this rate, I’ll actually hit second tier in a few years! Assuming dungeons get tiers, anyway.”

“It’s just so weird I’m higher level than you,” Shayma remarked, hands resting lightly on the core surface. “So, your ANATHEMA right now is *Depletion Sources*, would Tor Kot even register on that? No, wait, he affected Annit just by being near her, not by a spell, I think. Right, what’s a good change for now?”

“House Anell,” I suggested. “It shouldn’t affect the Ells we’ve taken from them, but it might affect the ones still serving.”

“Ooh, I like that.” Shayma grinned. “I’m looking forward to showing up with an *Anell Bane* effect to threaten them with.”

“As if you weren’t scary enough already.”

“Obviously not, if they’re not quaking in terror already.” Shayma said, tapping the core. “Ansa taught me that much.”

“Maybe I should be paying more attention to what you two are discussing.”

“Oh, it’s just girl talk, nothing for you to worry about.” She stepped back from the core, and a sudden shock seemed to go through me. Nothing that hurt, but it was quite odd, like being reminded of something I’d forgotten. Suddenly several bright sparks flared up, along with the concentrated hate of ANATHEMA. It was controllable, but still functioned quite well to draw my attention to a remote manor homestead.

“Feel anything?”

*“Yes, and apparently we missed some Anells. There’s six of them hanging out at some safehouse or something, but they’re all really low level. Maybe servants that got left behind or something.”*

“Hm, take me there.”

I spun up a portal for her, setting it just outside the homestead grounds, and Shayma stepped through. She had the [Panopticon] Field out, using illusion to cloak herself and create a double off to one side, just in case. In truth I didn’t think anyone that was around could hurt her no matter how hard they tried; the highest level was 26 and that was a [Journeyman Stoneshaper], a crafter Class with rock-molding abilities. Hardly something Shayma had to worry about.

She stalked forward, projecting my Presence as she went. There were a few score people there, not just the Anells, but she ignored the low-level [Farmers] and [Carpenters] that she flattened on her way to the mansion. They weren’t actually harmed, but it was made very clear that I was unhappy with their choice of employment. It was possible they didn’t know there were Anells inside, but fox-kin weren’t *that* common in Tarnil.

Nobody was ready for her by the time she reached the front door, so she simply skipped past it with [Wake of the Phantasmal] and extended my Presence to blanket the whole house. She didn’t smash them to the floor but everyone did freeze in place. Shayma held them there for a few moments before speaking.

“I am Shayma Ell, Speaker for Blue. All of the Anells here *will* present themselves to me.” Her voice boomed through the manor, amplified by her illusions. I almost felt sorry for the Anells, seeing that two of them actually trembled and the lowest-level one, a female [Scribe], nearly fainted. But only almost, because they were still Anells. My ANATHEMA played a part in that, but I was letting Shayma handle it so any excessive antipathy on my part wouldn’t matter. She released the Presence and waited, hands clasped at the small of her back and looking imperious. At least her illusion did, since she was still displaced from where she looked to be standing.

*“Well, none of them are running, but I think you scared them good. One of them is just cowering and two are trying to work up the courage to do something, I’m not sure what.”* The manor was large enough that only a few of the targets were inside Shayma’s perception sphere, so I filled her in on what everyone else was doing. The non-Anell servants pretty much all went straight into the back rooms to hide, not that I blamed them.

What I wasn’t expecting was for an older gentleman to gather up two younger servants and physically drag the highest-level Anell out of his room. That was kind of amusing. Two others started making their way to the front on their own, but the ones that were most scared didn’t seem to be moving. I was probably going to have to teleport them over, since they clearly weren’t coming on their own. Then the [Scribe] suddenly bolted.

*“We’ve got a runner,”* I said, and yanked her back in front of Shayma, who simply floored her with Presence again, though she let up when the woman – who was probably younger than Shayma – burst into tears. Shayma simply pressed her lips into a thin line and waited, letting the girl blubber while the

others were herded or came themselves. The last two I teleported in from their ultimate hiding place under some beds.

“Now that you are all here,” Shayma said, nodding to the trio who’d dragged in the [Journeyman Stoneshaper], “you will tell me why you are in Tarnil.” Silence met her proclamation, but Shayma didn’t say anything further, simply waiting and letting the tension stretch out. She didn’t even need to use any Presence to apply pressure, just letting time do the work.

“We— Our—” One of the young women started spluttering. “Master Giran left the household in our care and hasn’t been back!”

“Giran Anell?” Shayma asked, and the woman answered with frantic nodding. “I know the crown hasn’t been told this place is owned by him. Whose name is being used?” At that, they mostly looked blank, and the older servant who had hauled the [Stoneshaper] over cleared his throat.

“I believe Master Itan Gen is the actual owner of the property, Speaker Shayma.” The man had enough presence of mind that I actually bothered to look at his name, and he was a Gen, too, Tassen Gen. Shayma beat me to the question I wanted to ask.

“Any relation to Yamal Gen?” Shayma inquired, lifting an eyebrow Tassen.

“Yes, though distantly,” Tassen replied. “I have only seen Master Itan once since I began work here.”

“Mmm,” Shayma said noncommittally. “Hopefully this is merely a paper issue. Did you know that Yamal is awake again?”

“I didn’t!” Tassen said, looking astonished. “That’s wonderful!” Shayma nodded to him and surveyed the Anells.

“Queen Iniri is sending the Queensguard to secure this estate,” she told them, taking shameless advantage of [Companion Concord]. “If you haven’t been working against us, I suspect you have nothing to fear. However, there will be some hard questions for everyone here.” At this she lifted her eyebrows at Tassen, who simply clasped his hands and bowed his head.

“*I can open a portal in the courtyard, I suppose?*” I asked Iniri. She took a moment to reply because she was issuing orders for the Queensguard to assemble in anticipation of taking the hidden Anell estate.

“Yes, perfect,” Iniri said, frowning out over the courtyard in question where her Classers were starting to form up. “I admit I had thought they were all gone. How did you find them?”

“*Shayma set my ANATHEMA to House Anell since I figured it wouldn’t be a good idea for me to lose my faculties while we’re trying to talk things out with Tor Kot. Turns out it’s easy to spot Anells when they actively irritate me.*”

“That is wonderful.” Iniri took in a deep breath and let it out. “I suppose that lays any concerns to rest about possible agents inside my own palace. You’re going to spoil me, Blue,” she added with a smile.

“*Yeah, it’s handy, but it is itchy to have them around.*”

“Oh, we’ll be sending them away soon enough. Usually I’d ship them to Ir, but if we’re going there ourselves soon, we may just take them then and let Wright hand them back. Assuming Wright cares to.”

*"Anell probably doesn't care either way. I can't imagine they're much valued if they were just left behind. I think they thought there weren't any Anells left in Tarnil."*

"There won't be, soon enough," Iniri said happily. "Though the connection with the Gen family worries me." Her smile faded. "I trust Yamal, but if the Anells have gotten hooks into his cousins or even his heirs—"

*"I don't think you need to worry about that."* I assured her. She was still sensitive about potential betrayals, and I didn't blame her. *"It really does look like they were just left behind, and Iten Gen probably just rented it out to whatever cover identity the Anell person was using. Or maybe there wasn't even a cover identity; all the issues have been fairly recent."*

"The hostilities are recent, but it's clear that Anell keeps its fingers in where it can. If they've compromised people's loyalties, we'd only be finding out about it now." Iniri sighed. "I know I have Cheya, but would you keep an eye out for me, Blue?"

*"Absolutely."* For a moment I daydreamed about just putting up Fields on all the borders and being done with it, but that just wasn't possible. Putting aside that, even for me, it would be a ridiculous mana drain, Tarnil wasn't the Caldera and couldn't just be closed off. Even the Caldera wasn't something I wanted to put a lethal field around, for the Chiuxatli if nothing else. The ANATHEMA irritant was clearly affecting me if I was considering it. *"Any time I spot any Anell activity, or even something weird, I'll let you know."*

"Thank you, Blue." Iniri shook her head, watching her Queensguard step through the portal. On the other side, Shayma handed the Anells over before heading back through the portal herself. It was getting to the point where I needed to think about having a dedicated teleport hub, though of course I'd need someone else to make the signs.

Though [Companion Concord] meant she didn't really need to meet Iniri to discuss things, Shayma still dropped by Iniri's office. Maybe she'd gotten the hint that Iniri was feeling unsettled, or maybe she was just looking for an excuse to say hello. Either way, they were both happy to discuss the future of the Anells in Tarnil. Or rather, the lack of it.

*"I'm not sure I believe it," Molen Anell said.*

*"You could say that about many of the occurrences in Orn over the past few years," Toreq said dryly. "But I trust our jade agents. Wright is indeed meeting with the mage-kings, and what's more, Tarnil is going to be there. Specifically, Blue is supposed to be represented."*

*"Are we going to finally get a look at who this Blue actually is?" Risu asked lazily, puffing at her kiseru. "I know the official word is that he's a dungeon, which is just bizarre. Wouldn't he just be some rogue mage-king?"*

*"If he was, I doubt he would have destroyed four mage-kings in battle." Toreq pointed out. "Unless he's far more capable than they are, I suppose. It's always possible. Either way, dangerous."*

*"Then we definitely need to keep his attention on something else." Molen said. "Do we have any agents with the mage-kings?"*

*"No," Toreq told him. "They barely even have diplomatic relations to begin with."*



*"We need to know about that meeting between them and Blue. As much as possible." Molen looked across to Risu. "Can we do that?"*

*"I believe so." Risu frowned thoughtfully, idly toying with the kiseru. "I'll have to examine the lists of agents again, but I believe so."*

*"We don't have much time," Toreq warned. "The meeting is scheduled for only a few days hence."*

*"Then the sooner we know," Molen remarked, "the sooner we can act."*