

Chapter 30: Year 1, Day 268 – Blue

I wasn't all that happy about the idea of granting Tor Kot any sort of clemency, but the reason I consulted with my council was because they often had different and better ideas, and Iniri was right. Getting extra cores was a lot more important than taking any sort of revenge, and besides, Tor Kot was smart. If we made him desperate he might actually be dangerous instead of compliant, or just hare off to somewhere I couldn't get at him.

"The question is whether he's going to take the offer."

"He will," Iniri said confidently. "If he's looking to leave already, then he's feeling a lot more pressure than we see. Such as official displeasure from their council. All we need to do is provide a way out and he'll ransom practically anything." She paused to consider that, then shook her head. "No, he'd ransom any wealth, but not people. Or in his case, monsters."

"After dealing with the Scalemind I can understand it a little better," Shayma said. "Though the mage-ing monsters don't seem nearly as independent as the Scalemind."

"The Scalemind are in a weird place, I think, if they actually did separate themselves from their core while still remaining monsters. I would guess, wildly, that normally that separation happens when they get their full status."

"I wonder if there are any recent émigrés from the Great Dungeons in other parts of the world," Iniri said thoughtfully. "Something less distant than thousands of years ago."

"With the Underneath, it would be difficult to tell," Ansaë pointed out. "New races don't appear just on the surface. In fact, less than half do. The Underneath is, in many ways, far larger."

"Anyway, how long do you think it'll take Tor Kot to accept?"

"Another few weeks at the very least, I'm sure," Iniri said, accepting my bid to get the conversation back on topic. "It's not the kind of thing you rush into."

"Bah," I said, though it wasn't like getting another core would solve any problems. I needed more than that, another few cores or another level, and under the circumstances the level seemed more possible. After destroying seven cores with the Sungun with my ongoing depletion purges in Nicehapoca, the cost of my level was pretty significantly reduced.

Of my Companions, Taelah was closest to a breakthrough. After creating [Unbreakable Promise] she was in her upper forties, and most of her Skills were at or near their maximum levels. I figured that her ascending a tier would be enough to boost my level as well, but that would involve a lot of effort on her part. Considering she was also a full-time mom, it wasn't something that was going to happen in a day, or even a week.

"So, Taelah, how are you feeling about tier three?"

"You say that so casually," Taelah replied, shaking her head. "Most people have to struggle to get to their third tier before they get to age thirty or forty."

"Yeah but you're not most people. You're my wife and Companion."

"Flatterer," Taelah said with a smile. "I do have an idea of where I need to go for third tier," she admitted. "Though it feels a bit grandiose."

"We have a queen, a hero, and a Power in the room. Grandiose is kind of what we do here."

"True." Taelah laughed. "Very well. I've been thinking I need to expand from just taking care of the Village to the entire Caldera. We have Leviathans, dragons, Scalemind, Chiuxatli, and of course the Village, and someone needs to keep things in hand." She glanced at Iniri. "Which may seem somewhat of a step for an herbalist and an alchemist, and it's not like I actually intend to *rule* anything. But someone needs to make sure everyone plays well together."

"And you can actually talk to me directly."

"Yes," Taelah agreed. "While I enjoy my alchemy and herbalist Skills, I do have Skills to link me to the whole of the Caldera."

"Plus you have mom Skills," Shayma put in.

"Plus I have mom Skills," Taelah agreed.

"So you're going to be taking over dealing with rude leviathans?" Shayma teased.

"Yes," Taelah said with a smile. "In fact, we should discuss that later. As Blue's primary agent I may have to ask you to intervene from time to time."

"It would be my pleasure," Shayma assured her. "So if you have your inspiration for third tier, it's just putting in the work to get there?"

"Says the women who reached fourth tier in less than two years," Taelah laughed softly. "I don't think it will be as simple for me as it was for you."

"Well, it may not be that bad. I can help you out with experience feedback, and there's an awful lot of potential in the Caldera still. Like, it'd be awesome if you could make a spatial Chrysthenium."

"True," Taelah admitted. "Plus I think it would be great if we could find more [Nebula Foxes]. The children love the one that Shayma found."

"I had noticed that. It only makes sense to have a fox mascot," I said, and Shayma groaned.

"It's not even the proper fox color!" Shayma complained.

"You're just mad that it's cuter than you," Ansaë rumbled in amusement.

"It is not!" Shayma protested.

"You'll always be my cutest fox," I told her.

"See, at least Blue appreciates me," Shayma said with a faux pout.

The meeting was mostly chatter from there, and a lot of stuff that in many ways didn't involve me. Even if the Caldera was mine and I had a lot of sway over Tarnil, the entire point was to let other people take care of such things. I was just one dungeon, and despite my scope I could only focus on one thing at a

time — if I knew what was good for me. Nor did I think I was actually any good at running other people's lives.

It had only been a week since Shayma had completed her [Quest] and scourged the mage-kings from Einteril, so the consequences still hadn't fully sunk in. There had been a variety of messages that Iniri had handled, not surprisingly mostly negative, but the shock of the invasion had actually paused the slow-motion struggle over the vacuum left by the Anells. Apparently diplomacy was being given a chance.

It seemed politically improbable to me, but Iniri had a theory that the aftereffects of Shayma's [Quest] were in play. Fate Skills were almost completely unknown, but potentially nudging a few people here and there to consider a new approach rather than taking the old one might be within the bounds of what it could do. After all, Shayma wanted her intervention to save Einteril, not make things worse.

"So, Ansaë, are Powers at all immune to Fate stuff like that? Considering how different we are in general."

"I don't believe so," Ansaë replied. After the meeting she'd gone back to the Fortress, and was mostly lazing about. "It's subtle to begin with, and Powers tend to have a disproportionate effect on the world. It would only make sense if Fate magic could influence us just a little bit. You might be somewhat of an exception, considering that I can't locate either your mind or soul, so I don't know *how* it would affect you. But it still might."

"Huh. I mean, I guess Shayma did find me at an opportune moment." I gave up trying to figure it out. Trying to second- or third-guess how world-spanning and subtle magic worked was a fast road to madness.

While Einteril was drawing together, Orrelin was apparently falling apart. My visit there, along with Shayma's flashy appearance in the court and subsequent terrorizing of their army, had somehow sparked a full scale civil war. It wasn't like Shayma hadn't threatened the court *that* much but apparently the absolute slaughter she'd enacted in full view of the army was enough to galvanize the military into demanding more for itself. Then the Inquisition had got involved and it snowballed from there.

I could actually see smoke rising into the air over the plateau some days, as their internal conflict ground onward. Iniri was keeping an eye on it, so to speak, since it *was* on one of our borders, but there wasn't much we could do. They weren't our people, it wasn't our fight, and even if we'd had the forces for meddling, anything we did would make it worse.

If anyone, Wright was the most likely to have the wherewithal and interest in stomping out the chaos, though of course that would involve expanding Ir. Which could be good and bad. Even I, politically inept as I was, could see the benefits of having Ir as a directly bordering nation, and the downsides of the same.

All that said, Iniri wasn't completely heartless. The geography made refugees rare but they did exist, either earth types ferrying people down or the rich or desperate bribing the lift guards. Iniri set up refugee camps near the border, though with the trend toward earth Skills, it was more like an

impromptu city. Interestingly, none of them seemed to get inhabitant bonuses, so they clearly didn't count as dwellers of Tarnil.

They also didn't *like* Tarnil. Despite squatting on Tarnil's land and accepting food from Tarnil's coffers, when I bothered to pay attention to them many of them had nothing but complaints. A few seemed genuinely glad to get out of Orrelin, but they were the minority. I knew I shouldn't judge them too harshly, since they'd grown up in an oppressive authoritarian state and had a skewed view of reality, but it was annoying.

A far more pleasant contact was the arrival of a Leyn caravan from the Underneath, climbing into my territory from below and the south. It was even led by a familiar face, or at least name, since I wouldn't take any bets on my ability to tell Leyn apart just yet. Nillaren Diamond-Star had almost one hundred Leyn in tow, guards and grunts both, as most of the Underneath near Tarnil was wild. The presence of Nivir's Great Dungeon made it a rather unappealing place to stay, though of course once they were within my influence it was just fine.

While I could have used teleports or a portal to send them straight to the Caldera, that felt a little wrong. If nothing else, they should get a feel for the area I'd taken and made safe, map the way through for others, and besides, there were people using that part of the Underneath. Not that the Scalemind took up more than the slightest fraction, and in fact still had their main encampment in the roots of the northern mountains of the Caldera, but I still considered it theirs.

"Hey, Shayma? Could you get One-Eye-Green? We have some Leyn visitors down in the Underneath and I figure she should be there with you to greet them. Or do you think the Scalemind should do it on their own?"

"For the first time, I suppose I should be there," Shayma said, setting Grant back in the stroller despite his protestations. "Though putting the Scalemind in charge of the escort would probably be good for them."

"You know, I don't even know what Iniri set up for trades with them." I did have a standing list of items, and a good chunk of my free time each day went into making sure that production happened, and moving around bits of material and storing them in my treasury. It felt a little bit dragon-like to hoard so much shiny stuff, but I kind of needed to. Besides, it wasn't like it did any good sitting around in the Caldera or inside my mana dynamos where nobody could get at it.

"Does Iniri know they're already here? Ina is probably in charge of that stuff," Shayma pointed out.

"Uh. Oops." I quickly brought Iniri into the loop, and just as quickly got straightened out. Fortunately, I was on the same page with her in thinking that the Scalemind needed to be involved, but I hadn't thought of other details. Like the fact that they'd need housing while they were visiting, and that the Chiuxatli might want to trade as much as the Village and Tarnil.

Long ago I'd thought about setting up guest housing, but the closest I'd gotten to that was what I'd put together for the summit. Which had been repurposed into my audience hall, something that I hadn't actually used all that much despite how dramatic it was. Though I got the feeling, partly through [Blue's Sagacity], that it was for the best. The audience hall was for petitions directly to me, not ordinary business.

I needed to make up something new, and put it somewhere off and away from the Village so it didn't overwhelm anyone, so I decided to use one of the large islands on my lake. Though that meant that people would have to get there by boat or portal or air instead of just overland, it also meant that it was nicely contained and corralled and had strict limits on growth. While the water wasn't exactly a barrier for people of certain Affinities and high levels, the Leviathans that dwelt in the lake depths would be, with the added benefit that the Leviathans could attend trade on the island too.

Ultimately, I'd want to put any permanent trade center in the Fortress rather than the Caldera, but the Fortress wasn't quite ready. The Chiuxatli were still working on designs for different races, each of which would get an appropriate section, and there were a lot of races. Honestly there were probably quite a few they didn't know about, but we'd deal with that issue when it came. Space was not something that I lacked.

I started digging generous tunnels in from where the island met the seafloor, making an entrance for the Leviathans at each of the cardinal points that fed into a vertical shaft rising up to the island surface. That widened into a one-by-two kilometer pool which I treated as one anchor for the trade crossroads. The other anchor was the actual island shore, where I grew a small marina with docks extending out into the water. I only had a single boat at the moment, but it was the thought that counted.

For the actual trade hub I put two lines of housing running between the docks and the pool, bracketing an enormous, polished marble plaza. While I could have simply gridded off the plaza, I didn't like the way that looked, and ended up inscribing several large circles to demarcate market areas, with smaller circles of various sizes for individual booths or tents or the like. The effect was actually a little bit like orreries spread out over the ground, which felt kind of right, sort of a push from [Blue's Sagacity] and my Stellar Core both at once.

Despite the fact that I'd made the docks, pragmatically I needed portals to bring people in. Not only was the Caldera *incredibly huge*, even for my flying inhabitants, there just wasn't any travel infrastructure. Eventually I wanted to change that, with something properly magitek, but it hadn't seemed particularly critical. It probably still wasn't, especially if the trade hub was temporary.

The four corners of the plaza got portals, at either side of each stretch of housing: Scalemind and the Underneath in general, Village, Chiuxatli primary town, and of course Tarnil. For the Chiuxatli and the Scalemind I could just set the portal in a convenient wall, but for the other two some negotiation was required.

"I think it'd best if the portal to the Caldera trade hub is only accessible from the Palace grounds. That will screen out the riffraff and keep you from having to execute people too stupid to realize they shouldn't mess with you or your people." Iniri shook her head, despairing of stupid people everywhere. "Besides, it's something I want to reserve for our most trusted traders and partners."

"*Makes sense.*" I didn't want to impinge upon any of the current Palace grounds, so I just raised a small island off to one side of the main bridge from Meil to the Palace and spun a second bridge from the Palace to it. That way any trade traffic wouldn't have to traipse over much of the Palace grounds, while still only being accessible from an area that Iniri had under strict control.

The Village was easier.

“Just put it off to the side on the path out of the Village center,” Taelah said. “Just be sure to fence it off so we don’t end up with someone’s pet wandering through.” She considered a moment. “Well, I’m sure some will anyway, but it’s worth a try.”

“Sure.” That took all of thirty seconds or so, just putting a path to a portal with a stone fence about it. I was sure there’d be kids poking their heads through the archway at some point, but I trusted Taelah and the other elders to keep people in line.

Actually, that was true for everyone. I wasn’t going to play security for the trade center or try and manage portal access myself. If people couldn’t play well together, Taelah, Iniri, and One-Eye-Green between them had more than enough firepower to resolve the issues.

Since I didn’t have to think too heavily about the designs of everything, it didn’t take me very long to put together, and by the time I was done Shayma and One-Eye-Green were down in the tunnels of the Underneath to meet with the Leyn caravan. It was such a warren down there I had no idea how Underneath races navigated in any sane manner. Probably magic.

With [Wake of the Phantasmal] Shayma could lead an entire escort of Scalemind down to where the Leyn were in minutes, though the return trip through normal means would still be a few hours. I was very tempted to just pop up a portal and be done with it, but then they’d expect that every time and I wanted things to run without my manual control. Besides, they needed to establish an actual trade route, so a few more hours of travel to a proper destination wouldn’t hurt.

“Lady Blue,” Nillaren said as Shayma and One-Eye-Green approached, following the Leyn outriders that had preceded them back to the caravan proper. “Ambassador Green. It is an honor to see you again.”

“Caravan Leader,” Shayma said somewhat formally, but One-Eye-Green just grinned widely and bent down to give Nillaren a hug, half-lifting the Leyn off the ground. Despite her evolution being Ambassador, One-Eye-Green was incredibly strong.

“Caravan Master Nillaren!” She said happily. “How is everyone?”

“They are still recovering, as it were,” Nillaren said, sounding a little bit winded. “Trying to recover their lost levels. It’s faster the second time around, but they’re still behind where they were.” He paused for a moment. “That’s not a complaint! It’s better than the alternative, but that’s why they’re not with me.”

“Nevertheless, I see you have quite the group here,” Shayma observed.

“Summit Keleeheem has been very generous in supplying us,” Nillaren said happily. “He is quite anxious to improve relations with his powerful neighbors to the north.”

“We are glad he thinks so highly of us,” One-Eye-Green said, her ambassador instincts kicking in. Though maybe the hug was good relations too; just being professionally polite wasn’t really the same.

“We can guide you the rest of the way. The actual trading area is on the Surface, but we Scalemind generally stay in the Underneath.”

“Thank you, Ambassador Green.”

"You're a little way into Blue's territory at this point," Shayma said. "I suspect you noticed the change in mana?"

"Dungeon mana," Nillaren confirmed. "But it feels a little odd."

"That's Blue's mana," Shayma agreed. "Within his demesne, you do not need to worry about blightbeasts or depletion. While you are here, you will be in no danger at all. As you can imagine, anyone who incites violence will incur Blue's displeasure, so nobody you're trading with should give you issues either."

"That is most welcome, Lady Blue."

"*Heh. Lady Blue.*" I hadn't really picked up on it the first time he'd used the term, but it did amuse me.

"Shush, you," Shayma said, aside so Nillaren wouldn't notice.

Seeing that One-Eye-Green had matters well in hand, and the Leyn were not about to attack any of the Scalemind despite their twitchiness from sensing monsters, Shayma headed back to the surface. The trade hub was rather sudden, so we had to actually inform the Chiuxatli and the Leviathans. They wouldn't just magically know, and even though I'd reshaped a big chunk of an island, in the grand scheme of things that was barely noticeable.

»A trade center?« Tlulipechua repeated, crest rippling colors. »I suppose I should be surprised there was not one sooner.«

»It was a bit of a last-minute addition,« Shayma admitted. »We have a Leyn caravan arriving, and at this point with all the different races in the Caldera, it seemed a good idea to make a place where everyone can meet.« Though, I wasn't sure how much the Chiuxatli needed to trade. They vastly outnumbered anyone else in the Caldera and even Tarnil, so any trading they did would be for curiosities.

Of course, most trading across countries was that, so maybe things wouldn't be too different.

»I shall see about putting together a small delegation,« Tlulipechua said, and I had to hope he meant *actually* small. With a few million people I could imagine just taking one person from every trading concern would still end up in the thousands.

By contrast, there were only the ten dragons. Eleven if Ansa counted, and I didn't think she did. If she wanted something she'd just take it, but considering her hoard there wasn't much that she wanted. Except for food, which I knew for a fact that she'd sneak some of whenever she swung by the Village. Though by now Taelah and Miss Burnhade always had something waiting if they wanted to talk to her.

"I'm not sure we have any real reason to go," Akanen said thoughtfully, glancing at Syrinu. Their lair was an odd-looking affair, pure white and black with light and shadow crossing without any apparent source, forming sharp-edged patterns where the two types of mana slid past each other. "To be honest, with Syrinu so far along we wouldn't want to move from our lair right now anyway. We'll tell everyone else, but don't hold your breath."

The Leviathans were the most straightforward. Shayma simply called up Uilei-nktik and told him about the island, and he blinked all his eyes at her and promised someone would come in the next few days. He didn't seem very excited about it, not like he had when it was my stuff they were trading for, but

then, I knew Leviathans had pretty strict rules regarding Surface contact. It was probably a bit of a logistical nightmare for him, but Shayma had told him that he didn't *have* to, so any work was of his own making.

By the time Shayma finished her rounds, everyone had gone back to their own things so she decided to finally get back to forging. She wasn't making anything like the Sungun, and her [Chimaeric Neutronium] meant that she didn't really need to make tools for herself as such, that had never been the reason she'd done it. It was mostly because she wanted to, and could. Besides, I had ideas for plenty of things that could go in the Fortress or even just in Shayma's beach house that I couldn't make directly.

For example, portable coolers and heaters. They had to be magic, of course, since there as no concept of electricity or battery technology, but apparently Orn had very little of the proper Affinity material. While places like Ir had refrigerators, they were relatively expensive simply because most glacial Affinity stuff was imported from Hoarast. Primarily through House Anell, it seemed, so it was even rarer these days.

Considering Shayma's various Skill and Artifact advantages, there really wasn't any size of forging that was actually difficult for her. She could handle things either through muscle force or just by increasing the pseudo-mass of her [Chimaeric Neutronium] armor. The main thing was getting the details right, building from the knowledge the Class Hall gave her.

"You know, I should think about what to make Taelah for her tier three breakthrough," Shayma said as she worked. "I know she already has an Artifact, but I'm sure I can think of something nice."

"That seems maybe a little premature? Though yes, that's a good idea. Is that something adventurers do?"

"Third tier is kind of a big deal," Shayma agreed. "Most people don't get to fourth, so third tier is really the elite of Classers. I'm going to need to think of something for Keri and Annit, too. Especially since we're hoping Annit transitions into storm Affinity."

"Well, you know best. I'm aware I can do some absurd things with crafting but as far as ordinary items go, you're way better at it." Shayma laughed at my understatement.

"Practically *all* you make is Artifacts. Besides, I think those two would be uncomfortable with any *more* Supermaterials."

"Yeah, true. They're kind of in hock already."

"Speaking of which..." Shayma stopped hammering on her piece of fire Affinity steel. "What about Keri's owed labor? I didn't realize it until recently but I'm pretty sure she's still feeling like she has to fulfill that, even though I'm still alive. Alive again." Shayma rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean. It's some sort of Power stuff weighing on her."

"Um, I mean. Yeah I didn't think about it but you're right. I don't know if I can change it now, it's not like it was something I really did rationally. But yes. You can go tell her that her debts are forgiven and see if that works?"

"Hmm, since I'm your Voice, it probably has to be me, too," Shayma mused. "I'll go ahead and do that."

She dropped the half-made heater on the anvil and pulled on her teleport to vanish out of the [Craft Hall]. It seemed rather important for something she'd brought up casually, but sometimes life worked like that. A sudden idea taking precedence.

Keri and Annit were actually in the Village, not up on the mountain, going shopping. I wasn't actually sure how they got paid, exactly, not that the Village tended to use money, but if either of them had issues on that score I was sure the point would have been raised before. Technically I was fabulously wealthy, and the abundance of raw materials in the Caldera meant that living expenses for my people were low, but those were all technicalities and actual economics was considerably more complicated. I was reminded once again why I didn't bother with it.

Shayma popped into the Village center after belatedly asking me where they were and made her way over to where the pair were inspecting that one kid's carvings. It seemed they were on the path to becoming genuine magical items, since there was some residual mana structure inside them from his work, but they weren't there yet. For the moment they were basically just really nice wood carvings.

"Keri! Annit!" Shayma called, bouncing up to them. Sometimes Shayma appeared somewhat floaty, as if the gravity were low, and I wasn't sure if that was due to her [Chimaeric Neutronium] affecting things or her spirit nature.

"Shayma!" Keri said, beaming at her as she held up a little carving. It was, naturally enough, a sculpture of Shayma herself. "Have you seen these?" Shayma looked at the carving, raised an eyebrow at the kid, who flushed, and then laughed.

"Not that one, I haven't." She shook her head. "Anyway, I actually came to see you because I talked to Blue about your favor. He says that you're released from your debts." She paused for a moment, looking at Keri. "Did that work? Does it still feel like it's weighing on you?"

"Sometimes I forget that you and Blue are still new to this stuff," Annit said, shaking her head. "It just surprises me when you don't know something."

"Well, nobody knows everything," Keri said philosophically, closing her eyes and meditating for a few moments. "Yes, I think I feel better? Not as weighed down? It's hard to tell, maybe it's just the relief from you telling me."

"I hope it's more official than that, but yes, we're both somewhat uncertain how this sort of thing works." Shayma shrugged. "I'd like you to keep helping my family where you can anyway, but you don't have to stay there all the time, certainly."

"Honestly it's been good for me," Keri admitted. "But I'll be glad to at least have the option to go do other things. Annie needs to push for tier three and she can't do that on her own."

"I'd love to help with that," Shayma said. "Since for once we don't have some ongoing crisis."

"You wouldn't leave any for us," Keri laughed. "Is there anything below fourth-tier that can even give you a challenge?"

"Hey now, killing things is just a chore," Shayma waved it away. "It doesn't do anything for me. But I *can* provide [Wake of the Phantasmal] and work on my shapeshifting while I help you two track down stuff to hunt."

"We would appreciate it," Annit said, stepping over Keri's protestations. "I'm certainly not going to turn down someone who could turn the entire Wildwood into paste."

"Oh, surely not the entire Wildwood," Shayma said demurely.

"You have the Sungun. I think paste is actually optimistic," Annit pointed out. Keri giggled.

"Don't burn down the Wildwood, please," she said.

"I think I can restrain myself," Shayma said dryly. "I've had enough burning things down to last me a while."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Keri sobered. "I didn't mean..."

"It's fine." Shayma shook her head. "Einteril turned out pretty well, actually, but it's still almost overwhelming to think about what I actually *did*. I'm still adjusting to being a [Hero], I think."

"I still wake up and find myself wondering how I got here some days," Annit admitted.

"Oh, that's easy," Keri said. "I dragged you along."

"Thanks," said Annit, voice flat but eyes smiling.