

Day 199 - Blue

I finally had gravity Affinity materials. There were metals, stone, and gemstones of the new Affinity and I was ready to see how they worked. Attraction, repulsion, blocking gravity or multiplying it, all that. Controlling gravity was the kind of magic that I thought I might actually properly understand. The force was fundamentally straightforward, if powerful. It seemed actually a little odd that it had its own Affinity, but it didn't really fit anywhere else and it probably was necessary to keep the gravity reasonable considering the size of the planet.

I wouldn't be able to do any of the fine magic that a Classer could, or even just a mage with something like Iniri's Skill that let her use other Affinities, but that was no problem. I didn't need more than the very coarsest of control. What I was really looking for was the ability to project some sort of gravity anchor or a reverse gravity field or anything where the gravity material pulled on itself. I didn't know if that would exist, but it was worth trying.

I set up a test field in a small pocket cavern because I didn't want to accidentally launch something into the sky on the off chance I reversed gravity or something. For similar reasons I put it off away from the Caldera, just in case there was a massive gravity increase that collapsed the ceiling. While I could contain the havoc a maximum-power Climate could wreak, an overpowered gravity effect might well just go straight through everything. Or it might not, depending on how magical gravity worked.

The metal didn't exhibit any particular properties on its own, but I had expected that. Without intent, Affinity had a limited amount of usefulness. However, I did have access to something that sort of substituted for intent, in an analog-dial sort of way, and that was mana iron. As an actually mana-reactive substance, my hope was that it'd give me at least a touch of control.

I couldn't push mana into it directly, but I *did* have a gravity Affinity mana crystal and [Mana Geometries]. Though even with that, it took a few tries. The mana iron and gravity metal alone didn't seem to do anything obvious, though I could see the magic surrounding the sample I had plugged into my Affinity crystal. The gravity quartz just conducted it, confining it better than I could have on my own.

It wasn't until I alloyed the mana iron and the [Steelwoven Potentia] that I got what I was looking for. *Projected* gravity. Or even vectored. The latter didn't make much sense physically but considering that gravity chrysteniums just made local gravity aligned to whatever it was growing on, I couldn't complain. The thin end of the plate wobbled upward, and some of the pebbles I'd strewn around to see effects flew upward toward the knot of gravity mana that was flowing outward from the edge.

"Yes!" I said, wide-broadcast enough that Ansaë tilted her head, pulling her attention away from the remedial class. Only Vientus and Murayal were still having issues with being able to see and interact with my mana flows, mostly the latter, so they were still directly under Ansaë's tutelage. Shayma yawned and cracked her eyes open.

"What is it, Blue?" She asked.

"*Just some experiments turned out well. Nothing to worry about.*" I didn't need to keep her up late, and hopefully by morning I'd have something more interesting to show than my experimental setup.

“Something interesting?” Ansaë asked, while I was still replying to Shayma. She was probably looking with her senses for what exactly had prompted my outburst.

“Kinda. I’m still working on it, but I think I’m going to have something really cool soon.” Hopefully, something to replace the wind engines that nobody had any idea how to operate, let alone hook up to me. Depending on how much power I could pump into it, and how much I could control it, there were all *kinds* of applications for directing gravity.

Since the edge of the [Spellwoven Mana Potential] was where the gravity manifested, I went with a series of fins formed into concentric rings, starting with ten of them at ten-meter spacing and feeding them through gravity-quartz channels slotted into the back of the fins. It was a completely mechanistic way to get at what I wanted, but that seemed to be what worked for me anyway.

When I connected it up to the Affinity Crystal, I had confirmation that it had worked by the metal breaking off from the finger-width of quartz anchoring the whole thing and hurling itself through the air. So it worked maybe *too* well, and I needed to make things a bit more robust and try again. Possibly tone down the rate of mana throughput, which I could probably do by adjusting the size of the quartz conduits.

I tried one more time, this time anchoring the fins properly in the floor with metal roots and reducing the mana flow simply by sizing the quartz conduits to hair fineness. I could see the gravity Affinity mana forming up, pulling on the loose gravel to form a sort of dome about half a meter in front of the fins. I didn’t have any instrumentation to tell me how potent the gravity field was, but it was more than good enough. Especially since this was something I could *scale*. It was clumsy, but it was a useable gravity drive.

I waited for a moment, but the overlay didn’t ping me with anything new. Possibly because it was already doing what I wanted to and didn’t actually need any help to bridge the gap. Or maybe gravity Affinity was just weird. There wasn’t any magic symmetry, so I didn’t necessarily expect it to play by any of the rules of the others.

By the time I’d finished all that Ansaë had sent off her pupils and was snoozing herself. It was late, but I needed the clock in the palace to tell me it was several hours past midnight. Unfortunately, my overlay didn’t come with hours and minutes. That was fine, though, as I still had some extra refinements I wanted to try.

Considering the acceleration I’d seen, I was pretty sure the gravity magic wasn’t generating an enormous pseudomass, since that would have jerked all of Tarnil – well, the entire *planet* – out of bed. To say nothing of tidal effects. On the other hand, the ambient gravity magic might balance that out. It was difficult to say, but considering that I had magic-blocking materials it was worth seeing if I could confine the effect more closely.

I took the most expedient approach and made a thin gold dome over the gravity array. I had other, more complex options, like that gold-doped glass I’d used for Ansaë’s shield, but the point was to see how well it worked. For the moment I could turn on and off the array by physically disconnecting the gravity quartz with [Customization], but I would definitely make an effort to try and make at least simple logic. Worst case, I could use heavily modified doors as physical switches.

It worked. The dome blocked the mana from expanding beyond it, so long as I kept the total amount low, and none of the test pebbles outside the dome moved. It was so perfect I went ahead and started as much gravity metal cooking as I could manage with my storage crystal allotment. If I was expecting to apply a reactionless drive to a multi-billion-ton stone fortress, I was going to need a lot more of it.

I set aside a reasonable amount of it for Iniri's item, too. If I could get a gravity impeller going with my terrible control of the stuff, certainly Iniri and Shayma and Taelah together could make it work as some kind of Skill. Even if they couldn't figure it out, I was sure Ansaе had some trick or another to help. If I'd gotten some skill from it, like [Gravity Control], or even a gravity control Field, I would have shoved it into some Argentum without a second thought, but alas.

Sometime around dawn I noticed some odd behavior offshore, or rather, off-shelf, since it was down past where I'd claimed, in the depths where the leviathans dwelt. Even though I didn't have the best visibility in the water I could catch glimpses of leviathan bioluminescence and the light of their coral architecture, enough to see that a small town or some equivalent thereof had started to be assembled down at the bottom of the ocean.

That wasn't too unexpected, and in fact Uilei-nktik had alluded to something of that nature before he left. They weren't actually going to be in Tarnil's territory, so it wasn't much of a worry for either me or Iniri. It made sense that they'd set up some form of trading outpost, now that Tarnil and I were willing and able to trade stuff to them. The weird thing was that there seemed to be a long line of leviathans swimming in, like a huge caravan or something.

"I don't think there's much we can do," Iniri said, since I told her the moment she woke. Well, not the *exact* moment, I at least waited until she got out of the shower. "Uilei-nktik did say he'd be back with a signal device, but until then it will be a bit difficult to talk to them. Besides, if they aren't on Tarnil's land I don't have any authority over them."

"I guess it's not like they're going to invade or anything." Aside from the fact that they didn't use the land at all, Uilei-nktik had seemed pretty respectful of both me and Ansaе. Not that he necessarily represented all the leviathans, but I was pretty sure he had a lot of sway. While I'd certainly be keeping an eye on them, I didn't think I had to worry about anything aggressive going on there.

While I was surveying things, I took a look at the Scalemind. I found it interesting that they had effectively a diurnal cycle despite being underground where there was no sun. Glimstones, which seemed to be naturally-occurring light Affinity crystals, dimmed and brightened a little bit but it wasn't much variance. Certainly not enough to account for their behavior.

Ever since I'd give them the talk about how people become civilized, they'd been diligent about their activity. There weren't people lazing around campfires after the hunt. It was probably partly my fault that they'd gotten into such bad habits in the first place — civilizations didn't rise where people didn't have to work to survive. Since I'd given them water, shelter, and resources, everything but food, there was no real incentive to try anything else.

Of course, I preferred the directed path more than the purely Darwinian pressures of a hostile environment. In a real dungeon, those Scalemind would be forced to adapt or die, but I just didn't have the heart to try and kill them off solely so they could learn. Even if I did, that was a multi-generational thing and I wanted to see results sooner than that.

Already, there were young Scalemind carving up chunks of Underneath wood. Not unusual, but the important part was they were trying to make tools the Scythe Sisters and Brothers of Burden could use rather than just skewers for roasting meat. One thing looked like some sort of sled for the Brothers of Burden, which wasn't much above the crude saddlebags from before, but it was at least an improvement. At the same time, some Scythe Sisters were being fitted with what looked like a cuff that went around the base of their scythes, right at the joint.

Even if it wasn't especially advanced technology, it still showed attempts at innovation and more importantly, division of labor and specialization. Given their telepathy, specialization might not be as important as it would be for other species, but someone still needed to do the work in the first place. It was encouraging to watch, but I'd have to wait to see if any Status stuff happened before I could call it successful.

I just wished I had mental Affinity chrystheniums. Without them, I didn't feel I was quite able to provide everything they'd need for the future. At some point they'd need to make magic items that interacted with their native biology and I just didn't have the resources for that. Considering that all tech was also partly magic, that was a serious lack.

That thought brought me back around to Iniri's magical item. I definitely had all the materials for that, including the absurdity of an actual [Contained Star] or two. The neutron star variation, of course, considering it was about the size of a grape instead of nearly as big as someone's head. The thought of trying to hang a normal [Contained Star] around someone's neck was pretty amusing, but only Ansaе was large enough to pull that off.

I brought out the entire remaining stock of [Firmament], as well as gravity and light Affinity metal. Iniri's [Sunmetal] was far better than my own stellar Affinity versions, and more attuned to her besides, so she was going to be supplying that. Then, of course, there were assorted sources, magical gems, and Aurum for capturing Iniri's [Guardian Constellation].

Ultimately, this was meant to be not just Iniri's item, but something for her entire lineage. An heirloom piece of regalia, which meant the actual sources would have to be socketed so they could be replaced in order to allow for it to be passed down. I was actually kind of proud of the solution of supplying primal gem sockets to sidestep the binding issues entirely.

My first thought had been some sort of crown, but since this was meant to be something she wore all the time, that was out. It had to be robust enough to handle everything going into it, so rings and bracelets wouldn't work either. Iniri came up with the idea of a torc, and since she and Shayma were responsible for most of the work anyway I was happy to oblige. The only Skills I had to add to the thing were [Customization], because it was pretty amazing as a Skill, and [Warding].

"Some of these runes..." Iniri studied the etched metal plate that Ansaе handed her. "These are more complex than any that I've studied or gotten through Skill insight before. You've got to be an absolute grandmaster."

"More than that," Ansaе said lazily, sprawling out in the [Crafting Hall] in full dragon form because I'd made it that large. I knew she'd want to watch at some point. "I made runic magic myself. Why do you think the connections between shape and intent are so rigid? You're mimicking *my* intent when you shape a rune."

“Oh, wow.” Shayma stared at Ansaë. “I guess it makes sense. Runes work for all kinds of magic. But to make an entirely new branch of rune magic...”

“It’s not quite as amazing as you might think,” Ansaë told her. “People pioneer new paths all the time, and the Akasha remembers them. For example, I believe your Trickster path is a new one, and anyone who does will be inheriting your work.”

“I guess I’m doing that on fast-forward with some of my transcriptions. Or creations. I suppose the [Mana Diamond Anvil] is now something that could be created by others. Or even the [Contained Star].” It would take a ridiculous amount of effort for anyone that wasn’t me to do it, but it was technically possible for others to do. As opposed to the Primal Sources, which were explicitly mine and mine alone.

“I *think* so. Dungeons and the Akasha are rather strange, so there’s no telling. But anything that’s become a Skill ought to influence what’s available to other people as they explore their Classes. I wouldn’t be surprised if some scaled down version of [Starlance] or [Wake of the Phantasmal] starts showing up in the future.”

“Kind of like Lineage Skills,” Iniri observed, shaping [Sunmetal] into the rune shapes Ansaë had provided. As a testament to their complexity, or at least their difficulty, it took her several tries before she was satisfied. Even I could tell they were containment runes, and they made a complete circle around where the [Contained Star] would go. It said a lot about the power of such a star that it took two types of containment to make it safe for humans to handle.

“So how does this work, exactly?” I asked, providing the two neutron stars for Iniri to start wrapping in runes.

“Excess stellar mana strengthens the containment, pushing back against the amount being generated until a balance is achieved,” Iniri explained, glancing at Ansaë occasionally to make sure she was getting it right. “I’ve used this kind of containment before, but not for anything of this magnitude. I might worry about it holding up, even with [Sunmetal], if we weren’t embedding it in [Firmament].”

“Don’t forget the stellar Affinity liquid,” Taelah put in. “It will act as a buffer for any sudden changes in the mana flux.”

“Clearly I missed some design discussion somewhere.” I didn’t actually mind, it just amused me that I’d somehow managed not to notice them collaborating. Or maybe they just used [Companion Concord]. Either way, they knew what they were doing.

The skeleton of the torc was [Firmament], of course, with a network of runes in [Sunmetal]. The liquid stellar Affinity mana was used to fill channels inside the metals, which together with the runes formed the foundation of mana flow in the item. I provided a [Portable Affinity Crystal] tuned to gravity, [Customized] and compressed to fit into the curve of the torc, which was used to filter the gravity component out of stellar for the gravity Affinity metals. The actual methodology they’d use was again beyond my comprehension, but the gravity metal was shaped to look like a pair of kirins, hiding the runes.

Iniri and Shayma together shaped [Sun Aurum], a crystal-created alloy of Aurum and Sunmetal, into runes for [Guardian Constellation]. It was just one intricate protection rune, with the glowing orbs of the Skill itself at each junction and terminator. The Skill inside the [Sun Aurum] would be constantly

reinforced by the mana flowing through, and the runic design would augment the Constellation's effectiveness.

Once again, I didn't have anything to do but sit and watch as everyone else went to work. I was really good at making raw materials, but the only special crafting method I was the Fabricator, and Shayma's ability to work metal and use [Customize] rendered that mostly unnecessary, especially for detail work like the torc. By empowering my Companions I'd effectively rendered myself obsolete, at least when it came to these things. I'd have to figure out some new creations so I could keep up.

After several hours of work the neutron stars went in the ends of the torc, shielded by [Sunmetal] latticework, energizing the runework and making the Sources glow in their sockets. I could really appreciate the shielding involved, since the enormous glow of stellar mana coming off the stars was contained to a more reasonable level. It didn't run the risk of poisoning low-level people anymore.

It was true that I didn't need to use *both* of the neutron stars to make it, but it seemed appropriate. I'd spent those two in the defense of Tarnil, and considering the weight of intent when it came to magic I didn't think any other use would quite fit them. It wasn't just sentiment, either. [Blue's Sagacity] suggested it pretty strongly, which meant it either conformed with fate mana or just general mana rules. Either way, I was fine with it, since I could always make more.

Shayma Ell gains Crafting Experience.

Received 3,200 experience from Companion Shayma Ell.

Received 1,125 experience from Companion Taelah Marn.

Gained 1 trait point for Companion involvement in creating an Artifact.

The overlay confirmed that the ridiculous thing counted as an Artifact, which meant I had a pretty damn good record for making them. Though I was absolutely abusing things like putting two Origin Relics into a single item and other such nonsense. I knew we still weren't experienced enough to make them from skill or Skill alone.

"So how'd it turn out?" I asked, and Shayma pulled up the status.

[Regalia of Tarnil: Torc of the Stars]

Indestructible.

This object cannot be lost or stolen while bonded to a Bearer.

May only be used by members of the Tarnil Lineage.

Channels socketed Sources: Light, Stellar. Currently bound to Iniri Tarnil.

Supplies Bearer with a large, constantly renewed reservoir of stellar mana.

Bearer can use [Customize] on summoned light constructs and [Sunmetal].

Bearer is permanently protected by [Guardian Constellation].

Bearer may use a powerful [Starlance] that takes some time to recharge.

Bearer gains Skill [Gravity Control] within a narrow range.

The stars themselves watch over Tarnil and those who rule it.

“What on earth does that last entry mean?” I wondered. It was kind of a rhetorical question, because there was no way that anyone could precisely know, but I had to ask it anyway.

“I suspect it’s either a touch of fate mana or something like [Queen’s Insight].” Iniri said. *“Just one of those things Artifacts can do that make them different from normal magical items.”*

“Well, it’s pretty awesome anyway.” I suspected the description was also underselling exactly how much stellar mana Iniri could draw from it. It was more or less perfect for Iniri, though, and it came with a lot of interesting ramifications. For example, whoever inherited it from Iniri would be able to shape her [Sunmetal] at will, which only she and I could do at the moment. I could well imagine there’d be a *lot* of [Sunmetal] around Tarnil by the time she was ready to pass it on.

“It is amazing. Thank you, Blue. Thank you, Shayma, Taelah, and Great Lady.” Iniri said, sliding the torc around her neck. It was perfectly sized, thanks to Shayma’s skills, and I had to wonder if Shayma would have to readjust it for Iniri’s heir or if magic would take care of it. So far everything I’d seen was custom-made, no automatic sizing without a Skill being used, so if one of Iniri’s descendants had a build more like Giorn there might be issues.

“You’re quite welcome! It turned out amazing!”

“It was nice to get back to runework,” Ansaë admitted. *“I haven’t had a challenge in a while. Your Fortress is next, and finding a way to contain your [Starlance] so it’s more efficient. Then there’s a shapeshifting weapon for Shayma. It should be fun.”*

“These projects have been great,” Taelah agreed. *“I enjoy my herb gardens and alchemy but working on something big like this is a treat.”*

“So let’s see you fly,” Shayma added with a grin. Iniri rolled her eyes but smiled.

“It’s going to take a bit to get used to the Skill, so no laughing,” she warned.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Shayma said innocently.

For flying practice, they went back out to the Caldera, specifically out to the beach house so Iniri could practice over the water. I was sure the torc would protect her from accidentally smacking into the ground or some stray tree, but a little caution was a good idea anyway. Especially since the first time she activated it, she went tumbling through the air and almost crashed into the water.

Shayma did her honest best to refrain from laughing, but Ansaë had no such compunctions and made her amusement known as Iniri adjusted to the [Gravity Control] flight. The Skill probably could be used for things besides flight, too, but considering how it flung her around it’d take more finesse. I was glad Iniri was fourth-tier because it probably would have been pretty uncomfortable getting jostled around like that at low levels.

“So what are you going to choose for your first [Quest]?” Taelah asked while they watched Iniri practice. I’d asked the question myself days ago, but Shayma hadn’t had an answer then.

"I've been thinking about that," Shayma admitted. "Now that we're actually safe we can start taking action. I want to be careful about involving Blue in things, but there's one thing where he's already involved. We need to punish House Anell, and one way to do that would be to free the Ell branch and take away their void users. I've never met them, but I must have aunts and uncles and cousins under their control..." Shayma's voice made it clear how she felt about that.

"I think that's a fantastic idea. I might not be satisfied with that as the only punishment but it's certainly a good bare minimum." I wasn't sure how to go about fixing things like how the void users were kept leashed by drugs or the like, but getting them out from under the heel of Anell was the first step. It wasn't like I didn't have anywhere to put them, either.

"That's my [Quest], then," Shayma said firmly. "Freeing the Ell branch from House Anell." I half-expected the proclamation to come with some kind of effect, but there were no sparkles or sounds, or even a notification from my overlay. Shayma herself just cocked her head to the side, ears flicking.

"I think that worked," she said, a trifle doubtfully. "I'm not getting any sudden urges to do anything in particular, though. It's really a strange Skill."

"Well, the first step no matter what is getting the Fortress finished, unless you want to head over there by yourself. Which I wouldn't suggest." Shayma was incredibly powerful, but I didn't like the idea of her staying in hostile territory overlong. Better to bring along a giant floating fortress both for her to stay in and to make the point that I was taking things seriously.

"No, I'm not planning on it. We need to figure out what to *do* with the Ells before we start making demands."

"Depending on how many there are, the Village can take them in," Taelah suggested. "I can't imagine there's hundreds of void users running around, but we could handle four or five families. Especially ones that could teach the more adventurous children about combat basics."

"I'll ask mom and dad," Shayma said thoughtfully. "Mom should know more about what to expect from the Ell branch, and dad's family is one of the few fox-kin families that isn't associated with either Ell or Anell. So, he might have a more objective perspective."

"In the meantime I'll just keep making more stuff for it. I'm really hoping this gravity stuff works for the fortress because those air engines are just completely impossible for me to deal with."

"The mage-kings must have some talented artificers to be making those things," Shayma agreed, then laughed. "But they aren't Artifacts!" She said, touching [Promise]. Taelah's hand went to [Vow] and she smiled as well.

"I know I'm not anywhere near master rank in alchemy," Taelah said modestly. "But it is still amazing what I've been able to do with husband's aid."

"Don't sell yourself short," I told her. *"Extracting gravity Affinity and giving me a new chrysthenium was absolute genius. I'm sure given time you might figure out mind, or even space and time chrystheniums."* Taelah did blush briefly when I complimented her but bowed her head in agreement.

"I think I'll have enough in the Caldera to keep me occupied for the rest of my life, especially with interesting projects like that," Taelah said. "I've only just begun to explore what can be done with

Affinity liquid, for example.” She lowered her voice, leaning in toward Shayma with a glance at Ansaë.
“Miss Burnhade has started cooking with it, though. Brave woman.”

“Is that safe?” Shayma asked.

“Maybe not for you, but dragons will eat it,” Ansaë rumbled. “Extra mana just makes it more flavorful.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Taelah said, shaking her head. “Ever since Piping Hot Pies came by, she’s been branching out into more recipes.”

“Well, I sure appreciate it,” Shayma confessed, watching Iniri wobble back toward the shore. She hadn’t quite managed to avoid dunking herself, and gotten completely soaked from spray kicked up from clipping the lake surface, but the actual impacts hadn’t hurt her, and the one time she’d been immersed entirely there had been a pretty obvious shield. That more or less answered the question of how well the torc would protect her while flying.

“That was fun!” Iniri said, smiling more than almost any time she had seen her, barring certain intimate moments. “A little weird at first to get used to, but being able to actually fly around is amazing!” She dropped the last meter or so to the ground, landing with the grace of a fourth-tier Classer.

“Yes, it is,” Ansaë agreed with perfect aplomb. Iniri blinked at Ansaë, then nodded to her respectfully.

“It never really was my dream, to make it part of my Class, but now that I have it I wish I had been able to fly earlier.” She stretched and tugged at her dress. “Unfortunately, I’ve got salt dried all over me, now. Is there a shower I could use?”

“Of course,” Shayma said, showing Iniri into the beach house.

“I feel a little bad for Iniri,” Taelah said once they were both inside. “She’s not much older than me but has so much to worry about.”

“From what I’ve heard she inherited a hell of a mess even before the mage-kings attacked. It’s going to be a while until everything is fixed even with my help.”

“Kingdoms rise and fall all the time,” Ansaë volunteered. “Iniri is exceedingly lucky to be presiding over the former rather than the latter.”

“Certainly,” Taelah agreed. “I think we are all thankful for my husband.”