

Chapter 34A: Year 2 Day 15 – Blue

Of everyone, Iniri was the most busy. She had her hands full with, bluntly, subjugating Orrelin. I'd burrowed upward and [Assimilated] the central palace and the surrounding cells, and was working my way outward. It was a little weird to be pushing [Assimilation] in two places, Orrelin and Chiuxatlan, but with my new dynamos the only real limiting factor was my attention and patience. I was tempted to try and offload them like I had the faux sky even with the fact that it made me stupid, but there didn't seem to be any real value in rushing.

"I hope you're prepared to do this all over again for the Archipelago. I don't know how many people they have but it's a lot, and they're going to be in really bad shape after all the mage-kings and their dungeons are dead."

"I know, I know." Iniri sat back in her chair, tail flicking back and forth as she rocked Mirin. "Part of me thinks I ought to be ecstatic about expanding Tarnil this way, but mostly I'm annoyed that I have to. At least Orrelin is right next door and can function like a vassal kingdom. But the Archipelago? It's across the ocean and it's *huge*."

"Well, distance doesn't matter since I will have to take over at least some of it if not all of it, and so far as I'm aware most of it is taken up by the rift anyway," I pointed out. She was right that it was a lot of work, but hopefully not as much work as an area that large would normally be.

"I don't have enough people," Iniri said mournfully. "Orrelin has three times ours, and who knows with the Archipelago."

"Yeah, but you get all my habitation bonuses and they don't." I'd checked. Orrelin wasn't Tarnil, didn't count as part of Tarnil, and it's people weren't my inhabitants. *"So one of you is worth five of them."*

"Maybe," Iniri allowed. "But the problem is the lack of people I can trust and delegate to. Having you seize terrain means we have an insurmountable advantage. Just *being* there means that people won't attack." I wondered how they'd really know, but then I remembered that one of my upgrades was that people who plotted against me would feel a sense of foreboding. It probably didn't mean much for high-level political agents, but for ordinary citizens it would be difficult to deal with.

That was probably the reason I'd only seen a tiny sprinkling of terrorists.

"But that isn't the same as having capable administrators. I'm not so much worried about armed forces because you can concentrate all our force in an instant. I don't need to station soldiers everywhere, thank the gods, but there are softer sorts of depredations that someone will have to watch out for." Iniri pressed her lips together. "I'm not sure how much I can lean on you for help, either," she admitted.

"I know you don't generally like to involve me in political stuff, but we are a couple, even if we're not married." Iniri colored slightly and ducked her head at the reminder, which was rather cute. *"I'm always happy to do you a personal favor. Anyway, I'm the one who's responsible for going after the mage-kings, so all the consequences ultimately belong to me. Is there something that I can actually do for you, though?"*

"In that case, yes," Iniri said. "We could really use more money and trade goods. I could hire people from Ir or Nivir or Haerlish, or even further afield, and bribe anyone I needed. It's not perfect, and I'd still rather use my own people, but it's better than being stretched so thin that *everything* falls apart."

"Sure, that won't be a problem. I basically can generate infinite money at this point I guess." So far the trade of my Primal Sources and exotic Affinity materials had been fairly conservative, and quite a lot of the profit had gone directly into rebuilding Tarnil or adding to the Fortress.

"Do you know when you'll be taking them on, actually? I know you've been preparing for it, but I haven't heard a timetable."

"I need another level and a few more cores. Then I can Purify Ansaë, and that should give us everything we need."

"It should indeed." Iniri shook her head. "I wonder if we'll have to worry about controlling the Archipelago at all if she's involved. There might not be anything left."

"I guess it's possible." I knew Ansaë was a big, big fan of the scorched earth approach, but I'd have to ask her to go easy on Tor Kot's prior citizens, at the very least. Of course, if everything was run by cities with red cores I could just go around taking those over. The main point was to convert or destroy every last red core out there. That was where the power and legacy of the mage-kings lay, not in people. Most of them were just victims.

That said, I could hardly restrain Ansaë and I wasn't sure I should. She'd been around a very long time and was regarded with as much awe as fear, so she was clearly doing something right. Not that it really mattered until I actually reached the mana cap I needed to restore her to her former self.

"If I have your permission to start selling off more Sources and Affinity materials, then I'll start putting together something for the Archipelago takeover. *Please* tell me I have enough time to get people properly screened and trained. After what happened with the trade plaza there is no way I would trust anyone that hasn't been thoroughly vetted by Cheya."

"You have my permission. Feel free to look through my treasury at your leisure." I was past the days when I just had samples of everything I could make. After some itemization and prompting and prodding, I actually had a big cavern where I put stuff, emptying it out of my storage every once in a while. Or in the case of Sources, casting about until I found them and putting them on racks. From there we moved onto less tedious topics of conversation, but eventually I had to get back to work.

It was really unfortunate how much my days and nights were filled with fairly tedious labor. I'd go [Assimilate] hectares upon hectares of Chiuxatlan and Orrelin, make sure that my various material processes were processing, and before I knew it the entire night had passed and my Companions were up and it was time to tend things around the Caldera and Tarnil. It would have been great to automate things, but barely anything I had worked of its own accord. It was no wonder normal dungeons took forever.

Not that I was the only one working. Along with Iniri putting in overtime on meetings and paperwork and just plain old pondering, Shayma was helping Keri and Annit with their leveling push and Taelah, of course, was doing her best to make it to the third tier. It was sort of amusing that people were

consciously working for progression during a time when everything was quiet, but with that quiet came a feeling of pressure, of something impending.

I knew Tor Kot thought that the mage-kings would hold out for years yet, but I was pretty sure they didn't themselves realize the full extent of what they'd done by letting out the blightbeasts. It was probably only a matter of time before something else happened and the blighted regions began to grow out of control. I already knew there were big chunks of the Underneath below the mage-king lands that had to be like Chiuxatlan, where the blightbeasts had settled in and were reproducing. I was stockpiling material for [Contained Stars] in anticipation of needing to scour the entire area.

As a distraction from boring stuff, it was sort of amusing to watch Shayma mess with the Underneath or Wildwood beasts that Annit and Keri were hunting, since even big bulky bear-like things couldn't budge Shayma if she didn't want to. It was nothing as crude as holding down things for them to kill, since that wouldn't get them experience either, but cutting down time by setting Annit on a trail immediately after she'd found and dispatched her prior prey.

I didn't have the ability to judge how Annit was getting experience, but extrapolating from Shayma, Taelah, and Iniri, the fact that Annit was a *hunter* mattered a lot. Just killing things was not really how her Class advanced; it was finding, tracking, and then dismantling them. To the point where I was pretty sure that experience was more descriptive than proscriptive, at least the non-dungeon stuff.

With my ability to actually look into souls and understand them a little bit, I was pretty sure I had a good handle on what soul structure actually was for and how it advanced. Mana was a bit of reality that changed based on intent, unlike physics where everything was the same no matter what, and the soul and the Class was a safe way to go about it. Mana needed a lot of focus for people to manipulate it, so of course soul structures were based on continual refinement.

Cuts-Like-Cold and Ansaе had shown that it was possible to do things entirely outside the soul and Status structure, and those things could be exceedingly powerful, but doing so was proportionately difficult. I could see Shayma maybe figuring out new magic herself eventually, but with the way the Akasha worked that kind of thing didn't stay unstructured for very long. Possibly many of the Skills she was working on were, themselves, new ground she was treading through, bit by bit. But Annit was definitely not that type, and she was sticking to more prosaic martial paths, so she just had to work hard.

She was nearing the tipping point to the third tier, while Keri was just a few levels shy. The year that she'd spent with the Ells had done more for her Class than any sort of combat had. As terrible as war and tragedy were they definitely had given Keri more to work with than just hanging out at Wildwood. I could vaguely recall that they had initially been thinking of forming an adventurer duo like Shayma's parents, but in practical terms I couldn't see it working.

The boost my Primal had given Keri, along with the more practical scientific knowledge inherited from me, meant that she was pretty good at creating imbalances in her foes, but since she had to override their own mana it took time. Besides which, it wasn't exactly in line with her passion, which was true healing. It was pretty obvious that she wasn't really excited about hunting, whereas Annit still got fairly intense.

I was pretty sure that people already knew that it was Class-related actions that generated the most experience, though I did want to check with more experienced Classers. The principle seemed simple on the surface, but probably really wasn't. It was obvious what a simple [Healer] Class needed to do, but less obvious what a fourth-tier [Mother of Gentle Rains] drew the most experience from. It probably wasn't enough simply to heal, it was to heal in certain ways and certain places and with certain attitudes.

Similarly, Shayma's [Trickster Hero] meant she couldn't *just* Trickster stuff, she had to be a Hero, too. So stealing away the city to save it from the mage-kings was worth a lot of experience, but bamboozling dumb animals did nothing for her. Her class was absolutely a powerful one, but it was also one that was going to become extremely difficult to level, even with the benefits she got from being my Companion and having access to Artifact equipment.

Taelah, similarly, had kind of a weird Class. Druid was already a bit vague, but [Phantasmal Druid] was even more so. Though it seemed she got the most benefit from creating new chrystheniums and stuff like making that mana-flavoring plant for the Chiuxatli. Just plain herbalism and alchemy did very little, she had to go exotic. Which was a bit of a problem because Taelah didn't generally do that kind of work.

For the most part, especially since the children had been born, she was more interested in the day-to-day than the exotic. There wasn't much call for the more extreme types of herbs in the Village or even trading, so she mostly focused on the medicinal and culinary. The search for better spices was an eternal one, but it wasn't as much part of the *Phantasmal* aspect of her Class.

Which was why I was thinking and hoping that filling in one of my missing Affinities would put her over the top. With Iniri and Shayma both at fourth tier, neither of them were near a breakthrough, and while their normal activities probably provided me with some advancement, it wasn't much. According to Shayma I was hovering around seventy percent of the way to level fifteen and that number hadn't budged.

The two cores from Tor Kot and Yit Niv would reduce that further, but there was no guarantee it would push me over to a new level. In fact, I was rather sure it wouldn't, considering how many reductions I'd already gotten thanks to all the core elimination from retaking Einteril. For some reason I'd never actually remembered to ask Tor Kot how exactly it worked. Probably because I was never calm enough to think clearly whenever we talked.

I was rather dwelling on that last thirty percent, though I tried not to bug Taelah about it too often, since she couldn't just head-down grind away at putting together a mind Affinity Chrysthenium. She had Grant and Eva to look after and her own duties as Elder, so she wasn't like a full time adventurer. Nevertheless, I couldn't resist checking in sometimes.

"Got any leads yet?"

"Maybe?" Taelah was very patient, picking her way through the fiery center of the desert, [Vow] and her own Skills keeping the dancing fire tornadoes at bay as she inspected the stuff that grew there. I didn't think she'd find mind Affinity anything there, but I didn't know exactly where she *would* find any in the Caldera. I didn't have mind Affinity natively, so I wasn't sure that I'd get anything in my Climates that used it.

“One of Iniri’s requests got a reply back, and One-Eye-Green says that Dreams-Ahead remembers a mind Affinity plant from the underneath, but neither of those are actual samples. I’m not sure when Iniri’s contact will be able to provide a living sample of the plant in question, and finding anything specific in the Underneath is, well. It’s a chore.”

“Yeah.” Finding a particular plant on the surface was difficult, finding one in the Underneath was near-impossible. It had all kinds of biomes and little specialized caves and finding one thing that someone had seen years ago and miles away was not exactly easy. It might not even exist anywhere else.

“I guess I kinda feel bad about putting it all on you,” I said, and Taelah shook her head with a smile.

“The truth is I needed the kick. While I don’t really feel I need more power as such, I really need the next tier to make sure that people will listen to me in the future, as the Caldera grows. I don’t think I need to be fourth-tier, but at third tier it’s clear I’m actually serious.”

“Oh so you’re really getting into the whole Caldera leadership thing?” I knew she had mentioned it, and Shayma had bantered with her about it, but I wasn’t sure about how much she was committed to the idea. It was true that someone needed to oversee the accidental pseudo-nation I’d gotten in the Caldera, and it wasn’t going to be me and probably not Shayma. She was a [Hero], not a ruler.

“Yes,” Taelah confirmed. “Our kids are going to grow up here, and if I don’t make sure it’s a good place for them, who will? No offense, husband, but you are just not meant for a leadership role.”

“No arguments here. Besides, even if I could argue with people it’d probably undermine my Power mystique to do so. Is there anything you need from me for that? Aside from officially endorsing you which, you know, you always had that.”

“And I appreciate it.” Taelah squatted down to poke at a charcoal-colored fern. “I’ll think on it. Things are still coming together so it’s not like I have any official role. I’m not sure I even *want* one, I don’t want to have an official government like that. Just keep things like they are with the Village, where they just need someone to come around and knock heads together once in a while.”

“Yeah I know what you mean. Definitely would make no sense for a human to be in charge of leviathans or whatever. If anyone could herd that pile of cats, it would be you. I have faith!” Taelah laughed, either at my words or my tone, and shook her head.

“It shouldn’t be that bad. Most people are well aware of the boundaries you’ve established and nobody wants to provoke you.”

“As well they shouldn’t.”