

## Day 196 – Blue

I was pretty excited to finally start work on the new magic items for my Companions. Maybe they'd even be Artifacts, when all was said and done. I had a pretty good track record on that score, though I had a feeling that was more due to my putting ridiculous things into their construction than any skill on my part. Either way, I'd gotten my stocks of supermaterials and normal materials up, so we had plenty of stuff to work with.

Amusingly, I couldn't work on Iniri's right away because she had to oversee the fall festival holiday for Tarnil, the one which the Village had celebrated during the summit. It really would have been a pathetic celebration if it weren't for the extra trade in food and the magical crop boosting, and even as it was some people seemed a little daunted. At least it was a better Harvest than the past few years. In truth, the delay was just fine since it would take some time to get gravity materials finished anyway.

Instead we started with Taelah's. I still didn't have anything close to a supermaterial cloth, and while the Climates were producing stuff with a touch of Affinity, it didn't really compare to the things I could make with my willful abuse of the dungeon system. Which really drove home what Ansaе was saying about how dragons could improve the way mana worked. I wasn't lacking in mana, so why did I not have wood and fiber and fruit as mana-dense as my [Adamant Stone] or the like?

Regardless, the intent was for actual magic to make up that gap. I had seen how Annit's magic items boosted her, and with a little bit of work from Shayma and maybe even from Ansaе, we were sure we could get a bracelet to apply protections to Taelah. My job was to create the basic structure, Taelah would use her alchemy to infuse and adjust things, Shayma would forge in magic, and Iniri would apply runes. Ansaе would supply commentary.

She already had a bunch of stellar-oriented runic script etched out on a metal plate for everyone to reference, which meant it probably was going into the Akasha soon if it hadn't already. I would have thought that being effectively immortal she would have mastered crafting, but after listening to her speak I realized the issue was one of preference rather than competence. She was a mathematician, not an engineer. It was obvious that she preferred to play with pure magic, rather than items — though that didn't stop her from gladly accepting the gravity Source I offered when the chrystheniums finally fruited.

Since Taelah had nature, earth, light, and water Affinities, I started out with an ingot of each of those Affinity metals and used my [Infusion Crystal] to alloy them with their appropriate Sources. Taelah bound those to herself before Shayma made wire from them, which went back to Taelah to work alchemical magic on. Between the various flavors of anecrux, the Affinity pool liquid, tesseracted catalyst, and all the normal and supermaterials I could provide, she had a lot of choice.

I didn't completely follow what she was doing, but it was something to do with mimicking the normal interplay of the Affinities, how earth, water, and light fed the growth of nature. That was primarily for her herbalism and Druidry Skills, but there was also alchemy to consider. I was actually going to be providing some of that with infusing dungeon Skills into Argentum. [Customization] and [Temperature Finesse] were both invaluable options, especially after seeing Shayma use them.

The whole production was significantly more complex than it had been for [Promise], which made me wonder about how I'd gotten that to be an Artifact in the first place. Maybe because of the base

material, but maybe simply by virtue of being the first thing I'd really made for someone. Or maybe just because it represented a promise from a Power. That seemed to be about right for how Artifacts were all strange and unique things.

Even though I had a lot of trouble trying to get my [Purification] options working on Argentum, instilling my normal Skills into the silver wires was pretty easy. It was even easier than putting my Field into [The Ell Family Tree], which hadn't really been hard, just tedious. All I needed to do was focus trying to use the Skill on the wire without really doing much to it and after a little bit the Argentum shifted slightly.

The last bit, from my end, at least, was providing little beads of material to lend their properties to the bracelet. Not so much the metals, because those were easy enough, but [Incipex Thaumaglass] for its frictionless quality and [Adamant Stone] for temperature immunity. They wouldn't act as a permanent boost, not the way the benefits bound into the bulk of the bracelet would, but according to Ansa there were techniques to use them temporarily. Obviously, that took more mana, but mana was not something I was lacking. Just to be certain, though, I packed a linked core gem with core anecrux to give the bracelet a huge mana reservoir.

From there on I was out of it, so far as the crafting went. I had no idea whether that would be enough to make it an actual Artifact but it surely was going to do what I wanted it to do, which was protect and help Taelah while she was dealing with hazardous plants or concoctions. I wasn't worried about her accidentally poisoning herself so much, especially not with Keri around, but Taelah didn't have superhuman constitution. Unless I specifically adjusted things for her, she couldn't even travel into some of my more extreme Climates.

While Iniri's item needed to wait on gravity materials, and Taelah's item needed to wait on Iniri, I could at least get some work done on my fortress. While I'd made no real progress on figuring out the air engines, as they were off-limits to me the same way most every other magical item was, I could at least run the plumbing, so to speak. I knew I wanted to have stellar mana powering the thing, and I'd already seen the way mana lines had been run, so I could copy that. I could probably just manipulate the mana flows into the proper direction, but I didn't want to rely on that, so I spent a lot of time making sunquartz and installing it.

Ultimately I would want a lot of Iniri's help for the Fortress, because I really liked the idea of putting a sunmetal-rune Guardian Constellation on each face. Even without that protection it would be amazingly durable, since I was going to use [Adamant Stone] for the faces and my magic was strengthening the floatstone that filled the interior, but if it was going to represent me I wanted it to be invulnerable.

To some extent I didn't need to worry about furnishing the interior. Since the dungeon seed kept it connected to me, I could just link portals to my Caldera. Which actually would be kind of hilarious, to have someone walk into this giant floating fortress and come out under sky. That said, I still wanted a little bit of a control room and living space so it felt a little less like an oversized remote drone.

Part of me was really tempted to make a chunk of interior space and Expand it so I had a huge open area that I could cart around, but there wasn't any point. I had more than enough room available in the Caldera, and when I installed a [Contained Star] there'd be more than enough mana without dynamos. While I could Expand space inside it, I was leery of doing so without good reason. It wasn't like I couldn't add things in later on.

While I was on the materials and infrastructure kick, I gave a lot of thought to the item I was making for Annit. Despite the various approaches I'd tried to take to shoving the breeding station's [Purification] into an item, it wasn't working. Part of me wasn't surprised, because it wasn't anywhere near a direct skill and, given that it gave me the cost at the time, it probably needed feedback to begin with.

I stopped trying to mash the two systems together and tried looking at it a different way. That had worked with the Scalemind, or at least I hoped it would. If I wanted to Purify someone outside the bounds of the breeding station it was obvious that some things needed to happen. Gaining soul access was one, but for Annit I'd have to leave that process to Keri, as it were. The access really only happened at a moment of complete vulnerability or something similar, which was not the relationship I had with her.

On the other hand, the soul mana swapping and the fact that stellar Classes were immune to depletion meant that my authority and role as a dungeon were involved. It was my mana, specifically, that made them Purified, and was probably why it was possible to link them as a Companion at all. Stellar was mine, because it was the Affinity I governed, but it wasn't personal. My property, but not me.

I wasn't sure if I could get the [Purification] soul rebuild to happen just from doing a mana replacement, or if it would simply immunize her against further damage. With that immunization in place, the soul might fix itself on tier-up, as I'd seen a lot of movement in Shayma's soul during the process. With a solid foundation and my mana, it might trigger a rebuild of some sort.

I wasn't done with the model, since it was insanely complex even at Annit's level, but when I was, I'd have to figure how to make it do what I wanted. I would have to bring her under my authority, and she didn't seem the type for stellar, but there had to be other ways. There was always the idea of a Bargain but I really did not like that concept, partly because I couldn't control it and partly because I really wanted to figure out how to do this under my own auspices. A Bargain wasn't repeatable, but a mechanism or item, no matter how involved, might be.

However it worked out, I still had to finish the model of her soul structure. No matter how I went about things I needed something to start from, some place for the magic to get its intent since I couldn't do it directly. I was perfectly fine with that, too. If my intent did flavor my magic, I would have ended putting my intent into other people's souls and that just seemed like a very bad idea.

There was also the question of what I would need from Annit. Figuring out a way to fix depletion or otherwise interact with souls outside of the breeding station would benefit me, certainly, but it wasn't like I could gift her with an item and a process that cost millions of mana and hours of time. I was sure that it wouldn't be *just* magic involved, but also some Power-specific processes. A touch of fate mana, maybe. Which meant that it was absolutely not going to be a gift, but a trade or even a Bargain.

Fortunately, I didn't have to ponder it over by myself. Before I got much further on it, I'd get Shayma and Taelah and maybe Iniri to help me chew it over. They knew Annit and Keri better than I did, and would have a better idea of what the two of them could help with. There was no point in doing all this work if we couldn't come up with something palatable enough for Annit to accept. So, I brought it up when Iniri came back from the Harvest celebrations to dig into proper runecarving.

"If nothing else, you'll want to take advantage of Annit *not* being a Companion," Iniri said, etching runes onto the beads for Taelah's bracelet with a chisel tipped so finely it was practically invisible. While the

Adamant Stone was fine by itself, I'd enclosed the glass in a metal shell so it wouldn't break. "We three are, to some people, compromised because of that. Shayma is your Voice, so that doesn't matter so much, but neither Taelah nor I would be viewed as having any independence, politically."

"The Village doesn't think of me that way," Taelah interjected. Iniri nodded to her.

"The Village is not a kingdom, and you need not worry about your enemies besetting you from all sides. I'm actually rather envious of your position in that respect. I do wish I could know all my subjects as well as you know yours." Iniri shook her head. "Generally, kings and nobles are the suspicious type, for good reasons and bad. Regardless, if Annit is perceived to be a free agent, her behavior and opinions will be considered in a different light."

"Annit might be willing to do a lot to get rid of her depletion, but she isn't very diplomatic. She's fine with Blue now, but if she ends up resenting him then everyone will know," Shayma said, watching Iniri work. Shayma's rune skill wasn't as good at creating physical runes as Iniri's, though being able to summon them temporarily was still absurdly useful.

"The trick is figuring out the right framing," Iniri said, finishing with the stone beads and moving onto the glass ones. "Annit is attached to Keri. She would be absolutely fine with any interests of yours that helped Keri as well, which is probably quite a lot. Keri is a good-hearted girl, she'll be on your side unless someone else turns her against you. Which is exactly what you'd have Annit there to stop."

"*Huh, you know a lot about them,*" I said. I hadn't expected that Iniri was familiar with Shayma's friends, since they didn't really move in the same circles.

"Keri is part of Nivir's ruling family and both of them are close to the person who embodies your will," Iniri said with a wry smile. "Cheya made sure I was fully briefed."

"*That does make a lot of sense,*" I admitted.

"Keri's parents did put a lot of pressure on her to move back home," Shayma said. "I don't think that she'd really work against you, Blue, but they might be able to convince her to take actions that weren't good for Tarnil. Or just try and coerce her. They seemed rather cold-hearted when I saw them."

"*So, you're saying, empower Annit to guard Keri's free-spiritedness?*"

"The best way to get someone to do what you want is to convince them it's what they want. Not that I'm any good at that," Iniri said with a sigh. "I've years yet to go to really gain the proper skills." I'd actually thought that Iniri was doing a pretty good job so far, but I was biased. Not that it mattered.

"*Honestly, I think you're doing great,*" I told her. "*I mean, Tarnil seems to be doing pretty good even beyond the Bargain stuff. Especially the summit, that turned out great.*" Iniri visibly perked up at that, smiling as she ducked her head slightly.

"Thank you, Blue," she said. "I know that it may sound like a strange trade, but if Keri is anything like Tekaomi, she'll end up traveling all over," Iniri continued. "One of the reasons Nivir is in such good standing with countries halfway around the world is that Tekaomi has gone to help where others can't. Healers are not common enough to be in every city. I don't even have a dedicated high-level healer for my own retinue."

*“Oh. So, making sure nobody snatches her up and making sure every place she goes gets the good word of Blue at the same time.”*

“I don’t know of any place you can get healing Affinity materials like yours,” Shayma said. “You could equip Keri more richly than any other healer in the world. Even if she weren’t *your* healer, as such, you’d be credited with her actions some, maybe?”

*“I guess it wouldn’t hurt my reputation any. I’ll still have to chew over it some, but I think we’ve got the right direction. Of course, that’s all assuming that I can actually finish this non-breeding-station-Purification project.”*

“It’s not even been six months. Even for you, husband, it might take a while to figure out something that complicated.” Taelah said.

*“Well, I appreciate the confidence,”* I told her. I was rather spoiled by how quickly a lot of things had come together. The dungeon system had shortcut a lot of tedious work and figuring out details I probably didn’t have the background to perfect myself, but some things just took time.

“There,” Iniri said, finishing the etching of the beads. “Those should work, you just need to merge the mana flows with the wires,” she told Shayma. For her part, Shayma slipped the beads into her new pocket space and grinned.

“Time to finish it up,” she said, crossing over to her section of the new, well, *crafting hall* that I’d made for my [Crafting Hall]. While she could maybe have bent the wires into the bracelet with her bare hands, it seemed the process of doing things the proper way with proper tools was important to making magical items.

Shayma twisted all the prepared strands together, the various alchemized Affinity metals as well as a strand of Firmament. Each of the beads went inside the twists, regularly spaced, so they were captured by a cage of metal, though she threaded the Firmament wire through the center hole of each bead to ensure it stayed in place.

Watching the mana was fascinating, though it was obvious I didn’t quite have the knowledge, or maybe just the mana-sight acuity, to understand everything that was going on. Shayma’s mana and intent pulled things together, easily coloring the intent-free mana that was held in the anecrux and mingling with the bound metals. Finally, she joined the ends, merging the wire ends together with [Customization] and letting the enormous amount of mana involved flow around in a loop. Slowly at first, then more quickly and with far more complexity than the structure warranted.

The final product looked fairly ordinary to the naked eye, a tasteful beaded bracelet, something that didn’t look out of place compared to Taelah’s normal work clothes. In fact, Shayma had used [Customization] to alter the physical look of the bracelet to something close to that of copper with jade beads, matching Taelah’s brown hair and green eyes. It was a small detail, but one I was glad Shayma had thought of because it was perfect.

“What do you want to name it?” Shayma asked Taelah, holding it out to her. Taelah’s eyes unfocused for a moment, looking, I assumed, at an Artifact Status since that was one of the few aspects of the Status that appeared on its own.

"[Vow]," Taelah said, and letters suddenly glowed on the twisted braid of the band, forming words that I recognized. The wedding vows Taelah and I had exchanged. I thought it was Artifact magic at first until I saw Shayma's grin, then I realized that she'd done it on the sly without anyone knowing.

"*Sneaky sneaky! I love it.*" I told them. I was quite happy that it had worked and impressed that Shayma had even guessed right about Taelah's intentions. Plus, I even got a little bit of a bonus out of it.

*Shayma Ell gains [Trickster Imperatrix] Experience.*

*Shayma Ell gains Crafting Experience.*

*Received 87,800 experience from Companion Shayma Ell.*

*Received 4,500 experience from Companion Taelah Marn.*

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

"Does it do what we wanted?" I asked them. As always, I didn't trust my overlay to really let me see what an item did. Shayma provided the Status scry.

*[Vow]: This Artifact signifies the bond between Taelah Marn and Blue.*

*This object cannot be lost or stolen.*

*Acts as a Primal Source for nature, earth, light, and water Affinities.*

*Provides the bearer with use of [Customize] for objects under the effects of their Skills.*

*Provides the bearer with use of [Temperature Finesse] for objects under the effects of their Skills.*

*Bearer may convert water to nourishing water, dirt to fertile dirt, and light to restorative light.*

*Bearer may invoke [Vow] for protection from temperature extremes and corrosion.*

*[Instant Growth] and [Plant Control] have significantly increased range and area of effect.*

*Bearer may store up to three extracted properties from [Phantasmal Gardener] in the Artifact.*

*Potency of [Dungeon Alchemy] creations increased.*

*Bearer is protected from negative effects of alchemical processes.*

*Bearer may alter friction of alchemy equipment under the effects of their Skills.*

*Bearer Represents Authority.*

*[Vow] grows with Bearer and Authority.*

That was a complicated and many-faceted Artifact for certain. In keeping with Taelah's nature it didn't have any direct combat or offensive abilities, but it did make her better at everything she did. The bit with [Phantasmal Gardener] was fascinating, too. It meant she could go from essentially magical hybridization to something closer to actual genetic tinkering.

I certainly didn't mind that Taelah got *Bearer Represents Authority* the same way Shayma did, but I wasn't sure how useful it'd be with her. She wasn't going to be dealing with people as my Voice the way Shayma did. Still, I was sure she'd find it useful somehow.

*"That is fantastic."* I said, and Taelah nodded agreement.

"I got the Artificer title," Iniri said, with a strange look on her face. "I didn't know that would happen. I feel like I barely did anything! Not that I'm complaining, it's just..." She shook her head. "Thank you, Blue."

*"Hey, don't thank me, it was your own work that got it for you."* Honestly, at this point providing the special stuff wasn't even work. I had the feeling that I wouldn't be able to squeeze many more Artifacts from the supermaterials. Even with [Vow] I had a hunch that it was mostly an Artifact because of my Skills and Mana being invested in it. People weren't supposed to have access to dungeon abilities.

"I have to be honest, this is actually the most fun I've had doing runes. Normally they're just for work, not for something exciting like an Artifact."

*"Well, considering that I'd like your help with your Artifact and my fortress, there should be lots of exciting work ahead. Though, I bet the fortress will be tedious. There's a lot of it to cover."* That made Iniri snort in amusement.

"I wonder if all rulers with crafting Skills wind up doing a lot of crafting work. I know Wright does, but that's just how he is."

"It's better than paperwork," Shayma pointed out with a smile.

"Yes, it is," Iniri agreed.