

Chapter 33B: Year 2, Day 3 – Blue

It turned out the overlay thought a year was exactly three hundred days. It wasn't really an issue, just an interesting note, and of course I'd kind of missed the last one. I wasn't sure if it actually represented a rotation around the sun at all, because with the various sorts of magic involved I doubted the planet's orbit was what caused the seasons.

Regardless of the length of the year, months still were thirty days apiece and that meant it had been well over a month since we'd last talked to Tor Kot. I was seriously thinking that he'd decided against dealing with us, even if he still had discussions with Yit Niv every so often, but he finally did call back. He didn't seem particularly happy about it, but he did.

"Tor Kot," Shayma said, answering the soft chime of the messenger ball. She clearly communicated through [Companion Concord] because a few moments later Iniri popped in at the beach house, out of view of the scrying link.

"Voice of Blue," Tor Kot replied, in the same neutral tone that Shayma used. "I know it has been some time, but I assume the offer is still open?"

"It has been," Shayma acknowledged, "and it is."

"Well." Tor Kot pursed his lips. "As you can imagine, there are still some issues to work through, but Yit Niv and I are *provisionally* ready to agree to your offer. If it's acceptable, I'd like a pledge of safe passage to let several of our monsters undergo the core severing before we commit to it fully."

"*Yeah, that's reasonable.*" For all his sins, Tor Kot clearly *did* care about his monsters. Cuts-Like-Cold, who was one of the few Scythe-Sisters who could do it, was very hazy on the ultimate effects, other than severing monsters from their core. It was obvious enough to me that the Scalemind had done it to themselves at some point in the distant past, which was probably why they were stuck in a weird state where they weren't associated with a dungeon but they weren't fully connected to the akasha.

Doing the same to Tor Kot's mantis folk would create the same problem for him, but that was only an issue if his pale mantises cared and if they had the ability and inclination to form a stable population. I was pretty sure that wasn't the case, since I had the impression that he was going to be taking dozens of monsters with him at most, not the multiple hundreds needed for a stable population.

Admittedly, with monsters and magic and the weird genetics that had to exist I could be overestimating exactly how hard it was to make a new species. Either way, it wasn't going to be my problem. It wasn't like I had quite managed to fix the Scalemind's Status yet, though they seemed to be moving in the proper direction.

"We can certainly do that," Shayma agreed. "Are you coming yourself or merely sending your test subjects?" Tor Kot winced slightly at Shayma's term but didn't dispute it.

"For the moment we will only be sending the monsters in question. If and when we go ourselves, we will not be returning, so it has to be done jointly." I found it interesting that Tor Kot felt the need to explain himself, but he was probably worried about us rejecting his terms. It *was* tempting to push harder, but I really wanted the two cores. I wanted them a lot.

"Sure, but that means we're going to have to change my ANATHEMA again. To what, I'm not sure."

"True," Shayma said aside to me. "We'll think of something." She regarded Tor Kot. "That's understandable, when you're contemplating turning your coat."

"I merely wish to get out of Blue's way," Tor Kot said patiently. Shayma pressed her lips together, but didn't respond to that. I could tell it was hard. Not that I was immensely happy either, but Tor Kot was really the easiest mage-king to deal with. The others we would probably have to take care of through [Starlance] or Sungun.

"When should we expect these monsters?" Shayma asked instead, keeping strictly to business.

"I will be sending them by needle-ship, so in a matter of hours after you believe you will be ready for them."

"Huh, fast. Well, it's basically up to Cuts-Like-Cold, she's the one doing the work."

"You can send them any time, then," Shayma told him. "We'll be ready."

"Very well," Tor Kot said. "I have scrying equipment aboard as I wish for them to report back. If for some reason it does not function, could I prevail upon you to use this scrying link instead?"

"Certainly," Shayma allowed. "There's no point in proving this can be done if you can't see the proof."

"Thank you," Tor Kot said. "Expect them in a few hours." The projection vanished and Shayma looked over at Iniri. It occurred to me, belatedly, that I should have invited Taelah to actually determine the truth of what he was saying.

"He seemed honest enough to me," Iniri said. "I thought he'd try to negotiate more. It must be desperate where he is."

"Or he's really afraid of us."

"You mean of you," Shayma said with amusement. "I'm still not sure if he's very smart or cowardly."

"It could be both," Iniri said with a sigh. "I'm not enamored of letting him go but I guess stripping him of all his power and exiling him to another continent isn't exactly getting off lightly."

"I suppose not," Shayma replied, then shook her head. "Right, Blue, let's change your ANATHEMA so nothing stupid happens."

"Yeah. What are we changing it to?"

"I'm thinking the Orrelin Inquisition for now." My takeover of Orrelin was proceeding apace, and Iniri's negotiations with what remained of Orrelin's government, as well as the Alakeim royal family, had made it clear that the Inquisition needed to be disbanded. They even had their own pretender, though with the lack of any Lineage Skill I wasn't sure how that worked.

"Great, let's do that."

"I'll keep you updated on how it goes," Shayma told Iniri, who nodded and waved before teleporting back to the Palace. Shayma went into her bedroom and put her hands against the core there, closing

her eyes as she manipulated my Status. It was still a little bizarre that she could do things I couldn't, but considering that dungeons weren't supposed to be independent at all I could consider myself lucky.

The actual subjective experience of changing ANATHEMA was a little weird. It wasn't like I had the mage-kings or any of their monsters provoking it, but it was always there in some tiny corner, like a pet peeve. Changing the ANATHEMA changed the target of that peevishness without any sort of transition, and while it wasn't really a major thing it was still a little disturbing that it swapped so easily.

It gave me prickles from the bits of Orrelin that I'd taken over, plus a few scattered throughout the refugee camps. Which was more or less what I'd expected, and I passed the information along to Iniri for Cheya. While I probably could have dealt with it myself, I didn't trust that I wouldn't add collateral damage if I actually started killing people.

Then it was off to the Scalemind enclave to solicit the services of Cuts-Like-Cold. Through One-Eye-Green, of course, who had taken up the task of making sure that her people got properly compensated for their troubles. She was doing fairly well, and in truth it barely seemed like the Scalemind needed me. Sure, I provided their living area, but that was true for everyone in the Caldera.

"Big Sister is ready to try," One-Eye-Green said, the enormous hulking form of Cuts-Like-Cold looming behind her. "But we have some old memories that some monsters didn't like it when they were severed."

"Yeah, they probably became mindlessly aggressive like when I took their core away." The shadow monster and the Scalemind were proof that it worked for *some* monsters, at least. *"Where did you want to perform the severing?"* The conversation had to be translated through Shayma and One-Eye-Green, but it really wasn't all that tedious.

"Somewhere private," One-Eye-Green responded for her big sister. "A little place by itself, just in case they go crazy."

"Can do." I still had a bunch of leftover chambers from the early days that were sealed off, but it was frankly just easier to make a new one near the Scalemind area so I could actually locate it and remember what it was for. In deference to everyone who'd be involved I gave it at least a *few* furnishings and, considering how much the Scalemind apparently liked them, a nice thick carpet.

From there we simply had to wait for the needle ship to arrive. As Tor Kot had promised, it appeared over the great wall of Hungering Dark a few hours after we had everything set up, aiming toward Meil. I actually kind of wanted to keep it, since it was a pretty sleek design and moved very quickly, but that probably wasn't in the cards. In fact, my mana might well ruin it, if my mana was as corrosive to the mage-king's depletion-laden mana structures as theirs was to normal mana.

The needle ship floated down toward the portal to my audience hall, while Iniri's Queensguard watched intently. I could tell they were itching to shoot it down, but it was definitely being very careful about not approaching anything but the portal. Under the circumstances, there really wasn't anything on the other side that I needed them to see, so I swapped it over to an empty cavern before it went through.

Considering the scale and clumsiness of the Fortress, I was a little jealous that the needle ship was precise enough to descend to hover just above the floor, low enough for the ramp that flipped out from

the side to touch the ground. Shayma was there to meet them, waiting as the monsters climbed out of the ship. Two mantises, not ones I'd seen before, and two spiders.

"I wonder why they're both insect monsters," I mused to Shayma as I checked the overlay. *"Okay, these are all named. Lucy and Theodelinda, for the mantises, and Paul and Constantine, for the spiders. It's a bit weird, but the mage-kings are odd I suppose."*

"It's going to be awkward if they can't talk," Shayma muttered. "I can read them in Scalemind form but that's probably a bit rude."

Fortunately, Tor Kot and Yit Niv had foreseen the issue. While neither the Pale Mantis nor the Noble Spider monsters could speak in human tongue, they were able to write. Theodelinda had a simple slate and piece of chalk to write with, in lieu of any more magical solution. It seemed odd to me, but it did work.

Theodelinda started by introducing the four of them, stating that it was Lucy and Paul who were supposed to undergo the severing, with Theodelinda and Constantine observing. The first snag came when they brought out the red core magitek that was meant to link them to Tor Kot. As I'd thought, my mana basically dissolved the magic structures inside and when they went to try and use the polished crystals absolutely nothing happened.

"Good thing we have this," Shayma muttered, taking the scry link from her [Pocket Space] and channeling mana into it. It didn't take long before Tor Kot appeared on the other end, looking somewhat grim.

"I take it the scrying enchantments fell apart?"

"Yes," Shayma said, and he sighed.

"When you come here, you realize that means all of our magical infrastructure is going to fall apart. I'm not complaining, I'm just asking for some consideration."

"Yeah. I mean, I hadn't thought about it much but it's going to be a mess over there. If there's cores at every city some of that is going to melt when I take it over. If that means that the non-dungeon stuff is going to fall apart too, that's going to be a pain."

"Now that Blue is aware of it, he will incorporate that issue into his plans," Shayma said. "Now, right this way." She waved the monsters toward the portal I had to the room where the Scalemind were waiting. They actually glanced at Tor Kot's image, but he didn't seem to notice, and so they proceeded through into the carpeted room.

"This is One-Eye-Green, who speaks for the Scalemind, and this is Cuts-Like-Cold, who will be performing the actual operation," Shayma said, introducing the pair. Theodelinda wrote on the chalkboard to complete the introductions referring to herself and the other monsters, and gesturing to Lucy and Paul. Cuts-Like-Cold glanced over at One-Eye-Green, who nodded to the guest monsters.

"This does not take very long, but it may be unpleasant," she told them. Tor Kot merely watched from the scrying orb silently. I had to wonder what he thought of my capabilities, seeing the portals I could make and the furnishings I'd conjured on the spur of the moment. He knew dungeons quite well, so it was probably surreal to see me at work.

Lucy silently stepped up to Cuts-Like-Cold, who lifted her scythes and rested them on what passed for the pale mantis' shoulders. It was the second time I'd seen it and it was really very intimidating. The way the magic gathered was something that wasn't quite like a normal Skill, and made me think it was some exercise in pure magic.

"Hey Ansaë, you might wanna watch this. Where Shayma is now."

"Hmm?" Ansaë blinked and looked away from her stellar mana project, which she'd brought to the Fortress. "Take me there?" It was a fair request, since she really couldn't keep the entire world under surveillance. For some reason I still expected her to always know what was going on, after she'd surprised me early on. I opened up a portal to a hastily-created chamber with a wall between it and the severing area, since Ansaë could certainly see through just a foot or so of rock.

The mana suddenly peaked and Lucy stumbled back, swaying a bit on four limbs, to be steadied by Theodelinda. The only difference I could tell was that suddenly my mana washed the clinging feel of depletion out of Lucy's body. The four monsters looked at each other again and seemed to communicate silently, though not through mind magic.

"Fascinating," Tor Kot said. Since everything seemed to be more or less working, Paul stepped up and Cuts-Like-Cold repeated the process. The spider seemed to take it harder than the mantis, but at least he didn't go into a rage. He merely hissed at Constantine when the larger, higher-leveled Noble Spider pulled him back and away from Cuts-Like-Cold, but that was all.

"It appears to work," Tor Kot remarked.

"That was *very* interesting," Ansaë said. "You always show me the best things, Blue."

"Yeah? What's your take on it? It didn't look like any normal Skill to me."

"It's not. It's a pure intent-based application of mind magic, possibly affecting the Akasha directly." Ansaë tapped her claws against the floor thoughtfully. "I wonder how they created it."

"I have to admit, I'm maybe a little surprised they didn't learn it from you somehow."

"No, no," Ansaë said with a laugh. "It's not the sort of magic I would leave lying around. Who knows what that would do to someone who was *not* a monster?"

"It's probably not pleasant for the core, either," I noted, though I was probably the only dungeon that had the capacity to even be aware of such things. *"Oh wait, I guess I should ask Tor Kot."* I swapped my attention back to Shayma and she translated my question for him.

"Is there any feedback from the core due to a monster being removed that way?"

"None that I can tell," Tor Kot reported. "It's probably just like a monster dying, which doesn't have any effect that we know of."

"Huh. I guess that makes sense. I was thinking it was something a little more profound but apparently not. Well, it works, so I suppose we might as well plan on doing the rest of them. At Cuts-Like-Cold's discretion, of course."

“Now that you have proof that it works, are you ready to bring your cores and the rest of your monsters?” Shayma asked, translating for me as ever.

“Ready? No.” Tor Kot sighed. “But that doesn’t mean I won’t. It may still be a few days before we can make a break for it. Could you possibly host these four until then?” Theodelina turned to Tor Kot’s image and he shook his head at her. “I know, I know, but it’s safer than trying to come back and making someone suspicious.”

It seemed a little odd to me that he was worried about surveillance, what with the natural dungeon resistance against scrying and the fact that he was on his own island, but at the same time the mage-kings would have probably figured out how to address those things. For all I knew there was spying magitek all over the place.

“Sure. Are you going to take up my offer of hosting you somewhere?”

“I don’t mean to offend, but no,” Tor Kot said after Shayma had translated the question. “I don’t think either you or I would be comfortable if I stayed within your territory. I have made my own plans instead, and made some reasonable purchases on a distant continent. I hope you understand.”

“Honestly I’m a lot happier that way. You don’t have to tell him that,” I added, though Shayma was perfectly capable of deciding not to pass on my more impolitic musings. *“They’ll all be rid of depletion by the time they’re done too, though I have no idea how that works with mage-kings. Like, are they fully depleted and only the core holds them up or what?”*

“I suppose at this point keeping the secrets of Controllers is rather moot.” Tor Kot pursed his lips. “When we’re bonded to a core, the Controller class seems to override our normal Status, but it’s under there, hidden. On rare occasions Controllers *have* been punished by having all their cores removed from them.”

“That’s interesting,” Shayma said.

“That’s pretty weird, compared to Companions. I guess Controllers are kind of meant to be outside the Akasha, and Companions inside it?”

“It must be. The mage-kings use theirs like a normal Artifact,” Shayma said, speaking aside to me. “I’m biased, but I prefer the Companion route.”

“Me too!”

“You realize that your ships are going to decay inside Blue’s magic as well,” Shayma pointed out. “Wherever you’re headed, you’ll need other means to get there.”

“That had crossed my mind,” Tor Kot admitted. “I had arranged for some transport but if you are willing to aid us on that score I would be most grateful. The uncertainties involved in traveling that far over the ocean would make me worry about whether our arrangements would hold long enough.”

“I think we can manage that much.” I’d have to pay attention to where they went, too, though I was pretty sure Tor Kot was telling the truth about not wanting to have anything to do with depletion. Still, he was smart and bringing a small army so he could very well make trouble wherever he was going.

“We can,” Shayma told him, and Tor Kot nodded in satisfaction.

“Excellent. The next time I contact you, I will likely be en route.” Tor Kot shook his head. “This is obviously something that needs to go quickly.”

“Honestly I think he’s overselling how dangerous it is, but I dunno, they might have locked things down after you nuked all those mage-kings.”

“Very well, we will see to your monsters and expect you soon.” Shayma cut the connection and turned to the four. “I assume you will want to be housed in separate rooms?”

“Actually, Miss Shayma, if it’s okay with you and Mister Blue, I would like to offer to house them,” One-Eye-Green said. “We would like to talk to them since we’re all monsters. We haven’t been able to actually discuss things with any other types. We’ve only been near blightbeast monsters.”

“Oh, sure, that’s great if they want to.”

“If you are amenable, then we have no problems with that.” Shayma glanced at the four and after a few seconds got a tentative nod. “Then I shall leave you with the Scalemind.”

I took that as the cue to open a portal to the Scalemind village, or town, or whatever it could be called. They weren’t fully sedentary yet, but they were a long way past nomadic, and working hard on civilization. It wasn’t as luxurious as the accommodations I might have provided, but it had been made on their own. Besides, I’d seen how the mage-kings packed monsters together and I figured that *any* accommodations would be generous.

“Whew,” Shayma said when the portal was safely closed. “That was intense! Whatever Cuts-Like-Cold was doing was really unusual.”

“Yeah, Ansaë said as much. It seemed weird to me, so I called her over and she says it might be actual Akashic manipulation. I wonder if it could also cut off Companions — not that I want to try it, but I do wonder.”

“I don’t really want to find out,” Shayma said. “I guess you could just reinstate the bond but I have no idea what it would do to me.”

“Yeah, just a random thought. Anyway, can’t wait for those cores. I don’t know what I’m going to specialize them into, but two free cores is amazing.”

“And the trait points! Might be able to save up to buy something amazing.”

“I’m just afraid we might be counting our chickens before they hatch.”

“It’s up to Tor Kot,” Shayma said. “While I hate to admit it, he does know what he’s doing. It’s really just a question of when we’ll hear from him, not if.”