

## Chapter 3B: Day 207 – Shayma

*“That inventory Skill is absurd,”* Blue observed as she packed the last of Keri’s luggage into her [Pocket Space].

“I know! I love it.” She smiled happily, readying [Wake of the Phantasmal]. “All the Skills you Transcribed for me are unreal. Though you can still extend your inventory through me so it’s not totally necessary.”

*“I suppose so. It does make me feel better that you have your own though. I’m afraid I’d get distracted and lose something.”* Shayma just rolled her eyes. Blue was such a worrywart, though it was true that he had more land to lose something in than anyone else she knew.

“Are we all ready?” She asked Annit and Keri, who were doublechecking their clothing and weapons. Though Annit’s soul prosthesis was hidden, she’d asked Blue to make a medallion for Annit to wear as proof of her affiliation, [Core Lattice] over a wind Source. Annit kept rubbing it between her fingers in a sort of nervous tic, but Shayma was sure she’d be used to it soon enough.

“Ready!” Keri said cheerfully, and Annit nodded, stepping up next to her. Shayma flexed [Wake of the Phantasmal] and stepped into the strange ethereal realm, heading away from the bright glow of the Caldera. It had been easy enough to spot Invernir from the Realm, considering how much mana was put into it and how important it was, but Nivir’s capital of Versil was far more diffuse.

Oddly, it would probably take nearly as long to get to Nivir’s palace as it had Ir’s, because she couldn’t go as far out into the Phantasmal Realm. Directions in the Realm didn’t exactly correspond to those in normal reality, and if she couldn’t keep an eye on where she was intending to go she was just as likely to end up in Kinul or over the ocean as in Nivir.

In deference to Keri, Shayma and Annit kept the pace to a light jog. The healer wasn’t out of shape at all, but she didn’t have as much in the way of physical passives and had a Class geared more toward mana than stamina. Annit’s [Wind Hunter] Class gave her extra speed and endurance, and of course Shayma’s own Class had [Eidolon Body] which made her nigh-inexhaustible.

After twenty minutes or so of travel, she exited the [Phantasmal Realm] so they could get their bearings. Despite all the fog and mist it was quite bright, the sun penetrating more than it probably should have, illuminating tall, wide-canopied trees with slick, intensely dark green leaves and equally dark grass that looked more like needles than blades. Keri looked around happily, taking a deep breath of damp, tree-scented air. Winter hadn’t quite penetrated into Nivir, so it was cool but not too unpleasant.

“I missed this,” Keri confessed. “There’s nothing quite like Nivir air.”

“I keep telling you that you need to go sailing,” Annit told her affectionately. “A proper sea breeze is better.”

“The beach was nice,” Keri admitted. “But it’s not the same.”

“Someday we’ll go down to the southern lobe,” Annit promised. “Then you’ll see what I mean.”

"I almost don't want to interrupt them," she murmured to Blue. She could feel his attention still on them, a soft liquid murmur in the back of her mind.

*"They are pretty a cute couple, I admit."* Blue replied. *"Almost as cute as us."* Shayma almost laughed at how blatant the compliment was, but managed to keep her reaction to merely a smile.

"Flirt," she accused him, before turning to Keri. "Do you know what direction we need to go?"

"Hang on a moment," she replied, turning around to regard the landscape. Really they only needed a basic heading, since the capital of Nivir ought to be fairly obvious from the Phantasmal Realm once they got close. Shayma had considered shapeshifting into something that flew for an aerial view, but the pervasive cloud clover made that difficult at best.

"Northwest," Keri judged, pointing in the appropriate direction. "That way."

They returned to the Phantasmal realm, leapfrogging toward Versil as Shayma very roughly followed the road and towns until they hit the Serisil river. From there it was easy enough to follow it upstream to where Versil rested near the headwaters of the river. Or rather, at the base of the waterfall as it came down from the rim of Nivir's mountain boundaries.

The fourth time they exited Phantasmal Space they arrived in the middle of Nivir's capital, within sight of the actual palace. Shayma almost landed them on top of a horse and cart, the driver not even noticing the trio appear next to him. Even in the city the omnipresent mist was quite in evidence, but it had been sculpted to stay to canals and artificial streams. It kept the streets clear and visible so all those going about their business could actually see while still lending a mysterious and almost theatrical air to the place.

*"Oh, the mist control is neat. I wonder if I can do something like that. Or, well, I guess you, since I can't do magic stuff."*

"Probably. I'm not sure where, though. Don't the Chixuatli take up most of your foggy areas?"

*"True, but I have smoke coming from some of my volcanoes and the like. Though I think the dragons will be the ones managing them, so I should probably wait to see what they do."*

"Something to think about," she agreed, skipping the rest of the distance to the palace through very short jaunts with Annit and Keri stepping through the near-portals left behind. It had a ward boundary very similar to the one over in Haerlish, but this time she didn't need to burrow under it. Or rather, let Blue burrow under it. Instead, the three of them just strolled up to the front gate and Keri flashed her signet ring.

"Welcome, Lady Esox," said one, sending another of their number hurrying ahead. Presumably to inform people that Keri had arrived.

"Going to let them know who you are?" Blue asked her.

"Not unless I need to!" She rather enjoyed being a little bit whimsical, especially since her Class directly benefitted from it. Besides, it fit into the mystique of a Power. "My comings and goings shall be mysterious."

*"I like the idea,"* Blue admitted, *"but it'll probably cause trouble someday."*

"That's half the fun!" Shayma chuckled. "The rest of the Esox know who I am, but no need to make everyone else nervous."

"Ah, true enough." She could tell Blue was still doubtful, but she really didn't intend any trouble. Stating who she was and what she represented was more likely to make the guards nervous than help in any way. They followed a guide up toward the palace proper, a big sprawling complex made from a combination of pale and dark stone. There were plenty of water features, of course, artificial waterfalls and fountains and long reflecting pools, one of which surrounded a rather whimsical statue of a fish holding a pike.

They were ushered off to a small side room immediately, where Virn Esox himself was waiting to receive them. The king of Nivir looked rather harried, which made her think that Iniri had gotten the message through. Knowing that a void assassin might be coming for him or someone else important was bound to be hard on the nerves.

"Welcome to Nivir, Lady Shayma," Virn said. "And welcome back, young Keri. I wasn't expecting to see you." He didn't mention Annit, but it wasn't necessarily clear what her role was. She was looking forward to Annit putting her foot down with someone in the very near future. "At least, not so soon."

"I don't want to be late," Shayma said, no longer smiling. It was time to be serious. "I know firsthand how terrible void Skills can be and I want to find this Ell agent before they make a move."

"We have been surveying our records for all Anell-held properties," Virn told her. "But we don't have a confirmed location yet. While we wait, I would like to extend an invitation for you to all stay here at the palace." Shayma was pretty sure that had as much to do with the fact that she was fourth-tier equivalent thanks to Blue as it was any sort of politeness or protocol. Keri glanced at her and Shayma nodded back, letting her take the lead for the moment. While they were visiting due to Shayma's Quest and Blue's own sense of responsibility, it was Keri's family.

"Of course we'll stay, Uncle Virn," Keri said. "But if we find out something we may have to move at a moment's notice."

"Certainly," Virn agreed. "I'll give you some tokens to show that you carry my authority when it comes to cornering this Anell agent. If you would join Marie and myself in the Meadowbrook Courtyard for tea?"

"Do you still use Golden Orchard leaves?" Keri asked eagerly, following Virn into the palace with Shayma and Annit trailing after. While Annit was clearly listening to the wind, Shayma relied on studying things with her domain, though she really didn't expect an immediate attack. Possibly not even an eventual one; Anell's orders might not come for weeks yet. They weren't going to rely on that, though, especially not when such things as paired books existed.

Meadowbrook Courtyard was exactly what it sounded like, a small brook in a meadow behind the palace with a large gazebo where Marie Esox, the Queen of Nivir, was chatting with some of her ladies-in-waiting. There were also a large number of guards stationed about the courtyard, and off to the side some small children were playing in the brook. Probably grandchildren or nieces and nephews.

It looked innocent enough, but the Esox family were obviously drawing up their lines of defense. Though Shayma had high hopes that they'd find a stray fox-kin before a courier or something carried

orders, it was reasonable enough to assume there'd be a void assassin coming at any time. It might well be a suicide mission, but Sienne had said that some void users could erase their own presence, feeding it into the void, and even Shayma would have trouble spotting that sort.

"Welcome, welcome," Marie said, the pleasantries ringing false. She took her husband's hand as he stepped up next to her and squeezed it before nodding to them. "Please, be seated." She made no gesture, but the servants poured four more teas as Keri, Annit, and Shayma stepped into the gazebo.

"Thank you," Keri said, sniffing appreciatively at the steam rising from the teacup. "Though we're hoping we won't be here long."

"Yes, I understand," she nodded, glancing at her husband as he joined her, sitting down next to her. "I'm actually a little surprised you came yourself. I didn't think Blue was interested in getting involved in political issues?" The question was semi-delicately put, and Shayma knew exactly what she was asking. If Blue started meddling in normal politics, he'd have to act as the region's hegemon instead of Ir, and nobody wanted that.

"This is a direct attack on Blue's authority and legitimacy by House Anell," Shayma told her. "It would be in bad faith if he didn't move to deal with attacks by proxy. He has no intention to step into normal disagreements, so long as they don't involve him first."

"A very understandable policy," Virn said approvingly, and looked to Keri. "Are you staying, then, while—"

"No," Annit interrupted, which got a moderately shocked look from Marie. "Keri is here to support Shayma, in case she or anyone else needs healing while we're containing a highly dangerous void Affinity Classer."

"What are *you* here for?" Marie asked stiffly. Annit smiled in satisfaction and tapped the blue medallion around her neck.

"I'm here to guard Keri. Blue set me that task and that task alone, to make sure she keeps her independence." Annit leaned back and Keri just nodded when Marie and Virn looked at her.

"I trust Annie," she said, and left it at that. Shayma sipped the tea, which actually was quite good, and waited for the silence to force someone to change the subject. It was rather fun having a higher station than even kings and queens. Eventually Marie asked Keri about her healing arts, which was at least a somewhat safe topic, and Shayma half-listened as she kept an eye on the palace doors.

She wasn't sure if Blue overheard exactly where one of the Ells was had anything to do with [Quest], but she did know that the Skill was worrying at the edge of her perceptions. Nothing major, and nothing to the extent that [Seeker] had, but enough that she felt like she was in the right place. It would have been nice to have [Seeker]'s specificity, but knowing she was on the right track was a great help.

"Blue, remind me to see about trading for this tea. It's really good. I bet Taelah would love it."

"Will do. Maybe we can surprise her. Also Ansa? It'd have to be a big pot but I bet she'd appreciate it." Blue responded happily. "You could even do it now, while you're waiting. I can inventory through anything they want."

"I'm not sure either of them are in the mood for trade," she said, using her domain to keep anyone from overhearing her discussion with Blue.

"Or they'd like something that would be normal and keep their mind off having a void assassin lurking in the bushes," Blue pointed out. It surprised her sometimes that he actually did understand people, he just didn't normally exert himself to deal with social wrangling.

"True enough," she admitted, and focused her attention on the monarchs. "By the way, while we wait, I'd like to clarify some things and perhaps take care of a little bit of business."

"What sort of business?" Virn asked, instantly wary.

"Oh, nothing major," Shayma assured him. "Just, this is really good tea, and I was wondering if I might be able to trade for some for my own personal use." Virn blinked, then laughed.

"Certainly! I'll take that as a compliment. It would be my pleasure to give you some." He snapped his fingers and sent one of the servants for a cask of the stuff. Keri covered her mouth with her hand briefly, whispering because she knew Shayma could hear her.

"Golden Orchard is reserved for the palace. They don't normally give it out." Shayma nodded to Keri. They had to be more nervous than they seemed, which was odd. A void agent was a threat, yes, but not so much of one that monarchs should be terrified.

"Tell me, is there something else worrying you aside from Girul Ell?"

"Well." Virn eyed them thoughtfully. "After the absolute humiliation you handed my armies, there is a large faction that does not like Blue. Having you here so directly and obviously is only going to make things worse."

"I mean, I could have killed them instead," Blue muttered in her ear. "This is definitely not my problem."

"Blue appreciates that it's an issue," she rendered diplomatically. "But it's not one that he should address. Nor does it have any bearing on what we're here for today."

"Of course not," Virn agreed. "I can hardly ignore it, though. That said, I do not intend to let any of my government take action against Blue. It would be fruitless to do so, even if I wished to, but I can't guarantee that *someone* won't try something."

"Blue isn't going to hold you responsible if rogue elements try something," Shayma assured Virn. "It's only if you try to back them that he's going to be annoyed." That statement hung in the air for a few moments before Keri spoke up in an obvious effort to lighten the mood.

"I may not be here to stay but I'd still like to know what's going on with the family. I don't recognize any of them!" She waved in the direction of the gaggle of small children. "Why don't you introduce me?"