

## Chapter 1B: Day 204 – Blue

The Flight-Alpha's request seemed rather familiar, but as I understood things most people that came to Powers were desperate. Despite my annoyance at the way he showed up, he seemed honest enough and in truth I was eyeing all their fancy ships with a little bit of avarice. They were clearly well advanced in magitek, which made coming up with the Bargain terms fairly easy.

I wasn't being spontaneous. Once the Chiuxatli scout had arrived it was obvious what was going to happen, and I'd thought it over. Frankly, I had the room, and given their flight and their proclivity for high places, the Chiuxatli wouldn't even take up room on the Caldera floor. I had an entire vertical country for them, and it wasn't like anyone else was too interested in using it. Even the dragons preferred the more interesting Caldera interior.

Each Bargain so far had been different. Some had done incredible things to start or complete the Bargain, while others had been rather more subtle. This one definitely had an effect, because the moment we agreed I could feel the Bargain reaching out and covering the entire population of Chiuxatli, binding them back to both me and my [Craft Hall].

It took me a few minutes to realize what exactly was going on. When I realized I could suddenly understand colortongue, everything made sense. I was getting their knowledge and expertise. Most of it I couldn't use myself, aside from their language and maybe some of their political and geographical understanding. But all their crafting and magical understanding was starting to be linked with the [Craft Hall], pouring it into the Companion area.

[Blue's Sagacity] gave me a little bit of insight, and it wasn't like I instantly sucked all the knowledge out of their heads. It was effectively just expanding the effect of [Pinnacle Crafter] to include the Chiuxatli. When they made things, [Craft Hall] got that knowledge as well. Though obviously it was more than that, since I was getting colortongue. The Bargain was stretching things, as usual.

It also answered the worry I had about whether the [Craft Hall] knowledge was retained if I dismissed all the instances or not. It was definitely tied to the option itself, not to any particular version of it, like a miniature akasha. I would have to get Shayma to dip into the [Craft Hall] for a moment to see if she picked up colortongue too. Since she could shift into a Chiuxatli, she could even speak it.

That could come later, though. While Shayma showed off the Caldera, I opened portals. Lots of portals. I had to push up pillars from the ocean and create enormous frames, but since I had mana to spare it wasn't too much of an issue to create a few hundred portals, each a hundred meters to a side, and sprinkle them around the Caldera.

Three million people was an almost unimaginable crowd, and if I tried to shove them all in the same area it would just be a mess. As it was, the train of refugees was kilometers long and wide, including not just individuals but plants and farm animals and huge stocks of foodstuffs. Not to mention floating forges, portable carpentry shops, and runic workbenches, and more colored fabric than could be readily believed.

«We must act quickly,» Tlulipechua told his people. «We cannot know how long these portals will last. Alpha Spire through this portal, then in order obsidian-descending, settlement by settlement.»

The odd thing was that the language was the exact same in colortongue. The same noun and verb structure, even the same word particles, just with photonemes rather than phonemes. There were extra flourishes for emotion, rather like tone of voice, but in all it was identical to spoken language. A side-effect of everyone using the Akasha, was my guess.

Of course, being able to understand the words didn't mean I had any idea what they were talking about. *Obsidian-descending*, for example, was clearly some sort of Chiuxatli jargon, and trying to track the way the ministers spoke was incredibly confusing. There seemed to be some degree of repetition inherent in how the Chiuxatli communicated, where one person would repeat back components of what the first said.

Tlulipechua's ministers dispersed to the front of the Chiuxatli flock and repeated the instructions, giving me a quick lesson in how effective their colortongue signaling was. Each of the initial Chiuxatli duplicated the orders, and each nearby Chiuxatli duplicated that, and in a matter of seconds the instructions were reaching the tail end of the enormous column.

Watching everyone coordinate and turn about and start flying their ships through the portals was pretty impressive. Most of the refugees didn't actually have to do anything, since they were crowded into the tents and onto the platforms, but the crews of the ships managed to somehow all change direction and assemble without any collisions. Even with colortongue it was an amazing feat of coordination.

*"Man, there's a lot of them. All right, you'll want to tell him to have his people stick to the walls, since the village and the dragons have seniority, and I don't want them messing with any of them."* My pronouns were a bit confused there but I was sure she knew what I meant. *"He'll have to meet Taelah at some point too. Oh, and they're allowed to harvest plants and chop woods and quarry and mine and stuff anywhere on the cliff face, that's fine."* They'd have to, in fact, if they wanted to set up any sort of settlement. There weren't enormous numbers of metal and gem deposits in relative terms, but there was still a decent chunk of the stuff naturally growing from mana and Climate interactions.

*"Your people should stay to the cliff face. The Caldera is populated by a human village under Blue's protection and a number of dragons who are pupils of The Silver Woe."* Shayma told Tlulipechua and was rewarded with a red flash of shock. *"Any resources on or in the cliffs are yours, should you spend the effort to retrieve them."*

*"The great one is generous,"* Tlulipechua said, shifting his wings and causing them to suddenly glow with color, the equivalent of shouting, relaying those instructions across the portal where they were spread in the same flock-like manner. A few Chiuxatli who'd already started to venture away from the cliffs returned even as the sheer energy and mass of a few million refugees started to disperse the clouds in a few spots.

As they came through, I adjusted the Climate so it would stay clearer than before, so they wouldn't have a constant fog over their cities or equivalents. All of the portals were halfway up the cliff face, at about the fifty-kilometer mark, but they'd be spreading out soon enough. I actually hoped they'd stay more around the upper part of the Caldera so there'd be more of a buffer between them and everyone else, but I wasn't going to mandate it.

*"It will take some time to settle in,"* Tlulipechua added. *"But we will be ready to assist the great one as soon as possible. Might I ask what he will have us doing?"*

*“Well, we need to ward up the whole Caldera, for one. I need someone with magitek expertise to figure out what can be done with the Fortress, especially since I’m putting gravity drives on it. Plus I’ll want some people to teach anyone from the Village who is interested. Maybe get some people from Tarnil in on that, too.”* Shayma relayed in a more proper format, and even she could see Tlulipechua was daunted by trying to ward the two thousand kilometer diameter of the Caldera.

“It’s only one hundredth the size on the outside,” she assured him. “Still a large project, but not the work of generations. The Fortress may end up being a larger project still, once you see it.”

“I understand,” Tlulipechua said. “How might I communicate with you or the great one in the future?”

*“I’ll just make a permanent portal to the audience chamber.”* I told Shayma, and followed words with actions. The Chiuxatli were somewhat different than any of the other people I was responsible for. There was no personal connection there, so having them use the official petitioner’s hall was reasonable enough until we worked out some other arrangement.

After that, I let Tlulipechua go and figure out how to settle his people in. The logistics involved were beyond staggering, though in a sense they were lucky that they’d been able to evacuate after harvest rather than before it. As it was, people still gravitated to the myriad streams and rivers and pools, nearly draining them dry as they filled up barrels and tubs and amphoras. I couldn’t simply sit and watch, though, since if nothing else I needed to bring my Companions up to speed.

*“So, everyone should stop by the [Craft Hall]. If I’m right, it’ll teach you colortongue – the native Chiuxatli color-flash language – since the Bargain is funneling their knowledge to me. They’re not doing much crafting right now, but once they do I think that will go into the [Craft Hall] too.”*

“That is absolutely cheating,” Iniri said. “I approve.”

*“Yeah, there are benefits to being a Power.”* I admitted. *“So, to fill everyone in, I just made a bargain with the Chiuxatli. They’ll be staying in the Caldera until their own lands are fixed up, and they’ll be helping me with my lack of a magic labor force. Keep in mind all of you outrank them so if they give you trouble just call on me. Taelah, I think I’ll have you talk to some of them later on and figure out what they have experts in and if anyone in the Village wants to learn. Iniri, I figure you can send some people from Tarnil to get in on that and guide their Class along.”*

“That is a significant workforce,” Ansa noted from her tower. “The Chiuxatli were not terribly advanced four hundred years ago, but their current state of magical knowledge appears to be laudable. It seems you’re taking in their entire population?”

*“Yes, they got hit by blightbeasts too, and those seem to spread depletion somehow. So, they probably wouldn’t have lasted long inside my mana field anyway, but it’s definitely a problem elsewhere. It also means that we can’t really deal with the mage-kings until we can stop blightbeasts from, you know, pouring out all over and making more refugees. I’ll have to make more Calderas if this keeps up.”*

It was actually entirely possible for me to do that if I didn’t mind cannibalizing Tarnil’s mountain peaks. I didn’t *want* to, though. Partly because that meant the rest of the world was falling apart, but mostly because I didn’t want to be responsible for everyone even if I did get Bargains from them all to keep them in line.

“Oh, I’ll look forward to it. I know Suna would love some magic lessons,” Taelah said. I actually was interrupting her dinner with the other Elders, but she didn’t seem to mind. “We’ll see if anyone else is interested. Maybe even mother would like to see what she can learn...” Taelah trailed off thoughtfully, and I left her to it.

I was sure that importing an entire country’s population would result in trouble further down the line, Bargain or not, but it also meant that I could become far more aggressive. The Fortress would be done quicker, my Caldera would be protected so I wouldn’t feel the need to hover as much, and I’d have the expertise to start any magitek project I wanted.

Once that was done I could actually go out into the world instead of waiting for people to come to me. I could deal with House Anell and maybe even address the mage-kings, not to mention depletion in general. I’d probably have to clean up the Chiuxatli homelands myself, if I didn’t want them as permanent residents, and maybe a chunk of the Underneath while I was at it. I hadn’t been looking for a workforce, but I wasn’t going to waste one when it appeared on my doorstep.