

## Chapter 8: Day 215 – Blue

Iniri was extremely happy. It wasn't a political happiness, because Yamal wasn't a fourth-tier anymore and probably never would be again. No, it was a personal happiness, since Yamal was clearly a friend of hers, and she was nearly crying when she visited him at his estate. He was positively swamped in family, with a minimum of ten Gens nearby at any given time and probably over fifty on the whole estate, but they at least gave Iniri some time to talk with him.

Though still weak, he was well enough to walk on his own. It was hard to tell how much weakness was actual frailty and how much was simply being reset to first level. His new class clearly owed something to his prior status, but it still started at level one and [Thousand-Blessed Blade] had hared off to whomever deserved to inherit it.

I left her to it, since my part was pretty much done. I didn't really feel the need to extract something from Yamal, either, since I'd been doing an experiment as much as doing a favor. That soul collapse could have ended in real death instead of a sort of rebirth, or the soul prosthesis could have done nothing at all. Even then, without some way to deal with the mental trauma of losing his Class and Skills it wouldn't have been enough. It was a lucky break, though I had some suspicions that there was some actual agency on the part of magic and souls. There had to be more than one way to do what I'd done, and I hadn't simply stumbled on the only possible route.

It was nice to know that I could actually fix that, even if full depletion was still a terrible thing. The damage of mana collapse, according to Hurin, had been fairly severe, and of course Shayma had seen what it had done to his mind. His new Class had reclaimed some of his original Skills in most basic form, but he was still starting over. Better than death, but he wasn't going to recapture his fourth-tier glory.

"I'm fairly certain the mana collapse would kill me," Ansaе sighed. "Not to mention I don't like the idea of anyone digging through my head, even Shayma. I'm still holding out for Purification. But it's nice to know there are extra contingencies if the worst should happen."

*"Yeah, and who knows, with [Soul Proficiency] I might eventually be able to reverse the damage myself. Though that would probably take forever, considering how insanely complicated your soul structure is. Purification is probably still faster, assuming I don't stall out forever on leveling."*

"I wouldn't let you do that," Ansaе said with a smirk. "If you ever get lazy I'll just get Shayma to pester you until you do something."

*"A terrifying thought."*

Things went pretty well for the next day and a bit, with everyone occupied on their own projects. The Chiuxatli sectioned off a new space outside the Eyrie and put up a great model of the fortress in colored thread, while Ansaе worked on similarly complicated structures of mana and runes. I had the feeling I was going to end up with something a lot more elaborate than just a warning system for my wards.

Shayma took a boat and went sailing on the underground sea with Annit, Keri, and One-Eye-Green, partly for adventuring and partly just for fun. For myself, I extended a pillar downward to plumb the depths of the huge body of water. At some point I probably wanted to find out the limits of the sea,

assuming Shayma didn't find them for me, but I mostly wanted a deep-sea Climate of some kind so straight down was my best bet.

The sea wasn't pitch black, as might be thought for something so deep underground. The ceiling was about a hundred meters above the actual waves, and veins of glimstone ran through it, casting the rippling waters in all kinds of colors. Bioluminescent plants and jellyfish created their own spheres of light as I went deeper, and around four kilometers down I saw enormous sea-trees with buoyant, glowing fruit rising from the ground. Here and there I also spotted big pillars with glimstone crystals jutting up at various angles and covered over with plants and swarmed by fish. When I hit bottom I spent a bunch of mana to reach out and [Assimilate] everything, getting a very welcome message on my overlay.

*Cavern Sea Climate unlocked.*

*[Green Glimstone] unlocked.*

*[Blue Glimstone] unlocked.*

*[Orange Glimstone] unlocked.*

...

*[Phirropod Stem] unlocked.*

I covered the Leviathan area with it immediately, filling in the spaces between the dwellings I'd made for them and taking the opportunity to transport over some new fish varieties as well. I had to tune the Climate to be darker than the native Cavern Sea, but I had enough practice that doing so was fairly easy. Easier than manually ripping out all the bioluminescent ferns and pods and mosses and replacing them with less showy counterparts.

Not long after I got the Leviathan habitat spiffed up, Taelah finished her Chiuxatli flower project. She'd been working hard the past week, and Syrinu had pulled in Lorzent to help with the project since he had storm Affinity. Between the three of them, plus some extra samples from the Chiuxatli flora, they'd managed to cobble together a proper converter plant. It seemed to be the mana version of micronutrients, a local intent ecosystem, as it were.

Between the dragons, the Chiuxatli, and my [Contained Stars] the mana in the Caldera wasn't quite as intent-free as it used to be, which meant that when I started adding wildlife I'd have to worry about mana beasts. Considering the description of the interiors of Great Dungeons, my guess was that their mana was intent-free as well, but they had so many other things living there that it acted like a full mana ecosystem.

I was going to have to be careful about how robust I ended up making the Caldera. There was a unique benefit to the mana density not matching the intent density, for lack of a better description. While I could easily make areas that were free of intent issues, I'd probably have to separate them from the Caldera if things went too far. It might not be possible, in the end, to have both a living Caldera and have pure Affinity, but I wanted to get close as I could to both.

Taelah joined Shayma in going to Tlulipechua to make sure he had no objections. Considering the nature of the Chiuxatli plants, she'd adjusted a creeper vine with bright flowers to consume the ambient

wind and storm mana and generate the slightly adjusted, intent-touched version. I just wanted it approved, then I'd put the stuff on all the cliff faces. That would adjust things enough for the Chiuxatli crops to grow properly.

"This is astounding," Tlulipechua said, studying the multicolored blossoms sprouting from the thin-leaved vine. "It's almost like I can feel Chiuxatlan in the distance."

"Fantastic!" Taelah beamed. "Blue, at your leisure."

*"On it."* I spent a few thousand biomass painting Taelah's [Blossom of Chiuxatlan] on all my cliffsides, which took maybe three or four minutes. I could see an immediate change in the morale of the Chiuxatli, the spread of the mana lifting an unseen miasma from the refugees. There was a lot of rapid speculation on what exactly had happened with colortongue, some of the most outlandish rumors racing around the Caldera at breathtaking speed.

During the lull I didn't get any insights into any of my enemies, unfortunately. Neither the mage-kings nor the Anells did anything to set off my ability, at least not that I noticed. We well knew that they weren't idle, but lacking any other way to spy on them, we could only speculate and rely on Cheya and my [Panopticon] to make sure we didn't miss anything at home. That meant that we were completely blindsided when Iniri looked over the bound book she shared with Wright, blinked, and called for me.

"Blue? Wright just got a message from Tor Kot. He wants to have a meeting with us."

*"...the hell?"* It wasn't that I had no idea what they would want to meet about. It was that I couldn't imagine any reason we'd have for doing so. The mage-kings weren't trustworthy, Tor Kot was kind of scary, though rather less so since I was far more powerful than last time I'd run into him, and in the end there really wasn't anything they could offer.

"Wright wants to meet them too," Iniri continued. "He *did* have Blightbeasts come out of Ir's one connection to the Underneath. Since we warned him about it they just destroyed them all with siege magic, but he's got his own issues to raise."

*"Wait, do you think we should meet him? Or his representatives, anyway?"*

"I do. There isn't any threat from depletion with you or Shayma involved, even if we hold the meeting in Ir. Besides, the more we know about them, the better."

*"I can't argue that. Though I don't think we should have it here. Unless I have Shayma adjust my ANATHEMA I'm going to be fighting an urge to squash him like a bug the whole time. I probably will be anyway, but we don't need to make it worse."* Iniri laughed at my offhand remark, though I wasn't actually joking.

"It is probably better to set it up in Ir," Iniri agreed. "It will give me an excuse to meet my future in-laws, if nothing else."

*"That's a fair point."* Emperor Wright had been surprisingly amenable, though maybe due to the latitude afforded him by his power, so hopefully the rest of the Wright family were as sane as he. Though if they were too annoying, I could always sic Taelah on them. Shayma was my Voice, but Taelah's mom powers were already coming in, and she was definitely the one I'd send after impolite in-laws. *"If you think it's worthwhile, I suppose you might as well set it up."*

"I'll tell Emperor Wright that we're willing to attend a meeting." Iniri's lips quirked upward. "It's a lot easier to deal with official announcements and messages when you've already negotiated the details in private."

*"I can imagine. So, what do we need to do on this end to get ready for it?"* I wasn't sure there was much I could do, though double-checking the overlay did turn up something I needed to address. *"Hmm, I have ten free trait points. I should probably consider spending those in advance of any sort of meeting."*

"I'm not sure there's anything that would particularly affect the power balance, considering that between us Shayma and I can probably destroy war cores now. But I suppose there is little point in leaving trait points unspent if there does seem to be something valuable. This afternoon?"

*"Yeah, it'll take that long for Shayma to head back anyway."* I actually wondered if she could sail through the Phantasmal Realm with [Wake of the Phantasmal], or if I should see about getting the Chiuxatli to make an airship for her. Though her [Pocket Space] wasn't big enough to store vehicles, she always had access to my inventory.

*"Oh! Before you go, I'm going to get Cheya's [Soul Prosthesis] done. If we're meeting with a mage-king I want my side depletion-immune as much as possible."* Iniri closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again and shook her head with a smile.

"You are too good to me, Blue. But you know Cheya won't accept it unless the price can be paid up front."

*"Part of it is honestly the Bargain. Cheya performs a huge role in keeping Tarnil safe and if she gets depleted, even if I can fix that, it's a glaring vulnerability. For the rest, I'm going to need someone to train whoever is going to be my spymaster eventually. Probably someone from the Village."*

"I suspect she'll agree to that. She needs to start thinking about her replacement, too." Iniri sighed.

"She deserves to retire sometime before she dies in office, and it will probably take at least a decade to train someone else, once we find someone with the appropriate starting Class and Affinity."

*"I find it hard to believe people start out with spy-type skills."*

"Oh, certainly not. Usually we find someone with observation and stealth-oriented Class and Skills. That gives them the right temperament to start, and some extra training in philosophies of information gathering and management means they'll grow into their own sort of Spymaster."

*"Huh,"* I said, thinking of Suna. An observation Class with a stealth Skill. Not that I was going to volunteer for her such a thing. She was far too young and I'd feel bad about hijacking her life for a post I wasn't sure I really needed. *"I'll keep it in mind."*

I assembled the trait list in advance of the meeting, though nothing caught my eye as being particularly useful in dealing with Tor Kot. With ten points I could maybe afford some of the more interesting nonessential traits, though there was a good argument for trying to save for something like [Spawn Core].

- Burrowing: Upgrades [Boring Tendril] into [Burrower]. (1)
- Core Specialization: Ecology:
  - Companion Bounty: Creates Companion-attuned food Climates. (1)

- Affinity Ecology: Add additional plants influenced by governed Affinities to Climates (1)
- Stellar Transformation: Create a new stellar Affinity version of a selected magical plant. (2)
- Stellar Region: Infuse a selected area with stellar Affinity mana. (3)
- Ecological Directives: Allows Companions to designate areas where Climates will be created. (3)
- Climate Flourishing: Populate a targeted Climate instance with adapted animal life. (5)
- Inhabitant Climates: Adapt Climates to suit Dungeon inhabitants. (8)
- Core Specialization: Habitation:
  - Inhabitant Adaptation: Adapt inhabitants to Dungeon Climates they reside in. (10)
  - Affinity Attunement: Dungeon inhabitants gain governed Affinity Classes and Skills with less effort. (10)
- Core Specialization: Companion:
  - Empower: Immensely amplify Companion abilities for a short time, for a great cost. (1)
  - Companion Adaptation: Companions are immune to negative effects of dungeon Climates. (4)
  - Companion Directives: Grants Companions limited access to dungeon senses and build options. Companions may designate goals. (5 points).
  - Pinnacle: Companions of Dungeon Inhabitant species are made an exemplar of that species. (8)
  - Class Management: Companions may adjust Class and Skill details. (10)
  - Climate Empowering: Allows a Companion to be empowered by the nature of a linked Climate. (10)
  - Inspiration: Companions of Dungeon Inhabitant species gain natural leadership insight toward that species. (15)
  - Affinity Infusion: Companions may infuse their Classes or Skills with any governed Affinity. (20)
- Core Specialization: Stellar
  - Field: Depths of Space: Reduced gravity and atmosphere. (2)
  - Field: Corona: Lashing tendrils of intense heat, light, and stellar Affinity mana. (2)
- Core Specialization: Defense: Increases experience generated by defensive structures. Unlocks additional defensive materials. (4)
- Core Specialization: Dungeon Combat: Increases potency of combat versions of Skills and structures. Unlocks additional combat Skills. (4)
- Spawn Core: Allows the Dungeon to generate additional Cores. (20)
- Manifest: Allows the Dungeon to condense its mana into physical form. (30)
- Antithesis: Your existence becomes inimical to your ANATHEMA. Contact results in annihilation. (35)

“Aside from saving for [Spawn Core], I’d actually lean toward [Climate Flourishing],” Iniri said when they were all gathered around the table again. “After that second invasion, there are huge swaths of the country without any real wildlife. Tarnil will be easier to fill up with animals than the Caldera will be, that’s for sure.”

“With the dragons around, I am less worried about potential mana beasts,” Taelah agreed. “It’s not necessary but it might be nice.”

“If a dungeon seed takes three months, then a full core probably takes a year or more,” Shayma pointed out. “It’s probably very useful, but not in the short term.”

“I’m not sure there is anything particularly useful in the short term.” Ansaë said, considering the list. “Animals aren’t necessary; the stellar Fields are interesting but you have other defenses. Shayma is correct that it’s likely spawning a core will have an immense cost.”

“Sounds like you don’t like any of them,” I observed.

“More that you’ve already purchased the ones that are obviously the best.” Iniri tapped her forefinger against her chin. “Perhaps [Climate Flourishing] and [Burrowing]. While animals aren’t necessary, we really don’t have any other way to populate land at the moment, and if you’re going to be dealing with the Underneath more, [Burrowing] is a must.”

“Ah, yeah, definitely. Though if I buy that it rules out [Climate Empowering], which might be nice?”

“Your mana link already boosts Shayma and I to fifth-tier power,” Iniri said dryly. “Normally I’d say it’s the peak of idiocy to refuse *more* power, but there are some problems we can’t solve with our Classes alone.”

“Right. Let’s see what happens when I buy these, then.” I’d already learned that the actual trait descriptions weren’t quite good enough, which fit in with the rest of my overlay.

[Burrowing] came first, and as soon as I bought the trait my boring tendrils sucked down a bunch of biomass and went from small mana-powered limbs to giant, stone-crushing spikes. Boring tendrils were not long enough to exceed the range of [Genius Loci], so as long as I was paying attention I’d never run into anything unexpected, but the [Burrowers] were something like a hundred meters long and five meters wide, smashing through anything in the way. What really surprised me, though, was that it affected something I’d completely forgotten.

*Evolving [Boring Beetles] into [Burrowing Wyrms].*

The three boring beetles hibernating in my one and only monster station got an upgrade. The station consumed a few thousand biomass to increase massively in size and the three beetles got wrapped in black cocoons as they were upgraded. Since I didn’t have any monsters of my own, unless beetles actually counted, it was fascinating to get some insight on what normal dungeons had available.

I didn’t have any obvious countdowns, but considering that the beetles were a vestigial part of a path I was locked out of, I wasn’t surprised. If anything, it was amazing that the trait had applied to them at all. The name reminded me of something One-Eye-Green had mentioned, about how the lowways were made, and I had a suspicion I was going to be getting the monster that did exactly that. In which case they might well end up pretty darn big.

[Climate Flourishing] was next, which unlocked an entry of the same name under my Climate Category. To experiment with it, I targeted a very tiny test Climate, partitioned off in its own chamber. Just a normal Forest Climate, only big enough to contain a few trees and shrubs. One wall was entirely glass so my council could see what happened, strengthened with [Structural Mana Reinforcement] in case there

was something dramatic. Though with Ansaë there, I doubted there was anything I could accidentally create that she couldn't take care of.

When I triggered the entry a bunch of biomass drained from my reserves and a number of black flesh cocoons, almost exactly like the ones created for [Relocate], sprouted from branches and between blades of grass. None of them were more than a few centimeters across, and they only lasted for about a minute before disgorging their contents and shrinking to nothing.

In hindsight, it was obvious that a tiny climate wouldn't support anything large, so the fact that the cocoons produced only insects and larvae was not surprising. What was most interesting to me was that the organisms created seemed to be both purely mundane and not yet adult. The black cocoons were obviously doing some sort of rapid bioprinting or cloning, or the magical version of such, but they weren't giving me fully adult specimens. I wasn't sure if that was a limitation or a preference, or if there was any functional difference when I didn't have much control over what the Skill did.

Nor did I have any control over what the Skill produced. The insects went about their insect business, crawling around, flapping or flying, eating leaves and grass. The cocoons vanished like [Relocate] did, rather than sticking around like the station the boring beetles – now burrowing wyrms – used. So far as I could see they were perfectly mundane creatures, with names like [Terric Ant] and [Lero Moth].

"I hope it can make something other than insects," Iniri said, then she shook her head, realizing what she was complaining about. "That is, seeing things appear out of nothing like that is impressive, and I imagine it can do more."

"It's not completely out of nothing," Ansaë remarked. "There's direct Artifact processes there, something on the same level as your core crystals. I don't think that I could mimic them."

*"Yeah, building functional, living organisms from raw materials requires a lot of knowledge and finesse. Atomic level precision and that's just to start."* Though since it was magic I didn't think it was exactly like how a technological civilization would go about making creatures like that. The dungeon system seemed to run off of a mishmash of genetic and magical and akashic blueprints anyway, and I could see in a vague sense how it could make monsters and, thus, normal animals.

"Maybe try a larger area?" Taelah suggested. "Some wood in Tarnil somewhere?"

*"Yeah, see if I can't get some deer or something."* I looked over the Tarnil wilderness and selected a spot near the base of my starforge mountain, where [Conservatory] had regrown the plants and landscape but not much in the way of animal life had yet returned. There was a *lot* of Tarnil where that was the case, but most of the affected area had farms and villages and settlements spread throughout the landscape. I opened a portal for my council, and once they stepped through I tried using [Climate Flourishing] again.

It took three tries. The first try, it didn't work because I didn't actually have a Climate in that area. I hadn't kept the country-wide [Conservatory] for obvious reasons, so it was just normal landscape. For a little bit I tried fiddling with the Forest Climate to match what was already there, then realized I was doing it the hard way and threw up [Conservatory] again. That led to the second try, which completely drained my biomass reserves and led to very little apparent effect, because it was distributed over such a large area. It did spawn insects and squirrels and mice but nothing of any larger mass.

The third try, I limited it to about ten acres surrounding the portal, waited a handful of seconds for my biomass reserves to top up from passive income, and triggered it. Black dungeon-flesh sprouted from the ground and from trees like some strange fruit or mushroom, ranging from the small insects I'd seen before to juvenile deer and bears. The ones that took the longest to reveal their contents were the ones containing predatory cats, lizards, and birds, most of which seemed mundane but some had clear mana adaptations.

"Oh, my. That is amazing," said Taelah, looking around at a forest suddenly no longer silent, but filled with the buzzing of insects and the chirping of birds. Iniri looked quite happy and Shayma somehow had already found a juvenile [Moss Lynx] to pet. The poor cat didn't have any chance of escaping, though it didn't seem too displeased as Shayma scratched behind its ears.

"Just imagine if all those were monsters," Ansaë said.

*"It's a little weird. Monsters seem to need to gestate, they need the actual genetic process. These creatures — I think they're directly duplicating something else in the world. Kind of like plants."* It implied that a dungeon could create unending monster clones, though, which might explain how they managed such enormous numbers with relatively few dungeon-wives. There was also the chance the synthesized animals were deficient in some capacity, short-lived or sterile or something. Which might cause issues down the line, but there was little I could do about it at the moment.

"If all monsters are capable of becoming normal people, with a full Status and all, then that may be why," Taelah suggested, watching a young bird fly overhead. "You need a person to pass along that spark. To provide potential for the soul."

*"Oh, possibly."* I had been thinking of the soul as a mechanistic thing for so long that I forgot it was also entirely magic. Yes, it was obviously some sort of magical genome and the akashic connection, but it was *still magic* and operated under non-mechanical rules. Of course souls couldn't be generated ex nihilo, even if they were something with a concrete purpose and not just a metaphysical encapsulation of someone's essence.

It did make me wonder what would happen if I could somehow get the dungeon system to generate monsters without the need for an actual mother. Assuming they lacked souls, then they'd be unable to connect to the akasha, and judging by what Shayma said about Yamal's mind, they might not develop consciousness either. So they'd be almost zombie things, without any of the features of Status.

Rather like blightbeasts.

It felt like a bit of a logical leap, but I liked it. I could even feel a bit of a twinge from [Blue's Sagacity]. It wasn't exactly a level-up, but I got the impression that the next level wasn't too far away. So my guess was accurate, or at least along the right lines. Considering that feedback, I shared my thoughts with the women who were poking around the forest underfloor.

"That the Red Cores spread depletion does suggest there's a dungeon connection to blightbeasts," Iniri agreed. "It wouldn't surprise me at all."

"You were there, weren't you?" Shayma asked Ansaë. "What was it like?"

"I never saw the source directly," Ansaë said thoughtfully. "There's a great hurricane of depletion on the surface, wrapped around a large wound on the central island. A massive chasm nearly cutting it in two. I didn't get much further than the surface and trying to scry into that would be nearly impossible, not to mention dangerous."

*"If it's just a dungeon, they have those damn dungeonbane weapons to take care of it. So it can't be that simple."*

"Yes, true. We'll have to deal with it someday, so we'll have to figure it out. I imagine adventurer's rules about preparation applies to this, too," Shayma said.

"Don't fight something you can't identify? It's good advice no matter what." Iniri turned around, surveying the surroundings. "[Queen's Insight] isn't giving me any particular warnings about this wildlife, so they don't count as monsters. Once again, you're doing impossible things." She laughed, clearly trying to relax some. Iniri still had the habit of slipping into professional distance, and was making efforts to break it. "Thank you so much."

*"You're welcome. Honestly I was a little worried there'd be some problems, considering that fauna's been off-limits for ages. But populating the Caldera this way is going to take absolute ages."*

"Just populate little bits of each area and let animals spread naturally," Taelah suggested. "We're not missing *that* much so far, and that way you don't overload the dragons."

*"I suppose so. It's not particularly urgent. Even if the wildlife dies out I suppose I can just make more later on when I want to focus on it."* Depending on how long it took the Chiuxatli to finalize the Fortress design, I might have some of that time, since I doubted that the mage-king meeting was going to take place in the next few days. Maybe not even the next few weeks.

The climate seemed to be fairly mild on Orn, but winter was universally not considered a good time to travel. There was snow in Tarnil, Nivir's fog grew so thick it was impossible to see through, and apparently storms battered Ir on a regular basis. Besides, Midwinter was only a few weeks away and people were getting ready for the holiday.

Everyone seemed happy enough with the demonstration, and while I was poking around in my overlay I decided I might as well spend some of the experience Shayma had been generating for me. I hadn't been making much myself since I'd been killing things, rather than driving them off, and wasn't too worried about my defenses. Maybe I'd get more experience once the wards were up.

A glance through my categories didn't reveal anything of immediate interest. A lot of them were already at maximum, [Fabrication] being the standout laggard at only 6, but so far I'd had to discover everything in the category myself. The only other potential experience sinks for the moment were Fields, and of those the only ones I felt were worth pumping were [Greater Light] and [Hungering Dark].

So I did, raising them to 10 each. My experience share with Taelah and Shayma meant I had quite the pool to spend, though it was more or less depleted after boosting my improved Fields. [Hungering Dark] at 10 added *magic* to the list of things it ate, making it feel a little bit like void Affinity. It was certainly terrifying. [Greater Light], on the other hand, gained some actual solidity at 10. Not as intrinsically creepy as [Hungering Dark] but intimidating all the same.

With that, there wasn't much left I could do before the meeting with the mage kings, aside from work on my Fortress weaponry. It would be nice to get at least that much done before the meeting, but if not, Shayma was a potent deterrent all her own. If they tried anything, they'd regret it.