

Chapter 32B: Year 1, Day 291 – Shayma

It wasn't every day that she got to go rescue a prince. Technically, princeps futurum, since Orrelin thought itself as slightly different from a regular kingdom, but it was close enough. Part of her was a little surprised that Blue was fine with it, considering that he adamantly did not want to get involved in other people's problems, but she supposed it *was* an issue of Tarnil's safety, in the end.

According to Cheya, the kid was hidden away on one of the less well-known crown estates, along with some portion of the household. Nobody knew if the actual princeps was still alive or not, but it didn't seem likely. If he *was*, he could probably be persuaded to stand aside for his son, and if not, that was a problem for another day.

Annit and Keri were on call in case there was any need for healing, and so were her parents if there was any need to wrangle children or frightened civilians. Between them, Sienne and Giorn could charm the leaves off of trees. They'd considered asking Taelah for help too, because her mom skills were excellent, but this was more an issue of Tarnil rather than of Blue or the Caldera. No doubt a stay in the Caldera would do the princeps good, but he couldn't do that *and* take control of Orrelin.

Shayma stepped through the portal Blue had conjured for her, right at the edge of the Orrelin plateau, and looked upward. High above she could spot the lift working, likely about to spill more refugees into the camp. Similar things were happening in Nivir and on the other side where the plateau touched Ir's territory. They probably *weren't* happening in Kinul, because it was a horrible swamp there and any attempts to squat on the untamed land would end in disaster.

She shifted into dragon form and shrouded herself with her Domain, flying upward and past the lip of the plateau. If nothing else, the strange division of Orrelin into walled cells made directions easy, as she could just count the cells as she went along. Her target was actually nowhere near any of the plateau edges nor near the capital cell, but rather further west.

Along the way she could see the state of Orrelin, which seemed to vary from cell to cell. Some seemed mostly fine, while others had huge swaths of burnt acreage. A few had the skeletal remains of towns, or had fires actively burning. Shayma wasn't sure what good came of setting things aflame but it seemed to be inevitable whenever there was fighting or unrest.

While she was just there for the princeps, she couldn't stop herself from swooping down to help now and again. She *was* a [Hero], after all, and while things in Orrelin were too complicated for her to fix personally, she could stop any normal injustices she saw. Here, she snuffed out the flames that threatened to engulf a house with people sheltering inside. There, she disarmed and flattened a gang of bandits chasing some civilian [Farmers].

There was no way to save everyone from everything, and the best way to *stop* what was going on was to reinstate order, so she didn't actively seek out more work on the way. It was simply that she didn't ignore what she *did* see. Shayma didn't stop to talk with the people she saved, just snuffed fires, rescued people from rubble, neutralized bandits and overzealous soldiers or Inquisitors.

"Man, you're effective," Blue observed.

"I'm fourth-tier, I'd better be," she said modestly.

She left a trail of anti-destruction behind her, though some cells seemed to not even notice that there was anything going on in the rest of Orrelin, operating as though they were perfectly fine. Which could actually be true, considering how the walls blocked things off. The trail went westward until she reached one occupied by a large lake, where Cheya said the redoubt lay.

"That doesn't look good." Shayma agreed. There appeared to be a siege going on, with a big manor house set back against the lake with the landward part hemmed in by armed camps of Classers. Though there was nothing happening at the moment she arrived, powerful magical wards shimmered, occasionally distorting the air.

"Looks like the Inquisition's forces," Shayma said. "Though I guess that was expected."

"Yeah, civil wars are horrible and messy."

"I feel a little bad," she admitted. "Since we kind of kicked this off. But it's not like we did *that* much."

"If the king really didn't know what was going on with the blightbeasts, then this coup was probably already in process." Blue mused. *"Though to be honest, I'm not exactly impressed with how they run the country."*

"Yeah," Shayma said, and pumped her wings, swooping in toward the manor house with her domain shielding her from view while she circled it. While she could have broken through the wards, that would just give the inquisition's forces a way in. Instead, she shifted to spirit form, becoming intangible, and focused on the actual ward makeup.

Blue had once described to her how a spirit had slipped right through his lands without him even noticing until it had needed to displace the spatial magic that surrounded the Caldera. As a being of pure mana she could do the same sort of thing, and she was a lot smarter than the dragonbane spirit. She'd been studying wards, something vastly accelerated by Blue's bargain with the Chiuxatli and the [Craft Hall], and was fairly conversant in their structures and their weaknesses.

It would actually have been a lot easier for her to slip through if she were *less* powerful, as her sheer magical presence made it more likely that she'd trip something by accident, but even so she managed to ease her way through the layers of ward structure protecting the manor. Once inside, it was easier to move about. Blue provided the identities of people as she ghosted through the building, identifying maids, soldiers, butlers, servants, gardeners, and the occasional [Dux] or [Patrician].

She found the kid she was looking for in one of the rooms looking out over the lake, quietly working on runecraft with his tutor. It was a little absurd, considering what was going on outside, but it wasn't like cowering and crying would have helped anything. Plus, he was eight. There was really nothing he could do himself to change the course of events.

"So who do I talk to?" She mused to Blue, casting about for who was actually in charge.

"Is his mom here? Or, well. Maybe Cheya would know?"

"Oh, right." She rolled her eyes, annoyed that hadn't been her first thought. 「Whom do I talk to?」 Shayma sent to Iniri. 「I don't think just suddenly appearing in front of Cayleb here would work.」

「Oh, one moment,」 Iniri replied, and Shayma drifted through the manor while Iniri consulted. While Cayleb was relaxed enough and quiet, the Classers behind the wards were tense. Especially the mages, one of which started looking around when she got near enough. She hastily tightened the shielding of her domain, drifting back away before she triggered some alarm.

「You're looking for [Dux] Valentia, that's his mother,」 Iniri said. 「Cheya's not certain of her exact Class name. Barring that, [Stone Barricade Captain] Forsythe. He should be in charge of Cayleb's personal guard.」

「Got it,」 Shayma sent back, and went hunting for the names Iniri had given her. Part of her wondered why Valentia wasn't with her son, but she supposed at eight years old he deserved *some* independence. Or maybe she just didn't want to worry him by hovering.

Forsythe was easy enough to find, pacing the defensive points of the manor, but it was a little harder to hunt down Valentia. For a few minutes Shayma thought that she wasn't even there, but eventually located the woman inside what seemed to be a bunker, hidden underneath the manor basement, lying down and apparently napping.

「*[Iron Meadow Dux] Valentia Alakeim,*」 Blue supplied, and Shayma manifested herself outside the door of the small bedroom in the bunker, rapping solidly.

Valentia stirred and groaned, clutching her head, and Shayma decided she was actually hung over, not simply napping. Under the circumstances, it was hard to blame her. She waited patiently for Valentia to stagger over to the door, hitting her with some healing as she came. Valentia wasn't likely to be happy regardless of her own condition, but suffering from a hangover might make her do something stupid.

「Who are you?」 Valentia said the moment she opened the door, taking in Shayma. There were no fox-kin in Orrelin so far as Shayma knew, so it was pretty obvious that she wasn't one of the normal household.

「My name is Shayma Ell, the Voice of Blue,」 Shayma said, smiling at Valentia as if to a friend. 「I'm here on behalf of Tarnil.」 Valentia blinked at her, then shut the door. Blue laughed in her ear as Valentia shuffled back toward the bed.

「*I think you came on too strong, there,*」 Blue said.

「Honestly, you'd think that a ruler would be smarter than that,」 Shayma frowned.

「*You say, after seeing how useless the king was.*」

「Okay, point.」 Shayma sighed and teleported into the room. 「*[Iron Meadow Dux] Valentia, I really am here to help you,*」 she said, making the woman wheel around to stare at her.

「Wait, you're real?」 Her words were a little difficult to understand, with a thicker Orrelin accent than anyone else Shayma had ever heard.

「I am,」 Shayma said patiently. 「I came here to rescue you and your son. And your entire household, in fact.」

“Oh,” Valentia said, then simply dropped into her bed and buried her face in her hands, starting to sob. Shayma stood awkwardly for a moment before setting down next to her and patting her soothingly on the back. Eventually the woman calmed down some, scrubbing away tears as she looked over at Shayma.

“I know this isn’t free,” Valentia said. “What is it you need?”

“Oh, there are no conditions for rescuing you,” Shayma assured her. “I’m here now and I can bring everyone back to Tarnil. But Queen Iniri can’t let what’s happening here in Orrelin go on, so she has certain conditions for *returning* you.”

“I see,” Valentia said in a tired voice. “It’s not like any of us are in a position to argue.”

“It’s not like Queen Iniri is going to force you to do anything,” Shayma told her. “At this point it’s obvious that something like this was coming for a while, and you’re going to need help to regain control of Orrelin.” Then she shook her head; it wasn’t the time or place to talk politics, and anyway, Iniri did it better than she did. “Unless you think you can get out of this siege yourself, I suggest you leave now and figure everything else later.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Valentia rubbed her face again and stood. “I’d ask how you got in here but I’ve heard a little bit about you. I suppose a Power can do whatever they want.”

“Not whatever they want,” Shayma disagreed. “Besides, I’m here on Iniri’s behalf. Though after seeing Orrelin in the state it’s in, I know it can’t continue this way.”

“No, it can’t,” Valentia said, showing a little bit of resolve at last. “Very well, I will introduce you to Captain Forsythe and my son.”

Shayma watched with interest as Valentia opened the door to the bunker with the royal seal she carried, and followed her back into the main portion of the manor. Some of the guards gave her sharp glances but given that Valentia was escorting her and seemed unconcerned, they didn’t do anything else. At least, not until Captain Forsythe, who took one look and threw up a stone wall between her and Valentia.

She could have shattered it with a punch, made it unreal with her Domain, or maybe even suppressed the Skill entirely with Blue’s Presence, but so long as he didn’t actively attack her she was willing to let him have his entirely reasonable reactions. Valentia was more surprised, flinching away from the stone wall and glancing between it and Forsythe.

“Intruder!” He bellowed out, voice carrying as other soldiers suddenly jerked to attention. “Squads three and four to my location, squad two check the wards!”

“Captain,” Valentia protested. “This is— she is— it’s Blue’s person.”

“*What?*” Forsythe sounded incredulous. “That’s even worse!”

“If you please, Captain,” Shayma interrupted, banishing the stone barrier with her Domain and walking forward. “I am only here to help. I can get all of you safely out of this manor and, hopefully, help Orrelin in the process.”

“But you’re the one who started all this,” Forsythe said, leveling his sword at her. “It’s all your fault.”

"I have no interest in whatever propaganda has been put out about Blue and myself," Shayma said, taking another step forward. With a flex of her will his sword changed into a bird, fluttering over to perch on her right shoulder, while his armor slid down and formed into a hound that came and sat to her left, leaving him in his tunic and hose. "I killed no people and told no lies. Even now, I am only here to help."

Valentia and Forsythe stared at her, the guard captain's hands trying to grip a blade that was no longer there. Shayma raised her eyebrows at them. She had Blue's presence wrapped around her so it was obvious she was no normal person, but she wasn't using it like a club, which would have been her next option. But she hoped that simply doing away with his arms and armor, especially in the way that she did, would be shocking enough to force his brain into more productive action.

"...I see," Forsythe managed at last.

"I can transport everyone here to Tarnil," Shayma told him. "Let them siege an empty house."

"Couldn't you just wipe out the forces out there?" Forsythe frowned, glancing out toward the front of the manor. "I've heard stories—"

"I could, but then Tarnil might as well conquer Orrelin by force." Shayma said. "We do want to solve Orrelin's troubles, but it has to be in a way that makes sure that Orrelin won't cause *us* trouble."

"...Captain, we can't stay here," Valentia pleaded. Forsythe looked at her, then around at the other soldiers who were hesitating to approach, considering the circumstances.

"You're right, ma'am," he conceded, and turned to Shayma again. "How will you...?"

"I'll open a portal to Tarnil," Shayma told them.

"*Whenever you say*," Blue put in, probably to assure her he was paying attention.

"You'd better go talk to Princeps Cayleb while I get my men ready for evacuation," Forsythe suggested, and Valentia nodded. Shayma already knew where Cayleb was, but followed Valentia nonetheless, despite the fact that she didn't seem to be entirely clear on her son's schedule. After looking for him in the kitchen and the library, she finally led Shayma to the study where he actually was.

"Cayleb, honey," Valentia called, and the youth looked up from his books.

"Yes, mother?" Cayleb asked, very solemn and proper. Looking at them the family resemblance was obvious, even accounting for the earthy complexions all Orrelin natives shared.

"We're leaving," Valentia said. "We're going somewhere safe."

"Where is that, mother?"

"Well," Valentia said, casting a look at Shayma. "Tarnil."

"But mother, isn't it Tarnil we're fighting?" He looked confused, as well he might be if that was the lie they were feeding him. Valentia looked to Shayma for help, and she suppressed a sigh.

“You know how you might knock over a vase or something and then say you didn’t because you don’t want to get into trouble?” Shayma asked crouching down to be at eye level with Cayleb. He nodded silently. “That’s sort of the same reason they told you that it’s Tarnil’s fault this happened.”

“Oh,” he said, and she wasn’t sure that the explanation really worked, but it seemed to satisfy him for the moment.

“I’ll set up a portal in a moment,” Shayma said, then had a thought.

「They’re in a manor house. Should Blue just bring the entire manor through?」

「No,」 Iniri replied. 「That would mean they were still in their territory even if it was in Tarnil. It’d make things complicated.」

「Makes sense.」 She wasn’t completely politically inept, thanks to Iniri’s tutelage, but she hadn’t actually thought of that. 「Portal it is. Just tell Blue where you want it.」

“It’ll take some time to pack,” Valentia said hesitantly, and Shayma shrugged.

“Don’t take too long, but we’re not in so much of a rush that you can’t take some luggage.” Shayma knew she had a skewed idea of what luggage entailed since she had access to her own pocket space as well as Blue’s entire inventory, but at the same time knew that some nobles thought that light packing was five wagonloads. According to her parents, there were even merchants that acted that way.

From what Shayma saw as she hung around and waited on every one to pack up, Valentia was very much one of those people. Their possessions had been severely depleted in their escape to the manor, but Valentia still seemed bent on retrieving everything of value from the manor up to and including the paintings on the walls. In contrast, Forsythe had the troops ready to pull back in minutes, but they couldn’t abandon their posts while the siege was still going on. Even if the wards were doing most of the heavy lifting, there were still probing attacks on occasion.

When Valentia had servants start loading up furniture, though, Shayma stepped in.

“You’ll have furniture where you’re going. Let’s get everyone out of here so you can relax.”

“But this is my favorite chair,” Valentia said inanely, as if it weren’t identical to seven others in the room. She seemed to worry herself into a fret far too easily, and while she wasn’t actually stupid, she just had no experience operating under pressure. Shayma left her and found Forsythe, who was prowling the manor walls.

“Start getting everyone out,” Shayma told him. “They’re just dithering at this point, and I’d rather get out of here before there’s some surprise.”

“Yes, agreed,” Forsythe said, without looking at her, instead staring out at the banners of the various forces camped around the manor. They looked like various noble crests, which meant they were technically in rebellion and probably would not fare well when Iniri put the country back together. After another moment he started giving orders and Shayma headed to the sitting room to open the portal.

「We’re sending them to a retreat that one of my Dukes offered for the purpose,」 Iniri told her.

「Great,」 she sent back, passing that on to Forsythe. While he seemed to take her word for it, the first people through were actually several Classers, to ensure that the other side was safe. Not that they had many choices. When it was time for Cayleb to go through, he stopped to look at her.

“Is it safe?” For all that he was eight, he knew exactly who was in charge.

“Completely safe,” Shayma told him. “You won’t just be protected by Queen Iniri, but by Blue as well, and he’ll make sure nothing happens to you.”

“Well, now that you’ve said that, I’d better.”