

Day 188 - Iniri

Iniri groaned as she stretched out in the hot spring. She was so stressed that she was very tempted to ask Blue for a more intimate service, but ultimately did not. Iniri wasn't quite ready to cross that bridge yet, even if a lot of her really wanted to. It did help that Blue's various Fields meant that all the tension aches vanished almost immediately, and beyond that there was still something soothing about the hot, mineralized water. Magic might heal injury, but active relaxation was something else.

It had been the most complicated, highest-stakes political discourse she'd had in her relatively short time as Tarnil's queen and she wasn't interested in repeating the experience anytime soon. It wasn't the same stress of dealing with her kingdom being eaten alive by invaders, but it wasn't much better. Even if she knew none of the forces at the summit would dare attack Tarnil, her every word and gesture might result in a poor trade deal or a hidden grudge. Blue's power couldn't fix *that* unless he wanted to subjugate the rest of Orn.

The summit had also confirmed that there were no good prospects for a political marriage, especially with Tarnil's new status. None of the people she'd met at the summit were great prospects for marriage, aside from Haerlish's princes. Even with them, she'd have to wait to find out who *wasn't* going to be king. She wasn't entirely certain it was the best idea to tie Tarnil too closely to Haerlish, even if that were to occur any time soon, in part due to the insanity of The Hurricane becoming her *aunt* if she took that path.

The calculations of dynasty were not simple, which was another reason she couldn't indulge herself with Blue. She knew she wanted some things just because she wanted them, and emotion and hormones absolutely compromised her ability to think logically. She couldn't think of herself. Instead, she needed to worry about the stability and safety of Tarnil beyond the immediate or even short term. Her spouse would have an impact on who her children and grandchildren owed and who owed them. Which branches of nobility or which countries were closer, and which ones frozen out by the new family tree.

Even the nobles of Tarnil were poor considerations for her. They had been badly fractured by the invasion, and though she'd raised up a number of higher-tier Classers to replace them, it hadn't been nearly long enough to assure herself of their loyalty or stability or even competence. Most of the remaining ones had been in the cities Tor Kot had taken and nobody knew how compromised they might be. Even if Blue's monsters were helping in that regard, she wasn't sure how much she trusted them. Either the monsters or the nobles.

Finally, while Tarnil was currently protected by Blue, that protection had a very sharp expiration date and when the countdown stopped, the country needed to be able to stand on its own. She wasn't going to be around to see that so there was no guarantee the reigning monarch would even be on good terms with Blue. Unless, of course, she went the obvious route.

Now that Blue was recognized, officially, by all and sundry she couldn't avoid thinking about it. In a lot of ways Blue would be the perfect match for her. He wouldn't claim the throne, nor would any of his bloodline, as it were. It would tie Tarnil to Blue for a very long time indeed, even after the Bargain finished, but it would mean her children wouldn't have a father as such and there was no telling what Blue's biological heritage would even *be*.

Iniri groaned and decided to stop thinking on it for the moment before she drove herself insane. She plunged her head under the water as if she could simply scrub out some the thoughts she was having and then resurfaced and took a deep breath. Really, she should be dancing with joy for how well everything went. Not only did everyone, save Orrelin, officially recognize Blue, they all agreed to extremely valuable trade agreements that would help stabilize Tarnil's economy.

Even Wright was practically eating out of her hand. If he weren't already married she thought he might have actually proposed once he found out she could conjure [Sunmetal]. The man could be rather intense, and not just because he was a fifth-tier Classer. It was just a shame Ir's enthusiasm hadn't convinced Orrelin to overcome their normal isolationism, even if she'd never been too confident that Orrelin would do anything. It was a worry if they had been involved somehow at directing the dragons toward Tarnil, but since Blue had taken care of them so easily, not much of one.

She splashed into the deeper end for a moment, thinking of the beach house that Shayma had described, then sighed and pulled herself out of the hot spring. Taking time out to swim wasn't something she could afford just yet. Maybe soon, if there were no other disasters, but not now.

Iniri dried and dressed then teleported herself back to her tower in the Palace. She stretched and nodded to her Queensguard as she left her private suite, heading toward her office to try and take care of some of the last vestiges of paperwork. She could have zipped there with [Swiftray], but after the abundance of food at the summit she felt like she needed to walk some of it off, and besides, there was no point in having a gorgeous palace if she never appreciated it.

She walked in on Cheya sorting through things on her own desk, and raised her eyebrows at her [Spymistress]. Cheya had the good grace to look slightly abashed, since she was supposed to be taking a break after the summit. It didn't last long, and instead Cheya began tidying up the papers strewn across her desk.

"Emperor Wright already sent us a message about the spies," she said casually. At Cheya's suggestion, they'd loaded all the people they'd caught trying to infiltrate the summit that were of either Ir or Anell provenance onto Wright's ship. Tarnil didn't have the leverage to do anything with them, but Ir might.

"Do tell," Iniri said, taking a seat at her own desk.

"Two of them were just there to send advance notice of the summit's outcome to their respective masters. Fairly harmless, as things go. One of them, though, has a patron that specializes in poisons. From what I understand that will be judged rather more severely than those who were merely overcurious." Cheya smiled without any amusement at all.

"I wish him luck," Iniri said. She was glad nobody from Tarnil had tried subverting things, especially considering how fragile everything still was.

"The only other thing of note to report is that I think the Chiuxatli are having a disagreement with their homeland." Cheya frowned. "I can't actually understand their language yet, so I can't tell you the exact nature of it."

"So long as they stick to their agreement," Iniri said with a grimace. She was willing to host a reasonable number of Chiuxatli for the foreseeable future, but not if they brought their own politics into it.

"Hey, Iniri?" Blue's attention swept over her, and she cocked her head. She knew she didn't necessarily have to jump when Blue asked for her, but the sheer weight of his presence made her reflexively pay attention.

"Yes, Blue?" She responded.

"In maybe an hour or so, I'm thinking about getting everyone to interview the dragons I'm adopting. Make sure they pass muster."

"You're adopting *dragons*?" Iniri asked incredulously, drawing a knowing look from Cheya. Her [Spymistress] was rather sanguine about some of what Blue did, but Iniri couldn't help her voice hitting a certain pitch when Blue truly surprised her.

"Well, I'm planning to. But I want to make sure they're worth my time, so they all need to listen to my Companions and you have more experience gauging people than I do, I think."

"Gauging people, not gauging dragons," Iniri protested, but she already knew that she was going to agree. How could she not? "Very well," she said, before Blue could continue arguing. "Two hours, you say?"

"About that, yes."

"I'll be ready," she told him, then immediately switched to Companion Concord. 「So Blue wants me to interview some dragons like they're going to be members of my Queensguard.」

「Yes, he was just telling me about it.」 Shayma responded. 「I get along with Ansaë and she's essentially the queen of dragons, so it probably won't be an issue.」

「Husband does have lofty aspirations.」 Taelah added, half-amused and half-smug. 「They'll help me with cataloguing everything in the Caldera as well, so I'm looking forward to meeting them.」

「Oh, I know it will be fine.」 Iniri told them. 「It's just sometimes I'm still startled by Blue being Blue.」

She filled in Cheya and her Queensguard about the change in plans, not that there was anything particularly urgent scheduled for the evening. To some extent they weren't particularly happy that she went off to see Blue on her own most of the time, but it was a bit of a special case. Blue certainly wasn't any threat to Iniri, and if he was there was nothing anyone could have done about it anyway.

She worked on tidying up after the summit for the next hour and a bit, signing off on messages going out to merchants and nobles with what they needed to do to fulfill the trade terms. Some of them went by messenger, and some by bird-construct, depending on the recipient. One thing the new trade terms gave her was an excuse to pull Wildwood Retreat back toward actual crown control, rather than being its own entity ruled by a retired fourth-tier. Monat was actually quietly happy to cede some administrative control, and the extra trade would probably offset the ire of the merchants who were used to operating without oversight.

In truth she was more than happy to deal with dragons after spending time trying to figure out how to diplomatically tell people Tarnil wasn't going to let them do whatever they wanted anymore. She

headed back to her dedicated teleport and pulled herself to the council chamber, finding it empty but with a portal open on one side.

"Just go through the portal," Blue told her. "I don't think any of them can shift like Ansaë so the conference room would be, uh, a little crowded."

"I can imagine," she said, and walked through the indicated portal. On the other side was a space that obviously drew inspiration from the summit platform Blue had put together. There were three chairs raised up high on a marble platform, one for each of Blue's Companions, overlooking a large marble square. They were close to The Silver Woe's immense tower, the structure rising high above them, and it was no longer just an empty building. There were winged shapes flying about within it, leaving and heading her way.

Iniri trusted Blue and was sure The Silver Woe wouldn't let anything happen, but just in case one of the dragons decided to be entirely stupid she wanted a little bit of insurance. She conjured some [Sunmetal] and a few [Guardian Constellations], forming a protective rune on the marble in front of the chairs. After a moment, the marble seemed to grow upward, encasing the protection.

"Good idea," Blue said. "I think it'll be fine but never can be too careful. Taelah and Shayma are on their way." The last sentence seemed almost redundant as Shayma came through the portal a few seconds later, followed by Taelah. Shayma smiled and gave her a hug, and Taelah nodded before glancing at the incoming dragons, then down at the runes.

"Thank you," she told Iniri.

"These are dragons we're dealing with," she said by way of reply, and Taelah laughed.

"I'm just trying to think of them like angry family heads," Taelah confided. *"Easier that way."*

Iniri snorted in amusement at the idea and took a seat, settling herself to look imperious. The other two joined her, watching the dragons arrive. The new ones lined themselves up on the marble square of their own accord, with The Silver Woe standing behind them and looking stern. There was a sort of whisper on the edge of her perception, which she guessed was Blue talking to one of the others in particular. A guess confirmed by Shayma speaking, using her illusion powers to amplify her voice.

"Who is it that stands before Blue's council?" Shayma's question actually clarified a lot for Iniri. She was there in her role as Blue's Companion and advisor, not as the Queen of Tarnil. For this, Shayma and Taelah were peers. In reply, the volcanic dragon at one end of the line took a half-step forward, heat shimmering from the glowing lines tracing over her craggy scales.

"My name is Murayl Silam, and I seek a home." She took a half-step back and the bulky earth dragon beside her stepped forward. When he spoke, it was in a low rumble that Iniri could feel through her feet.

"My name is Huran Silam, and I seek a home." The introductions went down the line, with each dragon requesting the same thing.

"I will guarantee their behavior and see to their education," the Silver Woe said after they had all repeated the request, her voice full of authority, and the younger dragons all seemed to shrink slightly.

「Can you amplify my voice, too?」 Iniri sent to Shayma.

「Of course. Taelah's, as well.」 Shayma replied, glancing at Iniri before looking over to Taelah, getting an affirmative nod in return.

“You have told us your names, and that you want a home,” Iniri began. “Which means you did not find a home where you came from. Do you have any assurance that whatever troubles drove you to come all this way will not follow you here?” The light dragon, Akanen, stepped forward to answer that, scales glowing yellow-white.

“I was the least favored of my siblings,” he said bluntly. “Which was why I left my home and found my mate in a far distant land.” He gestured with a wing toward the shadow dragon next to him. “When the pulse of strange Affinity came through, it gave her clan an excuse to eject us. Nor were we the only ones. All of us were originally under clan Shadowscale or Clan Firewing, and none of us were on particularly good terms with the elders. This journey was an exile, if unsuccessful, or an expansion, if successful. But we have sworn ourselves to The Great Lady, the Silver Woe, and have forsaken any other clan bonds.”

Translated, nobody was going to be looking for them very hard, and when someone did, they'd have to contend with The Silver Woe. It was far better than adopting some band of criminals, though the idea of a roving band of criminal dragons boggled the mind. But Taelah confirmed the truth of it over Companion Concord, the dragons were the most harmless kind of refugees. Insofar as dragons were harmless, anyway. She nodded to her fellow Companions and Taelah stirred, looking down at the petitioners.

“Lady Ziir said she will guarantee your behavior and your education, and that's good.” Taelah smiled at them. “I'm looking forward to working with you all. But I want to make sure you understand you'll need to listen to us, even if we aren't dragons. The three of us will always be superior to you when it comes to Blue, and you'll have to treat all of Blue's inhabitants with respect.”

The dragon that Iniri recognized as the one who had led the attack, Kesteni, stepped forward to answer that. She had to imagine there was some conversation going on that they couldn't hear, to determine who answered what question, but it wasn't anything Iniri could catch. For all she knew, the dragons all had telepathy or the like.

“We recognize that we are not the elders here,” Kesteni said, though she didn't look entirely happy about it. “Swearing our fealty to the Great Lady and to Blue means that they decide where we fit in with their other subjects.”

“More than that,” Taelah said sharply. “We'll be neighbors. You'll be living in the Caldera with the Village, and there may be others as time goes on. Good neighbors know each other and respect each other, and this goes both ways. I expect you to respect people in the Village, and in turn, they will respect you. You may not think humans have much to offer in that regard, but consider who you will be getting any food or goods from here in the Caldera.”

The last point seemed to make Kesteni actually think, at least for a moment or two. Iniri took that as a good sign, and it probably meant The Silver Woe had made sure they would actually listen. Making

stubborn people pay attention was a skill that was difficult to master. Shayma took up the thread from there.

“You have some understanding, then, of what we expect from you. Tell us, what do you have to offer Blue?” Iniri nodded to herself; she knew Blue had already talked about it a little with Ansaë, but unless someone spoke it with their own voice no agreement could be expected to hold.

The dragons had clearly been coached for this answer, which was more or less what she expected. Just because their offerings weren’t spontaneous didn’t make them any less worthy, and in truth she would have thought less of them if they hadn’t prepared for it. What surprised her was that they had more to offer than just claws and teeth.

Apparently, dragons had schooling. Iniri didn’t know too much about dragons, but she never would have guessed that, at least when they were young, they were properly raised and educated, though not in any customs of the continent of Orn. Which meant not only could they read and write at more than a basic level, but they could also perform mathematics, and knew how to estimate, appraise, and tabulate. Those were the sort of credentials she’d expect on administrative staff, which made her revise her idea of dragons by quite a bit.

They also had proficiency in areas she’d never thought of as existing. Akanen knew something about *thaumic declinistics*, and could convince natural mana flows to diverge rather than converge. Tekeenu was an expert on different variants of ice and how they flavored everything from mana Affinity to water taste. Yiule, one of the storm Affinity dragons, seemed to know more about weather systems than anyone but maybe The Hurricane.

On the basis of pure experience she had to admit they had something for Blue. It was their attitude and actual loyalty that was at issue. It was clear that they were quite aware of how bad an idea it would be to test either Blue or The Silver Woe, but that was far from the best way to instill loyalty. The carrot tended to be better than the stick. Of course, given Blue’s habitation bonuses and abundant mana, he had a very big carrot indeed.

Of the ten dragons, the only ones who sounded like they could become an issue were Kesteni, which was no surprise, and Vientus, one of the other shadow dragons. Kesteni simply because she was smarting from being defeated so easily, and Vientus because he seemed young and rebellious in general. Overall, a better outcome than she might have expected.

“Not a bad batch, Blue,” she said quietly, expecting that he could hear it regardless. “Just keep an eye on Kesteni and Vientus so they don’t do something stupid.”

“Oh, I plan on it. Actually, Ansaë’s said she’ll take responsibility to make sure that doesn’t happen, since she has more direct options than I do, but still. I’m not going to have them around anyone else until I’m more confident in them. I don’t want them going to the Village unannounced.”

“No, they’ll need my approval for that,” Taelah said. “Some of them might be welcome, others will need some time to adjust to being Blue’s vassals.”

“You’re the boss when it comes to the Village. I assume it’s the same for wandering around Tarnil for you, Iniri. Not like they don’t have enough room in the Caldera.” Iniri snorted at that. The Caldera was

ten times the size of Tarnil, and considering the height of the rim walls they might have issues getting out of it without Blue's help.

"Correct, though if they actually can improve mana flows and the like, I wouldn't mind them looking at Wildwood eventually. It's changing already, though nobody is sure how it will turn out just yet." Maybe this was a service that dragons actually performed on the continents where they were more common. Certainly, Einteril was known to have some and House Anell hadn't been driven from its lucrative bay city, so there was some degree of coexistence.

"Ooh, yeah, and that's probably due to my extra and different mana. Plus stellar Affinity. I don't know enough to tamper with that, either. Anyway, Shayma? What do you think?"

"I think they all remember how I crashed two of them into the ground." Shayma grinned. "They seem fine so far, and I think it would be nice for Ansae to have them around."

"Very well, let's have them swear their loyalty and then we'll keep an eye on them." Shayma nodded decisively.

"Syrinu Mache, come forth to swear your loyalty," she said. Iniri relaxed slightly, but kept watching. It would take some time, and Blue should know if she felt that any of them were halfhearted about their oaths.