

Chapter 29: Year 1, Day 264 – Tor Kot

Tor Kot paced back and forth along the balcony as he waited for Yit Niv to arrive. It was quite pleasant in his personal villa, with fresh sea air and a view of the ocean that was only spoiled by the looming darkness of the rift on the horizon. It was far enough away that the details were vague, but there was still an impression of swirling clouds shot through with the bizarre un-light of depletion. Some might have decided to face their private rooms the other direction, but Tor Kot preferred to have a reminder of his purpose.

The greenery of other islands broke the wash of ocean blue, some on the water itself, some in the air, creating a rough circle around the rift. That circle stretched out further than he could see, but he was familiar enough with all the maps to know how things stood. His two islands held some fifty thousand souls, all of them depleted down to the standard one-third margin, with very little in the way of growth. Others, more distant from the rift, held more. Closer ones held only monsters.

His territory was in the middle ring, as he'd already served his time in the inner area, on the same enormous island as the rift. All of his surplus monsters went there, ferried over in job lots and reattuned to one of the war cores, and considering how orderly his lands were most of his monsters were surplus. Of course, he kept his original elites, whom he wouldn't trade for anything.

Some Controllers saw their monsters only as tools. They *were* tools, but they weren't mindless pieces of metal like a weapon or a plow, they were living beings with the requirements of living beings. The absolute control that Controllers wielded through their linked cores was necessary, but it was also a responsibility and a trust. That was why he *didn't* use that control with his elites, and had built a much stronger rapport with them than most over the years.

Some of them thought it was too much of a rapport, but Tor Kot didn't take those opinions seriously. He couldn't respect people who thought of their citizens as mere fodder for the dungeon, or as sources for Skills and stats. Those people were so far sunk in a hedonistic haze that they couldn't see beyond their own desires.

In short, there were actually fairly few Controllers whose opinion mattered to Tor Kot. Yit Niv was first on the list, his close ally for so long and one of the few he actually liked. Female Controllers were rare for whatever reason, and their close association had spawned rumors of varying accuracy, but Tor Kot prized her for her cool head and eye for detail over all else.

He saw her boat sailing through the air toward his island, the brightly-colored silks impossible to mistake, and walked to the front door to receive her along with Miriam and Charlene. Not only were they his guards and closest confidantes, they deserved to be involved in the discussion that was sure to ensue. He wasn't sure if Yit Niv had heard the news, but she was likely to be bringing her own named monsters.

Tor Kot watched through the front windows as Yit Niv's vessel docked at the airship spire, the Controller herself proceeding down the spiral ramp with a pair of spider guards in tow. The other spiders busied themselves with the ship, tying off rope and furling the outrigger sails. While she could have simply flown herself, she and Tor Kot both followed the philosophies of Ort Ner. Centuries ago, he had seen the excesses of Controllers and had tried to curb them, to no avail.

"Yit Niv," he greeted her, welcoming her into his villa. "I hope things are going—" He bit off the word *well*. "Adequately," he substituted instead.

"Somewhat," she sighed. "I've been hearing rumors that the Council wants to increase the monster quota for the front."

"Neither of us has extra to give," Tor Kot noted, the two of them walking together toward the balcony while Charlene and Miriam eyeballed Markus and Carson. Monsters from different cores did not get along particularly well, which was one reason they needed to be transferred between cores when they got to the front. Even if his mantids knew Yit Niv's arachnids quite well, there was still friction between them.

"And yet, we will be the ones it is demanded of. You know that as well as I do," Yit Niv said, not plaintively, just stating a fact.

"That's one of the things that I want to discuss." Tor Kot pulled out a chair for her at the small table, then took his own seat across from her. Their monsters did not fit normal human furniture, and had their own accommodations on either side of the table. Neither Charlene nor Miriam were comfortable using them in the presence of other monsters, but eventually they finally deigned to settle in and Tor Kot looked at Yit Niv.

"Have you gotten the reports of what happened to the Einteril expedition?"

"I did not know there *were* reports, and I'm in far better standing with the Council than you are." Yit Niv's eyes narrowed. "How did you find out?"

"My cousin met Blue's Voice, who apparently mentioned me. So he copied his report to me." Tor Kot waved it away. "Blue killed eight of us. Well, eight of *them*, considering who was part of the invasion force. The other five retreated."

"Eight cores down?" Yit Niv sighed and poured wine into her glass. "We cannot afford that."

"I would normally agree, but I don't think it will be our problem for very much longer."

"Oh?" Yit Niv lifted her brows at him. "You believe Blue will take up the task?"

"I think that the only reason he hasn't attacked us directly is that he isn't ready for it. But now that he has anywhere up to eight new cores, and a flying fortress that can destroy cities? I suspect that state of affairs won't last much longer."

"Hm." Yit Niv swirled the wine in her glass and took a sip. "So what are you proposing?"

"We've had various contingencies set up for a while. I think we might need to use one." Tor Kot held her eye for a moment, then waved around to include their monsters in the conversation. "There's no point in a holding action here, or trying to uphold a Council that has ceased to be fit for purpose."

"You're talking about abandoning your post. Your people." Yit Niv said, not exactly accusing. Tor Kot winced.

"The fact is, Blue *can* fix depletion. He can cure it from people and purge it from places, and apparently he can even restore people who have been fully depleted, though with some limitations. My people will

be far better off under that governance than one where I take two-thirds of the Skills and stats. Or ones where I need women to volunteer to keep the monster lines healthy.” Tor Kot leaned back, brushing a hand over his goatee. “They deserve more than that.”

“I know you. You’ve got more in your head than just a vague plan, if you’re suggesting it.”

“Well, first of all, our friends should get a say.” He waved his hand around to indicate the monsters.

“We can only bring so many with us. Any that remain here are doomed, either to die fighting the rift or when Blue arrives.”

“You’re really convinced of this,” Yit Niv said thoughtfully.

“You haven’t met his Voice, or felt his mana. I have. This is the solution we’ve been planning for, though we never considered that the person who could properly remove depletion would be a total outsider.”

“Boys?” Yit Niv asked, glancing back at her spider guards. They shifted uneasily, communicating with their Controller.

“Miriam and Charlene are fine with leaving. They have no wish to face either Blue or Shayma again.” He glanced back at them for confirmation and looked to Yit Niv again. “I know some would call it cowardice but there is absolutely no reason for us to stay here and no reason to fight.”

“The Council would have our heads,” Yit Niv observed.

“The only thing they could do is physically stop us, and how are they going to do that?” Tor Kot asked dryly. “Peel off even more cores to send some other Controllers on a wild chase after us? None of their censures or quotas or requirements will *matter*.”

“What about Blue? If he went to protect Einteril, surely he will stop you from conquering wherever it is you’re targeting.” Yit Niv said, arguing mostly for the sake of it. Tor Kot held up a finger.

“Ah, but what I have in mind is a certain uninhabited island with little mana. Bring a single core, and grow it only large enough to sustain myself and my companions, and not only will we be nearly undiscoverable, but Blue would have no cause to object.” He smiled winningly at Yit Niv.

“Carten Isle is literally *nothing* but a piece of stone,” Yit Niv said, then nodded slowly. “It’s big enough for two cores, if all we’re doing is sustaining ourselves. But is that all you want out? To sustain yourself?”

“I’m *tired*,” Tor Kot said. “I’ve been running cities and dealing with the Council and the slow failure to contain depletion my whole life. I want to just stop. To enjoy my life before I get so old I can’t. I don’t want to stay here like some overgrown parasite waiting to be lanced by Blue.”

“We *do* have dungeonbane weaponry. You don’t think that’ll stop him?”

“He outranges us,” Tor Kot said bluntly. “I’m sure that dungeonbane hurts him, yes, but why would he bother letting us get that close when he can use his city-destroying weapons to simply raze us from beyond the horizon? Which he would and should do, if he’s smart, even if it’s hard on our people.”

And if he weren't there, Blue wouldn't need to do that. Tor Kot considered himself to be at least an adequate ruler, maybe actually a good one, and if he wanted to keep his people safe he had to take them out of the line of fire. Considering his role in Tarnil's invasion, it seemed likely that if he were around Blue would pay special attention to him. Or at least his Voice would.

"You make a good case," Yit Niv said at last. "But I am not quite ready to go that far. Especially since Blue isn't yet advancing upon us."

"Yes, more preparation is needed, certainly. But I will personally be divesting myself of direct connections to all but one core, and making sure all my elites are attuned to that core." Yit Niv nodded thoughtfully at Tor Kot's suggestion. He hoped she would take it. When it was time to move, it might be an emergency.

They shifted to rather less dreary and sensitive topics, Tor Kot's servants arriving with proper food and drink. Cooked, for him and Yit Niv, and artfully prepared raw meat for his mantids and Yit Niv's spiders. It was all dungeon food, of course, but Tor Kot had gone to some lengths to induce his cores to learn more than the most basic types.

By the time Yit Niv left again, Tor Kot was not in a better mood as such, but a less resigned one. It was easy to forget he had at least a few friends and allies outside of his mantids, considering the political disgrace he found himself in. Even the faction that he'd worked so hard to form had started splintering, though part of him couldn't really blame people for deciding their loyalties lay elsewhere. He *hadn't* had a good record of success of late, almost entirely due to Blue.

Not that he blamed Blue for it as such. If he had been more willing to share the secrets of depletion immunity and removal, the setbacks might not have been relevant, but he wouldn't have trusted the Council with them either. Like so many ruling bodies, they mostly existed to further their own interests, which certainly didn't involve giving up their cores and their power and returning the land to their people.

He didn't *think* Blue knew the Council, and was just treating them all as the enemies who invaded Tarnil, but it was difficult to tell what a Power did and did not know. Iniri's message about the Einteril invasion outright admitted that Blue could spy on them to some extent, and did, but how and why and when was of course unclear. Though maybe he was overthinking things. He would admit himself that some of what Blue could do was spooky.

When the metal messenger bird winged its way into Tor Kot's territory, several days later, he had put those meditations aside, but seeing one of Queen Iniri's constructs brought it all back with a vengeance. There was no reason that he knew of for Blue to contact him, which meant another terrible surprise. Hopefully it wasn't some new, insane thing the rest of the Council was up to that Blue expected him to stop. He didn't have any access to the Council and they probably didn't even know he'd tried to warn them.

"Is the villa clear?" Tor Kot glanced at Miriam and got an affirmative. While he hadn't been specifically barred from communicating with Blue or, indeed, anyone on Orn, a messenger made of depletion-proof magic from an avowed enemy would draw attention he didn't want. They might suspect him of treason, and they'd be right.

He crossed out to where the bird was perched, statue-still, on the front lawn of the villa. After seeing depletion unravel every mana construct but those of the Controllers themselves, it was bizarre to see Queen Iniri's intricate workings shrug off the surroundings. It was even stranger because it wasn't Blue's mana, which purged depletion, rather, it was that strange new Affinity that was immune to it.

Both times previously it had just been a bird by itself, covered in runes and enchanted to fly away as soon as it had delivered its message. He probably could have tried to keep them, and was sorely tempted to if for no other reason than to have depletion-immune material, but that would have been asking for more trouble. This bird was the same, but had a small ball clutched in its talons, and as he approached the bird's runes activated.

"Tor Kot. Blue will talk with you." He recognized Shayma Ell's voice. "This messenger bears a scrying link. Activate it after you get it." As soon as Shayma finished speaking, the bird launched itself back into the air, leaving the metal ball behind.

Despite the instructions, Tor Kot didn't activate it immediately. He didn't even touch it immediately, inspecting it closely with his various senses, to ensure it was no more than what it was claimed to be. Not that he really suspected Blue or Queen Iniri of wanting to sabotage him, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Let's see what they have to say," he told Miriam, who was hovering at his shoulder. Picking it up, he brought it inside and made doubly sure he had no watchers. Using the scrying link was no difficulty, he merely fed mana into the complex of runes and waited. It would have been interesting to see if he could track the other end, but he already knew where it was, so it wouldn't have been very informative.

He didn't have long to wait. Soon enough the runes in the little metal ball glowed and the middle portion rotated, expanding the ball into a small frame. The face of Blue's Voice appeared within, looking stern. Really, he never saw her looking any other way.

"Tor Kot," Shayma said. "It has come to Blue's attention that you are intending to, shall we say, defect from the mage-kings as a whole." Behind him, Miriam was not happy with the situation.

"I agree," he muttered to her. "Better hope it's a Power thing or the Council will have our heads." He addressed Shayma. "Yes, well, you surely can't blame me? I know a sinking ship when I see one and I have said from the beginning that I don't want to stand in your way."

"Yes." Shayma sighed. "It doesn't excuse your other crimes but at least you aren't a hypocrite." She shook her head. "Regardless, as you can imagine, Blue has some opinions about your plans."

"While I understand the tension between us, I am hardly going to abandon my contingencies just because Blue objects," Tor Kot said, though his mind was racing about how he could possibly adjust things to avoid dealing with an enraged Power.

"You misunderstand," Shayma told him. "While Blue cannot allow depletion to spread unchecked, he sees this as a potential avenue for negotiation, and can provide far more than a rock in the middle of an ocean. He's interested in acquiring extra cores, and considering that the other mage-kings tend to force him to annihilate them entirely, that is certainly not easy."

"Ah, and if I am leaving anyway, he wants whatever cores I can take with me?"

“You have the right of it,” Shayma agreed. “So long as whatever you want is within reason.”

“While I can understand that, it is impractical.” At her raised eyebrows, he just shrugged. “Most of the cores I have control over need to stay in place to keep the infrastructure of my territory running. I have my personal core, but I need that to maintain my elites. That’s what I would take with me.”

“You don’t need it for your personal power?”

“I was second-tier when I became a Controller,” Tor Kot said, leaning back in his seat. “I wouldn’t care if I were second-tier again, but I refuse to give up Miriam and Charlene or the rest of my household.”

“You know, I can kind of understand that. Blue acquired some monsters himself, and they are rather more personable than I expected.” Shayma pursed her lips, ears flicking back and forth. “They’re Scalemind, and they, or at least one of them, is capable of cutting the connection between a monster and their core.”

Tor Kot twisted his head around to stare at Miriam. She was uncertain, but interested, and wanted Shayma to elaborate.

“How do you know this?” Tor Kot asked. “I am not accusing you of lying, of course, but that is quite a claim.”

“Blue suspects they did it to themselves generations ago, but more recently, there was a shadow monster that both you and Vok Nal used as a messenger,” Shayma said.

“Well, it wasn’t ours,” Tor Kot said absently, recalling it. “It was on loan from— you’re saying it wasn’t killed, but rather, severed?”

“Yes. We haven’t seen it since, and apparently neither have you.”

“No,” Tor Kot said thoughtfully. “That is certainly an enticing prospect, assuming it works. Most monsters do not take being cut off from their core well.”

“We had noticed that,” Shayma said dryly. “It makes neutralizing mage-kings who have established themselves in a city quite the problem. One we’ve managed to address fairly well so far, but only so far and only fairly well. That is actually one of the issues we wished to raise with you, how to avoid that.”

“You really can’t. Monsters like my Miriam are the exception, not the rule.” Tor Kot patted Miriam’s arm. “Most of them are barely anything without a Controller and a core. Of course, that’s probably a blessing, considering that they’re just meant as expendable soldiers to contain the rift.”

“Yes, the rift.” Shayma frowned at him intently. “We just destroyed or took eight cores from you. What is that going to do in regards to containment.”

“Today, nothing.” Tor Kot sighed. “Not that we’re doing great today, but those cores were all from outer islands, waiting to be rotated in. In three or four years, there will be severe problems, more politically than logistically.”

“It shouldn’t us take that long,” Shayma said bluntly. “So there is an inner core of, well, cores that’s responsible for keeping the blightbeasts back?” Tor Kot worried his lower lip as he considered the

question. While technically the inner workings of the Council were not to be revealed to outsiders, he was already contemplating a complete defection.

"I'd rather not discuss that sort of thing yet. First, I would like to see this core severance in action, and discuss it with my companions here." He patted Miriam's arm again. "If all that is possible, it gives me new options, though it is necessarily dependent upon Blue's honor."

"I admit that none of us are personally pleased with you," Shayma said. "But Queen Iniri feels that a diplomatic resolution might be more useful than simply hunting you down."

"Which I appreciate," Tor Kot said dryly. "Does this offer only apply to me?" Shayma cocked her head slightly, ears swiveling, then shrugged.

"If you're willing to vouch for your friend Yit Niv, we may be willing to negotiate separately with her." For some reason Tor Kot was not at all surprised that Blue knew of Yit Niv. Though he really should have been worried that Blue could spy on them past however many wards were in place, not to mention the natural scry resistance of dungeons, at this point he just assumed Blue could hear basically anything. Better Blue overhear it than anyone closer at home.

"I suppose my position can't get any more exposed," he sighed. "I will discuss it with her. How long is this offer good for?"

"Until it isn't." Shayma smiled, a poker smile. "Delay too long, and Blue may decide your cores aren't worth quite so much."

"Do I have at least a week or so?" It would take at least that long to get things ready, even if he were to jump at Blue's offer right that moment. Which he wouldn't, not without knowing more about it. Blue wouldn't lie; why bother inventing miracles he couldn't do? That didn't mean that such things were without other costs.

"Yes, I would say so."

"Then..." Tor Kot sighed. "I suspect it is far and away my best choice, but it is not one I am prepared to make at the moment. Especially since it is not mine alone. Perhaps we can resume this in a few days?"

"Certainly," Shayma said. "You know where to find us." The connection closed, and Tor Kot stopped channeling mana into the construct. He watched it collapse back into a small metal ball before setting it aside and turning to look at Miriam.

"Could you go get Charlene? We need to discuss this." Miriam signaled affirmative and headed off, while he frowned out the window in thought. Of course, Charlene was never that far away, and his two mantids returned in short order.

"Did Miriam fill you in on what Blue offered us?" He asked her. Charlene answered yes.

"What do you two think?"

It was hard to tell, Miriam told him. Even if they were sane after being severed, there may be instincts at play that would make them into different people. They would get a volunteer that was less powerful first, who would see what it did.

If they were apart from a core, Charlene wondered, how would they make their living? Even if Blue offered a place, that was not the same as sustenance. They knew the ways of combat, but none of the monsters, even the servants, knew the ways of hunting and farming and craftsmanship. Even Tor Kot would lose access to such Skills if he no longer had a core.

“Yes,” he agreed. “If we were to go this route I would need to take certain amounts of valuables with me, because we would no longer be self-sufficient. I am loath to give up that independence, but at the same time, to be truly free of dungeon cores would perhaps be an equitable trade.”

They would not have all that much freedom in truth, Charlene pointed out. People and monsters were separate, and Tor Kot would have to keep them separate from whatever populace they treated with, especially if they decided to live separate from Blue.

“Possibly,” Tor Kot agreed. “But money can convince people of many things. Perhaps we could essentially buy a village. Surely there is someone out there who would like the protection of fourth-tiers and third-tiers, whether or not they are monsters.”

Miriam agreed that might be possible, but it couldn't be on Einteril, Orn, or Nicehapoca. They would have to go further afield, to Hoarast or the Summerlands perhaps. If that was true, they would have to make preparations now, while they still had the majority of their resources, rather than waiting until they were stripped but free.

“Yes, though absencing myself that long without it being noticed...” He clasped his hands together, considering. Unlike many Controllers, he actually tried to exercise *all* the Skills he had access to, which meant that he'd crafted himself various toys, including needle ships that moved much, *much* faster than the enormous, luxurious craft most Controllers had. It might be possible to make some excuses about visiting someone and slip away during the expected travel time.

Miriam was also curious whether Yit Niv would be amenable to the same deal. While she was of the same mind as Tor Kot in many things, Miriam pointed out she certainly had not experienced Blue personally. Things that Tor Kot felt in his gut, she only knew in the abstract. Trust aside, she may simply not believe such a thing.

“I know. I am not even certain her own elites will be amenable to being severed from their cores.” He waited a moment for Charlene and Miriam to finish with their disparaging comments toward the spider monsters. He actually found the little feud between them quite endearing, especially since it was ultimately toothless.

It was unseemly to summon Yit Niv to attend upon him, especially since she had visited so recently, so he sent a message that he was coming to visit and asked his staff to ready the sky yacht. Not his needle-craft, but something large enough to carry a dozen or more monsters. Part of him hated the waste of time but it wouldn't take more than a day to fly to Yit Niv's island, and he'd be taking the depletion-immune ball of metal with him.

If nothing else, it would be proof of what he was saying.

Yit Niv was a touch closer to the rift than he was, though still in the middle ring. While he had a single landbound island and a flying one, Yit Niv had but one overlarge flying island. Unlike his, hers rode low

to the water, and wood and stone scaffolding dangled down to where sea craft were moored to them. Though of late, the seas had been far from safe.

Like Tor Kot, Yit Niv subscribed to a more conservative school of thought and her villa was fairly small, looking over the sprawl of houses and buildings from a small promontory. Other Controllers had massive towers in the middle of their cities, but Tor Kot had never liked the aesthetic and only used towers when he had to. With enough time, it was not difficult to add floors to satisfy dungeon levels.

He tied off his yacht at the dock, walking down a staircase similar and yet different to the one at his own place. Yit Niv's architecture focused on heavy use of silk for obvious reasons, the entire island more bright and cheerful than his own. While he probably could have traded for silk fairly easily, that would have insulted his mantids so he'd never broached the subject.

Yit Niv herself appeared as he approached her villa, looking more than a little wary. She wasn't dumb; if he were visiting so soon then she knew something drastic had happened. As soon as they were through the doors of her villa she turned to him, lifting her eyebrows expectantly.

"What is it?"

Tor Kot produced the ball of metal. Yit Niv looked at it, then looked again as its foreign Affinity and magical complexity became apparent. He smiled at her expression. It was nice to see other people as flustered by what Blue could do as he was.

"Blue has a deal for us."