

## Day 202 - Blue

I was not the most observant dungeon. Part of that was just because I was so large, and part of it was that I refused to try splitting my mind again because I hated being dumb. That was why I had missed the dragons initially flying in, and that was why I missed a swarm of things crawling up from the Underneath until One-Eye-Green called my name.

“Mister Blue! There’s Blightbeasts!”

“*Say what now?*” Of course, One-Eye-Green couldn’t hear me. There were some Scalemind hunting parties hurrying back ahead of the swarm, and the weird thing was that it looked like a bunch of different monsters. Most of them looked like they belonged on the surface, too.

There were scaled cats and giant lizards and ambulatory masses of vines. Here and there I spotted an oversized humanoid with a club, and there were even some giant birds that really seemed out of place in the confines of the low-roads. It seemed like some sort of bizarre monster mob to me but when I looked at them the overlay had no information. At all. They obviously existed and I could see them and their mana but my attempts to identify them were like they just registered as empty air.

Then the first ones, the ones pursuing the Scalemind, hit my mana field and ANATHEMA surged up. If One-Eye-Green hadn’t alerted me, that surely would have. It wasn’t enough to make me lose my mind, but I did dump a bunch of lava into one of the tunnels without thinking about it, almost catching some Scalemind in the process. Unfortunately, that by itself didn’t do much, since it seemed most of the Blightbeasts had enough mana to just power through mundane heat. Those that didn’t crisped pretty much instantly, which was satisfying, but I’d have to use actual magic to kill them off.

From my perspective on the Underneath, where my vision penetrated into the lowroad itself, there were thousands of things swarming through, almost mindlessly. Not completely mindlessly, since they didn’t attack each other and there were clearly groups going down side-tunnels, but none of them evinced what I would call normal behavior. For beasts or for monsters.

The swarm wasn’t really a threat to me personally, but I couldn’t deal with it with the Scalemind there, and I was *itching* to deal with it. There didn’t seem to be much in the way of infrastructure in the Scalemind’s cavern yet, nothing like an actual town, so I grabbed everyone and everything with teleport Fields and dumped them into the caves beneath my northern mountains in the Caldera. There was plenty of room there and they weren’t pocketed with lava reservoirs like the volcanoes.

“*Hey Shayma, could you tell the Scalemind that I moved them so I could take care of the Blightbeasts?*”

“Um. Yes?” Shayma blinked, and I teleported her over into the same cavern. I’d have to link up a permanent Field some other time. Not to mention filling in Shayma on what was actually going on.

With the Scalemind out of the way I supercharged my [Boring Tendrils] and took over an extra chunk of Underneath, encompassing the lowway entirely. Then I simply blanketed the entire area with a maximum energy volcano Climate. Which was probably overzealous, but I wanted them *gone*.

A few dozen cubic kilometers of Underneath basically exploded, superheated gasses foaming liquid rock, all of it heavily laced with my volcanic mana. I shoved several hundred thousand of my own, Affinity-

less mana into the Climate too, doubling down on the destructive power of the Climate, and the earth shook as bedrock fractured and pockets of water flash-vaporized. A huge chunk of the Blightbeasts outright vanished, and even more simply melted as my mana cut through them.

Above the ground, Tarnil trembled from the force of the underground eruption, and even the leviathan settlement seemed stirred up by it. The imperative urge to *deal with* the creatures faded as they all died, or at least, all the ones I could see died, and I realized I might have used a bit of overkill. It wasn't as bad as [Starlancing] them, but a giant magma lake had replaced the area with the lowroads, almost fifty kilometers in long and five wide, and the pyroclastic blast of lava and superheated gas had seared passages out of my range vision. At least I got something out of it.

*Depletion sources removed. Requirements for level advancement reduced.*

*Dungeon has reached level 12!*

*One trait point awarded.*

If it weren't for [Amplified Presence] strengthening the rock above the new, enormous cavern, there would have been more collapses and maybe even eruptions as the heat and pressure tried to force its way upward. Instead it was forced out along the lowway in both directions and out into the Underneath in general. Hopefully I didn't accidentally flood an actually civilized area, but I figured that if there was anyone nearby the Scalemind would have noticed them already.

"Blue, is everything alright?" Iniri asked, her hands on top of paper stacks to keep them from falling over. There wasn't any actual structural damage as, again, [Amplified Presence] made things just slightly tougher and kept roads and walls from cracking.

*"I had a slight Blightbeast problem. I don't know what they are either, they just came from the Underneath, thousands of them. Pretty sure I wiped them all out but there may be more where that came from."*

"Where *did* they come from?" Iniri frowned. "Is that just something that happens in the Underneath?"

*"I need to ask the Scalemind, hang on."* I focused on Shayma, who was chatting with One-Eye-Green. *"Sorry about that, Shayma. It was a little urgent and I had an ANATHEMA reaction, so I wasn't thinking my best. Could you ask One-Eye-Green exactly what the Blightbeasts are?"*

"They're from the blight where the other dungeons are," One-Eye-Green told Shayma, waving in a vaguely eastern direction. Considering I'd teleported her to a new place and the surroundings were different I was surprised that she knew which way was which, but underground species probably had some way to tell. I had guessed the provenance of the Blightbeasts from the name, but knowing that they were from the mage-king's area confirmed it.

*"Seems like they spilled out from the mage-king's lands,"* I told Iniri. *"I guess this is what they meant by losing containment?"*

"That is concerning," Iniri said, rubbing her temples.

*"I don't think you have to worry about it. They set off my ANATHEMA so I'll definitely notice any time they come near, and I can certainly kill them. Maybe warn other people though? I don't know if any of*

*these surface kingdoms are connected to the lowways at all, and for all I know there are Blightbeasts headed to other areas."*

"Yes, absolutely." Iniri reached for a fresh piece of paper and started penning a missive. "If these pop up anywhere else it might well be considered a fresh declaration of war from the mage-kings. Not that anyone really needs one."

*"The weird thing is that I couldn't actually identify them. It was like they didn't have any Status at all, not even as monsters. No level, no stats. The only thing is, I'm pretty sure they had depletion stuff clinging onto them. I can't tell for sure because they're all gone now, but I wouldn't advise anyone get near the things."*

"Maybe Uilei-nktik would know more, if the Scalemind don't." Iniri tapped her lower lip with her pen, frowning thoughtfully. "We're protected by your mana, but other people aren't. Something like this would actually be an issue for other countries."

*"Yeah, and it actually makes me worry about what the heck is going on over there."* If a minor breach meant thousands of weird depletion beasts wandering around, what did a major breach look like? That was assuming most of the Blightbeasts had ended up in the lowway underneath Tarnil. For all I knew, this was a bare fraction of what had actually been released and there were millions of the things spreading out beneath the ground.

I had to wonder if that meant the mage-kings had billions of things penned up over there, or if the 'rift' that Tor Kot mentioned spawned them if containment failed or what. There was really no conclusion that wasn't horrendous, so I decided I'd have to double down on my fortress. My best way to erase depletion was just flood an area with my mana, so a mobile means to do that was imperative. While Tarnil and my people were my first priority, ignoring the rest of the world would just result in more trouble down the line.

Of course, sterilizing several hundred kilometers of the Underneath was going to result in more trouble too. Even if I didn't screw up anyone's back yard, the Scalemind were going to have a lot of trouble hunting. I dialed the volcanic Climate back down but since I was lacking anything appropriate to the Underneath the best I could do would be to put a Forest type climate down instead. That, unfortunately, would seed stellar chrystheniums and create a false sky so it wouldn't be like the Underneath at all. Not to mention it wouldn't provide however many kilos of meat a thousand or so carnivores needed every day.

*"Okay, crisis over,"* I told Shayma. *"Thanks for covering for me. There iiiiiis a bit of a problem though, and that's where the Scalemind used to be is now a giant lake of lava."*

"So that's what all that shaking was," Shayma said with amusement.

*"Yeah, I overdid it a bit. I don't think there's going to be any place for them to hunt nearby, so I need to figure out how I'm going to feed them. Or at least provide so they can feed themselves."*

"That might be a problem." Shayma frowned, clearly thinking along the same lines I was. "They could probably hunt the Wildwood, if adventurers wouldn't hunt them at the same time. It might be easiest to just burrow down somewhere else in Tarnil and find a new part of the Underneath."

*"True, I probably will have to do that anyway, but I'm not keen on expanding downward from land that I'm only leasing, as it were. I mean, I still have a hundred years on it so I guess I shouldn't be."*

"You've got time," Shayma agreed, amused.

*"Yeah, okay. I kind of want to keep them in the Caldera but I guess that wouldn't work out quite yet. I need to make contact with an actual Underneath civilization."* Assuming there was one around. If that sort of swarm happened even once every couple decades that might be enough to dissuade anyone from living nearby. *"Hate to keep imposing on you, but after you get the Scalemind settled, could I have you go to the Stoneborn and ask them about local Underneath settlements? Should have done that ages ago."*

"Certainly," Shayma agreed cheerfully. "You don't want to explode them by accident."

*"No, no I don't."* I started pushing my way downward out near Wildwood Retreat, reasoning that a mana spring might have some sort of underground mirror that would make something other than solid rock more likely, and flipped my attention over to Ansaë.

*"Sooo, if you felt that, I had to kill a bunch of things in the Underneath."*

"With fire, as is proper," Ansaë said with a grin.

*"With fire,"* I agreed. *"Here's the weird thing. I couldn't get any read on the Blightbeasts. It sounds like they're coming from the depleted lands, and they didn't seem to have any level or stats. It was like they were totally disconnected from the Akasha, though they did have mana."*

"I don't recall that when I went there a few hundred years ago." Ansaë frowned thoughtfully. "There was a heavy depletion storm and there were mana-beasts that had grown from it, but they didn't have *no* akashic connection."

*"Well, we do know that it's gotten worse over time. Maybe it passed a threshold of some sort."*

"Something certainly changed." Ansaë scowled. "If it's sending things out into the Underneath on a regular basis it's gone beyond just the depletion." She lashed her tail in annoyance, putting aside her rune tablet. "That's usually the sort of thing I'd take care of, but I can't."

*"You normally deal with big existential threats?"* I'd heard a few legends of the Silver Woe, and they were pretty much all of the *she burned a continent to the ground and she slaughtered an entire clan* and things of that nature. Admittedly, there was a dose of *they had it coming* with some of the stories.

"Well, if I toppled every tyrant or killed every mad mage, nobody would learn anything," Ansaë pointed out. "Besides, tyrants and madmen are right more often than you'd expect. But there are things that scar the world or threaten it, and most mortals either don't see or can't imagine anything beyond their immediate circumstances. I try to keep the place where I live generally intact."

*"Makes sense to me."* It probably wasn't quite that simple, since there were Bargains in the mix and whatever Ansaë's own goals were. She didn't strike me as someone who wanted to babysit the planet for all eternity, but she wasn't irresponsible, either. *"So that's why you went after depletion in the first place?"*

“Yes, it was slowly poisoning the world. It still is, but if it weren’t for this Blightbeast issue I would still consider it only a long-term threat.” Ansaë scowled. “You need to increase your mana capacity. I admit the stat replenishment is fun, but it’s no substitute for having my full capabilities back.”

*“It is fun,”* I agreed, though it still occasionally involved a severed tendril or two. *“I’m still not having much luck with artificial mana storage, but now that I have a new leveling schema I might be able to hit the needed level fairly quickly.”*

“You just need to make sure your Companions are active, then.”

*“I actually did just get a level for killing the Blightbeasts. Well, I got a requirement reduction. I guess having them make Artifacts counted toward Companion advancement?”*

“Sounds like you have work to do.” Ansaë smiled toothily. “In a few days I think we’ll be ready to start selecting lairs for my pupils. They can easily set them up without help, you might want to officially approve the locations they select.”

*“Absolutely. I mean, most of the Caldera is empty so I’m sure it’ll be fine, but it’ll be interesting to see what they have in mind. I only have so many mountains...”* Ansaë just laughed at that.

Since I had to split my attention between the Scalemind, the exploratory dig, my Anvils, and sculpting metal into my Fortress, and finishing up the Annit soul-sculpture, it was surprisingly easy to while away a day or so without much noticing it. It wasn’t that I ignored anyone, it was just that it was, for once, not a crisis anywhere and aside from ensuring the Scalemind had enough to eat I could pretty much relax.

Until I secured another Underneath area I was just snatching game from the wilderness that led up to Wildwood. It wasn’t the best solution, but the move had made the Scalemind aware of the need for farm animals so they had started actually ranching some of the mana-infused deer and the like. They had a bit of an advantage when it came to domestication thanks to their mind magic.

I was talking with Shayma about some ideas for getting new crafting stations up and running when something itched. It was a really weird sensation, and made me focus in on it, right at the edge of the Caldera. What I found was some construct of pure mana shoving through the spatial weave that separated the outside mountain with the inside Caldera.

*[Spectre of Hate]*

*Level 100 Spirit*

*Dragonbane*

*Health: 10,000*

*Mana: 10,000*

I had never seen a spirit before, aside from the race Shayma was presumably supposed to be but kind of wasn’t, and I was surprised that they were definitely *not* the same as normal people. For one, it lacked stamina entirely, and for two, it seemed to be completely ethereal. It seemed to be an exceedingly complex knot of primarily shadow Affinity with some extra Affinities bound up inside it, which meant it could go straight through stone.

When it hit the weave of spatial magic, though, it had stuck. Not completely, but it had to shove enough that I had noticed it. For all its level it didn't seem particularly bright, since it seemed to be trying to shove its way forward by main force rather than trying to slip its way through the spatial matrix, but it was one hell of a level.

That said, the even numbers of the level and health and mana were incredibly suspicious. It looked like it was somehow artificial, and by the *Dragonbane* tag my guess was that it *was* artificial and a weapon of some sort. The question was whether it was targeting Ansaë or one of my other draconic guests.

I wasn't about to let it go about its business unmolested, though it annoyed me that I hadn't noticed it until just now. I needed a better way to keep track of weird things that entered my territory. Unfortunately, it was in the middle of rock and my spatial weave, so I couldn't teleport it, but I could try to contain and kill it.

Since it was moving straight forward I cleared out a space on the other side, where it would have gone into the cavern-worked of the terraces, and readied a Greater Light Field. I wasn't sure how fast the thing would move once it got through so I kept a close eye on it while I called up Ansaë. At level one hundred it might need more than overcharged light to deal with, and if so I might need Iniri's help. It'd be a good target for her Artifact [Starlance].

*"I have a level one hundred dragonbane [Spectre of Hate] here. I'm going to contain and kill it with a Greater Light Field but is there anything you want to do with it first?"*

"Gods above, no. A dragonbane spirit? I didn't know there were any of those left." Ansaë looked disgusted. "Murder it with all prejudice."

*"Great. So you've bumped into these things before, then."*

"You don't get to be The Silver Woe without making a few enemies," Ansaë said dryly. "At some point in the past a large circle of talented mages put together a number of dragonbane spirits to go after me. They've been irritating to deal with."

*"I can imagine."* If Ansaë thought they were irritating, they were probably downright horrifying. I contacted Iniri, just to let her know I might need her to blast something really quick, and waited for the thing to finish disentangling itself from my spatial magic so I could vaporize it.

Considering it was magic I was using some of my relatively scant magical knowledge and shielded the containment room with a gold lattice. As a magic insulator it'd probably do more to stop the [Spectre of Hate] than any of my alternatives other than actual Fields. I was pretty sure [Greater Light] would be pretty deadly to the Spectre, especially since I could make it stellar flavored, but that didn't necessarily mean that it would be trapped. I didn't want it to escape and be forced to chase an intangible dragonbane shadow ghost around.

It wasn't quite as dumb as I had thought, since the moment it broke through the spatial weave and into the caldera, finding itself in the killbox I'd made, it jerked back the other way. Perhaps it just didn't have the senses to deal with spatial expansion. Regardless of the thing's intellect it recognized the trap, but too late. A gold-lattice door slid down over the opening and I turned on the Field.

For being made wholly out of mana it could make a lot of noise. It let out a terrible, high-pitched steam-whistle scream, the vague wispy outlines of clawed hands trying to drive their way through the gold lattice. From what I could see that was actually hurting it, though probably not as much as the overcharged stellar and light mana that was melting through its mana body.

It didn't waste too long just trying a physical attack. After a moment or two it gestured and its mana dropped as a thin shadow beam pierced between the threads of the lattice. It didn't reach far, but the Spectre seemed to grab it and sort of pour itself along the shadow-beam, even as it crumbled under the assault of the Field. That might have been a problem if I couldn't simply extend the Field, which I did.

It spent more mana to conjure a shield around itself, burning through mana at a rapid clip as it tried to move through the Field.

Even diving down into the stone didn't do much for it, since the Field extended there, too. It wasn't quite as potent, but my mana still shredded away its shadow Affinity body and restricted its movement. The Spectre tried casting a few other spells, but they melted away under the influence of Greater Light before they could properly manifest. I was actually pretty darn impressed with that, considering the thing was at fifth tier. Admittedly, it was a construct so it might not follow the usual rules. It certainly didn't seem as impressive even as the dragons I'd thrashed.

That said, I didn't relent on the Field until the thing dissolved all the way away, hitpoints and mana both hitting zero and the actual threads holding together vanishing in my mana sight. It had taken a good five minutes to burn through the combined twenty thousand stat pool it had, but it hadn't given me any real problems.

Not that I was satisfied with how I handled it. Containing it with mana-blocking material was a good idea, but I should have used a solid plate or something to keep it from escaping. If it had been some Affinity I *didn't* have a perfect counter for, it could have gone and slaughtered my new dragon guests or even taken a chunk out of Ansaë. In hindsight I probably should have brought in Iniri to have her try and one-shot the thing. It was a stupid risk to run trying to take it out myself, though unless it was supersonic I could have always played teleport keep-away with its targets.

Regardless, it was gone. I kept the Field up in the spot just in case, but it wasn't like Ansaë was going to be eager to check. Besides, since it was actually a dragonsbane set of mana she might not even be able to see it. I knew from experience how damn insidious bane weaponry was, and a pure mana bane with no physical presence would be an utter terror.

*"All gone,"* I told Ansaë, once I was really, really sure. *"Thing was annoying but not really that much a threat to me. Not with how big a light Field I could throw at it."*

*"I do appreciate it,"* Ansaë told me seriously. *"I thought I had gotten all of them, but as you can imagine it's difficult to be truly certain."*

*"So I'm guessing it tracked you here after you showed yourself?"*

*"Almost certainly,"* Ansaë confirmed. *"Though why it didn't find me before I went into seclusion I don't know. Perhaps someone bound it in some corner of the world and didn't tell me, and it got loose sometime in the past four hundred years."*

*"Hmm so there might be more of these things. Is there any way that I can get some sort of alarm if something enters the Caldera that I didn't personally teleport in? I don't like the idea of potentially missing anything like this but I've got a lot of territory to cover."*

"Classically that's what wards do, but you have the problem that you can't really link them to yourself. You can't touch the mana with your intent, after all. You could link them to Shayma, though, or to a magical alarm if you're willing to monitor it."

*"Or a series of alarms. I assume wards can be made complicated."* I kind of liked the idea of an alarm room, though I'd need to put a core there to make sure I was actually in a position to hear everything. I kept forgetting that magical stuff was an advanced field, since Tarnil was a war-ravaged, mana-poor backwater and didn't have any significant infrastructure.

"They can. Your [Warding] is potent but very basic, just obscuring everything by sheer mana overload." Ansaë told me, which clarified matters. I had a jamming field, not anything approaching engineered countermeasures. Useful, especially since I had a *lot* of brute force behind it, but not exactly the same as surveillance and countermeasures. It made wonder exactly what Ansaë had put into her tower protections, considering the sheer number of runes involved.

*"I suppose warding the entirety of the Caldera would take a while, even if you went along the outside. I should probably think about starting to do it though."*

"Definitely. Many countries do ward their borders, at least for sensing, though that can get extremely expensive and mana-intensive depending on technique and how many miles you have to cover. But you have the resources and mana to spend on it, so you should."

*"I don't want to overload the Village, but I'm starting to get the feeling I have a ton of infrastructure I need to install..."*

"A common lament. I've set myself up in hundreds of different places, and balancing the small number of trustworthy people with grand projects is always a challenge."

*"So how did you solve it? I mean, I guess I could just buy expertise. Get some people in to make or train people, and ultimately I probably don't need too many who can build amazing wards or whatever."*

"Keeping good records, mostly." Ansaë chuckled. "I have libraries upon libraries in my hoard, memory recordings, techniques to advance certain Classes as quickly as possible, with and without sacrificing future growth. I don't tend to trust outside specialists too much, though I admit there's always someone out there who's figured out something new."

*"Well, that's certainly a place to start."* I had to wonder how many lairs or dwellings Ansaë had abandoned over the centuries. It was easy enough to imagine how much attention she'd draw over time, given what had happened already.

"You should take your own advice, the advice you gave to the Scalemind." Ansaë remarked. "You ought to be planning years or centuries ahead. Believe me, there's nothing worse than finding out you built a bad foundation five hundred years back and you have to redo everything from scratch."

*"Yeah, fair enough. I really should, I just don't have a handle on what can be done quite yet. Besides, it hasn't even been a year; I'm still flailing around trying to figure out what's going on."*



“True. It is easy to forget that you *don't* have actual years of experience with magic, no matter that you sound it.” Ansaë flicked her tail lazily. “Maybe once my pupils have properly started grooming the Caldera you'll have a better understanding of how you want to move forward. Once you actually see properly high-magic areas and effects you'll have more appreciation for what can be done.”

*“I'm looking forward to it, actually. Some of what already exists is pretty wild.”*

“Yes, the confluences are rare and strange, but your pure Affinity areas are rather underwhelming. No matter, they'll be tended to soon enough.”

I had a lot to think about. In fact, what really got me was that Ansaë pointed out I wasn't taking my own advice, though to be fair I didn't think I knew enough to make good plans. Beyond finishing the fortress and dealing with the depletion and blight stuff, I wasn't sure what I *did* want to do. I had to do *something*, because sitting on infinite resources and mana without applying it was terrible.

Plus, I had to take it up with Shayma. Though I hadn't much thought about it until now, the fact that the Spectre spirit had been around for hundreds of years implied certain things about Shayma's lifespan. Not that I objected, not at all, but it did mean that a five-hundred-year plan was going to be a joint one.