

Chapter 18C: Year 1, Day 237 – Blue

Orrelin only had a day of warning that Shayma was coming, which was all I was willing to give them. I might not even have given them that much if I didn't want to let Shayma have enough time to visit Uileinhtik and catch up with her family and friends more. It wasn't as much lead time as people normally got, but I was eager to get started even if I was following Iniri's advice in being marginally diplomatic. After all, despite how good they thought their defenses were, they were just as vulnerable to blightbeasts as anyone else and my barrier wall didn't extend far enough south to cover them yet. If they had any connection to the lowways at all, they were vulnerable, and represented a potential front that I wanted to deal with as soon as possible. Especially since I'd lost time by my inaction over the past year.

The official route into Orrelin was where Tarnil touched the plateau, sandwiched between the border with Nivir and the mountain valley that contained the Wildwood. There was a steep switchback that started halfway down the plateau, with the rest of the distance being covered by a lift. It was, somewhat surprisingly, purely mechanical, rather than any magical artifice. It was set up so they could cut the cables from the top, dropping the lift and leaving nothing but a sheer cliff face to climb, but that simple defense mattered not at all to either me or Shayma.

Instead, the Fortress loomed over Orrelin.

It wasn't really necessary to bring it, but I wanted to make it clear that I was taking this seriously, and nothing said serious like the thing that had eradicated an entire city. The bottom face of the Fortress still bore the mark of the [Starlance]; not in any crater but in a spangling of lights that turned the pure black face into a night sky. It was residue of the intense stellar mana, and while it might have been possible to get rid of it, I didn't really want to. Let it be a reminder to me and everyone else.

"Blue," Iniri said, mostly with amusement but with a touch of resignation. "It's probably not necessary to hover the Fortress over their capital."

"*Oh, fine.*" Considering that Iniri was back in Meil I was pretty sure Shayma had told on me. Though with [Queen's Insight], she might have been able to figure it out just from the path the Fortress took over Tarnil. I wasn't actually miffed about the admonition, despite the fact that I was sorely tempted to use the Fortress to drive home how serious I was. With her new armor, Shayma *shouldn't* need any extra muscle. The real reason the Fortress was there was so I could move in on any blightbeasts she should find, since the entire land would have to be purged of lingering depletion in the mana.

The liveried Classers waiting at the lift pointed and shouted at each other and probably at me as the Fortress moved forward, crossing high over the networked walls and coming to rest right at the edge of the plateau. There was a remarkable sameness to each of the cells described by Orrelin's walls, even if they were irregularly shaped, to the point that if I didn't have the top-down view that I did, it'd be easy to lose my bearings. The only landmarks of note were some projecting portions of the plateau in the far distance.

"*Okay, Shayma, time to go give them the bad news.*" Shayma just laughed and breezed her way out of the Fortress. Now that it was somewhat more complete she needed to take an actual path out rather than teleporting straight through the bulk. She had a wardstone but, like any security, some of the ward

protections were meant to not be bypassed by anyone, not even Shayma. While she could still bull her way through, neither she nor I wanted to break the infrastructure.

She exited the fortress in spirit form, taking short jaunts through the Phantasmal Realm as she drifted downward. It didn't take long for her to reach what was intended to be the welcoming party, headed by a weak-chinned man with his name embroidered on his uniform who was insisting that his soldiers do something about the blatant transgression of Orrelin's sovereign territory. I had no idea what he expected, considering that his retinue consisted entirely of second-tiers. Shayma coalesced behind him and allotted him a few seconds more of ineffectual ranting before exercising my Presence to get his attention.

"Commandant Greys," she said as he staggered slightly despite the relatively light touch Shayma was using. "I am Shayma Ell, the Voice of Blue. Show me to Princeps Alakeim." Greys stared at her, mouth working silently for a moment before pointing an accusatory finger at her.

"I demand you remove that monstrosity from our borders at once!" His tone was somewhat more shrill than was actually necessary.

"Why the heck did they send this guy? He's obviously a moron." I couldn't even be particularly mad; Greys was just so pitiable. He was either a sacrificial pawn or evidence of some severe nepotism somewhere.

"Maybe someone wants an incident?" Shayma wondered, masking her reply from Greys. Then she focused on him and the Classers backing him up. "You have one job, Commandant," she told him. "Escort me to the Princeps. Everything else, especially the Fortress, is not your worry."

Shayma was really taking my more aggressive attitude to diplomacy in stride. Though, considering that she only held back with the Anells due to her concern for her extended family, maybe Shayma had as little patience for political maneuvering as I did. Either way, her tone took him aback and he gaped at her, looking a little bit like a landed fish.

"You will not take that tone with me!" The statement was undercut by the way he looked back at his subordinates as if hoping that they would back him up.

"Okay, this guy's useless. Someone is trying to play politics with us somehow."

"Agreed." Shayma didn't bother replying to Greys, returning to spirit form and heading in along the plateau's road. According to the maps, the actual capital was pretty far inland, but Orrelin had enough infrastructure that if they'd sent a proper greeting party it wouldn't take long. There were some fairly obvious grooves cut into the tops of the walls for vehicles, and I could even see a couple of stone cylinders zipping about from the Fortress. Another sign that they weren't really taking our visit seriously.

"Maybe hijack one of their little stone transports," I suggested. *"If they aren't going to send a proper delegation, we'll just have to help ourselves."*

"Do they even know who we are?" Shayma asked incredulously, then considered what she had just said. "That really does sound bad out loud. But really, no country would meet a head of state with so little preparation and pomp unless they were trying to provoke an incident." She couldn't shrug in spirit

form, but I got the impression of it regardless as her Domain bobbed. "I suppose we'll have to take things into our own hands. Where is one of those transports you mentioned?"

"There's one two walls ahead of you, but they move quick. There's one coming from the north you can probably intercept. You'll probably be able to see it if you get up on the walls." She no longer had the ability to see perfectly that [Promise] had granted her, but between the Domain and the fundamental abilities of her race and Skills, she hardly needed it.

Shayma followed the road until it passed through one of the massive gates, then teleported upward to the top of the high wall, coalescing and waiting by one of the grooves their odd transports used. They were obviously not used for common hauling given their size, and besides there were roads for that. The ones I could see were big enough for maybe four or six people, zipping along the walls at speeds that indicated they were in a hurry to get somewhere.

The one Shayma and I had our eyes on was headed south, slowing only to take the curves where the walls intersected. If it weren't for [Wake of the Phantasmal] Shayma could never have reached it, but with her Skill she reached the intersection of the walls at almost the same time and promptly teleported into the cabin inside. To their credit, the Inquisitors inside reacted quite promptly in reaching for their weapons, but I was having none of that.

"No." I didn't have Shayma's finesse when it came to using my Presence, but I could still impose enough pressure to practically paralyze the trio of third-tiers riding inside the well-appointed cabin.

"I am Shayma Ell, the Voice of Blue," Shayma told them, using her stony official voice. "If you don't want to lose those weapons, you'll put them away now." Two of the Inquisitor seemed more intelligent than the Commandant and sheathed a sword and an axe, respectively. The third kept wrestling with a shortspear as if it were mere physical force holding him down. Shayma reached out with a silvery gauntlet and grabbed the spear, wadding it into a compressed ball of scrap as if it were made out of paper. All three of the men winced at the sound of tortured metal, but neither Shayma nor I had any sympathy.

"Well, gentlemen, with that taken care of, perhaps you can take me to the capital. I am expected there, but I found my escorts somewhat lacking in both courtesy and preparedness." She looked at the apparent leader of the group, a square-faced older man with shockingly white hair and the ironic name of Blackmane. I could tell Shayma had issues keeping a straight face when I told her.

"Inquisitor Blackmane, there is a certain amount of urgency to my errand." He stared at her a moment, then coughed and cleared his throat.

"Yes, of course, Lady Shayma. I suppose under the circumstances your credentials are obvious." He automatically reached up to brace himself as the car slowed for a turn. Though the little cylinders had some commonalities with Wright's magitek rail system, they very clearly used earth magic to move, tapping into the mana flows that followed the walls which covered Orrelin. They were also not automated in any way, as the driver outside and at the front of the stone vehicle was clearly controlling it. "If you would allow me to drop off my companions first. They do have business in the south."

Shayma inclined her head regally and Blackmane swiveled the speaking-tube in the corner of the cabin around to inform the driver of the change of plans. Since he didn't mention Shayma at all, I definitely marked him as a more intelligent specimen than we'd seen from Orrelin thus far. It was about time.

"Do you have any idea why I was met by nobody important at all?" Shayma asked Blackmane bluntly. He didn't turn a hair at the question, but his answer was not helpful.

"Foreign affairs is not in the Inquisition's remit, Lady Shayma." I was morbidly curious what actually was, but we weren't here to meddle in Orrelin's internal messes.

"A domestic question, then. Have you been informed of the existence of blightbeasts?"

"No, Lady Shayma," Blackmane said. He didn't seem to be lying, so the contents of Iniri's missive hadn't been seen by him. Once again, not really our problem but it didn't speak well of Orrelin in general. We hadn't given them much reason for cooperation ourselves, but existential threats in the form of depletion monsters seemed to be pretty compelling otherwise.

The driver halted at one of the guard towers that were sprinkled across the walls, letting the other two inquisitors disembark before the stone carriage swiveled about and shot back to the north. Shayma tried probing Blackmane with a few other questions but he was fairly tight-lipped, if polite. She even shifted into Scalemind form briefly, of course hiding it from Blackmane, but shifted back shortly so apparently he really didn't know anything.

The little rock vehicle could reach some significant speeds, coming in sight of the walled cell that held Orrelin's capital of Veleigh in only an hour. Though Shayma could have easily reached the capital city of Veleigh sooner, having someone from the Inquisition would bypass some of the nonsense from leaving the so-called official escort behind. While I wasn't willing to play their games, I also didn't want things to escalate to serious violence. That would just be counterproductive.

While Shayma rode north, some people showed up near the Fortress, ostensibly to keep an eye on it. A few came in the stone conveyances, but most showed up on foot or whatever the appropriate verb was for travel Skills. Considering that my reputation was pretty weighty now that I'd burned Port Anell off the face of the map, I was pretty sure it was just to look. One person looked to be setting up some scrying tools, but I knew that would get nowhere. Between my native dungeon resistance and [Warding] all they'd get from that was a blank. Which was good, because the Chiuxatli who were inside the Fortress, still working on setting up the living spaces, deserved to have their privacy respected.

Veleigh took up the whole cell, sprawling all the way out to the walls. The only buildings that were taller than the walls were deep in the middle, a big palace rising up over wide and tidy streets. It was also the only cell where the grooves for the stone cars left the walls, raised bridges carrying them to the palace itself. Shayma's Domain took all this in as Blackmane ordered the car into the Inquisition's station.

"If you'll allow me, Lady Shayma, I will show you to my superior. I don't have the station to bring you to the Princeps myself," Blackmane apologized. I was actually starting to like the guy; he seemed to be the one sane member of the whole kingdom.

"Certainly. You have been most helpful," she assured him, but he didn't look all that happy at the compliment. He was probably contemplating that he was supposed to be off somewhere else and not escorting a VIP that had ditched her official entourage. We got a good look at the palace interior as

Shayma accompanied Blackmane inside, finding it fairly tasteful though not as well-defended in terms of wards and enchantments as Ir's or even Tarnil's capital buildings. Shayma's Domain didn't find any torture chambers or interrogation cells or the like in the Inquisition's section of the palace, which was probably to the good, but the sheer amount of clerical staff made it obvious they were genuinely busy.

"High Inquisitor Leteille? May I present Lady Shayma Ell, the Voice of Blue. Apparently her escort was rather lacking." Blackmane stopped at an office not visibly different from any others, getting the attention of the flat-nosed old man inside. Leteille looked up, annoyed, and frowned at Shayma.

"What nonsense is this?"

"I am very unimpressed with Orrelin's hospitality," Shayma said, and invoked my Presence again. She excluded Blackmane somewhat, but Leteille got the full force of it and the color drained from his face.

"Enough!" He croaked. "I see I was mistaken! You are indeed the Voice of Blue." Shayma let off the pressure and Leteille took in a breath.

"I'm glad that's established," Shayma said, barely restraining herself from a cutting tone. "Take me to see the Princeps."

"Yes, Lady Shayma, if you'll follow me I'll make sure you're announced." Leteille creaked to his feet and cast a glance at Blackmane, who bowed and hied off to whatever he was supposed to be doing. Then he shuffled out of his office and guided Shayma deeper into the palace, ignoring the guards that detached themselves from their posts to follow.

As I pretty much figured, nobody gave the Head Inquisitor and his guest a second look. Or rather, the ones that did give Shayma a closer look were the sort who were wondering who exactly rated Leteille showing her around himself. Yet at no point were any runners or pages sent that I could see, which was starting to give me a bad feeling. Not that they'd try anything underhanded, but that they still weren't taking anything seriously.

"Please wait here, Lady Shayma," Leteille asked, ushering her to a well-appointed sitting room. When he left, he went back the way he had come instead of in the direction of the Princeps area, something Shayma only knew because she could see right through the walls with her Domain.

"Yeah, no. I bet that they'll just make you cool your heels here for a day or two. The question is do you want to go yell at him immediately or snoop?"

"Snoop," Shayma replied with glee, and vanished with a smile. She trailed Leteille for a few minutes, but it wasn't until he got back to his own office that he started writing a missive about Shayma's presence. Even without a body I could tell Shayma was rolling her eyes and she darted off in the other direction to spy around in the Princeps' area.

She breezed past open doors and closed ones, the wards not doing much to stop her since very few of them were actually active. Now that she was inside the palace by way of the Inquisition's entrance, there weren't any real defenses. I was sure that Cheya would have loved to get a verbatim report of any one of a number of conversations, but they weren't all that interesting. It wasn't until she wandered into the more military section that we overheard something relevant.

“Even the walls are starting to show signs of crumbling,” someone with a military insignia grumbled to an inquisitor, before knocking back a slug of some type of liquor. From the face he made there was nothing to recommend it but being strong. The overlay named him as one Marque Engele but it didn’t give me the rank, so I didn’t know if he was lamenting as a common soldier or a top-level commander. “It’s hard enough to keep the Leyn from breaking out into the surrounding tiles without the mana failing too!”

“Wait, aren’t the Leyn some Underneath race?”

“Yes, and that sounds like Blight damage? Mana constructs falling apart?”

“Yeah, if it’s not my mana, anything complicated just sorta dissolves.” We’d gotten an unfortunate number of up-close examples of that before I’d erected the wall of darkness. Shayma shifted to Scalemind long enough to ransack poor Marque’s mind before coalescing in a side hall, her mouth grim.

“Definitely blightbeasts, and it looks like they’re keeping the Leyn refugees penned in one of the neighboring tiles, as they call them. They aren’t delivering any supplies or aid, either, it seems they’re just considered invaders.”

I couldn’t completely fault Orrelin for not being happy about the Leyn, since I’d treated the Chiuxatli much the same way prior to them striking an actual Bargain, but under the circumstances I would have thought they’d at least try to debrief them. Plus they were fighting blightbeasts without me, which was ultimately a losing proposition. I just wondered how long it had been going on.

“Time to go tell Princeps Alakeim we’re here to take care of his problem.”

“Yeah.” Shayma left the hard-drinking soldier behind and headed toward the throne room. It looked like Alakeim was wrapping things up for the day, with his herald calling out some long proclamation about something or another, when Shayma appeared in the middle of the mixed nobility and got everyone’s attention by exercising my Presence.

“I am Shayma Ell, the Voice of Blue,” she said into the enforced silence. “I am here because you have a blightbeast problem, Princeps Alakeim. Fortunately, Blue can stop the invasion.”

“What is this nonsense?” Alakeim said after a moment, making me wonder how well he knew the Grand Inquisitor. They used the same language. “Orrelin has not been invaded. Orrelin cannot *be* invaded!”

“Oh dang. Has he not been told? Or are they suppressing the news out of some kind of national image issue?” Suddenly some of what was going on made sense. Nobody knew anything about it because the government refused to admit it was actually happening. I knew that happened sometimes but it was still weird to run into.

“Then you won’t mind if I go take care of several hundred Leyn and a few thousand depletion-bearing non-invaders up at Tile Heisen.” Shayma said dryly. We probably could have been more diplomatic, and I was sure Iniri would grump about it later, but they’d started it.

“You’ll do no such thing!” Alakeim said, glaring imperiously down at Shayma as his personal guards started for her. “Voice of Blue or not you cannot barge around my country at your whim.” He waved in

her general direction. "Return her to her room and ensure she stays there." I didn't even need to say anything, Shayma just rolled her eyes and teleported away.

"So where do you need me to move the Fortress?" While Shayma seemed to have gotten the general location of Tile Heisen and the blightbeasts, I had not.

"Straight south," she said. "I think we're going to need it."